

Robert Herschkowitz

Video Transcripts

Video 1: Bob Herschkowitz “Protecting from Bombs”

Every time those airplanes came, my father had to take—how do I say—a little process together. He would throw me in the ditch along the road, you know the French roads have those trees along, in between the trees and the roads, and eh—[?] ditch, he will throw me in the ditch—my mother on top of me, and he will lay on top of my mother to protect us from the machine gun. To protect himself he used a big suitcase that he put on his head. It never occurred to him that a 20 millimeter round will have gone through the cardboard box you know, and kill us all three with only one shot, but we were lucky. All I remember was the noise—the noise of the firing, the noise of the bombs, the screaming of the airplanes. Was I afraid? I was too young because remember, at that time I was two years old and my parents schlepped me everywhere, carried me because my little legs at that time could not take it.

Video 2: Bob Herschkowitz “False Identification”

The strange thing is my father had sold my mother’s engagement ring and because it was a diamond it was worth, well a lot. They were living off that and with that money he bought false papers, so we became Christians from one day to the other—Catholics, to be certain. We had each an ID card and our last name turned to be [?]. It was a nice French name, my father was Max [?], I was [?], my mother was [?], and I had to repeat that every day because years later, when we were back in Belgium, every time they asked me what my name is I will look up at my parents and say “Who am I today, [?] or Herschkowitz?” And—and we felt, or they felt, quite safe there—they put me—to even go farther, they put me in kindergarten run by nuns. And the only one who knew I wasn’t Catholic was the Mother Superior, and she liked me very much. I must say I was kind of a cute kid—blond hair, blue eyes, and always a smile.

Video 3: Bob Herschkowitz “Flight to Switzerland”

Now needless to say we had no papers to go into Switzerland—no visa, no absolutely nothing. But they will try because at that time they had passeur, people from the Underground who would—uh—who would uh—help Jews for lot of money, for lot of gold, to cross the border illegally into Switzerland. It was a risk to take because from the 250,000 Jews who tried to get into Switzerland during the war, only 25,000—so, 10 percent—were allowed in. The other ones were turned over at the border and usually shot the same day or sent to a concentration camp. So during five, I think it happened, from what I

gathered, three days and two nights, we traveled only through the night, we slept in the forest. And I thought it was very cool, it was my first camping trip, and I really loved it. My brother was less comfortable because they had put tape, what they called sparadrap, tape over his mouth so he won't cry and alert the German and French patrol, border patrol. And every time they would remove the tape, and give him some of that Swiss condensed Nestle milk that's suitably sweet, that condensed Nestle milk, with a spoon. He must have loved it because he still does eat that with a spoon, so many years later. And, so, we managed.

Now, my father was the worst navigator in the world. Plus, he never asked [for directions]. At one moment, the passeur told us, "Okay, you go straight ahead, and you will be in Switzerland. When you see a fence made out of barbed wire, that's the border." And we walked, and we walked, and we walked. We never saw the fence, but we saw a little house. And my father said, "Oh, that's the Swiss border guard!" And he knocks on the door, and who opens the door? It's a French *gendarme*. My god, we had turned into a circle and we were back in Switzerland [France]. And, he looked at us, and saw who we were, and he said to my dad, you know what he said? "I know who you are. I know what you're doing." He said, "I'm not going to do anything about that." And he showed with his finger, he said, "You see those two little hills? Go through those hills, and you'll be in Switzerland." So we went there, and we found ourselves in front of barbed wire. And on the other side, there was a group of Swiss soldiers and they were nice enough to lift the wire, we went in, and we were safe into Switzerland.