

Interview with John Rock 3-17-96

Disc 1

00:00-00:48 Opening credits

00:55-01:11 Interviewer introduction

01:12- Name, birthplace etc. born 1922 in Vienna

01:52 Childhood, parents etc. Mother born 1898 in Slovakia, Father born 1888 in Romania (at the time was part of Austro-Hungarian empire)

Information on parents, marriage, move to Vienna etc.

03:50- Mother and father in Venice feeding the pigeons (photograph)

one brother born Jan 23, 1925

04:12 Brother and John (photograph)

04:27 Father's occupation; died when he was five, had a small bank

04:45 other members of family supported family after father's death, uncles supported
names of uncles

05:40 photograph of members of mother's family- mother is on the far left side

06:32 stories about these family members

Julius (uncle) took him to soccer matches

07:52 father's side family, closer to mother's family

08:19 family's standard of living, economically poor but a lot of affection, difficult times, as a whole had a good childhood except not having a father

09:15 practiced Jewish religion, there was a sizable Jewish community in Vienna

Jewish community of Vienna

appeared to be accepted

10:22 location of where John lived, not really a Jewish section

lived in old apartment building, there were mostly apartment buildings

description of surrounding area, lots of churches, but also a synagogue

12:14 holidays

12:40 prayer book for Passover received by John in 1927

memories of using it

13:53 schools Schubert, humanist gymnasium-secondary school age 10

there were other Jewish children

spoke German at home and at school

15:26 religious education

Bar mitzvah-special education

at school- one hour each week according to religion you belonged to

there were a number of Jewish children in gymnasium

16:30 sports, belonged to scouts

17:10 friendships

problems occurred in 1938 lost track of most of friends

friend Norman managed to get out of Austria, played soccer together, talked about insecurities, etc.

worried about Nazis, overall positive

1937-1938 concerns about war

19:28 description of personality as a child, missed father, enjoyed school

20:03 family life, uncles and aunts around all the time, on the whole positive childhood

20:25 relationship with brother, photograph of John and brother by Danube canal

describes brother as weak little boy, he was strong; siblings just don't always get along

21: 38 mother; no profession, difficult to have lost mother, very hard to get a job, very kind

22:23 aspirations- wanted to become a lawyer

22:47 knew of Hitler since 1933, maybe before

23:12 Christian National Socialist party took over government from Social Democrats; increasing antisemitism in Austria

23:59 photograph of old Hungarian passport. Father was Hungarian, nationality determined by place of birth, so John was also considered Hungarian, didn't have Austrian citizenship

25:00 antisemitism in Austria- before Hitler, mostly name calling, later people beaten up

25:49 Hitler came to Austria in spring of 1938 description of event. Lots of people had armbands with swastikas. A lot of fear. People he knew were suddenly Nazis

example youngest uncle's chauffeur who used to be a social democrat

27:13 family discussion about what to do next; some felt it would go away, some felt they should leave

27:44 In 1938; wasn't going to school anymore; was working wrapping parcels and delivering them to peace workers; Jewish owners had to leave; Nazis took away Jewish businesses; John also had to leave this job

30:16 Everybody they knew were making an effort to get out- despair and panic. Economy poor. Some had relatives abroad.

31:00 brother managed to get out in July 1938 with Hungarian passport to live with uncles

John couldn't follow because passport was invalid at that time

frightened all the time; positive about survival

Julius taken to Dachau

32:00 Kristallnacht description; non-Jewish friend warned them, so they hid in a building for a few days
apartment was undamaged

33:45 people's attitudes changing both ways; example: at the company John worker for, there was a young man handyman non-Jewish, when non-Jewish people took over parts of the company, he was promoted to overseer and turned out to be an SS man; was SS illegally before this; but turned out to be helpful and protective of Jewish people; told family to take care and leave because it is going to get worse

35:45 No way to go to any other country-stateless; mother though she should try to go to Palestine; went to camp to learn farming 4-5 months; Later found out most of the youth didn't survive the war; went back to Vienna; papers available to go to England; camp 1939

originally was a camp to prepare to go to Palestine, became a labor camp; when he was there no one was killed, but afterward people were killed

about 300-500 people were in the camp, maybe only about 200

John and another prisoner left the camp at night;

40:10 papers to go to England; mother didn't know how she could get out; so they planned on once John went to England, he would try to get her out

41:08 photograph of Aunt Gisella's family- had left Austria from England before Hitler

41:50 what John packed to go to England

42:20 parting of John and his mother; photograph of mother;

44:00 on train, concern about trip on German train through Germany; atmosphere on train

felt guilty that he didn't wave to mother longer; John was 17

45:20 trip

scared, didn't talk to anyone; at border of Belgium and Germany

46:30 the officer let him go

thought the country looked beautiful

47:30 went to go get a boat to England, arrived August of 1939

48:40 wanted to join up but was too young

48:57 reception of immigrants to Britain; started working on a farm until old enough to join service

description of farm

50:35 photo of alien registration in England

51:00 type of work on farm; worked on farm raising daffodils, thought this was funny

year and half total farming

life in England

52:50 friendships; befriended piglet, very loyal, Cecil, followed him everywhere;

sad experience- at Christmas after a big Christmas dinner found out that he had eaten Cecil

upsetting, still think back about Cecil

54:00 other farm memories; enjoyed people he was with; one occurrence-some of the people he was working with was gone; police came and took some people with them; John went to police department and ask about it. They were taken to an internment camp; arrested because they were from Austria or Germany

54:54 Volunteered to join the army; had communication with brother; mother had managed to get out of Austria January 1940; she sent a card to say that she was in Yugoslavia; last communication he had from his mother

Disc 2

Postcard from mother; continued to write back to her, no more news after the end of 1940

1:11 enlisted in army; had been trying to get mother into England; wrote to Randolph Churchill, Churchill wrote back saying he couldn't help

2:05 Joined the army in Devonshire, stationed in Southern England, Pioneer corps-supplied other regiments with equipment, etc. Worked together with engineers

2:45 Why John decided to join the army- the cause was important to him

3:24 other people enlisted as well in similar situation-refugees

3:46 duties included construction, supplies, etc. rank-sergeant

4:15 stayed in Pioneer corps until 1943-Navy was looking for people with special language skills; interviewed; offered opportunity to serve in Royal Navy

4:51 interview- background information- long process etc.

Asked to name all the objects in the room he had been sitting in. Important to be aware of what was going on

6:08 about twenty from Austria and Germany trained to operate receiver to listen to German conversations etc. and translate and pass on these

7:04 attached to certain ships doing this work

7:18 photo of crew

7:44 transferred to another ship after about a year; on offensive and defensive sweeps, escorted convoys

Able to contribute, sometimes able to take evasive action

9:00 exciting and made him feel worthwhile- was 21 years old; had saved up 50 pounds and taken it with him wherever he went in envelope, was on own; ship was sunk one night; before it was sunk, sitting operating receiver and heard Germans releasing torpedoes, but released them before he could transfer news to skipper; first thing he remembered that he need to get envelope which was behind receiver, eventually gave up; then he was blown off the ship so decision to give up 50 pounds saved his life

11:50 in water, saw ship burning, bodies floating next to him. Water had become orange, water from the ship had caught fire, couldn't surface

13:00 finally found an area he could swim, saw ship going down

13:20 trained to sing if they fell in the water- keeps you warm

14:00 hoping for rescue, in the water for several hours

14:30 saw ship coming towards them, thought it might have been a German ship, didn't want to be captured; turned out to be a destroyer. Picked some of them up.

15:45 picking up survivors was against naval rules, not supposed to stop ship

16:17 this happened off the Isle de Pas French coast

16:35 had life vest

16:51 picked up- through nets overboard and climbed up nets. John almost didn't make it, hard to climb

17:15 didn't know at the time, but had a crack on his skull; healed quickly

17:50 hadn't made any special friendships- wasn't there long enough. Was a documentary about the ship, produced in Ontario. Found that he was mentioned in the video. Austrian intelligence person

19:40 book written about this ship; "Unlucky Lady." Mascot- Ginger a cat. The cat would not go aboard during the last venture

20:50 240 people were on the ship. 40 or 50 made it on the other British ship.

Half of 240 died, one quarter picked up, one quarter taken prisoner by the Germans. Happy to be alive but also guilty.

22:00 recuperated, then put on another ship HMS Black Prince. Operated in same area- Atlantic.

22:39 on this ship during D-Day. Very busy, lots of messages etc. Lots of ships and bombs.

23:00 felt good about invasion- move towards defeating the Germans, but was sad to see all of the casualties

23:40 Omaha beach, 6am, knew that this was a difficult area. Germans held off landings there.

25:00 achieved rank- officer. After this last ship, knew war was almost over. Worked in naval depot.

25:45 family- contacted red cross trying to find family. Brother alive- in Italy. John met brother and two uncles in Italy. All other family members had died.

26:35 hadn't heard from family for several years

27:00 letter written April 29, 1945. John writing to brother about news that he and uncles safe. Hoping for reunion. War over. Asking about news about mother, other uncles, and aunts. Won't lose hope about mother

30:00 memories about writing letter. Had to hold back emotions. When he heard the rest of the family didn't survive, he was very sad about that. Heard this from his brother

Ferdinand and Camilla died in Yugoslavia- shot by Germans

31:11 John's mother was sent to Auschwitz. Had remarried a year or two before that- John's , mother, her husband, and his mother were sent to Auschwitz in 1942. John's brother and 3 uncles sent to concentration camp- Ferdinand, Julius, Robert. Ferdinand released, had been captain in Austro-Hungarian army. Had managed to get a note to German general.

Ferdinand was killed by the Germans- same side even though he got the highest honor in previous war

33:00 brother knew that mother was on transport to Auschwitz. Knew what was happening in Auschwitz. John's mother was killed right after she arrived there.

33:40 John's brother had very difficult time in the concentration camp. He was 16-17. Camp in Croatia, was a grave digger, many people were killed. One Croatian tried to kill him in a mass grave, but bodies below him saved his life. Partisans later occupied area, saved brother, fought with partisans. Not a communist so he went to Italy write after was over

35:11 Trip to Italy. Photo of brother, uncle Robert, Uncle Julius, and John

35:44 back to England- still in service. After discharged, found out about UN service for helping displaced persons. Applied for a position to help for displaced persons camp. They were looking for people with language, service record, etc.

37:00 document from when John was hired by the UN. Displaced persons- people forcible removed from original location.

36:20 displaced person camps throughout Europe. 1947 still about 650,00 displaced persons left.

39:00 booklet from UNRRA personnel regulations.

42:00 received booklet in London. First job was administrative assistant. Became director of his area

43:00 sent to near center of Germany. Arrived in around March, 1946.

43:45 first impressions: mixed feelings. Country where government had been responsible for the deaths of millions of people, many members of his family. Foremost interested in helping displaced persons.

44:35 work as administrative assistant. Part of a team of about 20 officers from different countries.

45:40 everyone had a specific job. Never enough under officers. John tried as much as possible to have displaced persons manage themselves as much as possible

46:30 reported to deputy director. Document-from when he was appointed deputy director. Citizenship-stateless. Didn't become British subject until 1947. Promotion- worked hard, dedicated, spoke German, giving self-governance to displaced person, allowed them to increase confidence

48:53 statelessness, didn't help or hinder work. Displaced persons not necessarily considered stateless

50:05 registration with UNRRA. "Not subject to military law." In US area of occupation.

51:00 in American zone. Liked working here. Found Americans generally good to work with.

51:25 interaction between military and civilian authorities. Had officer's privilege, but didn't have insignias. Military generally cooperative. Difficult for average Americans to understand what was going on. Some American occupation soldiers found it easier to get along with Germans instead of displaced persons

52:43 promotion gave John authority of 5 camps.

53:15 camps. People in this camps- Jews, people from Baltic states. 10-12,000 people in largest camp. More males because many of the males in the camps had served in Russian army. Some of the women and children were exterminated, some of the men lasted longer in the concentration camps

54: 57 Question about relationship between DPs and German citizens. Didn't worry so much about that, more worry about DPs. Relationship not great.

55:52 Photo of John sitting on a jeep, wearing a combination of uniforms. Russian boots, American Jacket, British shirt, American khakis rolled up

56:45 What taking care of displaced persons means. Bringing them back to humanity, food, blankets, medical care, etc. Jewish people managed to reestablish themselves culturally. Wanted to start schools, get books, made musical instruments etc.

58:00 displaced persons more demanding, but doesn't think there was antisemitism. American soldiers who had fought the war mostly had returned to U.S. Occupying soldiers were new. New soldiers less sympathetic.

Disc 3

00:30 displaced persons allowed to leave camp, but DPs did not live outside of camps

00:56 own police force in the camps

01:25 If displaced person committed crimes outside camp, would be subject to military court outside the camp. Judges in military courts were officers

DPs got sentences 10 times more severe than Germans in the military courts

2:35 John went to the military court and saw that the translator translated with prejudice against the DPs. Saw what was going on and stopped this practice.

3:52 album that he got in Germany when stationed there in 1946. Photos of camps, DPs, etc.

4:47 photo of team taken when John was deputy director fall of 1946

6:27 photo of Jewish wedding.

7:03 established trade schools of displaced persons. Photo of group taken in by German factory to be taught a trade

7:38 printed materials- cards and notes given to him and sent to him by DPs in the camps. Jewish calendar printed in the camps by DPs. Invitation to a wedding. Happy New Year postcard- one of them sent from a man who was a teacher. During the war was sent to concentration camp and made him watch the killing of his family. Somebody who knew him told John his story.

11:28 Photo taken in the camp. Unaccompanied children-orphans. Lost their parents or didn't know where they were. One group came in when he was there-undernourished, had lived in the woods by themselves in Poland for a year or two and survived. Different nationalities, Jewish children mostly

14:16 photo of police department consisting of displaced persons. DPs took a while getting used to police, didn't trust any police. But with help, they reassured them and it worked quite well. Realized there had to be some discipline.

15:48 winter. Jewish people were being persecuted by the Poles, another influx of displaced persons who had gone home to Poland had to flee again. Took extra care and time to find lodging for them etc.

17:06 photo . march in favor of opening immigration to Palestine. People from Palestine came to camp and stayed with John including future Prime Minister. Early 1947.

18:49 photo of Passover celebration. People in camps did not initially know that he was Jewish. Didn't tell people for the first 2 months. Worried that people would expect special consideration. Once he felt secure, he told them.

20:32 Soccer. Soon after important things done for DPs, started soccer teams

21:00 Kindergarten opened- photo

21:22 chauffeur-photo. Turned out he had been a guard in a concentration camp

21:50 group of children who had lived in the woods by themselves-photo

22:00 clinic in the camp- photo

22:37 photo part of album that was given to him by DPs who he enrolled in training in trade schools.

23:20 School personnel at school in Hertzog

23:44 letter from DP that reached him in England. 1947. A thank you letter, and missing him.

25:20 when and why he left UNRRA. Though he did what he could do. Wanted to spend more time with brother also. Brother was in Italy, then got scholarship to University of Washington in 1947. Photo taken in spot where they had photo taken when they were children near Danube channel.

27:10 photo that John got in Germany from an officer from a concentration camp where Jews had to dig own graves and then shot into graves. Also small child with hat on.- orthodox Jewish males covered heads

28: 14 went back to England and got married, has two children, two step children (photos);

28:53 Children's families

29:10 Closing comments; responsible people can get together from all over the world and solve problem and hopefully not let what happened during WWII happen again; If UNRRA can work together, why can't any other organization work together as well

30:20 end; credits with photos; close-ups of artifacts shown earlier in the interview-letters