

EI-1157

EDGAR HAAS

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RESIDENCES: Bad Homburg, Germany; Jackson Heights, New York City; Fort Lee, New Jersey

LEVINE: Today is July 24th, the year 2000, and I'm here at Ellis Island with Mr. Edgar Haas, who came through Ellis Island in 1937 from Germany when he was 16 years of age. At the time of this interview Mr. Haas is 77 years of age and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Mrs. Haas is also with us in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio for the interview. Okay if you would repeat, please, your birth date and say where in Germany were you born.

HAAS: I was born on September 25, 1922 in a city called Bad Homburg, H-O-M-B-U-R-G, which is about fifteen miles from Frankfurt, Germany.

LEVINE: And did you live in the same place in Germany all your growing up years?

HAAS: Yes. We had, our bakery was very well known in Germany under the name of Haas. And I lived in Bad Homburg all my life until we left.

LEVINE: So your father was a baker.

HAAS: My father, actually my great Grandfather was the baker for the, I think it was the King of Prussia.

LEVINE: So that was - what was your father's name?

HAAS: Julius Haas.

LEVINE: Okay so this baking was a family profession.

HAAS: Going back I would say almost two generations.

LEVINE: Now were your grandparents also from that area in Germany or had they come from elsewhere?

HAAS: I believe they lived somewhere in the area.

LEVINE: Did you know them as a little boy?

HAAS: My grandfather also came to this country and I think he passed away somewhere in 1939 or 1940. And his grave is right near us in New Jersey.

LEVINE: But did you know him before he left Germany?

HAAS: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: This is your father's father?

HAAS: My mother's father.

LEVINE: Your mother's father. And do you have any memories of him when from when you were little?

HAAS: Yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember when you think of him? Can you imagine him?

HAAS: I can imagine him, as a matter of fact, my mother's family name was Blumenthal, and when my grandfather came over here, which I believe was 1938 or 1939, he tried to contact, I don't know whether it was his first cousin or his second cousin, the original founder of Bloomingdale's department store. Bloomindale and Blumenthal is like same name. I don't know what his contact was with the original founder of Bloomingdale's, but I know he contacted him when he came to this country.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name?

HAAS: Meta Haas, M-E-T-A, and her maiden name was Blumenthal.

LEVINE: And did you have brothers and sisters?

HAAS: Yes, I had a brother who was two years older than I was, and his name was Heinz, H-E-I-N-Z; and he called himself Henry.

LEVINE: And so when you, did you live with your grandparents? Did you live in a separate place with your parents and your brother?

HAAS: No we all, fortunately, we all came over here together. Not my grandfather, but my parents and my brother. We all came here together on the same boat, which landed here on December 12, 1937.

LEVINE: Okay well before we talk about coming here or life in this country, just a little bit about your growing up years. You must have gone to school, how far had you gone in school before you came?

HAAS: I had one year of what is called in Germany "Realschule" which is actually like the first year of college in this country. But in Germany, my brother and I worked as bakers from the time we were 5 or 6 years old; which was very common.

LEVINE: Could you maybe describe in as much detail as possible, the bakery?

HAAS: Yes. We had a very famous bakery at that time. We made rolls and cakes and my father was an outstanding baker and he had many rewards all over the world as a- he exhibited in many exhibitions all over the world as a outstanding baker. As a matter of fact, when we came to this country, my brother and my father went to work one week after we were here as bakers.

LEVINE: Now can you remember your chores in the bakery when you were in Germany?

HAAS: Yes, we made rolls, and we made, I forgot already what we call them, we just now called Howes [ph], which is a twisted bread. And my father tried to teach me to become a baker, and I personally was never interested to become a baker, I just took all our machines apart, I was always interested in machinery rather than baking.

LEVINE: Now you came here in 1937, so what, what precisely precipitated your family leaving?

HAAS: Well my father was very active in local politics in Bad Homburg and he said we should never leave, but my mother fortunately had a good vision and she said we better get out of here because she saw things coming, she was a realist, much more than my father. My father was a decorated World War I German veteran, and he never thought that, that anything would happen to us. But fortunately my mother had a better vision, and we looked for a sponsor in this country, who we finally found, it was a cousin of my mother, I believe his name was Herman Stern, who lived in a place called Valley City, South Dakota, to the best of my knowledge. He was a clothing manufacturer, and he sponsored I would say, close to a hundred of our relatives. And when we came to this country, to the best of my recollection, sponsors had to be at the boat in order to properly enter this country. Unfortunately he was not here and that's why we ended up on Ellis Island on a Friday afternoon, and we stayed here until Monday morning.

LEVINE: Now before you left, had you personally experienced any of the rise of the Nazis or Hitler? What had you experienced before you left?

HAAS: Absolutely. In the school where I went to, the teacher who we had, and for some reason or other I never forgot his name, and his son was a very good friend of mine; but the teacher was very anti-Jewish, and

that's the one experience. The other experience we had, in as much as we were one of the most famous bakeries in the area where we lived, in the Frankfurt area, a lot of our customers, since 1932 or 1933, were not allowed to purchase anything from us , starting back in 1933. And we lost most of our customers. That's the one recollection that I have. Also in the school that I attended to, which at those days was the equivalent to an American public school, a lot of my friends whom I was very close to, weren't allowed to talk to me anymore. That's about the only bad recollection that I had. And things were going downhill steadily up until the time we left in 1937.

LEVINE: And is there anymore you can say about Mr. Stern, the person who sponsored you, he sponsored so many?

HAAS: All I know, is he was a famous clothing manufacturer in South Dakota. I believe, I don't remember anymore whether it was South Dakota or North Dakota. I do remember his name, Herman Stern, and I do know that somewhere within a year of our coming to this country we met him. I don't recall the exact time and where we met.

LEVINE: And he was bringing relatives or he was brining other people...?

HAAS: To the best of my knowledge mostly relatives; they may have also been some of his friends. I do know that he sponsored over a hundred people coming to this country.

LEVINE: Okay so do you remember the circumstances under which you left? Do you remember actually packing up, leaving?

HAAS: Yes I do recall. We gave up our bakery and our home to people who lived on the corner, non-Jewish people, on the corner of our street.

LEVINE: You mean you sold it to them?

HAAS: I don't remember anymore whether we sold it or we just gave it to them. I don't believe we were allowed to sell it. I do recall those people because was many, many years later when we went back, my wife and I, went back to Germany, we met those people and they remembered us very well, and they still owned the bakery. After we got rid of our property, either sold it or gave it to them, I'm not sure anymore exactly what happened. We packed up all of our furniture, and it was put into a very, very large case, which in those days in Germany they called a lift, L-I-F-T, which was basically a tremendous case where all of our furniture was packed and sent to America.

LEVINE: Oh so you brought all your furniture.

HAAS: Not all of it but a lot of it. When we came to this country we, the first two or three weeks we stayed around 68th street. I forgot the name, I believe it was Rabbi Weiss, which was called the Congress House, until our furniture came.

LEVINE: Oh, did you have any assistance by a social organization?

HAAS: I really don't recall. I do know the assistance was that I believe we stayed free of any charges, and that was great assistance, at the so called Congress House, somewhere on 65th street. I think the temple is still in existence today, I believe it's either called Habonim [ph] or something of that sort. I know it was Rabbi Weiss who assisted incoming refugees in living there until their furniture arrived or until they found an apartment somewhere in Manhattan.

LEVINE: I see, well do you remember anything about the passage? Who else was on the ship? What was the passenger list like?

HAAS: Very little, I remember very, very little. The only thing I remember is getting off the ship and going to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Okay, so do you remember when the ship came into New York Harbor, do you remember when that happened?

HAAS: To the best of my knowledge and I'm sure it was within a day or so, it was December 12, 1937.

LEVINE: And what happened when you got there, here?

HAAS: I believe because it was late Friday, on a Friday afternoon, and for two reasons we went to Ellis Island. One reason is, I believe, all of the immigration offices were closed, and also our sponsor, who was supposed to be at the boat, was not there. So they held us over until Monday morning.

LEVINE: Did you, did you travel first or second class?

HAAS: I don't remember that at all.

LEVINE: Well I suppose if you had a sponsor, you maybe traveled third class, but your sponsor wasn't there, okay. So you got off the ship that you had come on, the U. S.S. Washington.

HAAS: Yes.

LEVINE: Right? And you got off at battery park, and took a ferry to Ellis Island.

HAAS: I don't exactly remember anymore of how we went or, that's it's happy in my memory for some reason or other.

LEVINE: Okay but do you remember anything about Ellis Island, the experience of being processed here?

HAAS: Not really.

LEVINE: And then when you first went to New York, do you remember anything that struck you as new or different on your way to Congress House?

HAAS: Very, I remember very, very little. I remember seeing the Statue of Liberty; and the only other memory I have is while we were in Ellis Island we were listening to the radio and the first American Voice that I hears was John B. Gambling, WOR. That's the only thing I remember from those days.

LEVINE: And what was Congress House like? Do you remember that at all?

HAAS: I remember very little there too. I do know we went to services the next day, and but I remember very, very little. I do know that we were treated very, very well and we were happy to be in this country.

LEVINE: And so where did you go when your furniture arrived.

HAAS: We were looking for an apartment in those days, and I don't know who sent us there, but most of the German-Jewish refugees went to Washington Heights. And we got an apartment at, for some reason or other I remember it, because we lived there for a long time, we were at 501 West 173rd street, oh 171st Street, overlooking High-Bridge Park in

Washington Heights. And we lived there for quite a while, when our furniture came we furnished the apartment.

LEVINE: And your father got a job as a baker.

HAAS: My father and my brother the first week we were here, they got the jobs as bakers, which they did for all, for the rest of their lives.

LEVINE: And what did you do when you first got here.

HAAS: Strange as it seems, the first day we went to New York, my mother visit an old time friend of ours, which also partially related to us, who started to go into the shoe machine business. And we visited him in downtown New York on 710 Broadway I believe was the address. And while we visited him, I helped him unpack some machines, and he gave me a dollar and I went home. And I went back the next day, and I stayed there for the next sixty years.

LEVINE: (Both chuckle) And what was the name of that?

HAAS: The name of the company, who is still in business to this day, we became a very large machine manufacturer, the name of the Company was Herman Schwabe [ph] incorporated. And we originally were in the shoe machine business. And I worked there for the rest of my life. And I also went to Harren [ph] High School, an Annex which was on 46th Street and Broadway. I went to High School during the day, and from then on, after two o'clock I went to Schwabe, and at night I went to night school, to learn English and the machine business.

LEVINE: So your brother was finished with school once he was in this country, he didn't continue, or did he go to night school as well?

HAAS: I don't believe he went to night school; we all had to work in order to make a living, and eventually we all made a good living, and we lived comfortably.

LEVINE: Now what was the German refugee community like in Washington Heights, can you say anything about what the community was like at that time?

HAAS: Well more and more German-Jewish refugees moved to Washington Heights, which at that time, a lot of them called the Fourth Reich, because Germany was the Third Reich, and we call it the Fourth Reich. And we all joined Temples in those days, and I would say it was a good life.

LEVINE: I imagine there were people there trying to get other people out of Germany during those first years that you were there. Were there a lot of organizations? Or were there community, any kinds of, what am I trying to say, agencies or places, people that were trying to get other people out of Germany?

HAAS: I really don't remember too much of that because I was between going to school and working and going to night school. I don't really remember what my parents did and what organizations they belonged to. I know we joined a Temple on 165th Street which at that time was called the Audubon Hall Audubon Theater. There was a Temple there with Rabbi Koupel [ph], that's about the only thing I remember about those days.

LEVINE: Let's see, well when you think about it, what would you say have been some of your greatest satisfactions in your life?

HAAS: In those days, just to get away from the Nazis and having a free life in this country. And I enjoyed working and going to school, and we all, from what I can remember, we had a good time, we enjoyed life. I don't remember anything specific.

LEVINE: Was your religion, would you say that your religion was strong when you came to this country?

HAAS: Well we were, our house in Bad Homburg was right next to a large Synagogue, and my brother and I even at our young age, were very active in our synagogue, which was the usual thing for young people. And we were brought up orthodox in those days, even to this day I have many pictures of our Temple because our bakery was two houses away from the Temple, which was later on, I believe in the 1939 area, was burned down. I even have pictures of the temple as it burned down which was later on sent to me by some German-Jewish organizations.

LEVINE: So did you, would you say that your religious life changed much as the years went on when you were in this country?

HAAS: I don't believe so, we may have gone from real orthodox to more conservative, to the best of my knowledge. I don't remember Rabbi, Koppel's affiliations with the Jewish organizations, but as I said, I remember very little because we were all very, very busy trying to make a living.

LEVINE: So then you came, it was still Depression time I guess, but of course the War changed things. What do you remember from your vantage point in this country of World War II?

HAAS: Well in, I believe it was 1942, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy, actually the CB's.

LEVINE: Why did you enlist?

HAAS: Because most of my friends were gone, and I felt an obligation to this country, because this country has been very good to me. And as I said most of my friends either were drafted or enlisted. And since at that time I was very well learned as a machinist, and the CB's were looking for machinist in those days, and that's why I joined the CB's; where I stayed for close to five years. And I went overseas to Okinawa, and all the invasions in the Pacific, and then I ended up in Okinawa for almost a year at the end of the war.

LEVINE: When you think back of your military time, how do you think about it now with hindsight or in retrospect?

HAAS: Although we endured a lot of problems in the Navy, I can only think of the good things, even being in Okinawa for close to a year. In spite of all the problems with the war, when the war was over we did have a good time in Okinawa; I only remember the good things.

LEVINE: And so then when did you meet your wife?

HAAS: I actually, and this is a rather strange story, coming over on the U.S.S. Washington, I met a family called Simon, S-I-M-O-N, and their oldest son was a fellow named Henry Simon. And he was about four years younger than I was, we met on the boat coming over, and we became sort of friends, and when the boat landed here in New York we said goodbye to each other, and the first week we were at the Congress

House and went to services, here was Henry sitting in the front seat because his grandfather was one of the members of that Temple, which was part of the Congress House. And we met again, and since then we became best friends. And a few years later, before the war, he introduced me to his cousin. And we had an ice cream soda together and that was his cousin, whom I married when I came back after I came out of the service, back in 1947, and we got married in 1948.

LEVINE: Did you remain friends with...

HAAS: He became my best friend and we were very, very close friends for all of the years until he passed away, I would say about two or three years ago. We were not only cousins by marriage, but also best friends.

LEVINE: And did you have children?

HAAS: We have two children, a boy and a girl, who are now, my son is going to be 50 next year, and my daughter, to the best of my knowledge is 48, or 47.

LEVINE: And your wife's name, maiden name.

HAAS: Her name was, her maiden name was Edith Lange, L-A-N-G-E. And they came to this country in 1936 on the U.S.S. Manhattan which was the sister ship to the U.S.S. Washington.

LEVINE: From Germany?

HAAS: From Germany.

LEVINE: So how do think about your German, do you feel German and American? And how you think about the German, Jewish, American, - how do you put it all together?

HAAS: Well looking back to Germany, I don't have any good feelings about the German, non-Jewish Germans, because of what they did to the Jews. However, the machine business that I went into under the name of Herman Schwabe Incorporated, after the war we were sent to Germany by the American government to seek out some of the manufactures that were not enemies of the Jews in those days. And we did import machines from Germany, from some friends that the Schwabe family had in Germany- I know it's a little bit complicated. And I went back to Germany many, many times to import machines from there. And I did realize that at that time, that not all of the Germans hated the Jews. Although to this day, many people feel that all of the Germans hated the Jews, there are quite a few that did not. And we went back to Germany many, many times on business and also I went back with my wife to visit the place where she was born, especially I believe on our twenty-fifth anniversary. And we did spend quite some time, and I went back to the place where I was born, we looked at our bakery and I spoke to the people who got our bakery who were very friendly to us. We also went back to the place where my wife was born which is a place called Lampsheim [?], which is near Ludwigshafen in Germany. And we met a lot of Germany people who were not Jew-haters, sort of speak.

LEVINE: Do you think that was healing in any way for you? I mean was that...?

HAAS: I can't get away from the fact that, especially after the ten, fifteen years watching pictures of the holocaust and all of these things which are shone in this country, so I can't get too friendly with them. But we did

have friends, non-Jewish friends in Germany who I corresponded with and whom I worked with for many, many years.

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LEVINE: Do you think the experience of coming here as a 16 year old and starting life again in a new place, do you think that had an effect on your character? On the person you became, on the man you became? That immigration experience, and in this particular case the reasons for it, do you think that made a difference in who you are?

HAAS: I always believe that as much as I hated Hitler and everything what he did, to not only the Jews but to all human beings, the one thing I should be thankful for is that he made us leave Germany; because I believe, and I know, I don't believe, I know, that our life in this country was so much better than what it would have been if I had stayed in Germany. Because I would have grown up as a baker and what I would believe, a rather uninteresting life. My life coming to this country I am forever grateful because we had a wonderful life here to this day, and many, many wonderful experiences. So am I really, don't know that- I really shouldn't say this: I am thankful to Hitler for throwing us out of Germany and let us enjoy a wonderful life.

LEVINE: Thinking of some of the high points, high points or low points, but over your lifetime, what are the things that you think of looking over it now?

HAAS: I think of many of the good experiences that I had, especially in my Navy days for four and a half years. Although there were some very, very bad time, including all of the invasions of al of the Pacific Islands where we were attached to the First Marine Division. But for some

reason or other, I only remember all of the good times that I had in the Navy; and coming back out of the Navy going back with the machine company that I spent the last sixty years with; and the traveling that I did all over the world for the company; and the enjoyment with my family life, my wife and her family and my family, most of which, unfortunately, most of whom, unfortunately, have passed away- which is part of life. But I only remember many, many of the good experiences that I've had, as far as traveling is concerned, as far as family is concerned. Joining the Temples in New York, and the Temple that I belong to this day in New Jersey. The social life, I have no complaints about life and only hope that everybody else should be as happy as I am.

LEVINE: And what is your life like at this point, now that you're retired and your family has grown?

HAAS: I can't think of any bad experiences. Fortunately we're all in fairly good health, of course as you age you have little problems here and there, but none of them are bad enough to really be concerned about. And I only wish that everybody should have as happy a life as I have, in every respect.

LEVINE: And what is your current wife's name?

HAAS: My current wife's name for that last fifty-two years is Edith Haas, her maiden name Edith Lange. And she just reminded me of something that I forgot to say; that we have two wonderful grandchildren, a grandson by the name of Richard who is now 16 years old- and he is about six or seven inches taller than I am, like six foot two, or six foot three- and a granddaughter by the name of Lauren, both who live in Boston. And they're part of our enjoyment in life.

LEVINE: Okay well is there anything else that maybe we haven't discussed or anything you would like to say in closing regarding your coming here, your changing your life and your living your life in this country.

HAAS: The one thing I feel great about is, and at the same time having a guilty conscience, that we lived so close to Ellis Island, less than a half hour from here, we live in Fort Lee, that I have not come here. But I don't know whether that's just an excuse. The last sixty years of our life have been extremely busy which is very good. And since I only retired two years ago, I now have the time to do things, some of the things that I've been wanting to do for many years, and one of them, of course, is coming back to Ellis Island, and I feel really wonderful. And I'd like to pursue it even more, and I expect to come back here several times to do a little bit more of investigating, and remembering my past and also my parents' and my relatives' past.

LEVINE: Okay well I want to thank you so much.

HAAS: I want to thank you for listening to me.

LEVINE: It was a lovely interview, and I'm speaking with Edgar Haas who came from Germany in 1937 at the age of 16. Now Mrs. Haas do you have anything you want to say before we close?

MRS.

HAAS: I don't think so, I think he sort of covered it all.

LEVINE: Yeah it was very conscience, very good. Okay well this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on July 24 the year 2000, and I'm signing off.