



UKHMF TESTIMONY TRANSCRIPT – ERNEST HILTON

[Testimony: 1hr 41 mins. Artefacts: 8'.19"]

A212_L001_0607HV - A214_L001_060743

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript. However, no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended only as a guide to the original recording.

This transcript contains copyrighted material owned by third parties. Any unauthorised use of this content is prohibited without the express permission of the respective copyright holders. All Rights Reserved.

10:00:00:00

Ernest Hilton

My name is Ernest A Hilton. I was born as Ernst Adolf Herz in Munich on October 28th, 1932. I spent three and a half years with my family in concentration camps, of which about two years in Westerbork in Holland, and about one and a half years in Bergen Belsen near Hanover in Germany.

[fade down and back up]

10:00:34:10

Interviewer

[...] So first of all may I thank you very much for agreeing to come and talk to me today um and ask whether you've ever recorded your testimony before?

10:00:44:23

Ernest Hilton

I have not recorded my testimony anywhere else. This is the first time and probably the last chance [*Chuckles*].

10:00:54:08

Interviewer

So it's quite a significant meeting then today.

10:00:56:05

Ernest Hilton

Yes, yes.

10:00:57:18

Interviewer

Why haven't you ever recorded your testimony?

10:01:00:04

Ernest Hilton

I have never been asked and I wouldn't have volunteered I think. Um but that wouldn't mean, that would depend on the circumstances but um my career was a very busy one. I got very involved in it. I liked it and I made a probably unconscious or maybe semi conscious effort to forget about the ice, I never spoke to somebody er by introducing myself as a survivor of a concentration camp let's say. And even today I very rarely do this. Um I speak, like most survivors, as little as possible about this part of my life.

10:01:57:12

Interviewer

Why would you say that is?

10:01:59:02

Ernest Hilton

Well I say that today quite easily because today I don't have this problem, um, but over the years, um especially after the war, I didn't really want to go around as a victim. I, I wanted to be as normal as everybody else who had not gone through this

experience. And so I avoided this and, and this started actually when I went to boarding school after a year of, after liberation. I don't know if you want to go into this now.

10:02:42:01

Interviewer

We'll go through that a bit later on.

10:02:44:10

Ernest Hilton

But I mean going back to the question of disclosing it, look my whole attitude is probably wrapped up in my name change, because when I went to school in America, I, my English was pretty poor still and of course everybody will ask where you from, you know, and I didn't want to be known as where you're from. I tried not to be different and so it, it took me until after or during my university days that I picked on a name and I picked on this name for reasons I can explain later if you like, and um I lived with that and managed very nicely.

10:03:36:21

Interviewer

Well why don't we talk about your name now. What were you and why did you become Ernest Hilton?

10:03:42:13

Ernest Hilton

Yes. Well, first of all the problem with Herz in America was that it was a continuous question of, is it spelled with a T or not?, because Hertz Rent-a-Car was very famous and of course everybody thought I am part of the rental car business and I had to make sure that this is not the case, so I had to spell H e r z and that was one reason why I didn't want to walk around as Herz because the next question was how come you got a German name? and that is exactly what I didn't want to hear.

How did I pick Hilton?, it's an interesting er story because it's almost childish in some ways but my father had four, three brothers. My father stuck to Herz after the war and three of his younger brothers all left Munich before he did. One went to Rhodesia who became Hurst. One went to London who became Hart. The third one, who was a symphony, went to Johannesburg and stayed as Hermann Herz which sounds terribly German; and so I was the only Herz left over after my father because the others had, I didn't, if I had taken one of the three I would've slighted the other two.

10:05:23:04

So at that time Elizabeth Taylor was very much in the news when she was dating, um, the son of Conrad Hil, Hilton, I forgot what's his, what his name now is but it was the son of Conrad Hilton and I was very jealous of this son having a chance to date Elizabeth Taylor, so the next best thing was to become a Hilton.

10:05:55:06

Interviewer

That's a lovely story. Thank you very much. I'm glad I asked you that question. Um a moment or two ago you said you didn't volunteer, or you don't volunteer to tell your

story, does that mean that you needed to be persuaded to come today?

10:06:11:05

Ernest Hilton

No. No today, as I say, today I'm mature enough and if, actually if I had the chance to roll it back and be Hans Herz I wouldn't have any problem with it, but that doesn't work, and I'm stuck with this, and my son has no problem being Ben or Hilton which is another story why he got a German first name but for him there's nothing odd about this. But for me I'm at a stage where I would've said the whole, the whole palaver as the Brits like to say, of changing my name was really not necessary but it was an insecurity on my part which made it useful. Because today people still ask me where am I from, you know, and [*Chuckles*].

10:07:08:13

Interviewer

So you didn't manage to avoid the question. Um, but so sorry Ernest what I, what I meant by that question was did you need to be persuaded. You said that you haven't spent your life talking about the fact that you are a camp survivor.

10:07:21:18

Ernest Hilton

Yeah.

10:07:22:10

Interviewer

Um and, and that you don't talk about it voluntarily. You've never given your testimony before. So why did you decide to come today? Did you need to be persuaded to come? What, what makes you feel like you need to be sitting where you are?

10:07:35:18

Ernest Hilton

Well this actually started because I was asked in a survey about a, um Holocaust Memorial in London. And I answered that in quite some detail be, for a variety of reasons but maybe the main reason being that I used to walk Rabbi Friedlander around Hyde Park and we used to look at this memorial stone that is there and he used to pray quickly over it and I always thought what a pathetic memorial that is to what really happened. So when I got this invitation to express my views, I expressed it very clearly that I figured something better should be in place. Having done that I certainly wouldn't step away from volunteering.

10:08:35:22

Interviewer

So now that you know where the memorial is going to be, and now that you know that a, a cross party group of people are working very hard to make sure there is a new memorial, and that there will be a learning centre, and that it is going to be part of the national agenda, what do you think?

10:08:55:09

Ernest Hilton

I think a lot about this question. I don't know whether you want me to really um, I, I spoke to Max about this just now while we were waiting and I've been to one Holocaust museum, er, and that was the one in Washington D.C. And I went there because a roommate of mine from Colombia University asked me to take him through this museum and that was my first visit; and it was a very touching experience; but and especially for him, for people who have very little, or no knowledge about it, it is an upsetting experience; and I felt that but on the other hand I, I think of a Holocaust museum is not exactly a pleasurable afternoon outing on a Sunday. So how do you sell a Holocaust Museum to those people that should be acquainted with it and of course Max explained about the learning centre and so on. But still if, since you ask me I'm quite sceptical about this, because, um, it is er actually quite a dreadful experience and hard, I would think, it was hard for people to, it's not a word-of-mouth excursion that you're going to sell to a lot of, of your neighbours, and friends.

10:10:51:05

Interviewer

Okay. Let's pick up on that later if we've got time. What about this element of the work that we're doing, the testimony project? Why do you think it's important to give testimony? Why have you decided today to come and talk to me?

10:11:05:09

Ernest Hilton

Well, I think there's, there's very a quick answer to this because there has been, there still is, and there will always be denial that the Holocaust happened. So as a survivor er that's the only way you can make your point that this is not some fantasy, but that it's an actual event and there's lots of evidence to make Holocaust denial a complete nonsense and just a form of antisemitism.

10:11:41:05

Interviewer

Aside from that what else do you think you are contributing by giving your testimony today?

10:11:52:21

Ernest Hilton

You're going to have 112 stories from what I gather. They will all be more or less similar and together we are quite an important voice in this future effort to make the Holocaust a subject work learning about because it has ramifications far beyond the Second World War.

10:12:23:07

Interviewer

You're absolutely right and when you look at the political landscape now and you survey what is going on around the world, there must be part of you that is incredibly anxious that something like that might happen again.

10:12:39:08

Ernest Hilton

Not only that, but in my mind North Korea is the concentration camp of our times and

we do nothing except talk about how to suppress their atomic adventurism.

10:13:02:09

Interviewer

So there is a degree of warning then with your message today?

10:13:09:10

Ernest Hilton

Definitely. There is to, the 'Never Again' is a excellent slogan but I wouldn't put money on it.

10:13:21:23

Interviewer

That, that must be a very depressing place to be then if you, if you genuinely think that we haven't learnt lessons despite the extremity of your experience?

10:13:32:18

Ernest Hilton

I think we have enough evidence that never again has already been broken by the time of the of the Second World War and today. If you look at the whole Balkan wars er with ethnic cleansing whatever you call it, er, Rwanda um there are oodles of examples, nothing approaching six million but it's bad enough. It's bad enough to read that the people that were living in Fallujah are either getting killed by Isis or by the Sunni Muslims. It's also a kind of Holocaust.

10:14:16:00

Interviewer

So history is repeating itself?

10:14:19:00

Ernest Hilton

In, in different formats but with the same end. Yes.

10:14:25:12

Interviewer

Do you feel that we learnt any lessons from the period of history in which you suffered?

10:14:29:23

Ernest Hilton

Not yet.

10:14:32:18

Interviewer

Is it possible?

10:14:35:09

Ernest Hilton

Yes. It's possible. It is possible not because of the Holocaust museum [*chuckles*] in my opinion but because the, the world is changing for the better, despite all these

negative things that we have touched upon, the world is getting better. I not, even though we are aware of the inequality in income the world that, that, the number of poor people in the world has shrunk enormously in the last 50 years and the prospects of making the world a much better place are definitely in place. They're gonna happen. It's, it's er I'm willing to say that we see paradise on earth within the next 200 years. Without any wars, without any er poverty, without anything because technology will bring those things which are most important which is energy and water in abundance. And if we get that in abundance everything else will follow in abundance, in a nutshell [*Chuckles*].

10:15:58:01

Interviewer

I, I sincerely hope that you are right however, religion is something that technology can't sort out and religion is the source of most wars.

10:16:07:00

Ernest Hilton

Yeah. Religion is a handicap but even that I see as religion is already on the defensive even if we have fanatics everywhere but talking about everyman religion is playing a far smaller role today that it has been and I am convinced thanks to Darwin and the author of the *The God Myth*, er, Richard Dawkins that all this will have an impact and that religion will gradually become in the realm of a fairy tale that we allowed ourselves to be swallowed up by through errors or thinking.

10:17:07:11

Interviewer

So I don't need to ask whether or not you have a faith.

10:17:10:15

Ernest Hilton

No.

10:17:11:24

Interviewer

You don't.

10:17:11:20

Ernest Hilton

You don't need to ask.

10:17:13:11

Interviewer

Cause you don't.

10:17:13:22

Ernest Hilton

No.

10:17:14:17

Interviewer

Have you ever?

10:17:15:11

Ernest Hilton

I grew up in a household which was very limited in its Jewish faith, which went to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and that was it. No, I don't think, I didn't attend a seder until many years later and I did not enjoy that either. So, er, [chuckles] especially since the Exodus is supposed another myth that it never happened.

10:17:45:06

Interviewer

And I guess with what you have experienced um your faith would've been tested anyway.

10:17:51:01

Ernest Hilton

Yes. One of the things that occupied me in Bergen-Belsen as always, not so much in the Dutch camp but by, by then I was 11 and what preoccupied me a lot was why did they pick on us, you know. All I knew was I was Jewish, but I didn't know why I'm in this condition and it was not a topic that you sat around a fireplace and discussed in camp but as a child it, it gnawed on me why am I here or why is my family here or my grandparents or so.

10:18:30:16

Interviewer

Did you reach any conclusions.

10:18:32:14

Ernest Hilton

No. Not, not in those days. All I knew is that I want to get out of here alive, yeah.

10:18:44:03

Interviewer

How do you feel towards the Nazis at this point in your life?

10:18:49:12

Ernest Hilton

Oh I, you know, I, I never had a sense of hatred against the Nazi's. That is something that is hard to understand but first of all we survived not thanks to the Nazi's but through a variety of circumstances and so on. But whether it's my parents or myself I think we instinctively knew that if we start talking about hatred we ourselves are diminishing ourselves. So that is not really beneficial, and besides we saw during the time that we were in Bergen-Belsen how the German civilian population suffered thanks to the daily bombing which was certainly no pleasure. We saw how Germany was destroyed on our voyage from [*town name* to Maastricht and all this had an impact on me.

10:20:06:20

Interviewer

So you have some sympathy with Germans obviously not the Nazis?

10:20:13:12

Ernest Hilton

I have no sympathy with the Nazis but the, the Nazis are not, the Nazis are probably not yet completely eradicated but it's irrelevant. They have no power. They have nothing. Um the, you know Germans, the, the interesting thing that may have er made me accept this, were two, maybe two events. One was going to a German school in St Gallen where there thirty-four different nationalities in that boarding school and they were quite a few sons of Nazi bigwigs who had spent the war years in that school because their father managed to get them out of the army and so on. But we were youngsters and I, I wasn't gonna go to this school and start talking about what your father did or so on. That was completely out of the question. My roommate in that school was a Indonesian Swiss boy who had a been in a Japanese concentration camp. So we could talk about some experiences, but we didn't go around school and the teachers didn't talk about it, nobody asked me to go to a, um dinner and, and talk about my time at the Bergen-Belsen experience, even though the management of the school knew the reason I was sent to this boarding school, partly to learn, to catch up and partly for health.

10:22:01:03

Interviewer

Clearly you have had an incredibly busy career and have been very successful, um now that you have more time do you find the memories are coming back and they're more difficult to handle or is that just not the case?

10:22:15:18

Ernest Hilton

No. Um, I have, er, I have certain memories which are difficult to, to take but overall um my memories are quite, I've been to visit Westerbork some years ago. I visited Bergen-Belsen with a Dutch group. That actually was completely meaningless because it was, there was nothing there that you could relate to, but my inner self can relate to experiences but nothing gruesome.

10:22:58:15

I never, I've never ever had a gruesome experience in Bergen-Belsen. Nobody beat me up. Nobody did anything. Gruesome was the daily clearing out of of those that died. But you get used to that. Even then you get used to. And I had a, an affinity somehow as a young boy to even younger children who I met in this camp and I have a very special er memory about a, I don't even know if it was a boy or a girl but probably was four years old that kept clinging to me and couldn't say Ernst and called me Analie and, you know, this is a long time ago, I can picture this and of course they didn't survive either.

10:23:54:16

So I am, I'm not as cold blooded as I may sound, I do have these very special memories, but I don't go around hating Germany. And maybe another reason was my mother, who I mentioned before, is probably um instill this not hatred thing in us because my sister, sorry to jump around, but my sister makes a big point when she talks about her experiences in camp, not to bring hatred into the picture. Because we don't want to perpetuate hatred. We want to be witnesses and that's it.

10:24:46:15

But my mother, my stepfather couldn't drive, my mother could drive. They, my mother couldn't stop going to Germany because she loved Germany after they started rebuilding it. I never went on these trips. She used to, they drove around Europe and also Germany as that picture shows where they met the Mayor. And she used to come back to New York and tell me how wonderful it is in Germany [Chuckles] and I, I, found this always very funny that er she who suffered a lot more probably than I did because I wasn't, I was only a child and I just floated along but she conse, re-conciliated herself to Germany in a very, very broad manner.

[cut for camera]

10:25:41:16

Interviewer

[...] we were just discussing about, um, the chance now to record a message for generations to come a, about the lessons that you have learned through the experiences that you've had. And that's a very hard question, isn't it?

10:25:54:18

Ernest Hilton

Well, yes. Um, and no. Er, yes, yesterday I listened to a tape, er, by an Egyptian, er, scholar who spoke in Arabic with English subtitles and explained to his fellow Egyptians why hating Jews is such a terrible curse on the Egyptians themselves. He spoke for about 15 minutes about all the things that he has learned from university days up of how Egyptian society is brainwashed to hate Jews. And here is a single Egyptian saying that this is completely, er, contrary to the sense of Islam and that Egyptians are hurting themselves far more and that by demonising Jews, which they do it by calling them 'animals', they are belittling themselves. I think that is a message that I would say should be multiplied by a few million and we'd all be getting along better with each other.

10:27:20:15

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Um, we might return to the general questions later on; but in the interests of getting through your story, let's start. Can we go back to 1932. You were born.

10:27:33:16

Ernest Hilton

Yes.

10:27:34:10

Interviewer

And it would be interesting to hear a little bit about your background, your family. Were you one of a number of siblings? Your religion, where you lived, what your parents did.

10:27:48:16

Ernest Hilton

Well, I was born in 1932, October, in Munich and, um, by 1933, the, Hitler had decreed that n, German Jews would lose their nationality. So being made stateless from one day to the next, prompted by family to leave Germany for Holland.

The reason my father chose Holland, g, rather than his brothers who went all over the world, was because Holland was neutral in the First World War, and if there would be a war, he expected Holland to be neutral again in the Second World War. So of course that didn't work out like that.

We moved into a village called Aerdenhout, which is, it's a very nice place near the coast near Zandvoort, which is a famous Dutch beach resort, and I grew up in that environment, which was very pleasant.

10:28:56:06

I learned Dutch, I went to a Dutch, er, kindergarten, I went to a Dutch first and second grade, so maybe more, and

10:29:06:00

by the time I was, um, seven, the war, the invasion of Germany and Holland had taken place in May 1940, and six months, and it only took about three days before the Dutch capitulated,

10:29:27:05

and about six months later, the Germans forced us, asked all Jews to move away from the coast to avoid escapism and we moved to Hilversum. Hilversum is a larger town and we lived there only for about six months before we were, we, we actually received a notice to go to the train station on a certain day where we took a train with other people, and we're sent to Westerbork.

10:30:03:12

Interviewer

Before we talk about that in more detail, which we need to, um, can you tell me a bit more about your parents? Did you have any brothers and sisters?

10:30:11:06

Ernest Hilton

Yes. Um, I have one sister, Erica, who is four years older. Um, my mother, her name is Margot, um, and was trained as a concert pianist which she didn't, er, f, follow once she arrived in Holland. And my father was a manufacturer of accessories, ladies' accessories in Munich and of course lost that business and became an agent for Swiss manufacturers of these things and had a partner, I think, and worked out of Amsterdam.

10:30:57:04

Interviewer

How religious were you? Were you known as a, as a very Jewish family in the community?

10:31:02:22

Ernest Hilton

No, we were not known as far as, I, I presume our neighbours knew that we were Jewish because of the circumstances that brought us, but not because we went to the synagogue, er, every Saturday or Friday, 'cause we didn't.

10:31:20:11

Interviewer

Do you remember experiencing any antisemitism before the world changed?

10:31:24:16

Ernest Hilton

No. I, I never experienced it in Aerdenhout or in [Aerden?], or in Hilversum. Er, it, it's, it's a concept that I learnt about much later.

10:31:39:02

Interviewer

Your father obviously, um, thought carefully about where to take his family, er, and ended up in Holland, as you said, which ended up not being the best choice, but who could know at that point in history? Um, but he tried to emigrate, did he, to other countries as well?

10:31:59:16

Ernest Hilton

Um, m, my grand, my, my grandmother's sister, Lisbeth, er, was already a resident of Palestine. And in, everybody that we knew was trying to get us out and she got us visas to be allowed to emigrate to Palestine. But by the time we got these visas, there was no transport. So we travelled with these visas, and it must have been part of why we ended up in Sternlager in Bergen-Belsen because we had for the Nazis a certain exchange value.

10:32:53:02

Interviewer

So in some way you were protected ultimately?

10:32:56:16

Ernest Hilton

We, we were not protected in the sense of getting better treatment, but we were separated from other people by virtue that we may be used to exchange against German nationals in occupied territory, which never happened.

10:33:18:10

Interviewer

I understand. Thank you. In, er, May, the 10th of May 1940, the Germans invaded Holland. You were about eight years old; I think. Um, what do you remember of that? How aware were you of what was going on in the continent?

10:33:33:21

Ernest Hilton

Oh, I was quite aware, because we had a radio in those days and my parents listened often to the news, but especially they listened to Hitler's speeches. And this is something that I remember very distinctly, not the content, but the tone of voice.

And my parents' body language I would call it today because it frightened me to hear Hitler speak, and of course it frightened my parents too because he had a lot of nasty things to say about the Jews. Not that I understood it, but I was aware that a war was coming. By that, my parents must have talked about it.

10:34:19:05

There was a farmer's field behind our house which was changed into a anti-aircraft gunnery field, so there were soldiers there.

10:34:32:11

The was, I remember my sister coming to my room the day the Germans invaded to tell me the war has started, and then we could see the smoke of the bombing of Rotterdam from our garden in Aerdenhout. So those images are still part of my memory of the war, although there was never any fighting in Aerdenhout.

10:35:01:08

Interviewer

But clearly you were a sensitive child and intelligent and you picked up on what was going on around you, which, as you said, was very frightening for a young child.

10:35:10:11

Ernest Hilton

Yeah.

10:35:12:10

Interviewer

Um, within several months, the Germans ordered all Jews to be moved to the coast. What happened to your? Well, from the coast into land. What, what happened to your family then?

10:35:24:23

Ernest Hilton

We, we moved, er, as a family to Hilversum, rented a house and lived there and went to school there. F, er, we didn't know that this was going to be a short pleasure, but, er, we lived a normal life. The German occupation didn't, I never saw a German soldier, I think, in all those time, well, in the time from the invasion to the time we got to the camp, I don't think I ever saw a German soldier.

10:35:57:20

Interviewer

But then life changed radically, didn't it?

10:35:59:08

Ernest Hilton

Yes.

10:36:00:04

Interviewer

What happened?

10:36:01:11

Ernest Hilton

Well, I mean, getting into this camp was not a, it, it didn't feel as frightening as walking into Bergen-Belsen. But then I was also older and maybe more susceptible to what was, what was at stake. But we were together. The four of us were together in this little, er, hut where we had a living room and a bedroom and a kitchen in the living room and I asked my sister, I think in the beginning, M, in the beginning my father could even go out and get stuff from Amsterdam but gradually that stopped and we must have gotten food from a local kitchen and we were one of the early settlers in Westerbork.

10:36:53:21

And as the, er, persecution of the Dutch Jews grew, the camp grew and my parents were part of this growth and being part of this growth also protected them because one day we were all those who had been left alone, back were checked as to who would go next. And when we came in front of the camp commandant, as a family of four people, er, the elder of the camp, which was by chance our neighbour from Amsterdam, he said, "Walter Herz is in the administration. We need him. Margot Herz is the *Baracke leiterin*?. We need her." So he looked at us four and laughed and said, "Okay, you can stay." Of course we stayed until such a time that the end of Westerbork was in sight, and we were sent to Belsen. But it didn't make us go on one of the transports to Auschwitz.

10:38:01:16

Interviewer

What was it like in Westerbork?

10:38:04:11

Ernest Hilton

It, in the beginning it was even we had some kind of schooling but as it grew, as I said, my mother was a camp, a barrack, er, elder for barrack number 86 I think. So it grew enormously. So that was, and then the weekly transports, we, we knew that this couldn't end up good. Nobody could put their finger on it, but I think the general sense was that we wouldn't see these people again.

10:38:42:08

Interviewer

Were there rumours? Did you know where they might,?

10:38:45:22

Ernest Hilton

There were rumours, yes. There were rumours. Not in terms of saying Auschwitz but, you know, Hitler talked about the Final Solution and probably the rumours swirled around that this, In any case, I don't know what people were told but they packed their suitcases, as we know, and they were travelling and, not all transports ended in Auschwitz by the way because my stepfather ended up in Buchenwald for some reason and his wife ended up in Ravensbrück and she actually died from an Allied strafing of the camp and not because of all the other things you died from in a camp and my stepfather also survived.

10:39:42:24

Interviewer

How did you end up in Belsen?

10:39:44:21

Ernest Hilton

We, we ended up because one day we were told to get on to a train and move there. I mean, we, we were told we were going to Belsen. We didn't know what that meant but when we arrived in Belsen, this, um, Jewish elder that had been operating in Westerbork was also the elder in that camp. His name is Joep Weiss, this is an important name. He is quite a personality and this big book about him, well, not a big book, but he is mentioned. Anyhow, I gave that to Max. But Joep Weiss was standing in the square where we were going to be counted. And when I saw Joep Weiss, it's like I felt, "Hey, this can't be so bad. He is alive. We'll be okay." And my father immediately went to him and said, "How is it?" and he said, "It's not good but you'll manage," or something like that. He was semi-optimistic. So it was not an extermination camp, not that anybody knew that by the time they entered, but anyhow, he had been there already for, I don't know, maybe half a year, so he knew what it was like.

10:41:07:00

Interviewer

And you were 11.

10:41:08:21

Ernest Hilton

In 1943, I was 11.

10:41:13:17

Interviewer

What was it like as an 11-year-old in Bergen Belsen?

10:41:17:19

Ernest Hilton

I, I don't really know. I, I had some friends, and I don't really know how we passed the day. Er, but we played a kind of stick ball I know. We helped with things. For instance, for breakfast, we got a, each camp was delivered big, um, it's like a 50-litre thermos which two boys could carry. One would carry it in front and the other one would carry it at back. And we would deliver this to the various barracks which was a ersatz coffee. And it was hot water basically. But that was only like a five-minute operation or whatever. *[Laughs]* So I, I don't know what I did. And my sister did some work in a, in a lab I think. My mother was not a Baracke leiterin/ in Bergen-Belsen, so I don't know what she did. My father worked in the kitchen for a while, until he was caught carrying, stealing some food and then that was the end of his kitchen job. *[Laughs]* But time passed on.

10:42:46:02

Interviewer

How long were you there?

10:42:48:23

Ernest Hilton

About a year and a half before we were taken out of the camp in April '45,

10:42:57:09

three days before the British Army liberated Belsen and went, we were one of those three lost trains. And that was, that was pretty frightening.

10:43:10:11

Interviewer

What was your main, um, problem in the camp would you say? What did you miss the most?

10:43:16:01

Ernest Hilton

The, the main problem in the camp was not getting enough to eat. There was no other problem. Hygiene, we dealt with it as best as we could. Medical, I don't know what happened to people that got sick. I suppose some people had a bit of aspirin or a bit of this. People had some kind of stuff. My mother [*noise off camera*] always kept something which she called the iron reserve. We did get some Red Cross parcels occasionally and the food that we got was partly eaten and partly kept in this iron reserve, which was when all failed, that would be eaten just before we pass away. Something like that.

10:44:07:08

Interviewer

She was a very enterprising woman, your mother.

10:44:10:08

Ernest Hilton

Well, I'm sure that our survival depended primarily on her activities.

10:44:18:09

Interviewer

Your grandparents arrived in Belsen as well, didn't they?

10:44:21:11

Ernest Hilton

Yes.

10:44:22:04

Interviewer

Was that just by chance that you met?

10:44:24:08

Ernest Hilton

Well, yes. I mean, when we were called in, somehow they stayed in Amsterdam; either because they had some connection or so, but anyway. One day they arrived. My grandfather was 84 when he died of a heart attack in Belsen, so that was a quick end. And my grandmother unfortunately suffered from cancer and was taken ill on

the train, died on the train. Was buried in a ditch, later on exhumed and buried in Trobits, I guess, and that was the end of the grandparents.

10:45:11:20

Interviewer

Because you were so young, um, do you have memories of Belsen or what it must have been like or, or fewer memories than you would expect?

10:45:25:14

Ernest Hilton

Of what it was like?

10:45:28:03

Interviewer

What it was like in Belsen?

10:45:30:02

Ernest Hilton

Well, I, I remember it because we played under the tower of one of the guards because there was a bit of space there where we could run bases. And, um, I remember it because every morning we had a countdown. Everybody that could walk, and that was a question of degree, had to appear on a, um, There's a name for it in the army where they, troops are counted every day. It's, Anyway, this is an,

10:46:12:10

Interviewer

Appel

10:46:12:23

Ernest Hilton

Appell. In German it's called Appell where you were counted to make sure that nobody had absconded - which was impossible - and also to count the dead for that night. And that could take hours because of either chagrin or because somebody miscounted, until it was done. So that, that was the opening of the day, seven days a week. And it was winter or summer, rain or shine, we were counted with this nonsense, so that was not a good way to start a day. And what we did afterwards was probably have whatever we got for breakfast, and I don't know. I, I mean, there was no school.

10:47:03:13

Interviewer

What did you do with your time?

10:47:05:24

Ernest Hilton

I probably slept a lot. *[Laughs]* I would think. Because, um, there was nowhere to go. And, I mean, and, and one of the things was that when, we were outdoors but when there was a air, er, attack on a, So when the air force, the Allied air force flew over our camp, none of us could be outside. Everybody had to be inside. So, and that

happened every day because these attacks were non-stop practically. Being inside probably, what do you do? Maybe, er, we talked, we, I don't know. It's, it's, I can't remember what we did except, er, that I liked to watch the planes flying overhead and I probably sneaked outside sometimes because actually that was one of my past times because there was a fantastic thing to watch all these planes flying in formation and I had a story which I created for myself that these pilots were eating cheese sandwiches up there. I thought if they would only know I'm down here, they would drop one. *[Laughs]*

10:48:39:12

Interviewer

Was that your fantasy was to eat a cheese sandwich?

10:48:41:06

Ernest Hilton

That was, that was just one of my fantasies, but it was, it, it was a real fantasy. In retrospect, nobody ate anything up there *[Laughs]* because it was a very tough and dangerous job.

10:48:57:12

Interviewer

What did it feel like to be surrounded by so much death in Belsen?

10:49:03:09

Ernest Hilton

You know, as a ten, 11-year-old, you saw corpses daily and this is not, er, thi, this is, you know, this is not something that creates, Maybe the first few times, it's a event, but after that, you, You see, these corpses were almost all naked because the moment somebody died, inmates would steal whatever clothing was available from the dead. So this was a very ugly sight.

10:49:43:20

Interviewer

Before we move on to talk about the lost train, is there anything that you would, could or would like to say about Belsen?

10:49:51:15

Ernest Hilton

Yes, my, my father was caught with stealing whatever it was, I don't remember. Um, he was punished by 24 hours of solitary confinement and when they brought him back, I was standing for some reason near the gate and the SS officer who brought him back said I, in German, he said something like this. I said, he said, "I bring back your father. He is in good shape, and he will be alright." You know, that was not somebody that you could hate. You know, I was very happy to hear what he had to say. And my father walked in and said it was okay. I never asked what he did and maybe, maybe they treated him to a meal because my father, my father had a, dark, a leather, black leather coat. He had blue eyes and when he was young, he was blond and he was over six feet tall. And in that black coat, he looked just like a Nazi officer, like anybody else in that kind of milieu. So maybe, *[Laughs]* And he

fought in the First World War. So maybe they only mentioned that they, I don't know. They didn't harm him.

10:51:18:10

Interviewer

Okay. Anything else about Belsen?

10:51:22:17

Ernest Hilton

Yes, there were kapos. Kapos, because the, the number of inmates grew and the number of guards didn't, they took inmates from prison, which, on certain charges, and made them deputy guards and these deputy guards were quite nasty. They used to beat people up with a rubber truncheon if they did something they didn't like. And one day I found one of these rubber truncheon in my walk around and I brought it to my mother, and she said, "Quick, get rid of it because [*Laughs*] we don't wanna be caught with this. It's not for us." So that was a, a special experience. And the kapos, actually I, maybe I should mention it. We had one nurse in this camp, a Jewish lady that had a, um, what is it called? A needle, a,

10:52:28:16

Interviewer

Syringe?

10:52:29:21

Ernest Hilton

Syringe. I, I don't know whether, what she could. Whether she could sterilise it. But I know one of the kapos got quite ill and she killed him with an injection of air.

10:52:42:22

Interviewer

Of air?

10:52:44:06

Ernest Hilton

Yes. An air bubble.

10:52:46:05

Interviewer

And that was revenge was it?

10:52:48:03

Ernest Hilton

It, well that was just so that he wouldn't get better.

10:52:51:07

Interviewer

How, how did that happen?

10:52:52:23

Ernest Hilton

I wasn't there. I was told this story. But I would believe it.

10:52:58:08

Interviewer

Okay. Thank you. How did you eventually leave Belsen?

10:53:03:24

Ernest Hilton

Well, we were marched out of Belsen in a, in, in quite a cold condition. We walked pa, on a road where there were German, um, machine gun emplacements, so we knew that they were expecting a fight in that area and we walked to a clearing in the woods where there was a cattle train, er, goods wagons and we were told to get inside, and everybody got inside, more or less. They locked the door, and the train took off. About a thousand people altogether.

10:53:46:00

Interviewer

And you were with your whole family?

10:53:47:11

Ernest Hilton

And we were in there with my family and my dying grandmother, whom they transported from Belsen in a truck to the train, because she couldn't walk. That was, But, you know,

10:54:03:12

Interviewer

Did you know where you were going?

10:54:06:15

Ernest Hilton

We had no idea, but we didn't think that was gonna be very, Basically we thought, "This is it." I mean, the third time, we won't be lucky. And, um, it was quite a, It was a ride through no-man's land until we got to Berlin. And we were on the outskirts of Berlin and by that time, the guards had already opened our cars because they knew we need to get out. We, er, had to get water, we had to wash, we had something, So and most of the time the train didn't move because there was, they di, they didn't know where to go, I guess. So one day that we were stuck in one of these sidings, my mother said, "You see that farmhouse over there in the field. Go over there and see if you can beg for some food." And so Erica and I walked over to this farmhouse, and we rang the bell, and the woman came, quite prepared, it must be happening all night long, and she said, "The only thing I can give you is potato peel." And we said, "Thank you very much," because potato peels was a delicacy and we built a little fire. We must have a pot. We cooked the potato peels, and we ate them very happily. And you know potato peels have most of the vitamins of a potato, in case you are not aware of this. So we really got a good thing there, in retrospect. *[Laughs]*

10:55:45:18

Interviewer

Fantastic.

10:55:48:23

And we also met other trains on this trip. In one place we were in a, quite a busy siding with all kinds of people on trains. Nothing, cattle cars. And there was one with Russian POWs and they, We had cigarettes, I think. How we got hold of these cigarettes, I don't know. But we traded cig, cigarettes was the currency during the war. And we traded these cigarettes for some food that the Russian soldiers had. So that helped us get to the next stage.

10:56:28:19

Interviewer

What happened, what happened next?

10:56:30:04

Ernest Hilton

Next is where we were in a wooden clearing, and somebody opened the door and started walking. There were no guards, so they told everybody, "The guards have gone. We are free." So what do we do? We walked to a village nearby, which is Tröbitz, but there were no, there was nobody in that village because the Russian troops were nearby and we found a rail car tanker with condensed milk, and we went into the houses and took whatever containers we could find and took this condensed milk out of the car and walked it back to the train so that those that couldn't walk could eat some condensed milk.

10:57:22:09

And at that same time, the two Russians on horseback came and that we knew that it was all over, that we were safe, and that it was just a question of we, what would, how, how would the Russians deal with us. And these two guards, these were two, er, scouts and they just spoke to somebody. They said they would send help and gradually they came. They brought us all to the village. Er, I guess that couldn't walk they transported, and we got, the k, us kids, as a kid, I got undressed by, They got the women from the next village. I got a bath, I got my hair shorn, I got a doctor from the Russian Army to look at me, and he ordered me into a hospital. And actually I was the least sick. I was the most emaciated but not, Most people had typhoid and that was the reason for the hospitalisation. Anyhow, I was three days in that hospital and then I was released. And meanwhile, my father and sister had very s, severe illness but they survived it. They lived, we lived again in a house that the Russians said, "Take whatever house you like, and we'll take care of you."

10:58:48:05

Interviewer

And then what?

10:58:49:19

Ernest Hilton

And then their process began to bring us back. But basically half the people that were liberated from that train died in the process of being liberated and are buried in Tröbitz. And, um, since we were, The, the Dutch contingency was picked up, I think, in May by the American Army that drove through the Russian zone. Got obviously permission. And they drove us to Dresden, which was the nearest big city. And we

spent a, a few days in Dresden and I have an interesting anecdote about that because my mother and I were standing in the queue for s, for the usual, some food. And while we were waiting the, the German woman behind us said, "Your son has terrible shoes. Why don't you let me take him home because my son doesn't need it anymore and he can choose, or I will choose a pair of good shoes for him." So my mother said, "Okay, go ahead." And as I walked with this German to her apartment, I got rather frightened because I said, "Hey, what if she is going to kill me in the last minute?" so I was quite concerned and we passed an American camp, I mean army camp, and there was a black soldier on duty, and it was the first time I've seen a negro and I kept looking at him to make sure that he would remember me for some, I think it, If I don't get back, he'll know I went this-a-way. This woman gave me a nice pair of shoes, walked me back to the queue and she was very nice. And, you know, that is, Er, the reason I bring up this incident is that hatred diminishes with something like that.

11:00:57:01

Interviewer

It's the kindness of strangers that so often saw people through.

11:01:04:13

Ernest Hilton

Yeah. Another thing that happened in Dresden which is worth noting maybe [is that for the first time in my life, I ate in a restaurant in Dresden and on the door it said, "Verboten für Deutsche," forbidden for Germans. So that was [*Laughs*] definitely a place that we liked. [*Laughs*]

11:01:27:10

Interviewer

A nice circular reference isn't it?

11:01:27:21

Ernest Hilton

Yeah.

11:01:31:08

Interviewer

What else can you tell me about that period?

11:01:34:07

Ernest Hilton

Well, we, we moved from step to step. I, I think the next step was Maastricht, which is, is a big city in the southern part of Holland, where we were really processed by the Dutch authorities for our return into civilian life in Holland and we spent two weeks there, because it was partly a quarantine and partly to give us our documentation, our food rations and so on and so on. And my father stole an egg in this villa where we were all, or it was a palace, and I was very, very embarrassed at that time that he had stolen one egg, but he said he couldn't resist it. [*Laughs*] So I don't know what he did with that egg but and, and he didn't get punished or anything but, [*Laughs*]

11:02:32:21

Interviewer

It was around this time that your parents decided to divorce, is that right?

11:02:35:15

Ernest Hilton

That was that, that was in the making because the, the barrack, er, elder, the man who was, the male leader for my, with my mother, they hit it off at, in Westerbork, but they both were married, so, I don't know what happened, but they must have had a pledge that if they survive, they will get married after the war. That he would divorce his wife and my w, er, mother would, would divorce, er my, hu, my father. And actually if, about two or three weeks after we moved into a rental apartment in Amsterdam, this man, Eugene Poor arrived at our door because he went to the Red Cross lists and saw that my mother with family had returned. And he came - in Holland, even in those days - with a bunch of red roses and that was the beginning of the end of the marriage between my father and mother. Of course, it wasn't an immediate thing. And my father was on good terms with this man, and he knew what was gonna happen and this was a very amicable divorce which took actually place in Mexico for reasons of documentation I imagine.

11:04:09:09

Interviewer

It's extraordinary to think, isn't there, that, um, the human spirit can still fall in love and still make decisions like that with a backdrop of a concentration camp.

11:04:19:12

Ernest Hilton

Yes.

11:04:20:07

Interviewer

There's got to be a film in there somewhere.

11:04:22:05

Ernest Hilton

A powerful, A, a, *[laughs]*

11:04:25:13

Interviewer

How did you feel about that?

11:04:27:18

Ernest Hilton

I had; I didn't have a clue. This was kept secret from me. I didn't learn about this until 1947 when my mother was divorced. It took a while for this divorce, um, and she wrote me a letter that I received on the Rosenberg Institut in, in my boarding school and, er, she explained the circumstances and I knew this man, er, so I was shocked, no doubt, because, er, even though I was afraid of my father - that's another story - but this was, er, quite a shocking event.

11:05:17:24

Interviewer

You'd already been through quite a lot, hadn't you?

11:05:20:09

Ernest Hilton

By then?

11:05:21:23

Interviewer

Yeah.

11:05:22:19

Ernest Hilton

Yes. [*Laughs*] But I mean, you know, d, divorce is a concept which as a, even a 12-year-old, you know, I didn't grasp it except that I now was gonna have a stepfather and he would look after us.

11:05:43:10

Interviewer

But I guess it's one of those things, isn't it, where you've experienced, or you parents had, had experienced such hardship that it goes one of two ways. You know, you, you've one life and so therefore you need to make decisions to make you as happy as possible in that one life.

11:06:00:22

Ernest Hilton

Yeah. And they were a very happy couple. I must say, er, my, my stepfather, er, was a devoted, er, husband and he was a great father to my sister, who always resented him by the way, [*laughs*] and, and to me. And my career is undoubtedly, um, successful due to his input.

11:06:32:19

Interviewer

Mm, and his influence.

11:06:34:13

Ernest Hilton

Yeah.

11:06:34:23

Interviewer

So your mother then moved to New York. Is that right?

11:06:37:23

Ernest Hilton

Yes.

11:06:38:16

Interviewer

To be with your stepfather. Er, your father remarried. You, you then went to a boarding school.

11:06:43:12

Ernest Hilton

Yes, I,

11:06:44:12

Interviewer

So how old were you at this point?

11:06:46:06

Ernest Hilton

When I came to the States, I was 13.

11:06:51:00

Interviewer

And was this when you started to feel that, um, desire not to be different?

11:06:57:15

Ernest Hilton

Um, no. This started in school.

11:07:01:18

Interviewer

Yeah

11:07:02:04

Ernest Hilton

You know, and I went to this, I went to a Quaker boarding school in, in a rural setting in Ohio. Partly because my mother's brother who lived in a rural setting in New Jersey figured that this is the right place for Erica and for me because we don't speak good English and the Quakers are very nice and they will, a boarding school will be easier than a public school. So my sister went only for one year and graduated and she liked it. And I went for two years and graduated and didn't like it very much, although in retrospect there are very good aspects to that two years there.

11:07:52:03

Interviewer

Do you think you were in any way suffering from post-traumatic shock with everything that you'd been through? How, how could you process what you had experienced at such a young age?

11:08:04:04

Ernest Hilton

I think that is, er, a question of personality. I probably compartmentalisation. I must have had the ability to take my current, my today's life as today's life. Or maybe the camp made this, because every day that you lived was, you know, like a little gift. So

maybe I learnt in camp just to focus on what's happening today and enjoy it sort of and not mix up the bad and the good.

11:08:40:10

Interviewer

Is that how you've lived your whole life?

11:08:42:23

Ernest Hilton

Probably. Probably. Now that you ask it. [*Laughs*] It's, it's a question of how I compartmentalised my, my living. And the camp is definitely part of that living but it's, it hasn't, it has not destroyed me in any way, I think. If anything it probably made me a more, um, rational person.

10:09:14:21

Interviewer

Can you say a bit more about that?

11:09:17:08

Ernest Hilton

Well, because,

11:09:18:19

Interviewer

Because it's, it's rather an extraordinary thing to say that, um, being in a concentration camp in, in total for three years?

11:09:28:04

Ernest Hilton

Three-and-a-half years. So I think,

11:09:30:11

Interviewer

But it didn't destroy you, but it made you

11:09:31:04

Ernest Hilton

I think surviving it. Because afterwards, you still wonder how you survived. I, I, what I would say you don't do this as a daily exercise in step-by-step but if the fact that you survived and that you've seen such misery, um, must create something in your brain that says, "This is a part of your life that you don't want to, er, base as a sample of the rest of your life, if that's the right thing. I mean, I, I don't think I ever dissected it, because I've never been asked these questions, but in, in reality, er, now that it's a question, I, I have the skill to take every day as it comes. I've had by the way three heart attacks and lived through that. And that is also not so easy to swallow and live with, but I'm, I still say I'm in good shape and, um, I have a pretty positive attitude to living, if not very positive attitude to living.

[cut for camera card change]

11:10:55:13

Interviewer

Ernest we were, we were talking [...] um about the fact that we've been through a lot of your story but that actually you have a fairly unique perspective of as a young child being in Belsen um and some of the other people that we've spoken about a who've been in Belsen were five or four but actually that your memories are quite unique um and I was going to ask you if you could bare to relive some of that for us um because that's the whole point of this project is to shine a very ugly light on the depths of humanity.

11:11:33:09

Ernest Hilton

[...] I think one of the daily experiences that even a 11-year-old has in those conditions is fear. Fear never leaves you. It's with you day and night because you don't know what's going to happen next. So that is definitely a, a recollection I have that whether it was my personal fear as much as the whole surrounding in which I was which created the fear. Basically will we see the following day. Can we survive and that kind of fear. It was not the fear of the guards, and the SS hardly ever entered the camp except to count and when they did count, you know they didn't kill anybody, they didn't kick anybody, they just counted and that was a, there was degradation for the old, elderly people. As a child the, it was a nuisance.

11:12:45:16

Interviewer

What does fear feel like for an 11-year-old?

11:12:53:08

Ernest Hilton

Pretty desperate. Pretty desperate, because you can be afraid but when you look around you and you're sitting in a barbed wire box there isn't much escape from that fear. So the only salvation always was that the war would end before we end. That was the solution, stay alive until the Germans are defeated. And when we, for, for example, when we heard the, the news when Roosevelt died, the Germans made sure that we knew Roosevelt had died and I remember - even though I knew nothing about the President Roosevelt - but I knew he was the leader of the American powerhouse. I know we all felt very depressed at this news, but it didn't really change the events of the war.

11:14:00:03

Interviewer

I'm trying to imagine what it must be like as a child to look to a grown-up because grown ups are supposed to protect you and the grown ups were actually trying to kill you and how fearful that must have made you and how distrustful it must have made you.

11:14:16:12

Ernest Hilton

But the, the a, the fear was not based on some sort of violent action by the enemy because that didn't really happen, at least not in my experience. The fear was, the overall fear of being a prisoner in a war zone which is what it was and whether we

can, whether physically we can survive; or whether we will be murdered at some point because the war is lost so why keep us alive.

11:15:00:08

Interviewer

Do you remember how your parents tried to counsel you through those fears?

11:15:06:24

Ernest Hilton

No. I, I don't remember. I mean I think my, my mother tried probably to whatever she could do she would do for me, and she was my guiding light. Not my sister and my father wasn't even in the same barrack so my relationship was purely with my mother and my sister was there an, an we were a unit an but we didn't, we didn't sit around and talk, how is your fear today, you know it, it, it was everything but that.

11:15:47:00

Interviewer

Did you ever doubt that you would survive?

11:15:49:16

Ernest Hilton

Probably. There was a, a part towards the end. I know my mother was very frightened that I wouldn't make it because I was not interested in food anymore. When, when the question of eating came, I said you eat I don't need it, I don't need it. And of course she made me eat because I may have been at a level of deprivation where the body had shut down partly.

11:16:21:09

Interviewer

What does having a full meal mean to you now. When there's a full meal of food in front of you, do you have flashbacks to that time?

11:16:31:08

Ernest Hilton

[Laughs] Um, there's very little to flashback on in terms of meal. But food has become probably, food for a survivor became a big deal after the war until today. I'm a absolute foodie [laughs] even though I don't weigh all that much nowadays. But that's another story be, you read about Montignac Boutique and that I worked for 12 years running this café and telling people how to eat healthier an all that at a time when nobody really was very aware of this sort of thing and which last week *The Times* had a huge article which you may have read, that calorie counting is nonsense, which is what we preached from 1995 till 2007 at the Montignac Boutique.

11:17:40:02

Interviewer

But you, you believe that your interest in food came from your starvation a, in the camp?

11:17:48:04

Ernest Hilton

I think so. I think the fact that food is no longer a question of availability but just of choosing, yes.

11:18:00:05

Interviewer

What did you do during the days?

11:18:03:19

Ernest Hilton

In the camp? Well I mean, the fact is we, I did very little I think. But there are, there are certain routines which one does in a camp in a day. One, and the fact is, I slept in the same bed with my sister because everybody had to double up because there was not enough space; so we slept like this, head on outside and the feet together, and in this bed, of course there were lice, so every morning you went on a lice hunt and you had to, I had to take care of my sister's hair, she would take care of me. The blankets we would kill, everybody would try and empty the bed from lice. That was one thing you did in a camp.

11:18:58:15

In terms of hygiene, there was also, there was, there was a, um public loo which is really called something else, latrine, it's like an army latrine. These are holes in the ground and so on. And so we did our business in the latrine and there was on the other side of the latrine, there was men and women so that was at least separate and there was water, there was cold water so we could wash ourselves, um, and we clean ourselves after the loo by using a rag which we clean in the water afterwards and that was part of our daily routine.

11:19:46:00

There wasn't a lot of need for making poos because we didn't eat a lot so that was probably a once-a-day event. I can't remember [*chuckles*] but since I bring this up it's part of being alive.

11:20:05:10

Interviewer

Absolutely.

11:20:06:10

Ernest Hilton

Yeah.

11:20:07:03

Interviewer

Um how did you cope with death?

11:20:11:00

Ernest Hilton

If you see a lot of corpses lying around, you, you have coped with it. There was nothing you know, first of all I didn't know these people, a I could see corpses, not only in my camp, but in the camp next door because they would lie outside to be collected. So we could see these, and they would come with a wagon and the wagon

would be heaped full of corpses. So you see that every day, you become quite immune this is, this is part of the daily activity to clear out the corpses of the previous night.

11:21:04:15

Interviewer

At this vantage point in your life can you believe what you've just said?

11:21:09:06

Ernest Hilton

That I, that I accepted it as? Yes, as an 11-year-old I've never been to a funeral by the time I been to 11 so I had no idea what people do at a funeral.

11:21:22:06

My grandfather died in Belsen and that was during the day. He had a heart attack in the loo and died instantaneously and that was still in a time when, when somebody died a horse and cart came from outside the camp to collect the body and the family, including me, walked behind this cart with the body of my grandfather was lying, until the gate from whence he was taken to a mass grave and buried with others. So that was almost civilised but that's the only time I ever remember somebody being accompanied into the final goodbye.

11:22:19:03

Interviewer

And now how do you feel about death having seen so much of it, are you frightened of death now?

11:22:28:03

Ernest Hilton

[Sighs]. I think to a certain extent everybody is frightened of death because we don't know how it will be and how we will cope with it. You know the fact, whether that is of interest to this topic or not, it occurred to me years ago that, the fact that most of my family on the male side died of heart attacks may have been the reason we are called Herz because my grandfather on my father's side died also very young of a heart attack. My father died when he was just 54. I would have died in 1981 if I hadn't been lucky enough that by-passes had been um established as a solution to this problem. So in a way I imagine I'm gonna die of a heart attack, I've had three, that's it. Ah, but you know nobody knows and so in terms of otherwise I have lived a very full life in any case, in spite of all this, and I've reached an age which is much better than anybody else in my family so I'm optimistic.

11:23:55:21

Interviewer

And you've had an extremely blessed and full rich life haven't you?

11:23:59:06

Ernest Hilton

Yes, I did.

11:24:00:12

Interviewer

How much of your early experiences have driven the rest of your life? How influenced are you by the beginning?

11:24:12:11

Ernest Hilton

I, I, I don't think I am very driven by my early influences. Um I was good at my work; I like my work which was very important, and my work and my camp days didn't really meet very often. They may have met at an occasion but,

11:24:49:13

Interviewer

But I'm thinking more about your psyche, about the fact that you were a survivor, that you went through so much hardship that you weren't ever gonna give up, that you were so determined. Whether or not that filtered through, whether it filtered through to your career or, or how you chose to be a parent yourself?

11:24:06:06

Ernest Hilton

No I think that my survival in Belsen was not the question of my mental capacity but of the care I got from my mother and my constitution being just at the edge of survival. Probably a week or two later I would have been also out of it. But I haven't dwelled on that question until today, yeah.

11:25:42:00

Ernest Hilton

Once you survive you, you have dealt with the worst part of living [*laughs*] in a way.

11:25:54:08

Interviewer

Absolutely, you've seen the worst of it so everything else, I guess is um, is measured by that. So does that mean you're an optimist?

11:26:04:08

Ernest Hilton

Yes. I, I'm an optimist in, on a grand scale. I'm a pessimist in small things.

11:26:12:08

Interviewer

Is that not just very Jewish?

11:26:14:00

Ernest Hilton

Yes [*Laughs*].

11:26:15:13

Interviewer

[*Laughs*] I, I come from a Jewish family as well so I'm, I'm allowed to say that. Um what about your parenting and your own son. How much of your experiences did you share with him?

11:26:28:13

Ernest Hilton

Oh we, I think we talked a lot, I think my son could easily repeat many of these stories because, not quite in the same intensity by any means but, um, he knows a lot and whatever he didn't know he will know from the DVD.

11:26:49:15

Interviewer

It, that's very interesting that you chose to be open with him as he grew up, is that right?

11:26:55:08

Ernest Hilton

Yes, yes.

11:26:56:08

Interviewer

Because a lot of people chose not to, to tell their family um but it's probably much more healthy isn't it, to share?

11:27:04:02

Ernest Hilton

Yes an maybe, Si sometime encouraged me to tell him also. There, you know, this, this, this camp story I've never really mentioned it to anybody in Thailand. Her family know but they don't take much of an int, I mean for them it's too far off. It's something completely out of their experience especially as Buddhists to treat people like this is unheard of – unthinkable - so but it's a, yeah they, it's a, yes I think it's a good point that in Buddhism they would just find this OK, everybody finds it unimaginable but in Buddhists they would have a different dimension.

11:27:56:24

Interviewer

Well it's beyond any, any comprehension isn't it, in terms of what Buddhism stands for. Um let's talk about Judaism and you as a Jew, are you proud of that?

11:28:09:17

Ernest Hilton

Ah, no. I'm definitely not proud of being a Jew because I, I don't know, er the, the story is that we should be proud of our heritage um, but - and that is a very nice point and having survived for a long time is, um, anthropologically a very interesting phenomenon - but as an individual I'm, got nothing to do with it, I just happened to be born into this condition. I didn't help it, I helped it only in survive, in as far as I survived Belsen, so I'm extending Judaism if you will but a proud of Judaism is a concept that is not part of my makeup. Because I don't believe in any religion and therefore Judaism is a religion above all, isn't it? And this religion is just as much a myth as every other religion.

11:29:40:02

Interviewer

How do you feel towards Germany today?

11:29:42:19

Ernest Hilton

[Laughs] I thought we [Laughs]. I

11:29:52:00

Ernest Hilton

Let me put it this way, I have often thought what would I, what would I have been if there hadn't been a Hitler, and I would be Ernest Herz in Munich and God knows what I would be, but I wouldn't be anything like what I am now. So I'm quite satisfied with what I am now, so I have no wish to be German again. If people talk about their roots with a certain nostalgia that may happen if you're older and have lived there, and many people do have that and some even move back. And I've back, been back to Munich. I have no family in Munich, I have no infinity to Munich. For me Munich is a tourist destination like Vienna [laughs] to pick a good one [laughs].

11:30:52:00

Interviewer

And you would visit there?

11:30:53:07

Ernest Hilton

Yes.

11:30:54:06

Interviewer

You don't have a problem?

11:30:55:08

Ernest Hilton

No.

11:30:57:00

Interviewer

How and why did you settle here?

11:30:59:23

Ernest Hilton

A that was the Bonsall story. Because my, my stepfather's business was a small version of Bonsall Pulp and Paper, it was Moulder & Grinder? in Vienna, American Paper and Pulp in America. We had quite a good business, but we were not manufacturers of paper, we were just exporters. Whereas [Bonsal] was manufacturing in Austria. Any how [Bonsal] came to London and re-established themselves and I worked out of New York and I um, see the trick of being an, an agent for paper mills or anything else is that you have agents throughout the world selling for you and the competition begins at an agency because an agent will sell nail polish, hairspray, shoes and paper, whatever he can get hold of he will sell it. So I decided to improve our business, I should become an area manager. I moved to Bogota, Colombia with the blessing of the partners and I spent a year running

around the South American circuit helping the agents sell so that I forced myself into their time and got us up the ladder so to say and it worked so good that [Bonsal] in London came to Bogota and asked me if I would like to join them and at that point I was the only young man in that company and I went back to New York and I said, what do I, what shall I do, shall I stay with you, are you going to keep going, or do you wanna pack it up and retire? And they said we are ready to retire, you go to [Bonsal]. And that's, that story.

11:33:05:21

Interviewer

Have you enjoyed living in the UK?

11:33:08:01

Ernest Hilton

Yes. My best, the best, I, hate to say this perhaps but, the best part of living in London for me is to be near Paris.

11:33:20:08

Interviewer

But why don't you move to Paris then?

11:33:23:20

Ernest Hilton

Because there was no [Bonsal] there.

11:33:25:03

Interviewer

Oh I see, OK but you could now.

11:33:27:12

Ernest Hilton

I, I had, you know I came to London with a purpose. Paris for me is, I consider myself partly French with some reason because my grandmother on my mother's side was born in Metz when it was French, so she was a fluent French speaker. That's maybe by the by, but my stepfather, for my graduation from high school, he sent me for three weeks to Paris as a graduation present to live with far off family, Hungarian family, who had settled there, and I spent three weeks site seeing Paris with their help. So I fell in love with Paris. I became a Francophile in 1949, when Paris was still into, after the war and a, I never stopped my, I love France, I love the language, I love the culture, I love reading about Napoleon [laughs].

11:34:36:13

Interviewer

Yeah, OK. Um we're coming to the end Ernest, so I just wanted to ask you a, a couple of other questions. One of them is picking up on something that you said in the break a, after your three heart attacks that you have never even told your cardiologist that you are a, a camp survivor um which made me think how do you introduce yourself to new friends, I mean obviously you're not defined by your past, but it's an extraordinary thing that you've been through and yet it's not something that you present openly is it?

11:35:10:00

Ernest Hilton

Yeah. I, I can give you an anecdote. [*Clears throat*] Because, my experience is, is, is that Germans, especially of my generation, with whom I did start this conversation, don't really want to hear about this. They don't want to have the pain of explaining that they were or were not or whatever, so that was already one, that was a signal not to talk to people of my generation; but I have a friend of my generation, who, with whom I went to school in Switzerland and who is an Austrian, and who is certainly not a Nazi offspring because his family lived the war in Kenya um, his children from Germany came to visit and I came to visit him at the same time. And Max, my, my friend, introduced me to this daughter and son and said you know, Ernest was in the concentration camps, and these people were extremely interested, and we spent about four hours talking about everything that I, that they wanted to know. They were genuinely interested and moved by what I could tell them and of course under those circumstances I was, there was no hesitation on my part. But that is a situation that is quite rare.

11:36:59:07

Interviewer

Do you wish more people asked you about it?

11:37:02:08

Ernest Hilton

Probably. Because it is a, it's not a topic everybody can talk about [*laughs*] yeah.

11:37:10:24

Interviewer

But maybe it's your duty to tell more people about it, maybe now that you've started to talk, maybe it's [*talking over each other*] something that you can feel you can continue?

11:37:19:19

Ernest Hilton

But I, you know I can't, I cannot tackle this topic, and I shouldn't tackle this topic from a point of view to prevent the next Holocaust because we should assume that mankind is a step better and there won't be a next Holocaust. Because otherwise that if I start saying if, if, if I do this, I mean it's, it's, You know the Holocaust is such an industrialised killing machine that it's very difficult to imagine this ever reappearing in that format. Maybe I'm completely wrong. I know you can kill more people with nuclear weapons, but that isn't the same thing. But, um, I didn't feel ever the need, what is the word when you promote someone's religion, apostelise [*sic.*] or my, my camp experiences.

11:38:30:09

I, my sister obviously is completely different because she volunteers, she goes to these events and speaks to children and university students a for the last, I don't know, ten years in Philadelphia and isn't, never says no and gives them this a maybe an hour's worth talk about.

11:38:58:00

And people always want to know the gruesome bits, but my sister never allows this in, she says the gruesome bits you know anyway, she said talk about the mental bits and the fact that we do not hate Germans.

11:39:14:07

Interviewer

Well that's the most extraordinary, um, kind of conclusion really to all of this. That somehow you've managed to find some peace.

11:39:23:17

Ernest Hilton

Yeah.

11:39:24:10

Interviewer

Through it.

11:39:25:00

Ernest Hilton

Yeah.

11:39:25:24

Interviewer

Is there anything in preparing for this meeting that you thought that you'd have a chance to say that you haven't said yet, that I haven't asked you?

11:39:34:10

Interviewer

Is there anything that you'd like to say?

11:39:39:24

Ernest Hilton

I think I'm full [*laughs*]. I'm fully, um, emptied if that's an expression. I have, I'm blank in terms of anything that I may have overlooked and that would benefit the interview.

11:40:04:07

Interviewer

Well may I say if that is the case, thank you very, very much indeed.

11:40:08:01

Ernest Hilton

Thank you.

11:40:08:21

Interviewer

Your perspective, your perspective is, is completely um extraordinary and um we all have complete admiration for the way that you're able to forgive an move on and that you've been able to process such a difficult time with so much positivity is

extraordinary.

11:40:28:07

Ernest Hilton

Yeah. Thank you very much. I'm glad I got to meet you and that I could unburden myself on this. When I say unburden, I don't mean that I walk around with this burden, but that I could express, um, my views of those years in a very open and very pleasant fashion.

ARTEFACTS

ARTEFACT 1: Scan of photo of Ernest's mother Margaret in Munich, 1932

11:40:57:03

Ernest Hilton

This is [...] my mother in Munich in 1932 when she was four months pregnant with me, and she has dressed up like a good German hausfrau, no, like a good German artist, which she was, because she was a concert pianist, and she looks extremely dapper there. *[Laughs]*

ARTEFACT 2: Scan of photo of Ernest, his mother, and his sister Erica, 1936

11:41:21:10

Ernest Hilton

This is a picture of my mother, Margot Herz, with my sister Erica and with me, Ernest, in 1936, in Aerdenhout, Holland. Although this is outside in some kind of wooded area, where we went for a walk. I was four years old.

ARTEFACT 3: Scan of photo in Hilversum 1940-1 & photo of Ernest in 194

11:41:48:09

Ernest Hilton

The picture on the left is a picture taken in Hilversum, where we went, or where we were forced to move inland from the coast by the German authorities, so that this happened in 1941, and is probably but four to five months before we entered Westerbork. So I was nine months old. The picture on the right is in 1946, when I was already a student at the Institut of the Rosenberg in St Gall Rosenberen, and I was, er, 13 years old at that time.

ARTEFACT 4: Scan of birthday card for his mother (two watercolours & a text), 1943

11:42:36:18

Ernest Hilton iv

These two pictures are part of a three-set so-called birthday card for my mother's 43rd birthday in Westerbork.

Ernest Hilton o/o/v

The picture on the left shows that we were in not a barrack but in a kind of a family hut and this is the living room dining room, and my sister is standing, and I am sitting, at, at the table. And you can see that it looks quite primitive by the kind of furniture that we had.

Ernest Hilton iv

11:43:15:24

And the other side of the picture is a fun

Ernest Hilton o/o/v

picture of my father and mother in bed [...] in the same, er, hut. And this birthday card was designed and produced by some of the people for whom she was the barrack leader [...] and I would imagine that most of the people who signed that birthday card [...] in June 1943, did not, um, survive the Holocaust.

ARTEFACT 5: Scan of photo of Ernest's mother's work pass from Westerbork transit camp

11:43:56:05

Ernest Hilton

On the back of the [...] second picture is a pass which is a work permit to [...] illustrate that my mother is working in Westerbork and gives her date of birth, 17th of June 1906, and it was signed on the 5th of January 1943 by whoever was authorised to issue.

ARTEFACT 6: Scan of Ernest's mother's Westerbork registration card

11:44:27:22

Ernest Hilton o/o/v

And there's another card which also shows where she was born, and from which place she arrived in Westerbork, namely Amsterdam, which was not quite right, it was Hilversum. *[Laughs]*

ARTEFACT 7: Scan of text on Ernest's mother's birthday card

11:44:45:05

Ernest Hilton o/o/v

This is the third part of my mother's birthday card in 1943 [...] a whole [...] congratulatory story in Dutch about the conditions of Westerbork, that we should still celebrate birthdays [...] The barrack where this was [...] made was barrack number 65 and [...] all these inmates knew more or less that their days were numbered, and despite that they took time and tried to be optimistic and lauded my mother's character because she was a kind and warm-hearted person, and they all liked her very much.

ARTEFACT 8: Scan of photo of Ernest in Amsterdam, 1945

11:45:34:23

Ernest Hilton

This is the first photograph of myself straight after liberation, once we were back in Amsterdam. It looks like a passport picture [...] but it was taken in 1945 when [...] my hair is just beginning to grow back. It was all shorn off, thank goodness after Liberation, and I look thin but not unhappy on this picture.

ARTEFACT 9: photo of Ernest's mother and his stepfather in Munich, 1985

11:46:05:18

Ernest Hilton

This is a picture of my mother and stepfather in 1985 where they were invited by the mayor, by the then mayor of Munich as a reconciliation visit, since mother was born in Munich, just as I of course. The mayor wanted to [...] show that the young German

population of Munich was sympathetic to her war experiences.

ARTEFACT 10: photo of Ernest Hilton in a brightly coloured shirt with his wife

11:46:38:18

Ernest Hilton

This is a picture of my wife, er, Sysampan, whom I met In New York, and we got married in Chelsea, London In 1978, and we lived together happily since then and this picture was taken [...] quite recently in Bangkok at a girls' party by a semi-professional photographer, and I picked it because I think It's one of the best pictures of her that I've seen. And she is now 66 years old. [*Laughs*] [...] I think, er, for her it's almost, for most people it is unfathomable, to, to listen to this and to grasp it. They listen because they know it's serious and mostly deadly, but it's, it's impossible to grasp.

ARTEFACT 11: scan of photograph of his son with his wife Vicky and baby daughter

11:47:41:13

Ernest Hilton

This is a picture of my son. I have only one son. No daughters. He is 35 years old; he was born in 81 in London, he is a British citizen and

ARTEFACT 13: scan of a second photograph of his grandson

this is his first baby, which he had with his wife Vicky

ARTEFACT 12: scan of jacket of Ernest's sister's book *Feeling Great and Grateful* subtitle *My Journey Through the Holocaust and Beyond*

11:47:59:24

Ernest Hilton

this book is called *Feeling Great and Grateful*. The subtitle is *My Journey Through the Holocaust and Beyond* and was written by my sister Erica Herz Van Adelsberg being her married name. And she spent, my sister is a public-school teacher, or was, in the Philadelphia area, and she spent probably five years writing this book with an editor and, er, talking about it, and she was, er, and still is, a very active Holocaust speaker to high schools and universities around Philadelphia. And I wanted this book to be part of my testimony since she has done a lot to make the Holocaust known to as many people as possible.

ARTEFACT 13: scan of document about the family name change

No commentary

ARTEFACT 14: scan of a page of photographs from Ernest's sister Erica's memoir

No commentary