

**Interview conducted by Andrea Hammel with William Dieneman,
Aberystwyth, 14.6.2011**

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I was born Wolfgang Dienemann in Cottbus in 1929. We lived in the Kaiserstraße, in a block of flats near a chicken farm. My sister Ursula was born in 1924. My father was a Landsgerichtsrat who had studied law in Breslau. He had volunteered in the First World War and was awarded the Iron Cross First and Second Class. He became a Lieutenant in the Artillery and learnt to ride a horse. There are photos of him in the Jewish Museum in Berlin. He was promoted to Kammergerichtsrat in Berlin/Schöneberg in 1930. In 1933 he was demoted to the Landgericht and in 1935 he was forced to retire because of the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws.

My sister went to the Zickelschule. Unfortunately she now lives in a home, she has dementia, otherwise she would be a much better person to ask as she remembered more.

My aunt and uncle lived in Sagan, which is now in Poland; they had a department store, Brandt und Wegner, which was sold for a song to a Nazi. They emigrated to Brazil with their three children.

In 1936 I was enrolled in the jüdische Volksschule in Schöneberg . It was attached to the Synagogue, the Prinzregentensynagoge. I remember going to school all on my own, it is amazing, there was no traffic. I remember playing on the Bayrische Platz when not in school and I remember feeding the ducks in the Stadtpark with my grandfather. My family life seemed quite normal; we had a Kindermädchen of course. I remember some unfortunate incidents; for example, I had this scooter which was operated by arm movements, and the first time I went downhill I crashed into two pensioners. Also once, I got my foot stuck in between the platform and the stationary U-Bahn, I was very scared, I thought I would lose my leg. Fortunately someone pulled me out before the train started moving.

When I started school in 1936, I had the usual Schultüte.

My parents were not practising Jews, they were High festival Jews, only attending synagogue on the High Holidays.

I enjoyed school, I remember my teacher Fräulein Marx. I have a school photograph, which I published in Aktuell magazine, and two boys and one girl from my former class responded. We wanted to have a reunion, but it never happened.

The day of Kristallnacht I went to school by myself as usual. I don't really know what my parents were thinking, and I remember feeling quite happy, I was eight years old, that the school had burnt down and that I did not have to go to school any more. I was standing in front of the school when someone told me to go home. The only thing was I did not go home, I went to the house of a girl, a friend of mine. My parents got very worried, and when I finally came home, they were so relieved they did not tell me off.

This of course was also the time of mass arrests. When the Gestapo came to the door of our flat, my sister truthfully told them that my father had not come home from work yet. This was stupid, and my mother did not forgive her for that for a long time. The plain-clothes Gestapo came back later and arrested my father. He had been working as a Syndikus for the Reichsbund der jüdischen Frontsoldaten. He was arrested and incarcerated in Sachsenhausen concentration camp. We went there on one of our visits to Berlin in 2000. It was very difficult to get there, as there were no proper transport links; we shared a taxi with two ladies on the way there and in the end the people running the Cafe near the memorial gave us a lift back to the train station some miles away.

When times were still relatively normal we had visits from our Aunt and Uncle from Sagan. We went to swim in the Stölpchensee one day, the only lake allocated to Jews; I remember the very day after we went, it was raided and closed down by the Nazis.

Before I went to school, I went to a Jewish Kindergarten, I loved my nanny Lilo, but of course, she was dismissed as well, as she was not allowed to work in a Jewish household. I also remember Frau Holländer, the Flickfrau, who mended our clothes.

As a child I was a bit of a rowdy, we went around in gangs of three or four, shouting, possibly wanting to imitate the Hitler Youth. We trampled all over allotments and broke the windows of one of the sheds. When the owner

appeared most of the bright boys ran away, but I and a few others did not. We were caught and were lined up in a flat by an angry woman who boxed our ears, 'Ohrfeigen'. It was November 1938 she probably thought that this was typical behaviour for Jewish children. She called the police and my father had to come to the police station. My father was very embarrassed, being a former member of the judiciary and all that. He had to compensate the owner for the broken windows.

I remember some holidays: in 1937 I went to the Harz Mountains with my mother, I also went to a children's camp in Bornholm in Denmark which I hated. I remember a holiday to the Riesengebirge, the Giant Mountains, a place called Spindlermühle. My parents used this code when they identified another Jewish family: 'a e', 'auch einer'. You had to be careful, even in Czechoslovakia.

After the school and the synagogue burnt down, I did not go out any more. My father was released from Sachsenhausen after six weeks, he had been hit with batons, he was in a bad state of health. He had to have an ear operation before leaving Berlin. Dr Hempel was his surgeon, he wasn't Jewish, so it was probably quite brave of him to operate on my father. My parents tried to hide these things from us, the children. My father had written a postcard from Sachsenhausen, I gave the postcard to the Museum, he wrote to my mother 'get the children out as quickly as possible'.

My sister was sent to embassies to try to get visas. My grandfather had a heart attack in 1939, so fortunately he did not have to emigrate; his second wife emigrated to Britain as a domestic, one of the few ways to be able to get a visa.

My father was a member of the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen which had connections to the Association of British Ex-Servicemen. He knew Mr Sarna who helped to find guardian for us, possibly also a guarantor, or maybe the AJEX paid the compulsory £50. This way my sister and I could leave Germany on a Kindertransport. After our arrival in England, we first stayed with a Jewish family in Bristol, the Sacofs, who had a large furniture store. They were culturally completely different from my family background, the family

was much more East European, I think they resented these well-dressed assimilated children from Berlin coming into their house.

I did not come the usual way, we came on a boat from Hamburg, the SS Manhattan, to Southampton. On the boat I was separated from my sister, who was a different age and different gender. I was very sick on the boat, whereas my sister had ice-cream and enjoyed herself. I thought I was coming to the Land of Angels. We arrived on 16 January 1939.

I never really settled with this foster family, I was soon placed in the Avondale Prep Boarding School in Bristol during term time. My sister went to a girls' school. It is amazing that there were all these private schools which were willing to admit pupils without payment.

My parents fled Germany in May 1939, they had a transit visa to Great Britain and were supposed to emigrate to the US within a year. They were put up by a wealthy brewery heiress, Doris Wethered, in a house outside Bristol. It was there that my father recuperated.

In 1940 my father was interned on the Isle of Man, my mother became a domestic at a crammer in Oxford. When my father was released from internment and the pioneer corps, his spirit was broken.

During the Blitz in my Bristol school, we had to go to the basement used as an air raid shelter. Every time a bomb landed nearby, we were given sweets, which for me as a child made the bombs quite attractive. I was ill with Diphtheria during this time in Bristol. I think my guardians were annoyed when the school was closed down and I was evacuated to Oxford as they felt that they should have the right to direct my future.

The Oxford Refugee Committee placed me with the family of Professor Zunz. His wife was baby mad and there were a lot of orphan babies there and another Czech refugee boy. It was a very noisy household and I hated it there. Dr Hempel who had operated on my father in Berlin turned out to be Mrs Zunz' father, which I always thought was an amazing coincidence. I went to Oxford High School, the fees were paid by the Oxford Refugee Committee. I remember feeling quite uncomfortable at times, I did not want to be German and there was a certain degree of anti-Semitism at the school.

Professor Gilbert Murray, one-time chair of the League of Nations, befriended my father and my sister.

My sister was sent to a training college for Froebel teachers, she later studied for a teaching diploma at Birmingham University. She became very English and married an English man. She remembered often hiding in the cellar steps in Berlin, when there were Nazi marches.

There was a big refugee community in Oxford; they had a 'Reformgemeinde'. I remember Rabbi Rosenberg. I had my bar-mitzvah there, but this was the last time in my life I had a real connection with Jewish life.

I remember receiving my school certificate and living with yet another family, the Bruckers. I remember that they had two dogs and that we used to collect food for the rabbits from the park. I remember being happy there. I sat the entrance scholarship for Jesus College in Oxford, but did not pass. This was largely due to the fact that I got very ill; I was in hospital for two months with rheumatic fever.

I got a job at Christ Church Library as a junior clerk and the Dean of Christ Church college made sure that I attended lectures. It was decided that it might be too difficult for me to read Classics, so I did German and French and I graduated in 1951. Following from my degree, I went to the School of Librarianship at UCL, again my fees were paid for by a charity. I remember that my London accommodation was really bad at that time. After I qualified as a librarian I worked at the Commonwealth Forestry Institute in Oxford. I was there two or three years.

At that time my parents obtained a flat in Oxford. My father worked in the Accounts Department of the local Co-op until his retirement. It was also during this time that my father received a pension from the German government, which helped him both financially and psychologically.

In 1954 I applied to become a librarian in Nigeria, at Ibadan University. My parents were not so keen on this idea and my mother got very suspicious when I took my only suit on a sailing holiday to Norfolk. I had trained myself to sail boats and my interviewer was also a keen sailor. So I had my interview during the holiday and I got the job. This was very exciting for me, I was only 24 years

old. I worked in Nigeria for seven years, we had a good time. We had money from the Carnegie Association to travel and meet the locals. After that I spent a year in the US, to give me an insight into libraries there. I also met relatives when I was over there.

I applied for a library job at Trinity College Dublin and I got the job in 1962. There I met my future wife, Marisa, the daughter of an American diplomat. As her parents did not give her permission to marry me, we eloped and got married in England in 1964. I worked in the TCD Library and worked my way up to Deputy Librarian. Marisa's parents were posted to Tokyo, and later on their return, there was a reconciliation in Dublin. Our daughter was born in 1967. She works as an Occupational Therapist in Geriatric Care and lives in Aberystwyth.

In 1970 I moved to Aberystwyth to become Librarian at the University there. Later my wife Marisa worked in the Education Library. Marisa has a degree and an education diploma from UCD and became a qualified librarian and worked at the Education Library of University of Wales.

My parents tended to move mainly in Émigré circles.

I am in touch with the AJR, and I went to three Kindertransport reunion meetings organised by Bertha Leverton. We accepted an invitation by the Oberbürgermeister to visit Berlin. We had been before once or twice, I also visited Cottbus, but I have never been to Sagan. My sister and her husband also went to Berlin, but they were a bit reluctant to go at first, she is more English than the English.

After I retired in 1995 I worked as a volunteer advisor for the Citizens' Advice Bureau and Age Concern.

What was difficult about my childhood was that we had no home, I saw my sister rarely, our family was fragmented. I spoke German colloquially with my parents, and of course later studied it at Oxford University.

My father enjoyed reading German books in the Bodleian Library in his spare time. My parents did not seem to be angry about what had happened. After the war my father received an invitation to join the Oberlandesgericht in Cologne, they were looking for people not implicated in National Socialism. But

he received a discouraging letter describing the difficult situation regarding accommodation and food in Germany. I think they also wanted to stay in Britain because of us, their children.

Sometimes my father got visits from survivors, but he does not seem to have felt an antipathy to Germans. My mother was friendly with a German woman who had married a British man. My parents visited the Black Forest, Switzerland and Holland after the war.

The whole transition from being normal citizens to outcasts was very strange: our neighbours in Berlin, the Von Klodts, were Nazis. When my father got arrested, Von Klodt came round with a bunch of flowers expressing his sympathy.

I think my father mainly felt that post-war German people were uneasy with him, not so much the other way round.

Summarized from notes and recording by Andrea Hammel