

Albert Hepner

Web Story

Growing up in Brussels, Belgium, Albert Hepner had a fairly normal upbringing up until the war came to Brussels. In 1938, Hepner's father was diagnosed with cancer and passed away not too long after his diagnosis. Hepner's mother was left to care for Hepner and his older brother on her own during such a turbulent time.

In his interview, Hepner recounts his experiences as a hidden child of the Holocaust. His hiding experiences included living in various strangers' homes as well as churches and convents that took him in. For most of the four year period, Hepner was separated from his family. He recalls feeling scared and alone for the entire duration of his hiding experience.

Hepner discusses his life post-war, including his education, family struggles, and move to the United States. Hepner recalls his healing process that began with him struggling to talk about his hiding experiences, which later progressed to him being able to openly share his story in front of large audiences. Hepner concludes the interview with a couple of takeaways. He implores everyone to educate themselves and see one another as equals.

Interview with Albert Hepner

November 17, 2021

Virtually through Zoom

Interviewer: Katarina Stefanik, Oral History Intern, Mercer County Community College
Holocaust, Genocide & Human Rights Center

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My relationship with my mother was unfortunately somewhat driven by when I was in the church when I first got there, where Motl took me. During the night, I peed in bed. It was probably, the way I remember it, the first time that I had ever peed in bed at night. As circumstances went on, I didn't say anything to anybody, and somehow I had a fresh sheet the next day. But this happened every night, I just peed in bed every night. After about the fifth or sixth night, the priest who was a very mild-mannered man, very gentle, very sweet man, to all of us, in just the few days I knew him, he had not raised his voice at us. But then one morning he raised his voice and said, "Albert, you need to stop peeing in bed because I can't have the launders, the launders don't know I have children, that I'm hiding children here. I can't keep bringing her wet sheets. She's going to be suspicious." It embarrassed me. I was old enough to be embarrassed. I was petrified, and so the following night when I peed in bed, I took the sheet in the middle of the night. Just the way that my cousin had brought me into the church, I walked out the same hidden way from the sub basement. I walked out into the street where our apartment was. I suspected my mother was still there. I was going there, hoping she would listen to me and give me a dry sheet. I had taken the wet sheet under my arm and brought it there. My whispering for quite a while, I was trying to yell up, but I knew I couldn't yell. So I whispered until she finally heard it from the second floor. She came to the window and saw me. She waved me on: "Go, go, go." She didn't know where I was, but she waved me to go back where I came from. She wouldn't open the window even. She wouldn't talk to me or anything. I was crying; I wasn't yelling because I knew that would bring other people out. So I listened to her and I walked away. I went back to the church. I was very angry with her. As I said, I hadn't seen her for almost three years, two and a half to three years later. Our relationship was nonexistent, but my feelings were such that by the time that mother superior in the convent told me, "Albert, someone is coming to get you. You're going to see your mother." I had no idea what she was talking about.

36:27 – 38:25

I re-entered the fifth grade. It had to do with my age and nothing else because for the entire period of the war that I was hidden, I only went to a one room schoolhouse where I was hidden in the countryside for a while with my mother. The convent didn't teach us anything. They barely fed us; they did what they could. So I had no education. They put me in the fifth grade and low and behold, Mr. Roggemans was the teacher. So I went to school for two years. In Belgium, when you graduate elementary school in the sixth grade, you wind up in high school after the sixth grade. So six years in elementary school and six years in high school, but guess what? Jack Goldstein graduated number one, Albert Hepner graduated number two, and Bruno Goldstein, the twin brother of Jack Goldstein, graduated number three. These were three Jews that hardly had any education during the war, and they graduated elementary school one, two, three. So I'm always proud of that for one very good reason. Senor Hitler was wrong! Do you understand what I'm saying? He didn't win, for many reasons. In this case, at least, intellectually, if no other way, some Jews were left.

Interview Transcript

<p>Krasner:</p>	<p>Today is Wednesday November 17th, 2021 and this is Barbara Krasner, director of the Mercer Holocaust and Genocide Human Rights Center. I am here today on zoom with our center intern from the College of New Jersey, Katarina Stefanik, and our featured guest, Albert Hepner, who is a member of our center’s advisory commission. He is going to talk about his Holocaust era experiences as a hidden child. I turn it over to Katarina.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>I just wanted to take the time to thank you for sharing your story, knowing that this might be extremely difficult for you to share. If at any point you feel that you need to pass a question or you don’t want to respond, feel free to do so. Could you describe your life before the Holocaust?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>I was not quite five years old yet, so it was a banal kind of experience. We lived in Brussels, and Anderlecht was the carichi where we lived. My father, my brother, who was nine years older so he was around fourteen, and my mother. My parents were pocket book makers. My brother was going to school. I would say, habitually; I don’t know if it was just Jewish people. But many, many people, who could afford it, would go away to the beach once a year in July or August. It was a standard procedure, which wasn’t terribly expensive, so a lot of lower middle class people would do that. I could virtually remember this because if there are any pictures of my life at that early time, many of them were when we were at the beach. So I sort of seem to remember having a good time with my father, who unfortunately, in 1938, was diagnosed with cancer. He did not live much longer, but I do remember that part. I was a kindergarten child until the war began.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>Thank you. Would you have considered your family to be religious? How religious would</p>

	<p>you have considered your family to be?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Principally, we weren't really religious. Infact, my father was probably an atheist. He was not religious at all. My mother would go to the synagogue. This was a small neighborhood synagogue. She would go no more than twice a year, probably Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur maybe. But generally speaking, if she went during the year, it was for some special occasion. So we were really not religious. But we were definitely Jewish in all our habits and things that we did. My parents probably spoke more Yiddish than they spoke French. They had immigrated from Russia and Poland, so they also spoke those languages. In a religious sense, it was a secular environment.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>So we'll kind of move in a different direction. You said you were about five years old when you were in kindergarten or maybe prior to that time, how and when did you know you were a Jew?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>It's difficult to answer specifically. I would say, specifically, I knew I was a Jew by the time I was six, six and a half years old, when my mother and I were already hiding in Urdezien, which is in the countryside. Where the underground was paying for us to stay and live in an apartment of a farmhouse with people who were clearly anti-semetic. In any event, it's a long story. At one point, things became more dangerous because the Germans were spreading out into the countryside and they were getting closer. So my mother was worried about things. So she told me to make sure that if anybody ever asked me if I was Jewish, to deny it. As you can imagine, being Jewish had a meaning to me in that we were a little bit different. But by that time we were hiding in different places from the Germans. So I knew I was a Jew, but what it had meant and all that didn't come up until much later. But I do remember that when she told me to</p>

	<p>deny it, it was very painful and very hurtful and I can only understand it by saying that it felt like a denial of me in some way that I can intellectualize now. But I don't think I understood it then. I was annoyed.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>So do you remember experiencing Anti-semitism growing up?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Absolutely. In the first grade when I was in the classroom with the other students of course, there was a knock on the door. It was clear even to us six year olds, two German gestapo fellas came in, practically barged in, and started calling out names. They called out two names before they called mine. I already knew that I was going to be the third name. I can't explain to you that I knew I was Jewish or maybe because the other two boys were Jewish. In any event, these two gestapo men said they were taking us to the principal. It's something I remember that has stayed with me. The teacher, Mr. Roggemans, sort of smiled cynically as the gestapo were taking us out. What they were taking us out for is to take us to the principal's office where our parents were called to take us out of school. That would've been one of the special times I knew I was Jewish. A lot of what I would say today would be speculation from an adult point of view, but I knew I was Jewish. I hated being thrown out of school and that my teacher didn't seem to be bothered by it too much. My mother took me home and screamed all the way home. I mean she risked our lives in a way, but she was so infuriated by the injustice. She just screamed all the way home about the situation. There you go, there's another situation: did I know I was Jewish, yeah I knew. In terms of anti-semitism, this was a clear indication of that I was not welcome.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>When you had to go into hiding, could you tell me a little bit more about that?</p>

Hepner:

Around the age of six (these are all approximates), my first cousin, who had become a doctor in 1938, now this is 1941, he had quite a bit of latitude, despite the fact that he was Jewish, in being able to move around in Brussels. And he also participated in the work with the underground. He knew that things were getting more and more dangerous. He felt that my mother, my brother and I were risking (by that time my father was dead by natural causes already), but he felt that things would be more difficult for my mother if she were discovered with me around with her hiding or doing anything. He came and literally tore me out of my mother's arms and took me to a church a few blocks away where the priest was hiding, in this case, five other boys. My savior, my cousin, his name was Motl. He brought me there. I stayed there for a few weeks, not too many. Then, it turns out that this young man, who was friends with my brother, and he discovered that someone, as you say in Yiddish, had gemasecht, somebody had told on the priest that he was hiding Jewish kids. Motl, my cousin, discovered this. So he came, dragged me out of there, and brought me just a few blocks away to a couple. Both the man and his wife, one of them (the man) was deaf and the wife was mute. They both worked on straw furniture. When I was hidden there with them, they taught me how to weave straw furniture. It was probably the best time of my young life. I spent a few weeks there. Then, I did something that contributed to the couple's worrying about me being there. The couple was worried about hiding me because someone had discovered that there was a little boy in their apartment on the third floor. So my cousin again came and brought me to another couple. Those people didn't want to keep me anymore, so he took me to another pair, a mother and a daughter. Then he finally took me to a family where there were some children. It was the first time in quite a while that I had some children to play with for a

	<p>little while. I got sick and it made the family nervous that I might have to go to the hospital. I couldn't open my eyes. There's a name for it I forget. There's a nofermalogical term for it, but I forget what it is. It scared them, so they didn't want to keep me anymore. So they called my cousin, who came to get me. He took me to his apartment where he was with his girlfriend, and I stayed with them for a while. Then things got so dangerous in Brussels that my cousin and another family friend who was in the underground, Vinnik, both found an apartment out in the countryside in Odegien, not far from Waterloo, which is outside of Brussels. They rented a room on the upstairs floor of the farm. My mother and I, together, stayed there for a while until it became more dangerous. After that, just for a short period, he took me to a farm, where I was hidden in the attic of the farm for a while all by myself. That was a very short time. Then when that became too dangerous for me, (At that time, by the way, my mother was hidden in a cabin, not a luxurious cabin, but a dilapidated cabin in the woods, where they took care of her by virtue of bringing her food and making sure she her safe, although alone for a year and a half.) someone came to get me, Mr. Vinnik. They put me initially in an orphanage in Namur, which was in the southern part of Belgium. I was only there for an overnight. Someone had told on the priest that he was hiding Jews in the orphanage, so he whisked me out of there and brought me to a convent where I ultimately stayed for two years. So, the entire period was about three and a half years of hiding. And by then, the Germans were still in Belgium, but I was brought back with my mother to spend more time in the countryside.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>Do you feel that your relationships with the individuals that were hiding you, how would you describe your relationships with them? And was it hard for you to leave every time you kept moving?</p>

<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Not really. The only one that I felt that it was hard to leave was the first one, the priest. I liked the priest immensely; he was a nice guy. But I think the only one I was sorry about was the couple where I was really busy a lot of the time, weaving some straw furniture. It was a very calming effect. There was no noise in the house, nobody spoke. They used, I guess, sign language, and I learned whatever they taught me by example. They just showed me how to do things. I missed that, but otherwise no. In the convent, I got beaten up because I was a Jew. There wasn't anything. The other couples were not... let me put it this way: Germans would ask the Belgians why they are risking their lives to save Jewish boys, Jewish girls, children? They just simply said, "that's the only thing you can do." I mean, what else do you do? Of course there weren't that many that did this, but there were several that did it. They felt it was the only decent thing to do. I don't know if that answers your question, but that's what came to mind when you did.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>Did you have experiences where you felt humiliated or in any way degraded that you can recall right now or that come to mind?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Well Katarina, I would say the entire four year period. I was scared the entire time. I was afraid the entire time. I could hardly trust anyone. I could trust Mr. Vinnik. I didn't tell you in detail, but my mother did something that made me feel like I couldn't trust her. I could trust Motl but then I didn't see Motl for a while, once I went to the convent. Then in the convent, I made a friend. It was like a default situation. One of the older guys was an altar boy. He was probably about seventeen years old. They made an altar boy out of me. I took care of all the things that the priest needed at the time. He met all the children and the nuns in the convent every morning. And this older boy didn't want to do the bidding that an altar boy needs to do for the priest every morning. He prefers to stay in bed, so I</p>

	<p>told him I would do it. I didn't care; I was an early riser. It wasn't that I was so bright, but in that sense, what I did was I developed a friend, who wouldn't tolerate any of the other Christians, who would beat me up and call me names. He essentially defended me. That's it.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>You mentioned feeling like you couldn't trust anyone, but did you ever feel safe during that time or at any point? Or was it a constant fear?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>It was a constant, if not, an underlying fear, if you ask me about that period. I was always afraid, and it wasn't like I was afraid that I knew I was to be afraid of Germans. I didn't even know Germans. Did I see some Germans at different times? Yes, but not while I was in the convent. I was protected from that. But when I was in the streets of Brussels, I saw Germans. It's not as if I knew as you and I can understand as adults that's what. I was afraid because I didn't know where I was going to be next. I was afraid because I didn't have a home. I had forgotten what my mother had looked like. I didn't remember that I had a mother by the time I was done in the convent.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>You brought up your mother a couple of times, how was your relationship with her throughout your hiding experience?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Horrendous, I didn't have a relationship with her. Like I said, I was in a convent, and she was out in the woods. So for a good part of the war, it was not a good one. If you want, would you like to hear the anecdote that caused that?</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>Only if you feel comfortable discussing it.</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>I don't feel comfortable with any of it. There's nothing to feel comfortable about. We're not talking about, "how did you make out last weekend?" This is not something for me to be comfortable about. I do it because the only reason I talk, and I've talked in many</p>

places and probably repeated this hundreds of times by now. I have no problem repeating it. I got involved doing this because when I was first asked would I talk about it, I said, “No.” Until the very next day that I had said, “No,” I was reading the New York Times and a well-written article on the front page of the New York Times was written by a denier. A man that said it had never happened. And that made me decide that I’m going to only talk about myself and what I remember of what happened to me. And that’s what I’ve done consistently.

My relationship with my mother was unfortunately somewhat driven by when I was in the church when I first got there, where Motl took me. During the night, I peed in bed. It was probably, the way I remember it, the first time that I had ever peed in bed at night. As circumstances went on, I didn’t say anything to anybody, and somehow I had a fresh sheet the next day. But this happened every night, I just peed in bed every night. After about the fifth or sixth night, the priest who was a very mild-mannered man, very gentle, very sweet man, to all of us, in just the few days I knew him, he had not raised his voice at us. But then one morning he raised his voice and said, “Albert, you need to stop peeing in bed because I can’t have the launders, the launders don’t know I have children, that I’m hiding children here. I can’t keep bringing her wet sheets. She’s going to be suspicious.” It embarrassed me. I was old enough to be embarrassed. I was petrified, and so the following night when I peed in bed, I took the sheet in the middle of the night. Just the way that my cousin had brought me into the church, I walked out the same hidden way from the sub basement. I walked out into the street where our apartment was. I suspected my mother was still there. I was going there, hoping she would listen to me and give me a dry sheet. I had taken the wet sheet under my arm and brought it there. My whispering for

	<p>quite a while, I was trying to yell up, but I knew I couldn't yell. So I whispered until she finally heard it from the second floor. She came to the window and saw me. She waved me on: "Go, go, go." She didn't know where I was, but she waved me to go back where I came from. She wouldn't open the window even. She wouldn't talk to me or anything. I was crying; I wasn't yelling because I knew that would bring other people out. So I listened to her and I walked away. I went back to the church. I was very angry with her. As I said, I hadn't seen her for almost three years, two and a half to three years later. Our relationship was nonexistent, but my feelings were such that by the time that mother superior in the convent told me, "Albert, someone is coming to get you. You're going to see your mother." I had no idea what she was talking about.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>How were you able to cope with your experiences during all of this?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Pretty much what I said, I was very— I want to say angry, but I think I'm angrier now than I was then. I didn't know enough to be angry. I was just frightened, and when you're frightened, you can't do anything. I didn't have any defenses. I didn't cope. I just went along with whatever was going on. I just tried to stay safe. When the kids first beat me up in the convent, it wasn't like it was one other kid. It was a couple of kids just because I was Jewish. That was it. I just existed I guess.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>After your hiding experience, what happened after that when you didn't have to hide anymore?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Well, my mother and I, Mr. Vinnik got us back together at Odegien, where we had been hidden before. Then when the Germans were pushed back, we waited until Mr. Vinnik had found an apartment for us. My brother had run away to Switzerland, where he had been a</p>

lumberjack and hiding in a camp there for the period of about three years. So, we went back to Brussels to a small apartment. My mother worked for, my father was no longer there which I told you, a hat factory that made hats for the army. She was a very good seamstress, having been a seamstress before the war in the pocketbook world. She worked very very well, but unfortunately the manager of this plant of one hundred women sewing hats, he was trying to entice other women sowers to do a better job. I suppose my mother was the best one there, and he used her name as an example. You know, “do the work more like Mrs. Hepner.” The next day, she got beat up by ten women for showing them up. So the very next day, she came home all bloodied. The next day, she received a letter from the Belgian government saying that there’s a warehouse in downtown Brussels, where she can go look at the confiscated furniture. The Germans had confiscated the furniture that we had had. They invited her to go down there and see if she could find some furniture that belonged to us, so that we would have something other than a couple of cots. So she went to look, and she found nothing. She couldn’t identify anything that belonged to us. She walked out of the place and threw herself under a streetcar, under a tram. And fortunately, the tram stopped and knocked her down. It stopped and didn’t injure her terribly. But in Belgium at that time, if you attempted suicide and survived it, you were automatically taken to an insane asylum. She wound up in an insane asylum. My brother would come back from Switzerland and by then had married. He didn’t feel capable of taking care of me. He was working, trying to make a living. So he put me yet again in an orphanage. It was a Jewish Orthodox orphanage that one of the Rothschilds was supporting. They were all technically going to be part of a kibbutz in Israel. This was in 1945, approaching 1946. So I had spent the year here, while my mother was in the insane

	<p>asylum. Then I came out, and I started living with her again. Sorry, I forgot which of your questions I was answering.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>More specifically, did you return to school and start your life back up normally? Or how did it work?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Yes, I re-entered the fifth grade. It had to do with my age and nothing else because for the entire period of the war that I was hidden, I only went to a one room schoolhouse where I was hidden in the countryside for a while with my mother. The convent didn't teach us anything. They barely fed us; they did what they could. So I had no education. They put me in the fifth grade and low and behold, Mr. Roggemans was the teacher. So I went to school for two years. In Belgium, when you graduate elementary school in the sixth grade, you wind up in high school after the sixth grade. So six years in elementary school and six years in high school, but guess what? Jack Goldstein graduated number one, Albert Hepner graduated number two, and Bruno Goldstein, the twin brother of Jack Goldstein, graduated number three. These were three Jews that hardly had any education during the war, and they graduated elementary school one, two, three. So I'm always proud of that for one very good reason. Senor Hitler was wrong! Do you understand what I'm saying? He didn't win, for many reasons. In this case, at least, intellectually, if no other way, some Jews were left.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>I just wanted to touch back on when you said you re-entered, you had Mr. Roggemans as your teacher again. Did he treat you differently, or was it the same type of dynamic?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Whatever his feelings were about Jews, they were clear. It's not as if he insulted us. It's not as though he mistreated us individually, it was just clear at the beginning of the war that he</p>

	<p>was not perplexed by the fact that the Germans were running all over the Jews. He was an anti-semite. I don't know that he graded us unfairly. I have no idea. I really didn't care. I was very upset when I walked in and I saw he was there, but it wasn't even that big of a surprise. Although I didn't know it until it happened, in those days, teachers went along with the students every grade. They just stayed with that same class until they graduated, so there was no surprise there.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>When did you move to the United States?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>In 1950, I was 15 years old.</p>
<p>Interview:</p>	<p>And how was that transition for you?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>In what way, what do you mean? I'll tell you how it was before you answer that. It was disgusting. It was terrible because I had run away from home twice because I wanted to go to Israel. Israel became a state in 1948. I really didn't want to come to the United States. I wanted to go someplace where a Jew could be a Jew, where a person could be a person. As much as I knew I had very comfortable relatives here and my mother's sister wanted her to be safe in America, I wasn't interested in that. I really wanted to go to Israel, where I would be able to be a Jew. Not that I knew that much about a kibbutz, I would've preferred that. So, coming here, it became very easy because we lived in the Bronx. Half the girls that chased me were Jewish girls. I was surrounded by Jewish people, so I felt a lot safer than I thought I was going to feel.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>Was there a reason why you were unable to go to Israel, and instead you came to the United States?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>I was fifteen years old. My mother wanted to come to America where her sisters would help her. She was a widow. She was working to support me. My brother by then, as I had said,</p>

	<p>had already been married, so he was somewhat on his own. For her, she was going to see her sisters. She hadn't seen them in thirty to forty years since they had all left Poland and Russia.</p>
<p>Interview:</p>	<p>How was your life here in America? I know you mentioned that you went to school and you had that Jewish community, which was good. Was there anything else beyond that in your experiences here?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>I suppose I Americanized pretty quickly. When you're a hidden child and you have to try to fit in, you bend yourself every which way to make sure you're accepted. And having not been accepted for most of my early life, that became easy. Then I was, after pretty much the first few years, pretty good with languages, so I learned English quickly. My accent disappeared I suppose, and I lived the life of a teenager in America.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>Going off of that, did you talk about your experiences prior to your adult life or did you never speak about what had happened to you?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>I mentioned some of what had happened to me to my wife. I rarely spoke to other people about it. Then when we had children, we had three daughters. When they were growing up, I spoke some to them. And then it struck me after quite a while that I knew I was telling about what had happened to me and I found myself one time telling the story to my children and my wife was there too. After I spoke to them, when I walked away, I started thinking about what I had just said to them. And I realized that I had spoken of a particular incident from the war, but I had attributed an awful lot of things to that instance. This included stories that had nothing to do with me. These were stories that I had seen in movies, so I blended in the fictitious with my real episodes. It got me so angry with myself that I had done that to my</p>

own family. I barely spoke to anybody else about it. So I stopped talking about it until 1982. I took my entire family to Belgium where I showed them all the places I had been hidden. I showed them as much of the experiences as I could. I didn't tell you before, but in 1975, this woman was a friend of my daughters. She was head of education at AOL, the internet platform. She called me and said that Mindy, my daughter, had mentioned to her that I was a hidden child, that I had been in the Holocaust. She said that for the anniversary of the Holocaust, Shoah, she wanted to have a live person, who had been there, speak to high school students throughout the country. Not to speak to, sorry, at that time the internet was not that sophisticated. By then you could email each other, so she set it up so that students around the country could write to me, and I would answer their questions. They would type a question that could be seen by all the other schools involved around the country, and I would answer, which would be seen by everybody. She asked me if I would do that for her and the community. I didn't feel right about it. I felt a little shy. I really don't know exactly why, I just wasn't sure I could do that. Then, what I told you earlier, the next day by coincidence, I read this article from some guy who claimed the war never happened. Or at least, that the Jews were not treated by Hitler the way we were. I was so angry that I called back this woman and told her that I would do it. As a matter of fact, I'm having some computer problems. So I looked back at some information that I thought I had lost, and I came across that very experience because everything was recorded. Whatever I typed, they sent me a file, so I have that file. I happened to have looked at it today. That's what I've said, and I've stayed with that principally telling people what I knew. As I said to many of them, if I was on tenth street and you asked me about something on eleventh street, let's remember that I was a

	<p>kid from the age of five to ten. I had no idea what was going on eleventh street. I'm not going to speculate on that. I have spoken at museums. I've spoken at different schools. I've spoken to individuals since 1975. I'm invited very often to different places. As I told that woman, I won't lie to these children. If I'm on eighth street, I'm going to tell them what happened on eighth street. Of course when I've spoken to other adult groups, when I'm done telling them about what they want to know about the personal private stuff, then I speak from an adult perspective. Katarina, it could be you don't want to hear about the whole thing. Your audience may not want to hear it either.</p>
<p>Interview:</p>	<p>Moving towards your views today, how do you feel about the Germans or Germany today?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Well, I won't buy any German products. Some people say, why are you punishing the children? I don't think that my purchases will punish anybody or my lack of purchases will punish anybody. I'm not punishing the children. I don't know if you know the film, "Twelve Angry Men." But the judge that was called in for the trial in that film, the accused happened to be a Puerto Rican man and the judge that they called in was a Puerto Rican judge just to make sure that he wouldn't bend over backwards and be not be as harsh as he needed to be with the Puerto Rican man that was found guilty. In the same way, I have been teaching ESL for thirty years. Occasionally, I have had some German students, so I made sure that however I dealt with them was the same way I dealt with anybody else. Once or twice, I had some comments made by them that were not very delicate. It angered me, but I tried to stay cool as young people say. Do I have any animosity for German people today? Not towards German people. I have animosity towards any Nazis or compatriots of the Nazis. I wouldn't</p>

	<p>go to Germany. For that matter, I wouldn't go to Poland. The little bit of history that I do know about it, I just wouldn't go there. It's not harming anybody. If anything else, I don't need to be subjected to whatever is familiar to them. I would feel that I'm supporting them in a way that I wouldn't really want to support them. I understand that things have changed and that people are different and so on. In some cases, people regret what happened. I think for the most part, I feel sorry for the Germans who were subjected to knowing what their ancestors did. Right now, we're experiencing the same thing with Black Lives Matter. A lot of people are recognizing that an awful lot of horrendous things have happened. I don't think my children would buy a German product. It's a kind of moral support that they have. That's about it. So many people say that Prime Minister Merckel of Germany has done an excellent job in many ways. I'm glad to hear that's happening in Germany.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>What do you think that we can do as a society to fight this indifference or even hatred and Anti-semitism that has permeated today?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>There are many ways to deal with it. It probably wouldn't hurt if the newspapers would stop mentioning that a person is of a certain color when they're talking about them. Or that they would mention a person's religion when they are talking about issues that are not related or where religion is not a factor. To me, the way I see it, it's just vicious of people. What I resent is that people somehow need to, when they're going to mirror themselves with others, make sure that they're not like some of these other people. They see the other as being horrendous. This identification business, as though it's better to be Jewish, or it's better Catholic, or it's better to be Protestant, or black, or whatever it is, is nonsense. To me it's nonsense as I see people. From the best to the worst, each group has the</p>

	<p>company of all these people. Most of us are not typically a certain way because we happened to be born in a particular group. We tend to be perhaps the way our parents are as we listen to them in our environment. The Jews are fighting a terrible battle. The battle is, simplistically, we killed Christ. Oh my goodness, we killed Christ! How on Earth are you going to change that? And ad infinitum we are going to be held responsible, but we know very well that it's an excuse to feel better about yourself, if there's somebody around the corner that is just not as good as you are. Having killed Christ, we're the worst that there is from not only a Christian standpoint but the entire world. It goes on and on. How can we change it? By mixing it up! Have people know other people and stop using those excuses for being intolerant of others.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>What would you want others to remember about you and your experiences that you've talked about?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>You should've asked me that question sixty years ago. You're laughing because you weren't around sixty years ago? Weren't you around sixty years ago? Hahaha. When I was young, I did quite a bit of acting here and there. I probably had the same desire that Bert Lancaster or some other famous actors had about being remembered forever. And here I am, old enough, easily forgetting names to know that it's all nonsense. We hardly remember anybody. I've been a teacher for thirty years and a businessman for thirty years. I hope I shared some positive examples with my students. I'll tell you; I just remembered. I was teaching at Kean University for about twenty-seven years. I was just coming out of a classroom, and one of my former students was walking down this very crowded hallway that we were in. There were really a lot of people, and he saw me and just kept walking. Then he yelled from all the</p>

	<p>way down the hall over dozens of people’s heads, “Oh Professor Hepner! You were such a great teacher.” And of course my chest swelled up, and I felt so terrific. And then his suffix was, “You were so funny!” I know this is not a time, Katarina, when you experience how funny I can be. But you know what, I’m afraid that if anybody that knew me for a while or that knows me for a while and they live on for a while that they are going to remember me for how funny I was. I just hope they don’t wind up feeling sorry for me, which stands to reason. There’s what to feel sorry about, but I hope I was the good person that I’ve always wanted to be. I think the desire to be a good person may be a reflection of having been assaulted as a kid when I hadn’t done anything bad yet. Maybe that’s why I always think, “Oh, I hope I’ll be thought of as a good person.” Entre-nous, tsevishen uns, forget it. It’s not going to happen.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>I just want to wrap this up with what would you want today’s generation to know about the Holocaust and things around that nature?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>I’d like them to know a lot of what happened. They don’t have to see pictures of people being taken to furnaces or people being taken into places to be gassed. They don’t have to see the mass graves in Ukraine and wherever they are. They don’t have to see the people being shot. But they have to know what happened one a day to day basis. When I speak to groups, I tell them that one of the reasons I want them to know is I want them to know that it happened to people with, here, flesh and blood. It’s not “bang, bang, shoot the man,” that’s it. It’s not a film. It’s not a good story. It’s a terrible story. I’d like them to know to the extent that they could know what happened and hopefully discuss enough to know that it’s a terrible thing to be that kind of human being: a. To create that situation and I’m talking about those that created it,</p>

	<p>meaning the Nazis etc. and b. that it is not the way to be. Sometimes I think that with all the years I have in me, I feel that I'm naive for thinking that that could ever be. But, why not? It's simple to say otherwise. I took a trip around the world in the Southern Hemisphere. Part of the time I spent in the jungle in Africa. One time, the guide took us near a lake and a rhinoceros came out of the lake. We were just eight travelers. We were taking pictures. Then pretty soon after that, a crocodile came out of the lake. He wasn't more than five to ten feet away from the rhinoceros. I asked the guide, "Gee, how come neither one of them tried to stamp on the other, or eat the other one up?" The guide said that both if not at least one was a vegetarian, so the idea of one eating the other was not part of the quantity of what was going to happen. Right at that moment, I wrote my blog: "Maybe that's what the world needs to be." It's not to eat or want to eat each other's food. Perhaps, we just see everybody as a challenge to our way of life because we all eat the same food.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>Thank you so much. Do you have any closing remarks that you want to say?</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Katarina, zei gezunt. If you don't understand Yiddish, you can ask Professor Krasner. But I don't want to leave you thinking I said something terrible. Zei gezunt means to stay healthy. Continue to do what you are doing and ask questions and share what you know. Thank you for your interest.</p>
<p>Interviewer:</p>	<p>Thank you for taking the time to share this. I know it was definitely not easy.</p>
<p>Hepner:</p>	<p>Thank you.</p>