

Name: Walter Bernard Boninger

Age: 87

Birthdate: June 21, 1928

Birthplace: Hamburg, Germany

Religious Identity: Jewish

Holocaust Story:

The story that I used to tell is that I'm not a Holocaust survivor, I wasn't in the camps I wasn't in hiding all the stuff like that, the only thing that happened to me is that my parents were killed when I was 11 years old in a Holocaust related incident, and I've come to realize that I am a Holocaust survivor. Losing one's parents at that age and so traumatically is not a picnic. In 1939 we were on our way, my parents and I were on our way to Chile, on a supposedly neutral boat but of course the Germans paid no attention to that. My parents lost their lives but I was rescued and I don't know sometimes I think that, we were all together as we hit the water, sometimes I think they just played airplane with me, you know when you do that, nobody could swim. They just lowered themselves and pushed me to the surface and I was rescued, I think there were some logs or something maybe that I held on to and I was pulled out of the water. I know we ended up in Harwich, I remember tea with milk and they pumped it into me so that I would throw up to sort of clean me out so to speak. I remember a lot, it's funny what comes to mind at the moment. The following morning they were, we were in a hotel in London and in fact I just read a letter that I wrote it's a very interesting letter. I wrote it, maybe a month or two at the most after this happened. I remember, think they were serving eggs and ham in this hotel, because I didn't know what it was but I guessed I could eat it and I did eat it.

What did the Germans do to the ship?

They had laid mines in the neutral shipping channels. Our ship was a Dutch liner the SS Simon Bolivar and we hit two mines and we sank.

Did you witness Kristallnacht?

November, I remember Kristallnacht very well. My father was in a concentration camp it might have only been one month I remember when he came home, he had instead of a belt just a rope to hold the pants up. I had an uncle there who was smart enough to hide or something and he didn't get thrown in the camps. My father came out, not everybody who went in during Kristallnacht came out.

Who pulled you out of the water?

Ships quickly arrived and came to where we were and they pulled us out and we went to England. It was very dramatic I did have an Aunt and Uncle who were living in England at the time. In fact my parents had just visited them. I was able to stay in England, I was told my aunt and Uncle snuck me into the American embassy, that's what I was told. I wasn't able to stay with them because they were themselves

were servants, and they couldn't house me. I think that's how I ended up in Margate, right near the white cliffs of Dover. There they found for me a boarding school that I attended. At the time my aunt and uncle in England were reform Jews and my parents and grandparents were orthodox and they did not want me to stay there. They even hired an attorney, I remember him as being very frightening man with a big swollen eye. The queen of England had given me permission to stay he stormed out of the room and say you will be hearing from me. One of the really remarkable things in this letter, is that even my grandparents were happy that I stayed in England, my grandfather unfortunately was one of the six million my grandmother died before all that happened.

I spent in those ten months in England I spent them in four different places, the bombings started and we were evacuated to the midlands. Then at the end my Aunt and Uncle were living with somebody there one of their relatives that lived there. I was able to stay with them, they gave me a recorder and it's a totally useless recorder it was in the key of A most are in C or D. I still have it, it helped me to sight read, it was a wonderful instrument.

It was September 1940 when I came here, came on a boat also. It was during the war and I think I was with three or four other boys and we were terrible. We woke one guy up in the middle of the night, and told him he was having nightmares, we were very bad.

How much time do you have? They're all stories. The couple that had given us the affidavits to come here, was a sister of my grandfather, on my father's side. There were some stories told, anyway she had not behaved herself properly but they gave us the papers. When I first stayed with them they had just lost a child, I think it was a terrible occasion for her. So she couldn't understand, I was playing my recorder and she didn't like it. I would march around the living room playing it and she would come after me. She had no use for my Jewishness, this was just before my bar mitzvah and I wanted to fast. She asked me if I wanted to go to the world's fair, or visit relatives. You know what I said, and what she said, so we visited relatives. But that was really a turning point in my life, they took one look at me and said you're never going back there and I never did. They never adopted me but they really became my parents. Herda was her name, she died shortly after she was 100 years old. I had been with her for 72 years.

My first job here I was selling the evening post, it was a nickel and I got to keep I think 3 cents. Standing at the entrance to subway stations and other places. I took five copies and I bought one myself, my parents and maybe somebody else. That was probably my first job. Second job, I was working in a candy shop. For a good many years I was delivering vegetables in a vegetable store, they don't have them anymore they have supermarkets but this was a vegetable store. You got your vegetables in paper bags and you had to take them to be delivered, I kept a very detailed book maybe it's my Germanic roots I kept a record of every delivery whether they gave me a tip and what their attitude was. I had that job for quite a while.

Were you a Rabbi?

Can't hide anything can I, not that I particularly want to. I still don't like to be called Rabbi, I kept telling my wife of blessed memory that I'm not a real rabbi, I was never ordained or any of that. And she would tell me I was a better rabbi than any of those real ones, I was pretty darn good. It was a small congregation that was kind of dying and I kept it alive, they told me that before I ever started there were

like 13 or 15 children that were in the religious school. My predecessor said that he would rather that somebody married a Jew than a non-Jew. This was in Butler Pennsylvania.

P.S 87 which was at 77th and Amsterdam avenue I believe in New York. At the graduation ceremony there were people who graduated from the school 50 years ago, that was when I first came to New York which was November 3rd. That's the day that I first met Herda and Julius, they saw that I was very undernourished and had a rash and they rushed me to a physician. He came to the house and assessed me, I had forgotten a lot of this, I had to be wrapped in something to get rid of the rash, I remember Herda telling me that story.

How did you meet your spouse?

The first one, I was married three times. My first spouse and the mother of my children, was herself a survivor who had spent a good many years in a Russian concentration camp. Janine Karter. Well they had a department store somewhere in Poland and it was spelled with a K there, I don't know if they changed it.

How many kids do you have?

Three sons and a step son from my most recent wife. They're wonderful children. My only disappointment is that I had two grandchildren from each of them, and I tell them can't one of you give me three children, two is all that I'm getting. I have these 6 grandchildren first four were boys but the last two my son David gave me two wonderful daughters. (Sons names: Ronnie, Michael, and David)

Favorite things to do?

Play at the piano, I love to sing and play at the piano. In fact I gave one of the world premiere of Stravinsky's mass which was done in a church as really a very amazing experience you feel yourself being in the 18th century. I was sitting next to a marvelous reader and I was able to follow him. I guess I was good enough to play.

Did your experience during the war hold you back or motivate you?

That's a deep question, I would say it held me back because I think I had a lot less confidence I think. PTSD, I don't think they knew it back then but it certainly had its effect on me and I didn't have a lot of self-confidence.

When we got here I started in 7th or 8th grade at Forest Hills High school I was one of the first classes that had gone all through the school it was a brand new school. Went to UCLA bachelors of Music, and I went to social work school and got a master's degree in Social work.

I had a double job, full time social worker, part-time cantor. I tell people that I am not practicing what I used to preach. Cleveland Society for the Blind, for many years, worked for Montefiore Home, which was a home for the aged in Cleveland.

How did you end up in Pittsburgh?

My son lived here, just one. One in Washington state, and the other in Arizona.

One of the things you learn is only answer the questions you are asked. Judge Judy tells you that.

Information about the SS Simon Bolivar:

Owned by the Koninklijke Nederlandsche Stoomboot Maatschappij and built in 1927 by the Rotterdam Droogdok Maatschappij; 8,309 tons; 419.9x59.1x27.7 ft. ; 856 n.h.p.; 14 knots; quadruple expansion engine.

On November 18th, 1939, the Dutch liner Simon Bolivar (Capt. H. Voorspuij), was on a voyage from Holland to Paramaribo, when she struck a mine, off Harwich.

The liner carried 400 passengers and crew. The explosion was very violent and many people on the deck were killed, Capt. Voorspuij was mortally wounded and died.

The Simon Bolivar's masts were blown down and she began to settle by the stern. The ship's radio was damaged by the explosion and the S.O.S. could not be sent out.

Nevertheless, other vessels were quickly on the spot. About 15 minutes after the first explosion, there was a second explosion that badly damaged some of the remaining lifeboats.

According to the ship's officers, the vessel had struck two mines, one on each side of the ship.

S/S Simon Bolivar finally sank with the loss of 84 lives