Felix Bauer

00:00:18

Interviewer: All right, we’re going to start now, Professor Bauer. I’d just like to ask you your name and where you’re from, et cetera.

Bauer: My name is Felix Bauer, and I was born in Vienna, Austria. Do you want the date?

Interviewer: Sure.

Bauer: The 2nd of January, 1914. And I lived there with my parents, Rudolf and Risa Bauer. And I studied in Vienna on the Technical University and then on a graphic school, where I had my masters degree from. What else do you want to know about me?

Interviewer: Okay, well, before we go, before we -- let’s go back just a little --

Bauer: Yeah. Okay.

Interviewer: -- before your university education, your college education.

Bauer: Yeah.

Interviewer: What sort of neighborhood did you live in in Vienna? Was it a Jewish neighborhood?

Bauer: Oh, no, no.

Interviewer: It wasn’t. Okay.

Bauer: Sorry to say. My parents were completely assimilated Jews. We had very little to do -- as a matter of fact, many in our families were not Jews, in my [indistinct] family. We lived in the outskirts of Vienna somewhere.

Interviewer: Near the Vienna Woods perhaps?

Bauer: No, no, no, no. Not that far. Near -- does anybody know -- near the Gürtel. That is the outside ring around the city.

Interviewer: Yeah, I know it.

Bauer: Yeah.

Interviewer: So would you -- was your family middle class?

Bauer: Middle class, yes. My father was a cashier at a large bank in Vienna, and my mother just stayed home and cared for me.

Interviewer: So having grown up in a very assimilated family, were you aware of anti-Semitism, and how were you made aware of it?

Bauer: Very much, very much. Something that is very seldom mentioned about Austria, as well as Germany and the other countries, is that anti-Semitism existed all the time since the Empire before. It was nothing great that Jews occasionally were beaten somewhere, long before Hitler came in. Then it got severe.

Interviewer: Yeah, so it was sort of a fact of life then.

Bauer: Yes, yes, it was.

Interviewer: It was something that you just accepted. Okay -- Rose? Excluded from what though? What do you mean? Ah, okay. Were you directly a victim of anti-Semitism?

Bauer: No.

Interviewer: Or was the fact that you came from an assimilated family --

Bauer: No.

Interviewer: -- helpful in that respect?

Bauer: No, I wouldn’t say that.

Interviewer: You weren’t directly affected.

Bauer: No. Later on, I could not conclude my studies at the Technical University -- I studied architecture there -- because illegal Nazis were very much penetrating the sites there, and occasionally for the amusement only, rolling Jews down the staircases of the university and things like that. But this was not my reason why I went to -- continued in another school.

Interviewer: All right. And so after ’33, I know that there was a great deal of political instability in Austria.

Bauer: Yeah.

Interviewer: But after Hitler took over, did you notice any change in your situation in Vienna? Do you remember much about that?

Bauer: Well, first of all, as a graphic artist, I couldn’t get any jobs. There was nothing. I went around the town on my bike to kind of pedal graphic works for movie theaters. They still, at that time, had little slides made, and before the actual movie, they showed these, and I got some into movie theaters. But it was a pittance really. Could not get any real jobs.

Interviewer: And so do you remember much discussion in your family then about what was going on across the border?

Bauer: Yes, but my father had the strange feeling. He said, “I am a soldier of the First World War, and nothing will happen to me.” He was for two years in Siberia in the First World War. “Oh, no, nobody can do anything to me,” which was rather stupid at that time, and we younger folks realized that we had to sever ourselves from the country because there was no way -- the incidents of killing people became more severe every day, so we tried to get out.

Interviewer: And so can you tell us what you remember about the Anschluss and perhaps even what was leading up to it? Was it a very -- was it a time that you pretty much knew what was going to happen, it was a foregone conclusion?

Bauer: Yeah. Austria had a very large membership of illegal Nazis at that time, and I knew from my Christian friends that it grew tremendously. The reason that Austria was so ready for Hitler was that we were in a tremendous depression. About half the people had no jobs. They lived on handouts, and it was just the right time for somebody who would promise people everything, jobs and money and the greatest things. So everybody was ready. You are familiar with the interim government of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg, these things, but they came to naught because it was ridiculous.

Interviewer: So you would say that, in your recollection, most people were just waiting for the inevitable.

Bauer: And ready for it, yes.

Interviewer: And ready for it. Do you remember the actual day of the Anschluss?

Bauer: Yes, I do recall it, but I was at home, and I was not there at the Heldenplatz, it’s called, where Hitler spoke, out of obvious reasons. I recall that, and from that moment on, we -- when I say “we,” a few friends of mine and I tried hard to get a passport to get out of the country. We stood, I would say, for about two weeks, every day in line where passports were given out. There were always other excuses. There were literally thousands of people waiting for passports. They were all shoved aside, and nothing happened. I never got one. So finally, one day we decided we have to get out and went illegally over the Swiss border.

Interviewer: Even before that happened, were there discussions with your friends and fellow students --

Bauer: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: -- about where you would go?

Bauer: Yes. I told my parents where I would go.

Interviewer: Where did you want to go? Where would you have looked to go if you could?

Bauer: I was probably the only Jew in Vienna who had no relatives outside Vienna. We were a large family --

Interviewer: But all in Vienna.

Bauer: -- but all in Vienna. We had nobody, and you couldn’t ask anybody in America to --

Interviewer: Sponsor you?

Bauer: Sponsor somebody, yea.

Interviewer: So America -- would that have been your first choice?

Bauer: Yes, it would, but it was an impossibility because America only took people in on the basis of -- preference of being very rich or having sponsors here that guaranteed for a job, things like that.

Interviewer: And that was something that you knew. That was not a secret.

Bauer: That -- always, we knew it.

Interviewer: What kind of -- after Hitler made his speech and after it was a fait accompli, what did your parents -- did their attitude change then?

Bauer: No, they understood fully that I want to get out, but they still had the hope, either that I could get them out later on or that nothing will happen to them, which was ridiculous.

Interviewer: And so tell us about Switzerland then. You finally determined that you had to get out.

Bauer: Yes. I went to a refugee camp there by going illegally over the -- part of the Rhine River there. I came -- I was conducted by Swiss -- I don’t know -- some kind of police that waited; very friendly.

Interviewer: Border police.

Bauer: The border police, yes. Waited for us and immediately calmed us down. “We are friendly to you.” We haven’t heard such a thing for two years. And asked us to come with them to that camp, refugee camp, where I stayed for two years.

Interviewer: How did you actually get across? Was it a boat? Obviously you were on the river.

Bauer: No, no.

Interviewer: How did it happen?

Bauer: There is a little part of the Rhine River that is called the *Alter Rhein,* the “Old Rhine,” and we didn’t even wade through. There was an old, dilapidated bridge there.

Interviewer: So you walked across.

Bauer: We walked across, yeah.

Interviewer: It was so shallow, you were able to walk across.

Interviewer: By the way, we went from Vienna by train to Feldkirch, and then to Hohenems, and there we went out and went through the customs procedure there.

Interviewer: You were able to do that still.

Bauer: Yes. There was Austrian customs officers who looked into our belongings. They were fantastic. I went with one set of underwear and a camera and -- it was different. At that time, it was about $10 to Switzerland. That was it.

Interviewer: That was it. What month was this in ’38?

Bauer: Oh, my. I believe end of November or earlier. I can’t tell you. I think in November would be --

Interviewer: Late, late in the year. Later in ’38.

Bauer: Yes.

Interviewer: And so you found yourself in Switzerland, and they conducted you --

Bauer: In a camp. In a camp where we had about -- if I’m not mistaken -- I don’t recall the number so well any longer -- about 150 people, not Jewish at all. It was a mixture of everybody who fled from Hitler.

Interviewer: Mainly Austrian, or German too?

Bauer: Austrians, Germans. We had people from Italy, we had people from Poland -- a mixture of people -- and many that were no Jews. They were persecuted just because they were not Germans or Austrians.

Interviewer: Yeah. Or they were anti-Fascist in general.

Bauer: Maybe. Yeah, sure.

Interviewer: And where in Switzerland was the camp?

Bauer: In Diepoldsau. That is -- between the River Rhine and that little *Alter Rhein,* there was a tiny, little bit of land, and there was Diepoldsau. Not too far -- oh, about an hour’s ride -- to St. Gall, in that area. Not very far from the lake -- what is it in English? Bodensee, a lake, that huge lake between Austria, Switzerland, and Germany.

Interviewer: Oh, Lake Constance?

Bauer: Lake Constance. Thank you.

Interviewer: You’re welcome.

Bauer: I know only the German name of that.

Interviewer: What were conditions like in the camp?

Bauer: Normal for a camp. We did not suffer. We got food. We got each a cot to sleep on. The main thing was, we were not allowed to work in Switzerland or make money, and a bunch of so many young people, many coming out of the educational systems, wanted to do something. There was nothing to do. So we installed all kinds of possibility to make the people work, like theater performances and kind of a music appreciation course. That was my field, also, and so -- in order to make the people do something.

Interviewer: Were people generally -- what -- how would you characterize the atmosphere there? Were people anxious? Were they --

Bauer: I would -- without being offensive, most of them were non-educated younger folks. We were a few handfuls of people who had a college or a university education, and therefore, we felt that it’s necessary to do something with them. There were people, for instance, who wanted to learn manual labor. We had a shoemaker there who taught them how to make shoes. We had a tailor there who taught that. It was a desperation education. Because there was nothing to do, we tried hard to do something there.

Interviewer: Where did people feel -- where did you or the people that you knew there, where did you feel you were going from the camp?

Bauer: I had no idea. Many had relatives in Australia, some in America, some in some African country, even, and they tried hard through their consulates and so on to get going further. I had no possibility.

Interviewer: Did people get out that way?

Bauer: Oh, yes, some. Very few, and it was a long process.

Interviewer: And only those who actually had family in these places then.

Bauer: Or friends who guaranteed that they were no burden for the --

Interviewer: The state.

Bauer: -- the respective country.

Interviewer: Yeah. This takes you through -- you were there ’38, ’39.

Bauer: Two years, I was there.

Interviewer: How much did you hear? I mean, did you get newspapers?

Bauer: Yes.

Interviewer: And you heard radio?

Bauer: Yes, whatever the Swiss had, we were -- the Swiss were friendly to us and did anything that they could for us.

Interviewer: And so you were well-informed about --

Bauer: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Do you remember your reaction when the war actually began?

Bauer: Oh, yes. We had a very mean reaction when I think back now. For instance, we could go up a hill and see the British bombers bomb Friedrichshafen, parts on the Lake Constance there, and we were delighted like the children, like children would be. Bad reaction, but --

Interviewer: Yeah. So the war began, and did you notice a change -- once the war began, did anything change in the camp? Nothing.

Bauer: No. At that time, every normal person knew that there will be war and that -- the Swiss were a peculiar people, good people, but peculiar, and they constantly said, “Oh, they don’t dare. Hitler doesn’t dare to come over. We would shoot them down like anything.” Frankly, Hitler would have needed a few airplanes, and in a few hours would have had Zürich and all else.

Interviewer: Were you in touch with your parents during this period?

Bauer: Yes. We could write, and I had -- before, my father and I made up a kind of a code, which became -- the messages became worse and worse as everything developed there. They were hungry and couldn’t get anything to eat, so I sent packages from there already and many, many more later on in the Dominican Republic. I knew that he was forced -- in forced labor at the Erzberg. That is an iron-ore mountain somewhere in Styria in Austria where the laborers had to carry off, from the outside, the ore. And then later on, they were sent, both, to -- first to Poland, somewhere to a labor camp, whatever they called labor camp there, and from there to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia, where they were gassed.

Interviewer: When did you actually find out what had happened to them?

Bauer: Actually I got a letter from -- I cannot read it. It’s Czech, and it says that Rudolf Bauer on that date had -- they never said “died” -- and Risa Bauer were gone somehow. If you are interested in this, you can have it.

Interviewer: Yeah. When did you actually get that letter then? And where did you get it?

Bauer: I got it in the Dominican Republic already, yes.

Interviewer: But when you were already in the Dominican Republic.

Bauer: Yes, uh-huh. I got it -- it says 23-9-46.

Interviewer: ’46, so -- and --

Bauer: It was through the Red Cross. They did it automatically, whatever they could.

Interviewer: When did you actually lose touch with your parents? When was the last you heard from them? Do you remember?

Bauer: In the Dominican Republic, I still got letters from a concentration camp and sent them care packages. I made in the Dominican Republic $3 a month. I sent care packages from there. That has nothing to do -- whatever we needed was there. It was so cheap at that time that I could afford it. That was the end of them.

Interviewer: Yeah, well, then let’s talk about the Dominican Republic and how you got there and how that all came about.

Bauer: Well, one day it was announced that there is a possibility, through the Evian Conference, that the ruler of the Dominican Republic was willing to take, I believe -- one said 500, one said 5,000; I do not know -- refugees.

Interviewer: Was that Trujillo?

Bauer: Trujillo, yes. And there is the possibility for first group of 12 or 13 people to go there. Who wants to go? And 13 hands went up. And we had to get through all kinds of physical tests and so. Later on, when I had said yes and we were already informed which route we would take, then I got myself a map and said, “Where is the Dominican Republic? I’ve never heard in my life of it.” And I had no idea what we will do there. It was a tropical island somewhere in the Caribbean, but that was all I knew about it. But we didn’t care. To get out of Europe, half the possibility, was great.

Interviewer: And this was in ’40 by now.

Bauer: That was in -- yes -- ’39 -- ‘40, ’40, yeah.

Interviewer: And so when did you -- you left by what means of transport?

Bauer: By train and buses.

Interviewer: By train and buses.

Bauer: We went in Switzerland to Zürich, from Zürich to Geneva. In Geneva we had to wait two or three days, and then by bus over the mountains into, into France, and then over the -- from France over the Spanish --

Interviewer: Oh, the Pyrenees.

Bauer: -- Pyrenees into Spain. We came to Barcelona and took a train from Barcelona to Madrid, and then from Madrid, another train to Lisbon.

Interviewer: What a journey!

Bauer: Spain at that time was right after Civil War, as you know. It was the most downtrodden, the most dirty, the filthiest country I’ve ever seen, but because of the Civil War. There was no house that we saw that was in one piece. It was all shot to -- the people begged in the streets, and the conditions were just plain horrid. Coming to Lisbon, we thought we are in heaven suddenly. It was clean. It had a normal life. We were getting into a hotel there. Later on I found out that an American refugee committee arranged all that and paid for it. It was called Joint; I cannot tell you exactly what the -- Jewish Organization of International -- I don’t know what it meant.

Interviewer: It was the relief organization.

Bauer: What? A relief organization.

Interviewer: How long were you in Lisbon?

Bauer: In Lisbon? One week.

Interviewer: One week in Lisbon.

Bauer: We had a great time.

Interviewer: So it -- and how did -- so did you feel that it was miraculous to be in a place that was normal then, during the war?

Bauer: Oh, yes, and a place with civilization. We went to a concert there. It was a time when they had a fair, a local fair, but a very good fair with lots of, I recall, pre-Columbian excavations or something like that. And we were in seventh heaven there, though nobody cared for us. Only we had to wait for a boat; that’s all.

Interviewer: Yeah. And so you got -- the boat was ready.

Bauer: Yes. The boat to New York, and --

Interviewer: Do you remember -- what flag was it sailing under, the ship? What nationality was it? Do you remember?

Bauer: A Greek boat. Nea Hellas was the name of it. But it was under, I believe, Canadian flag. Don’t take my word. That’s what I can barely remember. And in about five or six days, we were in New York.

Interviewer: What sort of journey -- was it a -- what was the journey like from Lisbon to New York?

Bauer: Oh, great. In a boat, a cruise. And to us, everything where we were not harmed and where we had food that we wanted and -- pardon me -- where we had bathrooms, that was great for us.

Interviewer: Do you remember your first reaction when you sailed into New York Harbor?

Bauer: Yes, yes. It was very a very joyful one, but we were put directly to Ellis Island still, and even that wasn’t bad. The food was excellent, and every, every day to have new, new bedspreads, it was something unheard of for years for us. Soap!

Interviewer: Yeah, little things that we take for granted.

Bauer: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you remember your feelings when you saw the Statue of Liberty? Was there any anger involved? Did you feel bitter in any way?

Bauer: No. We cried.

Interviewer: You cried, yeah. But you didn’t, you didn’t --

Bauer: No, no, no. We knew that America doesn’t want us actually, that it was one of the, I believe, 15 or so countries that wouldn’t accept us. But we overcame that. And from there, we went by boat -- after one week in --

Interviewer: One week at Ellis Island.

Bauer: -- Ellis Island, by boat to San Juan, Puerto Rico, and then the Dominican Republic. The boat went only like this all the time. It didn’t go directly to the Dominican Republic.

Interviewer: Did you speak a word of Spanish when you landed?

Bauer: None, none. And in about three months of very, very intensive study of the language with a teacher who was excellent, we could understand the natives, and we could start to study more to understand the language.

Interviewer: What were your first impressions of the Dominican Republic?

Bauer: Dominican Republic? Well, to us it was an Eden. Certainly, it was paradise because none of us has ever been in a tropical country, and it was so beautiful. It’s unbelievable to ride a horse through about 4 miles of orchids from both sides, hanging down there all year long. It was a kind of paradise.

Interviewer: Was it in Santo Domingo where you were?

Bauer: Pardon?

Interviewer: Were you in Santo Domingo?

Bauer: No, no, not in the capital. We were in the north, in Sosúa, and there a settlement developed under our -- with our muscles. It -- everybody who could help in one way or the other helped. I could help only with making maps and building houses. I was the chief architecture there -- architect there; wooden structures only. And it developed in a quite interesting way. There were a few people who knew something about cows, so cows were brought in, and developed a milk and cheese industry, which still exists there, by the way, yes. It is the largest of the country now. The idea, coming from America, was to try out if white men in the tropics could become farmers, and that failed to a great extent because in Vienna, besides a concrete industry, I have never seen anything coming out. I have never stuck anything into the ground that came out again. It was a completely new experience. We tried everything. We tried bananas, which flourished, certainly, and we -- as an example only -- planted tomatoes, which were a disaster because they grew so fast, at the moment when they were getting red, you didn’t have enough hands to get them, to pick them. They just rotted, most of them.

Interviewer: So this is an experiment. It was an experiment in --

Bauer: It was an experiment.

Interviewer: -- turning urban people, city people into farmers.

Bauer: Yes.

Interviewer: How many people were involved in this plan, approximately? Do you remember?

Bauer: I believe it -- my wife will know more about that out of one reason: She was the only nurse there. But I think about a hundred people, 150 people, something like that. And later on they came from other parts, too, from China, for instance, after we had left already. There were refugees from China, and there were people from Luxembourg and France and Czechoslovakia; Germany, certainly.

Interviewer: All there in the Dominican Republic. What languages did you -- I mean, did you --

Bauer: Spanish, fluently.

Interviewer: Did everybody learn enough Spanish to use it?

Bauer: Yes, and when I, after 40 years not speaking a word of Spanish, came back to Spain, I couldn’t build a single sentence. I was so ashamed. I taught there for three years. The last three years, I taught in the public schools there, only Spanish, to the kids of the refugees as well as the natives there. They came, and we had a good time with them.

Interviewer: Did a town ever actually arise?

Bauer: It was no town. It was a small village, and it still is there. It is a kind of a resort by now. Other people invested in hotels, and so it’s a very beautiful little resort village.

Interviewer: And as you mentioned, your wife, and we’ll talk to her in just a minute, but how and when did you meet?

Bauer: My wife?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Bauer: In the Dominican Republic.

Interviewer: In this settlement.

Bauer: In this settlement, yes. Ever heard of the -- how much Austrians love Germans and Germans love Austrians?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Bauer: It’s terrible.

Interviewer: Not at all.

Bauer: We -- not at all. Really, the Austrians hated the Germans throughout history, and whenever they could, they knocked each other over the head in one war or the other. And we met there, got married. Strangely enough, we are still together after 49 years.

Interviewer: Forty-nine years. So you were married in ’43.

Bauer: Yeah. And we had our son there, and our daughter later on is an American. She was born here.

Interviewer: As the war -- as you were there and the war was continuing, did you feel that you were going to remain -- how did you feel? Was it getting -- did it feel permanent? Did you ever feel that that was going to be it, that you were going to be living in the Dominican Republic?

Bauer: No. No. There was one thing lacking completely for me which I could not stand, and that was any cultural involvement. It was only what we could offer to that little settlement, but there was nothing else. And I’m a strange guy. I cannot stand that. And I tried to get out, but there was, again, no possibility. My leaving the Dominican Republic is a fairy tale on itself, which, I don’t know if you’re very --

Interviewer: Yes, we’re interested. Sure, absolutely. Tell us about it.

Bauer: We had -- let me go back. I organized a choir there of non-musicians. Most of them, with the exception of two, couldn’t read music. And we performed, and it was a pretty good little amateurish choir. And one -- once there came to that performance an American author -- I forgot his name, even, at the moment -- who was on vacation there. He wanted to stay there for a few days, but he began to love the country and stayed several months there. And after the performance, he asked me, “Mr. Bauer, how come you are here? Why don’t you teach in America? Why don’t you get over there and do something?” And I explained to him that I had nobody. There is nobody to adopt me. And he said, “Who was your teacher in Vienna?” I said, “I had -- you wouldn’t know him. He went, as far as I know, to Australia.” So he said, “Give me his name. Who is he?” And I told him Ernest Kanitz. That was after Alban Berg’s death. I had -- I was in his class. And he said, “Ernest Kanitz. Wait a moment.” He took out -- this is his address. He’s my neighbor in Los Angeles. Please write him if he cannot do something for you.” Fairy tale.

Interviewer: It’s amazing.

Bauer: So I did, and he had -- was the head of the music department in Erskine College in South Carolina for four years, and when he left for California, the president seemingly promised him, he will do whatever he can for him. And he wrote the president and said, “I have a guy here. He lives in the Dominican Republic. He wants to come over. He’s a teacher of music and art. Would you engage him?” And he did, and --

Interviewer: The rest is history.

Bauer: In ’46, I was in Due West, South Carolina, in a college.

Interviewer: From the Dominican Republic to Due West.

Bauer: By the way, the Dominican Republic has only given two visas on non-quota basis in the entire existence of the Dominican Republic. One was before me, somebody who went to a theological seminary -- I don’t know him -- and I was the second one, and nobody of my friends there believed that in 14 days we were gone. They thought that I was lying and we were for years and years applying for that. So that’s my fairy tale.

Interviewer: And so you’ve remained -- and then there you’ve been ever since.

Bauer: Every since, yes.

Interviewer: Did you speak English then before you came, or did you have to learn it the way you spoke Spanish?

Bauer: Only school English. Whatever I had in college, school English, and for two years, I learned all my English from my students whom I begged, “Please, whatever I say wrong, correct me immediately,” and they did. And from motion pictures.

Interviewer: You went to the movies a lot.

Bauer: We went once a month to a motion picture, and I listened to that thing.

Interviewer: And music was your subject then.

Bauer: Pardon?

Interviewer: You taught music when you came to Erskine.

Bauer: Music and art.

Interviewer: Music and art.

Bauer: And art because I’m such a strange hybrid, studying music. I taught only the theoretical subjects in music, harmony and counterpoint. And they needed it there, by accident.

Interviewer: And you liked the place from the beginning?

Bauer: You bet. It’s a great little college.

Interviewer: Well, that’s quite a story

Bauer: Okay.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to add or anything other statement that you’d like to make about your experiences or anything else you’d care to say?

Bauer: I can talk for the next six hours if you want me to if you have that much film.

Interviewer: And it would be fascinating. It would be very interesting.

Bauer: No, I think that’s about all.

Interviewer: Okay. Let me find out from -- okay. I think we’re okay.

Bauer: Good.

Interviewer: So we’ll come and --

00:42:40