

Frederic Hohl

Hillsborough Remembers

Frederic Hohl is Swiss-born and lived in Switzerland during the last part of World War II. He remembers the Germans and the effect they had on him and war-time Switzerland.

WWII

At Home & Abroad

This is an interview with Mr. Frederic Hohl (**FH**), who now resides in Tampa, Florida. Mr. Hohl is Swiss born and lived in Switzerland during World War II. He remembers Germans and the effects they had on him and his country. This interview is being conducted on November 24, 1999 at NAPFE Towers Apartments. The interviewer is Julie Fitzgerald (**JF**), representing the "Juniors to Seniors: Hillsborough Remembers Oral History Collection Project."

Julie Fitzgerald: Why don't we talk about life before the war and how it changed during the war.

Frederic Hohl: Well, I went back to Switzerland in '44 on a diplomatic passport. Switzerland at that time was still under severe rationing. Everything—sugar, meat, all of the basics—from the moment I got to my grandmother's house, the first thing I got was a rationing card, and that was it. You lived by that. It wasn't like the United States where you could go out and buy rationing cards without any further ado. And I stayed there and I went to school at the University of Basel. I stayed there until, what, '49? '49 I went to Paris. I was intrigued by the arts, and I worked in the arts too, I worked as a painter. Matter of fact, my uncle is a renowned painter over there. His name is Schinacher, which is a tough name. He has some magnificent paintings that my mother had . . . my mother just died. Mama died last year . . . she was a hundred years old. She had a magnificent home there, obviously a super house.

My father was very successful. My dad was an inventor, a great inventor. He was in *Who's Who* and that sort of thing. Papa made a hell of a—a tremendous reputation for himself. He was—vacuum packs was one of his basic ideas. Every time you open something it's vacuum-packed . . .

that's papa's idea. I remember when we had—that was Owensville, Illinois—when we had the house up in Toledo, Ohio, I remember Mama bringing home—or Dad bringing home things that were vacuum-packed, and my mother tested them to see if it worked. Did it work, or didn't it work? And it worked. Matter of fact Dad worked for Gerber's, Gerber's food. And of course he was a monster as far as being an inventor. When he retired, when he was sixty-five, there was about a stack of inventions about that high, one right after another that Papa dreamt up. He was a brain. And he was very smart in the people he had around him were all expertise in their areas. He had a mathematician, an artist who drew for him . . . he was very, very careful about who he hired and how they worked for him. And they were a heck of a team, a tremendous team. They actually created their own ideas . . . it was pretty fantastic. I remember going up there and seeing it . . . it was amazing. The whole floor of Owensville, Illinois was closed off to my father.

He was Swiss-German. My mother was Swiss-German. As a matter of fact I hope to go home around Christmas time if possible, see my kid sister. She's still alive. I have a brother who died. The saddest thing, my mother died as a hundred-year-old person. She was damned if she wasn't going to make it to a hundred. She did. And she was in the hospital five years after a very severe stroke. She was fairly helpless except my kid sister Rosemary has her own—my kid sister lives in Switzerland, in the same village, Ringgenberg - Ringgenberg, Bern, that's the little estate that they live in. Sis married a Swiss boy, she has two children, she's got three houses. She's got my mother's house, her own home right below, and then my grandmother's house was given to

her. So she has three homes in Switzerland.

I remember my grandma's house, that was fun. I mean this was years and years and years and years ago. So old that the barn was part of the house. The hay stack for the barn was part of the home. It was 380 years old then. When I walked—and I'm not a big person—when I walked in the house I had to bend over to get from one door to another. And grandma died when she was eighty-nine. And my father promised my mother if everything went well, he would take her home to Switzerland, to Ringgenberg, and build her the most beautiful chalet you could think of. And he did, he did exactly that. He helped design it. And all of the furniture in the house, to give you an idea of—Swiss people are strange. They're very very religious. All of the [furniture] in that house, they were all handmade. My mother indicated what she wanted, and the people actually sit there and they carved it.

I came back to the United States; I joined the army, like everybody else. In the infantry, no big deal. And then I created my appearance to raise cane. My mother was deadly against it. She wanted me to be a teacher. And I was on down list with my mother until Arthur Godfrey was on the air one day, and I was doing a broadcast at that time, and he had been listening to my show. And Godfrey said something very, very nice on the air about my show, and I was a friend of my mother's after that. She thought Godfrey was (). But I had made up my mind. I would make it to New York by the time I was thirty years old. I did it. I fought through television. I learned television. And I went to Miami, and I was named program director of the year for radio programming. And ABC in New York hired me.

So I went to New York, and I was there for a year. And then, this was purely God, God had to take care of this. I was in a building I couldn't get into, I didn't have the validity to it, at any rate I was in that building through my manager who was a friend of a vice president of that firm. And while I was there he came in the office and he said to Jack Beepan, who's my manager, and said to Beep, 'I need a children's program desperately.' And Mr. Beepan said, 'You don't have to look any further, he's right here.' I had built my television program around children, I felt that this was a field I was good at. I was good in art, I was good in sculpture, I was good in telling—well at that time I was able to tell a story. I've had a stroke, and that's caused somewhat of a problem talking. But I was very easily readable. I mean if I looked at a script, the minute I had a script it was remembered right then and there- not like that anymore unhappily. That I blame on being seventy-three.

JF: What do you remember about being in the infantry? What years were you in it?

FH: Nineteen . . . what was it . . . '50-'51. They had just started the war over in Korea. I didn't get involved in that, thank God. I learned how to shoot, all of the stupid things. I've had an aversion to guns, I don't like guns, they frighten me. The children today with their guns, it's unbelievable. We were different then. When I was brought up my parents were strict. I mean strict, strict. You followed the rules, otherwise, boy you got your fanny walloped. It was assumed at home, Mama and Dad were treated like gods. I mean they were "yes my mother," "yes Dad."

Even when I went to Switzerland, my aunt, the aunt I lived with my aunt in Lucerne, which is a beautiful city . . .

.ancient, ancient city . . . and I treated my aunt the same way. Actually, that was a strange piece of business because my aunt had raised me when I was a baby. My mother was so ill when I was born that they sent me to Switzerland because it was the only safe thing to do . . . to my grandmother's house. And when I met my mother I told my mother, I was three or four years old, I said, 'You're not my mother.' My aunt was my mother. I didn't know my mom, I was never raised by her. That was a completely different story. I went along with the same things my mother did- artwork and that sort of thing. She was a good painter . . . pretty darn good. And she painted all of her life, and then of course the stroke stopped everything. That was a terrible scene. Dad lived to be eighty-nine, so I guess I got a couple of years in me yet.

JF: What did you do during World War II?

FH: I was in the infantry.

JF: During World War II?

FH: Well, actually, not during World War II. I joined when I got back from Switzerland, as everybody did. World War II, my brother was in the navy. John was older than I was, and I guess the football team went down and joined the navy all together. Then he fought over in the South-Pacific. Poor Johnny. Terrible thing, my parents as I said were extremely wealthy, well-to-do. And while mama was in the hospital, John actually went to the hospital, went to Switzerland. And he bummed out fifty thousand dollars. He got fifty grand in his pocket when he came back to the United States. And my mother was dying at that time, I was very hurt about that. I got more than that, though, from my mother's will. Matter of fact they're sending me

the papers I have to write out right now, they're on their way from Switzerland.

And I don't know if my hands were still good-they're not-my hands shake and I can't carve. I've done wood carvings that have won a number of prizes in stiff competition, I mean tough competition. I won best in show at three places that I remember, and I sold all of the work that I did . . . I sold everything that I had. I even sent some to Europe, to my mother, and to my nephew, who's a genius. Good kid. He's an accountant.

That's intriguing . . . my sister's sons were part of the Olympic games. They played for a team, I don't even know the name of the team. I haven't seen my kid sister since the Atlanta . . . '88 she came over to this country and we spent a couple of minutes together. But, they were busy. That family, he traveled all over the world with the Swiss team. Went to Argentina, went to Japan, there isn't a place in the world that he hasn't traveled to. And matter of fact, two weeks ago, he traveled over to meet a friend here in Tampa, and we said hello, went to dinner together. The boys are doing well. my sister married to an affluent family.

Matter of fact, the divorce took everything I had. I had a daughter, twenty-two years old now, but I lost my studios, I lost my—when I came out of New York, I had a heart problem and the doctor said, 'Don't work for awhile,' and I didn't for a year. And then I got eager and I built a studio of my own and we advertised for car dealers all across the country. It was an exciting business, it was also monetarily very good . . . you make money.

JF: During World War II, what did people feel about Germans in Switzerland?

FH: In Switzerland? About the best phrase I can do is tell you about the village where the Germans, and the Italians, and the Americans were kept. The Americans were in a city called Wengen. They had everything that they wanted. They had their full pay, and they were given freedom to roam through the village without any further ado. And Lucerne, I told you I lived there, we had a bomber, an American B-17, flew in, and he was in terrible trouble, and the city was down here, and the plane was just flying across the top of the city. They couldn't fly. All of the people parachuted out. And the plane landed on the one side, loaded with bombs, blew the hell out of that place.

The Swiss, they didn't like the Germans. The German place outside of Interlachen, it was very severe, very strict, and they were guarded at all times. The Americans they were given, you know half part of my life. A lot of the American boys stayed over there. They made money, they got their () or whatever, you know (). You have to remember the difference. When I went to Switzerland in '44, I got four francs, trois francs, 50 centimes for each dollar. And I was allowed to carry a thousand American dollars. Which gave me way the heck more than I needed. But, now, today, the franc, one franc 70 centimes for a dollar. They, just one thing inflation did to them, and they got hurt by it.

JF: What do you think about all of the accusations lately that Swiss banks worked for the Third Reich and held Jewish gold?

FH: I have a Swiss bank!

JF: Oh really? [laugh] Well you couldn't like that very much!

FH: I think the fact that things were smuggled in there, it's the truth, they were smuggled, there's no question about it. They were smuggled in, the Swiss have gold, they have artwork, they have . . . you know anybody who could get out of Germany or Austria would smuggle things into Switzerland. It was the only thing to do. The only way you could keep what your value was, you know, how affluent you were. And the affluent people were terrible.

Zurich has gold, it has artwork, you name what you want, you'll find it all there. The lawsuits that have been filed are nothing, they don't mean anything. The Swiss did give some of it back. They gave some of the people who could identify what was theirs. They gave them back their money, they gave them back the artwork. But there's a lot of gold that's hidden in Switzerland that nobody knows about. Nobody knows where it came from or how it got there.

The Swiss are, except for me, very, very careful of money. It sounds terrible to say but it's true, my mother spent five years in the hospital, paid for it all, and I just got my money. The church, not the church, the school sent me a message, I have sixty thousand American dollars from her. So, you talk about people who save. My kid sister got fifty thousand, sister got sixty thousand, the boys have money (). Every dollar that ever crossed Mama's face got invested. No question about it. That's about it.

The homes, the difference between the United States and Switzerland is unbelievable. You would think you could eat on the streets, it's so clean. I know where my mother's house is. It's just absolutely gorgeous.

Ringgenberg-beautiful. beautiful little town. It's outside of Interlachen, that's one of the communities in Bern. Interlachen is extremely well-known. And I spent time there, spent a lot of time.

JF: Were there many Jewish refugees in Switzerland?

FH: Yes, but not as many as were in Germany. Germany became a Jewish populat—Jews lived in Germany, and Austria. Austria was very, very—Jewish people lived in the Austrian area, I knew that. It's so strange. Simple as different religions, they live differently, so be it, you know? Accept it, accept the fact that that's the way it is. Let's see, you've got to be Irish.

JF: Yes.

FH: You've got to be Catholic.

JF: Yes.

FH: By religion, we're enemies. Martin Luther was the one who blew up the Lutheran church. And when my, it wasn't my grandmother, but her father, when the Swiss had a revolution between the churches in Switzerland. Between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. And they had a war at it. The Lutherans won—there were more of them. But other than that, that's about it.

I miss Switzerland, I miss being there, I miss being with my parents, or I'd love to be with my mother. I wanted to see Mama before she died but I just didn't have the finances. She had the money, but she was being the usual snitch, she was guarding every damn penny and putting it away. Terrible. So, I know where she's buried. The church there, in Ringgenberg, is magnificent. It was built in 1292 by, I guess he was a prince of some sort. It was built not as a church, it was built

as a castle, up on top of a mountain. And that church still today, it's used, and the stairs are huge and monstrous up to the top of it. My mama used to go there.

But, that's the difference. You see that most things in the United States, after something gets old, break it down and build something new. The old things are there and you can see them. I remember when I was a kid, in '38, '39, of going up to the old place where the castle had been built. I stood there, I was on it, I saw it, I saw where the rocks were. And that changes your attitude. I guess (). So can I sign this and [signs the release form] Okay.

JF: Thank you.

FH: You're more than welcome. My shaky hands, I'm sorry. I guess that's part of getting old.

JF: Could you discuss Swiss neutrality?

FH: Oh, unbelievable. To the extent that American soldiers would break loose from the prison camps and they would head for Switzerland. The Swiss were allowed in—the Americans were allowed in. The Germans were locked up and sent to an internment camp.

FH: (continues) They are neutral, they defy, they literally defy someone who is not neutral to get involved. Matter of fact, every Swiss boy becomes a member of the army. I paid my dues in the army while I was in the United States. Every boy takes a gun home, takes his rifle with him and during the () times, battle (), the Swiss were called on several occasions. They had the mines, the railroads were blocked up so that they could blow them up if they were invaded. They had everything planned for an invasion. They thought that Hitler was going to

come through. He didn't. I think one of the reasons he didn't was because he knew what would happen if he did. Railroads would be blocked out, and he was getting stuff out of Italy anyway.

When I was in school as an American, some of the German boys had taken part (), and they nailed me one time. It wasn't bad. I remember that fact, that was terrible too. 'You're an American, huh?' But school was so different than it is here. You go through high school here. There you go through secondarschule (sp?), which is like a junior high school. You're so far ahead of yourself physically that you've learned so much more than you have here. The American education system stinks, it's terrible. We had to learn. I remember when I was a youngster at my grandmother's house. We had visiting trips where we would go out just to explore the area. I was up on that damn castle, and I saw some flowers, and I picked some flowers. I was late getting back to school, and when I got in, the teacher said, 'turn around.' Whack! [laughter] There were so many little things that happened. [Interruption]

JF: Did any of your friends fight in the war, in World War II?

FH: My brother.

JF: Your brother? For how long?

FH: He was shot down. He was an airplane pilot. His eyes were bad, and after that he became a—they wouldn't let him fly anymore because of his eyes. He was put on a destroyer as a—what is it? All that he did was a radar system, and that was his job afterwards. And when he got back to the States, unbelievable, he went back to play football. Yeah, Johnny saw a lot. My brother, he's a fascinating

story. He married the girl I was going with, and they got a divorce, and he went to Africa--to Kenya, Kenya colony. And he became the number two big hunter in Africa. He went with Hemmingway to the top of Kilimanjaro. He also spent time in jail because when they were out they had a way of testing themselves on shooting and he lost plenty at that. So my kid sister went to Switzerland and got him out of jail.

When he got back to the United States, he was very successful. My father saw to it that--my father got him to Owensville, Illinois and he was a good man for it. John was in charge of the unions that belonged. He guarded the union people, and I heard him work against them, wow! That was a fierce piece of business. It isn't that way anymore. The unions () and what have you changed things. I heard Johnny--I lived in Miami at that time and he used to come to Miami and invite union people down there—and I sat in a meeting and his people were told how to handle the various union fellows. And they were handled, believe me they were handled. John died when he was seventy.

JF: You lived in Switzerland the first part of World War II, didn't you?

FH: Yah, yah.

JF: Was there rationing and things like that?

FH: Rationing, all of that. Except you could get anything you wanted on any street.

JF: Black market?

FH: Without any further ado. Yah. It didn't matter what it was, whether it was gas or what have you. I know dad used to get the rationing cards, but I

know whenever he needed extra rationing cards, he got them.

JF: Did people want to support the war?

FH: Yes. At that time they wanted to beat up the Germans, they wanted to beat up the Japanese. They were very much—it wasn't like Vietnam. I mean if you told the people to give, they gave. And the girls were the big thing. The gals were something else. They worked in the factories. It was unbelievable. They beat their brains out during the war. The Americans knew how to fight. It was like saying, 'This is a team and we've got to go fight,' and everybody joined up. Except for me, I was too young.

JF: What about the Swiss?

FH: The Swiss? They joined up automatically. The moment the Germans started invading other areas. The Swiss are ready right now, against any attacks. All of the important areas are mined, can't get in them. And my nephews, both of them, spend time every year in the army for a month or so. That's automatic if you're a Swiss citizen.

I still speak the language, that was something that was very common in the house—different languages. I have been at home when German was spoken, Swiss German was spoken—and that's a whole language on its own--, French was spoken, Italian was spoken. And everybody, they are taught language. If you went to Switzerland right now, you could speak English, no problem.

JF: I used to live in Belgium and I went to Switzerland.

FH: Oh, hey!

JF: Did your mother find it hard being Swiss and German, because everyone was against the Germans?

FH: My mother never changed from being Swiss. She was a Swiss until the end. She got her legs hurt and she needed help, so dad put up \$5000 for a Swiss girl to come from Switzerland, and she was my mother's guide. They did that sort of thing. My grandmother was never never wealthy, they helped her, my grandmother, all the way. There's a loyalty that exists within the Swiss that you don't find here. People—you grow up—I was more of an American than anything else. I got my education, got my schooling, and decided the heck with it, the heck with school, Kierkegaard, etceteras; I'm going to go into broadcasting. And I went into broadcasting, which was a fascinating thing.

JF: Were you in it during the war at all, or was that after the war—the broadcasting?

FH: It was after the war.

JF: So during the war you just went to school?

FH: I went to school, that was it.

JF: Was it any different because it was during wartime?

FH: Yes, they skipped me, they skipped classes for me. Latin and all that—Latin was a simple thing, I'd been studying it from that high. Matter of fact, I was sixteen when I went in to Basel, and that was considered young. And that's all they did, they pretty much got on with it. Well . . . yah there was a difference between Americans and—Americans are vividly independent. Even Paris was different. I remember I lived in Paris just off of the Champs Elysees, rue de Pontue

was the name of the place, and there anything and everything goes.

JF: When did you live there?

FH: Ah, what? I was twenty-one I think.

JF: Was there a lot of destruction left over from the war?

FH: Outside of Paris yah, but not in Paris itself. They kept Paris in one piece. Other than that, the Swiss lost a couple of things—bombers that came and were hurt and they knew that if they flew to Switzerland they could get out of . . . and on several occasions they had bombs fall that were a mess. Let's put it this way, they fell in hopefully places where nobody knew about it.
(interruption)

I felt pretty bad about the divorce. That hurt tremendously. I had a daughter. (interruption) I had a daughter who was on radio, but she knew television, and she knew my studio that well that she would go in there and play her own records. Without any further ado, she played her records. She had her own microphone, and she knew which was my microphone and by God it had to be there, and a chair you know to sit on. And we did a series called the Christie series, and it was very very popular.

JF: What did people feel like after the war? Did they still dislike the Germans?

FH: The Swiss or the Americans? The Swiss said 'Okay the war's over, let's accept people for what they are.' The Americans haven't forgotten it. The Americans know exactly who did what to where when why. Those dirty finks took our studio away. You used to be able to smoke in the studio. Now ().

Oh well. So what are you, a junior or a senior?

JF: Senior.

FH: Senior? How did you get to Belgium? On a children's On the Queen Mary? A lot of good that was. Everybody was sick. My mother was sick. My sister was sick. And the two of us, my nephew and myself, we weren't sick and we went to every meal.

FH: (continues) And people would come and see us eating and they would respect the hell out of us. Well, that's my life. Mama. Course afterwards, once mama was in Switzerland, she flew on Swiss Air. And they have a chair on board, and they put her to sleep, and she'd go to sleep and wake up and be back in America. But she hasn't changed her attitude. She was a Swiss girl from the word go. She spoke Swiss-German to us, and we'd answer in Swiss-German. I had a bunch of languages that I used to play with, but

JF: Were one of your mother's parents German? Or was one of your grandparents German?

FH: No, they were Swiss. We can go as far back genealogically as we want to go, and they're all Swiss. Oh I remember some of the different languages that we used to talk. There was a Russian boy that I knew and we were on a plane together and we wanted to see if the nurse was a Fin. And we did. He spoke Russian and I spoke God knows what, and the only thing we had was a Russian book. That was hilarious.

JF: Was the Red Cross very prevalent in Switzerland?

FH: Oh yes. My aunt, the one who raised me—Tante Ida—went to, right

after the war, she would travel to any country that had been damaged: Czechoslovakia, Austria, Poland, and France. They would pick up children that were damaged, hungry children, children that didn't have food, and bring them back to Switzerland until they had gained enough weight and then they'd send them back.

But she traveled into the German poverty when it was difficult traveling. My kid sister went into Austria when the Russians, and the Americans, and the French, and the English were still running and one evening she decided to go out walking and she got the hell back in the house because the Russians were all with rifles and they were shooting out the lights. We spent some really difficult years there with children that were hurt. And the American people, or the Swiss people I should say, would open their doors and would welcome—and this when the rationing was still going on. I will say this: they are very generous people.

God, the youngsters that used to come in. They were terrible, I mean, well why not? All they knew wherever they lived was how to steal, how to grab food. They knew how to steal, let me put it that way. That caused somewhat of a problem, but they were cured of it in a hurry. They knew meals were going to be at that house where they were staying, and they could eat. My aunt, Tante Ida, was very good about that. They had a building. My uncle and brother's family had built the building and they inherited it and they were very comfortable. They were extremely generous. That's amazing, my Tante Ida lived here in the United States for a year, and then decided no and she went back to Switzerland. She lived in Chicago. But . . .

JF: How do you spell her name?

FH: 'Ee-duh' is I-D-A. Schinacher is a tough name. My kid sister's name isn't easy too. She remarried a boy named Schmocker. And she, like the German way, uses a hyphenated name. She's called () Schmocker-Hohl. And that stinkpot owns her own computer. She's doing radio by the way. When I was in New York, sis was there with Swiss Air, and we met about once a week . . . to go have dinner together or what have you. And I am so glad she married a Swiss boy. The American kids, I didn't like at all. I didn't have any approval. And big brothers become big sisters to little girls. The fellow she married is in the beer business. And he unhappily has heart problems. He has had major surgery and couldn't fly any more. He never forgot that. He never ever forgot that. Two old hellcats I guess. Now to watch them land on those things, how they land . . .

JF: The aircraft carriers?

FH: Oh God! It's unbelievable! You take a fighter jet up and they've got enough speed when you start them up that at take off they're already flying. I knew how to fly when I was a kid. I was a damn poor pilot. It was hilarious when pappy taught me how to fly. He took me up to 4,000 feet in a J3 and he said, 'okay, take your feet off of the pedals and let go of the stick—get ready because we're going to have an excitement here.' And he took, he dipped it over and dropped it, we did about four spins and pulled it out. And the amazing thing was that it was all by itself.

JF: So your father was too old to fight in the war at the time?

FH: My father was too old, yah. Dad fought in the war, but he fought for the government. Dad was involved in how to create, how to develop . . . Papa devised a system for making

arms in a big hurry. Part of the invention I guess. They made—as fast as you could load a damn weapon, bang it was out. But he was too old for the war. Your father in the Navy, he went to England or to Europe?

JF: To Europe.

FH: That must be exciting, a Navy pilot. I wouldn't miss JAG, when JAG is on, I'm there. I liked it better when (). [laughter] I wonder if she really knows how to fly or whether that's strictly amateur. We did the amateur bit on flying once on television. I remember it was great fun. The kids that I worked with on camera at Metro Media, they were the people who guided some great names. Who was the comedian who died out in the plane crash out in Los Angeles?

Doris Hudson: Well this must have been the most wonderful interview ever for you two to be talking for so long!