

Oral History Interview: Manfred Hassemer-Tiedeken

Interviewee: Manfred Hassemer-Tiedeken

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

Date: July 3, 2019 – Part 1

Mark B. This is Mark Bowman. It's July 3, 2019. I'm at the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics Conference assembly in Chicago, and I'm here with Manfred Hassemer-TIE-deken.

Manfred H. TEE-deken.

Mark B. Tiedeken, to do an oral history interview. So welcome. Thank you for taking this time to share your story. And I'm going to just ask if you might begin by saying your name and spelling it so that the transcriber has it. Thank you.

Manfred H. Thanks, Mark, for inviting me. My name is Manfred Hassemer-Tiedeken. It's a double name. And I'm born in 1950.

Mark B. Just tell me about the double name. What does that mean? Why do you have two names?

Manfred H. It's the name of my husband, and—

Mark B. Your husband, okay. So your original name was?

Manfred H. Tiedeken. My original name was Tiedeken, and in 1987 he adopted me because we had a small house, and he wants to be sure that if something happens to him that I have the right to stay there. So in Germany it's

possible to adopt an adult if you show it's a father-son relationship, something like this. So we have found a story for the lawyer, and he proved it, and after six weeks I got the notice to become adopted by... But I have to take the name of the father, of the adopter, to put it to my name, too.

Mark B. Good. Excellent. We'll hear more about him later, right? We'll hear about him later in your life kind of thing. So yeah.

Manfred H. Yes.

Mark B. So start—I ask you to just start to talk about where you were born, your early life, your family situation, education, religious upbringing. So thank you.

Manfred H. I'm born the third child of six children in a Roman Catholic family in the west of Germany.

Mark B. What year were you born?

Manfred H. Where?

Mark B. What year?

Manfred H. 1950. I'm 69 now. And I'm brought up in a, yeah, I think a very good family, and a normal life, Catholic school, and going every Sunday to church, and all these things. And then when I was 13 I remember, though, I was thinking I'm wrong somehow so, I will look for friends, not sexually, but that I would like to have a friend. But there was no model at all. Everything I want to know, it's a female you have to marry, and on the

other side, I want to marry. I want to become a very Catholic family father with six children, and my wife should be like Mary and so on.

But so it went on, and at this time when I brought up to be homosexual, it was forbidden. It was by law you could have come in prison, at least. And so it was very hard. And then always, of course, the sinning. And it's sordid and I have to confess if I have some contact or masturbate or something like this. It was always very hard and difficult for me.

Mark B. Tell me more about your childhood. What did you enjoy doing? What was your childhood growing up years like? How did you spend your time?

Manfred H. I'm...the hobby of myself were to have animals. I have had chickens, ducks. I would have a dog and so on. My mother doesn't like dogs, but later on I got one. But you must feed them from your own money and so on. And in the afternoons, all the way from 11, 12 years, I went every day in the summer, I went out to the farmer, helped them with the hogs and using the tractor, machines, and then the harvest time we have to get the hay and potatoes out, and so it was to get a little bit of money, of course. And I liked it very much.

And I was on my own, and I wasn't so much in other groups. I liked them and they liked me, but I was on my own. So when I later on, I had a dog when I was 14 years old, I walked hours and hours with the dog to lonely areas, and so it was my life. And then...

Mark B. Did you have brothers and sisters?

Manfred H. Did they?

Mark B. Did you have brothers and sisters?

Manfred H. Yes. I have three brothers, one elder brother, an elderly sister, two younger brothers, one younger sister, so I was the third one. And we have, even now in our days we have very good contact. Just now we have been all together in Turkey. My sister lives there, and—

Mark B. You said your sister lives in Turkey?

Manfred H. My sister, yes. And it's always the good contact. No one would like to live together with the other one, so we live spread all over Germany, too, and Turkey, but we like each other, we are in contact. And the youngest, one of the youngest brothers, I have very good contact, and we are quite often together because he's gay, too. He lives together with another man since more than 30 years already. Yeah.

But for me it was the whole time of between 14 and 21 always I want to become gay, I want to become a friend, or I was gay. But I was a sinner, and always to go for confession. And how can I manage it to be Catholic and gay?

Mark B. So did you talk about this in confession? Did you say it?

Manfred H. Not really. [*Laughs.*] But one colleague of mine, a female one, she wants to be my friend, but she asked why don't you want to marry and...marry her. I told her I will tell you later on, and then I told her one night, after we had drunk a little bit, that I'm gay, and I can't be your friend in this way.

And she was Catholic, too, and I told her my problem with the church. And she said oh, there's a very good chaplain, a young priest, you can go to him and he tells you. And I went to this priest and he said oh, it doesn't matter, as long as you don't harm to anybody, it's your life, okay. And from then on it was...yeah, I was like a flower.

Mark B. So that changed you.

Manfred H. Yes. Because I was...Catholic men or priests have told me you're okay as you are. And so I gave in to it. All the years I wanted to become a cook. All my life I want, I was as a boy, and so I wanted to become a cook. And I cooked at home a lot. My mother was very sick, and six children, I helped her.

But then later on when the decision had to be taken to become a cook, no, I said, you must wash up all the time, it's not good. Because while I would like to become a Catholic brother, like the Alexian or a sort like this, but then no, it's not good to be gay. And then I became a nurse, a male nurse.

Mark B. You became a nurse, okay.

Manfred H. Because I wanted to go somewhere outside in the developing countries as it was in this time, and so I started my nursing.

Mark B. Where did you do that? Where did you study nursing?

Manfred H. In Germany there's a special thing. At this time you had to go to the military. It was... And then for one and a half years. But if you go voluntary to the military for four years, that long, but I'll go for it, then if

you are in the sanitaire or the medical department of the military, you go there, then after four years you can get registration with the status as a nurse.

Mark B. Okay.

Manfred H. That was a good combination, the military and... And I was lucky. From the four years of military I was with the navy. I was staying three years of the time in the hospital, the military hospital, so it was very good preparation.

Mark B. Did you have any connections around other gay people in the military, or you just didn't do anything then?

Manfred H. It was...a quarter of the first year, three months in the first year I was to a special course in the island of Sylt. It's a very famous gay island in Germany, the most northern one.

Mark B. What's the name of the island again?

Manfred H. Sylt, S-Y-L-T. And there was of course the whole, the men from Germany came there for holiday, and we, as the young soldiers, we were of course young flesh, and in the evening. And they had the money. We went out every—there were three or four of us, we got to know very quick, and then we went out every night, and the men were inviting us, and we were dancing and drinking and so on. It was a very good gay time, but not a normal life, of course. But it was for us really coming out, maybe someone wants us. It was very good.

But at the same time I only wanted to become a nurse and want to go later on to some developing country. But I didn't want to go alone. And I didn't speak a word of English, and so how can we do? And then there was, in 1972, it was the time, the first time that the students came out. It was the first demonstration for gay rights in Munster, in my home city.

Mark B. What was the home city again?

Manfred H. My home, Munster. Munster. It was the summer of 1972. And there was, all the time there was the first gay magazine coming out all over Germany. It was called "Him." And there was nice pictures in it. So in all the advertisements I'm looking for a man, and looking for friends and so on. And in this paper in July 1972 a man wrote I'm looking for a friend who is Catholic, and he's a medical person, and is interested to go with me to a developing country.

Mark B. Wow. [*Laughs.*]

Manfred H. And I wrote to this person, and in August '72 we met the first time. I had to go to where he was living in Berlin. I was living in Westphalia. And I was the only one who wrote to him, so there was no choice for him.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Manfred H. But due to—you got to know he was not my type, I am not his type physically, but we got to understand straightaway. And he was a monk before, five years with the Carthusians and three years with the White Fathers. And so we were sitting there talking, and because I'm brought up

Catholic and he was a monk and is Catholic, and so we have a lot of mutual understanding, right, it was straightaway. And then we had the same aim, to go to Africa. And we couldn't understand. It could be a good thing. We can go there as friends or so. But really soon we got...we fall in love.

And he was a doctor. He was a medical doctor. And I was still with the military in the hospital there in Westphalia. And so he came over to this area to work in the hospital because he wanted to become a general doctor. In Africa he needs to know special, know specialized and general. And after three months we got to know. We were taking together a flat. The landlord, I asked I have a cousin, he wants to work here, and so it was no one was allowed to say that we are gay or friends.

And we are completely different types. He's more in the house and reading and so on. Until then I was out everywhere, going dancing and going to bars and so on. It's not a thing for him. But he always trusted me and he felt, when I got out, go have a beer somewhere, so it was very, very good, and makes me easy. When I was out then, why did I go out? It's so nice at home with him and all these things. But because he didn't say no, stay, stay, stay, and so I was free to do so. This was in '72, yes. And then all my brothers and sisters, in the meantime, they got to know that I am gay. But not my parents.

Mark B. Okay, so you told your brothers and sisters.

Manfred H. Yes, we came.

Mark B. What kind of response did you get from them?

Manfred H. My sister-in-law from my elder brother, oh, in what family have I married into? She was... But later on came] And my younger brother, he was gay, too, but he...this was okay.

Mark B. Did he tell you then that he was gay? Not yet.

Manfred H. Not yet. No-no-no-no. But the others were no...my elderly brother, he's very narrow-minded. You are my brother, but I can't do something. For him even today it's unbelievable that two men can be together and so forth. But anyway, he's very friendly to us. But then after this time we were together one year in the flat, and then I went to...we wanted to go to the country to prepare. I have to...we wanted to do a four months course in tropical medicine in Liverpool, England. But I couldn't speak English. I could only say my name is Manfred, and I'm hungry.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Manfred H. And so my friend said go over to Liverpool, stay in the YMCA hostel or so, and then after three weeks I'll come after.

Mark B. Okay.

Manfred H. I went over and—

Mark B. Did he speak English?

Manfred H. He was living five years in England before. He tried to teach me, but it wasn't possible. And I went to Liverpool. It was the time of the oil crisis. There was no life in the street in the evening, and so it was....

Mark B. Okay.

Manfred H. Liverpool is a very, at this time a very poor city, a working city. The populations are Irish people and so on. And somehow, from a friend, I got, before I went over, an address of a local gay pub in Liverpool. I arrived in the afternoon and somehow I found the place, and then I had a small sheet of paper with the St. John's Bar, it's called. I was looking for the road, for the street where it is.

But it was all dark in the evening. Then somehow, somewhere I saw a light. I went there. It was a pub. And no, we open by 10:00 in the evening. So okay, I walked around, I went back at 10:00, and then the kind of lady, was full of breasts, and oh, I was shocked. But no, come on, come on, come on. And we have to go up the stairs. And there was a lot of people in there at the bar. Have a seat. So may I introduce you. There's John, there's Phil—

Mark B. And you weren't speaking any English?

Manfred H. No, no, no.

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Manfred H. I didn't even know the word introduce you, but...from the gesture, and so... And from then I went there every evening, and we went out together, and I had to speak, yeah, word by word, every day a little bit more. And after three weeks my friend came. He took the same course I took at the

university in Liverpool. I took the part of nurses and he took the part of the physician, of the doctors.

Mark B. The university again was? The name of the university.

Manfred H. Tropical Medicine Institute of Liverpool. It's the most famous one, and a very practical one. The teachers and professors came out of the foreign countries, and in my course there were 55 students, male and female, from 25 countries.

Mark B. Wow.

Manfred H. So it was, the teachers were speaking very good English, and slow English and so on. And because it was a medical subject and we are medical persons, so it was quite easy after a while to follow up. And I remember there was one day he was talking about some *secum*, *secum*, *secum*. I didn't know what *secum* is. And then he wrote it on the cupboard. Oh, caecum, he said. And so I got to know.

And my friend, he came. We didn't speak a word of German. I always have had to try to understand. But it was good. We were living in a community of young students of the White Fathers. White Fathers are the African missionaries. And they also came from different countries. So in the evening we were together. There were many languages. And so step by step I came into this language. And after four months I met the requirements. I got my degree. And it states I'm just a nurse now in Great Britain, CTC MNH. It's a title I have.

Mark B. I'm sorry, the title again?

Manfred H. CTC MNH. Community da-da-da.

Mark B. It's okay.

Manfred H. Tropical medicine, something like that. For me, of course, it was, oh Manfred, after a few months you could manage this, and so it was very good.

Mark B. Very good. You were young.

Manfred H. I was 21 years old, 22. No, 24 I was 24. And so we wanted to go somewhere in an English speaking country, a developing country. But normally, so that organization, or the hospital or some people in the country has to ask the European organizations, please, we are looking for a doctor, we are looking for some nurses. But no one was looking for a doctor with a male nurse. It was unusual. Doctor with his wife, he could be even, but a nurse, that's okay, but... And so we asked there, we asked there.

And then we found an organization in Ireland, Concern called. And they were working in Ethiopia and in Yemen. And first we were supposed to go to Hodeidah in Yemen. Hodeidah is a harbor there. But then later on we were supposed to go to Ethiopia. But the procedure of getting a visa, getting a working permit, it took months and months and months. And so after Liverpool, after the studies, we worked half a year in a hospital. I

worked in the orthopedic hospital in Germany. He was working in the clinic in the same village.

Mark B. Okay, back in Germany then.

Manfred H. Yeah, back in Germany. And then we thought it will be fit if we can go. Then the next time no, the procedure delayed us. So we went back and were working in Sylt, on the island. It was beautiful there in the summertime in Sylt island. He was in the, what do you call it, dermatology?

Mark B. Dermatology, skin.

Manfred H. Yeah, dermatology, and I was working in the theatre. And yeah, in the evening we are free. There was a lake, it was summer. There was play time. And then at the end of this year, it was 1974—no, it was spring 1975. Then we got permission to go to Ethiopia in some very small hospital in the north near the border to Eritrea.

But at this time it was just Haile Selassie, the former emperor. He was on the way. The communist government took over and it was...the war was really, the war inside the country, and it start at this time. And in the hospital it was, for me it was very good. I was...yeah. I liked it. And we had a flat inside the compound. I had my chicken, I had my goat. I was with other nurses. Of course it was completely different to things I was used to.

Mark B. The other nurses were all women and you were there, or there were a few other men?

Manfred H. Oh, no. Almost women, yeah, because... It was...yeah, it was very good. But there, of course, they have different way of thing. If there was a patient which is not from their tribe, they didn't look at it. And so it was... But to see things through, a lot survive, of course. But for my friend, my husband, it was very difficult. He was straightaway thrown into his job. There was another doctor, but he was always out, and there was emergencies, and they came from the war, people that were shot down. And we have had equipment, not enough medical, not... It was very hard for him.

And after half a year he couldn't do it anymore because he was...yeah, it was too much. He was staying alone there and said, you know, he must go back to Germany. But stay, he said, as long as you like, you like it here. But of course I didn't want to stay there alone. And then at the same time also came the order that all West Europeans had to leave the country. And then there come the Russians, the GDR people came in, and so it was for us had to leave the country then.

And then we sort of, of course it's...we thought about it and there was this change order in Germany, so if we go to a country like this to work there, it's not good because there are so many personnel in the country, and they need the money, they need things. They need, of course, help for education, to give this out, but not with...you must not take their job.

Mark B. Not take their jobs, yes.

Manfred H. And even then we tried. We spent our days. We have programs or something. We support people to do some studies to become a pharmacist, to become a nurse, support them during the time they are learning. Yeah, that was a short time in Ethiopia.

Mark B. From Ethiopia you went back to Germany?

Manfred H. To Germany and—

Mark B. Where in Germany did you go back to?

Manfred H. I came a month later. Hago went over and he was near Cologne and Munster in Westfalia. He was there. And he said I must have a little bit keep down now. And he became a doctor in a laboratory in Gelsenkirchen. So there was no patients, but a lot to do and—

Mark B. A lot of research?

Manfred H. Yes, research, and so that's the life. And I want, and I thought after this time in Ethiopia I couldn't go back in a hospital in Germany where there's all, like, yeah, complete different. Before I was free to do what I think to do, and in a hospital in Germany I have to be put under the head nurse or so.

And at this time started in Germany the community nursing. And I found out there was a course, a one-year course for community nursing, and I took a place there. And this course, it was one of the first in Germany.

There were 21 nuns, Catholic nuns, two normal lay sisters and me.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Manfred H. And all the nuns with the habit and so at this time. But it was a very, very good time together, all the—

Mark B. Was it taught by a Catholic hospital or a Catholic institution?

Manfred H. By Catholics, yeah. And the leader was a Catholic nun, too, and so on. But it was a very good course. I got to know a lot how to deal with many things. And it was near the Rhine in Koblenz, in the wooden area, and in the afternoons or so I walked around through the woods.

There was one house laying in the... a wooden house. Beautiful place. Get a view from there, and the landscape. And so oh—because it's a small house and the school, all the sisters, the nuns, and so I must get a little bit air. I knocked at this door. To the people I asked do you have a room to rent where I can learn in the evening? No. Said we don't have a room, but we have to leave here, the whole house is to rent. Oh, I said, it's beautiful. And so my husband came to visit me, and so he said this house we could rent. It was possible that we can pay it, and so... But it took 300 Deutsche Marks at this time, for the whole house, eight rooms, ten square meter of land around. And the next neighbor was four kilometers away.

Mark B. Okay.

Manfred H. It was completely... It was the former house of a daughter from industrial...?

Mark B. Industrialist.

Manfred H. She was not married, and that was her summer place, and it was built in the 1930s.

Mark B. Now we should officially get your husband's name in here. I don't think we've ever said his name, your husband's name.

Manfred H. HaJo. Hans-Joachim. Johannes, Joachim. But it's HaJo. Hans-Joachim. HaJo Hassemer.

Mark B. His last name is Hassemer?

Manfred H. Yeah.

Mark B. H-A-S-S-E-M-E-R?

Manfred H. Yeah.

Mark B. Good. So you found this house.

Manfred H. Found this house. And then the course finished and I got a job there in the community nursing. And he...he what? He stopped his job in the laboratory. He went over to the city where we were living on the next side a few kilometers, and he became a doctor for...what is it? He was employed by the post, the German post as a what you call it? The doctor who has to be for at the places where the people work that they are medically okay. And if new employees come he has to—

Mark B. Okay, so he was working for a company as the company doctor?

Manfred H. Yes, for the post. The German post office.

Mark B. For the post office, got it.

Manfred H. As a medical doctor. Yeah, and so we had a house. And we opened the house. We had visitors all over. We founded the HuK there. The HuK was founded, but we founded the local group. And I like to cook. I had a big garden. I have the animals. And I took my job, only half time job. Got to have time enough for everything. And it was great. And all our niece and nephews came during the holidays to stay with us, so therefore for them it's normal that two men are living together. Yeah, it was ten years was really full of life. And we found nearby a very progressive and good Catholic church.

Mark B. Okay, there's a Catholic church nearby.

Manfred H. Nearby. There are a lot of Catholic churches around, but our parish head was terrible. You couldn't go there. But there was nearby a very good one. The priest was good. It was... The whole parish life was...yeah, very, very good.

Mark B. Very good.

Manfred H. And so we were straightaway integrated into this, and they came to our place, and I can't really describe it. It was full of life and every three, four weeks we had for the weekend a group of 30, 35 people to come and we have prayers together. We are walking together and talking about to be a Catholic and gay and other things.

Mark B. So this is how HUK was formed? How did that begin?

Manfred H. The HUK was founded, and every second year we have in Germany—or every year, one Catholic, one year Protestant, big Christian meetings. 150,000 people come for the marketplace, and discussions, and Bible, prayers. And there was only one place, one market box, Christians for Socialism.

Mark B. Do you remember what year this was?

Manfred H. Yeah, '77.

Mark B. '77, okay.

Manfred H. '77. And then at this place there were only a few Protestant—it was in Berlin—Protestant pastor and students. They were but you are gay, too? You are gay, too? And so oh, this is only the first time that they found it out. And they met in the evening in some student's room. And then we must go on. And that was the first point. It was in '77 in summer. And then—

Mark B. Where was it that that happened, that meeting was where?

Manfred H. In Berlin.

Mark B. It was in Berlin, okay.

Manfred H. In Berlin. And so...and then the students, or the pastors, they went home in their villages, to Frankfurt, Munich and so, after this big feast. And there was no email, nothing at this time. But somehow they got in contact and they said we must go on and do something. And they made something

some weeks later together in Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main. And from there on it was the founding of the HUK.

Mark B. Can you maybe say the whole name of the group? The abbreviation is HuK, but...

Manfred H. Homosexuelle und Kirche, Homosexual and Church. Yeah, and from then on it was going, going, going. We were, a few years later we were more than 700 members, and there was working in local groups.

Mark B. And it was Catholic and Protestant, right, or just Catholic?

Manfred H. No, mostly were Protestant.

Mark B. Mostly were Protestant, okay.

Manfred H. Catholics were also a few there, but dominated by the Protestants. It was even the first meeting we had, had weekend meeting, so that on Sunday mornings the Catholics went to church, Sunday kirche and the Protestants, and we're all together by 10:00 inside the house prayer. It was...

Mark B. So what did you do with the group? What sort of things did the group do in those early years?

Manfred H. In this...

Mark B. You gathered together just for conversation or study or...?

Manfred H. For conversation, for coffee, for... Well, it was the only place where you could talk to people that you are gay, you are gay, too. And then on the reflection of the Bible, to church, what's the... And we started very early

to deal with the hierarchy, mostly Protestant at this time. Now in the last years since we have Michael Brinkschroeder, we have here more of the Catholics. But at this time mostly Catholics.

There were some Catholic...or one Protestant priests or pastor, he was thrown out of the church because someone found out he's gay and there was a big solidarity action. And then it was the next year on the big feast again we were looking for the solidarity, and we got a small place inside this whole feast, and we could talk to people. And then people came on with the Bible and we are beating it, almost. And then mothers came—oh, my son is gay, and how can we do. Or other people were walking around our meeting point. And then come slow in contact. And so it was going, and—

Mark B. So you met, for this national feast day you would meet as part of that.

Manfred H. Yes.

Mark B. You would meet there together.

Manfred H. Yes. And in our house, in Koblenz, in this Jagdhaus—jagdhaus means hunter's house. It was a so-called jagdhaus. There we collected friends from Trier, Cologne, Koblenz, and so we met there because we had the rooms, and I liked to feed them all, and my friend was doing the...he's better in intellectual things, and it was very good.

Mark B. Were there men and women? Was it mostly men?

Manfred H. Mostly men, but also a few women came, too. Women, it's...yeah, always with these matters. Yeah, and then always with this side, with the homosexual meetings and groups and so, and all the families, and we have...yeah, my mother, my father came all the time, and my brothers and sisters and their children. And it was really lively. And then...but my parents didn't know that we are gay. Everyone knows it and thought about it. And somehow—

Mark B. Your parents came to visit you.

Manfred H. They came to visit. My mother made our beds. For them it was impossible because we were Catholic, we went every Sunday to church, we are very good friends, we are looking for the people to serve good. And so that's... And so and then my brother was living in Cologne, and his wife got a second child. My mother went there to look after their little one, and then one evening she said what's with Manfred's sexuality? Because this one nurse who she knows, Sigrid, I told you in the beginning who wants to be my friend and—

Mark B. Oh, yeah.

Manfred H. And my mother asked my brother what is it. And then he found the right moment to say that he's gay. And then my mother was, of course...yeah, it was a shock. But we had had a paper written before by a Catholic church, a minister, for this time a very progressive paper for gay people from the Catholic point of view. And so my... I went to—oh, I have to do something with my brother's place. I couldn't speak with my mother, and

she not with me about this. And then maybe when I left she was, what do you call it, she was kneifen/pinching. She was taking me on the back in this way.

Mark B. Okay.

Manfred H. But we must talk about something, she said. And then I left. And then we...my parents both were always able, if something new for them, to look for information, to be able to get how can we deal with this problem of our children. And they did it. They went also to a place to talk about it, some institution, and so...

And then after a while we got a letter by my mother. Always my father was writing, was doing every writing. My mother never wrote letters. But she wrote a letter, two pages by hand. And the last sentence was, well, if it's like this, that you are gay and you are friends, so then we take you as a son in our family, your mother. It was very, very good.

Mark B. Wow.

Manfred H. And from then on she was no problem. For my father, he couldn't understand it, but he accepted it. It was ... My mother, when she was in our place, and it was other homosexual friends, and so always she asked what is your mother doing, what is your father doing? So it was very... Then she was, yeah, she was okay. And then soon comes a big story I'll tell you now, but now I'm...

Mark B. Should we take a break now?

Manfred H. Yes.

00:42:08 [*End of recording.*]