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[Joined in progress]

[All responses through translator]

Robert Buckley: ... the tape. We will have a second interview at the end, right now.

This is the 26th of November, 1992, and are in Mulhouse, Alsace, France. And we're going to interview one of Jehovah's Witnesses, Maria Koehl, who lives in Mulhouse. And if you could have her tell us her name, her age, and where she was born.

Maria Koehl: She was born 16 January 1903. She was born in Mulhouse, and her name is Maria Koehl. Koehl is spelled K-O-E-H-L.

Robert Buckley: And would she tell us the name of her parents, please?

Maria Koehl: The father is Sebastian Simon, S-I-M-O-N, and the mother Lami, L-A-M-I.

Robert Buckley: What type of occupation did your father have to support the family, and how many were in your family?

Maria Koehl: He was working in a factory, just **handling luggages and things like that** in the factory, and she was the only child.

Robert Buckley: Only child, I see. When did you become one of Jehovah's Witnesses or where did you become acquainted with Jehovah's Witnesses?

Maria Koehl: She would say around 1925 when they first gave the "Photo-Drama" here in a big hall the first time she has heard something about Jehovah's Witnesses.

Robert Buckley: What was the "Photo-Drama of Creation"? Would she explain that to us?

Maria Koehl: She said herself she didn't go to the "Photo-Drama," so she couldn't tell you what she saw. But her husband was there, and he came home all excited because he said he had found God and has found the truth because the "Photo-Drama" went on from the creation all through the days of human history with God's purposes for man. It was all explained in there, and he was all excited and enthused about it.

- Robert Buckley:* And what was her husband's name?
- Maria Koehl:* Adolphe, A-D-O-L-P-H-E.
- Robert Buckley:* So when did you become Jehovah's Witnesses?
- Maria Koehl:* They came in to the truth and they took a stand at baptism in Switzerland during the 1936-37 period.
- Robert Buckley:* What did you think – what did you and your husband think was going to happen when you saw Hitler in power in Germany?
- Maria Koehl:* She said in those days they heard about Germany and the stress and all that went on, the persecution of the Witnesses. But since they were French here, they felt some kind of security thinking the Germans never would come over and put this kind of load on the Alsatian people. So they always thought that it would go by, kind of happen, you know.
- [0:05:15]
- Robert Buckley:* Did the French government put a stop to the work of Jehovah's Witnesses before Hitler attacked?
- Maria Koehl:* She recalls only that from the time the war broke out, we had no meetings anymore. But she couldn't give any details about how it happened.
- Robert Buckley:* Was she and her husband able to carry on the Bible educational work after the war broke out? And if so, how?
- Maria Koehl:* They had a barber shop. And in the beginning they had a meeting in the back of the barber shop. And then it became too dangerous, so they went up in the apartment. This apartment had two doors. So whenever somebody would come up, one part would depart through one door, and the other one would go up to the roof chambers, you know, in the back of the building in order to escape whenever somebody would come and check. So they had meetings, underground meetings in that place.
- Robert Buckley:* When did they close the French branch office? Does she remember?
- Maria Koehl:* She doesn't recall. She doesn't want to give the date because she doesn't recall. _____. _____.

- Robert Buckley:* Was her husband picked up and put into jail at the same time that she was? Or what happened with her and her husband when the Gestapo found out they were Jehovah's Witnesses?
- Maria Koehl:* The Gestapo found out they were Witnesses. They even told them openly, "We know you are Jehovah's Witnesses." Because they had no Hitler, you know. They were supposed to have the picture of Hitler in every shop, and they had none. So they exactly knew where they were.
- She said that up 'til now they never had gotten an official answer of why they have not been arrested being so well-known as Witnesses. They did not go to prison. They don't have a legal reason for that but ... as a matter of fact, her husband was the only one of all the Witnesses here who knew the way to get the *Watchtower* from France. It was a place in the mountains here.
- Robert Buckley:* Would she tell us how her husband – so evidently, she and her husband were instrumental in the underground work.
- Maria Koehl:* That's what she said.
- Robert Buckley:* OK. How was he able to get the information here to Alsace?
- Maria Koehl:* Here are mountains. And in those mountains on the top of the mountain was the border, the German-French border.
- [0:10:00] The French brother would come up the French side, and her husband would be the only one to know the way where to meet that French Witness. The French Witness had the French *Watchtower*, one [solemn?] copy of the French *Watchtower*. And he would bring it over the border, and they would meet on a special place on the mountain. And her husband was the only one who knew that place. So they believed it was Jehovah's will that he just keeps there to get the *Watchtower* there because the line would've been broken had he been arrested is what she said.
- Robert Buckley:* What was in the *Watchtower* journal that was so important that they were willing to risk going to a concentration camp?
- Maria Koehl:* She said they always felt it to be a duty toward the other Witnesses to get them the spiritual food.
- Robert Buckley:* So then these were Bible articles and Bible information?

- Maria Koehl:* The *Watchtower* is the same as they have it today. It's made up of Bible studies, of Bible scriptures which are studied, which are considered for the Witness as being faith-upbuilding material.
- Robert Buckley:* Okay. Weren't you and your husband afraid of being picked up or being sent to a concentration camp because you probably have heard by now what was happening in the concentration camps?
- Maria Koehl:* They had a lot of pressure from the Gestapo who came in the place because they had their haircut there, you know. And they said, "You know, we are going to arrest you. We are going to come and arrest you." And they had boxes where they asked for money for the regime, you know. And they said, "Put something in that box even so it's only a button just to make the gesture and put something in the box so we won't arrest you because we have to mention that you don't put anything in there."
- So we said, "No. We keep away from helping ____." And finally, he was called to the city hall. At the city hall they say the same thing. They said, "Put something in there even if it's only a button because as an Alsatian we don't want to arrest you."
- So he said to them, "You do your duty, and I do mine."
- Robert Buckley:* Very good. Did you have any children at this time at all? Did she say?
- Maria Koehl:* No, they had no children.
- Robert Buckley:* No children. How much had they heard by now about what was going on in the concentration camp? Did they hear about the persecution of the Gypsies, the Jewish people, handicapped? Did they hear about the experiments going on?
- [0:15:05]
- Maria Koehl:* She said she heard about all sorts of things, but it was unbelievable to them. They just could not believe that it was as bad as the rumor was going on. Of course, you wouldn't read anything in the newspaper about it, so they wondered if what they heard was the truth or not.
- Robert Buckley:* So all these years then, you didn't have to go to jail or to penitentiary?
- Maria Koehl:* No, not at all.

Robert Buckley: So you were able to continue to get the *Watchtower* here to Alsace for all Jehovah's Witnesses?

Maria Koehl: The *Watchtower* came in the French edition. And another Witness of the name of Graf was making the translation. And she was reading to him while he was translating so it would go faster. They did that during nighttime because in daytime it was not possible to do underground work, so this was night work. And Brother Graf's wife was standing outside and checking in the entrance if somebody would step in the house in order to hide the material, you know. So this was every month the same thing. They got the *Watchtower*, and at night they would translate it and print it in secret.

Robert Buckley: Where was the printing press at? Did they have a printing press?

Maria Koehl: They had a copy machine, a hand-driven copy machine, which still can be seen here in the congregation, the machine that used to work during the wartime. And the copy would be sent to different cities, for instance, to Strasbourg and Colmar—this is nearer to Mulhouse. And Freiburg—this is over the Rhine River. And then up to Lorraine in the other province. Just one copy would be sent around, and then they would mimeograph.

Robert Buckley: How did they get the copy from here in Mulhouse to Freiburg? And how did they get it to Strasbourg?

Maria Koehl: It was one sister, one Jehovah's Witness, a woman who would come from Freiburg or from Strasbourg or from Lorraine, come by train down to get the copy and bring it back home. They would come and go to the barber shop. It was an open place.

Robert Buckley: Now, did she cut hair as well as her husband?

Maria Koehl: No. She didn't cut hair, but she helped her husband because of keeping the place clean and hanging the coats and getting the money.

[0:20:10]

Robert Buckley: How did her husband feel when the Gestapo would come in and sit it the chair or the SS for a haircut? How did he feel?

Maria Koehl: Yeah, he was always on stress because of people coming, you know, and the feet together and then they say "Heil Hitler." And he

would answer “grüß Gott.” [*speaking German*] That would be translated in German originally, “May God be . . .” “Salute God” is the translation. It’s a common German expression. So they said, “No, it’s Heil Hitler.” And he said, “Well, the other way around is just as good.” So they would tell him he’s going to be arrested, and they would go to the main police and tell them that he doesn’t salute, you know, and they never came. Kept on the threat all the four years, and they never did arrest him.

Robert Buckley: How did you feel when the war ended? How did you and your husband feel when the war ended? What went through your mind?

Maria Koehl: She said it was a very, very strong relief because they were in constant threat of arrest for four years. Day and night they expected to go to prison, and this is as hard as being in prison, you know, such a stress.

Robert Buckley: Who were the first troops to come here to Mulhouse. Was it the British or the French or the Americans?

Maria Koehl: The French. It was French, **LeClaire**.

Robert Buckley: Very good. And so then you and your husband continued on in your Bible educational work after the war?

Maria Koehl: Yeah, naturally. Yes. Well, it took a lot of ____ time even after the war to continue to get the *Watchtower* by the same line because the work of Jehovah’s Witnesses was not free around after the war. It only got free later on, so they kept underground even though the war was over. But the French authorities were not persecuting. It was just underground without persecution.

Robert Buckley: When she and her husband were in business during the war since they were in town, did they notice Jewish people being picked up, the Gypsies being picked up, other groups being picked up on the streets?

Maria Koehl: They were the whole day in the business, you know. They heard about things but never saw.

[0:25:00]

Robert Buckley: Do you have a picture of your husband or anything she’d like to show on the camera?

Maria Koehl: *[Showing photo]* This is a late picture of Adolphe. That's not from when he was young. This is one when he was ...

Robert Buckley: This is a picture of whom?

Maria Koehl: Her husband, Adolphe Koehl, but taken about 20 years ago.

Robert Buckley: Anything else she has there?

Maria Koehl: *[Showing photo]* It was before the war.

Robert Buckley: All right. Does she have a picture of herself before the war?

Maria Koehl: *[Showing photo]*

Robert Buckley: And when was this taken?

Maria Koehl: At the beginning of the war.

Robert Buckley: OK and we have one more?

Maria Koehl: *[Showing photo]* This is her husband before they got married.

Robert Buckley: Well, tell her that we would like to thank her very much for the time she has spent sharing her experience in the underground activity here in France.

Maria Koehl: She said she was very happy to recall all this period of time. It made her happy to share her experience.

Robert Buckley: Thank you again.

[End of Audio]