

Oral History Interview with Mrs. Marlies Wolf Plotnik August 19, 2010

Marlies Wolf was born in Darmstadt, the capital of Hessen, Germany, on September 18th, 1928, to Hermann Israel Wolf and Irene Wolf, née Oppenheimer. Irene came from a wealthy family (they owned A & O, Adler & Oppenheimer, a leather business) and was 17 years younger than her husband, a well-known doctor of law and the last Jewish lawyer permitted to practice law in Darmstadt because of having been a officier on the front during WW I. Her brother Paul was born in 1922 and her sister Elfriede or “Ellen”, born in 1924.

Mrs. Plotnik has an excellent memory and had already written her memoirs of this period.¹ Marlies remembers the arrival of Hitler and how the family life gradually changed.

She remembers having a very good friend who lived nearby, but at the age of 6, her father came to ask Hermann Wolf not to let Marlies play with his daughter. She was deeply hurt. This must have been in 1934.

The family had a young governess named Lisbeth Hake, whose father had been Hermann Wolf's orderly when he was an officer in World War I. In 1935, a young Aryen woman could not be employed in a Jewish household where Jewish men lived. Apparently, Lisbeth went all the way to Himmler to ask that an exception be made in her case, but he refused.

Her brother Paul had been attending the “*Humanistische Gymnasium*”, but he was taunted and beaten by his classmates. He started hiding in the woods nearby rather than go to school. His parents decided to send him to a school that had been created for German Jewish children in a similar situation, the “*Schule in Mittlemeer*” or the “School on the Mediterranean” in Recco, on the Italian Riviera. He was sent there at the age of 14 in 1936. In 1938, he was sent to Hove College in Brighton, England. His parents were already thinking about emigrating. Mrs. Plotnik tells an interesting anecdote concerning Joseph Kennedy, who was Ambassador to England at the time.

Meanwhile during 1936, Marlies parents went to visit relatives in the United States, preparing for their eventual departure. They made secret financial arrangements. The relatives tried to convince them to stay, but they had to return to get their children. It took much longer than they had expected to be able to escape.

Elfriede had to leave her “*Victoria Schule*” at the age of 14, too, in 1938. She was sent to live with Mina Oppenheimer in an opulent apartment in Berlin on the Lietzenburger and attend a Jewish high school. Marlies remembers how chic her sister was, cutting her hair and wearing the latest fashions.

Marlies has vivid and terrifying memories of November 10th, 1938, which was when Kristallnacht occurred for the Jews of Darmstadt. Her father was arrested and taken either to the Gestapo or the police, his law offices ransacked and typewriters and furniture hacked to pieces. Miraculously, someone who recognized him allowed him to be released, but not to leave the city. She describes going to take a music lesson and watching her friend Gerda's father being dragged away. He returned, head shaven and trembling, after two weeks in a concentration camp.

A lot of the things Mrs. Plotnik recounts seem to come from her later understanding of what was happening concerning Jewish property or the laws forbidding Jews from exercising certain professions. For example, she showed me a carbon copy of a list of household belongings and purchases, or jewelry her family possessed, as well as documents needed for the simplest thing.

Mrs. Plotnik describes the long and tortured procedure of getting visas for the United States. They applied through the American Consulate in Stuttgart. The family gathered what they were allowed to take and met Elfriede in Berlin. Then, they got to England and picked up Paul. They all took

¹ (The interviewer had not read this unpublished manuscript when the interview was conducted. Entitled “We Came to America, Memories of a Refugee Child”, it is available in the USHMM Archives.)

the Queen Mary to NYC in 1939. Mrs. Plotnik describes the journey over and the arrival in a new country.

Hermann Wolf was 59 when he arrived in the United States and could no longer practice law. He had entrusted money to an American relative, but apparently, the business in which they invested the money, was not successful and they lost quite a bit. The family lived on the Upper West Side in a community of German Jewish refugees. Marlies remembers the conviviality and support, but also the despair her father felt for not being able to provide his family the lifestyle to which they had been accustomed.

Both Marlies and her sister adapted to the American schools and Marlies was soon one of the outstanding students, despite not knowing English when she arrived.

Mrs. Plotnik tells of how her formerly wealthy family learned to live more modestly and the parents of one of her friends, a former Jewish factory owner and his wife, had to be made and butler for people in NYC.

Marlies entered the High School of Music and Art, a select public high school, in 1941 and was determined to go to college. The women's section of Columbia University, Barnard, was an elite school. Nonetheless, at a time when women were less likely to go to college and especially a recent immigrant from a family with modest means, she was accepted there. She made money working as a journalist and writing the English section of *Der Aufbau*, a newsletter for German Jews scattered all over the world. She graduated from Barnard in June, 1949.

Her brother Paul enlisted in the U.S. Army and participated in the second Normandy landing. Her sister Ellen married a young man at the age of 19, but divorced when he returned from the war, 4 years later and remarried. Marlies describes how she met her future husband, Gene Plotnik, who was attending Columbia after he got out of the army, because of their mutual interest in theatre. She recounts how they met and his amazing letters. They were married in March, 1950.

Because of high rents and the scarcity of housing after WW II, Ellen and her family and Marlies and hers shared a large apartment on Central Park West. They sent their children to private schools. Later, the Plotniks moved to Scarsdale and Marlies ran a business out of her home while she raised her two sons, Ned, who graduated from Princeton, and Will, who went to Emory. The sons' names were legally changed to "Potter" the summer of 1973 to prevent them from suffering from anti-Semitism. Marlies has four grandchildren. She lost her beloved husband after years of fighting illness several years ago.