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This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Frieda Lefeber on June 22, 2014, in Penn Valley, Pennsylvania. Thank you very much, Mrs. Lefeber, for agreeing to speak with us today.

You're welcome.

OK, I'm going to start the interview, as I do with all of them, with the very beginning. I'd like you to tell me what was your name at birth, the date of your birth, and the place of your birth.

I was born March 21, 1915, in Wissek, Germany.

And what was your name at birth?

I was born Frieda Lefeber-- Frieda Graumann, Graumann, Graumann.

How do we spell that?

G-r-a-u-m-a-n-n.

OK, tell me, I have not heard of Wissek. Where is Wissek in Germany?

It's in the eastern part of Germany-- it was. And after the Treaty of Versailles, it was annexed to Poland. And my parents had to either become Polish or leave that part of Poland. It's the province of Posen.

Ah. Oh, that is Poznan in Polish.

Poznan in Polish. But the Germans didn't agree-- many Germans didn't agree, in that area, that they had to leave. And a militia was formed. And they had fights going on. Now, my parents lived in a small village actually. It was Wissek had about 500, 600 families. And they-- [COUGHS]

Bless you.

Excuse me.

It's OK.

And my father had a big courtyard where fights between the Poles and the Germans, every night, existed. And we children-- I still remember, our household help had to get us into pajamas. And bedding was down in the basement because it was too frightening to be upstairs. And you could hear the bullets between the Poles and the Germans--

Whizzing by?

In our backyard.

Wow.

Yeah. And we were sitting in the cellar. And my father still-- he was a veteran of the World War, fighting for the Germans. And he had big wounds on his legs, and had support, leg support. And we still had Russian prisoners of war on our farm.

And I still hear-- one night there was a knock at the door. And we children were awake from the bullets. And a Polish officer came. And he wanted to talk to the [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] Means the man of the house. But the Russian prisoner who spoke Polish went to the door and told them that he is an invalid, on crutches, and that they should leave him alone.

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But the very next days, the washwoman that used to take care of our wash every week had an argument with my mother. And she went to the Polish authorities who were in charge of that little town and told them that she saw my mother kill a Polish officer.

So in other words, she lied and denounced her.

Yes. And my father had a friend at the magistrate's office who called him and said, your wife is going to be arrested today. And he just packed everything that he owned of value, and put it in the carriage. And we fled, in the late afternoon, in January, in the snow, with a sled and two horses. And the children were sitting in the back. And off we went to try to get into the German part of the territory, which was only an hour away or so.

And we stopped at a barn. And my mother put us in the straw, and covered us with the bedding that they had taken. And they never-- we had to sleep in the barn. And then, early morning, we finally reached German territory. And my father had a house near the border where he put my mother and us children. And my mother got very ill with the flu of 1919.

Oh, I remember reading about that.

Yes. And I remember my father used to say, pray for mom would get better. So we were not allowed to get into her room.

Can I interrupt just for a second. I'm amazed that we're going to be talking not only about events in the '20s and '30s, but even events that are at the tail end of World War I. These are things that you directly remember?

Oh, very much so. Yeah. I know that my mother had anxiety. She was feeling that, so close to the border, that the police will come and pick her up. And after about nine months we went to the town of Kostrzyn, which was about maybe four hours away from where we lived. And there my mother had a sister and a brother who lived in the same city, Kostrzyn. Kostrzyn was about 60 kilometers from Berlin.

I want to stop right there and circle back a little bit. Tell me a little bit about your father and your mother as people. What were their names, if you remember it, when they were born? Let me know that. And a little bit about the families that they came from.

Yeah, my mother was born on November 15 1884. And my father was born July 28, 1884. And they were young when they had to flee and leave all their possessions. And they never got restitution from Poland.

What was her name, and what was his name?

My mother's name was Clara and my father's name was Samuel.

What was her maiden name, your mother's maiden name? Salomon.

Salomon.

Salomon. And she came from a family of 11 children.

Amazing.

11 children-- three of them died in puberty. But the eight lived in-- they all emigrated from that part of Germany to Germany proper. Most of them lived in Berlin, in Kostrzyn, and in the Black Forest.

So her family actually had been born and, several generations, had been in Wissek?

No, my mother came from the city of Poznan.

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Ah, I see. Sure, take some water.

And she-- I got distracted.

She came from the city of Poznan.

Yeah, all of them were born there. My grandfather was a-- he dealt in houseware wholesale.

So was he a manufacturer or was he a trader?

He just did houseware-- China and pots and pans, wholesale. He sold it to other stores. And he was very successful in it.

Was he well-to-do?

Very well-to-do. Each one of the girls got-- I forgot, $15,000 or $20,000 dowry when they married. And my father, who was poor, his father had early signs of Alzheimer's in his 40s. And when he got out of school at the age of 14, he had to help his mother go to the marketplaces and sell pots and pans, which he got from my grandfather.

On your mother's side.

On my mother's side. And he would come weekly or monthly and buy that stuff. And when my grandmother was very ill, on my mother's side, she wanted my mother to get married. And she found that this man, Samuel, was a very good man. So they arranged for a wedding. It was arranged. And they married in 1912. And my brother was born in 1913.

What's your brother's name?

Gerhard.

Gerhard. OK.

Yeah. He was born in 1913. And when they moved to Kostrzyn, my brother must have been about 5, and I was-- no, maybe 6, and I was 4. And it was in 1919.

So you said that your father helped your grandmother support the family because his own father was very ill and had early signs of dementia.

Yes. Did he have any brothers and sisters?

Yes, he had an older brother, and a sister also older than he was, and two younger sisters. And my mother had eight living siblings.

So one came from a much larger family than the other, but both of them came from not-small families, rather substantial.

Yes.

OK. What did I want to ask? Did your family-- you were on this borderland parts of-- can we break for a second?

Yep. OK, we're rolling.

OK. So a question comes to my mind. Did your family, which was Jewish, see themselves as Polish Jews or as German Jews.

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German Jews, very German. My father was fighting for the Germans in Russia, and got wounded. And my grandfather was an officer of the emperor's army. He was guarding, actually, in Potsdam, Germany, before he was married-- he was guarding the emperor.

Oh my.

Yeah, he was about 6 foot 3" and a very stately-looking man.

This is your mother's father.

My mother's father. And he could trace his lineage until 1605. They moved from the Western part of Germany into--

This area.

Yeah.

Wow. Who told you stories? I mean, what you're telling me about is a few things that happened before you were born. So who told you about this?

My parents. My father was very proud of his family.

So tell me-- were they storytellers? Was your father a storyteller?

Yes, very much so. Yeah. He would tell about-- he was very religious, and would eat only kosher food. But when he was a soldier in the German army, in Russia, one day they found, in the land, they found a pig head. And he wouldn't eat-- kosher, but he was so hungry he ate the pig's head.

Along with the other soldiers.

Yeah.

And so he told you about that later, huh?

Yes.

You said you were born in 1915.

Right.

So the war was going on then.

Yes. Well, mother my father was in war. And I was born the day my mother got notice that he has been injured and sent to an army hospital in Germany. And he stayed there for 17 months until he recovered and came home. And I remember the day he came home. I was playing with my cousin and my brother on the street. And this man came up. And he picked me up. And I looked at his-- he had a red beard with stubbles.

[CHUCKLES]

And I was interested in the stubbles.

And you have that memory?

I remember that. And he took me in-- I wasn't even afraid. He took me right into my mother's store. Because during the war, my father, while he was away, my grandfather had opened the store for my mother so she could sell pots and pans

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and stuff there. So he took me in there. And I saw my mother, yeah.

That is amazing.

Yeah.

So before your parents had to flee Wissek, you have this large family around you.

Yeah, well, my aunt lived right across the marketplace from my mother, my aunt, who had lost her husband during this war and had one child. What was your aunt's name?

Aunt Olga.

And her maiden name was also Salomon?

Salomon, yeah. They were two sisters-- you know, they were very-- it was my mother's youngest sister. And she later married someone else and moved to the Black Forest in Baden-Baden. And it was near-- many vacations we spent there.

Well, the Black Forrest is known for--

Yeah, it's beautiful. Yeah. And my mother had this sister, Aunt Katie, who moved to Kostrzyn, also from that part of Eastern Germany. And my grandfather moved. But he had lost all his business, and was supported by his eight living children.

So by the time you were growing up, this well-to-do man who had dealt in wholesale household-- was it, in German, like [SPEAKING GERMAN]? Is that how he would have--

Yes

--said it? OK. The China and such things. He had lost that business?

Yes.

Why?

Well, Germany-- he had to leave that part of Poland. Everybody, all of them, left. And most of them lived right past the border of Poland. They lived in a town called Scheidemuhl. And the rest in Potsdam and Berlin.

So when they left Poland, they weren't allowed to take any of their assets?

No, nothing. They just lost everything. Yeah.

And had they the option of staying, or not?

Yes, they did have the option of staying. And my mother's sister, older sister, stayed near Bydgoszcz, Bromberg, in Poland, and made a nice living with her husband. And but this was all-- later on, lots of them perished. Because of the Holocaust they didn't make it out in time.

So she stayed in Poland-- one sister stayed in Poland. But the rest of the family, if they were going to leave, they couldn't take anything with them.

Nobody could take anything with them.

OK.

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Yeah. They must have had hidden money. And like my father, he had real estate in Germany, where my mother-- and we stayed in the city of Flatow, right at the border of Poland.

Is this the place she was still anxious and nervous?

Yeah, very. She had anxiety reactions from-- she was afraid that the Poles would get her. And so we moved to Kostrzyn.

What was Kostrzyn like? Because, again, this is a--

It was a nice little town for, I would think, about 15,000 to 20,000 people. And my father started-- he didn't deal in grain anymore. And he started dealing in cattle and horse trading. And he made a very substantial living there.

But the economy in Germany was so terrible that he tried to invest into real estate the money-- you could buy something this week, and next week the money was just without any value.

So are you talking about the Weimar Republic, when people had wheelbarrows full of marks, and would plaster their walls and things like that?

You could almost plaster their walls. That's what they used to say. I had a little board where you would write on. And that, of course, one week I wanted it, and the next week you couldn't buy it anymore. It was too expensive.

Really?

You could not--

Like a chalkboard?

your money wasn't worth anything anymore. Yeah. And this is why the German-- right after the war, the economy was so bad. And that's where anti-Semitism really started. And there was a National Socialist Party formed, where Hitler was-- this was almost immediately after the war-- he formed this party and hated the Jews. And he started a riot in-- I think it was in 1922, three years, right after the war.

That's right.

He started a riot. And I remember there was shots during the night. And I got so scared I had to stay with my parents in their bedroom, between the two of them. I was so scared.

So in other words, there were branches of the party in Kostrzyn?

Oh yeah, all over Germany. People didn't have jobs. There was no jobs. And whoever had no jobs would join the Hitler party because he promised them he would improve their lot. So everybody joined the Nazi party, they called it.

So even as a 7-year-old child-- because in 1922, you would have been 7-- you were aware that there was someone named Hitler?

Yeah, I heard my mother and her sister, Katie, they were talking about this man who is a threat to the Jews. And I got so scared I had to sleep with my parents of time.

Yeah, they had this riot. And he was imprisoned. And that's where he wrote Mein Kampf, where he said he will do away with any Jew out of Germany. It was quite scary. And slowly--

So was Kostrzyn-- excuse me for interrupting right here, but was Kostrzyn really the place where you spent your childhood?

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Yes.

So your early years were in this border area, Wissek, in the Poznan province. And you have some memories from there. But the growing up part was in Kostrzyn.

Yes. And I went to lycÃ©e in Germany, in Kostrzyn. And I had lots of friends.

Explain to us what a lycÃ©e is.

A lycÃ©e is like a high school, I would say. I went to high school until I was 16.

You went to grammar school too, I take it.

Yeah.

Elementary school.

Yes, yes.

Always public schools, or not?

There were no private schools. It was all public schools. Except lycÃ©e was a little more-- my parents had to pay a fee. It wasn't anything much. And I graduated from there. And that was in-- I was 16, or 17 maybe.

Before we get to school life and the lycÃ©e, tell me a little bit about your family life, about your brother's personality. Were you close? Your mother's, your father's-- tell me a little bit who they were as people.

My brother wasn't very close to me. He loved to be with his friends. And I would always interfere. He loved to play piano. Very talented. He didn't want me around. I was a nuisance maybe.

And but we had lots of cousins. And Katie's-- she was much more caring than my-- my mother wasn't feeling very good. She had asthma very severe, and sometimes had to go to a summer resort in the Alps.

Did she work in Kostrzyn, as she had?

No, no, no, she didn't work anymore. And she had household help. And we had a governess, yeah. And she was wonderful. She too care of us.

What was her name?

Miss Gerson.

Uh huh. English? Was she English?

No, no, she was Jewish. And when Hitler really came to power, my mother couldn't keep her anymore. My father had lost his-- not lost his business, but was in the process of selling it.

Things turned from bad to worse when Hitler came to power.

We'll talk about that. We'll talk about that. But let's go back to the question of your family. And who were you closest to in the family?

To Aunt Katie. She's on that picture there. She always tried to console me when I came crying.

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And why would you go to her crying?

My mother was kind of-- had no patience with me. She preferred my brother very much. And she was kind of sarcastic, and told me that I'm the stepchild. But I knew I wasn't the stepchild. She just tried to be funny, but I didn't think it was funny.

So yeah, she wasn't-- I think she was affected from the fact that we had to leave the entire area of Wissek.

So she wasn't a particularly happy person.

No, not at all. No, she suffered from asthma. She had emphysema and asthma. She coughed many nights.

Yeah, she was very, very ill. She wasn't well.

So this was hard for your father too.

Oh yeah. But he worked so hard. He didn't have much time. He had so many things to do in his business. He was president of the-- he was president of the--

Was this an association of some kind?

Yeah, the horse and cow association in Berlin. And he of course lost his position when Hitler came to power. He would even go to East Prussia and get very fine livestock. And that was sold each year at auctions in-- and many earls and counts came and bought livestock from him.

Did you ever go with him to these auctions?

Yeah, well I wasn't very keen with horses. My brother had a little accident with a small pony, where he was thrown into the manure.

And I saw that. And he almost-- he sank until somebody helped them pull out of that. And since then I never would go on a horse, ever, no.

It sounds like your childhood was a little lonely. Is that true? Or am I making an assumption?

It wasn't so lonely because I had a lot of Christian friends, classmates. No, it was OK.

So that's another point that I wanted to ask about. As you were going to elementary school, was there any anti-Semitism from your younger years?

No, not a bit. Actually the lycÃ©e was directly in our garden.

Oh, so it was close.

Yeah. And I could get up a few steps and reach for the vine, arbor. And no, it was nice.

And did you have any special friends amongst the--

Yes. Her name was Dorothea Mueller. She was an only child. And her parents, the father had a heating and coal business. And he had to join the Nazi party or he wouldn't have been able to do business when Hitler came to power.

But she was always-- she was quite daring to be friendly with me, because it was not really allowed that any Aryan child would have friends with a Jewish girl.

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This is after 1933?

Yes. It was about 1934 when it all started. '33 was just big celebration of Nazi party all over. But real laws against Jews started in 1934. Yeah.

So but she was your friend from childhood then?

Yeah. And she went to study in Berlin also, as a nurse, like I did, in the hospital in Berlin.

OK, we'll come to the 1930s in a moment. But I want to learn more about life in the 1920s, in Kostrzyn.

We had lots of-- my mother lived in a house that belonged to an uncle in Berlin.

Her brother?

Her brother. When we first came to Kostrzyn, we all lived in Aunt Katie's luxury apartment. She must have had about 10 rooms. And I know my mother and father lived in one room. And I slept with my older cousin-- she must have been at least five or six years older than I was-- and Katie's daughter. And then my brother slept with his cousin, Bert.

So you shared rooms, he with the boy, and you with the girl.

Yes. And my father built a house in the courtyard of one of his houses. And it took him several months until we moved in. But the house was damp. And my mother suffered tremendously there. I think she even was once hospitalized in the local hospital. She couldn't breathe. But we stayed in that about nine months until finally there was a housing shortage. And my uncle from Berlin had a house where there was a vacancy. And we moved in. It was a beautiful house. And so the house that he had built, your father, you left that place.

Yes, yeah. That was in the courtyard of another house that my father owned with another brother-in-law.

And Kostrzyn, how large a city was it?

About 20,000-- maybe 15,000, 20,000.

Were there many Jewish people there? There was a Jewish community. And some of them were relatives from other in-laws and Katie's in-laws. There were lots of Jewish families, yes.

And did it have any significance, economically or historically, as a place? Was it known for manufacturing something?

No, it was a historic town. Frederick the Great had a castle there or something. I don't really recall exactly what-- he lived there.

OK. And you then went to-- let's say you started school in 1922?

I started school in-- I must have been about 5 or 6.

So you would have started in the early '20s.

Yes. I must have been 6 years old I think.

Do you have any memories of that time?

Not too much of my schooling. I remember the school in Flatow. I remember that.

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There was a fire once. And I went to the fire. And my mother found me-- there was a chocolate factory. And there was a fire. And my mother just caught me, and pulled me home. And my father had to spank me, but it didn't hurt.

She was a very strict woman. She had absolutely no patience with me.

Aw. That must have been hard. Growing up-- when you're older, you have your independence. You can think about things. But when you're a child, it's hard.

It's hard. But I always went to Aunt Katie, who fed me anything I wanted out of her storage [INAUDIBLE] yes.

Oh yeah. OK, so when you went to lycÃ©e, was there anything in the schooling-- then that would have been late '20s. Is that so?

Yeah, that was lycÃ©e in late '20s, yes.

Did the political world of Nazi ideology, did that make itself felt in the schools?

Well, I was the only Jewish girl in Kostrzyn. My cousins, who were all older than I was, they weren't in the same class anymore. So I was the only Jewish girl in the school.

Did you feel different?

Not before, no.

OK, OK. And so the teachers were-- nothing that stays in your mind about any incidents like that that would be anti-Semitic, or a teacher making a distinction, or any of the kids doing that.

No, none of those kids did, not before Hitler.

OK. And when did you finish the school?

I was about 16, 17. And I went to Frankfurt, to a school of higher learning.

Which Frankfurt?

Frankfurt the Oder.

So the one in the east?

Yes. It still exists. I visited once.

Really?

Yes.

Yeah. And so it was a school of higher learning. How was that different from a college or a university?

I know that, once you graduated, you had your baccalaureate. And it would have been just the end of the year if I had stayed there. And then our plans were that I'd become a dentist, because that was the shortest study. I think it's only three years study after your baccalaureate.

Did you want to be a dentist?

You know, that was the plan my mother and father probably had. But yeah, that would have been all right. I didn't want

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to stay and study medicine or anything that takes longer.

So you say you started studying at the school of higher learning.

Yeah, it's the Heinrich Von Kleist Schule. It still exists in Frankfurt. And I visited once. And the director of the school took me all around and introduced me to the young students there, yes.

When did you go to visit it?

It must have been about maybe 25 years ago or so.

Had Germany been reunited by that point?

After it had been reunited. Because that was the eastern part of Germany, yes. During the time of Reagan, I think it got united. So right after that, I went to Berlin. Yes.

Huh. And so was this the first time you had been back?

No. I was a guest of the Berlin mayor, who invited, actually, my husband to come back. But my husband had died. So I went. And I went in 1976 or '77. And I was a guest there. And they really-- there were 280 other people from Berlin. And they really celebrated us. They had tickets for the opera and housed us in fine hotels. Actually it was the hotel that I had met my husband on a dance for 5 o'clock tea. As I looked out the window, I saw the dance floor-- after so many years, yeah it brought back-- it was bittersweet memories from Germany.

They tried to be very-- tried to make us feel good in Germany. They had lots of young people who took us everywhere. And I think they paid us some amount of money every day for being there.

Yeah. What was the name of the hotel?

The Excelsior Hotel.

The Excelsior Hotel.

Yes. On Hardenbergstrasse. It's a very nice hotel. I don't know whether it still exists, but at that time it did.

Is that in the center of West Berlin?

Yes, in West Berlin, right off--

Bahnhof Zoo?

Yeah, Bahnhof Zoo. It's within walking distance from there, yes.

So you had gone rather early, let's say, in the mid-'70s, to go back. Many refugees did not go back at all, and some only after that, in the '80s or the '90s.

Yeah, well I've been back several times in Germany. I met very nice young people. Every time I would go, and you would see people my age, I always had, in back of mind, I wonder whether they were ever Nazis or not. I mean, I can't blame the young people. They are not responsible what their parents or grandparents have done to us.

Yeah. Those are inevitable kinds of questions. But at that time-- I guess I want to make a distinction-- you didn't go back to Kostrzyn or to any other part in the East.

I went back to Kostrzyn because it had become Polish. I forgot-- it became Polish. The Poles got that part of Germany.

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So this place that had been four hours from the Polish border in the interwar years now ended up being within the Polish border.

Right, right. And Kostrzyn, which is only an hour from Berlin, is totally Polish. And I went there one day with a friend of mine, by car. And you could not even recognize anything. It was totally destroyed during the war. And the only thing that I could recognize where we used to live was across our park was a hotel. And you could see the chestnut trees that used to be in front of my parents' home. I had hoped that I would go there, and look at the house where I used to live, and maybe go into the place and see the furniture that my-- but it was totally destroyed. Kostrzyn was a very big strategic point. And the Russians had destroyed everything they came across. Not even a church in that town was there.

And it was totally Polish-- every word, every store. The only thing that stayed there was the train station was still intact.

So in other words, all the other buildings--

Everything was destroyed. You didn't know what kind of street or town there was.

What kind of feeling did that leave with you?

I was depressed. I was very sad. And we left right away. We went there by car, a friend of mine. And yeah, I was very depressed. And we stopped at an inn. And they had-- something that I used to like so much is herring in cream sauce, and something else, certain mushroom-- pepper links, they were called. And I had that, and I felt a little better after that. But no, it was very depressing.

Yeah, it's sort of like the world you knew was wiped from the map.

Totally gone, yes.

Yeah, yeah. Let's go back, then, to the 1930s. You said that you went to Frankfurt an der Oder, and you started studying there. And then you said that you didn't finish. Why?

Well, my mother was-- Oh, my God.

It's OK.

This was in 1934. My mother was notified--

[SIDE CONVERSATIONS]

OK. Before the break, we were talking about lycÃ©e. And when you entered Frankfurt an der Oder in the-- what was it, Von Kleist? Hellman?

Heinrich.

Heinrich Kleist.

Schule.

Schule.

And did you have any problems finishing your lycÃ©e studies at all?

No, no. That was fine.

OK. What about now, when you're studying to become a dentist?

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I wasn't studying to become a dentist. I was still in college, actually, to the baccalaureate degree. I never finished that baccalaureate. It was just another 3/4 of a year and I would have finished it.

What was the baccalaureate going to be in? What were you studying for?

They don't have anything aimed for. It just your education-- general education. You had every-- history, mathematics, all that sort of thing.

And you were-- how many years was the program? That was from 16 until 19.

So for three years at least.

Yeah.

Uh huh. So from 1931 till 1934.

Yes.

But in the meantime, in 1933, Hitler comes to power.

Yeah. Do you remember where you were when he was elected?

Yes. When he was elected, I don't know. I don't remember the election, but I remember that he won the election. His party won overwhelmingly. And immediately, big parades started. And school was just finished when the parade passed by the school. We were just leaving the Heinrich Von Kleist Schule.

And they were singing and had the swastikas going. And my friends who had already joined the Hitler Youth-- many of my friends wore khaki uniforms with a swastika on. But they used to be-- I wasn't friends with them but they would still say hello to me.

So when you said that there were people who were wearing those swastika uniforms that you knew, were they joining out of belief or were they joining out of--

Out of fashion, more or less.

Out of fashion, OK.

The girls definitely liked the uniforms, out of fashion. And they sang the Nazi lieder. And one of the Nazi lieders, I still haven't forgotten, it was about-- it's called "The Horst-Wessel-Lied."

OK. Do you know some words?

Yeah. We'll kill the Jews until the blood drops from their knives.

How would you say it in German?

Kill-- what is kill?

Toten?

Yeah.

[SPEAKING GERMAN]

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Yeah. And I remember the name of the song. Probably people still know that song. And they wanted me to join the parade. But I thought this is not really-- I don't want to join this party singing these songs. No. I refused.

So these were some of your friends?

Yeah, they were school-- in the same class. And we were friends. We used to be all friends before Hitler came to power. But then they came to power. And it didn't start immediately that they were not allowed to talk to us. But then, when he did come to power, that was forboden.

Forbidden.

Yeah.

Yeah. The process by which somebody who was integrated into life and then becomes marginalized from that life is something that we don't understand in countries where that hasn't happened.

No. It's so demoralizing. And you felt so ashamed of being-- actually, many times, I thought, why do I have to be Jewish? And I have very religious parents. They were conservative at least. My father wouldn't carry a handkerchief on Shabbat. He would have it sewn into his jacket. And he would not answer any phones on Shabbat. So I mean, I found-- later on in years, I thought maybe because I really didn't want to be Jewish, maybe God punishes me. Later on I found out God doesn't do all those things.

Well yeah.

But as a child, you think, because I was thinking in the wrong direction, maybe I was punished. As if there's something that you could have done or not have done. As if it depended on you.

No, I was just drawn into this.

Well, when I respond like this, what I'm remembering is a lot of other people felt very similar ways. Because you experienced this very individually and very personally. But I've heard, many times, someone say, what had I done? What had I done that I would be ostracized? And they hadn't done anything. It was who they were. And you can't change who you are.

No, no. I think it does give you, basically, a very inferiority complex as a young person. And you wished you wouldn't be in this dilemma.

Did that inferiority complex ever go away?

Well, it did go way in a way that, when I came to America, everybody was so pleasant, and happy, and made you feel good to be here. You lose it. But you really had a horrible complex when you came over. You didn't speak the language. And you had your handicaps.

So school is-- the classes have ended. And people are out on this parade. And they're celebrating the victory of the Nazi party. What happens to you?

Well, first of all, after all the new regulations came out, no Aryan was allowed to fraternalize with Jews. And my parents had lots of Christian families that would come to our religious dinners. They were not Jewish. And we--

You'd invite them--

We invited them for dinners, and they invited us.

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Did that stop?

Hmm?

Did that stop?

That stopped. That definitely stopped. And I just couldn't stand living in that town anymore. The minute my friends would see me, they would either turn into another direction or pass by and totally ignore me.

And I had my cousins that I have, they were all older than I was. So I was very lonely. And I started-- living in that little town, and seeing my friends all the time, not wanting to be with me, hurts. But I decided I have to get out of town.

This is Frankfurt?

Oh, I was in Frankfurt-- that was past Frankfurt that I'm talking about. In Frankfurt, I went to school for more than a year. I think it was a year and three months. And I would have finished baccalaureate. After two years they made a charter that you could get your baccalaureate after two years. And I would have had just 3/4 of an hour left. And when suddenly my mother called-- this was in 1934-- my mother called and told me my father has been imprisoned and I should come home. She was totally-- she was--

Probably beside herself.

--beside herself. And my brother, actually he was away. The whole thing started already in 1933. My brother was stabbed in the back, in the lungs. And he had a collapsed lung, in college. The student behind him took a knife and pierced his lung.

And he was hospitalized and recovered. And he stopped going to school. And he went to a farm not far from where we lived. And he was preparing to go to Palestine. He became a Zionist immediately. And that was a farm that prepared young men and women to do agriculture. And so he was there.

Had he been political before?

Had he in any way been political before?

No, nothing at all. Just a fanatic boy in college, a student, was just-- he was not normal anymore. So my brother studied there. And on Shabbat, he had to come home to our house for Shabbat. And on his way one day he was attacked by three Nazis in the forest. And he came running home after the three boys, he knocked them dead-- not dead, but--

He fought them off.

Yeah. And he drove home on his bike and told my father. And it was on the Shabbat. My father, who never uses a phone, called the Zionist organization in Berlin. And they told him to take the very next train to Berlin and they'll take care of him. And I remember, I was already an au pair in Berlin. And my mother called me and said, go to the train station. Gerhard is going to be there.

So I got there, but he was talking to several men. And they gave him false papers. And he escaped to Holland. And in Holland, he picked up a boat with livestock. And it took him six weeks from Holland to Palestine. I can imagine my mother must have gotten insane never hearing a word about my brother, that he'd landed finally. It took months until she found out. So how much a woman can take not hearing from her children. This is all my mother was totally--

She was very vulnerable, it sounds, to these types of stresses, incredible stresses.

Yes. So I was an au pair. And--

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Let's go back a little bit though. It sounds like this happened with your brother after you returned to Kostrzyn. Your father had been arrested. And what happened with him? Tell us about that.

He was arrested because he had a-- there was no reason. He was arrested for protective custody. He hadn't done anything wrong. It was just that he had a foreman in his on his place. We had lots of land my father owned, which was actually later not allowed to own anymore. But he had lots of land. And he had some livestock which this man tended. And he was the fuhrer or the head of the Nazi party.

His foreman, your father's foreman.

The foreman. And he came one evening with two other buddies of his and said that he will always allow my father to continue his business on the farm. I guess there was a question of whether he could keep the farmland because he was a Jew and it's German land. So he said he will make sure that he always can continue. My father was very happy. And he invited him for supper in the evening. Supper, in Germany, is cold cuts and stuff like that.

So this foreman and his two buddies had dinner. And my mother had a seamstress just leaving the house who had sewn some stuff my mother needed. And she went to the dance hall and said two Nazis are eating with a Jew. And they send over the Nazis to my father's house. The whole group of Nazis came and wanted to talk to Kurt, the head of the--

The foreman.

Yeah. And he came out on the terrace and he said, get lost. And they obeyed him. And possibly the next day my father was put in protective custody.

By this foreman?

No, by the police, by the police, was put in prison. And he wouldn't eat the food there. And my mother called me. I was still--

In Frankfurt?

--in Frankfurt. And she said, come home. And so I came home. And my mother made dishes and casseroles. I would bring kosher food to the prison every day.

And this went on for three weeks. And I finally decided-- we were talking how we could help my father get out of there. In one of our apartment buildings was the judge of the town. And he used to know me since I'm a little girl. And I got enough courage to go up and knock at his door. I was so afraid that somebody might see me.

And he opened the door lightly and said, what do you want? And I said, my father is in prison for three weeks and I don't know when he could get out. Maybe you could help him. And he said, I see. And he closed the door. And a few days later, my father was released. So it must have been his influence.

My father decided, this is no country anymore. It took him two years-- he went to Palestine to see my brother. And he was able to transfer some of his money. I think it was 7,500 marks for each, through the Barclays Bank in London.

So this was in-- I'm sorry to interrupt, but--

1934.

So in 1934, he's arrested. After three weeks, he realizes, this is it. And he starts making plans of how to leave.

Yes.

That's pretty early.

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Yes.

Many people did not.

He had a lot of foresight. So in 1936, he went to visit my brother and transferred some money. But that money was-- he could not use it for anything but buying land in Israel.

Really?

Yeah.

And whose laws were this, British laws?

British I guess. I don't know. There was no Israeli. It's all British territory. So he got out of-- it took him two years to liquidate, from '36 to '38. And then they finally moved in June 1936. I had met my husband in 1934.

So this is another story.

This is another story.

So let's finish this part. When your father comes home after three weeks in prison, what did he look like?

Haggard-- very haggard, and hadn't had any fresh air or anything. Could I have some water?

Yeah, let's break a minute.

Or coffee. That coffee--

All right. So your father comes out of prison. He's haggard. And he realizes this is no country anymore for a future. And he starts transferring money. And in 1936, he was--

He transferred the money when he was in Israel.

I see.

In Palestine.

So until he went to Palestine, he wasn't able to?

No.

So between 1934 and 1936, what did your father do? Was he able to still work?

He liquidated his pastures. He sold his pastures. He sold all the calves and horses that he had at a very low price. And he lost money on that. And he put it all in the-- whatever money he got, he put in the bank, which he couldn't take out when he got out in 1938. He left stocks and bonds and money in the bank.

The Jews were only allowed to take about $1,000 a month for a family.

$1,000 for the whole family?

Marks, 1,000 marks for the whole family. So that was about just enough to eat. Jews were not allowed to have coffee. Jews were not allowed to have eggs. I hadn't had any butter for about years when I left, in 1939.

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Amazing.

Yeah. There was no allotment for butter. I remember we didn't have any butter.

Were you on rations?

Yeah. So how long did the rationing exist for Jews? When did it start, in other words?

It's hard for me to tell. I know I was a nurse at the Jewish hospital. And we didn't get real butter. I know, when I got into Holland and I got out of Germany, the next morning, for breakfast or lunch, whatever it was, they had butter on the table. And there were little scoops with butter balls. I saw those, and I ate the entire bowl with butter while the others looked out of the window. The Prince of the Netherlands was marching by. And everybody wanted to see that, the ones that were going to go on the same boat I was going to go on. While they were looking out the window, I really ate one butter ball after the other.

Oh dear. [CHUCKLES] Oh dear.

I never had eaten butter for a year. Yeah. So that must have been 1939.

So tell me, did you, in Germany, have to wear a yellow star?

No, not yet. Uh uh. But I was called Sarah-- Frieda Sarah Graumann.

Oh, you mean that the name, Sarah, was introduced to your name?

So that people would see, on your credentials, that you are a Jew.

Did you have to have an ID card?

Yeah, we used to have ID cards.

OK. And so did you have a passport or not yet?

I had a passport because, after graduation, my father gave me a ticket to go to America to find a relative that would vouch for me. And the rules weren't there yet for Jews to have the name Sarah, or for men I don't know what they call them.

I believe it was Israel.

Israel, right. That was the next year, the following year. So I still have the old passport where it didn't say Sarah.

Mm-hmm. The Nuremberg laws were enacted after Hitler's ascent to power. So how did those laws affect your family and you?

Nobody had a profession. My husband, who was a judge in Germany, lost his job right in 1934.

[PHONE RINGS]

OK, cut. We'll come to that in a minute. Excuse me for interrupting. But I want to kind of finish up a few threads. When you came home from Frankfurt and you had had just a little bit of schooling left to do, why didn't you ever go back to Frankfurt to finish it?

I could've finished it because my father was a veteran. And I still have his iron cross.

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Oh, you do?

Yes. I do. I have the iron cross of my father and the iron cross of my husband's brother.

Amazing.

He died in Verdun, in the battle, in 1918, a young man. And my father got the iron cross because of--

His wounds?

No, because he was a soldier in the army.

OK.

Yeah.

So you would have been allowed to go back to school. But what happened?

But my father thought it was senseless to study when you couldn't pursue any profession. It would have made no sense. You couldn't become a teacher. You couldn't become a doctor or a dentist or anything. So he said, I don't pay for education anymore.

How did you feel about that?

I agreed, actually, with him. You know, I didn't fight it. It made sense. And I just didn't know what to do. And the only thing that I could think of was being an au pair. So I answered ads in the Jewish newspaper for being an au pair.

And one was in the western part of Germany, quite a distance away, maybe five or eight hours away from where we lived. And it was a cute little boy I had to take care of. But the man of the house had an eye on me. And he was trying to pursue me. I remember running around the dining room table. He was trying to catch me. And he was an old man. For me, anyway, he was ancient, and a little, tiny guy. So I left that. After three months being there, I left the place. And before I went home, I heard they had a carnival in Dusseldorf, which was nearby.

And I went there and I stayed in a hotel. I couldn't leave before Shabbat was finished. So I stayed in that hotel in the lobby. And there was a couple from Brazil who invited me to join them for a walk in the carnival. And I felt so good, because first of all, they were foreigners. They didn't have the rules that Hitler-- I could go with them.

So in other words, they weren't subject to the same restrictions.

No. They were just visitors of Germany. So I had a wonderful time. I forgot all my anxieties. And the next day, I went home. But it was so boring at home. So I tried to get jobs in Berlin. And I did. One day, I found a job. The woman wanted me to come to take care of her grandchildren.

This was an elderly couple. The parents had left already for England to find some work there. And the grandparents had these young children. And I took care of them. I was supposed to take care of them.

So when I came, they seemed to be a nice elderly couple. And in the afternoon I went to sleep, or in the evening. And I woke up full of blotches all over. And when I look, there were bedbugs in the--

Oh my gosh.

Yeah, she had put me in the maid's room. And that room was full of bedbugs. So I told the lady, I'm not going to stay here unless she has it--

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Fumigated?

--fumigated. So she said she would do that. I said, I don't want to smell this. And it was a Saturday. And I went--

Where was this place located? Where were the family--

In the eastern part of-- it wasn't the eastern part. It was near the Spree.

Oh, in Berlin.

In Berlin.

Mm-hmm. Near the River Spree.

Mm-hmm. So she gave me off until 8 o'clock in the evening. And she would have it fumigated. So I remembered where my parents used to go dancing, outdoors, at the Hotel Excelsior on-- forgot-- Kantstrasse

Or did you say Hardenbergstrasse?

Hardenbergstrasse, yeah. And so I went there-- took a bus, went there. And I had just those cork shoes, not dance shoes. But I wanted to see how people dance. And I took some magazines along. Was going to read a magazine.

The minute I start sitting down, a young man came and danced with me. And he became my husband later.

Oh my gosh.

Years later, yes. He was sitting at the other end of the dance floor, and came over and danced with me. And he couldn't dance. And I couldn't dance, with my shoes.

And we had a lot of fun. And he told me that he comes from a nearby town where my parents used to live. And of course he was Jewish.

So he only danced with me once. And other people tried to dance with me. And I danced, and couldn't dance. When the dance was over at 7 o'clock-- 5:00 to 7:00 they used to play outdoors-- he came to my table, and he introduced himself, and he said, my name is Dr. Hans. And I didn't get the last name. And he said, I would like to meet you again. But when I heard Dr. Hans, I thought, this can't be bad.

[CHUCKLES]

So he said, when are you coming back? And I said, I don't know when I come back. And he says, well, can I write to you? And I gave him-- I said my parents wouldn't like strangers sending me letters. So I told them to send the letters to poste restante, and I would pick them up from the post office.

He used to write letters and notes where I should write for a job. But by the time I would write for a job, the position was already filled.

But tell, did you go back to the lady who fumigated the room?

Oh yeah, I went back. But it smelled so much so I told her, I'm not going to stay. And I went back. And I went home actually.

So you went back to Kostrzyn.

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Kostrzyn. And it was really horrible to stay in the town that-- I always met the people that I knew. And they looked away, you know?

What about Dorothea, your friend Dorothea? Did she do that?

My friend Dorothea was studying in Frankfurt. And whenever she came home, she would secretly-- not in that small town, she didn't dare-- we would correspond. But she would not dare to talk to me. That was really highly dangerous.

But for example, did she still let you know that she wanted to stay friends in her way?

Yes, yes.

OK.

And I went having these au pair jobs. This one was no good. And then I finally found another job. And this lady was very elegant, had a ground-floor apartment in a very nice section of Berlin. And she had a little boy that I was supposed to take care of. And in the evenings she had kind of soirees where you saw couples. One morning I saw a couple come out of a room. And I said to my boyfriend-- husband later on-- something is going on.

He said, give up this job immediately. You can get into trouble yourself. So I gave up that job. And I had another job taking care of two boys. And once, the parents went to Palestine to find out about future.

And while they were in Palestine, one of the little boys got sick. But the aunt and uncle were staying with us. So on my day off, I wanted to have my time off. And I went. And when the parents came back, the father was so outraged that I don't care about his little boy that he told me to leave.

So it was your first firing.

Yeah, I was fired. And my boyfriend said-- he used to have a friend who was a nurse at the Jewish hospital in Berlin. And that's a profession that I can use in any country in the world. So I followed his advice and I went for an interview. And the director of nurses looked at my fingers. And she said, I think you never did a day's work in your life.

Oh, that's so unfair.

And she said, think it over. I don't think you want to become a nurse. Think it over and talk it over with your family. And if you really think you want to become a nurse, you can come back in June and I'll see.

OK, before we go there, I have a few questions about this other period where you're an au pair in these many different places. You said that you read a Jewish newspaper. And that's where you would see the ads.

Yes.

So if this is 1934 and 1935, does that mean that the Jewish newspapers that were geared to the Jewish community were still allowed to be printed?

Yes, it was allowed to be printed. I think even as far as when I left, there was always a Jewish paper, yes.

And does this also mean that the people who advertised in the places that you worked were mostly Jewish families or almost exclusively Jewish families for whom you worked? Because they would place the ads there.

Oh yes, yes.

OK. So in other words, the way that you were able to make a living was really outside of, let's say, an open economy. It was all very private. It wasn't that went to apply for jobs in a company.

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No, you didn't make any money. I think my mother would send me spending money or stuff like that. No, you didn't get paid as an au pair. You just had room and board there.

And was your motivation then just so that you could leave your hometown because it was so hard.

Yeah, it was so unbearable in that little town to have nobody, no friends or anything. Yeah.

And did you apply or even think of applying to places where you could be, let's say, a secretary or work in a company?

No. That was impossible to get. Because Jewish business was so bad I don't think they hired any. And I had no secretarial skill at all.

Were almost all-- let me see if I can ask it in a different way. Were people still being hired by non-Jewish businesses?

No, no, no. That was forbidden. That was forbidden.

So I realize that, as an au pair, you wouldn't make much money. But as the way of being able to make a living, it was really not only circumscribed but almost impossible.

For a young girl, definitely. Yeah.

OK. So your boyfriend, Dr. Hans, suggests that you try nursing school.

Yes. And he said, that's a job that you can wear anyway. If you go to Palestine, if you go to any country, you can pick that up and be a nurse. And he was right. It was the best-- it really was one of the major things that saved my life, his advice. Without his advice-- it never occurred to me. I didn't even know that there was a Jewish hospital or Jewish nursing school.

I probably would have perished. Because I couldn't follow my parents. I was over 18. And the British wouldn't let you in unless you had any experience in agriculture, like you went on preparation for Israel, or if you had a profession. And I had nothing. So I was past 18. And they will not admit anybody past 18 with your parents.

I see. Now how did Dr. Hans keep himself alive after he lost his position as a judge?

He inherited a great amount of money. His parents were like, here, the Fuller Brush people. They made brushes, all sorts of things. And so he inherited a vast amount of money. And he and his sister, they lived together. And I even met, in 1935-- his father was still alive, very ill, some prostate problem or something. And he died when I became-- I was at an au pair. And I know he died.

OK, so he had some savings that he was able to use to live.

Yeah, he had lots of savings.

He had lots of savings.

They had lots of money. And at first they could use a lot. I know they intended to immigrate to America. And he bought all kinds of washing machines and stuff that you might use here. But the current was different here than there. And to change that current would have cost a fortune.

So anyway, he had connection to come to America. His aunt by marriage owned a lot of department stores in Germany. And she was married to a very wealthy man here.

In the United States.

In the United States. And when his-- who died? I think the father died. And the executor of the estate-- no, her father had died. But the executor of that estate died. And the German court appointed my husband as the next executor of the estate. And this was in 1936. And he--

Excuse me, can we cut for a second? OK, so he died and your husband was appointed executor of the estate.

Yeah. In Germany, those apartment houses, all the money that he took care of. And he had to confirm with his aunt by marriage about money that she had. And he had to come at least once a year over here.

Truly? to the United States?

To the United States, from 1936 until 1938.

And with all these things going on in Germany, why didn't he stay?

Well, the uncle wanted to have him to stay. But he didn't have the foresight like my father had. My father even advised him-- he had met my father once-- to get out as soon as possible. And he wouldn't.

And when I was here in 1937, he still wouldn't want to get out. Because he always thought he's going to get his judgeship back. He was a judge in the court in Berlin, the highest court.

Well, it's quite a position.

Yes. And the youngest judge ever to graduate from-- to be appointed and to graduate with excellent marks. You wouldn't become a judge politically. It's done on your studies.

OK. It wasn't appointment because of influence of--

No political influence whatsoever. It's just on the excellence of your credentials, yeah. But he was only a judge for maybe a half a year to a year when Hitler--

Came to power.

Yeah. I think it was about a year after that he lost his job. Yeah.

Well, let's go back to you now then. You have a first interview at the Jewish hospital in Berlin.

Yeah.

What street was that on? What part of town was that in?

Iranische Strasse.

Iranische Strasse?

Mm-hmm.

And what section of town was that?

In the north, I think, in the Wedding area.

Ah, in Wedding. OK.

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So I was to start working. And I went-- those three months that she sent me home, I saw my uncle had an accident. And he had a bandage on his forehead. When I visited him in the hospital, I had fainting spell. And I didn't faint, but I was very woozy.

That's hardly confidence-building.

And everybody made fun out of me, and said, don't go there. Don't go. But it wasn't that I wanted to become a nurse. I wanted to be with my boyfriend. So I finally made it there. And I only was there 24 hours and I was assigned to the men's ward. And they put me in the men's ward, in the utility ward. And we had to wash the bedpans and urinals, and place the urinals on each bedpan.

I come to one bedpan, and the man says, will you place the urinal for me? And I said, what's the matter with you? Can't you do it? And he takes his two hands out of the bed cover, and--

[PHONE RINGS]

Let's cut.

That's not for me.

Continue. So you ask him, why can't you do it yourself? And what does he do?

He showed me his bandaged both hands. And I had to put the urinal on him. And I was so shocked. I was such an innocent girl. I had never seen anything like it. So I just I just ran out of the ward, and into the utility room, and told the nurse, I'm done with nursing.

Oh, dear. Oh dear.

Secretly I took my little suitcase and I came with, ran out of the nurse's station, and took the next train home. When I came home, my mother didn't even pay attention to me. And I said, I'm not going there anymore. I'm done with nursing. She says, oh no, you're not. You had signed the contract, didn't you? You abide by it.

And I said, oh, you're such a cruel mother. Why do you do this to me? She says, you go home. That nursing home is your home now.

Oh wow.

Oh yeah. I thought that I had the strangest mother. And this is one thing that I'm thankful for. Because if my mother had told me, yes, you poor thing, you stay home, I would have been gassed by now.

Isn't that amazing? When you think about the connections--

Some of the things that are so detrimental to you at the moment turn out to be the best advice, the best things that could ever happen to me. Just like my husband telling me I should become a nurse. I was no longer-- I didn't know what a nurse has to do. I had no idea. I had never set foot in a hospital before.

So many things-- my mother, although she had no patience with me, it was good for me and made me very strong. Even any of the sarcastic abuse that she might have mentioned, it made me hard and strong. It's good for me.

Well I have, a question that's not historical, but it is something that I think is part of a life journey. When people have been difficult in your life-- and it sounds that, in some ways, your mother was very difficult-- they hurt you. And sometimes they hurt you very deeply. And at some point you're faced with the question of, should I forgive them? Can I forgive them? Or I don't want to forgive them. Did you go through anything like that with your mother? That is, in yourself.

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I think it's my own makeup that I'm never resentful really. And I think that's why I live a long time. Because I have-- what Hitler did to us, it's horrendous. But inside of me I can't hate back. It's one thing I-- I wasn't made up that way. I guess my nature is that way. I can't hate people, even that hurt me. No.

Well, OK, OK. Were you able to let go of the hurt? Was there a time when it didn't hurt anymore?

You know, there wasn't-- you mean about the Germans or about my mother?

Well, let's say both. Because both things that you're talking about are very interesting and, for people, also very instructive. We learn from others on the challenges that we face ourselves, as how did they face those challenges. So the question applies to both, both in a personal way and then when you talk about the Germans, yes.

In a personal way, I never wanted to be very much near my mother. And I think that was one of the reasons I would never even consider going to Israel or Palestine at that time.

And like I said, with the Germans I do feel that, like here, there are many Germans right here in America that might have been Nazis. But their children are totally innocent about the crimes that their parents have-- or even if they know about it, they're not responsible for what happened.

So I belong to this international woman's club here. And there's a German group. They're the loveliest women that you want to meet, very intelligent, very educated. But I often think, I wonder whether your father or grandfather was involved in this? But these people that exist now, I like them just as much as I would like any American.

So if I were to make an interpretation, that whatever injuries you suffered, you don't hold it against somebody who wouldn't have had anything to do with it.

No.

Yeah, yeah.

And whatever injuries I suffered, in the long run it was good for me. It made me strong.

OK, OK. So your mother sends you back.

Yeah, she sends me back. And the director, she was so nice to me. She said, I'll take good care of you. You are not going to go into the men's ward, you're going to go into the females ward. And I didn't like the whole thing. Nursing was the last thing I would have thought of becoming. But I want to stay in Berlin. Because Hans was very attractive to me. So I cried many times in the evening when-- it was this disgusting work that I had to do, changing dirty beds or stuff like that.

I was not a dedicated nurse at all. I became-- as the years went by, I was--

You got better?

Oh yeah. I still have translations of the documents that the administration gave me of the Jewish hospital, that I was a good nurse and that was compassionate. And yeah, I got used to it. You get accustomed to things, even in bad times.

So this hospital, what kind of training-- how long did your training last?

Two years and three months, something like that.

So if you started in '34, you finished in '36?

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No, in '37.

I started in--

'35, because they let you go. Right. I got that. I got that now. So it was two years and three months. And these are tough years. And these are years when there's a lot of changes, and not for the good, going on in Germany. Was the hospital affected by these? Was there any kind of presence of government in the hospital?

Not until 1938, when Kristallnacht started. Before that, there were no Nazis in the hospital, no.

So it was allowed to run on its own. It was left alone. OK. How large a place was it?

A very large place. The beds were, I think, only 370 to 400 beds. But the place was in a beautiful park environment. And for obstetrics there was a building, for internal medicine there was building. And the whole place, the top floor was private patients. And the second floor had all surgery.

So was it that-- were Jews allowed to go to other hospitals? Or did they all come to this--

In those days, yes. But we had also a lot of Christian friends from all over, Poland and from Germany. Even during the Nazi administration, we had Christian patients there.

Aha. OK, so doctors could still be employed as doctors in this hospital.

Only in the hospital, not outside. They didn't have private practices outside. They had patients. Yeah, they were allowed to practice in inside the hospital. If you got sick and you got to the hospital, they would take care of you.

And who funded the hospital? How did it maintain itself?

Oh, it's very old. I think it might be even 200 years old or so. It's beautifully maintained. It had many different-- like the laboratory was in a different building, and obstetrics in another, the administration in another. It was a big grounds. And it's all restored. The city of Berlin restored the whole place.

For today. That is in current times.

Mm-hmm.

But during its 200-years history, had it been founded by the Jewish community? Who funded it during the Nazi times?

I have a book. It's called [SPEAKING GERMAN]. I have it upstairs. [SPEAKING GERMAN]. It's written in German. And it tells you the entire history, even with pictures, of while I was a nurse there, with me in the group, how it was maintained through the entire war. And many of them young nurses that I knew were transported to Theresienstadt. I have a book of one-- I think I even have it here-- she wrote about-- I have the book right in the corner there.

That's OK. OK, fine.

She wrote it in English. She came over here. I think she met her husband who was a doctor.

You're talking about the author of this book?

Yes, Gerda Haas.

Gerda Haas, OK.

I have a book here. She gave it to me. And then I have a book [SPEAKING GERMAN], and it tells you the entire

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history of the-- and what happened during the years of Hitler time when Eichmann was there. He was functioning there. And I have no translation. I have it in German. If anybody is interested, you can have it.

That's OK. I mean, what I just wanted to have is a sense of what was this hospital, how is it allowed to function during this time.

It's a mystery. The director of the hospital, Dr. Lustig, who was later assassinated in the streets of Berlin, before Hitler, he used to have a job with the police department of Berlin as a doctor. He had his doctor in-- different doctors. He took care of the administration, and must have had some connection with some of the Nazis. So he was able to keep this hospital open. And at the time of the delivery, when the war was over, about 800 people were hiding in the hospital.

Really?

Yeah. 800, some of them Jews and some of them not Jews.

But they had been hidden from the Gestapo.

Evidently, yes.

And had the nurses been--

Some of the nurses survived, like this Gerda Haas. She lives in Milwaukee or Wisconsin somewhere.

And some were deported? Is that what you're saying?

Oh, yes, some of them deported and some of them died.

And some of them came over here. There is one here. Nobody knows where she lives. She went to Connecticut. I met her when she was just here, arrived here in America. I met her in Vineland, New Jersey, because I had relatives there. And she was very depressed. She had an alliance with one of the head Nazis there, Dobberke. He was a famous Nazi. And she was his girlfriend, maybe because she survived. I don't know. But when I met her, I met her just for a few moments. And she looked terribly depressed.

And this is right after the war?

Right after the war.

So your training takes almost two years and three months. And you mentioned earlier that you had gotten a passport because you were going to go to the United States. Or you went to the United States--

I graduated in 1937. And my father gave me a ticket to go to America to look for a relative. My grandfather had a brother who had immigrated to the United States. And I was to visit him.

And this was on your father's side your grandfather's brother or your mother's?

I think it was my mother's father. So my great uncle. But he was poor. He couldn't give me an affidavit. And he had a son who was-- and he had a daughter who was poor. They lived in the Bronx somewhere in a walk-up. And they couldn't give me. But he had a son who was in the printing business and quite comfortable. So I approached him, and he promised me to give me an affidavit immediately, but never came. And I was here three weeks. And nothing happened. He never had time. He said he would send it to me.

And it was just-- you know, things are meant to be. And my mother had told me I should visit my cantor in New Rochelle, in New York. And for me to go from Manhattan to New Rochelle, and not knowing the language very well, was kind of hard. And it was winter. And finally, since I hadn't heard from this man about the affidavit, I thought, I'm

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going to visit to my mother a favor and visit this cantor.

And I called him. And he invited me to come-- it was early February-- to come to New Rochelle for a Purim party. Purim is a holiday. I didn't want to go. The day I was supposed to come, I said, why did I agreed to go to New Rochelle. I finally got there. And you know, things are so meant to be. He introduced me to a lady who had a mother 80 years old. And she wanted me to look after her, on the same boat that I'm going to take home, four days after I met this lady. And she wanted to pay me because she knew I was a nurse. I said, I don't need the money. I would like to have an affidavit.

And she said, oh, I can give you an affidavit. Her husband was in the tie-- men--

Men's ties.

--men's tie business. And she had two little girls. And she said, yeah, you could be an au pair for my children.

And so explain to me, why did you need an affidavit? Somebody in the future may not understand why. You need an affidavit to enter the United States. There was a certain amount of people that the United States would accept each year from different countries. Actually I had the Polish citizenship in my passport. Because I was born-- then it was Germany, but now it was Polish. So I went under the Polish quota. And that was so filled, it was very hard to get in. It took me, actually, after I had the affidavit, 14 months to get out of Germany.

One thing that's a curiosity for me is that why, when you came to visit the United States, did you not just simply stay?

Because my father had real estate in my name in Germany. Little did we know that that real estate got lost anyway. But at the time, I owned some in my name, possibly because of policies, business interests. So I promised my father that I would come back.

OK, so the plan was that you would go on what I would call a scouting mission.

Yes.

But the idea was the scouting mission is for a permanent move. That is, your father was--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And so this lady promised me, by Thursday, four days after I had met her, that she would bring the affidavit. And it was a ship, the Bremen. The Bremen took the lady and me back. She had arranged that the rooms face each other. And I was to look after her. Instead, she looked after me. There were so many dances. And I wanted to go and have a good time.

Yeah, and I went to the dances. And I had met a young man there. He was old for me. He must have been-- I know he was 36. I still have his picture. And he was constantly after me. But I left him with the lady. They played some card game, and I went out dancing.

And when we came back to Germany, he left for Budapest because that's where he was going to learn how to do hospital administration. His grandfather had a hospital somewhere in the middle of America somewhere. And he was to take over that hospital. So he went to Budapest and I went to Berlin.

So you had many suitors.

Yeah, well, he was at that time. I was not interested in him. He was bald-headed and wore glasses and was little. And I was tall. And he wasn't my type at all. But he was very comforting later on when Kristallnacht appeared.

Yeah, I took this lady back to Germany. And when we arrived in Bremen, her daughter had picked her up, who lived still in Germany. And I went home. And I told my husband how much I loved America.

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Were you married by then?

No no. I wasn't married. I was just his girlfriend. He never intended to marry me. Just you know, he was very-- he wasn't settled, and he wasn't going to marry anybody.

I just stayed over the weekend, stayed with my parents, and came back to Berlin when I heard that his uncle had committed suicide. So all his plans to ever come to America fell apart. And he was very, very upset. Took the next boat to America to talk to his aunt and ask her about a visa for him and his sister. And so he had left immediately. And I started going back to work at the hospital.

OK. So you were telling me, I believe, about Dr. Lustig, and that he had been assassinated.

He was assassinated in the streets of Berlin after the war was over.

Really?

Yeah. He was the one that had to select who's going to Auschwitz or Poland. And maybe some people resented that. Other people think that he had some connection with the Nazi party. Because he was, in the police department, a very big shot in the police department before Hitler came to power. And somehow or other he--

But he was Jewish.

He was Jewish. And he was married to a Christian woman, also a doctor. And Dr. Lustig, I was very fortunate. Because when I was a young nurse and started at the hospital-- and I had met my husband, of course-- one day I developed, in both legs, an inflammation of the--

Achilles heel?

Yeah, on both heels. And I was going to go to a private orthopedist. And the director of nurses said, you don't have to have the head of the department. You can get it done here in the hospital. But I wanted to be out near my boyfriend. And I had made arrangements to see this famous doctor. And he put casts on me.

And while I was in the neighborhood of my boyfriend, I went to see him, and stayed out for two more hours. And when I came home, the directors of nurses was very angry at me why I stay out too many hours. And she told me to come into the nursery and stay there under her guidance in the neighborhood, and not go on the second floor where I was a nurse-- a student nurse.

And she told me to get my bedding down. And I said, can somebody help me? And she says, if you can travel from the western part of Berlin to our hospital, you can walk up two flights.

So when I got up the two flights, I took my bedding and threw it down the vestibule. It was a big staircase. And just as it dropped on the floor, it fell down and busted. And all the feathers were just-- the directors happened to be passing by there. And everybody of the nurses laughed that saw that. And she got so angry she put me in the nursery. And I was there. And she made me peel potatoes there.

So I told her, I didn't come here to learn to peel potatoes. My mother has enough help the home. She will send somebody to peel the potatoes. I'm not peeling any potatoes. I was really fresh.

And she said, you know, you don't have to study here. You can study in another hospital. And when Dr. Lustig comes home from his vacation, he's going to throw you out.

So Dr. Lustig comes back from his vacation. And she takes me over there. And she tells him, she doesn't need to work here. She has, in her room, a picture of a man this big over her bed. And he said, I want her to leave this hospital.

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He started smiling. And he said, Frau Oberon, isn't it better to have this picture over her bed than have him in bed?

[CHUCKLES] He had a sense of humor. So he says, I just want you to both shake hands and make friends again. And that's what we did.

And it happened, yeah?

If it hadn't been for Dr. Lustig, I might have had to leave that hospital. And all the other Jewish hospitals, all over Germany, were closed and the nurses all sent into concentration camps.

So and yet this one remained open.

Open and functioning. Of course very restricted with limited amount of food and money. But he was able to have a good rapport with some of the of the SR men, including Mr. Dobberke, who was a personal boyfriend of one of my student colleagues, yes. Ellie Kernigsfelt, a very famous-- she was a beautiful blonde nurse, and very pretty. She looked almost-- she looked like an Aryan. Yeah.

And Dr. Lustig had a girlfriend of his own too, which I knew, was in my class. he would examine all the nurses that were admitted to the hospital, the breast examination he did. And some of them he was a little more than he should--

Examine.

--examine, yeah.

News like that gets around very quickly.

Very quickly, yeah. [CHUCKLES]

After you finished your studies, did you have a particular job or a particular--

I was working on the medical floor. I think I was not in charge, but the oldest nurse in that part. There were several medical floors, female floors and male floors. And I was in one of them. And one was TB. And yeah, there were several.

And I was in charge there. But things were really not very pleasant.

In what way?

I also was up in the private pavilion. I knew I was taking care of some Polish women that came. I didn't know whether they were Jews or not. I know one day-- one of my jobs were to-- she had syphilis. And she had pus. And we had to just take the pus and send it to the lab. And pull with an ampule. And some of the pus got stuck. And the needle went off and got into my eyes.

Oh my.

Yeah. And I was put in quarantine to see-- my Wassermann was taken. Those were little incidents that were not pleasant. I couldn't go out for two weeks. I had to stay in the hospital.

Tell me, did the outside world, that really hostile outside world, did it make its way into the hospital? Or was the hospital kind of like an oasis from it?

It was an oasis for the longest time, until Kristallnacht really. Before that there were no Nazis or anything in there. And nurses had very nice nurses' residence. We were treated really very well. We had maids that would do our laundry. And we ate in a big dining room. And food was served to us.

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It wasn't a bad life, actually, with all the nurses around. And the doctors were most of them Jews. Many had real serious friendships with the nurses. One was almost going to get married when she had a infection and died.

Well, I want to follow up now with your parents. Your father went, in 1936, to visit your brother in Palestine. And how was he able to actually legally leave Germany and get to Palestine? I don't know when it was, but it was in June 1938 he left.

During that year, conditions in Germany with the Nazis got worse and worse. Many people were arrested who had mixed marriages and even friendship with Christian women. There was lots of arrests during that year. And also you could not take-- about the money, you could not take more than 1,000 marks for a whole family.

Mm-hmm. So your mother left with him, I take it.

Hmm?

Your mother left with him.

Yes. They both left in June. I remember-- you know, they had so many worries, and had just let me know that they were going to pass through Berlin on the day they left, I think for Marseilles and France to take a boat to Palestine.

They were allowed to take some valuables still out in 1938. Like I know my mother had a whole trunk full of one of those wooden things with very fine china and crystal, and even some silverware, and a certain amount only of silverware. And that was sent to Palestine.

And she bought the most elegant bed linen, all hand-embroidered, which later on she sold. She didn't need it. The crystal, and some religious silverware she bought, and some very fine French China.

And she was able to take that out?

Yeah, they were able to transfer that in big wooden boxes. It arrived in Israel, yes.

And when you said goodbye to them, I can imagine, as parents, they must have been very worried for you.

They must have been. There's no doubt. But you know, they had so many other things on their mind that I don't know how much they worried about me. They thought I'm pretty safe in the hospital.

I know I went to the train and I brought my mother some yellow roses, and how my future husband, Hans, was coming on the train station. And we waved them goodbye. And my mother waved until I couldn't see the roses anymore. And she wrote back that she will keep them until I either come or she dies.

Oh my. Oh my. So there was a soft spot to her too.

Oh yeah, definitely. I'm sure she loved me. You know, she's a child of 11 children. My grandmother must have been a very small, little woman. Having 11 children, you can't care like you have just one. And I know my mother used to say they would run around with wooden--

Clogs?

--shoes, yes. And in a small town like Posen. It wasn't a big town. And children weren't the priority in those days for very religious people.

Yeah. So where did they end up when they got to Palestine? In a town called Benjamina, near my brother, who was in the kibbutz. And my mother couldn't breathe there. And eventually they moved to Nahariya, which was in the North,

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and drier, and near the sea.

I would have thought that, yes, she would get much better being in the warm climate.

No, I don't know that-- Benjamina, I don't know. She didn't breathe well there. And then, eventually, my father bought land there. And I had tried to support them from here as much as I could.

You mean here being the United States?

Yes. So eventually my father built a ranch house, a very nice ranch house. I visited them once. Yeah. I was a nurse on a boat going to the different army stations that we had around the Mediterranean.

So you're talking now after the war.

After the war.

OK. Let's go back to when you're still-- you've said goodbye to them at the train station.

Yeah, I said goodbye. And that was the last time I saw them. And I didn't hear-- occasionally they would write. And I would write all the time and send them a little money. All in all, I must have sent them about $6,000.

That's quite a lot.

Yeah. From the time I came to America until even after I got married, I'd secretly send my parents money.

When you went back to the hospital, how did your life continue?

Well, it got so bad in Germany. And I worried whether I could ever get out of Germany. And the war with Stalin was very close. And Hitler had-- no medical personnel was allowed to leave anymore.

But in January '39, I received permission to enter the United States. But I didn't have any more money left. My father had left me several hundred dollars, thinking I would leave very soon, which I had spent. You could spend $600 very fast.

And I had to run around and ask for money. My boyfriend, who was very well to do, couldn't get his money out. Everybody only could get 1,000 marks. I asked my uncles, they couldn't give me anything.

But my father had a friend. He was a bachelor. And he was about my father's age. And he gave me $600 for a trip to America on a 14-ton ship, Holland America Line. So I was going to leave Germany as soon as the ship was scheduled to leave. And that was on the 26 of March, 1939.

So that's about nine months after your parents left.

Yeah. And it was about five months after Kristallnacht.

So let's talk about that. Let's talk about, now, what happened specifically on Kristallnacht. And you were saying that life had gotten worse and worse and worse in Germany. Describe those first days coming to Kristallnacht, the events that propelled things. I mean, Jews were not allowed to be with Christian men, Jewish women.

I remember sitting outdoors on the Kurfurstendamm. And near I noticed two Nazis kind of watching us, my husband and me. He was my boyfriend. And I had a big hat. It was summer or fall. And we were sitting outside. And I said to my husband, I think they are watching us. And he said, well, let's go.

So we walked on Kurfufstendamm. And it wasn't long when we had to show our credentials. He must have thought I

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was not Jewish. Because my husband definitely looked Jewish. And when they saw my credentials they said it's OK. But we were very uneasy most of the time. We didn't go out very much anymore in public places.

So even there, in public, you're under observation. Yeah. We definitely were. They wanted to know our IDs, yeah.

Tell me, what made Kristallnacht happen?

I don't know what made it happen. It was because of the assassination of a-- it wasn't the ambassador, the assistant to the ambassador, I think it was, in Paris. Some derailed Jew shot this man because his parents were persecuted in Poland. And we all were afraid something is going to happen to the Jews.

And sure enough, one morning, we were about to start working at the hospital. And we were listening to the radio. And we heard that Berlin-- all over Germany, the synagogues were burning, and that males from 14 to 65 were arrested, Jewish males.

And we looked out the window from our hospital. You could see, in the far distance, the smoke of the synagogue in the Oranienburger strasse was burning. I had an uncle who was chief cantor there. And with his old wife they lived there. And I was worried about them. I don't know whether anything happened to them later. I had no idea.

But we were scared. And about 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock in the morning, men came, desperate to be admitted to the hospital.

Jewish men.

Jewish men. Luckily they hadn't been found yet in their home. And they asked for asylum. So we got orders to make our charts for them. And they were admitted.

As patients.

As patients. It got so bad that all the mattresses from the basement were pulled up. And along the corridor-- these were long corridors, about a block long-- we put one mattress behind the other and put these patients on. We didn't have linen or pillows or anything. And we told them not to get up because we heard that the Gestapo and secret police is all over the place. And they should not get up. Ask for urinals, or bedpans, or whatever they needed.

When you say the secret police was all over the place, were they recognizable?

No, they weren't. They were washing windows, and cleaning the floors, and being in the male lavatories. They were all over. But you didn't recognize them. They weren't--

In uniform.

--in uniform. But some of the SR people were outside in the park. And whoever walked around there and was a male was caught. So nobody dared to go out. And it was the most scary thing that you could ever imagine. The rumor went around that we are targets too, that the hospital will be burned. And the nurses' residence. And we were told to work not eight hours but 12 and 20 hours.

Wow.

Yeah. And exhausted really. We went to bed at night just thinking we were not allowed to even take our uniforms off, or if we washed ourselves, to put them on again to be on the alert. We were told that the nurses' residence might be a target. And it was that a nurses' residence next to us, which was the Catholic nurses' residence, was set on fire. In the middle of the night, you could see the nuns on the street. Whether it was meant for us or-- Hitler didn't like Catholics either. It was possible too that he meant those.

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And I was worried all day about my boyfriend. I heard that all the men were-- I tried to call him. There was no answer. So I decided I will find a way to get out. And I had the plan that I will take an ID into the morgue. The morgue was about as far as from here to the Main Street. I would go underground. In the park, you couldn't go because there was so many SR people. I would go in the underground and bring a tag to the morgue. And in the morgue was an iron door that you could open from inside and out to take the--

Corpses?

--the corpse, the box, out into a car. So I figured, I'm going to get out there as soon as it gets dark. I told all the nurses around me that I will disappear for a while. And so I went and took the bus. I put my uniform and my nurse's cap, my pin, the Jewish pin with the Magen David.

Yeah, Star of David, yeah.

Yeah. I would put that under the corpse. And I went up the stairs, opened the door, and saw there was no light or anything. It was very quiet on the street. And I walked out to the next bus station. And it took about a half an hour from our place to where my boyfriend lived. And the bus went through the entire Kurfurstendamm, which is the most elegant street in Berlin. And you could see all the Jewish-- many Jewish stores, all of them totally destroyed and the glass all over the streets. One couldn't possibly walk there.

Was it empty? Were there people in the streets?

It was totally empty. It looked like an ice skating rink it was so lifeless there. And we finally got to a place, Leipziger Strasse, I think it was, Geisbergstrasse, which was not the business section anymore. And there were no stores, so you could walk there.

And I walked to my boyfriend's house. And everything was dark in his apartment. And I took the elevator upstairs. And next to his apartment lived two Jewish ladies. And I rang their bell. I rang his bell, but his sister didn't answer. I know she was there, but she didn't answer. She must have been frightened.

So anyway, these two sisters told me that my boyfriend is hiding with two of his aunts in Berlin somewhere. They didn't know where. So I was glad that at least he is not in--

Custody.

--custody. And I called his friend who was his closest friend. And when I called him, the wife answered who had just married him, crying tat he was taken away during the night. They broke into their apartment. And took him.

So this went on. And I went right back. I was very glad. At least Hans was safe.

So this was in the evening? This was 6 o'clock in the evening, yeah.

Oh my gosh. An the streets being empty at 6 o'clock.

Totally empty. You know, you couldn't even walk. On Kurfurstendamm, it was impossible to walk. There were some Christian stores. But many of the Jewish stores were totally destroyed. And you couldn't walk there. It's impossible.

Well today-- I'm going to make just a short aside-- today, on Kurfurstendamm, the largest store is Wertheim, a department store.

Yeah, that was also destroyed, yes. Yeah. So I was glad when I got home safe. And as I go underground, a person, a man, calls me. Please stop walking.

You were already within the underground--

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I was already in the compound, underground, in the laboratory. And this man stops me. He's in black Nazi uniform. And he says, what were you doing? And I said, I forgot to put a tag on a person that deceased. And I just bought it there. And he just stared at me. And I was shaking. My legs were shaking.

He said, do you know Dr. Knopf? Dr. Knopf was one of our medical interns. And I said yes. And he says, are you his girlfriend? And I said no. And he just stared at me. And he says, you can go.

And so I went home, went to my ward. I was still on duty. And I was glad when I got home. And I told all the nurses what happened to me. And then I got a phone call from a cousin in Kostrzyn that her mother is very ill. She's been attacked in her apartment. And the ambulance took him to the hospital there. And they would not admit her. Because she is a Jew, she should go to a Jewish hospital.

So she asked me whether I can do something about her. So I called the administration, and they said, yes, the ambulance should come here to Berlin.

Which aunt was this?

This was Aunt Katie, my favorite aunt.

The one who always gave you something sweet or something from the pantry?

Yes. It was in the middle of the night. I was trying to sleep a few hours, which was almost impossible. When I heard that she has been admitted and I went over to see her, she had a fractured skull from stones. She had been stoned.

[GASPS]

And she had a broken arm. I don't know whether the other one was broken. But she was--

Was she conscious?

--unconscious. No, she was totally unconscious. And she stayed in the hospital from November 9 until February.

Wow.

And then her family, in the interim, had immigrated to Cuba, her daughter and son-in-law and granddaughter. And they were in Cuba. And they had gotten an affidavit to go to Cuba for my Aunt Katie and her husband. And they went there on a ship. It wasn't the-- what was the name of that famous ship?

St. Louis.

St. Louis. It wasn't that. It was another ship that was taking them. And Cuba wouldn't let them in. And then Roosevelt here wouldn't take them in. And they finally ended up in Berlin.

Again.

Yeah. The ship landed in Bremen or Hamburg. And they were penniless. And luckily one aunt gave them enough money. And eventually they took a box train to China. And it took them 14 days to go from Berlin to Vladivostok and Manchuria. And they arrived in China. And they were put into ghetto. They stayed there for seven years.

[GASPS]

And she contracted dysentery and lost-- she used to be my size. She came down to 80 pounds.

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Oh my.

But survived. And eventually, after seven years, they landed here, in America. And this is the oldest sister of my mother. And the children that had lived in Cuba had gotten to Vineland, New Jersey and started a chicken farm. And my aunt was a great help, not only to them, but after nine months, she could-- she hardly spoke a word of English-- she did pass the, what do you call, not registered nurse, practical nurse examination. And she had patients and made a living for herself. And she was courageous, very, very.

What an odyssey. What an ordeal.

Yes.

What an ordeal.

And she was fine. Died at the age of 97. My daughter and I often visited her on her birthday. On her birthdays, we would go to Vineland and visit them.

So one could say that that story had a happy end.

This had a happy end, yeah.

But let's go back to the hospital right now. You get the call when you've come back from what you saw as the results of Kristallnacht. I want to ask, then, those people who were masked as janitors and window washers and so on, did they continue staying in the hospital? What did they do? It must have been extremely frightening to have such people around all the time when you don't know who's who.

Well, they disappeared actually a day or two after the Kristallnacht. I didn't see them around. Because it was free again. You could go out or anything like that. It wasn't--

What was their purpose to be there?

Just to watch people that people that would get up, for instance, and go to the bathroom, and didn't listen to our orders. They were caught. And you could hear them scream and cry for help. But nobody could help them. They didn't listen. They shouldn't get up. They shall ? ask for urinals or bedpans if they had to go to the bathroom.

So in other words, these people who had come to ask asylum, the Jewish men, so that they wouldn't be arrested, had to pretend to be real patients.

Well, they really weren't sick. They were just laying there and wondering what's going on. This must have been a fright to escape the Nazis on the street. So they were laying around there, motionless.

So as long as they stayed on those mattresses, motionless--

That was all right. And if they needed something, we were there to serve them. If they urinated, then we would empty the bedpans and dish out new ones, fresh ones.

And once the masked Gestapo people left, did most of these men leave too, or did they continue to stay?

No, no. They heard that everything is clear. There are no more arrests. But weeks after, it must have been in December, it was quiet. People wouldn't dare to go out in the evening anymore. And Hans was hiding for two weeks.

When did you next see him?

Until two weeks after, after he had left his aunt-- they weren't his aunts. It was his aunt's mother and sister. The Nazis

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knew exactly where men were living in apartments, fathers or so. But when two sisters were living, they didn't go into that. So that's where he was hiding.

But he came back two weeks after. He was convinced that this is not the country for him anymore. And when I came back from America in February 1938, I told Hans how much I loved America. The people are so nice there. No more kowtowing, and people are very free there. And he should consider moving to America.

And of course now, after the Kristallnacht, he realized there is nothing. But he tried to call his uncle. And the aunt called him back that he had suddenly committed suicide, cut his throat.

[GASPS]

And immediately Hans took a boat back to America. Because he was appointed--

Executor.

--executor. He was able to get to America and talk to us aunt. And he demanded that she take care of his sister and her son. She was a widow. And so she agreed she would do that.

And Hans was trying to get out of Germany also. But he had so many holdings. And he wanted to--

Liquidate them or something?

He couldn't liquidate. He could only either buy bonds or what do you call it? Or deposit it in the banks. Not knowing that, if he leaves, that he can't leave but with $4.00 like everybody else.

$4.00 a person-- 4 marks a person.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I thought you said it was 1,000 marks per family.

When he lived there in Germany. But to get out of Germany, only $10 for each person. I came here with $10. Everybody that left Germany had to only get $10.

So the aunt was nice enough to give him an affidavit. But the conditions in Germany, you would think, every day, the war might break out with Stalin, with Russia.

But they were allies. In 1939, they were allies.

They were not allies then, no. They just had made a pact.

That's right.

Yeah, they had made a pact. But it was still very-- they didn't trust them, the Russians.

I see. So this is interesting. Was the pact known in Germany? Well it would have been after you left. Because you left in March.

I left in March.

And the pact was signed in August. So that would have been five months later.

Yeah, well, he had left in May.

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I see.

I mean, we didn't trust the Russians.

Yeah.

I'm half hoarse.

I'm sorry. We're going to be finishing soon. And if you would like to, we can even stop now.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

OK.

So anyway. I had left. I was gone. And he, about a month later, April/May, May 3, he left for Sweden. The aunt who had great connection with United Jewish Appeal had given him an affidavit to Sweden with the whole family. And he stayed there from May until December. And his sister didn't get processed until the next year, 1940, in-- it must have been in the summer. It was nice summer weather. I don't know exactly what day it was.

So they stayed in Sweden. And then the war started. And it was difficult for him to get to America on a boat. He had to wait until there was a boat going to-- it took him I think three weeks to come here. And he arrived here in December 1940--

December '39?

'39.

He was in Sweden. You said seven months he was in Sweden. And then he took the boat, and he arrived in December '39?

Yes.

OK.

And his sister arrived in July or so '40.

I see.

Yeah. And he came over here. He had put on 30 pounds. Nothing fit him. All his German, made-to-order clothes were a different style anyway. And nothing fit him anymore. So I looked at him. And I thought, for this I have waited so long?

[CHUCKLES]

He was very depressed. Because his aunt had sold the business for $3 and 1/2 million. In those days, it was a lot of money. And she had she had no planned for him except that she had made arrangements with the new bosses that they employ him. And they employed him as an office boy. And he had to carry heavy packages to the post office.

This is somebody who had been a judge in Berlin.

Yes. And a black man was his foreman. In those days, a black one was not on the same level anyway. And he was very depressed. Nothing. And his sister, later, when she came, she was even more depressed because she was so spoiled, always had servants. And all of a sudden she had to help doing her own housework.

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But anyway, he started there. And in the evenings he would go to City College and pick up accounting. Because he had an accent like Henry Kissinger, a real hard German accent. He couldn't be a judge or a lawyer even, because who would take him with that accent? So that was a good choice to be an accountant.

And in the business, throughout the years, the bosses appreciated his judgment and put him in better positions as he even took all the courses. And he was very interested in taxes. And he told the bosses that-- the accountants were very well-known accountants in New York, [? Ottoburg ?], very famous people, that they are not really interested in doing any changes-- he would change the whole structure of taxes.

And they listened to him. And sure enough, saved them millions of dollars in taxes, and made him executive vice president of the firm with four other vice presidents. It was one of the biggest paint manufacturers in America. They had three factories all over the states.

That's a very impressive achievement.

Yes. So he was really doing well. And this was eight years after he had come over here. And we decided to get married.

That was a very long courtship.

Oh yeah. I was the one that always wanted to get married. He was not even ready for it. But when he became executive vice president, yes, he made an enormous amount of money. In those days, it was a lot more than, I think, than the president made at that time. So we lived in a very beautiful apartment on 79th Street East.

Ooh.

Yeah, overlooking downtown. It was really great. Yeah. 14 years-- six years in Germany, eight years here.

It's a very long courtship.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

So I think we've come to the end of the story as far as Germany is concerned and your experiences there. I know that there is many more that came in the decades afterwards, and that you've done amazing things, and have quite a broad variety of talents.

I wish we had the time to go through some of them. But I want to give you an opportunity now to add whatever you would like to at the end of the interview, and any final thoughts that you'd have about what we've discussed, about the meaning of it, about what you would want people to remember. So the floor is yours.

Well, I still think about the wonderful opportunities that I had to come here. Unfortunately many didn't have that. And it was due to my husband's advice and my mother's strength to make a tough human being out of me. And I'm very grateful to both of them.

What a tribute. In the end, how many people from your family survived?

Oh, unfortunately four of my uncles and aunts of my mother, three brothers and one aunt, perished in the Holocaust. They were sent to concentration camps. And my father-- two younger sister that I never met because they had some difference when my mother came into the picture. My mother didn't allow them to live with her in the house that they lived in.

That is when she just got married? She had just got married to your father?

Yeah, she didn't allow those two unmarried sisters to live with her. And they have never talked to us. And I have never met them. I don't even know their name. But I heard, from other relatives, from my father's older brother, who

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immigrated to Palestine, that they perished. I don't know their names because they were married and had children. How many died there I don't know. And my father's older sister and her son perished in the Holocaust.

So quite a few didn't make it.

Didn't make it. And most of them are dispersed all over the world. I have-- the people that lived in the Black Forest in Germany, Aunt Olga, she perished. Because she went on the St. Louis to Cuba, and was sent to America, didn't make it. The boat didn't leave. But the world was so outraged about America, that they didn't take, that Holland and France agreed to take some of these people from the St. Louis.

So my Aunt Olga and Uncle Ernst went off the boat in Holland. And soon after, Hitler invaded the country and sent them to Auschwitz. And they're mentioned in Auschwitz.

I see, I see. What a sad, awful end.

And this Uncle Ernst, and Gerda, and Aunt Olga, they had one daughter who immigrated to America with her husband very early in the Hitler time. And she had Alzheimer's. I met her once in California. She had the beginning of Alzheimer's.

She also had half brothers. Uncle Ernst and Aunt Olga had two sons, twins. Both of them were sent to the Kindertransport in Holland. But when the war broke out, the British considered Germans as enemy aliens, and put them with the Nazi prisoners of war in concentration camps. Each of them were 17 years old. One was sent to Canada with a boat, and the other one sent to Australia.

The boat took months to get to Australia. And many people died on that boat. It has been written about it. And he stayed in the prisoner's camp for four years with the Nazis in Australia. And then he came out, he didn't want to go back to England. He stayed in Australia, never telling-- he married an Australian woman, a Christian woman. And he had one daughter who looks exactly like my Aunt Olga.

And he didn't want to be a Jew. He never told them that they're Jews. And he denied his-- and so did his brother who was in Canada. And he married a young lady from San Antonio, Texas, who was a widow and had two children. And he visited me on my 70th birthday in New York. He had heard about my address somehow or other, and visited me. And we kept in touch occasionally.

And when he died, his stepson called me and said, just a simple question. Are you a Jew? And I said, why do you ask? Your stepfather was a Jew. He's never told us, he said. He denied that. And I first thought, when he asked me, are you a Jew, I thought maybe this guy belongs to the Ku Klux Klan.

But no, we keep in touch on holidays. They send me a note or they sometimes call me.

That's so sad.

Yeah. I have very sad memories about them. And my mother's oldest brother, Uncle Leo, he also died in some concentration camp. And he has a grandson here. His mother and father lived in Shanghai. And the father was an optician there, and made a lot of money, because there were about 26,000 Jews from Europe and Germany in China.

And he made a good living. And then they came over to this country. And he became an optician. And the son went to school and was a very successful man. And I still keep in touch with him. He lives in Florida, in Boca Raton.

It's truly true when you say your family is all over the world.

Yes. And you know, we used to-- very close family. We would visit each other all the time. They would come to visit us, or we would go to the Black Forest or go to the seashore. I have all our pictures there, as a child going to the beaches with my aunt, from all over.

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So that's about it that I can tell you.

Thank you.

Sure.

Thank you very, very much, Frieda. One thing, we have to find out your husband's last name. We never mentioned it.

Lefeber.

Lefeber. So you--

Hans Lefeber.

Hans Lefeber. OK, thank you.

Yeah, sure.

And so this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Frieda Graumann Lefeber on June 22, 2014. Thank you.