

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Ilse and Ernest Pollak
January 8, 1987
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Ilse Ernest Pollak, conducted on January 8, 1987 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

ILSE and ERNEST POLLAK

January 8, 1987

Time-coded notes for Interview with Ilse and Ernest Pollak

January 8, 1987

Ilse Pollack was born in Pomerania, Poland but grew up in Cologne, Germany

01:1:14

Interviewer : ...Do you recall any antisemitism [during school years] ?

Ilse: Yes, but I would say prior to 1933 it was not prevalent. Although we at home used to listen secretly (because officially it was not allowed) to the radio and we kind of heard what was going on with persecution, and uh how should I say, non-friendly gestures towards Jewish people at the time of the Kristallnacht...

01:3:54

Interviewer: What was the relationship like between you and the other students?

Ilse: Well, up until the time Hitler came to power we had a good relationship. Of course it goes without saying that we the Jewish people were in the minority. I went to an all girls school. It was a private school

01:4:29

Interviewer: And so you were ten years old when Hitler came to power... do you recall any of the anti-Jewish boycotts?

Ilse: Yes there was always a fear. Of course it was very much hidden by my parents who didn't want to worry us children. I had a younger brother--five years younger.

01:05:05

Interviewer: And so they tried to keep on life in a normal way?

Ilse: My father used to go down every morning...there was [*sic*] antisemitic signs nailed to the building and they used to say "Jews lived here, let's get rid of them" and every morning at 4 am - it was like a ritual with him, he used to go down and tear the signs off and so most of us, specially us children did not know about it that time...tried to spare us the grief...

01:05:55

Interviewer: Did your parents every think of leaving?

Ilse: Yes, we tried. We tried to get visas to different countries but were denied.. this was later in 1938... after Kristallnacht.

Interviewer: But prior to Kristallnacht...

Ilse: No before many of us considered ourselves still German unfortunately...of course then came the fear of this neighbor and that neighbor in brown uniforms...radio started to give us the fear..

01:08:40

Interviewer: Did your friendships undergo a change?

Ilse: Yes, plenty took me aside telling me they were a little afraid--but many stood by me. My brother was confiscated in Cologne and then put in a camp near Cologne. He was a personal friend of Adenauer. He was a friend of the family and he got special privileges. He got out of the camps earlier than I did.

01:16:00

Interviewer: Did you ever see the synagogue in Cologne after Kristallnacht? What had happened to it?

Ilse: Yes, well, it was destroyed. Quite a bit, but frankly we did not go too often because we were too scared then and avoided a lot of those places. My father was not Jewish therefore he had a few more privileges....

01:16:58

Interviewer: But your parents did want, after Kristallnacht, they still tried to get out?

Ilse: Yes we tried, we had visas, we tried to get visas to the States and we found out that the relatives in the States had to guarantee such a big lump sum that a lot of them were afraid, unfortunately that is how a lot of people perished. The government wanted such a big guarantee that we would not be a burden to the state, that 's what it amounted to.

01:18:50

Interviewer: How long did you remain in that office [job after Kristallnacht]?

Ilse: Well I remained until 1942 when at four in the morning the Gestapo came and picked me up and I was deported to Theresienstadt.

01:19:15

Interviewer: So you remained for quite some time. Was one of the reasons was that they had classifications and since your father was not Jewish...?

Ilse: I wasn't going to bring this up...I am by birth full Jewish. I wasn't going to mention it, see you brought this out -- they found it out by my birth records...and therefore I was the first one to go from my family...every Jewish female was named Sarah and every Jewish male was named Israel and one day the letter came Ilse Sarah Schmidt that was my birth name--we tried to fight it... they came at four in the morning and picked me up.

01:20:19

Interviewer: And when you were arrested and picked up what happened to your family?

Ilse: My brother was also picked up separately and my parents decided to go separate ways for the sake of hiding, but they were together, this was just easier than two people. They had different friends and they would meet on the weekends secretly. It was very difficult because of the rationing cards, you know the friends had a hard time. And then one day they were both caught and they were put into a locker... and they were able to bribe the policeman and they lived underground during the rest of the war... my brother lived in Cologne. Because of his connections he was let free but was always in hiding --got rid of their valuables...and thus they survived.

Interviewer: And your parents lived in Cologne?

Ilse: No, no, they had to go from place to place...they went to a very dear friend of mine...she helped me escape the night of my confiscation and she helped them...

01:22:15

Interviewer: But you were deported?

Ilse: I was deported. I went away -- I had help. We were all put into a private apartment. A former teacher of mine came to visit me to say goodbye (she somehow was notified). I am a very impulsive person -- my parents were upstairs in a community room and I said to my mother, "Don't ask any questions just go home with dad" see I've never talked about this before --and people had to show their ID when they came to visit and when this teacher of mine came to visit I told her, "Don't ask no questions open the door." They were busy looking at her ID and she opened the door and I ran out with her and I went to her house and she said I can't stay here they just looked at my ID - because she was a teacher, that's a governmental job - she says I tell you what, I've got a sister ... I come to the corner of the street - a girlfriend of mine I never knew she was Jewish, and the Gestapo was looking for her and she was smart enough to give another than her home address and she was notified they were looking for her ... "let's go"...ran to the teacher's house ...she gave us her sister's address...my God, I haven't talked about this in so long...there was an air raid on top everything else...it was in October '40- and we went to a station of all the buses and trains I don't recall anymore and she said everybody deserted her...she didn't know she was Jewish...we went to the teacher's sister house and we got there at two in the morning and her husband was a postal employee which was also a governmental job, and she told us not to tell him what happened because he would never allow us to stay there. So I remained until four in the morning and at that point my father came (there was no more public transportation at this hour) my father came walking, he must have walked eighty miles and he said, "you do whatever you want but they picked up mother and they are beating her something terrible so I said I'm coming back with you because I will survive it but mother won't. I went back and they beat me all night long on the train. The Gestapo wanted to know who helped me--they had forgotten and I said nobody I did it on my own and I stood fast so then I was in Theresienstadt for two and half

years until liberation in May of '45, the 8th of May. But I would say the Kristallnacht was the beginning of the end it really escalated from then on..it got worse because it was so publicized and official.

Interviewer: After you were deported your parents went into hiding?

Ilse: Yes, we had certain rules in the camps. We were allowed to write, and I told my parents if I wrote in Latin then it's not so bad but I always wrote in Latin in order not to frighten them ... our camp was one of the last liberated; by the Russians. I saw the death march. It all came through-- our camp was basically a transit camp but - I don't mean this in conceit - because of looks and strength, not necessarily in that order we were picked and that saved our lives - they needed us - I shoveled coal, we unfortunately helped the people in the trains to Auschwitz.

29:23

Interviewer: At any time before the end of the war did you know what Auschwitz meant?

Ilse: No, no they always had different rules...one day it was all children , another time it was veterans that were injured, selected groups all the time we saw them leave but no we did not know Auschwitz - they were rumors of all kinds but we did not have that much outside information coming in. We lived in bunk beds I think about a dozen per room we made the best of it - we were always led by an SS man...

01:32:49

Interviewer: You were never revealed who helped you ?

Ilse: Eventually they just left me alone...

01:33:15

Interviewer: After the liberation you came back to the city?

Ilse: Each city picked up their former citizens - the Jews that came from x amount of cities there was a huge truck we were in the truck for four days one of my neighbors saw me and she fainted. They all thought I was dead--took a friend home with me who lost her whole family...

01:34:13 Interviewer: Where your parents there before you came back?

Ilse: Yes they were already back and the city of Cologne had been occupied by the British and the British gave the most beautiful apartments to the Jews from former Nazis - I couldn't find them at first...

01:35:26

Interviewer: But there was never any thought of staying in Germany?

Ilse: No, we wanted to leave to the upset of my parents I put in my quota to come here unfortunately my father died of starvation shortly after I came home and I brought mother over here...

01:36:13

Interviewer: But your father died of malnutrition?

Ilse: Yes. We were unable to find a casket - we cleaned a used casket with the stipulation that he could keep it. I went back to Cologne In 1971, My feelings were mixed I went back for business restitution - I was a little homesick - but I got it out of my system - I visited the people that stood by me....

01:39:17 Interviewer: Once again on Kristallnacht, with all the experiences you have had, many people managed to get out but with your experiences ...?

Ilse: It was an extremely bad experience and it was the beginning of the end but it didn't compare with the concentration camps.

02:00:50

Interviewer: Do you recall any antisemitism as a student?

Ernest: There were some I remember in school...it got worse and worse as it approached the year 1938. After Hitler came to power ...I lost my job in June 1938... and then I awaited my emigration to the United States but I couldn't get right away I had to go England first.

Interviewer: But before the Nazis took over Austria did you ever think of leaving; did you think of yourself as an Austrian?

Ernest: Yes I never thought of leaving - no until March 1938 when Hitler came to power.

02:03:00

Interviewer: As far as relations with non-Jews did you have non-Jewish friends?

Ernest: Yes.

Interviewer: So, the antisemitism didn't feel that it was such that it would make you want to leave?

Ernest: Not until Hitler came to power...cousin from US sent the papers but there was no quota available I could not go right away so I had to go to England... I waited fifteen months...

Interviewer : As far as Kristallnacht do you recall any of the events leading up to it?

Ernest: I read it in the paper--we knew what had happened in Germany the day before - people were rounded up wherever they might be...around two or three in the afternoon they banged on the door and two young fellow told my parents that they have to move out in sixty days...right across where I lived was a very large old-age home -- two hundred elderly men and women, it was a religious place...it had a synagogue inside... some SS men came one afternoon, rounded up all the people, forced them into the street...cleaned out the synagogue...threw it out all out on the street...made a big fire and danced around it...the elderly men in this particular home- most wore long beards, they cut off their beards and danced round the fire.. it was a real celebration there.

02:10:30

Interviewer: And you were not caught?

Ernest: I was not caught...I was not arrested...

Interviewer: Why do you think they did not come for you?

Ernest: No special reason, they just overlooked me, no room to put any more Jews...I was just lucky that's all it was...

02:13:18

Interviewer: And so, in April you finally got a visa?

Ernest: In April I went to England...they had days when no Jews could been on the streets...they confined everyone to their homes. I could not leave I had no papers. I came here in September 1940; before I had been in a transit camp.

02:15:10

Interviewer: Eventually when you were here, you were drafted?

Ernest: Ii was drafted in 1943 into the army, I got 2 or 3 deferments - In Jan '43 I was drafted into the army - in 1944 I went overseas. I went to France, Holland, Germany - I stayed in Germany until the war ended. I went to Vienna after the war was over as an American Soldier - they told me my parents were sent away in January 1942 - they were sent to the concentration camp Treblinka and they were never heard from again.

02:17:30

Interviewer: Did you correspond with your parents?

Ernest: I got a letter from Jan '42 just before they left...it took a long time...I had the papers for them but it was too late I couldn't get them out of there - I had all the papers ready but they could not get out...

02:18:45

Interviewer: How would you summarize Kristallnacht? What did it mean for you?

Ernest: ...it was the beginning of the end...nothing was done anywhere. It went downhill from there until the war was over.