

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Ruth Rehbock
March 16, 1986
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Ruth Rehbock, conducted on March 16, 1986 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.

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RUTH REHBOCK

March 16, 1986

Q. Where did you come from? Give me the date of birth, the country and the town.

A. I come from Germany. I was born on November 24, 1906 in Shcmockhoden (ph) in Turin (ph).

Q. What was home like? How many brothers and sisters did you have, the occupation of your parents and the kind of home life the nature of how the family lived together?

A. It was very close relationship we were three sisters and three brothers and lived a very congenial life with my uncle and aunt. My father was a cattle dealer and my mother was busy with the six children.

Q. What kind of school did you go to?

A. We went to Alhad (ph) first primary and then we went to an advanced school.

Q. How many Jewish families were in this town?

1:15

A. I was born in scharkadden (ph) in 1917 and in we moved to Autov(ph) and there was civil war and my father was in control of the meat that was consumed in the army camp which later turned into a prison camp.

Q. How many Jewish families were there in town in 1917?

A. There were two. My family and another family.

Q. So then your friends were non-Jewish friends?

A. In fact a non-Jewish friend I went to school with lives in New York and I am still in touch with him.

Q. How was the relationship with the neighbors from 1917?

A. Till Hitler came to power it was a beautiful relationship. Until 1933 then the people changed.

2:54

Q. And during your childhood could you remember any special cherished memories that you can remember? What did you do?

A. I was a dental hygienist. I had education and the man hired me and I stayed there until I was married. I must say that that is still outstanding that this was one man who was still not a Nazi.

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3:47

Q. How did you meet your husband?

A. Through my parents. My father was the member of an exclusive lodge and an uncle of his who was 1917 in Autov and being the only Jewish family all the Jewish soldiers all came to my parents house and that's how I met my husband.

Q. In your parents house how did you celebrate Fridays and holidays?

A. Well we were never at home. We packed up and went back to Schardadden and stayed in a hotel and went to worship there in the synagogue. After 17 for special occasions like Yom Kippur and other occasions we went to Ghota (ph) where I was married.

4:51

Q. Where was your husband from then?

A. He was from Ghota and he was a owner of a factory over there.

Q. What did they do in the factory?

A. Made metal goods. Marshall Fields was already a customer for many years before 1933.

Q. So then you would say that the Jews were middle to upper class?

A. Well I would consider my parents middle class and I married a man with money. He was an only child.

Q. How about the Jews in the town in Ghota?

5:28

A. I would say they were poor to middle class.

Q. How many Jews were in Ghota?

A. I would say 8,000 Jews in Ghota. The Jews were separated even in 1920's. The Zionists and the non-Zionists were separated.

Q. Would you say that the German Jews considered the Polish Jews something less noble and they were also separated?

A. Yes but my husband's father tried very hard to bring those elements together.

Q. How about your children?

A. I had one child and of course he was spoiled. When we left Germany he was four years old because there was no child born in my husband's family for 26 years and then he had the name Rehbock again.

6:55

Q. Was there anything else before the Nazis came to power that you would like to tell us about?

A. We lived a comfortable life. We traveled and before I was married I traveled with my brother. Up to also the man I married and the doctor I worked for took us on trips. That of course changed after 1933 when the Nazis came to power even though we still traveled.

Q. How did life change after 1933?

A. My co-workers were the same but we never had gentile friends. The Jewish families would go out to the theater but fewer and fewer would. Many people left after 1933. My husband did not want to leave because of our business. Hitler needed the foreign money. That is why our passports were not taken or our drivers licenses and you probably that many people had to give these things up. People tried to leave or committed suicide.

Q. A lot of your friend committed suicide?

A. Yes.

Q. Let's go back to your family.

A. We were married 1933 in May. It was in my in-laws house because we could not rent a hall. There was sobbing in back of me it was a very sad affair. Later I found out my youngest brother who was still alive lost his job because he was Jewish. He was a teller at the bank by 1933.

8:58

Q. How about your other brothers and sisters?

A. Well my father and other brother were in Brussels so it wasn't really the same. It was still some my father I would say but very little. Less and less and less.

Q. The rest of your family?

A. My older sister lived in Gastville (ph) and there it was terrible it was an orthodox community and the day Hitler came to power they were mistreated. Then my other sister in and brother in law lived in Kessel and he was unemployed. He had been the manager of a dime store and my oldest brother he committed suicide in 1928. He was a lawyer and very educated. He was in love with a Gentile girl and he thought he couldn't tell my parents and he committed suicide.

Q. When Hitler came to power the rest of the family started to go down as far as well being?

A. Yes except for my husband who tried to help as necessary.

Q. What were your feelings when you saw the brown shirts and when was it. When was your first encounter with anti-Semitism of this basis?

10:00

A. People turned away from us they stopped talking and the family got closer together as we sat and listened to the radio for what was going on in Strassburg. We all saw it written on the wall. In 1933 on our honeymoon we went to Baden Baden. We didn't want to leave the country so we went to Strassburg. We had a good friend there who was later killed by the Nazis too. When we visited there he said Hitler wouldn't last long. Because my husband didn't want to leave on account of the business we really didn't prepare ourselves except to get the number from the American consulate just in case which helped us later.

Q. Were you at Kristamin (ph)?

A. No. We went to Berlin when the American consulate was in Berlin and we were examined for America to get our visa mailed in no time. While we were in Berlin we saw from the hotel, fire that was from the synagogue. We didn't know what went on. We got the car and the Jewish maid called and said not to come back, the English claims were canceled. They told us something but not enough. Later on I called or got the call from my mother, she said my father was on the trip but because of his age they let him come home again. We then found out the men were taken to concentration camps or prison. You know Buchenwald was not that far from us. From that day on my husband never went home again from Berlin but here we were.

12:37

Q. Let's go back to Berlin.

A. Yes we saw the fire and were called from home because the men were all taken. We found out there was no going home for my husband anymore. The week after Kristamin (ph) I hid my husband. First of all we went to an aunt in Berlin who was over 70 and her daughter who was over 50 and her husband were living with them. While we were there some Nazis came and got him. He never came back. They were scared. They didn't want my husband there anymore so we had to leave. I had an uncle, my mother's brother in Litsen (ph) so I went there to hide him. My uncle had a housekeeper and he could stay there one night. Meanwhile I went home to Ghota (ph). I wanted to go to America. For one week I hid him during the day, I stayed with him and at 5pm to go to Ghota and stayed there for the night and went back to Berlin in the morning to be with my husband again. There was a holiday and there went 500 women, me included, which was closed and we..well the noise and the screams and he came out and said people who had the visas could leave to England if we could get a transit visa to England. I went the next day with my husband to the English consulate he said alright, I'll get in touch with American consulate if you're alright for the visa we will grant you entry to England for the time being and you can go

to America. When my husband had the visas and I had the visas, we stayed at the hotel in Berlin again and we felt safe. We were told nothing can happen. So, I took my husband to the airport and he left for England and I went home. After all we wanted to leave at the given time for America. When I got to the hotel there was a sign "No Jews allowed" when I got back from the airport I asked for my luggage. I forgot, in 1938, you heard of the Leipzig fair? We both had our passport and we went to the American consulate to see if we could get a trip to America. We went to the consular and said, "we have no intention of leaving, but we want to meet our relatives." He said, "I will give one person a visa to America but not 2. What guarantee do I have that you would come back?" We said our three year old son. Well, I got the visa and my husband said you go, you know more about your relatives. So I went. I was here 3 weeks and met some relatives. My cousin went to Washington to get us to America faster. That's why we could leave in December in 1938. I went back home. After my husband was in England and I was at home I had to arrange everything for leaving. To pay the fine. Someone was killed over that fine. I could travel with our chauffeur and my father because they were both older than 65.

Q. You still had your car?

A. Yes, on account of my husband's personals. They needed foreign money. I got everything together and we left in December, Ralph and I.

Q. How about the rest of the family?

16:72

A. My father-in-law was dead. My mother-in-law was home caring for a 90 year old mother. They later left for England. December 10, after packing everything I had a horrible experience. The Nazi's came to my sister's house and wanted to get her husband who was an invalid from the first world war. The Nazi's came to pick him up. He was not fast enough for them. They kicked him down the steps and he ended downstairs dead. And of course the Gentiles in Gaston (ph) wouldn't bury him. So he got a coffin and everything and a Polish Jew and my father - they don't have Jewish cemeteries in Germany - so they drove two hours to get there and dug grave in November at 7am. Then my sister and her little boy came to my parent's to live. She and the little boy were the two who were killed in Auschwitz.

Q. They were taken to Auschwitz in what year?

A. I left in '38 with Ralph. About 11 o'clock in the evening on the express train. My Jewish girl who did a lot of traveling with me at that critical time - she took Ralph and me to the train. Ralph and I came to the boarder of Germany and Holland, it was called "all Jews out." I got out. I remember only all old men- they had to take all their clothes off, we really were mistreated. Ralph and I were taken to another room where I had to undress and where they saw if we had anything hidden. When I came out of that room with Ralph there was a man who said, "I'm Jewish. I live on the other side of the border. If you will take your boy and walk all the way down there is a local train that will take you across to the border. I'll be there to meet you." We could do it Ralph and I because we were told we had to wait for another train and that would be

another 24 hours. I took Ralph and walked down the tracks and there was a local train we got on and stopped at the Dutch border. There was the man. He took Ralph and me to his house. I had 4 dollars and Ralph had 4 dollars. My husband was in England with relatives he could leave only with 4 dollars. I quick called my mother in law. She would pay for the call in Germany. We told her to tell my husband in England that he shouldn't come; but he was gone already. He came home and we weren't there and he was told we would come. Those people in Holland are gone too. We then came to America, but what about my parents? My brothers left in 1936 & 1937 for Africa there were relatives in South Africa. After we were in America we had a number for my parents. In the Meantime, my brother could get my parents into South Africa. So they went there. Before they left they had to sign never to return to Germany. While they were on the ship for two days, war broke out and the ship had to turn back. My parents arrived back in Germany. Someone gave them shelter--a Gentile. While my parents were going to South Africa, my sister and her boy went to Berlin. There were relatives of my husband-wonderful people- got her to stay with a doctor. Later, was it 1942/3? My sister had to work, she was stripped down to 80 pounds. She wrote a farewell letter. There were gentile people in Ortho where my parents lived, a butcher and my boss, they were not Nazis. They sent her food every week. They couldn't send it from Ortho because it was taken. When she was taken to Auschwitz she got a farewell letter to them that got it to us. She said we should always really think about the people who really saved her life until then. My other sister, she went with her husband via Russia to America. My mother died in the morning and she came in the afternoon. I feel this is all my life. I tell people why don't we go look at the Holocaust museum and they say, 'oh, we know so much.' But this is my life. Twenty-eight members of my and my husband's family died in concentration camps.

22:37

Q. When you think back to war time, what do you think about those people - the Nazis, the people who did not oppose Hitler? They were your friends.

A. I cannot forgive them. I will not forgive them. I have one friend here - she says first you want us out, now you want us back. I do not forgive any German. I wouldn't go back for anything.

Q. So, you feel that even if the person was not in the Nazi party they were still guilty?

A. Right, they are still guilty. They have excuses. They all knew. I went to see Shoah. It cost me a lot of money. I paid for my grandchildren and their wives. I wanted them to see what went on. I'm very bitter. Many people did not go.

23:37

Q. What would you like to say to future generations who will see this film from your background and experience, what should we do so that it will never happen again?

A. First, to be a Jew. To be affiliated and to help the ones that need help. I talked to a Rabbi's wife yesterday and we talked about mixed marriages, I'm very bitter about mixed marriages.

Q. Because it didn't help in Germany?

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A. No, Not at all. I'm not supporting our government now. I'm very in of Israel.

RALPH REHBOCK

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 16, 1986

Q. Where were you born?

24:26

A. I was born July 11, 1934 in Ghota (ph) Germany in the providence of Turingen to Ruth and Hans Rehbock.

Q. What do you remember about Germany?

A. Not much first hand. We left in 1938, I was four years old. Up till then was typical of a normal childhood. I refreshed what I've been told when I went back to visit.

Q. You went to England after Germany. What do you remember about there?

A. England was only a stop off point before America. Just time before getting on a boat. The early years in Europe I've only talked about with my parents.

Q. You were the son of German Jews in the U.S.--How did you feel and when did your parents start talking to you about their experience?

25:13

A. There was never anything hidden, but not a lot dead. I always knew I had been born in Germany and many family members were lost. I never really asked for details until later on. I was specifically told by my parents that now we were going to be Americans. After arriving here we went to Chicago and I was sent to cousins while my parents were working so I could learn English. My parents stopped speaking German as soon as they got off the boat. It was as if the memories were so bitter they wanted to break off any remembrance of the past. The memories were never forgotten but not initially talked about.

Q. Did you feel any different about yourself in school?

A. In the 40s here in Chicago there were other immigrant children. There were 2 other boys whose parents had come from Germany in the thirties. We always prided ourselves that we were always the best students in the class. It was something I thought about - that maybe because we all had to start over again or because Jewish children in Germany couldn't go to school we were better students. We were always accepted, not singled out because we were Jewish (there were other Jewish kids in the school) and none of us had accents. I never felt different at home or school. I guess I brought some of what was good from the old world.

27:55

Q. Were you ever ashamed your parents having an accent?

A. I never felt ashamed.....

TAPE 2

A. It never bothered me that they had an accent. Everyone always felt welcomed at my house. Because my parents worked long hours the children that came to the house saw only my Grandmother. A lot of the social life of the family was centered around the cousins. I went there every day for lunch hour and after school went home. Then there was Hebrew school and Boy Scouts which my father was involved in. So, any differences never stopped me from doing anything.

2:30

Q. Did you have non-Jewish friends?

A. Yes, one of my friends was Japanese-American. Other friends were through the Boy Scouts. Most of my best friends were Jewish now that I think about it because I saw them in Hebrew school, Boy Scouts and Sunday School.

Q. How did you feel when you heard what was going on in Germany and when the survivors started telling their stories?

A. As a child I felt detached. I felt I had been there and my parents had, but I had gotten out and my family was intact the way I knew it. Only later did I realize that I was one of those survivors. I didn't relate to the displaced persons from the camp.

4:94

Q. When did you first relate your experiences in Europe to yourself?

A. Probably not in any detailed way until the Holocaust film was on TV. Even then it was through the minds of my children and not through my experiences. The next morning my son asked some questions that I couldn't answer. They asked my parents the questions and I found out all that had happened and I could relate to what I had gone through to what had happened in Germany. This was just in the last few years.

Q. Did you ever go back to Germany?

A. Last summer my wife and I went to the town in which I was born. We had mixed feelings about what we'd find and how we'd feel. My mother was not supportive of my wanting to go back. But she wrote letters to the non-Jewish people who helped members of my family and after she heard back and then she really got into what the experience would be like. I tried to get some

physical descriptions of what to possibly expect of the town. She drew me a map of where my relatives and buildings should be. I took that with me and called Frankfurt to talk with the daughter of the people my mother wrote to. They picked us up and we talked about their experiences during the war. Her father had hidden some people in the house and she said how she feared every night that her father might be caught. We went to Ghotia (ph) the next day. I tried to think back to what it was like when I was a child and had some strange feelings. The town had not been bombed and things were as my mother described them. We had pictures of the places there and as we took pictures it seemed to be the same scene all over again. As we went through the town and found all my mother had described we were reliving the scenes from my childhood. There were some East German soldiers walking down the street and I remembered stories my mother had told me about having to salute the soldiers in the 30s and I had the feeling that this was what it was like. I almost had the feeling that I should not offend or alienate them and realized that this is how I must have felt. That was my first emotional tying together of being a survivor. I heard about my mother when she was a little girl and we got caught up in what happened in the town after we had left in '38. We were in the courtyard of my grandfather's house in which I had played as a child. I recognized it and we took notice of what my mother had said about it. There were signs of life all around and I looked up and saw a clock and a bell. I had never heard about them in the stories. We took a picture of them. I had kept asking our guide if things would have been there when I was there. I was caught up in the details. We eventually got back to West Germany and got a phone call from my mother I said, "Mother you never told us about the clock and the bell." I heard her voice crack and I realized I had told her about something she had never told me about.

15:49

Q. Did you have any encounters with Germans that said I remember your family but I could not do anything to help them?

A. While there our contacts were with the family that had close contacts with the family. We saw a woman who remembered much about the family and details about the past in the 20s and 30s. She reflected on my aunt who had been in the concentration camp. But we never talked to her or anyone about what they did or could have done. Except in each case they talked about what Mr. Grohl (ph) had done because it was so positive and in jeopardy of his own life. Total strangers that we talked to (they needed to be old enough to remember) turned up a lady and she remembered my grandfather and how he helped out people in the town. This gave us a warm feeling because this was how we remembered my grandfather. Everyone there had only nice things to say. We didn't get political. There was an awareness of the today in Germany. The husband of the woman who took us around worked in East Germany and could not associate with us because we were Westerners.

18:42

Q. What would you say to the people in the future to prevent this happening again?

A. My deep feeling is that we cannot forget and cannot allow our children to not understand fully what happened - not just to the Jews of Germany but to the Jews of Europe - and everyone

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involved. We also need to remember the things that happened after the war to those that survived it. We need to teach Jew and non-Jew that these were real experiences. There needs to be education as to how it happened. This cannot be allowed to be forgotten - ever.