

**Time-coded notes for Interview with Renee Stern**  
**April 9, 1991**

01:00 She was born in Mannheim, Germany in 1926. Her family's roots in southern Germany go back to the 1600-1700's.

02:00 Her family was Orthodox Jewish, and she belonged to an Orthodox synagogue. She was an only child. Her father was originally in the wholesale shoe business. When he was in his early 30's, he got rid of the business--she is not sure, however, if he sold it or if it was taken away from him. Later he became a shoe salesman, and travelled frequently.

03:00 She says that her family had a comfortable life. Her grandmother (her mother's mother) lived with them. Her other grandparents lived near Heidelberg, and she and her parents visited them often. Her first bad experience came in 1935 or 1936. She had been on vacation, and when she returned, she was told that she could no longer attend the public school because she was Jewish.

04:00 The city of Mannheim had created a Jewish Day School for the Jewish students. In her mind, there was no hardship in switching schools. In fact, it was good because she was able to learn both Hebrew and English.

05:00 She does not recall any antisemitism at the public school. Yet, she admits that she was very young, so she might not have realized that anti-Semitism existed. After the creation of the Jewish Day School it was more obvious to her. Other kids knew she was going to a Jewish school and called her names. There was no uniform to distinguish the Jewish students, however, the other kids knew that they attended a different school, and they knew that this school was for Jews only.

06:00 She is not sure if her family had talked of leaving Germany in those years (1935-1936). Friends of the family left in 1938, and this was her first recollection of Jews actually leaving Germany. These friends went to Chicago where her family had relatives, and told the relatives what was happening in Germany. Her family had asked these friends to relate the news to their relatives in Chicago, because even though they had been writing to their relatives, they guessed that the mail was being censored.

07:00 She had no sense of fear/anxiety. In fact, she recalls, "Life just went on." She was happy with her Jewish friends. Her whole life revolved around the synagogue and the Jewish community. Her parents were active in the Jewish community.

08:00 She belonged to the Jewish youth group. They had frequent meetings. Her life was centered around this youth group.

09:00 The leader of the youth group left in 1937 to go to Palestine (The youth group had been a Zionist organization). The leader had asked Mrs. Stern to go with her to Palestine, but since she was an only child, her father did not want her to go and be separated from her family. If her family were to leave, they would go to the United States to be with their relatives.

10:00 Because of her involvement in the Jewish community, she had no non-Jewish friends/contacts. In addition, the area in which they lived was mostly inhabited by Jews. Prior to the Kristallnacht, only a few Jewish families had left. But, these families only went to Italy and France. She believes that these families probably did not survive in the end, because they stayed in Europe, and the Nazi's could still get to them.

11:00 In 1938, her father was sent to a concentration camp. This was prior to the Crystal Night. She says that the Nazi's were always looking for things that (Jewish) people did wrong. Being a salesman, her father had gotten in a car accident, and he received a ticket. She is not sure if anyone had been hurt in the accident.

12:00 Her father was sent to Dachau at the end of June, and he was held there for four weeks. He had been beaten very badly and in fact, his early death in this country stems from the beatings he received at the concentration camp.

13:00 Her father came back with open wounds and heel marks on his legs. She was able to see where he had been stepped on and beaten. Her father never spoke of what he had gone through at the camp. And her family tried not to pay too much attention to it because by that time, they had become preoccupied with getting out of Germany.

14:00 She believes that her father got out of the camp because of her relatives in Chicago, who had been alerted to what was going on Germany by her family's friends who had gone to Chicago. Her mother sent these relatives a telegram saying that her husband was in a "sanatorium." The relatives contacted the friends who had immigrated to Chicago and discovered that the "sanatorium" was in fact a concentration camp. Within two weeks, her family received their papers to come to America. But at that time, the United States government had put quotas on the number of people who were allowed to immigrate, so they were out of luck. Her father was able to leave the camp, though.

15:00 She recalls that some people tried to pay off officials in order to get out of the country, but her father did not believe in anything of this kind. Eventually, her family did get to England, on a tourist visa. In the meantime, however, her father continued to represent some shoe companies, but he did very little business because people no longer wanted to buy shoes from Jewish companies.

16:00 Her father's imprisonment definitely made the family aware of the severity of the situation. Until they were able to leave for England, however, they remained in Mannheim, and she continued with the Jewish Day School.

17:00 She was visiting her grandparents when Kristallnacht took place, and everyone was concerned. In a city very close to Mannheim (Mannheim's twin city), Jews were evacuated in July August prior to Kristallnacht. She said this made her more personally aware of the situation.

18:00 She believed something bad was going to happen. Her friends laughed at her. Nevertheless, she had a knapsack so full of clothes, that she couldn't even carry it. Moreover, she told her friends that she was going to start wearing two pairs of underwear, just to be safe. They thought she was cracking. Following his release from the camp, her father had to report to the local police everyday--not to the Gestapo, to the local police.

19:00 After the Crystal Night, her friends no longer thought she was crazy to be prepared. Her mother had been taking in Jewish people that had fled from other cities, so she knew what horrors these people had seen.

20:00 Her family's non-Jewish neighbors warned her father of what was going to take place that night (Kristallnacht), and they hid him. As a result, he was one of very few Jewish men in Mannheim who were not taken away to the camps that night.

21:00 The next morning, her father went to the local police. They couldn't believe he had been spared. They told him that they did not even want to ask him how he had managed to be spared. The neighbors who took him in had been appalled by the actions of the Nazi's. They were Catholics, and could not bear to see these things happening to their fellow men.

22:00 She says that there were not enough people to rise up against what was going on. Younger people were in school. The couple that saved her father was middle aged. She adds that maybe they were only in their 30's, because to a 9-year old child, a 30 year old adult seemed middle-aged.

23:00 On the morning of November 10th (the next morning) when her father came home, all the synagogues were burning. They went to see what they could save from their synagogue, and they were able to pull out her father's prayer book.

24:00 Her father wrote an inscription on the inside cover of the prayer book. She shows the book to the camera and she reads the inscription in German. Then she -translates it into English: "This book is a silent witness to the destruction of all German synagogues. This book was found in the rubble of our synagogue."

25:00 Their synagogue was completely destroyed. When they pulled out her father's prayer book, they saw others with heel marks and pages torn out. She does not remember where her family went for services from November 1938 (when the synagogue was destroyed) until the time that they left for England.

26:00 She believes they might have attended services at a Jewish old-age home. She was able to continue going to the same Jewish Day School since it had not been damaged. She remembers that one of the teachers from the school had also gone to the Synagogue the morning after it had been destroyed. That night, his wife found him in the bathroom--he had committed suicide.

27:00 She thinks it was probably too much for him. And yet, she describes, he was not a little guy--he was a man six feet tall.' Most of the students-had looked up to this man and adored

him. There were other cases where people tried to commit suicide (some were successful, others were not). A cousin of her father's tried to commit suicide, but he was not successful.

28:00 He had tried to cut his throat. Even after he came to the United States, he had a hoarse voice. Many years later, he went back to Germany on a business trip. He had a heart attack and died there--in Mannheim. She thinks it was ironic that he had failed to commit suicide there, but eventually died in the same place, years later.

29:00 By 1940-1941 it had gotten so bad that you could no longer get anyone out of Germany. Prior to that, if you had the paperwork/visas, you could get out. At that time, the camps were called "deportation camps" not concentration camps.

30:00 The Nazi's had been deporting Jews from Southern Germany to France. No one was aware of the camps in the East. Fortunately, her immediate family was able to get out, before they were deported. She and her father left Mannheim in March 1939. They spent two days with relatives in Holland, who went with them to England.

31:00 Her mother and grandmother followed four weeks later, because her grandmother was sick with pneumonia. From March 1939 to April 1940, she lived in England. When she left Mannheim (with her father), she wondered if she would ever see her mother again. She wondered if they would ever be a family again. When leaving the country, she knew they had to give up all their gold, but she had a gold chain with a shedai (sp?) that she was proud of and wanted to keep.

32:00 She wore it, and hoped she'd be able to keep it, but at the border, they checked for jewelry. Her father was able to keep his wedding band--they didn't take it. However, she had to give up her chain.

33:00 In April 1940, her family came to Chicago. Although she was still very young when she arrived in the States, she says she had some awareness of what continued to go on in Europe, with the camps, etc Her family received letters from her grandfather (her father's father) who was in a deportation camp in France.

34:00 Despite the fact that the mail was censored, they continued to hear from him. They had tried correspondence, they had tried to get affidavits. But by this time, he had already been deported.

35:00 Her father's family, with the exception of three cousins, was completely wiped out--and he had been one of five children. Her mother was an only child, and most of her family survived.

36:00 To her, the Kristallnacht felt like "the end of the road." Yet, because her family was religious, they looked at it as the beginning of another tomorrow. She says that she did not talk about it enough with her children. But she adds that recalling it is easier in front of an interviewer than in front of her children. Since her children live here and have freedom, she doesn't think that they can understand such fear.

37:00 She has always said that things can reoccur. She believes that we have to make the world see that these things can reoccur, and tell them not to forget it. We have to make the world see that it should never happen again.

38:00 She thinks that her religious faith helped to sustain her and her family. In her mind, you have to believe, because if you give up your beliefs, what are you?--You have to believe and you have to have faith and hope.

39:00 Kristallnacht was just the beginning. If the larger camps had been built at this time, many more Jews would have been killed. But at that time, they just did not have the place to put all these people.

40:00 She doesn't recall if Jews from the East had come to Mannheim in the wake of the Kristallnacht.

41:00 She says that they did not have to wear any stars or identification while they were in Mannheim--this did not come until later, until after they had left.

42:00 No one knew what was going to happen. Some Jews still had hope. A lot of wealthy people did not leave because they did not want to part with their fortunes. There were indeed ways to get money out if you were willing to take the chance. She says that her family was not willing to take that chance.

43:00 When they crossed the border there was an older couple in their train compartment. They asked her father if they were taken off the train to tell their son waiting on the Dutch side that they would be arriving on the next train. She wonders what gold/valuables they had on them. And she wonders what happened to them--they were so nervous that she thinks they might have been caught. At this time, however, it was still possible to get things out. People used secret compartments.

44:00 After Kristallnacht, people became more afraid. They were more willing to get out with very little. In a way, she believes that this was good. At this point, if people had tried to take a lot out, they might not have made it. There were body searches.

45:00 She has gone back to Mannheim once. Her first impression was that this was the place where she had lived.

46:00 She recalls that the homes of her friends were still intact. They have built a new synagogue there. There is a nice Jewish community there now. Jews living there now are mostly people who came out of the Holocaust who fled from the East.

47:00 In addition, there are a few mixed marriages where people survived and were able to remain in Mannheim. Returning to Mannheim caused her to feel more curiosity than sadness. To her it was just a big city in a pretty country.

48:00 Besides, there was no one there that she knew. She said that it would have been different if it were a small town. When you return to a small town you can be identified right away, and you never know who in the town may have been Nazis. Anonymity in the city of Mannheim gave her a feeling of security when she returned.

49:00 She says that Germany is a pretty country, and that she liked going back.