

My name is Susan Hackney. And today is March 12, 1998. And I am with Hilde Israel. And we are going to be talking about life in Germany leading up to World War II and her experiences during the '30s and '40s. And she is here now to begin speaking.

OK. So Hilde, you were born in Berlin, right?

I was born in Berlin.

When and where were you born?

At home in Nazi Germany Berlin. OK. It was, I would say, a blue collar, you know.

Uh-huh, blue collar neighborhood.

Not poor, but blue collar [BOTH TALKING] And we had a Jewish butcher, kosher butcher store. But we didn't know from any thing. You know, political, my parents were not interested. I had an older brother who was nine years older than I.

And his name?

Herman.

Herman whom?

Herman Cohen. He was involved you know that. He knew sometimes when-- you know, there were street fights in the beginning.

Around what date were there street fights that you can remember?

Oh, that was way back. That would be when they started out, maybe '28, '29, '30. You know.

Yeah.

Before that, even, because my brother left in 1933 for Holland. But he was involved. But my parents didn't like it because we were not political, but totally apathetic politically. And in school, I didn't feel much, not at all, as a matter of fact.

When you say you didn't feel much, what are you referring to?

Well, I mean anti-Jewish.

Like antisemitism, you didn't feel it?

No.

And you went to a public school with mixed children? I went to, till I was 10, to a public school, and then to a private school. And that was a middle school-- not like here in that sense. It was like here high school. OK? We had languages. We had very good teachers. But we also had Hebrew teacher and a Hebrew teacher in that school, a biblical teacher for the Jews.

So was it a private school for Jews?

No. No.

But all of those things were available?

Yes. They were available. And it used to be a private school. But then it became a state school. But it still was the same because we had to pay for it and all that.

And then in that school, I didn't have any trouble at all. I mean, we were maybe six, eight Jewish schoolchildren in a class of 44. But this was a mixed school. That means it was private and in a way left like the private school was. We had Jewish teachers, a principal. Not the principal, what do you call it?

Director or something?

No, it's the assistant principal was Jewish. And she was my English teacher. But so there were all kinds of teachers. And we didn't feel anything till, I guess, was about we was 14, I would have been.

Let's see, 1917 plus 14-- like 31-ish.

Yeah. Then the teachers were changed. There came in teachers, [? national ?] [? citizens, ?] and so on. The Jewish teachers were going out. OK. And then I felt an undercurrent, but still not too much in school. Yes, sometimes, I had-- you may call it a debate in classes and so on with some of the girls-- that was an all-girls school. Some of the girls had belonged already to the Nazis.

Oh. So the subject of race and all that came up?

It lasted, in a way, and take, you know, senseless. And I would tell them.

And how old were those children that they were already indoctrinated into that Nazi thing? How old were they? 13, 14?

No, earlier.

Younger?

It was earlier, yes. It's like kids at the Boy Scouts, you know, very early. And that is very early. But in this case, it were 14 years old girls, just like ever.

14, OK.

But in that case, I still didn't feel that I had to keep my mouth shut.

Right, right.

I had my friends. And I thought, yes. One time, what hurt me very much was-- it was in public school. I was maybe eight years old. And I was invited to a birthday party. The whole class, it was a party. I thought this girl with my friend in school.

I went to the birthday party, of course. And when I came into the house. The girl maybe must have introduced me or whatever. And she said, this is Hilde Cohn. Now, Cohn is a definitely, in Germany, Jewish name. The mother said, I don't want her here. I don't want her here.

Oh, my goodness. What happened?

I went home.

You turned around and went home?

I went home in tears. Of course, I had already eaten a piece of cake. And I told my father. And my father, who hated to write, somehow, he could, but he hated to. He just got a piece of paper. wrapping paper, you know in the store. And so he wrote a note, put two marks in and said, I hope that covers the piece of cake.

Oh, your father did that wonderfully.

Oh, yes.

And he sent that to her.

Then it turned out, the father of that girl was a [? sailor, ?] in the [INAUDIBLE]. I didn't know that. No of us kids knew that. And that was my first real hurt. Yeah. And that, I was about eight years old. I will never forget her name, [? Lieselotte ?] [? Katniss. ?]

Wait, his name was what?

Her name was [? Lieselotte ?] [? Katniss. ?] It was a girl's name. But you don't-- this, I forgot. Didn't forget . That was my first hurt.

Where it touched your life.

Really hurt. And then by and by, sometimes, somebody who knew me-- because I had the looks. I could go anywhere. All right? If anybody not knew me, I could go anywhere. Didn't matter.

But if somebody knew me -- like in the streets, the school kids and so on, they started sometimes to say something. At the time, when that happened, again, that was-- I was maybe 12, 13 years old, and so on. But my mother would be out in a jiffy and tell the parents of the boys. That was only one special who did it to.

Now, that's if children harassed you on the street?

Yeah.

She was very--

[INAUDIBLE], you know, like--

--assertive about it. She got out there, protected you, or whatever.

Yeah. Anyway, since I mentioned things, you know, the Jewish burial, the coffin is a plain coffin.

OK.

That is a Jewish coffin. We do not normally, if you keep this you have a plain coffin, not fancy. And they called it an egg crate.

Oh, dear. And they said, you will be buried in an egg crate. And that is what a neighbor, mine-- we were good neighbors. The parents were good neighbors. And they did [? laundry. ?] And I came into the store and told my parents. My mother was quick outside. She was right at the door this way.

Had you had a funeral that these children saw?

No, no, no, no.

They didn't see anything?

Just to impress.

They were just trying to harass you. I understand.

And my mother went to the parents and said, hey, this and this happened. We never again there were two boys, never again. And so you had it some ways.

But on the other hand, I mean, I don't know, maybe it's Hitler's birthday or what, the old school had to march up places, like they used to have sports events and so on, big paths, at the [INAUDIBLE] clubs. And I had to walk with them, of course. I was in the school. And I had to hear what Hitler had to say and Heil Hitler.

I mean, things like that happened, of course. But the thing when we-- the worst thing that began in the beginning was when that French diplomat was killed. And of course, they put it in the Jews.

And he was killed in Germany?

Yeah.

And so they blamed the Jews?

Of course. That was the first time that the mob got together.

And that was around what year?

Was around the '30s.

Mm-hmm, early '30s.

Hitler became chancellor in '33. But he had already Hindenburg, our president. I don't know how he could influence all these people, the upper crust, Deutsch national, not Nazi.

That were Deutsch national that were people that were officers, higher ranks, they fell for that. If you hear a speech of Hitler today still, the way he talked and so-- and he was totally uneducated. He was uneducated.

And so that was the first time, as far as I remember. It was before the Rathaus, what I showed you, you know, when they burned that down and claimed a Dutch man had done it. It was done by the Nazis themselves.

And that was in 1933, Germany's parliament building, the Reichstag caught fire, Nazis blaming communists used the fire as a pretext for suspending civil liberties.

Right.

OK. That's from the paper.

Yeah.

OK.

That was in 1933, when Hitler became chancellor. And after that, of course, the hate asserted power.

How was it different? When he became chancellor, what was your life like as a result of that?

Well, let's see.

What changed?

My father, he had a kosher butcher store. He could not be-- my father was a store that was known for first quality. And I mean first quality. The whole neighborhood, non-Jewish neighborhood, if they had anything, a celebration, a wedding, or whatever, then it had to be meat and so on from my father.

We had plenty of other stores. But for that, there was no question about it. Now, anything that was going on like that, all right, in the beginning, my father still could have put quality meats on. Then they came and asked my father, told my father, hey, there is a wedding coming up. But please, let somebody deliver.

In other words--

So that they didn't know from where it came.

Oh, OK. They were embarrassed to buy it from there. But it was still the best meat around.

No, they were not embarrassed. They were afraid.

Oh, they were afraid to support your business, the Germans.

And I remember that well too. Yes, in a way. In a way, it is supporting a Jew. Now, my father, then, after a while, my father could not get the quality of meats that he needed. And that he was known for/

And so he, What he got was the worst kind of meat. So if you know, the Jews, they don't only use certain sections of beef-- not all parts are not kosher. And my father bought-- then my father tried to keep this business up. And he bought instead of that, he had to pay through the nose to keep that up. My brother, my younger brother, he became a butcher too.

What was your younger brother's name?

[? Efutz, ?] [? Efutz. ?] He was four years older than I, but he was my little brother. So that made it very hard. Then my father suddenly, early '38, something like that, my father had to close the store because he had himself spent that. There was nothing to be done. He closed the store. But he lived still behind it in that apartment.

So he was put out of business by the conditions.

Yes, of course.

But nobody came in and said, I own your business now. And you have to leave.

No.

OK.

No, no, no. Nobody took that over.

They just made it impossible for him to do business.

Yes. He couldn't exist, which was lucky in a way. And so Crystal Night, you've heard about that. The Crystal Night, that day-- it's really a day. That day, because my father's store was closed, I do not know.

There were, of course, glass panels on the side of the store. They were still there. Kosher-- it's a kosher sign. It was a

kosher sign. So it was up still from the store, as it was. I do not know, on that day, if that was damaged or not because that was the day I left Berlin.

And that is the only thing because he was not open anymore, this way, it did not really get hurt. Right, it's difficult. But I have to say, my parents were very popular.

We did not have, really, from the people that lived there any, really, enemies. We didn't have that. It was just [INAUDIBLE]. You [? pipped ?] hello to them. And they didn't, wouldn't [INAUDIBLE] because nobody dared to. But that was with my parents.

Saying that, when I was still-- going back to the school, when I was 15, at this school where I went to, at first you've got, I would have graduated with 16. The normal school, regular school still went only to 14.

The private school, of course, you could go further-- much, much higher standard education. But I was 15, about 15 and 1/2. Then my older brother was-- I told you, he knew about politics.

One day, my parents were home. They said, Hilde, what do you want to be? And the schools were awful, were awful. The teachers that we had gotten, terrible for everybody, for everybody-- terrible teachers. All the good teachers were going out.

And then my brother asked me, Hilde, what do you want to do? I don't know. Do you want to work in an office? No. What do you want to do? I don't know. Then he said, Hilde-- we talked. I told him, what do you like to do? I said, I like to talk. I like to do hand stitching.

So this was Herman talking to you?

Yeah, my brother--

Your oldest.

--talking to me, his nine years younger sister.

Right.

And he said, Hilde, the school doesn't do you any good. Get out of school. When I told him that, then he said, then you could be a dressmaker. I like to talk. I like to do these types of things.

Do you want to be a dressmaker? No. I had already made clothes in my life, where you do seamster. Was not for me. So he said, you don't have to do that. You get an apprenticeship in good salon . So that's when I left school. Half a year before I graduated

So I against the wishes of my parents, of course, I left school.

Against the parents' wishes. OK.

Yeah, because at that time, there was still my English teacher. She was there as a teacher, not as a principal. And my mother went, of course, to see her.

And she said, please, please don't take her out of school. That is the only thing you can guarantee her, that she takes with her. That is only, the one and only thing. But I insisted I left school. And I found an apprenticeship by accident, an excellent apprenticeship.

Now, what year was that?

This was in '34.

OK.

That was in '34.

OK.

No, '31, in '31.

So two years before things got really complicated in Germany.

Yes.

OK.

at a very good salon. And a couture, accidental, all right. And then the first thing that the woman, my boss, she said, now, I didn't have apprentice for a long time. She was so disappointed. But OK, I will try. Just try it, that my name was Cohn.

In Berlin, in Germany, the name Cohn gave you away. And she said, well, OK, let's make it. We'll try one month. The first thing when I came for the first day-- I heard there were two big girls together to work there. I heard another-- the girls talking with each other. There was another Hilde.

Oh, well she was even, yeah, Hilde. OK. Anyway, I heard, now, you can't talk about the Jews anymore. Of course, I was mad, but I didn't say anything, all right? This girl turned out to be very nice, never, ever a word. So as far as work was concerned, it was fine.

When it came to the time that I passed the apprenticeship, three years later, then it became a big question, the whole outfit, which was a big one. We had three salons working in the house. And it was a big couture outfit. And so everybody was, will they let me take my test? Except from this [INAUDIBLE]. I don't know what you call it here.

Certification, probably, or licensing.

Certificate, professional.

Like a licensing?

Yeah, yes. But I had proof. Just like you as a teacher, first you have to take the Master's and so on. It was the same thing, only that it's also like you are a professional. Then I get permission from the union that the tailor belonged that I can take my exam. Everybody-- everybody did.

So finally it turned out, I got lucky because with my name, if they would have used the name, I could not get a [INAUDIBLE]. With that-- we got numbers. And with a number, I was anonymous.

And my paper with them, pair, I got it whatever it was. In Germany, good, all right, depending on what kind of clothes I made. And you got it. But work was work. I got angry at my boss because the dress what I had to make was for our high boss. It was a condition.

And she used to make thick material which was hard to work with, stupid. And she did. And I made a good piece instead of doing the best. But I got my papers. And everybody, everybody was very excited. It was hard. It was not easy.

So who is everybody? Your family, they were excited?

The family, yes, especially, but in the business.

Oh, they were happy for you?

This is a [BOTH TALKING] See, we had people coming from everywhere, from England, from everywhere. We made dresses for-- what was the ice skater name? You would get stars and so on, high class.

Was it Sonja Henie?

But they were from everywhere.

Who was the ice skater, Sonja Henie? You say there was a famous ice skater you made for?

Yeah, Sonja Henie.

Sonja Henie?

One day, we were. Oh, everybody was excited. Sonja Henie, it was. It's a salon. People were excited, including Mrs. Goebbels.

Who?

Mrs. Goebbels.

Oh, Mrs. Goebbels. Goebbels? How was--

How she went, I don't know, because the owners were Jews. It was a Jewish company. [PLACE NAME]

So how she comes in--

I don't know. We had a very good name.

She probably wanted the best.

Yeah. We made-- first off, we got French [INAUDIBLE] and so on every year, so on, so often, which were beautiful. But the work was lousy, very bad, very bad. But they bought them all there. Even they bought them all there, nobody else could make it. So it was a testing. I had to go there.