

## **Oral history interview with Helga Epstein** **RG-50.069.0001**

### **Summary**

Helga Epstein (née Dreifuss) was born August 30, 1924 in Cologne, Germany. She is the daughter of Leo and Margo Dreifuss. Helga received her diploma from Burbank hospital school of nursing in Fitchburg, Massachusetts in 1947 and her BS at Boston University in 1967. She received her Master's in education from Boston University in 1970. Alberto was a supervisor and general nurse at Burbank hospital.

Helga begins telling the students about Kristallnacht on the nights of November 8-9, 1938, and how it is memorialized in many Holocaust survivors' minds as a major event in their memories because it was one of the final times they gathered with many of their family.

Helga gives a historical background about Germany and the Jewish people: the Jewish people have lived in Germany since 321 BCE although they suffered persecution, they managed to integrate into the German culture. By the end of the 19th-century, Jews were thoroughly integrated into Germany economic, social, and political life. Following the armistice World War I, two very opposite political systems emerged: one was the German Weimer system, which constituted freedom and liberty for its citizens, other than national Socialist German Workers' Party later known as the "Nazi Party." The second was a very oppressive system, taking advantage of the liberties of the time to subvert later destroy freedom in Germany. Hitler's imprisonment and authorship of Mein Kampf. This was the early 1920s. She gives a few excerpts of Mein Kampf.

She quotes Hitler's statement that "Jews are responsible for all the ills of the world." Helga describes what life was like in the 1920s in Germany after the production of Hitler's book and its propaganda, which fed into the antisemitism that existed at that time. She quotes from Hitler's writings to show his plans to annihilate the Jewish people, steal their material belongings, and take away their human rights.

In 1933, when Helga was nine years old, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. She describes the oppressive laws against Jews during the 1930s. Jews in the country had to sell their stores usually for a penance. Jews were not allowed under penalty of death to have foreign currency. Although initially Jews were encouraged to leave the country, that door soon closed. Jewish families were limited to equivalent of \$2.50 or 10 marks for each head of the household.

1938 there was forceful addition to the Jewish population of the middle name. Helga produces paperwork to show her new middle name "Sarah." Hitler wanted every Jew to be identified and there to be no doubt in their paperwork. She also has her passport at the time. It stated her name as Helga Sarah Epstein. At this point Jewish children were expelled from public school. Helga points out how the world seemed to be indifferent to what was happening to the Jews in Europe at this time. Helga tells us how Jews were not allowed to salute during the Nazi military parades, etc.; however, because you didn't salute you would be spat upon by the other people in the crowd. When a parade came along she would duck into a doorway as much as she could. Helga remembers people loaded onto trucks and being taken away. She remembers the communists tried to fight back.

Helga's family consisted of her parents and one brother. However, she had a large extended family with whom she'd spend the holidays and vacations with. This was until signs started to appear such as "strange Jews stay away, we have enough of our own."

While many of her relatives did not survive some more able to escape to Columbia, Argentina, Israel, France, Holland, and the United States. Those who escaped to Holland were wiped out after the Nazis invaded; this included her aunt, uncle, a cousin who was her age (approximately 15 years old at the time), and a younger cousin.

Helga's father, who served for Germany in World War I, was in disbelief at first. After her father sold one business and opened a retail store, they moved to an area where he hoped his family could have a better life away from the Nazis. It was in a suburb. At the time she and her brother were attending Jewish elementary school. Those schools were soon closed by the Nazis and Jewish children were kicked out of public school. The synagogue has always been the center of her religious and social life. Signs were up all over that said "no Jews allowed"; they were at public pools, skating ricks, parks, beaches etc. Jews were not permitted in these areas.

The synagogue became the only place for social life. Helga learned to swim in the Rhine river. Jews would try to go to cinema; however, the Germans would come in with flashlights and say that the movie will not continue until the Jews leave. Helga says that necessity makes you innovative and soon the Jewish community formed a cultural community. One by one people that she knew disappeared. They would never be heard of again. Helga said she never saw many of her childhood friends again.

She recalls how her brother was bar mitzvahed, though they couldn't entertain in a big hall etc. They had a quiet dinner in their apartment. Downstairs the storm troopers were harassing the customers of her father's business. Things started to get dangerous for her family, so her parents sent her to an elderly aunt and cousin and she could only sleep on the couch. Helga refers back to the awful night of shattered glass, November 8-9, 1938, when she was living with her elderly aunt and thought she was safe. At first, she heard broken glass, crashing screaming, shouting, it seemed like the world was coming to an end. She was 15 years old at the time. In the commotion she saw fire outside the window and her beloved synagogue set on fire! She ran out of the house and she was going towards her synagogue and couldn't believe what she saw: German citizens destroying and burning sacred books and items from the synagogue. The fire department or police did not do anything to help. They were instructed not to. A boy at a gas station kindly instructed her to go back home.

Her fear that her dad was arrested because she saw all the men in the town she was staying in being thrown onto trucks and being arrested by SS. Later she found out that her father was not arrested on Kristallnacht because the Nazis didn't have enough trucks in bigger cities like Cologne. 8000 businesses were destroyed and 191 synagogues were burned, many of middle-class and up Jewish population were arrested and taken to concentration camps and were murdered. The lack of international response to the events of Kristallnacht.

Helga and her family were able to get a lower emigration lottery number (the limit for entry was only 2000 people per year for the United States). The United Kingdom offering temporary visas to people who already had lower lottery numbers for the United States. Helga and her family moved to England there first. Helga says that she and her family left Germany in June 1939. She was 15 and nine months old. She was in London when World War II broke out in September. The Following February /March 1940 they left England and arrived in the United States.

Helga then takes questions from the students.

In 1985 the mayor of Cologne invited 22 couples to come back for a visit. Helga was hoping to locate friends. The city of Cologne had 25,000 Jews, now has only 1000 Jews (these are mostly Jews who escaped from Slavic countries). Helga points out that the staggering reduction in population is due to genocide.

She leaves on a hopeful topic by talking about Cologne's first kindergarten since the end of World War II, which was created by displaced survivors who moved there. In the 1980s (when this presentation was filmed) Helga says the Mayor of Cologne was trying desperately to get more Jewish people to move back to Cologne. Helga had many books filled with pictures but was only able to bring a few with her she left most of her belongings behind.