

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Tana Gelfer**

**October 12, 1994**

**RG-50.106\*0001**

PREFACE

The following 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.

Transcribed by Carilyn Cipolla, National Court Reporters Association.

## **TANA GELFER**

**October 12, 1994**

Question: Mrs. Gelfer, let me start with just the basics. When were you born -- exact date?

Answer: October 7, 1939.

Q: And where were you born?

A: Berlin, Germany.

Q: And what was your name? Your maiden name.

A: Reichmann.

Q: And that's spelled?

A: R-E-I-C-H-M-A-N-N.

Q: At the time you were born, were both your parents alive?

A: Both my parents were alive at that time.

Q: Okay. And your father's name was -- ?

A: Herman George Reichmann.

Q: And your mother's name?

A: Johanna.

Q: And her maiden name was?

A: K-O-H-N.

Q: K-O-H-N. Okay. And I'll ask you some more questions about her as we go along. At the time of your birth, did you have brothers and sisters?

A: No, I am an only child.

Q: And did you remain an only child?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: What kind of business, or what did your father do; do you know?

A: He was originally a banker. At the time the war started, he was forced out of that and became a school at a school for boys and he taught mainly Hebrew Jewish religion.

Q: Do you know the name of the school by any chance?

A: No.

Q: How do you know that that was what he was doing?

A: My mother told me about that.

Q: When you say he was a banker, did you know what his position was at the bank?

A: No, no idea.

Q: And how about your mother -- was she employed?

A: My mother was originally an actress. When that wasn't possible, she worked for a travel agency.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And after that she just was forced out of work. She later on owned a store for children's clothing -- infant's and children's clothing -- and that was destroyed in Kristallnacht.

Q: And so, by 1939, was she still working at all, or was it basically impossible?

A: She was still working.

Q: Mm-hmm. And that would have been still the children's clothing store?

A: Right. Right.

Q: Okay. Now, let's start with, I guess, your father's family -- brothers, sisters that he had.

A: He had a sister and one brother.

Q: And his sister's name was -- ?

A: Kate.

Q: Okay.

A: And I don't remember the brother's name.

Q: Was it an older or younger brother?

A: It was an older brother. I don't remember his father's name. His mother was her -- died when he was a small child.

Q: Okay. Had you ever met his sister?

A: No. No.

Q: Okay. Do you know where she lived, or was she also in Berlin?

A: She lived in small town Germany. I don't know the name of it, but it was out in the country somewhere. I do know what happened to her and her brother. We never heard from again.

Q: Mm-hmm. Okay. Why don't you tell me what happened to your aunt, I guess.

A: She was married. And on the night of her wedding, they killed her husband and she committed suicide.

Q: And when was that approximately?

A: '40, '41 -- I'm not really sure.

Q: And that would have been in Germany.

A: Yeah, Germany.

Q: And I mean, I know who you're talking about when you say "they," but do you know specifically it was the SS?

A: SS.

Q: Yeah. And who told you that?

A: My mother. These are things that my mother told me. Unfortunately, I didn't take enough notes down.

Q: Sure. No, I understand. Sure. Now, was your father's family originally from Germany, or do you know how long they were --

A: They were originally from Germany. They were from Gelsenkirchen.

Q: Can you spell that for me?

A: G-E-L-S-E-N-K-I-R-C-H-E-N.

Q: Okay. And where is that in relation to Berlin, if you know?

A: Not really -- outside. Small town.

Q: How long had they been in Berlin, your parents, do you know?

A: Actually, my father was living in Gelsenkirchen and came to Berlin on a business trip and met my mother at that time through a friend.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Actually, my mother was dating his best friend. And he was supposed to deliver a note to the best friend. And that's how they met.

Q: It was more than a note he delivered. Okay. Let's then go to your mother's family now. Did she have brothers and sisters?

A: No, she was also an only child.

Q: Okay. And her background was -- was she also German, or do you know where she was from?

A: Yes, yes -- her father was from Austria, from Vienna.

Q: Mm-hmm. Okay. And her father's name, can I ask you that?

A: Her father's name was (?Kamil?)

Q: And that would have been K-O.

A: K-O-H-N.

Q: Okay. Now, you're born in October of 1939, and I guess what we're going to do is rely a little bit on maybe your mother's recollection of this early period until you had your own recollections as a child. But do you know what kinds of circumstances you were living in in Berlin at that time from your mother? Do you know if you're still in a house, an apartment, or?

A: Well, to go back a bit, my grandmother's name was Teresa. And she converted to Judaism when she married my grandfather who was a devout Jew.

Q: Okay. This is on your paternal or --

A: This was my mother's mother. So that lays the background a little more of why things happened later on that didn't happen to her.

Q: Okay. So your maternal grandmother basically converted. And what was her religion before?

A: Protestant.

Q: Protestant. Okay. All right. So the circumstances you were living in.

A: My grandfather was a prominent person in Avatas [?] until stock market and everything collapsed. And he lost all. He died in 1935. Basically when he lost everything, he gave up. They were wealthy people, always had a live-in maid. My mother grew up in those circumstances. Went to private schools.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And, after my grandfather died, my mother -- from the little money that he had left -- she opened the store to sell the children's clothes, started the business.

Q: I see. Tell me about a little bit -- and I'm sorry we're backtracking Mrs. Gelfer, but this is interesting. Tell me a little bit about her career as an actress -- what you know about it.

A: Mainly on a stage. In fact, she was starting to make a name for herself. Small town stage productions. She always wanted to be an actress from way back. She always mentioned she dropped out of school without her parents knowing about it and went to acting school.

Q: And did she use her name Johanna?

A: No, her stage name was Junsì. That was a nickname my grandfather had for her. And Karnau, K-A-R-N-A-U, was her stage name.

Q: Mm-hmm. Okay. Do you have any memorabilia from that time period or anything?

A: I have pictures of her. She was a slight person. Very trim. Boyish figure. She did things like William Tell's son. Cape Leer's son. A lot of these kind of parts. She did. My great grandfather was a ballet master of the Vienna opera house, so maybe there was a little theatrical book in there from the beginning.

Q: And that would have been on her side.

A: That's my grandfather's father. There are three cousins in Austria which are quite well-known writers by the name of Braun. That's B-R-A-U-N.

Q: Mm-hmm. Okay. So she owned her children's store.

A: So she was used to the finer things in life, born in well-to-do situation.

Q: Mm-hmm. And this was in Berlin.

A: This was.

Q: When was she born; do you know?

A: December 30, 1904.

Q: Mm-hmm. Back -- going back now to 1939 time period when you were first born, were you living in an apartment -- just the three of you -- or do you know?

A: We were living in an apartment with my grandmother -- the four of us.

Q: And that would have been her mother -- your mother's mother.

A: My mother's mother.

Q: Okay.

A: And we lived in that apartment till we left Germany.

Q: Mm-hmm. So, as far as you know, you lived in the same place.

A: All my life.

Q: Okay. From 1939 to --

A: -- 1949.

Q: Okay. Ten years later. All right. What are your first recollections as a child?

A: First recollections, I would say, would be wandering around streets with my grandmother not knowing the reason why really. Days and nights. I also had an aunt that was really not an aunt; it was just a very close friend of a cousin and later his wife who protected us. And she would pick me up and walk me in parks and streets. And I really had no idea why I was doing this.

Q: Do you know now?

A: Yes, of course. That was just to hide me.

Q: Okay.

A: I remember my father coming home from work and he would put me on his shoulders and ride me around the dining room and my mother would be saying, "You're tired. Don't do that." That's -- my father take me to the park.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Bits and pieces there.

Q: Do you know what kind of work your father was doing then?

A: At that time he was teaching. He taught until the very end when he was.

Q: Okay. When was that; do you know?

A: December 22, 1942. And he was taken right out of the classroom.

Q: Do you know what happened to him?

A: No. We just know that there was a sign in Berlin where they always had the -- the lists of people who were gone, had died. And it just had his number -- 21450 -- and his name behind it. Some said he was on his way to \_\_\_\_, but there was no proof of it.

Q: Mm-hmm. How are you so certain -- it's just interesting Miss Gelfer, that date.



A: The date was my mother went to the town hall every day to see if his name was there. One day the date was there, the number was there.

Q: I see. Now, once your father was taken away, was it just then the three of you in the house?

A: Three of us, yes.

Q: Now, what I think I'll do, Ms. Gelfer, just a little bit easier, I'm going to go through your recollections first from your childhood to the time you were liberated essentially to almost the present. And then what I'd like to do is go back and sort of I'll put you in the shoes of your mother in a sense and have you recollect what she has told you about that. I think that will be probably a easier way to do it as opposed to skipping back and forth.

A: I have something that I don't know if you'd like to use or not, but my father wrote me a poem right after I was born.

Q: Oh, terrific.

A: And it sort of tells what things were like at that time -- his fear, his knowledge what was going to happen.

Q: Oh, that'd be great. Why don't you just take the time now.

A: He wrote this to me about four months after I was born. It was called To Tana.

Q: And that means?

A: My name was Tana. When I came into your room, you stretched your little hands to the bar of your crib. I heard a sweet quiet sigh. You felt free from the loneliness of your prison. You are still such a stranger in this world. In a sense nothing in the end is loneliness. What hatred, fury passion has done to us. You smiled and consoled so fast from your small grief. Oh put out love tied around your colorful rich world. Thank you for all you have already given us -- memories of innocence, purity, and a life gone by. Life for ourselves has already vanished so long ago.

Q: Beautiful.

A: So he knew what was coming.

Q: Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to make a copy of this.

A: Oh, sure. I translated this from the German.

Q: It's beautiful. So your early recollections were unfortunately just of wandering through the streets. Some early recollections of your father's love for you it sounds like.

A: Playing with girlfriends -- German girlfriends. Really not knowing that this was out of the ordinary the way life was.

Q: Mm-hmm. Did your mother ever speak to you about your father in terms of that he had been taken away?

A: No, not that I remember at all. It was just one day he wasn't there. But, at age two and a half, I wouldn't have known the difference.

Q: Sure. Yeah. Tell me what you recollect as you became an older child so to speak.

A: You mean two, three -- and that's my recollections?

Q: Four, five. Mm-hmm.

A: Well, the main ones have to do with -- was the day that we were picked up. My mother was in forced labor, and I was playing, little non-Jewish girl, German girlfriend of mine -- in the dining room. And my mother came in, and she looked at my grandmother and my grandmother said, "What are you doing home already? It's early." And then she saw the SS man behind -- standing behind my mother. And my mother just said to my friend, "You have to go home now. Tana can't play with you anymore." And the little girl didn't know why, but she left with this sort of look. And my mother and grandmother just looked at each other. My mother told me to go get my coat. I remember I grabbed my teddy bear. And my mother, my grandmother hugged each other, and we just left and we were put on a truck. But I had no idea where we were going, what was going on at that time. It was just that I was being taken away from my playmate. And next thing I remember was we were in a place called Aranische I was told afterwards. And.

Q: You just spell that to the best you could.

A: A-R-A-N-I-S-H-E. And there were a lot of buildings there. And I was separated. That was the first time I separated from my mother. There were a bunch of kids. And there were bunk beds. And I wasn't going to stay there. And I ran away couple of times. And the last time I did find my mother. And they allowed me to stay with her. It was actually a place -- a holding place -- until we were put on a train. We were there for about four days or five days. I just remember being very very scared, because it was the first time I was really separated from my mother, and I was with all these children and I didn't know anybody. And I was determined I was going to find her. And the next thing I really remember is being in Theresienstadt. My first recollections were walking with my mother and it was a park and it had old swings and all of a sudden my mother screamed. It was a lady walking with a blind man pushing a baby carriage. And my mother had met one of her earlier very best friends of all places that she had really lost contact with. The gentleman was a first world war veteran also lost his eyesight in that war. And so, he was sort of a national hero. That's why he went to Theresienstadt, not to

Auschwitz or anywhere else. And my mother was overjoyed meeting these people. The little boy had been born there of all places. And I remember the camp -- the barracks.

Q: Mm-hmm. Tell me about that.

A: Lots and lots of people in dark barracks. The lice you could just take off the walls. Fleas. Smells.

Q: Describe the smells.

A: Waste. Human waste. Just foul odors. You tried to open the door, but not much better outside.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: I remember being fed. We used to go outside. And they had these big barrels. And it was filled with what they called "soup." And, if you are at the beginning of the line, you get maybe a little meat or something. If you were at the end of the line, you just get the water and a crust of bread would go with that. We used to save the crust of bread for a couple of days as long as we could, because when it got hard, you could make it last longer. So we'd eat it after a few days. My mother and I would sit together, and we just eat little pieces at a time.

Q: How often were you given these meals; was it just once a day?

A: Once a day.

Q: What -- midday, early day?

A: Early day.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: I spent a lot of my time in a hospital there. I had every disease and every childhood illness that -- measles and mumps. Of course, with all these children there, you'd catch whatever someone else had. I had intestinal infection twice -- it almost killed me. One time I remember I needed a blood transfusion. And then they put my mother on one table, put me on the other table and a tube went from her into me. Saved my life anyway. I remember that a lot of people, they didn't speak German, especially in the hospital -- the kids. There were not that many Germans there. And I was totally lost language-wise. We -- when I wasn't sick, while my mother was doing various jobs there, we were allowed to attend a day camp, which was run by, you know, inmates, girls. And there we were allowed to paint and draw pictures. We worked with little tiles. You know, a few little toys for us. But even there they made -- the Nazis made sure that we would be impressed and would remember our experiences as small as we were. When the people were brought in -- mainly the men were brought in from the outside, they were half

starved -- and this was Czechoslovakia. And this was December, this was winter, it snows like Russian snows -- they would be taken off the carts. And these were skeleton of people. And they were going by outside the windows. And they would open the drapes for us. And we were made to watch them move on until they dropped dead. And this is -- I do remember this was something my mother never really knew that I knew -- never told us. This was something I actually do remember. They made sure -- people say now, you know, "How can you remember things when you were four years old?" But things like that you don't forget.

Q: Now, were you in a separate barracks from your mother?

A: No, I was together -- I was lucky I was together with my mother in the same barracks at the time, except when I was in the hospital.

Q: Mm-hmm. And in terms of these -- when you say that these -- these men were taken off --

A: They were just brought in --

Q: -- from trains.

A: -- from trains --

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: -- and they were just made to stand there. And this was before they had -- were building the gas chambers there.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: So these people were sick already.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And they were half-starved. And, of course, they were freezing. And they were -- they were nude.

Q: And they would just leave them out in the elements.

A: They would just leave them out there. And we just -- they opened these big drapes. And we just -- we turned around and watched them.

Q: Now, in terms of your actual living conditions in the barracks, were you -- did you share a bed your mother, or shared a bunk with several other people?

A: We had bunks. Bunks. They were three and three high, the bunks.

Q: Mm-hmm. Did you always have the same place; do you remember?

A: I imagine so. I would think so, yes. Because my mother used to talk about barrack number.

Q: Mm-hmm. Did you have -- do you remember being able to keep any personal possessions there?

A: My teddy bear. I still have my teddy bear.

Q: You still have it?

A: My teddy bear came home with me.

Q: How do you -- just out of curiosity, how is it kept now?

A: It's just on my bookshelf.

Q: Oh, really. Okay.

A: Couple of times I've had him fixed a little bit.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: I sent a few things to the museum. Money from Theresienstadt. Postcards that we -- my mother was allowed to send out, which were kind of a joke. And I was ready to send the teddy bear, but I couldn't do it.

Q: No, you don't want to do that. It's made it this far with you; it seems to me it doesn't leave your house.

A: Right. Yes. Yes. And he still got the same -- my mother knitted me for Hanukkah there over in the camp; she knitted me a little outfit for him. And he's still got that on him.

Q: Mm-hmm. Did you name your teddy bear by any chance?

A: No, I did not.

Q: Okay. Can you -- besides that the couple vignettes that you told me about the camp life, is there anything else that sticks out in your mind -- any other people that you can recall, you know, distinctly or relationships that you might have had or things that impressed you?

A: Mainly the couple that we met there, as I said -- he was blinded WWI and taken to Theresienstadt because he was sort of a war hero. And they were little careful about killing these people right out. And his wife was a secretary to him. He was a lawyer -- an attorney -- I mentioned that. And she was a secretary. When he came back and was blinded, they married. She was always a sickly person. And they tried very hard to have children; nothing ever happened. After they wound up in Theresienstadt, she became

pregnant. And my mother says that -- told me that friends -- so woman friends -- helped her have her child in secret there; otherwise, the child would have been killed.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And they were there for over three years. So they had been there a year -- two years before us already.

Q: Do you know what their names are?

A: Yes. Minnie and Fritz Simon.

Q: S-I-M-O-N?

A: Mm-hmm. And the son's name is Michael.

Q: Do you know if he survived?

A: They all survived. And last we heard of them, they were -- when we came over here - - her brother was a friend of my mother's also in Germany. He remained in Germany. And he gave us their address. And they wound up in Mt. Vernon, New York.

Q: Okay. Hmm.

A: We saw them several times even after I married. My husband met him. My children. Michael went on to become a doctor.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Frits went -- frits went back to Germany and remained there. And I -- we didn't hear that she died, but I -- she must have died. And then last we heard of them, we went by to their wedding -- to Michael's wedding.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And then we lost track of the son.

Q: Mm-hmm. He would be about -- no, he'd be younger than you, I guess, right? Because he was just a baby -- three or four years younger.

A: He would be two years older than me.

Q: No, that doesn't quite match.

A: He was younger than me, I'm sorry, younger than me -- yes.

Q: Because he was in the baby carriage and you were standing.

A: Right. Right. Younger -- right. They were there two years more.

Q: Right. So two to three years.

A: Two to three years younger -- right.

Q: What about the -- the Nazis at the camp; do you recall? Do you have any memories of what they were like besides forcing you to see those certain things?

A: No. Really really not, because I came more into contact with -- in the children's camp, with the inmates. And also in the hospital -- the doctors and nurses were also inmates.

Q: Okay.

A: The people in prison \_\_\_\_.

Q: Tell me about that --

A: I do have a recollection -- go back to before we left Germany. A German officer -- he was not an SS officer, but he was in the army. His name was Zimmerman. At that time my mother had to take on a middle name, which was a Hebrew name -- Sarah --

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: -- which, of course, she wasn't used to, because she wasn't born with that name. And whenever she had to go somewhere and sign her name, that name had to be included --

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: -- otherwise, it would mean instant death with deportation. Well, one time my mother had to go somewhere and she had to sign some papers and she just forgot. She just put her regular name down. They caught her. It was an excuse to deport somebody.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: This Mr. Zimmerman was a friend of ours. He lived a couple of houses away from us in Berlin and had been bringing us a little food and was friendly with my mother -- well, my grandmother. And he saw the papers on the desk that she was supposed to be picked up. And he took the papers, and he came to my house.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And he said, "Look, Katsina[?], what you did -- stupid thing you did -- you didn't put your name down, your Hebrew name." And my mother says, "I just bluntly forgot. I just wanted to get out of there and forgot."

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And he said, "This paper is out for you. These are the papers. They're official." And she said, "Well, that's what has to be." And he says, "I can't do this." And he burned the papers.

Q: Hmm.

A: And they went out and killed him. And I remember him, because he was a very heavy-set man with a big mustache. I always cried. He picked me up, and he loved me to death. And I always screamed when he picked me up.

Q: Did you hear from your mother that he had been killed, I guess, later?

A: Yes, yes. From my grandmother, actually. When we came back from the camp, she told us that she heard that he had been killed.

Q: Now just digressing a little bit -- I guess your grandmother wasn't taken because --

A: My grandmother was not taken, because she was born Protestant and converted. She was 70 years old at the time. And they hadn't quite made up their mind what to do with her.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: I think the reason that we went so late was that -- also because my mother had been asked to come down to be measured. Her head was measured, her nose was measured to see how much of her was Jewish and how much of her wasn't. So it took them a little longer to take us, because they couldn't quite make up their mind where she belonged, because she didn't come from a Jewish mother --

Q: Mm-hmm. So technically --

A: -- technically.

Q: Although the -- I guess the code back then was like 1/64th or something. I mean, it didn't \_\_\_\_ .

A: Right.

Q: Just to finish up a little bit with Theresienstadt. Do you remember -- in other words, oftentimes people tell us about the -- either the concerts or cultural events that they had. Do you remember any of that?

A: No -- only from -- not myself. Only from what my mother said that the Red Cross came in, and they spruced up the camp.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: The banks were opened. The cafes were opened.



Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Bakeries had food in them. Butcher shops had food in them. And, of course, it was just a big show.

Q: Sure.

A: These were things that she told me. It was just for the Red Cross. I remember also my mother said that the Red Cross questioned them and said, "Well, how is life here?" And, of course, they couldn't say too much, because there was always someone listening.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: So the answer they gave was, "I must say it's not too bad." And that can be taken two ways. And they hoped it would be picked up in the way that they said.

Q: Mm-hmm. Back on around the second half, and we have two more, so --

A: Oh.

Q: -- we're in pretty good shape.

A: You had just asked if I knew what my mother did.

Q: Right.

A: She had several jobs. One was working in the fields.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: She picked spinach. She picked rhubarb. She got that job. They asked if anybody had any farming experience. And my mother was always outspoken, brazen, and kind of gutsy. If she wasn't gutsy, she wouldn't have made it through all this. She said, "Oh sure -- I have farming experience."

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And someone said, "Well, you came from Berlin; there's no farms there." And she said, "Well, I grew flowers in my window at home."

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Whoever she was talking to had a sense of humor and figured she was young, she was strong, and put her in the fields.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: They tried to steal spinach, put it in their underwear. And rhubarb. She fed the rhubarb to me once. She was overjoyed that she had some rhubarb. Well, with the

intestinal problems I had, it almost killed me. But they tried to steal what they could out of the fields.

Q: Do you remember eating some of the things from the fields?

A: I remember the rhubarb, because I almost died right after that.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Another job she had was when the people came into the camp they had showers. And, as I said before, very few of the people spoke German.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And that was -- she didn't speak any other language. These were showers with water, but these people didn't know that. They had heard about the gas chambers.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And they wanted to de-lice them, de-flea them before they came in. And she was one of the people that had to take these women into the showers. Of course, these people were screaming and yelling thinking that they were going to their death.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Another job she had was separating belongings of people that had died there. Assembly-line type of work. The Nazis wanted any kind that was valuable -- jewelry. Anything at all that could be of use to them. And so, they had these boxes, which literally had the ashes -- remains of the people in them, and they had to go through them. A lot of times the name on them would be somebody that somebody would recognize, a son or daughter or husband.

Q: Hmm. Just to backtrack a little bit, Mrs. Gelfer, I'd like to talk a little bit more about the hospital. You said that it was staffed by inmates. Do you remember what, you know, physically looked like -- the physical plant so to speak.

A: Just barrack-type beddings. Very, very simple. Everything that was used there was chipped -- the bowls.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Nobody asked from facilities for buckets.

Q: Mm-hmm. Somewhat less crowded than the barracks?

A: Yes, but not -- single beds, not bunk-style beds --

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: -- that was the difference. Just children where I was.

Q: Mm-hmm. So you assume that there's a children's section?

A: A children's section -- yes.

Q: How many kids were in the --

A: There were a lot I remember -- a lot. But I don't remember -- maybe say 100, 75 --

Q: Do you remember being liberated from the camp?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

A: Yes, I remember that -- well, the background of it was that -- what my mother told me first before -- what I remember was that the night before they had posted a sign that we were supposed to be gassed the next morning. They already had built the chambers. Let me just go back one more -- that just brings something else to mind.

Q: Sure. Mm-hmm.

A: When we first came in, "Tana" was a very popular name at that time. The children that were born around 1939 -- '38, '39 -- the parents were not allowed to give them names of their choices.

Q: Hmm.

A: There was a list of names. They were horrendous names a lot of them. Abiga -- which is Abigail here, which isn't too bad, but in German, it's the closest thing to a parrot, which is papagei. So these were not very nice names.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: So Tana was about the best. I guess there were about six or seven girl's names and boy's names. And the parents had to choose from the list.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: So "Tana" was a popular name of little girls at that time. We were brought into the camp. We had to line up. And Kohn -- my mother used -- after my father was picked up, my mother thought she can protect us a little better by using her name -- maiden name of Kohn.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: That also, of course, was a very popular name. When we were brought in, we were told to line up. And, if it wasn't a confusion, excitement, everything that was going on.

They knew that the names they were calling were the names that were not going to stay in Theresienstadt; they were going to go to Auschwitz or to one of the other camps. And my mother just remembers "Frau Kohn and child Tana." And my mother took me -- and I do remember she took me and pulled me forward. And a woman grabbed her by the sleeve and pulled her back and said, "Didn't you hear the first name? That's me and my daughter."

Q: Hmm. And they stepped forward?

A: They stepped forward.

Q: Did you know at that point -- or did you later sense how important that was? I guess you must have.

A: Later on -- yeah.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Well, anyway back to liberation. We were supposed to be gassed the following day, so. And, from what I understood later is that the next morning we were liberated.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: So it was a matter of hours. They kept us there for two weeks mainly to treat us --

Q: When you say "they," was it the Russians that --

A: Russians. Clean us up -- get the lice out of the hair.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: I was so weak. I was so weak that I had to be trained how to walk at that time. I couldn't walk under my own power. And we were just set free. They opened the gates, and we were set free. And the only place we knew where to go was back to Berlin.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: We walked for a while. We hitched a ride on a hay wagon. And I remember we stopped at a farm.

Q: And this is you and your mother.

A: Me and my mother, yes. My mother and I. We walked by a farm, and the farmer came out. And he must have realized who we were, where we're coming from. And he invited us in. And he gave me some goat milk. And I just remember my mother was so upset, because I wouldn't drink it. I just -- I just didn't like it, and I didn't drink it. And she was so thrilled that I was going to get some nourishment.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And we mainly hitched rides until we got back to Berlin. And just continuous process. A lot of people did it. And a lot of people stopped to help.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And the next thing I really remember was we were in Berlin and it was a big indoor market -- about three, four blocks away from us -- and we were running. That's the first thing I remember --

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: -- because we used to shop there before. And I knew we were close to home. And my grandmother had no knowledge of us that we were coming back.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: There was no way to get in touch with her. And she didn't know if we were dead or if we were alive at that time. And we walked up to the apartment door. And my mother pushed me ahead of her. She didn't know if this was going to kill my grandmother from shock or what was going to happen.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: She was in her 70's already. She rang the doorbell and stepped aside and just had me standing there. My grandmother opened the door, she just saw me. Well, of course she went hysterical from crying, but she also thought that my mother didn't make it. And then my mother stepped forward. And I remember that. Crying.

Q: Mm-hmm. And your grandmother had just basically lived at the same apartment and stayed there?

A: Yes, she had stayed there. Yes, she had stayed there.

Q: Now, when you moved back into your grandmother's apartment or your apartment, what did you -- what do you recall of those days?

A: First thing my mother says, "We got to get out of Germany as quickly as possible." And she just -- and the people, when we came back, all of a sudden the next door neighbors that have turned us in -- or someone who did turn us in probably before -- were our dearest friends, "Oh, we're so glad you made it. We're so happy to see you. And so glad to have you back." And my mother said, "That's it. We just have to get out of here."

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: So we put in for a reserve for displaced person to come to the United States. At that time we had an option of going either to Israel or the United States. My grandmother wanted to go to Israel. She fought my mother all the way. And my mother had a friend from Berlin who had gone to Israel also with his daughter Tana.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And they had survived. The family had survived and went to Israel. And they wrote my mother and said, "Don't come. You're without a husband. You're going to be separated from your daughter. You're going to have to work. Without a man you can't start in a new country like this. Go to the United States instead." He was a doctor, and she was a nurse.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And he said, "We never see our Tana. We never see each other. We're working so hard to make a go of it. Don't come here." My mother made the decision to go to the United States.

Q: While you were waiting for the visa --

A: While I was waiting, I was sent by the Jewish Counsel to Switzerland for three months to basically get my strength back.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And I went there by myself. Jewish people in Switzerland near Bern -- I really don't recall the name offhand of the town -- took me in.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And I lived with them four months and went to school there.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: I also did my first three years of public school being the only Jewish child in Berlin when I came back there.

Q: You say you were the only Jewish child in Berlin?

A: In my school in Berlin, I was the only one left.

Q: Oh, I see. Mm-hmm.

A: There just were figures in Theresienstadt. There were 15,000 children that entered and went through that camp. And 100 of us walked out of there.

Q: 100.

A: 100 out of 15,000.

Q: Mm-hmm. After coming back from Switzerland, do you -- did you go back to school? I guess you said --

A: I went back to school. Went to Switzerland '47, 1947, for three months and just went to school up to third grade in 1949.

Q: Mm-hmm. Do you remember what school was like then? I mean, were kids unfriendly, friendly; was it pleasant, unpleasant?

A: No. I was just different. They had religious training. And I went out in the courtyard and played by myself while they had religious training, because I was the only Jewish child. But other than -- no, not really. I had friends. I had no problems at all. And it was in November -- end of October actually. We had six days to get ready to leave Germany.

Q: Mm-hmm. Your mother -- what kind of work, or what did she do when she got back to Berlin?

A: She worked for the town hall, the city hall. City hall. Town hall. I don't remember.

Q: Mm-hmm. And when you got the notice that you were able to -- your visa had been approved, was it for the three of you -- your grandma as well?

A: For the three of us, yes.

Q: And how did you -- did you come straight to the United States?

A: We came straight to the United States. We were supposed to come in to the port of New York. We went by ship, got caught in a storm, and we were diverted into Boston. We spent one night in Boston. Very very elemental. \_\_\_\_ which we were. And then they put us on a train to New York.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And we were met by someone from the Jewish Council in New York, and they had a room waiting for us in New York.

Q: When you say "a room," what do you mean?

A: A room in a private home.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: People rented a room to us. And it was the three of us in one room.

Q: Mm-hmm. Do you remember much about that crossing or that ship?

A: A lot of people getting very very sick. It was a battleship, not a luxury liner or anything. My mother was deathly sick. We were 350 people, and the room we were in, we were in hammocks. Person on top would become ill, and everybody else would profit by it. What you became ill with, you had to clean up. There was no crew to do that for you.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: The sailor's plate with oranges. And I never had even seen an orange, no less eaten one. But because there were walls, we didn't get any of them. It was not a kind trip.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: First time I ate a banana, nobody told me you're supposed to peel them. And I was almost 10 years old already. I never had a banana. So I bit into it. My grandmother was in a room with four, five people, because she was over 70.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And she was the least sick. But my mother was deathly sick in the crossing. They showed us movies of what the United States was going to be like. I mean, it was gold-paved all over the streets. And we were going to all be very wealthy, taken care of.

Q: Mm-hmm. You said it was a battleship. Was it a --

A: It was a navy -- navy ship.

Q: U.S. navy, or do you know?

A: U.S. navy.

Q: Okay. Any other people that you knew from Berlin that came over?

A: No. No one. No one.

Q: Mm-hmm. So it sailed from -- I guess Berlin is not a port, but whatever.

A: Uh-huh.

Q: Okay. So you're in Newark in someone's home. You say you stay there for some time.

A: We rented a room there.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: When we got here, the Jewish Council gave my mother -- I think it was \$30 or \$33 and a newspaper to get a job. So she didn't know the language, she spoke no English, and had no training in anything really that she could do with our language, so she got a job as



a seamstress in a factory. She was also instructed to pay those \$33 back as soon as possible.

Q: Hmm.

A: And I don't remember -- the rent wasn't that high, but it was by a German-Jewish family that had come here before the war.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And they rented rooms. They had a very large colonial house, and they rented rooms. And we had basically one bedroom in their home with kitchen privileges in the basement. And we lived there almost close to a year. They sold the house, and we moved with them into their next house. So we stayed with these people for quite a while.

Q: And, if you could, Mrs. Gelfer, just give me sort of a sketch of what your life was like down the years after the war.

A: Well, I went to -- like, when I came here, they put me into fifth grade. When I left Germany, I left in third grade not knowing a word of English.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: You had to either learn the language quickly, or you were going to be in the fifth grade for a long time. So I caught on pretty quickly. I was a little hesitant at first to open my mouth, because in the end I was different and I was afraid people were going to laugh. But they weren't; they were very helpful. People even asked me to come over in the evening and helped me study the language. My mother remarried in 1952. She worked for a baking company, and she met my stepfather there. And things got a little bit easier after that. We moved again into Irvington. I did most of my growing up in Irvington, New Jersey. Went to grammar school, high school there. My mother was able to buy their own house.

Q: Your stepfather's name is or was?

A: Archie Anklowitz. A-N-K-L-O-W-I-T-Z

Q: Mm-hmm. Did he have children of his own?

A: No. No, he didn't have children. \_\_\_\_ about eight years ago. And my mother died in 1991.

Q: So, after you went through American schools, did you end up going to high school, I guess, in Irvington, or?

A: High school in Irvington, yes. Irvington High School.

Q: Okay. And then what happened?

A: And worked for an insurance company. And from there on to a title company. I worked with attorneys doing closings in the title company.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And then met my husband, Donald.

Q: When did you guys get married?

A: 1967 -- '66 -- I'm sorry.

Q: And do you have any children?

A: Yes. We have a daughter, 26 -- Karen. And a son, Steven, who's just about 24.

Q: Good name.

A: Right.

Q: And do you work with your daughter now?

A: No, my daughter's in advertising. She's on her own. My son just graduated college.

Q: What's he studying? What's he doing?

A: He's working for a company doing computer work. And eventually he wants to go on to a -- he's going back to school to do a bit more learning on computer science.

Q: Mm-hmm. I bet he could figure out how to work this tape recorder. And what kind of work are you doing now?

A: Oh, I work for Sears & Roebuck.

Q: Mm-hmm. And Mr. Gelfer, what kind of work do you do? Speaker H: I retired about a year ago. About two years ago.

A: From the post office.

Q: All right. Let's go back, if we could, to your mother, which is obviously important influence and told you a lot of things about -- and again, this is -- I know we've sort of gone through some of it already, some of the things that she told you. Are there any other kinds of -- and, I guess, if we take them chronologically -- sort of high point -- not 'high point', that's a terrible use of words. But, you know, anything -- kinds of experiences that you remember she told you about that you'd like to share?

A: Basically, what I've mentioned on here are the things that I remember her telling me. When we came back from the concentration camp and my mother was working in the city hall, she met a young man. She was lonely. And they started to build a relationship.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: He was Hungarian, I believe. And he asked her to marry him. And he knew that my mother had put in a visa to come to the United States.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And he kept putting the marriage off and said, "When you get your visa, we'll go together. We'll go together." And one day she got a letter to come down to fill out some more forms -- some kind of formality. And she went down -- and I can't quite remember how it was, but she was in the office and she had to put down how many people were going to come to the United States with her. And she put down "and her fiancé," and put down the person's name.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And the young man working behind the desk looked at the name and was kind of bewildered. And he said, "Just a minute." He went out of the room, and he came back again, and he said, "I have something I have to tell you. I don't know how to put it. But this man has been engaged several times to Jewish women who want to get out of the country. We're looking for him. He's one of the biggest Nazi war criminals. A man trying to use women to get out of the country."

Q: Did she -- was she able to give him his name?

A: She did give him the name, but then she just -- she didn't say anything to him. She just broke it off with him. Luckily we were able to leave right -- soon after that.

Q: Do you remember what his name was?

A: No.

Q: That's all right.

A: It's a real Hungarian name. I wouldn't remember his last name anyway.

Q: Mm-hmm. But you remember him -- I mean, you remember coming to the house, and --

A: Oh, yes -- I remember him. Yes. Very charming.

Q: Mm-hmm. And he wasn't the only one probably.

A: No. No. And, of course, these women were very lonely. They were young women. Very vulnerable to emotions.

Q: Mm-hmm. Did your mother tell you much as you got older about what she needed to do to hide her identity in Berlin, you know, before you were taken to Theresienstadt?

A: What do you mean by "hide her identity?"

Q: Well, not so much --

A: I mean, she had to wear the star.

Q: Okay.

A: She wore that -- I mean, she had to wear that. She was in forced labor. So, when she walked in, she kind of had that star on.

Q: So basically she lived in -- I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mrs. Gelfer, but she lived in Berlin as a Jew. I mean, she was not.

A: Yes. Yes. Oh, yes. Well, everyone knew that she was a Jew. Her neighbors knew she was a Jew.

Q: I guess we're discussing now just a little about your mother's experience in Berlin, just in '38, '39 time period. But as you recall, she told you -- I mean, she had to do everything that was required.

A: She had to do everything. One time she told me that she went out, and she had to go deliver something to her town hall. And there was a Nazi officer there. And she wasn't wearing her star. She was just -- she just said she had it. She wanted to use public transportation to get there, and she took the star off. She didn't think she was going to get asked into the office. She thought she would just drop this off and turn around. Well, they asked her to go in, and there was this big Nazi officer sitting there. And he looked at her, and he said -- started to question her -- and she got very nervous. And he said, he was just ready to ask her, "Aren't you a Jew?" when the phone rang. And he got the message that they captured ten or 12 Jews and they were able to execute them, and he was just delighted with that. My mother just ran for the hills -- just took off. Ran out of there. He was so distracted by that. But other than that, she had to wear the star at all times. My grandmother didn't.

Q: Grandmother did not.

A: No, Grandmother did not.

Q: Did you get -- you were taken to Theresienstadt what -- 1942, '43?

A: No, I'm sorry, '44 -- September 1944, and we were released in June '45.

Q: Okay. Do you have any sense, Mrs. Gelfer, how many Jews there were in Berlin in 1944? I mean, I know you were really young, but did your mother sort of say "There were a lot of us around," or?

A: No. No, not that I remember. I didn't even know what a Jew was at that time.

Q: Yeah. Right. But I mean, from your mother's recollection, it just -- it seems --

A: Only from what she told me that when she was younger the circle of friends she had, people that she went to school with. She traveled -- not to sound snobbish, but she used to travel in artistic circle.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And college professors. And they were all literary people. Most of them were Jews.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And she lost track of all of them. Except for this one couple that I mentioned. We did meet -- when we came over, one day we were walking in New York -- one of the main shopping streets going shopping, my mother and I. And this woman passed her and stopped, and she stopped. And they looked at each other and said, "You look familiar." And it was a next, a friend or an acquaintance from Berlin that she really had lost total contact with. And they met in the streets of New York of all places.

Q: Hmm. Small world sometimes. It's kind of crazy.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you know how your grandmother was able to survive in Berlin while you guys were gone?

A: She had food stamps. Her sister's son was very helpful to her. He lived a couple blocks away.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And since he was Protestant, he had food. And there was even people in Germany at that time. And he helped her out and watched over her, visited her and watched over her.

Q: Now, these relatives -- the German relatives so to speak -- do you keep in touch with any of them?

A: I call this person Uncle Julie. He's 10 years older than my mother. As I say, it was my grandmother's sister's son. Being that much older than I, he became my Uncle Julie. When my mother established herself a little bit over here, she got a visa for him to come

over. She had a job waiting for him. She did the same bakery, which was a large place where they make pies in case it wasn't a small bakery.

Q: More commercial.

A: Commercial type. Baking institution. And she got a visa and got him over. And then his stepdaughter -- he had married this woman that was a bit younger who many times saved me by just grabbing me at night when my mother would go over and say, "They're looking for us -- hide in one place. But it's Tana that they're really looking for." And she walked with me endlessly -- blocks, whatever -- kept me in her house. And she had two children. And until it became very uncomfortable for her. Of course, her kids were blue-eyed; they were blond, German-looking. Just the opposite of me. No way could I pass as one of her children. And my mother finally said to her, "Don't do this; you're going to get yourself into trouble. I won't allow it. You have two small children." And just Julie married this lady. She had two children from a previous marriage. Her husband was killed in the war before that. And my mother brought him over. And then his stepdaughter. And then later on his son and his stepson. So they all came over. My mother slowly with visas brought them over.

Q: And I assume that he's probably passed away.

A: Yes, he's passed away. He's ten years older than my mother. Passed away. And his wife also passed away. I am still in contact with his son.

Q: Mm-hmm. Who lives in New Jersey.

A: Actually, his stepson too.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Yes, they're all in New Jersey.

Q: Mm-hmm. What about your father's family -- do you know anything?

A: Nothing at all -- never heard about them. And my mother figured if his father would have survived or his brother, they knew where we lived. We never moved away from Grimmstrasse, we would have thought they would have tried to get in touch with us. My mother tried to inquire several places and times and was never able to find out anything about them.

Q: Mm-hmm. She had to assume they just didn't make it.

A: Yes.

Q: The store that she had -- your mother had in Berlin -- the children's store.

A: She ran it herself. My uncle -- Uncle Julie -- he at that time was also in the business of making pocketbooks. He was a fashion designer initially, but with the war went down the drain. But he made pocketbooks and odds and ends like that. So he was able to get her materials to make the things. My grandmother made the panties and outfits in our home. I remember sitting and snipping with scissors, kept me busy snipping them apart as she sewed them on the machine.

Q: But it was owned -- I mean, it was one of the Jewish-owned businesses that was identified as a Jewish-owned business; do you recall?

A: No, she owned the store until it was destroyed.

Q: Okay. Mm-hmm. Your mother did.

A: Yes, because my grandfather had a will and the money he left in the will she used towards that.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Basically, when we came back, the only people aside from the family, what there was -- a member that was there that remembered us and waited for us was -- when I mentioned before this family that met us in Theresienstadt -- Fritz Simon. Her brother survived. He was in Germany. He went into a mental institution and declared himself insane to hide. And he spent three and a half years in a mental institution. And the only one on to him was his nurse -- not a Jewish woman. And she kept his secret. Unfortunately, after three and a half years of living in a mental institution, his problems were just unbelievable. He did come out. He did marry her. She stopped by him.

Q: The nurse.

A: The nurse. His whole emotional being was -- problems after a while. You don't live among insane people for that long.

Q: Or fake to be insane.

A: And fake to be insane.

Q: Hmm. It's got to take its toll. I mean, it's obviously an act of desperation. Do you remember any actual physical abuse at Theresienstadt?

A: No. No.

Q: Okay. Just obviously deprivation -- no food --

A: Just mental.

Q: -- and seeing the violence, the hardship. Mr. Gelfer, you mention that there was 100 survivors from Theresienstadt. Is that -- how did you know that? 100 survivors of children, I guess.

A: It's a figure that's just been released into books. I have the book, "I Never Saw Another Butterfly," which I bought in the museum here, because my husband bought it for me when we were here for the opening. Which is a book of paintings and poems by children who didn't survive. And the preface mentions also the figure. But how accurate they are -- I know, but I always heard the same figure. It's always been 15,000 and 100 survived. 15,000 that went through the camp at one time from the beginning to the end -- not that they were all there at the same time -- that went through. And most of them went to Auschwitz.

Q: Mm-hmm. At some point.

A: So I guess records were kept, because it's always been the same record -- the same figures.

Q: Now, you say that people knew about the gas chambers -- about the gassing.

A: That I heard from my mother the night before. And it was -- she says it was just hysteria.

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: And disbelief that they were there so long they weren't going to make it. And, from what I heard is that the American Red Cross got word that this was going to be the end of the camp and they were going to destroy this whole camp with everybody in it. They didn't want -- they knew, I guess, that it was all coming to an end in '45. And they didn't want any visible signs of this camp. Theresienstadt was a fortress at one time. Just outside of Prague, a small town in the countryside of Prague, and was used as an army fortress. And they were just going to get rid of it all totally so there was no signs of it. So when this war is over and whoever -- Americans -- whoever came over, there would be nothing left to say, "Yes, there was something there at one time." And they had to do this kind of quickly where it was this was going to be over pretty soon. And so, they had to act very quickly. And somehow the Red Cross got wind of this, and the Russians came in.

Q: Before that. Do you have any idea of why you were sent there to Theresienstadt? Why you and your mother were sent there?

A: My mother, as I said before, was born of a -- born Protestant mother and a Jewish father. My grandmother converted when she married my grandfather. I think they were treading very easy at that time. They didn't want to antagonize the Christians by having



too many Christians killed. So my grandmother would say because of her age and she wasn't important as an old woman, 70-year-old woman, she wasn't going to do that much harm. My mother, they weren't quite sure yet where she fit in. She was not born of a Jewish mother, which makes a difference. Like I said before, they measured her -- the nose, the head and neck. And they really -- it took them a while to say, "Well, we're going to put you in a holding camp until we can figure out what we're going to do with these mischling -- people who were of half breeds or not quite totally Jewish." There were a lot of -- in Theresienstadt -- war heroes, like Simon, whom they didn't want to kill off either. We don't want a big war hero from World War I, who got the congressional medal of whatever in Germany and we wanted no -- a lot of writers out there, musicians.

Q: Right.

A: People that they were just going to hold for a while and then see what happens type of thing. They didn't want to leave them free, but they didn't want to send them to the death camps right away. And also people like my mother that they couldn't decide quite how Jewish she was at that time. I was lucky, because I was totally Jewish because -- well, almost totally Jewish, because I have a Jewish father.

Q: Mm-hmm. But so it wasn't because of the fact that she was an actress, I guess.

A: I don't think so.

Q: Yeah. It sounds more like the fact she was not Jewish.

A: Yes, definitely. The rest was just.

Q: All right. I think that's all I have.

#### Conclusion of Interview