

--just do the introduction and then I'll start asking you some questions, OK?

Yes.

OK, so we're going to start now. This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Charlotte Schiff. It is being conducted by Gail Schwartz on November 9th, 2015 and is taking place over the telephone at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and in Bloomfield, Connecticut. This is track number one.

What is your full name?

My name is Charlotte Minna Schiff. My maiden name was Goldschmidt, with a D-T at the end.

And what is the name that you were born with?

Charlotte Minna Goldschmidt.

OK. And where were you born and when were you born?

I was born on July 1937 in Fulda, Germany.

July what?

July 1.

July 1, OK. And let's talk a little bit about your family. Your parents, what were their names?

My mom and dad's name were Herman and Irma Goldschmidt.

And can you give me a little bit of their background? Were they in that same town themselves for a long time?

No, they lived a good half hour from Fulda in a town called Faha. And I was just born there because the hospital suited my family better. I believe the nuns took care of people there. So they preferred that place.

And my father was in hide and skin wholesale, importing them from Russia for fur coats, the furs, and leather for handbags, shoes, and gloves. And he had his place there, where he had to take care of these things and store them. And that was also in Faha. And we had a house and a place of business there.

You lived-- you lived in the same-- your house was where the business was, is that what you just said?

No, the house was a 16-room house that my dad had built in the early 1920s.

Oh, my.

And a little bit of [INAUDIBLE] was the business with some acreage and like a warehouse.

How much education did your father have?

Well, in Germany it was called [Kaufman's?]. My father had intended to become an attorney. He was born in 1886. And at the age of 14, unexpected, he lost his dad.

So he took over his dad's business, which was hide and skin imports from Russia and selling them to factories, sorting them, preparing them properly, and sorting them, and storing them, and selling them to the factories in Germany.

And how far back can your father's family go in Faha?

I believe he was the first one to build in Faha. He was born in Wehrda, which is a really, really small town. And that's where his family resided. And then he then built his house and the business in Faha.

How do you spell the town that he came from?

It's spelled W-E-H-R-D-A.

OK, thank you. And did you know your grandparents on your father's side?

My grandmother on both sides, they lived with us, but they were on in years and they were in wheelchairs. And we were supposedly a little better off and had a bit more heart than the rest of the family. And also, they went early to the United States.

So they both made their home with us. My dad's grandma passed shortly before I was born, is '37. And my mom's grandmother went with us to the concentration camp. Lived for seven years there, not too awfully long. And I remember visiting her.

And she was on, instead of a matt, was a straw sack, and being an old lady, and not having any care, and she finally succumbed to the little care that she received there.

Tell me about, now, your mother's family. Did your mother work, first of all?

No, my mother was a homemaker.

Yeah, and how much education did she have?

She had just the regular education that was customary at that time. And my father had-- I don't know exactly the amount, but had a little more. My dad came from a very religious family. His mom wore a sheitel and my grandpa had a beard.

Yeah.

And my mom's family were not that religious. But my dad was married for seven years, first to my mom's sister. They had no children. And she was diagnosed-- I'm not sure if she was born, but it was discovered she was a diabetic.

And in them days, that couldn't be taken care of, [INAUDIBLE]. So after seven years of marriage to my dad and no children, she passed. And then after one year, my dad married my mom.

Oh. Are you an only child?

I am an only child.

Yeah. And I know you were quite young, do you have any memories that you can talk about before things started to change-- before things started to change? Do you have any early, early memories?

Well, we lived in Faha for two years.

Oh, OK.

In that house my dad had built.

Right.

And in-- I was born in '37. In '38, my dad, shortly after-- it was in the fall, I believe in November-- he was taken for seven months to Buchenwald.

This is after Kristallnacht?

Yes.

Yeah, OK.

Shortly thereafter. And he was beaten [INAUDIBLE] getting off the bus there with iron bars. It injured his back and that was never taken care of. And as the years passed by, it got worse and worse.

And a nerve got into the vertebrae, between, and caused-- made it really painful for him. And as the years passed, and no medical, and proper nourishment care, he eventually had to die from the effects of that treatment.

Oh, my.

And after he came out, it was very difficult in a small town like Faha to buy groceries because the store had signs the Jews are not welcome here. And it was a town of 5,000-6,000 people and everybody knew that--

Now, what year are you talking about now?

In '38, he was for I believe three months or so, went to Buchenwald. When he came out-- I'm talking now about '39--

OK.

--we moved to, like many people from a small town, and documented in the paper you have there, they moved to the city. We move to Frankfort. We left our home, our furniture, everything. And we moved with my grandma, my mother's mom, we moved to Frankfurt.

And you're still a baby. You're just a--

I was two years old then.

Yeah, OK.

And we stayed there for three years.

In Frankfurt.

In Frankfurt. In [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]-- 27 that means. An upstairs apartment, of course no elevators. And til in 1942, we went to the concentration camp, Terezin.

Yeah, let's stop right here. Do you have any other memories-- you were very young, I know, and you were only five at the time, but do you have any memories of the life in Frankfurt yourself?

Not really, no.

Right, because you were so young. You were so young.

I was so young. I remember my grandma in a wheelchair. But really, nothing.

Was your father able to work in Frankfurt?

No, he was not able to work anymore.

So how did you-- do you know how the family support-- your folks supported themselves?

Well, my family was well off and probably through saving that we had.

I see, OK.

But we could, again, not go to stores there. But we met non-Jewish people. Without their help, life would be very difficult to get food. And they would-- under danger of their own life, would bring us food, which was not allowed. And that helped sustain us.

And til we went to the concentration camp. Then I do remember being transported there in cattle carts.

Do you remember leaving your apartment in Frankfurt? Do you have any memory of that?

I know the outlay. The living room and kitchen I remember. But otherwise, not really.

And do you remember the actual leaving, walking out of the apartment?

No, like nights, when the sirens, we had to go down to the basement. I remember some of these trips in the middle of the night. We had to go down there.

Was that very frightening for a little child?

Absolutely. And when other children would go-- if my mom would go in the park or on the street with me and other children could buy an ice cream cone, she had to tell me-- I don't know exactly what she said, but she had to say-- probably because I'm not a good girl she cannot buy me an ice cream cone, because we were not allowed in the store to buy that, while other children could lick on their cones.

Now that was, I'm sure, very difficult for my mom and for me to understand why they could. And here I was a good little girl. That was not allowed.

Did your mother have to wear a yellow star?

Yes, my parents all did. I don't believe I did, but my parents did. And they are in your position. I gave them quite a few years ago, along with a little money from the concentration camp, a picture and my identification card from the concentration camp. I gave that to the Holocaust Museum.

Wonderful, thank you, yes. OK, so now, you said you're leaving.

In cattle carts.

Yeah, do you have any memories of that journey?

Standing in these cattle carts, yes, I have vaguely. You just stand there like sardines packed.

You're now five years old, right?

I was five years old, yes.

And you're with your parents and your grandmother.

Yes.

And do you remember what your mother said about where you were going?

No, that I did not. But when we arrived there, my mom frequently would say-- we took some Italian bread and some-- they call it a raw sausage that you can keep. And I used to like that. I was not a good eater, but that I enjoyed.

And when we arrived there and we were put in an attic with 120 people on the floor, men and women, one next to the other, I would tell my mom, at five, that I didn't like the apartment, but I liked the food because I still had Italian bread and that-- that-- like a raw bologna, something. I do not know exactly how-- in English, it really doesn't exist.

And you spoke in German, I assume.

Yes.

Did you speak Yiddish also?

No. Just German, yeah.

No.

OK.

And shortly thereafter, my dad was-- and my mom-- we were all separated.

Oh, you were separated.

We were separated, as was everybody in the concentration camp. For a while I stayed with my mom there on the attic. And dead people and live people, one laying there next to each other. But after a little while, we got all separated.

I was in a children's home. My mom took care of children in a different children's home. And my dad was living in a what's called a [INAUDIBLE].

Yes.

It was a military garrison place, Terezin.

Yes.

And yes, I would find my way around there, even so it's been a while. But as the years passed. We were not allowed--

So what did you do during the day?

Not very much. We were not-- I was there from five to eight, for three years.

Do you know what month you arrived in '42? Do you know what month you came there?

What month I arrived--

Or the season?

No, I could only take a-- I really do not know.

OK. Was it warm weather or cold weather?

That-- I think it was cool.

OK.

I don't believe it--

That's OK. So you've been separated and you're living in the children's home.

In a children's home.

Who were some of the other children? Were they your age or were they older?

They were different ages. And the bathroom facility was not a regular bathroom. You had to go outside on a balcony in a latrine like, you called it, not a bathroom. And it was not allowed to teach children anything. When I was eight years old, I could not write my name or anything. I was pretty--

Who were the adults with you watching the children?

I do not-- whatever watched. You can talk about that. I do not know who-- they were just regular people, whoever was there. Like my mom wasn't trained to take care of the children she took care of.

Yeah.

How often did you see your mother, and your father, and your grandmother?

Not too often, maybe every several months or so.

Every several months?

Yeah. Not very-- not very often. I don't know who gave them-- I couldn't just go to them. They had to come to me and see me. And I do remember my dad saving the little food he got so I should eat it.

But still, I wouldn't eat it because that was not my favorite thing to do, to eat. But he saved it up for me and he gave it to me. And we seen each other now and then, not together, and not very frequent.

Yeah.

And the food we got there-- well, since I did not care to eat much, it was-- not [INAUDIBLE]. This was not healthy food, or good food, or anything like that.

Right.

It was kind of what we would refer to as boring, nothing interesting and nothing they did was us. We were just hanging around, passing the day with nothing.

Yeah. Did you make friends with the other children?

Well, yeah, as much as you could. As I said, they weren't exactly the same age or so. And it's been such a long time ago. Yes.

Were they from other countries?

That I cannot tell you. I do not believe so.

They were from Germany?

Yes. And then very frequently, they didn't stay all that long. As you're probably aware, the kindertransports-- at the time we were there they did not gas people in Terezin. They sent them to Auschwitz.

Right, right.

These transports.

Yes. So some of the children left on the transports.

Right. And I was already at, I believe one point, possibly more to be sent too. How my dad did it-- but we had-- as I said, we were well to do. And what I was told is they had money sewn into shoes.

Oh, my.

And from the shoemaker. Now, it couldn't be too much, but whatever they were able to do, they sewn into old shoes, not nice looking shoes.

Yeah.

And also a coat my mom had, that was old. And they made it dirty, did a bit, and some tears. And they had cloth buttons at the time in them days, big cloth buttons. And they had some money put in there too from the seamstress.

And also, a diamond pendant necklace that my dad had bought in Berlin in the '20s for my mom, had it sewn in there. Their wedding bands were sold for a little bread in the concentration camp. They came out without wedding bands.

This diamond survived and is in my possession. And I had it made into a ring after my mom passed. Well, she had it made into a ring and I had it sized. And I have it. It is box with 2 and a 1/4, 2 and 1/3 karats and of supposedly good quality.

And I was offered a decent amount of money, but, of course I would not sell it. And I do not it daily because it needs insurance. And being a widow, this is not necessary. And it's not a priority of mine to walk around like that.

So that [INAUDIBLE].

You said that there were no education.

No education.

But there were secret classes at Terezin.

Not to my knowledge.

So you didn't go to any of those.

I was not able to attend any of these.

Yeah, yeah. And what about the famous children's operetta, the Brundibar, were you aware of that?

No, I was totally ignorant coming out.

Well, you were very little. You were very young.

Yes, from between five and eight years old.

Right, yeah.

I didn't know what a banana was. Never seen anything like that. Or writing my name, I had no knowledge, whatsoever.

So just every day, you just walked around and--

Right, whatever I was told to be obedient and didn't do it. Just passed time. I remember doing just nothing. Taking a nap in the afternoon and--

Did you have any crayons and paper to color?

Not that I remember that. I certainly would do something like that.

Yeah.

No, nothing was done. We were just hanging around, useless.

Yeah.

I don't remember playing with any toys or anything.

Do you remember playing with any of the other children?

Well, whatever playing we were allowed to.

Did you have your own bed or did you have to share the bed?

It was a bed, but pretty close by, a bunk bed like.

Yeah.

I do remember that. And if we didn't want to sleep and had to stay there, I had to fake it. And one day it was my turn to be-- so when I was supposed to go to one of these gas camps, my dad said later-- first of all, my dad did not want, after the war, much to be said about the war years, not to make my life any sadder than necessary.

Yes.

So I got things from here and there. And supposedly, he gave the money that we brought to these people that were responsible there to send them to the gas chambers. He gave whatever he had. So I didn't have-- there was, I'm sure, a little luck involved too. But he paid whatever he had so I would not be sent to the gas chambers.

And another time, we-- not my parents-- I, along with thousands of people on a fall night were gathered on a pasture like. It was dark, no food, no bathroom facilities.

We were standing there. And we were surrounded by machine guns and supposed to be all shot. It's my understanding that the world got whiff of that and they