

This is Joan Krasch. And I'm interviewing Anita Graber. Would you please begin by giving your full name and your mother's maiden name?

My name is Anita Olejer Graber. And I'm the daughter of Elli Olejer and Cesia Obremski Olejer. Both my parents were born in Warsaw and eventually went to Berlin, Germany to live. And that is where my brother and I were born. The custom in Europe was that you were usually the citizen of the country of which your parents were citizens. So even so my brother and I were born before Hitler came to power, we were considered Polish citizens. And so we remained.

My parents did not have too much education in Poland. And my father was in business in Berlin with my mother. My father always admired the orderliness, the cleanliness, and the education that went on in Germany. Consequently, after Hitler came to power, even though I was the only Jewish child in a German high school, which was a lyceum, he insisted that I remain there. And there I was until Crystal Night in 1938.

It's very difficult to understand what it is to be the only person who is different from everyone else. I am a teacher now. And I see what minorities have to go through. And I guess in that sense, I most certainly was a minority. And after Hitler came to power, the topics taught in German class, in the German class, were related definitely to the political atmosphere of Germany. For example, a composition on the communists and the Jews, our worst enemies. And when I could not write such a composition, I got a failing mark, naturally.

And yet my father would not consider taking me out of school until Crystal Night, when all Jews were banned from German schools. And then I went to the Theodor Herzl school, which was a high school in Berlin, which was closed in the spring of '38-- '39 because it was located at the Adolf Hitler Square. And they felt that no Jewish school should be near such a square. And then I went on to another high school in the Eastern sector of Berlin.

And during summer vacation of '39, we left Berlin. And we left because our quota, we were fortunate, had opened. Our number came up June 20. And we left before I had returned to school, before the war broke out.

Can you tell some examples of experiences you've had in that school?

Well, there was recess. During recess, I usually was by myself. I was a good student. I was an excellent language student, and I studied English rather than French because my father felt, perhaps, we'd be lucky enough and get to the States. And so, if my assistance was needed, they would speak to me. Otherwise, I was by myself. And then the other, it was like a double edged sword, is I was an Eastern European Jew. Among German Jews, they considered themselves, first and foremost, German. And they really couldn't believe either, except for those that left very early, and they were the intellectuals and those that had certain moral principals.

But the others surely felt that, even though at the moment things were tough primarily for them, that eventually he would be ousted. And they look down upon me because I was an Eastern European Jew. I presume the way the Ashkenazim in Israel today look upon the Sephardim. I'm sure it's the same thing.

To give you an example, one of our neighbors where we lived in Berlin was this gentleman, a former soldier. He was a Jew. He had two children, a 19 and 17-year-old, who had an opportunity to go to Shanghai. And he wouldn't let them. And then in July of 1939, I still saw on his living room wall a helmet and the sword of the First World War. He still was so proud of the fact that he had fought for his country.

And that type of feeling of being better than the Eastern European Jew made itself felt, even among-- even in the temple we belonged to. They just did not treat me as an equal. So between being among the goyim and being among German Jews, I was not too welcome. And consequently, I had friends, but I did not have that many friends. So mine was a rather lonely existence.

I had a younger brother. My brother Peter is 4 and 1/2 years my junior. So he was very little when Hitler came to power. And when Hitler began with his Hitler Youth and they wore uniforms, and he couldn't understand why he couldn't have such an outfit. And they had nails on their shoes. And when they walked it made noise. And why couldn't he? And he

found that very difficult to understand.

And he, at first, was in a German school too. And he was not a particularly good student. And one day my mother was called to school to discuss my brother's poor scholastic performances. And the teacher said, but he has excellent Prussian manners. When I walk into class, he yells heil Hitler the loudest because that is what you did. You remained in class, your teachers came to you. You never moved about. That was a system of education.

And when your first teacher walked in in the morning, at first it was good morning. But after Hitler came to power, you were supposed to greet the teacher with heil Hitler, click your heels, and have your arm stretched out. And he was very good at that.

Antisemitism, of course, manifested itself in many different ways. My father had a fur business in a very nice section of Berlin. And my brother, not understanding, would copy what other children would do. He, for example, would get a hold of a piece of chalk, and he would scribble "Jude" on the sidewalk and open my father's door and scream in, "Jude." But then we had no understanding.

How old was he at that time?

At that time, well, he could already write Jude, so he must have been about six, seven. There's a very funny incident. In 1936, I remember very distinctly Mussolini had come to Berlin to visit Hitler. There was a big parade. And it was Simchat Torah. And the maid was taking us to services at this particular temple. And in order to go to that one, we had to be in the vicinity where the parade was. So first we watched the parade, and then we went to services.

And the leading candy manufacturers of Berlin were all Jews. And the children were really showered with goodies. And we were handed flags. And it was an Orthodox temple. And the maid, who wasn't Jewish, sat upstairs with the women. And the children were walking around downstairs where the men were. And as you passed, they kept giving you these candies. And when my brother received the flag, he started walking, marching, and he started to sing, [NON-ENGLISH]. That was Wessel song.

Well, I ran the other direction. And the maid upstairs, she was dying because she heard him. And people had to sort of quiet him down and make him understand, as little as he was, that that was inappropriate behavior. But of course, he had no understanding. He had no understanding of that.

When my parents took him out of German school, and they put him into a Jewish school, a school that was run by a temple, a very well-known temple, and [NON-ENGLISH] schule he went, and I-- it's in the Western part of Berlin. And I think the few Jews that are left in Berlin, I think, sort of congregate around that particular temple.

Some of my friends, of course, were German. Their fathers, some of them disappeared. I remember one in particular. He'd been an attorney. And when he came back several months later, he was not to be recognized. He looked like an old man, considering that he'd been so vigorous. And he had been either in Dachau or an Oranienburg.

And Dachau was the first concentration camp that was created by the National Socialists. And it was directed primarily, I guess, against communists, socialists.

Did you know about its existence at the time?

Yes. Because the Swiss papers were available. And the Swiss newspapers were printed in German, some of them. And you could-- there was-- they just could not keep.

But the German papers--

The German papers? No, they did not. The German paper, you had that famous German paper that was, you know, Jew [INAUDIBLE] Der Sturmer. And there, of course, they always talked about the inequities of the Jew, et cetera, et cetera.

Now, my father was a Polish Jew. And for my 13th birthday, my parents had planned a very big party. And that was October 29, 1938. And the night before, the night from October 28th to the 29th, there was a raid on all the homes, on all Polish Jewish males throughout Germany. And they rounded them up, and they put them on a train to send them back into Poland.

And the Poles did not really want them. And the Germans didn't want them back. So for a while they were in what's considered No-Man's Land. And I understand the facilities were quite primitive.

Did your father--

No, my father-- that's what's interesting. My name, Olejer, does not sound like much of anything. And my father had all the characteristics of what Hitler would consider a fine Aryan. And for some reason, they overlooked him. And everyone around him was taken, all his friends, so that he personally went to Gestapo the next day to say that he had witnesses to prove that he had been home, that he had not been in hiding because he really wanted to [INAUDIBLE] himself so he remained in Berlin. He was the only one. This was as though my mother had to share her husband with all her friends because he had consoled them and et cetera, et cetera.

What was his objective in going to say that he had been home?

So that they would not accuse him of having been in hiding and maybe throw him to concentration camp. You really, you know, sometimes you really didn't know which way to turn or what to do. Crystal Night, which occurred just a few days later, my father had a customer whose husband had worked for Goebbels' ministry. And she called my parents to say, they're going to start with the businesses. And if I were you, I would try and empty out whatever merchandise you can because they're going to try and break into the stores and loot them.

And without our knowledge-- my brother and I really didn't, even though we saw them bring it into the house. They hired a cab, and they went back and forth. And they took most of the furs and the raw skins out and brought them into the house. The next day, there was a rumor that the Germans were going to come to the apartments. And since my parents were Polish citizens, they felt they ought to go to the Polish Embassy.

And it was a bitter, cold day. And they, again, called a cab. And the four of us went. My mother had a very prominent nose, so she was afraid that they might stop the cab on account of her. So she kept that nose covered with a handkerchief, I'll have know. And we come to the Polish Embassy. This is, I remember, it was then the 10th, the 11th of November. It was a very severe winter, and it was cold already.

And embassies usually have a wall and a garden, the way you have here in Washington. And that's how the Polish Embassy was in Berlin. And they would not let us in. They said you're Polish Jews. You know, you're not Polish, rather than Polish citizens. And we walked around for several hours. And then they finally said, all right, the women and children would be permitted in, and the men would remain outside. And I recall very distinctly there was a woman who didn't have any children. So my mother lent her my brother so that she could come in too.

And eventually, the men were permitted to come and also. It's like the hijacking, you know, and you make deals. And finally they let everyone off. And then we were all inside. And then several hours later, the third secretary came out. And he said he just heard, had had word from Goebbels' ministry that this was over, Kristallnacht was over. And it was all right to go back home. And so we did. And no one had broken into our apartment. But many had. And many of the German Jews had simply been taken away, never to be heard or seen again.

So then, as a whole, I witnessed, I felt, but to say that I personally was physically injured or that my parents were physically injured, that was not the case. Certainly not that. It's just that these were emotional upsets. But we're very hardy, as you can witness here. If those people could survive, could experience what they did, no one can sit in judgment of anyone. And it's, as one of my cousins who survived said, you know, Anita, all the good ones died. And all those that could do whatever they had to do in order to survive, they survived. But that, of course, is the history of men.

How did your family manage to leave?

Well, my mother had a sister here in the United States. And so she wrote to her. And she sent papers. And even though the papers were not economically sound enough to bring over a family of four into a depression, that entitled my parents to a quota number. So that they had.

And my aunt had one daughter who worked for a very wealthy man. And one day they were collecting for HIAS or UJA or whatever it was called. And she was crying, and he asked her why she was crying. So she told the tale of her mother's younger sister. And he, then, sent his attorney to Washington. And he established some kind of a phony relationship. And he then, his papers, he could have supported an army because it was all based on your taxes you were paying.

So those papers would have vouched for our economic safety here. And then the quota opened for us June 20, 1939. And we went to the American Embassy and-- and then we got the American visas. In the meantime, my father had sent money out of the country. And there were Russian, White Russian, who had contacts with diplomats and you could send money out via-- I think each dollar was 2 and 1/2 marks at the time. My dad paid about 14 marks to the dollar and wanted to get it out. And he didn't. He wanted to hear as quickly as possible.

So he didn't send it to the United States, he sent it to Paris. My mother had our family there. And she'd even gone to Paris in '37 to establish a code. What else would-- and the other thing my dad did in addition to the money, he sent out fur coats because he felt if he would come to this country, he would be able to establish himself again. So my mother went to Paris, and she established a code with her aunt. And each release that was going to be sent was called [? Schapse. ?]

And if you bought a train ticket, you were entitled to put luggage aboard the train. So she would do that. And then she'd write a letter and say [? Schapse's ?] coming to visit. And he's not too familiar with Paris, so would you come and greet him and help him with his luggage. And she would nail the key so in that way, a couple of dozen fur coats were sent out because what was he going to do with the money anyhow? You couldn't take out more than 10 marks a person. 10 marks a person, this is how-- it was \$4, \$4 a person. They really sent you out with what you had on your back.

In addition to that, in 1937, another ordinance had come out that whatever jewelry you had, you had to declare. And if you ever left, that is all you could take. And when we left in '39, and we went via Paris because my dad wanted to pick up whatever it was that he had there. They had sealed the jewelry without his presence. So if they wanted to be nasty, if they just added one piece, that could have been a pretext for taking us all off the train and doing whatever they wished.

And once again, we're fortunate. What's interesting is that my mother's relative, one of them, She could send all the money to the rich aunt. For some reason, she also sent some to her cousin. And we read in the newspapers how bad-- how bad things were. So he didn't figure we'd get out because by July '39, the Maginot Line was up-- they were already massing troops. When we crossed into Belgium, when we crossed the German border, you could see what was doing. Oh, yes. And you could see on the kiosks in Paris, they already had [NON-ENGLISH] and they were calling people up. So he had taken some of my father's money, and he'd invested in his business. So he did not have it.

And he even threatened my dad. And he said, Monsieur, you're going to make trouble. I'll go to the police, and I'll be nice to you because it was frightened too. So we said to hell with that. My mother convinced my dad not to stay behind. And that is how we came. At the beginning, if you had money. If you could show to the American Embassy that you had bank deposits in the States, they would permit you to leave but then they found out that some people actually didn't have the money. They gave money for the people to put it in in their names, just to show. And so that was scratched too.

The were very few countries. And don't forget, there was a depression all over the world. In England, you had to have an Affidavit. The French would did not-- did not want to give us a transit visa for 10 days after we had the American visa because they were afraid we'd get stuck there. And they had already been stuck with so many refugees.

In South America, the same. As someone said to my father, Oh, you can go to Paraguay. If you buy both ship tickets, you can go. So he followed that up. And the man was willing to sell him tickets. They were very costly. And my dad said, you know, what guarantees do I have they let me in. So he said, hey, Olejer. It's now 9:30. What's going to be at

12:00. I don't know. So my father didn't want to take the risk because it takes money to manipulate, to move to maneuver and what have you. So that's how the world was.

Interestingly enough, once the war broke out, Franco permitted the Jews to go through Spain. And Russia permitted the Jews to go through Siberia, to get to Shanghai.

To go to Shanghai. To go to Shanghai that's right. And to get back to that gentleman who had his helmet and sword still on the wall in July of '39. He still was so proud to be a German that he said to my parents it's not fair. You Eastern European Jews, you can go to North America. And we German Jews, we have to go Shanghai. I bet he didn't. I don't know.

Do you think he'd stay? He probably stayed and-- but that he stayed, he was already his life was over, but that his children were not permitted. That was sad.

What kinds of fears did you-- must have been very frightened at times. At times I was frightened. But of course, children-- children are not as fearful, I imagine, as adults. And my parents were rather good at not demonstrating it so that we went to school. We had all we needed. I went to-- I went to a sleep-away camp. There was an Athletic Club called the Hakoah. It was part of the Maccabi, I think. And they had athletic facilities on the outskirts of town. I participated in that.

So that part was all right. Surely there were times we were frightened. When we heard what had happened afterwards, but I think we became more frightened in retrospect, that we had really been under this abyss that-- that we escaped it. Now, my father had nothing. My parents had not gotten their quota number. They-- they had made arrangements. The family in Warsaw kept saying, why don't you come back. And my mother kept saying, [NON-ENGLISH] because even though the family in Poland, they were middle class by and large. She just was accustomed already to a much-- the highest standard of living.

Nevertheless, if the quota had not opened up for us, my parents had already made arrangements to smuggle across the border into Poland, July-- August 31 because he had received an order from the German government that he had to leave Germany by August 31, 1939.

And we would have rolled together with the German Army, and that would have been the end of us. So once again, it's-- I've become a fatalist. It's a-- el destino. La forza del destino, there is a lot to be said about that, to be in the right place at the right time. That's all it is. It's not always [? Hohmann, ?] definitely not.

Do you have any memories of beginning your life here? Difficulties you may have had here?

Well, interestingly enough, since I studied English in Germany for 3 and 1/2 years, I had a perfect grammar background. I had a very limited vocabulary. And at first, it took, let's say, three months, six months. For a while I thought in English-- I thought in German and translated into English. But then after a while, that settled down. My brother, on the other hand, had had no English. So they put him into first grade. He was nine years old.

So of course, he felt terrible. But within six months, he was put into the proper grade. This is without bilingual education. It's What you have to do. We stayed for two weeks with my mother's sister. And it was in a rather poor section of Brooklyn. And it was the tail end of the summer vacation. And at the end of the first week, my brother had, I think, a working vocabulary-- vanilla ice cream, chocolate ice cream, Pepsi-cola, and then those two beautiful four letter words. That you learn immediately.

And he, of course, didn't want to remember and doesn't wish to remember. He really worked at it to forget German. And he did. He forgot German completely. I, on the other hand, I am a language teacher. I did not. And I felt that had nothing to do with the price of beans. However, I have not been back to Germany. Wherever I've traveled, I've made sure I did not have to cross the German borders.

As a former resident of Berlin, having been born in Berlin and having had to leave Berlin because of national socialism,

there is an open invitation to spend one or two weeks in Berlin at the expense of the Berlin government, with a hotel and the travel and pocket money, et cetera, et cetera. However, they go by age. And I have a few days to go. And frankly, I'm going to wait till my turn comes. And a spouse is invited too, but until they pay for it, I'm going to go.

Sure, there are times I'm curious. We all are. But I have a feeling you can't go home again anyhow, because it was destroyed. It's rebuilt. And there aren't going to be too many memories. I was in Warsaw several times. My parents each went twice a year to visit their families. They were very close to them.

But of course, I-- I grew up also without aunts and uncles and cousins. And there was only one grandparent alive by the time my brother and I were born. And she was a sick lady. And I was frightened to even go to her bed because it was so bad. And the last time I was in Warsaw was Christmas of '37. And it was a wonderful experience.

And one cousin, one first cousin, and one uncle, my mother's youngest-- younger brother. The younger brother. She was the youngest to survive. And the brother was in Argentina. He went to Argentina because she had an older brother there. And the cousin went to Israel. And I just saw him last week because I've just come back from Israel. I had seen him Christmas of '81.

Now, I arrived in Warsaw Christmas of '37-- Christmas Day of '37. And then the next time I saw him, I went to visit him Christmas Day of 1981 in Holon, which is a suburb of Tel Aviv. I don't have to tell you, that was quite a moving experience.

I'm sure.

That was.

Did your Parisian relatives survive?

Yes. And I went to see them when I was in Paris. And they were very cordial. My mother's aunt, who had been in the furniture business, unfortunately, her husband and her favorite son died also. They were also in the deportation. By the way, did you know there was a beautiful, beautiful museum called the Deportaci3n. Nobody knows of it. It's in the back of Notre Dame.

If ever you go, it's in the back of Notre Dame overlooking the Seine. It's not open all the time. And it is a very modern facsimile of a concentration camps, with a lot of wrought iron, very moving. And for some reason, we found out about it. And the last time we were there, we'd taken the children. And when my son went back while he was studying for a semester in Europe, he went back again. And he's now clerking for a judge here. And the judge was just in Paris to visit his son, and he had told him to go and see it. So it is there. So if ever go, it's not publicized, but they do have some right back of Notre Dame. I must say.

Are there any other memories you would like to record?

You know, when you're a child, things are rosy and they look beautiful. And memories are bittersweet. And you wonder what life would have been like if this all hadn't happened. But there is a German proverb that says [NON-ENGLISH] You know, the Jew doesn't give anything for the past. Maybe because his life has been like that, you have to look to the future. And that's what it is, what you're doing today, and what you can do for your children. And to impart good values, that we're all human beings and we should be judged on that not on what our religion is.

I'm not always happy with what my children did either. I have a daughter married out of the religion. And she married someone who's not white. He could pass for white, but he's not. And that was a tremendous disappointment. And I fought it for a long, long time. And then when she said, then we're going to be married by Justice of the Peace. I said I'd sit shiva. I'm not even religious.

And she kept crying. Why is it that I'm so happy, and it doesn't make you happy? But for her, her marriage is working, I'm sorry to say. You know? I don't have the right to do that. She's going to Israel herself now to photograph a kibbutz.

that she'd been on as a youngster for one summer. And they now have grandchildren, and all their children remained on the kibbutz. So she's a photographer. So she's going to do three generations on the kibbutz.

We must have done something right, even though she selected and we didn't want her to select.

You must have.

I presume so. I really don't know. I've had many sleepless nights, and I stopped-- I stopped thinking about it.

We're at the end of this side of the tape.

And I think I'm at the end of my story.

Thank you very much for doing this.