

Regina Hoffman, December 13, 1977

Q: When and where were you born

A: On the 25th of July, 1912 in Tarnoff, Poland

Q: Did you grow up in Tarnoff

A: No, I was two years old when I left. We went to Berlin

Q: Did you get your education in Berlin

A: No. in Pirmasens. After I was six months in Berlin, we went to Pirmasens where I spent all my years until I came to this country

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about your education

A: Well, I first went when I was 5½ to a Jewish public school. You see, in Bavaria, we were separated. The Catholic children went to Catholic school, Protestants, Jews, we were separated for four years and then if you went to high school, you were mixed in with all the others. But elementary school was strictly in your own religion. And interesting enough, I suffered a lot in that Jewish school because the German Jews had a hatred toward Polish Jews and being an emigrant from Poland, the German Jews were very resentful. My parents did not come as beggars in that respect. We went to Pirmasens on account that my mother had a brother there who was quite successful. He had a big shoe factory there and took my father in. I have a complex, a terrible complex all my life towards German Jews who always talk about the Pollacks and the Russian Jews and today their children marry these pollacks and they are so proud and happy and they say—and I purposely, there I am mean, I say who did your daughter marry? Ach, it's a second generation here and it bothers me to no end because going through emigration twice and being persecuted by gentiles, if you find this under your own. So you see this is one factor that's very strong for me with all my fighting against it and my husband who is a German Jew, he cannot understand it.

Q: In what ways were you—did you feel hurt

A: They wanted to make me feel I'm different—I'm not up to their level because my parents spoke with an accent. My parents spoke German because in Poland when you went to a school—most of them couldn't even go, they only went to a cheder, they called it—but these people who went to school learned languages. My parents spoke German as well as I speak English today. Maybe der die and das, maybe they don't speak so correctly and you know children are sensitive. I always said to my mother, If I bring a child home, mommy, don't talk much. You know it bothered me. You want to be up to the level of other children. And this was a big factor in my life and I can't shake that. I don't hate anybody but when

they come out with these statements and you see these people here from the small villages, the German Jews, how primitive they are and they still think they are it—they are superior. My husband says why do these people bother you, you know who and what you are but it's not something I can reason out.

Q: When you left this Jewish school, you went to a high school

A: To a Lyceum, an all girls school but mixed. And in this lycee, the girls who were on top could make an entrance exam to another school—the abitur. This only those who wanted to study did and I wanted to study medicine so I needed that education and so I went to that school, and that was mixed with more gentiles than Jews. I think only one other Jewish girl was with me. I made the arbitur and this was already in 1932 and I did not go to the University because it was very anti-semitic already in Pirmasens. We were not equal anymore—at the prom we were not accepted anymore and things like this. In smaller towns, they started early.

Q: This was when Hitler had already taken over?

A: No. it was 1932. By 1932,33—it was already bad.

Q: How did the Jewish girls feel not being able to as you said go the prom or

A: Well, we felt rejected of course but I think when you are young—this didn't make such an impression because we always felt—you see we felt double bad. We were Jewish towards the gentiles and they didn't like it and I was a polish Jew towards the German Jews. I never felt equal. As a matter of fact, interesting, I never cry. I control my emotions very well. But whenever I hear a national anthem, not matter which one it is, I soften up probably because I never felt I belong to that country where the anthem is played.

Q: When you heard the German national play at that time...

A: I felt German. I wanted to be German but I didn't feel like the others probably did. I meant more to me to be able to sing this full-heartedly. I always felt I'm not in the place where I should be.

Q: Did you have many gentile friends at the time

A: Almost all. But you see I felt better with them and that's why I guess I had them because you see if a gentile friend, them liked me and I felt very equal with them. Even if they would have made an anti-semitic remark, I would have felt it was justified because I am different—I'm Jewish. But amongst Jews I couldn't see it. I couldn't see that Jew who were persecuted already so many years before the Germans were persecuting them and that's why they had all these poor Polish Jews—there were not allowed to go to schools. They were kept down like the

colored people were kept down here. So I couldn't see when you come together with your own people—the Jewish people—that there should be a difference but you see the German Jews were first German and then Jews. They were first Germans and then Jews and I was brought up—I didn't know any different than being Jewish. My father was a Zionist already in Poland. His dream was always to have our own state—the Jews should have a state because he went through so much. He was persecuted all his life—there already—even being a big business man.

Q: Did you belong to a congregation in Pirmasens

A: Sure, where all the German Jews went. It wasn't so orthodox. Pirmasenser Jews didn't keep much. As a matter of fact, my parents were more Jewish than they. In a sense, going to Temple to pray—I wasn't brought up with a lot of—we ate ham for instance, I that respect I was brought up very modern. We traveled on Saturday, we did carry things on Saturday. But we were Jewish but I guess we had different values. When I saw here these Jews who had a key pinned to their tie, to me this is so hypocritical that there I act like a gentile. Maybe because I don't want to be anymore different than other people are—I suffered too much for that.

Q: Getting back to when you were in school, did you notice a change in the gentile attitude towards the Jews after Hitler came to power?

A: No, as a matter of fact we did not. You see my father was very much liked by the gentiles. My father later on had a shoe factory of his own and he employed about 400 workers himself and all his business friends who were not Jewish, they loved him. No, maybe that's why my parents stayed too long too.

Q: Were most of these employees...

A: Only gentiles. Maybe we had one or two Jewish people. Who worked really in a factory in Germany—very few Jewish people.

Q: Did you know many people who became members of the Party

A: Yes, later on. But you see they said they are all forced to do it. And I tell you the truth, Rosalyn, at that time I was such an optimist—not an optimist but I couldn't think that it's possible that a program like Hitler put it—I thought he is crazy. We laughed about it. If we were so immature or—it was really not justified because going through the emigration from Poland, we should have believed it. We should have believed that something like this can happen if you think back. But when you are young and you are in it, you don't want to have it true and I did not see in Poland anybody killed or anything like this. Today I know I went through an emigration then. But maybe all things look bigger to me now since it passed then when I went through it.

- Q: Today we look at it from hindsight and it is much easier to have 20-20 vision. But at the time, was you father's business affected at all by the Nazis coming to power.
- A: Not in the early years, only in the later.
- Q: You mentioned you finished school in 1932, you made the abitur. Did you continue
- A: No. I did not go. You see, I met my husband before I made the abitur and I really didn't want to leave town anymore and in order to go to the University, I would have had to leave town and friends were telling me how bad it was and Hitler would not let the Jews study and things like that. I felt why should my father spend money on something which will not have any value any more. So I went in my father's shoe factory and worked there in the office.
- Q: Was your husband already a doctor in Pirmasens
- A: Yes. He was at that time a doctor.
- Q: When did you get married
- A: Much later—in 1937.
- Q: Until 1937 then, you worked in the shoe factory. How did Hitler's growing power effect you
- A: If effected me in the way that we could not travel abroad—we could not get passports. We had to be very restrained—in the movies, they didn't want you anymore, in the theater they didn't want you. You had no cultural life. You did stick to yourself, more or less. Because in a small town they knew us. In bigger towns—for instance, what we did for our honeymoon. We went to Berlin—it was a big city and nobody knew us. We went to theaters and concerts and we still had three weeks of good time. But the Berlin Jews, they didn't go. But for us it was like going abroad. It was a big city, we lived in a hotel. They accepted us in the hotel and didn't ask for Jews at that time, because when you got a passport later, they put the J in and the name Sara, but that came later. This we didn't have so we could go and nobody bothered us. But of course it bothered us but you see, I had very strong family ties. We were all together—my family was together so to me that was a shelter and I never thought it could get that bad that they would kill us or destroy us.
- Q: What about in the shoe factory? Out of 400 workers, there must have been...

A: No. They were very glad to be paid well and to have a job. You see the job was very important. There was a lot of unemployment—that's why Hitler could do all these things too. No, they were—you see, the whole thing to me is not clear. I cannot really speak objectively. I say on the one side, it could happen here the same way. I think every people is the same, you have good and bad. If you find one nut that gets up here and has this power over people what Hitler had—he had power. You were fascinated. I was fascinated in a bad sense—I was afraid of him. They saw good in him so they were fascinated that he had—he had some gigantic sick power. It was sick but it was a power. This is the reason that I sometimes contradict myself—I have a great hatred towards the German.

Q: Did you ever see signs of Juden Unerwuensch

A: Oh sure. You see we didn't have any way of going to a swimming pool—there was no swimming pool nearby. So we always had to travel in order to go swimming. But then they built a beautiful swimming pool—the first thing when that was ready—there was nobody in there yet—the big sign Juden Unerwuensch. It was just one block away from where we lived. It was just outside of the town and we lived outside of the town in a villa—quite nicely. But at that time—look, if we would have felt it so terribly, we would have left. But there was another thing—we had no relatives here. We really didn't know where to go. We couldn't emigrate to America. My father came, with all the hardships of the German Jews and all that, he still felt good in Germany because that was culture. It was from coming from Poland even if you come from a city where there was culture, still the Germans were clean, they were neat, they were prompt, they were punctual. They had a lot of traits that were good—no matter how big our hatred is, you can see it here. We have a superintendent who has golden hands—out of dirt. So you have to give them their good traits. And my father was fascinated by that. And my mother was fascinated by the fact that the kids went to school dressed so nicely. In Poland, only the upper 500 had it. We had it but we were a minority—all the others were really poor and sloppy—they went barefoot. It was a different culture. So they felt very much at home there—they wanted to stay. There was no reason for them to want to go to a strange country—they were successful, they had a nice life—who wants to go? Do you want to go?

Q: Of course not. When did you begin to feel the hardships?

A: When my husband had his practice taken away.

Q: When was that

A: On the first of October, 1938. That we have to leave eventually, we felt before because people had trouble going to Jewish doctors. They made it hard on them but my husband was privileged—they loved him. He was a young efficient

doctor and they came. They even made a big “to do” to get these Scheine, krankenkassescheine—it was made hard on them and they still came to him.

Q: Was he able to treat non-Jewish patients

A: He had almost all non-Jewish patients. There were not too many Jews in the town. They were almost all non-Jewish and they were very nice.

Q: Was there ever a question of an SS or Gestapo....

A: The SS did not really come anymore. But this was only towards the end when they were forced to enter the SS that they didn't come anymore. A regular SS man didn't come. But there were so many who weren't in the Party until they were forced to get in. There came a law then that whoever wasn't in the Party couldn't get a job. And there I always say when I reason with myself—how would you have acted? If you would be the father of a family and you are gentile and they say look, we don't like the Jews and we discriminate against them, we throw you out of your position, if you don't enter the party, maybe I would have gone too. You see I contradict myself.

Q: But that's a question we all have to ask. What would we have done. But when your husband's practice was taken away, what happened to you

A: Well, then we moved to my parents—You see, my parents always stayed Polish citizens. My father never took on the German citizenship because somehow, first it was hard to get it as a Jew and then when he could get it, it was already a time when he didn't want it anymore. He was settled, there was no advantage for him. He said we are Polish, we suffered for our being Polish—we stay Polish. I don't want to become German. And my father could stay and the consul in Cologne where we belonged to always assured my father, it's only against the German Jews. Hitler is only against the German Jews. The Polish citizens in this country—nothing will happen. And that was a big factor in my father's life and that's why he stayed. He had a big factory, he had a villa, he had money. Even when he sold it, he could live comfortable, why should he emigrate?

Q: When did he sell the business?

A: He had to sell it in 1937 and it was not good anymore because we had a lot of Jewish trade in the country that bought our shoes, Leisa-Berlin was a relative of ours and he was the biggest in Berlin and a lot of these big firms that supported us were Jews and so business went down and we of course lost money because they couldn't pay their debts and my father saw that coming and he sold the business to an Aryan—he took it over. He wasn't forced at that time but he would have been forced because it would have liquidated itself.

Q: It was not forcibly Aryanized then?

A: No. not directly. But I still did get restitution money. They recognized it that the business went down and my father lost all that money on account of the boycott.

Q: Was he able to sell it at a reasonable price.

A: No, no. He would have gotten a different price if that had not happened. It was worth much more. First of all, the business would have stayed bigger.

Q: Did your father suffer at all because of his lack of German citizenship—was he considered *staatenlos*?

A: Well, you see, they started with the Polish first. They took the Polish citizens on the first of October 1938—I was there when they took my parents away and shipped them to Poland. And my parents at that time still had a lot of relatives in Poland and they heard about it and they came to rescue them. It was near Kattowitz, near Boiten or what that frontier was (*Sbontzyn*) and they came there and they took them away from the transport. I don't know where the other went but my parents went to Cracow—my mother had a sister there who was well established with a big business man and a lot of other relatives. My father had brothers—one brother took him into business even and you see, my mother and father, when they were taken—I was visiting my parents and we didn't know anything. All of a sudden, the SS came and they took my parents away and they took me too but by marriage, I became a German citizen. So I said look, first of all, my parents are Polish. If you take German citizens, you can take me. So I called this consul but he didn't do anything either—he didn't save us. He said—this comes from the top and I cannot do anything. Mrs. Hoffman, your parents have to go. And I went with my parents to that *gefangnis* in Pirmasens and they let me free but they kept my parents. And at that time we didn't know what they are going to do with them. I was very upset but you hope that it is not bad. I didn't think they were going to take my parents and send them to Poland and then kill them. This was not done like this. But the next day I knew that they were taken away from the *gefangnis* but I didn't know where and then we found out—my parents wrote us that they are in Cracow, And my mother took her jewelry—my mother had a lot of jewelry like a lot of the Polish Jews—they always believed in diamonds and things—to have something of value—what they can always take in case they have to leave—so my parents had the same thing. So my mother took her jewelry—I saw that—in a handkerchief and did hide it and with this jewelry, with part of it, my father could re-instate himself in a business and they did quite nicely. And then my father did get the permission to come back and get all his belongings and at that time, my sister was still there, she was married to a brother of my husband—with her child. My father was so happy and was doing so nicely in Poland that he said, you know what, before you can go to America, she had a high number and it would have taken two or three years, I'll take you to Poland and you emigrate from there. What a foolish thing—hindsight also. My friends always told me—your parents must have been stupid—how could they do a thing like this? But look my sister was with her child. Her husband was in

Dachau after the 10th of November and he had to leave the country. He only could come out of the concentration camp on the condition that he is leaving the country. So he got a visa through a friend of my father to go to France. And my sister with her child could have gone to France but they had no money and they were not allowed to work in France and they did not want to be supported by this friend of my father who was a strange man who did enough already to grant an affidavit. So my sister was sitting with her child in Pirmasens and my parents came back and took their belongings and their money and went to Poland.

Q: They were able to take their money

A: Yes. So my father said I'm going to hire a lawyer who will take you (my sister) with the child over the frontier. They did this—you know, with money you could get things like this. And they were successful—they smuggled my sister with her child into Poland with the help of the lawyer and they were happy for a few months. But then, Hitler came to Poland and took them to a ghetto and from there to the vernichtungslager.

Q: What ghetto did they go to

A: To Treblinka.

Q: While they had gone to Poland, were you and your husband still in Pirmasens

A: No. We had emigrated to the United States in February of 1939.

Q: What happened to you and your husband on Kristallnacht

A: On Kristallnacht, they came. When my husband had to give up his practice, my parents had that big house and he wasn't making any money so for us to sit in an apartment and pay rent was ridiculous. We went and moved to my parents villa and put all our furniture there in storage. So in the Kristallnacht, my sister who lived on the other end of town—that's where they started to take the men out—called me and said Gustav and Grandfather—she lived close to my father-in-law—were just picked up. They caught all the Jewish men—hide Max. And my husband got dressed and went into the woods. But they didn't leave me alone—they came and they said "Hmm, the bed is still warm here—wo is der vogel? I said he was called by a patient—he had no license anymore, it is not true—I said he went to help somebody who was sick. It was foolish but they let it go because my husband was so loved in that town performing for those poor people for a minimum of money. He didn't send bill and so—he was an idealist at that time. When he had a rich father—he could be an idealist. But they really respected him and as long as it was not really an order, they would not have done him any harm. So they let me get away with that remark that he went to see a patient but he was in the woods. Later on I the afternoon, he called me. He went to a phone, he managed to come out. So I said look, they are going to arrest me because that's

what they said to me. If my husband doesn't show up, they are going to arrest me. So of course, my husband went to headquarters and signed himself in. And from there, they took all the Jews and sent them to France. And now you can see how the other nations are—there were 63 Jewish men that were sent to France from Pirmasens.

Q: Was your husband among the 63? Where did they send him?

A: Yes, he was with them and they went to a small village near the border. And they sent them back—the 63—France sent them back. They knew what was going on so if they were such a wonderful nation, why didn't they keep these people? They didn't—they sent them back and the SS took them and they made them march I don't know how many miles. And my husband was with the marchers too and there was a blind man and he collapsed and my husband, being a doctor, picked him up and then they took a wagon and let him drive in with this blind man and of course, he picked up his father too and put him in the wagon. My father-in-law was an old man.

Q: Was your brother-in-law there too?

A: Yes. And they had to march back about 23 miles, in rennen—they didn't march—they were chased. And from there, they took them to Dachau. But my husband fainted before he was taken. I was not married too long so I had the feeling I want to be near my husband. So I went to see—they were all collected in Volksgartenhalle—that was the place—and I said to my sister who had a small child—I look what they are doing with these men—I'll go out. And all the women were sitting together and talking what should we do. I said I go and look. So they said don't—how could you dare—they might do something to you. So what, I said and I went and when I came there, my husband had just fainted. So, they let him lie there. Roslyn, I cannot tell you, it was a miracle because usually I wouldn't—if I think back, I wouldn't do it today but if you have to—you have a lot of guts. So I went away and a block away was a doctor, a gentile doctor, who hated my husband because he had a big office and I went up to his office and he had a lot of people there and I took him by the arm and said you come along, my husband is sick and you have to help him. And he said what, let him kripiern. I'm not coming and I took him and I shook him and I said you are going, you are going and he really went. And when he came with me there and he examined my husband, he said he can go to Dacahu—he's alright. So I went in front of these SS people and I screamed and I yelled and I said what—a man who did so much good for this city—you are going to take him to a concentration camp? How dare you? And they were standing with guns and they said if you don't go out of the way, you Jewish woman, we will shoot. I said go ahead, you shoot I don't care. I don't know how but I got my husband out and I got him to a hospital. They didn't want to accept him either and there was a director—there were two—an old one who loved him and a young one

Q: Had he practiced in this hospital

A: Yes. And the young one hated him also. All these young doctors were very jealous and they didn't want Jewish doctors especially not the successful Jewish doctors so my husband came through and he of course said to me in a low voice that I should try to get that old director when he is admitted but I couldn't—the young one was there and he didn't want to accept him. And I screamed and yelled with him and he kept him and in the morning, he said he can go home and he can report to where they were still assembled from the night before. But I tried to get some protection and I went to an alte kreisarzt and he didn't want to write a certificate that my husband has something wrong with his heart but finally he wrote that that he cannot be taken to prison—that he is not able to go t prison. And with this I really saved him—they did not inquire anymore. And we had relatives by that time here who sent the affidavit out and I always told them it's on the way it's on the way. It wasn't really on the way but they were working on it and we emigrated then in February of 1939.

Q: When had you applied for the affidavit

A: After the 10th of November. No, there was something that I left out. My husband had a nurse working for him who worked in this country and when it got so bad, she always said Dr. why don't you emigrate. And my husband said he had nobody there. I cannot go. And she asked should I write to my former boss? Maybe he can give you an affidavit—he was quite a well known man—a lawyer. And she wrote to Mr. Heinsheimer here, to her former boss. And this boss wrote a letter to the consul in Stuttgart that he had 50 or 60 people of this own to bring out but if he still could include someone, he certainly would let us come out. So when the time got very bad, my husband had a friend who was baptized but they fell under the same laws so he said, look, it's not going to take long anymore with our office. Let's go to Stuttgart and by the sheerest luck, that letter got a mark and we had the lowest number—124. But this was all a miracle. It was not our doing—it just had to be like that. When my husband went, he got a number for my sister also—it was already 22,000. So the man said to my husband, Dr. you have a number here. If you bring an affidavit, tomorrow you can go. That's how we got out because this low number was called right away.

Q: When you emigrated in Feb. 1939, what happened to your sister.

A: She was in Primasens until Sept. 1939 and then she was taken. My parents came in May, 1939 to get all their things and she was taken Poland.

Q: And Gustav, your brother in law.

A: He was in France all the time and then he went to the fremten Legion. The French people didn't let him work and so they took to a fremten legion and he worked in Africa on the road. He was a prisoner of France then.

- Q: When you came here, who met you
- A: The man who gave us the affidavit, my husband's uncle
- Q: Where did you go that first day
- A: We had a furnished room—my uncle took a furnished room for us at 510 W. 186th Street.
- Q: What impression did you have of New York when you first came.
- A: Well, when I came down from the boat—we went first class on the boat because this was paid in German marks. We paid it because our money didn't have any value—we couldn't take it along.
- Q: You only left with the 10RM
- A: Yes. And when I arrived here, first of all I was very seasick the whole time and when we arrived, Pres. Benes from Czechoslovakia was with us on the boat and so he came down and everybody was applauding. We didn't really know what it was so my husband was kidding me, he knew it was for Benes but he said oh look the welcome, they give us. My impression was, oh there must be a fire here—look at the dirt, all the newspapers on the street. The city struck me right away very dirty. What I didn't see later on at all any more—now I see it again. But after that it looked clean to me. That was the first impression.
- Q: I wanted to ask you before, how did you feel on the day you left Germany
- A: Well, very shaken up—very sad of course. Look, I left my sister and her small child. She was the only one left. My parents