

I mean, they knew my name and all that. And they had me directly to move into the Hotel Marseilles. They said you can stay there as long as you like. But I put directly an advertisement into the Aufbau, so quickly I found a nice room for my mother and myself here in Washington Heights. And I stayed with this couple for 11 years.

My mother died after one year already, and they begged me, don't leave us. Stay with us. So I stayed with them that was the first telephone call this morning, this lady who phoned me up, you see?

I see.

Yes.

That was the lady that you stayed with.

So you see, I'm still in contact with her. Her husband died meanwhile. Yes.

What was your impression of New York when you first--

Well, what I expected I saw. I knew it was New York of which you heard so much. And so I intended to work at an organization, going to all the work I did in South America, and I had very good letters of introduction with me.

And-- but I couldn't find anything. I was sent from one to the other one. You see, I went to the HIAS. I went to the self-help. I even went to the Quakers, because we work partly also with the Quakers in Montevideo.

And they sent me back to the Jewish organizations because they worked with me and they said if they want to, they can take you. We know it from one gentleman. They gave me his address. I phoned him up. I talked to him, and I said no. They won't help me very much. He told me.

So meanwhile-- yes, and my mother came from the same place as a child where this old Senator Wagner came from.

Mm-hmm.

So I was advised to approach Senator Wagner that perhaps I could come through the organizations for the refugees, something like that. And he was very, very nice to me as soon as I mentioned who my mother was and that he went to school with one of her brothers and so on.

So he tried everything in Washington to get me to the Organization for Displaced Persons. They sent forms to fill in, and then they wrote to him. I still have the letters. Dear Mr.-- Dear Senator Wagner, we are very sorry. We are not able to be of help to Mrs. Speyer. She just entered the country. Our policy is to take citizens.

So of course, it was also out of the question. So this lady where I stayed, she said, Mrs. Speyer, you love sewing so much. Try something with sewing. So the next day I had my job, and I stayed there for several years.

What kind of job did you get?

Well, it was very interesting in one way. The proprietor imported from France angora wool. And he had-- in fact, he had machines running there and workmen who knitted baby caps, baby hats. And I belonged to one who made the little silk bows and all these-- these ornaments, you know? And I loved the job.

How did you get the job?

By the paper.

The Aufbau or the--

No, no. At that time existed a special paper everyday. I don't know any more New York-- I don't know. It doesn't exist since years anymore. And that was the paper where all the immigrants more or less looked for it, you see.

But before I went from one Jewish organization to the other one with my letters of introduction. And the Joint was very distressed about it because they also wanted to help me. This-- they sent me to the-- not Jewish. Yes, I was also at the Jewish Agency, but the Bonds of Israel. And it wouldn't work out. Yes, It wouldn't work out.

That's too bad, because you had a lot of experience.

Yes, yes. But it wouldn't work out. Nobody wanted me. So I started this way in the factory. And later I went to B. Altman's, and I was there in the main shopping office. And I liked that very much, you know? I liked that very much. Although in the beginning they couldn't read my German lettering, and I-- and I had trouble with their letters, partly the big F and the big T, something like that.

So that I went to Elsie's boys, and I said, show me how you learn to make the F all of that. But afterwards it was worked out well, and I still go shopping to Altman's because I love to be there. And one of my Indian cousins I brought there, and he's still there in the Oriental carpet department and very happy.

Oh, that's nice.

He has a very big job there. Yes, yes. So it worked out, in the end, everything well.

How would you describe having worked in New York? How would you describe the difference between working-- between the American way of working and the German?

I didn't work in Germany. Only during the war, you see, more as a volunteer. So I couldn't. I mean, I was treated very, very nicely there. And at the Altman's, I was treated excellently.

Mm-hmm.

Yes, they treat their people excellently.

In looking back, what do you think would be the most difficult things of adjustment that you had to face, either in Montevideo or in New York?

If you have something in your head what you want to do and you don't get it, you know that makes you a little depressed. Because you think, what else can I do? If you don't have a certain profession-- I mean, if you have your own profession in some way, then you know what you are looking for, and you might get it.

But if you come as a single person who never really had a firm profession and she wants to do something, or he wants to do something, then it's rather hard. I tried everything. I went to so many places and talked. And several times I went to the Joint, and we talked matters over.

And they all always thought because my English wasn't so bad that I could manage to get to an office somehow, but in the beginning I was a little afraid to go to an office because I don't like typewriting.

Mm-hmm.

And I thought that will be the first thing they might offer me. But at Altman's it was handwriting.

So you were happy there.

Yes, I was very, very happy. I got the job like nothing. I got it myself. You know, I just dropped in and asked for work,

and directly they said, would you like to come tomorrow morning for a job? No, I must tell you SOMETHING how I got to Altman's, if it's possible.

Fine.

Yeah. I went this one morning to the-- what is this Jewish organization here?

Federation?

No, no, no.

United Jewish Appeal?

Mizrachi.

Yeah.

To the Mizrachi. I had a letter of introduction, and I went to a lady. I showed all the letters I had with me and so. And she said she couldn't help me very much. I should go to the, I think, it was 16th Street. There is an agency, and I should go there, Jewish Agency.

From there, I went to the Jewish Agency. When I came there, it was a very pleasant young girl. She said, lady, I'm very sorry, but we are only helping young people who come from Israel.

So all right, I had to leave again. And there was a very, very old, out-of-style elevator. So I waited for the man. It was an old Jewish man came. He just was washing the floor. Then he took me down.

And I don't know how it came out of me. I was so disappointed. I said is it really not possible as a Jewish woman to find work here? So this old man said to me, don't worry, lady. Up there is somebody who watches you.

I left there. I took the bus. I passed Altman's 5th Avenue. Oh, I say here you never were. Get out and ask. I went there. So I came to Altman's. Isn't it strange?

Yes, yes.

Because when I came there, the gentleman directly I followed-- I filled in a form. And I was only troubled when they said about the education, college. So I marked education in Germany. And I told him afterwards.

He said that doesn't matter. I see who you are. Would you come tomorrow morning for a test? I said, certainly. It was on a Saturday morning and there were other people, too. We were-- they have like a school room there.

And we were seated, and the lady gave us a booklet and a paper, and then we had to add figures, and to divide, and all that, and compare very, very difficult words, words I really never heard in English or read them. So that was difficult for me.

So when she said stop, and she came to pick up my paper, I excused me. I said, lady, my schooling was not in this country. I'm a foreigner. This was too difficult for me. She said, don't worry. We only want to see the intelligence.

I didn't know what to say. So she said, all sit outside and wait. So I thought, well, I'm through. I'm through. I was called, and the gentleman said to me, Mrs. Speyer, you did so well. We would like you to work for us. Could you come Tuesday morning?

I nearly dropped to the floor. That was the least I expected. So I came to Altman's, and I was so happy there. All the years I was there, I was happy. Yes. So that was the ending of my working time here.

Then I have trouble with my eyes, and I had a hip operation. I was very-- in the beginning, I had to be sometimes in the hospital. I had a very severe operation in the beginning, and they gave me such a strong X-ray treatment that my hip bone was burned through and all that. Yes.

Let me ask you something. Just why did you join the Hebrew Tabernacle?

More or less they were in the neighborhood where I lived before. I lived in 168th first near the Broadway, the corner of Broadway. And the temple was over-- I just crossed the Broadway, and there was directly the temple.

And besides, we were a liberal congregation in Frankfurt. And I loved the organ. I grew up in such a temple in Neuwied, and so it was natural.

Natural.

But sometimes I'm not too happy there like now again with the new book because it's so little in Hebrew. It's too much in English, you see. But I have nothing to say.

You were there on Friday night when they used the--

No, I'm a little afraid to go in the evening. I was attacked in front of our house in summer here. And since then, I'm more than nervous in the evening, although Elsie offers herself, but mostly she's invited afterwards. And I don't want to-- I mean, to take her pleasant time away.

So I stay home, but I went Saturday morning.

Oh, OK. That's--

And I look through the book and everything. I was there when Rabbi Lehmann spoke and all that. Yes.

I think that the new book, from what I know, is that it includes Israel and the Holocaust.

Yes, but it's too much in English. Too much. I mean, if you are used to all these nice Hebrew songs and prayers, because I learned much in Hebrew in translation as a child, and so I'm missing something, in fact.

Mm-hmm.

Yes, I'm missing always something there. I mean, the songs, the melodies are mostly like everywhere in the synagogues. I mean, I was in the temple in London and so on.

Of course, we in Montevideo didn't have an organ. We didn't have the money for it, you see.

What kind of a congregation was it in Montevideo?

My husband wanted to have it Orthodox, more or less. He said everybody can go there. There's no objection, you see.

And so this soup kitchen we had also kosher because we said everybody can eat there. If he is religious or not religious, it doesn't matter. Yes, it's the best way, then, you see? Then there is no difficulty. Yes.

Just out of curiosity, is that the only German-Jewish congregation in Montevideo?

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, and there is a Rabbi Dr. Winter who was several times here. And I met him, and so--

That's nice. Just one more area of questions. How do you feel about the Wiedergutmachung?

Well, I have to be satisfied and thankful. It's something of which my husband and I never thought anymore. You see, otherwise my husband probably would have taken some of the business books along. I mean of the--

Oh, yes.

--accounts and so. Because when the Wiedergutmachung came, I had no proofs. And then I had a great help of my husband's lead secretary in Germany. She was-- she really was lovely. She always wrote us to Montevideo, so that my husband said if I only had a business here, I would ask her to come.

In fact, when it was so-- she was Protestant. And it was so bad with Hitler, she asked one evening-- the one day to my husband, she said, Mr. Speyer, couldn't I go with you to your synagogue? The church doesn't give us anything anymore. Nothing.

Imagine. So she thought. That was her thinking. Yes, she was a lovely person. She still writes to me during the year.

Have you ever been back to Germany?

No, I don't want to. No, no. Although I would love to visit the graves we have there, but no. I don't want to see them. And I hear from relatives who are there, and over there they say you are glad when you are back at the station.

So I was in Switzerland at the German frontier and all that, I say but not-- once we went to the isle of-- what is it which belongs to the count of Sweden? Begins with-- I can't get the word. Afterwards it comes back with those lovely plants and so, between Germany and Switzerland.

And we had to show our German passport. And the moment they say your-- Ihre Passe, I grew pale when I heard this. And my cousins from Burma were with me. They said, Ada, you must forget. I said, I never can forget.

The whole day was spoiled for me, owing to this word, "Ihre Passe," the word, the way they spoke to us. No, not to Germany anymore. I have no combination directly there. The old maid of my mother, my aunt, she is in a home in Neuwied, and I write to her. And for Christmas I think of her and so on and so on. And this secretary, these are the only ones.

The mother of your aunt is in a home? Is that what you--

No, the maid.

Oh, I see.

Of my mother and my aunt.

Right, OK. Because I was-- I couldn't imagine--

The old maid is still living, and she still writes to me. And I help her as far as I can. You see, I send her packages. And she always was so against Hitler that my aunt always was afraid they would arrest her one day. She warned her always. She always called him the devil.

When you-- looking back, you spent a great deal of your life in Germany, part of your life in Montevideo, and part here.

Yeah.

But how would you--

I'm satisfied with-- everywhere where I lived, I was satisfied. You see, I have the feeling, wherever fate puts you, you

have to be. And that I did.

That's a good attitude.

I'm not looking back. The moment we left Germany, my husband said let us make a quick line underneath. We won't talk about our former life anymore. We never said we had it good on this or that. Never we compared as, unfortunately, so many of the others are doing.

Yeah.

It has no use. It has no sense.

But if you were to describe yourself, how would you describe-- how would you describe yourself, having--

I'm just an ordinary person, and I like to be helpful and to be satisfied and thankful myself for everything. I mean that I can live quietly. And so although I miss, of course, all my near ones who are not anymore with me, that is what I can say. And that is the truth.

Do you think that you're part of the American mainstream? Or would you think that you're more part of the German-Jewish community here?

I think I have still too much about the former education in myself. You know, to join the young ones in their present ideas in life, it's too hard for me. I can't get it very often.

You see, I can't get along with it. And it's natural. I mean, you were a finished person. I mean adult, finished with education when you left there, so to take it in to yourself the present time is too hard. I mean, you go along.

Yes.

Yes, but you can't enjoy it. yes I always say to myself, what kind of citizens these young ones want to be later on if they have such silly ideas? How will they govern the country and so? Yes, how might it look in 50 years?

I often think so and say so. Yes, because we live in a very hard time. Either we have been born too late or too early. Two wars.

That's right. That's right. And you never know how things will work themselves out in the future.

Yes. So I think we spoke more or less--