

## HOLOCAUST INTERVIEW WITH HILMA GEFFEN

Dr. John Fishbane interviewing 2/15/85

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Hilma was born in Jan 1925 in Berlin. Her parents were both born in the province of Posen in the 1880s. Posen was German then and belonged to Germany. She doesn't know a lot about her parents' families. Her father's family had a grocery store and her mother's was a butchery. Her grandparents on her father's side died very young and were buried in Posen. Then her mother's family moved to Berlin.

2:40

Her mother's parents are buried in Berlin and the grave is still there today. Both her parents had brothers and sisters. None are living. Both families had a son killed in WW I. Her father also fought in WW I on the Russian front, earning the Iron Cross and other medals of merit. When the war was over and Germany was defeated, the province of Posen was given to Poland. Her parents opted to stay German and moved to Berlin. Her father started his career as what would be known as a CPA. Her mother stayed with an aunt along with one of her sisters.

4:47

Her mother was 36 and her father 40 when they married, late in life for those days. Inflation was rampant. Her wedding cost \$2.00. They moved into a section of Berlin which is called Alexander Platz. A workers section. Tenement housing. They had a cold water flat. Even having that was good fortune. Her father had many clients. Evidently he did well, because he was able to build a house in a suburb of Berlin, a village about 25 miles away, Ranstoffs (ph). She was 6 then and began school in April. It was a village school with two classes, grades 1-4 and 5-8. Two teachers lived in the schoolhouse which was brand new and very nice. New furniture. Everyone admired its modernity. Still there.

7:38

School was uneventful. She learned. Change came in 1933, not drastic at first. It was a change in attitude -- by others toward her and by her toward others. They were the only Jewish family in the town, which was a resort town. On weekends they enjoyed the weekends. They gardened. It was a good life. They had good neighbors. Then some of the neighbors, with whom she was friendly (celebrated holidays together), asked them not to visit any more. Sometimes they nodded in the street or pretended they didn't know each other at all. At school, they said Heil Hitler instead of good morning. School became awkward.

10:45

In December 1933, she was still in a Christmas play. Her mother didn't feel it was any harm. No sooner was that over than a

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month or two later, she was in the STURMA newspaper, antisemitic newspaper. All caricatures. Big noses, fat women bedecked with jewelry. Her name and her father's name were in the paper because she had been in the Christmas play. The angel had been none other than the daughter of the Jew Dromer. The teacher was called on the carpet too.

12:41

She learned to be quiet, reticent, not to make trouble. They stayed in their house until 1939. Drastic change began in 1938 with restrictions. Kristallnacht was the most obvious occurrence. "The German people were so angry they couldn't help themselves" was the line of propaganda, but it was all S.S. and S.A. She describes Kristallnacht but explains that they only heard about it. 10:00PM that night, 3 or 4 S.A. men (brown shirts), came in and yelled, "we'll show you Jews." They smashed the dining room table, toppled the china cabinet, broke windows, destroyed things. It was very quick. Her mother screamed, but they stood there helplessly. They were stunned. Her mother never recuperated. They didn't know what to do. Her father's brother called and said they should come to Berlin because they were the only Jews in the town. They did go for a few days until in calmed down.

17:18

Then the new laws were set into motion. It was very swift as though it had been preset, planned, and they only needed to press a button and it would happen. Jewish children could not go to public schools. Her father could not work independently; he had to be employed by someone. His client became his boss. Jews had to pay a fine for the assassination in France, 1 billion marks, 20% of the assets of the remaining Jews in Germany. You were assessed and you paid in four installments. That wasn't enough, so you paid more. It was about 25% of her father's assets. All Jewish bank accounts were frozen. They were assessed a sum that the bank sent them monthly. An official came and figured out what it would be. The bank sent only that amount.

20:18

Any larger bills meant you had to apply to the bank to ask them to pay the bills -- for doctors etc. You had no control over your own assets. People who were employed did not receive their salary; the employers sent the salary directly to the bank and the bank only sent the monthly allowance. She doesn't know the details of their own allowance, but it was enough to live on.

21:38

The Nuremburg Laws did not directly affect her family. They had no maid. It affected those of mixed marriages. Mixed children had to be raised as gentiles or Jews. If you had servants, they had to be over 45 to work in your household so there was no mixing of blood or race. Maids in Jewish households had to be

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dismissed if they were younger than that. "Believe me they had it good in Jewish households."

23:54

In about 1934, a cousin came and worked for some people as a maid. She had a non-Jewish boyfriend. In 1935, he broke off the relationship. She committed suicide she was so distraught.

24:50

In 1938 after Kristallnacht, she went to a Jewish school in Berlin, commuting from her town on a steam train. It took over an hour. The learning and the studying, the curriculum was superior in the Jewish school. She slipped from being a good student to a poor one. It took her a long time to catch up when she went to the Jewish high school.

26:46

She no longer had non-Jewish friends. She was pretty much isolated, except for the new friends in the Jewish school. She had a boyfriend and girlfriends. They visited her in the country.

27:51

In 1939, her father saw the handwriting on the wall and he decided to sell the house which he did to one of his former clients. They moved back to Berlin. Her mother's sister had a 4 room flat. They moved in with her. An older aunt lived with them (a widow, an older sister of her mother) and so they took her.

29:26

They were very sad to leave the town. Her mother especially. She was proud of the house, her possessions, her family. Very few people owned houses, so she had considerable status. They had put a lot of work, care, love into the house, so it was sad.

30:40

Her mother never went back. Hilma finished high school in 1940 at 15. She could have gone on, but saw no future in it because she knew she couldn't go to the university. Her father wanted her to learn something practical, so she went to a vocational school to learn bookkeeping, math, other commercial business subjects. In April 1941, a decree came that no Jewish child was to be educated any further. Children under 14 were kept in groups to play, no teaching. Any Jew over 14 would work in factories. Her father could no longer work at his skill; he went to work at Siemens. Hilma, at 16, went to work in a telephone factory. They had to wear the yellow star. May 1941 it began. It had to be on the left side and had to be sewn on. Food was rationed and Jews received cards with a big J. You had to register with a grocer to receive your rations. Jews received about half what others received. Children, old people, sick people sometimes got extra if they were gentiles. Jews got the bare minimum. No meat. No matter what.

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35:35

They thought about leaving Germany. Many cousins had gone to Palestine in 1933-35. They had thought of it. In December and January of 1934-35 her father visited Palestine. It took over a week each way. He visited friends, relatives. He couldn't make up his mind. He got mixed advice. He put himself on the waiting list and it came up in 1937 and they could have left with money. He said he would wait another year. He still worked then, and they kept thinking Hitler would be overthrown. How long can it last they thought. Hitler outlasted everyone.

38:24

So they could have left Germany for Palestine in 1937. Her mother loved Germany -- she and her husband were in their 50s. Her mother thought it was hot there, there was disease. So they stayed. The fatal year. After that, there was no leaving for them.

39:56

In 1941 they started to wear the star, all the restrictions. Jews could only shop 4-5pm. Jews couldn't use public transportation unless the commute was more than 7 km. Jews were allowed nothing. There was no entertainment after that time. No theater, no orchestra. All prohibited. Only work. Curfew for Jews at 9PM in summer, 8Pm in winter. If caught, you were arrested. No cars, no telephones, no radios for Jews. All jewelry was given up; you could keep your wedding ring. All things of value were taken.

42:25

In 1941 the first transports to the east started. Rumors first, then it became reality. Many went east, then to Auschwitz and Majdanek. Aunts went in October 1941 to synagogue before transport. They were transported to the east and that was the last they ever heard.

43:54

They believed the rumors because some communication came back. A cousin of her mother wrote a post card from Piosk in Poland; she wrote after 50 hours of train ride, the hell of the work camp. Her husband spoke Polish so he could get some food. She was 65 and she wrote, how come she deserves this. She said, if it comes to this, don't take the old aunt along; let her die where she is. Another cousin wrote that she and her 10 month old were alone; her husband and brother were shot.

46:20

They even got one card and photo from a work camp. 3 or 4 post cards told them enough.

46:51

They thought they gassed the trains. They didn't know about gas chambers. They had heard that people were gassed. After the

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war, she learned about the gas chambers. Once you left Berlin, it was pretty clear that you would not return. Her mother said she had papers and money for Hilma and she told her to run away. Don't come with us if we have to go. Stay here if you can and live underground. Her mother said they were old, we might have to go, but you should survive. She gave money to some gentiles to look after Hilma.

49:14

The usual process was you got a post card to report to the synagogue in a few days. But Hilma came home one day to be met by her mother who said, "run away, people are here to pick us up, so you run away." Hilma turned around and ran away; she didn't say good by, she just ran away, and never saw her mother again. A half hour later, her father came home and she met him and told him what had happened. Hilma told him she would leave. She took off her yellow star and went to the house where she was supposed to go. That was the last she saw or heard of her parents. Later she learned that the transport on that day went directly to Auschwitz. She thinks they were probably gassed right away.

51:26

Hilma began to live underground. Micheling, a gentile (mother gentile, father Jew), helped her. He was an apprentice in an office and had access to personnel files. There was a girl her age working in an office. They sent away for her birth certificate and she assumed her identity. She never knew. They explained that her papers had been lost in a bombing. Through Gerhardt she met a gentile couple who said they would hide her in their weekend cottage. Eventually it would become the home for all of them, when Berlin was bombed out. She was to be their niece. She had money that her mother had left with the other people to buy food stamps on black market. When that ran out, they raised chickens, rabbits, grew vegetables. That is how she survived the war for three years. They were not hungry.

54:47

The Kerbers were blue collar workers. She was a dressmaker and worked at home to earn extra money. She also was a good cook. Her one son had died. They were childless. The father was a political worker, a social democrat, and was sent to concentration camp for six months in 1933 and eventually he was released to return to the postal service. He lived an inconspicuous life. Friends of friends told him about Hilma. When he heard about her, it seemed to help her was a way they could fight Hitler. He had also fought in France, despite being too old. He was dismissed and went back to the postal service. He was redrafted in 1944. Everybody was drafted again from 14 to 70 years old. He came home on weekends and brought bread.

57:32

The two women were by themselves with a dog. In May he was with

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them. She thinks he managed to come back just before the war was over. The Russians came April or May. Distant shooting, but the German army had retreated. Air raids toward the end, but no targets were in the suburbs. Berlin was the target and the factories. Only occasionally a bomb would fall when the plane was hit. They were liberated while fighting continued in Berlin. They saw Russian soldiers on little wide, sturdy horses. An American tank was posted at the corner of their street. They looked in each house for German soldiers and then left.