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Holocaust Survivor

Oral Histories

HILMA GEFFEN

February 15, 1985

Interviewer: Dr. Jon Fishbane

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I think the best way to begin is for you to tell everyone your name, and then tell your parents' names, where you were born, then proceed forward into the events of the Third Reich with your experiences.

Uh, my name is Hilma Geffen. I was born in Berlin in January 1925. I lived practically all my life in Berlin or in the surroundings of Berlin. My parents were both born in the province Posen. My father was born in Lubrza, Province Posen. My mother was born in Obornik, Province Posen. When they were born in the 1984.....and my mother was born in 19...in 18..I'm sorry, in 1884 and uh my mother was born in 1887. Uh, the Province Posen was German, and belonged to Germany. At the...all the families lived there. I don't know too much about my parents' family, except that my father's family had a grocery store and my mother's father was a butcher. And from what I can determine, they were, uh, well-to-do middle class. My father's family...my father's mother and father died very young and were buried in Posen. The Province Posen. My mother's family came to Germany, to Berlin and my grandparents were born, were buried in Berlin in the cemetery in Weisensee, Berlin which is now the East Sector under the Russian...uh..uh..the East Sector of Berlin. Uh, two years ago I went to East Berlin and I visited my grandparents' grave. It is in good shape and it was not destroyed during the fighting, during the second World War II. Uh, my...both my parents had brothers and sisters, none of them are alive anymore. In both families had a son who was killed during World War II. My father fought during World War I, I'm sorry, 1914-1918. My father fought during

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World War I. He was on the Russian front. He earned the Iron Cross and several other merits. When uh the war was over and Germany was defeated, that part, Province Posen was uh given to Poland. My parents and their families opted for Germany. You had the choice to become Polish or to stay German. They opted to stay German and like so many others moved to Berlin. My father uh...then uh..started his uh career. He was a CPA. The equivalent of a CPA in this country. Uh..my mother uh..stayed with an aunt of hers. Her sister the same way, and they remained uh with that aunt until both of them married. Uh, my mother was 36 when she married, my father was 40. They married late in life. And during the time, they just married in the worst inflation time in Germany, in 1923. And I heard my mother telling many a time that her wedding cost her two dollars. Uh...it must have been a lot of money in German marks because she paid for the whole wedding with the two dollars. When they uh...they moved into a section of Berlin which is now called, which is called Alexanderplatz, which was a workers section. It was not very exclusive. There were mainly tenement housing. Uh, we had uh cold water flat, and I guess at that time my parents were very lucky to even get that particular flat. Uh...my father had many clients. Evidently, he did quite well because within six years he had bought a parcel and had a house built in a suburb south of Berlin, which was called Rangsdorf. It was just located outside of Berlin. Uh, it was a village. I would say about 25 miles. We moved to Rangsdorf early 1931, when I was six and I started school in Rangsdorf. In Germany we started school in April. The school year started in April. It has changed now but then it was April for the school

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year to start. It was a village school. We had two classes. One was grade one through four. The other class of five through eight. There were two teachers who also lived in the school house. The school house was very new. It was brand new and it was actually very nice school house. A small one, was brick. Uh, new furniture and everybody admired the modernity of this school house. It is still there. It has been enlarged, but it is still there. Uh, school was uneventful. Like first grade, second grade, I learned like everybody else. And the change came in 1933. Not very drastic but never-the-less there was a change in attitude, in my attitude and behavior toward me by the children and by the teachers and by our neighbors. We had very good relations with our neighbors. We were the only Jewish family in Rangsdorf. We were, we had our house and we had uh..very nice neighbors. We uh...Rangsdorf was a uh, sort of a resort. There was a lake nearby. In summer there was a lot of bathing. In the winter uh, ice sport. It was a lovely surrounding, woods. A lot of people had weekend cottages. They lived in Berlin, they worked in Berlin and on weekends they came out to Rangsdorf and enjoyed the weekend. And uh, my father was very attached to the garden of our house. He planted a lot of fruit trees and of course vegetables, flowers. My mother loved to work in the garden and it was a very good life.

You mentioned that the attitudes changed. Could you describe the changes in the attitudes?

Uh, it started that some of the neighbors with whom I was very friendly and we celebrated uh..holidays together. I received Christmas presents from them and in

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turn we gave them presents, although we never celebrated Christmas. I did go to the house and admired their Christmas trees. And received always some goodies. Uh, it started by the neighbors telling us not to come to their house anymore. They were afraid. That we should...we were..and so when we met in the street we either just nodded to each other or pretended we didn't know each other at all. Uh..the uh...school, suddenly in school we were required to say "Heil Hitler". Instead of "good morning" the teacher said "Heil Hitler". And it was very awkward for me to say anything. Mostly I didn't say anything. Uh....in December, for Christmas, 1933, I was still in a Christmas play. It was, I was always partaking in Christmas plays and the teacher had asked my mother whether I should and my mother said well it doesn't really hurt, there's no harm done and it's only play, why not. So I performed in a Christmas play in 1933. And no sooner was that over, a month or two later I was in the Stürmer newspaper. I, I think the Stürmer newspaper is known even in this country as a very, very anti-Semitic newspaper. It was popular for the sole purpose to smear Jews. They were, they were total caricatures and everybody who was Jewish was made up as a big nose and fat. The women with uh fat and with, bedecked with jewelry. And nothing but smear attacks were in that paper. So I was, my name was in the paper, my father's name was in the paper and that I played in a Christmas play and the uh, the angel who played in that Christmas play was none other but the daughter of the Jew Ludomer. I also heard afterwards that the teacher who let me play in that Christmas uh, celebration was also called on the carpet. From then on I really knew that I was very different. That I had to be very quiet.

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Had to be very reticent and not to stir. Uh, we uh, we remained in our house until 1939. My father still worked. He went to Berlin everyday. He commuted and worked. And the change came in 19...the real drastic change in treatment of the Jews and in attitude and restriction came in 1938 when uh, in Paris a, Grynszpan assassinated a German official vom Rath. Most of the events are known because they uh...the uh...[sound quality is poor, but improves later] The Kristallnacht was the most obvious occurrence. The quote was that the German people were so angry that they could not help themselves but destroy, practically destroy the synagogues and have to destroy the Jewish stores and it was all over Germany. Of course, we know better, it was the SA and the SS. We were pretty much isolated in Rangsdorf where I lived and we didn't, I and my mother, we did not know too much what was going on in Berlin. So, we heard, when my father came home from work, we heard what was happening that day in November. That the synagogues were burning, that all the Jewish, the remaining Jewish stores were looted, destroyed, the windows were smashed, people were arrested and uh, we didn't know what would happen or, and we just heard this. And about ten o'clock on that November night, November 10th or 11th, there was a knock at our door, the entrance door to our house, and about three or four SA men, SA the brown shirts, came into our house and yelled, "We will show you Jews what it means to kill our people." And they started smashing the furniture in our house, in our living room mainly. They uh..toppled the credenza, where we kept our glasses, and our chinaware. They smashed with an ax our dining room table. The whole thing took maybe three to five minutes and out they were.

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Outside they picked up some stones and smashed windows in the upstairs bedrooms. Uh, before we could even think straight, they were gone. I know my mother screamed and we were just standing there helplessly. Uh, after that we didn't know what to do anymore. We were really were..uh, stunned. And my mother never recuperated from that fright. Uh, my father uh...he uh, his relatives or his brother from Berlin called and said you better come to Berlin. You may be picked up in...since you are the only Jew in Rangsdorf, you may be picked up, you may be arrested. So maybe you don't sleep at home that night. So for a few nights he did not come home but stayed in Berlin. Uh, until it calmed down in 19..., until it calmed down. Then of course all the new laws were set in motion. It was very swift, as if things had been written out previously and they just waited for an occasion to put all these new laws and restrictions in to order. It was like preset and all they had to do is push a button and it ran off. Uh, so in..so Jewish children were not allowed to go to public schools anymore but they had to attend Jewish schools. My father was not allowed to work independently anymore. He had to give up his profession and if he wanted to work he had to be employed by a non-Jew. While..uh..somebody employed, uh..in his case, his client became his boss. Uh, the Jews had to pay a fine for the assassination. It was one Milliarden Mark. We looked it up, it's one billion Marks. It represented about twenty percent of the assets of the remaining Jews in Germany. And uh, people were, you were assessed.

Did your father pay too?

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Yes, my father paid and it was paid in four installments. And when the four installments were paid up uh, it wasn't enough so they added another installment. We paid either four or five installments. I'm not sure anymore. But it represented between 20 and 25 percent of the assets that my father had. And I'm sure all the other Jews uh...people all over Germany. Also, all the bank accounts were frozen....

Whose?

Jewish bank accounts. We could not get to our money anymore but we were assessed some, that the bank sent us monthly. An official came to our house and assessed what we needed for the month to live on. The groceries, the utilities, the rent, whatever was necessary for a family of three to live during the month we were assessed. And he determined it and the bank sent us that money. If there were any larger bills, doctor bills or taxes, for anything unusual you had to apply to the bank and ask them to pay the money, or to these people, whoever we owed the money to from your own account. You had absolutely no control over your own bank account anymore. Uh, people who were employed did not receive, and had a bank account, did not receive their salary but the employer had to send the salary directly to the bank. And then in turn, the bank sends you your monthly allowance. I'm not sure, I don't know, I was not aware how much our allowance was. I have no idea what. But evidently, it was enough for us to live on. To buy things. There was no...we could not do anything extra.

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Out of that you mentioned that the change had come at the time of Kristallnacht. Did you feel any changes when the Nuremberg Laws appeared or did they not really affect you living in Rangsdorf?

The Nuremberg Laws did not directly affect my family because we didn't have a maid for instance. It affected a lot of people who were of mixed marriages. And the children were...had to de...the children were asked or rather the parents had to determine whether they wanted the children to be raised as Gentiles or as Jews. And it didn't matter who was the Gentile partner. Uh, a friend of mine was raised as a Gentile. His father was Jewish, his mother was non-Jewish, but they opted for him to be raised and be declared non uh, not Jewish. Uh, many of my friends opted to be Jewish and they went in turn eventually were treated like anybody else. If you had servants and maids they had to be over 45 to work in the Jewish household. Anybody under 45 had to be dismissed. So that there was no mixing of...of [laugh] Blätter race [marked race]. Which was of course very ludicrous. Uh, maids who had been in Jewish households for years and years had to be dismissed suddenly if they were under 45 and uh, believe me they had it very good in Jewish households. Uh, that was so, actually it did not affect us too much, except that I had a cousin who had come from Poland. She was a daughter of my mother's sister who had long passed away in childbirth. She was...she lived in Poland with her family but she did not like it there anymore and she wanted to come to the big city, Berlin, and find a husband there or live in Berlin. That was about 1934. She worked for some friends of ours as a maid. She also stayed with us for awhile and she liked it in Berlin. She had a

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non-Jewish boyfriend. And I imagined they were to be married or she thought he would marry her. In 1935, he wrote her that uh, he could not see her anymore. That he could not, certainly could not marry her and she was so upset and so distraught about it that she committed suicide. That was within our family, but as far as my mother, my father, myself were concerned there was not too much difference. Uh, in '38, after the Kristallnacht, I stopped going to school. I went to high school meanwhile in, near Berlin, in a suburb of Berlin and of course I could not go to that high school any further but, went into ...city of Berlin to a Jewish school. Uh, I commuted everyday, from Berlin, from Rangsdorf to Berlin. It was not a modern train. It was a steam train. Now they have electric trains, but uh, there was still steam trains. It took about 45 minutes and then...I was on the road about an hour, an hour fifteen minutes, from door to door. To my amazement, I found that the learning and the studying and the curriculum in the Jewish schools was so much superior than what I was used to. We had a lot of holidays. Everybody's official birthday was celebrated and the schools were uh... [laughs] there was no school and learning was very meager as teaching was very meager. Mostly indoctrination. And I found that I was very backwards and from...and I slipped from a very good student to a very uh, bad student. And it took me awhile to catch up. In languages, in math, in science, we...I didn't know half the things that was already taught in the Jewish schools, Jewish high school.

Did you retain any contact with non-Jewish, say friends from high school or from your town?

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I had no friends in the, the uh non-Jewish high school. I probably talked with the kids but I had no friends. So there was nothing to keep in contact with. Nobody there. No. I was pretty much isolated. I uh, of course once I was in the Jewish school I had a lot of friends again. I had a boyfriend who carried my books from the subway to the school. I had a lot of girlfriends and I started visiting girlfriends, and girlfriends visited us in Rangsdorf. They always liked to come to Rangsdorf because it was a suburb and it was very nice. It was the country. And we uh...and it was lovely, especially in the summertime. Uh, in '39, my father saw the handwriting on the wall. That there may be war. They also rumored that Jews were not allowed to have property anymore and he decided to sell the house. He sold it to one of his former clients. And in August of 1939 we moved to Berlin. Back to Berlin. Uh, my aunt had uh, my mother's sister had uh gotten a four room flat in Berlin. She used to live in a very nice part of Berlin but they had to move from that part and she had found this apartment and so she said we better move together. We had uh, also an old aunt. My mother had an aunt who uh..had lived with us for awhile. She was a widow and had nowhere to go and uh, had come to live with us. She also had. So she had a room and a little kitchen uh...my parents and I, we had two rooms. And my aunt and her husband had one room. We had one kitchen, then of course, the bathroom. Uh....

How did you feel to leave Rangsdorf?

Uh, we felt terrible to leave Rangsdorf. Worst of all, my mother felt terrible. My mother was a typical Jewish middle class woman. She was very proud of her

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possessions, of her family, of her possessions, she was very proud of the house. The house meant status to her because my...we had a house, most of her relatives and most of my father's, except for one brother, no one had a house. They lived very nice in Berlin, in the apartments. But she had considerable status. And she put...both my parents put a lot of work into that house, a lot of love, a lot of care, and the house was supposed to last for the rest of their lives. Houses in Germany were built to last. It was a very modern house. One has to think of 1931, '32, when it was built, '33. Uh, it was a very modern house and uh, so she never went back. She never passed by the street. Uh, if anybody ever said "do you want to go back and go by and visit?", she always said "no, never. I'll never go back." And she never did. [pause] In 19...I finished school in 1930...1940. I finished high school. It was...I was at that...I was fifteen and I could have gone on but I did not see any future in going, keep on going to high school because I knew I couldn't go to the university and uh, my father wanted me to learn something practical so he uh, uh said I should go to the Handelschule which is a commercial school. I learned bookkeeping there and shorthand, English, my English I had all learned and French. Uh, uh, math, bookkeeping math, all commercial subjects. It was a two year course. But in April of 1941, a new edict came out that no child, Jewish child was to be educated any further. All Jewish schools were closed. There was no Jewish teaching going on. Children who were under fourteen were kept in daycare centers with the strict uh, provision just to play, to be supervised but no teaching. Anybody who was fourteen and older was to go the uh factory. Working for...through the various factories. And

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people were assigned to the various factories. By that time, my father was not allowed to work anymore at all. He was for about a year, he had not worked. And he was now also compelled to work in the factory. He worked at Siemens. And I was, I was uh, sixteen and I was to go to work also in a factory which was called Deutsche Telefonwerke, the German telephone works. We also had uh, a new thing came, we had to wear the yellow star. It started in May, 1941, every Jew had to wear a yellow star on the left side. It had to be sewn on. There were...ever since the war started ration cards were issued. Food was rationed, and Jews received their ration cards with a big 'J' printed on it. You had to register with a grocer to receive from that grocery store your food rations and whatever the uh...most of the food that, whatever the non-Jews received, the Jews received about half of it. They were...very often there were extra rations given to children, to old people, people who worked hard, very heavy physical work. None of those benefits were extended to the Jews. The Jews got just the bare minimum ration of...people received a pound of butter, the Jews got a half a pound of butter. It's for...eventually uh, meat was cut out for Jews. There was just the bare minimum that uh Jews received. No matter what they worked, where they worked, how they worked.

From Kristallnacht to the beginning of the war or even beyond the outbreak of war had your father any thought of leaving Germany?

Yes, we had a lot of thought. My father uh...I had a lot of cousins that went with, to Israel, to Palestine with the Youth Aliya in France in 1933 already and in 1934 and in 1935. We had thought of going to Palestine and my father was very curious

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about it. In December of 1934 and in January of 1935 he went to Palestine. He had to go by ship. It took a week, from Berlin to go to Tel Aviv. It took a whole week. He took the train to Italy. I think it was Brindisi. And then from Brindisi by ship to Tel Aviv. He looked around, he stayed there, he talked to many people, he met my cousin, who's still in Israel now, uh, he met friends whom we knew. Some said go, some said come, some said don't. He couldn't make up his mind. People said if you uh, come out with money you can stay here and you can live well. Some people said if you still have a job in Germany stay. It isn't so good here. He, he got conflicting advice. When he came back, he put himself on a waiting list. In 1937, our number came up and we could have gone out to Palestine with money and he said I'll wait another year. Put me back for another year. Because he still worked. We were in Rangsdorf. We lived fairly well and it won't...how long can it last, how long can Hitler last? That was always the question or the answer to everything. How long can he last? It cannot last anymore. Once if he started the war, he can't last anymore, there's so many shortages in this country. And he still lasted. He out lasted everybody. Uh, then...so we could have left Germany in 1937 to go to Palestine. My mother hated the thought of leaving her house in Rangsdorf and her friends and her family. And she said "Palestine is hot. I cannot take the heat. I am not young anymore." And they were in their fifties. My parents were as I said, they were not very young when they married. So they were both in the fifties. "And I don't speak the language, I cannot adjust. The heat will make me sick." There was malaria in Palestine. Palestine was not modern as it is now and so let's wait another

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year. So of course, that was the fatal year. In '38 everything changed. In '38 Jews were not allowed to emigrate. Or if they did emigrate they just barely could take things out. Most of, at that time...a lot of Jews who left then bought goods. They took out goods. So that, that was the fatal year. That uh...from then on it was impossible to go out and uh, evidently whatever my father tried, it did not materialize anymore. Um...in uh, '41 when we uh, we started uh to wear the star. All the restrictions, Jews were not allowed to shop at all unless it was between 4 and 5 in the afternoon. Uh, Jews were not allowed to use public transportation. If you lived uh seven kilometers you had to walk to work. Anything above seven kilometers you were allowed to take the subway and you had to get special permission, subway or a train, whatever mode of transportation. Otherwise, no transportation was available to Jews and uh....there was nothing Jews were allowed to do or go. Uh, up till '30...up till 1940, or 1939 we still had uh entertainment for Jews in Berlin. The Jewish Kulturbund, actors and actresses, we had symphony orchestra. Of course, all that was uh, disbanded. None of that was possible anymore, it was prohibited, so there really was nothing except going to work in the morning and coming back at night. There was curfew for the Jews at nine o'clock in the summertime. In the wintertime at eight. If you were caught, unless you worked, and if you were caught you were of course arrested immediately. Jews were not allowed to have any cars, any telephones, any radios, all the jewelry had to be given up. You could not keep anything except your wedding rings. Uh, Jews were totally stripped of anything that was of any value. In '41, the first transport to the East started. Uh, we had uh first

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it was rumors, but then soon we knew it was reality and a lot of people first went to the East before eventually being transported to Auschwitz or Majdanek. [pause] My aunt and her husband, my aunt and uncle were transported in October or November of 1941 and they had to go to a synagogue which was standing. That synagogue could not have been burnt because it was between houses. Row houses. But it was now used for, as a gathering place for Jews to be transported. So they went to uh the synagogue and then they went and they were transported to the East. Of course, we never heard of them anymore. Uh... People...

When you first heard the rumors, what was your reaction? Do you remember? Did you believe them?

Well yes, we believed them very soon because there was some correspondence came, come back. Some uh...we had some uh communication. I did not know that person but a cousin of my mother uh, wrote us a postcard from one of the places she was sent too. Piosk in Poland. P.I.O.S.K. and uh she wrote after 50 hours of being uh in a car, in a train they arrived there and nothing but naked floors and they are eleven people to one room and cold. They get hundred gram of bread and one soup a day. They uh, the prices...if they want to buy food, one egg is one Mark fifty, a bread is ten Marks, a....totally unrealistic prices. And she wrote her husband speaks Polish so he could get some food from the Poles. And she said uh, I'm over fifty, I'm sixty-five she wrote. How come I deserve this? And uh she also wrote, if it comes to this don't take your aunt along. The old aunt of my mother who lived with us. Don't take her along. Let her die where she is now, she's better off. So there was

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some correspondence and then we received another card from, from these cousins. From that branch of my mother's family that remained in Poland. We suddenly, we never were in contact and then suddenly we did receive a few postcards. One wrote that she and her girl wrote that she and her 10 month old child is all alone. Her husband and her brother were shot. And somehow the postcards did come through. One of the children, I think he's the youngest, he was the youngest, sent us a card from one of the labor camps he was transported to. Sent even a photo. But soon after that everything was quiet. Nobody knew, we never heard anything further. So about three or four postcards told us enough. The rest you surmised. We were under the notion that they gassed the trains. They sent the trains to the East and then someplace in the East they just gassed the whole trains. We did not know there were gas chambers that they had built. Gas chambers.

But you had heard of the gassed cars?

We heard that people were gassed. And we surmised that the trains in which the people were transported, that they were gassed inside the trains. After the war, I learned that there were to be gas chambers. In Auschwitz and Majdanek. But it was pretty clear that once you left, in our case, Berlin, and you were transported you would not return. And my mother was very clear and it was very fixed in my mother's mind and she always started to think and she said, "I have papers for you, keep them in a safe place, you may need them. I also have put money away," and she told me where she gave the money to and "what I want you to do is to run away. Don't com...if we have to go, don't come with us. Stay here if you can." Because

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there were also rumors that some people lived underground. What we called underground. That means they had false papers, they had assumed a different name, they assumed a different identity. "I cannot do anything for myself and I'm old" and my father's old "but you should survive." And she planned. She, she contacted some people and said if something happens to us take care of Hilma. And she gave money to some people. These were non-Jews. And of course, we did not know anything. The usual process was, the usual rule was that you got a postcard. Report to on such and such a date to the synagogue. And you knew that was your date of transportation. We had about three or four days notice. It was different in our case. We had no warning whatsoever. I was out, my father was still away working, and I was still at work, and I come home and as I opened the door to our apartment my mother met me in the hallway. She says, "Run away! There are people are here to pick us up. Run away!" And I turned around and it was the last time I ever saw my mother, I didn't say goodbye, I didn't say anything, I just turned around and ran away. Uh about, I would say about in half an hour later or so my father came home and I must have hung around in the neighborhood because I saw him and I met him in the downstairs hall of the apartment house at the door and I said this is what happened. People are there to pick you up and Mom, but Mom told me to run away and I'm running away. And I turned around and I knew where to go. The first thing was I removed the star and uh...the yellow star and then I went to this particular house where I was supposed to go. And [sigh] that was the last time I ever heard of my parents or saw them or any notice. Later on after the war I learned that the

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transport on that day in October went to Auschwitz directly. So I don't think they made much to-do about that particular transport. They probably gassed the people right away or sent them to the gas chambers. And I started to uh live underground. Or started assuming a new identity. And uh, I had a very good friend who has helped us in the past, I think I mentioned him, he was a Mischling [half-breed], his mother was Gentile, his father was Jewish, but he was a Gentile. He finished high school. He could not..because he was a Mischling, he could not attend university so he was an apprentice in an office. He had access to some personnel files. He..there was a girl working in that same office who was my age. We sent away for her birth certificate. And I assumed her identity. Of course, without..she didn't know anything about it. And I...because of my birth certificate I got new papers. We said we were bombed out, all my papers were lost. She, she lived in, she was born in a southern part of Germany which already had seen a lot of bombing so it was very plausible that she was bombed out at one time and lost the papers. So I could um...so I, I received uh papers. I had my picture taken and I assumed a new identity. Through -- my friend's name was Gerhard, through Gerhard's intervention I met some people. A Gentile couple who said they would hide me. They had a weekend cottage in the suburb of Berlin, to the west. It was called Waldensee. It was west of Spandau. Where uh, eventually this weekend house was to be the home for all of us because of, for Mr. & Mrs. Kerber and for me because their apartment in Berlin also was bombed out. And they winterized the cottage, and we uh..lived there during the war years. I was to be their niece. I had money. I got the money from the people my

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mother gave the money to and for awhile, I had enough to buy food stamps on the black market. When this source died out, dried out, uh, we just tried the best way we could. We were in the country. We raised vegetables, we uh had rabbits, we had chickens. So we had enough food. I...we were not hungry. I helped in the household and that is how I survived the war until it ended in May of 1945. Almost three years.

What kind of people where the Kerbers?

The Kerbers were what we would call blue collar workers. She was a, she was a tailor, she was a dressmaker. And she earned uh, she worked at home and she earned extra money as a dressmaker. She also was a very good cook. She..they had one son who had died. So they were childless. They uh...he was a postal worker. He also was a political activist. He was a Social Democrat. In 1933 he was arrested with a lot of other Social Democrats. Act..active Social Democrats and was sent to uh..uh, a concentration camp. He was there for six months.

Oranienburg?

No, it was in Sachsenhausen.

Sachsenhausen?

Uh em. And he was with others and eventually was released. He went back to the postal service. He was not a letter carrier. He was....worked inside. And uh, was, lived an inconspicuous life after that. Never agreeing with Hitler's policy or anything. Uh, when the opportunity arose and people....friends of friends told him about me. Uh, as I said Gerhard's parents knew some friends who knew them. They said they

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wanted to help me. It was their way of uh fighting Hitler to be precise. He was in the Army. He fought in, uh, France. Although he was already above the uh age, the legitimate age. He was drafted and he was in France. He returned and was dismissed and he went back to the postal service. He worked in the post office until '44, when everybody was drafted again. From 14 to 70. So he was drafted again. He was not sent to the front but he was uh, uh on the post. He bought, every so often, he bought us some bread. On weekends he came home. Several weekends. Once or twice during the month on weekends he came home and he bought us some bread.

But you were alone with Frau Kerber?

Yeah, the two of us were by ourselves. And a dog. And uh, when a, when the a...in May he was with us. He was not in the Army. I think he managed to come back just before the war was over and uh, we were liberated by the Russians. The Russians came March or April. May...Berlin was freed in May. We did not hear anything of the war. I mean, we heard way in the background we heard shooting but uh there was no shooting where we were. Because the army had...the German army had retreated into Berlin and there was the last stand in Berlin. The same thing with air raids. We had air raids toward the end practically day and night but the airplanes flew over us. There were no targets in our suburbs. The target was Berlin. And the Siemens factories and all this. We had only occasionally a bomb would fall when a plane was hit by the flack. But uh, so we were already uh liberated when they still were fighting in Berlin. Of course, there was no communication whatsoever. Except

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that we saw Russian soldiers on their little horses. These step...stepping..steppe horses. Small horses, very widely, very small but very sturdy horses. With their carts going by for hours and hours. And on these carts they had all their war materials. At a...a tank, an American tank was posted at the end of our corner of the street and we uh, that was our occupation. They came to us. The Russian soldiers came into each house and looked around and said if there were any weapons, any German soldiers, and since we didn't have anything, they left. That was all right, later on the occupation troops were the ones who raped and stole. [pause]

We'll take a short break.

One of the people that seems so interesting to me is the person of Gerhard who as a Mischling had taken certain risks, certainly on your behalf. Could you describe how often perhaps you saw Gerhard and perhaps what happened to his families, his father and his mother?

Uh, Gerhard was a most unusual person. I met Gerhard when I was thirteen or fourteen. His uh aunt had a weekend cottage in Rangsdorf, right across from our house. The uh mother, there was a mother who was the aunt of his father. And the..three daughters, she had three daughters. Uh, excuse me, no, two daughters. The daughters never married. He visited, he and his family visited his aunt and his, the cousins in Rangsdorf and since they were Jewish and we were friendly with them uh I met Gerhard. I was 13, 14 and he was about two years older, 16. And we were very compatible. We did a lot of things together. We went swimming together. We

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went ice skating together. We went sleighing together, bob-sleighing together, and uh whenever he...and his family came to visit their relatives in Rangsdorf. Once we moved into...moved to Berlin in 1939 of course he went to school, high school. I went to school. We uh were together almost weekly, on weekends. He uh ordered....he helped us a lot as far as uh cigarettes for my father. He managed to get, once in awhile he brought my mother a chicken. I don't know where he got the chicken from but he did bring. And we were really comrades. We...he was an outdoor person. I enjoyed the outdoors. In the winter time we used to take the train to Havel or Grunewald and we would walk and in the summertime we would go swimming together. We would go to concerts together. When I worked...when I wore the star I would go out of the house and uh to a neighborhood where I was not known then I would either take off the jacket or put on the jacket, whatever the case may be, and we would meet and uh would go out together.

It was quite risky to do?

I felt pretty safe in his presence. I don't know rather he felt as safe in my presence. But we were actually inseparable. We were very close. On many weekends we met. Uh our parents were not very enthused about our friendship. My parents because he was not Jewish. And his parents because I was Jewish and therefore a risk.

Even though his father was...

His father was Jewish but uh it was still risky. If he had been caught he would have been arrested and probably killed. We prevailed. As a matter of fact, we were very brazen, brazen. Looking back I uh still don't understand how chutzpahdik we could

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have been. That's the only expression I really...we were so uh...not that we were unaware of the dangers but we laughed at the dangers. We did everything in spite of the dangers. He had a boat. A rubber boat. A little kayak which was uh in a marina at a, at the Havel River. Uh, it was stored there. It was a small boat for two. He uh..we named it Hatikvah [title of the Jewish national anthem]. In all that war, in all that danger we named the boat Hatikvah and we paddled around the lakes, the rivers...in that boat. No one ever stopped us, no one ever made any comments on that name. It was...of course in Germany, Hatikvah was not known to be a Hebrew word. It was partly, people thought it was just a make up word, as people do very often. They make up a name for a boat. But we knew what it was. And uh evidently we never came across anybody who knew what that name meant. And uh we uh kept on going until, until the end.

So you saw each other even when you were working and living with the Kerbers?

Uh, when I...well yes. Because he was instrumental in finding the Kerbers as I had mentioned and instrumental in getting me the papers. Whenever I needed help, I went to him, and he was always there helping me. He uh would come out occasionally on weekends because he was working and visit us. He also, eventually toward the end of the war, he was drafted. Not as a soldier but the operation Todt. T O D T. They took all the Mischlinge...er...Mischlinge and anybody else who was not honored enough to be a real soldier and put them in this uh, in this uh organization Todt. And they had to go uh...after the bomb burst, that their job, that they had to go and clean up. They had to uh put the electricity back. They had to

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remove the rubble. They had to clear highways. That was the job of the job of uh..of those fellows. They wore.... they wore uniforms. They were the black uniforms. And it was dangerous job because there were live wires. There were unexploded bombs that they had to remove and things like that. Besides, they were not treated that well either.

What happened to his father? And his mother?

His father, his mother and his father lived in their apartment. It was not bombed out through the war. And I understand his father passed away in the sixties, during the sixties, of old age. His mother was still alive in 1981...was it '81, when we were in Berlin. I called her up. She was in her eighties, and I called her up and said, "Do you still remember me?" And she says, "Yes, I think I remember you..you were a friend of Gerhard's." So she did remember me. So she was alive in Berlin in the same apartment. She lived with a companion there. Uh, Gerhard uh, as I said, was a very unusual person. He managed no matter what. He was not very tall. He was small. But he was very sturdy. Was very strong. He also was very...had a good mind. Excellent mind. He figured out, and he could uh...he always had been a very good student. He was good in math and he uh could manipulate things very well...as one could, see and organize. Shortly after the war was over, one day when I was still in Waldensee, he appeared at the gate of our garden and said, "Here I am." And he was one of the first people who returned. What happened? Well, there was such confusion where he was on the front that instead of going with the division, he went backwards. He separated himself somehow. Somehow got into civilian clothes and

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walked back. And he walked all the way from where he was back to Berlin. And since there was a lot of confusion, a lot of movement, refugees going back and forth, either going to or coming from, it was unbelievable in those...right after the war, the end of the war in Germany that uh, uh movement in the..on the highways. People fleeing, people going to, going back, coming, uh everything was happening in..on the highways. Plus the military retreating, dissolving, nothing worked. It was uh unbelievable. And it was easy to get lost in that confusion and just uh move back. Not to call any attention to yourself, but just walk. You were one of the refugees. One of the people who had to flee from someplace. So one day he arrived in Berlin. And one day he came out and visited us. It was as if he had never left. He a....after the war was over, I stayed for a short while with Mrs. Kerbers, with the Kerbers, in Berlin in, in Waldensee, and then I moved to Berlin. Uh, the allies opened the Jewish children's home. It use to be an old age home but they made it into a Jewish children's home. And all the surviving youngsters from concentration camps, from all over, from all the camps were gathered there. It was one of the gathering places. And uh we received daily new youngsters. People up to eighteen were kept there. We received food from both, from all the allies, both the Russians and the Americans. And I went there, because if you have no one you could...they would make transports to either...to Israel, to Palestine. And I wanted to get out as quickly as I could.

You had no thought of staying on in Germany?

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I had no thought, no. I uh, I filed...as soon as the war was over and Berlin was uh functioning, I mean functioning in that the allies were there and there was peace, the Jews came out. The ones who survived. Which was a handful, about two thousand. Uh, the Jewish Federation started up again immediately and you registered. The names were sent all over the world. There was the uh...in America you had the Aufbau. The Aufbau published all these lists and the allies sent lists all over the world. And I uh, that's how my relatives in Palestine knew that I was alive and friends. That my cousins knew I was alive and in turn I read some of their names. And these lists where published and Jewish Federations were uh established all over Germany. Wherever there were a few Jews or made a gathering place of Jews. The ones from the camps.

What made you come to America instead of going to Palestine?

I got in contact with my, with relatives that we had in Miami, Florida. The aunt of my mother. That branch of, her family went to America and uh we had the address. They had sent us affidavits but we never got out. It was too late. I wrote again through the Council of Jewish Women and they uh, uh contacted me and I contacted my uncle. Meanwhile, during the war, this aunt had died but her husband was alive and her two sons and uh they uh were instrumental that I went to Miami, Florida. They also paid the passage. They uh, they reimbursed the American Joint Distribution Committee for my passage. Those who could pay were asked to reimburse the Joint. Uh, that's how I got to America. Also the quota was established uh, uh Victim of Fascism. We received special identification papers,

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which were for Victim of the Fascism. And uh once we registered with the American Council in Berlin, papers were issued and very soon you could move out. I was in the Jewish children's home and I, whatever came first, either was going to Israel or I was going to America. And it happened that I could go to America. Which was about a year and half later, in September 1946.

That you came?

That I came to America, yes. After I was about oh, for six to eight months in Berlin, lived in Berlin, in the Jewish children home. I made myself useful. I worked, helped out in the office there and helped in the children's home because I was older than most, most of the kids.

During the early war years you mentioned you worked in the factory. What was that like for a Jewish person?

Well, we worked in the factory that made relays for telephones. And we were trained to adjust those relays. And then we did all day long. We had to get these relays in good working orders. And then they were..we were in a special room, we had special bathroom facilities. We had a, a woman who was our foreman and we had a man who was our foreman. And the uh..they really selected a very ardent Nazi to be our supervisor and he treated us accordingly. We had to be there I think six thirty in the morning and work till four, something like that. And uh, that was day in and out. We were about twenty to thirty women. All ages from 14, 16 up till 40's, in their 40's. And from all walks of life. There were girls I went to school with, one or two I knew from school. We worked together and people I never met before.

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When did you exactly stop working at the factory?

Well I stopped, I didn't go back the day I, when my parents were uh taken away. Were transported and uh that was officially my transportation date too. From then on, I wasn't there anymore. I wasn't in Berlin anymore, yes. That was the end everything. There was a...later on somebody gave me a uh newspaper, was a..where you had all these official notices, you have this in this country too, newspapers with official notices, there was that, all the uh accounts and the assets of uh the Ludomers were taken or liquidated. That means the Nazis took the money.

What was your new name?

Malga. Malga Gephart.

I see.

Malga Gephart. She was about my age. I never met her, I don't know who she is. I don't know of her. And I, I don't think she ever knew what happened, that somebody behind her back took her identity.

What was it like to have her identity? Her name for that amount of time?

I think I became that person for almost three years. And uh, I didn't think too much about anything else. Just, just that this person had to be uh surviving, had to do whatever was necessary to survive and not to think of anything else.

Did the Kerbers know your original name?

No. They never knew my original name, until after the war, when I told them. They didn't want to. In situations like that in Germany, the least you know the better you off. If you ever get caught, you cannot tell anything. If you don't know a person's

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name, you cannot name that person. If you don't know where the person lives, you cannot denounce anybody. You cannot say anything. So the least you know the better you off.

That's how you lived with the Kerbers as well?

Yes. Well they knew I was Jewish of course. But they didn't know my real name. Uh, they gave me as if, as a bombed out niece that came to live with them.

What was it like during the height of the war living there? Were you aware of events going on around you?

Well we...Kerber had a radio. So at night time we did listen to the BBC. So we knew uh to an extent what was going on, yes. Uh, remember we had a radio of course and then we heard the German news. But otherwise, I was very isolated, I, I very little...I did not go out very much at all. I, if I went out, it was mostly at night or I stayed in the...I had as little contact with any, any other people as possible. It was just too dangerous. It was not advisable to have any contact.

Did anybody suspect the Kerbers?

[Sighs] Well, if they did suspect, nobody said anything. Because if they did suspect and said anything I wouldn't be here. There were people around, I mean who saw me, couldn't help but seeing me. Whether they were satisfied or just accepted and didn't say anything, I don't know what they thought. I never asked, I never saw them again after I left. I never spoke with them. I never uh...with Kerber, after I came to America, she, she took me to the place uh where, the gathering place, where the truck took us to the train station to go to Bremen and from Bremen to America and

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that was the last time I saw her. Uh, soon after her husband died of uh...uh..he got very sick and he died. I uh wrote several times. And then I lost contact totally with her because Waldensee was the Russian zone. And probably she was not..she didn't get my letters or I didn't get her letters. And I had uh...after the first or second year of my being in America, I lost contact. She wrote that her, that her husband had died and that was about the last time I heard of her, from her. And then we sent her some food packages. I think she got some of them. But uh...then I lost contact. And I'm sure she's not alive anymore at all because she would be too...this by forty years, thirty, forty years, yeah.

Was it hard to say goodbye to the Kerbers?

Yes and no. The same thing with Gerhard. I was so anxious to leave everything behind me that uh...I was glad to leave. I wanted to get out very much. I was not, I was very unhappy the first couple of years in America because I felt the Americans were very insensitive. The American Jewery was very insensitive.

In what way?

Uh, toward what happened. I don't know how it was in New York but I'm talking about the Jews in Miami, Miami Beach. Uh, they asked well, how was it? How did you manage to survive? And when you wanted...and was it hard. And you said yes it was very hard and was very difficult and was dangerous and you had very little to eat. Oh, we had food rationing here too. We couldn't buy any meat, we had chicken only. We uh couldn't...we had a very hard time, we couldn't take our cars out on

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weekends. We only could take the cars to go to work. We didn't get enough gasoline. And I just sat there and was stunned, you know.

Two different worlds?

Two different...no, no concept of what....I still don't think people have a concept. Because you can't imagine. Really, you cannot imagine. Unless you live through something you don't imagine what it is like. And then when you look back at it I still say, "how did I manage to survive?" It's almost as if this was a different person who went through all this. From what I am now. I'm totally different. And my feelings are totally different. The only thing I know I'm...and it came out in many ways, that I'm not...my feelings are not different uh..feelings toward Germany. And towards the Germans. I mean that has not changed. As a matter of...I think it has, the hate has intensified.

I see.

I'm not forgiving. Uh, do you have some time? A few minutes? I would just want to say one thing. We were always told that why were the Jews like sheep and go through. It was...first of all, there was always the uh hope you were surviving. If you just comply and you're quiet and you do it, you will survive, and it..how long can it last? And I wrote this and I felt this..and there was always a certain dignity and I think that uh the more they stepped on us and the...more they uh, they, the Nazis would degrade us the more we felt our own worth. I know I felt my worth. I said they can do anything to me but I know I..who I am and what I am. Uh, going to the factory it was also very much brought out the way we dressed. Even though we had

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very little clothes, or it was hard to get clothes. Jews did not get any uh coupons to buy clothes, we always dressed and we were always kempt. I don't think I ever saw anybody unkempt. That was very important, the appearance. Always. Yeah. And one of the girls I worked with left...her name was Lada and she sent me a postcard. She couldn't say goodbye personally, she was transported. And she uh wrote a postcard. It was on the 15th of November, 1941. And she wrote, Dear Hilma, I'm leaving tonight and I don't want to miss to say goodbye, at least in writing. Uh, keep well and be well and most of all uh remain a human being and be a human being until uh until you reach that it's a long road but it is worth it. And regards to all the colleagues and to Mrs. Eunice, that was a woman we were very much attached to. And uh, kindness, the best regards, your Lada. And I don't think anybody who can write this in the face of leaving for your own destruction can be called a coward. And I think this is what should be brought out. Not that we went to the gas chamber like sheep but uh, that there was dignity and that we all wanted to until the last moment to remain human being. And give advice to others. Stay that way. Stay to be a human being.

Thank you.

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