

Charlotte Wendel, 4-24-89

CW: I was born in Katowice. I had two brothers; one is no longer alive. We were religious, Modern Orthodox. We left when I was four and I went to school in Germany. We moved so my brothers wouldn't have to be in the Polish Army. I was born in 1919 and we left in 1923. We moved to Breslau. I attended the Lyceum and the Jewish Reform Gymnasium. My father was a wholesale butcher. We were in Breslau until 1941 when we went to Berlin. From there we took the plane to Russia, to Moscow. Actually, we first tried to leave in 1933. My father sent my brother to Israel, but he came back with a bad report. He said the Russian and Yemenite Jews were rough, not our type. We tried many times to leave. We had affidavits but we were Polish quota to America and we were not called. We tried Bolivia and someone took the money we gave him for permits and used it for himself. In 1938, my brothers were taken to Buchenwald right after Kristallnacht. I got them and seven other people out. I went to the Gestapo and convinced them.

WH: Was it your impression that the Germans treated German Jews any differently?

CW: Yes. One day during Hitler's regime, my father received an award for his service in WWI. It was really funny. Anyway, using a little charm, when you are young it's easy, I got us seven visas for different countries. I figured one of them has to work. Then Kurt, who was already in the U.S., sent us some money. Then, with the Russian visas, we went to Shanghai. We stayed there for seven years. From 1941 to 1947.

WH: Was life in Shanghai hard?

CW: Very hard, very difficult. We sent our money to America and when the war broke out between America and Japan we couldn't get to the money. I became a second-hand dealer. I took merchandise from people and sold it in the Russian Quarter. Then I bought bread with it. We were completely undernourished with our kashrus. We were the only people who didn't get help from the Joint. A nephew from my father bragged about the rich uncle who was coming. And so they thought we were rich. He was never the smartest fellow. Ach! I said: 'How can we be rich; we came with nothing, but that idiot spread stories we are rich. But I made some money. I did some bookkeeping for a doctor. Several times I got sick. Once I took care of someone with pneumonia and I got pneumonia. We had lived as vegetarians in Germany and weren't used to it. We lived three people in one furnished room. One corner was for cooking and one corner had our luggage. I was also a teacher in the Bais Yaakov School there.

WH: When did your parents leave Shanghai?

CW: In January 1947 by boat for San Francisco and from there they went to N.Y.  
That's how I went too, a little later.

WH: What was the trip like?

CW: I was seasick the whole time. It was a troop transport. There were maybe 20 or 30 women to the room and one woman smelled from garlic and there were no windows, so I got seasick. It took about a week and we stopped once in Hawaii. The people from the Joint was very nice to us. They even took us, I think, to the club.

WH: What did you see when you came into the harbor in San Francisco?

CW: We couldn't care less. We were not interested. We were seasick and we just wanted to land. The Golden Gate Bridge looked beautiful but really I was, I lost 14 pounds on the trip. I stayed a month in San Francisco.

WH: Why did you go to N.Y.?

CW: My family was there. My parents had an apartment there near Fort Tryon Park. My brother greeted me there.

WH: What was it like in N.Y.?

CW: Well, I joined a group for the Shanghai Jews. We met on 157th Street and Broadway. It might have been a Habonim place. We talked about our experiences and if you found a job right away.

WH: What type of work did you do?

CW: I had to take all my license tests again to be a nurse and a medical masseuse. To make money I became a nurse while also going to evening school. I passed my exams and became licensed.

WH: Your husband was American. Did you have a problem relating to him about Europe?

CW: We never discussed Europe. He hated the Germans. He knew I was in Shanghai. We never discussed the past and not with my nieces or nephews either (We had no children). We wanted to forget it.

WH: Do you ever have nightmares about the war?

CW: I didn't until I started hearing the stories about it and reading books on it.

WH: Do you think there's more anti-Semitism now than when you first came here?

CW: Oh, yes. No comparison. Love for the Arabs and hate against israel. Many of the rich women I treat on Park Ave know nothing about Jews. Their husbands deal with Jews in business and in banks, but the women are church women, and that is their life. And they never see a Jew. And once or twice I saw their attitudes and saw that their image of the Jew was like this. So I said: 'Keep your pain I don't need you' and I didn't come back. I love my work and can do it day and night because I feel I do fantastic things for people. They kiss my hands and can't thank me enough.

WH: How do you think you survived?

CW: I was never afraid. I always lived with my bags packed, ready for anything. Not to be afraid and when my hour comes, I go. I always tried to be nice to everybody.

WH: If you believe in God now, how do you explain the fact that the Holocaust took place?

CW: We brought it on ourselves. We didn't obey the laws. Read the Bible. Each time the Jews didn't obey the laws, then came the punishment.

WH: How come so many of the Jews who were punished were the religious ones?

CW: When it rains, everyone gets wet. I really think we brought it on ourselves. And the State of Israel was a reward and to show the enemy that our Lord is alive.

WH: If the State of Israel could have been established only as a result of the 6,000,000 dying, was it worth the sacrifice?

CW: .....That is a hard question. I wouldn't say it that way. We could have waited for Moshiach. If I would have had the choice, I would have said----Let the Jewish people live.

WH: Did you have a place where the immigrants got together in New York, a park or club or restaurant?

CW: People came to our house. It was like a hotel.

WH: Did you go on vacations in those years?

CW: Oh, you must be kidding. We didn't spend a nickel until I got married two years after I came to N.Y. Then we went away twice a year to Atlantic City because that's where we had our honeymoon. We went to Kaufman's and later The Breakers.

WH: What Jewish organizations do you belong to?

CW: Agudah, Mizrachi, NCJW, HIAS, synagogues, sisterhoods.

WH: Would you buy German products?

CW: If I can help it, not. Because they cheated me on the Wiedergutmachung (reparations payments). We never got it.

WH: What about Blacks?

CW: They're very anti-Semitic. I had many incidents. They envy Jews. Anti-Semitism and envy is usually very closely related.

WH: What did you think of the Vietnam War?

CW: I never understood it. I didn't who was fighting who or what about.

WH: When you saw the Watergate trial on TV what did you think of it?

CW: I think Nixon should have burned the tapes. One match and the whole thing would have been over.

WH: What's your political preference?

CW: I'm Democrat but I vote for the person.

WH: What's your opinion of psychiatrists and psychologists?

CW: I believe very much in it. Of course, you find fakers. you have to go to a good one.

WH: What was your impression of Kissinger?

CW: He's not my cup of tea. When he left his wife and children.....I don't know why he insists on having that terrible accent. In my school in Germany he wouldn't have been accepted because he has the accent from people who live in a, in a village. I mean the normal person who lived in Germany speaks High German and High German doesn't have any accent. Any person who has education doesn't have an accent. And here, this man is here a lifetime. He reminds me of Zsa Zsa Gabor.

WH: A woman survivor once made a statement to me: Don't take it wrong but the survivors are not necessarily the finest people. What do you think about that?

CW: Just average. You get together with a crowd, you find good and bad.

WH: Do you see any differences between the experience of the Jews in the Holocaust and what happened to the Biafrans in Nigeria or Cambodians?

CW: You cannot even compare. We are people with culture. Our fathers were fighting in their war. My father got a heart condition, never went to collect even a penny. He paid taxes. you cannot compare with these people.

WH: What about the Armenians who were killed by the Turks?

CW: .....I don't know what happened. If I would know history well, I could say something. I feel sorry for them but I don't know the history.

WH: You think a Holocaust could happen here?

CW: It can happen anywhere. All you have to do is go to people and say: 'You can rob, you can steal; you can take their houses, their cars. You think if I would go to Harlem and say that, they wouldn't do it?

WH: What leader in this country impressed you the most?

CW: Truman, because he gave us the State of Israel.