

FRIEDA WOLFF, 3/23/89

FW: We came by ship. And, my brother who passed away in the meantime, he and a cousin of us, Otto hart (?)...they send us affidavit. But we had to wait for our quota number. And the German quota number was bigger than the Polish therefore we went back to Germany to come here quicker. And it took us two years until we got our visa to come here. And my brother was living here.

WH: What kind of a ship was it?

FW: When we came from Germany from here, it was a nice ship because we paid for it.

WH: So when you came - .

FW: It was not (inaudible) shipped us immigrant. It was a private ship. You know, we just booked the fare to Italy. We went to Italy. From Italy we took a ship.

WH: Did you land in New York?

FW: Ya, we came through the - .

WH: Then you went right to Oklahoma City?

FW: Ya. We went by train and it took us 36 hours to go by train to Oklahoma City.

WH: You had an affidavit from your brother, right?

FW: From my brother and a cousin.

WH: Were there any agencies involved, HIAS or - .

FW: Yes, the HIAS helped us.

WH: They helped you when you landed in New York?

FW: They helped us from Germany. They paid the fare for us, but we had to promise that when we are established, that we would pay it back. And we did.

WH: What was the fare at that time?

FW: It was for my husband and I and my children, it was \$510.00 and over the years, after we got our citizenship here in 1960, they wrote us, and we were able to pay it back. Slowly, pay it back.

INTERVIEWER NOTES:

WH: I am talking with Mrs. Frieda Wolff, who is born in Berlin, Germany, and who spent the war years in Shanghai, coming to Shanghai in 1939, where she lived for 10 years until 1949, and who then went by boat which I think took 56 days, because you couldn't go through the Suez Canal, to Israel, where conditions were very primitive, and very, very difficult and who then went to Germany in 1953, so that she could establish herself on the German quota, and who came to America in 1955.

WH: Do you remember anything about your first impressions when you sailed into New York Harbor, what it was like? What you were thinking about. You came with your husband, you have children - .

FW: Two children, son and a daughter. I tell you the truth, we just came through the immigration inside. You know, we never saw the outside. And when we came through immigration, they say, "Welcome to America."

You know, they welcomed us to America because we had affidavit,, and passport, and we went legal to America. Not illegal. Legal. And they welcomed us very nice to America. And in New York, my husband had a cousin, and she greeted us when we came off-through from the immigration. They greeted us, and from New York, we stayed a few days in New York, with a cousin of my husband, and then we boarded the train to Oklahoma City.

WH: And, what was it like in New York? Do you remember what happened when you first saw the people?

FW: Yah, it was very crowded, you know, and a cousin of my husband, she showed us around, with her car, but she say we are better off going by train or subway because the parking was very bad. And the first thing we saw was the theatre...Radio City. We were very impressed. And, in nighttime everything was illuminated, you know, the streets on Broadway. And she showed us around. But she didn't live close by. She drove us to her apartment which was a little further away. I think it was in Manhattan.

WH: You left Israel because life there was very difficult?

FW: Yah, but like I say, it was difficult, but we always wanted to come to America. We already had papers from my brother and cousin and it was just a waiting time. We waited for the visa.

WH: Why not stay in Israel? You wrote then, that it was a Jewish country and you always felt good about it.

FW: It was very hard at this time. We barely could make a living. My husband worked with a cousin, who was - he passed away in the meantime - who was a brother of Otto Hartz' in Jerusalem, and he was a contractor on construction, and he had a lot of work, and my husband got a job by him at his company. They built houses and other things., It was very hard, and physical work. And Richard's late brother who died in Germany later on, he couldn't take it. It was too hard for him. And he went to Germany earlier than we did. But, we were not unhappy in Israel. It was very hard. Everything was rationed, and we didn't have enough money to buy black market, so we had to make do what we could afford. We raised a few chickens, and we had some eggs...Richard's late brother, he raised...rabbits...we had rabbit meat but I never liked it...Richard's parents there with us too. And we all lived together in one house. Richard's parents, my husband and I and Richard's brother and wife and family. So we were nine people in one house,. But, we always wanted to come to the States.

WH: So, you came to the States, you came to Oklahoma City, you spent a few days in New York, what was the train ride like?

FW: Terrible.

WH: Why?

FW: We were sitting in the train for 36 hours. There was no sleeping facilities. We just sitting all the time in the train and I remember when I got up, my feet were swollen. You know, you have to put up your feet. But, we made it. It was a long ride, but we made it.

WH: You stopped in many places.

FW: Ya, we stopped in St. Louis.

WH: What did you think of America when you looked out, when you compared it to Germany, and Israel, and to Shanghai?

FW: It was a good feeling, because we hoped to have a better life and finally settle down, because all the years, we really didn't settle down because we were just waiting for things to happen. The same in Shanghai. We didn't want to stay there that long, but there was no other way to go any other place.

WH: Didn't you feel that you were going to be refugees the rest of your lives?

FW: Ya, we were called Displaced People. And we have a passport to prove it. And finally, after a long waiting we came here, and my husband has a profession. He

is a butcher. And, my brother found a job for him in just two weeks. And he worked 17 years at Smart? Meat Company. It's a big company here. And he worked until he retired.

WH: But that's 17 years, but you've been here 34 years, right?

FW: Yah, we came in 1955.

WH: So he retired in 1972?

FW: Ya, he retired a little earlier, because he has bronchitis, and arthritis, and he worked in a cooler, so he retired by 64 years.

WH: Going back to Shanghai. What were conditions like there?

FW: Terrible.

WH: Cold? Damp? It was hot in the summer?

FW: (inaudible-no screen doors, no screen windows?) we were bitten up from the mosquitos...you had no protection from mosquitos coming in the room, and the flies were all over, you know.

WH: Did you have any idea what was going on with the Jews in Europe during this time that you were in Shanghai, or were you cut off from the rest of the world?

FW: No, we knew about it. In 1940, Richard's brother came to Shanghai. He came a little later because he didn't want to leave Germany that quick, and he was almost the last people who could get out in 1940. After 1940 nobody could leave Germany anymore. And, they were all picked up and thrown in concentration camps. And, Richard's late brother, and his wife and they had a little baby 6 months old. They came to Shanghai over Moscow by train...and they made it. But there were a lot of people behind and we heard that they all got picked up and killed in concentration camp.

WH: How did you get the visas in Shanghai, to go to Germany?

FW: The Jewish community, the Heibsbein? helped us. And they chartered the ships, for us in Italy. And we were four weeks on a ship. On an Italian ship...from Italy...to Shanghai.

WH: Of course, only later you knew how lucky you were that you didn't stay in Europe. I'm sure it was terrible in Shanghai, but compared to what could have happened, at least you lived.

FW: Yah, that was what I was writing - the speaker too, he said, "We are the lucky ones who survived." And my parents got picked up in 1938, October. My father and my brother got picked up. My mother, she left later, and they were picked up from the Gestapo and sent to Poland, Cracow, first.

WH: When were you born?

FW: 1916. I was 23 years old when we left Germany. In '39.

WH: So you remember what was going on in Germany. You remember the anti-Semitism.

FW: Oh, yah.

WH: '35, '36, '37.

FW: You know, I wrote it down, because over the years you might forget. But, our children wanted to know too, you know. And, when I was thinking about it, I wrote it down, and I worked in a Jewish company, and in the beginning of 1939, - I think it was ready 1938 - they had to give up their company, (inaudible-needs translation?)...(WH: "appropriated it.") and they took the companies away, and gave the owners just a little value of the company, and we employees, we have lost our job and we got nothing out of it. You know, sometimes people give you a little bonus, you know, because you lose your job, you know.

WH: How is it, in your view, that Germany which was so friendly and welcoming to the Jews, could do what it did to the Jews?

FW: That was the Hitler regime, you know. He was so powerful, that the people around, said that they had to obey what he wanted to do. And if the people didn't do it, they were killed too. The German people who didn't want to go with the Hitler regime. And many Christian people and many church leaders, they were thrown in the concentration camp too, and they were killed, too. It was not only Jewish people.

There were a lot of - Germans, you k now. When you saw the film, "Sound of Music," you know, the Austrian people, they they were not for Hitler. But if they didn't do what they wanted to do, they were shot down.

WH: Do you ever have nightmares about what (?you left there?)?

FW: I think at the beginning, but luckily, we were a family. You know, my husband and my husband's parents. They were very good to me. But I was good to them, too, you know I did everything I could. We were surrounded by family. Not only Richard's parents, there was Richard's sister and husband, and Richard's brother and wife, so we were never too much alone. And we did the best we

could, and we survived better than people who were more spoiled. There were many - you know, when we came by ship to Israel, for 56 days, we were not that spoiled, but some rich women you know, rich people, they just lost everything. They almost lost their mind, too. You know, they looked terrible when they came off the ship because they couldn't take the hardship. But somehow - .

WH: Was that your impression that in Shanghai, also, that only the toughest ones survived?

FW: Ya, there were many many people who were suicide.

WH: Why do you think you were able to make it through? If someone asked you, now do you explain your survival compared to that of other people, what would you say?

FW: I don't want to brag, but I was always a good person, I was good to my parents, when I was a little girl, when I started working. I didn't keep my money like the people keep it here, I gave my parents all the money what I earned, and I just kept a little spending money, and they were waiting for my monthly pay check that they could make a living. You know, my parents, I was, I was poor. But I was always a good person, and I did good, and I was good to Richard's parents, so maybe - like my mother said, "If you do good, it somehow it comes back to you in some other way."

WH: Was there anything that you, yourself did in terms of your response, when you were living in Shanghai that was different than the response of other people. Were you able to adjust more easily because you weren't spoiled?

FW: Yah, I worked, too. I worked 6 years in Shanghai because the men couldn't find jobs, so slow by slow, the Jewish people opened businesses. At the beginning, we got help from the ?Unrah? and we got food. You know, they had a kitchen, and we could get food, free food. Every day my husband went and picked up a meal, a home meal, and slow by slow, the people opened businesses, because the Chinese people didn't take the foreigners in. You know, they are very family oriented. And they didn't take anybody in, and slow by slow, people started opening up their own business...people sold all their valuables to make a living...

I remember Richard's mother had so nice hand knit tablecloth, you know hand-stitched and everything, and when we didn't have anything to eat, we had to sell it.

WH: When you came here, did you work?

FW: No. I didn't work.

WH: How old were your children then?

- FW: Our son was born in '47...he went already in Germany to school, one year to the German school. And when he came here he was 8 years old but he had to start first grade, because it took him a while to learn English. At the beginning, he was very lost and lonesome because we spoke German at this time, and slow by slow, through television and playing with kids - he learned English and he was a very quiet boy...and he caught up so quick that the teacher skipped him two classes...til he was in his age group.
- WH: What happened to him - then he went to college?
- FW: Yah. He went to high school, he went to college at OU. He was four years in college and he graduated in journalism...and that was it.
- WH: What does he do now?
- FW: He started to work here, and through USY...they had a very good USY group, and through USY they made sometimes trips or conventions in Houston or some other places, and when he went to Houston, he found some friends. And he thought that the grass was greener in a other place, and he say he will try in Houston. And he is living in Houston now, about, almost 15 years.
- WH: He likes it?
- FW: He likes it. He has his own small business. He is an import, export shipping.
- WH: Of what?
- FW: He ships everything. And he ships a lot to Puerto Rico...and he makes a living...
- WH: He has children?
- FW: No, he's not married yet.
- WH: You'd like him to be married, right?
- FW: He was married to a Gentile girl, and they dated for a long time, and he married her, but it didn't work out. He got a divorce.
- WH: Do you think it's a problem when Jews marry Gentiles?
- FW: No. We were not for it, but you know, he was a grown person, and we told him, can't you find a Jewish girl, you know, but he loved the girl, and he married her, and somehow she showed her other side and they just were fighting and they got divorced.

WH: It wasn't because of religion?

FW: No. No. But she never participated in religion. You know, when many times we went to Houston - we have a daughter living in Houston, too - and we went over to Passover, you know she, uh, we invited her to the dinner and we made all the rituals, you know, she listened to it, but she never participated in anything.

WH: Was she Protestant?

FW: Yah, I think. And now, after many years, he found a Jewish girl. He's dating her. And hopefully, he will marry her.

WH: How about your daughter?

FW: Our daughter is - she is 37 years old, my son and daughter they were always very good together, and when he went to Houston, after two years, she went to Houston too. And she worked in offices, and other places, but she was never very happy, and she's very good with her hand, and so my son and my daughter, they talked it over, and she went to barber school for 9 months, and she learned haircutting. You know, men's haircutting. And she got her license, and she works as a men's hair stylist in Houston, in a very nice barber shop in downtown...she's doing all right.

WH: She's not married?

FW: She's not married.

WH: Not yet, or ?

FW: No, I don't know. She's a very pretty girl. But somehow she didn't find the right man yet. You know, she dates, and she has friends, but nothing serious yet. I don't think she will ever marry.

WH: You don't?

FW: I don't know. (her voice raises up) She's already 37 years - but she's pretty, and she doesn't look 37. She looks like 30 years old. And she works, and that's - .

WH: So, you're still waiting for grandchildren?

FW: Yah. We don't have any.

WH: But you're hopeful you will.

FW: I hope so.

WH: Did you discuss the war with your children? Did they ever ask you about it?

FW: Yah, they ask me about it. We always told them little things, and then I decided to write things down and give my children copies. And then - they realized what they went through.

WH: How would you say that the people here received you when you came to Oklahoma City. The Jewish community. Were they friendly?

FW: Yah, they were very friendly, and I could speak already English, and I was not a greenhorn. You know, in Shanghai we spoke English. And I had a very good teacher, I learned English, so I was not without language. My late brother came here and he didn't know English. They called him a greenhorn, you know. But they didn't call us greenhorn, because we could speak already. And, slow by slow, you know, I took part in synagogue activities, Sisterhood, you know.

WH: Were you friendly with any other survivors here, any other people.

FW: There are not too many survivors here. Just two, three people...

WH: There are probably more survivors in Tulsa?

FW: Ya, and a lot of survivors are in Denver, and San Francisco, and in New York. But to Oklahoma, very few people came. We just came because my brother was here...

WH: Did you give your children a Jewish education?

FW: Oh, yah, yah. At the (?inaudible-name of synagogue?) synagogue they had very good leaders. My son had Reverend Hardin (?) as a scholar, teacher, and Cantor Gerlitz was a very good cantor and teacher, and he was in USY, he was President of USY. And, he got a lot out of USY.

And our daughter also. But our daughter was not that interested, but she got the same education like my son. Our son became bar mitzvah here, and our daughter, you know, at this time they didn't push the Bat Mitzvahs that much. She didn't become a Bat Mitzvah. But they know Hebrew, and they had a good education.

WH: ...Did you observe holidays and things at home?

FW: Oh, yah. Yah. We always get together on holidays, and - .

WH: Were you able to keep kosher here?

FW: Uhh-you can, but we don't keep kosher. It's very hard.

WH: ...it's very hard.

FW: They can buy meat, there's a committee who orders meat from out of town. The real kosher people who want to keep real kosher, they can get - .

WH: There are people here who keep kosher like that?

FW: Yah, yah, yah...they order so much they want, til the next order, but we don't keep kosher. But we keep the holidays. We keep Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, and we go to the synagogue.

WH: Is your daughter interested in Judaism at all today?

FW: She is, in a way, she is, and in a way she isn't. But she, she always says she's Jewish and she doesn't pretend she's not Jewish.

WH: How do you think that being a survivor may have affected your children?

FW: I don't think it affected them at all. Because, when we came here, they were very young, and they got to school, and to college, and to Hebrew School, and everything, they really didn't know about the hardship that we had. And we tried to give them a good education, and whatever things came up, they went to things, you know, they were not affected. In fact, that's why I wrote this down. They always ask us. "Why you come, you came here," and everything. So, finally I wrote it down, and I told them everything. But we never really pushed it on them. You know, that they children of immigrants.

WH: You felt that it would not be helpful to them.

FW: Yah. And, we spoke a little German at home, because at one time Richard's mother lived with us, and she just spoke German. But we tried to speak English, that our children learn the English language. Perfect English language. And they understand German, but they are not too good in German. But they understand words. But they don't speak fluently German, like I do.

WH: Did she go to college - your daughter?

FW: Yah, she went one year in college, but somehow, she thought it was playtime. (laughs) She didn't adapt herself and she just couldn't make it.

WH: She didn't find it that interesting.

FW: Yah, and maybe it was too hard for her, but she's a smart girl. But, you know, you have to - have zits fleisch, that's right. So after one year, she was not interested and she started to find jobs. And then she found out, without

education, you cannot find good paying jobs. So, therefore she learned a trade. As a barber - but she's a very smart girl. She has the life smartness, you know.

WH: Street smarts.

FW: Yah.

WH: Did you become more or less religious after the war?

FW: I think the same. We observe - .

WH: Traditional?

FW: Yah. We observed everything. We went to services, you know, - .

WH: If you believe in G-d now, I don't know if you do, but if you do - .

FW: Oh, yah.

WH: How do you explain the fact that the Holocaust happened?

FW: I cannot explain it. Because that was a very bad regime who hated Jews.

WH: Do you ever ask yourself, why, if G-d exists, He would allow that to happen?

FW: It happened. I, I think, I really think the people didn't know what was going on. Many people didn't believe what happened in concentration camps and everything.

WH: But G-d knew it was happening.

FW: Yah, but He let it happen.

WH: Do you ask yourself, "why?"

FW: I don't know, I had a wonderful mother, my mother was such a good person, and, my father, they-they had to die? For no reason. Because they were just Jewish people. And, my brother, luckily, he survived, you know.

WH: You think that G-d should have saved them, right?

FW: Yah, he saved him, but, he had a lot of problems later on, you know. He had a nervous stomach, and his heart was damaged (inaudible). You know, he could have lived til now, like I could have lived - it was not meant for him. He died with 57 years old. But it was the hardship he went through, you know (needs

translation). So, I think from the concentration camp, he died too young - he had nightmares. He had a lot of nightmares.

WH: Did he ever go to anybody for counseling?

FW: I don't think so. I don't think - but maybe he didn't talk too much about it. And he kept it to himself, I don't think he went to counseling. But I heard from his wife, that he had a lot of nightmares.

WH: Do you belong to any organizations, yourself?

FW: Everything.

WH: Everything.

FW: Synagogue, Sisterhood...Horizon, a senior group...and whatever comes up.

WH: And your husband, too?

FW: Yah, we try to - .

WH: What do you do in your free time? Mostly - do volunteer work?

FW: I do.

WH: Do you read?

FW: I read a lot and, whatever comes up I attend, if they ask me to help in the kitchen, I do, you know for baking or anything, and in earlier years, I was Sisterhood Kitchen Chairman, for USY, they have a monthly dinner. I cooked for them for 4 years. I took an interest while my kids were in USY. And, at that time, Cantor Gerlitz was the leader of USY, and they didn't let me go...

WH: Do you read newspapers, magazines?

FW: Oh, yah. I read. I have a nice home. I like my home. It's a small home, but I like my home. I do my own work. And, I exercise. I belong to a club. I exercise.

WH: You go to the movies sometimes?

FW: Not that often. Because of t.v. you see so much, unless there's a good movie, we go. But not that often.

WH: When you think of say, your four closest friends, are any of them from Europe?

FW: No.

WH: You don't have the choice here.

FW: There's nobody here...but we have some nice friends here. We have four or five couples we are very friendly with.

WH: Americans.

FW: Americans, yah.

WH: Do you give money to Israel?

FW: Oh, yah.

WH: Do you visit Israel?

FW: No.

WH: You've seen it, since you left it?

FW: I'll tell you the truth, it's a little too expensive for us. My husband is retired, and, you know, the money that we would spend there, we spend for other things. We helped our children a little bit.

WH: You're not sorry that you left there, are you?

FW: No. But I was not unhappy either.

WH: Do you think that American Jews today can understand what the survivors went through?

FW: No.

WH: What do you mean by that?

FW: I don't think that they can understand what a hardship we had. Unless they went through here through hardship too, you know, and maybe - What was it? - Depression.

WH: But probably not as bad as - .

FW: Yah, but the hardship we had, not enough to eat, and everything rationed, and poor condition, and - .

WH: Do you think that what happened in Germany could happen here in the United States?

FW: They try not to. Because if something comes they, they try to resolve it, you know.

WH: Do you think it's possible that it could happen here?

FW: I don't think so. I hope not. But there were some things going on here, you know, they were disgracing the Temple, and the synagogue. They put something on.

WH: Where are you in your politics? Are you more to the Democratic side?

FW: Democrat. Democrat.

WH: Do you remember the Watergate trials?

FW: Yah.

WH: What did you think about that?

FW: Ahh, I think he was caught. Other people do it too. He was just unlucky to be caught, you know. But he didn't do right.

WH: Do you consider yourself to be an American first, or a Jew first?

FW: I'm a Jew. And I have the American citizenship.

WH: Right. But your main identity as being Jewish?

FW: Yah, sure - and we have only Jewish friends. I have a nice neighbor, but I don't be really close with the Christian friends.

WH: Have they tried to be close to you?

FW: Yah, I have a good neighbor.

WH: But, you don't want to be close to them.

FW: No, I - ehr, we don't get into the circle with Christian. You know, our circle is what's going on here, in the Jewish community.

WH: What did you think of Henry Kissinger?

FW: He's a very smart man. And he still has a very thick accent - but he's a very smart man.

WH: Did you accept money from Germany (needs translation).

FW: Yah. We got some. And, my husband and I, we get a pension, because we worked in Germany. You know, like social security. And the German government paid us some restitution.

WH: When you worked, when?

FW: We worked in Germany. My husband was working with his father in - his father was a butcher. They had wholesale slaughtering. And when Hitler came, they took it away from him.

WH: And, so they gave you back restitution.

FW: Ya...(needs translation).

WH: (inaudible) interesting. What's the difference between (needs translation)?

FW: If a person had a big business, and they could prove it, and it was taken away, that means you lost your income. And restitution is, what you suffered, you know.

END OF SIDE ONE - END OF INTERVIEW