

I am Anthony Dilorio, and I'm at the home of Trude Ludvig, Arlington, Virginia. Today is May 5, 1992. And I'm here on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to learn about the story of Helena Lebel. Good afternoon, Trude.

Good afternoon.

What can you tell us about Helena Lebel?

Well, Helly, she liked to be called to Helly, and I are cousins. And we actually grew up together like sisters. Because she usually lived with us, with my brother and myself, she and her sister. Helly was very smart, was a good pupil in school. And when she was about 18 or so she started working with in a law office as a lawyer and secretary.

And we never noticed anything strange about her until she was 21. And then she became strange in a way. And I don't remember very well, I was only 15 at the time, but I remember what my mother told me that they had to bring her to the doctor. And they said she had so-called [? Jugendehrs ?], whatever that is. I think today they would say schizophrenia.

And she was in and out of hospitals for quite some time, but she always got better. And then my aunt could take her home and she would stay sometimes even a year home. And then when the Anschluss came in '38 she was still in the hospital called Steinhof, which was a mental hospital. In and out, not all the time there. And then I think it was in 1940 that my aunt later told me because I wasn't in Vienna anymore she was supposed to be released. Because they told her that she's much better and that she can come home again.

And when my aunt the next time she wanted to visit her she was told that Helly got sick and they sent her to a hospital in Germany. And a few weeks later all she got a notice from the hospital that Helly died and they sent her an urn with ashes. She was cremated there. And that is all that she was ever told about it.

Other than the other telegrams. I remember we read there was more than one telegram and then--

Yeah, but always saying that Helly was sick. And I don't remember what they said.

A schizophrenic attack.

Yeah, some attack she had, a seizure, and that she died of it.

Yeah.

Which of course nobody believed because people knew in the end what happened to people who were mentally ill.

Now you mentioned that she was like a sister to you.

Yeah. We grew up together.

How did that come about that she grew up together with you?

Because her mother and my mother were sisters and my aunt was a widow and remarried again I think in 1923 after the war. But her husband was very sick and he had to be in a hospital near us near Vienna, in Grimenstadt, which is a hospital for people who have something wrong with your lungs, which he had. And so they were very poor, actually. They didn't have much money and we were better off at this time. And so Helly and Emme usually stayed with us during the day because my aunt had to work.

And we spend most of the holidays together. We went together to the country when vacation came and so on. So we really were always together. She stayed with you just during the day. She didn't actually live or sleep at your house.

No. Not sometimes. But most of the time they went home. They lived very near us.

So Helly was born in Vienna just like you?

Yeah.

Do you remember when she was born?

In 1911, I think. 1911 in September.

So she was older than you.

She was six years older than me.

And her mother, she worked?

Yeah, she had to work because he didn't make much money. First of all, he was sick for quite some time for a few years in this Grimenstadt, in the hospital. And then he worked as a bookkeeper there but didn't make much money.

What did she do? She was a bookkeeper?

No, she wasn't. I don't remember what she did. I think she sold you know like people did in this time in Vienna. She went from house to house to sell soap or stockings or something like that.

And you mentioned that her father had died.

Her real father had died in World War I, in the first year as a matter of fact. My aunt was very young. She was only 19 at the time when he died.

So he died in the Austro-Hungarian Army.

Yes. He was an officer in the Army.

He was an officer?

Yeah. He was an officer in the Army and he was killed in the very beginning of the war.

Now what was the religion of the household?

The religion of the household was Catholic because my aunt was Catholic. He was Jewish.

So Helly was raised a Catholic.

Was raised a Catholic, yes.

Did she have any brothers and sisters?

She had a younger sister who lives now in Miami.

So she was the older of two sisters.

And Emme emigrated in 1938 to the States and is here ever since and lives in Miami.

Now what kind of schooling did Helena have?

She had elementary school and high school. And then she made some secretarial course. So she was a secretary for the lawyer. That's about all I can tell you because I wasn't in Vienna when all of this happened. I only remember before '38.

How was she treated? You mentioned that she was diagnosed must have been like 1932, 1933. She's 21.

Yeah, about 1933. Yeah and she was diagnosed. They called it [? Jugendehrs ?]. I don't know how you say that in English.

[? Jugendehrs ?].

A mental illness that young people get. Now they would call it schizophrenia. Because she had moments where she was quite normal and then she had moments where she was very disturbed. But sometimes it lasted for two to three months and then she came home and she was normal. We could talk to her. And she was intelligent. She like to read a lot. And she was good natured. But when she had this attack she got very upset, easily upset.

She was afraid of things.

She was afraid of things and she had a persecution complex, thought everybody was against her. But only in this time when she had--

Short periods of time.

Well, sometimes it was a couple of months, sometimes it was only a week or so. But you should talk to her sister who lives in Miami. She will tell you more about it because they lived together, right? We did not see her then so often when she was sick. I didn't see her that often because my mother wouldn't want me to go to the mental institution because I was a very young girl.

You were sheltered.

Never sheltered from this. My mother felt that it was not-- My mother was very close to her.

So the healthy Helly that you knew is was a bright--

Very bright.

Happy--

Yeah, happy, bright, happy. Lots of fun to be with.

Lots of friends.

She had friends, yeah, lots of friends. But when she was around friends then she got very moody. That was, I think, the beginning of her troubles was that she was moody. And we did not understand it, of course.

In fact, I imagine the other young people wouldn't have understood it.

No.

Boyfriends would not have understood it.

No. She was moody and--

I noticed in her photograph, other than being well dressed and pretty she had a dog.

Yeah. She was very fond of this dog. They had him for a long time. A female dog, actually. It was a nice dog. And Helly was very fond of the dog.

She had had the dog since she had been a child?

No, since she was a teenager, I think.

You don't remember the name of the dog.

Oh, yes. Lydi. Lydi was the dog. Had a lot of puppies which my aunt sold because it was a valuable dog and very in vogue at this time. A terrier.

It was a terrier.

Like you saw it in the movies. At this time the terrier. Today you don't see so many terriers anymore, but then it was the dog to have.

She loved her dog.

Oh yes, she loved it.

And she was never afraid of her dog.

No.

And maybe her dog understood her.

Maybe the dog understood her, yes.

Did she walk the dog herself?

Oh, yea.

And of course whenever she got ill she was separated from her dog.

She was separated from her dog. She had to go to hospital. But when she had good times, you wouldn't think that she was sick.

No. There was no clue whatsoever.

No. At this time I think they didn't know much about this kind of sickness. Today I think they can have it under control with some kind of medication. But at least I know she got shock treatments at one time which didn't help much.

This was before the Anschluss. Everything before the Anschluss. After that she did not get anything.

You wouldn't know.

No, but she didn't get any treatment then.

So she got shock treatments. Yeah. That was all before the Anschluss. After the Anschluss, I think she didn't get any treatments.

You know of any other treatments that she got before?

I don't know.

She never was in the position to talk to you about--

No, when I saw her between her stays in the hospital we never talked about it. She never mentioned anything and I never asked cause anything. This was taboo, not to talk about.

Now the differences in the way in which she was treated before the Anschluss and after the Anschluss, now I know you weren't in Vienna when the Anschluss occurred, but you mentioned that she had shock treatments before the Anschluss but not afterwards.

No, my aunt said she had no treatment after that.

No treatment afterward.

She was just in the hospital. And I think it was 1940 when they told my aunt that she's much better and she can take her home in a week's time. And in this week they transferred her.

Was she ever released, sent home after the Anschluss?

I don't know. I don't know. Could be, but I don't know.

Did people know about the euthanasia?

Well, I don't know if they really knew. I think they did. But-- You didn't.

No, I didn't. Nobody talked about it much. You never talked about these things anyhow because people were afraid to say something. You were not supposed to know. I heard about Helly's death only after the war when I had contact with my aunt. I didn't know during the war that she died.

So her ashes were sent back to Vienna.

To her mother.

And then they were buried in Vienna.

She's buried in Vienna, yes, in the same grave as I think grandmother there and I don't know if her father is there or not. But she was buried in Vienna. Because my aunt got the urn with the ashes sent from Germany. No, in the letter it says what they told her she died of some kind of seizure.

Yeah, I remember there was more than one letter. But I think schizophrenic seizures was what was listed. Yeah. And then the doctors, I guess I can talk to Emme about the doctors and there were different people that were in charge.

Emme will know more, of course.

Can you think of anything else before we--

No, I really don't know anything else because, as I said, I left in '38 and didn't come back to Vienna until many years later. All I know is actually what my aunt told me and Emme told me. But Emme wasn't there either. She was already in the States. But she has all the documents because her mother left it to her.

OK, well thank you very much.

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You're very welcome.