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Helene Erman Interviews on: May 5, 14, and 26, 1981

Summary

- Born June 16, 1921 in Dortmund, Germany; youngest of five (siblings Erna, Max, Ferdinand, Leo); parents were Jacob and Dora Laufer; father died in Poland when she was two; mother operated family textile business, took care of family
- Polish in ancestry, but parents born and lived in Germany; father died in Poland in 1923 while in medical treatment; father had been injured in World War I (serving for Prussia) when he sniffed chemicals that burned his lungs
- Had live-in help named Mary, who had to leave their service when Hitler came to power and required it
- Cultural activities including singing opera and in Shulamite, but could not afford music lessons
- When Hitler came to power, mother's business no longer lucrative because people did not want to pay for her services, so she gave up the business and they lived off the revenue from an apartment building that her mother owed; lived at lower middle-class level; building was located in a gentile neighborhood; grew up primarily with all gentiles
- Mother was observant; kosher kitchen, celebrated holidays, brothers bar-mitzvahed; but accepted payments on Sabbath
- Went to a Jewish Day School; most close friends were Jewish; once Hitler came to power, gentiles did not want to play
- Brother was in "Reich's Banner"; was on wanted list of Hitler; he had to flee Germany, then went to Holland, Belgium and eventually settled in Israel; next day Hitler's men searched house
- Before Hitler, mother did business based on "abzahlungs geschäft," meaning extending credit; after Hitler came to power, people would stop paying, saying, "She's a Jew. What can she do to us?"; Jewish businesses were targeted, windows smashed, storefront demonstration of "Don't buy from Jews"; but her mother's gentile tenants paid the rent
- Family members belonged to Zionists groups, which made them targets of the Nazis; sister married a German Jew
- Her Jewish day school was not closed; did not bother Nazis, who did not want Jews in "German" schools, universities
- Zionist groups like hers were attacked by the SS or the SA when they went on field trips; her group had to decide whether to stop the field trips; they decided not to stop the field trips, but to fight with sticks/stones, which they did
- Nuremberg laws prevents Jews from doing ritually acceptable slaughters, so went without red meat unless imported
- Wanted to flee to Israel (US had quotas); went to "Hara Shara" (preparation school) in Cologne, Germany
- 1938: all Polish citizens were supposed to leave Germany, including Helene; came to door and told her she must leave; next day, on a train to "Spaunching" (sp?), Poland;

later found mother (who had been arrested and deported), and stayed in Poland for six months before mother returned to Germany to liquidate her apartment building for cash

- She, her mother separated, with Helene going to Vilna, Poland with a group of seven others, to try and get out Israel; very dangerous to get there, as the war had begun and they had to stay ahead of German soldiers.
- While escaping to Vilna as a teenager, she and her companions lived outside, in hedges and farms; then, Vilna there was a pogrom, and conditions were “terrible, terrible.” Meanwhile, her mother later disappeared from her Polish hometown of Bochnia; last knew of her, was in the Krakow Concentration Camp
- Vilna was like a Jewish refugee center; had been overrun by the Russians; lived in barracks where soldiers had once been; thousands of young Jews; four to a bed; farmed their own food; eventually obtained forged Lithuanian passport
- Was able to get out of Vilna in March 1941 by train; to Moscow, Odessa, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon and finally Israel; trip took about two or three weeks; when traveling through Syria and Lebanon, area had anti-Jewish feelings; drove through countryside being watched constantly; warned not to speak, especially German, Yiddish or Hebrew; paid Arab smuggler to take them into Israel; when got to Israel, bent down and literally kissed the ground
- When arrived, went to Bet Olim, the place where all new immigrants came; tests taken, shots given
- Attended an agricultural high school in Richon Le-Zion (not a Kibbutz-training school); received occasional Red Cross letters from her mother, but they stopped in 1943; most of her brothers and sisters-in-law had been vanishing
- Went to college in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv; majored in home economics; met future husband; married him in 1945
- Both children—Stanley (Ethan) and Dori (Dorit)—were born in Israel; but left Israel in 1954
- Was in Israel during 1948 War of Independence; did not serve in military because, at that time, women could not
- Living in Israel meant always being surrounded by enemies. Nevertheless, “in Israel I felt very strong. I am a very positive Zionist. I am a very positive Jew, so I don’t hesitate.”
- During the War of Independence, Helene’s husband and brothers were drafted
- Left Israel when husband decided that he wanted to study; moved to Chicago: “It was very, very difficult until I got used to the U.S. Even today, if someone asked me, ‘What is your homeland?’ I would not answer Germany! Never! My eyes feel very strong and very close to the Land of Israel and their wellbeing”