

Oral History: Gretl Luber, Oct. 3, 1995

Gretl Luber (née Rothschild), born in a small town near Kassel, Germany on May 19, 1921, describes: being virtually an only child, with two much older brothers who early on emigrated to South Africa; attending a Jewish school amid constant anti-Semitism, which became much worse when Hitler came to power; in 1934, the family moving to Hilversum, Holland; making many friends, the absence of antisemitism, and having a good life in Holland; planning for the family to move to South Africa; Gretl living in England from 1937-1939 in order to learn English; returning to Holland in 1939 and taking a secretarial course; the war breaking out in Holland in May 1940 and her father being forced to live in a detention camp because of his German citizenship; her father being released; Jews—particularly German Jews—being “terribly frightened”; restrictions on Jews imposed by the German occupiers, but living a reasonably normal life; being taken with her parents to Westerbork transit camp, where they remained for one year; the three being sent to Bergen-Belsen, where they remained for the rest of the war and where she encountered an uncle and aunt; the uncle dying in Belsen, and the aunt ending up going to Israel; being assigned to work in the Belsen kitchen, and being able to smuggle food to her parents; being jaundiced and then assigned to road construction; attending the mandatory daily count and witnessing people collapse and die; suffering from starvation; her father dying on February 4, 1945; on April 23, Gretl and her mother being among 2,500 camp inmates transported by cattle train to Auschwitz; the train being bombed by Russian forces; survivors foraging in nearby fields for a week until they encountered Russian forces near Frankfurt; her mother dying of typhus; only 35 people from the train surviving; widespread sickness among the survivors; the Russians and later the Americans stripping clothes and food from German houses for the survivors; being taken to an American camp in Leipzig and being hospitalized; weighing 45 pounds; being offered to go to Switzerland or Sweden to recover, but declining in order to return to Holland to try to find her relatives; going to Amsterdam; finding a cousin in Amsterdam and also finding someone she knew at Westerbork, who offered her a place to stay, food, and clothes; informing her brothers in South Africa that she was alive and wanted to immigrate, finding transportation to South Africa via Lisbon in 1946; arriving in Capetown and moving to Johannesburg, where she was reunited with her brothers and extended family members; marrying a man from Hamburg in December 1948; having two sons; moving to Australia in 1980 and building a happy life and a large family.