

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ELLEN TARLOW

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Natalie Packel
Date: November 19, 1993

© 1997
Holocaust Oral History Archive
Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

ET - Ellen Tarlow¹ [interviewee]

NP - Natalie Packel [interviewer]

Date: November 19, 1993

Tape one, side one:

NP: Friday, November 19th, 1993, and this is Natalie Packel interviewing Ellen Tarlow, for the Gratz College Holocaust Archive. Ellen, could you tell me where you were born, and a little bit about your family?

ET: Sure. I was born in Gütersloh, in Westfalen, Westphalia to you, in Germany. It is northwest Germany.

NP: Could you tell me a little bit about your family?

ET: Certainly. My parents in particular. I'm an only child, and I was born in 1927, December 18th. My father was Paul Meinberg. My mother was Ilse Meinberg, nee Cappel in English, I suppose. I might have had more siblings, but times being what they were, my parents made an early decision that that was it. And we lived alone, my parents and I, for about five years, and then joined the family home with my grandparents in a very, very large, beautiful home. I think of it now as very, very beautiful. When I was young, I thought it was a very old-fashioned house. And now I appreciate its beauty greatly. It was a three-story house with seven bedrooms. And it was a wonderful place to live. I did miss not having siblings. There were too many adults in my life. But there were a lot of cousins who visited every summer, so that made life a little more exciting for me. And that's the immediate family.

NP: What was your life like before the war?

ET: It was wonderful, and it took me many, many years to be able to say that it truly was wonderful. Because, I think that when one has escaped and is so grateful to have gotten out and to be living in this country, one tends to say, "Well, it wasn't so wonderful." But it was. And when one matures, one sees its beauty. It was a very small, magnificent little town. My son, on, during his visit there described it as a garden town. It had a lot of physical beauty, and the area in which we lived might have been compared to a small town Rittenhouse Square. There was a triangle park. The house was about a hundred and, I'm not sure, 120 or 30 years old. And, there was a maid—a cleaning lady—and a house man, and all the wonderful little extras one had then. And life was leisurely. And I enjoyed it very much. And the overtones of the Nazi regime did not become evident to me until I was about six. So having been born at the age, at 1927, at the end of that year, for me it was about 1933 or '4 until some things in the air told me that there was trouble. And I was a very articulate child and I perceived very quickly. And I quietly understood things, such as Hitler's election, quite well. My parents did not receive a gold button during the election,

¹née Meinberg.

which indicated they had not voted for Hitler. And I didn't understand it, but I knew that we were different. But it was an elegant life, a cultured life, a leisurely life.

NP: If we could go back a little bit, your father's occupation?

ET: My father was a, it's an unusual term, I guess. He exported cattle from Bavaria to Westphalia. The cattle in Bavaria was very docile, and very easily used by farmers to plow and till the fields. And so he would travel to Bavaria every winter and obtain these animals, and they would come by cattle car to our home, not...home, but two blocks in back of the property we had huge stables. And it was always a very exciting time in the winter when all the farmers came, made their purchases, and we would have twelve people to dinner every day, and there was a lot going on, and that was his livelihood. And it was third or fourth generation.

NP: Very interesting.

ET: Yes, it was.

NP: Your school experiences. Did you feel any overtones, undertones and trouble?

ET: Yes. In Germany, I'm sure you are aware, you attend public school for four years, and then you enter *Gymnasium* for boys and *Lyceum* as we called it for girls. And my first years were in public school and I do remember when I was eight that someone on the way to school called me a Jew, a young girl and...her friend. And I was very angry, and I hit her. And, when I came home from school my father took me into his study and he said, "You will not be able to do that again, because her father is an S.A. man, and he said that she can call you a Jew and you'll have to live with that. So just be passive and accept it."

NP: S.A.?

ET: S.A. *Sturm*...that was the Brown Shirts. They were the Brown Shirts. They were the rabble of Germany, and they were the Brown Shirts with the swastika. They were really his first little band of looters who ran around. They were not the refined S.S. troops, the elite. It was real-, they were really, basic citizens who dressed up in uniform and became strong men at the end of the day. So that was my first experience, and I learned then very quietly that even though I would be called a Jew, that I could not retaliate. Then, in 1938, in March, I entered *Lyceum*, which is your equivalent, I imagine, of a...well, I, it's private school and, but it is in preparation for college. You cannot enter college unless you attend a *Lyceum* and *Gymnasium*.

NP: Excuse me, that, in English that's L-Y-C-E-U-M?

ET: Yes. In French I imagine *Lyceé* would be it. Today, the schools are called *Gymnasium* for both sexes.

NP: All right.

ET: But they were separated girls and boys, and situated in different parts of the town. I loved that school. I found out later in life that when it was founded at the end of the 19th century, my aunt was the first "Jewish daughter" of the town to have attended. I was

the last. And, it was a very refined atmosphere. The teachers were hand chosen, hand chosen [chuckles] personally chosen, and I learned, I had the beginnings of language. You needed to learn two languages to graduate. You would be 19 at graduation, and I started English and the education was elitist. I loved school. I imagine that's unusual. Most kids say they hate it; I really adored it. And I did not feel any overtones there. I was the only Jewish child in that school. It was a small town. The town consisted of about 32,000 people, and there were not that many Jewish families there. So there was always an age difference of who was attending where and what. I didn't feel anything until the summer of '38 when, this was probably the most traumatic experience, other than Crystal Night. We had prepared during gym class, with swimming exercise, and we would be taken to the public pool in the summer and actually learn to swim. And I was so excited, because I really wanted to go. And the day we were to leave, the gym teacher, who was quite a lovely lady and I don't perceive her now as having been really anti-Semitic, took me aside and she said, "You will not be able to go. You know why." And I said, "Yes, I know." She said, "Jews, as you know, cannot go to public pools." Which I had known. I always thought that I could sneak through because I was with the school. And I thought maybe, and I would not be noticed. So, I went home. This was every Wednesday. The first time I went home I...just cried. And I was so lonely. And I could not believe this was happening to me. And at the same time I felt that if I would tell my parents, if I were to tell them what...had happened to me, they would feel so awful. So, I mitigated my little message and I said to my mother, "I really can't go and I guess you know why, because Jews can't go to these places." And I saw in her eyes a quiet desperation. I don't know which was worse, to see the secondary pain, or my primary pain. She took me out to a little bakery and bought me a chocolate puff. And every Wednesday this continued through the summer. I quietly walked home, and I cried, and everyone went out to swim, and my mother went out to the bakery with me. And I have never, ever gotten over that experience of total isolation. I learned to swim in this country in my early 30s. A friend taught me. And that was my greatest personal victory. And when I saw my children swim, beautifully gliding through the water—in this country—and my grandchildren, I can only think of myself as having been denied that one little thing. And that then was the major beginning. And my schooling was terminated at the end of the year. Crystal Night took place November of 1938, and two days later an edict came forth terminating all Jewish children from German schools. That was the end.

NP: Did you have any, did you attend a religious school?

ET: Oh yes, very much so. I don't know how I could have forgotten that. We had a small, lovely little synagogue. And outside the synagogue was a little house, I guess it'd be like the Little Schoolhouse on the Prairie [chuckles]. And we attended that with our rabbi one day a week, from 12 to almost 6. And at the age of 6 I was taught Hebrew, and all the stories of the Old Testament. And we also had what we called *Ivrit*, which is the Hebrew of New Israel—then it was called Palestine—just in case that we might go to Israel. So that was an in-depth education and it was reinforced at home by my grandmother, who

could read Hebrew and practice all the *b'ruchas* with me and the reading and I very much enjoyed that. And of course in 1938 the synagogues were burned and that was another termination.

NP: Did the family belong to any Jewish organizations that you remember?

ET: Well, they were all part of the synagogue.

NP: Yes.

ET: And everything went through what we called the *Chevra* in those days. The organizations were with the women, contrary to what anyone, I imagine, practices or knows about here, were the...funeral directors when someone died. The women washed the bodies.

NP: So that was the *Chevra Kaddishah*?

ET: Oh yes, absolutely. And we had a quiet organization in each town. When, very often eastern Jews traveled through destination I imagine this country or whatever, and they were quietly tended to by the women of the synagogue. They were given food, shelter, and clothing, and sent on with names to other congregations. So it wasn't as organized as I would perceive it to be here such as the Hadassah movement. It was a quiet, I guess you would call it *tzedakah*, it was just something that you, it was taken for granted that we did. And the men had what we know here as a men's club. But it was functional. It had to do with administration.

NP: And then you were saying in 1938, I...think I interrupted you.

ET: Let me think...

NP: You were talking about, then the schools were closed to Jewish children.

ET: Yes. There was an edict. And no Jewish child could attend a German school. And so I went, well, our house was burned and I think that should be covered by a separate chapter by you because it was the most intense experience of my life and...

NP: However you wish to proceed...

ET: Well, I will, maybe we should do that now because my life so radically changed after that.

NP: May I first ask you a couple of questions.

ET: Please.

NP: Did any of your family members serve in any national army? Well, I know your grandfather did. Your father, anybody else?

ET: My father volunteered at the age of 19 in World War I to fight for his country. That is a very difficult thing for my friends and relatives to understand now. But one has to realize that in 1914, one was a German Jew as one is an American Jew here, and that was our country. My family, dating, both date back a long time. My father's family dates back to 1692, and my mother's possibly the same. I have record of early 17, 18 or so. So one was German, and one fought. My father volunteered. He was in the thick of it in France. He was in the trenches. He was heavily wounded. He almost died. He almost bled to death. He had shrapnel in his back, and he was nursed back to health for one year, and he survived it. He was given the Iron Cross First Class, which is one of the highest

decorations. He was very proud of it. He thought that that would save his life eventually. Well, it did not. He was fiercely German until it was proven that he was not considered a German. But then, in our town there were two men who died for that country, actually two brothers. So everyone partook. My grandfather, too, was a cavalry officer in, he served in Russia for two years fighting the Cossacks in World War I. That was what one did.

NP: And your family's reaction then to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in '33?

ET: It was different. My mother seemed to foresee doom, black doom. [chuckles] My father was very confident. He felt very secure in a town where he had been an important person and his family had been known forever, and he thought nothing would ever touch him. The invasion of the Nazi years was a very slow insidious one. It was chipping away at one's life in ever so small an increment per day that it was not one fell swoop. And it, somewhere around the beginning of 1938, my father was called to the town and local authorities to resign from his profession because he was dealing with German farmers, and he was "contaminating their lives." I think that was his rude awakening. It was difficult for him. And so he was without a position in life. Luckily one had money to go on there, because life was so much simpler then. One didn't need all the extras that one uses today, and one could go on. It was just such a disillusionment. And then, also during the period of 1937 there was very strong anti-Semitism in the streets at night. There was singing in the streets by the S.A. and the S.S. There were songs sung that I'm sure all of you have heard, and I...can only translate them. They would sing marching through the streets at night, "When Jews' blood will run from our knives, the world will be free." One would say that we should have known at the time that it was time to go, in 1937, but not everyone had the foresight. My father still firmly believed that it was a transient kind of a thing, that it would go away. And lots of people did. He was not the only one. My mother did not think it would go away. She kept saying, "They'll kill us, all of us." And he said, "No, they will not." The final reality came in 1938 during Crystal Night. And we knew who we were, and who we were not. I don't know why our town was hit so terribly hard. It was not one of the most "anti-Semitic" towns. There were other areas, in Hestia for instance, which were known to be highly anti-Semitic.

NP: Could you spell that please?

ET: H-E-S-S-I-A. That's the American word for that province. In German it's Hessen. H-E-S-S-E-N. Kissinger's from that area. That was always considered a, an anti-Semitic area. I don't know why, but I do remember that. Our town was just mildly so. But the night of Crystal Night, oh, somewhere during, somewhere after midnight, we heard a violent crash, and we ran downstairs and we saw that our huge oak door, which is really very heavy, had been thrown into the house, into a Dutch tiled hallway. And a cold blast came in, and in came about four or five I think tall, six-foot tall, black elite guard, elite S.S. guards, the Death Brigade. They have a skull and crossbones on their lapel. Tall, young, blond. They had huge axes with them, and with the axes and with their boots they had

crashed the door open. They came through the house, tearing, banging, crashing, destroying. I think it took ten minutes, but I think it was ten years of my life. I stood on top of the stairs with my parents holding me. Luckily my grandparents were not home. They were at a rest haven in a hospital, just sort of being taken care of, a little arthritis and a little that. They were not there. And my parents held me. We were in our night clothes. We had pajamas and etcetera on. And we watched from the top of the stairs as they systematically destroyed everything that we owned. The axes were, it seemed to me, ten feet long. I don't know how long they were, but they appeared it. They raised them high, they crashed the china closets. They crashed my father's desk. They cut the wires to the electricity. They destroyed all there was. I just remember my mother cringing and screaming as every tea cup rolled by, as her life was slowly decimated and destroyed. The only room not destroyed was my room. Oh, I forgot to mention. When the first assault came, an S.S. man appeared on top of my bed, with his hand raised, with a, an axe in one and a Luger in the other. And I was not quite 11. And that is really, other than the crash of the door, which woke me. And I screamed as I saw him and I said, "Don't kill me!" And I remember, I was not quite 11, that he was a very handsome, tall blond man. And he was probably no more than 21 anyway. And he said, "I won't kill you. Just do as I say. Get up!" And that's when I joined my parents on top of the stairs. He did not touch my room. That is the only room that was untouched. But they absolutely and totally crashed and destroyed everything that not only my mother's lifetime, my grandmother's lifetime, but mothers before them had collected and favored and loved. It was a shamble, and hence the word Crystal Night. The windows were crashed, the furniture, the clocks, the pots, pans, all that there was. Wires were cut. And they left. And we were numb. There was no light. They had cut everything, the electricity. And we were in shock. My father was a very together person. My mother was more tender, I would say, and tended more towards hysteria. Of course that's understandable at this point. I was very calm. I internalize a great deal. We went into my room because it was untouched, and we said, "Well, we'll get ourselves together in the morning. We'll get out of here and we'll see what we'll do." And my mother, who always saw as my father said, "Everything is black with you," said, "You know what? I think they're going to burn this house." And he said, "Why do you say that? You always think the worst." She said, "Well, the worst has happened." So we huddled in my little bed, and about an hour-and-a-half later we heard steps in the back. We had a two-block property. It was the main house, a garden, and then a play garden and beyond that two blocks at the end of that were the stables and a huge meadow. We heard them in the back. And the next thing is what we smelled. We smelled gasoline and flames. And the staircase had been decimated to a point that there was no railing. They had cut that off. And it was strewn with glass and crystal. And there was no light. So, we smelled this suffocating odor of burning gasoline rags. What they had done is they had set fire to the drapes in each front room of the house, and the blaze was really encroaching upon us. And they laughed at us. "Jews, if you can get out, go ahead." And I remembered having just gotten a beautiful navy

camel's hair coat and I really wanted it. I ran into my closet and I got it. And I don't know by what luck God made me do it. I pulled my father's coat out. My room was the moth closet. I pulled a coat out for my father. He was in his nightshirt. I threw it to him, and I got one for my mother. I really had wanted my coat so badly that I found theirs. And we somehow got out of that burning inferno. There we were in the street around four, four-thirty in the morning, and looking back I knew that the whole thing had really...been orchestrated, because there was the town head policeman, and there were people assembled, and the fire engines had come to extinguish nothing, but to just be there and protect the neighbors' homes. That's what they were there for. And more S.S. men. And as we just had come running out of the house and the flames were really licking at it, my father was taken away, in front of my mother, and in front of me, and handcuffed, by a policeman who my grandfather had taken care of all his life because his family needed money. And, I ran up to the policeman and I said, "Why are you taking my father? He hasn't done anything!" Being not quite 11, one equates arrest with a violation. And he just smiled at me and he said, "There's nothing I can do." And my mother at that point was at near collapse. And, my father was removed. She was 36 years old. She had lost all her physical possessions, her husband taken away, and she and I stood in front of the house. Everyone removed themselves, took my father, and it was a quiet, cold, awful night. We looked at the house. It was burning. No neighbor came out. And we stood, and we were dazed. And I think, and I've said this very often, that at that point I became my mother's mother. I was the stronger. And we thought that we would go to the hospital where my grandparents were, my father's parents. And on the way to the hospital we had to pass the synagogue, which was in, absolutely engulfed in flames. That had been totally set on fire at the beginning of the burning of our house. And we knew then that this...was it, this was the time in the night that we were no longer Germans. We were nothing. We went to the hospital and Mother Superior, who we knew very well, let us in. The reason we knew the Sister so well is that my grandfather supplied them during World War I with meat for the hospital, which was hard to come by, to feed the Sisters. They had a cloistered order there, and they ran a hospital. And so they were very kind to us. They let us in, and they gave us shelter. And we joined my grandparents, and told them in guarded terms what had happened to the house. Early in the morning Mother Superior came in crying and she said, "I can't keep you. I can and I can't." She said, "The Gestapo was here. They know you're here. They said if I harbor you there will be no food supplies to my hospital, to my indigent, to my sick, and to my cloistered order. But I will do it if you want to stay." And we said, "No, we can't let that happen to you." So, she said, "I have another plan. I will give you clothing, and I'll put a veil over your head, and I'll dress you up, and you can go to the closest biggest town." Which is what we did. In our town we could never have remained anonymous, but in a larger town you could. I did not look Jewish. I had blue eyes. I had blonde hair. My mother looked French. She had spanking black hair, and a turned up nose. There was no way we would have been sighted as looking Jewish. So we went to a town

called Bielefeld, which was a major town. It's spelled B-I-E-L-E-F-E-L-D. It was a lovely town. It had about 80,000 to 100,000 inhabitants. It was a place we went to for theater and for culture. It was our New York. And we had friends there. And we were not known. So, Mother Superior gave us money and some food. And, it was only a half hour by train. We had friends there who, Jewish friends, and we went to their home. There only the department stores were burned, and the synagogue, but not a personal home.

Tape one, side two:

ET: We arrived in Bielefeld, a very beautiful town nestled in surrounding mountains, an exquisite little town. No, not town, big town. And we went to our friends who gave us shelter. They were Jewish, good friends who we had known a long time. And people began to give us some clothing. We did find out that all the men had been rounded up everywhere in Germany, anyone over 16, and taken to three different sites of concentration camps. The one designated for our area was Buchenwald. Now Buchenwald at that time was not an extermination camp. It was a camp for people who were politically opposed to Hitler, to homosexuals, to dissidents, to Gypsies, and so on. And they were simply confined there. But they had not started the killing process, as I'm sure you know, until the early to middle forties. So it was an internment concentration camp, and all the men had been rounded up. And we did find out that my father, too, had gone there, with all the men from that particular region. So we remained living with friends there for about a month. And I was taken care of very sweetly by a lot of wonderful Jewish people. Because what had happened to us was singular. None of them had their houses burnt. And having researched this later, it was very rare. Why in my town, I don't know. Another house was burnt in my town, and it, too, was an old, magnificent structure. It had served as a city hall 300 years before it was burnt. My hus-, I'm probably digressing but as I think of it, when my husband went back to Germany with me in 1985, he looked around and he said, "I can see why they hated you, and hated what you owned. This area is so beautiful where you lived, and the other area where the other Jewish house was burned was exquisite." He said, "I think it was jealousy that you owned that, and that you lived in such a little garden spot of the town." But coming back to the fact that we were singular in having had a house burnt, we did live in Bielefeld for one month. My mother was slowly wasting away, because my father was at that time gone for one month. And then the HIAS, a Hebrew International...

NP: Aid Society.

ET: Aid Society.

NP: Society.

ET: We called it HIAS.

NP: Mmm hmm.

ET: Rounded all of us up, and the local chapter was in Bielefeld where we were then living. And they told us that we could go back to our hometown, that two houses were designated as Jew houses. And that's what it was known as, *Judenhaus*, Jew House. And so we went back and there were two houses that had belonged to Jewish merchants that were given to us. The Jews who had lived there had, one had escaped to Holland and consequently the Germans found him in Holland then sent him to his death later on. The other was by a former merchant who had emigrated to the U.S. and it was still available. They were stone structures, and they obviously couldn't burn them. They had destroyed the

inside, but they had not been able to burn them. So, we were given a house and...we stayed in that house from 1939, January, until we left, August, 1941. And I lived as the only Jewish child. It seemed that right after Crystal Night a lot of the people in the town were able to go to Australia, Chile, Argentina, and so on. And we had a visa pending with the Consulate, the American Consulate. And our number, our waiting number was so high that it was not called until 1941, which made it, unfortunately, impossible to emigrate. So, we were stuck in the Jew House. And they were all older people, and I was the only child. And I grew up in a very strange world, because having been alone and only being able to relate to adults, was somewhat like the man who wrote *Rebel Without a Cause*, the psychiatrist. He also wrote *The Jet Propelled Couch*. And I always felt some identity with the people in his book. I was in an unreal world. The girls with whom I had gone to school had been forbidden to ever speak to me again. When I passed them in the street they avoided my glance. No one spoke to me. And so, at that point I was being educated in the Jew House by quite a few elderly people. And it's funny, everyone perceives education to be, one man decided that if I did not learn Roman numerals I'd never go on in life. So I learned that. My grandmother taught me geography. One little old lady taught me how to cook and bake. Someone taught me how to crochet and knit. My father thought I could never go on unless I learned Shiller and Goethe and some very fine, still quote "German literature."

NP: So he had been released.

ET: Yes, oh, I forgot.

NP: That's O.K.

ET: Sorry.

NP: No, no.

ET: All the Jewish men, if they had not died in the camps, were to be released within six to eight weeks. My father was released after six weeks, because he was the proud owner of a, an Iron Cross First Class. And Goering, at the time, decreed that, if you had been heavily wounded and had been an outstanding war hero you could get out earlier. That meant my father was able to crawl through the wired juiced up fences of Buchenwald, and take a chance of getting electrocuted or watching whether he was going to miss that precious little moment. He did make it. He was a very strong man, emotionally and physically. He was very unusual. He was an up man, too. His spirit was always up. He did, he was told he could go. He was still in his original night shirt, and the coat which I had given him. He had lost about 45 pounds. Tales that he had told us of Buchenwald later were rather awful, but he survived it. He ran through the woods of Thuringia, which is a...[unclear], a...province. And very, very cold. It's extremely cold up there. It's near Weimar, and it's a very, very cold area. He made it through the woods, and he said there were people peering out through their windows. And he said, "If ever you think they did not know what was going on," he said, "the screams of some of the people, and the escaping prisoners coming out such as I, you had to know." He hit Weimar, which is of course as you know, a major city. And he made it, there were people who whispered little things to

him again—it was HIAS who was present under cover—and said, "Go to the railway station and we'll take care of you." And there was a, an underground concourse, as I remember his tale. It's been a long time. And there were S.S. men standing there with clubs, clubbing all those who would come out to try one more time. And he dodged through. He was not hit too badly. And he was sort of shown by HIAS by a little wave of the hand which train to take. And they quietly gave him a little broth, just to sip through his mouth. It was one of the few nourishments he had had. He did make it home. One man from our town had died there, in, within a four week span. Another one came home, he was never the same. He died soon afterwards. My father was strong. He got out, he came out. He came home one night in January to the Jew House. I did not recognize him. He had a big, black beard. He'd lost about 45 pounds. But he smiled, and my mother collapsed upon him. And during that night I heard screaming. He was delirious. He had pneumonia. And without antibiotics, without any attending he got through it very nicely. And, he told about his experience there, and how they let them live in, there were layers of five slabs of wood, five high, five across. They slept there in the...dirt. And it was just like the concentration camps that you have seen later on, but they were just internment camps at that time. But they...gave them whale fish soup, with high salt content, and it made them very, very thirsty. And then they denied water to them. So they stood in the rain and they opened their mouths, and they had a "public toilet," which was a hole, with slats of wood across it, which were intermittently juiced with electricity, so that people would fall in. And these were tales he told us. And that the dead bodies were thrown to zoo animals there. And I did hear all this, at a very young age. And that if you didn't comply with rules, you were put in solitary confinement, which was a slab of concrete in which you were encased, straight up, and you could not move. And one night the Vienna Choir, I guess young men's choir, it couldn't have been boys, were at, it was actually at Christmas, sang. And my father said they had to stand outside in the cold and listen. The voices were exquisitely beautiful, but the songs they were made to sing were dirty ditties about Jews.

NP: Oh my.

ET: And they were very funny, and a lot of the Jews laughed. And the moment they laughed—they began to howl with laughter—a prison guard came from behind and hit them over the head. Because this is exactly what they wanted to elicit. So they put whispers down, "No matter how funny it is, don't laugh." So those were some of the things he had gone through. That was just part of it.

NP: Did...you hear your father talk about the Council of German Jews which was known as the *Reichsvertretung*?

ET: The *Reichs*-...

NP: R-E-I-C-H-S-V-E-R-T-R-E-T-U-N-G, and it was known as the Council of German Jews.

ET: Yes, all things were talked about.

NP: O.K.

ET: Yeah.

NP: And the Nuremberg Laws?

ET: Oh yes, I knew about them. Not in depth. I was too young.

NP: Right. And the Aryan Paragraph?

ET: No.

NP: That was in 1933.

ET: No. I have read since.

NP: That's fine.

ET: I was only five then, in '3-, no I had not. But one senses one doesn't have to know the history. The history I read afterwards. I lived through it, but I read later on.

NP: How did anyone support themselves at this time in...

ET: Afterwards?

NP: Eh...

ET: O.K.

NP: After your father came back.

ET: Right.

NP: And he was in the Jew House.

ET: O.K. Hitler confiscated all Jewish property, monies, belongings, investments, period. Because "the Jews had to pay for Crystal Night." I'm not sure how one can equate that, but we had to pay for it. So, we, and everyone else had nothing. We had nothing. We were not alone. We were then all equalized as nothing. What happened again, HIAS stepped in. We had a collective agency for clothing, because we could not buy anything in Germany. We, (A) we had no money, (B) they were going into rationing. We had no rationing cards. So we collected clothing items from each other and we rotated them. My shoes were stretched so they would last longer. Old clothing was made over for young clothing. Men's suits, for women's suits. My father was doing forced labor. He was work-, he was told to work in Bielefeld again, and this is now our concourse, our centralized place to be. He became a worker in a cement factory. He got up at five in the morning to take a six o'clock train to go to the town of Bielefeld, where he made cement blocks. He was at that time, '39, 46, -7 years old. He was doing very heavy labor. Then when that was finished they put him into a—this is the German, this is not the HIAS, this is the German authorities—he was making cigars and cigar bags in a factory. And he got paid minimally, nothing. If it hadn't been for HIAS, and Jews helping them selves out, I don't know how we would have really lived. There were always a few good Germans in my town who helped. There always are, everywhere, and they were definitely. They brought food at night and left it at our doorstep. There was one very courageous couple who didn't care what anyone said about them, a German couple who would have us over to dinner. And consequently, after my parents and I left, and I'm jumping ahead, but this particular couple took my grandmother, who had to be left in Ger many, and put her on the boxcar, to send her to Theresienstadt. They had the courage, the grace, and the humanity,

to take this woman between themselves and kiss her and walk her up. They were in grave danger of being killed. They did it anyway. Many years later my son, as a twenty-year-old, with his fiancée, visited them, in gratitude and with love. They were pure people, which was very unusual. And they did give us sustenance in the Jew House. I don't really know how we lived. There wasn't much, as, I don't...

NP: And...

ET: Is...

NP: They took your grandmother...

ET: Well...

NP: To [unclear].

ET: No, the assembling place for the remaining Jews...

NP: After you...left.

ET: This is after we left, and I think this was the earlier part of 1942, all were exterminated in the camps. We were the only people who got out of the Jew House—my parents and I. In both Jews Houses the people who inhabited these houses all died in the camps, including my grandmother. And, they were rounded up at different times and told to come to the railway station, where the cattle is. Not where people go, but where cattle is put in—a very familiar site to us because we were in that business, and always watching for cattle to disembark twenty or forty heads, and this is eventually where my grandmother went, into a cattle car. And she did not know her destination. It's a good thing she did at that point not know it. But they knew she had to go there, this couple, and they walked her there, right through the streets. These are acts of courage that you hear about once in a while, as you know in France and in Belgium, they happened everywhere.

NP: Very Righteous Gentiles.

ET: Oh very much. They were just pure, godly people. That's it. And there were a few farmers who left food at our doorstep. There was a wonderful doctor, who bought the Jew House we were in, so that we wouldn't have to worry, and we lived free. He was our doctor. He was wonderful. There were some, there was a delicatessen which, when we would go with our little stamps, rationing stamps, they were marked "Jew." We got very little of anything. They always threw something in the bottom of the bag for us. There were some good people. But they were in such a minority. So then my life in the Jew House took a different turn. For the first three months, and then my father's...eventual return, we settled into some order. We had one kitchen and we had one bathroom. We were all assigned rooms. And we had to cook together. That's a tough thing to do. We managed it, and on top of it, HIAS called us and said that the Baltic Sea coast was being freed of Jews because Jews could have possibly have some power as spies. And we had to incorporate those people into our houses. We had very little room. So we inherited a couple from the Baltic Sea. And they were put into the Jew House, into the one remaining room that we used as a community living room. So now we no longer had a living room. We only had our bedrooms. Somewhere in 1939, about three or four months after Crystal Night, the Rabbi

in Bielefeld, again the central town for us for all activity, started, a school for the remaining children of the entire area. A brave young man he was. He took an old storefront that had belonged to a Jewish family and he made a school for us, eight grades. He had a wonderful idea what he thought should be taught. It was all his idea. And, first of all, the older children had to teach the younger children, so I, being 11, was sort of in the middle but I took the six-year-olds. He taught us Hebrew again, very severely so, and the Sephardic Hebrew, too. He taught us Heine, the poet, some math, wonderful writing samples. It was very important. And then he took us into a little corner, and he attempted to do some gym with us. When I think of it now it's really funny, but he was great. He did a wonderful job with us. And when I finally arrived here in 1941 and I started school in October, I would honestly say I missed three years of school. But I had some very eclectic learning in my brain [chuckles]. Many people had put forth some great thinking, and thoughts. And I lived by that.

NP: Excuse me, did you, there was, you knew that you were coming to the United States. There was no other destination ever considered?

ET: You say I knew. I hoped.

NP: You hoped.

ET: I lived for that hope. We had gotten a registration number² in Stuttgart, which was the regional American Consulate for our area, in 1938, in August, when Germany, Czechoslovakia and the world was on fire. My father said, "I think we better get a waiting number." And I remember our number. It was 16,527. The people who got out in March of '39, their number was 5,000 and 6,000. So that will give you an idea. And I still facetiously thank our President Roosevelt for not enlarging the quota, and I would like to say to him if he could hear me, "You cost me three terrible years." If he had enlarged the quota the way we had done later for Hungary, for Vietnam, and for Cuba, I would have been out of there sooner. But we had to wait for that number to be called. This had nothing to do with Germany. This was purely the U.S. Immigration. It had to do with that. You could go to what was called a transit country, somewhere else, and wait out your number. Your number would always be a German number, a German waiting number. No matter where you went, you were under the German quota. We had relatives in Haiti, and my father wrote to them, "Could you get us to Haiti?" We had a cousin in the United States who was well monied. He'd left Germany in '28. He was a banker. He must have foreseen things that no one else foresaw. He left Europe in '33 and settled in the U.S. He was one of the few clairvoyants, I would say. We approached him. He needed to send money to Haiti for us to go there. He sent money to Haiti. We had passage on a ship. This was '39, in May. And then we got the glad "news" that the Haitian government had taken the money and had a big party with it, and had a drinking party. There was no more money, and there was no more passage. *A propos*, not much has changed in Haiti till now, has it?

²Quota number

NP: Are they still there in Haiti?

ET: They're dead, but their children are living here now. Their daughters are a bit younger than I. I am, I'll be 66 and their daughters are probably in their 50s. And there's no one there any more. They made a literal fortune there, in the mahogany industry, Sisal and Mahogany. So, no Haiti.

NP: Were there relatives that remained, other than your grandmother, in your town, or, I mean, in Germany?

ET: Oh yes. I have given a rough count. That I know of, about 45 of my relatives died in the camps. But there are only a few who count, and the only one who will ever count is my grandmother. I'll never get over it, ever. She raised me. She was more, my mother was a very bright, intelligent, vivacious woman, but my grandmother, actually it was her mother-in-law, was my sustaining force in life. She was my security. She was my everything. She was bright. She was tri-lingual. She spoke English, French, and German. Her English was just fair, but she could write it. Her French was fluent. She was my mentor. She was unusual. She was strong. She was bright. She could not come over because we would never have been able to get a visa. She was too old. This country looks at people, looked at people then, as a possible burden to the State. We had just here come out of a Depression, and that was understandable in that sense. But she would never have been got, able to have gotten a visa, so she was never on the application. I think we closed our eyes to the fact, not I, I think my father had to, that he knew that she would have to be left one day. And I have often resented that in my father, until I spoke with my son. He is 42 now. He has two children. He said, "What do you think I would have to do one day? Would I not have to leave you as much as I love you? For the sake of the children. And the children come first." I understand that. But, I can never make my peace with it. So, anyway, we did not go. I'm probably jumping the gun.

NP: That's all right. That's fine.

ET: We did not go to Haiti. We knew then that this was it, and we hoped and hoped and hoped our number would soon be called. We hoped. The points of exit in Germany were lessening, as Hitler rampaged his way, or ravaged his way through Europe. Every country fell, all the Scandanavians, the Netherlands, Poland, and in the end, France. So the ports of exit in Germany and all Europe were closed. We were still not getting any news from the, Stuttgart as to when we would be called. In January of 1941, after having been in the Jew House for two years, we got a letter from the Consulate. "You are to appear April 21st for your visa, for examination for the visa." HIAS got us the train tickets. It was a far trip. It's a, Stuttgart is in the south of Germany. We went, and we were treated by the American Consulate very much like the Germans treated us. I think they had learned German ways already. I don't know what it was. They were mass processing us. They took 49 fingerprints of me at the age of 13.

NP: Hmm.

ET: What criminal I could have been at that time I have no idea. We were given a sheet of paper, how to behave for the day. We would be there the whole day. We were examined by a doctor. I was 13 and some. I was menstruating the second time in my life, and I had to walk naked in front of this doctor. The indignancies [indignities?] of life. So did my mother. And we had to do certain exercises so he could see how well we were — raise our arms and our legs, and walk single file in front of him. And I think the most comforting thing my mother said to me was, "Ellen, pretend he is not there. Just walk. We may get out of this country." And so I did. It's a very tender age, at 13.

NP: Oh indeed it is.

ET: To be young, and also to be in flux at the time. It was very difficult. I didn't like the man. He was very military. He barked at me in German what I should be doing, lifting my arms. But I took my mother's advice. I thought of better things. And then we got dressed and there were...at least 50 people who had been called up that day. And then we were called to the Consul's office. He was a young man, and I think today I would say he was about 40, a handsome dark man, with a little moustache. And he looked at me, and he said, "Are you well?" And I said, "I think so." I wasn't sure how to answer him. And he said to my parents, "Are you aware that your daughter has a heart murmur and she may not be able to get a visa?" My mother at that point was just about to slip under her chair. And my father had a fantastic command of the German language. He was very bright. Instead of saying, "She doesn't," he said, "To the best of my knowledge I am not aware of it." He didn't want to offend the possible new country's emissary. And, the Consul looked at us, and he said, "I will have her x-rayed. And I will see what happens. But if she doesn't pass it, she will stay here, and you may go." My mother was not to be dealt with at that point at all. She was almost comatose again. We did go in for an x-ray. And we were told it was a lung x-ray. We came back and at this point we were I think-