

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HERTA BEESE

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Hanna Silver
Date: October 12, 1983

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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HB - Hertha Beese¹ [interviewee]

HS - Hanna Silver² [interviewer]

Date: October 12, 1983

Tape one, side one:

HS: When and where were you born?

HB: I'm a Berliner. I was born September 10, 1902. I had an older and a younger brother and a sister.

HS: Were your parents politically active?

HB: Yes. When they were young and working they were active in the trade unions, and through the trade unions they came to the Social Democratic Party [SPD]. At that time women were not permitted to organize or to be politically active. This was during the Kaiser regime and the "Anti-Socialist Law."

HS: Can you tell me something about your political and social education before the Hitler years?

HB: Yes. Even as a little girl I was exposed to the political activities of my parents and experienced everything with them. I must have been ready to absorb all this. All visitors who came to our house were functionaries of the SPD [Social Democratic Party] like August Bebel, Marie Juchacz, Louise Schroeder, etc. [who after 1945 became Mayor of Berlin]. I admired all of them.

HS: What kind of schooling did you have?

HB: I went to an elementary school for girls. At that time these were separated according to gender. All the children of my neighborhood were my school friends.

HS: How long did you go to this school? Until your fourteen's--or sixteen's...

HB: No. Until my tenth year. Then I went to a high school until I was 16. Then my schooling came to an end because all the teachers were drafted into the army [World War I].

HS: This was the first World War between 1914 and 1918.

HB: So I took evening courses and later on went to the university.

HS: What was your attitude towards Jews in your early youth? How many Jews were in your class? Were there just a few or many?

HB: When I look back, I know today who was a Jew, but at the time I did not know who was a Jew and who was not. We did not differentiate at that time. We loved all our friends regardless of their religion. To my parents' home came many friends and when I look back I realize that a number of friends were Jews. For instance, our family doctor was Jewish; his whole family visited us, he had four sons all very nice and intelligent boys.

¹née Scholz.

²This interview was conducted in Berlin, Germany in German and later orally translated by the interviewer, Hanna Silver and Edith Millman.

The oldest son became the solo cellist at the German Opera House. The only trouble that he had with his Jewishness was that he had to marry a Jewish girl. His uncle was Edward Bernstein, a well-known member of the Cabinet. Another significant member of their family was Dr. Silberstein. Also a friend of ours. We did not realize that there was a difference. Only when the Nazis came to power we found out who was Jewish. When the persecution of the Jews began and they emigrated, only then did we find out who was Jewish.

HS: Do you remember what was the composition in your school? You mentioned before that most of your classmates were Protestant.

HB: We had in Prussia a so-called "church-law." Everybody who did not have another religion had to belong to this denomination, the so-called *Landeskirche* [church of the land]. I was not baptized and therefore had to belong to this *Landeskirche* and had to participate in Protestant religious instruction. Who had *not* to participate was one Jewess an extremely nice girl, and three Catholics. It made no difference to us. We were all good friends.

HS: So the composition was 97% with one Jewish and three Catholics.

HB: Altogether we were eleven girls, and there was one Jewish girl among us.

HS: And your close friends probably had the same attitude. When did this change?

HB: It did not change. In 1933 existed still our "Abraham Circle." Rudolf Abraham was one of our Jewish students, who completed his studies, a very bright and intelligent man. He had gathered us together and we were a mixed study group. Today I could not tell you who in this circle was Jewish and who was not, because in 1933 we *all* were persecuted, whether Jewish or Socialists. So if somebody was persecuted it could have been that he was a Jew or a Socialist--we did not know *why* they were persecuted. They either disappeared or emigrated.

HS: How was it after 1933, after Hitler came to power, with you and your friends? What happened to all of you?

HB: Most of my friends remained steadfast, they showed resistance, everybody in his own way. We had grown into a strong group of friends, had children and came to our meetings as "family." We all had become quite poor, because we all were unemployed.

HS: Did you lose your jobs because of the political attitudes?

HB: Yes. Because of our political orientation and membership in the Social Democratic Party we all lost our jobs immediately. We had to live without any public support. We did not get one penny from public funds. I, for instance, addressed envelopes by the thousands so I could stay home and bring up my two children, since I would not let others bring them up. Others, for instance, the chairman of a union from Hamburg, moved to Berlin and was peddling coffee and sugar. And we bought from him more than we could use or pay for--so we resold it in our neighborhood.

HS: I remember that Annedore Leber [the wife of Julius Leber who was killed after the plot on Hitler in 1944] started a business selling coal to create a few jobs and help some of the friends.

HB: Yes, I remember. And Walter Wegner had a little wagon such as children play with; he peddled cabbage and other vegetables. He had been one of the best trade union secretaries in the country. But nobody cared at that time. My father had lost his position as mayor and received only a few *Marks* as disability compensation. He rented a little plot of land and grew some vegetables and then peddled them.

HS: And did you manage somehow?

HB: Yes. And my stepfather was selling insurance from house to house and earned just enough to pay the rent for a small apartment that they moved into. I also had to move into a small apartment. We all had only one room and a kitchen, so we managed to earn enough for rent and food.

HS: What can you tell me about your experiences with the Gestapo?

HB: Already before the Nazis took over in 1933 I had a search-raid of my home. Next door lived friends of mine. He was the chairman of an anti-fascist organization. His place was raided before the Nazis took power. He saved himself by jumping out the window, but he was unable to take his baby with him. It was left in this chaos that the Nazi hordes left behind--the worst kind, in contrast to other Nazis who demonstrated their power with revolver and billy clubs, these hordes looted and destroyed everything. The next morning somebody brought the baby to my door and I kept it for a while. This is why my place was raided for the first time. They questioned me what I had to do with the anti-fascist organization. My answer, "The mother of the baby was a school friend of mine and my friendship remains." Then the second event I witnessed: across the street lived a school principal. He had joined the SAP, that is, Socialist Workers Party which was ideologically left of the Social Democratic Party.

HS: What does SAP stand for?

HB: *Sozialistische Arbeiter Partei* [Socialist Workers Party]. We heard cries for help from the wife. The SA [Storm Troopers] dragged her husband from their apartment. Who could help her? Shortly thereafter she received a message that her husband had fallen down a flight of stairs while trying to escape and that he was dead. The third event: a young girl put Communist leaflets through mail slots in the doors and an S.A. trooper shot at her through the door and hit her in the head. These were the first events I witnessed and that was even before the Nazis took over the government officially. Then we had elections in January.

HS: That was January 1933?

HB: Yes January 1933 and this is when we had some disappointing surprises: some former Social Democratic friends met us in the street and said, "It is about time that you switch." From then on we ignored them and never talked to them again. The rest of us stayed in contact. That was one reason that I did not change my residence. I felt that if I

would move to another area I would not know anybody there and nobody would know me and my attitude. This way it was easier for all of us to stand our ground together.

Our family doctor was a Jew. He thought nothing would happen to him because the Nazis had announced that those who had participated in World War I and had been decorated would be spared. Dr. Florsheim *was* spared for a few weeks and months, but then his windows were broken, his door was pelted with dirt, so that one day he decided to emigrate to United States, with only ten *Marks* in his pocket. Before that, from Hitler's seizure of power until his emigration, he helped us with medicine. And also, something that I value tremendously, some of my friends were pregnant and did not want to bear children for the Nazis. Dr. Florsheim helped them with medication to have abortions. This was quite a sacrifice for those women.

Then I myself was drawn into the resistance work through a Jewish family and also the "Red Help." I always took my children along in a baby carriage--though they were actually too old for that--and we met in garden plots of friends. I had a friend who is today 96 years old; he later became a school principal and went to Dresden.

HS: What was his name?

HB: Gustav Betlow. He is quite a wonderful man and we remained good friends. He came always with a butterfly net pretending to look for butterflies. This is how we were able to hold out. But the owners of these garden plots who had harbored us, most perished.

HS: They were arrested?

HB: Yes.

HS: Because they helped you?

HB: Yes. One woman returned after more than 10 years after she had been incarcerated from 1933-1943.

HS: Was she in a prison or concentration camp?

HB: Yes. But first she was in jail near Potsdam, then in a concentration camp until she was liberated in 1945. She came back an old woman. Some of these honest friends are still around today and I still have a lively correspondence with all of them. We were never separated, not even during the Nazi period. Some of them were unfortunately active in the East as Social Democrats. They were not taken to a concentration camp but suffered their persecution until 1945. When the Russians arrived they were deported to Siberia.

HS: Did they ever come back?

HB: Some did come back after eleven to twelve years in Siberia. I was able to send them packages.

HS: Were they permitted to receive packages and did they actually get them?

HB: Yes. I was permitted to send one package per month. So I sent to each one a package every fourth month and they had to share it, so that everybody got something every month. They did share every package they received.

HS: Were they all together that they could do that?

HB: Yes, they all worked in a lead mine. After 1933 all our friends worked together in order to build up some form of resistance. Some foolish errors were made by some friends. For instance, some honest people kept a list of their donations with all full names and how much they had given. It was not much because we all didn't have much to give. Some of these lists fell into the hands of the Gestapo who found cause for another search of our homes. When they asked me what I had to do with these lists I answered, "Sorry, I didn't even know what the money was collected for. I was sure it was for one of *your* organizations." So we couldn't do this any more. From then on we worked only on a "friendship" basis.

HS: Was this only on a very small scale?

HB: No, I would not say that. It was all over Berlin. As an example, we would tell one friend that he has to renovate his kitchen now. So four of us went to clean his kitchen.

HS: To paint, etc.

HB: Yes and another one "needed" his garden worked over, so three or four went there. We drank some coffee, *ersatz* coffee and worked in the garden. Then we started to make excursions, we bought some used bicycles in the Münzstrasse which actually used to be a Jewish neighborhood.

HS: Near the Alexander *Platz*?

HB: Yes, the Alexander *Platz* and people who still managed to live there, those who were not yet deported [because deportations were done sporadically, some were deported some stayed behind a while longer], were selling cheaply different implements which they had pulled out from their cellars and basements. Then we met on bikes, we arranged to meet on Sundays in Bernau, the gates of Berlin, first four, then six and then eight or more of us. We had discovered an island in the middle of a lake which belonged to a farmer. It could be reached only by boat and the boat was always on the island when we were there.

HS: So you were safe?

HB: Yes, safe. The farmer built huts out of straw for us and we could sleep in them, on the floor. We met there on weekends and we were safe. At night we crossed the lake with the boat and went home on our bikes. So we always looked for and found means of evasion. In the Nazi years, from 1933 to 1945, I did not experience a single betrayal.

HS: Was this the same group that helped Jews to escape?

HB: No. These people were too poor and lacked influence.

HS: How did the people [Jews] whom you helped get to you? How did they know of you?

HB: I do not know that. One night about 12:00, my doorbell rang and in the dark hallway stood a couple. "May we enter?" I looked at them and said, "Yes, come in." I kept them for a few days. I never asked them what their name was. I knew the lady. She was an actress at the German Opera House in Berlin. The difficulty was to find food for them.

HS: You had hardly enough for yourself and your family?

HB: Yes. So I went from one friend to the next. One gave me three potatoes, another one a little bag with flour, etc. So we kept house together so to speak.

HS: Everybody had rations which were very small.

HB: Yes, and I had two grown children.

HS: You did not mention as yet what the Gestapo did with your children.

HB: This comes later. What was dangerous that neighbors could look into my windows. One day two ladies who lived across the street rang my bell. Both were members of the Nazi Party. They said, "Mrs. Beese, we like you very much but we have to tell you, the ladies should not open the window. One day there is a redhead, another day a brunette or a blonde. We know for sure that you have different ladies in your place but we do not want to betray you. But please see to it that they do not open the window." So I told everybody who came to me not to open the window.

There was an apartment on the ground floor that belonged to a Jewish family with whom I am still in touch. The daughter is now a member of the Parliament, and the son at the German Radio. Both earned their PhD's after 1945. They had to give up their apartment. The woman who was Jewish had married an Italian who was also Jewish. The Nazis found out and started to harass them. They left Berlin and left us their apartment as still *their* residence. We used it as a "hotel," as a hideout. We closed the shutters permanently and we put up once a couple, once a single, once several people at the time, etc.

HS: How often did these people come? Was it on a regular basis or was it unorganized?

HB: It was somewhere organized.

HS: Then did you not know who exactly sent them?

HB: No. We could only guess that it was the "Help" organization. As a matter of principle I never asked their name. I had, after all two children who went to school. If they ever would be questioned they could truthfully say they did not know. To me it was important that my children experienced at first hand and knew everything, so that they would never become friends of the Nazis. On the other hand, they should never know a name or other details. They could be beaten, but they never could give away anybody.

HS: Do you have any idea what kind of professions these people had?

HB: They were journalists, actors, and I suppose also--there was one lady who had a lot of jewelry and I told her she shouldn't wear all that jewelry, that it would be suspicious to be seen with all that precious jewelry. They had a jewelry store. But it had been looted and they were able to save only very little. Somebody else was from a big textile business, a Mr. Feder. They came from all professions; most were intellectuals.

HS: Did you know where they were going? Were they on the way to Switzerland?

HB: Yes. When they came to me they knew already that within three or five days they would proceed, helped by an illegal group of actors. I remember the name of one of

them. He is still alive and lives now in West Germany. I am not going to mention his name. There are still many Nazis in West Germany and some could harm him.

HS: In other words, all people who came to you were already on the way to Switzerland and knew that it would take only a few days to get out of Germany. There were no *long* stays with you?

HB: It was organized in Switzerland that they had to report to certain people in certain places. Nothing was written down. They had to memorize everything. They were led across the mountains on trails to Switzerland.

HS: Do you know how many of these people made it safely to Switzerland?

HB: No. Only three years ago I learned something I did not know before. There was an exhibition about the Nazi situation in Switzerland. There was a Gestapo in Switzerland.

HS: Inside Switzerland a Gestapo with Swiss citizens?

HB: Yes!

HS: And did they work together with the German S.S.?

HB: Yes.

HS: Did they operate especially in border areas?

HB: Yes. They were surveying "suspicious" people within Switzerland. So they had also an S.S. in Switzerland and persecuted the Jews there, too.

HS: Do you still have contact with some of these people?

HB: Yes. I have still contact with Bruno Schoenland and his family who emigrated, without permission of course. He was a worker-poet. He has since died but his daughter is still alive, and her husband and children live in London, where they had gone from Switzerland. Then still alive is the wife of Fritz Segal, also in London now. He had been editor of the *Vorwaerts* [*Forward*].

HS: Did you know them before they came to hide with you?

HB: Yes. I knew him as editor and as a friend.

HS: And did they come to you so that you should hide them?

HB: Yes. They live in London now. And she is still very active in the Federation. Then I know the daughter of Hugo Hase. She lives in Israel now. She lived already then in Israel, and she helped many friends to get to Israel and to get them settled there.

Then we had non-Jews who lived here illegally. For example, one of my colleagues, as I learned later, had the best connections to Israel, all "illegal"; she has been honored in Israel for that. She was also a friend of the daughter of Hugo Hase. We had a great number of people who were not Socialists, who were not Jews, who were not persecuted and who could have worked without a problem, who did not want to become members of any Nazi organization. They helped to a great extent in our illegal work.

HS: Did you know of the existence of other groups like yours?

HB: Yes. I estimate that we had in Berlin about 25 to 30 such groups.

HS: Do you know of any Jews who survived in Berlin who could not emigrate?

HB: No, I do not know any.

HS: So they all stayed only a very short time with you?

HB: Yes. I do not know how many were couples where both were Jewish. In this case one of our people got them out. But this was not a great number. Of those who survived--one of my friends, Herbert Wollstein and his wife. His wife was so-called "Aryan." He was Jewish,

HS: A so-called *Mischehe* [mixed marriage].

HB: Yes, this was a mixed marriage. He had to wear the Jewish star. When we met in the street and I saw him several times with the Jewish star, he always tried to cover it, but I said to him, "You don't have to do that, Herbert. Show it. Let people see that you have to wear it." But he was afraid that I would get into trouble and wouldn't talk to him any more. I told him that I would not get into trouble for speaking with a friend who had to wear a star. It was not so that people with the Jewish star were persecuted. There were those who persecuted and those who were active.

[End of tape one, side one in German.]

Tape one, side two:

HS: What made you risk your life, your freedom, your children, in order to help others, many of whom were even unknown to you?

HB: I did not do it for any logical or rational reason but simply from my heart. I had so many Jewish friends, so many men and women of Jewish background whom I admired that they never could be my enemies, they never could be despised by me; and my friends felt just the same. We all had the same attitude--it did not matter whether Jew, Christian or whatever--who is our friend remains a friend forever. And so it is to this day. There is no separation for us for reasons of religion or other beliefs. My heart belongs today to my many Jewish friends just like in those days. We could not have done otherwise. Only a few days ago I asked my daughter, "Were we not lucky that we were not caught, that we ourselves were not apprehended and persecuted and killed like so many others?" I admired the older Jewish people whose ideological apprentice I was, who were our ideological leaders, whether it was Rathenau or Rosa Luxemburg or Hugo Hase--I don't think that at the time I realized they were Jews. And if I had known it would not have bothered me. And then I had all those young friends of whom I knew they were Jews.

HS: But you have helped many others who were not your friends, who were perfect strangers who rang your bell. And you helped them just the same as you helped your friends.

HB: Yes. But the moment they were persecuted they became friends.

HS: What was your experience during all those Hitler years? Do you think that the average German did not like Jews, or even hated them, as a group? Or were they liked and treated as individuals?

HB: The way I felt, I think most Berliners felt about Jews: "He is a Jew? I did not know." Before 1933 we were so mixed that we could not differentiate. We went to school together, we worked together. One was shocked when one heard that the father of a family had been taken away. "Why?" "He was a Socialist or a Communist or a Jew, for no other reason."

HS: But you did not know of any hatred against Jews before Hitler?

HB: If there was here and there some dissatisfaction it was when somebody bought or sold something and was dissatisfied. Well let them fight over a pair of trousers or something like that--this did not interest me.

HS: When did it start that people did not like the Jews during Hitler [the Hitler period]?

HB: Not at all.

HS: With all those speeches of Hitler and the inciting articles in the Streicher newspapers, the *Stürmer*, did this make people change their attitude and they began to despise the Jews?

HB: This did not exist at all. It was only the beneficiaries of the S.A., the S.S. and the Nazi Party, who for profit and power and position acted like that and who were afraid that in case of a change if the Socialists returned to power they would lose all that. There was no *genuine* resistance against Jews, at least not in Berlin.

HS: When did you think that the average population learned what was going on in the East or even in our town, that people were arrested and killed, starved and froze to death? When did they hear about any of this?

HB: In all parts of Berlin in every street it became known when this one or that one had been picked up. The trucks that came to pick people up waited in the street and neighbors had to see it. But in the beginning nobody knew, however, that these were Jews *only*. Everybody assumed that the Nazis were picking up their opponents.

HS: Did they not pick up their opponents?

HB: Oh yes, they did. But it was not known then that this concerned Jews only. Therefore, there was no position taken by the Berliners to the persecuted Jews. But they were enraged that people who had not committed any crime were picked up. This included people who had only been members of another party but the Nazi Party.

HS: Can you tell me what you remember about the *Kristallnacht*?

HB: This was the first time in Berlin that it became public knowledge that there was a persecution of Jews going on. This was when people learned that it was not a case of political opponents but of Jews only. I heard about it from neighbors and took my bike and went to Münzstrasse [the area near Alexander *Platz*] where there were still Jewish stores which I did not know for certain, but there was talk that some Jewish merchants were still there. When I got there I did not find an unusually large number of people. They were neighbors. They were standing on the sidewalk looking on in disbelief. They could not quite comprehend what had happened. When I looked at their faces I saw that they were frightened, terrified, their eyes wide open. They looked not comprehending.

HS: These were neighbors...

HB: People on the street. Some were watching from their windows.

HS: Did you hear how they smashed the windows of the stores?

HB: Yes. The S.A. Storm Troopers carried billy-clubs even before 1933, the same clubs our police carried. These clubs were the first weapons against our own people; this was before the Nazis took power. When they saw...

HB: ...two or three of our Social Democrats, they beat them up. For instance, once they knocked out my brother on the subway. His eyes were badly hurt. He had to go to the hospital and have several eye operations. Fortunately he didn't lose his eyesight. I have photos of him in the hospital dressed in his railway uniform wearing eye bandages.

HS: So on *Kristallnacht* the S.A. drove up to the stores with their trucks?

HB: Yes, they came with trucks. They outright looted. First they smashed the windows, then they emptied the window displays, then they stormed into the stores, beat up the owners. They were on the floor. People said to each other, "This is awful. Keep quiet

or they do the same to you and take you away." The Berliner knew that this was wrong; they were enraged but they couldn't show it because they were scared that this will happen to them.

HS: Were there certain areas in Germany where the attitude towards Jews was more humane than in others, for instance, in small towns vs. larger cities?

HB: Once I was in Berchtesgaden--Hitler's turf. The S.S. walked on the sidewalk and we, the people, had to walk on the street. *Only* the S.S. was permitted on the sidewalk. It made no difference if it was a Jew or not, we had to walk in the street.

HS: How did this impress the people of Berchtesgaden? Did they accept this as something normal?

HB: No, they just did not leave their house unless they *had* to go somewhere. The others stayed in their homes and let the gangs march by in Berchtesgaden?

HS: Was it not that Hitler had many friends there? Was it not his stronghold?

HB: No, the native population, the farmers, were not his friends. Since my son had pneumonia I had to take him for his cure up to a height of 3000 meters. Otherwise I would not have gone to that place. We stayed in the house of a farmer. His son went to work and when I asked him a few days later what kind of work he was doing he answered, "I have to carry stones for these scoundrels up there." I asked what scoundrels? He said, "Nazis! Göring is building a hunting lodge for himself, and we have to haul the stones up the mountain. We were picked up in the fields or on the street and have to work for Göring and carry stones and cement up the mountain." This is how the farmers and natives felt. They observed what was going on with the young S.S., etc. who became diplomats. They saw the diplomats arrive from all over the world and they were outraged when they saw representatives from Europe and all over the world going up the hill to Hitler by elevator. And they, the mountain peasants, had to do virtually slave labor below. They had to suffer in other ways, too. Much was taken away from them. The young ones were drafted and couldn't farm their land any more. I saw for myself that they were not enthusiastic.

HS: Did it happen to you that an official or Nazi behaved decent to you or to Jews?

HB: Oh yes. When we entered an office you had to say, "*Heil* Hitler." Among our friends it was the rule not to say "*Heil* Hitler." I and many of my friends did it like this: I opened the door and said, "Good day, is this the right place for...?" And so we were inside without the "*Heil* Hitler." Several officials on the other side realized who was not for Hitler and did not react. Of course one could plead the matter much more relaxed with them than with officials who hollered, "Don't you know that you have to say, '*Heil* Hitler'?"

HS: Do you think that there were many who went along to keep their job who were not Nazis?

HB: I know only that all teachers and many, probably 90% of all government employees were members of the Nazi Party but they had nothing to do with the persecution of people. The persecutions were only executed by S.S. and S.A. Storm Troopers. Many

belonged to the party because they were afraid to lose their jobs and their wives belonged for the same reason. I had no friend who belonged to the Party, as a matter of principle.

HS: Could you draw any conclusions from the number of flags hanging from the windows, or were people forced to fly them?

HB: People hung the flags because of fear. I did not do it. So one day I had the visit of the Gestapo: "You have to hang the flag out! The *Führer* wants it!" I told them that I would not do it, that I do not own one. So they offered to bring me a flag. I told them not to bring one, that I will do it myself as soon as all my friends have returned from the concentration camps and jails. Only then will I say, "*Heil* Hitler." They left--and I was amazed that they did not take me along.

HS: Do you believe that Hitler's antisemitism which he preached in all his speeches contributed to his big election victory?

HB: No.

HS: What was the reason?

HB: Fear. And we had an enormous unemployment. Hitler knew the people who helped him to power were the capitalists who had made money making arms before, that they wanted to get rich again on a new war, like Krupp, etc. Also, we didn't have an army, and all the high military men with their medals and their uniforms, like Ludendorff, etc., wanted to get to power again and this could happen only through Hitler. Therefore they helped Hitler into the saddle. Only with their help could he succeed, become the *Führer*. Few others benefitted.

HS: How would you describe the attitude to the Jews today and to the crimes of the Hitler era?

HB: We who listened to foreign radio like the BBC had heard about it and we saw the Jewish people who were liberated by the Allies come home. We carried the news to the others. We told others what had happened, how many Jews had perished and also how many non-Jews. People did not want to believe it. They thought it impossible that such an enormous number had perished. And we said, "Even if they had killed only one hundred--it would have been too many. One *cannot* kill people..." But nobody believed that so many perished. There is something important that I want to tell the young generation: the children of the Nazi criminals did not believe that their parents could have done something that terrible.

HS: The parents surely never told them about it.

HB: No. They told them that Jews were no good, that they cheated in business. And all the things that Jews have been accused of doing, etc. I once talked to the son of a high-ranking Nazi. He asked me to tell him the truth. "Was my father a criminal?" And I said, "Yes!" He said, "I love him. He was so good to me. I had such a happy youth. I cannot believe that he was a criminal." In my opinion there is a strong possibility that several children of Nazis do not believe that their fathers did it.

HS: And how many of these have been enough influenced to still believe in Nazism?

HB: It is possible that some of them say that those who came after Hitler also were criminals. They killed, they hanged, they jailed the Nazis. They may have an antipathy towards us. Criminal elements moreover who think that if they helped the Nazis to return to power they might benefit. Only a few, a very low, insignificant number. No German listens to them.

HS: Do you know how much of the Hitler period is being taught today in schools and universities as "history?" And how is it being taught, true to the facts?

HB: I am convinced, yes. I was myself a teacher in the school system at the beginning of the post war period. We had to consider who was harmless enough to be retrained. All teachers had had to belong to the Party, to the NSDAP. The Allies, including the Russians, told us, "You may keep 20% of the teachers; 80% have to go. With these 20% you have to make a fresh start." And we did just that. Then came applications from people who had been teachers before Hitler, whom we could rehire. And then there were volunteers who offered to teach lower grades so that we could build up the schools without Nazis, and soon we could do without the 20% who had been tolerated because we needed them. This has been carried through until new teachers had been trained. These new teachers were still so impressed by the change in political attitude from Nazism to Democracy so that they told their students extensively about it, as freely as they had experienced it, before books could be printed. There was a time, which is passed now, between the beginning of the democracy and today when we objected that the students did *not* learn enough about it. Today's youth is well informed, enlightened. Today's youth is basically democratic. They think for themselves. They are anti-fascist.

HS: How is the situation in East Berlin and in East Germany as for the attitude towards Jews and anti-Semitism?

HB: In East Germany one is fabricating a loyal attitude towards Jews, from the top. However, it is well known that they made difficulties for Jews who returned from exile to East Germany, and those from Russia. A number who had returned from Israel left again. They came to the West or they returned to Israel.

HS: Are there any young Jews in Berlin today?

HB: Yes, quite a few.

HS: Where do they come from?

HB: They are mostly children of emigrants who have returned.

HS: Did many emigrants return from other countries other than Israel? And did they then have children? Or are there not refugees from the East who just stayed on?

HB: Yes, both.

HS: Did some new young ones come, or is this today's Jewish youth?

HB: Yes, children of emigrants who lived in Israel, married there and live now here. I am a patient of a Jewish doctor. She is from Israel--her parents had emigrated there

and are still there, but she came here, married a Jewish doctor--a lovely woman who is very well liked and has a large clientele, also Jewish patients.

HS: A Quizmaster. Rosenthal on TV.

HB: Yes. Rosenthal who lives nearby, was married to a Jewish lawyer before the war. Another friend of mine, also a doctor, had emigrated to the United States. They returned after 1945. They have two children; both are PhD's. We have many Jewish doctors who returned.

HS: And several hold high positions because they are competent.

HB: I do not know whether I am naive or what, but again I do not know who of our leading people is Jewish. If the doctor wouldn't have said to me, "I come from Israel, my parents were emigrants," I would not know.

HS: In other words, you mean to tell me that everybody is treated according to his value?

HB: Yes. My other doctor, Irene Rosenthal, emigrated with her parents, returned, got married to an orthopedist. Now her name is Drogula. We are the best of friends; but I do not know what religion her husband has. It is of no interest to me. I don't care.

HS: Something just occurred to me--yesterday I spoke to Ecksner. I was told that during the Hitler time he was issuing a publication. It was quite unusual, he only printed articles from foreign newspapers without adding anything in his own words and therefore it was permitted even under Hitler. It was widely distributed because it was legal and he did it for quite a long time. Ecksner - what was his first name?

HB: Kurt.

HS: Yes, Kurt Ecksner told me this himself. They arranged these articles in such a way that they would read like "double talk". I thought you knew about it.

HB: No. I only know this. I knew this family [unclear] who lived downstairs in my house and later emigrated as they could not stay here any longer. The son works at the German radio--he is a full Jew, the daughter, also a Jewess, is already a delegate, she made her doctorate [PhD]. Well, I don't know how he could have written or done something. I really don't know how Ecksner could have done it. I can't deny it but it sounds a little romantic to me.

HS: You wanted to tell me about the Gestapo--that they wanted to take your children?

HB: Yes. I had several searches of my home, at every occasion. For instance when I was requested to become a member of the *Luftschutz*, which is National air raid defense, I did not respond and threw away the letter. Altogether I received three of these letters. After the third letter a friend came and said, "Why don't you join? It is really harmless. We are just sitting in the air raid bunker. It is not a political obligation." I insisted that it is a Nazi Party *Luftschutz* and that I don't want to be part of it. They told me that I

was obliged by law. How could I avoid it? So I solved the problem. There was another family by the same name in the building, so I took the letter and put it in their door.

Tape two, side one:

HS: Tell me about the Gestapo and your children and also about your marriage.

HB: My two children were not members of the Hitler Youth. It happened like this: One day three gentlemen came to my door to talk to me. I always had my children present because I wanted them to be well informed so that they don't miss anything that I was fighting for and would understand me. The three gentlemen told me that my children would be taken away from me because I was bringing them up as enemies of the state.

HS: So you were considered as being an enemy of the state?

HB: Yes, and my children were being brought up the wrong way. My daughter Hertha was assigned to go to a woman whose family was in the SDAP and my son Wolfgang to a Nazi political education institution. I asked why? How is it an anti-state upbringing? They replied that I am still a Marxist. So I said them, "I'll tell you something. Yesterday the *Führer* gave a speech, a very important speech. I listened to some of it--he said that there are no Marxists in Germany. Therefore you made him into a liar and I'll go tomorrow morning to the chancellery and report what you said and that you made a liar out of him." To that they said, "You can't go to the *Führer*." So I asked, "Is this a law regulated state or is it not? and is he your *Führer* or the *Führer* of the entire German people?" They replied, "Do us a favor don't make any trouble. You are not allowed to go to the *Führer*. I answered, "This the *Führer* has to tell me himself." Then we talked a little more, after a while they said they had to go and left. The interesting thing is that one of them had lived in the same house I used to live in when I still had a large apartment, a few houses up the street. He was professor at the university. We knew each other very well and still he had the gall to do that. Wolfgang, Hertha and I sat together for a while, we were quite shaken. I kept thinking what I should do next, how life will go on. Then we heard a noise at the mail-slot at the door. A paper for Wolfgang's membership in the Hitler Youth and a paper for my daughter- membership to the girl's organization, the BDM. I told my children that no Nazi uniforms will be permitted in my apartment, they would have to get dressed and undressed in the hall. They said not to worry, they will not go there. And they did not go. These papers were completely without any significance. I don't even know if they kept them.

HS: Weren't they forced to go?

HB: No, they did not do anything. Not to the children and not to me. Then my daughter Hertha, this was in 1943, made the *Abitur* [exam after finishing high school]. We had doubted if she will be permitted to make the *Abitur* because the persecuted, with few exceptions were not allowed to graduate. She came home with the topic for her thesis she was supposed to do. It was a true "Hitler topic" and she asked me what she should do about it. I told her that she herself had to decide what to do, I have to leave it up to her and she had to deal with it. Then she chose her own topic: "Goethe's theory of colors". She wrote such an impressive work that she was recognized and she graduated with honors. The visit

of the Gestapo to our apartment was by then forgotten. After graduation she had to enter the *Arbeitsdienst* [labor service] in Spreewald. In 1943. I also was called to the *Arbeitsdienst* to work because I was not yet 42 years old.

HS: Your daughter also was in the *Arbeitsdienst*...

HB: She was *zwangsverpflichtet* [forced labor] and I was *dienstverpflichtet* [obligated to serve] because I was not 42 years old. The employment office registered me in my profession and the official assigned me to a teaching position. When I hesitated to be a teacher I was told that in that case I had to work in an ammunition factory. I decided, tentatively to be a teacher for the time being and see how it goes. Anyway, this did not last for long because I did not go to work on January 31, April 20 and May 1.

HS: This was Hitler's birthday and the takeover...

HB: Yes, and May 1st. So I was transferred from Berlin.

HS: Forcibly...

HB: Yes, however I could choose where I wanted to go and I chose Frankfurt on the Oder. I went to the head of the school board and he said "What is the matter with you? Are you not a member of the NSDAP? What nonsense, here every teacher is a member and where do you want to go?" I said I wanted to go to the countryside, possibly near Cotbus. He said, "O.K. You can go to the school board in Cotbus." I went there with my son. A teacher in this village had just been drafted to the army and I was to teach in a four grade school. I called Hertha, she was working nearby in the labor service and that was the reason why I wanted to go to that area in the first place. She came on a bike and told me that she had arranged to start work next day in this one room school. And I had been told previously that this one room school was also my responsibility.

HS: So you and your daughter were...

HB: Hertha became my assistant teacher. Naturally I continued to do illegal work. In this connection it might be of interest to you that on the first day some neighbors came to me, curious to meet somebody from Berlin. They talked in a strange language which I did not know. When I asked them what language they were using they said that they spoke Yiddish. "How can you speak Yiddish during the Nazi regime?" I asked. They told me that all cattle dealers in that area spoke Yiddish. All deals involving buying and selling cattle in the Spreewald area was conducted in Yiddish. The same evening I became the bookkeeper for the cattle dealers because I liked this kind of work and knew how to do it. I told them that I did not want to get paid for it but they offered food for the children in exchange. I stayed there until 1945. The Yiddish-speaking cattle dealers, all of them party members, took me with a milktruck to Cotbus and introduced me to people who were no Nazis. All of them opponents of the Nazi regime. One day one of them told me to brace myself and sit down, he wanted to show me something. He showed me the flag of the Cotbus SPD [Social Democratic Party] and said it had been hidden in a pillow case. He said that he just wanted to prove to me that these people were "for real".

HS: In other words, all these people joined the National Socialist Party but were opponents of the Nazi party? They just joined because they were afraid...

HB: I am not sure if they were opponents, they just did not care for them, and they were not active.

HS: Yes, but they were not Nazis. They joined because of fear, so as not to be considered outsiders and thus be under suspicion...

HB: They were afraid that the Nazis might take away their farms and possibly even deport them...

HS: Which could happen [unclear, both speak at the same time]

HB: From Berlin I brought some Jews with me to Spreewald, they lived now in my village.

HS: Did you hide them?

HB: No, they lived as "Berliners", nobody knew that they were Jews. There was one Jewess and three little girls, they lived with a farmer.

HS: That's how they survived...

HB: Yes. They paid their keep. They worked along the farmer in the fields. Nobody knew who they were.

HS: Was there no police registration necessary?

HB: Oh, yes. There was. The leader of the local Nazi party was also a farmer. He often said to me, "I am now going to my gang in Cotbus [unclear]. No, you don't have to be afraid [unclear]."

HS: Did he kind of protect you?

HB: This was not necessary. Nobody had any idea who we were. Then there was a doctor from Czechoslovakia. When the Nazis were retreating they became more zealous etc. He told us not to worry. When the Nazis retreated and the Russians were approaching he said, "I'll take care of you." When my son contracted scarlet fever he marked our door with the Red Cross so nobody was to enter the apartment. This doctor, a Jew, has been taken away as a Czechoslovak. He was drafted and assigned by the Germans for medical duty. The Nazis passed our door with the Red Cross sign. Then came the Russians and we took off the Red Cross sign.

HS: That area, the Spreewald what is it today? Poland? East Germany?

HB: [unclear, a third person talking in the background] When the Russians marched in, the Spreewalders said that they were no Nazis although they were NSPD [unclear] members. They said, "We are [unclear] Spreewalders. We were not permitted to wear our costumes under the the Nazis. We were not permitted to speak our language." I was able to confirm this and attest to it that they had not been active Nazis.

HS: Did you then go back to Berlin?

HB: No. Because of my illegal work during the Nazi regime I was called upon to be vice chairman of the Social Democratic Party of the Brandenburg province in 1945. I was also made chairman of the anti-fascist commission in Potsdam [unclear]. One day

two Russians came, stood in my doorway and said, "You bad". Then came two Russian officers and wanted to interrogate me. They had difficulty with the German language and I did not find it necessary to try to speak Russian. I took the phone and called Fritz Ebert [He was the first [unclear], and I was the second [unclear]]. I told him, "There are Russians in my office. It seems they want to take me away. Can you please see to it that this is straightened out?" He then contacted Lena Stein, a Jewish friend of mine, one of those who had lived through the illegal time in Berlin. She came over and said to the Russians, "Out! They left, because she was the secretary to the chairman. Then she said to me, "You better get out of here immediately". I called my two children. They came. We met in the street in front of our house. We could not take anything with us, except of what we were holding in our hands [what they could carry]. Then the chairman of the Communist party came over to me, his name was Willie Segebrecht [phonetic] and said, "Hertha, you do not deserve this. Although we do not belong to the same party we appreciate what you did. I'll see to it that you get out of here safe and without any further trouble." And Fritz Ebert had described me as a Free Thinker [unclear]. If caught I could have been handed over to the Russians.

HS: Then you went to Berlin?

HB: Yes, then we went to Berlin and I went to Ostrowski, the mayor of Wilmersdorf. He said, "Of course you'll get an apartment" So I went to the Housing Department where there were lists of available apartments whose Nazi owners had run away.

HS: What jobs did you have? Mayor of Reinickendorf...

HB: I was deputy mayor of Reinickendorf and its municipality in charge of youth, education and welfare from 1948 to 1965 when I retired. For the resistance I led in Spreewald--we had there a whole company of French prisoners of war. They had to work in the fields. Whenever I went by in the morning on my way to the school, I always greeted them with a polite, "Good morning gentlemen". I did their correspondence with Paris and France. They came to me to write letters for them and mail them and then letters came back for them. In gratitude for this they invited me to Paris in 1950. There I was honored and given the Golden Rose of Paris for my help. It was quite a celebration. I also received the Mariugash plaque [phonetic], the Ernst Reuter plaque and made "Elder Statesman" of Berlin. I was also chairman of two foundations, one for released prisoners and one for...

HS: I remember that you were in Norway on TV. You were being honored for...

HB: Yes, they interviewed me for the Norwegian TV for my resistance during the Nazi period. I told them, "Gentlemen you should not always talk about Nazi Germany. I think that is wrong. There was no 'Nazi Germany'. There was one part of the Germans who were Nazis and then were the others. They were the other Germany. These were healthy, sound German people who made no difference between Jews and non-Jews, who remained democrats, who helped each other even if it meant to share the last piece of bread."

HS: Many thanks Hertha for sharing your story.

HB: Yes, it has to be told.

HS: Yes, it has to be told and we'll preserve it for the future.

Postscript: According to interviewer and friend Hanna Silver, Mrs. Beese did not want her name submitted to *Yad Vashem* to be considered for the honor of Righteous Among the Nations because she had just done “what needed to be done”.