HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SYBIL A. NIEMÖELLER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Edith Millman
Date: November 21, 1986

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SN - Sybil Niemoeller [interviewee]
EM - Edith Millman [interviewer]
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Tape one, side one:

EM: [This is Edith Millman] interviewing Mrs. Sybil Niemoeller, widow of famous pastor Martin Niemoeller. Please tell me where you were born and a little bit about your family background.

SN: I was born in Potsdam, which is now in East Germany. Potsdam, the cradle of Prussianism. Both my families came from Prussian backgrounds. Three of my four great-grandfathers were Prussian Generals. My two grandfathers were Prussian Generals. The rest were landowners, military statesmen and military leaders, and had been for centuries. My father was one of four sons of my grandparents, the only one who survived. The other three were killed in World War I. He wanted to be a diplomat, but after the defeat of Germany in 1918, his career was crushed and he lived in poverty until in the mid-twenties when Kaiser Wilhelm appointed him to be administrator and financial advisor. So the family moved to Berlin-Dahlem in 1929.

EM: Did you or your family know any Jews as you were growing up? Did you have any close Jewish friends at all during your life?

SN: Yes, I did as a child, and my parents did as grownups. In my school in Berlin- Dahlem, we had a number of Jewish students, of Jewish children in my class, most of them coming from affluent Dahlem families and with the exception of one, who was my closest friend. They all left Germany in time. My closest friend, Anita Frank, namesake of Anna Frank, died in Bergen-Belsen like her namesake, Anna Frank.

EM: Do you recall specific church teachings about the Jews which you yourself heard as a young woman and then as an adult before the Hitler period?

SN: No, I was too little. I do not recall any such teachings.

EM: About how many Jews lived in your immediate town or city?

SN: Well, I lived in Berlin so I cannot tell you. There were many, many thousands. In our neighborhood of Dahlem, there were a number of houses that were owned by Jews, but all of them left Germany.

EM: Were they conspicuous in particular occupations? Or can you describe general attitudes among Christians in the city towards Jews?

SN: No, not without generalizing. I really couldn't do that. I was too small then. I was too small a child. I only really became aware of what happened because of the shock of November 9th, 1938 where I saw--not in Berlin but in the little town of Eberswalden north of Berlin where I was in boarding school, where I saw the synagogue burned.

EM: What do you recall of the atmosphere during the early '30s among people you knew, that is before 1933? Were you familiar with any members of the Nazi Party? If

so, do you recall their reasons why they joined? Were you aware of any articulated Nazi feelings or activities? Please describe in detail.

SN: Well, that's many questions. First of all, [tape off then on] what do I recall of the atmosphere during the early '30s among people I knew? Among people I knew, there were no Nazis in the immediate family. My father had already turned to be an anti-Nazi long before Hitler came to power because he had read *Mein Kampf* and always predicted what would happen if the man came to power. Was I familiar with any members of the Nazi Party? Oh yes. One of my mother's brothers turned Nazi. And the only reason why he did that, because he was too dumb to make good in any profession. The Nazis came along, and he became a big Nazi, as a matter of fact. And after they came to the house, he and his wife demanded that we children join the Hitler Youth. My father threw them out. That was what happened in my family, but there is a black sheep in almost every family. [tape off then on]

EM: When did you first become aware of Dr. Niemoeller's opposition to the pro-Nazi position of most of the Protestant churches?

SN: Well, very soon, because Pastor Niemoeller was like a member of my own family. He had come to Dahlem in 1931. I was present as a seven-year-old child at his first service. And the families soon became close friends. We were neighbors. And I was made aware that he took a stand very soon against the Nazis.

EM: How extensive do you think this opposition was? How did it express itself?

SN: You mean, I don't quite understand the question. His opposition?

EM: His opposition.

SN: His opposition was extensive. It was very outspoken, and he expressed himself in his sermons in the pulpit. And his church became more and more mobbed as the years went on, until he was arrested in 1937.

EM: Can you tell us what you recall of the beginnings of the Confessing Church and Dr. Niemoeller's role in its formation?

SN: Well, I really do not recall too much myself, only what I heard later from my parents and what I read after the war, because I was too small to be filled in on all the details. But I remember the Confessing Church was founded as a counterpart against the Nazi-ideology-supported Christian German Church. And my family, my father and my mother, became members of the Confessing Church. And the leading figure that emerged was that of Pastor Niemoeller.

EM: On what grounds were the pastors of the Confessing Church, including Dr. Niemoeller, imprisoned?

SN: Well, because they spoke out against Adolf Hitler, mainly in their pulpits. And after 1936, a declaration was sent to Adolf Hitler about the persecution of the Jews that was becoming more and more obvious and a problem that became very urgent. After 1936, after that declaration was sent to him, 700 pastors of the Confessing Church were imprisoned and sent to Dachau. And the first one to be murdered there was a Jew by Hitler's

laws, Pastor Friedrich Weitzler, who by being murdered in Sachsenhausen in 1937 became the first Jewish martyr of the Confessing Church.

EM: Please tell us about your activities in the early years of the Nazi regime. Did you at first believe that the regime would only last a short time? Do you recall the early measures passed against Jews; the Aryan Paragraph, the boycott, the book burnings? Within your own circle, was there acceptance or disapproval of these actions?

SN: Well, of course I was too young for any activities at that early stage of the Nazi regime. I can only talk about my parents. Did they first believe that the regime would last only a short time? They hoped it would. And with them, most of the people hoped, including the Jews who didn't leave Germany while there was still time. They couldn't believe it. Therein lay Hitler's strength. He planned crimes of such magnitude, and he took time, you know, too dreadful for any human to grasp. So that is optimism. We all were optimistic. My parents, even though they were pessimists, I must say, they hoped it would somehow come to an end. And do I recall the early measures passed against the Jews? Yes, I do. In school there were, the children in my class stayed in the school until '37, '38, '39, whenever their parents left, with that one exception. Otherwise, early measures against the Jewish friends of my parents? I do not recall. Because the closest friends they had went to Theresienstadt; but only in 1941. And they survived. The Aryan Paragraph, I do recall vaguely. The boycotts I knew about, but I never saw because we lived far outside in Dahlem. We never went, but just once before Christmas did we ever go into the city of Berlin. And there was no TV. And of course the radio would report only one side of it, if anything at all. So I never witnessed anything. And of course my father would talk about the book burnings. And was there acceptance or disapproval in our circle? Of course, there was disapproval *only*.

EM: Were you aware of any help rendered Jews by non-Jews up to 1935? And please describe any.

SN: No. I do not have any recollections that far back. I was too little.

EM: How about later?

SN: Oh later? I know of people who hid Jews. And in our own house, we harbored several Jewish people disguised as gardeners and seamstresses. I do not recall any names, except one lady, and her name was Frau Tieler. Her real name was Frau Bietenberg [phonetic], and her whole family had already been sent to the camps in the East. She, I know for a fact, did survive, and she went to England. With our family, four other Dahlem families took part in that underground railroad, and I would like to mention their names. It was the Aktiweiter [?] Frank and his wife. It was Dr. Leist and his Jewish wife. It was Walter Nikel and his Jewish wife. And Dr. Walter Egers and his wife, and my family. And none of us were ever reported. None of us were ever found out. What happened to the Jews after they left our house, I, at least, do not know.

EM: Were you aware of any non-physical resistance or opposition to the regime in the early '30s?

SN: I can't answer that question. I was too little. My only way of resisting was that I never joined the Hitler Youth.

EM: Do you recall Nazi repressive action against non-Jewish opponents of the regime?

SN: *Oh yes*, of course! Anybody who would not join the Hitler Youth, for instance, had to face the consequences. I can talk about me personally. I could not graduate from high school, because I was at that point, together with a half-Jewish girl who is still my best friend in Bonn, could not graduate from high school because I was not a member of the Hitler Youth. And there are probably others. I cannot at this point tell you any names.

EM: Can you please describe conditions of your own life between 1935 and 1945? Where you lived, how the policies of the regime impinged on your life, and what work that you did. What you knew about the fate of Jews in Germany as they were sent East.

SN: Well, in '35 I was 12 years old. I went to boarding school. I could ultimately not graduate from school, but I could do one thing--I went to acting school. There were no questions asked, because actresses in Nazi Germany had really, like in Soviet Russia special status. They were practically untouchable. So I became an actress, was an actress for two years, and then came the 20th of July plot, the plot to assassinate Hitler, in which my family participated. And my father, my cousin, First Lieutenant Werner von Haeften, and Hans Bernt von Haeften, who was a diplomat. There were meetings in our house at nighttime, between the years of '43 and '44, and my mother was in the house; I was in the house. We were never told what was going to happen, but we had a pretty good idea of what was being planned. So many attempts on Hitler's life had failed, and we knew they were building up to another one, which should be the last one. And now the question--[pause; tape off then on] After the plot my, both my cousins were killed, and my father and I were both arrested on July 23rd. I was let go after several *very* nasty interrogations. My father went to Lehrterstrasse Prison and later died in a concentration camp. The fate-

EM: Excuse me. Was this after the attempt on Hitler's life?

SN: Yes, that was as a consequence of the attempt.

EM: Could you describe more or what you know about it and how do you spell the name of your two cousins who took part in it?

SN: Well, the one who took part in the plot itself was Werner von Haeften--H-A-E-F-T-E-N. He was the adjutant at that time of Colonel Klaus, Count von Stauffenberg. And those two men actually went to Rastenburg and planted the bomb. While Werner's brother, my other cousin, Hans Bernt, was arrested, you know, kith and kin, and he was hanged. [tape off then on] As far as the fate of the Jews in Germany, I can talk about our own friends, Dr. and Frau Otto Stargalt, close friend, since World War I, of my parents, who lived in Dahlem, and they were sent to Theresienstadt. And they survived there, a day before the last transport went to Auschwitz. About the fate of the Jews, we heard on the BBC. Of course, names like Auschwitz, Treblinka were meaningless to most of us, till after

the war. I mean, Elie Wiesel describes in his book, *The Night*, how they arrived in Auschwitz in cattle cars, and people near the windows saw the sign of the station outside and they were asked, "Where are we? Auschwitz?" Nobody had ever heard the name as late as '44! [tape off then on]

EM: Were you personally ever in danger of being imprisoned or punished in any way?

SN: Oh yes. In absolutely acute danger ever since the 20th of July, 1944, and probably even before.

EM: Were you aware of the so-called euthanasia centers in Germany?

SN: Yes, because a neighbor's son, who developed epilepsy as a 16-year-old boy, was sent to one of those hospitals like Hadama, and the parents received notice that he died of a heart attack or…

EM: Natural causes.

SN: Pneumonia, of natural causes. And they knew then that something was happening.

EM: Did your father ever talk about any of these euthanasia programs?

SN: Oh yes, from him I would know about it, because I was too small myself to know about it.

EM: Did you know any other people involved in the July, 1944 effort to overturn the government? Please describe what you knew of these events.

SN: Well, I knew practically everybody involved. Personally, most of them personally, some of them not personally. We still meet the survivors. We still meet on every 20th of July in Berlin for ceremonies. So we were either related or we just knew one another. And what happened then you can read in any book. And many books have been written about the subject.

EM: How was your father involved, if at all?

SN: My father was, had he lived, was supposed to be the liaison man between the new regime, which would be headed by Goerdeler, between the new regime and the negotiations with England.

EM: Were you aware of any German Jews who were sent to the Polish ghettoes in 1941, up to 1942?

SN: Was I aware? Only what we heard through the grapevine, and from the Jews that came through our house.

EM: Do you remember ever hearing of Lublin reservation? Or Madagascar, as a reservation for Jews?

SN: Lublin, never. Absolute news to me. Madagascar, I remember very well that being talked about, where the Jews would be sent to.

EM: Did you hear of Adolf Eichmann or any other Nazi officials connected with the deportation of Jews?

SN: Adolf Eichmann's name, I never heard. Kaltenbrunner was the one; Heydrich was the one we heard about.

EM: Did you know about the gas chambers, or hear about Auschwitz or Treblinka or Mauthausen or Majdanek before the end of the war? If so, what did you know?

SN: No, if we heard the names, I didn't recall them until I maybe heard them again after the war. They were just nameless places to us. But they were places, and we heard about them on the BBC.

EM: In looking back over the Hitler period, do you believe that in general Hitler was supported by a large number of Germans?

SN: Absolutely yes, the vast majority.

EM: When, if at all, might effective resistance to him have been possible?

SN: Not later than '34 probably, because he saw to it that no massive resistance was possible, after taking first the Communists, then the trade unionists, then the Socialists and then the Jews.

EM: Do you have the impression that Holocaust history is being seriously studied by substantial number of German students today? Either formally in school, or through Church education, pilgrimages to Israel, etc.?

SN: I would say not in the first 20 or 30 years after the war. Practically everything was swept under the carpet. Strangely enough, the mediocre series of *Holocaust* on television, which was forced upon the air by my brother, who was then the manager of the largest German radio and TV station against the advice of his board. After that mediocre series, especially the very young then turned around to their parents and then grandparents and asked, "What did you do? Why don't we hear about this? Why aren't we taught about this?" Yes, I think history is at this point being, as far as schoolbooks go, rewritten. I hope it is. And, Church education, I'm really not well enough informed about. Pilgrimages to Israel and to Poland for that matter, by German, very young people, yes, all the time. I personally know of dozens of young Germans who are eager to go to Israel, eager to reconcile, live in *kibbutzim*, build roads in Poland. It's been done. It's been done more and more. [tape off then on]

EM: Could you please tell me something about your marriage to Pastor Niemoeller?

SN: Well, as I told you earlier on the tape, I met him when I was seven. And I was 14 when he went to prison, and I didn't see him again for 31 years. I came to this country, the United States, became an American citizen. I came into this country in '52, became a citizen in '57, and met my husband again in New York City when he was traveling and when he was lecturing and preaching in a Brooklyn church. And we met again for the first time in 31 years. I had no husband anymore. His wife had been killed. And so we ultimately got married, and I settled with him in Wiesbaden, even though he was willing to come and live in the United States with me. But he had all his sisters and brothers there. He had his roots there. He was then 79 years. When I met him he was 76;

when we married he was 79. I felt I could not transplant an old man like that. So we settled in Wiesbaden, West Germany, but we traveled a lot during the next, at least, 12 years. He traveled, and he preached. And wherever he went, he asked forgiveness for his part in the guilt of the German people, his part for not having done enough while he was still a free man between 1933 and 1937. [tape off then on]

EM: Will you please tell me what you know about his suffering after he was in prison?

SN: Well, he spent one year in prison, in Berlin. And that was still rather civilized. He got mail, and…

EM: What, excuse me, what year was that?

SN: He was arrested the first of July, 1937. And his trial came up in March, '38. And in March, '38 the trial took place and there were still, at that late date in Germany, honest judges. Surprisingly enough, he was practically acquitted. He was accused of insubordination, of treason, of disobedience, of all sorts of things. But since he'd already spent nine months in prison, he was let go. And he was arrested on the steps of the courthouse on his way home where his family and his friends waited for him. And he was kidnapped by the Gestapo and taken to a place unknown for a number of weeks. It turned out to be Sachsenhausen. In Sachsenhausen, he was turned over to the *Kommandant* with the words, "This is the Führer's private prisoner." And that man didn't know what to do with my husband. If he treated him like any other prisoner, mistreated him, maybe it wouldn't be right. And if he treated him too well, it wouldn't be right either. So he just threw him into solitary confinement, into a bunker cell, where he spent the next three years. And solitary confinement for my husband was the worst punishment. This man, who had to share every sentence, every sentiment, every thought with someone else, there he was. And the only company were the S.S. guards who brought him his food, and where the screams that pierced his cell from the fellow prisoners who were mishandled all the time, to which he protested aloud and was threatened by the S.S. that if he didn't stop protesting he would receive the same punishment, or even be put to death. They never laid their hands on him. They were not allowed to. But that status, that special status, there or later in Dachau, could change any moment if it so pleased Hitler. Why Hitler did not execute him will forever remain speculation.

EM: Mrs. Niemoeller, is there anything that you would like to add to what we have talked about?

SN: Well, my husband, as I told you, went around the world asking forgiveness for his part in the guilt. Reconciliation was one of his main concerns. To reconcile the Protestants with the Catholics, and the Christians with the Jews. Reconciliation is a word often misunderstood. A Christian cannot just go to a Jew and say, "Let's forget it and start anew." The first step in the direction of reconciliation has to come from the Jews, the precondition being for a Christian to say to him, "I am guilty. Please forgive me." That is

the first step. That is the pre-condition. And from there, maybe reconciliation will come. But that has to be up to the Jews, the ones who have been hurt.

EM: Thank you very much. We really appreciate your coming.