

HANNA SILVER [1-1-1]

THIS IS AN INTERVIEW WITH:

HS - Hanna Silver [interviewee]
NP - Natalie Packel [interviewer]
Interview Date - April 25, 1995

Tape one, side one:

NP: Good morning, Hanna. This is Natalie Packel, Tuesday, April the 25th, talking with Hanna Silver. Hanna has brought many pictures from Berlin, Germany, and she will be giving me an account; she will be giving the Archive a historic account of Old Berlin as well as personal experiences. And we begin. Good morning, Hanna.

HS: Good morning, Natalie.

NP: Hanna, could you tell me a little bit about your beginnings, where you were born, something about your family?

HS: Both of my parents were born in Sudeten, which at that time was a part of Austria bordering on Germany. They left there and they went to live in Berlin. After 1918 this area became part of Czechoslovakia. Then after Hitler came to power, it became part of Germany again. Then after World War II it became Czechoslovakia again. I was born in Berlin in this apartment house in center city.¹ It was a very solid building. Most of the people in there were government employees, teachers, and some were retired people.

NP: Was there a name for the section?

HS: Yeah. They called it Louisenstadt.

NP: How do you spell that, Hanna?

HS: L-O-U-I-S-, Louis, Louisenstadt.

NP: E-N-, L-O-U-I-S-E-N-...

HS: And it was very, very stable. Nobody ever moved out. Everybody knew the other tenants and a few girls went to school with me. So it was a very close knit neighborhood. Most of them, I would say all of them, were middle class, and there came a time when nobody had anything. This was right after the--nobody had any money after the inflation. Here are some

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photographs I brought you.

NP: I see.

HS: And they were taken about five months after the end of the war. But these pictures are exactly the way they looked at the end of the war. Number one, two, and three is a picture of Spittelmarkt, a center city important traffic point. There was a subway station, and it was the end of Leipziger Strasse, a main artery lined with major department stores like Wertheim, Herman Tietz. There were fine specialty shops, boutiques, and such.

NP: Excuse me, Hanna. Spittelmarkt...

HS: Yes?

NP: Is that the name of the area?

HS: No.

NP: No.

HS: This is the name of one place.

NP: The shopping...

HS: Like you say Greenwood Place. The name, this was called, this is a subway station...

NP: O.K.

HS: And there is a--this is here the place here. You can see this was...

NP: Yes.

HS: Called Spittelmarkt.

NP: O.K.

HS: So the trolley stopped there and it was called Spittelmarkt. The subway stopped there.

NP: And this is photo number one.

HS: Yes.

NP: O.K.

HS: Now in that area, between Spittelmarkt and Doenhofplatz were many, many offices. And the whole textile industry which was significant was located in that area.

1 Hanna Silver was born February 14, 1910.

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NP: I see, O.K.

HS: One, two, and three. One, two, and three.

NP: The entire area it looked like was...

HS: Was this, it's one large place...

NP: Was completely devastated.

HS: That you changed trolley cars and subway and all that. But there were, it was a lot of traffic at that point.

NP: All right, and so you would say this is immediately after the war?

HS: Yah, this is what actually happened before the war ended. These pictures and the destruction of these buildings happened on February 3rd. On that day most of the center city was destroyed, in a few hours.

NP: Did you know anybody who had businesses in this area?

HS: Yes, of course, yes.

NP: O.K.

HS: So now we come to picture four, five, six, and seven.

NP: All right.

HS: This is, I call them historic Old Berlin. The city of Berlin is 500 years old, but many original buildings--churches mostly--are much older than that. So 700 years ago was already the city of Berlin. Now here is a picture of the burned-out castle. And this is located on the river Spree. And here you see the iron work on the bridge across the river.

NP: Beautiful, beautiful.

HS: Yes.

NP: Iron work and beautiful architecture.

HS: Yeah, well, it's...

NP: I see it's still there.

HS: Yes. And there were several buildings. One was a dome, one was a castle. They were all, in one day they were all destroyed. Number five--this is here an old neighborhood, along,

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that is the canal, along this canal. And here you can see what the last days of the war produced. In order to keep the Russian tanks from just rolling into the city there were so-called tank traps. So, in a ridiculous way with the most primitive sources, because...

NP: They were barriers for the tanks.

HS: Barriers. They took vans, moving vans, and filled them with a few rocks and put them in the middle of the street.

NP: I see.

HS: So what the tanks, the Russian tanks did, they by-passed them and razed the houses, the buildings to the left and to the right. So it didn't deter them for more than five minutes.

NP: Were these private dwellings that I see on...

HS: All, all of it is private dwellings. Now here...

NP: That's picture number five.

HS: Yes. Now here you have number six. You see the canal I mentioned before. On both sides the old buildings, and here again you see this very beautiful wrought iron work. And here is a historic bridge in the background which I don't have a picture of.

NP: Hanna, where did these pictures come from?

HS: I took them.

NP: You took them personally.

HS: I took them, yes.

NP: I see. You went all through Berlin?

HS: No, just my...

NP: Just your immediate area.

HS: My immediate, yes.

NP: Right.

HS: There were for the longest time there was no traffic whatsoever. There was no trolley car. The subway was, and people were bombed out. They didn't know where to go. So they went down to the subway tracks and Goebbels opened the floodgates. And for months at a time,

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bodies were floating in the, on the tracks and the tunnels...

NP: Of the subways.

HS: Of the subways. Now here is number seven. You see one of the oldest churches, I think it's Nikolai Church, with very tall, very slender steeple. It's also com-...

NP: Spires up, yeah.

HS: Spire, yeah. And it's also completely destroyed and all the houses around there. Now not far is our neighborhood. The apartment houses are much newer. Maybe they were 30 years old, 25 years old.

NP: Is that in Louisenstadt?

HS: Yes...

NP: That's your neighborhood.

HS: Right, yeah. This is not Louisenstadt, my neighborhood, but it's adjoining. So our house was very, very solidly built and had tile floors in the hallway, stained glass in the upstairs stairways. Woodworks, banisters were all in carved woodwork. And it was, as I said before, very solid...

NP: Truly a work...

HS: With...

NP: Oh, with such, a work of art, such emphasis on detail.

HS: But it was not elegant in any way. It was just solid citizen, middle class citizen, everything. And as I said the, some people they lived there already since day one. And nobody moved. And then people, it wasn't common to move around like people now move. So people usually lived there, I would be still living there. Nobody moved. Now we come to number eight.

NP: Yes.

HS: Across the street from our apartment house was a church. It was called Louisenstadt Church. And that was about seven, I think it was 700 years old. And it had a very tall spire which disappeared. It was hit by a mine and by fire bombs and all that. And here you see in picture number nine, you look through the burned out church. And here in picture number ten

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you see our apartment--the windows of our apartment through the inside. This is the inside of the church. So this is the amazing thing. When you looked at the street it looked as if everything was O.K. But it was only the front of the building that was standing. The insides--I'll show you in the next one--the inside, here is the bell that fell down.

NP: From the church.

HS: From the church, and was lying there on the steps.

NP: I see. So we're looking through archways actually.

HS: No, these are...

NP: Or are...

HS: The windows.

NP: The windows in the church.

HS: Yeah.

NP: Of course they...

HS: And they're blown out. Here, this is the inside of the church.

NP: And the in-...

HS: And the, all these windows were blown out so you look through the burnt out windows.

NP: Where were you living at the time? Where were you?

HS: Here, in this apartment we were living, right here.

NP: O.K., O.K.

HS: Here is the church.

NP: Actually I meant...

HS: And...

NP: After it was bombed.

HS: I'll come to that a little later, yeah.

NP: We'll come to that, very good. O.K.

HS: Yeah. Now, number eleven is our apartment house. It was what you called a double

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house. There were, the number was 37-38. And this here, that last mark, this is our apartment. And this here is the ground floor. I have here just the ground floor.

NP: Oh I see.

HS: And what you see here, this little pile is the ashes of five stories of building--all the floors, all the furniture, the beds, the tables, the chairs. Everything was just this little pile here. And here is a little marker. This is the place where I found my mother lying here.

NP: It's so sad. Mmm. Such devastation.

HS: Yes.

NP: Hanna, what does this say here? Do you...

HS: Well it said butter. There used to be, in the next building used to be a store, a little store, a Papa/Mama store. And they sold butter. And this is still there.

NP: The sign. It said butter.

HS: Now we have number thirteen, where you see part of our building. And adjoining is the neighboring apartment house. There was nothing left whatsoever. And here is number fourteen. This is our corner. This is called Alte Jacob Street. And this is here it's Sebastian Street. It's just our street here.

NP: Alte Jacob.

HS: Yeah, it's marked there, yeah.

NP: Alte. It's all marked there.

HS: Yes, yes, yes. We come to number fifteen. And I mentioned to you before the primitive tank traps.

NP: Yes.

HS: And here you can see, here is the danger in how the tanks bypass the trap.

NP: They went around.

HS: Yeah, they went around there. Yet it took them a long time to take Berlin. It took them weeks. We used to say the biggest city of the world is Berlin. It took the Russians six weeks to go just through the suburbs. And we have here number sixteen, the remnant of a

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neighboring street. And it shows you here the total destruction. So where there was a street there were holes and where there were houses they were just pieces of, chunks of houses. And the same is here, number seventeen, and number eighteen. So there is practically nothing left, neither houses nor street.

NP: And there was, it was winter.

HS: Yes.

NP: There was snow on the ground.

HS: Well it happened on February 3rd, on that one day. Now here, this is six months later. Here is a picture of a GI taking pictures of all this devastation.

NP: I see. He's here with his camera.

HS: Yes. Now here, this is number twenty. This picture was taken in November of '45 after we had already a quartripartite government, that is, Berlin was divided into four sectors-- United States, Russia, France, and Great Britain. And each sector had a separate government but together they were united and had their monthly meetings.

NP: I see.

HS: And...

NP: Do I see the word Eisenhower?

HS: Yes, Eisenhower was in charge of that, and I met all his GIs, his honor guard. And they, well, I'll come to that later. They asked me to become the photographer for the American Red Cross. With...

NP: Is that so?

HS: Yeah, and the 82nd Airborne was there, the first ones to come. And I worked there as long as they were there. Now I have...

NP: That was quite a job you had. Wow.

HS: I was a very...

NP: A good photographer.

HS: No, but I spoke English so well everybody was so happy that they could talk to me.

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And I made friends with some of them. I still am in touch.

NP: Where did you learn English?

HS: In school.

NP: You were taught English?

HS: Yeah. Now here is a picture of myself, which was taken in the darkest days, when it got really bad.

NP: During the war, Hanna?

HS: That was during the war.

NP: You were so stylish and...

HS: No I was, this is a...

NP: Oh.

HS: A beret and after the war--I have a picture here--after the war I wore a beret that I made from an old half-burned plush of a sofa.

NP: You made the beret?

HS: And it, beret, and everybody...

NP: From the fabric on the sofa!

HS: Yeah, and everybody in the building who wanted to have a red beret got the beret from the plush of the sofa.

NP: You were wonderful with a needle and thread at that time, too.

HS: I was born with a needle and thread.

NP: Oh! Hanna, where were you living at the time that this was taken--summer of 1944--in the building?

HS: Well, I, let me say here I want, I went to the *Victoria Lyceum*, which is the equivalent for girls what a *Gymnasium* is for boys. And I got a very fine education. I spoke German, English and French fluently, conversation, grammar and everything. However, my cousins, who all were younger than I were, went to school under Hitler and had to stop schooling at 14. They were not permitted to go any longer to any school...

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NP: As Jewi-...

HS: Young? 14, yeah.

NP: As Jewish children...

HS: Yeah.

NP: Were prohibited.

HS: Yeah. And then I wanted to mention, on February 3rd came the...

NP: 1945.

HS: Then, right, 1945, the biggest air raid. I had left for work and this, because our office was burned out a few months earlier, completely destroyed, so we had to go to a suburb where our warehouse was. And so I wanted to take the day off and I wasn't given permission so I had to go to work. And my mother stayed home. So here I have an eye-witness report. I'll give you this.

NP: All right.

HS: This is from a book written by Nelson. And...

NP: This is an account that was in a book...

HS: Yeah.

NP: By this, what is his first name?

HS: Nelson. I'll give it to you here.

NP: O.K.

HS: And the report said that they heard screams for help from a woman inside the burning window. She was aflame. They found her later on the pavement, naked with clothes burned, a shriveled, black corpse. The policemen later, this report says, wrote down, *batch* of seven. They said that about 40,000 people lost their lives on that one day but there is no exact number possible because so many old people, especially they sat in their basements and didn't want to leave even when they were nudged by others. They said, "Where shall we go?" Because there was no place to go. And the Nazis were afraid of epidemics and they sealed entire blocks off. And only years and years later when they wanted to reconstruct or when they wanted to build

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there or dig up ground they found many, many basements with people still sitting intact on their chairs the way they were.

NP: And this bombing was done by...

HS: By the Allied. By day it was the Americans, by night the British. I think it was like that. Now between February 3rd, and the end of the war, which was May 8th, 1945, I was bombed out several more times and I had a collection of keys without doors to open. Now the reason that I took a place, a furnished room, because I didn't want to give up the right to a place of my own. If you did not, then you never had, were entitled to rent anything. So I just maintained it. So when I come to the new house and look, I think, *Gee, that was a house? I see it isn't there anymore.* So I ended up with a key and no more house. Of course there were from then on day and night raids. And every time a certain amount of houses were destroyed. So...

NP: I see.

HS: Then what we saw, the last, especially the last weeks, "traitors" (in quotation marks) were strung up on lamp posts and were dangling there. And when you walked you had to watch out that you didn't run into a dangling corpse. Because this was a warning to everybody, "Do not open your mouth," and they called it defeatism. "Do not say anything bad or you will hang up there too," which shuts up people pretty good.

NP: They were supposed to be an example.

HS: Yes, yes. [tape off then on]

NP: Yes, Hanna, we continue with picture number...

HS: Twenty-two...

NP: Twenty-two.

HS: Which was taken in November, 1945...

NP: Yes.

HS: At the American Red Cross in Berlin. And here I met hundreds and hundreds of GIs who were very happy to be able to talk English to me and...

NP: I'll bet.

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HS: I became good friends with many of them. And this picture was taken in the American Red Cross.

NP: Oh this is beautiful. This is the one where I say you look like Celeste Holmes.

HS: I don't know.

NP: Blonde and lovely, and blue eyes.

HS: And then I...

NP: And lithe.

HS: Have picture number twenty-three, which was taken at the British Red Cross, on top of the radio tower in Berlin where I, upon request I started another photo studio.

NP: You had a studio?

HS: Well I, they invited me to make a photo studio. And there was no room so they took a piece of hallway and overnight transformed it into a photo studio. And we took thousands of pictures of GIs and they sent them home to grandparents and parents and girlfriends and all. So we were very, very busy. I worked about...

NP: And the "we" that you're describing, you worked for...

HS: I worked, we were individual...

NP: Photographers?

HS: No, I just was...

NP: Oh.

HS: The only one hired.

NP: For the Red Cross.

HS: The Red Cross. And I...

NP: For the American Red Cross.

HS: And we ran the business with taking pictures and ordering pictures and it was a whole production.

NP: O.K., so the pictures that you took in the beginning were of the devastation of the war. You took...

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HS: Well this was one thing and then this was a bread and butter issue.

NP: Right.

HS: Because there was nothing to eat. And when you worked for the American [Red] Cross you were entitled to all the donuts you could eat. And after a while you couldn't, didn't like the sight of donuts anymore. But it was, and you were not permitted to take any out. Some people lost their job for taking out a couple of donuts--their own donuts--for their children. So I smuggled out every night two donuts which I gave to my cousin and my aunt and this helped them to survive. Because they were made in a factory in the building and they produced 150,000 donuts per day...

NP: Oh my!

HS: Which were delivered to all the Red Cross clubs all over. So we could eat all we wanted.

NP: Wow. In those times it meant a lot, yes.

HS: People stood in the street and sniffed the smell of Crisco. They were baked in Crisco. And they were good.

NP: I'll bet.

HS: Yes.

NP: After doing without for so long.

HS: Yes. And the only food we got were beans, bean soup. I never did like beans so the only food was beans. Because the American MP who was to guard the building, in cahoots with some German kitchen workers, sold the food on the black market. And we got only the beans. But it was better than nothing. It helped us to survive. I still don't like beans.

NP: I don't blame you.

HS: So here is another...

NP: Oh yes, here...

HS: Twenty-three. This is also from that...

NP: This is number twenty-three.

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HS: Yes.

NP: After the war in 1945 then.

HS: Yeah.

NP: You continued to be a photographer for the American Red Cross.

HS: Yeah, yeah.

NP: And the...

HS: Then here is number twenty-four.

NP: Beautiful, beautiful pictures. Did you have a dog?

HS: Yes. We had a dog.

NP: Here's a beautiful photo of yourself, number twenty-four, after the war.

HS: Yes, yes.

NP: And this was your own dog.

HS: Yes. And I lived with my aunt who didn't want dogs. This was my first problem. But I took him to work and the MP agreed to have the dog in. And here is a picture--I hope I get a copy for you--these are the survivors. These are an uncle and three, one, two uncles, and three aunts and two cousins who survived in England.

NP: When did they leave Berlin?

HS: '38.

NP: In 1938.

HS: Yes, and these three cousins joined the British Army. He was an officer. He was a sergeant. And the third cousin was killed in Dunkirk. He was, he volunteered to be a parachuter. He was killed in Dunkirk.

NP: Did some, so some of the family stayed behind and some went to England.

HS: Yeah. And one aunt was taken to Theresienstadt and see, she survived, because I had promised her she will survive and her daughter will get married, and she will have grandchildren and great grandchildren. Believe it or not, she came back from Theresienstadt because she was in a hospital with a broken arm so she wasn't shot.

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NP: Oh that saved her.

HS: So she survived, and she came back. Her daughter got married, and has a son. And he got married to a British girl and they have two children. So she said, "Always believe Hanna. She knew it. She kept me going. Her words were in my ear. I held out because she had told me. And she was so right." So...

NP: You were an inspiration to her.

HS: Well that's right.

NP: Hanna, at this time, when your aunt was in Theresienstadt, where were you?

HS: I was still in Berlin.

NP: Living in your same house.

HS: In the same house, with the same neighbors.

NP: All through the war?

HS: All through the war.

NP: Oh my.

HS: And here is an old picture. This is I think from 1906. This is my mother...

NP: Beautiful!

HS: Here's two sisters.

NP: Oh!

HS: She was killed in Riga.

NP: In...

HS: And she...

NP: Was she in a camp?

HS: Yes. She was deported from Berlin in '42. I went with her to the, to the place where they, it was a burned-out synagogue where they assembled. And she was there for a week. And somebody went back and forth with little notes and little whatever she asked for, and some food. He went back and forth from us to her. And then they took them away. They assembled them until they had enough. And then we learned from this person that she was on the transport to

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Riga. And she is also mentioned in our *Gedenkbuch* [Memorial Book].

NP: I see.

HS: So this one is this aunt who immigrated to England. And this one was killed. And my mother was killed in an air raid.

NP: Beautiful women, just beautiful. And these...

HS: So this is number twenty-five.

NP: Number twenty-five. And these two gentlemen in number twen-...

HS: Well this is her husband.

NP: I see.

HS: And this is her husband.

NP: Did he survive?

HS: He died of TB after World War I.

NP: Oh, oh, oh. Then you did not ha-, after this cousin...

HS: This is my...

NP: That'd be the...

HS: Aunt.

NP: Aunt, your mother's sister.

HS: We were very close.

NP: When your...

HS: Very close, yeah. Because--oh, I didn't bring the picture--she had a daughter exactly my age. And we grew up like twins. We were very, and she was killed in Auschwitz. So I have in my papers the last note where she says, "Tonight I will go away." They never said, "I will be deported." "I will go away." And she sent us a postal card with the last...

NP: It's so heartbreaking.

HS: And she is also in the *Gedenkbuch*.

NP: It's heartbreaking. Hanna, did you feel, did you...

HS: So in number twenty-five...

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NP: Number twenty-five.

HS: Yes.

NP: When this aunt was deported and her daughter and so forth, did you feel that you had to go into hiding at that time?

HS: No, because-

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Tape one, side two:

NP: This is side B, Natalie Packel and Hanna Silver talking about her war time experiences with many pictures before us showing Hanna's family and showing the devastation of the war--bombed out buildings and so forth. And I was just asking Hanna if after her dear aunt and cousin were deported to the camps did she feel that she had to go into hiding?

HS: And the answer was no, because people who were hiding didn't know where to hide. And I was in touch with three ladies who were in hiding. And one of them was the, I knew only one of them, the others I didn't know. And I, that's another story, she came from a very, very rich family, actually the family of my boss. And I urged her to take some money and put it aside because Jews were permitted only to take out 300 *Mark* from their accounts. And she says, "I don't need money. I know what I'll do. I have my *Veronal*," which is the sleeping pills. And most...

NP: How do you spell that?

HS: *Veronal*. Most people who intended to commit suicide had their *Veronal*. Ten, fifteen pills would do, and I had gone to our family doctor and had told him about the possibility of deportation. And people were deported separately, not together. And he gave me a prescription for ten *Veronal*, which cost about \$1, to have it. And he, I remember when I told him, he sat for about five minutes, because his career, his life, his family, everything was on the line, and after that he said, "Yes. I will do it. Ten will do." And he gave me the prescription. And I got for \$1 them, and I made a little side pocket in my mother's dresses to put the pills in in case ever it comes to a surprise pick-up, that she could take it. And I had promised her to give them to her mixed with raspberry syrup that they were not too bitter. Fortunately I didn't have to do it. But I know somebody who did it with his father and he never can sleep since, because he said he might have survived in the camp. These were all problems you had to solve with just yourself. You couldn't ask anybody. "Is it right to kill my mother? Is it not right?" What is better? So for my mother it was in a way the best that she did not have to be separated from me, did not have to

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be deported, didn't have to live in misery and lose all her dignity. Of course she would have chosen what she had, but it is beyond description. So you can imagine I don't like fire places.

NP: No.

HS: And the worst of it was that there is no place where I can go, because they just scooped up the dead people and threw them in mass graves. I don't even know in which mass grave she is. Somewhere. So I mentioned to you about the people in our building, though I don't think anybody was especially politically active. But most of them belonged politically, to the center. When they was to vote they would vote Social Democrat or maybe the Zentrum, which was Catholic. We had very few Catholics, hardly any. Most people were Lutheran.

NP: I see.

HS: And there were some Catholics, about the same few as Jews. It was in percentage almost--from what I know; it's not an official figure. And in the back of our building, in the back wing, were the offices of the Social Democratic Party. And most of the people were either registered Social Democrats or leaned towards it. So there was not one Nazi. And when Hitler came to power you see the big front, we have. And there was not one Swastika flag out. So they rang the doorbells and said, "How is it you don't have flags hanging out?" So we said, "Well, we don't have one." So they said, "We'll bring you one." And then they wanted to hang one from the roof and we said, "Oh, this would collapse," and all. So we never had one, and to stand out, two big buildings without a single flag, why when you came to a young community with young people, from each window was a flag with a Swastika on it.

NP: Swastika.

HS: And this, in this building where we lived and in this whole neighborhood, people knew everybody and liked everybody. When I was a child they called me, "Our little sunshine." So some knew; some didn't. We didn't ask people what they knew. But they told me after the war that they had regularly questionnaires, "Are there any Jews left?" And they said, "No, no, no." So, whether it was ignorance or purpose, we never knew, and they didn't tell us. And we thought nobody knows. And we didn't feel safe. But we did not feel as insecure if you go into a

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neighborhood where you have no idea and also, where could you go? Nobody would have taken you. An old woman and a young girl? Who would take us? And I have now learned enough here with my work with the Archive the difficulty people had. It wasn't only the shelter; you had to eat too.

NP: Yes.

HS: And the danger from, and there was just no question. You didn't know where to go. So you stayed. And as it proved it was not a good thing to do but it wasn't the worst kind.

NP: Right.

HS: Now, most people were, as I said, middle of the road people. There was no extreme. There were no Communists and there were no Nazis. So, I would say most people were apolitical. They were not antisemites. They were not pro and anti. They lived their quiet lives and...

NP: Feel as comfortable with each other.

HS: And I felt comfortable and my mother did. The basic thing was that we felt loved by everybody. Rightly or wrongly, but it proved to be the true thing because they really did like us. And nobody ever opened his mouth to anybody or to the authorities. And we did. Number one is we had no idea what to do and where to go. At that point, in the beginning we thought, *How long can he last? He can't last so we'll survive him.*

NP: Hitler, yes.

HS: Yes. And by the time it was bad you had no way of going out. And we didn't know where to go so you stay. So it was not a matter of choice. There was no way of choosing what to do. So the simple thing was to hang on.

NP: And since you had a feeling of acceptance...

HS: Very much so.

NP: Of...

HS: Yes.

NP: From the people that you lived with all these years.

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HANNA SILVER [1-2-21]

HS: Well everybody, yes, yes.

NP: Yes, this seemed a comfortable thing to do.

HS: Yes. And as they're not dead yet I'm still in touch with everybody. So there was such an outpouring of, oh, I don't want to go into the details...

NP: No, that's O.K., we...

HS: But during...

NP: Have time.

HS: During an air raid the mothers with children went to bunkers. These were very, very heavily secured, with tons of cement. Well you know what bunkers look like. And that's where all mothers with children went every night and slept there, and never heard a sound. Now we went into the regular basement, which was not even totally underground. So part of it was above ground, so you heard the bombs. And the worst noise was when the windows were broken and they fell down. This was a tremendous--so, sometimes you had problems and you cannot run upstairs. And you sat there. And the way people were nice and helped to cover you up that you could do what you couldn't do upstairs. So there was really so much affection and all that. So we had no way of going anywhere and we felt not too secure but, best possible. So we stayed.

NP: To be surrounded by those that you knew and...

HS: We knew and they knew us, we felt that they really cared for us, and wouldn't, as they didn't, give us away. And...

NP: That is very fortunate...

HS: They were...

NP: To be loved.

HS: One was a house warden. One was a block warden. And they told us about the questionnaires and that they always said, "No, no, no." There was another Jewish family and of course nobody knew what happened. One day you said, "Gee, I haven't seen them for so long." You didn't know what happened to them. So they protected them too. And yet one day they were gone.

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HANNA SILVER [1-2-22]

NP: Hanna, one day we were talking and you had said, “You think the Nazis were bad, when the Russians came the hell began all over again.”

HS: Well, entirely different, in different ways. With the Nazi, of course I’m not talking about myself. I talk about average people. If you kept your mouth shut, you never said anything, you never did anything, you didn’t have to worry. And the Russians had the attitude if you killed a thousand, one of them is for sure a guilty one. Well the “liberation” was something that nobody could have imagined. Looking at the other side you say, “Look what the Germans did to the Russians.” Also, the Russian soldier never got paid, and never got furloughs. They were told, “Wait until you get to Berlin. That’s your prize. And then Berlin is yours.” So they were entitled, and it was Goebbels who declared the total war. However, we didn’t declare the total war. And we, not I fortunately, but there were so many suicides you cannot imagine, immediately after the liberation, because, and the rapes. It wasn’t that one soldier raped one person. Twenty or thirty raped a girl until she was...

NP: These were the Russians soldiers.

HS: Dead. Yes. And there were excesses. And then when the Americans came they looked like, they smelled from soap and water and clean and their uniforms pressed and all that. And they never touched a girl. The girls were after them. They had to run from the girls. But the contrast was so--but after the, immediately after the liberation there came an order. The Russians ordered, “Remove the rubble or else you get shot.” So people formed lines and hungry and all did this hard work removing the rubble from the street by the, with their bare hands. They ordered us to hang out American flags. I was lucky to be in the American sector. And I had to make up a flag. And I didn’t know exactly what an American flag looked like. I knew the stars. I didn’t know how many. And I knew there were stripes. I didn’t know how many. And we didn’t have all the coloring. But with a torn sheet and something else I produced an American flag. And when they came in we waved and they accepted that.

NP: Incredible, what one can do, with so little to do so much.

HS: Well this was something they had, a lot of experience. Because when I was a little

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girl it started out where there was inflation. And our after school activity, was that mother gave us a little money and a shopping bag and we had to stand in line for potatoes and for bread. And many times just in front of us it was sold out, so you go home without potatoes and bread and money was only printed on one side. It didn't pay to print them, so we used the clean side on the back for scratch paper in school. So we lived through inflation. And after the inflation nobody but nobody, at least in our circles, had any money. So you were not poor. Money just did not exist for us.

NP: What year was this about?

HS: Well the inflation was 1922 I think when it was over. So we were in school and we didn't have, nobody had anything. Originally the school, this *Lyceum*, had to be paid for. But after the war nobody had money so we, they made it for free. So I got my beautiful education for free. In the beginning it was \$10 a month. So then nobody had money. But when you all are in the same boat, nobody had money, there wasn't one who was rich and one, nobody, we didn't know money. We didn't know pocket money. We didn't know allowance. And you learned to do things, I learned, to do things from nothing, with a little paper, with a little aluminum foil and toys or whatever. So you learned to make something from nothing. And even today it comes in very handy. Now here is such an abundance of everything. People don't dream to make a Halloween costume or to do anything. Or curtains, you buy. I make all my curtains. I make for dozens of children Halloween costumes and all that. I made so many things, because everything is here and you can do it.

NP: Where do you get all this motivation and strength and I guess...?

HS: I don't know. Either you have it or you don't have it. I don't think you can learn it. But some people envy me for all the rough times and say, "You wouldn't be the person, if you wouldn't have lived through that," and I assure everybody I would be a very nice person if I would not have had to live through it. But the...

NP: But necessity was the mother of invention I guess.

HS: Yeah, but the good part is that while you are in it, you don't think. You just put one

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foot in front of the other. You don't think of consequences or what; for instance the day with the fire with my mother I looked for her and couldn't find her. I didn't, I ran through the flames and all that and I still had no idea. And people, I saw ran away from me. Nobody wanted to tell me what really had happened. So I sat down on the stoop and people said, "Get going! Get going! You're gonna die!" Because they were right, later on things collapsed and I didn't care. I was not suicidal; I just didn't care. I thought something is gonna get me, either Hitler or the bombs or something else. And then after that came a lot of hunger...

NP: Well...

HS: After the war.

NP: Could you connect at that point with any family? Did you know where anybody was?

HS: No, there was no mail whatsoever. Until the war you could, here I want to tell you how things happened. The family was in England. And we had devised, my cousin and I, when we write, what things, certain things means. So when we said, "Very, we are doing *very* well," that meant we are not doing well. When we said, "We are doing well," we were doing well. And then of course everybody wrote about grandfather, which was Hitler. And we wished God would take him. He has lived long enough. So we said, and so then we had to go to the post office with the letter open. And you had to show your passport if you had one. And they noted the date in your passport. And they accepted your letter, stamped and opened. Then they gave it to a censor. They censored, and when you received a letter it was properly sealed and no sign that anybody had read it.

NP: Incredible. Incredibly efficient.

HS: Yes.

NP: This is...

HS: I had a friend, she worked for the censor. She was as anti-Hitler as can be, and they let, they had to mark off everything. And they let go through a lot of it. So there was a little form of resistance which helped people by receiving the message that was meant...

NP: You developed your own code...

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HANNA SILVER [1-2-25]

HS: Meant to, yeah.

NP: Within the family.

HS: Yeah.

NP: Hanna did synagogue life play any part of your childhood?

HS: No, no.

NP: With the family?

HS: And as I said, we were not members of a synagogue, which helped us, because my aunt, my two aunts were and the first thing they filled out the yellow questionnaires. And they just took the questionnaires and picked them out from that. We were not. And that helped a lot, because they used the membership lists for the deportations.

NP: Sure, yes.

HS: Double checking with the police, so we had also good relations to the police. Now you have never in your life anything to do with the police. We had to write a; when you wanted to go away for more than three days you had to sign where you go and where you, how long you stay and then when you come back you sign in again. And there were forms. And so the guy in the police knew you for years when you come and go and how was your vacation? I, so then finally my mother nudged me, "We have to go and get finger printed. They said the Jews have to." I said, "I have not registered. I don't do it." And, and the aunts, the two aunts, they nudged her so she forced me to go with her to the police. And the guy said, "What do you want? I know from nothing. Go back." So, me being smart, I go back. And she kept on nudging so we go back. And then he said, "I told you to go home. What do you want? Don't bother me!" And so I said, "Mother, [unclear]" He said, "O.K., she's foolish enough. Here I give you a card. I make you, the young girl, the head of the household with a nice clean card. And on the back let her sign her name. Nobody looks at the back." And she got that big J on there. So I was a clean card. And when they came to find J's, my card wasn't there. Nobody looked there. So this guy at the police, there were so many little things and I don't even know all of them, that contributed. So I can not tell which one was the most significant and which one was not. The end is that I am

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sitting here...

NP: Yes, thank goodness.

HS: And I...

NP: Thank goodness.

HS: I do not know why. That's why I'm always very, very hesitant. I don't want to say anything wrong and I do not know the whole truth. So somebody in the beginning when I was here, "Oh!"

NP: What do you mean by truth?

HS: No, I don't know who did what and who didn't.

NP: Oh, that affected your safety.

HS: And some people...

NP: That, or removed the "J" or...

HS: Well, all together...

NP: The card...

HS: Saved me. All together. But it wasn't any one person doing any one thing. It was probably a combination. And that's why I'm hesitant. I don't want to make up a story and I do not know what really happened in so and so many places. The fact is that I am sitting here.

NP: And we are very fortunate.

HS: And so somebody said to me when, in the early days, "So nothing happened to you. How come? My relatives are all dead. How come you sit here?" I said, "Forgive me. I don't know why." And when you start, some people say they don't believe it because, and have, some have very foolish reasons. They say how all Jews were deported in '33. I say, "Don't you know? So tell about '37." Things went gradually, very gradually. And you could somehow go on if you lived the way I--then another thing, I had a job working for a Jewish firm. And I was just the only employee in the office. And we had a warehouse with workers. And I was safe there. And the man lived till '38. So, he died in '38 but till '38 I was working for a Jewish man. And if you had under ten you didn't have to belong to the Nazi Labor front. So...

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HANNA SILVER [1-2-27]

NP: Under ten?

HS: Under ten employees.

NP: Employees.

HS: Yes. So that was another thing. And then he died and this was taken over and I was hired by one of the biggest steel wholesale places. And the director was as anti-Nazi as you can imagine. So they wanted to hire me because I was an expert through my fifteen years working for this. And the men who knew about metal and sheet metal, they were all in the war. So they hired me.

NP: That was the firm that you worked for.

HS: Yes, yes.

NP: They manufactured sheet metal?

HS: No they didn't manufacture but they bought from, they had their own steel mills and they got big government orders.

NP: Contracts.

HS: And so I was able to sidetrack and put them in steel mills that they are overloaded and they had to give new numbers and all that. I wouldn't call it sabotage but it delayed things. So, after the director hired me he said, "All right. Everything is settled. Fourteen salaries and every, this, and..." And I wanted to have Saturdays off. He said, "Well let's agree, if we, whenever possible you'll take the Saturday off." So then he said, "Well there is just one," I call the chief of personnel, you have to sign the Aryan proof or whatever. And I said, "I'm sorry. I cannot provide that." He looked at me and I looked like you see, and he said, "Why not?" Very, well, I said, "I just don't have Aryans in my background." He says, "Oh I don't believe in that anyhow. You're hired." And he calls the chief in. He says, "I hired her and she does not bring the proof of Aryan whatever." And I was hired and it was more than two years which were the most important, the most dangerous years. But I had bet with myself, I put all on one card, if I tell him--and I knew he was not a Nazi--if I tell him the truth and he hires me, I am safe. Because a firm that had, and they had many employees, a firm that had fired all Jews in '33 already, if

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somebody in '42 hires you, you're safe. And I thought, if I lose out, I'll see. But if I am taken, I'm safe. And that's what happened. But you have to with...

NP: So all the while you were almost one step ahead...

HS: So again...

NP: Thinking and planning.

HS: If you had a job, you didn't have to go to the labor department and ask for a job and they would have sent you out on the roads to do or God knows where. So I was safe here. Again, it was a combination of things. So, and a director hires me in '42 after they fired all Jews in '33, who would believe it?

NP: Incredible.

HS: So this is why so many people say...

NP: It's incredible.

HS: "I don't bel-," I had a friend she says, "I trust you with everything, but I just don't believe you." So, people cannot because they have all their preconceived idea and this doesn't fit in any mold. So that's why I was always hesitant to talk. So one, our dear friend took a tape with me and she writes, "A postman saved her life," which is absolutely wrong. It wasn't a postman. It was a policeman. That was the number one most significant. But the neighbors were second significant. And the job was important because the moment you had a job you had a right for a living space and for food stamps and rations.

NP: So all...

HS: And you got your money.

NP: All of these factors...

HS: Yeah.

NP: The in with the police and...

HS: Yeah.

NP: You know, living with these people who...

HS: And these were all...

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NP: Were accepting.

HS: Tiny little things. They didn't take more than five minutes.

NP: But it all added up.

HS: And you didn't, yes, but you never knew what added with what.

NP: Of course.

HS: The, you just see the end result. And of course if I would have not gone to work I would have been where my mother is today, in some mass grave. And we all had a little suitcase, which you never left behind. You took it wherever you went, because many times all that somebody had left was that little suitcase.

NP: Yeah.

HS: So when people went to the basement in air raids, they had the suitcase and the knapsack and whatever else. And many times they ended up with just that. So I had always; we had to go to work and the trolley cars were overfilled with people and all. So that day my mother said, "Oh today you work only half a day; leave it home. I'll take it down." She did take it down, and I didn't even have this one towel, a cake of soap, and toothpaste, a toothbrush. I didn't even have that. So I had nothing. So other people kept on lugging everything to the basement. And I was the perfect lady. I had nothing but a little clutch bag, with nothing but a comb and a handkerchief in there. That's all I brought. And this went on for weeks and weeks. So I saved a lot of *schlepping*. And then, you know when, I never minded because I felt without burden. But then when the war was over and people, those who were saved, and they pulled out and had everything; so a friend shared her coat with me. And I had to give it back to her when she needed it. But she let me have it. And somebody gave me a gift, a plate with a set of fork and a spoon, and the knife and said, "Somebody has to have that." And somebody gave me a feather bed, because I was very shaky. I shook for weeks, I was shaking.

NP: The shock of...

HS: It must have been shock, yeah.

NP: The shock from your mother's death.

HS: Of course there was, the mother was gone and the home was gone. And every--

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everything you could; you don't know what nothing means. Nothing means absolutely nothing. What you had on you and nothing else. And I got coupons, a bunch of coupons. There was no store where you could get anything.

NP: Hanna you mentioned when the GIs came in they smelled of soap and they had their nicely pressed uniforms.

HS: Yes.

NP: Do I understand that you married one of these wonderful GIs?

HS: Well he bought a, I didn't meet him in the Red Cross. He was a First Lieutenant with Military Government in the manpower division. And he was of course, all of the GIs were nineteen, twenty. And he was thirty. And he had a, he was requested to come to Berlin as [tape off then on]

NP: This is the end of the conversation between Hanna Silver and Natalie Packel on Tuesday, April 25, 1995.

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