

Testing this recorder, one, two, three. March 4, 1992. Interviewer is Janice Booker, and I am interviewing Mrs. Martha Mandel. Where did you live from 1933 to 1939?

I lived in Berlin.

I'm going to ask you something about your experiences in Berlin in those years, from 1939.

I want you to know I was there earlier, and I had the most wonderful, glorious time of my life. I got answers to all my 100,000 questions.

It was like an eye-opener to you?

I was born in Berlin. I was really-- my mind--

Like a new person. A new person was born.

My happiest years in life were from 1919 or 1920 until '33, until Hitler.

From 1939 until 1945, where did you live?

I escaped Germany July 31, 1939 to go as the only way I could leave, as a domestic servant. I never made myself a cup of tea in Germany. I have no idea what is going on in the house or what to do. And I went as a domestic servant there.

In Berlin?

I went to London. You asked me after '39.

'39, yes.

In Berlin, I worked-- I worked in the office of my mother's cousin, and I made a very nice salary, very nice salary.

And then you went to London in '39?

Yes, because a Nazi who knew me told me, what are you doing here? Can you get out as soon as possible? There are terrible things planned for the Jewish people. This is when I worked on my exit.

I see.

It's the only thing I could get out is as a-- got a visa as a domestic servant in London.

And that's what you did in London until '45?

And ask what?

Until when did you do that in London?

I was in London until 1941.

And then after '41?

I came to America with not a penny in my pocket. We were sitting at-- standing. And then we went via Canada because the whole Atlantic Ocean was full of mines. We could not go on a boat or come to New York. We went via Montreal to New York, and a wonderful Jewish organization in Montreal took-- there were about 10 couples, everybody without a

penny, doctors, and lawyers, and everybody.

We were standing then at Grand Central Station. We didn't know where to go. But I assume that Montreal called the HIAS in New York, but this took about a few hours. They didn't know when we came, and nobody was desperate.

Were were in a group of wonderful, educated people. Nobody had money. Nobody had-- but we were-- my husband, a musician, a cantor in Germany, a musician and a writer, and the last [INAUDIBLE], he went-- he never was in-- never spoke a word English, never, never in New York.

He went to a Jewish paper and told of our-- told them of our experience in London.

So that his story became known?

It told of our experience before in Germany before I left. I left-- I came to know my husband in London. I didn't know him before, and I didn't want to get married. I was so happy in Berlin in my work and in my wonderful, wonderful place. I didn't. I wanted only to study, to learn, and to study, and get answers to my questions.

Did you get any answers in London?

I worked from 6:00 in the morning until 9:00 in the evening. I had the turn-- afternoon, I had, I just two hours I could rest. Of course I never got up in my life-- up in my life at 6:00 in the morning. I never did any housework at all, period.

She made me do all kind of housework outside in the cold, cold weather. This changed everything here, my whole hand, and it never became normal again. I did it because I wanted to go to America, but my number for America, which I asked for is Berlin-- maybe I would be still in London. So I knew I had to stay a long time in London before my number will come up.

When you came to New York in 1941, what did you do in New York?

I was very lucky. A former student in my hometown told me, if I would like her position-- she was already a long time in England-- in America-- to be a companion to Ms. Gimbels. You know the Gimbels stores?

Yes, of course.

She was in her 80s. Why did she want a companion? Only to talk German. And [? Marta ?] only wanted to talk English. I could write and read English. I could hardly speak.

Even after those years in London?

Of course I spoke, and I went all around in London and never got lost. But I didn't speak too much. As a domestic servant, I was always sitting in the kitchen. She didn't talk with me. Her husband did, who was funny. He knew that I was not a domestic servant. He came, and he come from work, first into the kitchen and then to his wife. She hated me for that.

But I talked very, very little English. I had no talks with her. I didn't want to talk with her.

So you got this job as a companion to Ms. Gimbels because you were able to converse with there in German.

--in German. She lived in the very fine hotel. I had nothing to do. Everything was served, the breakfast and-- I told her I cannot cook, never cooked in my life. I never made a cup of tea. They served breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

And after lunch, she always permitted me to go out and see my husband because friends came, and she played bridge or something. I had every day two or two and a half hours off to go to my husband and bring him-- I had money. I made a good salary. I brought him The New York Times. I bought him food. He couldn't find any work to do.

So you were the one who was employed?

Yeah.

How long did you have this position?

I stayed there from January until the 1st of August. This is when my husband got the position here in Philadelphia.

I see. So then you came to Philadelphia.

And she held it against me that I left her.

She liked you.

I liked her, too, but I belong to my husband.

Let me ask you some family questions. The name of your father?

Abraham, Abraham Wolff.

And do you recall when he was born? Where was he born?

In Dulmen, D-U-L-M-E-N. And he died when he was 76. Let's see. He died 1928. Now figure out when he was born.

I'll do that some other time.

Yeah. I think '52, I think. I think around 1952 to a very well-off father who was just the contrary-- my father was a dreamer, and a-- I loved him with all my heart and all my soul. But he was not-- he could not make money or--

Not a good provider.

But he got all this from his-- as the first son-- and in Germany the first son gets everything, all the acres, the house, and everything. And my grandfather had a brick factory and everything. But my father was a dreamer, but he got everything and sold one acre after another because he could not make money. He could not sell-- he had people working there, and he paid them, but he could not sell the stuff the people produced.

What was your mother's maiden name? Do you recall that?

Ostwald, O-S-T-W-A-L-D.

Ostwald. And do you recall when she was born?

She was born 14 years later, but she was 1887-- no, that's '88. And she was 19 when she got married. This was in 1887. Now--

We'll figure out the mathematics.

--she was born in '68, '68, about, probably, yeah.

OK. And where was she born?

Forgot the town-- also in Westphalia.

Where did she die when she died?

In Dulmen, in my hometown.

And your father also?

No, thank God, before Hitler could put them in the oven. They were-- we thanked God that they died a normal-- it was normal death.

You had brothers and sisters?

I had 11 brothers and sisters. My parents had 12 children. Four died when they were one years old, crib death, only boys.

Really?

No girls. Wonderful children, happy, laughing, one-year-old, happy children. In the morning, my mother came down. They were dead, no signs of anything before.

Did any of them die as a result of the Holocaust? Did any of them die in the Holocaust?

No.

No.

They were one-year-old.

No, I mean of the survivors.

No, no, no. This was everything before the war.

Wait a minute. Are you asking for the whole family, about her whole family?

Her brothers and sisters.

Martha, she's asking about your whole family, not just about the boys, whether any of them died in concentration camp.

Oh, of course. I lost six brothers-- one brother and five sisters, put alive into the oven.

Where? Do you recall where they were in what camp?

They were-- I cannot remember that.

All right. You don't need to.

But I know where they were. I'm 95 years old. My memory is gone.

Your memory sounds pretty good to me, Mrs. Mandel.

Yeah, it's very good. Martha, you told-- Treblinka? They were--

In Treblinka.

Yeah, Treblinka.

They were-- they lived in the concentration camp Treblinka, but they were in the oven somewhere else, in Poland. It was in Poland, wonderful sisters. I don't-- my brother was brought to the Ukraine, in southern Russia. He had his visa--

Excuse me one minute.

This is side two of this recording with Martha Mandel. Do you remember the name--  
--of my brothers?

The ones who died in the camp.

Kurt, K-U-R-T, Wolff. He had a visa. He got the young married, and he wanted to go to Africa. And he got the visa, but his mother-in-law got in trouble with the Nazis with money, was well-off. He could not leave her alone. He took care of her and cleared everything with the Nazis so the mother could leave for Argentina.

He wanted to leave with his young wife. They took his passport away and her passport, and we never heard of him again. He wanted to go to Argentina, and they had everything ready. And the Nazis put them in concentration camp. Then he asked for a plane to go to Buenos Aires, never heard--

That was it?

--never heard of him again, a wonderful, young, lovely, lovely boy, or man.

Your husband's name is Eric?

Yeah, Eric, E-R-I-C.

Where was he born?

In Westphalia.

Do you know the date?

He was born--

That's all right.

In June, June, I think-- 1902, I think.

1902?

Yes, in June.

When were you married? When were you married?

We were married in September 1940 in London, not normally. He was in the Kitchener Camp. Do you know about the Kitchener Camp?

No, tell me about it.

He was in concentration camp in Germany, and they gave him the permission to leave under the one condition, that he's leaving Germany in four or six weeks. Can you imagine? To get a-- I got more than a year to get my things. Anyway, [BOTH TALKING] England--

The Kitchener Camp?

Had heard of this had opened a camp in England, in southern England, and took in all these people like my husband, Eric, that they had to leave under these conditions from Austria and from Germany. There were 200 people, maybe near 1,000 people, men, only men, in the Kitchener Camp in England. And England's government took care of them, and they were wonderfully taken care of in everything.

Do you have children, Mrs. Mandel? Do you have children?

We didn't dare.

So when the war was over, you were both in America? And you arrived here in 1940?

In January 19-- yeah, the 24th of January.

Can you attribute any medical problems that you've had in your life to your experiences in Germany and London? You said something about your fingers and arthritis.

Yeah, but only from the working.

I'm going to ask you some other questions now. Tell me something about what your life was like before the war.

I told you, I just had this wonderful time in Berlin.

So it was when you got to Berlin that you felt that life had changed for you?

I think it was 1919, when the war was-- when the First World War was over. You don't remember. You were not even alive.

No, but I remember from history.

I think it was around 1920, and until '32, until Hitler, I was-- had the life of a queen. I worked very hard, but I was so happy. I got into the theater, and it was-- and to see the concerts, and everything what I could afford, I made it. It was so great, but I didn't care for eating. I only cared for knowledge, knowledge. Knowledge was my hunger, not food. Knowledge was my concern.

Before Hitler, did you experience any antisemitism?

It was always a little out there, but I didn't-- I heard about it. I personally didn't hear, but I read about it. There was antisemitism in Germany, but I personally didn't experience anything.

When you were growing up, did you or your family belong to any Jewish organizations or to a synagogue?

I didn't get--

When you were growing up in Westphalia, did you or did your family belong to any Jewish organizations?

They kept up the Jewish-- my parents with the 12 children-- we kept up the Jewish schools.

Yes, I can imagine.

And of course we had to go every-- every Saturday, we had to go to the service. This was when we were in the Jewish school. Later, the high school, I was in a Catholic high school-- there was no Jewish high school-- Catholic high schools

by nuns. And they treated us like princesses. It was a wonderful school.

In the Jewish school, we know much more than the other children from the Catholic elementary school or the Protestant school. We were much better-oriented and educated and not-- in knowledge and everything.

So you were good students?

We were good-- I was always an A student. But there didn't be-- not for my knowledge of other engaged students because I was so hungry, and I didn't get the answer to my questions. So I would have been-- if I would have been in another city, I think I would have become somebody. As well, I became a nobody.

Did any of the men in your family serve in the national army?

In the national?

In the army.

No. Of course not.

When Hitler was only-- one brother was only alive-- another brother died when he was 19, a wonderful-- he died during the war of influenza.

Do you remember-- when Hitler was appointed as chancellor in 1933, do you remember how your family reacted, how you reacted to that?

We were all frightened to death because we know of him. The papers told about him. Later, when he was there, we didn't know anything what was-- when he was in charge, what was going on. I only got my knowledge through the Radio London in the evening. I knew what was going on in Germany politically. Not was nothing in the paper. I couldn't read them.

Did you ever have any contact with the Council of German Jews? Did you know--

The Council of German Jews?

Did you know what that was?

No.

OK. In 1933, there was the boycott. It's called the Aryan Paragraph. Do you remember that or how you were affected by it?

What was in 1933?

A boycott.

A boycott?

Boycott where Jewish stores, shops were boycotted.

Of course I know I went to work in the bus, and I saw all the Jewish stores. They were burning. All the glasses were broken.

Kristallnacht, yes.

You did not hear there, but I saw it, and I was crying the whole time to go to my office.

During this period of time--

This was in November 1933.

Did your family discuss the possibility of leaving Germany during this period of time?

No, we were so closed up of everything with other countries. We could not do it, no contact with other countries at all, no. And of course-- no, it is-- and I tried very hard to come to America, and but I told you I got a number this high.

And my sisters-- when I went as a domestic servant, they also tried, and they also had a visa. And they said, we don't say good-bye to you. We will see you in London. I never saw them again.

When they asked to go to London, they took their passport away and never heard of them again.

During this period of time, what was your contact with the Gentiles like, friends, neighbors? How did they react?

We were-- they wanted-- they wanted to help. They were-- I had wonderful, wonderful non-Jewish friends, fine people. Not whole Germany was as bad as Hitler, but within years, he got a great, great many followers. But I did not-- my Christian friends were wonderful, and they hold it against me that I left. They could not believe what I know, what I heard from London. They didn't know what I know, and I didn't dare to talk to them about it. You understand?

Yes.

They didn't dare anything. They were frightened to say a word because it could be misused against us, used against us. You wouldn't believe it.

When you left to go to London in 1940, did you work until you left? Were you able to work?

I worked as a domestic servant in London.

Before went to London, were you able to continue your office work in Berlin?

Yes, only until the 1st of January, 1939. The store I was working in was closed. It was a Jewish store. They had to close. So I was, from January until the end of July, not working, only working on my exit because the Nazi told me, try as hard as you can to get out as soon as possible. But it took me about six months to get out.

Why do you think he told you that? Why do you think he was willing--

I think--

--to help?

--he wanted to help me. He wanted-- he didn't want me to get in the oven.

And he knew that that's what was happening?

Right. He didn't tell me, but he said, terrible things are planned. He didn't tell me. I didn't know of the ovens, and he didn't tell me. He tells me, all these terrible things are planned against the Jews.

When Germany invaded Poland, you were still in Berlin?

What time was it?



'39.

Yes.

Did that change anything in your situation?

Nothing at all, only because I heard, I guess only that my family was already in Poland. This I didn't know, only guessing. I did not know. And I had a wonderful friend in Germany, a Swedish, and he left for Stockholm.

So the people knew were dispersing? They were trying to go all--

Everybody tried to get out, but he was--