HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ILSA R. KATZ

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Inge Karo
Date: September 11, 1989

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IRK- Ilsa R. Katz [interviewee]
IK - Inge Karo [interviewer]
Date: September 11, 1989

Tape one, side one:

IK: This is an interview with Ilsa Katz, on September 11, 1989, interviewed by Inge Karo. Please tell me where you were born, and when, and a little about your family.

IRK: Okay, I was born in Venningen, Pfalz, in southwestern Germany, on December 10, 1921. I was the eldest in the family.

IK: Would you mind spelling the name of your birth place? Could you spell it?

IRK: V-E-N-N-I-

IK: V-E-N-N-...

IRK: I-N-G-E-N

IK: P-F-A-L-Z?

IRK: P-F-A-L-Z.

IK: Okay. And were you in a middle class family and were, what was your parents' occupation?

IRK: My father was a butcher and cattle dealer, which had been the family business for many, many years. It seemed to be a tradition in the family. Also I believe Jews had been limited earlier in what they could do, and this was an occupation that had been open to them.

IK: And what was your life like before the war? Or before your life was changed by the Nazis in Europe?

IRK: Well, the first four years I went to school in Venningen, then I started secondary school in the largest nearby town, in Landau, L-A-N-D-A-U. And I went there from 1932 to 1938 and I was allowed to graduate, because my father had fought in WWI and had been wounded. Some of the Jewish children had to leave school earlier.

IK: Now, this was not a Jewish school? This was a...

IRK: A general school. Well, it wasn't for everybody. It was not a, your par-, you had to pass an entrance exam and your parents had to pay for you.

IK: Did your family experience any antisemitism before the Hitler period?

IRK: Well, I suppose there was always a touch of that in the population. But basically I, my family had lived in that particular tow-, area for, we have it documented back to 1648.

IK: So you, if there was any, you weren't rea-, as a child you weren't really conscious of it.

IRK: Well, you were conscious of it. You were different from the others. There were, I lived in this very small community, there were very few Jewish families, and I was the only child of my age at the time. I knew I was different, but I didn't feel myself inferior to them.

IK: And did you or you family belong to any Jewish organizations?

IRK: Except for the small Jewish congregation, not that I know of.

IK: Was it an Orthodox congregation?

IRK: Very traditional.

IK: And, well you referred to it already, but did any men in your family serve in any army?

IRK: My father had, yes. He had a crippled right hand as a consequence.

IK: In WWI?

IRK: WWI, yes. He served for over four years, I think. He lost hearing in one ear, too. He had been in the trenches for years. [tape off then on]

IK: Do you remember how you and your members of your family reacted when Hitler was appointed as Chancellor in January, 1933?

IRK: Yes, I remember that. We, it seemed like rabble. It was mostly rabble that had joined him and we did not think that could last. And anyway, we didn't think the decent Germans would want to cast their lot with this band.

IK: That early, did you already sense that this might be a threat for you?

IRK: No one had any idea really.

IK: Did you have any contact with the *Reichsvertretung*, or Council of German Jews?

IRK: I don't think I even ever heard of that.

IK: Were you affected by the boycott of April 1st, 1933, the Aryan Paragraph?

IRK: Oh, all these things affected fam-, you know, affected all Jews in Germany. I, there is no question that it cut back on what you could do. It cut back on mobility. Signs appeared everywhere that Jews were not allowed there. You couldn't go swimming in the swimming pool any more. There were restrictions, ever worsening restrictions.

IK: Now between 1933 and the Nuremberg Laws, which weren't passed until 1935, was your life changed then any more than you've already mentioned?

IRK: Well, too, I, you know, I was a child. I was pretty-, I went to school. Clearly things were not getting any better, but I really don't, I can't be very specific about that.

IK: Now, during this very early period, did you or any member of your family already discuss the possibility of leaving Germany that early?

IRK: Well, I know my father was the first in his family to--he was the eldest of six children--he was the first one to discuss it. Now when he actually formulated

that idea, I don't know.

IK: Now when the Nuremberg Laws were finally passed, how were you affected by the Nuremberg Laws?

IRK: Well, again I don't know too much about it. I think we always had a live-in maid, and I think you could no longer have a maid in the household. I mean these people had been part of the family in some way. But, and we used to have a laundress come in. I think there were restrictions. But it, and, I think also gradually some of my fellow students in Landau were no longer allowed to attend school. There were restrictions, but I can't pinpoint the time or anything like that.

IK: Did you think that this was going to be about as bad as it would get, or did you have a feeling that things are going to get worse?

IRK: I don't think anyone really knew. I mean, it was something that, there had always been, yes, there had always been antisemitism. Antisemitism. I grew up in a Catholic community and around Easter they would yell at you, "Christ killer" and that. You could feel the hostility, definitely. It was always underlying.

IK: And did you feel this was mainly caused by the religion?

IRK: I think it was taught in the churches that Jews were the Christ killers, and I think that was built in. I think that's very clear, if you look at the Church history.

IK: Now, between 1933 and 1938, did your family still have any contact with non-Jews?

IRK: Definitely. We had lived, you know, our whole family had lived there for centuries. We were part of the--part of, but separate from--the fabric of life there.

IK: Did you find that gradually the behavior of people that you had been friendly with changed, that you had been in contact with?

IRK: I believe people were afraid to associate with you, and I think there were, the business my father could do, there were definitely restrictions. I again don't know the specifics.

IK: Oh, that remind-, was your father a general butcher, or was he a kosher butcher?

IRK: Kosher butcher, yes. My uncle was the *shochet*[1], and we also then sold to the population at large, but it was always killed in the ritual way. As a matter of fact, now that you mention that, there were restrictions on the, you couldn't do the kosher killing any more. You had to shock them electrically, but I don't know, I don't recall the details of that.

IK: But then if your father, most of your father's customers were Jewish, then how was his business affected?

[1]Ritual Slaughterer.

IRK: Well a few. Not, no, no, no, he provided, he was the only one in that location. I think there were about 1,000 inhabitants. Maybe at most ten Jewish families.

IK: Oh.

IRK: Also, I think, and again, I don't have any time, timing of that in my head. One of my uncles had been a public school teacher in Frankfurt. And he lost his job. And the family came to live in my grandparents' house.

IK: Did, now during *Kristallnacht*, in November of 1938, what happened to your family?

IRK: Well, I, what happened to my family? That previous summer, I had been in Berlin, hoping to train to be a lab assistant. And in October, the...

IK: Excuse me, if you don't, you know, if you don't object to it, how, about how old were you at that time?

IRK: I was 17. I had finished the, well the, what was called *Mittlere Reife*. I had finished my education in the school in Landau, in April. And I wanted to continue studying, but there was no way a Jew could, would be admitted anywhere, except my parents somehow learned about this lab school in Berlin and they sent me there. But in October, the two men who ran that school were arrested, and we all were sent home. And so I was...

IK: And were the two, the two men who were arrested, were they Jewish?

IRK: Yes.

IK: And this was in 1938.

IRK: In '38. I think it was in October. So I was home again in November. And the ninth, I think on the ninth my father and all the men in the village, all the Jewish men in the village, were arrested and put in the jail in the nearby slightly larger town, EdenKoben.

IK: Do you know how to spell that?

IRK: E-D-E-N-K-O-B-E-N.

IK: Oh. Yeah, I'm sorry. So most of the men were arrested during the night.

IRK: Yeah, and they smashed the windows. And we were all terribly frightened. We had no idea what would happen. We already had gotten, we were the only ones in the family, because my father had applied for an Affidavit of Support to his uncles, who lived in Wilmington, North Carolina. They had emigrated in the late 19th Century, brothers of my paternal grandmother. So he had written to them, and we had gotten a number. And there was this terribly long waiting period. None of my uncles and aunts had obtained that kind of Affidavit early enough, so none of them had gotten out. But we had gotten our visa. We had already made the, made arrangements for getting our belongings packed, and for leaving as soon as possible. And this happened totally unexpectedly. And even, I

do remember a, someone in the village had run, they were burning the little synagogue, which was a very modest building. And someone had taken, they knew this was a holy object, he had rescued one *Sefer Torah*[2] and he brought it to our house.

IK: One of the Gentiles who was...

IRK: Yes, yeah. And we brought that over here, and that's in a synagogue in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where one of my cousins...

IK: Wonderful.

IRK: …helped found a synagogue. And, well, we were all frightened. Then the next morning, all the Jews were rounded up and put in a bus. And they drove us across the Rhine and dumped us in a meadow somewhere, we didn't even know where. It turned out it was near Karlsruhe, Baden. And we had an unc-, one of my uncles lived there. So somehow my father and other men got there and we, my uncle and aunt took us all in. And I remember everyone was sleeping on the floor all through their house, a whole busload of people. And no one knew what would happen. The one good thing, if any-, if there is any good in all that, they stopped in EdenKoben and picked up all the men and loaded them on the bus before we left the area.

IK: When you say "they", what, were these people...

IRK: The Nazis. The Storm troopers.

IK: From outside the village? These were not people who...

IRK: I don't know who they were.

IK: You had seen before?

IRK: My father might have known. I really can't...

IK: So they were in uniform?

IRK: Unif-, yeah, the yellow, you know, the brown shirts.

IK: Yeah, and they were not people from, that you knew from the neighborhood?

IRK: I can't, basically, I think, most of the people in the village were not particularly thrilled with Hitler, but they could not, they were very conservative. But there were some who did join very happily and willingly.

IK: No, the reason I ask is that it seems to have been a pattern in very small places, that they had to get people from outside to do these things and I [unclear]...

IRK: It could very well have been. They wanted to make, the, somehow, I guess one of the top commanders wanted to make the Pfalz *Judenrein*, clean, cleared out, or cleaned out of Jews. And they just drove us across the Rhine River and dumped us somewhere.

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[2]Torah scroll.

IK: Did they, were you allowed to take anything with you? Food, or belongings?

IRK: I, we must have, but I really don't recall the details.

IK: And, did they take, they took everybody?

IRK: The whole, all the Jews in the village.

IK: All the Jews.

IRK: From very old...

IK: And did they tell you...

IRK: To the children.

IK: Did they tell you anything, or they just told you have to get on the bus?

IRK: We just didn't know. We just didn't know what was gonna be happening.

IK: They, but did they tell you can't come back? Or...

IRK: We just didn't know. I don't know if what I, I really my memory of that is very vague.

IK: Well, that's understandable.

IRK: Yeah. One of my cousins promised me, she taped, she was about ten, fifteen years older than I, and she remembers much more. But I must say I'm really very, very unclear about this.

IK: And did you, did any of you think in terms of going back?

IRK: Well, I don't know. The grownups were working on this, and my family, because my parents and my brother and I, because we were read-, we had already had the tickets to leave and all the papers were in order, we were the first who were allowed to return. How we got back there, I have no recollection whatever. And...

IK: And when you got back, was your...

IRK: Well, the...

IK: Property still there, or had it...

IRK: It was still there, but the windows were smashed. And of course we had these wooden shutters which we put in and we were, this was in November. I, again I don't know very many details. We, our belongings were eventually, were packed. And we joined other family members who lived in Ludwigshafen or Mannheim at the time. We visited them. I do remember one thing, one of the last days there were, it was December 10th, even I had not thought of it that it was my birthday, that was my 17th birthday, till one of my aunt's said, "Oh my gosh, it's Ilsa's birthday today." We were all so absorbed with all this. And we arrived in, we left then, and I think that was about the best feeling I ever experienced, when the ship's motor started in the night, and we were out of Germany.

IK: But let's go, let's keep that for a minute.

IRK: Right.

IK: Now after *Kristallnacht*, when you had been taken by bus, after that time, were any members of your family able to work?

IRK: No, we had already, I think the business was closed quite a bit before that. There were, even earlier, you know, you asked me about how the various restrictions, the Nuremberg Laws and all that, affected us. There were ever-increasing restrictions on Jewish businesses, and I think that's what made my father recognize that we had to go. And, I, it must have taken at least two years, the process of getting...

IK: So in the meantime you just lived off your savings?

IRK: I don't, you know, again, I was a child.

IK: You were a child, yes.

IRK: Somehow my parents managed. I think today children are much more informed on what, what's going on.

IK: Do you, well now did, what, you mentioned leaving. Do you know, when did you leave? In 1938?

IRK: In December, 1938.

IK: Oh, yeah, [unclear]. Well I would like to go back a little bit before we talk more about the emigration. If you want to tell me anything that you think might be relevant about what kind of a place Venningen, Pfalz, was, and also about your extended family.

IRK: Okay.

IK: In those days.

IRK: In the tape? It was a small village. The people mainly were occupied with agriculture and growing grapes for wine. It was a wine producing area. And it was about three kilometers from the nearest larger community, which was EdenKoben. And I know, there were other small agricultural villages nearby, and, with isolated Jewish families. Then all would come in for a *minyan*[3], to our little synagogue.

IK: Did your synagogue have a rabbi?

IRK: No. Gosh, it was just a few.

IK: They took, people took turns leading the prayers?

IRK: Yes. I think my father did, my uncle did, and then when this other uncle came from Frankfurt, he, had had actually also been a cantor. He was probably the closest to a real religious leader that we had. The rest was all lay leaders.

IK: Now what, the Jewish children that lived in Venningen, Pfalz, what kind of a edu-, Jewish education did they get, if any?

[3]Quorum for a service.

IRK: Well, I can only speak for myself and my brother. As soon as I start, was in first grade, my parents had a man come in who was teaching me my Heb-, who was giving me religious classes. I think he came in two afternoons a week.

IK: As far as you know, did any boys become Bar Mitzvah?

IRK: There weren't any boys that age. My brother was six years younger than I. He was only ten when we came here. No, there were two other smaller children, but their family was very poor, and we, they were younger than I. So, in my age grou-, there was really no one else. As a matter of fact, I was the only child, Jewish or otherwise, who went to this secondary school in Landau. I was the only one going. The others remained in the local school.

IK: And, do, you don't have, do you remember whether other Jewish children also had tutors in their homes and...

IRK: Well, there were only, I was the only one, and my brother, and then, I had in my, the earlier years in Landau, we had a, the rabbi. That was both Catholic and Protestant, and there was a special Catholic school. So most of my fellow students were most-, they were mostly Protestant. And in the earlier days we had the prie-, the Catholic priest would get a room in the school building, the Protestant minister would come, and the rabbi from Landau would come into the school, and we had religious school classes built into the curriculum. Then, again, as the Nazi laws got intensified, we no longer, the rabbi was no longer allowed to come in, and we would go to the rabbi's house. We were scheduled there for religious instructions.

IK: And where did this rabbi, this rabbi though lived in another town?

IRK: In Landau. As a matter of fact, I'm still in touch with him, with the second one. The older one who was a Dr. Einstein, a relative of the famous Dr. Einstein. When he retired, a young man came in fresh from the seminary in Breslau. And he is in, he's in his 80's now. He is still active in Monroe, New York.

IK: And so, now after *Kristallnacht*, when you went back, there were no, and, there was no physical abuse or any real persecution between the time you came back and the time you managed to emigrate, as far as you know?

IRK: Well, I, as far as I know, no. But I do, to backtrack a little bit, prior to that my brother had started in the secondary school in, for boys, in EdenKoben. And he was beaten up so much on the way that my parents just kept him out of school the last few months.

IK: And who were, were these local children that were beating him up?

IRK: Yes, and I mean, you never knew when they would throw a rock after you, and in the winter the spiked snowballs. And, of course, you were cursed, you were spit at. But, well, you just bore up the best you could.

IK: But this, this was different from the antisemitism that you felt was always there under the surface, was this?

IRK: More, it intensified. I mean it became State sanctioned. It hadn't been officially sanctioned before. No, it intensified.

IK: Well, what I'm really trying to get at is you, I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but, do you feel that this was a different kind of antisemitism than what the children got just from the church, from being raised in the church?

IRK: Well, it became the State policy. You know, it was overt, and the proper thing to do, I suppose, or, for people who were so inclined, they felt they were doing right.

IK: Now did...

IRK: It must have taken great courage for the people that showed you any kindness, to do so, because they were putting themselves at risk.

IK: Well, would you, is there any incidents that you remember of people showing you kindness? Would you like to talk about that?

IRK: Well, my parents, there were people coming in under cover of dark, talking to my father. That I do know. And in school some of my teachers were very nice to me, even...

IK: Did you need any actual help? Or you didn't need that, like people bringing you food or money or clothes?

IRK: No, I think with food sometimes. When things became rationed, I think people might, you know, it was an agricultural community, and...

IK: So it was more...

IRK: You could get...

IK: Moral support.

IRK: Eggs. Yeah, I mean, actually, I don't believe we ever needed any real help. Perhaps with rationed items that sometimes people would help you. I mean, everything was very carefully supervised and controlled. You had to have proper papers for every thing. But again, I, I'm not very clear about these details.

IK: Did, was your entire family able to emigrate? Or did you have to leave family members behind that were killed?

IRK: We, my parents, my brother and I got out together. My father's four sisters, one brother, and their spouses all were killed. Most of the younger people got out. We also had an, my maternal, my one maternal uncle and his wife, and my grandmother, had not yet been able to go. And my, we were going to send for my grandmother. She stayed with them temporarily. Again I, most of my family was deported to Gurs, in France, I think in 1940. And, most of them either died in Gurs and Marseilles, or were deported east. I just looked up the names again in the, in this new book...

IK: Yeah.

IRK: That just came out.

IK: Now did you find out about this only after the war was over? Or did

you find out about it at the time?

IRK: Well, we had letters, and I hope to sort through them one of these days. We did have letters. Of course they were very often, they were very careful in how they worded that. But we do, did know they were deported and we tried to send as much money for food or food packages, some through the Friends Service Committee, some through other agents, some of whom even were frauds and taking it all for themselves. I don't think much of anything reached the ones for whom it was intended. Yes, we knew of it until the final deportation. And I do want to sort out the papers as I get my personal life in better order.

IK: Now we, by the time you left, you didn't leave at the last minute, you left in 1938, at that time, had you already heard stories about concentration camps?

IRK: Yes, and it was always whispered Dachau had been the one that we knew of, the one near Munich, because...

IK: And did you think, at that time did you just think they were a kind of jail? Or did you at that time already have a feeling about the extermination policy?

IRK: Well, the extermination policy I don't think anyone could have imagined that, in their wildest nightmares. But, it was, people who had been politically active with the Communists, with the Socialists, they were, if they didn't get out, they were arrested, and you, stories were whispered and again, young, you know, I wasn't really a child anymore, but still people would not tell you. But you'd hear stories where people got a little box of ashes back. While, you know...

IK: Did anybody from your community that had been in a concentration camp come back? Or once they went they never came back?

IRK: It was, I don't think anyone in that community, but my younger cousins, the younger men who had been active in wherever they had lived--politically--they got out. Some to, most to Israel. And...

IK: Were you, as a child, were you involved in any Zionist groups?

IRK: Well there was nothing where, no...

IK: It was too small.

IRK: It was too small. And whatever there was in Landau, I went home after school, so there was no, there was no opportunity to participate in that.

IK: Thank you, did you want to, I had interrupted you because I wanted to back track. Do you want...

IRK: Go ahead.

IK: To say some, a little bit more about the actual process of emigration, when you left to the United States, how you, which harbor did you leave from? Did you leave Hamburg?

IRK: We left from Hamburg.

IK: From Hamburg. And where did you, this was when?

IRK: This was in December, '38.

IK: December 1938.

IRK: I'm not sure of the sailing date. I know we arrived here December 22nd. And cousins of my father...

IK: And then where did you land? In New York?

IRK: In New York, and we were picked up, we had thought we would be living in Wilmington, North Carolina. My father had hoped to be able to open a butcher shop there. But, and he had brought a lot of equipment along. But then the, it was still the end of the Depression, Wilmington was very much of a backwater, and the local relatives said we were to stay here.

IK: In New York?

IRK: In Philadelphia.

IK: Oh, Philadelphia.

IRK: No, they brought us to Philadelphia right away. And...

IK: Did you have, were you able to take your lift? Your belongings in a lift?

IRK: Yes, we had brought the lift.

IK: Were you able to take some money?

IRK: Very little, I think 100 marks. It was a lot of money at the time, but it was not very much to live on. We just lived on the clothes we had brought, and, actually, the furniture was much more of a, an albatross around the neck. The huge beds and the huge armoires and all the things, that you had to find a very lar-, a house with large bedrooms...

IK: It constrains your mobility.

IRK: Yes, it certainly did.

IK: Did you have any contact with any of the organizations that were helping refugees, like HIAS or the...

IRK: No, our family had looked after us, yes. Perhaps HIAS with the papers, but only with, you know, the applications for citizenship. But we never needed aid. I mean we tried, my father was almost 60 when we got here, so he could not get work, and he was hard of hearing. And even so he worked very hard with that right hand. I guess it put people off, that crippled right hand. Mother worked in a household for a Jewish family, $5 a week. And I would babysit, and my brother would carry out shoes for a neighborhood shoe maker. The relatives had rented a large old house, 1824 Ontario Street, and a number of people in the family whom they had brought over were all sharing that house for the first year. Mother would cook for, would cook for the whole big extended family after she came home dead tired from-

Tape one, side two:

IK: ...about your experiences in Germany or the process of emigration. One thing that did occur to me, you mentioned your father had a crippled hand. Was that a problem when you went to the American Consulate, or they didn't...

IRK: I don't have...

IK: Because they were so particular.

IRK: I don't have any recollection of that. I don't know. It might have. I don't know.

IK: Well, is there anything else I didn't ask you that you feel you'd like to add?

IRK: [pause] Well, I, well, most of my younger relatives had already left earlier, or somehow managed to get out. All my father's generation were killed. And our house sort of became the family for all the cousins who had left, who had lost their parents. And we took in...

IK: In the United States?

IRK: In the U-, when we got here. We always had somebody, once we got on our own, we had someone living with us. And the local relatives, who were quite wealthy, sent me to, I'm, oh, let me backtrack. I had wanted to study chemistry. Well, when I came here, they said that was impossible. I started looking for, as most of the other young women did, I started looking for work as a mother's helper, or house maid, or what have you. And then one of the younger American relatives decided to send me to secretarial school, which isn't what I would have wanted to do, but it was a much better kind of thing to be doing, or more desirable, than being someone's mother's helper. So I went to the Philadelphia School of Office Training, and I worked real hard and got through the one-year course in nine months. And I started working in September, '39, as a secretary.

IK: Had you studied English in Germany or did you...

IRK: Yes, I had, in those six years in Landau I had English right through, every year. And...

IK: Then was this because you knew you wanted to come to the United States?

IRK: No, that was the curriculum. You had a set curriculum. We had six years of English, and then the last two years we also had French. You had no electives. It was just set for you.

IK: But the, for, the Jewish community in general or your family specifically, did they do anything to try to prepare yourselves for the United States or to find out what life was like in the United States?

IRK: Yes, I think my parents corresponded with the relatives here. And

there was also a lot of information in the Jewish press about, and family, you know, people discussed that, what you needed, what things were like in America, what...

IK: Did you find that the information was correct, or was it mostly wrong?

IRK: Well, I guess you just rolled with the punches. Some of it probably was right, and some was not. I really became the interpreter for my family when we got here, because I was the only one who had systematically studied it. And then of course by going to school here, that helped. I worked really hard to be able to make it. And...

IK: Well, sure. It's not easy.

IRK: No, it wasn't easy for anyone to adjust to this completely new life. And things here were not easy. It was still, as I said, the end of the Depression. Mother worked in this household for very, very little money, for very stingy people. And I know she would come, they would say, "The, this cheese is only for the mister," no, you know, the more expensive, the fancier cheeses. She had to eat the lesser kind of food. And then in, I started working as a secretary, and I think my first pay was $11 a week. And I continued to babysit for people on weekends also to make a little extra money for the family. And after about a year my father got a job in a scrapple factory. And it was utterly abhorrent for him to work with this...

IK: Because it was pork.

IRK: Pork, yes. But it was a, and it was, again, he worked long, long hours, and in pretty lousy conditions. And it was really totally abhorrent to him, but he did it. And he also made very, very little money. Then eventually was, when we got into the war, and there were, I worked for a candy manufacturing company. The Union was looking for workers, and through the Union, not, the, our family, our relatives owned that, but they had not really tried very hard to help the men get jobs. They hired me, but no one else. And through the Union, through the Shop Steward I got my father a job in that factory. And then he made a fairly decent salary. And he worked into his 70s there. And I worked there for almost ten years, till the birth of our, our first child.

IK: Okay. Well, I want to thank you very much. I know it...

IRK: Well, I want to th-...

IK: It is difficult.

IRK: Well it's, you know, it's past.

IK: It's all past.

IRK: It's all past. Which we ha-...[tape off then on]

IK: This is the end of the interview with Ilsa R. Katz, by Inge Karo.