

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ERNA SCHINDLER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Inge Karo
Date: November 12, 2008

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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ERNA SCHINDLER [1-1-1]

ES - Erna Schindler [interviewee]

IK - Inge Karo [interviewer]

Date: November 12, 2008

Tape one, side one:

IK: ...interviewing Mrs. Erna Lowenthal Schindler, E-R-N-A, L-O-W-E-N-T-H-A-L, S-C-H-I-N-D-L-E-R on November the 12, 2008. This is Inge Karo interviewing Mrs. Erna Lowenthal Schindler on November the 12, 2008. Could you please tell me where you were born and when and a little bit about your family?

ES: I was born in Munich...

IK: Munich.

ES: ...and I was the only child. My mother died when I was 10 and then my father raised me.

IK: What was your--did you father have a business or was he a professional?

ES: He was like in the--he used to sell farms and farm equipment in the country.

IK: And what was your life like before the war or before the Nazis changed your life?

ES: Well I went to San-tan-nelli-gym [phonetic] in München. It was a private school.

IK: And that was not, that was not a Jewish school, right?

ES: It was all religion. It had Jews.

IK: Oh it was not a Jewish school?

ES: Pardon me?

IK: But it was not a Jewish school?

ES: No. It was a mixed, all mixed; where I was they had that class Catholic, Protestant and Jews.

IK: And before Hitler came to power, did you experience any antisemitism in school or...

ES: No.

IK: No, and did you belong to--I guess you were too little--did your family belong to any Jewish organization or to a synagogue?

ES: My father belonged to the big synagogue. I don't remember, I was too young.

IK: And how about any organizations? Did you belong like to any Jewish youth clubs or anything like that?

ES: I don't remember. No, I don't think so.

IK: And did any men in your family serve in the army?

ES: My father.

IK: In World War I?
ES: Yes, four years, yes.
IK: And he...
ES: He was on the front.
IK: And so was mine, [unclear]. Now I guess you were too young in 1933 to know about Hitler's coming to power.
ES: Yes, I didn't--in 1943 I knew Hitler was in power, yes. I was in America, you know.
IK: No, no, I'm talking about 1933. You weren't in America then in 1933?
ES: '38.
IK: Yes, '38. Now after Hitler came to power and the Nuremberg laws came into effect, did that affect you at all or your family?
ES: Well they did take my father once and put him in prison or whatever.
IK: The Gestapo?
ES: The Gestapo yeah. So, so they took him like--I didn't even, after I left school, I worked *bei* the *Bayrische Jüdischezeitung*. At the Bavarian Jewish Newspaper. I worked in the office.
IK: At the newspaper?
ES: Newspaper.
IK: Now how old were you then, when you worked at the newspaper? Were you finished with school or did they make you leave early because you were Jewish?
ES: Yes. No. Yes, I did. I left early one years earlier because Hitler was in power and I don't think they let Jewish kids anymore, they wouldn't enroll them anymore.
IK: So did--so when you were still in school, did these things change once Hitler came to power because you were a Jewish child? Can you remember if anything changed and what exactly they were?
ES: Well some peop--some of the children from home they maybe there was antisemitism, but personally I was not persecuted. My father, he lost his business because of...
IK: Was that during *Kristallnacht* or before? Did he lose his business during *Kristallnacht* or earlier?
ES: After Hitler came in power.
IK: And then what did he do? Do you know?
ES: I don't know. In Germany the parents don't talk about any kind of money or anything. I never knew...
IK: Did you...
ES: ...if he had, he must have had a money account. I know, I remember him writing checks, so, but they never, ever talked about, you know...
IK: Except when you hear, you pick up things here and there.

ES: Oh yeah here children know everything but there you didn't know anything about insurance or what they're doing or if they have, what bank, nothing.

IK: So as far as you knew did your parents ever make plans to leave Germany?

ES: Well my mother died when she was 32, so she died before Hitler, and my father, sure he was thinking but he had no connections with anybody who would sponsor us.

IK: So how did you manage to get out?

ES: Well I met a fellow and he promised to marry me and, you know, this is how I came out.

IK: Was it a German man, or?

ES: He was German. What do you mean?

IK: No, there's a man who promised to marry you...

ES: Yes.

IK: ...you met him in Germany?

ES: No, here in America. But I had to get married in--they gave us one week otherwise they would ship me back.

IK: But how did you meet him?

ES: He lived in the same apartment building

IK: In Germany?

ES: Yeah, in Germany.

IK: And then he went to the United States before you did and came back to get you?

ES: He went a year before.

IK: And then he came--he actually came back to...

ES: Then he sent papers for me...

IK: It would have been too dangerous for him to come back.

ES: But it was set I get married right away, so that I am not a...

IK: A burden?

ES: For the state that they have to take care of me.

IK: And was your father able to come with you?

ES: No, my father had, no--and I couldn't sponsor him. I had no, you needed money and everything.

IK: And if you don't mind my asking, how old were you when this happened?

ES: I was in nineteenth year. But...

IK: It must have been very difficult for you, to leave your father behind.

ES: Yes.

IK: And you found...

ES: But one thing, my father had a very good friend who hid him for two years, a gentile man, who he was very well off, so he hid him for two years but then my father gave himself up because he felt he was too much of a risk for this...

IK: [unclear].

ES: And he had a child, a young boy and he figured if they catch him, they would whatever, take him and yeah.

IK: Now, did you know this at the time or did they find this out much later that your father was hidden and then gave himself up?

ES: Yeah, if I knew the man?

IK: No, no, no. Did you know that this--did you know that something...

ES: I didn't. After I left Germany, I, we had no more contact, we...

IK: Well that's why I'm asking.

ES: Yeah no.

IK: So how did you find out many--long after the war?

ES: After the war.

IK: And how did you find out?

ES: American soldier who freed--he was in Theresienstadt.

IK: Your father was in Theresienstadt?

ES: My father.

IK: Oh well that's important to note. So your father was in Theresienstadt.

ES: Yeah, three years, and when '45 when the war was over, they freed all the prisoners, so my father asked him to look for me, and there was not so many Lowenthal in Munich, you know. So he got in touch, in touch with me, he wrote me a letter and he got in touch with my father.

IK: Did he come to--did you get him to come to the United States?

ES: No, he was very, very sick. He had a stroke and in a year later he had another stroke and died. So I never saw him and you know you couldn't go travel.

IK: No, no, not then.

ES: And I, I was the only child.

IK: So except for your husband you have no family left?

ES: No. Well my father wasn't born in Munich, he was born in Hanover, and he was not very close with them and I never met anybody. So the only person was my father but he had very, very dear friends who were not antisemitic and they really kind of took care of him even when he was he was in Theresienstadt, this Mr. Stadler [phonetic] he came through the Red Cross and when he came back he kind of helped him. He got, I guess some of the money and things back, and he had a limousine and a chauffeur. So they picked him up and they spent a lot of time there. He kind of took over. He was a man, 20 years about younger than my father, but they were very, very good friends and when I went a few times to Munich, so...

IK: What, what year that was--did you know.

ES: He told me things...

IK: What year that was and when did you go to Munich? What in the 1990s, or 1980s or...?

ES: No, the first time I went in the 60s. My husband had three sisters, four sisters and two brothers. Three of the sisters stayed in Germany, not in Germany, yeah, in Germany and one brother, his youngest brother and his youngest sister they were sent to Theresienstadt and killed. They were about 18 and 20, and he had a big family and he had family here. He had a brother from his father and he had cousins so he lived with them and they kind of took care of us.

IK: Now where did you, where did you live in the United States, in New York?

ES: No, Philadelphia.

IK: Oh, you came straight to Philadelphia?

ES: Yeah, yeah, that is where they lived.

IK: Let me just--alright, now would you like to talk about how being separated from your father and living under the Nazis affected you and also...

ES: I didn't like it first. It took me a long time to get used to the different life and a lot of the people they didn't like German Jews, so, but, look I was very young so I got used to it and made some friends.

IK: Did you by any chance belong to Tikvoh Chadoshoh Synagogue, Tikvoh Chadoshoh Synagogue? That was for German Jews.

ES: Yes, I belonged to the Synagogue and I brought two boys up by myself.

IK: And which synagogue was it?

ES: West Oak Lane Community Center in Mt. Airy.

IK: I know it. And have you talked; did you talk to the children a lot about the Holocaust and what happened to you?

ES: My younger son didn't want to know too much. My older son Ron, he wanted to know all of what happened. The other one was very young and he was not so-- "look its past" he said, "its past," but he was diff--he was different. He wanted to know whatever happened. And when we went to Germany, I visited this man and he told me all what happened to my father and he really was exceptional. I mean he was an exceptional man and, but he said you come back in another year. He thought it's around the corner, but he died. I didn't see him anymore. But he really took care of my father.

IK: Well, you know, the Yad Vashem has, I forget now what they call them, Righteous Christians or something like that. If you're interested in that, we could be--I could find out for you, if you want to write all of this, send all of this to the Yad Vashem, maybe your son could do it so that, he could be put with other people who saved Jews.

ES: Should I tell you most of the people I knew, nobody from Munich, I never met anybody from Munich...

IK: No, no, I'm talking about the man who saved your father.

ES: Oh.

IK: [unclear]

ES: Well he's dead. He died.

IK: Well I know, but you know, it would sort of be nice to commemorate him...

ES: Yeah.

IK: ...but that's up to you.

ES: Yes, yeah.

IK: And did you--even though you weren't physically harmed how do you think having to live through that affected you, both as a little girl and as an adult?

ES: Well, it took me a long time to get used to the living here. It's a different life, you know, but when you're young you get used to things.

IK: And did it affect, did it affect your feeling of being Jewish, because if you hadn't been Jewish none of this wouldn't have happened to you?

ES: Well the people I was in contact they all were Jewish so, you know, they were no problem.

IK: Well, unless you have something else you'd like to tell me, but really...

ES: Well, you know it was a struggle in the beginning to make a living, you know, it was bad times. But thanks God my husband made a good living and we lived nice and we traveled different times to Munich. His sister, one of the sisters, we stayed--she was married to a doctor and the other one lived in Düsseldorf. She was married to an architect and the other one she wasn't married, she lived by herself. So we visited them a few times and then I had a very dear friend we went to school together. She signed papers for me, said she knew me in Munich and she too, her husband was a [unclear] in some church so, I still write to her. I mean they were not antisemitic. They helped where ever they could.

IK: Well it was very dangerous to help Jews, we know that.

ES: Yeah it was, but they took that chance. My father was lucky this way, that this man, he came for a couple of years and he, he took care of him but then like I said he gave himself up. He didn't want it that anything happen to this man's family.

IK: When you say he gave himself up, do you mean he actually went to the police?

ES: He must have.

IK: Oh no.

ES: It's what this man told me. He had other Jewish people in the camp he sent packages to the Red Cross. He was a very unusual man, that he was. You didn't find many like this.

IK: Well but your father must have been a very good man too to have friends like this.

ES: Yes, I guess maybe years ago he helped him. I don't know the story but anyhow he wanted me to come each year, you come each. He knew me since I was a little kid so he saw this around the corner, its not around the corner and he died, well he was then in his 80s, you know, so, but the son--he had one son, he died [unclear] in his 60s, a few years later, but I don't--I mean we moved, we lived with his aunt and cousins. He had an uncle who was a brother of his father. His father went to Austria, Innsbruck and he died there.

IK: Are you still talking about the man who saved your father?

ES: My husband's father.

IK: Oh your husband's father, I'm sorry.

ES: And he died when we were there yet. And then, you know, you got a family and you moved them from, to West Oak Lane and then to Mt. Airy and then to Elkins Park and I lived here 38 years but now we want to sell. It changed. It became all different.

IK: Oh sure. Now what was your father-in-law--I'm sorry, what was your husband's first name?

ES: Pardon me?

IK: Your husband's first name?

ES: Julius.

IK: Julius?

ES: Yes, Julius.

IK: Julius, okay. Well, I think that's about all.

ES: Yeah, I didn't have a very exciting...

IK: No, listen you're better off.

ES: Should I tell you even when I lived in Germany, I was 16 I think when I started to work for the paper, *Jüdisches* paper [Jewish paper] and do you remember that, the *Jüdisches* paper.

IK: I remember you saying it, yes.

ES: Yeah. Anyhow, the Nazis they, they heard I was Jewish, you were only supposed to get a job with a Jewish.

IK: Oh sure.

ES: Yeah. They broke all these machines, everything. They came in but I wasn't there yet.

IK: Oh that was before *Kristallnacht* already, in the early 1930s?

ES: No, this was right when Hitler came to power.

IK: Oh well that was 1933, right?

ES: Yeah.

IK: 1933.

ES: Yeah, but he built up again and then there was, every company had an *Gauleiter* [regional leader] which is a man that looks that everything goes right. So I

worked there for a couple of years, three years, three years. I think he went to Israel. He had a daughter who went to Israel and she worked there too. I guess he wanted to open another business.

IK: Did you have any problems like some families, I don't know did you have a maid or a governess for you that had to leave because you were Jewish.

ES: Ah yes we had a house keeper and you know...

IK: Did they have to leave?

ES: ...after my mother died but she had to leave. They were not allowed to work for Jewish people.

IK: I thought so or right.

ES: So we had only like day maids, you know, and--you know when you're young, you do not take it as...

IK: Right, right.

ES: I mean I remember, you know, most people in Munich lived in apartment houses. So during the night you hear them march through the streets and sing their Hitler *Lied* [song]. It gave me like the goose bumps, you know. I was a teenager, so, and...

IK: Were you able to have any--I forget now when some of the restrictions started--so were you able to have a social life or could you still go out, or by that time were you...?

ES: In Germany?

IK: Yes.

ES: No, no more social life. I had this one friend which I knew since I was a little kid. But, I didn't go out with her and I had one friend Inge. She, but she went away too and her brother went to Israel.

IK: Now, did you when you immigrated, emigrated to the United States, did you have to go to the consulate in Stuttgart?

ES: Umm hmm.

IK: Did you have any problems?

ES: No.

IK: No, you were lucky.

ES: They...

IK: A lot people...

ES: They...

IK: A lot of people that we interviewed went through the consulate in Stuttgart and he turned them down.

ES: No.

IK: Yes.

ES: They told me to go to Stuttgart and they examine you, if you, they don't let anybody in with any kind of sickness, and then it took close to a year till I got the papers and in Hamburg I met this other Jewish girl my age and her mother brought her

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and we stuck together, you know, but she stayed in New York and I came here, so you don't do much writing, you know.

IK: No.

ES: So it was a very--it took me a long time to get used to here. It's a different life here.

IK: It's a big change.

ES: Big change, language and, even so you learn English in school, it's not the English.

IK: British English.

ES: Yeah. I thought you were born in Munich?

IK: Essen.

ES: Essen?

IK: Essen, it's near Düsseldorf.

ES: Well one of his sisters...

Tape one, side two:

ES: I haven't met anybody from Munich, it's funny. So, they must have all stayed in New York, most of them, you know.

IK: Yeah, a lot of people stayed in New York.

ES: Yeah, I think I would have liked New York better but look his family was...

IK: Well you were only two hours away.

ES: Well his family were nice to me, so. His cousin, his older cousin where he lived with, she kind of took me under her, you know.

IK: ...wings.

ES: She took care of me, like the wedding was in their house, a Rabbi came, you know and all these people and you're like a novelty, you know what I mean?

IK: Yes.

ES: Everybody, oh, this is the girl from Munich. This is the German Jew, you know. So we started to move up and up and up. Thanks God, we never had problems, so--in the beginning, yes, it was tough.

IK: Oh, of course.

ES: Everybody but, what? My husband died five years ago, so and he loved this house. I wanted to sell it a long time, but no this was his house, so...

IK: Well it's a very nice house.

ES: But two people, we don't need it and it changed very, very much and we have very bad neighbors in the back. So it's time for us to move, but you don't know where. If you're going in an apartment, you don't know who you would get there, you know. Do you live in a house?

IK: Yes.

ES: So, my life was not--it was exciting because you always were in fear, you know.

IK: Yes.

ES: Even if you are 15, 16, you hear them marching and, I remember when I went with my friend in town to shop, there's a place where the Nazis stood outside and you had to salute them, so we always went the other way so we wouldn't have to do it.

IK: They were bothered by all the propaganda, you know, like in the *Stürmer* and the kiosk that they used to have on every street corner with all these anti-Jewish things on them and all the pictures of Jews.

ES: There were plenty antisemites but thanks God where I worked nobody ever gave me a problem.

IK: [unclear]

ES: Because I was still young, so they liked me, you know. And my boss--well, I think he went to Israel. His daughter went when I worked there and there was

another Jewish woman working there so we kind of stuck together. So, I'm sure they killed her because she was handicapped, so you know, they didn't like any handicapped people. She was so--we went together to the trolley, you know and she always said come on, let's have some Torte.

IK: Could you say that a little bit louder, what did she take?

ES: Torte, it's like a fancy cake, yes so--but I lost contact, and think they took her. Because they didn't like anybody who is not in full, you know, fully...

IK: A perfect Aryan.

ES: Yeah. No handicapped so my father he did have a--because he was in the war four years so he got kind of a little bit. That's why he never was sent to Auschwitz. Theresienstadt was...

IK: Yes, I know.

ES: What?

IK: It was not as much of a death camp as some of the other ones.

ES: Yeah, yeah. And it was only because he fought for the Fatherland and you know. This made a big, big difference and to the holidays--it took a holiday they had to stand outside to watch that nobody comes in and makes the synagogue. He was a guard outside.

IK: Was he outside the synagogue?

ES: Yes.

IK: Oh.

ES: On the door, so nobody would destroy it or whatever and they looked for the people who were in war. That saved him really. That he said, well he was fighting for Germany, so--but you know, in Germany, they don't talk about their life. He never said much. I know he was four years on this, near the front of France in Gyps-sum-graden [phonetic] you know but he never wanted to talk about things, what happened. Like even when they took him and he never told me.

IK: This is not uncommon. A lot of men didn't want to talk about what happened...

ES: No. And I went to the, when I heard, you know, everybody knew about it in the apartment building so they said [unclear] your father today. So I went to the police department so he said, "Don't you ever come again." You can tell, no, no, no.

IK: What the policeman told you that?

ES: Yes, he said, don't you ever come here again or you going to go in--I was maybe 16, 17 they didn't want any; they didn't give you any kind of...

IK: I think that is probably one of the many things that are the worst things, that you feel completely powerless.

ES: Yes.

IK: You can't do anything.

ES: Yes, nothing. So and when my father came home, he never, ever talked about it, never. They--it was like a closed, I forget...

IK: Well that is not uncommon.

ES: You know the German parents are different than here, the Americans. They don't talk to their kids about things, like Ron he wants to know about everything but my younger son, he knew that his grandfather was in a concentration camp but he didn't want to go into detail. He didn't want to know the details. Well, he...

IK: Well maybe he felt couldn't he couldn't deal with it.

ES: Yes, yes. It was--he didn't want to know.

IK: So when he's ready for it...

ES: Its past, he says.

IK: So when he's ready for it, he can listen to this tape I'll give you a copy.

ES: [laughter] Well, Ronnie's very interested in everything. Like, you know he teaches philosophy, so and he has a doctorate in philosophy. He went to University of Penn so he has very good education, so he is interested in things. The other one wasn't so crazy with school [laughter]

IK: Well everybody's different.

ES: Yes.

IK: But at least, you know, at least, you know, the biggest part of your life turned out to be well and that's a blessing.

ES: Yes. Look it was tough the first couple of years after, but I don't know if you will adjust, you know. Oh the first time when I came, God I couldn't believe it. How they lived, you know, Strawberry Mansion. The man was an accountant, his uncle, but they took to me so it was easier. First maybe they thought they find a maid, but when they saw me they knew right away there's no cleaning there. And everybody, all the relatives and other cousins saw we were like a show piece, they, you know, oh she's from Germany...

IK: A novelty.

ES: They didn't like a lot of them, you know a lot of people didn't like the German Jews.

IK: Well the East European Jews didn't like the German Jews. But it worked on both ways because a lot of German Jews looked down on the *Ostjuden* [Eastern Jews] so...

ES: Are you Russian?

IK: No, no.

ES: You're German. Yeah, this's what it is. They say you're no better than we are. Some of them were from Poland as well and I remember the German friends I had, German Jews, and a lot of them had the same trouble, they couldn't adjust. It's a different life.

IK: Right, right.

ES: But you adjust.
IK: Oh you have to.
ES: You have to, yes. Were you born here?
IK: No, no, no.
ES: You were born in Düsseldorf.
IK: I was born in Germany and I came over in December of 1939.
ES: How come you get away?
IK: Well I don't, I don't want to put that on your tape, so when you're finished I'll--if you want to know, I'll tell you.
ES: Yes.
IK: I'll tell you.
ES: Because the big thing was in '38 in *Kristallnacht* when they killed a lot of Jewish people.
IK: Yeah, well we lived through that.
ES: Did they have it in Düsseldorf too?
IK: Oh sure, they had it all over. They had it all over, all over Germany. But people didn't know. People thought it only happened in their town, but it happened all over.
ES: Well I got away in time, March. Yeah, it's like a dream, a bad dream [laughter] but thanks God, everything turned around have nice kids.
IK: Now, I appreciate you giving all of this time.
ES: Well, it's not much. It was...
IK: No, no it's like a mosaic we get testimony from all different people and some have more to say and some have less to say, but everybody you know, has at least one or two things that are a little bit different, so it's all valuable.
ES: Well Dr. Heller, like when my father was taken I said, what should I do? He went through the whole thing, you know. I told you they broke his whole place up, he said nothing can do, nothing. Just keep quiet and that's it.
IK: Difficult to do but it was probably good advice.
ES: Pardon me?
IK: I said, was difficult to do but it was probably good advice.
ES: Yes, yes. And like I said, my father never, ever said anything if they hit him or whatever. He didn't--it was a closed subject, no, no, no. But the whole apartment building knew. They must have come with the, with the storm trooper...
IK: Oh, sure, they probably knocked on the door real loud or something.
ES: Yes.
IK: Was everybody in the apartment Jewish or was it a mixed apartment house?
ES: Pardon me?
IK: Was everybody in the apartment house Jewish?

ES: No.

IK: No.

ES: There was only one other Jewish couple and I don't know what happened to them but he was the only--they said they took him, this won't sound, what is it? They said he's a communist, you know, they made this up.

IK: But they didn't give you any, the non-Jewish tenants, they didn't give you any problem? You had no problems with all the people in the apartment house that weren't Jewish.

ES: Oh no, no. And there where, I worked for a big company, there were two *Teilhabers* [partners], those Jews you only worked for Jewish company. I only worked a short time there because I got my papers and you know what, they were so stupid. They didn't talk to each other. They used to give me a slip. I had to go from one man to the other to give them the slip. And then not only didn't they talk to each other, they bought both themselves Chrysler cars and you know in Germany you drive a Mercedes you don't drive a foreign car, so I'm sure they were not thinking. I mean you have to adjust...

IK: People didn't realize, some people didn't want to know how bad things were getting and they just denied it.

ES: Yeah, but you know somewhere, Germany they with their Mercedes, this is the car you drive if you can afford a car, but they had it imported from America, Chrysler. They were, to me, they were stupid and he would just write a note, bring it to one and he would hold the note, I had to bring it to the other.

IK: Silly.

ES: In this took--times.

IK: Right, right, yes, it's silly.

ES: Silly, yes, it was. So we go to, did you meet other German Jews here?

IK: Well my parents were more interested in it than I was, you know, because I was 12 years old when we came over and you know, I really wanted, made friends in school.

ES: Oh yeah, yeah, yes. Did you know the Loeb's, Liesl Loeb?

IK: Yes, I know her.

[Mrs. Schindler wanted to know if the interviewer knew some of the German Jews that she had met in Philadelphia. Since this was information not connected to Mrs. Schindler's experiences during the Holocaust, the taped interview ended at this point.]