

Herta Gelber

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Interview with Herta Gelber

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Q: This is tape one of an United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Interview with Mrs. Herta Gelber conducted by Christian Kloesch on May 20, 1997 in Queens New York.

Let us start the interview with the most basic facts. Could you please, tell me your name at birth, when and where you were born?

A: My maiden name was Herta Gewing. I was born April the 8th 1920 in Leoben, Steiermark.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about your family?

A: My parents were Ida and Benzion Gewing. My father was a successful business man. And I had a very good childhood, even though there was always an uncured of Antisemitism in Leoben. The population was 10.000 people and the Jewish community consisted of 30 Jewish families. I went to public school and I graduated at the age of 14 and after that I went two years to „Handelsschule“, which is the business school. and during all my school years I felt that. There was not a hundred percent acceptance of a Jewish child. But it was all part of growing up and we knew we had to live with this. And with all that, my family, my parents were very well respected in town. And I had three wonderful brothers and life was normal. We were able to participate, you know, in whatever was available in a small town like this, but all this felt a little self-conscious, because people make you feel that way. But then, but somehow we made a nice living. And we just had. We knew as Jews there was always Antisemitism no matter when or where. So this went on until 1938, until March the 13th, when Germany invaded Austria.

Q: Could tell me a bit more about your family background, about your mother, your grandparents?

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A: I did not know my grandparents. My parents originally were born in Poland. My father came to Leoben at the turn of the century in 1900. And my mother came during the first world war as a refugee in 1914 to Vienna. My father at that time was a widower with three little boys, with three children. And my mother lived in Vienna, she worked for the red cross during the war. And my father through introduction met my mother and they got married in 1918. My mother took over the three sons, you know, and in 1920. I came along. I was born in 1920.

So this was more or less, you know, basically the background of my parents.

Q: What was the maiden name of your mother?

A: My mothers maiden name was Aldstaetter.

Q: And can you remember the town in Poland where you father and mother was born?

A: My father was born in Tarnopol and my mother was born in „Szbarasch“, little towns near Lemberg, Polen.

Q. And what kind of business did you father...

A: In Leoben? We had a small department store. Mostly clothing for the hole family, and textiles and you know, like in a small town we carried a lot of things, you know. But only dry goods, not food or anything like that.

And my father always had two employees and my youngest brother worked for him until he was able to establish his own business. And then when Hitler came everything was dumped My brother, who only a couple of years before Hitler established his own shoe store. And my oldest brother owned a store in Knittelfeld. And you want me to talk about the Anschluss now?

Q: Ah Could you, that's very interesting, the life, how was your family life in Leoben. Was it a Jewish household?

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A: Yes we were able to... My parents kept a kosher house. and there was one butcher, it was not a Jewish butcher, but he had a section were the Jewish people kept an eye. There was, the man who was in charge for the Jewish community, was not a Rabbi, he was a Hebrew teacher, and a cantor and everything. He took care of the kosher meat department. He observed it. And those few Jews in town, who wanted to observe, you know the religion. With all the necessary laws, they bought their meat there. And we were able to keep our Jewish holidays, which we did. And so we had, you know, we were all interested in Israel. We brought up to be interested in Israel to have feelings for this. So

Q: Were you a member of the Brith Trumpeldor, the youth movement?

A: Yes, how did you know that? Yes we were.

Q: Could you tell me...

A: I was a little girl, when all this started. Don't forget, when the Anschluss came, I was not quite 18 years old, they came in March 38 and my 18th birthday was in April. Yes, you know, we had a little meetings, we sang songs, and we learned a little Hebrew and we were interested in Israel as someday it should be the homeland

Q: Ja. That was a Zionist youth group.

A: Ja. It was a Zionist, a Zionist organization, of course.

Q: and how many members?

A: Oh God! A handful. I mean we had these little meetings with the kids. I don't know. 5 or 6. We got together and the oldest one was already our leader, he was a student at the university. And you know, he was talking to us about all these things.

Q: At the university in Leoben or in Graz?

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A.: Well there were, that's a good question. We had some young mans in our town, who studied in Leoben. There used to be „eine Bergschule“ you know, for mining, mining engineers, of with, he graduated this particular man. And his brother studied to be a lawyer in Graz. But he came so and so often. And he was, you know our teacher.

Q. Can you remember the name of him?

A: well he was the brother of my girlfriend Fanny Bernfield, whom you called yesterday.

She will tell you about it.

Q: And was there a Jewish community center?

A: We had a temple. Not a building of its own. It was a large rented auditorium in the „Musikschule“. the building of the music-school. The rented us this large auditorium and it was converted into a temple. And the congregation paid rent, proper rent. And for all Jewish holidays, it was always there for us.

Q: And were was this center?

A: The address? You got a good question. I remember the street. Musikschule.

Q. At the main square?

A: Oh no, we had to walk through the main square, further down. I don't remember the address. it was only one Musikschule, Leoben. The temple was rented there. I don't know if it even exist after this war. Who knows. somebody who was in Leoben, a few years ago, you would not recognize the place. And from 10.000 population, I believe they have now 30.000 population. People emigrated from all over. They have all different people now. But we did have. We were able to observe our Jewish holidays, whenever and whoever wanted to.

Q: And you also had Jewish religious class in school?

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A. Yes, we had religious teacher, he was also the cantor and he conducted he Jewish holidays in temple. And he used to be our religious teacher. ones a week, no twice a week Wednesday afternoon and Saturday, and classes were held in our public-school building. It was part of the curriculum. Just as the catholic children had. The Catholic priest come in once or twice a week to give them religious education. So we had our Jewish teacher come in twice a week. So in my class, even there was a few, we were only three, four kids in class. But at same age you see. That was possible. the Jewish community saw to it. you know, that we were brought up , you know, religious feelings, to knowing were we belong.

Q. and you learned Hebrew?

A: Yes we learned how to pray, the Hebrew prayer, but we didn't learned to speak Hebrew.

There was no opportunity to.

Q: And this man. Can you remember his name?

A: Yes, Jacob Koffler. and he was killed with his family and two daughters. Taken to a concentration camp. Yes.

Q: And your class-mates in school? You said...

A: My Jewish class-mattes? One of my best friends was taken with her child to a concentration camp. Of course he was killed. And my very best friend, went on a ship to, at that time it was called Palestine, hopping to save her life. But when they came to the border, the Palestinian, the British, who ruled the country at that time, turned them back, sent them back to Germany, and as they arrived and they got of, everyone of them, hundreds of people, were immediately shot to death. She was one of my very best friends, born in Leoben. And a couple of them survived by going to Israel and they were able to enter the country, that the ship, including my oldest brother and his wife, the ship landed in the middle of the night and they had to swim or wait and and

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people who lived there came and with dry clothing and they picked them up, and took them to their homes or to a Kibbutz wherever I don't know but to save them and to get them out of the water. One girl, friend of mine lives in Chicago, and she had Polio as a child, somebody carried her on one of those ships to bring her to shore. And she survived. So not all of them were as lucky, as I was, because after Hitler invaded Austria and when my mother saw what was going on and we were told that Leoben has to be „judenrein“ and we had to run away, my mother had a brother in this country and she saw what's going on, we had to flee some place, she wrote him a letter and my uncle and his wife started to get busy to make out papers Affidavits for my family, for my parents and most of us have reached America. Not so quickly, not so fast, it took time until the quota numbers came through, but its a story by itself.

But to continue, after the 13th of March 1938 my, we looked out the window by the day of the „Einmarsch“ and we lived in a section of Leoben where there were most of the Jewish stores and a lot of Jewish residences in the same street. We lived across the street of our store and we were told..

Q: And this was with street?

A: „Kaerntnerstrasse“. Our store was Kaerntnerstrasse 15, we lived across the street and we were told that when the Jewish when the Germans march in, in order for them to know which are Jewish windows, the gentiles who lived there, they should put a candle on the window, a lit candle but the Jews are not allowed to put a lit candle. This way they knew exactly where the Jews lived, because there was no candle.

Q: Who gave this order?

A: The city, the town, the „Buergermeister“. Of course. Who else. They turned immediately. They were friends one day, the next day they were Nazis, you know they showed their

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Antisemitism, that was brewing in them, now they had a chance to come out with it and to please the new regime. Next door to our store was a „Konditorei“, candy store and I was a very good customer there, I love sweets, and one of the salesgirls were one of my classmates in school and they day after Hitler. You know I didn't realize how bad things are, I went in and I wanted to buy myself some ice-cream or whatever. So she said to me: „Sorry we do not sell to Jews.“ I said: „Wilma“, I said „how could that be. You know me. Yesterday you sold me something and we went to school 8 years together“. She said. „I am sorry, I can not sell you. No Jews allowed in here.“ So this was the first blow on my head. When I came home, I said: „What's going on ? I can not understand.“ So this was the beginning. Anyway. Two days after Hitler invaded Austria, my father went down, he opened the store and all of a sudden two SA-man came and the stood in front of my fathers door, on the entrance, one on each side. And they wouldn't let any customers in. If a customer wanted to come in they said: „You can not go in there. This is a Jewish store. Do not buy from the Jew. And they went away. So my mother, when she came downstairs from our house with a shopping bag to go shopping. She wanted to walk into our store, so they said: „Don't go in there this a Jewish store. You can not buy there. So my mother said: „I am sorry to say, but I am the owner of that store.“ So one guy said: „Shut up, you dirty Jew.“ So, when you, what's gonna be.

Q: Where this SA-man from Leoben...

A: SA-man in uniform, Leoben, ja Leobner boys absolutely. There was an illegal. You know there were a plenty of illegal Nazis for a long time. They didn't walk around in uniform, bur we all knew. we sort of had a feeling which, one for a long time was an illegal Nazi. And...

Q: Where there Nazi riots before the Anschluss in Leoben? 1936, 1937

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A: There was a putsch in Vienna. I think it was in 1934. I think it was, when Dollfuss was assassinated and at that day there was a rumor going around, that they will do something to the Jews in Leoben.

Q: Really?

A: There was a rumor going around, that they are going to, you know, hurt the Jews or robe the Jews. So I remember it was on a Sunday and my father I had a cousin who lived on the outskirts of Leoben. He said. „Let's go Maxes house. Let's go away from here. Let's see what's gonna happen and my mother, my father and I 1934 went to our cousins house and it blew over. Nothing really happened that day, but it was a threat. It is interesting that you brought this up. I almost forgot about that. This was in 1934.

Q: That early.

A: Anyway.

Q: Did you know some of this illegal..

A: Personally you mean? Not by name, but we knew more or less. a lot of them were students from the university. a lot of them and from „Gymnasium“. Gymnasiasten they were Nazis.

Q: And from the „Burschenschaften“

A: Yes from the „Burschenschaften“. Yes. And to go on with my story. After the, you know, after few days, they said. Two SS-man come to my fathers store and they said: „Herr Gewing your store has to be „arisiert.“ And if you know somebody, who wants to take over your store, as long as he is an Aryan. And if not we will bring you somebody to take over.“ So my father, who did not know what to do, so there was another Jewish store who had an employee, who worked there for many years, we knew him and he knew my father and he came to our store. And he said to my father: „Herr Gewing, I want to be your „Arisierer“. I want to arisier your store. I will be

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good to you don't worry. I will make an Aryan store and I will pay you monthly so and so much for the merchandise and whatever is coming to. I will not steel your store from you." So my father, my parents were very happy that this wonderful young man, you know spoke to him like this and the other Jewish people were envious. „Oh, Herr Gewing has such luck.“ I think his name was Herr Strauss. „He is going to take over and he will pay him“. He didn't pay once. My father turned over the keys to him and the store. And he said next month I am going to send you a check. Not once. And there was nobody to complaint to. Who we are going to complain to? You understand? He saw his opportunity to steel, to take over Herr Gewings store for free. So we stayed in Leoben. Then of course, we had to get out so my parents make arrangements to move to Vienna. And we gave away a lot of our things from the apartment, you know. Who ever bought something, hardly paid ever anything, you know. And we just went without, I think my mother bought some dishes and linens and silverware and we moved to Vienna at the end of August 1938.

Q: How did non -Jewish neighbors, non Jewish friends react...

A: Yes, that's a good question. There were some, that were very sympathetic. Some of the older ones. The said: „Herr Gewing don't run away. Das kann sich nicht halten. That cannot be for a long time. Don't run away we want you here, stay here. And then there were some like my girlfriend from school, that ignored us and insulted us and treated us with Antisemitic tortured in many ways, you understand. So there was a mixed feelings amongst them. I used to have a wonderful tutor. He was. I needed help in math and in English, I took of English. so my mother hired him, when I was maybe 14 years old to come to the house to teach me, to tutor me. So he was a wonderful, he was also a student on university and he studied in England for a while, very educated young man. And he was very kind and very Gentleman in every way. A few days after

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Hitler marched in, I saw him in a SS-uniform, in the black uniform of an SS-man, but he greeted me: „Heil Hitler, Fraeulein“ You know, just the same, but he was an SS-man all of a sudden. So don't you think he was illegal, when he was already in the SS a few days after, he probably belonged to them God knows how long. He didn't show his anti-Semitism, and he accepted this job, he probably needed a few „Schillings“ too. But there were mixed, you know mixed.

Q: Sorry, I have to change....

A: Yes

Side B:

Q: How was the reaction of your Jewish friends, of other Jewish families of what happened after the Anschluss. Was it immediately clear...

A: Absolutely. We all knew this is the end of Leoben for us. Most of them moved away to Vienna. And some of the young people were able to go. They made arrangements to go to Palestine on those illegal boats, like my brother and his wife and then they like I told you they had to swim to the shore.

Q: When did that happened?

A: 1938. 1939, beginning of 1939.

Q: No this particular boat.

A: Oh that boat that was returned? I was already in America that time. Probably the end of 1938, beginning of 1939. You know, who would know this much better this particular thing, my friend Fanny, because she was one of this boats and she seemed to remember about our girlfriend Milly how she was on this ship that was turned around and send back.

Q: And your brothers?

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A: My brothers. One brother came together with me to America in December 1938. We were able to leave Vienna December the 7th 1938.

Q: So you moved from Leoben to Vienna in August 1938.

A: Yes, and I waited for the Visa to come through and the American consulate called us beginning of December or November, you know, to come for a medical examination to come to America. And we came on a Dutch boat, on Holland-American Line. We left Vienna on the 7th of December 1938. My late brother, my late nephew, my uncle and I. All the three of us all together. My parents remained in Vienna, they waited to get entry papers to go to England. Because one of my brothers, who was a doctor of chemistry was in Ireland, in Northern Ireland. It belongs to England. And he was able to send papers for my parents to Vienna to bring them over to London. In London, being they were both born in Poland, they belonged to the Polish quota, and that was a very full quota and it took a long time for them to come here. And they were for about a year in London, they went through the Blitzkrieg, they were bombed, they were interned in England, because they had German passports, because by that time they left Vienna, you know, the passports, Austria was part of Germany, so English people threaten them as they would be enemies and they interned them as German citizens. So my poor parents went through this on the top of Hitler, they had to be interned in England for a little while for several months which killed my father, he was a diabetic, he was sicker than he ever was and somehow they survived that and then a year later they came here and my father died soon after that. And.

Q: So your family was reunited here.

A: Yes we were reunited after a while.

Q: And what happened to your apartment in Leoben?

A: Somebody took it over. Who knows?

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Q: Your tried to sell the furniture?

A: No my parents didn't bring their furniture. I think the left everything behind, they gave it to some of the poor people around it and they were glad to take everything. And my mother, she wanted to sell the good china and the women who came for it, you know, hardly paid anything for it. You know just like given away. When we moved to Vienna we were boarders with another Jewish family. We didn't have our own apartment, that time in Vienna Jews had to live in the „Zweiten Bezirk“, it was like a Ghetto. And we lived with a family, that had a large enough apartment to take in another Jewish family, which was us. And this is how we lived until we were able to go away.

Q: Where did you live? In which street?

A: Leopoldsgasse 22 in Vienna

Q: Can you remember the name of this Jewish family?

A: The name of this Jewish family was „Vortrefflich“.

Q: And how was the situation in Vienna compared with Leoben?

A: Well. We were always in danger. That's when the took the women to scrub the sidewalks. The did this in Leoben already too. They took some of the Jewish women, two of them, they made them to put on their best clothing. They wrote „Jude“ in red paint on the sidewalk and they took this two wonderful Jewish women. And they said „get down on your knees and scrub this off.“ And they had do it.

Q: That happened in Leoben right after the Anschluss.

A: Yeah, in Leoben. Yes. So they took Jewish people from Leoben to Auschwitz to Dachau. My oldest brother was a short while in Dachau, before he went to Israel. They took several Jewish young man to Dachau and somehow, this was in the beginning, you know, when the could prove

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they would have a place to go to, not to remain in Austria. That they had „Ausreisevisum“, then after a few weeks, a couple of month, they let them out. So my oldest brother Simon, amongst some of the other young man were taken to Dachau and because he was able to prove that he and his wife was able to go to Palestine on such and such date, and he also had pull some Austrian gentile man who knew him well and who intervened for him also and he got out and some of the other young man got out, because they were able to prove that they go to Palestine.

Q: He was.. Excuse me. He was arrested in Leoben?

A: Yeah. Yes, he was one of the Leobner.

Q: When did it happened?

A: Probably in 38 still or beginning of 39. To tell you the truth, this I am not sure about. But I know a bunch of them were taken, a few of them. I think Fanny's father was one of them or one of her brothers. They were taken together with my brother to Dachau. And a lot, this poor lady who was scrubbing the sidewalk. She and her wonderful son were taken to Auschwitz and a couple, they lived opposite us, he and his wife and twin children, little girls, were taken to Auschwitz. And from that small Jewish community there was a large percentage, who could not survive. Were perished one way or the other through the Nazis. And, to leave not anything important out.

Q: Can you remember the „Reichskristallnacht“ in Vienna?

A: Kristallnacht? Kristallnacht, two young SA-man came to your apartment. My mother had in her suitcase linens and in the top of the linens she had some silver-cutlery, knives and forks and spoons, that she brought from Leoben, and she was hiding them in an European pillowcase that had little buttons around it. Are you familiar, with the European pillowcase of these days? The pillowcase had buttons. Maybe not at your time but in my time. So my mother had this all

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buttoned up needly, so the SA-man came and they wanted to take, rob, what ever they could from the Jews. „What do you have in this suitcase?“ And my mother said, linens, so he opens it up and picks up this pillow case you know with this silver in it. So instead of open up each little button, six or eight little buttons, you know, because this European pillowcases were large, not like the little ones hear. So he didn't want to open up this little buttons. So he took a bayonet and he slit it open and by doing so, he was in hurry, he cut his hand by accident, he cut through his hand and he was bleeding, he got scared and he grabbed another pillowcase and rubbed it around and the two of them ran probably to the nearest hospital, or the nearest doctor and they didn't take anything. So my late father was a very religious man and he said „God saved us, because in this house is a „Safertora“ which is. The „Safertora“ is the book of Jewish laws and our landlord was a very religious man, very few Jewish families had there „Safertora“ this is only something, that lays in the temple. But this man had one. And my father said, because of the „Safertora“ we were saved. So this was „Kristallnacht“. This was in November, wasn't it? That was the experience of the „Kristallnacht“.

But thank god, we were spared. And then, after we left. I remember when my brother, my nephew and I went to the train. My parents came to the „Suedbahnhof“. I think it was the „Suedbahnhof“ in Vienna to see us off. We didn't know that we will see each other again. It was a heard breaking... And soon after this. In order for us to go to America we had to go to Rotterdam through Germany. And in Rotterdam a Jewish organization picked us up, and took us to huge building near the piers were the boots are. And the put us up, you know like the sailors sleep there, you know, but we were glad that we had a roof over our heads. We were a day or two in Rotterdam, we looked around we felt free. and then we came to America. 11 days on the boot

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on the „Veendam“, „Veendam“ was the name of the boat. And our aunt and uncle took us in very lovingly.

Q: Can you remember the journey? Were there other refugees?

A: It was a pleasant journey. We paid for our own. It was not a refugee-boat. You know what I mean? It was a regular „Holland-America-Line“ boat and we were treated very well and we paid for our journey you know. It was, you know the trip was good. My brother got sick, seasick you know. But it was a normal see-journey. Good food and one steward on the boat said: „You better eat and enjoy the food , who knows what you gonna through in America until, you know, gonna establish yourself. It's not gonna be easy for you.

Q: Were there other refugees also?

A: There was German family, German Jewish family was there. Yes. Mother, father and a boy. And maybe there wee others, but we only got acquainted with that one family. I guess we set on the same table. But we.....What I gonna to say. Yes. And then life for us in America, in the beginning, you know, my aunt and uncle kept us for a while, you know, put us up. And then we had to start looking around to make a living. And at that time, beginning of 1939, America was still the end of a depression. There were very few jobs to be had. So, I found a job in a distant cousins factory as a sawing machine operator. And I learned how to do it and I stayed there for five years. And my brother couldn't find anything in New York. He went to the HIAS, which is a Jewish organization, asked them to send him away from New York into a smaller town. They sent him to Pennsylvania, in a small town and they got him a job in a furniture store. Were he had to do all the minor labor. But somehow he made a salary and he lived ,he was a bachelor. And my nephew, he was only 17 at that time. He had a job in the same factory, were I worked as a sawing machine operator. She gave him a job as a bundleboy. Which means he had to carry the

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fabrics to the operators, who sawed them. He made a few dollars. And he took a little furnished room in the Bronx. And I took a little furnished room in the Bronx. You understand. So this is how we to get started to get back on our feeds. And to have a roof over our heads.

Q: Were you supported at the beginning...

A: No. At that time there were no organizations to support. Maybe we didn't go, maybe we didn't now about it. But you see my aunt and uncle, who wrote the Affidavits. You see. When they send us Affidavits, they had to sign, that we will not be a burden to anybody. And this is how we had to carry it out too. As long we were able to make a few dollars and at that time we were able to buy in cafeteria a meal for 35 cents. My first salary was 10 dollars a week, they took 10 cents social security, they deducted so my take home pay was 9,90 and I lived. I survived. And then a few months later they gave me an increase of a dollar. And this is how we survived. We were not afraid to work. This is how we survived. But

Q: And then your parents came to America?

A: Yes.

Q: And did you lived together, did you moved together?

A: In the beginning, yes. We took an apartment together in the Bronx. My nephew lived with us. And then eventually my brother, who lived in Philadelphia, no in Newcastle, Pennsylvania. He wanted to live near the parents and near us and so he came back. And by that time the war already had started and during the war people found jobs. He started to work for „Gimbles department store“ until he retired at the age of 65. All these years he was a salesman. But what Hitler did to us, was something, you know, no matter how we today, we live a normal life, and everything, but they can't take this out of our system what we went through. This can never be erased.

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Q: Did you visit Austria after the war.

A: Never. There is nobody left there, that I want to see. I mean it is beautiful country. I grew up in the Alps, you know „oesterreichische Alpen“ beautiful. I wouldn't mind seeing it all this, you know. But a cousin of mine who lives in San Francisco was there a couple of years ago. And he brought his son, who was born here in the United States, to show him where he was born in Leoben. So they went to the „Kaerntnerstrasse“, his fathers store was also on the „Kaerntnerstrasse“ next to my fathers store. And he was standing in the front of the building and a couple, a middle age couple passed by. And they stopped, and because they stood there looking for something. So my cousin asked this man and woman: „do you live in Leoben for many years.“ And he said: „I was born here.“ He said: „Do you remember a family, they had a store here, there name was Gewing? There was a houseware store Gewing and next to, there was a clothing store Gewing.“

„Oh, the name is very familiar, very familiar, said he. So the wife said: „Come. Let's go.“ She didn't let him talk. She didn't want him to tell. She didn't want to remember. But they remembered. As I said, Mr. Kloesch, the memory of this terrible tragedy.

Q: Did you meet some other refugees from Leoben here in New York, besides of your nephew.

A: Not really. Yes. There was a lovely family here. Their name was „Weiss“. There is only one remaining survivor, Elsie Weiss, and she is in a senior citizen home, way out in Long Island, quite elderly. But her husband and her mother lived in New York, we were in touch with them. They survived Leoben.

Q: And your acquaintance in New York at the beginning. Were they mostly refugees from Europe or native born Americans.

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A: Mostly Americans. There wasn't much time to be together with friends. Work, you know. But most of them, and thank god, I had nice relatives. American-born cousins and my uncle and aunt were very nice to me and my family. Very warm. One thing, my uncle, when I came here and I told my uncle what went on, what they did to us. Many years latter he said to me: „You know Herta. When you told us this terrible things, that they did to you and to other Jewish families. I couldn't even believe it. How this „gemuetliche Oesterreicher“ could do such things. The music loving „Oesterreicher“. the cultured people. How they could turn in such monsters. But know I have to apologize to you, because now I know more as before.“ When they started to show on the news. He said: „Now I realized, now I know that you had told me the truth.“ People, you now, it was hard for them to believe. When my uncle came to visit us, he was here many years, and he came to Leoben and I was a little girl. I appeared in the theater as three or four year old in the „Graefin Marrizza“ on stage. „Oh what a wonderful culture loving little town.“ They changed like Dr. Jekeyll an Mr. Haid. One day they were Dr. Jekeyll and the next day they were Mr. Haid.

Q: And your father worked in a department store?

A: No my brother. My brother worked for the department store for nearly 25 years. He got married an American girl. After he retired they moved to Florida, but they are both deceased now. And you now.

Q: And your parents? How could you support your parents?

A: We children. My brother and my nephew lived with them. And I lived with them. And I paid table money. So much per week. You know to cover rent and food.

Q: So it was very hard for your....

A: It was difficult. But somehow you survived.

Q: I have to change the tape. Sorry.

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End of tape one

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Tape 2

Q: This is tape 2 of an United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Interview with Mrs. Herta Gelber conducted by Christian Kloesch on May 20th 1997, Queens 1997

Did your outlook on life changed after your experiences during the Holocaust?

A: My outlook on life. To tell you the truth. I was so young, that I was still able to look at things, you know, and hopping for the best. I was an optimist. And I knew things will get better. So I can't really say that.... I was happy, when I was able to see my parents again, my brothers. All that, that was already happiness for me.

Q: and your religious belief?

A: We are not observing really. I am proud to be a Jew, but we don't go to temple.

Q: So you are more cultural..

A: We have a wonderful daughter and when she was a little girl, we send her to Hebrew school every Sunday, you know. And she, to know were she belongs and to get her an Jewish education and she went to services on Saturdays with all the other children from her school, from her Hebrew lessons, but my husband and I never participated in religious practice.

Q: And your parents were orthodox?

A: Yes, my parents were orthodox.

Q: And your brothers?

A: Well sort of reformed. I would not call my parents orthodox, I think they called conservative Jews. The orthodox are very Chassidic I think, they were not. They were conservative Jews. They believed in conservative Judaism.

Q: You told me you had three brothers. And one brother came to U.S.

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A: Two brothers came to the U.S. The one, who was in Israel, he went with his wife and with one of these illegal boots to Israel in the beginning. He stayed for several years there and his wife passed away there. And then when he was alone, he came to join us here. He also moved in with my mother in the Bronx until we found himself a little furnished room. And he got himself a job and then he remarried eventually. And then the third brother. In order to get out of... he was a doctor of chemistry, lived in Vienna and so was his wife also, same profession. And in order to get out of Austria, when they started to take men left and right to take to Dachau, to Auschwitz. They took man away. He found out, that if he can gets to certain point in Germany, on the coast. He can take a boat, there is a man, who takes people to Belgium., during the night. He found that out, packed a suitcase, he left his wife behind in the meantime in Vienna and he went through this and he paid this man to take him during the night from the coast of Germany someplace to Belgium. He entered Belgium, he went to Antwerp and he put an ad into adverb newspaper, looking for a job as a chemist in a factory. All of a sudden he gets an answer, from a man in Northern Ireland. He wrote in his advertisement, that he is from Vienna and that he is an experienced colorist. He knew about diving of textiles this was his specialty. The man from Ireland owned a factory in a little village in Northern Ireland and he needed a chemist. He came to Antwerp, to interview my brother, took him along, once they arrived in Ireland, my brother told him my wife is also a chemist in the same field. He brought over my sister in law to Ireland. And the both worked, my brother was the head „Betriebsleiter“ in this factory. And my sister in law worked under him as an assistant chemist. He saved their lives by taken them to this little village and they remained in Ireland all this years, not in the same little village then after a while they moved to Belfast and they get different jobs their and they established themselves very, very well, they never have children, but they became Irish Jews, which sounds funny. But they had a

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good life their and that's how they were saved by this wonderful Irish man in the little village he brought them there.

Q: And what was the name of this brother?

A: Max, Dr. Max. He died two years ago in Belfast. So they are all gone my brothers.

Q: And he managed to get your parents out?

A: He managed to get my parents to London, because he was able to send papers from there and then, when my parents quota numbers came through. They were in an internment camp in England and the internment camp got the notice that this two people have the papers now to go to America. So they freed them and they came back to London and went to the Consulate and when they came on one of the British ships. This was already during the war. they came with a convoy of ships, to protect this passenger ship with a convoy, and they arrived here safely.

Q: And this was 1940?

A: 41 maybe, I don't remember this.

Q. And was this the Isle of Man, were....

A: Yes, they were at Isle of Man. Yes and what they did, the British, they separated the man from the women, the women were put up in a very nice little house, my mother said, like a boarding house, you know, comfortable more or less. The men were put up in tents, like soldier and they had to stuff their own „Strohsack“, filled it with hay to sleep on, and my father was elderly and diabetic and weak. And the food was mostly potato, pastas, starchy food, what a diabetic is not able to touch, but he had to ate. So my mother said, when they were freed not just they, but they were other man and women, that were freed at the same time. My mother said, the women were standing and they waited for their husbands to come from another part of the section there. So she said all the man were there, but „Papa“ wasn't their jet. She was standing there and

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all of a sudden, way back, a very skinny, little man, who could hardly walk and that was my father. The internment camp this few months made him more sick. But thank God he made it to America, he came here, we tried to make it comfortable for him in every way and a year later he passed away, natural causes. Yes, how did you know about Isle of Man? Other people were there too, probably

Q: Yeah. I found in a book about the Jewish community in Styria some few notes about the Jewish community in Leoben.

A: You said, you found a book? Who wrote that book?

Q: It's called „Die Geschichte der Juden in Sued-Ostoesterreich.“ The editor is the Jewish community in Graz. And it was published in 1988.

A: And you found that in Austria some place?

Q: In Austria. But it is also heard at the Leo Baeck Institute and I found some names there. Can I tell you some of these names and you tell me what comes into your mind.

A: Yes.

Q: Ludwig Roehr?

A: Yes.

Q: He was the director of the Jewish community in Leoben?

A: Not that I know. He had very little to do with the Jews. He was a Jewish man. He had a big shoe store Ludwig Roehr, and he had three sons, but he didn't pay much interest in the Jewish community. I don't think he ever came to a service. His wife came to services on the high holidays. We never saw him. I knew his sons well. And they all went to Israel. and the youngest son, he was my nephew's friend. His name was Hansi, Hans Roehr and he became a musician in Israel and played with the Philharmonic.

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Q: Oh really.

A: Yes. And who else do you have?

Q: Also the name of your father Benzion Gewing.

A: My father. See my father was with the Jewish community very active. And he was what they called in Hebrew „Rosh Hakuh“. He was the head of the community.

Q: Oh, really.

A: Yes, of the Jewish community in temple. My father had a special suit, a special honor suit and he was really nice. Benzion Gewing.

Q: And Ottokar Popper?

A: Yes, he was also very respective Jewish member of the Jewish community. He was the father of my girlfriend and who was taken away with her baby, with her little boy to Auschwitz. He was the father of Wilma Popper.

Q: Do you know what happened to him?

A: He died her. He lived in Israel for many years with his wife Helene. And then he came here, and he lived here a few years and he died here natural causes. Herr Popper

Q: I also found the name Jacob Koffler.

A: Jacob Koffler was the cantor and my religious teacher and he also surcommed (ph) with his wife an two daughters, taken away, yes.

Q: And he was also the organisator of the temple choir?

A: He was everything, that little man. He was talented, knowledgeable. I mean he was, he kept the community together. See Leoben didn't have no Rabbi. If we wanted a Rabbi, we had to go to Graz. You see, Leoben this little Jewish community was part of the Graz Jewish community. It was a bigger city, they had everything there, you know. So whenever you needed like this, we

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had to go to Graz, if we needed a Rabbi, somebody wanted to get married. If somebody died, the Rabbi had to come from Graz.

Q: But there was a Jewish cemetery?

A: Yes there was a Jewish cemetery, which was destroyed by the Nazi's. There was a time, when I was a little girl the Jewish community build a „Zeremonienhalle“ and I remember when it was dedicated and we were kids and we were watching you know. And the Nazis destroyed it, but it was reerected. Somebody, as a matter of fact some of the Roehr' sons. I think, he went to Leoben and he saw that the reerected and fixed up the cemetery, the Jewish cemetery.

Q: And the cemetery was destroyed after Anschluss or in the Kristallnacht?

A: After the Anschluss, of course not before.

Q. But at a time when you already lived in Vienna?

A. Yeah. During that time probably.

Q: I think in the Kristallnacht.

A: Maybe during the Kristallnacht, that I don't know when, but I know it was destroyed..

Q: And then I found that in 1933 there was a „Juedischen Armenfonds“ founded to support Jewish emigrants form German, who came to Leoben.

A: Yes, there was. We had in Leoben, what we called the „Frauenverein“. The Jewish ladies organized this Verein. And everybody of the community was a member and paid so much per month and from this money. And it all happens that, my late mother was the bookkeeper, you know, she volunteered, and she took care of this. And when refugees, came from Germany, who run away and they wanted to reach Italy to go to take a boat, wherever they wanted to go. They needed to go to Italy, they came through Leoben. The Leobner community helped them, gave them a few dollars, sometimes my father took them upstairs to our house to give them a meal,

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gave him a few dollars. And one day a Chassidic Jew from Germany, you know how they dress, Leoben never saw a Chassidic Jew in their lives. He came to my fathers store, he came from the „Bahnhof“, he came from the railroad station, and he said: „I was told there is someone here to help me to go on to Italy.“ So my father took him upstairs. We had a kosher house. We gave him a good meal, then we gave him not the „Frauenverein“ you know from this budget, gave him some money to go on and my father walked him to the railroad station because he was afraid, that this ignored Leobners, who never saw a Chassidic man, you know, with his dress and the long beard and the big hat, they shouldn't make fun of him. This was before the Nazis. This was in 1933, 32. And he walked him to the railroad station, saw him up on the train, you know. But then there were women, beautifully, elegantly dressed, women with daughters, that came from Germany that run away., that had to reach a certain point. Our „Frauenverein“ helped this people to go on.

Q: Did they tell you what happened in Germany?

A: I was to young. I was not there when they talked. But I remember, I saw some of this lovely ladies and my mother used to say: „Look what happened to this poor people, they look like as they must have had, you know, everything, and now the have to go begging.“ We didn't know a few years latter we would be in the same boot, practically. That we never thought about. You know. We thought, oh that could never happen to me. You know how it is. Also all this is listed in that book?

Q: Yeah.

A: And who wrote this.

Q: Several historians

A: Oh, I see, contributed whatever they knew about it.

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Q: And I also found, there was a „Kaufhaus Wertingsheim“.

A: Werdisheim, Werdisheim was the man and the women, who was send with two little girls, twins, to Auschwitz. He was the richest Jew in town, he was very wealthy man, he was not well respected, he was a rude person, but he was, you know, one of our community and unfortunately, who was killed by the Nazis plus his wife. His daughter, who was a very close friend of mine, Gerti, Gertrud, she went on one of this illegal boots to Israel. And she married a boy from Graz and I think they had a son, he died young, his name was last name was Fleisig from Graz. She is still alive. She was a few years older than I, she might be still alive. Lost contact. You know. Do you have anybody else their?

Q: Just. It was mentioned that the revisionist were very strong in Leoben. The „Liste Jabotinsky“.

A: Jabotinsky, Yes. He was a great Jewish leader. A big Zionist. Somehow the desire, when you life like this and you believe in a Jewish homeland and this man wanted to, you know, help the Jewish people to create this Jewish homeland. So well, Leoben had only about 30 Jewish families: There were some, who believed in the Revesionismus, some of them were other Zionist. There were all kind of parties, this one wanted this party and that party.. It was all part of life.

Q: And you were member of the „Brith Trumpeldor.“

A: Yea, they kids, you know that was for the kids.

Q: And they also had a „Heim“ for during the summer vacation?

A: Well, they rented, oh yeah I think there was something like this, some of them went, what they called a „Kofer hasahrah“(?). They called that, were they trained them to plant things, you know, in case they should ever life in Israel. They should know what to do. And some kids, not me, I

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was not the type, but some kids, you know, went to this camp. I think it was in Kaernten, if you ask me.

Q: Was it a camp at the „Woerthersee“?

A: That's I do not know. But you know, who was in one of this camps, I think it was Mrs. Bernfield. She went, I am almost sure. Yes, those were the good times. You know, what I mean. But all that changed. There was another thing we always used to have a sleep in maid. I grew up with a housekeeper, who lived with us. She, and when Hitler came, they were not allowed to work for Jews anymore. So very tearfully, she left us, because she was almost a member of the family, she had to leave. And she said, she never had it so good in her life as she had it with the Jews, with our family. then she moved in with some, her boy friend of 20 years, who came home drunk and he hid her and he mistreated her. You understand, while she lived with us, she was like a member of the family. So she saw him on a Sunday, but then she came back to home to us. This way she moved in with him and she missed the life with the Jews, that she was deprived of, because of the Hitler. So she was really also a victim in that way, you know. And not just she, but other people also who were not allowed to stay with Jews anymore.

Q: And you lost contact with her?

A: Oh, yeah. Well she was, you know, elderly already then. Lost contact, yes.

Q: OK. Could you tell me the names of your brothers? One brother was Max.

A: Max, Simon and Rudy. They are all gone now, my dear brothers. And my oldest brother Simon, had a store in Knittelfeld and a very beautiful villa. And the SS came one day and took everything away and his beautifully furnished villa with beautiful „Biedermeier“ antiques, and beautiful things, they could bought after many years of hard work, they were finally able to have all those things. And when they said, they have to get out., my brother went to the dinning

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room. He had velvet chairs and he said, he is gonna step on this velvet chairs and make them dirty. He is not gonna turn them over in such perfect clean conditions to the Nazis. And he did that. Because you now, in Europe, how often do you, well you don't eat at that dining room, this was just for company. So he was in there once or twice, while he even owned it, you know. But so he took everything. They went to Israel with their Rucksack and that's it. And that's it. And when they got to Israel at that time it was called Palestine. He started to peddle soap from door to door and my sister in law worked as a maid, as a cleaning lady to make (?) to have food, to have a roof above their head. And this is all because of Hitler what he did.

Q: Did your brother get some kind of restitution. Did he try to get back his property in Knittelfeld?

A: He went back, anyway. Yes. He did go back to Knittelfeld and he tried to get something back, it was almost nothing to speak of. Nothing to speak.

Q: Just money a little.

A: Very, very little. Nothing, almost nothing.

Q: This was after the war?

A: Yes, after the war he went back. He thought he could do something. Nothing. He came back and he said, it doesn't even pay to talk about it. A few Schillings.

Q: And what was the name of this shop in Knittelfeld?

A: My brother's store in Knittelfeld? Simon Gewing Kaufhaus, I think.

Q: Like a department store?

A: Clothing and shoes yeah. And my brother Rudi had a shoe store in Leoben. Rudolf Gewing shoes. With my brother he had in the shoe store boots. You know, black boots, men's boots to

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sell. The broke into his store first and they stole all the boots, because the Nazi were this black boots.

Q: And did he get anything back?

A: No nothing, nothing. My fathers store the man, who took over the fathers store, he married the girl, who worked for my father. She remained there as a saleslady, he was a bachelor and the two of them got married and they became the bosses the took over my fathers....

Side B:

Q: And you tried to get something back?

A: When my brother was their in Knittelfeld, he also tried to do something, but. You know. My fathers store, It wasn' t (...?) He couldn't accomplish anything. We had a very dear women, a gentile women, who was a very close friend and she was hiding some of my mothers jewelry and he went back to her and she gave back some of. She still had my mothers, which wasn't so great, you know a little ring, and little earring, that's it. And he brought that back. She was very faithful and very kind. It is all past history now.

Q: And did you applied for the Nationalfonds.

A: Did I applied for the this. Yes I applied, of course. After so many years. You know what I mean. After 50 years, they decides to do a little something. I guess, is this it?

Q: Yes

A: I think, My knowledge has exhausted and I was trying to tell you all those things, you know, the way they were, as much remember.

Q: Mrs. Gelber, thank you very much.

A: You are welcome. You are very welcome.

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Q: I can understand, that's very, sometimes it is very painful.

A: Certainly, Yes, I cracked down a bit, could not control myself. But I, That's you know. My daughter knows all about this things. She was born here, but never failed to tell her about, you know what went on. We fell she should know.

Q: I think that's a good decision, because the younger generation should....

A: has to know. Yes.

Q: O.K. Thank you very much.

A: You are welcome Mr. Kloesch.

Conclusion of interview