

So I said, well, could I come anyway? And she said, you can come. I can show it to you. it won't do you any good. Well, it happened that we just clicked. I liked her a lot, and she liked me a lot, and she said, you know what? Let's go look at the apartment. Well, I walked into the apartment. I didn't even look at the bedroom or anything else. I fell in love with it. And I said, this is it. She said, you got it. And that's how I came and I've been living there for 14 years and love it as I loved it the first day. And that's very nice.

Now you have been back to Germany.

I went back to Germany only for a few days to see my school friends.

When?

I went-- So last year it was seven. I went in '94, '95 and '96.

'94 was the first time you went? Tell me what that was like.

And I had only corresponded with one.

How did you keep in touch with that person?

Through another school friend who consequently passed away. And she was really my best friend since we were little kids. My dad worked for a time for her father and so we played when we were way before school and then we went through the whole school together. And she, for one reason or another, I don't know why, she went to Europe all these years and I guess she found all the girls. And then she told me of this one and she gave me her address and I started to correspond with her. Not for too long really until I had found her.

And so I told her I would come. And then in the last minute I wrote to her and I said, we haven't seen each other in 58 years. How will we know? I said, you better come to my hotel. Well, she came and she knocked on the door. And I opened the door, and I want to tell you something. She has not changed since our school days. Her face is still the same. Her hair's a little thinner, but that was always thin. And she is just as tall and just exactly as she was. None of the others, but this one has stayed exactly the same.

So then she got me together with all the others. There are eight of them. And we just had a wonderful time together. I did not touch-- I wanted to tell her about what happened and so on and so forth. And she shut the door immediately. No, nothing from before. The only remark she made, she said you think you had it hard? We had it just as hard. We had to flee. I had a baby. I had no milk. I had nothing to feed the baby. We went from farm to farm where we milked the cows and clean the stables and did horrible work so that our little boy would have a potato or something to eat.

So I decided I'm not going to touch on anything. I didn't want to hear how she went through the Nazi time. And she married. I didn't want to hear if she has in her living room a picture of her husband from-- I don't know whether it was a war or what it was in a uniform, in a military uniform, let's put it that way. So I have no idea was he a Nazi was he not, how did she feel about it. I have no idea. They don't talk about it. They don't talk about anything. And I thought, well, I'm not going to be the one to start it. We reminisced a lot and laughed a lot and really had wonderful times together.

What was it like for you to be in Breslau?

I did not go to Breslau. I only went to Munich. That's all. They are all there. And now a lot of Jewish people who were born there and grew up there are going to Breslau. I can't understand that. I don't want to do that.

Why not?

I have wonderful memories of my growing up years. I don't want to destroy those. It's supposed to be terrible.

In what way?

It's not Polish. There isn't a German, not a street name or anything around. Most of all the buildings are destroyed and there are just very military barracks built instead and so on and so forth. Our school is still standing. I know this from one of the girls who went there and found the school and went inside where everything seems to be all the same thing. I just don't want to see it.

I have a very hard time looking at films that have to do with that time. It took me two years before I finally got the courage to go to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, which was a wonderful experience for me because I think it's done in such unbelievable taste. You really don't get the horror feeling in there and I really like that a lot. But it's very strange. I didn't even go through the horror time, but I have a hard time dealing with that. Why it is I don't know.

Go ahead.

No, you ask me.

So all the people that you knew from school are all in Munich. Yes, some of them, not all of them. There are eight in Munich and they all have contact to one another, which I think is very nice. One is already in pretty bad shape and they all have little things here and there. I think with all the things that I have to contend with, with my inconvenience about my eyes, I'm still I think in the best shape, better than they are together.

But it always was a very enjoyable time because we do have a lot of memories to go back to. And so this last year and this year I haven't gone. And I don't think I will.

These are people that you went to school with and the school that you graduated in 1934.

And from the very first school day at the other school too, yes.

And none of them want to talk about it.

No, they don't talk about it at all.

Did that disappoint you that you couldn't talk about it?

Not really. Because I'm very honest with you. I always felt a little strange about that part of our lives. And I was kind of glad maybe. I like them all so much, I really didn't want to maybe discover that there was something there that they did that I would be very upset about. And I mean you would not believe how warm they are and how sweet they are. And they go out of their way when they see me. I mean it's unreal. And they write me the most wonderful letters and everything.

And when I talk to them it's really interesting that after all these years and being Jewish and different from them that that's the way they are.

You're the only one who's Jewish?

Yes. There is one in Argentina whom I have contact with and she goes also to Germany once a year to visit them. And we just loosely correspond, but she's Jewish.

So not wanting to talk about it, not wanting to find out something that might not feel good to you is sort of like not wanting to see Breslau.

Yes, for basically the same reason. I have, like I said, I have really such wonderful memories of growing up. I don't want to destroy that. And so I'd rather think about it if I ever think back-- I'm a very strange person. I never really look back and I always look forward. And I'll never forget, I think I've always been this way, but I never forget a sermon that

our rabbi in Hollywood, a part of a sermon that he talked about, and he said at the end God has given your two eyes in front of your head. If he wanted you to always look back, He would have put them in the back of your head. And I've never forgotten that.

And with this I have helped a lot of people, people who are unhappy about things that happened to them in their lives or anything like that. And I always quote that. And then they come to me and say, you know this is really wonderful. I feel so much better. So I am I'm always looking forward, I'm not a person to look backwards. And it was very strange, because when I talked to you I really had to sit down and think a little bit about it because I haven't thought of that in years and years and years and years.

Did the German government ever invite you back?

Well, the German government only invites the people from Berlin, and now also from other cities, but never from Breslau.

Because Breslau is not Germany.

Right. And then once I wrote to them a few years ago. My husband was from Berlin, and I wrote to them and I said you know I would like to come to Berlin to see all the places that my husband always talked about. And I explained to them that I was from Breslau and so on and so forth. And they invited me to come. I mean, I have to pay my own passage, but I think other people have to do that too. But they invited me that any time I wanted to come I should come.

But I really don't have the desire.

You don't.

Mm-hmm. I don't have the desire to go to Germany at all. I mean, I like Munich. I had never been in my life to Munich and I liked the thought that this is such a wonderful city. And I have no memories of anything in Munich, so it was all new to me and nice. And I met my friends and I saw a lot and that's enough for me. Otherwise, I don't really want to go anywhere else. I have no desire.

Your parents never went back to Germany.

No.

Your brother?

My brother was in the war and he was in Germany.

He was in the American Army?

Mm-hmm. And it was so funny. We always joked about that, because when he came back, his German was really bad, and we always joked about it. Already he lost it so fast? And no, my brother was in the war. And then he built up a wonderful business. He was one of the really first people who went to Japan to buy cameras and bring them into the United States. And he built up an absolutely fabulous business and was, unfortunately, too young to go.

And my sister married a man who was 20 years older than she was, but she had a wonderful marriage. My brother and sister each had two children and they all grew up and are doing really fine. And the family got sort of pulled apart so early. That was very sad because also their children were just too young to lose their father or their mother. But I guess they summoned up enough strength.

This was your sister's family you're talking about?

My sister's as well as my brother's. My brother had a boy and a girl and my sister had a boy and a girl and everybody is

doing well.

Gerda, what do you think has been the effect on you and the way you have lived your life from these experiences that you described and your needing to leave Germany the way you did?

Well, I think I always, when I look back on it, I think it was an absolutely-- how we did this I don't know. Why we did it, to be so to have such a foresight to do that so early in the game. All the experiences I would say have made me a very strong person and a very tolerant person. I don't think that I was exactly weak or intolerant, but I think I have developed that during the course of my lifetime.

And also I think going through the experiences that I've had I would say that I probably only told you a very small part of all the things that we went through. But I think it was good. I think when I look back on my life I think I did well and I helped a lot of people.

When I came to California, I immediately, except for my husband's family and we were not too close and my sister-in-law passed away real fast, I volunteered at the hospital right away, and I joined the temple, and I make friends very easily. This is no problem for me. I connect easily. And I built myself a very full life.

And I two years ago started to lose my eyesight. And within months I lost it completely. I don't see anything but shapes. And I can't write anymore and I can't watch television. I lost the driving. I lost a great deal of my life through that. And I sat down and I thought, I am not ready to sit in a wheelchair and just listen to my talking books. That's not the life for me.

And I got involved with the Center for the Blind in Palo Alto. And through that, the social worker I had worked with thought that I was lucky to be able to accept this in such a short time with the limitations that it has given me that she felt I should apply to the Commission on Disabilities. They had nine seats available on the Commission that's going to be turned over. And so I said, but I have no experience in politics. I have no experience in anything like that. And she said, I want you to apply.

And so she sent me the application. And when I saw the application I said, no. I still saw this through my-- I want to explain this. I have what they call a CCTV. It looks like a computer and it has a moving table underneath and a very, very strong light. And it enlarges the letters to I would say probably 4 inches. And so with that I was still able to read anything that came along that I needed to read.

So when I read the application I thought, how would they ever be interested in me? But I filled it in and I told them very much I had no-- They asked what experience do you have in that field? I said, I don't have any experience but I've dealt with the public, I volunteered an awful lot and I've dealt with the public. And that's all I can offer really. And so I send it, and my kids said, oh my God. You will never get it. So one day I got a call for an interview and they took me. And I'm very active working and I work on all different kinds of committees and trying very hard to make the public aware of disabilities.

Now what Commission is this? The state?

That is the San Mateo County Commission on Disabilities. It is a subdivision under the supervisors. And there are 21 commissioners. And we have a lot of professional people. And we have I think two or three or four in wheel chairs. We have two that are hearing impaired. I'm the only vision-impaired person. And a couple of people with mental disabilities. I couldn't even call it that. I mean, they have a hard time talking. I don't know exactly what the problem has been there.

And it's been a wonderful experience. I am working very hard now to try to go into the schools to make especially teenagers aware of disabilities. They have absolutely no idea or let's say you no feeling. I can't walk very much in the streets anymore, it's just very difficult, but I do try to walk around the block where I know pretty much the unevenness in the street.

And I come home maybe sometimes from when the schools are out. So there's a bus stop at our corner and they want to sit on the ground there, on the sidewalk, and if you think anyone would move or get up step aside for me or anything like that? I have to go out into the street and go around them.

And sometimes I feel like saying, don't you know what that means if a person can't see? And you got a little feeling. I think that you can do something like take a pair of glasses and put Vaseline on it. Then they can see the way I see. And take a person in a wheelchair with a dog maybe. And a person who is hard of hearing. She would bring the dog more than-- We have one person with a wheelchair who brings a dog. And just sort of spread awareness.

We do all kinds of leaflets and things we have now the disability expo on the fairgrounds where they will have, I think, 21 exhibitors who deal with all kinds of disabilities. We also will have a booth and I will work in that. I can't do much but talk to people.

I am really always very sorry and I've been looking around and maybe I put an idea into your head. I would love to see somebody make a documentary about macular deterioration. It is not written up much. It's not discussed much. Most people don't even know what it is. And the ophthalmologist does not enlighten you until you are suddenly in trouble and seek a specialist who might still be able to help you with laser treatments or not.

And there is nothing that can be done. There's absolutely nothing. I have tried every avenue possible. I've been everywhere, to everything, have been examined by lots of people, was willing to go all over the place. And when I talk to doctors they will say, your sight is too far gone. We can't help you.

And what I'm out for, this is really not a very sad thing because everybody, as you grow older-- after all I'm 84 years old-- everybody has a little something in my generation. And I'm very lucky that this is really the only thing that I have. And as I say, I call it my inconvenience. I don't think it's a disability. There is so much out there to help you that is unbelievable that people could take advantage of and don't know about.

And I have created a full life. I've been in the support group for the blind. I'm now being trained to be a peer counselor. I have tried to find out what can you give me to help me so I can be as independent as possible, and they have given me all the help it's all there. It's all there. And people get so caught up I see it in the support group of this as they call it this terrible thing that has happened to me, why me? why this, that they don't know that there's a lot of life beyond that. And that you just have to pick yourself up and say well I have this I have to accept it and I can get all the help there is.

Gerda, in listening to your life story it sounds like you've been doing that almost all your life.

Yes, it's true. And that's why I have been able to accept that as fast as it needed to be accepted for myself. But I notice that I have helped already so many people who have that. And I really have made a sort of a little mission in my life and I'd like to do as much as I can. Because it's so sad that people feel when you lose your eyesight that there's nothing left for them.

And that's not true. You can absolutely be very functional in your home. Of course the company that makes TV dinners is making more money, there's no doubt about that, because it gets a little difficult to peel the potatoes. The oranges become blood oranges all of a sudden and you cut yourself all the time and it's hard. But you can learn to remember.

Your senses get so much keener. Your sense of hearing is stronger, your sense of direction is stronger. Wherever I go I will remember how many steps I have to take. I don't forget it and I manage very well on my own. I only have help once in two weeks to do my house cleaning. And then sometimes during the other week I take a young woman who came from Russia and she comes and she takes me shopping.

I don't see anything on the shelves and I don't want to bother my friends all the time because it can begin to be a nuisance, so she takes me shopping. If I have to go anywhere special, she will take me. And we will take a walk. And she will clean my kitchen because that I don't know whether it is always the way I want it because I don't see when I drop something.

And it's a full life. I have a wonderful, full life. And I still have a social life. I take Ready Wheels when we meet for lunch, when I meet friends for lunch, and when I go somewhere. And once in a while I take a cab. And I walk down to Burlingame Plaza, that I have learned to do.

And I had a mobility teacher to teach me how to use a cane and how to get along in the street and how to cross the street, which is very hard. And when it came to cross El Camino at Truesdale, I did go across three times and he followed me. And when I came back I said to him, you know what? I'll take a cab. It's just too hard because the cars that have the U-turn come around so fast and I can't see anything. I hardly see the cars in the first lane and so I have abandoned this. Maybe one day.

But he just told me the other day, since you lost so much more I can still teach you more things. And I will take him up on that. And you can always learn. Whatever you do you can learn from books. I mean, I enjoy so much reading. I have never been able to have too much time to read history. And I have myself involved in that so thoroughly. They sent me wonderful books and I enjoy it. I sometimes say, oh gosh, I have to get up and get going here. I have something to do. But I don't want to even stop.

What periods of history are you interested in?

All kinds of periods, especially Roman history. And they have wonderful books. And it's been a real pleasure. And it was funny, because when I called up at the library for the blind in Sacramento they assign a person to you that you can talk to what kind of books you want and so on and so forth. And I told her what I was interested in, and there hasn't been one book that she has sent me, and I'm doing this since December of last year, that I had to send back unread or that I didn't like or anything like that. I've never talked to her since December of last year. She sends me all these books and every one is better than the other.

Are these books where it's read?

Yes. Yes, I have a 4-track tape recorder. The tape has four sides. And it's about this big. And then it has a switch. When you have read two sides you have to turn the switch so that you can read three and four. And they have sometimes 19 sides, sometimes only eight sides.

And I just read a lovely story which had nothing to do with history about a couple who were so much in love till the end of their days. And this lady developed Alzheimer's, and how this old man who was so crippled himself and so sick, how he carried on with this love. It was really very moving, and it was only four sides.

But the books come from Sacramento encased in a little green shell that you snap closed. And you just have to turn the label around to send it back to them. It doesn't cost a penny. Nothing.

That's wonderful.

And as soon as you send one back-- I always have seven books at home-- as soon as you send one back the next one comes.

Now you said earlier that there was one thing that you had in the back of your mind that you were thinking about doing.

Yeah. Well, this was that somebody would make a documentary about that and to show this in the doctor's offices and wherever. I haven't thought about that much, but I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if you come to the doctor and you still have some of your sight and you can still look at TV, let's say. I can't look at TV anymore, but most of the time and they come to the doctor's office they still have sight left.

And to show that and show them that this is not the end. This is the beginning of a new life of what you can do with yourself. And how really resilient a human body is, what you can still get out to do good in your community, to do good for yourself, and to just live your life. And that's what I always had in mind. That's what I would love to say.

I am very impressed with the Commission on Disabilities. They are really doing an awful lot of good, a lot of awareness. I mean, a sighted person really never pays any attention to that, like that the bathrooms have been made accessible, that there are ramps where there are stairs, that in the airports the signs are so clear, that you have help everywhere you go, that there's housing for disability people. There's so much. They do so much, it's unbelievable.

I was always-- When I remember back, even when I was very young when I saw a blind person I would always go and say, can I help you in any way? Or something like that. But that was really the extent that I would go to. I was never going any further to really find out what has happened to this person. Why is a person like that? And how does a person live like that?

And now of course I'm very aware of everything. And I'm trying my best to be as helpful as I can and to spread awareness that people, even people in wheelchairs, can live their lives. And people who don't hear can still be very productive. It should not be the end of anybody's life. And it goes on and on and on.

And especially I find that older people get so desperate about something like that happening to them. And it's true when you think back how much you really read, if there's a good show on television how much you enjoy that. And just to cross the street without worrying, even just walk around the block without thinking about every step you take. And to function in the home. And it's easy. It's real easy.

I even had a little party for lunch the other day. We were six and I cooked. And I did a good job. I had to try myself out if I could still do it because I used to entertain so much. Yes, I can still do it. That's not the end. So it's been wonderful for me. So I really always can say I have such a good life and I'm so grateful to that.

And I must mention that I have two wonderful children who are so attentive to me and two great grandchildren. Not great-grandchildren, but great grandchildren. And I'm really blessed that way with everything that has happened. So I'm grateful.

Gerda, on behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Project, I want to thank you tremendously for being willing to come and for sharing your story with us. And for being such an inspirational person.

Thank you very much.

It's been a pleasure.

Thanks, and thank you too.

Thank you very much too.

This is my school diploma, my final exam. It was given to me in 1934 when I graduated. And as you can see, you have the Nazi emblem.

I'm going to open it up now so we can see the emblem.

Where's the Nazi emblem?

I think it's on the front, isn't it? Wasn't it on the front?

What is it you asked?

The Nazi emblem.

Oh, I think it's here.

Is it there?

Yeah.

I'm going to zoom in on it.

Is it the eagle?

It's the Reichstadt--

Yeah. Yeah.

It was the Nazi, that's right. You want me to describe anymore? I don't think so. The grades are on the front page and I thought the Nazi emblem is also on the front but I guess not maybe.

OK.