

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Cassel, Hanna

Date of interview: 8/11 & 9/1/1992

Summary: (Deceased June 24, 2001)

Hanna was born on December 6, 1914, in Berlin, Germany. Her father, Arthur, owned a shoe store and her mother, Rebecca, helped him run it. She had one brother, Werner, who was about six years younger than she was. Her mother's parents were very religious, and Hanna spent many holidays going to the temple with them; her parents were not religious. Hanna attended a private elementary school and then a girls' high school, which she was not able to finish because about a year and a half before she would have graduated, she lost her scholarship (because she was Jewish) and her father's business ended (because he was Jewish). The family could no longer afford to send her to school. She does not remember experiencing much anti-Semitism when she was younger, and says at first most people thought Hitler was crazy and he would never amount to anything. She had very good non-Jewish friends, especially at school. Hanna provides a good description of her family home and her childhood, and says she always loved to read.

After she had to drop out of school, Hanna realized that she didn't have many options or opportunities for her future in Germany. She wanted to go to Palestine with some of her friends, but since she was underage she needed her parents' permission and they did not want her to go. They were assimilated Jews who at that time (around 1934) still thought that everything would turn out all right. Instead, Hanna moved to Rome and worked as a nanny for several different families. By 1939, Hitler had influenced Mussolini's policies and foreign Jews were required to leave Italy; however, since Germany had declared them stateless this was extremely difficult. Hanna recalls that although the Italian government catered to Hitler, many of the civilians disliked the Germans because they had so recently fought against them in World War I and many had lost family members. The government persecution became worse and worse. In December of 1940, Hanna was arrested and put into a concentration camp (she had avoided the first roundups). It was a women's camp, and she lived with about 65 other Jews, gypsies, and some Yugoslavian partisans. Hanna provides a good description of the camp, the people there, and the flourishing black market.

When the Germans occupied Italy, Hanna describes how the villagers in the town around the concentration camp helped free the prisoners. They knew the women of the camp would be killed or deported immediately by the Germans, so they threatened the director of the camp until he let them go (this was probably early fall of 1943). Hanna hid in the fields and then walked back to Rome, which took her about ten days; during this time she ate vegetables she took from nearby fields. The police in the concentration camp town had given her fake papers,

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identifying her as Anna Castelli - she told anyone who asked that she was an Italian fleeing the Allies.

Back in Rome, she hid with various friends. During this time, most people were surviving on the black market. The Germans destroyed the synagogue in Rome right after she got back, and then they liquidated the ghetto. Thousands of people were "taken" - probably to Germany. Several years earlier, her parents and brother had gone to Shanghai, where her brother and father both passed away. While Hanna was in Rome she had very little correspondence with them. She and her friends were able to get some information from listening to the radio, which was illegal. When Rome was liberated, on June 5th, 1944, she was hiding on the outskirts of the city. She remembers euphoria and people dancing in the streets; however, life was still difficult after the liberation. Food was hard to come by. Many people were stuck in DP camps, but Hanna got a job at the American Joint-distribution Committee and was eventually able to get a visa to the United States. She arrived in December of 1948. Her mother died about six months later, and Hanna became depressed. She decided she wanted to go back to school, so she worked nights while taking classes at San Francisco State College. She received a BA and wanted to become a librarian, but ended up a teacher after earning her Masters degree.

Hanna went back to Italy almost every summer once she was a teacher, where she visited friends. She went back to Germany for the first time in 1972 to visit a cousin and that also became a regular trip. She says she was hesitant to return to Germany, but she liked Italy. Hanna had a Bat-Mitzvah in 1983. She says she has experienced anti-Semitism in the United States, especially at the high school where she worked. She never married or had children.