

Today is February 12, 19-- now it's 2001. 2001. And this is the San Francisco Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project. And today we're interviewing Mrs. Ilse Steirman.

Steirman.

Steirman. OK. And Mrs. Steirman, what was your birth name?

Ilse Katz, K-A-T-Z.

And you were born when?

February 29, 1928.

And the city you were born in and the country?

Berlin, Germany.

OK. And your father's name was?

Julius, J-U-L-I-U-S Katz.

And your mother's name?

Frieda, F-R-I-E-D-A Simonsohn.

All right. And sisters and brothers? How many siblings?

I had three brothers. The oldest one was Hans, H-A-N-S. The second one was Horst, H-O-R-S-T. He changed his name to Horace in the States, H-O-R-A-C-E. And my younger brother name was Harry, H-A-R-R-Y.

And how did your family support themselves?

My dad was a traveling salesman for coffee, tea, chocolate.

And how did your parents manage in the inflation preceding, in the years preceding the Hitler system?

Well, my mother always told us that when she got married, her dowry got lost on the train. But actually, it all happened, so to say, minimized.

What schools did you attend when you were--

In Germany?

--were you still living in Berlin?

Yes. I went to 116 Volksschule, which is a public school, until the day after Kristallnacht where I went to school and the teacher said I think you better go home and study page so and so. And that's what I did.

Now that was a public school.

That was a public school.

Were there are many other Jewish students?

I really don't remember. I don't remember any friends because one of the reasons might be that in the afternoon, my older brother Horace and I, we went to like a children's camp where we studied Hebrew, religious items, and also did our homework and played. So we had friends which I don't remember because it's over 60 years ago. But I just remember that we went there.

And we used to get money for the streetcar, 15 pfennige. And very often we used to walk and spend a nickel on KuchenkrÃ¼mel, which each back at that time, the bakeries were all manual. So they used to cut off the ends and put it in a bag. And for 5 pfennige, you used to get a bag and sometimes they were really nice pieces of. And now when I was invited, I said I'm looking forward to the KuchenkrÃ¼mel.

So they said won't bag, sorry. Now that everything is--

Automated?

Automated, they don't have that anymore, so I was--

And you can't get anything for \$0.05 anymore?

Anymore anyway, right. And for the rest of the money, we used to save it. And for Hanukkah, we used to make gifts for our parents and our brothers. And I remember specifically, my dad used to wear these stiff collars were for the necktie. You know, you put that on. And I made him a bag where he could put the collars in.

The neighborhood where you lived, was that a Jewish neighborhood, mixed, or--

Mixed. It was a mixed neighborhood. In fact, the apartment that we lived in, it had a courtyard in the middle. And we lived in the back. And in the front, they had their headquarters, an SS group.

And my dad used to play cards with them and with the police station. So the first 10 years of my life where we lived, beautiful, like any child. We were not rich in money, but we were rich in family because my mother was the only sister that was married. So Sundays, it seems like we always had a what you would call now a party.

Two of my mother's sisters lived in Berlin. They were my favorite aunts, because I was the only girl. So some days, either one aunt took me or the other aunt took me to outings which was nice. And I remember Friday nights, my mother used to make chicken soup, and we used to sit around and sing songs.

Now the grownups knew already what was going on. But we sang English songs, because my older brother Horace went to take English lessons. And we sang German songs and Hebrew songs. So it was just a nice family gathering which really left a wonderful memory. So that's why I say the first 10 years is a wonderful memory in Germany.

What were the customs of the Jewish community in Germany in those days?

Well basically, we went to services on the High Holidays. And we observed the holidays like Passover and Hanukkah and Purim. And as I say, we, the two of us, because my older brother was just two years older, the younger one was five years younger. And my oldest brother was five years older than I am. So the two middle ones, we were kind of very close together.

There were many synagogues in Berlin. Were you a conservative, reform, Orthodox?

I would say we were conservative. And my dad never went to services. I don't know, and this is one of my regrets, that I never really got a chance to sit down as a grown-up with my dad and ask him questions. Because something must have happened to him that he didn't go to services. But my mother and the children went, and he would always stand in front when we came out with flowers for my mother.

So these are all wonderful memories.

How did you and your family interact with Gentile friends outside of the, as you told us, about playing cards? You had Gentile friends?

My friends, yeah. I remember when I was little in the courtyard-- I must have been two or three years old-- my dad used to hold me in his arm and I used to sing songs. And the people throw down pennies. [LAUGHTER] And that was all-- the people in the apartment complex were not just Jews. We never thought anything of it.

Especially, my dad figured they would never do anything to him because he served in the First World War. He was much older than my mother when they got married. So he served in the First World War. And he figured nothing would happen to him.

And I think Kristallnacht woke him up. And that's when we tried to get out. Because the day after Kristallnacht, we heard the SS come up, knock on the door, and said they're not allowed to live with Jews, that we have to leave within one hour. And they said to my mother go look for your husband. Don't let him come back, otherwise, we have to pick him up.

And so my mother went and looked for my dad.

So you guys were really friendly in that respect.

In that respect, because my dad was so friendly with them, they really treated us as nice as they could considering the circumstances. They padlocked our apartment so that nobody could go in and looted. And when we had found an apartment, we could go in and take everything out and move it to the other apartment.

So these were the same SS man that knew you and that your father played cards with.

Yeah. And also on the corner was a police department, and he also played cards with them. And from what I understand, they had him registered as being half Jewish, even though he wasn't, so that they could protect him a little bit. So we personally except then, my brother-- were treated OK at the time in '38.

And before that, when he would play cards and be friendly with them, did anything ever come up about being Jewish and what--

Not to us children, I'm sure the grown-ups knew. I was 10 years old. So we didn't think anything of it. And we had no idea about it.

Being 10 years old, did you have any ideas of what you might want to do when you grew up? Did you have any aspirations yet?

Not in Germany. In Shanghai, I wanted to become a kindergarten teacher. But there were limited schooling. We had ORT in Shanghai. But the main things that they could provide is an apprenticeship for dressmaking and for--

Hair?

--beauty shop. So my folks thought that because I took care of a little girl, and my folks thought that was not a good enough profession, so they kind of talked me into becoming a beautician.

So in earlier days and back to that, as a student and a young person--

I did not feel anything.

You didn't have an inkling about what was going on.

No. No.

And never had any antisemitic experiences in school?

No.

Did people treat you differently in any way?

Not that I can remember. No.

When did you first hear about Adolf Hitler?

Oh, we heard about him. In 1933, because my younger brother was born in 1933. So when my mother used to go with the buggy, they, a lot of young Jews who passed by used to say what a wonderful year he was born in. And actually, my mother just listened and walked by.

And then, what would you say from your perspective? When did you get to realize more and more of Hitlerism?

I would say I personally after Kristallnacht. Because when we had to leave the apartment, as I said, my mother went out to find my dad. And Horace, my older brother and I, we broke our piggy bank. And we took money and went downstairs to call the JÃ¼dische Gemeinde and say that we need an apartment.

Jewish congregation, yeah, right.

And whether we did any good or not, but we felt we wanted to do something.

Right. When did you first see the SA, the Brownshirts? Did you see you must have seen them before '38?

Yeah, we saw them before. But they didn't really seem like a threat to us. It was just Brownshirts, they were SS or SR. And that was it.

You saw them. Did you see them parading, marching along?

Yeah.

Did you recognize anybody that you knew--

No. No. No.

--in that crowd? What happened to the Jewish businesses before Kristallnacht and after?

Before Kristallnacht, well, I didn't remember. But when we were in Berlin now in September, we went back. My husband was not born in Berlin. He was born in a small town, Lindheim. And there they seem to have started in 1933 right away to harass the Jews.

And he told me that they made his dad clean the sidewalks. So they decided to move to Berlin in 1933. And they had a grocery store. And we went there now to see whether it was still there.

Well, the streets where my husband lived for two years, that was still there, but not the grocery store. And as we were there, we saw signs that they kept. Jewish doctors were not allowed to practice. Or-- oh, I should have bought one of the pictures that said, because I don't remember 100% whether non-Jews were allowed to go to Jewish doctors in 1937. So that was before.

That's why I say the grown-ups, I'm sure, knew much more than we children were aware of. Or I'm sure to tell you the truth, as children, we, not we didn't care, but we were not really involved. So the only thing that most probably seemed maybe a little strange, as I said, when we were Friday night singing songs, that we would sing English songs and Hebrew was songs and German, like there was one particular song that I remember in German.

And I brought it, and I translated it as best I could which because we in Chicago, we had family get together when we were older. And I translated that song, because Walter's nephews didn't know German. But in essence, it said that you have to learn English because without it, you were like without a hand. And someone went across.

And the first thing he will don't worry about going anywhere, because you'll find a little Jew, a little kosher restaurant where the waiter is from Vienna, the maitre d' is from Berlin, and the cook is from Neutillmitsch. And you will meet people. And after you talk with them during the meal, you will find out at dessert that they're actually related.

So don't worry about going anywhere. You'll find a little Jewish restaurant. And I remember that song.

Had you ever heard of the Gestapo?

Or when did you first hear about the Gestapo?

Well, again, I'm sure we heard about the Gestapo. But as children, the first main recognition of what was going on the Gestapo, the SS, SR, was after Kristallnacht when we were thrown out of the apartment within an hour.

So then what happened when you moved to the next place?

Well, first we separated. Some of us stayed with my cousin. Some of our stayed with a friend of my cousins whom we called aunt. And then after, I don't, two or three weeks, we found an apartment. Then we moved our belongings and we lived there until we left in 1939, April of 1939.

And was your father able to live with you?

Yeah. Because my father didn't come back. They didn't--

Didn't go looking for him

--didn't go looking for him. And that was a warning to my mother. And luckily--

So they warned her just don't want to come back the house otherwise--

Either we have to pick him up. Yeah.

So he never home.

Right.

Was he able to continue to work?

I'm sure that he was able to. He did not work from home. He was a traveling salesman. So I'm sure he still did his business.

And were you restricted as to where you could then live? Did it have to be in a certain neighborhood or--

I don't think so, just as long as we didn't live where the SS or SA were stationed or had their headquarters, like we did in the Jungstrasse.

So then what happened in terms of leaving?

Well, as I say, then my dad realized that even though he felt German because he was in the German World War I, he realized that didn't matter. So we tried to go wherever we could. But everything was closed except Shanghai.

How did you find out about Shanghai?

I'm sure my parents found out somehow. And my oldest brother was supposed to go-- he did go to Cologne, to Koelln with a children's transport where they were going to be prepared to go to Palestine. And the next oldest brother was supposed to go to England on a German transport. And my oldest brother was all gung ho to go to Palestine, so he went to Cologne.

But the other brother was very determined and very-- well, he went to the wherever you had to go, the Jewish community, and tried to get his papers in order to go and follow us to Shanghai, which he succeeded doing about a month after we got to Shanghai.

Now did you say you stopped going to school from Kristallnacht on or did you ever go back to school?

No. The only school we most probably went was the religious school, the Jewish school. And one thing I remember, we also went to day camps. That was like in a park.

And my dad was a big-- not really husky, but he looked like a-- not SS, but like an authority. And he came to visit us and like wildfire, it went through the camp someone is checking up, get away from the fences, and behave yourself. And then it turned out it was my dad just coming to visit.

How did this work? What did you have to have order to be able to go to Shanghai? Did you have to have a visa?

I would assume. I don't really know whether we had to have anything except passage to go to Shanghai, because a lot of people really did not want to go to Shanghai. That was so far off. Nobody ever heard of Shanghai before.

And I remember my brother who got everything together, at first he didn't really want to go because he heard all that there was rice, and he didn't care for rice. But then he did follow us. And you really, if you could afford it, could get anything in Shanghai, because Shanghai basically was an international-- they had international settlements, French and English and Russian, mainly white Russians who had been there quite a few years before us because they had programs in Russia.

That's why my mother's folks-- my mother was born in Russia. But when she was three years old, her folks moved to Germany. And they lived in Lubeck. And when my mother was 16 or something, she went to Berlin to go to a school where you would learn housekeeping and maybe being a housekeeper in somebody's house.

So can you take us on just what you went through? From Berlin, you went to where in order to get to Shanghai?

We, my dad, my younger brother and I, got passage on an Italian ship. But there was no room anymore for my mother. My mother went on a German ship, the Scharnhorst, by herself, just two days. We all went together, the four of us, by train to Genoa. And there my mother boarded a boat, and my dad and I stayed for two or three days and then boarded the Conte Biancamano.

And I remember that naturally, we made some stops. And one time people were saying, oh, the Scharnhorst is at the same stop that we're going to go through. But by the time we got there, she had left. So until we got to Shanghai, we were not in contact with my mother.

And then what happened? When you go back to Shanghai, who was there to--

Well, one thing I want to mention, my dad sent a telegram to my mother. Because the grown-ups, I'm sure, heard what

was going on that when you came there, you went into one of these camps until you found a room for yourself. And my dad sent a telegram to my mother to find a room. But the telegram didn't get there until two months later.

So when we got to Shanghai, we were put on trucks and we went to a camp, King Chow heim. And it just so happened my aunt and uncle who came from Lubeck, they had gone there and been there maybe six months before us. So my uncle was the heimleiter, was in charge of the camp. When we first got there, we were with about at least 30 people in one big room with bunk beds.

So my brother and I were on the top and my mom and dad on the bottom. So my dad asked my uncle whether he could get some bed sheets so we could just have a little privacy. And at first the other people said oh, even though we were in the corner, you're taking some of the air away. But then they saw that you had a little privacy, so everybody asked for bed sheets, and everybody made their own little privacy.

And after, I don't know how long we were there, maybe two weeks, three weeks, we found one room in Ward Road, 343, Ward Road. Which in Shanghai, there is a street number. And that's a lane, and you have different-- let's say, row 1, A, B, C, D, E or something, so we found a room there.

Now I want to go back to Germany. We were allowed to take some things with us, but no gold or silver or-- which we didn't have too much, but still. It happened to me, my younger brother's birthday when the SS came to inspect our crates, we had, I don't know, three or four crates.

So you packed up some crates to be shipped to Shanghai but everything was inspected by the SS.

Everything was inspected. So mainly what we took was clothes and some kitchen things.

Bedding?

Bedding and things like that. So nothing valuable.

Do you remember having to leave things behind?

Well, no. But what I do remember is my one aunt got engaged and I got a taffeta, a pink taffeta dress, which I took with me. And my other aunt got married and I got a green taffeta dress, which we took with us. Now these two aunts did not get out.

And in Shanghai after awhile, when we first got there, my mom and dad opened a grocery store with a partner who my dad met on the ship. But a month later when my brother came, after about a week, he contracted polio. And he was in the hospital for two years.

And the hospital was in, I think, the American sector. Because we didn't have the-- we had a hospital created by the people that came, but they were definitely not-- they did not have the--

Facility?

The pardon?

Facility?

Facilities, thank you. It's a senior moment. So my brother went to outside of what then became the ghetto. And so my mom and dad didn't have much time to devote to the grocery store because they went to visit my brother all the time.

And sorry to say the partner was not very good because more went in his pocket instead of our pocket, because my folks weren't there to receive it. So they gave up the store. And then they did a few things like they opened up a little coffee shop where my mother baked cookies and sold them, and that went well for a while.

And then my dad got sick. And so they gave that up. And they had a coffee-- a coffee stand, where they sold coffee and cookies again in one of the camps, at [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] heim, which went OK. So they did quite a few odds and ends so that they could support us.

But it was all not enough. So a lot of things that had some value, like my mother's wedding ring, we had to pawn. And my two dresses, we had to pawn.

And I went with my mother to say goodbye to them or whatever. I was 11 years old. That was, naturally, a little traumatic.

So you had to pawn those, your taffeta dresses.

Yeah, and you kind of knew that you would never be able to redeem it again.

And that was really to get the money to buy food. Were your parents able to take any money out of Germany? There was a limitation on that.

There was a limitation. And as I said before, we weren't really very rich. Some people, most probably, put some money, like we're talking about now, in Swiss banks.

But we just were able to support ourselves very nicely, that I say we kids never felt that we were deprived of anything. We had a wonderful family life with a lot of love from the aunts and the cousins. And so we didn't miss anything.

Did things change when the Japanese came in?

What changed was that we all had to live in a restricted area. Because some people were living outside the area. As I say, some people had a little more money so they lived outside the area. They had stores outside the area or whatever.

They knew how, but they had to move in. They had houses which houses there were not as elaborate as we would have houses here. But they had houses. And they had trade with Chinese people who lived in the area. And they naturally, the Chinese got a better deal, but they had to live in the area, all the refugees.

So when you were living in camp, however, food, the daily food was provided? You didn't have to worry about it?

The food, even when we didn't live in camp, when we had our own room, I don't know who all contributed to it, the Joint, the HIAS, probably. But there was a kitchen where every day you went and they told you ahead of time how many courses. So we took parts.

And for the holidays, we really had a nice-- well, we had soup, we had vegetables, we had meat, and four or five courses. But I also remember-- now whether that was only for one day for the holiday, because I remember and it was always fascinating and unbelievable to me how my mother could prepare holiday meals on a Chinese stove which you had to go outside and light.

Because they were like the briquettes that you use now for barbecuing. But at that time, that was the only-- it was a square thing. You put first paper and a little wooden shavings too so that the coals would light. And once they were lit, then you could bring it inside because then you didn't have any smoke anymore.

And there was also what they called a Japanese stove which had like charcoal, and that lit much faster, but it also went out much faster. But with these two stoves, my mother made a whole meal. I remember she made potatoes, put them in the bed to keep them warm.

And my aunt and uncle came, and we had, especially at Wayside Camp, we lived in the camp, where we had two bunk beds. And there was a little-- there was one bed here and one bed here. My mom slept here, and I slept on top. My dad

slept here, and my younger brother slept on top.

And by that time, my older brother had come out of the hospital. And there was like an enclosed balcony. And that's where my older brother slept. But in front of my dad's bed was a table, and my aunt and uncle came and the five of us, and we had a very nice-- whether it was Passover or Rosh Hashanah.

And to this day, I am amazed how my mother could have fixed it with these two--

With those little stoves. And no oven?

No, no.

Now that was in a camp or in your little apartment?

That was a camp.

At the little room, I don't really remember too much about whether we got the meals every day from the kitchen, from the community kitchen. But first we lived in Ward Road in one room. Then we moved to also one room but in King Chow Road, which had a little courtyard that was all around.

And it had a little courtyard where we would sit with other-- there, naturally, only Jews lived. And we would sit and schmooze. And from there we went into Wayside Camp because we couldn't afford.

But after the war we moved out of Wayside Camp and moved into the same courtyard building. And in fact, my younger son in '86, he graduated from Harvard. And he figured before he gets into the real world, he wanted to take a trip.

He went to Australia because my aunt and uncle from Shanghai, my uncle had Polish quota and that was-- you couldn't get into the States at all. So they went to Australia. So my younger son went to Australia to visit her.

And we thought we were going to pick him up, and he said he met some friends and they're going to go trekking in Nepal. And then he was going to go to Shanghai. But I could only tell them over the phone approximately where we lived.

But he found the Wayside Camp which he was fascinated because they had torn it down, and it was just in the stage of being built as a school for the Chinese. And the scaffolding-- I don't know whether I pronounce it right-- was out of bamboo. And that fascinated him that bamboo was so strong that they used it there as scaffolding.

You also got polio--

Yes.

--while you were in Shanghai.

Right. Right.

Was that about the same time as your brother? Or was that a different time?

No. That was in later in 1941. I had a slighter case. I was in our hospital.

And at that time, 1941, not that they were-- what's the word again? That they had all the facilities that the other hospital had, but they were more prepared already.

This was the relocation camp hospital?

It was in one of the camps, in Ward Road Camp. But at that time, we still lived private, what we used to say, in one room. But I was in the hospital on Pearl Harbor Day. And we noticed that something was wrong because the nurses didn't come at the usual time.

And the hospital was right across the police station. So we could look out, and we saw that the Japanese had taken over. That's when the Japanese occupied Shanghai again.

And otherwise, nothing really changed for us.

Did you have any inkling that this might happen before the Japanese appeared?

No.

Nobody knew. Now what did they do for you, for polio?

Actually for me, the only thing they did, I had to wear a metal corset to support. First how it showed was I lost muscle on the left side and then my spine started curling. In fact, word from the doctor that I had muskelwunde, muscle deterioration. And that was in July of '41.

And then in September, he examined me again, and it got worse. And then I did go to the hospital where my brother was for an examination in October of '41.

And he said that due to infantile paralysis, I have curvature of the spine, and I need a corset. But then in December I went to the hospital, because they thought maybe they could do something with exercise or something. But nothing could be done except the metal corset which gave me support.

And I continued with going to school and then-- when you're younger, you make mistakes. And one mistake I made, because I'm a perfectionist, I needed to have all high grades. And in my last year, which was equivalent to completing high school, to make some money, I tutored some younger children in math, I was very good.

And I felt that I did not have enough time to study enough for school, so my grades were not as good. And I dropped out instead of finishing, even though the grades were not the best. But I dropped out, so I did not have a high school diploma.

And your brother had a much more difficult time with the polio?

Yes. They had him in traction in the hospital. And they tried to give him therapy. And that's why he was there for two years.

And when he came out, he was at least capable, strong enough to work. My cousin's husband, one of the cousins that were in Berlin and we were close, well, she got out. She got married, and she got out. Her brother did not get out.

Her husband was a pharmacist. So my brother helped him deliver medications, and that was outside of the ghetto. So when the ghetto was, he had to go and get a pass. And there was a Japanese-- I don't know whether he was a soldier or a official.

And he was a little Japanese, a small, and his name was Goya. And depending on his mood, people got either passes or they didn't. And sometimes when a tall person came, he would stand on the table so he was taller than this guy. But most of the people did get passes to go out.

You had to stand in line for hours before you would get the pass. And yeah, I'm jumping back and forth.

That's all right.

What about the medical care from what you remember, could you get the medical care that you needed?

Yeah. We had, as I say, there were about 17,000 or 20,000 refugees from Austria, from Germany, I think from Poland. So you had a lot of talent.

You had doctors. You had musicians. You had actors that we put on even though the conditions were terrible. A lot of people could not make a living, and they were really destitute.

But all in all, you felt a camaraderie because everybody was in the same boat. And we tried to put on plays and reviews and concerts to keep our spirits up. And that felt really very, very good.

That even though we felt from the day we got there that we'd like to get out of there-- I mean, maybe not everybody, but the majority of people-- but life went on. I became, like I said, I went-- started as an apprentice, as a beautician. And the art school gave us-- we practiced on one another. We had to go to the art school and practice on one another.

And before I could graduate, the war was over. And I remember distinctly the war was over but not officially were we allowed to get out of the ghetto. But my boss was a young man.

We went in a pedicab with a hair dryer and went to where the English were interned. We went to the English internment camp. And women are women, we had a lot of business with the women who wanted to finally get their hair done.

But the first time going there, I was afraid that-- we were scared that the Japanese maybe still would come.

In the hospital, do you recall, did they have any iron lungs?

Not in our. But in the hospital that my brother was at, yes. And I don't know how long he was in an iron lung--

Oh, he was in an iron lung.

--when he first came.

Oh, so he had pulmonary--

Because he had pulmonary problems which eventually in 1972, he passed away from the pulmonary. In fact, he got sick going on a cruise to Hawaii. And he was in a hospital in Hawaii.

And first, my younger brother went right away. And then my mother and I went over there and stayed for two weeks with him. And I had to get back to work, but my mother stayed another week until he was strong enough to come back home.

Yes.

But I don't remember whether he got the oxygen tank in Hawaii or whether when he came back, he got it. But he had an oxygen tank. He did not go to school in Shanghai, because he was in the hospital.

He was bar mitzvahed when he was 15.

In Shanghai?

In Shanghai. Because he got to Shanghai when he was 13 and after a week or two, he went to the hospital. And then he went to work for my cousin's husband.

So this attack that he had sounds like a post-polio possibly.

Possibly. Yeah.

Tell us then what happened after the war was over.

After the war was over, naturally, the first thing everybody tried to see where they could go. And the German quota-- now I don't remember exactly how the quotas here worked, but the German quota was the best quota. And my brother, the older one, was-- let's see he was born in '47.

He was 21. So he had his own quota. My dad passed away in Shanghai.

We knew that he was sick for a year. He had prostate cancer. And that is another story. He, as I say, we knew he was sick and wouldn't last long. But he was determined and hoping to live until his youngest son was bar mitzvahed.

And sure enough, my younger brother became bar mitzvahed in the camp. They had a-- like where you gathered, they had a potbelly stove. Because we didn't have any heating in the individual room.

So it was a hall where you gathered in the evening and also someone had coffee, tea, and snacks. And that's where my brother, they converted it into a little shul and he became bar mitzvahed. And that evening, my dad went into a coma and died the next morning.

So he really-- sometimes, your will just keep you going. And then after that, you just let go.

So he was able to attend?

Attend the bar mitzvah. Yeah. And in fact, I went out that evening with my boyfriend. When we came back, the door was locked, and my mother told me. So I was sitting up all night with my dad.

Was he able to get medical care or--

Well there wasn't much they could do for him at that time. And now I think if he would have been in the States, that maybe he would have been helped. But I don't know whether-- that was in '46, so that's over 50 years ago-- whether even in the States, they-- now you have a better chance. But I don't know how it was in '46 in the States.

But that's what he died of.

So then you came here on the American quota.

I think we'll get a little bit more on Shanghai. That must have been difficult then for your mother in terms of supporting the family.

Yes. Well, I was 18. And I worked. I didn't get much money, but I worked. I got some money.

And my older brother made some money. And my mother was hired to take care of a sick woman and do the housework and the cooking where her training when she went to Berlin and learned housekeeping and cooking became very handy. And that's how she made money until the woman passed away.

And the husband, and they had two sons, they emigrated to the-- And actually, during the Japanese occupation when we had to live in the ghetto, it's not really that the Japanese did anything to us as long as you obeyed the rules and didn't go out of the ghetto. You had to have an identification.

And the main thing that we were scared was sometimes there was a Japanese troop transport and you had to stop. So we didn't know the language. But we understood when they came with the bayonets that we knew to stay.

And I am sure if we all knew the same language, they would have just said stop until the transport is passed. So that, naturally, was scary. And another time, I remember my younger brother and I, we went to the movies.

And when we came out, that was our main, as I said, entertainment. Sometimes I went to the movies Fridays and Saturday and Sunday. And when we came out, Japanese soldiers had us lined up. And they wanted to see the identification.

Well, we were kind of in back. But we realized we didn't take our identification. We had it at home. So we were panicky.

And we are lucky enough, just four or five people before us, for what reason, we don't know. They stopped and walked away. So from then on, we always carried our identification with us.

What would be the consequence if you didn't have your identification?

We don't know for sure. But I know for a fact, because I worked in the beauty shop and you get to know the people. And the nicest thing about working in the beauty shop, even though I hated it, was that you talked to the customers. And in Shanghai, you had different hairstyles than now.

Well, you happen to have long hair. But there, they all had long hair. And you combed. Some came every day to have their hair comb, some every other day to have their hair combed. Because you had an inside roll, you called it, outside. I should have brought a picture of one of them.

So you discuss the movies you saw the day before and a lot of other things. So we found out that the husband of one of the women talked back to the Japanese. And he was put on a truck and we never heard again from. So there were some incidents like that.

But in the whole, if you did what they told you, they left you alone.

Now was the ghetto enclosed?

It was not really enclosed with a wall. But you knew which was the perimeter that you could-- and they had Japanese police and also they had Heimpolizei. From the camps. They had-- not really police-- but people that were standing at different checkpoints and made sure, for your own protection, that you didn't forget that you can't go out.

That nobody could go beyond.

Right.

So at that point, there were only refugees in there.

And the Chinese merchants. But--

So they still lived there amongst you?

Yeah.

And they--

Communicated with us as well as we could. Because the, I don't know what the sense of it was. In school, we had to learn Chinese and Japanese when the occupation was. But the Chinese that we learned was the Mandarin Chinese which was the upper class. The lower class did not know Mandarin, so we could not really use it to talk to the merchants.

They picked up a few words of English and maybe we picked up a few words of Chinese. Or we just pointed. For

instance, we never made water for coffee in the morning.

Because at the corners, there were stores that boiled water, not just for us, for the Chinese. And we went, took our thermos bottle, put some coffee in, and they poured for a third of a penny, they gave you one ladle or two ladles. And when we had coffee in there, we always used to tell them watch out that it doesn't spill over, because then the coffee would be diluted.

And that's how we got our hot water, because it didn't really pay to put the Chinese stove on just for hot water. And then they also had-- we remember as kids we went to school, they had a barrel where they had fire in it. And they had sweet potatoes. And they baked them in there.

And we bought one. And first we put them in our pockets to warm our hands, and then we ate them, which were delicious.

Did it get very cold there?

Well, it was cold because nothing was heated. The buses weren't heated. Your apartment, your rooms weren't heated. So that's why you, like you said, you couldn't get warm. You couldn't really get warm.

I'm sure the school was heated where we went to school. And also at school, the children got a hot meal which I don't know whether it was donated by people who had a little bit more money, like my cousin and her husband, because he made a pretty good living. She would be one of the women who would volunteer to serve the food, so I always got enough.

I mean, you could go for seconds. But the food was mainly starch. So naturally, I blossomed. I gained a lot of weight. But it's amazing.

We had maize. I don't know what that is, whether it is ground corn. And either you got it with meat sauce or you got it with dates. And I enjoyed everything, whereas my older brother, he didn't eat.

He was very finicky. He also was, which was another thing, very, very careful. When you had food, you had to wash it in kali, which is a disinfectant. And I'm not saying that my younger brother and I were smart, but we were more adventurous or didn't care.

We used to eat the apples. Or you were not allowed to drink the water. We had to boil it first.

But where I worked, there was a beauty shop and a barber shop at the same time. They were partners. And the barber shop person lived upstairs.

So in between was a basin. And when I was thirsty, I went up and drank the water. And my younger brother and I, we never got sick.

But my older brother, who was so careful, he always got sick. That's why I say it was not that we were so smart. It was just coincidence.

And during the war, you were not allowed to do permanents. So my boss took the permanent machine, which is entirely different than it is now, it was a machine where you clamped it on. It was electric. And that's why you were not allowed to use it during the war.

But we put it upstairs in the barber's where he lived. And the women still got their permanents. But sometimes you didn't know-- and Chinese people came in too. It was not only for the Europeans, but the Chinese also came into the store, and Japanese because they lived there.

So sometimes you were not sure whether maybe the Japanese came and checked up or whether they really were a

customer. But we were lucky. We were never caught.

But these are things that you remember because in one way scary and in one way different. What else? Another thing that happened in Shanghai towards the end of the war, the American bombers came.

So whenever there was an air raid, you looked forward to it with mixed emotions. Because in one way, you felt the more they came, the sooner the war would be over. On the other hand, especially one time there was a mistake made and a bomb was dropped on the ghetto. And we lost about 37 people on July 17.

But war is war. I mean, it was naturally traumatic at the time. And I for some reason had to, before I could hide under a table in the shop, I had to see the planes first where the noise came from. And then I would hide.

And my younger brother studied for his bar mitzvah at his tutor's house. And the tutor, his duty was also, when the bombs came, to stand by as a fireman. So Harry was not quite 13, was upstairs and the man said, well, just wait there until I come back.

Well, as it happened, a bomb exploded close by. And all of a sudden, he was in the first floor. But luckily, nothing happened.

Were there any bomb shelters or just you hid under a table?

No. No, no. And they also said you should go under doorposts. But as it turned out, that was not a good idea because the cement or something would kill you easier than.

And the conditions when you were living on your own, could you describe a little bit? You said it was in one room.

One room, yeah. One room that was a living room, bedroom, dining room, all in one. And when we lived at Ward Road 343, that was a lane where you went in and then there were a lot of houses, where the Chinese lived and the Europeans was all mixed in.

And the bathroom. shower, where was that?

That was outside of their home which was like a community. More people lived in the houses. So we-- I'm trying to think. In the King Chow Road, where we lived, where the little courtyard was, there, I think, was a water closet. But it was outside, and the showers were outside.

But in the Wayside Camp, there were stalls outside with buckets. And every morning you could hear the Chinese come empty out the buckets, and the smell was not too pleasant. But you get used to everything.

And in the Wayside Camp, because my brother had been sick, the five of us had that one little room that I had described before where my mother made the holiday dinners. But the other people, there were a few maybe that had a bigger family. Like I remember one other family had four children, and they had one room.

But otherwise, there were big rooms where 20 or 30 people lived in one room. And as I say, we had get-togethers in the big room where the potbelly stove was. And we got together and we had plays and we had entertainment. So that part was OK.

You had quite a community.

Yeah.

And most of the things you talked about, were those-- even the movies and things like that-- was that organized by the refugee community, or--

The movie houses were by the Chinese. That's why we got synopsis in English and also in Chinese. Or maybe that was the custom there. I don't know.

Because after the war, we went downtown also to movies which was-- Hongkew was a poor section. There were the poor Chinese living there which were merchants, but they were all poor. And downtown where the Bund Nanking were, that is more because Shanghai, as I said, is really a cosmopolitan city. It was at that time.

It was not just all little huts. But the downtown had big-- the Cathay hotel and big hotels and businesses going on. The other thing that was-- and that was after the war, the inflation was terrific, that when the Americans came after the war and the English docked. My boss went to an American camp to be a barber there because he could make more money.

And so one of the women, she was younger than I was, but she had already graduated and her dad had a little bit more money. So they had a house, and they took the living room because the bedrooms were upstairs. And he made beauty parlor out of it.

So I continued my internship with her. And I got my diploma from court, which I still have somewhere. And then when they left, I worked for a barber from Vienna. And I was the only beautician. And the beautician made more money than he could do with a barber who was just cutting hair.

So we split. I got half of what came in, and he got half because he was the boss. He provided everything. But during the inflation, I got paid every day. Every evening, we figured out.

And I walked home. And I used to love shoes. And when I passed by the shoe store and I saw something I liked, I bought it. And then the next morning when I went back to work, it was higher.

And one time even I went downtown to go to the movies. And I was going to buy a chocolate bar before. But I went first and figured, well, I'll get it on my way back. Well, on my way back I didn't have enough money with me because the prices had gone up.

Had gone up in the time that you were in the movies?

Was there a Jewish community in Shanghai at all? I know there are--

You mean besides the--

Besides the camps?

--the refugee-- yes. There was a Russian-Jewish community. And there was also other Jewish communities in the--

Did they reach out to you at all?

Yes, more after the war. And maybe I think before the war. Because I remember one of our teachers took some of the pupils, and I was one of them, and we went to one of the people. I don't remember whether they were English or French or Russian. And we were treated to a nice afternoon of cake and a meal.

And that was a treat for us. So they did that quite often where different children went to downtown. And especially, there was one, he was from Iran, I think, but a Jew, businessman, Kadoorie. He was very well-known, Kadoorie brothers. There was also Sassoon.

But Kadoorie, the school we went to was called SJYA, Shanghai Jewish Youth Association School. And Kadoorie donated a lot of money So. That we called it then Kadoorie School.

And at the school, we also had the children put on plays. "Father Knows Best," I was a maid during that time. And in the auditorium, we had Friday night services.

And our religious school teacher, for us to go to services, he would give us a star. And I don't know whether it was when you had 10 stars, you got a movie ticket. So I really was lucky because I love to go to services. I enjoyed-- I was singing in the choir, and I think I could even perform the whole service by myself, because I enjoyed it that much.

And on top of it, I got the star and got to go to the movies. So there were a lot of really-- we helped ourselves a lot. And there was a lot-- yeah. There were reviews that people put on from-- because, as I say, they were actors which helped to build up them well. And it was fun.

So the refugee community really created a cultural light.

Right. Right. The refugee community really was a community that, in a way, was self-sufficient as far as culture was concerned.

You come, I guess, at the end of the war and--

Can we go to that?

--what happened then, how--

Yeah. Well, I don't know whether I mentioned before that my older brother became 21 and had German quota, so he left in 1947. And my dad had passed away. So we were, my younger brother and I, went on my mother's quota which because she was born in Russia, was a Russian quota. And that was very, very low, but there were not too many who had Russian quota.

And I knew that my mother wanted to come here to join my brother. And I was an ardent Zionist. I belonged to Brith Noar Zioni, which was one of the-- there was also Betar, which was a little bit more military, I guess.

Hachsharah?

Hachsharah, that is what my oldest brother went to. That is preparing you for Palestine. Now in 1948 when the state of Israel was created, a lot of people actually, you could say, fled to Israel. Because all you had to do was go to the Israel consulate. And you could go to Israel.

So people from Shanghai went as well?

Yeah. And some went to, like my aunt and uncle, to Australia. Some went to South America. We still have an aunt of a friend of mine that we still correspond with in South Africa.

And so the people left. And my mother went one boat to another to say goodbye to friends. So she was anxious. She said let's go to Israel.

And I had a fight with myself, because I was anxious to go. But as I say, I said to my mother let's wait a little longer. Maybe we'll make it.

And sure enough, her quota came up. We got our first papers. You got your first papers when a quota was available.

So my boss who was from Austria, the Austrian quota was also no good. He got worried that I would leave and I was his main income. So he went back to Austria-- quite a few people went back to Austria-- because he had no chance to go anywhere else.

So between our first papers, so then we had to go get a lung x-ray. And I don't know if they saw anything on the-- we called it a small x-ray. But if they saw anything, then you had to come back and take a big x-ray. Well, naturally, we were petrified.

Because we were afraid that maybe we had developed something and then we wouldn't be allowed into the United States. So I had to have a big x-ray. But luckily, it was OK. But between our first and our second papers, I became 21.

But I didn't know that I then had to go on my own quota, because we had the first papers on my mother's quota. So make a long story short, we finally had all our papers together, and there were not too many people left. In fact, when my boss left to Vienna, I went to the few customers that I still had, went to their houses and combed their hair.

And the income was less and less. I had more and more time but less money to spend. But anyway, I painted our suitcase, and we got ready. And then we got our second papers.

And my mother found out that all the ships that were in the neighborhood of Shanghai had to stop in Shanghai because the communists were close to take over Shanghai. So we were lucky again a luxury liner, the SS Wilson stopped, and we got passage on the luxury liner. They emptied out the music room and the library, and we were 30 women in one room, which we had been used to.

But the dining room was the same as the first class. In fact, the first night we were afraid to go into the dining room. It was so fancy. But you get used to pleasant things very fast.

My mother and the other people at the table, I always kidded them, they ate the menu up and down. And my mother gained 20 pounds. But I love dessert, so I usually just had soup and dessert. And at the time, I walked around because I love ships. I walked around the ship, and I luckily lost 20 pounds.

Because I remember I had been heavy from all the starch in Shanghai. So we were lucky in that respect. We stopped in Yokohama. Oh, you were not allowed to have American money when you left.

But somehow, I had \$10. And we stopped in Yokohama and to make a sightseeing tour cost \$5. So I spent \$5 on the sightseeing tour because I figured I'll never get back there.

And it was very interesting where we went to a tea house. So I never regretted it. Even though when we came here, oh, I only had \$5.

But anyway, then we stopped in Hawaii. And in Hawaii, the-- what do you call it? The ones who check your papers.

Customs?

Customs, thank you. The customs came on board so that they could between Hawaii and here, could try to process as many people as possible so that it would go faster. Well, they looked at my papers and technically, I came on the wrong quota. Even though the German quota, which I was born in Germany, was better than the Russian, but it was a technicality.

And when I came here, I was detained on the ship, our whole family, until someone came from the HIAS to vouch for me. And I had to be on parole until they straightened it out. Because if the communist would not have been as close-- in fact, we stayed in San Francisco I think about two weeks-- excuse me.

My brother, who had come in '47, settled in-- they sent him to Chicago, because Chicago had a very good hospital. And they had hoped that they could do something for him at the hospital. But they couldn't.

But that's why we followed him to Chicago. But when we arrived here, my cousin and her husband from mom, they had a little girl in Shanghai who was maybe two years when they left Shanghai. And they came here.

And after a week, my cousin's husband had a heart attack. So when we came here, she was not at the boat to greet us. Now that was not a very nice how do you do.

But anyway, we went by train to Chicago. And while we were on the train, we heard that the communists had taken over Shanghai. So we really got out in time. And that's why all the ships around there had to take people that were ready.

What year was that?

That was in 1949.

So that after that point, after the communists took over, you wouldn't have been able to get out.

Right.

Were there many--

There were not that many people left. And some of them did get out over Harbing or over Russia at the time, a long way around. And well, in order to get here, my brother had to find someone to vouch for us that we would not be a burden on the government.

To guarantee?

A guarantee, yeah. And my brother happened to meet a family here, which was a story in itself. He had corresponded with a friend and had her address. So he went to the address.

And when they opened up, they said well, sorry, she doesn't live here anymore. But why don't you come in? And it happened to be his birthday.

And during the conversation, he mentioned it had been his birthday. And that family was just the most wonderful family that you could ever meet. I mean, sure, there are a lot of others, but-- because there were two sisters who lived together with their husband.

And one had a little girl. And one of the sisters went out the back way and got a cake and brought the cake. And since then, naturally, they had a wonderful relationship. He went over there, brought their laundry over there.

Because he rented a room with a family that had two sons. They had rented out a room to him. And these people vouched for us. They gave us an affidavit so that we could come.

Because my brother, even though he worked and considering our standards in Shanghai, made a very good income, but it was not enough to support or to vouch for us. So we had to have someone else, and they vouched for us. And we came over in May of '49.

And at first, I went to the Jewish Family and Children's Services. At that time, I think it was called Jewish Family Services. They straightened out my parole. I only had to go once.

And I always kid my kids, did you know that your mother was a parolee? [LAUGHTER] But that was straightened out. And so the Jewish Family Services, they sent me for a job which was a part-time job.

Because it was a dress factory and seasonal, they needed when the salesman came in, I had to check down each dress had a different number. And so--

And this was where?

In Chicago.

So you go there and you lived in the city.

In the city, yeah. At first, we lived in Hyde Park area where most of the Jews settled in, naturally, in one area. And after a few years, as they got more assimilated with their jobs, they moved all over.

Where was I? Oh, I got a job, a part-time job. And the pay was very good. It was \$1 an hour.

And after my job, so to say, was over, they needed a payroll person. And I was very good in figures. So they taught me the payroll, and I did the payroll for years there. Well, first, I went to the hospital. They tried to loosen the muscles which didn't work. And then I went to the hospital and they tried to straighten out the curvature of my spine which took - it was very interesting the way they did it.

They put me in a cast and then they cut the cast and every day twisted me a little bit so that I was straight, but the cast was open here. And then they put a hole in the back so that they could operate through the cast. And they took some bone out of the leg and, so to say, sewed it, the spine straight.

And then they closed up the back, although I was allergic to tape, so I had a rash and I was petrified that they would close it up without healing it. But that was OK. And after that, I didn't need the metal brace anymore. I was strong enough to go without a brace.

Well, as I say, it took nine months. Five months I was in bed with the cast, and then I had a walking cast. And then my brother, the older brother, and some friends of ours who didn't have a high school diploma because they were older than I was so they worked, we went to night school to get-- no, it was before I went to the hospital. I'm sorry.

We went to night school to get our high school diploma. Well, then I went to the hospital. They continued. And then when I came out, they were done and went to college. And I didn't want to go by myself at night. So I didn't get my high school diploma.

Did you meet your husband in Chicago?

I met my husband in Chicago through a mutual friend, through a friend who-- well, as I said, we in Chicago first, we were all together. And my mother met two women. And one of them came to visit me all the time. I didn't know her, but she knew my mother.

So she came. She worked downtown. And I can still see her with shopping bags but coming to visit. And she had two daughters.

And she passed away very young. She had cancer. And she lived in the same building as my husband. And I went to visit, to make condolence calls to the family.

But I had met my husband before because-- these stories are just so intricate. My younger brother went to high school, and his best friend, his mother was sister and cousin of Walter's mother.

Because let's see. Walter's grandfather-- no, grandmother passed away. And her mother passed away, that aunt, and they got married. So they were then sisters, Walter's mother and my brother's friend's mother, but actually, they were cousins. So these two became very good friends.

And I visited his aunt. And they enlisted together. And they went to Fort Sheridan. And his friend's mother asked her nephew, who had a car, whether he would take her to Fort Sheridan.

And she asked my mother whether we want to come along. So we sat in the back, and I had just washed my hair, so I had a hood on. And that's the first time I met him.

But that was it. And then I--

We're going to take a break, Ilse.

OK.