

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Batzdorff, Susanne

Date of interview: 3/3, 4/7 & 5/12/1994

Summary: Susanne Beeberstein Batzdorff was born September 25, 1921 in Breslau, Germany. Her immediate family consisted of a father, Hans Beeberstein, mother, Urna Stein Beeberstein, and brother, Enschuwein (sp?) "Ernie" Beeberstein. Her brother Ernie was born in November 1922. Her father was a Dermatologist and her mother was an Obstetrician/Gynecologist. Her parents' practiced medicine in a joint medical practice and her father also lectured at the University. Susanne's family was upper-middle class and lived in their maternal grandmother's home with several members of their extended family until 1933.

Her maternal grandmother kept a kosher home but was not very religious. Susanne's maternal aunts were not very knowledgeable about Judaism, as girls were not given much religious instruction at that time. Susanne's father was the religious "head" of the family, as he was very educated on Jewish tradition and lead activities such as the Seder for the entire family.

The Beebersteins only went to synagogue on the High Holidays and every so often on Shabbat. They were cultural Jews, meaning they believed in G-d and observed the holidays but were not completely assimilated as some Jews were prior to Hitler. However, after Hitler came to power in 1933, the Beebersteins became more aware of the religious aspect of their Jewish background; it was a renaissance of Jewish learning for many Jews.

There were Anti-Semitic policies within the employment practices of the University and for civil servants (government employees). For example, a full professor at the University you could not be Jewish. Therefore, many professors/people converted for the advancement of their careers.

Susanne and her brother attended non-Jewish public school until they left Germany in 1938. Prior to Hitler, it was not uncommon for children to yell slurs at Susanne and her brother. However, Susanne did not experience organized anti-Semitism prior to 1933.

It immediately affected Susanne's life at her public school. Children brought notes to school to certify that they were of Aryan descent, they could not criticize the government, her school friends joined Nazi youth groups and wore swastikas, they greeted the teacher with "Heil Hitler", songs from the Nazi movement were taught in music class and Hitler's speeches were broadcast in school and over loudspeakers on the street corners. At first, when Hitler came to power it did not affect Susanne's friendships, but with time, her friends pulled away as their parents could lose their jobs if they associated with Jews. By 1938, Susanne

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had only one non-Jewish friend. Susanne wanted to attend a Jewish school to avoid the anti-Semitism that she now faced, but her father insisted she stay in the non-Jewish school, as it was her “right” to go there too. Susanne’s last year there was very difficult as the school principal was a “super Nazi”, i.e.-on the school camping trip he played Hitler’s speeches and Nazi propaganda the entire time.

In 1933, Susanne, her parents and her brother Ernie, moved from her grandmother’s home into a “professional apartment” (apartment that contained their home and joint medical practice) across town. Susanne’s parents moved their practice to a “more Jewish” neighborhood since they felt they could not rely on non-Jewish business in their old neighborhood. However, her parent’s medical practice declined as Jews lost their jobs, no longer qualified for insurance coverage and/or moved away. In 1938, Jewish medical licenses and hospital affiliations were taken away entirely, thus her parents could only treat very sick Jewish people in their private practice. After losing his medical license, Susanne’s father left Germany in the summer of 1938. He went to the US. on a visitor’s visa to look for work through friends in New York City. When his visa expired, he went to Cuba for three days and then immigrated to the US. Soon after, he obtained a nonpaying teaching position at Columbia University. After her father got this position, Susanne and her family were able to come to the US with non-quota visas. Eventually, her father was able to get a paying job after he passed the US medical boards.

On Kristallnacht, synagogues were burned, homes were destroyed, people were beaten in the street, non-Jews spat on their Jewish neighbors, and Jewish men were rounded-up and taken to Buchenwald and Dachau. There was complete chaos as the phone lines were cut and people were trying to hide from the police. After Kristallnacht, everything was segregated: restaurants, park benches, pools, facilities, etc. This is one of Susanne’s worst memories of Germany.

A week after Kristallnacht, the Beebersteins received a telegram that their father had secured non-quota visas for them. However, it took them until February to leave Germany because of all of the “red tape” that they had to endure.

Susanne’s father (age 49) arrived in the New York in the summer of 1938. He survived in the U.S. by living with friends and worked as an assistant for a dermatologist. He was an assistant, as he could not practice until he passed the U.S. Medical Boards.

Susanne (age 16), her mother (age 49) and brother (age 17) arrived in New York in February 1939. They traveled first class on a ship from the Port of Bramahoffen, Germany. They were able to travel first class through the sale of their furniture, yet they had no money to tip the porters. After they boarded the ship and waited for it to leave the port, a band was there and played Germany’s national anthem. At that moment, they all felt very sad to leave Germany. However, the next song the band played was the Nazi Anthem and they were

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ready to leave as they felt it was no longer their home.

After arriving in New York City, they stayed with her father's friends in Brooklyn, rented rooms in various houses and finally rented their own apartment in Brooklyn when their furniture arrived from Germany

Susanne started a romantic relationship with her old neighbor in Germany, Alfred Batzdorff, shortly after she started Brooklyn College in September 1940. Alfred and his family escaped Germany and moved to New Jersey via England in 1940. Alfred worked for a surgical instrument company in New Jersey. In college, Susanne was very focused on her studies and wanted to be a writer. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with a degree in English and then graduated from the Pratt Institute Library School in 1944, receiving her second bachelor's in Library Science. During Library School she married Alfred on March 12, 1943.

After Alfred returned from Japan Feb. 1, 1946, they moved into their own apartment near her parents in Brooklyn. Alfred went to school and after he received a degree in engineering, they moved to Delaware for five years and had two more children, Jonathan in 1951 and Benjamin in 1953. In 1955, they moved to Langhorne, PA (a suburb of Philadelphia) where they lived for 26 years. Susanne returned to work as a librarian in 1961, after taking 11 years off to have and raise her children, and retired at age 60.

During those 26 years, Susanne and Alfred traveled to Germany and to Israel. In 1967, Susanne and Alfred returned to Germany for the first time with their two youngest children. It was this first visit that was very difficult for Susanne as she relived her bad memories of the Holocaust. They did tell their children when they were older about their Holocaust experiences, specifically at Passover as it was their own Exodus, but not in much detail. The visit to Germany was also difficult as she did not know how to react to people of her generation and older on the streets in Germany because she did not know what their politics were during the war. She never returned to Breslau, as it was now in Poland and since it was resettled, she did not know anyone. Susanne and Alfred have been to Israel six times, their first visit was for their 25th wedding anniversary.

Susanne and Alfred moved to California in 1981 after her mother died, following her sons, her brother and brother in law to the area. She has five grandchildren and is now the librarian for her synagogue and has written her life story ("Reflections in a Rearview Mirror," 1984), a book about her family history (Edith Stein: Selected Writings, 1991) and some works of fiction and poetry (In The Beginning, 1984 and In Every Generation, 1991).