

Interview with GERTIE HOTZNER.
Holocaust Oral History Project.
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Place: San Francisco, Ca.
Interviewer: Judith Backover.
Transcriber: Barbara P. Goldsmith

Q. TODAY IS WEDNESDAY, JULY 25, 1990.
I'M JUDITH BACKOVER OF THE HOLOCAUST ORAL
HISTORY PROJECT. I'M INTERVIEWING GERTIE
HOTZNER IN SAN FRANCISCO.

GOOD MORNING, MRS. HOTZNER.

A. Good morning.

Q. I'D LIKE YOU TO BEGIN BY TELLING US
WHERE AND WHEN YOU WERE BORN.

A. I was born in Vienna on June 10,
1925 and lived there until April of 1939.

We lived in not a very Jewish
district. In fact, it was called the workers
district. My grandparents owned the flat before
the first World War, and my parents moved in
with them because after the first World War.
There were no apartments or flats to be had, and
my parents were married in 1921 and moved in
with my father's parents. And we grew up in that

flat, in the third district in Vienna.

We were surrounded with a large family. My father originally had 13 brothers and sisters. My mother had two sisters and a brother and the family was very close. They always congregated at our house. We had musical evenings or card playing. It was a very lively household all the time.

As far as religion is concerned, my father was totally irreligious. He worked on the High Holy days. My mother went to temple on the High Holidays and we were not raised religious at all; and I had a lot of Jewish friends, had a lot of non-Jewish friends as well. I went to girls a school.

And let's see, where shall I start? I would like to start at age 12, 1938, when Hitler marched in. I was in the center of the city when he marched in and had to stay there because there were millions of people standing there, something I'll never forget. And he was received very, very enthusiastically. Hitler spoke to the crowd and they screamed "Heil Hitler" And I stood in the middle of this.

Jews were not allowed in the inner city, but I had had a dentist appointment and was stuck there in the crowd; and to this day I don't like big crowds. I felt that I wanted to dive into the ground, and I was very, very frightened to say the least.

The things in Vienna happened far more quickly than in Germany. Anti-Semitism was not that rampant when Hitler first took over in Germany, but in Austria, it seemed as though they were waiting for him, and I think they were, and extremely enthusiastic about having him there; and anti-Semitism, which was hidden most of the time, really became very rampant very, very quickly because it was authorized by the government after the Nazis took over.

I'd like to backtrack a little bit before Hitler came. We had many upheavals already in Vienna. Between I think it was the Social Democrats and the Christian Socialists. They blew up telephone booths all over the city. And I remember even as a child they would have soldiers standing underneath our windows with guns pointed up at our windows. And my

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parents would say, "Don't go near the window" and we'd even hide underneath the dining room table. I remember that when I was very young.

And then they assassinated Dolphus who was the chancellor at the time, and that was before Hitler, and I'm sure that the Nazis had something to do with this. So we were used to a lot of unrest to begin with. When Hitler marched in, of course that intensified tremendously.

As I said, I went to a school, not a Jewish school, and the first thing that happened, almost within a couple of weeks after Hitler marched in, the few Jews who were in my classroom were relegated to the back of the room; and we were given more difficult examinations than the other children. And pretty soon after that we were thrown out of that school and were sent to a Jewish school.

My aunt and uncle had a men's store two houses away from where we lived which was in a convent and also a Catholic school. They were the landlords. And I think the first things we saw were -- and I don't know whether my aunt was

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involved in this or not -- but Jews having to scrub sidewalks, the windows broken, the "Yuden" on the windows of the stores and it was really mayhem. People were being picked up in the streets and being put into trucks and hauled away, especially men and boys, but later on all kinds of people.

We had neighbors in our next door flat. We were up on the third floor. The husband was an engineer, it was a couple, and we just knew them slightly just to say hello in the hallway. And this man, long before Hitler marched in, would listen to Hitler's speeches, and we could hear it through the wall. My father, we had a piano in the dining room and he played, and the minute he heard Hitler's speeches going on he would sit down and play the Russian hymn just to let the man know that he was hearing Hitler's speeches. But we never went to the police to report these Nazis.

Well, as soon as Hitler marched in, this man rang our doorbell, and when my father came to the door he said he appreciated our not saying anything to the police. He obviously

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knew that we knew he was a Nazi and it was against the law before Hitler marched in. He said he had been jailed a number of times for being a Nazi when it was still illegal. He was high up in the hierarchy, and if there was anything he could do to help us, he would do that. This man was a real, you know, a real Nazi. So this was sort of a twist. And this man did help us.

There was a bakery across the street from us and this baker really had his eye on our flat, and the engineer next door helped us stay in our flat longer than we would have if this baker across the street had had his way, but eventually we did get thrown out.

Now, my father was in a paper printing business with his brothers for many years. They printed commercial paper. And the oldest brother, in fact, a number of our family were married to non-Jews, and the oldest brother was married to a non-Jewish woman. He was the head of the firm, and he committed suicide almost immediately after Hitler came. He threw himself out of the window thinking that he could

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save his brothers because his wife was not Jewish and she could run the plant. I'm afraid it didn't work out that way because his wife had already had a Nazi lover, unknown to my uncle. And she took over, and the other brothers didn't see a dime out of the business and were completely out of it within a matter of weeks. So that was a big disappointment, obviously, in the family.

A lot of things happened. We lived on the third floor in the flat. On the first floor was a couple, a Polish-Jewish couple, and they committed suicide. They turned on the gas after Hitler took over. And I had difficulty going past their place every day.

I ran because it really frightened me. I was more scared than anything else, I think, especially in the streets. They would throw stones at me, spit at me, call me Sarah.

My non-Jewish friends were pretty good, but in public they would not speak to me. My mother's non-Jewish friends totally ignored her in the street. I think they were more frightened than anything else.

Then we moved into sort of a cold water flat and because this baker had his way finally and got the flat. And on Kristallnacht, what do you call it in English, night of the crystal, the SS came to our door and took my father; and my mother insisted on going with him. So my brother, who he's my only brother, he was 14 at the time, I was 12, they left us alone. And they were gone most of the night, and we didn't know whether we would see them again. I'm not sure whether this engineer helped him get out, but they did come back home and they were all right. They were just kept overnight.

Let me think what else I have forgotten?

Yes, my father was a wonderful employer. One employee stole from him and my father had him in his office, and this was before Hitler, and said if you need money, I'll gladly give you some and so forth, and even kept him on. This man, after Hitler came, as my father came home, met him in the hallway and beat him up very badly. And my father came up

bleeding like hell.

Other than that, let me think.
Could you turn it off for just a second, please.

Q. SURE.

(Pause in tape.)

A. All right, I would like to tell you the story of my father. No, first let me tell you as we left. We had family here in San Francisco, my father's oldest sister, older sister, had come here after the earthquake in 1906, and although my father kept saying to my mother before Hitler marched in, this will never happen here. He was an incurable optimist. And my mother said let's write the family for an affidavit. And she finally had her way and we finally got the affidavit. And so we were able to leave in April of '39. My father was born in Silesia, so his quota was different from ours and he was supposed to follow a year later. My father and I were extremely close and I really didn't want to leave him. And we had sort of made an unspoken pact that nobody was to cry at the train station, but ofcourse I was the first one to break down. It was pretty awful. I was

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pretty angry at my father for making me leave him. We left on the train for Hamburg and it was all blacked out already at that time. And we stayed in a hotel, I think it was the Four Seasons if I'm not mistaken, and it said Jews are not allowed, but we stayed there anyway.

And then had a ticket on the Hamburg-American line which is a German freighter and passenger line, a boat by the name of Vancouver, and boarded that. And since we couldn't take any money out, my father got us a very good cabin which was the second officer's cabin, next to -- or third officer's, whatever it was; a very good passage across. And the funny thing is that we heard the American sender on the short wave radio in the officers' cabin next to us who always asked us in the morning, "Did you hear us? Did we disturb you?" We always said, "No, no, we didn't hear a thing."

But the crew were -- Nazis and we were not too comfortable on that ship. And we had to listen to all of Hitler's speeches until we reached San Francisco, which was not too comfortable. But one funny thing happened. Our

steward was a wonderful, wonderful man who, since I was quite sick before we left, would come to the cabin in the morning and bring me hot cereal and fruit. And he said he's got to get my weight up. This man looked exactly like Hitler. I still have a picture of him. He had a moustache and his hair was combed like Hitler's and he was the kindest man. Really it's sort of a very tremendous paradox.

So we reached -- we really had a very good journey. It took three months because it was a freighter. And there were about 40 Jewish refugees on board. We all became very friendly, of course. And we stopped in various places for a long time because they had to unload the freight and so forth, and arrived in San Francisco in June of '39.

My aunts and uncles, my grandfather and my father, of course, were still in Vienna. My father, we tried to get him into England and he already had the visa to go to England. He was on the plane. War was declared and they took him off the plane. This was how close he came to getting out. He was deported in October

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of '39. He was put on a train and on the train met his older brother. Neither one knew about the other being deported. So the two of them stuck together.

Now, the story I always believed all these years was that, he and his brother escaped from the train, and my brother informs me this was not the case. They did not have concentration camps ready at this time. So they stopped the trains in Nisco, I think it was in Poland. They unloaded the train in Nisco in Poland and they were chased off the train, having to leave all their belongings behind with dogs and machine guns and were herded over the border into the Ukraine. We still heard from my father from there, and he and his brother were polishing shoes and cutting wood to keep themselves alive.

And strangely enough my father had been in the Austrian army in the first World War, was in a Russian prison camp and learned to speak and write Russian in six months before he escaped this prison camp and came home over the Black Sea and remembered enough of his Russian

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in the second World War to get by, which to me is very amazing because he obviously didn't speak Russian in all those years. He even addressed the cards to us in the Russian script, and I was totally amazed by this. We still heard from him. We tried to send him money; some of which reached him, some didn't. And he was okay for awhile until the Germans caught up with him. And we received, at the end of the war, actually it was on VJ Day when we received this letter. Would you like me to read that? From a doctor, and this was written in Lowicz, Poland on November 24, 1945.

And it says, it was written to my mother. "Dear lady" and his English is very poor. "I make my sorriful duty informing you that my sick patient," and he said Otto Wohlfeiler the first name incorrect, "and his brother and somebody by the name of Bunslau were barbarous murdered by Germans in April of 1942, year in general government" whatever that means, "I beg you very much to inform the Bunslau family in the United States, Philadelphia, addresses I became from the unhappy murdered men

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who presumed their terrible destiny which must meet them. I fulfill their prayers and wishes informing you about their deaths. Safeguard their souls."

It was signed by a Dr. Sililovich. I don't know if you can get this or not but, this was a copy of that letter (pointing.)

Q. WE'LL GET A SHOT OF THAT AT THE END ALSO.

A. Okay.

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