

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Collins, Helen

Date of interview: 10/13/1995

Summary: Helen Collins was born in July 1912 in Mannheim, Germany. Her father was an officer in WW1 in the German Army and then became a lawyer, and her mother was a housewife. She had a brother who was a year and a half younger. Helen went to public school for five years for elementary school and was the only Jewish student. For grades 6-12 Helen went to a private school where there were two other Jewish girls. She was interested in learning about Christianity and in 11th and 12th grade she audited the Christianity Theology class. After graduation in 1932 her family felt it would be a good idea to go abroad so she went to England for a year. She got along well with both Jewish and non-Jewish students and was friends with both. Her family was Jewish but only gone to synagogue on important holidays. She feels she was more religious than her family and went to synagogue more often and attended Jewish class at school with a rabbi. She feels she is more German than Jewish.

The only personal experience of anti-Semitism that Helen could remember was when she was nine years old and another public school student said that she was going to hell because she did not believe in Christ and that the Jews killed Christ. She told her parents and they said it wasn't true.

Two years after Hitler came into power, Helen's father lost his job because he was a Jew, and Helen could no longer go to the University for schooling. In 1934 her brother was sent to study in Switzerland, and later went to the U.S. Her father would not let him return to Germany while he was in Switzerland. She and her parents would meet him from time to time in a special room on the German-Swiss border. In 1935 Helen's friends told her to leave Germany because it was dangerous for her, but she did not really believe what was going on or what was going to happen. The option for Helen and her family was to go to Israel or the United States, and her father chose to try and go to the United States. However, when they went to receive their quota numbers they were very high, which meant that it was very unlikely they would go.

In 1938 after Kristallnacht the SS/SA moved the Collins to a new home—a ghetto in Stuttgart, Germany. The SS/SA informed them one week before that they were going to have to move and moved some of their furniture with them but the government sold the rest. There were restrictions on when and where the Jews could go in the ghetto. Helen's non-Jewish friends could not visit her in the ghetto and the family was cut off from society. Prior to Kristallnacht 50-60% of the Jews in Stuttgart had already left Germany. The SS took her father to Dachau, but he came back four weeks later. Her uncle, who was a physician, was also taken to Dachau but he did not return. Her father returned because he was a WW1 veteran and was ill. Helen stated it was not logical why he returned. Her father did not want to talk of Dachau much but said people were put in barracks, beaten and not given much food. Upon his return the Collins knew that

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everyone's life was in danger.

In 1939 Helen left Germany. Her parents were able to take her to the train and that was the last time she saw them. They exchanged letters for awhile. She was able to go because an Uncle had already gone to the U.S. and sent her money to bring her over. She had no knowledge at this point of exterminations and did not learn of this occurrence until 1941. She traveled from Germany to England and then by ship to Ellis Island, NY, which took 2-3 weeks. Upon arrival, she worked in households and then became a masseuse on 5th Ave. She could speak little English but could read, having taken four years in high school. Two years later she moved to Berkeley to be with her brother; she moved there the day before Pearl Harbor. In 1946-47 she learned from a lawyer friend in Stuttgart that her parents had died. Later while in the U.S. she read 'Jews of Stuttgart' a book about the life of the Jewish community in Stuttgart and it mentioned her mother's death.

Helen met her husband in Berkeley; they were married in 1952 and had one son. She talks quite a bit about her son and how he does not take much interest in learning about her life during the Holocaust; she feels it's not a part of his life so he does not have much reason to.

In 1954 she received restitution for property and a little for her parents. The money was not even close to what her parents had, but it did help greatly and she was able to buy a house with it.

The City of Stuttgart and the Jewish Christian Society brought Helen back to Stuttgart with other survivors. The Jewish Christian Society paid for the trip. She speaks a lot about how unusual and moving this experience was and she was grateful she went.

It wasn't until 1990 that Helen found out the details of her parents deaths. Supposedly in 1945 Stuttgart Jews were moved to a camp in Lowpine (sp?). Her father died there in 1941. Her Mother was taken to Auschwitz and died in 1942.

Towards the end she reflects on how her life could have been different had the Holocaust not occurred. What she thinks of Germany today, why the Holocaust happened, and how little anti-Semitism she faces in the U.S. The Holocaust did allow her to come to America and experience independence, which was a positive. She also speaks of how her extended family is spread all over the world. She ended up getting her B.A. and her Masters in Psych/Social work.