

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Gattman, Hildegard

Date of interview: 9/8/2003

Summary: Hildegard Gattmann (nee Stahl) was born in 1927 in Wurzburg, Germany. Before the family left Germany, she lived with her parents and an older brother, Ludwig. Her father, Justin, and his brother owned a machine tools store that was started by her grandfather. They lived in an apartment in a university town. She went to a Jewish school and started as a first grader there. She never liked art because the teacher wanted the students to draw something exact. The first lesson was to draw a perfect oval. She thought it was a waste of time. One of her teachers, Mr. Greensfield, moved to London during the wartime. She also attended a Jewish kindergarten. There was one girl who lived in the same house with her and was not Jewish but she learned how to speak Hebrew and knew all the Jewish songs. Her father used to bring the priest home for dinner on Fridays. He was involved in World War I and was in Poland, on the Eastern front. He was in charge of the hospital, but he never had any official medical training. Her mother, however, did have medical training, It was not until 1933 that Hilde realized the Jewish affiliation in Germany. Her mother came from a small town in the countryside called Tann. Her first job was working in the city mayor's office, later she went to the hospital for medical training. The family always spent the summer in Tann. The family was not politically active but her father was interested in politics.

Hilde's father had eleven siblings, four being sons, he was self-educated and was smart. He did not have a formal education because it was too difficult with so many children to raise. He used to listen to the radio quietly but never had any political discussions. He was a strict father who expected top grades from the children. If the children do not get top grades, he would demand an explanation. Her brother started school young and continued his education in the United States. Both she and her brother were top students and had excellent grades. She used to walk 30~45 minutes to school and became afraid, as the 'brown shirt' group grew larger and larger.

Once Hitler came to power, her father's friend started giving her rides to school at times. One day when she was walking home with a friend of hers, they were harassed by some Christian girls and never walked that way again. They were calling them names, pushing them and making threats. They had a Jewish gym at school and the Jewish students felt safe there.

Hilde's father said if you leave Germany never stay in Europe. So the family moved to South Africa and after her father died, the family moved to New York in 1938.

Mrs. Gattmann was only eleven when they moved to the U.S. Although her experience was not as direct as many others, many of her relatives did not survive the Holocaust. The description of passing the border was horrible, all of them had to be examined carefully while all being naked in front of the soldier. It

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is not just humiliating but also inhumane. They were glad and could not believe it was real after they finally left Germany. The family also experienced lots of hardships in the United States. When they first came here, the children had to stay with aunts and uncles while the parents worked to earn money, since they were not allowed to bring any money to the U.S. After a couple weeks of the family being separated, they were able to get an apartment together. Her mother was an independent and hardworking woman. She got a job a few days after they arrived in the States. Later on, she even got a twenty-hour job that she only had four hours to be with the family. Often times, it took her two hours to get from her work place to home roundtrip by taking the subway. Because both of her parents had to work many hours a day, she and her brother had to take care of the home. She learned how to cook at an early age, eleven, and also learned how to iron. Her brother did all the heavy work. They faced many difficulties but they all managed to overcome them. During World War II, she and her mother volunteered at the Red Cross and other medical departments. Later on in her life, she was a medical social worker up until 1992 when she did not feel well enough physically. Mrs. Gattmann and her family are tough and were able to overcome obstacles in life.