

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Benjamin, Irma

Date of interview: 11/2/1989

Summary: Irma was born in 1893 in Breslau, Oberschlesien, Germany. She was born, raised, attended school, and married in Breslau. Irma had three younger brothers, all of whom survived the Holocaust. Her early memories before the war include her experience in a girls' school of higher education. She attended the school for ten years but was not allowed to participate in gymnasium classes due to a minor sickness that she describes in detail. She explains that her family always celebrated the Jewish holidays when she was a child and she and her brothers received Jewish religion lessons on Sundays. In 1919, after World War I, Irma married her husband, Mr. Benjamin, in Breslau. Her husband was in the garment business. They had three girls, whose ages in 1938 were eighteen, fourteen, and ten.

Her family in the 1930's had everything that they needed or wanted. She never felt any anti-Semitism; her family was in the upper class. After listening to a political speaker in support of Hitler as new chancellor in 1933 Irma feared for her family's safety in Germany. She wanted a good education for her daughters and knew that the new leadership would not allow it. Irma and her husband agreed they would have to leave the country. Her brothers ignored her fears saying, "Don't talk to Irma, she is crazy." On October 1, 1933, Irma traveled to Palestine on a train to obtain information about a possible move to that country. Her description of her travels to Palestine is very difficult to understand, she switches topics quickly and does not always talk directly of the trip.

Upon returning from Palestine, Irma and her husband set about to sell his business. Even though Mr. Benjamin had opportunities for work in England and America he believed that Palestine would be a safer place for the family to move. When they sold the business, each of them received 25,000 marks but they could not bring the money to a bank for fear that the sum would be reported to the government. In 1935/36 Irma and her husband made another exploratory trip to Palestine. Here Irma talks about a young girl they knew/met. The information she gives is very hard to interpret and she changes subjects quickly and often. During her story of the young girl she speaks about Russians living in Palestine who had immigrated there during and after the First World War. Upon their return to Germany the family planned everyday for their departure to Palestine. Irma describes a trip to a government bureau to explain why her husband has traveled to Palestine; her information is vague as to why she was called into the bureau.

On June 6, 1938, Irma immigrated to Palestine with her three daughters to join her husband. Her husband became discouraged, as he was never able to find a job in Palestine (Israel in 1947/48) even after he learned to speak Hebrew quite well. The family was never well off but used the money saved from the previous business. They were able to take their possessions from Germany

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

because they had obtained them before Hitler came to power.

In 1949, at the age of 61, Irma's husband died of a stroke. Before his death, he had heard that Germany was offering restitutions to those who had been forced to leave the country out of fear. He wrote a postcard to the German government requesting money but never expected to get any payment. Irma does not mention whether the family ever received any money.

In 1950, Irma visited her mother in the United States and soon found a job working as a "companion to a lady" in the Hilton Hotel. Irma abandoned her apartment in Israel (previously Palestine) to remain in America. She later accepted a better job with a senator from Montana and was then under the protection of the Senate and did not have to worry about ever having to go back to Israel. Later, in 1959, she got permission from the senator to have her daughter move to America as well.

Irma is the only living member of her family today even though all of her family members survived the Holocaust. She explained that she has no fear in telling her story and that even though she was not in the camps she brings in another piece of the story.