

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Bregoff, Herta

Date of interview: 2/7/1996

Summary: Herta Bregoff (nee Maas) was born May 13, 1922 in Heidelberg, Germany. She had three older siblings (Eva, Henry, and Gertrude) and her father worked as a civil engineer for the German government. When Herta was nine months old, her entire family moved to her mother's hometown of Karlsruhe, on the Rhine. There, her father gave up his job with the government and instead worked for Herta's uncle at his tannery. Herta remembered her childhood as enjoyable, if slightly difficult. Despite the nationwide depression (of which Herta's family felt the effects), they lived in a spacious apartment and her mother employed two maids. Although she remembered receiving some Jewish education in school, Herta did not grow up in a religious household; her father was an Enlightenment thinker and only attended High Holiday services sporadically and the family annually celebrated Christmas.

Herta remembered how the atmosphere changed once Hitler came to power in 1933. Although she counted herself and her family as lucky because she did not experience many direct acts of anti-Semitism in the early-mid 1930s and because her family had many loyal friends, Herta could recall the stories of discrimination and brutality that she heard from relatives and friends. Her two uncles, for example, ran a bank together and eventually had to give it up (they got the bank back at the end of the war). Herta's family's Jewish physician lost his license and Herta recalled not being allowed in restaurants. During this time, Herta's father, who was much more aware of the situation than either Herta or her mother, worked very hard to get his children out of the country. He succeeded in obtaining visas and immigration papers for Herta's three older siblings, who all left Germany by 1939. Herta and her family really began to understand the gravity of the situation after Kristallnacht in 1938. The Gestapo took, Herta's father and two of her uncles that night. Herta's father was returned later that night, but her uncles spent six weeks in Dachau. After Kristallnacht, Herta and her parents went to stay with an aunt of her mother's in Frankfurt for a while, but eventually returned home.

Herta, her parents, her two uncles, and one aunt were deported on October 22, 1940. Their deportation was a part of Germany's armistice agreement with France in which France was forced to "accept" some people from Germany (i.e. German Jews). After three days in a passenger train, they arrived in Gurs, a transit and assembly camp in southern France. Herta recalled feeling "euphoric" at the thought of being out of Germany and relieved that the train had taken the family West instead of East (by that point, she had heard rumors of what happened in concentration camps in occupied Poland). Herta was in Gurs for five months, during which time her father died of dysentery. In March of 1941, the family was released to Marseilles thanks to the hard work of Herta's brother and other relatives and friends in France. They spent six weeks in Marseilles,

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waiting for their American visas to come through. In May of 1941, the family traveled through Spain to Lisbon, Portugal, where they boarded a ship for New York.

Herta and her remaining family spent four days in New York before heading West to Berkeley, CA, where all three of Herta's siblings lived. In 1942, Herta enrolled at UC Berkeley. She graduated in 1947 with a degree in chemistry. She went on to receive a graduate degree from Washington University in St. Louis. In 1948, Herta married her now ex-husband and the couple had two daughters. Herta worked in many professions, including teaching and nursing. She has returned to Germany and France multiple times and remains in contact with many friends from before the war.

In this interview, Herta talks a lot about her struggles with her own identity and the effects of the Holocaust on her personal relationships, especially her relationship with her eldest daughter. She also discusses how her experiences during the war changed her perception of the world and how people interact. The video ends with Herta's narration of a selection of photographs of the places where she lived in both Germany and France and immigration papers that her mother obtained in France in 1940.