

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Berlin, Margaret

Date of interview: 8/9/1990

Summary: Margaret Berlin was born Margaret Wassermann in 1921 in Oxborg, Germany, a small town in Bavaria. She remembers her childhood fondly. Her father and uncle ran a men's sporting clothes company while her mother remained at home. Margaret and her brother attended a non-religious school and had Jewish and Christian friends. She was very smart, and was eventually placed in Gymnasium – a type of high school that placed students on the track to attend college. Her family took frequent trips to Austria and Switzerland to vacation in the mountains. Although Oxborg had a very small Jewish population, Margaret remembers the Jewish population being very well assimilated.

Although Hitler had not yet come to power, Margaret remembers her first anti-Semitic experience in 1931, involving some older boys with swastikas who were making inappropriate remarks about Jews. At this point, the Oxborg Jewish population did not expect Hitler's influence to last. However, when Hitler was appointed Chancellor in 1933, the situation for Margaret's family and other Jews in Oxborg grew worse. Very quickly, Margaret found herself no longer welcome at swimming pools, movie theaters, sports clubs, hairdressers, and by 1937 she was no longer allowed to attend school.

At this point, Margaret's parents decided that it was time for the family to emigrate. Her brother was able to leave for the United States in 1938, shortly before Kristallnacht. Margaret was able to leave Germany for Essex, England in 1939 when she was hired as a mother's helper. Although her parent's received visas to leave Germany in 1942, they could not pool enough money (even with the help of Margaret and her brother) to pay for their journey to safety. Margaret last heard from her parents in 1943, shortly before they were deported to Auschwitz.

In England, Margaret worked as a babysitter for a small boy. She remained with this family until 1940, when all foreigners in England were ordered away from the coast. She moved inland to Lamington, where she worked for two subsequent families as a nanny. Here Margaret joined an international refugee club, and met her future husband, Herbert Berlin. She gave up babysitting to join a mobile civil nursing reserve. In the nursing reserve, she was often moved from place to place, and worked in terrible conditions. She requested to return to Lamington, where she rejoined Herbert.

In 1942, Margaret and Herbert were married in a civil ceremony. She continued working as a nurse until 1944, when she became pregnant. Shortly after the birth of her daughter, the family moved to London, where Herbert started a successful construction firm. In 1951, the family decided to move to the New York area to be closer to remaining family. When housing and working situations turned out to be difficult, the family decided to move west to San Francisco. Margaret continues to reside in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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At the end of the interview, Margaret explains how she has coped with her past. She says that she has to put aside feelings so that she can go on living, but that she never forgets her past, childhood or parents. She says that she occasionally encounters anti-Semitism today and that she fears such feelings will always exist.