

TITLE-RITA KUHN
DATE-AUGUST 7, 1989
SOURCE-HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT-SAN FRANCISCO
RESTRICTIONS
SOUND QUALITY-GOOD
IMAGE QUALITY-GOOD
DURATION-2 HOURS 8 MINUTES
LANGUAGES-ENGLISH KEY SEGMENT
GEOGRAPHIC NAME
PERSONAL NAME
CORPORATE NAME
KEY WORDS

NOTES-

**NOTE; The tape ends abruptly. It is obvious that, during the interview, a second videotape was started but this video-tape ends with Rita Kuhn in mid-sentence. There may be an additional tape that has not been forwarded from San Francisco. This story is incomplete.
(E. Finder)

Tape 1

Rita Kuhn was interviewed by Evelyn Fielden
(minutes)

00:00 Rita was born in Berlin; November 29, 1927. She had one brother who still lives in Berlin.

00:01 She went to German public elementary school until 1937.

00:02 Her mother was German but had converted to Judaism and the family was registered as Jews in the Jewish Community Center.

00:03 The family was considered Jewish "by law" according to the Nuremberg laws. The Nazis still considered her mother Aryan by race even though she had converted.

00:04 She attended a liberal synagogue and was fairly religious. The neighborhood kids teased/harassed her for being Jewish, but the schoolmates treated her well.

00:05 After Kristallnacht she was en route to school and at first was unaware of the events of the night before. By this time she was in a Jewish school and had to walk down a main street to get there. She entered the main street and saw that the Jewish stores had been smashed.

00:06 Rita remembers clearly the anti-Semitic slogans and the stars that had been painted in blood red paint. The wet paint was still dripping and it made her think of blood.

00:07 Shortly before she was to reach the school, some of her classmates stopped her and said the Synagogue was burning.

00:08 She called out to passerby strangers that the synagogue was aflame but everyone ignored her.

00:09 Her father had been a banker but he lost his job when Hitler came to power. Her mother had TB. In 1937 her father got a job at the Jewish Community Center.

00:10 Her parents had considered emigrating even before Kristallnacht.

00:11 They had not left earlier because her grandmother (father's mother) was ill and the father did not want to leave her. After she died he was unemployed and did not have the money to leave.

00:12 Her father had worked in the emigration department at the Jewish Community Center. There they were able to help Jews with money and connections to get out of Germany.

00:13 Rita's family had nobody outside of Germany to sponsor them. They had considered the possibility of going to Shanghai or Israel (Palestine) but they did not have enough money even for that.

00:14 She continued attending Jewish schools.

00:15 She attended school until 1942. After Kristallnacht laws were changed that made life more uncomfortable.

00:16 The family had to move from their home into Jewish housing (housing that was deemed appropriate for Jews--she does not elaborate except to say that the owner of the building was a Jew in America). This new housing was near her mother's family.

00:17 They were the only Jewish family there then.

00:18 When the war started she felt trapped...no possibility for emigration anymore. In 1939 her parents were panic-stricken and tried to find ways to save the children.

00:19 The parents thought that having the children baptized might save them. Rita fought the idea. In her mind Christians were synonymous with Nazis.

00:20 Her father tried to persuade her. She went to Protestant Sunday school to learn the New Testament. She resisted Christian beliefs.

00:21 Her father told her "You don't have to accept it (Christianity) in your heart. G-d knows what is going on."

00:22 The children were baptized. Her younger brother did not resist.

00:23 September 1, 1941; she had to wear a yellow star (which she still has and displays on the video).

00:24 She would sometimes walk with a book or a purse covering the star. This was dangerous.

00:25 Rita showed photos of what the Synagogue was like in Berlin. She also showed photos of her grandmother's house and where the JCC is now in Berlin.

00:26 She showed her identification card from 1939.

00:27 She showed photos of her parents and family. She makes the point that they were not a Jewish-looking family.

00:28 In 1941 they moved to Jewish housing. In 1942 the Jewish schools closed. The bombing of Berlin started in 1940.

00:29 In 1941 her father was drafted for forced labor in Berlin and was able to live at home.

00:30 In 1942, when she was 14, she was drafted for forced labor. Her brother was never drafted but he had to quit school. The father worked in a railroad station. She worked in an ammunition factory.

00:31 They were the only Jewish family in the apartment building and they were allowed into the bomb shelter until about 1942. They were allowed in wearing their stars identifying them as Jews.

00:32 A Gestapo woman moved into the apartment right next door to theirs. She kicked them out of the bomb shelter during a raid.

00:33 Rita cried because she was afraid to leave during the raid. A different neighbor woman tried to comfort her and find an alternative shelter for the family.

00:34 (1942) She worked from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. with one half hour break. She had a ration card and she ate potato soup and black bread.

00:35 They had no ration cards for textiles, so they had no clothes. Her mother's family tried to help them but nobody else did.

00:36 According to the Nuremberg laws, people who had been baptized were Mischling (privileged Jews). Contrary to matrilineal Jewish law, Nuremberg laws followed the father's line. The mother was still considered Aryan by blood, even though she was now a practicing Jew.

00:37 Rita worked on huge machines after she finished elementary school.

00:38 She worked in a factory that made batteries. Her co-workers knew she was Jewish, but they treated her well.

00:39 The factory was owned by a Swede (which may have had something to do with the way she was treated?) Once she made a mistake at work. This was especially dangerous because, as a Jew, she risked being accused of sabotage.

00:40 The foreman came at her with a hammer and she fainted. Others

came to her aid. The foreman later apologized for scaring her.

00:41 She worked there for 7 months, until the big pogrom of February 27, 1943.

00:42 "Fabrik Action" (factory action) was a pogrom to make Berlin Judenfrei (free of Jews) in preparation for Hitler's upcoming birthday.

00:43 The Gestapo, police and SS were all mobilized to round up the Jews. On that day heavily armed SS arrived and took the Jews out.

00:44 The Jews were not allowed to take their overcoats or the lunches they had brought with them to work. Some 15 Jews were rounded up at her factory and taken out into the yard.

00:45 The Jews were loaded onto a truck and the truck was closed with a canvas.

00:46 The non-Jewish co-workers looked aghast but nobody did anything.

00:47 On the truck she was frightened. She thought the Nazis were going to blow up the truck and kill them all.

00:48 The Jews were taken off the truck and she had to walk past rows of SS troops.

00:49 As a child her father once told her how to walk quietly without looking at troops so she would not draw attention to herself. That's how she walked into the building.

00:50 They were taken into a huge rooms and the men and women were separated.

00:51 Rita had a friend at work who was not part of this action/roundup. The friend had been taken from her home. She had been an epileptic and had some

80 00:52 seizures in one week and Rita doubts the friend survived that transport from home.

00:53 Thousands of Jews were collected at her collection area but they were not mistreated.

00:54 She does not remember seeing any children at this center. Everyone was quiet and brave...no panic.

00:55 The people weren't very old...in their 40's or so. Women were throwing their jewelry down the toilet so the Germans would not get them. Rita kept the few pennies she had.

00:56 Rita felt conflict because she might be saved because of her Aryan mother, but she did not want to be given special treatment.

00:57 She did not know what was happening to her parents. At around 10:00 p.m. she was called to the main tables where the clerks were.

00:58 She does not remember how, but somehow the Nazis had her papers.

00:59 People were told to go either the right or the left. Most went to the left.

00:60 The SS clerk asked her if her mother was living (1 hour) with her and she said yes.

01:01 He told her to go home. She was dazed and confused.

01:02 She could not believe she was free. She found another woman outside who had also been released.

01:03 Together they found the subway and each found their way home.

01:04 She walked home from the subway. Their apartment was small and they shared it with other people. Her family occupied 2 rooms within the apartment.

01:05 The rest of her family was in the kitchen. They went in there when the doorbell rang because they thought it might be the Gestapo and they did not want to be immediately visible.

01:06 The Gestapo had already been there and taken away an elderly Jewish woman who had lived in one of the rooms in the apartment.

01:07 Her father had not gone to work. She herself was home for the next week or so...she had not been called back to work.

01:08 They had no phone or radio. She was sent a message when she was supposed to report to work.

01:09 The family never thought of hiding. Where would they have hidden? February 27th had been the 10th anniversary of the Reichstag fire. It was a Sabbath and the roundup action was planned deliberately for that date.

01:10 Her father was concerned that she was not called to work since Jewish workers were so much in demand. Albert Speer specifically asked Hitler not to deport Jews because they were such good workers.

01:11 Foreign slave labor was brought in to replace the Jews. Rita had been paid for her work in the factory.

01:12 Her pay was small. There was not much food, but the food was not expensive...just not available.

01:13 There was very little oil or margarine. Her mother had to get the rations. Her father stole cheese from the railroad where he worked.

01:14 He was working in the freight yard, unloading materials. He was practically the only Jew and his co-workers helped him. They knew he was taking cheese.

01:15 He was caught and one of his co-workers defended him and saved his life. Rita's mother sewed special secret pockets in his clothes so he could hide the cheese.

01:16 He sat once on the subway train and the others on the train moved away from him because he was carrying smelly cheese. He thought they moved to avoid sitting by a Jew. He did not realize the cheese was so smelly.

01:17 One day the mother could not get the family's rations cards. Each member of the family had to report in person.

01:18 The father thought this was to be the end of them and had the family bundle up in extra clothes. He said the Nazis must have realized they made a mistake in releasing her.

01:19 He went to report for the ration cards fully expecting to be deported. They showed their I.D. (clearly marked with a "J") and the SS man wanted to deport everyone except the mother.

01:20 They were taken away (without her mother) and put into a locked room. Soon others came in, including a Jewish widow of a German man. She had had privileged status, but now she was taken too.

01:21 As the room started filling she heard a woman outside screaming and asking for her children. Her father told her that it was her mother but the kids had not recognized her voice because she was screaming hysterically.

01:22 The guards would not let the mother see the children, but she could bring them food. The family had a non-Jewish friend who was able to find them to check on them.

01:23 This man had gone from room to room until he found Rita and her father and brother.

01:24 The family was loaded onto trucks. She did see her mother as they were being taken away. The mother looked pale but was quiet.

01:25 Rita was among the last onto the truck and she saw her mother from the truck. The widow's daughters stood with Rita's mother.

01:26 An SS guard was moved at the sight of these Aryan women losing their families. The Jews were not abused but were treated well.

01:27 At some point the children were separated from their father (she does not remember when or how) and they were sent to a place where Mischling were being gathered. (Rosenstrasse)

01:28 She was separated and sent with other women. There had been some 2000 people there, but by the time

01:29 she got there, only a few women remained.

01:30 At night she was given some soup which she could not eat. A woman there told her to eat since there would be no other food.

01:31 Rita was too tense to eat. She began speaking to another woman there. She learned there had been some protests.

01:32 Women had been protesting on the street to have their men released. She had not seen protesters.

01:33 While there were demonstrations, word of the protest spread quickly by word of mouth.

01:34 Some thousand women ultimately assembled and the cries from them could be heard inside the building.

01:35 An SS man came to the men and said the women's cries were being made by loyal Germans (she does not elaborate because she is interrupted by the interviewer).

01:36 On March 1st there was a major air raid. On March 2nd the German newspapers carried the story of the raid.

01:37 The surrounding buildings on Rosenstrasse were destroyed in the raid, but not the building she was in.

01:38 Her building was a few blocks from Gestapo headquarters.

01:39 The story had not been documented in 40 years. (Rita refers to an newspaper article on several occasions).

01:40 She explains the article that describes the women's protest as non-violent resistance on Rosenstrasse.

The article appeared (recently) in the German newspapers.

01:41The building where the privileged Jews were interned still stands in (East) Berlin. She showed a photo of the building from the newspaper.

01:42November, 1988, she went back to Berlin to mark the anniversary of Kristallnacht. She also wanted to speak to schoolchildren in Berlin.

01:43Nov. 8, 1988 there was a silent march to commemorate the synagogue. 5000 Berliners took part in the march. Speeches were made by the mayor of Berlin, the leader of the Jewish community, and Willy Brandt.

01:44During the mayor's speech there were a lot of hisses which she did not understand. She suspects

some people questioned whether or not the mayor was a hypocrite.

01:45Rita's brother still lives in Berlin and she met

some authors there and she was interviewed for the newspaper article.

01:46A peace, non-violent resistance group is doing research on the events on Rosenstrasse. Goebbels had organized the fabrik-aktion.

01:47The Nazis had imported Alois Bruner from Austria where he had successfully removed the Jews from Vienna.

01:48Bruner did his job and left, and the SS took over. Pressure was being put on Aryan partners of mixed marriages to get divorced.

01:49Very few of these partners succumbed to this pressure. Not often is mention made of their loyalty.

01:50In his diary Goebbels wrote that he did not want to see any more yellow stars in Berlin.

01:51That included Mischling and "Jews by law." 01:52 The action started on Feb. 27. In May of 1933 demonstrations were prohibited by law unless they were organized by the Nazi party.

01:53The secret police reported violators. The Rosenstrasse demonstrations were illegal.

01:54Rita spent one night, approximately 24 hours, at Rosenstrasse. 01:55 The protesting women had made enough noise to be heard even at Gestapo headquarters. 01:56Some of the Jews who were interned during this action were placed at another site (Hamburgstrasse)

and some protestors went there.

01:57 March 5th was probably the day she was interned.

01:58 At one point SS guards pointed their machine guns at the protesting women. The women started screaming "murderers" and the guns were lowered.

01:59 The women were successful in getting some of the people released. Over 7000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz.

02:00 There were other collection sites and nobody protested there. On March 6th, 25 Jews were sent from Rosenstrasse to Auschwitz, including Felix Weiss, the musician.

02:01 They had been married to non-Jews. That same day Goebbels gave the order that some of the privileged Jews were to be released.

02:02 Goebbels had heard of the protests and cancelled the evacuation of Jews. He postponed the action.

02:03 Goebbels was said to have released the Jews to remove protest...so the protests would not become public knowledge.

02:04 Goebbels could not annihilate all the Jews and he feared the protests.

02:05 There had been a Jewish woman interned with her whose husband and son had come to enquire about her. She could be freed if the men would take her home. The men refused and the SS guard called them pigs who did not deserve to be German.

02:06 He was a decent SS man.

02:07 The Gestapo was afraid to have the Final Solution become common knowledge.

02:08 People were deported and then disappeared since 1941.

AT THIS POINT THE TAPE ENDS WITH RITA STILL SPEAKING.