

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Felsenstein, Sylvia

Date of interview: 4/1/1998

Summary: Sylvia Felsentstein was born on August 17, 1926 in Linz, Austria. In 1929, her parents went through a bitter divorce and fought over Sylvia's custody, in which her father eventually gained guardianship. In 1937, at the age of 10, right before Hitler occupied Austria, Sylvia was sent to boarding school in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Her father made the effort to ensure that Sylvia would gradually lose contact with her mother. Her father was able to obtain the appropriate papers for Sylvia's travels into Czechoslovakia.

When Hitler invaded and occupied Austria, Sylvia's father and stepmother were on a pleasure trip in London and Paris. Following strict orders from her father, Sylvia packed for Prague, unaware of her dangers. Her father arranged to have his business partner in Prague pick Sylvia up at the Czechoslovakian border.

In April 1938 with minimal assets, Sylvia and her father rented out a living space in Prague, waiting patiently for a visa to South America. Bribing the secretary at the travel department, Sylvia's father soon got the visa they needed to escape to Uruguay, the only country at the time that opened its doors to refugees. Subsequently, Sylvia's father divorced his Catholic wife when she refused to leave her home in Austria. Nevertheless, Sylvia and her father flew to Belgium, where they soon left Antwerp for South America in late 1938. Sylvia's uncle and grandmother reached Mexico. Sylvia's mother also escaped Hitler by traveling to New York.

Sylvia and her father's visa required them to move to Montevideo, Uruguay, where Sylvia lived for 20 years. She attended a German-Spanish school in a small Jewish community. Fluently speaking Spanish, Sylvia later became a citizen of Montevideo, attending a trade school for sewing and tailoring. At the age of 15, she met her future husband and years later they moved to America.

Sylvia and her husband came to Los Angeles, California in 1959, and later they decided to move to San Francisco. 2 years later, once they were stable they sent for their children, whom they had had to leave behind. In New York, in 1979, Sylvia's aged mother committed suicide. Sylvia and her husband currently reside in the Bay Area, with their children and grandchildren. With all of her experiences and struggles, Sylvia loves life and is extremely optimistic. A true survivor, she admits that her experience as an émigré has made her more flexible and stronger.