

BRAUNSDORF Transcription

I = Interviewer

P = Person Interviewed

I: I have told you that we are interested in the stories of people who lived during the Nazi period and are knowledgeable, as a teenager and adult, and that perhaps first you could simply tell us about where you came from, how you grew up, and then about your experiences.

P: O.K., I was born in Berlin, and specifically on Einauer Str. , currently part of Kreuzberg city borough. Kreuzberg in the past was not full of foreigners or unwanted people as it is today, but rather a solid, middle-class neighborhood. So I grew up in Berlin and went to school there. And I had luck that above all my mother thought it important that get educated. There was either the municipal school which was free and the other schools which cost money. So there was nothing free. Books had to be bought, but in any case they didn't have a school with all the grades like they have today. So when I completed the girl's school, the Dietrische in the Bremer Str., I wanted to go to high school on Koch Str. That was a liberal arts school or basic as they call it today, and then the one on Weinmeister Str. in the center of town. Later I attended the one in the center of town, on Weinmeister Str. and graduated from there. At that time in Germany or in Europe we had students of all religions and there were no difficulties. One, my best girl friend was Jewish, Luzi Nussbaum, and the third one in the group was **Rita Zuckermann. Her father was a Russian Jew who came to Germany with his German wife from Russia because of Jewish persecution. I then studied electro technology at the Technical University. Our professors and assistants were also different religious beliefs. And Professor Ollendorf in the electro technology department was, you can say, unusually accessible and made an extraordinary effort to promote the three of us women students there. Concerning National Socialism I took absolutely no notice of it during my studies there. Among us at the university, here at the technical university, we enjoyed a peaceful co-existence. We were girls, were joined in an association of technical university women students, and there was one Jewish woman in it, Evi Levi, who came from the school on Weinmeister Street where we got to know each other. I had obtained my diploma degree (trans. note: the basic degree at German universities, roughly equivalent to a master's) in February 1933 and was then also without a job. It wasn't until October 1933 that I obtained a position at Siemens and was naturally very glad and very happy. Since we lived in Kleinmachnow in Dreilinden, I thus had absolutely no idea of the things which were supposed to have occurred at the beginning of National Socialism. And I also had in, at (sic) Siemens a Jewish colleague, Dr. Friedlaender and (/) Dr. Rudenberg, who was in charge of the scientific department at Siemens and who was also Jewish. So, ask me something**

I: Perhaps you could simply tell us a little about how it began then. Like how things started so that you noticed that it was any longer easy with the Jews, like you said at first you had good relations with them and were friends and lived together with them and...

P: At first yes. I haven't said anything further.

I: So during the Thirties at work you didn't observe anything?

P: No. So these things which today are un.. and..it is naturally like, when you don't live in the city and experience windows being broken, but windows are being broken everywhere, telephone booths burned down. It don't have to have anything to do with Jews and today they no longer have anything to do with Jews, and I left Siemens in 1942 because..as a woman, let's say, we just had the feeling all the time that we had to stand in line behind the men, that's the way it was then, that despite the fact (laughing softly) I **had received a good grade from my final examination, I received less than a man did. And for that reason I was for equality. And, well, in 1942 I am, I had tried to leave Siemens, but at that time it was prohibited. You weren't permitted going to another competing firm. And so I tried other organizations, foreexample the Labor ministry and was accepted there. And Siemens had to release me. And the astounding thing was, for me seen in retrospect, that I was immediately put into training, nominated by the ministry, for executive service. And that was 1942, at a time when as a woman you had at least a certain limitation. Well, I endured the two years of training and then landed in the executive service, worked also in Oreanienburg, and could have received a job there as chief of atghe work camp up there, Ravensbrueck. But I didn't accept the offer because my mother had just died earlier and I had to lookafter the family. Ekveryting went well until 1946. I received then from the ministry a letter (which stated) since I didn't live in Berlin, in Greater Berlin, but in Kleinmachnow, I would report for work in Potsdam. And in 1946 I then negotiated with Potsdam and was supposed to be taken over by them for an executive position. And then two forms for my signature were presented to me: one a work contract, and the other for the Party. And I said, listen, I didn't go into the party under Hitler and still had a job. Why must I do that here? So since 1946 I had no job in the DDR. And you can say, like I hear today, what all happens with the Albanians, with murder and so forth. So I ask myself really why do we Germans without interruption claim our guilt without interruption because persecution of the Jews certainly was not just in Germany. I also came out of Russia. And I know, for example, from Professor Ollendorf, who had been at the technical university of Danzig, that he had come to Berlin from Danzig because of Jewish persecution.**

I: What happened to Professor Ollenhauer, Ollendorf?

P: He later went to Israel and after the Wall came downhe came back in practice every two years with his wife Ruth who came from Danzig an as much as I can remember was the daughter of a chief rabbi. And Professor Ollendorf one told me, you know Frau Braunsdorf, I ask myself there must be something about the Jews that they are so unliked

in all countries. And that was something which always stuck in my memory. He said we Jews were a race in Israel. So up to the time of his death in the Seventies I saw them in Berlin when they came here or I went to Switzerland and was their guest there. They also spent their vacation there in Zuerich. So I can only always say again when I think about it what happened to the Albanians. There aren't any memorials there or signs of admonition erected. Only here at home in Germany, despite the fact that persecution of the Jew didn't originate from Germany. And the fact that Herr Hitler was an Austrian that still today surprises me, how an Austrian could become our leader.

I: Have you ever seen Hitler?

P: No, I have never gone to Tempelhof (trans note: today an airfield, earlier the main parade grounds in central Berlin, dating back to the Kaiser's days) or outside of town to participate in such things. So I was completely uninterested in political directions. The only thing which I fought for was indeed equality. That which we today call equality I believe is an excessive effort, because why in my opinion do we have to have to be in the fire department which up to now has been a closed profession for women? There are other things they can do.

I: Perhaps you can tell a bit more what you did professionally at Siemens.

P: I was in the vacuum tube department; in the past telephoning was not as simple as it is today. Today there were, so the construction which we had, one like earlier for a radio there were many tubes inside and I afterwards became chief in 19...1930, 40 of the testing department because the equivalent man there had been drafted into the army and that was certainly very interesting or for me at the time not interesting but on the contrary caused a problem. I was always being assigned to jobs where men had been drafted. And when I complained, my chief, Dr. Etzrod said, Fraeulein Wassman, you always begin each time at the bottom and soon you come again to the top with enthusiasm and devote 100% effort and are never sick. But later I was sick and wanted to keep the position and not always be transferred. So I am uninteresting there as you can see.

I: I don't find that so.

P: The training for upper grades in the Labor Ministry was extremely interesting because I was in, was assigned to the Reich trusteeship office for labor.

I: What were they responsible for? Or what did they do?

P: It was mostly negotiations about some sort of differences, for example whether someone was drafted into the army or not, was needed because he was considered irreplaceable here and then there were efforts made to put him in or out. That was what the Reich trusteeship for labor did, and then I was in various labor offices in Lower Barnim, East Havelland. It was specifically about juridical questions, about limiting or opening work relationships to employ someone, and so I had the whole time until at Oranienburg.... where once a person, a party official complained to me that I had arrived

five minutes late but that was the way it was then and not like today, every twenty minutes, and so I had to go from Dreilinden (trans. note: just south of Berlin) up to Oranienburg (trans note: north of Berlin), do you know the distance?

I: Yes, I know.

P: The way there and since I have...I told him (angrily) that I certainly didn't come by train earlier and sit around here for 55 minutes in the midst of world history. **I would rather stay for ten minutes more in the evening for what I had missed in the morning. But that was the only time that I had experienced someone who wanted to force rules on me because of his party affiliation. And I had turned down the job at Ravensbrueck because my mother had died in 1942 and I had to manage the household for the family. So I continued then on and then later after my training they wanted to transfer me to Prague. I turned that down. So whereas women today accept all kinds of positions when it is about rising in their professions. I have an acquaintance. The wife is a professor in Bremen but they live in Hamburg. And she is in Bremen all five days of the week and takes the children with her, two children, and her husband sits alone in Hamburg. So that is a little difficult. On the hand it is naturally understandable for women who had attained uch positioned that they want to retain, but you can not have everything, family, children, and a top career.**

I: Can you remember when they they made you the offer to take over this job in Ravensbrueck?

P: Yes, my boss called me to his office and said, Fraeulein Wassmann, you can be head of the office in Ravensbrueck, the women's re-education camp. I was not interested in it. Because I lived...I would have had to move to Ravensbrueck since you have to be there and I had...We had of course our house there, it was in Dreilinden and my father and my sister and our third sister, we were just a close family there.

I: Did you know then was there in Ravensbrueck...

P: No

I: what kind information did you have about it?

P: No I had...I only, that was a women's re-education camp, somehow to re-train women who had committed crimes or women who didn't fit into society, so something that was understandable at that time.

I: And did you have any idea how that could be done?

P: No.

I: Did you ever visit there?

P: No.

I: You were never there?

P: Never.

I: You had only heard of it?

P: Yes, because everything that one hears about it today, there was none of it then because the newspapers didn't report about it, we didn't have any TV at that time and the radio didn't report about it either. Above all I believe mainly that there is a whole series of things which have grown up.

I: Can you just give an example?

P: No.

I: So when you say that I have seen it differently, and that is presented today otherwise?

P: (stutters briefly) So of all things the collegiality we had among ourselves, we also had Jewish co-workers, like I still remember from Siemens Dr. Friedlaender, there was no trouble at all. Of course I naturally couldn't follow the case when...I had departed, wasn't any longer aware of what happened. I was indeed off on my own path, also not involved, I also don't know for example how Professor Ollendorf came to Israel. Especially with his idea that he believed the Jews were one racial group in Israel and now Israel is completely Jewish.

I: What happened to you girl friends with whom you were friendly with when you were in school?

P: Well, you know I...

I: You had named before two of them, Luzi..

P: Well, I left school in 1922 because the Lyceum was finished. There was Luzi Nussbaum who entered the humanistic high school (Gymnasium) on Koch Strasse. Rita Zuckermann I knew for a longer time, she was half Jewish. she lived in Wicleff Strasse here in the Tiergarten district. She had a brother whose artistic name I no longer can remember, a musician and later there were only three girls in the technical high school, we never talked about politics and were not interested at all in it. None of us except Gisela Brettschneider who in 1933 was a student representative, not from the technical high school but she must have been in the party. And she demanded that I expel Eva Lewi who was a member of the organization of women technical high school students. And so we simply dissolved the organization. I said no. Eva I knew from the

Weinmeister Strasse neighborhood. I didn't know why I would throw her out. So we simply dissolved the organization. So nothing happened further.

I: And then the organization didn't exist any further?

P: Then there was no more of the organization..I don't know if later at the technical high school some sort of girl's club was established. I don't know that, because I received my diploma in February 1933 and then began my career.

I: And you don't know what became of you girl friends?

P: No.

I: About Luzi?

P: Luzi Nussbaum. No.

I: Nussbaum or about Eva Lewi?

P: No, I don't know anything.

I: Well, when did you see them last during your time at school or at the university?

P: Well, 1922 the lyceum was ended, my father wanted before high school graduation That I get to know life in the factory and so I works for 66weeks at Siemens as an intern, and during this time I had no kind of difficulties, I experienced that before Hitler came to power. In 1928 I was 29 years old. I had spent a quarter of the year in Paris and worked there as a student and can only say (emphasizing) that in comparison with the kind of hatred I experienced then, what happens today is nothing. **There was a through train from Paris to German originating at the Gare du Nord. There were two cars on the train for Germans, O. K.? Every French soldier who passed them spit at the cars and the Germans looking out at them. And so I I have such a, as it is always called today, tried above all a (??) to make clear, that I have never witnessed such a hatred of the Jews. And that any kind of organization had perpetrated it, which never was done in public.**

I: So,you didn't see at all here in Berlin that Jews were picked up?

P: No.

I: You can't remember such situations?

P: Well, you see, we lived in Dreilinden. We rode on the S-Bahn (trans. note: elevated trains) from Dreilinden to the Wannsee (trans. note: large lake in southwest Berlin), then transferred to the regular train to ride to Siemenstadt or later to Oranienburg. What were we supposed to see?

I: Have you just heard that something had happened there?

P: Well now, no one had heard anything but (hesitates) you have to believe it or not.

I: Can you remember the first time you heard anything about it?

P: No.

I: Or another example?

P: No. We I...in that direction I can always only say again, well that which is ktold today and what the German were supposed to have done, I have never experienced it.

I: Well, for example, the book burning, have you seen anything of that?

P: Well, told that it made me incredibly mad because I am such an avid reader, like to read, unfortunately no more bcaue my eyes no longer allow it. But my God if of all things..When today I see daily from the TV et cetera what the youth of today do, that they blow up the telephone booths, that they start fights on the trans and in the train stations, then I don't know what difference there is. Today that is the same in another area as it is told today how it was earlier.

I: Well then, but there were indeed thousands of Jews deported from Berlin.

P: Yes, well we didn't live in the Grunewald. That was of course the deportation station. We didn't live there. And that we would have gone there to look around, because nowhere was that announced, that tomorrow or the day after tomorrow a train departs or a train loaded with Jews left, how would we have known?

I: That is clear, but did you just hear something in your office...

P: No.

I: Learned that suddenly a person was missing and

P: No.

I: Wasn't there any more?

P: No.

I: So you said indeed that you had many co-workers who were also Jewish.

P: Yes, but they weren't concentrated and since the Jews prematurely..., now we have had several reports on TV, I don't know if you have seen them, how Jews in practice in

the past, without any hindrances could go to other countries, Professor Roedenberg, for example, went to England, and Ollendorf, like how he went to Israel I don't know at all, I have never asked him about it but (hesitated a bit) in the time we live in, with all the excitement, when I (think) of the Albanians, even now I experience it again, that there two high ranking generals from the UN come now in order to conduct negotiations and then they have discovered again a mass grave where so and so many Albanians were shot and buried.

I: That is naturally very terrible and it is terrible that it happens today but you can't dismiss it for that reason that six million Jews were murdered.

P: Well, the numbers I can..., that were given to me, whether they are correct I don't know and must accept it. Naturally when you in opposition, want to count, that you have thus a hundred dead Albanians and that...

I: I don't want to count them, I only say, it certainly belongs...

P: No, so six millions naturally sounds today terrible, but whether there were six millions I don't know at all, it was told to me.

I: Yes, so I believe however that it is not the most important thing how many as in the end the conclusion that every person murdered is outrageous.

P: Yes, certainly, but the killing of Jews

I: That that happened

P: was certainly not originated or invented in Germany, on the contrary we had Jewish pogroms in Russia, many years ago and I just heard from Rita Zuckermann that in 1918 this Jew, this Zuckermann came to Germany with his family and how many Jews were murdered in Russia, and the Poles have also conducted Jewish pogroms which were very bad. I don't know, I must accept the numbers which are told to me and I always think about the meetings with the Ollendorfs, that last time here in Berlin and there they couldn't stay in the hotel because it was overbooked and then they stayed with friends of mine in a house in Kleinmachnow. There was no problem. So in my circle of acquaintances I don't know of anyone who hates Jews and I can only say (quietly sighs) I have to accept how many of them, I don't know if it is correct and I certainly can't accept Herr Netanjahu as the standard measurement for such matters.

I: Didn't you experience what happened on the "night of broken glass (Kristallnacht)"?

P: Also not, I told you we lived in Dreilinden; do you know Dreilinden as it was?

I: We you couldn't go there. (trans. note: because it was in East Germany, just over the border from West Berlin).

P: Earlier?

I: Yes.

P: Oh, so that was the time before you.

I: Exactly.

P: Wannsee, Dreilinden, Stahnsdorf was an extra train connection. Fkor the Stahnsdorf cemetery is, was made for the Berliners, for greater Berlin because they didn't have any more space to bury their dead. And in Dreilinden there was no traffic,, we have only a single store there. So we had to go to Wannsee to buy things or in Siemenstadt, and in Siemensstadt I experienced no evidence of Jewish persecution. So in that respect I am really a complete zero.

I: In Ravensbrueck where you were supposed to have been employed there were Jewish prisoners, Jewish women prisoners, maybe you had...

P: Women, that was a women's work camp.

I: Yes, when have you learn that Jewish women were also incarcerated there.

P: I didn't know that there was anything special about Jewish women. Well, I only knew about Ravensbrueck that it was a women's re-education camp and I wasn't further interested in it at the time. I didn't want to accept a position there as head of this large camp and I was completely uninterested in such personal professional advantages or social standings. So in this respect I can only say again in reply to the many things which are published todayt, I can only shake my head (whispering with emphasis) and that amaze me, always again when all that is so well known and all countries knew that, why there wasn't the possibility to say to all, come to us. **And you certainly know that even in Switzerland, I know it from the Ollendorfs, they were reluctant to let these people immigrate. And all other countries were also not very happy to admit them.**

I: Well, there were a great many who wanted to emigrate.

P: Well, what then?

I: That's right.

P: Well,

I: Well, it is already a problem when they say we can no longer live in Germany and have to fear for their lives and then search for a country which would accept them and then, I think, the guilt does not first fall on the country which cannot accept so many, but

P: But it's not Germany. Germany accepts all, we do it again now.