

Stop. Now, it's moving.

This is an interview of Renate Harding, born in Recklinghausen, Germany on the 21st of the 3rd, 1930. The interviewer is Anita Fisher on the 2nd of November, 1991. We will begin by asking you where you were born, if you can describe the home life, how many brothers and sisters you had, and just give me a background.

I was born in Recklinghausen, Germany on the 21st of March, 1930. And I think I lived in Recklinghausen for two years. But I have no recollection of that. And then I think I lived in Berlin for a year while my father was already in South Africa.

My father went to South Africa in 1933. And he met an MP he knew in Cape Town, who put him in touch with a big farmer. And he went onto his property. And for a year, he stopped there, learned about farming in South Africa. He'd done two years of veterinary school. And he thought he'd like to go farming. And then in 1934, my mother and I sailed on the Watussi to Durban. And then we went by train from Durban to Waschbank.

Before we go to South Africa, can you tell me what type of life you led in Germany and why your parents had, in effect, left?

Well, I don't remember about life in Germany because I was only a toddler and a small child. I really don't have no recollection about life in Germany. I think I have the very hazy notion of my-- the front of my grandmother's house, but that's about all. I had no brothers and sisters at the time.

My parents left because my father was no longer allowed to practice his law. He was a barrister. And he could no longer practice. And he had to go and get work. And so he went to South Africa. And then in 1934, after he'd been there a year, we went to South Africa, my mother and I.

And where was your first stop in South Africa?

Waschbank. Waschbank was a little place about halfway between Durban and Johannesburg. The train used to pass through there in the early hours of the morning. I still remember it.

It had the railway station, and a hotel, and the post office. And it had a butcher in a rondavel, which is a round, thatched building. And there was a general store run by Indians. And then there was a tiny, little fruit and vegetable place. And there was a mill that milled corn. And that was Waschbank.

And 3 and 1/2 miles away, through a dirt track, there was no bitumen anywhere, not in Waschbank, either. It was deep sand. The road was deep sand. And 3 and 1/2 miles away was the farm, Kameelkop, which became our home for the next six-- how many years to 1946? That was the next 14 years, 13 years became our home then.

The first few months on the farm, we had no furniture or anything in the house. We lived at the hotel. So every day in the morning, we used to walk up to the farm. And I used to get tired. My father used to take me on his shoulders. And then at night, we used to walk back to the hotel.

And lunch, I can remember, there was a rondavel made of stone with a thatched roof. That was the dairy, so-called. And we used to have-- with a few enamel plates, we used to have boiled potato and cottage cheese. That was our lunch.

And then in the afternoon, we'd walk back to the hotel. And that's where we slept, and had our dinner, and so on. And later, then, the furniture came. We lived on the farm. And on the farm, before I went to school, up to the age of six, I had a Zulu girl, Katrina, who was my playmate. And she was also responsible for looking after me because when we were out, she had to see that I didn't get bitten by snakes, and that I didn't fall into any dams, and to just look after me.

And also, we used to make clay animals. We used to fashion the whole farmyard from clay. And then after the night, as they used to cook their mealie meal porridge, their putu-- and when they cooked their putu in the trough, well,

afterwards, there were hot coals left. And we used to take these hot coals away, put all our clay animals that we'd make very carefully into this hole in the ground, and cover it with the hot coals. And that's how we fired them. And then they lasted better.

Quite often, too, the natives would bring in animals and things from the farm yard that they'd made-- chickens and so on-- as presents for me, as toys. And we had horses, and carts with moving wheels, and all the farm animals, and everything. They generally used to come out red and red and black from the firing. It was just some clay that was in a particular spot on the farm. And that was one way in which we amused ourselves.

And so what happened with your education? What-- where did you go?

Well, I had to-- there was no schooling near home. I couldn't be a day sch -- And I had to board. The first time I went to school, I went to the convent school in Dundee. And I stayed there for three years. When I went to school, I couldn't speak English or Afrikaans, which were the common languages. I could only speak Zulu and German. And so I had a really hard time.

The kids used to tease me all the time. And I found it very difficult to interact because I wasn't used to mixing with other white children. And they used to tease me a lot. There was one sister, one nun, who could speak German. I always used to try and find her. But I must have been pretty miserable because after three months, the nuns said, my parents should take me away, that I was too miserable.

I then went to a little farm school. The people there were Dutch Reformed and spoke Afrikaans and very quickly. I learned to speak Afrikaans. But while I was there, I also learned to speak English. And it was a one-class school. Now, all the classes were in one room. There were only about six or eight children. And we were all taught in this one classroom at all the different levels. And I stayed there through to including standard 2.

And then for standard 3 and standard 4, as we called it, I went to Mooi River, which is on the way to Pietermaritzburg, from Waschbank on the way to Pietermaritzburg. And that was an English boarding school. And I spent those two years there.

And there, during the war, I was, really, very often hassled, and very often teased, and very often treated unpleasantly by the children because, they said, I was German. And they used to tease me, chased me around the classroom after school, shouting, German, German, German.

Tell me, did you have any sort of a Jewish background, any sort of Jewish home life that you-- what was there, any?

At home, on Friday nights, my mother made a bit extra for the meal. And we had two pewter candlesticks, which I still own. And we lit them. Well, actually, my mother lit candles. And then after the meal, my parents would play a game with me. This was the big treat for Friday night, a card game, or fiddlesticks, or something like that.

And then Hanukkah-- Hanukkah was a big deal. Before the war, for Hanukkah, the relatives from Germany always sent lots of presents. And there were lots of toys and things. Once the war started and there were no more parcels from Germany, well, it became pretty sparse.

But we always lit all the eight candles for Hanukkah. And Hanukkah was always a big deal. And the Hanukkah music is the one that we sang, anyway, is the one bit of music that I know. I didn't have any other Jewish background.

At the farm school, it was Calvinistic Dutch Reformed. But they read the Bible morning and night. And so I learned quite a bit about the Bible, including the Old Testament, which was read as much as the New Testament was. At Mooi River, the girl-- it was a girls' boarding school. The girls used to go to church on Sunday. And I went with them.

And later, in high school, when I was at high school in Pietermaritzburg, the girls also used to go to various churches on a Sunday. And I went with them to the Church of England and actually sang in the choir there, too.

And I had no Jewish education. I was vaguely aware there was one other Jewish child in the whole school. But I don't remember ever having any contact there. And I never identified as being Jewish or being German. I was always more or less like a chameleon, trying to be inconspicuous.

And so what happened after, when you finished at Mooi River?

Well, no, from Mooi River, that was-- they closed the school. And I finished standard 5. So standard 6, I had to go back to Dundee. And the year in Dundee, there was no-- it wasn't a boarding school. It was just a day school. And I boarded with a family. And I had a bicycle. And I rode my bicycle to school and so on.

But that was the only year that I wasn't actually at boarding school. But then I still had to board with the family. And I didn't have any particular religious education or anything there. It was just when I went home that Hanukkah was always something we looked forward to. Well, celebrations at home were Hanukkah and birthdays. That was sort of the year's festivities.

And then?

And then for high school, I went to the Pietermaritzburg Girls' High School for four years, till matriculation. And I matriculated there. And by that time, we lived in Johannesburg. And then I went to Pretoria University for four years. But because I've never had any Jewish background, so to speak, or so on, and I'd had a lot of Christian church, and Bible, and this, and that, I never took any interest in Judaism, on things Jewish during my younger years.

And so what you went from-- then you went to Pretoria, you said.

Yes. Well, I was in Pretoria for the four years of the science degree, bachelor of science in dietetics and the hospital diploma in dietetics. And then I worked at the Johannesburg General Hospital and its associated hospitals in Baragwanath and the Far East Rand Hospital until early 1955.

Well, actually, before then-- have to backtrack a bit. In 1954, I had the Toni Safra bursary from the Union of Jewish Women of Southern Africa. That's what it was, the Union of Jewish Women of Southern Africa. I had the Toni Safra scholarship for two years. And in 1954, I went back to Pretoria and did the coursework for the master's degree.

And then in 1955, I got a scholarship from the American Home Economics Association. And that, together with the second year of the Toni Safra scholarship, took me to Ohio State University, where I did a master's in foods and nutrition. And I finished that in July 1956.

And then when I went back to South Africa. I finished up my science, my master's in dietetics at the University of Pretoria by doing my thesis in the months to the end of 1956. And then in 1957, till the end of 1959, I worked for the department of nutrition of the Union of South Africa.

And then on the 13th of January, 1960, I went to Israel. And I spent a fortnight there, had a look at the Hadassah Hospital. And then I came to Australia. I had a job in Perth at the Royal Perth Hospital.

Where were your parents all this time?

Well, my father died in 1946. And that's when my mother moved to Johannesburg. So my mother, during this time that I was at latter years of high school, and at university, and then in America, and then back in South Africa working, my mother lived and worked in Johannesburg. And when I came-- I came to Australia by myself. And then having spent until May in Perth at the Royal Perth Hospital as a dietitian.

Why Australia? Why Perth?

I came to Australia because in a journal, in one of our professional journals, I saw this job advertisement for the Royal Perth Hospital. And in those days, well, I certainly wouldn't have contemplated moving about without a job. So I

organized myself this job. And that's when I then left South Africa, went to Israel for a fortnight, and then came to Australia to this job. I had a round-trip ticket in my pocket because I didn't know yet what I was going to do.

And then in May of 1960, I came to Sydney. And I got a job with the New South Wales State Health Department. And I stayed with them until the end of September 1988, had various names during that time. But I was with the state health department all those years. And I was responsible for public health nutrition during those years. I worked in the head office of the state health department.

Did you get married in between all this?

I got married in 1963 in Sydney. I married an Australian. And it's only really now, in my later years, and now, in retirement that I have got interested in things Jewish, and Judaism, and so on. And so now, I find I'm going to talks and lectures at the yeshiva, and talks at the Temple Emanuel, and go to things Jewish. And now, I'm suddenly enjoying the Jewish news.

But it's only now that I've come back to thinking, and wanting to know more about my roots, and even being open about the fact that I'm Jewish. Because all during the war years and all through our time in South Africa, we never spoke German on the street and never-- just sort of mingled with people. Not that I now go around just saying, shouting it from the rooftops that I'm Jewish. But I don't mind saying it now, whereas in those years, I never-- I was always like a chameleon.

Was it because you were German or because you were Jewish?

Well, that's interesting. I think, certainly, because I was German, but also, I think, because I grew up in this very Christian environment and identified with it. Not that I ever-- I was never baptized or anything like that. And I never sort of-- and even if I go to church today, I won't go up. Like when they have communion, I'll just stay in the pew if I go to church today. I never got involved. But nevertheless, because I went to church all through my school years, I did identify a lot with the Christian religion.

And when was your sister born?

My sister was born on the 4th of September, 1939. And she died on the 11th of August, 1943, unfortunately. See, when you live in the bush, you don't get medical help when you need it. And until we got medical help, it was too late.

Tell me, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to include in the tape that you'd like?

No, I think, I mean now, as I say, as I've got interested in Judaism and things Jewish, well, I-- it's no use wishing. But I sort of wish I'd sort of made-- got more Jewish-oriented earlier. But that's the water under the bridge, isn't it?

Well, it's fulfilling for you now that you're doing it. So it's never too late.

Yeah, well.

Is that how do you feel, that you're happy, you feel-- there's obviously a need in you that you want to.

Yes. I think there are lots of things that I could have found out about earlier, times that I didn't. But we all have that, I guess.

OK. Thank you for the interview.

That's fine.