

This is tape one of Charlotte Stern, born on the 23rd of the fourth, 1905, in Soest, Germany. The interviewer is Anita Fisher on the third of November, 1991.

We'll begin by my asking about your family background and if you can just elaborate for me, please.

I was born, as I told you, in 1905, and I had an older brother and sister. And number three was not so comfortable, but my parents were very comfortable. And we had a nice family life and a nice house and went to different schools. First, when we were little, we went to a little Jewish school. It was a one-class school like here the farm schools.

And the teacher also was the cantor, and he did all the jobs that they do in a small town here in Australia, too. And we were four in our class. And there was an older pupil, and he taught me to write. And his son is living here in Australia now.

Would you just tell me, before we go into your education, about your family background.

Family background? What do you want to know?

Well, if they-- were you-- was it a religious home or--

Well, no. All the families in Soest were almost as liberal as here the Reform. There was no such thing as-- or there were-- I wouldn't know of any Orthodox Jews there, all of them. We went to shul, and the women and the men stayed all downstairs. And we had to go there every Friday afternoon because our teacher wanted us to, and we learned to read the prayer books.

And the boys became bar mitzvah, but the girls-- there was no such thing as a bat mitzvah in those days. And then I went-- after three years we went to a-- what's it called here-- high school that we went for seven years. And it was also near our home. We walked there in the morning, and we walked back for lunch. And we went back in the afternoon for school.

And we learned English and French. As much as we learned we learned through the teachers, as kids do these-- they don't do that these days. Do they?

No.

And after we finished there-- I was 17 years when we finished there. And I stayed at home for a year, and then I went to work-- what they call here? It was a Handelsschule. I wouldn't know what you call it in English. It's like-- you learned accountancy, and arithmetic, and things like that so that you could get a-- like a secretarial school, but it was a real school, official school.

I went there for two years. It wasn't in my hometown. It was nearby. I went every morning by train and came back every afternoon. And after that I got office jobs.

Before we go into that, can you just describe the main-- the type of work people were doing in that town, what type of a town that--

It was as small-- what-- not in certain-- not here, but in Germany it was a small town. It was near the river, near Hameln, Dortmund. You know where-- you know more or less where that is? And it was all agriculture around, and my father was born in a little village. And he knew all the people, and he could spoke Low German with them, which they liked. And we were comfortable off, so we had-- my father-- we had a shop with soft goods, and ladieswear, and things like that.

All right. And going back to your education, you were telling me about your high school.

High school-- yeah, well, we went there because we had to, not because we wanted to, because we had to. And that took 10 years, and I feel sorry for every child that starts going to school today and has to go 10 years to school, still feel sorry for them. But we all did it, and so they have to do it.

And, well, I don't know what we-- there was no radio. There were no motor cars. There were no motor cars in this town. We had a horse and cart, and my brother could drive it. You wouldn't-- 40 years? No, you wouldn't remember during the war when they bombed the dam in-- you remember that?

Now.

In that dam we went-- in holidays, every day we went there to swim. And we had our friends there, and--

It was comfortable.

There was a telephone, of course, we all had, but no radio, no motor cars. And kids can't understand. There were no motor cars. You could play in the street, and there was nothing coming.

So what happened after high school?

After high school, I stayed a year at home. Then I went and had jobs in one of those big concerns like David Jones here, those department store concerns in Western Australia there. I went to Cologne, and I went to Mainz. Mainz-- what is it in English? I don't know. Mainz? Near Wiesbaden. I don't know the English word for it.

And to different places, all it was the same firm. And then I became engaged around there, '27, '28.

Of?

Of?

What year? What year?

'28. '29, I married. 1929, I married. And my husband was born in the same town. He had done veterinary science first, and then he got sick and tired of it. And he studied law, and then he was a barrister. When I married him.

And we moved to a small town-- smallish town. It's a [INAUDIBLE]. And he worked in Bochum. Ever heard of Bochum? No. Bochum, near Essen. You heard of Essen?

Yeah.

And that's where he worked. And we were all right. We were comfortable. And then I had a baby. You saw the baby. And in 1933, on the 1st of April, he was forbidden to come into the courthouse. He was in the First World War, and he got an Iron Cross. You know what an Iron Cross is?

And I went to the farm. I took the Iron Cross, and I throw it-- I threw it on the dung heap because I didn't want to have anything to do with it. And he still tried to get into court. And they got hold of him, and for one whole week I had no idea where he was. One week he disappeared.

When he came afterwards, then we left, went to my mother's house in Soest. And I told him, I said, if they give you to you in writing that you can't work anymore, will you leave? He said, yes, then I'll leave if I have it in writing. And that happened in the end of the year, and he left for South Africa in November 1933.

Did you find any antisemitism, personally, in that town?

What you really were-- and the kids cry afterwards "you Jew" or something like that. But I wasn't-- there were about 60

Jewish families living in Soest, and they were all comfortable-off. There was no poverty or nothing that you had people to look after them.

So they had a little synagogue, and you had a little school and no antisemitism that you could really call. Occasionally you got called, oh, you Jewish kid.

For South Africa, and because-- in a country where there are three different languages, you can't just go and do law, and because he had veterinary science before, he got onto a farm. We hired the farm. We rented. We rented it, yeah. We rented it.

You went in what year?

He bought-- he got it already in the beginning of '34, and I came in with my daughter in August '34. And--

Where did you go?

Hmm?

Where exactly did you go?

To the farm.

The name of the--

[PLACE NAME] There was a house. It wasn't bad. And the dunny was way outside, as it is here in Australia, too. There was no electric light in the house. There was no water in the house, and I came there straight from Berlin.

So I had to get used to it, and I didn't know the difference between a cow and a bull and the difference between an ox and a bull. And I had to learn it all, and I did.

And I learned to milk cows, and I learned to look after the Blacks. There were only Black workers there, and you really don't do the work. All you have to do, to supervise them, in those days, not today anymore. If you don't supervise them, they just don't work.

And so it went on, and a few years later, we bought a milking machine. And then things became easier. And during the war we were on the farm, and our neighbors always considered us we were spies for Germany because they didn't know anything about refugees, had never seen any Jewish people there where we were to come and farm.

And they had not-- I couldn't speak English. They had no clue why we came there, brought all this stuff with me. And, well, we fixed up the house a bit, and we had a few friends. It wasn't so bad as I thought. In the beginning it was.

And, well, what else can I tell you from there? All the cows, and all the calves, and all the pigs, and all the dogs and cats-- what else do you want? And I have beautiful pictures with all the animals on it, and we were breeding pedigree Frieslands. You call them Friesians here, Blacks and whites.

And we sold them for good money, and feeding our cows all the year round-- they looked all very well. And we got a lot of milk, and from the milk we were living. And my daughter went to boarding school because there was no school around where we were. Of course I hated it, and she liked it.

And in 1940, I had another daughter, and we lost her after three years. And that wasn't so good, 1943. And life went on, and my husband died in '46. And you can't be on a farm in South Africa as a woman on your own, couldn't have managed this, me going and milking 60 cows twice a day and I don't know what to do. So we sold the lot, and I went to Johannesburg.

What year was that?

'46. And for one year I looked around and didn't know what to do, and I had friends there. And then I bought with a friend a big delicatessen, and, well, grocery, and everything shop. We sold fresh fish, and poultry, and whatever you have in shops like that. And it was in Johannesburg near the streets, whereas where it's here where all the Polish Jews live, where it's here, well, in Melbourne more.

There was a-- down that [? Brooke ?] Street there was a part where all the [? apartments. ?] The men, of course, all could speak English, but the women-- they came into the shop, and I had never heard-- in my life had I heard a word of Yiddish, and that's how I learned it because they couldn't speak English, and I had to understand Yiddish.

And, well, didn't belong to any Jewish-- well, I belonged to the B'nai B'rith Lodge. Here to the-- no, I didn't go, really. They make you pay all the yearly fees, and that is it, still the same. As long as you pay the really fees, then you are Jewish. So I was. Last census, somebody asked me, are you sure you are Jewish? I said, yes, ever since I was born.

And my parents lived in Soest, and my grandparents lived in Soest. They're all buried there in the cemetery in Soest, and I don't know what was before. So--

And so what happened after Johannesburg?

After Johannesburg, my daughter worked-- did she tell you she had three master's degrees? So did tell you. Usually she doesn't talk about it. And she was the first woman in South Africa to take a master in nutrition. And she worked for the government in Pretoria.

And the way it came-- with all the Nazis around, with all the nationals around, she didn't like it anymore, and she said to me, what do we do? Do we stay here till they tell us to go, or do we go now? I said, look, for my sake we go.

Once you leave the country where you are born, it doesn't matter to you where you live. All right? So if it was-- this morning I saw about Tonga, or if it was Australia, or where it was. So she tried to go to America, where she had friends. And she tried here, and she got a job in Perth, not because my sister lived here, just because she got a job here.

And after six months, she came to Sydney, and then she was quite settled. And that's when I sold my business and my things in Johannesburg and I came with all that stuff at 63 years old. And here I lived for 21 years in this unit. Long enough?

So if I tell the kids this story, they wouldn't-- they couldn't fathom that, that you lived in three different continents in your life. It doesn't drop there. Is that right?

Yeah. It's such varied life.

Hmm?

Such a varied life from different countries.

Different continents. I haven't been back to-- yeah, I've been back to South Africa. In 1972 I went back when I wanted to go to Israel. So I went back to South Africa, and I went through all South Africa. And I saw the Falashas in Ethiopia. Didn't go in there. What I tell you about the Falashas. Bloody.

Certainly.

Is there anything that you feel you want to say that I haven't actually asked you about?

Lots of things. So what would you like to know?

Well, whatever you want to add.

Never ask-- I never worked any more when I came to Australia I was old enough, and my sister was here, and I hadn't seen her for over 30 years. And what did I do? We played bridge.

And then I had two hip replacements in 1969. 22 years ago, I had my hip replaced, and I'm still walking on them, good. Last year I had a stroke. I can still walk on them. You can switch it off. I tell you story just now.

Who wants to know the details? I always say nobody. I have got-- I've got a tape. I've got a video tape that a friend of mine made. I had six boxes of photographs, and I was sure that if I'm not here anymore nobody would know who was on those photographs. So I said to Leo-- he is the son of that man who taught me to write. He lives in Australia now, and he made that video tape of me. You haven't-- I haven't got a video machine, otherwise I could show you.

But it starts in Soest when I walked with my mother on a Saturday afternoon to the cemetery and I had to look after the gravestone-- graves of my grandparents. And there were some other graves we had to look at. And it was quite a walk when we went. That's how the video starts.

And it stops here in Australia when all the family from South Africa came out here 12 years ago. And some of them I also hadn't seen. So the video is good.

Well, thank you for the interview.

I thank you for coming.

It's my pleasure.

You want a cold drink?