

INTERVIEW WITH HILDEGARD LEE,  
Mystic, Connecticut, 22 APRIL 2010

KL: This is an interview with Hildegard Lee at her home in Mystic, Connecticut. The date is April 21, 2010. We're going to talk about Hildegard's life and experiences in Germany during World War II and the Holocaust.

First, I wonder if you would give us your name.

HL: It is Hildegard Friederike Lee. My maiden name was Rossmann.

KL: And the city where you were born?

HL: The city where I was born is Bickenbach. It is in the State of Hessen.

KL: Hessen. And is that near...

HL: Near the Rhine River.

KL: And, if you don't mind, the date you were born.

HL: April 13, 1928.

KL: You have a sister, I believe. Her name and date of birth?

HL: Her name is Erika and her married name is Wolters, and her date of birth is in March of 1931.

KL: Then we'll talk about your parents a little bit, their names.

HL: My father's name was Karl Rossmann, obviously, and he was born on January 8, 1904, and that town was Ober-Beerbach, near Darmstadt, in the State of Hessen. He died on July 14, 1943.

KL: And your mother?

HL: My mother was Margarethe Rossmann. Her maiden name was Bauer and she was born on January 24, 1909, in Bickenbach. She died May 12, 1934, in Darmstadt.

KL: Do you have names of any of your grandparents?

HL: Yes I do. My grandmother, who was Fredericke Bauer, and her maiden

name was Jakel.

KL: Would that be on your mother's side?

HL: Yes, on my mother's side. And she was born in 1881. I don't have the date that she died. My grandfather was Adam Bauer and he was born in 1880 and died in 1954.

KL: Anything on your father's side?

HL: Very little on my father's side. I remember an uncle. His name was George Rossmann and I believe he was born around 1874 and I learned through family members that he passed away in 1950. He is the uncle that my sister and I stayed with, he and his wife, on occasion after my mother died.

KL: I know that once both of your parents were gone you were in a way adopted by relatives.

HL: Yes, one was the George Rossmann family and for a while they took us both into their home, my sister and me, because they lived in Seeheim so they were practically neighbors. We were there off and on when my father had a housekeeper and then we could go home and stay with them. We did not live in a house; we lived in an apartment, an upstairs apartment of a duplex house.

KL: And so that was your life in Germany until the war was over.

HL: No, that was my life until my father passed away. And that's when I went permanently to my aunt in Darmstadt and my sister remained with my father's side of the family in Seeheim.

KL: Your father was a professional. Was he a physician?

HL: No, no, his trade actually was locksmith but he did have later on, when he couldn't really perform that type of work anymore, he had a small - that's called a hardware store - and he could manage. I believe that by then he was already in a wheelchair.

KL: Your mother passed away when you were very young.

HL: Yes, she passed away in 1934, and I was born in 1928, so I was six years old when my mother passed away. This is why I remember very, very little. I have a picture of my mother in the hospital. She was in and out of the hospital very often. Later on, it was either confirmed or the family suspected that it was cancer that she died from. And in those days, especially in a small town or city, it was never diagnosed.

KL: The neighborhood where you grew up after your mother died and before your father died, those years between your 6th and 12th years...

HL: We were in Seeheim, a suburb of Darmstadt. It was a very, very small town. We had one school for all the years.

KL: Changes in your life as the political scene changed in Germany because of the Nazis being in power, did you experience any of that at your school, could you see changes in any way?

HL: Well, I don't know if they were actual changes because at that time we didn't know any different. We did what we were told to do. In other words, we had no elective subjects like we do today. It was just the basic education and it was geared much more - today you would probably say survival. Things I remember for instance, having to go out in the field and having to pick potato bugs out of the potatoes when the green first comes through the ground, and those things were actually considered part of the school day. We gathered everybody and got our little containers, and it was much more geared to arts and crafts, learning how to knit, learning how to crochet, learning how to sew.

KL: That was true of both boys and girls at school.

HL: Yes. So there really I didn't notice many changes. Today I think maybe the teachers in those days maybe only in a small town, if you were really not interested in a subject, they never consulted the parents. Or as in my case, whoever the parents - whoever acted as the parents - if you didn't do too well the

teacher just didn't bother. There was something else that they got you involved in.

KL: Do you remember your father talking with any of his neighbors about politics?

HL: Neighbors, yes, not politics, but since we lived in a duplex, there were three other families and we would get together and in our case, the people would help more our family. My father was always looking for someone to give him a hand to do something. I remember we had a very, very small piece of land that went with the house and we would grow whatever would grow for the season, and so it was more of neighbors helping each other. Politics, I don't know if it ever entered our lives until later on.

KL: And that would be the beginning of...

HL: 1938. We consider the war to have started in 1938. This is when Hitler really, I think it was Poland that he marched into. Czechoslovakia. And this was when his power really became known, or felt.

KL: And do you think you would have seen visible changes in your village or...

HL: Well, probably in our life because then my father could no longer do what he wanted to do, for instance, looking for a housekeeper. There were rules and regulations about children, you had a small apartment, yes the Government came in to regulate your own life. And I have one example that I've saved forever and don't ask me why. As my father was in a wheelchair, we needed a blanket, and we had to request, had to put in a request to the authorities to get a blanket. We didn't go to the store to buy one, you had to justify why he needed a blanket. Eventually we received a blanket. I still have it. You would consider it today a horse blanket. It's a real, real rough brown horsehair thing and this is what was issued to use as a blanket which we had to request and were granted to receive. Those are minor things but I remember you did not regulate your

own life.

KL: Let's talk about your father, then, about his illness, his ability to continue running his shop.

HL: Yes, it was very, very difficult, and of course he did pass away in 1943, right in the middle of the war. I do not know the date that he was taken away from home. The institution was in Goddelau. It was an institution that we never realized what it was. It was a home. Today you would probably consider it an infirmary. Because he couldn't walk anymore, he couldn't do much anymore, so he was no longer entitled to get help in the home. So he was taken there.

KL: You weren't home at that time? He was abruptly taken from home?

HL: Yes. I think so. I don't really remember. All we know is that eventually one day we may have been staying at that particular time with my aunt and uncle in Seeheim because all of a sudden our father, we were told, was in a hospital. Later on we realized and I have a note now from Germany, where they say it was really an institution where people could no longer work and Hitler said they were not contributing anymore, and they were just absolutely put in an institution.

How long he was there, I have to take a look at correspondence, I don't know when he went but he died in July 1943 at the institution. I don't remember anything about his funeral. Obviously he came and he was buried in Seeheim along at the grave with my mother and I believe my aunt in Darmstadt was responsible for all of that.

KL: I wonder if your aunt and other members of the family had an inkling of what his life might have been in that institution. Was it a natural death as the cause of his illness or was it something unnatural.

HL: I remember visiting him only once, that's all I remember. He asked me to bring him a razor. Now you figure how old I was in - he died in 1943 - I was old

enough to realize that my father needs a razor to shave. And when we came home I said to either my aunt or someone we were living with, "Oh Dad wants a shaver." And they said, No, you cannot give him anything. So that is the only suspicion I have that he realized where he was and what he was facing, that he tried to commit suicide. This is the only recollection I have and find it very strange that I should remember only one visit and this is what he asked. I don't know whether we ever visited him again. I don't know whether my sister was along or whether I was alone.

KL: I understand that you've received some new information about your father's stay in the institution. I wonder if you would tell me about that.

HL: Yes, I had asked a niece in Germany, she is now in her 60's, her mother is elderly, whether they remember anything. She tells me that her mother told her that Karl Rossmann was taken to Goddelau to an institution because Hitler considered him as a nonproductive person and he died eventually, which her mother suspects was - and this is German - Euthanmord, which is the word for murder. The official statement was Lungentenzundung, which is failure of the lungs.

KL: I wonder if that would have been a natural occurrence given his disease, which was multiple sclerosis?

HL: MS, yes. Resembling MS. That too was never established. Today you would probably say Parkinson's. Nobody cared to analyze it, if you couldn't walk, you couldn't walk, period. I don't know if we ever saw a doctor.

KL: And so tell us a little about his burial, his burial site.

HL: He was buried and I have the pictures. He was buried alongside my mother and of course my mother had died in 1934, and he died in 1943, but whether they ever had a plot when they moved to Seeheim, but they actually, the graves are side by side with the gravestones. And maybe if my aunt - she's very

elderly now - I may ask her if she remembers anything about the gravesite. The pictures - the names - I suspect it was she. Because she, because they took me in and I was part of the family, and I really think she was responsible for what happened in Seeheim, which was quite a little distance away. You could go by streetcar but it was a little journey. So today I wonder what the graves look like. For a while I had asked a landscape business in Seeheim to look after the graves but eventually those people got older and I didn't want to send them money anymore without knowing what happened at the graves. I really have no idea.

KL: And so once you realized that your father was gone, you and your sister were completely separated.

HL: Separated, completely separated. She in Seeheim with my father's side of the family and I in Darmstadt, which is a good-size city, with my mother's side of the family, and my sister I always felt was really hurt a lot more. Number one, she was a lot younger and she lived in the country and she had a pretty difficult time. She always felt that I got the better side of the deal.

KL: That was 1943 and the war was over in 1945, you were still quite young but perhaps by then being a teenager, you were aware of some deprivations as a result of the war. I wonder if you could tell us about that a little bit.

HL: Well, I guess first of all would be the food. You did not go out shopping anymore. Naturally we all had the ration cards. You bought a loaf of bread and that was gone, you weren't entitled to anymore. You just didn't eat bread. I know that in a little plot of land that most people had with their home we would grow onions and potatoes and asparagus, and things that you could harvest and eat. So it was usually the food. And of course clothing, shoes or clothes, none existed. You just couldn't get.

KL: Other foodstuffs, like meat or fresh milk?

HL: Milk you could get from neighbors who had goats or if you knew someone on a farm, but everything was just - if you were just a family with two children - we were a family of two children and father and mother, and you were entitled to just so much and you just had to spread it out and make do. So yes, we were really - today I wonder how we really survived on what we ate.

KL: I think you told me once a story about your uncle having gotten one hen's egg and it was a great celebration.

HL: And the girls wanted to do something special with it. The aunt said no way, I'm going to make a meal out of this. They did a lot with coffee grounds, stretching things, gravy, stretch things, to brew coffee and then use it forever and ever. And the clothing, for instance we had one pair of shoes that we were required to clean every night when we took them off, with shoe polish. Where that came from I don't know. Maybe it was just fat or grease or something. Anyway, we had to take the laces out and had to wash the laces and put the laces back in in the morning.

KL: Did you have to change schools as a result of moving to your uncle's?

HL: Yes, but by then I was already what you would consider either high school or in a school to learn a profession. So my aunt enrolled me...I was signed up as an apprentice in an office, it was probably the equal of the state capitol that was in Darmstadt for an apprentice as well as school. The school was not run by the office but they were connected. One day school, one day office. One day school, one day office. So I started that at 14, and then you were guaranteed that you would be accepted for employment in that office. I know I have the records and I just have to find them. She kept those records and I was amazed that she still had those.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1

SIDE B, TAPE 1

Interview with Hildegard Lee, April 21, 2010

KL: We were talking about your new life as a high school student. Could you describe that arrangement please.

HL: Yes. I was apprenticed to an office, called The Landkreis Darmstadt, and I believe it is probably similar to the State House. I entered there in September of 1943. I was an apprentice for three years. I would go to an actual school, with a full school day, in a school, and the next day a full day being in this office to learn office procedures. That lasted for three years. I was graduated in 1946 and automatically had a job in the office where I had apprenticed as a steno typist. I entered there as a steno typist.

KL: Were you there at that job until you left Germany?

HL: No, because I left there and I believe that I went for an agency that was a civilian agency that worked on restitution I believe for the Jewish people or for the people who lost property and people who had property taken away from them by the Germans. Because it was a civilian agency and the name means to "make good" for some damage that you had done. I was there from 1946 until 1950, and again my position was steno typist.

KL: I wonder, along that line, what happened to your father's store when he was taken away?

HL: I have no idea what happened to our furniture, what happened to the...obviously the apartment was closed or would be closed...I have no idea what happened to any of this. I do not know.

KL: And so at the restitution agency, when your time was finished, that was in 1950, is that when you came to the United States?

HL: No, I came to the U.S. in 1952 and I worked for the "Stars and Stripes," the newspaper for the Occupation Forces. And I would think that I started there

in 1950 because I left there in 1952, in June of 1952. The supply and transportation director I worked for said "She has performed her tasks cheerfully and competently. She will soon marry and immigrate to the United States. Should she desire to work after her marriage, I will recommend her heartily. She is an intelligent young woman." So I left there in June of 1952 and was married in September of 1952. I did not leave Germany until November.

KL: You were telling me about your status as a German citizen when you came to the States.

HL: When I got married, my aunt and uncle suggested, or perhaps insisted, or recommended, that I should not go to America as a German citizen. For whatever reason, I think they feared what I might face because my husband had already left Germany as an Army sergeant and had gone back to America, and all we knew is that he was going to be discharged from the Army. So I had no idea - I kept in touch with his sister who lived in Bridgeport (CT) and he always thought we would settle in Bridgeport when I came to the States. I have the Army orders to be going to the States on a ship but I do not think that I was in touch with him at all. I do not think there was any correspondence after he left.

KL: So you came to the United States as a "stateless" person and you took out American citizenship at some point. [Official ID issued by Stadt Darmstadt Der Polizeipresident on 21 October 1952 shows: "Staatsangehörigkeit - staatlos -"]

HL: It took me either 3 or 5 years and there again I don't remember...I know it was a long period of time because I had to find work where it didn't matter whether you were an American. In fact at the "Stars and Stripes" we had people of all nationalities working. We worked with English, with French, with Polish, our drivers for the Press cars were usually Polish people, so by then I had been used to working with all kinds of people. But then when I came to the States I learned that if you were not an American citizen it was not quite as simple to find

a job. So I applied, and it took me either 3 or 5 years before I got my citizenship, and of course I have that paper, because I had to change my name from the old name Richardson to Lee.

KL: If you wouldn't mind telling us again about your American citizenship and about becoming an American citizen.

HL: Yes. I arrived in the States the first week of December 1952, settled in Bridgeport (CT) where my husband's sister lived, in a one room apartment, and he went to the University of Bridgeport on the GI Bill. So those were difficult years but I found work, but I had to get work where it was not necessary to be an American citizen. I studied for my citizenship and became a citizen on June 15 of 1956 in the District Court of Connecticut inn New Haven, Connecticut.

KL: And you've been in Connecticut ever since!

HL: I've been in Connecticut ever since.

KL: Are there any things you'd like to add about your life in Germany before you came to the States - something we might have missed? Obviously you have succeeded in keeping in contact with friends and relatives in Germany.

HL: Yes, I still have my uncle and aunt's daughter who I grew up with as a sister who is now my age, which is 80, and her daughter, who is in her 60's that I correspond with. My niece does not write very well anymore. She is the one who wrote me that her mother suspected about my father's death. But what I remember about the war years is naturally the war, the nights that we were bombed out several times in Darmstadt, and the night that Darmstadt was completely destroyed by fire, by the British air force, and we lost everything that we owned and escaped luckily. It's called the "Brandnacht" where everything burned, the whole town. Those are the years that I remember, speaking of school and business, that were constantly interrupted. You know, you'd go to school and the sirens would go off, you would either go to a shelter nearby or

you would attempt to run home, and that was the end of the day, that was the end of the school day. So it was the interruption of your normal life.

KL: It's quite a story.

HL: And then of course what I called the Liberation, when the Americans came in.

KL: Oh, yes, can you tell us about that?

HL: Oh, yes, we still love General Patton who was our big hero. I remember that. Things got a little better, and that's when I started to work for "Stars and Stripes" and got my English.

KL: Isn't it interesting that for a German citizen that you would feel so happy with the Liberation, just as everyone felt about the war. It needed to be over.

HL: Yes, you see we still lived in Seeheim, again by a family that took us in. There were four people, my aunt, my uncle, their daughter and I, and we just walked in one day, and said there is no more Darmstadt, everything is gone, and can we stay here. So we lived there under very, very cramped circumstances, in a little house in Seeheim. And so when the Americans came, when they moved in, it was almost like - it was an end to this awful life.

KL: Your story makes it so real for us. We're very grateful to you for telling all of it. One last thing that you had mentioned, a family that your aunt had worked for. I wonder if you could tell of that circumstance and the irony of it.

HL: OK, the people were a Dr. Paul Wolf and the whole family, a Jewish family, and my niece writes me that in 1935, they moved to Dallas, Texas, by ship, and he had/has a clinic there, and after the war, during the hunger years - she actually says "the hunger years" ("Hungerjahren") - we would receive packages with food from the Wolfs.

KL: And that is an irony, isn't it.

HL: As you would imagine it was usually the other way around! But I think that

she remembered the year that they actually moved from Darmstadt, 1935, and that they moved to Dallas. Maybe he had a clinic already there. This is not very clear, whether he established a clinic there or had a a clinic there. That part is not very clear in her note.

KL: Well, that is certainly an interesting end to this story that you've told us. We appreciate your sharing all of these details and personal stories for the Museum's Archives. It's lucky for us that you've kept in contact with your family and friends in Germany, and so we have this for the Museum. Thank you!

HL: You're very welcome, and if I can help any further or if you need more information, just let me know.

KL: All right, thank you!

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1, END OF INTERVIEW