

Interviewee: Ruth Markowitz de Strauss

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Interviewer: Ilana Solowiejczyk

Ruth was born at the end of 1924, an only child of a Jewish German middle class couple. Family was very assimilated. Mother went to the synagogue 3 times a year; father did not. The maternal grandparents kept kosher but that was all. The first years Ruth went to the neighborhood public school. At age 10, she went to a good high school, the Goethe Shule. Even then, she did not feel anti-Semitism, except for the Art teacher (who was a Nazi.) The neighbors were mainly Protestant. She studied there for a couple of years. Father then registered her in a Jewish school, Carlbach. It had been a very good school before, but the classrooms were built for 25 children, and since they had to accept many refugee children, the class grew to 50. For the first time, Ruth met Eastern European Jews, and for the first time, she met Orthodox Jews. She even became best friends with a child whose parents were Polish orthodox Jews. During that time, people felt a segregation unknown to them until then. Ruth's best and most intimate friend was German. One day, a maid brought her greetings from her, and explained to the family they will never see each other again, because the friend, Herta, had embraced Nazism. After the war, Herta sent her a photo, but Ruth did not answer. Ruth's only prohibition at first was not to be able to go to swimming classes. Ruth's pediatrician advised her parents to take her out of town because what would come. Some friends' children were being schooled in Malmo, Sweden, and Ruth too was registered there as a boarder. Kristallnacht. Father left the home while the Nazis came for him. He missed the first rounding out of the Jews, and thus saved himself. Ruth and her mother found refuge at the home of an English family. Awaiting the visa for Sweden. At age 13, Ruth left for Sweden on her own by train and ferry. At the border, the black shirts came by Ruth's compartment. She was taken off the train with her suitcases and at the Customs, she was made to undress looking for valuables, and they checked her luggage too. Arrival in the school. Many Jewish children studied there. The difficult mission to tell the 3 children of friends of her father that the Germans had come to their home and taken the father away to a camp. Ruth was in the Malmo school for one year. Activities in the school. The atmosphere was a Zionist one. Many intended to go to Palestine. Ruth also had wanted to, but her parents informed her that, difficult as it was, they had managed to get a visa to Chile. The only problem was that the Chilean consul in Malmo could not extend the visa to the minor Ruth there: she needed to go back to Berlin, and join her parents to get it. She was worried to go back to Germany. The family got together in Berlin by the end of October of 1939. Her parents' home had already been sacked. That night they said goodbye to the relatives, whom they never saw again. There were all murdered. The family travelled by train to Genoa to board the ship. The German ship, named Horace, had transformed the third class dining room into a huge sleeping area. The first night, near Marseille, the ship was stopped. An admiral boarded the ship, and checked all the passports in search of spies. He decided who could continue and who had to leave the ship. Father's passport was not found so he offered other documents he had in his possession. When the admiral opened the stash, the first thing he saw was the Iron Cross, given to her father after WWI. He was forced to leave the ship. The family was invited to leave with him, but father made them to continue to Valparaiso, Chile. Father was interned in a concentration camp in France. Everyone was robbed of the items they had brought with them. The camp was in an old brick factory. There were roll-calls every day. The rest of the family arrived in Chile. Father joined them in the very last ship possible.

Mother worked as a housekeeper; Ruth as a nanny and a German teacher. The family finally reunited after one year. Ruth studied to be a secretary. She got married at age 19. She had three children. First she worked with her husband and later became a nurse, working for the Red Cross. Father became a peddler.