

HEINZ AND NERA ZIFFER
INTERVIEW IN TEL AVIV
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M – You both studied with the German professors who arrived in Turkey.

HZ- I started to study in 1940 at University of Istanbul and I studied mathematics and physics. The teacher in physics was Professor Denber who was the head of the physics department especially at the lab. His course was of course in a very big amphitheater, were about 800 students, so we had no direct contact with him, but in the lab, I wanted to speak with him, to ask him something and I knew that he was from Germany and he gave his course in French and they said after three years he would speak Turkish. That was in his contract. When he started to speak with me I thought that it would be easier for him to speak German, so I started to talk German and he didn't answer me in German, he answered me in French, he didn't like at all, I saw it from his face, he didn't like at all that I spoke in German with him. I heard then that he was the only one who had this reaction to what the Germans did to him. Unfortunately after I was there one year he left and I only heard that he was invited to Princeton University by Einstein himself and then I learned that he died very soon after that. He was my only teacher from Germany. But I knew of course that in the chemistry department and biology and so on there were a lot of German professors. Chemistry, well, I didn't study chemistry at that time so I had no direct contact with the other professors.

M – What was your awareness of the reasons why they came to Turkey and of the sense of their reputation elsewhere?

HZ- Well I knew that there were a lot of German professors. In fact there were about 700 who brought over from Germany, and part of them were already in Paris or in London as refugees and years before the war the end of the 30's. I knew of course before I started my studies that there were a lot of medical doctors, professors in all kinds of medical departments and I also met the professor of agriculture in Izmir where I was living before I went to Istanbul. He too was a refugee although he wasn't Jewish, his father was Jewish but that was enough for that time. So, I knew that there were a lot of professors and they brought with them experience and so on, they were not only young men. I met also at the American college with another physics professor whose name I forgot who filmed at that time, color film of the Bosphorus and he explained his theory of filters and so on. I was no expert of photography but I understood that he made a certain

system, invented a certain system, to make color film. So, not on pictures but on film and it was very nice pictures. So, I knew that there were a lot of German professors at the University and I met also with some assistants who came to the college a year after Denber went away, the university burned down. It was a wooden palace of one of the Sultans, it was called the Zeynep Han, the Enep Konak. It burned down and all the laboratories were destroyed so they came to the college, American College to ask for some apparatus to be able to continue the course because they had no materials on hand.

M – Let's turn to you for a moment.....(Mrs. Ziffer) (change rolls)

M – You also studied under these professors.

NZ – Yes, he's two years older than me so I entered the University at 16, I remember. We used to learn the PCM, this is Physics, Chemistry and Biology, in this Konak that burned. And one day my father told me, something is burning in Istanbul. So I said, it is the place where we get the courses so everything was burned. Then I don't remember, it was already the second year and we began to learn at the University and not at the Konak, Istanbul University. But at that time, well it burned down so we were very young and couldn't imagine that all the papers and everything burned and it was a disaster. But when people are young they don't imagine how great a disaster it was. For the professors I remember that there was always at the University the professor who spoke German and an assistant, they say "docent" in Turkey, and he used to translate. So, we heard it in German and every word he said was translated. So it went for a lot of years. We had biology, microbiology, all people from Germany.

M – Which professors did you study with?

NZ – I studied with Schwarz. Professor Schwarz was the only one who used to say he was a Jew. He was, he used to be friends with the students. He was a nice man, jovial, social, but the other ones, no. The other ones were always very, they didn't mingle with the students, they didn't talk with us. Later on when we went to the hospitals, they were, all the professors were doctors too, for instance Professor Franck, he was head of the department of internal diseases, I remember he was a very hard man, not very nice. I had an experience with him, my father was very sick, he had heart disease, so I said we'll take him to, he used to take patients at home at his house. I said I am student, it didn't make a difference for him, that I am a student, that my father is a Jew and all that, it didn't make a difference. He was very as you say, ????, only what matters. He said "your father is very sick and

all that". He had a son and he was my brother's friend, my brother who came here. He invited me to the college, he was a student at the Robert College, at a Ball. The son was not like his father, he was very shy, not at all brilliant and all that. That's what I remember, he was a friend of my brother's.

M – What was your sense of these people's relationship to the Jewish community?

NZ – Not much. We knew that Ataturk wanted to save them from the Nazis, that we knew, but the Jews knew, the Turks didn't know that. I mean the Islamic Turks. I don't think that it was very interesting for them. Ataturk did a big thing but for the Turks they were Germans. They said the "German professors", they didn't say the "Jewish Professors" not at all. As much as I remember.

M – And your sense is that these professors felt themselves to be German professors?

HZ – Yes it seemed like that. I had at college studied with other German speaking students and I knew that some were sons of the professors. But they didn't even give a sign that they too were Jews, so I had no relations with them although we had a common language.

NZ – I want to say something. There was a professor Heilbron, he was biology professor. He was a very nice man. His assistant was a lady, Sarah, they called her. She was Turkish, she was a great friend of them. So one day this professor, he had a big house "Konak", she invited me to see, I was a friend of her niece, she invited me to see this Heilbron. He was a nice man, but he didn't talk about his being Jewish, not at all. His daughter went to America, she married an American. Well that's all, they didn't say that they were Jews and all that and what Hitler did, not at all.

M – Growing up in Turkey during this period of time, how aware were you of what was happening in the Holocaust?

HZ – Well I had family in Vienna, in Greece and in Romania. Family was little, everywhere. We got letters until 1941 and then I knew that the family from Austria was eliminated. They were not eliminated at once, they could get away from Vienna, they got to Zagreb and there a Croatian man wrote us about them that they were with him that we should not worry. But then he too was eliminated because he had them at home. In Greece we learned only after, in Greece that was my uncle, my father's side, he and his son and his little son, his son's son was also

sent to Auschwitz. Only the son's wife was still living when Auschwitz was liberated and she wrote us about the years that went by and what happened to the baby and to the old people, my uncle and his wife. We knew about what was going on starting from the end of 41.

M - Were you afraid growing up of a German invasion of Turkey?

HZ – Well when the Germans occupied Bulgaria we had also some colleagues in the college, in American Collage who were officers in the Turkish army, engineers. I asked them what do they think, the Germans would be able to get through the Turkish lines and occupy Istanbul? They all said the same thing, “It won't take more than six hours”. They said nothing would stop them at that time. So we were afraid that the same thing would happen to the Jews in Turkey what ever happened in the other occupied land.

NZ – But in general in Turkey for the Jewish community was safe. They did not think about it. Perhaps people living in Edirne, which is very near Bulgaria, thought about all these things. But I remember that in my family they used to look, to hear the radio. But it was not spoken perhaps the Germans are coming. I don't remember about something like that. We knew that terrible things are happening but we did not talk and were not afraid. I know what it means to be afraid now, people worried about what would happen, in Turkey, no. The Jews continued their life. They were rich and some of them, and some of them not. Every thing was as usual.

M – Were you aware of things that were happening like the Struma?

NZ/HZ – (in unison) Yes!

HZ – Especially since I was at the start of my studies, I was a member of illegal organization called the name “Anetzion”(spelling???) There we heard about everything, we were in contact with the committee for, they called it “At Salah” “The Rescue” committee. It was sitting in Istanbul. At their head was Hyam Barlas. The young people wanted to help them as much as possible. During the Struma, for instance, since I went to the college by passing through the port of Eminonu in Istanbul, in front of Galata. I went every day I used to pass through there and I saw the Struma every day and every day it was getting colder and colder. They came in November and at that winter we had ice even floating on the Bosphorus which came from the Black Sea. It was a very cold winter and the ship was also covered with snow. I remember they wrote on the deck, “please help us”

and in Turkish they wrote in big letters, “Long live the Turkish Republic”, but that didn’t help them. One day I, it was in February, suddenly I didn’t see the ship, I heard that they were towed away to the Black Sea and we didn’t know it was torpedoed, any way it was sunk. After years I heard that one of the young people could swim and get hold of a piece of wood and he was the only one of 760 people who were saved.

M- Tell us for a couple of moments about the illegal activities that you were engaged in, in the Zionist movement in Turkey.

HZ – The young people in that organization wanted to help so they could only help in that we went for instance to the train station on the European side when children were sent from Romania and Bulgaria we used to accompany them from the European side to the Asian side till they were embarked on the train went to Syria. The other help was giving information about people who wanted to get certificates from Turkey to Israel, Palestine at that time. We could only give them the necessary information. Apart from that all the young people who wanted to immigrate to Palestine had to go through lessons, so those who could gave Hebrew lessons. They gave some information about Palestine geographically and the history of Palestine. I gave two years gymnastic lessons to the young men and young women, girls, because the age was not more than 20. I used to give four times a week, gymnastic lessons in a whole.

M – Where did you meet?

NZ – Oh we met after many years, after I finished; I was almost a doctor, two years before we met in Izmir. He used to live in Izmir but he was in the college. He finished college and I was still learning to be a doctor. We met in Izmir at the “Fuar”, at the “Fair”, the Izmir Fair by accident because I was with my aunt and he was, they had mutual friends. So we met there and from then on we thought of coming to Israel. This was, I was very much influenced by my brother, this is the picture there. He left Turkey and came to a Kibbutz. He left Turkey without saying anything to his family. My father was very sick from that and he died after a few years, he got hypertension. My brother left and came to the kibbutz an he used to write letters that everything was fine and when do you come and all that and Heinz was active in the Zionist movement. We waited that I finished school, medical school and we thought to leave everything and come here. So we married exactly, tomorrow is our wedding birthday, at when it was announced at the partition of Palestine. This same day we got married.

M- You got married on November 29th, 1947.

NZ – Yes, we came, I had my eldest son. He was eight months old when we left Turkey. And when I returned after sometime, friends told me why did you learn at the medical school and then left? I was uneasy. Well I said I had to leave, I have my country now and all that. Well that's it. Then when we came my brother was already dead. But my parents didn't know that, they thought he was a prisoner in Egypt. He fought in the Negev, he died when he was 19 years old.

M – In the War of Independence?

NZ – In the War of Independence and the kibbutz. My eldest son wrote a book about him. We have the book here. Well it was the end for my parents. My father died, because his son did not say goodbye and he left like that. My father wanted him to be an engineer and finish Robert College. But he left and said "I am going to Franck's son to visit him at a villa on the Bosphorus and I will come tomorrow night". He never came. And we knew that he left for Israel.

M- Looking back on your education, what did these German professors contribute to your education? (end roll)

HZ – I must say that in mathematics we did have a Turkish professor who studied in France at the Sorbonne. I liked him very much. He contributed as much as Denber for me. The only thing is when the German professors came to reorganize the university. They really reformed the whole thing. I remember only the war, Denber had to fight and that is why he left because when about 300 students to 800 did not pass the exam in physics, the year after he saw among his students of the second year he saw students who he remembered they had failed the exam and that was when he wanted to verify that, I have no proof but I thought at that time that the fire in the university was the cause of that fire was the irregularities. He really fought to reorganize the university and he left of disgust, he didn't like at all what was going on. I hope I was wrong but you can never tell.

M – And what about you?

NZ – No we used to go, after this "Konak" burned, we went to the Istanbul University and we had the courses in the amphitheater. What I think now happened that the Turks, the Turkish students did not realize that these were Jewish professors. For them they were Germans. It did not enhance the status of the Jewish people in Turkey. Because they were professors, they were Jews and it

should do something for the community which the Turks thought these were Germans and the Jews were Jews and it's not the same thing. That was my feeling because there was a lot of anti-Semitism at the University. I remember at the school too, I remember that every day at the school, that is in the gymnasium. They used to put a picture of Hitler in my copy book. That is at school. At the University there was anti-Semitism, it's not very much but there was such a thing.

M – Tell me a little bit if you remember of the human side of these professor. You gave a wonderful example in Denber, not being comfortable speaking German. Do you have any stories of these professors that you can remember?

NZ – No, No. They didn't mingle with us, only Schwartz, he talked and because you know the amphitheater was perhaps with 800 or more students. The medical school is not as it is now in Turkey. We heard the conferences, they talked in German, the professors, and the Turks translated it, we wrote everything and finished. We did not see them. They disappeared, another came and that's all. We had no contact with them. But the only contact was with this Heilbron, this years after that I saw him in the house by accident. He was a nice man and they thought of going to America. That's all. The daughter married an American not especially Jewish. I did not find a correlation between these professors and the Jewish community, because I was a Turkish Jew. I didn't find anything.