

Kindertransport Association Oral History Project
Interview with
RUTH KNOX
June 16, 1998

KEY:

- [brackets] describe action in the interview
- *Italics* indicates a word in a foreign language, spelled correctly
- {*italics in bracket*} indicates a word in a foreign language that may be incorrect
- {brackets} indicate indecipherable words

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Interviewer: We are at the Washington DC Kindertransport reunion. I'm Melissa Hacker and Ruth Knox. Can you spell your name for me, Ruth?

Ruth: Why, of course. Ruth Knox, K-n-o-x is my last name, my surname.

Interviewer: Is that your maiden name?

Ruth: No, no. That's my married name. My maiden name, which is also printed on the tags that we wear around here, is Liebermensch.

Interviewer: How would you spell that?

Ruth: Perhaps a little difficult for you, but not as bad as it sounds. It's actually "lovely person." That's what the translation is. L-i-e-b-e-r-m-e-n-s-c-h. So that is my family name. And about the only thing that I ever regretted in entering into a marriage, losing that maiden name. And at the get-together of our Mannheim (where I come from) reunion back in 1990, when close to 200 people attended, plus their spouses or friends or family members, at the time we were only interested in seeing each other as we had parted as children, and knowing each other by our maiden name, of course exclusive of the men, who were then the boys. So that was part of it. And I promised I would send you some material out of the commentary that I had written for the book, as one of the participants of the Mannheim reunion, with collections of our experiences. Of course it had to be very consolidated because we were only permitted two typewritten pages, because collectively it was sent, and all the memoirs are now in the Library of Congress in Washington.

Interviewer: When and where were you born?

Ruth: I was born in Mannheim, in February of 1925, February 6th to be exact. So that makes me an old lady of 73, which I don't really feel.

Interviewer: What did your parents do?

Ruth: My father was the *Religionslehrer*, in other words, the teacher of biblical and religious studies, and the cantor. And my mother had studied singing. Both families on both sides, the paternal and the maternal side, were very musically inclined. And I guess that sort of absolute hearing is something that I inherited, plus the vocal part of it too. And so did my sister.

Interviewer: Did you sing?

Ruth: Yes, but of course lately I just had a bronchial kind of an infection, and that affected my vocal cords or the voice box. That will pass in due time. And of course I have an older sister by five years, whom I'm now going to visit when I go to New York, when I continue my trip from here.

Interviewer: Did you live in a house or an apartment?

Ruth: We lived in an apartment, and it was a very sizable apartment, on the *Hauptparterre*, which is the higher—*Parterre* is actually ground level, but *Hauptparterre* is the slightly elevated area in Mannheim in those days. And it's remarkable how the first 14 years of my life, which were the formative years, were so (should I say) so well remembered. So the input obviously left its mark. And as we talk about that, it's truly still upsetting—after 60 years, practically, the separation.

Interviewer: Was it just the four of you in your apartment.

Ruth: Yes, the four of us. And of course there were grandparents, my grandparents in the same city, and other relatives on my mother's side. My father's side came from Upper Silesia, had studied at the cantorial teachers' seminary in Berlin, and was a young veteran after the war when he was hired to the congregation in Saxony, in Plauen. That is actually where my sister was born. And shall we say, that is where my parents lived after they got married, for the first five years of their marriage, before then moving to Mannheim, where my father had a bigger position. And that's where I was born.

Interviewer: Was it a religious home?

Ruth: It was a conservatively religious home, yes. And religion, a devout believer, as he was, and something that was passed on to the children and absorbed, particularly, I would say, more so by myself as the younger of the two of the siblings, because I always had an interest in history, was it biblical, was it—I found it very fascinating as the explanations and the further input was of that particular time, at my age, naturally. So there were the Friday night get-togethers around the Shabbos *Tisch*, as they say. I guess you understand that.

Interviewer: I know some Yiddish.

Ruth: Well, The *Tisch* remains the *tish* in Yiddish and in German. And the singing of *zemirot*, which was then called the {*zemiras*} because it was the Ashkenazi rather than the Sephardic pronunciation of the Hebrew language. And my father spoke Hebrew quite well, not only what you read in the *Tefillah* or what he taught, but as it went along for the studies of conversational. You must remember, we're talking about times when Zionism flared up tremendously, and the desire (as I remember as an 8-year-old), when Hitler came into power, that the pursuit to go to Palestine, or whatever would open. But actually the idealism for Zionism and the defense of what was then described as the future home of Jews, and its rescue, that's what it entailed, you see.

And of course as time went on, my goodness, there are so many incidents that one could speak about, that I remember. I remember the day when the proclamation came that Hitler came into power. It was on a Tuesday afternoon, January 30th, in 1933. And it was very alarming as a— (How old was I in 1933?) So it was just before my eighth birthday. And seeing and sensing the excitement and the upset that it caused politically. And it changed the entire method of living, because the immediate fear that entered, the protection that followed. And I'm always focusing not on myself, because you continued going to school, but the news that came about not only in the newspapers to the conferences that my father attended on the local level, concerning the {*Lehrhaus*}, the *Gemeindehaus*, which is the congregational meetings. And the teaching at the various high school levels were sort of consolidated, because less time was made available for such studies. And I guess being in the so-called public school system, public educational system, whatever was being taught had to be watched very carefully. Of course this is as I saw it as a child. But life went on as normal as possible.

Interviewer: Were you in a mixed school or a Jewish school?

Ruth: The Jewish school only came in (I believe it was) 1937, when the law decree came that all students have to leave public school (high school at the time; I had just passed my sixth {unintelligible}, in other words going into the seventh grade this {*quinta*}), and equally as much with the discharge of the teachers across the board, were discharged. However, this entire group of teachers within the city of Mannheim, of Jews (not only of Jewish background, of Jewish), there was the Jewish school which was developed as a result of the educational aspect of the Jewish community. And so we had very good teachers in all directions and with the teachers who had been discharged, from mathematics to history to biblical studies to religion. And that's what it was.

Mannheim was known also as a center of very good musicians, not professionals but amateur participants. And there was the Jewish orchestra that had been formed by the *Kulturbund*. That is the cultural center. And in fact, that was the *Jüdische Kulturbund*, which is the Jewish Cultural Center nationally throughout Germany. And those that were professionals on the stage started to tour throughout the country, and since Mannheim was a city of, at the time, about 7,000 Jews, that was considered quite a sizable number, and it was one of the largest cities after Berlin, Frankfurt, and should I say maybe Breslau, a few other communities that may have had a larger Jewish community. And I

enjoyed going to rehearsals where my father was the violinist. One of the composers was the first cantor of our congregation, the late Hugo Adler, who composed a wonderful musical work which is in circulation here, "*Licht und Volk*" (the Light of the Jewish people, basically), where my mother was one of the soloists.

These were very enjoyable times. They were the times of birthday parties, because I always enjoyed birthdays, dragging along, with my older sister and her friends, taking lessons in tap dancing and what is now called aerobics. And don't forget, we all grew up on a bicycle. That was our means of transportation. And a car, we did not have. Very few people did, because even on the weekend or Sunday excursions to nearby Heidelberg, there was the electric operational sort of tram, and that provided the transportation. And there we would be picnicking. And that also not only happened with the parents; that also happened through the *Bund* association with the *Habonim*, *Hashomer Hatzair*, and the development in those days, the projection towards going to Palestine, and the awakening of the hopeful exit out of Germany.

Interviewer: Were your parents active in any particular Zionist movement?

Ruth: My parents were less, but they encouraged us. They encouraged us, meaning my sister and myself. And there were these younger leaders that came from different parts of the countries, along the borders from Czechoslovakia and so on. Suddenly all of these countries more or less joined, from the aspect of the Jewish communities. You understand. And so the activity was awakening: how we would see it under the British Mandate, and what is expected of us.

However, destiny took another turn, and the time eventually came in 1939—or shall we say first before the Kindertransport. Yes. As more laws were decreed, there came first of all the discharge from the public schools. And there was a narrowing. The participations on the outside became more and more limited. Very upsetting for children who just are not free to move about as they want to. But we had get-togethers through the synagogue. It was a highly respected and regarded institution where we, as the so-called *Jugendgruppe* (the youth group), felt very comfortable by our young leaders, by the younger rabbis, who were interested in awakening the directions towards hopefully Palestine. And I use that term because at the time it was Palestine, before the creation of the state.

Interviewer: When you talk about children not being free, did you notice that you couldn't go to parks or movie theaters?

Ruth: Well, that came later. You could go to movie theaters for the first two or three years, but in those days you were not a frequent movie goer. If you went three times a year, you had the movies. We were avid radio listeners, and I think that stuck with me to this very day. I need very little television but I do need the sound of music and the sound of talk. And so that became difficult. I remember going to the *{Nationaltheater}*, the national theater, for opera presentation. By that time I was 10-11 years old, and my first opera I ever saw

was *Aida*. Well, I was pretty well equipped in those days because the music was a standard kind of being at home, you understand. When you come from a family of academics, then of course these are the things that are more or less urged, more so than people that grow up with (what should I say?) mechanical kind of doings. You know. But then there were get-togethers. My parents had a quartet, and that frequented from one home every three weeks to the other. And that always created a lot of excitement at home, knowing that these friends were coming. And they were all more or less professionals. And every time I look at the picture—because the first one to depart was the first violinist. He was a physician, and they went to Palestine with their daughters. They were friends and lived in the same neighborhood as we did. And of the participants of this group, 40% perished, among them my father.

Interviewer: When you say “this group”?

Ruth: The group of the quartet participants, of the musical quartet participants. In other words, the cellist died, and his wife, were deported. And only two couples survived, plus my mother, who also came to the United States shortly after my sister’s and my arrival back in 1940. She came and fortunately was able to get her visa, and had to reroute quickly her departure because she was scheduled out of Antwerp, but that was the time when Hitler invaded Antwerp, and she was able to get passage then through Genoa, Italy, and make it to the United States. I guess I’m jumping a little bit.

Interviewer: Back to Mannheim.

Ruth: Now we’re going back to Mannheim. All right. Mannheim was a city of squares, *Quadraten*, surrounded by the ring in the old town, with lots of parks, with rivers, the River Rhine, the River Neckar. I mean, that’s the geographical explanation. Talking about the Rhine just brings up the memory of: There were these bath institutions, or swimming (bath) institution, when by 1936 the signs appeared, “*In Deutschen Rhine kein Jüdische Schwein*,” which translates, “In the German River Rhine, no Jewish swine permitted.” I mean, this is a very morbid kind of a translation. However, these were the humiliations that you dealt with—plus the fact in schools. By that time, my compatriots or peers were girls; then by the age of 10 or so, they joined the Hitler BDM (*Bund Deutscher [Mädchen/Mädel]*), which was the group of German girls. And a child is easily influenced, and sees the ill effects of— shall we say, will follow in the path to which they are raised, and so on.

However, there was joy at all. Naturally our upbringing was not as liberated or as liberal as it was. You respected your parents. You looked up to them. Where my mother could give us a easier slap, my father was much more the type who would reason: “Now, why did you have to do that? And what was your reason behind it?” And I think this kind of curiosity is something that developed in me consequently as well, you understand, well, from here on in.

Interviewer: In the late thirties, as things got worse, did your parents make attempts to plan or—

Ruth: Well, yes, of course. There were heavy correspondents in all directions to secure very possibly affidavits from the United States, which finally came as we had urged, for example, my uncle (my mother's brother), who had left in 1937, to contact the respective affidavit providers. And no one ever saw the real need, outside of Germany, what was going on. And things were going in very slow motion and slow pace.

For example, there was an incident that was indescribably upsetting, when the family on my mother's side (her brother and family) left, and we wanted to secure some funds out of the country. So consequently, my father bought two Leicas and one other camera, because they were the kind of cameras that were very much in demand in America, and easy to sell and thereby get a few pennies. However, to avoid any difficulty, because you were being watched already as monies were being spent in and out of the country, he went to Heidelberg to shop. Well, it was a month or two later, after the departure of my uncle and his family, when there's a call from the Gestapo, who came unannounced. And "Herr Liebermensch?" "Yes." They were two men. They were ushered in. I will never forget that. And it was a very lengthy, upsetting questioning. They could have taken him right there and then. "Why did you buy?" And you have to be prepared at the moment, during these— (What should I say?) It's not an interview. It's just like being confronted with the facts. "Why did you do— Did you purchase?" "Yes." "What is the purpose? Where are these cameras? From which account did you withdraw the monies?" Anyway, he twisted and turned and was able to get out of it free, after a lengthy discussion. I remember it so vividly because my cousins were visiting from Hanover at the time, visiting to bid us goodbye because they were getting ready to leave Germany for the United States. And there was always that inner fear of losing the father. Naturally, the pressure was always greater on the male than on the female. Anyhow, he was able to survive with (what should I say?) with flying colors.

As 1938 approaches, and we are in 1938, then there were not only certain curfews but you could not shop as freely as you did. You need to have other stores to give you some supply, because the supply was never as much in abundance as it is here. And the night of November 9th to 10th, we get an early 6 o'clock telephone call from my grandparents. "Come. The synagogue is aflame." And my grandparents, having been connected professionally (my grandfather, I should say) with the *Hauptsynagoge* in Mannheim, lived in the building adjacent to the synagogue. And at that age, he was retired and was in his early seventies. And in a dash, my father and I practically flew out the door to come to their rescue. It was about a 10-minute walk. And we saw exactly what was going on there. He even tried to save some of his musical notes and so on, but you couldn't get into that. It was absolutely aflame. So we picked them up and walked home.

By that time my mother, very anxiously awaiting us, had prepared some breakfast. And the day went on. It was a very dreary, overcast, cold (unintelligible) is already cold at that stage, in that area), and sitting around, trying to catch our breath from the early upset, when at lunch (or dinner; you know, we always ate our main meal at mid-day)—and I'll never forget, we had spinach that day with some eggs—when suddenly we hear the young protestors coming, ringing the doorbell, storming into the apartment. My father had hidden in the back. We were sitting. The first thing that happened was, they took the

bowl of spinach (I see it always) at the ceiling. Anyway, and they rounded up, opened the windows, took all the books. He had an extensive library of literature in Hebrew, of course German, some French, and a lot of musical books, because he looked also for manuscripts very often. And out the window and outside were these other gangsters who just lit a match to set it ablaze. There were at least, that I remember distinctly, three of the Jewish homes on *Kirchenstrasse*, where we lived, that were ablaze. However, much more important was, they found my father in the back bedroom and dragged him out, together with my grandfather. And that was so upsetting. I mean, I see these actions—after 60 years you can't even talk about it—because it instills a fear, because there is the one you love. You don't want to lose him. You need him. He's the guidance. He's the provider. He's just everything that you imagine.

And my sister was in Cologne. She was studying or her nursing degree. And we phoned her and she was under the same condition because this had spread through all the Jewish communities. Some people, fortunately, were able to escape at least being taken into custody. And Mother and I then went down to the police precinct, pleading for the release, because at that time they were assembling all the men. We did manage to get my grandfather back at the time. For the young men such as my father's age, it was not possible. Anyway, we came home very exhausted, very disturbed, to say the least, with beating hearts. What can we do? From that moment on, how can one get a release?

He ended up in Dachau for four weeks. He did write various postcards, not praising but writing facts and signing off, "This message from your Papa {Oser}." And {Oser} meant it's contradictory. It was like a secret code. Fortunately, after four weeks he was released, and appeared that Friday morning, 7 o'clock in the morning—I hear the bell still ringing—and practically frozen. These people stood at attention half of the night sometimes. It was very, very crucial. Many did not return. Some were released earlier, some were kept longer. And it was just such joy. However, his spirit had been partially broken, I would say. Nevertheless, he was a man of optimism in the long run, and just hoped that— We were all registered at that point for the quota for immigration to the United States. There was no opening to Palestine.

He was involved with the National *Jüdische Hilfe*, the Jewish Assistance towards the children. And my sister was fortunate enough to get assigned to a position in Oldham, Lancashire, England, as a student nurse. And her consent and visa to England, as a transit visa, came in March-April, and mine came just about a week. When the notification came, we got to get ready, and I had one week for preparation, not only preparation physically in getting the suitcases and wardrobes ready ("wardrobe" is a broad word at that point). However, and your children, who are developing at an age where I didn't realize a year later nothing would fit anymore. And that was the time that I so vividly remember. And that was in May of 1939, when my parents accompanied— My father had made arrangements (you couldn't get into a hotel, but there were Jewish families that gave a sort of bed-and-breakfast at that time) to escort me to the time when I would be leaving from Frankfurt. And so we spent that night together yet in Frankfurt, with luggage and all.

Conversation on these {unintelligible}— I remember, for example, it was probably a day or two before my departure, or our trip to Frankfurt, when my father at the time (I was 14 years old) took me on a walk and he explained how people in general are, as I will recover, especially, as he thought, a young, attractive girl has to be exceptionally careful when a young fellow will approach her, and how my attitude should be, and I should not let my heart just carry me away; and how to approach people with whom I will be living, the family that had agreed to take me in, a Jewish family in Leeds. But of course all of this was very difficult to visualize, because when you have the protection of your parents, then you have a different kind of concept, until you are suddenly confronted with reality.

Parting was under severe tears. Turning back, I didn't realize it would be the last time for Papa. However, getting together with these children, meeting new faces, provided a complete new outlook, and eager not to be a burden to anyone, as a youngster. Naturally there were a few idiomatic expressions that you knew because you had studied English, you had studied French, but it was limited. And I remember, before crossing the border, the train stopped, which was just before the Dutch border. I think it was Aachen, if I remember correctly, where then the police and the German—they were not Gestapo; they were SAs—to examine your papers, and “What are you doing? and looking at you as a piece of dirt. “You don't even deserve to get out.” You know. The attitude was a very (how can I describe it?) demeaning attitude. That's the way I would describe it.

But once this was over, there was an anticipation with anxiety. What is this new life without parents? You're suddenly free. You could do. But are you doing the right thing in your life? By the time we arrived in London, after the boat took us from Hoek van Holland to Harwich, then the boat train from Harwich to London, then I remember the large assembly hall of children. And more or less a lot of these children were called by the people who had picked them up or had been assigned. Well, I had to continue my trip to Leeds. There was no one. These people were working people and they figured the trip would be provided by Bloomsbury or Woburn House, one of the agencies who took care of the transportation for the children. And I will never forget, the train ride was a four-hour train ride from London to Leeds, where I admired the countryside, the peacefulness. And in this compartment was a gentleman who had ordered tea and toast with marmalade. And he said, “I will order some for you.” It was the first time I ever tasted toast in my entire life. And I thought he saved my life, because I was so hungry. [laugh] He was really so compassionate and understanding, and saw for the first time a little refugee girl.

And by the time I arrived at the station in Leeds, no one there. I did manage to take a bus. I had 10 Marks, and that was (I don't remember) probably two or three pounds. I don't know how much the pound's value in exchange was at the time. I did take the bus to the home of another friend from Mannheim, who had arrived a week or two earlier in Leeds. And she was very helpful. As a matter of fact, we were very close friends in Mannheim, and after 50 years, found each other again here. And we have the greatest rapport nowadays. She lives in Los Angeles. I have visited with her repeatedly, and our reconnection was as if we never had parted. Amazing. She had wiped out a great deal of her young Jewish past as a kid and young teenager, but it did come back to life. Her name

was {Laura Baron}. She married later on a man from England. We had joined the *Haganah* and were in Palestine at the time, after the war. Anyway, we connected, and we had spent some time together when that evening the family Davis Levine called for me.

A very strange home. They had no children of their own. But living habits, everything was quite different in a new land. How will they accept me? And I had to work very hard in that house. It was not a happy time for me at all. They were obliging. They took me the following week by car to visit my sister at the Royal Infirmary in Oldham. And that was just embracing for a moment. You know, your own flesh and blood. There's nothing better than your own, that you can trust. But it was very short duration, because the same day we returned. At least it was a flash, it was a hope, it was a resurrection.

During that time we had quite a bit of correspondence with my parents. And my father, being the pedagogue that he was, always sent what was then called the questionnaire, *Fragebogen*, on a sheet of paper that was folded, where his questions were on one side and we had to answer. No, there were three pages: one for—first Hannah, the older one, and Ruth at the end. And that went on. And he was interested to know how people accept you. How do you do in school? How can you follow with the language? What are they teaching you? How can you manage? Is there homework? What do you have to describe? The typical pedagogy questions that come up. There's no sense in going into further details because that is perhaps too trivial, not for me but in the report. As the time went on, my parents reported how they think of us at night when they go to bed, to include their children in the prayer of meeting, always the hope, hope, hope, *hatikvah*. (That is the translation into Hebrew. I guess you know that too.)

Interviewer: Did they have to move apartments?

Ruth: No. That was still okay. Let me switch back now to what I have there. That was now '39. Of course they were on rations then. Going out at night had been closed off. By that time, the rabbi had left. A lot of people had left. But he was appointed to take on the rabbinical, the theologian for the congregation. And within the congregational office, schools had been closed. There were occasional meetings where the younger children were still instructed more or less on an individual basis. And so life became really very isolated. And you must also remember that people were not anxious. Our own compatriots were not anxious to talk openly. They would not tell you what their prospects of emigration are, because people protected their own skin, and they didn't trust anyone. I'm talking now about the Jew amongst the Jews. And he carried a lot of responsibility in visiting people, people who died, people who took ill. There was still the so-called *Jüdische Altersheim*, the Jewish old age home, which served as a refuge in many ways, because the synagogue had been destroyed, offices had been destroyed, and business was transacted through the offices at the Jewish home for the aged, which served as a hospital as well.

Anyway, so after that, I don't know all that much that happened, only based on the mail that we received, until the outbreak of the war. That cut off everything. I must also add at this point that we (when I say "we," my sister and I) left Germany equipped with tickets

and transfers and all of the paid-up tickets for the United States, because we knew it was going to be a transient country, but we didn't know what the future developments would be. Neither did anyone else, for that matter. As soon as the war broke out, all of these paid passages went down the drain because they had no value anymore. Well, anyway, the war broke out, and we had a very good friend. His name was {Wurzweiler}. You may even know the {Wurzweiler} School of Economics that's part of the Einstein College and so on. Very well known. He gave a big donation at the time. And he channeled the mail between Hannah and myself to my parents, and vice versa. So there was still contact, because we were at war and there was no way of getting any news. And that is what happened at that time. (Oh my God, we're getting close to the end.)

Yes. The war broke out on the English side, the Leeds side. All of the children from school were evacuated. And we were evacuated into Lincolnshire. I would imagine we'd be less than 100 miles away from Leeds, which was Yorkshire. And I lived there with a family of farmers, out in the open country. It was a wonderful fall because it was September and October. We had to go to school— [noise] I'm all right. //

Interviewer: We've had a little lightbulb explosion which interrupted this interview. But we're all alive and well and unhurt. Ruth, where are you located now?

Ruth: Where do I live? I live in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Interviewer: Okay. We hope that at some point in the future we can continue this interview.

Ruth: Oh, I should hope so. I invite you to my home to continue the interview, and I think we have strong outlets that will supply all of the—

Interviewer: This has never happened before.

Ruth: Can you imagine? Well, the light has been on for some time, the previous interviews and so on.

[End of Interview]