

Kindertransport Association Oral History Project
Interview with
VERA LEVINE
November 13, 1993

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

[FILE: EL_B_14_VeraLevine_11_13_93]

Interviewer: It's November 14th, 9:30 in the morning. And I don't know your name—

Vera: Vera Levine.

Interviewer: This is Jennifer Fuschel doing the interview. You can start with your name, where you're from, your parent's name, your original name. We can start from there.

Vera: My name is Vera Levine. I came from Berlin. I was an only child. I was 12-and-a-half years when I left Germany. My father had a business. My mother was at home. She was a first-class dressmaker, but she had retired. She just worked for the family. I was very overprotected. I came from the kind of family that, during the flu season, you didn't use public transportation. You didn't go to theater or opera. Very, very overprotective.

We lived in a suburb of Berlin. My mother, incidentally, was not Jewish. My mother converted when she married my father. At my 6th birthday party, my best friend didn't show up. This was 1933. We waited and waited and then one of the other mothers approached my mother and said "Mrs. Freidman, I don't think Mrs. Meyer will come because you're Jewish." So at 6 years old, I think it was the first time that I heard that I was Jewish. I was familiar with the candle lighting ceremony and Hanukkah, but it was never really spelled out that I was Jewish and there was another world around me that was different. It was interesting.

Going to school, elementary school in this suburb of Berlin, Pankow, I was relatively lucky because there was no overt anti-Semitism. I do remember asking my mother for 20 Fenigs or some kind of small change; we were going to see a movie from school. And my mother [laughs] naïve woman that she was, thought it would be *Snow White* or a children's story. Turns out it was the story of Horst Wessel, one of the founders of the Nazi party, with very graphic details of street fighting between the young Nazi party and the communists. A lot of blood. My parents were horrified afterwards when they found out about it.

Anyway, I finished the four years of elementary school there and then my grandfather died and we moved into the city, to my grandmother's apartment. It was a huge, barn of a place. She had moved there as a bride with—this is an apartment I'm talking about—with separate entrance for the servants. They were supposed to have changed apartments when my grandfather became ill and died, but then it was course thought that poor Umi couldn't be expected to leave her familiar apartment under the circumstances. So we moved in with her. It was right in the center of Berlin. And I started to go to Jewish school, the only Jewish secondary school in Berlin, which was good. I concentrated on Hebrew. I became much more conscious of my Jewish background and history. I had a lot of friends.

My closest friend Jenny lived a subway ride away from us. And even then, I was quite independent; I was allowed to travel around Berlin by myself. However, I had to be home at a certain time. I had to be home at the latest 7 o'clock or 8 o'clock. I remember coming home on the subway train, being late and trying to sort of push the train to make it go faster, because then I would be in trouble and obviously it was because my parents were so very concerned. If I was 5 minutes late, they imagined god knows what had happened to me.

Kristallnacht came. I didn't know about it. I didn't know about it until the next morning. My mother told me I couldn't go to school. My girlfriend Jenny's parents came over from Poland, which meant that that night her father was rounded up and sent back to Poland. I remember telephoning her and an agonizing two or three days before we could get together again. Our business was right next-door—well, the next block—from a department store, a Jewish department store, a very nice one. The damage caused there was spectacular. The revolving doors would not move because of the heaps of glass. Typewriters were thrown out of the 5th floor. Merchandise was destroyed. The streetcars could not travel by that place because of the broken glass. Turned out, the store was owned by an English Jew and they had to pay reparations for it. I remember things like that. We got kind of pleasure out of this. That is very graphic in my memory.

Then, of course, we had no business anymore. My father was home. My father, who was a strict disciplinarian, suddenly switched roles with my mother. My mother was not a well woman. She had kidney disease from my earliest recollection and very high blood pressure with it—nobody knows exactly which comes first—and reacted very poorly, obviously, to the everyday stress of those Hitler years. Every time the doorbell rang, she went into a panic. So she was much more intolerant of me suddenly. Roles were reversed. My father was much more protective, even suggested I should go visit my friend to get out of the house every once in a while.

My uncle—my only uncle, my father's brother—was arrested twice. He was a doctor. He was accused what they called *Rassenschande*, which I believe means sexual relations with non-Jewish, with Aryan patients. He was arrested twice. Never sent to a concentration camp, but detained in the basement of the police station for 3 or 4 days and beaten, what have you. After the second time, he was released and he was able to get to

England. England had—Kinder may not even be aware of it. England made provisions for endangered adult men to be sent to England to a camp in the south of England, in Sandwich. Kitchener Camp, I remember now. And my uncle was one of the fortunate ones to be sent there. His wife and my small cousin followed later on.

My grandmother had an affair with a distant cousin, a love affair with a distant cousin of hers, who wanted to marry her and she jilted him. And I guess with a broken heart, he decided to leave Germany and went to England. And married and lived in England. During the Hitler years, my family like every other Jewish family, tried to ferret out any kind of family abroad in the hope that they could help. And she wrote to this man, Uncle James—James Barronson, I remember—who immediately wrote back to say that he had a daughter, Sophie, who was very much involved in finding guarantees for children and had placed several children already in England. And, of course, helped me, too.

New Year's Eve, 1939, we got news that there was a guarantee for me and I was going to go to England. And I left June 5th, six months later. I remember, I don't think there was any direct correspondence between the woman who gave the guarantee and my parents; it might've been through this cousin. But I remember a letter coming to my parents wondering whether it was all right if I attended church with Miss Kingham. 12 years old. I became hysterical. As far as I was concerned, anybody that was non-Jewish was my mortal enemy. I couldn't envision living with a non-Jew.

Anyway, I was well prepared for the trip, emotionally. I had private English lessons 5 days a week. I don't think they did very much good except I didn't have to do my homework and didn't have to practice the piano, and those were plus factors. I reacted to a great extent as though it was going to be an adventure. I wouldn't have to ask permission which dress to wear when I went to school. We used to wear knee-highs in the fall and then in the winter these horrible woolen stockings, which I hated. And all I could think of was I could go through the entire winter without having to wear the stockings. I wasn't really that immature, but boy oh boy, I guess I was immature! [laughs]

We left. Saying goodbye to my maternal grandmother, who was not Jewish, was terrible. I thought that I would never see her again. She doted on me. I was the only grandchild. I was the only—My mother had had one sister who died as an accident as a child; she drowned. So my mother was an only child and I was obviously then the only grandchild.

We left in the morning of my departure. Had a cab. I remember my dear father realizing I had left my umbrella at home and making the cabdriver return. So he ran up to the apartment to get the umbrella. Of course, I left the umbrella on purpose. I didn't want to go with an umbrella. That was my father, though.

I remember very few things about the trip itself. There was a young boy, probably about 5. And there was an older girl, much older than—she was probably 15 or 16—who was asked to take care of this little boy. And he cried and wet his pants, but we sort of took care of him. I remember the traumatic moment when the German, I guess SS officers,

came by to check our papers and to check out luggage. I had a little suitcase. They had us open things and rummage through it. And the relief when we realized we'd crossed over the border to Holland. And the first stop, the only stop in Holland, the station where we were given fruit and cookies. I was old enough to realize this was— I was out of Germany.

The trip on the boat was very uneventful. The next morning, I remember we disembarked and it was a nice morning. It was June, June 6th. A nice, warm sunny morning and we sat on a large meadow—I believe it was the playing field of a school—while we were waiting for the train. And we were given a bar of Cadbury chocolate. I was in seventh heaven! Oh was that good!

We got to Victoria Station and were taken to a waiting room, I suppose, with chairs lined up for us to be picked up by our guarantors or representatives of the committee. There was a boy who was older, probably also 14 or so, who turned to me and said, “Why are you crying?” I said, “I’m not crying.” I wasn’t. But tears were streaming down my face. I guess just tension. Shortly, my name was called. I met Miss Kingham. It was a short trip to St. Albans, which was a fashionable suburb of London, and my first tea party. I hated tea. Tea to me was a beverage that you were given when you were sick. And being a child, I wanted to get rid of it and concentrate on more interesting things. So when I was offered another cup of tea, I said, “Thank you,” thinking that it meant “No, thank you.” After the third cup of tea, I caught on.

The woman who guaranteed for me was unmarried. She had two tobacconist shops in St. Albans and a very nice little house, lived with a housekeeper. And married two weeks after I got there. She married a widower with a 20-year-old daughter who never knew of my existence until that first weekend when he came up. He was the head postmaster of Ipswich, that’s on the east coast, in East Anglia, and about 7 or 8 small towns around there. And we moved to Ipswich.

The first year I was there 11 months and two weeks. They were unhappy. Now, I was not abused, it was more neglect and disinterest. And total insensitivity to me. When war was declared, I thought my world had come to an end. My father had written a horrid note. Oh, of course, I should say that I had daily letters from my parents and packages at least two or three times a week. My father had written a horrid note saying that he thought that there will be a way to keep in touch. He remembered the First World War; there were means of communicating through the Red Cross. But as far as I was concerned, the day war broke out I thought my world had come to an end.

My guarantor’s husband, uncle, there’s a conversation— She asked me, “How do you feel? Who do you want to win the war?” And he turned to his bride and said, “Alice, how can you ask such a question?” And I said, “Yes, how can you?” Then he said, “After all, she is German.” And I thought how can you ask such a *question*!? So as I said, total insensitivity.

I was installed at school and I made friends and it was a good experience for me. My guarantor, my aunt, sent me up to her room one day to get a pack of cigarettes out of the dresser, from the dresser drawer, and there was a letter from refugee committee. I was unhappy and I was a nice kid, nicely brought up, but I read the letter. And from it I gathered that they were trying to find different placement for me and the excuse that was given was that he was Head Postmaster and got early warnings of air raids and should not have an alien in the house. I was concerned because by that time I had friends and had established a very happy relationship at school.

Through my headmistress at school, another home was found with a unmarried woman, Miss Bailey, Joan Bailey, who already had one Kind two years younger than I, Doris, and who took me in. The committee paid my schooling and paid her a small amount per month. And that was a lifesaver for me. This was a lady, a great woman, who gave of herself unselfishly, who surrounded us with care and love with no strings attached. And you don't find that very often, even the most loving parent-child relationship. When I'm a parent I realized this. She was really wonderful. And having Doris, this other girl, there was like having a sister for the first time in my life.

The school practically adopted me. They had much more sympathy, or empathy, for me than for poor Doris. Doris was two years younger, had lost her accent and was already completely assimilated before she got into the school, whereas I was the poor little German refugee child whose parents were still in Germany. Doris had a father in London and her mother and brother had managed to get out to Switzerland. So it was a different situation. And I made the most of it. One teacher paid for my Red Cross messages. I managed to get a tennis racket during wartime, which was almost impossible. A teacher's mother made or sent me a tennis dress without coupons. These things mean absolutely nothing here, today, but at that time ah! They were treasures.

I stayed in school. I took my matric. And my guardian—I really prefer to think of Joan Bailey as my guardian—gave me another semester in school just to give me a little breathing time between the traumatic events of this matric examination—for the last year of school, you zero in on that—and trying to decide what to do with my life. My headmistress tried to get funds for me to stay in school and attend college. She wrote to Lady Astor, because her daughter was a school friend of Lady Astor's daughter, and was told—and I don't really blame her at all—that the Astors did not make any donations to individuals, it was just to organizations. So I decided I better find a way to become independent and make a living for myself. I managed to get a job with the Ministry of Supply. I got training in Cambridge, very intensive lab training, and then was stationed in the north of England.

And then I heard my parents had survived. Now, all along— My father had given me a watch, a stainless steel watch with a very interesting clasp. I don't remember now exactly, but everybody commented about it. And I had this childish feeling that as long as the watch still worked, my parents would be all right.

But when the Red Cross messages— I don't know if people know this: they were 25 word messages, including address and signature, so you couldn't really write very much. Any message that originated in England and would go to Germany, my parents would answer on the back and it would come back to me and vice versa. And it would take about 4 months to make the last trip. Well, the last 6 or 8 months of the War, no messages anymore. Naturally, because of the bombing there was no train service anymore. And I had really steeled myself to the fact that I would be an orphan at the end of the War. And I learned my parents had survived.

Then, I made every effort to get to Germany, to try and help them. I was too young for everything. British Red Cross, you name it. And that's where my friend, the same Jenny, who lived in England with her parents and was part of the refugee community, she had read that the American government was looking for people who could speak and read both languages fluently. I was two years below their minimum age, but they were desperate. I went for an interview. They took me.

In the end of September, a week after my 19th birthday, I went over to Germany in an American uniform to work for the Civil Censorship Division. I was stationed outside Munich. Because of my scientific background, I had found out there was a lab—didn't know what kind of a lab—but a lab that didn't have to travel to Munich every day to work. The lab had a special building in Pullach, where we were stationed. So I applied for it and of course I got the job. My husband was in charge of the lab. He was a GI. My husband.

I met my husband and we got married. He took a discharge overseas. This was a cryptography and secreting lab. It was interesting.

Interviewer: Have you seen your parents yet?

Vera: Yes. How could I forget that?

I moved heaven and earth to get to Berlin. We were stationed just south of Munich. And CCD—Civil Censorship Division—had a station in Berlin. My parents contacted the American Red Cross and I had a communication from them saying that—sent not to me, but to the CO—if I wanted to see my mother alive, I should come soon. And in spite of that even, I did not manage to get papers to travel to Berlin.

I was there for just a little less than a year before I managed to go to Berlin. Somebody, a GI, was going to the clothing store and I hitched a ride with him and he had to stop off at military government. And I was sitting in the jeep and in the spur of the moment, I decided I was going to Berlin. I asked for a Chaplin. There was no Jewish Chaplin, there was a protestant Chaplin who saw me, who heard my tale of woe, couldn't understand why I couldn't have gotten TDY and within 5 days I had—TDY for Ten Days Temporary Duty—to assign me to Berlin.

I got to Berlin loaded down with sugar and coffee from the mess hall; the mess sergeant had given me stuff. Cigarettes; I didn't smoke. Loaded down. I didn't know how to get from the train station to my parents. Could not get transportation. Finally got transportation to our station there in Berlin and the CO there gave me a jeep with a young German driver. My parents lived in the Russian sector of Berlin. The kid was afraid—First of all, didn't know the Russian sector and was afraid to drive in there. How I found my way, I don't know.

My parents by that time lived in the same house where I had been living until I was 6 or 7 years old, in Pankow, the suburb. What happened was the Russians set a certain date by which time Germans had to claim their property, whether it was houses, businesses or apartments. And if they did not claim their property, then they confiscated it. And people like my parents were given it to live there. So my parents at that time lived in the same house, one floor above the apartment when I grew up, I was a baby.

Somehow I managed to find my way, to direct that jeep back to Pankow, which was difficult because first of all it was quite a while since I'd been to Berlin, but primarily streets I was looking for didn't exist anymore. Mountains of rubble. I managed to find it.

I stayed there for 10 days. I must've lost 15 pounds because I couldn't eat at my parents' house. I knew they had very little food. I couldn't swallow. During that time—twice during those 10 days—I went to the American Zone, to the PX and ate a meal and stocked up on my cigarette and candy ration again.

But it was—It was a wonderful reunion. My maternal grandmother had survived. She was there. I thought I would never, ever see her again. My mother and father realized something strange was going on because every once in a while, more often than I realized, Bob's name would pop up—my husband to be. So they were not too surprised when, shortly after I left, I told them we were engaged to be married.

My father managed a business. Business. He worked for the city of Berlin in the Russian Sector. The Russians immediately put him into some kind of job, administrative job. He managed to get, with their help, an interzonal pass so he came to Pullach, Munich, to visit with me. He stayed about a week. My mother managed to come to us after we moved—After we were married, we moved to Esslingen, which was near Stuttgart and I had my own home there. My mother was able to come, also, on a temporary permit. She stayed about 3 weeks with us.

And then Robert's tour of duty was over and we came back to the States. And about 18 months after that, my parents came to the States.

How much time do we have? All right.

I'm happily married. We will be celebrating our 47th anniversary in December. Very fortunate. Things were not always easy when we first came here. My mother-in-law was a very difficult person. We stayed with her for a year. We couldn't find an apartment. But things weren't bad.

My parents came here. They had quite a number of friends here, lots of friends in the New York area. We were much more involved with my mother-in-law who was by then a widow, and very demanding, than I was able to devote time to my parents. I think there was probably a little resentment there.

Because we had to get away from New York and my mother-in-law, we ended up in Dover, Delaware. My husband got a job with International Latex there. We arrived with nothing in Dover, Delaware and three years later left with one dog and two children. It was a very successful stay, to say the least. We came back to the New York area, ended up where I am now in New Jersey, East Brunswick.

My parents decided, after my father retired—my father worked for Barney's clothing stores and was in charge of the payroll for all their 80-something stores at that time—after my father retired, he decided he could not live on social security here and they went back to Germany.

And at that point, I realized that there were deep scars that I bore from the initial separation from my parents. I had always considered myself very fortunate because my years in England were, except for the first year, my years in England were very, very pleasant. I loved England. I am very grateful to England. England gave me back the childhood that I had lost in the last couple of years in Berlin. So I've always— And of course I never considered myself a survivor. The survivors were those who lived through the camps. But when my parents decided to go back, I found it very hard to cope. Initially I was under the fact that they were abandoning their grandchildren, but I think—subconsciously, they were also abandoning me a second time.

Now, I had always thought that my parents' decision to send me to England was the most unselfish sign of maternal love. After we were reunited, I was horrified to hear my mother say that if she had known how long the separation would have lasted, she would never have let me go. This was— I realized, of course that she suffered from losing her little girl and unfortunately, she never found her little girl again. I wasn't that same child. Somehow, miraculously, I managed to face that fact without developing guilt feelings. My children feel a little underprivileged, or short-changed, I should say, because their mother doesn't have guilts. I don't have guilts. I have regrets about certain things. I don't have guilt feelings. Since—this is the second reunion we've attended—since we've attended these reunions, my husband who attends the workshop for spouses found out that I am not unique. Quite a number of us Kinder have this ability, or disability—I don't know what it is—of not having guilts. I'm not a psychiatrist, I don't know why it happens, but it seems to be a fact.

I realize that whatever disappointments my parents had in me, it wasn't my fault. It wasn't anything that I did or didn't do. This was a result of the Hitler times. This was a result of the separation during critical years of development. I grew up in a different country, different language, different culture. And I was not a little girl anymore. I was a young married woman when we finally were reunited.

But when they did decide to go back, it was very, very hard for me to accept. My mother—now remember my mother was not Jewish, my mother converted to Judaism—my mother told Robert, my husband, “If anything happens to Papa, I will come back immediately.” She only went because of my father. Their marriage was exceptionally good. They lived for each other, probably because they had been through so much during the Hitler years. They only had each other. But it was a very, very wonderful close relationship. My father would go to work in the morning and leave love letters for my mother. I always said there's my mother and my father and then for a long time, there was nobody. And then I came. And then for a long, long, long time nobody. And then the rest of the world. And I didn't say this with any bitterness. It was a fact. I think they were very fortunate to have that kind of relationship. But she gave in to my father about going back to Germany. And why my father wanted to go back, I have no idea. I tried to get professional help at the time to cope with it. It was— It was suggested that my father was— It was like returning to the womb. My father was going back to a time that he thought of as carefree, as his childhood.

My mother died in Germany. I did see her. I went once to see them, to visit them. Ten days after I left, she went into a coma and she died. I think she was waiting for me. My father remarried a girlfriend of my mother's, actually. My father died then and I've had no more contact with his second wife.

I had very loving parents. Our relationship would have been very, very different if it hadn't been for the separation. But the separation was a fact. My children have very happy memories of their grandparents.

I have two children. I am still working, although I will be retiring as of December 1. We have been offered an early retirement package. I'm looking forward to it with some apprehension because it will be an adjustment. But I am looking forward to it. It'll give me opportunity to pursue some other interests. We live in East Brunswick. Both my children live with us. Neither one of them is married. My son is adopted. I had a great deal of difficulty and later on carrying. So we adopted. When we went down to Dover, Delaware, we adopted. And within a very short time, I was pregnant with my daughter. Perfect pregnancy, painless delivery. Just a miracle. But we are relatively old for my children. My daughter was born on my 13th wedding anniversary. So we worked at it for quite a while. My husband is retired, although he does work for a friend of ours part time just to keep busy.

My relationship, my overall relationship when I think about what happened to me was that I think more good than bad came out of it. No question about the fact that the initial

separation was a tremendous trauma. My friends consider me a survivor, told me that years before it here three years ago, at the first reunion. I never considered myself a survivor. But I think I am. Whether because of my early childhood or in spite of it, I don't know. I hope this has been some interest for others, particularly for my family. I enjoy doing it and I thank you. My husband just peeked in.

Interviewer: Wow, you covered practically everything. The only thing I think you didn't touch on was Judaism.

Vera: Oh, that is so important.

Interviewer: Can we go to that for a minute or two?

Vera: Yes, maybe you can put it in the middle though, it shouldn't really be at the end.

Interviewer: You can say, PS.

Vera: I just realized I left out something very important. And that is Judaism. I think I mentioned I had gone— For two years, I had gone to Jewish school in Berlin because of Hitler. See? Everybody says there was some good in him. Because of Hitler, I was much more aware of my heritage, of my religion, of my faith. When I got to England, as I got older, I made it my business to read about it a lot. Books were not available in Germany. Not to me. I don't think they were available period.

When I went to England, I had no contact with any Jewish community whatsoever. Ipswich, the small town where I was staying, had two other refugee girls and they had a representative, a local representative of the children's refugee committee, Mrs. Burton, who was Jewish originally and married to a Unitarian minister without a congregation who was teaching English in a high school. She had open house for us three girls every Sunday. And we would congregate there. And it was through her effort and my headmistress that Miss Bailey was found for me as a second home. But it didn't give me any contact with my religion. I remember visiting my friend in London and seeing her mother light the Friday night candles and bursting into tears. I went there for Passover. Other than that, there was no contact at all.

And yet. I didn't go to church. And everybody knew I would never go to church. I don't think I would ever have considered marrying a non-Jew. Not necessarily because of my religion, but because of what it represented. I wouldn't give *them* the satisfaction.

We are Reform Jews now. My children both went to Reform temples for Hebrew School. I am 100% Jew, but I'm not an observant Jew. I do not observe the dietary laws. Both children, they may end up intermarrying, but both of them will never give up their religion. My daughter one time was close to being married, assured me that her children would be raised Jewish. Facing facts, it's difficult to date, to exclude the possibility of an

intermarriage. And I'm the product of an intermarriage, too, and it worked out fine. But I am 100% Jew.

[END OF INTERVIEW]