

Kindertransport Association Oral History Project
Interview with
IRENE SCHMIED (Part 1)
October 24, 2004

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: IreneSchmeid_BayHoloPt1_10_24_04] (Note: Schmied is misspelled in filename)

Interviewer: [inaudible] San Francisco Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project. And we're interviewing [inaudible] Irene Schmied. And the videographer is Dr. [Ann] {unintelligible}, and my name is {unintelligible}. What is your birth name, and when were you born? What city and what country?

Irene: My birth name was Irene Katzenstein, and I was born in Berlin, Germany.

Interviewer: And what was your father's name?

Irene: It was Dr. Martin Katzenstein.

Interviewer: And your mother's name?

Irene: It was {Annie Böhm} Katzenstein.

Interviewer: And did you have brothers and sisters?

Irene: No.

Interviewer: How did your family support itself?

Irene: My father was a lawyer, a sort of a corporate lawyer at that time.

Interviewer: And did the family ever talk about the Depression days, how they managed to get through those? Do you know anything about that at all?

Irene: Well, my mother's father was also a lawyer, so I think they were quite affluent. But I did hear from my mother the stories about the decline in currency and the fact that they had to pull money around and the prices flopped and what— you know. But I didn't really hear too much about the hardship, although my mother was very democratic in her outlook.

Interviewer: And what schools did you attend?

Irene: Well, I first went to something called the *Schmargendorfer Volksschule*, and then I— Well, I had never had any problems actually, but my parents felt it was better to take me out, I imagine some time in 1937. And I went to the *Goldschmidt Schule*, which was quite a well known Jewish school.

Interviewer: In Berlin?

Irene: In Berlin.

Interviewer: And what grade were you able to achieve?

Irene: I'm not sure, because I went to school to the very day after Kristallnacht, and I never went to school again. That happened just after my tenth birthday, so I guess I would have been like in fourth grade, fourth-fifth grade.

Interviewer: Can you describe your parents' education?

Irene: Yes. Well, my father was very, very scholarly. He was also a bit of a *bon vivant*, but he was very much an intellectual. He was a lawyer, but I think he had also studied economics, and he was quite successful as a corporation lawyer. Later on, he had his own practice. I believe he didn't do quite so well. But he was very interested in a lot of things in addition to law. He was an authority on etching, you know, engravings, and he collected etching: George Grosz and— you know. He was very interested in art.

And my mother was also very literary. I get the literary inclinations from my mother. She, I guess, had the sort of normal education. She did not take an *Abitur*, but she must have had the equivalent of a high school diploma. Then before the First World War, she took what— It was not a university program, but it was a certificate in English. It was called the *Englische Sprache* exam, English language certificate. So she was actually authorized to teach, I think like in middle school for girls. She never did teach, but— And then she was very literary, and she married relatively late. She worked as a secretary against her parents' wishes for a sort of journalistic outfit. It was similar to Reuters. They wrote articles and sent them out. And they found out that she had a talent for writing these short personal essays, and she moved up. She wrote them while she worked as a secretary, and they printed them, and they made her an editorial assistant for about a year. And I think that was the best time of her life.

Interviewer: And she talked to you about that?

Irene: Oh yes! Everything. Yes. Oh, she talked— Sometimes it got on my nerves. It was called the *Telegraphen Union*. And “If I were still at the *Telegraphen Union*, I would be writing

about this.” You know. “Yeah, yeah.” But I think she worked so hard that it affected her lungs. And then she went away to recuperate somewhere in the Italian Alps, and that’s where she met my father.

Interviewer: Were both families from Germany– [voices overlap]

Irene: No, they were a little bit different. My father’s family came from a little town. They were more middle-class and more sturdy and more Jewish. They came from this little town near Kassel, where there was a very old Jewish community. The family tree goes back to the 1600s, something like that.

Interviewer: What town was that?

Irene: Eschwege, near Kassel. But they were merchants, I think cotton. The linen and cotton industry was very important in that area. So most of them were in some kind of manufacturing. It was an old, fairly large Jewish community, and unfortunately they were rather prosperous, so people turned against them. But they were not overly– In my father’s generation there were few lawyers and doctors. I mean, they were not ambitious. They were happy to be businessmen and merchants, and they were not as culture-conscious as the Berlin Jews. My father of course was, as a lawyer. So I’m saying they were sort of typical middle-class German Jews. And they were more Jewish. They celebrated– my memories of celebrating holidays. They went to the synagogue. They were Orthodox but not really Orthodox. You know. And they ate kosher but they didn’t really eat kosher. But it was a very old sort of German Jewish—sturdy. My mother always said my father’s family is very sturdy, self-assured, a little bit petit-bourgeois in some ways.

Whereas my mother’s family was much more ambitious. I believe they were also wealthier. My mother didn’t like to admit, and it’s silly. Her mother was born in Posen, which was Germany, so they were German. But my mother always said “We don’t go back too far.” Apparently, my grandmother’s father had gone to Australia and made a lot of money, and gone back to Posen and became a very distinguished—I don’t know—some kind of something or other, some honorary title and stuff like that. But my mother said they were not Eastern European. They did everything to pretend not to be Eastern European. But if you go back, probably the great-grandfather came from a shtetl or something. So they were assimilated. Their assimilation came much later. But they did much better financially, because I think they had a lot of money. That grandfather who was a lawyer, he never worked much because they were in the liquor business or something. I don’t know. They had something to do with alcohol. And other people in that family were chemists. Chemists and alcohol apparently were two things– So they were very prosperous and they were very ambitious intellectually. They wanted to be cultured, much more than my father’s family. They wanted to be cosmopolitan. They wanted to go to– But my mother always said (that was her take on it) that my father’s family were more neurotic, and that the assimilation process had gone much faster, so

that there were sometimes problems. They didn't have that sturdiness. They were more neurotic, more highly strung. But interesting.

Interviewer: Did you have family living close to your home, in the general area?

Irene: Well, we lived in {Dahlem}. My father didn't want to have children. He was a bachelor type. And he was already in his forties when he married. My mother was actually 35 when I was born. He didn't want to have children. They wanted to be more sort of little bit bohemian. You know, they liked the good things. But he was very happy when my mother decided to have a child. So they built a villa in Dahlem, a Bauhaus villa in Dahlem, which is quite a nice area. And we didn't have relatives there, but my mother's family— We went for lunch to my grandmother, who lived in Berlin. And my uncle (my mother's brother) lived with her. And my grandmother from Eschwege came to visit, and my aunt came to visit, and my cousin, who's still alive today, came to visit. They were all— I was a sort of latecomer because my parents were kind of— My mother was 35, my father was 42 when I was born. But we had family, and also of course my parents had friends.

Interviewer: What kind of Jewish customs did you celebrate or keep in your home?

Irene: Well, not much, you see. As I said, my real experience of Jewish holidays was when I went to this little town, my father's home town, because they kept all the holidays. And that's where I went to synagogue on Saturday, and I think they celebrate Friday evening. And I certainly remember Passovers there, because I remember I had the wishes, the youngest child. And there was a museum in Kassel that had a very famous Rembrandt, Jacob's Blessing. And I remember as a little seven-year-old, I had a wish Passover that I could go and see that painting, and they took me to see it. And then I was on a visit there about two years ago; I went to see the painting again.

Interviewer: Oh, that's nice.

Irene: Yes. But at home, you see, my mother's family were much less Jewish, strangely enough. And actually some of them were converted. In fact, they almost converted my uncle, but at the last moment they decided the old grandfather might be hurt or something. They didn't. But they didn't celebrate much. And we didn't celebrate too much. I think sometimes we went for Passover to relatives of my father, because I remember that. But of course my father had had a sort of traditional— He certainly read Hebrew. And I have his prayer shawl. I gave it to— you know. And he had everything. The Hanukkah *Leuchter*, I don't know if we always lit it, but I certainly remember it being lit the last year or two. And also we did celebrate Christmas. But I think that year after Kristallnacht we did not, because we'd never done it before. I remember my father with his prayer shawl, reading Hebrew. So then we sort of reverted. And also, the synagogues had been destroyed, but we went to something that was a temporary synagogue, a makeshift synagogue. And I remember I was given a prayer book. And I really cherished that prayer

book the first months in England. And then, with evacuation and stuff, it sort of got lost. So then my Jewishness also sort of went. Yes.

Interviewer: Did you know you were Jewish? Did you feel Jewish before Kristallnacht, let's say?

Irene: Oh yes, before, because also this *Goldschmidt Schule*. Oh, I always knew I was Jewish. Yes. There was never any pretense that we were not Jewish. I mean, we never pretended to be anything else. And then I went to this *Goldschmidt Schule*, which was a Jewish school, so we put on a play for Hanukkah, and I was one of the charwomen sweeping the temple. You know. And then I remember doing the Hebrew lettering and finding it very beautiful. I didn't know Hebrew, but we did Hebrew lettering, and it touched me very deeply. And my father was kind of Jewishy, you know, because he was an intellectual. My mother, I think, in her youth flirted a little bit with not being too Jewish. But my father was a certain type of professional Jewish intellectual. I mean, in his youth he also liked the ladies, in his youth, but he was essentially rather Jewish.

Interviewer: What were the ethnic divisions in your neighborhood? Was this a Jewish neighborhood?

Irene: No, no. Well, this was Dahlem. This had been some kind of an estate. So our house was the first house on this plot, and it had been an orchard. So we had a cherry tree and we had a plum tree, and all sorts of things in our garden. And actually, the architect who built our house and I think the house next door was Jewish. I know his name was {Marcus}. Now, the people who lived on our right side, they were called [Fenner], and they were German, but we were very friendly with them, and they were actually responsible (I'll get to that later) for helping my father to get out of Germany, to Chile, because they had a relative who was actually the foreign secretary in Chile. So they got a visa for my father. On the other side, I think the house on the left-hand side was actually like built by the same architect. I think there was a family living there who were Jewish. But later on, there was a non-Jewish family. And I have pictures of my playing with the girl from this side and that side. But on the other hand, here through the Kindertransport, at the first meeting I met a woman who found out where I'd lived, and she contacted a second cousin of hers here in California, and she came and she told me, "My second cousin knows all about you," and so on. So the Zuckermans, they lived two doors down, and I remember the little boy, and we were continuous playmates. So it was pretty much a sophisticated mixed neighborhood.

Interviewer: Did your parents have many Christian friends as well?

Irene: Yes. I mean, my mother still had some friends from where she worked, her year as an editorial assistant. And she actually had one very good friend who was Italian, and that's a whole different story. She had been her Italian teacher, but they became very close friends. That's a whole story. And this woman then married a German reserve officer, but anti-Nazi. And that's a whole story. I can't go into it. And they still visited us, or {Alice}, long after nobody was supposed to visit us. And the daughter of this— You know, it was all so mixed up. The German reserve officer who was anti-Nazi and worked as a

photographer, she was Aryan but she married a Jewish composer in Sweden. And she took out a lot of jewelry for my mother. After the war, that jewelry— You know, there are stories. Oh yes.

And my father— Well, all right, I'm supposed to talk about everything. You know, when I was in therapy in New York, my mother got very irritated. And she had a right, but— you know. I was becoming too interested in my father. So once when I was visiting her, she said, "But you know, you were not the only one. Your father also had a son." So it turned out that he must have had some kind of a relationship when he was a student in Leipzig with a lady, probably a sort of simpler woman. And he had a son, and this son called him Uncle. But I never met that son and I've never met any—

But you know, so I mean, it was a little bit like in New York today or in California today. You were Jewish but, you know, your friends were every— yes. I just can't think. All I can think about is this Alice, because she also had a brother, and they used to come. And her daughter actually then married somebody in the States who was kind of related to me. So some kind of ongoing relationship. So it was— you know. I guess you understand. You were Jewish and you didn't deny it, but it really didn't impinge until the National Socialists came in. It didn't impinge so much on— You had friends from school, you had— you know. I can't think more.

Interviewer: Was anyone in your family or your father involved in politics or in unions before—

Irene: Well, they weren't. They were liberal, but when I listened to some of the other people, they were really not leftists. My mother always felt very liberal because she voted for something which was called the Democratic Party. It wasn't anything. I mean, it wasn't socialist. My mother thought— I don't want to say anything negative about her. She thought she was very liberal, but in many ways she was also a little bit a product of her time. But they were certainly democratic. But I don't think they were the kind of people who went out during the bad times and— My mother worked for the Red Cross during the war. And my grandmother in Eschwege, also during the war she was doing a lot. But that was sort of more patriotic, actually. They were not socialists. And I hate to say it, they didn't have too much of a social conscience. But they were liberal.

?: That was in the First World War.

Irene: That, yes.

Interviewer: What did your father do?

Irene: Well, he was already a lawyer, so he was an officer in the First World War. And I hate to say it. And he learned perfect French. You know he was not a— I hate to say— He was a lieutenant, but I don't think he saw too much action. I think actually he quite enjoyed the experience. Because my mother always said there was no responsibility and— you know.

Interviewer: How large was Berlin before you left? Any idea? How many inhabitants?

Irene: Oh, I don't know. It was a big city. I mean, it was a big city. But that's easy to find out.

Interviewer: So before Hitler came, relations with other people, with Christians, was—

Irene: Yes, actually it wasn't so— I don't remember— So many people, especially Austrians, have told me they went to school and had friends, and then when the Germans marched in, the Nazis marched in, from one day to the next things changed. Well, I don't remember that so much. I left the school, the *Schmargendorfer Volksschule*, not because they had— They hadn't really discriminated against me, but I think at that time you were not supposed to go to a public school, and my parents sort of thought it was better. But actually, the teacher I had had in class used to pass by. I don't think she came to visit us, but she always passed by the garden. And I actually communicated with somebody else who went to that school, because I was writing about it. And he also said he never had any tr— you know. Now, in Berlin, the atmosphere— But I do remember in Eschwege, my father's home town, where things were much worse. Right away the administration became National Socialist, and the town was given a military airport. And I remember going for an excursion somewhere with my aunt, and then she came home and she sort of collapsed on the chair and she said, "Ah, this is terrible. People I've known all my life, people I've gone to school with, people I danced with when I was a girl, and all of a sudden they act as if I don't exist." So that, I got from her.

Interviewer: When do you think—

Irene: All I remember as far as discrimination is concerned, I do remember once we were on an excursion, and we went somewhere, a sort of café or beer garden, you know, with these benches, and you go in and you eat your sandwich or you order some apple pie. You go and order coffee and apple pie and maybe a beer. And when we came out, it said "*unerwünscht*." We saw the notice, "Jews not wanted." But they never said anything. But remember, Berlin was a Social Democratic city. In Eschwege, my father's home town, it was bad from day one.

Interviewer: I was going to ask you, when did you first notice anti-Semitism?

Irene: Well, I didn't. But what I did notice, what I'll never forget is in 1933 I was playing on the street with my scooter, and it was a weekday, and my parents both came out, very well dressed, formally dressed, and they were going to vote the election. And I just sort of felt something ominous. I don't know, I certainly felt it. You know, I felt it. Bu I can't remember any definite— This is the terrible thing, you see. I know you understand it, but people are always asking me for instances, and I don't. But it's just that gradually things did become narrow. I loved the zoo, and I did go to the zoo. We stopped going to the zoo.

Oh yes. The one thing that really was upsetting. We had a maid. Once upon a time, we'd had a cook and a maid, but afterwards we just had this one maid. And I was with her a lot because she was also there for me. I was very close to her, in some ways sometimes closer— you know, very close. And she left. And actually she didn't leave when the Nuremberg laws came. She left later, because the funny thing is, she had American citizenship. She had been born in America because her family were Seventh Day Adventists, and so she could stay. And the Seventh Day Adventists were also— And she used to take me to her Seventh Day Adventist chapel, too. I remember that. And I guess she then left Germany, because the Seventh Day— So when she left, that was difficult, because we couldn't get anybody. You couldn't have anybody. You couldn't have a woman under the age of 45 or something. And we had some kind of a man, a horrible man, working for us for a time. And then we got a maid from my father's home town, who was very old and who had worked for a very Orthodox Jewish family who had gone to America, and she came to us then. And I never got on with her very well. I never liked her very much. So the maid leaving was really very— She was like my friend.

Interviewer: [inaudible]

Irene: Yes. And then of course there were all sorts of things you couldn't do. I think my mother sent me to the zoo with a maid sometimes, because maybe people didn't notice. I don't know which maid. I didn't go with my parents.

And then the swimming pool. I learned to swim, and we went regularly. And all of a sudden we couldn't go there. So I do remember— And then my mother would get very nervous. She would take me to Wannsee, which is actually where the Wannsee Conference was signed. And then Jewish people would go out to the beaches in Wannsee to swim, because they couldn't go to the swimming pool. And there was some kind of a *Razzia* there. And my mother was always very nervous. I remember her being very nervous. We would take the bus and she was very nervous. And funnily enough, I remember once we went or we didn't go, and there was some kind of a *Razzia*, I mean, some kind of *Aktion*.

Interviewer: Action.

Irene: Yes. They came and they looked at— maybe picked up— I don't know if they sent people to concentration camps, but they took them in for a few days. They looked at everybody's paper and they gave people a hard time, and they probably made some of the men stay somewhere. I don't think they sent them to camps. But we were lucky because my father was not picked up. He did not go— Kristallnacht, no one— In his home town, Eschwege, it was ghastly. But he was not— I never know why. You see, it wasn't all— I don't know. I mean, what I have to say sometimes is, it wasn't all black and white, was it?

Interviewer: Not at the beginning.

Irene: No.

Interviewer: And he might have had some connections that helped him?

Irene: Well, I just don't know. Well, Kristallnacht, my mother was in Munich, because we were already— There was a tremendous conflict between— I mean, it was a very good marriage for two sort of scholarly, artistic people, sort of upper middle-class people who were used to a certain comfort in their life. And the marriage was very, very good. But then they could never agree about how to leave Germany. And that's why I think the sister's important, because my mother said, from the day the National Socialists took office, she sensed that something was going to happen. But she didn't know how to express it. She didn't know how to work on it. So she would repress it all inside her and just go on every day, and do a lot of reading and knitting and work it all out. And then occasionally she would just sort of explode and blame my father (in fact, I remember him crying once) and sort of make a scene. And then they would have a reconciliation and nothing would happen.

And my father at the same time collected a lot of etchings and really quite valuable things. But he also collected books. I mean, it was like an obsession, his first editions. All the closets were full of the books. It wasn't only the bookshelves; they went into the closets and everything. And he became so absorbed in his book collection that it was like he was trying to get away from it. So they were both trying to escape. And it's sad because my mother always said after the war, I mean, after we left Germany, “*{Es war mit— Mann könnte nichts mit ihm Anfang.}*” It was impossible. You couldn't talk to him about it. He didn't want to leave.

So my father said, when we reunited in Chile, “If only your mother had been a different kind of woman, and we'd been able to talk about it sensibly, and put out a feeler here and put out a feeler there, and not someone who had these emotional moments and then withdrew, we could have made so much more sensible plan.” Because actually we did have relatives, quite close relatives, in America. But I do think my father— I mean, he was in his early fifties, and he was able to keep his practice till 1938. So he was not particularly keen on starting off again somewhere else. He really wasn't. So my mother—

One of the incidents my mother told me then, and I put it in one of the stories I've written, is that we had a friend who had already gone to England, and he wanted to take some money out for us, so he said my mother should bake a cake and put some money in that cake, and my father should take it to this friend in his hotel, and he would take that cake with him when he crossed over to the Swiss border. And my mother said my father refused to do it, because he said, “I have never done anything illegal in my life.” I mean, how can you say that when everything that Nazis were doing was illegal? How can you say “I've never done anything illegal” when you're living in an illegal system? But you also have to think that if he had been caught with a cake and they had opened it up, and out came these Marks, he really could have ended up in a camp or something. You know, so there was a tension at home.

Interviewer: And your father was a lawyer, so he believed in the law.

Irene: Yes. And he as very German. And I don't know if he had connections, but he had been an officer in the German army. So then my uncle, my mother's brother, went to England in, I guess, 1936-37. And then my mother really took— When her brother left, she suddenly decided that we would also go to England. And we had relatives in England who were actually English, you know, had become English and who were quite affluent. They did much but— So actually my mother and I went to England on a visit. We were still able to go and come back. We still had passports—it's all strange—in 1938, and I wasn't well. I had flu or something. I must have sensed. And that's when my mother made the arrangements.

Interviewer: As late as 1938?

Irene: Yes, my mother must— I don't know. I was feverish. And then she decided that she would go on a domestic visa. This great-aunt in England gave a guarantee, but my mother still had to have a job and go as a domestic. So then she went to Munich, to some kind of very fancy cooking school, where she learned to make fancy pastry or something. And she was in Munich, Kristallnacht. And that was very bad.

Interviewer: And where were you?

Irene: Well, I was at home. I have to say, I was at home with my father, but she was in Munich at this place, this cooking school or pastry making school. Was Jewish. They were all ladies who were learning to make fancy pastry. That was raided and the guy was taken away. I remember she spent all her time in the museum because it was the only safe place.

The terrible thing is—I hate to say this—but my parents were also, in some ways, sort of anomalies or whatever. They had all this sort of sophistication (literature, language, art), but in some ways they were very old-fashioned. We never had a car. My father didn't know how to drive. My mother didn't know how to drive. And we didn't have a radio. We had a gramophone and we had fantastic music and waltzes and all sorts of things. No I don't know if we didn't have a radio because my father didn't want to listen to the Nazi propaganda, or we didn't have a radio because my parents were just sort of very— We had telephones. I think we had two telephones, upstairs and downstairs, which I think was quite something for those days.

So I hate to say this because I don't— I didn't even know about Kristallnacht till I went to school the next day. And I went to school, to the *Goldschmidt Schule*. I can still see myself. The real school was in a very fancy villa, but the elementary school (I was still in the elementary school) was in a smaller villa in the side streets. And we were standing there, two or three children and I, and nobody answered. Nothing. I think one of the kids may have said something. But we really didn't know what was going on. And then that

building was also a boarding school for the kids who had come from outside Berlin. And then they came out and told us there would be no school and we'd better hurry home. So then I knew. But I knew more. I mean, I knew by that time. A lot of people were out of work and had lost their jobs. And I remember there was a photographer once who stopped me in the street and he asked me if I was Jewish, and I said yes, and he told me he would like to take my picture. So I went and talked to my father and I told him this gentleman— and my father said right away that he should come, because he was someone who had lost his job. And we still have those pictures.

Gradually I must have— I sensed it all. I mean, when we went to England, my mother and I also sensed that something was happening, because I got sick in England—I think just apprehension. And then also Germany, around that time then, Kristallnacht or maybe earlier, I used to feel very restless in bed at night. That was a problem. I would get up and go downstairs. My parents were very understanding, even if they had visitors. They would let me sit there for a while. In England that became a problem. So I felt this anxiety {from it}.

And then, even if my father wasn't— nobody came {for} him, my mother came back from Munich and she was always afraid. So that if somebody rang the bell after seven o'clock in the evening, she would scuttle my father down to the cellar. He wouldn't go, but she wouldn't open the door till he had hidden in the cellar. He protested. He didn't want to go.

And also around that time, or even earlier, it got to the point that either people had left— I mean, the Jewish people who lived in the neighborhood, they had all gone. So it sort of got empty. And on the other hand, the Gentile neighbors and people really didn't— Actually they behaved fairly well. But it was just very quiet. We didn't get many visitors. Well, actually they came.

But let me just finish about my mother. As of the summer of 1938, she was working on my and her— Well, we were going to go to England, and we had the permit from my great-aunt. So even if I hadn't gone on a Kindertransport, I would have gone three weeks later. I would have gone with my mother. But she had her visa (or her affidavit) but she still needed a job. So it took a little while till she found a job. You couldn't go to England. So that was it.

But that was a tense time, because first of all, whenever the doorbell rang, my mother would push my father down the— And he would protest. And at the same time, my mother's friends, people, they came and they told all these horror stories, and they said (I can still hear them talking) that their husband had not been picked up but he never slept at home; he would go every evening to the house of somebody where the husband had already been collected. And another woman came and she said her husband had gone into hiding. And every evening she would go to a certain place at a certain corner and give him some food, and he would take the food and then he would go back into hiding. I mean, I can still see these women coming to tell my mother. And they were all relatives

or friends. And it was always the same. Either their husbands had been picked up or the husbands were sleeping— You know, there were certain ways of getting out. If you had a different passport, they would go and stay somewhere where the person didn't have a—

Interviewer: So what happened to your father? When did he decide to go?

Irene: I don't know. I don't know, because then the Kindertransport started. And then my parents must have decided, because the atmosphere was so tense, they decided— And also they knew that these children going to England would be fairly well looked after. And we already had arrangements with these friends. They used to stay with us. It was some kind of— So they had somewhere where I would stay, these friends. So they decided to send me on ahead. And I remember, I went with my father somewhere, to some kind of bureaucracy, you know, where people were sitting at desks and talking. And I think my father then also paid for another child so that I could get on.

But I don't know if my father was— You see, all my father's family had gone to Buenos Aires. So there was always the kind of unexpressed hope that maybe they would come up with something from Buenos Aires. My mother and I were going to go to England, and my mother felt that my father didn't know how to do anything in a household. And remember, he was over 50. So I think there was a vague hope that maybe his family in Buenos Aires would come up with a visa, and that he would go there, and that we were going to England just to get out, and later on somehow we would be reunited.

But when I left Germany, I knew that my mother was going to come, when I took the Kindertransport, because we were supposed to go together. My father was still in Berlin, and I didn't know— So that's another thing. That's different then.

Interviewer: All this time thinking about leaving, or preparations for leaving, you were a young girl. How did you understand all that?

Irene: Well, it was kind of depressing, I think. Yes, because the world sort of closed on one. You know. And I got that feeling also when I went back to Berlin. But you know, it was like a well that had been— Now I can't understand how I ever ran around that garden and ran around that house. It was like— you know. You were becoming slightly crippled. Your life was crippled. I mean, actually I don't remember any direct— Nobody ever said anything to me. It was a pretty good neighborhood. Actually, I hate to say this, but you understand that. Half a block down from where we lived, the other block was a big compound with stone walls round it. That was Ribbentrop's compound. And when our dog ran away, Ribbentrop's children used to bring him back. (Can I say these things?)

Interviewer: Of course.

Irene: I remember one my mother and I and a friend (the husband of the lady where— we lived in England then), we were all going for a walk with a dog, and we passed this compound,

and there were a lot of people standing there, and a cavalcade was beginning to come along. And apparently there was some big dinner or reception or luncheon. And there really was, I think, a car with Hitler in it. And just at the moment, our dog broke away from the leash. And my mother called out, “*Der Hunt! Der Hunt!*” And our friend said, “You were lucky that they didn’t arrest you.”

But anyhow, so you know, I’m just saying that it was not the kind of working-class neighborhood where the Communists and the Nazis fought it out together in the streets. It was a sort of— The atmosphere was still the same. I can still sense that atmosphere, especially when I first went back. There was still this oppressive— And somehow your whole life style became kind of crippled, because nobody really came to visit you, and you couldn’t go to the zoo, and you couldn’t go to the swimming pool. And I guess my parents didn’t go out very much. I think they went sometimes— There was a Jewish cultural organization that took over the *Kulturbund*. I think they went to some of the things there. I remember them going to— But we didn’t actually travel anymore. We used to go to Eschwege every year, but I don’t remember if we went. No, things there were worse, in my father’s home town. So it was a crippled way of life, and it was ominous. I can still sense that when I go there. There was an ominous sort of soupy, black feeling that you just couldn’t quite— Anything might happen. And things were always happening. There was always some new— like this business about having to be called Sarah and Israel, and there was always some new regulation coming up. So you felt you were gradually— No, it was a bad— And I think that’s why I couldn’t sleep.

And then so many people left, and at school also. It was a very nice school, and they tried to make the environment as good as possible, but people were always leaving, and you heard stories from the other girls. It was ominous and oppressive. Even if at that time you had no inkling of the terrible things to come, it was still ominous, because it’s like suddenly you had been swimming in clear water and gradually the water turned black and soupy, and you just couldn’t move much.

Interviewer: Do you remember visiting your father’s parents or grandparents and family? And do you remember how you knew that things were worse there?

Irene: Well, I do remember going to my father’s home town, and I definitely remember this excursion with my aunt. I mean, I wouldn’t have known who the people were. We went by train to some— There was a mountain there maybe or something. and I remember her collapsing when we came back and saying—I mean, she was a little bit like that anyhow—but you know, “This is terrible. People I’ve known all my life, and the people are now—” So I knew things were bad there. And, well, my uncle left then.

My grandmother died, you see, my mother’s mother. Then of course I knew, and also after Kristallnacht, my father was not picked up, but the fathers of school friends and friends, and we would visit them, and you heard those terrible stories that he was picked up, and he had a cold, and then he got sicker, and he had no handkerchiefs. I mean, that’s the least thing, not having handkerchiefs. But you heard these stories.

And then there was also the feeling that if– Like my mother’s Italian friend who was married to this German officer, who was a reserve officer but then the Nazis reactivated the army. So he actually was an active army officer but he resented it because he was anti-Nazi. There were all these– So she used to come, but she had to sort of come secretly or something like that. There weren’t many visitors. And we didn’t go visiting much. Beforehand, we had gone visiting.

I mean, I think that’s a good analogy. Beforehand, you were swimming through water and the sun was coming and the fish were playing around you, and that water got more and more murky, you know, and so you were just groping your– I mean, there was nothing life-threatening, but I can still feel that atmosphere. I’m sure you know it too. And it comes back to you when you go back the first one or two– Until you really know people there, it’s with you.

And when I went to my father’s home town, where we happened to have a friend, a German woman who is a postwar German teacher who is a Holocaust authority, and she took me around and told me and a Russian immigrant lady who lives in her house, and told us all the stories of what happened there. I just wanted to get out of that place.

The only city in {Germany} I can really relate to is Berlin. As I told you, I was in Erlangen, a town where my father studied. I didn’t feel comfortable in these small Bavarian and Franconian towns, because I knew there had been Jewish communities there, and there’s nobody there. So in Berlin, it’s the only place in Germany that I could– Not even Frankfurt. I have a cousin in Frankfurt. I don’t feel comfortable in Frankfurt. But in Berlin, because now I have friends, and I even have a potential publisher who’s Jewish, [laugh] and I think that made a lot of difference.

Interviewer: When did you first find out about the Gestapo?

Irene: Oh, I don’t know. I’m very murky about that I never really knew what the– I don’t know about the Gestapo. I do know that I knew something about the SS and the SA, because I remember there was that *putsch* where the SA was eliminated, the Rome *putsch*. And I vaguely remember talk of that. I think that was somewhere in the Berlin area, but I may be wrong. But somehow I heard about that, that they had eliminated part of this sort of more– this SA.

Interviewer: Do you remember seeing soldiers in the street?

Irene: Yes. But I saw soldiers in the street in September 1938, before the invasion of Czechoslovakia, or the Sudetenland, because we had– Round the corner, not far from us, there was a place there was some kind of a pub or something, a *Wirtshaus*, and they were all sitting there. And I remember loudspeakers, because I remember in England when I heard the radio, I was always afraid. We didn’t have a radio. But at that time there were a lot of loudspeakers. I do remember loudspeakers. Do you remember loudspeakers? I do

remember loudspeakers, and especially during those days when those soldiers were sitting around, and there were voices over those loudspeakers. And I know when I came to England, whenever the news came up and I was in bed, I used to be afraid. I thought, "Oh God, that's Hitler." So there must have been some loudspeakers somewhere. I do remember that, because I was scared of those loudspeakers.

Interviewer: Later on, the Jews weren't supposed to listen to radio.

Irene: No, but we never had a radio. I mean, I'm just saying, in some ways my parents were very old-fashioned. We didn't have a car; we didn't have a radio. I don't remember ever having. I mean, then they confiscated radios, but that was much later.

Now, there's one thing I'm not quite sure about. We had a dog, a dachshund. He was always running away. And as I said, children in the neighborhood would bring him back. He was old but he was not that old, because I have a 15-year-old dog now in New York, and he was only about 11 or 12. So once he didn't come home (he would escape through something in the garden fence), and my father had to pick him up at the dog pound. And they suggested, because he was old and no longer in good shape, that he be put to sleep. But I don't think that was because we were Jewish, because I know Jews had to surrender their pets. But that was much later. That was during the war, in '41, '42. But that also hurt me a lot. But I guess it was just, they really felt— I remember my father took him. My mother prepared a special beefsteak for him and— But I don't think that had anything to do with being Jewish.

And the radio thing: We didn't have a radio. I say in some ways my parents were old-fashioned. They were a little bit older generation. They were "with it" in some ways, artistically and intellectually, but in some ways they were quite old-fashioned.

Interviewer: How did they explain to you about the Kindertransport?

Irene: Well, first of all, I had been to England, although I didn't feel well there. And I knew we were going to England. My mother had explained that. And I remember her explaining to me that we would be poor. And I asked her all sorts of things: will we be able— Oh, that was also another thing. I guess my father was still working, but my mother would get very nervous. She would suddenly say, "We're spending too much," or this and this. She was a little bit temperamental. She would get sudden {anxiety}. But then I sort of remember pondering, what was it like?

And then how that came with the Kinder— So I knew we were going to England. We were going to stay with these friends with whom we had stayed when we went in '38, and their daughter was actually my school friend. We'd always been to school together, from kindergarten up. So it wasn't so terrifying. And then I went with my father to all these places where they registered me. So I guess I gradually realized that I was going. And then my mother kept saying, you know, "I'll be there very soon. I'll be there very soon."

So it wasn't such a surprise, because we were going to go anyway, and I had been there. But I do remember the last evening. I felt pretty bad and I went round the house and— I do remember. It was bad when I got to England. That's when I felt terribly homesick. But in Germany, I guess I didn't want to leave, I'm sure. I felt bad about it but it wasn't sudden. I was somehow prepared and I knew where I was going. I had my uncle there too, not that he did much, but—

Interviewer: Were there things that you remember that you had to leave behind? Was that an issue, to decide what you were bringing with you?

Irene: Well, I had a very small suitcase. I know that. But I don't remember. I mean, I don't remember what I must have taken. I think I took some books because I had those books. You see, what happened was that my mother arrived three weeks later, so she brought a lot of things. Now, I had some books. I don't know if I took them with me on the Kindertransport or whether my mother brought them afterwards. I do remember that prayer book because afterwards in England I stopped being so Jewish. But we did become much more Jewish before leaving. I remember thinking, "Whatever happens, I'll always keep this prayer book." I do remember that. I had that also when I first went to stay with these English friends, this prayer book. But I guess it was also this sort of heavy feeling. But I don't remember really what went into that suitcase, funnily enough. I remember very well the clothes I had afterwards, because my mother, when she came three weeks later, which to me seemed an eternity, you see, she was able to bring out a lot. But of course we left everything at home.

Interviewer: Was she able to bring out furniture too?

Irene: No, no. Not furniture, but clothes and books. No, no, not furniture.

Interviewer: And how did she proceed to get rid of that? Do you remember? Did she sell it?

Irene: What?

Interviewer: Your furniture.

Irene: Well, my father stayed behind.

Interviewer: [inaudible]

Irene: Yes. Well, that's the sad thing. And that's also unusual. I'm not blaming my mother, but I've read quite a lot about it, and it was unusual for the husbands to stay behind, because they were in much more danger of being sent. Usually it was the husbands who left, and the children who left, and the women who stayed behind, because they were in less danger. But it was my father who stayed behind, and he then liquidated the whole house.

And I don't know what it was, but from what he said when we were reunited in Chile, it must have been very hard, because he absolutely rejected everything German then. And he had been very German. He rejected everything German. And apparently, somebody came and sat there, and supervised what he took with him and what he left behind. And there are all sorts of mysteries there, which I don't want to bring them here. What happened to different things, that still isn't— I don't want to bring in everything here. But it still isn't all clarified about the paintings and the art. But that's another issue.

But he was there, and he had this maid, this old maid. She stayed because she was awfully old, the one I didn't like. But he was a heavy smoker, my father, so he had— well, my mother always said it was smoke poisoning, you know, because he smoked so much. But it was actually a heart attack then. So he already had a heart attack after we left.

So whatever. Why don't you ask me, because I don't want to steer away.

Interviewer: One question I had is why your father was not able to go also to England. You did have some contacts but they weren't able to—

Irene: Well, my mother felt— You see, I told you, when my uncle left, I think that's when my mother decided, because she also had this conflict I told you about. The sister— I have a feeling she just didn't— My father was the person, from what I found out later, who, because he was a lawyer who was in charge of fixing the financial thing about the sister (you know, there was always money for her), but I have a feeling my mother then, when my uncle left, she didn't want to stay behind. She had always identified with her brother rather than with her sister. So I think she had a tremendous urge to leave, and she wanted to take me with {her}, and she really had got to the point, she— And I hate to say that, but it was frequent. I exaggerated a little bit in the memoir. These friends we stayed with in England, I sort of felt she was carrying on a little bit of a flirtation with the husband. I don't think she had an affair with him. And I spoke to my cousin about it. I don't think they were having an affair, but something was going on, and she relied— He was also a lawyer, but he was a much more dynamic, pushy, rough person than my father. And I think in some ways she may have done it because he egged her on to leave for England, more than my father. She gave up a little bit on my father. And this {Kurt Slutsevsky}—I shouldn't mention names. Anyhow, the husband of— you know, it was a flirtation. It was a flirtation. I don't think they ever really had an affair. And it stopped later, because he always called her Prima Vera. And she told me once in England, she said, "There's no more Prima Vera now." So he may have done it intentionally to encourage her to leave.

But I'm just saying, she saw a possibility for us to go out with the affidavit. I know. When I saw an analyst, he also couldn't understand it. And there was the hope that the family in Argentina would cough up a visa for my father. But it was difficult for them because they had a lot of relatives. So my father was left pretty much stranded. And we left— And the reason my mother did it, and she told me, "How could I get a visa for him for England, when he has to work, and he would have to work as a butler, or he would

have to work as a waiter? It's absolutely impossible." He'd hardly been in a kitchen. He didn't know how to boil an egg. I mean, I'm sure he would have been able to, because when he was alone in Chile, he made all sorts of little things. But that was the underlying rationale: it's impossible for him to find a job in England, and maybe something else will come up. And it did come up, you see, because these Gentile neighbors we had on the right-hand side, they got him a visa for Chile. And strangely enough, I went back to read some material only a couple of months ago, and I saw in this material (actually it was my diary; well, it was an English version of my diary) where I say that when she came to England, {shortly} after she came to England, my mother told me that my father was coming (that was couple of months) and that we would all be going to Chile. So he actually, the way I reconstruct it now (and it makes sense because people give visas for families; they don't like to give visa), these next-door neighbors who had this connection in Chile must have gotten him a visa for all three of us for Santiago. And then my mother was already in England, got him (through my great-aunt) a transit visa for England, so he came to England in June 1939. And he left England in August 1939, alone. And that's another chapter, then. That's the English chapter. And he was lucky to get to Chile because he had to go back to the continent—to Rotterdam, not to Germany. He had taken a passage on a German liner to Chile, because he could still pay for it in Germany, and that liner left from Rotterdam. So he went from England to Rotterdam. And that liner was on the high seas when war was declared, when actually ships had to go back to their home port, which in this case would have been Hamburg, but the captain let these refugees disembark—not in Chile, I think in Peru or somewhere. So he was okay. But then, you see, I got to England and in many ways a completely different life started. So I'll wait for your question.

Interviewer: Tell us about your journey to England.

Irene: Well, I don't remember that much. Funnily enough, I've written about it, and now I remember what I wrote about it, but I don't really know if that's what I really saw. I mean, what I do remember, I don't know. I get confused with what I imagine and what I know.

But I went on a different Kindertransport. And several people I know did that. I didn't go this Harwich route on this ferry. We went from Berlin to Hamburg, and in Hamburg we got on an ocean liner, which was actually heading for New York. It was the *SS Manhattan*, and we were on the boat overnight, and then we landed in Southampton. And I spoke to one of the gentlemen in New York who organized the Kindertransport, and he remembered this Kindertransport. He said, "Yes, there were two or three transports that went on ocean liners."

So what I do remember—I mean, this I do remember—is that in Hamburg they took us to a Jewish domestic science school, and we got lunch there. These students made a big fuss of us, and I don't know what we ate. We ate something, but I think there was an apple, and there was cocoa. And I think then we played games. And then we went on the boat.

Interviewer: So you were with a group of other children?

Irene: Oh yes. I don't know how big. I don't know. But then I shared a cabin with other girls, and I was by far the youngest. So I felt kind of flattered, because a lot of the people who went on the Kindertransport were already 14-15. So these girls were much more aware of what was going on than I. So they told all sorts of stories. I don't know if they said goodbye to their boyfriends or if they said goodbye to their parents, but I know some of them had tranquilizers and took {unintelligible}. And they showed pictures. And I somehow felt this was very sophisticated, to be spending the night with all these older girls who were already quite— not glamorous, but they were teenagers, adolescents.

Interviewer: When was this?

Irene: Well, this was in the middle of January. I think I left on January the 18th.

Interviewer: '39?

Irene: '39, yes.

Interviewer: Were you 10 years old, 11 years old?

Irene: Ten. I was 10 around Kristallnacht, strangely enough, on November the 7th. And I did know some English, because we had had a little group of children from my neighborhood. We all had an English teacher who came. So I did know a bit, not very much, but enough. And I remember getting up and going out of the cabin and asking the steward what time it was. And then it was much earlier or much later. It was all a little bit exciting, actually. I could go to bed for another hour because it's early. I don't know. But anyhow, I spoke in English, and then I remember—

Well, what I really remember is that we did get to Southampton, and it was dark, and we went down. I don't remember that. But I remember sitting on a bus, a double-decker, I think. And it was raining, and you heard the rain on the roof, but also it was a double-decker so the trees must have been very low, so you heard the sound of the trees sweeping over the double-decker bus. And then I think they took us to a school. It wasn't a hostel. And I don't remember, we just went to bed. But I do remember the next morning. They had the matrons (or whatever they had, nurses, or people helping us to get up), and we went to breakfast, and I spoke English, which was exciting. And I remember we had porridge for breakfast (I'd never had porridge) and brown sugar (I'd never had brown sugar). And they made a big fuss.

Oh yes, and then I do remember one thing. My mother, all those years when she was repressing so much of her anxiety, she became a passionate knitter. She knitted all sorts of things, beautiful things. But she also knitted a horrible thing, a pair of panties for me which went from here down to here. You know, in England the heating is not good, and

so she gave me these panties. I remember they had an elastic band and they were gray. And that's one thing that was in my suitcase. And I never liked them. The heating in England is not good, and it's so damp and so on. And she felt I should take them. I didn't want to take them. And then the last evening before we disembarked, we were all sitting in a room, and they held up the lost property. You know, people had left a toothbrush or a comb or toothpaste or something in their cabin. They must have gone through the cabins after we took our things. So they held up this pair of knickers or panties or underpanties. "Who does this belong to?" And I felt so embarrassed. I felt so embarrassed. And I looked around and I remember sort of feeling hot and bothered, and I somehow felt that everybody was looking at me. And they held these things up and they kept— I think they did it about three times. "Who do these belong to?" And I never admitted they were mine. I never told my mother. But it was so embarrassing. I felt everybody was looking at me because they knew they were mine. And I sort of looked away; I had never seen them before. Of course nobody knew they were mine, and nobody would have cared if I'd said yes.

Interviewer: I bet they were scratchy.

Irene: They were scratchy, but you wore something else underneath. But they were scratchy, yes. So that, I remember.

And then I remember the porridge. And then I remember getting to Victoria Station. And Tante Hilde, the lady I was staying with from this couple (they were called {Slutsevsky} people), she was there to meet me, and my uncle too. They were both there. I never saw them for weeks on end. He was there, and this Tante Hilde, this lady (she was not a real aunt). And then she took me to a taxi, and the taxi drove right into the station. You know, they do that in England. So I was very impressed. I thought the taxi had come especially for us.

And then we went where they lived in Hampstead, Turners Wood. And the daughter {Annelie}, my friend from school) ran out, and they also had a maid Hetti. She came out. I knew them! So that was all very nice. But after that, it just turned into— I didn't sleep in the room that I had slept in when my mother— the visitors' bedroom. They had me staying in an extra maid's bedroom under the eaves. And I don't think they meant badly. I had to go up these narrow stairs, and it was cold and miserable up there. And my friend Annelie, she became very snooty. She was going to some fancy school in London. He was quite successful, this guy. I don't know what he did, what money he took out of Germany, but they never went— So they were on their way up socially and professionally in England. And at first I went to this London County Council School, which is just the regular— where all the poor children go. And there was a whole bunch of us refugee children sitting at the back of the room. We didn't understand. The teacher was talking too fast. I don't remember learning anything there. And I got more and more depressed. That school was depressing. And these friends, so-called friends— I'm sure they meant to be kind, but they were so different to my parents. We had to go to bed at a certain time. And there were problems in that family too, and I sort of sensed that. That's neither here nor there.

The lady actually was some kind of amateur psychologist, and she was really upset that I was sort of sitting there almost crying. Even later in life, whenever I got depressed, I would always get the same depression. Oh, it was just awful. I hated being there. It was all that {woman}, and I had to go to bed at a certain time. And they were very ambitious for their daughter. It was much more regimented. You had to do this at this time. But of course she got all the sugar. I mean, she was getting private lessons and piano lessons and private lessons and going to Henrietta Barnett School. It was a good school. And I was suddenly really the poor relative. And I felt that. And then it was cold. And I got chilblains. I was just hoping for my mother to come. I just thought that once my mother comes, she would rescue and everything would be better. But of course it wasn't.

Interviewer: So you felt at that time kind of like a second-class citizen?

Irene: Oh, I didn't feel second— I didn't rationalize it. I just felt miserable. I cried, and I dragged myself around. Later in life, whenever I got depressed, I would feel, "This is the same depression I had there." I was just homesick, mainly for my mother. And I just hated it there. I don't know. I still think of it. I didn't like the atmosphere in the home. They were much more pushy people than my parents. And then they would have these *Musikabende*. And then I started wandering around the house, which I had done in Germany sometimes when my parents had guests or something. I would go downstairs, and they wouldn't mind. But they didn't like it. He was a violinist, and they would invite all their fancy new English friends for a *Musikabend*, you know, and the house would be full of these people. And I couldn't sleep so I would just wander around. Here was this child wandering around at night, when they were trying to create a social life for themselves in England. I don't think they liked that. But I can't recover it. I can recover that feeling. You can't have access. I can get that feeling in Berlin, what it was like, that sort of heavy water. But in England, all I can think of is sort of gray, you know, rainy gray and tasteless bread and—

Interviewer: And tasteless fish.

Irene: Yes, it was all— And these people, who meant to be kind but who were so different in their way to my parents. Later on—it's beyond the scope but—there were also certain problems. There were problems in that family. In fact, they used to have fights too, and then Tante Hilde would shut herself up in her room. It wasn't a very good marriage, I think, and there were other issues. It was a family with problems. And once you lived there, you realized that. And socially very pushy and ambitious.

Interviewer: So what happened when your mother came?

Irene: Well, that was the big disappointment, you see. I mean, it was wonderful. I remember, I got home from something, I didn't know she was coming, and I heard her voice in the dining room or in the living room, talking. I mean, it was just wonderful. It was like the lights suddenly going up and everything. I remember the next morning, I went to her room (she had the nicer room) and I got into bed with her, and we talked, and she told me

how my father was, and the maid. And then actually we also went out with my uncle, because he was already there. I don't remember him ever bothering with me, but when my mother came, we all went out with him, and we went to his boarding house. And then I had this rather wealthy great-aunt by marriage. They had never bothered with me, but when my mother came, we were invited to lunch at this great-aunt. Actually they were very wealthy people. So we had a sort of social life for two days, and all sorts of things.

And my mother gave me a diary. That's the one thing. And then she disappeared, because she had a job in a household somewhere in the country. And it was just as awful as always. It was terrible. So then I think I just got more depressed. But then I remember once I woke up in the morning very early, before breakfast, and it was gray and rainy and cold and damp and miserable. I know is, it was miserable. And I really didn't know. I could have wandered around the house, but I just had this feeling, up-tight restless feeling. So then I had the diary. And that's when I started writing the diary. And I must say, I was very good. I drew lines so that everything— and I really wrote it as a story. The first story was the departure, and I can even see it verbally. I don't have the diary. Somebody lost it for me. But I started, "I, Irene Katzenstein, with my mom, we were standing on the *Anhalter Bahnhof*." Actually I re-create the scene at the railroad station. So I did remember the railroad station. And I wrote about the whole thing, all the things I've told you about: the cocoa in the Jewish Domestic Science School, and the night, and then arriving and seeing Annelie, my friend. And then the next chapter was—I mean, I was really good—it was "*Die Neue Heimat*" (The New Home). So that really helped me.

And then I do remember once it was a miserable day and I went to the school, you see, because we were sitting at the back, and the teacher screamed a lot. She had a stick. I don't think she hit anybody. She had all these working-class English kids. It was a London County Council school. All I remember from that school is, I used to have a ball and I used to bounce it. But once I was coming home from school, and I was feeling horribly, you know, this sort of depression. I was miserable. And I turned round the corner, and there was my mother! And she came towards me, and that was just glorious. And then she told me that she was taking a job in the same street we lived, so that she could be near me, two doors down. And I wrote in my diary about that. The diary, that's another issue. And that's where I was checking something. I have the English translation of that diary but I remember the German too, although I don't have it any longer. I found that a month or two ago, and that made me think. I said Mutti (that was my mother), "Mutti said that in summer, we and Poppy are all going to go to Chile." So that she must have told me we were all going to Chile that summer, although we didn't. But I realize. So by that time, she didn't tell me my father was coming, but I guess that was already February, probably late February. But it didn't work out. I don't want to go in particulars. It was a wonderful feeling to think that my mother was going to be two doors down from us in this closed— Turners Wood was a cul-de-sac. And I went in the garden, I thought she— But it didn't— It's beyond the scope of this. She didn't get—

This terrible thing, I can say it. My mother was a terrible snob, and she felt these people were too Eastern European. They were kosher, and they were Yiddish-speaking and— Isn't that stupid? And it's beyond the scope of this thing, but you know, I took writing

courses at the University of Iowa a couple of years ago, and there was an English psychiatrist there, English Jewish psychiatrist. And I told him that I had lived— It came out in a conversation. I said something about Turners Wood, and he stared at me and he said, “You lived in Turners Wood?” And I said yes. And it turned out he also. And I don’t know, but I have a feeling, because he came from that kind of a background, that it may have been his family that my mother— Because he told me later, they also had a refugee housekeeper then. And he kept asking me. But it’s just silly. And he was, of course, a wonderful man. I mean, it was my mother’s shortcoming. But it was probably, the people also didn’t quite understand.

So she then took another job in London, for a very upper-class family who gave cocktail parties. She had wonderful stories about that family. But after that, I kind of tuned out because I had been looking forward to my mother’s coming next-door so much, and then she was there, and then she was gone. And in between time, there was talk that I wouldn’t be able to stay at the {Slutsevskys}. I don’t think I felt so depressed any longer, but I think I became kind of withdrawn. And then things changed, you see. Then a new chapter in my life started, which you could ask me about, because I lived with English family.

Interviewer: Did you keep close contact with your mother during the time when she was working—

Irene: Well, no. But then everything changed, you see, in April, because I couldn’t— Well, let me just tell you. Because I couldn’t stay with these friends. First of all, they were unhappy that I was unhappy. But secondly, they had family coming from Germany, so they were going to have a houseful. So they felt it was better that I move. So then there was this whole apparatus of organizations, Bloomsbury House, that looked after the refugees. And actually my great-aunt was quite active there. So they found a very nice family (my mother asked them) for me to go. And that’s where my new life started.

Interviewer: Where did you go then?

Irene: Well, then one day, again, my mother and I were standing at Victoria Station, waiting for this English lady to come and pick me up and take me to their home. And this very sort of homely, square English woman emerged. My mother took a liking to her, and I took a liking. Well, then I went with her to Rotherfield, which was a village near Tunbridge Wells, on the border of Sussex and Kent. And she was married to somebody called John Henry Muirhead, Professor John Henry Muirhead. He was an eminent philosopher, a moral philosopher. He was one of the founders of the University of Birmingham. The auditorium at the University of Birmingham is named after him. And he was quite well known. It was a second marriage. The first wife had died. But she had been his student (it was a long story) much earlier. He married her when he was in his seventies. So she was about 30 years younger than he. And they had a lovely cottage (that’s what you call it in England) in this small village, Rotherfield. And so we got to Rotherfield Station and we walked up {Cat’s} Hill, and then we opened the door of Dyke-End, which would really be more or less my home for the next six or seven years. And there was this elderly man. I mean, he was only about 83, but I had never seen anybody with— He looked very

sprightly. He was Scottish. She was sort of English, but I think she was actually Irish. But anyhow, so he had these curls, and he came forward and he spoke to me in perfect German, because he belonged to that generation of people who had studied in Germany in the old days. I mean, he was 83 in 1939. So he had gone on holiday always to Germany, in the time before German reunification, you know, that old philosophical—before the Germans really became German. I mean, you know. So he spoke fluent German. He was also a Bible scholar and very pro-Semitic.

But anyhow, it was like a new world. I still cry when I think about it, although in the end things didn't work out always. After he died, there were little tensions with her. But I'll never forget. It was like my homesickness disappeared. And these people were so kind. They did everything. And it was so lovely. I'd never lived in the countryside before. They were not rich, and in fact it was a cottage, but it was all full of books and wood paneling and woolen blankets and open casement windows, and the garden and flowers and cherry trees, and then you walked outside and you walked to the little village, and you walked through these fields. Oh, and it was spring, and there were sheep, and there were calves. And they were really loving and kind. And they were much more like my own parents. They really didn't care when I went to bed. They were not so disciplinarian, like the Slutsevskys; we had to go to bed and we had to do this. You know. They were not social strivers, and they were terribly kind. And she read to me. Actually I must say, my mother had never read to me. She read to me. She read *Pilgrims Progress*. [laughs] But she also read other things. And there were books.

I was talking to a lot of people, and they said, "We lost our childhood." We did, but in some ways I also had a second childhood. And I never homesick there. It got bad when I went to boarding school. But it was just so lovely. And even on the way down, in the train. I just got to love that countryside so much. And my English wasn't very good, so there were always some kind of confusions, which were humoristic. Like I didn't know what hops was. She pointed out there were hops, gathering hops. The children go and gather hops in the hills, and I saw the children hopping through. But also in the train, I found a wallet, just by chance. It was lying there on the floor. Somebody must have dropped it. And it had quite a lot of money in it, and a card, an identification. So we returned that wallet to the owner. And that was very exciting because he then wrote and thanked us, and he sent me some money. I think I gave that money to my mother then. But anyhow, everything was suddenly—

And there were other refugee children in the neighborhood, staying in other homes. And there was a party. There was a local committee that looked after the refugee community. Everybody was always giving parties. I remembered parties from Berlin. That was really something. And they were tea parties, one or two elderly ladies. So there were always tea parties. The English are not perfect, and they probably always got a little bit of an anti-Semitic edge, but they are so wonderfully idiosyncratic. And I really do think what it was, maybe because they were not—well, I hate to be racist. Neither of them were Anglo-Saxon. No, because he was Scottish, and actually I didn't know it but I found out later that her family was Irish. They were born in England. So they were more easygoing. They didn't have this Teutonic thing that even German Jews had. And they were loving.

They had a lot of love. They were not religious. I mean, later on things didn't work out always that well, and the professor died very soon.

But I always feel that a second life for me started. And actually even today, the connections I still have with that world. They took in another girl, who became completely English. She's not Jewish any longer. But she's like my sister. And her children are like my nephews and nieces. I mean, I have a family there. And even when I came to America, it was partly due to another girl I knew from there. So it's like I had a complete second family, who in some ways were closer to me than my own family. So whatever happened later, it was an enriching experience.

Interviewer: And you were able to continue your schooling there?

Irene: Yes. Well, of course I went to boarding school, because the committee there sent me. The first boarding school, they were not nice to us. But afterwards I went to very nice boarding schools. The first boarding school, because I started my wandering again, and they punished me. Even Mrs. Muirhead—I called her Dame because I always used to write to my mother "*die nette Dame*." And so we didn't know what I was to call her, because "auntie" sounded *déclassé*. So I called her Dame, Damie. Even she always said they were not nice— But I did go to boarding school. I went to boarding school. I finished my whole secondary education in England.

But unfortunately, my relationship to my mother changed, because I now had a home. I had people who cared about me. She was just working as a domestic, with a foreign accent. And even if she was very elegant and slim—I mean, Professor Muirhead was very impressed by her. He talked to her in German.

Interviewer: She came to visit you?

Irene: She came a week or two later. And right away, I no longer felt so comfortable with her. It was suddenly, here these people— She came, and then, you see, my father did come to England because he got that visa. I went to this boarding school where they were not nice to be because I used to wander around the house at night, and they punished me for that. Eva, another girl, who then came to live with Mrs. Muirhead, she also went to that school. She was from Vienna. She couldn't spell because she didn't know English. And they made her take some gray stomach powder because her spelling was so bad. And me, they found me wandering around at night, because I got restless and I got up. And they said I didn't get enough sleep, so they kept me indoors in a dark room in the afternoon while the other children went to the beach to play. They did other things too. They were not nice. But even so, it wasn't all bad. It was in {Bexhill}. And Mrs. Muirhead knew that. She always said they were not nice. In fact, I begged her once. So we were taken away from that school, Eva and I.

So the thing with my parents, you see, because my father then came to England, and actually at first it was very nice. He was staying in London with a cousin of his, and spending all day long in the British Museum. That was the way he was, which infuriated my mother because she had a job, and she said my father— You know, there were all these things. I don't think they wanted to get on. But anyhow, so we all went to visit the Muirheads, or they took me down to the Muirheads, because I spent a few days with my mother, staying with these relatives in England, and then my parents took me down to the Muirheads. And the professor and my father got on very, very well, because they were both philosophical and they could speak in German. So the Muirheads suggested, and it seemed at that time wonderful—

My mother must have decided then, and my father must have agreed, that it was better for us to stay in England, and for him to go to Chile alone, which was kind of sad. I think they saw it in exaggerated terms. The Muirheads were being so kind. They didn't understand that this was really a foster home. And the Muirheads said they would always look after me. The Muirheads had already lost one little girl they had guaranteed, who had gone to Bolivia with her parents. So they were almost afraid of losing me. So they must have told my father, "We will look—" So what they did was, they said, since he's going to Chile and my mother and I are staying, and they were going on vacation, on holiday, they said all three of us should stay at their house for two weeks together while they went on vacation, so that we could have a last taste of family life. Yes, it was nice. So we did. My father and my mother came, and we stayed there. And these English neighbors came and brought us jam, and if they had a car, they took us for excursions. And it was nice. But in retrospect, I think it would have been much nicer if they had done something for my father. I mean, he had a transit visa, a visitor's visa, and it was obvious then, in July-August 1939, that there was going to be a war. And if he had been in England when the war broke out, they could have done something to keep him in England. But they didn't.

So anyhow, so then we were there together. But again, this change of feelings towards my parents. It wasn't so much my mother who got on my nerves then; it was my father, because he was always fidgeting with the Muirheads' radio. Obviously he had to go to Rotterdam to catch that boat, to go to Holland, and it was a couple of weeks. He wanted to {know} the news, and he spent all day— And I kept thinking, "Oh my God, he's going to break the Muirheads' radio." What he did in Germany, I never objected to it. He had the habit of going up to the bathroom with his cigars and his newspaper, and spending an hour on the john, smoking and reading and so on. Well, they had this maid coming in in the morning who cleaned for us, and I felt embarrassed about my father sitting in the john, in the bathroom, with his cigars when she came.

And the same thing, not so much with my mother then, but later, and it got worse, because then after the fall of France, the German-speaking refugees became enemy aliens. My mother wasn't interned or anything like that, but she had certain restrictions. She lived in another part when she came to visit us in Rotherfield. She had to get permission from the police to travel there. And this was a big thing for her. She loved coming, because she had a much harder time, I realize. I was a kind of establishment pet,

but she was a very cultured woman, working as a domestic. And I felt very uncomfortable when she came. She sort of disrupted my life. I was taken care of. Children are selfish. And although she was very elegant and well dressed, but yow, in time she got a little bit shabby. And she spoke very good English because she had taken this English language exam, but she still had a foreign accent, and her gestures were a little bit different. You know. She didn't have the smooth, cool, calm, collected thing. And she used to give me little pep talks, which seemed to be completely unrelated to my life. So actually I felt discomfort. And afterwards in life I felt very guilty that I had felt that discomfort.

And the same thing, she used to write me long letters then, when I was at the nicer boarding school and I had friends, and I was very involved in my friendships and in my life there. And then we would go for our coffee (I don't know whatever we got), something, at {unintelligible}, we got a glass of milk or something, and they would have the mail for us. And there would be another letter from my mother, and she would lecture me, you know, all these things, that I should do this, and I should be that, and she was giving me all sorts of advice. And it seemed completely unrelated to my life. I hardly read those letters.

Interviewer: So you were trying to fit into your new surroundings.

Irene: Yes.

Interviewer: So your father then went to Chile, and you understood that he went ahead—

Irene: Well, he dropped out of my life.

Interviewer: So there was no contact after he was in Chile?

Irene: Oh yes. I used to write letters to him—in English of course, because by that time I didn't speak or write German any longer. But at my mother's behest, I would write him letters. But then I remember for my 14th birthday, or 13th birthday, there was a letter, and he wrote these letters on this very thin airmail paper. Do you remember that paper? And he typed it very painstakingly. Never a typing mistake. And he sent them in duplicate or triplicate, because you never knew. And there was this letter; I don't know if it was my 13th. And also it struck me as completely irrelevant. It was in German. I guess I just managed to read it. And it said, well, I was growing up, and all those sort of things. And it said that he hoped that I was—I had always been interested in typewriters, and he hoped I was keeping up my typing. Well, at that time I was writing poetry. I was turning into a Shelley. I was turning into a Keats. And then I was helping to write the school play. I was writing articles for the news—I had dreams of becoming the next English poet laureate. And there was my father saying, (I can say it in German) “{Denn eine junge Dame die gut tippen und gut Schreibmaschine und Steno-}” I don't know. “{Die gut tippen kann und gut Stenographie schreiben kann werden immer in Leben ihr unterhelfe.}” I don't

know. I don't even know the German. But he said in German, you know, "A young lady who types well and who knows shorthand will always be able to make a living." Well, at that point, that was Swahili to me. And I was even mad about it when I rediscovered these letters later in life. But now I understand. From his point of view at that time, he was right.

But you know, they encouraged me very much in a literary way, and I was very good at literature and history, and I had all these ideas of going on to study, which I did later but not at that time. But it was very difficult. There was a real disconnect with my parents for a time—not all that bad, because my mother then had positions where she could have me for a few days, and I would stay with her. But it was never really very profound. I mean, the contact. I always lived in my own English world, even if I stayed with her. And also the relatives, as I got older and they saw I was turning into such a nice English schoolgirl, they also started inviting me for part of my holiday. My mother was very determined that I finish school in England. So in that way she was very good. She always put a lot of emphasis on language, so she paid for my private lessons in French. She was very determined. A lot of the Kinder did not finish school. So in that way, she wanted me to spend— Also she kept an eye on the sort of cultural thing, taking me to see Picasso and Klee in museums, although she was still working. So it was difficult.

Interviewer: After the war ended, you stayed in school?

Irene: No. Actually the war ended and I got my {matriculation} about the next semester. But by that time, you see, we were already planning to go to Chile. And I must say, at that point my mother and Mrs. Muirhead were very good. I was not quite 17. I think they felt I was too young to go out to work. So before we went to Chile, I spent six months with Mrs. Muirhead. My mother paid for my Spanish lessons, because my father said, as long as I know typing and shorthand, I don't need to know Spanish; I'll learn it once I get there. But my mother was determined I learn Spanish, so she paid for my Spanish lessons. And somebody (not Mrs. Muirhead, but somebody on that committee) paid for a course in shorthand and typing, which I never really learned. I had some kind of congenital— I mean, I type but I never really gave it much.

So then I did have a job. It took a little bit longer. Then in early 1946, I joined my mother in London, and I lived where she was living, and I had a job, actually quite a nice job. There was something called UNRRA, United Nations Rehabilitation and something or other Association. This was the Jewish branch of UNRRA. It was very nice. And a lot of German-speaking refugees were in uniform there, going back to the continent to help the DPs in the camps. So it was nice. I never understood why— Actually I got it through this cousin of my father's, through his secretary. So they took me, although my typing was awful and my shorthand was also awful. But they kept me for about three months.

Interviewer: We're going to take a break.

[End of Part 1 of Interview]