

Kindertransport Association Oral History Project
Interview with
IRENE SCHMIED (Part 2)
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: IreneSchmied_BayHolo_pt2_10_24_04]

Interviewer: Okay. So we'd just left off with—

Irene: So in June 1946, my mother and I set off for Chile. And first actually my relatives in England, I guess, paid for our passage, and it included a stay in Paris, because we also had relatives in Paris. So we had a very glamorous weekend in Paris. I even wrote about it. And I felt it was our farewell to Europe. And then we embarked in Bordeaux on a French ship, and it was one of these typically postwar ships, and there were a lot of people. We were third class, a French {call}. And I guess there were a lot of refugees or displaced. There were a lot of people on that ship. And it took quite a while. We got to Buenos Aires.

And in Buenos Aires, I had my father's family. So they came *en masse*, and I didn't understand that at that time. I was still so much an English school girl, you know, with my head full of all sorts of literary ideas. But actually we were not allowed to disembark in Buenos Aires because we didn't have a visa. So they kept us on that boat for a whole week, till we could catch the train to Chile. But the whole *mispoche*, all the *mispoche* in Buenos Aires (that was my uncle, my aunt and her husband, my uncle, and my cousin, and my cousin's little boy, and the grandmother, and the cousin of the cousin, and the cousin of the cousin of the cousin, you know, about 10-12 people), they almost always came, either all together or in groups. So we were never really alone. And it was very interesting. First of all, I had to speak German again, and I really hadn't had any such close contact with family. So it was quite a touching experience.

And then we took a train from Buenos Aires to Mendoza, which is across the *Pampa*. And then we took this train up the Andes and down the Andes. And we got to a little town called Los Andes, up in the mountains. And there was my father at the station. He had come from Santiago. But my mother never told me that. I just wonder. She must have known. It must have been agreed on. All of a sudden, on that little station high up in the mountains, was my father. It was touching. And then he took us to a typically Chilean hotel, where we got some kind of soup which had some kind of shellfish. Chile has a lot of sea. He was very proud. It was some kind of special shellfish. But it was moving around in the

soup. Anyhow, I don't know if it was nerves or what, but I somehow had caught the flu, so I was feverish.

So then from there we took the train to Santiago. And my father had lived in a boarding house, in a pension. It wasn't very fancy, because in Chile the old-fashioned houses are built round a big patio, inner court, so the rooms don't have windows. And there was a little adjacent room which was for me. But we got into this room, and almost everybody in the German Jewish community left something. There were cakes and flowers. At that time it didn't move me as much as it moves me today, because now I understand. I was feverish and very English, and barely Jewish any longer, because I'd been going to church all those years. And there was this room with flowers and cakes and sweets and welcome cards, and goodness knows what. The whole place. And actually now that I think about it in retrospect, I think it was very touching that everybody who my father knew left something for us to welcome us. So that was very nice. And I really had the flu, so the little room adjacent to my parents' room where I slept was like a big cubicle. I retired to that with a very bad flu. So my first days, I think we went out for a walk, but then I had a high temperature so I was actually in bed.

But while I was in bed, my mother had gone to see somebody for whom she had some kind of a contact. And this woman was a very well known English teacher. She was a very energetic person. She also worked as a psychoanalyst later. She did everything. A very dynamic woman. And she came to see me, and she said she would get me English lessons.

Interviewer: Do you mean Spanish lessons?

Irene: No, English. No. I had my {matriculation} to the University of London, so she suggested that I become an English teacher. Remember, this was 1946. There was a tremendous demand. And Chile had, until then, been more— the sophisticated language was French. Anybody who was sort of classy would learn French. And anybody who was less classy would learn German, because there were always a lot of Germans in Chile. But English was only beginning to rise, so everybody was wanting. So she actually got me an English student. So as soon as I was well enough, I started giving English lessons. And she also got her sister-in-law, who was Chilean (or anyhow, never mind what she was), to come and give us Spanish lessons, or speak to us in Spanish. So she kind of took over.

But you see, my father hadn't done very well in Chile, because I think on the one hand he was hurt because he went to Chile alone, a man in his fifties, with a heart condition. He was not some young pioneer going out to make a— He was a broken man. He was a broken man. And he got to Chile, and he could have had jobs, because a lot of people from his home town were in Chile, because it goes too far. There was one very important German Jewish mining family, and they had employed— Well, so a lot of German Jews were in Chile working indirectly in

office work for this mining company. And they would have given him a job. And the German Jewish community, just the community, also gave jobs to these elderly lawyers and people. He didn't want it. He did not want— He was too proud. You can understand. He did not want a 9-to-5 *rakhmones* job, you know, a charity job. He said he didn't want to be pushed around. So he went off on his own. I don't know what he did. For a time he had a Chilean friend, and they tried to go into real estate, but it never worked out. And then he had representations of products, but nothing much. And he already had a walking problem, and he didn't like to go out in the heat. He didn't work too much. He worked a few hours in the morning and then he— He had a heart condition, you know. And his room, once we had cleared away all the gifts and things, his room was absolutely piled high with newspapers, walls of newspapers, because he loved to read the newspaper. He never threw anything away. And he hadn't been very well, so {he} had some medical expenses. So actually he asked my mother, but very shyly and nicely, if I could give him the earnings from this first student that I had, because he needed it for the rent. So actually, I really helped them keep the family going then.

And then I got a job for an English school, which didn't work out. But I had some other recommendations to the British Council, and they got me a job. This job didn't work out. They got me a job as a governess on a big Chilean estate—Chile was plutocracy; they had the high society; this was really what they called *alta aristocracia*—in the country, on one of these big feudal estates. So I was actually there for four months. So I really got a feeling for Chilean life there.

I also went to church. In England I had gone to Protestant church. They knew I was Jewish but they asked that I go to church. I mean, it's interesting to you, because they didn't want the children to know that there were other religions besides Catholicism. Well, never mind. But it was interesting, and they were quite refined people. There were some problems. I didn't get on with the children so well at first, but later I got on quite well. Anyhow, all of that has nothing— But I was there for four months.

And I learned Spanish. I studied Spanish, but I also spoke actually. I mean, I taught the children English because I was preparing them to go to English schools in Santiago, but actually I learned much more Spanish than they learned English. I'm quite honest. I applied myself more to learning Spanish than they— So I actually came back to Santiago speaking very good, I mean, a real good basis in Spanish. And also I got to understand life in Chile pretty well, because I saw a lot of things. It's beyond the scope of this talk, but it was quite an experience.

But in between time, we had moved. We had moved, and we subleased two rooms from a lady. You know, refugees always subleased. So it was a little bit better. But there were also conflicts between my parents, or there were conflicts between my mother and the German Jewish community. Is that relevant? You see, my mother had formed some kind of idea that when she got to Chile, she would be

Frau Doktor Katzenstein and everybody would say, “How wonderful that you, a former journalist, you worked so hard in England so that your daughter could go to school, you worked as a domestic.” In Chile they didn’t give a damn. They didn’t give a damn because they also had all had a hard time, the German Jewish community. They all took my father’s part. They said, “Well, finally. How good that Mrs. Katzenstein and her daughter have finally come to Chile to help poor Dr. Katzenstein, who has been so lonely and on his own all these years.” You know. So there was a disconnect there. And my mother went from one side— First she wanted to be— So she took on some kind of a job, nursing somebody, just to show. And she went out in the heat, and she started getting an eczema. Well, to make a long story short, that eczema spread all over her body. She was going through her menopause. And she later admitted—and it really was so, because she also became very difficult emotionally, and there were scenes and stuff—that it was really a nervous breakdown. So she was really sick. I mean, this eczema spread down her chest; it spread down her back.

Well, anyhow, I came back from this job in the country, and then through the same contact at the British Council I got a much better job, teaching for the Grange. That was the best English school in Santiago. And I really applied myself. I’d had one bad experience. I stayed there for ten years, and I taught elementary school English. But you know, because of the situation at home— This was a school where all the upper-class Chileans wanted a status symbol. They wanted to send their children. And I think they didn’t pay me too much at the school. So I could give as many private lessons and earn quite well with the private lessons. So I worked at the school in the mornings, and the rest of the day I gave private lessons. And I earned quite well.

And my father worked on it, but he— And I also wrote to my uncle and told him things were not too good, so he sent a bit of money, which was typical: it was put into the Chilean stock market, because we always invested. So the thing is, with my mother, that was really a problem. She ended up in the hospital. We tried one treatment after the other, I don’t know, all sorts of fancy treatments. Finally she did get a doctor who helped her. But I think probably the disease, the virulence of the disease had somehow run its course, because later she admitted that it was really a nervous thing, a kind of nervous breakdown.

And so she gradually had recovered, and we moved from there to another sublease, which was a little bit nicer. The following year, again I worked at the school, gave private lessons, and in summer I went with another family, again as the governess. But they were actually Jewish. Well, the husband was Jewish. It wasn’t so fancy and so strange. So that was in Viña at the seaside, near Valparaiso, which is very similar to San Francisco. That’s why I always feel— So I was there for three months, and then I went back to the school, and things were a little bit better. I started feeling that I could take a course. I took some French courses. A little bit better. My mother was getting a little bit better, and things were a little bit better. I always somehow hoped that maybe we would go to

Buenos Aires to be with– I always wanted to write to the family in Buenos Aires and suggest that we come over there, but I never did.

And then in the winter, let's say sort of June 1946, my father had a heart attack. The doctor came in time, gave him an injection (that's about all you did in those days), and then in August he had another heart attack. And I always felt guilty. I should have pushed the doctor to come quickly. And just as the doctor was poised to give him the injection, he passed away. So there were my mother and I alone in Chile. So I think she hoped at that time, somehow she hoped that my uncle would see to it that we come back to England. Fat chance. He was doing very well as a stockbroker. He also got married. He may have sent us a little bit of money and something. But it was actually my mother and I alone then. But we did much better alone than we had done with my father, because my mother took over my father's representations. And she was younger, and she walked better, and I guess she was trying to prove something, and she did quite well on her own. And I went on teaching and giving private lessons, but I started doing more on my own. Actually I tried to go to the university part-time, but it just wasn't possible. The schedules overlapped too much. But I gave that up. I stopped going as a governess, so in summer I always went to the university.

But somehow there were problems, because my mother always had a problem with the German Jewish community, from the time when we had arrived. And when I had come to Chile (I think about that now vis-à-vis the Kindertransport), they had come to fetch me from the German– We had youth organizations. They knew my father's daughter was coming. They came from the youth organizations to fetch me, and there were dances and excursions. It wasn't anything, but I was with young people my age, and had a boyfriend, you know, innocent. But then when my mother was sick, she really turned against all that, and she didn't want me to see this fellow again. And somehow I never went back to the German Jewish community. I don't know why. I think I was waiting for them to come and ask me, but of course nobody came. They came for me when I arrived. I could have come back, but instead I made other friends through my work in the English community. I started writing articles for the *South Pacific Mail* on drama and book reviews, and through the drama reviews I had Chilean friends. And my mother encouraged all of that. She never wanted me to be very Jewish. So it wasn't too good.

My mother also always said she kept me too close, because all those years I suffered from terrible migraine headaches. I was incapacitated in many ways for about two or three weeks every year. And I think that was because I just didn't quite live a– It was too close. My mother said we had been separated in England during those years between my age of 10 and 17, so we should make up for these years now together. And of course I was a young woman in her twenties. So it was very difficult. Well, anyhow, there were problems.

But we did make a life together, and this was very important. But I felt somehow I wanted to do more. And my mother wanted me very badly to take a trip back to Europe, to visit all our friends and family, and I didn't want to take that trip. In fact, I started a relationship with a Chilean art critic, I think, just because I didn't want to take that trip. Because I felt, "I'm going to go to Europe, and then I'm going to come back to the same old thing."

Well, then it happened. Life is so full of ironies. Well, then, through some friends I met a— At that point, in Chile to be unmarried at 25 was pretty bad, because everybody married very young in those days. Well, anyhow, I did meet somebody in Chile who was here from America, through friends. Well, I'll bring this up because actually— Maybe this is confidential, so maybe you can cut it. The funny thing is, I mean, it's been on my mind so much because this guy lived in Santa Cruz, and I was going to visit him now, because we're still in touch, and I found out that he died. His wife— I didn't marry him. He married a girl from Peru. He was going around South America, I guess, looking for brides. And the funny thing is, she called me in that hotel, and we had a long conversation. And she told me so much about her marriage. Really, this is confidential. Ever since then, I'm so glad I didn't marry him, because she left him several times. She was German. She was from Stuttgart, and she was German Jewish. She said she went back to Lima several times because of the mother-in-law. Anyhow, this is the confidential part. But anyhow, he proposed to me. And the funny thing is, he proposed to her too, and she also came to America. But anyhow, that's a personal story. But anyhow, I thought, rather than wait for—

So I had already been thinking of going to America. And just the fact that I had him over here, I mean, I wasn't going to get into a marriage or something with someone I hardly knew, so I thought it would be a very good idea to continue on my plan rather than to go to Europe, the way my mother wanted me to go, to go as a translator to America. So I really trained myself. I did translations for the United Nations. I did all sorts of translations. I trained myself to be a translator from Spanish and French, not from German. And I even got accepted by the United Nations for the exam, not for a job. And I came to America.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Irene: Well, I left Chile at the end of 1957, and I spent a few days in Buenos Aires. I arrived in New York on January the 2nd. And the person who sponsored— I had guilt feelings about my mother, so I didn't want to use the little bit of money we had in Germany. So actually someone who I knew from my English life, who had also lived with these English friends for a time, she and her husband guaranteed me, and I lived with them—they were wonderful—when I first came, an American Jewish family. I arrived on January 2, 1958, and I've been here ever since. I didn't get into the United Nations, but I did get a job as a translator for Chase Manhattan, and I was there for almost 28 years.

But the first years were always under the guilt of my mother. Shall I go back to Chile? Shall I bring her over here? So that was some kind of a shadow over those first three years. I was really more of a semi-tourist. And then my uncle in London (I guess they had a close bond for things in their mutual past), he suggested that my mother had always been happy in England, and he had done very well as a stockbroker, and he suggested that my mother move into this apartment that he had just moved out, which had very low rent. There was some kind of special law about it. So my mother came here, I think, two or three times to be with me, and she came again to be with me at the end of 19— it was just when Kennedy was being elected, so at the end of 1960, and she went to England.

And then it was like a fairy tale. Well, there were some bad things in between, but this is where I really can end. She got quite a lot of restitution then. She got her pension, and she got some very good payment in arrears for 20-30 years. In between time, we did have some other restitution. None of it had been spent because it all went through my uncle at his firm in London, so it was all in the stock market. So then I had that money here, and she had that money in England, and she had a pension. So I was about 32 by then, but I thought finally I could have a little bit more of a life for myself. My mother wanted me to come to England, because she had that nice apartment, really nice apartment. It was all very comfortable. The good times were more or less back. But I just thought, “If I go to England, I will give up this little bit of freedom that I have achieved.” And so it took me a lot.

I did know my husband at that time. We had always been friends. We married much later, but he had sat next to me in the— We worked together. So I did have friends here. It was a conflict. So I actually went into therapy. And my analyst felt that now was a good time for me to go back to school. So then I went on working for Chase, but I went to Columbia General Studies, evenings. And actually I got married too, and it took me six years to get my degree. And I went to England a lot to visit my mother. But it was all much easier then. So my mother lived to be almost 89 in London, and she died in 1982, and I was there, and my husband came. And it’s been a much easier life. So it really isn’t that interesting.

Interviewer: One summing-up question I’d like to ask you is: From all your experiences, are there lessons that you’ve learned that you’d like to pass on to future generations?

Irene: Well, yes, I mean, because I’ve been doing a lot of writing. Maybe you won’t agree, but I feel we shouldn’t stereotype our experiences as Kinder or Holocaust victims. I know we’re all survivors. Everybody is a survivor. Because each life is very, very different. We’re all the product of historical circumstances. But we also create ourselves through our own inner lives and our inner strivings. I’ve learned a lot of things. One of the main things, I think, is to go with it, because there are bad times in life, terrible times in life, but there are also better times. And the best thing is not to worry too much, to stay open to the world.

Interviewer: Well, with that, we want to thank you very much.

[End of Interview]