

Kindertransport Association Oral History Project
Interview with
ILSE KAGAN
June 6, 1998

[FILE: 98_DC_A_2_IlseKagan_06_06_98]

Interviewer: My name is Anita Gross. We're here in Washington, DC at the airport hotel, Holiday Inn. It's June 6, 1998. And we're here to do an interview. Could you please say who you are and when you were born and where you born?

Ilse: My name is Ilse Echt Kagan. I was born on September 23rd, 1927 in the Free City of Danzig. I now live in Great Neck, NY. And I'm here to attend the Kindertransport Reunion.

Interviewer: What were your parents' names?

Ilse: Hilla and Samuel Echt.

Interviewer: And when and where were they born?

Ilse: My mother— My mother was, I don't know, had all of her parents and great-grandparents buried in the city of Danzig. And it was our custom every Sunday, the first Sunday of every month, to visit the graves. And I remember going to the cemetery and visiting— I mean, at that point I don't know how many generations back I had to go. But they were all there in the cemetery in Danzig. And I think the family was there from the moment the gates opened. And I don't think the gates opened until about the 18th century. For Jews to get into the city wells. So my mother was definitely a Danziger all the way.

And my father came from East Prussia. He was born in a small town in East Prussia. And his parents lived in Fischhausen. Fischhausen, I think. A little tiny place.

Interviewer: Do you know what that is near?

Ilse: Near Königsberg. Near Königsberg. I visited them usually via sea. By sea, you left the *zeideinst austprossen*, as it was called from the Port of Sopot and we went to Pillau, which was in East Prussia. And from Pillau we took a train to Fischhausen to get to my grandparents.

Interviewer: When was the last time you were in Fischhausen?

Ilse: Almost the few days before I left. I was apparently the favorite of my grandfather. And although I was only 11 years old, I traveled all by myself by boat to say goodbye to him.

And it was quite an experience because I was there on this boat—I mean, I had traveled by boat many times, but never alone—and I sat on the deck and I was reading a children's book and I'd forgotten it, left it there. And then when we had to get out— Everything was very complicated to go there because you were going over borders, so you had customs duty and all that. And while I was waiting for the customs duty to clear me, down came a whole lot of Hitler Youth girls. And I was wondering, I was a little frightened what they were going to do, but since I looked so much like them, all they did was give me back my book, which I had left upstairs. And it was— They had no idea what they were doing. If they had known otherwise, they would not have been so kind.

But I remember that experience. There they were, rushing down, all the Hitler youth girls. [laughing] I wondered what they wanted from me, and then I realized they were just returning the book I had left.

Interviewer: And what was your grandfather's name?

Ilse: My grandfather's name was Chaim Echt. Chaim.

Interviewer: And his wife? Was your grandmother also alive at the time?

Ilse: She was not alive, no. She was not. She had died earlier. [interviewer overlapping] Ria, her name was. Yes I did know her. She died when I was— I was conscious of her. I knew her quite well. We went there fairly often as children. We often visited our grandparents. She was a very quiet, lovely woman. But she died a normal death.

Interviewer: Did you have other family in Fischhausen?

Ilse: Yes, I had a maiden aunt. Her name was Hannah. Then there was sort of a widow of my father's brother who had died in the War. She lived in Fischhausen. So those were the two. And then I had—

Interviewer: Do you remember her name?

Ilse: Mit— No, I'm not quite sure. I used to know until very recently, but I forgot. Mitzi or something like that. Anyhow, she lived there in Königsberg. My father had a brother and he had two children, Ilse and Manfred. His name was also Echt, of course.

Interviewer: Did they survive the War?

Ilse: No they did not.

Interviewer: And any of the— Did they have children?

Ilse: Yes, Ilse and Manfred are the two children.

Interviewer: Oh, the children.

Ilse: Yes. The girl had the same name as I did. She was Ilse, too. And I remember my mother begging them to send their children to Danzig so they could go on the same transport with us, but the mother couldn't part— Could not part with them. She could not.

Interviewer: You remember those discussions?

Ilse: Yes, I remember that. I remember my mother trying very hard to get them to come to Danzig and join us. And there was no way that she'd do it.

Interviewer: And your mother's side of the family— did you have family members also there in Danzig?

Ilse: I had one aunt, her name was Minnie Ivalofsky. She lived in Danzig and she also didn't get out. Except for my immediate family and one brother and his family, my father's family did not get out. They tried very hard. They took all— My father's brother, who lived in the suburbs of Danzig, had a cow and some chickens and some pigeons and a garden so he pretended he was a farmer and on that basis he was able to go to Canada. So he collected all the family's money and went to Canada and bought a huge farm. And he was hoping, that way, to bring out his entire family—all his brothers and he had another sister nearby named Rachel—and they were going to come over there and help him on that farm. And exactly what happened, I don't know. But I believe it was the brother Joseph had varicose veins. And because he had varicose veins, they decided he could not be a farmer and they would not give him the visa. So the entire family, although they already were at consulate, ready to come over, did not leave the place and stayed behind to perish.

Interviewer: And do you remember when that was? Was that right before you left?

Ilse: No, that was after. That was after I'd left.

Interviewer: Oh. So how did you learn about this?

Ilse: I think at that time you could still write. He still wrote to Canada, or something, my uncle. Yes, I think it was before the War, you see. But it was between May— I arrived in England on May 5th, 1939. And between May and September, I think they tried to get— My uncle, actually, left in February of '39 to buy the farm in Canada. So between February of '39 and September, I think he had sent the visas over to them in order to come over as farmers. And the entire family was supposed to come. My one aunt, who

lived in Danzig with my— with us—her name was Frieda—she got as far as Holland and that was sort of the 1st of September.

Interviewer: Of '39?

Ilse: Of '39. And she got as far as Holland. And what made her turn back, I haven't— never found out. She never— She sent her suitcase over and they received almost an empty suitcase because it had been ravaged. And she never showed up. So either the War had broken out and she didn't want to leave her father and sisters, or else they wouldn't— the authorities wouldn't let her come over. It was really never— She was coming to England. But how she never— We never heard back.

Interviewer: What did your parents do for a living?

Ilse: My father was a teacher and therefore he was a civil servant; teachers were civil servants of the state and the city. And in 1934, the state of Danzig—at least the authorities of Danzig—asked him to form a Jewish school. And he formed a Jewish school for practically all grades. But it was not— It was done by the authorities so that you actually were using the regular text books of ordinary schools, but children couldn't sign up anymore to go to a non-Jewish school, so they all had to be directed to the school my father started. That's the early grades. There was also a Jewish high school in Danzig, privately started by Miss Rosenbaum. But that was a private high school, whereas my father's school was state-operated really.

Interviewer: Did you attend that school?

Ilse: Yes, I did.

Interviewer: You started around '34?

Ilse: I started in 1934. I went to the school, yes. I was one of the first students.

Interviewer: And what grade were you in at that point?

Ilse: The very first grade. Yeah, the very first grade. I started late, actually, considering I was born in 1927, that was my first year at school. It was kind of late.

Interviewer: Do you have any siblings?

Ilse: I have two sisters. I mean, I had. One sister just died, but I had two sisters. One of them came over with me to England.

Interviewer: And what are their names?

Ilse: Their names are Eva and Anelise, who now calls herself Ann. Eva and Ann.

Interviewer: And when were they born?

Ilse: Eva was born in 1920. She's seven years older than I am, so she was born in 1922, I suppose, or '21. No! Seven years. 1920, right? I was born in 1927. 1920. And my other sister is 4 years older than I am, so she must be 192– 1923, I suppose. One is 1920, one is 1923. But it's something very close to there. She's going to be 75, so yes. So it's 1923. One is August 25th, 1923. And the other one is December 10th.

Interviewer: Did they marry, your sisters?

Ilse: Both my sisters married Europeans.

Interviewer: So what are their last names now?

Ilse: Eva Meyer married Jared Meyer, who came from Berlin and who left Germany long before the atrocities, really. I think he studied law in Geneva and France, and then came to America. So he really missed it all. And he was the spokesman in our community for reaching out to Germany, to the Germans. So he was– On Yom Kippur, he would make speeches every year talking about Germany and how we have to give them our blessings again.

And my other sister married someone from Vienna. His name is Kurt Gelles. He's now 92 and he's still alive and doing well.

Interviewer: That's great. And they have children also?

Ilse: The Meyer children– They have a son and a daughter. The son lives in Stockton, California and he has two children, Samuel and Rachel. The daughter is Dr. Madeleine Meyer, she's a psychiatrist who married an anesthesiologist and they have two children, Emily and George. And Peter Meyer is a professor there at the university in Stockton.

And my other sister has one son who's married and has two children, Eric and Matthew. And his name is Ronald, Ronnie Gelles.

Interviewer: Did you have a close family when you were living in Danzig?

Ilse: Yes, extremely. Extremely close. [interviewer overlapping] Both my mother's side and my father's side. Very close.

Interviewer: Did you live in a Jewish community or was it an integrated community?

Ilse: I went back and I looked at my apartment house. And my husband asked me the same question: was this a Jewish neighborhood? And I actually don't think so. I don't know that there was a specific Jewish neighborhood in Danzig. I don't believe it was. Although there were many Jewish families in the building, yes, there were. In the apartment building there were quite a number of Jewish families, but on the other hand, I remember playing on the street, we had all kinds of incidences with non-Jewish children. So I know there were many non-Jews on the street, some who refused to play with my sister or something like that, or somebody got hit by a gang. So there were a number of non-Jews, although there were a number, quite a number of Jewish families in the area. But it's very small.

Interviewer: Were your friends Jewish or non-Jewish or both?

Ilse: Well, my friends, of course, were all Jewish because I was in a Jewish school. So I don't really remember not having any Jewish friends. I was active in the Jewish gymnastic organizations, even as a young child. We were— We belonged to groups, you see. The Jewish community was very organized and all the children belonged to some group or other, either Zionist or non-Zionist or in between. You really had to belong to something. Immediately, when you got into a class, they would fight over you, who would get you. My family was non-Zionist and we believed— We children belonged to the *Bunddeutch Jude Judent—Bede Jat Jat*. And there were two groups of— gymnastic groups. One was the Zionist, which was the *bachaba*, and one was the non-Zionist, which was the *schict*. And we often had exercises together and competitions against each other, right from the early age. The children were— I as a child was really only surrounded in a Jewish kind of atmosphere.

[Interview pauses, restarts]

Interviewer: So what was your family's religious—?

Ilse: We were, I would say, religiously liberal. My father, of course, I think came from a much more Jewish-conscious—well maybe not conscious—more Yiddish-Jewish household. I would imagine that as a child he might've spoken more Yiddish than German. And he went to train as a Jewish teacher in Nerchau, or somewhere in East Prussia. So my father knew a lot about Judaism, really from all points of view. But my mother was entirely a liberal Jew. But, you know, he was religious, so we definitely had our Shabbat on Friday night. We lit our candles and my father did the Kiddush every single Friday night and my spinster aunt would be there for dinner, or my mother's aunt would be there for dinner, or somebody would always be invited on a Friday night. And I can— We went to temple quite often, not just the High Holidays. I remember going there for all kinds of occasions. And it was an important part of our lives, the temple. My mother, particularly, she was confirmed. Not many were confirmed in those years, but she loved the ritual rabbi that she had, Dr. Kilter. I had a Dr. Grull who was okay. He came over to America. Actually, he married me. He married me and another rabbi from suburbs, the two of them married me here in New York.

Interviewer: Nice.

Ilse: So it was– The liberal– The *Liberal* [indecipherable, speaking German] it had all the Danzigers in there. It was very important to the Danzig community. And it was only built in the 19th century, but it was built in the center of town, the synagogue, and it was a landmark as well as an important institution for us. Very important.

Interviewer: Have you been back to Danzig?

Ilse: Yes, I have, actually.

Interviewer: When did you go back?

Ilse: About 4 years ago.

Interviewer: Was that the first time you went back?

Ilse: The only time, yes.

Interviewer: And what made you decide to go back at that time?

Ilse: The reason is not what you want! But my husband answered a– Pan Am, I think. Pan Am became Delta, I think, and they had a competition and you had to recognize somebody's voice on the radio, you know, who says "this." And my husband recognized the voice and nobody else seem to have recognized it. And so we had two tickets to anywhere in Europe. And we decided to go to Helsinki. And that was just a little ferry ride over to Danzig. And I always wanted to go, so he came– He actually wanted to go more than I did almost. So we took that trip to Danzig then and then went back to Helsinki and St. Petersburg, etcetera, then on to Prague. So it came to be a very nice trip.

Interviewer: Did you see anybody that you knew there?

Ilse: Well, there was absolutely no one you could have seen that you knew. There was a total, total transfer of population. There was absolutely nobody left who knew anything about the city or its history or anything at all. And I felt I was the conscience of the city. I mean, there was nobody there! All Polish and youngish people, and they didn't know. So I hired a driver to take me around and I showed him– I wanted to go places. There's a certain smell I remember of pine trees and the salt water of the Baltic. And that combination, I just needed to smell again. It was very important to me. So I asked him to go to a certain area where that combination existed. And he said, "Oh how beautiful!" He said, "I must take my own children there." So they don't even know the places to go. There was nobody there who really had explored the city in any way whatsoever. So there was nobody there at all.

Interviewer: And how was it for you, experiencing it again?

Ilse: Well, I felt very guilty at one point because I always thought, "I shouldn't be here, my mother should be here." And then I— After the second day, I changed my mind completely because we lived in Sopot. We decided to live in the Grand Hotel in Sopot. Well, that was still the same Grand Hotel. It hadn't changed. But then, as soon as I went to Danzig and saw Danzig's, I was as glad my mother hadn't seen it. It was just so devastated by the War. And, yes, they're trying to rebuild it, but the city was no longer a city. It became a tourist town, and a museum town. I don't know what to call it. It just didn't have the feel of a city where people lived. It was— And all of a sudden, I could see all of the churches, from one area. I know there were buildings in between. I could never see all the churches like that. And it was— It was not really— It was a sad experience to see Danzig the way it looked.

And it was even sadder after, because I went from Danzig to Prague and I saw how beautiful Prague was still. It had one building where the roof had fallen out, but that was about it. And all of its glorious buildings were still standing. So I felt quite jealous of Prague and even sadder about Danzig. So it— But it—

Just the character had been lost. The entire wharf used to be a fish market, where you would never buy a fish that wasn't alive. And sometime it was so alive even after— it jumped out of the pot when you got it home. So you had certain ways. But there was nothing but boutiques. All boutiques. Amber, amber of course, was sold all over the place. But millions of little boutiques. So you saw so much of it that you didn't want to buy it. And silversmiths. I mean, it was still nice, but it was cute kind of thing. Boutique-ish and not a town. Not at all.

And Gdynia had become the city, actually. Gdynia is really where people live. And Sopot is where people go to enjoy themselves. So you see there's a line, but there's a shuttle more or less from Danzig to Sopot, Gdynia. And Gdynia is really the town where it looked as if people really— The harbor. Danzig no longer is the harbor. Sopot was no longer where all the boats would come to the pier, although they rebuilt the pier. It's the longest pier in Europe. And Sopot was always an international spot. All these cruise ships would stop and all these little children would run after the— They would stop far out in the sea, their little boats would bring them to shore. And we would always run after them to see what language they were speaking. And we always used to laugh when people came in fur coats in the middle of the summer. But it was quite cold there, it was much colder than I remembered. And I was always thinking, "How did I ever go to bathe in the sea when it's this cold?" And it was— When I was there in June or July, it was quite cold.

But, so it had changed. Sopot was sort of interesting because everything was still there. I looked— It was a very high-class kind of spot. And you had this huge casino, and outside the casino was a dance floor. And in the afternoons, they would always tape down songs. And there was the dance floor! It was still there! It was absolutely amazing. Half the

bricks had gone, but the floor was still there. Then there was a fountain and at night, at 10 o'clock, the lights would go out and somebody would be dancing in sequined sort of bathing suits in all kinds of different kinds lights. And I always found that very exciting if I was allowed to stay up that late. And the fountain was still there. Of course, it wasn't functioning. And the hut where the band used to play and all that, the grandstand—everything was still there but nothing was— It was just in disarray. But it was there. It hadn't really been bombed as much.

And then the Grand Casino, which is of course the major hotel there, which had the casino. I went into the casino because I remember I used to be taken there when people would sort of sneak in. You're not allowed to go and gamble if you're a wife of a civil servant. You absolutely had no right. You would not get a ticket. You would not get a certification to go in. And so my mother occasionally got herself in there and I know it was very important to her. So I looked for the casino and I was the only one who remembered that the casino was on the third floor. And all of a sudden it was on the first floor. But nobody else seemed to know that or remember it. And then there was sort of—

I had a real cultural shock there because I was sitting at the roulette table—I wasn't gambling any big deals, \$35 worth or so, with my husband behind me, who spoke English, of course, and I was speaking English—and then next to me was a Chinese gentleman. And he was just betting all over the place. And I thought, "Well, maybe—" And then all of sudden he threw me a chit. And I thought, "Well, did he hear that I was coming back to Danzig? Is he giving me this little tiny sort of present?" And he threw it at me and said, "Dwa!" And my brain was going in circles until finally I caught on that there was this Chinese person to me speaking English or German, saying "Dwa"—number two, which is two in Polish—to put his chit on number two on the roulette table! [laughing] And before I ever got to what he was trying to do, I really felt my brain was just functioning very fast in order to understand what he was doing. But that was a culture shock: a Chinese person speaking Polish to me! In what I thought was my Sopot, German-speaking Sopot to somebody who came from England. So it was kind of funny.

Interviewer: Was German the prominent language while you were there?

Ilse: Yes. Yes. They had an enclave of Poles, a Polish school, and I think the railroad was under Polish authorities; that was sort of so arranged by the treaty after World War I. But everything— We were German. Yes. And more and more German-speaking people came because Hitler made— transferred people to Danzig, so that when finally the war started he would have a friendly group to come to. So they infiltrated a lot. So there were more and more German-speaking than anything else. It was really German-speaking. Yes.

Interviewer: Did you speak Yiddish at all at home?

Ilse: No, not at all. No. My mother was not at all a Yiddish-type, that kind of Jewish person. You know, they're a little bit— At that time, the German Jews didn't care for the Polish Jews too much, as you might well know, so that there was a gap. And my father— I never

heard my father speak Yiddish until—I didn't even know he knew it that well—until he got— when he came over here, he had a job at the New York University in the Judaica department and he was cataloging Yiddish books.

Interviewer: So that's how you learned!

Ilse: That's how I knew that he knew Yiddish that well.

Interviewer: Did you talk to him about it, then? About his background and his home life?

Ilse: I don't think we ever talked that much, no. I knew who his father was and I knew his mother. I did know there was Yiddish in that family, but I didn't know to what extent it had gone to the children.

Interviewer: You're home life, what was it like, as you recall it, before you left to go to England?

Ilse: It was really very lovely. Everybody as you know had— We had an apartment, but a huge apartment. And every summer, we rented a house in Sopot, by the sea. So we spent every summer by the sea. And my mother was— We were not the wealthiest by a long shot, but my father was extremely well respected. He was the leader of all the various organizations. He was a marvelous orator. He was very brilliant. He knew a lot and was a very brilliant guy. And I think he came to Danzig once as a speaker and my mother heard him and said, "That's going to be my husband!"

[Interruption off camera]

Ilse: So my father was the— He was the speaker and very blond and blue-eyed. And my mother, who was dark-haired and dark-eyed, decided at that moment that that was going to be her husband. And I don't think she knew that he was Jewish or not because [indecipherable word]— And she was a very strong-minded woman and practical woman, and she did what she wanted and he became her husband. So she was never— As you know, civil servants are never rich and all that. But my mother's father had a department store and everybody—a well-established department store.

Interviewer: What was that called?

Ilse: Goldstein. His name was Goldstein. And something with his other daughter— He had four sons and two daughters. Two sons died during World War I and the plaque that was hanging in the temple of the fallen, of those fallen during the War, is now hanging at the Jewish Museum in New York. And both their names—Bruno Goldstein and Sigmund Goldstein—are on there. And I see it quite often when I go to the Jewish Museum.

And one brother sort of did survive the War in Europe and Italy and he came over to America after the War, to Oswego. And then went over to Seattle to live. And the other brother went to Israel. But—

Interviewer: What was his name?

Ilse: His name was Felix Goldstein. But the sister was the problem, somehow or other. I think the sister married somebody and the dowry my grandfather had to give was apparently enormous. So they divided up the department store and one little section of it became household wares, or something like that, china and bowls or whatever he had—I think household stuff. I don't know. I remember a lot of china. And it was right by the marketplace. And it had been there for quite a number of generations. And when my grandfather died, it was sort of my mother— It was not doing so well or something and my mother wanted to restore the name. And she wasn't allowed to own the place because, again, as a civil servant only one person in the household could work. So she brought in my father's maiden sister, Frieda, and she made her the official owner and ran the store that way, and it became a gold mine. And that was why were able to do the— My parents traveled every year. They would always go abroad. And we would always go in the summer and be by the sea. So we always had everything we needed. And certainly the recognition by the community. My father was on the board of the temple, I think. It wasn't all money, but it was other things, too.

My mother's company was always up there. I think of when she had a bridge circle, it was sort of the elite of the Danzig community. I think there were only about 2,000 Danziger Jews. Actually. There were 10,000 afterward, at the end, because so many came in from all over the place, but really, truly Danziger Jews, I think there were only about 2,000. There were very few.

Interviewer: Is that including the Polish Jews?

Ilse: No, the 10,000 is including the Polish Jews. But the Danziger—the actual, real Danzigers—the Danziger families whom everybody would recognize as a Danziger family—were about 2,000. There were very few.

Interviewer: Do you know what happened to the department store?

Ilse: Well, I tried to— It wasn't— I tried to find it and I did find the street. I did find the street. And I think there was a little store there, too. I asked the people whether they knew anything about all this before, but I believe that the place where the store was, in the same street and the same number, was reconstructed. It was a reconstructed building, looking like the old building, but it was a reconstructed building. The people there were really, truly, actually selling glassware and things like that, but they had no idea whatever what had been there before the War or anything like that. So that didn't exist. It was easy to find because it was right by the marketplace. And I had, of course—

Interviewer: What street was it on?

Ilse: It was *Yunkekassee*. And they called it something very similar that you could recognize. The Polish name was very similar to that, so that I knew that I was on the right street and in the right place. But it was really not there. There was no trace of it.

Interviewer: Do you know how long they were able to operate the store?

Ilse: Officially, they sold it.

Interviewer: When was that, do you know?

Ilse: Well, it was after Kristallnacht because I was there during the Kristallnacht and I remember sitting on the lap of a Polish student who lived with us at the time, when the police called in the middle of the night and told my parents to come down there, that they had smashed the windows. See, in some instances, the police really didn't do anything, but they were nice enough, I remember— You see, that's where the little nuances are between Danzig and Germany. The police occasionally did something good, and sometimes they did not, but you could pretend that they would. And there were many incidences my mother had. So they went down there and I know that everything was smashed and been looted. And then afterwards, they had people stand in front of the door—you may have seen that—saying, "Don't go in there."

Interviewer: You remember that?

Ilse: I remember that very well. And I remember another occasion from my mother. Actually, she tells that in the Danzig movie. They made a documentary when the Jewish museum showed the *Danzig 1938: The Destruction of a Jewish Community*. But I remember the occasion when she was in the store and somebody came up with a huge paint box and wrote "*Jude*," "*Jew*," and something like "Don't go in." And so she went out there and spit into her hand and wiped off the stuff as the guy was putting it in there. And he tried again, and a whole crowd gathered. And she had the guts— I don't know how she had the courage, I really don't. My mother was unbelievable. So he tried again, but she smeared it away. And then at that time he got really mad and he was going to hit my mother. And at that very point, my father appeared and hit the guy. And the paint went all over his face. And instead of the crowd attacking my father, the crowd dispersed and that was the end of that. So it was an amazing sort of an incident. But that's what happened there. So I think soon thereafter— So you can imagine, it would be beginning of 1939 that they sold it.

But then, of course, actually the store belonged to my—officially—to my aunt. So that the money that they had, my aunt was left behind. So they didn't take any of it with them because they were afraid that she was left and she had to show the amount that she got. She would have to show it in case she was ordered to, or whatever it was that they would

do. So that was— I'm sure it was not a price that you would get normally, you know it was under duress, but they sold it and we never claimed for it or any way like that. I made no claims.

Interviewer: Do you know what happened to your aunt specifically?

Ilse: That was the aunt who got as far as the Hook of Holland.

Interviewer: And then she's the one who went back.

Ilse: Either went back, or— I don't know what happened to her. That empty suitcase I shall never forget.

Interviewer: Do you remember the first time when you heard about the Kindertransport?

Ilse: Well, my father is the one who asked for the hiding places for the *krote*. And he organized the whole thing. But my father being my father organized it in order to get some of the Polish children out of Danzig who no longer— whom the Danzig community couldn't support any longer. And he was just thinking of that, you know, get those people who are trying to depend on the Jewish community to support them and couldn't, that they should get out. And my practical mother again said, "Are you crazy? It's a matter of life and death of your own children."

Interviewer: Do you remember those discussions?

Ilse: Yes. And then all of a sudden it was pretty close to the date of actual leaving, you know, we were told we were going too.

Interviewer: How much before you were leaving?

Ilse: I remember we had a big party before that. It wasn't— It was just a few weeks. It wasn't that long. So I remember we took out an atlas and looked at England. And then all we could think of was Lord Fauntleroy and how he lived and who would take children into their home. They had to have castles and lords and earls and gardeners. That's how we sort of imagined our trip over there.

Interviewer: Did you discuss that with both your mother and father?

Ilse: I think we were all around the table doing that, sort of looking at England. And my sister— Oh, my sister had already left when— My elder sister had already left for America in November of '38. So my two— My middle sister and I.

Interviewer: Did you speak any English?

Ilse: No, no I didn't.

Interviewer: And your sister, did she?

Ilse: A little bit more, because she was already in a higher grade of high school and she'd learned some but not much. I didn't know any.

Interviewer: So what were your thoughts about—aside from going to a castle—what were your thoughts about leaving and going to this land you hadn't been to?

Ilse: Well, to me it was more of an adventure. You see, my father was there with us, leading us. And there was always a matter of we're going to be together sooner or later, with them. I shall never forget the aunt especially. I had to go and say goodbye to my grandfather and that, of course, I didn't know that I should never see him again. But you, somehow, you know it and you don't act it out. You don't act it out as a child. I did know it. I was aware of that, saying goodbye to him. He had a big beard. He loved me. I know why he liked me most because I happened to like his beard. And I didn't mind being kissed by him with his beard and that, he thought, was the greatest thing. So that gave me my place number one in his line of grandchildren! So I remember saying to by to him. Saying goodbye and going.

Interviewer: Did he give you any parting words?

Ilse: No parting words that I remember now, no. I don't think anybody— You know it and yet you don't know. You pretend not to. But I remember I could never understand how my parents sent me there all by myself, why they didn't at least bring my eldest sister with me. Because I remember I got so sick on that boat and I needed a bathroom desperately from all areas. And I saw a lady going into the bathroom and I didn't realize that once— that was just the door to the bathrooms. So I was always waiting for that same lady to come out. I was suffering and suffering! I remember that. That was my trip, so I remember the trip.

Interviewer: Do you remember packing for your trip?

Ilse: Yes, I do. It was only one suitcase, but we had a lot of— I remember the week before, or two weeks before— We always had our clothes made by a lady who came to the house. We had one person who came and would always repair the linens. And another lady who sewed and made us clothes.

Interviewer: Do you remember their names at all?

Ilse: No, I don't remember their names. No I don't remember their names. But I remember the maid. Gertrude was the name of the maid that we had and she got married the same day we left for England.

So we had the clothes that she made for us. And that was just one suitcase full of clothes, I remember.

Interviewer: So you had clothes specifically made for the trip, or—?

Ilse: Yeah, specifically made for the trip. Yeah.

Interviewer: And how did they imagine you were going to dress when you got there?

Ilse: The people who opened up my suitcase, they thought I was— They couldn't understand what I had. They were wondering what it was for! [laughing] Because when I got to this little village in England, they'd never seen things like that. Party dresses, other dresses. It was pretty crazy. It wasn't— They couldn't— They thought I was a little orphan. They had no understanding, really, who we were. They were wonderful people, but they did not quite understand our situation at all. I don't think that was really explained to them. They thought we were a bunch of orphans, really, and they were going to save our souls and our lives at the same time. But they were really lovely. They had our photographs. They loved— They were really fond of the photograph. They showed it. Proud of the photograph. They showed them around. They showed it— The whole village new we were coming and they were really anxious to adopt us and to have another child in the house. Their daughter was already 16 and out of the house by 14 or 16.

Interviewer: What was their family name?

Ilse: Simms. Their name was Frank Simms. And they had a daughter Joyce who was a nurse and she was working already outside the house.

Interviewer: And what was the village?

Ilse: Kings Stanley.

Interviewer: Where was that?

Ilse: Near Stonehouse, near Stroud. In Gloucestershire. So it was a little hamlet. And the people there had the village post office. Most of the house was taken over by the post office, and then you— They also sold newspapers and cigarettes, and a cup of sugar or something. Not much. But the post office was the village post office and that was important. And you had to go through the post office and then up a very creaky staircase, a very creaky little staircase, and you came to the upstairs. And I think it was a prison of

the year in Charles' the Second reign. It was an old, old house. The floors were totally uneven, but it was charming to some. To me, it was going back into history.

Interviewer: Did you know the family you were going to before you left?

Ilse: No, we had no idea. No. On the contrary, when we arrived, we went by train.

Interviewer: You went from Danzig?

Ilse: From Danzig, yes, on the Slaughterhouse—it was called the *Schlachthof*, that's where in the medieval times the animals were slaughtered—that's where our buses left from.

[Pause for someone knocking at the door]

Interviewer: We're just going to go back to when you were leaving Danzig.

Ilse: Yes, by that time Danzig was a very special kind of community. It was different from all other areas. When the Kristallnacht came along, our temple had a lot of people standing guard and really nothing happened to it. But there was a man in Danzig who was very entrepreneurial. He decided he'll make a deal with the authorities. And at that point he said, "Well sell you our temple. And we'll sell you our cemetery," which was horrendous. "And with that money, we'll help you get Danzig *Judenfriede*."

Interviewer: Was this agreed to by the community?

Ilse: The community had a big last meeting at the temple.

Interviewer: And you attended that?

Ilse: I don't think so. I don't think so. It was not really for us. Children wouldn't do that. I don't think my mother went either. I don't think she could face that. But it was full, the temple was very, very crowded and full. And they agreed at that particular moment to do that.

So by the time we were leaving, the temple had already been— they had begun to tear it down. And there was a big sign up that [speaking phrase in German], so that was "Come make us free of all the Jews." There was a huge sign as they were taking down all the pieces of the temple. And the temple had a museum. And somehow or other, two people got together and made huge crates—and I don't think they knew what they were doing—but they put all the good stuff and again said they were selling it. They were selling it to America for money to get rid of the Jewish population of Danzig. So they saved all the artifacts. So that's how the plaque— Anything that was important to people or the Danzig temple— The plaque was one of the things. And the Torah curtains.

And all the various items that were in that museum were sent in a crate to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and they didn't know what to do with it for years and years and years, and some of it got burned in their cellar. But it was about 10 years ago they finally resurrected it and had this exhibit which traveled all over the world, an enormously successful exhibit of *Danzig 1938: The Destruction of a Jewish Community*.

And so that our— the Jewish— We had a Friday night session for the children who were leaving from the temple. And we were leaving in the gymnastic hall, that was where now services were being held since the synagogue didn't exist anymore. And we were all given a prayer book, as a farewell gift, by the community. So that was the community farewell to us.

Interviewer: And you took that with you?

Ilse: And we took that with us.

Interviewer: Do you still have that?

Ilse: I lent it to the Jewish Museum during the— And I can't remember if I ever got it back. I don't think I did. But that was what I— I know I gave it to them because it had in the back of it, saying "In Commemoration of the Transport." So that was— Those of us who belonged to the temple—I don't think every one of the hundred children were there—but I do know that those from the temple were there. There were a few, not that many. Not the hundred, I'm sure, at that particular ceremony.

So that was our ceremony. And then in the morning I remember saying goodbye to my aunt, my mother's sister. And then the other aunt. I remember my mother running after the bus, crying, crying. And then, of course, I realized it's more serious than I was thinking. I still remember that: her running, crying and crying, running and falling on the bus as we were leaving. So that was really the most emotional point at the time.

Interviewer: Your father didn't come to the bus?

Ilse: Well, my father was somewhere in the bus. But my father was very prescient, you see, and he was in charge of a hundred of us. So he wasn't particularly interested in just his children, his two children. He knew we could take care of ourselves. He was interested in the organization of the whole thing. So we didn't see very much of him. At least I didn't. In fact, I was very angry until we got as far as Holland. A lot of people— You could see pictures of that. There was some kind of hostel or something. We would stay in Rotterdam for a day, a meal or something, and then at night went on the boat in the Hook of Holland to go over to England. And—

Interviewer: Let me ask you. You started off in a bus from Danzig—

- Ilse: Danzig to some kind of a German area. I'm not quite sure where we boarded the train. In order not to have to go through all these different borderlines—you see, once you go over here, you had the Polish corridor and then Germany—I think they took the bus through the Polish corridor to Germany and then we got on a train there. The initial bus thing was to stop this—too many different border crossings.
- Interviewer: What was the atmosphere on the bus as you were traveling to this town?
- Ilse: Some children were crying. I remember some children were crying. I don't think I was.
- Interviewer: Was anybody singing songs or—?
- Ilse: Nobody was signing songs that I remember, no. Nobody was signing songs. Nobody was signing songs. And the train—I was just fascinated on the train. I remember we stopped in Berlin for quite a while. It was just fascinating to look out. I'd never been to Berlin or anywhere like that, so I just wanted to see what it was like. I remember these huge columns with a swastika on them that I could see from the train. So I have an idea of what it really looked like. But I was in a compartment. There weren't that many in that thing, in that train. They left us alone. In fact, they actually had a Gestapo man on the train so that we would be taken care of, that nobody would come on and do anything to us. It was the Gestapo that took care of us.
- Interviewer: You didn't have anybody traveling with you at that time? Because sometimes they had escorts that went.
- Ilse: No, it was just the leaders of the— Just the leaders, my father and I think somebody else may've been a leader.
- Interviewer: So your father came with you?
- Ilse: Yeah, my father was the leader of the school. And a Gestapo man made sure that we went through the borders and everything, had their permission to do it and that there would be no problems.
- Interviewer: Was anybody searched?
- Ilse: Nobody was searched. No. We had a very easy trip to Holland, actually. Because, I think, of the protection—as stupid as it sounds—but that's really what happened, I think.
- Interviewer: Did you join up with other children at any point? Or it was just the hundred of you that went all the way to Holland?

Ilse: I don't remember any others coming on board. I don't. I don't think we were more than a hundred in that place that took us in to give us a meal. And then my father took everybody over the age of twelve to look at Rotterdam. And I was eleven, so I got— I said, "That's my father!" So I never got to see Rotterdam at the time. I remember staying behind and playing games that they had there in this particular place.

Interviewer: Did your father continue on with you on the boat or did he—?

Ilse: He continued on with us on the boat. And he was in London. And we all came to this huge hall. And several of us— We had these tickets, sort of, labels put over our necks and shoulders. We had no idea where we were going when we got there. So we entered this hall and then— Oh, no, first of all when we arrived in London, it was a big deal arriving in London. So everything was very— It was almost an exciting trip. At that time it was May 5th—it wasn't so early in the game—but still a lot of publicity went with the arrival, with our arrival. And very beautiful women were there, I think just for the publicity stunt—of course, I didn't know that—and I saw her take the hand of one of the children and I was so envious. I said, "Look how lucky! Look at this gorgeous woman. She's going to go to her home." But it was just the publicity stunt by some kind of actress or actresses who were there, too. And I know that the BBC was there because not so long ago somebody showed me a BBC documentary, and low and behold, I'm sitting on my suitcase, arriving in London. So that it was— pictures were being taken at the time.

And then we got to the hall. And about six or eight of us got the same labels. And that, of course, just substantiated what we thought all along: we're going to a huge castle. Eight of us, can you imagine, all the same address? We were just thrilled, the eight of us to be together. Except then we were put into another train and somehow civilization was left behind. It seemed more country-ish every minute of the day, every minute of the ride. And then when we finally arrived at our destination, which was Stroud, a gentleman met us and he was the organizer of the refugee committee of that area. And then he divided up— divided us up to the different homes.

And at that point, I was still very hopeful because at the end he took my sister and me to his house. And the lady asked would we come upstairs to wash up, because bathrooms are upstairs not downstairs. And my sister and I said, if we have to live here, that's fine with us as long as we were together. And she served us tea and everything, so it seemed wonderful. Until twilight appeared, and then everything was sort of darkish. And she said, "Now I have to take you to your homes."

Interviewer: How did you understand what was being said?

Ilse: Well, I think my sister interpreted it. And the gestures: now we have to take you. In other words, I looked and we were not staying there. And that was— That was the first shock I had. Really a shock. And then he drove us, and he drove us to this little old, old house— a smallish old house—and he dropped me off, and me alone.

Interviewer: And that was the first time you knew you were being separated from your sister?

Ilse: That was the first time I knew I was being separated and where I was going. And the lady stood in the little gateway—it was called the use—

[END FILE 98_DC_A_2_IlseKagan_06_06_98]

[START FILE: 98_DC_A_3_IlseKagan_06_06_98pt2]

Interviewer: We can continue now.

Ilse: The lady was standing by the gate. And I remember her saying "Mommy." And I remember shaking my head. I didn't want to call her Mother or Mommy or anything like that. So she said, "Auntie." So I remembered Auntie. So that was okay. And it was a twilight hour and they don't put their lights on too early. And she showed me you come in and there was a little tiny corridor and that was the kitchen. And that lead out to a garden. And she took me out into the garden and she showed me the outhouse. It probably didn't quite sink in. And then there was just one living room, on the side. I mean, there were other rooms, but they were used for storage and, as I said, the post office, and all kinds of things. So what was left, really, for use was this tiny little gangway—hallway, which was the kitchen and the living room with a fireplace. And that was it. And it was very dark.

She took me through the store and up that creaky staircase and to my room. Of course, I was looking— In Europe, you had a very substantial wardrobe, a real armoire or whatever you call that. And there was just this tiny room and at the corner there was a curtain sort of to cut off the corner, and behind that was where you hung your clothes, behind the curtain. When she unpacked, and saw me unpack my things, she couldn't believe it and where was I going to put those things, although it was just one suitcase. And then I looked at my bed. Of course I was looking for the featherbed, and all I found was sheets and a couple of blankets. So, I was missing that. Somehow, I remember— I don't know how I went to sleep. I must have cried a lot during the night, in my sleep. So probably something like—

I had no idea where my sister was going. When they said she's only going to the next village— I mean, if you come from a town, the next town sounds far away. And I had no idea where she was. I know I asked her to give me, since she knew more English than I did, I asked her to give me the dictionary. I know she gave me the dictionary and then she left to go to her place.

So then during the night— That night was really the only traumatic moment in life, I think, during all this commotion. When I woke up, obviously from the crying that I had done, and I desperately needed to go to the bathroom and I knew she'd shown it to me. So I

was groping, I was groping and groping from room to room—there were three rooms there—and I just couldn't find it at all. And finally, she showed me a potty to go to.

Interviewer: She was awake still, or she woke up?

Ilse: No, she woke up by my wandering around. So that— I remember that was very traumatic for me. I just didn't know what to do. And that was my first moment. And soon thereafter—

My father had stayed in London because of the paperwork and other things that had to be done.

Interviewer: Did you say goodbye to him as you were leaving?

Ilse: Not that I remember particularly, no. He was busy doing whatever he had to do. And so I wrote to my mother. That was the worst thing I could have done. She had— My mother had sent her husband— Her first daughter was in America. Her husband and two children were in England. The maid had just married. So she was totally alone in Danzig and I wrote the card, "Take me to America." I said, "They don't have a featherbed," they don't have this, they don't have a toilet, they don't have heat, no nothing. I said, "Please, take me to America." And that's what I wrote. And my mother got all upset, of course. Not that she wasn't upset already. She was totally upset by that and called my father in London and said, "Get there! Go and see where your children are." [laughing] And then of course my father came and he was totally delighted with this old fashioned way of living. He thought it was so charming. It was in the Cotswolds, the landscape was so beautiful. We are city kids. Landscape, at that age, doesn't strike you as anything that you really think is very important.

Interviewer: Was he speaking English?

Ilse: He knew a little. He knew a little bit, self taught, but he did know a little. I remember he helped my sister write letters to England, to his family here in America, and to get the visa for my sister. So any one of us could've come to America, but he couldn't. We were all Danzig quota and that was open. But my father, being born— having been born in East Prussia was on a German quota. So that's how— Alone, my sister could come, but as a family we could not come to America. We were listed but nothing ever happened.

Interviewer: So he came to visit and he was very pleased with the situation?

Ilse: He loved it! He thought it was absolutely quaint and English and adorable. He was thrilled. He didn't see anything wrong at all.

I don't know whether at the time I was— When I got there, the rector immediately came over and greeted me as part of the community. And I also had an interview with the headmistress or the teacher of the one classroom school. And I might have said something at the time about the school.

I know that when my father did go back, he wrote a lot of letters asking whether his children couldn't continue the education they had. And I was already— We had skipped a grade and I already was in high school. My sister was four years older than me, so she was also in high school. And so for a while I did not go to that school while they were negotiating what to do. In the meantime, there was another— There were some refugee children in Stonehouse with a Miss Kimmons. And those children were giving English lessons. So we were invited to come and join those English lessons. So my sister and I had a month of English. And I remember additions of pence and shillings and pounds and how to do that, all that kind of thing.

Interviewer: Was that a frequent thing?

Ilse: That was— I don't think it was a daily basis, but several times a week for that one month we would meet and have that lesson given to us. And then one day the refugee committee lady came and picked me up and then we went and picked up my sister, who happened to be in the next village. If you were brave enough to cross a field with cows on them, you could get there in 20 minutes. But if you were to walk, it was quite a walk because you had to circle all those fields. So that's where she was.

So they picked both of us up—

Interviewer: How long was that since you had been left there?

Ilse: Within weeks. Within weeks. Within the month actually, within the month. Because I started school a month after I was there. And we were taken to the central school, which was a vocational school. And my sister was already over 14. So they asked whether they had a spot for either one of us or both of us. And as fate would have it, they had it only for my sister. So she went there and then I went across the street to the high school and asked— Well you see that was your fate, really. And I asked and they took me. So from that, then they took us to bicycle store and gave us each a bicycle. I had never ridden a bicycle, so I had to ride this bicycle home, which was four-and-a-half miles, to go home. But my sister was there and I had once or twice been with her on a bicycle—because she had a bicycle, I didn't have one. So I managed. I had a small little bicycle. I don't think any gears. I had no gears. She had gears, I had no gears. And I was sent home with a bicycle and from then on I had to go to school on the bicycle. And that was okay in the summer, but it was very cold in the winter, very cold.

But anyhow, that's how fate put me on a groove towards higher education and my sister learned mostly just secretarial work. And the year after that, she left school and worked.

I think that was as far as the school would go, the age of 16. That's right, after a year or so, she was 16 and she left school.

In the meantime, though, my parents— About 3 months or so, they came— My father had gone back. He had to go back, that's one of the stipulations of leading a Kindertransport; you have to go back. He was able to come over to take a course at the University of London, in English. He was given a visitor's visa with my mother, but only because he could provide proof he was still employed by the state of Danzig. He could do that, so they let him come.

When my mother died and I went through the effects there, I realized their visa was up on September 5th and September 3rd is when England declared war. So after the war, they couldn't go back. They let them stay there.

Now, when they came over, they were very careful not to give any hints that there was any chance that they might stay, even if they wanted to. So they had no— The money they couldn't take over because they left it with my aunt. And they brought in what they needed for a month's trip to London, so to speak.

So my sister, who was the older one and also very practical, she was asked to find a place for them to live. She did find them a tiny little cottage in Leonard Stanley, sort of one room downstairs and one room upstairs.

Interviewer: Where was that? Was that near where you lived?

Ilse: Leonard Stanley was where my sister lived, the next village to Kings Stanley. So my parents lived there.

Interviewer: So you were able to see them frequently, then?

Ilse: I was able to see them, but they never asked me to stay there or anything like that. It was just one room that they had. And probably they didn't know how long they had to be this way and there money was not ample. They were not allowed to work, at first, because they were alien and they had no right to work. So they were living very frugally in this little tiny cottage.

When I was sick, I would go to them. I remember having the measles or something. I was sleep on— They had a chair that opened up— It was just a chair. So I stayed on that chair, I remember.

The whole thing upset— When my parents really did come, that of course changed the entire attitude of the family with whom I was living. So that was all against the way they had thought it out.

Interviewer: So what happened? Atmospherically, what changed?

Ilse: Well, eventually— It took a year. It took a year. They finally came to the conclusion that there was no reason for them to keep me. And I had to go and look for another place. I was so-called thrown out. They didn't say why. I only found that out very recently. It was very upsetting to me. It wasn't that I was terribly, terribly happy, but he was a very nice man, the man who took me in. I had to deliver papers in the morning and he would give me six pence pocket money for taking out the papers every morning. It was quite a long route I had there with all these papers. And then they had written a letter to the authorities or whatever that I needed more supervision. That was really totally wrong. They never let me have a friend in the house. I was never invited— I could be invited out, but I could never invite anybody to the house. I never had any friends to play. So I just went to school. It was the school that their daughter had gone to, so I was given a hockey stick so I got on the hockey team. But then they wrote that I needed more supervision and I had to find another home.

That's already after my parents had found— They weren't there anymore. They were already in Birmingham, my parents, by then. After a year, the friendly aliens were allowed to work. The labor shortage during the war became acute after a while and they were allowed to look for a job, and that's when they found a job in Birmingham to take care of the hostel children and to run a hostel in Birmingham. So my mother became the house mother and she had to learn to cook and do things for 30 children all at once. And my father was the guiding light, and he was very good in the sense that he was very stable, made people— You should listen to anybody from the hostel—there are three of them here—and I think they will all say that my father encouraged them to go on with their schoolwork, to learn more, not to stop where they were.

Interviewer: So did you end up there at any point?

Ilse: After school certificate, I did. But not for four years. Not for four years.

Interviewer: So where did you go after, then?

Ilse: There was another family that had a little house by the railroad. They had a toilet. It was a little bit higher— up an echelon a little bit. He was working for some kind of factory during the war. Although he was quite old, he joined up.

Interviewer: What were their names?

Ilse: Their names were Humphrey. And I don't understand— I kept in touch with the Simms, but not with the Humphreys. I don't know why. The Humphrey's was very embarrassing all the time. They had another European girl there from Czechoslovakia. And I was— At that point, my parents were working and they actually paid 10 schillings a week for me. The Simms never received any money for me at all. They just took care of me. The

Humphreys were paid 10 schillings a week by my parents. And the other girl, I don't know whether she paid or not.

Interviewer: Do you know what her name is?

Ilse: I don't remember. I liked to forget it.

Interviewer: You didn't get along with her?

Ilse: No, she got me once into a lot of trouble. After that, I don't remember very well what her name was. I left to go on holidays. I went to Birmingham to visit my parents. And the bicycle that I had was the same bicycle that I had which was given to me by the refugee committee. And she bought me— I said if I leave it, I should lock it. I'll leave the key here, but I should lock it. And she bought me the lock. *She* went out to buy me the lock. And the family, who had a daughter, they got furious that I locked the thing. They said that my friend had bought it and she never owned up that she had done it, and she encouraged me to do this and she never owned up to that at all. So she was always the— My friends who were totally innocent became the scapegoat and she was totally appalled by what I had done, knowing that she was the one who did it. So from that day on, I forgot about it. She was in a higher grade than I was at school.

Interviewer: So how long did you stay with the Humphreys?

Ilse: Quite a number of years, actually. I stayed at least four and something. One and a half of that— Two-and-a-half years, I think. So the girl, a very beautiful girl that they had, and at the age of 14 had to go to work. At least, she went to work. I don't know if she had to go. And she became an apprentice in the bank. And I know she had nightmares over it, she used to have sleepwalks over it. But she was also really also much too young to go out to work. But there was I at school and she was out to work.

Interviewer: Did you develop a relationship with her at all?

Ilse: Well, she was a lot into men. She would go to all the dances and other things, and I was terribly naive and very immature for my age. I really was quite immature. I had long plaits. Once, I went with her to a dance with my long blonde plaits—I was much blonder—so with my long blonde plaits, I picked up immediately Dutch airmen, but I had no idea what to do for them. It was funny. Both of us came home with whomever we picked up, and she sort of really dated and I really didn't know what— I didn't want a man there to date me. I didn't know what to do with them. I was 14 years old, or 13 years old. So her interest was— Every five minutes she was engaged to somebody else. Her interests were not— were totally different from mine, although I liked her very much. There was just no connection really.

Interviewer: Did you lose complete contact with her?

Ilse: Yes, totally. That was my fault. Totally. He was sort of— He drank. He liked to drink. And he came home and was sometimes a little drunken sailor, but he also meant well. They were very— And the wife was a nice lady and worked hard. I wasn't that good at living with people because I really didn't contribute that much to the household. I didn't know how to cook or take over breakfast or a meal or anything like that. I really didn't— I wasn't very good at anything. I just didn't know how, I don't think.

Interviewer: There was no expectation for you to carry on any tasks in the house?

Ilse: No, I didn't have any that I know of. The other girl, I know, made breakfast. I remember she was always cooking the bacon. But I never got that at all.

Interviewer: Where did you go from there?

Ilse: I waited until I had my school certificate. In those days, it was finishing one level of high school, a school certificate. And then I saw the correspondence very recently— The refugee committee in Birmingham where my parents were, and everywhere else, were pushing for me to go to work, that I should look for a job. I was writing letters—"I know you know what to do, what's best, but please, I'm not ready yet. Don't send me to work. I don't want to work yet." And my parents had a very hard time persuading the refugee committee that as long as I could go to school, I should go to school. So they made me sit for an examination to— The bombing had ceased by then.

The reason I wasn't with my parents in Birmingham at all, at the refugee committee house, was because Birmingham was intensely bombed every night and it was really miserable there. Absolutely miserable. Every night you had to get out of bed and you had to go down to the basement and sleep on trunks. There was a bomb in the front and there was a bomb in the back and no lights, and once no lights. And the windows were smashed— It was really— What the English people went through and how they did it, they were really to be admired. It was constant, constant thing. It's not just occasionally. It was an industrial town. And I remember being there myself during one of those really bad attacks. You could hear the whistle. Everybody said as long as you hear the whistle, it's fine. It's when you don't hear it, that's when it matters. And I remember when the children went out in the morning to go to work, one by one they were coming back from the hostel because they couldn't find their offices. The center of town had been hit very badly. And they just had— All their places of work had been shattered. It was a bad thing. I was only there for vacation time, holiday time, and the rest of the time I was back where I was. And that's— I don't know why I was telling you that.

I was staying there until school certificate. And then I sat for an entrance examination to King Edward's School. Edward's was sixth in Birmingham, which has turned out to be the number one school in England, even now. And they gave me a scholarship to that school and money for my uniform. With that bit of ammunition, I think, my parents were able to persuade the Birmingham refugee committee that I should go. If it doesn't cost anything and they'll have so much deducted from their salary for my stay in the hostel,

would they let me then go on to do that? And so they did. The only expense was a certain deduction of not that much money from their salary for my keep. And that was the only thing they had.

So then I was able to live there for a while, again feeling terrible because everybody else my age and younger were going out to work as nothing, coming home—as they're apprentices, mechanics—with filthy hands, coming home with that. Or going to a hairdresser's and becoming a hairdresser. Nothing with any kind of future at all. And I was there going to school. It was very hard. I didn't—

And then somehow or another, after I got the higher school certificate, the headmistress there called my parents in and said that I wasn't brilliant by a long shot, but they thought I was clever enough to have a chance to get a scholarship to Oxford. Just a chance. So she— They let me stay on to take the exams. And then I got into CQ's. So that's how this one little trip of the Birmingham refugee— no, of the Stroud refugee committee, this school or that school, really made a total change in my future.

Interviewer: So what did you study there?

Ilse: I took an easy way out because I really didn't know what Oxford was all about. I really didn't. Living in a hostel was wonderful in a way, but it was totally isolated. We were very strong and supportive of each other, but we lived in an island and once you're outside of that island, it was a totally different world. We were the refugee group. We were not people. We were not children. We were refugees. We were totally different. Happy among ourselves; as happy as could be. And on Saturday nights— Friday night my father always said an oneg Shabbat of some kind where somebody had to read a paper or do something—if he didn't do it, somebody else had to. And on Saturday night was always dancing. People were envying us for being where we are! But occasionally my parents tried to make me go to a regular home, a Jewish home where there was another young girl also. But it was the most awkward situation I'd ever been to. She didn't know what to do with me and I didn't know what to do with her. I remember her always patronizing me in some way. I remember being on the bus afterwards with one of them, she said, "Isn't it strange? You were the one that ended up going to Oxford." This little refugee kid who was not quite up to par to be normal. That was a very strange kind of situation. So I never really felt comfortable anywhere outside this little enclave of the hostel with the thirty children in it.

I was certainly never really comfortable with the families. There were a lot of letters that I wrote. I know— I already saw those. I had forgotten about them until I saw them recently. I said, "I know you're getting bombed all the time." I said, "But please let me come to you." And I always pleaded. "At least we'd all die together," I always said. "Please, let me stay with you." But my parents decided it was a safe area and I was learning English and as my father was so enamored with the area I was in, so there was never a chance of me joining my parents and my sister. I was really quite all alone.

My sister, as soon as she graduated, went to Birmingham and got a job there. So that I was alone there.

Interviewer: So eventually you did study at Oxford?

Ilse: Yes, I did, I got my degree at Oxford.

Interviewer: What did you get your degree in?

Ilse: It was modern languages. I had— The idea was to teach, really. I had another year's scholarship to take the Master's of Education, but in that— My sister, after a while, went to Paris to work for the Joint Distribution Committee. They were looking for people in Europe to work for the refugees. And she was given a job in Paris to go there. So she was a stateless person, in a way, living in Paris. My parents became English, British.

Interviewer: Oh, they did?

Ilse: And I did, too, because I was under 21. But as the years passed by, 1948 already, the hostel children had all become of an age that they no longer needed this kind of care. They've earned now enough money to live on their own, or wanted to live on their own. The hostel was good for the children 14 and up who didn't earn enough, who had to be subsidized. Once this whole situation—because of years and age, etcetera—the hostel in itself was no longer needed and my parents decided to go to America where I had my elder sister.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Ilse: 1948. In 1948. So they decided that that was a good time to go to America. And that was the only place that— My sister in Paris agreed to go to America. So the only time our family— My suffered very much not having her eldest daughter with her all the years. Actually, she went over immediately over the War, the first moment she could.

And wire crates— A lot of crates. A long time ago, before we left we sent a lot of crates to America. And my sister was supposed to take care of them. And we never found out, to this day, what happened. They were all auctioned off. Not an item was ever recovered. Not an item. They were all there and somebody was supposed to pay the storage. The money was there, but somebody fouled up.

So when my mother came to America, she found out it had all been auctioned off and nobody helped her to restore it, to get any of it back. I think she could have, I think so, but nobody helped her enough. So she lost— My mother lost a lot. A lot.

But then in 1948— That must have been 1947 she came over. And then '48, the two of my parents went over and that was— I was left. I had to come with them because the visa was on my parents' visa, the affidavit, because I was under 21. So I went on their visa. I came over for the holiday and went back again to finish my degree.

So I was alone in England. Then I decided that Oxford is wonderful, but it has three terms of 8 weeks, which is 24 weeks a year. That means you have an awful lot of weeks where you're not at Oxford and if you have nowhere to go, it makes it very difficult. And so I decided after my degree, I came over here, too, without knowing what to do. But I came over.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Ilse: I came in 1949. In August or something, of 1949.

Interviewer: So you all came to New York, or where did you go?

Ilse: New York. My sister was in New York. My sister was married by then. She had married without us here in 1946 or '45, something like that. So she married. And she lived in Little Neck. In Little Neck. And I think my parents stayed in a— When my parents came over, she was in Europe, just on holiday, and I think they stayed a little while in her house. But then there was no one to help them and they really had a hard time in those years. They had to pay a lot of key money to get an apartment. You couldn't just get an apartment. You had to go to the super and bribe, and god knows what, and key money, or whatever that's called, to get the worst. You paid thousands of dollars just to get a place to live. And they found an apartment on 96th St, but it took a lot of their money,

Interviewer: On the West Side?

Ilse: On the West Side.

Interviewer: And you joined them there at the apartment?

Ilse: I joined them in the apartment when I came over here. It took me a couple of months to find a job, a few months. But then I— I had a friend who was working at the United Nations and he called up one day and he said, "Come on over." He was a big success at the time. He said, "Come on over, they have an examination for secretaries." I said, "You must be kidding! I cannot type. I cannot— I really cannot do anything a secretary does. No steno, no nothing." He said, "Doesn't matter. Come over." So I went over there. A whole room full of young ladies sitting very upright and erect and their faces looking onto the document and their fingers typing without any looking and I was doing whoops, whoops, whoops! And obviously there was no chance. But what I didn't know and he knew is that that was— When you were there, there was also an IQ test. And when you

were there they take your application— I had an application in. They take your application and look at it; otherwise it's just filed with a hundred thousand others. And at that time it was General Assembly time, so they had extra money. So I was hired.

Interviewer: To do translation, or?

Ilse: No, no translations at all. I was put into the library. I was put into the library. So then I decided I can't become anything professional in the library unless I had a library degree, so then I started going to Columbia University to get a library degree.

Interviewer: And did you get your degree?

Ilse: Yes. Ten years later. Ten years later. A year-and-a-half after— In 1991— I got the job at the end of 1949, I think, or 1950. 1950, when I got married, my husband wasn't crazy about the United Nations and all the foreigners. He was a Bostonian. So his first job was at Harvard, a teaching fellow at Harvard Law School.

Interviewer: He was a lawyer?

Ilse: He was a lawyer, yes. So I went to my first year of married life at Harvard, at Cambridge. And then I got a leave of absence, which is unheard of for not professional people. I got a leave of absence from the United Nations. Of course, when his year was up as a teaching fellow, he chose not to go to New York, he chose to go to Washington. And so I had to give up my United Nations job. So that was— Then we lived here— We lived in Arlington, actually. My first child was born in Washington.

Interviewer: So you've come a long way!

Ilse: Yes, I've come a long way.

Interviewer: Is there anything in particular about the early years that you would like to talk about that we didn't cover?

Ilse: I don't know. I suppose the only thing that's really left me, I think, that is— I was terribly conscious all the time of being a charity case. And it really bothered me a lot. And I remember that the people I was with, the Humphreys, were really— they were wonderful people. He organized— It's not vaudeville, but a musical kind of thing once a month on Sundays. And it was fascinating. All kinds of artists—second-rate artists, but artists— same and juggled and did things like that and it was kind of fun. But he would always introduce me as this little refugee child. And I couldn't stand it. And rather than go with them, I stayed home. It shows you how much— how unhappy I really was with my situation.

And then the other thing I— Of course, the letters always take me away. The other thing— I remember an essay I wrote. It was something where you could write anything you wanted to and I must've compared my life in Danzig to my life there. I don't think England came out ahead, especially not the situation I was in. Well, anybody who had any kind of pedagogical background, would read in between the lines, but this teacher got so mad at me. She made me tear my essay and told me how ungrateful I was, that I didn't see the good in England, I thought the other things were better. That was an incredible experience for me. I wasn't— I said a few things that were, you know, comparatively speaking, but it was an honest essay. It was really things that I thought were a little bit— I was living in a village and Danzig, even though it was Europe and Eastern Europe, it was a very modern city. And we did have modern facilities and we did have a spa next to us. Life was a totally different life. It was a very lovely life.

Interviewer: So these were the things you had pointed out in the essay?

Ilse: I can't remember what I pointed out, but certainly I pointed out that my life beforehand was probably better than my life was then. I remember how she made me cry and tear up my thing and gave me a terrible mark. It really— She should have— In retrospect, as an adult, she should have kind of questioned it first, not just embarrassed me and make me tear it up, I don't think. Why should I have to tear it up? It wasn't— I didn't say anything nasty. I'm sure I didn't. I just compared, which I should have probably contrasted. But it wasn't— I remember that as an experience as a very unhappy one. I know the headmistress was very good, she was a very nice woman. I remember writing— After many years, I suddenly realized that she really was the one I had to thank for anything that happened to me. So I tried to reach her somewhere.

Interviewer: Do you remember her name?

Ilse: Dancer. Miss Dancer. Yes, I remember her. Miss Dancer. And she lived in Bournemouth after she retired. Yeah, Miss Dancer. And she was the person who really had— Miss Dancer and Dr. Smith were two headmistresses in the schools whom I have to thank for a lot. When I got to the school and she really— I always had a little bit of a problem with— I don't know what you call those girls who were in charge of taking care of discipline? They were in the top grade class. They always had to take care— Prefects. They were called prefects. I was a prefect, too, at one point. Whenever I didn't wear my hat right or something like that, they reported you. And I never used to think that was of great importance. I said if I'm on a bicycle and I don't wear my hat, which would fly off in any case, it's not the end of the war. So they put me before tribunals and other things and I had to go to the headmistress and she was always very sympathetic. So I remember— She didn't let me get away with it totally, but she certainly understood the insignificance of the occasion. So the two headmistresses in my life, Dr. Smith and Miss Dancer, they were really very instrumental.

Interviewer: This feeling of not wanting to be pointed out as being a refugee, did that have an impact on you later in life?

Ilse: Oh, I think so. I think so.

Interviewer: How did you react?

Ilse: I like to give and I hate to receive. I really do. I don't like to receive at all. I'd much rather give. I don't know if this is something to do with my past or not, but I hate to call. I hate to make telephone calls. I love it when people call me, but I'm very hesitant to make the first call.

Interviewer: Whether you know them or not?

Ilse: Whether you know them or not. I very rarely do. I like it when they call me. It's not that I hate people. I really like to be called. But there's a certain shyness about— Somehow or another, I'm not as assertive in some ways. In some ways I'm very assertive. I don't quite— There are some things, though, in that respect that are unusual. I don't know why I don't want to call, but I don't. And I also always hate it—

I don't like to stay with people, by the way. The English people, when they come over, they don't mind at all living with you. I would hate to go over there and live with them. Not that they— They're perfectly hospitable, and really you don't mind at all. But it's just the feel— I'd rather not. I'd rather be independent and live on my own again. It's the same feeling that I have. I don't like to receive as much as I hope that I can give.

My daughter asked a very interesting question to me just the other day. She said, "Why weren't you in Birmingham?" I said, "Well, because my parents thought I was in a safe area." She said, "Well, if it was safe for you—" My sister was in Birmingham. She said, "Why was it okay for her to be there and not okay for you to be there?" But I really didn't know how to answer that. I said, "I know I wrote— I said, please let me come. I'd rather die with you together than be here by myself." And I never quite understood that, either. Actually, I guess I could understand it. I suppose my father thought I was in a good school. It was not a good school. It was not. It was— Stroud High School was not a good school. It fed all of the villages around there and believe me the villagers were not necessarily intellectual families. Some of them—I'm not saying totally—but their idea was to get as many people through school certificate as possible. Enrichment programs didn't exist. It was just total repetition and repetition and repetition to make sure that people would understand enough to get through the exams. So it wasn't a good school. So my daughter asked that question: if it was too dangerous for you, why wasn't it too dangerous for your sister? That was just one of the questions that are probably unanswered.

Interviewer: So do you— Are your children interested in your background?

Ilse: I think so. I think so, yes. I think so. Well, my daughter occasionally comes up with these questions, but my son is— My son is a great intellectual and he went to Oxford, too,

Harvard and Oxford. And I think he understands the English life and many things like that. He was the first one to call that he thought he made a big discovery, but I knew about it. Ken Tynan had just written—no, his wife, Kathy Tynan, had just edited Ken Tynan's letters and the book was just published in the last month or so. And he was the first to discover me. Ken Tynan had mentioned me a couple of times in the book. And he was so proud that he found it. But I had been to England a few years— I went to a reunion at college and people were saying, "Oh I saw your name in your book!" But the book had never been published over here. So when I saw that the book was published I went and looked at it, but he found it immediately so he did know that I had a connection with Ken Tynan, or at least that he came from my school. So he knows my story, although he doesn't ask about it that much. But he is— He is an ancient historian, so my history comes a little bit into the ancient history. So he's well aware. I don't know whether he knows all about the— how far back to my aunts and uncles he goes. I'm not sure.

My parents didn't— My father— I was rather touched, actually. I went to the Yad Vashem. I said well, let me put all those people, whom I mentioned here, I said let me write them down. And then I filled out a form and asked if any of them had been registered. And I found that my father had registered every one. He never really said that he'd done that. I had no idea. But I saw his writing in this thing and he had obviously suffered knowing that so many of his siblings—his father would have been too old in any case—but the siblings did not make it.

Interviewer: But he didn't discuss any of that with you?

Ilse: He didn't discuss it, no. I didn't even know he'd filed, you see. I didn't even know he had filed. So he didn't really discuss it very much. My mother had a little problem with his brother. Well, I shouldn't say that in public, should I? [laughing]

Interviewer: It's okay.

Ilse: Because he took the family money in order to buy the farm, which everybody agreed to, and he kept it during the war and he kept it after the war, thinking maybe somebody would have survived. And when nobody had survived and he really didn't want to be a farmer, he sold the farm. I remember my mother was always saying, "It was all our money, and all the family's money, and my husband is your brother. Some part of that should go to us." And he wouldn't think of it. And so my father always said, "Whatever my brother does is all right." At that point, he would never even think of asking, even asking. "Whatever he does is all right." My mother is, well— [laughing] He had one surviving brother, so he would never say a bad word about him.

Interviewer: Are you in touch with that family?

Ilse: I am, actually. I am, actually. Yes. It was very difficult because I know how my mother felt and she was right. She was really right. Because he bought houses for all his children with the money.

I feel my parents, my mother particularly, suffered the most. All of us came up— came back on our feet and we're all living a life we would have lead, and probably even better. But my mother never regained her status in life. She had to work very hard. She didn't have— She always wanted to buy a little house on the water or so. And even her money he didn't let go of, that brother, so she never had a lump sum so she could do that, buy the house, or live the way she wanted to live, although she was always very regal. Always very regal. And it never mattered what she did. She tried everything. She had clients as a masseuse and she tried all kinds of things to earn some money, and other things. She would never, never lose her dignity in any way whatsoever and always when she walked in she was very queenly in her own way.

But in retrospect, I think she had the hardest life. She lost— Danzig to her was everything. Not only had she lost her brothers in the War, the First World War, then she lost all her family and all her status in Danzig. And her she was— She never had the same friends, a couple of them that's all. But never quite regained that kind of lifestyle that she really had enjoyed and that my sisters and I had enjoyed. We are sort of back to where we started from, but I don't think she ever did. She would never let on. She would never say a word. And she lost all her possessions. To us, the possessions were not as important as they were to her. We could buy new ones. For her, it was— The plates were no longer the Myson plates and the silver wasn't the silver. Her life was really different. She was always totally grateful that her family was there and all of us—the three of us and my father—the five of us survived. And that was all important. She would never, never let on. But I can't imagine that. It was very difficult for her. Especially the hostel years.

And then once over in New York, she became a hostel— Not a hostel mother. A house mother to a halfway house. And that was horrendous. I think she was— Knives were sort of pointed at her and things. She was there with people on drugs and other things. She really did terrible things in order to find a place in society, what to do and how to live. But it was things that she would never have thought of in other times. I think she was the one who suffered the hardest. And I always think— I wish I had told her that, that I understood, but I don't think I ever did.

Interviewer: When did she pass away?

Ilse: She would have been a hundred on May 16th and she died just before she was 90, so it's ten years ago.

Interviewer: Wow.

Ilse: Ten years ago. But whenever we had a reunion— Many of her birthdays, I would try to get a hostel reunion because there are so many of that hostel— the hostel children now living in America. And of all she always loved to have those hostel children around. She really enjoyed— She liked that the best.

Interviewer: If you could pass a message to the future generations, what message would you pass on as a result of all your experiences from your childhood and early years?

Ilse: Fight persecution whenever you can. Fight any injustice in the world wherever you can. Be active and speak up. And if you're a child, always be optimistic and be strong because in the end things work out and you're the one in charge. And if you wish it, it'll happen. That's what I can say.

Interviewer: Well, thank you. Is there anything else you want to say?

Ilse: No, I want to thank you very much for taking the trouble because it's very nice of you.

END

