

Transcript:

Hanna Hamburger

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Interviewer: As you know, what we talked about on the phone...

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: We're going to talk a little bit about pre-war life. You were raised in Germany, is that right?

Hanna Hamburger: That's right.

Interviewer: Can you talk a little bit about pre-war life? What you remember? I know you escaped, is that right?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes, we escaped.

Interviewer: Couple of weeks before Kristallnacht.

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: OK. So we're going to talk a lot about what you remember, what your experience was like in Germany during the creation of the Third Reich and we're going to talk a little bit about what you remember. You were born in 1922?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes.

Interviewer: OK. So you escaped it 12?

Hanna Hamburger: Sixteen.

Interviewer: Sixteen, OK. My math is bad. So we'll talk a lot about what you can remember if that's OK with you?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: OK. So tell me a little bit about your family.

Hanna Hamburger: Well, it was only my mother, my father, myself, and my grandmother. We live in the same house. We had a hardware store and it was going very nicely, even when Hitler came nothing really changed because people respected my father. And what I can remember is the boycott. I was coming home from school for lunch because the school was two blocks away and I saw that the store was closed and in front of me was our doctor. So I ran after him and say, "What happened to my grandmother?" He says, "Nothing." "Well the store is closed something must have happened." "Oh," he says, "I don't know." But, he was a Nazi.

Interviewer: How did you know he was a Nazi?

Hanna Hamburger: He always wore the...

Interviewer: A swastika.

Hanna Hamburger: Swastika.

Interviewer: And he was your doctor?

Hanna Hamburger: He was our doctor, yeah, to the end.

Interviewer: To the end.

Hanna Hamburger: To the end, yeah. He never refused to come when we needed him. And so at that time, they had some men in uniform walking up and down in front of the store and my father came out with his medals and he said to them, "Which one of you gentleman can show me this?" He had the iron cross. And they apologized and they said, "Mr. Marx, keep your store closed for today," and they left.

Interviewer: The Nazis apologized?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: Because he showed them an iron cross?

Hanna Hamburger: Right.

Interviewer: What do you think that meant to them?

Hanna Hamburger: That they were a little bit ashamed.

Interviewer: The Nazis were.

Hanna Hamburger: Yes. Because they were youngsters and they knew my father all their lives, I mean maybe early 20s, maybe even not.

Interviewer: So they were following orders?

Hanna Hamburger: They were following orders, yes.

Interviewer: But you got the feeling they really didn't want to be doing it?

Hanna Hamburger: No, that's why they left.

Interviewer: So they asked him to keep it closed for the rest of the day maybe to protect him.

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: And he did.

Hanna Hamburger: He did.

Interviewer: What was going on in your home that night when you recognized the boycott was starting? Do you remember?

Hanna Hamburger: Well, we kept behind the doors. We stayed inside.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you talked about? What your parents explained to you?

Hanna Hamburger: No, I don't. They didn't talk much to me about it. And to this day, I really in a way – what can I say? – I regret the fact that they were never open to me and didn't talk to me about what was going on.

Interviewer: So, you were saying that you have feelings that your parents didn't share with you. Do look at it now...are you a mother?

Hanna Hamburger: Am I a mother? Yes, I have two sons.

Interviewer: So do you look at it now as a mother that maybe she was...they were protecting you?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes, as I was protecting them. I didn't talk too much about it. And last year, the town invited us and we got two tickets and I took my oldest son with me.

Interviewer: The town invited you where?

Hanna Hamburger: To come back to the city from Germany.

Interviewer: From Germany they invited you here in Tennessee? They invite...

Hanna Hamburger: No, from Tennessee to go to Germany.

Interviewer: They invited you back to Germany?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: For what?

Hanna Hamburger: For a get-together with all of the surviving Jews from the town.

Interviewer: And was that the first time you talked about it with your children?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes. No, I mean they knew what was going on, but they didn't realize just how much there was in property. My son couldn't get over it. It really floored him.

Interviewer: And your daughter? You have two sons.

Hanna Hamburger: Two sons.

Interviewer: And so, you brought them back with you, both of them?

Hanna Hamburger: No, just one.

Interviewer: Just one? So tell me when the boycott started, do you remember when that was?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah, it was on Hitler's birthday, 1933.

Interviewer: 1933.

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: So with the boycott, things begin to change drastically.

Hanna Hamburger: Not really.

Interviewer: No? Not for you?

Hanna Hamburger: Not for us. People still came in to the store. We had a very decent mayor and people came...we were treated as nothing happened. The only thing is they said, "If they're marching, somebody should be watching, should be looking out of the window."

Interviewer: Do you remember any of the restrictions that were placed on the Jews in Germany?

Hanna Hamburger: Not until '34 when I was in the pool one day and a youngster came in. He was visiting, a Jewish boy, and he said to us this sign outside, Jews are forbidden, you know, "Juden Verboten." So, I said, "Oh, come on. We came in. There was nothing on the door." Sure enough when we went out, there was a sign on. So that was really the first kick in the pants.

Interviewer: What did you think when you saw that sign? What were you thinking was happening?

Hanna Hamburger: It's beginning.

Interviewer: Were you surprised?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes.

Interviewer: What were you most surprised about?

Hanna Hamburger: That they would do something like that to us.

Interviewer: So you went home. Did you talk to your parents about what you saw?

Hanna Hamburger: I talked to my parents about it and it so happened that the people who were for us going into the pool went on vacation and they were not there so they put the sign up. So the money that my father contributed towards the pool, he got back. They made him give him the money back.

Interviewer: Do you find that interesting that they put "Juden Verboten" on the door, but they gave a Jewish man back his money?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Hanna Hamburger: Because they respected my father very much.

Interviewer: But he was Jewish. What I'm getting at is I understand what you're saying. He was still Jewish and I know during that time even the most respected citizens were being robbed of everything. What do you think your father had besides respect and admiration? What do you think it was that they singled him out in some ways and treated him better?

Hanna Hamburger: I have no idea.

Interviewer: But you said you even had a Nazi doctor to take care of your family.

Hanna Hamburger: Family...I remember once he came...my grandmother was ill and he came in and he had to pin on the Nazi...you know the cross. And he's examining my grandmother in the back, her lungs, and he's not coming out. And my mother, my aunt and I were looking at each other, "What is he doing behind the back?" When he came out from behind the back from listening to my grandmother's lungs, he had removed the pin.

Interviewer: He removed it. So you think there was a sense of shame?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah and my grandmother used to really curse Hitler and we said to the doctor, "Please, doctor, don't."

Interviewer: I'm sorry, she used to what?

Hanna Hamburger: Curse Hitler.

Interviewer: Curse Hitler, OK.

Hanna Hamburger: He said, "This is my patient and I respect her."

Interviewer: Do you find that extraordinary that a Jewish family in Germany was treated differently by the Nazis?

Hanna Hamburger: Well most of the people with few exceptions were treated decently till finally, they got a new mayor.

Interviewer: And who was the new mayor?

Hanna Hamburger: He was a Nazi. As a youngster, he was no good, then he joined the Nazi party very early and he came back as a mayor. And that's when things changed. People came in and said we can no longer come through the front door. We will come, but we have to come through the back door and not as often as we used to, but people from out of town still came.

Interviewer: Did you witness any brutality in the streets? Any...

Hanna Hamburger: No. Sometimes they called you a dirty Jew. The kids or I remember one of the bookkeepers when we were leaving that they threw rocks at us, we walked through the town.

Interviewer: How was that?

Hanna Hamburger: Frightening, but I know I was going so...

Interviewer: You knew you were leaving?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah. And I have to leave school when I was 14.

Interviewer: How did you know you were leaving? Did your parents tell you they were preparing to leave?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah. We got our visa.

Interviewer: Were you able to tell anybody that you were leaving?

Hanna Hamburger: Oh yes people know. People came into the store in droves when they knew we were closing. And they told the Gestapo who was walking up and down where to go and he left and people had said goodbye.

Interviewer: You said they told him where to go?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Hanna Hamburger: "Go to hell."

Interviewer: That's what I thought you meant. I just want to make sure. So the Jewish people actually told a Nazi to go to hell and he left?

Hanna Hamburger: No, not the Jewish people. The non-Jewish.

Interviewer: The German?

Hanna Hamburger: The German people.

Interviewer: Non-Jewish.

Hanna Hamburger: They said we were going to say goodbye to Mr. Marx. No matter what you want...if you're walking up and down. It's bad enough that you make him go. And when I was out there last year, they were telling me how good my father was to some of those people that the other firm, the other hardware store wouldn't give poor people when they came in and had no cash to pay on credit and my father did. And they came to me and they thanked me for it. And some people even brought (I should have brought it, but it's in German), bills that they didn't pay because they didn't have the money and my father let them go. Let go, you know, forget about it at that time.

Interviewer: So you left two weeks before Kristallnacht?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes, on the 30th of October we left.

Interviewer: And then you came to...?

Hanna Hamburger: To New York.

Interviewer: To New York.

Hanna Hamburger: On the 5th of November and we lived in the Bronx until I moved here.

Interviewer: How soon after? How long after living in New York did you know about Kristallnacht? Did you know what happened?

Hanna Hamburger: I found out about a week later. There was talk.

Interviewer: When did you start to know about the extermination of the Jewish?

Hanna Hamburger: You didn't really...you gave whatever...you had very little money at that time. My father became a dishwasher and I became a maid and then later on a nanny, but we tried to help.

Interviewer: What did you know, not necessarily financially, but how did you feel when you found out that you left before six million Jews were murdered?

Hanna Hamburger: Guilty.

Interviewer: Because you escaped?

Hanna Hamburger: Because, yeah, we escaped.

Interviewer: How do you feel about it now?

Hanna Hamburger: I still feel at times guilty.

Interviewer: When you hear the other stories?

Hanna Hamburger: When I hear the stories, yes.

Interviewer: So I know when we initially talked, you had trouble recognizing yourself as a survivor?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you feel because...?

Hanna Hamburger: Because we got away ahead of time even so we went through...I was kicked out of school and the kids didn't talk to me anymore. They wouldn't even go in the same train car as I was.

Interviewer: These were your friends?

Hanna Hamburger: These were my friends. The kids that I grew up with who weren't allowed anymore.

Interviewer: Do you remember of anything special about that time? Did somebody come to you and tell you that they wanted to be near you, but they couldn't?

Hanna Hamburger: There was one boy who said, "My father said that he doesn't care what they say. I'm your friend." And he told me that because of my father, he can say that he make millions after the war because my father gave him on credit. As a matter of fact, he still owed money when we left.

Interviewer: And your father forgave it.

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: So how did he make millions?

Hanna Hamburger: They had...he started a big factory, machine parts. He had in Canada a business, in here, a business and all over. He was a Russian prisoner of war. When he came back, he became an engineer and then he started his business. His father kept...I mean continued it...

Interviewer: Where in Germany were you from?

Hanna Hamburger: It's a small town. It used to be 3500 people. Today, it's 7000 or the whole neighborhood was incorporated, neighboring villages.

Interviewer: What cities were you near?

Hanna Hamburger: Heidelberg.

Interviewer: Heidelberg. How far would you say that was?

Hanna Hamburger: 25, 30 minutes, today on the autobahn. And Karlsruhe is also about 40 minutes...

Interviewer: Were you surprised to hear what Dachau turned into?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah. Actually, a cousin of my mother's who was a lawyer was well known in Frankfurt and they arrested him and send him to Dachau. And then, they told him he was free to go.

Interviewer: Is that upon liberation?

Hanna Hamburger: That was in '34.

Interviewer: So before?

Hanna Hamburger: Before. They had some excuse why they arrested him.

Interviewer: Did you have any friends or family that you knew were sent to camp?

Hanna Hamburger: Oh yes. Yes, cousins of my mother's and my father's two sisters and nobody survived. As a matter of fact, my father had a sister in Holland whose husband was born in Holland and when we left, we left from Rotterdam and we saw them and my father said, "I'm going to try and get you out." And she said, "What for? We're citizens of Holland." And I cannot find a trace of them. They're not in the Yad Vashem. Their name isn't in the Holocaust Memorial. I can't find their name. I can only find the name of the son who was killed.

Interviewer: You lived in the Bronx for 54 years?

Hanna Hamburger: Um-hmm.

Interviewer: In New York, what were the other Jews saying about what was happening?

Hanna Hamburger: We had our German congregation and also, we tried to do everything that we could, but you didn't know that much. There was no television. There was no radio and you didn't talk about it. You really didn't know how bad it was. We tried to get my father's other sister out and we didn't...we tried to get them the visa, but we didn't have any money in the bank, so they wouldn't take us. So my father wrote to Switzerland to his brothers to send the money. So he put the money in the bank, but by that time they were already in Riga and we never heard from them again.

Interviewer: How do you suppose your father knew to get your family out?

Hanna Hamburger: Well, I'll tell you something. What was to him the worst blow that he knew it was time to go, he was very optimistic it won't last. "I'm a German. I was in the army. I was a sergeant. I fought for four years. What's going to happen?" And my mother was the one who already wanted to go when my uncle went in '35. She says, "Let's go with them to Palestine." And he said, "What for? It's not going to last." But when they came, he was a volunteer fireman and he had a helmet. When they came for his helmet that's when he knew that things were getting worse. And that's when he decided it was time to ask for a visa and he wrote to America.

Interviewer: And got one.

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: When you look back during that time, what do you think you remember the most during your time in Germany when Hitler took over? What do you think

you remember the most about that time? Is it the feeling of rejection and betrayal?

Hanna Hamburger: Rejection, yes. The kids that I grew up with and were with them at Christmastime and birthdays and I remember having a birthday I think, it was '35 or so, and inviting everybody and nobody showed up except one girl and she never belonged to...

Interviewer: Because you're Jewish?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes. She never belonged to the party...this girl and I'm still friends with her today.

Interviewer: Do you think you were old enough as a child to understand?

Hanna Hamburger: Not really. And yet, you knew. After I was kicked out of high school – gymnasium, they called it. I wasn't 15 yet and you had to be 15. So I had to go to continuation school where they put kids who graduated from the 5th and 6th grade. And the teachers, they used to send me on errands and things like that just so I wouldn't have to hang around, and they taught us some cooking. And then after...at the same time, the nuns took us in to teach us how to sew, Catholic nuns. And there was one girl who is sitting next to me and her father came and said, "My daughter is not going to sit next to a Jew." And the nun said, "Look, your son was at the seminary and he was kicked out and not because he was a Nazi, but because he stole. Do you want me to start telling to people what really happened? You have a choice. That either that girl sits next to your daughter or I'm going to talk." See, there were still decent people around.

Interviewer: Do you tell these stories when people talk about the horrors?

Hanna Hamburger: I talk very little.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Hanna Hamburger: Because I feel that I really didn't go through enough as much as the others did.

Interviewer: How do you think that takes you out of the era? Because you didn't go to a camp?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: Because you didn't live in a ghetto?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah. Because they didn't break windows, because there were still decent people around, who spoke to us, who came to us. I found out last year from one of the men whose father was arrested on the ninth and sent to Dachau. And the head of the camp was his captain in the First World War and the Jew who had saved this man's life and he called him into his office so he said, "Take your men from your hometown and leave as fast as you can."

Interviewer: So you were one of the survivors.

Hanna Hamburger: Yes.

Interviewer: A witness to a lot of the kindness.

Hanna Hamburger: Right.

Interviewer: Of the Germans.

Hanna Hamburger: Yes. Well, there were still people who tried to when I was on my bike, who tried to hit me, to get me off the bike. As a whole, people were afraid to talk to me. My age group, they were all afraid.

Interviewer: But your memories, in your experience, offer more kindness.

Hanna Hamburger: Yes.

Interviewer: The Germans have been accused, the non-Nazis, the Germans, have been accused of voluntarily going after the Jews not by orders of the Reich, not for any other reason, not even for nationalistic purposes. They have just been accused of cruelty and stepping up and voluntarily helping in the destruction of the Jews.

Hanna Hamburger: That came after.

Interviewer: Do you ever think that those people that helped you in 1934 could have changed their opinion and in 1939 participated in the destruction of the Jewish people?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes, definitely.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that? That those same people --

Hanna Hamburger: I was there last year and they asked me to speak and what I said was, "I'm back today after 60-some-odd years, 64 years. I will tell you that I forgive you but I will not forget."

Interviewer: You forgive them for what?

Hanna Hamburger: For whatever they did to us because there were people there after us.

Interviewer: Do you think it's easier for you to forgive because you were not sent to a camp?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes.

Interviewer: So it's easier for you because your experience with them was less horrible.

Hanna Hamburger: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you understand why there are those survivors who will never forgive?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes, very easily.

Interviewer: I've heard some say that they can forget for now to get through their day to day but they will never forgive and they will never let it go. You understand what --?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes, I understand.

Interviewer: Do you look at your situation as being serendipitous and luck?

Hanna Hamburger: Luck.

Interviewer: Good timing?

Hanna Hamburger: Luck.

Interviewer: Luck, good timing?

Hanna Hamburger: Yes, good timing.

Interviewer: The wherewithal of your father who had predicted?

Hanna Hamburger: It was the mayor of the town who was the biggest Nazi, who had somebody come to my father to tell him to leave.

Interviewer: They tell him to leave.

Hanna Hamburger: "You have the papers, get out." We didn't finish packing our furniture. A maid did it for us, a former maid. We just left.

Interviewer: And what do your parents tell you, you were doing, leaving?

Hanna Hamburger: Leaving because it's time but they didn't go into details, only afterwards I heard, that they told me.

Interviewer: When you talked to other survivors outside of the guilt, do you feel like you can offer something to them now?

Hanna Hamburger: I can stand by them and talk to them. For instance, I'm a very good friend of Elizabeth Limor, who can't come, she broke her hip bone and she went through hell.

Interviewer: So when she talks to you about it, you're a friend to her.

Hanna Hamburger: I feel.

Interviewer: As another Jewish woman, as a friend.

Hanna Hamburger: Yes. I feel, why was I saved and...

Interviewer: Not her.

Hanna Hamburger: Not her. I mean the last few months I was not home, I was away in school that was purely Jewish kids and we were more or less isolated in that house. There was a couple, the man was a cripple and his wife, and they worked in the garden. They were allowed to work there. And once week, two kids could go

into town and sometimes we could go take a walk on a Saturday away from town. But otherwise... And I had relatives in Munich and I used to go visit them and go around Munich and nobody knew me. So, this way, I could walk around. My mother had a cousin who was a physician. He was an anesthesiologist and he also had a friend in the party and when he heard that they were going to be sent away, he committed suicide and took his whole family along rather than having to go into a camp. And my uncle, in Munich who was in America and was an American citizen gave up his English citizenship and had a chance to go to America again and wouldn't.

Interviewer: Why?

Hanna Hamburger: He had money. He didn't want to leave his money. He also thought that he could live it out.

Interviewer: What happened?

Hanna Hamburger: He died in the Theresienstadt.

Interviewer: But you escaped?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you think your greatest feeling is guilt?

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah that's about the only feeling that I have is the guilt.

Interviewer: Have you been able to let that go?

Hanna Hamburger: At times, but when I hear the stories then I, you know, people talk about it then I feel, "Why was I lucky? Why did I get away with it?" I always say I have an angel sitting on my shoulder. And my parents at that time, around that time, there was that Munich...meeting in Munich with Chamberlain and Mussolini and all

that, and they had my clothes packed in case they couldn't get out that I could get out because I was the only one who had the passport. My parents had to pay whatever was left over from the sale of the house, which was not much at that time and only after they paid every cent that they get back their passports and we had the Gestapo sitting in the business, going over the books and when the bookkeeper said, "Look, I take care of the books. I know what's going on. Mr. Marx keeps a straight business. I'm here for that many years and I know exactly what's going on." They threw her out, told her, "Don't come back. We're not interested."

Interviewer: It sounds like you had an amazing father.

Hanna Hamburger: Yeah.