Transcript:

Frieda Lorch

J37

35m24s

Interviewer: I'm speaking with Frieda Lorch and this tape is an interview of someone who emigrated from Germany immediately prior to World War II but during the reign of Hitler and the early period of Nazi Germany.

Frieda Lorch: Correct.

Interviewer: My first question has to do with what life was like for you as a Jew in Germany and in the town where you were born and where you grew up.

Frieda Lorch: Life was very unpleasant to put it mildly. I had grown up there under very normal circumstances but suddenly, life changed like from day to nighttime, all of my friends avoided me in school, I was really left out of every activity that went on. I was walking home from school by myself for all my friends were gone, and it was a kind of a sad story not to be able to communicate with your friends anymore.

Interviewer: Had it always been like that or was it just after Hitler?

Frieda Lorch: No, it had started like that around 1930s, way after Hitler. Up to that point, things were fairly normal. I mean, there were a few friends who started to already avoid me or not come to my house before Hitler's time, let's say in '32, '33. But then, it was very markedly changed to being ostracized and being left out of all activities.

Interviewer: And were there a lot of Jewish people living in this time?

Frieda Lorch: No, there were just about 20 to 30 families in that city.

Interviewer: And was there a synagogue?

Frieda Lorch: No, there was no synagogue in that town at all. We used to just have services for the high holidays whereby they would ask a rabbi or a cantor to come in from Berlin or from some other larger cities and run services. And that was the only type of service we had, once a year.

Interviewer: Was there a Jewish education program or any kind of training for the few Jewish children there that you grew up with?

Frieda Lorch: It was a very loosely-knit type of thing that the parents individually arranged. For instance, I recall that a Jewish student who was studying at the university and I believe he either came from Poland or Russia, I don't know exactly, was hired by my parents to instruct me in Hebrew and religious background, and at the same time, there were two or three other children who participated in the same lessons together. But it was being arranged on a permanent basis.

Interviewer: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, I have brothers and sisters.

Interviewer: Were they also being educated the same way by the student?

Frieda Lorch: The same way, yeah, hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: How about your secular or your regular school education?

Frieda Lorch: What do you want to know about it?

Interviewer: Was it fairly typical for all young German children?

Frieda Lorch: Yeah, yeah, that's right, hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: So there was nothing different about that?

Frieda Lorch: No, there was actually nothing different. When they had their religious instructions, I was being excused and so were a few other students who did not participate for any particular reason.

Interviewer: Were you involved in any kind of youth groups, any kind of Zionist-oriented youth groups?

Frieda Lorch: No, there was nothing of that sort available in that small town.

Interviewer: How about in terms of other youth activities associated with schooling or just the community itself?

Frieda Lorch: No, there was no such thing.

Interviewer: When Hitler first came to power, how were you first affected by that? What kind of change did you see? You mentioned before that there was a marked difference.

Frieda Lorch: Hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: What kind of difference did you see other than maybe just friends pulling away somewhat?

Frieda Lorch: Well, I saw the boycott of all the Jewish department stores in our city who were being boycotted by SS troops standing in front of the building and watching everyone who would walk in and naturally, hardly anybody would dare to walk into the store. I was also affected by my father having to resign his position. He had to retire.

Interviewer: He was forced to resign?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, he was forced to resign. He had to retire. Yeah, he was still at that time pensioned but in a gentle way, they had to ask him to retire, to resign.

Interviewer: And when he resigned, was he bitter about this or did he just accept this as—

Frieda Lorch: I think he accepted it and he put up with it. He was unhappy about it.

Interviewer: Did you experience any kind of restrictions? You mentioned that your father was forced to resign.

Frieda Lorch: Hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: For you personally, were there clear rules that you weren't to break or were there places you couldn't go? Those kinds of restrictions.

Frieda Lorch: Yes, there naturally were. There was a tennis club for instance that my sister who was older than I was, she had been a member there, she had to leave the club. There was no more admittance of Jews and could not play tennis there anymore. We had also public places to go swimming and we couldn't go there anymore because Jews were not permitted to use the bath. Let me see what else…any kind of social activities from school like dances or such, I could not attend to because…really no young boy who was participating in the Hitler youth activities was interested in dancing with a young Jewish girl.

Interviewer: And that brings me to my next question: the non-Jewish population of your town, how did they respond to Hitler's coming to power and the Nazi rule?

Frieda Lorch: Well, many of them thought it was a wonderful idea since Germany had been really in a depression and so they kind of expected great things from Hitler.

Interviewer: Are there specific—

Frieda Lorch: And others just shrugged their shoulders and said, “Well, we’ll see what happens,” and just took it as it came.

Interviewer: In your town, what kind of activities went on with the non-Jewish population in regard to Hitler’s coming to power? You mentioned a young German boy that may be involved with the Hitler youth, what other kinds of Nazi party activities occurred?

Frieda Lorch: Well, a lot of marching through the streets and all kinds of festivities that were all Nazi-oriented, speaking in public squares or in various assemblies.

Interviewer: A lot of rally-type activities?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, a lot of rallies, hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: And did many of the people, non-Jews that you knew, did they become members of the Nazi party?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, they did but most of them felt compelled or probably really had to since they would lose their positions, their jobs if they were not and everyone was wearing the Nazi…the swastika on their lapels and some of them wore them underneath their lapels and then moved them to the top whenever necessary but…I know of one interesting case where, for instance, an English teacher we had in school, he was at the same time also a professor of English at the University, who was a great Democrat. And he refused to walk into the classroom and raise his hands and say “Heil Hitler!” This was a required greeting and he said, “Well, I’m not going to do it.” So, he just continued to do his usual thing, and he was thrown out, he lost his position at the university as well as at the school.

Interviewer: What other kinds of things happened to other members of your family during this time? You mentioned your sister and the tennis club—

Frieda Lorch: My sister studied medicine and in fact, we were always kidding her about it. She started to study medicine in 1933 together with Hitler and things were pretty rough. And she studied at the University of Jena. She wanted to go very

badly out of town but my father talked her out of it and said, “Listen, stay here. It’s still a little bit calmer here on this small town than in a big university.” So she did follow his advice but it got very hectic at certain times. For instance, she was examining a patient in her obstetrical course and some of her Nazi students stood up and shouted in the arena, you know how they have these big lecture halls, “This is a Jewish woman and she should not examine an Aryan patient,” and stopped her from doing it and the professor was kind of perplexed, didn’t know what to do so he said, all right, rather than have a big uproar, he asked her to please step back and forget about it. And things of that sort happened all the time. Then she studied as far as she could managed and got all of her courses done to take her final exam but then she found out, they wouldn’t accept her for the final exam. So that was—

Interviewer: No matter how smart she—

Frieda Lorch: Yeah, right.

Interviewer: —was or how well she had done.

Frieda Lorch: Yeah, she had done very well, exceptionally well. That was in 1937, that’s when she decided to emigrate.

Interviewer: What were the factors that contributed to you leaving as well as other members of your family?

Frieda Lorch: Well, it was kind of interesting. My sister said to my dad it’s time for me to leave and we did have relatives here in the States who were willing to help her to get started here. So, I said at that time, “I’m going right along with my sister, we’re going together.” And my father said, “No, you’re too young, you stay here.” And I think, in the back of his mind, he just didn’t feel like giving up his youngest daughter at the same time. So, I insisted, I said “No, it’s just so unpleasant in school and there’s just no sense for me to stay.” So finally, you know, nagged him long enough until he said, “Okay,” so we both left.

Interviewer: So you and your sister left?

Frieda Lorch: Together, hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: How about other members of your family?

Frieda Lorch: My brother was here already and that was quite a savior for us since he really helped us tremendously.

Interviewer: And your parents stayed in Germany?

Frieda Lorch: My parents stayed because my father always had the opinion that Hitler wasn't going to hold out very long. And he kept saying, he'll hold out a few months, then he gave him a few years, and I know that a lot of his friends had the same feeling, he is a madman and he cannot possibly manage to hold this country. But then finally, in '39, my parents came over to this country also, just about three months before the war broke out.

Interviewer: Can you tell me something about how you went about getting documents to leave Germany?

Frieda Lorch: We got affidavits from my brother who had already left Germany in 1929. He already then was studying at the university in Jena and he said to my dad, "It's so anti-Semitic, I am going to leave." My father had cousins here in this country who had come over a long time ago and they had once told my brother, "Anytime you want to come, we'll be glad to have you." So, he took him up on that, and he got a job with them and thereby, he was already more or less fairly established and so he could help us come over. We had also some additional relatives and they also gave affidavits and that all helped us get out quite speedily. We really had no problems at that time.

Interviewer: When you and your sister left Germany, where did you go?

Frieda Lorch: Originally, we went to Buffalo, New York where my brother was at that time established. He was working there for relatives of my father's. So, since he was living there, we decided we wanted to try to live there. And then my sister attempted to get into medical school in Buffalo and she succeeded in that.

Interviewer: Did you consider other countries for immigration?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, we were thinking of Israel.

Interviewer: What made you choose the United States?

Frieda Lorch: Well, I think the fact that our brother was living here made us decide that we would like to join him.

Interviewer: He was fairly well established here within Buffalo?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: And how did you happen to come to Nashville?

Frieda Lorch: Well, it's kind of a long story. My sister studied for two years in Buffalo and I went to a business school in order to learn something. I had just gone to school and really just had a nice general education but really did not have any type of profession whereby I could earn a living. So, she went to medical school and I went to a business school. And in addition, I kept house for the three of us, my brother was not married at that time, so that worked out very well. Then when she was graduating from medical school, she first thought she was going to leave for internship out of town which then fell through and she did get an internship in Buffalo. That was also really a story by itself. But anyway, we broke up our housekeeping system and I moved then to New York and worked in New York for quite a number of years. Then I met my husband in New York. So, we got married in New York and lived there for quite a number of years. When Jack decided to start his own business, so he bought a plant in Virginia and so that was our first move down south. After a couple of years, he sold that factory in Virginia and we moved to Nashville because he had bought another manufacturing plant outside here in the country near Smithville, but we did want to establish and have our residence in Nashville because our son was still going to school, and I felt like he should get his education here.

Interviewer: How long have you been in Nashville?

Frieda Lorch: We have been here a total of 21 years now.

Interviewer: Do you have relatives here in Nashville or did you have—

Frieda Lorch: No, no we don't.

Interviewer: It was just because of the plant?

Frieda Lorch: Of his business, hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: When you first came to the United States, when you came to Buffalo, what were some of the needs that you had? Did you need English lessons?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, we needed English lessons very badly. Although, I had English in school, but it was very insufficient.

Interviewer: What other kinds of needs did you have? From what you have described, your brother, and your sister, and you lived together.

Frieda Lorch: Yes, we lived together. We—

Interviewer: So you didn't need housing and such?

Frieda Lorch: No, he provided that for us and clothing and stuff, we just managed with whatever we had brought over.

Interviewer: Did you make any attempts to contact other family members that were still in Germany to try to convince them to leave Germany?

Frieda Lorch: Yes we did. We tried to convince our parents and we also had a cousin whom we convinced to come over. She managed to get out of Germany with her husband, but her mother, an aunt of mine, did not make it.

Interviewer: Similar kind of… I guess you would say, did they have any problems with getting affidavits and just the whole immigration process?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, I think they applied at a later date than we did. And then they really, problems came up with papers and requirements were I think different…I don't know exactly what all the holdups were, but they just could not get things rolling in the way they had hoped to, and that's what caused their mother to stay behind and then she perished.

Interviewer: The wait was probably a lot longer in order to get the kind of documents.

Frieda Lorch: Yes, I think so, in order to get the documents from the consulate.

Interviewer: Did the nature of your religious practice change when you move from Germany to New York and then perhaps to Nashville?

Frieda Lorch: I think possibly I became more religious, or more observant, let's say. I'm not Orthodox, but I think I have always felt that we had been persecuted and why shouldn't I be more positively Jewish because when we were brought up…we were brought up Jewish and we did keep holidays but we were also still so absorbed in the gentile life that I've always felt that it was too much. We were too assimilated in many ways.

Interviewer: So how was life different in the United States than it was for you in Germany.

Male: Okay.

Interviewer: Are we rolling.

Male: Yeah, we're rolling.

Frieda Lorch: Oh.

Interviewer: Let me ask you that.

Frieda Lorch: That's a difficult question to answer.

Interviewer: What were some of the differences that you experienced in the US as compared in Europe, especially with it being two sisters coming to the United States at the same time?

Frieda Lorch: Well, I think, what we mainly experienced is to just be able to walk on the streets and feel relaxed and be able to say anything you wanted to say which you could not do in Germany anymore. And naturally, the few years that we lived there under Hitler's regime were very depressing and you were in constant fear of something happening to you. I recall for instance that very often in the evening when we went to sleep, we used to hear these SS troopers marching by our house and you know how these huge big boots sound and they echoed through the street and every time two or three would march by our house, our hearts stopped. We thought they are coming to get us or they're coming to get our father. It was a constant frightful feeling and it did happen to some of our uncles who were picked up and brought to the police station or being held. So were in constant fear of that. Then we enjoyed just being able to do the things we wanted to do and to socialize with people and to be very free. We just really felt free like birds.

Interviewer: In many European communities, there were public beatings of Jewish people.

Frieda Lorch: Hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: Did you see any of that kind of activity?

Frieda Lorch: No, I did not see any of that kind and I do not believe, as long as I lived in my hometown, Jena, it did not happen there.

Interviewer: You mentioned you felt a feeling of freedom.

Frieda Lorch: Hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: Is that your dominant feeling during this time when you first came to the United States?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, I would think so.

Interviewer: This pretty much fear…the fear went by the wayside.

Frieda Lorch: Hmm-hmm, right.

Interviewer: How long did it take you to feel at home in the United States?

Frieda Lorch: It's difficult to pin down, but I do recall that the first time I dreamt in English, I was absolutely in ecstasy and that may have been maybe after a year and a half or two years or some such thing. I'm not sure anymore when exactly it happened. But I think it did not…maybe the first year, was the most difficult year.

Interviewer: Did your sister know English before she came?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, she knew some English and I knew some English but I think…she had also taken some English courses at the university so I would say that her English knowledge was better than mine.

Interviewer: Did you establish relationships with a congregation in the United States soon after you arrived?

Frieda Lorch: We did go to the services at the temple that my brother attended at that time but we did not like it. It was also reformed and it was just not exactly what we

were used to and very often on the second day of Rosh Hashanah for instance, I would go to the conservative synagogue in Buffalo, New York. And then when I moved to New York and my parents came over then and I lived together with them until I got married, we did join a synagogue, yes.

Interviewer: You mentioned while the tape was being changed that your father had been arrested at some time.

Frieda Lorch: Yes, he was. Yes, he was in a concentration camp, Buchenwald at the Kristallnacht on the 9th of November 1938 and he was being held there for about a week or 10 days.

Interviewer: Ultimately, he was able to leave?

Frieda Lorch: He was ultimately released due to my mother's extreme efforts of showing cables that we had sent, that the affidavits are on the way and showing them proof that he was going to leave the country. Otherwise, they would not have released him.

Interviewer: Have you returned to Europe?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, Jack and I have gone back once to Jack's hometown and environment which is in that Frankfurt area. I did never go back to my hometown since I have absolutely nobody there and I also felt that maybe I couldn't cope with it. I was a little bit afraid. Also, another reason was at the time we went to Germany, Jena was still in the East German sector and it was kind of complicated to get permission to get in there.

Interviewer: So you have—

Frieda Lorch: I did not want to go through all that hassle.

Interviewer: And you have no interest in returning to Jena to—

Frieda Lorch: No, not really. I am, at the time, in contact with just one man whose father worked under my father's direction at the time, and he is very kind by looking after our cemetery graves that we have in Germany.

Interviewer: And this is a non-Jewish person?

Frieda Lorch: He is a non-Jewish person, and I knew him as a child when I was growing up. I think he is possibly two or three years younger than I am, but I do know that his father was an average-type Nazi because he had to hold on to his job.

Interviewer: When you say average-type Nazi, what does that mean?

Frieda Lorch: Well, I mean, he was not actively showing any kind of…or did anything forceful against Jews but he was embarrassed to greet people who were Jewish on the street. So, we had noticed that if we ran into him on the street, he would look the other way.

Interviewer: Do you think he felt a similar kind of fear that you felt or a different type of fear?

Frieda Lorch: Well I think it was a different type of fear. It was a fear of possibly being called a Democrat or not being a Nazi as everybody was supposed to be, and he feared his job. That was the ultimate thing.

Interviewer: You mentioned this non-Jewish man that you were able to keep in contact with.

Frieda Lorch: Yeah.

Interviewer: Were there members of your family that you lost contact with that you have been able to reestablish contact with after the war?

Frieda Lorch: In Germany?

Interviewer: Hmm-hmm.

Frieda Lorch: No, I have really no more family in Germany, none. And when we visited my husband's hometown, I felt very depressed going around in a very nice little town where there wasn't a single Jewish family anymore.

Interviewer: You have mentioned aunts and uncles that you had, do you know what has happened with them?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, quite a number of them had been successful in leaving Germany. Several came over to this country but many of them went to South America and the larger part of my family was very fortunate in coming out of Germany.

Interviewer: And where are most of them now? You mentioned South America, others are in the United States?

Frieda Lorch: Yes.

Interviewer: What portions, what parts of the United States?

Frieda Lorch: Well, most of them are older people and they're unfortunately not alive anymore but their children are in New York City, one cousin still is in South America, Bogota, Colombia, I have a cousin who is living in Arizona. As far as I can remember, that's about it.

Interviewer: And most of these relatives were able to leave Germany prior to—

Frieda Lorch: Yeah right.

Interviewer: How has your experience with pre-war Germany and your immigration changed you do you suppose?

Frieda Lorch: Well, it made me more aware of being Jewish and I think that I also stress educating my children better in their religious backgrounds.

Interviewer: Do you think because of that, you look at other people a bit differently? You had mentioned earlier what kind of experience you had with people who had been your friends when you were growing up and all of a sudden, they stopped associating with you. Do you think that experience has caused any kind of change in the way you look at people?

Frieda Lorch: It would be difficult for me to judge but I think most of the time, I don't think about this really anymore and it's kind of in the back of my mind. And just when I think back to those years, I'll recall it but otherwise, I don't think it makes that much difference to me.

Interviewer: You have mentioned something about the way you raised your children in terms of their Jewish awareness. What other kinds of things have you shared with them about being Jewish that if you had not gone through this kind of transition in your life, you might not have shared with them?

Frieda Lorch: Hmm-hmm.

Interviewer: Apparently, it's very important to you that they have a very strong Jewish identity.

Frieda Lorch: Right. I have just always stressed to them that they should remember what their backgrounds are and—

Interviewer: How do you feel about being Jewish?

Frieda Lorch: I feel very positive about it. I'm very proud to be Jewish and I consider myself very fortunate to be here on this country and have had a very good life here.

Interviewer: Now that you have given us glimpse of your story, are there other things you would like to say or other messages you would like other people to remember about your experiences?

Frieda Lorch: I don't know, I really don't know. I think it's individually, depending on the person, what they want to stress.

Interviewer: As you look back on what happened with you and your sister and other members of your family, do you have any sense of anger towards the German people? With the events taking place in Germany now with the reunification, are there concerns that you have about what might result from a reunified Germany?

Frieda Lorch: I have my reservations about the unification and about helping them to become very powerful again because I kind of fear that there is something in the German nature that seeks power and superiority and it could possibly lead to similar problems again, politically. Maybe not the persecution of Jews and such since there are very few in Germany left but I think that their power structure is such that they might again feel they want to control Europe and it could lead into new problems. That's my reservation about it. Now, I hope I'm wrong.

Interviewer: How about for the United States, can you imagine something like a rise of a Nazi party or a strong leader like Hitler ever coming to power in the United States?

Frieda Lorch: It's difficult to imagine it, but I feel that if economically, this country would be very depressed, some such thing or similar situation could come up.

Interviewer: So when times would get hard, it would be foreseeable?

Frieda Lorch: Yes, it could happen. Hmm-hmm, I would think so. We do have some anti-Semitism right now, and very often, when things go wrong, then the blame is being put on certain people and it could happen. I hope, I'm not too pessimistic, there are a lot of factors in our government that should prevent such a thing to happen but nobody can foretell really.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

Frieda Lorch: You're very welcome.

Interviewer: I enjoyed that.

Frieda Lorch: I enjoyed it too.