

Transcript:

Herta Adler

A58

12min22s

Interviewer: So let's start talking about where you grew up.

Herta Adler: I grew up in a small town in Germany, western Germany, Diez an der Lahn. People always tell me that they know exactly where it is but of course they don't. It's close to the Rhine about 30 kilometers from the Rhine. The Lahn is a small river which runs into the Rhine at Koblenz and I guess I had to...

Interviewer: What year were you born?

Herta Adler: 1915. And up to the time when Hitler came to power, I think I had a good time, enjoyed my life.

Interviewer: You enjoyed Germany, you didn't feel--

Herta Adler: Sure.

Interviewer: --anti-Semitic?

Herta Adler: Never. Never.

Interviewer: Neighbors, everybody was good.

Herta Adler: Very cordial and very nice and very good neighbors. It was a small town about 3,500 people and about 15 Jewish families and it had a beautiful synagogue but it served the surrounding town, the surrounding little villages which all those villages, I mean I don't know if you're familiar with this particular neighborhood had about one or two Jewish families who all came to Diez to the services. And I never felt discriminated against. I went to public school til Hitler came to power.

Interviewer: Tell me about 1933, what you remember when Hitler came to power?

Herta Adler: I remember it exactly because the other school children had to appear at a certain place, it's a market place and listen to Hitler's speech. "Heil Hitler" was a common greeting from now on in school. I never raised my hand and nobody ever asked me that I should. And, I think, before I could graduate I was permitted to attend the school I was attending which was turned into a [unintelligible 0:02:02.3]. It was turned into a school which trained the future leaders of the German Reich, the future Nazis, and all my teachers were SA men in uniform. From then, of course, I knew that my time would be very limited. School in Germany or college in Germany is a little bit different than here and before I could graduate I was asked to leave because up to this point in time I had permission to stay in this particular school because my father had fought in World War I, unfortunately the wrong side. So I was asked to leave and I changed schools and I was admitted to a school in Limburg an der Lahn which was owned and run by nuns. [unintelligible 0:02:55.4]. You want me to translate it?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Herta Adler: School of Mary of the Poor Maids of Jesus Christ. And I was asked not to come the first day, but two days later and I never knew why til much later. Later on, the girls told me in my class that one of the nuns said a Jewish girl is coming to the class and who is willing to sit with her, and, of course, nobody raised their hand.

Interviewer: This is when you were how old? Do you remember being how old?

Herta Adler: 17, 18.

Interviewer: 17, 18, no one would sit next to you.

Herta Adler: No one volunteered to sit next to me and there were two girls in this class who wanted to be nuns eventually, and so the head nun told them that they have to sit with me, and they both cried. I mean I was told later about that and...

Interviewer: What was that like for you? What were you understanding what's happening?

Herta Adler: During intermission - that was a different town. I had to attend - I have to talk about that, too. I lived in Diezan der Lahn, went to school in [unintelligible 0:04:09.5] - that's another long story - but then I had to change and go by train to Limburg to attend the MariensSchule... I wanted to graduate. I wanted to have my certificate. So, they didn't want to sit with me. Now comes intermission. Nobody talked to me. Nobody wanted to associate with me and I stayed in the classroom and the girls played outside. But eventually, they realized that I didn't have any horns and that I was a human being. Gradually, they warmed up to me so we conversed or talked. But in addition, it was difficult

because I had to attend school in Germany on Saturday and I come from a very orthodox home and of course I never rode. I could not drive. But I had to attend classes. So in order to go get to Limburg I had to take a train but it was Shabbat and I wouldn't take the train so I walked. In the winter time there is snow in Germany and then I had to walk through kind of woods in the winter, dark.

Interviewer: Just how far did you walk?

Herta Adler: Over an hour.

Interviewer: Wow.

Herta Adler: The train took ten minutes but to walk was a little bit over an hour. So I walked and of course my parents and the Rabi all said I should take train, I would be permitted to take the train because it was dangerous for a girl alone to walk. But I didn't. I walked.

Interviewer: Wow.

Herta Adler: And survived.

Interviewer: Tell me about Kristallnacht what you remember.

Herta Adler: Remember just talked about Kristallnacht. I was at home and one of my neighbors knocked on the door and said the synagogue is burning. It was the most beautiful synagogue in Frankfurt actually. The [unintelligible 0:05:59.1]. My mother had a painting of the synagogue, the inside. Unfortunately

I don't know what happened to it. So I was standing in a crowd, surrounded by a lot of people who are looking at the burning synagogue and of course my heart was bleeding when I saw that. Next to me stood a man and a woman, and the man shook his head I remember and he said, "It's a shame. This is the house of worship. This is the house of God and that shouldn't happen. I know Jewish people and they're such nice and good people," and the woman next to him turned around and said to him, "They are no good, and a Jew is a Jew like a herring is a herring." So this is fresh in my mind, of course, and then I just mentioned it, too. I listened to Goebbels on the radio - that was the time before television, of course, - and I remember that he ended his speeches saying... first he said, "Jews, wherever they are, kill them. You can kill them," and then he said, "There are some people who say that the Jews are human beings." One shouldn't do that. But he said, "The Jew is a human being like a flea is an animal." So as I remember.

Interviewer: You have how many sisters and brothers?

Herta Adler: I have one sister and one brother. Both are deceased unfortunately.

Interviewer: Did they die in the war?

Herta Adler: No.

Interviewer: No.

Herta Adler: I was the last member of the family in Germany, of my immediate family. I mean uncles and aunts.

Interviewer: What about your parents were they -

Herta Adler: They were in Portugal.

Interviewer: - did they survived the war?

Herta Adler: My parents were in Portugal, my brother was traveling in foreign countries for a company and Portugal had apparently a law or that parents of siblings who had residence in Portugal could come to Portugal. So my parents left with the assurance that - I had a bought a number to come to the United States - then I would follow shortly thereafter. But in the meantime, war broke out and I couldn't get out. Hitler marched into Poland and I was stuck.

Interviewer: So you had papers waiting for you transfer to the U.S.?

Herta Adler: No. No I didn't. I had a quota number.

Interviewer: Oh a quota number. I'm sorry. I thought you said order number. Okay a quota number, okay.

Herta Adler: I had a quota number to the United States five. I even remember the number - 5,960 - and it had not been called yet. So I had papers. I had permission to go from Germany to Belgium, from Belgium to London and wait. My brother had sent money to London so I could stay in England til my number would be called, and this is the only way I got permission to go to England as long as I had a number and had enough money. I mean, to stay there and wait there. But I didn't get out.

Interviewer: You were not sent to a camp.

Herta Adler: No I was not sent to a camp, I got out before. Hitler and Mussolini were friends and in early 1940, I went to Italy. I got permission to go to Italy and from Italy, unfortunately, I had my passport and I had this JudenKarte which I have here with me. I do remember, as [UNCLEAR - we get our support of it we came 9:40] from Germany to Switzerland to Italy and I remember when the German police came to look at us and questioned us and I had with me in my personal things - he had to open my bag - a box of candy that somebody had given me and the SA man who came took the box of candy and opened each piece to see if there was a diamond or some gold in it. Then we crossed the border and, of course, it was great relief and then from [unintelligible 0:10:16.3] and then to Portugal to visit my parents and...

Interviewer: So what year had you cross border out of Germany?

Herta Adler: It was I think January '40.

Interviewer: January 1940 you were able to get out?

Herta Adler: Yeah, I went out. Yes.

Interviewer: And your parents were in Portugal -

Herta Adler: My parents were in Portugal...

Interviewer: - with your brother.

Herta Adler: ...with my brother and I stayed with my parents for one month and on the following trip to [unintelligible 0:10:41.3] made the round trip Italy, Portugal, United States and back. So the next trip I went with the [unintelligible 0:10:51.3] from Portugal to the United States and on the following year, following trip the [unintelligible 0:10:58.2] was sunk at the English. They took the people. They took the passengers and interned them in Australia. They were afraid that German spies would be amongst the [unintelligible 0:11:12.6] passengers and they sunk the ship. So I would not...

Interviewer: How long did you stay in Portugal? You said one month.

Herta Adler: Six months.

Interviewer: And then you went to...

Herta Adler: United States.

Interviewer: United States. And what brought you to Tennessee?

Herta Adler: My husband. My husband had left Germany 1933, he was a doctor and he settled... I mean he was not my husband at the time, I mean, I didn't know him at the time.

Interviewer: And where did you meet him?

Herta Adler: In New York, he was in the army at the time and I met him by coincidence in New York.

Interviewer: Okay, so you...

Herta Adler: And after the war, he had been practicing in Memphis. He had family in Memphis. Family who had come in the past century already and so I...

Interviewer: And you stayed in New York for how long?

Herta Adler: In New York for let me think, a year and a half.

Interviewer: And then from there you went to...?

Herta Adler: To Memphis.

Interviewer: To Memphis?

Herta Adler: No, Springfield, Missouri. My husband was stationed in Springfield, Missouri. He was at the army at the time and he went overseas and I been went to my parents who lived in New York, at the time we had move to New York or come to New York and I went to...