

Transcript:

Elsa Herzfeld

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Interviewer: This is an interview for the Jewish Federation of Nashville Holocaust Project with Elsa Herzfeld, who was born in Saarlouis, Germany. The date of this interview is May 6th, 1990. Mrs. Herzfeld, can you talk about what life was like for you before the war in the town where you lived?

Elsa Herzfeld: First of all, I left long before the war. The war really only started in 1939, and I left Germany 1937. So, I wasn't there when the war was on.

Interviewer: But before the war, can you talk about your school, your family, your friends, just—

Elsa Herzfeld: We lived in a small town in Erfelden, which was about 20 minutes by train from a larger city, Damstadt, which is about 15 miles south of Frankfurt.

Interviewer: Could you spell that?

Elsa Herzfeld: Frankfurt?

Interviewer: Erfelden.

Elsa Herzfeld: Erfelden is E-R-F-E-L-D-E-N am Rhein. And, we lived sort of a nice comfortable life.

Interviewer: How big was your family?

Elsa Herzfeld: My father and mother and my younger brother and I and my grandmother lived with us most of the time. My mother's mother lived with us most of the time. My mother had a sister who lived on the North Sea so my grandmother often spent three months, the summer months on the North Sea with her, but otherwise, that was our whole family.

Interviewer: Can you talk about your school?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, for the first four years, I went to a regular school. They called it Folkschule and most of the people in Germany, their children went to school, to that school for eight years and that was the end of the schooling. But for the people who were interested in education and had the money to send their children on, after the first grade, you started...Well, I don't know. It was not just a private school like they have here. It was...you had to pay for it, but it still was more of a city school, but it was only for girls, and that's where I went after the first grade. And I went, in Germany, one either went until 16, but if you wanted to go and have a college education, you mostly went to 13 grades really and made this [unintelligible 0:03:06.7] they called and then you went on to a university. But first of all, I kind of thought I would like to do that, but I was no longer allowed to do that because you couldn't go where you wanted to go. So I went to school until I was 16, which was really the usual thing for people who had the means. Most of them, as I said, only stayed in the other school for eight years and that was it.

Interviewer: So you went to school until you were 16?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. And then I went to a business college afterwards because my father thought that anything I could learn to make it in the world, I should do that. In fact, I sometimes think it's funny, what all I did. While we were waiting to leave Germany, I could no longer go to school. So I went to the business college, and then I went to a place where I learned to sew to try to learn to make patterns. I went to a convent for about two months to learn how to do that like if your sheets tear to mend them or something. Little did I know that in the United States, you don't mend sheets or something. But my mother and father thought whatever you learn might benefit you. So, that was it.

Interviewer: And when did you leave Germany?

Elsa Herzfeld: We left Germany in...I left Germany on the 26th of March, 1937, and I left by myself because I was the only one in the family who had a passport. And my passport expired on April the 2nd, so I had to get out. My parents and my brother got their passport later and they went through doing what we really needed to do. So I was in the United States four weeks before they came. So, I sat in New York, shaking and trembling, wondering if I'd ever see them again, but they made it out, too.

Interviewer: And did they make it out?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. They came out, too. They got here in April and we came to Nashville. We stayed in New York 10 days, and then, we came to Nashville. I never will forget it. On the 10th of May, 1937, one of the hottest days, they said, in Nashville's history. And we came from this beautiful temperate climate into 95 degrees in the shade, but that's how long...

Interviewer: That was quite a change.

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: I just wanted to ask a few more things about your life in Germany before we move on. Was there any kind of Jewish education?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yes. There was Jewish education. I think once or twice a week, I forgot it, we had kind of two afternoons a week, I think, I had to go to, we call it Hebrew school, I suppose, or religious and a young rabbi was teaching there. Yeah, we had religious education.

Interviewer: So, this was Hebrew as well as history and—?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yes, all these, yeah.

Interviewer: —other subjects. And were you involved in any kind of activities outside of school?

Elsa Herzfeld: Like what?

Interviewer: Any kind of youth activities? Were there clubs or like the kids have now or interest groups?

Elsa Herzfeld: I don't think we have that then. I don't think they had that. I think we went to school and did our homework and played ball or something, but nothing organized, nothing organized.

Interviewer: Now, when the Nazi's came to power, how did this first affect you and your family?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, I think right at first, it probably affected us very little at first. There were some girls in my class who already were in the youth movement. I think little did they know at that time what that was all about. Then, little by little, my father's business went under because nobody was allowed to trade with him anymore. In school, all my non-Jewish girlfriends wouldn't have contact with me anymore.

Interviewer: About what year was this?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, it probably started in 1934, I would say. Hitler came to power in 1933, but I'm not aware of it that it came like the next day or so that you noticed it. But little by little, and then the SR marched by our house singing, "Wenn das Judenblut vom Messer Spritzt" which means when the Jewish blood comes off the knife and those kind of things and then came boycotts that people were not allowed to trade in Jewish stores. You could no longer go to concerts, to opera. Like I was at the age where girls went to dance, took dance lessons, dancing lessons, and I was not able to be involved in those things. So, those were the first realization of what went on. Even so, I think it's so strange that lots of these German people really, at the very first, did not know really what it was all about. Because I know there was a boy who really apparently liked me a lot and he looked like the picture of a German boy, blond, blue-eyed, tall, a member of the youth, Hitler-Jugend and he would come to me, ask me to go wherever young people go. And my father said, "Ask him if he wants to go to the concentration camp with you. He can come, but otherwise, don't." So, he didn't quite realize what it was all about at first I think.

Interviewer: He saw no conflict and he saw no conflict in there?

Elsa Herzfeld: It's amazing, isn't it, that they didn't realize that just...but they were in such a...Hitler at first kept these people in such a celebrating mood or something. They would march and torch things and what not. And I think that many of them joined it at first really nothing, at least, in my opinion, not realizing what this was all about. Really, they were just sort of swept away with the hurrah. Really, I don't think they...At least, I think that.

Interviewer: And what kind of business did your father have?

Elsa Herzfeld: He was in the, how should I say, hides and furs. And also he sold casings for sausages and things like that. That was his business.

Interviewer: And his business dropped off?

Elsa Herzfeld: Because of that. And then, we moved from this little town to a larger town. I mean, by the way, and I said I went to school for four years, I went to school in Erfelden, but then they had no high school in Erfelden, so I had to take the train every day to Damstadt. That's where the high school was.

Interviewer: And then you moved to—

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, we moved there, yeah.

Interviewer: And what year was that? What year was this about?

Elsa Herzfeld: In '35.

Interviewer: Do you remember any other reactions by the non-Jewish population to the Nazi rule? You mentioned that boy...

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, well, it was just...You just weren't free to do what you wanted to do. You just couldn't take part in anything which went on and in this constant fear that they would...You see, my brother was still a young boy. He was almost three years younger than I, but there was this constant fear that they would pick up my father to put him in the concentration camp because they did do that. At that time already, some people we knew...One man, he stood on the street while they constantly had parades in Germany under Hitler at first, constant parades. It was hot and he just scratched his head and they said that it was a sign of saying that they think they're crazy or something, and off he was hauled into the concentration camp. My parents owned this apartment house in Germany. Most of the apartments were rented out. And of all things, one apartment was rented out to an FBI man, who lived there for quite a few years, and we were scared to death of him, but my father had to grant him every wish for fear that he would say something.

Interviewer: FBI?

Elsa Herzfeld: I mean the German FBI.

Interviewer: Okay.

Elsa Herzfeld: Geheime Staatspolizei, it was called. Not the FBI, not the—

Interviewer: Okay.

Elsa Herzfeld: Something equivalent to the FBI.

Interviewer: Okay, just to get it straight.

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. So, we lived in constant fear, constant fear that he was going to be hauled off. That was the biggest thing that we were constantly afraid, that our father was going to be hauled off at that time.

Interviewer: And then, when you moved—

Elsa Herzfeld: To Damstadt.

Interviewer: Then what was your life like? Did your father have a job?

Elsa Herzfeld: No, he had to give up. He had to wind his business down and we waited then to come to the United States. We sort of got things rolling to come over here.

Interviewer: So you realized then that—

Elsa Herzfeld: It was time. The strange thing is, I say this so often, my mother was really sort of responsible for us getting out, because she was a people person and it hurt her terribly that her friends no longer would say hello to her. My father wasn't quite like that. I think if it wasn't for my mother, we all would have ended up in the concentration camp. But it hurt her so much to be not...I don't know how I should say it. I mean nobody said hello to her anymore. She said, "I cannot live under those circumstances."

Interviewer: Now you said you were the only one who had a passport?

Elsa Herzfeld: I was the only one who had a passport because it was very difficult to get passports, for Jews to get passports. We felt like one of us needs a passport and, well, there's another part of my family. My mother's brother and also my mother's sister lived in Wilhelmshaven which is on the North Sea, I told you. And they had to flee overnight, my mother's brother. They had a uniform business in Wilhelmshaven and somebody threatened them and they had to flee overnight. They're just...with nothing. I mean they just took their pocketbooks and went and, at that time, of all things, they had a son and daughter. They spent their summer vacation with us and my aunt and uncle, they had fled over the border to France, to Forbach. And so, when we said, I wanted to visit them and somehow it was very difficult, but somehow I finagled a passport, but they gave it to me only for a very short period. I think no longer than six months, and they wouldn't renew it. And my parents and my brother also had a very hard time to get that passport. So, I had to...my passport, I landed in the United States on the 2nd of April, and I think my passport expired

on the 6th of April. So, I just barely made it. So, that's why I had to leave Germany before they did because my passport was about to expire.

Interviewer: So, it was then or never.

Elsa Herzfeld: And I was 18 at that time. I think back, sometimes, I think I was really something, wasn't I? At that time, to come to the United States, to a country I...was far away from us and...

Interviewer: Now, what about the rest of the family? How did they get passports?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, they got their passports, they got their passports. We all got the affidavit at the same time, but the passport, they somehow, I forgot how, but they all got passports and they all got out and I waited for them in New York and we were reunited.

Interviewer: Now, how did you wait in New York? Did you know somebody?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, I know...You see, at that time, almost everybody knew somebody because other people had immigrated. And so I had this boy I used to date when I was 17 and he was 19, a little bit, and then I had somebody from that little country town where we lived, and he got me a room. He, I think, his name was...I even forgot his name. Anyway, he and two members from Council of Jewish Women I think, picked me up on the dock. And they had got me a room with also a German-Jewish family in Manhattan. And so, I had some...I knew some people. So, I hanged around there for four weeks and my only problem really was that I had just about no money and I worried about my father and mother and my brother getting out. But otherwise, I sort of had a nice jolly time, more or less.

Interviewer: So, then, when the rest of your family came, you met them in New York?

Elsa Herzfeld: Right.

Interviewer: And what did you do from there? Did you stay in New York?

Elsa Herzfeld: No, we came to Nashville. We came to Nashville because the only people in the United States really outside of those German immigrants in New York, the only people we knew in the United States was Mortimer and Gertrude May. And that is mentioned in this thing. They were the only ones we knew. And they really, against their wishes, I must say, Mortimer said, "Why come to Nashville?" He didn't really like Nashville even, so he lived here all his life.

Interviewer: He didn't like it?

Elsa Herzfeld: I mean he liked it, but he said, "Why not go to California?" He loved California. "Why not go to California?" And you know, in retrospect, I feel like, too, we could have been just as poor in California as we were in Nashville, wouldn't it? We would have had to start—

Interviewer: Poor?

Elsa Herzfeld: Poor...We would have been...what did we know about the United States? What did we know about a new country? Nothing.

Interviewer: Now, how did Mortimer May know you?

Elsa Herzfeld: That was really...Well, we knew Lily and Erna. I don't know if you know Lily Levy and Erna Preis and their family. They lived across the street from us in Germany in this little town. And we knew that family and it was their uncle—

Interviewer: Morimer?

Elsa Herzfeld: I mean not Mortimer. He wasn't their uncle. MortimerF was a cousin really, but Jacob May was their uncle. So, somehow, we met Mortimer and May's through them and they came visiting in Germany a lot. We visited them. I never will forget when I saw Reva (sp) May the first time. I thought I never have seen anything as beautiful in all my life. You don't know Reva (sp) I guess.

Interviewer: No.

Elsa Herzfeld: But I thought I have never seen such a beautiful...She was exactly as old as I, three days older I think, and we got to know them and they helped us to come.

Interviewer: So you met them in Germany?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: They came to Germany?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: So they knew you?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. We knew them and they were kind enough to help us out.

Interviewer: Now, how did you make contact with them? From Germany?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. From Germany.

Interviewer: And when you arrived in Nashville—

Elsa Herzfeld: I don't even think it was smuggling out but that money, a little bit of money we had, just a little, and I don't know how it got out there, very little.

Interviewer: On the tape, would you like to?

Elsa Herzfeld: I don't know. But we were not allowed to...We were not allowed to take any money out. We were allowed to take our furniture, clothes out, but we were not allowed to take our money out.

Interviewer: Why don't we repeat that off for the tape? We're just taking a break now.

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. I don't know if it's interesting or not. I mean—

Interviewer: Well, I think it's very interesting.

Elsa Herzfeld: So my father and mother, we smuggled cameras out of Germany. We smuggled them out literally, Leica's.

Interviewer: Let's get that on the tape.

Elsa Herzfeld: And it was awful. We got nothing for it. Leica's are unbelievably expensive cameras, but we had sold them for practically nothing because that was all we could rescue and that under practically death threat.

Interviewer: Now, how did you support yourself? Were you able to take any money out of Germany?

Elsa Herzfeld: No, we were not able. \$10. Again, I say, I don't know it was \$10 or 10 marks, I'm not quite sure, but it was 10. I think it was probably \$10 that we're able to take out.

Interviewer: Were you able to bring anything else out?

Elsa Herzfeld: I mean we were able to bring out clothes and furniture. My parents packed what they call a lift. It was like a great big box where they brought the furniture out. At that time, they said we could bring things out but no money. But this little money I had brought to Luxemburg, that helped me survive in New York while I was waiting for my parents to come. So, it wasn't much, but better than

\$10. And so, my parents, they bought some cameras, Leica's, which we heard were much in demand in the United States, so they bought quite a few Leica's and there was somebody who always specializes in something and takes the opportunity and there was somebody who introduced us to somebody in New York who bought Leica's and it was ridiculously cheap. I mean, for them, they're probably...But for us, it meant being able to eat.

Interviewer: Now, these cameras were from Germany or Luxemburg?

Elsa Herzfeld: No, no, Germany, Germany—

Interviewer: Germany?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. So we sold the cameras and so that was...I had a very strange experience when I waited for my parents to come; everything was unbelievable. They came and I had rented a room with this German-Jewish family I lived with. Then, the people had, one of their children, broke out with measles and we were not smart enough to know that one doesn't get the measles twice. So everybody advised me, don't stay there. So my parents came with practically no money. We had to, at the last moment, find us a room someplace else. We had to take a taxi, drive around in New York trying to find a room. Well, we surely didn't have money to stay at the Waldorf-Astoria so we stayed at some flee thing hotel. It was just terrible, just terrible. So, we stayed there for the first night. The next day, we somehow, through some people, we found out that there was a German-Jewish family who had sort of a [unintelligible 0:24:52.2] as they call it in Europe. They rented out rooms to other people and also gave them meals on Riverside Drive. So we moved there but with a very little money we had. I still remember we drove around New York with the taxi.

Interviewer: Looking for a place.

Elsa Herzfeld: Looking for a place. I thought of all things. The little money we have, we have to run around to look for a room. That was wild really.

Interviewer: Can't imagine doing that there today.

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, really.

Interviewer: Now, when you got to Nashville, where did you go?

Elsa Herzfeld: Where did we live? Well, at first, we got a little, also a room. You see, we knew Lilly and Erna and her family. And they lived on 16th Avenue South and they got us...I guess a couple of rooms upstairs until our lift came, our furniture came and then we rented a house on 16th Avenue and I got a job in May Hosiery Mills at the office. And my father worked first also in the office and then in the factory and my mother. And we rented out a room to Elsa Frank and Harry Sternheimer. And mother worked at [Cornman's (sp) 0:26:11.2] for a while and that was the way it started.

Interviewer: Now, was this all on 16th Avenue also?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: And what about English? Did you know English?

Elsa Herzfeld: I knew English amazingly well. It sounds like I'm bragging, but it is the truth. I had three years of English and six years of French, but I really didn't know French all that well. But I had a fabulous English teacher. I still remember her, Fraulein [Zimmerman 0:26:40.8] and I really did amazingly well with English. It was hard to understand at first, but I really managed well for the whole family because I knew it...And that is when I told you a little while ago how we had tried for my aunt and uncle to get out, that I always was the one who went begging for somebody to vouch because I was the only one in the family who could speak English well enough to negotiate these things.

Interviewer: Now, tell me what you did or you tried to do for your aunt and uncle?

Elsa Herzfeld: To try somebody to give them the affidavit to get out.

Interviewer: And who did you go to?

Elsa Herzfeld: Oh, I forgot to all...several members of this community and Mortimer May tried to convince people to do that and tried to convince them that it most likely wouldn't cost them a dime, but it was just to enable people to get out. But it was hard to convince anybody and then my uncle and aunt just...When finally this Kirchner family vouched for them, it was too late. They were no longer...we couldn't reach them anymore.

Interviewer: And why did Mortimer May not help them himself?

Elsa Herzfeld: Because the American government would not take any more affidavits because I think he had given over 200 because legally he really was responsible, even so...I don't think anybody ever caused him any trouble even for a nickel. But legally, if somebody would have needed help, he would have had given them and I think the government just wouldn't accept anymore because it probably really wouldn't have been possible for him to support more than 200 people. So that was it.

Interviewer: Now, did you try to get any other family members out?

Elsa Herzfeld: No, that was all. I had an aunt and uncle. We helped them to come over, but also Mortimer helped them to come in. My mother's sister and brother-in-law and my grandmother, they came out.

Interviewer: But this wasn't the ones you had—

Elsa Herzfeld: Those were not the ones. This was my father's sister and her husband and their son was already with us when this all happened.

Interviewer: And the aunt and uncle that you tried to help then, did they ever get out?

Elsa Herzfeld: We don't know. We never heard anything anymore. They probably had to go to Auschwitz, Buchenwald, or something. I'll forever really feel sort of responsible. When I think about it, I feel guilty about it and yet, I feel like I did everything I could. But I really...I don't know. I did everything I could. I know

we cannot force people to do this if they don't understand and if they don't want to.

Interviewer: There was no one else in the community who would—?

Elsa Herzfeld: Because Mortimer really tried—

Interviewer: —sign affidavit?

Elsa Herzfeld: The Jewish Community as a whole really I think did not realize at all what was going on. I really felt that. They just didn't...I think they didn't have any sympathy for us either. Like now, with the Russian-Jewish people coming, I think the community is extremely sympathetic and I think the people who come out of Russia, I don't think they really come out at all with the same problems we came out because they more or less come out, because they choose to come out, don't they really? Well, we had the knife on our throat. I mean it wasn't that we didn't like the circumstances in Germany. It wasn't because we didn't...It was because it was a matter of life or death. But I think the Jewish Community as a whole I don't think grasped that. At least, I think not.

Interviewer: Do you think it was a matter of not understanding or not caring?

Elsa Herzfeld: I think it was a matter of not understanding, I think. I really don't think they would have not cared, but I just think they sort of distanced themselves from it all. That's what I had been feeling.

Interviewer: What differences about life in the United States compared to Europe struck you when you came here? What were some of the most notable features?

Elsa Herzfeld: About life in general or—?

Interviewer: In the United States compared to life in Europe?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, for us, of course, it was freedom and not to be afraid that somebody would put you in the concentration camp. That was probably the best part of it as far as it had its status in the community which didn't mean that much for me, but for my father, it was very devastating, too. He had a business and he was respected. He was well-respected person in Germany. While here, he was a poor immigrant and it hurt him very badly so much sometimes that he said, "I wish I had stayed and gotten killed in a concentration camp." Really and truly, it hurt him terribly. He got sick soon afterwards which he became hypothyroid which might have had to do with his unhappiness. He was happy to be out, but it hurt him to be. I think when you're 18, you don't realize what it means to have accomplished a little bit something and have it taken away from you. Well, lots of my contemporaries always get sort of amused, contemporaries or even younger than me act like they lost a fortune in Germany. They lost everything when I always am terribly honest about it is that I really didn't...I mean, I didn't I lost a lot of fun in my youth and a lot of carefree life, but as far as material things, at 18, you hardly accumulate material things. But, it was hard. It really was hard to be an immigrant in Nashville. It really was hard to be it. I think it was hard. For me, it was hard to be, and I think to this day, I haven't quite gotten over it. I don't think I'll ever quite get over it.

Interviewer: To this day?

Elsa Herzfeld: To this day.

Interviewer: You still feel like an immigrant?

Elsa Herzfeld: It's funny that I don't feel like an immigrant with you because I have never met you before, but my contemporaries, I don't want to name them, I still feel sort of strange to these people. I feel like I'm still not measuring up really. I still feel like that. I'm not measuring up to...It was hard for me. I think sometimes people my age, I think probably everybody will say that people my age, everybody would say, had it hard because everybody had their own problems, but I think sometimes I came in a terrible time because I was too old to be a little child and too young to be an adult. It was just that time in my life when young people have fun and I was burdened down with earning a living to help support us. Other people's daughters at that time wondered how many evening dresses they should take to Vassar or Wellesley with them and I wondered how we would make ends meet.

Interviewer: When you say you didn't measure up—

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: Socially, the others—

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: The natives were—

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: —ahead of you.

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. Because I felt I was like I didn't measure up, but it's really only with my contemporaries I think. And it was sort of...I don't know why I am telling you this, but I just tell it. These so called wealthy people of the community felt like they are to be doing something for the poor immigrants. So they invited little young girls like me to the parties or something, meaning very well, and in retrospect, I felt like I wish they hadn't invited me because I really didn't belong there. I didn't belong in there...mentally, I didn't belong. They were worried about their boyfriends and their clothes and their parties and their dances, and I wasn't any part of that. So I think, sometimes, I used to think, I think it would have been better not to be, not to be thrown together with these because it wasn't the young girls who wanted me. It was their mothers who thought, "Let's invite this girl." I think it wasn't...I don't think it was the girls, the 18-year-old girls who thought, "We better invite this girl." It was their mother's who thought, "Don't you think you'd better invite Elsa?" And there I was, isolated. And my mother would say, "Why don't you go to this party? Why don't you go?" And I couldn't quite...I felt like I ought to be grateful I guess that they invited me when, in reality, I think it did me in I think sometimes, really. It presented a sort of...Another thing is I think, in retrospect, I don't think once should stay in a city like Nashville, when one is an immigrant, I think one should move on. I think one should move to a community where you didn't come to as an immigrant, that's what I thought a lot of times because—

Interviewer: You wish that you had left?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. I mean, as I get older, it's different, but while I was still a little bit younger, I always thought it's best to go where...you're just whoever you are you are. You're not...I just...I don't know why I should tell you that, but I mean maybe I will tell you though. I even can tell you the name of these people. Erna Preis's daughter, do you know her? Elaine...Cook is her name. I mean... she married Bobby Doochin, her first marriage. A very, very pretty girl and I heard people say, "Isn't that great that he is marrying this little immigrant girl?" Now, Elaine Doochin is no more an immigrant than you're an immigrant. It was her parents who came. And so, I thought, "Isn't there ever going to be an end to that that they call her the little immigrant girl when...?" I thought, you see, this is...when you stay in a community where you came to. I mean this bothered me that this lady said he is marrying that little immigrant girl. She was Phi Beta Kappa, went to Emory University, got a Fulbright grant. And so, in the eyes of some of the people who were here when her mother and father came, they called her still the little immigrant girl. That's a little much, don't you think?

Interviewer: Overwhelming.

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: It makes you wonder what you're up against.

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, the little immigrant girl so, wow. Those are little experiences.

Interviewer: I also meant to ask you what did your father do for a living in Nashville.

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, he first worked at May Hosiery Mills in the office. I did, too. And then came in 1937, there was sort of a Depression kind of a time, a recession sort of a thing. They kept me on because...they kept me on. And daddy, they made him work in the factory and he swept floors and he said, "I cannot do that. I just cannot go on sweep floors at May Hosiery Mill." And he quit and he started a peddling business. He just sold things.

Interviewer: What did he peddle?

Elsa Herzfeld: Clothes and things like that.

Interviewer: And whatever happened to that business? Did he have to travel then?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, he traveled, but then he died in 1955.

Interviewer: Was he on his own or was he working for another?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, he was on his own. No, he was on his own.

Interviewer: After the war, did you ever try to go back to Germany?

Elsa Herzfeld: I never have. Yeah, after so many newcomers I should be.

Interviewer: Did you ever try to go back to Europe after the war?

Elsa Herzfeld: Never have, never have.

Interviewer: Was there any reason why?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, most of it I think because I really, well, it cost a lot to go. It's expensive and then, for many years, I looked after my mother. My father died in 1955 and I kind of looked after mother from then on, and I didn't want to leave her to...I wouldn't say unsupervised, but I felt like I'd rather stay around and she had many bad times, broke hips three times, once with two hips and two wrists and she had many lung problems and operations and what not. It was just...I couldn't make myself go.

Interviewer: Is she still living?

Elsa Herzfeld: No, she died almost...She died 10 years ago, almost 91 years old.

Interviewer: Do you think you would want to go back if you...money was loaned?

Elsa Herzfeld: I don't know. Sometimes, I think I would and sometimes, I think I rather remember things as they were than...I don't know I would have. I think everybody but me has been back.

Interviewer: Have you made contact with any members of your family that you were separated from?

Elsa Herzfeld: I think we have contact with everybody who got out, sort of, yeah.

Interviewer: Where are they now?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, we have some relatives in Israel and in France. Those are my first cousins.

Interviewer: And how did you find these people?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, my cousin in Israel is my first cousin. He's a brother of this boy who grew up in our house. And the ones in France where we kept sort of in contact, they were hidden for years in France, my uncle and...You see, they fled and they went to France and then they came back to the Saar Region. In the Saar region, I always went back and forth from France to Germany, but then, they had to go across the border to France and then, Hitler invaded France and they had to go into the interior France and they were hidden for years because the anti-Semitism...I mean they did the same thing with the Jews in France then as they did in Germany. I mean my uncle and aunt are both dead; they had two children when they left Germany; they had a girl and a boy. And were poor, I have never seen such poverty. They really had nothing. And my aunt became pregnant. She was 40 or something, 40 or even early 40s. And with all this, no money, no nothing, she was pregnant. And I talked to this cousin of mine the other day, that one who came after my aunt...The oldest girl was 18 and the boy was 15 when this girl was born. And she talked to me the other day. She has two sons who are both physicians. One is a psychiatrist in France and the other one is in Chicago; he's a physician, too, but he's now getting a PhD in biomedical thing, biomedical...whatever you call it. So I have contact with all of them, but they live in France. Also, other interesting things what happens to people...One

of the cousins there in France has two daughters. One of them married a French boy who became a cantor and he had a job in Manheim, Germany for years. Isn't that strange? But now, they moved back to France, but they all are doing fine now, but they had a terrible time under Hitler in France.

Interviewer: Did you maintain contact with them throughout?

Elsa Herzfeld: Not during all that.

Interviewer: How did you find them again then?

Elsa Herzfeld: I guess after it was all over. I think they probably...I really don't remember how we got together again, but I guess maybe we still had the same address or something. I really don't know how we found each other again.

Interviewer: What about the cousin in Israel? Do you remember how you found him?

Elsa Herzfeld: Oh yeah. Well, also because we saw my cousin here who's his brother. He really had a time, he went there at 15, entered the kibbutz. Then, after that, he went into the Israeli Army. After the army, he went to high school, to university, and he got a PhD at age 57. Can you believe that? In the meantime, he was in Ghana, teaching people how to fish or something like that. They are amazing people really. He got a PhD at age 57.

Interviewer: Is he still in Israel?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, he lives in Jerusalem. His wife was...Everybody has a story. His wife was a little girl from Poland who wandered along the streets in Poland and somebody picked her up. Her parents were killed. Somebody picked her up and somehow she got to France, she doesn't even know. She was 5 years old. And she went to France and somehow ended up in Israel. Really, amazing stories, isn't it? They have two daughters. They still live in Jerusalem, but he was here last year for two months at the university, at the Hebrew University in Cincinnati doing some research of all what's happening.

Interviewer: On the Holocaust?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, on the Holocaust. His name is Menachem Kaufman. That's about my story I guess.

Interviewer: How do you feel that these experiences with the war and coming to America have changed you? Do you look at life or at other people differently than you once did?

Elsa Herzfeld: I really don't know. I was really not old enough yet to have a real life. I think at 18, one doesn't have so much of a life yet to have a perspective. I guess I pictured my life different from...As I said to my husband, "I guess I wasn't born to be a maid," I sometimes say. At that time, people had maids and...It was just, I think, I expected to not work as hard as I have to work now, I think. But otherwise—

Interviewer: Well, how long did you work at the hosiery factory?

Elsa Herzfeld: I worked at May Hosiery Mills until the very end of '41, until November '41 or October '41.

Interviewer: And then, what did you do?

Elsa Herzfeld: And then...I'm almost pouring my heart out. My mother, at that time, was terribly unhappy that I was not a popular girl, that I didn't seem like I could ever have a chance to get married most likely which was, at that time, uppermost in mothers' minds. So she really wished I would go to Chicago or New York or something where there were other young boys and young girls and maybe I would have more of a chance to meet somebody. I liked opera a lot. Opera is my main love, and they had the opera season in Chicago and I decided, why not spend my vacation in Chicago. So I went and spent my vacation, went to every opera they had for seven days. And I stayed in Chicago. I decided I'm going to...I had a good time and I thought I might as well stay in Chicago. And my mother had some friends in Chicago and you know those people, too. I mean I don't know, but this lady was a good friend of my mother's. She was Ms. Windmiller's sister. And they had moved to Chicago and they invited me to stay

with them and have a room there and be kind of my adopted family. So, I stayed and I got a job and I—

Interviewer: Where? What kind of job?

Elsa Herzfeld: In Chicago and I got a job in an office and I did payroll in that office. I learned to do comptometer at that time. In Nashville, I did payroll work and I was happy in a way. I missed my family terribly. But I met other young people and I went to play ping-pong and bowling and I went to dances and I just was more accepted. I was just one of the other German-Jewish people, and then eventually, I met my husband in Chicago.

Interviewer: In Chicago?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah. I met my husband in Chicago.

Interviewer: At one of these dances?

Elsa Herzfeld: At bowling I think. I met him at bowling and then we went to the same dance. We had not dated or anything. I went with somebody else who insisted that I wasn't going to be his date. He was just going to transport me to the dance on the south side. I lived on north side, but John was there, too. Then, we had known each other already several months, but that started it. Somehow, the dance started it. And we dated for a while and then, it was World War II, and he went into the army and I followed him for a while, stayed in Chicago, followed him to different camps, and then he went overseas. And so, that was it.

Interviewer: And then, after the war, you came back to—?

Elsa Herzfeld: We came back to Nashville.

Interviewer: Stayed in Nashville?

Elsa Herzfeld: Stayed back in Nashville. I somehow, I guess, I was still very attached to my family, so we came to Nashville.

Interviewer: And do you have children?

Elsa Herzfeld: One son.

Interviewer: And has your whole experience had any effect on him?

Elsa Herzfeld: I don't believe it had any. I don't think. I don't think—

Interviewer: The way you raised him or things that—

Elsa Herzfeld: I don't think it had any. The only effect I can really say, when he was little, we decided we wanted to speak German to him because we both felt like to learn another language without any effort would be heaven, not to ever study a foreign language. And I thought "Oh, to pick up a language without having to study," but it didn't work. It didn't work. He got it all mixed up, played with other children, and got German and English mixed up. The little other children wouldn't understand what he was talking about. So we thought, no, that doesn't seem to be the right thing to do either. So, he understood German for a long, long time because we'd lived with my parents for a long, long time because after World War II, there was no housing available. There was no place to move, and even if there was a place to move, there were no cars. We're all too young to remember that. There were no cars because the war effort took all the cars and all the shoes and all the...everything. So, in order to go some place to find a place to live, we really had to have a car. So the first thing was to be able to get a car because...So we lived with my parents and our son really understood German. I would think perfect, but little by little, it went away.

Interviewer: So, he didn't stay with them?

Elsa Herzfeld: So I don't believe he...he still understands some, but I don't think he really was affected. That's what I say. Maybe, he thinks he was affected by it. I don't know. Maybe, from his point of view, maybe he was affected by it. Maybe, he didn't think that he didn't have all the breaks he might have had. I don't know.

I think sometimes he does because he went to Vanderbilt. We wanted him to go to Vanderbilt because it was nice to have him at home, and besides, it was lots less expensive to go than to go away to school. And I think part of it...I think he resents still I think that he went to Vanderbilt instead of going someplace else. I think he doesn't say that, but I think he would probably think that. Because most of his children are away at school.

Interviewer: So, is he living in Nashville?

Elsa Herzfeld: Our son lives in Montgomery, Alabama, but the oldest grandson is going to graduate from Princeton in months and the younger one goes to University of Virginia. So apparently, he didn't think the University of Alabama or Auburn or anything was good enough.

Interviewer: He wanted them to have that experience?

Elsa Herzfeld: Yeah, he wanted them to have that living-away-from-home experience and all. So maybe it affected his life in a way that we were poor immigrants or something.

Interviewer: How do you feel about being Jewish? Did your feelings about Judaism change or the way you practice it change?

Elsa Herzfeld: No, no, it really didn't. It didn't change, no.

Interviewer: How do you feel about it now? Do you have any thoughts about the experiences as a Jew or as...

Elsa Herzfeld: What do you mean by...?

Interviewer: I mean about...has the experience affected the way you look at—

Elsa Herzfeld: Religiously, you mean—?

Interviewer: —about Judaism...Yeah, religiously or at other...

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, I don't think it really has affected me. No, I don't think so. I do get angry sometimes I think because I feel like...No, I don't think I should say this. I feel angry sometimes. Why wasn't there somebody higher up who kept the Jews from being burned in the concentration camp or being cremated or something. Yeah, it has affected me, I think. It has affected me. Other people go the other way, but this cousin, both of my cousins, both of my...the professors, both of them, Irvin in Arizona and Menachem in Israel, I don't know. The one in Arizona was extremely religious. I mean, he was really orthodox, as orthodox can be when he came here, but he threw it all, all of that. I mean he's still Jewish and he feels Jewish and is Jewish, but religiously, religion doesn't mean anything to him. And I think...I've never really discussed it with him, but I think really that losing his parents was the cause of it. I really think so.

Interviewer: Did you find your observance change because of it?

Elsa Herzfeld: I think so. I really think so.

Interviewer: In what way?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, I'm not...I don't have faith. I don't have faith. I just...I feel like why did this all have to happen? I mean, after all, there was no reason for this to happen. For perfectly wonderful people to be shipped into a gas chamber and be cremated because we were Jews, I mean, who didn't do anything. It was just by accident of birth. And so, it's hard to have faith. Other people are affected just the other way around and I am happy for them and I think it's...I really admire and I am jealous of people who have a lot of faith. I really think they go through life easy because there's somebody watching. But I just have a hard time.

Interviewer: Now that you have told me your story, is there anything else you would like others to know or is there any other message you would like other people to remember about your experiences?

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, don't ever let it happen again, I guess. Tell the story, make it believe...Make it so that people realize what happened and...I don't know. I

don't think I have any special message, but I hope it never happens again. That's the big message. That's about it. I hope it never happens again and I think, sometimes, we don't have any guarantees that it will never happen again. I don't know what one can do about it. I just love to be in Israel, in many ways, because of...You don't have the anti-Semitism in Israel, but then you have these ultra-orthodox Jews there who almost destroy Israel with their ultra-orthodox means and that is frightening to me.

Interviewer: Well, I want to thank you again for your time.

Elsa Herzfeld: Well, I enjoyed it.