

Transcript:

Hedy Lustig

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Interviewer: Just tell me your name again.

HedyLustig: HedyLustig.

Interviewer: Okay, Hedy. When you were growing up, where did you grow up? Which town? What was life like before the war?

HedyLustig: Well, I remember I was born in 1930. I can remember as a very, very small child, that life was strange because I was not—when I was three years old, I went to a school kindergarten with nuns. Shortly thereafter, I was not allowed to go to school anymore. I had to go to a Jewish school which was part of our synagogue. I was not allowed to play with children because, I guess, my mother was afraid that somebody would harm me. As early as—I think Hitler got in in '33. As early as 1934/35, it was unbearable to be Jewish.

Interviewer: How old were you approximately? You were just a little girl.

HedyLustig: Absolutely, a very small child.

Interviewer: Do you remember the normal times? What was it like?

HedyLustig: The normal time was picking blackberries in the forest with my parents and going for long walks, going to synagogue on the Sabbath, which we did every Saturday. But most of my life was not normal. It was not—I never got the opportunity to be a small child. I felt like I always had to be grown for my age. When I was, I'd say five or six and I was beginning school at the Jewish school, we used to have to go to the doctor in another city. The whole school would take busloads of children to another city, Darmstadt, in order to go to the doctor or to the dentist. You'll have to excuse me.

Interviewer: No problem. They would take you by the busload to go to the doctor, how come?

HedyLustig: By the busload, because no non-Jewish person would treat a Jewish person. I think the non-Jewish people were afraid because Nazism was already beginning. I remember going to the dentist in Darmstadt. One of the most vivid recollections is when my brother and I used to try to go to school. We would leave our home, and it was maybe three or four blocks

from school, and many days we didn't make it to school because adult Nazis would run after us with butcher knives. We would run back home. It was like this at all times. At night, when we try to sleep, my father had to board up the house. We lived in a two-story house, and downstairs was my father's butcher shop and behind our home was my father's—we had a big packing house plus my dad owned lots of land. In Europe, you owned tracts of land away from your village. My father had to board up the house, the windows, in order for us to sleep at night because at night the Nazis would come and throw rocks in our windows. My father's store was closed in about '36 or '37 because nobody would patronize it anymore. People were sincerely—the ones that were not Nazis—were afraid to have any dealings at all with the Jewish people. My dad had fought in the First World War for Germany. He had twelve brothers and sisters. He couldn't understand how Germany could betray him like this. Jewish people in Germany were just as comfortable as we are as Americans right here in America. They were part of everything. It was like overnight everything changed for us. It was frightening for a young lady, young children. As I was a little girl I remember my mother used to push my little brother in a carriage—not my mother, we had a maid at that time—but after that, after, I'd say about '34 or '35, we had no more help. We did everything ourselves. We could barely scrounge enough food for us to eat because people didn't want to sell to the Jews. I lived in a small town and it was even worse. My uncles, where my father was born, also lived in a small town. And the Nazis were even worse there. So my father and a brother that lived in our community would go occasionally and bring them food because they absolutely had no way to provide themselves with food or meat or whatever. I lived through Kristallnacht. I was eight years old. But like I said, I was never a small child. I was always an adult and I missed not being a small child. Kristallnacht, we had already gotten papers to come over to the USA. At that time, we were just a Jewish problem. The Jewish problem could still leave Germany. We were still able to get out of Germany up until Kristallnacht. We had our papers to come to the USA. We were in our home and we had—how you are when you leave some place forever—we were getting our things together. We had relatives that came to see us, to say goodbye to us. We had a seamstress at our house making us a few clothes or whatever. About five or six that evening, a Nazi came by. I have his name but it's ridiculous to even mention names because nobody would know here who they are.

Interviewer: But I think you should if it doesn't bother—

HedyLustig: Well, I have it recorded. But anyway, he came by and he was sent by the Stormtroopers to turn off electricity. He told my parents and I, my whole family, he told them that tonight we're getting rid of the Jewish problem.

He said all of Germany, the electricity was to be cut off from the Jewish homes. Well, my father was very excited and upset. Well, we knew things were bad and we didn't know—we felt like we would get away before worse things happened. Dad went to see some other people, Jewish people, and they had heard the same thing. He came back home and we decided we had to take off and run. I lived in a home that I was born in, and the May family from Nashville, Tennessee was also born in this home. They lived upstairs in our home. There was an old gentleman—I'd say he was in his 80's—his name was Abraham May. He had a daughter, her name was Matilda May. She was not married. She went with us. We decided to run away. So Matilda, an uncle that was visiting us, Uncle Moritz from Rüsselsheim—I'm trying to think—my mother, my father, my brother and I, we ran through the woods. This is in November, and Europe, at that time, was pretty cold already in November. We took whatever we had on our backs, and we ran through the woods for several days. It was frightening because here was an old woman that was the seamstress with us, this Matilda, my uncle finally left us. We walked, like I said, for a couple of days and nights and we would feel like we heard people running after us. We were hungry. My brother was small. He was six years old and he kept crying. He wanted something to eat. I was hungry also but I was scared. We decided, well, maybe, whatever had transpired was over with. We would try to return to our home. We perceived getting ready for our trip. We got back to our home. We see debris all over the place—crystal, silver, furniture that had patches had been taken too. But at that time we were not concerned about the furniture nor the silver nor the whatever. We saw Nazis coming. My father ran and he hid in the attic. We also hid with him. But they found us. They had no problem finding us. They took my father. They took—I can't even think—what did they hit you with, a club? They took a club and beat him across the nose and his eyes and they said, "All Jews have to have crooked noses." While they were beating my father and they took him to a concentration camp, my mother, this other lady that lived upstairs, the May family...

Interviewer: Matilda.

HedyLustig: Matilda and myself, we started running again. Where to? We didn't know. Mother had a little money with her, not a lot. We had nothing to eat. We started through the woods again. We were so frightened. Here's a woman with two little children and Matilda, and we don't know where to go. I don't know how many days we were in the woods. We would stop at train stations and we were afraid they could detect that we were Jewish. We finally got to a train station and we proceeded to take a train. Here we've not eaten in days. We got on the train and we were going to Rüsselsheim. I had an aunt that lived there. We made it to Rüsselsheim.

On the train, there were a lot of Nazis. We felt like they could detect who we were, but they didn't. We got to Rüsselsheim. We went to see my Aunt Aida. She was no longer there. She had been taken to a concentration camp. She had lived in an apartment house. We went to see—I don't know whether he was the owner of the apartment house or a super of the apartment house—he saw how hungry and frightened we were, he offered to feed us. But we sat down, I kept crying to mother. I had a mind way beyond my years. I said, "Mother, they're going to kill us. Don't eat. They're going to poison us." We left there and we went to see another uncle. We took a train. I'm sure my mother was exhausted—two small children. Somehow Matilda was no longer with us.

Interviewer: You don't know how she...?

HedyLustig: No, I don't.

Interviewer: Got lost?

HedyLustig: No. But she was no longer with us. We went to see this other uncle who was employed by Opel. And, believe it or not, their family was still intact. The reason being they needed him in the factory. I don't know what his position was. My parents would know but I don't know what his position was.

Interviewer: What was his name and what town was he in?

HedyLustig: His name was Uncle Moritz and he was in—I can't think right now the name of the town—I do know but it just slipped...

Interviewer: Was it in Germany?

HedyLustig: Yes, it was in Germany.

Interviewer: Was he an uncle on your dad's side?

HedyLustig: My father's brother. My father was one of twelve brothers and sisters. Out of all the twelve brothers and sisters, only four survived. All the rest of them—uncles, aunts, cousins, young people—they were all killed. So from a large family, I have hardly any family. Anyway, we got to my uncle's house. I had two cousins and they were older than I. I had such a good time with them. But they're gone. They were killed in the concentration camps. We stayed with them a number of days. And they traced my mother to—they knew exactly where all the Jewish people lived and who they were and who their relatives were. They traced my mother to this home and sent her a telegram and said she had to come back to Höchst, my hometown, and clean up the mess the Nazis had made. Well, she went back and she had to clean up the debris that they

had made in the—we had like a courtyard and most of the things were thrown out in the courtyard. The bedding was cut like feather bedding which you had in Germany. They were all cut and destroyed. My mother still owns furniture. We still have furniture here in the States that are living testaments to what happened. Because the furniture—they used hatchets on the furniture and we had it covered with pieces of wood. The mirrors in my mother's armoire were destroyed. They were hit. We have no more mirrors. We didn't want a mirror on that again because we want it a reminder of what had happened to us. We never wanted to forget, nor do I want my children to forget, nor my grandchildren, because I feel like things like that can happen again.

Interviewer: The time period from Kristallnacht to when your mother had to go home to clean up, we're talking a couple of weeks?

HedyLustig: I'd say a couple of weeks. My mother went back home and cleaned up. And in the meantime she went to the mayor of our town and said, "Please, where is my husband? Is he still alive?" We found out he was in Buchenwald. Mother said, "We will not be a problem. We have our papers. We have everything intact. Could you get him out? We'll go. We're ready to go." Believe it or not, they let my father out. When I first saw my father, he came to my Uncle Moritz's where we were staying. Mother had come back to this place.

Interviewer: Did she come back knowing he was going to be out?

HedyLustig: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes.

Interviewer: They had let him out. But had he already been to Buchenwald?

HedyLustig: Oh, yeah. He was there for like, I'd say—this was November, December, we left the end of January. He was there, I'd say, a couple of months. They let him out. My father looked like a living skeleton when...let's see, where was I?

Interviewer: Well, I wanted you to start from the description of when your family was first reunited and your father came back. You were talking about what he looked like and what it felt like.

HedyLustig: Oh, okay. My father looked like a living skeleton when he came back from the camp. We were almost frightened of him. He told us some of the experiences at camp. He told us that they had one thing to eat a day and it was just water with some things. It must have been a soup. He said if they wanted water to drink, they got water to drink when it rained. They'd have to run out and drink the water from the roof as it was dripping off the roof. He said there were people that would run out, they were afraid or they want to get away and there were barbed wires and

they were electrocuted because they had electricity in them. It was an unbelievable happening. We left my aunts—we really could only leave with the things on our back. We did have furniture that came over. They call it a “lift.” They bring to the USA. We did bring what remained of our furniture to the US. I think the happiest day of our lives were when we left Germany.

Interviewer: So you all gathered in the town where Uncle Moritz lived, how long were you there, all of you together—your brother, your mom, you, and your dad?

HedyLustig: Not very long, probably a couple of days. And I really, I know sometime during that period, we went to see my grandparents who lived—after we left Uncle Moritz, we went to see my grandparents, my mother’s parents, who lived in Breisach. They were still there but not long after that, they moved to Switzerland because my grandmother on my mother’s side was from Switzerland. She was from Endingen and Lengnau. This particular community in Switzerland had Jews from many, many years before. I recently had the opportunity to visit Endingen and Lengnau, and there are two synagogues there. There are no more Jews there because this used to be a ghetto in Switzerland. But we went to see my grandparents and it was very painful because we knew we would never see them again. My grandparents passed away and we really didn’t get to see them again because they passed away during the war in Switzerland, with relatives. You had asked me earlier and I did remember some good times going to my grandparent’s house when I was a very small child.

Interviewer: Before any of this happened?

HedyLustig: Before any of this happened. I used to travel to Breisach, which is on the Rhine, and visit my grandparents. They were precious people. I did have a good time there.

Interviewer: When you were visiting them, how long were you there and did you have your papers at this point? Whatever you had taken from your house, did you have your...?

HedyLustig: Oh, we had our papers with us at all times.

Interviewer: But your immigration stuff too that you’d gotten ready?

HedyLustig: Everything. Everything ready to go.

Interviewer: So how long did you stay in Breisach?

HedyLustig: Not very long. Time to a small child is—I really couldn’t tell you whether it was two days or a week. We left from there saying goodbye to all our

relatives. I think I told you before, before we left Germany, I have a book that I brought from...

Interviewer: Why don't you show us?

HedyLustig: With me. I had all of my relatives and cousins write a message in this book. It means a great deal to me and I'd given you my age so you know this book is about 50 years old. We have lots—we have prayer books we brought from Germany also. My son, being a rabbi, was very interested in those. He has most of those prayer books. My mother who is now almost 89 lives here in Nashville with me and she has many of those books. She has one prayer book that she brought over with her and every day of her life, she reads that prayer book. She thanks God that she could come over here and work. When we came to this country, both my mother and father had to go to work because it was '39 and we were not able to bring money over nor any, really, worldly possessions. We had to leave everything behind that we had with the exception of the two pieces of furniture. It was my job, at age eight, to take care of my brother who was younger than I. So, like I said, I was never able really to be a small child. But mother has this prayer book that she, like I said, thanks the good Lord every day for letting her survive, for letting her be able to go to work each day. Now I can't think of many people that pray to God and thank Him that they can go to work, but that's a fact.

Interviewer: I want to talk about your time with your grandparents again.

HedyLustig: In Breisach.

Interviewer: Breisach. That's when you had this book filled out.

HedyLustig: Well, I had this filled out in Breisach and also had it filled out when I stayed with my Uncle Moritz and the cousins and other relatives, because I thought that was very important.

Interviewer: Is there like one little passage in there or something that you could...?

HedyLustig: Well, they're all German. I can read it but very slowly.

Interviewer: Is there any thought that—you've probably had this translated to you before, is there something especially you remember that one of your relatives wrote in there to you?

HedyLustig: Well, my grandma wrote in there how special I was to her and how much she loved me. That means a great deal to me since she was a precious lady and I was never again to see her. These are my relatives and my friends. And I feel like each day that I live I have to enjoy the sunshine and the trees and the flowers much more than anybody else, because I

think I always feel like I have to see things in a bigger perspective, I guess, because I figure I'm seeing it for the 6 million Jews that perished in Germany.

Interviewer: How long were you in Breisach and how did you end up leaving there? Tell us what happened from that point and who was with you still at this point?

HedyLustig: Well, my mother and father were with me. We left. When we left, we went to Hamburg. In Hamburg, we got on our ship and the name of the ship was the "Hansa" which was evidently a German ship. It took, I would say, about a week or more to come to the States. There were many people from Germany leaving for the USA, many refugees at that time.

Interviewer: Was your mom with you?

HedyLustig: Mom and dad were both with me and my brother. None of us could speak English once we got to the States. I remember getting to New York City and we had—my one uncle that lived in the same town I did, who was Uncle Max, my father's brother, had migrated to New York early in '34/'35. He knew what was coming and he had some people that sponsored him earlier. See, the only way you could come to the U.S. was to be sponsored by a person in the U.S. and for them to put up money for you if you got in to some sort of trouble. They had to be responsible for you.

Interviewer: What year, or if you happen to remember the day or the month, when was it that you left Germany and got on that boat and came to the States?

HedyLustig: We left in January.

Interviewer: Of 1939.

HedyLustig: We came to the States in January of '39.

Interviewer: At that point, you couldn't have understood or known what was happening to so many other Jews and how lucky your father was.

HedyLustig: We did know how lucky we were.

Interviewer: You did know? Talk about that a little bit.

HedyLustig: Absolutely, because we were almost certain whoever was behind was not to come to the U.S. again, I mean, was not to leave Germany. Because my father had written a letter in 1950 to Germany, one of the few people that wrote a letter telling what happened to him. When they took him to the concentration camp, he mentioned the names of people that beat

him. At one time they wanted to take him to somebody's courtyard and kill him. And another gentleman intervened. I don't know that he was a gentleman, but evidently he had enough heart. He was a Nazi also. But my father knew all these people all his life and they turned on him overnight. They took my father first to jail where they beat him some more. Next to his jail cell was a Mrs. Kahn. They had taken her. My father describes that he was bleeding from his ears, his nose and his eyes. His face was so swollen you could hardly recognize him. He said if it had not been for this one other Nazi that had some feeling—couldn't stand to see him killed—he would not have survived.

Interviewer: That was the first night?

HedyLustig: That was the first night. Then they took my father to a concentration camp in a train. He described all this. Before, he also describes—I don't think I mentioned the fact that around Kristallnacht, our synagogue was burned in Germany and my father witnessed that. And in this letter he sent back to Germany, he mentions that he witnessed the burning of the synagogue because he went to Lara Kahn, which was our rabbi and teacher in the small town and they were no longer able to meet at the synagogue. So they met at his home and worshipped. My father made a minyan. From Lara Kahn's house, they watched the synagogue burn. And they knew who burned the synagogue. They threw out prayer books and burned the prayer books. My father described this in the letter.

Interviewer: In the letter he wrote to you all from the camp?

HedyLustig: No. We're getting a little—this letter he wrote after we came to the USA to Germany. He sent the letter to Germany in 1950. As far as I know, that letter is one of the few letters that was ever sent describing what happened and the people who'd—especially in the area that I was from, because I've talked to some Germans. The letter is on file in Darmstadt. I have a copy of the letter. But the only way I could get a copy of this letter was a German man went and copied it for me by hand. He was not able to even Photostat it. That's been—this is 1990; this was last year, 1989.

Interviewer: He sent the letter to German officials to let them know?

HedyLustig: Right. Let them know what happened and that the people that did these atrocities should be punished. Now in this letter, evidently, many of them had been punished. It was sad when you see a man that had a business in Germany and he could no longer do anything. My father, we came over, and my dad was, I would say, he was about 47, and had to start all over again. But not even in his trade or whatever he was doing.

Interviewer: How long did the voyage take, and was it a pretty modern ship? Was the voyage itself okay?

HedyLustig: The voyage was a very modern ship. I have yet to go on a cruise. I've never had a desire to go on a cruise. I don't know why. This was a modern ship. They had all the things you have on cruises nowadays—from the wonderful dinners to the parties at night. The only thing—I think we were a little bit out of New York not far from Ellis Island, and they checked everybody out and somebody broke out with measles, some small child. And we were terribly afraid that we were going to have to be put off Ellis Island. I remember we got up early that morning, crack of dawn, and this was January, and the Hudson River did have ice. I do remember that. But it was a wonderful sight. We all got up early, all the refugees. They wanted to see the statue of Liberty, which meant a great deal to everybody. We did manage—they checked everybody out and those that did have measles had to stay on Ellis Island.

Interviewer: The whole trip took days or weeks?

HedyLustig: I would say probably a couple of weeks.

Interviewer: And did you ever consider any other country besides the U.S. to come to? How did the choice—how was the choice made that this was where you were going to come, to the U.S.?

HedyLustig: Well, the only—you had to have a sponsor. There was no way out.

Interviewer: And you had a relative...?

HedyLustig: My father, many years before, had written the relatives here and said, "We want to come to the United States." Because as early as '34, we knew things were bad for the Jewish people. When they throw rocks in your windows and run after small children with butcher knives and you're not able to—nobody buys from you because you're a Jew, you decide it's time to leave. We wrote our relatives and they said, "We'll let Israel out," who is my father. "He can establish himself in the USA and then we'll bring the children and mother out." Well, my father wouldn't leave us. He said, "If one of us goes, we're all going together as a family." He didn't want to separate from us. We did get the papers. But there are many people who didn't get papers. There are many people—my uncle, one of my uncles, Uncle Benjamin from Beerfelden, he lived there till 1945 until they took him to Theresienstadt. I have nightmares thinking about what they had to live through. His children all got out. They went to Holland and other places, but then they were killed in Holland. But Uncle Benjamin was there until 1945. He and his wife were taken to Theresienstadt which the Germans, the Nazis, told them that was a resort

area with a two-bedroom apartment. Then they gassed them. I just can't fathom what my other relatives must have experienced because the times that we were there were just unbearable.

Interviewer: And they couldn't get out—was it that they couldn't because they didn't have a sponsor?

HedyLustig: They didn't have a sponsor. Now there are some Jewish people got out, say, in '35/'36, they went to South America. But they had to beg their way or be smuggled to certain parts of the world. But to go out as a family was just almost impossible.

Interviewer: How did it happen that you came to Nashville?

HedyLustig: Because that's the people that sponsored us, the May family. Part of the May family was born in the house that I was born in. The Mays had a hosiery mill here. They brought over at least, I'd say, 38 to 40 refugees from Germany. I was telling you that the Jewish people at one time were very, I don't know, very into their communities.

Interviewer: And prominent.

HedyLustig: Prominent. One of the Mays that was from my town that was born in the house that I was born in was quite well-to-do. He built a school for my community. He built a bathhouse because there are a lot of people that didn't have places they could bathe or didn't have a bath in the house. He did so many philanthropic things for this community. Then they turned on all of us.

Interviewer: So you were in New York for how long and then when did you come to Nashville?

HedyLustig: We were in New York with relatives I guess for about maybe a week or two. Then we came to Nashville and that was a frightening experience because my father nor my mother nor my brother and I could speak English.

Interviewer: Who was the specific sponsor? Which May was it?

HedyLustig: It was Jacob May that sponsored us and his brother lived in the same house that I lived in. This brother, which I forgot to mention, when we left Kristallnacht, this brother who was in his eighties, he may have been a little bit younger but to me I was a small child, he was a very elderly gentleman. They made him come downstairs. While we ran away, they choked him with a scarf of mine on our dining room chair. He didn't survive.

Interviewer: That was Abraham?

HedyLustig: That was Abraham May. Abraham May was a brother of Jacob May who lived in Nashville, Tennessee. Jacob May has two sons—Mortimer and Dan, who are no longer living. Jacob May brought us to the United States. My father was married to one of the cousins, Abraham's daughter. She passed away at childbirth. Then my father remarried my mother, who was Clara Reinheimer.

Interviewer: You took the train from New York to Nashville. I take it was still January 1939?

HedyLustig: I think it was probably closer to February, middle of February. We came by train. At '39, things were pretty poor, I guess, in this country. It was right after or during the depression. I remember we were so frightened when my cousins in New York put us on the train to go to Nashville, because that was like a two-day trip by train and none of us could speak English. We knew we had to change trains in Chattanooga. In Chattanooga we had to go to another train station. The whole trip, we couldn't think about anything but how were we're going to get on the right train to Nashville. But we made it. It was frightening going along the countryside and we were afraid because the cattle looked pretty poor at that time. Because I guess things were not real good in the USA at that time. We came to Nashville and we were met by many of our—well, the Mays met us. The Mays were wonderful to us when we got here. They gave my father a job at the factory and my mother a job at the factory. We had to start from square one. I think when a man is almost 50, it must be frightening and my mother was maybe 39. Mother was quite a bit younger than dad. She had to go to work and had never worked before in her life and leave the two little children at home. And I again became the mother because it was my job to see that my brother got ready for school. I got ready for school. I prepared many of the meals, and I did some laundry too at age eight, which was—in fact, neighbors felt so sorry for us because I used to go on a little stool outside and hang clothing up, but we were just so glad to be alive. That, to me, it seemed wonderful to be able to do these things.

Interviewer: And you could go to school finally.

HedyLustig: Finally went to school. A young man that was a teenager took me to my first day of school and I understood absolutely nothing when I got to school. I do remember it was—I can't forget the name of the book that they were reading. They put me back to the first grade and I should have been in the third or possibly going in to the fourth grade. I went in to the first grade and I remember they were reading the book called "Peter and Peggy." The teacher used to make the children write and she would say,

“Skip a line.” I remember that so vividly because I thought it was just a funny word. But within about, I’d say, three weeks, I could speak English, because children pick up the language like their mother tongue. Now had I come over later, it would have been much different.

Interviewer: You talked about how you were taken out of a normal German school and put in a Jewish school when the Nazis took power. Here, what was it like? What school was it, by the way?

HedyLustig: The name of the school was Tarbox, which is now a Senior Citizen Center.

Interviewer: Right here in Nashville.

HedyLustig: Here in Nashville, and I lived very close to the school so my brother and I could walk to school. It was a complete joy. And I remember we used to have a big hall we would meet in every day. I remember the teacher after I spoke English quite well, I got up and she wanted me to tell them the story about what happened to us in Europe. I used to get up frequently and tell of our experiences.

Interviewer: You talked about the cruelties that the people and the kids and the adults in Germany did to you even before Kristallnacht. How did the kids in Nashville react?

HedyLustig: Oh, they were wonderful. When I came to temple, there was a family that—being a refugee, I had no clothing whatsoever. One Saturday or Sunday they picked me up in a station wagon, and that probably was one of the first station wagons. And they took me—a Mrs. Star picked me up, and she took me to her home in Belle Meade and she—it must have been in June because that’s when my birthday is. She took me and she had a birthday party for me. And the kids, I had so many gifts, when she brought me home with the box of gifts, I remember my mother cried. She was overwhelmed that the people would do this for me. We also had a wonderful doctor, Lowenstein, who’s no longer living. When we used to be ill as children, he would come out and treat us and he wouldn’t take any money or pay from my parents. He said, “When your children grow up and they have children, they can pay me.” So when my kids were born, I used Dr. Lowenstein. He was a precious person because he never accepted anything from my parents and he treated us whenever we needed it, and, at that time, still made house calls.

Interviewer: When you first came, you talked about how the Mays got you guys jobs. Did you have a home to live in?

HedyLustig: First, we lived with a family here for a few days. And then they found us a furnished room. Then they found us a home. We had like a duplex on 16th Avenue South, which is now Music Row. We lived there for quite a few

years. Then my parents purchased their own home. My father always wanted to go back in the business here, and mother just didn't want him to.

Interviewer: He worked for the Mays and he earned a decent living.

HedyLustig: He worked for the Mays and then later on he went back into his own—he became a butcher at some other place. But he never did go back into business.

Interviewer: As normal as life could be for you, quickly it turned to be a normal life compared to what you'd been through?

HedyLustig: Well, it was somewhat normal but it was still not normal for a small child to have to do housework and laundry and cook. See, my mother had never worked in her life. And here she had to take a job and work in a factory and do production work. It was not normal as such. It was wonderful that we were here and we could do all these things, but we had to live a little differently from my friends. It never bothered me. I felt so lucky. My friends never treated me any different than anybody else because I didn't have the things that they had. They shared with me. That was never a problem.

Interviewer: You mentioned in Germany that you had gone to the synagogue with your parents every week, what kind of—I know they don't have Reformed Conservative, but was it a very religious one or...?

HedyLustig: It was orthodox.

Interviewer: And when you came here and got resettled, did you pick up that practice again of going?

HedyLustig: When we came here, we went to the orthodox synagogue here, which is now the Sherith Israel. We went to Hebrew school every day and my brother was Bar Mitzvah'd here. Then I went to the temple. I was confirmed at the temple, because really it was such—we didn't keep kosher anymore. We kept kosher at home. There were no kosher...Well, at that time, I think there were few kosher butchers in Nashville, but possibly it was more expensive to be kosher, so we did not keep kosher. I think we kept kosher for a short while.

Interviewer: When you look back, I think you already answered some of this question, but when you look back, what are the most dominant feelings about your resettlement? Happiness, you mentioned, joy of being alive. What else?

HedyLustig: Just the joy of being near my family. My family which was so small meant so much to me, and friends really became family. All through my life here

in Nashville, my friends are really my family. All the crises I've had, they've been right there with me. I would walk to the school in the morning, and I would look at every blade of grass. I would just appreciate every blade of grass and I loved the sunshine and I love the flowers that bloomed. It was just almost like a rebirth because I was not able to enjoy that. I was, as a very small child in Germany, when I went to the kindergarten with the nuns and went to the woods to pick blueberries. But that part of life, we were afraid to go outside. My mother was afraid to let me go be with other children because we were so afraid. She was so afraid that I would be harmed.

Interviewer: And the relationship with the May family, how did it continue? Obviously, they provided jobs, and so your mom and dad probably saw them on a daily basis.

HedyLustig: On occasions, and if there was anything really important, we would go visit them. But of course they were in a much different position than we were in, financially and—but we always kept that relationship.

Interviewer: Which Mays were it that were living in Nashville, that were running the factory, and that had contact with your family at that time?

HedyLustig: It was Jacob May was still alive, who was the brother of Abraham May that lived in my house. Also, Mortimer May and his wife [Gerty (sp) 0:56:05.5], and they had two children: Reba and Leon, who live here in Nashville now; and Dan May and his wife Dorothy. And they had two: Jack and Betsy May. They were always very gracious to us, and warm.

Interviewer: Did you ever in times with them or with—were any of their children or any of the various generations your age?

HedyLustig: Not really. When you're younger, either they were a little bit too young for me or a little bit too old for me.

Interviewer: What were your feelings about them on those occasions, special occasions, when you'd go over there or when your family was sitting around the dinner table would talk about your dad's job in the Mays, did they hold a certain aura perhaps, because of what they enabled you to have?

HedyLustig: Well, they were very special. Without them, I would not have these 50 extra years that I've had. I would have been annihilated like all my cousins and uncles and aunts. I feel that they gave us a gift of life, and nobody could be more endearing than that. I feel that I've experienced so many joys. Even the unpleasant things that I've experienced, at least I've been able to experience them. There are many people.

Interviewer: Once you were settled, did you guys ever make any effort to help get other family or friends out of Europe? Was there a way? Were there efforts made?

HedyLustig: It was too late. We were possibly the last to leave because they were putting people in concentration camps. There was no way of leaving Germany. Then they were—before, we were a problem that could leave, the Jewish problem. But then the doors were closed, the problem was no longer allowed to leave, they were annihilated. Sometimes I wonder why I survived. You get that feeling, “Why me? What am I supposed to be doing, or what? Am I supposed to be doing something special?”

Interviewer: There’s a lot of confusion in the United States and in history as to when Americans really knew what was going on. A lot of people hate Roosevelt because they think he must have known and he didn’t—et cetera, et cetera. You got over here and the war was still going on. How did you know that it was too late? Did you know that the rest were gone, that they were in camps? You knew.

HedyLustig: We knew. My grandparents lived there in—they moved to Switzerland. They knew. My relatives in France had to move to the south of France, but they survived. But we knew that the rest—we tried to get in touch with the uncles, but to no avail. So we knew they had—either they were deceased or we knew that they were unable to correspond with us. We were able to correspond with my grandparents.

Interviewer: Did you ever see your grandparents again?

HedyLustig: No, never again.

Interviewer: And that town in Germany—Breisach—where you last saw them, they left there and went to Switzerland when the war got bad? And they lived out the rest of their years in Switzerland?

HedyLustig: Yes. They went, I would say, right at ’39 when we left. They went to Switzerland and spent the rest of their lives in Switzerland without either one of their children. My mother came to the U.S. They had two daughters and a son. The son was killed in the concentration camp. The other aunt moved to England. My Aunt Rosa moved to England.

Interviewer: What is your mother’s full name? Clara...?

HedyLustig: Clara Geismar.

Interviewer: And her married name was Reinheimer.

HedyLustig: Right.

Interviewer: Do you remember your grandparents? Their [family] name was obviously was Geismar. What are their names?

HedyLustig: Correct. Uh-huh. The other grandparents, my father's parents, had long been deceased.

Interviewer: But what were the Geismars' names? Do you remember?

HedyLustig: Raphael and—unbelievable, I can't think of my grandmother's first name.

Interviewer: That's not surprising.

HedyLustig: That's unreal.

Interviewer: That was the grandfather?

HedyLustig: Yes, Raphael.

Interviewer: Okay.

HedyLustig: Bertha.

Interviewer: Bertha? Which town in Switzerland was it, where they lived out the rest of their years?

HedyLustig: Endingen.

Interviewer: Spell it if you can.

HedyLustig: E-N-D-I—I'm not sure. I'll have to sort of sit and write it in.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you ever go back to your home to Höchst?

HedyLustig: Fifty years after I left Germany, I was invited back for a commemoration of Kristallnacht. I reluctantly went. I wanted to go back and I didn't want to go back. It took me forever to make up my mind as to whether I wanted to return. Finally, I decided I would go back, and I returned to Germany in '89. Our flight to New York, we missed the plane going to Germany. And it was my decision that it was a bad omen that I would not go to Germany. This was something telling me I shouldn't go back. I called both of my children. I called my son, Ronnie, who lives in Nashville. I called my son, Bruce, who lives in Washington. I said, "I've decided to return home." I said, "I just think I'm not supposed to go over there." I think it was sort of a frightened feeling on my part about going back. They told me, they said, "Mom, I think it's important that you go back, that you deal with what you felt in your heart all these years." I went back and there were...I'm from a small community. I'd say there were maybe 40 Jewish families in my community at one time. Of course, there's not one family left. But when I returned, a gentleman met us in

Frankfurt at the airport. I went to Höchst and I had such mixed emotions, you wouldn't believe. It was terrible the way that I felt. I returned to my town and they had provided for us, for about fourteen people that returned, an inn and they had koshered it, made it kosher. So people that did keep kosher would feel comfortable. The first day I was there, we met at the Rathaus, which was the mayor's courthouse. When I went to the courthouse, we sat around a huge table. The courthouse was a pretty large meeting room and there were quite a few dignitaries. The mayor was there and he welcomed us "former citizens" of Höchst. I was just so upset, I thought, "You didn't consider me a citizen of Höchst." I looked outside, there were windows surrounding us, I looked outside and I felt so much hatred in my heart. The scenery was very much like Nashville. The terrain, I should say, there are lots of hills in the community that I was born. I could just see these hills and I could see me running through the woods when I was a small child. It took me quite a little while to feel comfortable. When they were through greeting us, there were many people that came over to me and hugged me and kissed me. I thought to myself, "Why are they doing this? I don't know these people. Were these people that harmed my father? That harmed us when we were younger?" And one lady came up to me and she said, "My parents and I lived across the street from you. We were your '[unintelligible 1:06:51.5] and I used to take care of you when you were a little girl." She hugged me and kissed me and started crying. She invited me to her house. She says, "Please, Hedy, you've got to come visit us. I want you to come over to the house." I said, "I don't know what's planned for us. We'll just have to wait and see." I really didn't feel like seeing any of those people because I knew many of those people had taken possessions, had harmed us. I was a small child. I didn't know whether this was the person that had done this to us. We did go to her house eventually. We had coffee with her, my husband and I. She told me, she said, "Hedy, I could take you to a few houses. They have some of your things." I said, "I'm not interested in things. I'm happy with all the things I have now." That wasn't important to us. It was interesting talking to some of the returnees. Some of them were from Argentina, from Buenos Aires, from Israel, from England.

Interviewer: People that grew up in the same town as you.

HedyLustig: Same town as I, went to the same schools that I went to. We were all dispersed to different areas. And if we all didn't have the common language of German, which I spoke I thought a very poor German, because I was only 8½ years old and I spoke the German of probably an 8½ to 9-year old child. I knew none of the big words. But I did express myself. They took us to a couple of synagogues that were now like museums. We were taken to all the surrounding towns to be welcomed by mayors. They named, while I was over there, a street after the rabbi

that was our rabbi in Germany. They had a dedication. They had a town meeting while I was over there. And I'd say 300 people showed up or more. I got up and spoke a few words. There were several people that were there. There was the mayor. There were some clergymen. There was a gentleman from Israel that had come to Germany. He had been to Germany before. So he was at the head, on the podium line. So I got up and I told them what happened to me when I was a small child. How we ran through the woods, how we never had a comfortable day that I can remember. I got up and I said, "I speak a very poor German." I said, "I speak the German of an 8½ to a 9-year-old child. I said it's nobody's fault but yours." They listened. Afterwards, a man came over to me. He's an architect. He ran over to me and he said, "Who did these things to you? Who harmed you and your family?" I said, "I'm too young to really know." I said, "I know there were people that did it." So I said, "You'll have to ask Elsa Frank." She is a refugee from Germany. She came over probably in '32 or '33. She also lives in Nashville. And she had been back to Germany many times. I said, "You'll have to ask Mrs. Frank." I said, "She's old enough to know who they were." So she met with this gentleman and some of the biggest Nazis were his parents. They were the beginning of the Nazi party in our community. Well, I think he knew this all along. She had dinner with him and the granddaughter. His mother was still alive but he didn't invite her over. She told him all the things that they did as Nazis. He said, "My daughter had a feeling that my parents were some of the biggest Nazis." The grandchildren just won't have anything to do with the grandmother. While over there, we were also invited to speak to schoolchildren and the teachers. I do think we made an impression on these children. Most of them were high school and probably 11th, 12th grade, 9th graders. They asked Bible questions and were very interested. They had never seen a Jewish person before, because there were no more in Höchst. There are some Jews still living in Germany however.

Interviewer: But there were none in your hometown when you went back?

HedyLustig: No. Not a one.

Interviewer: I've got to ask this. Obviously, you had mixed feelings during that visit. There were probably people that you really sensed were genuine.

HedyLustig: It took me a long time to realize they were genuine.

Interviewer: Do you still think you're bitter? Not just at them and at Germany, but did you see a side of human beings that maybe changed you?

HedyLustig: I feel I'm really glad that I went. I know there are still lots of bad things going on there because they told me that we, as survivors, have to speak

out on the subject because they said now there are the Turks who are the minority there that could have problems. I think it's very important that we speak out. I felt a lot of these people that helped us while we were there were people in their forties and say, 45, 46. They were not born some of them. They genuinely want to know what happened. In fact, one man has written a book about my hometown or has done a lot of research. I have a book that he wrote. He traced down, he and Mr. [Haffelbach (sp) 1:14:52.5]. Reiner Guth wrote this book. This is my synagogue on the book that was burned. While I was in Höchst, they put up a stone for our synagogue. They had a big ceremony at night. They had a choir singing. The mayor spoke. That was—I shook so hard. I can't tell, you my husband was really concerned about me. It was such an emotional evening for me. There were people that came over and just hugged me for no reason at all. We were surprised the mayor didn't know how many people would show up, but there was a mass of people out there watching the ceremony. It was a really emotional evening. But I do feel the ones that I met anyway—of course I only met a few people—I felt they were sincere in what they were doing. They needed to repent, I guess. One man that lived across the street from us, we went to his house and we had a cup of coffee. We had to go to the cemetery. We were invited to go to the cemetery and look at the cemetery that was left. When we went there, he took us. He's a man about 66, 67. I'm sure he was in the war. He kept hugging me and crying and he kept saying, "Hedy, we had to do it. We couldn't help ourselves." He said, "You know, they would have taken us and send us to the concentration camp." In fact, the day they took my dad to the concentration camp, a man across the street yelled—a non-Jewish person—"Why are you taking Mr. Reinheimer to the concentration camp?" They took him also. So this gentleman took us to the cemetery in Höchst. When he left, he hugged and cried like a little baby. So they have a lot of feelings that they have to let loose. I think some of them were genuinely sincere about their feelings. But there are still some there that are not too happy with the Jewish people, because they have to watch the cemetery that's left very closely because, on occasion, it's destroyed again.

Interviewer: Mark, we're pretty much done except for—Pick up the big one for example and tell us, what is this to you? What does it mean to you?

HedyLustig: Well, this piece of crystal was one of the things that was thrown out of our home. Most of them were destroyed. This one survived and I've had somebody file this down a little bit so I wouldn't cut myself on it. But I want this to be in my home at all times and I want my children and my grandchildren, I want it passed on for generations. I don't want them ever to forget what happened to the Jewish people in Germany. I think

we have to be aware that it's happened too many times to us. I have a little piece here that...

Interviewer: Hedy, talk to me, if you would, as opposed to the cam. What's that?

HedyLustig: This is a little vase. A Mr. Oppenheimer gave me this vase a long—quite a few weeks before we left because he wanted me to remember that family. Well, it was partially destroyed. You can see the little—but there are so few things that were left. Those that were not broken or destroyed, they were taken by the Nazis. I think I have like three pieces of crystals at home, stemware, that was left intact.

Interviewer: And the other piece also...?

HedyLustig: It's also, these are just reminders. This is just chipped on the ends but just reminders that it did happen. My children were schooled with this. Not until they were old enough to know what happened, because I just thought it was not important until they could understand what happened to us. So it's something I never want to—I can never forget it. It's like a bad dream. Sometimes I think, "You know, how could anything so terrible happen to a people? My father never did anything wrong. What's bad about a young child? How can anybody hurt a young child? You just have to be a tyrant to do that." So these things are very precious to me.

Interviewer: And speaking of being a child, show us your passport and your picture and what—when you opened that up, what's the first thing you see there?

HedyLustig: The red means "Juden"—"Jew." Each passport had "Jew" on it, if you were Jewish.

Interviewer: If you were lucky enough to get one.

HedyLustig: Absolutely. And this—my mother and father before—that are on the passport. I do remember going for the passport and we were really—we had to go to Stuttgart. We were quite frightened that we would not pass all their qualifications. That's my brother and I.

Interviewer: Hold it if you will.

HedyLustig: Hmm-hmm. When we came over.

Interviewer: There's a stamp on the right that says, "January 5th, 1939."

HedyLustig: That's when we got the passport.

Interviewer: That was when you got the passport? It was after Kristallnacht but before...

HedyLustig: No. Evidently, this is when we left Germany, I would think. Yes.

Interviewer: I see.

HedyLustig: That's when we left. This has been back to Germany.

Interviewer: You took that?

HedyLustig: Yes. Well, this was sent back and they have things in the book about our passport. I sent them many things.

Interviewer: Can you hold that up and leaf through it again?

HedyLustig: What? The front?

Interviewer: Yeah. Just, yeah.

HedyLustig: This passport is over 50 years old.