

Transcript:

Helene Rothschild

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Interviewer: Hello, Helene. This is Helene Rothschild who arrived in Nashville in 1937. The interviewer is Rosemary May Arnold. As I see here, you want to tell me a little bit about yourself. I've known you for quite a while, but I really don't know your story at all. You want to tell me about yourself?

Helene Rothschild: Well, do you want me to tell you since I came to the United States or before?

Interviewer: No, before, where did you live and how did you live in Europe? Where do you come from?

Helene Rothschild: Okay. I came from Czechoslovakia, the Carpathian section of Czechoslovakia. And I was born in a little village which was called [Sagano (sp), 0:00:50.4]. It's [Sagano (sp) 0:00:52.8], I would say in Bohemia. And the village was located about 6 miles away from the capital of the Carpathian section...oh, I would say 6 miles...I mentioned already, 6 miles. And that's where I went most of my schooling. I did my schooling over there in that little city at that time. Maybe, the city was about 25 thousand, population. And after I finished the, I would say, like high school and then the business college, I went to another city called [unintelligible 0:01:41.7] and stayed there about a year or two. I wanted to get into the Teacher College, but by then already, Jewish children, girls or boys, were not accepted to any Teacher College because it was hard to get in into any Teacher College at that time already. So, my brother sent me papers to come to the United States which was in 1935, I think. The first papers I received was in 1935 and one of my uncles signed the affidavit. At that time, you had to sign an affidavit that you come to United States. The United States would not have to support you, that the family would have to support you, to that effect. So, my uncle who signed the affidavit was not accepted because he was already too old, so then my brother sent me another set of papers beginning of 1937. And of course, the [unintelligible 0:02:56.6] went in, too, trying to get everything all fixed so I could come out. And unexpectedly, actually, I received a letter from home that I should come back there to...I was called to Prague to their consulate, to the American consulate for an interview and they will approve whether I could come out or not. At that time, I was very nearsighted and I was

wearing glasses, very thick glasses, I remember. And they didn't think that the consulate would approve me, but anyway, I went and one of my brothers came with me who actually went to concentration camp during the war, but later he survived. And we came to Prague and I was approved, because after taking an intelligence test, they passed me because I was really good in reading, arithmetic and all that. So they passed me and I came without even having to go back to my home. Right away, I just boarded a ship and came to the United States.

Interviewer: Immediately.

Helene Rothschild: I was still...but that was about the last ship or something, coming over from Europe.

Interviewer: Where did you board the ship?

Helene Rothschild: At that time, in 1937...I boarded the ship in Prague, in Hamburg.

Interviewer: In Hamburg?

Helene Rothschild: Hamburg, yeah. That's right, at Hamburg, Germany, I had to go through Germany.

Interviewer: 'Cause I know Prague did not have a port or anywhere in Czechoslovakia.

Helene Rothschild: No they didn't, you're right. No, I went...in fact, we stopped in Berlin. We had to...before coming to Hamburg. And being a young girl at that time, I didn't realize how really bad the situation was already for the Jewish people at that time. I went out and took a walk by myself in Germany. I remember the city itself, Berlin, was so quiet. It seemed like there was no traffic whatsoever and I could understand why a big city like that, people were not going or coming. It was really remarkable. So, but anyway, it was lucky for me that no one stopped me, to find out that I was Jewish because they probably would have, who knows, would have taken me in to jail or whatever. So, anyway, I came back to the hotel and then two days later we came to Hamburg and got on the ship.

Interviewer: Did you travel by yourself?

Helene Rothschild: Yes. I did travel by myself.

Interviewer: And what about the rest of your family? Your parents?

Helene Rothschild: Well, my parents were left behind. I had two brothers and three sisters who were left behind. I had a brother and sister who had been in the United States for some time. My oldest sister came over in 1922. And her name is Sadie Davis. She still lives in Mt. Pleasant, Tennessee. And my brother, Jack Schlanger, he came over about two years later, maybe two or three years later after she came out, and he lived here in Nashville. Most of the time from beginning I think he lived some place in Scranton, Pennsylvania. We had some family over there. But most of the time, he lived here in Nashville. He worked for an uncle. His name was Leopold Jacobson. He was in a meat market. And then, he went and worked with Steiner Liff for a few years until he got married, and he married Jenny Klein from Russellville, Kentucky, and they lived in Kentucky for a few years. He bought a...I think they were in scrap iron business and also automobile supplies.

Interviewer: What about yourself? Any of your siblings stayed behind in Europe when you left?

Helene Rothschild: As I said, my two brothers and another two brothers—

Interviewer: Oh, there were two more brothers?

Helene Rothschild: Yeah, two more brothers, William and Aaron, who stayed behind and three sisters who were...My oldest sister's name was [unintelligible 0:08:10.7], in Jewish, Gertrude, and my two younger sisters, one's name was Ester and [unintelligible 0:08:20.2] in Jewish. I don't know what would have been her English name here. And in fact, I had some of the pictures here.

Interviewer: And they did not come to America?

Helene Rothschild: No, they could not—

Interviewer: Do you know what happened to them?

Helene Rothschild: No, they couldn't come over because already in 1939, two years after I came over, the war broke out.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helene Rothschild: And everything was closed up. Nobody could come or go.

Interviewer: Do you know what happened to them?

Helene Rothschild: Well, they all were taken to concentration camps and they were all deaths.

Interviewer: Your parents and your sisters?

Helene Rothschild: Well, my father got ill. He always had problems with...it was like emphysema or something. He was smoking a lot, and so he died in a local concentration camp. It was in that city that I told you I was going to school to.

Interviewer: Like a ghetto?

Helene Rothschild: Yeah, like a ghetto, yeah, and so, he was still buried. I understand one of my friends said that they could not put him in a regular casket. They only put him in a sheet, just put him in the ground, that way. And in fact, in 1986, I went to Europe, and I thought that maybe they will let me go to my village where I was born and I went to see his grave. But my mother and sisters, they were all taken.

Interviewer: And you never were able to get any information as to where they were taken or where they ended up?

Helene Rothschild: No, no. The only thing, the only information that I got is from my brothers and my sister-in-laws who went through concentration camps and they said that they were taken to Dachau, I believe.

Interviewer: They ended up in Dachau.

Helene Rothschild: The Buchen...no, the other one.

Interviewer: Buchenwald?

Helene Rothschild: Buchenwald. Buchenwald. And I believe that's where they were.

Interviewer: That's all the information you have on them?

Helene Rothschild: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: You want to show the pictures of your sister?

Helene Rothschild: Well, this is my older sister. This picture was probably taken in 19...I was here about 2 years, maybe, '39 or 1940. And she had at that time already four children and probably by the time she was taken to concentration camp, she may have had another child or two. And my two younger sisters...This is Ester and [unintelligible 0:11:28.6]. They were taken...actually, the whole family went together.

Interviewer: They went as a family?

Helene Rothschild: Yeah, they all went together, and they could have probably survived, but they were so close to my oldest sister and they were told that if anybody have children, they would take them, separate...they would not bother them, they would not give them hard labor, and so they went and claimed my oldest sister's children that they were their children. They took hold of them.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helene Rothschild: Each sister got hold of one or two children and said that that was their children, and so, they sent them right away to the cleansing camps where they cleansed them and put them in the gas chamber. And, this is my mother, she may have been, at that time...this is the only picture we have of her. This was taken...I was still home probably around 1935 or something like that. So, she probably was around 42 years old in that picture. She may look older. That's it.

Interviewer: You came to America in 1937?

Helene Rothschild: I came in 1937.

Interviewer: Did you come immediately to Nashville?

Helene Rothschild: I arrived here on July 4th, yeah, July...on July 3rd or July 4th. That's right. To Nashville and my sister, who's been here quite a few years already, she met me and she said her birthday is on July 5th. She said, "This is the nicest gift I got, to get my sister here."

Interviewer: You were fortunate, you had a brother here and a sister.

Helene Rothschild: Yeah. I had a brother and a sister and I had my mother's family. My mother's brothers all settled here in Nashville excepting one who lived in Memphis, Tennessee. By the time I came out, I still had I believe...let's see, three or four uncles living. She had...I believe, two uncles were already dead at that time, but I still had many uncles left and I stayed with one of my uncles. And, the first year, of course, I couldn't talk English. So, I was going to night school to learn the English language. I met quite a few of the German refugees that came over at that time.

Interviewer: Yeah. Did you get any further education here or did you start working right away?

Helene Rothschild: Yes, I did have to get more education for one reason is that I had to go, well, more or less just really learn the language, learn the grammar and spelling.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helene Rothschild: I was working already at May Hosiery Mill and I wanted to get to work in the office so I went to into comptometry at that time. Comptometry was being used in offices, the payroll offices, and I did very well, and so, they took me into the office. Then in 1941, I left Nashville; I went to Chicago, and I got a job as an assistant bookkeeper there. And it was a hardware place, and about a year or two years later, my uncle passed away and my aunt was left by herself so I came and stayed with her. I came back to Nashville and stayed with her for about a year. And I got my job back at May Hosiery Mill in the office and then in 1944, I went back to Chicago, and I got my old job back again there. So, I stayed on that job until I got married, and then after I got married, we bought a little store in Gary, Indiana, because that's where my husband was living. A grocery store. And a few months later, I don't know, one of my cousins was leaving for California and she said, "You want to come with us?" So we sold the store and we went to California and lived there 12 years, Los Angeles.

Interviewer: Was your husband born in America?

Helene Rothschild: No. He's also from Budapest, Hungary, but he came over in 1929, I believe.

Interviewer: So, quite a while.

Helene Rothschild: Well, it's about, like eight years before I did.

Interviewer: Now, when you were still in Europe, how did the anti-Semitism affect you in the small town you lived in? Did you have any problems there?

Helene Rothschild: Well, as far as...of course, there was always...children would always be kind of mean and some of the peasants, they would always make remarks about the Jews. I remember one incident that was about two years before I came over to the United States. I went to visit my sister who lived in another village about, I would say, about maybe 15 kilometers away from our village. And her oldest

daughter came home one day crying badly and I said, "What's wrong with you?" And she said the teacher was very mean to her. I say, "Why is she mean to you? Aren't you doing okay at school?" She said, "Yeah, I tried to do all right." So, I said, "Well, let me go and talk to her." I may have been at that time already about 17 or 18 years old. So, I came to her school and I said to the teacher, "May I talk to you?" And she said, "No, just wait until I get finished." And she let me sit there in the back. So, after the teaching was over, and I talked to her, I said, "Why are you mean to my niece?" I understand that she is doing pretty good at school. She said, "And who are you?" I said, "I'm her aunt. I told you, she's my niece." And she looked at me kind of mean and she said, "Why is it your business whether I'm mean to her or not?" I said, "She's just a child." I said, "Why do you have to be mean to her?" She said, "Well, she is Jewish, isn't she?" I said, "What does that have to do with that?" I said, "She's a human being." I said, "Why do you have to be mean to her?" And she said, "Well, she's just Jewish." She says, "And if I want to be mean to her, I will be mean to her." She was just...she did not hide her anti-Semitism.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helene Rothschild: Let me put it that way. Then, at that time already, some of the people knew already what was going on. We were kind of ignorant that day, the truth, my family. And maybe because I was still young and I didn't pay much attention to what's going on. But I remember another incident. We had a good friend who used to come to our place the summertime since we had that resort place. She was married to a Bohemian fellow. He was a nice fellow. He was working for the government. And she was Jewish, but he was not. And used to be very nice and every time I would go and visit her when I was in the city, because I was going to school there, and she used to be very nice and receptive and friendly. But one day, when I saw her on the street and I said hello to her, and I started walking with her, she's made a remark to me. She said, "Helene," she says, "I like you. I don't have anything against you." But she says, "I'd rather if I'm not seen with you anymore." I said, "Why? What's going on?" She said, well, you know, she said, "I'm Jewish and I don't want him to know that I am Jewish." She said, "You know what's going on." I'd said...I just was ignorant about it. But later on, I could understand why she did what she did.

Interviewer: But you actually...we were just talking about how the population at large treated you in 1935, '36, '37 in Czechoslovakia. Were there any restrictions put on you by the government?

Helene Rothschild: No, not by the government, no. The government I think almost at the last, they were just like the American government.

Interviewer: So, there was no—

Helene Rothschild: There is...no—

Interviewer: —problems as far as—

Helene Rothschild: No—

Interviewer: —where you could go or where you could not go?

Helene Rothschild: The only restriction that I could see was at schools. They would not accept Jewish boys or girls to a higher education. They were...as I said teacher colleges or—

Interviewer: Was this all over Czechoslovakia at that time that Jews could not get higher education or was it just—

Helene Rothschild: I really don't know about the whole country, but in our section, it was very hard for a hard for a Jewish person, for a Jewish girl or boy, to get into a Teacher College or to any university.

Interviewer: Like lawyer or doctor.

Helene Rothschild: Right, right. It's very, very hard to get into...especially if they knew that you were Jewish and by the time in 1937, I suppose completely stopped to, no Jews were permitted at all. In fact, I took an exam and I know I passed it very well to the Teacher College, and they told me that I did not pass and I said, "I'd like to see my grade. I'd like to see the paper," because I knew every question that they asked. Well, that I answered it correctly, and they wouldn't show it to me. They just...So and I know that it was very hard for a Jewish girl or boy, so I was

happy to get out there because there was no chance for a Jewish girl or boy to get any place.

Interviewer: When did this start?

Helene Rothschild: It probably started around 1935, '36, and as Hitler came in, especially the longer he stayed in Germany and things started getting worse and worse for the Jewish people. We were in business, and actually, we did not feel, as I said, I don't know...although my mother used to tell me because I was not home, but she used to tell me that business is not as good as it used to be. People don't come around as much in the summertime as they used to, but as I said, I was young and I didn't pay much attention.

Interviewer: And you contributed to the fact that you were Jewish, or just that business was off?

Helene Rothschild: Well, it probably contributed that business was just tough. I'd never thought. It just never entered my mind that being Jewish...because they said they...they really can't believe then, and the peasants always used to make remarks. Sometimes, my mother used to always explain that maybe it was just jealousy or whatever. But one thing that I know that all this condition coming about was not surprising for one reason is that the Jewish were despised because the priests and the ministers in Europe used to all the time preach that Jews killed Jesus Christ. And for that reason, they should be despised and they...I don't know they just made up all kinds of lies against Jews, that they were dishonest, they were cheaters. They were this, they were that. They were taking advantage of the Christians. So, when this condition came, and they came to take, pick them up, there was no problem. Nobody defended them. Nobody...in fact, they were glad that—

Interviewer: To be rid of...were you an observing family religion-wise?

Helene Rothschild: Well, yes, we were an observing family. My father and mother were very observant. For one reason, I mean, we...most of the Jews around there were the Orthodox Jews. We didn't have Reform. The only thing we knew, it's Orthodox, and they came to keep Saturday Shabbat. We were very strict about it, but—

Interviewer: Did you have a synagogue right in the village?

Helene Rothschild: No, we did not have a synagogue in our village, but in the neighboring village, my brother used to walk there on Saturday. And when it came to the holidays, to the high holidays, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, they used to go to the city; there was a big synagogue and they used to go to that synagogue for the high holidays. But during the Saturdays, during the year, they were just going into the neighboring village and I think they were praying in a private home.

Interviewer: Oh—

Helene Rothschild: All the Jews used to get together.

Interviewer: About how many Jewish families were in the town?

Helene Rothschild: In our village, we only had three Jewish families. One, the Jewish family that I know, the name was Mammerstein. They had about four children, four or five I believe. I can't remember exactly. And I believe they were all taken away to except one boy we met here. He lives in Chicago. He changed his name from Mammerstein to Mashtik. And he's still in Chicago. He married a girl from Czechoslovakia, from one of the Slovak counties there. And the third family; their name was I think, Wolff, and they didn't have any children, but they were bringing up I think a nephew. I think it was a nephew. And they were bringing him up, but they didn't have any of their own family and I really don't know what happened to them.

Interviewer: Don't even know what happened to them—

Helene Rothschild: No.

Interviewer: —whether they got out or not.

Helene Rothschild: No, I really don't know. Now, the neighboring village, they had six or seven Jewish families.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helene Rothschild: And I think some of them...so I then came to the United States, some of them I think there are two boys that I know of still they live in there, I mean in New York. And some of them maybe one or two maybe went out to Israel after the war, but most of them were done away with.

Interviewer: And nobody who stayed in Europe in the two villages you know have survived?

Helene Rothschild: No, I don't think so. Nobody lives there because—

Interviewer: Not to your knowledge.

Helene Rothschild: No, no. In fact, my brother, William, he passed away about a year and a half ago. He went back after the concentration camp to the village, to our village, and he didn't find anyone, that he knows of, and didn't hear of anyone and the Russians were coming in and in fact, he got into prison there and he was just lucky to escape from the prison. He paid off somebody and was able to escape.

Interviewer: Now, since he is no longer alive and his son is not alive anymore either, you want to tell a little bit about his story?

Helene Rothschild: Whose life?

Interviewer: William's.

Helene Rothschild: William? Well, William and Aaron, they're both my older brothers. William passed away as I said. Aaron, I still have a living brother, Aaron. I had three brothers.

Interviewer: One of your brothers you said survived the war.

Helene Rothschild: Two brothers.

Interviewer: Two survived the war?

Helene Rothschild: Yeah, because, Jack, my oldest brother came out to the United States way before the war.

Interviewer: Right. I'm talking about the one—

Helene Rothschild: And William and Aaron, yeah, they survived the war and they—

Interviewer: Where were they during the war?

Helene Rothschild: They were in labor camps. They were in concentration camp. One of my brothers was already in front of the firing squad. They were going to shoot him, and I don't know. I guess just by luck or God's help, whatever you may call it, somehow—

Interviewer: They survived.

Helene Rothschild: He survived. And—

Interviewer: But you don't really know their story as to exactly where they were and how they were liberated or any of these things. You don't about it?

Helene Rothschild: Not exactly, but I believe you probably have it on file because...didn't you interview, I believe Ester Schlanger, who is my sister-in-law, William's—

Interviewer: Yeah, but she might have—

Helene Rothschild: Yeah, she probably knows more about it. And my brother Aron Schlanger he's still living and probably he should maybe be interviewed he would tell you something.

Interviewer: Well, if he was...he was in the camps?

Helene Rothschild: Oh yeah. He was in labor camp.

Interviewer: I don't think we were aware of that. I have to double check that.

Helene Rothschild: Yeah. He definitely was in camps. He is the one that was telling me that he was almost shot, yeah.

Interviewer: Because we would like to hear his story also.

Helene Rothschild: Yeah. Well, anyway, William and Aaron, William came out 10 years after I came out, in 1947. Aaron came out 1948. They were both liberated and went to Italy. They stayed in Italy. I think Aaron stayed there. And in fact, Aaron got married in Italy.

Interviewer: Oh—

Helene Rothschild: Yeah. And William got married in Prague. That's Prague. And so, after they came out here, they both were working for a while and then they went into business together. They have a scrap iron business in Columbia and thank God they did very well. They prospered and—

Interviewer: And you prospered, too. You've been doing very well, too.

Helene Rothschild: I thank God. I can't complain. Put some money into real estate. I had a little money but real estate was very reasonable at that time, yeah. And so—

Interviewer: And then, you, too, can say, "America has been good to me."

Helene Rothschild: Yes, America has been good to all of us. I would say not just to me or to my immediate family but to everyone else. Yes, I could say that. So, we were just lucky I guess to wind up here in the United States. I don't know how the people did, when they went to Canada or to Israel, but I think everybody that came to the United States and was willing to work hard, they did okay.

Interviewer: Most, most—

Helene Rothschild: And I think—

Interviewer: Some did not. Some didn't.

Helene Rothschild: Some did not.

Interviewer: But most did.

Helene Rothschild: But then if you had your help and you were willing to work—

Interviewer: You could. There was no question about that.

Helene Rothschild: And you did not throw away your money, but—

Interviewer: Exactly.

Helene Rothschild: —were thrifty about it and...

Interviewer: Well, Helene, thank you very much for telling us about your story and good luck for the future.

Helene Rothschild: Well, I thank you for being able to tell the story, and I hope that no one will ever have to tell a story like that anymore.

Interviewer: Well, that's why we cannot afford to forget.