INTERVIEW WITH FELICIA BROH

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HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is an interview with Felicia Broh for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust History Project by David Zarkin at Mrs. Broh’s home in St. Paul on April 12, 1983.

Mrs. Broh, I’m very glad to have this opportunity to speak with you today for the Holocaust Oral History Project. Could you please tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name if it is different.

A: My name is Felicia Broh. My Jewish name is Faigel Broh, if you mean the Hebrew.

Q: When were you born?

A: May 13, 1904.

Q: In what town and country were you born?

A: I was born in Germany. The town was Breslau.

Q: And that was always known as Breslau?

A: Breslau.

Q: What were your parents’ names?

A: Carl Pinchas and Lena Pinchas.

Q: What was your mother’s maiden name?

A: Mailish.

Q: And your grandparents’ names? Do you remember them?

A: My mother’s side was Mailish.

Q: Do you remember their first names?

A: My grandfather’s name was Isaac and my grandmother was Frederica, Freida.

Q: Where were your grandparents born, do you know?

A: My grandfather died at the age of 84 in Germany. That’s what I know. I don’t know when they were born.

Q: Do you know if they were born in Germany?

A: Yes. They were born in Posen. Belonged to Germany at that time.

Q: And your parents, where were they born?

A: My parents were born in Posen.

Q: What kind of work did your parents do?

A: My father was a tailor, my mother was a housewife.

Q: In the home, what languages were spoken?

A: German only.

Q: Was your family secular or religious in practice or orientation?

A: They were Conservative.

Q: Did you observe, then, the holidays?

A: Oh, very much.

Q: And the dietary laws?

A: Very much.

Q: Were they Zionists? Or Hasidic?

A: No, not that I know.

Q: Did you receive any formal Jewish education?

A: Oh, yes - in Berlin. I was a baby as my parents moved to Berlin, and I went to the religious school there.

Q: For how many years about?

A: About four years. Then we moved to another street, and it was too far away, and so I couldn’t go anymore.

Q: From approximately the 1930s to 1941, what local, national, or international events were you aware of?

A: We left Germany in ‘39. And still we, at that time, were German.

Q: So from about 1933 to 1939, do you remember any of the political events that were going on in Germany or...

A: Oh, yes. I do. It started already in 1925, the organization of Hitler. Or maybe earlier even. And they had some location where they had meetings and we were a little bit scared already in 1925. We read papers about them, and we didn’t know what to do, but still we thought it never would come out like it did.

Q: What kind of things were you reading in the papers?

A: My son was born in 1930, and we lived in Berlin. Across the street was a meeting place for the Nazis. And we couldn’t understand what he (Hitler) talked about, but something was wrong. Mostly we heard everything then later on radio, that they were against the Jews. It’s hard to explain. We noticed something was wrong there, so we were a little bit upset about their doings. They started to close many stores, made signs, “Not for Jews,” even on benches when you wait for the streetcar.

Q: About what year was this?

A: It was about 1935, already - ‘35 and ‘36 and ‘37. They painted signs on the benches, “Not for Jews.” Then we couldn’t go to some restaurants: “Forbidden for Jews.” And they had many meetings on the street, even.

Q: When you’re talking about “they,” you’re talking about the...

A: The rebellion - against the jews.

Q: Did you and other people in the Jewish community get together and discuss?

A: Yes! We did! And we didn’t know what to do. Shall we stay? Shall we go? But still, we didn’t believe that it will come worse. My husband was working...

Q: What kind of work was he doing?

A: He was in iron and metal business. And they took away the company and somebody else lead the company. He was an employee from the company, a plain employee, and to cover that the company wasn’t Jewish, they put him on the top as a boss. It was just a plain employee.

Q: One of your husband’s employees, then.

A: That’s right. He was a friend of my husband, and his mother has hidden my husband for at least one week in their apartment, because they pick up all the men.

Q: What year was that?

A: That was about 1938.

Q: About what time of the year was it, when your husband felt that he needed to go into hiding?

A: It was fall, I believe. And he was hidden there, because they picked up already the men to the concentration camp. One word to the other, everyone listened what’s happened, so his friend - or his boss now - said to him, “Better you go to my mother’s house and stay there for a while until it gets a little bit calm.” And always when I heard some steps to come to the apartment, I was so nervous. My son was at that time about 7, 8 years, and I told him to be quiet - don’t say anything. But the week came by, and then my brother-in-law, my husband’s brother, decided not to stay any more in Berlin. He says, “There’s something going on.” We were there as the Crystal Night were there.

Q: Tell us about that.

A: The Crystal Night, they damaged any kind of store and synagogues.

Q: Who were the perpetrators of that?

A: The Nazis. Really, it was trouble! We couldn’t go on the street. it’s hard to remember. It was terrible! And then after the Crystal Night my husband’s brother and we, decided we have to go out. And we tried everything. Meanwhile, a brother-in-law of ours was in a concentration camp.

Q: Which one?

A: I believe in Buchenwald. And he came out, from some Jewish organization. They transferred him to Bolivia. His wife couldn’t go with him. She had a ticket already for Bolivia - both of them - and we begged the organization, begged my sister-in-law, to stay home and give the ticket to another fellow in the concentration camp, otherwise he’d get killed, and so she did. And after one year, she could go to Bolivia, too, but what they did in Germany to her, we don’t know. This is my husband’s sister. She went by boat to Bolivia, and my brother-in-law wrote us that my sister-in-law came very disturbed from the boat. And after three weeks, she died in Bolivia. And another sister of my husband, she was a nurse, and she took her own life as they wanted to pick her up.

Q: About what year was that, do you remember?

A: That was in 1940. Already people got picked up. She heard that they will pick her up, and she didn’t go.

Q: You were living in Berlin then, right?

A: No, we left on April 20, 1939.

Q: We’ll cover that period later, but now let’s talk about before 1939. You were living in Berlin with your husband and your son, and you had a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law there?

A: Yes. My parents, too.

Q: What became of them?

A: My parents got killed. They couldn’t get out. My brother-in-law, my sister-in-law and we, we went to Shanghai.

Q: Did you have any other relatives in Germany who were living in Berlin or outside of Berlin?

A: Yes. I had another aunt in Berlin and a cousin who got killed. And I had a cousin of my mother...

Q: Do you know the circumstances of how that happened?

A: I got just a letter from my aunt and my uncle. My aunt wrote me they know that they get picked up, and this is the last that I heard. My mother’s sister, my father’s brother, and two aunts, and one uncle and all the cousins - the whole family got killed. We were in Shanghai, and my aunt wrote me that, “They picked up everyone and certainly they will pick us, too.” And my husband’s family, too.

Q: Let’s take a look at that period then, up until 1939 in Berlin, and see if you can recall any other events or anything that happened with your family, and what your family was doing during this time. What was everyday life like in Berlin during this time? What were you doing?

A: I got married in ‘25. I was working and my husband was working.

Q: Did you read in the newspaper or hear on the radio about the Nuremberg Laws? How did they affect your family at the time?

A: We listened all the time to the radio. We wanted to know what’s happened. And the more we heard, the more nervous we got. We had the privilege to go out, and we went. We didn’t hear much then, in Shanghai.

Q: Did you leave Germany before the outbreak of the war?

A: Yes. While we were on the boat, the war started.

Q: How did it come about? What were the discussions, and who was involved in deciding to go to Shanghai?

A: We tried everything to go out. My husband and his brother wanted to go to Holland. To America, we couldn’t go, because the quota was. We didn’t have an affidavit for America. Then we tried Bolivia. We couldn’t go to Bolivia. My brother-in-law was in Bolivia and he told us to write, but we had to have so much money for Bolivia, and we were a big family, my brother-in-law, with the children, we couldn’t afford it. Then one cousin says they are going to China, and we said, “Maybe we can go, too.” He had connections with a travel agency. And by accident, two couples couldn’t go who were booked for China, and he called us right away and said, “Go right away to the travel agency and try to get in!” We were lucky enough to get the place. We were lucky enough to get booked for a Japanese boat.

Q: Sailing from where?

A: We took the train from Berlin to Italy, and then from Italy we got the boat to Shanghai.

Q: About when was it that you booked passage with the travel agency?

A: We left July, and we booked about May in ‘39.

Q: At that time was there restrictions on Jewish people leaving?

A: No, it wasn’t, but so many people booked for any kind of place where they could go, so therefore it was hard to get in.

Q: Did you have to leave a lot of your personal effects behind?

A: Yes. My parents were still there in Berlin as we left. They couldn’t go with us. We left them our stuff. We couldn’t sell it anymore, because everything was in hurry. Whatever they could sell for very cheap, they sold it, but mostly they couldn’t do it. They left everything. Then, in ‘42, my father died for grief - suddenly. My mother got picked up in ‘42 to Poland.

Q: Were they in a ghetto at this time, or do you know where they were living?

A: It was a concentration camp. We got from the Red Cross a letter that my mother got picked up, to Poland. And all my relatives, too. I got it from Warsaw, the Red Cross letter. This is the only note I got.

Q: So you went by boat to Shanghai, and it was kind of by chance then, because there was a space available. You didn’t have any relatives or anything like that in Shanghai, did you?

A: No.

Q: Did you have to have any false identity or papers?

A: No. There the committee, the Hilfsverein - did you hear about the Hilfsverein?

Q: Tell me about that.

A: They took care of all our people who came from all over, from Vienna and from Germany and Poland - wherever they came. They built up a committee, and we got support from them as we came.

Q: Was this a Jewish organization?

A: Jewish organization, yes. In Shanghai. It was a Jewish committee built mostly from Russian Jewish people. The Russian people were there already - Russian Jews. They came when the Revolution was in Russia. There were lots of Russian Jews in Shanghai, and they built a committee, and took some of the people who came from all over in, too. And they supported us with homes in schools. There was empty schools, and we could sleep in there. They built like in military, the beds, one down and one up. They put us there.

Q: Like bunk beds.

A: Like bunk beds, right. And were now of course lots of people in one room.

Q: How many, do you think?

A: Oh, sometimes 30.

Q: And how long did you live in the school then?

A: In the school we lived a few weeks, until my brother-in-law found some house. The Chinese people, they left some houses, and my brother-in-law found a houses.

Q: Where did the Chinese people go?

A: In another town. it was still war on in China. So we had a room, by my brother-in-law, and he took some other people in, in one room.

q: About how many people in one room?

A: It was just one room, one family. there was a bedroom, and kitchen, and toilet and everything - in one room. But we were then not so many people like in the school.

Q: During this time, when you were living with your family in this house in Shanghai, were you hearing any news about the war? Did you know what was happening in Europe?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: How did you hear about these things?

A: From letters we got from some relatives - in the beginning - and then, we came together to meetings in Shanghai with all other people, and each one know a little bit more.

Q: About how many Jews, do you think, there were at that time in Shanghai?

A: I think we were 10,000, if I don’t make a mistake.

Q: Tell me, then, a bit about life in Shanghai. How long were you in Shanghai?

A: Almost nine years.

Q: This must have been somewhat difficult, coming from European culture, into a far eastern one.

A: It was, but you get used to everything. I was working even. Women, they got jobs easier than men. There was a committee. Maybe you remember Mr. Sassoon? Did you hear about him?

Q: Tell me about him.

A: He was British. He was in Shanghai many years before us, and he was the one who developed a committee.

Q: This Jewish committee that aided refugees.

A: Yes. he did so many good things for Jews. He built up a school in Shanghai. My son went to school there, the Katuri school. And they got lots of money for the committee, too. Then they built a kindergarten for all the Jewish kids. And Sassoon was the builder. He was the one who took care of everything. I worked for the kindergarten and cooked there for all the children. This is hard. So many things I forget. It was not easy, but we made it. We saved our life. That’s all what I can say.

Q: What were other members of your family doing at this time?

A: My brother-in-law tried to make some business. They tried to communicate with the Chinese people, and with your people. We had in Shanghai different sectors, like British and French, and they were not only Jewish people. The other people, they were there for many years. So he tried to go in business with them. And my husband was lucky enough to be in a Chinese factory, but occupied from Japanese people. He talked a little Chinese, and that helped him a lot. He was in the metal business, so he did know a lot, and so he worked there. Worked for a long time, maybe for two years. That was all. I tell you, it’s hard to remember anymore.

Q: You’re doing very well. What was Jewish life like in Shanghai?

A: Jewish life was great! My son went to the yeshiva there. They had a yeshiva. It was like all over, you know. Some people, they were not so religious, some people were more religious.

Q: What about your family?

A: We were in the middle. We participated in the temple, and my nephew was in a yeshiva, and my son was in a yeshiva there. We were Conservative.

Q: How about the war that was going on in the far east at this time. Did that have any effect on your life? Tell me about that.

A: Yes, very much. The American soldiers, they bombed us in Shanghai.

Q: About what year was that?

A: That was in, let’s see, in 1945, about, before the war began to end. Shanghai was occupied from Japanese.

Q: What was that like - the Japanese occupation? Did that present any problems for you?

A: Not for us, it didn’t, but there was a war between Japanese and America, and so the American people, of course, they bombed Shanghai.

Q: The American Air Force?

A: Right. And we were bombed out, where we lived. We had to live for five weeks again in the school.

Q: But then how did you save your life? Where were you when the bombs fell?

A: We heard the siren. They built under, what you call it...?

Q: Air raid shelters?

A: Yeah, shelters. They built shelters, and for several days we had to be in the shelter. And as soon we heard the siren or the airplanes, we rushed to the shelters. Or, if we couldn’t make it, then we ducked our whole body and went to the floor, and covered us with everything.

Q: About how often would that happen? A week, or a month...?

A: More than a week.

Q: You mean several times a week it would happen?

A: Yes, yes. The American soldiers didn’t know that the Japanese people had some buildings where they hide so many things, like oil and gas and whatever it was. The American people didn’t know where they have to fight.

Q: Where they have to drop the bombs?

A: Yeah, but they didn’t know that it was a living quarter of our Jewish people, either. So many people got killed, from our people, too, and were wounded. We were lucky to come out.

Q: How long did the bombings go on?

A: As the war was ending. Then was okay. Was about some weeks.

Q: Were you receiving any news about how the war was going?

A: No, not at that time.

Q: There weren’t any newspapers, or...

A: No, no, no. Chinese people, they did know. We couldn’t read the Chinese newspaper. Some of the Chinese people, they tried to explain, but it was hard to understand. How we got through, I don’t know. I just remember one day, some Jewish people had a watchmaker store, and my son was there. We came in another part of Shanghai, and the bombs, the airplane came, and we were by some ruins, and we ducked in where the ruins were. We didn’t know where my son was. And my son, they took some pots over their head from the kitchen and he was hiding. We looked for my son and we saw him alive. The tears came out.

Q: How long was it before you found him?

A: It was not long. It was hours, maybe three-quarter of a day. But as we saw him, we were quite a bit excited. And then, of course, Chinese people got bombed. And they couldn’t take the dead people away. They put ‘em like a little hill. One human over the other, like a little hill, the Chinese people, one over the other - all the dead people.

Q: During this time, were you and your family or people in the Jewish community talking about possibly getting out of China?

A: We hoped. But when you were there such a long time, you almost lose your hopes.

Q: When did you and your family make plans to leave China? And how did that come about?

A: It’s still the Committee. The Communists came in, and all the white people had to go out. The Committee was involved. They arranged everything. And then, we were lucky enough to come here. Some people were living here in America, and they helped many people to get out. They were the sponsors. Like we had sponsors, a family from chicago - or Philadelphia - I don’t remember. And so my brother-in-law and my sister-in-law got another sponsor from someplace. Later on, we got an affidavit from strange people, and we had to promise not to thank them for getting out.

Q: Who were the people who gave you the affidavit?

A: Some people from Chicago or Philadelphia, I don’t remember. And I believe they had connection with the yeshiva.

Q: Tell me about his affidavit. What did the affidavit say? I don’t need the exact words, but what were they promising in that?

A: I don’t remember any more.

Q: But you needed that affidavit to...

A: We needed this to get out, yes. And many people who didn’t have the chance to go to the yeshiva people had to wait a little longer, and they got out through the Committee. But we came first to America, earlier than the other ones. My son was in the yeshiva, and therefore, some people had interest in us. We had to promise that we don’t come to them, that we stay on our own, that we are on our own. They wouldn’t support us, and we should never thank them for getting out. I know the name of the people, but I forgot the name of the town where they lived. We heard they were very rich, and they brought several people out, not us alone.

Q: So how long did it take from the time you made that connection with those influential people until you actually were out of China? Was it a year, or was it a few months?

A: Just a few months then. it went very fast.

Q: And during this time, Shanghai was still under the control of the Japanese? Is that correct?

A: Yes. These Japanese people had then connections with the Nazis. They built already a gas chamber in Shanghai to kill us, and this we didn’t know. We heard it here in America, the first time. Chinese people, they acted a little funny, and tried to tell us what they did - the Japanese people - but we didn’t know it was true or not. As we came to America we heard here from the synagogues, the Rabbis, they told us from the pulpit that really they built gas chambers, and they wanted to kill us just as the people were killed in Germany and all over. We were lucky to go out, because the war was finished. If the war wouldn’t be finished, we would to the same way then in Germany and all over. I still have everything here, I believe. We had to sign a form with our pictures. We didn’t know what it was. We had to sign our name, and therefore, they could get us right away to get in the gas chamber, but thanks God, the war was finished, and they couldn’t do nothing anymore.

Q: What was this paper you had to sign?

A: It was in Chinese. We had to bring a photo of ourself, and our name and where we born, and sign. I still have it here.

Q: The JCRC-ADL, for the Holocaust Project, is asking people if they have some mementos from that period that they want to donate to the project.

A: I wouldn’t give it away, because it’s a document for me.

Q: Was there any discussion at this time, before you decided on coming to the United States, about the possibility of going to Palestine?

A: Yes, we were just set for Israel - at that time Palestine - already in Germany. We had a very low number, and we couldn’t come out, and waited and waited, and then we had a chance to go to Shanghai, and we went to Shanghai.

Q: But when you got to Shanghai, was there any thought given to going to Palestine?

A: No, because my whole family went there. We were thinking on Palestine, but we didn’t go.

Q: So when did you leave Shanghai for the United States?

A: July, 1947.

Q: And who all left, who survived?

A: From Shanghai, we left together. My brother-in-law, my sister-in-law, and two kids, and my husband and I with my son.

Q: And what happened when you got to the United States then? Where did you go?

A: Here was a committee, and we had to register. They picked us up from the boat - the committee, the people. They registered us, and we had a choice to go to Chicago, to New York. We came by boat, in California,. But there were many, many people, they didn’t want to go, would like to stay in California. They had too many people, so the committee told us it’s better to go someplace else where not so many people are now, and they suggested Chicago, New York, and here, Minnesota. I had a girl friend, Rosa Goldsmith, she was here two months before us - or more.

Q: She was with you in Shanghai?

A: She was in Shanghai, too, yes.

Q: Did you know here from Germany, too?

A: Yes, yes. They left much earlier than we to Shanghai. They left in December and we left in July. She wrote us that we should come to here. This is the same climate as Germany, so we decided to come here.

Q: So you maintain contact with Mrs. Goldsmith, who you’ve known since Germany. Are there others that you maintain contact with in the Jewish community who survived the Holocaust?

A: Yeah, there’s another fellow - Herbert Herzberg. He was in Shanghai, and he’s here in St. Paul.

Q: Is there an organization of people who survived the Holocaust and lived in Shanghai, that you know of?

A: No, not the people from Shanghai. As we came here, there was a Neighborhood House, they call it. We met each other there. We don’t go anymore. Now everyone is in the Jewish Community Center.

Q: Can you tell me in your own words what you think it means to be a survivor of the Holocaust?

A: It means that we were very lucky. How we came through, I don’t know.

Q: Reflecting on your experience through the war years, can you describe to me your general feeling about human nature, non-Jewish people, and Germans?

A: Still there is something inside, when you hear about German people. It’s a funny feeling. Even if they say, “We never were Nazis,” but where did the Nazis come from? And still the hate goes on. I don’t know why. You see we have here just the same. The people are hating Jews. I don’t know why.

Q: Do you think your belief or practice in Judaism, or a supreme being, is changed?

A: This I don’t know, I can’t answer this.

Q: Have you read any of the books about the war period and the Holocaust?

A: Yes, I read them, yes.

Q: And the films. Do you think that they tell the story right? The books and the films?

A: The films, I don’t know. But some of the books, it was true. it’s really true. Maybe not true enough.

Q: Any particular book come to mind, that you can think of?

A: I just bought a book for my son in Los Angeles last year. So many things written. It was true, but not good enough, not tough enough. Nazi and Japanese was the book. And then my son has Fugitive.

Q: Fugitive?

A: Yes, he has that book, but I didn’t read it at all. The book is good, but still not enough.

Q: When you say “not enough,” do you mean a lot of the details are missing?

A: Yeah, it’s not enough details. That’s what he said. I have here a book that is so old, from Emily Harden. She wrote about Shanghai. it’s familiar to me, what she wrote, but not enough what happens before in all countries. It is not enough. You know that film, Exodus? I couldn’t see that. It was too sad.

Q: Is there anything we should add we didn’t cover? That’s a long time to be living in Shanghai, for almost nine years. There certainly was a lot that went on there, I’m sure.

A: Oh, yeah, we had diseases.

Q: Diseases?

A: Oh, yes, we had the malaria. My son had the malaria and diphtheria. Many people died. Many, many people died. Oh, Got! They had the diarrhea so much. But you forget, you know. Maybe you don’t want to remember any more what’s happened. So therefore, I don’t see any sad films. And especially when you lose more of your family. We had good times, but we had bad times. We were very nervous before we left Germany, because always the scare: What will happen? We got support from an organization - Hitzim.

Q: Tell me about it.

A: Hitzim is an organization built many, many years ago for everyone, for every Jewish people, and this is like a community center. This was in Germany, all over, international. This is a wonderful organization, and they gave us a check, I believe, in Shanghai, as we entered Shanghai. It was not much, but it was a little support from the Hitzim. And with this check, I must say, I bought affidavit. I shouldn’t tell you on this tape. Some of the Jewish people had connection with the Japanese and they could give you an affidavit. And I took that money from the Hitzim and bought an affidavit for my parents. My parents were still in Germany, and they had already everything sold from their apartment, and they were sitting on suitcases waiting for our affidavit. They got the affidavit, and couldn’t get out anymore. And so we went, in Shanghai, day by day we went, to the harbor. We went day by day, and waited for my parents, and they didn’t came and didn’t came. Meanwhile, my father suddenly died. For grief, he died, and my mother was alone. And then it was a month later my mother got picked up, to the concentration camp in Warsaw. I think it was Warsaw. Then we got a Red Cross brief from Warsaw. What happened then, I don’t know. So, whatever was, it was. We saved our lives, this I can say, nothing else.