Interview with Mrs. Lydia May

Series Survivors of the Holocaust—Oral History Project of Dayton, Ohio

Interviewer—Dr. Charles R. Berry

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Q: We are at the home of Mrs. Lydia May at 529 Daytona Parkway. It is Wednesday afternoon, July the 5th and this is the first interview with Mrs. May.

Mrs. May would you tell me how old you are?

A: Ninety-one.

Q: And what was your birth date?

A: Frankfurt- on- Mein, Germany, September, 1886.

Q: What is the day?

A: Sixth of September.

Q: My birthday is on the seventh; we’re almost twins. What a coincidence! And you were born in Frankfurt-on-Mein? Did you spend your life in Frankfurt or did you live in other places?

A: We were three years in Zurich, Switzerland before the first World War. My husband was in the army before and had in his passport, if war breaks out he has to return right away to Germany. And the good patriot he was, he went the first day. My daughter and I stayed there but I had my mother in Germany, too. They wrote and wrote for me to come back; you have to come back to your Fatherland.

Q: So you spent all your life in Frankfurt except for the three years in Zurich. Had your parents and your grandparents lived in Frankfurt?

A: No, not in Frankfurt, they were born in Reinhessen.

Q; And when did your family come to Frankfurt?

A: When my mother married, maybe in 1884. My father was not from Frankfurt and my mother was not, but they married in Frankfurt and used to live in Frankfurt. My father was only 47 years old when he died.

Q: And how old were you at the time?

A: Maybe 18 years.

Q: What was your maiden name?

A: Mayer. MAYER. In German, I don’t know if you understand it, mayer is a man, so she said he and we said mayer, so I always made a joke, if somebody asked my name.

Q: Did you come from a large family; did you have brothers and sisters?

A: No, I was the only child and I have only one child.

Q: What was your father’s name?

A: Morris Mayer. My husband’s name was May.

Q: And what did your father do?

A: He was a butcher and he had two butcher stores with men working for him. They had a very good business but my mother sold it right away. For a woman, it was not good to be in a butcher store. It was cold in winter and there was just a little room in the back. So then we were alone. So I got to know my husband and we were married very young because my mother was spoiled by my father. He did everything for her so I thought it was necessary to have a man. When I married, I took my mother with me. And our maid. We had our maid over 20 years.

Q: Was your father a butcher before he came to Frankfurt?

A: He had to learn.

Q: But his first butcher shop was in Frankfurt?

A: Yes.

Q: And what was your mother’s maiden name?

A: Mann. MANN. We all have “M’s.” Three generations with “M”.

Q: And then when your father died, and your mother sold the butcher shop, how did your mother and you derive your income?

A: I had some money and we saved money and my father said that what you have in your head nobody can take away from you. I learned business, I learned bookkeeping. I learned what you have to do in the home: needlework and such things like that…I did it all, everything I had to learn. I went to schools and I can do everything, like my daughter. She learned everything, too. And she’s very handy with her hands. This picture, here. My husband was very talented.

Q: Did your parents have a formal education? And do you know how much education they had?

A: I’m sure they had, but I don’t know what they learned before I was born. They both came from a little village. My mother from Reinhessen. My father from close to Frankfurt.

Q: What sort of religious life did you have in the home?

A: We were Jews, but not overly. We went to the synagogue when the holiday was. We belonged to the Conservative as we do here, too. We went on Saturdays, sometimes on Friday nights, the holidays especially. We would close our store, too, on the holidays.

Q: And did you keep kosher?

A: Yes, my father learned in the kosher store. But he said he didn’t want it. In the store they made sausage and everything and he did not keep a kosher store. He made the sausage we ate himself but he had other meat, like you buy here.

Q: What languages did your family speak? German, of course, and?

A: I learned French at school and I learned English. We didn’t speak Yiddish. I can’t speak Yiddish. I can’t understand it. Sometimes there is a little German word in it and when I came into the grocery store here, they started to speak German to me. I said, “I’m sorry, I want to learn English.” I knew English and you have to talk English to me. Do you know that many stores in New York are owned by Jews and they speak Yiddish. But we never learned it. We spoke German.

Q: Did your mother or father speak French, do you know?

A: No, my father sent me to a very good school. We took it in school already and we learned French and German. You learned English easier, do you know that? There are many words the same, the spelling is different, but they write it the same. When I came to New York, I went to evening school to keep up with English but it confused me. I knew what English was, but New York was a little different, you know, the language. It’s very mixed in New York but here it is much better. So they confused me, so I took my radio when I was cleaning and looked up the words I heard in the dictionary. So I learned the English much better. I could write and could read. I even had English books from school very much as you do here in high school.

Q: Did you travel very much as a child on vacations?

A: Yes, as a child. My mother had two sisters and a brother. One lived in Wiesbaden. I went there. The other sister and brother lived in Reinhessen and the brother was 94 years old. The Nazis killed him. He lived in the same place where he was born and he was working for the government there. They sent men from the other cities. They killed him. He would have lived much longer. His son now lives in California. He’s the only one who is left. He had four daughters, three daughters my age. Two killed themselves in Wiesbaden when they heard the Nazis go around and take the Jews out of the houses. They killed themselves. And one was married to a gentile in Mainz, a city in Reinhessen also. She was living and her husband died and her daughter is married and here in the States. I don’t know where exactly.

Q: So you would visit family? Cousins and aunts and uncles on vacation?

A: Yes, we were a close family.

Q: Before you went to Switzerland to live had you traveled outside of Germany?

A: Yes, we went on vacations in the mountains. Frankfurt is not far from mountains. We could go by bus and then we walked up the highest mountains, my husband, my daughter and I. My parents, too, before. But my father died too early. There were some things they couldn’t heal in Germany. Now, they can heal it here. He had kidney trouble. I have a friend here who has it and she is all right. But they had nothing to help. We had a nurse and a doctor, couldn’t help. Now everything is more advanced, here.

Q: Did you think of yourself and your family as a member of the middle class, the working class?

A: Middle class. My parents were both working in the store and I took turns. We had the stores open all day and when they rested in the afternoon I relieved them sometimes.

Q: Mrs. May, did you have much contact with the gentile community?

A: Sure. Many friends. We used to say later, when the Nazis came, everyone had a Jewish friend. My husband had friends and they came (it was 1923) and they told him there is a group in the Odenwald that is a mountain, actually in Koenig, the city. They started already to go against the Jews. Nobody took them seriously at that time. You know they started like here and it was 1933 when they really worked against us. In 1933 they started to take the men out of the houses, march through the streets and singing, “The blood of the Jews shall flow by the knife.” (Renate Frydman). Through the city there were already many in the brown uniforms. Then we were shocked.

Q: That was in Frankfurt in 1933?

A: In 1933 they started to walk through the streets singing, maybe a few hundred already at that time. That was the Horst Wessel song, that was one of the first, but what could we do? We couldn’t go out, you had to have an affidavit. My husband got it in ’36 and went alone to New York and had to let us come in two years. She went out, you know the story about her (obviously meaning Renate Frydman, Lydia’s granddaughter).

Q: Yes, a little bit of it, not all of it.

A: Somebody threw a stone on her buggy. She was a baby, she was a few months old. He wanted to kill her. Our maid was standing there with the buggy, waiting for us to come down. We were going to the park in the neighborhood. And my husband said, “Now I have to go.” And he had an affidavit for only him alone. So he didn’t know anything about the family and we didn’t know that family, too. Just accidentally we got the name. It was from his father, a brother in New York. And he died in the meantime. And when my husband came here, the aunt died. Only cousins were there. In Frankfurt lived an aunt who was a widow and she had four sons, five sons she had. Two were living in New York, very well off. One had a jewelry store in the Waldorf Astoria. The other one, I don’t know. And three were still in Germany and we tried to get an affidavit from them but they said we have to take care of our brothers first. One of the brothers was on the boat they never could land somewhere, remember that story? He was killed this way. They started to go in port somewhere, a beautiful handsome blond man he was. May, his name was May, too. I don’t know the first name. The twins were Otto and Richard. I forget the names. OK and slowly the two other brothers came here, too, to the States. So, my husband was working in the studio. First he was working making pictures. I think I told this story. When he got a job in the studio where they had trays. He was handy with carpentry work. And this lady and her husband, they gave every day work for us because Renate was a baby. They wanted more. And they gave for my son-in-law, my daughter and me and for her an affidavit. But not for my mother. So my mother was killed in the concentration camp. When we sent the affidavit it was too late because they gave numbers and she didn’t know it. She had too high a number. They took her to the concentration camp. And an aunt of mine, too. She was 80, over 80. Nobody thought she was that age, she never looked it. There’s a picture of your great-grandmother, that little one there. That’s a passport picture, she already had her passport. The whole old aged homes they took, two the same day.

Q: I’d like to go into more detail about that later on. About your leaving and the affidavits, and so forth.

A: I’ll tell you something, they took the men out of the houses. And we went to the American consulate in Germany to get our passports. My daughter, and we took her, and one Nazi was after us, we were in a taxi, after us with a bike. And we went to the American Consulate. “English,’ he said, “English,” so that he could do something. We were standing there waiting to get our passport for England because the boat was going later. It was the SS Washington that we took, the American steamer, no? And my husband had a brother, he had an affidavit from someone else. We went to London and he went to France with his family. And when we came to Calais, that’s France, across the straight of Dover from England, the port, he was on the same boat with the family. And that was a wonder that we met them there. He had a son and a daughter. The daughter was here already. She sent him the affidavit. And his wife. That’s what I can say, we had to have an affidavit, everybody else can come in. Isn’t that so? From every country, without. Do you realize that?

Q: Yes, I knew that.

A: Hungary, Vietnam, Korea, many more. Everybody could come but we from Germany had to have an affidavit at that time. (As long as the immigration laws of 1921/1927 were on the books, everyone needed an affidavit of support before being admitted for a number according to the yearly quota set up by nationality of origin. Note that there was not national quota for people of Asiatic origin -- they could only come as visitors or be native-born. RF).

Q: Let me go back and ask some more about your earlier background. Was the maid that your family had gentile or Jewish?

A: Ach, the maid. The maid was from Bavaria. She was Catholic and we had many Catholic friends, too. They started to help us and we had people who came in the night and put some food in the door. Neighbors and so. They were working for the radio next door from us, where the office was. One day, Goebbels (the Nazi propaganda minister) was there. We could see. They had a big yard and he was walking around there, talking on the radio. And these people were working for the radio. They were gentile people who brought us food. The food was rationed for us. We could go in the store, we had to bring our ration card. We didn’t get enough. But we had some friends. When I went to a special store for butter and eggs and cheese, and he always gave me something extra. There was a special store for everything. Not like here the way the stores are now. Maybe they have it now, too. My family from Reinhessen sent us potatoes. When somebody got married somewhere and took the train, they gave them a sack full of potatoes for us. Some friends helped us. That is something, this rationing. If I hadn’t had gentile friends, I don’t know what we would have done. My husband was in the army at that time. And they chased him out, too. The first Jews they took, the man made them walk through the city with a big sign, “WE ARE JEWS.” And the women came and they put them together and the wives came and wanted to get them out but they chased them away. Put the men in the concentration camp and everybody was against them. Who is not for us is against us! They had big signs in the city that said, “JEWS ARE OUR MISFORTUNE.” Big signs. In every store was a sign like That, “JEWS ARE NOT WANTED.”

Q: Do you remember approximately when that began, those signs were put up? Was it in 1933, 1934? What year were those signs put up and the men had to march through the streets, was that early, right after Hitler?

A: That was 1933.

Q: As soon as Hitler came to power?

A: No, it was later. It was ’35 or ’36 because we had shutters on the windows and we closed them. The same day we left Germany, that was the last train before the war. And we had our luggage and we were sitting in the main train station and people were standing around us, the Nazis, until the train came. When we left, some family was living in the house and later came to New York, too. They told us they were looking for my son-in-law, for your father. He was just out the same day. They wanted to take him, too. You don’t know what that is, you can’t imagine. They wanted to take him to the concentration camp. The last day they said no train was coming anymore, at least for a while.

Q: What sort of associations did your family belong to in the synagogue or the cultural life of the city?

A: Conservative and B’nai Brith.

Q: What about political party affiliations; was your family very political?

A: No, we were Democrat, we were Democrat.

Q: Was your father an active member of the Democratic Party?

A: No, first he was working, then he died too early. We were not active in any party, no. They could have said something against us in that case. But we were Jews!

Q: Did you attend the theater and concerts?

A: Yah, from the opera we had season cards and there were theaters where dramas were played and other theaters, we went there too. The circus was there and so went everywhere before (Hitler came). Then everything was forbidden.

Q: What year were you married?

A: 1905.

Q: How old were you when you got married?

A: It was 1886, maybe ’04, I was 18, something like that.

Q: Then after you got married did you continue to live at home with your mother?

A: No, my mother and our maid went with me and we were living in Worms-am Rhein and I didn’t like it there. So we went back to Frankfurt. The maid was with us, too. She was with us until her mother died and her father was blind so she had to go home. She died two years ago. She was 90 years old. We always were in touch with each other. We wrote each other. Now we have one friend in Germany, a Catholic lady, to whom I write. And I have one school friend still in Zurich. We write each other.

Q: Pardon me, let me turn this tape over.

Begin Side Two.

Q: July 11, 1978 and I am in the home of Mrs. Lydia May for a series of interviews.

For example, do you remember when your husband was born? What his birth date was? Where and when?

A: 1888, not directly in Worms-am Rhein, but in a little village. But he could walk to school. He had one brother and one sister. The sister is still living, she is in Atlantic City. She was 90 last January.

Q: So your husband was two years younger than you. You were born in 1886.

A: No, he was six years older. He died already 19 years ago, now. And we were here in Dayton for 30 years. He came to New York and could not speak English very well. He came in that business (the studio) where they were talking German, they wanted to improve their German. They came from Austria. They spoke German there. He never learned to write English and speak English well. So he couldn’t make friends here. I could. I went into the organizations and I made friends. I was working for the organizations. He was very handy in carpenter work. He never had learned that. He was a picture painter. That is what he was doing in New York with that picture painter, that helped him in New York, that he had that talent, so he could make a living. I told you that he was alone here for two years?

Q: Yes. Now, what was his occupation?

A: He started with a leather business. They started in that little city and were living in Worms when we were just married, and I didn’t like it in Worms-am-Rhein. It is a little city. When you were walking through the streets they were looking out their windows. I didn’t like that. You see, I came from a big city so we moved to Frankfurt and he went in the furniture business for barbers and for beauty shops and he sold that in a store until we had to leave.

Q: Did he own the store?

A: Yes, he did. He went out of town also. He had a driver from Berlin, but he could drive also. So he went out of town. But he always came back in the evening, he never stayed away longer. He never stayed away overnight for the business. I didn’t know too much about the business but he was very active in it. His brother used to live in Hamburg. He had an import and export business. He spoke every language and he took his son in the business and he has now a business in Boston. He died three years ago and his wife is so active in that business, she goes into every country. You would be surprised. She was here a few months ago and I asked her, “How are you doing that?” She says, “They all speak English and I can do that.” She has a son-in-law who studied to be a doctor. She took him into that business and they travel around and have a very good business. I think that she has 20 or 30 employees. His father brought him in that business and he took his son-in-law into it, and his wife also. My sister-in-law was in Atlantic City but they won’t let me go anymore. My son-in-law won’t let me go out of town anymore, or someone has to go with me.

Q: They keep close watch on you.

A: I don’t like Atlantic City so much. You know, I got a sunburn all over -- sun poisoning was better word. I had to eat up everything and when I was in Florida I didn’t get that. What is it? The same ocean? I don’t know.

Q: I don’t know either.

A: I don’t know. I was asked myself always. I didn’t get it in Florida.

Q: I also don’t know your husband’s first name.

A: Max. Maximilian!

Q: Maximilian May, and you mentioned during our last interview that he was in the army.

A; Yes, he was in the army like all the soldiers are.

Q: What year did he join the army, do you know?

A: He was in it. I don’t know.

Q: Had World War I already started?

A: No, in World War I he was out already. It said in his passport that he had to come back. I told you that we were in Zurich when the war broke out? He was a good patriot and he went back and we were alone. My daughter was a little girl, and my mother was living in Germany, also in Frankfurt. They wrote all the time that you have to come back to your fatherland in such a time. We were there (Zurich) until 1915. What could we do? We went back but I would have stayed there.

Q: So when he went back he did enter the army.

A: Sure, they took him right away. He was in the artillery. They were shooting at the planes from the other countries. They always called up when they heard on the frontier that the planes are coming. Then he called us up so that we would go to the basement. We were in front of the basement, we had a good basement there. The French planes came like that.

Q: Was Frankfurt bombed during the war?

A: Yes. The French bombed us. They bombed Germany during the first year. I told you that we had a maid from Bavaria. She went downstairs into the basement, my daughter was a little girl -- it was funny what she took down. I believe that she was only three or four years old then. I never forgot what she took with her. We heard them when they dropped the bombs, and when they were done we went up again. He was first stationed in Frankfurt and then they took him to Ostende on the ocean. He was a sergeant. I also have pictures of him. Sometimes they were sick, but they didn’t send them home. When he came home, thanks God, he was alright. Nothing happened (to him).

Q: So he was in for the duration of the war?

A: Yes, all of WWI, 1914 until 1918, four years! And then came the bad times -- the inflation when we had nothing to eat.

Q: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that also. Would you mind recalling what Germany was like after the war with the inflation?

A: We Jews got later rationing cards.

Q: Just the Jews?

A: First yes, and then the others also, but the others could go in the stores but they had the signs, “Jews are not wanted.”

Q: After World War I?

A: After World War I, yes.

Q: Oh?

A: No, that was after the Nazis came. I am wrong here. Not the war! But the inflation was something else. We had money, but it was worth nothing! My daughter has still paper money -- my son-in-law was in a factory as a manager and they printed it. It was worth nothing! I mean thousands and thousands of marks which were worth nothing. That money she still has, has pictures on it and thousands of marks of value -- and other denominations also. Everything was worthless. What could we do then?

Q: When your husband returned from the war, did he go back into the business of selling (the furniture)?

AL Yes, he started his business again.

Q: Was business bad?

A: It was good then, for a while until the inflation, because money was worth nothing. They gave rationing cards to everybody, the Germans. I wondered if they wanted to start here also, but they don’t.

Q: How did you get by? How did you find food?

A: I had my furniture in storage. All in one storage place. When I wanted my furniture I couldn’t get it since there was a war on. And later it was mixed up with other items -- half a bed, half of the good glasses which I had and of my silver flatware, and everything. They mixed it up. OK? I said what I don’t have I won’t use. But we had to start from scratch! It was hard to make money, etc. I started to work also a little bit in a hotel. I gave out the linen and everything for the kitchen. My mother was there and still the maid was with us. My daughter went to school in Zurich for the first year. She spoke “Switzerdeutch.” Did you ever hear of that?

Q: No.

A: It was German as spoken in Switzerland. It is mixed language. The real Swiss people didn’t speak German. But Zurich was in the German speaking part of Switzerland. Switzerland had actual three (official) languages: German, French and Italian. And when we went on a bus or something like that and I had my daughter with me, they said, “Oh, what a pretty girl,” in dialect using some Italian. But you could readily go to Italy from there. Switzerland is a beautiful country. I get homesick when I see pictures. I never saw such a beautiful country. We went around it very much. Italy was very bad also, at that time. They didn’t take care. Switzerland is clean! The cleanest country is Holland. We were in Amsterdam and The Hague and every day they clean the rooms and they take everything out of the rooms and put it in other rooms. It is so clean and in Switzerland also. The women put the white laundry on top of the houses to dry it -- a thing which they do in New York also. We had an apartment there and the rooms had parquet flooring. The landlord said, “You have the nicest flooring in the house.” I was alone there, no one to help me. My husband was traveling around, on business. My brother-in-law let us come for three years, then we had to go back, because of the war.

Q: When was your daughter born?

A: In 1907.

Q: Was she the only child?

A: We never had any other children. It was a bad time, after and during the war, but we managed it. What could we do? And then when Hitler came it was a lot worse for us. We had hardly anything to eat. My husband was still in the army. He came to the States in 1936. We all went through that whole thing.

Q: Back in the 1920s when the inflation was so bad, there was growing anti-Semitism at that time. You told me about the incident in the Odenwald in 1923, were there other incidents? Was there anything happening in Frankfurt?

A: Not like that until Hitler came. You know they burned the synagogues in the whole country in one day?

Q: That was in March of 1933, wasn’t it?

A: Yah, it was not spontaneous, it was all prepared. They got the order and they did it and I remember, my mother came home. She had been shopping and she said the man where she was shopping said the synagogues were burning. We didn’t even know that. All the synagogues. We lived across the street from a Jewish study center and it was a big house, five or six floors. They went upstairs into every room and threw all the paper out. We saw that! Papers in the streets.

Q: This was in 1933?

A: Yes, that was after, 1933, yes. And they took the men. They went into the houses, not in 1933, that was sometime later. The Jews were not allowed to get there and go here. Where we lived there was not the star, but my mother had it. Do you know that the King of Denmark wore it. He was very loyal to the Jews. What’s going on now, did you read that, in Scandinavia? The star too. Not the star, against the Jews.

Q: In Scandinavia?

A: Didn’t you read that?

Q: No.

A: The paper wrote it. In Sweden -- Sweden was very good too, and I think in Norway. The young Jews, they don’t know what to do, they want to go out.

Q: I hadn’t read that.

A: You know what Hitler did? He had the party. He took some men, “Strength Through Joy,” and they put them on the boats, on the train, put them up in other countries. They were part of the party. This way, he brought it everywhere, into every country. I used to live in New York in a big apartment house. There were elevator men, black ones. Once I came downstairs and a white man was standing with him. Later I said, “What did he want?” “Oh, he told us about the Nazis, that we should join.” They were working in every country. He didn’t join, but he said it.

Q: Agents, Nazi agents?

A: Yah, they brought them for vacation but they had to work for the party. Nobody knows what they did. We were afraid of everything.

Q: Well, would you talk about that? What about your own feelings? What did you feel when you went out on the streets, when you went to shop for food?

A: Like I said, I was suspicious of everybody. You know? I was afraid when they were marching through the streets, hundreds and hundreds, with that brown uniform and they looked for Jews. We don’t look exactly like many do. We were not so afraid, but anyhow, but they knew where the Jews lived. Some Jews were living in another city or another little village and they moved out but they found them in the other city, far away, they found them. They had everywhere their spies.

Q: I understand that it was rather common that Nazi party members would be stationed in every city block or every house. A big apartment house, there would be a Nazi there who would look out. Were you aware?

A: Yah, he watched the people, what they did. If they were a Jew or not a Jew. The others were in danger too. When someone was working in an office and said something like, ‘Do you know what they did about this man or so?” the neighbor went into the Nazis and told them. They got him. You couldn’t trust them, the gentiles couldn’t trust each other.

Q: Were you aware of who these spies were in your neighborhood?

A: Not for sure. I don’t know if I told you this before but when the food was very short some neighbors brought us food in the night and put it in front of our door. We know who it was because they called us and told us, but we had to be very careful. There was a lodge, a B’nai Brith lodge -- and that is a story, too. They took, one day, all the members into a large auditorium where the meetings and everything usually took place. The Nazis came to the house and they let the members enter the house and put them into the auditorium. They told them which seats to sit in. Nobody sat in the middle so that they couldn’t talk together and the Nazis were asking questions. I was there also because I was the secretary at that time. I wrote letters in English to the President here. They knew all of that. They were questioning us and we were afraid that they would take us. One day they made me come to the headquarters to ask me questions and, when I looked around, I saw a microphone behind me. A few times I had to go there to answer questions.

Q: Why would they ask you to come to headquarters? Was it because you were secretary to the B’nai Brith lodge?

A: Yes, they knew that! They knew that I was writing letters and such but here, also, for the Covenant House, or such, wherever it is I write letters.

Q: What kind of questions would they ask you?

A: “What did you write? Why do you write?” And so on. “What do you want from them?” It is a simple thing, everybody could read the letters. Then one day they went into the office and took everything from the offices; there were three B’nai Brith lodges. First was the Frankfurt lodge, later on came Herman Kohn and Markus Salarus, three lodges. And all the offices were there, in that house. They came and took every book and everything. We had prayer books there, we had a library there. They only left us the prayer books -- and they burned it. You know the story. They came in our house; we had a big library -- a cupboard full of books -- they took it with them. Then before we left, there was a Nazi sitting in that room. He took every book out and shook it, upside down, to see if we had money in it. Then he took every book -- they came and picked it up -- which was from a Jewish author or with Jewish stories and burned it in the city. They burned all the books. I don’t know but some came out.

Q: But they actually came to your apartment, in your house?

A: Yes, they came and they heard that we go out. We had the affidavit to go to the States. Every book! They went into the houses as if it was their apartment. I see this, as you are sitting there, it was terrible; a blond young man. He turned every book upside down. We were not allowed to take money. I think 100 mark, or something like that, what we had.

Q: Did you have any warning that this was going to happen?

A: No!

Q: It just happened all of a sudden?

A: No, they just came. “I want to see what books you have,” he said, and then he took it out -- “what you read!”

Q: Did they talk to you while they were doing that or did they just go about their business?

A: No, they said nothing. They came and walked in. The milkman came every day. He brought the milk in such big cans and asked how much milk you wanted, you know, a liter or more, and he asked us, “Are you Jewish? Go out, leave the city as fast as you can.” A gentile man. Some gentiles were nice but they were afraid. They couldn’t do anything since they (meaning the Nazis) took them right away to a concentration camp. My daughter had a friend and her husband, they were gentiles, and he had to join the Nazi party. They had the big flag on the car. They came to us to visit us with the flag, the Nazi flag. At that time, that was risky. They were lucky that they did not take them.

Q: Mrs. May, as you look back can you recall any sort of increased activity like that? Did it start out on a very small scale and get more and more constant? All the intimidations, the books (burning), the fear of going out in the street; did it start out very gradually and then get worse? Did it build up?

A: It built up. There were so many who had to join. You saw pictures, when he (Hitler) was speaking, how many people were there. In every store, in every factory, everywhere, they had to join. Who is not for us is against us, they said. On the street, I told you that there were signs which read, “The Jews are our misfortune.” They were big signs, from one side of the street to the other.

Q: You said that those signs were put up in 1933. What I am trying to determine is: was there a constant level of this kind of activity from 1933 to ’38, or did it start out very little and then build up?

A: Only they took the men from the houses and took them into the streets. We saw that. We were looking out the window and saw that.

Q: Was your husband taken?

A: My husband was not taken, but the day when we left they wanted to take my son-in-law. My husband was out (of Germany) already. In the evening they came and wanted to get my son-in-law. They knew every Jew, every Jew!

Q: Was your son-in-law there?

A: He was with us, he went with the train, the last train.

Q: No, I mean, to be taken out of the house. Was your son-in-law there?

A: No, they didn’t take him out. We closed the windows and everything and we went to the consul, the American, no, the English consul, to get a visa for England and for Holland. We were in Holland and England before we could go to the States because the boats didn’t leave when we left. My son-in-law had family in England and family in Holland. And he said to our friends, “Go away from here also, they will be coming here.” And they came into the concentration camps. But a few returned, they could leave, but not all. His parents, his father did not want to leave, he put money into Panama for them. Panama took the Jews if they had a few thousand dollars. He put money there so that his parents could go out, and he was waiting for his parents to get out of the camp. Some people were there (in Panama). I know people here who were in Panama during that time until they could go to the States. Panama was helpful, they could even work there. But there was enough money there (for my son-in-law’s parents) to see them through. We didn’t know that. But anyway, my husband went early, by himself, to the States. I think that I told you the story when we went for our visas? And when we came to the States, he had cousins there whom he had never known. They picked us up and put us in a room. “See how you do!” Did I ever tell you when my husband first went by subway, alone?

Q: No.

A: You know the subway in New York?

Q: Yes.

A: You had to put five cents in. He put it in and when he went out he put another five cents in. It was hard for him at that time to make his living. It happened a few times until someone went wit him and saw that and told him. He was alone. His family didn’t care much. His aunt died and his uncle died and his cousins didn’t care much.

Q: This tape is about to run out, so I am stopping this one.

This is a continuation of the second interview with Mrs. Lydia May on July 11, 1978.

A: I was working, after the war, in a factory. You know I told you that my father had said that one has to learn everything, of a business. So I worked in a big factory. We were working there. One day they came in and said, “The Jews have to,” the owner was Jewish, “go out.” They put another one (an owner) in. My son-in-law had a business there in Frankfurt, the same as he has here, iron and metal (scrap). He had a good business there. One day they brought a Nazi in and, “Out!” They had to all go out. They put (the Nazi) in and he (the son-in-law) didn’t get a penny. But now he gets something.

Q: Then how did you live, if you had to leave your job and your son-in-law was ousted from his business?

A: And my husband was helping him then, with bookkeeping and such. His father was in it and his brother was in it and he also had employees. He had a good business. They just put somebody in it.

Q: What year was that, do you remember?

A: 1934 or ’35, it must have been. They threw all the Jews out of the stores and the factories and put their men in regardless of whether they knew the business or not.

Q: How did you live if your income was cut off?

A: As I said, it was a very hard time for us. I tried to make some money, my daughter was working a little and we had some money which they didn’t take, but you couldn’t take it out (of the country). What we did was that we went to Switzerland during the Nazi (times), before we left. Oh, how I love Switzerland. There was somebody already from Frankfurt, he was a doctor, he was already there and we got money through him. Later on they sent us some. When we first went out we couldn’t take any. We just could pay for our trip. What I said he (the son-in-law) had family in London, an uncle and an aunt and (some family) in Amsterdam and in The Hague, so we could live there for a while.

Q: Was there any particular incident that made you decide to leave? Was there any one thing that happened that made you say to yourself, “It is time to leave!”

A: I think that I told you (about the incident) with my granddaughter?

Q: Throwing the rock at her?

A: My husband left.

Q: No, I am talking about, was there any one thing which made your husband decide that it was time to leave?

A: That one thing I told you about. They threw the stone at the carriage.

Q: But your husband had already gone at that time, right?

A: My husband was gone?

Q: Yes. What I am asking is, when your husband left, was there something that made him decide, at that moment, that it was the right time to leave, rather than to stay on and see what would happen?

A: I told you the story about the maid, not the one we used to have (during WWI), it was an older one. Only older ones could come (to work for Jews). She went downstairs with the baby in the carriage. She was waiting for us in front of the house -- we wanted to go to the park -- and someone threw a stone at that carriage! So he said, “I have to go. I don’t want to live in a place where they will kill my granddaughter.” She was lucky that she was not killed.

Q: Was that Renate?

A: Yes, Renate. She was a baby.

Q: I thought that happened after your husband had already come to the States.

A: No! That was the reason why he left before us. He had only an affidavit for himself and he said, “Right away, I go!” It was hard for him in New York. He was in his fifties, I think something like 57 (years old). It was good that he had that talent that he could paint and then talent to make shelves and to make everything they needed for the studio. You know they paid $12? The greenhorns, they said. You know that? Twelve dollars a week! And with the overtime he could let us come. They helped him. They made out affidavits for us. Because there were four of us, that was a lot. Especially for the kid who had to go to school and everything.

Q: Now, who gave your husband the affidavit? Who signed for him?

A: An uncle, who died.

Q: In New York City?

A: Yes, he never knew him. No, he never knew him.

Q: That was arranged by letter?

A; Yes, by letters. Accidentally someone said, “There is a man,” I forgot the name, “living in New York. Maybe you write to him.” And he wrote to him, maybe he did not understand fully, but he sent an affidavit for him only. He (this uncle) died and when he came (to the States) the aunt died. And then there were only cousins left and they didn’t care much. They picked him up at the boat and put him in a room to see how he would do. He had to pay everything. So it was good that he could pay, that he had enough money.

Q: How did he find a job?

A: He went into the town. They told him to go around and show what he could do. He made a few pictures to show them, and they ordered, every week, so and so many pictures. Day and night he was painting, and when he came there (the store where he had been selling his pictures) one day, it was closed, the store. He lost a few hundred dollars. Then somebody, in that same apartment (where he had a room) was working in that studio. She said, “Maybe we go there and maybe they have a job.” He got that job. That was OK for him alone, and with that overtime he could work (for us to come). He didn’t have an apartment at first, he just had a room with a German family. And that is where it happened with that elevator man. It was a house with an elevator. And he told him that he wanted him to join the Nazi party. That is, the elevator man. Can you imagine how that was? Everything they thought about? I think that they saw some old stories. What they did in earlier years against each other! I think in that book here, “Are We Nazis?” Did you read it?

Q: No, you showed it last time. Yes, I do want to read it.

A: It is very interesting what is in that book. How the characters act and everything, which it describes there. Everybody says that he is nothing, that he did nothing, that he acted only on orders, orders from higher up. Well, they couldn’t (simply) say, “No, we won’t do that.” They would kill them. And children, children, they went to school and they heard something the parents said, and they went to the teacher. They told the teacher, and the teacher reported it to the (Nazi) party. First they told them that and if they don’t stop that, you have what would happen! They acted that way not against Jews alone, but, of course, specifically to Jews. The brother of my son-in-law was in a camp, in Buchenwald, of which I am certain you have heard. And my mother was in Auschwitz, Theresienstadt. I didn’t say it last time. I recalled it later. There a lot of them died. I didn’t know that. The rabbi came back and said, “This is from our home town.” He saw my mother and it was the same with my aunt. It is horrible when you read that, what they did. It is impossible! How can men do such things to other human beings? They can have no character, no scruples, nothing! They must be sadists, or I don’t know what the name is for them. That Hitler, how he forced people to come to his side. Well, he had associates, too, such as Goebbels and Goering and Hess. Hess is still living.

Q: Did you ever see Hitler?

A: Yes.

Q: Where?

A: He went through Frankfurt with all the hands raised. And we didn’t do that, when he went through the streets in the cars. I saw him and I saw Goebbels also, next door to us, as I told you. His foot was not OK. I think that they were both terrible and Goering, too. Goering had a brother in Frankfurt who was a dentist. You would think that he could do something. They were afraid. Every Nazi said that he had a Jewish friend. You know that they didn’t want to let me go out? Did I ever tell you that?

Q: No. Wait a minute. Who signed your affidavit?

A: The people where my husband was working.

Q: For you and your son-in-law and daughter and granddaughter?

A: The baby. They didn’t want to let me out. I had to go to the Gestapo or something like that. Those were the fellows in the black uniforms, and the brown were the Nazis. (Actually, the black uniforms were for the “elite” Schutz Staffel, i.e. the “protective staff” and the brown were the “run of the mill” SA or Schutz Abteilung, i.e. the “protective divisions.”) They made me come to the headquarters and they asked me question. It was terrible. I don’t remember anymore what they asked. They didn’t let me out and my son-in-law had a friend, a Nazi friend. He destroyed the papers from my story so that they would let me out. They didn’t know what I did so they let me go -- we had to pay him. Still, they exchanged letters. Every year at Christmas he sent something very nice -- and books and articles and food and things. And my daughter sent him some also. Still. And I have one friend left, a Catholic friend, a lady. We write to each other. The Catholics were better to us, but they were under pressure. They couldn’t do what they wanted.

Q: What city did you sail from? You said that you first went into Holland.

A: First to Holland. We were in Holland for a few weeks.

Q: With your aunt and uncle?

A: No, with my son-in-law’s aunt and uncle. I had no one in Holland and no one in England. We were a small family. I told you that my mother’s brother was killed in Germany and the others, daughter, son-in-law and another daughter took their lives. My doctor was living across the street from them. He sent his family to London and he killed himself. They took all his patients away -- they weren’t allowed any longer to go to him And it was all the same. The affidavits were for the family but not for him. He killed himself. Many did that! Rather than fall into the hands of that killer, or whatever you want to call him. My family did that! I had a couple in Wiesbaden -- did you hear about that? That is a very nice resort, hot springs, for rheumatism and such diseases. It was very good. Close to Frankfurt there was another such cure place, Bad Nauheim. Frankfurt was nice, but now it is so dirty. Friends of ours went there. I never would go -- I couldn’t stomach it, I tell you. My daughter was there once, my son-in-law didn’t go there. We didn’t want to see the people there. To think that everybody says, ‘Oh, here are the Jews.”

Q: You never have been back to Germany?

A: No!

Q: You don’t want to go?

A; No. Once we went to Switzerland, once we went to Italy and here, in the States, we make many trips. But, no, I honestly don’t want to see them. You never know what they think. And that maid which we had, we wrote to each other, also. She was no Nazi. I am sure that she was not. But they forced the people to join the party. The children were happy with the uniforms, and going around and singing, they didn’t understand. They went with them. A uniform is something which the children like. It was hard for us to start in New York. I made homework (needlework). You know what they pay, a piece of homework? They pay little. Every time that you think, and I am very handy also, embroidery and sweaters. My daughter also. My daughter went into a factory. She learned to make hats with straw and such. We worked together, little things which they wanted, lapels and such. We went into different factories and we got work to do. But they paid terrible. Once it was in the summer, it was hot, I was working at home, the water was running. We had no air conditioning so the people left the doors open so that they circulation of air. But you can’t do that now.

Q: Well not any more.

A: But I remember, in Germany, in Baden. My sister-in-law and family were living there. We went there visiting and they had the doors open also. That was before Hitler. They wouldn’t dare to do that today. People were much better, I think, until Hitler came and brought those ideas to the people. We had anti-Semitism before, also, under the Kaiser, too. You know that we used to say that we wished we had our old anti-Semitism, when Hitler was there. It was much better. They were against (the Jews) inside, but they didn’t show it so much. They didn’t do anything to us. I remember the Kaiser, he was in Frankfurt, too. I saw him. Wilhelm. But that Hitler, what he did, that is impossible. But I think that that was all in the old books, in the old history. People who were not educated, not conscience and so on. They did what was done in earlier years to the people. Don’t you really think so?

Q: I think so, yes.

A: They pressed it into the people. Everybody was afraid and when you went into a store, a store which had that sign (about not wanting Jews to enter). When we were in the train, that was the last train, when we left Germany for a while and we sat in a compartment and one came in, a blond young man, and started to talk to us. “Isn’t it awful, what happened in Dusseldorf? They destroyed all the stores and in Frankfurt.” You know, they went into every store owned by the Jews and threw the merchandise out. You know, glasses like here at Elder-Beerman, such stores. They threw everything out. We did not answer. If we had answered he would have taken us. We didn’t say a word. He wanted us to say something. He went with us to the frontier. There is a no-man’s land between Holland and Germany and when we went out of the train, he was there. By the way, at the border they took my son-in-law out. They were looking in the compartment, under the seats and everything. Both of us had a fur coat, my daughter and I. The agent who was checking asked, “What do you do with two fur coats?” I said, “we are two ladies, we need it.” They took my son-in-law out and he had to take everything off. They were looking to see if he had anything on him. He hardly came back, we were afraid (that he would miss it), the train was almost going when he came back. And when we went out of the train in that no-man’s land, the young man was standing there, looking at us. The same man! In every train they had somebody.

Q: You went to Amsterdam?

A: We went to Amsterdam and then The Hague. The Hague is beautiful. The tulips! Fields full of tulips! And the windmills -- that looks beautiful. And clean. The canals, that is where the water is, the windmills go into the water. The people. Every house, every apartment, has a special door from outside, not like here where you have two doors. Then they have their beautiful garden houses. They had the windows open so that you can see, even in the evening, through the whole house. They had that in Germany also, with greenhouses, but it is beautiful in Holland. Holland is very dangerous now, too.

Q: Then from The Hague you went to London?

A: Yes.

Q: And how long were you in London?

A: About two weeks, something like that. Then from Southampton we went to the boat. I think that I told you that my brother-in-law came from Calais on the same boat. We hadn’t known that. My son-in-law was seasick from the beginning to the end.

Q: How many days did it take to cross?

A: I think almost one week.

Q; Was it an American ship?

A: Yes, an American one. I believe that the name was Washington. We were booked for it and we had to wait until it came to Southampton.

Q: Were there a lot of German Jews on this ship making their escape?

A: Yes, there were lots of them. Some came from Calais and some came from England. (It is believed that the French harbor which was used was Le Havre rather than Calais since the harbor at Calais is very small, only being used by ferries, etc. and is hard to reach from Paris). It was very nice. It worked very well. The boat was beautiful and we had our luggage downstairs. Everybody was seasick except me and the little girl. I took her with me and then she got sick downstairs because of the rough water. I had my troubles, that I wouldn’t also become sick, but I made it. And my son-in-law was laying down on the chair on deck all the time. I was lucky that I could take care of the little girl. That was something. We had something to talk about.

Q: It is now 20 minutes to 4:00. Let us stop and I will come back next week.

A: Next week?

A: Yes.

Q: Third interview with Mrs. May. I am in her apartment on Daytona Parkway on Tuesday afternoon, July 18, 1978.

Mrs. May, you indicated in one of the other interviews that you did not have to wear the star. At least that is what I recall, that before you left Germany you did not have to wear the yellow star.

A: No, that came later.

Q: That did not come until later.

A: My mother had to wear it.

Q: After you had already left?

A: Yes, we had left.

Q: Had the decree been issued that all men had to sign their names as Abraham and all women had to sign as Sarah?

A: We had already left before that came. I know people here now, they came from there, and they had the Judah or whatever names they had been given. I didn’t remember that women were to be called Sarah. No, that did not come while we were there. We left earlier, but we left just in the last minute, I think.

Q: I am not clear about this. Did you intend to bring your mother to the States?

A: Sure, we tried. We sent an affidavit. My husband used the people he was working with. They gave him the affidavit and we sent it to her. Then they didn’t let them out unless they had a low number and she did not know and she had a high number, when she heard about it, so that she couldn’t make it. Some people could make it, but not many!

Q: Was she living with you?

A: She was living with me until we left. I called a cousin somewhere else, close by. Her husband was a doctor, the chief doctor of a hospital there. The name was Niedermendick. And she had no children. She was a cousin, the daughter of the sister of my mother. We told her to come and to stay with my mother. She came and she said that in the same night they had wanted to arrest my son-in-law. Just when we left. We knew that that would come. She was there (with my mother) until she was to go to a home, a Jewish home. There were two new Jewish homes and she was in one.

Q: In Frankfurt?

A: In Frankfurt, yes, and her sister-in-law, my aunt, was in the other one, on the same street. One thing I must say, we had a maid who went to visit her and we had some family who were still there who went to visit her. Suddenly they took the whole home -- all of them -- to the camp. I think to Theresienstadt. It was, or possibly Auschwitz. My family never told me exactly what happened. They heard it from a rabbi who came back to Frankfurt. The rabbi then came to New York City. They heard from him.

Q: After the war, or during the war?

A: When they took the people to Auschwitz?

Q: No, what I am asking is, you did not receive the news from the rabbi until after the war. Or was it before that?

A: Wait a minute. I think it was after the war. He came to New York City and they knew that he was from Frankfurt and they asked him. They called him up. He told them what happened to my mother. He came out. My family didn’t tell me. I never asked. Now, I know what happened when they came to the camps. She was over 80.

Q: Another question I neglected to ask is, in the 1930’s when you were in Frankfurt. Is Frankfurt a predominately Catholic or Protestant area?

A: Mostly Protestant, but many Catholics also. We had friends -- I am still corresponding with a gentile friend.

Q: Among your gentile friends, were most of them Catholics or Protestant?

A; Most of them Catholic but some Protestant also. I even had two friends who were Evangelical. There is one family to whom we still write. She is still living and there are children. Her youngest child was the age of my granddaughter. They were really friends of the Jews. Now she is also in a Catholic home. We write to each other. I had a letter last weekend from her. We send her many packages of food and dresses. She says that she has four daughters and one son. It was very rare that they could find something. She always signs herself as “Your thankful Maria Bertoldt.” That is her name. Suddenly then, after a few years, she wrote that now they can have everything and we shouldn’t send any more. So we send her still on Christmas, money. Her children, I think that they are well off. One is a teacher, a principal in a school close to Frankfurt, and the girls are married also and have children.

Tape two begins here.

In the home (where she now resides) there are only 20 people. She was a very good Catholic lady, always. But our maid was Catholic, and she was as if she belonged to the family. She died two years ago.

Q: Did you think that the Catholics were kinder, more generous, than the Protestants, or could you make no such differentiation?

A: The Catholics were more friendly to the Jews, that is for sure. With the other, you always felt that it is not so genuine. The Catholic people were much better and still I think that they are. The Pope also did something, but it still is no help with such questions as Israel.

Q: Some sort of official position or statement from the top is what you missed.

A; He is a little bit for Israel in the fact that he says that Israel has to exist, or something like that -- he doesn’t say anything against it. I cannot understand that because I was thinking very highly of the Catholic people. Even our maid took me once in a while to the cathedral. She went every Sunday, every holiday and sometimes in the morning for services. So I saw what is going on. I can’t understand the Pope.

Q: During the 1930’s did you attend, from the time Hitler came to power -- he came to power in 1933 -- until you left in 1938, the synagogue regularly? On the Sabbath? Or did you become too frightened to go?

A: Yes, too frightened. We couldn’t go out much. They knew everybody. They went into every house and they knew the Jews. That was something really extraordinary. Some Jews went to live in different cities and they found them also. They thought that they could hide but they couldn’t. We didn’t leave Frankfurt but we knew that they knew us and they were watching us to see what we were doing and everything. They were watching and they had so many people who told them things. How they got them all, I don’t know. I think that they were frightened! They were frightened because if they didn’t do what they wanted them to do, they put them into the camp or something.

Q: Another question I wanted to ask was about the disposal of property. When you left your home, I know that you said that, for example, your son-in-law’s business was taken over and that your husband lost his business. What happened to your home when you left in 1938? Did you just lock up and walk out?

A: We just walked out. What we could take along we took, such as dresses and wardrobes. We couldn’t take most things. They even came in for the jewelry. My mother had to give the jewelry up. They gave her a few pennies for it. They took everything. I told you that they took the books and burned them. They took the paintings. They took everything which was valuable.

Q: When you walked out of your apartment or home, did you lock the door?

A: My mother was still there. I told you that we called my cousin who stayed a few days with her until she could go to that home. She was still there. We couldn’t take her because we didn’t have enough affidavits.

Q: And then do you know what happened to your home?

A; No, I don’t know. She couldn’t write. You couldn’t write anymore. They opened every letter. When we got a letter from her it was opened. And it was also when we wrote to her. You couldn’t write anything what you had in your mind and you wanted to ask. We did not want to endanger her.

Q: After Hitler came to power, he very quickly established concentration camps?

A: Yes, as I told you, they picked up the men, they brought them in a big hall and from there they were sent somewhere.

Q: So you were aware of those concentration camps in the 1930’s?

A: Sure, sure we were.

Q: When did you become aware of the death camps? After the war, or did you receive news during the war?

A: That they killed the people? We knew it, but they always said no, no. We don’t do that. We just want them to be together there and to be taken care of, if they were taken sick. We didn’t know what happened!

Q: But you suspected that they were being killed?

A: We suspected nothing good. That is for sure. Because we were afraid that my son-in-law would be arrested, as I told you. In the night when they came to get him, he was out. People told us that. So no man was there. Later on they took the women. I told you that they took them out of the old age home and there were only women there.

Q: And after you got to New York, then all ties with Germany were cut? There was no way that you kept up with relatives or friends? For example, refugees coming into New York, let us say in 1939 and 1940, before the United States was in the war. Did you contact them?

A: No, when we saw someone in the street we talked to them, especially in Manhattan. Most of them were in Manhattan. Sometimes we would go to Broadway. We went to the park next to the river there. They were talking German and we talked a little to them. They came from other places, not just from Frankfurt. I remember that we had a house in the suburbs but we could walk from there. Across the street was a family with 20 children. Two wives were sisters. One died and the other sister, I met in the street. I said, “How do you come with all the children?” But I didn’t meet them anymore. Sometimes there were people from other cities in Germany. Later on, after one or two years, we met other people, Germans. Women came together. Husbands were working. They couldn’t do much. We came together during the week. Everybody was worried about their families there, what happened to them. Anyhow, we couldn’t do anything. I said that they opened the letters. Every letter which we got had been opened and every letter my mother got, also. When we send a package we tried to send such things as food sometimes. Food was very scarce at that time. You never know whether she would get it or not. They had nothing and that is why they took everything from the Jews. I think that was one of the reasons. After the last war, 1918, my husband was in the war. During World War II, he was here. It was hard for us to get settled in New York. First my husband had a room and I was in a room with him. And my daughter and her husband and the child, they had a little apartment.

Q: In the same building?

A: Not in the same building but we were very close; we could walk to each other’s places. My son-in-law started with Fuller Brush. Then he said to me that he met some friend from Germany who worked in his line. And they had a convention there and this friend said to him, “I know somebody who is looking for a refugee. I recommend you.” He did that and so my son-in-law came to Dayton and he got that job. I don’t remember what year that was. They were here a few years before us. And then he said, “I can do that for myself.” He started his own business. They (his old firm) got an new owner so he decided to start for himself. And it started very slowly and he made a go of it. The iron and metal, as he learned in New York, is different from what it is in Germany. He was working here to learn it. Fuller Brush was not just (his line) . We were not idle either. My daughter and I did do homework. And my husband earned the most. With the overtime he worked he earned $12.00 I think I told you that. And when my daughter moved to Dayton we visited each other once in a while. But after a few years, I think they were here already for eight years, she wrote, ‘Why don’t you come to Dayton?” She started in an apartment here also. No one was helping her. That was something, too. She was a stranger here. My son-in-law had been a stranger here also. He had a room until they found an apartment and until the furniture came. They (my daughter and granddaughter) came here later. When she saw that no one was helping her, she went to the (Jewish) community here and said, “If someone is coming and I can help, I will help them.” And she went to the train when they called her that this one or that one is coming. She went to the train, she was looking for a room, a job for these people. Some were tailors, some were electricians. And there is a family here, you have no idea how much she helped them. They didn’t know a word of English. I think that they came from the Polish frontier, the one with Germany. They are now very well off. He is a skilled worker. He works here for the Muelers. Do you know the Muelers?

Q: Yes.

A: Still, she went with him when he was ordered somewhere to work to translate what he has to do. She said, ‘because I had no help. I want to help others.” She does that still. She is working so much and sometimes I worry about it. This morning she was already in the synagogue helping. She is in organizations to help, not only for Jewish people -- we have an organization which helps the hospitals. Did I tell you that?

Q: No.

A: The Order of True Sisters -- that includes some gentiles in it. Last week they had a meeting, a board meeting. They said that there are two children here who are very sick. The parents are on welfare. The children cannot walk anymore. One is three and one is five, from different parents. They need wheelchairs. Do you know how much a wheelchair is?

Q: No, but I think it would be very expensive.

A: $800,00! One for each child! What did they do? They did buy the two wheelchairs, that organization. People who were there said, “I give $70.00, $100.00” and so on to get the wheelchairs. This is not for Jewish people who get the chairs. They give machines to hospitals and everything. It is a wonderful organization. I think that I have here something. They made a trip beginning of August to Cincinnati. They meet the organization from Cincinnati. They go by bus. I may go, but I am not so certain. It is long from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p. m.

Q: Yes.

A: I think that they will stay in a hotel and have something like a convention. My daughter wrote a skit for that, with singing. And they have some ladies who sing and speak about this organization. It is something like a jubilee.

Q: You say that gentiles are members of this organization?

A: Some, yes, and some are converted. We had a president who is converted. She was terrific, terrific. They have a thrift shop on Salem Avenue from the True Sisters. She started it and they made money and give the money to the hospitals. They give all the checks. Sometimes the doctors come or the nurses or such and give the checks to them for the hospitals. They gave a check to the rescue squad. The meeting will be in a motel. We have a new president now, since May. I don’t think that I will go since I didn’t make my reservations yet.

Q: Did Mrs. Appel speak very good English when she arrived in the States?

A: She speaks very good English.

Q: No, I don’t mean now. I mean when she arrived in the States.

A: She did too. We took it, both of us. She took lessons also, in Germany already. They had an English teacher, she and her husband. Any my husband had a teacher who was not too good. He never spoke very well. I don’t speak very well either, by the way.

Q: You do fine.

A: I have an accent. An accent of which I cannot get rid. Some people have even worse. But my granddaughter, she was born over there but she came here as a baby. Does she also have an accent?

Q: Not at all. How long was it from the time you got off the boat in New York before you began to work? Making the sewing at home, which you told me you did.

A: Yes, we heard from other people (that was a way to earn money) so we went to the factories downtown and asked if they had some work. They gave us the material. We had to carry it home. We had to work very hard on it. I don’t know how many pennies we got for piece work. I don’t know anymore but it was not much. We did some of anything you can think of since we were all very handy in needlework and such. My daughter, anyhow, she inherited it from my husband. He was very handy. I also made very may things. Sometimes we were sitting and knitting.

Q: Approximately how many years did you work in New York doing the sewing?

A: I came there in 1938 and I am here 30 years now. I was 10 years in New York.

Q: But how long did you work?

A: During the last years I didn’t work anymore. My husband made better money. We was even working here. Do you know Sucher (Meat Packing House), Beerman was the owner. He did a lot for the refugees, here. And they had a meat slaughterhouse and a meat- packinghouse. It was on Riverview somewhere. My husband was a watchman there. And when they came with the bulls that was not so easy. He was working sometimes in the night. That was dangerous. What he went through here! Then he was working part-time. Then he was retired. When my son-in-law started his own business, that was good then. He said that he had to learn first. He went here to Duberstein. Duberstein was the one who hired him to work there. So he learned it anew and after several years, I don’t know how many, he opened his own yard. He has this business for a very long time already. Then he took his son-in-law in the business and his son is in it also. My grandson was studying to be a dentist, here. And when it came to go to dental school they didn’t take him. That too was restricted. So many took Jews and so many didn’t. So he stopped and started ion his father’s business. What could he do? He liked it. He was in Ohio State and he was in Cincinnati and then he had to go to a special school and they didn’t take him. It is different now. Renate, my granddaughter’s (children), the oldest is going to take his bar (examination) next year but he was already in court as an assistant lawyer. This is different now, they can’t do that (discriminate) anymore. When you want to enter somewhere you have to write down your religion and all, you don’t have that anymore, in the applications.

Q: You said, in the beginning, that you considered yourself German and that you weren’t aware of much anti-Semitism before the 1930’s

A: No, not much. What we said was that the Kaiser was a little bit, but it was not directed mainly against us.

Q: Are you aware of very much anti-Semitism in the United States? What I am asking you to do is to compare the United States with Germany. The Germany before Hitler.

A: No, absolutely not here! No. Nobody is that here. Only I was suspicious. What I heard, I told you, with the elevator man of that house, when that Nazi was there and wanted to turn them in. But they told me that -- that he is working for the Nazis. I (personally) did not find that here, not in New York either. I told you that I have friends here.

Q: But do you have this suspicion of all gentiles?

A: I don’t know.

Q: I have heard other Jews say that they always have a feeling that they are always on their guard.

A: Yes, a little bit. As long, as I said, the government is not against (the Jews) I am not suspicious. But anyhow, sometimes when I see somebody (who acts) I think, “Do they like us or don’t they? Do they know I am a Jew, or don’t they?” I will say it when they ask me. I don’t know if I told you about my neighbor. She move in two years ago and we were talking, when she had been here long. She was sitting here and I was sitting here. She asked me, “To which church do you belong?” I said that I don’t belong to a church, I am Jewish. I belong to a synagogue. Something is in them, I think. Why did she ask me what church I belong? Somebody told me that she wants to convert me. The same happened in New York. A lady who I got to know, she had a grandchild like my granddaughter, the same age. We started talking. We were out for a walk. She was the widow of a Presbyterian minister. We were talking about everything. She said, “You know, one day I take you to the Presbyterian church.” And her son-in-law was a Presbyterian minister, too. They moved from New York to a little town, not far from New York, and she invited me sometimes there. She wanted to take me to the Presbyterian Church always. She said, “You know that we have a few people who used to be Jewish and who converted.’ That was a wonderful lady. We wrote letters to each other later on, until she died. You know I had always something else to do. When you talk to each other, it suddenly comes out. She wanted me to be a Presbyterian because she thought that the others are already converted. She took me to the church, she took me to the Baptist church, but she couldn’t convert me. That is something it varies from being a lovely lady. What I said was that the other’s husband was too (a minister). I was there visiting. She invited me and everything when we came together. That just makes me suspicious, when I talk to somebody.

Q: Yes, I understand.

A: When you hear that…

Q: This tape is running out. I am going to stop it and put in a new one. Did you want to ask me why I converted? I am not a Jew.

A: No, I know that you are a Protestant. What was your father?

Q: My father was a Disciples of Christ minister, a Protestant. And I converted to Catholicism.

A: Yes, why did you?

Q: Oh, I don’t know. I think that there were a lot factors. For one thing, the Protestant denomination that I was a member of had a liberal wing and a conservative wing. They couldn’t agree and I got rather disturbed at one time about the divisiveness within that denomination and I began to study Catholicism and it sounded very logical to me and logically right.

A: There is something in common with us.

Q: Oh, there is a great deal in common, yes.

A: I always thought that, when I came to the church and so on. Sure we don’t kneel, but anyhow they cover the head, don’t they?

Q: They use to, but not any more.

A: Yes, and your wife is Catholic also?

Q: Yes. She grew up an Episcopalian and she converted to Catholicism about the time we got married. But our prayer form is much the same. We pay a lot of attention to the Old Testament and Psalms and the Prophets.

A: That is it. I think Catholicism is better than the others. They have the Old Testament also?

Q: Yes.

A: Not only the New one. They study that also. That is what I think, whether I am right or not. I tell my friend here that the Jews never talk about religion. Sometimes they tempt me. I was invited to a Jewish wedding one time and they had Jewish friends, some of whom converted. They were studying and found a Jewish wife and she converted. She studied to be a minister and she converted to the other religion. That happens like that. I think that they converted to the Jewish faith when they married. But I don’t know if that’s so right. We can’t say anything. We can say, “As long as you have unmarried children you don’t know what they will bring home.” What can we do? If they are happy, then good! It is the right wife, O.K.

Q: Do you, in comparing life in the United States with life in Germany prior to the coming to power of Hitler, would you say that there is more advancement here for Jews, more opportunities? What I am driving at, what lurks behind this question is, do you think that the European culture and the European society offered more to a person or do you think that the United States offers more? It is frequently said that the United States is the land of golden opportunity. Do you believe that?

A: When we came to New York we were surprised. Everything was longer and everything was bigger. Yes, it was different, much different. Everything; it is the thinking of the people and the acting of the people -- the life. When you talk to someone who was born here and so on. Where I come from, we said that the people are stiff. When they were in a Coffee Restaurant, which you don’t have here, maybe there were 50 tables. Everybody was sitting at separate tables. Here they come to you to have a seat, or something. That was not (the case) where I come from. Not because we were Jews. When they came in they didn’t know who you are. But they were a little isolated, especially where I come from. Elsewhere it was, at times, better. In the Rhineland, they are much better. We came together, like here also, in the Rhineland. But mainly here we came together with other people from Germany, until we got acquainted. Especially here where there are not so many people from Germany. I had German friends, sure.

Q: As far as associations are concerned, sisterhoods and religious associations and civic associations and organizations, would you say that there are more here in the United States than, let us say, in Germany?

A: Yes, I am much more active with these things than other people. For instance we helped the people when the pogroms took place in Poland. We sent packages and boxes, big boxes and everything. I didn’t do so much. They had their organizations, so they were helping each other. But you didn’t help other people so much as they do here. If you saw in the paper that someone is very much in need then they write what this one sent and this one also. That never happened in Germany. I think that here they are much more good hearted. They didn’t care as much as they do here. That is something which puzzles me. It is wonderful when you read that somebody is very needy, that fire broke out and he has nothing, they take him in with his family. They didn’t do that in Germany, they didn’t care.

Q: Do you think very much of your former life before the war? Or do you not think very much about it? I know that you are thinking about it now because I am asking you questions and I have been for three weeks.

A: Yes, it was wonderful. Frankfurt is a wonderful city.

Q: Do you remember it? Do you think about it a lot?

A: No, not much. I don’t want to. I want to take it out. Sometimes it comes to me but in the main I don’t like it. I don’t want to see the people anymore. I wonder that people can go. I told you that somebody was there in Frankfurt and found it so dirty. It used to be such a clean city. It used to be beautiful. There used to be little parks all around the city, all around, but now they are built up. You could go from one park into another park. You could sit there and could enjoy yourself. Have coffee or no coffee, whatever you wanted to do. The children had playgrounds. They have it in New York, too, by the way. I went often with my granddaughter to the playground, when she was a little girl. I went with her once to the park on the East side, where the blacks were living. Nobody was there. I went with her alone. She was two or three years old. We could walk in that park and enjoy it. They had plenty of benches and on the playground she was playing with everybody. That is what we didn’t have in Germany. That is wonderful that they take care of that. Swimming pools and so on we had no outside swimming pools. There was some you could go inside, from the city. I went there every day. I went swimming every day. I don’t do that anymore. I loved it. I did it in the beginning in New York, also. In New York we went to the ocean, my husband and I. Every weekend we went there when the weather was good. We walked up Broadway, 50 blocks or more. I always say that Main Street here is as long as Broadway. What is the song? The wide Broadway?

Q: The great white way.

A: Yes. And you could find your way so easily. I was in New York for one week when I took the subway downtown. I went to Brooklyn and I had two sister-in-laws there. They never went alone, they always had to go with someone, they were afraid. I found my way so easily because the left is East and right is West and when you went with the subway it brought you everywhere. You could read that it goes here and goes there and where to change. It was so easy for me. Maybe I was there for a week when I went to the store. I think I told you that when I went to the store and they started speaking German to me.

Q: Yes, and you told them to speak English.

A: Yes.

Q: Of all your experiences in your long life and the wisdom that comes to you with your many years -- this is a tough question -- what would you choose to pass on to future generations?

A: To my family?

Q: Yes, to your family, that us, to future generations of your family.

A: Do things exactly as they are here. As I said, in Germany before Hitler, it was not such an open society. I mean that you had friends, but other people were isolated. When you had friends, you had gentile friends. My husband and a couple, they had one son the age of my daughter. They were gentile friends and every Sunday we were together, They lived in kind of a suburb but you could go, like here, on the bus. We did everything every week together. We were very good friends! We could talk everything over. Hitler forbade that. Everything was forbidden, yes. They couldn’t come anymore to see us. So my daughter had friends also who came, but it was a risk. It was a risk! If someone would have seen it, or would have said it, they would have taken them away. That was something, when they put signs in every store and every factory to throw the (Jewish) people out. They knew everyone who was Jewish! Whether the owner was Jewish or the people and the workers were, they were very well informed. They knew everything! They had us because they threatened, “If you don’t do that, we take you out, we take you away.”

Q: Back in the 1930’s, after Hitler came to power, let us say in 1933, 34, 35, when he would make these speeches over the radio, when Hitler made his long and very famous radio speeches, would people talk to you about the speeches?

A: Yes! Sometimes they did. You know we had a radio and when he was speaking on the radio and after he was finished, they were playing something, a dance or something. You know he put them in the camps.

Q: No, I never heard that story.

A: They put the people from the radio station in the camps. They were not allowed to play music. They had to talk about things like his speech. I will never forget that. They had all the radios and we were not allowed to have individual headsets (so you could hear what you wanted) so that they could hear what is going on. You were not allowed to have a radio, or anything. At that time they had no television.

Q: But in the streets during the next day for example, Hitler would make a speech in the evening and the next day you go out on the street. Would people comment to you?

A: Oh sure. Of course they did. I told you that when the milkman came and said, “Are you Jewish then it would be better if you go out.” My mother came and said that all the synagogues were burning. They told us that. They were afraid. That is what it was. They were afraid that somebody sees them or somebody hears them. Then we had rationing cards and when we had no friends who had paper or something extra at that time, I lost a lot of weight because the food was for the (entire) family. Sometimes I got something extra but not much. It was not so easy to go into a store anyhow because of the signs, “Jews not wanted.’ Such signs! Sometimes the people in the store damaged it.

Q: After you came to the United States and were living in New York I know life was very hard. I know all of you were working but did you ever go through a period of not having, so to say, the bare necessities, enough to eat?

A: No.

Q: Were you ever hungry?

A: No, we always could but -- maybe we didn’t buy the best -- but anyway we had (enough) to eat. Things were very cheap, everything. We didn’t make much money but we helped each other. I was in a family where we first had a room, in a German-Jewish family. We helped each other. You know exactly what we went through. It was very hard for my husband. When he came he hardly could speak English. The teacher was not very good and her came from a little village where they didn’t learn it. The schools were not like that (everywhere). I was in a city where we had to learn it (English). They made us. We didn’t think that we were going to need it. I think that I told you when my husband said that our daughter should go -- before Hitler -- she should go to the States because she had a girl friend there. We didn’t let her, my mother and I. We said why should we let that girl go alone? I believe that it would have been better. But then? Many times we said if we don’t have money, we don’t go out! They could have gone out. They could have sent the men out and we could have stayed in Germany. The Nazis took all the money and everything was gone, just like that. It is unbelievable. If we hadn’t gone through it, we wouldn’t believe it. They knew everything.

Q: Did your family, at first, believe that? I have heard it said that a lot of Jewish families in Germany thought that surely this is going to end. Surely it can’t get any worse. And they kept putting a decision off, month after month, until finally it was too late. Did your family, at first, say that surely this is going to pass? Or were you certain, from the very beginning, that it was going to get worse?

A: No, not in the beginning. I will tell you what gave us the idea, when we heard that they started to take the men. Then my husband, as I said, he got that address from a brother. The brother knew that (address of the uncle in New York) and he gave it to him and he asked for an affidavit, for him alone. So he said, “I have to go, before they kill my granddaughter, I go.’ At that age, it was not so easy. He had something here, under the arm. It was nothing serious but they first didn’t want to let him out. Strangely enough it started bleeding while he was on the ship. Nobody was helping him on the boat. Usually they have doctors there. When he came to the States the cousins picked him up and put him in that room. They didn’t care anymore! And when I was there my husband’s brother-in-law, the sister’s husband, he had no affidavit and I went to them and said that they should give me one for my mother and for the uncle. They said no, we have brothers so we can’t do that. We have to bring them out first. They were well enough off. They had a jewelry store in the Waldorf Astoria. What can you do when they have such ideas? When I came to London I knew people from Frankfurt and I met them after I made an appointment and I asked them if they could help me bring my mother out, and my brother-in-law. They said that they had family to bring out first. You can’t blame them, can you? They wanted too much money anyhow for the affidavits (RF: Affidavits did not cost more than the nominal fee to execute them and sign them before a Notary Public, but they were sworn statements that the recipient would not become a financial burden on the state or the Federal government and had to include a copy, at least a partial copy, of the previous year’s income tax, and that, often, was the rub.” And especially for my little granddaughter at that time, because she needed an education. She needed to go to school, etc. and she wasn’t going to earn any money.

Q: How much did you end up having to pay for affidavits, do you recall?

A: I don’t know. Thousands of dollars. I don’t know how much. We didn’t pay, they paid. They didn’t pay it, they wrote that they would come up with so much if something is happening. That could amount to a lot but they didn’t have to come up with the money. I know that my husband went to a relative he never knew on West End Avenue (in Manhattan) and the wife didn’t even let him talk to him. She said oh, he is not able to let you in, or something like that. No, it was very hard for him to obtain affidavits for us. Finally his boss gave him the affidavit for my mother. He didn’t make so much money which they owed. You had to have so much money, you had to earn so and so a month. I don’t know exactly how much was needed. That was hard, it was very hard for us to get affidavits. When you came to New York and you saw the stores, with the vegetables, the fruit and so on. They had it outside the stores. That was something we couldn’t believe. We didn’t have that in the last years in Germany. Food had become very scarce. And, I will never forget, my daughter went downtown -- she had saved a little money -- and she bought a dress for my granddaughter for 25 cents. My granddaughter with a dress for 25 cents! You can’t imagine that. She bought it in a big store in Manhattan, Klein’s on 14th Street. You have to find that out when you are a stranger in the city. I went out about these stores. In Brooklyn, they had Abraham & Strauss and in the Bronx, they had Alexander’s, a big department store, which is cheap.

Q: Now let me ask you another question that may be a little tough to answer. Do you feel that your views toward religion have been changed at all by your experiences in Germany? Do you feel that you are the same, that your beliefs are the same, that your religious practices are the same today as they were in the 1920’s? Do you feel that you are less interested in religion or more?

A: Better.

Q: More?

A: More. I don’t deny that we are Jews. I tell it to anyone who is interested. I go more often to the synagogue than ever. My parents were working so they couldn’t go so often. My father took my daughter often on Friday night and Saturday or holy days -- then I was helping my mother in the store. After a few more years we had more time. I think about it more anyhow and I like it in every synagogue. I have been in every one (in Dayton). I think our synagogue is all right. We were Conservative in Germany also and so we are here.

Q: I am going to stop this tape, but there is one more thing on which I want your opinion. If you could tell that there was any change in religious beliefs or practices since I have heard other people say that the Holocaust was such a terrible experience that God forgot them and they turned away from religion. Did you at all ever feel that way because of your experiences?

A: No. No. No. We didn’t. We know that it was forced on the people. Many of them didn’t want to do it but they felt that they had to. We didn’t have a claim against our religion for what happened. It was done by man.

End of Interview.