

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Ruth Heiman

October 16 and 17, 2010

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PREFACE

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Transcribed by April Pearls, National Court Reporters Association.

RUTH HEIMAN

October 16 and 17, 2010

Question: Hello. We're starting the interview again because I am afraid that it did not record. This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Ruth Heiman, conducted by Agatha Lysis (ph.) on the 16th of October at the Kindertransport Association conference in Arlington, Virginia. I apologize in advance that you would have to repeat, but we will just -- now that I've heard more, maybe it will even be more helpful that I can direct questions in a way --

Answer: Okay. My name is Ruth Heiman. You know that already. I was born December 31, 1923, at 7:00 in the evening, five hours before 1924; tax deduction, exactly nine months after my parents got married. My mother was -- my parents had a textile business. My uncles -- I had -- my father had several brothers. It's a large family, and they had a wholesale business. And my father, who was totally disinterested in business -- I had to go back to that -- however, they set him up in the textile business. And we lived comfortable, but no comparison to my uncles who were all very wealthy. And my father was, by nature, highly musical, would have liked to be a musician, which was out of the

question. And as I mentioned before, he had been in America before the war. At the age of 18, he had come to America like some of his brothers. Were in Louisiana: I don't know for how long. And when World War I broke out, his brothers insisted he come back to Germany. If you refuse -- and they said

if you refuse, then you will not belong to our family anymore. He went back, married my mother who had a profession, which was unusual for women. She was a chemist and worked for the Germany equivalency of General Electric, it was called IB, until she got married, and then she always worked. My mother always worked. We had a business, she worked in the business. Very strong, very strong, very powerful woman. As I say, most women were much stronger and more able to cope than men. And my childhood, as such, was quite pleasant, until I was about 5 -- until I was about 10 years old. And even then, our parents protected us to the umpteenth degree. We really didn't know what was going on. They kept -- I knew from nothing. To the extent that -- I don't know if it's right or wrong. Today you would probably consider it wrong. At that time, it was the thing to do. You didn't talk to your children about -- I know we covered the telephone. We thought somebody was listening in. This was in the late '30s. And I went to a German grade school, and the teacher was very anti-Nazi. I think because they told them that songs which were forbidden, famous song, and had two children who they sent to Switzerland; so they would not have to go into the Germany Hitler Youth Movement. But Nuremberg was extremely antisemitic always. And I was -- since my father had been in the World War I and fought at the front, I was -- the Jewish children whose parents fought, their fathers fought in the front, they were allowed to go to German high school. I refused to go, because I knew what was going on more than my parents. All of my friends went to the Jewish high school, which was very difficult to get into. You had to pass an exam. I don't know how I did it. I copied somebody else's notes. Got in when I was 10 years old and managed to graduate. We were forced to graduate with an equivalency of a high school exam at the age of 15. That is when schools shut down. It was a very orthodox school, where I learned -- we had Hebrew every day. I learned nothing. I had a good life. I had a good social life there. And then somehow or other, I got to -- my parents got me on the Kindertransport. I remember my father coming to Berlin and saying, you are going to immigrate to England. Sounded great to me. Anything to get out at that time. Berlin was not as bad as Nuremberg, because, of course, there was more of an international community there. So I was sent to England on a ship. I remember, as I said, being on the -- my mother pushed me on the train. That was it. Nothing told -- all she said, you forgot your washcloth. Got on the train with a bunch of other kids. And the Nazi officer came through just before we got to the Dutch border. And he said -- I had a watch, a very cheap watch. And he said, a Jewish kid doesn't need a watch, and he took my watch. I had nothing. We got to Holland. They gave us hot chocolate. Some people can remember the ship. I have no recollections of how I ended up in London where I was taken in by a

Jewish family arranged through relatives my mother had in England, I think, who were pretty poor. They were -- the woman, she was a young woman, very volatile. One minute she would hug me and kiss me, the next minute she'd hit me. And she had a little boy. I took care of him. I used to -- now he calls me all the time. Now he is 70. We are still in touch. He called me. He got in touch with me, I have to add, ten years ago. He wanted to know what happened. I don't discuss this thing. I don't discuss it. And I lived with him for a year and a half until I was interned at the Isle of Man. Because I was 15 when Holland and Belgium and France were invaded, and we were considered enemy aliens. And I was not yet 16. So we had to pass a tribunal at the age of 16. I was -- I don't know how I got there. I was at the Isle of Man, which was an interesting experience in itself. I was there for nine months. You want me to tell the story?

Q: Yes.

A: It's about the spy.

Q: That's okay. If you could, please.

A: We were put up in a hotel. And we had a house committee. Of course, I thought it was fantastic. I was there. I was 16 years old. I didn't have to do a thing. Read all day long, went to the beach, had a good time. And the food wasn't bad. We were not being bombed. And there is a place on the Isle of Man, there's a holiday camp. It's a resort areA: And they had stationed German nuns there. German nuns were interned there, I think about 19 or 20. And they all had separate camps, because they were very devout nuns. They were all completely covered. And for the fun of it, we used to count them every morning. They were praying every morning on the beach. And to backtrack, when I was -- I remember lights coming, flickering back and forth at night. And I mentioned it to somebody that I see these lights all the time. It must be -- are they German ships, or are they British search lights or whatever. Nobody took any notice. I don't know what happened. But one day I saw, instead of 20 nuns, there were only 19. So what happened to the other nun. There's a nun missing. And it turned out, that particular nun, I found that out only much later after I was released, a German spy had parachuted. They used to parachute. This was in the early '40s. They parachuted spies into England and disguised as whatever. This guy was disguised as a nun and tried to get off the Isle of Man by signaling to Ireland. And a week later, I was released. I was not told why. But I only found out later, I don't remember how, that he was a spy, and he was frantic trying to get out. So that was it.

Q: Could you please tell us a little bit about your earlier life in Germany, and maybe also about any anti-Semitism that you personally experienced or that you witnessed.

A: I experienced a lot of anti-Semitism pretty early on, as I said. I had very curly, very kinky hair. They called it Juden Haare. My brother, who did not have it, didn't have any

problem at all, because he had -- he was rather Slavic looking. And he could have easily passed for the Hitler youth, while I did not. And I remember walking out very often having rocks thrown at me. However, I had good German friends whose parents -- I was invited to birthday parties. All this stopped around 1934. Then people got scared. You know, they wouldn't -- I still have pictures of birthday parties where I was invited, and there was -- we had carnival. We were dressed up in costume and stuff. I have pictures of that with my German friends. And that stopped around 1934, '35, because the parents actually got scared, except one. We had a family living -- we lived in an apartment house, had a big apartment. My parents and my uncle lived with us. There was a family, he was a count. And they were pretty decent. I think, if I remember, they did invite us and talked to my parents and didn't greet us with "Heil Hitler". But I was more aware -- I don't think I was more aware, but I was anxious not to go to a German school and forced my parents to send me to a Jewish school by the simple method -- I was 10 years old. I drank a whole bottle of castor oil on the day of the exam. That way I don't have to go. I did not take the exam. Because you had to pass an exam to go to high school. And in Germany, you went to high school at age 10 for six years. I went to this Jewish high school, where my grades were very mediocre, except in sports and in socializing. And I belonged to a Jewish youth group in Berlin, and we had a great time, because we stayed enclosed, you know. We were very much protected by our parents. As far as possible they protected us. However, children realize things that they don't tell their parents either. We tried to protect our parents, too. My brother was too young. I don't remember much. He was just a nuisance, as far as I'm concerned, at that time.

Q: And what do you think that you might have noticed that your parents weren't seeing as a child?

A: That were what?

Q: Do you have an example of something you feel that you were noticing that maybe you were saying that you were protecting your parents a little bit?

A: Yes, by not telling them that people attacked me on the street. I didn't tell them that. I found another way of going. I did not tell them that I read *Der Sturmer*, whichever. I was an avid reader, in fact, to the extent that I was told by my mother, stop that incessant reading and do something. So I bought a *Sturmer* or I found a *Sturmer*, and I hid it, and I read it. And it was totally the most horrendous thing. And as I said, to this day, I cannot understand how a people of so-called literate, cultured people can read pornographic stuff like that. There was somebody in our community, I don't -- I only remember the name. His name was Katzenberger, was accused of *Rassenschande* because he had a Chekhov girlfriend. And what happened to him, I don't know, something rather awful. And all of this was in *Der Sturmer*.

Q: Can you talk about your brother a little bit.

A: Yes. My brother was -- he was 3 years younger than I was, very attached to me. To me he was a nuisance, because he read my diary. And he was sent to -- I was already in England when I found out. But after the war broke out, they managed to -- my parents managed to get him out to Palestine, where I have my uncle and my aunt and my mother's brother lived and my cousin. All our relatives were in Palestine already, the ones who had survived. And he told me this only later on. He was sent -- he and two other children, ages 12, 11 and 13, he was 12 years old, were put on a train to Trieste, where they were supposed to get a ship to Palestine. And when they got to Trieste, the ship wasn't there. I ask him, this is not long ago, a few years ago, what did you do. He said, I don't remember. They must have wandered the streets of Trieste. I don't know what they did. After about three or four days, the ship came. They got on the ship. He told me, nothing -- he has no recollection of it. And all of the letters that my parents wrote, he has them. Now, I have to say, what I do now, as a volunteer, I work for the -- I do translations for the Leo Baeck Institute. And presently, I'm also going to have -- I just finished a lot of translations for a pastor minister in Germany who published pamphlets for small towns, what happened for Jews who lived there from the 12th Century on, just background of this particular village, and I translated all of that into English. That is what I'm doing at this point.

Q: That's great.

A: They asked me to come to Germany next year to see -- for the publication.

Q: Oh, that's great.

A: I got a little sidetracked. What were we talking about?

Q: About your brother.

A: About my brother, yes. He has the letters of my parents, which I could have -- should have translated. I can't do it. He speaks English fluently. So he can handle this. I left it to him. I never discuss this with my -- I never showed it to my children. They couldn't read it anyway. They are in German. But I did read two letters from my mother. That was all. When I was -- about 1939, '40, they wrote to these people very concerned about me, because I was 15 years old, what would happen to me. And also, I was at a very vulnerable age. What kind of trouble can I get into. In fact, I was sent to America with the following sex education. When you go out with a boy, keep walking, and don't sit down. That was it. That's all. That's all I learned. And that came in very handy. After Dunkirk, I met a young guy who was from Vienna, and we went out. We went to the park, and we sat on the bench. And then, I found out what they were talking about.

Q: Yes. Yes.

A: That was my sex education. That was, to me, unforgivable how little we knew. You know, that was those days, just not good enough.

Q: Right.

A: And then my parents, I found out my parents were deported very early on. And I didn't tell anybody. I had -- my mother had a cousin in Sweden. And I don't remember, I think he wrote. He told my aunt, who was my mother's aunt, my great aunt what happened. He found out that my parents were deported immediately to Sobibor and that they were gassed within three weeks after they got there. And I didn't tell anybody because I could not, simply cannot handle, and not to this day, any kind of pity. I didn't want any -- this is my business, you know. My brother is the same way. My brother and my sister-in-law, they lost a son in the war, in the Lebanese war. My sister-in-law, who was Hungarian descent, was able to really let go, and he didn't. We're just too inhibited, to this day. So be it. It's nothing. I don't apologize for it. You know that is how we were made, in a way, how we were brought up. Pretty unemotional, which made it difficult, but also was a help at times.

Q: And do you -- maybe you don't remember if we had talked about it -- if you remember the Kindertransport?

A: The Kindertransport, yeah, I remember coming to England. You know, the people who took me in, they were, in a way, they were very -- I spoke very little -- very little; I spoke no English. I spoke whatever English I learned in school. And they invited people, young people to the house who lived nearby so that I learned English. And I learned English by playing Monopoly and not speaking a single -- nobody spoke German. They took me to the movies, and that was How Green was My Valley, and within six months I spoke English. I was sent to a school. In England, you went to a private school. You didn't go to public school. Of course, there was no money. However, there was -- school was impossible. You could get a teacher certificate by finishing high school. And I went to a school, Pitkin (ph.). I got a uniform, and I got a hat and a uniform, the whole bit. And I met a young girl there who became my friend and whose parents owned a pub. And we've been friends. We were friends all our lives until she died last year. And I do remember, they were talking -- the first two or three weeks I was in school, they were talking about somebody called Enemy. Now, my cousin's name was Anime (ph.). And I said, why do they keep talking about Anime, Anime. That was the only word I understood. But within six months, I spoke fluent English, and until I came to America, I spoke English without an accent, with a British accent. I said buttuh instead of butter. That was my -- the people were not bad. It was okay. But I was always the outsider, no question about it. And they always -- and people started feeling sorry for me. And many years later, when I went back to England with my husband after my children were grown, I bought all new clothes. I wore all the jewelry I had, which wasn't a lot, to show that I

made it. And there were -- because I felt so inferior, and they had -- the people I lived with after I came out of the internment camp, was the sister of the woman before, which was very strict, very clean and very neat. They had three daughters, one my age and twins who were two years younger. One was deaf. So I had -- she was totally deaf. But they were pretty good. The husband was very compassionate. The wife less so. She was very demanding. But I learned a lot. I learned how to be a marvelous house cleaner, best cleaner in the world.

Q: Do you want to talk a little bit more about your time on the Isle of Man?

A: The Isle of Man, yes. The house committee, the story of the house committee. Ms. Brahms, I think her name was Abraham, she became Ms. Brahms, called me one day. Oh, there was another story. I was by far the youngest. I was six years younger than the next young woman. There were only women there. And there was two women who were always fighting. One was from Vienna, and the other one was from Berlin. I found out afterwards they were prostitutes. And I got sick. I had the flu. And these women were desperate for children. They wanted to take care of me. So they both came, and they came with a hot water bottle. One came with hot water. And they were screaming and fighting. I was lying in bed pretty sick. I think I had flu. And one opens the hot water bottle and pours the water over the other one. But I recovered and recuperated. I was like a pet to them really, so. And life wasn't bad on the Isle of Man. And then I came back to London. I started working first in dressmaking, supposed to be a dressmaker. Totally unsuitable for it. Totally hated it. And then got a job. I wanted to go -- oh, yes. I wanted to go to the ATS, but I wasn't old enough. I was 17. They had a girl's training course, something. However, for some reason, my relatives wouldn't let me. I don't know what say they had over the matter. No, you can't go to the ATS, too many men around or whatever. So I ended up in a factory working four years, and I did a good job. I started out as a toolmaker's helper. And then one day I was promoted to a very big machine that had just arrived from America, a milling machine came from Pittsburgh, size of this room. And I was making little blocks. And I got a wide apron, learning how to do this. I was 18 years old. And they had a minister of -- the war minister, and they were showing him the factory. Ms. Heiman, will you demonstrate the milling machine. I demonstrated the milling machine showing off, put my finger right through it and cut off half my finger. I still have no sensation. So after that, I couldn't work for a while on the machinery, because I could only use one hand. So they put me on sorting out stuff with old people of 30 and 40, and I worked. And then I was promoted. I became -- I'm not that stupid; so I don't have to sit there all day. I became an instrument inspector. And we made something to do, put into planes, airplanes. And I worked there for close to 60 hours a week with overtime. Not bad. Made good friends. Learned a lot about life from ordinary people, very, very ordinary people and had very -- I always say, my best friends were the British, the ordinary working class people. They were kind. They didn't question

me about my background. They were never judgmental. And if it hadn't been -- if I hadn't met my husband, I would still be in England. I would now be an English woman.

Q: And can you tell me the story of how you met your husband.

A: Yes. My husband -- as I say, no nice girl went out with an America, you know. They had a reputation. They were called overpaid, over here and oversexed. So you didn't go out. You know, you had to be introduced. You had to be very careful. And my husband was -- I had two cousins who were distant relatives of mine. I met one when they came. They were stationed in London. And I met Marty. He was ten years older than I was. He knew me because he was 14 when I was 4, but I didn't know him. And his family had given him my address, and we met. And that's another story. Piccadilly was an American -- a club for the American soldiers, and there was a newsstand there. And I'm standing there waiting for Martin. I didn't know what he looked like. The lady who owned the newsstand said, you can't stand there. I said, why not. It's somebody else's stand. I said, I have a right like anybody else. I didn't know that Piccadilly was a place especially for prostitutes. So she said, young lady, I'll advise you; move.

Q: Oh, no.

A: And I don't know. I met him. Somehow we met. And we only spent a few days together because he was sent overseas. That was it. And then he wrote me during the war. We kept in touch, but I had another boyfriend. He was engaged to somebody else. That's a long -- he was engaged to a girl in Argentina. I had a boyfriend in England, but that broke up. And we got -- he got -- we came to America. We couldn't get a ship because we were called GI issues. We were only fiances. On the same ship came -- we came over on a ship and landed here January 1, 1947, they had a bunch of German war brides who had children who were already married to Americans. And there were the British girls and the German girls. They had to separate us. Fights broke out. We were furious that they let the Germans on while we had to wait for a year to get to America, while the Germans came. So that was quite a to-do. And the ship, I remember the steward said to us, young ladies, you don't know what you are in for. I take as many of you back as I bring over.

Q: Oh, wow.

A: It happened very frequently. I met one guy, I met a man, a soldier from Kentucky. And he couldn't read or write. He said, the first time he had ever worn shoes was in the Army. So these young girls from England, they all looked alike, and they all had money. So that was -- and I came here, and my parents owned -- my parents-in-law -- my father-in-law was a cousin of my father. And they owned a chicken farm in New Jersey, in Lakewood. And we came here. We got married in March '47.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the war.

A: About what?

Q: About the war.

A: The war, yes. It was, at times, it was frightening. I remember, I was not there. I missed most of the blitz. However, the British were always very calm. And I remember the outbreak of the war, where we lived, I lived with this family Robinson. Across the street lived a family, a man and a wife, called Atkinson. And the British were very calm. Nothing ever shook them. And on the -- I think it was the 3rd of September, when the war broke out, I was sick. I threw up, and I came back. Everybody, let's have a cup of tea. And Mr. and Mrs. Atkinson came over and sat down to have tea, very calm. And Mrs. Atkinson had a coat on. And she opened her coat, and she was totally nude. She was a nudist. They were nudists, and she forgot to get dressed. That is how they show their excitement. I remember, she quickly went like that. She had forgotten to get dressed.

Q: Wow.

A: That was the outbreak of the war. And another scary thing, I was out on a date, also with a distant relative, a cousin, an American officer. We were in London in Leicester Square. Now, I saw subways here like that, with an enormous long escalator. We were going up an escalator. Air raid siren had just stopped, and another one started. And that's the only time I saw British panic, the people were going up the escalator, other people going down. Everybody fell backward. And fortunately, this guy held up ten people. Otherwise, we would have all been killed. We did have a shelter in the house, a table like this, a heavy table. We were supposed to sit under the table. And the children were evacuated. I was not evacuated. I didn't want to. I was old enough. I stayed in London, on the outskirts. You know, it was scary. And I remember, the Robinsons, whose original name was Robinowitz, said at the big outbreak of the war, if the Nazis -- if the Germans set foot in England, we're going to turn on the gas. That I remember. We did not starve. We had enough food. Except, I weighed 30 pounds more then than I do now, because we ate a lot of bread and potatoes. And since I worked in a factory, we got extra rations. I got extra rations. And we got food rations, coupons, and clothing coupons. I sold my clothing coupons for sweets. I'd rather having candy than clothes.

Q: That's a good idea. A: I think I would do that, too. Maybe then, let's then jump a little bit ahead to your life in the United States. Do you want to talk about that?

A: I had a good life. I came, as I said, got married. We used my husband's pay to buy a house. It was impossible to get an apartment, and I had a good -- as I said, my uncle insisted that I come to Palestine, and my husband too, to see my brother and my family. And I was just married three months, and I left. I have all of the letters. That was not easy

to be -- it was a long trip in those days to go to Palestine. It was like three weeks. We had a change in Genua, stuff like that. And so I was gone. And then, when I came back, we -- my husband was in the spice business. He worked for a spice company. We had two children. My son is now 61 years old. My daughter is 58, and I have grown grandchildren. And we had a wonderful life until he died ten years ago. He was 83 when he died. He had a stroke. And we had a very good life together. What attracted me to him at the time was also as a father. He was very protective. He took care of everything. I felt -- I was very anxious that someone would take care of me, instead of having to take care of myself. And yet, I was still very independent. I got a job.

Q: Your children or your grandchildren, do you talk about your experiences with them?

A: My children, to some extent. My grandchildren, not at all. They don't even know. That is why I just bought a book. Not at all. Both of my grandsons live in Pittsburgh right now. One is a web designer, and the other one is going into physical therapy. Never. Even my daughter complained about the fact that I never talk about it. And she said, all I ever learned -- she was in Israel. She spent two years in Israel. And she said, everything I learned about what happened is from your brother, from my brother, not from me. I wanted to get on with my life. I did not want to dwell on the past. It was my fault up to a point, but I didn't want to. And my husband talked to them about it, but I didn't even tell him everything. That was my shtick. It was just too difficult.

Q: Thank you for sharing. And is there anything else that you would like to add, or is there a memory or --

A: All I can say is, always -- it's what I said in my last interview too. People have to learn to be tolerant of each other. I get terribly, terribly upset when I see what is going on now with the gays, with this -- anybody who is different, different color, different persuasion. As long as you are a decent human being and don't hurt anybody else, you can do whatever you want, as far as I'm concerned. Intolerance, and the advantage I think we have in America is that it's not a homogenous society. There are so many cultures, so many religions. We've got to accept them. You can do what you want. Leave me alone. But be tolerant towards other people. I go to the -- we have in New York -- I don't know if you've heard of it, The Holocaust Tolerance Center, The Tolerance Museum, and my emphasis is on tolerance. That is what you have to teach children and not be bullies and not look down on other people's color or because they are a different race or a different background or a different education.

Q: Great. Anything else?

A: I can't think of anything else.

Q: Thank you. Thank you so much.

A: You're welcome.

End of File One

Beginning File Two

Q: This is a continuation of an interview with Ruth Heiman on October 17, 2010, regarding the Kindertransport. Please go ahead.

A: The interview yesterday I left out the most important thing to me that I pushed out of my mind all along. When my son was born, when I was in the hospital giving birth to my son, I was furious at my mother for not being there. And I needed her so much. I was 24 years old. She had been killed six years earlier.

Q: I want to thank you for sharing that.

A: I knew that, but nevertheless, I never got over the anger. How could she leave me at a time like that. Totally irrational. My husband was there, of course. It was totally irrational. I never forget it. This was '49. She was killed in '43.

Q: Did she die in a concentration camp?

A: My parents went in 1942 to a death camp. That is the addition.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You're welcome.

End of File Two

Conclusion of Interview