

Ilsa Cole Testimony Transcript

I was born in Germany in 1916. At that time my father was a soldier in the German Army and he was far away from home. My mother, who was very young and had one baby already, went home to my grandparents and that's where I was born. We lived with the grandparents until the war was over in 1918. And so, I was about two years old when we came home to our own house.

Geilenkirchen was a small town, a county seat, about 4,000 people lived there at that time. My family had lived in that particular town for generations. I never knew of anyone – Dahl – who lived anywhere else. My grandfather was born there. I believe his father was born there. And my father certainly thought of himself as being a German just like all the other people around him. We practiced our religion. Actually we were, I think you'd call it Conservative.

I went to school – there were three of us, three children. My sister who was a year and half older than I, my brother three years younger than I. I went to a Catholic school run by the Ursulines, the nuns. And it was a very excellent school. I went there in kindergarten and then ten years. There were about four Jewish children in the school. The nuns were very nice to us and when the Catholic children had religious instruction, the Jewish and the protestant or Lutheran children would go into a separate room and do their homework. The treatment was absolutely equal and fair and we had many good friends and felt just really at home.

That went on... I went to this school for ten years. During the last year there was talk of Hitler and talk - it was 1932 - and talk of Communism and I guess the nuns didn't really know which way to turn. It was difficult for them too. We had, my sister and I and there were maybe six Jewish children in the whole school. We were treated very fair and I was the valedictorian of my class and had to address the school - the faculty and the students. And at that time I already knew that things were going to get very difficult and it was a very moving moment for me.

So you see we were fully accepted. We never felt that we were different from the other children until all of a sudden it just all turned and people became afraid. They became afraid to talk to us, afraid to associate with us. And that became then very hard especially growing up and thinking they were all your friends.

I never forget coming home - on the first, the first... What was it called? I forgot the word of it - but when they stopped Jews from going into Gentile... uh, they stopped Gentiles from going into Jewish homes and in front of, placed soldiers in front of our house. And I was coming home and there was a neighborhood boy, with whom I had grown up, standing in front of our door in uniform and acted as if he didn't know me. That was the first time I really realized what was really going on.

My father was in the cattle business. And he and his brother were partners in this business. My grandfather, before my father, had already been in the same business. And we lived in the family

home that my father bought from his mother. My father was one of eleven children - seven boys and four girls. And the brothers, all seven of them, served in the German Army and they all felt the same way we did – they felt that they were Germans of Jewish religion.

After I finished school, I had to decide what to do and I wanted to become a dress designer. And I worked for a French lady in Aachen, which Aachen was twenty-five kilometers from Geilenkirchen. I worked there for five years and she was very nice. And I left there to go to Berlin to continue my education. The people I worked with were pleasant enough. I had not too many complaints. At that time though it became so bad. We couldn't go into theaters. We couldn't participate in anything that was going on in the cities anymore. And the Jewish organizations started something they called *Kultur für Ein*, which was actually to give jobs to the Jewish actors and actresses and the musicians and at the same time provide some entertainment for the Jewish people. And that lasted awhile and somehow we always had the feeling, well, if we can't participate in what the Germans do we'll just go on the way we can.

That was unfortunate, especially as far as my parents were concerned, because my father and my mother and almost my entire family did not get out of Germany because they couldn't see what was coming. They couldn't, they just couldn't see themselves living anywhere else because they had lived there all their lives. And by the time they realized what was going on it was too late and they couldn't get out.

Now, I - after the five years in Aachen, I went to Berlin and in Aachen already you couldn't go to the opera house. You couldn't do any of these things. But when I came to Berlin it was about the time of the Olympics, I think, and they had those in Berlin. And they covered up all this Nazi business until that was over and then things got bad. They would send Nazis in uniform, SA or SS, into the restaurants or into the hotels and arrest all the Jews that were there. And you didn't hear from them anymore. Usually when they - if somebody did get out, they would try to leave Germany as fast as they could. But it wasn't easy to get a place, to go somewhere. It isn't as if you could just say I wanted to go to Holland, I wanted to go to Belgium. I just wasn't like that. They wouldn't let you in.

So it was... I was... I had gone to Berlin to attend a school but I was there just a very short time and the school that was run by Jewish people was closed and so I did get a job in the dress manufacturing company and every morning when I came to work, they would say this one was arrested and this one was not there anymore. And it was just terribly scary - frightening, frightening times.

And I then started to prepare to go to America. And my parents would say, "Oh, you go ahead," they would say to me and to my brother, "and then when you are settled, then we may come." Well, unfortunately, it never came to that. They just... by the time they were ready to come, there were so many people and they had to take a number and that number was somewhere way

in the future when they would be called and they never got out. They were deported to a concentration camp in Poland and never heard from again.

Well, I had relatives here in Kansas City - my mother's sister who had come here with her husband. And they are the ones who helped me to get out of Germany. To send... You had to have papers from an American citizen who would guarantee that he would take care of you if you couldn't make a living and so on, and my relatives did that for me.

So, I went to the consulate in Berlin in the summer of 1938, I think. You always got a date a long, long way, you know. So, I... They told me that I would get the visa, I think, on November 15th of 1938. So, after I knew that, I went home to be with my parents for the few weeks that I had left before I would leave the country.

The American Consul was very set in his way. He wouldn't give a visa one day before it was due. I was at that time engaged to my present husband and he had papers from a friend in St. Louis. Well, anyway, times were terrible. My fiancé had, he had gotten his - he lived in Koblenz - he had gotten his visa for August, I believe. And it looked as if war would break out in Germany any moment, and he decided that it would be best, as long as he had the papers, that he would leave, because you never knew what would happen. They would close the borders, in case there would be war.

I did forget to tell you what the changes... I mean the terrible things that the population of these small towns did to the people. Jews couldn't have a telephone - they could not have a telephone anymore. The Jewish butcher, his store was closed, he couldn't work anymore. The Christian butchers wouldn't sell meat to Jews. The barbers wouldn't cut the hair of the Jews. It was a situation that was, I can't describe it. It's so inhuman.

Well, my husband then decided to go. I remember we met in Cologne one day. I lived in Geilenkirchen, I was in Geilenkirchen ready to go but I didn't have my visa. But he had his and so we convinced him that it should be, that he should leave because you never knew what was going to happen. So he did that. He went from Cologne that night to Belgium where he had a cousin. See, if you had an American visa, which he then had, you could go through Belgium and through Holland. They would allow you in for a limited time. Same thing with England. If you didn't have that, these countries didn't want you because they didn't have the facilities to take care of more people. They were very small countries. And he was lucky to have the visa so he went without even saying goodbye to his parents because it just looked as if the war was going to start any moment. He went on to Belgium, Holland, and then to England. That was, I think maybe in August or September... No, August. It was in August of 1938. And I stayed with my family. I had tried to call the American Consulate but I just couldn't...they wouldn't give me the visa, not a day earlier, so, whatever happened, happened. I couldn't get out of Germany. So then I think my visa came the first week in September and I had booked on the *Manhattan* to leave Germany on the 18th of September....November not September! November it was.

So I was with my parents on the 9th of November and we had, on that day, a Polish Jew had killed a German diplomat in Paris. And there were constant reports on television - on radio, we didn't have television then - on the radio, and we knew something was going to happen. But that night we went to bed, like every other night, normal time and during the night all of a sudden we hear an awful lot of noise in front of our house. And my father opened the window on the - my parents were on the second floor, he opened the window, and I was above on the third floor in my bedroom. And he said, "What's going on down there?" And somebody yelled - there were a lot of people in uniform, awful lot of people - somebody yelled, "Are you a Jew?" and he said, "yes." And they said, "Well in ten minutes we will burn your house down."

So, what do you do if somebody says that? We... I grabbed my passport, my purse, and a suitcase. I was... I threw some things in the suitcase. My mother took her purse and took some valuables. You get so confused; you don't even know what you're taking at a moment like that. And then we went to the railroad station. We got to the station and there were - it was about four blocks away from our house - there were almost all the Jews from Geilenkirchen. They were mostly old people. Their children had gone away or worked somewhere else. And nobody knew what to do. Well, I bought a ticket to Cologne.

I have to say something else first. My brother, three years younger than I, had come home. He had worked in a city called Essen, which is not too far away from Geilenkirchen. He had come home also to leave for America. And he had gone to Stuttgart, where he would get his visa. There were different places in Germany. People from the western part would go to Stuttgart. And so he had gone there, and then on the way back he was stopping to say goodbye to my grandmother and to my relatives who lived in Hamm. And we didn't know where he was at that moment, whether he was already in Hamm or whether he was still in Stuttgart. So we just didn't know where he was. My sister was working, also away from home, in Germany. So on this *Kristallnacht* - well, see, when we... when I went to the railroad station, I was under the impression that what was going on in Geilenkirchen was just happening there, because the people in the small towns were very much more antisemitic than the people in the big cities because the people in small towns, they were watching each other and one tried to outdo the other. So I thought that this was just an idea of the people in Geilenkirchen. I did not know that it was nationwide or ... I had no idea what was happening.

So I got on the train and I was just shaking. It was just an awful situation. I went to Cologne - that's about 70 kilometers from Geilenkirchen - and I get off the train there. Meantime I had combed my hair, you know you get out of bed and run out. Well, I had bought my ticket from a travel agency in Cologne, and so I thought I'll go there first and see if I can change the ticket or what I could do. So the travel agency was right close to the railroad station. I go in there and the whole place was filled with Jewish people all in the same situation, trying to buy tickets to go out to have to get visas. I'm standing in line to be waited on and all of a sudden somebody tapped on my shoulder and there's my brother. See, we didn't know where he was at all and so we both cried and then we found out what we can do. And we both tried to get visas - a visa to England

and a visa to... Well, I got a visa to Belgium and then to England. And then in order to catch the ship that I had booked on the *Manhattan* on the 18th from South Hampton, I believe. So my brother and I, we were together at least.

When I looked around in Cologne, I was just amazed because in Cologne, the area around the railway station was beautiful shops and a very elegant area and the Nazis had destroyed all of it. They had broken the glass in all the windows and the merchandise was on the street. That was the first time that I realized it wasn't just Geilenkirchen where this all was always happening. And my brother and I, we hadn't had anything to eat, you know. We went up and down the street looking for a restaurant where we could get some food and all the restaurants had signs – "Jews are not wanted." "Jews are our misfortune." "Jews stay away." I mean, there wasn't a place where you could even buy something to eat. Went up and down the streets there trying to find some little place. Finally, we decided that we just had to get - go in somewhere and as it happened, you know neither my brother nor I, I don't know what they mean by looking Jewish but people couldn't tell whether we were Jewish or what we were. We looked like any other, anybody else. So nobody really bothered us.

Then I went to get my visa to go to Belgium and to England. I had no problems with that because I had the American visa to leave for America. And my brother and I then tried to contact our parents. And we had relatives in Aachen, and before I left, my mother had said that they would probably go there, because they also didn't know that the same thing was happening in Aachen that had happened in Geilenkirchen. So we tried to call my parents and we did find them at one of my uncle's house and they were under house arrest. They could not leave the house, but they were not taken into custody by the police.

So that night we stayed at a hotel in Aachen – in Cologne, also where it says Jews are not wanted, but we had to stay someplace and they didn't bother us. The next morning, my brother went back to Essen - that's where he worked - and I went to Aachen to see my parents and then to go to Belgium the same night. So, my father did get the permission to take me to the railway station. My mother did not. So, that was the last time I saw them.

And I went to Belgium where Walter had - my husband - had a cousin and I stayed there overnight, and the next day I went to Houtvenne, Holland and went to England on the boat. And in the morning, I was standing there with my passport - you have to show the passport - and who stands behind me? My brother. He had come on the same boat and so it was really an unusual thing to happen that the two of us were together. And then we stayed in London. I had, I have some cousins in London, until the 18th when we took the ship and came to America.

So my experience was very terrible and we... for a long time we did hear from our parents. They then gave up their home in Geilenkirchen and moved to Aachen where they shared a house with my, with an uncle and aunt. But at the end they all had to be, had to move into, I only know this

from the correspondence, they had to move into a ghetto-like districts, where they lived in very poor housing, and then from there they were transported to Poland and died.

Interviewer: How was it that you came to Kansas City?

Well, my uncle and my aunt arranged to send papers to me. Actually, I didn't realize myself how important it was that I should get busy and try to get out of Germany because I was young and I had all this family there and I kind of hesitated. But then I thought, well, I'd better make some arrangements and then I can still do whatever I want to, and I was certainly fortunate that I had these relatives here. Otherwise I would have gone with the rest.

Source: Ilsa Cole edited video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/coleilsa/>