

Ann Jacobson Testimony Transcript

I'm Ann Reisner Jacobson. I was born April 25, 1926 in Berlin, Germany. And I was born into what I might consider an extremely comfortable home. My father was a civil engineer. And my mother a graduate of the Conservatory of Music in Berlin. Both had an interesting background. My grandfather, my father's father, had been a physician in Gratz, Austria, and my father had wanted very much to be a physician also. But his father was very opposed to that – in fact told him that he would disinherit him - and he decided to become a civil engineer instead, and ended up in Germany and specifically during the war, World War I that is, building oil tankers and installations for the German government during the war in Bulgaria, Romania and I believe even Russia.

My mother had been born of German parents in Poland and she, after her father died, she and her mother emigrated to Berlin, Germany, so that she could finish her education and eventually she became the secretary, personal secretary of Pola Negre - she was a movie star. Both my parents, before they met and after, were part of that interesting scene in the '20s in Berlin - very much intellectual cultural scene. Berlin was sort of the Mecca of artists, writers, musicians and that sort of thing. So our household was an exciting one.

My father had been married once. His wife died in the 1918 flu epidemic, and they had had a boy and a girl, and he had been a widower for about five years. And then he met my mother and they got married. And then later I was born and my younger brother was born. So there were two sets of us in the, in the family.

My dad had a business selling auto parts and working with oil companies on materials and parts and whatever it was. In 1932, he was made the District Director of Olex for Württemberg – Stuttgart being the main community in that district - and we moved from Berlin to Stuttgart. That was a pretty exciting time because for the first time we lived in a house. And also had a car, which was unusual in those days. In late 1932, early 1933, my father was told that he had to be let go because of Hitler's and the government's requirements that companies need to get rid of their Jews. So I still have the letter that tells him that they're very sorry but because of that they needed to let him go. I have the feeling that probably he was the only Jew in a management position at that time.

So big arguments started because my mother, having been so to speak an émigré before and getting away from Poland where antisemitism was rampant, did not want to go to Austria where my father wanted to go, still being an Austrian citizen. He was a true blue Austrian. And he said, "It'll never happen there." And my mother said, "Well, it's too close – too close for comfort." Nonetheless, evidently my father won out and we did move to Vienna.

After that everything seemed to be pretty normal. We lived a very comfortable life. I attended public school. I don't... I cannot remember any particular incident or specific

conversation about antisemitism in those days. I went to the synagogue on Saturdays with my girlfriends. We went to religious services in a very beautiful synagogue. My father never went – just my mother. And certainly we saw ourselves and thought of ourselves as Jews.

When I finished grade school – public school, which lasted four years – my parents started looking around to see where I could go to school for the next level, which in those days was either called *Gymnasium*, *Lyceum*, or something like that, and applied to **the** public school in Vienna, that they thought would, you know, meet our needs, and were turned down because I was Jewish. And that was the first time that, you know, that hit us so to speak, in that, in that respect. So, they enrolled me in a private school that was predominantly Jewish, but we had other children of other faiths attending – Catholic and Protestant – because religious instruction occurred after school in the afternoons and we all separated into being taught by a rabbi, a priest and a minister. And it was a very comfortable and interesting time, certainly for me.

March 1938, Hitler took over Austria. Things changed very rapidly. The first thing that happened that particular summer was that the Nazis gave my parents an ultimatum - number one that we had to vacate our apartment. We lived in a very nice apartment on the Donaukanal. If you know Vienna at all, a canal from the Danube goes through Vienna and we lived right on the banks of one of them – of one of the canals. And the Nazis wanted to have it as their headquarters. So I think my parents had a few days' notice to pack up and move upstairs to the other side of the building. Well, there wasn't any recourse so we had to do that. Shortly thereafter – it couldn't have been any more than two months – well, we were told that we had to get out again. And I remember my parents frantically try to find an apartment somewhere, and finally found one in a very lovely building still on a canal but further up and in a different district. So we moved.

In the meantime, my parents were also called up to the Gestapo on a regular basis – every three months starting that summer. And each time we would say goodbye to each other not knowing whether they would come back or not. Each time that they went to the Gestapo they were told that they had to get out within three months – out of the country. My father always explained to them that we had an affidavit and the problem was, with our affidavit, it wasn't sufficient cause there were two minor children – myself and my brother, younger brother. And in order to come to the United States, when you had minor children, there had to be a \$3,000 letter of credit put up so that we would not become wards of the state eventually. You know, that there was somebody who would take care of things. In other words, you had to have a sponsor. So every time my dad would say, you know, "We're still waiting to see if we can't find someone who can do that for us – we definitely have a way to go out, etc."

When school started that Fall I could not go back to my school. And what was established were ghetto schools for Jewish children, and my brother and I went to a ghetto school. And it was not a very pleasant experience. The teacher constantly reminded us that we

were Jews and that we weren't too great, you know, and who are we? And, you know, if somebody made a mistake, well what could you expect? So, I mean self-esteem went way down.

I think probably the next turning point in our life was Kristallnacht. As it happened, in the fall of '38, my father began not feeling well. He was still working for the company and it was diagnosed that he had gallstones. So there was a very famous cure in his old hometown of Gratz in a Catholic hospital and it was decided that he would go there because this was a cure without surgery. So my dad, in early November, went to Gratz. Coming to November 10th, which was Kristallnacht, actually, my brother and I went off to school. My older brother was living at home. He was not working anymore. A very strange thing began to happen during the day. One after another child was called up to the front and the teacher said something to them and they left. And so, fewer and fewer kids were in class and, you know, it was kind of bothersome, because you didn't know what was happening and I was still there. When school was out, I walked home with my brother and my mother was beside herself. My brother, Franz, my older brother, had gone out in the morning to mail a letter and had never come back. Well, what happened was that on the way out to the mailbox, he got picked up and he ended up in a holding detention place, which is what the Nazis had planned in school gymnasiums and public places, where people were packed in – 200 to a small room with no facilities whatsoever - and on the way to concentration camps. So, we knew nothing. We didn't hear anything. My mother was frantic. My dad wasn't there. And suddenly, late afternoon, I guess it was already... no it was still daylight. Late afternoon there was a knock on the door. My mother opened up the door and there stood three burly guys, two Nazi uniform and one in SS uniform – the black and the brown. And they said, "Where is Mr. Reisner?" And my mother said, "He's not here." "What do you mean he isn't here?" "Well, he's in the hospital in Gratz." "Alright!" They marched in, they said, "Where's your jewelry? Where's your money?" Well, my mother went and got the jewelry, got the money. Obviously, there was more money than usual in the house because my dad was gone. And my mother was so calm about the whole thing. It was just unbelievable. She handed over everything. They took my father's short wave radio. He was a great enthusiast, and he had a really fine whatever. And then my mother asked very innocently, "Now when am I gonna get all this back?" And they said, "Lady, you should be glad we didn't throw your children out the window." And they left.

My mother didn't know what to do at that point and she called the man who worked most closely with my husband – my father. He was the bookkeeper, Mr. Fiedler. He came over right away. It was amazing. I mean, considering the circumstances that he literally took his life in his hands to come. He was not Jewish. He came over and brought money and asked my mother what else he could do for us. There really wasn't, you know, anything. It's just that we were concerned about my older brother and wondered what was happening to him. I can't really remember when my dad came back. It must have been a few days later that he came back. And well, obviously, the stay in the Catholic hospital saved his life, 'cause he did not get picked up and put in a concentration camp.

Then someone called us and told us that my brother was in one of these detention places and that he was okay. I mean, *okay* (laughs) that he was there- he was alive. So, we didn't know where to turn, or what to do. I think it must have been January or February, when my parents, as I said regularly they were called up to the Gestapo headquarters. It was, it must have been January, because it was then they said to my parents, "This is the last time we're going to give you an extension. You have until April 15th to get out of this country." And so parents came home and said, "We're not sure we're gonna make this and so you and Pete - my younger brother - are going to go on the children's transport to England." And preparations were made, you know, we were signed up. All of our clothing was marked and there was this big trunk waiting in the front hall, whatever, for us to be leaving March 1 for England, and if, you know, by some miracle, they could get out they could stop in England, pick us up and take us to America.

My father's sister and her husband left Austria, in probably already in March of '38 – I mean, almost immediately after. My uncle had family in New York and they brought him over immediately. He was able to take out everything – his money, his furniture, his whatever. He did secure the affidavit for us. It was the head of – the owner of Maxwell House Coffee who sponsored at least 200 Austrians to come to this country. But as I told you before, there was the need for the letter of credit and my uncle refused to give that even though he was well able to do it, because he didn't want the government to know how much money he had. So my parents started a frantic round of whatever was possible to see how could we get to the United States. And one of the things that people did in those days was to write to their namesake in the United States, thinking some black sheep might have come to America. Well, it turned out that one did. When my mother and grandmother lived in Poland, they owned property and a young man - one of the cousins collected rent for them. And one day he ran away. He was eighteen years old, he never came back and he ended up in Kansas City and became a pillar of the community – had five children. And there had been a patriarch of the family who still lived in Poland, who had kept track of everybody. And he had written my mother all these addresses, and, you know, where he thought people lived. And so my mother had written all these letters. And one letter came back from the five children who by then were older my mother. And the tearstained letter saying, "We had no idea we had any family left in the world and what can we do for you?"

My father wrote to Reisners in the United States and none – well, people were very nice, they responded, but nobody was related to us. So by that time, God knows how and why, in January we got a letter from the American Consulate that we were to appear on February 24th for our physical exam. And that was the beginning – what I call the beginning. That was exactly a week before we were to be shipped off and the parents took a chance and said, "We're gonna go for it." And we went on the 24th for our physical exam. And for a while there it didn't look so good, because, you know, we were all in our little cubicles getting ready for our physical exams when I heard a terrible scream. It was my mother. It seemed they suddenly realized that my mother had been born in Poland and therefore was not on the Austrian or German quota to be let

into the United States. No Poles, no Romanians, no Russians, no you name it. Yugoslavs - none were eligible to come. That was the quota system. My father must have done an unbelievable job of talking to these people, because they let her go. And we got our – we were passed on as far as physical exam was concerned and we were slated to get ourselves together, whatever was necessary and leave before the 15th of April - we actually left the 13th of April.

Then it was a question, you know, of picking and choosing and preparing yourself for coming to the United States, which meant that we had to pick and choose. Everybody who left the country then was allowed to take whatever what they could pack into what we called a lift, which was a huge wooden structure, which was then put onto the ship and brought to the United States. And I would say it was the size of a room. So your furniture, your clothing, your belongings could go into that. Everything that was of value was confiscated - you know, sterling silver, gold, whatever. The Nazis just, you know, said, “You can’t take that. That stays here.” And everything was done to make it very practical – I mean we did, my mother and father. Furniture was built that would serve both as a couch and as a bed, because we were very limited as to what we could take. And clothing was made so that it would be practical and last a long time. Because all that you were allowed to take, as far as money was concerned was \$80. So when we arrived, four of us in the United States, my dad had eighty dollars in his pocket. We went on a ship, an ocean liner prophetically called the *SS President Roosevelt*. And then, you know, you slowly said goodbye to people. I guess, from my point of view, each one of us had to decide what was most precious to us that we wanted, you know, to take with us. And we packed up the lift and went to, by train, to Berlin to say goodbye to people there.

That kind of took care of our family. My sister was in Prague and everything was seemingly okay there. My brother was in England and getting along just fine. So we went on our journey to Berlin to say goodbye to everybody and on to Hamburg. The reason we chose an American ship at that time to come over on it was because it was the safest thing to do. Once you were on an American ship, you were on American ground. You could never be returned like the *St. Louis* and other ships that were sent back to Germany or were kept in detention, because you know, it looked like war on the horizon then, whatever. So we came to America and arrived here on May 13, 1939.

Source: Ann Jacobson edited video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/jacobsonann/>