

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MARGARET EISEN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer:	Dorothea Bartha
Date:	May 25, 1995

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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ME - Margaret Eisen¹ [interviewee]

DB - Dorothea Bartha [interviewer]

Date: May 25, 1995

Tape one, side one:

DB: ...interviewing Margaret Eisen, on May the [tape off then on] -- start.

ME: Okay, thank you. I was born on May 20, 1933, in Königheim, Germany, a very small town near Stuttgart, or, actually also near Heidelberg. In the town there were about 2,000 people, of whom one was Protestant, 50 were Jewish, and the rest were Catholic. It was a really Catholic town. And the Catholics and the Jews got along fine, until Hitler came into power. I lived with my parents. I was an only child who, and also with my grandparents who had a grain business. So it was my whole family had a grain business.

DB: Was your father in the grain business too?

ME: Yes, my father came from another town, from Schmieheim, Germany, when he got married, and joined in my mother's family's grain business.

DB: Did your father have any brothers or sisters?

ME: He had seven brothers and sisters, yes.

DB: Were they also involved in the business?

ME: No, they all stayed in Schmieheim. They didn't, yeah.

DB: And your mother, did she have any brothers or sisters?

ME: My mother had a brother and a sister, and they were in other businesses. Well, Hitler was voted into power in January, 1933, shortly before I was born. And on, he declared April 1, 1933, a month before I was born, as Boycott Day. Everyone, all the Jews in the whole town, had big signs put on their property saying that they were to be boycotted, which was not a big problem for the Jews, because it was on our Sabbath and they were very religious Jews. So they didn't operate their businesses on Saturdays anyway. But we had a very simple minded farm girl who did our sweeping and so forth outside the house. And she didn't like the sign in front of the house, so she tore it down. And right after she did that word spread very quickly all over town that my father had told her to tear down the sign. Well he didn't even know about the sign. He was at a local inn playing cards. But there were a lot of Nazis from other towns marching through the middle of town, and when they heard the sign was torn down, they marched about 50 or 60 of them, in uniform, with whips and flails, and they marched through the whole town to the inn where my father was playing cards, yelling, "Let's kill Sam! Let's kill Sam!" Now, very luckily the man who was playing cards with my father looked out the window and saw them coming. So he quickly locked the door of the inn. My father, after the door was locked, my father quickly called the police, who came right away. Now these were not Nazi police; they were just government police. And they took my father into protective custody, kept him in jail for a week, to keep him away from the Nazis. Now this affected my whole family terribly for the rest of his life. My father died when he was 81 years old. He had dreams of the

¹née Bloch.

police coming after him every night. And of course my mother was very, very pregnant and this was just terribly upsetting to her. And what they did next was try very hard to get to the United States right away. And they could have gotten to America very quickly, but because I was born, and it was harder to come over with a child, we couldn't get over here till 1938. Now during that time there were just a lot of problems and my family tried to keep a low profile. But we were able to come, to arrive in America September 19, 1938, just my parents and I. And I...

DB: Who sponsored you?

ME: My aunt, who was a maid in Philadelphia, a housekeeper for very wealthy people, got a cousin's cousin's cousin to sponsor us. And it turned out this sponsor was not a very good person. He did a lot of things that weren't nice, but at least he got us over here. Anyway, right after we got over here, all the Jews in the town were put into one house. All the Jews in my family that hadn't been deported or left or anything, were put under house arrest. And the entire Jewish community was sent to Gurs, which is a camp, not a death camp, but a concentration camp in the south of France. Now there I lost, two of my grandfathers died there. But my grandmother and my cousin and her mother managed to come to the United States. Now what was very, very hard on my family is that we only had enough money to bring one person, one family over. So it was either gonna be my mother's sister and her daughter, or it was gonna be my father's brother who raised him after his mother died. So we couldn't, because we didn't have enough money and everything. We couldn't bring over my father's brother. So he was gassed to death. And that also upset my family for the rest of our lives. Now, when I first came to the United States, my father took two jobs. He parked cars in the Bronx and in Brooklyn, and he slept on the subways between jobs. He never came home. And my mother was a cleaning lady, who used to take me along. But there were very big problems. See, I had -- because when I was growing up no Christian child was allowed to play with me -- I had never played with a child when I came to the United States at the age of five. I didn't know English. I didn't know anybody here. I didn't know how to play. And my mother, trying very hard to get me to socialize, used to lock me out the door, out the back door of wherever she worked, telling me to go play with children. But I didn't know the children and I didn't know English and I didn't know how to play. So it was a very, very hard period for me. [tape off then on] I just want to tell about some of the other things that happened to my relatives. I had, the aunt and uncle that my parents couldn't rescue, they had two children. So, when they were taken by the Nazis and they were all taken to a hotel, they told their children to jump out the windows from the second floor and run away. Those children jumped out the windows, and lived in a forest for a while. Then -- it was a boy and a girl -- then the girl was taken by nuns into a convent. She was fed and taken care of and everything. But one night she heard that they were going to convert her the next day. So she must have been about 10 years old or something like that. So she ran away again, and into the forest, and ran to France and worked in the French underground, helped in the French underground. Now my other, the other cousin, my mother's sister's daughter, she lived in, under house arrest. And there were so many problems. For example, just before that she had gone to an all-Jewish school because the Jews and the Christians weren't allowed to mix. So it was Jewish teachers were teaching informally out of a building and calling it a Jewish school. And they told her one day that anybody who didn't do their homework was going to get into terrible trouble.

So she was very, very worried. But she couldn't do her homework that night because she was busy. So that night was *Kristallnacht*. And for years she thought that her not doing her homework had caused *Kristallnacht*. It just, but nobody, she never told anybody and so nobody could ever get that out of her system.

DB: How about the cousin that worked in the French underground? Did she survive?

ME: Yes. All my cousins survived, yes.

DB: Are they living in this country?

ME: Yes. She's, that one's living in Florida now. Well actually I had several who worked in the French, who were in the French underground as nurses and delivery men and everything else. Can you stop it a second? Cause I'm [tape off then on]

DB: This is Dorothea Bartha, finishing the interview with Margaret Eisen on May 25, 1995. Margie?

ME: Thank you. There were just a few more things I wanted to talk about. It impressed me that when we came to the United States and my parents started a little candy store they well, we had such little money we couldn't even afford an egg for Passover. And that really upset my mother. We just couldn't afford a Passover dinner, the first Passover here. But what impressed me is that when they did go to synagogue on the Jewish holidays, they had these beautiful *Machzors* that they covered, that they brought to synagogue in a paper bag, to hide them, so they were, because they were still even many years later afraid that somebody would attack them or do something to them just because they were walking to the synagogue.

DB: What is *Machzor*?

ME: It's Hebrew, books. Synagogue books.

DB: Oh, I see. How do you spell that?

ME: Well, I'll just, can I tell you later?

DB: Okay.

ME: Also, it was very, very hard for me in school. I started school without knowing any English at all. And there was, the kids really were not very nice to me. They were pretty awful to me. And when I was still a young girl a bunch of kids beat me up with two by four sticks, to my spine, for being German. They didn't know I was Jewish but they were ant-, they had anti-German sympathy during World War II. So they beat me up with big two by fours and I had spinal damage in that area for the rest of my life. It was not easy. Although it wasn't easy there, for sure it wasn't easy coming over here. Okay, do you have any questions?

DB: No questions. You said it all.

ME: Okay. Well thank you very much. Oh, bye. [tape off then on]

DB: Mrs. Eisen would like me to add that when the family was taken to the trucks, a gentile neighbor saw cookies cooling on a window sill and risked her life getting the cookies to them. The cookies kept them alive until they reached the camps.

[End of interview]