

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JEANETTE ROTHCHILD

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Jerry Freimark

Date: July 24, 1997

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

Project Kabed¹

You shall remember the days of old....

You shall love your father and your mother...

Project **Kabed** is a series of oral interviews, designed to preserve the memories of the immigrant generation that left central Europe under the pressures of the Third Reich.

These interviews may be of interest to succeeding generations to help them learn about our experiences. The subject has certainly found much interest among students of the history of the recent past.

It is therefore our intend, to make these personal histories accessible to any seriously interested students and to collections of archival materials such as, but not exclusively, to the Leo Beack Institute.

All interviews will be transcribed and a copy given to the person interviewed.

A copy of the tape may also be requested.²
Thank you for participating in the **Kabed** project.

Jerry M. Freimark, 1999

¹Jerry Freimark referred to his oral history project as both Project Koved and Project Kabed at different times.

²The Holocaust Oral History Archive has these interviews in the form of CD Rom.

JR - Jeanette Rothschild [interviewee]

JF - Jerry Freimark [interviewer]

Date: July 24, 1997

Tape one, side one:

JF: Today is the 24th of July '97. We're interviewing Jeanette Rothschild, everybody knows her [Mrs. Rothschild] as Aunt Jenny. Her maiden name is Fernbacher. She was born in the town of Großmannsdorf, Bavaria, on September 13th, 1898. So she will be celebrating very shortly her 99th birthday. I would like to thank Aunt Jenny very much for permitting me to interview her. Aunt Jenny, I would like you to tell us about your very early experiences that you remember from your childhood.

JR: I went to school in Germany in Straubing. It was a nunnery where I went to school. Very nice. I mean a very good school. I was also a very, very good student. Well-liked by the nuns and all that. But [I] never had any experience of being outnumbered because I was Jewish. Never! I must say that.

JF: Were there, were there any other Jewish children?

JR: Yes, there were three, four Jewish girls. I mean it was a girl's school. And just an example how they treated the Jewish people: The superior mother, the priest died. Who should take the wreath after the funeral to the grave? Now, the Mother Superior, she decided on the three Jewish girls. Probably you remember the Bambergers? Mrs. Bamberger, she was from Straubing. Irene, geb. Schwarzhaupt. She and another girl, Lizzi Stern and I, we should take the wreath at the funeral. My mother didn't want this really. She went to the Cloister and asked the Mother Superior: "Why did you do that?" So she said: "If we take some of the Catholic girls, everybody is mad at each other. But if we take the three Jewish girls, nobody can do anything." So we did that. I just wanted to [show the] spirit of the people.

JF: That was-- you were how old about? About how old were you then?

JR: It didn't mean anything to children, about that time.

JF: You were about 10 years old or...?

JR: A bit older, about 12 you know. I don't remember.

JF: But you remember that very well.

JR: This I remember, because my mother, she said: "She's a very wise woman." My mother said that to my father. Never had that anybody said, something about you're a Jew, or we don't like you. In the contrary, I was one of the most liked people, girls, in the school, by everybody. I can only say that. Never heard the word *Jude* [Jew] or something. Never! Never!

JF: So when you played, you played with all children.

JR: Yeah, what they had, the nuns had also a farm. The *Maiausflug* [May outing]. Remember that *Maiausflug* we went there to the farm and we were entertained with beer and bread and butter and all kinds of good stuff. I never heard of anything like that [antisemitism]. They also had like a school for teachers. And also those teachers, they were all friendly with me. Till I'm even married. I can only say, I had a very easy life. Never was I insulted for being Jewish.

JF: Did you have any close friends among the Christians?

JR: Oh, yes, sure. I had two very close friends. One was Annie Frankner. She became a nun. When I got engaged to be married, she sent me a letter and she said, "You will on your way *viele Leute beglücken. Ich aber weihe mich Gott* [German: On your way you will make many people happy. But I will consecrate myself to G-d]." And she became a nun and she lived in Rosenheim. [Unclear.] We corresponded, when I was married, always. She died earlier.

JF: And your other girlfriend? You said you had two.

JR: Ja, the other one was Irma Bauer. And her father, I mean, they were the richest people in Baden. They had a big, big store and they had so *Manufactur* [German: dry goods, textiles]. I was very friendly with them. I was always there.

JF: What did your father do?

JR: My father was a cattle dealer. But they had a big business. He had three brothers. Two in Regensburg and one in Straubing. They were all in business together. "*Gebrüder Fernbacher*" was the name.

JF: They felt very much at home. There was no antisemitism there.

JR: I really must say, I don't know that. My father, he dealt with the,-- I mean,-- they all, my uncles and my father by that time they had big farms [as customers]. *Thurn und Taxis* probably means something to you they were a customer. And people like that. "*Die waren Große*" [They were big] big businesses. They said to my father, we want 40 cows. So my father went to Switzerland or he went to Friesland. In summer he also went to near Koblenz and bought little horses and brought them there.

JF: Ponies or young horses.

JR: Young horses and brought them there. The people raised them big. Big business. Really big business.

JF: Did you have any other relatives right in your area? Your father's brothers, you knew them well?

JR: His older brother live in Straubing and he had eight children. They were all friends. One of them, the son of his son, the grandsons of my uncle, my cousin, he lives in Silver Spring, Maryland. I had two uncles, they lived in Regensburg. They also had children. They became doctors. One of them lives in Boston. He is with MIT. He come from New Zealand. The father moved to New Zealand and married there. Well, and I have other family. I have a cousin, he was as old as I, he was also a doctor. His daughter is a doctor. She is married to a professor in Switzerland. They live in Zürich.

He is not Jewish, the father. (636) The son became very religious and married a gentile girl. She converted recently to Judaism. They are professors in Zürich.

JF: So, most of your relatives who survived live in the United States now?

JR: They don't live in the United States. They live in Zürich, this one. He, the one in Boston and Fred Fernbacher lives in Silver Spring. They are the children of my cousins.

JF: So you would say, you had a very happy childhood.

JR: Absolutely! Nothing wrong. Very happy.

JF: You lived in your hometown till you got married?

JR: That's right. It was 1920, I got married.

JF: How did you meet your husband?

JR: My husband--. My parents went every year to Bad Brückenau that is in the *Nähe* [vicinity of] Bad Kissingen. There was also this Mr. Abbe and his mother and father. Also they were in a Jewish hotel of course. They got friendly. My husband was a traveling salesman by that time. He came and visited my mother and father and met me.

JF: You remember the First World War very well. The big war, 1914?

JR: Oh yes, I was a girl of sixteen by that time.

JF: Would you tell me a little bit about those times.

JR: Nothing was said about the Jewish people. In fact, the first boy who died in the war, I remember that, he was an *Einjähriger*, I don't know if you know that [expression]. They were also a little related to us. The name was Lippmann. He was a banker in my hometown, Straubing. He was the first man who died. The war started on Saturday. I remember Saturday evening was the war declared. I remember that as it is today.

JF: I remember the story of Sarajevo [a big firm].

JR: On Friday night Mrs. Lippmann, that is the mother of that boy, and Mr. Lippmann, they said already Kaddish for that son. (684) The first one from Straubing to die.

JF: He volunteered?

JR: No, he was an *Einjähriger* what is an *Einjähriger* [in English]? Somebody who went to college. He had to go. I don't know. He was in the *selben* [same] Regiment. *Wie Straubing* war. There was nothing said that he was a Jew. It was in the *Zeitung* [newspaper]. *Unser geliebter Sohn usw.* [Our beloved son, etc.]

JF: Do you know if any of your relatives served in the war of 1870?

JR: My grandfather served. There was a war between the *Bayern* [Bavarians] and the *Preußen* [Prussians; in 1866] and he served. Because we have letter by my grandfather to his that-time bride, he wrote to her.

JF: And then there was the war between Germany and France, 1871.

JR: I don't know anything about that. I only know that my grandfather, the father of my mother he served in that war between the *Bayern* and the *Preußen*. '66 I think it was.

JF: Do you remember any hardships during the war?

JR: I guess you had everything you needed. Food? Oh, yes. You mean during the 1914 war. In fact, my mother and father they went always to Bad Brückenau. And they befriended people from Bonn. Their name was Goldschmidt. They had like a grocery *en gros* [wholesale]. So he came and brought sugar and whatever and he took flower from my father. [He] had everything. The farmers had everything.

JF: You met your husband after the war? What was his first name?

JR: Richard Abbe. Richard.

JF: Did he have to go in the war, too?

JR: No, he didn't go. His brother died and he said that he couldn't go and all kind of stuff. He was a real faker. He didn't want to go.

JF: Did his brother die of natural causes?

JR: No, in the war.

JF: Oh, in the war. His brother died in the war.

JR: His brother Ditmar. Ditmar is his name. He died in France.

JF: You got married then in 1920.

JR: In 1920. I moved to Berlin.

JF: Why did you move to Berlin.

JR: Because my husband lived in Berlin. He was a Berliner.

JF: A born Berliner?

JR: No.

JF: What was his business?

JR: First, when I married him, he was a traveling salesman for a big form. When we got married he opened a store in Berlin for ladies underwear. We manufactured that.

JF: He was a manufacturer and he had a retail store?

JR: That's right, several [retail stores].

JF: Where did you live in Berlin?

JR: Fasanenstraße am Kurfürstendamm.

JF: (743) Near the big synagogue?

JR: Yes, the next street. Here is the synagogue Fasanenstraße. Here is the Kurfürstendamm, and we-- *an der anderen Seite* [on the other side, across the street] we lived on the next corner.

JF: That was a very good section.

JR: Yes, one of the best.

JF: You had an apartment? Everybody had apartments.

JR: A beautiful apartment. My nephew Peter said, he always said, we had the finest bathroom. You could go down steps to the bath and all that. That's all forgotten.

JF: No, shouldn't be forgotten. It's nice to remember.

JR: I remember everything vividly. We had a beautiful apartment and everything. Nothing missing.

JF: How about Berlin? Did you have many friends?

JR: Not too many, but good friends.

JF: Mostly Jewish, in Jewish circles?

JR: All Jewish. Only one Gentile. He was here from my hometown, from Straubing. He was the director with General Electric, his name was Habeneger.

JF: [unclear]

JR: This man, the Jewish man they murdered. That was because he was a Jew. [Rathenau] it was already by that time [antisemitism]. Later on. He was a director of that. Not Hitler yet. Rathenau³.

JF: He had converted?

JR: No, he didn't go to synagogue. But his sisters bought in our stores. I remember that.

JF: I had the switch off. Would you repeat that for me. You moved to Straubing.

JR: When I was four year old, we moved there to Straubing and I grew up there.

JF: And you said, you didn't notice antisemitism in Berlin, but when you went home to Straubing...?

JR: Yes, well then I was visiting my parents in the 1920s, when it just started. I didn't in Berlin, no. In Berlin today nobody knew you. I mean, it is a big city just like you would go in Philadelphia. In a small town, when I came there. Of course, my so called friends, they looked to the side. My school friends, they weren't so friendly anymore. Only several. Not everybody.

JF: So you would say, about 1924? You didn't get any trouble in Berlin until 1933?

JR: No, we didn't have any trouble.

JF: And then what happened when the Nazis came in?

JR: It was on that day, 1933, they had the Nazis in front of the stores and who wanted to come in, they didn't want to let them in. I remember, there was a customer of

³Walter Rathenau - one of the most prominent Jewish political figures of the Weimar Republic, is assassinated by right-wing radicals. Rathenau, the president of the General Electric Corporation of Germany (AEG) since 1915, became foreign minister of the Weimar Republic in 1921. As a Jew, he was hated by right-wing groups particularly for his policy of fulfilling the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and his normalization of relations with the Soviet Union. His murder is indicative of the right-wing antisemitic campaign blaming Jews for Germany's defeat in World War I. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

ours, she lived nearby, her name was Erika Dressner. She was a *Schauspielerin* [actress], very famous at that time. She was customer of ours, came in. We befriended people there. She said, what do you want, I go where I want to go, Jewish or not.

JF: So, you could keep your stores?

JR: Yes, we kept our stores, very successful, till that *Kristallnacht*.

JF: It seems to me Berlin was better than most of the other cities.

JR: Well, Berlin was insofar better, because nobody knew who is the *Inhaber* [proprietor] *von dem Haus* [of that store] store. They were big stores. They were all Jewish people. Tietz and all those. Grünfeld.

JF: What was the name of your stores? Era...?

JR: E.R. Richard Abbe.

JF: What happened in *Kristallnacht*?

JR: We didn't know anything. But my nephew Peter lived in Berlin by that time. He went to the ORT school and lived in my house. He in the morning left for work or school and-- Well I didn't know anything. Then about eight o'clock somebody called on the phone. We had like a corner store. And they said, "Mr. Abbe, please don't come down. The store is completely destroyed." It was a corner, so the man with the newspapers was standing there. [There was a newsstand.] The *Journal am Mittag* or the *Berliner Tageblatt*. He didn't go to open the store. But later on he went down. When he came up he said to me, my husband, I had never seen him crying by that time. He said, "We don't open up our store anymore. And the synagogue, *Fasanenstraße*, *brennt!* [is burning!]" So that was bad. And then, about two o'clock the doorbell rang and two men came from the Gestapo and took my husband to the concentration camp.

JF: Which concentration camp?

JR: Oranienburg [a subcamp of Sachsenhausen].

JF: Did he come back?

JR: Yes, after about two months.

JF: (840) How did you manage to get out of Berlin, out of Germany?

JR: Well, at first, we did not open the store. My nephew Peter and I we had to take the glass, there were big glass windows we had to clean up the broken glass. Nobody could help us. He and me and a friend of his, also a Jewish boy, helped us. Then we had to immediately put new glass in. I know that was 1700 Mark. Just windows-- too much to remember. [Pauses]

JF: How and when did you get out of Germany? Who helped you?

JR: I didn't know where my husband is, that was the most important thing for me then, that he was not here. When they took him, of course I wrote a letter and all that. And I had also friends (845) that were in *Leitung* [administration]. Nobody wanted to touch all these things Jewish because were afraid that they catch them. So I wrote to the Gestapo why is my husband not here and all that. So they called up after a week or two and said you should come next Tuesday, or whatever it was, to the Gestapo,

Alexanderplatz, to discuss all this. We had also such a certificate for Israel. By that time that was already closed. We bought that. My husband had bought that certificate. And also we had another certificate was about 2,000 Marks by that time, through another man, Tortino was his name. He was not well. He had no money. So when I went to the Gestapo, I went in the morning to put the case behind me. Here I was sitting. That had nothing to do with it that Tortino. He just gave the certificate to him [my husband]. So the man who interviewed me, a very nice man. When I came in, he said, "Hello, Mrs. *Frau* Abbe, now, what can we discuss?" I said, "Well, where is my husband?" "What do you mean?" So he said, "Well, let's first talk about that all." And he said, "What can you give me that he will be released?" I said, "What would you like to have?" So in the meantime I had a friend who was with that Ley, the *Arbeiterführer* [head of the Nazi, so called, Labor Party], he was a friend of ours.

JF: So he wrote a letter?

JR: The business is too big. Mrs. Abbe can't take care of it herself.

Tape one, side two:

JR: “*Was können sie mir geben, daß ihr Mann ‘raus kommt?’*” [“What can you give me to get your husband out?”] I said, “I have a certificate to Israel.” He said, “That is not so good. That is not good.” He said, “because--” but he was reasonable. He was not hateful. He said, “*Dies Ding ist geschlossen die Einwanderung nach Israel.*” [“That thing is closed, the emigration to Israel.”] *Palestina hat das damals geheißen.* [Palestine, was the name at that time.] “Here,” I said, “I have also a letter from the American consul.” He was a friend of a friend of mine. He wrote, Mr. Abbe is necessary because, she can’t do that by herself, too big the business, *usw* [etc.] And he said, “That’s not so very good.” And he said, “Don’t you have anything else?” So I had that letter from that man from Ley, and it said, Mr. Abbe should come, because then the business should be taken over by somebody else. “*Die Fran kann das nicht alleine.*” [“The wife cannot do it by herself.”] “Alright,” so he said, “Well, that’s better. That’s not bad.” He said, “I’ll give you my word of honor, that your husband will be home by Tuesday.” I thought, the word of honor by him? So I went home. And on Tuesday, my husband came. He was not the same anymore. You saved my life, he said to me. Peter and I were sitting in the *Eßzimmer* [dining room] when the doorbell rang. So I can’t believe it. He came at the same time as that man had said he would. It was on that Friday before that Saturday when the Jewish people couldn’t go out, were not allowed to go out on that Saturday. You don’t remember that.

JF: I left before that.

JR: He was one of the first to be released. The whole Jewish people was running [to us]. “Did you see my husband?” “Did you see this and this?”

JF: [unclear]

JR: November. He was only three or four weeks only there. And I remember, after he was taken, the next day, I went to the American consul. Hundreds of people went there. The consul said: “Now you’re coming, now you’re coming. First you could have everything.” Nobody wanted to go. Who wants to go from a table which has everything on, and go as a pauper? Nobody! Because you couldn’t take money out. We had a little money out, but not much.

JF: Peter was not taken by the Gestapo?

JR: No, he was a boy of about 14. They saw him. When he came in, they were there. He came in from school at about that time. “So, who is that?” I said, “This is my nephew, he is a schoolboy, he just came from school.” They would have taken him also.

JF: Did your husband then have to sell his business?

JR: Sell it? We never got anything for it. Nothing! What can you do when somebody stands behind you with a revolver, right? Well, we were lucky. I had that cousin who lived in England. He got us a permit to go there. We had a little money out,

not much. Nothing to talk about. We lived over a year in England and we had to eat it up. Some people went and had some from charity the funds but my husband didn't do that. We lived on our money.

JF: From England you came to the United States?

JR: Yes, eventually. My husband was also taken in England. He went to, not a concentration camp, but for enemy aliens. It was in Lynnefield, that was like a race [for races, a stadium]. I always visited him there. I became real friendly with the Home Office and he said, "What do you want today?" Then I told him, I wanted a permit. I said, "It is my birthday." "Well I can't say no to that." My husband said, "How come you always can come? Nobody else gets visitors." By that time I was not so dumb.

JF: Did you have any relatives in Berlin?

JR: You mean at the time?

JF: Yes.

JR: Dave's [Bieber] sister and mother and father. They lived in Dressen. Not far. *In der Nähe von Frankfurt an der Oder*. [German: Near Frankfurt an der Oder⁴] They had a store there also. In fact he [Dave] was just visiting [1997] somebody from Dressen, in Regensburg, he told me. My husband's sister, [Dave's mother] and father [unclear]. As long as I am in the family, we never had anything [fights, problems]. We all helped out when somebody needed it. When I was 17, 16, I went to a *Pensionat* [boarding school for girls] that was like fashionable, in Wiesbaden, for a year. We went there to the opera. I had never been in [unclear] to the opera in München [Munich], my mother and father took me. We went to the theater. But there is Wiesbaden, beautiful concerts, a little bit of culture, education.

JF: Did you learn a foreign language?

JR: Oh yes. In school I learned French and English. I could speak very well in English when I came here. I came here as a visitor, before, 1935.

JF: You didn't want to stay here then?

JR: No, no. See, we were friendly with the Blinds, the stove people [Caloric Ranges]. I am not related to them. But the Daniels, they are real cousins of them. In fact two days ago the last of the Blinds died.

JF: So you came to the States in '35, for a visit?

JR: Oh yes. It was too hot for me. After five weeks I left. [Reminisces.] We were not related to the Daniels either. But my husband was the best friend of Mr. Daniel. He died early, here. He was the first one who died. Do you remember them, the Daniels? Among other [things] I also was also a sales lady in Luria [Women's Clothing]. So one day Mr. and Mrs. Maerker came in and they noticed that they had the same accent. So Mr. Marker said, "*Wo kommen sie denn her?*" ["Where are you from?"] So I told them. They came from Mainz. So I told them, I was in Wiesbaden. There always

⁴the Oder - a river in East Germany. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

came girls from Mainz visiting there the *Pensionat*, Sopenheim, was the name. “We went often there,” said Mrs. Marker. I said, “There came some girls.” They had a photo shop. “Do you remember what’s their name?” “No,” I said, “but they had long noses.”

[End of interview.]