

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY
OF
Else Nowak
Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Josey G. Fisher
Date: May 9, 1983

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EN - Else Nowak [interviewee]
JF - Josey G. Fisher [interviewer]
WN- Willie Nowak [husband]¹
UP - Unknown Person
Date: May 9, 1983

Tape one, side one:

JF: This is an interview with Mrs. Else Nowak on May 9, 1983, with Josey Fisher. This interview is Mrs. Nowak's childhood in Germany before she and Mr. Willie Nowak were married. The rest of her story is presented jointly on Mr. Nowak's tape. Mrs. Nowak, can you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your family, please.

EN: I was born in Germany, in Dresden, 25 of June, 1902. My parents moved later on to Berlin.

JF: How old were you when you left Dresden?

EN: About four or five years.

JF: Do you have any memories of life there?

EN: Yeah. We lived in Köetschenbroda [or Kötzschenbroda], it was about 20 minutes away from Dresden and we had very nice home there with a big garden and my parents gave me sandboxes to play in it and we had chickens only for fun.

JF: Was this an estate or was this a suburban area?

EN: Yeah, a suburban area.

JF: How do you spell that approximately?

EN: K-Ö-E-T-S-C-H-E-N-B-R-O-D-A.

JF: B-O-E...

WN: D.

EN: B-O-R-D-A.

WN: No, B-R-O. Köetschenbroda.

EN: Broda, yeah.

JF: B-R-O-T-A.

WN: D-A.

JF: K-Ö-E-T-S-C-H-E-N-B-R-O-D-A.

EN: Yeah, it was a single home with a garden around and I think I was maybe three, four years old, five years old when we left it.

JF: Did you have brothers and sisters?

EN: No, never. I was the only one. My mother wanted to have another child but she lost it three times.

JF: Your father was in what kind of business?

¹Mr. Nowak makes brief comments during the interview.

EN: He was a director in a insurance company.
JF: Do you know the name?
EN: Victoria Tuberlin. [phonetic]
JF: Victoria Tuberlin. Who owned this company? Was it a Jewish owned company or a non-Jewish owned company?
EN: Non-Jewish I guess.
UP: Excuse me, Victoria Tuberlin.
EN: Yeah, Victoria Tuberlin.
WN: Is that what the name was? I didn't know.
EN: Yes.
JF: He stayed with this company during these moves that you have described?
EN: No, he got later into that, what he did before I really don't know. That was later when we were in Berlin.
JF: But at the time when you were a child, he was working for this one company?
EN: I was already more grown up. What he did before I really don't know.
JF: The time that you were in Dresden then, you're not sure. This is not what he was doing?
EN: No, not in Dresden, that was in Berlin.
JF: When you were living in Dresden, were you aware of the nature of the Jewish community there?
EN: No, not at all. I was a child, a little child.
JF: As you talked to your parents later, were they in interaction with the non-Jewish community?
EN: No.
JF: They were only with the Jewish community there? They had friends that were non-Jews?
EN: I don't know.
JF: You don't know. This was not something that was discussed?
EN: No, never.
JF: And you were not old enough.
EN: It was not such a problem at that time.
JF: You don't remember your playmates at that time whether they would have been Jewish or non-Jewish?
EN: No, no. I only remember that we have relatives there.
JF: You had relatives in Dresden?
EN: I have, brother from my mother and a sister of my mother, sister of my father, but that I remember, but no more.
JF: And then, after Dresden, you said that when you were four or five your family moved.

EN: After Dresden we moved directly to Breslau, actually. B-R-E-S-L-A-U, but there I went the first year to school.

JF: What kind of school was that? Was it a public school?

EN: ...[unclear] stuff. A private school.

JF: Was it a Jewish private school...

EN: No

JF: ...or a private school for girls?

EN: For girls.

JF: You lived at home...

EN: Yeah.

JF: ...and went . . .

EN: And a-. That was only about for two years, then we went to Berlin.

JF: During your time in Brelsau were you aware of . . .

EN: I had girlfriends in school, non-Jewish and Jewish and I became sick. I got appendix operation so that ended my school there.

JF: It ended your school there.

EN: Yeah.

JF: Were your family, was your family involved in a synagogue in those early years before you moved to Berlin?

EN: Not very much.

JF: They were not very involved.

EN: My -- mostly we went Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the High Holiday and my mother sometimes went with me also Friday night.

JF: She would take you?

EN: Yeah, sometimes, not regularly.

JF: And then you moved to Berlin.

EN: Yeah.

JF: ... when you were seven or eight?

EN: Yeah, about.

JF: And what was your experience there? Was it any different?

EN: I went to school, *Lyceum*.

JF: *Lyceum*.

EN: And I was very, very often sick as a child. Very often, so my parents took after two, three years private teacher into the house. She came in the house.

JF: What kind of illness did you have?

EN: Fever.

JF: Was it ever identified in any way?

EN: No, I got often fever. I didn't have all the children sicknesses like typhus or so, the only thing I had was the whooping cough.

JF: You had whooping cough?

EN: Yeah, but otherwise, I had very often fever and that was taken care of by my mother at home and the appendix operation.

JF: And when you were at home were you able to still see friends?

EN: Yeah.

JF: And these were non-Jews and Jews?

EN: Yeah.

JF: Did you have any kind of special religious training?

EN: Very little. I cannot repeat all but inside I may be a better Jew than some people who can.

JF: I'm sure. At that time was it common for the girls that you knew, the Jewish girls that you knew, to have any special kind of religious training or was this something that was taught?

EN: We had it in school weekly two or three times for an hour by a teacher, lessons. I had it only at home when my teacher at home at the table like we are sitting down.

JF: When your private tutor came did you also get the Jewish lessons?

EN: Yeah.

JF: You got it as well.

EN: Yeah, yeah.

JF: Was this primarily history then or Bible information or you said you did not know Hebrew.

EN: Bible, *Chumash* [The Torah].

JF: Bible.

EN: Yeah.

JF: Were any of the girls that you knew involved in any Jewish organization or was there any question of involvement?

EN: No, no.

JF: This was not something that was common in the group you were in?

EN: Right.

JF: Did you ever experience any kind of antisemitism during that time, growing - up years?

EN: Ye -- there was one school where my parents sent me, after the Lyceum, and private school also and there they took me out because I was the only Jewish girl there and I didn't like that.

JF: What happened there?

EN: Nothing special, but I had a feeling that I was a little bit [unclear], a little bit not so well-accepted.

JF: They didn't always include you in their social...

EN: ...yeah, yeah.

JF: ...things. Were you not invited to their homes?

EN: Yeah, that's right, and then I became so often sick and then my parents decided to have a tutor at home.

JF: So how old were you then when you were home with the private tutor? A teenager?

EN: About 10.

JF: About 10. Did you ever go back to a school?

EN: No.

JF: You just finished your education at home?

EN: That's right.

JF: And you had a mixed group of friends still...

EN: Yeah, yeah...

JF: ...this continued that you saw?

EN: Yeah.

JF: What happened after your education was completed? Was your health any better as you got older?

EN: I think so, yes.

JF: Did you have any kind of training or work in any way after you were done with your education?

EN: We moved when I was about 16 years old to Hamburg. My father took over another office in Hamburg for the same company and I was just with my parents. There I met my first husband, and after a few years we went back to Berlin.

JF: You married...

EN: ...I married in Berlin.

JF: You married in Berlin.

EN: Yeah.

JF: When did you marry first? What was your first date?

EN: Twenty-sixth of May, 19...

UP: Don't look at me, I don't know.

EN: ...'26, I guess.

JF: 1926.

EN: I think.

JF: And you lived in Berlin?

EN: Yeah.

JF: And your parents were also in Berlin?

EN: Yeah, yeah I lived always with my parents.

JF: Even after you were married?

EN: No.

JF: But you were still in the same city.

EN: In the same city. That's right.

JF: Were either your first husband or your father involved in the First World War?

EN: My father was for a very short time with the military, but also he wasn't too well. They didn't find out what it was, kidney or something, and he got sick.

JF: Did the war affect your life in any way?

EN: No.

JF: You were still living with your parents at that time?

EN: Yeah, yeah.

JF: And things were fairly comfortable for you economically?

EN: Yeah, yeah.

JF: Was there ever any sense after the war living in Berlin of the Jews being blamed for the war that you picked up personally?

EN: No, not personally.

JF: With the onset of the revolution was your life affected in any way with the abdication?

EN: Not really.

JF: Were you concerned about that?

EN: Oh yeah, sure.

JF: It was going to change Germany in any way?

EN: Sure we were concerned about it, but it didn't affect us that much.

JF: There was no question of your leaving Germany at that time?

EN: When do you...?

JF: In the early '20s after World War I?

EN: No.

JF: Your father's business was still doing alright?

EN: Yeah.

JF: Was his business affected in the '20s by the economic changes?

EN: I don't know. I don't think so.

JF: And your husband did what kind of work?

EN: He made his [unclear] and then later on he went in my father's -- my father gave him the job...

JF: In his office.

EN: In his office, yeah.

JF: And as things reached closer to the early '30s and Hitler became more well-known, what were your thoughts at that time? What kind of discussions were going on with your husband or with your parents about...

EN: I was divorced after two and a half years already.

JF: So you were divorced in 1928.

EN: Yeah.

JF: You had children by that marriage...

EN: Yes, I was pregnant with my second child when I got the divorce.
JF: ...when you got divorced.
EN: And then you moved back with your parents?
EN: I had my own home then. Later on I moved back to my parents'. When we met, I think I lived with my parents.
WN: Yeah, yeah.
EN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
JF: When you met Mr. Nowak, you were living with your parents then?
EN: Yeah.
JF: So when Hitler came to power, you were living on your own?
EN: With my parents.
JF: You were living with your parents by that time.
EN: And I started -- I never worked before but then was a time I wanted to go to work and make my own living a little bit at least, not depend on my parents.
JF: And what did you do?
EN: I went in school to learn millinery and after half a year already I got a job in a very good store as a millinery and until we left Germany.
JF: So you were working during the '30s?
EN: Yeah.
JF: How was your life affected once Hitler came to power?
EN: My father's job was not so good anymore and I think he gave it up later on.
JF: Was he forced to give it up?
EN: Yeah. Yeah.
JF: Were you continuing to live in your home or were you?
EN: Yeah.
JF: You were allowed to live in your home?
EN: Yeah.
JF: Your job was not affected? You were allowed to continue?
EN: I was in my job until Nazis found out that still a Jew works in that store and my boss came to me and said, "You," and we had lunch time, "When you go to lunch, please don't come back because I was *bezaknung* [phonetic] ordered from the Nazis not to have you as Jewish girl anymore."
JF: When was that?
EN: You must know when it was, when I left Karichta [phonetic], what year, '37, '36?
WN: No, '36 I wasn't even here...
EN: '37, '38 about...
WN: Yeah, '37, '38.
EN: And they were so nice to me that the cashier from that store came to [unclear] our apartment and said we give you work for one more month salary. Of course,

it was very nice. And then another lady hired me someplace else and she said, "I like to have Jews in my store. You can be here but if they come to check it, please go for a moment in the bathroom." But I was registered but they didn't know I'm Jewish.

JF: So you were....

EN: But that lady the, it was the owner of the store, she knew that I'm Jewish and she wanted me.

JF: When you say you were registered but they didn't know you were Jewish, how is that?

EN: I was -- she had to, to give my name whom she hired and my name was there but most probably nobody cared or saw that I'm a Jew.

JF: How did the Nuremberg laws affect you after 1935? Did you feel limited?

EN: Yeah.

JF: How? Where did it hit you the most?

EN: It's hard to say.

JF: Were your children in school yet, they must have been in school.

EN: My children were in school, yeah.

JF: Were they allowed to continue?

EN: Yeah, later on I took my daughter out of school, right? When we met -- it was shortly before we went to Shanghai I took the children out of school.

JF: In '38?

EN: Yeah.

JF: But until then they were staying in school. Were they taken out of a mixed classroom and put in a Jewish school?

EN: No.

JF: They were always in a mixed classroom?

EN: Yeah.

JF: Did they experience any trouble from their classmates?

EN: No, no, not that I know of. They never complained about it.

JF: Did they have friends, both Jewish and non-Jewish?

EN: Yeah, I think yeah. Oh, yes.

JF: And what about things religiously for you at that point. Were you still not that involved in religious life?

EN: Not very much, not very much.

JF: ...there wouldn't have been any effect. Were you limited as far as where you could go, things you could attend that you had usually done before that time when Nuremberg laws were put into effect? Any part of your life style change because of the laws?

EN: We didn't...

WN: Well, you couldn't go to the theatre.

EN: ...no...

WN: ...or movie or anything.
EN: Yeah, no. That's right.
JF: That's primarily where it hit, that and your father's business.
EN: Yeah, yeah.
JF: Was he able to work after that time or did he just retire?
EN: He retired.
JF: And then you, you and Mr. Nowak met after you returned from Czechoslovakia. So that would have been '37?
EN: Yeah.
WN: '37.
JF: '37.
EN: And he lived with his friends which were also my parents' friends.
JF: Which is how you met.
EN: So that's why we met.
JF: You said before to me that you were unable to marry in Germany.
EN: Yeah, because he was...
JF: He was stateless?
EN: Stateless. I could have done it but I would have lost my job.
JF: Because you would have been married to someone who was stateless?
EN: Yeah. No, I wouldn't have lost my job, I'm sorry. I would have been stateless too, and I didn't want to be stateless.
JF: Alright, so by not marrying you still had your German papers?
EN: That's right.
JF: That you had a "J" on your passport?
EN: Yes.
JF: But you were still a German...
EN: ...a German Jew.
JF: ...considered a German Jew?
EN: Yeah and I didn't want to lose that.
JF: And you would have given that up if you had married?
EN: Yeah.
JF: What was your thinking at that time? Here you were dating someone that you wanted to marry, not knowing what the future would bring. What did you think would come of your relationship? How did you think you could get around it? Did you think things might change?
EN: We knew that we'd move together to Shanghai and we wanted to get married, and they told us, the Italian boat, the captain will marry you. So we wanted to do that.
JF: This was after *Kristallnacht* though that you decided?

EN: Yeah, when we left, yeah. And we went right away to the captain and he said, "Yes, we did that years ago but not anymore, only if one or the other part is to die."

JF: Only if one or the other is...

EN: ...if one or the other is dying.

WN: ...is dying.

JF: Is dying.

EN: Yeah. So we figured that it doesn't pay.

WN: [unclear]

JF: You weren't that desperate. So you waited as Mr. Nowak told us.

EN: We waited until we get to Shanghai. Then we right away started to get married.

JF: Now you mentioned before that your father did not want to leave Germany when you...

EN: He was an optimist. He figured it won't last. And many people did so.

JF: But it was a friend, a good friend of his, you said, that encouraged you and Mr. Nowak to leave and it was with him that you left?

EN: Yeah, yeah.

JF: Did your father think that you were making a mistake in leaving Germany?

EN: I don't know.

JF: Did he try to discourage you?

EN: No. He said you have to do what you think is best. But then they wrote, of course, they can't stand any longer. And we should try to get him in and we did, and we got him in.

JF: Were your letters censored in any way or do you think...

EN: ...no, I don't think so.

JF: ...it was fairly accurate reports of what was happening? When your parents came to Shanghai you said that this was probably 1940?

EN: Yeah, it was the last minute. They were one of the last coming.

JF: Were they able to tell you anything more about what they had experienced in Berlin, before they left in between the time you left and the time they left was a couple of years.

EN: They gave up their home already before because they needed money, and lived in a, I think in one bedroom only apartment, furnished, right?

WN: Yeah, yeah.

EN: And people, gentile people brought them food at night sometimes because they had food...

JF: Rations.

EN: Rations and that wasn't enough, of course and they had a lot of gentile friends who brought them food at night, which was dangerous for them but they did.

JF: And this is how they got through.

EN: From the house maid and other people, so they got food.

JF: You had mentioned before in the discussion we had with your husband about your trip back to Germany after the war that you met a woman who had taken care of your children during the time that you were in Germany. Was she also helpful to your parents after you left?

EN: She didn't live in Berlin at that time, she couldn't.

JF: She had lived in Berlin before then ...

EN: Before ...

JF: ... and helped you with the children earlier?

EN: Yes, she raised the children for six years.

JF: While you were working?

EN: Also before when I didn't do any work. I worked for only four years, that's all.

JF: It was only four years that you were working.

EN: Only four years.

JF: But this was the custom at that time to have someone there to raise the children from the beginning.

EN: That's right.

JF: Yes, and you mentioned...

EN: ...because we were very well-off.

JF: And this was the custom of that time. You also mentioned before that when you got to Shanghai and you wanted to get married that there was a problem because you did not have a *get* [a Jewish divorce decree]...

EN: ...yeah.

JF: ...from your first divorce.

EN: Right.

JF: Was this something that was fairly common at the time that you were married and getting divorced in Germany where *gets* were not given or did you just not have it with you? When you got divorced in Germany.

EN: I didn't get a *get* at that time because I even didn't ask for one because I didn't know I will get married again.

JF: This was something that you had to request...

EN: Yeah.

JF: ...when you got divorced, there was no Jewish divorce as part of your divorce then, you got divorced legally?

EN: Yeah.

JF: And in the community in which you lived, it was not customary then to follow through with Jewish ritual and get a *get*?

EN: No.

JF: Is there anything else other than what we have talked about together with Mr. Nowak about the years in Shanghai that you want to add to your part of the story?

EN: Not really.

JF: Okay, thank you very much for telling us what you have.

EN: You're welcome. My pleasure.

[Tape one side one ended. Interview ended.]