

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

BERTHA ROTHSCHILD

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Hannah Silver

Date: May 17, 1990

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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BR - Bertha Rothschild [interviewee]

HS - Hannah Silver [interviewer]

Date: May 17, 1990

Tape one, side one:

HS: This is Hannah Silver for Gratz College interviewing Mrs. Bertha Rothschild on May 17, 1990. Where were you born?

BR: I was born in Eschwege in Germany.

HS: And when was that?

BR: That was December 6, 1897.

HS: And how many brothers or sisters did you have?

BR: I was the youngest of five.

HS: And how many brothers, how many sisters?

BR: Two boys and two sisters.

HS: And what was your life like in Eschwege before there was an idea of Nazis ?

BR: It was...

HS: In normal times?

BR: It was normal, it was pleasant. We had a lot of Christian friends besides Jewish friends.

HS: And neighbors?

BR: And very nice neighbors.

HS: So you did not know that there was a thing like antisemitism?

BR: Of course not.

HS: Not at all.

BR: No, not at all.

HS: Did anybody in your family belong to a Jewish organization?

BR: Well we belonged to the...

HS: To the synagogue, yes?

BR: Of course. My husband belonged to the *Central-Verein*...

HS: ...*Deutscher Juden*?

HS: Did anybody in your family serve in the army?

BR: Everybody.

HS: Yeah, every man.

BR: Every man. My father served in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. My husband was a volunteer in the First World War.

HS: Nineteen fourteen.

BR: Yeah.

HS: Yeah.

BR: To 1918.

HS: And do you remember how your family reacted the day Hitler came to power in '33?

BR: Well, we did not like it, of course, but there were, at the time there were so many political parties that everybody was believing, "Let him try it, he won't last."

HS: That was our mistake that we thought he would not last.

BR: Of course.

HS: So you were convinced it would be just a temporary thing until...

BR: Yes, especially since we were told -- my husband was a front soldier so he wouldn't be touched ever.

HS: Yeah, they would leave him alone.

BR: Mhmm.

HS: And the boycott in April of 1933, were you or your family affected by it?

BR: No, not at all.

HS: Not at all, so did you-- wherever you worked or whatever connection you had, everything kept on...

BR: Yes, my husband kept on...

HS: Normal.

BR: ...doing business. He had very loyal customers, until about 1937 and the Nazis came and confiscated his business books.

HS: So in other words, between 1933 and 1938, '36, everything was absolutely normal and then...

BR: Outside, it was normal of course...

HS: Yeah, yeah.

BR: ...we suffered with the Jews that were [unclear].

HS: Yes, but you personally were not affected, business went on as usual?

BR: That's right.

HS: And then came 1937 and they came for the business books and took them away.

BR: Yes and that was it.

HS: That was the end of the business? Did they take the business away too?

BR: Yes, that was the business.

HS: And so he was out.

BR: My husband worked in wholesale.

HS: Wholesale. Did he get the compensation for it?

BR: [unclear]

HS: Well, they took away his business.

BR: Yes, later, later on in America. *Wieder gut machung* [German: restitution].

HS: No, no I mean when you said they took away the books and took away...

BR: We didn't get anything for that. The Nazis didn't pay anything.

HS: That's my question. Sometimes they gave you a few pennies. But they gave...

BR: No, no, no.

HS: ...you nothing. So he was out of business and that was it. And he didn't get any...

BR: We had to hurry to make appointments for our...

HS: So did you start to talk about leaving Germany immediately?

BR: Yes, yes.

HS: After they took the business away.

BR: We may have thought about it, but never expressed it because we both had to leave our old mothers there. And that was very difficult.

HS: So, what happened to the mothers? It was some relative there who took...

BR: My mother who was in her late 80's at the time, said, "You have to leave the country. You have a little boy, just for his sake. And don't bother, don't-- leave me.

HS: ...worry about us somehow.

BR: Yes.

HS: So did they live on for a while or were they deported too?

BR: My mother-in-law was deported and died in Theresienstadt.

HS: So she was way up in her 80's?

BR: No, she was in her 70's. But my mother, luckily, as sad as it was, died a natural death in '41.

HS: And were not deported.

BR: Yeah.

HS: So she couldn't be deported.

BR: After her death the Nazis confiscated the old-age home in which she died, in Kassel.

HS: And took it away and threw out the Jewish in...,

BR: Everybody. They just took over, the war was on already.

HS: So what did you do then, did you have relatives or friends in America?

BR: My sister had connections with the bank House of Warburg in Hamburg. And they helped us to get a sponsor here, another Warburg.

HS: You applied and got your exit visa.

BR: We had to wait...

HS: Yeah, but there was no problem that you got your exit visa for the three of you? Your husband, you and your son.

BR: Yes.

HS: Then you came to Philadelphia? Or where did you go?

BR: We landed in New York and didn't know where we would settle until our furniture would come.

HS: And did it come?

BR: It came.

HS: Oh, that was good.

BR: And in the meantime we had met my cousin, Dr. Brinkman, from Philadelphia. And he took us to Philadelphia to look around. He recommended we stay here, since we didn't like New York anyway. It was...

HS: Too big.

BR: It was the end of June, and July, and we thought we'd choke in New York. So we settled in Philadelphia.

HS: And you were not sorry out here?

BR: No, we like it, to this day.

HS: How about your husband, did he start a business here? Or how did you make a living?

BR: No, my husband after a few weeks being unemployed, or a few months I should say, he found a job as a night watchman in a tooth factory, Universal Tooth Factory. And then when the war started...

HS: In '39.

BR: ...he took a course in a metal factory -- he was not a, since we were not citizens yet, we were...

HS: Yeah, immigrants.

BR: ...immigrants.

HS: With a permanent status.

BR: He had to work in a shop until we were citizens, and then he worked and made more money with the defense industry in Philadelphia.

HS: And then America went into the war much later than...

BR: Yeah.

HS: ...in Germany it started in '39...

BR: ...'41.

HS: ...and for you it was '41. And how about your family, there were still left behind, cousins and nieces and things. For instance Helen was over there still?

BR: Very good friends did not survive. My brother was killed in Riga.

HS: That means he was deported to Riga and was killed? You found his name in our memorial book, you looked it up?

BR: Yes, exactly.

HS: And did anybody survive?

BR: My mother-in-law was taken to Theresienstadt. And my brother-in-law, we don't know, we didn't find in the book. But he was killed too.

HS: But you never heard from him after he was deported.

BR: No, no, no.

HS: And do you still have family living in Germany now?

BR: One nephew.

HS: Is he in Eschwege or did he move?

BR: No, he lives in Stuttgart.

HS: Oh, and you are in touch with him?

BR: Of course. Very much so.

HS: So now you have been here all these years in Philadelphia and you are not sorry for the change.

BR: No. My niece, Helen, came after us with her husband and her little girl and since she had a [unclear] house we could sponsor anybody. Another time a cousin of my husband with her husband and little girl lived with us until they got settled.

HS: Did you go back to Germany for a visit?

BR: After 31 years, the first time.

HS: Did you go?

BR: I went.

HS: Did you go to Eschwege?

BR: Yes, of course.

HS: How did you, what did you find, your house and people?

BR: It was a very emotional thing. It was familiar and strange at the same time.

HS: Both at the same time, yeah. Did you go to the cemetery?

BR: The cemetery.

HS: Was it in good shape, the cemetery?

BR: It was in very good shape.

HS: Well kept.

BR: Yes.

HS: And are there still Jews now in Eschwege?

BR: Not one.

HS: Not one, oh. They were either killed or left?

BR: They left. And a few, about a handful of young people came back but didn't stay in Eschwege.

HS: Yeah, well it was lucky for you that you were not there during the "Kristallnacht," and all that, it was good for you that you were here already.

BR: We lived through it, first of all, we heard more here on the radio than the people in Germany knew. And when I got a letter that my mother sat on the side of her bed all night praying, when she heard...

HS: ...what was going on.

BR: It was heartrending.

HS: Do you have anything to add that comes to your mind about those years?

BR: Well, when we packed our things we had no money to take to America

HS: Yeah, I mean...

BR: Every piece of household goods, every little and big thing, Brownshirt¹ was in our apartment watching.

HS: While you packed.

BR: While we packed.

HS: Did you have one of those vans?

BR: Yes, one of those large vans.

HS: Yes, yeah I remember in those days that...

BR: We hadn't finished in the evening. The Nazi locked our door and my husband, and my child and I had to sleep outside.

HS: Somewhere else.

BR: With relatives. And the next morning we finished. He didn't bother us much, he just watched.

HS: But he made sure everything. And you could take anything you wanted and when you...

BR: Well, no jewelry and no gold, I mean.

HS: No, that you had to take in, turn over probably. But you came here without any money at all, but you had...

BR: Very little money.

HS: ...but you had furnishings so you could start living.

BR: And all the linen for years you know. And the featherbeds, and everything. We didn't have to buy anything.

HS: This was worth more than money to have it...

BR: Yes.

HS: ...right here and then.

BR: For the money that the van cost and the packing, we could have bought new stuff here, but we didn't have the money.

HS: Over there it was German *Marks* and here you needed the dollars. But you had your familiar things which must have made you feel good too.

BR: Yes, and that was also one reason we couldn't stay in New York. We had too much furniture with us; we couldn't get in the apartment...

HS: In New York apartments were probably harder to get than here.

BR: Naturally.

HS: ...and cost more than here a house and probably. And that's why you were able to take Helen and her family over. So it's...

BR: The house \$4,000, in '39.

HS: With eight rooms.

BR: With eight rooms.

HS: Well, it was worth having because it gave you a good new start in this country.

¹Brownshirt: popular expression for SA or *Sturmabteilung*, also known as Storm Troopers.

HS: Thank you so much. We are very happy to have your testimony to add to all our other tapes, to remember what people went through in Germany before they came here.

BR: Yes, and it is important that the young generation learns what really happened.

HS: Yeah, because they can have no concept how this all came about.

[Tape one side one ended. Interview ended.]