

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Senior Citizens Project

Jewish Culture

O. H. 319

HARRIET ORGEL

Interviewed

by

Carrie Stanton

on

November 29, 1983

HARRIET ORGEL

Harriet Orgel is 95 years old and has lived at Heritage Manor since 1983. She was born in South Germany, the daughter of Susan and Adolph Sommer. She had four brothers.

She came to the United States in 1905 to live with her aunt and she worked cleaning apartment buildings. She worked as a practical nurse and then went to college to study dress design. She worked for Art Needlework Journal making needle art objects.

She last visited her family in Germany in 1924. Her family perished in Nazi Germany in World War II.

After working as a nursemaid for several families, she married Ben Orgel, who was widowed with several children, in 1944. He died in 1956. Her stepchildren have been very devoted to her and have supplemented her income for many years. Her hobbies are painting, and handicrafts. She is very well adjusted and is a great lover of life.

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INTERVIEWEE: HARRIET ORGEL

INTERVIEWER: Carrie Stanton

SUBJECT: Depression, World War I, World War II

DATE: November 29, 1983

S: This is an interview with Harriet Orgel for the Youngstown State University Jewish Senior Citizens Project by Carrie Stanton at the Heritage Manor on Gypsy Lane in Youngstown, Ohio, on November 29, 1983, at 2:30 p.m.

Do you want to tell me about your childhood? That's what I want to hear about, when you were young.

O: Yes. I was born in Germany, in the south, near France. Switzerland is next door to Germany, and Austria is the other way. All I know are the borderlines. They are all together. Germany is surrounded by Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Austria. Spain has nothing to do with Germany, that's way down south. Russia is north. Belgium is between them on that side. Above France is Belgium. Belgium speaks the French language, just like in France. They teach it in school. My father lived there for two years before he married my mom. He could speak French.

S: He was originally from Germany though?

O: Yes.

S: Your mother was too?

O: Yes. My parents never came here. They stayed in Germany.

S: Do you remember what the town was that you were born in?

O: Yes.

S: What was it?

O: Mannheim, it's on the Rhine. The Rhine is a big river. It's like the Hudson River. I think it is even bigger than the Hudson. There were quite a few big cities in Germany, but not like in America. I was born in the last century, 1888, I'm 95. I come from Mannheim. My father also moved around in several cities, that was his occupation. We moved to Saxony, Leipzig in Saxony. Different states have different dialects. Then we were in Cologne for a year and we were in Saxony for six years. He worked there. We were in Switzerland for two years. Lucerne, I don't know if you know anything about that, it's near the border of Germany.

S: What did your father do?

O: He designed machinery and alphabets to be printed and letters and articles to be printed. He also designed pictures that you put in newspapers to be printed, like a basket full of apples. He was an artist in one way, really. Then he worked for himself and he didn't make out very well. In fact, he got swindled a lot. My father was a very trusting man. That was a long time ago, almost a hundred years ago.

S: So you kind of moved around then?

O: We moved from that city because at that time, as I understand, that was like a specialty for him, for what he did. You could not get a job in every city. When he wrote to the different bosses they saw his work and they employed him. Naturally, I guess he wanted to go up higher so we landed back in Mannheim. That's where papa started out.

S: Were you the first born?

O: Yes.

S: Did you have brothers and sisters?

O: Four. None of them are alive anymore. My parents aren't either. One brother was killed in the First World War.

S: Fighting for Germany?

O: Yes. The Swiss were not Jewish yet. In those days if you were German born you were a German.

S: In the First World War the Jews fought for the Germans?

O: Yes. They call you, they don't ask if you are healthy enough to fight. In fact, my brother really didn't fight, but he was in the war. He told me when

I went home that he had something so he couldn't fight. When he was a few months old he had convulsions, when he had teeth. He had convulsions and that left both legs bowlegged. They army wouldn't have a soldier in the army to fight with bow legs. My brother was lucky in one way, he ran an automobile with supplies. He was in the army for two years and when the war was over he was going home. Two days before he left he was in Greece. He got sick and got the Black Plague. People didn't have that anymore. They live only one day and then it kills them. That's what my brother had.

S: Did you lose other people in your family to the plague? Do you remember other people in your family dying from the plague?

O: No, I was too little. In fact, I wasn't too little-- what am I talking about--I was in this country already. I came here when I was sixteen.

S: Do you want to tell me about that?

O: Yes. I came to my aunt's, a sister of my father. She was about forty. She didn't marry young and I came to her. She had no children, but she was married two years at that time. She had a baby and lost it in childbirth. That was in 1905, a long time ago. I stayed with her until I got married, two years later. She wasn't a very easy person to get along with, so I left before I got married.

S: Where does your aunt live?

O: My aunt died a long, long time ago.

S: Yes, but where did she live?

O: In New York. We all lived in New York.

S: In New York City?

O: Yes. I lived on the east side, way up near the river. My aunt, she never moved out of New York. She and her husband bought a saloon. They had no children, they were both around 45 or 50. They didn't make out after four years. I never bothered much with her because I could have gotten along with her if I would have let her slap me around. My husband wouldn't stand for it and neither would I. My parents were not like that, abusive. I wasn't used to that so I never bothered much with her. Then I heard that she went to visit in Germany and papa wrote to me that he put her out too. My aunt, the way the doctors told me, had typhoid six weeks when she was a young girl, 18 years old. The doctor gave her up,

he said she can't live, she'll be affected in her brain. She will go out of her mind or die like that. She didn't die, she's tough. Her system pulled through. She liked arguments, excitement. She was nasty, she acted like the curse of the people, she liked to pick fights. She could be very nice too. The doctor said, "You can't change that woman, that's what the typhoid did for her." She is eccentric, that's what he said. Now I remember.

S: That's a good word.

O: He told my mother that she was an eccentric woman and she will never be different. In fact, he said that he thought when she got older that she would probably get in trouble. She went to Germany and I don't know what she did in Germany.

S: When would this be?

O: I don't know.

S: Before World War II?

O: Right after the First World War, between the two wars.

S: What did you do when you came to the United States?

O: I was married.

S: You were married?

O: Yes. I was married and lived with my husband in New York. I didn't have to go to work so I learned a little English and I read a lot and I took piano lessons and I took singing lessons. My husband was in the musical line so I had it very easy that way and I liked it. I did a lot of reading because I never learned English and that's how I learned English. Even when we lived in New York I had a lot of chances to go to the opera and to all the new shows because we received half price tickets. I had no children to my sorrow. I had friends. I did needlepointing, that was the rage at that time. I worked some time for the Star Needle Journal in New York. They put my sample in their magazine so as to sell needlework. They sold cotton and silk thread. Lots of years ago when you were a young woman in New York all you ever did was needlework. Not any more, people have radio.

S: What did your husband do?

O: He was in the piano business. He tuned and he repaired. We went to New Jersey and he worked for himself. He passed away when he was 42.

S: You weren't married very long?

O: No, I was married 21 years. Then I was single for about ten years, and then I met Mr. Orgel. I married again and we moved to Ohio. He had children.

S: You have step-children?

O: Yes. I love them like my own. I had a good life. I had one brother come here. My mother's oldest son, he wanted to come. When I was married to my first husband I asked him if he wanted to come to America. After waiting twelve or thirteen years, he came. I sent him to school, he went to a public school and he went to high school. He was a very bright fellow. He landed in Wall Street after a year, in the stock exchange. That's where he worked for a broker, in the stock exchange. That time in 1929, I don't know if you heard, the market fell.

S: No, tell me about that. You were in the Depression. What do you remember about it?

O: The people lost their money overnight, so my brother did too. I know people who had houses and cars and chauffeurs and servants and had nothing the next morning.

S: What did they do?

O: The stocks, there were the bulls and the bears. I think the bears won and killed the bulls. That's the money game, I don't know anything about it. Eric, he was around 26 or 28 at that time. He was a single fellow. He had no work and he had a little money saved. He didn't do anything much but finally had to work so he ran an elevator in New York City. He got tired of it after a while, a few months, and he said to me, "I think I'm going to the Bahamas." I don't know how he ever got to the Bahamas. I don't know whether he said Jamaica and the Bahamas or only Jamaica. They are close together anyway. Every year he used to go down there for his vacation. I have an idea that he had friends down there. I think so, because my brother left and I never heard from him.

S: Never after that?

O: No. God help me, like I look at you, he left and he said, "I'll write to you."

S: Do you think something happened to him?

O: I don't know.

S: Did you ever go back to Germany?

O: Yes. I went twice.

S: On a big ship?

O: Yes. It was very nice.

Often I think about my mother's heart. I tell you, when you are a young girl you are cruel. You are really cruel. I never thought about my mother wanting to have me home. One daughter and four boys, what she must have felt.

S: Your other two brothers, did they stay in Germany.

O: They stayed home, yes. They got married. Then the World War came along and I never heard anymore. I tried to trace them.

S: Do you think they were in concentration camps?

O: Papa and mama died naturally before Hitler. My other two brothers, they both were married at that time when the war came.

S: They disappeared without a trace?

O: I never heard from them. I never could find anybody who knew anything. We were a small family, really. My mother had only a brother and a sister. They were married and we heard nothing from them either. They weren't young anymore, mama and papa were born in 1865, so the brother and sister were not young either. They died off. My father had a brother who was married and he never had any children, then our family dwindled off. My brother, I don't know where he is. My brother, he would be near my age, I'm 95. My brother would be 89, five or six years younger than me. I never heard, never could trace, never knew where he was. Sometimes I think maybe he hired himself out on a steamer and went under. Either that, or he was disgusted and just didn't care anymore. He was what you call the fellows that lay around on the beaches. They live on the beach. Some of them make out good. I read about that. I couldn't find anything out. Of course, I didn't have a thousand dollars for a detective. He didn't give me much hope.

S: Did you live around this area during the Depression?

O: I lived in New Jersey, in Elizabeth, near New York. Before World War II we moved here. My husband's two sons went to work. They were college men and after

they graduated they were doctors. They were foot specialists, both of them. They're still alive, but they don't know anything of my family. They never came in contact with them. My family never came here and my stepsons never travelled there. After the War was over there was no more family for me. That's my childhood.

S: Was there a big Jewish community in New York City? Were there a lot of Jews in New York City and they all kind of stuck together?

O: In New York City, yes, there were a lot of Jewish people. Downtown there were people gathered together. There were a lot of Jewish people living downtown in the bowery. There was Chinatown in the bowery and there were the Catholic people gathered down there in the section, and there were other Christian people gathered in another section. They made sections where the ones that couldn't speak English lived together. There were quite a lot of Jewish people downtown. I used to go downtown to buy clothes, which were really reasonable and marvelously made. The tailoring was astonishing. Of course, these people came from Europe and they were good workers and couldn't get any work here so they started for themselves, the ones who had a little money. I don't know how they did it. You could buy a tailor-made suit for \$12. It was excellent wool material. They did that just to live, for bread and butter.

S: The Jews were from all over Europe then, Poles and Germans?

O: Yes, they lived together. They had a synagogue and they had a rabbi and candles. They were poor but decent. They gathered in the same neighborhood. In Europe they locked them in the ghettos, but they didn't do that here. They stayed close to each other, naturally, they were from Europe, most of them, or from Poland, Russia, or Austria. They came from all countries and flocked together downtown in New York.

S: You call that the Bowery? Is that the Bowery?

O: They were in the Bowery. There was also another part of the Bowery where wealthy people lived, that was on the west side. It wasn't too far away from the poor. You could go shopping. There were the old, Jewish men who couldn't get work, they had a little pushcart and bought vegetables and they sold them reasonable and clean. You saw a lot of maids down there from the rich people, buying their vegetables. Fish was fresh down there because the bowery was near the water. Food at that time was very, very reasonable.

S: Was it?

O: Something like that. Thirteen rolls were a quarter and a loaf of bread was ten cents at that time. You could live very cheap. You couldn't save much money either, except if you had a big business.

S: Did they have gas street lights then?

O: Yes. Not in the beginning when I came, but in the end. My aunt used to have to light the gas light. There were no open gas lights flickering like that with glass around it. We had no cooking with gas, not in 1905.

S: Right.

O: Then when I got married it was 1907. After I was married a year or two we got a little cooking oven to roast in. It was the size of a small cabinet. It was used just to bake. You could bake meat or any kind of cake in there. It was as big as that.

S: Just inside, not on top?

O: You could cook on top. It had two or three burners. It was a little higher than that. You rented that for two dollars a year from the gas company in New York City.

S: A good buy, huh?

O: Yes. I had one for two or three years for two dollars. Then people moved around and bought their own gas furnaces. Then they started to get more modern and they had what they have now, more burners with hot water on the side to heat hot water. There was a tank that sat in the stove. All that they had. That's how they had the coal stoves years ago. They made it with the gas too. It was nothing like now. If you told them there was a computer now they would look at you like you were crazy. The world has changed.

S: Oh yes. You must have seen a lot of changes. Do you remember when you saw the first car, the first automobile?

O: Yes, we had an automobile, my husband and I. Both of my husbands had automobiles.

S: When did you get your first car?

O: Not in New York, it was when we moved to New Jersey. My husband had a business and we lived next to Newark. There was a lot of business over there. We moved over there and he bought a car, a Fliver. It was open,

but when it rained you could roll the top over and you were not as dry as a closed car nowadays. It was a rough thing, but it ran.

S: Did you have to go in the front and crank it up?

O: Yes. You had to get out and crank the car. When it rained sometimes the darn thing stopped in a mud puddle or somewhere. It killed the engine. We had a good time.

I lived in New York 25 years, and I loved it. I don't know what I loved about it.

S: Do you remember F.D.R.? Do you remember Roosevelt?

O: Oh yes. I remember the one who went hunting the wild animals.

S: That was Teddy Roosevelt.

O: Teddy Roosevelt.

S: Do you remember him?

O: Yes. He was the president when I came over in 1905.

S: Did the people like him?

O: I couldn't tell you because I was too young to know. I couldn't read English when I came over either. When I got married my husband couldn't talk German and I couldn't talk English. (Laughter) We learned from each other. I learned English very quickly. I read nothing but English. I figured I would learn it faster. He taught me a lot, too.

S: Was your marriage arranged or did you just fall in love?

O: He lived upstairs in the same house as the girl that I worked with for awhile. Her brother was his boyfriend. I saw him every day. We lived downstairs on the first floor and he lived upstairs with his mother and another brother. This girl who took me was friends with them, the brothers. She had brothers and they were around eighteen or nineteen years old already. My aunt knew them, they were neighbors in the same house. It was an eight or nine family house. There were six rooms. There was no heat or gas.

S: How did you keep warm?

O: Stoves, kerosine stoves, you carried around from room to room. We slept in the cold bedrooms; you covered

yourself. You would be surprised how you can live. You lived in the kitchen all winter and in the summer you lived in the front of the house. (Laughter) We had a lot of windows, each room had two or three windows, big, high windows. There were big, high ceilings. We ate at five o'clock and we had to be downstairs only after three o'clock.

S: Do you remember Franklin Roosevelt? What did you think of him?

O: I remember a lot of things about New York.

S: Did women pay attention to politics then?

O: Not as much as now. Women didn't go to work either so much as now.

S: Do you remember when women got to vote?

O: Yes, but I forgot the time. My husband was a born American and his mother was. His family came from England. They weren't Irish, they weren't Scotch, Wales I think, it was something like that. His mother was born in New York. They were immigrants from a couple hundred years before. You would be surprised how so many years are gone now. You met people like that in New York. Through him I was an American. I didn't have to swear anything. I was eighteen and he was twenty-one. Being he was an American when I was eighteen I became an American citizen. Of course, I could vote. I voted the way he thought best. I voted Democrat.

S: You voted the way he wanted you to vote?

O: Yes. Naturally, I couldn't talk such good English. It wasn't too bad.

S: You did vote though?

O: Yes. My husband voted every year, I voted too. It's a peculiar story. (Laughter) I do love New York, and now you couldn't sell me New York.

S: It has changed a lot.

O: I met a lot of people that voted like that, the husband and wife. We all went together sometimes. One had a car and picked up three or four or five of us and we all went together. Not all in the same booth, you each had your own. I gave up voting when I got to be 90. I couldn't walk so much and I didn't want to be bothered. Then I was laid up with arthritis and I gave it up. Here, I vote.

S: Do you?

O: Yes. They ask us if we want to vote. I said, "I used to vote, but due to sickness I gave it up." She said, "Do you want to vote?" I said, "Well, I don't know how I'm going to get to the polls if I'm going to vote." I read the paper. She said, "Well, you don't have to walk a step out of the house here. We have tablets. You are an American citizen and you will have no trouble."

S: Do you remember World War II?

O: Oh yes, very well. My second husband's younger son was in the Army five years. His two son-in-laws were in the Army, one was in Germany and got shot the first day, and the other one lived here, and married my daughter, the younger daughter. He was in Australia the first couple of years; he was like a correspondent, but he was a soldier. He was in the war over five years, but he never had to fight. He was an educated man, he was a college man. They sent him different places, like a go-between. I don't know what you call it. He told me one time, but I forget. The other son-in-law, he got a pension on account of he got shot the first day, from Germany. It was a bullet from a church tower. He walked around with his arm like that for five or six months. My husband's son was sent to England and he spent two years in England and Germany and then they sent him home. My daughter, the older one, had been married two years and had a little girl. She lived with us while her husband was in the War. That was nice.

S: You lived in Youngstown during the War?

O: Yes. We all lived here. Now they are all over somewhere.

S: How did you get here, by car, when you came to Youngstown? Did you come here by car or by train, how did you get here?

O: You mean years ago?

S: From New York City.

O: First by train and then we had our own car. When the boys started to work they both earned pretty good, they were college boys. We liked to send our children to college so we did our best. They bought cars and naturally they wanted us to go along. My husband and his first wife were related also, so it was not so strange for the relatives to get together, the cousins.

- S: When you married Mr. Orgel, you came here then right away? He had already lived here?
- O: He was here already, long before me. He married a cousin from his family and then she died. The children were big when I met him. The girls were fifteen and eighteen and the boys were already in college. My husband had a business in Elizabeth, New Jersey, a horse, feed and grain business, and coal and wood. He had a good business and all of a sudden after the war it scrambled because there were more automobiles; they sold more gas than coal. All the houses remodeled, the people didn't use coal.
- S: What did your husband do here when he lived in Youngstown?
- O: My husband, for a year or two, had a heart condition and he couldn't do anything. The children all worked, but the two were married, no one; the second one married later on. The first son had a business in Canton, he was a doctor, a foot specialist. He helped my husband out and my husband had a little money. He had to give up his business, it fell apart in Elizabeth, New Jersey. When the second son graduated as a doctor, the first son had opened an office here already down on the square. In the Mahoning Bank they had an office, Dr. Orgel. You find out easily. The other lived in Canton, Ohio. He lived there way over fifty years. He's retired now. He had a good business. He was a well-known doctor. They helped out the family a little bit. When my husband got well, the second son, the youngest, took his father into the office. He had wages and we all had a home together. We bought a house and the girls went to work. My one daughter, the older one, was a secretary, and the younger one was also a secretary and she got married. They both got married after the War. In fact, one got married during the War, the older one. She married her boyfriend, the one she went to school with.
- S: During the War do you remember the persecution of the Jews? Did anybody in this country know that this was happening to the Jews in Europe, that they were being killed?
- O: I don't think so.
- S: No?
- O: You mean the holocaust?
- S: Yes. It was just kind of something they didn't know

about?

- O: Who knew that Hitler was a dog like that? Okay, he hated Jews. I know a lot of people don't like the Jews, we know that too. We realize it, but why? They let the bums live, but why are the Jews such bums that they can't live? The Jewish people are very smart in a lot of things. My daughter did all the sewing. The son-in-law has his oldest son--I don't want to brag, but I want to tell you--he is a first class diplomat in Israel. First he spent three years in Egypt; the president in Washington, D.C. sent him to Egypt because he had all the education and knowledge necessary for a man like that to fill a place. He was a college man for many years, a young man, and naturally smart. Now he is working for America in Israel and is married and has three little boys.
- S: How you ever been there, have you ever been to Israel?
- O: No. I don't know why we didn't go, my husband and I. We could have gone. The children all went. My other daughter goes over to Israel for four or five months. It's her son who is over there.
- S: Do you know a lot of people who have been to Israel?
- O: No, not so much. I don't get around anymore. My son-in-law works for the Jewish home, not for the home, the Jewish Center. He helps run it. He is the associate director. They went to Israel several times. A lot of people, I hear they go and they like it so much that they live there. It's a very small, little country.
- S: It's tiny, isn't it?
- O: Small.
- S: Were you happy when Israel became the Jewish homeland?
- O: Yes. They wanted to get back there, they wanted to live there. A neighbor I had when I lived on Elm Street, she has a sister quite a little younger than her. Her husband sings in the temple, he is a cantor. He is in Israel. They have lived there the last three or four years. They come here and they go back. They like it there very much, they like the living. I don't know, a lot of people say that. I don't know what they like, but they love it. My husband's daughter, the one whose son is over here, she says he loves Israel. It's a small, little country. I don't know what they like, maybe the way they live. Of course, they live their own religion naturally. The boys had to study Hebrew, they talk Hebrew. I can't talk Hebrew.

S: No?

O: I don't know one word. I go to service here; I don't understand anything, but I go anyway.

S: When you came to Youngstown, how many synagogues were here? How many temples were here, just one?

O: There were more than one. There were a lot of Jewish people in New York, even at that time. The Holocaust, I don't understand it. I have seen pictures. My husband's second son, he was right in Germany for ten months, behind the army. He was a doctor, and of course, he was working in the fields where the people were shot, taking X-rays, putting the bones together. He took some photographs. All the people were laying in the ditches naked, men, women, children, all mixed up, on top of each other. That's how they buried them, with the dirt on top. The cruelties were horrible. I don't think Hitler was right in his head.

S: He couldn't have been.

O: The funniest part of it, I've read a lot about it and I can't read anymore about it, it says that Hitler himself somehow in his family is Jewish blood. I don't know if it is true or not. Why did he do that, the stupid man?

S: It's terrible.

O: It wasn't anything that made him live or made him rich. He killed himself. He couldn't live anymore because they would have killed him, like Mussolini. I was in Italy twice. When I was a widow I had money left and I went to see my parents and I went to Italy. I had friends and we all went together, in a troop. I was in Italy five weeks, it's very beautiful in Italy. If I had a choice I think I would have loved to live in Rome. I don't know how it is now, after the War, that was before the War.

S: You don't want to go back to Germany?

O: No. What would I do in Germany? I don't think there is anybody left that I would know. If I had to hunt them up I wouldn't know them either. I've been here so long, since 1905.

S: You don't really remember that much about Germany?

O: No, I couldn't trace anybody through the Red Cross, of my mother's and father's people. There weren't many because there were no children. My uncle had no children,

he married a lady that didn't want any. That was my father's brother. My mother's brother married and as far as I know he had no children. My two brothers that were left in Germany, single, they both got married and as far as I know they had no children. Who are you going to hunt up? They all died. Except probably if there would have been children maybe somebody would be left, maybe grandchildren. There was no grandchild and there was no child.

S: You never went back there after the War?

O: No, I never went back. I didn't want to see any more. I thought to myself, that's no place for us. That's a funny story.

S: Yes.

O: I wiled your day away.

S: That's okay. Is there anything else you would like to add?

O: It's getting hot in here.

S: Anything else you want to say? Any little stories you want to tell?

O: There is no more, I talked enough.

S: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW