

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Nazi Germany Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 537

CHRISTINE HELD

Interviewed

by

Steve Evanson

on

March 9, 1981

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: CHRISTINE HELD

INTERVIEWER: Steve Evanson

SUBJECT: Life as a German Citizen during World War II

DATE: March 9, 1981

E: This is an interview with Mrs. Chris Held for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Nazi Germany Project, by Steve Evanson, at her home on March 9, 1981.

Mrs. Held, what do you remember about your parents and family?

H: I was born in Germany. I have three brothers still over there living. I was the only girl.

E: What were your brothers names?

H: Heinz, Hans, and Claus.

E: Where in Germany were you born?

H: I was born in Idar-Oberstein; it's about 80 miles from Frankfurt and it's very close to the Rhine River.

E: At the time did your father work at all?

H: Yes. My father was a bookkeeper for a bank and has changed several times working for different people as a bookkeeper.

E: How about your mother?

H: My mother started working during the war also as a clerk-typist and bookkeeper.

- E: So you were inspired by them to go into that field of work?
- H: Yes, in a way. The war had a lot to do with it, growing up, going to school. There was a period where there was no school for a month or two because of the bombings.
- E: While you were growing what sort of foods did you eat? Do you remember any particular German dishes?
- H: Yes, they had a lot of potato dishes. I wasn't too crazy about them, but I ate them anyway. Vegetables were really the major dish, all kinds of vegetables, even today. Through the years after the war they have added new vegetables like peppers and corn, which they didn't have then.
- E: Is beer really popular over there?
- H: Yes, very popular.
- E: I heard it is not like American beer.
- H: It is very strong; it's more potent than American beer.
- E: As a child what do you remember about the town or village you grew up in, sort of like activities, the population?
- H: I grew up mostly in Idar-Oberstein, but my father was transferred during the war. They opened a new branch of the bank in Alsace-Lorraine, which was occupied by the Germans then. Of course, we all moved there. In fact, I finished school there. The graduation took place in the basement because there was an air raid that day.
- E: What were the children like when you were growing up? Do you remember any particular friends?
- H: Yes, I do. I have a lot of girlfriends. I remember two of them were Jewish girls. They were able to escape the tragedy of Hitler; they left in 1938. Some went to England and some went to the United States.
- E: As a youngster growing up what sort of activities did you personally get involved in?
- H: Mostly sports because it was mandatory in school that we have gym every morning before class, whether it was rain, snow, or sun. Throughout the summer we only had six weeks of vacation. There were a lot of activities in sports on the weekends.
- E: When you were growing up what was your local government

system like?

- H: It was divided into provinces and you belonged to a certain province. There were governors.
- E: They were appointed by somebody?
- H: By the government. It's not like here where they are appointed by the people.
- E: Tell me about the Alsace-Lorraine?
- H: That was taken over and occupied by the Germans.
- E: While you were growing up what types of industries were there?
- H: The city I was born in, Idar-Oberstein, their main industry was stone. It is called today the stone-cutting center of the world. They make jewelry. In the Alsace-Lorraine there was a lot of agriculture. There was also pottery. A lot of these things were converted into ammunition depots too for the war.
- E: Around 1940 or so were there a lot of feelings of the people being nationalistic? Were they happy with the country at the time?
- H: Yes, I believe so. People were happy. Most people who had been out of work for a long time all got work. They built new roads, like the Autobahn.
- E: In other words, his programs centered toward the people?
- H: Yes, towards the people and the military also. They had a lot of military academics for the young people.
- E: Hitler had motivated the people?
- H: Yes, he did. Like I said, the parochial schools were dissolved; there were only public schools. Idar-Oberstein is a community where the majority of the people are Protestant. If you were Catholic you couldn't go to Catholic school because there were none anymore. They had catechism in the auditorium and you took an hour out of every week to do this. Most of the teachers were opposed to this and there was a big dispute going on between Catholics and Protestants. My mother just turned around and assigned the three of us over to the Protestant temporarily. That way we were not harassed in school being a Catholic, because the majority were Protestant there.
- E: Was your father still alive then?

H: Yes.

E: Was he pretty much in obedience with Hitler's ideas?

H: My father was a private citizen; however, almost every man who had a public job had to join the party and they got a pin to wear on their lapel. Most people did not wear it all of the time for some reason which I do not know. It was a must that you had to join. Everybody over eighteen had to join.

E: How would the media manipulate the people's minds?

H: There were some and they let you know they were the best. Nobody really knew what was going on then.

E: What were the feelings, especially among your family, when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia and Poland?

H: We never really found out what the people felt, the people they invaded, because we weren't there. However, I was a young teenager when my father was transferred to a town in Alsace-Lorraine and we lived in Lorraine. There were hard feelings among the younger generation because they were raised by the French up until then. Their parents, the older generation, they could speak German very well and they were used to this because they were Germans before. The younger generation didn't care for the Germans because they had to join the army now that they had become Germans and fight the war. That was the bad part because they felt more French than they did German. Some of them couldn't even speak German. My father was a private citizen and had nothing to do with military stuff like this. We just lived there and I had a lot of freinds. That is where I got my first part-time job.

E: What was your first part-time job?

H: I worked part-time in the bank on certain days.

E: Do you remember the name of it?

H: The bank name translated means "Bank of the German Laborer". I also joined the vocational school. School was bad because of the bombings, air raids and stuff. I was sixteen so I joined the vocational school.

E: The educational system, how was it structured?

H: Very good. You went eight years to a public school and then you had two choices: You could go to college . . . After public school you went to the gymnasium, or high school. You were tested several times to see if you

qualified to college. You could enter college when you were eighteen. Or you could join vocational school, and they really had very good programs, including language.

E: At that time was the vocational type of education program more beneficial, was there more money?

H: It was more beneficial if you were looking for a job. You got a good education there too. If you wanted it you got it, but you had to work at it. Also during vocational school you got your part-time job, seven hours every day during school. It was in the morning or afternoon and then on Saturdays you worked full-time. The banks were open on Saturdays too at that time. School was held on Saturdays too. In fact, they still have it today and they are fighting it. I liked it very much though.

E: Roughly how many hours a week did you work at the bank?

H: No, the pay wasn't too great. By then the wages were low too. There is no comparison with today. You get paid though, and you worked with the public. In the Alsace-Lorraine there was a port also and a lot of French came with their barges. They had one river there and people stayed one or two days and came in and exchanged their francs and German marks.

E: Do you remember who your superior was?

H: We were just a branch; the main office was located in Germany. Every month the bookkeeping department would come and check us out. It was war and there were only three of us: The manager, myself, and the cashier. There used to be two more, but the Germans put them in the army, so they weren't there. There were just three people. There were also lots of air raids. Sometimes we spent days doing the typing down in the basement. One day it was pretty bad and we had an air raid and we didn't pay much attention to it. We went outside, two of us, and we would count the tinsel dropped to stop the radars. We counted the bombs too. One bomb hit the bank in the back in the bookkeeping department. There was a glass roof and it tore off a big wall on the side of the building. We were downstairs and upstairs were other offices and the last floor was the fourth floor and there were private apartments there. There was an old lady who stood up there looking down at me. I looked up and you could see the stairway going up there, but no wall.

E: Was there a lot of vandalism and crime in your town?

H: No. During the war I can't remember any of that stuff. Everything was organized and ran smoothly. Toward the

end of the war were the bad times.

E: In the classroom in particular what did they really emphasize?

H: History. It was just about everything. Most teachers were nice and had feelings. The history teacher I had was very Nazi-like I remember. He would come in in the morning and you made sure that you stood up by the time you saw the handle go down on the door. His greeting was not "Good Morning", his greeting was "Heil Hitler." I think his name was Weber. In fact, two years ago I went back home on a visit and I visited my old teacher. He is still like the day when I remember him in school.

E: Being in the classroom would they emphasize a lot about how superior the Germans were?

H: No. The classes were pretty normal.

E: Do you recall any Hitler type of youth groups?

H: Yes. We had to join the youth groups. There was one for boys and one for girls. That was a lot of fun because we had a lot of sport activities on weekends throughout the summer. There was a lot of competition too, but it was plain, old fun. I enjoyed it.

E: They never looked at the ideas of Hitler?

H: Not that I remember. We had a uniform though. It was a black skirt and white blouse. We had a swastika and there was a triangle sewn on my blouse with the province I was from. You had knee socks and brown shoes.

E: What about the boys, were they sort of military?

H: They had a band. They had big drums. They wore black shorts and white shirts and the same kind of necktie. They also had caps on.

E: When you watch a movie on television, is it that way when you see the way German people are portrayed?

H: The people who met Hitler on a parade had to salute him.

E: Did you listen to a lot of radio broadcasts of his?

H: There were a lot of speeches he made, but I don't remember in school that we had to listen.

E: Do you remember listening to any of them?

- H: Yes, but it didn't mean anything to me then. I was not old enough to get the whole thing.
- E: At that time did you think that Hitler's philosophy was correct?
- H: Towards the end some things leaked out and people weren't dumb. What could you do? You didn't come out and say what happened because you were afraid. You didn't make any open comments about Hitler. You might have discussed it with your friends.
- E: That talk with your friends, did you feel that he was justified and he would succeed?
- H: There was a military build-up in 1938 and it really went on big. I remember people talking about whether we were going to have a war. That was always denied in his speeches. He just said that we were a strong nation and were building up.
- E: When you got into school did they still have this attitude? Maybe you can recall the turning point for Hitler.
- H: Not so much in school; school went pretty normal. The group for girls was called BDM; the men's group was Hitler Youth.
- E: When did you realize the turning point for Germany?
- H: Not until it was almost over in 1944. You spent almost every night in the cellar and you kept asking yourself when this was going to end. The air raids got pretty bad. The experience I told you of at the bank was in broad daylight, around 12:00 noon. From then on it was constant. You forever had to have a suitcase in the basement because you knew at night you were going to be going down there.
- E: Where did you live at, near where you worked?
- H: We didn't leave Lorraine until 1944. We didn't go to Idar-Oberstein, but we went to my grandmother's near the Mosel River. It was in the country and most people were going to the country because you were safer there. The air raids took place in the major cities and you were pretty safe in the country.
- E: While working in the city what was the economic situation at the end of the war?
- H: Toward the end of it was bad because supplies were hard to come by; the trains were bombed, and the major points were bombed. There was really very little transportation available.



We always managed. We had ration cards at work. I was at my grandmother's with my parents when the whole thing collapsed and it was finally over; that was in March of 1945. This was near the Rhine River; one of the first places the war was over. It took until summer of 1945, July, until it was all over in Germany.

- E: While you were working did you make a lot of money? Did the whole family have to work just to eat?
- H: After the war, when the bad times came, you had to buy most of your stuff on the black market just to survive. That sometimes you couldn't even do with money, because your money wasn't worth anything. Most parents like mine exchanged other stuff, like bed linens, china, silver, flax, new pots and pans, whatever you could get. We took it to the farms and exchanged it for eggs and butter. It was not until 1947 when the new money was printed. Everyone started out with 40 marks per head, which was not very much. Then almost everybody had to go to work.
- E: What did you expect to happen to you?
- H: You really didn't know. I'll never forget when it was really over, you just thanked God on your hands and knees that this was over. By then, of course, most people knew what had really happened.
- E: You were still employed after the defeat of Germany?
- H: No, not in 1945. We went back and jobs were not available then. We went back to my hometown in 1946 and that's where I got my real job.
- E: Did your family or friends fear any type of imprisonment at that time?
- H: No, not unless they were very active in the party or they had other functions like putting the Jewish people into concentration camps. Other than that you were just an ordinary citizen.
- E: Did you know of any people in particular that got arrested?
- H: I don't remember any. I remember my teacher who was an officer of the reserves. He was not a Nazi. He just did his duty. He was called in and he went. He did just what anybody else did as a soldier. He came back and he went to Texas into a prison cmap.
- E: In the United States?
- H: Yes.

E: Do you recall how he got here?

H: We talked about that two years ago when I was home. He said he first went to England and then it was all by boat going to the States. The whole thing was really ridiculous because he was a teacher, a good teacher, and a soldier in World War I and then an officer. They called him in in World War II for two years; he was on active duty.

E: He got transferred from England to the United States?

H: Yes.

E: After the war did the Marshall Plan help?

H: That helped tremendously. I think that put us all back on our feet again.

E: How did it help you personally?

H: Economically, it built the country up again. You could buy merchandise again. I think it was a tremendous help for West Germany.

E: How did the people actually feel that they were receiving this help from the United States?

H: The majority of the people felt good.

E: There was no hostility toward the Americans?

H: No.

E: Do you remember what sort of reconstruction was going on then? Were there new ideas for universities, education, transportation?

H: After the war?

E: Yes.

H: Yes, that slowly came about after the war. Education was pushed very much.

E: Industrywise were there a little more factories?

H: Major industry was pretty much underground; it was bombed out. It didn't take them too long to rebuild it again. That was tremendous. They didn't mind doing it either; they did a good job.

E: Do you recall any particular factories that they built?

- H: I was back in my hometown and their main industry was stone.
- E: After the war, the feelings between the allies and the citizens, was there a lot of . . .
- H: There was a very good relationship. The majority had very good relationships with the allies. Like I said, again there is a handful of people . . . Where I lived in my hometown there was a French zone. It was divided into sectors; there was a French sector, American sector, Russian sector, and English sector. We had to lived in the French sector occupied by the French. It wasn't too good, but there weren't any incidents. The French, if they wanted something they took it ; if they wanted an apartment or house even. Going back to my teacher, they took his whole house for three years. They took it over and he had to move out. He moved into an apartment. That house belonged to his wife. There was one French family in the middle and one downstairs. They did a lot of damage to the house too. He got some compensation, but it didn't make up for what the damage was.
- E: Do you recall how the German soldiers were being treated? Did you witness prison camps?
- H: My two older brothers were both in private schools away from home. Toward the end in 1944 they put students between the ages of sixteen and eighteen into the army. We didn't know that at the time. My oldest brother happened to be in a prison camp as a soldier near my hometown. We found out by accident. Since I had taken French in school I wrote a letter to the French commandant to release my brother since we lived so close and he was only in his teens. I went there and my brother was home within one week. In the meantime my brother had also come home from school. It was really a tragic time for my parents during the war because we didn't know where they were, where they had put them.
- E: Overall though, how would you say the German citizens were treated, fairly or cruelly?
- H: They were treated good, the majority of them.
- E: Were the German people optimistic after the war?
- H: The majority did pretty good. You did anything to survive. We lived in the city and my mother rented a plot in somebody's yard and she put a little fencing around it for money. She put two geese in there and at Christmas time we butchered the geese. This was part of survival. You did what you could.

E: How did you feel personally? Did you think after the fall of Germany life was over?

H: I remember I felt very, very good. I was glad it was over and we all knew what was going on, what was happening. I think the majority didn't want any part of this. They were all glad that he [Hitler] was out of the way.

A comedian here makes a joke on television about a government official or a political leader and it is all right. You couldn't do this over there; if you did you were thrown in jail. I remember my father telling me a few comedians did that. Herman Goering was the official of the German Luftwaffe. I loved fish and would go to the fish market in the morning. There was a woman there who said, "Herring, Herring, just as fat as Herman Goering." They put her away for three days.

E: As a citizen of Germany would you say that you were free under Hitler's regime?

H: At that time I wasn't old enough to realize what was all going on.

E: Living in America, what do you miss most about living in Germany?

H: My relatives really, my brothers.

E: Pertaining to the war, was there a lot of censorship with the mail?

H: Not for private citizens.

E: Suppose you were writing a letter to a friend in America, pretend that you are in Germany during World War II, what would you say that would best describe Germany?

H: I don't think that was possible to do then. That letter would never arrive here. They would confiscate it.

E: What would you write? What would you say about the people? Would you say that German people are a supreme race or would you be conservative.

H: If I would write to a personal friend I would never mention something like we are superior or better. Maybe there were people who would do that and believe that we were the superior race, but I didn't believe in it; we are just ordinary people.

E: To reverse that, let's say you were going to write another letter and you were an American in Europe. If you were going to write to Germany what would you write to describe

America?

H: I would say it is great. People who have never visited us over here don't realize how big the country is. People over there really have no idea what it is like over here. It is so different.

An example is if I cook in the morning or night and I have my hair in curlers and decide to go to the supermarket to get something, I put my coat and hat on and jump in the car. You don't do that over there. You dress up before you go over there. You're always afraid you will meet somebody downtown and have to shake hands. You can live more freely here.

E: Is there anything at all that you feel important that we didn't talk about?

H: If you have more questions, go ahead.

E: During the turning point for Germany, would you say it was somewhere around 1943 or 1944? Did the people realize that Germany was not as capable as they thought they were?

H: Yes, we found that out in 1944 because we all had radios in the basement. There was a station called the "Voice of America", which is still very popular over there today. Through that we got a lot of news which we didn't get through the Germans' radio station. Also they would announce the air raids, where they were coming from. We knew how close they already were.

E: Where was your bomb shelter at?

H: Mostly in the basement and it was supported by extra beams in case it got hit. I remember in Lorraine they were building one under a church. They had prisoners doing this and they were guarded by Germans. Prisoners included men, women, and children. I remember we had boxes on our basement windows filled with sand for protection against bomb splinters.

E: When did the bomb strikes really start, towards the end of the war?

H: No, earlier around 1942, in the major cities anyway.

E: What was the feeling like in the bomb shelters?

H: Fear because you never knew whether you would come out alive or dead.

E: After the war there must have been a lot of allies looking for souvenirs and gifts to take home. How did they handle

that?

- H: A lot of the first fighting troops took a lot of stuff from the homes because sometimes people weren't in their homes. What you had left, the Germans came around after the war and you had to turn it in, like flags and weapons and all that stuff. When I met my husband after the war most of the souvenirs were pretty much cleared out. In fact, he wanted the flag so bad just to take for a souvenir, but I told him to forget it; you couldn't get a flag anymore in the 1950's. I bought black and white and red material and had one made for him. My dressmaker made it for me and she thought I was crazy.
- E: You said that the allies were really welcomed. Were they nice to you and did they treat you just as nice?
- H: Yes.
- E: When you went back recently how did those old towns look?
- H: Strange. They have progressed; they have big turnpikes now and highways. I felt strange being home two years ago.
- E: When you went back did you talk to anybody that lived in your time when you were there? You talked about visiting that one teacher. Were there other people that you talked to?
- H: Other friends and relatives, and neighbors.
- E: I want to thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW