

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Nazi Germany Project

Germany, 1930's to 1940's

O. H. 610

IRENE LUDWICK

Interviewed

by

Steven R. Ard

on

June 1, 1981

IRENE LUDWICK

Irene Ludwick was born Irene Neumayer on June 19, 1935, in Stuttgart, Germany. Much of her childhood memories as an only child are of World War II and the bombings on her hometown. She recalls that the elderly and young were evacuated to the rural areas in 1944 and she feels that the farmers "really didn't like . . . but they had no choice."

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INTERVIEWEE: IRENE LUDWICK

INTERVIEWER: Steven R. Ard

SUBJECT: School, soldiers, wartime, childhood

DATE: June 1, 1981

A: This is an interview with Irene Ludwick for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Germany in the 1930's and 1940's, by Steven R. Ard, at European Imports on Mahoning Avenue, on June 1, 1981 at approximately 5:25 p.m.

Okay Irene, would you kind of tell me about your childhood, growing up in Germany, and approximately when were you born?

L: I was born June 19, 1935 in Stuttgart, Germany. Well, childhood was alright until the war came, and I would say bad times really started in 1940. It started earlier but that is when it started for us and the bombings, of course, started in 1942, 1943, which was very bad. We had food; it was rationed food. We had plenty during Hitler. In 1945 and 1948 it was very bad for us after the war, as far as food goes; we were hungry all the time. So the childhood wasn't all that great, you know. I was an only child and that helped, but coming from a big city it was especially hard for children. We did not have much milk or butter, you know, so we were always hungry.

A: Can you tell me some of the things you did in school as a child? You mentioned the bombings, was your school in any way affected by this?

L: Yes, I remember many times during class we had a bombing raid and we went to shelter. A lot of times we had maybe 60 to 80 children in one room before the school was bombed. So they put more children in the remaining rooms.

A: Can you describe what kind of shelter you went to?

L: Well, when I was at home, we were assigned; we had two bunkers. Our bunker was the kind which goes up in the air,

you know, a high bunker. It was even hit once, but the walls were like a meter thick so it just shook; it didn't bother the bunker itself.

A: Now this was the one you were in. Can you describe the physical interior of it? How large was it?

L: Well, it was quite large; it had 70 stories. I don't really remember it, but it was large. It had two to three bunk beds in all the cabins. Maybe two thousand people were in that one bunker, if not more. I really don't remember. It was when the sirens blew that we had to leave our homes; it was one tremendous hassle to get into there and sometimes the bombs blew before most people could get in.

A: You never had any warning that the air raids were coming? Did they come on a regular basis?

L: Yes, they came regularly, sometimes two or three times a night.

A: And you never knew beforehand?

L: Well, the siren would blow, but they didn't give you much more than five to ten minutes to get . . . Then towards the end of the war we would sleep in what they would call now jogging suits. That is what they were. We wouldn't get undressed in nightgowns anymore or pajamas; we would sleep in jogging suits so we were, at all times, dressed. (Laughter)

A: How long did you have to spend in the bunkers?

L: Sometimes an hour, sometimes four hours, sometimes only a half hour. It just depended, you know, how long the air raids lasted.

A: You say your school was hit?

L: Yes, it was hit. Several schools I attended were hit. And then I believe in 1944, and right before the war was over, the children of the big city were evacuated into the country; old people and the children were evacuated at the time.

A: Was that where you were evacuated?

L: I was with farmers. They really didn't like it that they had to take the big city kids but they had no choice; it was one of those things, you know. Then the food was a little bit better, because the farmers do have food. And there were no bombing raids out in the country.

A: Did you do work while you were on these farms?

L: Yes. They didn't make you, but it was voluntary. We baled

hay. I was only nine or ten; kids couldn't really do that much.

A: Going back to the school, was the school ever in session when it was hit or was it out, when kids were away?

L: I believe, to the best of my knowledge, it was hit when the kids were not there. It was, I think, at night, when school was not in session. That is to the best of my recollection.

A: So most of the air raids came at night?

L: Most of them, yes.

A: Can you tell me what it was like, let's say from the years five to ten, growing up? What kind of things did you do? You said there wasn't much to do but . . .

L: Well I'll tell you, we had fun anyhow. We really did. We didn't have what the children have today. I always had a lot of dolls because I was the only child; I had plenty of toys. But as far as clothes, we didn't have a whole lot. They were rationed; they were just not available. You had the money but it wasn't there in the stores for you to buy, for the parents to buy. But I often say we probably had more fun than the kids have today. And even going to the bunkers . . . well, at the end it got tough, believe me it got tough. I had a little suitcase to carry; my mother had it always packed. But at first I thought it was really fun to go, you know with the other kids; instead of sleeping you could go there, and we had fun. Even though it was serious, as a child you don't really take it seriously. You don't think that your life is on the line. It was a tough childhood, don't get me wrong; we went hungry many, many times. But for some reason we probably had more fun than the kids of today who have everything. We would play for hours with the same thing. Now the children have a million toys and they are bored, and they get into fights.

A: Let's talk about the school day routine. You said you knew it was in the midst of a bombing raid and things like that. Was it pretty normal?

L: It was pretty normal. We had longer hours. I think we went to school from eight o'clock to twelve and then you had a half an hour lunch. I think it was till five o'clock at night. In the summer we were only off, I believe, four to six weeks, not three months. But at the same time we're through with what they call high school here, at fourteen. We have a high school education at fourteen.

A: Do you remember any classes that you took?

- L: It was no question what you took. You couldn't skip a class if you wanted to. You had to take whatever was assigned. We had the three R's: Reading, writing, and arithmetic. Arithmetic, at that time they called it math. I had four years of English; at the time I was fourteen I spoke English, not all that good, but I understood. We had history, which I never liked; we had physics; we had chemistry; we had religion; we had needlework for girls. There was even a cooking class thrown in, one hour a week for the girls. We had geography, which I liked. I think it was a darn good education. We even learned shorthand and typing in school. English, if your grades were good enough you could even take four years of French, by the time you were fourteen.
- A: Did you talk about the war in school?
- L: Not a whole lot, to be honest with you. Not a whole lot.
- A: Did your teachers talk about the war, how things were going?
- L: No, no, no. We respected our teachers; we had fear. We were afraid of our teachers, not what the kids do now in high schools, that the teacher is afraid of the student. It was disciplined. No, they didn't talk about the war, but they did tell us that whatever the Third Reich was doing was right, and we believed it.
- A: Do you remember some of the things they may have said? What did they talk about?
- L: I really don't remember that, I do remember distinctly--I don't know what grade I was in--but Jesus' picture was in every classroom behind the teacher's desk. And that was taken down and Hitler's picture was put up. That I do remember. But I don't know what grade I was in, first grade maybe. It might have been kindergarten, but I do remember they took Jesus' picture down and put Hitler's up. I remember. But I couldn't tell you what grade I was in.
- A: Did they talk about Hitler?
- L: No, not really. The only thing was instead of saying hello to a teacher, you said "Heil Hitler" to a teacher. They told you that.
- A: Did you have to perform a little salute?
- L: Yes, with a salute.
- A: And if you didn't get it right was there any punishment for that?
- L: No, every kid got it right, truly. You didn't say "Hello" or "Good morning, Mrs.," you said "Heil Hitler."

A: When the war got going were most of your teachers men or had they been drafted?

L: I tell you, we had more lay teachers. I had an older male teacher. And I remember, after the war, I had a handsome teacher from Guatemala. I remember him, I don't remember his name, but I remember . . . but it was mostly lady teachers. Gosh it was so many years ago.

A: That's okay. Did you ever have the opportunity to join in any of the youth movements, youth groups?

L: No, because I wasn't old enough. I was going to join what they called the Young Girls; it was a Hitler group. I was very eager to join, to be honest with you, because they had fun. It's like the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, you know. And then the war was over and it fell through.

A: Did you ever hear any of Hitler's speeches or go to his speeches or anything like that?

L: Yes, I heard speeches on the radio, and I remember my mother used to say, "That doggone guy." She didn't like him at all. I saw Hitler once too.

A: Did you see him or meet him or . . .

L: Not meet him, but he was in a large open car coming up one of the main streets and I was small and they let me through and I got a good glimpse of him and I was very proud.

A: Now, was he just passing through town or was . . .

L: He was passing through town. I don't know if he held a speech anywhere; that I don't know, but he was passing through in an open car.

A: Did the school go out to meet him or did you go with your parents?

L: No, I think I went on my own. I was a little tomboy as a little girl. I was a tomboy, I tell you. When my mother said, "Come home at five," Irene came home at six. And I got lickings and I got punished for it. But it didn't seem to help; I was a free spirit.

A: You said you didn't, especially your mother, didn't like Hitler and you listened to these speeches. What did he talk about? Do you remember?

L: Well, yes, I remember that the Germans had to sacrifice and tighten their belt so that there could be more ammunition. That I remember. And I didn't know why the war started, and

to this day I don't really know why the war started. You hear so many things and you read so many things you know, but I never liked the looks of things either. What you saw in the paper, okay. There was no television at that time. I do remember my mother didn't like this whole idea. Of course, my father got killed. You couldn't say anything; you had to keep it to yourself. It was a dictatorship, it is as simple as that.

A: Do you remember anything that happened to people who did talk out against the Third Reich?

L: No, because I really didn't know anybody. It was a working community where we lived and everybody just kept to themselves. Later on we heard that if you spoke out against the system it was your neck. My mother went to work from morning till night. I had a grandmother; my dad's mother lived with us. She really more or less raised me. And we just kept to ourselves. If they would have spoken up before he got too strong, it could have been prevented. But at the same time I must tell you this, that he did a lot of good for the German people too, at the beginning. He gave them work.

A: Did you ever hear any stories as a child about Hitler, from various adults?

L: Not really. To be honest with you, not really, that I remember.

A: Do you want to go back to the time you said as a child you went to the bunkers and you kind of considered this a game? Did most kids feel this way? You were young enough really not to know what was going on.

L: Yes, we played games. We played cards, kids' cards. And it wasn't all that bad. Once you got out of bed . . . getting up was terrible, and mom used to say, "Irene, get up." I was asleep and I couldn't get up and sometimes I would lay back down. But once I was at the bunker I was okay. It was more or less, for the kids, a game. Even the one time it got bombed and shook, the building shook, we still didn't realize we hated whoever bombed us. We thought they were really bad guys, naturally. But it wasn't all that bad for the kids. Kids take things much easier than a grown-up or an older person. It was probably the hardest on the old folks.

A: Do you know whether it was the American Armed Forces that were bombing or the English or both?

L: It was first the British, and then both. It was both definitely. Some people could tell by the engines, by the roar, whether they were English or whether they were Americans. I could never really tell. I just thought they were bad, whoever did that to us.

- A: Towards the end of the war, could you describe the occupation by the armed forces, the allied armed forces?
- L: Yes.
- A: What was that like?
- L: Again, we were lucky. The French Moroccans came in first, I believe. And they were black, and we had never seen a Negro or a black person. And that was scary to us. But they really didn't bother me or my family, not any of them that I know of. Then I believe the French came and then third was the Americans. I think the French came second. The Marines, I believe the Americans were third. You heard a lot of rapings again. But if you minded your business and you were in your house at night, you were not hurt.
- A: Did you go out and talk to the soldiers during the day? Did you ask them for candy bars and things like that?
- L: Yes, a few times I did; not for candy, but for chewing gum. I believe my mother caught me once and she didn't like that, and then I stopped it. But many kids did. There was a real cute story I must tell you. I think I was coming home from school; I was thirteen years old, and I walked down this hill and up came an open American jeep with four GI's in it, MP's, Military Police. And they stopped real fast. I was the only one walking down the hill at the time. And they stopped real fast and I got scared and they called me over. Now at that time I spoke a little bit of English already. They handed me a bag of donuts. I will never forget, there was a white bag and they were the raised donuts. I said, "Thank you very much." And I ran all the way home. It's the truth. I was so hungry. I ran all the way home and it was quite a ways to run and I got all out of breath and I said to my mom, "Look what these GI's gave me." She said, "You can't eat those," because you heard a lot of stories that there was poison and so forth, rat poison. She said, "I'll tell you what Irene, I'll eat one and if I survive then you can have the rest," and that's what we did. But I don't think we ate them all; I think we shared them equally. But she ate one and it didn't hurt her. They were so delicious. (Laughter)
- A: Do you ever remember being introduced to any uniquely American troops from these people?
- L: No, not really.
- A: You say food was kind of hard to come by right after the war?
- L: Yes, from 1945. It was rationed before, but you could eat decent. You didn't have a lot, but from 1945 to 1948 it was the worst. Those three years were the very worst. We had

nothing, really. You fried potatoes in a little skim milk and meat was unheard of; meat was maybe twice a month, and little, little pieces. I mean tiny pieces. It was rough. In 1948 our mark, our reichsmark was evaluated through a German mark, but then you could buy everything from one day to the next. Everything was in the markets again, but then nobody had money because it was devalued. A person got forty marks for the month.

A: From whom?

L: I don't know. The German government gave you that forty marks then, the new government. Forty marks a head, that was \$10. That was a little less than \$10 a head, really \$9.50 for the month.

A: Do you have any idea why this food was so short after the war?

L: Yes, I think they sold a lot on the black market; you could get anything, a pound of butter. Yes, I remember that. At black markets, you could get anything, but nobody had the money. It was just the very rich, the business people, well people with a lot of gold or diamonds; they could buy there. But the average person could not buy anything there. There was a lot of smuggling going on. I think they wanted to starve us for three years.

A: Who?

L: The Allies. I really do, I think they thought--well, you suffer now. They were perhaps swayed. Because the Germans did a lot of bad things too in Poland, in the Ukraine, wherever you want to go, you know. So I think they did it really a little bit on purpose. I really believe that and I really don't blame them.

A: When did you come to this country?

L: 1955. I came here to 710 Esme Drive, Girard, Ohio.

A: You were mentioning the fact that you thought after the war that the German people were being punished for the things that went on. I was wondering, have you ever heard of some of the things that did happen during the course of the war to the people around the European area?

L: No, I really didn't know. I just thought--Gee, you know if we get bombed and everything, the towns . . . There was nothing left of most of the towns, or the biggest part of the towns. I thought we had to do something bad to get this, you know, to deserve this. That's as far as a kid would think at ten, or even at twelve.

A: But you never heard any rumors or any stories at all?

L: No, I really haven't.

A: I would like to turn to the other topic you mentioned. You said you were kind of anxious when you became tempted to join the youth movement. Do you want to explain why?

L: Yes, because it was fun. I heard that they went in the woods and they built fires and they went on hikes and picnics and things like that. And everybody did it, so you know I wanted to join too. It was something a lot of the older kids did and they enjoyed it, and they told us about it and I couldn't wait to join myself.

A: Were some of these kids your friends, or the kids at school or . . .

L: School friends who were mostly my age. You know, like school chums. Girlfriends were in my class.

A: What did you think of the uniforms that they wore?

L: I thought that they were sharp. I really thought they were sharp.

A: Can you describe them to me?

L: I think, if I'm not mistaken they were beige in color, with white shirts and blouses and they had a tie. I do think they were also dark brown or black, I've forgotten.

A: Was there any ceremony that was connected with going into the youth movement?

L: I don't know, because I was never able to join. The war was over right when I turned ten; I turned ten in June. There was such a turmoil then that they didn't have time or anything like that. And I never really joined. But I thought the uniforms were sharp.

A: Can you think offhand of any other general comments that you would like to make about that time period, about your life then, that might be of value here in this report?

L: Well, I tell you, now that I am older and I have heard what went on, and I never saw it personally okay, but I hope it never happens again. I don't care how many people got killed, if it's six hundred million it should never happen again. That's all because war is terrible. And people who have not gone through it don't know. They can't even comprehend what it is like. They can figure--well sure it was rough; they had rationed food, we have rations too. But they cannot comprehend how rough it is to get up two or three times a night to go to your shelter. It was fun at first, but it gets boring real quick. They cannot comprehend it unless they go through it themselves.

But like I said, the kids take it much easier than the parents and the old people; it was roughest on them. It was rough on the kids, but it was not as rough because they were happy-go-lucky, and it's good that kids are like that.

A: Any other comments then?

L: No, not really. I just hope that it never, never happens again. I don't care what side it's going to be on, whether it is Middle East, whether it's the Russians against the United States or the United States against China. Whoever, I hope it never happens again.

END OF INTERVIEW