

NARRATOR: Mrs. Hella Mautner
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Interviewer: Deborah Rich

Mrs. Mautner and her husband owned a sanatorium in Vienna, Austria. According to her description, life in Vienna was very good. In 1938 her brother-in-law, who was living in the United States, came to Vienna and told them they must leave. But the Jews couldn't leave; they had to pay taxes in Austria. The brother-in-law bought false passports, and they got out August, 1938. Then they had to wait in Prague for a visa. Everyone was preparing for war. The Czechs wanted to defend themselves. There was the Munich Agreement which Hitler never intended to honor; he wanted the Germans in Czechoslovakia. Hitler wanted more and more. Mrs. Mautner and her family were stranded in Prague. Their visas were finally issued in February, 1939, but they could only pay their passage in American dollars. There were many restrictions on Jews at that time. Their passports didn't even resemble her husband and her. They were searched everywhere. Fortunately, the people at the border were in a smuggling ring to get Jews out. They got to Czechoslovakia in March, 1939.

They were able to come over on a Dutch boat to New York. Her husband stayed in New York with \$120. Hella came to Birmingham with her brother-in-law. She had \$80. Her husband had been a doctor in Vienna, but he couldn't practice for five years until he became an American

citizen. He couldn't speak English either. So Hella had to work. She had never done any work, housekeeping or cooking. But she went to work at Pizitz bakery as an apprentice. Next she worked at Tutwiler Hotel as assistant housekeeper. From seven in the morning to five in the afternoon she had to supervise the black maids. But she couldn't do this kind of work. She and her husband wanted to start a sanatorium. The real estate people in Birmingham found a house on Highland Avenue that was a tea room consisting of eleven boarders. At night and on Sundays they had dinners. So they took it. It was called Highland Terrace Gardens. The helper stayed on and the place was furnished. It was very nice. It was all rented. Sunday dinner was her first experience. Hella was appalled at the size of the portions--too small. Sunday dinner was only seventy-five cents. The rent was \$130--this they obtained from boarders and dinners.

Finally their furniture came from Vienna and they began to have more parties. People wanted European food, so Hella had to learn. Then the war came; prices were frozen. Many boarding houses closed down. Hella was swamped with people. Italians had big showers with hundreds of people. Hella learned how to make finger sandwiches, pastries, cookies, etc. She had beautiful tablecloths. They had more and more business, because no one wanted to ration.

Concerning school, the teachers were wonderful and school was good. The children went to Lakeview, then to Ramsey. The teachers were kind.

All of their relatives were in Prague. They heard nothing after 1941. Then they heard from an aunt in Switzerland that all the family had been deported to Poland. Hella had brought all her jewelry over and sold it. So she had bought passports to Cuba for her family, but the Germans wouldn't let them come. Her brother owned a chemical factory. Her mother was in a concentration camp. The nephew of one of her sisters was the only survivor. The rest of her family were all exterminated. Hella applied for a visa for her nephew who had been in Auschwitz. He escaped by jumping out of the train into a river. He lived in the woods in Czechoslovakia. Then he was able to make it to Allied headquarters and then to Prague. There was no trace of the rest of the family. The nephew came over a year later. He was eighteen years old. He spoke no English. Hella sent him to Ramsey High School. Her children went to Birmingham Southern. Her nephew also went to Birmingham Southern. Hella's son wanted to be a doctor. The nephew wanted to make money, so he went into the scrap iron business. He wanted a car and girls. When he reached his ambition to be making money, he was killed in Anniston by a taxi.

Hella's son volunteered for the Army. He was not

old enough and was not a citizen. It took five years to become a citizen.

In 1944, they were going to become citizens. That day her husband had a heart attack in court and died that night. He had planned to go to New York to pass the doctors boards.

The house was in a good location on Highland Avenue, so, instead of renting it, Hella bought it. The real estate man wanted Highland Terrace Gardens, so he found Hella another house across from Park Towers. It was ideal for parties, and she continued to make her living the same way. Her son finally got in the army in 1945. He went overseas but was not involved in any shooting. The son came back and went to Harvard Medical School. He is now an administrator at Mt. Sinai Hospital. Rabbi Grafman wanted him to be a Rabbi, because he knew Hebrew so well, but he was set on medicine.

Hella's daughter went to Syracuse then got engaged. She came back to Birmingham Southern and got married. Her husband later drowned. Her daughter's family is very religious. Her daughter has not remarried.

Mervyn Sterne came to Hella and said they were having a Jewish fund drive, and he wanted her son to speak. He was only thirteen years old at the time. He wanted him to speak about what it was to be an American. Willy, her son, said that everyone has a chance in America. He had to

repeat his talk in Atlanta and other places. Hella's son married a non-Jewish girl. Rabbi Grafman married them in his study.