

**MEMOIRS OF  
RACHEL HERSCHTHAL**

Narrator: Rachel Herschthal

Date: May 23, 1980

Place: Home of Mrs. Herschthal, Birmingham, Alabama

Interviewer: Donna Zucker

This is Donna Zucker and I am conducting an interview for the "Memory Bank" project of the Birmingham Jewish Federation. The person I am interviewing today, June 25, 1980, is Rachel Herschthal.

Q: In your earliest memories, could you describe your immediate family, what were they like and who were you closest to?

A: There were my father, mother, brother, sister; my sister was the oldest, but I was closest to my brother at that time. When I came to this country I became closest to my sister. In Germany, my father was pretty strict; he was a very good provider and a very good husband. My mother was also a disciplinarian, but she was not as strict and was very loving. We were a very close family. We did things together, played games together. Actually, I felt closer to my mother.

Q: Did your grandparents live with you?

A: No, my grandparents lived in Frankfurt. In the summer we went to visit them.

Q: What was your house like? Was it big?

A: No, actually it was an apartment. We always lived in a nice apartment. My earliest recollection was that it was in the city. We lived there a few years and then my father bought a new apartment house -

a five family house. Each family lived on one floor, and the store was underneath. We had oil paintings under glass. We lived on the first floor. My uncle and aunt lived on the second floor apartment. We did things together. We were very close.

Q: What was the kitchen like?

A: Our kitchen was gas, not electric. We did have electric lights. I remember way back when there were gas lights.

Q: Did you have central heating?

A: No. We had a "kachal oven" which used coal. This heated the apartment. There was an opening where we could put in water. My family was very orthodox, and on Saturdays we would put food in it to warm up, for it was kept going all night.

Q: Did you have a garden that you played in?

A: At that time we didn't. Later we moved and my father bought a one-family house. In Stephanstrasse. Then we had a garden, on a tree-lined street. We had a large balcony.

Q: Servants?

A: Yes, we always had a live-in maid, until Hitler came and didn't allow it any more.

Q: Were you raised by her, or did she just help your mother?

A: No, she helped. She cleaned the house. She was not allowed to cook for we were very orthodox; my mother was a very good cook. We

all went to high school.

Q: What was your religious education like?

A: My religious education was received twice a week in the afternoons at a religious school and my brother had a private tutor at that time. He learned Hebrew. I was not that crazy about it, but I had to ...

Q: What Jewish holidays did you celebrate?

A: We celebrated all the Jewish holidays and on Passover and the High Holy Days my grandparents and aunts and uncles all came and we observed together. It was very nice - I remember that it was very nice. It stays in your memory.

Q: What was the rabbi like? Were you very close to him?

A: We were close to him. His name was Michalsky. My parents knew him well, my sister like him - I did not have that much contact with him. He had no children. He was my sister's teacher. My teacher was Rabinowitz and I was friendly with his daughter. We did go to Shabbat services. My father went every Saturday to the synagogue, which was a part of his life.

Q: There was a Liberal synagogue in the town?

A: Yes. The Jews did not mix between the two synagogues. I did have friends in the Liberal synagogue. My father was prejudiced against the Liberals, but not my mother.

Q: With regard to your formal education, what schools did you go to?

A: I believe I was six years old when I started public school. Then I went to high school, which was called gymnasium. We did not wear uniform. This was all public schools. The first few years of school it was girls alone, and as you know in Germany, you had to pay for tuition, it wasn't free like here.

Q: Were there a lot of Jews in school?

A: There were quite a few Jews in school. I liked the men teachers more. They were more tolerant. Teachers today are completely different than they used to be. In Germany they maintained strict discipline. I had a man French teacher who was very nice man. I liked languages. I had one year of English and 5 years of French. I wasn't very good at math. I liked Chemistry, not the theoretical - the practical part of it.

Q: How about summer vacations?

A: My favorite vacation was going to visit my grandparents in Frankfurt. I would be the only one there and they would do everything to please me. They spoiled me. They had a very large apartment, and in one very large room they employed women who sewed sheets and pillowcases. They would sell them to one of the stores in Frankfurt. I used to love to be with them, helping. My grandparents were also very orthodox. My grandmother wore a sheitel. My grandfather was very tolerant - a very fine man. When I was eighteen a young man approached my grandfather. He said he was interested in me and would like to get to know me. If it worked out, he would propose marriage. My grandfather asked me - and told me the man was nice, had a good business, and would expect me to wear a sheitel. I said "Forget it!" I wasn't all that orthodox!

I didn't marry until I was 25. Going back to my earlier childhood, Karlsruhe was a very nice city, with a castle, gardens, and lovely woods. Also, there was a very fine theatre. My mother saw to it that we always went to concerts. We all played musical instruments. I played the piano, my brother played the violin, my sister played the cello. We played together once a week. It was very nice. My father said we had to practice one hour every day. I hated it, but now I wish I had practiced more.

Q: Did you belong to a youth group or did you date within a youth group?

A: I belonged to a Jewish Youth Group - Zionist Blau-Weiss. I always wanted to go to Israel, and I went Hachsharah one year. I also went to Berlin one year. I worked with children dumb and deaf. No we didn't work with them actually, but at the time we worked all over the place, outside and inside, you know, the laundry, and in the kitchen, and we took Hebrew lessons. My father had to pay for that. I enjoyed it. We worked hard but we had socials and I learned a little bit of sign language. I learned to talk with the children at the time. I went home after that and I wanted to go to Israel that was during Hitler's time, but my parents wouldn't let me go. If I was married they would have let me go. I wanted to do something, so I went to work for a dentist. I worked for him for two years. It was Dr. Meyer.

Q: Backtracking a bit; what was life like for Jews in Karlsruhe as you were growing up before Hitler?

A: Well, when I was a child I was not aware that there was anti-

semitism in Germany. There was always a little bit, but I was not very much aware of it. Life was really pleasant for the Jews as far as I remember.

Q: How did World War I affect your family, as far as you remember?

A: During World War I my father was in the War. We had a business, and my mother kept it up. I was very young, but I remember when he came home after the war he brought us things - he came home loaded with food, and other things. He received the iron cross for service in the army. He was very proud of it. I don't remember - I was very young at the time.

Q: As far as you remember, there was a terrible inflation after World War I. How did that affect your family, as far as you know?

A: The inflation, I seem to recall, wasn't that bad for our business and for us.

Q: What was your first personal awareness of the rise of Nazism?

A: It started in 1933. I don't remember anything specific before then. There were rumors - I was 20 at the time, out of school. They put all those kids in uniform... brown uniform. I was glued to the radio but nobody wanted to believe what was going on. Listening to the news wasn't very pleasant but we felt it couldn't last very long ... But nobody in the whole family thought about emigrating at that time - later on, yes, and as I said, I wanted to go to Israel. My sister left in 1938 - she was the first one to leave. I had a gentile friend, a very close friend - she married very young but I knew the boy for we

went to school together. He was a very nice fellow. One day I saw him on the street in a SS uniform. I was going to pass on by but he stopped me. He asked me why I didn't come to visit them any more. I said "How can I visit you when I know you wear the SS uniform?" He said it didn't mean anything, I just didn't have a job. That was the best thing for him. He begged me to come to see them - they had a young baby - but I wouldn't. I didn't go anymore.

Q: Were your relationships with your non-Jewish friends affected by this?

A: Only with this one. We grew up together and were very close.

Q: How about your parents friends?

A: We did not have contact with non-Jews after that. My father sold his business later. My aunts and uncles and children left in 1933 - they went to Holland, and we stayed on. My parents went only with Jewish people, seeing others only for business.

Q: How did you meet your husband?

A: We had a Jewish Hotel near my home in Karlsruhe, and they had dance and I met him at a dance a year before we got married ... He had come to town on business, and when he left we corresponded. I wasn't ready to get married, but when we realized we had to get out of Germany, I wanted to go to Israel, but I couldn't. There was no one for me in Israel. We became engaged in June, 1938, and we married in November.

Q: What happened to you on Kristalnacht?



A: Well, we had packed all our furniture at that time, all of our new things, my trousseau which all girls got at that time, and my parents stuff and moved into an apartment across from the Temple, because we wanted to leave. We were in the apartment when all of a sudden we heard a terrible noise ... and we looked out and the Temple was afire. We heard them come in, the SS come in storming the house. We had an attic. And they caught my husband and took him away. There was another young man too in the same house. And then they left. And afterwards we did go up to the attic to hide. We didn't know what's going on. But sure enough they came back. They didn't find us. We were lucky. There were only gentile people living in that apartment house. They must have known we went up to the attic, but nobody said anything. When it was all quiet, we came down. But my husband went. They took him away. It was a terrible experience really. That was the 10th (of November) and we were supposed to get married on the 10th of November. We couldn't because of that. I went to Gestapo. I wasn't very brave but I had to ... I was shaking in my boots when I went there and I explained that we were supposed to get married and go to United States. After two weeks he was released and we were married on 25th. He was told he had to leave Germany as planned or they would get him again. During the time he was in the concentration camp I bought a ticket for him to go to Shanghai for he was in more danger than I was. But, when he came out he refused to go by himself. I could have gone to the United States under the German quota, but he would have to go under the Czechoslovakian quota. This was June, 1939. My parents were still in Germany. They couldn't get out, either. So finally he got out to England to Kitchener Camp - in June, '39. He worked very hard for me to get out of Germany.

Q: You were describing how your husband got to Kitchener Camp and how he tried to get you out.

A: He went to the local rabbi with a paper, but it didn't do much good. The local priest got the women out. When we married at the time we took an apartment with another Jewish couple and I stayed there for a while. Anyway, I finally got to England in July, 1939.

Q: What were your first impressions of England when you first got there?

A: When I got there I had no money. They only allowed us to take the equivalent of \$3.50 with us when we left Germany. My husband was in Kitchener Camp, and he got me a room in Ramsey near there. I ran out of money so I wrote to my brother who send me \$20.00. I didn't realize at the time how hard it was for him to send me the money. He had a family - two children - he worked in the day and went to school at night. He couldn't finish college in Germany. He is now a CPA. I had to do something. Four of us immigrant women were given jobs in a hotel at a place called Westgate. I wanted to work in the kitchen. In England at that time they had bathrooms but the people were too lazy to go, so they had chamber pots in the rooms where the women worked. I did not want to work in that atmosphere. The Chef in the kitchen was very nice, very patient with me, and I worked in the kitchen from 6:00 in the morning until 9:00 at night. My husband was allowed to leave the camp and visit me, sometimes to stay over the week-end. When the war came they let the other women go and kept me. After a while they couldn't pay me, but I stayed with them in a nice room, with, believe it or not, a bathroom right next door! I had to

move. I was an alien, so I went to a hostel in London with all Jewish women. The Kitchener camp was moved to the Isle of Man. I didn't stay but one day - I couldn't stay there. I got a job working with Jewish family. At that time the bombs were falling all around. I had friends in London, a couple. I stayed near them in Kilburn and visited them quite often. One day they said they were going to Peterborough, to make flowers and asked me to go with them. I did. So, in Peterborough, they didn't include me, so there I was in Peterborough - I had saved some money by that time. There was a Quaker family - they interviewed me - and said they wanted me to come with them. They had a beautiful estate, house, and I went to stay with them. Their name was Baker. They had a factory - Baker-Perkins. She was good to me - I had a lovely room (and a bath) and they treated me like one of the family.

Q: Did they have Central heating?

A: I believe they had central heating. They had open fires everywhere. It was such a huge house; later on they had to close most of it off and just use about two rooms. They had a man to do the heavy work so I did not have to.

I think I told you before I left Germany my sister, who lived in the United States, wrote that I should take a course in hair-dressing and cosmetology in general. So, I did take a course in facial massage and hair removing and also in doing hair, so I gave Mrs. Baker facial massages, did her hair (it looked terrible, but I did it).

After a while my husband came, and she let him stay with me in my room.

Q: Do you remember when this was - the September the war started?

A: Yes.

Q: When did your husband finally get out of the Isle of Man?

A: He must have gotten out in '41. We were separated about two years. We stayed in Peterborough for about 8 years. He wasn't well when he got out. He had lost a lot of weight and was undernourished and needed building up. I looked for a job and found one in a beauty parlor. The lady who owned it asked if I had had much experience and I said not too much. She told me to come in and observe for one week and then I worked on the customers. I worked on a woman, and believe it or not, she looked worse than when she came in. The English are very polite, and neither the customer or the boss said anything. Later, my boss put me back into a training program. The first permanent wave I gave I did everything the wrong way, but it came out beautiful and the customer said it was the best permanent she ever had! I worked there for six years and it was very nice, good hours 9-6, and over an hour for lunch. By that time my husband was working as a barber - which he knew nothing about. We would meet at lunch time. We lived with another couple and shared the house. They were not Jewish. Because of the war people had come from many countries, as far away as Australia. There were dances once a month arranged for the Jewish soldiers, and of course, there was a theatre. There wasn't much else there of a social nature. We were waiting to go to America at that time. It was 1945, the war was over, but we still had to wait until 1947. When I first got to Petersborough I was happy to be there, to be away from London during the blitz. But, it was lonely and of course I was counting the days,

months, and years to go to the United States.

In Peterborough I lived upstairs in a house with outdoor plumbing. One day when I was taking hot water up the very steep stairs I fell down the stairs and burned myself very badly - with 3rd degree burns. It was impossible to get a doctor. My husband went to the hospital to try to get something. The next day I went to my doctor and when I told him we had tried to get a doctor he couldn't believe it because the hospital was not that far. That was very bad.

My husband had a Jewish doctor who was very good to him. He got milk for him for he wasn't well at the time. My doctor was nice to me, for he kept me out of the munitions factory, where all the women were sent. That was the story of Peterborough in England.

Q: Did you travel while you were in Peterborough? There is very pretty county outside.

A: Yes, it was near Cambridge and we went there a couple of times on the bus. First I went by myself, and then my husband came and went together. I was working six days a week so the only day left was Sunday.

Q: Did the bus run on Sunday?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have any experiences in speaking English when you first came to Peterborough? Did you have any funny stories about using the wrong words? Did they laugh at you?

A: No. The English wouldn't laugh at you. I used many wrong words,

but the English are so polite they didn't correct me. I wish they had. It would have been better for me.

Q: Did they regard you as a curiosity - speaking with a German accent?

A: Curiosity? I guess they did. I worked for this lady first in the beauty parlor and I spoke a little better. I remember one little old lady said you speak very well now. I lost my English accent. When I came to the United States I worked in a beauty parlor it was in a German section. I think they thought I put it on (the accent). I was always shy, still am, so the experience was not a nice one.

Q: In Peterborough?

A: No, in the United States.

Q: What happened?

A: We intended to come to Birmingham to stay with my sister. We bought tickets to Birmingham. My sister had written so much about Birmingham and we wanted to come here. When we got to New York we stayed with my brother first. My husband has a sister also living in New York. We were looking around for an apartment. We also stayed two weeks with my husband's sister. We wanted to go to Birmingham but they wanted us to stay in New York. I was very close to my sister-in-law, a very lovely person - she passed away a year ago. They finally found us a room on Broadway and we shared a kitchen. And the roaches there - I have never experienced anything like it. I made up my mind that we would go to Birmingham. And when we came here it was in the summer. It wasn't easy for my husband to find a job. My sister

wanted us to stay. I found a job right away. My husband couldn't find anything. My brother called from New York say he had found a job for my husband and we should go back. My sister begged him to go back by himself to first see if he liked the job. He didn't want to go alone, so we went back. We couldn't find an apartment so we took a room with a Jewish woman in Washington Heights. My husband's job was in an umbrella factory which he didn't like. I went to work in a beauty parlor. Then, through friends, my husband got a job selling paint. After about a year we found an apartment in Riverdale. We then moved to Forest Hills where we stayed for 18 years.

Q: What were some of your impressions of New York coming from a village in England?

A: Well, first of all, when we came to New York we found the hours were hard, 10 - 18, different from the leisurely life in England. In 1947, our first winter in New York there was a terrible snow storm. Everything stopped. The cars were stopped in the middle of the road. My house was four blocks from the beauty parlor so I walked home. The snow was knee deep. It was seven o'clock, and all was so quiet, there seemed to be nobody on the street. All of a sudden I heard a noise behind me. I looked around and there was a man behind me. I was terrified. I don't know how I did it, but I got home. It was impossible.

Also, that summer was very unusual, for when we first came in '47 it was so hot in July - July 7th, I will never forget that - my brother gave me some money and said "Buy yourself some light clothes". I was not prepared for that kind of weather. So I bought myself some light clothes.

It was hot. No airconditioning and the fans were not much. And working in a beauty parlor on top of it. In comparison to here in Birmingham I don't remember a hot summer like up there. In the eight years I lived in England there was one year it was warm and I was lucky enough to have a two week vacation at the time, in August, and we went to Bournemouth.

Q: Did you stay in a Jewish hotel there?

A: Yes. No, we stayed in a boarding house.

Q: Do you remember the names of any of the Jewish hotels there?

A: No, I don't remember.

Q: How did you happen to retire here in Birmingham?

A: We use to come to Birmingham for visits during vacation but although my sister wanted us to come to Birmingham to live, but we both had jobs and we stayed in New York. So we waited. My sister was ill so finally when we retired we came here. When we came we didn't know how sick she was. She was really very ill.

We came here in March. The first week we came here she went into the hospital. She never came home and at the end of seven weeks she passed away.

Q: You decided to stay here even though your sister had died?

A: Yes. I knew quite a few people here because of my sister, so ... I like it here. My husband wanted to go to Florida. We have family there - his brother living in Miami - we go there quite frequently



because he is sick, too. We don't care too much for Miami. Unfortunately we do not have any relatives here in Birmingham, now. My brother-in-law lived here for years.

Q: I think we will end it now.

A: O.K. I remember on High Holidays my father with a top-hat. Do you know about that? During the high holidays everything was so festive. We all walked down the street, we were all dressed up with hats, dresses, gloves, you would never go without gloves ... Also, on Yom Kippur the women were dressed in white and the pews where you had to lay your book on, had white lace or colored serviettes which the women brought from home. The women were upstairs and the men were downstairs.

Q: Did it bother you?

A: No, because I was brought up with it so I never knew any different. The men were always looking upstairs - I remember the young men always looking upstairs.

Q: Was your father narrow-minded?

A: He was always narrow-minded. To be friends with the Liberals was not the correct thing to do. I remember we had a cantor who was extremely orthodox and his son married a non-Jew. This was a long time before Hitler - must have been in the twenties. She converted and became a better Jew than some Jews. There was not much intermarriage at that time. When I was in school I went skating with a non-Jewish boy and he wanted to bring me home. I said "No, don't take me home ...!"

Q: Was there intermarriage amongst the Orthodox at that time?

A: No.

Q: Did you ever go to services at the Liberal? Were they very different from the Orthodox?

A: Yes. Oh, yes. First of all, they had music. I loved it, for I always liked music. Even here I go to Temple. I love it. No, it didn't shock me.

Q: They had mixed seating?

A: Yes.

Q: What has happened to your synagogue in Karlsruhe?

A: It was burned down - both the Orthodox and the Liberal were burned at the same time.

Q: What happened to your father's business?

A: When he was 49 he became sick - had a stroke. He couldn't speak and couldn't walk. Eventually it came back. My parents went to a spa for 6 weeks and he recovered there.

He had never been sick, had never complained before. I was only 15 at the time... My father and his brother were in business together, so in 1933 when my uncle moved to Holland that is when they sold the business.

Q: What was a German girl's trousseau like?

A: Everything in dozens - beautiful - the linens and every thing. I

remember going shopping with my mother - it was a great joy. We had eiderdowns. I still have them, we went them here.

Q: This was instead of getting a lot of wedding gifts?

A: Getting wedding gifts was different. Every girl had a dowry. A girl couldn't get anybody with a dowry.

Q: How much was a dowry?

A: It depends. Each was different. My husband was economical and had saved his money. With my money we bought furniture. Also, my parents had a Meisen set - the most beautiful I have ever seen. A dinner and coffee set. They gave that to me for my wedding present. The figurines on top of the soup toureen and the vegetable dishes - the most beautiful I have ever seen. They confiscated everything - we could not take it with us. In '38 we gave some pieces of our jewelry to some good Catholic friends of ours who use to go to the U.S. on business trips. They gave our jewelry to our family in New York, and we now have the jewelry. They also gave us furs to help us get out of the country.