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ANNE HANNELORE GASNER
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SHIP: STAATENDAM
PORT: ROTTERDAM
RESIDENCES
GERMANY: BERLIN
US:

DIXON: Today is August 5, 1980. I'm visiting with Anne Gasner who lives in Castle Village which is on Cabrini Boulevard and 181st Street which is on the very upper west side of Manhattan. I guess the best way to begin is to ask when you immigrated to the United States. Did you come through Ellis Island?

GASNER: No. I did not.

DIXON: When did you actually come and--

GASNER: We landed in the United States, June 24, 1938.

DIXON: Right. And where did you land, I mean--

GASNER: In Hoboken, a horrible place to land, terrible introduction (chuckle) to the country.

DIXON: You came to Hoboken, you came by boat or you came by plane or--

GASNER: We came by boat on the S.S. Staatendam.

DIXON: Which was, do you remember the steam, the line company?

GASNER: Yes, it was a Dutch Line. Now it's American Line.

DIXON: Right.

GASNER: It was the - it was not the present Staatendam. That boat's been sunk and it's been replaced.

DIXON: That's interesting because the AMI has a collection of the passenger lists for the Holland American Line that covers that period of time.

GASNER: Oh, really!

DIXON: It would be interesting to see if that name was on there.

GASNER: Of course, I had a different name then.

DIXON: Oh.

GASNER: Totally different name.

DIXON: Right, well--

GASNER: Not only my maiden name, Anne is not my name.

DIXON: Oh, well, maybe you should tell us about that or--

GASNER: Okay. My German name is Hannelore, H-A-N-N-E-L-O-R-E. That was the legal name that was given to me when I was born, although my family always called me Henni. It was a name that was never used except on papers. In fact, I think it's on my German report cards which I still have. And --. But I believe that on my formal record as a ship's passenger list, I probably would be Hannelore on that.

DIXON: So you're actually of German nationality when you--

GASNER: I was born in Germany. But I am not a German national because my parents were born in Poland, although they came there as small children. Nevertheless, they were Polish citizens. And I went on the same quota as they because I never formally became a - a German citizen. In Germany, I'm -- you were not automatically a citizen of the country although you were born there.

DIXON: And so when you came to the United States, you left from where in Europe? Did you leave from Germany or--

GASNER: We went from Berlin to Rotterdam. And -- my mother, my brother, myself, my aunt and my cousin, and in Rotterdam we rendezvoused with my father and my father's brother, my uncle. They had left sooner; I believe in order to avoid suspicion of departure. I'm not quite sure, but there - there was something clandestine about the whole thing. They left before we did, and then we met each other in Rotterdam and from there we went to the United States on that boat.

DIXON: How long did it take, the Voyage, do you remember?

GASNER: The voyage? It was eight days. We should have landed the night before, but there was a very heavy fog so we were all on board an extra night.

DIXON: Did you see the Statue of Liberty when you came?

GASNER: Yes. That was the thing. My mother woke me up in the morning and I then - well everyone was that was my very first sight of country and very memorable. Everyone was standing on deck to see the Statue of Liberty. It was a very meaningful experience.

DIXON: The boat you came on, was it unique in the sense that it was a regular passenger boat, or was it mostly Jewish people leaving Europe or was it just a regular boat traveling back and forth between--

GASNER: It was a regular passenger boat, but I - I believe that most of the passengers were probably Jews leaving.

DIXON: And how old were you on the--

GASNER: I was ten, I was going, -this was June--- and I would have been -- I was eleven the coming October, so I was about ten and three-quarters.

DIXON: Right. And before you left Germany, where did you actually live. You lived in Berlin?

GASNER: We lived in Berlin itself. I was born in Berlin and we lived there all my life.

DIXON: Well, I guess the logical question to ask is -- tell us about why you decided to leave, your family decided, sounds like your entire family left?

GASNER: My entire -- not the entire family.

DIXON: Well, immediate family.

GASNER: The family began to leave Germany actually shortly after Hitler came into power. Two of my aunts went to then -- the then Palestine and in order to leave they had, one of them had, a proxy marriage. We were just discussing that the other night. She have - she married a man who had papers to come and bring a spouse here. It was a marriage in name only and this aunt is still in what is now Israel. And another aunt went too, and an uncle, my mother's brother, also went, and he in turn married a woman so that he could bring her over. And subsequently we came to America. My grandparent -- to America.

My grandparents went to Palestine. Some of our relatives went to Cuba. And some of our family were still left in Poland and in Czechoslovakia. Those were the two countries we had family, no other places. But we were very fortunate a lot of us came, and I - probably because we were rather sophisticated about what was happening. Unlike a lot of other Jews who deluded themselves that things were going to straighten out. We knew that it was not going to straighten out. And our efforts to emigrate from Germany began far sooner than we actually did. In fact, a year before we were able to get the visa to come to the United States my parents, myself and my brother went to Belgium to

Antwerp -- to attempt to get a visa from there, but we - we -- the consul turned us down.

DIXON: The consul turned you down in Belgium, the German consul or-

GASNER: German, no, it must have been the US consul.

DIXON: Oh. That's one other thing I was going to ask, when you were planning to leave, was it, you said you had to kind of leave clandestinely as a regrouping of your family in Rotterdam.

GASNER: Yes.

DIXON: Did you have trouble getting permission to leave, not just from Germany, but to enter the United States?

GASNER: Oh, it was very difficult. We were turned down a year before. And I remember at that time, I was a year younger and we were in Antwerp. I have hated that city ever since because all I remember is my parents crying. My parents were very young. They were in their thirties, which really -- very young age. And they were -- my mother was constantly crying because we knew we had to back to Germany. And it was then that I got more -- a stronger sense than ever of you can't go where you want to go. I believe that the reason that we were able to finally get the papers in Berlin, my father told -- said we were on a capitalist visa, whatever that meant. And I understand that there was an Adler milk company here, maybe the consul believed we were related or whatever.

DIXON: So you got approval from the U. S. to immigrate into the United States.

GASNER: To immigrate, yes.

DIXON: But how was it, excuse me.

GASNER; Yes. We were going on a Polish quota, remember that. That was the problem.

DIXON: Right, but how about Germany's reaction? Was it hard to get out of Germany, did Germany have to approve your departure?

GASNER: So far as I know, they did not. But I -- nevertheless people left in a clandestine fashion. Whether it was because they tried to take property with them and that had to be done secretly. I believe there was a rule about taking money out and that may have been the reason that we left secretly.

DIXON: The plans, when you decided to leave, did you decide, did you set on the United States as a sole goal, or were there other places you would have gone to as well?

GASNER: I - I always thought it was only the United States, but my father - I later -- wi -- argued with him. The point, I said, "Why did you -- we stay so long when it was so dangerous?" He said that we tried

to come to Palestine, we couldn't. That was very difficult. The British, if you recall, had a very strict quota there, so although my parents tried to emigrate to Palestine, they weren't successful then. And --- this must have been the second choice.

DIXON: Before you left, did any unpleasant events add impetus to the trip or did people you knew have unpleasant occurrences because of the, well, because of--

GASNER: Because I left?

DIXON: Right.

GASNER: It was - we - we only said goodbye. We - I - we didn't confide to friends. I don't know if I was instructed not to, but I really didn't say goodbye to anybody. I kind of - very quiet we said goodbye. And I remember mainly my grandparents crying, my grandfather especially crying terribly and said he would never see us again. And, in fact, he didn't.

DIXON: Because they went to Palestine.

GASNER: They went to Palestine. I did see my grandmother again, but there were relatives that we said - we said farewell to, we ne-- and we didn't see them anymore. That was that. My father never saw his mother anymore.

DIXON: Well, when they left did they, like did you to sell your house or did you just leave or did you leave the furniture?

GASNER: No. We sold the whole thing, lock, stock and barrel for a very nominal amount compared to what it was worth. But we did the thing -- we were able to sell. My father had a printing shop. It wasn't only an apartment. The store was attached to the apartment and he sold all the machinery very, very cheap.

DIXON: So you just essentially took what you could carry almost.

GASNER: Yes, basically. No furniture or anything like that.

DIXON: But, too, part of what I was getting at was did anything occur between German and Jewish that was on the negative sense. In other words, an insult or that kind of hostility or you just decided because of Hitler and the situation to--

GASNER: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. (Chuckle)

DIXON: There was more?

GASNER: It was -- my entire recollection of Germany is fear and anti-Semitism. I thought you were referring specifically to when I left. I don't remember any time walking on the street and not being afraid. Perhaps I did before Hitler, but that was before I, when I was such a little girl I wasn't allowed to walk on the street. I never -- almost

never went unaccompanied on the street. To school, somebody took me. And I was scared. Because what would happen would be that kids -- gangs of kids would come and beat you up or pelt you with snowballs or stones or torment you in some horrible way. That's all I remember of Berlin. I really have no memories of walking cheerfully down the street by myself.

DIXON: That's very interesting because that has come to be almost a cliché picture you see, but it's, I guess it ceases to be a cliché if it really occurs to someone.

GASNER: Do you remember that movie, Voyage of the Damned? It was also a book.

DIXON: Very vaguely.

GASNER: This one scene in there, it so happens incidentally that I had relatives on that boat who were sent back, but there was one scene in that - during that movie-- where the Nazis were pursuing a - a man as -- he was running, I believe to reach the boat. Of all -- the entire movie, this was the thing that frightened me the most because this was what I recall, being--it was as though I was being stalked all the time.

DIXON: Afraid you'd miss the last boat? They'd get you (Chuckle)

GASNER: Yes, well, my uncle came on the last boat. We had relatives who came on the last boat. We had -- there was a big swastika painted outside our store which in fact is still there. My brother saw a movie of East Berlin, which is where we lived. It's now East Berlin. And, believe it or not, in that TV movie that swastika was still there. I guess nobody bothered to paint it out.

DIXON: The people then in order of -- you left Germany was not a problem with the Jewish end, was probably, the German end, it was getting permission under quotas to enter the United States.

GASNER: Yes. As far as I know that was the major problem. We were very, very careful not to antagonize anybody in the German government. We paid our taxes and we conducted ourselves with something that we never would create a problem.

DIXON: But, well, as part of the approval, was there a medical examination?

GASNER: Yes.

DIXON: Or was there any kin of ex--? There was.

GASNER: Yes. There was. I remember it very well because I was so frightened. I was terribly afraid that we wouldn't pass because my mother had told me a story of somebody who went to the Consulate and was rubbing his eyes and got a red eye and then they couldn't get the medical certificate to come through.

DIXON: Right, and so you had a medical examination before you left. And then did you have one after you got here or was there--

GASNER: No, no. I don't recall any, no.

DIXON: So when you got to Hoboken, what happened? Did you just get off the boat and walk away?

GASNER: We got off the boat. We were met by an uncle, and he took us to an apartment he'd rented for us on the lower east side on Ridge Street.

DIXON: Did you have to go through any paperwork on the Hoboken side or did you go through customs or any kind of--

GASNER: Agents came on the boat, I believe. I remember lining up under our initial. Suddenly, they came on to the boat.

DIXON: Did anyone on your boat go through Ellis Island or did the vast majority leave in Hoboken or--

GASNER: So far as I know they left in Hoboken. I don't remember. I had heard talk about Ellis Island, but I believe nobody I know went there. I don't -- you mean was anybody detained?

DIXON: Well, detained or for some reason go there for the--

GASNER: I don't recall.

DIXON: Formalities.

GASNER: I don't recall. None of the people in our group, and we had - we were more than just my uncle, we met people on the boat that we became friendly with. In fact, I'm still friendly with, and they weren't detained either.

DIXON: The people that were leaving were all; the Jewish people were all leaving for the same reason?

GASNER: That was the reason.

DIXON: That was the reason to get out.

GASNER: Was it ever. One of the things that really bothered me when we came here was the people asked us whether it was true that they called us bad names. I was appalled that they knew so little about what was going on. How - how -- we were in fear of our lives every single day. The American Jews didn't seem to understand that at all.

DIXON: Something I was going to ask the reaction to, in other words, when you got to Hoboken and you got to the lower east side, you moved in, what did the people in the neighborhood say, in other words, why did you leave Germany, why were so many people coming.

GASNER: And they were entirely too surprised. They really didn't know what was going on. Except for some sophisticated people who did, but entirely too many did not. My mother - except for some sophisticated people who did -- but far too many - my mother went around visiting relatives of people who were left behind, pleading with them to send visas to their relatives, and their reaction would be, oh, I'm so poor and it's a depression and I don't make any money and so on and so forth. They didn't understand that those relatives were going to get killed. And indeed they did.

DIXON: The visa could be generated from here, in other words, in a sense?

GASNER: Yes, yes. I -- in our cir-- the people who sent visas were those who had come themselves. An aunt of mine had a brother who came to the United States a couple of years earlier, he sent thousands of visas. In fact, I don't know if you have ever heard the composer, Siegfried Landau. He - his father -he con duct many -- his father was a very well-known rabbi and he came here with his family as a result of papers sent by my aunt's brother, Mr. Lieberman. Because he knew what was going on. So those who preceded us were very active in getting the others out.

DIXON: The visas cost money, in other words, or you could send as many as you want?

GASNER: I think there was probably some guarantee involved that you made yourself responsible because we weren't allowed to become public charges.

DIXON: But the Jewish community as was -- was as naive or perhaps more naive than the people in Germany.

GASNER: Unbelievably so. My husband is American born, and I've asked him, what did you know about the period. And he knew nothing. And I can't understand that because it was going on for so many years, and people were escaping and being killed even then in concentration camps. And how could none of this have filtered here? It just didn't make sense.

DIXON: When you actually, did you have trouble settling in or did you adapt easily or readily to the--

GASNER: Well, we stayed overnight in the lower east side. (Chuckle) My uncle rented us this apartment. My mother had an uncle here, and he gave my uncle thirty-five dollars to find an apartment for us. And he decided that rather than pay one month's rent, he was going to pay two months and took this cheap apartment in the lower east side. And overnight we were eaten up by bed bugs. And we didn't stay there. We were not the type of immigrants who was accustomed to the lower east side. I came with a valise -- trunks full of custom-made monogrammed clothing. We were financially well-to-do there, and we just couldn't stay there, I mean, we stayed one night and then we moved into a hotel.

And then we visited my aunt who had relatives in the Bronx. We took an apartment there. And the adjustment period was a very weird one. In some respects, it was a good period of life and others it was horrible. My father had very difficult time finding employment. And I have in my German diary that Papa got a job. I spelled D-S-C-H-A-P-P, that's how I spelled job. I didn't know what --. And he was only making fourteen dollars a week. The fact that we were Sabbath observers made it very, very difficult for us to-- He was fired Fridays by other Jews who couldn't understand -- despite our experience, he was still Orthodox. And the language was probably the least problem.

My parents went to night school, and I went to school. I came in June, I went to my--. In September I started school and I was put into 5B which gave me actually half a year. I only completed four years of school in Germany. And on the strength of my very good report cards I was put ahead a class and within one year I knew enough English to skip the whole year. So language was no problem at all. The major thing was economic, getting a job because my father had been a businessman in Germany. Not that he was too proud. He eventually became a pants presser and so on. But we, I will say, we pulled ourselves out of that routine very quickly. And my father is now in diamond manufacturing.

DIXON: It was, I guess, hard times for the U.S.

GASNER: It was a hard time for the U. S. It was a very hard time for them to accept immigrants and -- because, as they claimed, they had no jobs and it was a very difficult time economically. And we came, not as poor little immigrants from Russia, Poland as they expected us. They were calling us Greene [greenhorns] when we were so much more sophisticated, in fact, than they. And they resented us to a large extent.

DIXON: That's probably part of the reason it was, people were more absorbed in their own economic troubles than worrying about Europe. They were--

GASNER: There was question about that.

DIXON: They were just--

GASNER: Yes, they were. Except that they couldn't see it was a matter of life and death.

DIXON: And so you adjusted. Then you actually, you stayed in the Bronx or did you--

GASNER: No, we stayed in the Bronx until 1944, which makes it, well, six years; my goodness. I can't believe -- it seemed like such a big portion of my life. And then we were well off enough to possibly put a down payment on a house. And just the day we were going to look at a house, someone came, a friend of ours also from Berlin, and said there was an apartment available in Washington Heights and there were many Jews of German extraction living there. And we went to live in a building

only six blocks away from here. My parents moved in there, and after I was married, I moved in there, too. And we've remained in this neighborhood.

DIXON: Does that still hold true? Are there a lot of people who left, as yourself did, from--

GASNER: Yes, oh, yes.

DIXON: In this neighborhood.

GASNER: Kissinger's parents live here.

DIXON: Really.

GASNER: Yes. Just a few blocks away. I issued him a reduced coffee card in my senior center. This is the German neighborhood. Not the Berlin neighborhood, but most of the people are from Frankfurt. It is a very large German Orthodox community here.

DIXON: Very large, like would estimate how large? In the thousands?

GASNER: Yes.

DIXON: So those people all have essentially a common origin in Europe that come here for the same reason and settle in the same--. That's understandable.

GASNER: Well, I didn't take that route because I went via the Bronx, but the other group did. And they belong to a congregation where the rabbi recently passed away, Rabbi Breuer. It made the front page of the New York Times. And he has many hundreds and hundreds of followers. and they settled on Bennett Avenue, and they are large in that community. Now although I'm German, I really do not quite fit in with them because I'm from Berlin, I'm not from Frankfurt. They have rather small townish ways as far as I am concerned. But they came as a -- almost as an entity, bringing their schools and their synagogues and so on with them, and they're still here.

DIXON: This was the same period of time. They left because of Hitler or they--

GASNER: Oh, yes! Everybody left because of Hitler.

DIXON: On other words, they just picked up their society and withdrew it into another country.

GASNER: I think this particular rabbi was able to take a large group with him. And those who didn't come at the same time came around the same time. But when we moved here, they were very well established already.

DIXON: And you said Berlin was different from Frankfurt. When you were in Berlin and left, about how big was Berlin? Was it more cosmopolitan?

GASNER: Very.

DIXON: Famous.

GASNER: Far more cosmopolitan than New York, frankly. (Chuckle)

DIXON: Well, it's famous for being at that period of time.

GASNER: It was.

DIXON: During those Berlin years.

GASNER: It was very cosmopolitan. And also it had a different set of Jew, it had eastern Jews. The Jews from Frankfurt are several generation German born. And we, Berlin had more of a conglomerate. Like my parents were Polish and people were Russian and so on.

DIXON: That often leads to more cosmopolitan when you've got more diversity.

GASNER: It was more diversity.

DIXON: Almost like an island when you don't have any other--

GASNER: They were in the small cities more like islands and we - we couldn't be because we mixed automatically.

DIXON: So it sounds like you actually in some ways miss Berlin, even though you left in the--

GASNER: Well, I -- it's always the question of what might have been.

DIXON: Right. You mean the potential that was in Berlin as a place or--

GASNER: As a place and as a, you know, the family relationships were different and closer and I had very close friends. Naturally, it's - I - it's hard for me to say. I met my husband here and obviously I've made a new life here, but I often think of, you know, what would have been if we had stayed. We were very, very close-knit family unit there. And some of us never got together again.

DIXON: Did you actually ever see Hitler or people in the, his whatever they have, the S.S. or whatever they were called then, I mean were they in Berlin while you--

GASNER: They were, and how! All over!

DIXON: All over. They actually--

GASNER: They were in uniform. They were marching, the Hitler Jugend, everybody.

DIXON: Almost like the police, I guess, just wandering around in the streets?

GASNER: Well, far more than the police. They were ever present. Everywhere! That's all you saw.

DIXON: And were there, I mean, synagogues and places like that were allowed to go on and when you were leaving or did they--

GASNER: Well, we left in June - Kristall Nacht -- that famous - infamous event came in November. So we left before that. There were synagogues there when I left, but there were restrictions on - on Jews all along. Our people couldn't employ a young German cleaning lady. My father wasn't allowed to do business with Germans. I didn't have any German friends, none, although I remember having them when I was a little kid.

DIXON: You mean non-Jewish child.

GASNER: Non-Jewish, yes, that's what I mean. It's interesting that I made that distinction.

DIXON: Well, all right, that probably was the Jewish community then, Berlin would have actually been in a community unto itself.

GASNER: It was. And a very well organized community, despite its diversity. I guess all the problems that they had made a whole lot of them. We had a community newspapers, camps, school--. I had to go to a Jewish school.

DIXON: That makes it even stranger that there was not more awareness on the part of the community since it was organized and it was something that needed to be gotten away from.

GASNER: I think a lot of people just couldn't believe that this was - - they were pillars of society. A friend told me a story that her father had been in World War I and much decorated. And when they came to take his business away he said, "What do you mean, I'm going to call the army. I was a soldier. Take a look at my medals," and he thought that that was going to stand him in good stead. It didn't. A lot of peo-see, for me, being Orthodox, was in a sense a protection. I expected it. (Chuckle) Those people who were more assimilated felt that they were Germans first and Jews second, and to Hitler it didn't matter. If you were a teeny little bit Jewish, you were Jewish in his eyes. And I learned then it doesn't matter what you think you are. It's what they think you are that counts. And so all their German, wonderful German background whether through intermarriage or having given up the religion and feeling themselves German didn't matter. According to Hitler they were Jewish and they were all in the same boat.

DIXON: Well, I don't know. This may not be a very fair question, but your life then is profoundly different because you left Germany.

GASNER: Completely. I became a totally different person.

DIXON: Yes. I guess the thing to ask is you were an immigrant almost because you were pushed into it, but what was your, the immigrant experience, I mean, if you had to characterize something like that, would you say it was, was it difficult or was it hard or was it rewarding or was it just ambiguous or--

GASNER: It was difficult starting from scratch. I had been the top student in my class in Berlin. I was very distressed not to be the top student anymore (laughs). It was difficult making friends at first. Not so much, because I was an unfriendly person, but because I had very large family group that we -- I had automatic friends. I didn't have to go seek them. It was difficult at first not speaking the language, however brief the period was. It was hard. It was hard having to lower our standard of living a great deal. And I really resented also being called a refugee. That really bothered me. (Chuckle) In fact, people still sometime refer to us as refugees and I consider myself, you know, a rather sophisticated young lady and to be put in the class of, even be labeled immigrant, bothered me because in my mind that was associated with someone who came on a freighter or what-ever, not the way we did.

DIXON: Your family would not have left if Hitler hadn't, they wouldn't--

GASNER: Oh, absolutely not!

DIXON: Unwilling immigrants in a way.

GASNER: No, certainly not. We were very well off financially even until the end. My parents made trips to -- on cruises, on boats -- to Palestine. They went to Italy.

DIXON: It almost seems that something like that would have disrupted the German economy when large numbers of people left who were--

GASNER: They took over everybody. They just took the businesses over.

DIXON: I guess that's, too, I guess another reasonable thing to wonder is when you got here was there any, I'm sure it wasn't, I hope it wasn't as dramatic that the prejudices that -- were there prejudice against Jewish people here that you felt or was the community such that it didn't--?

GASNER: No, I remember we did not feel prejudice against Jews. And frankly, I've been careful to insulate myself against it ever since. I literally lead my life in such a way as not to encounter prejudice. I can give you a good example. There was a co-op available right across the street, Hudson View Gardens, that had once been restricted. And when my husband wanted to purchase it at a very good price, I told him that I

wasn't interested because I didn't want to be the one Jew in the building. And when my husband told this to the prospective seller, the prospective seller said, oh, no, we have a very nice Jewish family here. The words a very nice Jewish family was enough to set me off. I would never get myself into a situation where I would be the only Jewish person. Or -- I'm not a trailblazer in that way.

DIXON: You said the building was restricted. What was it?

GASNER: Against Jews.

DIXON: Really? they--

GASNER: This one, too.

DIXON: You've got to be kidding me. (Chuckle)

GASNER: I'm not. This one, too. And I'm talking about nine years ago. They had a very nice Jewish family living here.

DIXON: You're talking; this is the Washington Heights section of Manhattan.

GASNER: Across the street.

DIXON: There were buildings that were restricted against Jewish people nine years ago?

GASNER: Yes. That - that - not --

DIXON: That's incredible.

GASNER: That is not in, you know, subtly.

DIXON: You mean there was no formal policy.

GASNER: There was no formal policy. Well, here Casa Village 2 in the thirties had no Jews.

DIXON: Really.

GASNER: All the old tenants are Wasps. (Chuckle)

DIXON: Very, very interesting.

GASNER: Yes.

DIXON: I find that surprising.

GASNER: But I'm super sensitive to it, but I would not go to a resort or anything like that where I would find myself the only Jew. My husband has no such feelings. And my kids say I have the ghetto attitude, but it's very deeply ingrained. (Chuckle)

DIXON: Well, I guess you've already answered this. You said by the time you, the times in Berlin before Hitler came to power when you would have been freer and not had that sense. In other words, what I am getting at is Berlin would have been -- the prejudice before Hitler wouldn't have been there because it was a more cosmopolitan city. In other words, it was more in actually Manhattan than it was in Berlin preceding Hitler. But you said you more or less don't remember that far.

GASNER: Not that far. But I'll tell you my first encounter with anti-Semitism came not in Berlin but in Poland. So anti-Semitism -- such a fact of life in Germany that that in itself, you know, as you say, the name calling, that wouldn't have bothered me. My mother went to German schools and the teacher would come in and sniff and say, "I smell a Jew in here."

DIXON: (Chuckle)

GASNER: So (Chuckle) that's how far back that goes. I mean there was always anti-Semitism, but if it didn't endanger life or limb, it didn't matter. To that degree it doesn't bo-- bother me now, although I wouldn't put myself into a living situation with it, you know, that I would live in a place where people looked down their noses at me. But I don't get that bothered with anti-Semitism unless it endangers life and limb -- which is what it meant to us.

DIXON: What happened in Poland?

GASNER: A peasant came and spat on me.

DIXON: Oh, really.

GASNER: Called me a name. I was with my grandmother. She said the name meant dirty Jews or something of that sort.

DIXON: Doesn't sound like a very positive attitude. (Chuckle)

GASNER: No. (Chuckle) But that happened when I was five, so probably just before Hitler.

DIXON: I suppose there were, well, a lot of horror stories from the people who actually came, I mean--

GASNER: Unbelievable.

DIXON: Stories that people told.

GASNER: They themselves say they can't imagine that they lived through that experience -- to be -- ways. It was just in the Times in there reunion of people who were in Shanghai during the war.

DIXON: Right. I remember seeing the article.

GASNER: We have an acquaintance who was in Shanghai. And I'm not even talking about people who were in concentration camp. That's a whole story in and of itself.

DIXON: There are people who, well, I guess there must be people who were in concentration camps who came later to the United States.

GASNER: Oh, loads of them. The largest group are Hungarians because they were the last to be swallowed up by Hitler, so they had the largest chance of survival. I know lots of, in our own family, there were not many concentration camp survivors. Those who remained behind were killed. [pause]

DIXON: Well, I guess what I could do is say, you said you wouldn't have come if Hitler hadn't appeared, but, and I'm sure there are elements of one way or another, but basically if you had to look at it and say, are you sorry you came?

GASNER: I can't say that because it's where I met my husband, a whole new life started for me here. And -- I would have rather not gone through the very difficult period I did -- in very hard times. Not only connected with the immigration. As I was reading my German diary, there was an interval of a few months; I'd say at the age of eleven, we'd been through a terrible time. Telegrams every day. And those telegrams, I'm sure, were from relatives pleading to be rescued. I don't even specify, but I know what it meant.

DIXON: This diary is what you were writing in the United States.

GASNER: Once writing -- I began the diary in the train on the way to Rotterdam, and it continued on the boat and then the first year or so in the United States. And significantly I just dropped the whole thing. And I write the last entry, it's hard for me to write in German. I had a new name and describing my -- my school situation. And I think what happened at that point, I just gave up my German personality. And that's why the diary meant nothing to me anymore.

DIXON: You mentioned earlier you changed your name, did you change your name legally or did it just--

GASNER: No. A teacher decided that the name Hannelore was too difficult to pronounce, so he gave me a chance to say. He said, "See you take either Anne or Laura. A-N-N-E or L-A-U-R-A. And in Germany all parrots are called Lore, just like we call Polly (Chuckle) so, of course, I wasn't going to be called Laura, so I picked Anne. There was never any formal legal change. I just -- I have that on my citizenship papers. I just call myself Anne.

DIXON: That's interesting because so many of the immigrants had their names changed on Ellis Island because it was hard to say or something --

GASNER: Yes.

DIXON: Just a school teacher saying that this--

GASNER: This is too hard. (Chuckle) Yes.

DIXON: Seems a little presumptuous on his part.

GASNER: Yes. Especially since I already had it, even the name that I was called that he could have used. My name was Henni. It was a Jewish name. Could have used that. But he decided it was going to be either Anne or Laura.

DIXON: Maybe it was an attempt to assimilate you into society.

GASNER: Yes, he made a very big attempt. He gave me all kinds of books to read and, you know, to learn English quickly. I mean, that was part of his goal. But he - I think he wanted --. He gave me a buddy, an American girl. you know, a kid in class, who was supposed to look after me. And I was - I was assimilated quickly. I began to use the libraries here very soon. And it didn't take very long. The difficult parts of it were the financial problems and also the terrible anxiety about the relatives in Germany or in Europe.

DIXON: The school you went to wasn't just a Jewish school, it was a, was it--

GASNER: In Berlin?

DIXON: No, here.

GASNER: Here was a public school.

DIXON: It was a public school.

GASNER: Yes. My brother went to Jewish school, but I went to public school.

DIXON: Returning just to, I guess, for a moment to your diary, you mentioned that there were some things that were insightful then, in fact, that surprise you, like anything particularly that's not too personal or--
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GASNER: Well, one thing, when family came here, of course, they couldn't find work. They start playing stock market -- sit around the stock market all day long. Just they didn't have any meaningful activity and I write that my cousin was in the stock market again. Just, he had no place to be. That's where he sat.

DIXON: Well, the stock market actually might have been very interesting in the 1930s anyhow because it could have been just about as low as it could have.

GASNER: Yes, however low it was, whatever it-- we still managed to lose. (Chuckle) I remember my father was just saying that we had a little bit money and so we invested it and we lost it. Got even worse.

DIXON: Right. Well, is there anything particular that you can think of that we've left out or that you would like to add? We covered your journey over.

GASNER: Yes.

DIXON: And you experiences settling in, the reasons you left.

GASNER: Yes. Well, I would like to say one more thing.

DIXON: Sure.

GASNER: A lot of people ask me whether I've ever gone back or whether I want o go back. And I can tell you intellectually here between you and me, yes, it would be an interesting experience. I know that I never can go back.

DIXON: So you have actually never returned to Europe, or just Germany?

GASNER: I have been in a plane that landed in Munich, and physically couldn't get myself to walk out of that plane. And told the stewardess to please allow me to stay, and I was the only one, my husband stayed with me. I couldn't bring myself to step on German soil again. And I have cousins my age who have the same experience. My husband, we went Hol -my husband -- we were told it's a beautiful road, from Holland through Germany. It's such a nice trip. I said, "You go, I can't." Although I will say, yes, it sounds like a nice trip. I can't. There's an emotional barrier to returning there, and I decided the reason is because I have just almost no good memories of Germany at all. All I really can recall is Hitler. The only good memories I have are within the family, but of Germany, none. So I have nothing but bitter memories, and older people than myself do return, but they have good memories, too. I have none.

DIXON: Did they have pictures of Hitler posted on walls and things like that?

GASNER: They had pictures of him everywhere. All I heard was this barking voice. I didn't know how the Germans understood him because, although I spoke German, I didn't understand him. Sound just like -- you could walk on the street and stand somewhere and you'd hear his voice, you know, with his speeches coming over loudspeakers everywhere.

DIXON: So it was actually Hitler that was the root of all evil, I guess.

GASNER: He was. German people themselves other than their anti-Semitism which goes back a long way were not that way. We had some very good German friends who I'm sure did not survive the war. My father had a German customer who, after Hitler declared not to do business with Jews anymore, came and said, " Mr. Adler," he had a laundry, this guy, he said,

"From now on you're getting all my business." I can't imagine that that man survived the war. He was far too outspoken.

DIXON: Yes, that's very unfortunate.

GASNER: We had other, we had German friends. people who came to visit my grandmother, who also spoke against the regime because they had been, you know, Junkers members of some kind of an upper class, and they too were dissatisfied with the regime. But, as I said, I don't believe that these people really survived.

DIXON: Did any of the German people actually assist the German community? I mean, the Jewish community.

GASNER: Well, this, yes, this man, he gave us all the business. Our cleaning lady refused to leave. She was an older woman. She was loyal to us until the very end. Yes, there were some people--

DIXON: Pockets of resistance along the way.

GASNER: Yes. Who were really very nice. Who just refused to accept the edicts of Hitler and continued to be friendly. A few, not very many. I guess it wasn't safe for them.

DIXON: It certainly makes for an interesting story, the experience and stuff.

GASNER: Well, it's like another life.

DIXON: It sounds almost like what you'd see on television.

GASNER: Yes.

DIXON: Makes it more vivid to know that it actually occurred to a real person.

GASNER: Yes. I have one short story published, and what I discuss in there is the reasons that I felt, perceived, you know, why people didn't leave Germany. And I saw it as three reasons. One was some people just felt they were too old to make a change in their lives. And the other two were that they felt they couldn't believe it was really happening and the third was that some people who were, like, Orthodox Jews, felt they wouldn't be able to practice their religion when they left. And it wasn't easy. As I say, my father was fired every Friday and so on. And as I was writing the story, I was crying because it was so painful to remember all the events which I related in the story.

DIXON: Kind of cathartic, too, I guess.

GASNER: It was, yes. It was very good to write it and it was published in a little magazine. As I said, the experiences, we block it a lot of it out. We don't want to think about it.

DIXON: I think that's all the tape we have.

GASNER: Yes. Or we couldn't survive were it not for that feature. There were so many people who were in concentration camps say that it just was another person it happened to. It didn't happen to me.. There are very -- a lot of people feel that if you escaped before, if you escaped before you could be put into concentration camp you had a relatively easy time of it. And I differ with that to a great extent. I mean, I'm not going to compare myself to having had a concentration camp experience. But I feel that there were permanent scars in every one of us. One of the things, for example, when a kid is small, they often entertain thoughts about killing their parents, and they feel a lot of guilt attached to these thoughts. We, as kids, actually have that power. If we misbehaved, my brother once broke the street lamp, my parents were in mortal fear of being arrested because of my brother's relatively naughty act. So we had tremendous responsibility to behave ourselves because not only would it reflect badly on our families, but our families could be arrested for one simple act of naughtiness.

DIXON: Right. Sounds very much like they used to call the black people in America the invisible race. You tempted the invisible so you weren't--

GASNER: Yes, that's it. And it - mostly the kids felt -- the adults took crazy kind of chances. I remember my parents playing Russian records. They pulled down the jalousies and they played Russian records, which was strictly forbidden. It was just for kicks, kind of --. You were never Communists or anything like that, but it was just an act of defiance. They did certain other things as well. But we kids, we felt so totally helpless.

DIXON: Why did they care that you played Russian records?

GASNER: Because they were always anti-Communists.

DIXON: Oh, I see, that's right.

GASNER: Yes.

DIXON: They actually had rules published that you couldn't do this and you couldn't--

GASNER: No. I often wondered. I don't know, but you just knew what. There were certain things that were in the paper. Hitler has his newspaper, the Streichen it was called, one of them, and one day my parents telling me my uncle's name was in the paper, that Abraham Korn get out of Berlin, Germany. My family has some really interesting stories. The Nazis, they were searching for Jews. In the later nineteen thir-- I think, thirty-nine--my uncle -- they were rounding everybody up. My grandfather was rounded up with my uncle and dumped into Poland. They stayed there for about a week and then they were allowed to return. And my youngest uncle was bicycling around the city all day long and then he went to his sister-in-law's house and hid between the bed and the wall. And they came in and looked under the bed and in the bed, but not between the bed and the wall.

DIXON: Who was they?

GASNER: The --.

DIXON: The police or whatever.

GASNER: Police, yes. So he got away. He got away to--

DIXON: It almost sounds like 1984 in 1938, it sounds very--

GASNER: It was. I don't think people really understood how horrible it was.

DIXON: It would be horrible, since you couldn't live a, life can be difficult enough when it's not attempted to make it more difficult.

GASNER: Yes. There were always things to frighten, you know, scary things happening. I was in camp about six months before we left. And there were two little girls there with their brother. They seemed to be special pets of the place. And they were like permanent guests. Their father was concentration camp and their mother had had a nervous breakdown, I think. And these children were at camp because they had nowhere else to be. And I remember when we were in our beds one night, one of the girls was telling how the Nazis knocked on the door and grabbed her father, and how she was crying. And even the idea that such a thing could happen was so scary to me, although it hadn't happened. Well, my father's sister with her family, the Gestapo was knocking on the front door, and they were running out the back.

DIXON: Unbelievable!

GASNER: Yes. It actually is. You can't believe it. Horrible things happened. My father's mother was about eighty. They shot her.

DIXON: Really. Why did they shoot her?

GASNER: They just rounded everybody up. Not in Berlin. They shipped her over to Poland. See Polish nationals they decide to go to Poland, although she had lived in Germany for umpteen years, and she was shot.

DIXON: I've enjoyed talking to you. It's a very interesting story, even if it's a little bit, well--

GASNER: [not understood] .

DIXON: Your story is a very interesting one, Mrs. Gasner. It shows kind of the cruelty of one human being or one group of human beings toward another.

END OF INTERVIEW
NPS-122/GASNER

