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Lillie Levine interview for The Survivors of the Holocaust Oral History Project

Lillie Levine
Cynthia Wolfe

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Interviewee: Lilly Levine (i.e. LL)
Interviewer: Cynthia Wolfe (i.e. CW)

CW My name is Cynthia Wolfe and I am a graduate student at WSU in Dayton. As part of the Oral History Project of the Survivors of the Holocaust who live in this area, I am interviewing Mrs. Lilly Levine 09 May 1981 at 02:00 p.m. in her home. Let us start with date of your birth and place of your birth.

LL I was born March 31, 1925. I am 56 years old. I was born in a small town of Kulsheim.

CW Did you grow up in that town?

LL We lived there until I was approximately two and half years old. Then we moved into Frankfurt on Main, and that is where I lived until we left Germany.

CW Tell me a little about the first town you lived in...where it is?...what kind of town it was.

LL It is a small town in the area of Wurzburg, which is a university town. It is probably 100 miles or so from Frankfurt, maybe not that far. The town had, I understand, about 127 Jewish families in it from about a population of about 1000 approx.

CW How did your family come to that place?

LL I don't know. They seemed to have lived there for at least 3 or 4 generations.

CW Did you own your own home?

LL Yes.

CW How many brothers and sisters did you have?

LL I had one brother who was 4 1/2 years older than I am.

CW Did any other family members live with you in your home?

LL My mother and father and brother, that was it.

CW What did your parents do?

LL My father had a store-general type department store.
CW Did he own it?
LL Yes.
CW Did your mother work there also?
LL Yes, she did at times.
CW Do you remember anything about your life there?
LL Quite a bit. It probably seems strange since I was that young when I left there but I do remember attending a nursery school which was run by Catholic nuns. I remember that at graduation they gave a play and my mother made my costume - I was an angel. I remember some of the people in the town. I was very fond of someone that lived catty-corner across the street. An elderly gentleman, by the name - I called him Feist (that means 'stout') and he used to take me in his buggy riding around the area.
CW At the nursery school you went to was it for Jewish and Non-Jewish students?
LL Well, I think my father and mother had good relation with the rest of the community - and there was no problem as far as that went at the time, in the 20's.
CW When did you first become aware of any anti-Semitism?
LL I believe that it probably was after we moved to Frankfurt.
CW When did you move to Frankfurt?
LL I believe that it was in 1927 or early 28. I am not sure.
CW Do you know why you moved?
LL I think that my father wanted us to be in a school that would be Jewish and would be a little more sophisticated, than what would have been available in Kulsheim.
CW What education did your parents have, that you were aware of?
LL I think the usual at that time which was 8th grade education.
CW Can you tell me anything about your religious life? When you were very young.
LL That I don't remember that much, but my parents were Orthodox Jews and they observed all the religious things. They kept kosher, observed the holidays and so on.

CW Did you attend Synagogue?

LL Yes.

CW What was the principal language spoken at home?

LL German

CW Did your parents speak any other languages?

LL Yes, my father knew French, but they didn't speak it with each other.

CW Did they do a lot of travelling?

LL My father did, yes.

CW Was it for recreation or was it for his job?

LL Business

CW Would you consider yourself to have been among the richer of the community? Maybe amongst the poorer? or in between?

LL I would say "in between".

CW Did your parents relate socially with the other - non-Jewish people?

LL Yes.

CW Can you remember any? Specific?

LL Well, from Kulheim, I know that my father belonged to clubs and, of course, I mentioned the nursery school. Naturally most of the customers in the store were from the non-Jewish community. As far as friendships go, I don't recall that much about it.

CW Was that also true in Frankfurt, that the clientele of the store was basically non-Jewish?

LL My father did not have a store in Frankfurt. He was a salesman for a wholesale jewelry company.

CW To what extent would you say that the Synagogue was or was not the center of the Jewish Community? Maybe in Frankfurt you remember better.
It very definitely was a center of the Jewish community. I also went to a school that was a Jewish school and that, very much, was a center also of the activities.

Could you name some of these activities?

The religious observances, and holydays and so forth. Sometimes things like concerts and speeches and things like that.

How about politics? Was your family involved in politics?

Not involved, as such, in politics, but very interested. Very aware of it and I was made very aware of it, even at that age.

Through conversations at home

Through conversations at home and because I think there was a lot of concern about what was happening in politics. Of course, at the time Hitler gained power in 1933, and just before that, there was a lot of parading and speeches and so forth. I remember the symbols—what I think were the 3 main groups that were vying for that election. Of course the Nazi's had, what they called the Hakenkreutz—which is the swastika; the Communist's party had the hammer and sickle; and there was another party, and I can't remember what it was called, their symbol was 3 arrows side by side.

What year are you referring to here?

This was right before Hitler was elected. I believe in January 1933, so the campaign must have been the 2 or 3 months before that.

How would you describe your childhood in general?

I think that up to a certain point, it was a very happy childhood. I felt very loved and secure. When I was about 6 years old my mother became ill and eventually died in January of 1933, when I was a little over 7. She died of cancer at that point so it was a family tragedy that we went through at that point and at the same time Hitler began at that time.

How did your mother's death affect your life?

There were various ramifications of course. At first it restricted my father from traveling since my mother was in the hospital a lot of the time while she was ill. I grieved very much—I think that all of us did. It was a very insecure time, of course, otherwise herwise also, economically and politically. All these things coming together made for a lot of insecurity and fear and what have you.
What do you remember about the economic problems?

Of course, in the 20's Germany went through this terrible inflation period. It caused great havoc. Once Hitler came into power - and my mother was already dead it restricted my father very much from traveling or conducting his business. It was very difficult for him to earn a living after that.

What about your buying power? The things you needed for the home? Did you have problems buying what you needed?

You mean food or clothing or things like that? Probably some - that doesn't register with me (she was 7 old). I think that there probably some problems.

Did you continue to go to school?

You mean food or clothing or things like that? Probably some - that doesn't register with me (she was 7 old). I think that there probably some problems.

How you said that this was a Jewish school? Can you tell me any more about it?

The school was called 'Philanthropin' (LL spelled). It was a school founded probably 125 years prior to that year. It was a school to teach both Hebrew and religion as well as the secular subjects. It was one of 2 or 3 other Jewish schools in Frankfurt. When Hitler came to power, I believe it was probably around 1934, Jewish children were no longer allowed to go to public schools and those who had been going to public schools were kicked out and were taken in by schools like the Philanthropin. Also (Jewish) teachers in the public schools and the universities were no longer allowed to teach so some of them became teachers there. Probably, before Hitler, I would say, that student body may have been 400 students after Hitler, it became about 800. It was a school which went from 1st grade all the way through high school, the foreign languages were taught and my brother learned French and English.

What about you?

At the grade level I was, I learned Hebrew - learned to read Hebrew not really to speak it, also I could understand some of it.

The main language spoken in the school then was German.

Oh yes!

What about your associations in school? Friends? Were they mostly Jewish or non-Jewish?
there were only Jews in school.

Did you have friends outside of school?

Yes, at some point, we did but not after Hitler came into power because something seemed to happen.

What would that happen to be?

We had neighbors who lived in the same apartment building with us, who were very good friends at one point. When my mother first went into the hospital they insisted upon us having dinner at their house - they couldn't do enough for us. There was a time, and I know Hitler wasn't in (power) yet, we had all gone to a main street where there was a parade taking place. My father went back to the house to get a chair for my mother who was temporarily out of the hospital. On the way he was beaten up by these people. So something was already happening when people were (beaten up with impunity).

That was the something which (happened later)?

Yes. The reason why I brought that up was that their children I had played with them, they had been my friends. But after that no more!

Do you remember any other incidents that made you feel that a difference had occurred?

Lots of them. One of them was: leaving school one day a bunch of hoodlums were outside and threw stones at us. I was actually hurt by it and scarred by it; after that my father would drop everything and come pick me up after school, rather than letting me go by myself. But after the incident I mentioned, if my father being beaten up by this people he became - all of us became very suspicious of anybody we knew and we no longer continued relationships.

What did the general feeling seem to be among your friends and neighbors who were Jewish about what was going on? What was the reaction?

Everyone was (naturally) very concerned. Some people were hopeful, I believe that it would blow over, that it wasn't permanent thing which was going to go on. I think that you always hope for the best. I think that my father, probably more than most people, began very early to look for a way out of Germany, because he was very concerned about what was happening.

Why do you think he started so early? To think about a way to leave? Any specific incidents?
Yes! I think the beating he received and when he, at that time he went to the police to report the incident, and they told him to forget about it and that, if he came back to report anything else they would arrest him. So I think that he felt that there no longer was any law or anything you could go by that you know would be there tomorrow. Each week there was some new regulation - something else was happening - after Hitler came in.

At that time did you consider yourself to be more German or Jewish?

I don't think that I distinguished between the two. I thought that I was German and I knew that I was Jewish. There was no distinction.

Did the Jewish community become tighter and more closely associated? Did they try to help each other in anyway?

Oh, they definitely tried to help each other. I think that there had been the care right along. There had been a closeness right along.

In what ways were they able to help?

I am not sure (I can answer that). You know that they had always been a charitable group that helped each other. I know that people supported the schools and had to give extra support to the schools after additional students came there. I think that there were groups that tried to probably direct you how you could get out of the country, how you could get to another country. That sort of thing.

Did you or did your father partake in any of these organizations?

I am sure that he did. I can't say specifically what it was.

What about his job? Were there changes in his work?

Yes, definitely because at a certain point he could no longer travel and his job did require traveling. He couldn't leave Germany that easily on business because passports were not that easily given by Hitler's government.

Were there any changes in your religious life? For your family and in the community?

No.

Did anything in particular happen to your own family, when Hitler came to power? You mentioned that your father didn't lose his job.
We did more a number of times, each time to a cheaper place, because economics became quite a problem.

Within Frankfurt?

Yes.

Do you remember any of the reactions among the non-Jews in your community to the new policies?

As far as I knew the people that we knew of they went along with whatever was done by Hitler. It seemed like mass hysteria, where everyone went along with it.

How about the newspapers?

I know that my father occasionally would get a copy of 'Der Stürmer' which was a rag written by one of Hitler's propagandists. There would always be anti-Semitic diatribes and that sort of thing in there. I don't remember if the regular paper in Frankfurt had this type of propaganda in it. It may have.

Did your father share the news with you?

Oh yes, or I would read it.

How did you feel as a 7 or 8 year old? How did you comprehend what was going on?

I believe that it added to the feeling of insecurity and apprehension of what might happen.

Did you fear that something would happen to you or your family?

Very much so. I knew that I used to wait in the evening for my father to come home. I used to watch out the window and look at people a block away. I could tell his walk before I could really distinguish his face, and I always wait there, waiting very fearfully that he might not come. The German word for arrested was: 'Verhaftet' which had a terrible meaning to me. And I was always fearful that my father, if he wasn't home on time - if he was even 5 minutes late, that he was Verhaftet. It is something that did happen to friends around us and also to my uncle who lived in a small town. He was taken to a concentration camp and later released. But it was a terrible, terrible fear which I had. I remember one time when I was walking - I believed that it was a Saturday morning walk to the Synagogue - on the corner were a number of soldiers. I do believe that they were SA (Brown Shirted, uniformed members of the Hitlerite Sturm Abteilung), with machine guns. And as I got to the next corner
there was some more there. I remember things like this. Yes, that produced a little fear.

CW Why would the people that you know be arrested?

LL Because they were Jewish!

CW They were using that as an excuse?

LL Goodness knows; they may have used excuses, but it was because they were Jewish. I don't think that they even bothered with excuses.

CW Your uncle who was arrested, did he come from your father's side?

LL No, he was my mother's sister's husband, and he managed to get out later on one of the last flights out of Germany. He came to this country then.

CW Did you hear about any violence against any of the Jewish business?

LL Oh yes.

CW What do you remember

LL Very often there would be either breaking a window, some businesses were even forcibly closed. They couldn't operate or things like that.

CW What were most of the people doing? As a result of this, LL I think that those that were affected by this type of thing probably tried to get out of Germany. We had many friends who went to Holland or to France. But some of these people were later on killed in concentration camps.

CW Were people frowned upon for leaving Germany?

LL I don't think so, no. I think that those who were not leaving very often were envious of those who could and did. Many of them, at the early point that we left, were not as eager to leave yet and thought that this would blow over.

CW Do you remember anything about the Zionist movement?

LL Yes, I know that there were people who were part of it. I know that we went to see someone at one point, when it looked as if we couldn't come to the U.S., to see if we could immigrate to what was then Palestine.

CW Who did you see?
LL Someone who apparently interviewed people about going there.

CW A Jewish organization

LL Yes.

CW Do you remember any incidence where you were not allowed to go to a meeting or to a theatre? Were you kept out of certain institutions?

LL I don’t remember that and I am not sure if that was happening at the point when we were still there. It probably was happening or at least beginning to - but I don’t specifically remember.

CW What date in 1935 did you leave?

LL February 12 is when we left Hamburg.

CW Before the Nuremberg laws?

LL Yes.

CW Can you tell me about any other incidents which happened in school or in the community?

LL Maybe we can come back to that. Right now I can’t (think of any). There were probably many.

CW You said that your father had considered leaving once Hitler came to power.

LL Yes. I think that from that point on his aim was to leave.

CW Do you know how he went about it? About being able to.

LL My mother had cousins in Cincinnati who, through their efforts and good will, made it possible for us to get visas to come to the U.S. We had gone to the American consulate in Stuttgart about one year before our final visit there. At that time, my father was very, very puzzled because we were turned down since they said that he had a dislocated shoulder or something like that, which wasn’t true. So he simply replied and came back and was finally given a visa for us to come over. I know that my mother’s cousins I think got the help of a Congressman, at that time and were able to get us out.

CW How many members of your family?

LL 3 of us. My father, brother and I.
CW: How did you feel about leaving Germany?

LL: I think that I was delighted to leave. I was really ready. A number of things had happened and I was eager to leave. There was no fear of new places or anything, I was so eager to go.

CW: Did you speak any English?

LL: No, I didn't. My brother spoke a little and he taught me to say 'I am afraid I don't speak English'. And that was the extent of it.

CW: You said that a number of things had happened. Are you referring to additional incidents that haven't talked about yet?

LL: Yes, there were not major things, as far as I remember but a lot of things that added to my feeling of fear and insecurity. I was really very eager to leave. I know that my father was too.

CW: Can you mention any of these incidents?

LL: That is what I answered to before. I had been very independent, up to a certain point, and walked everywhere to school, to Synagogue, where I went to play with someone and it got to the point where my father wouldn't consider even my walking anywhere anymore and felt that he had to accompany me. Various things of this sort. We were hearing reports of friends who were "Verhaftet", arrested, and taken away with no explanation - and things like that.

CW: You said that the population of your school doubled. Do you know of any other changes which occurred as the result of that in your school?

LL: Outside of the fact that our class was put in an annex because there was no more room in the school. The annex was a little way from the school. They had to find room in other places to hold classes and a number of new teachers came, of course. I think that outside of that we were well aware of what was going on, that there were other new children coming in from other schools which they could no longer attend and that sort of thing.

CW: What was the general feeling at school?

LL: Of course no one was happy about it and the general feeling was that you did the best you could with it. We were still children and played and this sort of thing; but we were also aware of some of the things going on.

CW: Did most of the students and teachers feel that this was going to be a permanent change?
LL: I am not sure that I can answer that. I think probably so.

CW: What about the religious life of the average student there? Were most families orthodox in your town?

LL: The students at the school, yes, because it was a traditional Jewish day school and religious school, where the teaching of religious subjects was combined with the secular subjects. Everyone was quite observant — very religious.

CW: Was this maintained in spite of the influx of new students?

LL: Oh yes! It continued.

CW: Did you have any friends in school who were leaving Germany?

LL: Yes! There some who left before we did.

CW: Were most of them coming to the United States?

LL: No, I think that they were going to places like Holland or France; places like that.

CW: What grade did you get up to in school?

LL: Fourth grade.

CW: How did you first find out that you were coming to the United States?

LL: As I said, my father had worked very hard to try to have us leave Germany and come to the U.S. We had to go to the American Consulate in Stuttgart and I knew of course at that point that we were trying to come and hoped very strongly that we would get to come.

CW: Did you bring anything with you?

LL: Yes, I think that at that time we were allowed to bring either 10 Marks or $10.00. I can't remember which in money. So we just brought suitcases of things we wore. We brought very little, otherwise. We were actually afraid to bring anything of value in case that would cause friction where they wouldn't let us come. We left anything which might have amounted to anything, was worth anything.

CW: Did you have any trouble getting out?

LL: Not really. I remember that when we were getting on the boat, some official took our passports and told us that he had to check them or something, and that brought fear to us. Maybe about one hour later he came back and we were able get on the boat without any trouble.
were on a U.S. Line boat. So, once we left Hamburg we thought that we were already in the United States and away from Germany.

CW Did you have trouble getting from Frankfurt to Hamburg?

LL No. We took a train and that was that. There was no problem there.

CW Did you know other people on the boat?

LL No. Not when we got on it.

CW Did you receive any help while you were still in Germany from any Jewish organization?

LL I am not sure about this. I do know that at times, after school, I would go to a Jewish Center, until my father could come and pick me up. I know that I went away on a trip to a family out in the country, that was sponsored by some Jewish organization, more or less, as a vacation type thing for one week in the country.

CW Was it in the summer?

LL Yes. I believe that it was. I remember that I wrote a letter to the Jewish newspaper from there and that sort of thing.

CW Did the newspaper continue? Was it published?

LL Yes. As long as we remained there. I don't know about later.

CW And the school remained open?

LL Yes. The school remained open, according to the book which I received from the school until 1938 or 1939. Apparently after Kristallnacht the teachers and any students over 16 were taken to concentration camps and they closed the school for a period of time. Some of the people came back from the concentration camps and they were able to reopen it for a short time. There weren't that many students left then.

CW How did you receive that information?

LL I have a book that was written by various teachers, and the students in the school, and people who were there at the end. The book is printed by the city of Frankfurt.

CW When did they print it?

LL Probably in the early 50's, I think.

CW Did someone send it to you?
Yes.

I don't think that we mentioned your maiden name before.

Ms.

What was it?

It was Weissbacher (spelled by LL).

You mentioned that you had family in Cincinnati.

Yes, cousins of my mother's. How did they happen to be in Cincinnati?

This. I don't know. I believe that their parents had emigrated to the U.S. and the cousins had been born in the U.S.

Did you directly come to this area?

Yes, to Cincinnati. After a day in New York we came directly to Cincinnati.

Did anyone meet you in NY?

No, we were on our own.

Did you have any problems getting from N.Y. to Cincinnati?

No, no.

Did your father speak English?

Ma, he didn't, not at that time.

Your brother?

My brother was able to get a few words across.

Did you keep contact with home in Germany after your arrival in the U.S.?

Yes.

Could you tell me about that?

Do you mean friends or relatives? Yes, my father had a brother, his brother Arno (spelled) who lived in Stuttgart. He had a wife and a son. We regularly corresponded with him, of course. My father had
urged him to make arrangements to try to come to the U.S. He did not seem to feel that it was necessary. He thought that things would get better. He had a chemical import business. He too, later on, couldn’t conduct his business any further and around 1938, I believe that it was maybe one month before the Kristallnacht - some incidents evidently had happened to him, which he really couldn’t write about because the letters were always opened and censored and what have you. He wrote that he now my father to try to get a visa for him (and his wife and son). My father, of course immediately went to work on it. Although at that point we had not become citizens. I believe that it took 5 years (to become a citizen). We had someone who countersigned for it and we tried to get the papers. My uncle wrote that he had applied for a number - the number was somewhere in the 21 thousands - and he said 'we have to wait until that number comes up - please don’t send the papers, until I tell you because they have to be within 3 months of our being seen there (at the consulate). Well, to make a long story short, this was in 1938 - in 1941 he was still waiting for his number to come up. The last letter was sometime in 1941, it said that the consulate in Stuttgart is closed and only Berlin is open but that he didn’t know if he could get into that consulate. We never heard from him further. My brother did some checking right after the war because he was there with the U.S. army of occupation. Apparently, my uncle and his wife were taken to a city by the name of Riga, which used to be the capital of Latvia. It was one of these situations where they were lined up in front of a ditch and machinegunned. And he (my brother) found out that my cousin was in one of the concentration camps - Buchenwald, I believe, and apparently lived until about 3 or 4 days before the Americans came. He died of starvation, my brother gathered. So that is as much as we found out about them. We kept in touch with friends, of course and what have you.

CW  Did they tell you much about what their life was like?

LL  No. They didn’t dare write things. I know my uncle wrote in one of his letters: ‘So and so is no longer at home’. Otherwise said using an euphemism to say that someone was taken to a concentration camp. However, he would not have dared say the actual thing.

CW  Were they able to receive your letters intact?

LL  Not all of them. I believe that we started numbering them and not all arrived.

CW  How about your life in the U.S.? Could you describe what it was like when you first got here?

LL  We lived for a short time with my mother’s cousin. I went to Avondale School in Cincinnati. I was placed with a teacher who
understands some German and could speak German but I believe that she only spoke English to me. It was a very short time. I think that within one month I felt comfortable speaking English. I remember that I woke one morning and I was thrilled to death about the fact that I had dreamed in English. That was the point where I felt that I was really going to learn English well.

CW: Was this a private school?

LL: No. It was a public school.

CW: Did you have any problems with acceptance? The students accepting you?

LL: I don't think so, not really. Of course, there were students of various economic levels and I know that my father - this was still during the depression - he felt very fortunate to get a job in a meatpacking plant. The pay was very minimal - very low. He had never, earlier in his life, done hard physical labor. He was very proud of himself that he was able to do it. This was the only work which was open to him at that time, with the language and so forth.

CW: What about your brother?

LL: I believe that he started in Junior H.S., probably. He learned English very quickly also.

CW: And your father learned English?

LL: My father went to night school, as part of citizenship classes, and also to learn English.

CW: He decided immediately to become a U.S. citizen?

LL: Oh yes, yes.

CW: I asked you earlier if you considered yourself more German than Jewish. What about now, when you were in the U.S.? How did you feel about yourself in that respect.

LL: Of course, the German part - you can't help being whatever you were born into - I certainly didn't have very good feelings about the Germans; but I guess that at the time I considered myself as a German who was coming here. Now I think of myself as an American - sometimes, I don't even think of the German.

CW: Why do you think that your father was anxious to be a U.S. citizen?

LL: I guess that he wanted to make his life here. This was it.
How long did you live with your cousins?

Probably a few months and then we got our own apartment and we lived there.

Did you continue to go to the same school?

Yes, oh yes. We lived in the same area.

Did you receive any help from any organization in the U.S.? In the Cincinnati area?

No. We were strictly on our own. I know that my father’s income was very low but we, somehow or other, managed to make it.

Do you remember much about your school life?

Some, yes.

How would it compare to your school life in Europe?

First, it was a public school instead of the Jewish school. The religious training stopped at that point. I think that probably, in some areas, in my school in Germany, they were more advanced. I think that writing skill and mathematics and things like that probably were somewhat advanced over where they were here. Then, in Germany the girls were separated from the boys in the lower grades. They even had their own playgrounds. For some reason or other they didn’t intermingle; whereas here, of course, that is not done. Outside of that the experiences were probably similar.

How about with your friends?

Of course I had friends which I had had over several years in Germany. But I made some very close friendships here. I would say that (that aspect was) similar. I don’t think that I had any difficulties making friends.

Were they mostly Jewish or non-Jewish?

I think that my friends were mostly Jewish, although there were some non-Jewish.

Was the principal language spoken at home English or German?

My brother and I spoke English and my father had to revert to German occasionally, but eventually we all spoke English.
CW: Did your father ever remarry?
LL: No.
CW: How about your religious life, in what way did that change or remain the same?
LL: I think that my father remained very orthodox and we kept kosher and probably our religious practices may have fallen off somewhat because I think, mainly the milieu that we found here wasn't as Jewishly concentrated as it had been in Frankfurt.
CW: Did your father remain with the same occupation?
LL: Not totally, but for a long time he did.
CW: What did he go into after that?
LL: He went into business with my brother.
CW: Do you remember when the war broke out between the US and Germany?
LL: Yes.
CW: What thoughts did you have?
LL: I remember first of all in 1939 - I believe that it was Sep of 39 when the Nazis invaded Poland. I was very concerned at that time about what was happening with family and friends and so forth. I did follow that situation very closely. Of course, once the U.S. was at war with Germany any correspondence with our relatives stopped completely. Up to that point we had continued to hear from my uncle and so forth. We were even able to, through England or Denmark, to send kosher meat to my uncle. That was apparently sent in frozen. He had been able to get that. However, once the war began that was the end and that was also his end.
CW: Did the war make any other changes in your life?
LL: My brother was then around 20 years of age. In 1943 he did graduate from the University of Cincinnati. As soon as he graduated he was drafted into the army. That made a big change. He was sent overseas and was in England and then later on went into Germany, and so forth.
CW: Were there any problems with that? How did you feel his being of German origin affected him?
LL: He went in with the army of occupation to Germany. Because he knew German, he was able to do some things. I guess that he got some
special jobs in so far as what he did with the army of occupation, including interrogating and so forth.

CW He had no internal problems with being drafted?

LL No, no. By internal problems do you mean fight against Germany?

CW How he felt about it personally?

LL Well, of course, he wanted to see Hitler defeated! It was more that he was going and fighting against the Nazis.

CW What did you do during the wartime? Were you still in school?

LL I graduated from H.S. in 1943. And from that point on I wanted to do all kinds of things. I wanted to go over there. I even wrote a letter to President Roosevelt, saying 'no one wants me because I am not 21 yet' or something like that. I wanted desperately to do something to assist my country.

CW Militarily, you wanted to?

LL I don't know if militarily but to help somewhere with the war effort.

CW What would you have liked to be able to do?

LL I don't know what I had in mind. But eventually I went to work for a research project with Curtis-Wright on an airplane which really had nothing to do with Europe, but with the war against Japan.

CW Did you receive an answer to your letter?

LL I think that I did. It was written by one of his assistants. I don't even remember what it said, only that it didn't get me anywhere.

CW Did you attend college?

LL Yes. I went to Ohio University and graduated from there. I attended graduate school at the University of Denver in social work.

CW What about your father, and during the war and such? Did his life change?

LL Not other than that he was a news hound and listened to every report and read the paper and otherwise kept up with things which were going on. He was very concerned about what was happening to his family and others.

CW Did he continue to work at that time?
Yes, sure.

Do you attend the synagogue?

Yes, we do. It is a reformed congregation.

To what extent do you feel that it is the center of Jewish Community life?

Here?

Let's talk about when you were in Cincinnati?

I think that it probably was the center at that time.

And here?

I think that here also. There are now auxiliary things like the Jewish Center, but it (the Synagogue) is the center I would say.

Would you say that it differs from what it was in Europe?

Yes, very definitely.

In what way?

I think that in Frankfurt - which is the place I remember - the Synagogue was mainly a place to worship. Here it assimilates more of the everyday life. It circumvents the practice of strict orthodoxy, except for the most die-hard people. It is not conducive as much as it was in Europe. I think that our orientation is not as strict and as orthodox as it had been for my family in Europe.

Do you think that that is good or bad?

I don't think you can put it into this framework. I think that it is a matter of changes: changes of times, changes of what people do.

What about your outside associations? How would they differ from what they would have been in Europe?

First of all, in Europe I am not sure that I am able to say what really went on because I was looking at it from a young child's viewpoint and here we have made a different kind of life. We feel fully accepted by the entire community. I don't feel that there is the overt anti-Semitism that we experienced in Europe. That was the 1930's and this is the 1980's. It is different.
CW Do you find any subtle cases of anti-Semitism?

LL Oh, I think that there always are some. I don't ever think that they necessarily come from someone who is trying to harm you. It is often what they know and what they understand - they (often) do it very unconsciously.

CW When did you first come to the Dayton area?

LL When we were married in 1954.

CW Is your husband Jewish?

LL Yes, sure.

CW Did you meet through college?

LL No. We met through family in Cincinnati.

CW What does your husband do?

LL He is an engineer. He worked for many years in the Avionics Laboratory.

CW Is he a native American?

LL Yes.

CW What other activities or associations do you engage in other than religious oriented ones? Such as organizations or clubs you belong to.

LL We attend theaters, concerts, lectures, this type of thing. We like to hike.

CW What about within the Jewish community? What do you participate in?

LL The Sisterhood at Temple or we attend Sunday morning brunches at Temple and we do volunteer work and so forth.

CW What kind of volunteer work do you do?

LL Not necessarily Jewish organizations. I work with the hospital - I am a member of 'Reach to Recovery' where I visit people who have had mastectomy and talk with them about various things like that.

CW Do you think much about your former life?

LL Yes, I think so occasionally, I do.
How do you feel about it?

I am not certain that I have any strong feelings about it one way or another. That was my life. I think that I have reached the point where I am able to look at the situation a little more objectively and less emotionally. Many times I have wondered how, in a civilised world, some of the atrocities that occurred million fold - how it could be. I think about it often and I feel that our young people - my own children - need to know about it, in order not to let the same thing happen again. They have to be aware that it can happen. I think that very often people don't want to hear about it - or don't want to think about it. That is one of the reason why I feel that the 'Project of Oral History' is so valuable. After a while it has no meaning, it is like somebody in China having something happen to them & you are not being able to relate to it. Recording these 'Oral Histories' can bring it to a more personal and human level.

Do you talk to your children about it?

I tried to.

What do you mean by 'try'?

I am not certain that my own children really comprehended it, comprehended what went on. We had discussions about it at times. It is too hard to comprehend.

Do you usually bring it up to them?

No, not too often; but we have had discussions about it.

What do you tell them about it?

I think that in our discussions we touched on some of the things which happened. They read books on it. But I don't think that they believe it.

They don't believe that it happened?

I really really believe that.

Do you mean that they can't grasp the idea that it happened?

Yes!

Or do they actually believe that it has been exaggerated or that it didn't happen?
I am not sure. They may have some of that, but they also can't grasp that it ever happened. I think that it is too hard to comprehend.

How many children do you have?

Two boys.

How do you view their lives as being different from yours?

I think that I grew up very fast and became very serious about life due to my experiences. Fortunately, they have not had these kinds of experiences and I hope that they never have. They probably look at life a little differently than I did. I don't believe that I ever had the 'teenage' that you see with most people.

This is the 2nd interview with Mrs. Lilly Levine. It is 2 PM May 29, 1991 and we are at her home.

The last time we met we talked about your children lives being different from your own. Would you like to pickup where we left off?

OK. I believe that we were talking about my own childhood and teenage years. They were different, of course, than in the case with our children. Our children grew up in a normal household where one is not concerned about economics or getting thrown upon new friends and new environment including country and languages.

Have you ever returned to your former home?

Yes, as a matter of fact, last October. We saw a trip coming up through our alumni association and my husband talked me into going. I was a little hesitant but I am very glad that I went. I believe that I was able to solve a lot of feelings which I had. I think that it was worthwhile. I had not wanted to go back up to that point.

What kind of feelings did you have about going there?

I had, of course, rather strong feelings about people who allowed to happen what did happen (to me and) to my fellow Jews. I was not certain as to how I would feel after I get there. I knew that it would be quite an emotional thing. I knew that when we left I had such a feeling of relief that ever going back seemed most unlikely.

Who was it you blamed for allowing what happened to you happen?

It is not a matter of blame; however the fault lies with the people who either you remained silent or you actively participated.

In Germany?
LL Others also. Whether you actively participated or you stood silently by - there is not that much difference.

CW How were you able to resolve how you felt when you did go back?

LL I am not sure that I can describe that. We had been in other parts of Europe and when we got to Frankfurt I simply decided that I would keep some of my feelings in the background. It was very interesting to see some of the places that I knew so well as a child. We started on the day after we got to Frankfurt by taking a streetcar to the spot where I had remembered that our Synagogue had stood. I knew that it no longer existed. They built a wall around the area on it is preserved. There are some very old graves preserved from the XVI or XVII century, which graves had been with the Synagogue. The Synagogue, of course, had been burned down during Kristallnacht (Nov 10/11 1938) and my one cousin whom I still have; he lives in the NY area. He was about 16 at the time and was living by himself in the Frankfurt area and going to school. He witnessed it. He stood right across the street and saw the Synagogue burn. It was quite an emotional thing to see that area. From there we walked, as I had done many times as a child, to where my school had been. Part of the school is still standing part of this are offices of the Jewish community. We went in there and talked to people a little. We got an idea what the situation was in Frankfurt. They told us that very very few German decent - and even fewer Frankfurt Jews were still in Germany, that the Jews who live there were people and their own children who after the war came out of "displaced persons (F.P.) camps" and had chosen to settle there - they usually originated from Eastern European countries to which they could or would not return. Apparently there is still fear there. They don't have a large number of children, especially young ones. They are particularly concerned about the kindergarten. They had recently hired extra guards since there had been kind of increase of Neo-Nazism in the area. We had quite a long talk with the Secretary and also with the Director of the Jewish community. They were able to help me get in touch with the records for the Jewish cemetery. We then went to visit my mother's grave, which I always wanted to visit. We found the cemetery in very beautiful condition - it was well taken care of. None of the graves, including the headstones, appeared to have been disturbed or else they had been put back into condition. There were a number of monuments to those from Frankfurt who had been killed in the camps, such as Auschwitz. That was very touching. There were a lot of new graves of the present residents' families. We had been on a tour group but we left them to do things on our own. We also visited a family we had met on a previous trip to Europe who lived in Frankfurt and who invited us to their home for dinner. I felt very comfortable with them since they were hospitable. As a matter of fact, the wife came to the airport when we left and brought us a gift. We also took a trip to Kusheim, the little town where I
was born. This was to me, in a way, more thrilling than anything else on the trip. I thought that I had remembered the place - and I verified that, when I saw it. I could identify our house as well as other house where friends had lived. It was quite exciting to go back there because my father's family had lived there for many generations.

CW Was anyone left there whom you knew?

LL We didn't make any attempt to contact anyone. I went to the Rathaus, that is the local courthouse and city hall. The town was totally deserted - you didn't see any people. I went upstairs in the Rathaus, to attempt to get a copy of my birth certificate, which I don't have. It said: 'ring the bell' for the police and the other for the offices. I rang both bells and I got no answer. We went up some long steps, up to the local castle - the very old Schloss - on top of the hill. There a little boy greeted us with 'Guten Tag'. That was the only human we saw in the whole town. It seemed as if everyone was elsewhere.

CW How is your German now?

LL Well, I haven't used it in many many years, but you don't forget that. I understand it - I am a little slow to speak it, in the beginning. Of course, I can still write. I do naturally speak German and understand it perfectly.

CW How would you say that the entire situation affected your religious belief?

LL I don't believe that it had any effect. I believe that the beliefs formed as I grew up and as I questioned and thought for myself and that I came to my own beliefs which may not follow exactly, Orthodox Judaism, especially since I don't pretend to keep that any more. I have my own philosophy.

CW You don't think that it was shaped in any way by your experience?

LL Possibly, although I don't believe so. I believe that it was formed more by my beliefs and the philosophy I developed about life in general.

CW Do you have any grandchildren?

LL No.

CW What experiences would you like to pass on to future generations?

LL On this subject, I would like to emphasize that my experiences were a lot less dramatic than that of many other people since we left Germany
so early. In no way can I say that my experiences were typical. But I feel that it has taught me to try to understand others; since people may be different and come from different cultures it is important that they try to understand others, and not to treat them in such a way as to promote hatred or even prejudice. I think that much of what happened is still a mystery to me. I would like future generations to deal with that in some way, so that humanity does not have to experience this again.

CW What you found particularly hard to comprehend?

LL That human beings who have human feelings for families and pets can treat other humans so inhumanely and become animalistic.

CW Do you think the world can learn a lesson from the Holocaust?

LL I hope that it will be kept before the world. I believe that we tend to forget. It is now in the distant past. People should study it and learn from it.

CW Do you remember anything else you wish to add?

LL No, nothing else which would be significant.

CW Do you have anything else you want to add?

LL No, not really and I am very happy to contribute to the project.

CW I want to thank you for contributing. We appreciate it!