

ORAL HISTORY
INTERVIEW

By

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Mary Louise Ruth Weinmann Munsell was born in Detroit on April 15, 1929, the daughter of Andreas and Bertha Weinmann. Mr. Weinmann came to the United States from Germany in 1926, followed by his fiancée in 1927. They were married immediately upon her arrival. About a year after the birth of her daughter -- April, 1930 -- Mrs. Weinmann decided to return to Eisleben to visit her parents and show off her baby for a period of six weeks. Upon her arrival, however, she realized how much she missed her family and her homeland. She attempted to convince her husband to make the journey back to Germany. When he refused, because there was nothing in the old country for him, Mrs. Weinmann remained with her daughter.

Thus, from 1930 through 1947, the child lived in Germany and was brought up as a German child would be. Though she spoke the same language -- she did not learn to speak English until her return to the United States -- went to the same schools, and experienced the same war, she was always different. She was an American citizen.

The pages that follow are the transcription of an interview which I conducted a few weeks ago. In this interview my mother tells of some of her experiences in Germany before and during World War II. Though it would have been interesting to go beyond her experiences in Germany to those in America, this was not done. The interview ends with her departure from Berlin in July of 1947.

Q: What do you remember first about Germany?

A: Oh, really the first thing I remember was in 1933 when everybody voted for Hitler.

Q: Everybody?

A: Well ninety some percent let's say.

Q: Now that was when he was elected Chancellor?

A: Yes.

Q: Why do you think he received such an overwhelming majority?

A: Well, he promised the Germans a lot of things, because things were bad. He promised the Germans jobs and bigger incomes and stuff like that.

Q: Did he fulfill his promises?

A: Well, yes he did. People had jobs and things got better.

Q: How did he get jobs for everybody?

A: Well, he built roads. He built the Autobahn. He did good things for Germany. Of course no one knew what he had in mind.

Q: What other good things did he do? Was there a public works program like they had here.

A: That I don't know. I know a lot of people had jobs and thought about buying cars. He had a program where you could buy a Volkswagen.

Q: Did you get a discount or something?

A: I don't know, but people could buy cars. It was pretty much of a luxury to start out with, because most people had bicycles.

Q: Were there a lot of horses in Germany when you were a little girl or did most people ride bicycles?

A: Most people were riding bicycles. They delivered coal and groceries, groceries to the stores, they delivered them with horse and wagons. They had trucks, though. Beer was delivered with a wagon and horses, beer in barrels.

Q: When did you start school? How old were you?

A: Five.

Q: Did you go to kindergarten?

A: No.

Q: You didn't go to kindergarten? I thought kindergarten was a German invention.
A: I started out in the first grade.

Q: Did you have any pre-school at all?
A: No, I didn't.

Q: Did you start out going a full day?
A: Yes.

Q: What type of subjects did you learn?
A: Reading, writing, arithmetic to start out with, music.

Q: Did you have art?
A: Yes. We had only one teacher

Q: About how large were your classes?
A: We had fifty. There were four classes in each grade and each one had fifty.

Q: Where did you live in Germany?
A: I lived in, well, you would probably call it an apartment.

Q: What town did you live in?
A: Lutherstadt-Eisleben.

Q: And what is that famous for?
A: Martin Luther was born there and died there.

Q: Is he buried there also?
A: I don't believe so, I don't think so. I don't know where he would be buried. The only things that were shrines were the house where he was born, and the house where he died, and the church where he preached.

Q: How many Lutheran churches were in Eisleben?
A: There was four Lutheran and one Catholic.

Q: So most of the population was Lutheran then. Were the Catholics looked down upon because they were of a different religion.
A: Oh no.

Q: Was the Catholic church supported by the state just like the Lutheran churches

A: I don't know, but I don't believe so. Now they had a Catholic school too, and I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't have to support it themselves. Over in Germany you had to pay taxes for everything. Like here you pay a water tax and a sewer tax, over there you paid an electric bill and your taxes, and you paid a church tax. You got a bill three times, four times, a year and it was all in there.

Q: Did they divide the payments up?

A: So much for electricity. so much for water, so much for the church.

Q: Getting back to your school, did you have any languages or anything?

A: They taught English before the war.

Q: Did you learn any English in school?

A: No, I didn't. They didn't teach it in grade school. It was required to go to grade school for eight years, then you could take up an apprenticeship and do that for three years, so you would be done by the time you were seventeen. Or you could go to grade school for four years and go to high school for six, but you had to pay for the high school, then you could get classes like typing, just like our high schools here. Then you could get a job in an office of something like that. Or you could go to high school for eight years and that got you ready to go to the university. Then you could become a teacher, or a doctor, or something like that, but you would have to go to high school for eight years.

Q: How long did you go to high school?

A: I went for six years?

Q: Did they have any other languages in school besides English?

A: English and French. When the war started they quit.

Q: Why did they stop teaching these languages?

A: I don't know. They never said why. They just stopped teaching them.

Q: Did they have any other subjects in school?

A: They had history. We had reading, writing, arithmetic, music, art, history, and we had those classes each day. And we didn't have any study hall. We learned at school and studied at home.

Q: Did your teacher lecture to you?

A: Yes he did. He wrote on the blackboard and explained stuff.

Q: Was there class discussion?

A: No, there was class discussion. When we did papers in school there was no such thing as using pencils. We did everything in ink.

Q: Ballpoint pens?

A: No. Regular ink pens. We had an ink well. There was no such thing as erasing. You had one answer and that was it.

Q: How did the other students treat you?

A: They treated me alright sometimes. Sometimes they didn't. Sometimes I was that no good American.

Q: Did they ever make fun of you? What did they do to you?

A: They threw stones at me.

Q: Did the teachers treat you differently than they did the rest of the students?

A: Yes. If anyone did anything wrong it was always me who got blamed. I didn't have to have anything to do with it.

Q: Before the war broke out?

A: No. Not before the War. Probably around '38 or '39, something like that.

Q: Did you feel that you were being watched?

A: No. I didn't know that I was watched then.

Q: Later on?

A: Yes. After the Russians occupied eastern Germany.

Q: During the war did they keep an eye on you? Were your letters censored?

A: I don't think so, I mean if they were I didn't know it. I didn't get any letters from the United States. I didn't hear from my dad from 1941 through late 1945.

Q: Was there a lot of Nazi activity?

A: Well almost everybody in school belonged to the Hitler Youth.

Q: What was the Hitler Youth?

A: It was really something like Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts. That was what was supposed to be. They participated in games and went on marches.

Q.: In parades?

A: Yes.

Q: Uniforms?

A : Yes.

Q: Did they sell cookies?

A: No, nothing like that.

Q: Was it supposed to be a military organization?

A: Well, don't they make the Boy Scouts march in step? It really wasn't any different. I mean what the common people knew. The common people really didn't know too much what was going on.

Q: Did you belong to the Hitler Youth?

A: No.

Q: Could you if you had wanted to?

A I don't know. I really wasn't interested. They didn't make me.

Q: It wasn't compulsory?

A: No.

Q: Was there a lot of anti-American talk before the war?

A: No. I never really heard too much against the Americans. Not until we had the American occupation from April to the last of June, and then the Russians came. For two days we didn't have anybody and then we had signs up Americans go home, and flags to welcome the Russians, but really nothing against the Americans or anyone really. At least not where I lived, I don't know how it was in the big towns, because this town was about like Adrian.

Q: How far were you from Berlin?

A: 135 miles, between, on the map, Leipzig and Berlin.

Q: In 1938, when Hitler annexed Austria, how did the people feel?

A: Oh they were really happy. They figured it was a part of what originally belonged to Germany, but was taken away after the war, the first war.

Q: Austria?

A: No the Sudetenland.

Q: Did they feel that Austria belonged to Germany?

A: No, but Austria was friendly toward Germany and Hitler was born in Austria, so most people figured, I really don't know.

Q: What about the Sudetenland?

A: What originally belonged to Germany. The people of the Sudetenland wanted to be with Germany. They didn't want to be with Czechoslovakia who had it.

Q: What did the people think of Neville Chamberlain?

A: Well, friendship was what it really was. It wasn't just Chamberlain, it was the guy from France too. They all came there. It isn't any different than President Ford going to China now.

Q: How did you feel when the war broke out with these other nations?

A: We believed that Germany was going to win. That was all you heard. I didn't know. I was ten years old. You really don't think what was going to happen, how it's going to turn out.

Q: Were you afraid?

A: No, not then.

C: How did they get men for the army?

A: Oh that was just like here, they got drafted.

Q: Was there any draft evasion?

A: I don't know. You only heard what they wanted you to hear. There was no freedom of speech or press. You found out what they wanted you to hear.

Q: When the war started did they implement a food ration program?

A: Yes. They put it out about three weeks before the war started. Sometime in August, we got those little yellow cards and they had your name on it, and on one side was for sugar and flour, bread, butter, and meat, and you got so much for each stamp. Things were pretty good when the war started, but after the war was there for awhile, they changed them and old people got less and young children got more, men got more, babies got milk, while grownups got just a little bit of milk. Most everybody raised a big garden if they could to supplement.

Q: Did you have book burnings after the war started?

A: No, but when in 1938 when this Jewish man killed that attaché in France, they burned Jewish homes and stuff like that.

Q: What was the Jew's name?

A: Oh, it was Greenspan or something like that.[It was Herschel Grynszpan AKA Hermann Grünspan]

Q: That really set off a furor? Was that the first Anti-Semitic activity?

A: The first I know. Right at that time, but more after, they started to ar their star. It was through the war you saw Jews one day and the next day they just disappeared.

Q: Didn't you wonder where they went?

A: You may wonder why you didn't see them anymore, but you just minded you own business.

Q: Did you have any Jewish girlfriends?

A: No, but had a Jewish family that my mother was pretty friendly with. He was a lawyer. And they had a son about my age, but we, well, we see them and talk with them, and stuff like that, it wasn't like we would go to their house. But then when the war started, he lost his job and then you would see them sweeping the street and they had a yellow star on their backs, the Star of David, but then all at once you didn't see them, the whole family they just disappeared. Her father owned the biggest department store. Now he went to Holland when they had the trouble with the rioting against the Jews. hey made a shambles of that store. He left right after that. It was '38.

Q: But his daughter and his son-in-law?

A: No, he was a lawyer and hehad a job. He didn't have a store, and they were minding their own business. They weren't hurting anybody.

Q: Did Eisleben have a large Jewish population?

A: No, just a few.

Q: Did they all eventually disappear?

A: Yes, and 'cause her dad went to Holland, I imagine everybody thought they did the same.

Q: You didn't know anything about the concentration camps?

A: No

Q: When did you first learn about them?

A: After the war.

Q: How did you feel when you saw pictures?

A: You just think it's unbelievable, nothing could happen like that. You didn't know. You minded your own business because you were afraid to say something. It was war.

Q: Was it true that you couldn't say anything for fear that a member of your own family would turn you in to the Gestapo?

A: Yes. You couldn't say anything to anybody. You didn't know if you could trust your own relatives.

Q: Did you know of cases where a child had turned in a parent?

A: No, but that's what you heard.

Q: What was the peoples' attitude toward Hitler?

A: He did a lot of things for Germany and because no one believed that they would lose the war, even when things, well like when in April when the Americans came to our town, you listened to the radio and they were still 300 miles away and everything was going just fine. You never had freedom of press. You found out in the papers what they wanted you to know. There was no such thing as a reporter who would come and interview anybody and just wrote down what he heard. Everything you found out was what they wanted you to find out.

Q: About the riots after the murder of the attaché. Were they spontaneous?

A: Yes. I remember the fellow getting killed in Paris, it was in Paris. Then that night they got in Jewish peoples' homes and threw furniture out. One thing I remember is someone saying they threw a piano right out the window. And then they slit the feather pillows. Feathers flying all over. I saw it the next day. Mother took me.

Q: I've read that Hitler had a plan to eliminate old people, the Jews, the mentally and physically handicapped. Did you see evidence of this?

A: No, you heard that he had the elite guard and the only way you could belong was if you were six feet and had blue eyes and blond hair, it was his SS guard.

Q: Did you know anyone who belonged?

A: Yes.

Q: Were they any more intelligent than other guys you knew?

A: I don't know if they were smarter, but they were smart guys.

Q: Was there any such organization for girls?

A: No, not that I know of.

Q: What type of community was Eisleben, farming or ...?

A: No, it had copper mining, copper mines right around.

Q: When the war broke out were there a lot of preparations?

A: When you found out, you had to fix your houses up, fix the windows so the light wouldn't shine out at night. There weren't any street lamps at night, everything was dark.

Q: Did people go out at night?

A: Not too much, just people who had to work.

Q: They worked the copper mines at night?

A: They worked the mines at night, but not the melting plant. They only worked during the daylight hours.

Q: What about other preparations. Did the government order you to prepare?

A: Yes.

Q: What else did you do?

A: You had to get your basement ready, because they figured you would probably have air raids.

Q: Did you?

A: Yes you did, not too much when the war started, but beginning in 1943, just about every night; then in '44 and '45 they started even in the daytime. You heard the siren and went down to the basement.

Q: Did life go on about the same as it had before?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you listen to the radio a lot?

A: Yes, 'cause it was a government operated radio. You had just one station. You heard the news and you heard music. On the news you found out what they wanted you to hear.

Q: Did you hear a lot of Hitler's speeches?

A: Well, if he made a speech that was all you heard on the radio. If it was time for music, the music quit and you heard Hitler.

Q: What type of speaker was he?

A: He was very forceful. He was a good speaker.

Q: Did you ever see him in person?

A: No.

Q: Toward the end of the war did he make more speeches?

A: No, toward the end of the war you heard less, well you saw less of him.

Q: There were some attempts on Hitler's life, did anything change because of those attempts?

A: The only assassination plot I remember was in 1944. You heard on the radio that they tried to, and that they had caught the guys who tried to do it. By that time things were pretty bleak anyway you still thought you would win the war, but food wasn't plentiful anymore. You couldn't keep warm in the winter, they rationed the coal and everything by then. There were a lot of refugees who left western Germany, because they were bombed out and they all congregated in the middle. Then the refugees came from the east.

Q: Where did you house these refugees?

A: Well you found out that if you had a big apartment, and maybe there were two people living in the apartment, they allotted you so many rooms and you just had to, well if you had five rooms, they told you that you could have just two. In the other rooms, they put refugees and then you would share the same kitchen.

Q: Food was scarce?

A : Yes, well, you got a new ration card each month. To start with you got quite a bit of food, you wasn't going hungry. Toward the end of the war they shortened you here and they shortened you there. This was less. There was no such thing as getting more, you always got less.

Q: When did it look like the Germans were going to lose the war?

A: When the Americans marched into town.

Q: How did the people react when the Americans came through?

A: Well, they drove through on the main street through town. I was there, I watched them. Trucks, cannons, jeeps. They were the ones who went through, but then the ones behind stayed._ They took over the telephone office, and the post office, and the government. Then we had an interim government that took over, and they were people that the Americans appointed, more liberal toward Americans than the ones that were there before, because those they put in jail.

Q: What kind of crowd were the people?

A: A look crowd. They went to look. Some of them waved, if the Americans waved first. The people weren't glad, but they weren't sad either. I think they were relieved. Maybe things were going to get better.

Q: Did they?

A: Not right away. We still had the ration cards.

Q: I've read that after the arrival of the invasion forces, warehouses of food would be discovered. Did anything like that happen?

A: We found out that there were two warehouses that was just food. Some of it spoiled, because it should have been used and they didn't use it. Something like that really made the German people angry. Some people looted and took the stuff.

Q: By the time the Americans came, who was left in Eisleben?

A: Children and old people. Most any man, even boys 15 or 16, boys out of my class in school, well they called it the home front. They drafted them into that.

Q: What did they do?

A: They didn't go to school.

Q: Did they go to the front?

A: They didn't go to the front, but then the front wasn't very far.

Q: How long did the Americans stay?

A: From the 12th of April to the 30th of June [1945].

Q: What did the soldiers do during this time?

A: They sat in the windows, three stories high. The government was really run by them.

Q: What happened after the Americans left?

A: Well the 1st of July we didn't have anybody. The second of July the Russians came. They gave up two hundred miles of Germany all the way across, back to the Elbe River for one-fourth of Berlin.

Q: How did you feel when the Russians came?

A: I didn't feel very good.

Q: Again I've read reports, where women, particularly in Berlin, were committing suicide rather than be there when the Russians invaded. Were there any reactions like that in Eisleben?

A: No. By the time they came to Eisleben, well, it wasn't the raw front troops. There were incidents where, well, you weren't supposed to be out after such and such a time, and maybe a girl was out and got raped. But if you minded your own business and obeyed the rules there was no trouble.

Q: What type of people were these Russian soldiers?

A: You had very highly educated people, but the common soldiers weren't. They, I don't know if they could even read or write. They looked like they weren't too bright.

Q: Were they totally ignorant of civilized life?

A: Yes, they were. You heard of incidents where one of them had a bicycle and he saw a boy riding a bicycle without using his hands. He thought that bicycle was good so he, his [bicycle] was brand new, the Russian's was, but the boy's bicycle was an old one. He traded the new bicycle for the old so he could do the same.

Q: What happened?

A: He fell off and the kid made a fast exit. They didn't know what bathrooms were for, toilets especially. They thought you flush the toilet and washed your feet.

Q: Did they take a lot of stuff back with them to Russia?

A: Yes, they tried to take it. But if they were stationed in Germany and were called back to Russia they had to go to a labor camp for a while to forget the good times that they had in Germany.

Q: Did you feel less safe in Russian occupied Germany?

A: Yes. You knew you shouldn't trust the Russians.

Q: Did you have to report to anybody?

A: Yes. I was an American citizen and as soon as the Russians came you got a card that said what nationality you were, with your picture, and it had to be signed, and you had to report once a month.

Q: Did you report to anyone in particular?

A: Yes. Lt. Socolowski.

Q: What was he like?

A: He was a very educated Russian. He could speak English, Russian, and German.

Q: What did you remember about him?

A: He would ask me questions like what did you do this last month? Did you go here. Did you go there. By that time I had a job and worked five days a week, but if I went away on the weekend I told him. One time I forgot. It just completely slipped my mind. After I was all finished telling him what I had done, he asked me if there was anything else. I told him no, and he told me that I had gone to my grandfather's at such a time and had returned at such a time.

Q: Did you have people following you?

A: I don't know, but I must have. How else would they have known.

Q: Did you feel less sure of yourself after that?

A: Yes, because by that time I knew that I was coming to the United States. I had to go to Berlin to get my passport. They knew I was going.

Q: Did he make any attempt to stop you?

A: He asked me one time if I was going to America and I told him yes if I could. Then he wondered why. I told him my father was over there. Oh, he says, it isn't any better over there than it is here. I didn't question him. When I got my passport the American Viceconsul in Berlin told me that as an American citizen, my passport was the only identification that I had. He kept it in Berlin. He wouldn't even let me take it in the Russian zone. My arrangements were already made for me to come. I was leaving the twelfth of July from Tempelhof airport, and I had to be there the day before so they would know that I was getting out, and that's when they gave me my passport. My mother got the railroad ticket. I didn't go to the railway station. I left at three o'clock in the morning. After I got to Berlin they couldn't do anything.

Q: Did you and Lt. Socolowski talk about anything else besides where you had been?

A: We talked about studies. He was a pleasant guy. He was a Russian Jew.

Q: Did he feel at all bitter toward the German people because of what had happened to the German Jews?

A: We never discussed that.

Q: There were no political ideas changed?

A: No.

Q: Did the Russian officers take over the best houses in Eisleben?

A: They took over a whole street. It was off limits for everybody else.

Q: Were they the nicest houses?

A: Yes. It was a really a nice section. Some of the Russians had their wives and their children over there.

Q: Did they go to school there or did they have their own schools?

A: They didn't go to German schools. They must have had their own schools, like the Americans had their base schools. They hired the Germans as servants. I knew one girl who was a maid.

Q: Was she treated any better?

A: Well, she had more to eat. She had pretty nice clothes. I imagine that the Russian lady liked her. When they went back to Russia, she felt bad. They had to go to the labor camp to forget what they had in Germany.

Q: How did you feel when you stepped on that plane to go to the United States?

A: Lonesome. But there was nothing for me in Germany.