Refugees from War: Interviews with Elsa and Max Siegmund

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REFUGEES FROM WAR:
INTERVIEWS WITH ELSA AND
MAX SIEGMUND

June and October 1987
Norman, Oklahoma

English Translations
These taped interviews were recorded on a cassette recorder in the summer and fall of 1987 — the year that my mother Elsa died. We knew the end was in sight, as she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in May of that year, and so we felt motivated to record some of my parents’ history and my own. This fall (2021) Dick had the tapes digitized, and then we began first transcribing them, then translating them. It was at times a tedious and onerous task, but soon turned into a labor of love.

Most of the tapes are recorded by me. One entire tape is recorded by our good friends Ed and Gerlinde Thompson. Gerlinde is originally from Kronstadt (Brasov, in Romanian), while Ed is from Oklahoma and served in the U.S. Army. They lived in Norman at the time the tapes were recorded. They are both deceased. The last tape is a one-page autobiographical letter from my dad to me, written by him and read by him. He was already feeling the effects of Alzheimers, so he decided to just read what he had written.

I am excited to share the tapes with the family and hope that they will answer some questions and leave you wondering about others. What’s missing, of course, is the sound and inflection of the voices. We will never know the full story, but at least we have this to add to the family’s history. I hope you will find the information interesting and worthwhile. There is much happiness, sadness, pathos, drama, cultural customs, and a good deal of humor! — something for everyone! :)

There is no set order to the audio files, but my suggestion would be to read them in the following order.

1. June 20 - Interview with Elsa by Marianne
2. June 20 (b) - Interview with Elsa by Marianne
3. June 6 - Interview with Max & Elsa, by Gerlinde & Ed
4. October 17 - Interview with Elsa by Marianne
5. October 18 - Letter to Marianne from Max

In this translation some words were deliberately left in the vernacular.

Flucht: The meaning in English suggests flight, as in birds flying. The German word as used in this context carries a deeper emotional meaning, suggesting an escape or the act of fleeing.

Mühle: The literal meaning is “mill.” Here it indicates the area in the Carpathian Mountains where the Siegmund family had a summer home.

Ja = yes
Nein = no
Vati = Daddy
Mutti = Mommy
Frau = Mrs.
Omama = term of endearment for grandmother
Otata = term of endearment for grandfather
Tante = Aunt
Onkel = Uncle

Other German or Hungarian words are indicated within quotes. Inaudible words are indicated with ellipses or with a question mark within brackets.

Geographical names are generally left in their vernacular form (i.e., Hungarian for places in Transylvania and Hungary, German for places in Austria).

Proper names generally follow the German Saxon practice of placing the surname before the forename — for example, Siegmund Elsa instead of Elsa Siegmund. Likewise, the terms “Tante” and “Onkel” usually follow either the surname or the first name — Siegmund Tante or Elsa Tante instead of Tante Elsa. The terms “Tante” and “Onkel” may be used for both the relative as well as for family friends.

Marianne Siegmund with Richard Hacken
“Die Mühle” (The Mill), as depicted in this Transylvanian painting, was the site of the Siegmunds’ summer home in the Carpathian Mountains.
Gerlinde: Max, when exactly were you captured, and where were you at the time?

Ed: At the end of World War II.

Gerlinde: Was that in your home town?

Elsa: Oh, no, no, no.

Max: In Upper Austria.

Gerlinde: You had left Romania already?

Max: Oh, yes.

Ed: The Americans captured you in Austria.

Gerlinde: Did you serve in the Romanian army?

Elsa: The Hungarian army.

Gerlinde: Oh, you switched? [laughter]

Ed: First, which army, Max?

Elsa: First in the Romanian army.

Ed: Then they transferred you to the Hungarian army?

Elsa: Ja, because our town and everything went over to Hungary. “Wiener Schiedsspruch” [Vienna Award], you know, in ‘42.

Gerlinde: So then you belonged to Hungary. So then you served for the Hungarians.

Elsa: But my sister in Mühlbach belonged to Romania. And my “Chef” [boss] — I worked in a textile industry — my “Chef” had four stores in different countries, chain stores, you know. And in Udvarhely I was in Hungary. He was in Schässburg, in Romania. That was a problem. Then, once we met on the border between Schässburg and Udvarhely — [Szekelykeresto?]. That was the “Grenze” [border]. And then we met there
and communicated, and he gave us some instructions on what to do in case...

Ed: The boss? Talking across the “Grenze.” [border]

Elsa: Oh, it was terrible.

Gerlinde [to Max]: How was it with your bank? You worked in a bank, didn’t you? The same?

Elsa: Yes. The “Hauptanstalt” [headquarters] was in Schässburg. Max was in Udvarhely in a “Filiale” [branch] that was in Hungary. [laughter]

Gerlinde: How did that work?

Max: I was the director of the bank.

Elsa: Of the “Filiale.” [branch]

Gerlinde: So you were a banker for a short time.

Max: It was okay. And then they drafted me.

Ed: So they drafted you into the Hungarian army.

Gerlinde: How long did you serve in the Hungarian army?

Elsa: From ‘42… [to Max] “Wie lange hast du in der ungarischen Armee gedient?” [How long did you serve in the Hungarian army?] He got drafted when Marianne was three days old.

Gerlinde: Three days old!

Elsa: Ja, three days old. She was born the 25th, and the 27th he had to go.

Ed: My goodness! [to Max] About how old were you then?

Elsa: 42.

Ed: 42.

Gerlinde: Where did you go first? Where did they take you in the army, as a soldier? Do you know where?

Max: Cluj.

Gerlinde: Klausenburg.

Max: Then they took me to Russia, on the front, “Galizien.” [Galicia]

Ed: You were on the Russian front in the Hungarian army?
Max: Ja, in “Galizien.” Then we had to come back slowly, back, back.

Ed: As a retreat from the Russian army.

Max: We had lost the war. We came back from “Galizien” over [via] West Hungary and to Austria. And they caught me in Austria. We were there a few months in Austria. And then they brought me back to “Russland” [Russia], to “Estland” [Estonia].

Ed: So you were in Estonia three years. As a laborer? A prisoner of war?

Elsa: In the meantime, I was at home, during the summer of ‘44.

Gerlinde: You stayed in Austria?

Elsa: No. The summer of ‘44 I was in Udvarhely and still went to the textile store, and so forth, and Marianne grew up, and I hired a nanny [i.e., nursemaid] for her because I didn’t have milk. And I hired a nanny [nursemaid] for her, and we had a lady in the house who cooked because, you know, Max’s father was there. And the whole summer… and then came August 23.

Gerlinde: His birthday [i.e., Ed’s birthday].

Elsa: His birthday. Then the Romanians departed from the “Axenmächte” [Axis powers], from the Germans, and went over to the “Allierten” [Allies], the Russians and the Americans. And then September 10 we left.

Ed: The German army provided transportation?

Elsa: Yes, I went the day before… The ninth of September, I went to the German headquarters and asked these people to do something and transfer us somewhere because it was not anymore… “Es war keine mehr Bahnverbindung” [There were no more train connections]. And then they said okay, tomorrow at one o’clock a German “Frachtwagon” — a truck — will stay at your disposition. And then with several other good friends, families, we went on this German truck, and they transported us until Deva, near Temeswar. And then in Deva, they put us on a German freight train which was going to West Hungary, you know. “Es war im Rückzug schon” [It was already in retreat]. And there we were in a “Viehwagon” [cattle car] — a box car — about 40
persons, other people, you know, and they gave us every other day some “Konserve” [canned goods], meat and a bread and…to feed us. Except for Marianne…she couldn’t eat.

Gerlinde: What did you give her?

Elsa: You wouldn’t believe it! Because I took Marianne with five months from the nanny’s [nursemaid’s] breast. And the nanny [nursemaid] said, “Poor girl! You will die.” And what I took from our garden, from the Siegmund garden — a big basket of “Gravensteiner” apples — they were ripe and nice — “Gravensteiner” apples. I had a glass “Reibe” [grater], a…

Gerlinde: Ja, ja, ja, we had one of those, too.

Elsa: I still have it.

Ed: A shredder.

Elsa: Shredder, ja. And before that, I baked some sugar cookies. And I took that. And with that I fed Marianne.

Ed: My goodness! At five months old!

Elsa: Five months old! And I took two milk bottles. And when our train — because our train — we traveled from Deva a whole month until West Hungary.

Ed: My goodness!

Elsa: From September 11 until October 11. A whole month, Gerlinde. And then our train was put on the “kalte Linie” [siding], you know, because they needed the “Hauptlinie” [main line] for the military. And sometimes our train stood on the track, side track, for two or three days, then I went into the villages and begged for milk, and brought milk for Marianne. And the German soldiers allowed me to go in the German kitchen and heat it up. And then I went to the German kitchen…

Ed: The German army kitchen?

Elsa: The German army kitchen. And the German army kitchen was on the first box car, you know, and ours was on the last. It happened that I went to heat the milk for Marianne,
and I run to the first car. In the meantime, our train started going. My mother didn’t know where I am. My mother was in the last car with Marianne and with Max’s father and with my sister, and I was in the first. You can imagine my mother’s...

Ed: Fright.

Elsa: Fright. And then at the next station our car stopped, and I went with the milk, and then my mother came and said, “Mein Gott” [My God]! I am so glad to see you!”

Ed: She must have been panic stricken.

Elsa: Oh!

Ed: That’s very interesting.

Elsa: And then one night we had a “Bombenattack” [bomb attack]. We all had to go out.

Ed: Out of the train?

Elsa: Out of the train. And it was a vineyard. [laughter] And we went in the vineyard and ate grapes! [laughter]

Gerlinde: It was that time of year.

Elsa: I took Marianne, and Max’s father said, “I am not going! If a bomb falls on the top of this car, I am going with it!” [laughter] Then we arrived early October in West Hungary, and then we stayed there until after Christmas. And, of course, the Russians came closer and closer, and we had to leave that place, too. And then we went over to Austria and lost our citizenship and were displaced persons.

Gerlinde: In West Hungary, did you stay with a family? Or where did you stay?

Elsa: Well, we were “einquartiert” [quartered, housed]. We were stationed in the villages, people from the village, you know. And my mother lived in one house, and I lived in the next house, so we were close to each other. And then we went to Austria, and then in Austria we came in a camp.

Ed: That was in October of 1944?

Elsa: That was in January of 1945.

Ed: You got to Austria in January of ‘45.
Gerlinde: How did you…by train? How did you leave Hungary to go into Austria?
Elsa: Well, or by train, or by German transport. And then we were in that camp for about four weeks. And then they slowly replaced us to the different places, you know.
Ed: Now where was this camp?
Elsa: In Rüstorf.
Ed: The camp itself?
Elsa: The camp itself was in the school, the school house. We had a lovely…that’s what I wanted to say…the head of this camp was the principal from the school, a lovely Austrian lady. She was so nice to us, just like a mother, and kept contact with us until last winter. For Christmas I wrote [to] her. And she died this spring, and her daughter sent me the picture.
Ed: What’s her name?
Elsa: Mrs. Wlk, Paula Wlk. And then we made very good friends, you know…a family from Sächsisch Regen, and we were very good “befriendet” [befriended]. A dear friend of mine died recently. Now this is that Mrs. Wlk with whom I corresponded. The last year she lived in Linz, after she retired. She lived in Linz. I kept contact with her, because my sister, who had cancer in Austria, was in a very sad condition, you know, and she was dying. And she was in Linz in a hospital, and she [Mrs. Wlk] visited her every day.
Gerlinde: Every day?
Elsa: Every day, Gerlinde, there in the hospital. And I could not forget it.
Gerlinde: Ja, so she was married?
Elsa: Ja, but she was a widow lady, and had one daughter.
Gerlinde: And she [the daughter] is still alive?
Elsa: Yes, she sent me a notice that she had died and sent me this picture.
Gerlinde: And the daughter lives in…
Elsa: The daughter lives in Germany. She is married and lives in Germany.
Gerlinde: Do you know where? What town?
Elsa: Ja, I can give you the address.

Gerlinde: She sounds like a nice lady. I wonder how old she was. Max, do you know approximately how old this lady was?

Max: Mrs. Wlk?

Gerlinde: Yes.

Max: Older than Elsa... “Oh, ja, bedeutend älter” [significantly older].

Gerlinde: Ja, she was older than Elsa. About how much older was Mrs. Wlk?

Elsa: She was older than me. Oh, you can see here how old she was.


Elsa: Wlk. “Keine i” [No i].


Max: “Zwei Jahre älter als ich” [two years older than me].


Elsa: And she sent me that announcement, you know, and then I sent her a check from $12 instead of flowers. And she wrote me a very nice thank you letter. “Herzlichen Dank” [thank you very much]. You can read it.

Gerlinde: So the daughter, is she married, too?

Elsa: Yes, she has children. And she lives in... “In dem Partezettel kannst du sehen, die Adresse von der Tochter” [In the death notice, you can see the daughter’s address.]

Gerlinde: Max, have you met Mrs. Wlk?

Elsa: I think he did, but he don’t remember. Oh, yes.

Gerlinde: Now, let me see. But then you moved out of the school.

Elsa: Yes, but Mrs. Wlk lived [at] that time in Rüstorf, because, you know, at that time she was principal in the school in Rüstorf.

Gerlinde: Okay. And you lived in...?
Elsa: In Rüstorf, “am Pfaffenberg” [in Pfaffenberg], that was in the same area.

Gerlinde: Max, when did you come home?

Elsa: In ’48.

Ed: 1948. From Estonia? You said you were in Estonia in prison?

Gerlinde: First, let me see, first you were captured by the bad guys, the Americans. [laughter] Where was that? Was that on the front?

Max: In Austria, in Austria.

Ed: What part of Austria?

Max: Northern part.

Gerlinde: How long did the Americans keep you?

Elsa: Not long. Just a few weeks.

Max: Maybe half a year or so.

Elsa: No, Max. Less than half a year.

Max: “Du hast mich ja einmal besucht aus der Gefangenschaft.”[You visited me once when I was in captivity.]

Elsa: “Aber nicht in Österreich! In West Ungarn. Ja!” [But not in Austria! In West Hungary. Yes!]

Because I did not go with the whole group. Max, before Christmas the whole group got transferred to Austria — my mother, and his father, and friends, and so forth. But I stood behind, with a family, with the Zieglers, because they...he didn’t want to leave Hungary and lose his citizenship, you know. He was an “Apotheker” [pharmacist], and he didn’t want it. And he said, “Elsa, if you come in trouble, I promise you, I get you over the border.” Because Max wrote me a card, and he said he will get early in December four days vacation, and if I stay behind in Hungary, he can come and visit me. So I stayed behind, and he visited me.

Gerlinde: So he did come.

Elsa: He did come. On December 6, the “Nikolaus” [Nicholas] Day, he departed.

Gerlinde: Oh, that was a Nikolaus Day!
Elsa: He had to go back on Nikolaus Day, he departed.

Gerlinde: Where did you go back to?

Elsa: Still in West Hungary.

Max: In West Hungary,

Elsa: But then after Christmas, the week after Christmas, Heinrich Ziegler came and said,

“Elsa, we have to go over the border because the Russians are coming.” And so we went then later on. And then later on Max landed in Austria, too.

Gerlinde [to Max]: Ja, but now, okay. So then you were captured by the Americans. How did they tell you that you were…how many about, do you think, captured soldiers were you from the Americans at that time? About how many were you captured there?

Max: How many?

Gerlinde: Ja.

Max: Oh, boy!

Gerlinde: A lot.

Max: Twenty thousand.

Ed: Twenty thousand!

Max: Oh, ja!

Elsa: It was a big transport.

Max [—?—]

Gerlinde: Were they all Hungarian soldiers? All Hungarians?

Elsa: Yes, yes.

Max: A Hungarian officer had the right to have an orderly come to him.

Elsa: “Zu dir gekommen. Ja” [Came to you. Yes].

Gerlinde: What is it, a boy…?

Max: He took care of me.

Ed: Orderly, in the American army. So, Max had an enlisted orderly. And what was your rank?

You were a “Leutnant” [lieutenant]?
Elsa: “Leutnant. Was warst du — Leutnant” [Lieutenant. What were you — a lieutenant]?

Max: “Oberleutnant” [Senior lieutenant].

Elsa: “Oberleutnant.”

Ed: In the Finance…

Elsa: “Finanzabteilung” [Finance Department]. “In der Verpflegungsabteilung war der Max. Zum Beispiel hat er mir gebracht” food and… [Max was in the Department of Provisions. For example, he brought me food and…]

Ed: In the American army, probably the quartermaster corps, quartermaster corps. They handle the supplies and food and all. That’s the branch…like inventory, quartermaster, engineers…

Gerlinde: So that’s where you were. And what did you have to do there?

Elsa: To go to the farmers and “Requirieren” [requisition].

Ed: Yeah, requisition.

Elsa: Requisition, ja. Food, corn and “Weizen…” [wheat…], and…

Max: “Speck und Fett.” [bacon and fat]

Gerlinde: I don’t believe those farmers liked you.

Elsa: No.

Max: I was very [-?-]

Elsa: He closed an eye. Sometimes he closed an eye.

Gerlinde: That must have been quite difficult.

Ed: Hard job.

Max: “Ich habe mit denen gesprochen und habe ihnen gesagt, sie müssen etwas geben. Sie waren bankrott.” [I spoke with them and told them that they had to give something. They were bankrupt.]

Gerlinde: “Die waren froh, dass du kamst und nicht ein Anderer.” [They were glad that it was you who came and not someone else.]

Elsa: Then we haven’t heard from each other for three years, maybe once or twice a year.
In [Kereswar?]…

Ed: Is that right? When he was in Estonia as a prisoner?

Elsa: When he was in Estonia.

Gerlinde: How did you know…how did they notify you, you all, that now you’re going to be taken over by the Russians? How did they break the news to you? How did you find out?

Elsa: You don’t remember.

Max: “Der Offizier, der leitende Offizier, ist in Verbindung getreten mit dem Ungar…” [The officer, the head officer, contacted the Hungarian…]

Gerlinde: “Ja, der amerikanische?” [Yes, the American?]

Max: Ja. Der ungarische. [Yes. The Hungarian.]


[silence]

Gerlinde: “Na, ist egal.” [Oh well, it doesn’t matter.]

Max: “Damals hat sich in Ungarn ja gedreht die Sache.” [At that time the situation turned around in Hungary.]

Gerlinde: Ja, ja, ja, ja.

Max: “Sie haben uns gleich besser behandelt.” [They immediately treated us better.]

Gerlinde: “Und wann haben sie euch dann transportiert von Oberösterreich weg? Wann haben sie euch von dort wegtransportiert?” [And when did they transport you away from Upper Austria? When did they transport you away?]

Max: “Wir waren nicht lange in Oberösterreich, vielleicht zwei, drei Monate.” [We were not long in Upper Austria, maybe two, three months.]

Gerlinde: “Ungefähr, war es Frühjahr, Sommer, Winter wenn ihr von dort weg seid? [Approximately when did you all leave, in the spring, summer, winter?]

Max: “Es war Frühjahr.” [It was spring.]
Gerlinde: “Im Frühjahr. Mit der Bahn?” [In spring. With the train?]
Max: “Mit der Bahn, auch im ‘box car.’ Zurück bis Schässburg. Dort war… [-?] Aber ich hab’ herausgeschrien, ‘Herr Pollner, Herr Pollner!’ Das war ein Angestellter bei der Bank, wo ich gearbeitet hab’. ‘Herr Pollner, Herr Pollner, sagen sie meinem Bruder, ich bin am Leben!’ Und so weiter. Der Fred hat ja noch gelebt.” [With the train, also in a box car. Back to Schässburg. There was… [-?] But I shouted out, “Mr. Pollner, Mr. Pollner!” He was an employee at the bank where I had worked. “Mr. Pollner, Mr. Pollner, tell my brother that I am alive!” And so forth. Fred was still alive.]
Gerlinde: “Hast du ihn auf der Bahnstation gesehen?” [Did you see him at the train station?]
Elsa: Ja, ja.
Max: “In Schässburg, auf der Bahn. Ich habe ihm zugerufen, er soll meinem Bruder sagen, dass ich noch am Leben bin.” [In Schässburg, at the train station. I called out to him, that he should tell my brother that I am still alive.]
Ed: Boy, what a coincidence!
Gerlinde: “Du wusstest ja nicht, wo dein Bruder ist, zu der Zeit.” [You didn’t know where your brother was at that time.]
Elsa: “Sie will wissen, wo der Bruder ist, der Fred.” [She wants to know where the brother is, Fred.]
Max: “Er hat ja in Schässburg gelebt.” [He lived in Schässburg.]
Gerlinde: “Er war vielleicht nicht dort. Und dann seid ihr weiter nach…” [Maybe he was not there. And then you all went further on, to…]
Elsa: “Nach Estland.” [To Estonia.]
Gerlinde: “Estland. Dazwischen seid ihr nicht gehalten, oder das war keine grosse… Immer weiter.” [Estonia. In between, you all did not stop, or that was no big… Always further on.]
Max: “…Bukovina…bis nach Estland.” […Bukovina…until Estonia.]
Gerlinde: How are the people in Estonia? Did you come in contact with the people living there, or were you separate, kept in a camp as prisoners?
Max: As prisoners, we were separated in huge “Stallungen.” [stalls]
Gerlinde: “Es handelt sich von den Hausungen. Du sagtest, es war wie ein Stall, wo ihr gehaust habt.” [We were talking about housing. You said that it was like a stall, where you all were kept.]

Max: “Der Stall wurde aufgebaut in Stockwerke. Vielleicht hast du gesehen, wie die Deutschen die Juden…” [The stall was built up like floors. Maybe you have seen how the Germans kept the Jews.]

Gerlinde: “Ich hab’ Dachau gesehen.” [I saw Dachau.]

Max: “Dachau, wie sie dort einquartiert waren, nur auf Brettern, vier oder fünf Stockwerke.” [Dachau, the way they were housed there, on just boards, four or five floors.]

Gerlinde: “So habt ihr geschlafen?” [That’s how you all slept?]

Max: “So haben wir geschlafen…zwanzig tausend Menschen.” [That’s how we slept…twenty thousand people.]

Gerlinde: “Habt ihr Matratzen [sic] gehabt oder Strohsäcke?” [Did you have mattresses or straw sacks?]


Gerlinde: “Auf den Brettern!” [On the boards!]

Max: “Wie die Lager in Deutschland.” [Like the camps in Germany.]

Gerlinde: Ja, ja, ja. Just like in Dachau, on the wooden boards, several on top of each other.

Ed: Russian labor camps, prison camps.

Max: Millions of bugs. That was terrible. “Wanzen, Läuse. Wir konnten nichts machen.” [Bed bugs, lice. We couldn’t do anything about it.]

Gerlinde: You had nothing to kill them.

Ed: While a prisoner there in Estonia by the Russians, did you have to work?

Max: Yes, but not heavy work.

Ed: What kind of work?

Gerlinde: Outside? Building?

Max: “Nicht schwer hab’ ich gearbeitet.” [I did not do heavy labor.]
Ed: You were still treated as military, is that right? Maybe the Russians didn’t make some of the officers work?

Max: I know that they made holes and made “elektrische Leitungen, sie haben die Pfähle aufgestellt.” [electric lines, they put up poles.]

Gerlinde: Electric lines.

Max: But not me. I don’t know why. They didn’t needed much people.

Ed: Yeah, there wasn’t enough work to do. They just kept you prisoners because you were military, right?

Gerlinde: So you never had a chance to go out into the village?

Max: No.

Gerlinde: So you didn’t see how they lived and how the people…?

Max: We had no contact with the people.

Gerlinde: No contact at all.

Ed: Were you guarded by the Russian soldiers?

Max: Ja, Russian soldiers. The food was terrible. “Kascha in der Früh, Kascha zu Mittag, und Kascha am Abend.” [Kasha in the morning, kasha at noon, and kasha in the evening.]

Gerlinde: “Was ist das?” [What is that?]

Elsa: That is a kind of corn meal, corn meal mush.

Max: “Immer dasselbe. Drei Mal am Tag.” [Always the same. Three times a day.] We were hungry.

Gerlininde: All the time.

Max: All the time. “Und dann haben sie angefangen zu kochen, am Papier, Rezepte gemacht, Dobos Torte, und was weiss ich was! [laughter] Da ist einem der Mund zergangen! Sie haben Rezepte geschrieben. [And then they began to cook, on paper, concocted recipes, Dobos Torte, and I don’t know what else! It made our mouths water! They wrote down recipes.]
Ed: Can you remember how the guards treated you? How did the guards treat the German soldiers and prisoners?

Max: Very well. We had no trouble at all.

Ed: No trouble.

Max: No, no, no.

Gerlinde: And you stayed how long there?


Ed: In the same “Lager?” [camp]

Elsa: Yes.

Max: Ja.

Gerlinde: And how did they release you? Did they tell you, you’re free, you can go, or…?

Max: They came and said, “You can go home.”

Gerlinde: Was it the whole company?

Max: Ja, the whole company.

Gerlinde: In one of these boxes, or whatever you call them, in one of them about how many prisoners lived there, slept there?

Max: Twenty thousand.

Elsa: In one compartment, Max.

Ed: Your own compartment, where you had to live in the barracks, Max.

Gerlinde: Were they partitioned, or what?

Elsa: One compartment. They were not all together.

Gerlinde: Was it all open, or some partitions?

Max: “Es war ein Stall. Es war früher... Kühe waren dort.” [It was one stall... Cows had been there.]

Elsa: “Aber mit zwanzig tausend Menschen...” [ But with twenty thousand people...]

Max: “Es waren drei oder vier Riesenstallungen.” We were like the sardines “in diesen Abteilungen.” [There were three or four giant stalls. We were like the sardines in these]
compartments.]

Ed: Shelves, like shelves.

Max: You can see...if you have seen Germans, how they kept the Jews.

Gerlinde: Ja, we've seen.

Max: “Das ist die russische Art.” [That is the Russian mode or way.]

Ed [to Elsa]: And during this time, you were in Austria?

Elsa: I was in Austria, in Rüstorf.

Ed: Where did you have to work?

Elsa: I was not compelled to work because I had a baby, and I was free from work. But my sister had to work in a factory. But then later on my mother took care of Marianne, and I went by myself and was looking for a job. And I met a seamstress, an Austrian seamstress, and she saw that I was pretty skilled in sewing and so forth, and she said, “Mrs. Siegmund, if you would like to make a little money, I would be glad to employ you, and come for a couple of hours every day.” And I came. So I went every day for years, at one o’clock and stood until six o’clock. And she paid me, and not only I had the payment, I learned a lot. And she showed me how to sew and how to cut out. She was very lovely to me, and once she told me, “Mrs. Siegmund, you will remember me later on in your life.” And I remember her until today. And I still correspond with her.

Ed: Oh yeah? And what is her name?

Max: “Die Frau... Na wie heisst sie noch?” [Mrs.... What is her name?]

Elsa: Schimpl. Schimpl.

Max: Schimpl.

Ed: She still lives in Rüstorf?

Elsa: Ja, close to Rüstorf, on the other side. And she had a little boy, exactly in Marianne’s age, so they went together in the school — Schimpl Franzi.

Gerlinde: Good!

Max: Schimpl Franzi! [laughter]
Ed: Has Marianne ever seen the boy since she…?

Elsa: Well, I saw them when we went back.

Gerlinde: Marianne was how old when she was with you to visit?

Elsa: Marianne, when she came back with us, after graduating…

Ed: I see. Did she ever see the boy that she played with?

Elsa: Ja.

Ed: She remembers him?

Elsa: He is married and has family and children.

Ed: What was his first name?

Elsa: The boy’s name?

Ed: Yeah.


Ed: Maybe she can visit again some day and visit her schoolmate. So you were a seamstress.

Elsa: I was a seamstress, and I learned a lot.

Ed: I know you’re sure good at it.

Gerlinde: I think you told us that you had to ride your bicycle in order to get to…

Elsa: Schwanenstadt? That was the closest town.

Gerlinde: …How far was that?

Elsa: That was about four kilometers, and there we bought our meat and groceries. I learned the bicycle riding only after Max came back.

Gerlinde: Oh! So how did you get around before?

Elsa: With buses. And walk. We walked to Schwanenstadt.

Gerlinde: So Max came back exactly when?

Elsa: In ‘48.

Gerlinde: About what time of year?

Elsa: About August, September. And then we bought two bicycles.

Gerlinde: How did you find Elsa? How did you know where she was?
Max: I wrote to Udvarhely.

Gerlinde: To a friend?

Max: To [- ? -].

Elsa: To a friend.

Max: He wrote me, “So you finally went to Austria, “oder” [or] Vienna.” “Aber dann, weiter musst du wissen.” [But then, you have to know what happened then.]

Elsa: They transferred you to Marmaros Sziget. Do you remember? From the Russian camp? And put you in a camp. And then my sister from Mühlbach visited you...

Max: Ja, ja, ja.

Elsa: And I think she told you...through my sister.

Gerlinde: I see.

Max: Oh, I knew before then that you are in Rüstorf. I knew that before.

Elsa: Anyway, he came back then in ‘48. In ‘49 his father...

Gerlinde: Did he surprise you? Or did he write to you?

Elsa: No, I knew that he was coming. And I went to the train station.

Gerlinde: Ja. Did you recognize him?

Elsa: Oh, ja!

Ed: How did you know when he was coming back?

Elsa: Well, through the Red Cross, and we had some contact.

Ed: Oh, you did have. So he was able to write some?

Elsa: Ja, some. Then after he was in Marmaros Sziget and after he came to Austria, he wrote us. We knew when his train arrived in Linz, and the Russian [sic] prisoners are coming...

Gerlinde: Max, what did you think when you saw Elsa with a girl about three or four years old?

Elsa: She was five years old, I think.

Gerlinde: Five years old! And you hadn’t seen her.

Elsa: I remember when he came, and he went in the house, and I told her, “Marianne…”

Gerlinde: Excuse me. Did you go by yourself to greet him at the train station?
Elsa: Yes, Marianne stayed at home.

Gerlinde: Marianne stayed at home.

Max: At home, ja.

Elsa: Then when he came in the house, I told her, “Marianne, dies' ist dein Vater.” [Marianne, this is your father.] She was scared a little bit.

Gerlinde: She didn't know what is that? [laughter]

Max: ‘Wer ist das?” [Who is that?]

Elsa: He went and embraced her, and she was happy. And then in a few days, they got good friends, and he went with her playing outside, walking. And then we bought two bicycles, and I learned the bicycle riding, and then we made some trips.

Gerlinde: That must have been quite an experience.

Ed: A five-year-old child you've never seen!

Gerlinde: There are probably a lot more experiences that you cannot remember now, I'm sure.

Ed: And so after you arrived in Austria, how long about was it before you were able to find a job?

Elsa: Well, first of all, he was very weak. So we tried to feed him. And he was shy, you know, to go to the people, and he was emotionally tired. So first of all, we fed him. And then I think after a year or so, he started looking around for a job, because as long as Max was in the prison, I got a … from the Austrian government.

Gerlinde: An allowance?

Elsa: An allowance. As soon as Max came home, the Austrian government said [that] the breadwinner is now here. Stop! So he had to see for a job, and he took the first job through your friend Nösner.

Max: Nösner. Ja, ja, ja.

Elsa: Nösner. He had a banker friend who was already in Wels at this American…

Ed: “Kaserne?” [military base]

Elsa: “Kaserne,” yes. And then Max got in contact with him, and he helped him.
Ed: So you worked for the American army. Now did you stay, after you worked with the Americans, what kind of work did you get before you came to the States? Did you work some other job in Austria?

Elsa: No.

Max: “Nein.” [No]

Ed: Only with the American army.

Max: There I heard the first English words.

Gerlinde: So that’s where you learned your first English!

Ed: You learned a little English there, with the American army!

Gerlinde: But for a Saxon it's not too difficult. [laughter]

Max: Not too difficult.

Ed: And while you were living there together now with Marianne, did you get an apartment, or did you just have a room?

Elsa: We were seven people in two little rooms — my mother, my father, my sister, Max and his father, me, and Marianne. [laughter] It was no...

Ed: No vacation.

Elsa: No vacation! And no married life! [laughter] There was no privacy.

Max: There was no privacy.

Gerlinde: I can imagine.

Elsa: There was no privacy.

Gerlinde: Now let me see, you were how old then, 44 or 45?

Ed: In ’48.

Max: “In welchem Jahr bin ich jetzt, 85? Drei-und-dreissig, acht?” [What year am I now, 85? Thirty-three, eight?]

Elsa: Anyway, Max was 43, and I was seven years younger, because when we came over to the United States...

Gerlinde: In ’52?
Elsa: Max was 50, and I was 43.

Gerlinde: You were young, both of you.

Ed: You came on a ship, from where now? Where did you leave?

Elsa: We left in Bremerhaven. And then...

Ed: An American ship?

Elsa: Yes, it was American.

Gerlinde: Was it difficult to make the decision to leave Austria and leave Europe and come here?

Elsa: Yes, very difficult, especially for me.

Max: They were all refugees on that boat.

Gerlinde: Oh, they were?

Ed: Only refugees.

Gerlinde: Conditions were still bad in Austria.

Elsa: That was the reason we came over, because Max couldn’t find a job. And his sister asked him to come over here, and we decided to come. But it was very hard on me because I had to leave part of my family — my mother, father, and...

Ed: And they remained in Austria?

Elsa: They remained in Austria, on [i.e., in] Pfaffenberg.

Gerlinde: And you had never seen America before?

Elsa: No. How long we came, Max — two weeks? On the boat?

Max: On the boat?

Elsa: I think, two weeks.

Gerlinde: About two weeks?

Ed: Where did you land in America? What port?

Elsa: In New Orleans.

Gerlinde: Oh!

Max: New Orleans. My sister and brother-in-law...
Elsa: Picked us up.
Max: Picked us up.
Elsa: They came by car, and...
Ed: I bet it was kind of strange, seeing America, from New Orleans up to Norman.
Elsa: First thing when we came out from the ship, the Red Cross sisters were there.
   It was nurses, and they served us coffee and doughnuts.
Gerlinde: Oh yeah?
Elsa: That was the first time I saw doughnuts. [laughter] And then we spent the night or two
   nights in New Orleans, with my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, and then they drove us
to Norman. We came during the dogwood blossoms.
Gerlinde: So it was pretty.
Elsa: And then we arrived on Marianne’s birthday, Marianne’s eighth birthday, March 25.
Max: We lived here on University Boulevard.
Elsa: For four years [i.e., months?], with my sister-in-law and brother-in-law. And during the
   summer Max took a course at the university to learn the English expressions for
   business and so forth. And I got my job September 1 at the Union Cafeteria. I brought
   the first check in the house. [laughter] Max got the job on October 1 in the State
   Hospital as a…
Max: In the Finance Office.
Elsa: First, Max, you were a…
Max: First an attendant?
Elsa: An attendant.
Max: “Ja, stimmt.” [Yes, that’s right.]
Elsa: For a couple of months you worked as an attendant and took care of the… And then
   they transferred you to the Finance Office.
Gerlinde: Was it difficult at first to learn, concerning the English language [while] working?
Max: It was difficult, but as an attendant, it was…
Elsa: He didn’t need it.

Gerlinde: But you learned pretty quick, didn’t you?

Max: Oh, very quick.

Gerlinde: I think you both did.

Ed: You told me once before, Elsa, that working at the cafeteria, that’s where you learned English.

Elsa: I learned English there. My brother-in-law hired me a teacher, an English teacher, to learn English. I didn’t learn a word. [laughter] As soon as I got the job in the cafeteria… thirty women, and you know, the women, they talk — and they talk and talk and talk. And I listened, and I picked up the words.

Max: Marianne had no difficulty with school.

Elsa: Marianne started school in September and at Christmas, she was on the honor roll.

Ed: Is that right? And what grade would she have been in?

Elsa: Second grade, I think.

Gerlinde: Now which school did she go to?

Elsa: She went to the Washington School on the Flood Street. And she had a bicycle, too, and she rode the bicycle, and Max had a bicycle and rode the bicycle, and I walked to work every morning at six o’clock.

Ed: When you all bought this house, what year was that?

Elsa: After a year, we left the Nielsen house and rented a small little house across from the McFarland Church — a very nice little house — and lived there for one year. And then we thought why shall we use the money in the rent, we’d rather buy a house. And then we bought this house in ’54. So two years after we came over, we bought a house. And our landlord was Professor Dorsett, a university professor, and he sold his house and the neighbor house next door, and he said, “You can choose, which one you want, because I can give you this house, and I can give you that house.” But we didn’t have so much money, so we choose the cheaper house. And then we made a contract to
pay him monthly $200. The house was something like $5500.

Gerlinde: Unbelievable!

Elsa: The contract said to pay him $200, but it was only a contract between the two of us, you know. But we told him, “If we can afford it, can we pay more than $200 a month?” And he said, “I never heard that in my life!” [laughter]

Gerlinde: [He wanted to know], where do you come from?

Elsa: So we paid many, many months more than $200. We bought the house in ‘54, and in ‘57 it was paid off. And in ‘58 we saved so much money that we made the first trip to Europe, three of us, and had still a little money in the bank as savings.

Ed: Great. You worked hard and saved your money.

Elsa: People said, “I don’t know how they did it.” I didn’t buy me a single dress or something, and I sewed Marianne’s dresses, and we ate very simple, mainly hamburger meat (meatloaf and that sort of thing), and…

Gerlinde: No steaks.

Elsa: No steaks. And in ‘58 we made our first trip to Europe. And that was the last time I saw my family.

Gerlinde: So in ‘58, is that when Marianne came with you?

Elsa: Ja, Marianne came with us because she was about 14 years old. And I and Marianne were two months, and Max came after us.

Ed: He came by ship?

Elsa: No, we flew. And then the second visit we made in ‘67, to Austria, and that time Marianne had already the bachelor degree and had a Fulbright scholarship for a year in Spain, and spent a year in Spain. She went to Spain in ‘66 after she graduated from OU. And then in ‘67 I joined her, and we met each other in Austria, in Kärnten. And then we went to Romania, and Max came again one month later to Romania, and we spent three weeks or so. Then I went with Max, only two of us in ‘72, and we were planning to go back in ‘76, but my health gave out.
Gerlinde: Now in ‘72, did you go to Austria and Romania?

Elsa: Yes, Austria and Romania.

Gerlinde: Which places in Romania did you go besides your home town?

Elsa: To Mühlbach and then to Schässburg and to Udvarhely, and I think that was all.

Gerlinde: You visited friends?

Elsa: We visited friends. — — —

Gerlinde: Max, did you meet any of your old colleagues that you worked with at the bank?

Elsa [to Max]: Did you meet your colleagues, when we went back in ‘72 and in ‘67? Oh sure…

Max: “Ja, mit dem…[-?-]” [Yes, with…]

Elsa: Sure. And I met them.

Gerlinde: To talk about the good old days.

Max: The bank is not existent. “Es existiert nicht mehr… in Rumänien… mit Kommunismus.”

[It does not exist anymore… in Romania… with Communism.]


Niemand hat ja Geld. Wozu braucht man Banken?” [Well, indeed. There are no private banks at all. We had no bank. No one has money. What would one need a bank for?]

You don’t even know where the banks are. You never go to a bank.

Max: But to go back in your own house, it hurts a little bit.

Ed: Yes, I’m sure.

Gerlinde: It’s a funny feeling.

Max: “…Elternhaus, wo ich gross gewachsen bin, was dann dir gehört hat…” […]Parents’ home, where I grew up, which had once belonged to you…]

Elsa: We went back to our own house.

Ed: Romanian families live there?

Gerlinde: “Wer wohnt dort jetzt?” [Who lives there now?]

Ed: Two or three families.

Max: “Bauern. Rumänen… vollkommen eingerichtet schön. Aber dasselbe ist ja bei deinen
Eltern sicher der Fall.” [Farmers. Romanians... fully and beautifully set up. But the same must have happened with your parents.] When did they come out?

Gerlinde: What?

Max: When did your parents came out?

INTERVIEW WITH ELSA SIEGMUND: recorded June 20, 1987, by Marianne Siegmund
Subject: Elsa’s Account of World War I and WWII Experiences and Post-War Years
Transcribed and translated from the German by Marianne Siegmund and Richard Hacken,
Fall of 2021

Elsa [reading]: Now my memories go back in time to my childhood. My father had a grocery store in the marketplace in Székelyudvarhely [pronounced SAY-kay-OOD-var-hey], Hungary, Transylvania. My mother was very helpful to him in the store, in addition to caring for the household and the raising of three children — Grete, Herta, and me as the youngest. Transylvania was as always a battleground between the two bordering nations, Hungary and Romania. We were born in Hungary, but as it turned out later, this same area is now part of Romania. In the year 1914 the Austro-Hungarian War broke out, which would lead to World War I. My father was conscripted into the Hungarian army, where he served as a Hungarian gendarme. His main headquarters was in Udvarhely [short for Székelyudvarhely], so he could take care of the store in his free time. In the fall of 1916 the collapse between Hungary and Romania occurred. We had to flee. My father, a soldier; my mother, alone with us three girls, got herself ready, with very few earthly goods. Where to? Into the unknown. After three days and three nights, she came as far as West Hungary. By chance, she landed on a farm among good people. I remember the primitive conditions. For example, at that time there was no protection against pests — flies, mosquitoes, bugs, etc. And as our landlady led us to a small room next to a cow stall, it was teeming with flies. Herta’s first remark was, “I will not sleep here!” [laughter] My mother’s answer: “I’ll kill you if you say another word!” Of course, my mother won, and we moved in. My mother and my sister Grete (the oldest) immediately lay down and went to sleep. Herta and I killed flies with the flyswatter and had fun doing it. After two hours, our landlady appeared at the door with a bowl full of marvelous chicken soup and a loaf of freshly-baked bread. The landlords also had two children around our age, with whom we played a lot and made trips to the countryside,
and after six weeks, as the Romanians were chased out of Transylvania, it was difficult for us children to leave the nest of flies.

We lived at home in Udvarhely. Life went on as normal, but not long. In the year 1918 Transylvania became affiliated with Romania as the result of the peace treaty. And so our life went over to Romania.

Around the year 1933 the word Hitler arose for the first time. At first we were enthusiastic, because it promised so much good to Germany and for those of us of German descent. Then we became skeptical, and in the end we knew the sad truth.

In 1942 we got married. On March 25, 1944...

Marianne: Which day in ‘42 did you get married?


Marianne: Okay.

Elsa: On March 25, ‘44 you came into the world. There was much joy, also for your grandparents, because you were the first grandchild in the Heitz family. Three days after your birth, Vati had to report for duty in the army. World War II was underway.

I had no milk, couldn’t breastfeed you, and had to hire a nursemaid, who came to the house three times a day, in order to feed you. The remainder we supplemented with a bottle. However, you did not tolerate the bottle and cried a lot. I continued going to my office the whole summer. Frau Londar took care of the household.

The Siegmund house remained as always beautiful — beautiful flower garden, many fruit trees in the garden, and grandmother Heitz took care of you. Already in July there was bad news. The German army (the Axis powers) was in retreat. The War seemed to be lost for us Germans. On August 23, 1944 Romania dropped out of the Axis powers and went over to the Allies (the Russians, the Americans, the English). We knew what confronted us. It was only a question of time — to flee and to surrender to the Russians and to bear the devastating fate of the Germans.

On September 10, 1944 we suddenly lost our home and homeland as we fled with the
help of the German army. We left everything — everything — behind and came out of the house with two suitcases. With us were also my parents, Herta, and several families that we knew well. Traveling on a freight train, a transport train, we got as far as West Hungary in four weeks.

Marianne: What is a “Güterzug?”

Elsa: A “Güterzug” is a freight train.

Marianne: Okay. But there were no seats?

Elsa: No. Completely empty. On straw. Our train often had to sit for days on the siding, because the main line was being used for the army. At five months old, I had to take you away from your nursemaid in Udvarhely, and only God knows how I managed to keep you alive. I had brought with me a large basket of Gravenstein apples from the garden, a glass grater, and a tin of simple sugar cookies, two milk bottles, and your diapers. When our train would stop for hours or days, I would run around in the village and beg for milk to feed you. The people were good and helpful. I washed and bathed you with the warm water from the steam engine, also the diapers which were dried in the open door of our cattle car. You were never sick and you thrived. At first we were stationed in West Hungary for six weeks. Then the Russians came closer, and we had to go into Austria, and so we lost our citizenship.

Marianne: Yes, then how was it when we arrived in Austria?

Elsa: In Austria we came to a camp, actually in the small village of Rüstorf, which was three kilometers from Schwanenstadt. There we were accommodated in a large room of a school. Many families in one room. And we lived there. Our supervisor was a teacher in the school, Frau Wilk [pronounced Wilk], a very good woman, who was like a second mother to us. There we got to know the Streitferdt family — the children, Gerlinde, Lothar, and Uwe.

Marianne: You didn’t know them earlier?

Elsa: No, I didn’t know them. Throughout the “Flucht,” we came to know many people, from
Sächsisch Regen and Bistritz, and in our need we helped each other out. After a few weeks, the municipality of Rüstorf provided us with accommodations at farms. The farmers were not very enthusiastic to have to take refugees into the house, but there was an obligation, they had to take us in, and in a short time they came to appreciate us, and we became good friends with the farmers. At first I lived with [Siegmund] Grandfather and with you in a little room at the Hillinger family. Then came more refugees, and I was told that either I would move together with my parents, who had two little rooms, or I would stay here and my parents would be given a strange refugee family. Naturally, I could not do that, and so we moved out of our independent little room and moved over to my parents at the Stürzlinger family. Then later we moved again into another little house, which belonged to Frau Spittaler. We lived there until Vati...

Marianne: How was it in the camp? Is that where I got sick?

Elsa: Oh yes, in the camp... When we arrived in the camp, the disease measles was rampant. And, of course, after a week you got the measles. You were very, very sick. As you eventually got better, the doctor, Dr. Puchner, said to me, “Dear Frau, you have gotten this child back for the second time, because she was close to dying.” Then we moved to Frau Hillinger’s in Pfaffenberg, and her three children, about your age, had whooping cough. After a few days, you got whooping cough. After the measles, the whooping cough — that was not so simple. Herta would often take you outside in the fresh air, because that’s how whooping cough is healed.

Marianne: That was in the winter, right?

Elsa: It was in the winter, but we bundled you up really well, and Herta would take you outside, but it was very difficult. After a few hours, you would get a coughing fit and you suffered so much from it, that I thought you would die. Then the coughing fit would stop, and you would feel good for a few hours. But when the time came again, you would get another coughing fit. Of course...
Marianne: There was no medicine for that?

Elsa: Ja, Dr. Puchner did prescribe a medicine, but it didn’t help much. And whooping cough has a typical course. With time, it begins to weaken, and it gets better and better, and the coughing fits come in greater intervals. So after a few weeks you got well again and thrived. And you played with the Hillinger children. And then we lived there in Pfaffenberg, seven or eight years. In the meantime...

Marianne: You worked?

Elsa: Through Frau Hillinger, I came to know Frau Schimpl. She was a village seamstress, a simple village seamstress. And she made me a proposal: I can work for her, and she would pay me, not very much, of course, but I was happy. And in the mornings I would work at home, looking after the household, and in the afternoon at one o’clock or one-thirty I went to Frau Schimpl’s and was there until six o’clock, and worked there, sewed with her, and Heitz Omama took care of you. And so I worked there at Frau Schimpl’s for several years. And not only did I earn money, I learned a great deal from her, because she showed me how to sew and how to cut out, and so forth. She was very nice to me, although she was much younger than me. We became good friends. She had a small radio, and we turned on the radio while we were working and listened to music and this and that. There I listened with Frau Schimpl for the first time to “Rebecca.”

Marianne: Oh! On the radio?

Elsa: On the radio. The book “Rebecca.”

Marianne: That was read?

Elsa: That was read on the radio. And it was with continuations (serialized). Every day at a given time, there was “Rebecca” for half an hour. And we enjoyed that very much. So that book became one of my favorite books, which I read several more times in America and also saw once on television.

Then in the year 1948 Vati came home from his captivity.
Marianne: I was four years old?

Elsa: You were four, five years old. Then you saw your father for the first time. And Vati could not get work. Through a friend he got a job at the American occupying forces in Wels, with the fire brigade. And so every third day he would ride the train to Wels. He rode his bicycle to the train station in Schwanenstadt, and from there he rode the train to Wels, and worked there three days. Then he had two days off, then he worked three days again.

Marianne: Did he have to live there?

Elsa: He lived there, in the American camp. And then in 1949 Siegmund Grandfather died.

Marianne: ‘49? One year after Vati came home?

Elsa: One year after Vati came home Siegmund Grandfather died. He was 86 years old and was infirm. And then Vati got in touch with Tante Trude, and she encouraged him that we should emigrate to America.

Marianne: What did Siegmund Grandfather die of?

Elsa: From infirmity, weakness from old age.

Marianne: He didn’t have a stroke?

Elsa: No, Marianne...slowly...

Marianne: He went to sleep?

Elsa: He virtually went to sleep. I was working at Frau Schimpl's. Frau Londar was visiting us in Pfaffenberg. They still spoke with him, but saw that he was frail, and as they came in, they saw that he was no longer [alive]. So then Vati applied for the right to emigrate, and then in the year 1952...

Marianne: And that took a while, until...

Elsa: Yes, because at that time America didn’t take in an exact number of refugees, not like today. Today the Mexicans come over the border, but at that time it was very, very strict, very stringent. And it took some time before we got permission. That was one of my hardest times, because I had to leave behind my parents and Herta.
Marianne: They didn’t want us to emigrate?

Elsa: They didn’t want that. But they understood that fate was forcing us. But the separation was very difficult, especially for me and Omama, because they were old and sickly. And then we did leave. And after seven or eight years, after we got the citizenship, after we saved ourselves a little money, we went back and visited them in the summer of the year ‘58. And that was the last time that I saw my parents.

Marianne: How long have you known the Ziegler family?

Elsa: Oh, the Ziegler family. We came to know them in the twenties, 1920’s. Udvarhely, Székelyudvarhely was a Hungarian town, and there were not many Saxons. And they came from everywhere — from the Schässburger area, from Bistritz, from Mühlbach, from Mediasch, and so forth. And Ziegler Onkel was a young pharmacist. And there was a pharmacy for sale in Udvarhely. He took it over, renovated it very nicely and had an exemplary beautiful pharmacy in Udvarhely. And so we got to know the Zieglers, and also the Dienesch family, and the Adleff family. Adleff, he was a veterinarian, and Dienesch was a medical doctor. And so we all stuck together. I can remember when Inge was born, and when Rolf was a little baby, of course also the Dienesch children and the Adleff children. We held together, like a family. Then came the “Flucht,” and Ziegler Heinrich was very helpful to us during the “Flucht,” because by chance, he was not called to enlist in the army.

Marianne: Why not?

Elsa: Well, Marianne, I think he was on vacation, and then came the collapse, and then of course he was no longer obligated, and could therefore go with his family, flee with his family. And that was a tremendous advantage for him, because he was very helpful to his family. In contrast, Vati was in the military, and I was alone with you and with [Siegmund] Grandfather and with my parents. And Adleff Tante, she was also alone because Adleff Onkel, he was also in the military. And Dienesch Onkel was in the military. But Ziegler Onkel, he was very helpful to us and helped us a lot. Then the
Zieglers, they were also in Rüstorf at first, in the camp. But he managed to free himself from there and to move to Salzburg. At first he was in some other place, near Bad Gastein. But then he settled in Salzburg and took on a job as a pharmaceutical representative. He sold pharmaceutical materials.

Marianne: Did he have to travel?

Elsa: He had to travel, he traveled around, came often to Schwanenstadt and always visited us in Pfaffenberg. And traveled a lot around Austria. And he was a very good salesman. And so the friendship thrived more and more. We were very, very closely befriended. Then later Inge got married, and her husband was a metallurgical engineer. And he was sent by his company for three years to America — in fact, to Tennessee, Waverly, Tennessee. And Inge, she saw us as parents, because she was also here alone in a strange place, and she knew we were in Norman. And then we got together. First we visited them, the three of us, with our car, with the Comet, and drove to Waverly, Tennessee. And then they came to visit us, with Elisabeth. Elisabeth, she was a little baby. And then three years later, they came again. Then Elisabeth was maybe three years old. And then Inge and Ernst made a trip to the Grand Canyon and left Elisabeth behind with us, and Vati and I took care of Elisabeth. I took off a few days from the cafeteria and was home during the day with her, and then in the evening when Vati came home from work, then I cooked for the three of us. And then Vati spent time with Elisabeth. And I can remember, the first day after Inge… Inge [and Ernst] drove off early towards the Grand Canyon. And the day before, I asked Inge, “Isn’t Elisabeth going to cry when she finds you’re not here?” And she said, “I spoke with her and told her, ‘Look, Elsa Tante and Max Onkel are going to take care of you, and you should be good.’” I can remember that first morning I heard her as she woke up and went over to her in the room where she had slept, and she looked around, asked after her Mutti, and started to cry a little, and I comforted her. She was very cute, sweet. I put her on the little pot, and she
did her thing. [laughter] She was very, very cute. And after four or five days, I think, after Inge [and Ernst] came back from the Grand Canyon, she didn’t want to go back to her parents. She had become so accustomed to us, to Vati and me, that she didn’t want to go back to her parents anymore. And she had taken on our speech patterns.

Inge and Ernst laughed, laughed so hard! [laughter]

Marianne: And at that time I was in Spain that same year and visited her parents.

Elsa: Yes, you were a year in Spain right at the same time when Inge was here, yes. Then you visited the Zieglers in Salzburg at Christmas. And I was very grateful to Irene Tante that she had invited you, and you surely had some beautiful days there and had a beautiful Christmas. Then after three years Inge [and family] moved back to Austria. And then we visited them another time in the year ‘72.

Marianne: But I was not there.

Elsa: You were not there, just Vati and I. Two years later Rolf died, a very sad case, and then later Irene Tante died. Heinrich Onkel died two-and-a-half years after Irene Tante died — in fact, his heart gave out, because he had heart trouble, too, and his heart gave out. And then Inge and Elisabeth were the only ones remaining. Inge, she is still very attached to us, and we would like to visit her, but it’s not possible for her probably not for me. But I was very happy and am very happy that you are maintaining and have refreshed the friendship with her, when you were there two years ago.

Marianne: One year ago. I was there last year.

Elsa: Were you there last year? Yes, yes, last year, while you were over in Austria. I would like for you also to maintain the friendship with them, with Elisabeth, too, because Elisabeth seems to be a nice girl. Also the friendship with Waltraud and with her children, as well as Bärbl and Grete Tante. She was always very sweet and nice to us. We visited them while Walter Onkel was still alive, and they were very hospitable to us. I’ve always said that Gretl Tante is my favorite sister-in-law. In Kärnten [Carinthia]… and I can remember how one time we were on the alpine pasture in Kärnten. Don’t you
remember? That was in '58. Those were such beautiful days in Kärnten on the
alpine pasture, with Gretl's mother. And then later we visited them once in
Radenthein. Waltraud is a very sweet person, I appreciate her a lot. She also had a
difficult childhood and hard times to endure, and she is a very good and sweet person.

Marianne: Maybe you can tell about the… when we rode bicycles in Austria back then?

Elsa: Yes. After Vati was freed from captivity, we first bought a bicycle for him, because he
always rode to the station with his bike after he got the job in Wels. And then we
bought another bike for me, and I learned to ride a bike.

Marianne: For the first time?

Elsa: The first time. I didn’t know how to ride a bike in Austria. But Vati taught me and
instructed me. And I very much enjoyed bike riding, very much. I always rode by
bike to Schwanenstadt and did my shopping — meat, and so forth — and
could bring the provisions home. Then once we rode with the two bikes through
the Salzkamergut. Vati loaded you onto the back of his bike, at the back.

Marianne: There was a little seat there?

Elsa: There was a little seat, and I carried the provisions (the groceries and the blankets
and what we needed) on the back of my bike. And we took off from Rüstorf,
through the Reuthamer forest at first. We rode through the entire Salzkamergut,
I think four days or so. At night we stayed with farmers, because it didn’t cost so
much, and in the mornings they also gave us a breakfast, and we paid for it. And
so we [saw] all these beautiful lakes — the Attersee, the Traunsee, the Wolfgangsee —
and many beautiful things…

Marianne: Gmunden?

Elsa: Yes, we were in Gmunden. Gmundner lake. Gmunden was not too far from Pfaffenberg.
We could ride to Gmunden on a Sunday afternoon, and it was a beautiful Sunday
ride. We often rode into the Reuthamer forest and visited Necke Tante. They lived in
the village Reutham, and we visited Necke Tante. And also often rode into the forest
in Rüstorf and picked raspberries, and strawberries, but mainly raspberries, and…

Marianne: They taste better than here.

Elsa: Oh yes, much better, also the strawberries, the wild strawberries, and we…
Elsa: Well, Vati and Andi Onkel and Adleff Onkel, they were all in the military.

Marianne: Together, or…?

Elsa: They were not together, Marianne, but after the collapse happened, all three of them were captured and met each other again during their captivity and were together during their captivity. Vati was together with Andi Onkel. And they were released together.

Marianne: Yes.

Elsa: And then it was left up to Vati as to where he wanted to go. He could have asked to be sent to Udvarhely, or else to us in Austria.

Marianne: Yes.

Elsa: Vati asked to be sent to us in Austria. And Adleff Onkel, he asked to be sent to Udvarhely, because he thought he would be able to save his house and everything. He got nothing back. And so he was separated from his wife and children.

Marianne: And they were in Austria?

Elsa: In the meantime, they had gone to the area around Leipzig, since she was from Leipzig. And her father was still alive, and they went back to Leipzig. And after a while he was able to bring them back to Transylvania.

Marianne: They went back?

Elsa: They went back to Transylvania and lived there, but it was very difficult. And then after Adleff Onkel died, then Hilde Tante and the children came out to Germany. And then Andi Onkel, he also asked to be sent to Austria, because Necke Tante, they were in Reutham, and he asked to be sent to Austria. And Vati and Andi Onkel, they arrived together in Linz. And there Necke Tante awaited them. And then Vati went from Linz to Schwanenstadt. In Schwanentadt I waited for him. I had also wanted to go to Linz.
to wait for him, but my mother had a sore leg, a so-called open leg. She had an open wound and was not allowed to put weight on the leg. And I couldn't leave her behind, because she was…my mother, my father, Herta, you and I… Of course, I had to look after the household. And besides, it was just before a holiday, and we had a lot to do at Frau Schimpl's, a lot of sewing. And Frau Schimpl, she begged me to stay and help her sew. So then I only went in the afternoon. I took time off on an afternoon and went to the train in Schwanenstadt to wait for Vati. Then we came on foot from Schwanenstadt to Rüstorf. And Frau Schimpl, she came out, because she lived there, at the edge of the village. And she came out and greeted Vati and welcomed him in Rüstorf. And Vati, he also liked Frau Schimpl very much. She had a good sense of humor. A typical Austrian woman.

Marianne: Yes.
Elsa: But she had a good sense of humor.
Marianne: And how was it when he came home? I didn't even know him.
Elsa: You didn't know him. He came, and we introduced you to each other. We told you, “Look, this is your Vati.”
Marianne: I was afraid. [laughter]
Elsa: Yes, you were afraid at first. But then Vati played with you, because he always got along well with children. And in a few days you were good friends. Then Vati spent a great deal of time with you and played with you and went with you on walks and played. Vati was also physically weakened after [his captivity].
Marianne: Was he really thin?
Elsa: Yes, he was physically weakened, and also spiritually and mentally. I mean, he was not accustomed to being with people, after three-and-a-half years in captivity. So it took a while until he got acclimated and accustomed to being friendly with the people, especially with the Austrian farmers, because they had their own idiosyncracies, you know. But then in a short while, he got back to normal.
Marianne: He didn’t go to work right at first?

Elsa: No, for a few, or, I think, two months or so he was not working. But he had to go
[to work], because my allowance was taken away. They told me, the bread…bread…

Marianne: Breadwinner.

Elsa: Breadwinner, yes, “He is here now and therefore he should go out and earn money.”

But Vati was already close to 50 years old, and it was hard for him to find work.

So then we had to leave Austria. If we had stayed maybe one more year in Austria…
because at the time we came out, Germany and Austria were still very shattered after
the war. And the industry was kaput, and no business, and so forth. But Germany and
Austria recovered quickly. And after one year everything was beginning to flourish. If
we had stayed there maybe one more year, Vati could have gotten a job somewhere.

Marianne: Maybe in Salzburg?

Elsa: Maybe in Salzburg, through Heinrich Onkel or so. Heinrich Onkel always said, “You
left at a bad time. If only you could have stayed here a little longer…” But, of course,
one couldn’t know that beforehand. And after we were here and Vati had gotten a job,
then he didn’t want to go back. I mean, we reestablished ourselves quite nicely on a
material level, because we had a house and everything and savings, and so…

Marianne: Okay, how was it with Herta in Transylvania?

Elsa: Well, Marianne, we were three siblings, three sisters. And between us there was always
a difference of three years, a difference in ages. Of course, I was not so close with
Grete Tante, because we were six years… I was six years younger. But I got along well
with Herta, and we played together. We always had the same friends and played
together. Herta, she was the stronger one.

Marianne: Oh, how do you mean that?

Elsa: Well, physically. Besides, I was more modest and was the stay-at-home nest sitter and
was the spoiled one, and so forth.

Marianne: And because you were the youngest.
Elsa: And because I was the youngest, yes. She would often hit me. So I experienced not just good things with Herta, but the end result was that we nevertheless got along well. And we played well with one another. Our friends, they were all, of course, Hungarians, Hungarian friends, with whom we played together. We went on outings and went up the hills around Udvarhely. And then later we got to know the Schuller family — Lisbeth Tante — and with them we also went up in the hills. Around Udvarhely there were two beautiful hills — three, actually. And those were half-day outings, whenever we would go up. And then we often went to the Hargita, in the Carpathians, to the Mühle. There the Siegmunds had a small summer house, in the Mühle. And we often got the key and asked for the key to the summer house, and then spent several days there.

Marianne: Weren’t they there in the summer?

Elsa: Well, earlier when the Siegmund children were around, then they were there. But then later, when we were teenagers, then we made these outings ourselves. And at that time the Siegmund children were already away from home. Walter Onkel was studying in Germany. Fred Onkel, he was in Schässburg. Vati, he was…

Marianne: And Tante Trude was already away?

Elsa: Trude Tante was already away, yes. And then we often went with our friends to the Mühle. The Mühle was a very beautiful place, a very beautiful place. And there we spent wonderful days. And there was bus transportation between Udvarhely and Csikszereda [Romanian: Miercurea Ciuc]. That is another town there over the Carpathians. Then we could always ride the bus close to the Mühle, and then we got off the bus, and then walked a forest path to the Mühle. And there was a beautiful mountain stream and meadows and mountains and fir and pine trees. And then there was a so-called Falkenstein. That was a…a…

Marianne: Boulder?

Elsa: That was a…how do you call it? A big hill. It was called Falkenstein. And we climbed up
it. Beneath the Falkenstein was a summer residence. There were summer villas there that belonged to people from Schässburg. The Schässburgers would come in the summer and would spend their summer months there. [The summer residence] was called [Keroly? (pronounced CARE-oy)]. The Keroly, it was beneath the Falkenstein. That was a boulder.

Marianne: That is a Hungarian name, right? Keroly?

Elsa: It is not Hungarian.

Marianne: No?

Elsa: Well, I don’t actually know. I don’t think so.

Marianne: It’s not German and not Romanian.

Elsa: Well, I can’t say now.

Marianne: Well, anyway… You went to school. How many years?

Elsa: We went to the Hungarian school. I went for eight years to the Hungarian school.

Marianne: And also Herta?

Elsa: Also Herta.

Marianne: Grete Tante?

Elsa: Grete Tante, she also went to school for eight years, but then she went to a two-year business course. That was at that time in Udvarhely, a Hungarian business course, two years. And after she graduated from the business course, she took a job in Mühlbach in a bank. So that is how we were separated from Grete Tante and were at home with only Herta. But Grete Tante, she visited us every year, two or three times.

Marianne: Herta did not take a business course?

Elsa: Herta didn’t do anything. Herta, she was not very talented, intelligent. She also got mostly bad grades in school, and she was… As far as house work was concerned, she was good with house work and so forth. And at that time, it was not customary for young girls to become independent and to earn money. My father had the store.
We helped out my father in the store and worked in the house. And she also did needlework. I did needlework. We earned money with that.

Marianne: Did you sell them, or what?

Elsa: Yes, we sold them, the needlework. And we sewed underwear. At that time, one could not buy lingerie, like now. One had to make the underwear oneself — the underpants and the bras and the undershirts and so forth. And we sewed, and in fact I was the master-seamstress, because Herta didn’t know a lot about that either. Therefore, I did the main part of the sewing. And then Herta...

Marianne: And where did you learn that? From Omama?

Elsa: From Omama. We learned it from Omama. We had a [sewing] machine. We earned money from this.

Marianne: But Otata had to pay for the school?

Elsa: Otata had to pay for the school, already the first year that we… With us, that is how it was, that one had to pay for school.

Marianne: So some children could not go to school at all, if the parents couldn’t pay for it?

Elsa: Well, I don’t know, Marianne. Most of them did go to school. Maybe the government helped those who couldn’t pay. But my father, he had to pay.

I went to school with really good children. My class was always exemplary. There were children from top-notch families in Udvarhely, Hungarian families. And as a result, I tried very hard to observe and listen and learned a great deal through my own efforts. And, for example, German. I never went to a German school. But I read and wrote and learned German on my own, to read and write. And I learned a lot through Grellmann Else, because she was a very intelligent woman who showed us a lot and helped us a lot. And Siegmund Grandmother, she encouraged us to learn German and to read German. And that is the only way I learned it.

After I went for eight years to the Hungarian school, I was at home for several years. But then I understood, something had to happen, I had to learn something, because
I couldn’t get any work and could not support myself with just sewing. So then my sister, Grete Tante, helped me out and paid for my school in Hermannstadt.

Marianne: And what year was that? You were 21 years old?

Elsa: I was 21 years old, Marianne. That was in 1929-30, when I went to Hermannstadt.

And attended this one-year business course and lived in the dormitory, in the Lutheran dormitory which was very cheap. Children from diaspora communities were housed there, and that is where I stayed a year and slept and lived there with the girls. Then there was another section, another wing of the building, where there were just the boys. That’s where the boys were. And then in the other building were just the girls, and…

Marianne: You said that some of them made fun of you?

Elsa: Well, of course they made fun of me, because I was the oldest one in the class. My classmates were all 15 years old, because they were...they left the school at 14 years old and then...they were 15 years old and took the [business] course. And I was already 21. And there was another girl from Hermannstadt, [Trudi Hahn?]. She was also 21, and we sort of stuck together, and especially the boys would make fun of us. But we didn’t really didn’t give it much thought.

At the end of the year, there was a May Day celebration, a so-called May Day celebration in Hermannstadt, in May. And then on May Day all the schools would march out into the forest, and then there would be cooking and baking chicken and sausages on a spit, and I don’t know what else. The schools, they would always march. In the morning at 8 o’clock, the schools in the whole town marched. They were all nicely dressed and wore the student cap on their heads. And one student (girl or boy) walked at the front with the flag. And here we were in this one-year business course. And they chose me to carry the flag. [laughter] And I was not in favor, because at the beginning the students made fun of us two. But then they got to know us and appreciated us. And they chose me, because I had become one of the best students in
the class. And I was not in favor of carrying the flag. But they insisted that I had to carry
the flag up front. And we went to the young forest (that is a forest section there in
Hermannstadt). And that’s where we marched. I am sorry that I could not save these
pictures, because at that time we took lots of photos, and the students took photos.
And there you could have seen me with the flag. But the pictures all remained behind
during the “Flucht.” And then we were there the entire day at the May Day celebration.
And then this was always the end, the end celebration of the school year. And then that
was the end of the business course, and I returned to Udvarhely and was at home the
whole summer. And then in the fall, I think, I got a job with the company Essigmann.

Marianne: You were there until the war?

Elsa: I was there until the war, until the “Flucht” — 12 years. I was at the company Essigman
for 12 years and would have stayed longer. But then came the “Flucht.” But there I
was able to save a lot and make money and could buy myself many things.
I had beautiful clothes. I also sewed many clothes for myself, in part, and had them
made. Those were my…

Marianne: The best years.

Elsa: The prosperous years.

Marianne: Yes [sigh]

Elsa: The best years. [—?—]

Marianne: When did that happen?

Elsa: Shortly after I graduated from the business course and came home, we saw that
the economic conditions in Udahrely were very bad. And it was not just Otata who
went bankrupt. There were others. Siegmund Grandfather also went bankrupt. And
then we saw, and I saw, that I have to get a job and earn money somehow, because
I could not allow myself to be supported by my father. And then my father could not
pay the rent. And then one time, in the dead of night, we had to move out of our
house, because the landlord… Otherwise, the landlord would have come the next
day and would have taken away our furniture and everything and…

Marianne: Taken everything away.

Elsa: Taken everything away and confiscated it. So then one time, in the dead of night, we moved out. We rented a small dwelling and moved out. That was a very sad night, as in the dark we…I was embarrassed to death in front of the people.

Marianne: Even though others also did this.

Elsa: Even though this also happened to others. But my father was such an honest and upright person, and we were honored and respected. It was very sad. And so then we moved into a smaller dwelling, and Otata, he had to then give up the store. And then I got this job at Essigmann through the store manager, Wilhelm Imrich. He was a bachelor, but he was about my father’s age and a very good person. He helped me to get the job at Essigmann. And then I was employed there and worked as cashier and managed the accounts. Whenever I managed the accounts, Vilmos [Hungarian for Wilhelm (pronounced VIL-mosh)] would come and work as a cashier, and I ran the books and managed the money. And every weekend we would deliver the money to Schässburg, and usually I was the one who took the bus to Schässburg on Saturday morning, with a little bag full of money.

Marianne: Oh! Weren’t you afraid?

Elsa: Well, in those times there were… I was not afraid, but today you could not carry this out, because I could have been robbed. But I went to Schässburg and delivered the money and gave orders for whatever they needed to send to the branch in Udvarhely. And that was sheer pleasure for me, because they paid for my trip, and I rode to Schässburg, and so forth. And then every year after Christmas, we did inventory in all the stores, also in the main store in Schässburg, and in Udvarhely and in another small town. And when that was finished, then our manager in Schässburg gave all of us employees a banquet in a nice restaurant in Schässburg. And then all the employees came together
on a weekend, on a Saturday or a Sunday, and our manager gave us a banquet. There was music, and we danced. It was a joy. And there I would also be very celebrated, because I was the only girl in the Essigmann store in Udvarhely. I had many great colleagues. They were so nice and so friendly. That was always such a celebration.

And then when we had to flee, then I stood there with quite a lot of money in the safe, and I said, “Well, what is going to happen with this money?” Our store manager, Wilmosch, said to me: “You take it with you.” “Well, yes, but for God’s sake, I can’t steal the money!” Says he, “Well, what do you want to do? Tomorrow morning the Russians will come and take it anyway! You take it with you!” Because he did not need it. He was a bachelor and very well off.

Marianne: Did he also leave? Or did he stay there?

Elsa: No. He stayed there. But he was well off, financially. So I took the money with me, but I couldn’t use it, because by the time we got to the Austro-Hungarian border in four weeks or six weeks, the money was totally worthless. I virtually could not buy anything.

Marianne: Yes.

Elsa: And then after a few years, when we went back to Transylvania on vacation, that is, from America, I ran into my boss, my young boss, and I told him, “I stole your money!” [laughter] And he laughed and said, “I’m glad that it was you who stole it. Otherwise, the Russians would have stolen it the next day. And I wish you had been able to use it.” Said I, “Sadly, I couldn’t do much with that money.” And he said to me, “Don’t worry. I’m glad that you took the money with you.” But just look at the sorts of things that happened back then!

Marianne: Yes, yes. Unusual times.

Elsa: This boss has died in the meantime, and also his wife. And his wife was also employed by the company Essigmann.
The winter before you were born was actually the best winter in our young marriage. I was expecting you. Adleff Tante, she was expecting Dieter. You two are only a few weeks apart in age. We were so glad and so happy. Dienesch Tante, she was still relatively healthy. And we spent a very nice winter. Vati, he was not in the military. He was working in Udvarhely in the bank, and I went to the store every day. And we celebrated Christmas at home in the Siegmund house. And we celebrated New Year's Eve at the Dienesch house, Marianne, and the New Year’s Eve celebration remains in my memory, how at 12 o’clock we all stood up, all of us at the Dienesch house, and toasted the new year. Especially Hilde Tante and I received many good luck wishes, because we were expecting our babies. And that next year brought so much goodness and also sadness with it. In February Dieter was born. That was a great joy. In March you were born. That was a great joy, Marianne. In June Dienesch Tante died. That was very sad. And at that time, Vati was in the military again, but when she died, during those days he was on vacation and was at home. And those were very sad days. And in September we fled. And that was actually the end of our beautiful life and family life and friendship life, because we were all dispersed and separated, and it took a long time until we came together again. But I can still remember that New Year’s Eve celebration at the Dienesch house. We were invited there — the Zieglers and the Adleffs and the Dienesch and Vati and me — for an evening dinner and there was a beautifully decked out table, and at midnight we offered a toast to a happy new year, Marianne, and that year brought with it all kinds of things.

Marianne: Was I born in a hospital or at home?
Elsa: You were born in a hospital, in the hospital in Udvarhely, and Klara, Rösler Klara, assisted when you were born. She brought you into the world.
Marianne: She was a doctor?
Elsa: She was a doctor, and she brought you into the world. And I can remember, she
said, “A healthy little girl!” [laughter]

Marianne: In German? Because she spoke Hungarian.

Elsa: No, in Hungarian.

Marianne: How do you say that in Hungarian?

Elsa: “Egészséges kislány!” [laughter]

Marianne: And why couldn’t you nurse me?

Elsa: Marianne, I didn’t have any milk. I mean, not every woman can make milk. Besides, I was nervous. And Vati had to enlist [in the army] three days later.

Marianne: Did he know about that in advance?

Elsa: No, no way, no way. You were born, and the next day he was called up. Because we had thought he would stay here and would be happy and at peace. He had to leave. And I knew that the war, the war, was fully underway.

Marianne: Yes.

Elsa: And I was nervous. And I had no milk.

Marianne: Yes. And did you have to go to work?

Elsa: No, I had four weeks off, and I was at home. And I gave it my best effort, I ate and drank — I drank beer, so that the milk…

Marianne: Beer? It was customary to drink beer?

Elsa: Yes, oh yes! For example, when your nursemaid came and she fed you, then afterwards I always gave her lots of food. I made her a good sandwich or whatever, and always with a bottle of beer.


Elsa: Beer makes milk!

Marianne: Not nowadays.
Marianne: Was there enough wood in the forests of Udvahely, or in Transylvania? Were there many trees?

Elsa: Yes, but the woodcutters, they would bring the wood from the towns, from below the Hargita. They would come and with this wood... That was a hard job for them. And there was a lot of wood.

Marianne: Also now.

Elsa: Also now.

Marianne: Were there lots of dense forests?

Elsa: Yes, oh yes. There were many. But of course we had to save. We never heated the entire house, never heated the entire house. And during the day we didn’t heat the rooms. We spent our time in the kitchen.

Marianne: The kitchen was warm, because it was where you cooked.

Elsa: Yes, because that’s where we cooked.

Marianne: But was there no heating in the bedrooms?

Elsa: Oh yes, there was heating, and in the afternoon we turned on the stove and heated [the bedrooms] until around 10 o’clock, and then turned off the heat. Some people had these tiled stoves. They held the heat better. For example, the Siegmunds...

Marianne: Did you have feather comforters, like in Austria?

Elsa: No, we had straw sacks, straw sacks!

Marianne: And did they keep you warm?

Elsa: Not so much, but...

Marianne: Did you make them yourselves?

Elsa: Yes, we made the straw sacks ourselves, or bought a sturdy fabric, and then we went to a farm and filled them with straw. And then the farmer would bring them to us on a wagon. We put the straw sacks on the bed and put a flannel sheet over
them, and that kept us warm.

Marianne: So there was straw underneath and on top? Also underneath? No mattresses?

Elsa: Well, the mattresses, they came later. As children we slept on straw sacks. And then the mattresses... My mother and father, they had mattresses. But then they came later. When I got married, then we did have mattresses... But as children, as small children, we slept on straw sacks. Because as children, we sometimes wet the bed... And then they had to throw out the straw.

Marianne: And then they put in fresh straw?

Elsa: And I know that the Dienesch’s, when we visited them in Udvarhely, they were still sleeping on straw sacks.

Marianne: It can’t have been very comfortable.

Elsa: Yes, it was not very comfortable, because you would lay on your side and the straw bunched up there, and then on the other side as well.

And then every day in our house the rooms were swept and dusted and the windows were opened and aired out.

Marianne: Did the maid do that?

Elsa: The maid did it at times, but we were three girls in our house, and we had a large house — one, two, three, four large rooms. Then we would open the windows...

Marianne: And how were the pillows, also made with straw?

Elsa: The pillows were made with feathers, and in fact, we made the pillows ourselves.

Marianne: And what kind of feathers?

Elsa: They would buy the geese and then butcher them, and the feathers...

Marianne: Why didn’t they also stuff the blankets with goose feathers? Was it too expensive?

Elsa: Well, they were too expensive. In Transylvania, there where we were born, there we didn’t use feathers. Those were used more in Hungary, because they used and butchered more geese and ducks. We had more chickens, but we had... And then we had quilts; there were these quilts.
Marianne: Yes, yes. What did you fill them with?

Elsa: They were filled with cotton. They were much thicker than the quilts made here.

Marianne: They didn’t make such beautiful patterns, like they do here.

Elsa: No…patterns. But then we did make beautiful quilts out of silk. Then we also had wool blankets. We also had many sheep in the mountains, sheep’s wool.

Marianne: Were you already making these night shirts at that time? Did you always wear them?

Elsa: Oh yes, we always wore them.

Marianne: Out of flannel?

Elsa: Out of flannel, yes, in the winter and then in the summer…

Marianne: With the [handmade] cord.

Elsa: With the [handmaid] cord. Vati also wore these shirts at night.

Marianne: And wears them to this day.

Elsa: And loves them even now. He doesn’t like pajamas. He actually has three [pair of] pajamas here…and I can’t make him any more [night shirts]…

In our house, there was no main meal without soup, and then a meat dish and potatoes and salad…Without a meat dish, then some sort of pastry (crepes or noodles or dumplings or so). But the soup was always…

Marianne: There was always soup?

Elsa: Every day a soup. Then in the evening — because we ate the main meal at noon — then in the evening we usually had a sandwich or sausage or bacon and eggs or scrambled eggs. And then for breakfast we always had only a milk coffee, and in fact the coffee was made with chicory, chicory.

Marianne: With chicory? Yes?

Elsa: Oh yes. We used very few coffee beans, because they were too expensive. Most of the time, we used chicory. And then we would fill the cup only about one-fourth full with coffee. Three-fourths was warm milk, hot milk. Then we would drink only one cup of
coffee for breakfast, a milk coffee, with bread, and on the bread we would smear butter and honey or jam. That was our breakfast. No fruit, no juice, nothing. That would come later. That was introduced by the Siegmunds — the fruit and the juice — because the young ones, Walter Onkel studied in Germany, and Vati studied in Germany. And they saw how the people lived there and were drinking juice.

Marianne: They were already drinking juice and eating fruit in Germany? I thought that was an American custom.

Elsa: No, they were already…in Germany…

Marianne: We didn’t do that in Austria. In Austria we also had just a milk coffee and bread.

Elsa: Yes, that was actually introduced by the Siegmunds. Maybe Trude Tante wrote them about it, but I don’t know. But I know that through the Siegmunds, it was customary. But we did eat enough fruit.

Marianne: That was very healthy. Also that you would eat the main meal at noon.

Elsa: Yes, we ate the main meal at noon. And plenty of bread. My mother, she would make her own bread every week.

Marianne: She would bake the bread herself?

Elsa: She would bake the bread herself. The maid would knead [the dough]. We had a large wooden surface. And that was where she kneaded it, with flour. And then my mother had a baking oven down in the courtyard, a bricked-up oven, in a room.

Marianne: Just for bread?

Elsa: Just for bread and Strietzel (braided sweet bread) and pastries. And that would also be heated with wood, it was at first heated up with wood, until the wood turned to coals. Then she would disperse the coals evenly. Then my mother would always test the heat with a piece of paper, to see if it was warm enough or not. And then she would take the risen dough down to the baking room. And then my mother would always bake six or seven loaves of bread. They were round loaves. They were delicious! They were delicious!
Marianne: Yes, I’m sure.

Elsa: She would shove them into the oven, and they immediately turned black from the heat. And then they were in the oven for about two hours.

Marianne: That long?

Elsa: Yes, one-and-a-half or two hours. Then she would take them out with a paddle and cut off the black part with a knife, and then what remained was a very beautiful [-?]-. Oh, that bread was wonderful!

Marianne: And in Austria she did not bake bread?

Elsa: Well, no…

Marianne: There was no room.

Elsa: There was no room.

Marianne: And one could also buy good bread.

Elsa: Our landlady, she had a baking oven. But they made it simpler and more comfortable for themselves by buying the bread in the Strassberger bakery.

Marianne: That was good, too.

Elsa: Oh yes, but at home in Udvarhely we always baked bread, although we also had bakeries. Many people bought the bread. Or they could take the dough to the baker, and he would bake it. And then he would form the loaves and put a tag on them with your name written on it. And after two hours, you went and picked up the bread. But my mother always made the bread. Like the Siegmunds. And then my mother baked the Strietzel there, too. The Strietzel, it did not require such high heat, and she always put it in later [after the bread]. The Strietzel was wonderful!

Marianne: She baked this every week?

Elsa: The bread, every week.

Marianne: The Strietzel?

Elsa: The Strietzel, not [every week]. The Strietzel, only on holidays. She would bake just one Strietzel.
Marianne: Did she also bake Dobos Torte there?
Elsa: No.
Marianne: She baked the Dobos Torte in the other oven.
Elsa: In the oven [regular oven].
Marianne: And just for holidays.
Elsa: Just for holidays.
Marianne: Did she use the cake forms for the Dobos Torte?
Elsa: Yes… Then we learned it from her. And then she did not bake anymore, because Grete Tante was a great baker. And then later I took it over, after Grete moved to Mühlbach. Herta was not so interested.
Marianne: And in Austria you also made the Dobos Torte?
Elsa: [-?-] Well, yes, in that house…
Marianne: But right after the war there was no butter and no eggs.
Elsa: No, no…[-?-]
Also dried fruit. Yes, my mother also dried fruit in the summer — apples and plums, these Italian prune plums. And she would dry them in the baking oven. After she had baked the bread and taken it out, the oven was still warm enough, so that she would put the fruit in on large sheets and would dry apples and plums. And in the winter, we…
Marianne: And they kept well?
Elsa: Oh yes, they kept well. Then we filled sacks with these…
Marianne: Did you have to add sugar to them?
Elsa: No, no.
Marianne: Why don’t people make this nowadays?
Elsa: Where? Here? Because they can buy it in the store.
Marianne: But they are expensive.
Elsa: Well, I’m convinced that the farmers on the farm make these. And then we filled up
the sacks, and in fact, in linen sacks, where the air could enter a little but flies and pests
could not. And then we would hang up the sacks in the pantry. And in the winter…

Marianne: And you don't need to put sugar on top?
Elsa: No, no, no.
Marianne: You just put them like that into the oven?
Elsa: Just in the oven. Particularly with the apples, my mother would make a soup with
dried apples, with a pork bone or a piece of ham or bacon. And the soup, it tasted
very good. Because she first cooked the pork bone or ham or whatever she had.
And then she added the dried fruit (apples) until it thickened, then made a roux
out of fat and flour. And that went in. And then lots of sour cream. And that was such a
good soup. And then we would eat the soup with the meal, and ham with it, and that
was a meal. And afterwards … the apples...
Marianne: Everything got used, nothing was thrown out.
Elsa: No, in our house, everything got used, with the pig, too.
Marianne: Not just with the pig, but with fruit as well.
Elsa: With fruit as well. We never bought jam. All the jam we made at home — strawberries,
raspberries, apricots, apple jam, plum jam. And then in the fall, when the apples
were ripe, then we would buy the apples from the farmers as they brought the
apples into the towns in great big baskets. And they sold these in the open market.
And my mother bought enough apples for the whole winter.
Marianne: And they kept well?
Elsa: They kept well. We had a storeroom in the store. And at the top, there were two rows of
shelves, and we filled up the shelves with one or two layers of apples and they kept well
there. It was a dark room.
Marianne: And fairly cold?
Elsa: Fairly cool, but not that they would freeze.
Marianne: And the rats couldn't get up there?
Elsa: No, no, there were no rats there. Maybe…we had mice everywhere. But not rats. The rats were mainly in the cellar. And then we had fresh apples all winter. But we also had to save.

And then my grandmother in Mühlbach, they [sic] had vineyards. And then before the grape harvest, they picked the grapes and stored many of the grapes and hung them up on poles in the vineyard, and they also lasted until Christmas.

Marianne: Yes? They kept well that long?

Elsa: They kept well that long.

Marianne: How is that possible? Here you buy grapes, and you have to eat them in a week.

Elsa: Well yes, Marianne, those were a different type of grape, and…

Marianne: Did they also make wine with the grapes?

Elsa: Oh yes, oh yes! My grandmother, she didn’t have a vineyard outside [the city], just grapes in her yard… But my uncle and my aunt (the one who made all the beautiful cross stitch needlework), they had a large vineyard, outside the city, where the vineyards were. They could not go into their own vineyard every day, because there were guards who guarded the vineyards. They could only go into the vineyard once a week, on Saturday. In their own vineyard, just once a week! And then my aunt and uncle would go and bring grapes home to last for the whole week, in the summer and in the fall when they began to ripen. And then usually in October or November there was the grape harvest. The grape harvest, it always lasted a few days, and all the owners would go out with workers and would pick the grapes and throw them into large wooden vats, those beautiful grapes. And then one of the farmers would wash his feet really well.

Marianne: Yes?!

Elsa: And would roll up his pants.

Marianne: Yes? Did they really do that?

Elsa: Oh yes, that’s how it was back then.
Marianne: Did he wash his feet well? [laughter]

Elsa: Oh yes, really well! [laughter] Then he stepped again into this wooden vat and squashed the wine grapes. And then we poured off the juice, then they took the juice into the town, and stored it in the cellar…and then the juice began to ferment, and then it became grape cider, first grape cider.

Marianne: And you could drink that as well?

Elsa: Oh yes. And that had no alcohol. It was already a little…it spritzed, you know.

Marianne: Yes, just like in Austria.

Elsa: Just like in Austria. And then later it became wine.

Marianne: Was it mostly white wine?

Elsa: Yes, white wine. In Udvarhely the Siegmunds and my mother and the Fernengels would make wine out of red currants, because in our area there were no wine grapes. Udvarhely was not such a farming area, and no wine grapes grew there. But then they made wine out of red currants. The currants would be crushed, but not with the feet — with a machine, some type of machine, and then the currants would be crushed, and there we had to add sugar.

Marianne: They are sour.

Elsa: They are sour, and the sugar allowed them to ferment. My father, and all of us, would always fill a few large glass bottles. And then the wine would begin to ferment, and the red currant wine was very good.

Marianne: And were there also alcoholics back then like nowadays?

Elsa: Oh yes! Well, there were not as many as here. We would see people on the street who were drunk. For example, I knew a young fellow in our town who was a little [-?-]. He came from a good family. His brothers, they all had nice restaurants. But he was… When it came to drinking, he would really drink. But he was well-known in all of Udvarhely. He was funny. He didn’t do anything bad. But then he would stagger around the streets, and would sing, and would sing. He was well-known in all of
Udvarhely.

Marianne: There were people at that time who drank too much, but not as many as here.

Elsa: But people did drink a lot of wine and beer, and drank wine with meals.
Marianne: This tape was recorded on October 18, 1987, in Norman, Oklahoma. [To Max]: Okay, you can start reading.

Max: Dear Marianne,

I don’t know how I can report on everything about my dynamic and volatile life. There is a German saying that goes: To give is better than to receive. This saying has accompanied me my entire life.

My dear parents had five children. After I finished my business school studies in Kronstadt in the year 1921, I wanted to study business in Germany. After one year’s study at the University in Frankfurt, I had to break off my studies, because my father went bankrupt. I got a job at the commercial bank in Schässburg. This bank had a branch in Udvarhely, and as soon as a job became available, I applied for this position. In this way, the problem was resolved. I lived in my parents’ home and did not have to pay rent. Trude had just about finished her medical studies. My father could not help her, so I jumped in and helped her to finish her studies. I supported my parents for 10 years. Even today, I am so happy and thankful to have done this.

In the bank, I continued to advance until I reached the post of director. At last, I was in a good financial situation, so that I could marry. The splendor did not last long. The second World War broke out. I was conscripted into the Hungarian army and came to the Polish front against the Russians. One fine day the Russian [i.e., American] soldiers captured my regiment. After three years, which were terrible, I was released from captivity and came to Rüstorf. The rest of the story you already know. Mutti and I worked diligently and did everything possible to help you to complete your studies. Until the present day, I hold fast to the saying: It is better to give than to receive.

I wish you a quiet and satisfying life. Mutti and I love you very much,

Vati