

Interviewee: Helga Mansfield (HM)

Date: November 13, 2014

Location: Phone interview – Interviewee in Huntley, IL and interviewer in Marquette, MI

Interviewer: Maranda Macmaster (MM)

HM: Ok.

MM: Alright, this is Maranda Macmaster in Marquette, Michigan, interviewing Helga Mansfield. Hello, Helga.

HM: Hello. Hi Maranda, nice talking to you again.

MM: Yeah, it's nice talking to you. Can you please tell me where you are currently located?

HM: I'm currently in Huntley, Illinois.

MM: Huntley, Illinois, thank you.

HM: Yes.

MM: Um, I am just going over this again, but I'm interviewing you to hear your story of how you acclimated into living in the United States of America. Are you ready to start?

HM: Yes, go ahead, ask the questions.

MM: Ok, so where were you born?

HM: I was born, actually, in, right now it's the Czech Republic, uh, Czechoslovakia, it is, uh, _____, they called it, and it was under German supervision at that time. My father was in the military, and he was, uh, he became the chief of police over there.

MM: Interesting. What is your birthdate?

HM: What is my birthdate?

MM: Yes.

HM: My birthdate, I was born 19 – in 1942, August 19th.

MM: Ok. Um...

HM: So I'm 72 years old.

MM: So, what did your mother do?

HM: My mother was just a housewife, she was, uh, she did a lot of sewing for other people, but, uh, she was basically just a housewife.

MM: Ok.

HM: My father was chief of police of _____, then he, then the war started, and he went into, unfortunately he was one of the, uh blue-blooded Aryans, so uh, he was in the SS.

MM: Oh, interesting.

HM: Yeah.

MM: What age were you when your father started, was he always in the military?

HM: Um, no, he, uh, like I said he was the chief of police.

MM: Ok.

HM: And then, uh, then he was drafted. Um, I never knew my father, because 1942 when I was born, it was getting towards the end of the war and we had to get out of, uh, the Russians overran us over there, and so we had to flee Czechoslovakia and had to go to Germany, since we were Germans.

MM: Wow. Do you have siblings?

HM: I had a half-sister.

MM: A half-sister, what was her name?

HM: Uh, Ingeborg.

MM: Ingeborg. Can you spell that for me please?

HM: I-N-G-E-B-O-R-G.

MM: Ok. Um, and what were your parents' names?

HM: My mother's name was Edeltraut, E-D-E-L-T-R-A-U-T. And my father was Joseph Thomas.

MM: Joseph Thomas. Ok. What was your education like?

HM: I, well, I have four years of college, University of _____. Uh, high school, I went to a Catholic high school, and then I graduated in, I think it was '60... Let me think, I'm trying to remember, it's been a long time. Uh, anyhow, I worked, uh, for about two to three years over there.

MM: Interesting. Um, what were some of your memories of your home country?

HM: Uh, well, when I grew up, when I was a child, I was very, very poor, there was no food, there was nothing, I ate my first orange when I was 12 years old. Um, I, it was very poor, we lived on rations, _____ the war, the country was in a rubble, so it wasn't very good.

MM: Yeah.

HM: But _____, you know the Germans are very resilient, they're starting to, you know, bring everything back, and, uh, education is free over in Germany, so uh, there's a plus to that, so uh... But I had a very poor childhood because there was nothing there, and, I mean, just about everybody had a poor childhood at that time.

MM: Yeah.

HM: 1945 the war was over, you know, I mean, it was just, and we were under occupation, you know, occupation, so, um, it was tough.

MM: Yeah. What was your... So, you mention that you went to a Catholic high school, so you grew up with a Catholic family?

HM: Yes. Yes, we were Catholics.

MM: How was your house influenced by religion? Was it, were you very Catholic, or...?

HM: I just, uh, when I was a kid, well, I did communion and confirmation and everything, but we kind of, you know, Catholic religion, we went to church every Sunday, so, uh, you know. It's just kind of like, once you get old, in old age it's kind of lax. I think it's just like over here.

MM: Yeah

HM: Yeah.

MM: What were some of your favorite foods?

HM: My favorite foods? (LAUGHS) Uh, probably – over there?

MM: Yes.

HM: Ok, my god, when I grew up, I mean, everything was favorite, we had schnitzel, we had _____braten, we had sauerbraten, we had a lot of fish. It's just, whatever we could get ahold of. (LAUGHS)

MM: And your mother did most of the cooking?

HM: Yes. Yes, my mother was an excellent cook, I learned a lot from her.

MM: Ok, beautiful. So, how old were you when you first decided you wanted to immigrate?

HM: Well, uh, I had a lot of American friends, because we had some sort of an exchange program from the German police department and American, we were working together, so I was in civil service when I came over here, and, uh, I had a lot of friends, and they invited me to come over here for a visit, so I came, I think in 1967 I came over here for, on a vacation, and, uh, fortunately, I met my husband in the airport. He was an associate, you know.

MM: Yeah.

HM: So, uh, he decided that, he fell in love with me and decided he wanted, I went back to Germany, and 1968 I came back and then I married John.

MM: John. What was his last name?

HM: John Roth, R-O-T-H.

MM: Roth, ok. So, what was your mother's, um, what was her reaction to you wanting to move to the United States?

HM: My mother was heartbroken. She, uh, she was heartbroken, but she had, she had remarried, because my father was declared dead, they never found him he was just lost in the war, and so she remarried when I was about 10 years old. And my stepfather and I never hit it off when I was young.

MM: What was your stepfather's name?

HM: Say again?

MM: What was your stepfather's name?

HM: My stepfath- uh, oh my god, Heinrich. Henry, Heinrich. We called him Henry.

MM: Ok. So your mother was heartbroken, what did your half-sister think?

HM: What did my who?

MM: Your half-sister?

HM: Oh, my half-sister. She, she enjoyed it, she, uh, she was behind me 100%, she was supporting me on that end, she was, she almost wanted to come over here, too, but like I said, she was married, and, uh, she had a good _____, she worked for the German military for 40-some years, so she had a good job, and, uh, they came to visit a few times over here. She, uh, 100% she supported me.

MM: That's very nice. How old would you say you were when you finally made the move?

HM: Uh, I think I was 25 years old.

MM: 25, ok. So, how did you, you flew here?

HM: How did I move here?

MM: Like did you fly in a plane?

HM: Oh yeah. I came over on – well, yes, I came over here, the first time I came to the states I came on a military plane, because I, um, you know, they gave me vacation and the military flew me over. Second time, I flew _____, I came over German, and, uh, like I said, I started my immigration process in Chicago.

MM: Chicago. Ok.

HM: Yeah.

MM: So what were some things that you noticed differently... that's here than when you're at your home country?

HM: You mean when I came over here?

MM: Yeah, did you notice anything different, like right away?

HM: Um.... Yes, yes, I mean, first of all, this country was overwhelming how big it was, compared to Germany, such a little country, and mean, at the time that I came over here we were still divided from East and West Germany, so it was really small. And uh, it was just, the cars were so big, and the streets were so wide, I mean, it was just overwhelming how big everything was.

MM: Definitely. So, you wanted to come here to marry your husband.

HM: Mmhmm.

MM: Did you work when you came here?

HM: Yes, I had a work visa, I worked for four years on a work visa. I worked for Chicago law enforcement, and, uh, I worked, I think I worked for about two years, and then I got pregnant with Michelle, and we decided we're moving out of Chicago, so, uh, since we had to leave Chicago, I had to quit my job.

MM: Ok.

HM: And, uh, then I had Michelle and I started working in a restaurant, because, uh, due to, my husband worked during daytime so I could work at night, so I became a cashier, hostess, cook, and whatever in a big restaurant here in _____.

MM: What did your husband do?

HM: My husband worked for _____ Electric, right now known as AT&T.

MM: Oh, ok. Um, let me see... So, when you immigrated, did you face any discrimination?

HM: Did I do what?

MM: Did you face any discrimination, were people rude to you, or... do you have any stories of anything like that?

HM: Uh, actually no. Actually, well, it was a little tough at the start, because when they found out I'm a German, you know, right after, you know, I mean, the war hasn't been over that long, 1945, I came 20 years later, but no, not really, not really. There was a lot of German people in the Chicago area, and I met quite a few German people, but I never experienced any discrimination, no.

MM: Ok, good.

HM: Matter of fact, everybody thought my accent was kind of cute, but like I said, due to my college education and everything I spoke fluent English, so, um, no problem.

MM: When you were in elementary school, I'm not really sure if they call it elementary in Germany, but –

HM: Yeah.

MM: Is that when you first started learning English?

HM: Uh, I started learning English in high school.

MM: In high school, ok.

HM: Yeah.

MM: And did your mother speak English?

HM: No. She spoke fluently Czechoslovakian.

MM: Ok. So you, so your family never spoke in English together.

HM: No.

MM: Interesting. So, how was it becoming a citizen, was that a hard process?

HM: I'm not a citizen yet _____

MM: Really?

HM: Yeah, I'm a registered alien since 1970, I have never, I started the citizen process two years before _____ died, and it's such a lengthy, lengthy, expensive process, I never, I have the same rights as an American citizen, the only thing I can't do is vote.

MM: Interesting. Yeah, that's what we're talking about in class, is how hard of a process it is.

HM: It is a very, very hard process. I mean, you're getting fingerprinted, you're getting asked for _____, I mean, over and over, same thing over and over, very lengthy, very, uh, I mean, _____.

MM: Yes.

HM: I mean, they could really, you know, um, I think they make it a little easier now, but, uh, because President Obama is starting, you know, trying to loosen up a little bit, but I don't think it's fair to us that he does that, 'cause everybody else, we had to go through, I mean, gosh, what we had to, backwards, forwards, whatever, and it's expensive, it's a very, very expensive process.

MM: Yes.

HM: Yeah, I have all the papers here, I have started all the papers, but due to your grandpa's sickness, _____, everything got put on hold, I was ready to become a citizen when I was 70 years old.

MM: Yeah.

HM: But uh, well, I guess I'm gonna ask my daughters if I should go for it, see and my kids are American citizens, so, you know, I think, um, _____ but it's very, very expensive.

MM: Ok, how many children do you have?

HM: I have two.

MM: So there's Michelle and?

HM: Ingo, I-N-G-O. Ingo Joe.

MM: Ok, and you have grandchildren?

HM: Oh yeah, I get three grandchildren. Plus from my husband's side I get a few more.

MM: Yes, I being one of them! So, when you first came here, did you have any, like, clubs that were mostly aimed for German people to make it easier for your assimilation into the United States?

HM: No, actually, there wasn't, I belonged to the _____ in Buffalo Grove, which is the German-American club, but they had nothing to do with making things easier, it's just _____, like I said, I'm a fantastic cook, and, uh, they always like my potato salad, so, I joined the club due to, I met a German girl here and, uh, when I came over here first, and she initiated me into the club, and it just, it just was a nice club. I haven't been there for years, but, uh, like I say, I get too busy.

MM: Good. Um, let me see... I'm trying to think of – So, um, you just said that you can't vote because you're technically not a citizen.

HM: Yeah. I'm a registered alien, I'm an illegal registered alien (LAUGHS) So you have the green card, right now it is the beige card.

MM: Yeah. So, the politics, obviously from when you were in Germany was probably crazy with everything going on, um, so, what have you noticed that's different here?

HM: Well, the parties. I think Republican, the Independent, and the Democrats, uh, we didn't have them over in Europe, uh, we only had, well, like I say, we had Democrats and Green parties and whatever they called it, you know, it's just changed so much over the years, but at the time we had, our leader of the country was Eisenhower – ah – no – Adenauer, excuse me, Adenauer, and, uh, he was a big Democrat, and, uh, but even _____ political parties like we have here.

MM: Yeah.

HM: They don't have, we don't have any lobbyists, uh, you know, we don't have any, you know... We didn't have anything like over here, the elections, it's totally different over there than _____. It's still totally different, it's just, it's got lots of, I mean

_____, but, uh, like I say, it's just, um, it's different, there's too many political parties over here.

MM: Yes, definitely. So, you kept in contact with your mother.

HM: Mmhmm.

MM: So, did you, you called on the phone probably, right?

HM: Oh yeah, letter writing, I'd send a lot of care packages over there, um, there's a lot of stuff they didn't have over there at that time, and I came over and I supported them, you know and uh, I sent money over because, uh, you know, things weren't that hot over there when I left, I had a good job over there, so, uh, it was ok for me, but, uh, for them it was still, you know. And, uh, there's a lot of stuff they, I don't know. It's just uh, letters, phone calls, packages, whatever. You know.

MM: Did you visit home?

HM: Oh yeah. I went over every second year, every two years.

MM: Oh, very nice.

HM: Yeah.

MM: And you, um, would you bring your children with you?

HM: Uh, my daughter turned one over there.

MM: Aw, very cute.

HM: Yeah. Yeah, she had her first birthday, she learned how to walk over there.

MM: Ok, um, another question I have, have you noticed anything in the United States that's very similar in Germany and Czech Republic, like, um, have you, anything that's very German influenced here?

HM: Uh, well, I, _____, there's a lot of German people over here, and, uh, lots of German communities, I mean, there's _____, I mean, I notice a lot of, um, German, I don't know, like German restaurants, a lot of German stuff over here, so it was never, I never got too homesick, I mean, I missed my mother and I missed my, you know, my friends over there, but, uh, Germans were always available over here, you know, especially in Chicago, where I started out of, you know, they had a big German neighborhood over there, so we frequented a lot of German restaurants, a lot of German, you know, so, it wasn't an issue.

MM: Yes.

HM: Not much of a, you know, I'm, uh, I was surprised at how, how many different, how do you say, different countries are represented in this country.

MM: Yeah.

HM: You wouldn't find that in Germany, now you would, because they had all the foreign workers coming over, they needed them because all the men were gone after the war.

MM: Yeah.

HM: So, uh, but, uh, you know. Totally different.

MM: So your husband, he was born in America, right?

HM: Yeah, my husband was born in America.

MM: Ok. And then, you met my grandfather, uh -

HM: I divorced John when my daughter turned 18. My son was already gone when, uh, when I, we were, we were kind of grown apart, you know, when you have a restaurant, I bought a restaurant and bar in the '80s, and, uh, that's where I met your grandpa. And when your grandpa got divorced he kind of frequented my bar, my restaurant and bar, and we got closer and closer, we kind of were in the same situation. He was alone, I was alone, you know.

MM: Yeah.

HM: So we met, he was a very, very sweet man.

MM: Yes, he was.

HM: Yeah.

MM: So, you've strictly lived in the United States since you've immigrated, right?

HM: Yeah.

MM: Ok, so. When your immigration, did your immigration experience match your expectations?

HM: Oh, yes.

MM: Yes?

HM: Definitely, definitely, I, uh, I knew it was, uh, there's so many opportunities I have over here I wouldn't have had over in Germany when I grew up. Uh, I mean, when I was in my 20s, you know, I would have never had my own house, we never would have had two cars, probably one. TVs were also a luxury over there at that time, so, I mean, it was, uh, yes, I never regretted coming over here, I love this country, and, uh, I love the freedom you have, you can do whatever you want and, you know, I just absolutely, I lucked out when I came over here.

MM: I'm glad! I'm glad you've, uh, and hopefully you can become a citizen, because you already are, you know.

HM: Oh yes, I-I-I will, I probably, I mean, I've been 40-some years over here.

MM: Yes.

HM: I mean, it's been a long time. (LAUGHS) So, uh, so, yeah. I have all the paperwork and everything, it cost me about six, seven hundred dollars just to get the paperwork downloaded and

everything, you know. And now you have to go through a couple of _____, but that's no big deal.

MM: That's cool.

HM: I just never had, uh, the time and never had, you know, I was working full-time, I, uh, you know, my history was after I worked at the restaurant and bar, I went and worked for a German company, Union Special in Huntley, and, uh, I worked for them for 10 years, I was a translator, yeah.

MM: Ok.

HM: And, uh, and then I went to work for, uh, _____ Corporation, _____, I was a senior buyer and logistic administrator, and all this, those jobs were due to my German background. I kept up with my German 'cause there were German companies.

MM: I really appreciate that, it shows that you can keep your culture here.

HM: Oh yeah, definitely.

MM: So, and you're retired now, right?

HM: Yes I am. I retired three months before your grandpa passed away.

MM: Ok. Um, so, we already talked about how hard it is becoming a citizen. How else do you think it's hard for people to immigrate into the United States?

HM: Uh...The process of obtaining a visa, I think, is very, you have to have a visa to come over here, and, uh, if you want to come over here to work you have to have, a company from over there has to _____ over here, they have to have certain education, they have, I mean, it's pretty tough, so, uh, you know, to come over, legally come over here, you know. I mean, a lot of illegals run the border, and that's, but they're mostly, you know.

MM: Yes.

HM: Blue-collar workers, and, uh, when somebody with education comes over they it really, uh, kind of hard for some people to come over.

MM: Yes, definitely. Another question I have is with your background, you were already in America when the Berlin Wall was torn down, but I wanted to know your experience with that.

HM: Well, I was a fan on John F. Kennedy, you know, and he was a Berliner, so he kept a close eye on the wall, and yes, I was over here, and my, uh, it was great when the wall came down, it was great, uh, I mean, putting a fence in the middle of a country, you know, and, some of your relatives over there, some of your relatives over here, you can't go and visit because you can't, uh, they won't let you in or they won't let you back out or whatever, I mean, I was happy when the wall came down, let's put it that way. It was, it was really exhilarating.

MM: And you watched it on the news?

HM: Yes, I did.

MM: Ok. Yes, I just thought I should add that in since it fits. So, what else would you like to talk about? Is there anything here that you saw that was confusing or funny to you, any customs that we do here?

HM: Well, uh, some of, I don't know, uh, nothing really, I'm a pretty liberal person, so I go along with anything, but my thing is the religions over here, to have so many different religions over here, I've never, in Germany it was cut and dry, either you are a Catholic or you are a Protestant, or you have the Jewish faith, that-that's it, you know. We didn't have the Mormons, we didn't have the Quakers, we didn't have all the other off the wall, Methodist and all that stuff, you know, we don't have those, we didn't have those religions over in Germany or Europe. That's what I, what struck my attention, I, it was just, it's just different.

MM: Yes.

HM: But otherwise, uh, you know.

MM: Did your mother ever come here and visit?

HM: Oh yes, oh yes.

MM: Did she like her experience here?

HM: She's been twice. But she passed away in the '70s because, uh, she had cancer of the kidney, and, uh, she passed away, so I haven't had my mother for quite a while.

MM: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

HM: Well, I'm 72, and I expect by now she would be in her 90s.

MM: Yeah.

HM: So, you know, yeah.

MM: So, after your mother's passing, did you ever return to Germany?

HM: Oh, yeah, every three years. And then due to my, uh, due to my job I did a lot of extensive traveling, so Europe, uh, all over the world, I've been to China, I went to, uh, Brazil, I went to, wherever, you know, I, I did a lot of traveling, yes.

MM: So you've seen a lot of cultures.

HM: Yes.

MM: Interesting. What... Let me think if there's any- is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your life in Germany?

HM: My life in Germany? It was just like everybody else's life, like, uh, I was a college student just like everybody else, and then I went to work for the, um, like I say, for the Americans as a civil servant and exchange _____, I worked for the German police department, and then I learned, I, for some reason, I had a lot of American friends, I went all over Europe with the German Americans, we were opening and closing, uh, bases, you know, we were tracking

shipments, and, uh, it was an interesting job, and everybody told me how great the States were, so I came over and visited. And I ran into my husband on the, on the (LAUGHS), when I went to customs.

MM: Yes. Yeah, I think that's pretty much about it for the interview, here, I'm going to stop recording now, thank you so much.

HM: Well, you're welcome, if you have any more questions let me know, I'd be glad to answer.