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Gertrude Schmidt Memoir

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Interview and memoir

1 tape, 40 mins., 10 pp.

GERMAN-AMERICANS PROJECT

Schmidt discusses being a German-American living in Springfield during WWII: her family, Adolf Hitler's rise to power and the reaction of the German-American community.

Interview by L. L. Leamons, 1972

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GERTRUDE SCHMIDT MEMOIR

German-Americans Project

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by L. L. Leamons for the Oral History Office during February of 1972.

Gertrude Schmidt was born in St. Louis, Missouri and moved to Springfield, Illinois as a small child. As a German-American living in Springfield during World War II she was interested in political developments in Germany and the reactions to those developments of her friends and neighbors.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational state that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Gertrude Schmidt, February, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

L. L. Leamons, Interviewer

Q. How long have you lived in Springfield?

A. Well, we came here in 1912 about sixty some years and we lived at this house.

Q. What did your family do?

A. Well, when my dad first came to town he was a coal miner. He worked at the coal mines in the winter and an ice wagon in the summertime.

Q. Where did he work in the coal mine at?

A. Way out close to the fairgrounds. What did they call that? Anyway, the shaft was behind the fairgrounds.

Q. Oh, yes, I think I know what you mean now. Out in back of where they have the police pistol range.

A. The escape part was way back. He used to walk it every day, too.

Q. Where did you live?

A. On Washington Street. East Washington Street. Then the folks after that ran a grocery store at Fifteenth and Washington, where the high-rise is now.

Q. Where did your family come from before that?

A. Well they both came from St. Louis, but my mother came from Patocha originally and she went into St. Louis to work, but my dad was born there. He—his dad worked fishing the river.

Q. Was it the Mississippi?

A. Yes, the Mississippi River. That is the way his dad made a living.

Q. You said he came from where?

A. He was born in the United States, but his grandfather came from Switzerland; was raised in Switzerland. That would be my great-grandfather. He came to this country and wanted to have papers taken out, and by taking citizenship out here he lost the right to his property and a title to land in Switzerland. But when I was a young girl—oh, I don't know around fourteen or fifteen something like that—we did have some inheritance from it. But it took a long time, you see that was over a couple of generations to get it straightened out.

Q. When did you say he came over, about?

A. I haven't the slightest idea. Let's see, Poppa was eighty, and his dad didn't live quite so long. I think around sixty some years. And then whatever the grandfather had lived. I didn't know my grandfather on Poppa's side at all, because he died somewhere around when Poppa was twelve.

Q. Then he must have come over about . . .

A. It was way back.

Q. Would you say between 1770 and 1800? What are your earliest recollections of Adolph Hitler and his grasp for power?

A. Well, I thought about that, but you know I think actually I . . . don't remember anything too much about him until after the First World War. And the part that came to mind then was when he was head of this National Socialist Party, at that time, it was about 1923. And then when he was arrested they—he and some other men—were arrested for treason against the government of that time. And he was sent to prison. While he was in prison he wrote this book. And my own personal feelings was that when they sent him to prison that that would be the end of him. But actually he was getting a real good start.

Q. Did most people around share that same feeling that they didn't care for him already or did some of them think that he was all right? He was working against the Depression in Germany?

A. Well, I don't know really, about most people, because Dad's folks and nobody mentioned it too much really. We just considered it none of our business, actually, in the beginning. But as a younger person I wanted it to be more peaceful, I just didn't like war. Of course when it came up to the part where people were drafted and it started getting closer in your own family and the people around you then you did start to worry.

Q. So as it came time to start drafting and everything, and as we did in fact enter into the war did the feelings towards him change?

A. Well, it is surprising how fast—you know how there is a little period in there where the National Party came in and before it came the time that he was really a leader. There was some, Hindenburg I think was president in 1933 and he had named Hitler, I think it was Chancellor then. And this is where it really started to worry people, because he had already organized over ten million people in this Nationalist Party of Hitler's. And he really wanted to be president, but this other one was elected. And then when this president died, which was around 1934, Hitler then just took over as dictator.

Q. Do you remember any of the feelings at the time?

A. I think then people really started to worry. They knew there would be trouble and they knew that before. Well, I remember lots of times when they would say, "Well he is nothing but an old paperhanger, and that it didn't make any difference," you know. Politically he was nothing, but when this Nationalist Party started gathering so many people as followers, it got to the place that it started to worry people. And then there was always little leaks in the news that Jewish people were being mistreated and other nationalities. They wanted a pure race there, they did not want anybody in the country that would be junk. But I think that it must have been around ten years where these young boys going up and it was something exciting for them, to go into this party, and they marched. And about the same time Italy had a dictator. Everybody, the younger people thought that it was fine and fun. They would go off to these camps and just have a ball.

Q. You mean camps for military training?

A. Yes, and they always presented it to them as they were going to be a super race and they were going to rule the whole world; it wasn't going to be just their country, they would rule the whole world.

Q. How did you actually learn about this mistreatment of Jewish people or things like this back in Germany?

A. Well, we used to have a lot of Jewish friends earlier, before we came to Springfield, and we lived by them and we still have. . . . Edith Shanburg over here on Seventeenth and Brown, she, well I have known her all my life. Like Jack Weiner, we lived next door to them on Washington Street. . . .

Q. Was it through these people that you gained prominence?

A. Their folks, or someone was there or someone was connected. Being neighbors and friends you bring your troubles to them. He renamed the country, the government in other words, the Third Reich. He renamed it and he was like the father image, you know, for the Feurer. That was what he called himself. This has just about slipped my mind.

Q. What did people here think about the renaming of the country?

A. I don't think that they thought too much of that. If they did I never heard anything about it.

Q. Did you notice any differences in the attitudes of the people in the neighborhoods, or just in general, towards the German-American people, as Hitler began to make his objectives more known?

A. Well, I was just trying to remember if there was anything that a

person would worry about, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. Our neighbors were our neighbors, and of course we carried the name of Schmidt, and we would have had something to worry about if there had been something.

Q. The reason I asked that is because you know there were some hard feelings during the First World War, and I was just kind of wondering if there was something comparable.

A. I don't think so. We were so busy at this time. We were working; building a curtain cleaners—we had that curtain cleaners here—and it didn't seem to bother us at all. Another thing, during the War itself we had to do without drivers and some of our helpers in the laundry and we had to just knuckle down and do a lot more work, just to keep the laundry going. Several times the trucks would sit in the garage; we couldn't get them out because we had gasoline rationing. So finally we decided to do without the delivery, and evidently we cut down so much of our business that we could handle it then, without the delivery. Then there was rationing of food, there were a lot of things you had to give in to and work with, so you could be part of the team that was working to help beat them.

Q. How did the feeling of these same people, German-Americans, change as the war ended and news of Hitler's death?

A. Well, to me this is quite a ways back. I think mostly here it was that people were thrilled that it was over, because they had children, boys, someone in the Army, Navy or something. Some of them were sad because their boys didn't come back. They were glad it was over for others, too. Really I just don't know about that. I

know in the First World War the people were thrilled to death, I can remember that. I can't seem to remember quite what happened at the end of the Second World War. Well, the First World War everyone would hug and kiss anybody they found on the street. And everybody was on the street, they were all out. But after the Second World War I don't remember any of this.

Q. Is there anything else that you would add that you have thought of while we were talking?

A. On feelings of other people. Well our family has always been friendlier than most people. If someone would be angry with us we would probably try to smooth it over, rather than to make some issue of it. But there was a lot of high feelings during both of the wars, it wasn't just something that you liked.

Q. Did any of your friends, or people like this, of German-American ancestry notice any?

A. Well, now I think that, maybe, in St. Louis where there were breweries or something like that, they may have had this problem. Because it would be all nationalities working in there and sometimes a group of men—by the same token they were a lot of them drafted out, so I just don't know just how much work they had in the breweries at that time or if they were working. Because you see this was a necessary grain and so forth.

Q. Okay, thank you very much.

END OF TAPE