Donna McCrea: This is Donna McCrea. I’m the archivist for the University of Montana’s Mansfield Library. I’m recording today with Dr. Gertrud Lackschewitz at her home in the Rattlesnake [neighborhood of Missoula, Montana]. If you’ll please state and spell your complete name for the record.

Gertrud Lackschewitz: Yeah. I’m Gertrud Lackschewitz. Gertrud leaves off the ‘e’ and still spelled gar-trud in German, pronounced gar-trud. Lackschewitz, L-A-C-K-S-C-H-E-W-I-T-Z, which is my husband’s name who came from the east. Originally from Latvia Riga, Germany.

DM: What is your maiden name?

GL: My maiden name was very German. Degenhard.

DM: Can you spell that?


DM: OK. Can you tell us your date and place of birth?

GL: I was born in 1923, in March. In Gelsenkirchen, Germany. Nineteen twenty-three is sort of a loaded date because it was after the First World War. It was in the middle of hyper-inflation. It was a total upheaval of society and so forth. Gelsenkirchen, Germany spells the industrial center. Coal mines, heavy iron industry, sort of starting in the late nineteenth century. So a newly expanded mine town. The Butte of Germany.

GL: Okay. Where were your parents from? Where they from there?

GL: My father was. His father, my grandfather, came to Gelsenkirchen, originally of Central Germany to Ringea (?), where the name was from. He had become a business man and my father after him also. They worked in the nascent margarine business which, I don’t know, Unilever was a very famous firm that started making margarine. Was there anything else to the question?

DM: Your mother.
GL: Yeah. My mother was from the Rhineland. She from the Mosel River, from a small town at one of those many windings of the river. Her father had a cigar factory. So she was a very spoiled, precocious, young girl who played the piano and made poems.

DM: And what was her name?


DM: Ok. What about your father’s name?


DM: So now I’d like you to tell us a bit about your experiences growing up in Germany.

GL: Yes. Again, my first experiences were rather, I think it was a rather turbulent. My very first experience was not yet an experience. I was born as a preemie and burst upon the family as a second child, a little too early. My first memories are of living in this big city in the flat. There was a lot of turmoil. I remember the communist demonstrations on the streets. I remember the voices of the demonstrators there. Their red ties and their shouting, “Hunger, Arbeit, Brot.” Hunger, Work, Bread. So I think it was, on the one hand, a politically-loaded time.

The French were occupying. The French military was occupying the industrial center, the Ruhr industrial center because they wanted to make sure that the Germans, that the revenue from the coal and iron industry would not go to Germany, but to France as reparations for the First World War.

There were some underground resistance movements. My father was involved in them. Otherwise, I had a very sheltered home life. My mother had maids; she could play the piano and have parties in spite of coming up the long run with six children. My father was secure in his financial, so I thought. Except all the security broke down when the hyper-inflation came down and the money, people don’t realize how much uncertainty will come when suddenly the money is no longer worth what you thought it was, when it keeps coming up and down. But there were some nice nurse maids and...what shall I say about my first childhood? The roaring twenties that brought a lot of cultural impetus, it was really that after the first World War all Germany was waking up to modernity, in part because of the chaos, the social upheaval after the First World War. Am I talking loud enough?

DM: You’re fine.

GL: I remember my mother having evenings reading plays and theatre and my father was also quite interested in cultural events that happened in the city. Concerts were prominent. Then I also mentioned political talk. My father was always quite alert to these things and somehow
tried to think them through. He had been an officer in the Second World War and was very frustrated coming home; Germany having lost the war and all the consequences of that. Then there was the nascent Nazi party but my parents being sort of bourgeois were quite standoffish to that, particularly in the early times and couldn’t take them quite seriously. But what I didn’t pick up right as a child, but it became clear later to me, historically that there was sort of a very sharp polarization between the communist and leftist camps. It was either communism or National Socialism gradually. The question became more pointed towards that. Because the president, Hindenburg, was an old general of the First World War and not quite up to even understanding all the things that were going on at the time.

The Weimar Republic was the first republic that was founded after the breakdown of the monarch after the First World War. It didn’t function very well. People were all full of criticism. We had parties, but not two or three, but thirty parties. This made any kind of government extremely difficult. We had the huge weight of the Versailles Treaty of the reparations depressing the economy. All of these things. They were, my father was quite interested in them. He had a friend...

Again, my childhood, my mother was very imaginative. We had a little puppet theatre and there were puppet plays going on and when we grew up we had a, we had a weekend getaway on a farm which we loved very much. We were singing songs driving out. My father had a car, which was rare at the time. We’re very happy to be in the country there.

Very unfortunately when I was nine my six-year-old sister, younger sister, had climbed...There was a old barn and my parents were on a walk and she climbed up on the rafters. We were appalled and crying to her to come down, that it was dangerous. Then she actually fell and had first a concussion and then the meningitis and my mother was... my parents were extremely concerned and put her to the first doctor...there was a children’s hospital in Gelsenkirchen.

But he experimented on her. There was a serum against meningitis at the time. Instead of giving her the prescribed way first, twice within six weeks, she got better. Her headaches, her crying, her cramps, her symptoms had all subsided after the first treatment and he didn’t give her the second which was prescribed. Instead he injected something else into her brain and the end effect was that she was paralyzed and blinded for life. It sort of broke up our childhood. My mother was a hundred percent concerned with this ill child and we were distributed among relatives for a while, until she came back from the hospital. Then we had, the child was again transferred from hospital to hospital. There were other experiments. Originally her eyes were not affected, but she is a multiple victim of doctor’s errors. They gave her X-rays on her brain and this resulted in her blindness. So we changed, we even moved away from the town to the
suburbs when she came back and sort of had a new phase of life when I was ten years old. I was very attached to this big city.

My experience in school was very funny too. I didn’t realize that I was near-sighted when I was small and I just thought that was the way to world was; it was slightly blurred and not quite visible. My mother was also near-sighted. I came in to school; suddenly I couldn’t read the blackboard. I couldn’t read very well. So I was having near-sighted. That was a huge disappointment to me because I was the only one in class with glasses. The little boys ran after me. (Says German phrase) My last wish to have one with glasses. I remember.

And the other childhood experience which was slightly traumatic was the Catholic Church, the initiation into communion and confession and so forth. The religious teachers were very stern and I was very conscientious. We also had lists of possible sins we would have committed and I remember having real difficulty when I was supposed to confess, go to confession for the first time. I was supposed to have repentance and I couldn’t repent. Somehow [I] had terrible difficulty with this concept and I finally did go in and tell them how many times I had been disobedient and how many times I probably had trouble fighting with my siblings, whatever the sins were. So I had a very conflicted relationship because when the first communion came along the teacher had told us that it would be the greatest experience of our life, Jesus would come in our heart, and we would be extremely happy and so forth. When I took the oath absolutely nothing happened. Nothing whatsoever. So I sort of felt excluded from the saints.

DM: Were your parents Catholic or was this just a Catholic school you had gone to?

GL: There are two answers. My parents were in name Catholic, but didn’t go to church. So we kids were very conflicted. I remember we held counsel [about] what we could do about our parents not going to church because we were so indoctrinated by school. It was at that time mandatory that all children attended religious instruction in schools. Either Protestant or Catholic, there were two kinds. So we all dramatically drifted into this split of conscience in this particular case because my parents prided themselves of being sort of above all this but thought it would be a good thing, an absolutely accepted thing, that the children go through with, but didn’t imagine what it caused in our lives.

So this sort of influenced my thoughts probably all of my life about this. Actually when I was fourteen I finally left the church because I had some negative experiences, particularly in confessional that the priests were prying into sexual matters and things like that. I mean it started with the little girls at that time. So this is just on the very personal life that this happened.
When I was ten Hitler came to power. At first the reaction of my family, my environment, was “Oh God, this is a bad thing.” But Hitler managed to do several very popular things right away. One was that he renounced, not only renounced the Versailles Treaty, he declared that Germany from hence forth was not paying a penny anymore. The whole people rejoiced because finally the economy could go on its own resources. The second thing was his turning to the working class and the attention that was paid to the rights of the workers, to them having a vacation, to them having this in pay. So with that Hitler brought the working class people in his following. The second was also that the business community started to get some movement with all the changes in the economy and thought they could work with this fellow after all. My father was one of those. He had a friend from the First World War who had been an officer who had turned to the Nazi party early and was very much a believer, which my father was not.

But in 1930, he [my father’s friend] was a very capable man, and he became the governor of our province. Then in 1934 he was looking out for people to help him in his government, in particular, he looked at my father as a candidate for establishment of social service, of government social services. He [my father] was a business man, he knew how to handle money and he was a good manager. So my father agreed and became a Nazi, if you want to call it that. He said lots of things are not going the right way, but if people have some sense or turn away from it, it’ll go worse. We have to try to work with them. He also was very attracted by the offer of the social services because he was just, that was just his personality. Suddenly he has the power to establish all kinds of social agencies and he was no longer home. He had to go to the Munster, which was the capital of our province. So it was then Mother who shepherded us all. He got involved also ideologically and somehow there was a strain in particularly, the nationalist, the patriotic part, which had captured him. So we became right away as children of ten, eleven, members of the youth movement. We get little uniforms at that time. Little brown dresses with white collars on them. I must say what this participation, and I participated until I was seventeen. With twelve I became a leader.

The Hitler youth was modeled after the girl and boy scouts and after the traditions of the German “Wonder Vogel,” nature and singing. The political indoctrination was part of it, but I must say of all the organizations that Baldur von Schirach, who was the head of the youth movement, was the most decent guy, so we never…it was not part of our indoctrination and of the indoctrination we had to do as leaders to talk about the Jewish question, for instance, at all. We had heroes in the National Socialist Movement who had been killed, and so forth. We talked about those.

We were also very free to build our programs ourselves. It was not restricted or supervised in any way. So when I was twelve, I became a leader of a little group of twelve. Then when I was, two years later, thirteen, fourteen, yeah fourteen, I think the next rank, and I became a leader...
of a group which was about eighty or ninety students. By the time I was fifteen we organized the trips, field trips.

By that time Hitler had abolished the Saturday school. We used to go to school six days a week, but just morning. Instead there were these youth movements and the youth movement actually became compulsory, although it was never quite enforced. It couldn’t really, not everybody came. But I must say that in my development that this particular early responsibility had become an outlet for me because school was very authoritarian and basically, although my parents were very understanding, warm, and so forth, but still it was clear who was in charge and who was not. There was not enough outlet for our own selves, or creativity. All this emphasis we have now was not there. I got to play the piano because that was part of the schedule, when I was eight or so. But here, in this youth movement, I could suddenly do what I thought, what I wanted. Arrange things and learn things. So it was for me, in a way, a most defining experience. But at the same time I was partially, I was very bored by it. By the marching and so forth. But we did a lot of singing and in our family there was musical, we played the recorders. So every part of every meeting was learning folk songs. There were two kinds of literature. We worked with musical literature. We worked off the folk song tradition which was very strong in Germany, in particular, had been regulated and there was literature on it from the Wonder Vogel movement. The other was patriotic songs, particularly when the war started. We kind of just sang them. I don’t think we quite understood what we were singing when we were singing. “We would march forward until the whole world falls into shards,” and this sort of braggy and aggressive tone which gradually came into it. When I was seventeen I said I wanted to go into an academic career. Actually, originally, I wanted to study medicine in part because that was non-political. I had to devote all my time to preparing because we have at the end of high school exams and if you have good exams, you make it to the university.

So I must say I was in part disenchanted with where, that the youth movement wasn’t really going anywhere. It was just going in circles. Then at the same time I hadn’t…well until the war, it really broke out, and that was big in my youth. A big change when suddenly we heard that the war broke out. We had not been prepared for this. We did not believe that there was any reason for it. As a family and as an environment and many people were shocked. I remember very clearly sitting at the table, at the radio, and listening to the announcement that this morning at such-and-such o’clock we traversed the Polish border because we were attacked by the Poles.

You know this was the ruse that was used for the attack. We were in part indoctrinated that Germany was entitled to part of what we call the Polish corridor. But we were scared and I remember after having heard this announcement saying loudly in the family, “We will never, NEVER win this war.” I felt doomed. My whole family, they talked in low voices as if somebody
was sick or something that we couldn’t quite understand what was going on. The mood though, in general, changed when Germany became victorious in (unintelligible).

Things happened and I finished high school and after that I spent a year with my sister. My mother used to have always young women staying in our house as caretakers for my sister. We felt that we should also partake in this, in her care. I taught her and we worked together and my mother was very intensively focused on teaching her something. She could write Braille, she could transfer Braille books. My mother had a physical therapist who even taught her how to walk. But then when the war broke out, how to walk on crutches. She even attended school for a year. But when the war broke out, she had recurrences of the meningitis and she fell back again. She had two more of these recurrences. So I spent the year with her.

Then deferred the work service and everybody after school had to do one year, after high school, of work service. (Speaks in German) – translated work service. We were working, we were gathered in camps and worked in the country. At that time it was war time and many of them men were in war so the farmers were short of hands and we worked on farms. One month on each farm. We couldn’t really warm up to anything but then we were transferred again. There was a lot of indoctrination going on and also a lot of regimentation. I think during that time I had really the inside of the insidiousness of the regime and how we had practically all week long, one-half of ourselves. There was constantly sports, housework, or work in the camp itself, or activities in the camp itself, orindoctrination, or cooking, or working on the camps. We didn’t have any time to develop as individuals. I became, I remember one day that I, when I was going home for vacation, for a short weekend to my parents, that I threw all my Nazi insignia(?), what do you call it?

DM: Mentality?

GL: Yeah. Re...

DM: Regalia?

GL: The regalia. I threw it all out of the train which I was riding. Threw it on the curb. I was through with it inwardly. I had realized that we were caught, but we were caught on a very bad, gradually, very bad. Somehow I had difficulties with my father because he was so deeply involved and became deeply involved. He became an official in Berlin finally. He got promoted and all of that. Somehow he, the mindset thinking had engulfed him. I must say I had become more critical at that time. But I must also say there was a lot of discussion going on.

There’s often the notion here in American that everybody who said “Goring is a murderer and Hitler is a criminal,” would immediately be jailed. And that was not the case. Because as long as you were just talking, they let you talk. This was Goebbels idea. Particularly when I later came

Gertrud Lackschewitz Interview, OH 434-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
to Berlin I realized that. They were constantly, there were theatre and cabaret performances where the regime was ridiculed and so forth. He let all of this going on. But as soon as an activist group was formed, wanted to act, these were the people who were then the victims of being jailed and eventually coming into concentration camps.

I did realize the injustice against Jews and I remember that I was extremely sorry for them. Because inwardly I was racist. We were brought up racist. The Germans were Germanic and what not, Wagner and all the rest. I read, I don’t know whether you know the book about Houston Stewart Chamberlain, books of the nineteenth century. Nineteenth century in the title. But he was, he had promoted this theory of the race and the different between the Aryans and the others that they were inferior. This was quite pervasive originally. But I felt just simply sorry that they were not Aryans and whites. I hadn’t really fully developed towards realizing the extent of the problem and the extent of the injustice. Most of these concentration camps were also in the east and out of sight of most people. I must say to stay with the Jewish question, during the war, my uncles were in the war, three or four of them. One of them came back to us when he was on furlough. He said to my mother, “Put the children to bed, I have to tell you something. What I have seen.” He described the killing of the Jews. That they were in the east, he was on the Eastern front. That they were rounded up. That they had to dig trenches, stand aside of them, and they were gunned into them. He was terribly shocked and we were all terribly shocked. I think this was in 1943 that I realized.

DM: So you were there? You heard this conversation?

GL: Yeah. I was already half adult, almost adult at the time and was there. Then there was no denying it. At first people had talked about it, but they always, “Oh this is American propaganda. We’re not doing this.” This was the first reaction. Then I knew it was a very, very palpable truth. My mother got very depressed. By that time the bombing of [by] the American had started, forty-three, forty-four, and the children... Actually the first air raids came in September, forty, thirty-nine (?). We all had our cellars converted into air shelters. All the children every year...I had small siblings. Everybody down into the cellar. This became kind of routine that the nights were interrupted. But then it subsided. There was not very much bombing in 1939. It started in forty-three.

By that time I had started to study as a student in Berlin. That was, again, a life changing experience for me. I did not meet any of the professors who were Nazis. They [the professors I did meet] utilized every opportunity to make snide remarks and made it clear they were critical of the government where we were. But it was veiled. But at the same time it gave me the support I lacked from home because my father was indoctrinated and my mother was depressed and conflicted. So I did not have an environment that would support my own
development in that respect. Then the air raids were in Berlin and I became, and as a student, it was very difficult for me because I actually lived with my father then because we had an apartment there. My sister had become a journalist and was also there. But there were several air raids every day and almost every night. I became so attuned to it that I was, by the tone of the sirens, I could tell whether this was serious for our area or not. There were several, quite a few people living in the same house, apartment house where ever I, we lived. I could say “We have to go down,” or I could say “You could sleep on,” because you were fighting for whatever little sleep you got. But I just knew this is not serious and knew this is serious and people listened to me. They came down and I told him. I had kind of sixth sense on that.

I had some negative experience in my studies, medical studies. I was in Berlin, Hitler had ordered that all students had to have a practical experience in the hospital and had to work as nurse’s aides or in one capacity or in another. So they knew what was going on. I was privileged, there was (unintelligible), very famous, the (unintelligible) in Berlin. I was there and I saw things that made me terribly sad. For instance, the sterilization of gypsies. I didn’t have to help there but (unintelligible) and I couldn’t bring it together that doctors, otherwise respected, would even do that. But apparently they ordered them to. Then other things, I also felt that medicine at the time had regionally, see, I wanted to help. I was interested in healing more than I was interested in science. I could that...that angle was healing had kind of gone out of it and everything was science and everything was...I felt I just didn’t belong there. I remember I was, for a while, I had to supervise kids who were chronically ill and I was with them and started telling them stories. Then the sister supervising, she says, was I crazy to do something like this. I should work and make little bandages and do this and do this and she forbade me to tell stories to kids. The whole spirit of it was so narrow and focused. I remember there was a very, kind of death-bound, young man who I visited regularly there. He had tuberculosis. Then the sisters, the nurses accused me of being in love with him or something like this. I just thought this was the work in which I don’t belong. At the same time I felt I wasn’t that good in science. It was very difficult also at the time. We had no books. We went to the lectures, often there were air raids and we didn’t even get there. We had to kind of copy from the board and learn. It was absolutely absurd. And eight o’clock we had physics and nine o’clock botany and ten o’clock we had chemistry and all of this with no books. I thought, “This is crazy. I can’t do it.”

I switched to humanities and this is when I had the good professors and I learned about art history and I learned about literature and I learned about history and philosophy. Philosophy was very important to me. I knew that there was another world of thinking aside from the overly-political world in which I lived. Then in 1944 everybody who was not in exam semester had to do war service. In other words you were drafted. I came into the unit of Special Forces which was in Friedenthal near Berlin. My job was a map clerk. I had to work, sometimes I had to parse (?) maps and I had to give out maps. At any rate, we didn’t wear uniforms and I must say
this is also an incredibly deep experience because I was with the unit that was involved in active fighting. They were sent out behind the lines in Russia, behind the lines in France and do damage there. I mean, you know what Special Forces do. And they were fallschirmspringer, who jump from planes.

DM: Oh the skydivers, parachutists?

GL: Parachutists. Yeah, they were all parachutists. Many of them were Baltic Germans who spoke Russian. This was mostly towards the Russian front. Our commander was Skorzeny, the famous hero who had rescued Mussolini once from there. I had to bring him the maps in the morning. So it was very, very, it was a highly charged atmosphere in which I was. Suddenly I was all among men. Suddenly I was all among fighting men and I got the most first-hand. This is also where I met my future husband, in this unit. He was one of the parachuters. Since he looked so German, they did not want to drop him behind the lines. But he was training the Russian deserters because the Russians deserted in droves to the Germans in the beginning because they thought they were going to free them from communism. So there was a whole unit of lots of, which were all Russian soldiers. So Klaus was involved in training those Russian deserters in supporting the German troops. Then we were transferred to Poland. I remember, I just loved Poland and I also met someone there who really taught me little map signs, which I hadn’t had before. I was just kind of stumbling on. That was the fall of 1944.

In the winter of 1944 the Russians came (unintelligible). The maps that I had to show Skorzeny, every day I had to change the front line. The front line would come closer and closer to us. Hitler had this incredibly destructive idea that everybody should hold the front. They were not allowed to retreat. So they had to sacrifice themselves at the moment came when the Russians were nearly there. There the commander said, all the women by that time, there were several of them, maybe four or five in our unit, and gave us a truck to go back to Berlin. They did not want us to be there. I remember being in Poland at the time and no trains would go anymore. Everybody wanted to flee and people were screaming, crowding at the railroad station and no trains were going and then hanging on to our truck and saying, “Take us! Take us!” We look how many we could accommodate. It was very, very cold at the time. It was a below zero winter. I remember that one of my friends there had given me an overall and had taught me how to shoot a pistol so if a Russian would attack me or wanted to rape me, I had some defense and so forth, before we boarded this thing and took off. The roads were clogged with stretches of refugees which moved very, very, very slowly forward. I felt almost, that it was unfair that I was in the car passing by them and they had to walk with all their belongings.

The Germans leaving, that were in this area which had mixed population, here a German village, there a Polish village, mixed village, and the Germans were, I remember the night, I said...
at the time, there was another woman and I. We became sort of the...tried to organize this thing. The driver was no good. They had given us the weakest guy to drive. During the night we wanted to sleep somewhere in a farm and people were all baking bread and getting ready to leave and flee. But it was almost too late. It was incredibly cold. Suddenly we were kind of in the open and didn’t know whether we were behind or before the Front or whether the Russians would come or not. I was twenty-one at the time and I must say, I almost was...not enjoying, but I was not afraid. I was the height of concentration and we, then our car broke down, and we said, “No, we have to go to the next military station and get some help.” And we did get some help.

Several days it took us to go to Berlin but we did finally arrive in Berlin. Then the old unit was still there. Skorzeny had disappeared. All the important people had disappeared but the rump, sort of, of the soldiers, were still there. Klaus was, at the time, he was married before. He had wanted to help his wife, who lived in the area, escape. But when he came, she already had left. Actually, her father had helped to leave the estate, to do his work because he was a soldier. The father...his first wife was one of this interminable treks. Her father had gotten a heart attack and died on the trek. They could not bury him. They had to throw him by the wayside and move on because the trek was moving on. This was terribly traumatic experience for everyone, including small children which also were there.

Klaus, having failed to meet his wife, reported to the next military station. He would have had two choices: just disappear because he had furlough or fight. He chose to fight. He got wounded. When he woke from being unconscious, a Pole had pulled him into the cellar, into his house and given him first aid. Then the Russians came and took the village and took him along. So, in the long run, the Pole had saved him probably from bleeding to death. But then they [Russians] took the wounded man and he ended up in Russian captivity for two years. At the IC [internment camp] way in Arkhangelsk, which is the most end of Russia.

Since we are talking about him, he knew Russian. He became an interpreter in the camp. Since he had been one of the Special Forces he had to change his whole story, who he was and how he came to know Russian and all of that. Once when he was very ill and talking in his fever, one of the attending doctors was also a German in the camp and said, “Be careful what you say, because it’s completely clear you are not who you say you are.” But he said people died like flies. Most of them did not have the resilience to withstand the physical, the starving, the physical exertion. They were just expendable and they were working every day. Klaus did not have to work quite as hard. He also knew botany. He knew the plants that eventually could be eaten and could tell others about them. After two years he got very seriously ill.
He never had any contact with Germany. Nobody knew he was still alive. His wife was convinced he was dead. Only one of his sisters thought he was still alive, said, “I know he’s still alive.” There was a Russian woman doctor who examined him and said he had tuberculosis and he must be sent home. Occasionally there were transports home, those that were useless and working no longer were put on these cattle cars and sent back to Germany. He said he had no memory; he was just totally feverish on that trip.

But he arrived in Berlin, in East Berlin, he didn’t know that Germany was divided. He had said he wanted to be released in East Berlin. He arrived in East Berlin and on the station they were greeted by communist officials and got a big speech about all the blessings of communism. He said he couldn’t get to his third sentence because all the wooden clogs were flying around the heads of the soldiers who came back in tatters, with their padded… Then he walked through the rubble in Berlin. Berlin was total rubble at the time. This was 1947, and didn’t know what do to next and where to turn to find some sort of news from his family or some kind of normal situation. Behind him this voice, “Klaus!” He was out of nowhere and this friend took him home and fed him. He got so sick from eating normal food that they could no longer take care of him, brought him to an American release camp (begins to cry). In this American release camp he got restored. It turned out that the American doctor said he didn’t have tuberculosis and he knew this Russian doctor had saved his life. So he got his name back, he got his papers back, he finally found, there were agencies where he could find out where refugees were and he finally found his parents and his wife and children. One of the children had died of tuberculosis in the meantime. That’s his part of the war experience.

My part of the end of the war is that in our unit were some smart people. As I said the commander had gone and they devised to go to the Bavarian forest and that the guys of the, what is it, the “Werewolf” unit. They devised to say, “We will hide in the woods and be,” how do you call them… the soldiers… just be underground and fight the Americans. This was they got away. My sister had joined me by that time. We were all on a truck. We’d been to Prague first and then into the Bavarian woods. There they dumped the girls and said, “You will have to fend for yourself. You are now on German soil and get home somehow.”

Now this was the American Zone and we couldn’t move. Nobody was supposed to be riding railroads and everybody had to stay where you were. My sister and I and some friends gradually we dispersed. Gradually we got home. Although not home because we were…since our house had been in the city, we belonged in the country for shelter with the children. We found our mother at farm after several stations and inquiries.

But I do want to tell also one incident that burned itself into my memory. One of the soldiers that had been part of our unit somehow rejoined, found us and rejoined us. He had escaped
from hospital. He had, in his past, an experience of killing Jews. He was so overcome by these memories that he kept having to talk about it. He had been injured. He couldn’t really walk. He had escaped from the hospital because he was afraid of being caught. He talked to us and so, “I have to talk to someone who really was involved.” His conscience was so shattered. He was speaking often incoherently and so forth. This man, I later learned, had been caught and had been tried and put into, now the concentration camp for the other… a prison for several years. So you never knew quite whom who met.

Although my husband’s unit had been something else but he had this previous experience that had nothing to do with the Jewish stuff but it was the... Waffen SS. Originally his unit had been not Waffen SS but in the fall of 1944, his whole special unit had been taken over by the Waffen SS. They were not asked they were just put there. But he didn’t have the sign and they were not, they didn’t have to swear the oath, they were just... from the top, they were put there.

Then we found our mother with the three younger children, three youngest children on this farm. My sister and I then worked for one year on this farm because the farm woman’s husband had been starved to death in a Russian prison camp so she didn’t have her husband anymore, just the children. She had only some Polish help, but they dispersed. So we went to help her there before we went on to try to find our own ways.

My father had been also caught and put into an English... this was the English Zone, an English, we’ll call it concentration camp. We had heard about this. I decided, I took my youngest brother, I was trying to find him and make contact with him. So I got the location of the...at that time trains were going there...of that place, of that camp. I put my old Red Cross uniform that I had from Berlin on so I was a little bit inconspicuous and approached the camp. They were all outside. Suddenly I saw my father in there, behind the fence at a distance, not too far from the fence. I told my little brother to hide there in the back and I would approach the fence and try to just talk. Because we were not allowed at the time to talk to the prisoners. So I slid on the fence, then shouted very loudly, “We are all still alive! We are there and there.” Just two sentences which gave the most important [information] and by that time the guard had gotten me and tore me away from this but it was out, what I had to say.

DM: And he [her father] saw you?

GL: He saw me and got the message that we were alive, yeah. So then we had brought some stuff, I don’t know where they had gotten it or not, but from then on we had contact with my father. My father was also tried in 1947, but since his work had been with the welfare organization he got a fine. Got away with a fine. He had already served two years in the camp. My mother’s brother paid the fine so he could come home and life could get to normal again. I
could begin my studies at the University again. I studied first in (?) and then in Goettingen and I got a PhD in history.

Meanwhile, my husband had been divorced. His marriage no longer functioned after he came back as a totally kind of broken man. He had water everywhere in his body and instead of being the pillar of the family, he was broken down, sick man when he came back from the war. I remember his first job, it was very hard to find a job, was to... he bought somehow a horse and wagon and he brought the East Germans who wanted to go over the border and needed help to get there... get guided through the woods and get their belongings if they had them, for money. This was his first job, to help East Germans escape to West Germany. But all of these were very occasional jobs and he worked in the factory. He decided that he was, particularly when his marriage broke down, he was going to go to America. He applied for a long time and went all through the screenings and so forth and was admitted to the United States.

By that time we had met again, but he said he was never going to marry again. But after one year, so he went in 1952, alone. He had contacts here. Not here, in the East Coast, and was to rehabilitate a farm there, an abandoned farm that had been for fifty years abandoned. It was somewhat problematic. He had to clear the woods again and it was supposed to be a sheep farm. He did not see things with the same eyes than his boss, who gave the money and was a rich industrialist there and had a mansion or whatever. The farm for him [the boss] was one of the uses of getting tax exemptions for rehabilitating a farm. So he was very happy, but he was overworked. After a year I had my exams for being a high school teacher. Behind me, he decided he wanted to marry. I should come and he did not want to be alone. We had met and I had somehow, when we met again, I had the feeling, “This is it,” and “This is my fate.” But he was very, very, wavering to go into marriage again and all that but after one year alone, he had enough. He asked me to come and I said at the time, “I have to do a PhD because I will not get a job, adequate job, here when I have just my high school credentials.” So I took another year working my master’s thesis into a PhD. I went to my professors and “Is there enough substance that this can be a PhD thesis?” Yes, they said. I worked very, very hard for one year to get my dissertation done and my doctor’s exams.

So in 1954 I came to United States, joining him on this little farm which did not have electricity. I learned to work with kerosene lamps, with a pump in the hard. Of course, I had worked on the farm, I mean, I had worked with all kinds of simple jobs and I could do it. But I had more the business sense and said, “This is going nowhere.” Then this man...the tax laws were changed. He could no longer deduct his expenses for the farm. So he lost interest in it. Meanwhile, he had bought already seventy sheep. When I came there was seventy sheep. So for one winter we’re in this romantic, absurd situation at a little farm in New Jersey where I had to cook on wood and decided whether I wanted to burn oak wood or birch wood depending on how much
heat I needed. We heated with wood in this little farm. Meanwhile I pressed that we go on. This man kind of wanted to rope us in. I should work in the factory and be grateful he said. No, we have to get out of there.

We went, and actually since he [husband] had a degree in agriculture but also had studied botany and zoology and so forth, so he had told the man that it would take four years to rehabilitate the farm and he got impatient and superficial and so forth. So he [husband] found a job, and this is actually quite an adventure, in Virginia through the newspaper as a farm manager and wife. This was kind of the lowest point of our whole career of marriage. This was not an abandoned farm, but was a six hundred acre farm. But it was so badly run. Klaus said there was not a hammer on the farm to mend the fences with. The cows were dying in the creeks that were there. The people had a restaurant and only had the farm to have meat for the hamburgers and stuff. I mean a business model which was very destructive, out farming farms. We had decided within one month this was absolutely impossible. There was one black man. There was a son who wasn’t worth very much and there was a black man helper. When I came there, we all lived in a big house there. First thing I clean the house from top to bottom. I started at the bottom and saw that this black man had a dirty mattress next to the furnace there and that was all. He had to eat separately, this was Virginia, separately on a separate table and I had to set separate dishes for him – old, cracked dishes and so forth. Of course the first thing, I was the cook and the first thing was that I changed the dishes. I wanted to get his confidence. But this poor guy never saw any money. He got a pair of jeans when he needed them. He was in his late teens. I couldn’t understand, of course, I couldn’t come there and change things drastically in any way. Except we made the decision just to await for our first salary because we didn’t have enough money to just go without salary. And then, this poor guy stole from our little money, socks and so forth and I forgave him, because he was much poorer than we were.

One day during that month, it was May, I look out and I see the tractor a flame outside. I ran and tried to find Klaus and inform the owner at the restaurant and get something done. He said, “The insurance will pay for this.” This was the attitude and he had dead cows and the burning tractor and the suffering boy, it was very difficult to stay even that month there. Then they deducted all kinds of things and paid up.

Meanwhile, we had through newspapers again gotten a job as a couple. Klaus as gardener and I as cook for a rich lady in New City, New York on the Hudson. We wanted to get back to the New York area because jobs were easier to get. So we worked a year there for this old Mrs. Bulova, you remember Bulova watches, right? She was in her eighties and she had a companion and I was the cook. I was pretty unhappy there because I didn’t want to stay there. In the long run I wanted to get back on my own track. Klaus said, “Well, you never ate out of a tin can and you
never know what life can be like.” But still, I was restless and unhappy. Time to figure out, on
Wednesdays, I went into New York, into the city, to take courses and the Columbia University
Teacher’s College because I wanted to improve my English. I wanted to know what’s going on in
American pedagogy and get a basis for moving on. Then I got very unhappy and I remember
one day I was crying because my husband was not in the same place with me to stay there.
During that night the old lady had fallen and cracked her, and came into the hospital and died.
It’s also how things happen in life, like in the story. So they immediately dismissed us. Here we
were, without a job. They didn’t worry as much. They wanted us to be loyal to them but there
was not much loyalty to us and we were gone. Klaus got a job as a gardener and I got a job in
the teacher’s college library as a library clerk. So I worked as a library clerk for a year there
because my principle was work each job for a year so they don’t think you are flighty. It was so
funny, those librarians [knew I] had a PhD and they knew that. But it didn’t impress them at all.
I was told in New York that a German PhD was a dime a dozen anyhow. I was not to talk about
books with anyone. I was just to type orders and order books and so forth because I did not
have a library degree. I left after a year there and got a job as a reference librarian with the
New York Public Library.

DM: Interesting.

GL: So they were wrong by it, and being bilingual, I was answering letters that came
for...research letters in the New York history and genealogy department. That was the first real
job I had. Klaus had no such luck because in his...see, immigrants were treated as second class
citizens. There was such a class consciousness and such a conformist attitude in New York. I
remember I had to commute from one place and everybody one morning had the same kind of
trench coat and had an umbrella. I thought, “Did they telephone each other? This is the
umbrella/trench coat day?” But so conformist and how people were. At any rate, but at the
same time immigrants were taken advantage of to the hilt. Klaus got a job as a grower. At first
he got a job as a gardener with a rich, Jewish, Japanese, garden owner. He [the garden owner]
got a heart attack and that was over. This was when I commuted from Scarsdale. We lived in
Scarsdale in a little cabin and commuted to New York. When that was over he [Klaus] got a job
as a gardener, as a grower in a nursery. In March he got the job and he really grew, grew, grew
because he was really an excellent, excellent horticulturist. In June, he was fired. He said,
“What’s this?”

“Don’t you know? He always hires someone new in March and fires them in June because he
doesn’t need to grow any more after that.”

So he said, again, this was kind of a series of crap. Of three people dying on us along the way.
And by the way, when we phoned back to the farm, the black boy had died. He had drowned.
This cumulation of doom there, dying cows, and the neglect. This was just unthinkable for me. I got the immigrant life from the bottom up when I came here. Which made me so I identify with immigrants in a way and with immigrant questions. So finally Klaus got a job in a landscaping firm...one of his friends from home who had founded this firm. He had actually a job as a horticulturalist and he was a planter. He was the one who designed the garden work, not just the maintenance worker and so forth. But he got overworked and got a heart attack and I got pregnant. All things happen. I got pregnant and I lost my job at the New York Public Library because they had a law after the fifth month, a pregnant woman had to leave the job.

DM: What year was this?

GL: 1957. No. Excuse me, ‘57 when I started. ‘59 when I was pregnant. Yeah, ‘59. I was so furious. I went to the director of the library and said, “Here are my references. You can call my supervisor and so forth. There is no reason to fire me. I can work in the back. I can understand that you may not want me to converse with the public. But there’s enough work in the back of the library.” He found a grant for me for writing a bibliography on a thing which I vaguely, I mean, I had studied some art history. It was the history of interior decoration.

DM: That explains why I saw that record in the library catalog. I was wondering what the connection was.

GL: I took it because he was (unintelligible). I was simply to work from that collection which was pretty extensive. It was not very difficult to categorize and figure things out. So I got that, but I had lost my library job. Then Anna was born and I worked until a week before she was born and the week after she was born, I was back at the library. I hadn’t finished my job.

In November...she was born October 20. At the end of November, six weeks later, Klaus got his heart attack. He landed in the hospital. We didn’t have any doctor, we didn’t have any insurance. We called the medical center and they sent us someone out. This man came and took a cardiograph and said he didn’t have a heart attack, let’s drink a cup of coffee and so forth. He had this pain. In those days, a heart attack was not as clearly defined, I think. At any rate, he did not take him in the hospital. But the next night, Klaus got incredibly sick. I thought he was dying. I gave him a lot of aspirin, which, my brother was a doctor and said that was exactly the right thing, and called this doctor again and said he needs to go to the hospital. At two o’clock at night he came and took him to the hospital. He came to a new doctor and then another doctor who said he is sort of intern or whatever, but this man will never get a job in this hospital because he misdiagnosed and he [Klaus] has a coronary occlusion and he went into an oxygen tent and he had to stay several weeks in the hospital, over Christmas there.
And I with this new baby and my work not quite finished. At any rate, after Christmas, when he came home, Klaus gradually recovered from this. As to the heart attack, when we came later to Missoula, he had a hard time with the altitude, but the doctor whom he had for many years after that here, said he did not have a heart attack because his heart is not damaged. So ultimately, the opinion of this young man had been right, that he did not have a heart attack. But nobody knew the accumulation of overwork, of diseases he had had of his camp experience and so forth; it had all worked towards a point where it appeared to be a heart attack. So he could climb the highest mountains here and was completely recovered after years here.

But the story is...soon this part of this story will end. After Christmas then, January, I got a letter from Missoula, Montana. Here I was without a job, he was without a job and sick. I, from a friend who was an American, her husband was a German which had been a friend of Klaus, and she was teaching here German, as an instructor. She had a Master’s Degree in German. She said there was stupid time, and everywhere foreign languages suddenly became important. They wanted to add to the faculty. They had three members in the German section and they wanted to hire a fourth. She said, “Do apply for this job. I will tell about you, I know you, and the best thing for you is to come out to Missoula, Montana.” We had read in Harper’s Magazine an article about Missoula, Montana, in which an Englishman, who had been teaching here, wrote a love letter to Missoula, how beautiful Missoula was. We had thought if we ever could get into a place like Missoula, Montana, it would be heavenly. And here came this possibility. I came home from the New York Public Library still kind of winding up. Klaus was there and said, “Pat wrote this letter. I already sent your stuff.” I said, “Klaus, this is not the way you do it!” But of course he sent them to Pat and she screened and handled for me until everything was together. I applied and got recommendations from my Doctor Father, that’s what you call them in Germany, and other professors in Germany, and from the New York Public Library. I got the job, signed and sealed because my next competitor wanted as much as $9,000 a year and they could have me for $4,500. So I was hired and that was, you know, the next phase. I came and Klaus had recovered enough to pick up some of his work the next summer and he didn’t want to let it go. My job started in the fall and I came here in September, 1960 with a tiny baby, eleven months old, crawling. I remember getting her to Mrs. Stanley on Sixth Street, to a nursery school. I was wondering how she would react and she came, saw all the other kids, saw all the toys there, immediately crawled, replaced the boys and started playing.

DM: So she was fine.

GL: That was easy, to put her in.

DM: Okay, so before we start on the Missoula story, because we’ve talked for an hour and a half now, I want to ask two questions. One of them is the name of the first city that you moved
to before Berlin, when you were young. The city that your father moved to, that you moved to in Germany. What was the name of that place?

GL: Where my mother was, you mean, we moved to Bunde, B-U-N-D-E, Westphalia, a small town, so they would be safe from the air raids. The family would be safe from the air raids. And I omitted some things. When I was in Berlin as there was all these air raids, I also got hepatitis. Hepatitis A. I was yellow as a lemon and had to leave. It was three months before I had recovered from the hepatitis that, but it saved me again from some more air raids.

DM: I also wanted to ask about your marriage to Klaus. Were you married in Germany? Or did you get married after you got here?

GL: I got married after I got here because we couldn’t afford...

DM: Right. So he said, “Come over, we’ll get married. We’ll live on this farm with no electricity, it’ll be great.”

GL: Yeah. Yeah. It was his sponsor who sponsored the marriage also. It was very funny. We didn’t quite know about all the laws in America, you know. In each state they are different and the day before the marriage party was supposed to happen here, we went to have the civil papers done. But then they said, “Now you have to wait three days before you can get married.” This was Friday and Saturday was the party. Klaus was very, very angry that we made these mistakes but how could we know? And I said, “What we do is, if you don’t want to re-invite the people tomorrow, this is a pre-marriage party and if you want to I will make a speech and explain the situation to them.” And that’s what I did.

DM: So you knew people here already? There were a group of people...

GL: His sponsor was a German. A German immigrant who had become rich here. I didn’t know anybody else, but I knew him. He was the one who wanted to, kind of say, sack us into his establishment where we had to break out in order to be on our own. See what was going on.

DM: This has been fascinating. Do you want to continue or should I come back in the next couple days? What would be easiest for you?

GL: Yes. If you want to, if you find it interesting enough, right.

DM: This is amazing. But because we’ve been talking now for ninety minutes I don’t want you to become tired or your voice to give out. So I will leave it up to you. We can keep going right now or we can schedule one or more...

GL: Thank you very much for listening. But it has so many valid points in it.

Gertrud Lackschewitz Interview, OH 434-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
DM: Yes, it’s amazing. Would you like to talk now about coming to Missoula? Oh, it’s noon.

GL: No. Maybe the University discussion deserves a fresh beginning.

DM: Well let’s stop right here. I’m going to turn the recorder off.

[End of Interview]