**Transcript**

Topic: Eyewitness account of Germany during and after World War II.

Interviewer: Mary Joens

Respondent: Dietlinde Joens

Date: August 11, 2011

Location: Oedenberger Straße 140, Nuremberg, Germany

Duration: 60 minutes

Background: My paternal grandmother, Dietlinde Joens, was born in 1930 in Düsseldorf, in the industrial region of Germany. She and my late grandfather grew up mostly in Düsseldorf until they moved to Nuremberg in 1955. My grandmother was nine years old when World War II began, and fifteen when it ended. My father, Michael Joens, was present at the interview to help with translations.

*AUTHOR: I was wondering whether you could tell me what life was like for you after the war.*

DIETLINDE JOENS: After the war – everything was destroyed in Germany. Also in Düsseldorf – Düsseldorf was very bombed. And we had to go on foot. Where the street trams used to be going, nothing was going, we had to walk. And also I had to walk to school. The big problem for the first two years was that we had such a big hunger. – *Was sind Lebensmittelkarten?*

MICHAEL JOENS: Food ration cards.

*AUTHOR: Food stamps?*

MICHAEL JOENS: Food was rationed, so it was different from food stamps.

*AUTHOR: OK.*

DIETLINDE JOENS: We got so little bread, that we made signs [charts] of what we can eat each day. I think that the two years after the war were much more bad than the years during the war. And what I told your dad, rather all the people were in some way a Nazi, because they had no choice, and the *Entnazifizierung* [denazification] was – I remember that we asked people to speak good about my dad. My dad was not very interested in politics, but he had to do it –

*AUTHOR: Did your parents have to turn in papers or something? Did they have to prove that they were not active Nazis?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes, we asked people to write down that he was good and social [charitable] to people. Yes, I can remember there was one half Jewish woman with children; we asked her [to speak on my dad’s behalf]. And, the – what is *Gehalt*?

MICHAEL JOENS: Salary

DIETLINDE JOENS: – of my father, he didn’t get it. It was given to a bank and he was allowed only to take 300 D-Mark from this money. What happened with the other money, I can’t remember. But I only know that we had really to look that we could get what we needed with the money he was allowed. And in 1945, he also had to go to clean the stones [bricks]. This was a big thing in Germany, the stones from the destroyed houses. To use them again, they had to be cleaned, and he had to do it for some weeks.

Also, my mother was more involved with the politics, but at the end of the war we haven’t been in Düsseldorf, my mom and I. She was not imprisoned or something, so it was fine with her. My brother Günther, he was in the Navy. The Navy, under Dönitz, they were under self administration. He came home very early. He came home in November ‘45. Achim was imprisoned by the US Army – but that was the time [back then]. They gave them [the POWs] to the French. The French were very bad, and one day the US soldiers came again with a big truck and said “you have to go on – you have to go on” and they were brought home. So Achim came home in January ‘46. But friends of his were five years longer in French prison. The most bad were the Russians. That was really bad. I have had a girl with me in my class who had two brothers who died in Russian prison.

What else do you want to know?

*AUTHOR: One thing I was wondering was, did you ever, at the time, hear that the Nuremberg trials were happening, or did people not really talk about it?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes, I think we heard of it, but – I was thinking about it in the last days – I think, we had to suffer so much. Every family had lost people in the war, they lost their home, or the town was destroyed, so I think our own suffering was so much that they didn’t touch us so much as now. And I was only fifteen when the war was over.

This part of our history in Germany, it didn’t touch me too much, because when I was 11, I went with my school class into evacuation for the first time. That was fine, in ‘41, that was not too bad. But then the Russians also declared the war and we couldn’t go home. We were not allowed to go home at this time because nobody knew what would happen. This was a very bad time, not to know when we can go home again.

In ‘42, I was at home. My school was bombed completely, we had to go to a boys school and we had lessons – one week in the morning, one week in the afternoon. And there I can remember sometimes we had to go into the basement and we didn’t know where the bombing would be, so we didn’t know if we could ever go home again.

But on the other side, we all have had the same problems, so I think we all together – we came over it. In 1943, I was for the second time in evacuation with my school. This was in Schwangau – from there comes my love for Schwangau [author’s note: this is the castle area in Bavaria; my grandmother made this reference because I have traveled there with her, my father and my sisters]. It was very difficult, because the Bavarians were not very nice to us who were from the north of Germany.

My mother was – I can’t remember why – in a town near Düsseldorf, Wuppertal, when it was bombed with firebombs. It was – the whole town was burning. And she got that – the material that was burning was phosphor, and she breathed it in, so she was really ill, and she was allowed to stay longer – she got a permission to stay anywhere else but at home, so she was permitted to stay in Hohenschwangau, the same hotel where I was in evacuation. So that was very nice. And when she went home I wanted to go with her; I did not want to stay there. At last, she took me with her.

But then, in 1944, it was so bad in Düsseldorf with the bombing, so my parents wanted that I also went into evacuation, and I could meet – they moved from Bavaria to Thuringia, and I met with my class again. But this was really a bad time, because we heard of the bombing of Düsseldorf, and all was broken down, we did not get any mail, we didn’t have a telephone because it was broken down. We didn’t know what really happened at home, but this was really a bad time. But I think, we all together had the same problem, and this helped us to get through. Yes, and then in March 1945, my mom came from Düsseldorf, with train and walking and bus. She wanted to stay there, but I said no mom, let us go to your sister. She was living near Hannover. That was a part of Germany that was bombed, but not so bad. At last, she did it. And when my mother and I were living there, we didn’t know what was with my dad, and we didn’t know anything about Günther and Achim. Yes, it was a bad time, but I think all people were suffering the same, so – yes, it was also very much about helping together. We did not ask ‘do I know him?’ – if somebody needed help, we did it. In this way, it was a good time.

*AUTHOR: How long did it take after the war ended for things to start going back to normal, for buildings to be rebuilt and people starting to live normally again?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: I think in 1948, when our – the *Währungsreform* [currency reform]*,* the money was worth something again. Before that you couldn’t buy anything. I wasn’t home. I was away on vacation with school, and we heard. Overnight, you could buy everything [again], but of course you didn’t have the money. But this was a very special point, the *Währungsreform*, when we got the new money. I can’t remember which year the Marshall Plan – I can’t remember when it was – the Marshall Plan came from USA. It was then that our industry came up again, and also our food. I really can’t remember what happened there. I can only remember, in 1950 I was in England, and the English didn’t take part in this because they said it will take longer, but we will help ourselves. We [Germany] were not asked, we had to take it. So in Germany it was much better with the food than in England. My mother, she was a really good mom, we didn’t mention it so much, but we really didn’t have enough to eat, so she gave what she had [her ration] to her children. We didn’t notice that she didn’t eat enough. She was in hospital for some weeks because she was ill from hunger.

*AUTHOR: So then, after 1948, for almost the next 40 years or so, Germany was still occupied by the allied forces. What was it like to live in an occupied country, even with the war no longer happening?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: In Düsseldorf, we were occupied by the English. The English – in 1947, you didn’t see much about it. They had a normal uniform and they were – you didn’t notice it. I visited my aunt in Giessen, it was occupied by the Americans, in – it’s funny – the Americans you couldn’t overlook them. They dressed in another way, we were educated to dress very well, and they had only such shirts, or T-shirts – we never had seen it – and also it was special for me, so many black soldiers. The English have no black people, they had no black soldiers. But I think when we came to Bavaria here [in 1955], there were also a lot of black soldiers. I think they liked to be in Germany, because after the war with all our education, we had no sense to make a difference between black and white, so I think they had a much easier life here in Germany than in USA. My mother had a school friend in the French part, and the French were really very bad. This is an old history [rivalry] between Germany and France. So, I can remember that she sent her friends money because they really didn’t have enough. And another school friend of hers had been in the Russian part, and they sent her parcels.

*AUTHOR: So even before the wall went up, was the Soviet occupied part of Germany a harsh place to live?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes it was very harsh, and what we Germans couldn’t realize was the American and Russian soldiers met at the river Neisse – it’s very far in the eastern part of Germany – nobody thought that the Americans could give the Russians so much of Germany. Where my school had been, where I have been, they didn’t go home. It wasn’t easy at this time, but they were very anxious because the Russian soldiers were really cruel, and all the girls, and so. In the beginning, it was called the Green – what is Grüne Grenze?

MICHAEL JOENS: The open border.

DIETLINDE JOENS: It wasn’t really a war, but it was very bad.

*AUTHOR: Do you remember when the actual, physical Berlin wall was built?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes, but it was far away for us, from where we lived. You may remember Frau Sorge [author’s note: a friend of my grandmother whom I have met during a previous visit], she is coming from Dresden and then she lived in Berlin for the first years after she got married, and she can remember how it was when the Russians didn’t let any trucks go through. You have to see that this was West Berlin and all around was the Russian zone, and they closed it so that nothing could get through. How long did it take? A year? The American, we say, air bridge –

*AUTHOR: The airlift?*

MICHAEL JOENS: The airlift was much earlier.

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes, 1949 or something.

*AUTHOR: That was before the wall –*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes, long before the Berlin wall. But this was what the Russians could do. They said we don’t allow any people to go through our area, so Berlin was really cut off.

*AUTHOR: So did the cold war between the US and Russia really affect Germany at all, or did you mostly just go about living your life like you would have otherwise?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes and no. It was more bad for the eastern part, especially. I can remember that it was hard to go from Düsseldorf to Frankfurt because you had to have a permit that you could leave the British area to go to the American area. Going to the French part was even more difficult. But you have to remember that at this time, we had no car, and the train was rather bad to go. Your living space was very small, yes, until 1948. Then it became better. But also I had an aunt, who was the sister of my dad, she was a nun. She was in USA long before the war began. She was in Milwaukee, and from there we got parcels. She went to her class and said “oh I have my family in Germany, and they have nothing. They don’t have clothes or shoes and so, and nothing to eat,” so they collected these parcels, and they sent dresses and also what we needed, soap. Or, they collected money and we got a CARE package. This was food, and what I heard much later was – people said that, I don’t know myself – that the Germans were asked what they needed most, and they asked for “*Korn*.” “*Korn*” is for us grain, but the Americans sent corn, which we call “*Mais*.”

*AUTHOR: So after the war, up until fairly recently probably, did anyone really ever really talk about the war?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes, the war was a part of our life, and yes, you have to think all the towns were bombed, and when I went to school I had to walk an hour to school, and all the houses we came through were bombed and broken down. I remember school not so much, but all the houses on the way, and I can remember one day it was a very hard storm and the walls were breaking down where we were walking, and so – yes. But I think, this was a part of our lives, we lived with it. I think we didn’t think too much about it, we were more looking for how to build up again. The first two years we struggled just to come through. At home we had a big – not near the house, five minutes to walk – we had a big garden where we had potatoes and strawberries and vegetables. It helped a lot.

With the Nuremberg trial, I – I think we knew about it and we were aware of it, but we had so much other things, I don’t know how much my parents – perhaps they heard and read much more about it, but I can’t remember so much. – I think this came some later, what we also were asking, is it right that the Americans sit at the trial about the Germans, because also your country and the other countries did cruel things, with your Indians, and the English in South Africa, the Boer wars.

But on the other hand we were also glad it was over. We heard in the last year of war also, “wait until the war is over, it will become better,” and so we didn’t think that Hitler would lie or so, but we thought – what is forgotten so much, but my parents were living in Düsseldorf after the first world war, and this part of Germany was occupied by the French, and the French really were very bad and took everything from the industry. And so, I think in 1936 or so, when it became better – okay it was the building of the Autobahn – but the people got jobs. It was for the generation of my parents important that the French were going home, and they got real jobs, because I can remember when I was six or seven or eight at school, I had a lot of girls whose fathers didn’t have any job, so this was also something where today we see how bad has it been. I think it was not too bad for the people living there.

And I – I was also – for the boys there was the *Hitlerjugend* and for us there was the BDM [*Bund deutscher Mädel*]. But the younger ones, from 10 to 14 years, the boys were *Pimpfe* and we were *Jungmädel*. And it was, well, it was when I was 10. We learned about Hitler, and this I think was normal for us. You also have to learn today in school about your political persons or so. But we were writing letters to the soldiers, we brought small gifts to the wounded soldiers, and we played a lot together, and we knew where to go. So, I think also this was not only [all] bad, but I especially – yes it was from school – we began to learn the piano, and for this I went to the music school for youth. And there I had piano lessons and dancing lessons. And when I was doing this, I didn’t have to go to the other thing. And so I think it’s not all bad and it’s not all good because when I see today, or what I read in the newspaper, what the young people are doing, or children, is also not all good. We learned to stay together and to do something for others. I was very happy because my brother – my brother Achim, he didn’t like it – but my brother Günther, he was really a rough brat. All the girls were liking my brother, so perhaps it was especially easy for me, I don’t know, and when nature is like this – I pick up the good things, and the bad things I let go. This I have from my mother, yes. So what was really, really bad was not to be at home and not to know what was happening, and not to know what my brothers were doing.

*AUTHOR: How much older were your brothers?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Günter was seven years older and Achim 3½. So in 1939, they did not think how cruel the war is; they wanted to do fight for their country. I think in 1940, Günther joined the Navy. In the military, the Navy is special group of people. In 1943, Achim’s whole class had to go. They had school a little bit, but in the night when the airplanes came, they had to look for them and shoot them, together with other people. Was kann man da sagen? Luftabwehr?

MICHAEL JOENS: Air defense.

DIETLINDE JOENS: But he had to do it, they couldn’t choose it. Günther, he became a soldier because he really wanted it. He was a different person than Achim.

*AUTHOR: Now, before the war started, in ‘33 to ‘39, do you remember ever hearing about the rallies in Nuremberg?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Nuremberg was so far, and I was too small perhaps to realize it. But what I can remember is that once my dad was supposed to go, and he said no thank you, I don’t want to go there. Nuremberg, from Düsseldorf, at this time, was very far. Also, I think they didn’t hear a lot about what happened in Berlin. It was a government like the government today, sometimes we still say they are doing bad things that we could do better. I was too little, I think, to realize all this. But I think it was our government, and it was very, very dangerous to speak against it, and not to do what they wanted was really dangerous.

And on the other hand you have to understand, it must have been in 1936/37, not all people have a job, and should they who have one now lose their job because they speak out against this? That was also a problem. I would say, my dad was not very political. My mother more. But also this you have to understand, on one hand, at this time for a woman it was not possible to do something, and she was the kind of person who wanted to do something. For the women, there was the *Frauenschaft* [National Socialist Women's League], a women’s group. She was there, and I think that was the only thing a woman could do. She was a teacher before she got married, but this was also before the war, and – a woman who got married could no longer be a teacher, so she lost her job when she got married and it was not easy for a woman to do something. Only later in the war – men were soldiers then perhaps. Well, it was – during the war you never would know what would happen in the next moment.

I think the time after the war was more bad for me. When I grew up, I could think about it. Günther’s wedding was in 1947, near Lübeck [in the north of Germany, on the Baltic Sea]. To get there, we first had to go from Düsseldorf to Cologne, because there the train was beginning. But it was so full that my mom and I had to help to go through the windows. The train was so full that you had to stand most of the time. – Yes, and it took from Cologne to Hamburg [on the way to Lübeck], it took 22 hours.

*AUTHOR: Wow!*

DIETLINDE JOENS: We were lucky that there was a train going at all. At this time, nobody had a car. This was the other side.

And then, I think they mentioned it in the Doku Center, there is a picture of the Archbishop of Cologne – and his name was Frings – and he said, this was in 1945/46, to steal coal is like *Mundraub* [theft of food one needs for survival], it is not a sin when you steal something because otherwise you would die for hunger. And he made it the same with coal because we had nothing to heat up our rooms and so. We didn’t have anything. This was the time. We all had to see that we live in it, and not to die, and I think it was another time than today. Today I don’t know who’s living beside me, but back then we were all looking out for each other. I think this we really lost. Yes, and we were all thinking to build up our towns again. The government back then was really doing things for the people. I think today our government insists in doing things for us, but I think they have forgotten that – It was a time when we would really stand together, and we had an idea what we had to work for. We had lost so much in the bombings – we didn’t lose our apartment, but when we were coming up from the basement, the porcelain and glass were all broken. We said, “Oh look here’s a plate that is still fine.” But it was not too bad; we were still alive.

*AUTHOR: And then three years later things were mostly back to normal?*

DIETLINDE JOENS: Yes, I think after the *Währungsreform* it slowly – my parents lost all money. They lost all their money in the 1920s with the inflation, and then in 1948 also. We lost our money and everybody got only 40 D-Mark. I can remember, I was not at home, I was away at school, and we heard from our parents that overnight you could buy everything, and we said “oh I need something new for school, I need a new lamp, I need, I need…” but for a long time we couldn’t pay for it. But it became normal. I can remember that once I needed new soles for my shoes. I had to borrow one pair of shoes so I could give the pair I had to have it repaired. We had nothing. You must remember, I was nine when the war began and I was 15 when it ended, and 18 for the *Währungsreform*. I grew up in this time. We couldn’t buy things. So, from two old dresses we made one, and then I grew more, and the dress became only a skirt. That was the time – everyone was doing it this way. But it also was – I don’t know whether it was only in the English zone or also in the American zone, we got soup at school – the hunger was very, very big; it was hard. We had only two slices of bread for the whole day, potatoes from the garden. Meat, meat! In the week 50 grams per person, and butter you could forget. The meat can also have some fat, and my mother would put it in the pan and make something that we could put on the bread – unbelievable.

Well, I think it’s getting late.

*AUTHOR: Alright. Thank you, Omi.*