JESSIE MEL IS

Lansing, Michigan Unit

Transcript of an Oral History Interview

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Jessie Melis

PREFACE

This transcript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted in C1986D, for the Women ’s Overseas Service League.

Signed, dated agreements of release and biographical information accompany the original cassette.

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers

Lansing, Michigan 15 July, 1988

JESSIE MELIS

E East Lansing, MI

Note: Elsie Hornbacher is interviewing Jessie Melis. Jessie

4 lives at 1400 Old Canton Lane, East Lansing, MI 48BE3.

Her telephone number is 33E-6930, and the area code is

B 517. Jessie is being interviewed For the Lansing Unit of the Womens’ Overseas Service League.

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| **B**  **10** | **EH:**  **JM:**  **EH:** | **Jessie, when did you go overseas? In August of 1950.**  **1950, and where did you go?** |
|  | **JM:** | **My First assignment was Munich, Germany.** |
| **IE** | **EH:** | **Munich, Germany? How long were you overseas?** |
|  | **JM:** | **Three years.** |
| **14** | **EH:** | **□h, three!** |
|  | **JM:** | **And stayed the entire time in Munich.** |
| **IB** | **EH:** | **Then what prompted you to go overseas?** |
| **18** | **JM:** | **During the war period, I tried to join the WAUE ’s and**  **didn ’t pass the eye test. So, I sort oF Forgot about it; and then when it was announced that they were recruiting** |

JESSIE NELIS, Lansing Unit E

EO teachers, I got interested, and then sort of Forgot about it. Then, when it happened again, I decided to apply For

EE several reasons. I was sort oF interested in going to Europe, and I was also interested in seeing what had

E4 happened during the war. I had relatives in Holland, so

I was curious to see them and see how they Fared because

EB it had been very bad From our reports during the war.

EH: How close were these relatives in Holland? Were they

E8 cousins, or— ?

JH: They were aunts and uncles and cousins. They were my

30 Father’s Family. He was the only one who was in the United States. The others had gone into the Asiatic

3E area, or had remained in Holland.

EH: Tell me a little bit about your experiences?

34 JM: Well, I guess the First thing that impressed me Cor struck me), was very much as it had everybody else at

3B that time; some oF the results oF the devastation that had happened during the war period.

3B Some oF the streets were still blocked oFF. Some oF the buildings you could see that had been cleared but where

40 other buildings had been attached to— the colors oF— you could tell diFFerent rooms on the side oF the building:

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| **42** | JESSIE | MELIS, Lansing Unit 3  **The railroad station in Munich was still— any glass** |
|  |  | **covered areas were still in sort of bad shape, but things** |
| **44** |  | **had been cleaned up considerably. I think that was** |
| **46** |  | **probably the first realization how bad— how much damage a**  **bomb could do.** |
|  |  | **Among other things, as you ’d meet some people, you got** |
| **48** |  | **impressions. One of my first impressions was at the** |
|  |  | **Octoberfest. We had gone Cand the mobs of people) and** |
| **50** |  | **finally, a group of German people in one of the beer** |
|  |  | **tents signalled and joined us. We spent the evening with** |
| **52** |  | **them and we spoke some English; our German was nil. We** |
|  |  | **got along very well, and after the closing, we went to** |
| **54** |  | **one of the night clubs. We found out then that they and** |
|  |  | **some of the people in the restaurant; a violin player and** |
| **56** |  | **some of the other members of the band, were refugees from** |
|  |  | **Marienbad, Germany,— and from Czechoslovakia.** |
| **58** | **EH:** | **Refugees from Czechoslovakia, in Germany?** |

JM: They were Germans. They had been with a group of Germans

60 that had settled in the area, and when the war came along— after the war, they were thrown out— of

62 Czechoslovakia; because of all these boundary changes over the different years and one thing and another. So

64 we met them, and we met them a few times afterwards. We went and had— didn ’t really strike up a strong friendship

56 or anything, but we saw them several times.

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|  | JESSIE  **EH:** | MELIS, Lansing Unit 4  **Now, am I correct here; they were Germans that had gone** |
| **68** |  | **to Czechoslovakia, lived in Czechoslovakia until roughly 134-?** |
| **70** | **JM:** | **Well, till the war period. Then after the war, they were** |
|  |  | **sent back to Germany.** |
| **72** |  | **That was one of the things that was good fun, and of** |
|  |  | **course, it was 1950; the Oberammergau play, and we had** |
| **74** |  | **tickets for the last play of the season.** |
|  | **EH:** | **Jessie, before you go on with this Oberammergau play, do** |
| **76** |  | **you remember that great big bear in the Octoberfest? Wasn ’t he there in 1950?** |
| **78** | **JM:** | **I don ’t; I don ’t remember now.** |
|  | **EH:** | **In 1951 or ’5E, they had a bear— I would say, that was** |
| **80** |  | **about 60-70 feet tall— and he hollered, ”Leav-en-brau!”: His mouth would open?!** |
| **BE** | **JM:** | **Oh, over at the tent!** |
|  | **EH:** | **Yes, and do you remember the horses?** |
| **84** | **JM:** | **Yes!** |
|  | **EH:** | **Tell us about that.** |
| **86** | **JM:** | **I d o n ’t remember that much about them.** |
|  | **EH:** | **Weren ’t there about eight-ten teams of horses?** |

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| **88** | JESSIE  **JM:** | MELIS, Lansing Unit 5  **Well, the teams, yes; very much like the Budweiser’s team** |
|  |  | **here?** |
| **80** | **EH:** | **Right, but weren ’t there about ten horses pulling those kegs of beer? Well, it was a real kind of a spirit.** |
| **38** | **JM:** | **Yes, well, it was. It had rides, and you could do things** |
|  |  | **and of course, the chicken; the specialized chicken— the** |

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broiled chicken kind of thing on the spits: And lots and lots of beer. Every brewery in Munich— I think there are seven— had a big tent, and the place was mobbed.

EH: There were tables up. You sat at the tables.

JM: Yes, and then they had these huge kind of barn-like things, and they called them tents. I don ’t know how many thousand people could get in them, but they were just absolutely packed and the band ”oom-pahed” all along, and you ”oom-pahed” with them.

EH: CGerman expression)? JM: Yes! (Laughter)

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| **EH:** | **CGerman singing)** | **Remember** | **that?** |
| **JM:** | **Oh, yes, indeed!** |  |  |

EH: The music was gay— and LOUD— and most people were

108 extremely sociable, were they not?

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 6

JM: Yes. We had a fun group— seemed to there, but everybody

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was so packed. There were so few places to sit or stand. Anyhow, we were invited with this group, which was fun because you felt not quite so much as an outsider.

EH: One thing about the Germans though; when they go out to have fun, they associate with all different kinds of people— quite different from in America. I was quite surprised to have Dr. Uogel tell me that when you went out to have a good time, that you were very rude if you didn ’t dance with anyone who asked you to dance. In business, there was a great deal of class distinction. For example, I understand that at that period of time that you couldn ’t have a car better than your boss ’s, and you were definitely in a caste system; but socially, definitely not.

JM: The two big things I noticed when that was true was the

□ctoberfest; and then ’Fasching,” when all the barriers were down. You would go with a husband or a date or whatever, and it was understood that you would not stay with those people necessarily. That you would go with anyone who came up and asked you to dance, which was very different from our social customs.

EH: What is Fasching?

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 7

132 JM: Well, it is the big celebration before Lent. In Munich, it starts in December when they take the Prince and the

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| **134** |  | **Princess to preside over the period. Then it ’s party, party, party, until the end of —** |
| **136** | **EH:** | **Is it costume?** |
| **138** | **JM:** | **Yes, there are all kinds of costume parties, and it was**  **fun to see all the little kids because they were always in Western; cowboys, Indians, and this kind of thing.** |

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That was probably my favorite. We went to a number of parties and you could rent costumes or you could concoct you own.

I remember going on a date with somebody to one of the hotels in Munich. Somebody came up and asked me, and he said goodbye and sort of left me, and he said, " I ’ll see you in such and such a spot at three o ’clock,” or whatever time the party was to break up. So I went with this young man whom I had never seen before. We went to about three of the areas where they danced and had different types of music Cwhichever one you wanted, you could do 3; drank Champagne, and at the time he brought me back, and my date dropped his date again and we went home. CLaughter) But it is; everybody joins in and it didn ’t matter. Your social position really and truly did not count. You Just met, and somebody was attracted to you, and you could not— you could not refuse because it

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 8

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was considered a sort of an insult. That was true whether you were married or not, so I guess anything could happen. It ’s said that very many babies resulted

nine months after the Fasching season, and that sort of thing; but it was lots and lots of fun.

They have this terrific parade. I have scads of slides of the parade. One of the Germans invited me to go where there was a building and the parade. It was a narrow area, and it would come through a narrow street. It would be on a second floor. I had an unobstructed view of the parade and I Just took scads of pictures as I leaned out the window.

Of course, it is all kinds of things. Some of them are satirical; some of them poke fun at the political. One of them, I remember, poked fun at the Americans for chlorating the water when that was spoiling the beer.

CLaughter) You know, things of that sort.

It was a long parade. It was about two and one-half hours, I guess, as I remember— and everybody in costume. Then of course, all of the various sections had their own wagon or their awn group, and then they had the different costumes. Women who participate in that cannot cut their hair because they need the braids for this particular thing. They keep their hair long. They don ’t cut it during that period of time. So those were two

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| **IBS** | JESSIE | MELIS, Lansing Unit S  **interesting and, I think, rather insightful things in the** |
|  |  | **group of people.** |
| **1B4** | **EH:** | **Jessie, when you went to Munich, where did you live? And tell us about the school you taught at?** |
| **1B6** | **JM:** | **Well, the CMcGrawJ Kaserne was BLQ ’s and they were like a** |
| **IBB** |  | **series of row apartments, such as they have in Europe. We were on the second floor.** |
|  | **EH:** | **Did you have an apartment?** |
| **190** | **JM:** | **Yes.** |
|  | **EH:** | **How many people in the apartment?** |
| **IBB** | **JM:** | **Two, and then we usually ate over at the officers’ mess** |

in the club that was at the Kaserne.

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EH: Did you pay for your meals?

JM: Yes; we had Just nominal cost, but we had pretty good meals, and we got almost all three because we didn ’t cook. We didn ’t have facilities in that particular apartment, so we didn ’t have the facility to cook.

Besides, we didn ’t have commissary privileges. So, that meant either buying on the German market— which we got the Cchloride compound!, you know, sterilized the vegetables— if we bought anything like fresh fruit; and

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 10

the little bit that the PX had. That was practically

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none, and then cur Friends sometimes got things From the commissary For us.

EH: You said you had an apartment but no kitchen?

JM: Well, there was a kitchen there, but it was not equipped with stu FF. They had been— as I understand it— they had been SS troops; For their oFFicers and Families, at one time. During the Reich period.

EH: There was a living room and bedroom in the apartment?

JM: Yes, and then there was a kitchen and bathroom. It was a complete apartment, except that we didn ’t have a stove and that sort oF thing to cook. Later on I moved, and we did have a stove then; so I did do some cooking, but most oF the time we Just ate right across the street— so it was simple.

UJe were Forced to move out oF that apartment because the order had come to integrate various groups. The WAC Cthe colored WAC) detachment was outside the Kaserne. Our building was next to the WAC detachment, so we were Forced to move because they were going to do some intermixing oF the two groups, and we were to make way For those W A C ’s that were being transFerred into the Kaserne.

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 11

226 When I first went there, we were outside the gate because the State Department was there. Because of the trying to

228 work with the Germans, the military and the State Department were at odds. So, finally the State

230 Department moved downtown so they wouldn’t be impeded. I went to school one morning living outside the walls of

232 the Kaserne, and when I came home at night, I lived within the walls of the Kaserne: Guarded gates and

234 showing papers with which you could get in, your AGO card, and that sort of thing, so that was a change.

236 The Germans came in and they did all the cleaning: I had not thought anything about the black marketing business,

238 but I had picked up three cartons of cigarettes when it was cigarette rationing time. I was going out that

240 evening so I didn ’t put them away. I left them on a bookcase and we went to Coutl. When I came home at

242 night, they were gone. I thought, Well, that should teach you not to leave things out. But the next morning,

244 the going rate of cigarettes was left in marks on that same spot where I had left the cigarettes. I could see

246 the black market evidence really for the first time. I had heard it but it was the first time I had had a

248 personal experience with i t . And it was very easy when I first came because we were outside, and the Germans who

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit **IE**

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worked didn ’t have to pass the scrutiny of the guards coming in; nor did they have to have their satchels checked and that sort of thing.

EH: Perhaps you can remember what the Germans paid on the black market for a carton of cigarettes?

JM: It was eighteen marks. I don ’t think I ’ll ever forget.

EH: Eighteen marks! and at that time, that was four marks to the dollar, wasn ’t it— which would be four dollars fifty some cents per carton.

JM: It was sort of a strange feeling because I had been sort of resentful at first. Then I could see the humor and the understanding that it was left out on purpose; and I had not intended it to be done. Then I found out more about the various things in black marketing as time went on. I think probably the black marketing was helpful to the Germans, particularly at the beginning prior to that time, because food was scarce. In trading back and forth for things like Crisco and lard; they had been without fat.

EH: The Germans loved fat, too, didn ’t they?

JM: Yes, a good many of their foods are rather on the— but I had found that out from relatives in Holland. That

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 13

272 during that period (they called it the starvation period

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| **274** |  | **in Holland!, when that last year the Germans didn ’t pull**  **out and they were still suffering, there was a lack of** |
| **276** |  | **fat; some of the essentials that your body needed and craved.** |
|  | **EH:** | **They didn ’t have coffee either, did they?** |
| **278** | **JM:** | **No, and coffee was a high market priority. I think there** |
|  |  | **were other foods, too, that some of the Americans got** |
| **280** |  | **from the commissary. As time went on, in 1950, when I** |
|  |  | **went over things were much, much better. Things were** |
| **282** |  | **still a little short, but I don ’t think there was any** |
|  |  | **real hunger at that point.** |
| **284** | **EH:** | **No starvation, anyway?** |
|  | **JM:** | **No, no. Ule were not encouraged to eat in German** |
| **286** |  | **restaurants. They said two reasons: In some instances,** |

it might be sanitary; to be sure that you didn ’t eat some

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of the fresh things because of the ’hunting wagons.” EH: Did they use hunting wagons?

JM: In Bavaria, they did.

EH: In Bavaria? Is Munich in Bavaria, or another— JM: It is, yes. It ’s the capital of Bavaria.

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 14

So they, of course, sort of told us that we should be

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careful with that, and that meats and some of these things were rather hard to come by and rather expensive; so we really shouldn’t eat too much in the restaurants. As time went on, that changed again and you went to the restaurants more and more.

EH: I would say that in 1353-54, when I was in Austria, there was no problem of eating on the Austrian or German market; as I remember, travelling in Germany.

Jh: No, by the time I went home in 1353, you could see on the stands— and I used to stop after we were in the other apartment and I had a stove— sometimes I would stop at one of the little German shopping areas and pick up some vegetables and fruit. Then we used the [chloride compound] to soak lettuce or anything like that, and I never had any problems there; where I had with some others, when I was travelling.

EH: Llere the Germans warm? Did they have warm clothing and

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| **312** | **JM:** | **shoes?**  **Yes, they had. It was interesting because we sort of** |
|  |  | **laughed at their shoes in the sense that they had the** |
| **314** |  | **fleece-lined shoes with the heels; sort of fancy, and** |
|  |  | **they were terribly, terribly expensive for them. That** |
| 316 |  | **was really a mark of some substance, if you could have a** |

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 15

pair of shoes like that. We sort of laughed and later

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on, we sort of adapted that type of thing ourselves.

EH: Did you ever buy a pair?

JM: No, because my feet are long and narrow. The German feet were not that way, so I never could buy any. The girl in the PX used to say, ’W e ’ve got some narrow shoes in,” so I ’d buy another pair of shoes. That was the only way I could buy shoes over there because I Just couldn’t get a fit. There were shoes available, and there were lovely leather purses. They were good shoes, and my roommate happened to have a foot that would fit the sizes so she could buy them, and she did.

EH: In your contact with the Germans, were they antagonistic toward you? Your name is a Dutch name, is it not?

JM: Right, yes. No, I c a n ’t say they were antagonistic, but I ran into some feelings at different places: Those who had been a Nazi die-hard group.

I was teaching summer school in Augsburg, and I had gone up to visit a friend who was teaching summer school in Giessen, which was a staging area at that time. Her helper was a young German boy Cyoung man). They were trying to hire a lot of the Germans,- trying to sort of indoctrinate the democracy bit, and he was hired. I guess not only democracy; also to get thB economy moving,

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 16

so he came with us to dinner that night at a German

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restaurant. There were a lot of Americans (military} there For the reason they had out— they had Just come and were going to be reassigned places, and there was a curfew. All of the Americans had to leave; officers and enlisted men, or anyone in uniform. As civilians, we were not under those restrictions, so we didn ’t have any wish to go. We were Just staying there, listening to the music.

The minute the Americans left, the Germans came and filled in the tables. In Europe, a place at a table is a place whether i t ’s your party or not. It ’s a place, so you sit, or you join a place. So we talked, and I was talking to this one man. He asked me to dance, and we danced. Then he said, ’You know, I was a Nazi.” I said ”0 h?” He said, ”Yes, I was an important man in this village,” and he said, ’You know, if Hitler were to come back again, I would follow him immediately.” He wasn ’t drunk, but he had been drinking so I think his tongue might have been a little loose.

EH: He was arrogant, was he not? German superiority?

JM: A little bit— and I noticed also— my roommate was an older woman in Munich, and her husband was working in Bonn. She was head of a school primarily to educate the illiterate, and she was in charge of that out at Dachau;

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 17

366 and her husband was at Bonn. One of his jobs had been to try through selection process to Find teachers and people

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of that sort uiho might have an influence when they came back and try to indoctrinate the democracy; or to send them to the States for awhile to go to school and do some of these things.

Ruth said, ’Well, you know, Russell said this one young man that he thought so highly of and wanted to go to the States, said, ’You know, I believe all of what you say, but I could never teach without my desk on a platform,’” which was typically true of most of the schools. The German schools I worked in, the teacher’s desk was on a platform about six-ten inches higher so that the teacher could overlook. He said ”1 could not lower myself to be at the same level as my students.” He had to have that. He would have been lost without it, which I think was quite typical of a lot of the Germans; the feeling that you had a position and you could not lower yourself.

EH: Right. Then German teachers were sent to America to pick up ways of democracy, and teach in schools upon their

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| **386** | **JM:** | **return to Germany?**  **I d o n ’t know that all of them went to the States, but at** |
| **388** |  | **least, they were given some training somewhere. I ’m hazy**  **on the details now. This was thirty years ago, and I ’m** |
| 380 |  | sort of hazy on some of these details. |

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 18

EH: As I understand it from Friends I have who were raised in

338 Germany, the students argue a great deal more with the teacher than they do here in America.

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| **334** | **JM:**  **EH:** | **Is that recent?**  **No, this she told me maybe fifteen or twenty years ago.** |
| **3SB** |  | **She was raised in Germany, and is approximately in the** |
|  |  | **same age group I am; sixty plus or minus five. I noticed** |
| **338** |  | **in the Austrian school where I taught— we were on the** |
|  |  | **second floor: Austrian children were below and above us** |
| **400** |  | **in the high school . UJe knew immediately when the teacher** |
|  |  | **left the room because the children were very active, very** |
| **408** |  | **noisy . They were well-behaved when the teacher was** |
|  |  | **there, but they did not have the control when the teacher** |
| **404** |  | **left that we American teachers have.** |
|  | **JM:** | **There is a difference, too. One of our German teachers** |
| **408** |  | **(they came in and they worked, and they were to teach**  **German, and they did some other things too) but the one** |
| **408** |  | **teacher, when I walked home sometimes would be either** |
|  |  | **walking or had been there in this little neighborhood** |
| **410** |  | **area. Any of the children that knew her, or had had her**  **in school at one time or had some connection with her,** |

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would come and shake hands and curtsy on the street. Which, I couldn’t imagine most of our children curtsying to a teacher, but they did and they were very prim and

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 13

proper, but evidently thought a great deal of her because

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they were very eager to run up to her. She must have had something that was not too austere about her.

EH: Would this have been true For any German teacher, Dr do you think Just this one teacher?

JM: I d o n ’t know. That was my only experience with it, so I d o n ’t know whether that was general. I would say the curtsy and the shaking hands, of course,— shaking hands was very common when you met people, and I was not unaccustomed to that because I have that with my relatives in Holland. I mean, when you come in the house you shake hands, and when you leave you shake hands.

EH: I like that habit.

JM: It ’s not a bad habit. I think i t ’s a nice thing. We did this too, but it was strange. I think a lot of the Germans—

EH: They respect education, I believe, more than we do.

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| **432** | **JM:** | **It has a higher standard in their minds. Now, whether**  **that ’s true at the present, of course, we don ’t know** |
| **434** |  | **either. I think the old traditional— it was still** |
|  |  | **evident in a lot of things.** |
| **436** | **EH:** | **What was the school like where you taught, Jessie?** |

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 20

JM: Well, the school where I first taught was a Berman

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school, and it was two stories. It was sort of an H, without an extra extension of the wings. Some of the upper grades, when I was there, were on one side. Then, the lower grades were in another section. The First room

I had was next door to one of the German rooms. Then later on, I was moved to the other side when they built a new building. Then, the high school and the first grade were over at this new building. First and second were over at the new building and the middle grades, so-called Junior high, were still in the old building.

EH: Was the high school some distance from you; a mile, or a few blocks?

JM: No, it was Just walking across the courtyard. I understand there is a brand new building over in another section now, not too far from there, but the other building was turned over. Central section was like gym, which was used as sort of an auditorium and a gym. There was a huge playground, and our kids were always unhappy because the German children were out earlier; but then they went out and did all of their— sports activities were not sponsored by the school. They were sort of separate From the school, and they always had loads of

460 homework to take home.

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| JESSIE | MELIS, Lansing Unit |  | El |
| **EH:** | **The German children did?** | **What grades did you teach?** |  |

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JM: I had fourth grade one year and fifth grade two years. A couple of times, I went into some of the German class­ rooms for one reason or another. If I entered as a stranger, or guest, the children immediately stood by their desks until the teacher signalled they could sit.

One time I was in there talking tQ the teacher, and she had said they could sit. The Priest came in and immediately they were all standing again— and stood, perfectly quiet, next to their chairs until they were given permission to sit down. And again, the teacher’s desk was on a platform, probably about that high. So, it was quite different. That was interesting.

EH: Jessie, you said something about military trains. Tell us about it.

JM: They had the field trains going into Uienna and into Berlin, and they had the checkpoints that you had to go through. It was going through the Russian zone because of the country’s partition, and you had to go through the Russians’ in order to get into Berlin from any of the areas. You could go by flying, but that wasn ’t always possible. So if you wanted to go to Berlin, you usually went by train; but it was the long way because you had to

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit EE

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go through the checkpoint, then you had to go down into Frankfort and then back into Munich.

One Thanksgiving we Flew into Berlin, and the weather got bad. We were a little delayed because it was a Berlin airlift period of time and they had a number of refugees. They were trying to Fly them out, and we were overloaded with baby buggies and one thing or another. As we went up, they decided they couldn’t maneuver well enough to get past the Russian area by flying the particular flyway they were supposed to, so they turned around and came back. We were grounded. This was as we were coming back on Sunday afternoon, and we were grounded. Then we tried to get out on the military train, but that was booked solid for a Sunday night; so we couldn’t go out until

Monday night.

The trains, of course, go into Berlin and into Uienna. You got on, and there was military personnel— M P ’s, and you had to keep your windows down once you got into the Russian zone (keep your curtains down) and not look out until you got through this particular zone. Uienna was the same way. You were limited in some of the areas where you could go. As a civilian, you had more Freedom than the military people did because they were much more strict with them.

One weekend we had gone down to Uienna, and a bunch had met at one of the Hungarian places for dinner. One of

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| **510** | JESSIE | MELIS, Lansing Unit 03  **the women in our group was studying For opera. She was** |
|  |  | **an American teacher, but she had decided she wanted to** |
| **51S** |  | **study. One way she could do it was to take "housemother”** |
| **514** |  | **For the high school. Then she had time oFF on her**  **weekends and her daytimes to take her lessons.** |
|  |  | **Anyhow, we were encouraging her to sing. We were in sort** |
| **515** |  | **oF a little separate alcove, and we got started. She was** |
|  |  | **singing some popular songs. Her voice carried, and** |
| **510** |  | **pretty soon we had everybody in the place applauding.** |
|  |  | **All the kitchen staFF came out and stood around and** |
| **520** |  | **listened to us— or to her; because we sang once-in-a-** |
|  |  | **while, but she was really the star. So we spread some** |
| **500** |  | **good will that night.** |
|  |  | **They were pleased, but going back on the train Sunday** |
| **504** |  | **night, a bunch were sitting together and chatting and** |
|  |  | **didn ’t realize when we pulled out aF the station that we** |
| **505** |  | **had gone into the Russian zone. The M P ’s came by and** |
|  |  | **demanded that we pull the curtains and keep them pulled** |
| **500** |  | **until we got out oF the Russian zone.** |
|  |  | **I can always remember the changing oF the guard in** |
| **530** |  | **Berlin, when the various nations would take over For a** |
|  |  | **month; be in control For a month. Not too Far From our** |
| **530** |  | **hotel were the Russians, and they had warned us not to** |
|  |  | **take any pictures oF the guards and so on. Some girls** |
| **534** |  | **did, and it happened to be that weekend there were three** |
|  |  | **oF us. We were walking into our hotel and the guard at** |

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 24

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the door said, ’Are you the ones that they ’re looking For?” Ule said, ’Uihat?” They had gone over and walked up close of the guards and taken pictures of them in the hotel doorway, and the guards had knocked the cameras and everything down and confiscated them; and of course, reported it as an incident. It got tricky sometimes, where you could go and where you couldn’t.

EH: When I drove to Uienna, we could see the Russian zone.

However, we had to check in at a point. Then, if I remember the distance, it was about one hundred miles.

If we weren ’t there in two-three hours, they came to look

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| **548** |  | **For us. At no time did I stop. We were not to go to the**  **ladies’ room or make any stops of any sort enroute to** |
|  |  | **Uienna.** |
| **550** | **JM:** | **There were incidents, things that happened to friends.** |
|  |  | **More annoying incidents than anything serious and they** |
| **552** |  | **were sort accustomed to them; to shrug them off from time** |
|  |  | **to time.** |
| **554** | **EH:** | **Did they take the film out of your camera that day?** |
|  | **JM:** | **They didn ’t do mine. There were three other girls that** |
| 556 |  | **were involved.** |
|  | **EH:** | **But do you remember? Did they take the film out?** |

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit ES

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JM: I imagine they did— and confiscated the Film because that was customary; and there would be the little diplomatic deal, you know, with somebody invaded. The privacy type of thing and annoyances, mare than anything else.

EH: I think this was common, for us to take pictures. I c a n ’t remember whether I did or not, but in Uienna, I took a tour of the Russian zone.

JM: In Berlin we went out, but it wasn ’t difficult. I still have pictures in Berlin of the bunker; Hitler’s bunker that was blown up before they had destroyed it. You know, just as it had been left and with some of the grass. We went through that area and had no difficulty. I know that night, we had tickets for the opera. We got a cab and we asked for the opera and he said, ”Do you want to go to East Berlin or West Berlin?” We said, ’Well, our tickets are For West Berlin.” He said, ’They have better opera in East Berlin. You should go there.” CLaughter) Under the circumstances, we weren ’t about to, but it wasn ’t the difficulty— getting back and forth.

You could do it, but you had to check and have your papers verified. We did take a military bus across because they were offering tours. We had taken that tour, and we weren ’t stopped or anything; and we did get off and take pictures.

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| **502** | JESSIE  **EH:** | MELIS, Lansing Unit **26**  **UJas there a great deal of devastation in Berlin?** |
|  | **JM:** | **Yes. Especially in the Eastern Sector.** |
| **5B4** | **EH:** | **In the Eastern Sector: Did Berlin seem more austere to you than Munich?** |
| **506** | **JM:** | **Yes, very much so. I think there uias a tenseness; of** |

course, that was that period of the Korean War, when I

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was there. The flyway, where you could have the three paths coming in and out, and they had the airlift into Berlin in that period— and it was a little tricky. The refugees could not go out by train because if they went out by German train, they would be picked up. For some reason, I guess, Cl don ’t know) they couldn’t ride the military train, so they flew them out so they would not have to go through the Russian Sector.

EH: Now, my German friends are from— Dr. Uogel is from Berlin— and they got out of there; he and his mother. He said there were ways for them to escape.

JM: Yes, there probably were, but at that time the Germans could go back and forth between East and West Berlin. There was no problem. Not like it is now. I suppose they had to have papers to show, but a lot of the G I ’s would fall asleep on the train— streetcar type of thing, you know. Sometimes they would wake up and they would be

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit E7

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in there. Then there would be this little incident. I guess this happened regularly and nobody seemed to be too excited about it.

EH: I never did get into the Russian zone by streetcar in Uienna. UJe were just across the Danube From the Russian zone, but it would be very easy to go across there on the streetcar.

JM: We did. We went over, and we took the Ferris Wheel ride. ’The Third Man” was the movie that was popular, and we saw the place where that had been Filmed and went to some oF the places.

We also decided we would go over into Prater, which is kind oF an amusement park area. We rode the Ferris Wheel, which is prominent in the Film. But we were glad to get out. I think it was very comFortable to get out. As civilians, I think there wasn ’t much point For the Russians to Fuss at civilians. You know, it would be more meaningFul to Fuss at someone who is in the military .

EH: Yet, it could have been an incident where the American Consolate would have had to get you iF the Russians held you; and they could hold you.

JM: You didn ’t think quite that much about it as a civilian.

We had more leeway.

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit E8

I ’ll always remember, even in Uienna back then— the

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pastries.

EH: They were rich.

JM: Oh, they were marvelous. Seemingly, everybody— and I noticed that in Bermany, too,— everything in the afternoon. It didn ’t matter how much it cost. People would stop and have coffee and something with schlag in between, in the afternoon, and get a pastry. They were terribly expensive. It would be the equivalent of five dollars almost, because I can remember some of the pastries in Bermany being marked about four marks seventy-five, and their coffee was always expensive.

With the tip, that would be rather an expensive refreshment. The Germans weren ’t making that much, actually .

EH: Do you remember what your salary was then? And what a German would be making?

JM: I c a n ’t remember. I tried to look it up— what I was getting, and I couldn’t find it. I have no idea. I would say that was the standard—

EH: Around four or five thousand, wasn ’t it a year?

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| 650 | JESSIE  **J M :** | MELIS, Lansing Unit 23  **I d o n ’t think it was that much when I went over in ’50.** |
| **652** |  | **I think probably, it was closer to less than three thousand when I went over.** |
|  | **EH:** | **But you did have your room Free.** |
| **654** | **JM:** | **Yes. Our meals were our own, but we did have—** |
|  | **EH:** | **You had the advantage of going to the hotels, didn ’t you?** |
| **656** |  | **At about two dollars a night?** |
|  | **Jfl:** | **Yes, or a dollar; going down to Garmisch for skiing or** |
| **658** |  | **something. Weekends, you could get by at any of the** |
|  |  | **better places for— with meals and everything— about ten** |
| **660** |  | **dollars for the weekend. Because you could give about** |

seventy-five cents For the RTO ’s, which was the military

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railroad ticket. You got that at the military depot part, but it was inexpensive. It was a way of getting beautiful recreation. Ski lessons for twenty-five cents, I remember.

EH: That would be one mark back in that time.

JM: Yes, that would be about a mark.

Anyhow, things that I remember: My first Christmas that I was there, I did go to Egypt; and the trip included Jerusalem, which was really what I wanted to do— the old part of Jerusalem, which was in Jordan at that time.

When we flew from Egypt into Jordan, we had to go way

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 30

south and back because we could not cross the Israeli 674 territories. The war had stopped at that point, but it

was still very evident, and the older part of Jordan had 676 tank traps still. When you went around some places, you had to watch that, and they had the barbed wire dividing

67B the new city from the old city. Since most of us in the group were more interested in the old city, the historic

600 part— and we couldn’t go back and forth between the two countries— when that choice was made, we took the trip

682 that would include the old part.

I think I got Just a bit of a feeling that is evidenced 6B4 recently in some of the problems and why there has been

some real serious problems since that time. The feelings 686 from the Palastinians; and I was invited to a Palastinian

home of some people who were refugees, and of course,

608 they were quite bitter. They had hopes of going back and were resentful. They had been quite well-off and now

630 were not too well-off, although they were in this home. Ue went out in the countryside, and when we went in, I

682 couldn ’t see. It was so dark. They were being polite, and we were in this room which would be a living room,

684 and there was no heat. I was freezing. I was so cold and finally they said, after we had gone through some

696 formalities, ’Would you like to come into where i t ’s warmer into the kitchen?” I was so grateful. We had a

698 lovely evening. I enjoyed it very much, but I think it

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 31

gave me some understanding of some of the bitterness that

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some of the groups have and uhy i t ’s so difficult to even talk of peace and try peace. Because of all the little bit that I got that evening and the little bit of the few days that I was there, that I saw and heard; you could understand why there is going to be a great deal of difficulty ever even thinking that there ’s going to be a lasting peace there.

EH: Thank you, Jessie. Jessie, you didn ’t tell us why you came home. You were there three years.

JM: Well, I had come to the point. At three years, you are going to have to make a decision. You are either going to have to stay with the idea of making that work a

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| **712** |  | **career, or coming home and picking up things; because it** |
|  |  | **would be too long to be gone much— I mean, you would lose** |
| **714** |  | **your ties at home for career possibilities, and I was** |
|  |  | **needed at home. My father had become ill. Weighing** |
| **716** |  | **things out, I decided my wisest choice would be to come** |
|  |  | **home and reestablish myself here and do what I could at** |
| **718** |  | **my home.** |
|  | **EH:** | **Did you come home each summer?** |
| 720 | **JM:** | **No, I taught summer school the first year. The third year I travelled until I did come home.** |

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| **722** | JESSIE  **EH:** | MELIS, Lansing Unit **32**  **I see. You stayed two summers in Europe. You had been** |
|  |  | **away a t o t a l of three years before you came back? That** |
| **724** |  | **was a long time.** |
|  | **JM:** | **I had three teaching years.** |
| **726** | **EH:** | **Were you lonesome for the United States?** |
|  | **JM:** | **No, I d o n ’t think so.** |
| **72B** | **EH:** | **I was terribly lonesome for it.** |
|  | **JM:** | **I missed certain things, of course, but I have been very** |
| **730**  **732** |  | **fortunate (maybe) that when I ’m with some place or something; something that ’s finished or done with, or**  **I ’ve made a decision; then that ’s it, and it doesn ’t** |
|  |  | **bother me. I don ’t get nostalgic about whether I should** |

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have or I shouldn’t have, and I missed my parents. That was my first Christmas away from home. I had always managed to get home, if only for twenty-four hours. I couldn ’t do it very well, and I think the last Christmas I was there we went skiing in Switzerland. We went for a week

EH: St. Moritz, perchance?

JM: Oh, I was there too. No, it was at Klosters, but there

742 was a hotel that name. It was on the Swiss plan, which

JESSIE MELIS, Lansing Unit 33

was one of those military Cthe helping the Swiss get back

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on their feet as Far as hotel business was concerned?, so it was a very inexpensive way to do this at a very lovely hotel.

We had the week there. Christmas Eve we had dinner. The

dining room was off sort of a mezzanine, and as you came out, they had placed about a two story tree in the center of the lobby, which came up over the mezzanine part; and

you still had to look up. It was lit with candles, and I

**\***

was homesick. That was the first time I could really and truly say in the years that I was gone that I was homesick. I had always been able to be busy at that time, but that was the last straw. I don ’t think I have ever seen a more beautiful tree, except some that my grandmother had with candles. Here it was dark and then all this huge tree. It was Just loaded with candles.

EH: People came in and lit them by hand?

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| **JM:** | **Well, they** | **hand fixed them,** | **you know, so they** | **reached—** |
|  | **but it was** | **lovely. I think** | **that ’s it.** |  |

EH: And y o u ’re back in Lansing? You went back to your old school?

JM: I went back my same town but into a brand-new school that had been Just built while I had been gone.

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| **7SB** | JESSIE  **EH:** | MELIS, Lansing Unit  **Did you teach in East Lansing before you left?** |  | 34 |
|  | **JM:** | **Y e s .** |  |  |
| **768** | **EH:**  **JM:** | **And you came back to East Lansing.**  **I came back to East Lansing.** |  |  |
| **770** | **EH:** | **You were originally From Grand Rapids, *w e r e n ’t*** | **you?** |  |
|  | **JM:** | **Right. I was born in Grand Rapids.** |  |  |
| **772** | **EH:** | **Well, thank you.** |  |  |

774 Transcribed by Patricia Siggers Lansing, Michigan