ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

Ilse Williams

An interview conducted on

February 7, 2023

Interviewer: Dr. Matthew Gritter

Angelo State University
West Texas Collection
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GRITTER: Alright, so. I'm here with Ilse Williams with the Greatest Generation Oral History Project. Today is um, Tuesday, February 7, 2022. My name is Dr. Matt Gritter, and I'm here with Ilse Williams, and we are just going to ask her some questions. So I'll begin with an easy one, what is your name?

WILLIAMS: Um, Ilse Williams.

GRITTER: Alright, so when and where were you born?

WILLIAMS: I was born in 1952 in Cuxhaven, which is right on the North Sea coast of Germany.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: Mhm.

GRITTER: Nice, and where did you grow up?

WILLIAMS: I grew up in Cuxhaven.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: For eight years, and then our family moved to Hanover.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And that's where I lived until I was twenty.

GRITTER: Uh huh.

WILLIAMS: And then I got a scholarship to be in the United States for a year.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Because I was in the process of becoming an English Teacher in Germany.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And after that year, I traveled, a little bit through Texas, to the Uncle of my roommate.
GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: Who was a farmer in West Texas. And two weeks later we were married. And my whole life changed.

GRITTER: Oh wow.

WILLIAMS: So that was the only thing… [laughs]

GRITTER: So you got a- got your West Texas connection in.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Mhm.

GRITTER: So what schools and colleges did you attend?

WILLIAMS: Okay, I uh attended um basic Elementary school, um then a kind of prep school Gymnasium, the first Co-Educational one in Hanover.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And uh, after that two years, the Technical University in Hanover.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Majoring in English and from there I got a scholarship. It was a Fulbright-Hays grant.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: To attend Vassar College.

GRITTER: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: For a year. And uh however, because my, uh, American academics would not have been recognized back in the German University.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: I did not take my courses for credit.
GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And I also worked as a German language intern, that's, you know, part that was part of the…

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: -the scholarship agreement. So, um yeah.

GRITTER: Great. And what was your first job?

WILLIAMS: My first job was substitute teacher in my old high school.

GRITTER: Oh nice.

WILLIAMS: Uh…

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Which is one of a long line of jobs I've had that I have been asked if I would do it. Um I have never had a job in my life, and I've had a lot jobs, where I had to apply to get that job.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: It's uh.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: It's been the story of my life.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: So, uh, when I. I don't know if this is all part of what you wanna know.

GRITTER: Oh, you know, anything you want to share is great.

WILLIAMS: Okay, uhm, so when I, when I then married my husband, who's still my husband now.
GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Um I had to revamp everything, you know.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: All my plans and whatever, but I was certain that I wanted to finish college.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And my first idea was, I will always fly back to Germany for the semesters there.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And come back here. But then I figured out that here I could not become a teacher if I didn’t have an american teaching.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: and, you know, a Texas teaching certificate.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And, so um, I missed that fall semester but then by spring semester, uh, also with the help of doctor Tetzlaff who, you know, kinda tried to give me a transcript, you know, to-

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: to find out what classes I ought to take here.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: I started then in the spring,

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: and I graduated in December ’76.

GRITTER: Uh-huh.
WILLIAMS: And uh, then realized, that, uh, that my other subject was P.E.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Um, that I did not know anything about, the sports that were taught at the school in Eldorado. I was a swimmer, a gymnast-

GRITTER: [chuckles]

WILLIAMS: A little bit of track, didn’t know anything about basketball. You know, so, I felt like woah, you know, that's going to be difficult and I was still a little uncertain about my English, you know,

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Whether I could teach English. Even though English then was my minor here

GRITTER: Uhm.

WILLIAMS: When I graduated at ASU. And so um I didn't immediately look for a teaching job but I was offered um a job as a roustabout in a gas company that was three miles from my, that was Northern Natural.

GRITTER: Oh nice.

WILLIAMS: They’d later on, you know, um, became Enron.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And uh, the reason for that was that it was the time when they needed to recruit some women and they had heard about me, you know, helping a lot on the farm, and- and you know, having a presence of mind, or whatever so they.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: The boss asked me if i would be interested in working there and I thought man that’s easy. Three miles from my farm.

GRITTER: Yeah. [laughs]
WILLIAMS: You know, we’ll just do that and I did that until I became pregnant, wasn’t very long, until I became pregnant with my son.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And that time I thought well I can’t do this physical work, you know, with that pregnancy but I didn’t ask for a secretary’s job, I probably couldn’t have done it very well either. Um, anyway so, um, that was the end of that job, and then um I had a son, and I’m trying to think when, oh but I always kept taking one or two graduate courses. In English, you know, with English as my major in- in Masters, um, program.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And, uh, then one time they- Dr. Gragg asked me if I would like to be uh, was interested in being a graduate assistant.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And at first I said no. [sighs] Um, when my son was one year old and when he was three years old f- three years old, uh, a counselor had told me you need to do something academic.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And so [laughs] I called Dr. Gragg.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: And I said is the offer still there.

WILLIAMS: And so he said, yes. So then I, you know, was a graduate assistant then the following year, was a teaching assistant.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Um, and in the English Department, you know, teaching, writing.

GRITTER: Okay.
WILLIAMS: And uh, that was always the joke, that, you know, it took a German to teach the freshman.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laughs]

GRITTER: Right. That's great.

WILLIAMS: -English. But anyway uh and then I- I finally got my Masters Degree, uh way after I had stopped, um grad- uh, the teaching assignment.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Uh I got it in uh in 19 uh 90, yeah in 1990.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS. Yeah I finally had my Masters cert. But there was all this, you know, farming and kids.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And- and trying to do your thesis and…

GRITTER: Oh wow.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: All this- all this deal. So uh and after that I, I also worked as, did you want more jobs.

GRITTER: Um I mean, right now, it's going to go more into the World War II connection.

WILLIAMS: Got it. Okay.

GRITTER: It's good to have your context and, you know, your west texas connection kinda getting in there.

WILLIAMS: Okay.
GRITTER: So um, okay, did you have any personal connections to um service members who were serving in World War II? Like?

WILLIAMS: Not American, I mean other than, you know, my- no my husband is my generation and he was in the National Guard.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Uh other than that no. I never knew any American service members.

GRITTER: Okay, so could you tell us a little bit more about like, you know, your parents and their experiences.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, sure uh my parents were the prime, um, candidates for conversion, to the Hitler, uh period.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Because my father was thirteen and my mother was, uh- No, my father was fourteen and my mother was thirteen.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: In 1933: the famous year when Hitler came to power and the world changed. GRITTER: Mmm.

WILLIAMS: And uh before that, both my grandparents had been in World War I and survived it.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: So there were uh, you know, war stories from both wars.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: But it always, really affected the, after the War, um issues, and uh, you know, again all three men as well as my uncle who also was in World War II, um never told about actual war experiences, and that seems to have been the same with all the others. You know,

GRITTER: Mhm.
WILLIAMS: there was a- a project were that we did at the school in Eldorado when I- I uh was in charge of a service learning program and we- we had the eleventh grader history students interview veterans from, you know, all american wars, and um so this, you know, we had a booklet of that one too and the main result of that was the same thing. They would not speak.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: uh about actual war experiences they would speak about, you know, how they started, you know, how they got to the place they they were trained.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: What kind of job they had in the war and then how they uh celebrated the last day of service, as the highlight of their life.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: You know, so, this- thats just, uh, you know, that seems to be the standard way.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Of.

GRITTER: Mhm. Definitely.

WILLIAMS: Of dealing with the past, uh especially, with um, young people.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: You know, with- with children. I've thought about that alot but I think it is the son, you know, if a murder or something really awful happened in your family. You wouldn't tell that to your kids that way either.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: You know, you would be careful about how you told it. And so I think that is, and that, I think the other thing they, themselves don't want to revisit-
WILLIAMS: That time either. So um, that just- that's just how it is. Hahaha.

GRITTER: Yeah.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Okay, well I um, When I look at the life of my father actually at my parents, I mean they were actually- they were really really affected by that whole World War II business.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And the time before. Um, I can say that my father was evidently selected for, um an officers career, or something.

GRITTER: Got it.

WILLIAMS: Um, because he was academically as well as physically really talented.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And I know, also, you know, I have talked with him a lot of times, um the older I got the more I tried to, you know, always the same question, how did that happen? You know, what made it possible? And um, he gave me a lot of answers, explanations, and so on, but it was all on the history, philosophy side, you know.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: You know, and of course what we always had is, he had, you know, the Greek and and, uh, Latin history in his head too.

GRITTER: Mmm.

WILLIAMS: And so, you know, there were always comparisons they were really, you know-

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: almost college level-

GRITTER: Yeah.
WILLIAMS: conversations about it, but the actual day to day experiences of the war he did not, he did not share.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Um he was, let me see, they shortened the highschool career.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: For the boys instead of thirteen years, that was the normal prep school range, or, you know.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Or um, Gymnasium range, they made it twelve years and then they immediately got went into the work service.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: It was called, Arbeitsdienst, you know, so it's really work service.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And in that work service already, they did, you know, a lot of, um- I don't know, clean up or works, or whatever, so for my father that would've been, I'm trying to think, 19- in ‘37.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: But also what they did during that time was that was um, my father, uh through his physics teacher, and you have to remember that teaching was also aligned with the whole, you know, system. [laughs]

GRITTER: Yeah. [chuckles]

WILLIAMS: And the physics teacher interested the boys in glider plane flying.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And then there was a glider plane airport nearby Cuxhaven: where he grew up.
GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And so he and I don't remember whether he was fourteen or sixteen, uh he got his glider plane license.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And of course for them that was all fun they also didn't realize that that was also a spying uh uh.

GRITTER: Oh yeah.

WILLIAMS: A spying strategy, you know, to have those- those glider plan abilities and the other thing my father was very good at was- was throwing events.

GRITTER: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: And he was an exceptional javelin thrower and I said something, about well why was that so important why was that, so, you know, admired?

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And in the aftermath, I knew that was hand grenade throwing.

GRITTER: Oh.

WILLIAMS: You know, I mean it was that the throwing sport among the boys was really pushed.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Um and so, you know, my father, [chuckles] was able after, you know, in the in the 60’s 70’s and 80’s he was very very well able to tie all of this together.

GRITER: Yeah. [chuckles].

WILLIAMS: But, you know, as a youngster, you know, he was just like any football kid is now, you know.

GRITTER: Yeah. [laughs]
WILLIAMS: I mean woah, you know, this is this is the thing, this is fun to do, so, uh, those were little things but other things that also happened in his life that again, you know, is- is all, uh trying to put this together his parents as well as my parents then when we grew up were supporting um trips to the- to a foreign country from young on.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: My father went to Sweden as an exchange student when he was twelve.

GRITTER: Oh.

WILLIAMS: I went to England as an exchange student when I was twelve.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Again when I was thirteen. Um, you know, and and my sister went to France as an exchange student, my other sister went to America in ’66-’67-

GRITTER: Mmm.

WILLIAMS: for one year. I mean, it was really this famous: give them roots and wings. You know,

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I mean, my parents were really building wings for all of us.

GRITTER: [chuckles]

WILLIAMS: Which is also why I'm here, you know, that’s- that’s just.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: So it was not closed in view at all, it was very much, uh, um, you know, this is part of the education you need to know what else is going on in the world.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: So okay, that's all I know at this time.
GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: From this time I don't know what your next questions are.

GRITTER: Um, you know, so usually we we kind of ask things about World War II so I mean was World War II remembered in a certain way?

WILLIAMS: Oh, oh. [laughs] yeah! Nothing but.

GRITTER: [laughs] In West Germany.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think that um what was always told us, you know, when we have asked was it bad during World War II?

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Uh my parents would say no the horrible thing came afterwards, you know, ‘45 to ‘48 was the no man's time. I mean, there was no currency that was floating it was all cigarettes, and, you know, and, of course for my father it was, um, being interned.

GRITTER: Uh huh.

WILLIAMS: My mother evidently could go there by bicycle and bring additional him food.

GRITTER: Uh huh.

WILLIAMS: Because the food they got were mostly potato peelings and, you know, my father when he came home in ‘48 he was- he was pretty skeleton. You know, he was- he was not in good shape.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Uh, but anyway, so the time afterwards: this complete, uh, changing of whatever you thought was right, was not right, you know, uh, was just, um, you know, then the scarcity of everything and the, you know, not having enough food and whatever so, I mean, everybody, I think, in Germany from that time will say the same thing.

GRITTER: Mhm.
WILLIAMS: And it’s also you see that in those papers too. Except in the Soviet Zone it was a whole lot worse.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Than it was in the Western Zones. And, uh, so, you know, during World War II my parents like many others married in World War II.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: In 1942, in Dresden, a year before-

GRITTER: Oh, wow. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: [laughs] it was bombed to bits and that was only because, again, you know, they were marrying age, 22 and 23.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And it depended on furlow.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And as soon as furlow was given it was rush rush rush hurry up, you know, and so, um, but my father always said with, uh, you know, uh I don't know if what kind of a grin that would be it was um, you know, he said and we got a Mein Kampf for our wedding, you know.

GRITTER: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: From the, you know, from an officer.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, uh huh, but he said everybody that got married, got that, you know.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And I asked him one time uh whats in that book, you know, later on, I thought he said it is a uh, sorry written book
GRITTER: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: You know, he said it's- you know, it’s a piece of junk.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: But, you know, we had to have it, everybody had to have it, so um, and I still haven't read it-

GRITTER: [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Even though its now being published and that's another thing I mean one of the effects of this whole history is that, uh, I still have this- this enormous, uh, feeling of guilt of how could something like that happen.

GRITTER: Mmm.

WILLIAMS: And how could it happen with a person whom I knew to be so rational and considerate.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And so, um, you know, it’s- it’s and then, of course my little bells always ring when any politics that happen.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: You know, I just: woah, woah, woah.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laugh]

WILLIAMS: You know, I mean, its just you always- it always in the back of my mind and I still read a bunch of stuff, you know, and I still see German news everyday.

GRITER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And uh, you know, its just, uh, it- it’s just something that does not leave you, at least somebody like me. Now, the next generation and the next generation, they are completely different.
GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: You know, that’s all- oh that doesn't matter anymore- only for a few select people. But, you know, my generation was different and I can say to that too, um, you know, seeing I've learned something too about the old movies that you see of you-