ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

Ilse Williams

An interview conducted on

February 7, 2023

Interviewer: Dr. Matthew Gritter

Angelo State University
West Texas Collection
“Greatest Generation Oral History Archive”
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The electronic file and complete transcript of this interview were processed in the Department of History at Angelo State University and are available at the Dr. Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.
GRITTER: Okay, so starting our interview, um, here with Ilse Williams. This is, um, Dr. Matt Gritter again. So we got up to where you talked about the wedding and you know some of the events so.

WILLIAMS: Okay, I talked about the wedding. And during the war.

GRITTER: Yup.

WILLIAMS: Depending on furlough, you know.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Wedding and- and- and honeymoon and dress things.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Back to into the war.

GRITTER: Yup.

WILLIAMS: And what I do know is that when the war started my father was in the Eastern, you know, in the invasion of Poland.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And I don't know in which way.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I also know that in ‘42-‘43 he was at the Atlantic coast. I also don't know in which way.

GRITTER: Mhm.

Williams: Uh. So, um, anyway, but that's- that's all I mean never any- never any details.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Of it.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Okay, and then we started talking- we started talking about the, um, media coverage during that time.

GRITTER: Yup, exactly.
WILLIAMS: Okay, and that now what's left, uh, it's hard to find anything that was not already the- the engineered manufactured-

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Uh, every impressive Nazi, you know, conquest of the world.

GRITTER: Yeah definitely.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laugh]

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: But, um, but anyway, um,

GRITTER: So-

WILLIAMS: And then of course in ‘45 you know everything fell apart.

GRITTER: Yup.

WILLIAMS: And, uh.

GRITTER: Then ‘45 to ‘48 was the occupation.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, and another consequence, um, was that my father was not allowed to attend the University until 1955.

GRITTER: Oh, wow.

WILLIAMS: And if you, you know, in the German History in 1955 Germany was granted, you know, whatever you call it: nice country status, there’s- there’s another term for it.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: You know, and so until then, um, because of his past…

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: He was not allowed to study and so he had to try to do something else and he tried to start a button factory and then came the Korean War. They got their supplies from Korea and Dad went broke but he also was not a businessman, you know. He was- he was always more in the teaching vein.

GRITTER: Mhm.
WILLIAMS: Whatever. But then in ‘55 he started, [sighs] he was, you know, he started teachin-
um, to get his teacher’s degree at the University in Hamburg.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And for the next, five years, it took five years to become a teacher in a high school, you know, in a gymnasium.

GRITTER: Yup.

WILLIAMS: And for those five years he traveled by train back to us; we didn't have a car.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Or anything. Came home every second weekend and finished his degree there and then he got his first job in Hanover when he was forty.

GRITTER: Oh wow.

WILLIAMS: That was his first teaching job.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Okay, and we moved to Hanover all of us did.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And so then we lived- lived there until I left for America and, you know, my parents still live there. Um, anyway, so, um, you know, he just started his teaching career- career at forty.

GRITTER: Uh huh.

WILLIAMS: And was a very well liked, respected Latin and Social- Social Studies teacher.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And, uh, some of the other things that I remember because he taught- he taught social studies but he also taught an evening school.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: I don't know. You know, there were people that were trying to get their high school graduation, which is not th- like the high school graduation here.

GRITTER: Yeah.
WILLIAMS: You know, the high school graduation in Germany, um, qualified you to go to University.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And there were quite a few people that, uh, were getting that later on in the- in the evenings and he also taught those- he taught those classes.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: Um, and then what I remember as far as politics are concerned post-war is the Cuban Missile Crisis. I was eleven.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And you know I heard bits and pieces of the news my grandfather listened to the news every night at seven o'clock.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I heard that. And it really didn't mean anything to me but my parents panicked.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And, um, not really panicked but it was immediately this: we need to put food in the basement.

GRITTER: Oh yeah. [chuckles]

WILLIAMS: You know and so I mean we got sugar and flour and all that kind of stuff and- and by the way right now in Germany, the government is recommending to people to have two weeks supply of food and water and everything.

GRITTER: That's interesting.

WILLIAMS: Because of the war in the Ukraine.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, uh huh, I mean that, Germany still remembers very much what-

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laugh]

WILLIAMS: What can happen to you.
GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And you know the- the American public is a little short on, you know, the last war here was the civil war that- [laughs]

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: You know, where that- where you lived through the consequences.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And so, you know, that’s one thing and then I remember the absolute shock, um, with my father when Kennedy was assassinated.

GRITTER: Oh yeah.

WILLIAMS: One of his students called him, I don't think we had a television then, yet, we just got all that stuff later. Because, you know,

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: We didn't have any money before that, um, and one of his students called him and I saw that shock. You know, it was at night, you know.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Let me see one o'clock, two o'clock in America would have been eight o'clock at night.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: In Germany. So, you know, I remember it was at night and well I mean he was just in total shock.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And, of course, again, you know, you didn't know what Khrushchev would do on the other side. [laughs]

GRITTER: Yeah. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: All this stuff, so those were the two political events where- where I knew, uh, you know, uh, wars are still possible.

GRITTER: Yeah, definitely.
WILLIAMS: Yeah, and so that was it.

GRITTER: Interesting.

WILLIAMS: Yeah talking about travel my mother too, um, loved to go elsewhere, um, took a bicycle tour through Holland.

GRITTER: Okay.

WILLIAMS: Loved that and, uh, was really excited in that group that they made up for German girls, you know.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: She played, uh, an accordion and that was all this togetherness and, you know.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And then when you see that in connection with the political turmoil after World War I you know when Germany had these, I saw a ballot sheet the other day. I think there were 24 different parties.

GRITTER: Mhm. During the Weimar Republic.

WILLIAMS: Yes, during the Weimar Republic. And, I mean, you can see that nothing was getting done.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And how they, you know, and there was this bitterness, of course, about losing World War I.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And having to pay the reparations.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And that’s what Hitler built all his strategy on. You know, he he said, first of all we don’t need those Russian troops in the Saarland, you know, along the Rhine.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And nothing happened and then, oh and by the way Czechoslovakia, is really a German- there are mostly Germans.
GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And we need to protect them, enter Czechoslovakia. I mean it's just, you know, until it- that was three years.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Actually from- from yeah, uh, before eventually the British decided they had to- to do something.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: You know, when- when he went into Poland and, uh, so, so, I don't know. I mean, it just- it just sits in your brain a long time.

GRITTER: Yeah, definitely.

WILLIMAS: And then yeah we were talking about the flag business.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And the National Anthem. You know, in Germany the National Anthem could no longer be [laughs] Germany above everything. Deutschland über alles.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: So we had the third verse of unity and justice and freedom, I think something like that.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: But really it was sung very rarely, and…

GRITTER: I've heard that.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

GRITTER: Especially in West Germany.

WILLIAMS: And the same thing with the flag business. I mean, you did not parade the flag you just-

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: You just kind of kept it- [laughs] kept it. Okay, uh, it didn't work out really well last time.
GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laugh]

WILLIAMS: And so, it was, yeah, it was just, um, you know, not- not, um, you know, before games and whatever and of course that was one of the things that was really hard for me to get used to here.

GRITTER: Oh, where it's done all the time.

WILLIAMS: Yeah all the time, you know, all our grandkids, now two of them are athletes.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: You know every game it- it’s- it’s again that you have to really switch your mind and say, okay these guys have not been through what we have been through.

GRITTER: we’ve been through.

GRITTER & WILLIAMS: [laugh]

GRITTER: I've heard some people in West Germany that like…

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Yeah, it's just, you have a different tool box that you bring with you in your life and you just kinda feel like: woah. Mmm. Ugh.

GRITTER: Interesting.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Okay and I think the other one is this, you know, what I said in the beginning, um, this habit of questioning authority.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Which was strong in the ‘68-‘70s, you know, when I was starting, I-, uh, I started college in ‘70, 1970.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And of course that was big. You know, that was, um.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: But all together that was something that, you know, be critical of people in authority.

GRITTER: Mhm.
WILLIAMS: And I know that [laughs] sometimes I have taken that too- too far but it's still what what we grew up with, you know.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: So, um, I don't know. I mean, I just always considered my Father to be a really rational, experienced, educated advisor.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And then that's hard to put together-

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: With the rest of the story.

GRITTER: Mhm. Mhm.

WILLIAMS: But this is happening to a lot of people, you know, there and what I- what I find amazing is that in German literature people are still writing about that time, you know.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: They’re writing about the social and personal lives, uh, from that time, even though they are.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: There’s a German, uh, author that just, uh, died two years ago but he wrote a story about his mother that was exactly my mother’s story.

GRITTER: Interesting.

WILLIAMS: I mean I thought, oh yeah, that's- that’s how it was.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: So it’s, by far not forgotten and, of course, it- her- the whole current situation it's bringing- bringing, all, all kinds of stuff back.

GRITTER: Mhm. a lot of things are coming back.

GRITTER: That's great.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah.
GRITTER: Mhm. So, um, do you think that one of the things that we talk about in this idea of the Greatest Generation, what do you think of the idea of a Greatest Generation, you know, in the United States the World War II generation has kinda adopted that, but?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think it was, uh, uh, a really, a remarkable effort but it was also that way in World War I.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: You know, it was a remarkable effort to stop something that needed to be stopped.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Um, and I think, you know, the- but that generation, I mean the World War II Generation has been honored since they came back home.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: You know it's- it's, uh, it's nice to keep it in mind but it's also the last war that America has won.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: You know [laughs] so, so, yeah, so, you know, it’s this dealing with Vietnam and- and, uh, and Korea has been a whole lot harder.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And still is, but, um, I don't know. I mean, I think- I think it is what so just put into, um, a war effort is- is inhuman and hard- impossible to understand, I would say- I would think for- for a civil people, you know, for- for a population.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And we all know PTSD.

GRITTER: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Is rampant all over the world.

GRITTER: Definitely.

WILLIAMS: And so I think honoring them is- is a good idea but I think exploring the situations that led to-

GRITTER: [chuckles]
WILLIAMS: this quote inevitable war, uh, is always really important, you know. That’s, to me, I mean to- to look at what happened before the war.

GRITTER: Definitely.

WILLIAMS: That made it- that made it happen. You know, I know with my- with my grandson, somehow we were talking about World War II and- and, uh, Pearl Harbor.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And- and all of those events, and I looked up in a history book that I had, you know. And it’s- and then we went on to- to online and whatever but the- the diplomatic events that happened years before Pearl Harbor was attacked…

GRITTER: Oh yeah, definitely, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Uh, quite an open book. I mean, it was threat after threat after, you know, and so, you kind of feel like no it was not out of the blue, you know. That- that it was long in coming but it was just not-

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: considered that- that they would be that, uh, what- rash or whatever the word is that, you know, the Japanese would not actually do something like that.

GRITTER: Yeah, mhm.

WILLIAMS: But, uh, it was- it was, you know. Later on you could follow the track and you can see, oh yeah.

GRITTER: Interesting.

WILLIAMS: This was- this was really building up.

GRITTER: Mhm. So do you have any concluding remarks you want to make?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I think history is too important to be neglected.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And I think that efforts like these help bring history back.

GRITTER: Mhm.
WILLIAMS: Because they go more on the personal level which seems to be what the current-[laughs] uh, state of mind is going to, you know, it's going away from the scholarly and into the personal experience.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: And so it may be, you know, that- that, uh, this can become just as important but I kind of still hope that, um, scholarly efforts are not neglected because there is more, uh, veracity in it.

GRITTER: Mhm.

WILLIAMS: Perhaps, and- and so you know it's, uh, I don't know. Yeah, I think history is- is most important.

GRITTER: Great! Well thank you very much for agreeing to speak with us.