

Good afternoon. I'm Bernard Weinstein, director of the Kean College oral testimonies project, the Holocaust Resource Center. Assisting me is Devora Lichstein. We'd like to welcome Lilly Gottlieb. Mrs. Gottlieb, would you tell us a little bit about where you came from?

I was born in Vienna quite a long time ago, in 1925. And as a matter of fact, I've naturally thought about my early childhood all along these years. But last year, it was 1988. It was 50 years after the Anschluss. The Anschluss of Vienna to Nazi Germany took place in 1938.

And there have been many memorial things done in Vienna. And even a small group of my colleagues from school-- I went to a Jewish day school in Vienna-- people who live in this area decided to get together and to reminisce a little bit. And I even have a picture here of our class. That was taken in 1937. There were about 12 out of a class of maybe 45.

We had very large classes then. There were 12 people at this reunion, and we thought about how we all left Vienna in '38 and '39. Some went to Israel. A great many disappeared, and we don't know what happened to them. And some of us found ourselves here.

And I have been in Vienna not that long ago, just for a short visit. And I found that they have a Jewish day school there, again there. It's also called the same as ours, HIAS, HIAS Schule. This was a gymnasium, of course. They didn't have elementary grades. So this brought back a lot of childhood memories.

And I entered the school when I was 10 years old, because I actually insisted upon it. Because I did want very much to go to a Jewish school. It wasn't because I was afraid of antisemitism. We had some incidents of antisemitism, or of people calling us names because we were Jews. But I don't think that at that time, before the Nazi Anschluss, we felt that this was tremendously threatening. But I had become already when I was 9 or 10 very oriented towards Zionism. And I wanted to learn Hebrew, and go to a Jewish school.

Of course, I wasn't there too long before the Nazi Anschluss took place, which made me even gladder, because my friends who were not in this day school were kicked out of their schools. And some of them were taken in by our school. And they formed some quickly put together Jewish schools. I mean, they were not left without schooling. But the regular public schools kicked out the Jewish kids.

What oriented you towards Zionism in the first place? What attracted you to it?

I think it was in the neighborhood. There were a lot of Zionest youth organizations, Betar, Hashomer Hatzair. It was something that I wanted to belong to. It was a feeling of wanting to belong to a group. I mean, I was a little young for that, but some of the older kids in my neighborhood belonged to Betar, which is the right-wing youth organization.

And I liked it. I mean, I must be honest about it, I liked their uniforms, and they were marching up and down. And I guess we were given to that kind of thinking. Maybe because the other kids had-- well, that came later, when they started with the Hitler-Jugend and all that. But I have to admit that we tried to imitate them in some ways. We want to also belong to something.

And Zionism in itself-- I came from a very Jewish family. Many people in Vienna came from families which were very assimilated, very Austrian. My family was originally from Poland, had just come to Vienna during the First World War. My grandfather was a Hasidic Jew with a beard. Even so, my parents were not that observant. I mean, there was never any question about my not being a Jew or assimilating. It was too far-fetched, because of my family background, I think.

Can you recall any memories from your childhood with your family?

Well, my grandparents had a very influential role in my childhood, because they're like the extended family they always talk about. We didn't live in the same place, but we lived across the street from them. And since my mother became a businesswoman, my grandparents took care of me a great deal when I was small. And we always had all the Jewish

holidays at their place.

And I had a friend whose parents were less given to Jewish observance or Jewish tradition, and some of my friends would always come to my grandparents' house, actually, to share these holidays with us. And I have very warm memories of this, especially sharing the seder at my grandparents' house. My greatest treat as a child was to be able to sleep over at their house, even though they had very, very close quarters.

But that's what I liked to do. I was a little embarrassed when I was smaller, when my grandfather went to the playground with me. Because sometimes, kids would tease him. He had a long beard, and he wore Hasidic clothes-- I mean, black and so on. But--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--all in all, it was a very warm and supportive relationship.

At this time, did it ever go beyond teasing? Was there any violence or attempts?

No, no. There was just some kids would make a remark, look at the old Jew with the little kid, you know? And then I remembered that my mother once said that my grandmother-- well, she was busy with other things-- should take me to the park, because I felt embarrassed about being with my grandfather. My grandfather-- coming to Vienna after the war, he couldn't really fit himself into the economic picture, so he was sort of retired.

What did your parents do for a living?

Well, my father was doing some import/export business, and my mother created a business of wool and yarn. She had a company with her brother as her partner, where she imported wools and yarns, and sold it to some small home industries. There were people who had knitting machines, and manufactured sweaters in their house. And that was actually like a home industry, which she supplied with this wool.

And when it started to really become a success was when the Nazis took over, and she had to give it up. As a matter of fact, when they-- after the 10th of November, that we had the Kristallnacht, they taped all the Jewish businesses shut. So my mother could never enter her business anymore. And it was just taken away.

Yeah.

But I was proud of her being a businesswoman.

Were there any other children in the family?

Well, I had some cousins who didn't live nearby, and we would get together maybe once or twice a year, not that often. I was an only child, and most of my cousins were only children too. That was the thing, to have a one-child family. I guess it had to do with rather a great shortage of apartments in Vienna, and space, and money. People who were ambitious usually had only one child.

At that time, it was no more difficult for Jews to get apartments than for anybody else, is that--

No, no, no. On the contrary. Maybe many Jews owned apartment buildings, so I wouldn't say that. What's more, but it was very difficult, because there were very strict rent controls in Vienna, so there was hardly anything being built there.

What was your schooling like?

Well, Austria had a system of schooling which is very different. The first four grades in elementary school, I went to a public school. For four years, you had the same teacher, which-- I still remember her. When I feel guilty about something, I sometimes see her in my dreams. She was very stern. And then you had to pass an examination at the age

of 10, which determined whether you go to a gymnasium, an academic high school, or a regular high school. Very unfair, of course, in retrospect, because it's much too young to make such a decision about a child's future.

And I went to this Jewish gymnasium, where we had, as you can see, very large classes. But most of us got a fairly good education. We had Hebrew there as a modern language. We also had English, which is probably the cause of my rather strong German accent. Because those of us who started studying English here have much less of an accent. But my first English studies were conducted by teachers who themselves had a strong accent.

And we also had Jewish history. And it was generally not religious, but very Jewish, and I would say a Zionist-oriented school. I think that in many ways, the methods of teaching were a little more modern than in the regular Austrian schools. We had less rote learning, when I compared with others, and we were more permitted to ask questions, more like methods prevailing in the United States. European schoolings were very much into learning things by heart and rote learning. It's harder to do with Jewish kids, who like to argue and ask questions.

When did you first feel yourself in danger?

The very first night that the Nazis marched into Austria, in March 1938. They were singing a song right on the-- they were marching up and down the street singing a song where some words are "wenn Judenblut vom Messer spritzt," which translated means, "when Jewish blood runs off our knives." I was already-- I was I can imagine-- panic stricken. I was very afraid.

And from then on, we always felt threatened. I mean, we did what we had to do, but we felt threatened. Kids from my neighborhood would tell us to get off the sidewalk. They took Jews and had them-- because there was supposed to be a plebiscite before the Nazis marched in. So there are a lot of slogans written on the streets and on-- I don't know why they wrote them on the sidewalks.

And they made Jewish-- mostly women and girls-- get down on their knees and scrub them off. So you were always afraid to be-- I was never personally taken to this. But I could see it from a distance, I would run in the other direction. It wasn't something that actually anybody got killed in, but it was very-- to have all these people stand around and taunt you, and have to scrub the sidewalk.

Then after the Kristallnacht, there were several people that we knew taken to concentration camps. Some didn't come back. Most of them did so. At that time, people did return from Dachau. And they were thrown out of their apartments. As a matter of fact, you may have heard of or maybe have met him, Raul Hilberg. Our parents were very friendly, and we were friendly as kids, although I've never gotten in touch with him again. His father was taken to Dachau. And after Kristallnacht, they came to stay with us. We shared the apartment with them.

Can you describe what Kristallnacht was for you?

Oh yes. I remember, I went to school in the morning, because we didn't realize. We didn't get the news every 10 minutes on the radio like you do now, although it did come over the radio later. And the teachers told us, you shouldn't be here, there's something going on. Go home immediately.

And what I still remember is they told us, take off your glasses, those of you who wear glasses. Because they may throw stones at you, and you may get glass in your eyes. This is the thing which stuck in my memory, because quite a few of us wore glasses. So we took them off. We went home, and I saw the synagogue already in flames.

And then my parents-- we were all in my grandmother's house when some SR people came in, and wanted to take my father and my grandfather away. My uncle was still there. I think he was hiding elsewhere. And my mother prevailed on this person to let them go. She promised him to give him some furniture that we were going to leave very soon. She was very persuasive and very protective. And somehow, he listened to her. But it was very, very scary.

Yeah. Was anybody from your family taken away?

Yes, one of my uncles, a great-uncle, actually, was taken away. But he came back, and then he was taken away again. And his wife got an urn with his ashes, saying that he had tried to escape. They did that at that time.

Did you believe it?

No. As a matter of fact, when that happened, we had already left. She wrote us this. Nobody believed it, of course. The problem is that so many people could have left. They could have left. Well, we did try to send somebody. Because we left to go to Belgium. And we did try to send one of these people to get them over the border. But they were caught.

But there are many people-- my other aunt, great-uncle, who was lost in Poland. They could have left. They could have gotten visas. I mean, it was many times, a matter of spending the money for it. But I still remember when we said goodbye to him, he said, I worked so hard all my life for what I have, I'm not going to leave it behind. You are younger, you can go. I'm not going to go.

And sure enough, we never saw them again. They were all killed. Because people did not really believe. Many of them could not really believe even though we saw it all around us-- that these things would happen. And that was-- we went to Belgium. We had visas, which were not quite kosher. They were sort of fake. And we went to Belgium.

And again, I mean, when we went to Cuba, the same thing happened again. People who could have left, did not believe. Then--

Did you-- I'm sorry.

How did you obtain these visas?

Well, I mean, I was a kid. My parents took care of these things. My parents had money in the United States. And there was some consul in Milano who issued these visas against some reimbursement. That's how you got them. Some people just hired guides to go across borders, because it was hard to do it themselves. Some people got legitimate visas, and some people got these visas which were semi-legitimate.

It depended. And unfortunately, it depended on foresight very much. Many people could not believe. They always said, well, this is always going to abate. It cannot last. It's just the spirit of the moment that people are doing all these things.

And my parents were Polish Jews, even though I was born in Vienna and German is my mother tongue. But the Polish Jews always had some kind of a love affair with German culture, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And they said, the Germans as a culture, it cannot be. It cannot really be. I remember that. I mean, that happened. That was a recurring theme. Because when we left France, the same thing occurred. My father did not want to leave.

Did you leave Austria immediately after Kristallnacht?

Oh, no, no. We left--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

We left rather late.

What happened in the interim between Kristallnacht and the time you left?

Well, my uncle left, my grandparents left, my father left in March. Kristallnacht was November, my father left in March '39. And my mother and I left in May. We were left behind-- actually, we stayed behind-- to try to wind up certain things. My mother had a lot of people who owed her money.

At that time, I didn't go to school anymore. She would send me to try to collect, and to try to get money. And there were ways to transfer money to the United States. I mean, they just didn't want to leave everything. I mean, we were sort of

rounding up the odds and ends.

We sent big trunks to the United States with all kinds of clothes that we never-- the clothes were here, and we were in Cuba. But anyway, at that time, people thought that this would be very useful to them. They would have nice clothes when they-- because our ambition was always to come to the States, of course. And we had an affidavit from my uncle.

But what was the mood in your household as you were winding up your affairs and preparing to go? Did you think of going immediately to Belgium?

That was the only place we could go to. It wasn't our choice. We would have liked to go to the States. But our quota number was not up yet, so that was the only place. My uncle had gone across the border to Switzerland, but that became tight. So Belgium was not our choice, but the only country at that time that we could go to.

And the mood was, of course, was very sad. My uncle left, my grandparents left, my father left. And my mother and I, we were-- well, we weren't afraid. Although now, when I think back on it, we should have been. We didn't seem to be-- at least she didn't voice it to me, and I was only a kid-- to be afraid that we would be cut off there, which could have happened. But it didn't.

So we took a plane to Brussels. And when we came to Belgium, we met my father again. I mean, he was only gone about six or eight weeks before us.

Where did you stay in Belgium?

We rented a little apartment, a small apartment. In Belgium, apartments are not as difficult to get as in Vienna. And my parents had a little money, so we just waited. We waited for an American visa, and in the meantime, the war broke out. As a matter of fact, we were supposed to go to the American consulate regarding our American visas on the day of the invasion, on May 10th, 1940, when the Germans invaded Belgium. Which was ironic, because we'd been waiting for that all the time.

And in Belgium, we also-- it was very disappointing to us, because in Antwerp, we encountered antisemitism. There were many places where they wrote in Dutch on the windows, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] My Dutch isn't so good. It meant no Jews. They wouldn't lend to Jewish refugees.

But, you know, there were many other places where we could rent, and I started to go to a school there, which was in Flemish. Of course, I didn't like it. It couldn't compare scholastically to the school I had been to, because that was a school, which was really a gymnasium, where we had Latin. It was more intellectually oriented, and this was just a public school. I did pick up some Flemish there. And there were quite a few of us, so we had our own-- we did not have to rely on the Belgian kids for peer group. We had a little peer group.

This was in Antwerp?

Yeah.

Were there other Jewish refugees there that you met?

Yes, yeah, and we stuck together. And we did meet some of the Jewish people from Antwerp. I think I went to some Zionist youth organization. I met some local Jewish kids. But I never really had any social contact otherwise with Belgians, per se. And then, of course, the invasion happened, and they took my father away.

Because he was a German Jew, they took him. The Belgians said, while we're at war, all German nationals have to report for internment. Even though these people had a J in their passport and they were refugees, they took them away. And then when the Germans won the war so quickly afterwards, they did not let these people come back, but they were shipped to a camp in the south of France.

Of course, we didn't know the whereabouts of my father for quite a while. Then somebody came back from that camp. First, my father was in the St. Cyprien, and then the second camp was Les Milles. And somebody came back from St. Cyprien and said that my father had tried to flee, and he was put into some custody and arrested. But eventually, he was able to get to the other camp, Les Milles, which was a camp where people were kept who hoped to leave France.

And when we heard that-- well, first, we moved to Brussels. Because there was a decree that Jews had to leave Antwerp. Although in the beginning, we lived in the same building with German soldiers in Antwerp. And they didn't know we were Jews or whatever. Or maybe if they knew, they behaved fairly decently.

And some of the Belgian Jews said, I don't know why you ran away from there. These people are very correct and they're very polite and all that. I mean, they were not Gestapo, they were just plain soldiers, and they were trained to be very polite to civilians, and salute when they saw us go by and all that.

Then we went to Brussels, which was also full of German soldiers. And my mother made a contact with some guides who took us to Paris. Then we had to go through different checkpoints and zones with faked papers. It was very complicated. And we stayed in Paris for four or five days. And then some other guide took us to the non-occupied zone of Vichy France, where we went to Nice. And then we made contact with my father in Les Milles. I can't remember, eight or nine or a year afterwards-- eight months or a year afterwards-- we went to Cuba.

Where was your father? He was in Nice itself?

No, no, he was in the camp.

In a camp.

He could not leave the camp. After a while, they let him go on a weekend pass occasionally. But that was when we already had the Cuban visa, which we obtained also through some payment.

Yeah.

What kind of camp was it? Was it a labor camp?

It was not a labor camp. It was a holding camp, where they held people prior to their leaving. But those people who didn't leave-- those friends of my father's-- that were in camp who didn't leave when we left, and we left about on the last boat that it was possible to leave. I left Europe in '42, which was rather late. And those were all then transferred to another camp called Gurs. And from Gurs, they were sent to the camps in Poland.

Of course, my father didn't really want to leave. He said, there's all this talk about these death camps. That must be propaganda. I think we'll sit out the war here in Marseilles. But luckily, my mother didn't listen to him. She sent for the visas. I mean, that was a matter of transferring money and all that to get these Cuban visas.

So your father wasn't mistreated in the camp?

In the beginning--

It was just a holding camp?

Yeah. No, it was just it was unsanitary conditions and little food. But he was not mistreated there. I think in St. Cyprien, after he tried to flee, they did mistreat him, but he never wanted to talk about that.

And you--

I used to go to the camp during the week sometimes with food.

And they would let you go in?

Yeah. It was not like the camps that we hear about.

And how did and your mother sustain yourselves while he was in the camp? What did you do?

I don't really-- I think we still had to have some funds that we had transferred out of Vienna. Because we certainly didn't have any jobs or anything. The money-- you know, I always left all these things to my mother. My job was to stand in line for food, because food was very short in Marseilles, so I would always stand in line and try to get some food for us. We lived in some small room. I mean, we didn't need that much.

But still, it's a good question. I wish I could ask my mother. Unfortunately, she had a stroke, and she lost her speech. There are many things I often want to ask her.

How were you treated by the Vichy?

They sort of left us alone. But as soon as-- well, what they did-- after the people who could not get visas, they sent them to Gurs. And as a matter of fact, when we were making our way from Paris to Nice, some Garde Mobile of the Vichy government-- Garde Mobile are like state police. We were in a van. There was another woman with us with her kid.

And they tried to arrest us. They asked us for our papers to go into the un-occupied zone, and we did not have the correct papers. And our so-called guides turned out not to be able to do anything. He couldn't even speak French to them. So he was also a German Jew. He said he would guide us.

So he asked me to talk to them, and I begged them to let us go. So they said, OK. I said, I want to see my father. He said, OK, go. So we get on, and the guide told me that I should bribe them with money. He wanted to have them as a connection maybe for the next time.

And of course, I was a little girl then. He handed me the money, I hand it out in front of them. They said, no, we don't want, go. And then-- I still remember, as the van started moving, they were on bicycles. They started to pedal very fast. They changed their minds. They wanted the money after all. They must have thought it over why did they not take it.

But this was a moment of life and death, because if these people had taken us-- all the people which were arrested by the Garde Mobile were sent to Gurs. And from Gurs, they all went to death camps in Poland. And there was no way for people like us to even be hidden in the south of France. Because we didn't have any connections there. My parents didn't even know French. And French Jews, some of them had connections with people who would hide them. But who would hide us?

And we also we didn't have any ration cards in Marseille. That's why it was so difficult to get food, because they didn't issue us ration cards. But there was always places where you could get food. Sometimes there was vegetables that they sold without the rationing. And I sort of-- I used to go to consulates to try to get visas, or stand in line for food.

How old were you at that time?

I was going on 15. I mean, at the time, I didn't-- looking back on it, I didn't think it was so horrible. I sort of felt it was adventurous. I didn't have a schedule. I was free to go, and I was proud of my accomplishments of getting food, and doing this, and being so free. When you look back on it, it's so horrible this, child with-- though I did take a course at the Berlitz School in Spanish, because I knew that I was going to go to Cuba.

But when you're involved in it, it's not as horrible as it seems when you look back on it. When you look back on it, you think what kind of a child or what kind of a youth is that to do these things? But when you're involved in it, it just seems unavoidable, like a given.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And there were many people who could have-- had they really tried hard-- left Marseilles at that time. But in spite of all the indications that we had already had that these people are out after our lives, there were many who did not believe it, who just couldn't bring themselves to believe it. That was very sad.

There was a young woman-- her father was a friend of my father's. There was a guy who wanted to marry her. He had a Cuban visa. He said, I'd marry your daughter, I'll bring her to Cuba. And her father, like as if it was back in the 18th century, said, how are you going to support my daughter in Cuba? She's only 17. What do you imagine, young man? And he didn't let her go. And this fellow-- all during the war, he never formed an attachment to anybody. He always hoped that maybe she survived, but she didn't.

Do you know where she was taken?

No, but I know she went to one of the camps, I think Bergen-Belsen. But it was the people had so little foresight, and used mental processes which were so inappropriate for the time.

Did your parents place a lot of the responsibility in your hands, or did they take care of whatever had to be taken care of?

My parents took care of everything that had to be taken care of. The things I did were minor things, like collecting money in Vienna, where my mother thought it was risky for her to go, or getting food delivery, and inquiring at the consulate. But the decisions, my parents made, and they took care of. They always take care of me. I was never hungry or anything like that.

We didn't have any kitchen there in Marseilles, so we used to make like-- anything that I got on the market, put in one pot, and give it to a bakery to slow cook. We called it ratatouille. It wasn't actually ratatouille, but it was very good. I liked it. Sometimes, we ate in restaurants, which didn't require rationing. And they always served lapin, which is rabbit. Then later on, I found out that some people said that it was cats, but anyway.

Yeah.

And--

Were you ever hungry? Were you ever in want?

No. Never. My mother saw to it that we always had plenty to eat. It was also because we had some money, and we could buy these things on the black-- I mean, we didn't buy steaks or anything like that, but additional food. And on the ship to Cuba, there were-- that ship was called Serpta Pinto. I found this sauf-conduit. This is a safe conduct from France, which shows that we left on January 9, 1942. Because there was--

Could you hold it up so we could see it?

This is the--

Your picture is on the left, isn't it?

Yeah, which is a-- I wasn't quite sure which date we left. I found that the other day. I should preserve it. Which was rather late to leave Europe. And we went to Morocco, to Casablanca. And were kept there in some like-- it was a beach resort, which they opened up for us to sleep there. We were not-- but then we could get a permit to visit the city.

But we were all kept in this beach resort till we boarded the Portuguese ship that took us to Cuba, the Serpa Pinto, which was a ship that should have held 350 people, and we were about 800. And they had all the women-- they opened up one of the hulls in the bottom of the ship, there would be 25 women in one room, men in another. It was not the normal-- I mean, they just crowded onto it. But that was a lucky thing. But again--



Were they all Jewish?

Most, but there was something very interesting. They held our ship up. Of course, the young people drifted together. And again, they had all the formalities. They had music every night, and dancing, even though we were housed in this perfunctory fashion. In Jamaica, they hailed our ship, and they took off a young fella who had claimed to be another refugee. We always spoke German. And they say he was a German spy. The British took him off the ship. That's what we heard. Because they searched the ship and held us in Jamaica for two days.

Then we came to Cuba, where they held us up also in something like Ellis Island that they had in Cuba for two weeks. And one of the people on our ship had contracted typhoid, so we all had to go through the vaccinations and all that. Apparently, she had contracted typhoid in Morocco or something. She was a friend of mine, she died there. And that was our trip out of Europe.

How long were you in Cuba?

We came there in '42. I was there six years, and then I came here and went back. All in all, 12 years. But I came back there after I was married, and my sons were born there. But we came back here when they were very little.

Did you know what happened to the rest of your family, to other members? I know you mentioned an uncle who died.

From Vienna-- the ones who stayed in Vienna all were-- we don't know exactly where, but we know that they were taken away to Poland, Auschwitz, or Bergen-Belsen. And my father had brothers in Poland. And they all dis-- because we tried through HIAS to find out if anybody had survived, but they were all killed, all the family in Poland, my father's brothers.

There were records kept?

I don't really know about any records. I know that we wrote to HIAS after the war was over about that these people should contact us, and they never did. And I mean, HIAS never answered us, so the assumption is that they were killed. And then also, I met a man here who was a cousin of my parents from Poland. And he had survived the war in Poland.

As a matter of fact, he still lives in Poland, but he comes here. He used to come here. And he told us that he knows that it's a fact that they were all killed, I think in Auschwitz. One of my father's brothers lived in Auschwitz, as a matter of fact, Oswiecim. I was there as a child, they took me to visit.

In the town?

So they were all gone. Everybody who stayed in Vienna, there nobody was saved. And the people who stayed in the south of France that we knew, they all disappeared. They were all deported. Because they had-- like I said before, they could not really save themselves and a foreign territory.

Were you aware at the time you were in Cuba of what was going in the climactic years of the war to the Jews?

Not completely. The news came to us rather slowly. But I remember vaguely that some spokesperson, a shaliach of some sort, came to Cuba and told us about all these things happening in the death camps. I don't know exactly when it was. I think the war was still on, and that the Jewish community in Havana decided to march through the streets in protest of this. But I mean, we did, we showed our compassion? I don't know how to-- solidarity? But that was all that ever came of it.

Where did they march? Before the German embassy?

Well, there was no German embassy in Cuba.

There wasn't?

Cuba declared war on Germany.

Oh, they did.

I remember something, that we went from the Jewish center to the presidential palace, I think, and back. But it came little by little, this news. And then the first people started to come out when the war was open. But during the war, we didn't know that much.

Did you finish your schooling in Cuba?

I actually didn't. I worked in a diamond factory in Cuba. At that time, I felt I was beyond that already. So I always took courses in literature. I went to university and took this and that. But I never really graduated from high school. When I came here, I went to college and got a college degree. I got credit for my other life experiences.

But I was, at that time, beyond going to high school, you know? I was out of that already. It was a very bad time for this to happen, because it really-- people who were a few years younger than I went through normal schooling, and people who were a few years older had already more of a background. Well, at the age that this all happened in Vienna was when I was 12, 13, it was a bad age. But I mean, those who want to always get some kind of an education, if that's important. But in the long run, it didn't really matter.

And how many years did you spend in Cuba?

All in all, about 12 or 13 years, from '42 to '48. I came back for a year this way. And then I got married, and in '55, I went to Cuba till '61. It's another five years. About 12-13 years. And we came here because of Fidel Castro.

How did you meet your husband?

It's very interesting. My mother and my husband's stepmother actually knew each other when they were girls. When they were fleeing from the First World War in Poland, where there were pogroms in that area, they met each other in a small town in Czechoslovakia. And then in Vienna, they also knew each other. But then they lost touch.

And my husband's stepmother survived the war in Poland. She was hidden by Gentiles. But after the war, she was once sitting in Paris in some Jewish nightclub, and they were discussing this and that. And she said, I had these friends, and I think they lived in Cuba. And there was a man there who happened to have lived in Cuba and knew us. He gave her our address, and they started corresponding.

And then when they came here to the States, I met Sigmund, and that's how it all happened. Actually, it's his stepmother and my mother who are responsible. But it was just the unlikely thing that they should meet in that nightclub and find us, you know?

And have you talked-- or your husband, has he talked about his experiences with your children?

Oh yes, a lot. We always talk about it. It comes up very often. My husband has experiences, of course, far more dramatic and worse than mine. And he has talked about it to the children, without going into too many details when they were younger which may have been horrible. But he talked about it. And we always talk about this. It comes up very often.

My husband thinks about these things more now and dreams about it more than right after the war. I have a theory, that many people, like my husband-- I'm speaking of this kind of survivor-- who after the war, there was a process of total repression. They didn't think about it. They just thought mostly to have a good time. They were very nonchalant about most of it, almost.

And I think it was a defense mechanism of the mind to stay sane and redo their lives. And as time goes by, it comes back more and more, all the feelings. Because I think it would have been dangerous for their mental stability at the time to dwell on it too much. And they didn't. It's coming back more now. I mean, I don't know, I think that the mind also has some defense mechanisms, just as the body. And those who dwelled on it too much may have not retained their mental balance or their sanity as well.

I mean, for me, these things were not that traumatic. I mean, it was traumatic as a child to walk down the streets where I was born, and to have kids tell me, get off the sidewalk, you dirty Jew, or to go by park where I played all the years as a child, and to see a big sign-- dogs and Jews entrance forbidden. I mean, it had an impact. But I think it was easier for us who were very Jewish-oriented.

There were some people in Vienna who were very Austrian, who hardly were aware of the fact that they were Jews. It was terrible for them. I mean, being in the Jewish school and in Jewish youth organizations, it helped our self-esteem. I mean, I don't think that any of us ever felt inferior, even though we saw this caricatures, and heard all these things. It didn't affect us that way. Because that's the worst thing that can happen.

Do you have any idea how many Jews were able to leave Vienna at the time that you and your family left? An estimate?

I really can't give-- I know that there were about 200,000 to 250,000 Jews in Vienna. I think that-- how many were--

Were able to escape before they started with the concentration camps.

I would say that more than half left before. But I mean, this is just off the top of my head, because I see so many Jews from Vienna, no matter where I go. But maybe they just come to the surface. There must be statistics about this someplace. Many went to the States, and others to England. There were children's transport. There were many Jewish children which were taken to England by [? Winton ?] and the women's international Zionist organization and all that.

Maybe there were-- I don't know. Right now in Vienna, there is a very small Jewish population, and these Jews are not really Jews who had lived in Vienna before. They are mostly Jews who came after the war from Poland and Hungary, and some of the Russian Jews, maybe men who stayed there and all that.

Ostjuden? Ostjuden?

Ostjudent.

[CHUCKLING]

Yeah, well, that always had a very, very derogatory connotation in Germany and in Vienna. Even though I was an Ostjude, I don't remember ever anybody calling me that. But I know that as a child-- I speak Yiddish well now, but as a child, nobody spoke Yiddish to me. I didn't even know of the real existence of such a language. It was not considered very-- I mean, it interfered with your speaking proper German, like black English may interfere with you speaking proper English. And people were very proud of speaking German without any Yiddish accent.

When you think about that attitude now, does it ever bother you? I mean, I don't know, people may retrospectively have different feelings about it that there was this attitude towards the Eastern European Jews.

Well, it doesn't really bother me today. I mean, it became an irony of history, because the other Jews were sent to the same camps as the Eastern European Jews. So today, to think about their snobbism has no more validity. Also, I didn't suffer personally by it. Because my circle at my school, the majority were Eastern European. So nobody-- I was never left out of anything as a kid because I was an Ostjude. It happened to people a little older than I. And then, maybe one feels it. Because teenagers are very sensitive to these kind of things.

Did you have any non-Jewish friends?

Well, I personally didn't have too many, but I must say that my parents and my uncle, they did associate socially with non-Jews. When I look back on it now, sometimes more than some of my American friends, which are three generations here and went through college here, my parents had been in Vienna seven years when I was born, which I didn't realize. I just thought of it the other day. So actually, they were newcomers. But they did have some social contacts. I remember we once went to the country with some Gentile people. My uncle had many Gentile friends.

But once the war started, did their relationship with these friends change?

Well, there was one or two which behaved very nicely. The rest, they stayed away from us and we stayed away from them. There was one-- I know it was a great disappointment, especially for my mother's brother, my uncle. Because he had liked to associate with Gentiles, which was sort of-- he was divorced, and he went-- I didn't know it was not looked upon with great favor in the family, but it was very disappointing, and a great shock to him that most of them did not want to associate with him any longer, with some few exceptions.

But when I look about the Jewish life actually here where I live, I find more and more, the Jews mostly associate with Jews unless it's some business. Maybe it's just the people I know. Which was not as much true in Germany or Austria. I think it maybe also the effect of the Holocaust has been very great on Jews all over the world. People have changed. And then Israel and the Six Day War and the different agenda we sometimes have has made these friendships sometimes a little--

Stronger.

A little questionable. I mean, not my aim. I would like to associate with everybody. It's just circumstances.

Have you been back to Vienna since the war?

Yeah, twice.

What were your impressions?

Well, the first time, it was in '66. I was just there for a day. It seemed very sad, and I felt like a ghost. And in fact, it was like a ghost town. And I did come upon one we asked in a cafe there, a waiter, we asked him if many people come from behind the Iron Curtain, because then there was the-- and he said, only the rich Jews. So "nur die reichen Juden."

And then I was in Vienna a couple of years ago-- about two years ago. It was after Waldheim, already. I had some contact with some non-Jewish Viennese journalists that I met, who was very, very pro Jewish. He's married to a Jew. I didn't come across any antisemitism. I found Austria much more prosperous than it ever was when I was a kid.

I think sometimes, I feel it's almost too nice for the Austrians. Because it was mostly a poor country. That was one of the reasons that people welcomed the Nazi Anschluss so fervently. It was not so much hatred for the Jews. They expected improved economic conditions. While now, without Germany and being all on its own, Austria is doing very well, better than it ever did.

And I'm not the kind of person who is really-- I'm not given to boycotting anything in the German language, or to not ever step foot on German soil. I think it's a little late. I've never been given to that. I know there are many people who have gone through it, who said I would not step on that soil, or I would not read a German book.

It's just not my way. I mean, I like certain things about the German culture. I feel to deprive myself of it would be just to cut off my nose to spite my face, as a matter of temperament. I feel a little uneasy when I'm there, because sometimes, people take me for Austrian, and I don't consider that a compliment.

[CHUCKLING]

But I don't feel any violent reaction.

Is there anything else you'd like to say in conclusion?

Well, in conclusion, I have to say one thing, that my husband and I have discussed what happened to us very often, especially what happened to him. And we've talked to our kids about it. And a lot of the things that-- I mean, there are many people who don't feel that way-- but some of the things that have happened in Eastern Europe could happen in such mass quantity because people were very trusting, very law abiding.

If it was a law or decree, they did not even question the legality or the origin of it. They would just obey these orders, and actually cooperate in their own liquidation. I mean, there was resistance, but there was also-- we cannot turn our eyes away from that-- there was also this kind of thing. And we've gone over it many times.

And I have told my sons, even when they were little, that to obey every law-- everything has to be weighed-- its ethical value and its value to you as a person. Blind obedience to laws or cooperating with people who want to destroy us is something that I don't think could happen so easily again. But I've always tried to emphasize that.

When my kids were little during the Vietnam War, I was against it. And my little son, who was then 9 years old said, I don't want to go to war. I said, if it lasts till you're eligible to go, I won't let you go. I'll do something about it, even if it is the law. That is, I think, some remnant of what happened. Because we were brought up in a very law-- you have to do what's decreed.

Thank you very much for your testimony.

You're welcome.