

Oral history interview with Ernest Weiss

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Summary

Ernest Weiss, born on December 19, 1923 in Vienna, Austria, discusses his parents and family; his father's farming family from Pápa, Hungary; his mother's bourgeois Viennese family; speaking only German at home; societal norms and pressures in Vienna; his father's department store, Kaufhaus Weiss, in a working class neighborhood; his mother and grandmother's upscale clothing store, Helene Neumann and Company; the family's twelve-room apartment near the Vienna State Opera; his parents' emphasis on education; attending the Theresianum (Theresian Academy), founded in the 18th century by Empress Maria Theresa, and his studies; the Anschluss in March 1938; witnessing Nazi demonstrations near the opera house before and after the Anschluss; being required to attend services with the school's other Jewish students on Saturday afternoons; his studies in Vienna v. in New York later; having a Bar Mitzvah, but living in a very assimilated home; uncles who served in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I; the aryanization of businesses; the liquidation of his mother's store and the aryanization of his father's; his grandmother's death in Theresienstadt; his mother's death in Auschwitz; the family's attempts to get visas to the United States and his success; his mother's choice to stay with his father after he was not issued a visa due to his Hungarian birthplace; his father's death in Vienna; being expelled from the Theresianum after the Anschluss and finishing the academic year at a Jewish school; the boxing matches between Max Schmeling and Joe Louis; teenagers gathered near the Jewish school who forced him to fight a non-Jew, after which his parents pulled him out of school; his parents securing a visa to the United States for him after the fight incident; his mother arranging for him to stay with a couple in Rotterdam, Netherlands for the night before his ship left for the United States in August 1939; learning later that this couple was sent to a concentration camp during the war; the trip by ship; arriving in Newark, New Jersey and being picked up by an uncle; getting fired from his uncle's business for fighting in December 1941; earning his high school diploma and meeting his future wife in the class; receiving a Red Cross pre-printed postcard from his parents; learning of his father's death; his mother and grandmother being forced into a ghetto and then to Theresienstadt; the attack on Pearl Harbor; getting married in June 1942; being drafted into the U.S. Army soon after marrying and being sent to Fort Dix; gaining U.S. citizenship during basic training; serving in the infantry and being shipped to England; becoming a German interpreter and receiving intelligence and interrogation training; reporting to Paris; reporting to a post near the Saar River and finding that the German prisoners were all dead; fighting in the Battle of the Bulge near Bastogne, Belgium; General George Patton; passing through Weiden in der Oberpfalz, Germany with his division; hearing stories about Dachau; being awarded a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star medal; Andrey Vlasov and the Russian Liberation Army; meeting other survivors in the United States; feeling more American than Austrian or Viennese; still speaking German and maintaining an interest in Austrian and German cultures today; the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller; and the possibility of another Holocaust.