This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Erika Reis on April 25, 2018 in Bergenfield, New Jersey. Thank you very, very much, Mrs. Reis, for agreeing to speak with us today.

You're very welcome.

I'd like to start our interview with the most basic questions. And from there, we'll build our story and hopefully get a picture of what your experiences were, what your family experiences were, and how the Holocaust impacted you and those who were close to you. So my very first question is can you tell me the date of your birth?

December 2, 1929.

OK. And what was your name at birth?

Erika Roslyn Lowenthal.

Lowenthal. And where were you born?

In Plauen, Germany.

Can you tell me where Plauen is in Germany?

It's near Czechoslovakia.

OK. Would it be, let's say, in the eastern part of Germany, what was considered the eastern part?

Yes.

OK. So it's not Bavaria?

No.

OK. All right. And did you have brothers and sisters?

I had a brother.

And what was his name?

Herbert Lowenthal.

Was he younger or older than you?

Older.

By how much?

About four and half years.

So he would have been born in 1925 or 1926?

'25 I think.

OK. And what were your parents' names?

Lotte. And actually, her real name was Charlotte, but nobody called her that. Everybody called her Lottie. And her maiden name was Rosenwald. And her married name was Lowenthal. And my father's name was

Egon Joachim Lowenthal.

That's a very German name.

Yes.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah, all parts of it. And can you tell me-- let's start with your mother's side of the family. Was her family from Plauen or was it from someplace else?

It was from Bünde.

Bünde?

Bünde. And I'm not sure--

Where Bünde is?

I think that's in Westphalia.

Oh so that's quite a ways from Plauen.

Yes.

OK. That's on the western part of Germany. And your father's side of the family, were they from Plauen?

Yes.

And do you know about how many generations back?

I have no idea.

OK. What about your mother's side? Do you know about how many generations back they were from Bünde in Westphalia?

A long-- each of them was from a long time ago. But I cannot tell you.

OK. One of the reasons I ask this question is to establish whether your family was really German Jews for many generations or, let's say, recently arrived from Poland and only one or two generations. It sounds to me like it's the former.

Oh yes.

OK.

I do have to blow my nose.

Oh excuse me. Let's cut the camera. OK. What language did you all speak at home?

German.

So that's your first language.

Yes.

Do you still remember it today?

Yes.

OK. Do you still speak with someone in German today?

Occasionally. But more in a jokey kind of a way than seriously.

OK. Is English now your stronger language?

Absolutely.

OK. And was your immediate family-- your mother and your father-- were they a very religious family?

No.

Would you say they were assimilated?

Yes, assimilated.

All right.

And were they secular in the sense of not really abiding by the old traditions of Judaism?

Well, they were more secular than very religious. But they did-- I remember we said a prayer every evening at dinner time. And they went to temple on holidays. And I was sent to Sunday school. But that was about it.

And did they keep kosher?

No.

OK. Tell me a little bit about your father's side of the family in Plauen. Did he have brothers and sisters?

He had a sister.

And what was her name?

Greta.

Greta. Again a very German name.

Right. Well, that's where they came from.

Exactly.

And she and her husband went to Australia, because during World War I, her husband was a prisoner in England, I think. And he was under the guidance of a ward who was from Australia. And when Hitler came to power, he offered them an affidavit to come to Australia.

So his former ward, where he had been a prisoner of war--

Right.

What a relationship.

Isn't that something?

Yeah, it is.

But they had an unusually good relationship. And so they moved to Australia, where they raised their family.

And if you say it was when Hitler came to power, then it must have been still '33 or '34?

Well, it was probably '37, '38.

Oh I see. OK.

I think it was after we came to America.

OK. But still what a difference that one gesture makes.

Right. Right.

What was that uncle's-- it was Greta and her husband?

Right.

What was her husband's name?

Alfred.

And they're married-- and they're--

Fleischer.

Fleischer. OK. And they left Plauen then?

Correct.

All right. So that was one sister. Any other siblings?

No, that was it.

All right. And what about grandparents on your father's side?

They lived in Plauen. And I'm not sure exactly what my grandfather did. But my father tried very hard to get them to come to the United States but was unable to do so. And my grandmother fortunately died of a heart attack before being put into a concentration camp. My grandfather unfortunately went to a concentration camp at about 80. He was probably about 79 when he was exterminated.

Oh dear. Do know which camp this was?

I think it may have been Bergen-Belsen.

And it sounds as if this kind of information your family didn't know at the time.

Right. When my husband and I went to Prague, and we went to-- what is it? Theresienstadt?

Yes, north of Prague.

Right. And we went to the office and they looked it up, and sure enough, they had his name and told us where he had died.

Do you know what year it was that he was in Theresienstadt and then sent to a camp?

No, I do not.

OK.

I don't remember.

OK. And what year was it that you were there with your husband? It must have been--

1970s, 1980s sometime. Maybe 1980s.

Several decades later.

Yes, right.

OK. Did your father ever know these types of details about his parents?

Yes, I think so.

OK. And so there were no other siblings then in the family. There was just your father, his sister Greta.

Right.

The grandparents. And do you remember their names?

Opa Alex and Oma [? Minnie. ?]

OK. Opa Alex and Oma Minnie. So Grandpa Alex and Grandma Minnie.

Right.

All right. And what did your father do?

My father was a judge.

Was he?

Yes. And when Hitler came to power, my father lost his job. I guess it must have been the end of 1935 or the beginning of 1936 because no Jews were allowed to have that kind of a position anymore.

Well, yes, it's a civil service position.

Right.

It's part of the government.

Right.

And nevertheless, he was still a judge for two years after Hitler comes to power.

Yeah.

That must have been very tense years for him.

If they were, the children never knew about it.

OK. That's often the case.

Right.

But it speaks to a few things that are part of what my questions are. Hang on a second. Yeah? OK. So yes, I was saying that speaks to a couple of different areas I'd like to explore. Number one, it meant that your father was educated.

Oh yes.

Do you know what his education was, what university he went to, and so on?

I think he went to university in Leipzig.

That would make sense.

Yeah.

That's not so far away.

No.

Yeah.

And that's really--

And he must have studied law.

And he was a lawyer and then became a judge.

Do you ever remember seeing him in judicial robes?

No.

OK. Any photos of him that way?

No.

OK. And too, usually a lawyer and particularly a judge would be a fairly comfortable living and a comfortable standard of living for the family.

Correct.

Was that-- that was the case with you?

Yes. I think we had a very nice apartment. And we had a live-in maid, who was later unable to work for us anymore although she loved us very much.

Do you remember her name?

Maria.

Maria. OK.

But she had to leave. She was heartbroken, but she couldn't stay.

Well, it was nice that you had a close relationship with her.

Right.

Many people didn't have that with the non-Jewish help.

Right. No, we had a very good relationship with her. I do remember that.

OK. And can you describe your home to me a little bit, what it looked like?

I just remember a room with a big piano. We had a baby grand. My father loved to play piano. And he loved operas, and he sang.

Oh did he?

Oh yeah.

Did he have a nice voice?

He had a very nice voice. Yeah.

What about your mother? Did she join him?

She had a nice voice also. She didn't play piano. But she sometimes would sing with him, not too often.

Did your parents have a wide social circle in Plauen?

Yes.

And do you remember people visiting your home?

Not really. Not really. It's been an awfully long time ago.

Oh, I know. I'm asking the most unreasonable questions, because I realize you came to the States as a little girl still.

Right. And I'm now 88 so--

[LAUGHS]

--it's been a while.

Yeah. But what I'm trying to do is paint a picture with your words of what your life was like as much as you can remember and as much as you have been told by other people.

Right.

And making a distinction, where we can, what are the memories? And what are the stories?

OK. What I can remember are several facts. One is that I had diphtheria. And it turned into a mastoidectomy, and both ears needed surgery.

Wow.

And our own doctor apparently was not available. But a very good doctor came wearing a swastika. And he said I needed surgery. And even though I really did not belong in a hospital, because I was so contagious with the diphtheria, he managed to get me in. And he operated on both ears.

And unfortunately, one ear I haven't heard very much out of. But the other ear was fine. And I remember that my head was full of cotton. And I always wanted to remove that cotton. And my mother would come to visit, and she would bring books, and she would read to me. And that was wonderful. So I do remember

that.

And you remember seeing the armband with the swastika?

Yeah.

Now that's an unusual behavior.

Yeah, it was very unusual. And the other thing that I remember is-- and I don't really remember how old I was, but it must have been before Hitler really took over. We went to a swimming pool. And my mother was busy chatting with somebody.

And I must have walked off, and somebody in the pool waved to me. And the next thing you knew, I was in the pool. And I didn't know how to swim. And a lifeguard came and turned me upside down. I still remember that.

Really?

And then my mother came shocked. But OK, I survived that. And the other thing that I remember is that my mother was taking me someplace or I was going someplace. And we lived in a walk-up apartment. And I fell down some steps. And on the way back up, limping, [? Muschi ?] and [? Guschi, ?] sisters who lived underneath us, heard my crying and so forth and came out with some chocolate in the form of thread, of spool of thread.

Oh I see. So it looked like spaghetti chocolate?

Well, it was in spools of thread, a needle, and scissors.

Oh chocolate?

Chocolate, right.

Oh so they had chocolate on the one hand and then thread and needles and scissors in the--

No. The chocolate was made to resemble--

I've never seen something like that.

Well, this was in 1935 maybe.

Yeah.

And I guess I had either broken or sprained my ankle. And I remember before we came to the United States, we stopped off in Bünde to say goodbye to my--

Mother's side of the family.

--my mother's father, my Opa Simon. And I remember that they had a dining room table which was round. And that was the first time that I felt comfortable holding on and walking.

So you had been healing but not completely until you felt that.

Correct.

And Muschi and Guschi, were they neighbors downstairs?

Yes.

And were they Jewish as well?

No. No, they were not.

OK. Can you describe the building that the apartment was in for me a little bit?

No, I cannot. Yeah, I was asking about what the building might have looked like. And was it in the center of Plauen or in the residential?

It was residential section.

OK. Do you remember-- I ask this question of many people, and it may sound a little strange. But bear with me. Did you have electricity?

Oh yes.

Did you have indoor plumbing?

Yes.

Do you know how the place was heated?

I have no idea, but it was heated.

OK. Did you have these sort of coal ovens, these tiled kind of ovens in the middle of a room or inside?

No, but we did have an oven in the kitchen. And I remember that my mother-- I don't know whether she was answering the doorbell or something-- and she had 100 marks in her hand. And she-- what's the word I'm looking for? Before she knew it, she had said fed the stove or the oven with that 100 marks. And that was quite a disaster. I do remember that.

Yeah, well 100 marks is 100 marks.

Right.

Did you have a telephone?

I don't think so.

What about a radio?

I think we had a radio. We may have had a telephone, but I don't remember.

Did your father have an automobile?

I think we did have an automobile. I remember seeing a picture of myself standing in front of an automobile. So I'm assuming that that was ours, but I really don't remember it.

Do you know how your parents met?

Somebody knew each of them and a blind--

He was a matchmaker?

A matchmaker, a blind date kind of thing.

Because Plauen is a long way from Westphalia.

Right. But they met some place, and--

Got married.

--they got married. [LAUGHS]

Now, when you were living in Plauen and before you leave for the United States, did you know any relatives on your mother's side of the family?

I knew her brothers. She had two brothers-- Ernst and Otto.

Ernst and Otto. And her maiden name again was--

Rosenwald.

Rosenwald. Of course. Ernst and Otto Rosenwald. And had they come to visit in Plauen, or had you--

Maybe we visited them in Bünde. And Otto was married to Elfriede. And they had a little girl whose name was Helen. So she is my first cousin. And we were very close. We were like sisters.

Even then when you were that little?

Even then but even more when we came to the United States.

OK. And Ernst, did he have any children?

Yes, he had a daughter. But he married later. I don't think I met his wife until they came to the United States. Oh yeah-- and their daughter Margaret was one year old when they arrived.

So she was a baby.

She was a baby, yeah.

And did you know your grandfather Simon, Simon, before leaving Germany?

Oh yes.

Oh yeah?

Well, I told you that I walked around the table in his house. They had a very lovely, big house.

But was that the first time you had met him or you had met him before?

Oh no, I had met him before.

Yeah. And your grandmother on your mother's side, was she alive?

No. She died a long time ago. My mother was 12 years old when her mother died.

Oh that's very tough--

Yeah.

--for a child and particularly a young girl who just is going to start adolescence.

Right. And she had the two older brothers. And my grandfather never remarried or nobody ever mentioned that there was another woman in his life.

Tell me a little bit about your parents' personalities. What do you remember. Again, this is with the emphasis still in Germany. What do you remember of your father? Was he a quiet man? Was he an extrovert? Was he somebody that you were a little frightened of? Was he somebody that was gentle? Anything. What was he like?

He was a very loving father. He was very outgoing. He loved his music. He enjoyed his friends. I don't-- He was a good guy.

OK. And an outgoing-- yeah, so he was more of an extrovert?

I would say so, yeah.

Now, when he lost his job, of course, you were a very young child.

Right.

And if I were that age, I would not have known the difference if papa has a job or doesn't have a job.

Right, I didn't either. And they didn't make a big fuss about it.

Did he ever tell you, though, later on in your life what that was like, what the details were?

No. No. In fact, my brother Herbert and I discussed that. My parents never complained about what had happened to them or their arrival in America. Nobody ever said, "Oh my god, you know, how terrible." So they were very stoic about their lot in life.

And so you would not have known any of the details even later on.

Right, exactly. What I do remember, however, is that in 1936, I guess in the spring, the Olympics took place in Germany.

That's right.

And my father was able to go, and he enjoyed that very much.

Well, that's interesting.

Yeah, that may have-- well, that was in May I think or whatever.

I don't remember the month of the Olympics, but they were famous ones.

Yeah. And in November, we left Germany.

But you see-- everybody who was Jewish was affected first in Germany and then on any territories that were occupied or annexed. But not everybody would have had as high a position within German society as your father did being a judge.

Yeah. But for example, one of my mother's brothers was a lawyer. And then a friend of theirs was a dentist. So they traveled in a pretty upscale--

Circles.

--circles. Right.

What I'm thinking, though, is that as a judge he still, even if he had lost his position, he might have still had some prominence that allowed him to go to the Olympics. Not everybody would have been--

I have no recollection. I just remember that he went. That's really what I remember.

What about your mother? What kind of a personality did she have?

She was also very wonderful. She was a wonderful woman. And everybody who knew her just adored her. And she made life very pleasant. And when they came to America, well, we lived in a hotel on 72nd Street and Broadway. And I remember Helen and I were surprised because we saw the first Black person who ran the elevator. And we really liked him. It was very sweet.

And then when we moved both families-- Otto and Elfriede and Helen and my parents and brother and I-- moved to Washington Heights. And we had two apartments right next-door to each other. And my mother and Elfriede were very close. And Helen and I went to the same school. And as I said, our relationship was always very close.

In Germany, did your mother-- was her main focus bringing you and your brother up? Did she have any other kinds of hobbies? Did she help your father in any way? No.

No.

OK. Their social circle--

I'm sorry?

Their social circle, still in Germany, do you know whether it was almost exclusively Jewish?

I'm sure it was.

OK.

I'm sure it was.

So there wouldn't have been any non-Jews they would be friends with?

Not that I'm aware of-- which doesn't mean that it wasn't so.

Yeah. And do you have any memories of when you would visit your mother's family in Bünde in Westphalia, what their places looked like? You remember the round table in your grandfather's apartment. What about where Helen lived or your other--

Helen lived with my grandfather. Her family lived with them.

I see.

Yes.

And that's Ernst?

No, that's Otto.

That's Otto.

Otto and Elfriede and Helen.

And Ernst, did he live close by?

That I don't remember.

OK.

That I don't remember.

Do you remember conversations in your own home in Plauen about leaving Plauen, about traveling somewhere else, about going away?

Honestly, I have no recollection of that at all. I have no recollection.

But you do have a recollection of your nanny, your maid Maria leaving you.

Yes. And I remember going on the ship. And actually my mother told us that we had to-- the ship was leaving from Hamburg I think. And it was delayed by a few days because there was, as she put it, a nut missing.

So they put us up in a hotel. And she said we had a wonderful time until we left. And the trip was very pleasant. But it was kind of wintry. Except for my mother, everybody else was kind of vomiting. [LAUGHS]

They didn't get their sea legs.

Right. But my mother enjoyed every meal and didn't feel anything.

Do you remember leaving Plauen?

I don't.

Do you remember taking anything with you?

My Kathe Kruse doll.

You had a Kathe Kruse doll.

I still have one.

Oh wow.

Yeah.

Oh wow. The same one?

No. Somebody brought me back one from Berlin once.

And were your parents able to take anything with them from Germany?

Yes.

What did they take?

Well, it's my feeling that they took the baby grand piano.

That's substantial.

Yeah. Or else I don't how we got it to the United States. Although, my mother said that-- I've forgotten what she said-- that maybe the bedroom was shipped over by somebody else. I don't really remember.

But I do remember that my father bought an accordion which he took because not that he played it but he thought it would be something he could sell. So they brought some things that were allowed. But because they couldn't bring money, they brought silverware, I guess, and some jewelry.

OK. So they were able to take some household things and some personal things.

Right.

But did these like furniture and the piano, did that accompany you on the ship?

I don't think so, because when I think about it, we had no room for it in the hotel. And I don't think we had room for it in the first apartment. But when we moved to our second apartment, I remember the piano. Maybe I just don't remember it in the first apartment.

Oh, the one that you're talking about, the second one, is the one in Washington Heights?

Well, they were both in Washington Heights.

OK. And you do remember then going to Bünde before your trip to the United States?

Right.

And Bünde would be on the way to Hamburg.

Right.

Now did Helen and her family come with you?

Yes.

Ernst and his family?

No. And neither did my grandfather. He had a cigar business with a brother of his, Julius Rosenwald. And they didn't want to give up their business. But in 1939, Opa Simon came with Uncle Ernst and Tante Trude and their daughter Marge.

OK. And when she was a baby then-- the daughter when she's just a baby.

Baby, right.

And so what happens to Julius?

He and his wife also came. But I don't remember whether he came with us. But their son Bernd came with us. And I think they were about a dozen of us who came at that time.

And was it so that your mother's side of the family was all able to leave? Or was there somebody who wasn't able to leave?

No, everybody was able to leave but didn't want to leave. My grandfather didn't want to leave. And Uncle Ernst I think was even in a concentration camp for a while.

Oh, he was?

Until they let him go. And he had to walk for days to get back home. And then I guess they decided that they were ready to come to the United States.

OK. But was anybody remaining in the family through the duration of the war on your mother's side?

I don't think so.

OK. Which then leaves then the one relative that you knew that perished was your grandfather on your father's side.

Correct. Correct.

OK. Now let's come to the huge question is how were you able to come to the United States to begin with, because many people had such problems and weren't allowed in?

Well, because William Rosenwald--

Who's he?

He's the son of Julius Rosenwald, who was the owner of Sears Roebuck.

I see.

You didn't know that?

No.

Oh OK.

I didn't know that Julius-- who was it? William Rosenwald was the--

Son.

--son of Julius, who owned Sears Roebuck.

Right.

I didn't the ownership that way.

Oh OK. And he set up a social worker. And I don't know what else. But he saw to it that about 125 relatives could come.

So did Julius found--

Julius was already dead by the time Hitler got into power.

But was he a founder of Sears Roebuck?

No, he had bought Sears Roebuck from either Sears or from Roebuck. And he just made it into what it became. And he became a tremendous philanthropist. And for example, he felt a need to educate Black people. And he arranged-- I think somebody said or it was a fact that he arranged for 5,000 schools in the South for Black people. And they all had to make some kind of a contribution, either working for or supplies. But he did the main--

So he was offering educational opportunities.

Right. He also opened up the first-- he lived in Chicago. And he also opened up the first Y for Black people.

Wow.

Yeah. He was a very unusual man. He was friends with Theodore Roosevelt and with-- I can't think of the

very, very well-known Black educator. What is his name?

Oh, yeah. I know who you're meaning, but his name escapes me as well. We'll probably remember it later when we're off camera.

Right. [LAUGHS]

So do you know how Julius Rosenwald was related to your mother and her father? What was their relation?

Her father and Julius were first cousins. And he would come to Bünde every once in a while and visit and maybe even left a stock or two in Sears.

OK. Well, so he had obviously come to the United States much earlier.

Oh, yes. He was born in the United States I think. And he was married and had five children, including William. And he's well-known in the Chicago area because he helped to found the Museum of Science and Industry. And one of his daughters married a man who I think had something to do with the planetarium. And very well-endowed.

Well, a well-to-do person, a prominent person. And certainly, if you own Sears Roebuck, you own one of the major stores at the time--

Absolutely.

--with the catalog. So you're also well-to-do.

Absolutely. And I remember we had a reunion about 10 years ago in Chicago of all the people who were still alive to commemorate the book that was written by one of his grandchildren. And that was held at the museum, which he had founded.

What museum was this now?

What did I say?

Well, you did mention a planetarium.

No, but before that. Arts and Science? It escapes me again. I'm sorry.

That's OK.

And they took us to see-- before this big dinner, they took us sightseeing where Sears started out. And he started it across the street from a park. So during their lunch hour, the employees could enjoy the fresh air. And he started a pension program. And they took us to this Y for black people.

And they also showed us his house, which was very nice. But it was nothing-- no mansion or anything on a huge piece of property. It was lovely, but it was not what you would think of a multi-billionaire, millionaire would live in.

Did your grandfather Simon have any memories of him that he would share with you?

Not that I recall.

OK. And what was the book that the grandchild wrote? Do you remember the title of it?

I have it here someplace.

OK, we'll look for it later then and see maybe whether we could at least film the cover. And you say the book

was about this.

About Julius. About his grandfather.

OK. So it was not just specifically about the relatives coming out of Europe? It was a biography of his grandfather.

Right.

OK. And so he had a personal tie, and he visited Bünde and so met with various family members. They weren't strange to him. They weren't just names.

Right.

All right. And by the time that there was this need in Germany, he no longer is alive.

Correct.

What about his children, the five children? Did they have as familiar a tie with all the relatives as he did? As Julius had?

No, I don't think so. I don't think so.

All right.

But William was the one who saw to it that everybody who wanted to come out came out of Germany.

That's huge.

Yes. Yes.

That's huge.

And not only that, but when we first came here, he supported everybody until they found jobs and until they were able to find housing. Somebody told us recently that he allowed $0.25 every Friday for women to go to the beauty parlor.

Oh.

Yeah.

And that's-- I mean that's something.

Yeah, right.

That's something.

Right. And then ultimately, everybody found jobs and went to work.

So about how many people does this mean? How many relatives did they get out from Germany?

Somebody told me 125. Somebody else said 160. So I'm not sure. They're all different Rosenwalds. They're not only from my family, but other Rosenwalds on the other side. I can't tell you exactly who. You'd have to ask David Sperling. Have you--

I've heard-- the name is familiar.

Yeah, well, interview him. He knows every family member.

Is he also part of the family?

He's part of the family. And we only met him maybe 10 or 12 years ago. He's a young man. And he's very much into the whole family. And he can tell you anything and everything you need to know.

I mean, it's fascinating. It's truly fascinating that there is-- first of all, there is this large extended family, and that there is the means, the financial means to bring them over, and the will to do so.

Although, the will is more because the money was really no problem. But the will to do so was-- somebody in the family had come to the United States maybe in 1935 and expressed perhaps to William, I'm not sure, what was going on in Germany. And he said he would go back to Germany and get everybody psyched up to come.

Well, that was very prescient.

Yeah. Yeah.

So did you ever meet William?

William used to come I think once a year. He visited every family member. And I remember my mother used to be a nervous wreck, because we never knew what time he was coming. And we lived in Washington Heights, which was not particularly a wealthy area. And he would come in his chauffeur driven whatever.

Limousine?

Limousine. [LAUGHS] And he would stay for a while and ask how we were and so forth until--

Well, what kind of impression did he leave? You were a little kid.

I have no recollection.

No?

No recollection. No. But I do remember that when we were getting married, we sent him not an invitation but an announcement. And he sent back a letter of congratulations. But we always said the check fell out--

[LAUGHTER]

--before it came.

Did you ever meet any of the other five siblings?

I don't recall. At this reunion, we met some of the children--

Of those five siblings.

--of those five siblings. And one of them lived near New Orleans. And in fact, one of them lives in-- what's the famous-- starts with an L-- in New Orleans? I can't remember the name of it. I'm sorry.

Is it a neighborhood or a house?

No, it's a house. It's a home with-- beautiful home. If you look in the AAA guide, it'll--

It'll have it there.

Right. One of the things I remember in the kitchen there were a couple of sinks. And one of them was for flowers. So anyway, one of the relatives who lived across the street-- if you want to call it a street-- from them told us that when-- was it Katrina, the big--

Yes

--hurricane? They had to leave their home. And they had their dog, and they were walking and somebody gave them a lift to the airport. So they got on their plane to go wherever their other house was.

That sort of stuff that you share--

[LAUGHS]

So the reunion, was this a reunion of all Rosenwald family?

Right.

But it was not a reunion of just the relatives who had come over from Germany, or was it?

No.

No. So the event was a family reunion not a focus on the German side that had come in the '30s.

Right.

OK. Where was it held? Chicago you said?

Chicago.

And about how many people came? Do you know?

Over 100 I think.

All right. And had there ever been a reunion like that before?

No, and I didn't know anybody outside of our own immediate people either.

OK. So you never really got to know-- aside from William's visits, there wasn't any direct contact with his brothers and sisters?

No, except that our family every year had a gathering in a hotel or in a restaurant. And one year his brother Lessing came. And Lessing was known for being very anti-Israel.

Really?

Yeah. And that's all I remember.

OK.

And I guess the others were maybe three sisters. And I don't remember meeting them. Maybe we did. I'm not sure. When we were in Chicago, we did get into the home of one of them, which is no longer belongs to the children or whatever.

Did Sears Roebuck continue to stay within the family?

I don't know at what point did they gave it up, because they haven't been--

Associated recently.

No.

OK. He probably would not be happy to see what state Sears Roebuck is today. Julius.

No. No.

Yeah. So when you come over on this boat, the ship, where everyone's seasick except your mother, who's having a whale of a time, and was it ever that somebody-- when did you learn of how it is that you got to the United States? Because as a child, I would assume you wouldn't have any questions how did we get here.

No, I didn't. I was just--

So when did you learn that it was because of this relative, because of William Rosenwald?

Maybe we knew about it to begin with. My mother reminded me that-- we came at the end of November. And it was around Thanksgiving. And the first day that we were here was Thanksgiving. And they had a big dinner to which those of us who were on the ship were invited. And that's all I remember about that.

You remember her telling you this?

I remember her telling me this.

But you don't remember the Thanksgiving?

No.

Yeah. What you mentioned earlier about giving women the $0.25 every Friday to go to the hairdresser, it's a very thoughtful gesture--

It was.

--because people who have lost everything don't want to feel like second class--

Right.

--and don't want to feel like they can't enjoy something that makes them feel beautiful again.

Yes, right. Yeah. And then after we lived in Washington Heights next-door to Helen and her family, they moved to Brooklyn, and we moved further up in Washington Heights. And my mother met the people who lived underneath us.

And he was also a lawyer in Germany who started a small factory making eyeglass cases. And they trained my mother. And my mother started making eyeglass cases. And it was very convenient because it was right underneath. And then they moved a few times. And my mother had tremendous energy to walk to where they moved.

--were now moved to.

And then ultimately they moved to Fort Lee, New Jersey. So she had to go to the bus terminal--

Oh, wow.

--and take a bus. And she never complained. She always-- wind and rain, snow, whatever-- she was really a very remarkable woman.

Well, it does speak to that, because if somebody was brought up to be the lady of the house and had never assumed that they would have to go and earn money to support the family, there would be a lot of ladies who would be not happy and let everybody know they're not happy.

Right.

So it speaks to a strength of character.

Yeah, she worked till she was 67.

Wow.

And then the reason she stopped working basically was because he gave up the business. And by 67 she had--

It was enough.

It was enough already.

[LAUGHTER]

Now what about your father? How did things go with him?

Well, obviously he had no opportunity to go to law school or practice law. And I think for a while he worked at the local Y talking to people who would just come over and calming them and helping them. And then ultimately, he went to work in some kind of a factory for the war. And I think that that ate out some of his nostrils or something, so he had to stop doing that.

And then he worked for Ira [? Hauptan ?] Company, which was a big stock broker in those days. And when the war came to an end, he lost his job because they took back the veterans. And he decided to go to business on his own. And he sold plastic signs to stores.

He had a tough time.

He had a tough time. And he died at age 63.

Oh dear.

They were going on vacation to Massachusetts. And Herb and his wife and Frank and I, we were expecting our first child. And we had a [INAUDIBLE] boat that we'd like to take to Candlewood Lake in Connecticut. And my father knew that we were going to be there over the Fourth of July. And sure enough, they found us and we spent some time together.

And by July 6, he had gone. They were in Massachusetts. And he got up at 7:30 to go into the water. And my mother said, "Where are you going?" And he said, "I'd like to swim before the crowds get there." So he never came back. He had a heart attack apparently in the water. And they found his--

Oh.

Yeah. So that was a terrible time.

And that was what year?

1955.

Oh, I see. So he had been in the States for 19 years?

Something like that.

Yeah. And had gone through all of those different transitions and attempts and things like that.

Right.

Did his personality change in that time?

I don't recall that it did. I'm sure that he complained everyone once in a while about not being happy.

Yeah. And it sounds like he never was able to find his feet here.

Exactly. He really wasn't.

Yeah. And so your mother, would it be fair to say that she was the one who held things together?

I think they both did. Both did.

Well, when you mentioned earlier that as a couple, as your parents, that they never complained, it's huge. Particularly, when he had been somebody who was accomplished and not only prominent-- it's not the prominence-- but being the judge is a very responsible position.

Right, exactly. Exactly.

And it takes a lot of different elements of a person's character to be a good judge.

Right. Right.

And to not have something that calls upon those parts of oneself.

He was a remarkable man. My mother was a remarkable woman. I was very fortunate to have such great parents.

Tell me a little bit more if we can in detail about when you got to the United States. And this could be things that you were told rather than have direct memories of. How the Rosenwalds helped out in various ways. You mentioned that it wasn't just that they got people out of Germany and provided them affidavits. You said you were in a hotel for a while?

Yes, for a short period of time when we first arrived.

Were your parents given some cash?

They must have been, because they-- and that's why they-- and in addition, they got the $0.25.

For the hair?

For the hair. Yeah.

Did your mom use it?

I imagine so. I don't really remember.

And you said there had been a social worker.

Yes, to help everybody get jobs.

Do you remember this name, the name of the person?

No. Pearl, I think was his last name, but I could be wrong.

And did you remember meeting him?

I may have, but I don't remember.

OK. And aside from yourself and your mother's side-- your mother's immediate family, that is she's the connection to Julius Rosenwald and William Rosenwald-- and it is your uncle Otto, your uncle Ernst, your grandfather Simon. All of them come over. Did you know other people in New York City who were part of this Rosenwald exodus?

Well, my Tante Greta Friedheim and her husband and daughter. I'm not sure if they came with them. They may have been on the ship with us.

Is that your father's sister?

No, no, no. This is a different Greta. This is a cousin of my mother's.

OK.

Yeah. She's the sister of Bernd Rosenwald, who also came with us, who was single at the time. He was still young.

And how was he related to your family? [SIGHS]

[LAUGHS] Do you know?

He and my mother I think were first cousins.

OK. When one gets into family trees, I know, one can get lost.

Right.

But over time, were there other people that would come by that were extended and yet they were connected?

Well, except for David Sperling and David's mother, whose name is I think Marge. But if he tells you it was something else, don't tell him that I made a mistake. And his grandmother Bertha. There were some other relatives from other Rosenwalds, not from Julius. But Julius had brothers and sisters also. So they came from other sources.

But was there any contact with these more distant--

Well, I know Bertha and there were some other women with whom my mother corresponded a little bit, but nothing-- she didn't have time. She worked all the time.

Yeah. About when-- did she start going to work almost immediately?

As soon as we moved up to Wadsworth Terrace was the name of the street on which we lived. Shortly after that, she met Leopold.

OK. And they're the people downstairs?

Correct.

And what was his last name?

Leopold.

Oh his name was Leopold.

Eric Leopold was his name.

Eric Leopold. And what year did you move to that Wadsworth Terrace? Do you know?

I'll say '38, '39 maybe.

Still before the war?

Right.

All right, and she starts working then and continues until she is 67.

Right.

Do you remember the years your parents were born?

My mother was born in 1903. And my father was born in 1893. They were 10 years apart.

OK. So that means that yes, he's 62 when he passes away from the heart attack. And she works until 1970.

Right.

That's quite a while.

He died at age 63.

At 63. Sorry.

[LAUGHS]

OK.

It's OK.

My math is never my strong point.

It's OK. Mine isn't either.

Let me think. So they both start working. You go to school. And do you have any memory-- you probably didn't start school in Germany. Was that the case?

I think I may have just barely started-- because I seem to recall a picture of myself with I think they call it a Zuckertüte--

A Zuckertüte.

--which was a big cone filled with sweets.

Yeah. I think that's used on the first day of school.

Right, exactly.

A tradition for children.

Exactly.

OK. Do you have any memories of that?

None whatsoever.

Just the photograph to tell you.

Just the photograph.

All right. Do you have memories of starting school in New York City?

I don't remember the very first school when we lived in the hotel. I don't know. We must have gone to a school for a short period of time. But then when we moved to 176th Street, we went to PS 173. And we were put into the first grade or something. But they realized that we were older. And they moved us into the second grade. And I think we learned to speak English rather quickly.

Well, that was one of my questions.

Yeah. And I do remember going shopping with my mother on Broadway. And she would speak to me in German. And I would answer either yes or no in English because I didn't want anybody to know that I was not an American.

Oh.

Yeah.

That's such a typical kind of reaction for the younger generation with the older generation.

Right, exactly.

Did your parents continue speaking German with one another?

Yes. And with us as well. But they also went to school at night to learn English.

OK. You say that your uncle Ernst was taken to a concentration camp in Germany. Do you know which one it was?

I have no idea. He was in some kind of a jail or camp. I'm not sure. I just remember hearing that he was let go and he had to-- I don't know how many days it took him to walk home.

Do you remember when he and your grandfather arrive in the United States? Did you meet them there?

We met them at the ship. Yeah. And I don't even know if I should say this. But they came with so much clothing especially for Marge their daughter, who was a year old, they must have had enough till she was five or six years old. And we felt so sorry for her because she was going to be wearing all this German stuff. [LAUGHS]

Yeah. But it could be that that's where they could spend the money if they had any left.

I guess. Whatever, but Helen and I didn't think about that. We just, "Oh my god, the poor kid."

[LAUGHTER]

And was there talk-- now, you were born in 1929. The war starts in 1939. And so you have your adolescence

during the war years. Was there much talk in your family about what was going on in Europe?

I really don't remember except that my brother went into the Seabees, which was part of the navy.

Was he drafted or did he--

I think he was drafted.

OK. He would have been the age if he was born in the '25, he would have been the age of that.

Right. And so that was a terrible worry always. He ultimately went to Okinawa, but the war was pretty much over by that time. But they were very concerned about him.

Do you remember where you were when you learned about Pearl Harbor?

I think I remember something, because we had friends, my parents had friends who lived in the next building. And our back windows faced each other. And they had some kind of a conversation about, "Oh my god, this is what happened." And I didn't take it that seriously.

You're 12 years old.

I was 12 years old.

Yeah. But you do know of your brother going. That's a lot more closer to home.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. So I was worried about him also.

But he's in the Pacific theater. And I think I read someplace that he became a citizen while he was in the Seabees.

Right, that's very true.

What about the rest of you? When did you become US citizens?

I think in 1945, '46. I don't remember.

And again, I go back to how much discussion do you remember at home about the war in Germany? How much knowledge was there about what was happening to Jews everywhere, not just in Germany, but everywhere where there was the Nazi occupation?

I don't know whether I've just blocked it out or I truly don't remember.

Did your parents read any newspapers when they were in Washington Heights?

If they did, it was the New York Times. But I truly don't remember that either. They probably didn't do it every day. We had a radio.

And do you remember particular attention to the news broadcasts or was it more for entertainment?

I truly don't remember.

That's OK. That's OK. As I say, I know that I'm asking unreasonable questions such as-- Where were you on September 3, 1943 at 5:00 PM?

[LAUGHTER]

I realize that. Did you ever go back to Germany?

No, and I never wanted to. And neither did-- well, Herbie, my brother, didn't want to either until one year they succumbed, and they did go.

Where did they go?

Berlin.

They went to Berlin. Your brother and his wife?

Mm-hmm.

And what kind of reaction did he have to what he saw there?

I think they were very impressed. And as a matter of fact, he met with a man with whom he had gone to school in Germany.

Oh wow. Well, he was already a teenager and-- no, no, he was still a boy. He was a kid.

Yeah, he was-- I was 7 and he was 11 and 1/2.

Yeah. He was still a kid having come over.

Right.

But he didn't go back to Plauen?

No.

Do you remember what year he went to Germany?

I do not.

Would it have been before 1990?

I don't think so.

OK. So after 1990, there would be no obstacles to go back to Plauen.

Correct.

Before there would have been a few--

Right.

--because of the East German government.

Right.

And did he go to Bünde?

No, he did not.

OK. So when he comes back, and he says he's impressed by what he sees. Did that influence you to change your mind?

No. Not at all. And my husband was also born in Germany. And neither one of us wanted to go back.

I think I've come close to the end of our interview.

OK.

But are there any things that I have not asked you that you think are important-- either about your story and how you get to the United States, or about the Rosenwalds, the foundation-- that you would want people to know about?

All I can say is I thank them very much for giving us our lives.

That is probably the most important thing.

Right.

Yes, because without that.

Right.

OK. Then I will say that with that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Erika Reis on April 25, 2018.

Thank you.

Thank you.