

OK, so today is June 19th, 2020. We are continuing the USHMM interview, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview, with Mr. Helmut von Schweitzer, who is in London. And I, the interviewer, is in Falls Church, Virginia, right outside Washington, D.C. And this will follow up on our interview from June 18th, which was part one, where we talked about your early childhood in Austria and some of the people who were part of your world.

Now, at the end of our interview yesterday, we had already come to the point where your family is moving to Germany. But there were a few loose ends to tie up from your life in Austria. So let's start with those right now. Tell us about your stepmother whom you called Ulla Mutti and how she came into your life after the death of your mother.

OK. Well, of course, we hadn't really properly realized, because of my father's care, that we had lost our mother. Because she just wasn't there anymore and life went on otherwise completely as normal so we kids just couldn't ask the question, so to speak. But then about six, seven months later, my father called the whole family together, including Grandmother and Tila, all in our children's room.

And he said that he had an important announcement to make that Ulla would be our mother in the future. He would marry her and that would take a few months. So that was a big family shock.

But again, we children really didn't fully take it. But I was so moved by it that I jumped up from my little seat with my favorite Grimm fairy tale book. And I gave it to my dad and said, please take it to her when you see her.

Aye, that was quite a moving scene. And of course, when my dad came back from another trip to Germany, he brought me an even better Grimm's fairy tale book with a lot of colored pictures in it, which I didn't have in mind. So that was a kind of good start.

Can I ask a question here?

Yeah.

So when you say, everyone was in the room, including Grandmother, that means Lily, your father's mother.

Yes.

Is that correct?

That is correct, yeah.

And it also means your Aunt Matilda, who you call Tily. Is this correct?

Tila, yeah.

Tila, who is your father's sister?

Yes. And she was, by that time-- already had been taking full charge of little Yumgard, baby Yumgard, who was still only a few months old at that stage. But she became a kind of mother to Yumgard.

This is Tila?

Tila, yeah. I think we talked about that briefly yesterday.

Yeah. And the year is 1930 when all of this happens?

Yes, early January, 1930. Yeah, that's right. And of course, when my dad talked to us about marrying Ulla, that would have been probably September, 1940.

1930.

1930, sorry.

Yeah. So your mother passes away in January, 1930. And your father would have talked to you by about September 1930. But Ulla was not in the room with you. He didn't introduce you to her at that time?

No, he did not. He had met her at a agricultural exhibition in Hanover, where he was joining Ellen [PERSONAL NAME], who was a cousin of his. But her father, a brother of Lily, had moved to Germany, and married, and was a married man in Germany.

And then the daughter, Ellen, joined the German civil service and was a household teacher. And Ulla was a pupil of hers, and they were both at the same exhibition. And so my dad, Otto, was introduced to Ulla. And then they seemed to fall in love almost at once.

Had you met Ulla by that time or not at all?

No, not at all. We had no idea who she was and what she might be. But it was that announcement by my father to the assembled family, if you like, that suddenly brought that name into our lives. And as I say, very deeply, I was touched by it. That is why I jumped up with my favorite Grimm's fairy tale book to hand to my dad for her.

That's a lovely gesture for a little boy. It's a lovely gesture.

Yeah.

Yeah. So I have a few questions about our Austrian discussion. And I want to touch on one of the illustrious former owners and guests. And that is Ludwig van Beethoven who had stayed at the house.

Now yesterday, after our interview, I looked up on Wikipedia about Gneixendorf. And I saw that even today, there is something called the Beethovenhaus in Gneixendorf. And I wondered if that is the same place or whether this is something else.

It's a place where people can go and see where Beethoven was. Can you tell me about that? Was the schloss in the middle of the city or are we talking about a different place?

Well, that is again something we didn't talk about-- the dispute where Beethoven and his younger brother actually stayed. There are two properties there. I can show you a picture. Where is it now? Can you see it?

If you push it up a little bit. Pull it up. No, up in front of your face.

Yes, I can see the top half of it. That seems to have a church. The bottom half, I cannot see. OK.

The bottom half is-- are these controversial? The one here on your left side, I believe--

You're going to have to pull it up like this. Perfect. So in the bottom part, yes?

That one with a tower, that is the one that is claimed and now, definitely again, the one that is the Beethovenhaus. But the other one on the left-hand side was, for a considerable time, also a rival claim-- certainly when I was a young boy. And there's a personal story involved with it.

Our neighbor had established his claim and people would come to either that house or the other house. And my parents were not on talking terms with the Kneifel people who were having it. But then one day, the old man, Kneifel, invited me as a little boy on a Sunday afternoon when all the people normally when and had their afternoon sleep, and invited

me in and showed me this-- you can see it here, actually, in the middle.

His grandfather, who was a craftsman, had established a proper Beethoven museum piece, if you like. There was a small piano, and the proper tapestries, and so on. And that is how the claim appeared, their claim, and came to be.

Whereas, in actual fact, it is almost certain-- with now documentary certainties-- that it was true because where we was born-- in fact, the children's room in which all the three generations of Schweitzers that were born there had been born, that was also the Beethoven room. And as far as the Schweitzers were concerned, to have a Beethoven bust on the children's wardrobe, that was all they would do. No further pretense. Because your original furniture wasn't there anymore.

And Beethoven's brother was not at all a musician, and so on. In fact, the two brothers-- particularly with the brother's wife involved-- were in constant arguments. And all these arguments have been carefully recorded, to a large extent by, again, some other relations of mine on the Kleine side. And a book has been written about it.

And of course, the whole thing has become very publicized. And that in the end, of course, led to the incident going back to Vienna of Ludwig and his-- no, what do you call it? Not his son but his brother's son.

His nephew.

With his nephew. But that's--

Nephew.

--another brother's son-- nephew. Which was in fact an open carriage-- well, not a carriage-- cart, really. Because there was nothing else available on the spur of the moment. And so three months later, he died in early 1827.

OK. So if I understand this properly, that there are two, separate places-- one, which would be a castle, and one which was another house.

Yeah.

And the other place was established by your neighbors, but not neighbors in the sense of right next door to you?

But actually, opposite. Yeah. As you can see, these two buildings-- if you can see them.

Yes. I can see them.

They're just opposite each other.

OK. So the building with the tower, is that your home?

Yeah.

That's your home, the building with the tower?

Yeah. And that window here, where my thumb is, that was what generally has been thought was the definite Beethoven-

Beethoven room.

--where he stayed as a guest of his brother.

OK. And the house on the other side is your neighbor's house opposite?

Yeah, that's right.

OK. So what claim, besides fitting out a room that had a piano in it? Did Beethoven ever stay there?

Well, they claim the same. And of course, in a sense, for the visitors, this other establishment was so much more of something to view. Because there, you had an apartment reconstructed, if you like, in the same way as it was the fashion at Beethoven's lifetime. Whereas, on our side, it was a usually disorderly children's room with just a Beethoven bust on the wardrobe, which doesn't look terribly authentic, does it?

No. But this explains something that was a discrepancy in my mind. Because you had mentioned yesterday that by the time World War II ended and the various military presences-- first from the German army and then the Russians took over-- and you said nothing was left of the castle, that it was in ruins. And so there couldn't be--

No, it wasn't in ruins but it was dangerous to live in. It was officially condemned as not safe to live in.

So when we see today, and today being 2020, that in the town of Gneixendorf, there is a Beethoven museum that claims that he might have stayed there, it was confusing to me. Because how could that be if the castle had been condemned? So this explains it. But this place that has the Beethoven museum currently, is that neighbor across the way the opposite way?

No, it's the other way around, actually.

I see.

But during the wartime-- ever since the German army occupied what was the genuine Beethoven room, if you like. There was a German army, and afterwards, the Russian army, and afterwards, the family who had bought it from us got it back. But they only could temporarily live in it before it was also condemned. But when this new guy with a lot of money, an architect from Vienna, bought the property, I think in-- I don't know the exact date, but fairly recently-- after it had been totally condemned, he got it, obviously, quite cheap.

In the meantime, the rival one had been big on the internet and had a lot of visitors. But around about that time, the building itself on their side was condemned as not fit for anybody to live in. And the architect from Vienna was very much an internationally-connected person. He then produced a huge, glass--

Plaque.

--plaque on the outer wall of what was our original home with a display of part of a quartet that Beethoven completed while he was in Gneixendorf. And he had it introduced in a very solemn way.

OK.

He had it introduced by a professional quartet playing that quartet to an invited audience from Vienna and from elsewhere. The villagers were completely ignored.

OK. So thank you for that. At least we have covered Beethoven's presence in Gneixendorf, in the schloss that your family owned, the estate they owned. And now we go back to where we left off yesterday. And that is, your family moves to Hessen. And Hessen is a region in Germany, yes?

I know it's been a little bit up, and down, and back, and forward. We started off with father announcing to us that he would marry Ulla Roepke and that she would be our mother. The background to that was, in fact, his father immediately said, on no account can I agree for Ulla to marry this guy, Otto, from Austria. A, he is a Catholic. B--

He's got children?

--he's got three children from a first wife. And thirdly, although he has got a title and he owns this estate, as far as he's concerned, that estate doesn't look very profitable. And so there doesn't seem to be any real future for a gifted person like you, my favorite daughter, Ulla.

Well, we talked about this yesterday.

I think we did.

I don't know if you remember but we talked about this yesterday and how he became, who had this reservation, like a stand-in grandfather who was very much your champion and whom you were very close to. And so once she disagreed and did what she wanted to do, he came around.

Yeah, absolutely.

OK. So now, we are on the train. We're going to Germany. Your sister's doll is taken away.

There is still-- because my stepmother married in a Lutheran way back in Melsungen and the history isn't sure whether her father actually attended that wedding or not but the rest of the family certainly did. And then they had a Catholic wedding in Linz on the way back. Because she had to accept that the children would have to be Catholics and that my dad certainly didn't want to have that broadcast in any big way around the village. So as far as weddings were concerned, nothing happened in the village of Gneixendorf and nothing was apparent to the little children either.

But then she came, and she certainly turned the place around, and modernized it, and so on. And of course, her family-- I think I mentioned yesterday, she was the eldest of six people. They all came to Gneixendorf and she certainly turned it around. And we lived, from 1932, still three years in Gneixendorf. And they certainly were dramatic years as far as the turnaround was concerned and as far as-- for us children, a complete change from-- all these servants that had been the establishment before, except for the cook, were sent packing or pensioned off.

Because, as far as Ulla was concerned, you do it yourself. The family does it yourself, as I did at home, and so on. And we children, we were directly involved.

We all had to play our part. We had to clean up our shoes and things. She would do it first with you and then you were expected to do it yourself. So it was, as far as our family lifestyle was concerned, it was a complete change from being the aristocratic kind of setup to a proper family setup.

I would like to ask you, if you could-- I'm sorry-- just sit back a little bit. Because I cannot see your full image. Yes, that's much better. Thank you so much.

Yeah.

Then we catch more of you in the screen. Ulla, was she successful in turning the farm around with these kinds of--

Not the farm. The household was completely turned around. My father was still struggling on the farm side of it. And I think we fairly well covered it all, didn't we--

Yeah.

--with the eggs and with the Jewish-- did we talk about that?

No, we didn't. Tell me about that. About eggs, you say?

Yes. Quite apart from having the combine harvesters and the tractors, I mean, he reduced the regular staff of the farm from what it was originally-- about 20 workers-- to about four men. And it was all mechanized.

Then, additionally, he had these, again, American White chickens-- 2,000 chicks that he imported. And again, they were also bred on a electric breeding station in our cellar. So the chickens didn't breed their own eggs. They were then bred and--

That sounds kind of bizarre that a chicken--

It was the completely modern establishment. But with the economic disaster of 1932, the complete international breakdown, it just wasn't enough to save the property. And he had to sell, every two years or so, a piece of land to keep the bank-- not happy but at least--

Off his back.

Off his back, yeah.

But you mentioned something about chickens and you mentioned the word Jewish. So what's involved there? Was there someone who purchased the eggs?

There was a dramatic scene that took place which was completely out of the ordinary. A Jewish guy with a little, motorized cart had arrived from Vienna. He had caftan on and he was just as if he'd come straight from Russia or somewhere. And he wanted to buy eggs, which was totally out of the ordinary.

It wasn't an ordinary customer. So my dad personally saw to him. And he said what he wanted. They agreed on a price for eggs. And then my dad brought a cart from the chicken area with the proper cartons of-- I don't know what they were-- 50 eggs in each carton, safely, separately fixed.

And this guy was busy fitting them into this rickety, little cart. And of course Dad kept the count on-- and I happened to be around there at the time. And it was that such an unusual scene that even the little boy got a little bit attracted to what was going on there.

Well, the guy said, look, I'm now full up. So then my dad said, well, you had 40 carts at the agreed price, and that's so many hundred-- what was it-- shillings. And the guy said, look, I've only got not 200 shillings. I have only 150 shillings.

So my dad said, well, how can you come and do business with me, and then you haven't got the right money, and you've agreed to the price? He said, yeah, I agreed to the price but now I've got all these extra cartons here. And so my dad had a furious scene with him and then sent him off. He said, I don't want to see you ever again.

Did he ever show up again?

Not that I know of.

Had this been the first time you had seen a Jewish person?

Well, no. I'd seen a Jewish person before. I talked to you yesterday about the lady from Krems who came. What was her name? My memory.

[INAUDIBLE]

It's OK. Just tell me about the lady because I don't remember her.

It's the one who gave the black doll to my sister, Baby Schmidt.

Baby Schmidt. Her first name was Baby?

Well, that was the way they talked. It wasn't. It probably was some other name. But we didn't know that.

And tell me again, what kind of connection did she have to your family?

Well, she was a great friend of my late mother. And she was married to a shoe manufacturer down in the Krems area. But she came from Hungary.

And did you continue? So she gives the doll to your sister. And did you continue having connections to her after your mother's passing?

Yeah, definitely. They were part of the main family. And Ulla Mutti would deal with them as well. It was a continuous friendship.

Do you remember when she gave the doll to your sister? Was it right before leaving for Germany or was it some time before that?

No. I would guess about six months or a year before-- Christmas, or something, or a birthday. It's something that I don't know exactly when because I hadn't really taken so much notice of this doll. Girls have dolls but boys just don't really get involved with the dolls too much.

Yeah. So tell me this, Ulla Mutti succeeds in turning the household into a more efficiently running operation.

Yeah.

Your father tries various ways to modernize and financially have the farm be a going concern. But that doesn't work. And so when you sell the farm and then are on that train to Germany, do you know where you are going? Do you know if you have a final, at least temporary destination where you will be staying?

Well, the parents knew. We kids, of course, were just taken along.

And where was that place? Where was the place that you ended up?

We ended up at a first station at the big, huge sanatorium, [INAUDIBLE] Sanatorium, which Ulla's father was the director of.

And where was that located? What was the name of the town, the place, the area?

That town was called Melsungen, which was a district town. And this lung clinic was on top of a hill that belonged to that city that the city had granted the grounds for the building of it around about-- just before the First World War. Because Otto Roepke was one of these great, new doctors that conquered all these lung diseases at the time, which the key of it was not to leave the people in their beds. Get them out of their beds, get them walking, sit in the sun, and have exercises-- and all that quite apart from the medication. That was the new, great, international novelty which solved a lot of deaths in lung diseases. [INAUDIBLE].

OK, so he had become someone at the forefront of this.

Yeah.

And so, was his sanatorium a huge place? Was it rather large?

Yeah. It belonged to the railways. And you can imagine, the railway, all the steam rail services, basically anybody who was working there as a driver, or a cook, or assistant driver of these coal trains soon got a lung disease with all the coal dust and everything.

That makes sense. Yes, it makes sense that that would be something that could be part of the railway service as a health aspect. But tell me again, how do I spell the name of that place, Melsungen? How do I spell it?

M-E-L-S-U-N-G-E-N.

Melsungen.

Yeah.

And it is a spa town. I'm looking up--

No.

It's not?

It's not a spa town. It's a district-- in Germany, you have what they call a kreise. It is a district where this was a market town, if you like. And then there may be one other, little town and the rest are just villages. Or at least that's how it was in the Hessen area, where all this house was.

So you went to the Hessen area. That's where it was located, Melsungen. And was there a difference between what you saw in Austria and what you came to in Germany?

In other words, in Austria, when you leave in 1935, there is no Nazi government yet. But when you come into Germany, there is. It had been there since '33. Was there a difference in what you see on the street and what you saw on the railway station in what you see in, let's say, the public life?

I think that just seeing what everybody expected-- and certainly the Germans hotly believed in-- was that in Germany, everything was tidier, more punctual, better organized by tradition. In particular, of course, the Prussian, north German outlook. You must have experienced that when you were in Berlin. It was that they were just very orderly people.

And those Austrians down there-- well, you couldn't be sure. They may be very charming. But whether they were punctual-- not so sure.

Were the trains running on time? Maybe, maybe not. That kind of thing.

So did you notice that difference?

Yeah. Right.

Did you notice the difference when you--

Yeah. I certainly noticed it-- particularly, of course, in the Roepke household. Because Father Roepke was a very strict organizer, not just of his family but also of this huge sanatorium and anything he had to deal with. But he had worked this up from absolutely nowhere in what was then Prussian Poland-- Poznan now, the area not the city-- and had come across and thus--

So he had left the Poznan area and moved to Hesse to Melsungen--

No, he didn't. No, it wasn't as simple as that. His father had a village pub in--

You mentioned that yesterday, yes.

Yeah, I mentioned that story.

Yeah. But what I'm interested in is that-- for example, when you cross the border, do you suddenly see a lot of swastikas? Do you see flags? Because that's the image that we have today, that once Hitler comes to power, the towns are draped in flags, that there is much greater presence of the Nazi Party in public places, that there are soldiers, and stormtroopers, and whatever else it is. Did you see that?

Well, that was only in the process of becoming. When you think of it, Hitler only came to power in 1933 and only just. And he then had still got to do a lot of sorting out, including--

Yes, that's right.

--his own troops that had been, shall we say, battling with the communists and communist crowds in the city streets. And we're talking the big cities. The small towns like Melsungen, they were way off the beaten track and hardly-- well, they incidentally knew from the newspapers what happens in Berlin. But they were historically and mentally miles and miles away from what happened in Berlin, and in Munich, and in the big cities.

But was there views expressed towards both the Hitler regime and the Nazi Party? If Ulla's father has this sanatorium, I'm sure he came under pressure to do one or another thing or institute one or another policy from the ruling regime which then got into everybody's life.

Well, at that time, I think that wasn't so fully developed. I think that what you're talking about, that only happened when the war was imminent, and particularly during the war, of course. But before that, the Nazi Party hadn't hardly established.

They were all newcomers. And certainly in the countryside, there were very few of them. Because people hadn't caught on to what was going on in the big cities.

So when you come to Germany, you don't feel that presence. You don't feel that--

No. Certainly, we kids didn't feel that presence until later. In the following year, when suddenly there became a Hitler order that all children, male or female, from the year 10 must be part of the Jungvolk and Jungmadel. And then Hitler Youth from 14 to 18. And that was completely novel then.

And you were told that the kids could buy their uniform from a certain shop in town, of course. So that was, again, a major problem I had to deal with when I was suddenly told I was the village leader because I was the only boy going to high school in the small town nearby, which wasn't the same class as Melsungen-- not a kreise. It was only just an ordinary, little town.

What was it called?

Lichtenau.

Lichtenau?

Yeah, Lichtenau. But it was kreise Witzenhausen. That was it. Witzenhausen was a town right at end.

We were right at the southern end of this kreise. And Witzenhausen was on the north side, 30 kilometers away. And that was more like a town like Melsungen. And we kids, or even my father, hardly ever had ever got anything to do in Witzenhausen. It was just way off our beaten track.

The nearest big city was Kassel. Kassel was only 25 kilometers away and there was a train service from Lichtenau. Kassel was in the next higher class of city, in particular.

They were a regional city. And wasn't Kassel where the Brothers Grimm were born and grew up, I believe?

Yes, that's right. Yes, in that area. Yes, quite true. [INAUDIBLE] and all that.

So you're in Lichtenau? That is where you go to school. Is this true?

That's right. At high school, where I went from 10 years on.

So it's called high school and from 10 years, it was a gymnasium? Or was it--

Well, shall we say, the old-fashioned name was gymnasium. But during my time, it was called oberschule.

Of course. And "ober" means "higher". Yeah. High school.

High school.

And it went from 10 years on. So you come from Austria--

It went from 10 to 18, basically.

OK. You come from Austria. And in Austria, you had finished how many years of schooling?

Four years or three and a half years. I can't remember now exactly. I think it was just about four years, from six to 10.

And did school differ much? Was that jarring for you?

School was so different. Austria was so old-fashioned. You didn't have any paper and pens to write on. You had tablets.

Slate.

Slate.

Slate tablets. One side's writing. The other side's arithmetic.

So you used chalk? In other words, you used chalk to write on the tablet?

Well, yes. We had chalk there, yeah.

OK. And then you'd erase it and then use the same tablet again. Is that right?

Yeah, that was the Australian way. And of course, you had the old-fashioned German handwriting as well. I don't know whether you ever came across-- very angular.

Well, I don't know if you're referring to that Gothic script that we see in printed books. I don't know what it's called, but there's a script that is very old-fashioned that is hard to read even when it's printed-- whether that's the same thing.

It could be that that is one. But that script was also still the one for ordinary schooling in Germany. But in Germany, obviously, you had writing books and you wrote with a pen.

Was it different in any other way? Can you hear me?

Yes, it was very different. But of course, the essential knowledge of knowing your ABCs, knowing your numbers and basic-- obviously, that kind of drill was much the same. Although to start with, we had to go to the city of Melsungen to do the schooling, which of course had separate classrooms for every age group, which of course in the village school in Gneixendorf, all of us kids were in the same room-- the youngest in the front and the highest class at the end of a large room.

And in Retterode, in the village where our farm was, it was the same kind of thing. But in Melsungen, of course, being a town, it was so much more modern, the school system. And of course, the kids used to have fun with our Austrian pronunciation and made fun of us. [SPEAKING GERMAN]

So in other words, it wasn't seamless in the sense as if you as if you're moving from within in the same country. You're actually coming from a different country, and in the school, it's noticeable.

And of course, the Melsungen school was a state school, whereas in Gneixendorf, it was very much a church school. Well, everything in Austria was Roman Catholic in some way or other. Whereas in Germany, and particularly in Lutheran Germany, the schools were sort of neutral.

Tell me this. We didn't talk about this much, but you were born Catholic. And I assume that all of the rites that go with bringing children up in the church were things you were introduced to, but was your family particularly religious? Did you go to church on Sundays?

Did you have catechism classes? Did you have any other special instruction in the Catholic religion? How much was it an impact in your own family?

Well, very marginal. Because with Lily having been brought up in Sweden in a Lutheran way-- and that was fairly limited to, shall we say, the Major Festival, Easter, and Christmas, and that kind of thing, and obviously going to church for christenings and Christmas maybe, and New Year, and other festivals. But, again, we were fairly casual.

And a big change had come in with my real mother, who had been educated in a Catholic-- in Prague in high school. And she wasn't originally but she had been converted, shall we say, to be a serious Christian. But she was here such a short time so the direct influence wasn't all that great.

But Dad had also been sort of activated in a Catholic sense through her enthusiasm. I told you, I think, that he would take us to Krems on Sundays if the weather wasn't too bad. He wouldn't go to our neighboring village, where the main church or the priest was.

But certainly, as far as the whole family is concerned-- except for my mother during her short stay-- there wasn't any serious observance. But when we were in our farm in Wallbachsmuehle,, 30 kilometers south of Witzenhausen, the only Roman Catholic church in that whole kreise was, in fact, in Witzenhausen. And when it came to being-- what is it when you're being--

Was it confirmed?

--confirmed. Being confirmed, we had to spend the weekend in Witzenhausen to attend the celebration and pass the test.

So you have been confirmed. So I'm assuming you got First Communion, you got Confirmation, all of those things.

Yeah. That all was crammed into a short weekend in Witzenhausen, for want of any better solution. And we formally became Roman Catholics. And the only one of us who's ever been a little bit more persistent as an adult was, again, my sister, Rosemary. But even there, it was only a--

So when you mention this distinction which was a distinction between German-speaking areas, Catholic German-speaking areas, and Protestant German-speaking areas, it doesn't sound so much you're talking about religious differences-- but tell me if I'm wrong here-- as much as approaches to life, approaches to how one lives one's life?

Absolutely. The north of Germany was passion-marked, and the passions were people who were hardworking people kept on time with everything. There was a proper way of doing things, and you were sticking to it, and you were doing it-- that kind of thing. In Sweden, it was also, to a certain extent, like that. I don't know what your Berlin experience was but if you had come from Berlin to Vienna-- maybe you have-- you feel a kind of different tone, a different way of

approaching people, being more easy and that kind of thing.

OK. The question is this. Did you ever not feel Austrian? Or were you an Austrian in Germany? Or did you ever feel German? Were you ever German?

I was definitely an Austrian in Germany for the rest of my life, I think.

OK. That's what I wanted to know. Did you ever feel like you had become German? And the answer I'm getting is no. You were always Austrian.

Yeah.

OK.

Which meant I took liberties where a north German or my only actual grandfather who helped me is concerned. I took liberties.

Such as?

Well, not being punctual or trying something new and doing it differently. Whereas, as far as the tone in Prussia was, you know that there's the right way and you're doing it the right way, and that's it. That's the end of it. Yes, I was always exploring alternatives.

Does this mean you were not quite obedient or you were mischievous? Is this in childhood terms, that growing up as a teenager, that in those terms you were doing things differently than what was prescribed?

Yes. I wasn't the type to automatically cause a showdown. I'd much rather find a way of getting around things without upsetting anybody, which meant usually doing things behind people's backs or going outside the house altogether-- which, of course, I was the first kid, I think, in Gneixendorf from the schloss who was regularly going out and playing with the kids from the village, which had not been the tradition at all. But my Dad never interfered, never put his foot down.

I nearly drowned actually on one occasion. I should have mentioned. Kneifel had a deep pond at the back of their thing, and it wasn't fenced in. So in the winter, it was obviously frozen over. And we kids used to go there because it had a nice, steep approach. And you could run the sleds in, onto the ice, and right across to the other side-- beautiful.

And I had inherited a rather heavy, big thing, again, from my dad's childhood. So we could load three or four of us kids on it, and charge down, and be ever so much faster. And, of course, we did on one occasion and crashed in the middle of the lake. We went in, and I was the first one in the front.

And I just grabbed what ice I could and it broke, and it broke, and it broke. But gradually, I dragged myself onto the ice. And the other kids went sideways and backwards. All escaped. But of course it caused a terrible rumpus with the parents, particularly as my eldest brother had already died, as I told you. Trouble.

Yeah. So now, the farm that you eventually settle in is close in the same area as the sanatorium that Ulla's father has. Is that correct?

That is correct. And in our whole family life, it has been that whenever women were involved, they were staying more or less, or as close as possible, to the place where they were born. And the boys were the ones who went out and were all over the place.

All my boys are, well, all over the place. Well, our youngest son lives in Australia. My son from my first marriage, he stayed in England, but--

So when we go back to the farm, can you describe that farm for me a little bit? How many hectares was it? And what was grown there? What was your father trying to accomplish with this farm? What was its main way of sustenance?

Well, it was a much more hilly farm, with all the hills covered by state forests.

Was it logging?

That was the state. The state forests were owned by the state and run by the foresters, which was part of Dad's problem. Because obviously, the deer would come across into the fields and not just eat a lot but trample down a lot of wheat or--

What did he grow mostly? What did he grow on the farm?

A mixed farm. It was half and half. Well, let me think.

There was a main stream going from south to north in the main valley. That was the Esse, which was quite a lively stream. And there were, from our farm area, three, minor streams coming into it-- two from the west and one from the east.

Excuse me. Could I ask you to sit back again a little bit? Because your face gets cut off and I would like to--

No.

--have it all on there. Yes.

OK.

So you're saying that there was a stream that came that cut the lands of the farm. Is that what you're saying?

Yeah. The main stream, the Esse-- there wasn't only the stream. There was also a main road which went right past the main house. And in fact, when you wanted to get to the farming area, you had to cross the main road and the Esse streams through little bridges to get to the actual farming area on the other side.

As far as around the main stream, it was a very wet-- it was a grassy area, and the grass would be cut or the cattle would be grazing there. But further up, you had the fields. And then, of course, along these side arms, apparently, after the Thirty Years' War, there had been two villages there along each of these little streams and, again, a fairly flat area surrounded by the woods.

But do you remember what your father grew? Do you remember what he tried to produce, and sell, and make the farm a financially good concern?

Well, it was mixed farming-- potatoes, turnips, all the different corns.

Was there wheat? Did he grow wheat?

Yeah, wheat, rye, and barley, and very general, normal, mixed farming.

And was it a large farm in the sense of, do you know how many hectares it was?

Well, it's 350 hectares or more.

That's a substantial-size farm.

Well, obviously, it was a substantial farm. And then they tried to have about 30 cows which turned out to be a problem because they picked a pure, Friesian type which obviously wasn't, being in the northern part of Germany by the seaside

where they were at home, and--

But this was the middle of Germany.

This is the middle of Germany. It's a mountainous area. And in fact, the milk herder, or the specialist who was looking after our-- it was a specially-bought high classer that came from the Alps where you had the Simmental cattle, which our relations in Southwest Africa, where my sister went to later enormous success with Simmental cattle in the rougher areas of South Africa-- I think if my dad, at the time, would have picked the Simmental rather than the Friesian, it could have made a lot of difference.

The special herd that he got from Friesland had nothing but trouble. They got foot and mouth disease, which meant that we had-- what do you call it? Locked off now. What have we got now?

Quarantine?

Lock jaw?

Quarantine-- and of course, couldn't sell the milk for a year or so. And then they had another infection of calving dead calves all the time. And so these were major contributors why my parents couldn't make a success of that farm. But there was also this question of all the wild animals coming in from the forests. And the foresters, they were very strong, particularly because Goring loved forests, and hunting, and all that.

And they all had to report to him and he had major influence. So they were like a police, these foresters. And my dad had, of course, the right to shoot animals when they were on his grounds. They were mostly there at night. But if you shot something with a promising, young deer, immediately, he would be in danger of losing his license. So it was a hell.

So in other words, this political kind of system made itself felt in a very unusual way, one that we wouldn't have expected. That, instead of party ideology, we're going by proclivities. So Goring likes forests. That's one of these proclivities. And therefore, in any kind of tension with the foresters, your father is more nervous that he could lose, rather than have things dealt fairly.

Absolutely. Yeah, the whole main electricity line went right past the farm along the valley. But could we get any electricity connection to the farm?

Could you?

The electricity authority virtually refused or they told him that the price would be something astronomical to make a separate connection, and transformer, and all that, that the farm could never afford. So although the whole general-- particularly at that time, was that Germany was the land of the farmers, do it yourself, we provide all our food. Well, the farmers were the heart and gold of the nation, and all that kind of thing. But in actual fact, it wasn't quite like that.

Well, it doesn't sound like there were any kind of special exemptions, special arrangements to foster agricultural, let's say, financial health, in this case, your father buying a farm, and trying to establish it, and make a go of it in this part of Germany.

As far as the party line was concerned, what my parents did was just wonderful, just what the nation wants. But when it came to actually living with it, then you ran up against all these difficulties. OK, they make their own mistakes and they were badly advised by Mutti's various experts, but the strange thing was the farm was only, as the crow flies, 20 kilometers away from where she was born. And in later life, during the war, she and her brother settled down on the other side of the river, Fulda, and also about 20 kilometers away from Melsungen, from the farm. It's amazing, the family clinging together.

So did your father have any feelings about Goring because of the foresters and the strength that they had knowing that they have his backing? Did he have any feelings about the Nazi Party? Did he ever express any kind of views or opinion

during those years where he's trying to make a go of it?

Well, what he wasn't the kind of having hatreds. He was a nice guy. But he would see Hitler as somebody who didn't know what was going on at his level. He was somewhere in the clouds.

You could become a party member. A lot of people would do it so that they would have a standing when they would come to the various authorities. And that's what he was. You paid your membership subscription and you could wear your little badge but you didn't have a uniform or anything like that. But when you came to big meetings and so on, you were sort of part of society.

So in other words, he joins the Nazi Party. Is this correct?

Admitted, He was a nominal party member.

What about Ulla? Was she a member of the party?

Why should she? Because if her husband is a party member then, I'm a sort of member too. As far as that was concerned, in the normal kind of life, she was just Otto's wife and that was that.

What about her father who ran the sanatorium? Did he join the party?

No, he did not join the party. Of course, he was the older generation. He was highly successful in his way. He couldn't see anything in Hitler.

Did he ever express those views of Hitler?

No, he didn't but he certainly never joined the party.

OK. And did many people in-- where was it now, Lichtenau, that you were living in?

Yeah.

Did the party establish a foothold in Lichtenau?

Yeah, there you had organization. How many people were active? That's another story.

What do people do usually? Try and adapt and avoid trouble. And if you were in the city administration, you obviously were under pressure to be a party member or to be a member of one of the party organizations, the SA, or the SS, or whatever, to show that you're aligned.

You mentioned before, there was a Catholic church in Witzenhausen?

Yeah.

Yes. Were there many Catholics in the area?

No. Witzenhausen-- obviously, there were a few more Catholics. But in our particular area, there was virtually nobody-- in Kassel, yes. There were definitely also at least one Catholic church. But we weren't connected with that because we were kreise Witzenhausen We weren't kreise Kassel.

And were most of your neighbors and most of the people around you then Protestant, Lutheran?

Yes, that's right.

Were there any Jewish communities, any Jewish families?

Not in these country areas.

So you never came across anybody who was Jewish while you were living there?

That's right. That's correct and true. But there may have been the odd Jewish person in Lichtenau but we weren't too involved with Lichtenau. The only thing famous about Lichtenau I learned was that the Lutheran priest of the big, Lutheran church in Lichtenau was the brother of the general who had led the Germans in-- what was it called, the big, Russian surrender?

World War I? Are you talking about World War I?

No, World War II. Come on. What was it called?

[INAUDIBLE]

Stalingrad.

Well, Stalingard was where the Russians--

He was the German commander of Stalingrad. He was a general of some sort.

Well, Stalingrad was not where the Russians surrendered but where the Germans surrendered.

Exactly. He was the one who surrendered. And of course, Hitler immediately condemned him totally.

I think his name was Paulus.

That's right. And Paulus was the name of the priest of the church in Lichtenau.

Did you have a radio at home?

Yes. Everybody had a radio.

Do you remember any kind of the broadcasts that you would listen to or hear over the radio?

Well, yes, sure. You would listen to the news. And the whole family usually listened to the news. And if there was a famous speech like Goebbels, or Goring, or even Hitler, somebody would, at least, listen to it-- so some of the time, not necessary at all. But there was nothing compelling about it or nobody said, you must do this or must not do this.

Yeah, but did you discuss it? Let's say there was a speech and Hitler was upset about one or another event, or presents a new policy, or anything like that? If the family listened to it, did they then comment on it afterwards amongst yourselves?

Well, I expect they would but certainly not with the children. And by and large, it wasn't the done thing to talk politics in our family. So if you started talking politics, you were a risk to be ignored, or people would walk away, or something like that.

Why? Because Georg, your uncle, you said he was clearly a Nazi.

Yeah. But did I ever hear him make a speech? No, I didn't. He knew that in the family-- I never understood him but he never wore any kind of sign, or order, or uniform, or anything like that. He was always the elegant, English-type civilian.

But the Austrians kept arresting him so he must have been rather active as a Nazi or he had enemies in Austria that he couldn't get rid of. And funnily enough, one of his cousins-- because my grandfather had a sister and she married in another family. Well, one of their sons was an Austrian civil servant, and a genuine, Austrian-believing civil servant.

And when the Nazis took over in 1938, he was arrested because he was against Hitler succeeding in Austria. And then when the new Austria, at the end of the war, came into existence, and Uncle Georg was immediately put into prison, he was made the first ambassador to Yugoslavia. And the joke in the family was that Georg was always complaining that Edward was not doing anything for him when he was in prison and Edward was complaining that Georg was not doing anything for him when he was in prison.

The impression I have-- and it may not be a fair one, but tell me whether or not any part of it has some relevance-- and that is that when it comes to really seminal, important issues and events for your family, there is a silence that descends. When your mother died, there was a silence about her and no reference to her later.

Yeah.

The coming of and the takeover in Germany of Hitler in 1933 seeped into every aspect of German life and it is quite central. And yet, the sense that I am getting from you is that it was a see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil kind of situation--

That's right. Yeah.

--and so therefore, an avoidance of coming into contact or an avoidance of dealing with the implications. Is this correct?

I think that's very true, yeah.

So that was true for your family--

Yeah.

--you'd say? OK.

You tried, in yourself, to be a decent person, to do the right thing in your own mind as long as you didn't interfere. If you have a powerful father, you obviously try not to offend him-- that kind of thing. My father was honored in that kind of way, yes.

Excuse me. I didn't quite understand. What did you mean? Your father was a powerful father? Or you're referring to Hitler and how you tried--

My father was a powerful father in the sense that he didn't speak much or shout aloud unless he was really upset. And then he did it in a big way. Like Grandfather Otto Roepke too, he would expect you to do the right thing in a way that you couldn't really resist.

Well, some people would have questioned--

I mean, you would have to make a big scene. And that was really something that rarely happened. Grandfather Roepke had his problem because he was a, shall we say, a particular authoritarian person. He reckoned that having himself become a doctor from absolutely nowhere with no kind of initial support, apart from his mother's money, that his children should be quite capable, in the much more easy doctor's home atmosphere in which they grew up, to all become-- all the boys, definitely-- becoming doctors.

And so Heinz, the second boy-- all of us, the first born. But she was a great girl anyway so he really liked his daughter. And Heinz was told, you become a doctor. Well, he became a doctor. And he was that sort of tough guy-- not

particularly brainy but tough guy in the sense of, right, I've got to do it. I will do it. And the second son, Jurgen, was some sort of a playboy, much more than his elder brother. So when Father said, you go where Heinz is and Heinz will look after you while you do your studies.

So being a bright guy, he managed to become a doctor. Unfortunately, he died young and that was that. But then the other two boys, they were country lads.

Otto, although he had the same name as his dad, was a country job kind of boy. No way was he interested in anything to do with university. He was a bit of a ruffian, really.

And then Wolfgang, the youngest, I learned from him that he passed his university entrance exam at least, whereas Otto never even came to that. He was sent out to South Africa on the farms. But they all came back when the war was imminent. And of course, they lost their lives in Russia.

Did they? These are all Ulla's brothers and--

Well, Otto and Wolfgang got killed during the Russian war.

You mean on the Eastern Front?

On the Eastern Front. And Jurgen died immediately before his son was born. He was a doctor in the German army.

And he had some trouble with his-- not appendix. What was it? Anyway, he stayed on doing duties at the hospital until it was too late. And then the operation failed and he died before his son was born.

Appendicitis.

Appendicitis, yes. Sorry.

I see. So in other words, what you're saying is that the issue for you at those years-- and you're giving me the example of your step-uncles-- is that you follow what your father is saying, you try not to displease him, and you try not to introduce conflict, and that there is a great deal of what we say in Germany, [SPEAKING GERMAN]. People are obedient.

They obey. They don't question. They obey.

Yeah. And if they don't obey, they usually get into more trouble like Otto and Wolfgang did.

And how did they get into trouble? Otto involved them?

Well, no. OK, they had to be serving in the German army anyway. But they obviously weren't in a particularly favorable position. Most soldiers in war who die are not the officers but the front guys would really meet the enemy. And they were that kind.

So you're saying that had they been more in line with what their father would have wanted for them, they would have been able to avoid such a fate.

Well, all the military doctors were definitely not immediately front line victims. They were looking after people who were wounded or injured, somewhere behind.

I want to go back to what you were saying earlier. By the way, let me ask one other question. Did your father get any newspapers? Was he a newspaper reader? Did he subscribe to any?

Yes, he subscribed to the main, national newspaper called Volkischer Beobachter, which was definitely a Nazi

publication.

And did he ever comment on any of the articles that he would read in there?

Hardly ever.

And what about you? Did you read the paper?

I looked into them, sure, because I wanted to find out more about it. But it really didn't affect me as a schoolboy to any great extent. And obviously, the great victories that were at the beginning of the war, and the great successes of getting full employment, and so on-- that all sounded pretty wonderful.

OK. And what about the anti-Jewish articles, anti-Jewish broadcasts, and things like that? Were they memorable for you? Do you remember hearing things like that?

I remember hearing them. And everybody in our family or in our circles said, it's a whole, terrible rubbish and just ignore it. That was the attitude. They said, that's the worst part of the Nazi Party and at least they saved us from the communists. We have to put up with this kind of thing.

Now, let me go back a little bit. Do you think that your father's experiences during World War I and being in Siberia for six years would have influenced him when he's in Germany? Because you just mentioned this, at least they saved us from the communists. In the evaluation of things in your family, would it have been that the communists are worse than the fascists?

Definitely, 10 times over. No question about it.

OK. So there was some sort of political point of view. It wasn't entirely neutral.

No, I think if there was any kind of definite, majority spirit in Germany, it was that if it came to fighting or beating Russia, everybody was for it. Russia was the danger to the world. I remember when I was a soldier with the Waffen-SS, which was, of course, a proscribed part of me. But we can talk about that later.

Because the rumors that went around when I was actually fighting and so on was that the Americans and British have come to a conclusion that the real-world enemy are the Russians. They are making a secret peace with Germany and then join forces against Russia to kill or exterminate communism altogether. That was the rumours that went around.

That's interesting.

[INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, that's interesting.

Eventually, towards the end of the 19th century, that's exactly sort of what happened, but not like that.

You mean at the end of the 20th century.

That's right, yeah.

Yeah. But not in a military way. It was a different way. You're talking about the fall of communism in 1991.

Yeah.

But what I'm talking about here is not-- yes, it's important to know about what was the sentiment in Germany. But within your own family, was your father's experiences during World War I, do you think, something that formed his

experiences and the way he looked at the rise of fascism and the fight against communism?

Definitely. He had seen Russia at the worst possible time when the Reds and the Whites were killing each other senselessly. And then, of course, the prisoners of war were involved or got involved in that total chaos. As far as he's concerned, no time for Russia or anything Russian. Although, by strange coincidence, when we had this farm, [INAUDIBLE], the one worker who was residing on the premises was a Russian prisoner of war of the First World War who had married a German girl, Herr Polotov.

Herr Bruderoff was his name?

Polotov.

Polotov. And did she get on with your father?

Yeah, he did. He was a pleasant guy and quite the--

OK, I'm going to ask something else. It's much more on the political line. So when Germany concludes a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union-- and that's in 1939-- did news of that filter out to where your family was living? Because all of a sudden--

Yeah. It was broadcast in a big way on all the state media, yeah.

And did anybody raise an eyebrow?

Look, in a sense, Hitler was a bit like Trump now. Anything to attract his greatness, it would be grabbed at. And Goebbels certainly would see to it that he would be painted out and developed to throw the most wonderful light on him. So it was a genius of diplomacy, this treaty with Russia.

And how did people react to it in your circle?

Well, in a sense, people were relieved that there was a sign that the war would be finishing.

But the war hadn't even started.

[INAUDIBLE]. I mean--

Well, let me back up a bit.

Sorry, yes. You're right. It hadn't started yet.

But it started right away because of the pact. That is, the pact is concluded on August 23rd. On September 3rd--

On the face of it, it was taken as a peaceful process when in actual fact, it was a way of killing off Poland and splitting it up.

Yeah, that was the immediate effect.

Again, that was something that, certainly, the population hadn't expected.

OK. Let's go back a little bit to before the war and talk about when you join these various groups, when it's mandatory-- is that correct-- to join the Hitler-Jugend. And tell me what that was like-- how old you were, how it came about, and what kind of activities these groups had.

Well, it came just about out in 1936. I was 10 years old. That's when it came out. And the instructions from the top was

that all 10 to 14 years would be Jungvolk. And so there was then some sort of leader appointed in Lichtenau to see that the villages were doing that same sort of thing.

So this guy, who was actually a very nice guy-- I got to know him quite well-- went around to the local burgermeister or if there was a Hitler party personally in the village and said, make sure that those boys get organized. And, is there any one of these boys that should be the local leader? And so the next question then was, we are particularly looking for boys who are high school boys and who will come to Lichtenau on a regular basis so we can have contact with them.

I happened to be the only one. Although, I was the youngest of all the 10 to 14-year-old boys. I was only just 10 years old.

And new to the area.

And I was new to the area. That didn't bother this guy. He said, look, we've got a shop now organized in Lichtenau that sells the uniforms. They're quite simple uniforms but they cost money. And also you had to--

What color was it? What did they look like?

Well, you had black shorts and a khaki shirt. That was it. You had a tie, a funny sort of black cloth tie with a roundabout kind of knot, a real plastic knot. And then, of course, you had a cap. And then you had a winter uniform, which was more like a training suit.

You mean like a training suit that we would normally look at today or--

Yeah, sort of that kind of thing. It's long, black trousers and a pullover jacket on top. It had to be very simple because people couldn't afford much. Even at that time, collecting the contribution was one of my worst jobs when I was first appointed to village leader. Because a lot of the kids couldn't get their parents to find the money.

And it was silly amount, so many pfennig. But you had to put a stamp into their passport. It was a silly bit of bureaucracy that was, within a year, abolished. So you were a member without having to pay any contribution.

Did you ever know of any people who resisted and didn't want their children to join the Jungvolk?

Not in Retterode, although there were some people who showed definitely, without actually making a clear statement, that they didn't want their kids to join this. They needed them at home and they had better things to do-- going to school and that kind of thing. Definitely.

But although I am a shy guy-- or was a very shy guy-- they never let off about it to me. And eventually, in that first year, I somehow coaxed these people to actually pay these pfennige for contribution. It completely spoiled any positive ideas I had about being a Jungvolk leader because that kind of thing-- chasing after the odd bit of money-- and you know they're hard up too. Some pretended more than others but there was nobody in the village who had a lot of money to spend.

It's a hard thing to put on a 10-year-old boy.

Yeah. But I was obviously very impressed by that leader in Lichtenau. And I certainly wanted to be in his good books.

What are some of the other activities that was involved in being a member of the Jungvolk.

Well, basically, you had an official meeting every Saturday morning because there was no school on Saturday mornings. So you then had to assemble your group. And you had the options then of a political lecture-- which I wasn't really capable of doing. But sport was a big thing because just at that time 1935, 1936, Olympic Games was a big thing. And the Hitler government had decided that physical--

Training?

What? Physical training became a main subject. In other words, you had as many school hours as you got for maths, or arithmetic, and German was all also allocated to sport activities outdoors and indoors-- whatever was available-- so running, and high jump, low jump. All that athletic things became very much single. We were all, in a sense, training for the Olympics.

And this 1936 Olympics, certainly at my level, became a very popular affair-- very successful. And I needed it particularly because after my foot operations, I'd been having this toe problem. I needed it particularly. And I was inclined to be a little bit sitting back kind of guy anyway.

Remind me again about what happened with your toes. I think we mentioned it yesterday.

Yes, we did.

But tell me again what it was.

It was maybe also a bit of the cause of my mother's death where she got the blood poisoning.

That's right.

Yeah.

Did you make friends in the group?

Yeah, we made friends. That was a thing, of course, that you had another way of meeting up. You went to school together.

Again, at the school, the boys-- to a great extent, you were trying to play your little games while the teacher was dealing with the other kids of the different levels. And so we do it. We did a lot of drawing at the back of our books.

And I was very good at drawing tanks. And everybody wanted tanks so I had to draw, for the other lads, tanks. And they would draw, for me, airplanes or fighter planes and that kind of thing.

And that's really what the essence of my Jungvolk leadership. We were a gang. And as a gang, you did all kinds of things that weren't in the book and that the leaders in Lichtenau didn't know about.

We used to play robbers and gangster games in the woods with torches. If you shone the torch at somebody, he was dead and out of the game-- that kind of thing-- whoever shot first and all kinds of games like that. And that was great fun.

Because we were successful and we got on well together as a group, I said, look. When these guys come from Lichtenau or we have to parade in Lichtenau, then we've also got to show like as if you were one of the soldiers and appear all smart and beautifully dressed. Jump around.

And so that was then quite fun too. Because that then also was a kind of game. A, we were actually proving that we were the better kids from the other villages or from Lichtenau. And at the same time, we knew that we were just playing the game to show them that we could do it but we certainly weren't playing that game when we were together normally-- type of thing.

Was there anybody who was not in the group? Were there children who were not part of these games because they had not joined the Jungvolk or for whatever reason?

Well, there were just those people who weren't fit, who had a lame leg. And in those days in the villages, there were a

lot of kids that weren't completely fit. The doctor was far away, couldn't be afforded anyway. And every year, you had these things like-- what are all these children's sicknesses? They would come around and most of the village would get then diphtheria and--

The measles and--

Measles and so on.

--chickenpox and things like that.

There were all these kids that died of it. It wasn't as safe as it was later. It was just the beginning on having the injections. But apparently--

Vaccinations.

What?

Vaccinations.

The vaccinations were only beginning in those years. In Austria, I don't think we had any vaccinations while we were there. But in Germany, it was already more advanced there.

So for how long did this situation last? How many years were you part of Jungvolk? How long were you going to school? And any other events during this time before the war starts?

So obviously there was quite a bit going on. Before the war, the whole of the Kassel district had summer camps for the Jungvolk people, that you could join those if you were, of course, a Jungvolk member, and particularly if you were a leader. But the parents had to pay for it.

And so in 1937, I was on a camp on the Isle of Langeoog on the North Sea for the first time in my life seeing the sea. And it was a great experience. And of course, there were kids from all over the Kassel district and, particularly also, the city. So it was a much better crowd than just the village boys, a much more lively, and much more varied crowd. And the leaders were senior guys, university student types who definitely had some story to tell and something [INAUDIBLE] to be with.

What were some of the stories that they were telling?

Well, about the diving in the sea, and seeing the fish, and what they were, and going on marches along. There was always a military drill element involved which was the rock bottom of-- some of the leaders didn't know what to do and I found that very much later when I was with the Waffen-SS. At least then, you would be called on a parade and they would check something-- check the cleanliness of your gun, or check anything and find fault with it, and then send you on something. You had to do so many dive-ups or whatever punishment.

And then that was a kind of-- the militarization was indirectly, slowly taking place. And I was always trying to avoid it, or prevent it, or not to join it. But of course, I had to do it to a certain extent.

Why did you want to avoid it, the militarization?

I just hated it. I wanted to do my own thing. And just standing in a row, stiff and still, and then turn left or right on an order, it was so stupid. It was.

So when you were talking earlier about marching smartly when you're in Lichtenau with some of the boys from your area, was that fun to do or was that just a show?

Well, it was to some extent. It was usually some sort of special occasion. I remember one in particular-- the opening of a big swimming pool in Lichtenau. That was a glorious thing.

And then my immediate leader-- it so impressed me. Well, the crowd was standing around. He swam underwater the whole length of this new swimming pool, 33 and 1/3 meters.

For the rest of my youth and part of my later life, that is what I was trying to do-- when I was swimming, to swim the length of a swimming pool underwater. It's amazing. It became a kind of--

A kind of challenge.

A permanent challenge. But that's the sort of thing that I picked up.

OK, during this time, what's happening is that you are growing up from being a boy into a teenager. And in the late '30s, you become more involved in these groups or that is, you take part in them and the athletic aspect is something that is very appealing.

Yeah.

Was there talk at the same time of war? When you're talking about the militarization of even the Jungvolk, was there any talk of war going on locally-- again, in your family, in the area. I'm not necessarily talking Germany at large but now how much of it filtered down to your life and your family's life?

Well, it did. Because my dad was called up. I think it must have been in 1936 or 1937. Being still of an age, he had to be sort of fitted into the German Army or Reserve Army. And he went on a autumn course with a lot of other guys. And he came back as a captain in the German Reserve Army which, of course, he was terribly proud of.

And it was a whole crowd of them who were there and sort of became friends through it from all over the place. And so that definitely was a positive thing. And the whole family was thrilled because he had not been an appointed officer when he became a Russian prisoner of war.

In World War I?

In World War I.

OK. When was he born? 18--

1894.

1894. So that makes him 37 plus 6. So he's about 43 years old when he becomes a captain.

Yeah, definitely in the-- I think it was after 50 years, you weren't called up automatically.

OK. Tell me, was he a gentleman farmer?

Yeah.

When you moved to this place, did he actually go out and do any farming or was it all that he had to hire someone to manage either the entire farm or various aspects?

Even in Austria, he may have been nominally a gentleman farmer but he was certainly a working farmer with the other boys, with the other men, the tractor drivers. And he probably could do any of the other workers' jobs well because that was his life. He was a practical guy.

So that means that when he was called up for this kind of reserve training, his job was a gap in the farm.

Yeah, that's right.

There was a gap left there and somebody couldn't step in and take it over. It wasn't like he was at a distance of it-- X jobs didn't get done because he was off.

No. But of course, working with a small group of people, most of them could do, to some extent, the other's work which, of course, was very important anyway. Because if somebody was sick, then somebody obviously had to fill in for that guy who was on his sickbed.

Did you have chores on the farm?

Not regular chores, only additional. And I certainly wasn't a great volunteer. So that was one of the reasons why Dad-- my sister, Rosemary, was much more eager to jump in anywhere than I. I'd much rather stick with my books or--

I'm sorry. I'm interrupting again. But your father comes back. And he is now a captain and that's a big thing, whereas it wasn't before.

But the implications is that, what is he a captain for? Is he going to be called up? Did the question come up of, could this ever be put into practice, and would there be ever a place where he would have to be fighting? Did that come up?

Well, yeah-- and obviously, nothing's certain. But by that time, by 1936, 1937, the Hitler regime was definitely getting more and more aggressive. And the army was being increased the whole time, and strengthened, and modern weapons-- all that kind of thing.

So the whole thing was in the air as a potential without any certainty. And that was one of the reasons also why the parents made their decision to sell the farm before the-- it actually was already the beginning of the war. But they could see that if the war went on for any length of time, he would be called up. And Ulla Mutti, with six, small children-- well, young children-- was off the beaten track, not even in a village but way outside one-- it was not a very good place for the family to be. So that was all part of it.

So what did they do? Walk me through that. They sold the farm and moved where?

Well, they didn't move anywhere. They split up.

I'm confused. What does that mean, they didn't move anywhere they split up?

Well, my dad was, in fact, called up. And then he was in France, basically looking after a farming area in the Ardennes to see that the farmers were doing a proper job-- the French farmers-- and delivering the goods, and that kind of thing.

So that means he was called up and his duties in the military were to ensure requisitions of agricultural goods for the German Army. Is that correct?

Not just for the army but for the common good, if you like.

So that means, when France is taken over?

Yeah.

So when France is taken over. And was he then within the army? Or what was the institution within which he was working?

He was in the army, but in a specialist organization that was looking after the agricultural administration of the occupied

country.

OK. And where was Ulla Mutti?

Well, Ulla Mutti was the one who just didn't know exactly where to go. And she had a distant cousin who said, in her family, there was-- I can't give you the name exactly. He had just been appointed to be the deputy minister in another Hitler area for the food production and nourishment altogether.

And they had an estate near Hanover and they needed somebody to look after the main house and the home there while the family was stuck in Berlin. And Ulla Mutti with the two, small children-- smallest, the babies-- all three of them, I think. Her three children went there for about a year and looked after it while they were in Berlin. And during my holidays, I was staying in Wiesbaden with my grandfather, going to high school. I would come to them. [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, so that was my next question. So that means that you move to Ulla Mutti's father's house-- is that correct-- in Wiesbaden?

It was there a time and--

Take a sip.

--their retirement apartment in Wiesbaden.

And what about your sisters, Rosemary and Yumgard?

Rosemary and Yumgard went to relations in Sudetenland who had children of similar age.

So does this mean that when the farm is sold, the family splits apart in the sense that you were saying your father is called up, Ulla Mutti goes to be sort of like a housekeeper-caretaker of another large home, you go to her father's retirement apartment in Wiesbaden, and your two, younger sisters go to paternal relatives in Sudetenland. Is that correct?

Yeah. And I was only there in Wiesbaden for one year and then I went to another branch of relations in Sudetenland until I was called up.

OK. So let's talk about a few things here. Do you remember where you were when the war started? And that would have been September 1st, '39, when Germany marches into Poland.

No, definitely. We were on the farm and there was no sign that we would leave the farm. But we were struggling. We were under quarantine with the foot and mouth disease.

And we had milk and cream to eat all day long and also deer meat. Because Dad had to do something about all these deer coming in. And he would get up at 3 o'clock in the morning, and creep up to these animals, and somehow got away without having shot one of the promising animals. And I think later, he had also reasonable relations with the foresters. They wouldn't unnecessarily cause him trouble.

I remember he took me once to a foresters party. And that was a very jolly affair. And he was obviously treated as if he was one of the foresters. So he obviously managed to have good relations with them. And then the question of whether that animal was beyond--

Beyond saving?

Yeah. You know, you could--

You could come to an understanding.

An understanding. And in the Nazi time, that was just as prevalent everywhere. If you had reasonable relations, whether you were a follower or not a follower, if you had the good relations, that was all that mattered in the end.

So you are on the farm, quarantined-- hoof and mouth disease-- venison to eat, lots of dairy products, cream, and milk, and so on, and World War II starts. How did everybody react?

Well, again, we children weren't told much in advance. It was always a shock, Dad or Mutti saying, well, I think we've got to start now packing up because we're all moving out. And it was put over as a cheerful thing, like another holiday. Yeah, that's the parents way of--

Of handling it.

--of handling it, yeah. And it worked with us children.

So these two events collide. The war starts and you sell the farm. They come very close to one another. So in your mind, are they conflated? When you think of the war starting, is it really, for you, that's when the family splits?

Well, it was really only after the first year that this happened. The Polish War was over in no time at all. And then in 1940, I think it became more serious with France. But then my dad really could be pretty certain if they want land.

Again, a manufacturer from the rural area was very keen to buy a country estate. Obviously, that was the clever thing to do when bombing of cities was likely. You buy yourself a country reserve. And so they sold the farm in very little effort.

Was there enough money to take care of everybody from that sale?

Well, I would say, theoretically, yes. The only thing is that the deposit in the banks was automatically converted into German rearmament and securities.

So in other words, the monies that you deposit, it's Reichsmark.

Yeah.

So was it then requisitioned by the banks?

It was requisitioned by the government and converted my Reichsmark into these, so-called, government securities.

And could you draw on that? Could you use those government securities?

I think they're worth, probably, some allowance to draw on it or to borrow from it. I can't remember whether I was being told any details about it. But in any case, the family was split up in such a way that the housekeeping money wasn't a big issue because we were with relations. Ulla Mutti, of course, was on a paid job there, looking after that estate. Yeah.

The other thing, though, it sounds like is that these securities that the money was converted into means that by the end of the war, when Germany loses, if there was any money left, did you have anything? Or was it all gone?

Our money was completely worthless, obviously, at the end of the war. But when Germany resurrected itself with the D-Mark-- what was it, 10 years later or more? 1945? No, it was 20 years later. I should know it.

I remember. Because I remember the D-Mark came in when I was released as a prisoner of war, which was in June, '48. So after 1948, when there was a German government, they paid out the nominal value of that original deposit in D-Mark, which in other words meant, 1/10th of the value of the Reichsmark in which it was issued. So they got their money back without interest. But in Austria, where Uncle Georg had sold the Lengenfeld estate on the same sort of

basis during-- the new Austrian government never paid anybody back for--

OK. So with your parents, it was a 10 to 1, but at least it was something.

It was not just one thing. It was a real value because that 10 to 1 conversion-- in reality, the D-Mark was worth much more than 10 times the Reichsmark. It was a totally different kind of currency.

OK. So thank you. That's something that we normally wouldn't have known, what happens when your assets are turned into armaments and then government securities? What does that really mean? And you were able to enlighten us a little bit about that.

At that stage, when the war really started, then everything was war and everything else was a side issue. And the government obviously was a dictatorship.

Yeah. So I would say, let's go onto one more aspect today. And that would be your year in Wiesbaden and what was that like? And then, I think, we wrap-up for today. And we'll start again another day to talk about, what was Sudetenland like and take things further. How does that sound to you?

Yes, fair enough.

OK. So tell me about moving to Wiesbaden, and going to school there, and how was that different, and what was life like in a city? Because Wiesbaden is a city, not a country town.

Maybe I can just fit in the summer holiday when we left the farm, obviously, my mother with the two, little ones went to this distant relation people. And I was ordered to take young Peter, my step-brother, to Lengenfeld, back to Austria, and stay with Aunt Emmy for the summer holiday. Obviously, with Uncle Georg there, it was one of the few times when I regularly met-up with him when he wasn't in Vienna.

And in fact, during that time, he once took me for a weekend to Vienna. But he was doing their own thing and I was doing my own thing. There wasn't any--

Was this the first time you were back in Austria since having left it?

That's right. It was the first time we were back. And Peter and I--

Is this the summer of 1940?

Yeah, that's right.

OK. So it's the summer of 1940. That means Germany has been in Austria since 1938, I believe it was. Austria has changed. What did you notice?

No, not much in Lengenfeld. It was very similar. Obviously Uncle Georg was not in prison. He was working in Vienna and he would be back at the weekends. He had a little flat, which I obviously stayed with him there when I was in Vienna.

Do you know what he was doing?

No. He would never talk about it.

Was he part of the Gestapo? Was he part of a civil service unit? Did he wear a uniform?

No, never wore a uniform-- always as a civilian. I think he was a kind of cover, and a respectable cover for what was going on behind the scenes. He never did a legal degree but he had studied law at the university. So he was a sort of

administrative cover for the Nazi Party. That's my guess.

I've never really learned much. My dad really just wanted to wash his hands of anything Georg was doing. But he took him back when he was sick and out of prison after the war. Ulla and him took him back and he died in their home in Germany.

OK. You wanted to talk about this summer that you had gone to Lengenfeld with Peter and Aunt Emmy so you visited her there. Describe it for me. What was that summer like?

Well, I believe we were just building bridges to come across the little river that was going across their garden. Their estate or their castle was right in the center of the village with a crossroads. And there was obviously the usual village stream. And that went through their park-like little garden which was--

Was that also Lengenfeld? Was it all the village called Lengenfeld?

Lengenfeld.

So would that be spelled, L-E-N-G-E--

G-E-N-- feld-- F-E-L-D.

OK. Was there anything else memorable from that summer that you wanted--

Peter and I once went on a long walk to Gneixendorf to see what it was like. And of course, the German army had really taken over the schloss and there was a military guard in front of it. But otherwise, not much had changed. And we felt a bit lost and walked back.

So Lengenfeld was within walking distance of Gneixendorf?

Yeah, a 5K's walk.

So after the summer, where did you go?

Well, then of course, I went to Wiesbaden and had started high school there. And of course, I think I've mentioned it to you-- maybe not-- that I was joyfully going to join my next level class but that the headmaster said, I think we have to have a test. You must be tested.

And you were tested and the grades were found wanting?

I had failed in all the main subjects. So then Uncle Dr. Grosspapa said, right. We are now going to see the headmaster.

And of course, the headmaster bowed to Herr Professor Dr. Roepke. And he said, well, I'm very sorry and sure we can do something about it. And her professor said, well, look. Let him in then, and in his normal, extra class, he will work his way through.

And they presented this to the headmaster, who said, well, if you're sure that he will get all the extra lessons and support to manage to do it, then we accept him provisionally in his class. Obviously, he had no intention of giving me [INAUDIBLE] or arranging any extra lessons. He reckoned, I think, rightly. Because I also felt that, if I can't manage that, then I am stupid.

Well, then it was just the tests, but the class work itself was something that you could handle?

Well, I had to catch up with it, definitely. Because the teaching in Lichtenau just wasn't up to their standards.

So in Wiesbaden, how different was it going to school there versus Lichtenau? Were you still a stranger? Were you still an Austrian amongst Germans? Or had your accent improved and gotten a Lichtenau twist in between?

Definitely, I wasn't a little Austrian anymore. But I was certainly the country idiot kind of person. And headmaster-[INAUDIBLE] for master, Dr. Sputz, had a very sharp wit. Of course, for the city, I didn't have the right clothing when I went to Wiesbaden.

So Kurt Bandorf, father's great friend in Hanover with the pelican, his son was two years older than I had. And obviously, his suits didn't exactly fit mine. But they were certainly the suitable kind of suits for me. And I inherited it.

And Dr. Sputz had tremendous fun because they obviously didn't fit me properly. And so I was always the country yokel. But he was such a brilliant teacher. And every now and then, he would stop the Latin drill and he would talk about what the Latin empire was really like, the institutions and the law. And he obviously was in love with the Latin period, although they had killed each other too often enough.

You're talking about the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire. And he was talking about the Roman Empire in such fervid terms. In retrospect, I sometimes think he just wanted to tell us, look, this Nazi outfit that you've got now is no touch on what the Romans did. And look what the Romans did. They also killed each other.

Does that mean he was like an anti-Nazi? Is that what you took away from it?

Well, I didn't take it fully away. It only gradually dawned on me. But I was totally fascinated by his personality.

He said, at the end of the day, when we had the final notes of the year, he said, well, you're certainly a tough guy and you've passed through. Congratulations. That, to me, was like being praised, reverence.

This raises a question that I should have asked earlier as well. Were any of your teachers, from what you could sense, fervent Nazis or fervent anti-Nazis?

I didn't have any high school teachers who were fervent Nazis, but certainly sympathizers, I would guess. By and large, my teachers didn't get into politics at all. In fact, one of my most admired teachers, right at the end in 1943, 1944, in Hohenebel, he taught us history. But he told us, definitely, Austrian history, not Prussian.

He made a point of it but he was brilliant. And to me, to learn how controversial history is, and politics, that made an immense impression on me. History and geography were my best subjects in school.

So by the time you're in Wiesbaden-- well, I also asked this earlier, but particularly Wiesbaden-- were there any Jewish kids in your classes? Did you ever come in contact with any Jewish kids?

I don't know. The issue never arose. The only time of any Jewish kind of experience, if you like-- when I came to Wiesbaden, I was often transferred as a Hitler Youth, lower-level leader.

So in the area I was living, which was the spa area, there was no Hitler Youth organization at all. So I was given an appointment in Schierstein, which is the suburb of Wiesbaden, towards the Mainz area, a working class area, and some factories there. So once a week, I had to make my way there.

And I had a group there and did it. In Wiesbaden, it was so organized. We always got, from the local government, a job to do-- to clean up a street, or to do some sort of ordinary job. So for three hours, my group would clean up a particular area, or cut some grass, or whatever job needed doing. And then at weekends, you were supposed to collect Winterhilfe.

The idea was, on Saturday, the family would just have a thick soup for a meal. And the difference between the thick soup and the full dinner, you would give for the help to the poor, to the needy. And we would have to collect a house-to-

house collection.

And I thought to myself, living now in the expensive part of Wiesbaden, I could do my collection. I wouldn't have to go to the working class district in Schierstein. I could do it around my own area.

And the people had more money. Maybe they would give me more money and I'd get good marks for returning it. So I started that.

And then I suddenly found, every now and then, I had the door slammed in my face because I was there in my uniform. Or somebody would throw the money at me, or something else, and then slam the door shut-- something I couldn't understand. And I was so petrified and put off. So I went to Grandmother and I said, I'm trying to do these Winterhilfe collections that most people gladly give for and I get these people.

She said, look. She said, I think there are some Jewish people here in Wiesbaden. And when you come in your uniform, they really see red. They don't like you. So I stopped my collections.

Did she explain why they may not like you? Did she say what the reason was?

No, she said, they are in trouble, the poor Jews. But you can't just go there and ask them for money. She was right.

By the way, one of the events that I missed asking about, chronologically, was in November 1938 in Kristallnacht. Did Kristallnacht come to Lichtenau?

I don't know. I knew Kristallnacht was made, obviously, a huge publicity all over the country. I think all of my part of Germany was totally upset about it. We were all getting more full employment. We're all doing things better. And then this rampage which was worse than the communists ever did when they were roaming the streets, it was a complete letdown.

So in other words, what you're saying is that there was sympathy for the Jewish businesses and the Jewish institutions that were ransacked, rather than any ransacking within your local community?

Well, there wasn't anything in Retterode. And as far as I know, there wasn't anything happening in Lichtenau. Otherwise, I would have known about it because of being a school boy there. But the newspapers were only talking about Berlin, and Munich, and the big cities-- which is, of course, where the worst was happening.

Well, it was happening wherever there happened to be Jews. So if there was a Jewish business, if there was a Jewish presence, if there was a Jewish community, then there was a target.

I think I honestly, personally, didn't know for sure. In Lichtenau, if there was a Jewish person, I think they would have handled it quietly. Certainly, the Hitler Youth, or the SA, or whatever organization, wouldn't have made a big rampage about as they did in the big cities.

I see. I have a note here that says I should ask you about an excursion to Frankfurt during your time in Wiesbaden.

That's a strange question. I don't think I--

You didn't recall it. OK. Where you see the plaque of ancestors and the ghetto, was that something that happened at that time? Did you go to Frankfurt to see where your ancestors had lived, the old family?

That was my first organized cycling tour in my life. That was from Lichtenau from our schul. We were in Lichtenau. We finished off in 1940 at the highest point of what the school would go to. And from there on, we would have had to go to Kassel to finish high school.

Well, most of the boys-- I said, why don't we go on a cycle tour? This was just after the French War was over. And so, I

asked my parents. And the parents said, well, we are in a war and you're going to go right next to France when you go down the Rhine. It's a bit dicey.

But they said, yes, just be careful. And so we did our cycling tour. And we avoided anything to do with police, or Hitler Youth, or Hitler things. We stayed secretly in farm sheds and things like that-- no youth hostels, not to be turned back or so on. And so it was quite a hair-raising trip in that sense.

But in Wiesbaden, of course, we stayed with the Roepke parents in the basement. They had a basement and we stayed there and had wonderful, Italian ice cream. And then from there, on the way back, we went to Frankfurt. And of course, my dad had told me about that big, plaque stone.

That you told me about yesterday, I believe. Yes, in the cathedral there.

Yeah, that's right. And from then onwards, we cycled back but it became a bit of an uphill kind of job. So we jumped with our bikes on a train to cut out the [INAUDIBLE].

And then we eventually got back home at the weekend. Yeah, we did that trip. And that was the first of many outings like that I organized, privately and also as part of the Hitler Youth-- always outings and camps rather than just hanging around at home.

OK. Well, I think that, for today, we can wrap-up. And when we talk next, we will speak about your time in the Sudetenland, and everything that comes after, and see how far we go there, and continue for as long as you have something to say. And I'm very interested and fascinated by all of it. Thank you.

Thank you so much. I'm sorry that my memory's often trapping me, but that's what happened [INAUDIBLE].

You're doing wonderfully. So I will turn the recording off now, and then we can speak a little bit more. But this then concludes part two of my interview with Mr. Helmut von Schweitzer on June 19th, 2020.