Interview with Renate Fischer Chernoff
June 23, 2005

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Renate Chernoff**, conducted by **Gail Schwartz** on June 23rd, 2005 in **Potomac, Maryland.** This is tape number one, side **A.** Could you give me your full name please?

Answer: My name is **Renate Rosemarie Fischer Chernoff.**

Q: And where were your born and when were you born?

A: I was born on June 25th, 1929, in **Breslau, Germany**. Germ -- **Breslau** is now Polish, but it was German at that point in time.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family background. How far back did your family go in **Breslau**?

A: My family actually went very far back, I would say. I have records to -- o-of graves having been erected in -- just right after the Napoleonic war, the **Franco-Prussian** War. And of all strange things, one of the graves that may have survived all the fighting in that area is still standing today. I managed to get a picture of it just very recently on the web. And we were very excited to see that gravestone.

Q: What -- what was your father's name?

A: My father was **Walter James Fischer.** He was a psychiatrist. He went to school in his native town of **Breslau** where most of my forebears were born. He was -- is

the professional person in his family. His parents were merchants, they had a wonderful -- probably the largest toyshop in all of **Silesia,** and he chose not to go into that kind of work, perhaps because he was in the army in -- in the first World War, and fought in **France**, fought in **Verdun**, came back and -- and at that point he was only 16 or 18 years old. And came back totally paralyzed by what he had seen; he was a litter bearer in the field, and decided that medicine would be his calling. S -- my grandmother and grandfather had the shop, both of them worked. My grandmother worked alongside her husband and so did her sister and his brother. They were two brothers married to two sisters, and so it was definitely a family affair. And their parents, my great-grandparents were also in **Breslau**. What they did I'm really not sure, but in -- in business of some sort. The business, interestingly enough -- the house where the business was housed is standing today in the very same place, it was one of the few buildings that survived the second World War. It was on the rink, the main square of the city of **Breslau**, right opposite the court buildings. It's number 26 on -- number 36, excuse me, on the rink. And I have seen reproductions of that area, or photographs of that area and sure enough, it's still there. The Poles have really taken a great deal of trouble to try to rebuild that area as it was, and I think s -- handled it very successfully. My forbearers on my mother's side were from **Birnbaum**, which is really on the Polish side. What -- my

grandfather on my mother's side was in the canning business, and was the first canner who did diabetic fruits in **Germany**, canned diabetic fruits. And had the factory just outside of **Breslau** and so my mother grew up really in the country, in this -- it's suburban now, but it was really country when she grew up, and that she loved. And she did go to school in **Breslau**, but the rest of the time she was a country girl.

Q: And was she a housewife?

A: Actually, she was, although she went to high school and upon graduating from high school went to a sort of a finishing school for girls and studied music. She had a magnificent voice, and was very nicely trained, and sang eventually professionally, in part, but always sang for the high holidays at synagogue. And in fact, I came across a letter just the other day, the head of the synagogue in **Ratibor**, which was one of the places where we lived, thanked her for making the service so beautiful.

Q: In talking about the synagogue, can you tell a little bit about how religious your family was?

A: My grandparents on both sides were fairly religious. My father was pretty much of a free thinker. My mother was more religious than he, but I think both of them became very, very much more religious when we crossed over to this side of the ocean.

Interview with Renate Fischer Chernoff
June 23, 2005

Q: Mm-hm. Did you, as a small child, remember celebrating any holidays?

A: Oh yes, we always celebrated holidays and I particularly remember Sukkot in the synagogue in **Ratibor,** which is the little town that I really remember best of all. It was in the -- in **Upper Silesia**, which was a number of hours by train from **Breslau** going towards the Czech border and the Polish border, we were sort of in a -- very close, within walking distance of the Polish border, because I remember walking with my mother to have buttermilk on the Polish side of the border because the farmer -- that farmer's buttermilk was by all means the very best, and so we walked across wheat fields and over the border to get our buttermilk. Very nice memory.

Q: So did you celebrate Shabbat, did you go to synagogue?

A: We celebrated Shabbat, my mother kindled candles. We celebrated Passover, but mostly we celebrated our Passovers, and I have very vivid memories with very dear friends who were Orthodox, I believe. And we s -- I went to services on Saturday mornings, not with my parents, but with a friend of theirs who took me not only to synagogue on Saturday mornings, but took me out for a **krimmelhelmchen** which was a poppy seed roll o-on our way home. And that made a great impression on me. But my grandpar -- my grandmother -- I think all of them were really liberal Jews rather than Orthodox Jews. I think tha-that it was not named Conservative, I think

that branch of Jewry in **Germany** was called the liberal branch and we went to synagogue there rather than the Orthodox synagogue.

Q: Were your parents very politically active?

A: They had very strong opinions. Active, I wouldn't say, no. Ma -- I think my father's days were so full with his -- with his work, and with work for the courts. He was very often asked to be the s -- the psychiatrist who gave opinions in court cases. And they were very active at their lodge, the **B'nai Brith** lodge. That I do remember.

Q: Let's just get a sense of a structure here with how long you lived where. Y-You said you were born in **Breslau**, and how long did you live there?

A: All right. We were born -- I was born in **Breslau**. When my father w -- a-already was working in a suburban area -- area called **Obernigk. O-b-e-r-n-i-g-k**, I think. It was a suburb of **Breslau** and had a large psychiatric hospital in it. And there he had his job and there we lived. Now, I was very little and really have no memories other than picture memories of that place. It was the same town that my grandparents had the canning factory in, so this all worked out very nicely in that respect. We moved, I believe it was 1934 to **Ratibor**, **R-a-t-i-b-o-r**, it is now also in Polish hands and has changed its name just a little. And I think when we moved we -- I was i -- going into nursery kindergarten, and I went to the school of the **Ursuline** sisters and I

loved my time there. They were so good to us, and they -- I learned so many little skills, and I even still have the little needle book that I embroidered for my mother, my first timid effort at working with fibers, and it was very precious to my mother, and a little moth-eaten but I still have it. And we moved into our first house and we rented an apartment on **Svingerstrasser** 17 and within a month or two we were asked to leave because we were unwanted. The owner of the house didn't realize that somebody with the name of **Fischer** could be Jewish. And so we moved and found a very nice apartment on number 23 **Svingerstrasser**, and I have very vivid memories of it, I could draw the plan of the apartment. It was a first floor walk-up, very large apartment and my father was able to have his practice right in our apartment. The first room was very large, with -- I can't think of the English word for the moment. It's a-a-an **[indecipherable]** a a no -- a no -- a knockout, a glass knockout so that one could really watch the street up and down and see what's going on and it was an up -- first floor, upstairs, and large. And then the room next to us was the waiting room. And during the day it was the waiting room for the patients and in the evening it was the gentlemen's room to have cigarettes. And as we walked down the corridor, there was a kitchen to the left in which **Maria**, our very dear domestic help who lived with us, did her thing. And then further down, of course, was the dining room and the living room and my bedroom and my parent's room.

Q: So you were an only child?

A: I -- yes, yes.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: My mother always said Mr. **Hitler** saw to it that I was an only child. They would -- they were ready to have a rather lar -- and had hoped for a rather large family. However, I did acquire a brother a little later on, but that's another story.

Q: Were either of your parents artistic?

A: My mother sang very beautifully and my father always thought that he might have, if he had not become a physician he might have become an architect. So I think yes, I would say so. They both had extremely fine taste in things that they chose to buy, and yeah, I would s -- and my mother's singing, of course, was quite -- quite remarkable.

Q: What languages did you speak at home?

A: German only. My mother knew some French and my father studied Greek and Latin in school, and -- but of course it was the reading language of Greek and Latin, I don't know that he spoke it, other than memorized poetry.

Q: Was it a mixed neighborhood -- we're now talking about **Ratibor** because you said you didn't really remember before that, is that correct?

A: That's right, yeah.

Q: Yeah, so can you -- was it a mixed neighborhood of Jews and non-Jews?

A: Yes, it was definitely a mixed -- a mixed neighborhood. I don't think that **Ratibor** had a specifically Jewish area, I think we were all very well here and there. I-I cannot think of -- of a Jewish neighborhood, per se. The neighborhood where we lived was -- was a nicely treed neighborhood. It was a main street, and yet it had trees on it and in the back of our house was a -- every apartment had its own little garden, and so we raised strawberries. It was a small garden, but we raised strawberries and flowers and there was a little house on the garden, in the back of the garden, big enough to have a table and maybe six or eight chairs and I know my mother's book club met there in the summertime. And of course, I loved playing in the garden. And I had a nanny who made sure that I learned how to grow things and to weed, and to take care of flowers and who was really my steady companion after I came home from school each day.

Q: So did you play with any of the other chil-children in the neighborhood or just with your nanny after school?

A: You know, it was easy, it was -- well, not -- perhaps not the children in my neighborhood because across from our house were the courts, the courts of that part of the province. So there were not that many houses that had children in them.

Q: You're talking about judicial courts, not --

A: Judicial courts.

Q: -- not courtyards.

A: No, no, no, no, judicial courts. But one usually made appointments with one's friends and after school they could come to my house and it was always -- I always had a lot of little friends who came over and whose company I enjoyed and whose homes I went to as well. Not for very long, but for awhile.

Q: Right. Were these Jewish and non-Jewish children?

A: We had -- I had very close Jewish and non-Jewish friends, and I was very fortunate enough to have the non-Jewish friends because some of them were really lovely children with whom I enjoyed being together. And we were together really, until the time when it was no longer allowed that these little girls, particularly, could come and visit me. My very dearest friend was a young girl by the name of **Ushi Blaut**, whose father was an architect for the city, and who was threatened to lose his job if his little girl came and played with me. And I think maybe that was the first awakening that things were very strange.

Q: That was your first awakening.

A: My first awakening.

Q: And -- and what was -- do you remember -- granted, you were very young, but do you remember any thoughts you had at that time, or what that meant to you?

A: It meant a great deal to me because we saw very much eye to eye and we loved being naughty together. I couldn't understand why. I couldn't -- I could see her at school, but yet she couldn't come to my house after school, and I couldn't visit her any more. And that -- that started -- I mean, that kind of began and then it was like something rolling on and on and on and it -- and it was -- I tell you, the one thing that I do remember is by going through some old photographs, I did find out that she was allowed to come to my birthday party and I think that must have meant a lot to me, and it was very special, but on a day to day basis, she couldn't visit.

Q: Do you remember which birthday party it was?

A: I think it was my fifth -- fifth and sixth birthday parties. Now, I -- as I say, I could not visit her, she could not visit me, but birthday parties seemed to be kosher.

Q: So this would be 1934 - '35?

A: Mm-hm, yes.

Q: **Hitler** came into power in 1933.

A: '33.

Q: What was your very first memory of him?

A: I think one of the most frightening things were the parades through our streets. And I mentioned the bay window earlier on, which gave wonderful visibility to everything that was going up and down the street. And the night that the brownshirts

were having their parades, I remember my nanny holding me in her arms and we were watching it. It was nighttime, it was with candles lit and loud singing and -- and boisterous goings on on the street. And I wish I could tell you what year that was, that I don't remember. But I remember the fact -- oh, I remember the fact, I remember the shirts, I remember the glistening on the black boots. And we were one story up. But it seemed like endless numbers of people were marching and marching and marching. And yet, that part of **Germany**, I think was not as badly off as other parts of **Germany**. Somehow we were late, I think, in receiving the blows, so to speak. I think things were worse in other places, but I do recall this vividly and even today when I talk about it, I get a little chilly.

Q: What did your nanny say to you? Do you remember if she tried to comfort you or said anything special?

A: I think she held me. She hugged me. She herself was so appalled at what was going on, I think, and understandable for her. And for **Maria**, our -- our help in that -- our live-in help in the house. **Maria** was a very simple Polish woman, who did all the housework for us, and was -- and lived with us, and when she would go to church and come home, she would always tell us what the father's sermon was, each week. She would share that with us. She was totally against the regime, although her brother was a member of the Nazi party, and I remember having him come and visit

and he sat out in the kitchen with her while she was preparing coffee or something. And he proudly showed off the lap -- other side of his lapel, with a swastika attached to it. When he came into the house he had the good sense of putting it on the reverse side. Most of the time I think he had it on the real side, he was a Nazi of the first order. But not his sister. **Maria** was a gentle, wonderful soul, with whom we kept in touch through the war -- not during the war, but after the war. She wrote to my parents and she wrote as long as they allowed mail to go through and I have le -- her letters t-to this day. And she actually, after my grandmother was deported, she actually walked out of the house and walked til she came across to the Czech side of the border. She couldn't stand being in **Germany**. And she say -- she went into the service of a priest in **Czechoslovakia** and survived the war.

Q: What does it mean to a little girl to see a swastika?

A: Then, or now?

Q: Then.

A: I think frightening. Terrifying to -- to say the least. I of course didn't understand the ins and outs behind it all, but there was something frightening about the image.

Q: Did your parents ever explain anything on their own, or did you go up and ask them? Granted, you were very young.

Interview with Renate Fischer Chernoff
June 23, 2005

A: I don't think that I was old enough to ask the right questions. They, of course, tried to shield me. Things got very difficult in **Ratibor**. My father, who was in private practice, when the decree came out that only Jewish patients could go to Jewish doctors, his patients, of course had to hold off coming. Although strangely enough in the middle of the night, very often the back door knocked, it was a patient who didn't want to be seen entering the doctor's house, would come. And of course, my father saw him. And patients asked him to come and see them. And he did not have a car, and in the early days he went to see his patients by bicycle. But later on, he got a motorcycle, yeah, a big do -- it was my father and his pale green motorcycle and his one piece suit, which covered him all the way from over his head, to his shoes, with a zip in front. Went to see his patients in **Poland**, and he would take his motorcycle and go over. And there was the standing joke, he stopped at the -- at the customs bureau -- at the customs office to get his papers signed that he was going across the border and about an hour later he would come back and the border guard sniffed -- he would sniff, oh Dr. **Fischer**, you have just seen a patient? Yes, and the payment was two wonderful Polish sausages that were hanging on the inside of his suit. They knew it, they looked the other way. It was just -- it was an -- an accepted norm. And so people did come and he did still help people who needed help, i-if they could just get to his hou -- to our house and not be seen. But one morning -- and

I don't remember what year it was, there was a big yellow sign plastered all over the entryway. And **Maria** went outside as always to pick up the milk and the fresh rolls that were left at the doorstep and she removed the sign. And the sign said, **De Jude lugt.** The Jew lies. And she tore it off very quickly and tore it up.

Q: How did you know about this?

A: My father told me. Yeah. And I think maybe that was sort of the beginning of when he thought probably it would be better to move to a larger city, and so -- and many people did move from the smaller towns, hoping to find their place and a better way of life in the larger city. So in 1936, I think it was 1936, he decided to go to **Breslau**. And so there was movement afoot to move the family, mother and me, up to **Breslau**. But the move was going to be a difficult one, he already saw the handwriting on the wall. And so I was sent to **Berlin** to stay with my other granny, my mother's mother, who lived in **[indecipherable]** in **Berlin**, and also, I was not allowed to go to school any more. Jewish children were not allo -- were not accepted at school any more, so it -- there was a duel reason for moving. I had to go to Jewish school. And there was no Jewish school. There were too few people in **Ratibor** for a Jewish school to be there, so I was sent to live with my grandmother in **Berlin** and to continue my education at a Jewish school, which I did, while my parent **[indecipherable]** while my parents were moving.

Q: Do you remember what some of your thoughts were and your feelings were when you had to leave to go to **Berlin**?

A: I disliked it with a vengeance. I did not want to go to **Berlin** and I have letters that I wrote home, I have them in my keep. Please take me home, I don't want to stay here, I don't like **Berlin**. It was all very strange to me, and living with my grandmother was sort of an unknown, I didn't know her really that well. And she was a darling, kind, wonderful person, but it wasn't my mother and it wasn't my father and I didn't know my surroundings. Not a soul did I know other than her, and I was deeply, deeply unhappy in **Berlin** and I had to stay there through maybe one or two semesters. And by that time, Mother and Father had moved to **Breslau**, but this was a sort of an interesting thing, they were not allowed to live with my grandmother. My grandmother had an enormous house, really. Beautiful house with spectacular gardens, a flower garden and a vegetable garden and a fruit garden and a -- it was really -- it was a semi-attached -- semi-detached? Semi-attached. Well, they were two houses together, but they were both enormous, and wi-with lots of help. There was a gardener, and there was a lady who came in and did the laundry and there were two people who just cleaned and cooked and washed and did things in the house. And she had some borders because she was at this point by herself, my -- her husband had passed away. Her husband, my **Omi Hadel Fischer's** husband passed

away of natural causes in 1936, I think it was and so there was plenty of room for us to have a very comfortable existence in the main house, but the Nazi wouldn't have that. We weren't allowed to live in the same house unless it was in servant's quarters. And so we did, we lived in the servant's quarters of the house. We were very, you know, it -- it was just another form of breaking the spirit. But we made the best of it, my folks did really very, very well in -- in adjusting to the new life. My father opened an office in **Breslau** and immediately had a fairly sizable practice -- practice. And things were moving along. Not well, but they were moving along.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Renate Chernoff**. This is tape number one, side **B.** Before we go into talking more about **Berlin**, let's finish up with some of your memories of **Ratibor**. Can you tell me a little bit about your friends there?

A: I was very fortunate to have friends both Jewish and non-Jewish and we did a lot of visiting back and forth to each other's homes, although always with an appointment, it wasn't a natural going back and forth the way we have, or at least our children had it when they were growing up. It was an appointment made and the nanny was on hand and it was supervised play. For example, every Sunday my

friend **Maya Furlish** and I had a date, it was every Sunday, it was at the home where the nanny wasn't on duty for the weekend. And we always had the same meal, it was always hot dogs with potato salad, and either vanilla pudding with chocolate sauce, or chocolate pudding with vanilla sauce. That was the given menu and we had wonderful times together. **Maya** had an older brother. **Maya** and her family moved to **Israel** early on. Her father was a veterinarian and he went to **Israel** and was in charge of the chicken farms all over the country. And they were very happy to have him there. Her brother joined the army and stayed i-in the permanent army of the **Israel** force. Changed his name from **Evian Furlish** to **Ari Rohn. Maya** s -- kept her name, she married some a -- a -- an attorney by the name of **Kolhana**, who unfortunately passed away, and then she remarried a man from her own settlement, which was **[indecipherable]** and they both live in **Haifa** with all their children and grandchildren and I still am in touch with **Maya**, we write often, more so now that we have email. And we have visited back and forth a number of times, she coming here and we fortunate enough to be able to travel to **Israel**. At the birth --

Q: Wh-When did they leave to go to **Israel**?

A: They left in 1937, and it was a -- a good time because they were able to take things with them and they were i-immediately very well accepted, built a home and

have lived there very well since. And my parents also went to visit them and the old ties are very strong in our chil -- in -- in ourselves. Our children don't know each other too well, although two of my three kids have visited in **Israel** and stayed with her, so in a way it goes on. The -- there were many other young people who -- with whom I grew up. Many -- several of them went to **Israel,** one was **Epstein, Rutal Epstein** who went to **Israel** and has made a good life for herself, i-is still living there now, I have not kept up with -- with her, but hear about her, occasionally. **Vera Marcus** came to the **United States** with her family and lived in **New York**. **Laura Mamlock,** daughter of the ear, nose and throat Dr. **Mamlock** also came to the **United States** and my parents were in touch with the **Mamlocks** for many -- for many years.

Q: Wh-When you say these people left, do you remember specifically when -- all this time --

A: I think that they left in 1937 -- '38. '37 or '38, and they were very fortunate, those two families, of being able to get into the **United States**. I don't think anybody else was. No one of my -- that -- whom I know, I don't think anyone made it into **Canada**. **Canada** had a very tight immigration policy and only allowed physicians and farmers in and once they got here, they gave them a pretty hard time. The farmers were settled immediately, the doctors were kept from working, so -- but

may-maybe more of this later. Other friends were the **Baums,** Dr. **Baum** went to **Israel**, he was a pediatrician and his children and grandchildren are in **Israel** now. His son, unfortunately lost an arm in the 1948 war. And the whereabouts of several other people, I really don't know. I know that my dear friend **Ilse Meyer -- Mayer -- Meyer** didn't make it, nor did **Yurachem** -- forgotten his name at the moment, his first name was **Yurachem**, but he di -- he also -- **Yurachem Vaber** did not make it. And I have seen the fact that they did not make it in the files of the -- of the **Yad Vashem** database. And many of the teachers that I had also, unfortunately were unable to -- to escape. But **Ratibor** was a nice little city to grow up in, it was a charming town, winter was wonderful, we had snow and skating. We had a pond in the middle of the town and it froze in the winter, and the entire li-little town was there skating. In the summer my father took a boat and rode us all around in the boat. It was -- it was a good time, it was a nice time for -- for only a short period of time though, unfortunately.

Q: What was the first day of school like?

A: Oh, first day of school was very exciting because every child who started school was given a cornucopia filled with candy. It's called the **Osted Tuete.** It -- the Easter cornucopia because school started in spring. And I remember my friend **Maya** be -- who is a year older than I am, bringing me my cornucopia, I was still in

bed and she brought it to me and it was such an exciting occasion. In fact, I have some pictures to verify the fact that it was really an occasion to be remembered. And of course, we went to school. School was an extremely formal affair. We did not wear uniforms, but we were very regimented. We had 42 children in a class of -- with one teacher. And school was from eight in the morning until one o'clock and then we were through. We all brought our little lunch in lunchboxes that were hung around our necks, sort of second breakfasts, my mother called them. And then we had -- when we got home after one o'clock it was dinner, dinnertime. And the curriculum when we started included of course, the usual reading, writing and arithmetic. But it also included art and music and gym, and religious studies. And to that end **Halpy Befelt** was my religious teacher, and I st-still have the Bible books that I used, written in **German**, of course. And once or twice a week he came, not to the school itself, but to a building close to the school, and we all walked over and took our studies while the catechism was being taught to the Catholic children in the si -- in the class. I think boys and girls were separate in school, I'm pri -- I'm sure they were, but to religious school we all went together.

Q: Did you experience ana -- any anti-Semitism from any of the other children at the school, or any of the non-Jewish teachers?

A: Yes. I think one of the eye opening experiences to me was when an in -- an inkwell was thrown at me. And I think I was terrified. It was by one of the other children. That frightened me. The other thing that really upset me was the fact that we had row monitors who were supposed to take care of people not speaking or misbehaving, and if they did talk to anybody or in any way misbehave, the name was given to the teacher. And I remember getting more sh -- of my shares of -- of -- of censure to talking or misbehaving than I really should have gotten. And of course the result was that there was a stick that was used and was really -- we rece -- I received a whipping on both my hands every time I was **unget zeigt,** which meant, pointed out. And that I think kind of really ma -- discouraged me. And somehow the teachers, I don't know, they turned their backs on these things. For what reason, I don't know. For example, when we walked down the street, we -- and we had to wa -- we saw a teacher, the -- the way to acknowledge it was to raise one's hand and to say, **heil Hitler**. I couldn't do it and my parents absolutely forbade me to do it, and so I just curtsied. And the teacher, instead of acknowledging the curtsy, would look the other way. But of course, she didn't do anything to -- to upset me, but it was that -- but in itself was upsetting to be looked over and not acknowledged. And so it was with most of the teachers. I think that they were being threatened and -- and we were being threatened in a way, too. That was a hard time.

Q: Were there pictures of **Hitler** in the classroom?

A: I don't remember. I really don't remember, but picture or not, he was there in -- you know, in -- just in so many little, small details. For example, there was every week or so, the pot was po -- passed around for money for **Wintahilfe**. Winter help for meals for -- for indigent people or money being raised for unusual causes, and you realized, of course, that the causes were the party, but you had to give. So that was another somewhat humiliating experience. But the fact that the teacher believed the children who -- whose hate was really being taught at home, and who took it out on -- on us, that was -- that was unpardonable.

Q: Wa-Was this something you talked about with the other -- your other Jewish friends? Did you ever talk about such things?

A: You know, I don't remember that. I remember talking to my parents about it, but I don't remember talking to other children about it.

Q: And what would your parents say?

A: I don't -- I real -- I just don't remember. I don't remember. All I know is I have some pictures in my picture album in which I've got hanky in hand, and I remember the incidents, telling my mother and she was deeply, deeply unhappy. And you know, I think what I've learned, and I've -- it's been with me all my life is, I don't

want to make my parents unhappy. And so rather than make them unhappy, I wouldn't.

Q: Would you describe yourself as a very independent child?

A: Yes, I think so. I think so. I was fairly independent. I wasn't a very good student, I was a very average student. And according to my report cards, all of which I have from **Germany**, I was not very artistic either. Music was better than art, I think.

Q: We-Were you athletic?

A: No. I don't think so, but I did exercise well. I mean, I -- I was not athletic, but I was flexible and -- and I enjoyed games. But athletic per se, I don't think so. I don't think I was ever very athletic, although I did play basketball on my high school team, and in college. But that was only because I'm very tall for a woman.

Q: Did you as -- during that young childhood have any hobbies, or things that you liked to do, like reading? Anything outside of school?

A: I loved to draw, and I liked to do handwork and my grandmother taught me how to crochet. And -- and I liked -- y-yes, I -- I -- I did like that very much. I liked to sing and my mother and I sang a lot together. And to this day I -- I recall with much pleasure the children's folk songs that we -- we sang together.

Q: Can you sing a little bit of any one of the songs?

A: I probably can, let me think of one. **[sings in German]**. I should bring my book up from downstairs where I have all of the songs. Just off the top of my head? Let me think a little bit.

Q: Okay.

A: I'll go into song later.

Q: Okay. And so you said you had the Jewish instruction once a week and so forth, yeah, yeah. Well, se -- speaking about singing and music --

A: The Jewish instruction did not at this point in time, include Hebrew. It was Biblical stories mostly and the Hebrew came later, unfortunately. I wish it had come at -- at much earlier age because I was at a tremendous disadvantage when I changed schools, not having had early Hebrew training.

Q: When you changed schools to **Berlin**, is that what you mean?

A: Yes, when I changed schools to **Berlin** and particularly to **Breslau**, everyone was able to read Hebrew quite fluently, and I was struggling terribly with it. And I really think to this day, I really struggle with Hebrew. I have learned French easily, of course the German and the English no problem, but with Hebrew, to this day I struggle. And I wonder how much this is a little resistance on my part. Not willing, mind you, but sort of subconscious.

Q: Mm-hm. Is -- yo-you had started to sing a song and I was saying something about music, and did you have any experience with the Jewish orchestra, the **Kulturbund?**

A: Of course I didn't, I was too young, but in -- in **Ratibor,** for a -- a -- quite a while we were allowed to go to theater -- to the theater and to the movies, and to musical events. But the last one that -- the last cinema that I saw was in 1936 at the time of the Olympics. And after that we were not allowed to go to the movie theater any more. And I think it was after that ti -- point in time that the **Kubu** -- the **Kulturbund** came and did its outreach program to the smaller cities and towns and brought wonderful people to sing and to play and so on. One was, for example, **Alexander Kipnis,** who came. And I remember my father, who was very active in these circles, getting all dressed up, I think it was tails. And my mother in her very finest. And it was an evening of **Alexander Kipnis**. I remember this very well. And there must have been other occasions when the **Kubu** came down, but this -- this is the one that stands out in my mind. Also my father, who was a cigar smoker and a pipe smoker -- apparently before the performance there was a dinner and I think he pulled out his cigar and **Alexander Kipnis** made some very unpleasant remarks about people who smoke. It sticks out in my mind.

Q: Where did this concert take place?

A: The concert was actually in the social hall of the synagogue and the synagogue must have been an old church that was taken over by the Jewish community. I remember it very lovingly, my father sat downstairs. My mother, who sang in the choir sat upstairs and I was allowed to sit with my mother. Mother was not only a member of the choir, but did the solo work for **Yizker** service and sang just very, very beautifully. On the side of the synagogue was a little courtyard and nice things went on including, in my memory, wonderful **Sukkoth** that was built each year with tables laden with fruits and vegetables and goodies to eat. And lovely decorations from a roof that was made of greens, and it was just such a delightful time for the children. We also had -- I guess it was like a club, but I can't -- I can't be a hundred percent sure, but I know that I -- one Sunday I guess it was, we made lead candlesticks for ourselves. Very tiny lead candlesticks, we were allowed -- they had some forms and I guess they poured the lead and each child went home with two candlesticks. They were big enough to take maybe a birthday candle, but it was so special and I still have them, and my granddaughter now has them. So they've come a long way and they were very dear. But a lot went on in the synagogue because of the social hall. In fact, plays were given and there were readings and lectures came. And all this happened in the social hall of the synagogue, which was pretty much in the downtown area of **Ratibor**, and **Ratibor** was a pretty little town, not far from the

synagogue for example, was the marketplace. And I know that my mother went marketing many times during the week because of course we didn't have a refrigerator, we only had an icebox. And so she went marketing. But besides getting fish and vegetables and things like that, they also had pottery, and it was called **[speaks German]**. And they were wonderful pottery shapes and today, when you go into **Pier One**, sometimes you can see pottery made in **Poland**. It's blue and white usually, and a very nice, repetitive, simple design, a repeat design on the pottery. And very charming, very attractive. It hasn't changed a whole lot since then. I kind of -- I think it's very lovely and I recall going to potter's market with -- with my mother.

Q: What was the name of the synagogue and do you know the -- where it was located?

A: I do not know the name. I could draw it on a map, where it was located. I don't know the name of the street, but I do know it was on the corner of the place where the **Marcus** Furniture store was and the st-story about the **Marcus's** -- and that was my friend **Vera Marcus's** family, story I remember very best was a party at their house. A most unusual party. It was a party that celebrated the safe arrival of an electric refrigerator from the **United States of America** that had a light in it. I remember the children going to the refrigerator, trying the doors, trying to sneak in

to see who it was who was opening and closing the lights. And so much joy and so much merriment. It was just a -- an unforgettable evening. And --

Q: What -- what did you know about the **United States** as a young child? Did you have any idea of what it represented to you?

A: I don't know whether it was at this point in time or whether it was a little bit later because at this point I was what, seven or eight years old, but my greatest fear of perhaps coming to the **United States** or **Canada** was I was so afraid of the wolves. Four legged ones. I was petrified to think that I was going to have to live in log cabin with ice and snow all around and the wolves in the neighborhood. It was kind of frightening, but I think the nicest, nicest story that my father told me, and I'll remember to this day is, dear, he said, we're going to a land where even a Jew can become a person in the government. And of course he was talking about **Bernard Baruch**. And I'm still a -- you can see, I'm still emotionally very touched by that. It must have been a little bit later than living in **Breslau**, but it was -- it was certainly -- you asked me about what I knew about **America**? Not a whole lot.

Q: Did you ever hear any of the speeches on the r -- di -- on the radio that **Hitler** made, and if so, as a child, what did that do to you?

A: I do remember hearing the speeches on the radio, on -- on -- and the yelling, and not really ever being able -- to this day I can't follow the words, they were so

garbled and mispronounced. But the tone of voice was so grating and the sheer shouts of adulation and adoration were frightening in themselves. And I recall my father saying that he had heard, and I'm sure this is so, everybody in the audience felt the fuehrer was looking into his eyes. One was a -- a person was standing there, one in 10,000 but each one felt that he had been individually touched by this, you must say, charismatic character. It was frightening and the music was frightening too. The -- the -- the marching music and the boots, the boots, the boots. The beat of the boots, oh, very frightening.

Q: You had spoken about one parade. Were there many parades in **Ratibor** while you were there?

A: There were a number, I wouldn't say many, because we left before there were many, but there were quite a number that I recall. I even recall the night that there was a fire in a building not too far away from us and it was always a question as to why the fire. Was it a set fire because there were Jews living in that building, or was it a Christmas three that -- it was on Christmas -- whether it was a Christmas tree that was responsible for it. I don't think anybody ever knew, but I associate that picture along also with the marching, the marching, the beat. It may not have happened at the same time, but in my memory was very -- it must have been very close together. And of course the -- the birthdays that were always celebrated,

Hitler's birthday and other notable occasions. And then there were always special parades.

Q: What -- what would you do on **Hitler's** birthday?

A: We would stay at home. We would not go out. It was not worthwhile jeopardizing oneself. And still we -- there in -- in **Silesia** were so much better off, I think, than people in the other parts of **Germany**. It was a little bit later in coming to us. It was as severe, but it was a little later.

Q: Were there banners, Nazi banners hanging from buildings in your town?

A: Yes. I believe that the -- the official building was -- had banners on them -- flags. And of course you couldn't miss them, the bright red just was like blood hanging. That I recall. I don't -- you ask me about pictures of **Hitler** in the classroom. I don't know. There may have been the flag, but I'm not su -- I'm really not sure. That I don't recall.

Q: Did you have to ha -- ever have to say **heil Hitler** in the classroom, to the teacher?

A: In the classroom, I don't remember. Oh, it must have been. It must have, but I don't think that -- I don't think that I raised my arm, but I couldn't swear to that. That I'm -- I'm a little unsure of, but I do know very well walking along the streets and seeing my teachers, my various teachers and feeling totally hum -- not -- totally

upset by the experience of not being recognized. Although, they tried to be fair with -- I think with grades. I don't think that I was graded down in my -- in my studies. I'm sure I wasn't. And I think in some respects these teachers were going through so much themselves, because usually, people who did become teachers in **Germany** were very dedicated, true teachers with high ideals and high principles, but when your life depends on it, sometimes those principles change.

End of Tape One, Side B

Interview with Renate Fischer Chernoff
June 23, 2005

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Renate Chernoff**. This is tape number two, side **A.** And can you tell me about celebrating Passover in **Ratibor**?

A: Well, my most vivid memory of si -- Passover **Seders** were celebrated with my parent's very dear friends. The Passover with the **Weisbarts** are really in my memory very frequently because they were absolutely wonderful **Seders** together. The **Weisbarts** had a store on the -- downtown in the rink area, the rink area of the downtown part of **Ratibor**. And it had all sorts of wonderful things like kitchen equipment and things for the house and they lived above the shop in a comfortable apartment. And just above them was a family by the name of **Rechnitz.** And so on **Seder** evening, first night of **Seder**, Frau **Weisbart**, whose husband used to take me to synagogue on Saturday mornings and buy me those delicious little rolls, had us over -- I think they had no children of their own. I don't believe -- or perhaps they did, but at any rate, they were not there. He would conduct the service. We were all interspersed, sitting in -- at a long table and I also remember having f -- my four cups of wine and being a little bit out of it one year. But they had the most delicious **sidoram**. The food was unbelievable and a particularly good thing was a fish **shodoe**. And I cannot spell it, I don't know how to tell you about it, but it was fluffy

and it was lemony and it had fish in it and it was wonderful. And there were children around the table, and -- and a family by the name of **Rechnitz**, and it was a long evening, but always one that was a very, very happy one. I think I remember two years that we were there, and I'm sure there were more years than that. What I think is particularly interesting, my husband is very interested in Jewish genealogy and I bring this in because it really does relate. There was a request about people who knew people in **Ratibor** and in that general area of **Upper Silesia** and I answered it and I said yes, I do know the area, and immediately a response came, would you happen to know a -- I'm looking for the name **Rechnitz**. And it came from somebody who was originally in **Shanghai**. This was a Jewish family who went, instead of going west went east and found refuge in **Shanghai,** lived out the war years in **Shanghai** and then came to the **United States**. And the name of the lady who made the request was **Yvonne Adler**. And I said, this is very, very strange. I said, I saw a Mrs. **Adler** present almost every day when **O.J. Simpson** trials were carried on. And they sometimes interviewed her, would you be the same one? She said yes, that was me. So she wanted to know about **Rechnitz**, and I said yes. And she said, I have no knowledge of their whereabouts. I said, I can tell you nothing perhaps of the mother and father, but the two daughters survived and are living in **Israel**. She was delighted, needless to say. So then a little later a letter came. She

said, you know, I have a relative who lives in **Rockville**. Is that close to **Potomac**? I said yes, I think within, sort of, walking distance. And so we met in the relatives, and had them over for a cup of coffee and enjoyed meeting them. And in between, every now and again, we still get on the genealogy line and a -- express a word of greeting at Passover time, and just to stay little bit in touch. But it all revolved around the pass -- that Passover table. And I was able to fill a -- in a little bit on her family tree, and likewise she was able to fill in a little bit of my family tree, because a distant cousin of my father's was an editor of the Jewish newspaper in **Shanghai** during the years of the second World War. He was an editor in **Breslau**, made a trip and stayed in **Shanghai**, lived out the years in **Shanghai** and apparently moved to **Israel** and unfortunately died there before we could make contact. But she was able to help us out in that part of our family tree, so the internet's a great thing.

Q: And what was his name, the gentleman who was the editor?

A: Let me think. I have it, but it's -- it's not coming through **[indecipherable]**.

Q: All right. W-We can come back to it later, it's okay.

A: Mm-hm. **[indecipherable]**

Q: Did your family take vacations?

A: Yes. And I've -- I have several memorable vacations. My father and mother were great hikers and they loved to hike in the mountains and so very frequently we went

up to the **Tetras**, and the **Riesengebirge** and walked and enjoyed the fresh air. I have happy memories of being put into a sled driven by horses and being pulled through deep snow, and staying at a lodge, and enjoying the -- the winter activities. Mostly -- it mostly was walking. But -- and this was all very well and good, we could go and do our vacations, go on our vacations and stay at the lodges, or at the hotels, but a time came when they were taking no more Jewish visitors and so the vacation places were somewhat rationed and we had to go to places that were Jewish -- run by Jewish families for Jewish families and that's where we went on vacation. And I remember going up to **Swinemünde,** which is on the **Baltic**, where there was a very lovely vacation spot that catered to the Jewish trade. Was called the **Möve**. And the **Möve** is a seagull and it was on -- on the water, and we went. I stayed one year with my grandmother and one year I think I went with my mother. Yes, I remember going with my mother, because I had to do homework, so not to fall behind. And the German school year was a little bit different, but I was allowed to -- to miss a little time, as long as my mother kept up with the assignments with me. But it was interesting to think that we were really isolated even in where we could spend vacation time. **Swinemünde** was rather fri -- to me was a little bit of a frightening place to be because the lodge where I stayed with my grandmother sat opposite of **Peenemünde**. And that's where the Germans were building their **U**-boats and we

could see the white boats in the harbor, across the water. And we were well aware of the fact that in 1937, there were definite attempts at getting ready for a war. And I -- I still see in my mind's eye the white -- the very white painted ships against very gray waters. And rather frightening looking, they looked like sharks.

Q: Wow, mm-hm. Anything else in **Ratibor** that you wanted to talk about?

A: There was a very -- in **Ratibor** was a very nice municipal swimming pool, and I was given my first instructions to swimming at that pool, I was five years old and it was a funny way of learning how to swim. There were ro -- there were **L**-shaped rods -- well, actually probably fairly stable pipes that had ropes on them, that were suspended over the water, and we were hooked onto these ropes, and were in a very safe place to study our strokes. And I -- I learned how to swim that way, I became a very good swimmer, very fast. And I remember it was a miserable day and I was about to take my test to pass to get my first card, and it required 15 minutes of uninterrupted swimming around the pool, the edge of the pool. And as I say, it was a dreary day, but my grandmother was visiting and she took me to the pool. And I passed, I even did 20 minutes, but in order to get your card you had to jump in at the far end, into the deep water. This I could not do. I was a totally petrified creature. But they said well, if you will jump, if we put you on the harness and the rope, we will let you pass. And of course I did, and I got my certificate and I was the happiest

person in the world. But then that was closed to Jews after we left. It was no longer allowed for Jewish people to -- to swim there. But at least I learned how to swim.

Q: So then you went off to **Berlin** while your parents settled -- were getting settled, and you were with your grandmother. And how long did you stay in **Berlin**?

A: Actually, I think I probably was there less time than in my imagination. I was there a matter of maybe six months. But I was so lonely, and my grandmother tried to make it so pleasant and comfortable for me, but I was away from my parents and I was very unhappy. I went to a school where I didn't know anybody. It was a Jewish school and I didn't know Hebrew and all the children knew Hebrew. I was devastated. However, the period came to an end and I saw a little bit of **Berlin**. I don't remember very much of it, I remember where my grandmother lived, I remember where the beautiful synagogue was at which Dr. **Joachim Prince** was the -- the m -- the rabbi. I remember going to a service there. I re -- I remember going to the zoo and to -- doing things that little children like to do, but in general I have a very, very limited memory of what went on there, as opposed to the very accurate memory I have of **Ratibor**, where I c -- I can draw a map and I drew a map for my father some years back when -- and asked him whether he could go over this map with me to see whether my memory was accurate, and he said absolutely. The memory of the street where the dentist was, and where the knit shop was and where

the market was and so on and so forth. But my memory of **Berlin** is not at all that good. However, when I moved back to be with my family in **Breslau**, when I came back to **Breslau**, I have a much better memory of that place.

Q: When you were in **Berlin**, did you see lots of evidence of Nazi party symbols?

A: Actually, I don't even remember that. I think there must have been -- there must have been, but I cannot visually pinpoint it as to where I might have seen it. My grandmother, I am sure took me only to places that were permitted. It was interesting, my uncle, my mother's younger brother went to **Israel**. He wanted very much to emigrate to **Israel** and in 1935 or th -- '36, he went to **Israel** and had a marvelous experience and wanted very, very much to go and settle there. He saw the handwriting on the wall and he wanted -- he had a chance to buy into **Egged,** the bus company. And my grandmother did not want to leave **Berlin** and she would not give him the money, although it was there in spades. The consequence was that **Ludz** did not go to **Israel**, had a terrible time leaving **Germany**, and my grandmother didn't make it at all. There was a wonderful opportunity where the wrong turn was taken. You ask did I see much evidence? I just really honestly cannot recall. Mm, I can't.

Q: Did your parents come visit you in **Berlin** while you were there?

A: I don't have memories of my parents visiting me at all because they were in the throes of moving and setting up a practice and trying to start getting things ready for

a possible chance to -- to emigrate. My mother was very reluctant to emigrate. She wanted more than -- she was sure this was all going to blow over. My father knew better, or he -- he did indeed know better. He was sure that it wouldn't and so at that point they were putting feelers out to see what might happen and what ha -- in effect happened was my father, being a physician was contacted by a number of countries in **South America** who were opening their doors to physicians particularly. And it was either **Uruguay** or **Paraguay**, and I'm sh -- not sure that I remember, but one of the -- one of those two countries that made a most attractive offer, but my father, not Spanish speaking, not having had too much contact with the Spanish speaking population decided that might not be for him. He also did not want to go to **Israel**, I might add. He was not at all set on going to **Israel**. But in the meantime, this wonderful telegram showed up, the one that really saved us when we were able to establish a family -- a blood connection to someone who lived in **Canada**. The question is, could we get into **Canada**, because **Canada** had a very tight quota. You might know the -- the book, 6,000 is too many and indeed I don't even think that they got 6,000, or allowed 6,000 in. But an -- at any rate, perhaps this is not what I -- what I should be -- yeah. So my father turned down **Uruguay** or **Paraguay**, turned down **Israel**, but was absolutely positive that we had to leave. And so my mother decided she better learn how to do something. And so my mother, who was a singer

and a lady who entertained beautifully and who was a -- a homemaker at heart decided that she would study and did study under **ORT** auspices, and studied physiotherapy. She had always loved a -- gym and exercise and physical culture and so on. Right up her alley, and she, in **Breslau** went to school and studied physiotherapy. And really, in effect, this step did keep body and soul together once we did come to **Canada**. And she loved what she was doing, and she did it for many -- well, for a number of years. So that was while I was in **Berlin**, she also started on that and got -- got into class and worked.

Q: And this is the Jewish Organization for Rehabilitation and Training. You said your father did not want to go to **Israel**. Were your parents Zionists in any way?

A: My parents were not Zionists. You know, in **Germany** there was the big schism, the blue and white and the black and white. He did not belong to the blue and white, although that changed too. I mean, he was the strongest supporter of **Israel** that anybody could wish for, but at the time of our move he thought he could not take the weather in **Israel**. That was why.

Q: Y-You said he was a psychiatrist. He obvious -- he had an adult clientele. Did he have any kind of more of a specialty or just general psychiatry?

A: Actually, when he went to school, and he went to school at the university in **Breslau** after he came back from the war, he studied neu-neurology and psychiatry,

that was a -- a study that always went hand in hand. And then he went for specialized work to **Munich** and studied in **Munich** for awhile before he actually went into practice. He dealt mostly with adult patients and he did some very early work on mescaline, which became a drug a -- that was used for, I believe recreational, but it was a -- a very potent drug and he wrote one of the first papers on mescaline. And he also dealt with bromism, which I'm not sure I really understand. And then he got very interested and very involved with electric shock therapy, and was exceedingly successful with electroshock until it was sort of downplayed, and was not used any more. And now things have come back and they are using electric shock therapy, under perhaps better circumstances because of the muscle relaxants and things that go with it. But my father was exceedingly successful. I always felt he was out of favor with the establishment because his basis, from the earliest of all times he said, we will find biochemical and biologic basis for mental problems and diseases of the mind. And of course when **Freud** became so popular, he was not at all in the swing. And he stuck to his guns and I think the world has changed. He was more of a **Jungian**. He was extremely interested in what **Jung** had to tell us. And he really felt, and I think he was -- h-he -- it -- it came to pass that his way of thinking was quite right, quite on the ball. And he worked until he was -- worked in his profession until he was 80 years old. And at that point in time he felt he couldn't

keep up with all the new medications and then decided that this was -- this was not, you know, good for the patient. But he was quite successful in his -- in his work and he loved every minute of it. He was the sort of person who, if somebody in the province, in **New Brunswick** when we came to **Canada**, was ill and needed his help, he got into his car and drove 300 miles without batting an eye. If the patient needed him, he was there. He made housecalls.

Q: That is some kind of a housecall.

A: Oh, yeah. Oh my gosh, yes.

Q: All right, now you're finished being in **Berlin,** you're back with your family in **Breslau,** and how long did you stay there?

A: I would say probably only a year. It was a very full year though, because I had to get used to a new school and new surroundings. I lived fairly far away from the school, the na -- **[tape break]**

Q: We were talking about your full year in **Berlin.**

A: I --

Q: I mean in **Breslau [indecipherable]**

A: Ah yes, I moved back to **Breslau** and I was started in the Jewish school in **Breslau**, **Raydia** ar -- school and all children there were Jewish. All, or most everyone was trying to leave and -- and I think everybody's mind was such that --

that we were il -- we were losing people every day in school. I went to **Raydia shula**, it was a Jewish school. It was a sizeable Jewish school, much bigger than my school in **Ratibor**, certainly ba -- much bigger than the one in **Berlin,** which was a small, little independent school. This was a large school, and almost all the children there were being prepared, really, to leave the country. Hebrew was very big in the curriculum and I was painfully inadequate. I did not like the school. I only made two friends while I was in school and it was -- it was a very unhappy time of my life. My father started his new practice and my grandmother -- my grandmother was having to rent out more rooms so that things would go reasonably well. She was made to give up the store at the point of a gun. This beautiful store, this beautiful toy shop, the biggest one in the entire province of **Siles** -- of **Silesia**, where people came from all over to buy. In fact, the people who had the **guta**, the large farms, these enormous farms would bring their families in at Christmastime to do their shopping at **Garson Frankel.** That was the name of the store, was the name actually of my great-grandfather. The store had been in the family since 1826 and my grandmother was running it with her sister because both had lost their husbands, and they were made to sell it, as I say, because it was taken over. And I even have a clipping to the effect that it's now Aryan, a big clipping from the newspaper. So she took in borders into her big, beautiful home and everybody got along very well. But it was not as it was

before. Still, she was able to have help in the house because help was still allowed to work. It was later that the help was not allowed to work for Jewish people any more, but at that time, in that place, there was help.

Q: Were the borders Jewish?

A: I believe they were. I do believe they were. The house was one, two -- four stories high and the lowest part had the servant quarters of the gardener, which became our apartment. It was on the lowest level, the entry level and there were lovely shrubs around it. I remember there were lilacs that smelled so beautifully, and Lilies of the Valley. Had a large iron gate that opened up to allow cars to move in. We di -- she did not -- we did not have a car. My father had his motorcycle, never drove a car until he came to **Canada.** And then there was the **rote deala**. That was a red foyer where when people came to visit, left their coats before being shown upstairs. And that was, of course, my favorite place to play because everything was so beautiful. Red satin or velvet or plush, very beautiful, with a bay window looking out into the shrubs. And then the back or side part of it had a huge kitchen. It was not a kitchen for cooking though, it was an area to do the laundry. And every week the laundresses came in and that was always great fun for me because they would hand wash everything on boards and then they would rinse it and then dry them, and then at the end of the day the two of them would take the sheets, one standing at one

end, one at the other and they would pull them in order to dry them completely and my greatest joy was to stand underneath in the middle and have my hair fly up into the sheets. It was such a joy and it was so much fun. That was so much fun. We had a lovely gardener who took care of the garden, which had a walk all around it so that one could stroll around a central green area. And then the borders were all peonies and roses and lovely shade flowers and tall trees. And then there was a small garden arch that led into the fruits and vegetable gardens. And we had gooseberries. Never see gooseberries any more. And red and white currants and raspberries and apple trees and peach trees. It was -- it was a paradise, it was absolutely lovely, and the gardener worked hard to do -- to keep it so. And the back of the house had an enormous balcony so that one could sit in the balcony and then look down on this lovely green area and then into the distance where the fruit trees were.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Renate Chernoff.** This is tape number two, side **B.** Cou -- let's start talking about the actions that your father took to try to get the family ou-out of **Germany**.

A: Once my grandmother was found and was able to establish contact with a distant relative who had emigrated to **Canada** much earlier, and I wish I could tell you exactly when, I don't ec -- but, at any rate, he was a blood relative and action was taken to try to contact him and see whether he could, in any way help out. His response was immediate and he said he could, of course try to help out but not monetarily because it was in the late 30's and **Canada** was still reeling, as the **States**, I know must have been after the depression, and really no one had much of anything. He -- Uncle **Charlie**, his name was **Charlie Redlish,** had established a small institute where he treated alcoholics. And it was very small and he ran it by himself with one nurse. But he apparently was successful enough, but I don't think was getting paid exceedingly well because he and his wife and his married daughter and unmarried daughter, all -- an-and son and his wife all had to live together in one flat just to be able to make it. But he was instrumental in getting things going and very fortunately, his daughter **Fay Redlish** had a friend who was extremely well-to-do. He was in the manufacturing business of men's suits, and at the time just before the war, was starting to get contracts for army uniforms, and apparently had an in politically speaking. And **Jack** took it upon himself, and I think I'm right in saying this, that he went up to **Ottawa** to see whether there was some way of expediting bringing us into **Canada**. Well, **Canada** had the law, of course, that only farmers

and physicians could come in, and the other law, the law stated that they, if after a year's time, the person could not make it on their own in **Canada**, they would be sent back. So it was a trial run, so to speak. In addition to fulfilling that, the person also had to bring 3200 dollars with them, which at that point in time I guess must have been a fair amount of money. And it took many months to actually get the permission to come, and once the permission was granted there was an awful lot to go through as far as the Canadian authorities were concerned, but as far as the German authorities were concerned. Because they were on our tails constantly about signing this paper and that paper. And during that period of time, many people were called to the police stations and never returned. This was a time in '36 - '37, when people were called on unbelievably small details to their leaving and to their lives, they were called, and they were made to jump off buildings. And this happened indeed, to friends of ours. Well, I think I can tell you, one day my father was called. We were trembling, I think all day long, but he was one of the lucky ones. He signed whatever he needed to sign and pay whatever he needed to pay and he came back. In the meantime we were granted permission and a van was ordered to pack up our things. And I think it's interesting to mention that we were allowed to bring things with us that had been -- that were old things. So my grandmother suggested that we take her furniture because that could be certified as being old. I don't know how -- I

-- I know it was 10 years on suits because my father had to go to his tailor and tell him to put labels into his suits which indicated when they were made, and he did. But the van was -- as I say, was ordered and some of the old pieces were packed and -- and put in, but nothing of their modern furniture could come with them, it -- it was only the old things, which -- which was fine. But when we were packing -- and my father ha-had a terrific library, and a wonderful stamp collection, and when the actual packing took place, the Nazi, with their guns came, and they stood over us as we were doing the packing. And I remember very, very well, we were in our little downstairs gardener's apartment with lots and lots of boxes on the floor, these two men with guns watching as my father packed all the books. And whenever they liked a book -- an they particularly liked my children's books, they just helped themselves. And they helped themselves to some of my father's stamps too, and there wasn't a thing we could do about it. And I remember my father putting his hand to his mouth and saying shh. It was just, that's the way it was done. Well, he still came over with a lot of books and I did come over with some children's books, but I think my best ones didn't come with me. That's all right. But it was just, you know, the situation. Also, for example, it's interesting; in that same apartment where we were packing the books, we were also taking our food, because we were not allowed to eat with our grandmother upstairs. We had to eat separately. I mean, the

little downstairs apartment was like an independently organized apartment. They were allowed to bring the food down to us, but we couldn't eat it together with them upstairs. All the boarders could eat upstairs and my grandmother could eat upstairs, but we couldn't, and we had to eat downstairs.

Q: How would your family know this rule, this regulation that you couldn't eat upstairs? How were you told?

A: Oh, you know, that I don't remember. I don't recall, but there would be -- day after day there would be leaflets left on th-the doorstep and people were checking up. So, I assume it must have been through those leaflets. Otherwise I -- I can't imagine. But there were people always coming by and always checking up.

Q: What about your going outside to play with friends?

A: I didn't go out to play at all. I went to school, but I rode my bicycle on the side of the street. I took a streetcar to school and I remember having to actually change places on **Victoriastrassen** and -- into another streetcar and that seemed to be safe enough. I don't remember having friends when I was in **Breslau** at all, because I was hardly there long enough and people -- there wasn't that nice easy going back and forth to houses as there is in **America**, it just wasn't there. And surely not at that point in time. I only had -- I only made two friends while I was in **Breslau**. I wasn't there that long, I guess, and the times were just not conducive.

Q: When you would see a Nazi officer in uniform, do you d -- do you remember any visceral effects it had on you?

A: You know, I must say I don't. Again, I don't remember, other than seeing them in groups. And yes, I was scared, terribly scared because of what I remembered from **Ratibor**. But I -- either I was held away from being put into that situation or it perhaps just didn't register. I don't know. I don't know. I remember in **Breslau** it was not a time to go to the movie theater, because we couldn't. It was not a time to go to a concert because we couldn't. And I think everything was in the home. There wasn't much of that either. I think the times were so desperate. My mother went to class and came home. But I have to add this, because this I think is very important. My parents both decided it was -- would be good if they took English lessons. And so they found out that there was a man, an Englishman who was settled in **Breslau**, who was giving lessons to people who were leaving the country. My parents decided to also study English, as many of their friends were, a-and they went to the home of somebody who had come from **England** and who was doing something other than giving English lessons. But he gave English lessons on the side, and he gave them in the evening, and my parents decided to take them. And first they walked into his home, and he's -- they were sitting at his desk, he with his back to a huge picture of Mr. **Moseby**. And who is Mr. **Moseby**? He was the Nazi of **England**. He was the

emissary there. Well, my mother and father said, we've got to learn English, we've got to face **Moseby**, and they went ahead and did and just disliked the occasion terribly but liked their teacher. Their teacher was a very good teacher and a very nice person. So they never could understand why **Moseby** was there, but he was there.

Q: So th-th -- you said they continued with their English lessons.

A: Yes, they took their English lessons and they did rather well and at least got a little bit of a foundation and developed their hearing skills and along with taking the -- along with taking the **ORT** group, my father also learned how to concoct beauty preparations. He learned how to make cold creams and vanishing creams and moisturizing creams and all sorts of things practical. And this stood us in very good stead, actually. And he bought jars, beautifully designed jars and labels for the jars, so -- in English -- so that they could be at -- affixed to the jars that perhaps might be of -- of use on immi -- on immigration. So that was a time when you asked what did people do, my parents were very busy, taking classes and doing very practical things.

Q: Did you know they were preparing to leave?

A: I knew, yes. I knew that we were going to leave. When my mother -- when my father finally persuaded my mother that we had no alternative, she came around to it and of course I knew, because of the papers that needed signing and the

documentation that needed to be gotten and the visits to ready ourselves, yes. And of course, when the furniture was being packed, I think it was very clear. It was very -- a very difficult time for my grandmother, because unfortunately we could not bring her with us. The Canadian government put an age limit on those whom they would permit. And of course, she was not a trained person, either a farmer or a physician, so she -- on her own she would not be able to go. And she could not come as a member of the family, much to the everlasting sadness that my father went through. He was an only child and he was very close to his mother, and I think he suffered terribly, just the fact that she had to stay behind.

Q: What was her name?

A: Her name was **Hedwig, Frankel** was her maiden name, **Fischer.** And the store's name was **Garson Frankel**, it was her father's and that family's store. She was a good business lady, she was very interested in genealogy. In fact, I've just put together lots and lots of genealogic data, much of which she wrote down in German script. And since there are not too many of us left who can still re-read German script, I thought I'd best do that, and I've done it and I am so glad because it has opened up all sorts of interesting new avenues to investigate. And unfortunately she -- she was taken to **Belzec**. And you know **Belzec**, of course is a -- was a killing camp. So that was her demise. I -- I **[indecipherable]**

Q: How old was she when she died?

A: Well, we're not really quite sure, but I know that I'm older than she was when she died. In fact, I think she must have been 60. Probably something like that. I can look that up, I -- that I don't know exactly. But she was the -- it -- it was so much fun visiting her when I was a little girl because she read stories to me and she introduced me to handwork. She did beautiful tatting and beautiful crocheting and I still have collars that she made me, which I have put into tissue paper, and have kept a tablecloth that she made for my mother, and just lovely handiwork.

Q: So your family was preparing to leave. Were you kind of thinking of what to take with you, cause you know you'd be leaving your home?

A: I don't think that I had any choice, because they could not buy things new for me, so I had to take what I had. And for themselves they couldn't either, so we went with what we had, we couldn't really prepare in that sense, at all.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Nope.

Q: So what was it like when you had to leave, for you emotionally?

A: Well, I remember taking leave from my grandmother -- my grandmother in **Berlin,** we said goodbye to earlier on. When we moved to -- I think she came to visit us and we said goodbye then. My grandmother in **Breslau**, with whom we stayed,

we said goodbye and -- and it was a very -- it was a very quiet time. And I remember that one of the people who rented rooms from my grandmother was a pianist, and he played one of **Chopin's** etudes. And to this day, when I hear that etude, the tears come -- welled up in -- welled up in my eyes. This -- there was not much to say. I think we all knew that this would be the last time and we were taking leave. It was -- it was tough, very tough. I don't remember how we got to where we went, I mean to the station, but I know we went by train. I don't know how we got there. We went by train from **Breslau** to **Hamburg** and in **Hamburg** we had to undergo medical checks with a Canadian doctor. And that was not a nice experience, but it was done. My mother, who very early in her life developed glaucoma, she was in her 40's, she thinks that the doctor who examined her, Canadian doctor who examined her, might have had a suspicion that there was something there, but he didn't let on. All she remembers is that she was forever getting her eyes examined. Now, she was an undiagnosed glaucoma **[indecipherable]**, so imagine if she had had the glaucoma 10 years before and they would have told her about it, she might never have gone blind. Because she did eventually become blind. But yes, we passed our exams, our physicals.

Q: Did they check you?

A: Yes.

Q: How did they do that?

A: All over. All over and then some, a little bit more than they really needed to, I think, but I passed. And --

Q: Was your mother able to stay with you during the time?

A: Yes, yes, she was. But it was -- you know, I was a little girl, nine years old. It was not -- it wasn't my doctor, the one that I was used to, and being patted all over by a strange person who was not -- whose language I didn't understand, was not a happy situation.

Q: What month in 1938 was this?

A: Well, I figure it must have been June, or July. June or July. My mother's brother came to see us off -- I mean, came to **Hamburg** to see us before we took our leave, and oh well, we were hoping that we would see each other again. And we did.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But it was very iffy, because he hadn't gotten permission to leave **Germany**, and it was late 30's -- mid-30's.

Q: The **anschluss** had taken place in March of '38, when **Hitler** marched into **Austria**. Did you -- were you aware of that, or did your parents tell you about that?

A: Yes, they did, and they -- I could -- you know, interestingly enough, they didn't have to tell me. There was so much electricity in the air, just our every day routine.

And hearing particularly what was happening, through the maids, who went out and did their shopping and who went and -- to church. We always were aware of what people were thinking and what they were talking about. I think it came -- it came as a bit of a shock, I think. But then my father -- by that time my father had already made up his mind to go, and I think that reinforced his judgment. It was just such a nerve-wracking time to be there. One had to watch ones **P's** and **Q's** so carefully. Didn't say anything in public, didn't have an -- you know, even -- even when -- when you went for little walks, you'd look around and sort of make sure that nobody was hearing your conversation. It was fraught with -- with all sorts of intangible, unpleasant things.

Q: Did you see any violence on the street?

A: I don't think so. I wasn't on the street long enough, really. I -- I was fairly well sheltered. I don't -- that I don't recall. But I recall the dinner conversations when so and so was asked to come up to the Gestapo and so and so lost his business and such and such a person was asked for extra documentation, which of course they didn't have. And it was -- it was just an unsure and uncertain and nerve-wracking time. And I think my mother, who was a bit of an insomniac must have suffered terribly. But you know, life continued and it's amazing that it does, but it did. And bi -- after **Hamburg** and having the medical exam and seeing our -- my Uncle **Ludz**, we were

put on the train and we left for -- for **Holland** first, on our way to **England**. And I don't remember the day that it was, but it must have been -- it was in the summer of 1938, and we were on the train from **Hamburg** to **Hoek van Holland**, which was the port, the seaport in **Holland**, before getting on the little peanut boat to **Greenwich.** And I remember we had second class tickets. My father had gotten those and we were to get on the train and we were entering the second class carriage when somebody came waving a paper. Dr. **Fischer**, Dr. **Fischer,** would you kindly move over into the first class carriage? My father said he had second class tickets. Yes, but it would -- it would be better if we went into the first class carriage. I remember it so vividly, but the second class carriage had red leather seats, and first class carriage had green velvet seats. I was dressed -- what is it, to the sevens? To the fours?

Q: To the nines.

A: To the nines, well okay, I was very nicely dressed with while gloves. I remember my mother slipping several rings on my fingers and telling me to keep my gloves on, which I did. But we were ushered into this very nice carriage and sat with not too many people, whereas the other carriage was very, very full, and we came to the border and I know we came to the border because there was my father, knowing exactly at what time that train was leaving **Germany** and getting into **Holland**,

because he was waiting to be out of the clutches. Just before the border, the stop before the border, the train stopped. Second class carriage people left the train. We went on without many of second class carriage people. I'll never forget it. I will never forget it. And my father to this day said, we were that lucky because of the English teacher with **Moseby's** picture in back. He was trying to help people out of **Germany** in whatever way they could. My father said he was very interested in knowing what trains we were taking. And really, my mother and father both, many, many times had said, if it hadn't been for the English teacher, we might not have gotten out of second class carriage. So we crossed the border. I remember everybody, we three, just hugging each other, crying and making our way over to **Hoek van Holland** and getting on our little boat. My father and I got very sick crossing the English channel. My mother, the good rider -- or sailor I should say, had no problems whatsoever, as she did on the voyage across the **Atlantic** as well. And we landed in **Greenwich --** or **Harwich -- Harwich**. S-Sorry, **Harwich** I think it was. **H-a-r-w-i-c-h**. Yeah, **Harwich.** And from there we took the train to **London.** And in **London** my father had made arrangements for us to stay in a very nice hotel, which we have since visited. And we stayed there and h-he had fraternity brothers in **London** and his cousin was in -- no, his cousin wasn't there yet. But the fraternity brothers were in **London** and we had a few very nice days in **London** until about

three days before we were to sail to **Canada**, I came down with appendicitis. Had to go to the hospital emergency. Where did they take me? To the German hospital. Had to have my appendix removed, and fate again, fate unbelievable. I was on the operating table, about ready to have my appendix removed when the young surgeon who came and was about to do the job said, oh, and what's your name and where are you from, and said, is your father a physician? Yes. And we -- we established the fact that my father was a physician, and he said, he helped me out in my final exam. I told this story to my father. He said, you know, he was trying to keep calm, but sure enough, my father slipped him some answers when he was taking his final exam. And this was the doctor who took out my appendix. But I had to stay in hospital for a week, I guess it is. I was very well looked after, but it was a German hospital. And I suppose it was good that I was there because I understood what was going on, and they understood what I -- and af -- we had to miss our boat to **Canada**, and that was the difficult part.

End of Tape Two, Side B

Interview with Renate Fischer Chernoff
June 23, 2005

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Renate Chernoff.** This is tape number three, side **A**, and you were saying because you had your appendix operation you missed your -- the boat. Before we get to that, did you have any special toys that you brought with you from **Germany**?

A: I had a lovely doll, a **Katie [indecipherable]** doll and something happened to her between the -- in the last 20 years. I cannot locate her and I am desolate. Yes, mine **[indecipherable]**. I certainly brought a doll with me and I don't think I brought too much else in way of toys. That was -- not even a Teddy bear, I don't think so. Just a doll.

Q: You were nine years old at the time. Also, did you -- a-and you also said the Germans who were watching you while you were packing took some of your children's books. Did you have any favorite children's books that you didn't bring with you?

A: I brought some fairy tales and a few stories about animals and I still have them and look at them every now and again. There was one lovely one about an aquarium. But I loved fairy tales. My mother always used to say **[speaks German here]**. I am too much involved in play. I was always imagining, playing imaginary games of -- I

think my joy in life was to be a princess, to have a crown on my head and to eat noodle soup. I -- I don't -- I can't think of other toys. I did bring card games. Some games and some puzzles. And I have the card games, they were quartets and they were quartets dealing with authors and with flowers and with comics. Very funny comics from the newspaper, but they were in sets of fours. And also cards with letters so that one could make **Scrabble** words, but all as cards. Small, small things. But I think that's all. Maybe a chessboard.

Q: And -- all right, you've now recuperated from your appendix operation? And then what happened?

A: I recuperated, and my father of course, had to scout around to find a new -- a voyage for us across the ocean and it was close to September and the visitors were returning back to **Canada** after vacationing in **Europe**. It was a particularly busy time of the year because the teachers were coming home on their trips and it was -- it was a bit of a -- of -- of a difficulty. However, the Canadian embassy could not have been nicer. They found my folks a place to stay because staying at a hotel was too expensive, and they settled them in somebody's home in **Golders Green**, which is a f -- well-known Jewish community, and perhaps not so far away from the hospital either. And they arranged, through the Jewi -- with the help of the Jewish Aid Society in **London** to get us a later boat over and we came over on the **Montrose**,

which was a slightly smaller ship than we were supposed to come on, but they had room for the three of us and we had a good voyage across the sea. At least my mother had a good voyage. My father and I took it downstairs. We were -- he and I were quite seasick. Not that it was such a hazardous journey at -- according to the information that I got from pier 21, it was a rather smooth journey, but our stomachs did not know that. My mother played ping pong onboard and we were downstairs.

Q: Were there many refugees on the bor -- on the boat?

A: No, there were not. There were -- I don't think there were -- I -- as far as I know there were none, and I have the -- I have the entire list of the people in our class, tourist class, and we did not see Jewish names at all. Most of them, as I say, were returning visitors to **Europe.** Did not at all. We did have iceberg practice and we all got into our assigned jackets and had to parade out. And we were very close to an iceberg. I think it's as close as I'd like to get to an iceberg. But it was a drill, and of course everybody took part. There was a very nice party, I'm told, at the end of the ride. I don't think my parents were in -- in a partying mood, but there was a party. And I should mention to you that the last day, the day that we were supposed to -- that we did in fact land in **Montreal**, I woke up and could not move. I had total paralysis of both my legs and my father had to carry me off the boat. This happened twice in my life. This was the first time, and the second time it happened when, as a

student in 1948, I had the -- and I was on an international student service seminar, I had the opportunity to go back to **Germany** and the same thing happened. I woke up paralyzed from my waist down. The paralysis did not last very long. My father carried me off the boat. The relatives were there to meet us. And in a day the paralysis was gone. I think they call this a hysterical paralysis, which it undoubtedly was. Terribly frightened.

Q: What were you frightened of?

A: This new life in a new country where we didn't know the language, where we didn't know anybody really, not even our relatives. I think just terrible fright. But you know, it happened that time, the first time and we ascribed it to that. But it was interesting that it should happen -- what was it, 10 years later? Again, and th-the return visit. And I've never been back to **Germany**, you know.

Q: Did you know any English at all?

A: I didn't. Not at all. And I learned it very quickly. But for the first couple of months I was very silent, but after that I could grapple with it quite nicely. I sat. My schoolteacher did not allow me to have a dictionary in school. She wanted me to absorb it totally by ear, which I guess perhaps was the right thing to do. I was horrified that I couldn't have my dictionary, but she didn't allow it, and I learned it very well.

Q: So you settled in **Montreal**?

A: We came to **Montreal** and met Uncle **Charlie** and Aunt **Bertha,** the people who sent the telegram, and their children and it was decided that all of us, Uncle **Char-Charlie**, and his wife and the daughter, married **Wilfred** and their son, and my mother and father and I would all take a flat together in **Montreal**. And we did, and we all lived together for a number of years in one flat, where --

Q: When you mentioned telegram what were you referring to?

A: Well, I think the telegram was sort of the lynchpin, if you will. This was a telegram that arrived at the wedding, for the wedding of my grandparents, sent by a distant relative in **Canada** by the name of **Charlie -- Charles Redlish.** It was a telegram that was sent to send congratulations to the wedding of and the **mishpoka** of the grandparent, my grandparents. And my grandmother kept that telegram, as she kept many, many things, and remembered in the 30's that there was somebody in **Canada** who was distantly related. And this telegram really started the correspondence between my parents and that distant relative that lived in **Montreal**. And I have many copies of this telegram because I feel it was the thing that saved our lives. The one item that established a relationship with family abroad.

Q: When you started school, were you placed in your chronological grade, or a younger grade?

A: No, actually I started in grade four and was in my -- with my own peer group, so that I had to learn English, but I think I could do most everything else. Math I certainly could do, and I learned English soon enough. By the end of the year I won the prize for the best student. So I didn't do too badly. I worked hard at my studies because I had so much to catch up on. My distant relative played all kinds of tricks on me and made me say horrible things because I didn't know what I was saying. And I got into a lot of trouble, but it sorted itself out.

Q: Did you miss **Germany**? Did you consider **Germany** your home at that point?

A: I missed my friends, I missed my grandmothers. I don't know that I missed the physical part of **Germany**. I think at that age perhaps that's not so important, but I certainly missed my friends. It was so much -- there was so much to learn and so much new, and so much to catch up with. It -- the impressions came so hard and so fast and they were so different. Coming from -- coming from a home, for example, as we were lucky enough to have, with servants and whatnot to a one room that we stayed in. We had one room and that -- that was it. It was a -- a new lifestyle, but you know, my -- my mother particularly was quite adventuresome. My father became very depressed. My father, who was unable to find work because they wouldn't let him work, was in a -- sort of a desperate situation and as the war years came along, it became even more so. Because remember, in **Canada,** the war started

September the third, 1939. We were at war exactly a year from the date we arrived in **Canada**. My father tried to join the army, they wouldn't have him because he wasn't a citizen. He wanted to join the medical corps, they wouldn't have him because he wasn't registered as a medic in **Canada** and you couldn't become a medic in **Canada** until you took up citizenship. And so all -- everything was closed, and his main concern was trying to get the grandmothers over. And he had absolutely no luck in that department. I know he traveled back and forth to **Ottawa** trying to persuade the powers that be, the natio -- the commissioner of refugees, a wonderful woman by the name of Senator **Karen Wilson**, to see if there was some way of getting the grandparents out, even if it would be over at the **Dominican Republics**, or **Cuba**, but even that door seemed to be closed because of their ages. And my father was making creams at that point and my mother, fortunately got a job and worked very hard. She fortunately met a physician through friends, I guess, or family, Canadian family, in **Montreal**, who was very interested in the fact that she was able to do physiotherapy, which was not done a whole lot on this side of the ocean. And she was very well trained and it was a period of the polio epidemic starting. And also, she did post-operative -- broken legs and things like that, she worked with patients and so on. And she really had a lot of work. She -- she e -- well, in time she even -- we even got an apartment that had a basement in it, a

finished basement in which she gave classes, gym classes, and then the rest of the apartment was rented out to different people -- different rooms. And she -- she did very well and -- because my father couldn't work. But he was invited by Dr. **Wilder Pennfield** and Dr. **Cohen** at the Neurological Institute in **Montreal,** which is a very well known place, to come on rounds and to hone his skills and to get the English lingo. And he did that, and in time he met someone who asked him to become an intern in a hospital in the Maritime provinces of **Canada**, where the medical people left in order to join the army. So a place became available where they really needed his skills, and he -- he worked there until -- until someone said, why do you have this enemy alien working for the Ca-Canadian government? And he went through a horrible period of time in which his life was made miserable by the powers that be because he was -- they considered him as an enemy alien who -- whom they suspected of being a farmer and a spy. He -- the Mounties came to visit him one day and he said, take the cameras, because they were afraid that he was photographing installations on the shore -- o-o -- the seacoast of **New Brunswick**, which was where his job was. He went to **New Brunswick** to take on the job, my mother and I stayed in **Montreal** so that she could continue working. And as an intern, you know, it's hardly enough to support a family, so they -- we lived in separate places for awhile, for a number of years. But he even weathered that, and I came across some of the

clippings in the newspaper in getting ready to talk to you just the other day and I didn't realize the splash that all this made in the newspapers across **Canada**, that, you know, the government was employing enemy aliens to -- who were taking advantage and taking the money from our people. So you come from **Germany**, you come to **Canada** -- and of course, I was called a dirty Jew from **Germany** in school in **Canada**, where you know, the blinders were close to the head. And it was not an easy time in **Canada**. It was not.

Q: So how did you handle this? Coming from **Germany** and hearing this in **Canada**?

A: With great difficulty. With very, very great difficulty. But I did have Jewish friends in class, and I must say, I found -- I found my friends among Jewish kids. All -- practically only Jewish children in **Montreal**. And we did not live in a Jewish section of **Montreal** at all.

Q: Were -- were these other refugee children, or these were Canadians?

A: In -- they were can -- my friends were Canadian friends, but my mother circulated with a group o-of refugees because in **Montreal** they were quite a number and yes, she had -- well, she also had non -- she also had Canadian friends, but many not -- many Jewish friends who, like ourselves came over at one time or another.

Q: What about the teachers in the school?

A: The teachers in general were absolutely wonderful. I had never of -- I -- been so well received, and the principal of the school was really -- they were trying so hard to make me comfortable, and they did. And I had a very -- I had a happy time in **Montreal** in school -- well, you know, you always have one teacher that's maybe not so great. But I would say, generally speaking, they were wonderful. And in the Maritimes they could not have been nicer. They were very accepting. Na -- but nobody ever asked me about where I'm from or why I'm here. Nobody, even when I went to college, nobody ever brought up the subject. And with a name like **Fischer**, y-ye -- and I had no accent, nobody even suspected. And it's interesting in these last few years was the first time that my college friends and my high school friends, with whom I'm still in touch, some of whom I'm still in touch, posed questions to me. I-I think they were afraid. They didn't want to rub salt into wounds. I would have been very happy to talk. I think I would have. In -- in college I would have, but nobody ever asked, and I wouldn't -- you know, I wouldn't speak on my own. In fact, I've not spoken too much, although I have with my children, I've told them a fair amount. Not everything.

Q: Your -- your father was in the Maritime provinces, you were in **Montreal**.

A: **Montreal.**

Q: Did you go back and forth to visit?

A: Well, no. In the summer, I was sent to camp and my mother went to visit my father. It was just too expensive. I -- I went to **Y** camp, and one summer I stayed with friends who invited me to stay with them while Mother visited my father. And then other -- then I went to summer camp. One summer, the first summer, I think it was the summer of ’39 -- the summer of ’39, my mother and father were engaged to be camp doctor and nurse and I was allowed to go along as addition. And I was a camper, and they were in charge of things and that gave us all a little vacation in the mountains.

Q: Wa-Was this a Jewish camp?

A: Yes, Camp **Hiawatha.** Yes, it was a Jewish camp and my mother met and was very, very friendly with one of the counselors there, and it was a lifelong friendship that continued til both of them really passed away. In fact, **Sophie** came and visited my mother here when my mother was in the nine -- in her 90’s. **Sophie** was a bit younger. The **Sophie** that I mention is interesting because she’s a poet -- was a poet, **Sophie Yellen**, and was one of **Canada’s** outstanding poets. And si -- the friendship continued and a wonderful one it was. All happened in **Hiawatha.**

Q: Did you have, or did your parents have any correspondence or connection with the people back in -- ya -- the family back in **Germany**?

A: Well, that's a very interesting question, because yes, they tried to have and they have letters to their mothers until the war broke out, which was only a year. And after that, there was no more correspondence. But when my father knew that somebody was going -- traveling from **Montreal** to the Maritime provinces, or from the Maritime provinces back to **Montreal**, depending on where he was, he would always ask them would they mail a letter in the one stop that the train made in the **United States**. And so yes, they got mail over to them, a-at least to let them know that things were going well for us, even though the only -- they could only write to the **States**, and then **States** would send us the mail. So that -- that was very di -- that was traumatic.

Q: Did you write to your grandparents?

A: I don't know that I did. I don't know that I did. I don't think so. I think those little blue letters were very, very closely written upon and I think maybe I signed my name, but I don't re -- I don't recall writing to them.

Q: Mm-hm. And then as the war proceeded in the early, you know, early 40's, did you as a child know what was happening? What was your world like during the war in **Canada**?

A: My world was totally consumed with the war. My father used to keep a map on the wall and punch pins into where the Germans were, and especially once the war

started, how the movements of the Germans were taking place, how the forces were progressing, both into the east zone towards **Russia**, as well as out to -- through **France** and into **Holland.** And we would listen to news every night, of course, and as many times during the day as, you know, as there were news on, which wasn't always our time. I mean, the news came on at seven o'clock and everybody was sitting around. And I think it was the most trying of times because my father was trying to tell people in **Canada** what was happening and nobody listened. My father brought out clippings from newspapers, German newspapers that he hid in slatted areas of his suitcases. He hid them in the linings of the suitcases, to show the powers that be on this side of the ocean what was happening because nobody was listening and nobody wanted to believe what was going on. Fortunately, he did not get caught, because when he was called one time to the police station -- and he was called many times -- he was very afraid that they might have found something because he was clipping, he was clipping newspaper articles right and left.

Q: Clipping from which papers?

A: Newspa -- the German newspapers. He was taking sections out of newspapers to bring here to this side of the ocean --

Q: I see.

A: -- in order to tell people who were so unbelieving, of s -- things that were happening that didn't make papers here, and people weren't willing to listen. You know, when you read what **Steven Wise** couldn't even get through. Nobody listened, nobody. And nobody wanted to. They didn't want to believe. So you asked -- I was -- I was totally consumed with the war. I would come in from school and listen. I listened. It was almost a way of life, wasn't it?

Q: Were -- were your fam -- was your family aware of what was happening to the Jews specifically during the war?

A: Oh, oh absolutely. Not -- well, they saw the beginnings of it all when people disappeared and people just didn't make it back from the police stations or they were snatched out of their beds. I mean, that was happening all around. And it was 1938. Things were not at all tranquil, even -- even in **Silesia**. I think there was much fear, there was much fear and there was the constant hope that we could bring the mothers out.

Q: What happened to your grandmother in **Berlin**?

A: My grandmother in **Berlin** was in a round-up and was put on a train and died in the cattle car on her way to **Riga**.

Q: And her name?

Interview with Renate Fischer Chernoff
June 23, 2005

A: Her name was **Unni Haushner -- Unni Rosenber -- Rosenbaum Haushner.** She had two children, my mother and Uncle **Ludz** and **Ludz** was the younger of the two and he was smuggled out of **Germany** by his non-Jewish girlfriend and made it to the **States** in '39, the war had already started, and made it to **Chicago**, and signed up almost immediately for the army. And what I'm trying to find out at this point in time is whether he might have been one of the **Ritchie** boys. The **Ritchie** boys, the German Jewish people who came over who became interpreters and who were sent back to **Germany** in the army to help with language things. Because he did indeed go into the army and became an interpreter and stayed in **Germany** after the war had finished to help with the -- with translations for the **Nuremberg** Trials. But I don't know. I'm trying to find out whether he might have been a **Ritchie** boy because there's been some interesting information. **Ritchie** boys, the camp that was started here in **Maryland** that trained linguists -- he might have been, I don't know. I --

Q: How did he get into the **United States** now, and you all couldn't?

A: Well, that's very interesting. He established -- well, I -- I think that he was able to come through an uncle on my mother's side who declared him as being very well versed in the canning industry. I think that may have been it. He worked for my grandfather, I mean how -- he -- and he was trained in the chemical aspects of this canning business.

Interview with Renate Fischer Chernoff
June 23, 2005

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Renate Chernoff**. This is tape number three, side **B.** You were already in **Canada** when **Kristallnacht** happened in November ’38. How did you hear about it?

A: Well, I think we probably learned about it through the radio, a-and of course knew at once that if synagogues were the targets, ours, both in **Ratibor** and in **Breslau** were undoubtedly part of the picture, and indeed they were. I don’t know that we knew the particulars, but I do know that my father said, and they didn’t burn part of that synagogue because there were stores around the synagogue that were in hands of Germans, close to the wall around or near the synagogue. So part of the building was destroyed, and part of it was not. But the **[indecipherable]** synagogue, which is the one that my parents and grandparent went in -- we-were in -- were members of and where my grandparents had pews, strangely enough next to each other, we know that that -- we knew that that synagogue was badly damaged in part. And the pictures have borne that out. They’re in the process of restoring that synagogue at this point in time, but what I learned -- what we learned, and of course to the horror of everyone, oh we -- we learned through the radio and then also I

believe there must have been notification by mail as to what -- what was damaged. Interestingly enough, I think that my father and his mother probably had sort of an understanding of what was going to be said in a -- in a code sort of way, as to the situation.

Q: This was a code between the two of them so you wouldn't understand?

A: No, so that -- so -- all the letters were censored at that point and they did not want the censors to be aware. And I know that certain people's names were mentioned, and never with a surname, and maybe with Uncle **John** did such and such, and you kind of knew what was going on and I do remember the last letter that my grandmother wrote. She wrote that she needed some tea, would we be able to send her some tea, and that was the last -- that was the last letter that we ever received from her. And in all the letters, it was a little bit upbeat, in I am very well, but -- or -- or I am very well, and then period, and then could you possibly send me some tea. And we knew that that was a very bad sign. About **Kristallnacht** itself, other than hearing it, and of course my parents just speechless with the news that was coming in, I still see us sitting around the radio, the whole family and really despairing.

Q: You must have been a very old nine year old by that time.

A: My mother always said -- she said -- of herself, she said, I had a childhood, you never had a childhood. And I think it's true. I don't think I ever did. And what can I say? I didn't have a childhood.

Q: Mm-hm. Any other experiences you can remember about during the wartime while you were in **Canada**? I mean, you said your father followed the progress of the war with the pins.

A: Well, in our Canadian schools, a lot of English guest children came over and so we had many guest children in our classes. People who opted to send their kids overseas until the end of the war. And I had a very, very dear friend, **Monya Williams** was her name and we stayed in touch for awhile after she went back home. And life in **Canada**, as life was here was -- had rationing, we had a lot of rationing. I think you probably had more rationing than we did, but it was as my mother always used to say, this isn't rationing. She went through the first World War, and she said this was just equalizing things out. It was, you know, very, very little rationing per se. Nobody ever went hungry. And during the war -- a-as a child during the war I rolled bandages. I went down to Red Cross headquarters on Saturdays and I helped served coffee. My mother also w-worked for the Red Cross at the -- at the blood donating centers. I work -- I -- I helped when we had service personnel come to the Jewish u -- like a **USO**. We went and we washed dishes and we served sandwiches

to the young soldiers who were coming through. And this was a little bit later on, this was when the soldiers were coming through the Maritime provinces to get on the ships to send them overseas. The Jewish lads had a place to come to to dance and to write letters and just to have a good time, and we teenagers were allowed to help and that was always -- that was very nice. I had a job very early on. I tried to get a job in **Montreal** painting signs, but they thought maybe 11 was too young to get a jo -- to give anybody a job. But I used to sometimes walk to Sunday school -- to Hebrew school. I did go to Hebrew school in **Montreal,** we went to **Shaar Hashomayim**, which is a very beautiful, large synagogue and I had Hebrew twice a week and I had Sunday school, but most of the time I either walked, or more than likely I took the tram, if I wasn't lucky enough to get a ride in the **Bronsman** car. Now, the **Bronsman** kids, **Charlie** and **Edgar** were classmates of mine at **Shaar Hashomayim**, and they had a -- a driver who drove them back and forth from class to Hebrew school, and once in awhile we got rides with them, and that was very nice because they had chocolate milk on the cars and the rest of us usually just got white milk. And my mother, as a matter of fact, in her -- in her physiotherapy capacity massaged -- gave massages to Mrs. **Bronsman**. And I remember very well in **Montreal** my mother did the **Bronsman** job, I guess once a week and she would have to walk, because of course she didn't have a car and the streetcar or the bus

would only carry her so far, and she would have to walk up **Westmount.** Now mind you, the **Bronsmans** lived up on the very top of the hill and there certainly wasn't a -- a bus going up there. And so she marched in the cold of winter. And **Montreal** can be very icy in wintertime and she got such chilblains, and I remember she came home, her legs were just so cold. I remember weeping and thinking how she was suffering. And I asked her about it a number of years back and I said, Mother, I used to cry so, because I was so unhappy that you had such hard work. And she said oh, she said, you know, I look back on this and she said it was such a good time. It was the only time in my life, when we lived in **Montreal,** where I was an independent woman and where I carried the family on my shoulders, and she said that was very satisfying. I go -- I -- I've mulled that over many, many times, and indeed it was. She did wonderful work in -- in her capacity as therapist.

Q: So, did you experience any anti-Semitism during the war years in **Canada**?

A: I would say, other than being called names in school every now and again, dirty Jew from **Germany** --

Q: Oh, right.

A: -- I would say those were really very few times.

Q: Ho-How would you respond when that happened?

A: I think I just walked away from it. I don't think that I could respond to it. I would

think I could not. I still recall exactly where these encounters took place, and they were not in sight of the teachers, they were when we were having recess, either playing marbles, or downstairs. On very cold days we were -- we were just mulling around and sitting on the benches and so on for -- for a little time out. And it wasn't the boys as much as the girls that were nasty. But maybe girls are nastier to each other anyway.

Q: Did you tell your parents about these incidents?

A: Probably not. I don't know. Probably not, I think -- I think I just did not want them to worry about things more than they did. They had -- they had so many worries on their shoulders. My father, who couldn't work and who wanted so much to work. And y -- no -- you know, no money coming in. My mother, who worked so hard, and nothing in the offing for my father and that must have been, to the kind of person that he was, a tremendous blow. And -- however, he had a fantastic sense of humor all -- all his life, and I think maybe it even helped him then when things looked so bleak. And I think the frustration that he carried within him, having so much information, wanting to tell people -- he even was in touch with a writer from the newspaper who was the son of somebody who knew somebody, you know, closer, and not just the man on the street. And nobody wanting to believe. I think that must have been so frustrating.

Q: Mm-hm. Did you feel German at that point? Canadian, Jewish? How would you describe yourself during the war years in **Canada**?

A: Well, I didn't feel Canadian, certainly not. Everything was very strange to me. I didn't feel German. I guess I felt Jewish. And maybe not by choice, but I was made to feel Jewish. Not that, you know, not that I wouldn't say I was Jewish, but I think yes, I think I was made to feel Jewish. I remember a sad thing. I was walking in front of a shop one day, looking at some baked goods in the bakery store, I'd -- would feast my eyes on all these good, good things. And there was my father, I didn't realize that he was in back of me, looking at me -- so he tells me, and I'm sure it's true -- with not enough change in his pocket to buy me the little roll that I wanted, that I would have liked to have had. It -- I think, you know, these are such small things in the scheme of things, but such humiliating and -- and depressing reactions. I mean, I think of it often. I'm sure he never thought of it that much any more after the fact. He was a realist, it couldn't happen at that point. I, on the other hand, internalized the whole thing. And -- yeah.

Q: And so you made -- you continued to make friends though, when -- y-you were talking about during those times?

A: Yes, I had -- I made friends, I had no trouble making friends. Made good friends. And then, of course, I was in **Montreal** only fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh -- four years

in **Montreal** and then we moved to **Saint John, New Brunswick**, where my father got the job as an intern, but we were not able to join him until the four years were over and h-he was able to get an apartment and get enough money to support us, because my mother did not work after we came to **Saint John.**

Q: And then how long did you stay there?

A: And we stayed in **Saint John --** well, I was married in **Saint John**. So I think my parents moved in 1955. My father got his citizenship in 1945 or '46, and then took his Dominion Council exams and passed his exams so that he could go into practice, which he did, and then he be -- he became a diabetic and had some physical problems and so it was thought that he should give up private practice and go into a hospital situation, which he did in **Halifax, Nova Scotia**. And it was a psychiatric hospital there, and he was in charge of all the woman patients, I think, at that hospital. And he stayed there until he retired and he was -- that was '78, I guess. So he was there quite a number of years and they made a very happy life in **Halifax**. **Saint John** was a very small town, little in-bred. I mean, it was very small in every way. And moving to **Halifax** was really a nice thing for them to do because first of all it was a beautiful city and then it had the stimulation of having a university there. Two, as a matter -- three -- three universities, with a lot of cultural things going in, which they loved. And they got a house on the **Dartmouth** side of the -- of the city

and then they joined us. When my father -- when my father retired, he wanted to move Mom and himself down to **Knoxville,** which they did. They came and they joined us in **Knoxville** and were there a couple of years when my husband was called by the **NIH** to come and work here and to head the department of blood diseases. And so my parents said, well we'd like to go back to **Halifax.** With heavy heart. They -- they did not want to come to the **Washington** area. So they moved back to **Halifax** and had many more good years in **Halifax** until my father died and then my mother did indeed come to visit -- I mean, come to stay with us, and that was good.

Q: Let's go back a little bit in time, to the end of the war. What was it like for you when the war was over?

A: Oh, it was the most freeing, wonderful experience. I remember being in camp, and my father sending me information about the victory, and all hell broke loose in camp. This was Canadian camp, you know? And it was such a freeing -- it was like tearing away ropes that bound one's chest, really. And of course, with it came the realization that even though the war was over, there were so many gone. I remember, for example, in the middle of one night when my mother woke us all up screaming. And this was in the 40's, the early 40's. And to this day she thinks that was the day that her mother was killed. And -- and probably it was. Probably it was.

But the fact that the war was over was -- at least the European part of the war was over. This was not yet the end because -- but Canadian forces were not in the **Pacific**. So in a way, for us that war was over.

Q: During the war, during the latter parts of the war, did your family know anything about the camps, or did that come out only later for them?

A: You know, I had the feeling that they did know about the camps because there were some camps that were already in existence when we were in **Germany**. **Mauthausen** for one, and **Dachau**. So, I think they were very well aware of what was going on, and I don't know, but they kept in very close touch with friends who had also emigrated, and when one got, you know, word about anything, that they would share with the adults, not the -- not the children. And as I say, for many years my father tried so desperately to get the grandmothers out, and would go to the **States** in order to do some of his work. I mean, up to **Ottawa,** down here to this area. But there was -- there was no way.

Q: Mm-hm. So the war is over, did the camp celebrate at all, or did you celebrate in any specific way? Was it a Jewish camp?

A: No. No, I don't think there was a celebration. I can't -- I can't -- I can't -- I don't know.

Q: And you were 16 then?

A: Yeah. Ah --

Q: In 1945.

A: Yeah, I w -- yeah, right.

Q: And then what happened, just generally with your life, from 16 on?

A: Well, I'll tell you a wonderful thing that happened. After all -- after the war was over, my parents wanted to adopt a child from a **DP** camp. And indeed they did. Our darling **Saul** came to us -- my father had wanted to have a son, a boy come. He didn't have a boy of his own, I think, and he probably thought it was best not to have another girl. So arrangements were made through the Canadian -- mm, I can't think of the organization, but it was a refugee organization, and in time **Saul** arrived with a number of other children who were brought to **Canada**, for whom homes were found, and he came to live with us. And he came, I was away in college already and when I came home from college, here was this new addition to the family. Well, as it turned out, he was with us for awhile, and when he gain -- when he realized the kind of person Mom and Dad were, he said, you know, I really have a mother, but I was afraid -- a -- a blood mother who survived -- and -- but I want -- I needed to get -- I wanted to get out and the only way to get out was to declare myself as an orphan, which is how he got into **Canada**, and --

Q: How old was he and where was he from?

A: He was from **Poland**, I re -- I don't know the name of the town. I think I can look it up, but I don't know the name of the town. And his mother and one sister survived. The rest of his family, his father and his other brothers and sisters did not, but these two survived. And of course as soon as my father heard that there was blood kin, he did his level best to get them out and -- and did. And, as a matter of fact, next week I am going to **Los Angeles** to be present at the **Bar Mitzvah** of his grandson. And we have kept in close touch. **Saul** stayed with my family for a number of years, went to high school in **Saint John,** stayed with Mom and Dad and then decided he would like to go to **Montreal** where there were more Jewish kids. And he became a typesetter and type -- was able to do typesetting in English and Fren-French and in Yiddish. And then got a job in **Los Angeles** and took his mother and sister to **Los Angeles**, and that's where he is today. He married a girl from **Poland,** from his village, and as I say, we're going to see them next week. They have come to all our **simchas**, we have tried to be at theirs. And it's a very happy and wonderful relationship. It's -- it's a different sort o -- probably not like a kin -- an -- a blood kin relationship, but it's a wonderful relationship. And there isn't a week that goes by that we don't talk. And he's a lot of health issues with his wife over the last six months and I think I talked to him every other day. And --

Q: HoHo-w old was he when he came to your family?

A: 16. He was a little younger than -- no, he was 14, he was 14, yeah. And it -- it was something that I know my mom and dad wanted to do it and you know, you never know how things work out, but I think this worked out very well.

Q: What was his last name -- what is his last name?

A: **Saul S-Silvershein -- Silvershein**, but he changed it to **Saul Silver.**

Q: Yeah. So you finished high school, you went on to college, where did you go to college?

A: I went to college in **Halifax, Nova Scotia**, **Dalhousie** University and I studied chemistry. Not by choice, I wanted to go to art school, but my parents wouldn't let me go to art school, I had to do something practical with which I could earn my keep and preferably not something that required a change of language. And being the good daughter that I was, I did not fight the thing, this was ordained, my father had said so, and I did it. I went to college, I did well in school, and ended up going to graduate school at the University of **Chicago** in microbiology, for which the province paid. Then I -- but then I met my husband and that's the tale. I met my husband while I was at the University of **Chicago**, at international house. I w -- I, as an international student and he as a good representative of American-hood. He was in a residency at **Michael Reese** Hospital in **Chicago**. And it was love at first sight and we got married in 1953 in **Saint John, New Brunswick,** my parents were still

living in **Saint John,** and we moved to **Saint Louis,** where he finished his residency and our first child was born in **Saint Louis, David.** And then we moved to **Durham, North Carolina** where he was at **Duke** and **Susan** was born. And then we moved to **Knoxville, Tennessee,** where he headed a research unit of the University of **Tennessee** and **Judy** was born, and then we didn't move any more, until we moved here. It was too late then.

Q: Whe-When did you move to the **Washington** area?

A: About 20 years ago, which would have been -- well, 25 almost, 1980.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: 1980. And our kids went on to make good lives for themselves. **David** is at **Cornell,** he's a professor at **Cornell**. Our daughter **Susan** is an attorney in **Chicago** with two children, and **Judy,** who is a physician, lives in **Laurel** and she has two children. So we are so blessed with four grandchildren, and good kids all the way around.

Q: Di-Did you say earlier that you had gone back to **Germany**? Can you tell me about that?

A: Last year, plans were made to take the children, our three children to **Germany**. We had plans ready in action, and unfortunately I got sick. Now, whether this was a return of the paralysis, I don't know, but I really did get ill, and it was advised that I

not go. It was a cardiac thing and it was deemed not -- not good to take any long trips, so --

Q: So you --

A: -- we did not go. I have not been back, not ever been back. I shouldn't say that. I went -- that's to my hometown -- hometowns. I did go back. **Amos** had to deliver a lecture in **Berlin** and I had an old aunt who survived the war. A non-Jewish wife of a brother of my grandfather's who survived the war in **Berlin**, and we -- since **Amos** went to gi -- talk there, I wanted to see her because she really was a favorite of the family. And she did survive and we did see her and we had a wonderful visit. So yes, I've been back to **Berlin**, but only to see her and I saw nothing of **Berlin**, I just saw her.

Q: That was purposeful, not to see anything of **Berlin?**

A: I think so. I think so. I really -- I wa -- I don't think I was up to it, really, but I did want to see her because she was a very --

Q: What year was this? How long ago?

A: It must have been in the 70's.

Q: Mm-hm. Yeah.

End of Tape Three, Side B

Interview with Renate Fischer Chernoff
June 23, 2005

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection with **Renate Chernoff.** This is tape number four, side **A.** Let's now talk about some of your thoughts and feelings about what you went through. You said before that your mother had said you really didn't have a childhood. Do you agree with her?

A: I do. And I'll tell you, to this day, though I have a large circle of friends, I am still an outsider. I still feel myself as removed from others. Not that there -- not that I don't have friends, I have plenty of friends, but I'm still the one who's looking in. And some days I find this rather discouraging. I think -- I think that in my artwork, a lot of it has dealt with Holocaust and Holocaust issues, and even there I feel as though there is a layer between me, my work -- me and my -- and friends, and I don't know how else to explain it.

Q: Do you feel in a sense that you are like -- you are two people, one person on the inside and one person on the outside?

A: I guess so, because most people think I'm rather a jolly person, that I am full of fun and games and beans. And I can be that person, but I -- I'm not that person. I'm really reserved and I am withdrawn at times. I get very easily depressed, and I have kept a journal of some of my thoughts, not -- not often, but there are times. I have

insomnia. And I have the dreadful need -- and I say dreadful because I dread it, I guess, I have to read every scrap of Holocaust literature I can put my hands on. Whether I can find an adequate answer to something, or when I look at broadcasts on the television, I'm looking for those people that are no longer in my life. I look for my grandmothers everywhere and I keep saying sometime I'm going to see them again. And I busy myself in -- in a quiet way, with many of the questions of the Holocaust. And I've tried to read not only people who -- work of people who have gone through it, but of authorities who have written about it, and studies that have been -- psychological studies that have been done. I guess I'm trying to answer, who am I. And -- and it all has made me what I am today, I guess, but I'd like to know, you know, why. I often say oh, if life had been different and if I had -- if this had happened and if that had happened. But everybody says that. You don't have to be in -- in ma -- in my shoes or anybody else's shoes, everybody asks that. But I sometimes think my life would have been so different if times had been -- in th -- had run in a normal way and I had grown up in **Germany** and gone to school in **Germany**. Maybe it wouldn't have been as interesting at this point in time, but it would have been very different.

Q: You had said that you went back to **Germany** and visited your aunt, but that's all you did. Why did you not see more of **Germany**?

A: Well, for one thing we only had a few days in **Berlin**, being practical about this. **Amos** was asked to give a lecture and we went and we came back. I think I wasn't ready to go back and I don't believe it was easy to get to **Breslau** at that point in time. **Berlin** was open, **Breslau** o -- I don't think was a tourist place -- tourist -- not that it needed to be a tourist place, but I don't think it was a place that wa -- I -- I -- we di -- we didn't do it. I -- I -- I wish I -- I wish I could tell you more, but we didn't, and it was a ma -- it was really a factor of time, and of fear, and of fear. You know, you want to go back and you don't want to go back. We've gone back to places where we had visited. We lived in **Thailand** for awhile and went back 30 years later and were so sorry as to what had happened to the country. I like to remember it the way it was 30 years ago. Now, everything that I remember -- not everything, but things that I remember in the -- in **Germany** at the countryside, and meadows and -- and the beautiful winters and so on, they're still there. The h -- th- the houses and the buildings in my mind are still the ones that are there, they're not there any more. That area was terribly shot up, particularly the Russians took their guns to that area. And I don't -- perhaps didn't know or didn't want to know what had really happened. Although some of my friends have gone back. My friend in **Israel** has gone back several times. But, interestingly enough, she is a year older than I am and couldn't remember a thing. And yet, I'm the visually one -- visually

active one, and I can remember it and I -- no. But I -- I think I'm ready to go back now. I would like to be well and go next year, and we're talking about it.

Q: What was it like though, when you put your foot down on German soil again, when you went back?

A: I did not like it and I did not tell anybody that I could understand what they were saying, because I could. I did not speak German, I spoke only in English. And it's very interesting when a German talks German to me, I question in my mind, where were you and where was your family? Take an example. My next door neighbor a few years ago was a couple. He was from **Germany**, he was a writer for the **Frankfurter Allgemeine**, wonderful German, conservative German newspaper, a good newspaper, though. He was married to a Spanish gal and they lived next door and it took me at least half a year before I could be comfortable with him. They had since become perhaps our closest friends and neighbors. They -- you know, if anybody could make me feel that maybe the younger generation today is different, he was the one. I am still in touch with them, they have moved back to -- well, at this point to **Spain.** He still is writing for the **Frankfurter Allgemeine**. I watched their daughter grow up, I babysat with the daughter. I have a little plant here that's my little **Laura** plant because she gave it to me. They are -- he is such a dear person and he has -- the one who has sent me books on **Ratibor** and **Breslau** and tried to make

contacts for me to make it easy for me to go back if I wanted to go back. The dearest people in this world. And I hope -- I hope that the young people today are like him because he's an incredible person, maybe one of our best friends. So --

Q: Did you tell him about your experiences?

A: Oh yes. He asked and I told him, and he was also -- he was the first writer who wrote anything about the memorial -- the memorials, the Holocaust memorials in **Florida**. He was -- and he had an interview, one of the very few interviews that were given by the chap who headed the memorial -- the Holocaust Memorial Center. Now, he was the one from **Israel** -- was there one --

Q: **Weinberg, Shaika Weinberg**?

A: Yes. He had one of the few interviews and had a two hour interview with him and was amazed and thrilled to have it. He was often a visitor over there. He was an un -- he's an unusual person, to say the least.

Q: Are there any sights or sounds, smells, or anything that bring back the experience that you had?

A: Mm. Well, the sight of boots, leather boots, black leather boots. Not suede boots, but black -- shiny, black leather boots, and the rhythm of the -- of this -- o -- th-the marching rhythm really, really bothers me very much. Now, on the other hand, I can listen to **Wagner** music and be absolutely thrilled by it and where's the logic there?

There is no such thing as logic. Smells, I don't think I'm at all aware of. And did -- did you say sights?

Q: Mm-hm, or sounds.

A: Sounds.

Q: Which you talked about.

A: The sound -- the --

Q: Mm-hm.

A: -- the beating of the -- of the cobblestones, feet on cobblestones, yeah.

Q: Do you think in German?

A: I count in German, I do my sums in German. I'm not very good at using a little machine, so I -- I do all my math in German. I read German, I -- I would say I'm fluent in every day German. I read slowly, stuff that's a little bit more complicated, because after all, I kind of stopped talking German when I came to **Canada** and my parents wanted to improve their English, so of course I had spoke English to my parents. But -- but I did speak German, and -- when I went home, Mother and I always did try to keep it up at least a little. But I feel comfortable speaking German ma -- if I know who I'm talking to. Otherwise I don't open my mouth and let on.

Q: Why not?

A: I don't like to think -- I don't li -- th-there is a sound in the German language when I sometime hear people speak, that rarely there is a brashness about the language that bothers me. If I know that they are German Germans, I-I just -- I don't react. I can listen and know exactly what they're talking about. But there is a manner, there is a brusqueness ab -- the German tongue in some -- some people that I find a little difficult to take.

Q: When your -- when your children were the ages -- the age that you were, seven, eight, nine, when you were going through those difficult times in **Europe**, did that bring back th -- your childhood experiences even more vividly?

A: I guess I was -- I was a tougher mother probably, than I needed to be. I was probably a more careful mother, in many respects a stricter mother. My children tells -- tell me that I was fairly strict. But I guess the -- the inclination is to -- to now let anything happen, to be careful, to not see them hurt, as I was. They had very good rapport with each other and with their cohorts and I think they had very happy childhood and very often I was just peeking in. I'm not sure I answered your question very well. Pose it to me again, please.

Q: I -- I was just thinking, when your children were the same age, when they were seven, eight and nine, when you were going through these difficult times in **Europe**,

did you look at them and did it make you think of your age -- what you went through at that time? When --

A: Yes, I think particularly with the -- with the two girls. Not so much with my son. I could identify less with him, of course. But yes, I -- I guess I -- I did, I -- I did think -- I did think so often how fortunate, how fortunate they were to be born in this country and to live in this wonderful, wonderful country, of which I became a citizen, not too long ago. I did not -- I was a Canadian citizen for a long period of time and then when I started to critique the government, I was told I better take out citizenship. You cannot criticize -- well, the story was ma -- my husband needed **Q** clearance for his work, and so ah -- I -- I did take out my citizenship and it was a very formal thing in **Knoxville, Tennessee** in the old-fashioned way and it was wonderful. It was a day to remember. And my children were there and they were just sorry I couldn't become the president of the **United States**, that's all.

Q: Did you tell your children as they were growing up, about your background?

A: You know, it -- it's interesting, I did and I didn't. I think I -- I was hesitant until they asked questions and then when they asked questions I tried to answer as truthfully as I could. On the other hand they, like I, did not want to rub, you know, salt into any wounds. They did not want to put me into a situation that would make it hard on me, as I did to my mother, because I did not want to hurt her. I -- I did share

with them, especially the school experiences. I di -- I shielded them, I think, a great deal as to what happened to the grandmothers. I just -- I couldn't talk about it and obviously they couldn't either. But we watched together many offerings on television which prompted questioning, and I was tra -- I tried to answer as best I could, what I thought was appropriate for their ages. So in a way I did share. But I think -- I think now -- I think now that more is being written and more is known. The children today -- I mean, my -- my grown children today feel freer to ask me and I am able to answer them, perhaps a little bit better than before. And even my grandchildren have asked me questions and I'm very willing to answer. And my grandchildren range in age from 13 to 17. So I have a good range there, and they -- the thi -- the youngest one, who has just turned 13, is the only one who has not yet been really exposed to things. But were he to ask, I would certainly be able to -- to answer, I think.

Q: Are you angry that you had to go through and your family had to go through and pay the price that it did and people living in this country didn't have to?

A: Sometimes. But you know, on the other hand, I am so grateful that things turned out relatively well for our family. And they did. I sometimes am very angry that the world didn't respond. On the other hand, we were so lucky and I feel so blessed that I have come -- I'm much less angry now than I was at one time, and I think that in

my early adult years, I was very angry. But I think, as I'm getting older I'm -- I'm seeing it perhaps more in perspective. And I think the -- who in the world would have known, or would have believed what was happening? I mean, the whole thing is so in-inconceivable. That's why I think I -- I-I -- I am much more aware and -- and worried about places like **Darfur,** because again the world is silent. But not quite as silent as they were then because we were inoculated at that point with a -- with a virus, if you will. So I cannot -- you know, I -- I'm far less angry now than I was.

Q: Were you involved in any way in the civil rights movement because you came from a country that deprived many people of their civil rights, did you respond to that?

A: I was very involved in the civil rights movement. We lived in **Knoxville, Tennessee** and we lived there during the marches, and we lived there during the sit-ins and we lived there during the non-mixing of the races, and I was very involved. I took part in sit-ins in the south when it wasn't exactly a picnic to do that. And I was one of the very, very few white people who became a counselor at a black -- a mixed -- well, it was not mixed, it was a black camp, and I was maybe one of the few white people who, during those times went and taught at a camp when I was thr -- we were threatened. The camp was threatened because it had some black and whites together.

But I felt strongly enough -- in fact, I felt so strongly about going to that camp, my little **Judy** was 18 months old and I took her in her stroller to that camp. I felt that if -- you know, maybe we didn't have the money with which to -- to -- to give large donations, I felt my place was to do the right thing, and so I -- it was very close to that movement and we always had friends who were -- black friends who came to our house and with whom we, you know, worked together. My husband was the first one who gave a black person a job at the University of **Tennessee** Memorial Research Center. Yes, we were very involved, always have been.

Q: Do you think that's because of your history?

A: I think so. It's also because we're Jewish. That's -- that's our religion, and we have to live it. And that was one way of doing it.

Q: Which was going to be my next question about what your thoughts are about being Jewish, after all your family suffered because -- and you did too, because you were Jewish, I was just wondering what your thoughts on that subject was.

A: More Jewish than ever. Not necessarily in the religious sense, but in the way of life sense of doing the right thing and supporting the right causes. And helping where help is needed and living the exemplary life that our religion teaches us to live. And you know, whether I go to sh -- s -- Shabbat services every Saturday, that's not my thing. I go, I do gis -- I -- I go to **Yizker** services and I go to the high

holiday services, and I do go to Sabbath services. But to me it's the -- it's the every day life. And I -- I hope I have instilled that in my children, because one of my children worked for the brown lung situation, has worked in the mountains of **Appalachia**, doing good work. And they've taken synagogue activities very seriously, but not the -- maybe not the little things, but in helping the homeless and that sort of a thing, so I think they're instilled hopefully with -- with that -- those thoughts in mind. Am I more religious? Well, it depends what you call religious. I li -- I live my life in the best way I know how to. I serve on the **Hevre Kadisha** at my synagogue. I did a lot of volunteer work when I was younger. I taught Sunday school, all that good stuff. Going to synagogue, depends. I like to think that

[indecipherable]

Q: So being discriminated because you were Jewish, and losing relatives who were close to you because you were Jewish has not negated any of your feelings about it?

A: I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't think so. I would say it may have reinforced the doing of the right thing at all times and be it in very simple and easy ways of doing the right thing or -- or making more difficult decisions. It has not negated it. I know many people left their religions on the other side of the ocean when they came over. I was not one of those.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Nor were my parents, in fact, quite on the contrary. It had ma -- made them more s -- much more religious and they too, fought for the good causes.

Q: Let's talk a little -- just more about some history. When the **Eichmann** trial was going on in **Jerusalem**, what were your thoughts at that time?

A: Get the bastard. I don't know, at that point I probably was in a way seeking revenge. I -- I really can't -- I can't remember how I felt at the time. I watched it diligently and I felt that **Israel** came up with the right answer. Of killing him. Putting him to his **[indecipherable]**

Q: If you -- if you hadn't gone through what you did go through, do you think you would be a different person? Are you --

A: Oh, absolutely.

Q: In what way are you the person you are today, attributed to your history?

A: I think if I had lived in **Germany** and brought -- had been brought up in **Germany**, I would have had a -- a much more superficial kind of life. I think I would have been a pampered daughter, certainly a pampered granddaughter. I was the only granddaughter on both sides, and the apple, I guess, of many eyes and I think my life would have been very different. I don't know that I would have gone to university, I probably wouldn't. I probably would have done something much more frivolous. I'm not -- well, I don't know, but I'm not so sure that causes would had

stirred me so, as -- well certainly the civil rights cause did, but there were so many other causes that, you know, that my husband and I were associated with. And he comes from a very, very strong Zionist background and his father was a rabbi. I'm sure **Aba Chernoff** thought his son married out of the faith, but -- I don't keep a kosher house and that sort of thing, but I think -- and you know. I-I don't know, I think I would have been a -- a pampered girl in **Germany**. Maybe not, but you know, this is speculation and life is life and I am just -- you know, I am so grateful, there isn't a day that I don't thank the fact that I'm here and that I've got four grandkids who are well and healthy and -- and life goes on. And it's -- it's a good place to be at in -- in life because when **Amos** and I got married, life was not easy for us, but we muddled through somehow and -- and here we are.

End of Tape Four, Side A

Beginning Tape Four, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Renate Chernoff.** Tell me a little bit about your artwork. What media do you work in, and what subjects? You had mentioned the Holocaust before, and so if you could expand on that?

A: Well, I -- I was a frustrated art student when I was studying microbiology and really all my life wanted to go to art school. Wasn't allowed to because of other

matters. However, finally, after my children stayed in school til 3:30 in the afternoon, my husband urged me to do what I've always wanted to do and that was to go to art school, which I did. I went to school at the University of **Tennessee** in **Knoxville**. And first I -- he had had a -- a second heart attack at that point in our story and I again thought well, I should go back to school and learn to do something that would prepare me to earn a living, God forbid, and thought I would study art education. However, after the second class of art education I decided that was not for me under any circumstances. Perhaps I should try the art school. And he wanted very much to have me do that and so I did go to art school and I studied metalworking. And I -- I learned how to s -- do metalsmithing, metalcasting and all aspects of the metal as an a -- as a tool, and taking a Master's degree in Fine Arts at the university. And worked in metals and also had to choose a second part and that was fibers, and so I took metals and fibers both, and then interesting situation arrived in the sense that after two years I was told -- and I was working part time because I still had the carpools and the kids and 18 puppies and all that sort of thing -- I was told I had to choose a thesis project. And so I decided I would write a thesis on the history of the ceremonial objects pertaining to the Torah and make contemporary pieces based on the research of the history of each of these as implements on their own. And that's what I did. So I made breastplates and I made **[indecipherable]**

pointers, and I proposed the **[indecipherable]** and I made the covering for the Torahs and I made **mezuzahs** and all sorts of other things along the side, learning the technique. But I wanted to do something that was a bit cerebral as well as doing -- creating something new, and so that I did. And I wrote a thesis, a thick book, which -- the work of which I enjoyed tremendously, both doing the library re-research, which was a little difficult from **Knoxville, Tennessee,** but the university got me all kinds of books that I needed to and I was able to do that and in my graduate show I showed my pieces, and it was accepted and I was a happy camper. I graduated in 1973 with all my dear ones around me. Cap and gown and the whole thing, and **David** graduated from high school. So we had a gala celebration together. And then we left **Knoxville** and I had -- I had the use of the university lab to do my work in and then we came to **Knoxville** and I no longer had a lab to work in and so I decided perhaps it was time to switch from doing metalwork, which required gas, which I find very hard to -- to keep in my house, which psychologically was very difficult for me to have a gas tank in my house.

Q: **[indecipherable]**

A: Because of -- because of memories or thoughts about gas. I decided I would go ahead and carry on with weaving, which I loved, and I did tapestry weaving on -- I have a loom and I used the loom for various tapestry projects. But all along I still

loved my metal. And so, in the l-last number of years I've combined the two and I weave metal on my loom. And it's wire that I use, and I use stainless steel wire and copper wire and brass wire and I weave it on my loom and I do sculptural pieces. Many of them are Judaic. I take really my inspiration from the jew -- things Judaic. And of course, I have concentrated both on the liturgy -- I've done a series on the High Holy Day prayers, but I've also done Holocaust series and I did one particular six piece Holocaust -- progression of thoughts on the Holocaust from the earliest days to the final days. And so -- and also my metal, my woven metal -- metal pieces are **[indecipherable]** boxes and things that could -- that could be used in worship or in home worship at least. I made mis -- **mizrahs** and the -- various other implements where I can use the wos -- woven fi -- the woven fabric made out of metal. And the combination of the technique of the loom plus the material of the metalsmith has given me a great deal of satisfaction, and I still continue working, very much influenced by my Judaic background, and very happy doing what I'm doing.

Q: Can you describe your -- your six panel work that you did relating to the Holocaust in a little more detail?

A: Okay. I called it "**Never Again**" and it is really a -- a group. It's made up of six individual pieces and you'll see a lot of symbolism in this, o-of course. It -- it's a progression of the events that occurred from the beginnings, relating increasingly to

the restrictive things, of the ims -- restrictive laws of the Nazi regime in the 30's. The second panel details **Kristallnacht** using my synagogue as a -- part of the synagogue as my emphasis. The third is badges, reminding us of the oppressive acts of the Nazis when they tried to cleanse the country of undesirables. Incarceration, a progression for the confinement, enclosure and last journeys. The rapid escalation to -- to convey to and remove prisoners from the camps. I think one of the ideas that I used o-on the side, there's a progression from one to six, I used the stripes of the **tallid**, progressing from one to six. I chose six because of the reference to six million. My last piece is a very dark one, but it has a little glimmer of gold, and that is our hope for the future, that these things never happen again. They're small tapestries. I wanted them small so that one has to lean into them in order to really study them, more like putting one's nose into a book, if you will, by coming thr -- into very close contact. I used cotton material because it was a non-precious material. I felt that I wanted to use something rather universal and simple and there are -- there are many references to numbers and to colors and to the stripes on the prisoners garb. And the colors of the -- the badges, which represented different factions, not only Jews, but people in general who were incarcerated. It's a series that I did not start with piece number one, strangely enough, piece number five was the first one I did, and then kind of wove. I knew I wanted to do six pieces, but

started with number five and then went backwards and started to number one. The first one has a few let -- letters in it, and it says **Jude Raus**, but if you'll see the **d-e** and the **u-s** is **Deus**, and my question is where was **Deus**, where was God then? It was a mammoth undertaking psychologically for me to do this piece, but I hope that the children will look on it sometime and remember what happened to all of us.

Q: Have you been to the Holocaust Museum, or any other Holocaust museum or **Yad Vashem**?

A: I have been to **Yad Vashem** and I've been to the Holocaust Museum in **Washington** many, many times. I go frequently. I feel privileged in the fact that I can go and read names on **Yom HaShoah**. I take every visitor that comes to visit me here in **Washington** to the museum. I find it an e-extremely uplifting as well as the other extreme. I feel both buoyed by the experience and I feel very sad and -- and -- and live it again and again but I feel sometimes it's important to go and just be there and see maybe just one or two of the exhibits, or go to the library and do a little research on subject matter that's very dear to your heart. And I -- as I say, I go very frequently. I go to the bookshop, I find very wonderful books there to -- to take home. And I find it an -- perhaps the most unusual place to visit in **Washington** and I tell every one of my visitors they mustn't leave **Washington** without going and they will be well rewarded in different ways by going. I think that the teaching

programs there are just remarkable. I love the fact that so many of the teaching is done, not only teaching children, but teaching the police force that comes through the gates, the teachers. I like the spirit of the workers there, who are just remarkable people who -- I can't say enough for it. I think we are just so blessed to have the museum here. And have I been to others? I've been to **Yad Vashem** and I will probably go to the **Wiesenthal** Center when I go to **Los Angeles** next week.

Q: In closing, is there anything else that we haven't talked about, or any message you wanted to give to your children or your grandchildren, before we close?

A: Learn well the lesson, as the great philosopher said. You are fated to wander through it again if you don't learn the lesson well.

Q: That is a very important note to end on. Thank you very much for doing the interview. This concludes the interview of **Renate Chernoff.**

End of Tape Four, Side B

Conclusion of Interview