This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with George Arnstein. This is track number three. And let's talk now a little bit about your thoughts and your perspectives considering where you were born and what you went through.

What are your thoughts about Germany today? You said you've gone back, obviously, on visits and lectures. Just generally.

Let me detour. My wife was a powerful influence in my life, which I'm sure happens in other marriages, too, but unusually so. She was smart, competent, sensitive, et cetera.

On our first trip to Europe, which she was eager to do, we also stopped off in Stuttgart ostensibly to liquidate a wicker basket, which had been deposited by my great-aunt Claire with a bank in Stuttgart. When Claire, American born, great-aunt, and the bank had charged annually a modest deposit fee, rent. And my wife said, we've got to liquidate that-- fine-- among other things.

She also said-- and this is typical of my wife-- I want to know where you came from. So we looked at the house we lived in and things like that. We also went to the bank.

Took half an hour to produce the wicker basket. And it contained linens, towels, 12 pieces of silverware, which, however, is not sterling, because the German standard is only 875 and sterling is 92% or something like that. And there also were a couple of armbands.

She said, oh, I think there was something that turned out to be gold. And one went to my sister and one went to Sherry. She spotted them. The linens we gave to former maids, whom we also looked up.

The pieces of silver we took to a local silversmith jewelry store. We would like to buy-- we had German restitution funds. We would like to buy 12 place settings.

And they said, we can't do that, because we don't have enough silver. And we can't import any. You have to have old silver to trade.

And I said, well, we just happen to have this pile. And literally, that's how it happened. And that is how today I own place settings for 12 in almost sterling silver.

You asked about my feelings about Stuttgart, this is an example of my wife's influence in, to some extent, reconciling me. And on that same trip-- oh.

What year was that? When did you go?

'57, '58.

Oh, the 1950's. OK.

I also engaged in a long correspondence dealing with restitution. My mother doesn't type. My sister doesn't know German. She does, but badly. And so it befell to me.

And I inherited all these documents from my aunt Nellie, from my mother, from my grandmother. I still have an enormous collection of them. And I successfully pursued any number of restitution claims. Successfully has its limits.

They were put into blocked mark accounts, because Germany, in those days, had no foreign currency. They were essentially bankrupt. So you could use the money within Germany, but you could not-- or you could sell it in Switzerland at a terrific discount, which we did a couple of times. And of course, I shared everything with my mother and sister. The result is that we were wealthy when we were in Stuttgart.

In the process I engaged a lawyer in Stuttgart, and got a letter from one of his interns, for lack of a better name, who identified himself as a former classmate, who is now an apprentice lawyer. And he would fully understand if I did not want to continue the correspondence. The point is I did, and we're still friends today. His kids have visited here, and et cetera. P.S. his father was a printer with the pre-war Social Democratic Newspaper, in other words, left leaning.

So that is another, shall we say, point of reference where we had access to a-- oh, they weren't living in Stuttgart they had been evacuated during the war, where my wife got a feeling for how Germans lived, and what's most curious to learn about my previous life. Is this the kind of stuff?

Well, yeah. I just wanted to go into your--

Oh.

--what your thoughts about Germany, whether you're comfortable there.

At the Ost-Kolleg, the lecture I gave in German, very significant. I faced a decision if I accepted that invitation, for which there was a trivial honorarium, I had to accept the Germans. I had to make my peace. So I was confronted with a decision, and I made it. And in the affirmative if you want to put it that way.

Germans today are two generations removed from then. Every once in a while I run into somebody, who, of course, is of my generation. And there I tend to have problems.

Nothing hostile. They all behave very properly. And I behave, I hope, properly. But I simply don't relate to them the way I relate to younger people.

There is an American foundation, the Obermeyer Foundation. Arthur Obermeyer is a third generation American of German Jewish descent from Southwest Germany. And he has established an annual award honoring those Germans who are doing something to keep alive the German Jewish memory. It's mostly the restoration of cemeteries and that kind of stuff.

And four years ago, Hans Hirsch, and I, and a couple of others nominated somebody successfully. And I thought, OK, I've done my thing. So Hans asked me, you're going, of course? I said, it hadn't occurred to me.

But I went and found it very interesting. And I'll spare you the details. I have since done it three more times, mostly because we have identified various people. And we're currently waiting to see whether this year's nominees were elected or not.

The trip to Berlin was interesting to me also, because I wanted to meet this German historian, who is also interested in the six week occupation. It turns out he was conceived during that occupation of an American and a German mother. That's his motivation.

And he doesn't speak much English. He has since discovered his American father, and has been accepted by the family in Ohio, or wherever, still doesn't speak much English. But he has been very helpful in taking me sightseeing to pieces of Berlin that I would not have seen otherwise and, obviously, is of a different generation.

Do you think you would be a different person today if you hadn't gone through the childhood that you had living through the beginnings of Nazi Germany and having to leave your home country?

Yes.

Different psychologically?

I can tell, because my sister, being three years younger, and married to an American with three American, California

born kids knows about American childhood rhymes, stories, anecdotes. I, not having kids, and being just a bit older-- oh, I vaguely know who Old Mother Hubbard was, but not really. In that sense, I am not fully assimilated. You asked me, would I be different, yes, I would be different. But I didn't have that kind of childhood or experiences.

Yeah, I also meant like psychologically. In background knowledge, right, but psychologically, do you think?

Yes. I still have certain German habits, customs. The way I was brought up is emphasizes deferred gratification. Maybe fewer white lies, maybe too much adherence to telling the truth, even when it shouldn't be told. Now, my wife taught me an awful lot and certainly has Americanized me. I think that's as far as I can go.

What are your thoughts about being Jewish? Did you become-- you didn't realize it until you were older. Have you become more Jewish or not?

I have for the past dozen years or so, longer than that my wife, been very active in doing family history, genealogy. My wife teased me until I started compiling her family history, which is quite limited, of course, because Eastern resources are. But I discovered a cousin of hers, who had fled the Soviet Union and lived in Germany. I corresponded with that cousin, who said, oh, you, Sherry, have an uncle in Leningrad, whereupon we took a Baltic cruise.

First, lined up a local recent immigrant, who made a phone call to the uncle in Leningrad and basically arranged that we would meet in Leningrad when our ship stopped there. The uncle imported a cousin of Sherry's, who lived in Moscow, a retired teacher of English, who had never been in an English speaking country to serve as interpreter. In short, my wife has forgiven me my interest in family history. I'm being glib, of course.

Why did I engage in what is clearly unequivocally Jewish family history? I learned a whole lot about my ancestors, who spoke probably Western Yiddish, who clearly were observant. I have a great-grandfather, who was either a parnas or-- but it's all historical interest. It doesn't do anything for me.

In the emotional Jewish sense, I am ethnically Jewish as non-observant as can be. The only time I go to a synagogue is for weddings and funerals. Hans has forgiven me, clearly that's it.

What are your thoughts about Israel? Do you feel a connection?

That's an awkward question or an awkward answer. I keep thinking the Jewish claim to Palestine, to Israel, is a little bit like, are we ready to give America back to the Indians? I'm conflicted, obviously.

I am not a Zionist. I am vaguely pro-Israel. But it's a tenuous connection.

Have you been there?

We've been there twice, but superficially. We took Mediterranean cruises, and the ship docked in Haifa. And we had 36 hours. I walked the stations of the cross in Jerusalem, because the fellow passengers were Protestants.

My wife had a non-cousin in Haifa, I think, and visited him. My wife had a much more traditional Jewish upbringing. She belonged to B'nai B'rith youth, and [INAUDIBLE].

I don't want to put words in her mouth, but I think she kind of saw marrying me as a liberating experience. Part of it being, of course, simply loyalty to a marriage, and I don't know. But she certainly adjusted more to my way of life and thinking then I adjusted to hers.

What were your thoughts during the Eichmann trial?

I'm not sure I had any. But he's an SOB. And he had it coming. I mean, that's simple.

When the news came out after the war on the liberation of the camps and the terrible photographs and films, did that--

There, but for the grace of God, go I.

Did you feel that way?

Of course. Of course. I certainly internalized that.

I am very conscious of the fact that, thanks to an American great-grandfather, and thus an American grandmother, and thus extended family in California, my life became a whole lot better. In part also, because I didn't get hung up on the East Coast in New York. There's nothing with New York. And there's nothing wrong with-- but I'm glad I grew up in San Francisco. We're in a moment of weakness, of course. I can claim to be a fourth generation Californian.

Do you still get restitution? Reparations, I meant.

My mother was unhappy, because she never collected a monthly--

She never did?

No. She somehow or other fell between the cracks. No, we collected on the house, and it's forced sale, and things like that.

And I got a very modest restitution for my sister and for myself for interrupted education. Parenthetically, she collected more than I did, because I was hell bent to get a PhD. She took her own sweet time to get a Masters. But those are the aberrations or idiosyncrasies of laws enacted

So you didn't get monthly reparations?

Oh, it didn't amount to all that much. But we were poor, struggling, graduate students, and every little bit was welcome. I have uncovered a couple of dormant Swiss accounts, because I pursued that kind of stuff. And I tipped off a cousin in Connecticut, who collected far more than I did. But she had wealthier relatives. And tipped off a cousin in Florida, who failed to follow through.

It has been ongoing. But nobody in my immediate family ever collected monthly payments. No, these were always rather small lump sums.

Do you feel the lessons have been learned? Do you feel lessons have been learned from the Holocaust that the world has learned?

Who is the learner? I mean, who is supposed to have learned? And as far as the Germans are concerned, I am persuaded that they are trying to do the right thing and are doing the right thing.

Sometimes I even worry that they may be going too far in outlawing any kind of a protest. But that's their problem, not mine. Yes, the Germans have learned their lesson I think.

Who else is supposed to have learned? The Austrians, certainly not. They're opportunists. I happen to have Austrian, Jewish neighbors-- he was much younger than I was when they came here.

He's fully far more Americanized than I am. And we sometimes make our unkind remarks about Austrian opportunism. I assume you're familiar with the story. Who else is supposed to have learned from the Holocaust?

I just mean the world in general.

Sorry, I draw a blank.

What are your thoughts about a Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, built in Washington?

I'm glad it's there. I'm glad it includes the Roma. I have been there. I have-- enjoyed is not the right word-- the exhibits.

In fact, the last time I was there I was reminded it is my life deja vu all over again. The exhibits are awe inspiring. In a way, I'm glad that it's just off the Mall. Period.

Because? Why do you say that?

The Mall should be American patriotic. Just like Martin Luther King is just a little bit off, in part, because the Mall is more or less full. It's only in a limited sense the American experience, therefore, it's entirely suitable, but maybe off the Mall.

Well, is there anything else you would want to say before we close? Anything else you want to add? Anything we haven't covering that you would like?

I should add something about my military experience, which obviously is a major event in my life. I am glad I was sent to the European theater. It was a very meaningful experience.

I don't want to call it an emotional experience, but it-- and I don't want to call it vengeance either. But I was clear what the war was about. And I was glad to be doing something towards it.

I am amazed with hindsight-- and I was in a small outfit, 160 men-- how fully accepted I was. That they never, to my knowledge, had any doubts. They were not conscious of the difference between Jewish and non-Jewish. I was fully accepted.

You're talking about the men in your outfit?

Oh, yes, my fellow troopers. And of course, I was more pivotal than most others, because I spoke French, and I spoke German. And I knew all kinds of local things that turned out to be useful. I could translate the sign that said Achtung Minen.

So I just want to add that was a meaningful experience. And I'm glad I was in it. The experience in military government after the end of the war was also meaningful. First of all, it certainly enhanced my vocabulary. To do denazification questionnaires you enlarged your vocabulary and your view of the world.

It also refreshed my memories. One reason why I am probably better able to remember things during an interview like this than others is because I had a refresher course at age 20, 21, which living in an environment that evoked all kinds of things that are forgotten or would have forgotten. And once again, the influence of my wife is massive. Period. And positive, obviously.

Do you feel German in any way?

I'm not sure I understand the question, probably because I can't answer it. Part of me says, hell no. And part of me says, well, of course. That's where I was born. That's how I spent the first 13 years of my life, or 12 years.

My father certainly wasn't Americanized. My mother became quite thoroughly Americanized, and learned to speak excellent English. Well, she lived within walking distance of her grandchildren. And she became a surrogate mother to the grandchildren, who to this day think very highly of her. Well, she had a house with a pool in Los Angeles.

But my mother was German, and expected me to-- I was expected to write home in the army after the war regularly, often. And I would get a letter back punctually. That simply was a

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Were those letters always in German to her and back to you?

Oh, no. No, no.

In English?

In English. Well, mine had to be in English, because they were subject to censorship.

Oh, censorship.

Well, not after the end of hostilities, of course. But I'd have to look. My mother's letter almost certainly were in English by then.

Did you talk to your mother in English or in German?

We spoke English almost from day one in this country. Obviously, not. We had to speak German, because we didn't know enough English.

But we were hellbent to become Americans, and assimilate, and learn English, which in the case of my sister and me happened, not overnight, but very quickly. And in the case of my mother, we increasingly spoke to her in English.

We had no intention of going back. This was in the day when it took a week on a steamer. And, no, we didn't want to go back. Of course, I went back within five years.

Did your mother ever go back to visit?

Oh, my mother went back at least twice.

She did?

My aunt Nellie died too soon. She didn't go back. Marianne didn't go back. And my grandmother, also, she died in '49, much too soon to go back.

Did you lose any extended members of your family in the Holocaust?

Extended, yes.

You did?

But not immediate family. Well, because I do family history, I have, of course-- I mean, I have several thousand names. And there are lots and lots of victims.

But in terms of people that I knew personally, there was a classmate of my father's, who was also a distant relative, who committed suicide in Los Angeles, because he found out that his nieces and nephews had been deported. There was a cousin, who of all things was the equivalent of a county judge, not-- I mean he was a judge, but not-- who was killed, or his wife was killed. I don't remember now.

One of them died of natural causes about that time. I think it was his wife. And she is the relative, as opposed to the judge. But this is extended family. Of all the people that I knew, I literally can't think of one.

When you meet someone from Germany, your generation or about that time, do you ever talk about your childhoods or do you not dwell on that?

Well, as I told you, Herman came out of a PW cage. This was September 1945. The war ended in May.

We explored the neighborhood together. And we did it amicably, successfully, and nostalgically. He told me that-- he was a Lieutenant-- his company commander, who was a captain, was a guy who lived across the street. And he was four years older than we were, and he was killed.

Period. Paragraph.

My wife and I went back and visited Herman and his wife. This must have been-- my wife died 14 years ago, so I tend to time everything before and after. This must have been 18, 20 years ago.

And it was a very good visit. He, and his wife, and my wife, and I took a trip out in the country and we visited a ruined castle on a mountaintop, because Herman and I had bicycled there on a one day trip and. We were all staggered that we had managed to do out at the age of 12, 13. But these are selective.

When I visited the city of Stuttgart had a program to invite its former citizens. My wife was by then too ill to travel. And so my sister, and I, and her husband went whenever. And I was interviewed, and there was a story in the newspaper with my picture, whereupon there promptly was a phone call from a former classmate in the hotel. He'd like to get together with me.

Well, he was one of those I did not wish to get reacquainted with. He was the cousin of one of the guys who had followed me during a soccer game. Now, blood is thicker than water.

He was a cousin, so maybe he was less enthusiastic and less nasty. But I chose not to tell him off, not to do anything. I chose not to get reacquainted. Does that illustrate?

Yeah.

In 1945, probably during that same visit with Herman, I remember walking past the house where the teacher lived who had made that precipitating remark. And there was the doorbell, and there was his name. Should I break his goddamn windows? No. I chose to ignore him.

So I don't remember exactly what your question was. But my feelings are very clearly, no, I do not want to exact revenge. I merely want to take advantage of whatever pleasant memories I have.

Well, that's a good note to end on. That's a good note to end on.

I thank you. I hope I have contributed something.

You certainly have. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with George Arnstein.