

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Erica Laufer  
August 19, 2012  
RG-50.106\*0199**

## PREFACE

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## **ERICA LAUFER**

### **August 19, 2012**

Gail Schwartz: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer collection interview with Erica Laufer conducted by Gail Schwartz on August 19, 2012 in Chevy Chase, Maryland. This is track number one. What is your full name?

Erica Laufer: Edith Erica Laufer. I do not use my first name.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In Klagenfurt, Austria.

Q: And when were you born?

A: May 11, 1930.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family. Your parents' names?

A: My father was variously known as Julius Laufer and Joel Laufer. My mother was in Austria was known as Clara Schwartz Laufer and she changed it in the US to Clare.

Q: And where were they born?

A: My mother was born in Berlin, Germany and my father was born in someplace near Krakow, Poland. I believe at that time it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Q: And how did they meet?

A: Apparently his parents and him moved to Vienna and my mother and her parents apparently moved to Vienna. And they both worked during the day. It was so modern. They took French

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class at night time. That used to be the way to meet people, study French conversation. And they met there as a result. In Vienna.

Q: Do you know when they were born?

A: Yeah, but not off hand. My father was born November 14th, 1898. My mother was born May the seventh of 1905.

Q: Tell me again when your father was born.

A: 1898.

Q: 1898. Yes, thank you. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

A: No.

Q: You were an only child?

A: I'm an only child.

Q: OK. What kind of work did your father do?

A: Well in Austria, he had a limited education. And he was a support of a large family. And he was working. When I was born he was in Klagenfurt working as a window dresser for the only department store in town. My mother had been sent to be a, to learn how to become a master milliner and she was an apprentice for I believe seven years. They had the guild system in Austria and she was a master milliner. And as a result she had a store where she made hats and had four apprentices working for her. Meanwhile, they lived in a flat. We lived on the second story and they always had every year, a different girl, peasant girl would come from Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, some such place, for a one year contract and up, upstairs, there was another family and Herbert was a little boy who played with me. He was a year younger than me and if

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we wanted to play we would push the broom on the ceiling or the floor as to whether or not we wanted to play.

Q: Let's talk about the neighborhood where your apartment was. Was it a –

A: I haven't got the faintest clue. It had a yard and it had a big, big peach tree which Herbert and I one day attacked and ate a great deal of peaches when they were not ripe. And were sick for days and got very much punished. It had a very nice yard that we could use to our heart's content. And I don't know goose, by the name of Pauline. And we would sit on a bench. It was very pleasant. Lots of plants and trees and things around there.

Q: Do you know if it was a Jewish neighborhood or was it a mixed neighborhood or you don't know.

A: I have no idea. It couldn't have been a Jewish neighborhood. My mother wouldn't have wanted that. And certainly, Herbert certainly wasn't. And as far as I know, I was the only Jewish child in the entire school.

Q: Tell me about your school.

A: Oh. I don't know. One thinks one knows things but one doesn't necessarily know. One doesn't know what it is that one remembers or what one thinks one remembers. I remember being taught by nuns. I have no idea whether the public schools in Klagenfurt were run by nuns or whether that was a Catholic school. My mother liked to deny her Jewishness and tried to tell me that her parents, her mother Julie **Hotzel** was Catholic. But I'm not too sure about that. I sort of doubt it. But anyhow, I went to school and I was the only Jewish child there. My father insisted that I not attend class during Catholic training. As a result I recall spending my time out in the school yard, even in the fall and the winter for the hour that they had the daily religious training.

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The nuns didn't like me and they thought that I was slow witted and insisted that I be trained to learn how to read and how to do math. I was very slow and I seem to recall sitting in front of the room in disgrace all the time.

Q: It sounds like maybe your house was obviously not a religious home. In no way observant?

A: Oh my father was very observant. Oh yes he was conservative. And oh no, he was –

Q: Do you remember any holidays you observed?

A: Oh yeah, absolutely. I can still rattle off **Manishtana Chalala Chased** [ph]. Of course. And he convinced my mother to light the Shabbos candles and she would cook carp and all the special foods and all that, yes. Yes, my father was very tolerant of this but he prayed daily and –

Q: Did you belong to a synagogue?

A: Excuse me.

Q: Did the family belong to a synagogue?

A: I have no idea what they did. I think everybody had to. I don't think in Austria you had any choice.

Q: Do you remember going to the synagogue?

A: As a small child?

Q: Yes.

A: No, I don't have any recollection. I don't have many recollections because let's see we left when I was eight years old. And it was quite traumatic. And –

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Q: We'll talk about that.

A: It wiped out a lot of memories I would otherwise have perhaps.

Q: I'm sure. I just want to talk a little bit about your life before 1938, a little more. Did you have any Jewish friends in the neighborhood or –

A: No, no. I don't recall having had any other friend other than Herbert upstairs and his baby sitter or whatever you call them, nursemaid, housekeeper and my – we would go out together like going skating and what not. And –

Daughter: How about Freddy?

A: Oh no those were relatives. They frequently came to see us. My father's family frequently came to see us, from, I don't know from where they were. I don't know whether they were in Klagenfurt or whether they were in Vienna or where they were. But my favorite cousin Vera was very glamorous, very beautiful. A few years older than me. And my father had a sister by the name of Stella and she – they were all in Vienna I guess. The time I saw them frequently was after we had to move to Vienna. Other than that I, we got photographs of them visiting us in our place in Klagenfurt.

Q: What about your mother's family?

A: Well my mother's parents were retired. I have no idea what they did before. But they moved to Klagenfurt to be near my mother and me. And every day when I went to school, my father would take me, walk me to school. I would run after him because he walked so fast and my grandfather, my mother's father, Otto Schwartz would pick me up after school. And take me either to the candy store to get one piece of candy or else to the coffee houses where he would sit and sip coffee and read international newspapers. Then they would take me to the little shop that they had. It was no larger than this room here. And they had imported fabrics, beautiful fabrics

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from Scotland or what not. Wools for hand tailoring suits. Julie, his wife, would run the shop. He sat up front, outside, rolling cigarettes and translating German into Esperanto.

Q: What language did you speak at home? German?

A: Yeah, that was the only language.

Q: Not Yiddish at all?

A: Never. Yiddish was basically done by southern Europeans, people who could speak German or spoke German. They were rather prejudiced against Yiddish. Ok? No one ever spoke Yiddish. It was looked down upon.

Q: So I know you left when you were very young, but do you have any memories that you can recall about when things started to get a little difficult. This is before you left.

A: Before, yeah, ok. There we were one day, I've told this to my daughter several times. One day suddenly, there were troops in Klagenfurt. And I went to school and they sang Deutschland, Deutschland **uber Alles** [ph] and the miracle was that everybody in the class knew all the words and how to sing it. And then they were doing Heil Hitler. And they all knew how to do these things. It was very – day after Anschluss. Annexation in English. And I recall one of my friends in class, **Herta**, she kept raising her hand cause she wanted to go to the bathroom and the teacher thought she was saying Heil Hitler too much and wouldn't let her go. And next thing you know she evacuated (laughs) right there in class and we all laughed and the nun was very, very angry at us. (laughs) Ok.

Q: Had you heard of a man named Hitler by that time?

A: Now wait a minute. I'm getting to that. And when I went home, when I got home, the babysitter, housekeeper, whatever she was, took me downtown. And there was this man. This is my recollection. There was this man with a funny hairdo and funny moustache and a uniform



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and he was screaming and shouting and everybody was Heil Hitler-ing. The next day or the same day, almost immediately, Herbert came to see me and said his mother said we could no longer play together. He was forbidden to talk to me. The school told me, I could no longer go to school there. Dr. **Strife** the pediatrician said he could no longer treat us. And then a short while after that, an edict came that everybody who was Jewish had to resume or acquire a Jewish or Hebrew name and wear a yellow star. And everyone had to leave and move to the first section, **Asta Bitzerk** [ph] of Vienna. Find relatives or anything to go there and so we moved into the small flat of my father's father, **Shmeil** Laufer was his name. I think he went by Samuel. But his name was Shmeil. His wife had died a number of years earlier, Esther. She had died earlier. And everybody descended on this little apartment. It was on one of the upper floors. Flats they called them in those days.

Q: Let me back up a little bit. The young boy came and said he couldn't play with you and the pediatrician said –

A: Everybody said they couldn't deal with us.

Q: You were young. Do you remember how you felt as a young child, a young girl. Was it upsetting? Do you remember being very upset, frightened?

A: I, just total confusion. That's what, I don't really recall other than total confusion like what in God's name is happening.

Q: And when the troops came into your school, what was that like?

A: No, no troops came to our school.

Q: I thought you said soldiers came to the school.

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A: No we went. My babysitter or whatever, took me downtown after school and I think it was after school. Anyhow it was in the afternoon and although it doesn't make sense. But anyhow she took me into town.

Q: And when you saw those troops, what did that mean to you as a child?

A: I don't recall. I don't' recall. It wasn't anything you would see in a, very half rural town you know. It was a very quiet town. You wouldn't have seen such a thing as troops.

Q: How far away from Vienna was this?

A: Six hours by slow train.

Q: Six hours. Was it in the countryside?

A: Klagenfurt was the capital of Corinthia in the Roman empire. (laughs) Ok. Six hours by slow train. When we visited Austria many years later, it was still six hours by slow train. (laughs) But when she was, when my daughter was three years old, when you would go to India.

Daughter: maybe five or six.

A: It was still six hours by train.

Q: Oh so now you've moved. How did it feel as a young child to have to leave your home and move out –

A: I have no recollection. I have no recollection and my next recollection is being in the small stuffy apartment with all of these many relatives. My mother was desperate. She finally oh, my mother's story. My mother was a master milliner and had a very successful store as a milliner. And everyone, all the ladies wore hats all the time in public at that time. So that was very successful. Several years earlier she had fired Dora **Taya** [ph], one of her apprentices because

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she was stealing from customers and from the store. And after Anschluss Dora Taya came with an SS officer and said for my mother to get out. This now belongs to Dora Taya. No, don't take anything with you. Just go. My mother's brother, Richard Schwartz, meanwhile had married a very beautiful Catholic girl by the name of Annie. Very stylish, very beautiful, very tall. She advised him to take all the money out of the bank. We don't know what's going to happen and they put it in, they put it in a paper bag and she said she accidentally threw it in the trash. They spent two days at the city dump looking for the money. Of course they never found her and of course she was seen next with an SS officer as well. I don't know what happened to Richard or my grandparents at that point, my mother's family. Until later. I never saw, I know I never saw them again.

And so we moved to Vienna with all the other relatives on my father's side. And –

Q: Did you take anything special with you?

A: Oh my mother had, was so happy. She had finally gotten **runbough**. She called. It was all the furniture was inlaid and had round corners and she was so thrilled with it. She finally had it and of course she couldn't take that. So I don't know how she did it but in this very small apartment upstairs in Vienna she had brought the dresser, the dresser with a tall mirror and the vanity, whatever you call it. It was not a dresser. It was a vanity with a tall mirror. And every day she would dust it and she would be so sad because she had left the rest of the bedroom furniture there. And then being her and dusting every day, one day, it was Saturday, she dusted the vanity. And shook the dust cloth out the window to the horror of from the family because it was the Sabbath. You don't dust on the Sabbath, ok. Very vivid recollection of her daily stroking of the vanity.

Q: How long were you there in that apartment?

A: I don't know. Not long.

Q: A few months.

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A: We had to have, we had black curtains in front of our windows so it couldn't be seen from the street. That people were there. And one day let me, every once in a while we would speak out and they would get very angry at me for trying to peak out the corner and see what was going on. And I'd see all these armed boys and marching around.

Q: Was that scary?

A: One day there had been an impromptu synagogue next door, downstairs and that was burned down. And thank goodness they put the fire out. They had some kind of impromptu schooling as well. And the teachers remarked how, what a good student I was and how brilliant I was.

And I don't know how I suddenly within days became from the village idiot (laughs) to being brilliant, but whatever. Miraculously I suddenly became very intelligent.

So there was an impromptu school but it was very crowded there and there was one day it was especially bad. And some SA, SA were the younger fellows, SS were the storm troops. And the SA were like scouts, first. They marched also with them and they were of course, being young boys, were the most vicious. They came upstairs one day and they were looking for things.

Unfortunately nobody had anything but they threw some furniture out the window. But then they left. I recall one of them actually looked at me and smiled. I was a little kid, eight years old. I had no idea with a big white bow in my hair.

And after that my father decided we were leaving. And –

Q: Up to that point, did your parents sit down with you and explain to you what was happening?

A: I don't know.

Q: You don't remember asking them.

A: I don't know. My mother was always in danger of being half hysterical. I have no idea.

Q: She was always very frightened, your mother?

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A: About everything, yes. You know, why me, et cetera, et cetera. And my mother was real intellectual or whatever.

Q: So did you know what was happening? I mean I know you were young. You were only eight.

A: I don't know but I have recollections. My mother's family was, my mother had family in Vienna who were Christian. And at least they were Christian before the Nazis got hold of them and didn't believe they're not, their Christianity went sufficient generations back or something. Anyhow, I recall going with my father, my mother and me and hiding in doorways, going over to the other section. Taking off the gold, the yellow stars and going in the other section and hiding and trying to stay there until the pogroms were over and we could go back home during the day or something, and nothing would happen. It, just a recollection of total fright and terror. After a while the relatives said they couldn't afford to have us come there anymore of course.

Q: What did wearing a yellow star mean to you?

A: that nobody could tell who was a Jew and who wasn't unless they had a yellow star. You couldn't tell by looking at them, watching them or anything else.

Q: Were you upset to have to wear one?

A: I don't recall. Absolutely don't recall. Anyhow, there we were and my father said after this happened, a lot of ways and a lot of broken things. And

Q: This is cause of Kristallnacht.

A: I guess that's what it was, yeah. He said we're leaving and he got tickets. Since we had always lived frugally we were different from all other people. We had enough money, although my father was just a window dresser. My mother, everything she had was taken away. We had enough money to go. To buy tickets to go to China, which was willing to take anybody.

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And they laughed at him. I remember we were sitting around. There was just one candle and all of us sitting around and they were laughing at him.

Q: They being your other relatives?

A: His father and all his relatives as to how could we go someplace where it's so strange and different and we don't know the language and the custom and they got slanted eyes and yellow skin and nobody can understand anything they say, even when they speak German, which is true. You can't understand them when they speak English and they're speaking English. But anyhow, they made complete fun of him and they said these classic words that he's being very foolish that god will take care of him. they have lived good lives and god will, good God fearing lives and they, God will, God will take care of them in the form of England and the United States.

America and England would not let anything happen to them. Ok.

They laughed at him and said he was foolish and had no skill, no ability. What would he do?

And he said well his wife makes hats. And we would figure it out. Ok. One of his sisters apparently had a new husband who had more energy than the other people there and she had a daughter or maybe it was his daughter. I believe it was her daughter. And he said they were moving to Sweden and they laughed at him too. What would he do? And he said he was going to make soap. And I remember they laughed at him. they had to hold their mouths so they wouldn't make so much noise. They were laughing. So everybody already has soap. Why would they need you to make soap? And what do you know about making soap. Anyhow, there was a big kettle. And he proceeded to make soap. He did make soap. Understand they did move to Sweden and I understand that the daughter became a nurse. I don't know her name. I don't know their married name. I have no idea. I don't know his name, his father's name.

Anyhow, my father also had a sister whose name was also Clara and she had, she was I believe divorced or widowed. I think divorced or whatever. Anyhow she did have a husband. Her daughter, Vera, was my favorite cousin. And they of course had no money to go anywhere. So we were going to leave and go to China. My father went to some kind of a building. I don't know whether it was a court, or whether it was a government exit visa. I don't know what it was.

Anyhow, we went there and when he got there it had been occupied and there was a commandant sitting there. And there was blood on the wall and he could hear men screaming. And it was my

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father's turn and he said he went up and said Herr commandant I am a veteran of World War I. I fought on behalf of the Austria-Hungarian Empire. I am a poor man. I am a window dresser without any skills. I have tickets to China. If you have seen the movie, Good Earth you know that they are so poor that they are even eating earth. Undoubtedly we will be killed there or starve to death or they will kill us or we will die as a result of the civil war they're in. You don't need us and there's only me and my wife and my daughter. My small daughter. And we will, have tickets to leave within two weeks. And the man said, let him go. As far as I know, he was the only person who ever talked his way out of a concentration camp. It's been my inspiration all my life. Speak up. Ok. Speak up and have something worthy to say.

As he went out, a man approached him and said do you want tickets to Port of Spain. My father said what's that. He said it's a British crown colony in the Caribbean and my father said, he asked what's that and the man told him it's a small island opposite Venezuela that's owned by the British. And that he had gotten tickets where he wanted to go, namely where everybody wanted to go, Argentina. And did my father want his tickets to Trinidad. Of course my father took it. I don't know whether he paid or had the money or whether it was all free in those days. You could only take a hundred marks, shillings, whatever they had, out of the country. So it didn't make any money, difference how much money you had or what you spend.

Anyhow, I remember he came back and said we're going to Trinidad. And he offered his tickets to China to the other relatives who just laughed. I don't know if eventually they used them or what. I have no idea. I have no recollection or knowledge of what happened to the relatives after that. Other than Clara.

Anyhow, we went to, we had to go to Amsterdam. I believe we had 67 relatives when we left. And we went by train to Amsterdam where we would wait until the ship, the **Cotica** would come and take us on to Trinidad.

Q: What was it like for you to leave your extended family, the relatives?

A: I have no idea. I have no idea. A small child excited about leaving. And my mother desperate. She had to leave her vanity and her furniture. That I recall.

Q: But she wanted to leave?

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A: Oh yes.

Q: She also wanted to leave.

A: Oh of course. They were devoted to each other. I mean they were married for 48 years until he died. They argued all the time but they were devoted to each other.

Q: Did you take anything special, a special doll or a special book or a special toy or anything?

A: Nothing. My parents had two big containers of big, containers in which they had eider downs and woolen suits and woolen socks, all of which of course you wouldn't use in Trinidad which is tropical. I forgot about Pauline, my pet goose.

Q: Tell me about Pauline.

A: Oh. As we were leaving Klagenfurt one day, we were eating a meal. We were having our going away meal. And I said what's this? It doesn't taste like chicken. They said it was Pauline. They ate Pauline, my little goose. That was sad. The things that you remember. You forget most everything. I think I'm losing my voice as usual.

Where was I? Oh we were going by train to Amsterdam and we were sitting in a compartment and there was a man who sat opposite us in the same compartment.

Q: Now this is November 38 you're talking about.

A: 38, yes, yes we left almost immediately. We left almost immediately.

Q: After Kristallnacht.

A: We landed in Trinidad in December of 38 so we left almost immediately and we were on this train and this man was sitting next to us, apparently wanted to talk and he wanted to ask my



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father how much money was he hiding in his suitcase. And my father was horrified because my father was the most honest person you've ever met. Even to people who wanted to kill you, exterminate you, he was going to obey what they said. He would never have done anything like that. He was shocked. Anyhow the man said he had emptied his suitcase and he had fixed it so that he had lots of money in there and jewelry or whatever it is. And my father said the only jewelry we have we're wearing. There was, I had a little locket. And my mother had a couple of bracelets and my father had a watch or something. And I think maybe two gold chains. They were in plain sight. We were wearing them. Anyhow, when we came to the station, the SS agent came and took the man away. I mean they overheard the conversation obviously. And then too the man, the agent looked at me and looked at my little locket and my parents' chains and watch and he just smiled nicely and nodded his head and left with the man.

Q: Did anybody ask for your ID papers?

A: I have no idea. I wouldn't know an ID paper if I fell over one. We stayed in Amsterdam until the ship arrived. And we were in a hotel room and we were stunned by what we saw. I don't think they do this anymore but every single morning, I'd look out the window and before it was daybreak we would see housewives scrubbing their steps with brushes. Every single day. They were so clean in those days. Amsterdam was about the cleanest place on the face of the universe. Eventually the ship came and we went.

Q: What did you do with your yellow star?

A: I don't know. I guess we threw it in the trash as fast as we could. Who knows? We didn't keep it as a souvenir if that's what you mean.

Q: I just didn't know whether you remember taking it with you.

A: No. no, no, no. No recollection of ever seeing any such thing again.

Q: How long did you stay in Amsterdam?

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A: It was at least over a week. I don't recall cause I remember going almost stir crazy. You know little kid, mother, father, in a small hotel room.

Q: Did you feel free to walk on the streets?

A: Yeah but I have no recollection doing it, yeah. Just strange town, scared place, whatever. No recollection of anything other than the hotel room.

Q: And the name of your boat, you said was Cotica?

A: Excuse me

Q: The name of the boat.

A: Cotica.

Q: How do you spell it?

A: I don't know. I would spell phonetically as C-O-K, I don't know what Dutch did. O-T-T-I-C-A. K-A.

Q: Do you know what line it was?

A: No. I haven't been able to trace it on the internet but its name was Cotica and it was a Dutch ship as far as I know.

Q: A Dutch line. So now you get on the boat.

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A: Yeah, and then we were on the boat. It was to go from there to Trinidad you had to go past a, Biscayne, the cay of Biscayne. The ship, we were first class since we had enough money. All the other kids were third, fourth, whatever, steerage whatever, way down there.

Q: Was it filled with refugees?

A: As far as I know that's all it was. I don't know. I have no idea. Yeah it was going to – who else would go to Trinidad. Why would anybody in their right mind want to go there.

Q: Did you talk to the other children?

A: Oh yeah, well you know there were others, they would come up. But there were days when the weather was very bad. I remember going up cay of Biscayne the ship was almost parallel up and down, up and down. And of course we were sea sick, throwing up into the ocean which was easy since we were first class and we were up on the balcony. After a few days you get your sea legs and you no longer throw up. But yes, there were other children. The adults were taking English lessons. Us children, no. and some teenage boy came to see us. There were four or five of us. And some teenage boy came and saw us. And we complained that you know we didn't know any English. What were we going to do when we got there. And the parents all were learning English. And how about us.

And he told us there was one phrase we should use and it would get a big sensation and we asked how do you trans – and what were the – oh it's untranslatable and he says you look at the people straight in the face, look straight in the eye. And smile as much as you can and say shut up. It got a reaction. Ok.

Q: Did you talk about what happened to you with the other children? Did they talk about their stories and you talk about what you went through?

A: I don't know what we talked about. I doubt it. I don't know. I have no recollection. Nobody talked about anything. Then we got to Trinidad.

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Q: So you went, there were no stops on the way.

A: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know about that. I never heard about it in my whole life. That's something you got from your grandmother, not from me.

Daughter: She did a painting of the ghost that you saw on the ship.

A: I don't know. You know, you know more than – you must repeat this. You must tell Mrs. Schwartz about it. Are we related by the way? Are all Schwartzes related?

Q: I hope so. So you –

A: Anyhow we got to Trinidad.

Q: What did Trinidad mean to you , as a young child.

A: What?

Q: What did Trinidad mean to you as a young child?

A: It was hot. It was unbelievably hot.

Q: Even in December.

A: Trinidad is very close to the equator and coming in December from winter, bitter winter. Klagenfurt of course is at the foot of the Alps and being used to snow and ice and what not, to get to the tropics. And –

Q: I meant did Trinidad have any meaning for you before you got to –

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A: We were in Trinidad and I believe we spent two weeks or so – Ah. They had arranged, I don't know where. Probably the Jewish refugee committee, who knows. I have no idea how it happened. Children don't ask questions. We were staying with a family. And --

Q: A Jewish family?

A: Oh no. No, the man was they told me, he told us he was Portuguese. He had very yellowish brownish skin and very curly whitish hair. And his wife was obviously very British with blond hair and blue eyes. They had about 12 different children. No two of them had the same shape, size or color. I had never heard of adoption. I don't know if they were adopted or whether this happens through having enough children with a mixed race, whatever.

The youngest ones were pale blond. The oldest ones were much darker, that's all I know. Anyhow we stayed with them for a month. That's what had been arranged. And then there was carnival or something. I think carnival is in February actually. I don't know why. But anyhow there was carnival in Trinidad where they go singing through the streets and marching and dressed in costume. And singing Mardi Gras and what not and so on.

They'd do nothing except sing and dance through the streets. And I ran afoul of the color line which we knew nothing about because often in Austria, we had never seen anyone. Oh we once had gone to, we once had gone to Vienna and saw a gypsy with a baby. She was nursing a baby in the middle of the street, very shocking. Other than that we never saw anybody expect a white person. And in Trinidad there was a -- which we didn't know there was a color line and we had no costume so my mother had, I had dirndl skirt and an apron. And my mother put a kerchief on my head upside down, mammy style. And apparently I crossed the color line and caused a sensation because a white person doesn't dress like a black person.

Anyhow, I don't know how it happened but my mother immediately got a job in a hat store, making hats. My mother's a very nervous woman. And she, we had no place to leave the little jewelry and money that we had except in her purse.

Q: Are you still living with the family?

A: I don't know. I guess so cause it was almost immediately. She almost immediately got a job.

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And she's carrying all this stuff in her purse. And she went to the bathroom at work, put the purse down on the sink while she was washing her hands and a black man came in and stole her purse. She of course could not identify him because not having been there long enough, every black looked like every other black. When you first see Chinese or you think they all look the same after a while you see everybody's different. Anyhow all she could say he was black. Of course he was never found.

We now had no money, no jewelry which they had hoped to be able to sell. Anyhow, my mother worked and she hated black people. All the rest of her life detested them with a passion.

Thought they were all ignorant stupid and black. (laughs) And they were no better than a gorilla. She absolutely detested them. They later had more reason to hate them. But anyhow, she was working there. And in the evening she would, she cut apart our curtains and made I think maybe a dozen or less little children's dresses, little fluffy children's dresses. And my father was -- nobody would hire him. There was nothing he could do. They found a little hole in the wall and selling children's dresses which my mother had sewed after working all day and they were an instant success.

They were very fluffy and ruffle-y and what not and they were a tremendous success. And as a result this got around and wholesalers came to see him and gave him credit so that he was able to start a nice little business selling children's dresses. And he even put an ad in the newspaper saying delicious little children's dresses which he sent to my mother's relatives in New York. Because we were hoping to get a visa to go to New York. My mother could have gone instantly since she was on a German passport. There was an endless ability of any German to enter at any time.

But my father since his place had become Poland was on a Polish visa and there weren't that many Poles in United States at that time and he had to wait until his visa would come up. And he showed, he sent this to show what they were doing in Trinidad. And they never lived down the -- my aunt's husband Alex Cramer. They never stopped giggling and laughing about delicious children's dresses.

My mother meanwhile opened up her own store, naturally and was very successful because she created hats of a kind that they hadn't seen before. And they were doing very, very well. And then it became time for England to enter World War II, at which point it was said that it's a crown colony, an oil colony and so they clapped every last refugee into a detention center with

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barbed wire all around it. Black guards in white uniforms high socks with bayonets guarding us. And there we all were in a detention center. Not that we were mistreated or anything but every family got one room.

Q: Was this in Port of Spain?

A: Hm.

Q: In Port of Spain?

A: Oh yes. Somewhere in the suburbs I guess. It was apparently a barracks at one time, well whatever, but there we were. As far as I know I was only one who would leave all the time. I had been chosen by Mrs. Lake who had studied in Germany and wanted to practice her German. And although there were a number of children there, I was the one chosen to be a companion to her who was one year younger. A little monster. And so I got the benefit of a British boarding school education for the two years we were there.

Q: You actually went to a British boarding school?

A: Yes I went to a British boarding school. Stayed at the boarding school.

Q: While your parents were in the detention camp?

A: Even before then. Almost immediately after we arrived, I was chosen. I never went to whatever schooling they have in Trinidad. It was certainly be segregated. The British would be with British, the Portuguese with Portuguese. The Chinese with Chinese. The black with black, the Spanish with Spanish. No one spoke to anybody outside of their own whatever. They were countless people from India. I don't recall the women but I remember the men. They were so many of them. They had turbans and were wearing some kind of diaper. And would be sitting on the public steps, all day long. I don't know why but they would just sit there, old men sitting in their turbans and sitting on all the public steps.

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Q: So you obviously lived at the boarding school.

A: I lived at the boarding school.

Q: Did you see your parents frequently?

A: Oh yeah. Oh they had, they had rented a very, very nice house before this happened. It was somewhere on the -- way on the outskirts. It was a very nice little house. Within the first month of our arriving there. Because he undid his over, over those wooden crates that you have. He over -- he opened up the crates and he took out a saw, hammer and nails and he sawed apart one of them to make a table and two benches of the crates. So we instantly had furniture.

It was very interesting. There were coconut trees and the houses were, had metal roof, corrugated metal roofs and when it rained, it had monsoons there, rainy season. The coconuts would fall on the roof and went bong, bong, bong, bong. And opposite us there was some guy who had, some man some Indian man who wore just his diaper and a turban and had a goat. And the goat would be there all day long on a chain and say (bleats). I would carry on conversations with the goat. That's all I remember of that. I don't remember any children there whatsoever. By the time we were in the detention center there were I think five children. They had duties. They had to sit, decide who would cook and who would clean, who would do what. And --

Q: Were these Jewish refugees?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah they were all Jewish except there was a separate section for one Christian. That was the only one who was a Christian. The chain they couldn't tell, the British claim they couldn't tell if some of us might be spies. And that was very important because there was a, an oil crown colony, besides which I believe the natives didn't want us there. I think they hated us with a zeal to work. Specifically they all had siestas. They would have a big meal at lunch time. Everybody would go home from work and eat and sleep and the refugees were, just continued to work and walk around in the heat of the sun. Nobody would care about whether it was hot and cold or whatever. And everybody would make fun of us because of that.



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And since nobody had ever seen refugees before and the zeal they have, they assumed it was, that's the way Jewish people are. Instead of that's just the way refugees are. People who have lived wherever they were, were –

Q: Did people exchange their stories, the refugees among each other?

A: I don't know what they did. I know they had their own synagogue and everything else.

Q: They had a synagogue?

A: Oh yeah they instantly had their usual mentality of everything. Synagogue, shops, stores whatever.

Q: Did your parents observe the Sabbath in –

A: Hm.

Q: Did your parents observe the Sabbath in Trinidad?

A: Oh yeah sure.

Q: The holidays, and still kept that up.

A: Oh yeah, yeah. They do all their lives.

Q: Even in the detention camp they did.

A: I don't know. I don't know what they did in the detention camp because after a while I would just stay in the school and on weekends since I hated having to go to the Anglican church. They went to the Anglican church and I had never been to church before and I was, you had to kneel down at certain times. And Mrs. Lake's daughters, the oldest ones were in the choir. And I was

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certain that if I kneeled down or attended church any minute God would come and lightning would strike me dead. And as I discovered he didn't.

I was terrified at the boarding school because we had to sing a certain prayer. Oh there were mosquitoes. So you had the mosquito net and you had to say a prayer at night time before you went to sleep. Something about if I should die before I wake I hope the Lord my soul would take. Something, angels at my head and feet. I was terrified to go to sleep. I didn't want to see these damn angels and I sure didn't want to see god taking my soul while I was sleeping.

Meanwhile Valerie, Mrs. Lake's daughter, the little monster, would have her fun. I couldn't speak English you see. And in the dead of night, we shared the room. In the dead of night she would get up every once in a while. Out of her mosquito net, come over to my bed while I was actually sleeping. See I did sleep and whack me one. And I would scream. I mean I had gone through a lot. All I need was something like that. I would scream.

And Nanny would come in and she would say that I was had, Valerie would say I had done this to her. That Valerie was sleeping and I had done this. And I couldn't defend myself. I couldn't speak English.

So I had great incentive every single day we had lessons and I would go after I had studied the lesson, you go to school all day and then you have to learn your homework and then I had to go see Mrs. Lake every day and recite my homework. And I complained to her. I didn't know what these words meant. I can't memorize this. I can't understand this. Sail-y, gaily be night a Gallic night and sunshine are in shadow when riding along, singing a song. In short what does it mean. And she said you don't have to know what something means to learn. Just repeat it often enough you can learn anything. When you are old enough you will know what it means. Unfortunately I'm now 82 years old. Ok.

Anyhow I owe Mrs. Lake a great deal. I learned a huge number of things. I learned how to memorize. I learned how to do mathematics, English and everything else. British history. You name it. French. It was an excellent school. Every single day we had lunch and they would serve these tropical foods I'd never seen before. Fried bananas. Breadfruit. These horrible things as far as I was concerned. Secondly you have to eat it at lunch time, whereas we were used to having a small lunch and a big dinner. They had these huge lunches after which they took a nap and then ate hardly anything at all in the evening.

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I would spend all night long starving to death, crying to myself being so hungry. But at lunch time when they served these foods I would make horrified faces and Mrs. Lake would send me out of the room. I had to stand outside where I could see the children so I'd stand outside. And I wouldn't get to eat anything the next meal that was served. I had the same food. I had to learn to eat it without making a face, without dawdling, eating as rapidly as everybody else. And I learned to eat any garbage you put in front of me without making a face.

Q: What was the name of the school?

A: Mrs. Lake's boarding school, as far as I know.

Q: And what, did the detention camp have a name?

A: I have no idea, no. But on weekends, since I was so terrified of having to go to this Anglican church if I stayed there, I said I was homesick. I wanted to see my parents. And it was a two hour, two hour ride going by tram and you have to change, transfer in the middle and wait for the one to get to the detention center. And there was a little girl all by myself going on this open air tram, every single weekend. All the way over and all the way back. No one ever spoke to me, looked at me twice. That's what strict color line does.

Gail Schwartz: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer collection interview with Erica Laufer. This is track number two and you are still in Trinidad going to school and visiting your family on the weekends, you said. Going by tram, yourself. Did you hear me? You were talking about being in –

Erica Laufer: Yeah, Trinidad and going home weekends.

Q: Anything else about that?

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A: Yeah and as far as I know there were only about five children, four or five children in the whole camp. And I would, we would be together on the weekend when I got there. And this is so strange. They had an old piano outside. This is a tropic with tropical rains and all that. There was an old piano outside. Opposite the entrance to the sole Christian. This man looked like a, my recollection, he looked like the classical picture of a German spy. Bald headed or whatever. Anyhow he was the nicest man you ever met. He could play the piano. The parents just didn't approve of this, but he would come and play the piano and we would sing along. We were the only people who ever spoke to the man. He was all by himself in there.

Q: What kind of songs did you sing?

A: I don't know. I guess German. I don't know. I have no idea.

Q: Were you a musical child?

A: No, no. Painting, artist, what not, but not musical. My uncle, I understand, Richard, my father's, my mother's brother I understand was an understudy at the Vienna Opera, but I don't know about that. So I was told. I can't always believe everything my mother said.

Q: Did you think of Klagenfurt when you were in Mrs. Lake's school at all? Did you miss your home town? Did you think about them, think about it?

A: No, not that I know of. Hasn't occurred to me.

Q: How would you describe those two years? You were in that boarding school for two years? Was it mostly positive, mostly negative, part of each?

A: Other than being hungry all night long and hating the food, having to learn a new language and having to memorize all kinds of things. I was miserable. I had no friends. I didn't play the strange games that they played. Eventually they were knitting sweaters, cocky sweaters or socks or something, sweaters for the troops. And I found I could under the wits out of people a certain

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way get even, by reading. I would sit on the swing and read and knit at the same time. This would annoy the living wits out of everybody around me but I felt I got my revenge that way.

Q: How long did it take you to learn English?

A: I don't know. I was desperate to learn because I thought that if I could speak English I could explain that Valerie is doing this to me, instead of me doing it to her. And then I discovered the great knowledge that one needs to have in life. That truth does not set you free. That the fact that you can speak and say something, no one will believe you against the daughter of the owner. And so I learned so many things in Trinidad.

Q: Were you aware, or did people talk or your parents talk about when the war started, when Germany invaded Poland in September 39?

A: No, I have no knowledge or recollection. My parents didn't speak about such things in front of children. Secondly, as far as I know, nobody ever talked about anything again. Period. Tried to forget it like it never happened. And go on with your life from here. And never think as to what happened in the past. It's only very recently in my old age that I've been ruminating on it. Everybody always hid. Now I keep wishing I had asked my mother or my father certain things long before they died, for which I will never have the answer. But nobody ever spoke about it again. They never mentioned Austria or anything.

My parents did go back to Austria once after the war. They were offered to come back. They were requested to come back and they went back. But of course you can't go back again. There were too many memories. My parents drew double social security. They drew social security from Austria, as a result of having worked there as well as US social security.

Q: Just to go back in time, were you aware of the book burnings?

A: Was I what?

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Q: To back in time, were you aware of the burning of books, book burning, have any memories of that?

A: Not in Trinidad.

Q: No to go back before Trinidad.

A: Yeah well in the middle of the street, yeah.

Q: You actually saw –

A: Yeah, in Vienna, yeah. But they were so angry at me because I kept peeking out of the corner of the black curtains.

Q: You saw it from your –

A: Yeah, from the upstairs. They were so angry at me because somebody might see that the black curtain was moving. But yes, you could see those things. Of course you could smell the smoke and that would be enough for you to look to see whether you all were going to burn any minute.

Q: Did you ask your parents why are they burning books?

A: I have no idea. I don't think people spoke to children. This was a generation where children were not meant to be heard. I mean they were to be seen and not heard and not seen all that much either. I mean stay to yourself and don't bother us.

Q: Let's get back to Trinidad. So you're in the school for two years. What did you in the summer time? Did you stay?

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A: In the, it was very, very strict. There was nothing you could do. I mean you couldn't go back to your bedroom. You couldn't do this, you couldn't do that. You had to stay in this room, study. You had to go outside and play there. It was very, very strict. But in the summer they had a place on the water and I went there with them for two weeks one summer. And there was no electricity. There was no radio or anything but there was a wind up Victrola where you could play records, ancient records. And I learned how to swim and how to dive. And how to jump in.

Q: Did you see other parts of the island? Besides Port of Spain.

A: No, not that I know of. No, people didn't have cars in those days. My parents were working all the time. Their excuse for everything and the rest of the days they were working. They never did anything.

Q: Let's move on then to the time that you're getting ready to leave. What were your parents' plans and how did they make it?

A: I have no idea. I haven't got any idea at all. I had no idea. Recently my family, my son and my daughter pointed out that it says on the internet that we left from Argentina which I have no recollection of ever having even dreamt of Argentina or seen Argentina or how we got there. The only thing I remember is that we came on ship and got, we were very disappointed because it was very foggy and we didn't see the Statue of Liberty.

Q: We're talking about December 1940.

A: Yeah.

Q: So you were in Trinidad for two years?

A: Yes.

Q: Were you sorry to leave Trinidad?

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A: I don't know.

Q: You are now ten and a half years old.

A: Yes, ten and a half years old. I have a photograph of myself when I'm sitting there hunched over with a space between my teeth and a stupid white bow on top of my hair.

Q: What did the United States mean to you as a ten year old?

A: It was very cold. Compared to the tropics. We were at Macy's and Irene, my mother's distant cousin, somehow vouched for us and in those days you couldn't come to the United States unless you had somebody vouch for you, that you would never need one penny from the United States or from any state or city or anything. Something for some reason they stopped doing. But anyhow in those days you needed that. And aunt Irene, her husband, uncle Alex, worked in New York. He checked music to see if that sound was copyrighted. And they sponsored us. And she had never worked. And they sponsored us and she said they could only sponsor a limited number of people depending on how much money they make, Alex made. And made my parents sign a contract that they would never ask for one penny from them. Regardless of what they promised the United States.

I sort of never forgave aunt Irene for that but that's a different story. But they had gotten us a one month rent in a brownstone in Manhattan. It was a huge efficiency and my father pulled out the dictionary, encyclopedia, whatever it was. It was orange covered and it showed the flags of all the different countries and what not. And he pulled up the United States and he found out that Washington, DC is the capital and that not too far from New York and it didn't cost that much by Greyhound to go from New York to Washington. And he, and it was a small town and since it was the government, they all would be needing hats because of the ladies would be attending functions and would need to wear a hat. And so it would be a good place for my mother to be a milliner. And they decided to we would move at the end of the month to Washington, DC.

Q: Did you parents speak English well by then?



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A: No but they could make themselves understood.

Q: And your English was good by then?

A: I don't know. I guess so. Yeah.

Q: After two years?

A: Oh yeah, so very British, British English yes. Very proper.

Q: What boat did you come on from Trinidad to United States?

A: I don't know.

Q: You don't know.

A: I don't know. I don't remember. Yeah. They didn't need much English in Trinidad. Other than you know the store and what not. How much and you know and no and yes and next week and things of that nature.

Q: Before you came to the United States, what did America mean to you?

A: Nothing. I don't think I'd ever heard of it. Nothing. I, they discovered my family, my son and daughter discovered that I came through Ellis Island. I swore up and down I never heard of Ellis Island but they showed me where on the internet it shows that we came, got my name, came through Ellis Island. I don't know what Ellis Island is. I never saw it but they tell me that's where we came and that we came from Argentina, which I don't understand either cause I came from Trinidad. Children don't know these things. So now we are in New York. And we're in, no we're in New York and we're at Macy's and seeing all these sights and it's snowing outside and it's bitter cold. And my aunt had gotten me without knowing me, had gotten me a snow suit.

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Here I'm ten had a half years old. A snow suit. This dark maroon with snow drops in turquoise and a big hood and I looked like a dwarf. That was because it was very, very cold and I don't know about shoes. I must have had boots. I don't know but we walked through Macy's and I'm dressed in this weird outfit. And I suddenly got whatever, I started to howl. I cried and cried and cried. I wanted a doll. And my mother said you never liked dolls. You hate dolls. And you're too old for a doll. But you know I wanted a baby doll. And they said they're not much money but eventually they got me a doll just to shut me up. I guess. And of course I never played with it again, but anyhow, that's a vivid recollection.

Somehow we had one month, every place we went to we had one month. When we got to Washington, DC we had one month, it must have been through the refugee committee I guess. I don't know. We were staying with a rabbi and his family in northeast Washington. And it was just so different again, so very confusing.

Q: So you were in New York only for a month?

A: Yes, we couldn't have afforded the rent and my parents were anxious to get on with it and not have to be thankful or whatever. And just get on with life. Yes, we were just there for a month. And when we had this one month, I think in DC with the rabbi and looked around. And it was obviously to my parents not the right neighborhood in which people would be wanting to buy designer hats, made to order. And discovered a place in Georgetown, which at that time was a slum where they rented a building at 1330 Wisconsin Avenue, northwest. That there was a store downstairs and there was a little efficiency upstairs. My parents stayed upstairs and the store had, in the back of the store there was a little room which, my mother's workroom and it had a cot and that's where I would sleep at night time. That was my place. They were upstairs, I was downstairs. There was a small refrigerator, an antique one, with a gas refrigerator with a motor on top of it.

And one day apparently the gas, my mother was always very, she couldn't do anything. Oh, her husband had to do everything. Everything was such a crisis. Couldn't do anything at all. One day the gas leaked and this person who could never do anything, somehow called the authorities, had them remove the thing and got a new refrigerator.

By the time my father came home, we had a new refrigerator. Ok.

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Q: Where did you go to school in Georgetown?

A: It was just there were three schools next to each other. It was just a block and a half away. Not on Wisconsin Avenue, but the side street and it was Addison high, Addison Curtis and Hyde. Two of them were elementary schools and one of them was a school for bad girls. And we all shared the same playground. And the bad girls learned how to can and cook and iron. And I know we went over there too. We learned how to, this was during World War II and we learned how to, we were taught how to iron your husband's shirt. And how to sew and how to darn socks and how to cook Spam and string beans and potatoes and foods, very cheap foods and so on. So that we could manage on your husband's income.

Q: Do you remember December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor?

A: No.

Q: When the United States entered the war.

A: No. No. We had a lot of air raid drills at the school and we would go into the basement and sing patriotic songs and being me, I one day raised my hand and got called on and asked why are we in the basement. If there really was an air raid and a bomb dropped on us, we'd be buried alive. And the teacher gave me the same reply that people always give to this kind of question apparently. Just keep quiet and keep singing.

I've heard this so often in my life. I would ask a question so basic and always got that type of response. So all life has been a learning thing. I was picked on mercilessly. They called me the little Hitler. Because I was German.

And of course the only one in the school and of course the only Jewish person within miles around. As far as I know. And I was not ever going to tell anybody that I was Jewish again. I had enough in Austria where it was out there when they were in a nice warm classroom and I had to be outside all by myself in the snow and what not so I wouldn't have my brain filled up with Catholicism or whatever.

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So I said nothing. I was picked on mercilessly. They played games like dodge and it finally occurred to me that they really wanted to hit me as hard as possible. So I would refuse to play and remembered what I had done in Trinidad and I would sit during recess and I would sit and read. You won't believe this at ten years old, ten and a half, I would read Plato and all the classics. The others could barely read. They were American students and the education system was ridiculous. My parents of course were terrified of authorities. Wouldn't dream of saying no, that's not right. The teachers felt I needed to learn now to adjust to learn American history. I could have learned it by reading a book in one weekend. But no, they insisted that I go in class according to my age, instead of according to my knowledge which is far superior having gone to a boarding school.

They were learning adding and subtracting and I was doing algebra. Doing math in my head and what not. Doing compositions. Anyhow I sat in the back of the room for two years. Teacher said I could join in any time I wanted to for whatever I wanted to do and spent my time painting pictures the whole time, two years.

Q: Then what happened? Did you leave that school?

A: Oh Georgetown was a slum in those days and we would play hide and go seek in buildings, huge, huge, huge buildings. The floor, there were no windows, the doors were wide open. The floor would have holes in it. We would play ghost and what not and I was on the swimming team, having learned how to swim. I was on the swimming team and we had swimming thing against whatever the major schools in northeast and they disabled me almost instantly by kicking me in the stomach after we dived in.

But anyhow, I was on this -- I went to the playground. We never had anybody watching me after we came to the United States. I spent all my time after school. I would go to the library and read books every single day until it was time to come home and eat dinner. And in the summer I would go to the playground. Georgetown playground was just a few blocks away and did crafts and what not.

And fended off boys who kept saying annoying things to me. No longer picking on me. They were interested in me.

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Q: How aware were you of World War II going on at the time, besides the fact –

A: In Georgetown.

Q: Yes, how aware were you. I know you had to –

A: We had, we had air raid drills all the time.

Q: Knowing what was happening.

A: Oh no, well there was rationing and you couldn't get anything. There was rationing for everything. And there was a butcher across the street who had his eye on me and my parents would send me there because if I went there, we would get butter and meat, whereas if they went there they didn't get anything, even if they had ration cards.

Q: Did your parents have any contact with their family back in –

A: My mother had some kind of stomach condition and her cousin, Freddie's father, Hotzel, one of the Hotzels, Leo Hotzel had moved to Switzerland and with my cousin Freddie who was I think a year younger than me, who eventually became a physician I understand. I think he's still alive or where he is. I think he left, they all left Switzerland because Leo was in Czech Republic when he died.

Anyhow, where was I?

Q: I was asking if you –

A: I was looking at pictures of Leo. What?

Q: I was asking if your parents had any contact?

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A: Yeah, since she had this stomach condition and needed medicine and kept ranting and railing that American doctors are far behind, she would send to her relatives in Switzerland soap and perfumes and candies and what not. And they would instead send this to Austria or Germany or France or wherever they had relatives for **sedrabal**, which was some kind of a stomach thing. I think she lacked sufficient stomach acid or something and this would cure her. They had nothing comparable in the United States. I haven't been able to find it on the internet. It's long since gone whatever it was.

My mother's brother meanwhile, when we were you know I said I had never seen when we left Klagensfurt, I had never seen my very beloved grandparents again, my mother's parents. The Schwartzes. Apparently uncle Richard, my mother's brother, took them, they – I know he was in Italy and that went. I know that they were in several countries and eventually he took them to France.

From there they were, after World War ended, the Red Cross informed my parents that her parents had died in Buchenwald concentration camp. Apparently the French sent them to their death in Buchenwald. My uncle somehow, remember he was the one that the nuns had said when he was a kid that he would end up on the gallows. But because he always found some way out, that wasn't a standard one.

Anyhow, he wound up in the French Foreign Legion and spent World War II in North Africa with the French Foreign Legion. He eventually, he went back to Austria after, after the war. And he eventually came to the United States.

Q: Let's move on. You spent the war years going to school. Now it's 1945.

A: Yeah, oh I was on the swim team and I had a good friend by the name of Audrey. Very, very pretty girl who was also a very, very good swimmer. And I remember being shocked going to see her in their apartment as to how many people there were who slept all in one bed. And how little they had. Anyhow, next thing you know it was World War II and sailors would come home on the weekend and you couldn't go downtown to the movie houses without the sailors were and soldiers were lined up on the street like four deep, trying to pick up any girl that walked by, screaming after them. Anyhow, next thing you know little Audrey was pregnant. And she asked me whether I knew where babies came from and I said of course. I had no idea.

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No idea whatsoever. I foolishly went home and asked my mother. And she went why do you want to know. And I said well Audrey says she's going to have a baby. I thought my mother was going to throw up on the floor. She was so shocked. Within I think a month or weeks, she had found a house to buy in Petworth, a row house, all the way across town. I remember my father being stunned. How would you have money for a down payment on a house? And she had done that. My father had never gone to a grocery store and she had. He would -- she worked and she gave him all her money and he would take care of it as was the ancient method. And he would give her grocery money and she would skimp off the grocery money to such an extent that she had enough for a down payment on a house. And he wanted to know how would they pay for this every single month and she said they would rent out the apartment they were living in now and she had her store. And he had an income by now too. And they would be able to do, and they would rent one or two rooms in the house. I could sleep on the sofa. And they would rent enough where they would pay for the utilities and the mortgage.

She had read a book that's called How To Make a Million Dollars in Your Spare Time in Real Estate. And she took that as a recipe and followed every last word of it. Toward the end they owned six houses.

She could never get my father to do that because every penny he had, by that time he had a uniform shop. And every penny he had he stuck into the uniform shop. I would work there on Saturdays. He would go on shopping trips for his store to Philadelphia or New York. Mostly Philadelphia and would take me along and I would try on the uniforms and see which were comfortable and which ones didn't wrinkle and which ones looked very stylish and as a result he had very stylish uniforms. And the wholesalers made a lot of money telling people which uniforms had been proven to be the most comfortable and the most stylish. They were selling them all over the place.

Q: These are military uniforms or --

A: No, no these were. This was a day of segregation and white -- or black women couldn't be in a white neighborhood without being in a uniform. And besides which you wouldn't want to see the clothing they wore. It would be too risqué or too dirty or too weird. By our taste. And you wouldn't want to have one of them walking through your neighborhood because they would be

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in great danger probably, undoubtedly. And so they all had to have a uniform. So he had a shop in a black neighborhood on seventh street and (sigh) which had uniforms, ladies uniforms. And then he also took in for pretty white fluffy blouses and then he took in white stockings and then dressy stockings for holidays and so on.

And I would go there on Saturdays and help him.

Q: Now you're in high school.

A: I don't know. Probably junior high. I would go there and I was so shocked. Little black girls came in. They looked like they were ten or eleven with boyfriends who would buy them fancy stockings and the girls would act so thankful to the boys. And the boys were so nonchalant. I became so disgusted with the whole thing. I hated it.

The moment I was 15 I got a underage permit and I got a, I was able to get a job at a department store as a sales lady. For the summer. I didn't tell them that I was going to go back to school. They just assumed I was one of the many girls who stopped working, I mean stopped going to school and was working. And so I got a job, at a very nice department store. And two months later my parents insisted that they were going on vacation. A friend of theirs, a man who had a shop across the street. His brother had a place up in **Akwar**, New York in the Poconos and insisted I go with them for a week because the man had a son by the name of Harold that they wanted me to meet.

And of course I hated him at first sight. And when I came back after the week up in the mountains, Lansburgh's said that they didn't need me anymore that my job was gone. So I got a job at a five and ten a block or so further down. Kresge's five and ten. And I was in the basement. They put me to selling, counting a hundred marbles and putting them in a sack. A hundred marbles to the bag, all day long. And I, there was a curtain there between this and the store and I would sit as far in the curtain as I possibly could because there was a black man who worked the stock room.

He was big and I was terrified of him. I had never been this close to a black man before. I was terrified of him. Anyhow –

Q: Did you ever go back to high school?



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A: Oh yeah. I went through high school, college and law school. And secretarial school and half way through a master of laws. Yes.

Q: You were talking about what you were doing

A: Oh no, at this time, yeah I was sure I went back. I was in the, it was so interesting. I was in the basement of the five and ten and then they transferred me to selling goldfish and I was opposite a lady, a very old lady who painted Polaroid photographs. And I learned from her in my spare time which is much, how to paint on photographs, a very good skill that came in handy many years later.

Anyhow, from there they transferred me upstairs, next to the entrance, selling wall paint. And one day a sailor came in and I was very sheltered you understand. I had not ever gone out or anything. And he came over and he wanted to meet me later, as soon as I got off, and proceeded to tell me what he wanted to do. And like an idiot I opened up my purse and took out a day's worth of wages, five dollars, handed him the five dollars and said here go buy it on ninth street. It's just two blocks over. Ninth street was a red light district. He took my five dollars. A short while later the lady who was the floor walker walked over and said I was fired for being uppity with the customers. I found out later he was her son home on leave.

I never mentioned anything about the five dollars or what he had said because I knew I wouldn't be believed. I had learned this at Mrs. Lake's. No use saying.

Q: Let's move on a little bit, so you finished high school?

A: Yes.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

A: I went to first McFarland. It's in Petworth. Went to McFarland junior high and it has, next door to Rosewood high school. I was very popular. I was considered very good looking in my

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day and I had many friends and I joined a Jewish sorority. They were outlawed but we were in them and—

Q: Did you talk about your childhood with them?

A: No, no. No. You don't want to show that you're different from other people, that you had different backgrounds from what other people have. No, never mentioned it.

Q: Never mentioned it.

A: Nobody asked either.

Q: Did you drop your British accent?

A: Oh yeah, I lost that very rapidly in elementary school you know. Elementary school when I first got there, the teacher walked in the room. I stand up and said good morning Miss Jones and she would call on you so and so. Yes, Miss Jones, right away Miss Jones. And the others, yes, yes, you learn very rapidly to drop that.

Q: Then you go on to college. Did you start college right after high school?

A: Oh no, oh no. my father wanted me to open up a chain store and I didn't want any part of that kind of business. By that time he had moved up to 14<sup>th</sup> street to a better neighborhood, so called for a while. And I wanted no part of selling and I wanted to go to New York school of fashion designing. And my mother said over her dead body would I leave the house until I was married. So my father said that he had been supporting his family at a much younger age. He saw no reason why they should support me. But anyhow they finally decided they would give me one year of any education that would then make me financially independent and I could then do whatever it is I wanted to do with my whatever.

One of the problems was in high school in those days people were very insecure. We all were sure we were going to die as a result of an atomic bomb from the Russians. And everybody got

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married. It seemed everybody was engaged, including me in high school, ready to get married the day they got out of high school.

And we decided on **McLafin** school for medical and legal secretaries. One year of learning how shorthand, typing, blood tests, urinalyses, biothermies, all the systems of the human body, et cetera. Very, very intense for one year. Upstairs, two rooms. And I learned how to take blood give blood, do all these things. Look at microscopes, count how many blood cells there are et cetera. And then after I graduated I got a job. They gave me a job for the summer for some physician, Dr. Goldstein. While his nurse was in England on a three months honeymoon. And I worked there and learned I would never again work for a physician in my entire life, that they're total phonies and what not.

Anyhow I then got a job with the American Trucking Association which was a lobby for the trucking industry in the legal department. And the men would come in at 10:00 with their hats on, sit down at their desk, smoke a cigarette and read the paper and send me out to get coffee and have me doing typing and shorthand and what not. And I soon realized that I could do what they were doing a lot better than what I was doing. And saved my money. Needed all the money I could. I had to work for two years to pay for dental work. I had never had dental work, shoes, feet and what not. I had all kinds of disabilities that nobody had enough money for.

And after that decided I would, I didn't know I had the brains for it, but I decided to I went to George Washington University and they said I didn't have the requirements to get to college. I had decided in high school to enjoy myself. And not take geometry. I dropped geometry and algebra two and physics, what not. And enjoyed myself in high school, instead of studying. Cause I thought I was going to marry Ralph as soon as I got out, but instead broke up with him. But anyhow, as a result I didn't have the requirements. They told me I could go as a non-degree student and if I got good grades, when I was 21, I could petition that my grades be counted and miraculously I got all A's. I went all the way through college and got all A's and one D. The D was in sociology, criminology and sociology of the criminal. I just wanted to throw them all in jail and throw the key away instead of mollycoddling them.

But anyhow, all the rest of them I got A's and I became Phi Beta Kappa which was an honorary society. I requested a scholarship the last year. I was working during the day and going to night school or other years when I had enough money going to day school and I mean I would go to school during the day or at night, depending on which I had money for. And one year, the last

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year I won the scholarship and they told me my father made enough money to send me through college. And I said my father refuses to send me to college. He believes that women have no business being in college. They should be married and having children. And that if I got an education I would limit my choice of how many husbands, for a husband and he was adamantly opposed to it. They didn't care about that. But the head of the political science department said if I would switch my major to political science, they needed a secretary. I could work there three afternoons a week and I would, they gave me a scholarship of 150 dollars which in those days was something. And between that and working for him in the school I was able to pay for my last year of college.

And then I was working as a secretary, got good wages, I finished and I thought gee I got all A's and what not. I tried to get a job and I was, couldn't find a job. The only job I could get was as a typist for the Congressional Record. A reduction of what I was making as a secretary. By that time I was a cracker jack secretary, legal secretary and I was so shocked that you could get all A's, show that you had the ambition to work your way, pay for it yourself, and nevertheless couldn't get a job. I walked across the campus to law school and said I would like to apply to become a lawyer. And the gal there said to fill out this form and she saw my Phi Beta Kappa key and she said it wouldn't be any problem at any rate. No tests, no anything. Ok so I went to law school and worked as, for lawyers. One year I went to the most outstanding law firm in Washington. They had an ad for -- two ads, one for a law clerk and one for a secretary and I applied for a secretary. And they gave me an IQ test and refused to hire me because they said my IQ was as high or higher than the lawyers.

And I said so that means I can really help them and they said no, this would be too confusing so I said well how about the job you have a job as a law clerk. Oh no. We don't hire girls for that. I said well if my IQ is so high then I'm going to law school. They said that would confuse everyone. There's -- absolutely not.

So I became a women's libber very soon.

Q: What did you do after law school?

A: Well my last job was with a law firm. It was fabulous. They were going to hire me as a lawyer, but I'd have to find my own clients, because one of the men was pulling out. He was

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becoming a lawyer for the musicians union and I could take his place. Unfortunately I had to pass the bar within less than a month after school was out. And the DC bar at that time was three days ordeal. Three solid days of writing without stopping. I thought I knew everything since I knew where the court houses were, the judges, since I had composed wills and contracts and I knew everything about it. I thought oh well I can whiz through it in no time.

Unfortunately I flunked the law exam on contracts, a course in which I had gotten an A. I flunked it. I sat through this law exam. My mind was blank. I had writer's cramp. I couldn't even concentrate. Anyhow within a week of having taken that exam I also took the federal service entrance exam as back up. And I practically passed that barely within two points or something. But was picked up by the veterans administration because, not because my score was high because everybody else had a higher score since they had studied for a year.

But because I had worked for a doctor and gone through McLafflin's medical school, I knew one bone from the other. I knew the blood systems. I knew all this stuff backwards and forwards and they were doing disability and they were rating disability of veterans. And people on social security and old age and so on. So they hired me.

And they couldn't promote me fast enough. They thought I was a genius. I got one promotion after the other. Even bringing, in taking off several weeks to have a baby.

Q: When did you get married?

A: I got married in my last year of law school. At that point I was working for the teamsters union and I suddenly had the -- and Chris was working for, Chris was at the Indian embassy and he was studying, at that point he was studying on his, was he still on his master's. Yeah, at that point he was on his, no he was on his PhD. He had gotten a master's in Poly Sci, international relations. And he was working on his PhD in this. Peaceful uses on atomic energy was his field. And --

Q: His name --

A: Chris, Christian Mathur, M-A-T-H-U-R. Christian **Dion** Mathur. He, we were typing his thesis. We rented a typewriter. My girlfriend Beatrice and I were sitting there on a table just like

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this. We had two typewriters and he had written something and his English was atrocious. You couldn't make heads or tails of half of his stuff. What do you mean here, what do you mean. And here I am within weeks of delivering. I am sitting here drinking gin and water and smoking, chain smoking the entire time. Nobody ever told us you shouldn't drink and shouldn't smoke. You can see my daughter here. She's perfectly normal.

Q: Where was your husband from?

A: India, from Hyderabad India.

Daughter: You didn't marry the Jewish person.

A: Oh yeah. My, my I couldn't find anybody. I would find, I would go out with a – and nowadays you were on dates. You took a date and you would have them meet you at home. Your parents met your, parent – you didn't just go out. Your parents had to meet who you – If I brought home a Jewish boy, my mother would have a fit. This is wrong with him, that's wrong with him. This is wrong with, she'd carry on. If I brought home a Gentile boy, my father, heart broken. How could you do this. I couldn't satisfy them, no matter who I went out with, they disapproved totally. And I don't know how. But anyhow, I never found anybody who was, I tried desperately. I never found anybody who was intelligent. They all seemed shallow, thinking, drinking beer and girls and what not. And Chris was different.

Q: You had your first child?

A: Yeah so I had a child, yes. And you can imagine how unique this was. Well first of all there were only five people in my law school graduating class out of a couple hundred.

Q: Five women you mean?

A: Yeah. Yeah.

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Daughter: I thought there were two.

A: No, there were five. In the law school. We would meet in the ladies room. We would dash in the ladies room to hide from the guys. The guys were so angry at us because we were in law school. It wasn't usual in those days. It was so rare.

Q: Did you have any other children?

A: Yeah, I had a son a few years later. But I brought the baby into the office cause they'd given me a shower and the women were very angry at me for politicking. I want to show them. This is a beautiful baby I have as a result of a shower. But anyhow, I came back to work very soon. Chris got his PhD and I came back to work, very, very soon. And kept getting promoted. And then word came, this is the veteran's administration. Only veterans should have jobs as long as there's a veteran available. And so I was out of a job. And I found a job at Central Office where they didn't have this requirement at that point. And I was drafting letters for the signature of the commissioner of social security as to the final whatever it is to congressmen. And I got promoted and then the word came and I was section chief at that point. I got promoted right. That there was a disabled veteran who hadn't gone to college, but he was a veteran and he would qualify with his 15 points for the job I had. And so again I lost a job and got into a category of simply sitting there and writing with a hundred other people in the same category. Instead of being the local genius I was the bottom of the pile, ok. Then I had another child. I was pregnant and, boy. My son and those are the only children I have. I have seven grandchildren.

Q: You stayed in the Washington area? From then on?

A: Well after a while my marriage to Chris sort of disintegrated. It was my fault. Somehow, eventually I could no longer take it. He was just too – he kept saying I didn't speak to him the way a wife should et cetera. And I kept saying anyhow, I was earning a lot more than he was. And whatever. After a while I could no longer take the difference in personality and background. He was a party guy and I would, we would be working all day long and I would come home and

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he would have invited 40 people to come over and cook and eat and drink in our basement. My parents had given me down payment for a house in Arlington, off Lorcom Lane. And we built out the basement and had parties all the time. And it, the weight of it all got too much for me. Between the racial thing and the difference in views and what not. I could take it no longer. And Medicare was enacted and I was again in one of those positions and I got transferred. I had applied for a transfer to San Francisco where a friend of mine had moved and had inherited a huge mansion or something. But they said the only vacancy was in Baltimore, that Medicare had started. They needed a lawyer in – to interpret the Medicare law and so I moved to Baltimore. And Catonsville.

And general counsel and me were not a good fit. General counsel means that you spend your time in the library looking at books and deciding things. Instead I liked to handle cases and people and work fast and what not which is not anything to do. So I transferred over and to Medicare in the programs. And wound up promoted and what not. And was president of my -- I married a well-known lawyer in Baltimore who had a trial practice and spent all of my vacation time handling court cases for him at the rate – they were all in the morning – at the rate of three hours here, three hours there and what not. And had special dispensation to do that and enjoyed my life for a while. I was married to him for 13 years. Until that disintegrated.

And here I am. I was president of the women's bar association for two times, president of Catonsville business and professional women's club. You name it. I was in the newspaper constantly.

Daughter: National Organization for Women.

A: Yeah, organization for women. You name it. I was in all those things. And I was being viewed for running for, becoming a judge in Baltimore and Bill Gosnell my husband said over his dead body. He was practicing law in the city. He can't possibly have a wife who, who is a judge. And so that ended that ambition.

Q: Then when did you come back to Virginia? When did you come to Virginia?

A: I didn't. I got divorced and moved to Ocean City, Maryland and lived there 15 years. I retired



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on early out during Reaganomics. And I think on one third of my salary. I had been in the government as a grade 15 I think step three, for as high as one can get without political appointment and lived in Ocean City for 15 years. And then I sold my place and moved to be close to my family, all of whom are in Arlington or in Leesburg.

Gail Schwartz: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Erica Laufer. This is track number three. Let's talk about some of your thoughts and your feelings about what you went through. Do you think about your childhood often now and what you had to go through, leaving your home, going to different places? Do you think about it more often as you've gotten older?

Erica Laufer: Oh yeah. Because once you're retired you don't have as much to do so you have time to think about these things. Otherwise, one keeps oneself so busy, one doesn't think about anything. Leave alone anything that might be difficult. I've thought about many times. My parents had a chance to go back to Austria and then they did visit. I also was sent something or other and unfortunately, any time I see something German or Austrian, I have mixed feelings. I don't want to give them a penny of my existence. Other than that I don't think much of them. I'm grateful that I'm not living there, that they sent me away. They wanted to exterminate me. I don't have any – the thing that bothers me endlessly in my brain is something that is politically incorrect. And you can't ask. The Germans went through people's history as to how many generations back they had Jewish blood. And if so, they were sent to concentration camps. How are the Germans now that they have their pure Aryan blood? That has been bothering me terribly. When the Moors and Jews were thrown out of Spain, we know what happened to Spain. It went downhill.

And why hasn't this happened to Germany yet? All their intellectuals, all their money people. Everybody who was anything was Jewish. The men all tried to marry a blond girl, as non-Jewish as possible, if they possibly could. What's happened to those children? Were they all sent to concentration camps? Did they wind up in Argentina, New York, Israel?

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My father's sister Clara and her daughter Vera, my favorite cousin, were in concentration camps. They apparently survived and were sent to Israel. In the last days of concentration camp, Vera married a fellow from the concentration camp. However, she became pregnant in Israel and he said he had never had a life. He had had no youth. Had nothing. He didn't want to be burdened with a wife and children. And that was the last heard from him, I understand. She went insane finally and she habitually would run through the streets stark naked. They would arrest her and put her in a, whatever it is. And my father would send money for, or for some medicine that would temporarily make her sane. I don't know what happened to them. Eventually they, somebody, maybe it was her mother, grandmother.

But her son, the son wanted to go to technical school and they didn't have money and my father sent money for him to go to technical school. After that my father died in 1975. My mother I think tore up everything she could possibly find, where there were any knowledge of anybody else. She says all they want is money from you. So I have no way of knowing other relatives. Obviously I have some in Israel. I obviously have some in Sweden. Unless they have all gone back to somewhere else. Who knows? Cause I don't know where Freddie wind up. Men usually die earlier than women, but he may still be around somewhere. But I saw some photograph when I was doing, I was doing a history of the family. And I came across a picture of Freddie and his children and his wife. But that was something in Germany. I don't know if they were just on vacation or what. I don't know where these people are. I don't have any relatives. I didn't really care. I never thought about them. I agreed with my mother. Forget about them. But my children keep wanting to know do we have relatives, some. My grandchildren. Do we have relatives in some other country? Where are they? Who are they? I don't know. And I guess I've got to find out before I die. I'm already 82.

Q: Do you know how many relatives you definitely lost?

A: I don't know. Well over 60, I guess. I don't know if any of them rescued themselves or not. Never heard of them.

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Q: When your children were the age that you were when conditions got bad and you had to leave, you know Hitler got into power and you had to leave. When your children were that age, did that make you think back on your childhood at that time?

A: No, I never thought back. I never thought back until old age, never thought back. I did what everybody else does. Just remove it from your brain.

Since I'm retired, not before. Because I have time.

Q: And also with your parents, just to repeat what you said, you did not really discuss war years with them.

A: My parents never mentioned it again. Ever. Not in my presence.

Q: Did you try to ask them?

A: No, no we all agree the same thing without discussing it. Forget it, forget about it. It's gone. You can't bring it back. It was no good. Why waste your effort on it. Think of what you're doing now.

Q: Have you been back to Austria?

A: I went back only once, when the children were very small. Roy was still on baby bottles and but only because we were going to India because Chris wanted to see his uncle who had raised him who was sick and old or something. And we stopped off in London where we always had one of my mother's cousins lived there. Always long before the war and all that. Alice. She lived there. And we stopped off to see her.

And stopped off in German Switzerland. And went to Vienna. We went, I wanted to go to Klagenfurt but it was snowing and there was -- it was six hours by train and the train couldn't go cause the tracks were full of snow. And we spent, no airplane could leave Vienna airport. And there I had a little overactive son and a daughter at Vienna airport. And we couldn't go. We were stuck there for days at the airport. And finally I let them run loose and he did what boys do. He

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ran up to the conveyor belt and played with the conveyor belt and within minutes somebody came and said Madame, we do not let our children run loose in – perhaps in America. And so I took the cue and said oh but I don't know what to do. I don't know. We've been here for so long. What can I possibly do, I can't control them. Within minutes they found us a plane to get us out of Vienna.

I think it was to Egypt. And from there we would go to India. Unfortunately, there seemed to have been some problem on the plane, because we all had to depart, stand in the middle of nowhere and they brought our luggage next to us. And we had to stand next to the luggage. Nothing seemed to happen. The luggage went back on. Everybody got back on the plane. And they said it would be I don't know, four hours or something before we would leave. Six hours. And so I left Chris with the children and decided to go to the airport and enjoy it. I thought I couldn't get back on the plane until it was departing. It was hours and hours at the airport. I couldn't leave outside. No permission to leave and go outside the airport. But there I was. That was the only time we went, ever went back. A few hours –

Q: What were your thoughts of being in Vienna?

A: Well we went to see, we went to see like tourists. I had no recollection of any of it. Cause I never lived there. We didn't even go to the first section where we had fled to. And we saw the palaces. We saw the palaces and I remember little boy had to go to the bathroom and I asked, there were 200 rooms in the palace, magnificent palace. Where is the bathroom and he said there's only one in the tower.

Q: Did you feel a sense, any sense of belonging in Austria?

A: No, no it was the same thing as if I had visited France or China or --

Q: Do you feel Austrian?

A: Apparently I had lost my accent because when we were in German Switzerland, somebody in a taxi had stolen a little case in which we had stuff. And I reported it to the front desk in

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German. We were in German Switzerland. And the man did what, unbelievable, insisted he call the gendarmes and police finally came and he said Madame, perhaps come from Chicago. There is no crime in Switzerland. Only financial. Ok, no I had no desire. The Swiss food was delicious. I will say, German Swiss food, we thought it was delicious. The English food was not good I thought. But no I had no desire for any of it.

Q: Do you feel that because of your difficult childhood that you really –

A: I didn't have a difficult childhood.

Q: You don't consider it a difficult childhood?

A: No.

Q: Even though you were uprooted.

A: They did me a big, big favor as I've been told many times from other people. If people had lived in Austria, they never would have had the opportunity that we have in the United States. You know we immigrants are the most patriotic Americans there are.

Q: So you consider yourself American?

A: Oh absolutely.

Q: Not Austrian?

A: Oh no, no. I've become very angry at people who tell me that they're Irish or, or Czech or something. How can you be? You were born in this country. If you feel you're, you're Irish or Italian, they're always telling me they're Italian. Go back, go to Italy. What are you doing here? No I have no desire for it.

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Q: If you meet a German today in public, what are your thoughts?

A: That he's German. And that he's a Nazi.

Q: You do feel that way?

A: Yes. I will always feel that way. They keep talking about oh they, they, they couldn't do anything else about it. And they're in that kind of a country. And there was no, whatever it is, this that and the other and so on. No. No. The day after Austria was, was annexed, everybody knew the national anthem. No, they were all Nazis. They were Nazis before they became officially Nazis. No, every last one of them. There is no such thing.

Q: Are you angry that you had an uprooted childhood whereas other children your age were very safe in the United States?

A: No I feel blessed by it. I've had so many interesting experiences. Instead of being one of those boring people.

Q: You're not angry, as I said that your safety was –

A: Not at all, not at all. I'm glad I'm not where they didn't want me. I'm glad where I could contribute. I have worked for the government. I did work that I think was very, very valuable, very helpful to the public.

Q: Because of your family history and again what you went through having to leave Austria and going to Trinidad and then coming here, and not speaking the language and so forth, did that affect how you raised your children?

A: Well I was raised in a very strict Prussian style. Children were seen but not heard or hopefully not seen very often either. Raise yourself and shut up. Don't get us in trouble. Don't do anything that raises any problem. We're not here for you. Very simple. No, I, when I see how

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they raised their children or how my grandchildren are raised, they're just a bunch of spoiled brats. Their parents spend all their time, their mother and father spend all their time on them. Instead of telling them go outside and play and shut up. What do you mean you don't want to eat this? Eat this or you don't get anything.

Q: But my question was did it, did your background affect the way you raised your son and daughter do you think? Because there were times when you had to be independent. You went to this boarding school and you had to come home, go back to visit your parents. You were a child. You were very independent.

A: Yeah.

Q: Did that affect how you raised your children?

A: I expected them to be independent too, yeah. This one here would go to school and she wanted to belong to Girl Scouts. I told her to call up a taxi and have a taxi pick her up and take her to the, in those days it wasn't dangerous to have your taxi pick you up.

Daughter: She neglected us.

A: Ha.

Daughter: If you really want to know.

Q: I'm saying is it because you had to be independent when you were so young.

A: Yeah, I thought that was normal. I thought that was a normal way of raising people. That they need, life is, can be full of hell. You better be able to handle it. No matter what happens and keep going and be happy about it instead of whining about it. We don't go to psychiatrists and psychologists. We don't have mental problems. We follow what my mother's mother did. You got problems, here's a small brush and a pail. Start in the upper left hand corner and keep

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scrubbing the floor until you get to the lower right hand corner. You will have guaranteed, no problems by the time you're finished.

Q: Are there any sights today or sounds or smells that bring back your childhood to you?  
Anything that you –

A: It's been a long time.

Q: Anything that you hear or see or read about that brings back your childhood?

A: I have successfully suppressed everything I possibly could. I don't believe in Freud and raking it all up and bringing it out. No, just hide it and go on.

Q: You said that your parents got restitutions, reparations from Germany?

A: Oh I got \$25,000 from Austria. I got 25,000.

Q: You yourself got it?

A: Yeah, recently, within the last few years.

Q: You'd have gotten payment.

A: \$25,000 for loss of all the relatives that I mentioned. From the Austrian government. They had to divide it equally among the people who are still alive. And I wrote them several letters saying you're waiting til all of us have dropped dead. I got 25,000. I couldn't prove the name of the bank that my parents had money in. I don't know. I was a little kid. They wanted to know the bank account number. How should I know.

Q: But your parents did get reparations when they were alive?



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A: They got social security. I don't know what else they got. I have no idea. I would not, they would not have discussed it with me whatever it is.

Q: From Germany?

A: From Austria.

Daughter: They would have discussed it with you when you were an adult.

A: They never discussed any of those things with me. We didn't discuss these things.

Q: Do you think your children were affected by the fact that you had such an uprooted childhood?

A: Yeah they complained of, I neglected them.

Q: Because you wanted them to be independent.

A: Yeah I wanted them to be independent, be able to cope. This kid was able, I don't like to talk on the telephone. I'm very shy actually. And I taught her from the earliest age, make all the phone calls for me. And she's a genius at it. As a result she became a financial advisor and got all her clientele by cold calling on the telephone. I gave her her trade.

Q: Have you been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington?

A: She dragged me there one time.

Q: And what was your —

A: It was very, very crowded and very busy and yuck. I don't want to be reminded, actually. I'm hoping after I speak to you I will go one more time to a Holocaust museum and see about

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Trinidad because when I look up Trinidad on the internet they don't mention the fact that they had refugees and put them in detention center. It did say on there, wiki did say that it was for blacks who had been Muslims and slaves. And that may explain some of it.

Q: Have you been back to Trinidad?

A: No. I wanted to go several times and the travel agent warned me not to go there, that they are, seem at that point when I mentioned it several times that they were having a problem with white people.

Q: That it wouldn't be safe you mean?

A: Exactly.

Q: Have you been to Israel?

A: No, never have. I sort of dropped every last bit of everything. My father insisted I become bas mitzvah which I did, against my will. After that I went to a synagogue a couple of times, missed, mostly because we sat outside to see what boys we would meet. And I did go to reformed services. I was very active for a long time in the Jewish community center on 16<sup>th</sup> street in DC, used to go there for dances at night time, on weekends. In hopes of finding somebody. But after that simply, I, I was in a Jewish sorority in college. But couldn't stand the, it sounds like I'm talking like my mother. I couldn't stand the personality of the people. The flamboyancy, showing off the empty-headedness. I just couldn't see it. And I gave it up. And never went back.

Oh no, I did last year or the year before. I did go to reformed synagogue here in Reston. My daughter kept trying to insist that I go to the one out in Ashburn. But I never went. I took them off my internet after my, email after a while. Never did go.

Q: How did you raise your children? Did you raise your children as Jews or –

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A: No, no, no. I promised my mother that I gave her a holy oath with me being chosen people would end forever. Never again would we be chosen for, for death, extermination, plunder. No, never again.

Q: So you promised your mother what?

A: I swore a holy oath

Daughter: she made her promise.

Q: That what.

A: That with me, any trace of being Jewish would terminate.

Q: And so you did not raise your children –

A: Absolutely not.

Q: in any way as Jews.

A: Not even mention it.

Daughter: Yeah, as a matter of fact, this just all came out recently. At my grandfather's funeral a man walked up to my brother and I and said you can't hide from being Jewish. One day you will admit it. Even it had been hidden from us. And I hope this isn't going to do anything in future right.

A: I used to have a lot of problems you know. People would look at me and say it was endless question, every single solitary person I ever met. Whether I knew them or not, or whether I ever would see them again. Are you Italian, Greek or Jewish? And there was always that accent on it.

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And finally one day I decided to bleach my hair platinum blond and no one has ever asked me that again. Because I also bleached my eyebrows. That was the secret to it.

Q: What was your reaction during the Eichmann trial? Did you follow that, the Eichmann trial?

A: No, no.

Q: You did not follow it.

A: I did not follow it. I just hoped that he would be hung by his thumbs and ripped to death, but other than that, no I didn't follow it. There is no punishment adequate. But as I say with me it ends.

Q: Were you active in the civil rights movement let's say in the 60s and 70s because –

A: Are you kidding. There we were in the, first they stole my mother's money. Then we were in a detention center with, with armed guards and bayonets guarding us with and you, and you want me to be in favor of. No. I have my own things. Let them handle theirs. There's lots more of them than me. They don't need me ok. I was active in women's lib.

Q: I meant because your parents civil rights and your civil rights were taken away. Do you relate that –

A: We left, we left. Those who didn't leave died in concentration camps.

Q: How do you think your parents were affected emotionally about it, the loss of all their relatives? You said they didn't talk about it but what –

A: Nobody ever talked about it.

Q: But what are you thought –

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A: I have no idea. I can't psychoanalyze dead parents. They didn't talk about it. We didn't want to talk about it. I never met anybody else as a matter of fact. Never did I meet any other person who had gone through it. I did briefly at the community center, Jewish community center, I did meet one guy who his mother was in Am, in someplace in Holland. I did meet him and he had been, they had been refugees. And other than that, that's the only one and I only went out with him briefly for a few months. Other than that I never met anybody else who was a refugee. Never. All these years in community centers, in synagogues, no, never, never.

Q: But now in today's world, if you meet someone who is a refugee, do you feel more comfortable?

A: I've never met anybody that –

Q: Even now you haven't met –

A: I haven't met any –

Q: Up to now.

Daughter: I introduced you to Dora that one time.

A: Oh, well it just left me blank. Did I discuss it with Dora?

Daughter: Yeah, we had lunch with her.

A: I was just making talk then because to her because I don't even remember it.

Q: Is there any message you'd like to leave to your grandchildren, any message to your grandchildren?

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A: I see them all the time. They don't like my message. They only want their parents' message. Are you kidding? People are born knowing everything. All old people are a bunch of old fogeys. What are you going to say?

Daughter: That's not how they treat you , mom.

A: No but they're very nice but, very sweet. Every last one of them. Meir's going to paint my bathroom on Monday and Tuesday, powder room.

Q: How do you feel about the Holocaust Museum being in Washington?

A: Well that's where it belongs.

Q: Why?

A: Cause it's the nation's capital. What do you want me to say. No just because of that doesn't mean that I feel better about people discriminating about Muslims or blacks, no. That's a separate story altogether. They have their thing. I have mine. I'm not responsible for them. They sure as hell didn't do anything for me.

Daughter: That's true. Everybody expects so much charity nowadays. You know you look at them and actually I thought your parents owned ten houses at one point. They became like millionaires and they just out of their own hard work. No welfare. No handouts, nothing. I just can't believe how much charity we're giving out.

A: Well our charity came from Goodwill. My father had training from Goodwill to become an upholsterer. He couldn't handle it because of his nose. But he learned how to use hammers and what not and so on and got a good job at hardware stores. And from then opened up that which is simplest for a Jewish refugee. Opened up a shop. It comes natural.

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Q: Do you feel that you in a sense are two different people, somebody on the outside, different from the person on the inside because of your experiences? Or are you the same?

A: No I think I've all one person. I'm not psychotic in the least.

Q: I didn't mean psychotic.

A: I know people who went through several personalities. You're comparing it to the wrong, wrong person.

Q: I didn't mean it in that sense. I just meant because of the what –

A: No, I'm all one sound person. No, I don't have any psychological scars as a result that I know of. I don't believe in all that stuff, like I said, right. Like my grandmother said you take a brush and you do some physical labor and that's the end of that. You won't be moaning and groaning anymore. Mao Tse Tung.

Q: That's I guess a good note to end on.

A: I'm glad you got grapes, I mean cherries. It's one of the few things I can eat.

Q: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

A: No I've already added too much.

Daughter: You do want to find your relatives, that's all

A: Yeah I would but you all would. Laura desperately wants to

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Q: You want to find, yes. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Erica Laufer.

(end)