

Interview with Ellen Mendel
March 25, 1992
New York City

[Transcriber note: The voices on this tape on the loudest volume were very soft and when the voice of the interviewee dropped it was often impossible to hear the words.]

Q: Today is March 25, 1992, I'm Anthony Di Iorio. I'm at the home of Ellen Mendel and I'm here on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to interview her about her recollections of the Holocaust and about the effects of the Holocaust on her family. Before beginning I should probably mention that Ellen had some surgery this morning as a result of an accident on her foot but as a great trouper and academician she has decided to go ahead with this interview even though it is a beautiful day here in New York City. Hello Ellen.

A: Hi, Tony.

Q: How're you doing?

A: Great. Enjoying this a lot.

Q: You're enjoying a broken toe a lot.

A: I appreciate the opportunity of talking to you about my family.

Q: Okay. I'm going to ask you to go back in time, forgetting about feet and the nice weather and take us back to Germany when you were a little girl growing up. First of all where were you born in Germany?

A: I was born in Essen.

Q: And your birthday?

A: September 22, 1935.

Q: Your parents?

A: My parents' names?

Q: Yes.

A: My father, his name was Ernst and my mother was Jella Mendel. That's how we pronounced it in Germany. He was a physician.

Q: Your father was a physician?

A: Yes.

Q: In Germany. In Essen?

A: Right.

Q: And your mother?

A: She was a housewife.

Q: Now what memories do you have, if any, of growing up in Essen?

A: Okay, what I'll tell you about is what I remember and also what I was told.

Q: Was told by your parents?

A: Right. An interesting fact is that I was born one week after the Nuremberg laws came out. They came out September 16. I was born a week later. And at that point Jews were not allowed to have anybody working in their house who were Christians unless they were over fifty because the Nazis were afraid that they would intermarry or...

Q: Hanky Panky?

A: Right. And so my earliest days -- you know I had a nursemaid that they had to let go and I know my mother explained how sad that occasion was so they had to let her go of this nursemaid and they changed several times. There was Shvesta Gatzog or Shvesta Maria. So I think I got Shvesta Maria. She was over fifty so that was okay. She was nice too but from my earliest years were kind of changing caretakers. There was, of course, my mother but I think she felt it would be good to have a nursemaid for me in those early years.

Q: So your nursemaids were all elderly Aryan women?

A: Right and they were very lovely people and my parents got along very well with them.

Q: Were there other non-Jewish people in the household?

A: What I want to say is that I think Shvesta Roiskin,, Shvesta Gatzog, Shvesta Roiskin, Shvesta Maria -- Shvesta Roiskin made them..... They also could have somebody Jewish so maybe one of them was Jewish. If you had someone who was Jewish they could be that age. But I am aware that there was a lot of change in the beginning because even though the Nuremberg laws came out -- until they came to the people -- you know, a little time must have gone by, there was a lot of confusion. And then my mother used to say that new edicts would appear like a bolt of lightning out of the air overnight. You never knew what was going to happen next, where the Jews couldn't go, what they had to do or what they couldn't do. So my parents, for example, were married at home because that was easier.

Q: When were they married?

A: And they didn't go on vacation in Germany on their honeymoon because that was already was closed off as far as I recollect so they went to Italy on their honeymoon. They got married in 1934.

Q: So the Nazis had been in power for more than a year?

A: Right. On my birth certificate also there's a swastika.

Q: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

A: No. My father said because of the situation we couldn't afford it.

Q: Was he able to continue practicing medicine?

A: Well that's an interesting story -- because he served in the First World War and had been decorated for distinguished service the army kind of was able to protect their own as it were and Hitler couldn't do very much. So he was allowed to practice for a very, very long time and he was of the opinion that Hitler was blowing over and that then things would be better. So we stayed in Germany until 1939 which isn't to say that we didn't want to leave earlier. After Kristallnacht I don't think any Jews had any doubt of what was going to be the mood of the country. I wouldn't say the fate of all Jews because it wasn't known at that time. So during Kristallnacht, for example, I was in Essen alone with my grandfather, my father's father, while they were getting ready in Berlin, they bought all this furniture that you see here, they bought all of that and they got ready to emigrate. And I would always be left with different people, my grandfather in Essen or my grandparents in Heidelberg while they would leave.

Q: So your grandfather in Essen, would that be on your father's side of the family?

A: Right.

Q: Your grandparents in Heidelberg on your mother's side of the family?

A: One of the stories that is told, that my father told me is that when I was a toddler we were in the trolley car and there were a lot of men with their swastikas and we were sitting there. My father was trying to keep a very low profile and me being this curious little kid I started asking all about those signs that I was seeing. In a loud voice Papa [vas iss dos] and my father tried to explain very quietly so that I wouldn't cause a commotion and nobody would notice us. And I said [very indistinct] and I just kept on and on and he wasn't able to let me know enough that I had to keep quiet. So finally he took me and we got out of the trolley car because he was afraid that we would get in trouble. My father was also in a concentration camp, in Dachau. In the early days the Nazis were imprisoning a lot of people and it seems to me from what he told me he was put in because he was vice-president of the B'nai Brith chapter. So they were ransoming until they got all the money he was there. So he was there maybe two days or something like that. But he was in a concentration camp.

Q: Two days in Dachau?

A: Right.

Q: And this was to extort money?

A: Right.

- Q: So the fact that he was a war veteran and a physician didn't make any difference?
- A: At that point it didn't matter anymore. At that point Hitler had taken over the army. And so the army was powerless.
- Q: Was this after you were born this happened or before?
- A: Oh, after. It was after Kristallnacht I guess. Oh yeah, that was just before the...probably '38 or something like that
- Q: Was he still practicing medicine at that time?
- A: No, he had to stop at some point. There was one point where everybody had to stop who was Jewish. At that point he said if I can't make my livelihood then I can't live here. At that's when he started to get ready and to find out how to get out, where we could go, who would give us the affidavit, and these must have been extremely stressful times. As far as my life before that I came from very comfortable milieu. My parents' families on both sides had lived in Germany since about the 1700s. We were very comfortable and my life was a very good one. An interesting story is told that people like my -- once my mother told the story that if my father --- this couldn't happen in the Holocaust though---he was so prominent, two things, first he walked into a store like Woolworth, or some kind of a low class store, people were overheard to say well -- Dr. Mendel...[in German] if he goes in we could also go. But more directly, when my parents were getting ready for the emigration it was around the time of Kristallnacht and they were in Berlin and I was alone in Essen with my grandfather. When they called they were told don't come back, stay where you are. You won't be recognized in Berlin, in Essen you're too well known.
- Q: So your grandparents told your parents that.....
- A: I think somebody called the house and spoke to my grandfather. My grandfather was very prominent in Essen, not only my grandfather but his brother had a huge practice my father inherited. He made some discoveries with diabetes. He was very well known.....[indistinct] But he died.
- Q: This would have been your father's uncle?
- A: Yes, Uncle Felix. My father called him Uncle Felix. He was my great-uncle. So they stayed longer and my father treated people from the Krupp family and so they helped also and from the packing they gave him favors because 1) he was well liked 2) he was well known.
- Q: So you're saying Krupp, people from Krupp helped your father during the emigration?
- A: Yeah, yeah, right. I mean we got everything out. All into our [indistinct] and everything and most of it seemed to come from here.
- Q: Did your parents own their own place or were they...
- A: No, I went back there and they were renting.

Q: Apartment building or a house?

A: Like a big apartment.

Q: Now you mentioned you were with your grandparents at one point. Did they live with you or was it just you and your parents?

A: No, this was in Heidelberg.

Q: Oh, so you stayed in Heidelberg?

A: Yeah, my parents would park me there and I would be with my grandparents but you know I've been in therapy and some of the stuff that's come out you know in the last ten years even would say is that on some people I was afraid they were never gonna come back and that they wouldn't take me. So today certain reactions to things go all the way back to that time when I was left with wonderful grandparents but all I wanted to do was in a garden...

Q: This was in Heidelberg?

A: Yeah, all I wanted to do was go home.

Q: Home meaning to Essen.

A: With my parents...I just wanted my parents.

Q: So would you say you were growing up half the time in Heidelberg and half the time in Essen?

A: No, I think most of the time I was in Essen but then when my parents would get ready for a few weeks I would stay for a time...Moving ahead ...[indistinct] well that's some of what I remember when I was growing up.

Q: So you remember seeing any other Nazis besides the ones on trolley car that day? That was the first time you had seen a swastika?

A: That was the first time I responded out loud, so openly.

Q: Did your father ever explain afterwards what the swastika meant?

A: Nobody ever explained anything to me and so I came to this country, I was a very confused little child. I had many fears and once I found out in a big, long workshop that I thought that everything that ever happened that was wrong was my fault. That any problems my parents had you know I just [?] had this feeling that I was always doing the wrong thing so everything must have been my fault. Nobody really ever talked to me about it because they didn't think I would understand.

Q: So not even afterwards did they explain?

A: No, not when I was a child. You know I'd be much older before they explained anything. Then

my father spoke. I can tell you what he did. We were only allowed to take out ten dollars, the equivalent of ten dollars.

Q: When you left Germany?

A: When we left Germany and my father knew that it would be hard for us to get started and he couldn't be a physician right away. So he took toothpaste out of toothpaste containers with gloves, no well he squeezed it out with gloves and put in money with tweezers and then he sent it [indistinct]. I'm not sure if he ever got the money but...

Q: Got it out of Germany?

A: Right, and there were always these obstacles. Even when we were in Belgium we almost didn't get out. Many times we almost didn't make it. At one point though in terms of Germany my father didn't want to wait any longer in Germany because he saw what was happening and so we emigrated to Belgium.

Q: When did this happen?

A: We left in May '39. And we were in Belgium, in Brussels until January 1940.

Q: Just the three of you?

A: Yeah, just waiting for our number to come up.

Q: So you were waiting for visas to America?

A: Right, yeah, the affidavit, the folder [?], the visa, the whole thing.

Q: And your grandparents in Heidelberg, did they remain behind?

A: My grandparents in Heidelberg, at some point, probably before we left Germany, because we were in Essen, well they were still there Kristall ...I'm not sure if they were still there Kristallnacht.

Q: Your grandparents?

A: My grandparents in Heidelberg. But I know I was with my grandfather in Essen at Kristallnacht, but I don't know if that was because they left.

Q: Your grandfather Mendel, that would be November 1938.

A: Right. I think maybe in '37 they may have left. They left, let's see, I'll tell you who all left. My grandparents left either around Kristallnacht or before. I have a sense it was before.

Q: These would be your mother's parents?

A: My mother's parents.

Q: This would be the Hocher.

A: The Hocher part of the family, right. They left and his brother left and his wife, Uncle Simon, that's with his wife.

Q: Grandpa Ferdinand and his wife and his brother Simon and his wife.

A: Right, and family actually. And their whole family. Went to Amsterdam.

Q: So the Hochers went to Amsterdam.

A: Yeah, them anyway. There were a lot more. Because they were in the cigar business and they had connections in Holland because they imported from Holland. So in order to get away from Hitler they went to Holland assuming that they would be okay. At least that was the first leg of the journey. And also my mother's sister and her family, her husband and her child. He was three years old in Holland ...he was born about 1937no, he was born in Holland, I think. Yeah, my cousin was born in Holland, yeah I think in '37.

Q: This would be your aunt Erica?

A: Yeah, right.

Q: And they went around the same time that your grandparents ...

A: Right, they all went to Amsterdam. They lived in different houses in the same part of Amsterdam because I saw it when I was there.

Q: But when you left Germany, you went to Belgium.

A: To Brussels, right.

Q: Completely independently of their movement. You didn't visit them.

A: Right I think it's because my father had a cousin in Belgium and we were going to live with them. Right, I think we sort of lived in their building. Their name was Rose, right. Alex, that's right, I played with their son. And my father wasn't really -- it was dangerous for Jewish men to go out on the street at night. It wasn't really a curfew. So he didn't go out that much. I know I wasn't easy there either. And I went to a parochial school. I went to a Catholic nursery school.

Q: You were too young to go to school in Germany?

A: Right.

Q: Did you start learning another language at that point?

A: Yes, I learned French, Belgian French.

Q: When you left Germany, were you able to say good-bye, do you remember saying good-bye to

any family members at that point? Did you know you were really leaving for good?

A: It was really sad. I don't know. My father must have said good-bye to his father [indistinct]. I guess we said good-bye but I don't remember good-byes.

Q: You were glad they were taking you with them, though?

A: Yeah, my earliest memory which was in Germany is that we're leaving and walking out of the house and as I turn around I guess a door's open and I see the workmen starting to make changes in the apartment and my attitude as I'm walking forward is why couldn't they have waited till we left to start turning things upside down. On some level I was aware. I was really aware on some level of what was going on but it wasn't anything my parents could speak to me about. So it was something I just felt.

Q: Did you have any playmates in Essen?

A: I had playmates, I don't remember about my playmates in Essen. I did but no hard and fast ones. Maybe it had to do with the times. When we got to Brussels because I went to nursery school, I did play with this boy Alex in the building because he had a dog.

Q: Did you have any pets speaking of dogs?

A: No, I always wanted a pet. We could never have one.

Q: No pets. Any dolls, any ...?

A: Oh yes, I had a doll. I have a picture somewhere if I could dig that up where I'm looking out of the window and I have my doll. And my grandparents gave it to me.

Q: You got to keep the doll?

A: I kept my doll.

Q: From your grandparents from Heidelberg?

A: From Heidelberg.

Q: So the doll was from Heidelberg?

A: Right, from those ..yeah, yeah. Then I had a great grandfather[indistinct]

Q: What kind of a doll was it ...?

A: Yeah, very cute. It had blond hair. It had eyes that opened and shut, I believe, I won't swear to it. What I remember is it had a cape. It had a beautiful velvet cape with maroon on the collar part. And hair and I used to hold her very tightly ...[indistinct] and so I got one in America, my first doll in America, I remember that also. I had three dolls, I had that doll and I had one named Kita. Those were German dolls, they were celluloid. And that had hair stuck on. I also

had a boy doll, his name was Peter.

Q: What was the girl's name? Do you remember that? She got up to go to the U.S.?

A: It was a very good doll[indistinct]

Q: The blond with the maroon cape, she made it to the U.S.?

A: Yeah, I think so.

Q: And that was the end of her career?

A: I think so, either that or she got lost somewhere in the shuffle because I don't remember that part.

Q: Do you have any other memories of Brussels?

A: Oh, yeah, Brussels I remember sitting on the kitchen table because I had been naughty or something or else they were cleaning, I can't remember which. Anyway everything is out of the kitchen. I'm sitting in the middle of the table and I'm saying my catechism in French.

Q: You were saying catechism in French? [She says some of it].

A: That's Wednesday night I remember.

Q: Now you were a Jewish girl though with Jewish parents.

A: Yeah, but I went to ...I had a little apron and a little slate, yeah my mother made me a little apron. My mother made all my clothes. One she was very handy and two we didn't have any money. So I remember that and I remember that experience. And then my father tells us that we used to go to the beach in the summer. Well, we didn't used to I guess we were there one summer. We went to [?]. And my father tells the story that he was lying there and all at once he hears these people laughing. And he looks up and he sees that I am walking on the beach following a little dog, a little male dog and I am imitating a little dog urinating, putting my leg up and trying to urinate with my leg up.

Q: This is the pet that you wished you had.

A: I guess so because I always wanted a dog, a pet. So he was embarrassed. It seems as if I was always embarrassing my parents[indistinct].

Q: So you were a mischievous child?

A: I think I was, yeah. My father used to call me "strolth."

Q: What's that supposed to mean?

A: Like a little imp. I think that's what it means. I have to look it up.

Q: And you didn't have any other nicknames? You were Ellen otherwise?

A: Called me devil, little devil.

Q: What did you ever do to earn that?

A: In America I was always getting into trouble.

Q: But in Germany you didn't get into trouble did you?

A: No, there they called me Sonnenscheinkind.

Q: Oh, well everybody knows what that means.

A: Yeah,[indistinct] sunshine.

Q: So in Germany you were Strolth and Zonnascheinkind?

A: I'm not sure I was Strolth later on. I was much loved and much looked after and focused on. There were pros and cons to that. I was an only child. And I have a book about every word I ever spoke and what I ate and how much I weighed

Q: Did you know that you were Jewish?

A: No. I knew I was Jewish when we came here because my father was a very loyal member of the synagogue and the rabbi from Essen founded a synagogue here. We came a year after they founded it. They founded it a year after Kristallnacht.. We weren't here yet, November in 1939. We came in 1940[indistinct].

Q: So one of the rabbis of Essen founded another synagogue in New York in November 1939?

A: Called the Builders, Habonim.

Q: Builders Synagogue, right here in New York City.

A: Sort of an answer to the ...that we wouldn't be left out.

Q: Meanwhile had you ever heard of Hitler? I know your first experience with the swastika was on the trolley car. Was the name Hitler ever mentioned, do you recall talk of Hitler or of war, because after all war has broken out during these months?

A: My parents were the kind of people who would want to shelter their children from everything, any harm. And that happened until my father died last spring. Their attitude always was we want to shelter Ellen, we want to protect her, we don't want her to worry. So I think they made very sure never to discuss anything controversial or fearful or [indistinct] around me.
[indistinct]

Q: Did they ever give you a reason why you were moving to Belgium and then eventually moving across the ocean?

A: No, I wish they had. Let me just go back. This was a story my father told over many, many, many times. My grandparents Hocher would have liked to have come to America and planned to. But it was a question of getting the papers together and everything. And they said to my father and my mother, my father was always the spokesman for the family, why don't you leave Ellen with us in Amsterdam? And you'll be free to settle and get yourself together because after all it's not easy with a little girl and you don't know what awaits you? And then we'll bring Ellen with us. No my father said no, no. No matter how bad things are there always will be enough for Ellen. Wherever we go Ellen will go with us. There will always be enough. And so we finally got out January 1940. May 10th was the invasion and all borders were closed. So the fact that I'm here talking to you is a double miracle, maybe a triple one. One is that my father didn't say yeah that might be a good idea, let's do that and then I would have been killed with my grandparents probably in Sobibor or elsewhere because I would have been too young to be useful. The second is that our number came up before the invasion. It was just luck. We could have been sitting there and it could have been July and we might still not have our number. So that's a clear-cut two.

Q: And what's your maybe third one?

A: I just made it up because I like three. Oh three. We went through the Atlantic Ocean and it was mined. That was the last voyage of the Van Dank the boat we came on. It was torpedoed, mined, sunk on its return voyage.

Q: The Van?

A: The Van Dank.

Q: Dutch ship?

A: Yeah, Dutch ship. We sailed from [?]

Q: Du, no Da which sank on its return.

A: 1940 going back. So that's three, but you thought of another one.

Q: Well not another one but what struck me was that you'd always been afraid that your parents would leave you behind and yet here your father had this golden opportunity to leave you behind and yet he said no and you weren't there to hear this. If you'd only heard this conversation then, there all of your worries and your concerns probably would have evaporated.

A: Yeah, yeah, because a lot of my memories from Holland was I'm supposed to take a bath and go to bed. And I decide I don't want to take a bath but I don't want anyone to get angry at me so I get undressed, I have the bath water drawn and I'm standing there but I figure if I don't put my foot in the water I'll never have to take the bath and I won't have to go to bed and then my parents won't leave me in the middle of the night while I'm sleeping and never come back.

Q: Very elaborate.

A: That was quite a story.

- Q: Yeah, now while you were in Belgium, '39, early '40, did you ever get a chance to visit family members in Holland?
- A: No, but what we did, that's a good question, before we left we stayed two weeks with my grandparents and it was at that time all the good-byes, all the plans, and that's when I was so afraid my parents would leave. We lived with them.
- Q: Which grandparents now?
- A: Holcherr.
- Q: O.K, so this was in the Netherlands?
- A: In Amsterdam, by then they were there because they had gone in '37 or '38.
- Q: Before leaving you guys go to live in Amsterdam ...
- A: To live for two weeks.
- Q: Was this January or December?
- A: Yeah.
- Q: You were there with your grandparents, the very same grandparents who wanted to keep you.
- A: Right. It may have been at that time when that conversation came up. It was at that time I was fearful of taking a bath because I thought my parents would leave and never come back. And at that time I guess that's when we said our good-byes.
- Q: Do you remember saying good-bye to those grandparents?
- A: No, I don't think I remember.
- Q: Was there any possibility of them leaving since they indicated they wanted to go to America as well?
- A: Yeah, there was and I guess their number didn't come up or they didn't have anybody at that moment in Amsterdam but it seemed imminent almost.
- Q: So there was paperwork?
- A: Possibly, I don't know at what stage it was.
- Q: How about the other members of the family? You mentioned your aunt Erica, your mother's youngest sister?
- A: They stayed. They weren't planning on going to America.

- Q: Did anyone suspect that Germany might ...
- A: And my aunt, Tanta Simon they weren't planning that I know of to come to America either.
- Q: They were in the Netherlands?
- A: Yeah.
- Q: And they were continuing the same line of work, they have the cigar ...
- A: Right until the Germans ...
- Q: Did anyone suspect that the Germans might invade Holland which was a neutral country?
- A: I don't think anyone did.
- Q: Nobody thought about it.
- A: I don't think people thought about these things. My father wouldn't go to Holland because he was a doctor and he didn't have any connections there. So we had some connections in America so we figured ... somehow my father didn't want to stay around because there was talk of Australia if we couldn't get into America. That was a possibility, to go to Australia. Never wanted to go to Palestine.
- Q: After the fact, did he ever share with you his thoughts about -- remember you were telling me that being Jewish and talking about Nazis and Hitler that was saved for much later. Eventually when your father came around to telling you about these years including the decision to leave Germany, did he add any additional information?
- A: It was my mother who said how things happened overnight. My father had tremendous ambivalence about leaving Germany. Germany had been a source of success, friendship and many things. And when we came here he says [spoken in German] which means we got to thank God every day that he brought us to this God damn country.
- Q: Meaning the United States of America.
- A: Right. And I used to hear in the beginning years after that how wonderful Germany was.
- Q: Before the Nazis came.
- A: Right. So my father used to live in his stories to me more in what happened before the Nazis except for his overcoming. He never shared feelings vulnerable. He never shared feeling Jewish, never talked about stuff like this, nothing. All he said is they thought he was a mad man and he would burn himself out.
- Q: You're talking about Hitler?
- A: Hitler, yeah. He really felt that he could outlive Hitler.

Q: And he did, but only because he left.

A: He was right, but only because he left. And he was very reluctant to leave. All he did was save us. We don't fight the language. He made me speak German. I'm bilingual. He said we're not fighting the language, just the people. And he used to talk about [in German]. So you had a sense of who was good and who wasn't good.

Q: So it wasn't the people even, it was some people bad and some people good.

A: Right. And he spoke about sometimes about friends who hadn't survived, people he was very close to who were very successful, I guess. But that was the irony of some people [indistinct] that their country would turn on them. So my father thought [indistinct]. Just my mother who said overnight you never knew what was happening next.

Q: Would you say that your mother was more eager to leave than your father was?

A: Well, you see my father's father was still in Germany and my mother's parents had gone to Holland so in a way perhaps but I think they both had really decided. The minute my father couldn't practice medicine he resolved to leave. And he also said many years later he would never go back to a country that had thrown him out. Never go to visit.

Q: Even though it had been such a great place before the Nazis.

A: Right. No, his father kind of died right before the war. [indistinct]

Q: Did you find out what happened to the other members of your family who didn't leave?

A: For a long time we didn't know anything. I remember one day my mother found out [indistinct]. I'm not even sure if she cried. I don't remember my parents crying for anything that ever happened. I only remember my mother maybe a little bit she cried when her parents were killed, but not a big cry [indistinct] maybe she cried but nothing long lasting. I remember though once she found out -- late, because I must have been about ten years old.

Q: And what did happen?

A: Well, they were put on cattle cars and I found out from my aunt, I thought they were shot getting off the cattle cars, but to speak to my aunt she told me they went to Sobibor and they perished there.

Q: Your mother's ..?

A: Parents. Ferdinand and Eva Holchherr.

Q: Eva being her stepmother?

A: Right.

Q: So it would be your grandfather Holchherr and your step-grandmother.

- A: Right and the only one that I ever knew.
- Q: And they were deported from the Netherlands directly from Amsterdam or were they sent to any camps ...?
- A: No, I think they were sent to Sobibor. Where is that?
- Q: That's in eastern Poland. It was an extermination camp that was active in '42 and '43. And you don't recall the date that this happened?
- A: They might know [indistinct]
- Q: So your grandparents were deported together. Were there any other members of the family that were with them in the cattle cars?
- A: Well you see Tanta Ella and Uncle Simon were [indistinct]
- Q: First your grandparents, they were sent directly to Sobibor from the Netherlands. Now you were starting to talk about your grandfather's brother.
- A: Right, Simon, who [??] in a cigar factory together and they were very close. He had a son from his first wife. His name was Heinz Holchherr ... so, let me get the family group. There was Simon and his second wife Ella. Her name used to be Lizer but now of course when they got married so that was Holchherr. They had two children. One was Heinz who was from his first wife.
- Q: Right. Whose mother died when he was young.
- A: Right. Sometime around a little before the first World War. And his father was very prominent in the first World War.
- Q: This would be Simon. He was a war veteran of the German army.
- A: Right. He had a big scar... [indistinct]
- Q: From the war or from fraternity.
- A: No, from the war. He and his wife had another child. Her name was Lisa Lotte. They were all living in Holland but then Lisa Lotte went to England to study to be an interpreter. And Heinz eventually in those years got married. He got married to someone named [indistinct].
- Q: German woman?
- A: German woman.
- Q: Also living in the Netherlands?
- A: Yeah, I believe that was the story. Pretty popular.

Q: Jewish?

A: Yeah, Jewish. Now I won't swear that he didn't get married in Germany and come there with his wife. I'm not positive but I could find out for you. But they had a child who was about a year younger than I, maybe she would have been, or a year and a half younger, about that age. And Lisa Lotte was studying in England to be an interpreter.

Q: This was Heinz's half sister?

A: Right, Ella's daughter, came back to visit her parents and was trapped -- couldn't go back.

Q: She came back when to visit her parents?

A: Before you could get out again.

Q: Was it after you had left for America?

A: Yes.

Q: So we're talking early 1940.

A: Right.

Q: And bang, the Germans come in.

A: Right, and she's stuck, she can't go back to England. Because she was their daughter, she was just studying there and she didn't have a right to be out there. She was there at the wrong time. So she was stuck with them.

Q: And they all have German passports?

A: Either German or Dutch, but it didn't matter, they were Jewish.

Q: Right, I mean they would only have been living in the Netherlands for a year or two so Lisa Lotte for example really wasn't living in the Netherlands. In all probability their passports were German. With a J on it.

Q: Probably. Yeah they definitely had the J on it because we had that too. So she was stuck there and she and Heinz and Heinz's wife and then there was a little daughter. They were asking for young people to go to the work camps.

Q: Who's they?

A: The Germans were asking for names of people to volunteer to go and ... you know things were bad in Holland for the Jews, in Amsterdam by that time. I don't know what time. I don't know if my grandparents were still there but around those years.

Q: During the German occupation?

A: Oh, for sure. And Simon thought that things could be a little better for them. So he encouraged them to volunteer to be in a labor camp to work, young people, in Germany. And they never came back.

Q: So he encouraged Lisa Lotte and Heinz.

A: Probably Margo went too, not positive.

Q: Heinz's wife.

A: Heinz's wife. Now the little daughter, I'm not positive. Her name was Suzanne. I don't know where she was killed. The parents, I'm not even sure who went to Theresienstadt but Tanta Ella, Simon's wife and uncle Simon were deported to Theresienstadt.

Q: Alone.

A: To the best of my understanding, but I'm not positive. Maybe the little girl went too, their little granddaughter, I don't know. Because Tanta Ella survived the war because she came to live with me in 1946.

Q: So Jella survived deportation to Theresienstadt?

A: No, Jella was my mother, Ella? Ella went to Theresienstadt suffered tremendously. Her husband was deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz and killed. A lot of people in our family went to Auschwitz, names I haven't mentioned to you. There were many brothers. There was Simon and Ferdinand and many others and a lot of them were deported because only two people came back, Tanta Ella and Tanta Marie.

Q: Ella remained in Theresienstadt until the end of the war?

A: And she was liberated and then I guess she was in a DP camp and then she went back to Holland a little bit and had difficulty living with my aunt and uncle who by then had returned from Switzerland because they had fled to Switzerland, I didn't tell you that story and so then she came here. And she never wanted to talk to me about what happened. It was only on her death that I [indistinct] but she lived with us. So first my father died, '57, then my mother died in '70, and my great-aunt is still alive. And all the stuff that came to me that I inherited she took to the Windermere to hold for me and it was all in her will that everything in the house belonged to me. So when she died my friend Bernie and I [indistinct] cleaned out the apartment and found some of the pictures that I have here that I had never seen. So I pieced a lot of this together. She would say little things but not much. It was too painful for her. I remember once she showed me money from Theresienstadt that they were supposedly into her views but she said it was horrible, horrible, just horrible, she couldn't talk about it. She wore black for a long time, wouldn't wear lipstick. She was in mourning for a long time till her husband
[indistinct]

Q: Did she tell you any stories about her husband in the time that he was in Theresienstadt?

A: No.

- Q: Nothing about it, no incidents?
- A: Nothing. I think she felt guilty that she survived. She had a great deal of difficulty dealing with any of it. By the time she died I wasn't living at home anymore and quite honestly I was reluctant to ask her because it wasn't very popular yet in those days. I'm trying to remember when Epstein's book came out, Children of the Holocaust so when I read it I could identify a lot with that kind of feeling [indistinct]
- Q: So she really has little idea or share very little with you as to why she might have survived?
- A: It had something to do with breaking her foot and being in the infirmary but I could never piece together how that could help her survive. I think she felt very, very guilty.
- Q: Do you know how long she was in Theresienstadt, in terms of years?
- A: Maybe not that long. You see if Simon could have stayed in Theresienstadt he might have lived too but he got deported. It seemed to be that she was in the right place at the right time not to get deported and it was pure luck. And she never wanted to talk about it. She kept it, just everything locked in her heart. It's just that when I wouldn't eat or something she'd say [in German referring to eating in Theresienstadt] what I'm leaving on my plate.
- Q: You would have drooled at the sight of that in Theresienstadt.
- A: Yeah, and she did show me the money and I think she talked about the orchestra, maybe. Maybe she did talk a little, very, very little. She was a very strong woman. She was like a duchess, very proud, and it was her way to stay sane certainly after the war.
- Q: How old was she, approximately, when she was in Theresienstadt?
- A: Well, we could figure it out. She was 90 when she died in '76. So let's say over forty years.
- Q: She was 90 in '76. That means in 1945 she would have been about 59, so she was getting along in years. Was she active in anything at Theresienstadt, social service, because there were some activities available?
- A: Yeah, shows for money. She never spoke about it, never spoke about it.
- Q: Were there any other family members in Theresienstadt other than Ella and Simon?
- A: I think Tanta Marie may have been there but I don't know. They may have just gone straight to Auschwitz. I could find out.
- Q: What about Heinz and his family?
- A: I think my cousin Henry may know that. I could find that out, maybe.
- Q: And he was with Lisa Lotte? Did they volunteer together to work in Germany?
- A: Yeah.

Q: Now another that that occurred to me, your Holchherr family in the Netherlands, they were in business, right? They were in the cigar business. Were there any losses of property? Was there any talk about compensation?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah, we got back from Germany. They worked hard, my mother's family, and they would get back for the factory.

Q: The one in Heidelberg that was confiscated?

A: Right.

Q: What about their business activities in Amsterdam?

A: They may not have been on the same level. Don't forget they were new in the country. It would take a while for them to I don't want to break your train of thought. I just want to briefly touch on my aunt who was also living in Amsterdam. So you've got my grandparents, Simon and Tanta Ella and Heinz and his wife and family and Lisa Lotte coming back and then you have Erica and Franz. Erica was my mother's sister, a year and a half younger. She must have been born in about 1909. That's when she was born, March 7, 1909.

Q: In the same town?

A: Yeah, and she married Franz who came from Mannheim. They left Germany. He was like an engineer, mechanical engineer or chemical engineer, but I'm not sure.

Q: An engineer. And his last name?

A: Joseph.

Q: Franz Josef, that was his last name? Spelled German style with an "f", Josef.

A: I don't know because in Holland whoever I knew was a "ph". So they may have changed it. And they emigrated to Holland. They didn't emigrate with anyone. I think my cousin Paul was born in Holland. They left also in about '37, got married and then left

Q: Around the same time as your grandparents?

A: Right. My grandparents may have gone there first and so it might have been you know, they may have all gotten there first and then that might have been why they went, you know – because that would be her parents, her stepmother and her father. And in Holland, in Amsterdam, they all got stuck. So what happened to my mother's sister and her family, they fled. They disguised themselves as French peasants, as peasants ...

Q: Erica and Franz.

A: Yeah, and she had a little baby boy two or three years old....[indistinct]

Q: This is the baby born in the Netherlands?

A: Yes, I think he was, my cousin Paul. Now I have pictures of myself with Paul, just before we left. I have those pictures. And they fled on bicycle, train, and foot. And they also were helped by underground. They had false passports. And for much, much money, jewels and everything else, you could buy your way sort of to freedom. And it was like an underground railway. So they would stop off and different people would escort them for a while. But in one place towards the end of that journey, my aunt explained, nobody came.

Q: You mean there was a rendezvous and they were stood up?

A: Nobody came to escort them, they were stranded, they were stood up. My uncle, who was no slouch, he said I'm not taking any chances I'm not waiting any longer. So in the middle of the night or whatever it was he knocked on the door of someone he knew in Brussels who was a colleague of his, an engineer, and he said would you take us in. And they did. And then they continued on. I remember my aunt told the story, they wrote out the whole story down, but that's in Holland because I saw it once.

Q: When did this trip take place?

A: I have to ask my aunt. Maybe '42 or '43. Well I could try to figure it out by when my cousin was born

Q: In Switzerland?

A: In Switzerland. So once I think they were in a place and there were German officers on the other side of the inn and they just tried to keep a very low profile. My aunt like she couldn't speak the language, and the baby, and she was wearing a babushka. My uncle spoke French very well so he could almost pass. They had papers I think that he was maybe from Alsace somewhere so that if there was a German accent it wouldn't be so strange. And when they just about got to the border, even there the Swiss weren't so great and they sent back many, many people. But they were lucky. They were taken in, they had a child. Men and women were separated and they had to work very, very hard and they only got back together because my uncle said there was nothing he couldn't do. So, he said he could fix toilets and toilets were overflowing and they needed a plumber and he was good with his hands so Then they gave them a room together. My aunt said they were so thrilled just to have that room together. And shortly thereafter [indistinct], it may have been my cousin was born. Eventually they went back to Holland and two more cousins were born.

Q: So they survived in Switzerland and then returned to Amsterdam?

A: Right, but en route my uncle as well as my cousin got tuberculosis. In that time.

Q: Your cousin meaning the ...

A: My first cousin Paul.

Q: The child born in Switzerland?

A: Born in Holland.

Q: In Holland?

A: The first one. The second one was born in Switzerland.

Q: The first child made the trip across France.

A: Right.

Q: Now, did we miss any stories along the way? We just talked about Erica, this would be your aunt, your grandparents we talked about them so far as we can remember. We got your parents and you across to America. And then Lisa Lotte and Heinz we have them deported to the east.

A: Maybe to Germany or maybe to the east, I don't know. [some indistinct comments].

Q: Well I'm sure that wasn't so bad.

A: It was tough, very tough, first we lived in a furnished apartment where we had bedbugs and everything.

Q: Nothing like that in Germany.

A: No, you're right, nothing like that in Germany. I'm sure my father would say that. We weren't used to that kind of thing. I remember our first night in America. We came at twelve o'clock midnight and we lived in the Beacon Hotel and they had two floors.

Q: You were glad to get off the ship?

A: Well my father said I was seasick for the whole trip and he was always singing to me so I wouldn't think about being seasick. The problem was that my father would spend hours and hours at night studying for the medical boards.

Q: So he could then practice.

A: Right because we didn't have money and we didn't have an apartment. We didn't have much of anything except each other. And in the middle of the exam he had a heart attack. That's when we were still living in a furnished apartment, [indistinct] ... so he was laid up with a bad heart.

Q: And he was a young guy then, right?

A: Well he was older when he was married ... [indistinct] ... in his forties.

Q: So he was born in 1895, that's still pretty young.

A: Oh yeah he was young for that. I always remember my father having heart trouble. So not only was I always "shushed" in Germany, I would be "shushed" in America, too. Don't get your father upset.

Q: But of course he didn't have the heart trouble because of you? That I think we could say with a

great deal of certitude.

A: Right. And I know that, that part I knew, but I was afraid that I could make him have a heart attack ...[indistinct] because I was told that.

Q: Meanwhile it was probably the stress studying and trying to make a living.

A: Yeah because we observed, oh my parents went every Friday night to synagogue and every Friday night we made the candles and everything and whatever they talked about, the certain thing about the prayer and the grace after the meal it had to do with [in Hebrew] it had to do with please give us sustenance and my father would sort of smile at my mother. It was always something that was of concern. My mother made my clothes because she didn't have any money for it. She would make jam and jelly out of rind. There were a lot of resourceful ways. My father walks so he wouldn't have to take the subway. I heard all those stories when I was pretty young. So it was a time of sacrifice.

Q: When did your parents and eventually you first learn about the Holocaust, that is to say the full magnitude of what was going on? They left because he couldn't practice and because the Nazis were very mean towards the Jews and they trashed synagogues and so forth but I think it's safe to say that they never could have imagined in 1938 and 1939 what would have happened. Being American during the forties and keeping in mind the controversy of whether or not ...

A: They only became an American in '46. They were enemy aliens when they came here.

Q: Yes, German spies perhaps. But seriously the argument that Americans didn't know what was going on in Germany ... it was kind of a shock at the end of the war when the camps were opened and photographs were distributed. When did your parents first realize that there had been this Holocaust, concentration camps, extermination camps, millions of people.

A: Well certainly by the time they found out about my grandparents being deported.

Q: After the war.

A: Right.

Q: So during the war ...

A: There wasn't much [indistinct]. In '45 I was ten years old. By the time there were the Nuremberg trials I was very aware of the war.

Q: So you knew who Hitler was by then?

A: Oh yeah, and I was following it. I was following the Pacific and the Atlantic and I had a big map and I was looking at my map and at the Solomon Islands and Iwo Jima and all of that stuff. I read the Times.

Q: And you learned English.

A: Right.

Q: The German, the French, English.

A: Well my parents felt they couldn't keep up two languages so French went by the wayside. And I remember certainly and I mean but that was very late, the Nuremberg trials I knew how horrible things had been. I had the papers for that with all the pictures and we didn't have television or anything, you know Goering with all his [couldn't understand], I had all those pictures, and I was reading about it and Patton I remember and VE Day I remember. I knew about the war how horrible it was.

Q: And you knew what the swastika stood for?

A: And I certainly knew what the swastika stood for and I knew when my parents found out about my grandfather but I didn't know much. I didn't know when my parents found out, I think gradually they began to find out what it was all about. The first time I ever saw pictures of everything was very late.

Q: When your aunt died or just before you ...

A: No, not those pictures, of the concentration camps and the bodies and that was -- well of course there weren't any movies around.

Q: No, not movies, documentary ..

A: Yeah, this was a documentary --when I was in San Francisco in 1958 that was the first time I had actually seen all those bodies. I remember once hearing about lampshades and soap and I couldn't believe that that could happen. I just didn't believe that that was possible. From hair, mattresses. I didn't believe that that could be done. I couldn't believe that. ...[indistinct]. I could only deal with situations like when Tanta Ella came -- I know when we got Tanta Ella at the airport, it was nineteen forty something, six, well certainly by then but that was after the war. I don't know what they knew. You know whatever the Red Cross let through. We didn't hear from my aunt and uncle, anyway they were stuck in Switzerland. We didn't hear much ... [indistinct]. If we did, my father was the kind of person who would not share that with me. He would protect me. He would shelter me.

Q: Wanted to preserve a little bit of sunshine.

A: Yeah, he did. [indistinct]

Q: In retrospect, basically you got a little information here, a little bit here and there. Of all your family members who would credit as being your single biggest source as to what happened to your family in Germany and then outside of Germany? You have your parents, you have Tanta Ella, you got Erica.

A: My aunts, Erica, when I went to Holland a few years ago. First of all when she first came here in '52 she brought the diary and that was very interesting.

Q: This was the diary ...

- A: Switzerland.
- Q: They had a diary.
- A: That my uncle kept. You know, a journal. She still has it.
- Q: This is their underground railway escape.
- A: So I knew their story very well. I knew what I told you of our story from my father, but our story was not through the Holocaust. It was getting away before the Holocaust.
- Q: Getting away before the Holocaust and before you knew what the Holocaust was going to be.
- A: Right, so Erica told me not too long ago that when my grandparents were killed and that was a big shock.
- Q: Even they skirted, Erica skirted the Holocaust. Ella, I suppose, of all of your surviving family is the one that was the most involved in the Holocaust.
- A: Right. I got little from her.
- Q: Because she didn't want to speak. And the other members of the family who were very directly involved in the Holocaust, none of them survived.
- A: Right. Only Tanta Marie who lived in the Bronx and I never had any conversation about [indistinct]. All the cousins, they were like ten years older than I, and they made it out. This was all in my mother's side. See on my father's side a lot of his grandfather's brethren, siblings, died early, or didn't have boys. I didn't have kids or they did. I think all their kids made it but I don't know what happened to them. I really don't know much about my father's side of the family. I mean I know about various cousins and their children but not too many. Of my grandfather, he was the oldest too. He sent everybody through school. They were all in practice. They were lawyers. My father's family was pretty successful, they were lawyers and doctors.
- Q: Well your mother's side of the family also were rather successful.
- A: I think they were, they really were but my father was such a snob you would have thought that my mother came from ...
- Q: The wrong side of the tracks.
- A: Right.
- Q: Instead where did they come from, Waldorf and Heidelberg, not bad places?
- A: Right. They were very
- Q: In fact, if you would look at the Germany today, people from Heidelberg and Waldorf would

look down on the people from Essen.

A: Well I think it had to do really with my father's attitude that his family was the best in the world and nobody could compete. A very interesting thing that I just found out last week because one of my mother's cousins was here from Italy. She has her story from Italy. They went to Italy. Everybody went somewhere else. Someone else went to South Africa, some to Canada, some to England, you know but they're different people. And she said that my mother's family was the most, you know they always felt they were the most elegant, and they thought that they looked down on the rest of the family. So both my parents came from sort of snobbish backgrounds but my mother kind of gave up to go along with my father.

Q: Well even you look pretty elegant with your foot laid up like that on top of a chair after an operation what we're talking eight hours, less than that, five hours after surgery.

A: Well I guess we're all survivors.

Q: Yes, one thing or another. But as for the rest of the story of your mother's family we can get some more information from your aunt ...

A: From Holland. And Henry Bauer in Rego Park, Queens, and Claire, my cousin Claire, if I need anything they could all ... [indistinct] and they're my best sources.

Q: Okay.

A: I'm good at doing this ... and detective work [indistinct].

Q: We'll look forward to that and to you getting on your feet again.

A: Do you want to see any pictures?

Q: Yeah, but we'll just close the tape and look at some photos. On behalf of the U.S. Holocaust Museum I'd like to thank you for your time and your help.

A: Is there anything else that I should have told you?

A: You look kind of exhausted by now.

A: I'm not exhausted, I can talk forever. I think what's important is that yes a lot of people perished and it's horrendous. But the miracle is all who survived and overcame all the adversities ... mother, father, aunts, uncles, Tanta Ella, they all survived to live very productive often giving service to others kind of lives. Either they were successful, professionally, they had children, or they did things for others, they lived worthwhile.

Q: An understatement.

A: Right. I mean they lived the kinds of lives anyone could be proud of in spite of what they went through. Because they could have said screw it I don't want to do anything ever again. I give up -- or whatever. But those who survived and did it well are the answer to Hitler, that in spite of all the adversities they were able to overcome and maintain a connection to their Judaism

because my great aunt despite Theresienstadt everything she was very orthodox when she came to America. She held on to her religion; she held on to her dignity; she held on to her keeping the family together; she held on to knowledge and exploring other area in life, you know reading. Certainly my parents are excellent examples. My father was a wonderful doctor and he also took care of people free of charge. So he was also a humanitarian. My mother was very supportive and Franz and Erica founded an old age home. I don't know if they founded it; they were very instrumental in putting up an old age home and they did all the design for the old age home.

Q: In Amsterdam?

A: Yeah, in Amsterdam. And then the rest of the family too in spite of what happened. They overcame.

Q: To that list I would just like to add you. You certainly were successful as a professional, still are, serving mankind, humankind. I don't know which campus is it you're ...

A: Now I've been in the school system for 32 years.

Q: New York City?

A: New York City public schools as a teacher first and as a guidance counselor. I was awarded guidance counselor of the year twice. And now I'm on sabbatical and I'm looking at how children go about making plans. I'm going to write a book and I'm also a therapist in private practice. I think what I'm happiest about is that in 32 years of being in the school system I was very committed to my job and never once did I [indistinct]. And now I feel that I'm ready to retire next year, I'm not burned out but I feel I'm ready to move on.

Q: A new career?

A: Right, bigger horizons and a few books. Thank you for giving me the opportunity for doing a little postscript.

Q: On that happy note I again want to thank you.

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