

Interview with Liane Reif-Lehrer  
March 29, 1992  
Re: Parents - Dr. Gerson Reif and Klara Reif

- Q: The date is Sunday, March 29, 1992. We're speaking with Dr. Liane Reif-Lehrer about her father, Dr. Gerson Reif. What can you tell us about your father? What do you know? Do you know anything about his childhood, about his family?
- A: I don't really know anything about his family. The only things I can say about my father is that -- first of all, apparently he was a pretty good daddy. Apparently he really wanted very much to have a daughter and so he was apparently very happy when I was born, as a girl. I think he was probably a fairly serious person but I think he was probably less way out than either of his children -- in the sense that I think he was serious about his professional pursuits but he also apparently enjoyed going to the opera and so on. I guess he and my mother bought sort of popular music records of the day and so I don't think -- I have a feeling that he was not like an ultra intellectual type but very serious about his work.
- Q: Do you know where he went to school or anything about his education?
- A: He went to school in Vienna, that's all I really know. Then he actually was in the war during World War I and he was wounded. He was in the Austrian army and he was wounded at the Russian front. Actually I'll take you on a three -minute tour to show you a certificate that he got for that. That happened during his medical training apparently and then he went back and --.
- Q: Had his parents -- you said he was born in Poland?
- A: Yes.
- Q: Grew up in Poland basically
- A: Yes and apparently he was the only one of the children who did anything professional.
- Q: Do you know anything about any of the other children?
- A: Well, I know about the two who are in New York and my Aunt Lena came here I think in the 1920's; got married and she and her husband owned a hardware store. The other, the Uncle Max brother owned what was called a luncheonette in New York which was a place with a fountain. You could get sandwiches or a sundae or something like that. I think he probably was different within his own family, different from all the others. My brother felt that he had -- my brother liked him because he was serious and he would bring him books to read and things like that. I think he also took my brother ice -skating, for example, which my brother apparently hated. I think he had a variety of things that he liked to do and he did

go dancing with my mother. As a matter of fact, I grew up with this funny thing. I thought that all people in Vienna ever did was to go ballroom dancing in white gowns and tails for the men. Actually I love to do that; my husband and I do a lot of ballroom dancing in evening gowns and tails. I don't know whether there's a connection there but I think he was quite a serious person. I think he really liked his work. I think he was a good dentist. I think he was serious and interested in his patients.

Q: Did he always run the practice out of his home or did he ever work for someone else, do you know?

A: As far as I know, he always ran the practice out of our house. There was something else I was going to say, but it just eluded me. No, it wasn't because you interrupted it's just because I'm so forgetful. Well, I don't remember what I was going to say but I don't really know very much else about my father. I think he was probably a gentle, kindly sort of person. I think he was rather good-looking. He looks good-looking when he was young. I have a picture of him around a cadaver on a dissecting table and he was rather good-looking then. But then later on he got kind of stocky and I don't know, to my mind, that didn't look too great on him.

Q: Do you have any memories of any outings or anything that you ever took with him?

A: No. I don't have any particular memories of my own. I know that in the summers we used to go to the country and he would come on weekends. I know my brother, to this day, still talks about those things in a somewhat mocking way, about how many suitcases and porters my mother needed to go on those trips. I guess that's really about all I can say. I know it seems weird to me how circumstances shape people's lives and about the fact that my father was in the Austrian army. If he had been sensible to come to the United States earlier, that he would have been probably in the American army because you know he would have been in that age group where he still would have gotten drafted. You're sort of a pawn of the country that you're born in, in a funny kind of way.

Q: But on the other hand, if they had remained in Austria, they probably would have been deported very early because they were Polish born?

A: Yes, right. That's -- I guess that's about all I know. I think he was a rather serious person although I don't think he's as serious a person as my brother has turned out to be, maybe. I guess that's about all I can say unless I think of something later.

Q: Okay. Is it all right with you if we are able to use what we have about your father to represent his story as being a victim of the Holocaust to a large extent?

A: Definitely. I think not to a large extent, I think entirely.

Q: So that we represent the suicide as a direct result?

A: Oh, absolutely, yes, definitely.

Q: All right, well thank you very much. It's been very useful and I appreciate your time.

A: Okay.

## TAPE 2

Q: Okay, this is a test. Do you want me to do more?

A: No.

Q: The date is Sunday March 29, 1992. We're speaking with Dr. Liane Reif-Lehrer about her parents. What can you tell us, let's start with your mother, is that all right?

A: Okay.

Q: Can you tell us her name, her date of birth, her place of birth, anything you know about her childhood, anything at all?

A: Okay. My mother's name was Klara Gottfried Reif. G-o-t-t-f-r-i-e-d,. She was born in a small town in Poland, not far from Lemberg which is now called Lvov. She was apparently somewhat of a rambunctious young lady. She often said that she -- I guess she didn't get along with her father as well as with her mother. She liked to run around and travel and do a lot of things. She spoke several languages because when she was a child, the borders kept changing and so at one point, where she was born, was part o Austria. I think both she and my father were actually Austrian citizens because when they were born, Poland was a part of Austria, then the Russians came in. She spoke Polish, Russian, German; I think she spoke some Czechoslovakian and she might have been conversant with a couple of other languages. She always said she spoke five or seven languages, I never remember whether it's five or seven.

Q: Do you know what they spoke at home?

A: I think at home, they probably spoke a combination of Polish and Yiddish. Yeah, I think that was correct. My mother did a lot of traveling around. She used to go to Lemberg to have clothes made and so on. I think she went off to school at some point also.

- Q: Do you know what kind of school? Was it a Jewish school or a private school or a technical school?
- A: I don't know. No, it was definitely not a technical school and I don't really know. I have a feeling it might have been more like a finishing school or just some kind of general school. She definitely finished gymnasium but did not go to college but she was pretty clever. She was very, very good with numbers and she did a lot of reading. Anyway at some -- I think she was very interested when she was young in fashion and that kind of thing. At some point she went off to Vienna either for a vacation or to have clothes made, I don't know. Somehow and I don't know how, but she met my father. Ultimately they got engaged and then they got married, I think in 1925.
- Q: They got married in Vienna?
- A: They got married in Vienna, well, I'm not sure about that. I'm not sure about that, they might have gone back to Poland to get married. But anyway, they lived in Vienna after they got married. Then in 1927, my brother was born. Now my mother tells me about her life in Vienna. She said in the beginning it was kind of hard. My father had been trained as a physician and then he went back and retrained as a dentist and he opened his practice. Now one of the things my mother always told me is that we lived in Este \_\_\_\_\_, that's the first district in Vienna. I guess that was not such a nice -- or the nicest part of Vienna. \_\_\_\_\_ Excuse me, the Este \_\_\_\_\_ is where she would have liked to live. She said that the reason they lived there was because my father's office was in our house and that's where he saw patients. It was for reasons of the business that we lived there. We lived actually, I guess, right overlooking the Danube. So in the early years, she said things were difficult and she helped my father. She would do things like answer the phone and maybe help prep patients and various other things. I guess my father did pretty well fairly quickly and so things kind of perked up. I think things were quite comfortable. We had -- I know there were about six people who used to come and go in terms of "servants." There was a cook who did our meals. My brother and I each had a governess when we were kids.
- Q: Each?
- A: Yeah, we are very far apart so it wasn't concurrent. There were one or two women who came in to do laundry. You know in those days everything was a big deal. I mean coming in to do the laundry was taking the sheets and boiling them up with soap and Clorox and so on and so forth. It was kind of a big thing and then even --. We did actually have a vacuum cleaner and I personally remember that these two cleaning women used to come and they would roll up the rugs and take them up to the roof with these bamboo, oddly shaped paddles and beat the hell out of the rugs. There were these servants around and at that point I think my mother sort of became a lady of leisure. Again I don't know which of these

stories are true or apocryphal but her role was to put on a white glove after the servants came and go around to make sure that they had cleaned well. I think she went and I think they did a fair amount of socializing. I think they went to the opera and they would go dancing and go to the theater. I know they went -- apparently once a week they went to play cards with this relative who actually -- the daughter lives in New York now. They must have done a lot of things like that. I think my father was a fairly serious person and my mother was probably a more -- I don't know, a more frivolous person. Actually my brother apparently didn't do very well with my mother because he was a very serious kid and he really liked my father. But he thought my mother wasted her time even when he was very little. Then --.

Q: Can we back up just a little?

A Yeah go ahead.

Q: Do you know about her life in Poland before she moved to Vienna? Do you know about, for example, the Jewish aspect of their life? Were they religious, were they orthodox?

A: I think her parents were orthodox. I don't know that my mother really -- I mean my mother always did all the very traditional kinds of things but I'm not sure she really believed in any of that. I don't know, she certainly had some sorts of superstitions involved in Jewish religion but I have a funny feeling that she probably went along with the things. I don't think she and my father had -- we didn't have a kosher house and we --. I think they did go to services on the high holidays and things like that. I'd be curious to know whether we -- I'm sure we ate matzo on Passover but the real question is did we also eat bread? I don't know what the answer is.

Q: Was it ham on matzo?

A: Right, right. Well, I'm sure we ate ham. I'm absolutely sure we ate ham. We probably didn't eat bread at Passover but it was not -- I don't think it was terribly compulsive. I think it was fairly casual. I have a feeling that her father was probably not very casual and I don't know about her mother. I have a feeling that the mother was a more worldly woman and the father may have been a more sort of retiring religious kind of person. I think that my mother always felt that she was considered the black sheep. Not by her mother, but by her father, that her father didn't like her as well as he liked the other two kids. I think she thought that was because she was sort of rebellious and didn't do the things that the other kids did. Definitely, my mother's brother and sister sound like more traditional kids. They got married and they had kids and they stayed, I think, in the same town, or nearby. Here was this young chick going off to Vienna and marrying strange people.

- Q: Did she ever find out the exact fate of her family?
- A: Yeah, well, in 1946, when I would have been 12 and I remember this very dramatically. There was a blue letter that came from somebody, one of her relatives. I think it might have been this guy called, Moshe Weinhaub who went to live in Israel and whose son is in Israel and is a physician, I think. Of course, I lost contact after my mother died. I think the letter was from this guy Moshe Weinhaub. It told in very great detail what happened to all the relatives. Well, they all perished in one form or another. Now my mother's sister, that was the most dramatic thing. Apparently they forced her to watch while they threw her kids into an oven and then they shot her. That was really a horror story. I think my mother's brother and maybe the parents -- I remember him describing that a lot of people in the camp had typhoid. They purposely tried to contract typhoid and they did so they died of the typhoid. They purposely did that because they didn't want to die in what they knew was awaiting them. There were just descriptions of what happened to everybody that he knew about. I don't know whatever happened to that letter. As a matter of fact, it's really weird. This is my mother's -- those two pieces of furniture are my mother's. Since my mother died. I have not been able to find the key to this. Every once in a while, I try to get it open because I keep thinking that maybe there are some letters and things in there. I know I could probably get a locksmith to open it but I probably have mixed feelings. Part of me wants to know what's behind those little doors and part of me probably doesn't. But anyway, my mother -- I think my mother was a very, very different person after the war from what she was before. Although I can't really judge that, that's kind of a guess.
- Q: I made you jump. Now why don't we come back to the time that she had given birth to your brother, I guess?
- A: Right, 1927, April 24, 1927. My brother was apparently a very serious little boy even at age two. My mother always told stories about how when she would go for a walk with him, instead of wanting to sort of play and so on, he would want to have her read the street signs. What does that say, how do you spell that, what are the letters? And so on. That's her perception. My brother -- I have a picture of my brother sitting all dressed up with a little Lord Fauntleroy tie in a sandbox with his rear end up -- sort of off the sand so he wouldn't get himself dirty. My brother sort of tells, with some resentment, that he wasn't allowed to be a little boy because they dressed him up and he always felt he couldn't get dirty. I think there were a lot of interesting dynamics there. Then at age three, they started him on violin lessons. Somehow it didn't work out so they stopped at the advice of the teacher, I guess. Then he started again at the age five. Then it really took hold very well and he really did play the violin. If you ask him, he'll say, well you know, I'm not -- I can't really play very well. But he really plays. I mean for an amateur, he plays extremely well. Then when my father died -- well first my father got very depressed because, well, because things were obviously looking very bad in Europe. I really should back up. Starting in 1933. I think things

started being politically very hairy. People had just come out of a Depression. As an aside, all my life, I was always really bothered that I might have been an accident because I'm seven and a half years younger than my brother. Subliminally that always bothered me and I never had the guts to ask anybody which in retrospect seems silly. But actually I was over forty once when I asked my brother, was I an accident? My brother said, no, absolutely not. Why did they wait so long? Because of the Depression. I was born in 1934, in November and so things were --. Now as I think back on it, it was a really dumb time to have a kid because things were not looking good. Did I send you the article I wrote for Boston Magazine?

Q: You sent me one about your cousin?

A: I didn't send you one from Boston Magazine? I should give that to you because that's sort of about this subject. Anyway, so then I was born, and then things started getting bad. They got worse and worse. My father and mother started talking about the possibility of going to America. Apparently my father just felt - in 1934 my father was already forty years old, right? So his feeling was, how can I go to America? I don't know the language; I would have to retrain. We would get there and we would have nothing so it just didn't seem like a reasonable thing to do. But then in August of 1938, I think it was, my father, like everybody else, had to close because Jews were not allowed to work any more. My father got really, really, very, very depressed. My brother, I think my brother really still has and had all the time, a really tremendous resentment about my mother not handling that right. I've asked him about that and he says well, she used to say well you know you got to come out of this. You can't walk around like this. She would kind of go off then and do whatever needed to be done. I said to my brother, well what did you do? He said, well I remember standing in a dark room holding his hand, just quietly. Now that I'm at my present age and our kids are 22 and 24, I realize that it was just a very difficult situation for my mother. How, if somebody else is just very depressed all the time and you really don't know how to get the person out of it, I think after a while maybe it's kind of a survival thing. That you've got to just keep doing what are your daily things because otherwise you're going to go insane also. I don't know what was going on there but it was a really bad scenario, really very unpleasant things were happening to Jews. I'm sure that my father must have been extremely frightened. There's a woman who actually went to medical and then dental school with my father. We were always friendly with that family. For example, that woman was forced to go out and scrub the streets and things like that. All sorts of demeaning things happening and I think it must have been just a terrible, terrible time psychologically.

Q: Until the time that he was forced to stop working, he worked regularly?

A Yes, I think he did work regularly.

Q: Even if maybe he was beginning to be depressed or whatever? He didn't --?

A: No, I don't think so. I think he got very depressed after he had to close his practice. Now I don't know that for sure, I just know that from things that I've gathered. Anyway, my mother, I think, tried to keep going about her business. Somewhere in this time span, they did decide that they would have to leave. So they went and applied for visas and passports and so on. On the morning of September 30, 1938, my father and mother actually left the house together to go pick up those passports. They picked up the passports and at about noontime, they parted to do separate chores. They were supposed to meet, I think, at the home of this cousin where they used to play cards. Apparently my father never got there. I guess at about 2:30 in the afternoon, I seem to remember somebody telling me, there was a phone call. My father had been found at the bottom of a staircase. I'm not sure whether he was already dead or whether he died either on the way to the hospital or right after he got to the hospital. But the death certificate says he died of multiple fractures including a fractured skull and lots of fractured ribs. All my life, I grew up thinking that he had thrown himself off the top floor, the fourth floor of this -- down the stairwell. There was a lot of trauma around that. My mother did not want -- so the general consensus was that he had committed suicide. My mother did not want anybody to know that and I don't understand. You know, it's funny, children don't ask the right questions all the time. I just took that on gospel and I never, ever said anything until quite recently about that. I never told it; I mean practically no one did I tell this to. When I was discussing with my brother recently, he said, well, I've never kept this a secret. Then a few years ago, when I started really thinking about this; I started thinking, well, now how do we know he committed suicide? People say you're just trying to protect yourself from this sort of thing. First of all, I don't have anything against this, I just don't. It wouldn't -- in general it wouldn't bother me now. I keep asking myself, does it bother me if he did commit suicide. I suppose in one way it doesn't bother me and in another way I think well this was sort of a shirking of your responsibility. You know you had two kids and this was not the appropriate thing to do, to leave your wife alone with these two kids. My brother's idea is that my father probably did commit suicide and that one of the reasons that he did it, aside from being depressed and aside from -- I mean people were committing suicide right and left -- was that he probably figured that a woman with two children would have a much better chance of escaping if there was no husband around. At that time, mostly it was the men who were being really harassed, initially. I don't know but now as a scientist, I sort of stop and I think, well there was nobody there to see this. All sorts of horrible things were happening to Jews, how do we know what really happened? Could he have been pushed? I think the chances are 90% that he probably did commit suicide. The other thing is that I keep thinking why would somebody with a medical profession who has access to much neater, cleaner ways of committing suicide throw himself off a stairwell. That's another reason why I think that maybe he didn't do it himself. On the other hand, I suppose that when people commit suicide they're not necessarily being totally rational.



- Q: Right, the way some people plan it out. This sounds like it perhaps hadn't been contemplated for long, this specific act if it was?
- A: I don't know but somebody recently pointed out to me that Primo Levi who was also a scientist and also had more sophisticated means of committing suicide apparently also jumped off something or other.
- Q: Yes, he did.
- A: But anyway, the answer is I don't know what happened. When this happened, my mother was just totally devastated, just --.
- Q: Before we -- I hate to break your train of thought?
- A: No, go ahead. I don't mind.
- Q: Do you remember anything about her personality before this time? When you were very, very young?
- A: No, I don't remember very much about her except --. I remember a few silly things like I used to like to go into the kitchen and dry the dishes for the cook. The cook would stand me up on a little stool and hand me one dish at a time and I would dry it. I also liked to iron. You know in those days there was no electric iron so they had those irons that you kind of had to keep putting on the stove until they get hot. I used to like to iron and my mother really didn't like me to do those things. I loved to do those things. Maybe she was already overly protective before the war, I'm not sure.
- Q: Do you still like to iron?
- A: No, I don't like to iron. I don't mind but I don't like to iron and I hate to dry dishes. As a matter of fact, I think my mother used to kid me about because then --. When we came to New York and she wanted to help with those things she would tease me and say you used to love to do it when I didn't want you to. Now when I want you to, you don't want to do it. Well, it seems to me that it's fairly self evident that it would be that way. Do I remember anything else about her? You know, I actually remember more about my interactions with the governess and the servants. For example, the things I remember about the servants is that they were fun for me. The reasons they were fun was that they would come in and do all these routine things. Like we had a very long hallway because the apartment was two 7- room apartments with the wall broken down between them so there were 14 rooms. They all went off this long hallway. We had this rug, runner-rug, so they would roll that up every time they came. I don't know whether it was every day or every other day or whatever. They would let me sit on the end of the runner. Then they would start rolling it, pull, roll, pull, so I'd

get a ride. Or if they were sweeping the floor, they'd let me put my feet on the broom and sweep with me. Or swing me back and forth and things like that. Those were kind of exciting things for me and I think my governess had a cot in my room. I remember her being there; I remember it was kind of a probably consoling feeling that -- I don't know whether she was there all the time or what. I don't ever remember the kind of thing of being left alone. But then early on, I think I did get left alone at night to sleep because my brother tells me I was an absolute royal pain, that I used to scream through the nights. The governess would not let my mother come to me. I don't really remember a lot about my mother in those days and I certainly do not remember my father. The funny thing is I remember my father but then one day, when I must have been about ten or something, looking at this picture of my father that my mother always had on her night table and suddenly realizing that the real memory of my father had been taken over by the memory of the picture. I no longer had that real memory that I had originally. I remember my room in Vienna and I think I remember the dining room and I certainly remember the kitchen.

Q: Do you want to describe them at all?

A: Well the dining room, I seem to remember, it was kind of very formal and dark. It seemed dark in there. I don't know whether because there were curtains drawn or something. We did have in New York the table that was in that dining room. It was a dark, probably mahogany or something, massive. The furniture we had in Vienna was the sort of massive thing that was popular in the 1930's. I just remember the big table in the middle and looking in there and it was -- just remember a sort of formal feeling. The kitchen was sort of light and airy; there was this white --. In Vienna there were no built in closets and so people had -- they were called wardrobes. In the kitchen there was a white lacquered big wardrobe with two doors that opened with keys, these kinds of old fashioned keys. I think the cook had like dish towels in there. One memory that became very important for Kristallnacht -- she had -- and actually I have one upstairs. There were these little things you could buy, pasteels they were called. They were sort of awful tasting things, minty or something. They came in either single boxes or triple boxes. I don't know if they were double sized ones but they were sort of green and gold cans. The cook had a triple sized one of those in that white closet. Whenever she had extra goshen which are the equivalent of pennies she would put them into that can. There must have been some connection to me about that can. I don't know what it could have been, maybe she bought me things with those occasionally or something. But anyway, there was this long hallway and I remember my room quite well.. My room had a nice window which I think overlooked the river. Then there was a dresser over there with a stuffed animal on it and then my crib which was not like an American crib but had -- the part that goes up and down had a mesh of sort of ropes going both ways. That was the way cribs were made in that time, I think. Then there was this cot that the governess used to maybe nap on or whatever. I don't think it was a very big room but I sort of liked that room. Then I remember my father's office, my father's examining

room. I remember the linoleum on the floor and that becomes important for later when we back to Vienna in 1963 and I recognized that. But anyway so then the next -- my big memory is the night of Kristallnacht. My mother was holding me up in her arms and my brother was holding -- of course my father was dead by now -- my brother was holding on to my mother's skirt. There was this loud knock on the door and my mother said who's there and the superintendent was there. Now I only remember the superintendent and one other man. But my brother says there were actually five or six men who came. My mother went to open the little metal thing on the glass peephole and this guy smashed the glass with the back of a revolver. The superintendent said, let us in Mrs. Reif, we won't hurt you. They came in and I remember being in the kitchen. The only really strong memory I have is of them taking that can full of coins. They took, they helped themselves to everything, all the radios, anything that was of any value, they took. Although before that, interestingly, apparently either my mother or some relative -- my father as a dentist had hunks of gold because in those days a lot of fillings were made with gold. Somebody went and dumped those in the bottom of the Danube. Whatever else was valuable in the house, these people helped themselves to. I do think I remember one of the guys having a radio or something in his hand. But the thing that I, as a little girl, felt most resentful about was that they took away this box of coins. They left and then I don't remember anything else about Vienna, I don't think. I think I may remember the little suit that I wore when we got on to the ship, the San Luee but I'm not sure whether I remember that or I remember a picture that we have. I actually have that outfit still. I remember one other thing. After Kristallnacht, somehow, I don't know how it happened, but my mother managed to get these tickets to get on the San Luee. The reason we got first class passage was because you were only allowed to take, I think it was like four dollars a person, out of the country. My mother figured, what the hell, we might as well go first class. We had to pack up stuff. You were allowed to send things away.

Q: Send abroad?

A: Yes, but there regulations and I have a feeling that some things got smuggled in. For example, a bunch of sterling silver flatware was in that van and I think that was strictly forbidden if I have read my history correctly. But anyway my mother was not very -- my mother was really devastated -- I was going to say she wasn't very functional but she obviously managed all right. I think other people came and kind of had to help her do things. There was a -- my brother had met another boy called Irwin Kleinfeld who's now a mathematician at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Through that friendship, our parents kind of got to know his parents. The father was a lawyer and somehow he came and helped my mother out with various things. The day this enormous van pulled up in front of our building, he was there helping my mother get stuff packed into this van. I think my mother was not doing very well and he kind of said, take this, take that. I don't know who made the final decisions, I have a feeling that he made a lot of them. There were some really weird things in this van, just really weird. For

example, we had one room in Vienna that was totally covered apparently in mirrors. It was made out of these tiles that were about eight inches wide by about fourteen inches high. One of the things that came out of this van, when we got it in New York three years later, was all these mirrors. Now what did anybody think we were going to do with these mirrors! So that was in there. Weird things, on my second birthday, I had been bought a very special doll. That doll arrived in New York, speaking of traumatizing kids, it was hung by the neck from the bar inside one of the wardrobes with all the clothes and so on. This guy, I remember that day, I remember this guy coming and I remember these things going out into this van. That van went to New York and it sat in a warehouse which I think was paid for by my aunt Lena or maybe we sent -- I don't know. Then I don't remember that trip except for being seasick. Then we were sent back to Europe and we went to France. That's where my memories start again. The first thing that happened was -- am I on track? -- is this the kind of stuff you want to hear?

Q: Yeah, since I already have a lot of this, of the facts, do you know any of your mother's responses to these things? Or her feelings -- how did she respond being in France when you --?

A: The thing that I remember is that my mother -- my remembrance of my mother was that she was, to a large extent for years and years, in a state of -- I don't know what to call it -- in a state of somebody who's just been through a catastrophe which she had been. It's just that most people seem to recover more rapidly and she just did not recover. She recovered effectively in that she always seemed to do the right thing to get to the next step but emotionally she never recovered. So my recollection of my mother through most of these years is that she was often a very sad person, it was like a lot of sighing and just this unhappy demeanor on her face, for years. She also, in later years, some of that lifted and she could be a real fun person sometimes. It was almost weird and I couldn't even begin to go through this until very recently. But now I have a feeling that if somebody had somehow just let her or encouraged her, she could have been a really vibrant dazzling lady. Occasionally she would dance with me, not very often but occasionally. She was very good in later years like after I met Sam and we got married and everything. She was always game for anything, fly on a jet; yeah, I'll fly on a jet. She didn't have any of these hang-ups like other parents of my contemporaries. You know, they wouldn't ride an escalator. She came, even when she was sixty, she climbed with us in Yosemite but there was always this real sadness. I remember once when she was already starting to get Alzheimer's disease, she said this to me very often but this particular time I remember it very dramatically. She said, I've only had thirteen good years in my whole life and those were the first thirteen years with my father is what she was referring to. We were not very nice children to her. We were extremely hard on her for many reasons. First of all, my brother thought she was frivolous, I probably thought she was a little frivolous also although she was very sad and serious. She always seemed to be concerned about things that -- I don't know how we got to be so lofty thinking but she always seemed to be concerned with things that we felt

were not terribly important. One would say that there was friction because we just totally lorded it over her. It was really, as I think back on it now, was a very strange situation.

Q: Let me flip it over.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 2

A: Is it going now?

Q: Now we're on.

A: Okay. She was very, very encouraging of our studying and doing well for ourselves but she didn't demand enough for herself. I can say this in retrospect. For example, my brother had a room to himself in New York -- I'm skipping ahead now but -- and I didn't. I shared a room with her and I did my homework in the kitchen. She'd come home tired from work, she would make dinner, she would clean up and then I had the audacity to tell her that she couldn't run the water to wash the dishes while I was doing my homework. She went along with that! That was really -- in retrospect that was sort of amazing. She should have told me where to get off. She did get after me to help often and I sometimes tried to help a little but I -- it's funny you know now, do you have children?

Q: No, not yet.

A: You see this thing reflected in your children. I mean she would say, would you dry the dishes? I would say yes I'll dry the dishes as soon as I finish my homework. Then she would say -- she couldn't wait till I finished because she was very methodical about all the household things. So she would dry the dishes, so most of the time I never got to do it. I would have done it if she had waited but she couldn't wait. Now as a parent I can sense that irritation of I want it done now and the kid wants to do it later. It's just that I sort of know enough to know that if I really don't want to do it and I want the kid to do it, you just leave it and let the kid do it later.

Q: Did she have any interests? You said she enjoyed dancing and things like that? You mentioned that there was opera -- did she follow anything closely? Have hobbies or anything?

A: No, I don't think so. She actually, she was fantastic with her hands. In Europe when she was a lady of leisure she did embroidery, that's what ladies did. She did that whole thing, that's all silk petite point. It took her two years to do that. We were such terrible kids. We both used to tease her about why did you spend all this time doing this really disgusting-looking scene? Why didn't you at least pick some --? First of all, now it's still looks like --. I still think why did she spend all this time doing this scene but it doesn't look as bad as it used to look. Now I

really appreciate the time and the energy and the devotion and the workmanship. There are lots of things around the house that she did. Later on it became things that we tried to get her to do to keep her busy. She didn't know, I don't know how she did this in Vienna. I think in Vienna she probably picked this up whenever she had time and then put it down and so on. In the time that I really knew her, she didn't know how to relax except to read. She did a lot of reading. I'm not always sure that -- she read in a funny way. She did not read like an educated person. She read in a way that was non-analytical. We, the children, who both turned out to be Ph.D. scientists found this really weird.

Q: How do you mean non-analytical? Reading fiction in a non-analytical way? I have to defend the humanities.

A: Well the best way and this may even be an unfair way to say but one of the things that I remember and this had nothing to do with reading but rather with a movie, she was here baby sitting for us. She had seen a movie called 'I Never Sang For My Father'. My husband and I were going out to see it that night. When we came home, almost simultaneously my husband and I said boy, what a miserable father. At the same moment she said, wasn't that a miserable son? I'm sure it could be interpreted both ways but I think any -- if you looked at the critics which I don't think I ever did of that movie -- I think the whole point of that movie is that here is a parent who is manipulating the son in such a way that the son's life becomes ruined. My mother totally missed that, all she could see was the bad son, not being nice to the daddy.

Q: I see what you mean.

A: Or for example, after our kids were born, I would keep giving her books to read about child rearing. Every time she finished one, she'd say, ah, this is really interesting. This is great. I wish I had known about this when you were small. But then ten minutes later she would go and totally interact by her gut reaction rather than by what she had just read about. We would get into some really ridiculous arguments, she and I. Later on, after I got my Ph.D. and got a job, because she worked like a mad dog in the factories -- she had incredible pride in her work. She not only did what she had to do but she worked harder because she wanted everything to be just right. We pretty much had to insist that she retire and my brother and I each gave her money. Well, she never could feel comfortable with getting money from us. We would say look, you struggled like mad to support us. Did we ever complain about that? No, we just took the money and we lived happily ever after. Now it's your turn to have a good time and retire. We are doing quite well, we are in no way being hurt by giving you this money. Why don't you just take the money and enjoy it. You've had a really hard life, now's the time to have a good time. She could never cope with that. Every month when the checks came, there was a struggle about whether she was going to keep these checks. But then also when she did retire, she was lonesome, what was she going to do with her time? Sam and I used to devise these projects

for her to do. One time she said she really needed a bookcase. We bought her an unfinished bookcase and some varnish and shellac and the rest of it. We said well this ought to keep her busy for a week or two. We told her how to do this and so on. Two days later or three days later, she calls up, I finished the bookcase. What do you mean, you finished the bookcase. You have to wait at least so many hours in between. She said, oh I did. It said wait five hours so I set the alarm clock when I went to sleep and at five hours I got up and I put on the next coat and so on. Everything was like something she had to do. All right, I'll give her something better to do so I gave her this enormous piece of rug mesh, to hook a rug which is now hanging on our wall. I thought well this has got to keep her busy for a while. After a few weeks, she came back. It was all finished. She said, you know this was really very hard. My hands were bleeding along the sides from working on this. Everything we tried to do to occupy her time in a nice way -- but on the other hand she also did very well. She must have gone to every free concert in New York and free plays and so on. She would start talking to younger people, other people found her very delightful because they didn't have to grow up with her. So none of those irritations were there but it was very hard for her to make friends. The only people that she made friends with were other ladies like her from Vienna. It was hard to find those as the years went on. Even with those people, she was very critical and so if they did something wrong, she would get very annoyed or insulted or --. You were going to ask something?

Q: Did she speak German with you and your brother or with these other people? Did she prefer to speak German?

A: She did speak German with them, yeah. She did speak German with us for a long time. I think in the later years, after our kids were born, she probably spoke more English. When we first came here, she had all these books and every night she'd come home from work, she'd be exhausted. She would make dinner, she would clean up, she would get into bed, she would study her English. She was very thorough; she had these little notebooks about this size that she would keep. Every night she would write down everything she spent that day in that notebook. She would add it up and then she would count what was in her change purse and her wallet. If it was off by even one cent, even if it was late at night, she would go through the whole thing as many times as it took, to balance that perfectly. It could not be off by one penny. Then funny things happened. One time I remember -- you know how you get into silly discussions about -- she had bought me this dress and I said it cost so much and she said no, it was so much. She just went and got her little thing of little books and looked it up and there it was with the date and how much it was. Gray dress with white stripes. She was really, she was almost compulsive about keeping the records. Every Saturday was cleaning day. Come heaven, hell or high water, the house got cleaned on Saturday from top to bottom. I got involved in that and sometimes I felt resentful about that. It was a gorgeous Saturday and from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon, we cleaned house -- washed the floors, everything. I want to go back to France, right?

Q: Yeah.

A: In France, my mother was not doing very well. With all the languages she could speak, she never learned to speak French because she was just so emotionally devastated and in France, when we first got to Ludern we lived in this hotel. There were a whole bunch of about twenty refugees who were put up at this hotel. She was really -- in addition to things being bad, she was upset about all sorts of minor things. Like in the kitchen of the hotel, there were cats and the cats were allowed to walk on the food table. Well, I get bothered about that also but under those circumstances --. She went to ask the woman who ran the hotel where is there a public bath. There was no bathroom, there were toilets but no bathroom in this hotel. The woman didn't know. This blew my mother's mind, how could she not know! This woman, like a lot of other French women, would put on a lot of perfume. My mother was always -- g-d, she must be filthy. I'm sure she sponged-bathed and so on but anyway -- so my mother was really bothered by things like that. I remember that hotel very well. Then after we had been there -- I had a little boyfriend whose name was Jacques Paul Berg and I just --.

Q: He was in the picture you sent me.

A: Right, and he apparently perished. I don't know what that meant having a little boyfriend but I think he was just my friend. We played together. Then the other thing I remember from that time, this was really weird stuff. I remember there were these two girls who forced me to watch the hotel cooks kill a chicken in the back of the hotel. I just cried and cried, I was really upset. Just around the time of the San Luee reunion in 1989, I coincidentally met these two women who were the two girls. They said well there weren't any other children so it must have been us. Yes, it sounds like the kind of thing we would have done. They actually, those people if you could get to interview them, it would be very interesting, because those two sisters have diametrically opposite stories about what happened in France. Not the facts, but the attitudes are just diametrically opposite.

Q: Do you remember their names?

A: Yes. First of all their unmarried last name was Isner. I-s-n-e-r. The younger one is Ruth Isner Kissinger and her husband is actually a first cousin of Henry Kissinger. The other is Bella and she remarried. I don't remember what happened to her husband. She's now Bella Isner Uhlfelder U-h-l-f-e-l-d-e-r. Ruth Isner is, I found her very easy to talk to. Actually Bella was originally easier to talk to. Ruth is a more reticent person but Ruth has been much more cooperative with me about collecting stuff for my book. Bella got mad at me for some really dodo thing at the reunion. Because I got up and announced that I was doing this book and she accused me of making this very emotional thing into a commercial affair. I don't know but anyway I have not gotten a story from Bella



but I have one from Ruth Isner. I think it will be very interesting to interview both of these sisters.

Q: Where do they live, in New York?

A: Yeah, they both live in --. No, she lives in New Jersey, Bella lives in, I think, the Bronx or uptown Manhattan but somewhere in the 100's. Anyway, so we spend almost a year there, just short of a year. Then one morning the Germans came in and took the town. I remember that because we woke up and they were parading around. Shooting into the air and just being generally very noisy. The thing that I remember was I was a very goody-goody little girl. I'd always been taught, you don't lie, you don't this, you don't that. I was told that no way was I allowed to let on that I could speak German. The generals, I guess, actually came and lived in the hotel so for about two weeks, we were together. I remember being totally -- I thought that this was really weird -- that you're not supposed to lie but here I am and I can understand everything all these guys say. Every time they talk to me I'm standing there saying \_\_\_\_\_. My brother now tells me that one day my brother just had his heart in his mouth because one of these guys came up to me, started to talk to me and my brother saw me start to answer in German. He became petrified and he said at the last minute, I suddenly must have remembered, and I said \_\_\_\_\_. But that was a very important time in my life because there was a young German soldier there. I don't really remember his face except it was a very nice face. He had sandy colored hair; I don't know if I could have judged but as I think back he must have been 18 or 19. There was something very pleasing about this kid. Every morning they did these stupid maneuvers around this hotel and we would watch from our window which looked out over the side. This guy would throw me candies and things; my mother was always sure they were poisoned and didn't want me to eat them but you know I didn't get stuff like that. So I ate it and here I am. Then he ultimately gave me a little doll which I treasured for a long time. Now I don't know whether this is true or not but in my mind, that soldier was unbelievably important. Because when I came to the United States, the kids -- well first of all kids are brutal. The kids were really brutal. First of all everybody was making fun of me because I couldn't speak English. Even some of the parents in the neighborhood in Brooklyn were not really very kindly which I find kind of shocking. The kids would come over to me and even the adults and say, do you hate the Germans? Even as a kid, I was seven, I would say no, I don't hate the Germans. There are good Germans and there are bad Germans. The reason I was able to say that must have had to do -- probably also had to do with discussions with my brother -- but I think it had a lot to do with this soldier. It really wasn't until very recently that I started thinking. Well was this soldier -- well I always somehow, in my life, assumed that that soldier knew I was Jewish. But recently I thought,, well, did he know? Maybe he didn't know, maybe he was just being nice to me because he thought I was a cute little Catholic kid. But the point is, it's irrelevant it's what that guy represented to me, throughout my life whether it was real or not real. That I think was incredibly important about that particular stage. Then there was

a lot of talk between my mother and my brother about what's to be done. You can't stay here because I don't know how my mother managed to -- I mean my mother couldn't even talk one word in French. How could she carry this ruse on for two weeks of us making believe that we couldn't speak German. I don't know how we managed to get through that. Apparently, according to my mother, my mother says that my brother said to her one day, I'm leaving here whether you leave or not. Now my brother doesn't quite remember saying anything quite so dramatic but in the meantime apparently my brother tells me that there are meetings amongst these twenty refugees. As a group, they decided to get out. Now there was only one family, I heard about this for years, there was one family who decided not to leave. I never knew who that was until 1989; it was this family, these sisters. That was obviously the wrong move because they didn't get out until '46 or '47. We left all our stuff in this hotel except for a couple of pairs of underwear and my brother's violin. We went very late at night, I remember walking to the train station. It was dark and I think it was midnight. We went to the train station and I didn't remember that there were 20 of us or 18 of us or whatever it was; I only remember my mother and my brother and me walking to the train station. We took the train. My brother has filled me in on the funny things that happened along the way and how we actually got across the border by -- it was just luck and a ruse. The next thing I remember is being in Limoges which is the town in southern France which is famous for its china. I think that first night we actually must have slept in the railroad station and I slept on a scale. There was a scale in the railroad station. Then we got put up and I thought it was just for one night but my brother says we were there for six weeks. You can see that my memory is distorted compared to his. But we got put up in the concrete bleachers of a stadium for the circus.

Q: Yeah, you told me this, right?

A: Then ultimately some people got together and rented these two rooms. The rooms were each maybe about two or three times as big as this room. There were 30 women in the room downstairs and I think I was the only child. We live in there for several months and all the guys lived upstairs. I think my brother was the only child upstairs, the only one of the men who was a boy.

Q: What did your mother do there, when you were there?

A: Nobody could do anything.

Q: You just hung around --?

A: I seem to remember them being pretty busy cleaning up. They were always cleaning up. In the nighttime we had these straw sacks that we put down on the floor and we slept on. In the morning, we piled them up against the wall and there were these crates, like orange crates and we'd put those down as tables and chairs. People were always sweeping and cleaning and walking down, every

morning we walked down --. I was allowed to get about three inches worth of milk in a coke-sized bottle. My mother made me share that with my brother. You had to walk to the store and they measured this out, walk back. There were always walks begging for bread in the bakery. That was my job, I think I told you about that.

Q: Right, it was cute.

A: Just last year, when I was interviewing my brother, I said to him, did anybody think how demeaning this was to me? My brother looked at me and he said it wasn't demeaning, it was bread. I have a sign in my office that says that because it reminds me of something. Anyway that's where I went to school for the first year. I think it was a very lonesome time for me. There weren't, somehow, I don't think I played with the other kids after school. They lived some place else, we were refugees which was probably not a nice thing to be.

Q: Do you know about your mother? Did she interact with the other people?

A: Well she interacted with the other women.

Q: You know how you said, she basically began to change or whatever. Do you think she was in this --?

A: She definitely interacted with the other women but I have a feeling that she may not have been terribly popular. She was emotionally a downer a lot of the time, she was always sad. A lot of other people -- I think that's true of my brother also. When we got on the San Luee, apparently not people -- when the ship sailed away, and the captain said all right, these people are going to be treated like all people who are on a tour, people were rejoicing and dancing and doing all these other things which my mother was not participating in. Which my brother, even though he was about 11 or 12 at the time, said he was really bothered that these people were being so insensitive. That they had left people behind in dire straits, that they had just come from being in dire straits and it was not a time to dance or sing. Well my adult me can see it both ways; yeah, it's not a time to dance and sing. On the other hand, I can see where, if you've been really hurting for so long, and there's an opportunity to do something different, then maybe it makes good mental health sense to try to take advantage of this. I think we spent our time on the ship rather quietly. I must have played with the other kids and there's a picture that I sent you a copy of and there seemed to be quite a lot of kids though most of them, I think, were older and there were a few babies. In Limoges I went to school and I have a feeling that I was kind of lonesome but there was some -- I remember some really nice things. Like there was a carpenter who couldn't work most of the time and he made me this wonderful little set of red and blue furniture, tables and chairs and he made upholstery things with little pieces of wallpaper and so on. That was a really nice thought. Then after a few months, two rooms next door to the two rooms we had, became available. I don't know

why but somehow my mother was chosen or somehow got to have the smaller of the two rooms with us. We didn't have to sleep on the floor, we could put our -- they were like orange crate beds that somebody had put together. We could put our straw bags on those. That's where I had real measles in that room and I remember that very dramatically. I remember for two weeks lying on my back in this room with a dark curtain drawn because I was do photophobic and watching the mold grow on the ceiling and the drips come and drip down. For two weeks I was lying there like that. The two couples who got the outer room, were two sisters married to two brothers. One of those brothers was almost blind and he somehow, even though I think this was illegal, he managed to find some leather. He would punch out those pieces of leather that you make the belts that hook onto each other. My brother and I would sometimes help him and I liked doing that especially because I think he used to tell us stories while we sat and work. We would sit at this little window and we would make these belts. That was kind of a pleasant thing for me.

Q: Is there anything else you can think of about your mother? Because I know, basically when we write this ID, we will stop when you get o America because that's the Holocaust --. Is there anything else you can think of to fill in?

A: I think my mother was extremely somber in those days. I remember going for some long walks to try to get food and I remember those as being somber occasions. I may be totally wrong but I don't remember any laughter or --. The only way I can present her personality really is to tell you about after we came to America because I think it must have been worse in France. My mother imagined herself a really aristocratic lady -- that's the way she thought of herself. When my aunt Lena and -- actually it was her kids who came with her -- brought us from the boat to her house --. She lived in the lower East Side and I was sitting next to my mother in the back seat and my brother was sitting next to me. As we drove into the lower East Side with the push- carts and this sort of mass of humanity, my mother whispered, for this I've struggled all these years. I thought oh my G-d, what a terrible thing to say. Even though maybe I was also feeling part of that, maybe I was worried that someone was going to hear or what but she just --. We lived with my aunt for three months. My aunt got sick at one point and in retrospect we should have been really grateful for being put up. I think my mother really was very grateful but at the same time, when my aunt got sick and needed somebody to make her a cup of tea, my mother had no idea how to make a cup of tea because she'd been so --. Part of that had to be a put-up job because in France, in those two years, everybody was struggling making meals and so on. I think it was more maybe when she was asked to make cereal or something, she had never done that, she hadn't a clue and so on. But she was a very giving person and so when we finally got an apartment after three months and I think she was earning \$35 or \$45 a month, something like that -- no wait a minute -- what was she earning? She was earning \$15 a week, that's what it was and the rent was \$45 a month. She would buy things for us. Sometimes she'd even come home with a little treat for us and she was living on toast and tomatoes. It was all for us.

She wore black for years and years and years; it wasn't until -- I don't know when it happened that she would occasionally put on something red; but for years --. Then there was that whole struggle of when I tried to put on something black. She would say there will be time enough for that, don't wear -- if you have to wear black, put on a flower or something like that. She often complained about her state in life and I don't blame her but she didn't have any guidance. She could have had a fantastically better life, she could have been a fantastic bookkeeper but nobody guided her so she ended up leading her life in the factories which she hated. It wasn't so much the work as it was the demeaning atmosphere. She felt that she was with these uneducated, boorish people who -- I think occasionally even people made passes at her which she found --. She was so Victorian that even when she was in the nursing home -- no it wasn't the nursing home. It was when she was living in a senior citizens' thing, when we moved her up to Brookline and she belonged to some golden age club. I think she was 80 by then. One day she called me up and it was raining and she said, some 80 -year- old man offered her a ride back to her apartment. I said good, did you take it? Who do you think I am? Would I take a ride with a strange man? So she had this image of herself, she never would have thought of getting remarried. She wouldn't, the idea of, no man was allowed to touch her except my father. She had a terrible time getting used to America because one time she came in for a job interview or something and the boss was sitting on his chair with his feet up on the desk. Well, she thought that that was treating her in a terrible way or for example, when people would call her by her first name without being invited. In Vienna she was Frau Doctor Reif and the least she expected was to be Mrs. Reif. She had a lot of those -- she was just very European. But she also -- she adapted very well in other ways. She got to be really good at shopping and knowing where to get bargains. She was very, she was always very energetic. It's just that she didn't always channel her energy. Like when she went to work in New York in the morning, she would get up I think at six in the morning in order to be able to leave the house at a quarter to eight. During that time, she must have expended, I mean you could have built a house with the amount of energy she expended just in the process of getting herself dressed, makeup and a hat and hat pins, stockings and shoes and all these things. Then she'd get to Manhattan and take it all off and put on some work clothes that she had at the factory. Then she'd put it all back on to take the subway back home. What else do you want to know?

Q: I think that's painting a very nice picture and I think we definitely know -- because we have the story line.

A: Let me add one more thing because I don't want to leave you with the wrong impression. She also, she was very good-natured like she'd play cards with me, if I was bored, she'd play cards with me.- Or if I needed to memorize a poem for school, even though she was exhausted, she would sit up in bed at night and have me recite over and over again. Was that IF by Roger Kipling, I just remember that one in particular, but many things like that; she was really very good about

always trying to do things to try to make me happy. I think there was a really fun loving person there that never got to come out because of the way life went.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you very much. This is the end.