

FROM OLD WORLD TO NEW: OMI'S STORIES

Oral History of Regina Lederer

[This is an edited transcript of an interview with Regina Lederer, conducted in her apartment in Silver Spring, Md. in December 1984 at the age of 89. She died just over three years later. The interview was conducted by her grandson, Bob Lederer, and edited by Bob and his sister Karen. Regina Berger was born in Vienna in 1895 and married Theodore Lederer of Pottenstein, a small town near Vienna, in 1922 where they lived for 7 years before returning to Vienna. Regina had her only child Paul in 1925, and the three of them fled Nazi terror to New York in 1939. She lived in New York until 1972, two years after Theodore's death, whereupon she moved to Silver Spring, Md. to live close to her son Paul and his wife Judy.]

Q. Tell me about your parents, what they did for a living, and what kind of life you had in Vienna.

A. I had the most wonderful life in Vienna. I'll never forget it. A wonderful youth and my parents were wonderful. My father had a factory, my mother didn't work. Only in the younger years, she helped Dad, my father, in his business. We had a big house and in the back, a big factory, so my father was never far away from the house. He came home to eat lunch and we would go over and talk to him.

Q. What did he manufacture?

A. He manufactured chemicals, paste for cleaning shoes and most important, an oil to clean weapons. During the First World War, he had very, very big business with the Army.

[As a teenager] I went to dancing school. I went to take courses in the Italian language because I took singing lessons all the years through all the time at the conservatory. I never had a job; I always was home until I got married when I was 26 years old.

Q. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

A. We were four girls and two boys. The four girls were the older ones. The boys, only a year between each other, were the youngest. Both went to high school and a kind of college, which we didn't call college over there. It's half a university and half a college which wasn't called college in Europe.

Then my father had a second factory in Italy, in Milano, and when Roberto, my brother, was a year older, when he was finished [with school], [my father] sent him to the factory to work there with the people. My father came twice a year, sometimes three times a year to control everything there and see. When Alberto, also my brother, was finished, then [my father] sent him there too. He said, "You be with Roberto and

learn and work there." And Alberto, even I think today, is still [working there]. I don't know if he [manufactures] it himself or sells it only. It's cream for cleaning shoes. They both didn't come back to Austria; they lived, and Alberto still lives, in Milano.

Dora, my sister, was very well off. Bruno, her husband, was a wonderful man. When Hitler came they moved to Baltimore. Had a son Jerry, which is still living in Baltimore. He had three girls and a boy, and all are married now, and he now has grandchildren. So Jerry and his wife travel all over and they just came back from Italy, wrote me greetings from my brother and showed me pictures. My brother in Italy, he's the only one [left]. The other, Roberto, died when he was 47 years old.

Q. So tell me a little about your schooling.

A. As I said, I went only to high school and not more then, but I took courses. I even learned typing.

Q. Oh really?

A. Yes, but I forgot. And I learned shorthand or stenography, but I don't know what you call it here.

Q. Yes, stenography.

A. Stenography. And I think somewhere it's written I was good in it. But I never used it because Dora was always, when she was not married, when she was young, working in my father's office in the factory. I never was good in office work; I never wanted to be there. I liked to help cooking up there and going shopping and be with the boys, which was little boys when I was younger.

Q. When did you first get your interest in singing and what kind of formal training in voice did you have?

A. Until I was, I think, 16 or 17 years old, I had no training. But in the summertime, we always went to a resort over the two hot months, with Mother of course. And we lived in a hotel and then in the evening when people started playing piano, my mother was very happy and proud of my voice, without learning. So she right away said, "Reginaral —" she called me "Reginaral" with an L on; all the Viennese put the L on the end to make it sweet. So I started singing and the people came and said, "Oh, Mrs. Berger, she should have singing lessons, that is a beautiful voice. We've never heard something so beautiful!" People even came, one couple which were singing teachers in Hungary, they absolute wanted Mother should let me go with them. No money, they would teach me and bring me to the opera. My mother was "Oh no, my daughter will not go, she has to stay with us in Austria. Thank you very much." But she got a little nearer to the project and let me have singing lessons. And from then on I really, I went to a private singing professor and she -- it was a woman -- brought me into the conservatory where I went for many years and had her also as private teacher.

When Theo came back [from serving as a P.O.W. in Russia during World War I] and we got married and I, against my will, had to move to Pottenstein, near Vienna, I went still for a few months, twice a month for three days and had singing lessons there. And then over the summer, she came to give me singing lessons in Pottenstein and lived there in a room; we had many rooms in the house.

But then when I moved in 1929 to Vienna again, I really started getting singing in concerts. And of course to have a big concern would have cost too much money, but my sister Dora arranged a big concern for a lady she did know, a pianist. And [Dora] said, "I will help you, but I want my sister should also the half of the concert sing. I had the most well-known, the best accompanist on the piano, which was always being with the real big singers in the opera in Vienna. And so I had often opportunities to sing in concerts. But people came and wanted to bring me to a small opera in Prague, Czechoslovakia, because they said, "When you have a year traaining there and sing in operas, then in the Vienna Opera they will take you in. But first you have to go there." I said no. Then I had already my little boy, my son, and I said no. My husband said, "I know you, you would every night call [to ask] if the baby had enough food." And so I gave up and wrote, "I'm sorry, thank you very much but I have to stay home."

Then I had a big concert with that pianist, and I remember that I had so many times to repeat because the people applauded more than to the pianist. And she was very excited and said, "You can have now two more songs and then I am coming in." Anyhow, I had a very good report in the papers and everybody wrote, "We hope to see you soon in the opera. You are not only a very charming and good-looking lady, but you have a gorgeous voice."

Q. That's nice!

A. So I had concerts -- small ones, because I had to sell tickets. Otherwise, I couldn't go on alone, and you can't have only friends in. After all, I had to pay for the accompanist.

Q. Did you have to rent the hall too?

A. Yes, I had to rent the hall and he said, "Here are the tickets, but you do what you can and give them away." So I did it a few times, but then I said I didn't have a job and I didn't need a job, so we did stay home. But then there was a -- what you call that? -- from all the countries near around, from Italy and Czechoslovakia and Hungary, came young singers. There was a -- where they all had the most important professors in singing and dramatic singing and playing theatre and they gave prizes out for the best?

Q. A competition?

A. A competition. In the biggest hall, in the concert hall that was the biggest and the newest. And my mother went there and she met a friend which was the biggest opera singer at that time, Selma Kurtz, which was a [star] over the whole world, she went all over. But at that time she was

also [judging] in that small surrounding with the professors. And I got -- I have it still -- a diploma from all signed, how wonderful I was singing and they also said they are sure that it will not take too long and they will see me on big opera houses too. It never came because Hitler came, and I couldn't do anything.

When I came to America, first of all -- I have the papers here still -- on the Rex, we came here with the Rex, the last boat which President Roosevelt called in -- we were lucky -- there were 3,000 people. And one of the biggest opera singers, a man (he died here now) was on the boat, also to come with his wife. And they had an evening concert there, and I did sing for some people in the meantime in the evening there just for fun. We were on the boat for six days. And then somebody came up and said, "I talked about you with that man, Professor So-and-so (I can't remember the name right now) and he has a concert, and he wants you also to sing." Now I had my evening dress, evening shoes and everything down, down, down in the boat.

Q. Packed away.

A. Of course. I couldn't do anything. I said, "I can't do anything, I have nothing to wear. I have everything packed up in big trunks downstairs." They sent the people downstairs and I had to tell them which case they had to open, and they brought me up a beautiful black and lace evening gown which I brought with me and shoes, so that I did go singing. And he said, "When we come to America, I will talk to the Director," which I did write from Vienna when Hitler came and asked him, "I'm a singer and I have to leave the country," and I would ask and beg him to let me just talk to him and hear my voice. And he said also on the boat, "I will help you with that letter; he will hear you." Three days later on the boat, in the news the Director died, the first Director in the Metropolitan [Opera]. He was heartbroken.

But I said, "I try to sing." I had a very beautiful evening there. They wrote on, "Mrs. Gina Lederer from Austria, opera singer" and so on. And we had a wonderful time. At that time, we were poor. You know, we came over with nothing. So we were on the tourist class, we had each [cabin] with two. [Theo and Paul] had a cabin and I had with a lady a cabin. But from that time on, I could be in the first class all day long. Everybody did know me there and said, "Come on, sit down with me." I had a wonderful time during all that trip to America.

Here, I tried again. We had no money and I wanted to earn something. And I did study Italian songs and two English songs and operas and also Viennese waltzes and songs. I could not get a job. Everybody said, "Are you an American?" And I said, "I hope with God, but it takes 4-1/2 years more. I'm only half a year here." The biggest synagogue on Fifth Avenue, the Temple Emanuel, I did sing for them. So [the administrator] said, "First of all, we have here now concert evenings for all the refugees, immigrants, and of course we don't pay you for this because you are an immigrant, so you can sing for them." I did, for nothing, and we had a wonderful time. From that time on in the Temple

Emanuel I could do what I wanted to. So then they said, "And once we want you on Sunday to sing during the service." And I had to go twice and have a rehearsal with their accompanist on the organ and I did sing there. And before I started, he gave me -- I will never forget it -- \$25.00! That was in 1939, that was money! And he said, "You will feel better when you sing with your money in your pocket." And really I did sing. And he said, "I can't give you a contract; you have to be an American citizen." I tried, I did sing for nothing all over in the coffeehouses, so they paid the accompanist but not me. But I said at least that's his job. So he got paid. Then later on I did sing in the evening and I got paid in the restaurants and coffeehouses and the dances afterwards. But it was 2:00 in the morning, I was afraid to go home. So Theo, the poor man, had to stand outside at 2:00 in the morning and take me home.

So I did see for long it will not be possible. And that's when I tried to get a job with my hands, and I did. It happened just that I met somebody who knew me from Vienna, and he was in the knitting branch. So he said, "I know where I work they look for somebody that is very good with his hands, stitching and things like that. So come, I will talk to the boss and you will get a job." And here I started for 35 cents an hour in the factory.

Q. Was that the minimum wage then?

A. That was the minimum, but they were very good to me, very good. I had to belong to the union and I said, "\$10? I can't pay that!" The boss said, "No, I pay for you, because you have to be in the union or I can't keep you." So he paid it. It was a hard time, I had to go to Brooklyn, it was very far to go for me. I had to change in Times Square to go to another train, then I had to take another train. It was really very, very far, but I did. And I went, the first I think, was 6 years; that was my first job. Then I had only 2 more jobs and then I was really trained. I was a very good worker. I had one job with very nice people and the last job I was at 12 years.

Pop died in 1970. First of all, my boss did know my husband, he often came when there was an entertaining from the firm. It was a very big firm, the May Company, which is even today, I think, quite well known. And so they did know him. So when my husband died, they all came to the burial. (I didn't know it then. I found out later because I didn't know even that I went there, I didn't know anything.) But they all were. And the boss called me on the phone and said, "Regina, at home you will sit and cry. Come here. When you cry here, all the people like you very much, they will talk to you and you will forget a little bit. And then go home, cry at home, but work; you will forget a little bit." And I went, and I did stay until May 1972.

For two years I couldn't make up my mind to come here [Maryland]. Really I was so used to the city. And I'm still not very happy here, that's true. But then I moved here. I told him [my boss] and he said, "Fine, you deserve a better life now. Don't work any more." I was 77 years old when I came here. That was when I stopped working. That's all.

Q. That's very interesting. Now let's go back and tell me a little bit about when you first met Theo, how you met him, what he was doing then, and about the war and so on.

A. I met him first of all in 1913. We were invited. My parents had friends, very good friends, a couple. He was a shoe manufacturer, so we all got shoes from there. And they had two girls like we two, Dora and I, in the same age, so we were very good friends. And they had a big apartment and they said they make a New Year's Eve party, and the two girls and the other two girls all will invite some more girls and there are a lot of young men and the parents had to come; they were in the living room and we were separate for dancing in another room.

Q. You were 18 then?

A. Then I was around 17, 18 years old. There I met him. And somehow we found each other there. But not much, I didn't even think he will remember. But yes, next day he called and asked if I could come up. He wanted me to introduce him to my parents and to go out. I could never go out alone. Helene, my younger sister, had always to be with me. It was another time, I couldn't go alone.

Q. That was the social custom of the time?

A. Ya. And then he bought theatre tickets, and I went to a beautiful play, very sad, but it was beautiful, the Teabok [phonetic]. I don't know if anybody knows it here, but it was wonderful. And he brought me home. That was before the war, but I liked that he had already the uniform. You know, all the young men wherever they had jobs or what -- he had his own business started alone, buying and selling food for animals for the big men who had cows and horses. They had always to be on the go but he made a brilliant business. But then [in 1914], I remember we went out for a walk together in the afternoon and we did hear blazing the radio that the man who was supposed to be the Kaiser when Kaiser Franz Joseph died was shot in an open limousine. And we were both shocked and we said, "Some man killed both, him and his wife in the open car." We all did know that means war. And so the war started very shortly. After college and before university, all the young men had to serve in the Army for a year. That's what Theo did before the war.

Q. What was his training before the Army? What did he study in college?

A. Only agriculture and business. And he was very good in it. But he forgot everything because he had right away to get the uniform. He was on the list, the youngest, and I saw him once in his uniform, he was already, in Europe it was lieutenant, I don't know what it is here, first he was not a lieutenant, lower than the lieutenant but in the moment they called him in, he got right away that he is a lieutenant. And when I saw him in that uniform he was beautiful, I never forget that picture. But I didn't see him any more. He wrote me then, "I be already in a train, we have to go out." And I never saw him.

I sent to the great Princess or what she was. She called in the paper for whoever has somebody there that's [on the front] in Russia or somewhere should bring chocolates; she would bring it to them. But he never got it. And so I couldn't do anything. I did know he's in the war now; I didn't know where.

But then he started, the first month or two months I think, I've got [a paper saying] when he got wounded. That was not too long [into the war]. He was out with the Russians in the field fighting and he got a shot in his stomach that was so big you could put a whole egg in his abdomen, and a shot in the head. But it was little and he never had hair there. And I didn't know about it. But the Russians found him on the field, bleeding, unconscious, so of course they took him as a prisoner and brought him to Siberia. Then when he got out of the hospital he couldn't go anywhere. There was the barracks where he had to live with them. And they took off the lieutenant, no lieutenant, everybody is everybody, just a soldier. And every day one or the other one when the Russians lost, they shot a few Austrians here, a few Czechoslovakian people there. They were so angry that they lost against the other people. Then he started writing, it was permitted on a postal card to write me only I think ten words, but nothing in the back, and make slits and put the picture from him in -- nothing in the back -- and so I got from Pitschanka, from Shetah, from all over Siberia.

Q. They kept moving him?

A. They moved as soon as we came nearer, they moved the prisoners further out to Siberia. And then I didn't hear anything any more. They were running and holding them so close that nobody even could send a postcard. He told me that when he came back, after 5 years. That means [that when the war ended] he didn't have -- the other prisoners too -- there was nobody to tell them anything. They just found a train standing there. So they did steal all the wood they had and put into the locomotive in the front so it should burn and they got in and they didn't know where, but they hoped somewhere they would find people and food. They didn't have anything.

Q. What year was this?

A. That was in 1919 -- no, it must have been later, 'cause in '15 he must have been writing me, in Siberia. [Actually it was late 1920 -- see below.] We had trouble in Vienna with the Communists and there was already people which come in from Russia.

Q. What kind of trouble, what was happening?

A. Oh, they wanted to be in the factories and push the other people out. They worked in the war, they had to have jobs and so on. But that stopped soon. And somehow Theo came back. And of course the first thing is to go to Pottenstein [where his parents lived].

He told me later on that he brought a beautiful fur, the most expensive Russian fur with him, but on the border they found that the fur was full of lice, insects, and they threw it in the fire to burn, not to bring typhus and cholera which was over there everybody, so they were afraid. But he came back and went to his parents.

Q. Let me just ask you though, I remember him saying before he died that he had been delayed in getting out of Russia for at least, I think it was, two years after the war. Do you remember that?

A. He came back in the end of 1920.

Q. And the war ended in 1918. What took so long? Why did it take two years?

A. They traveled! They couldn't come to Vienna, so --

Q. Why not?

A. Because they didn't have wood until they found a city in Russia. Theo at that time could speak very well Russian. And he behaved like a Russian, he was so long there, and he spoke beautiful. So I don't know.

In 1920 I remember he came to Vienna. He was in Pottenstein a few days, came to Vienna and the first thing he did he called. And that was when we came together again, on a New Year's Eve party with the same people. That was at the end of '20. In '21 he came every week, yes, during the time in the summertime when he was here already and we did know we want to get engaged. That means in the summertime we got engaged, but only the two of us. Then his father had a heart attack and died. So he had no job; he was just coming back. So everybody said, "You have to [take over the family business]." The mother is there and the big business which was no business at all any more. Everything was ruined.

Q. Which business was this?

A. He had a big store, like a department store, but a simple one.

Q. Theo's father, you mean?

A. His father had it. They had three houses, private houses and one big house for the store. And he had many sisters and he had three brothers. One died in the war, the others are Fritz and Richard which died in England and also was in the war [World War II] in Italy. And they told Theo, "Look, first of all, you be the only one who has no job. You have to take over your father's business and help Mother in the business." Mother was always in the business. And then they said, "Of course you want to get married. Mr. Berger wouldn't give her if you don't have a good job and know that you can take care of her." So he did, but he found that the people all bought always on credit and they said, "Next week I pay, but I need a little bit," so more credit came. There was no war, no

money, all whatever was in the store, linen or furniture. They had everything, food, everything. It was gone! There was nothing there that Theo could do with it.

Q. Weren't times pretty rough after the war? Wasn't there a depression?

A. It was very bad, but I lived. In '21 we got engaged in the summertime. My mother was angry that he came where we were on vacation. He said, "Mrs. Berger, I want my vacation to be there in the same place." So my mother was supposed to go to another town to get something for her rheumatism. She didn't. She said, "Now I have to go there to be with the girls because Theo and Richard came." (Both of them came there.) And there we got engaged, only me and him. But Mother did know, and when we came back, that was the time when he had to go back because his father died. So my father, when I came back, said, "Look, I know you want to go -- my father was wonderful -- I go with you because I know you have to go. It's Theo's father and I know you would like that, but you can't go alone. You are not officially engaged or anything." So I did.

And then at the end of '21 we had an engagement party. All the sisters came and the mother and everybody. There we were officially engaged. It wasn't long because on the 15th of January, '22, we got married. And I moved to Pottenstein. That 7 years until '29 were the hardest for me.

Q. Why did you two stay in Pottenstein?

A. Because Theo had to be in that store. And there were houses. He didn't leave when his father died and we got married. He had to fix from one of the houses for me a beautiful apartment. He made everything I wanted there, really. We had a fireplace going to all the rooms, wonderful. But I hated it: there were no sidewalks or street, everything was sand. I was very unhappy there. And the women in the store, they took out whatever it was and never paid a penny. And when I went sometimes to Vienna to have singing lessons, I didn't want to go back. He didn't know I'm not happy there. But what should I do? It's my husband and I stayed with him.

And then in '29 he did [agree to move]. First of all, Paul was born in '25 and I said always, "Theo, Paul will never go here to school. If you don't move, I move with him. I want him to be in Vienna in school." So I still kept four years to '29 there. And then Theo did say, "The business is dead." All the money I got, really a lot of money from my parents when I got married, but three years later it wasn't worth anything. We could buy a pair of shoes or a set of dishes --

Q. Because of inflation?

A. It was terrible! And I said, "No, not here." So Theo started looking for somebody to sell or take over the business and send us monthly so-and-so much money. So it worked only -- ya, and we moved. My mother and father tried hard. You couldn't get an apartment without paying a hundred thousand [schillings]. But somehow they had friends and there was

a young man who went out, had a beautiful apartment [in Vienna] and went to Switzerland or so. So I got the apartment. Walk-up four flights. But we did go with the baby and we had a nice apartment there. Only we had to walk [up], and I was scared. And right away next street was a kindergarten for very intellectual children. So I put Paul in there, on the next corner from the house where we lived until Hitler came there.

But we were glad because Fritz couldn't go so fast from Pottenstein. They took all his teeth out with a stone, with terrible things, with football bats, they pushed him in. So then he run away. He always had a business next to ours, only for stockings for men and women. So then he left everything there, and went. But on his way he had nowhere to go. The Russians found him on the way to Poland and took him in Poland to the concentration camp. There died his first wife. And then after the war, the Jewish community took him back to Vienna and a half a year later he married Paula. And then the HIAS [Jewish refugee aid committee] brought them to America, 'cause nobody was there.

Q. I'm very curious about some of the conditions of life in Austria at that time. In particular, did you find that there was a lot of anti-semitism either in Vienna before Hitler came, or in Pottenstein? Starting from when you got married or even when you were growing up.

A. Ya, especially in Pottenstein, they all were drinkers and the first word was "lousy Jew" all over. I hated it there. I was so unhappy, but I loved my husband more than my own life.

Q. There were very few Jews in Pottenstein?

A. Very few. Then my father-in-law had the holidays in his house. He had a very big living room and he had a safe and the Torah and everything. And every year on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur, from all over the small towns around Pottenstein -- there were many little ones -- wherever the Jews were, they came for holidays to stay with my mother-in-law and father-in-law. We had at least ten rooms there. And so they could stay overnight and they bought in the store food enough over the holidays to stay with them. And after Yom Kippur, everybody left of course. In Pottenstein, there were not more than, I think, three [Jewish households] and these were relatives of Theo.

Q. Did the anti-semitism ever come out in any more serious ways than name-calling?

A. No, no, no. But that was enough for me. It did not do harm to anybody, just the contrary. If you needed something and there was a gardner, when he was drunk, then he lets go and screamed. But when you needed work from him, he did it. Money didn't bother him.

Q. When did things start to get worse? Was there an Austrian equivalent of the Nazis that got organized before the Nazis took over?

A. We never thought in Austria that could happen. We did know five years before [the Anschluss - annexation by Germany], this came to Germany. But

it was different in Germany. They didn't do what they did five years after in '38 when they came. I never forget, on a Friday in the afternoon, we did know, now it was the end of our life. When they came in, on Saturday morning we looked out the window, they were so prepared with everything weeks ago, that on every house and every bank was that cross with the, what is that, what you hang out?

Q. Effigy?

A. No, when you go march and you have a...?

Q. A banner?

A. A banner. Every banner was Heil Hitler. It was terrible. You looked out of the window outside, not a human being was on the street. And Sunday on the banks everything. You couldn't get in to the bank anymore. On Monday I wanted to go to the bank. The door was closed. Our savings were there; my jewelry was there in the safe. No more, I never saw it again.

Q. There was a law that no Jews could go to the bank?

A. Nothing. Everything was for Hitler. A Jew didn't have to have anything. And then a few days later when I looked out, I was very much afraid about Theo. Thank God nobody did know him. But from the house two other men were taken down. And two women had to scrub the streets, and the Nazi boys came and pushed them in the back, they fell on their knees and their nose. With the dirty water they had to scrub the street! Rabbis, most of them, were on the street scrubbing, and women. It was terrible, and I worried so much.

[One day] a girl came and said, "Mrs. Lederer, take Paul and go to your parents in Hittsig. They don't know you there, and here they want to come all the women to take them also cleaning." So I packed and run out to Hittsig to the house where my parents lived. And in the afternoon I came back home. And nobody did anything there. We had old friends, Theo's friends and his father's friends which was a judge, the highest judge. Theo found the apartment in our house where we lived because he retired and didn't want to stay there anymore. We didn't know how his children are Nazis. We didn't know that and he left town. And from the day on when Hitler was there, they didn't see us. Only at night when nobody was on the hall or the steps up, they came and said, "Oh, we are so worried, we are so sorry." And I said, "If you can't talk to me in the daytime, don't talk to me in the evening!" And we never talked to them, but we were very good to them all those years before -- from '29 to '38.

Q. What were some of the other restrictions that the Nazis passed against the Jews?

A. First of all, on all the benches on the street was written on, "Dogs and Jews not allowed to sit down" and all the stores were "Jews not allowed."

Q. So how did you go shopping?

A. There was no shopping because in the meantime the superintendent in the house where I lived -- they were very good to me -- they came and said, "Mrs. Lederer, we know that someday you will have to give up your [apartment]." I had a beautiful apartment but on the fourth floor, with room for Paul and for us. And so she said, "I know somebody who works." I was very near the Westvohof, the station for trains going out, and she said, "That man there, the big man in that station, he wants so much to come here and he would like your apartment. I swear he will never tell you [that] you have to go out before you really go out from here (I told them I hoped to go to America). And he wants to pay you. He can't pay you more than 1,000 schillings for one piece, but he [needs to] come 3 times a day. He wants your bedroom, he wants a part of your living room."

Because I did know I can't use that all, I could only use my piano, which I brought with me [to the U.S.], and a few things, like that chest is from Vienna and things like that, it's also very old. And he said, "I look at it and please, only when you will tell me 'tomorrow my furniture will go out with the liftvan [moving/storage company] to America,' then I move in. Leave the curtains, I pay you for everything." And he never came before I called him and said, "We're going tomorrow, and I had the apartment cleaned very nice, and you can have it."

So then, we were forced, I couldn't have the girl anymore, no Jew was allowed a Christian girl. Then we were forced to go to a smaller apartment, but my liftvan was out already. I did send it to Arthur Berger [a wealthy cousin living in St. Louis, Missouri.] I didn't know what but that I hoped to come to America. And he took care of the liftvan for a whole year, from '38, because with '39 you couldn't move furniture any more, and he paid every month storage, otherwise they would have sold it. And we had to live in one room.

Q. What do you mean by 'you were forced out of your apartment.' They passed a law about that Jews had to leave their apartments?

A. Ya, we couldn't live there anymore.

Q. They said certain housing areas were restricted?

A. All were restricted, only for Christian people. Every Jew had to move [out of buildings owned by Christians]. I was lucky because that man said, "until you know where you go." So I had my furniture, the few things, the piano, already on the way to America. And we had to go only to other Jewish women, because I couldn't go to a Christian family, only Jew. We lived all in one room.

And there at 4:00 in the morning, boom, boom, boom on the door. "We want to look up if you have weapons." At 4:00 in the morning!

Q. It was the SS, right?

A. That were the Nazis who came in. I will never forget.

Q. Were these Austrian or German Nazis?

A. Austrian Nazis! They were worse than the German! They learned from the German. They were beasts, just animals!

And Paul was on the sofa. We had two beds and a sofa. And he had his sheet over him, he was not quite 14 years old. He didn't know much. And they looked in every drawer. And we had some money there which was to go to -- Roberto wrote us, "Don't wait longer, come to Milano. I send you some permit to go to China. You don't go to China but it will let you out in Milano, and we wait for you there. Don't wait longer." And I really came in the last moment. So the men found out that my husband Theo Lederer was an officer, was in the war for Austria, and so they said, "Here is money, I see. Keep it, we don't take anything from you, but go away from here as soon as you can! But we don't take your passport." (When they take it, we can go nowhere.) "Here is your passport, your money." And they saluted, because [Theo] had back his hautman -- that's the colonel or something like that -- which he got when he came back from Russia as a prisoner, he got his regular title back. And they saluted and went out. But he said by the door, "Go as soon as you can away from here!" So we told him we hoped to be able to go soon.

Q. So in other words, because they found his papers proving that he was a soldier in World War I --

A. Ya, at that time. Later on, they didn't make with other people any difference.

Q. But at that time they were sympathetic?

A. We were lucky, because in the same house they took two men, and they were never heard of again.

Q. To a concentration camp?

A. Ya, never heard of them. But we were lucky, and I always said, "My luck was really always there. I was born to a lucky star." Really, and it is true.

Q. Do you think that the reason that they were willing to pass him by because maybe one of them had himself served in World War I and so he was sympathetic, or just they thought he was loyal because he was in the Army?

A. Oh, I don't know.

Q. Well, why do you think it mattered to them? Why do you think the Nazis cared and were willing to let him go?

A. No, only in the beginning. That was the first --

Q. Yes, but why even then?

A. No, we were lucky. There were three men in uniform with the black with red. We were lucky! The same went into my parents' house, and my father died, fell down right there, listened on the door and fell down and had a heart attack and was dead! And there were ten men, ten in that uniform, talking with my mother.

Q. And they always claimed they were looking for weapons, right?

A. Oh yes, they came in and they went, and my mother said, "I know." She said, "Please, there is an old, sick man in. Don't go to the bedroom." They really didn't go, but my father must have listened at the door, because he fell right next to the door inside the bedroom. He was dead in a minute. And they run for a doctor, but there was no help, he was dead. And we were lucky, absolute --

Q. Did you know what was happening in the concentration camps? Did you know people were being murdered at that time?

A. No. You know that Bruno was taken up, not to a concentration camp, but also from the Nazis, and Dora was standing, just to see his face. She got crazy for worry. Then I think the telegram came here to the American Embassy in Austria, also to Arthur or Harry, one of the Bergers, and they sent a telegram to the Embassy, to take him right away out. And he came out and the Nazis told him, "We don't want to find you ever, or you don't come out any more." So Bruno and Dora slept every night in another friend's house, not to find him, because they had the names and everything there because Bruno was a very big man in the metal factory there, and he was a director of a bank in Vienna, a very fine bank. So right away they wanted to have him.

I'm telling you, the time until we did know that we can go to America, the nights in that one room, and every night we didn't know if they don't knock at the door. But we were lucky.

Q. What was it like for Dad going to school? Did they segregate the schools?

A. Oh sure, for Paul? Yes of course. They had altogether to go to a Jewish school. And I had to go. We were forced to take our children there. We were forced not to keep him home. And when the school was out and I did hear screams, I run out to the street [to see] if I can see him and of course I couldn't see him. But I was so scared, I can't tell you, because the Nazi boys, the Hitler Yuget, they spit in the face of the boys. They did know they are all Jews, they come from the Jewish school. And they had to come there.

Q. Did they ever beat them up?

A. No, no. Nothing happened to us. But you know, later on they were beasts. They took my mother to the biggest one.

Q. Yes, tell me about how that happened.

A. I don't know. I know only that Roberto and Alberto with the children went near the border to Switzerland to hide.

Q. This was in Italy, right?

A. In Italy, but at the border to Switzerland. And they took Mother. And they found a little town next to the border to run over. And they took a house for them together, and a house where my mother could have a room. Both were near, one house to the next house.

Q. They were both on the Italian side of the border?

A. Ya. My mother run away, and when they took the house [in Vienna] over, she went to Italy and she lived there. And Roberto got the news, because he wrote me a letter afterwards when the war was over, and they came back. That's why he died, because he said [that] as soon as they got the news that they come to get them all, they run away and to pick the mother up too, but there were some which did know before -- maybe the landlord where Mother lived -- and they told them and they took the mother away before they could reach the house for the mother.

Q. And I think you've told me before that it was within the space of one day that they took her -- that one day the family saw her and the next day she had been taken away?

A. Ya, one day they saw Mother wave from the window. And during the night they got news with the radio or something. And they run out and quick to get the mother in the morning. They couldn't find her.

Q. What was the news on the radio -- that the Nazis were advancing?

A. I don't know, yes, something. But they did know they have to run.

Q. I ask because the Fascists had been controlling Italy for 20 years. They weren't as anti-semitic?

A. No, no. They didn't do anything to the Jews at that time. They took [Jews] away, but they didn't kill them.

Only the Nazis found my mother and took her right away to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. I went all the time to look for Mother. There is in New York a church on Fifth Avenue, the biggest church, and I went there. And one of the priests told me during the time Mother was still in Italy you couldn't send any news. But there was a priest, he said every week I have to go with portfolio to Italy to the Pope, bring him news and come back. And I begged him, can some give a word to my mother, and that she can let me know what's there. And he said, "You can write 25 words, and on the same paper I will tell your mother to write 25 words." But that was only one time that I got from her a letter. But she was still living. Then I went there, five or months later, and I said, "I can't hear any more. Can you something find out what happened, where did my mother

go?" They brought me back a news that she was sent to Auschwitz. That means in the morning already you were sent to the gas chambers. There was no more.

Q. This is in 1942, right? You mean people in the United States already knew that they had gas chambers that they were using against the Jews?

A. Oh yes, of course. But the people who could have helped didn't want to help. So the news don't come out. They knew!

Q. You mean it was known in the Jewish community, but it never got into the newspapers?

A. No, no. Not in the Jewish community. We had no -- we did know that they disappeared, but we didn't know. When I went to that church, the priest who did know me, he said, "Yes, your mother, we have no more other papers as that she was sent to Auschwitz." And that means the old people they didn't even stay there, they were right away killed.

And Roberto and Alberto, when the war was over, the Swiss people were nice to them. They helped them. Alberto had Chi-Chi with him and Trudy and Tommy and Enzo, they were all there. And somehow he got money, because you couldn't work in Switzerland. But they lived until Hitler was out [of Italy] and Mussolini was hanging. So they came back. And Roberto looked for Mother. He wrote me a heart-breaking letter, I think five pages or more. And he couldn't get over that, that they lost her. And he was 47 years old when he died. He came home and said, "I looked all over, but I have a headache, I have to lay down." Two hours later he was dead. So young. But he was very worried that he couldn't help Mother. He was a screamer, like your father is. But they had all that from my mother, she could -- not my father, he couldn't scream or anything. He could get angry and talk, but that was all.

Q. So tell me about the other members of the family that were killed by the Nazis.

A. Look, Theo's sister, Valley Steiner, and [her husband] Heinz Steiner, were the parents of Herbert Steiner, the professor. When Valley and her husband, Irma Weiss, which was a sister of Theo, they all sent the children to England -- out the children that they don't take them in to the Hitler as so. So Ilse was sent to England, Herbert was sent to England. They had to find somebody who gives them a permit. Ilse found a girl which was in school in Vienna with her sent from England to learn here. That girl remembered when Hitler came, and she wrote Ilse, "We try to help you. Give us all your name and we'll take care." And they took her over. And Herbert, somebody else also, only that the parents don't worry about the children, Eric run over to Panama. They all hoped to bring the parents out. So Irma and her husband Dolphie, Adolph Strass, they made it. Eric went first to Panama and got a job there as a bartender. And right away as soon as he could he brought father and mother there. But Herbert was in England and couldn't go anything, because at that time they couldn't do anything. He himself was there because somebody took care for him. They both died in the concentration camp.

Q. How did people find that out?

A. Because they didn't answer anymore, any cards or anything, and this was returned, "famised." And "famised" said enough.

And many friends of Theo, from his student years, and from the Jewish committees... [gap in tape]

Q. Now, you had said that Fritz [Theo's brother] was also in a concentration camp in Russia?

A. The name was Karaganda.

Q. How did he end up there? And his wife was with him, right?

A. Look, because with his wife, they had no permit for anybody. They didn't find him.

Q. They were fleeing from the Nazis, right?

A. And they were fleeing, they went to Prague, Czechoslovakia. There the Nazis were behind them. They went to Poland at night; they paid a little money and they brought him over from one border to the other. And then, at the last moment when they thought to be somewhere, the Russians found them and took them in. There were not only Austrians which they [the Russians] did want to kill, there were Jews they wanted to kill, first of all.

Q. This was a camp for people who had entered the country illegally?

A. I don't know, I can't tell you anything about it. I know only, its name was Karaganda and he was there. And we sent him blankets. He never got them. We sent them, I think Theo made a package. They never got anything. They kept it when it came there, they kept it. And the women didn't see their men, and there was a separate part and only late at night, she didn't eat, she kept the bread -- he is a good bread-eater always, like I am -- and she selected and she collected the bread instead of eating and at night slipped it somewhere into the house. And he did know, so he waited in the bushes. I can't tell you, that's only what they told me.

Then a week before Paul got married [in 1950], we were told that they were here, the HIAS brought them here.

Q. What was the HIAS?

A. The HIAS is a Jewish committee for refugees. And they took over here in America the refugees who came and gave them a room to live. They gave [Fritz] next to the HIAS on Swift Street or something a hotel, a room. And Paula [his second wife] was very unhappy; it was too hot and --

Q. But wait a minute. His first wife died in that camp in Russia. How did she die?

A. That I don't know. She died there of starvation, that's what they told me. From that time I can't tell you anything. I don't know.

But then we got the news that Fritz is coming to America. The HIAS brings him here, and the address where we should go. And we went there. That was a week before Paul got married. Ilse came a month before from England. We took her over because she didn't have a passage for America. She couldn't come. She came from England, but not here. We took her over. Paul got married, I had his room, and I let her stay until she had a job, for months and months, until she had a room where I looked with her, she had to be next to me, because we had dinner, always she came to eat in my house, as long as I could. But I know only Fritz came and they were both very unhappy. But I didn't know that's a young wife he had. He went to Vienna from Russia and somehow she must also -- that's dark, I never did really understand what happened, that he all of a sudden met her and he didn't get rid of her, so he had to marry her. And they didn't fit together. She's dead now, she broke her hip in New York and died.

Q. So I want to hear the story of how it was that you, Theo and Paul finally made it to the United States by way of Italy.

A. We all three went to Italy first.

Q. Yes, how did you get out of Austria? Weren't the Nazis restricting the emigration by Jews?

A. No, we had visas for China, I told you. Roberto said, "I send you something to show that you can go from the border with."

Q. But I thought you had to get that approved by the government authorities before you got a visa?

A. No, the visa, that all came from the American embassy. That's the only way we could go.

Q. How did you get it from the American embassy? Was that because you had a sponsor?

A. Because Arthur [the cousin in St. Louis] sent us, all three, the names to go there. They looked us over and told us, "We let you know when you can go."

Q. So, what I'm trying to figure out is the rule at that time about immigration into the U.S. was that you could only enter if you had a sponsor who would guarantee your financial stability for five years?

A. For five years.

Q. And what about the Nazis? They allowed you to leave if the Americans or some other government would allow you to come in?

A. No, not all the other countries, but China or America. With America they weren't on a war, the American embassy was there, and that was the only way that we could go there and find out. But there was a lot of swindle there. Because people who had a lot of money, refugees, wanted to

go quick. You know, you got a number from the American embassy. When my name was already there, and Paul's and Theo's, they said, "We send you a number. That number is yours, and that is from the embassy, you will get the permit to go." But in the embassy, there must have been people who like money better. You could behind give them 2,000,000 schillings and he changed the number, he had a number two years later, which he never could make. And I had to wait. And it was a big scandal.

Q. How long did you have to wait from the first time you applied?

A. My mother applied for me, because Dora was already in America a year before. And we wanted first and she wanted first alone to come and not I should wait until she was there. She was afraid maybe they would say too much for us, we can send Dora and we can send nobody else. But when Dora was already there, my mother wrote a letter to Arthur Berger -- I was there with her -- before she left to Italy, and begged him. Arthur sent -- I didn't know it, but I [now] have a letter, Arthur had a friend, this friend said he's going to vacation to Vienna and Arthur gave him my mother's address in the villa in Hittsig and said, "Please go there and find out what's going to be with them, what's happening, and if they can leave there or what." And this friend went, I didn't know, to visit my mother. He was there, I know the name, but I didn't know that he came there because of Arthur. When he went back to America, that is what I know from the letter, he called Arthur and said, "It's terrible! Harry, if you want to save them from being dead, you have to send them right away, don't wait! Every day is a danger!" That's the letter Sylvia [Arthur's wife] gave me when Arthur died. There I know that he alone took us over.

Q. The friend said, "You have to do something quick." What was the something that Arthur had to do in order to get you to come?

A. Right away to give to the embassy the names and ask that he guarantees for all three [of us] for five years. And he guaranteed for Rose Spranger [a family friend] and her brother. And when Arthur got that letter, he right away wrote to the embassy to put all the papers that he is rich, that he can guarantee for five years for all three. And that's when I got in the last moment -- believe me, I did not let Theo go to the embassy, because the policeman's there. When they thought you were not a Jew, then it's OK. When they thought you are a Jew, they pushed you, they were terrible. And when they looked at me, I had a black kerchief on my face -- after my father died I never took anything else than a black coat and a black kerchief. And he looked at me and he said, "You don't belong here. This is for the Jews. You go to the Christian side." And I looked at him, what should I tell him? But I went back to the Jewish side. I had to wait an hour longer until my number came and they told me what I have to do and what I have to expect and when I have to go to a certain place where they will look me up and take my name and give me a number. And when I get the number I know I can go and show that permit. It was very difficult but I never let -- because the policemen, when they could find a Jew they didn't like, they pushed him out and -- believe me, I did go because I did know I looked so terrible and so poor that they didn't even look at me. First of all I looked like a gentile. Nobody believed that I was a Jew.

Q. Well, that reminds me of something. In Austria didn't they require Jews to wear the Jewish Star on their clothing?

A. No.

Q. That was only in Germany?

A. That was in Germany. No, no, you were a Jew and that's --

Q. They could pretty well tell from your appearance?

A. Oh, it was "no three Jewish people together on the street."

Q. But how could they tell who were the Jews? By appearance?

A. They did see how scared we all were. You have no idea. We didn't talk together because there was somebody listening behind. Just any word which would be against Hitler and I would be dead.

But we lived there in that one room and downstairs was a dairy shop -- milk and butter. I was very sick at that time, I had already gall bladder trouble, it was awful. And one day, that woman from the dairy store was standing in the door and she said, "You look awful." I said, "Yes, you know, I can't come in here. I can't buy anything from you. You wouldn't give it to me, I'm a Jew." And she said, "Don't be crazy. I have a package. Go to the back door of my store in the back. I give you the package -- milk, butter, bread." She gave me everything. No pay. "Go, nobody should see you."

I went on [the restaurant on] the other corner. (I think Paul and Judy, when they went to Vienna [in the 1980s for a vacation], went to that restaurant, but of course the children were having the restaurant; the father was dead.) But at that time it was an old man there who had the restaurant. And once I came and asked him, "Can I talk to you? We are three people and we are not allowed to go to eat somewhere or shop, but we would pay you if you would let us eat somewhere. Don't you have a place where nobody sees us that we could eat?" And he says, "Come in with me. I want to talk to you in another room." And he came in and he said, "See? Nobody knows that that room is there at all. You will come every day and have dinner there." But there were days when the law was "No Jews on the street" -- Saturday, Sunday.

Q. Every Saturday and Sunday?

A. Nearly every week, either Saturday or Sunday, no Jews on the street at all. Sunday, but most the time Saturday too. So I said, "I can't get in." He said, "I have a way where you come in. You bring me a basket -- not a basket, it's too much -- a shopping bag, a big one. I have all the pots put in for you" -- soup and rice and chicken and whatever he had, beef. "And for the boy," he said, "I have to give him something good" -- an apple pie or whatever they had for dessert. He said, "put newspaper on top and go home with it. Nobody will see you. Come in the evening

when it's dark. Nobody will look. You have a black kerchief and a black coat. Who looks for an old woman at that time?" And on the other days we came there in that room and he served us every day dinner. And I remember that Paul said he went there. But of course that were the young people, they spoke to him and he spoke to them. We had a real Viennese dinner there. People were very good to us.

Q. Do you think a lot of the people in Austria disagreed with the Nazis?

A. Of course! But they couldn't -- they got killed themselves. They were afraid. But most of them were beasts themselves. When they could get something for nothing, it didn't mean a thing, a Jew. You see, my sister Helene, she married a Christian policeman. She did stay, she didn't go, and nothing -- they were in the beginning not nice to her, but nobody did anything to her and her children and her policeman, nothing. And he came every second day and brought us bread, that we had something to eat. But I was lucky! We three were very lucky.

Q. Let me ask you something. When you were forced to move out of your apartment, did you have to move into a Jewish ghetto? Were all the Jews herded into a few neighborhoods in town?

A. No, no, you had to find -- I could stay, because that man said he wants the apartment, he is a Christian and they give it to him, a Christian could get the apartment. "But I promise you, I feel very bad about what happens to you. You didn't harm to anybody, I can't understand, but I can't help it. But I will never force you out before you have your --

Q. No, I understand that. I'm talking about when you said you were forced to leave. Was that --

A. You had to give the apartment anyhow.

Q. Yes, that's what I'm asking. Were you forced to move into a particular neighborhood?

A. No, look, I did stay a few streets from the street where I was living in a very fine --

Q. So you lived in a mixed area of both Jews and gentiles living together?

A. Ya, there was nothing, no, no.

Q. So the Nazis didn't cordon off the Jews into just one area.

A. No, no, no. That was not at that time, as long as I was [there]. But I promised that man, because he said, "You do yourself a favor because as long as I had that apartment, no Nazi can get the apartment. But otherwise anyone can get it, so go out, I be here, but nobody will do that until your liftvan is going to America with the piano and that." On the day when I did know, I called that man and said, "Come up. I will show you what I give you -- everything, the bed, the curtains, the

furniture, everything, from Paul's room, everything." So then, when I called him, he came up, paid me the rest of the money. That's why we had a little money to get on. And then I did know that I can only go to Jewish families for a room. I did know I couldn't go to any apartment anymore. And we did know we will soon, we hoped to get the number and go out. But at that time we found two blocks from us an elderly woman from Czechoslovakia, she lived there for 15 or 20 years, and she had a big apartment. And so she gave us one room and a kitchen which was dead -- nobody cooked or did anything -- but we could warm water for tea, and that's all. And there we lived until we could, from that room, we had the trunks, and we had from straw a big chest with my linen. They looked it over, the Nazis came in to the room.

Q. Oh, that was the place the Nazis searched, or the previous apartment?

A. No, when I was in the good apartment where I promised that man. When I had the liftvan ordered, I had the liftvan from the Nazis. I couldn't get any other, everything was Nazi. They said, "OK, we come to your house and we will look. You will not [bring with you] gold or silver or when we find money or stock, we bring you to the concentration camp. And we come and look through." That's what I did. I had the linen, sheets and whatever I had next to that trunk, and when he was there, I put everything in so that he did see. And many things, it took hours. And you know what? Before they left, I had two entrances to that room, from the foyer and from the bedroom. They locked both doors. I could not get in until the next day when they came back, so I shouldn't put something in which I wanted them not to see.

Q. And then what happened when they came back the next day?

A. They came in, they opened the doors and said, "Now pack the rest." And then a man brought all these things to the train where we left. We had three big suitcases which we could take, but only when they looked it over. And then on the border, it happened the same. And I remember we had to put down to show them, opened up and they got in with their hands to find something, "OK." And Theo said, "I have another one up there, shall I take it down?" He said, "No, leave it there." But another man said, "Give me your suitcase." He looked in, took the man and the suitcase and we never saw them. He must have had something in to shuggle out, you know? I never saw him.

But there was a German Hitler officer across from us sitting, in a white uniform, oh my God! And there was another woman sitting there and she had a pen to write something, and she sprayed him full with black ink [laughs]. It was a feather [pen] which you don't know, will it work or not, and it sprayed that white uniform [laughs]. But he couldn't do anything. She didn't want to do that. I don't think that that was a Jew. I think we were the only -- no, that man which never came back must have been a Jew. But even there on the border, they found a schilling and fifty pennies or something -- I don't remember anymore -- and we said, "That's what we have." He said, "Give it to me, give me an address, we send the money to them." I said, "Oh I have nobody." I wouldn't give them the address for Vallee to send it to her. "No," I said, "I have nobody. Give it to somebody." I learned a lot, what human beings can do.

And when I came to America, you think they didn't look us up? Before, when we were in Milan, we got a note, "Go to Naples. There you will be looked up." And I remember Paul had something inside his fingers, like red pimples here and there because for a year he didn't have an orange or something. I took sometimes from orange peel when I did see it and cut it with water and let it stand so that he should drink something. And that came out that he has some things here which hurt him. I put some honey on and so. And I was afraid, because they look for that. And the eyes -- when you have anything with your eyes, they don't [let you enter the country]. You have some little liquid which came and gets white, then they know that's glaucoma.

Q. You mean the immigration authorities?

A. The immigration -- they don't let you [enter if you have those medical conditions]. And then we had to go in, women to a woman, men to a man, to look us through completely. America! That was already America!

[Unfortunately, the tape ran out here. The interview went on briefly unrecorded before concluding.]