INTERVIEW WITH RUTH PLAINFIELD

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PLACE: Temple Beth Shalom

INTERVIEWER: Evelyn Fielden

CO-INTERVIEWER: Laurie Kuhn

INTERVIEWER FIELDEN: My name is Evelyn Fielden. I'm an interviewer with the Oral History Project. Today is April 7th, and we are at Temple Beth Shalom, and I'm interviewing Ruth Plainfield. My co-interviewer is ~~Laurie Kuhn.~~ Lois Kernan

Q. GOOD AFTERNOON.

A. Hi.

Q. I'D LIKE YOU TO TALK ABOUT YOUR EARLY YEARS A LITTLE BIT, WHEN YOU WERE BORN, WHERE YOU WERE BORN, AND ABOUT YOUR FAMILY.

A. Well, at the time I was born, which was on January 25th, 1925, my parents still lived in the house where my great, great, great, great grandfather was already born, which was in a small town in Rheinhausen. The name of the town is (Gabegelheim).

RUTH PLAINFIELD

I was born in (Mainzmumba), in a hospital there. My parents always said that on that wintery day they drove in this convertible which they had, to get my mother to the hospital in time, and it remained sort of a story of the town forever because other people had their babies delivered by midwives. I don't really know to this day why my mother chose to have an obstetrician, except it was the modern thing to do.

That's where I grew up for the first six years of my life, and that really governs much of my existence because I grew up in the fabric of a town that was totally in the condition that it had been for a very long time and my family had been part of that for a very long time.

At the time when I grew up, there were only my family and one other Jewish family left in this small town. Everyone else had migrated to the cities. But my family were winemakers and

were very much tied to the soil. That's why at least until 1931 --I was born in 1925-- that we moved to Mainz, where we also had a house. My father thought it was best, but he really didn't want to, he was such a man of the soil.

My mother, who was born in (Odenval), which is on the east side of the Rhine River, had also come from a small town and she was also a person tied to the soil.

So I really grew up like a farmer's child, but of a family where the women for several generations had already been rather well educated or better educated than the rest of the family.

The family was absolutely and totally German, but absolutely and totally observant in the Jewish religion.

I remember when I was very little my mother would give me a basket of matzos at Passover time. On the streets you could walk easily, there were no sidewalks. I would trade

the matzos for Easter eggs, one matzo for an Easter egg, from the houses of my friends.

Those were the first six years of my life.

Actually, I began school in Mainz, Germany. We only lived there for three and a half years, at which point my father decided there would be less anti-Semitism --you have to understand those years were from 1931 until 1935-- in the beginning of 1935 he decided there would be less anti-Semitism in his hometown and we returned back to (Gabegelheim). But very shortly after that, he was arrested in 1935 and imprisoned because he was an absolutely outspoken person.

You may be familiar with this German magazine which, of course, was an anti-Semitic magazine and its format was of many gruesome cartoons. He said it was a funny paper, (ein vitzblat), and someone overheard him. By the time he returned, I think he was in Nierstein that

day, and by the time he came home the police were already waiting for him.

Is this the kind of thing you are interested in?

Q. VERY MUCH. ABSOLUTELY.

A. So he was arrested and was put in prison in Mainz, and we would visit him there. He finally was released after three or four weeks, it was a relatively short time. But it was also unusual at that time for people to be in prison. Well, anyway, the mayor of our little town vouched for him because he had been a war hero in World War I. But he had to sign a statement that if he was ever arrested again it was going to be for life.

Well, by that time my life had changed utterly and completely. I was still part of the fabric. My maiden name was Oppenheimer. My name was (Oppenheimer-Schluse). That was the dialect of the town and that's who I was. Everybody knew

me, and my family was known not only there but everywhere because they had been known for such a long time. But my life had changed. I was now utterly and completely different from everybody.

The other family in the town had a small child and she was about eight years younger than I. She was really not out in the community yet. When I was 10 she was two.

I was really out there by myself, and wherever I was I was the only Jewish child. That's really one of the most important aspects of my story, how this sinister system in this banal way had an effect on one child, a totally unimportant person.

Anyway, I don't think I'm being clear consecutively, am I?

Q. IT'S FINE. CAN YOU TELL ME YOUR MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME?

A. Jonas. Actually, my grandmother, who we got out in 1939, went to this synagogue here in

San Francisco, and I wanted to go in today to see whether I could see her name on the memorial tablet. I know it exists here. She came here.

Q. WERE YOU AN ONLY CHILD?

A. Yes, which is not my fault.

I always say, when people ask me where were you born? I say I was born in Germany, but that's not my fault.

I'm completely and utterly dis-identified with that culture at this point. I think it's a culture that's simply, in any way that I can appreciate, has not learned its lesson, and I have lots to say about that.

Q. LET'S GO BACK TO YOUR SCHOOL DAYS. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THAT?

A. Well, I remember in Mainz, before the election, seeing all the posters and all the propaganda, and how we as a family feared that that might happen, that Adolph Hitler would be elected, and how that affected me.

But the most poignant thing I remember is that when the crucifix went down in the schoolroom --every schoolroom had a crucifix because the church and the state is not separate in Germany-- and the crucifix came down from the wall and I remember when Hitler's picture went up.

The crucifix never bothered me at all as a child because I was used to living in a Christian society and I had been taught to respect that society.

But when Hitler's picture came up, that changed things absolutely forever. That was in Mainz, when I remember that part.

Then when we returned to (Gabegelheim), I then went to (Realshule and Sprendlingen). I had to take a train there every day. It wasn't very far, maybe it was five miles. There I was the only Jewish child. You have to remember this was '35, '36 and '37. During that time it was absolutely the rule that no one could play with me

in the playground; and it was absolutely the rule that if I got an A and no one else got an A, that I could not get that, I would have to get it in the level that they did. I existed with those rules.

What I did in the playground, I became a great scorekeeper. That was my adjustment to it.

School was just something that I knew was the way it was.

The most difficult part for me was the fact that the principal of the school was also our mathematics teacher, who was brutal. I had to bring my own stick. The part I remember the most is there was also a boy in my class by the name of (Valdifassel), who just had a kidney operation. He was my age, and his father was a physician in that little town and a socialist, a total anti-Nazi. (Valdi) and I were the only ones who had our own sticks with which we were punished.

For example, this Professor Mueller would have these long problem sets and you would have to put them on the board. For example, four minus two plus three. Each time you'd have to repeat the whole thing. If you missed one part, then he would hit you. But you would have to stay there until you finished the whole long problem set. He did that to both of us. I remember that it was much more worrisome for (Valdi) because we were hit on our backs and he had just had some surgery. I remember that very poignantly.

But I knew that's what I had to do. This was the only school that I had to go to and that was it.

The other thing is my parents were too concerned about their own existence and the worry about my father. They couldn't tune in to my problems, besides which I don't think it's common in Germany, not to this day, that children have any problems at all. You don't inquire how were

things today, how did it go, how is it with you because you are a Jew? It just didn't come up in the conversations at all. I went, I did, came home, and that was it.

I had one friend, a woman who lived in my neighborhood in (Gabegelheim) to whom I would go and tell some of the things that worried me the most, but certainly not to my parents.

Q. DID YOU HAVE GIRLFRIENDS, LIKE A BEST FRIEND?

A. Well, there was a friend I had, Katrina Mause. You know, in these small towns, when there was a rule, everyone could observe. Since you couldn't play with Jewish children anymore, her parents said it was all right for her to play with me. She came to my house and I would be able to go to hers, and that was an enormous thing for me.

Near our little town of (Gabegelheim) there is a mountain that has the Stations of the Cross that go up to a chapel. One day we were

walking up there and she turned to me and she said, You know, how can I be anti-Semitic, my Jesus is Jewish.

And I didn't confess to her that I didn't know Jesus was Jewish. Nobody had ever mentioned that to me, in fact nobody in my family. I was taught to respect the Catholic church.

This was a completely Catholic town, by the way, utterly Catholic town, everyone, and naturally that's what these people did on Sundays. All their celebrations and so on, I participated whenever I could.

But no one had ever said to me that Jesus was Jewish. That was a day of very great insight for me.

I did go back to see her, to thank her, 30 years later, because what she did is she saved hope for me.

Q. HOW OLD WERE YOU AT THE TIME?

A. When she said that? I imagine I was

about 11. She said (Mine Yesus est Yeddish).

Q. HOW DID YOU HANDLE THE COMPULSORY RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION WHICH THE GERMAN SCHOOLS HAD; RIGHT?

A. Well, I was excused from those, and we had religious instruction in another little town a ways from here.

In Mainz, of course, I went to religious instruction which was Hebrew instruction and other religious instruction. A lot of times I would go every Sunday, walk there and have Hebrew instruction. In fact, we had modern Hebrew instruction in case any of us would emigrate to Israel.

I don't know, am I answering your question? I'm not sure.

Q. YES, BECAUSE SOMETIMES THAT WAS A DIFFICULT THING IN GERMANY, THE RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION, IF YOU HAD TO ATTEND, THEY FORCED YOU TO ATTEND OR THEY EXCUSED YOU. THERE WERE ONLY

TWO THINGS, OF COURSE.

A. They excused us, but, of course, there wer prayers in school.

In Mainz, you could tell how the Catholics went like this, the Protestants went like this, and the Jews went like this (demonstrating). But you just didn't say anything when the word Jesus came up, that's when you stopped participating in the prayer. But I never felt that that was a major problem because I didn't feel distant from any religion, and I still don't to this day. I especially don't feel separate from other religions of any kind, and I've always been that way.

Certainly we observed absolutely every holiday with great precision and fanfare, and I certainly attended a synagogue in Mainz, and as long as we could we attended a small synagogue near our town in (Gabegelheim).

So I didn't have that particular

problem, but I was excused, I'm sure.

I also didn't go to school on Saturdays, at first. You know, school was for six days. Then when I did go on Saturdays, I simply would not write because you are not supposed to write on Saturdays.

There were always these alterations in the Jewish religion, you know, this way and that way and that way.

The most important thing I want to say is how my whole life totally changed. I was in the smallest town, 1200 inhabitants. One child, I felt part of the fabric. I had a different religion, different name. A lot of people did things differently, but suddenly being different was wrong. Being different meant you should not exist.

That's what changed in my childhood.

Q. DID YOU HAVE ANY HOBBIES AS A CHILD, LIKE SPORTS OR ANYTHING YOU LIKED TO DO

ESPECIALLY?

A. Did I have any hobbies? I was always a great explorer, I can tell you that. I was an interviewer of people, I was a looker into people's homes.

If you ask me what I liked doing most, I would have said I had a great curiosity and was always interested in everything around me.

I did the usualy handicrafts, you know, but not with great passion.

I had a cat and a dog.

But I was not good at sports, not at all good at sports. I participated to the extent that I could, but as I told you, that for three years, from 10 until I left, I couldn't participate in any of the things on the school playground.

Now, for children who went to a Jewish school, that was very different. That part of the education continued, the physical education part.

And I just didn't.

It was a restricting time. Your family was full of worries.

We were going to go to South Africa, and my father in his spare time studied to be a coppersmith and a welder, after he was imprisoned. Then my grandmother became very sick and during her sickness the immigration closed in South Africa, and there we were. But it was also during her sickness that she remembered that she had a second cousin in New York.

That's a whole different story, you know, how you finally can't go someplace because it wasn't just a matter of leaving, you had to have someplace to go.

Perhaps I'm telling this in too good a mood, without indicating enough the kind of fear and courage it took to go every day into the school and to know that you are a stranger. Examples of it really don't tell it very well. For example, during the singing hour. I have the

songbook at home. There would be songs about nature and this and that. Then there would be terrible anti-Semitic songs and everybody would be singing, and I just sat there silently.

But it was a kind of slow whittling down. You've heard this, I'm sure, in interview after interview. The slow whittling down of your personhood. That can also happen to a child. And what happened, by the time we were ready to come to this country, I wasn't so sure that all those people who said that I shouldn't exist, that I wasn't worthwhile, that they weren't right. I wasn't sure at all. I mean I was not sure anymore. And what begins to happen, I think, is that you begin to identify with the point of view of the aggressor. After all, this is part of your culture, everybody says that I'm wrong and that I shouldn't exist anymore. Well, what can I say against that? It's everybody who says that, most people say that, most people practice it, we can't

live here anymore.

You adjust, like children adjusted to these kinds of conditions in our country and other countries. You adjust constantly because that's part of being a child, adjusting and adjusting and adjusting. Anyway, yes.

Q. DO YOU REMEMBER THE DAY YOUR FATHER WAS ARRESTED, WHAT IT WAS LIKE? WOULD YOU LIKE TO TALK ABOUT IT?

A. Well, we came home and somebody was at our house. He was asked whether he was in such-and-such a place? And he said yes, he was. Had he said such-and-such a thing? He said, yes, he did.

And at the same time, when he was at this other winery, my mother was outside, at the kiosk, also looking. She was standing, waiting for him outside. Somebody took her photograph and they said we've taken a photograph, we don't have it yet, but we do have a photograph of your wife

reading the Shema outside, and you know it's against the law of the country.

And they took him away, just like that.

Q. WHO WERE THEY?

A. You know, I've never -- I thought that they were the police. They were the police, but not from our town. They were police that came in a car. I never thought that it was important for me to know that. I just knew that they had a right to take my father.

I'd say they were the police. Do you think that they may not have been the police? I don't know. You mean were they the SS? I don't know. I think they were the police. They were in uniform.

Q. POLICE UNIFORM?

A. Yes. He had done something against the law of the state, which was to speak against the government. That was it.

Q. AND WHILE HE WAS IN PRISON WAS THERE A

CHANCE FOR YOU TO COMMUNICATE WITH HIM?

A. We could go to see him.

I remember I had a job to do. Remember, this is in 1935. I'm only 10 years old and I'm already going to this school in the next town. He had bought some wine there, in addition to other, you know. And I had to go to this farmer with my father's seal and the sealing wax. I had to climb up the steps of the barrel. He wanted me to be sure to put the sealing wax over the bung of the barrel, because he had already bought it. That's what I had to do. It's a little bit faint in my mind, but I remember doing that for him.

I remember being very cheerful for him when I went to the jail. That was one of my jobs in my family, to be cheerful, because they weren't very cheerful about things anymore, so that was my job.

Q. DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS LIKE IN

PRISON, HIS CELL?

A. Well, I honestly remember the light more than anything else, I remember that it was grayish-green and where the light came through, and that there were some bars there. And that's about it. I carry with me this feeling of grayish-green. It wasn't a hole in the wall, it was a regular prison. And, of course, we never knew whether he was going to get out or not because by this time we were already without rights.

Q. DID YOUR MOTHER IN ANY WAY TRY TO GET HIM OUT OR COMMUNICATE?

A. Oh, I'm sure she did, and I think that's how come the mayor vouched for him finally and that's how he got out.

It's vague for me. I wish she were still alive so she could answer these questions in detail. I didn't do that, I just stood at the sidelines.

Q. SO HOW LONG WAS HE IN PRISON?

A. Between three and four weeks. And it was in (Mainz), so he wasn't taken away anywhere.

After that, one night he heard that the signs were going to come, Jews Not Allowed (Juden Nisht Avingsht). He went out there and tore them off, after he was in prison. I remember when he burned the signs, they were made out of wood.

So you see, he was not very quiet about what was happening to him or to anyone.

I think we probably wouldn't have left as early as we had. Once having the opportunity to leave, if it hadn't been for my mother we wouldn't have left as early as we did. I mean it's relatively early, it's five years after Hitler came to power, but still a lot of people never did leave.

There were certain difficulties because no one else but the three of us in our whole family had an affidavit. That's a very difficult

thing to do and that's a great suffering that a child endures, too, because I had to leave everybody and I didn't know whether I'd ever see them again, and some I didn't.

Q. HOW LARGE WAS YOUR EXTENDED FAMILY?

A. My mother only had one brother and my father only had a sister, but my grandfather had 10 brothers and sisters.

My mother counted that 32 members of my family were killed in concentration camps. So that's a lot. The immediate ones that I can count, that I knew very well, are fewer than that, but certainly I could name after name after name.

Anyway, I want to talk about my grandfather a lot. My grandfather was Isaac Oppenheimer and he was the oldest of 11 children. The 11th one was by his father's second wife. Their mother had died and she took on all these children and there was one more child. The interesting part about his family is that three

brothers and a sister came to San Francisco around the turn of the century, and that's another long story. Anyway, my grandfather, we lived with him for the first 10 years of my life, until we returned to (Gabegelheim). He was a man of great presence, great joy, and great influence on my life, and of all of us by far the most religious one. But he was a man of the world. In his youth he had traveled a great deal and he spoke not only German but he spoke French. But he delighted in his religion, he really delighted in it, and it's really from him that I learned much of it. Certainly not from my father. My father was already moving away from being Jewish.

When I was young, during my teens, when I finally learned that he had been murdered in a concentration camp, that was always the greatest puzzle from which I began to ask questions: why he, the most religious of us all, had been murdered? That was the greatest puzzle for me.

Even to this day, you know, recently there was the work of the artist from Theresienstadt, at the Berkeley Museum, and I had already seen these things. Well, that's later on. I'm really freely associating here and I don't know whether I'm doing it well enough.

You know, I'm really freely associating here and I don't know whether I'm doing it well enough.

The most important thing that I want to emphasize again is that all these people, this happened to them in the greatest innocence.

I have a prayer book at home, my father's prayer book, in which his father, this marvelously religious person, wrote down every battle my father was in in World War I, and where he was finally wounded in Flanders, every battle in which he participated. He was proud to have his child be part of the German army and do such a terrific job of it, and after three years he was

wounded in Flanders Field. Of course, he was on the German side, naturally. But that's in his prayer book. You know, it makes you feel like just splitting your head in half, it's such a devotion to that state. And, of course, the Jewish religion really leads you to do that, you are, in the Diaspora, to be a part, a loyal citizen of the state where you emigrate to and it's part of what you do.

I just want to say, for the purpose of the record, my mother's father died of the consequences of World War I. He had diabetes and he was taken in in the very last. She had a grandfather on her mother's side who died in the War of 1870. These were not people who didn't participate in the German Army.

The whole thing is totally idiotic. You must have heard one idiotic story after another having to do with nationalism and all this.

Am I answering your question?

Q. Sure. I'd like you to talk about your family, as much as you can remember, and when you saw them last.

A. Well, let me tell you, my grandmother, my mother's mother, her husband, as I mentioned, died in 1919, just immediately after World War I. He got sick. Insulin wasn't discovered until 1923. He had diabetes. My grandmother, from her I really learned another aspect of Judiasm that was very different from my grandfather's. She was a person who prayed every morning and every noon and every night, quietly and to herself. She was the gentlest of creatures. She didn't care one whit about material possessions. She cared a lot about education, but she didn't care about material possessions. She loved nature, she loved stories and fairy tales and proverbs. She was just the gentlest of creatures. We were able to save her, and she actually did see the birth of

two of her great grandchildren. So that was a wonderful thing.

But the thing I want to say about my grandmother is the way she approached Judiasm, that when our first child was born and I had some extra help for the house, she said remember what the Ten Commandments say, on your day of rest you give rest to your servant and to your animals, don't forget. That's an example of what I got from her, which was a very kind of personal and direct use of the religious aspects of it, which weren't very elaborate, but they were what was gently appropriate to life. That's what I got from her.

My grandfather's sister, Paula Stern and her husband and her two children were taken to concentration camp. Three of them were killed. Actually, Ilsa Stern survived. She is the only one who survived. She was a nurse and she was used by them in one concentration camp after

another. We could talk an awful lot about that.

Then there were Manny Oppenheimer, in Frankfurt, and his wife. They were carried off.

My father had a cousin in Frankfurt, the (Esenbergs). Her husband was a dentist in Frankfurt. She had been born in San Francisco, because her mother had come here, and was raised here. She came back, when her father died, to Frankfurt, with some of the flair for private charity. She had a very grandiose house, and I was always a country bumpkin and I'd go to this grandiose house. Well, the tragedy about them is that they had two children, one of whom was feebleminded, and she was taken over to one of these camps where the children were destroyed. You know, all the mentally retarded children were destroyed in Nazi Germany. Her father committed suicide. First, her mother committed suicide and then the father committed suicide. Then the nursemaid took the remaining cousin to England,

where she, the nursemaid, died. Then we finally were able to get Marion over. After we got in, we got some people to give affidavits to relatives.

I should have written all these people down in preparation, there are so many of them.

My father's sister and husband and two children we were able to get over here.

I think you have done an oral history on Bernard (Worth). He's my first cousin. He lives in San Francisco. Their name is (Vortheimer).

Here is another thing, what we all did to our names. It's a very common story. Their name was (Vortheimer), our name was Oppenheimer. My father thought it was too refined a name for the kind of work he was going to be doing in this country and he changed it to Opper. Well, that has to do more with immigration.

Let's see. Some of the other

relatives. You are talking about the ones who were killed?

Q. Anyone you can remember.

A. Well, for example, in Mainz there was the (Shermberger) family. I don't know whether you know Heinz Cornell, in Napa. Well, Heinz Cornell is of the (Shermberger) family. He's a cousin of ours. In the town of Mainz, where the champagne company was located, there was his uncle, and his uncle had three maiden aunts. They lived on the Hindenburg Strase, and I adored these aunts, especially because they could make such great salads. They were really into health food. You cannot imagine how many different kinds of salads they could make, and I would love to go there for lunch and have these marvelous salads. Well, I smile at this. I adored these aunts.

We left. I once read the book (Mainz Tarrable). Nobody told me about them. It says in there clearly that they died on the same day in

Mainz, which always meant that they committed suicide before the transport.

If you see people in one family dying on the same day, they committed suicide. I know a lot about this now because I've gone into it. Before the transport, somehow there would be some doctor or somebody who would give them whatever it would take to commit suicide, and these three aunts committed suicide.

One of the tragedies about the German situation is that so many old people in their older years didn't go out because they let their children go out first, and a lot of people left their parents behind or were made to leave their parents behind. My grandfather would not get a number for immigration until it was too late. When we could have gotten him out he was no longer able to go, it was too late to go to the American consul because his number was too high and that's why we couldn't get him out. That's not why he

perished, but that's why we weren't able to. Simply this man did not believe what was happening. You've heard that story over and over again, that it was just too unbelievable.

One interesting thing about the American language, you say I just can't believe it. And then there is that other statement, you better believe it. That should have been all over Germany, you better believe it, you better believe it, you better believe it.

I certainly believed it when I was a child. I believed that something terrible was happening because of my whole reality. It looked the same, but it was totally changed.

Well, anyway, let's see. Other members of my family. There used to be these huge gatherings, and I hadn't thought about that. Oh, for example, this is another one. My father had a beloved first cousin. I want to tell you about them in the past a little bit more. But there was

this Walter, who was my beloved second cousin. His father was head of the Jewish veterans of World War I, in Wiesbaden, and as soon as Hitler came to power, was elected, the whole thing, they came and beat him up something terrible, because it was one of Hitler's things to deny that Jews fought in World War I and how could there be Jewish veterans of the world war. Well, he had to flee immediately. This was, I think, in February of 1933, he fled with his wife and his family to Holland immediately. I mean this was just very, very fast.

At any rate, there is a moral to this story. Well, I finally saw him again in 1938, when we came, and I'm in touch with his daughter and all that. I mean some of that is going on.

Is that what you want to know about my family?

Q. By all means. Whatever you can remember.

RUTH PLAINFIELD

A. I have photographs. I probably should have brought the photographs, but I didn't. There is a photograph, if I can make it just clear, there is a photograph that was taken of my great grandmother. She only had two daughters. Her husband had died in this little town of (Gabegelheim). Here she was with her two daughters and their husbands. One daughter was married to the grandfather that I mentioned who was killed in Theresienstadt. The other daughter, my own grandmother died before I was born, but her sister, the other daughter, Clara Oppenheimer, was also killed in Theresienstadt, and she is the grandmother of the Walter I just spoke about a moment ago. And here is this photograph of the grandmother sitting in the middle, it's really a very beautiful photograph, with her daughters and their husbands. One husband is in a German war uniform. My father is in a German war uniform. My aunt is in a Red Cross uniform. Here sits this

German family in all their pride. They happened to have been rather good-looking people and they were all erect and handsome, and this was a typically German picture. And that's the thing about that family; it's the whole business of this assimilation.

I don't know why nobody noticed that there was some kind of ground for what could come out later. This is still a huge puzzle to me. Unless propaganda --of course, you have to remember in 1933, I think the unemployment in Germany was 33 percent-- propaganda and need, and really no matter what people say about the German culture, as a whole the people were really very uneducated. They could read and write, but they were not an educated folk. They were not a country of readers. They were not an educated people or maybe not even a philosophical people, and they were certainly a people who were addicted to following orders and doing things

extraordinarily well and being sure that it's all done and being on time, being punctual and doing the way you are supposed to do. It's also a culture that absolutely minds your business: I'll know exactly how you should do it, I don't have to worry so much about whether I'm doing it right but whether you're doing it right. I think it's, from the little I know, quite a lot different from the British islands, where you mind your own business and you see to it that you do well and are responsible for it. But people are always: How should it be done, how does one do it, what is expected? It's a culture outside of the personal.

There are hundreds of explanations of how this all happened. You know, it's a huge universe and maybe it's very unimportant that people can kill their own brothers. Or when I have gone back people say, Well, there was this Jewish family who lived nextdoor to me and then they disappeared and I really don't know what

happened to them. And never wondering or finding out afterwards.

This is not about my childhood now. Do you want me to talk only about my childhood?

Q. No, that's fine.

A. Chancellor Kohl was in Berkeley recently, and I went to the Greek Theater to listen to him. He didn't speak on the topic. That's another story. But I did write to him and I told him that he had come to visit me in my home this time and that I was terribly disappointed that he hadn't spoken one word about the past, which he did not. I really said to him all these people were killed, but especially my grandfather. I have never had an official word from the state to say we are sorry your grandfather was killed and the murderer was such-and-such and he has been punished. That kind of message none of us have ever gotten.

A lot of German Jews have had

financial reparations which if I had been given them, I would have not taken them. I would not have been paid off.

I think that the crime of the past is so great that if I had any sense I would be wearing a Jewish star every day. I think we have helped to sweep it under the rug. So what's six million people when the universe is so large? But since our universe here, where we live every day, is so small, that's such an enormous crime. The fact that one person, my grandfather, was killed and that my family was never told why he was killed. They weren't even told by the German State that he was killed. They never said who killed him or that the German State worried about who killed him. That's an unbelievable crime. And that that country should this day be the largest economic, self-satisfied power in the world? I mean it's a miracle that we are all alive. I'm not talking only about Jews, I mean

that the whole world is alive.

That we can do these kinds of things, how is it possible that the world doesn't fall apart? That's what makes me believe in God.

Anyway, back to my childhood.

Q. Let's go back a little bit. When did immigration first come up in Europe?

A. In 1935, after my father was imprisoned. Then we were going to go to South Africa. I think I mentioned that my father studied to be a coppersmith and welder on Sunday, with a friend of his, because he heard air conditioning was happening in South Africa and that he would have to do it. He actually passed the mock exam. Sometimes I would go with him and I actually learned how to deal with hot copper and so on. He bought all the tools and we were ready to go, when my grandmother became sick, and then she remembered her cousin, who did give us an affidavit, and we were able to get out in 1938.

Q. To America, you mean?

A. This cousin was in New York.

But my grandfather, who was killed in Theresienstadt, and his sister and his brother, his two sisters, his brother-in-law, another brother-in-law, two nieces and nephews -- Uncle Julius Oppenheimer lived in San Francisco. I don't know whether either one of you know the (Brekelbank Apartments). They are right nextdoor to the Fairmont Hotel. He was an exceedingly wealthy man, did not give any affidavits to anyone, and I was the only one of our family -- there are not very many of us that came out that actually met him. It's one of the puzzles of our lifetime. He had been very close to his brothers and sisters in Germany, but he met one nephew whom he considered to be kind of a criminal type, didn't approve of him, and he was afraid. He was already pretty much of a frail, elderly man and he was not well, that he wouldn't be able to contend

with this person in this country if he got in, and he refused to give affidavits. When we came we visited him immediately and asked him to do it again, but he was already bedridden at that time.

Here is the Fairmont Hotel. I'm looking at it now. Here is the (Brekelbank) Apartments. Around the corner, you go down this little street. He had this huge lot which he made into a garden, it's called the Friendly Garden. It's a piece of property the value of which I can't even talk about. He gave that to the Girl Scouts at the time of his death. It still exists there. He became very fond of me. I think he may have had some doubts, but he was no longer well enough to issue any affidavits.

Well, does that get off the question? It shows the complications of trying to get to the United States for us. In September, 1937, we got our visas, and left in January of 1938. At that time, you've heard the story, people could take

their things and not their money, and so many Jewish immigrants became much too addicted to the possessions that they brought, they could hardly let go of them. That's another story. But that's when immigration came up and we were able to pay for passage to New York and our train trip across.

The reason we came to California is because my father didn't know there were grapes anyplace else except in California. He didn't know there were any in New York, and we came out here with the hope that he would be able to be a winemaker.

Q. Did you learn English in school?

A. Not at all, not at all. I had French and I had Hebrew, are the two foreign languages I had. I had no English at all.

I came on my 13th birthday.

Q. What about your parents, did they speak English?

A. My father spoke better than my mother

and he wrote English very well. My mother, a little bit, but she caught on rather fast and she did very well.

But are we speaking about immigration?

Q. Yes, before immigration.

A. Before immigration. Well, let's see. Let me just tell you, the night before we left to go on the train to Hamburg there was this gathering at my aunt's house in Frankfurt. I mentioned that my paternal grandmother had died before my birth. Well, they opened up a jar of strawberries that she had canned in, before her death, maybe 1920. And I kept a diary at that time. I probably would not remember this if I hadn't described the night very well in my diary, how the strawberries tasted, I remember that I wrote in there that they looked like strawberries but they only had a hint of the flavor of strawberries. That was our ceremonial meal. We all had a little bowl of these strawberries, you

know, for some kind of connection, that she had canned. I remember I wrote that the most important thing was that she had laid her hands on these strawberries before they went into the jar. And I remember how everybody looked, and it was so, so difficult to leave them. It was terrible for me to leave all those people.

There was a certain excitement about immigration, you know. You got new shoes and you got new this and you got new this. But when it finally came to leaving, it was excruciating because I didn't know whether I'd ever see any of these people again.

I think because I was the only child, I was very attached to my cousins. Well, I tend to be attached and I haven't given that up yet. So that it was just very difficult.

It was also difficult to watch them, how they suffered, how difficult it was for my parents to leave, to leave their own father and

their own mother.

You know, your life isn't in your own hands anymore, but you act like it's in your own hands. You deal with the crumbs of having to leave as if you were still in charge, but you weren't really in charge of your life anymore in Germany because the rights were being taken away day by day.

Before we left, they gave my father the most terrible problem. He had taken, from the little town, a couple of women, over the years, three or four, to the hospital. Now they were beginning to go to the hospital for delivering their babies. And because he had transported someone of non-Jewish blood, they were giving us real trouble at the end and made us pay all kinds of fines because of that. It was kind of touch-and-go whether we could leave because of that. He had taken them as a favor to them because in this town he was still the only person

who had a car.

Q. Did you have household help?

A. We didn't have household help at the end anymore. Of course, cars we always had before. But at the end, because of the racial question and mixing of the races, I do want to say something about that that was important to me as a child. I grew up with the knowledge that young Jewish men, when they fooled around, they tended not to fool around with Jewish women. They all had had some history of their adolescent experiences with non-Jewish women. They didn't do it with Jewish women. That may have been more true in the little towns than it was in the cities, I don't know, because in the cities there tended to be more freedom around this issue. So when this law came, I'm telling you how I thought as a child, I wasn't surprised there was some worry about that, considering how they thought, you see, how the outer world thought about this.

So we didn't have any household help at the end.

Q. Tell us about the law.

A. The law was that the races could not be mixed. What's interesting to me about that law is, of course the Jews had the same law about themselves, that we could not mix our race either, and I have never seen or heard discussion about this. It must not have seemed like a very strange idea, because Jews had been practicing that for centuries and centuries: You must marry a Jew, you must be purely Jewish. And this was another pure racial idea. I have never heard anybody talk about that or discuss it. I wish that I could have asked all those people at that time who were my adults, did that seem strange to you, that idea? Because it couldn't have seemed strange if they just looked at what they had been practicing forever and ever. So the law was that the races could not be mixed.

Q. Right. But the reason why you dropped

your household help?

A. It was in order that in case my father would have sexual intercourse with one of them and the household help would become pregnant, then that would despoil the German race. Isn't that well known?

Q. Not enough; maybe to a certain extent.

A. I see. Well, that's what it was.

That just showed me again that there was something wrong with me, even though I knew that we also believed that. I knew that. I knew that we also believed that. I knew that we also believed, for example, that I should never have a child by anybody except a Jew when I grew up. I also knew that, so it was not an unknown idea.

Q. But the household help had to be over 45, wasn't that the rule, the way I remember that?

A. Well, I don't remember that.

Q. Because they had to be not of

child-bearing age?

A. So if they were older, you could have someone?

Q. Yes.

A. I didn't know that. Is that right? I didn't know that.

Q. Maybe it was not done in your area.

A. Well, the lucky thing about that is that I learned to keep house that way. I helped my mother and I learned to do all those things. That was good, from my point of view.

Q. Did you, your girlfriends at the time, did you talk to them about emigrating? And what was their reaction when you told them you would leave Germany?

A. Well, I really only remember talking about it with my friend Katrina, because we didn't have any. She told me in later years how glad she was afterwards that we had left because things got worse and worse for them, too, you know. She is

the only one with whom I had any discussion about it, how much we would miss each other and so on. That's all I can really say about that.

I know that the whole town really suffered by our leaving. It was a very actual thing that was happening to them. The town, as a whole, saw this as a very momentous occasion, that we were leaving. They knew we had to.

I know more about that from my return visits.

Q. You left before Crystal Night?

A. Yes. We left in January and that was on November 10th, 1938.

Q. Can you tell us how you found out about your relatives, the ones who were taken away to the camps, when that was and how you learned about it?

A. My recollection is that it was at the end of the war. I know that my family went into a hugh writing campaign, writing to people about:

do you know what happened to my father, do you know what happened to so-and-so?

Then we found out pretty quickly. There is a death certificate issued about my grandfather. It's in Czech, by the Czech Government. That's one of the more interesting things about all this, is that the Germans actually notified the Czech Government, and that the Czech Government issued the death certificate which has my grandfather's name. I have that certificate. It has my grandfather's name, where he was born, the date of his birth, his religion, his occupation, and supposedly the cause of death, which was a heart infarct. It's all on there, with the seal, and blah, blah, blah, issued by the Czech Government, the death certificate.

Q. You got that when and through whom?

A. Somehow through the Czech Government in 1945 or '46, very soon. I think the reason that was done so quickly by my family is that this

uncle I told you about had left these huge amounts of money, I think maybe $40,000 for each one of his brothers and sisters. That was a lot of money at that time, and the survivors were thinking how can we get this money, you see. That's my guess. Remember, I didn't have anything much to do with this.

My mother's brother had also come, that's another thing I ought to mention to you, she had a brother who was a very bright student and was a lawyer in Berlin. Remember, my mother was in her 30s and her brother was 32 -- no, in 1933 he was 29-years-old. He was practicing law in Berlin.

I don't know whether you remember that almost all lawyers had to give up practicing law because Jews could not represent the state anymore.

He went to England and studied some more law, finally came to the United States and

studied law again. He was a practicing attorney in San Francisco. He did a lot of these things for my family. A lot of these things happened more quickly because he knew his way around the language, around the laws in Europe and here, and so on.

So that death certificate exists, issued by Czechoslovakia, in Czech.

That's how we found out. My mother slowly traced, as much as she could, hearing about a survivor here and a survivor there, just what happened.

I have a letter at home of someone who knew my father's aunt, who I mentioned in that photograph, and the content of that letter, I'm really extraordinarily grateful for it because what she said is that my Aunt Clara and her sister-in-law, (Tanya Beda), died pretty quickly when they came to Theresienstadt in the winter of 1942, and my grandfather attended their so-called

funeral, as a service, and she described what happened, that they could pray there and for just a little while follow the wagon that took the bodies away.

I can describe a lot to you about Theresienstadt because I was there. That was my way of connecting with all that when I became an adult.

She said in the letter that my grandfather really kept himself together pretty well and the only thing he complained about was that he wasn't getting enough food, but that he often attended these services for people who died whom he knew, and that he kept himself very neat. That would have been like him because I remember as a child I was his, for the fun of it, his manicurist. He let me pick out his ties. He was always a beautifully dressed guy and had a lot of presence. He was just a great influence in my young life and I'm just so sorry he had to die

that way.

I use the word die and I've been trying to train myself to use the word murder. There is a difference between dying and being murdered. We have to learn to say that all these people were murdered. They didn't die in concentration camps, they were murdered in them.

Some people make a huge differentiation between Theresienstadt because that was not a camp of annihilation, except for one portion of it. In a small fortress people were actually shot there. But nobody was gassed in Theresienstadt. I don't know if you saw the exhibition that will clarify what I'm saying in great detail. But what happened there is people were -- should I skip when I went there, you don't want to know that now? I went there to trace --

Q. Well, if you are going to have to talk about your going back to Germany.

A. Well, of course, Theresienstadt was in

Czechoslovakia.

Let me just say that's how I think my parents heard about it. My mother died two and a half years ago. She had kept my father's wallet intact and in it he had a little piece of paper when his mother died in 1923 and when his father died in 1943. They died 20 years apart, but it was like a whole world apart in which they died. His mother died of a kidney disease in 1923, and everything was pretty well intact in that family. Then 20 years later everything was completely ripped apart, her husband was murdered by starvation in a place that was not his home, and whomever he knew died of starvation and/or disease right in front of his eyes, and there was no way that he could get in touch with his children or we could get in touch with him. It's incredible to me because it's such a terrible event, if you just look at one life only, and after that there is no echo from that, there is just no echo from it. I

mean there is no statement from Germany ever that your grandfather was murdered or your grandfather died in such a place. We had to find out. No one ever told us. No one ever took the initiative. That's a very peculiar event. These were full-fledged law abiding citizens. This was a man who wrote all these battles in the prayer book.

Yes, that's how I think we found out. Then the surviving member, we heard from Sweden, that she had gotten there and we worked to get her here, to get an affidavit for her to come after the war, and she came here. When we last saw her her hair was black, and when we saw her seven or eight years later it was absolutely white. She said that after she came to Sweden and her hair grew out, that it just grew out white.

Q. How old was she?

A. I've never thought about that before. I think she was in her late 30s when she came to the United States. She had survived by being a

nurse in one camp after another, and they were discharged into Sweden.

The interesting thing is that all my tracing that I've done back, there particularly were some children that I was interested in, and I finally found one in Sweden that I went to school with. This was somebody I had gone to school with. The interesting thing is she had become a social worker and she was a social worker for people that came out of the concentration camps, and she actually remembered my father's cousin, (Ilda Stand Fromann). I said, How could you remember her? She said, There were hardly any people from our area that came out and that's why I paid attention to her.

So when I finally saw her probably something like 45 years in between the time we had seen each other, she could tell me a lot about my cousin.

I made some attempt to make some

connection with some people, to try to find them myself, whom I cared about. That's how I think my parents found out what had happened and finally were able to know absolutely everybody who had been killed in concentration camps. My mother had a complete list. These were, to some extent, some distant relatives, and the great tragedy about most of them is that they were older. I really think that that's a tragedy, that in the early Jewish immigration to the United States the older people were left behind. The young people managed to get across Europe, got on a boat somehow, but they left the parents behind. The parents did not come. That's probably true of a lot of political immigrants to the United States, that the older people were left behind.

Q. What did you do first, when you came to the United States? Of course you went to school, I understand, you were 13 years old. Right?

A. Right.

Q. What were your first impressions? You landed in New York?

A. Right. Well, we only spent two and a half days there. My most happy memory was observing black men shining shoes on shoe stands. I thought that was the most fascinating thing of all. I really just thought that that was a remarkable skill and what a good job they could do.

Seeing my cousin Walter again was a great excitement, and we could take up playing King and Queen again the way we always had when we were children.

I noticed that there were a lot of cars with bent fenders, which I hadn't seen before.

I mean it was all so big.

I remember going to an Automat, since you mentioned about New York.

The journey across the continent was pretty interesting. I would spend a lot of time

in the ladies room, watching women put on makeup. I hadn't seen a lot of that because nobody in my family wore lipstick, watching exactly how they did that and how they used their little finger to put the lipstick on, and so on.

And I remember rescuing a person who felt kind of faint, with a bottle of 4711 we always carried around to kind of refresh people. It's a cologne. It was a very typical thing to do.

We knew that my cousin was going to be bar mitzvahed and we brought him a Pelican fountain pen.

Those are the first impressions.

But it was a great excitement to emigrate, all this new stuff and so much to learn.

Then we came to San Francisco. My mother's brother was here. He had a one-bedroom apartment near Union Square in San Francisco, on Sutter Street. Then I began to walk around Union

Square and noticing all these beautifully dressed women who could walk so well and look so well. Women were beautifully dressed in San Francisco at that time time.

My mother wound send me out, I remember this, learning English, out to buy pure beef sausage, and we always pronounced it as "poor". The "u" was not with the "u" sound but with the "oo" sound. So I'd go out and look for poor beef sausage. And she was still in the habit of baking the sabbath bread and we were looking for poppy seed like crazy. I remember finding it in a drugstore, an Owl Drugstore near Union Square somewhere, but I found it.

I had this little dictionary I took with me. I was never afraid to go out and explore. Of course it was safe at that time, but I never even thought about that.

Then, finally, as I mentioned to you, we moved to Second and (Corbillo) Street, in San

Francisco, and my father finally found a job as a welder.

I went to Frank (McCoppen) Elementary School. I didn't go by there to see if it still exists. I think it's on Sixth or Eighth Avenue. I didn't speak any English, and I remember very well that I sat down and a boy said something to me. It turned out that what he said to me was that somebody was crazy, and the way he let me know what crazy meant is that he went like this (demonstrating). Well, that's a universal sign for crazy. That's the first sentence I remember learning.

Then my father decided he just didn't feel well in this climate. I think it was just a lot of tension. At that time there was a committee that resettled people into outlying areas and we were sent to San Jose. We moved there in the summer of 1938. We were the first Jewish immigrants to go to San Jose from Germany

at that time. It was a voluntary committee. They found a place for us to live. My father, I think first he worked in a junkyard someplace, sorting junk, and he scrubbed barrels for (Carbarry Brothers).

We had to begin to work right away. My mother worked for Marcus Furrier, sewing in the lining in fur coats. We had to work right away because we needed to get passage for my aunt and her family, who were in England. He was already in a concentration camp. I don't know whether you know, in the beginning, that the annihilation wasn't part of the idea yet. It was beginning to happen, but you could still get out of a concentration camp if you had a way of getting out. They were part of that and they went to England and we had to get passage for them, they didn't have any money, from England over here. So we did all these jobs, and I worked for the furrier. At that time the fur coats, you put them

in a rotating barrel with sawdust, and then you had to go with two little sticks and pound all the sawdust out.

Q. You did that after school, I suppose?

A. Well, this was during the summer, when we came.

Then a family needed to have household help and I went to work for them. I was a maid in households.

Are we talking about immigration now?

Q. Yes, when you came, when you were in the States.

A. Well, we came here and we began the settlement.

Then my father began to work at Kay's Service Station, recapping tires, for two years, until he finally got his first job as a winemaker at Fountain Grove Vineyards in Santa Rosa.

At any rate, my school experience at San Jose was very, very positive. I considered it

to be wholly and absolutely positive, particularly in the junior high school. I was asked to get tested, an IQ test. There was an Eleanor Blodgett. Her name should be written on a wall somewhere. They had four tracks in this junior high school and I was put in the lowest track because I hardly spoke any English. You can imagine what I did on one of those tests. I appeared in her English class and within six weeks she took me out and put in the top track. That was the best thing that could have happened to me because that was a challenge immediately. I was taking Spanish, I was taking everything there was to be taken, you know, and it just went very, very fast after that. My whole schooling in the United States was a wonderful story of what could happen to an immigrant in this country. There was always a helping hand. They didn't coddle you, but there was always somebody there just a little bit. You could do anything you wanted to do, and at that

time schooling was free or so inexpensive. I went to the University of California a few years later after this and it was $17 a semester. It was just nothing.

So my immigration experience in terms of what this country offered me was totally positive.

My immigration experience in terms of what I did with the past I consider to be pretty negative, inside of myself, because by the time I left San Jose, where I was still going to synagogue and became confirmed, by the time we then moved on to Santa Rosa in northern California and I spoke English without an accent, I wanted to pass and I told no one I was from Germany, no one that I was Jewish, and according to my crazy definition I was free at last, free at last. That's what I did with that experience because it was a bad way of digesting it. At the age of 16, I was not completely identified with the

aggressor, to think that I had to cast away my own identity, with the negative experience, that it all had to be put away. Well, it was resurrected later, but that was one of the adjustments to it.

Q. How did your parents feel?

A. In what way?

Q. How did they adjust to the United States?

A. I think they did really very well. They were hard workers and they enjoyed the new challenge and they were thrilled every time someone would come out, like my father's sister and her family that were able to accomplish that. When my mother's mother was able to go to England, we were able to get her to be with us. I would say that they really enjoyed their life here, that they truly enjoyed it.

Q. How old were they when they came?

A. Well, they were 38 and 42. That's pretty young.

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It was another challenge really. I would say that my mother was always a world Jew. She was not nearly as German as my father was. But because my father was able to get back into his work and get close to the soil again and produce wine again and made a great success of it, he felt very, very good about it.

I remember in 1960 they took a trip to England and to Germany and to Israel, and I remember my husband at that time going to the airport, giving them the certificate, that they had finally come to the United States, because he could tell from what they had written that they were ready to come home here after seeing Germany again. I do think they went for some sentimental reasons in 1960.

I have to tell you that as soon as I learned English, my parents could speak all the German in the world that they wanted to me, I would not speak that language anymore. I just

wouldn't. I have since learned to write it a little bit, but it's all very childish yet.

So I think they did really very well. Since we lived in this rural situation in Santa Rosa, actually after I was married they moved back to San Jose because my father became head of Paul Masson Vineyards at that time and from the small winery in the hills made it into this big thing, which if he saw what happened to it he would turn in his grave, because for a while it was a quality vineyard and then it became a non-quality vineyard.

They were never around a lot of other German Jews. There were some. In Santa Rosa there was maybe one family. It made a great deal of difference. They had to become more a part of what was going on.

Is that what you were thinking about?

Q. When did your father die?

A. My father died in 1965. He became very

sick with Parkinson's disease and he had four pretty bad years. But he died of a heart attack, in his sleep, in July of 1965.

My mother lived almost 25 years after that, in the same house, in Saratoga.

Q. Did you marry a German-born man?

A. There wouldn't have been a chance in the world. No, I did not. I married somebody who was from Providence, Rhode Island. His grandparents on both sides had emigrated from Russia to the United States. His father was born here and his mother came when she was two. So he felt he was a pretty integrated kind of New England Jew. It's a pretty New England city, Providence, Rhode Island, and there is a large Jewish population there. Well, the war is how I met him at a certain point.

Q. Do you have children?

A. Yes, two sons.

Q. Do you talk with your sons about your

past?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. What was their reaction?

A. We have talked an awful lot about it. They are two very different kinds of people.

Mark, it's a long story, but he was really into political theory at the University of California, at Berkeley, into political philosophy, so he knows how to think about politics a lot and oppression a lot and so on. It's really with him that I've had some of my most healing kinds of discussions.

What I would call a healing discussion is that once you are oppressed and once you have suffered, that's the only truth there is, there is no retribution after that, there is no answer to that. That's it. That's a fact of history, continues to be that way. Once your people have been oppressed, there is no justice, there is no

resonance of justice about that. That's the burden an oppressed person must carry. No one helps you to carry that burden. That's just the way it is. And we are not the only ones to whom that's happened in history; it's happened over and over again. It's happening now.

He is remarkably interested in all the philosophical parts of that.

Our younger son, whom I took when I went to see my childhood friend Katrina in Germany, I took him and a friend of his and left them in (Ludbegen). They bicycled to Mainz. So Kim has seen this house where I grew up in (Gabegelheim) and he's met some of the people that are there, particularly Katrina's family, and he's seen the actual aspects more.

They are very well aware of the fact of how much I think about all this. I have dealt with it in my later life and I'm still dealing with it, about what the meaning is and what the

lessons can be from all this. They are very aware of it.

Both of them married people who are neither Jewish, nor are they Americans, and Sanford and I both absolutely didn't have any question about any of that. I think it stands to reason that they felt free to do that because to me one of the lessons about all this is that you don't put a tight fence around you when that's what almost killed you.

In fact, our grandchildren are aware of it and are interested in it. They are interested in those facts and interested in just what happened to me. One of the things that I talk about to them is that I just absolutely don't understand how I could be in a school where I was so prejudiced against and I still learned. I don't understand it to this day, and I asked them to figure it out with me. You know, why didn't I stop learning? I could have easily, but I didn't.

You know, today you would say that that's a pretty good excuse for not learning. Really today you would say that. But why didn't I? It probably showed another lack of character? I don't know.

Q. When did you first go back to Germany and why?

A. We took a long European trip with our children in 1967. I went specifically to say thank you to Katrina, I went specifically for having helped to save my hope, because there was one person I hung a lot of that honor on. I think I'm basically a hopeful person, but it was extraordinarily meaningful to me that she was such a faithful friend during those bad times and that I could go to her house and feel perfectly at home there, but not to other houses.

So I went in 1967. Sanford and I and our two children stayed in Paris because Sanford would not set a foot in Germany, would not go.

Q. Who is Sanford?

A. My husband.

Q. He wouldn't go to Germany?

A. No. And that still is perfectly clear to him.

Q. What was the meeting like when you first met her again?

A. Well, the interesting thing about it is I realized when I was in Lyon I couldn't remember what she looked like. I had a dream and that dream helped me to visualize her and I did recognize her at the airport. And it was a very joyous time for both of us because those five days, we probably put a big halo around those days, and it meant that all of the terrible things of the past could be cast aside and friendship is still friendship and things are still good. And a lot of things that I noticed during those days, I put aside. You know, it didn't register well enough, which I've registered since.

The friendship developed and I went

back. Her husband, she married someone at the end of the war. That was the French part of Germany, Mainz, and she was the secretary to the organizing provost of Gutenberg University in Mainz, and she was processing all these applications of all these professors who wanted a job, and all of them had been members of the Nazi Party or the SS.

You know, the teachers and the professors in Germany were among the worst. They were civil servants and they did anything in order to keep their jobs. Let that be a warning.

That's another thing. Someone asked me recently about what I thought of the children. The children were really never mean to me. They couldn't play with me, but they were not mean to me, never. But the fact that a teacher could be so mean to one child has always remained a puzzle to me, because he got absolutely nothing out of that except for permission to do anything he wanted to. Anyway, that's another story.

RUTH PLAINFIELD

So I went back. Excuse me, I skipped something there. At the end of the war, she worked for the university provost, who was organizing hiring professors. She noticed there was one application of a man who hadn't been in the Nazi Party, in fact had been in a concentration camp for five years, Antoine Hiltman, and she said I've got to meet this man, and they fell in love and she married him.

So I got to meet him. He was Catholic and he had been in one concentration camp after another. He was a political prisoner. He was never in an annihilation camp, and because he knew so many languages they used him as a translator and so on, and he survived.

So this friendship developed out of these five days, on an adult level. So I went back to see her and she came here two or three more times. But during these visits terrible things happened that opened up the whole thing

about what Germany is like now, and that's a whole other experience.

So that's why I went back. I went back to my little town. Interesting enough, this is such an ancient town, it was a motor town established in about 1200 B.C., and the inside of that town just doesn't change at all, it stays the same. What they've done with the house where I was a child, where my great, great, great, great grandfather was already born, four greats, is that they took the slogan -- the house is a house that is on a quadrangle, where the buggies could drive in the middle, and it had a great, big door that you could open so the buggies could drive in. The cellar was in the back and the living quarters were in front, over the top. Over the door, my grandfather had put a saying of his: (Gut liben macht falish, vine drinken macht frelish, und drinken vine und libe Gut dast due falish und frelish con zine), To love God makes you holy and

makes you happy, therefore love God and drink so you can be happy and holy.

Well, they, the state, have completely redone this house because it's such an ancient house, at the state's expense, repainted in the most remarkable lettering his slogan above the door, wonderful letters this high (demonstrating), and they won't attribute it to him. I have been at this now for eight years, to get a memorial put on this house to my grandfather and his sister-in-law, both of whom were killed in Theresienstadt. They keep saying they are going to do it and it still hasn't happened. I'd like to go and take red paint and just paint over it. It's a terrible kind of memorial to me. It shows the emptiness of the gesture.

What were you asking me, actually? When did I go back?

Q. That was the first time you went there?

A. Right.

Q. Did you go back again after that?

A. Well, I should say, about the first time I went back, since Tony was connected with the university I was shown the library of all the Jewish literature. God only knows where those books came from, from how many murdered people. Someone took the trouble of cataloging them all, and I met the man who did.

I was also given a tour by a professor who did all the investigation of the ancient Jewish cemetery in Mainz. There are a few graves out of the eleventh century there. Of course, he could read them, et cetera, et cetera. The one I liked the best, I remember it says in German: (Er soula gabe tsurech stum bindle des labens). It's like: Her soul shall return to the bundle of life. I always liked that idea, were gathered all these souls for the bundle of life. I thought it was a beautiful kind of statement.

I think Judaism is being studied very

well as some sort of an artifact in Germany.

Yes, I went back again in 1970, after her husband had died and spent some time with her.

Then in 1974 it was she who drove me to Theresienstadt. She and I went. I flew to Frankfurt and we drove to Theresienstadt together. But I didn't know until recently, very recently, in fact this year, that she doesn't think he was murdered there. I asked her specifically why she didn't think that, and she said because he was not shot or gassed. And I said, Well, if someone doesn't get enough food and dies of starvation, that's not murder? And her answer to me was, There were soldiers in (Kraitznach) at the end of the war, in a British prisoner of war camp, German soldiers, who didn't get enough food who died in the camp. And I said that I couldn't discuss the matter with her anymore; that if she wanted to know, I considered all were murdered, that I considered that murder and I consider what

happened in Theresienstadt murder.

But it was absolutely on this technicality. This wonderful child. We had long exchange of letters about this and finally a phone call. She thinks that he died of natural causes, and she is the one who drove me to Theresienstadt.

I don't know what to think about all that kind of thinking. But apparently in politics that is a very important issue, that if prisoners died in a prison, they are not killed, they have died there, no matter what you do to them, but the state hasn't killed them. It's some kind of distinction that's made legalistically or something. I don't know.

So those were my times. Also, I went one more time, for one day, because in Mainz there is a Gothic, very simple Gothic church, Catholic church. Do you know about that church? Klaus Meyer, somebody who is a friend of mine, he was instrumental. We corresponded about this whole

thing, about the Chagall windows, and I wanted to see them. I went to see him for four hours and he explained all the windows to me. He's a wonderful guy. Klaus Meyer, by the way, is a Catholic priest. His father was Jewish and his mother was Catholic. His father did not get out of Germany and she hid him all through the war, and he made a vow to become a priest during that time. He is my age. He's half Jewish by birth.

So that's how many times I have been back, and that's the last time.

Anything else?

Q. Well, I leave it to ~~Laurie~~ Lois, if she has something.

QUESTIONS BY MS. ~~KUHN~~ Kernan:

Q. As a result of your last visit, you say that was the last, do you have any intention of going back?

A. Never.

Q. And the reason is?

A. Well, I have so many experiences, one of which I mentioned recently, with my friend Katrina. It just boggles my mind absolutely. We have had correspondence about this before. She would say that she felt so ashamed and guilty about what happened. And I would say that I find that shame and guilt are not feelings that lead to any kind of change, that I would be much more interested in just awareness. What is awareness? I said like A Thousand And One Nights, you tell the story again and again and again, you find out what you did to contribute to it, what your silence did to contribute to it, what you could have done to have prevented that, what could have been a better part of being human.

Q. You were talking to someone who was your childhood schoolmate, who was 10 and 11 while that was happening?

A. Right.

Q. When it began, you left and she was

still there. But at this point, you have no further communication with her?

A. At this point, our communication, which was very frequent for many, many years, has stopped because I started to add up things, finally. I started to add up things. For example, a friend of hers, who was a professor of sociology and was visiting in Berkeley, we invited her to come to our house. Finally, I had a German intellectual there, eating with us, and after dinner I asked, Could you tell me what your view is about how this happened in Germany? And she said, Oh, well, you know that's all a sociological question and this is just after dinner, I couldn't possibly answer that now. This was at our house.

Or even Tony Hiltman, Katrina's darling husband, telling me a story about his concentration camp. Why he picked this story? He could have told me a thousand stories. In all innocence he was standing there, saying this to

me. He had very bad eyes. He was a man who had two Ph.D.'s, a remarkable fellow. He said one day he dropped his glasses and the guard was standing there, ready to step on them and said, You dirty Jew. He said, Look at my nose, I'm not Jewish. And he said to me, That's how I saved my glasses.

If I had any sense at all I would have said to him, Well, then I wouldn't have saved my glasses, would I? But I didn't say anything.

It's very hard for me to think what kind of insensitivity it takes to tell me that story. He could have told me a thousand stories.

There was a Dr. Becker, who took me through the reconstructed synagogue in Worms. It's a very important synagogue. That was his Ph.D. work, to supervise the reconstruction of that synagogue. At the very end of this long day that we had, where he explained everything, I didn't realize I was looking at a museum. I said, It's Friday afternoon, we better get out of here

because these people are going to come to service. He said, There aren't 10 Jews in Worms. I didn't know that and I was just shocked as we walked out, by what I had done, to go there, to witness something that I would be totally and utterly opposed to. That not only were we killed and destroyed, but our history was being made into a museum, and I hadn't said yes to that.

But as we walked out of there he suddenly turns to me, this close to my face, and says, Could you please tell me why all the brothels in Frankfurt are owned by Jews?

Q. Is that modern times?

A. Now. And I was so stunned. I mean I wanted to scream at him and shake him and run away from there and say what a terrible thing I've dome to come here. Instead I said, How do you know? And then my friend who was with me said, Everybody knows that. And I finally said, Well, it's not the worst of professions.

RUTH PLAINFIELD

But to show you how deeply in terms of I was involved listening to the point of view of the other whenever I got there, it didn't occur to me until I told a grandchild this story, that I should have said, How would I know? That's what any American would say or any person who hadn't been involved in that situation where the whole sense of yourself can get to be so removed from yourself. When I go there I become an object instead of a person.

What he was saying is since you are a Jew you must know why the brothels in Mainz are owned by Jews. But this is a man who reconstructed the synagogue, asking me that question.

There was one event after another that showed me the whole gruesomeness of it all, the whole coarseness. It's enormously coarse, what goes on, the lack of sensitivity.

What else?

Q. Do you consider yourself observant, in this part of your life? Do you have any religion? Do you keep any traditions or holidays?

A. Well, I certainly do Passover exactly the way my family had done. I don't belong to a temple, but I'm about to join one, which is a congregation in Berkeley that's without a door.

We certainly belonged to Temple Beth El for many, many years. But there is a congregation in Berkeley that doesn't have any building and I like their emphasis on social issues of the day and their concern about them and the fact that they are not concerned about raising money for the building and doing everything in a middle classy-assy way.

Q. Were your sons bar mitzvahed?

A. Yes.

Q. For the record, tell us your sons' names and which son has which children and what are their names and ages.

A. Mark Plainfield is married to Vicky. Mark is 40-years-old and he has three sons, Fernando, Samuel and Julien.

Kim Plainfield is married to Maureen. I mentioned Mark lives in Santa Cruz. Kim Plainfield lives in New York, outside the City of New York, with his wife Maureen and his son Joel.

I call them my penis parade since they are all boys.

Q. What do your sons do?

A. Kim is a jazz musician; and Mark gave up academia altogether, he'd gone a long way, and he's a contractor now. He thinks that's honest work.

Q. One thing I did want to ask you. I don't know if we got it for the record. I know we heard your mother's name, but did we hear your parents' both names and the years they were born?

A. My father was Kurt Gerson Oppenheimer. He was born in 1896 in this same town that I

talked about. My mother was Gerta Gill Jonas.

What was interesting is that I had three grandparents by the name of Oppenheimer, none of whom were related to each other. In other words, my grandfather married on my father's side an Oppenheimer, and my maternal grandfather Jonas married an Oppenheimer. So there were a lot of Oppenheimers.

The history of the name Oppenheimer, and I have that history, by some coincidence during all these terrible happenings during the centuries, there was a duke or a bishop that lived in Oppenheim who was kind to the Jews, so a lot of Jews were happy to take on that name. It's one of those funny little things. It's a nice town, by the way, Oppenheim.

Q. You talked about one other Jewish family in town. Do you know what happened to them?

A. The young ones came to the United

States. The grandfather was murdered. And that was it.

In the adjoining town, where I went to Sunday school, I actually met one family in Israel once, and I can't tell you what happened to the other ones.

Let me say to you that a Ph.D. thesis has just been written about my part of Germany, and I was interviewed by this person, Dieter Hoffman, who has written a history of the Jews in the small towns of my region. It's not only a history since Nazi times, but from before, what happened before. It is a most detailed history of what's happened. This is a young man who is about 31 now, who for some blessed reason has devoted his whole existence to this question. He got a Ph.D. in history from the University of Cologne, and he came to interview me. I read his Master's thesis, but I haven't read the Ph.D. thesis, which is now being published in a book. For example,

the butcher in a neighborhing town, they walked in and took one of the knives and cut off his head.

In the small towns it's more illuminating what neighbors could do to neighbors, instead of somebody from the outside coming in, once you are given the OK to do it. Of course, we know there are some people who didn't do that, too.

Q. You came to this country. You lived in San Jose, you went up to Santa Rosa, went to Santa Rosa High school. What did you do after high school?

A. Well, I actually went to Santa Rosa Junior College because it was cheaper. I could live at home. I finished two years in a year and a half and then I came to Berkeley.

Q. You graduated with what major and what did you do after that?

A. I had a major in social work and was married immediately after I got my degree. Then

two years later I went back and got a Master's at UC. Then I had children. Then when I went back to work I worked at Howard Hospital at the UC campus, in the psychiatric clinic. Then I went into private practice. That was my professional work, but I've done a great variety of voluntary things because it can be done with more initiative.

Q. Is there anything else that you can think of that you would like to have us record, any experience or any thought that perhaps Evelyn or I have not asked you?

A. Well, just this thing that is so important to me, that if you are an immigrant from this kind of political situation, you come to this country and for all practical purposes --

(TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: Videotape concludes in middle of sentence)