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MS. WEISS: Okay.

THE INTERVIEWER: Any time.

Okay. I am Sandra Bendajan. I'm here interviewing Ruth Weiss and our second is Marcy Jenkins.

MS. WEISS: Hi.

THE INTERVIEWER: We're here at the San Francisco Oral History Project. Our producer is John Grant. Today is May the 14th, 1993.

Ruth, Could you please introduce yourself and tell us where and when you were born and if you were born with a different name.

MS. WEISS: Uh-hm, yeah, Okay. I was born on June 24, 1928 in Berlin, Germany. And my name has always been Ruth Weiss. Actually I have a middle name which I never tell anybody but I think today -- it was Ruth Elizabeth Weiss. I would like to say something about that.

In Germany Jewish families, or maybe the -- not the very Orthodox but the ones that had more assimilated to German always had a German name and a Hebrew name so my name was Ruth Elizabeth. Now it seems I always thought, well, Ruth is a Jewish name and Elizabeth the German

1 name, but years later I thought about that and
2 Ruth was actually the (unintelligible), she was
3 not a Jew, if you look at the Bible. And
4 Elizabeth, well, Beth in Hebrew is house so it's
5 really the house of Eliza. So actually Elizabeth
6 is actually Hebrew. Now I just came up with
7 because I like words, I like language and I just
8 thought of that one day so I wanted to share that.

9 THE INTERVIEWER: So would Elizabeth be a
10 German name?

11 MS. WEISS: Yeah, like English, you know,
12 English and German have a lot. Elizabeth is a
13 very common English name, also a very common
14 German name. But nobody knows that that is my
15 name.

16 Weiss was spelled originally W-E-I-S-Z
17 because my father was born in Vienna and his
18 mother in Hungary so it was when the
19 Austrian-Hungarian Empire so it was S-Z. And when
20 I came to the United States we changed it to S-S
21 and that's about the only change.

22 I've been married twice but my husbands
23 have always accused me of never changing my name
24 because I'm writer and so I've always used my name
25 so that's -- and I'm together with a person named

1 Paul Blake now. We've been together almost
2 twenty-six years. He's seventeen years younger
3 than I am and I think he practically saved my
4 life which I will bring up something. I could
5 bring it up any time. Should I -- I don't know,
6 should I just jump in? Whenever you want I can
7 talk about something.

8 THE INTERVIEWER: Sure. Either way.

9 MS. WEISS: So I was born and I'm the only
10 child. So it was my mother and my father and I
11 who eventually managed to escape from the
12 Holocaust, which I will talk about how that all
13 happened.

14 I spent most of my life in Vienna, not
15 Berlin, but I will also talk about that. All of
16 my mother's relatives, most of them were gone,
17 were in Yugoslavia. My mother was born in XX
18 Daruvar, which was not too far -- which was in
19 Croatia, in Zagreb, and my father as I say was
20 born in Vienna and his mother from Hungary so was
21 Hungarian and Yugoslav background.

22 When I was very young I spoke both
23 Yugoslav and Hungarian fluently but since never
24 learned it to write it, I forgotten. I know a few
25 words in Yugoslav which is fun when I run into

1 somebody but my first language was German and that
2 it was until I came to the United States.

3 THE INTERVIEWER: Did your family speak
4 Yiddish?

5 MS. WEISS: No, no, not at all. No, not
6 at all. The only Orthodox person in our family
7 was my father's mother and she was absolutely
8 strict Kosher and, well, should I just jump around
9 whatever comes into my head?

10 Okay. See, I was born in 1928. My father
11 had had a job already for ten years. By 1933 he
12 had already worked for ten years for a place
13 called Vos Spiro (phonetic) which was like a news
14 service, like a AP, UP in the United States. He
15 was the night editor and he would fly to Paris and
16 all of this so he had his job already for ten
17 years and he was really like senior editor even
18 though he was only in his early thirties so it was
19 something like a real career going for him.

20 And my mother was a housewife and just me,
21 and at the age of five in 1933 when Hitler took
22 over Germany the only thing that happened to us
23 was my father lost his job. Something simple like
24 that. Our lives weren't threatened, just lost his
25 life, job, you know, but I'm saying there was no

1 life-threatening thing. And we immediately moved
2 to Vienna to my father's mother's house, my
3 grandmother, my paternal grandmother and she was a
4 widow so had brought up her son, which was my
5 father, who was also a single child completely
6 alone and she was my -- my -- one of my closest
7 relatives.

8 She and I were very bonded but she and my
9 mother did not get along so I was often caught in
10 that middle thing. But she must have been part
11 gypsy and part of her family goes back to
12 Transylvania when Hungary Transylvania was all --
13 and everybody said, oh, vampire, well, the -- what
14 happened was the Transylvanians actually learned
15 how to fight, how to obstruct vampires because,
16 you know, garlic and all of this so because they
17 lived in that. It wasn't that the Transylvanians
18 were vampirical. I'm just mentioning something
19 else.

20 So my early years, summers, I spent a lot
21 in Yugoslavia and Hungary, more in Yugoslav. My
22 mother -- my mother was born in a town called
23 Daruvar. All right, I'll go back. My father was
24 born in 1897 in Vienna and then his father either
25 died or disappeared, I never asked too many

1 questions about that, when he was less than a year
2 old. So his mother brought him up alone. I'm
3 jumping again. All right.

4 1933 we moved from Berlin to Vienna. What
5 happened my grandmother had a rooming house, a
6 boarding house, about three blocks from the
7 University of Vienna. And her roomers were mostly
8 students who would stay, you know, a semester or
9 more. It wasn't like a -- although once in awhile
10 somebody would stay overnight, you know, it was
11 also that. There were only seven rooms. It was
12 like a huge -- like maybe here, a Victorian
13 apartment only was huge with maybe two bathrooms
14 and seven rooms and a kitchen and a hall and the
15 hall turned into this big dining room at night
16 because their dinners were served there. So I got
17 to know a lot of the students that went through.
18 And so I was always, you know, this five, six,
19 seven year old who most of my friends were adults.
20 And I had friends from Finland, friends from
21 China, friends from Japan, friends from America.
22 And so when we moved to Vienna, we moved into this
23 rooming house which was my grandmother's. And my
24 grandmother was a fantastic cook but a very sloppy
25 housekeeper so the first year my father and my

7
1 mother had to get this place all cleaned up. But
2 she always had -- her rooms were full, she was a
3 fantastic cook.

4 Now our bonding was she would get me, you
5 know, I'd go to sleep like I supposed to like a
6 little girl, eight or nine in the evening. By
7 eleven or twelve she would wake me up and I would
8 help her cook. We would stretch the strudel
9 together while my parents were asleep, you see,
10 and I will show later pictures of my grandmother.

11 My mother -- now my father had some
12 relatives in Budapest. I don't remember any of
13 them. I don't think I hardly ever met them and it
14 was a sparse family. My mother's on the other
15 hand -- and my father grew up very, very poor. My
16 mother came from a town called Daruvar which is
17 not too far from Zagreb, and Daruvar was a spa
18 town. There was a hot springs there which I never
19 saw, but between the age of five and ten which is
20 from 1933 to 1938 I spent most of my summers
21 there. Most of them, not all of them. And -- in
22 Daruvar, in fact the first year I must have been
23 about six or seven, 1934, '35, something like
24 that, I was walking down the street in Darova and
25 these two women were walking towards me and just

1 jabbering away in Yugoslav. I just understood a
2 little bit but what I got out of -- "Zlata's
3 daughter, Zlata's daughter." Now, they had not
4 seen my mother maybe for fifteen years and they
5 immediately recognized me, that I was, you know --
6 now, this was not that tiny a town. It was a, you
7 know --

8 THE INTERVIEWER: Because you looked like
9 your mother so much?

10 MS. WEISS: Yes, yes, they knew.

11 THE INTERVIEWER: In Yugoslavia --

12 MS. WEISS: I also looked like my father
13 people say.

14 In Yugoslav?

15 THE INTERVIEWER: -- were you staying with
16 your grandmother or --

17 MS. WEISS: No, I was -- well, it was --
18 oh, my mother's parents were the wealthiest Jews
19 in that town. They were like the head of the
20 Temple and this. They were not Orthodox but they
21 were very civic-minded. They had a -- I think
22 they had a grain store, I don't know, a store. I
23 know they had some farm animals. It wasn't a huge
24 ranch. I remember a lot of flowers. And since I
25 was a city person this was all magic to me. And I

1 was, you know, I loved being there and that's when
2 I learned Yugoslav and I spent some time in Zagreb
3 too. Some of her relatives lived in -- my mother
4 by the way had -- there were I think nine or ten
5 sisters and brothers. But by the time I was old
6 enough, you know, five or six years old, there
7 were only four of them left so what it was was my
8 mother, who was the youngest, her sister, Elsa,
9 who later died in concentration camp, her brother,
10 Herbert, who also died in concentration camp, and
11 her brother Arthur, Arthur Gluck. Was that her
12 name before, Gluck? Yeah, G-L-U-C-K.

13 THE INTERVIEWER: And what was her name?

14 MS. WEISS: Gluck. I'm sorry --

15 THE INTERVIEWER: Her first name, I mean.

16 MS. WEISS: Okay, her -- Fani Zlata Gluck.

17 Fani, F-A-N-I, but the name that I always loved
18 was Z-L-A-T-A, which means gold in Yugoslav, and
19 Zlata and Gluck, G-L-U-C-K, with an umlaut which
20 means good luck. So that was the Gluck family and
21 let's see -- my mother -- so my father was an only
22 child but as I say my mother came from a huge
23 wealthy family and during the -- this is something
24 else. I'm jumping around. Is that all right?

25 THE INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MS. WEISS: Just whatever comes to my mind.

During the First World War my mother spent her time in a Catholic boarding school and she said those were the happiest years of her life. I think that's where they were safest and schooling was good. After we came to the United States, and I will tell you more about all that, I spent my eighth grade, in other words, I graduated grammar school from a Catholic boarding school. I was the only Jew in a Catholic boarding school outside of Chicago, Norwood Park, a polish order, Resurrection Academy, and I was very bonded to our teacher, Sister Yuloja, who encouraged me in my writing and that was actually a very -- I'm not saying a happy year, it wasn't a happy year. Chicago, I never liked Chicago. But it was a very nurturing in my writing year because of Sister Yuloja.

But I would go to early Mass and that was voluntary. You had to go to a Mass every day. But there was a six o'clock Mass, an eight o'clock Mass and nine o'clock school started and I always went to the early Mass because there was hardly anybody there and I always took my Jewish prayer

1 book. So here I was with my veil and my Jewish
2 prayer book every morning, right, and then Sister
3 Yuloja and I would have long discussions and I was
4 about going on, I twelve then, about the whole
5 philosophy, you know, and there was definitely a
6 subtle thing of seduction of wanting to convert me
7 but we would have these wonderful philosophical
8 discussions and it was a lot of fun, you know.

9 THE INTERVIEWER: So do you think your
10 mother sent you there following her own
11 experience?

12 MS. WEISS: Because she was so happy
13 during, you know, during the war and I thought --
14 she thought that I would, which I didn't. I mean,
15 the things that she liked I didn't.

16 THE INTERVIEWER: In her family, in
17 sending her to Catholic School --

18 MS. WEISS: There was -- there was some
19 mixture. Part of her family was Catholic from
20 another branch. And my father's, his mother was
21 Orthodox but there was an aunt or something that
22 was a Protestant so there, you see there was all
23 of that mixture already.

24 As far as my own Jewish upbringing I was
25 very, very connected to -- from the age of five to

1 ten when we lived in Vienna. First of all,
2 religion was taught in the public school. And you
3 had, I don't know, there weren't all of these
4 Lutherans, Baptists, all I know is Protestant.
5 Vienna is a very Catholic town. Austria is very
6 Catholic so the Catholic festivals were a very
7 major thing but there were three different
8 teachers that came during every week. So you
9 had -- religion was one of your subjects in
10 grammar school. I don't know how it was higher.
11 And also girls and boys were separated so I went
12 to an all-girl school and I have some pictures of
13 my classes I brought. And so once a week there
14 would be relig -- twice a week, and so there was a
15 Jewish, a Catholic and a Prostestant. Then I
16 belonged to the Temple which was not Orthodox --
17 but was it? I don't know. I don't know. The
18 women did sit upstairs. But I went to that every
19 Saturday, and so I knew all the festivals and all
20 that. Then I took lessons from -- there was
21 something I wanted to do, to learn Hebrew how they
22 spoke it in Israel. At the age of five I was very
23 much a Zionist.

24 THE INTERVIEWER: Were your parents
25 Zionists also?

1 MS. WEISS: No, not at all. My
2 girlfriend and I, same age, we were going to run
3 away at the age of seven to Israel and do that
4 whole -- the whole idealistic thing. Today I feel
5 very differently about it because it's a very
6 strange thing what's happening there and it's
7 frightening. It frightened me years ago before it
8 hit the newspaper. I picked up subtly what was
9 going on and to me I could never understand that
10 they would absorb some of the Nazi tactics, maybe
11 not to the extreme, I mean, there aren't
12 concentration camps per se but -- I don't want to
13 go too much into this and I didn't know if too
14 many other Jews felt like this.

15 THE INTERVIEWER: Did you have any other
16 Zionist teaching? Where did you come by the idea
17 at such a young child?

18 MS. WEISS: Oh, you know how little
19 girls -- little kids are about wanting to run away
20 to some place to make the world better. Oh, yes,
21 my best girlfriend and I were definitely going to
22 do this at the age of seven and I found out later
23 that she -- she and her family with saved and they
24 escaped to Israel but I'll talk about this later
25 too and it's partly in my story.

1 Let's see, you were talking about -- okay.
2 Till 1933 I lived in Berlin. And that was my
3 father was usually gone nights. That's when he
4 worked. He slept days. Right. My mother and I
5 were very close during that time. Then we went to
6 Vienna and my parents were very involved with
7 helping my grandmother so I was much more involved
8 in school and I loved school and my parents gave
9 me a lot of freedom. I mean, at the age of six
10 and seven they were not concerned that I went to a
11 park about eight blocks away by myself. I had --
12 there were six little girls all my age from our
13 class and we sort of had a club and we did all
14 kind of things including going on hikes on the
15 weekend. Well, the first three times my father
16 took us and showed us in the Vienna Woods and all
17 that and then later we went on our own. Now I
18 don't know. I mean none of us ever thought of any
19 danger or anything and years later, you know, 1952
20 I hitchhiked from Chicago to San Francisco and
21 never occurred to me there would be any danger,
22 maybe because I didn't think there was any danger;
23 there wasn't. I mean, today I wouldn't hitchhike
24 in Mendocino but that's me, right? Today. But
25 I'm just saying there was -- they did give me this

1 kind of confidence about I would know how to move
2 in the world, so they gave me a very good
3 grounding so there wasn't the fear constant, you
4 know, about being overprotected or anything like
5 this.

6 And my father and I were -- when I was a
7 little -- when I was a child in Berlin he and I
8 spent a lot of time going on hikes and he always
9 wanted a boy so -- I mean he didn't really want
10 any children at all but if it had to be, it had to
11 be a boy. So he kind of toughened me into -- I
12 mean, I would take four or five, six-mile hikes at
13 the age of three and four and if I got too tired he
14 put me on his back but mostly he made me walk, and
15 ice cold showers, that kind of thing, you know.
16 But which was all very good grounding. My father
17 died in -- 1984? Yes. Was still swimming within
18 a week before and going on a bicycle, you know, at
19 this age. I have pictures of him.

20 THE INTERVIEWER: I don't think you said
21 his first name yet either.

22 MS. WEISS: O-S-C-A-R, Oscar, and his
23 name was Oscar Weiss and it was W-E-I-S-Z which
24 then was changed to W-E-I-S-S.

25 THE INTERVIEWER: Now when he left Berlin,

1 you said already that he lost his job. So was the
2 move only to stay with your grandmother because of
3 finances or did he have a political sense about
4 leaving Berlin too?

5 MS. WEISS: Oh, we had to. We had to.
6 Remember he was in the newspaper. He knew. In
7 fact, because of that is what probably saved our
8 lives later because he was aware of things
9 happening before it ever hit any major arteries.
10 I mean Hitler entered in 1937. I have the date, I
11 have -- tell you about this from my book. But he
12 had been aware of that I would say at least six
13 months before.

14 All right. I'll jump to something. In
15 our rooming house we had people from all over the
16 world, right? One of the students was a man named
17 Nathan Zusgick (phonetic) from New York, who was
18 my parents' age. So they must have all been in
19 their thirties then. And he was a student which
20 was kind of older for most students but he was
21 doing some doctorate in, I don't know what. But
22 they became very close friends. Now Nathan wasn't
23 wealthy or anything. He maybe came over on a
24 scholarship or something. But he was the person
25 that ended up getting people to -- to sponsor us.

1 Because of him is -- all right, so the quota for
2 the United States for allowing people in, well,
3 the German and the Austrian quota was pretty large
4 in comparison to Yugoslav and all these -- the
5 Eastern. Of course they weren't as threatened at
6 that point because first there was Germany, then
7 it was Austria and then later on the other ones
8 were so-called annexed. So somewhere, it must
9 have been maybe end of '36 because Nathan came
10 back two or three times, my father must have been
11 aware having already left Germany in '33 knowing
12 through the newspaper business and must have
13 talked to Nathan. Now I'm just surmising this.
14 Remember I was six years old, but this what is I
15 think because the way we managed to get the visas
16 so quickly. I think he already applied at the
17 very beginning, and Nathan was able to get some
18 people in New York to sponsor us. Because you had
19 to have a sponsor, you know, if you don't have a
20 job and all this. Nathan did arrange all that,
21 our actual departure from Austria. So we lived in
22 Vienna from 1933 to December 31, 1938.

23 THE INTERVIEWER: In those later years
24 there in Vienna did you ever as a child experience
25 anti-Semitism?

1 MS. WEISS: Well, I will talk about it,
2 yes. I want to talk about this notebook.

3 THE INTERVIEWER: Okay.

4 MS. WEISS: This is my dictation book from
5 fourth grade. I'm not -- with my writing today,
6 I'm a writer, I'm a poet, but I'm not a neat
7 writer. But we had a lot of discipline so most --
8 if you go through this book you'll see it's very
9 neat. I mean it's reasonably neat. That's my
10 drawing. Here's my writing in German and we had
11 to do lines around it, and also if you made a
12 mistake you could never cross it out, you had to
13 put a parenthesis around it.

14 Well, what I noticed a few years ago, I
15 found this book, I'd had it in some boxes. I came
16 across it. It's in my fourth grade, second part
17 of my fourth grade. The book starts out on the
18 fourth of October, well, I must have been -- this
19 is my dictation book so these were dictations
20 from -- and notes and had -- and we studied
21 geometry and all of that in third add fourth
22 grades. This was Vienna. So here's a date,
23 fourth of October, 1937. So I run through this
24 book and I get to -- and see I have a reason why
25 I'm showing how reasonably neat this is -- we get

1 to a certain date here. It's the 23rd of March,
2 1938. This is the page. Now it's very funny you
3 go through the whole book, nowhere else have I had
4 made a mistake in the date. I originally said
5 1937. It's actually I had to cross it out with
6 parenthesis. It's 1938. In the whole book I've
7 not ever made -- it was like I didn't want to
8 acknowledge that it was 1938. I wanted to go back
9 a year. This is unconscious, right? If you look
10 at this, how sloppy, it's spilled all over and
11 these funny red, white and black flags, right,
12 which run out of there, you know, how messy they
13 are. What it is, it announces the arrival of
14 Hitler into Austria. This was our dictation and
15 it says, well, I can read it in German and it's a
16 very simple statement.

17 -----

18 (Whereupon Ms. Weiss read aloud from the
19 book in German.)

20 -----

21 MS. WEISS: I haven't read this in years.
22 I didn't practice it.

23 -----

24 (She continues.)

25 -----

1 MS. WEISS: What this means is a few days
2 ago there was a great happening, you know, a
3 fantastic happening happened. On the thirteenth
4 of March, Austria and Germany were bonded, you
5 know, were bonded, were -- were reunited, right?
6 Adolf Hitler is the Reich, I don't know, Reich
7 Counselor --

8 THE INTERVIEWER: Chancellor.

9 MS. WEISS: Chancellor, right, and his
10 second in command is Doctor Zoyce Inggart
11 (phonetic). From German, Deutsch and Osterreich
12 means they put Germany and Austria into one word.
13 See how they even combined it. And the color of
14 the flag is black, white, red. Black white, red.
15 They didn't -- there was no swastika here. But
16 see what a mess I made of this? Now, nowhere has
17 it been announced that, you know, it's all this
18 great thing happening. Unconsciously see what a
19 mess I made? Now, it wasn't until about three
20 months later that the Jews -- that all the Jewish
21 girls in that school had to go to another school.
22 But, so there was no -- and see, the next day, now
23 here, oh, the next entry in this book is the
24 nineteenth of May, 1938 and you see now nice and
25 neat it is again? I just -- that's why I had to

bring this book. I wanted to share this, that
somewhere when you said what did I feel, how did I
respond, I thought that would tell you.

THE INTERVIEWER: You noticed the trauma?

MS. WEISS: Yeah, underneath it happened.

(Transcription concluded.)
