

OK, today is January 5, 1998. We're at the Berkeley Hillel at 2736 Bancroft Way in Berkeley, California. We're interviewing Herbert Weber. My name is Peter Ryan. I'm the interviewer, and Maurice Harris is doing the videotaping.

And the date.

Hmm?

January 5.

I said it.

Ah, sorry.

Can we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

My name is Robert Weber, and I'm born in Cologne in Germany, 1927 on the 6th of July.

How many people were in your family.

We are my parents, three children. The oldest one was Karl Hans. He was born in 1924. He died more than 10 years ago. And my younger brother is just four years younger than me. And he is still alive in Berkeley.

And my older brother, he made his doctoral degree in medicine, and he went to the United States just after-- in the 50s. And he was first in Denver and, after that, in Long Beach in a hospital. And then, in South Laguna, he had his own office. And he stay here, in this place, for his life.

And your younger brother came here, too?

Yes. My older brother talked to him and said, come on. It's a better life in the United States than, at this time, in the 50s, in Germany. But I was already married. And I married in Germany in 1953. And then I got two children, and I had a very good job. And so there was no reason to go away, to change the country.

Mm-hmm. Tell me a little about your early schooling. We lived in Cologne at this time, 1927. And I went to school 1933, just the time Hitler came to power.

Still in Cologne?

In Cologne, yes.

And 1936, my father got a job in Hamburg. And at this time, the whole family went from Cologne to Hamburg. And I went to school in Hamburg. And I went to go to a high school-- it was the time to change-- but I couldn't do it because Hamburg is a harbor, and you have to speak English, or you have to learn English. And we didn't do it in Cologne. And so I didn't get it. I finished the public school.

And after that, I start with two years for trade school-- business school. And this was already the war time. But after one year, I went to this business school-- this was in the morning time-- I start in the private school for the permission to study in the university. And we call that Abitur or, in Austria, they said the Matura. You don't have the same in this country.

And now, at this time, from 1942 to '43, I went to two schools, in-the-evening school and in-the-day school. And then Hamburg was bombed through the Allied Air Forces. And we went to the middle of Germany, to Wasungen by Meiningen. That's in Thuringen, near Eisenach. Maybe it's more important, this term, Eisenach. And I stay there only for three months and went to school, to a gymnasium. And then our class came--

This was 1943?

This was 1943. And then our whole class, including our teacher, they took us to the army. And it calls Luftwaffenhelfer. We are in special uniform with a swastika on the coat. But we are half soldiers. We help the original army to shoot down the planes.

And you had put up batteries.

Yeah, yeah. And this was in the area of the Leunawerke and Buna Werke. I say it special these two names because this year, we have been in Auschwitz. And I didn't know that they are also the Leunawerke and Buna Werke.

In Auschwitz?

In Auschwitz. And

Does that mean same companies?

Yes, it's the same company. It was the same company.

Were they into synthetic rubber?

Yes. That's in Schkopau. It was for synthetic rubber and Leuna for the synthetic gasoline.

Gasoline.

And also gas. The trucks, they go by gas.

What did your father do when you were growing up?

My father was two years in the First World War. And he was on the Navy. And he became an engineer diploma during his time on the army. And after that, he was one of the unemployed people during the 20s. And I remember, I was 27, my parents spoke about it, in 1927, he never had had a job.

From the time of the war till then?

Yeah, yeah.

Wow. How did you guys get along?

He was-- I don't know the name in English-- he was going around from door to door and tried to sell vacuum cleaners. But he did it very well. And so, this company-- it was based in Cologne-- sent him to Hamburg or to Koblenz. And he took Hamburg until 1936. We went to Hamburg.

Now, do you remember that move?

Yeah, very well.

Was that disruptive for you? You had all these friends in Cologne and everything?

Yes, it was absolutely another town. But for the family, it was--

A step up for you.

Absolutely. We have had a car. And I was the only one in my class in school whose father had a car. And he needed for his job. And he opened a business and just for two and a half years.

Then, after 1938, the middle of this year, it ended. Because they took my father to the army at this time. And it was finished of the job. And his business was very well. He had 45 people works for him. And this was very well. And that's, I remember, it was the best time of the family.

'36 to '38.

Yeah, the well done time.

Now, they drafted him into the service, even before the war?

Yes, before the war. It had to do with, was First World War, he went to this place and want to be an engineer, and army paid for him. And so they took him first. But he was only for, I think, between six or eight weeks in the army. And then they sent him home. But he spoke always they sent him home under the wrong name. But he said, OK, I like to go home.

And so he went home. And this was just in the beginning of the war, 1939. And he had to look for something else. Because if he didn't do that, then maybe they take him back into the army. And so he took a job in Berlin with a friend of him in the Reichsluftfahrtministerium. This is for the aircraft department.

And what was his job?

They called it, in German, Dienstverpflichtung. It was a private job, but it was a job. You have to take it because it had to do with the war. It was a private alternative to be a soldier, to work in this area.

So was he actually in the service, or was he private?

In person, he was private and civilian.

He came home every night?

No. No, at this time he had to go to Berlin.

Yes, he was in Berlin, but--

And the family was still in Hamburg.

Right. But in Berlin, did he--

He lived private.

He lived private.

Yes.

OK, so he was still not considered part of the government?

No. No.

They paid him privately?

Yeah.

He lived privately off the premises?

Yeah.

Tell me a little about your mother. What was she like?

My mother was born in a neighborhood of Cologne. And she had only one sister. And her father was a bookkeeper in a big company. They had a house and was very well done. And she works during the First World War for the post office. And after the war, at the same-- I think about in this country, too-- they have to give back to the place on the desk for--

For men.

--for the men. And this was inflation time, 1921. And they gave her money for this, for her job and for her future. But she used this money only for one cupboard in our dining room. And the money was gone. It was the inflation.

Inflation.

Yeah.

Made it useless.

Yeah. And she married, 23.

1923?

1923, yes.

Do you remember how old they were at the time they got married?

'23? Yes, it's 26. She was born 1897. And my father one year younger-- '89.

Now, would you eat meals together as a family when--

Yes, it was.

--when you were growing up?

Yes. Yeah, a family. And we went together. First, we stated two places in Cologne. And then we went, the whole family, to Hamburg. And this is very special. My mother found a place just downtown to live and to have her office together. And it was Chile house. The name came from the country, Chile.

And Hamburg is a big harbor. And there was a ship company, Sloman. It was a name. And they have big business with Chile. And they brought Chile saltpetre from Chile to Germany. And in this way we are-- and this building looks like a ship. And it's a very important building in Hamburg.

A landmark.

A landmark, yes. And we lived there for 25 years.

Still standing?

Still standing, yes.

And built like a ship?

Yes. It's Bauhaus style. Maybe you know something like Bauhaus.

No. Were politics talked about much in the family when you were growing up?

More negative and positive. My father spoke always-- OK, do something, but don't do too much. And he never was in the party. He never-- also, during his time in Berlin, he never was there. And he-- they have in their office, during the war, they have to stay overnight. Because if the bombs came down, that they can clean up it and so on. And he was wounded once. And for that, they want to give him-- how you call that?

A bypass?

No, not a bypass.

Oh, a medal.

A medal.

A medal.

Yeah. But the better medal became his boss. But the boss wasn't there. And so he said, no. Come on, I don't want it. And he took nothing.

He was humble, huh?

Yeah, yeah.

And what do you remember from your growing-up years in school? Did you have mixed classes with Protestant and Catholic?

Yes, this was mixed. And in Cologne, I remember there were lots of Gypsies in our class. And they like my bread always. [LAUGHS] And during the Nazi time in Cologne, we always saw camps of Gypsies. And this changed later.

Like poor people?

Yeah. Yeah, I don't know. You have the same situation in this country.

Yeah. We call them hobos.

Yes, OK.

Homeless.

No, no. It's not homeless. Gypsies. In Germany, is we said Zigeuner. I don't know.

I think, maybe, real Gypsies.

Yeah, real Gypsies. And they have--

Gypsy.

Yes. They have a trailer and horses, and they are sitting around. And they came and want money and bread and something like that. And it was the same situation in Germany. And I remember that.

Were there rumors that they stole children?

Not children, but bread and everything what--

Everything that wasn't nailed down.

Yeah, yeah. But I, later on, they put them, also, in concentration camps, you know? And the political way it works, we have to go to Hitlerjugend. That my brother, and also myself, we had to do so much with our schools that we had the permission that we don't have to go.

Because the school was first, and the second thing was the Hitlerjugend. And this way, they took me always, if we have a soccer game and to play. And I loved to play soccer. And I was a good keeper. And so they took me for that. And the same situation was with my older brother.

He didn't have to go either?

No. No. We have connection that was useful. Everybody had connection. And we had a uniform. But I have only, it was not from the Hitlerjugend. They're called "Pimpfe." It was for the younger one.

Younger one?

Yes.

Before Hitler Youth.

Yeah. My father, he never was in the party. And my mother also never worked for the party.

Do you remember parades in Cologne and Hamburg? Parades for the Nazi party?

I remember that only from Hamburg. And I saw Hitler. And I was there because we lived downtown. And it was just in front of us.

Do you remember how you felt in the parade, watching?

Watching was-- everybody said heil and so on. I was one of them but not so fanatic like other peoples. I remember this special in Hamburg, the Legion Condor came back from Spain. You know this?

Condor Legion.

Yeah. They came back with the ships from the Kraft durch Freude-- Wilhelm Gustloff. Wilhelm Gustloff and Robert Ley, that's two ships, passenger ships, for Germans if they go around for just for holidays. And on these ships, they brought them back. And in Hamburg was a big parade of this Legion Condor. That's what I remember.

Yeah. Do you remember what year that was?

It was before the war. Must be 1938. I don't know what year.

The war in Spain was over in January '39.

'39.

And then maybe they came back after that?

Maybe was '39. I don't know.

But still before the war.

Yes.

Yeah. And they got a rousing reception.

Yes, it was enormous.

Yeah. Did you know much about what was going on in Germany and the politics, the laws?

No, no. I hear that most of them, I hear it after, through my wife. But I remember that my father had, in his office, sometimes Der Sturmer. This was a antisemitic paper. But I don't remember why. It was just one of this paper in the office. And then I saw it for weeks, I didn't saw it anymore. And then it was here. Maybe he had to--

Publication.

--to take it.

Subscribe to it?

Yes, I don't know about it. And I was going to school. And I worked for a company-- it was a one-man company-- who had material to make shoes, to repair shoes. And I think the owner, he was Jewish. I did this more than three years. And it was just the beginning of the war.

I came in one evening back and went to have again. It was closed. I never know why. And this, I think, now, I remember that he was Jewish, and they put him to someplace I never hear about. And there was no chance to get information about him. I tried, but I didn't get it.

Did you have any understanding at all of what had happened to him?

No, no. And our neighborhood of the Chile House was the old part of Hamburg. And there are Gypsies-- Zigeuna. And that, I remember, that they took them away.

You do remember them taking them away?

Yes.

Did you see it?

I saw that, yes. But after that, they broke down all the buildings. Because they want to renovate this area with new buildings. And so I didn't get it, that it was another reason. They talk-- we bring them to another place.

Were you there in Hamburg at Kristallnacht?

Yes. I saw this broken windows from the shops. And I couldn't understand it. And at this time, I haven't had questions. I don't understand it, but I also, I didn't know why. I don't know. I can't understand it myself today that I don't have had questions about this, what happens.

In other words, you didn't go home and say, why is this happening to my parents.

No, they know it. They know it, also. But we never spoke about things like that. We never spoke about Hitler or Nazi. The only what my father said-- it was before the war and also after the war-- don't go to demonstrations or don't do too

much in the political areas. Always, this was.

So he wanted you to be conservative about your political participation?

Yeah, more neutral.

How do you think most Germans felt? Were they mostly neutral, or were they enthusiastic about him and what changes he was bringing to Germany?

My remember is mixed with after, what was after, that I saw what was going on. I think that plenty families, like our family, that it became better and better. We had money. We have bread enough. We have everything after my father got his job and got working. And this situation, I think, was in Germany for plenty German families.

For many people, it improved their quality of life.

They say-- yes.

And so, they had to be supportive.

Yeah.

Where your bread is is where you support goes.

And it was much better. The way with the Arbeitsdienst. There, nobody was unemployed anymore. It's a little bit the same like what they did after the war in East Germany. They never have had unemployed people. And everybody had a job.

And so it makes you support the government.

Yeah.

If they find work for you, and they give you bread, you support them.

It was the same time, like in this country here, the big depression. Yeah. Nobody had-- there are big, big, big problems.

Yeah. We threw one party out here and put another one in. That was our solution to the Depression.

The same is it changed the situation with the value, with the money. Germany was the first country who said the power of the people, the working power of the population in the country, this is a value of the money. And not in this country. It was, at this time, Fort Knox-- gold.

The background for the value of your money was, in this country, gold. But it changed in Germany. It was the working people are the background for the money. And it changed now, after the war, also, in this country, all over this. It's the same system.

Do you remember when they drafted your class and your teacher to be in the anti-aircraft battery? Do you remember how you felt about that?

It was terrible. Because I was in Hamburg, especially during the nights of the bombing. And during three nights, we have had more than 45,000 deaths. People and downtown was absolutely destroyed. They put down phosphor canister.

Phosphorus.

Phosphor. And bombs, they burn everything.



Incendiary bombs.

Yes. And all my shoes, everything, was full of this stuff. And if you are at home, we put our shoes into water. And this was the only way that they don't burn. But it was so terrible. Because we are just in the middle of the town, downtown. And it was this time in Hamburg. And my older brother maybe, possibly, we helped the people. I was too young for that.

So you were there during the fire bombing?

Yes. What kind of help did you do?

We pick up things from the apartments of friends of us. We are all together in the basement. And we had people-- there was the Red Cross nearby-- and brought them to the hospital. And then, we are looking for food. We have no light, no water, nothing. And we went around to look for bread and so on and help other people, especially our family.

And we saved this famous building. Because all the bombs looks long like that, the burn-- what brought the phosphor to fire, we pushed them down from the roof of the building. And we got a letter from the company and they thank you.

That must have been a terrible three days.

Yes. And after this, we are evacuated from Hamburg to the country. And honestly, three months later, they took me to this half-military place, no, because I'm flak-- F-L-A-K.

Mm-hmm, the flak.

Yeah. And we are there-- I was there for 13 months.

In Hamburg?

No. Near Halle Malzeburg-- Leipzig.

Leipzig.

Yeah. Schkopau work and Buna and Leuna work.

Were they protecting the factories?

Yes. And we are there the beginning '38 in our class. And after these 13 months, we are only 17 left. Because they bombed also our places. And all the other, they died.

How many?

About 15, no? And it was so-- we couldn't do nothing. Because they are so high with the planes that we--

Could you see them?

We saw them, sure. They came each Friday afternoon. In the blue heavens, you saw them.

Did you ever shoot any down?

No. I was with a Vierling, it called, with four-- with four. And they never arrived them. They was very high. And it was a time with-- it began with this radar. And they put down aluminum things that the radars, they--

For the radar.

Yeah, they go crazy.

Yeah, they would drop aluminum pieces, huh?

Yeah.

At that time, when you were doing that, did you know how the war was going?

Yes.

Did they give you accurate news?

Yes. Also, they have to go back from Russia and so on.

So you knew things weren't going too well.

Yes. And they took me to the army in January, the end of January of 1945. They took me to the army.

How old were you then?

I was 17. And I was six weeks in the army.

Where were you?

In Goslar. Goslar is in the heart, the middle, of Germany, near Hanover.

In the north?

Yeah. And it was a special troop from the Air Force that calls Raumgeschwader Oesau. This was-- we never-- I was only six weeks there. And I was very happy that it never came to that I have to do it. They put you in a plane, and they shoot you high to the backs of the bombers. And then you have to, like a hara-kiri man, to go to these planes. And this way, they shoot them down. But you are also done. This is for the--

Was this like a

This was a little bit-- no, it was a real plane but with bombs on it. And I think it had to do with the Japanese, that they did the same.

Kamikaze.

Yeah, like the kamikaze.

And they were training you to be in these planes?

They want to do it, but if the war was--

The war stopped it.

Yes.

How did you feel about that kind of work?

No good. [LAUGHS] OK, I was six weeks soldier. And after that, I was 13 months in prisoner of war from the American army.

Where were you captured?

In the middle of Germany.

When?

This was the beginning of April '45.

So right at the end.

Yeah, yeah.

You never were in combat?

No, just in the moment they took me. They sent us on the street. Their tanks are coming. We have nothing. And our officers, they ran away. And I saw them later in the camps, the prisoner camps.

So you were captured by American?

By American.

And where were you sent?

To Liège in Belgium. They have a citadel in Liège on the top of a mountain. And there was a American Army general hospital. And I worked there for 18 months, during the night-- only nights.

Nights?

Yes.

Doing what?

To work in the hospital. And I gave the penicillin shots around hospital for American soldiers. And there was also one ward for German prisoners if they are sick.

So you weren't actually in the prisoner of war camp.

Yes. Yes, it was a small camp in the ground of the citadel. And we are, I think, around 80 or 100 prisoners, no more. And we work in the hospital.

Was that something that you wanted to do, or did they tell you that that's what you were going to do?

No, they are looking-- I was more than six weeks in a big camp near Namur. And they are looking for different kind of person, but I was a student. I was young, and I was a student. I never have had to learn a job.

And so they are looking for-- they call it instrumentmacher, to make medicine instruments. And I say, huh. The Americans, they bring everything to this country. Maybe you can clean it. And if you have to clean this instrument, that's the right place, at the hospital. All 18 German prisoners, they think the same. And we were in this way in this hospital.

Did they treat you OK there?

The first time, yes, because they are the American soldiers, they have been in Germany for a longer time. But then it changed. They changed it against younger--

Replacement?

Yeah, replacement. And this person, these soldiers, they are always thinking one German with a fork in the hand is dangerous and then an American soldier with five pistols in their hand. And so it was, during this time, it was very hard. We didn't get enough food. But it changed after that.

It got better again?

Yes.

How long was it not good?

Oh, two months.

Two months?

Yeah. But maybe it was other time, just after the war was finished, and I remember that we have had more than two months no sugar in the American army. And the need too much food for all the prisoners, I think, or for the people in this area.

Did your family know where you were?

No. I sent letters. It was allowed to send letters. But I never get an answer. Later, after that I went home, I hear that they got only one letter from just 20 letters.

Were sent?

Yes. So this was the only one that they know I'm still alive.

So they never really got any mail from you?

No.

In the 18 months you were there.

Yeah. And Liège was near the border to Germany. And American officers, they like to go to Germany, to the black market. And this way, one of our German interpreter-- he was from Cologne-- he took letters. It was not allowed, but he did it. And on this way, a uncle of my family got the information that I am in Liège, in prison. And he informed my parents in Hamburg.

Did you have much to do with the Belgian population?

No. We are three prisoners. We run away from our prison. It was allowed-- Genf-- the Geneva Convention, that you can go away. And we did it. And I came home after this 13 months. And all my other friends from the camp, they stay one year longer in prison.

And Hamburg was a British zone. And they gave me the papers. They asked me for my camp, if I do maybe wrong things or something like that. And there wasn't. And I got my papers. And I needed because, at this time, we have food markets in Germany. It was not enough to eat, no?

So people stayed on as prisoners because going home was worse. Is that the idea?

No.

No.

Because general hospital closed, and we came to Henri-Chapelle. This was on the three corners between Belgium and-- France? Germany?

Belgium-Holland.

Holland.

Holland and Germany, near Aachen. And this was a cemetery for American soldiers. And they brought died American soldiers from Germany to this place. And it was a job for a long time, or forever, because most of the places of the cemetery was already finished, and you have to clean it. I stated there only two days, and then we ran away.

You ran away.

Yes. And it was Belgium, and we know that Belgium, if they catch us, then they get money from the American army for that. But it works, and I went home.

Was there much discussion, when you were in this prisoner of war camp, with the other German about why you'd lost the war? Did people talk about that much?

No, not in this camp. Because they are no SS or people like that-- more normal people. And we had no officer. The officers came later to our camp. And the American army sent them to a French camp. And they look very hungry and very thin. And we feed them during the night and gave them transfusion in the hospital. But the American soldiers, they didn't know that. We put them some places until they recovered.

So you tried to give them extra ration?

Yeah, yeah.

How soon after the war was over did you find out about the death camps and the concentration camps.

I hear that already in prison, and I couldn't believe it. Because it was Star and Stripes. And so, we had, on this place where we working, we had connection to the American soldiers and also to newspapers and so on. And I couldn't believe it.

Did you think that we were making it up?

First, I think it is propoganda. But after that, it was a real situation, you know?

When you ran away, how did you get home?

We have over my POW dress, I took other dress. And we have tea-- teabags-- in our pockets and coffee from the camp. And so we paid the people on the train. And they put us in a special place on the train. And on this way, we came back to-- first, we have to walk across the border. And it was Belgium.

And we didn't know the right way because we have to cross to streets, big streets. But we crossed only one. And so we ran on some place in the morning and we didn't know it was Germany or is it still Belgium. And I was a person, they sent me-- there was a girl looking for milk. And I have to ask this girl where we are.

Where you are.

Yeah, we are in Germany.

In Germany?

Yeah. And then we paid with tea to get the train.

So you took the train to Hamburg?

Yeah.

Yeah? And nobody tried to check your papers or stop you?

No, no.

And how long since you had seen your family?

Pardon?

How long had it been since you had seen your family?

It's around 18 months.

What was that like, to go back?

Wonderful. That was very good.

Was everyone there?

Yes, I was the last one to come back. On the end of the war, everybody was-- my mother was, in Thuringen, in Wasungen. This was our place of our evacuation. My younger brother, Rolf, he was in the Adolf-Hitler-Schule. I was near Goslar somewhere. And my father was in Berlin. And my older brother, Karl Hans, he was pilot in south of France. And they are all here at home in Hamburg, then me. I was the last one.

That must have been some reunion, huh?

Yeah. We are very happy that we come together again. But my father, something was broken, His energy to do something, to work with a job and so on. And he never spoke about it. But now, I have been in Auschwitz. And I saw the chimneys of the kitchens and all the other barracks.

And these chimneys are just the same that the factory in our evacuation place in Thuringen. It was a [GERMAN]-- [GERMAN] who works with wood, cut wood and so on. I don't know the name in English. And the factory, it's just this chimneys.

And my father said all the time, he was working for the Luftwaffe that he had to build field air bases for the German army in the east and also in France and also for gasoline for the planes. But this was the only information what we got from my father.

But I saw these chimneys. And this company is in Thuringen, where we were evacuated, they work for my father. This was the address we got from my father, to go to this place. And I'm not sure. Maybe he had to do with concentration camps. He didn't-- I don't know.

You think he knew more?

I think he knew more, but he never spoke about it. And after the war, he tried to pick a business or to do something. Everything was different to the time before. He never got it. He start drinking, and we lost plenty of money. And he was bankrupt. And it was a hard time.

You think something was broken in him?

I think so.

Yeah. That he knew too much, or he saw too much?

Yes, that's my feeling today. But I didn't know it. My mother, she was during this time by herself in this small village. She wrote a diary over the last three weeks of the war. And I couldn't believe it, that she wrote down that our Hitler didn't get it and that she was very sorry that he didn't get it with this war, that he lost the war. Crazy, huh?

Mm-hmm. This was your mother writing in the last three weeks?

Yeah. Because first, the Russian soldiers in this village and, after that, the Americans-- or first, the Americans, then the Russians. It was later on, Russian zone.

So she never understood the full scope of his madness?

No. But she never heard of-- my father-- she never learned something about Jewish people or something like that.

Did you know Jewish people when you were growing up?

This was only this person. I worked for him in his shoe place.

In his shoe place.

Yeah.

Otherwise, your family didn't know any Jews?

After the war, I hear about two people, they're working for my father. Because they came back after the war, and they are looking for my father, or for my parents. My mother was working, too. And I remember that one family came and want to say thank you to my father because he helps him and his father to go to the United States. I don't know which way.

Did they ever get to talk to your father?

They talked to my mother. And my mother, she talked to me after that. And she didn't have an address-- nothing. And so I have just this information, no?

So how was it after you got back from being a prisoner of war?

Yes, I go back to school to finish my school. And after that, I studied medicine.

What was the spirit in the country at that time?

It was the black market time. And now, I went down south of Hamburg, in the country, that they are places of still thinking in the Nazi way. And it was near Uelzen-- near the Luneburg. That's a place-- I don't know why they thinking in this way.

It was also Celle, a small town. It was not destroyed. And they are, after the war, are still thinking the Russians have to give back German country and Ostpreussen and so on.

But from this point on, I couldn't believe it, what they wanted, which way they are thinking. And my family, we are not Nazis at all. We are not thinking this way. We are more thinking as a social way, the sozialdemokratie. This was more our way after the war.

I cannot understand today that we don't have had questions to our parents, no? And I understand that, during the war and also during the Nazi time, let's say, they cannot do it. The system was a little bit the same like after the war in the GDR.

The children, if the children say something in school about their parents, that they are not of the same political line, then the parents have had big troubles. And so I think it was the same in Germany that you have troubles if you spoke against the Nazis, no? I think so.

So you think there was kind of an understanding that there were certain things that shouldn't be talked about?

Yeah.

And everyone kind of knew that?

Yeah. The only thing what I thought before, after the Luftwaffenhelfer time and before I came to the army, I was, for six weeks, in the Arbeitsdienst. Arbeitsdienst, this was a organization what--

A work organization.

A work organization. During the time from 1933 to the war, they built Autobahn, the highways, and so on. And it was a half-military organization. But you have to do it. You have to go to, first, Luftwaffenhelfer, and then I was six weeks in this area in Weimar.

This was in the neighborhood of Wolfs-- Hitler's school, Adolf-Hitler-Schule. And he met me once. And in this camp-- this was in Weimar-- the train, we was on the railway, near the railroad track. This was the first time I saw prisoner of Buchenwald. And they spoke, that's political prisoners.

How'd you know they were from Buchenwald.

Buchenwald was just in our neighborhood. And the train, this was--

Went through the station.

Yeah, yeah. And they spoke about it. Yeah, a camp in Buchenwald. And they are working there. And this was the only passenger contact. We couldn't speak to them, but just we saw them, no?

It was forbidden to speak to them?

Yes. The distance was too big. And in this camp, the SS was there. We came together in a casino, and they spoke. We like that you come by yourself to serve in the SS army. And this was information of my father, said, don't do this. Never do it. Say that you want to go by yourself to be an officer in the Air Force. And then, they let you go.

And I say that. And there was a door. They ask each person. And they let me go out. And after that, I called my father in Berlin. I said, now you have to do it just now. Because they look for that, that your answer was right, that you ought to go to the Air Force. And this way, I came to this Raumgeschwader Oesau. And not to the SS.

And not to what?



To the SS.

But what did you know about the SS then?

I know only that they are special troops, and they have a very high rate of death, the soldiers. And I wasn't interested. For what?

Were there rumors about camps in the east?

No. I never hear about camps. If I came in prison, was a prisoner of war, the American army, that's the first time that I saw they have different gates. And some gates are for political, that some gates also for Gypsies or foreign workers from France-- they worked-- and Germany, and so on. This was the first time I hear about that they are also political.

That they're a political prisoner.

Yeah. I saw it on the Kristallnacht, after that, people in Hamburg with a Jewish star on their clothes.

That was only after Kristallnacht, huh?

Yeah.

Yeah. And did you see people throughout the war that had to wear the star, or less and less?

No, I saw-- I was too short in this time, in this-- I have to do it. I was too young. I was 17 if I came in prison.

Now, after the war and after everyone got home and so on, did you talk about what had happened earlier in the family?

Yes, only that my father lost his good job and his good business. And yeah, we have everything, our furniture and that we have it still. What we have in Hamburg, it was still there. But my parents took my truck, some, down to the country, and we lost it in East Germany.

And so I remember after war was terrible. But of the time before, it was very bad because we have had everything. But we never got a car after the war, my parents.

No more car.

No.

It took until, what, around 1955 for Germany to begin to revive economically?

It start earlier.

Earlier?

Yes. I couldn't finish my study because there was limited who can be a physician. And so, after six semesters, there was an examination, and I didn't get it, OK. And during this time, I met my first wife. And her father was a plumber with a big company. He had 150 workers. And it was a time Germany was to build up. And his son died during the war, and he was looking for somebody. And OK, we married 1953. And I study now to be a plumber. And I got a master's degree in this area.

Plumbing?

Plumbing, yeah. But it doesn't work very well with my father-in-law, and he's going bankrupt. And I changed my job. I

studied medicine, and I was a plumber. And so my new job was to furnish laboratories.

Medical laboratory?

Everything, every kind of laboratory. And I did this for 40 years. And this was a very good job, and the basis for that was very well.

Did you like it?

Yeah. It was my hobby.

Oh, I'm sorry. You didn't get on with your father-in-law too well?

Pardon?

You didn't get along with your father-in-law too well?

No. He didn't study. He liked to install social buildings, apartments. And there was one like the other one-- hundreds. And I like it a little bit more difficult. And I start to furnish laboratories to furnish hospitals to furnish industrial companies and so on. And this was more important. And I get a little bit more complicated.

And he didn't want it. And so I went to another company, to a special company. And yeah, he finished his work. I was very sorry. My mother-in-law, she was how you call that, with-- Germans have a [GERMAN] when they feed their horses thing, you know.

Blinders.

Yeah, blinders. And this was the end of the company of my father-in-law.

So you were married how long?

I was married 17 years.

17.

17 years, with three children.

And what happened?

Our problems years were 1968. This was a time in this country with the flower children. And in Germany, before we have had always the Christ Democratic Party, Konrad Adenauer. And they are very, very conservative. And I liked it the other way, more with Willy Brandt, the Social Democratic Party.

And it was a time of changing that Willy Brandt came to power. And his information, see they were too extremely. Because it changed, if you have problems with your family or with financial or with the health insurance or that, you have to go to the government.

The government had to do it. You don't have to ask for something. It's your right that you get it. And on this way, they over dived everything. Also, my children. They said, no, no. We can do what we want, and this is the right way to live and not your way and so on.

And they didn't get the school. They did a class a second time and a third time. That's not the right way. And my wife, she start to study, also. And I accepted it. Because the children are quite enough. And this was in a part of Germany, it was always-- we call it this was a red part of Germany. Most Social Democratic people there.

And they said, now, it changed. Now, we're the capitalists. They have to pay for everything, and we have open hands, and we take it. We take it. We take it. And it changed absolutely, also in the way of life in the families that the children did what they wanted, absolutely, and I couldn't do nothing. And so they said, no, come on. And they took money, and they took credits and so on.

And it was very fast that I have no money anymore. On the other hand, I had a very good job. But I had a chauffeur and a Mercedes. And they drove me to different places in Germany and also at home.

They picked me up in the morning. And I was a capitalist for them. But in the company, I was just the opposite. Because my way of thinking was still the other way. And so it doesn't work. My marriage broke down. Yeah.

Was that hard?

And I lost my job, too. Because they said, you are lefty.

Really?

Yeah. And this way, it was in the middle of Germany. And then, this way, I went back to Hamburg, and I stayed there by myself. And this way, I met my second wife in Hamburg.

Tell us about her, and tell us about that.

She was a teacher. Her family is from Vienna. And they came 1978 from Vienna to New York. And Gerda had a sister. She was two years older. And they stay in New York, and they finished school and university. And she was first. She studied physics, and she works for Bell Laboratories in New York.

And then, she married, and the children came. And she start to teach mathematics on Scarsdale High School. And she did this for more than 18 or 20 years. I don't know exactly. At this time, I met her in Hamburg. Because she had traveled with her husband. And she was looking for someplace for a separation for one year.

And she took a job. Hamburg was looking for foreign math teachers. Because, at this time, we haven't had enough math teachers on high school. And she was one of them. And I met her in Hamburg. Hamburg took 45 teachers from the United States. And in this way, we met each other in Hamburg.

And her match looks like that it's more than separated, and she was divorced, and my marriage, too. And so we are good friends, but we never were thinking about this we maybe want to be married. Because both of us, our marriage, on the end, was not a good way of thinking.

And so after four years, it was the time that I said, OK, now, I have no problems to live by myself in Hamburg. And Gerda called me and said, what you think about-- I want to visit you for one year in Hamburg. And my first reaction was, oh, god.

But she came, and she start to teach for one year in Hamburg, mathematics, in high school. And she start with a question here. What happens to the other teachers, the American teachers? What do you think? What is the difference between to teach in Germany or to teach in the United States?

And also, she asked students, German students, they are for one year in the United States, what do you think about what is the difference between to go to school in this country and so? At the end, she came back to this country and studied on Columbia. In the morning, she was in high school in Scarsdale. In the evening, she studied. And she made her PhD.

In what?

Psychology.

Psychology.

Yeah. And her dissertation was a questionnaire to American and German students about that they are 17 years old in this area. And it was a questionnaire from a lady-- her name is Kagitcibasi. She was an American at this time. Now, she is back in Turkey.

Just after the war, she asked German students and American students, and there was a big, big difference in German students are very authoritarian. And OK. And her thing was 1978. And this was the first time it said, the German students are more or less authoritarian than the Americans? Nobody wants to believe it.

And she continue it, this questionnaire, in Austria and in Russia and also in this country. And it's still the same situation. The American young people are more authoritarian than the Germans. Yes. And now, she is still working in this area. In the moment, she is teaching online, on internet, in New York for the New School, and in Germany, it's the University of Bielefeld.

And now, it's the second semester. The first time was about prejudice, Germans against Americans and Americans against Germans. And she had German students and American students. And it was a very interesting, of course. And this time was about what happens with the media in this country and Germany and what the students, what they remember was an important political thing during their life.

And very interesting that the Japanese students never spoke about Hiroshima or something., that it was important. The important thing was, OK, World War II but nothing very special. And the same as the American young people. And now, at the moment, she is teaching the Manhattan College and about Holocaust.

Was that a problem for you and for her to get together?

It was not a problem for us. It was more a problem with her children-- not with my children, with her children. They couldn't believe it, that their mother met a German and this German was also in the German army-- well, only six weeks, but I was. And we had to work on this, especially with the oldest daughter. And there are some I tell you, it was very, very hard. But today and now, for a long time, it works very well with her three daughters.

And how about you with your friends in Germany?

Yes. Most of my friends, we have no problems. Because I never know friends that they are in the German Nazi party or have a big job or something like that. And the connection to Gerda was very quickly and very friendly and very open. We have had big discussions about it. And we never have had problems.

If we met sometimes somebody, Gerda works with scales. They are Authoritarismus scale. They are-- they are different scales, a group of question who answered you if you have this question to a person. And she said, yes, yes, yes, or no.

And so then, you can say, OK, it looks like that he is a very tolerant person, or he is a very authoritarian person, and so on. And so we met together people have said, look, this one, if you have the 10 questions asked him, yes, he said, yes. It's crazy. It's crazy. And on this way, I learn plenty.

What did you learn?

To see the people through different eyes. And it's now that now we work together, and we speak together. We have in New York the Leo Baeck Institute. Maybe you know the name.

He was the rabbi from Berlin.

Berlin and Austria, Austria. And we are there with plenty discussions, also with Goldhagen about the book of Goldhagen. And sometimes, some Jewish people, they fight me-- very often-- and I accepted it. But I cannot change it.

They fight with you?

Yeah. And I cannot change it anymore. The only thing what we can do, not only to hope and to work on it is never come back, that it never came to the same situation that what we have had in Germany at this time, the Nazi time.

But how did they fight with you? What do you mean?

Differently. People who were-- there was an American army, and they are in Europe during the war. They understand more than people in this country they never have been in Europe and the influence of her friends or their friends maybe are so strong that they cannot understand it, that something is changing in Germany, that we don't have the same situation anymore.

I learn it from my own children after the war. German teachers start to tell crazy stories in front of the class. And they are waiting that some say, come on, that's crazy. That cannot be OK to go in the opposition to your own teacher. Because the teacher is an authoritarian person.

Were teachers encouraging them to?

Yes. And this way, it was very, very hard-- also for Gerda and for the American teachers-- to teach German students. They are so critical.

German students?

About everything. Sometimes, it's too much. But I think better too much than--

Than too little.

Yeah And this is what I see, through my eyes, in this country. There are too much things what the American people do for honor. And they think it's for honor. But it is, in a way-- in Germany, you are under the Kaiser and under Hitler, and everything was for honor.

For honor?

For honor. And in German, I say, I [GERMAN] of it. I hate it, something to do for this honor. And plenty things are going in this country the same way. And the American people, they are OK, it's a way. It's a way. And this is what I think we did it the same way, saying, it's OK. And it was going the wrong way. And this is my feeling here.

So it troubles you to see people accepting things too easily that they shouldn't.

Yeah.

So you've come a long way from that young boy in Germany.

Yeah. I learn very much in this country but also in Germany, no?

Do you have hope for Germany? Are you hopeful for what's happening over there?

Yes. Yeah. I think, in this country, you have more right-wing people than in Germany. If it's going on in Germany, then it is just in the newspaper. New York Times is the first people who printed it. And I think it's good when take a feedback to the German government, and they say, come on. We have to do something against this situation.

And the Social Party, they have in the moment not good leaders. That's the reason we have still this Chancellor Kohl. And Chancellor Kohl, he went the politic and the social way the same way like in this country. We have more poor

people and homeless people than ever before.

And this had to do that they can't solve everything, but they can do to cancel what had to do with the social way of life. And this is the situation, no? And the other side, these people, they don't have no more this social security. They go in the direction of the right wing and said, OK, they cannot help me. They look just for their own money and for everything. And so we go the other way. And this is a part of the opposition. That's what I think.

Yeah. Now, you grew up with an authoritarian system that was one of the most authoritarian in history. And yet you weren't really aware of it. And I'm not blaming you personally, but I'm saying could that, then, happen again so easily in the world, that we could have monsters in our midst and not know it?

We have three sons with my father. And my father, he was saying after the war, if I say this is black, then it is black. But in reality, it was white, right? And we fight very, very hard with our father. Because this had nothing to do with the real way of thinking. That had to be just only he wants to be the boss. I don't know.

Because that's what he was taught.

Yeah. And so it was very hard for him to understand that it works better the other way, to go--

With the conflict.

Yes. And both brothers, also, I and Rolf, and my older brother, they go the house. They couldn't stay anymore at home. It was always fighting. And I was the only one at home. And I took it with my father.

That must have been hard for everybody.

Yeah.

Because the rules changed.

Yes.

And nobody knew how to do it.

No.

And it probably looked worse than it had before, when there was peace.

Yeah, yeah. But it changed-- another specialist who-- Gerda. She had many friends in New York. And they said, I never want to do one step in Germany. But they came, and they visit us in Hamburg. And they came again, again, again, again. And we like them.

And we went to-- we have, in north of Germany, we have Neuengamme. This was a working camp. We have Bergen-Belsen, that was a place of Anne Frank. And each time we have visitors, we went to these places and spoke about it.

But the time we went to East Germany, to Buchenwald, and now, in Auschwitz and also in Birkenau, that's camps in the eastern part of the world and the communist part of the world. They don't speak about Jewish people there.

They speak about anti-fascists.

That's right. But if you go in a museum of these places, you see in the corner, you see, oh, yes, they are 60,000 Jewish people and 1,200 social people died in this camp. And they have to start to change their way of demonstration, what is going on and what was going on in those camps.

I'm going to switch tapes. So maybe we should-- I've got to switch the tapes.

Yeah. You have--