

Interview with RENATA POLT
Holocaust Oral History Project of San
Francisco

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Interviewer: Gene Ayres

Transcriber: Susan Perrish

GENE AYRES: TODAY IS MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5TH,
1996. I'M GENE AYRES, AN INTERVIEWER WITH THE
HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF SAN FRANCISCO,
CALIFORNIA. TODAY WE'RE TALKING WITH RENATA POLT.
CAMERA OPERATOR IS SEAN SIMPLICIO. JOHN GRANT IS
VIDEO PRODUCER.

GOOD MORNING, MRS. POLT.

A. Hello.

Q. WOULD YOU PLEASE TELL US WHEN AND WHERE,
PRECISELY, YOU WERE BORN AND THE NAMES OF YOUR PARENTS
AND BROTHERS AND SISTERS, IF YOU HAVE ANY?

A. I was born in Czech. It's called Usti Nad
Labem. In German it was called (Ausek on the Elba).
In English it's (Alsiger Uste), as you wish, (on the
Elba).

It's a small industrial city in northern
Bohemia, and what the Nazis called the Sudetenland in
Czechoslovakia. On June 4th, 1932 my parents were

(Frederich) and Elizabeth, later Frederick and Elizabeth, and our name at the time, before we changed it to Polt, was (Pollachek), which is a name that can be either a Jewish name or a non-Jewish name. It's a Czech name. Ours was spelled in the German way, though, with the T-S-C-H. I have an older brother, John, who was originally called Hans, born in 1929, who lives in Oakland. And that's my only sibling.

Q. DO YOU RECALL IN THE EARLY YEARS--FIRST, TELL US WHAT YOUR FAMILY SITUATION WAS; WHAT YOUR PARENTS DID OR YOUR FATHER OR YOUR MOTHER DID FOR A LIVING. BASICALLY THE FAMILY SITUATION THERE IN THIS TOWN. A PRETTY GOOD SIZED TOWN, ISN'T IT?

A. I don't know how big it was.

Q. 40,000 OR--

A. Yeah. Something like that probably. It was much bombed during the war and has been reconstructed a lot.

Q. IT'S NOT FAR FROM DRESDEN, IS IT?

A. Yeah, It's about halfway between Dresden and Prague.

Q. NEAR (TERAZIN)?

A. Very near (Terazin), yeah. My father was an attorney. He had a partner, and they had their own law firm. He did, I think, corporate law, primarily. His family had lived in (Ausic) and my mother's family had also lived in (Ausic) for, I guess, a couple

of--several generations at least. My father had been in World War I and was wounded--actually, he told me that he had wanted to be a biologist or something along those lines when he got out of the war, but I guess they had sort of a form of GI Bill or something. At any rate, I guess there wasn't space in the biology faculty and so he went to law school, kind of by default. At any rate, I think he enjoyed his work.

My mother was a housewife. We lived in a large house that was built in, I think, 1902 or 1903. My grandmother, my father's mother, had an apartment downstairs, in the downstairs where she lived, and then the rest of us lived upstairs with various servants and a cook and gardener. And all those accouterments of upper middle class European life before the war.

Before World War II.

Q. YOUR MOTHER, I BELIEVE, WAS HALF JEWISH?

A. My mother was half Jewish.

Q. AND YOUR FATHER WAS FULL JEWISH?

A. My father was Jewish, right.

My mother's father was Jewish, but he converted to Protestantism when he married my grandmother. Nobody, I think, was particularly serious about religion one way or the other.

It was, I guess, professionally more convenient not to be Jewish. My father never

converted, but he told me that he had had some sort of argument with a rabbi when he was 18, and had quit attending any sort of services after that. I don't know what that was about. I don't know whether he was Bar Mitzvah'd or anything of the sort. But none of them were religious in any way. My brother and I were baptized. We were baptized Lutheran and I think that, you know, every now and then we were taken to church, but it was not a regular thing.

Q. THE TOWN, WAS IT COMPLETELY GERMAN-SPEAKING?

A. No, I don't think so. I think that the way it worked was that most of the wealthier people were German-speaking and most of the working class people were Czech-speaking, but I could be wrong on that.

Q. BUT THAT'S THE RECOLLECTION THAT YOU HAVE?

A. I think so, yeah. I know that, for example, my father spoke Czech and my grandmother spoke Czech. My mother barely did. But I guess the Czech was used more or less to speak to workmen or people like that.

Q. THERE WERE CZECH PEOPLE AROUND?

A. There were Czech people around.

Q. WOULD YOU SAY THE MAJORITY OF THE PEOPLE WERE GERMAN OR GERMAN-SPEAKING?

A. I couldn't tell you.

I was, you know, a child.

Q. AND YOUR CLASSES AT SCHOOL, WERE THEY GERMAN?

A. I had one week of classes in (Ausic). I started first grade in the--it was a Protestant school and it was, of course, German-speaking. I don't know why I say "of course," but at any rate, it was.

And then we left. So my school experience there was pretty limited.

Q. DO YOU GET A SENSE IN YOUR MEMORY--I REALIZE IT WAS A LONG TIME AGO AND YOU WERE QUITE YOUNG--OF ESSENTIALLY THE ATTITUDE OF THE PEOPLE THERE? WAS IT VERY STRICTLY PRO-GERMAN OR PRO-AUSTRIAN OR PRO-CZECH, OR DO YOU GET A SENSE OF HOW THAT WAS?

A. I couldn't tell you from personal experience. From what my parents have told me and from what I have read, there was among the gentile, German-speaking people--a lot of them at any rate, a good deal of pro-Nazi sentiment, and I imagine when you spoke to my mother you got stories from her about how her relatives stopped speaking to her. Although at the time she and my father married, I don't think it was any big deal for Jews and Gentiles to marry. It was not considered anything.

Q. DID YOUR FATHER'S LAW PRACTICE OUT IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY INCLUDE GERMAN CLIENTS, OR WAS IT STRICTLY A JEWISH LAW PRACTICE?

A. No, I don't think so. I don't think so.

I think his partner was Jewish. He was arrested later by the Nazis. He was a Socialist also.

And I'm not sure what happened to him.

I think he probably went to the camps. I'm not sure.

Q. WHAT WAS HIS NAME, DO YOU RECALL?

A. I have it in various records. I can't recall offhand. It may come to me.

Q. IN YOUR BRIEF BIT OF SCHOOLING THERE, DO YOU RECALL ANYTHING AT ALL INDICATING THAT THE TEACHER OR THE TEACHINGS OR THE CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE WAS NATIONALISTIC IN THE GERMAN SENSE OR EVEN IN THE CZECH SENSE?

A. No. All I remember is that they taught us how to count, and I already knew how to count so it wasn't very interesting. And that's all I remember of that one week of school.

Q. YOU WERE BORN IN '32 AND YOU HAVE OTHER MEMORIES OF YOUR FIRST SIX YEARS THERE, I GATHER?

A. Yeah.

Q. DO YOU REMEMBER KNOWING WHAT WAS GOING ON IN GERMANY?

A. Not at all. For one thing, I was, you know, very young, and for another thing, even at a much later age, we were very sheltered from ugly realities. It was the kind of upbringing in which children were believed to be better off if they didn't know what was going on. And also my brother knew a lot more what was happening, and my brother was much more political

and more aware of historical and social and political events. I was not involved in that kind of thing until much, much later. And so even into high school, I didn't really have much of an idea of what was happening. I mean, high school being much later in the United States, of course.

Q. YOU DON'T RECALL EVER HEARING YOUR PARENTS TALK ABOUT THE EVENTS THAT WERE GOING ON--

A. No.

Q. --THAT MIGHT POSE AN UPROOTING OF THE FAMILY OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT?

A. No. It came as a great surprise to us. We had been in Switzerland that summer of '38 for a vacation, and in September, when I had just started school, first grade, my parents--and I think I remember this--my parents said, Well, we're going to go back to Switzerland for another vacation. And the famous story is that my brother said, Well, that's fine, you go ahead, I'm staying here, because I guess he was, you know, a big man in 4th grade and he was not about to leave. But I don't remember what reason my parents gave us. Something perhaps with my father's health or something along those lines. But nobody said the Nazis are amassing at the border and we have to get out because God knows what is going to happen to us. No, there was none of that kind of thing.

Q. AT LEAST YOU CHILDREN CERTAINLY WEREN'T INFORMED?

A. No, no, no. I certainly wasn't.

Q. YOUR IMPRESSION WAS IT WAS ANOTHER VACATION?

A. Something like that. Yeah.

Q. DURING YOUR SCHOOL YEARS?

A. During school year.

Well, I started first grade then in Switzerland.

Q. DO YOU RECALL THEN THE ACTUAL LEAVING OF YOUR HOME? HOW DID THAT ALL GO?

A. I vaguely recall being at the train station with lots of luggage and lot of confusion, and a certain amount of fear and so forth and excitement. But I don't--

Q. LOTS OF LUGGAGE?

A. No, I don't think we really had lots because we left practically everything behind, but we probably had a couple of suitcases each or so.

I know parents always did counts, you know, we have seven pieces, one, two, three, four ... and that's about all I remember of that.

Q. SO YOU WERE SETTING OFF ON WHAT YOU THOUGHT WOULD BE A VACATION, AND YOUR PARENTS WERE THERE, GOING WITH YOU, AND YOU HAD BAGGAGE AT THE STATION?

A. Yeah.

Q. WHAT WAS IT, A TRAIN?

A. Yeah.

Q. ANYTHING HAPPEN AT ALL NOTEWORTHY THAT YOU RECALL AT THE TRAIN STATION?

A. I don't. No. I don't remember anything.

Q. YOU DON'T REMEMBER ANYTHING ABOUT THAT? PASSPORTS WHATSOEVER, PASSPORT OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT?

A. No, I was not aware of these things, particularly.

Q. I KNOW. YOU WERE VERY YOUNG. WERE YOU AWARE OF THE LOYALTY AMONG A NUMBER OF PERSONS IN THAT LOCALE TOWARD THE OLD AUSTRIAN EMPIRE?

A. No. I wasn't. I didn't know anything about the old Austrian empire.

Q. AND YOU WERE NOT AWARE OF THE ANSCHLUSS AND WHAT THAT MEANT POLITICALLY?

A. No. Nothing. Nothing.

Q. OR THE SUDETEN CRISIS AS SUCH?

A. No.

Q. OKAY. I WOULDN'T HAVE THOUGHT SO. BUT I JUST WANTED TO ASK. OKAY.

PICK UP WHEN YOU WERE LEAVING, IF YOU HAVE MEMORIES OF HOW THAT WAS TO LEAVE YOUR HOME AND GET ON THE TRAIN AND GO. YOU WENT TO SWITZERLAND, YOU SAID.

A. We went to Switzerland. Why did we go to Switzerland? I guess we went to Switzerland because it was possible to go there, although it wasn't

possible for my father to work there. The Swiss had a rule that, you know, you couldn't come there and work. So fortunately I guess we were sufficiently well off that that was doable. We went to Lucerne and rented an apartment in--I think it was a hotel, actually. My mother, I'm sure, has told you in more detail about that. The hotel was closed for the season, I believe, but they rented this space to us, and my brother and I were enrolled in a small, one-room private *Spelling* school--(Fraulein Rye)--which was quite a wonderful school, really.

It was very progressive in a way. We did things like--we learned how to knit, both of us! And I still have one or two notebooks from first grade and *Spelling* (Fraulein Rye's) school where we did lovely little illustrations of the letters of the alphabet and things of that sort. And I learned how to read there. I mean, they already had learned how to read.

I guess their school year started earlier, and those first graders already knew how to read and I didn't, and it was very difficult for me.

Q. WAS INSTRUCTION IN GERMAN?

A. In German, yeah. Yeah.

Q. IS LUCERNE IN THE GERMAN SPEAKING--

A. Oh, yeah. Yeah. We learned how to speak.

Spelling We started speaking (Switza-Deutsche), you know, Swiss-German, quite incomprehensible to most people.

We just picked it up the way kids do. And John, my brother, helped me learn the alphabet at home after school. And I learned how to read. I remember learning how to read. It was a great thrill. And I just started reading like crazy. And it was lovely there. I'm sure my parents were under a lot of stress. I know they were. Each of my grandmothers came to visit. My father tried to get his mother to stay, tried to get her to leave Czechoslovakia and come with us, and she wouldn't, and that's another whole story. But at any rate, for us as children, it was quite beautiful and we went skiing in the winter and learned how to do that. I was very excited by that. And we would go ice skating and it was very beautiful.

Q. HOW LONG DID YOU STAY IN SWITZERLAND?

A. We were there about a year.

Q. AND YOU REMEMBER LEARNING TO READ IN THAT SPAN OF TIME?

A. Yep. Yep. In less than that. I think I learned how to read in a month or two.

Q. YOUR GRANDMOTHERS, WERE THEY BACK IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA FROM THE SAME TOWN YOU WERE?

A. Yes.

Yeah. My maternal grandmother lived oh, you know, half a mile or so away I guess, and my father's mother lived downstairs from us, as I mentioned. She

Speculating
later moved to Prague when the Nazis took over the Sudetenland, my Grandmother (Pollachek) and my aunt moved to Prague, and--well, after my father died I found a large file of letters from my grandmother which some years ago I translated, and edited into what I'm trying to get published, a book. And that's another story. But my father tried for several years to get her to come out, and one reason or another, she didn't want to leave her furniture, she didn't want to leave her daughter.

Then, when she finally made up her mind to go, then it was too late and she wasn't able to get out.

Q. SHE WENT TO PRAGUE?

A. She went to Prague, and then in '43 I think both she and my aunt were taken to Theresienstadt, I think not together, however, and then she was taken to Treblinka. And we have the records of that from the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia.

Q. AND HER DAUGHTERS--

A. Her daughter, Lana was sent to some work camp in Poland. When last she was heard from, she was working on some sort of a river construction project.

Q. AND YOU HAVE NOT HEARD FROM HER SINCE?

A. Well, no. No. She presumably perished.

Q. AND THE OTHER GRANDMOTHER?

A. My other grandmother lived with my uncle's

family. My mother's brother's family. And they had a difficult time during the war, but they got through it, and she --

Q. SHE'S NOT JEWISH?

A. She was not Jewish. My uncle was, of course, half Jewish, my mother's brother, her only sibling, and he had some difficulties, but he was married to an Aryan woman and so he and his family were essentially okay.

After the war, the Czechs in a kind of frenzy of ethnic cleansing or something like that threw out all the German-speaking people regardless of whether they were Gentile, gentile, what their background was or anything, and so that whole family moved to Germany. And my grandmother lived to be nearly 93 years old. And they all lived in Germany then after the war. Anyhow, they each came to visit us while we were in Lucerne, and those were very happy memories.

My maternal grandmother was a great storyteller, and she would spin tales.

Q. COULD A PERSON WHO IS HALF GENTILE HAVE SURVIVED IN THE SUDETENLAND, FROM WHAT YOU KNOW NOW?

A. Well, it depended.

Q. SHE WAS GENTILE THROUGH HER FATHER, WASN'T SHE?

A. Right. But that didn't matter to the Nazis.

I have a cousin who's half Gentile and her parents divorced during that period, so that the mother and the children would be safe. The mother was not Gentile. The father was sent to the camps and died. In the case of my mother's brother, my uncle, as I said, he was married to a gentile, and they never divorced or anything and they were okay.

So I don't know whether it was a sort of a case-by-case thing or just what the temper of the time was that determined whether a person could survive or not.

Q. BACK IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA, FOR A MOMENT, IF YOU DON'T MIND, AS A CHILD, DO YOU REMEMBER AT ALL ANY SORT OF RACIAL ENMITY OR DISCORD BETWEEN, SAY, THE CZECHS AND THE SUDETENLAND GERMANS OR JEWS AND GENTILES OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT?

A. No. No.

Q. AS FAR AS YOU KNEW, LIFE WAS--I ASSUME EVERYBODY WAS--

A. I'm sure it wasn't, but I was not aware of it. As I said, I led a very sheltered life and I had a nanny and was always supervised, and we had a large garden and I played there much of the time. I didn't--I wasn't even that conscious of the town except we went ice skating and went to the market and stuff like that. But I don't remember the town well from my childhood. I have been back since, but that

is something else.

Q. SO IN SWITZERLAND, THEN, YOU WERE THERE ABOUT A YEAR AND HAD SORT OF THE NORMAL SIX-YEAR-OLD SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. AND YOUR DAD COULD NOT WORK THERE--

A. No.

Q. --EVEN IF HE HAD WANTED TO, MAYBE.

DO YOU KNOW WHETHER OR NOT THEY CONSIDERED OR WANTED TO STAY IN SWITZERLAND, YOUR PARENTS?

A. I don't think they wanted to stay in Switzerland. They wanted to come to America. Switzerland was not very hospitable. And I don't think there was any likelihood of his getting citizenship--or our getting citizenship or being able to work or anything of the sort. It was strictly a stop-gap measure, as far as I understand.

Q. DO YOU KNOW THAT YOUR PARENTS HAD WANTED TO COME TO AMERICA FROM THE TIME THEY LEFT?

A. No, I think at the time they left, they just wanted to get out and see what was going to happen. You know, let's get out of here, take along just enough to get by for a few months or whatever, and then we'll see what happens.

Q. DO YOU RECALL WHEN YOU LEFT? THE DATE YOU LEFT CZECHOSLOVAKIA?

A. Well, I think it was September--it might

have been September 11th or something like that. I have records of that. But I should have looked at the month, but I didn't.

Q. SINCE, HAVE YOU HAD OCCASION TO REFLECT ON THE DATE YOU LEFT AND THE DATE THE NAZIS ENTERED?

A. Yes. It was about a week before the Nazis entered, or less.

Q. AND YOU DID NOT HAVE AT THE TIME THAT SENSE OF URGENCY?

A. Well, I didn't, but my parents did. This story that my mother tells is that her brother had been in Germany on a business trip, and he came back and he called them and came over and said that he had seen these German troops massing on the border, and that he thought we ought to get out, and that it was very dangerous.

And so I think greatly to their credit, my parents decided on the spur of the moment to follow his advice and to get out. I don't think there was any particular thought at the time of where we would ultimately end up or whether we might come back or what have you. We were just getting out to the one place that we could get out to at that point. And then, there started the business of getting visas and, you know, all that process that refugees went through.

Q. DO YOU RECALL THAT AT ALL?

A. I don't recall it from Switzerland.

I recall it from Cuba later. We went--in 1939--(coughing)--excuse me.

Spelling
We left Switzerland and we went to Havana on a ship, called the (Reigna Del Pacifico), Queen of the Pacific. I have a wonderful brochure of it. It's a marvelous old-fashioned thing. And I remember that trip quite well. First we took the train to France and we stayed in Paris for a few days, and I remember sitting at the (Cafe De La Pei) in the--I think it was in spring, actually. It was cold, though. Fairly cold.

Q. SPRING OF '39?

Spelling
A. Yeah. It might have been later. But I think it was in the spring. Anyway, then we went to La Rochelle, where the ship left from--I believe that was the place. And there was a lot of fuss with getting the ticket and getting things straightened out. And I remember waiting on the dock side for many hours, being exceedingly bored and irritated, and playing with matches. And I didn't have anything to read or anything to do while my parents fussed with the details of the trip. And then the first thing that happened on the ship was that my mother, my brother and I all got monstrously sea sick. John and I shared a cabin. He was sicker than I and my mother was sicker than either of us, I think.

My parents were next-door. And that was not

pleasant at all. But finally, we recovered and got to go on deck and it was lovely weather and there were flying fishes and there were other children and we learned how to play ring toss and stuff that people used to do on shipboard.

It was quite, quite lovely.

Q. THIS WAS A CUBAN SHIP?

A. No. It was--was it an English ship? I think it was an English ship.

Q. WITH A SPANISH NAME?

A. Yeah, with a Spanish name.

Q. DID YOU WONDER AS A CHILD WHY YOU WERE GOING TO CUBA?

A. Yeah, I think I wondered about that. I don't know that I ever got much of an explanation, or at least I don't remember getting an explanation.

Q. SWITZERLAND VACATION WAS BEING EXTENDED TO--

A. It was being extended and broadened. Right. Cuba was a terrible shock. We were not used to the heat, the climate, the insects, the language of course. All that sort of thing. John and I had had some private English lessons before we left Switzerland from a young Englishman who came to the apartment and instructed us, and then my father had a--there was a series of sort of "teach yourself language" books that was published probably in Germany. They were called 1,000 words of ... you

know, English, Spanish or what have you, and we had that series of 1,000 words of English. And they were sort of cute. They came in different little leaflets, separate leaflets and they had cartoon-like illustrations. And we studied those. But basically we arrived in Cuba knowing neither English nor Spanish, certainly no Spanish. My father knew some English and so did my mother, but John and I really didn't. We stayed at first in a hotel while we were sort of getting our bearings. There were quite a lot of other refugees there, and we were friends with them, and would go out to the countryside with them and so on. One of my most--well, I have several vivid memories of that hotel. The rooms were small and very high and they had tile floors. All the houses had tile floors. And the window--we had one window. It was very high up. I think you would stand on the bed to look out of it. It reminded me of a prison cell. I absolutely hated it. And I hated the food. I was not much of an eater as a child anyhow, a habit I've since acquired. But I just refused to eat the food, which was, I guess, a mixture of American and Cuban.

And then the worst thing that happened was that I fell on the marble steps of the hotel and cracked my chin open and it had to be sewed up, which they did without an anesthetic. Somehow that was the medical philosophy at the time. And it was very

traumatic and I had a gigantic bandage around my head. My parents used to joke that I looked like a wounded person from World War I, you know, war-wounded person. And then I had that bandage for some time.

And after a few weeks I guess in the hotel we rented a house in, I think, a very pleasant residential area in Havana. It was a two-story house with front and back porches and a big garden, and it came complete with a family of cats, which thrilled me no end. And we hired a maid, Leila--who was Jamaican actually, and spoke English--and set up house. And my brother and I started school at a private American school, which was not far away.

We used to walk there. I was in second grade. And John was in 5th. In the morning the instruction was in English at the school, and in the afternoon it was in Spanish. And I went only in the mornings. There was no bilingual anything, you know? You learned English or else. And so I learned English. And I guess I learned it pretty fast. And my brother went in the afternoons also, so that he learned not only English but also Spanish, and he grew up to be a Spanish professor, based originally on that experience.

Q. YOUR FATHER WAS NOT ABLE TO WORK, I GATHER?

A. My father did some private work there for--as I said, there were a lot of other refugees

there. And there were also people still back in Czechoslovakia who were working on getting out.

Spelling
Specifically a family called (Pechic) who were distantly related to us. They were a very wealthy and prominent family in Czechoslovakia. In fact, if you have read Raul Hillberg's book on the destruction of the European Jews, that book was partly financed by the (Pechic) family, as are a number of other projects.

Spelling
Anyway, my father had worked for the (Pechics) in Czechoslovakia and he continued working for them, getting them visas and, you know, working on their emigration, and I think for other families as well.

Q. WAS HE ABLE TO EARN MONEY?

A. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Q. WERE YOU AWARE THAT YOUR PARENTS HAD SUMS OF MONEY IN OTHER COUNTRIES BACK WHEN YOU WERE--

A. No, of course not. Money was never discussed in my family. I never thought about it. It was a good thing they did, because otherwise we couldn't have gotten out. But I wasn't aware of it. My father got quite ill in Cuba.

He had some sort of a circulatory problem. I'm not sure what it was, or how it was brought about.

First it was believed it was through some insect bite or--I'm not sure whether it really was.

And I don't know that it was ever actually diagnosed. But he had a--I guess a blood clot in his leg and that was something that bothered him for many, many years. And really influenced the course of his life after that. So he was sick in bed for quite a long time and it was a strange life for us there, because everything was very different.

The food was very different and of course the climate and every morning we had to shake out our clothes for tarantulas, our shoes and our clothes, you know, shake everything out. I don't know that we ever found any in our shoes or our clothes, but anyway, that was the drill. There were big ants in the yard, which my brother and I--I must confess--tormented and did naughty things with. There were--what are those big hairy spiders? Okay. Those are tarantulas. No, it wasn't the tarantulas we shook our clothes out for. It was--what are the ones with the stinger in the tail?

Q. SCORPIONS?

A. Scorpions. Scorpions, right.

I think occasionally we saw a scorpion, and I know we once had a tarantula on the porch which the maid dispatched. The maid was a black Jamaican woman and she had a daughter and a son who were both--the son was, I think, in his teens already.

The daughter was close to our age. Somewhat

older. And she used to come and spend--Josephine--she used to come and spend the weekends with her mother and we would play with her and Leila. The maid was very astonished because none of the other white folks she had ever worked for would let their children play with a black child.

Q. DO YOU THINK YOUR ENGLISH WAS AFFECTED BY THE JAMAICAN ENGLISH?

A. No. I don't think so. I don't think so. The children in school were--I guess they were mostly American children of people who worked in Havana. I remember that there was a presidential campaign at the time, Batista, you know, whom Castro overthrew, was running for president and they would--one of the techniques of the time was they would have planes flying over scattering leaflets, and I even remember the campaign song, "Batista Presidente," which was current at that time. But I wasn't particularly --

Q. DO YOU REMEMBER THE TUNE?

A. Yes. (Singing) Batista Presidente, da, da, da, da, da ... (humming the song) ... Batista Presidente, da, da, da, da, da... I can't remember any words, obviously.

Q. AND OBVIOUSLY HE WON?

A. Yes. I guess he won. Yep.

Q. DO YOU RECALL WHEN YOU WERE IN CUBA--WHICH WAS WHAT YEAR?

A. '39. About a year-and-a-half I think, yeah.

Q. AND IT WAS DURING 1939?

A. '39 to--let's see, spring of '39 to fall of '40.

Q. DO YOU RECALL AT THAT EARLY AGE--AT THAT POINT YOU WERE SEVEN OR EIGHT?

A. Seven, eight.

Q. KNOWING THAT, WHEN YOU WERE IN CUBA, GERMANY HAD GONE INTO POLAND? DO YOU RECALL ANY MEMORIES OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN EUROPE?

A. Just a little bit. I remember my father listening to the radio a lot and being upset. And John knew much more of what was going on, and was also upset. And I didn't quite know what they were upset about, except that there was a war and that things were scary and, you know, not going well. That's about all I recall.

We got postcards from my--well, and letters of course, my father got the letters which later turned up in that file. I got postcards from my grandmother saying that she--they were usually for a birthday or something, and next year on your birthday I will certainly be with you, and so on. And I wrote to her, of course.

Q. THIS IS BOTH GRANDMOTHERS OR--

A. Well, both grandmothers but the only ones I have--I still have physically are my father's mother.

Spelling My (Pola-czech) grandmother.

Q. WHO WAS IN PRAGUE?

A. Who was in Prague at this point.

Q. DID YOU EVER HEAR FROM HER AFTER SHE WAS
TAKEN TO THE OPERATIONS FACTORY?

A. Not directly. We heard from other people who had seen her but once she was, quote, transported, we didn't hear from her again. Nor from my aunt, although other people got notes from my aunt asking a friend to send her some soap, asking a friend to send her a brassiere or a dress.

But we ourselves never had any other mail from her, from my aunt.

Q. SHE WAS IN THERESIENSTADT AT THIS TIME?

A. My aunt was only in Theresienstadt for a few days and then she was sent to Poland.

Q. WHEN AND WHERE WERE YOU AT YOUR EARLIEST
RECOLLECTION OF KNOWING THAT WE'RE AT WAR AND THERE IS
THIS GIGANTIC TROUBLE GOING ON IN EUROPE? DO YOU
RECALL WHEN YOU FIRST REALLY--

A. You know, I think that must have been--

Q. --REALIZED IT?

A. Must have been in Cuba. In Havana, in our house with my parents listening to the radio, and I think--I think it must have been the invasion of Poland. I didn't know what words like "invasion" meant. I was really very innocent.

I saw my first movie in Cuba and it was--I was just talking with my husband about it last night because Gulliver's Travels has been on TV, you know. It was that cartoon version of Gulliver's Travels and it was in English, and I went with my brother, and the filmmaker introduced many elements that were not in the original, including a couple of comic spies.

And I only understood, I think, every other word or something of that film and I certainly didn't know what spies were, and I would poke my brother and say, "what's a spy?" "What's a spy?" I don't know if I knew what the word meant in German, even.

Q. THAT WAS IN SPANISH?

A. That was in English. They might have had Spanish subtitles or something, but it was in English.

Q. HOW DID YOU KNOW, AFTER A WHILE--AND OF COURSE YOU CAME TO THE UNITED STATES?

A. Yeah.

Q. DID YOU KNOW ANYTHING AT ALL ABOUT HOW THOSE ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE AND WHAT YOUR PARENTS HAD TO DO TO--

A. Yeah, I know a little bit about it. We had to get a visa, of course. And I don't know whether you had to bribe somebody or--I think not. But at any rate, I remember my father coming home from the city one time in his white tropical suit which everybody wore, and there was great joy because we had our

visas. And my parents arranged for us to go to the United States via Miami, on a plane. Now that was an extremely exciting thing, because flying was not so common in those days.

So we have some lovely photographs of the family, waiting at the airport, all wind-blown. And so when we got on this little--it was a seaplane, you know, with pontoons, and we flew to Miami, which can't have been a very long flight, but it was the first flight I ever had, and we got to Miami and spent I don't know how long, maybe a week or so at Miami beach, which was quite nice, and my mother taught me to swim there.

We had gone to the beach regularly in Havana. We belonged to a beach club and we went all the time, including in winter, when the Cubans never went. It was way too cold for them, but it wasn't too cold for us. It wasn't cold at all. And I would go in the water. But nobody had taught me to swim. I didn't know how to swim. I had, you know, like water wings or something like that. But in Miami my mother taught me how to swim and I was very happy about that and very proud of that.

And then we took the train up north. We stopped in Washington for a few days and we were going--my husband and I are going to Washington in April which will be my first time there since I was

eight, but all I remember of Washington is that there were squirrels in the park and I hadn't seen squirrels since we left Europe, and I had missed that kind of a landscape a lot. So I was very happy about that.

Q. WHAT TIME OF YEAR WAS THIS?

A. It was in the fall.

Q. IN THE FALL?

Specimens
A. First we stayed in (Cue Gardens) on Long Island. In a hotel, I guess.

And after a while, we rented an apartment in Forest Hills in a new brick apartment building which was not very satisfactory. My dad used to talk about looking out at all the other brick buildings and he loved the mountains a lot and loved the Alps and glow in Switzerland and he said all you get here is brick glow. We had a one-bedroom apartment.

My brother and I had the bedroom and my parents slept in the living room on a hide-a-bed or something like that. And we started school. I went to public school, PS-3 in Forest Hills.

I was in third grade. Had a very hard time. There were a number of refugee children at the school, specifically a pair of twins who were my dear friends, Eva and Erica, but the American kids were quite mean to us and, you know, our English was not perfect, and we stood out and we were very, sort of, well, brought up European-style children and that didn't go over too

well. And we dressed funny--or at least I did. My mother made me wear knee-length underpants of a heavy cotton, and I remember being cornered in the school yard by other children who lifted up my skirt and said, "She's" wearing bloomers!" "She's wearing bloomers!" You know.

After that, my mother made my brother walk me home from school every day. The schools were very overcrowded. I think I was on a morning shift and John was on an afternoon shift, at one, but he would have to come and pick me up from school and take me home to protect me, which was kind of sweet.

The teachers were not particularly helpful, either. I remember some math assignment, arithmetic assignment which I misunderstood, and didn't get it right and was forced to stay after school and write some multiplication table, you know, hundreds of times, as punishment together with the other dummies, and I think in my case it wasn't that I was dumb or couldn't do it. It was just that I didn't get the instructions right. It was a very bad school, really.

I remember a class called Music Appreciation. I don't know if you want to hear all this. During Music Appreciation we were all herded into the auditorium and they had about maybe a dozen records, and they would put them on. One of them was "English Gardens" and another was "March Slav" and

another was "Valse Triest" and there were a few more, you know, popular favorites, and they would put the needle on the record, and then some kid would raise his hand and identify the piece and they'd take it off. So we never heard more than about the first five bars of any selection. That was music appreciation, and that was sort of the level of education that we had there, as I recall.

Q. THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN IN THE EARLY '40'S?

A. This would be in the early '40s.

Q. AND THE SCHOOLS WERE CROWDED, AS YOU SAY?

A. Yeah.

Q. WERE YOU AWARE OF THE WORLD WAR GOING ON AT THAT TIME?

A. You know, it's hard for me to remember whether I was or not. I must have been. I'm sure I was, because of course there were things like Saving Stamps, you know, and War Bonds and that kind of thing. So I guess I was. And I realize that we weren't getting mail from Europe anymore, from the grandmothers. I don't think I felt it in a particularly personal way.

I mean, I realized that we were refugees and that I was different from other children in that respect.

Q. WERE OTHER REFUGEES IN YOUR SCHOOL?

A. Uh-huh.

Q. DO YOU RECALL THE LAST NAME OF THE TWINS WHO WERE YOUR FRIENDS?

A. Yes. Erica ... I thought I did. It's a funny thing. I wrote an article -- Eva and Erica. It could be M-A-N-N, but I'm not sure.

Q. THEY WERE GERMAN?

A. They were German, I think, but in those days anybody who was German said that they were Swiss or something like that, because --

Q. WHAT DID YOU SAY?

A. Czech, which --

Q. OBVIOUSLY YOU HAD A GERMAN ACCENT.

A. No, I didn't have an accent.

Q. REALLY?

A. No, I don't think so. If you learn a language that young, you don't. My brother doesn't, either. I think that --

A. YOU SAID YOUR ENGLISH WAS NOT PERFECT?

A. It wasn't perfect. I didn't know--I remember some kids saying, "Oh, I can't, you know, buy this candy, I'm broke." And I said, "That should be 'broken'!" And stuff like that. I didn't know the lingo, the slang, the idioms and that sort of thing. But I picked all that up very fast.

I wrote an article, oh, maybe 15 years ago. It was a sort of a memoir which was published in a magazine called "Moment," and it was about that time

in New York, and I mentioned the twins, Eva and Erica. And Eva and Erica, who live near Boston, read it in the dentist's office, and contacted me! And we got together back in--back east. But we haven't kept up.

At any rate, they were my best friends, and the people that I felt the most comfortable with.

But I think we always spoke English, all of us. And we spoke English at home. As soon as we got to America, my parents said, "Okay, now we're going to speak English." And we did. It must have been very hard for them.

Q. YOU STAYED IN FOREST HILL FOR?

A. Two years, about.

Q. AND YOU SAY THE NATIVE AMERICAN KIDS, BECAUSE OF WHATEVER STRANGENESS YOU PROJECTED--DID YOU FIND THAT UNUSUAL, THAT THESE KIDS WOULD BE PERHAPS TEASING YOU, WHATEVER?

A. Oh, I found it frightening! Yeah. I had not been treated that way before. Yeah. Made me feel very, very strange and very much a stranger.

Q. THEN WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU LEFT--OR WHY DID YOU LEAVE FOREST HILLS?

A. Why did we leave? Okay.

The second summer--I guess it must have been the second summer we were in Forest Hills, my brother and I were sent to a summer camp in the Catskills. Some cousins of mine were there. It was a boarding

school, actually, during the year, and it was in an old house, and in the summers it was a summer camp; a rather badly run summer camp, actually.

But my cousins, John and Frank (Subek) went there to boarding school. They had come over with their mother. Their father had gone to England. Their father was a cousin of my father's. He had gone to England and had fought in the Czech army in England, as had my cousin Peter.

At any rate, the (Subek) boys and their mother had gotten out by walking across the (Piranes), the story goes. And they went to that boarding school. And their mom worked and so they were in boarding school. And in the summers they were in the camp, and my brother and I were sent up to that camp.

At the time my mother was very ill, and it's never been too clear to me what the problem was. She had headaches and dizziness, and I don't know whether it was physiological or emotional. It's been referred to as what used to be called a "nervous breakdown." At any rate, she just couldn't cope very well during that time.

And both my parents, I think, were severely depressed by the events in Europe, and by living in Forest Hills, which none of us liked. Daddy was doing some work at that time, still for people like the (Pechic)s and so on, but they were both very unhappy,

and so during that summer they scouted around for someplace for us to move to.

And one of the places they went was Lake Placid, which is, of course, a well-known winter resort and also summer resort in the Adirondacks. And so after that summer in camp--no, wait a minute. We were in camp the first summer we were in Lake Placid--in Forest Hills.

The second summer we went to Screw Lake, which is a resort in the Catskills. We spent the summer there. We pulled up stakes in Forest Hills, packed everything up, and went to Screw Lake to a resort called "The Little Club," which is still there.

It's not called that. But it's a bunch of cottages and then a main house and it's right on the lake. It's very pretty. Very old-fashioned. I think everybody there was gentile. I think they were all refugees.

And people would say, "Well, where are you from?" And we'd say, "Well, we're not from anywhere." Because we weren't.

Actually, they weren't all refugees. There were a lot of American gentile families there, too. And that was a very lovely summer.

And we had a great time and played in the water and had canoes and row boats and swam and took hikes and climbed mountains and had a lovely time.

And then after that summer, we went on up to Lake Placid where we rented an apartment. I remember going with my mother to go and look at this apartment, and I said, "I like this one, let's take it." And so we did. And it was on Main Street right across from the one and only movie theatre in town, above a furniture store, and the owners of the furniture store were our landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Leonard.

And we lived there for about three years, from 19--well, we left in '46. 1942 or '3 to '46. And I was very, very happy there. The apartment was right on the lake. Mirror Lake. And we had a canoe in the backyard in the summers and there was a dock next-door that we swam off. And in the winters we skied and skated. Mostly skiing; that was my thing. It was a very simple kind of skiing. There were no chairlifts of any kind. You know, the skis were simple.

We would wear our ski clothes to school, which were those baggy wool pants and parkas and ski caps and sweaters and so on, and our ski boots. Those were ski boots that you could walk in.

And as soon as school was over we'd rush home, drop our books, grab our skis, and walk to the ski slope which was not far away, and ski until it got dark. And it was a lovely, lovely time. There was a rope tow which cost, I think, 50 cents. And every now

and then my parents would treat us to a rope tow ticket and the rest of the time we snuck on, and the operators were pretty lenient about that kind of thing. Once in a while they'd chase us off for form's sake, but most of the time we just--we could slip on.

And I competed in some ski races, children's races, won some ribbons--which was easy, because there were very few girls who competed in skiing at that time. They mostly were into skating, and I was more into skiing. I was a tomboy from a very young age.

And the first winter there my parents skied with us, but my father, because of his problem with his circulation, was not really able to tolerate those severe winters. So the next winter--I think the next winter he went to California--or else to Florida, I'm not sure. He went to California one winter, and to there the other, by himself, which, during the war, was difficult, you know, to get tickets and things like that. He wrote wonderful letters.

The place that he liked a lot in California was Santa Barbara, where we later settled.

At any rate, the 4th winter in Lake Placid, we all left and went together to Florida and spent the winter in Florida and then came back for the summer, and then my brother had already started college by that time. He graduated from high school at 15, and started college at 16, so he was away at Princeton.

My parents and I pulled up stakes from Lake Placid, which was very, very traumatic for me, and moved to St. Petersburg--actually St. Petersburg Beach, Florida, and I went to 9th grade there.

Q. DURING YOUR LAKE PLACID STAY--WHICH EXTENDED UNTIL THE WAR IN EUROPE WAS OVER?

A. Not quite--oh, yes. Yes. Of course it did. In fact, I remember the war ending.

Q. DO YOU? THAT WAS MY QUESTION. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER OF THE END OF THE WAR?

A. Well --

Q. AND WHAT DID IT HAVE TO DO WITH YOUR FAMILY PERSONALLY AND INTIMATELY?

A. I remember my mother's first letter from her brother and her mother back in Czechoslovakia. I think my uncle was sick at the time--he recovered--but anyway, everybody was crying. I don't think I had ever seen my dad cry before. And I think he was. And then--well, I remember--I remember VE day and I also--I remember the dropping of the bomb.

I had a radio. I listened to the radio a lot in those days. And I used to wake up early and listen to the radio in my room before I got up. And I remember hearing about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and I remember VJ day.

And then I think I remember word coming *Spelling* about my grandmother (Pollachek) and what had happened

to her. That seemed very remote to me by then. Because we had had--I guess we had had the occasional Red Cross letter from my mother's family and so I--you know, I knew that they were alive and that things were happening with them, and my cousins and so forth, and then they turn out to still be okay after the war.

My father's family had just kind of disappeared without a trace, and then when word came after the war that they were dead, I'm not--I don't know whether I remember that exactly or not. I'm convinced that what happened to his mother and his sister changed my father's life forever such that he became depressed. And not that he always acted depressed, but I think basically he was a depressed person who never really worked again and never really--he was only in his 40's at that time--never really found anything satisfying to do with himself. He traveled a lot in later years after the war. Took up a number of hobbies. He took up photography. He took up mosaics and pottery and all those things that were the things to do in the '50s, but I don't think any of them ever really satisfied him.

Q. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA THAT HE HAD A SENSE OF GUILT, PERHAPS, FOR HAVING SURVIVED?

A. Well, I don't know. You know, he never talked about it. He never talked about his family. He never talked about the Holocaust. In fact, much,

much later in the '60s--it must have been in the '60s or late '50's--when did "Exodus" come out? You know, Leon Uris's "Exodus"? Like around '61 or '62 or something.

Q. I WOULD SAY IN THE '60'S.

A. I read that book and I was very affected by it, and I gave to it my father and he read it--or unless it was the other way around. But I think I read it first and then he read it. And then I went to Israel in '63 in large part as a result of reading that book. And I think my father went, too, either before or after me. I can't remember exactly. Probably before.

At any rate, he started taking an open interest in gentile history and recent gentile events and he was able, a little bit, to talk about that at that time. But never before then. And it was sort of understood in my family that you didn't ask Daddy about what happened to my grandmother and my aunt and so on.

Q. HAVE YOU ARRIVED AT KNOWLEDGE OF HOW MANY EXTENDED MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY DID NOT SURVIVE?

A. Do I know that now? Yeah. Well, not in specific numbers. There was my grandmother, my aunt of course, my aunt's husband, my uncle, who had gone to France where his parents were, and was taken to one of those French concentration camps and disappeared

without a trace, and then a lot of second cousins on my father's side, and I think some on my mother's side, but I don't really know about them.

Q. PERHAPS AS MANY AS A DOZEN OR MORE?

A. On my mother's side?

Q. NO, ALTOGETHER.

A. Total? Oh, yeah. At least. Because my father's mother was one of I think six children, and they all had children, and grandchildren. And some of those people got away. Some went to Sweden, some went to England, some went to South America I think, and Israel, but a lot of them didn't. So I'd say more than a dozen.

Q. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHETHER OR NOT THAT FAMILY, ALL THOSE PEOPLE WHO WERE DISPERSED SO TO SPEAK, EVER GOT BACK TOGETHER, EVER GOT BACK IN CONTACT WITH EACH OTHER?

A. Oh, many of them are. I have a second cousin called Vera, who lives alternately in Germany and in Israel for pension reasons. She lives in Germany part of the year, and she's a great family person and she has gotten cousins together that I didn't know existed. I have cousins in Germany that I never knew anything about--I mean, not in Germany, in Czechoslovakia. And I haven't met them yet. But not for want of Vera's doing, because she pressures me in every letter she writes to come and meet these

relatives. I don't know how those people got through the war.

There are others in England, for example, who left before the war, and got through the war in England and that's how they survived, and I have met one of those a long time ago. I have a great uncle in Australia whom I never met. He's in his 90's now, and she's met him and so on. So there is a connection.

And then my cousin Peter, who was the son of the aunt who died in Poland in the camps, he got out and he's now dead, but his children live in England now, and I'm in close enough with them--or with a daughter, mainly. The son is retarded. But the daughter, who is now in her 50's is--you know, we're close.

Q. BACK TO LAKE PLACID, THEN, DO YOU RECALL THAT YOU DECIDED TO MOVE TO FLORIDA, WAS IT?

A. We moved--yeah.

Q. AND LIVED THERE?

A. We moved to Florida because my father couldn't tolerate the winters, and the idea of being separated every winter or going away every winter just wasn't satisfactory, obviously. So we moved to St. Petersburg Beach, rented an apartment there, and I started 9th grade.

I had to take a bus into St. Petersburg. I went to (Distan Junior High School), where I again had

Spelling

a very bad time because this time I was an outsider because I was a "damn Yankee," and I remember in school having some history lesson about the war between the states, and I objected to some of the things that were being taught, and afterwards in the playground a couple of girls beat me up because I was a "nigger lover" and a "damn Yankee." And so I wasn't real happy in school there, although I had some very close friends.

In fact one of my friends from that time is still a friend of mine, my oldest friend. And I went to the beach a lot and that was nice. We lived right across the street from the beach, learned how to play tennis and ride horseback. My father taught me all these things. Rode a bicycle and --

Q. YOUR BROTHER WAS AWAY AT COLLEGE?

A. My brother was away at college, yeah. And then my mother and I didn't like Florida. I, for one, didn't like the heat. Didn't like the flatness. Didn't like the sand, didn't like the bugs. This was before everything was air-conditioned, and in the summers it would get horribly hot.

So we decided to leave and we pulled up stakes once again and went for the summer to North Carolina. My brother joined us there. And we had a very fine summer there at a resort that was at the time brand new, little pine cottages near a lake. And

we swam and boated and that was very nice.

And then my mother's mother came to join us and my mother took the train up to New York to meet my grandmother's boat--or ship, I should say, and my father and my brother and I drove across the country to--which was quite an adventure in those days, you know, staying in motor courts and so forth. And my mother and grandmother took the train across and we surprised them in Salt Lake City, where their train was stopped. We happened to be there the same day, the same evening and we came and surprised them. And my poor grandmother had been in bed already and she had her teeth out and she came to the train in her gums--or came to the door.

At any rate, then we rendezvoused in Santa Monica, I think it was, and we stayed in Santa Monica in a hotel or sort of a hotel-apartment for several weeks while my parents looked around for a place to stay, to settle.

This was in August of '47. And they didn't find anything they liked and so we went to Santa Barbara, which my father had enjoyed when he was on one of his winter trips before, during the war. And that was in the fall of '47. We rented an apartment, small apartment. My parents and my grandmother and I. My parents had the bedroom, my grandmother and I slept on--I slept on a sofa bed and my grandmother slept on

one of those murphy beds that pulls out of the wall, you know?

And we stayed there, and my parents bought a lot and hired an architect and built a house. I'm impressed at the decisiveness and energy with which they did these things.

And by the following May, I think it was, we moved into our house, which was a very comfortable ranch-style southern-California-type house with a big patio. And I had my own bedroom, finally. And a nice yard and all that. And I was in high school.

I had started high school in Santa Barbara. And that was where I graduated from high school.

Q. AND DID THE REST OF YOUR FAMILY--YOUR FATHER NEVER WORKED, YOU SAY, AGAIN?

A. Right. Right. My father, as I said, traveled a lot, took up various hobbies, went fishing, drove me around before I had a car when I was in high school, and so on. It was nice having him around.

Q. WHAT HAPPENED AFTER GRADUATING FROM HIGH SCHOOL, TO YOU, PERSONALLY?

A. I wanted desperately to go away to college, you know, like most kids do. I wanted to go east. But my parents said, "No. One of the reasons we moved here is that there is a college here and you're going to go here. And if you like, you can transfer after a couple of years."

So I started college at what was then called Santa Barbara College of the University of California, which was up on the hill on what was called the Riviera up above the mission, and I had a wonderful time.

I hadn't enjoyed high school at all. I found the social atmosphere very snobbish and stultifying and intellectually it was nothing to write home about, either, and in college everything was different. Kids respected you-- they weren't kids. There were a lot of veterans there at the time.

It was a much more sophisticated, mature atmosphere. Intellectually it was much more challenging. I loved my courses and my professors and made lots of friends and dated and did all those things that you do. But then, after five semesters, many of my friends who were older than I had graduated, and I started feeling like a big fish in a little pond, and so I transferred to Berkley, where my brother was then a graduate student. And I came up to Berkley with two other girls and we rented an apartment.

Q. WHAT YEAR WAS THAT?

A. That was in '52.

Q. '52?

A. '52. I was a high junior--I'm sorry. '53.

It was in January or February of '53. I had spent the

summer session of '52 in Berkley. My brother had an apartment on Hillgard Avenue and he was going to be away for the summer, and so I stayed in his place for the summer session, and that was my introduction to Berkley, which I liked a lot.

I found it very stimulating and very exciting, and so I had decided that if I liked it there and my parents had agreed, that I could transfer after the fall semester. Even my father agreed to let me do this. He was --

A. WHAT WAS YOUR MAJOR?

A. English. I had wanted to go into journalism. While I was in high school, the best thing that happened to me in high school was that I took news writing and journalism classes from a woman called Dorothy--well, she's not Dorothy Brubeck. She married Dave Brubeck's brother, who was the band teacher at school. But her name was Dorothy Westfall at the time. Miss Westfall. And she was a very inspiring teacher to me. She was an independent, bright woman who dressed nicely in little suits and she was very--she was just very bright and much more modern and creative than most of our teachers.

And I got really involved in the school paper. I was the co-editor of the feature page, and I did a lot of writing and I fell in love with journalism. And I was going to be a big time foreign

correspondent or something like that. But Santa Barbara college didn't have a journalism department and so I majored in English as a fallback position. And then, when I transferred, people told me, Oh, the Cal Journalism Department is not any good and you shouldn't major in that.

Besides, I had begun to believe that journalism was a little bit--not snazzy enough, or a little bit low-life, and that I should continue majoring in English, and so I did that and I got my BA and MA in English from Berkley; BA in '54 and MA in '56.

Q. AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A. Well, and then what happened was that I didn't have a job. But I had gotten a Fulbright to go to Vienna in '56. And so I did. And I wasn't very happy there for a lot of reasons.

For one thing, I had just had a major romantic disappointment and the trip to Vienna, which should have been a tremendous high and a great achievement in my life, became something that was second-best because I had thought I was going to get married and live the '50's housewife life or something along those lines. And instead of that I, quote, had to go to Vienna.

So I did. And Vienna at the time--this was 1956--the Russians had just pulled out in '55. It was

still a very deprived, depressing kind of place. There wasn't much to eat that was--you know, in the winter time, the vegetables--I remember going into a store to see if I could get some vegetables, and I said, don't you have any vegetables? And they said, well, we have potato and cabbage. That was sort of it.

Besides which, I didn't have very much money and I was always saving money to go on trips to Italy and France and so forth, which was my real goal. So I economized on myself a lot. And the room that I rented was also not terribly satisfactory. So I had kind of a hard time in Vienna that year.

I found the Viennese on the surface very charming and friendly, but immediately below that surface, extremely distant and cold and remote. And I had some relatives there, relatives of my mother's and they would invite me to dinner and--but even there, I didn't feel much warmth. I didn't feel much contact with them.

Q. DO YOU SENSE THAT THEY FELT THEY WERE A DEFEATED NATION AND YOU WERE THE CONQUERER, IN ANY SENSE?

A. Oh, I suppose there was that, yeah. And there was a kind of defensiveness.

Q. THEY WERE OCCUPIED?

A. Yeah. Yeah. There was that. I think most

of the landlords gouged us kids pretty badly, as much as they could.

And then there was a lot of defensiveness about the Holocaust. By this time I was well aware of my background and of being gentile--or at least being of gentile background, which I hadn't been, really, until I was in college, I would say, and everybody you met would say things like, "Oh, well, we hid Jews," and "We helped the Jews," and da, da, da, every single one! I found that a little suspicious. But, you know, what could you do.

Q. WHAT WERE YOU DOING ON YOUR FULBRIGHT?

A. What was I--it was a "comp lit," comparative literature project, having to do with modern Austrian literature, and I enrolled in some classes at the university, but I didn't care for them at all. It wasn't the kind of university experience I was accustomed to, where you had discussion, you know, and you got to know your professors and this kind of thing. It was totally different.

The students would sit there and the professor would come in and he would read his lecture and the students would ... (tapping on the floor)... bang their feet on the floor in lieu of applause and the professor would leave and that would be the end of that. And you never got to know him. It was always "him," of course.

I didn't get to know very many of my fellow students, either. Although my German was--it was rusty when I got there, but it soon got better. And so I didn't do too much by way of my Fulbright project, to be quite honest with you. But I had some very nice trips to Italy and France.

Q. AND YOU WERE CLOSE TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA, OF COURSE, WHICH WAS THEN BEHIND WHAT WE CALL THE IRON CURTAIN?

A. Indeed it was.

Q. WERE YOU ABLE TO GET IN THERE, OR WERE YOU INCLINED TO TRY TO GET IN THERE?

A. I was so severely discouraged from even trying, because people felt it would be dangerous, and probably was. I don't know. I don't know whether it really was or whether that was just fear and paranoia. But I never even tried. I don't know if it would have been possible to get a visa or what. I went later, many times.

Q. THE COLD WAR WAS VERY COLD?

A. It was very cold.

This was the year of Hungary, you know, the

--

Q. '56.

A. '56, the Hungarian thing, and some of the people I knew, some of the American students went down to the border and helped Hungarians to get across.

Spring
One of my colleagues in the Fulbright group was a woman called (Georgienne Guyer), Gigi Guyer, a journalist I'm sure you know of, and she has written in a memoir that she published, a book, about how she went down there and helped those people escape and had a romance with one of them, and so forth. But I was not involved in that.

I was not political until much later in my life.

Q. And YOU STILL WERE EMOTIONALLY SMARTING FROM YOUR BROKEN ROMANCE?

A. Yes, yes.

And then I got involved in another romance there, which was even more traumatic in other ways. So it was personally, for me, a very difficult year.

Q. IT WAS A YEAR?

A. It was a year, yeah. I left in June but I traveled for pretty much the rest of the summer with various friends who came over from the states, went to Denmark and Holland I think and England, spent quite a lot of time in England and Scotland and had a very nice time.

I was still without any job to come back to, so I wrote to some professor in my department at Berkley to see if I could get my teaching assistantship back, and I was able to do that, and so I came back to Berkley, so I fell right back into the

old routine as a TA and a graduate student, although I really didn't want to get a Ph.D. I was in the Ph.D. program, but that was because I had nothing else to do.

And in the spring of--this would be '58, I got a part-time job teaching at San Francisco State, and so I dropped out of graduate school and I taught at State, and meanwhile I was applying for jobs elsewhere and got a job at what was then Oakland Junior College for the fall and stayed there for the rest of my working life. It became Oakland City College and then Merit College.

Q. TEACHING WHAT?

A. Teaching English, mainly. My dream job would have been to get a job at San Francisco City College. That was what I really wanted.

And in fact I had been interviewed for a job there before I went to Vienna and I was told later that they had been about to offer it to me. But then when I came back, they didn't offer me a job, and so I took the job at Oakland Junior College which was in a--not a very fine neighborhood, and sort of a slummy neighborhood, and didn't have a very good reputation. But I had a fine career there, I think, in a lot of ways.

Q. HOW LONG DID YOU WORK AT --

A. How long? 33 years.

Q. IS THAT RIGHT?

A. Yeah. The last years I wasn't full-time, most of the time, because I was doing other things; I was writing more and so forth.

Q. WHAT ABOUT PERSONALLY? WERE YOU MARRIED AND--

A. No. I didn't get married until I was 38. I had a series of apartments and cottages and so forth, and I had a cottage in '6--I traveled a lot in the summers. I used to go to Europe sometimes for three months.

In '63 I took a semester off and went to Israel, stayed there for six weeks, and then I traveled around Europe. And by this time I had started writing film reviews, and I found that I could go to film festivals in different places and they would put me up and I could see a lot of films and could write to magazines at home about my experiences, you know, about films I had seen, and so I spent a summer gloriously doing that from Venice to Cannes to Berlin. A lot of different film festivals. I think I went to five film festivals that year of '63.

The following year, I went--no, it was that year I went to Czechoslovakia, back to Czechoslovakia for the first time, and that was still dicey at that time. It was hard to get a visa, and in fact I had applied for a visa.

Nothing happened. Nothing happened. I was in Berlin, I was waiting to hear and I met a Czech film reviewer, film critic and he ran interference for me and suddenly I had a visa. And so I went to Czechoslovakia that summer.

Q. SUMMER OF '64?

Spelling
A. '63. Stayed in Prague for several weeks, and went up to my old home town of (Alsiger Uste), saw our old house, which had been broken down into about five apartments, and was looking very shabby, although I understand that since then it's been fixed up and is looking much better.

It was a very strange experience for me and very interesting. I liked it very much. And I went back to Prague many times.

At any rate, aside from that I was teaching and I was writing mostly film reviews, although not regularly, and in 1969 I met my husband, Fred Schmidt--although he wasn't my husband then--in 1970, we got married, August 1st. And we've been married ever since.

Q. ANY CHILDREN?

A. No. No.

Q. AND YOU LIVED IN?

A. Berkley.

My husband--at the time I met him was teaching at Merit College. And then went to San

Francisco State--well, then he taught at Alameda for a while and then at State and--but now for maybe 15, 20 years he's been at College of Marin in computer science.

Q. AND YOU NO LONGER TEACH?

A. No, I retired in 1991.

Q. AND WHAT ARE YOUR ACTIVITIES NOW? YOU DO WRITING?

A. I do a lot of writing. I still write film reviews. I have for about the past--nearly 20 years I think I've written regularly, that is either monthly or weekly, for one or more publications, from the Berkley Monthly, and the Berkley Gazette, the Center Independent Journal, and then for maybe the past ten years or so the Pacific Sun, and for the past seven or eight years or so, the Hills chain of papers in East Bay, Mt. Clarion, Berkley Voice, the Albany Journal, et cetera, et cetera, and I do a fair amount of travel writing. I travel quite a bit. And I've published a lot of that.

And then I do kind of all-purpose journalism. I'm right now working on an article about a spinner, a woman who spins, and about the process of spinning. So I enjoy that a lot.

I travel, as I say. I swim every day.

Q. AND YOU SAID YOU GO BACK TO PRAGUE FREQUENTLY OR HAD OVER THE YEARS?

A. I have over the years.

I haven't been there since 1990. That was the last time we went. After the fall of the communist regime, things were already very different in Prague. And I don't--I'm a little hesitant to go back because the communist era was of course very difficult for people there. On the other hand, there was kind of a camaraderie that I don't think exists anymore with the coming of capitalism.

Q. DO YOU HAVE ANY SENSE THAT--OR HAVE YOU REFLECTED ON HOW YOUR LIFE MIGHT HAVE BEEN HAD YOU NOT BEEN FORCED TO LEAVE WITH YOUR FAMILY AT THE AGE OF SIX?

A. Oh, many times. Many times. Of course it's very hard to predict, you know? To know what would have happened.

The world was changing anyway. If it hadn't been for the war and if it hadn't been for other changes in the world I probably would have grown up and married somebody--some friend of my parents, son of a friend of my parents, my father's--oh, my father's law partner was called (Oigen) or *Spelling* Eugene--like you--Mahler, by the way, M-A-H-L-E-R. My brother had announced that he was going to marry Oigen Mahler's daughter when he was, you know, four or five years old, something like that.

I probably would have gone to university,

although I was--and am--the first woman in my family to go to university. My mother didn't go, my grandmothers of course didn't. I probably would have gone to university. I might have had a career, probably would have married. But society has changed--probably would have changed anyway even without the war.

Who knows if I would have stayed in Czechoslovakia. You know, maybe I would have ended up in France or in England or in the United States or in Vienna or--who knows. It's one of those "what if's" that you can't really answer, but it's kind of tantalizing to think about.

Q. DO YOU THINK, OR HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT, WHAT HAPPENED TO LOTS OF MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY?

A. Oh, I've thought about it a great deal.

In fact --

Q. HAS THAT AFFECTED YOU?

A. Yeah. Yeah. It has. In ways that are not easy to put your finger on. But these letters of my grandmother's, I've read them over countless, countless times, because when I first started working on them, as I said, about 20 years ago, and then I came back to them about a year and a half ago, and re-edited them and put them on disc, and--well, just as a sort of immediate example, there are times when I--you know, if I feel cold or--or I have to postpone

or skip a meal or something, I feel hungry, I always think, well, you compare yourself to Aunt Lena or to *Spelling* (Momena), which is what we called my grandmother, what they went through.

It sort of trivializes one's own experiences, in a way. And I ask myself how would I have--how would I have conducted myself in that time? Would I have had the courage my parents did to get up and leave or would I have been tied to my furniture and my habits and my custom ways, the way they were?

And how would I have behaved if, you know, I had been taken away to the camps like they were? You never get away from that question. And as far as other effects on me, I don't know. I've all my life felt different from other people. I mean, from people around me because of my background, because, you know, I'm not really a native of anyplace I've lived for any length of time.

And I guess for other reasons as well, but how that's affected me in a practical way, I don't really know.

Q. YOU JUST KNOW THAT IT HAS AFFECTED YOU?

A. Yeah.

Q. Is there anything else at all that you remember or want to reflect upon about your lifetime experiences?

A. It will all come back to me after I leave

here--but I don't, no.

Q. WELL, THANK YOU VERY MUCH. I THINK YOU HAVE
AN INTERESTING STORY.

A. Thank you.