

My name is Constance Bernstein. And I'm talking to Ernest Rosenthal at the Holocaust Oral History Project Center in San Francisco. And the date is December 19, 1990. Ernest, I like to begin these interviews with a background history of you, your childhood, where you were born, your mother, your father, what they did, how many brothers and sisters you had, a general history of you growing up.

All right. I was born in Konstanz, Germany on July 23, 1920. I was an only child. Neither of my parents were born in that city. They both came from other places in Germany.

My father came from a very small little village near Frankfurt, 1 of 12 children. Very poor family. And when he got out of school, he became an apprentice the way it was customary in Europe. Became an apprentice and then worked for other people.

And later ended up as a traveling representative for a fabric house in another city called Krefeld, which is near the Dutch border in the Rhineland. And worked for someone who happens to be or happened to be the uncle of my mother. My mother was considerably younger than my father.

She, in turn, went to work after she got out of school as what they called a volunteer, an unpaid volunteer in a fabric retail store in Mannheim, Germany. And this was a customer of my father's. And that's how they met. And they started a courtship, which was interrupted by World War I when my father served in the German army in the Western Front.

And to make a long story short, they got married on December 31, 1918, right at the end of the war. I was born two years later. My father then bought a business in Konstanz and ran it successfully until my parents finally left Germany in 1940. That, in a nutshell, is my background.

OK. Tell me about your father's family. You said that there were 12 children and they were very poor. What did they do? What did they do, his father?

His father was a cattle dealer. He lived, as I said, it was a very, very small village. And he went from one person to another and traded cattle, sold it to be slaughtered for whatever they do with animals, calves, cows, and so forth. And he barely eked out a living.

And so your father had 11 siblings?

Yes, actually, when I was born, there were only eight left. Two were killed in World War I fighting in the German army. And two died of natural causes.

And so were the eight brothers and sisters all over Germany or did they--

No, not all over Germany. Most of them were in the Frankfurt area or a little bit away from it down along the Rhine in the city called Bingen. But, basically, they were all there. We were the furthest away from where they were living.

So you used to visit them?

I used to visit them on summer vacations. Spent summer in the country, or something like that. Those were fond memories until after 1933 when things changed very radically, very rapidly.

But up until that time, you would go for the summers there?

Yes.

To your cousins and aunts and uncles?

Right. And my father used to go on business to Frankfurt, where they had a trade fair every year. It was internationally

known in those days. And I would go along with my parents. My mother was active in his business too. And they would be there working while I would stay with one of my uncles and have a good time.

And your mother's family was from where?

My mother's family came from Krefeld, from the Rhineland. Their background was, on her father's side, they had lived there forever. And my great-grandfather was a dealer in woolens and stuff imported from England and Ireland and traveled extensively. They were very educated and highly successful.

On her mother's side, my history was a little more interesting. I would say my grandmother's father as a young man came to the United States and settled first in upstate New York and later in Cincinnati, Ohio. I really don't know what he did there except that he met a young mechanic by the name of Singer, who later invented the sewing machine. And he financed him partially in this endeavor. For a reason that is unknown to me and my mother didn't know, is he moved to Russia.

My goodness.

He was an American citizen and moved to Russia. He was married by the American Council in Moscow to his wife, who was also from Germany originally. And they settled in Kharkov, where he had a department store, what they called a department store in those days. And, apparently, he was quite successful. He made a lot of money invested in oil wells in Baku.

And early retired back to Germany retaining his American citizenship all the time. And he died as an enemy alien during World War I in Germany. And that's my mother's background.

I don't know if this is of interest or not, but, Basically, my mother's family was very assimilated. The type of story that you hear about German Jews here. Totally assimilated, not religious at all.

My father's family was ultra-Orthodox. And somehow there was a merger and a meeting of mind when they got married. And I grew up in an observant home, but not an Orthodox home. But we kept all the holidays, we went to synagogue, I learned Hebrew, and whatever sort of is expected.

And you said that your mother went to work as a volunteer?

Yes. What that meant is that young ladies of well-to-do families, it was considered necessary for them to learn something. And, in those days, it wasn't customary usually to go to university, so she was sent to learn a trade. Basically, she worked for somebody, but she wasn't paid for it. And that was considered socially more acceptable.

And what did her father do?

Her father originally was in his parents' business, in his father's business. And then later, he tried things on his own. He was not successful, unfortunately. He was a wonderful person, but he was not a businessman, and that is what broke up my grandparent's marriage, which was unusual in those days.

Very.

Yeah.

What was that? I mean, that he couldn't make money?

He didn't make enough money and my grandmother came from a very wealthy background. And I don't know what actually transpired. I'm just assuming that somehow her parents must have persuaded her to leave him.

They never were divorced. They never spoke a bad word about each other, but they separated. And my grandmother

together with my mother moved in with my great-grandparents, who lived at that time in Konstanz.

They settled here because it's a beautiful, beautiful city and one of the most picturesque parts of Germany or Switzerland. It's right between the Alps and the Black Forest, and it's just lovely. So that's how I happened to be born there.

So your mother came back to that place when she got married.

Mm-hmm.

And her mother was there then?

Yes.

Interesting because divorce was so unusual at that time.

It was, yeah.

And your mother never remarried?

My grandmother.

Your grandmother.

No. No. She died when I was four years old.

And what about your mother's brothers and sisters?

She was an only child.

She was an only child?

Mm-hmm. Just in parenthesis, as I said, she was born and my grandfather's family lived near the Dutch border. His family also was a large family. There were also 10 children. He was the oldest.

But at least four of sisters married to Holland. They married Dutch people. And that more or less saved my life afterwards because I went to live with one of them in Holland.

But that's an interesting combination. Your mother and your father, your father coming from the Orthodox family with 12 children, and your mother being the only child.

Right.

So it must have been an interesting combination.

It was, but it was a very good marriage.

So that's how I got to Lake Konstanz?

Right.

And your father started a business there?

Right.

And you were the first child?

I was the only child.

The only child? And tell me about your school? Did there were other Jewish children or families in Konstanz?

Yes. We had a congregation of about 400 families, some of whom lived on the German side of the border and some of whom lived on the Swiss side. Actually, the city was 2/3 German and 1/3 Swiss. The name changed on the Swiss side, but it was really one city in those days.

And people would go freely across the border and you didn't need any documentation. Nobody ever asked for a passport or anything. But you all had one, but you didn't even show it, and it was back and forth.

And religious training, which in both Germany and Switzerland is part of the regular school curriculum, was combined. The Swiss kids would come over across the border and join the classes with us. There were, as I said, 400 Jewish families. And probably in my age group in my class in school, there must have been about seven or eight Jewish children, maybe more. So it was a pretty active Jewish life.

Officially, the congregation was Orthodox because that's the way it was, but people weren't very observant. And very few people kept kosher for instance. And most people worked on Saturdays.

Some of them stayed even open on the high holidays if they had stores or something like that. They called it liberal. Here you would call it conservative leaning towards reform.

And your father had a textile store there?

Not a store, he had a wholesale and manufacturing business.

And did he stay open on Sundays?

Yes. He went to synagogue and I went to work.

So were you very aware of your Jewishness when you were growing up?

Yes, yes. Friday night was Shabbat. We made knish. We had a different kind of meal. And we said the Birkat Hamazon after meals. We observed most formalities and I was brought up in a-- really a Jewish home.

And what kind of school did you go to?

I went to public school for four years. And then I went to-- in Germany, you paid for your higher education. Only those people who could afford it went to what you would call a high school here, but it started at fifth grade. And I went there until the day I left, which was in 1935.

So how many years was that you were in the private school?

Five years. I had a total of about 8 and 1/2 years of schooling that was my formal education period.

So how old were you when you left, in 1935, the school?

I left in '35. In 1935, a distant cousin from my American side-- as I told you, my great-grandfather came here. One of his brothers also came here. They stayed here.

And one of his children happened to be visiting in Zurich in Switzerland, which is only 40 miles from where we lived.

And we went to visit her. We were sitting there at the Dolder Grand Hotel, which is still the hotel in Zurich, it was then, too, and listening to Hitler ranting and raving on the radio proclaiming his racial laws at Nuremberg at the party meeting.

And when he was finished, my mother came and sat next to me. She said, Ernest, I think you should leave Germany. And I said-- I was 15, I said whatever you think. And she said I'll write to Holland. And a few weeks later, we got the answer, send him. And so in October of '35, I left.

Now tell me about the time of building up to that in school. Did you feel any anti-Semitism? At what point did you begin to feel the anti-Semitism? Did you or had you always felt this difference?

No, actually, Konstanz was probably less anti-Semitic than many other parts of Germany. I'm talking now in pre-Hitler days. But it was always in the air. Sort of meander around here a little bit.

I remember when I must have been about 9 or 10 years old, one winter my parents took me for a winter vacation together with a friend of ours to a little village in the Bavarian Alps. And I remember meeting one of the party officials sitting there in the restaurant because that was a real sort of cradle of Nazism. It wasn't far from Munich.

And while we were up there, my mother shushed me and said don't talk so loud. There was this fellow, S-- I'm trying to remember who he was. He was later killed in the Putsch in early '33 after Hitler took power. If you remember, they had the Night of the Daggers, he was one of the people, but he was one of the high party officials.

You were always told to be cautious. Jews were to be seen but not to be heard, so to speak. And you wanted to be inconspicuous. So that was one of my early recollections.

And how old were you then?

About eight or nine. This was before '33. The apartment house we lived in was right across the street from where I went to high school. And I'll never forget-- the 31st of January, Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. And on January 31, 1933, the next day, during intermission in the morning, I happened to go home for whatever reason it was.

We had a 20-minute intermission and we'd go outside and used to play or whatever. And sometimes some of my friends and I would go to the house. And while we were there, we saw an SS and an SA man-- one wore a black uniform and one a brown uniform-- enter the school. And they came out a few minutes later with the director of the school.

And they stood there giving the Nazi salute. And they lowered the flag on the school, the old Weimar Republic flag, and raised the black, white, and red flag, which was the imperial flag of Germany before World War I, and also the swastika on the school. And then they all stood there and sang the "Horst Wessel Song." That was my introduction to the Nazi period. It was the very next day.

In the apartment house next to us around the corner was one of the leaders of the party. And his kid also went to class with me. I remember his name to this date, his name was an Italian name, Sepaloni. And I was just scared to be anywhere near that kid.

His father used to start running around in his uniform. And he had a dagger on the side, which was a sign that he was an old fighter, that he had joined very early in the movement in the '20s. You started to be fearful.

Most of my friends up until that point were not Jewish. I had good many Jewish friends, but most of my friends were gentile. There was no difference. And slowly some of them started to drop, not all of them.

There was one fellow who had problems in school keeping up, and one of our teachers had suggested that I tutor him. I was a very good student. And he kept coming for about a year, and then he started making excuses. He didn't want to be seen in our house.

In the apartment below us lived an official of the police department. I should say that the owner of the apartment houses is usually pretty much all the same. Each apartment covered the whole floor and there were usually four floors. The owner of the building lived above us, he was Jewish also. The other two families weren't.

The people below us, the husband was a police official. He was in charge of the issuance of passports. And we used to be very, very friendly. They were good Catholics. They were members of the Catholic party.

And all of a sudden, his entire demeanor changed. And very shortly thereafter, he wore a swastika in his lapel. And he hardly talked to us.

They used to invite me to come down and look at their Christmas tree and things like that, no more. There was no social contact whatsoever. And sometime later, when I applied for a passport, he gave us a really hard time. He yelled at my mother just to make a show that he doesn't like Jews.

So slowly things started to change. By 1935 when these racial laws were promulgated, things had changed considerably. Unfortunately, business was very good and my father was busy and, like most German Jews, they made the mistake of thinking that things might change. But my parents did have the foresight to send us away.

To come back to my summers when I used to go to visit my relatives. I had one favorite aunt, she lived about 40 or 50 miles north of Frankfurt. Her husband had a, what you would call, a general store here. And he sold just about everything in there, mostly groceries, but many other things, dry goods, and so forth.

And he not only had people coming into the store, but he had a car. And he'd go to the outlying farms and so forth and visit them once a week and take their orders and deliver the stuff the next week. I used to love that. And I knew all the young children in my age in that village.

I started going there probably around 1930 for the first time, maybe '29. And every summer we'd play and things. In 1933, they started throwing rocks at me and started calling me names. They're not going to play with a Jew. And so that was my real first physical encounter with people like that.

And you were 13 at the time?

I was 13, yes.

Must have been very difficult.

It was. It was a real shocker. But on the whole, things weren't really bad until the racial laws were made public and numerous clauses was established where only 1% of the population in high school and universities could be Jewish. Well, exempted from that was children of people who had fought in combat in World War I.

Well, my father had fought in the German army. He was a combat soldier. So we were exempt. But things were really becoming very intolerable.

So you were able to stay at school.

I stayed in school.

But friends of yours had to leave?

Well, they didn't have to leave because several people started moving away slowly. A family would move to South America. Some of the people were fortunate, they were able to move to Switzerland. Not too many, but we were so close to the border, and some of them had either married Swiss wives or had relatives there, and they managed to get out. So the number of students remaining in the school really was below the quota.

Now tell me, before '33 when the racial laws became known, was there any discussion in your home between your mother and your father about leaving? Or what was the discussion between your mother and your father?

Very little that I remember. There was some discussion about leaving, but it seems so incongruous. Everybody thought this thing can't last. And everybody figured maybe France and England will step in.

I remember the day when Hitler marched into the Rhineland, which was probably in '34 when he sent the troops into the demilitarized zone in the Rhineland. It happened to be Purim, I remember that. And there was a Purim party for kids of my age at somebody's house.

And I was walking with my father going there, and we talked about it. And my father said, oh, the French are going to move in. This will be over in no time. Everybody expected it. But it didn't happen. Nobody moved, nobody did anything.

Obviously, your mother was a little more cynical or skeptical about this, or was she? Because she was the one who suggested that you go to--

Well, she's the one who talked to me. I'm sure that she had discussed it with my father before she did.

Now what about your father's business? Were there any laws before '33 that started to change his business?

No.

So what happened? OK, you were in Switzerland the day that they left.

No, no, no, I was in-- oh, that day, yes.

The day that the announcements--

Yeah.

--were made about the racial laws. And so after that, how did life change for you and your mother and your father?

Well, one of the things we had to do is let our maid go because you weren't allowed to have a maid below the age of 40 because they accused Jewish men of sleeping with the maids. That was one of the reasons for that. So we had to find somebody above the age of 40 at that time. And we did.

That was not a major change, but it was something that had to be done immediately. Other than that, we really weren't affected, except, at that point, you started to see the handwriting on the wall, and you figured things will get worse. So that's why my mother suggested to me that I go to Holland thinking that I would come back, but just in case. And I'd be out of the reach of the Nazis.

But she didn't think about leaving or your father?

No, because for some reason or other everybody was always optimistic it would change.

So what did happen then after-- it took how long for you to get to Holland from that time?

Well, this was in September. I left Germany in October 23, so about five, six weeks later--

That was really quick.

--right in the middle of the school year.

Very quick.

And just another little sideline. We had one teacher who had joined the Nazi party in about 1923 or 1924, one of the real earliest ones. I remember when he came to our school from some smaller town where he had been transferred as a penalty because he was a Nazi at one time and he had made some pro-Nazi remarks in probably 1928 or 1929.

Well, when Hitler came to power, he was transferred back. And he turned out to be our teacher. He was my English and French teacher. And the day that I left school to say goodbye to-- there was another Jewish boy who, incidentally, lived in San Francisco afterwards, too, but he managed to get to Switzerland. But he didn't want to be alone in the class, the only Jewish boy, so he left the same day.

And this man stood in front of the class and he says, I'm an old Nazi, but I don't believe in these racial laws. I think it's a crime that I have to lose my two best students because of these racial laws. And this was really something for somebody to get up in public at that point because the fear was so pervasive wherever you went that he took a chance, but I'll never forget that.

He is the only one I went to see when I first came back to Germany after the war. And he was an old man. And he got out of his chair. I walked in his house and he said, Rosenthal, I have to get up. I want to apologize to you for what we did to you.

He says we were guilty. He says, I know what went on. He was an officer during the war in the army. He says, I rode in on a train with an SS officer who told me about the camps and how they were killing the Jews. We knew about it. He says we were guilty. It's the only German I ever met who did that. But to get back, where were we?

Well, we were at the day you left your school. And so the only Jewish children in the class left together. Was there anyone else Jewish left in the school at that time?

There were a few left in the school.

But most had left or--

A lot of them had left. I had several friends who left about six months before I did. In what they call the Children's Transport, they all went to New York, about five or six young children. They came mostly from families who had some financial hardships.

And I don't know what committee it was here, I suspect it was the National Council of Jewish Women who brought them to New York. And they lived there. They were parked with families there as they were raised in various Jewish families.

In '33 already?

No, this was early '35 in probably February or March. And I'm still in touch. My best friend was one of them. And I'm still in touch with him. He's back in New York.

I was going to ask you if you knew what happened to those kids.

Yeah. No. And later when I came to the United States, I got together with them-- with some of them anyway.

But '35, that was rather early for people to be moved out by committees outside the place--

Well, this is really the only case that I knew of. Much later, my wife was bought out in '39. She went to England.

This was six years before?



Yeah.

Well, all right. So what happened to you at that day after you left school? What happened to you then?

Well, within a few days, I went to Holland. My father drove me there. And you have to realize, my father still was very active in his business and he did a lot of traveling. He had his own car.

And he sort of made a business trip towards the Dutch border. And then we took the train and went to Rotterdam. That's where I lived.

And I worked there. I had to work. I was 15 years old.

So that was it for school?

That was it for school.

And you went to live--

Actually, while I was in Holland, I went to work full time. I went to school at night to study English and bookkeeping just to get some kind of training.

Those were good to know.

And I worked in a relative's business. They were in the watch and clock business importing to Holland wholesale and I worked there. And I still had a German passport. And I went back, I guess, twice until 1937.

In '38, or late '37, Germany passed a law that anyone who had left Germany, if they came back, they had to be re-educated, which meant a concentration camp. So that was the end of that. But my father still had his passport. And he used to come and visit me twice a year.

In '36 and '37?

'36 and '37 and '38. He was visiting me in March of 1938 on the weekend when Hitler marched into Austria. And we were listening to this thing. I was listening to the radio when things were happening.

And at that time, my father said I think you ought to get out of Europe. How would you like to go to America? And I said if you think that's right.

So my mother had good friends in New York. To go back a little, her grandparents were Americans. Her mother was born an American citizen in Russia at the time. In Konstanz, there were two or three other ex-American families living, and they had all been very close.

And the sons of one of those families, who were my mother's age, had come to this country in 1916 before the United States entered the war. They wanted to be out of Germany and became very successful business people in New York. And my mother was in touch with them. And she wrote to them and they sent me an affidavit of support, which is what you needed to come to the States.

And I applied for an American visa in Rotterdam. And after some shenanigans, about six months later, I got my visa. And, eventually, I came here.

About two weeks after I came, on a Sunday morning-- I was staying with an aunt, a sister of my mother's, they were in New York-- a Western Union boy arrived on a Sunday morning with a telegram to me. And it came from the Swiss side of the border in my hometown from friends saying Father in Dachau. Send papers. That was--

What's that mean?

Well, that was-- Kristallnacht was on a Thursday night. Sunday morning, I had a telegram that my father was in Dachau. And what it meant is that I should send an affidavit of support.

I had no job. This was the end of the depression. It was very hard to find work in New York. But I went to the same friends who had helped me come over here. And they gave me the necessary papers, which we sent to the American consulate in Germany.

And my mother was notified that papers had been received and I was given a waiting number and so forth. And probably she took that to the Gestapo. And the fact that my father had been a combat soldier in World War I and he was 57 or 58 years old at the time probably contributed to the fact that he was released.

He was released in the end of January. And my parents got a visa in 1940 about a little over a year later. So they were very fortunate to get out.

So tell me what had happened to-- OK, back to when you were in Holland and you were living with your relatives and working for two years, was there any anti-Semitism in Holland?

No, no. None whatsoever.

Did people know what was going on in Germany?

Oh, yes. Generally speaking, there was a lot of anti-German sentiment in Holland. There was a boycott of German goods, an unofficial boycott. But not just Jews but gentiles still wouldn't buy anything German. They hated the Germans at that point.

They used to joke about it. They said we don't have to worry, the Germans will never attack Holland. We'll just put up signs along the border. [SPEAKING GERMAN] It's forbidden to enter. And the Germans will obey and turn around. Unfortunately, it didn't work that way. I lost a lot of my Dutch relatives.

When Germany invaded Holland?

Yeah.

So you were there for two years and--

Three years.

Three years. What was happening to your mother and father in the meantime in terms of your father's business? You saw him occasionally when he came to see you and you were back there twice.

No, they were doing quite well. I'll never forget, for one of my parents' birthdays-- I don't remember whether it was my mother or my father-- I sent them a German book that I bought in a department store. I didn't know what the book it was. One of the Lion Feuchtwanger's books.

And somehow it got through the customs without anybody opening it. And my mother got it. And she took one look at it and burnt it because it was one of the prohibited things. But it gave you an idea of the feeling. People were scared.

It was a very gradual process. And, of course, by '35 and '36, it was almost impossible to get out of Germany, not because you couldn't, the Germans wouldn't let you go. They would at that time, but there was no place where they would take you.

But your parents weren't trying to get out at that time were they or were they?

I think they were thinking about it, but there was no place to go. Those people who had friends or relatives somewhere could go. To come to the United States was virtually impossible at that point because we had the quota system and you just couldn't get in. It took forever to--

So how did you get in?

Well, I was lucky. I think the fact that I lived in Holland had something to do with it because I went on a German quota. The quota was assigned to the country of your birth. The German quota, I think, was like 20,000 a year. I don't remember exactly, but something like that.

And a certain amount of that was set aside for people who were living in other countries but who'd fall under the German quota. And when I went to the American consulate when they finally approved my coming here, I had to wait for the new quota year which started July 1 to get my visa. But they promised me I'd get one of the German visas that they were allowed.

So what about your father's business, it continued doing well?

It continued doing well. He lost some of his employees because they were scared to work for Jews. Some of them stuck it out, but most of them left. And he hired, at that point, some Jewish people who had lost their jobs.

And some of his customers wouldn't buy from him. But there were still, at that time, enough people left in Germany willing to do business with Jews. All of that changed November 9, 1938. And while my father was in Dachau, my mother was forced to sell the business.

How did that happen?

The Jews weren't allowed to have businesses anymore. And somebody that they knew, one of their suppliers, bought the business for peanuts. And that was it.

And they were just sitting-- well, my father was in Dachau for two more months or so and, eventually, he came home, but they couldn't do anything. He came home a broken man. He came home with a heart condition, which he didn't have when he went in.

He had lost a tremendous amount of weight. I mean, when I first started seeing him after they came here, he wouldn't talk about Dachau. After a while over a period of years, some of the stories came out. And it was pretty brutal even then.

What were some of the stories?

Well, they have this big square in Dachau. I went to see it a couple of years ago, and it still looked the way he described it. Every morning-- all they wore were thin pajamas, no underwear, nothing. No shoes or anything.

And winters get pretty bitter in-- Dachau was a suburb of Munich, and they would have them stand at attention in the square for 6, 7, 8 hours in the snow with no food in them. These were old people. Well, every Jewish male between the age of 18 and 60 was arrested that night.

And they would just stand there. Most of them caught pneumonia. As I said earlier to you, my father's best friend died. He got pneumonia and he died after two days.

They were malnourished. Some of them were beaten, maltreated, all depended on the whim of the gods. But it was pretty rough.

And how long did your father stay in Dachau?

From November 10 until, I think, early February.

Did he tell you any other stories about what happened to him?

No. I tried, he just wouldn't talk. It was just-- he clammed up. I remember having a record, which was made during the Spanish Civil War and I just put it on my phonograph at one time. And they sang-- this was made by the Republican volunteers or whatever it is.

And one of the songs was the [SPEAKING GERMAN] the song of the soldiers in the moors. I played that, my father says take that off. I can't hear it. And, apparently, that was a song of prisoners in concentration camps.

And he just wouldn't let me play it when he was around. It brought up such horrible memories. In the meantime, my mother had to take care of selling the business and doing all ones. She was quite a woman. Did she talk to you about that time?

Oh, yes.

And what was her story about what happened? How did the Gestapo come for your father?

[SIGHS] Pardon me?

How did the Gestapo come for your father?

Well, they came about 5:00 in the morning. There was a knock at the door, and they took him. And they wouldn't tell her where or what of anything. And she told me that the next day she happened to be walking downtown from where we lived-- the city is fairly compact, at that time, it was only by 35,000 people. It wasn't very big, it's much bigger now.

But she was walking, I guess, going to business or whatever it is, and she walked a slightly different route from her normal route. She walked by the prison. And they were just loading them up there. And she saw them loading them in trucks taking them to be shipped to Dachau. She happened to see all the Jewish men being loaded, so that was her first thing.

And one of the things that happened within a few days afterwards is two SS people came in uniform to the house. And they said we want your silver. And my mother, I guess, had the chutzpah to say, well, do you have an order or something? They said our uniform is your receipt.

And they took-- we had quite a bit of silver and other things and that was it. That's the last we saw of it. They took something like 20 kilos of silver, which is about close to 50 pounds. It's quite a lot.

And there were similar other things. The Jews were put on reduced rations. The food was already rationed. And, of course, I guess, she had to sell the car, they had to get rid of the car.

Their passports were taken away. They could no longer go across to Switzerland. The fortunate thing is that the Swiss could still come to Germany. And, somehow, they kept in touch with the Jewish people. That's how the telegram came to me.

So Jews weren't allowed to have cars? Is that why your mother had to sell it?

Right.

And she didn't know where your father was all this time or she did know?

No, she found out. I don't know how she heard that he was in Dachau, but, I guess, all the Jews from my hometown were taken to Dachau.

And you had two postcards that your father had sent her from Dachau.

Right.

What did they say?

They talked that he's well and he hopes that my mother is well and just don't get too upset. And, hopefully, I'll come home again, something like that. They were somewhat cheerful. They were trying to cheer my mother up.

[INAUDIBLE] You can talk some more. So just at your convenience.

OK. Well, I have these two postcards. And I haven't read them in a long time. It writes to my mother. My mother's name was Jeanette, but they called her Ninny.

It says, "My dear Ninny, I was happy to see your letter that you're healthy. And I can tell you the same from here. I received your money. Please send me another 75 marks."

I can't quite read that. "I was very happy to hear that Ernest is well. About selling the business to Aryans," to non-Jews, obviously, "I spoke with Nathan."

I don't know who that was. That was probably some kind of a code word. "And please discuss this with him."

I'm sorry that you have to be so busy with all this. And I hope that you're able to sell a lot of the merchandise." I can't wait to visit here. Let's see what the other one says.

The interesting thing about that postcard is that half of it is empty, isn't it?

Yes. And, of course, all of this was censored. And it says, "Dear Wife." He never addressed her that way. Otherwise, that shows that he was under some kind of strain.

"I hope that you are well. And I'm also pretty well. Please pay attention to the printed remarks on the other side of the postcard with correspondence.

I can buy every week merchandise in the amount of 15 marks at the canteen, so if you send money, please write on the coupon which I get on the back side my complete address and date of birth and the block number. Send regards to Ernest, and kisses, Leo." And that's all there was.

Obviously, they weren't allowed to say anything. Basically, all he said is he asked for money. And then there's this third postcard which is just a postcard with a postmark and "Dachau" and nothing written on it. I don't know what the significance of that was.

Well, it's interesting, his handwriting looks-- was this not the first one that you just read?

This was the first one.

That was the first one?

Yeah, this is the second one.

Interesting. So how did your father get out? Why was he let out?

Well, two things. I managed to get the affidavit of support from our friends. And we sent that to the American consulate in Stuttgart, which was for that area of Germany.

And they sent an official notification to my mother that they had received that. And they gave him a number. Applications for visas were taken in order of receipt. And with that, she walked to the Gestapo and notified them that they had made an application to leave the country.

Also his age and the fact that he fought in the German Imperial Army during World War I apparently helped. And he got out, I think, it was in early March. So he was there for just about three months, a little less maybe.

And when he got out, did your mother tell about how he came home, when it was, and was she expecting him?

I don't know. I really don't know. And one of the things they did is they went to a photographer and had a portrait taken of the two of them, which they sent to me. I have it framed hanging in my house.

I was so shocked because my father's appearance was so changed. He was so thin and haggard. And when you pose for a photographer, you try to have a smile on your face or something. Nothing. It was just terrible.

So how much longer was it before they got over to America?

About just a little over a year. They left Germany in March 1940.

And what happened in that year? Did they tell you about that?

Well, they prepared for coming here, essentially. That's what it amounted to. Well, one of the things that happened is that in 19-- no, that was the night that all the Jews from that part of Germany were deported. But it was later after they left, I thought it was before and they weren't spared.

They were the first ones to be deported. But they weren't sent to concentration camps in the east, they were sent to Southern France.

Which is in Lake Konstanz?

The Jews in the province of Baden, Wurtemberg, and Palatinate, they were all sent to these camps, where they stayed for about a year or two. And then those who remained there, who survived there, they were eventually ended up in Auschwitz. Practically none of them came back.

But at that time, that wasn't happening yet. What my parents did is try to sell a lot of their things because they knew they couldn't take it with them. And I don't know, just tried to hang in there.

What did they leave with?

They left with some of their furniture and some of their personal belongings. Dishes and eating utensils, which weren't silver. And linen and that type of stuff. And that's what they came with.

Now what about your father's family, all of his brothers and sisters, what happened to them?

Two of them disappeared in the concentration camps. We found out that one brother died in Auschwitz with his wife. And then another brother apparently died somewhere in Lithuania in a camp. I don't know what became of his wife, but they were never heard from again.

Others managed to get out. Several of them had gotten out of Germany before then. They were here already when I arrived. I lived with one of his sisters.

And, well, that's it. Two of my uncles and aunts died and two of my cousins. The others all managed to get out. Some of them went to Israel, some of them came to this country.

So when was your reunion with your parents?

April 1, 1940.

In New York?

In New York.

Is that where you were living?

I was living in New York, yes. And they came by boat to New York. They came from Italy at that time because the war had already started. And they came on a United States ship.

So they got out right in time.

They were very fortunate in that respect, yes.

So then what did your parents do? Did your father start working again?

No, my father was never able to work again. I mean, whatever it is that they did to him in Dachau, he never worked again for the rest of his life. Which was very, very hard on him because he was a man that provided very well for his family, and now he was dependent on his son and wife to help him.

I had gotten here, I found a job, and I was working when they came. And I paid the rent and the utilities. And my mother got a job working first she was a cleaning woman.

And then she graduated and she worked in a factory sewing garments. And she did that for quite a few years. So between the two of us, we supported my father.

And what was your job?

I worked with a Swiss watch importer. And I did very well. I got drafted in 1942. I went in the army.

And, of course, then my mother was my father's sole support, except for what I could send them from the army. And that was another tough nut for them because they didn't know what would happen, where I would end up, and so forth. As it was, it turned out all right.

I first-- my overseas experience was in the Aleutian Island campaign. And later, when I came back, I ended up working with German prisoners of war, interrogating them.

In Germany?

No, here. We had 350,000 American prisoners in the United States. Most people aren't aware of that. But we interrogated them. And later after VE Day, I was one of 20 people separating the good from the bad.

We were looking for people to get the German government going again. People who had at least a non-Nazi background. And we were trained to do that.

We had some very intensive training about German recent history and who was who. And we tried to find people to get municipalities going again, to get the police departments, and the utilities, and all that back on their feet. And, incidentally, also look for war criminals, which we found a few of those, too.

Now you say your father was never able to work again, was that because he was too nervous or what was it?

Well, he had a very severe heart condition after that. And he also had problems learning English. He tried very hard.

He always walked around with his dictionary in his hand. He always attempted to, but he really never quite mastered it. And he'd sort of do the chores at home, while my mother was out working.

And that must have been very difficult for him.

It was. It was very humiliating for him. But there was nothing we could do about it.

But your mother had her sister there or other relatives? You said when you first came--

No, my mother was an only child. They were all my father's relatives, really. And they were a very close family and they were very good, but they were all very involved in trying to make a livelihood.

Everybody worked hard. Most of them were older. And if they had jobs, they had menial jobs. Everybody started either as a busboy or a butcher or something like that. It wasn't the type of thing that they had done in Germany because most of them had been fairly successful there.

So then what happened? Did you get married after the services or you go back to New York, what happened after the army?

I came back home and I went back to work for the firm I had worked for. I became a traveling salesman and covered various territories. I did a lot of traveling which, unfortunately, kept me from going back to school.

I should have said that when I was in New York, I went to high school. I finished my high school diploma at night. And then I went to City College in New York for a while, until I got drafted. I never graduated, but at least I had a little more education. I managed to do that.

I would have liked to go back to college, but, I guess, the fact that I had to help support my parents kept me from doing it. I had a good job, I was making pretty good money, and I felt that was my primary obligation, to support my parents. Which I kept doing until the day my father died.

I did get married in 1951. I had three lovely children. I lost my wife 11 years later, she passed away.

11 years after you got married?

Mm-hmm.

Was she a survivor, too?

No, she was an American born. I got remarried a year later, and she was a survivor. She was interviewed here yesterday. We met in New York when I moved here.

But your three children were by your first wife?

Yes, and then we had the fourth one together.

And where are your children now?

They're all in the Bay Area. One lives in Santa Rosa, he's an educator. He's principal of a school in Healdsburg. I have one who is in business with me.

My older daughter is a social worker down in Palo Alto. And my youngest daughter works for a-- what is it? Venture



capitalist corporation. And she's about to get married.

Congratulations.

Thank you.

Do you approve of her choice?

Oh, yes. Nice Jewish boy.

[LAUGHS]

Well, how do you think that your experience as a survivor has-- or do you think it's affected the way you relate to your children for example? Or how do you carry--

It probably does relate. We talk about it quite often lately. We were talking about the fact, both my wife and I, that when our parents came here, or in my wife's case, they were here before she was, she was in England, but when she joined them, we automatically moved in with them.

And we pitched in. We had to help support them. It's an obligation that, thank God, our children never had. And I'm grateful for that.

And yet, somehow, I feel that they're missing out on something. Things come to them too easily and too fast. So probably my children have heard some of these stories too many times and complain, and they don't want to hear about it.

Although, they're quite interested in our background. My youngest daughter, the one who's getting married soon, studied in France during her junior year. And when she graduated, she went to the University of Strasbourg Law.

And I went over and picked her up and met her and took her on a roots trip. We showed her where she came from, where I came from. We went to Dachau together. We showed her all these things.

And I think it had a very profound influence on her. Two of my other children managed to get to Germany on their own when they had both been in Israel. And on the way back, they stopped off and went to see the places that they had heard so much about, so it influenced them.

It's interesting that you say you think that the children have missed something in not having the closeness you think with the [INAUDIBLE]--

The closeness and the sense of responsibility. Also the fact that you had to deny yourself some things. For instance, I gave up finishing a college education and studying what I really wanted to do. I had always wanted to study medicine because I felt I had to help support my parents.

And I wish I had had that opportunity, but by the same token, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I think I did the right thing. So I feel that our younger generation misses out on some of that. Things are sometimes a little too easy. They don't have to work for anything.

I can appreciate that. Tell me about your trip back to Germany. How was that for you?

Well, I've been back four times. My first trip back was in 1949, which was only four years after the end of the war. Actually, I went to Holland first. And then I spent some time in France but, eventually, to Switzerland. And my trip to Germany was just to walk across the border and to go to the cemetery and visit my grandmother's and my great-grandparent's grave.

At that time, Germany was still occupied and Konstanz was in the French zone of occupation. There is a committee there from the Joint Distributing Committee and I was introduced to them and had quite a few interesting conversations. The place at that time was pretty heavily populated by DPs from Eastern Europe, people who had been released from various camps. And they had settled there.

And I met some of them. We talked a lot. A lot of them were involved in what I thought were pretty shady dealings with currency and things like that. I had all kinds of offers of getting merchandise and getting good rate of exchange.

I wasn't really interested. I did go and see a few people I had known before. I mentioned to you my former teacher, he was one of them. I also went to see the woman who had been my father's bookkeeper for probably 20 years. And she was overjoyed, although, I remember that when I was a young kid, she used to visit relatives in Bavaria in the Alps and come back full of patriotic sayings.

I'm sure there was a little bit of latent anti-Semitism there, but it never came out openly, but you had that feeling. Anyway, she was very happy to see me. I went to see a few other people. Some of them were really happy, others were not too happy.

I went to go to the apartment that we lived in when I left. And I rang the doorbell, and these people opened up, and I explained to who I was. And I could see the fear in their eyes. They thought I had come back to reclaim the place. But all I wanted to do is see the apartment, so they showed me through and were very happy to see me leave again.

But, at that time, I traveled a little bit in Germany with one of my friends from Switzerland. We went through the Black Forest. And he was doing business with a French army. And I saw the devastation.

I remember driving through the city of Freiburg, which is a university town. It was in complete rubble. And they hadn't dug up the dead yet. They had grave markers, right downtown. Here's the body of so-and-so, and so forth. It was total devastation.

It looked as though they'd never dig out again. It was to me quite surprising because I had been in Rotterdam, which was one of the most heavily bombed cities in Europe and that was completely cleared up. They hadn't rebuilt it, but there was no rubble.

They had started to put in landscaping and things like that. The houses that had been partially bombed, they had put a wall up there. I mean, you could see that they were working. The Germans were just sitting there waiting for things to happen. It was very surprising to me next time I went back and I saw what happened.

And, of course, we know what happened to Germany. Since then it's thriving, but I don't know where they got the will to do it with. I guess they were still in a stupor.

I rode on a train one day and I just-- how should I say, it was-- well, I still get that feeling every time I go to Germany, I can't wait to get out. There's just a feeling of oppression in there for me. I could never understand Jews who went back.

And when you went the second, third, and fourth time, did you go to the same places?

Well, the second time was 1971. We had been in Israel, and we wanted to visit our friends in Switzerland, so we did, again, the same thing. And my wife and I just went across.

We had talked about visiting her hometown, which is about 3, 4 hours further north by train or car. And she said she couldn't do it. She didn't want to go into Germany anymore. That same feeling happened again.

Our next trip was in '81, we had been to Scandinavia and we were going first to Holland then Switzerland. And we'd go through Germany to go to Switzerland and that was the first time my wife went to her hometown, essentially, for the same reason she wanted to go visit her grandparents' graves. There were always cemetery visits when we go to Germany. That's what it amounts to.

And then the last time was two years ago with our daughter. There we visited cemeteries every day. My grandfather's grave in that little village near Frankfurt. The rest of the cemetery was destroyed. I mean, there were maybe 30 or 40 graves left standing out of it must have been hundreds.

They had cleaned it up and it's well maintained. The grass is cut, but literally hundreds of stones lined up against the back wall just because they don't know what graves they belong to. And it's just a pretty devastating thing.

We went to see the synagogue, and it's got a sign on there now that this is the former synagogue. It's a Catholic Church now. But to me, it's a terrible shock every time you go back there. My own hometown, the house I was born in still stands. And we lived across the street from the synagogue.

First time I went back, the synagogue had been burned and they cleaned up the rubble. And it was a garden, there was a plaque there. No, there was a stone almost like a gravestone of a little monument marking that this had been the site of the synagogue.

Now it's an apartment house with stores underneath. And there's a plaque about this size. A marker saying that this is the site of the former synagogue, period. And that's all that's left.

And was the synagogue burned by the--

It was burnt in Kristallnacht.

And what about you in terms of, as a survivor, how have your experiences affected you and your outlook on life or your philosophy or your values?

Well, it probably strengthened me in my resolve to be consciously Jewish. And I've managed to become involved in the Jewish community here. I've been an "activist," if you want to quote, unquote.

I think basically that's the important thing. I think it's important to pass on our values to our children, which I've tried to do. I've tried to encourage others to do the same thing. And that's about it.

I guess it sensitizes you to the people around you and their relationship to Jewish people. We were in Spain last year and every place I went, we heard about the Jews did this, the Jews did that, everybody in Spain has Jewish blood in them and I take it all with a grain of salt. I feel that we really have to rely on ourselves if we want to survive as a people.

I want to thank you very much for--

OK.

--for sharing all of this with us. Do you have some questions? Would you like to come up and--

Yes, a few questions.

Sure. Sure.

How are you doing? Are you OK?

I'm doing fine.

OK.

Yeah.

The voice seems to go after talking for so long. So after Kristallnacht and the arrest of your father, were there any gentiles in Konstanz that remained friends with your mother and supported her or offered support to her?

Well, probably not very close, but there were some. One story always sticks out that my mother told me. I wasn't there, obviously.

I mentioned just before that we lived in an apartment house across the street from the synagogue during the first few years of my life. And next to us was the official residence of some Catholic priests. And two houses away on the other side was a medieval church that they served. And my parents, apparently, always had a very friendly relationship with the priests to the extent even that if they needed some extra chairs, they'd come and borrow them from my parents, and vice versa, and that type of thing.

One of these priests later on became the Archbishop of the City of Freiburg, which included my hometown in the whatever you call-- it's not a parish. Anyway, during this time, I think when my father was already in Dachau, my mother was walking down the street and the Archbishop had happened to be walking on the other side of the street. He saw my mother and he made a very deliberate attempt.

He came across the street and stood and talked with her, shook hands with her. This is in public when everybody knew who he was, he was the Archbishop. And this was an act of defiance. So I've never forgotten her telling me that. That was quite something for someone to be seen in the street talking to a Jew.

After 1933 in the gymnasium, did you notice a change in the curriculum that was being taught to you, in say, German history?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Very much so.

Can you talk about that?

Well, obviously, there were racial implications. Wherever you went, German history was glorified. And we got the full brunt of it. One of the things everybody in this class had to do is to research the background of your family, which I found very interesting because I was able to. I had a lot of documents and papers on both sides of the family.

And I was able to go back and trace my family, both of my father's side to the late 18th century before they took on the family name. And also my mother's side. And, I guess, the thing that really got to me is especially with my mother's family, how they were such wonderful Germans all the time.

My grandfather had served in a regiment of hussars of the Prussian army. And his grandfather before that was an adjutant to the then the Crown Prince of Prussia. And during the revolution of 1948, when he was fleeing, he accompanied him to the Dutch border. So these are the things I got out of the Nazi degree that we had to research our family. But the curriculum changed quite a bit, obviously.

We got the whole story of how Germany was mistreated after the end of World War I. And how wonderful Germany was. And there really wasn't too much talk about the Jews, but it was the emphasis on German history had completely changed.

Also even the number of hours spent at school had changed because we used to go to school on Saturdays until 1933. In early 1934, I guess, they abolished Saturday school because all the members of the Hitler Youth had to have Saturdays free to do whatever young Nazis did. And that was quite a change. That's why we Jewish kids started going to synagogue on Saturday mornings.

Was there a noticeable change in the attitudes of the teachers towards you?

Some of them. I mentioned the one teacher who was an old Nazi, who was very self-assured, and his attitude never changed. But some of those who had been non-Nazis or anti-Nazis, they changed.

One of the teachers I had disappeared very quickly because he was a socialist and a very active one. And he crossed the border by night and wasn't heard from again until after the war when he ended up being the director of the school. He came back to Germany, but I happen to know him.

As a matter of fact, one of his brothers worked for my father because they had lived in the apartment house where we had lived. And that whole family had a history of either Democratic or Social Democratic membership going back to before 1848. They were actively engaged in politics, so that was a change.

There was one teacher we had who was Jewish. And he had a-- that was an interesting thing, I had forgotten about it. He had apparently been a Communist some years before, and he had gone to Russia. And he was imprisoned in Moscow for quite a few years.

And he was a very, very active anti-Communist. And became a tool of the Nazis, even though he was Jewish. And he stayed on after all the others had gone.

He lived near us. And when he first came, he became friendly with us. And we had him over for dinner quite often. He was a bachelor. My mother felt sorry for this nice Jewish boy, until one night when he asked could he use the phone and was calling Berlin.

He says don't worry, you won't be charged for the call. And he was on the phone for an hour speaking Russian. And my mother died 1,000 deaths through at that time because phone calls were censored.

And he said you don't have to worry about it, I was talking to the Ministry of the Interior. He was, obviously, a spy or Gestapo man or whatever it was. And he disappeared after a while. I don't know what became of him.

Do you remember his name?

His name was Kinderman. I'll never forget the name.

Those were my questions, and I thank you.

You're welcome.

I have a couple of questions.

OK.

You mentioned early on that there were some Jewish people in your community who were married to Swiss gentiles, I think you said.

That's right. Well--

Swiss Jewish people?

Both, actually.

And they were allowed to cross the border and go into Switzerland. I was wondering what was the fate of those people. Did they live unmolested for the duration of the war in Switzerland or did they have to move again a little later?

No, most of them stayed there and are still there and I'm still in touch with some of them. There's is a daughter of some of my parents' friends that we were very close to. We see them every couple of years.

They've been here, we've visited there. We've met in Spain, we've met in France. We're in touch with them, so they're

doing very well. And most of them were very, very active in trying to help.

German Jews tried either sending them food or sending them money or helping them get out somehow whatever could be done. A lot of people managed to get out of Germany because somebody put up the money to get them out. My wife's parents, for instance, after they were deported down to Southern France managed to get out.

They had relatives in Switzerland. And they paid somebody in Cuba, and that was a very common thing. And they were given a Cuban visa and got out that way. They took a boat in Portugal and came to Cuba until they were able to come to this country. So I have to give the Swiss Jews a lot of credit for helping wherever they could.

Did they ever feel endangered during the war?

Oh, yes. Quite a few of them came to this country, including the people I worked for in New York. They thought that Germany might invade. And if they had a chance to come over here and get a visa, they came.

And, of course, they came under different conditions. They could take all their money out. And most of them established successful businesses in this country. Some of them were doctors and so forth. And they established practices.

I'll give you one man whom I knew very well, his name was Metzger. He was originally from Basel, Switzerland and lived in Barcelona. And he founded a little company that's known as Dannon yogurt now.

Oh, no.

Yes.

You mentioned that your father was kind of dysfunctional as far as being able to work after he came to the United States. I was wondering if you could explain that in more detail. Was he simply completely a broken person who wasn't able--

Yes, he was.

--to interact with people on a business level?

No. No. No, it was mostly physical. It was a matter of just not being able to walk any great distance. We lived in a walk-up apartment in the Bronx in those days. And we were on the third floor. And every time he went down, to come back up became a major thing.

He had cultivated people on each floor where he could stop and sit down for a while until he could climb the next flight of stairs. If we are together, so when I come home, I'd want upstairs and take a chair out of the apartment and bring it down to him so he could sit down on each landing. So it was that type of thing.

How old was he at this time?

In 1940, he was 59.

Do you have any sense of what the physical, physiological problems were that he developed in his internment experience?

Well, they were mostly damage to his heart. And he had a severe case of angina pains. And he was living on nitroglycerin. He developed other things later, but I don't think they were related to his concentration camp experience. It was practically his heart, which he had never had any problems before then.

It kind of broke his heart.

Yes, literally.

Well, I guess that's the end of questions. Thank you very much.

You're welcome. OK.

Do you have any final thing that you'd like to say?

No. I wish you luck in your pursuit of oral histories. I think it's an important thing to do and. As I said, to pass this on to the generations after us.

And it's because of people like you that we can do this, so thank you very, very much.

Thank you.