Interview with Claus Shelling

Holocaust Oral History Project

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Transcriber: Sue Ross

MS. NETTER: THIS EVENING WE'RE TALKING WITH CLAUS SHELLING. MY NAME IS BEATRICE NETTER, AND I'M THE PRIMARY INTERVIEWER. THE SECONDARY INTERVIEWERS ARE CATHY MILLER AND GINA MARGILLO; IS THAT RIGHT?

MS. MARGILLO: Uh-huh.

MS. NETTER: THE PRODUCER IS LAURIE SASNA. TODAY'S DATE IS DECEMBER 11TH, 1991.

BY MS. NETTER:

Q CLAUS, COULD YOU START BY STATING YOUR NAME AND THE DATE THAT YOU WERE BORN.

A My name is Claus Shelling, and I was born May 11th, 1929 in Germany.

Q WHAT'S THE NAME OF THE TOWN?

A Breslau.

Q AND COULD YOU TELL ME THE NAMES OF YOUR PARENTS AND SIBLINGS?

A Yeah. I'm an only child, and my father's name was Rudolph Otto. Schlesinger was our German name, S-c-h-l-e-s-i-n-g-e-r. And my mother's name was Lily.

Q HOW ABOUT STARTING -- CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE TOWN THAT YOU GREW UP IN, WHAT IT WAS LIKE?

A Yes. The town was in a province called Schlesien.

Translated it would be Silesia. And it was kind of a rural part of Germany not far from the Czechoslovakian border. And as I recall, it had a population of about 35,000, and it was not too far from a large city, Breslau, probably about 30 miles or so. And Breslau was about the size of San Francisco. It was an old middle-aged city.

Q WHAT WAS THE HOUSE LIKE THAT YOU GREW UP IN?

A I grew up in a -- it was probably an upper middle class family. My grandfather had been a -- well, he owned a grain mill in the town, and it was a family business. And my father succeeded him. I remember my grandfather dying in the early 30's, and my dad took over the business. And while he was quite young, actually.

And well, the house you asked about --

Q UH-HUH.

A It was a very nice, comfortable home with a big garden in a nice residential area, part of town. And I grew up being raised by a nanny. And I remember we had live-in help. We had a couple that lived there, and they took care of the place. And they also -- well, I still remember them, so I must have spent a fair amount of time with them.

Q WHEN YOU WERE A YOUNG CHILD, DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU DID DURING THE DAY, WHAT A TYPICAL DAY MIGHT BE?

A Oh, boy. That goes back, because I have, since I left when I was nine years old, it's hard, because there's not any point of reference. I remember having a fairly pleasant childhood, because I enjoyed school. I actually went to a Catholic school. I was raised by nuns. And I think the reason

spelling

was in a town like (Schweidnitz), there were very, very few Jews in the town. And I started school right at the time that Hitler was in power. So my choices were either a public school, and there would have been a lot of prejudice. So instead, I was sent to a Catholic convent, raised by nuns. And I have actually very good feelings about my -- let's see. I went to school there till I was 9, so that would have been about three years. And I remember being very religious, so I was actually raised as a Catholic for about three years even though my parents were not religious at all.

Q WHAT CAUSED, IF YOU WERE AT THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL, TO BE SHELTERED?

A Well, the Catholics were also not in Hitler's favor. Not to the extent that the Jews were. They were not hassled to that extent. But they were quite sympathetic of Jews, at least in our school. And it was sort of a better class, more educated class of kids that went there. Because I imagine there was some tuition. I don't really remember that, but I do not recall a lot of prejudice in that school. In fact, I have pleasant memories about my childhood there, my experience in school.

Q DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT A DAY IN THE SCHOOL WAS LIKE?

A All I can remember is that I was -- I considered myself one of the leaders. I remember being sort of a leader among the kids and enjoying sports like soccer. We'd play soccer in the playground next to the school. And I was also a good student. I really enjoyed school. And I remember religion was my favorite subject at that time.

Q WHAT ABOUT RELIGION DID YOU LIKE

A I don't know. I was awed by it. I remember there was a beautiful church, and I was really quite touched by the Catholic religion at that time. It gave me something to hang onto, I suppose. I don't really recall the reasons. It's all very vague. This whole experience is very vague.

Q WHAT WAS THE COMMUNITY LIKE WHERE YOU GREW UP?

A Community, well, I can remember they were sort of -- it was kind of a typical old German small town with cobblestone streets, a marketplace, you know, a big marketplace with a church in the center and a huge beautiful gothic cathedral that was sort of a focal point of the town. And I think the main industry must have been agriculture. It was sort of rural. There were a lot of farms around it and small merchants, that sort of stuff. There was no other kind of industry that I can recall.

Q WHO DID YOU PLAY WITH?

A Oh, I still remember, I had -- I remember a couple of -- I suppose this is because of some old photographs, but I remember a couple guys that I enjoyed playing with. And there were also a couple girls. And I still have pictures riding the tricycle with them, I mean, when I was really young. And then, later on in school they used to come over to my house a lot, because we had a beautiful garden, beautiful very huge garden, with fruit trees, and lawns, and all kinds of stuff.

Q WERE THEY KIDS THAT LIVED IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD, OR WERE THEY KIDS THAT YOU MET FROM SCHOOL?

A They were probably fairly close. I think they

probably -- it was probably within walking distance, but I can't really remember too well.

Q YOU MENTIONED THAT IF YOU WENT TO THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL THE CHANCE OF GETTING ABUSE -- OR i DON'T KNOW IF THAT'S THE RIGHT WORD, BUT GETTING HASSLED FOR BEING JEWISH WAS REDUCED. DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT THE CLIMATE WAS LIKE IN THE COMMUNITY AND HOW YOU WERE TREATED?

A Well, the thing I can remember very well is that was -- do you remember the Hitler Youth, the little boys, I think from age ten. It was a compulsory military, pre-military service. And they used to actually have drills in front of my house. And they wore, you know, short pants and brown shirts with swastikas, and they had rifles. They would be out there drilling in our residential neighborhood. And the reason they did that there is because there was a big public school not far from our house. And I used to walk by, and they would yell, you know, obscenities related to being a Jew. I still remember that.

Q IN GENERAL OR AT YOU? THEY WOULD JUST YELL THEM OR AT YOU

A No. They knew -- it was small enough of a town, so they probably knew I lived there. And being a Jew, you weren't eligible to become part of the Hitler Youth. They called it the Hitler Youth.

Q WHEN DID YOU FIRST FIGURE OUT THAT YOU WERE SOMEHOW DIFFERENT?

A Well, I think it was pretty obvious, because my parents, you know, you couldn't help but see how scared they

were. And they were -- you know, they were very threatened. And the papers were full of Hitler and the hate campaign against the Jews. And I'm sure it was everywhere. You know, it was just -- it got worse and worse as time went on.

Q DO YOU REMEMBER SOME OF THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

A I remember some of the things that happened. After a while, let's see, Jews had to wear -- that's just before we left. They had to wear a Star of David to identify that they were Jews so people could throw things at them, I suppose, and beat them up on the street and that sort of the thing. I mean, it got worse and worse.

Q WHAT WERE SOME OF THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

A Well, the thing I remember obviously the most was that, you know, that November 8th, 1938 event or November 9th. You know, the Crystal Night.

Q YES.

A I was in school, and my parents at that time were in Berlin getting ready to immigrate, getting the final paperwork done to immigrate to the United States. My father had made the decision in 1938 to leave the country. And so they were -- luckily, they were out of town. Berlin must have been five-, six-hour train ride from where I lived.

And toward the end of the last class, one of the nuns called me into the office and said not to go home. And she said, "We're going to go to Berlin. You're not going to go home." And I didn't really know what was going on, and I can't really recall as to whether she explained to me what happened.

But, of course, what happened, you know what happened from history.

The Black Shirts, I think, you know, the Hitler -- no, it was the SA, the Brown Shirts. They were the hatchet boys. And they literally went around to the Jewish residences with axes and hammers and destructive types of weapons and just made shambles of houses. They broke windows. They destroyed furniture. They smashed all the beautiful china in our house and all that kind of stuff and just left it in an absolute shambles.

And it turned out that I never went home again. I never saw the house again until I took my daughters over in 1978, I think I went back to see it. That was the first time I went back to that community.

But I ended up -- let's see. This was in November of '38, and I had an aunt and uncle that lived in Berlin. My parents, at that time -- we left in March of '39, so that was what, about five months. And during that five-month period, my parents were sort of in hiding, because at that time, I think they started taking Jews to concentration camps. So I stayed with my uncle and aunt. And in a big city, it was easier to hide. It was harder, you know, the logistics were such that it was -- that it was harder for them to find where the Jews were. And they were so many. There were probably millions of Jew in Berlin. So it was very hard logistically to go after them, to identify them.

Q DO YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR HOUSE?

A You know, I really don't know what happened to my

house except, of course, we lost it. You know, nothing happened to it. I mean, we were just -- they confiscated all of our assets is what they did, the Nazis did. A Jew couldn't own anything. And at a certain stage, I forgot when that happened, maybe it was in 1938, but whenever that happened, my dad lost everything, the business, the house, virtually all of their possessions. And I suppose he had made arrangements to pay for the transportation over here the few things that we could pack to take with us. So I think literally we arrived over here with a just a few suitcases full of clothes and something like a hundred dollars or something ridiculous like that.

So anyway, what was the question now? I got ahead of myself.

Q I DON'T REMEMBER, BUT LET'S SEE. CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT -- YOU WERE A LITTLE BOY WHEN YOUR FATHER RAN A GRAIN MILL?

A Uh-huh.

Q CAN YOU TALK ABOUT A LITTLE BIT ABOUT WHAT HE DID, WHAT HIS LIFE WAS LIKE.

A I think basically they were sort of a middleman. They had -- I remember they had grain elevators, and they bought the grain from the farmers, and then they sold or they, I suppose, bagged it, and processed it or whatever they did. And then, they ended up selling it to the farms that had animals, you know, as animal feed. And that was a pretty good business.

And my grandfather had started that business, I don't know when. It must have been in the 20's or before even.

Q WHAT DID YOUR MOM DO? WHAT WERE HER DAYS LIKE?

A Well, that's another story. My mother left when I was five years old. My mother was big city girl from Berlin, and I think that she was very lonesome and bored, you know, living in a small hick town in east Germany. So she ended up numerous trips to Berlin, and one day she just never came back.

And I don't know if that's the purpose of this particular -- to go into the details of that, because I don't really know a lot of the details. It's only what I've heard from my father and the woman that -- he ended up marrying, her best friend. And that's who essentially raised me from the time I was five. I think about five years old. He remarried her, and the three of us immigrated to America. And, you know, she raised me. And I didn't see my mother again until I was over here, until I was in college in the Bay Area.

Q IN THE TOWN WHERE YOU GREW UP, WAS THERE A JEWISH SECTION, OR WAS IT --

A No. As I recall, there was just a handful of Jews in that town. I bet there were under a dozen Jews in that town out of 35,000 people. I think there were hardly any in that particular area. I remember a couple of other, two or three other families, that my parents associated with. That was it.

MS. NETTER: How about doing questions now from like up until nine years old.

Speaker MS. ( ): I have a couple.

Speaker BY MS. ( ):

Q YOU TALKED ABOUT HOW GOING TO CATHOLIC SCHOOL WAS RELATIVELY THE BEST CHOICE REALLY AS OPPOSED TO THE PUBLIC SCHOOL. AND IT SOUNDS LIKE THERE WERE REALLY VERY FEW JEWS IN

THE TOWN AT ALL. BUT I'M CURIOUS TO HEAR ABOUT. WERE YOU THE ONLY JEW IN SCHOOL? AND IF SO, DID OTHER KIDS KNOW YOU WERE JEWISH? AND HOW DID THEY DEAL WITH YOU, OR HOW MUCH OF AN ISSUE WAS IT, IF IT WAS?

A Well, the answer to the first question, were there any other, I don't think there were any other, at least not in my class. Some of the older or younger kids might have been, but I don't remember any other Jews in the school.

And the other thing, I don't remember any incidents of prejudice or any kind of display of that. They were really quite -- it was quite a tolerant group. At least that's my recollection.

Q I WAS JUST CURIOUS ABOUT THE EVENTS, CHAIN OF EVENTS, FROM THE TIME THAT THE NUN TOOK YOU TO THE TRAIN STATION AND YOU MET YOUR PARENTS IN BERLIN. HOW LONG WERE YOU IN BERLIN BEFORE YOU ACTUALLY LEFT?

A About five months.

Q WHAT WAS THAT TIME LIKE FOR YOU? WHAT DID YOU DO IN THAT PERIOD?

A Well, I was a nine-year old kid. I was taken out of school, because this happened in November, and I was delighted with that. I mean, I was like a little kid in a toy -- and I remember my uncle taking me all around Berlin. It was fabulous experience. I mean, these were grim times, but I had an absolutely wonderful time in Berlin. He took me to all the big department stores, because all my clothes were left behind. I got all new clothes in Berlin. And he took me to the zoo.

Berlin, as I recall, was a fabulous city pre-World War II before it was bombed. It was comparable -- it was sort of a Paris. It was also in the continnent, but it was just a fabulous city, as I recall. So it was very pleasant.

And my uncle and aunt were very, very good to me, better than my parents were. The one incident, one very frightening incident, I remember my father on the Main Street in Berlin, the (Kofersandam). You may have heard of that. And I saw him being picked up by the Gestapo. He was supposed to meet us, it was like in the middle of the day, and the Gestapo picked him up. And they took him to their headquarters and all that.

And the reason he was saved is because he had, in the process of getting all the final paperwork, the preparation for the immigration process, he became friendly with an American consul. And so he called, I think, the American consulate, and he was allowed to -- he said he was a good friend of this American consulate. And the Germans were, for one reason or another, were very awed and were very afraid of the Americans at that time.

Hitler always was, I think. I think even in the book Mein Kampf, he alluded to the fact that he feared America. So that's what saved him. But, I mean, you lived in fear day-by-day, because you saw Jews being hauled off to the concentration camp. That was sort of the beginning of it.

MS. ( ): I have one question.

BY MS. ( ):

Q YOU MENTIONED THAT YOUR FAMILY WAS NOT TERRIBLY RELIGIOUS, ACTIVELY RELIGIOUS. DID YOU CELEBRATE JEWISH

HOLIDAYS?

A No.

Q WITH THAT IN MIND, THEN, WHEN YOU BECAME AWARE THAT THERE WAS A LOT OF ANTI-SeMITISM AND THAT JEWS WERE BEING BEATEN UP AND BEING CURSED ON THE STREET, YOU DON'T SEEM TO CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE JEWISH. HOW DID YOU REACT TO THIS, YOUR BEING FORCED TO LEAVE YOUR HOME?

A Very, very confusing to a little kid. It was incredibly confusing, because I really -- in a small town, you know, you were relatively safe. I mean, they identified you and all that, but they really hadn't gotten around, except for that Crystal Night, for that particular day, they hadn't really done anything tangible. They didn't go around and beat up people and destroy the synagogue and retail stores. That came on that fatal day after that.

But my parents were always in denial. I think German Jews, in particular, they considered themselves more German than Jewish, because they had been there. I think my grandfather, they went back a couple generations. And especially in the small town, because there were so few Jews. I don't even think there was a synagogue in that town.

And they were totally -- I mean not somewhat, not non-religious. I mean, there just wasn't any religion. They didn't celebrate anything. And we went along with Christmas and the whole bit. They had sort of integrated more into the German society.

Q KNOWING THAT THEN, DID YOU EVER ASK YOUR FATHER, OR YOUR UNCLE, OR ANYONE, WHY ARE WE LEAVING WHEN WE'RE NOT REALLY

JEWISH IN THE SENSE THAT --

A I think that was explained. I think I understood that pretty well that Hitler had his own definition of who Jews were.

Q SO THAT WAS A --

A Yes, that was a given. And I was very clear, although I never -- it took me a long time to figure out whether being a Jew is really a religion or a race. And I'm still not sure.

BY MS. NETTER:

Q THERE WAS ONE QUOTE WHEN I WAS DOING SOME READING BEFORE THAT JUST SORT OF RESONATED WITH ME. AND I JUST WANT TO READ IT, ELICIT HERE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS. "NAZI POLITICAL PROPAGANDA SUCCEEDED IN MAKING THE JEWISH QUESTION INTO A MAJOR ISSUE IN THE NAZI STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DEMOCRATIC REGIME. AS A RESULT, NOT ONLY WAS THE POSITION OF THE JEWS IN GERMAN SOCIETY IMPAIRED, BUT THE JEWS THEMSELVES UNDERWENT A CRISIS OF JEWISH CONSCIOUSNESS AND BEGAN TO EXAMINE THEIR JEWISH IDENTITY."

A What's my reaction to that?

Q YEAH.

A Well, you know, there's no question that the role of the Jew in Europe goes back to the Middle Ages as some sort of an inferior creature. They were the money lenders. They were looked down on by the various -- well, Germany, of course, is a very class-conscious country. You now, they had the titled and all that sort of outgrowth of the feudal system. And the Jews never really were accepted by the German social system, I don't think ever.

So they were a very easy target for Hitler, because they were separate. He called them a race, I guess. So they were easy for him to identify and for Germans to sort of take their frustration and their hate out. I mean, a perfect scapegoat, absolutely perfect.

Then you came to the United States, and there was a lot of prejudice over here, too, especially in those days, much more than today. When we came over here, there was a lot of prejudice. I was very conscious of racial prejudice over here.

Q TELL ME ABOUT THE TRIP WHEN THE NUN TOOK YOU TO BERLIN. TELL ME ABOUT THAT.

A That was really a fabulous thing. I wish to this day I could thank that nun. She probably saved my life. She might have saved my life. She just accompanied me to Berlin, and my parents met me at the train station. And, you know, I had worn the same clothes for a couple days by the time we got there. I mean, that's all I had was my school clothes, period. No toothbrush, no nothing, just what you wore to school.

And then, they took me to Berlin. I never ever got anything back. I mean, everything I had, all my toys, all my clothes, everything, I never saw again.

But anyway, so that you talk about the nuns. Then she just went back. She turned around and went home back to her convent.

Q WHAT WERE YOUR PARENTS DOING IN BERLIN?

A They were going through all the administrative procedures of immigrating, whatever that -- I was too young to know what that entailed. But it must have -- they had to get

affidavits and visas and get their passports in order. You know, all these kinds of things. And probably make all the travel arrangements and decide where they were going to go. It's rather a fairly important decision.

They were -- my father, let's see, how old was? He he was born in '02, so he would have been 36, and my mother about 30 at that time.

Q WERE THEY STAYING AT YOUR UNCLE AND AUNT'S?

A No. They stayed at my stepmother's mother's, I think, most of the time. They hid out.

Q SO THAT THE TIME THAT THEY WERE THERE BEFORE YOU CAME, WERE THEY IN HIDING ALREADY?

A Yeah. They certainly didn't stay in hotels or where they could be sought out. In fact, I question whether hotels even took in Jews at that time. And if you even -- my father -- I didn't look Jewish, but my father did. So he would have been identified as a Jew right away probably.

You know, I mean, you had to really be careful. You couldn't get in any of the restaurants, any of the hotels at that time. Not any. I mean, Berlin is such a big city. I'm sure there were some that would have taken them in, but you didn't want to take that chance.

Q SO DID HIDING MEAN NOT GOING TO CERTAIN PLACES? OR WHAT DID BEING IN HIDING MEAN FOR YOUR PARENTS?

A Just what I said. You don't show up in certain public places. I think my grandmother lived in some apartment that was in a huge building that was probably reasonably safe. They had really no reason to look for my parents in there. And

I think they were probably too disorganized at that point to look for them.

Q WHEN YOUR FATHER WAS PICKED UP, DO YOU KNOW HOW -- DID SOMEONE REPORT HIM, OR DID THEY LOOK AT HIM AND SAY, "OH, HE'S JEWISH"?

A I think that's probably what happened. I think they just looked at him and decided to arrest him.

Q TELL ME ABOUT THE TIME YOU WERE IN BERLIN. YOU SAID YOU GOT TO GO SHOPPING AND SEE THE ZOO AND DO A LOT OF FUN THINGS. WAS IT RELATIVELY SAFE DURING THAT PERIOD?

A I felt quite safe. And my uncle and aunt were -- for that day, they were quite free-spirited. And I think they were still under the belief that they were safe from all this. In fact, they made absolutely no effort to leave in those days.

They lived in this apartment. My grandfather -- I mean my uncle, he was an attorney but not a practicing one. I don't know how he lived, but somehow he lived. He was able to support himself or feed himself. And that's an incredibly interesting story, my uncle and aunt. But they were also considerably older than my parents. He was probably in his -- I would guess he was probably around 50 at that time and my aunt maybe in her late 40's. And they lived in this apartment building sort of in the center of Berlin.

And first I'll talk about the environment there at that time. I remember there was a synagogue right down the street that was destroyed on that same day that they went into our home. So I used to see that every day as a reminder of what was going on. And then, like everywhere else in the world, the

major Berlin department stores were all Jewish. And the elegant retail stores in the fashionable parts of Berlin, most of them were Jewish. And every single store was damaged. Usually the store windows, the glass was smashed, and the place looted and all that kind of stuff. And I'm not sure any of them ever recovered from that. So I was constantly reminded of all that happening.

But my uncle and aunt had absolutely no fear of being identified as Jews or getting arrested, because they sort of looked like everybody else. They just sort of fit into the crowd. They weren't were conspicuous looking people.

And I didn't look Jewish. I was sort of -- I had blue eyes and relatively light hair, you know. So nobody thought of me as a Jewish kid. So we just went around. My uncle just took me everywhere.

Q YOU MENTIONED THAT YOUR UNCLE AND AUNT HAD AN INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCE.

A Yes, they had an incredible experience. In fact, my aunt wrote some memoirs about that, her experiences. They did not leave Berlin until 1942. I mean, they were going to stay in that place for another four years. And she described what it was like to live in Germany as a Jew right up to the end.

And they weren't allowed to shop except like an hour a day. And then, of course, no one would wait on them. People would know they were Jews, and so they would crowd in front of them, so it was impossible to buy groceries.

So what developed was the black market. People

would blackmail you and do your grocery shopping for a fee. You could get anything for money. So that's what happened. They would pay these people. And she describes all this in her memoirs. It was fascinating.

And then, finally all the Jews were being trained off to the concentration camps. Little by little, they got around to them, even in Berlin. And their number was about to come up, and somehow they knew it was just a question of time.

So this ex-convict managed to get hold of them, and his business was smuggling Jews out of Germany into Italy across the Alps. So she describes this experience. That's what they ended up doing finally. And they took all their life's possessions, you know, whatever they could carry on their back. And at that time, I think they were in their 50's and not in the greatest of shape, and they walked across the Alps. They trained down into somewhere, I suppose, in Bavaria, and they walked across the mountain pass into the Italian Alps.

The problem was, though, Italy was a Hitler ally into those days, so they still weren't out of trouble, except the Italians were a lot more casual about this whole thing, this whole Jewish stuff. So they managed to -- they ended up somehow in some kind of refugee camp in Italy. So she describes her horrible experiences in this refugee camp. I think she was probably there a year or so.

And then, somehow President Roosevelt rescued those people, and they ended up over here in this country in about, I think, about 1945. It took them three years of just wandering around Italy and with nothing, just from one camp to another. I

mean just a horrible experience. They ended up over here. I remember meeting them at a train station in Oakland in 1945, and that was quite an experience. And they ended up living here until they died. They ended up living in San Francisco. But incredible, incredible experience.

Q SHALL WE GO BACK TO YOU?

A Yeah.

Q LET'S SEE. YOU WERE IN BERLIN, AND YOU SAID YOU FELT RELATIVELY SAFE THERE. AT THE SAME TIME, YOUR PARENTS WERE BUSY TRYING TO GET THE PAPERWORK TOGETHER TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS SO THAT THEY COULD LEAVE. DO YOU REMEMBER, DID SOMEONE JUST TELL YOU THAT WE'RE GOING NOW, AND THIS IS WHERE WE'RE GOING? OR DO YOU REMEMBER HOW IT WAS DECIDED HOW YOU WOULD GO ABOUT LEAVING?

A You know, I don't remember the details at all. But the reason we must have stayed there as long as we did was just because that was the soonest we could leave.

Q AND THEN, WHEN YOU LEFT, WHERE DID YOU GO?

A I remember flying from Berlin to Hamburg and spending a day or so in Hamburg. And a friend of my father's lived there, and he was very nice to us. He took care of us. He was not Jewish. That's right, this friend of my father's. That's why he was able to do all that.

And then, we flew to London, and then we stayed with other friends of my father's who was Jewish and who had immigrated to England. And I think we spent maybe three or four days in London. And then, we boarded a Dutch freighter and came to the United States on this freighter, this Dutch freighter.

freighter. And it was a long trip. It was like a three-week, four-week trip.

Q WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

A It was a real adventure. I mean, I was little. I was a nine-year-old boy, and it was just an incredible thrill for me to be on that boat.

Q A FREIGHTER, THAT SOUNDS LIKE A BOAT FOR CARRYING THINGS OTHER THAN --

A Cargo.

Q YES.

A Yeah. As I recall, there were about 20 passengers on the ship. That was all. And most of them were -- no. There were some other Jews that immigrated from Germany. And we all, our destination was either Los Angeles or San Francisco.

Q HOW DID YOU COME TO BE -- IT SOUNDS LIKE THE PLANE RIDES WERE A MODE OF TRANSPORTATION OF CHOICE.

A Probably.

Q AND THE FREIGHT BOAT SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING ELSE, OR THE CARGO BOAT. DO YOU HAVE ANY SENSE OF --

A Why we -- well, I'm sure it was economics. I'm sure it was very inexpensive to go on a freighter. And I don't really know why we flew and didn't take the train or -- you know, I have no idea.

Q SO IT SOUNDS LIKE A LOT OF THIS STUFF WAS -- YOU WERE NOT REAL CONSCIOUS OF A LOT OF THE --

A No, I wasn't conscious, no, not those kinds of details.

It's also interesting when you make a major move

like that from one culture to another, and you never see it again. You never speak the language again. Because the minute we got to the States, speaking German was all over. My parents never spoke it again. You know, they just spoke with broken English from that day on. And so, anyway, the whole thing was sort of -- I think my parents tried to deny their whole experience, I think, was really what happened.

So I, too, I think, tried to forget and put it out of my mind. And so it's really hard for me to remember all the details. But I've been back. It was really interesting for me to try to pick up some of that stuff. It's been interesting.

Q WHAT DID YOU GET IN GOING BACK?

A Well, I went back to my hometown in 1978. That would have been, what, 40 years later? Yeah. I took my two daughters, and we drove -- at that time, it's now Poland. That whole area where I grew up was partitiond by the Poles after the World War. Some guys sitting around a conference table decided what it was going to be, because the Germans lost the war.

So I guess millions of Germans just had to leave their homes and leave there where they've lived for hundreds of years. They had to just from one day to the next pick up and go. Because that's something we don't know about. Because they lost the war, after all, who cared. That probably made the fourth page of the newspaper. Probably some little article that millions of Germans had to leave their homes.

But I went back there, and there was not a single German or English speaking person in that town. It had been totally transformed to a Polish community. And what was really

fascinating is I drove right to our house. I drove right to our house even though the whole thing looked so different. But I found my school, my father's business, and the house. You know, I found those things just without any problem whatsoever.

But our house, that whole neighborhood, was completely deserted, and they had weeds ten feet high covering a big part of the house. The windows were broken. And nobody lived in any of those houses, and there was nobody for me to ask as to what happened. And I wasn't sure that it was our house until I compared a photograph I had taken with some childhood pictures, and I noticed that it was my house because totally run down.

And I know don't know what happened. They weren't bombed. They hadn't been damaged in the war. I just guess it was just a very poor community, and they just deserted that neighborhood. It was kind of scary to go back there; weird experience.

Q SOMEHOW I CAN IMAGINE ALL THIS STUFF GOING ON IN YOUR HEAD RIGHT NOW ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED, BUT I'M NOT SURE WHAT QUESTION TO ASK YOU. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT IT?

A How about you two?

speaker

BY MS. ( ):

Q THE SCHOOL THAT YOU WENT TO WAS STILL INTACT? THAT WAS STILL THERE, OR WAS IT SOMETHING ELSE?

A Yeah, it was still there. It was still being used. I remember knocking on the door, but I couldn't find anybody. Or, no, there was nobody there who could either speak either German or English, because I wanted to talk to somebody and ask

questions, and there was nobody in that town.

Q THEY WERE STILL UTILIZING THE ORIGINAL BUILDINGS?

A Yes.

Q WHAT IS THE NAME OF THE TOWN IN POLAND?

A Now that's a real tongue twister. It's something like (Schweidneza). It's got z's and c's and s's and all that. They changed the name of every town in that part of the country.

BY MS. NETTER:

Q LET'S SEE. LET'S GO BACK TO WHEN YOU FIRST ARRIVED IN THE U.S. CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED?

A Yeah. The reason we came to San Francisco is because my uncle and aunt and cousin, my first cousin, they had left Germany a couple years before we did from Berlin. They had lived in Berlin, and they lived in Oakland. And that's who housed us. That's where we lived when we came over here.

And I remember sailing through the Golden Gate on a beautiful April morning with the sun shining and brand new bridges, brand new. And there was a World's Fair going at that time. And it looked like paradise. I mean, I could not believe that I was going to live here. I just could not believe that, because it was incredible.

And anyway, we ended up in Oakland. What was interesting,, we got here, I think on a Saturday, and on Monday I was in school. They put me in school on Monday. And I didn't speak a word of English, and yet the kids were pretty decent in Oakland. This was in Oakland. And Oakland in 1939 was a lovely community. It hadn't been ruined yet by World War II, by the shipyards and the influx of all those hundreds of thousands of

people moved here.

And so it was a very, very pleasant community at that time. And I felt kind of sick that we left Oakland. My father got a job up in Petaluma, so that's where I grew up. That was a little country town sort of similar to where we left in Germany. And he ended up in the same business that he was in over there.

Q HOW LONG WERE YOU IN OAKLAND?

A From April until September. So we moved to Petaluma in September of 1939.

Q SO THE REASON WAS BECAUSE OF YOUR DAD'S JOB?

A Yeah.

Q BUT WHAT WAS IT LIKE IN PETALUMA?

A Well, at that time, Petaluma was called the World's Egg Basket, and they used to -- actually, they used to ship eggs to New York. I mean, this was truly the center of the poultry industry in the United States at that time. And there were like 30 some feed mills in that town. It was a real agricultural center, just perfect for my dad.

So he went to work for a Russian Jew, I remember, who owned a feed mill, and within one year my dad had his -- no, excuse me. Not one year. Four years, he had his own business and started a business like his father had and did real well. He was a workaholic.

Q GIVE US A SENSE OF WHAT IT WAS LIKE FOR YOUR PARENTS, AS WELL AS YOU, MAKING THAT ADJUSTMENT TO LIVING. IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU WERE HAVING THIS GREAT ADVENTURE.

A No. Actually, once I got here in Oakland, it was

wonderful, because the kids were -- I think they were more intelligent. They were better educated. But in a country town, it was really pretty miserable to grow up as a German Jew who didn't speak any English and who wore different kinds of clothes and all that. The kids were not tolerant at all. So I used to get in a lot of fights. And it was a hard adjustment, because those kids, you know, they just weren't educated.

What was interesting is I used to get baited for being a Jew. I mean, here I had just -- no, excuse me, for being a German, because we were now at war with Germany. So these kids saw me as a German, and here I had just been booted out of Germany for being a Jew and now was being baited for being a German. So that was a pretty tough experience; very confusing for a little kid.

Q HOW WAS MAKING THAT ADJUSTMENT FOR YOUR PARENTS?

A Well, I think my parents were so grateful to be alive and to be in the United States, because this really was a great environment in those days for immigrants. And Petaluma was a very ethnic, very ethnic community, because the farmers were -- you know, there were a lot of Italians, Germans, Jews, you name it. They came from all over Europe, and they had their own little groups, their own little communities. And so they were really quite accepted. It was easy for them.

And what was interesting, it's the Germans that helped my father the most in getting started and not the Jews. That was real ironic.

Q CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT? WHY WAS THAT?

A Why?

Q YES.

A I don't know. That's fascinating. I suppose it tells you something about the type of Jews. I guess it tells you about the type of Jew that settled in Petaluma. They were mostly New York Jews that were not making it in New York. Sort of from the ghetto, from the slums in New York. They were very tight fisted, and they had suffered a lot.

And there was also -- there was a lot of prejudice between German Jews and Polish and Russian Jews, which you're probably aware of. And the German Jews were always considered -- in fact, my parents were very prejudiced against Russian and Polish Jews. They considered themselves superior. And that must have rubbed off. And, of course, they had become so acclimated -- assimilated, I guess is the word -- in Germany as Germans. You know, they considered themselves more German than Jew. So they related very well to the Germans over here.

Q WAS THERE A POINT WHEN YOU STARTED CHANGING FROM FEELING LIKE YOU WERE FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY TO BEING FROM HERE?

A Yeah, there was. You know, I've always been a pretty positive kind of a person. And about the first -- yeah. We got there in September, and I remember these three or four kids that were sort of the leaders of the class, they made a project out of me. And they said, "Hey, here's a kid, he doesn't speak any English. Let's sort of take him in hand."

They taught me how to play baseball, and football, and basketball, and that all that kind of stuff. And I just loved it. So between sports and just playing, you know, being around these kids all the time, I was so eager to get acclimated

to this country, and I was so into my denial of being a Jew and a German, and I didn't want an accent, I wanted to fit in with the other kids, that I learned English. Within a few months, I spoke fluent English, because it was so important to me to be accepted and be assimilated.

And so in that sense, I learned very rapidly. But inside I must have been really hurting. I mean, my God, I had lost my country, my mother, my religion, my language, my name, you know. They changed my name from "K" to "C," my first name and my second name from Schlesinger to Shelling. So I didn't know what the hell was going on. What are they doing to me?

So I lived -- this whole life was almost like a lie. And no communications with my mother. And I had a real hard time ever telling anybody. I was in total denial about my background until I was probably in my early 30's. I don't think I ever told about my -- I was very ashamed of my background. You wouldn't have caught me dead here 20 years ago or whatever, because it was very hard for me to talk about any of this stuff.

Q WHEN I LISTEN TO PEOPLE TALK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES IN GERMANY AND COMING OVER HERE OR IN EUROPE AND COMING HERE, THIS SHAME THING KEEPS COMING UP.

A Does it?

Q AND IT'S SOMEHOW -- I THINK THIS PROBABLY HAPPENS TO ALL PEOPLE IN LOTS OF DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF THEIR LIVES. BUT I GET THIS ONE THEME ABOUT -- IT'S LIKE YOU GOT DUMPED ON SO MUCH FOR BEING JEWISH AND GERMAN THAT YOU PICK IT UP. YOU PICK UP YOU START OWNING THAT SHAME.

A Uh-huh.

Q CAN YOU SPEAK TO THAT?

A Yeah, absolutely. I think my parents are just the perfect example of that. They were never ever proud of being a Jew. I think the only thing that they were proud of is the fact that they were German. I mean, being German, a German Jew, was sort of the saving grace as far as they were concerned. They were proud of that, part of it, the German part and in total denial about Jews. And I mean being, you know, the religious aspect of it was nonexistant.

And it was always very obvious to me that they were very impressed by people who were American, you know, second generation American. I mean, they were always very impressed with that. So from a very early age I thought there was obviously something wrong with me and that I had to play the role of looking and acting and being very American. And athletics, that was a great way to do that. And so I played this role. I put on this facade for many, many years being very American. You know, all-American, that was my goal.

Q DID THAT CHANGE AT SOME POINT?

A UH-HUH.

Q CAN YOU TELL US WHAT HAPPENED?

A Well, you know, I think as you get older, and you start looking at your own life. And my first marriage failed, for example. And you start looking at your life, and you become more honest with what's going on. And you go through the usual, the therapy, and the 12-step programs, all these different things, and you find out who you really are. And you tend to realize that honesty is the only way to go. And you start

taking a look at all this stuff. That's probably why I'm here, because now I feel it's very healthy for me to talk about all this kind of stuff.

Q YOU GREW UP IN PETALUMA THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL?

A Through high school, yeah.

Q AND THEN WHAT?

A Well, then I was lucky enough to be accepted to Stanford, so I was -- that was also a wonderful kind of an image thing, especially for my parents. They thought that was wonderful to have a son, to be able to say that I have a son that goes to Stanford and even though they didn't like the tuition. But that was kind of -- you know, they liked that.

And so anyway, I enrolled at Stanford. That was actually a very good experience for me, because it got me away for the first time in my life. And I was surrounded by very bright kids who were from all over the country, different backgrounds, even though in those days it was a very -- well, No. 1, it was anti-Jewish. There was a lot of prejudice on the campus.

You know, the fraternities didn't take Jews in those days. I think there was one black on the campus, and he was a basketball player. And they were virtually no Asians in those days. You know, it was really a white Caucasian population in those days. But nevertheless, I learned how to think; had some great professors. And there were some great kids there, and I learned how to think.

But I was very intimidated there, because I was so in denial. I was so afraid that people would find out about my

background. I thought this is the way to get away for me, because nobody knows my background here like they do up in Petaluma. Now I can be this person that I want to be, the facade.

Q DID IT WORK?

A No, it didn't work.

Q WHAT HAPPENED?

A Well, I found myself -- I was actually quite shy and withdrawn in those days, all during my -- I had that side of me. And I didn't date much. I didn't mix with the people I really wanted to mix with. I mean, I always felt like I was a little on the outs. And it's very clear to me now as to why that happened. Because I was so embarrassed about my background that I couldn't -- I was afraid that someone would ask me the wrong question and that I might be found out. That they would meet my parents, who had a strong German Jewish accent. They would know that once they met my parents or my relatives, they would immediately know where I came from, this sort of thing. It was a very, very tough for me.

Q WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT THE PREJUDICE, YOU MENTIONED THAT JEWS WEREN'T ALLOWED INTO THE FRATERNITIES. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT WHAT PREJUDICE WAS LIKE AT STANFORD WHEN YOU WERE GOING THERE?

A Well, there was the actual -- those were facts, that it was in the bylaws of these fraternities. Most fraternities -- there weren't any sororities at Stanford at the time I went there. There were before, but somebody had committed suicide, some girl, because she couldn't get into a

sorority. So they closed down all sororities at that time.

But the fraternities, most of them, the ones that were considered the the real social, the prestige fraternities, did not allow Jews. And so my perception was that all these guys were prejudiced, which probably wasn't the case. But because I wanted to be one of the boys, I wanted to be included, I was very intimidated by these people. Didn't want them to find me out.

So it was -- it made life tough. So I ran around with a bunch of kid where I felt safe. And I didn't feel safe with a lot of the women, too, because I felt that if I actually, say, fell for a girl, and I would meet her parents, and her parents then would know my background, I felt that she would probably leave. So I never bothered to date the women I wanted to date, for the most part. So I lived with that for a long time.

Q THEN WHAT HAPPENED AFTER STANFORD?

A After Stanford, well, let's see. After Stanford, I joined the Navy, because it was that or get drafted. So I decided to get commissioned.

Q WHAT YEAR WAS THAT?

A This was in '54, 1953. I went back to Newport, Rhode Island, Officer Candidate School. And it was a four-month program in beautiful Newport, Rhode Island. That was the summer that Jacki married Jack just a few blocks from the naval base. And so I went through four months of that. That was real tough for me, but I got my commission, and I became an officer.

And then I started gaining confidence. The Navy

was good for me, because for the first time I had some responsibility. I was away from my parents. I couldn't turn to them for any help. I was on my own. And I ended up feeling terrific, because I did a good job in the Navy. So that it was a great confidence builder. It was actually more of a confidence builder than Stanford for me, because I was able to get away and actually accomplish something on my own.

Q AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A And then what happened? Oh, boy. Is this part of the script, or is this just about the Holocaust? We go into all this stuff?

Speaker MS. ( ): THAT'S PART OF YOUR LIFE. IT'S WHAT'S IMPORTANT.

A This is my life, yeah. Well, let's see. In 1949 when I was about a junior -- no, as a sophomore at Stanford, I met my dream girl at Lake Tahoe, and I ended up marrying her in 1956. No, I was still in the Navy. And so I brought her out with me. And the reason I married her is because she stood for everything that I couldn't have. She was a blood, blue eyed Protestant sorority girl from Minnesota, just the opposite of what my parents probably would have selected for me.

And anyway, we got married. And after the Navy, I returned to Petaluma, because part of the deal was that I join my father's business. I mean, that was a requirement. No if's or but's. I mean, he built that business for me, so it was mine to take, you know, with no options.

So we got back, and so that was a -- and I did not want to go into that business. I did not want to go into that,

but I did anyway, because I felt -- you know, it was a guilt trip, and I felt an obligation and the whole thing. So I gave it a two-year try, and it didn't work. So after two years, we had a one-year old baby and lots of debt, we moved to Palo Alto or to the peninsula.

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And I got a job with an insurance company, because I did not want to get into the corporate world. I'd read a book called "The Organization Man" that was written in the 50's by William White, and it had a profound influence on my life. I didn't want to go into the -- most of the people that had a -- I ended up with an M.B.A., and most people with M.B.A.'s went to work for Standard Oil, or Dean Whitter, or Wells Fargo, and that type of stuff. And I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be independent and not get into that.

So that's why I went into the insurance business, because I could, in a sense, be independent. So that's what I did, and I ended up really liking it. I really liked that, and I became sort of a leader in my field. And it just gave me incredible confidence like I never knew I could have. I was always kind of a late bloomer because of my background.

And so what happened is we had two daughters. We have two daughters that are now 34 and 30. And my marriage to Ellie lasted 17 years. And we had our good moments, but we were both so incredibly untrained, so much in denial. She came from a strict Lutheran background, and we were both very uncommunicative, as was the way most people were or are. And so anyway, it finally caught up with us, and we split in '70. I moved out in '72. And I stayed single for many, many years

until two years ago and I got remarried. And we have a ten-week old baby.

So I've had like three lives, I feel, at least three separate lives. I mean, I look back at my life, and it's fabulous, really. I think I've had a fabulous life, I mean, in spite of all these horrible things. But I've survived. I've stayed in good health. I love what I'm doing. I love my wife and my kids, and it's just great. I feel great.

BY MS. NETTER:

Q DO YOU HAVE A SENSE OF HOW YOUR EXPERIENCES IN GERMANY AND HOW YOU HAD TO LEAVE AND THAT WHOLE THING AFFECTED YOUR CHILDREN?

A That's funny. I took them over there so they could really see where I came from. And I don't think it's -- I don't know. They're all involved in their own life, and they really don't talk about it; rarely. But how has it affected them? I can't answer that. I don't know.

Q DO YOU HAVE A SENSE ABOUT -- HOW SHALL I ASK THIS? PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY LOTS OF EVENTS IN THEIR LIVES, AND IT'S HARD TO SAY, WELL, IF I HAD TO CROSS THE STREET AT THAT TIME AND RAN INTO THAT PERSON, MY LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN LIKE THIS. BUT YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH CHANGING COUNTRIES AND DEALING WITH NAZI GERMANY, DO YOU EVER IMAGINE WHAT YOUR LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN OR HOW IT'S CHANGED YOU, OTHER THAN THE OBVIOUS, HOW IT'S CHANGED YOUR LIFE?

A Oh, I feel very lucky. I feel I have a much richer life than people who grew up in a more traditional -- like the kids, for example, I went to Stanford with. A lot of them who

grew up in wealthy homes and never had any -- at least on the surface, you know, never had any major problems. I feel very lucky that I've been through all that. And I think it does help sustain you more as an adult, because you tend to keep growing. I don't know. I feel like I keep growing, and a lot of the kids that had it too easy seem to sort of peak out very early, and their lives tend to go the other direction. I mean, that's a generality. But I feel my life is a lot richer because of it, and now I've become more spiritual. And just all the way around, it's -- I actually think more about my background now than I have in a long time.

Q IS THERE MORE TO THAT?

A Well, I think, yeah. I've had some therapy some time ago, but I think you learn to -- there was a time in my life where I felt, well, what happened in the past is a closed book. That's history, and it has no effect on me now. I went through that for a long time. I figured, well, that's just an excuse. But now I'm so completely aware that you can't deny your past. It's part of you. And you have to feel. You have to address it. And it's very helpful to know that, why are you the way you are. Why do you feel low? Why do you feel depressed? Why does this sort of situation make you feel a certain way? Well, if you can feel it and think it through in terms of how something in your childhood might have affected you, it's really helpful.

BY MS. ( ):

Q TWO QUESTIONS. ONE IS: DID YOU OR HAVE YOU SINCE YOU'VE GOTTEN MORE INTO THE JEWISH RELIGION, HAVE YOU BECOME

RELIGIOUS IN JUDIASM?

A I've become -- I used the word -- it's more spiritual than religious, because I'm not practicing any kind of formal religion, although we do go to the Unity church, which is a sort of a nondenominational. And I'm conscious now that there's a God, and it's sort of a personal God. And it's a feeling, I don't know exactly who or what he is, but I'm very aware of a God. And it's not an easy concept for me, but I'm learning that there is a God. And so I -- you know, but as far as Jewish, no, no. I have no connection with the Jewish faith. I don't know anything about it.

Q AND MY OTHER QUESTION IS: EARLY ON, YOU MENTIONED THAT YOU WERE REUNITED WITH YOUR MOTHER IN THE BAY AREA.

A Oh, yes.

Q IN THE BAY AREA.

WHEN WAS THAT?

A Yeah. My mother ended up getting married way back then in Germany, and they ended up in Switzerland and finally immigrated. When we went to the United States, they immigrated to Brazil. So she spent all those years in Brazil.

And my parents would not allow me to -- my father and stepmother who raised me would not allow me to have any communication with her whatsoever. I mean, they would intercept her mail and all that kind of stuff, so I was never really able to receive any of her letters. And I heard so many bad things about her that I didn't dare write her. I was also afraid to write her.

And so, you know, this brings -- that's funny. I

haven't thought about this in 20 years. I'm glad you asked that. But it wasn't until I was at Stanford that she found out that she could now write direct to me without my parents intercepting. So she started writing to me again. And I must have written her back or something, because she ended up meeting me in San Francisco when I was a freshman. I guess I was 18. And she brought her husband along from Brazil.

And I remember that my parents somehow found out and tried to prevent her legally from seeing me. And somehow she got a court order. It required a court order for her to see me. And so anyway, I did see her.

And then, later on I saw her. I met her in New York a few times; once in Los Angeles. And it wasn't until I was much older that I told my parents that I was seeing her. I did all this on the sly. I lived my life that way. But it wasn't until she was actually on her deathbed. She had breast cancer and died in the early 70's. But I went down to Brazil then to visit her. And I met her in New York a few times, and we had a great reunion.

Speaker

BY MS. ( ):

Q TAKING YOU BACK A NUMBER OF YEARS, I WAS CURIOUS TO HEAR A LITTLE BIT FROM YOU WHAT YOU THOUGHT AS A KID, COMING TO AMERICA, WHAT YOU THOUGHT ABOUT AMERICA. IT SOUNDS LIKE THE JOURNEY WAS AN ADVENTURE AND COMING INTO THE BAY UNDER THE BRIDGE WAS MARVELOUS, BUT WHAT WERE YOUR PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS ABOUT THE STATES?

A Okay. That's a good question. It was all based on fantasy, the movies, I guess. I remember there was a movie

theater in this little German town, and I remember seeing pictures of Clark Gable and people like that. So I had this very glamorous -- I associated with Hollywood, America, No. 1 through movies and jazz. I loved music. We had a radio. We had a -- what do you call those things in those days? You know, the radio station that would broadcast all over, from all over the world. I forgot what it was called.

BY MS. ( ):

Q A RADIO STATION?

A Yeah. A radio station that would pick up stations from all over the world, what's that called?

Q A SHORT WAVE RADIO?

A Yeah, a short wave radio. And I used to hear American music from hotels. They would broadcast that sort of thing from New York, from London and so on. And then, I associated that with Hollywood and movies.

And then, my father came over here by himself in '38. He took a liner. In those days, you took the ship from London to New York and then the train. And he took hundreds of pictures of the United States, and he came back, I mean, like a little kid. It's like he had discovered heaven. And he had all these pictures of the transcontinental train ride, New York, and Philadelphia, and the Rockies coming across the country and then the San Francisco Bay Area in those days.

And I mean it was just unbelievable how enthusiastic he was. So that was my picture of the United States, fantasy land, paradise. And actually, it is. I mean, when you compare it with what I came from, it was paradise.

speaker

BY MS. ( ):

Q I HAVE A BUNCH OF QUESTIONS. I'M GOING TO TRY TO DO THEM IN SOME SORT OF LOGICAL ORDER.

YOU TALKED A LOT ABOUT AS A YOUNG CHILD OR AS AN ADOLESCENT AND AS A YOUNG PERSON AT STANFORD AND IN YOUR EARLY ADULT YEARS ABOUT HIDING ALL THESE THINGS ABOUT YOUR PAST AND ABOUT WHO YOU WERE. AND YOU ALSO TALKED ABOUT BEING IN PETALUMA AND THE FACT THAT YOU WERE -- GERMAN WAS WORSE THAN BEING JEWISH. I'M JUST CURIOUS HOW THAT DEVELOPED FOR YOU AS YOU BECAME OLDER. I MEAN, YOU TALKED A LOT ABOUT BEING IN DENIAL ABOUT ALL THESE THINGS THAT HAPPENED. AS YOU GREW OLDER, WAS IT MORE AN ISSUE OF BEING GERMAN THAT WAS SHAMEFUL FOR YOU, OR BEING JEWISH, OR CAN YOU EVEN SEPARATE IT?

A No. It was more, I think, being Jewish. Oh, yeah, in this country. Yeah, Germans were respected even though they were our enemies. Once the war was over, you know, German built up, and we always compared ourselves to the Germans, industrious and all that kind of stuff. So being German was fine.

But I was raised to hide my feelings. I mean, I was not allowed to talk about my real mother, my name, my religion. I mean, that wasn't information you could talk about. Basically, they never spoke German again, so I mean, I was taught to hide feelings. And also, they were the type that, if you came home and told them you had a bad grade on a test, you would get punished. I would get punished. So I learned also to hold that back. So I learned, you know, as a kid, I really learned that it doesn't pay to express your feelings, or you're going to get pounced on. And I think that carries on into

adulthood.

And I think it's kind of pervasive, actually, in our society. It wasn't just me. I mean, that's kind of accepted behavior in the business world and in politics, and it's all over. And it's only the last few years that I've addressed all that and understand it even that that's what I was doing.

Q WHEN WAS IT THAT YOU FINALLY SHARED THIS STORY, OR HAVE YOU SHARED THIS STORY, OR TO WHAT EXTENT, WITH YOUR CHILDREN? WELL, OBVIOUSLY, YOU HAVE. YOU TOOK THEM TO GERMANY WITH YOU. BUT WHAT WAS IT THAT, GIVEN ALL THE DENIAL AND SHAMEFUL FEELINGS THAT YOU HAD, WHEN WAS IT THAT YOU --

A Well, I think with my immediate family, no, I shared this all along. Like with my first wife and my kids, I didn't hold any of this back. In fact, she helped me become more honest with all this stuff anyway.

Q MY LAST QUESTION FOR NOW IS IF YOU FEEL -- IF YOU SEE MAYBE HOW THESE EXPERIENCES OF LIKE HAVING LOST SOME OF YOUR FAMILY OR HAVING LEFT SOME OF YOUR FAMILY BEHIND IN EUROPE, AND YOUR MOTHER, AND HOW THAT AFFECTED YOUR VIEWS OR YOUR VALUES AROUND FAMILY AS A HUSBAND AND A FATHER YOURSELF.

A Yeah. I haven't even talked about that. We left behind two grandmothers. We were a very small family, so I didn't leave that many behind like a lot of Jews. But my two grandmothers, they were old at the time. And they didn't live near me, so I didn't really know them very well. But I know my mother -- my stepmother, must have experienced incredible guilt for leaving her mother behind. And my father left his mother

behind, and they both ended up dying. I mean, dying in some sort of mysterious death. And I think they probably committed suicide before they were hauled off to a concentration camp. That must have been what happened. But they were too old to come with us, and so they were left behind.

I think that's probably one reason my Berlin aunt stayed behind, because her mother was still there. I think that might have been a factor.

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BY MS. ( ):

Q MY QUESTIONS CONCERN THE WAR YEARS. YOU WERE ALREADY IN THIS COUNTRY. DO YOU REMEMBER DECEMBER 7th, 1941?

A Very well.

Q CAN YOU TELL ME YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF THAT DATE?

A Yeah. It was a Sunday afternoon. We were having our big dinner, our Sunday dinner, in Petaluma. We were sitting around. For some reason, we had the radio on, and we heard President Roosevelt announce that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and I had never heard of Pearl Harbor. And I was what, ten, eleven? No, 12. I was 12, and it was a big shock.

But it didn't relate to, really, you know, the fact that I was German. I was glad that we were going to fight against Hitler, of course. And the country, I mean, the whole spirit at that time was so Pro-American. We overall were so patriotic. It was such a clear-cut good guy/bad guy war, it was incredible.

Q DO YOU REMEMBER RATIONING, FOOD RATIONING, GAS RATIONING?

A (Nods).

Q DID THAT AFFECT YOUR LIFE DRAMATICALLY IN A WAY THAT YOU WERE AWARE OF CONSCIOUSLY THAT IT WAS DIFFERENT THAN BEFORE?

A Well, I'll tell you how it affected me. Food rationing was absolutely no problem in Petaluma, because you had all those farms. And my father was constantly visiting famers, so he'd come home with chickens, and eggs, and milk, and all that stuff, and meat. So, no, there was no food rationing at all. I don't think there was, anyway, was there? I don't think there was really any food rationing.

But there was gas. You got those cards, A, B, C cards. And, for example, if you were a traveling salesman, you would get a larger quota than someone who didn't work. And so they had a limit on how much gas you could buy. And there was also -- I think there was a 35-mile speed limit. I remember that. And it used to take us forever to drive from Petaluma to San Francisco. I remember that.

But my dad had a B card, so he could get away with going, because he had to use a car in his business. So he got pretty much all the gas he wanted. It seems to me he had his own gas pump at the mill, too. So there were ways around it.

The thing I remember is the curtailment of our athletic program in high school, because we played -- we were restricted. They gave up sports because of the gas that it took to go from town to town. So there was that. And that's about the only suffering that we had. There wasn't much. There wasn't much sacrifice.

Q DID YOU HAVE BLACKOUTS AT NIGHT IN YOUR AREA?

A No.

Q THERE WAS AN AWFUL LOT OF AMERICAN ANTI-NAZI PROPAGANDA FILMS MADE DURING THE WAR. HOLLYWOOD CRANKED THEM OUT. DO YOU REMEMBER GOING TO THE THEATER AND SEEING MOVIES LIKE THAT?

A Oh, yes, all the time. Oh, all the time.

Q CAN YOU TALK ABOUT WHAT THOSE MOVIES WERE ABOUT AND JUST YOUR PERCEPTION OF THAT PERIOD? BEING A GERMAN JEWISH AMERICAN IMMIGRANT AND SEEING THOSE KINDS OF MOVIES, WHAT DID IT MAKE YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR HOME COUNTRY?

A You mean about the United States? Because I didn't consider Germany -- it was sort of a closed chapter for me. It was amazing how I just sort of programmed that out of my life, and I was sort of right there with the rest of them. I was so eager to be accepted by this society that I blocked all that stuff out.

Q SO YOU DIDN'T CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE GERMAN THEN ANYMORE?

A No, no. I didn't relate to the German. I wasn't really a German. I was kicked out, so I wasn't a German, so I didn't really relate to that. I can certainly endorse the propaganda against Hitler, and the Japanese, and Mussolini. I mean, everywhere you went, yeah.

Q WHEN YOU JOINED THE NAVY, YOU SAID YOU WERE STATIONED IN RHODE ISLAND; IS THAT RIGHT? WHERE WERE YOU STATIONED AGAIN?

A No. I don't think I said. I was stationed in the desert, California desert, on an air base, navy air station.

Q IN THE CALIFORNIA DESERT?

A Yes.

Q WHAT DID YOU DO?

A I was in charge of athletics. I was the special services. I ran the movie theater, the bowling alley, the hobby shop, and that's how I carried out my Navy career.

Q THAT'S HOW YOU SERVED YOUR COUNTRY?

A That's how I served our country.

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Q IT'S AN IMPORTANT JOB. I CAN UNDERSTAND THAT.

A Morale.

Q THAT'S WHAT THEY CALL IT, RIGHT.

Did you feel an obligation to join the service in any way?

A Not really.

Q IT WAS JUST --

A I didn't have a choice, so I didn't feel an obligation. But I was very proud to be in the Navy. I even considered staying in, anything not to go back to Petaluma.

Q WHEN YOU MET YOUR REAL MOTHER AGAIN, YOU SAID IT WAS IN THE '70'S, DID SHE TALK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO HER IN EUROPE AND HER WHOLE EXPERIENCES AND GIVE YOU HER PERSONAL HISTORY? DID SHE VOLUNTEER THAT INFORMATION?

A Yes. She was somewhat closed-mouthed about her past experience. I think she had a lot of guilt feelings, especially around her second husband who had then died. But I didn't like her second husband. I never accepted him. And I don't think she stuck around Germany very long. She went back to Berlin, and Berlin being a big city, you didn't notice things

as much. He was Austrian. He wasn't German. So they ended up in Switzerland, I think, almost right away, so they weren't really there during the tough years. She got out early.

Q I THINK THAT'S ALL THE QUESTIONS I HAVE. THANK YOU.

BY MS. NETTER:

Q IS THERE ANYTHING THAT WE SHOULD HAVE ASKED YOU ABOUT OR DIDN'T?

A No. You covered -- I almost forgot my grandmothers. That was --

Yeah. You know, there's something I want to say that's kind of interesting to me. I guess I'd like to ask you that question.

Do you think there's something unique about the Holocaust; in other words, as opposed to some of the other events that take place in the world?

Q FOR ME, THE REASON WHY I DO THESE INTERVIEWS IS THAT I GREW UP IN A FAMILY THAT -- MY PARENTS ARE FROM GERMANY. THEY WERE KICKED OUT, AND THEIR STYLE OF DEALING WITH IT WAS TO NOT TALK ABOUT IT. IN THE LAST YEARS, I HAD BEEN GOING, WELL, WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM? HOW DID THAT AFFECT THEIR LIVES, AND HOW IS THAT AFFECTING ME? SO I GUESS I WENT IN IT ON A PERSONAL LEVEL, BUT I'M GETTING A MORE GLOBAL LEVEL.

AND SO WHEN I READ THE PAPER, AND I SEE WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE WORLD, I GUESS I SORT OF FOCUS ON WHAT'S HAPPENED IN GERMANY, AND I SORT OF JUST PAY MORE ATTENTION ABOUT WHAT ELSE IS GOING ON IN THE WORLD. AND IT JUST SEEMS THAT PEOPLE SAY, YOU KNOW, NEVER AGAIN. WE MUST KNOW SO THIS WILL

NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN. BUT I DON'T THINK THAT'S WHAT'S HAPPENING. I THINK THE SAME THING IS HAPPENING IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES AND MAYBE SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT STYLES OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

A That's my reason for asking the question. Somehow I get the feeling that many Jews think that's the worst thing that ever happened in the history of the world was what happened, you know, during the Hitler regime, the murdering of, what, three million or whatever the number is, Jews. And I don't see it as that different from events that take place now in certain places in the world now. And it happened in Armenia, and it happened in, what, in the Far East, and you see it happening all the time.

Do you think there's something unique about the Holocaust as opposed to other disasters?

MS. ( ): I THINK THAT I AGREE WITH YOU FOR SURE THAT THIS IS ONE OF MANY HORRIBLE THINGS. BUT I MEAN I CERTAINLY SEE IN TODAY'S WORLD AND DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE WORLD IN THE LAST HUNDRED, 500, THOUSAND YEARS. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, I FEEL LIKE THERE IS A UNIQUE STORY TO THIS. NOT NECESSARILY THAT IT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT STORY, BUT I SEE IT AS BEING VERY IMPORTANT, AS IMPORTANT AS THE OTHERS.

YET I ALSO THINK THAT IT'S A STORY THAT NEEDS TO BE CAPTURED AND RETOLD AGAIN SO IT DOESN'T HAPPEN AGAIN, EVEN THOUGH I SEE IT STILL HAPPENING. BUT I THINK THAT IT CAN'T AND SHOULDN'T BE FORGOTTEN.

MS. ( ): IT'S REALLY UNIQUE IN A SENSE THAT SO MANY PEOPLE THAT WERE INVOLVED IN THE HOLOCAUST DID COME TO THIS COUNTRY. AND THERE WAS JUST THAT DOMINO EFFECT OF

GENERATION AND GENERATION AFTERWARDS HAVING TO STILL DEAL WITH IT. I MEAN, I THINK IT'S STILL AN ISSUE UNIQUE IN THE WAY THAT IT -- AMERICA'S ROLE. AND WE WERE VERY INVOLVED AS A COUNTRY AND JUST HOW SO MANY JEWISH PEOPLE CAME TO THIS COUNTRY. I THINK IT MAY BE UNIQUE IN THAT SENSE. YOU KNOW, I MEAN AMERICA HAS PLAYED DIRECTLY AND INDIRECTLY SUCH A ROLE IN THE WHOLE EVENT FROM A CIRCLE POINT OF VIEW.

MS. ( ): I SEE IT MORE AS A -- I TRY TO PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE IN TERMS OF THE WAY IT CHANGED THIS COUNTRY. THIS CENTURY HAS SEEN SO MUCH CHANGE ON SO MANY LEVELS. IF THE PERSECUTIONS IN EUROPE HAD NOT OCCURRED, AND I MEAN FROM THE LATE 1800'S WITH THE RUSSIAN POGROMS THAT HAPPENED ALL THE WAY THROUGH THE RISE OF NAZISM AND FACISM IN ITALY, ET CETERA. THERE HAS NEVER BEEN SUCH AN INFLUX OF IMMIGRATION INTO THIS COUNTRY, INTO AMERICA, THIS COUNTRY WOULD BE SIGNIFICANTLY LESS INTERESTING WITHOUT IT. IF THESE PEOPLE HAD NOT COME HERE, THIS COUNTRY MIGHT NOT HAVE GONE AS FAST AS IT'S GONE, PROGRESSED AS FAR AS IT'S PROGRESSED.

AMERICANS HAVE A TENDENCY TO THINK THAT WE ARE THE BEST, BECAUSE WE ARE. WE ARE VERY NATIONALISTIC IN A WAY THAT GERMANS ARE VERY NATIONALISTIC AND ITALIANS ARE VERY NATIONALISTIC. WE WERE A VERY YOUNG NATION, AND IT'S BECAUSE OF THIS MELTING POT EFFECT THAT WE ARE THE WORLD POWER THAT WE ONCE WERE AND WE STILL ARE IN A SENSE. THAT'S THE IMPORTANCE FOR ME, IS THAT THIS COUNTRY WOULD NOT BE THE WAY IT IS. MY LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT IF THIS IMMIGRATION HAD NOT TAKEN PLACE.

A Even as a non-Jew, do you think that would be true?

MS. ( ): I'M NOT SURE. I'M NOT SURE. I'M VERY CULTURALLY JEWISH. I'M NOT PARTICULARLY RELIGIOUSLY JEWISH. I DON'T GO TO TEMPLE A LOT, BUT I'M INEXTRICABLY LINKED TO MY BACKGROUND BEING A JEWISH PERSON AND GROWING UP AND ALL THAT STUFF. I DON'T KNOW HOW NON-JEWS FEEL ABOUT IT.

STALIN KILLED TEN MILLION PEOPLE. HITLER KILLED SIX MILLION PLUS. WHO KNOWS HOW THE WORLD WOULD HAVE CHANGED WITHOUT IT. THE IMPORTANT THING FOR ME RIGHT AT THIS MOMENT IS THAT THERE ARE STILL PEOPLE THAT SAY IT NEVER HAPPENED. AND THE HISTORY THAT I LEARNED IN SCHOOL OF THE HOLOCAUST WAS PAINTED WITH NOT A WIDE BRUSH BUT A ROLLER. IT WAS JUST BROAD STROKES. THIS IS THIS BATTLE; THIS IS THAT BATTLE. EVERYBODY WENT TO CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND DIED. OR YOU READ ANN FRANK'S DIARY, AND THAT WAS IT.

THIS TO ME IS A VERY PERSONAL THING. AND TO GET THESE KINDS OF PERSONAL STORIES IS A REMARKABLE DOCUMENT. THAT'S WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO ME. NOBODY ELSE KNEW, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT YOU COULD GET OUT OF GERMANY, THAT YOU COULD GET OUT OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA OR POLAND OR ANYTHING ELSE. I ALWAYS ASSUMED THAT DOORS WERE SLAMMED SHUT IN 1938 AND NOBODY GOT OUT.

A So you hear actual stories of what happened to individuals.

Q REAL STORIES. AND NO TWO ARE THE SAME. AND THAT'S WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT. YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO GO TO A CAMP.

A From the terms of history.

Q EXACTLY. YOU'RE PART OF A LIVING, CONTINUING HISTORY. YOU MADE AN IMPACT THERE. YOU MADE AN IMPACT HERE.

A Well, it's fascinating that part. And this stuff,

I think that's so interesting about my aunt, the living conditions in Berlin in those late years. That's something you never hear about, what was it really like to just get food, you know, the basic kinds of things that are so automatic to us.

MS. ( ): I'M NOT JEWISH, AND I AM STILL VERY AFFECTED BY -- I'VE BEEN INTERVIEWING HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS WHERE I WORK FOR ANOTHER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.

WHEN I WAS IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, I GREW UP IN A VERY JEWISH NEIGHBORHOOD IN LONG ISLAND, AND WE WERE CONSTANTLY WATCHING FILMS, AND WE HAD TO KNOW ALL THE DETAILS. SO I WAS VERY AWARE.

BUT IN HIGH SCHOOL, YOU'RE REALLY NOT INTERESTED. IT'S NOW RESURFACED, AND YET IT'S EXTREMELY -- IT'S A VERY BIG FACTOR IN MY LIFE AS A NON-JEW, BECAUSE, FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, I MEAN, SUCH A BODY OF PEOPLE, SO LARGE OF A PEOPLE WERE AFFECTED, AND NOW I KNOW THESE PEOPLE PERSONALLY. SO I CAN'T HELP BUT BE AFFECTED, ALSO. I'M EXTREMELY AFFECTED, AND I WILL CARRY THIS WITH ME.

A It's funny. When my dad died, he hired a -- it's really ironic. He hired this German. He looks like he's out of a World War II movie. You know, the stereotype villain with the German accent and the beer belly. I mean, the whole thing, and (Ja Wole,) Mein Herr. He kowtowed to my father. And yet this guy was in denial about the Holocaust. He would not believe it. And my father, I mean, I could never imagine how my father could have a guy like that as his right-hand man 40 years later.

And after Dad died, one of the first things I did was fire the guy. I couldn't stand to have the guy around.

Now, he was an alcoholic besides, but I mean it's really interesting to me how much in denial my parents were about this stuff.

The Jews in Israel, you know, the way they react is interesting to me, too. I sometimes wonder what they learned from all this, don't you?

BY MS. NETTER:

Q YEAH. I DON'T REALLY -- THE WAY I'M STARTING TO FEEL NOW IS I THINK PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE AND THAT IN HOPEFULLY MOST OF THE TIME PEOPLE ARE GOOD PEOPLE. AND THAT I THINK EVERY ONE HAS A CAPACITY TO DO THINGS THAT ARE HORRENDOUS.

A Yeah. It can happen anywhere. That's what's interesting. I used to think that there were certain conditions that made -- that enabled a Hitler to do what he did that were unique to Germany, and I don't believe that any more. I think it can happen anywhere including here when a David Dukes can run for office.

Q RIGHT. IF YOU HAD TO DESCRIBE CLAUS SHELLING, THE MAN, IN A FEW WORDS, IN A SENTENCE, HOW WOULD YOU DO THAT?

A Well, as I said earlier, I consider myself extremely lucky. I'm certainly a survivor. I feel very good about myself as a person personally, professionally, you know, the whole bit. And I can say that, you know, this kind of experience I've had has certainly enriched my life, because it does put things into perspective. I think you tend to appreciate what we have more, although I have to remind myself periodically.

Q THANK YOU.