

[INAUDIBLE]. Today is November 25, 2003, and we are at the Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project. And we're interviewing Mr. Guenter Gruschka. The videographer is Anne Grenn Saldinger, and I am Hilde Gattmann. Would you give us your birth name, please, and where you were born?

Guenter Ernest Gruschka. I was born in Breslau, Germany on July 30, 1934.

And what was your father's name?

My father's name was Leopold Gruschka.

And mother's name?

Erna Gruschka.

And what was her maiden name?

Glaser or Glaser.

OK. And what was-- did you-- excuse me. Did you have any brothers or sisters.

Yes, I do have one brother. And his name is Peter Gruschka.

And how did your family support themselves?

In Germany?

My parents had a ladies and men's clothing store in addition to notions and fabrics.

And did they have any difficulties that you know of during the Depression-- the '30s?

Not that I know of. The store stayed open until Kristallnacht. And at that time, it was completely demolished.

What schools did you attend to in Breslau?

I didn't go to school there. I was five years old when I left Germany.

And so did you have other family that lived in Breslau?

Yes, I had a paternal grandfather.

And how did you relate to each other?

He only came up there to visit. I related quite well to him in the small town that my parents and my grandfather lived.

And what was the name of that town?

That was called Ohlau-- O-H-L-A-U.

And what was the economic status of your family?

I would say middle class.

And did you live in a Jewish neighborhood, or was it--

No, this was a general German neighborhood, because the town was very, very small.

And do you know anything bad relationship of your parents to the neighbors before '33, before--

No, I don't. Well, I know that they had-- they had German help in the store as well as at home. And they got along very well.

But you're not aware of any socializing.

I don't think they did any socializing.

Breslau-- I mean, that area had quite a large--

We didn't move to Breslau until after Kristallnacht.

I see. So in the small town, was there a larger Jewish population?

No very, very small.

Small. Was there a synagogue there?

Yes, there was. And my grandfather was one of the directors there, or board member.

And were your family-- was your family observant?

Quasi, somewhat.

You observed holidays at home?

We celebrated holidays at home, and as far as I know, the store was closed.

Do you have any memory of celebrating the holidays at home?

No, other than perhaps Passover. Because quite a number of relatives gathered at the Passover Seder.

That was impressive. All right. And do you know whether your family was involved in local politics at all or unions?

No, they were not. Except for my grandfather-- paternal grandfather in that small town. He advised the city council on many different things.

And how did he get into that position? I mean, just did he--

He was very well respected and obviously a very nice man. And he was very, very educated.

How large was the town approximately? Do you know?

I have no idea-- very small.

Now, as a child, do you have any memories of friendships or kids played with or--

No, I cannot recall. The only thing I can recall is in that small town in the synagogue where my grandfather was a board member, at one time he took me through the synagogue. And I saw a podium. And immediately-- this must have-- immediately I went to the podium, and I decided to speak or preach a sermon. And that's what I've been told later on in

life. And the first thing that I said is people should get along well together.

[INAUDIBLE]

But you don't remember playing or--

No, I do not.

--or anything-- any special things you used to do? Well, you must have been playing there with Gentile children.

Oh, certainly.

Yeah. That's all right. Describe the first time that you noticed anti-Semitism.

I wasn't sure whether it was anti-Semitism or what it was. After Kristallnacht, my parents moved to Breslau. And one evening-- or it was during the night I would say-- a bunch of people came up to the apartment, knocked at the door, and asked for my father to come out and leave with them.

And I remember crying, don't take him. Don't take him. And as I used to call my father Vati. And I said Vati, Vati, don't go. And that's the first time I came into contact with anti-Semitism, because after they left, I had to ask my mother what this was all about.

And what did she tell you?

She told me these were a bunch of hooligans, and that they hated the Jews, and that they were going to incarcerate my father. She didn't for how long.

And that was after Kristallnacht though.

Yes.

So you had Kristallnacht still-- the experience still in the--

That I couldn't remember, and I was told that everything was destroyed. So immediately after we all went up to Breslau.

OK. So they were trying--

And then shortly thereafter, they took my father.

And how long did they keep him?

He was gone I'd say-- what was it-- three to four weeks.

And how was he when he came back?

He looked a lot thinner, and he didn't say very much. But in the meantime, my mother had gotten tickets to go. And the only place that was available at that time to go to was Shanghai. And the only reason they released him is because we had that-- my mother had the tickets.

And what happened?

Where was your father taken?

Buchenwald.

And at what point did your mother know anything about what had happened to him?

She found out from some of the people that had come back. And they knew my father and mother, so then they communicated with my mother, telling her where he was and that she better get something going so that we could leave. Otherwise they would keep him at the Buchenwald camp.

So you actually found out through friends, not officially.

No, not officially-- from friends.

So that first night he was taken, do you know who took him? Was that--

From what I understand, was the SA.

And was he first imprisoned in Breslau, or do you know?

No, no, no. From what I understand, they took him to a police station in Breslau and then immediately transported him to Buchenwald.

With others.

With others.

Yeah. So this was still going on after Kristallnacht.

Yes.

But--

This was in late '38.

Very shortly after.

Yeah.

Was he charged with something or--

No, he wasn't charged with anything other than being Jewish.

What happened to the business?

The business-- he tried to get some money back from the German government, but it was all futile.

Later on?

Yeah, later on, but that was all futile. There was nothing.

But at the time, that business was just left and you had--

Well, my parents just left. And that was it.

So in the smaller-- in the small town before you came to Breslau, what had happened there on Kristallnacht? Do you know?

Again, all of the Jewish commerce was disrupted, broken down, and destroyed in many cases.

So was your father's store--

Completely demolished.

--demolished.

Yeah.

So that was the--

It is possible that my grandfather, who went back to Ohlau later on-- that he might have taken over or helped out in the store that my parents had.

And they thought it would be safer in Breslau?

No, my mother's sister had moved to Breslau from another town since then-- since Kristallnacht.

And they wanted to be together.

Yeah. First of all, at the town was so small where they lived that they felt safer going into a larger city.

That's what they did in those days.

So what happened to you then in Breslau?

In Breslau? I didn't play with anyone from what I can remember. And the only thing is my aunt, who had gotten us the apartment-- she came to visit, and she took the stroller. And even though I was five years old, she took me around the park.

So you didn't stay there very long.

No, we didn't.

And then when word got out that you're--

In very early 1939, after my mother had bought the tickets, we boarded a ship in Genoa for Shanghai.

Do you remember the name of the ship?

I think I was called the Victoria-- yeah, Victoria.

And you went by way of where?

Oh, we left-- well, first of all we took the train to Genoa. From Genoa, we took a ship, and it stopped in, was it, Colombo, which is Ceylon. It also went to Singapore. I can't remember the other places.

It took you a few weeks to get there?

Yes, it did-- I'd say at least two to three weeks to get there.

Do you remember leaving? Do you remember having to choose between your possessions or--

No, I can remember boarding the ship in Genoa. And there were all kinds of pigeons flying around.

And what about toys? Were you able to take anything along?

No.

Nothing at all?

Nothing at all.

Did you understand why you were leaving Germany?

Well, at that point I understood. And after they had taken my father, and my mother explained to me the reason what was going on in Germany at that time, then I understood why we left-- why I had to leave.

So then on a ship, you met other children.

Yes, I did.

How many? And you played?

Yeah, I'm sure I did.

Right. Probably was exciting. And what happened when you landed in Shanghai?

Well, I remember we got off the boat. And we were inoculated, because of the many diseases that they have, and put on a truck with other people, and then transported to the section where later on it became the Shanghai ghetto.

And we were given a room, or a room and a half. That was before my brother was born.

So it was your parents and you.

Pardon?

It was the three of you.

Yeah, the three of us.

Any extended family also?

They came about the same time-- my uncle-- my father's brother-- and his wife. They didn't have any children. But they didn't move into the camp, because they had some money, and they were able to get an apartment.

And do you remember before you left Germany, were there other relatives-- grandparents or anyone that you had to leave behind?

My paternal grandfather I knew, because he was going back to that little town. He stayed behind. And my mother had, let's see, three siblings. No, actually four siblings. The one-- no, I think-- one, two-- no, there were four children together-- three siblings. And they had left for-- or they were leaving just at that time. They managed to get tickets to South America-- Bolivia-- together with my mother's parents.

So they could go there.

So then what happened to you once you moved into--

Oh, as soon as we got into Shanghai, my parents enrolled me in the Jewish school there-- Kadoorie Jewish school.

And--

And that was at age five or a little bit over. But I didn't stay very long in that school. I was boisterous. I guess I had something-- I wasn't very nice to the teacher. So then they transferred me to another Jewish school, where I stayed until form four, which is equivalent to, I think, junior or late sophomore year in high school.

OK.

So do you remember school? Did you like school?

Yes, I did. I had a lot of friends there in school.

And the language was?

The language was English. There was some German introduced also, but since I only spoke German with my parents, I didn't pay attention to the German that was taught in school.

So that's when you learned English.

Yeah.

And you stayed in Shanghai until what age?

Until 13-- till I was 13.

How about your parents? Was your father able to find work?

No, at first, before the Japanese took over the entire area, he managed to work for a rubber vulcanizing factory. That was very, very difficult, and he got paid very, very little. And that went on until '41, when the Japanese occupied the whole section. And at that point he just couldn't find any work.

Was that factory outside of the ghetto then?

Yes, it was. It was still run by the Japanese. So then when he stopped working, or he had, my mother-- in the small quarter that she had, she became a seamstress. I don't know whether she even learned that in Germany or not. But she did the best she could, and she had quite a large clientele.

And what facilities did you have in the one and a half room?

Yeah, the facility consisted of a bedroom, a kitchen, a semi bathroom, because I was little and my brother was born in 1941 in Shanghai. And a kitchen-- and that had to do for our apartment.

When you say semi bathroom--

You know, in the hallway there was a bathroom for everyone. And when that was too occupied, then we did it in the small apartment.

Now, was there plumbing?

Yeah, the plumbing was only in the hallway down the hall. Well, this was mainly for my brother and myself.

You mentioned you came into camp where the refugees settled. And that's where you had these--

Yeah, that's where we had the apartment.

So it was part of-- sometimes referred to as a hostel, I think? Or was it in one big building?

No, there were actually-- in that particular camp there were about three large buildings that housed a lot of refugees.

Was there a name?

Yeah, this was called Wayside Road Camp.

And did your mother cook separately for you, or was there a place where--

No, she cooked in the apartment. That mostly consisted of-- they call it soup made out of flour. That was the biggest meal we had.

I was just going to ask you what kind of food was available.

I was lucky or fortunate. At the end of the day, there was a deli at one of the main quarters of the camp. And in the evening, I would go down there, and I knew the people that owned or ran the deli. And they would give me leftovers of sausage, but mostly just the rings of sausage. And that's how I kept going.

And also, when my mother did have some extra money, she gave it to me. And I went down to the corner Chinese place, where they cooked these oil-- long pieces of flour, which they put into hot oil. And I just loved having that.

Like fried dough.

Yeah, it was fried dough. Yeah.

Now, was this before the Japanese came?

No, this was all during the occupation.

Yeah.

And before that, was the food any better? Did you have anything?

No, before that we had to do with care packages that came from one of the organizations here in the United States. But that didn't last very long.

Right.

And what was cooking facility for--

They had a stove which they fed with coal, and then just fanned it.

I see. Was it like a hibachi, or was it a regular stove?

No, it was a regular stove.

And how did you manage to communicate with the Chinese?



Well, we didn't.

Was it like charades? I mean, if you needed--

No, we didn't communicate at all. We didn't even get together with the Chinese.

Didn't have to.

No.

Do you remember being hungry?

Yes. And in fact, it got so bad for some of us that we went to one of the larger camps. And we were carrying a sheet-- a white sheet. And we scribbled on there, we're hungry. Help us.

And did people help you?

I can't remember. I think things just continued the way they were. Because the other people in these camps didn't have anything either.

What happened if someone needed medical care?

We had established-- or the refugees had established a hospital. And there were many doctors that came from Europe-- and nurses. The only problem is they didn't have much medication.

Yeah.

Were you or your family ever sick?

Yes, we were. Nothing very acute, but we had, oh, just the usual sicknesses.

So were you able-- your family were able to bring any money at all from Europe?

No, they were not.

You were not allowed a few dollars per person?

No. I think all the money they had, they had to spend it on the ticket to Shanghai.

Sure.

And in terms of possessions, were they able to bring anything with them?

No, nothing-- just the clothes they had on their back.

Right.

And then after your father could not continue working at that one factory, he wasn't able to find work.

No, it was so limited there, because the other refugees didn't have any money to pay for any services either.

And was it because he couldn't leave the part of town where you left him to go to--

That was one reason, but then again he didn't have any profession. If he would have been an engineer or a doctor, that

might have helped.

Yes. All right. What was social life like for you?

Oh, for me that was great. As I said, I had a lot of friends. And then also there were more kids at the camp where we lived. And we played all kinds of sports, from soccer and basketball, gymnastics. We did a lot of mischief.

What about the Jewish community in Shanghai? Did you have any?

Oh yes, I did go. Every afternoon I went to Talmud Torah, learning Hebrew. That was run by the Orthodox. And there was another means of getting food.

I was just going to ask you if they helped you.

Yeah, they did. They gave us snacks every afternoon.

I see.

So that was good motivation.

Oh, definitely.

[INAUDIBLE]. Right.

So you managed to get food from--

Yeah, one way or the other.

Yeah. But your parents--

They did not.

Harder.

Yeah, much harder.

And did the people who lived there sort of get together and try to help each other?

Yes, they did to a certain extent, because none of them had very much.

[INAUDIBLE]. Right.

But very close friendships came out of that, between my parents and the other people.

Did you-- were you aware of any news coming from the outside? Were you able--

Yes, because I had heard and seen people listening to the radio.

Was that allowed, or did it have to be--

No, it was allowed. And then also public announcements were made.

So then when did you hear what was happening?

Soon it became-- we really became aware of it after Pearl Harbor.

I see. So the news didn't trickle out after that.

Yeah.

And were you bar mitzvahed?

Pardon?

Were you bar mitzvahed?

I was bar mitzvahed here in San Francisco on my way to South America.

Oh.

The ship came from Honolulu, and on that Saturday I had bar mitzvah. And that same evening we took the train to go to Miami and then to South America.

Oh, is that right? So how were you able to leave at that time?

Because we had wanted to come to the United States, but we were told that the quota-- we were Polish quota, and that was very, very limited. So then we got papers from my mother's parents and relatives in Bolivia. They had gone to Bolivia-- that they would get us the papers, which they did.

And then by virtue of the HIAS, they paid for the trip to get us to Bolivia. So the transportation was from by ship from Shanghai via Honolulu to San Francisco.

Nice.

And from here by train to Miami, and then from there by plane to Bolivia.

And what year was that?

Pardon?

What year was that?

That was in '47-- 1947.

So that was relatively early for leaving Shanghai. Many people didn't--

No, that was-- no, many of them left in '46.

OK.

[INAUDIBLE] Do you remember during the war in Shanghai the bombing?

Yes, at one time I think the American bombers-- they-- they hit where the refugees lived. And normally they wouldn't have done that, but I guess it had happened by mistake. And there was quite a bit of a destruction.

And did you-- when you went to Bolivia, did you have a better life there?

In terms of friends and-- no, I don't think so. Not in the beginning. Because we came to La Paz, which is the largest city.

But my uncle and my mother's parents, they lived in a very small town. And then we moved down there. It was an agricultural town.

And I started to work for my grandfather in the store. They had a grocery store. And my mother went to work in a hotel in housekeeping. And my father became a bartender.

Oh, is that right? Versatile family.

Yeah.

And had you worked in Shanghai?

No, because I was 12, and then as soon as I got here, I was 13. I had not.

So tell us a little bit more about that journey, because that was quite some trip leaving Shanghai.

Yeah again, it was a troop transport-- an American troop transport. I think it was the General Buckner.

And a lot of people got seasick. And the next thing I knew, we were in Honolulu. And we were very well accepted by the Jewish community. They all came aboard the ship. And, in fact, they gave us clothing and food.

But again, we couldn't-- my parents and I, we could not set foot in Honolulu. We couldn't get out, because we didn't have any papers for the United States.

So then--

So then the next stop was from Honolulu, and the next stop was San Francisco.

Now, they let you out there without papers.

Yeah, they did, because my parents had friends here that vouched for us. And at the same time, the Jewish community had heard that I was one of the people that was going to have a bar mitzvah.

So who had arranged that?

It must have been the Jewish community in Honolulu.

And so where were did you have your bar mitzvah?

At the Beit Sholom on Gehry.

Yeah, in those days, that's an old congregation [BOTH TALKING]

Yeah, the old congregation.

Judea, right? Is that the one that you worked with?

Yeah, the one that's now Beth Israel Judea on Brotherhood Way.

Rabbi Burstein-- was he there then?

Yes, he officiated.

Now he's-- yeah, a nice man.

And you had been prepared for that in Shanghai.

Yeah. In fact, the people were amazed at how good my Hebrew was. But I felt very much out of place. The only pants I had were short pants, and I saw everyone, oh.

That's right. It was very painful for the youngster then.

Yeah, not looking like the rest of them.

So a whole group had their bar mitzvah together?

No, no, no. There was just me. It might have been others in probably other synagogues.

How long were you in San Francisco at that time?

I'd say maybe I think a day and a half. That's all. The following day after the bar mitzvah, we were put on a train I think over in Emeryville to go-- we stopped in Chicago. I remember Chattanooga, Chattanooga, and to Miami.

It must have taken, what, three days or more?

No, it wasn't long, about a week.

About a week.

Yeah.

Yeah. And then you get to Miami. And you went on to South America right away?

Yeah, right away. Right away.

Right away. And then you had people.

As soon as we hit the airport in Bolivia in La Paz, my uncle was there.

Were you excited about this transition?

No, from what I saw in that little bit of time that we had in San Francisco, I wanted to stay in the United States. As soon as I hit South America, I saw the primitive way of life there. It was as primitive, I'd say, as it was in Shanghai.

Really?

Yeah.

But for the masses.

And another language yet.

I had no idea.

So you knew no Spanish.

No Spanish. In fact, when I started to help my grandfather in the store, I learned-- before I learned Spanish, I learned an Indian dialect, which was called Aymara, which they speak in Peru-- the Cusco Indians.

What was the name of the town?

Chulumani. That's in the province of South Yungas. It's beautiful. It's tropical. And there are a lot of bananas, mangoes, papayas. Oh it's very fertile.

How far from La Paz?

Oh, about a day's journey on a truck. And we used to ride the truck. A lot of times I did that with the picking up merchandise in La Paz. And I was sitting on top of the truck-- on top of the merchandise. And it was just a one lane coming and going.

Yeah.

And it comes from-- it's a very mountainous trip.

Did you ever feel it was a good adventure-- I mean, being at that age?

No. No, on that road I saw a lot of accidents-- trucks toppling over.

And at that point you stopped going to school then?

I didn't go to school in that little town at all.

You went right to work?

Yeah.

And then in a little while, I'd say about six months, we went back to the city, because my father didn't want my mother to be a housekeeper, and he didn't like to be a bartender. And he wanted for me and my brother-- who was born in Shanghai in 1941-- to start going to school.

So he managed to save some money, and then I think he had gotten some help from the Jewish community in La Paz. And he opened a deli.

And then my brother immediately went to school, and I just took some private lessons. He wanted me to learn how to type in case we ever came back to the United States.

OK. And did you learn Spanish at that point then?

Yeah, I did. I did, because I was in the store, and I also did the buying for my father-- for my father's deli. And I learned Spanish very, very rapidly.

OK. So you stayed there three years did you say?

No, we stayed there-- we came here in '53-- from '47 to '53, 7 years-- close to 7 years.

How did you come here then? I mean, I knew you had your brother.

My father-- as I said, there was a very close relationship between the people in the camp in Shanghai. And one of the people that he became very friendly with, they stayed in San Francisco. And these are the same people that sent us the affidavit.

And so you came here?

Yeah.

And that was 50--

Late '53-- December 1953.

And then what happened? Where did you live? What did you do?

Well, we lived in San Francisco. My father got a job, I think in Oakland, working for GE in the light bulb-- manufacturing phase of it. And my mother took in-- she did clothing again-- clothing repairs and worked for a cleaning store. And I started to work for, like many of the refugees did, for the Fairmont Hotel.

Oh, I don't think you mentioned that. Right.

And at night I went to high school.

Yeah. Lewin was the name, wasn't it?

Yeah, Harry Lewin and the other one-- Henry.

Which one was at the top?

Pardon?

Which one was at the top?

One was the top, and the other had the establishment.

Yeah, I think Henry was the big wheel

Top [INAUDIBLE].

So I worked in catering. I liked that. In fact, I only had to work there on special occasions, like lunch or dinnertime. Because it was in the catering department. And the tips were very good.

OK.

And in the meantime, I'd gone to Galileo High School in San Francisco.

And your English was good from--

From school, because that's all we learned in school. But we did speak German at home.

Right. And you had Spanish as your language at school.

No, because again, I had no contact with people here. The only thing-- one of the first things I took in high school was Spanish. And people-- they were just amazed how good my Spanish was.

Right. And then what happened?

And then I didn't want to be working in the hotel business for the rest of my life. I managed to get a job with the Wall Street Journal in advertising in San Francisco.

And it was mostly clerical work, and also getting the paper ready for printing. And that's where I started my printing career. And this lasted for about three years, and then I was drafted.

Did they send you?

Pardon? No, when I was drafted, I went to Fort Ord near Monterey for basic training. And they had given me-- and I was too stupid to take it then. I could have gone in Monterey to the School of Languages and learned some more languages, but I would have had to stay in the army.

That was what year?

That was in 1957. So since I declined to go to the School of Languages, then I had gotten orders to go to Europe. So I went from here to-- what was it-- Fort Dix in New Jersey.

Yeah.

What was it called? Not Trenton-- Bordentown. And from there, we had orientations. And then I took again-- and this was just by coincidence that General Buckner, the one that transported me from Shanghai to San Francisco on the troop transport from New Jersey to Southampton.

Same ship?

Yeah, Southampton, England.

Yes. But on that same ship.

Same ship, yeah. And then from Southampton, I was transferred by train to Aschaffenburg. And there I became a courier.

I went to Heidelberg. That was the headquarters of the American army. And I took documents, I guess, up and down the train route.

And your German came in handy?

No.

Really, no?

There was one thing. When I got to Germany and anyone tried to speak to me, I was just-- I couldn't say a word. I was just a complete blank. I could not speak German.

[INAUDIBLE]

I understood what people said, but I wouldn't reply. I guess subconsciously it--

You lost it.

Yeah.

And none of it came-- I mean, none of it came back while they were there at all?

Well, it came back, but I just didn't utter any--

Didn't use it. Didn't want to use it.



No.

OK. So how long did you stay over there then?

About two years overseas, but in the meantime, something had broken out in Lebanon. I think there was a change of-- no, first of all, I think King Faisal was murdered. And our American troops were dispatched into the Middle East. And I happened to be sent to Lebanon.

And the fact that you were Jewish--

Oh yeah, that's the first thing that I was asked by the headquarters in Germany-- whether I was a Zionist-- that I could possibly run away and cross over into Israel or fight the Arabs.

The dog tags that you were issued when you went into Europe didn't have religion on them?

Yes, they did-- Jewish.

They did.

Yeah.

And then when you went to Lebanon, you also had it on there?

Yeah, I kept it on at all times.

Were you concerned especially?

No, I wasn't.

So how long were you in Lebanon?

97 days. That I remember-- three months and 7 days. Because we lived out at the airport, and I-- in a Quonset Hut.

So you picked up a little Arabic?

No, no Arabic.

OK.

And then where did they send you?

Well, then when I went back to Aschaffenburg. Well, first of all, it was Frankfurt for a little while, and then back to Aschaffenburg.

Frankfurt headquarters?

No. In Frankfurt, no. I was in the hospital there. I had minor surgery on my leg. And that was very nice. The doctors were nice and very good food.

And then I went back to Aschaffenburg for another very short period of time. Then I home.

So were you hurt in some way?

No, no, no. That was just varicose veins-- a ligation, what they call it.

Yes, true. OK, so were you discharged from the army eventually?

Yeah.

In what year?

No, there was a ship again that we went back to from Southampton to New York. And then from New York we flew to Oakland, and I was discharged in Oakland.

In what year?

1959.

[INAUDIBLE]

No, '57 to '59-- just two years. But prior to that, I was in the National Guard here in San Francisco. And I had finished a four-year term, but I was silly enough not to re-enlist.

So a few months after my enlistment expired at the National Guard, I had gotten a letter from the draft board that I would be drafted, because I didn't continue my military trainings. You know, the National Guard just consisted of-- at the time was only one weekend a month, so that wasn't very much training. But it was draft dodging. But it didn't work in my case.

Now, were you a citizen at the time?

No, I was not.

So you did not have to be a citizen to be in the National Guard. And then they drafted you without--

Without being a citizen.

Sailing overseas when--

I came back.

And [BOTH TALKING] a citizen once you were--

I went to Lebanon. I was not a citizen. In fact, I didn't become a citizen until about 1960. I had to take tests, go in front of a judge. And it didn't help me one bit, except for seeing the world.

[INAUDIBLE]

Now, of course, going back to Germany as an American soldier is something different, but how was that for you? Did you feel like any attachment to Germany or any connection?

None-- none whatsoever. I just blanked it all out. The only time I came into contact was-- were actually other American soldiers that had come from Germany after the war and enlisted. These were butchers out of Chicago, and they were anti-Semitic as-- even more so than you could have imagined any German to be. And I had to fight them off many times.

Really?

Yeah, within the same barracks that I lived in.

So these were German Americans.

German immigrants to America.

Jewish?

No, no, no, Germans.

They were--

Aryans. Yeah, and they never stopped being anti-Semitic. But that could be because of the conditions that they lived in Chicago, or in the environment in which they--

Did you experience other anti-Semitism within the army?

No, none whatsoever.

And what about in America?

I think the first anti-Semitism that I came across-- it was in a foreign country in Panama that was on the way to San Francisco back from South America. And we had to go to an American shipping company in order to get or check the tickets back to Los Angeles and then San Francisco.

And this gentleman, of course he was an American. He was the manager of the shipping company-- shipping line. He said to me, why do you want to go to America? Here you are Jews that were thrown out of Germany. Do you want the same thing to happen in America? That was in Panama.

Or course, lot of Germans I guess--

No, this was an American native. He ran the shipping line. But what he actually tried to say-- and in a way, what he wanted to say-- that neither I nor my father or mother had any kind of occupation. And at the time, the economy was very poor in the United States. And so he felt that why would you want to come here for, especially being Jewish?

Yeah. [INAUDIBLE]. So you've been in the printing business.

When I got out of the service, I had gone to a friend of mine, who also worked for the Wall Street Journal in Chicago. I couldn't get a job there, so I worked for in advertising for a catalog company. I don't know whether it's still known-- Sweet's catalog.

And after a little while, I came back to San Francisco, because I couldn't stand the cold weather. And I went to work for an aluminum company in South San Francisco-- Kaiser Aluminum. And this was a combination of laminations of foil and paper and also printing.

And by hands-on experience, that's what I did. At same time, I went to college at San Francisco State.

And what did you study?

San Francisco State-- literature, because I like to write-- literature, history. That's what I majored in.

And is that a hobby now?

Writing? Yeah, but it's mostly stupid things that I put together-- mysterious.

[INAUDIBLE]

I can sit down and write something within a half an hour. But whether it's readable, that's something else again.

OK.

So you did this in the evening, going to school?

Yeah, the evening. Actually, it was by virtue of the GI Bill.

OK.

I received the monies in exchange for going to school.

Sure.

And did you get a degree?

Yeah.

In [INAUDIBLE]?

No, actually business management. First I went to-- actually, first I went to junior college in San Bruno where we lived. I received an Associate of Arts.

OK.

And then after the two years, I went to San Francisco State.

OK.

And when did you meet your wife?

That's right.

I had known her brother in Shanghai. And I met her brother again in early 1954-- that's when she came over-- at the Jewish Community Center on California Street.

And we started talking, and then one day said, why don't you come to the house or the apartment that they had in California Street-- I think 4th Avenue. And I went, and I saw this little pretty girl. And I couldn't take my eyes off her, and that was the beginning of the end. And then when I came back after the military, and half a year in Chicago, I came back and then we got married in 1960.

So you met at the Jewish Community Center. They had activities for young people.

Yeah, they had dances. You sit in-- well, they had benches across the room. And I guess somebody played some music. But I didn't meet her there.

You met--

Her brother.

--her brother that you had--

Yeah.

That's been the place where sounds like people met each other-- busy place. They had nice food, too, didn't they?

Yeah.

Right. How do you think your experiences have affected you generally speaking?

You know what? The thing that strikes me as-- when I see the young people here or when I came to the United States-- that their way of living was so much different. And it was organized. In other words, they went to school, and then they went to work, and they made friends and so forth, which I didn't have that.

Of course, the time that I spent with friends in Shanghai, that was quite wonderful, too. Because these people came. They had to live just like we did, and I enjoyed that.

But again, the handicap that I had coming here-- first of all, not knowing the-- not knowing how to-- I didn't have a profession. I had started going to school again and taking all kinds of odd jobs, such as the one in the hotel.

But as the years progressed, I think that that's just fine. It turned out fine.

Now, what happened to your parents? You all came back from South America.

Yeah. And my father started to work in Oakland for General Electric. And my mother worked as a seamstress.

And how was that adjustment for them?

For them, very, very difficult. In a very short period of time-- seven years in Shanghai and then three over there, or another-- in a very short period of time, they had to learn different languages, which they never really did. My father spoke English quite well, but my mother so so. And for them the first disruption from Germany was very, very difficult.

So yeah. I was trying to figure out what ages they were when they had to leave.

They were-- let's see. '39-- my father was born in '06, so he was 33. And my mother was 35.

Yeah, they'd had to start a new life several times all over again.

And your brother?

He was born in 1941. He went to school here. Because when we came here-- he actually started school in Bolivia. And he now lives in Los Angeles.

Did you ever share your story with your children?

I have, but there was never very much excitement about that. I think not-- a desire not to listen to what we had to say. They couldn't comprehend, so they shut us off very quickly. Except today, my daughter asks all kinds of questions.

That's what I was going to say. Sometimes the realization comes later on. And sometimes they start asking questions.

But contrary to my daughter, my son just-- whenever he hears anything about Shanghai or South America, he just makes fun of it. But my daughter really delves into it to find out what happened and how we got here.

When your grandchildren are old enough to write reports in high school--

I don't know if they'd be interested.

They may surprise. What stands out for you about your experiences in Shanghai?

The poverty, the disease, and the will for many of these people to live-- to continue on with their lives. Because there were a lot of suicides, especially amongst the single people.

Was that more so within the camp area where you were living?

Yeah, because the people that had some means, of course they lived better. They had all kinds of cultural engagements and so forth. Because within a small community, we had comedians, and there were cafes-- everything that they had brought, the culture that they had brought from Europe. The people that didn't have the means, they were despondent.

No support system. How did your parents keep up their energy and desire to go on and to--

They just-- I think they continued on for the sake of myself and my brother.

And at the time, did you have-- well certainly, being hungry, did you have a sense of how difficult it was?

As I grew older, yes-- not quite at that time. And I always felt that it's a shame that people cannot make ends meet in order to feed their families.

Having gone through that difficult time, do you think that there's something in your life today that you can relate to those experiences?

Oh, just by reading the paper and magazines and watching television-- the famines that exist in Africa, and also the poverty in Southeast Asia. And also, I would say-- also in the United States, like Appalachia-- a world that's so full of riches, and it cannot provide enough for its inhabitants.

Which of your attitudes and values and personal interests do you think stem from that time?

Yes, they do. I guess the first few years when you grow up, those are the formative years. And that's where everything starts making sense. And these values stick with you all your life.

Are there particular values that you can see their roots in those early times?

Not really-- feeling sorry for people, but values actually, that one grows up with honesty, sincerity, spiritual belief.

Now, you were not able to receive any reparations at all, or have you--

No, we did not. Because we were too young to have worked in Germany. So my wife and I, we never received anything.

Did your dad ever talk to you about his experiences at Buchenwald when you were little?

He did. He did. He said they were for some people quite gruesome. They got beaten very badly. He didn't say very much about his experience, but I think it stayed with him all his life.

How did you see it impacting?

I could see it in all his life, because he was-- there wasn't very much-- he was very, very quiet and very hard to deal with. And I'm sure that all came about because of his experience in Germany and later on.

But he didn't talk to you much about what that meant to him.

No, the only thing that he did mention-- he cannot forgive himself for not bringing his father-- or getting his father out of Germany. And that lived with him all his life.

And when did you hear what had happened to your grandpa?

Oh, very early on when we started hearing the news of what was happening in Europe and Asia around 1941, '42-- the atrocities that were committed against the Jews and so forth.

Had your family corresponded with him up until that point, or could they?

I don't think they corresponded at all from South America to China. They didn't. We did learn that my grandfather, in that small town, when the Nazis got hold of him once again, that he had to work on the streets laying brick or something like that. And then in order to stay alive, I think he either married-- I never found out-- he either married or lived with an Aryan woman. But then they finally got him in '44.

He actually was able to hide and stay out of danger for some time.

Yeah, survive.

And were there other family members left behind?

My parents never talked about that, but my mother had a lot of cousins that all perished. How long they stayed alive and where, I have no idea. Of course, she was fortunate enough for her parents to move to South America. And then-- which is two brothers and a sister she had.

And they stayed in South America?

Yeah, they stayed in South America. No, not all their lives. The one brother died, and another one went to Brazil. And the other sister came to the United States. She passed away over in Fremont a few years ago.

How do you feel about being Jewish?

Wonderful. I think it has so much to offer. It's the basic values of how to live. They are in Judaism.

Do you think another Holocaust could occur?

It's possible. Not to that extent, I don't think. Because first of all, there aren't that many Jews around, or maybe. But it could happen.

My fear is that perhaps that could happen in Israel-- that it might be taken over by the Arabs, and they wouldn't show any kind of mercy. Because even if the Palestinians get their state, the two countries are-- they're so very small, especially the way the Arabs breed. There wouldn't be enough room for them. So they would have to get out of their borders and eventually take over.

Can you tell us about your children?

I have a daughter. She's a trainer for a major restaurant chain, and she travels constantly. And she lives with a fellow in Kansas. She loves animals. She doesn't have any children. She's got two dogs, two cats, and she's looking for a horse. In fact, this Thanksgiving we'll be flying to Kansas.

Then I have a son. He is the operations maintenance manager at United.

That's a good job.

He lives in Belmont and he has three children. And they were both born in San Francisco.

Are there any lessons that you've learned through your experiences throughout the world that you would like to pass on to future generations?

Well, first of all, if need be you can always do with less, as far as income goes and material things. And always to look ahead and be an optimist rather than a pessimist, because if you're a pessimist, then things will not improve very much. And if at all possible, educate yourself as much as you can. And that in itself will be a factor in living the good life.

Do you have anything else that you would like to add before we finish?

Pardon? This here today is quite an experience, and a lot of things that I haven't thought about for many years have come to the surface. And that in itself is interesting. And I thank you for that.

We thank you. We'll take a little break to put on some photos.

OK.

This photograph-- the top photograph depicts the second school that I went to in Shanghai, all the way to form four, which is equivalent to like sophomore year. And at the very top on the left-hand side, that is me.

At the bottom on the left-hand side, that's the facade of the outside of that school. And on the right side is the hallway in the school where we played. It's quite primitive, and I think there's the wash hanging down from some of the people that lived on the other side of the hallway.

That was the Immigration and Naturalization Service-- the citizenship paper with my father Leopold-- the picture of my father Leopold.

And this is the US Naturalization paper for my mother, Erna.

These are my children, Ralph and Kathy. Ralph is going to be 42 years old this year, and Kathy is-- let's see. Kathy will be 40.

And this was taken two years ago?

No, I don't know.

These are the grandkids. The tallest one, from left to right-- Karen, 10 years old, Mark eight, and Amy, six.

That's great.

Now that little one is--

And on that note of the next generations, we want to thank you very much on behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Project for sharing your experiences with us.

Thank you for having me.