

You can start.

Today is July 18, 1990. I'm Evelyn Fielden, interviewing Margaret Kaplan for the Oral History Project of the Northern California Holocaust Center in San Francisco. We are at Temple Beth Israel-Judea. Good afternoon, Margaret.

Good afternoon.

Would you tell us a little about your childhood and where and when you were born.

I was born on June 30, 1926, in Stuttgart. And I had two brothers and a twin sister. And we were there, we lived in Germany until 1936. Then we thought it was time to leave.

And my parents shipped us off to an aunt in Switzerland, and they sought permission to settle in Belgium, in Brussels. So the lift and everything went to Brussels, and then they found out they had no permission to settle.

So they joined us in Switzerland. And we ended up moving to Meran, which is in the Tyrol in northern Italy. And we were there for about three years until Hitler and Mussolini made their pact, and we couldn't go to school anymore.

And then we went back to Switzerland. And then we came, we got our visa in Naples. And then we came to the States in May of 1939.

Would you tell us a little about your childhood, about--

Oh, it was lovely.

--your mother and father.

Let's see. My sister and I, we're the youngest of the four. My father was, first, a lawyer. Then when he married my mother, he became a tax consultant. My grandfather had a series of department stores in Germany.

And it was a very happy childhood-- big house. We lived on the main floor. And my mother's brother and his family lived on the upper floor, so there were seven of us playing together all the time.

And my mother's brother, they moved to England in 1933. They were the first ones to leave. And then the aunt that we used to go to in Switzerland, she left Germany about '35.

What was her name?

Wolf. And her husband's family had a big-- it was cotton, lace, leather and silk. And they had a silk factory in Switzerland. That's why we could go there. And they ended up moving to Argentina.

And then there was another brother of my mother's. He ended up, first, in Luxembourg, then in Liechtenstein, then in England. And then he tried to come over to the States. And then came Pearl Harbor, so he ended up five years in Panama on a coffee plantation.

And then they came here in '45, '46, something like that. And then they stayed here. And my dad had one brother who went to England. And he came here in '41, he and his wife. And they also lived in San Francisco until their death.

So we were a pretty complete family.

And what happened to your brothers and sisters, your--

Nothing, nothing.

--twin sister? I mean, once you--

My sister still lives here. We-- yeah, there were the six of us that came-- my mother, my father, my two brothers and my sister. And my sister and I, we went-- we started in junior high school, here.

My-- the younger one of the two brothers, he started City College. And the older one went to work. He worked, first, in Modesto. And then he worked in a hotel, here, like he was desk clerk.

When-- can you remember anything about your earlier life in Germany?

The one thing I remember is that we-- after a while, we weren't invited to birthday parties anymore. That was quite a blow. And one day my sister and I beat up this one little boy. He was a real little guy, because he was calling us names.

And then our folks told us that we better not do that again.

What did he call you?

Oh, probably dirty Jew. What else could they call you? I mean, we were-- it was either first-- second grade. I mean, their vocabulary wasn't that extensive. But the funny thing is before we went-- no, I was in the first grade already.

And I used to have long blonde braids, you know, hair parted in the middle and all that. My sister has dark hair. And some photographer came up to the-- well, the nurse, I guess you would call.

Went and had my picture taken as the typical Aryan girl. And I had those-- what do you wear for the books on my back and a little basket in my hand for our handiwork-- you know, the sewing and what have you.

And so the nurse said, well, you couldn't do that, because she's Jewish. The fellow said, well, who's to know? And that was about all I remember, because we were 8 when we left. So there wasn't really that much that happened to us.

And my brothers were out of high school already. In fact, my older brother-- he's 11 years older than I am-- he was already in Italy, working.

When did he leave Germany?

He-- well, he was born in 1915, so he must have left about '35, '36. But he went to Italy, and we went to Switzerland. And the other brothers are 7 years older. And he finished high school in Italy.

In Italy?

Mhm, mhm. It wasn't so bad, because we went to a private school in Germany, so, you know--

Was it a Jewish private--

No, no, no. But after Hitler, we had to go to day school in the afternoon. And we weren't too crazy about that. We figured school in the morning was enough, but we had to go to Hebrew school then-- not that we learned too much.

Did-- and your parents, were they observant Jews or Orthodox?

No, no. No, no, not at all. We had Christmas tree and everything. And then in Italy, no more Christmas tree. And we did go to temple in-- oh, it was Orthodox, because we had to sit up on-- in the balcony.

We went for the holidays. And then, of course, in school we always had religious instructions. They used to bring the teacher in. But I didn't learn Hebrew until my daughter learned Hebrew.

And my brothers went to synagogue just for the holidays, and so did my parents. No, because they all worked. My mother and my father worked in my grandfather's store. And that was open on Saturday.

Now, my grandmother became extremely observant after her husband passed away. She started keeping kosher, and she wouldn't turn the light on on Saturday. And it was difficult, because she was close to 80, and we were afraid she'd hurt herself, you know, going up the stairs in the dark. She wouldn't--

That was still in Germany?

No, that was-- oh, she-- oh, that's right. No, my grandfather, my grandmother, they finally got out of Germany in '41 with just, you know, 10 mark.

Would you tell us about the details? Do you remember the details?

I don't know too much. I know they, they didn't want to leave, because he insisted, if I deal correctly with you, you deal correctly with me. And if anybody tried to get money out of Germany, you had to bring it back. He wouldn't let you do it.

So he was a multimillionaire, and he left with 10 mark. And they went to Switzerland to that same aunt, because that was their daughter. And he died in Switzerland. He was about 82, 83.

And my grandmother-- oh, she must have been in her middle 70s. She first was in Switzerland. Then when her husband died, she moved on to Argentina to stay with the other daughter. But I mean, she left with nothing.

But they were never in a concentration camp. They had everything confiscated. But they never were-- the only one that was in a concentration camp was my father's brother.

What was his name?

Well, we were all Kaumheimer. And he was a pediatrician in Munich. And after he was in Dachau, my aunt took his Iron Cross First Class and wrote a letter to the SS, saying that he had earned that during World War I.

He was a, I think, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Medical Corps and that she thought it was only right and proper that they would release him. And they did. And he had about six weeks to get out of Germany. Now, that's the letter I gave to Joel. I mean, she had nerve.

Really.

And but other than that, nobody that's very, very close to us that I know of had any problems, because we all left. My mother didn't want to leave, but my dad convinced her.

Well, it's not easy to leave, so then in Italy, it wasn't too bad, because she still had somebody to help with the house. But then when we came to the States, she had, well, the six of us and then my aunt and uncle to take care of all by herself.

And she wasn't used to it. But I mean, she managed. My dad, he went to work. And he started out as a messenger boy for-- I think it was McKay Wireless, and then he ended up carrying documents around for Dean Witter, which was quite a, you know, comedown.

And then he-- I mean, when he was old enough, he retired. They used to go to school to learn English, although my dad and mother knew some. And then they took out their citizenship papers. And then we changed the name from Kaumheimer to Kay because it was just too awkward.

Anything else you'd like to know?

How-- you, you get to San Francisco right away, or did you--

Oh, well, my folks-- we took the train. We landed in New York. Of course, we went from Switzerland to Naples to get the visa. And then we went back to Switzerland. And then we took the train to Rotterdam.

And we took a Holland America liner, there. And we landed in New York. My dad had some fraternity brothers there. We spent a few days there, because we got to see the World's Fair. That was in '39.

And they took tickets to San Francisco. And it was a matter of-- well, we went-- New York, Chicago. He knew some more people there, and we stayed there for a few days.

And then we went to Los Angeles. And they didn't like that too much. It was too big. And we did know somebody that had worked for the Jewish community in Stuttgart here in San Francisco.

So that's why we ended up here. And they got us-- she got us an apartment on Sutter Street. And then we ended up with a flat on Arguello Boulevard. And I haven't moved out of the district since. That's now, what, 51 years.

And we all got our-- my sister and I got our whole schooling here in town. We went to junior high and then Lowell and then City College and then University of California.

What can you remember? You were about, what, 13 when you--

When we came here, but we were only 10 when we left. See, we left in '36, Germany.

Yes.

And then we spent, oh, about, altogether about eight months in Switzerland, the rest in Italy.

Yeah.

And Italy, I mean, that was no problem at all. So, you know, really, we didn't suffer much. I mean, my folks I'm sure suffered financially and all that, but physically, we didn't.

Do you remember anything about your life in Germany at the time in more detail-- what your parents, how your parents reacted?

You know, they didn't talk much about it. If we were around, they would talk in French. And then we didn't know what they were talking. My mother would say, plus tard, and that meant we weren't going to understand the rest of it.

[LAUGHS]

No, they kept most of that from-- because we didn't know what was going on in the business. I mean, who cares when you're 8-years-old. So we were just worried if we couldn't go to birthday parties anymore. And I remember we had to stop our swimming lessons, because they wouldn't let us in the pool anymore.

Did you wonder about that, as a child?

Well, we were told that's because we're Jewish. And that was the end of it. You know, we didn't question as much as children do now. You were told, and that was it. And you know, you tried not to make waves, and that was-- but see, we lived a little bit on the outskirts of Stuttgart.

So things were easier going. It was strictly residential. And we didn't get to go downtown too much. I can't remember too much about it. I mean, not too much happened to us. And then I always had my sister, so we really didn't need too many friends.

You were close to your--

Well, she's a twin, so you can get very independent that way, you know. In a way, it's good. In a way-- but then the lady that took care of us, she was fabulous. She got into a lot of trouble for opening her mouth too much.

And we went to-- well, in '67, we went to Europe once. And we-- I didn't want to go to Germany, but I said it wouldn't be fair not to visit her. So we went one afternoon and left again the next morning.

And we visited her and her husband and her son. Now, the son spoke English, so he took my husband and the children around. And I, you know, sat and talked with them. And I've never been in Germany since.

My family's pretty uptight about buying German-- my-- you know, the other generation, buying German products. And my uncle, he loves those, you know, the gingerbread, the Nuremberg Lebkuchen. He wouldn't even buy those.

And he wouldn't buy those stuffed animals for the kids if they were German. He-- of course, he was there much longer. And he was that much older. I mean, when you're young, things don't concern you that much.

So that's why I really didn't consider myself that much a Holocaust survivor, because compared to some of the other people, we had it very easy.

When you were in the States did your father ever talk about--

No, what could he-- well, he would talk about-- you see, we missed Kristallnacht altogether. He would just talk about you had to give up your jewelry and this and that. And you had to pay high taxes before you could get out.

And you had to give up-- you know, they sold your business for practically nothing. But it was my grandfather's business. He worked-- they were just kind of like partners, so it didn't affect us that much. And then later on, they got quite a bit back with the reparations.

Of course, by then my grandparents were dead, so it went straight to my grandparents' four children. But my mother and dad never went to Germany, nuh uh. They went to England to visit the brother.

And that's it. They wouldn't-- they didn't go-- they didn't go to Italy or Germany after the war. My mother went to Argentina once, but that was just to visit. You know, so I wouldn't call it carrying a grudge, but there was really no reason why we should go.

Things would have changed. You know, it would be so different anyway. And there was really nobody left for us to visit except that one couple. Not very exciting.

Did you go to school? Did you like going to school in Italy?

It was strange. I liked going to school in Germany. In fact, we still have our autograph book. And you'd be surprised what one of the teachers wrote in it. I mean, he compared the German government with, you know, little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf.

And he-- you know, he more or less intimidated. So we were quite surprised that he had the nerve to put that down in black and white. And in Italy, we couldn't go to public school, but that was because we were foreigners-- we weren't Italian.

So we ended up in a Catholic school. Well, that was the only private school there was. Meran is a very small town and was even smaller then. And they would send-- I think his name was Dr. Jaffe.

He had to come once a week, and give us religious instructions-- I mean, no Hebrew. He didn't have no-- and we have

him in the autograph book, too. So that was about it.

And we were very happy. We didn't have to go to mass, we didn't have to go to catechism. [LAUGHS] We had a lot more free time. No, we did enjoy it. And it-- most of the people spoke German, even the kids in school.

Because I mean, the Tyrol was as bad as Germany as far as the admiration for Hitler was concerned. But in school you had to talk-- you had to speak Italian.

Did you learn Italian?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. In fact, it was a big blow to us. We-- my sister had scarlet fever, so I missed six weeks of school. When I came back, we had to take entrance examinations for, like, middle school.

And I passed them. And then came back edict that you couldn't go to school anymore. And I was crushed, because I had really worked hard to get decent grades. And that's when my folks decided that it was time to leave Europe.

But I mean, Italy, we really had no trouble at all. And then we had to wait for-- we were lucky that we could get our visa through Naples. It was a much shorter wait.

So we all took the train to Naples, the six of us, and then we went back and waited till our number was called, and then we went on to Holland. And the lifts went on ahead, so when we came here we had the furniture.

Didn't have all of it, because the Italian government took most of-- my folks collected porcelain-- you know, Meissen, Nymphenburg and what have you. And what they do is once you have it in the country, it was considered, like, a national treasure.

So when you wanted to leave with it, you had to give a price on each piece. And if you priced it low, they bought it from you. If you priced it high, they taxed you. So my folks lost most of the miniatures that way.

We still have quite a few of the dishes and things, but-- and the plates, but the figurines are all gone. They were sent to the museum in Turin. And then it was bombed. [LAUGHS] And there's nothing left.

But I mean, compared to what other people lost it wasn't that terrible. I still have the catalog. My mother made a list with photographs and descriptions, so that we still have.

I think it was much, much harder for my parents than for us. I mean, as long as the whole family was together it didn't matter that much.

How old was your mother when she died?

My mother was 71, and my dad was 77. It was hard for him, because he died in '58. '38-- so he was end of his 50s when he came here. And you know, he couldn't get a job as a tax consultant, so that's why he started as a messenger.

I mean, it was a real comedown for him. But he was marvelous about it. And we tried to speak English at home. That's why my German is so bad. I mean, I speak German, but I put a lot of English endings and stuff like that on.

And we made it a point to speak English, so you know, we would learn it more quickly. And we started in the 7th grade. And by the 8th grade, we had skipped half a year. So by then we knew-- half a year, we knew English.

We came in May. In June, they put us six weeks in a camp to learn English. And after that, we started school. And that was it. I mean, we had no trouble with-- that's why my sister and I are dead set against English as a second language.

We feel people, when they're here, they should learn it. It's much quicker when you're a child. You know, and my brother-- both my brothers had been in England, so they knew English much more than we did

But it seemed like such a nuisance. First, we had to learn French. Then we had to learn Italian. And then we had to learn English And the French we never used. And the Italian we did use.

You were in the French part of Switzerland?

No, we had to study for Belgium.

Oh, for Belgium.

But then we never did make it there, which was-- we were lucky in a way. I mean, my brother's wife, she went from Hamburg to Holland. And she was underground for three years. See, it could happened to us, too, if we'd been in Belgium. So we escaped all that.

And so how-- where did she hide?

She hid with a family. She was like a maid. And it really left a scar on her. It was very difficult for her. I think she was underground from ages 12 to 15. And she lost her brother and her father. She lost both parents. That's it. She lost both parents and her brother there. That's right.

And she had relatives here. And so she came to San Francisco. And that's how my brother met her. But I mean, she went through a lot more than we did.

And my other brother, he went from Italy to-- you know, he came with us. And he died when he was 32, so he was pretty young.

How come he died so young?

He had rheumatic fever. And you know, there was no penicillin, so it affected his heart. That was pretty rough on my folks. But then when my aunt and uncle came, we had a big room upstairs in the flat, so they stayed there until they got their own apartment.

And then they both worked-- my uncle as an orderly, which wasn't that easy, considering he'd been a physician. And my aunt worked in-- oh, like a notions place.

And then my uncle would get private patients as an orderly-- you know, a practical nurse. And my aunt worked at that notions place for quite a while. And then they both retired. And my aunt is still alive. She's 89, now. In fact, she came over yesterday.

So she kind of dwells in the past quite a bit, but she does all right. And the other aunt and uncle that came to San Francisco, they both died within the last eight years-- eight, you know, eight, nine years.

What-- that aunt, the aunt was still alive?

Mhm.

She was. Was she born in Stuttgart?

No, she was born in Berlin. And she doesn't let you forget it. No, she was in Berlin. My dad was born in Munich. My mother was born in Ulm. And two brothers were born in Munich, and then my sister and I in Stuttgart.

Because a few years after the two boys came, my dad moved to help-- you know, to work for my grandfather.

When did you marry?

I married in 1950. In fact, we're going to have our 40th anniversary next month.

Congratulations.

I'll take it in advance. [LAUGHS]

Is your husband also from--

No, my husband was born in St. Louis. And it's a funny thing. Everybody thinks I'm a war bride. [LAUGHS] I met him at Chevra Thillim at a youth group. And oh, he'd been here since 1936.

So I met him there, and well, we got-- met in '48 and got married in '50. Well, it's working out very well.

How many children do you have?

We have three, a boy and two girls. Girls-- one man and two women. I mean, they're 38, 36 and 32. So they don't know too much. I mean, there's not that much to tell. They look at photographs.

I mean, I have mainly photographs of my dad and my uncle from World War I. We didn't take too many later on, you know. So they want to know what the uniforms were about and all of that.

But they're all three very Jewish, you know, Jewish-oriented. In fact, the one who's in New York, she's a demon for Jewish daycare, you know, Jewish day school, temple day school, young men's Hebrew association school.

And the little one just told me, she said, she was in day camp, and they have a gonif and a good man, there. So we asked, what does the gonif do? Well, he steals my documents.

So I mean, she is very gung-ho. And she converted. And she-- oh, yes. She learned Hebrew. She went to the mikvah, everything. And she asked me if she should go to the mikvah.

I said, I didn't go, I mean how can I tell you to go? And she says, well, in case we join a conservative congregation, I don't want the kids to have any trouble. So she went all the way.

She complains my son doesn't like to go to temple. [LAUGHS] I said, I don't understand that. So no, she's marvelous in that respect. She would-- when she went to work, she would take her Hebrew books with her and read them on the subway.

So my husband said, doesn't that embarrass you, you know? She said, well, who reads English on the subway? What's the difference if you read, you know, Spanish or whatever they have. So she really knows quite a bit.

And Janet, the youngest one was always very Jewish-minded. And Carol, too, really. They may not show it, but you know, you can tell. They take the kids to children's services. And I mean, you can't ask for more when the kids are that little.

They're only-- the oldest one is only 5, so you can't do too much. So in fact, last week, we had a baby naming, here. Yeah, that was an experience, I think. I aged ten years.

So I mean, my husband, he came from an Orthodox family. I kind of toned him down, and I kind of went up a little bit, so that's why we joined Beth Israel, the old Beth Israel.

Have you children ever been to Germany?

Just that one afternoon. And I don't think it means anything. They were 9, 12 and 15. And the son of that lady that raised



us, he drove them around. And he said, this is the old castle, and this is the new castle. So you know, that really didn't mean anything much to them,

But in relationship to you, having been born there, did they ask you any questions?

Well, if they asked, I told them that we left and why we left. And you know, that was that. And Jan, Jan is extremely proud of being Jewish. She used to complain. She used to wear her little Star of David when she went to Davis.

And she said, you know, most kids don't even want to-- or a lot of them-- don't even want to admit that they're Jewish at college. So once she went to a Hillel service. And she said that wasn't for her. She liked a real service.

She's very conservative in all her views. And it took a long time to get used to a reformed temple. So oh, no. She used to adore Rabbi Berstein. They had a correspondence going.

So it took her a while, but she always wanted him to marry her. I said, honey, don't expect it. I mean, the gentleman was well in his 70s when she was 12, so she was very happy to have Rabbi Morris marry her. In fact, he married both girls.

And Rabbi Hirsch married Bruce and Anne in New York. He just passed away, I think, last year. But it's nice. And my husband-- first thing he always asked when the kids said they had a steady friend-- is he Jewish, or is she Jewish, and if not, are they going to be Jewish?

And I'd say, don't push so, because you have to consider the other parents, too. But never had any trouble. In fact, with Anne, I think one of her cousins gave her a book-- how to run a Jewish household.

They were-- I mean, she was Unitarian. And no problem at all. No, we consider ourselves quite lucky.

Is your sister very much like you?

No, completely different. She's got black, kinky hair and a ruddy complexion. She must weigh about quite a bit more than I. And she's much more outgoing.

Does she remember anything about your childhood in Germany?

No more than I do, because we were always together.

Uh huh. What about your brothers? Have you ever talked to them about it?

No. Now, of course, I mean, they left-- John left Germany same time we did. So I mean, it was all the same. It wasn't any different for us than discussing whatever happened during the day, except he started school at a higher level. That was it.

But it was interesting during the war. They did send-- they had enough sense to send them to Europe rather than the Pacific, so he went from Africa up Italy. And he met an old girlfriend in Milan that he had known while he was in Italy.

And he never did make it to Germany, though. But he spoke Italian better than we did. He still speaks it fluently. With me it takes a while for the ear to get used to it again.

But really, we didn't have anything much as far as experiences are concerned. Sorry. [LAUGHS]

No, it's all right.

I mean we were just, we were just plain lucky.

Did you ever keep a diary?

No. I did once when I went to visit my aunt in Argentina. When I came home. I figured I'd better throw it away. I didn't want anybody to read it. [LAUGHS] Now, see, my aunt in Argentina, they left Germany so early they became Argentine citizens already in '33.

You could do it. I mean, you didn't have to live there. You went there. And so then they were in Switzerland for the six years. And then they just went to Argentina as citizens.

And the other uncle, he went to England in '33, so that was no problem either. And the ones that stayed the longest, they had no children. So it was just he and his wife.

How long did they stay?

They didn't get out of-- well, they went to Luxembourg about '37-- Luxembourg, Lichtenstein. I know they went to England. Then he was interned as an enemy alien. And then they released him.

And then they wanted to come to the States. And that was after Pearl Harbor then. So he had bad luck in that respect. And they were up there on that coffee plantation-- didn't do him any good, physically or mentally-- you know, completely isolated.

And then the other uncle, as I said they went to England. And then they came here before Pearl Harbor. So the whole family really was together, you know, the nucleus.

Did you ever meet any of your schoolmates, or did you hear of them from Germany?

No.

I know you were very young, but--

Well, they'd all have married names now, anyway. I wouldn't know what they would be. Now, I know some of the people here at the congregation, they go back for reunions. But I've never heard of any reunions or anything like that.

And the same with my brother. He's never heard from anybody from Germany. We wouldn't know where to start. And I mean to be truthful, we're not really interested.

How far can you trace your family back in Germany?

Well, on my maternal grandfather's side to 17-something, because when my grandfather was 80, somebody made him a family tree. And it was supposed to have been made out of silver. I never saw it. But we got the parchment, you know, where they put the family names on. And that goes to 17-something.

And considering how German he considered himself, there were an awful lot of Jewish names on there. You know, that shouldn't have-- my mother always said there was this business of Germany against east European. I don't think she realized how many Jewish words she used.

You know, she just didn't know they-- either she didn't realize, or she didn't know that they were Jewish-- Yiddish words, a lot of them. And it was the same with my grandfather. I mean, he was 200% German.

How did they feel about the Jews from the east?

[LAUGHS] It's not nice. Not-- I mean, they felt quite superior to them. Listen, they didn't even like the Austrians, much less anything that was further east.

No, because I mean, my grandfather, he used to be a cattle dealer way, way back, because he must have been born 1850,

something like that. And then he started with a wagon, like a peddler.

And then he started buying. He had one store, and then he had some more. And he was a self-made man. So he figured if he can do it, everybody can do it. And if they don't, you're just lazy.

And his wife was 10 years younger. I think he met her on one of his travels. At least that's what the other aunt says. In a way, it's a shame that we don't know more about two generations back from me.

But nobody even talked. The only one that would talk about it was an aunt that married into the family. And that-- she didn't get married until 1923, so we didn't trust her. You know, everything she said, she was-- she had quite a sharp tongue, so we didn't know how much-- [LAUGHS]

So but it was quite interesting. We all come from the southern part of Germany, my grandfather and grandmother. My grandfather had, I think, 11 brothers and sisters. And my grandmother, 7, so it was quite a confusion of aunts and uncles.

That's why the family tree is so interesting. But that is only on my grandfather's side. Well, it was his birthday. The other side of the tree is empty. [LAUGHS]

And the same, my-- well, my dad only had the one brother. But his mother had about 8 or 9 sisters and brothers. But we really didn't get to know them that well. When we were in Germany, we stayed home.

See, we were too young. We didn't travel with our folks, because there was somebody to take care of us. So we really didn't see too much of Germany or too much of our relatives unless they came into town.

So we just know a couple of aunts, here. And we knew a couple of aunts, there. I know one of them lived in Bombay. And I thought that was extremely exotic. I think it is. [LAUGHS]

Did you have a Jewish cemetery in Stuttgart?

Oh, sure, a big one. They had quite a congregation, a reasonably large congregation. I still have the one prayer book. And in it are the little entrance tickets.

And it says, you know, it is-- how did they put it-- it is requested that you don't make any noise during services, and after service, you do not congregate on the street. Well, you know, it was in the '30s, so I kept those.

But I don't think I ever went to the cemetery. And where my grandfather was born there was about 80% Jewish. It was maybe 2,000 people. And we went there once for vacation. That was it. Other than that--

Where was it?

It was called Bittenhausen. That's a real little town. It's not even a town. It's a hamlet or a village. And they thought we should see it, but it didn't make much of an impression on us, even at the age of 8 or 9.

And I never-- my grandmother came from Laupheim, which, she'd never-- everything's right close to Stuttgart. So we really didn't get around too much.

But I'm sure your grandmother and grandfather were buried there, right?

No, my grandfather was buried in Switzerland. And my grandmother was buried in Argentina-- on the one side. And on the other side, on my father's side, my grandfather died in 1925, so I'm sure he's someplace in Munich.

And my grandmother, she also died in Munich. And that must have been in the early '30s. But I mean, we were never taken to the cemetery.

Who lived with you? You said an aunt and uncle.

An aunt and uncle on-- my father's brother and his wife. And that lady is still alive. She's the last one of their generation. Then it's my turn. [LAUGHS]

That's wonderful. Look at 85--

Oh, it's nice. Oh, 89.

Oh, 89, great, yeah.

Yeah, it's quite something. But no, we never went to any of the cemeteries. In the old days I don't think they took children to cemeteries much. I don't remember ever going to a funeral until I was adult.

I don't think they took children anywheres, did they?

No, not us. Not my sister and me. But then see, my one brother is 7 years older and the other one 11. So by the time we were 5, they were in their late teens, so they could go places.

In the wintertime, they would go to Switzerland for skiing, and we stayed home. You just didn't question it. I mean, that's the way it was. But they had a good life. We all did, really.

Saturdays we would visit my grandmother for Shabbat. It was lunch. It was one of those-- children should be seen and not heard. And Shabbat was the only day they wouldn't let us pick berries. My grandmother wouldn't let us pick berries or pick fruit.

You know, she tried to keep as much as she could, but with having to work. It wasn't that easy. And they only lived maybe 5 blocks away from us. And then we had cousins across the-- well, they were distant cousins. There were cousins of cousins across the street.

So you know, it was very nice. The houses were big, and there was plenty of help. We went to a nice school. What more can you ask for?

You're right.

You sometimes wonder what would have happened if he had stayed. You know?

Mhm.

Because across the way, they had twin boys. And it was said, when they were bigger, and we were bigger, they'd match us up, and we'd have a double wedding and all that.

But I think they both live in Los Angeles, now. We see them once in a while. But I mean, we really don't keep in touch with even too many cousins. I mean, they're spread out. We've got cousins in England.

We've got one in Vienna that I've never met. We have one in-- a couple of them in Rio and in Sao Paulo. We've got some in Buenos Aires. We've got one in Seattle. So we're all spread out all over the place. But the only one we're in contact with is the one in Seattle.

Imagine if you had a great big family gathering.

Ooh, well, my-- we do have one family picture. Every year, my grandfather and grandma had a family reunion with all those aunts and uncles. And there were over 100 people by the time you figure a couple more generations.

We were too young for that. I just had my-- I think my two brothers were on those pictures, but not us. So that must have been late '20s, I would imagine.

Only one brother went in the army?

The other one was sick, and then he died. Yeah, he was 4F. The other one went in the army. He was drafted out-- after he finished school. But he went in the army before Pearl Harbor, which made it nice for my sister and me.

Because since we had a-- we were enemy aliens, of course, but since we had a relative in the armed forces, we had no curfew. Because if you didn't, you had a 10 o'clock curfew, I think it was, if you were over 18.

So we could babysit, and we made a fortune, because all those poor old ladies that used to babysit and didn't have anybody in the army, they had to be home. So my sister and I, we did a lot of babysitting in those days.

Did you get to travel around a bit in Italy?

No. No, no. We stayed in Meran. The only place we went really was Naples to get the visa. But by then the folks were trying to save money. You know, it wasn't like in Germany. You really didn't know what was going to happen. There wasn't any sense in wasting more money than you had to, so-- because my dad didn't work in Italy

So no, we really didn't. We'd go-- every summer we'd go to Munich to visit my-- the aunt I'm talking about. We used to visit her and her husband. We'd get new outfits of clothes and shoes and that kind of stuff. And then we go back over the Brenner Pass and back to Meran. It was a very quiet childhood.

What did you-- if your father did not work in Italy, you must have lived off something.

Well, they had-- I think he sent quite a bit of money out to England at the beginning. And so you could live on that. Like I say, tried to make everything as liquid as could be. See, there was another lucky thing.

Your parents must have had some foresight, really.

My dad did. Mother didn't want to leave. Well, don't forget, her parents were there. The one brother was still there. And like everybody else, she was hoping things would blow over. But no, it was mainly my dad that did the pushing to leave.

Anything else you can tell us about your childhood? You remember something going way back? I know it's not so easy, but--

Well, until Hitler came along, that really-- it was just a regular childhood. We had a good time with the cousins. And the household help we had, we had until the day we left. Nobody quit. No.

We used to-- It was a big family. I think there were seven sisters and one brother. And you had two of them. And then when they got married, the next two came. And we used to go visit them around Easter time.

They used-- one of them had a-- oh, she used to make caramel rabbits and chocolate rabbits. And we used to go there. And we could help make the rabbits. It was-- we were really very not too religious a family.

And they stayed till the end. And in Italy, we had one woman that helped. And she stayed until we left. So really, we had no trouble in that respect. I don't know what went on in the business, you know, at the stores. But at home, we had no problem in that respect.

And then don't forget, we were shipped off to Switzerland while our folks that dissolved the household.

Where in Switzerland did you stay?

Linthal. It's in Canton Glarus. It's not too far from Zurich.

The German part?

Yes. Well, we used to go there once-- no. My folks used to go there once a month, like on vacation in that general area so-- and my aunt and uncle had a huge house. So even having all of us in there didn't make too much difference.

Well, I mean, the proportion in wealth compared to then and now, you can't compare it. I mean, we were more than comfortably off, but we can never reach those standards. But we don't need to. I mean, we've got more than enough.

I do remember that my sister and I, we had two dolls-- black one. We were one of the first ones to have a black baby doll. And then a regular Kathe Kruse doll, you know.

And they had one of those children's trains coming from Germany, you know. And we had to give up one of the dolls, which, I'm sure no child nowadays would do. But we were told you give one away. You can pick which one you want to keep.

So we kept the Kathe Kruse doll. And I had to give the other one to one of the little girls that was going through.

You had to-- I didn't quite--

We had two dolls. We don't have-- not like Barbie dolls here, where you have a dozen, you know. And I was told by my granddaughter, you can never have enough.

So we had to give one of the dolls away to one of those little girls that went out of Germany with one of those children's trains.

Oh, I see. That's the part I didn't get.

Mhm. But it never harmed us, just having one doll. But other than that, we really didn't notice anything much. We thought it was most unfair, but what can you do? Your folks told you to do it, so you did it.

But what my mother's sister and her husband did was quite interesting. They had a huge estate outside Stuttgart. And it was bombed pretty badly during the war. For about 30 years, they did nothing. They wouldn't sell it. They left it bombed as it was.

And it used-- we have a friend here-- it gets complicated. He's half Jewish. His mother was not, his father was. So he went to United States with his father. And the other brother stayed with the mother in Germany.

So when he got older, he used to visit his mother, also in Stuttgart. And he used to get so upset. He said, they haven't done a thing with that estate. And I said, well, why should they? They want the people around the neighborhood to remember what had happened.

So well, the war was over in '45. I don't think they did anything with it until about '70-- '70, '75. They just left it the way it was. I thought that was pretty good. [LAUGHS]

And what did they do then?

Oh, I'm sure they sold it. I mean, how long can you hang on to a piece of property if you're never going to see it again. But then that's about the only exciting thing that they did.

They went to one of those progressive schools that we weren't allowed to go to-- Pestalozzi, one of those things. But we used to have good time with all our cousins. We had four-- seven in that one town alone. So we used to visit each other

quite a bit.

You sound as if you really had a happy childhood?

Extremely, extremely happy. Extremely happy. And I mean, as long as you went with the whole family. It didn't really bother you that much, moving from one place to the next.

In Italy, we spoke at least as much German as Italian, because as soon as you were out of school, you spoke German. And in our autograph album, I think we have more German verses than Italian verses.

And it didn't take us that long to learn English, here. And don't forget, I always had a sister to go. We always went together. It wasn't that I was ever lonesome if nobody talked to me. Yeah, we had a very happy childhood.

That's why I couldn't-- I didn't consider myself a survivor, because I thought that, you know, you really have to go through a lot.

Do you talk to your sister about the past a lot?

There's not enough of it, really. Look, I'm 64. And 10 years of that we were in Germany. It's not enough. I mean, the interesting things happened afterwards. Oh, once in a while I make fun of a German spelling, but that's about it.

Does your sister still remember German?

Oh, we use-- we speak German to each other. so we won't forget it.

Good.

Besides, that way the kids won't understand. And to my aunt we speak German. And then as my mother got older, we'd-- once we knew how to speak English, there was no need to at home. So we'd speak German unless the children were-- because my husband doesn't understand.

He understands, but he can't speak. What German he understands is mainly from the Yiddish. So we try to speak-- like, with my aunt I'm kind of bilingual when she comes.

She forgets, and she goes into German. So we say, speak English. And she speaks a little English. And then she goes back to German. And my husband says, ya, ya. And so it's good. There's no reason to forget it. Besides, I like languages.

But it's too hard. I tried, when the kids were little, to teach them German, just for an added advantage. But unless your husband speaks German, too, you can't do it.

It's a lot.

It's impossible, because as soon as he comes home, you speak English, again. No, so we don't really reminisce much. There's too much going on, right now.

I just want you, today, to reminisce a little bit. [LAUGHS]

There's not that much to do. [LAUGHS]

I have a couple of questions.

Go ahead. Maybe a question would help.

OK, I'd sort of like to backtrack along that process of all the moves that you made.

Go ahead.

Get a little detail on it.

Go ahead.

And I may be repeating some information you already gave.

It's all right.

So forgive me if I do that. For example, your first move from Germany was to Belgium.

No, only my parents.

Oh, so your parents.

We were sent to Switzerland.

Oh, I see. OK.

So see, we missed that whole business.

I see. OK. Can you tell me how the-- what your awareness at the time was of how the decision for your parents to go to Belgium evolved? And then could you tell us about, say, the day or two of preparation before they left and the day they left?

They didn't do a thing until we were in Switzerland, see. The only reason I think they went to Belgium was because my folks spoke French, and it wasn't that far from Germany. They could have picked Holland, too.

You know, it was just a matter of luck. And I know the lift-- the furniture lift went to Belgium. And then they couldn't get the permission to settle. So the lift was sent. No, it stayed there. And by then they made up their mind they might as well go to Italy.

Oh, so your parents did not actually go to Belgium at any time either?

My parents did. The children didn't.

Well, could you tell me what that was like-- your parents announcing to you that they're going to go to Belgium and then what the day was like when that--

You don't ask. You were said-- you go to your Tante Fridl in Switzerland with your older brother. And you go. And what they did then we didn't know, except we were supposed to learn French.

And then we were-- one fine day, we were told there's no need to learn French, you better learn Italian. So we started learning Italian. And then the folks came back to Switzerland and told us we were going to settle in Merano.

And we said, when? And they told us whatever-- you know, whenever it was ready. And when it's ready, we packed up. We said goodbye to our aunt, and we went to Merano for three years.

And then when we couldn't go there anymore, they said, we have to get a visa from Naples. And you're very lucky that we don't have to go back to Germany, because the wait is much longer.

And we went back to our aunt in Switzerland and stayed there until we got the visa. We went down to Naples to get it--



you know, for the physical and all that. We went back to Switzerland.

By then they were moving to Argentina. They left a few months before we did. So we stayed in Switzerland until May. And then we just came on over. The kids really didn't know much. We didn't know much about what was going on.

We knew we had to learn, first, this language and then the other. And we weren't too crazy about our brother taking care of us, because he was rather bossy, as I remember. Well, he was seven years older. And that was it.

Then when we came here, we found out this lady that had worked at the German community, she had gotten us an apartment, and furnished, because the lift wasn't here yet. And then when we got the lift, we moved into a pair of-- into a flat.

And we went to junior high school. And then as soon as the folks could afford it-- that was in '41-- we bought a house in the avenues. And then life went on nicely. My aunt and uncle rented an apartment not too far from us. And there we were together again.

When you went to school here in San Francisco, did you ever tell anybody about your German background?

I think by then we were too interested in boys. We were in the 7th grade. I remember we had to go to Sunday school, and we were most unhappy, because it was a very-- well, it is a very affluent temple. I won't name it.

And the kids used to have beaver coats for Sunday school. And we had the seersucker dresses. We felt very uncomfortable. And so when we started high school, mother promised us we didn't have to go to Sunday school anymore. Oh, that was such a relief.

They made you feel, you know, about this big. Kids can be cruel. And this business of when they wear a different sweater every day-- we had to wear our dresses till they had to be washed. At the beginning, it was a little hard.

But then Ruth and I, we both started quite a bit. So we did well with the grades, so there was no more problem after about, well, a good year. Because we started in the first half of the 7th grade, and we skipped the second half of the 7th.

And by then, we were almost in our age group, again. And then we skipped another half year as a junior. And by then, we were actually with our own age group. So that, it wasn't bad.

And as I said, this lady helped us. And then we had some distant, very distant relatives of relatives of relatives. And they saw to it that my brother got into junior college. And they took us to the principal in junior high, and they kind of helped smooth things out. Oh, It worked out quite well.

Do you have any other questions? See, it's not very exciting, my life.

Sure, I-- my problem is that, doing the camera work, I tune in and out of your interview.

That's all right. I don't mind.

I'm not sure what you folks have talked about.

I don't mind repeating.

I'm embarrassed to sort of--

It's all right.

No, I don't mind repeating.

I was just interested in getting your personal account of some specific moments-- for example, what the travel time, the travel days were like in each of these moves that you made. If you could just tell us what happened in the morning, the afternoon--

Well, you know, from Germany--

--in the evening and what--

From Germany to Switzerland, it's maybe three, four hours.

That's all. There's no distances. And it's the same.

So for you, was it just like, gee, we're going on vacation, today?

Oh, you said it, because we didn't have to go to school in Switzerland. My cousins were very angry, because they had to go to school, you know. And we didn't have to. So of course, we had to learn the various languages.

And then from-- that was from Germany to Switzerland. From Switzerland to Italy, it's no distance, either. And once we were in-- it's almost a shame to call it Italy. It was Austria until World War I.

And even now, we were there during vacation this summer. And it's exactly 50/50-- who speaks-- everybody speaks German and Italian. And what we would do is we would visit our grandmother in Munich. And that was maybe a 5-hour automobile ride.

The longest trip, really, was going down to Naples to get the visa-- and that was very boring on the train-- and then taking the train up to Rotterdam to catch the ship. In the ship, everybody was seasick the first couple of days.

I was just going to say, on the ship--

Oh, well that--

That was your longest trip, wasn't it?

The Channel was terrible. And yeah, that was about what-- five, six days on the ship at least.

Oh, it must have been longer at that time. I'm quite sure.

Easily could have been two-- a week, 10 days.

You were sick, anyway.

Well, only through the Channel. My mother was sick all the way. My sister never got sick. But it was nice. It was one of those one class ships. So you could do everything you wanted to. And once you got your sea legs, it was fun.

And then somebody picked us up at the ship in Ellis Island. And we went to this fraternity brother of my father's. And we were rather upset, because his children had only been there two years, and they refused to speak German to us. And we knew very little English.

Then we went to the World's Fair. And we went on to friends in Chicago. And there, the kids were nicer. They spoke German to us. And I was introduced to Jell-o. That was quite an experience.

And then we came to Los Angeles-- was another fraternity brother.

How did you come?

Train, and not a Pullman. You sat up. That was a long trip. And then we came up to San Francisco, and that was it. I haven't moved out of the same neighborhood since '39. I'm still in the Richmond District.

Who taught you these various languages? When you said you went to Switzerland, you had to--

Well, you had these-- they were called Fraulein-whatever. And they taught us. And they had them come in. And there was the French and the Italian. English, we didn't really learn until we came here, because there wasn't enough time.

There was a little bit of a problem. We came-- like I said, we came in May. And in June, they put us into a camp, and I cried every night for six weeks. And well, if you don't know what's going on-- my sister, it didn't bother her as much. But there was one counselor who knew German, so that helped.

And when we went to junior high, there was one math teacher who knew Italian, so we learned the fractions in Italian. And after that, we really didn't need any more help.

My brother tried-- our brother tried to teach us, I think it was Italian. But I mean, you don't want to have your brother teach you. It caused a lot of aggravation. We used to write letters to my folks, I remember, complaining bitterly about him. In fact, we still have the letters at home.

And well, that was it. My sister's better at languages. She has less of an accent. But I'm better in grammar and spelling, so it balances.

Do your children speak any other languages?

Only what they learned in school. I know, once in a while, I try to talk Spanish to them, but it's not very successful. Well, they're all in science, so they took as little language as they could. They just took the whatever was needed. And then they went on to math and what have you, so I can't follow them in that.

And what little Hebrew they know is just what they learned in Hebrew school. Carol went further. She went through, I think, most of Hebrew high school. And then both girls went to Israel for summer. The boy didn't. At that time, it wasn't the vogue yet.

OK.

And that was about it.

Have you been to Israel?

No, no. We tried. We tried twice, and each time they had a war. [LAUGHS] First time in '67-- that's why we ended up in Europe. No, we haven't gone yet. We really just started traveling about two years ago, because our youngest one, she's only been married four years, now-- or it will be four years.

So we like to have them all settled and out of the way. Now, what happens is they come with their children. [LAUGHS] It's nice, though. We can always travel.

No, but you know what you said about the traveling-- people have no idea how short the distances are, even if you cross three countries. Now, I had a friend, she called me up. Her friend's son is in Brussels, and he wants to see San Francisco.

So he called her up and said, I'm flying to Los Angeles-- can you pick me up at the airport? And she said, my God, that's 10 hours or 8 hours away by a car. But you're in the same state. They have no idea what distances are here compared to Europe.

I was just trying to get to your--

Yeah.

--state of mind as a kid. I imagine it--

Oh, it was just-- listen, it's no worse than going to, I mean, going to Tahoe, a little bit further than that. And I mean, you never took that much luggage with you. I remember when we used to go to Switzerland, we'd get all kinds of little necklaces and bracelets hung up, because they figured they wouldn't search the kids as much as the parents. But we were always glad when we were over the border.

You were physically searched?

Sometime. I mean, you didn't know. But my folks figured chances were they wouldn't search the kids. But I mean, you couldn't take out that much anyway, because it was too risky.

So on a series of several trips, your parents were trying to bring some possessions out?

Oh, so we'd get a necklace on, which we ordinarily wouldn't be wearing. Or they'd have a new one made, and we'd wear it for the trip. Then we'd leave it with the aunt in Switzerland. I mean, everybody did that if you could.

And how many different crosses of the border were made to--

Well, you had to be careful. You couldn't do it too too often, because you got a-- right, you got a stamp in your passport. Besides, we just had the identification card with a J on it, so that kind of alerted them.

So in other words, your family did make this relocation to Switzerland, but they continued to go back and forth across?

Not too often, not too. But every so often, yes. And like, we went to Munich for summer vacation to visit my aunt and uncle. And then we'd get new clothes there. And then we'd come back to Italy. That way we could still spend German money, rather than having to spend Italian money on clothing.

So in retrospect, though, that was a little risky in the sense that you never knew when the--

Oh, no. The guy that drove us, he was a real Nazi, but he liked money. So when you were with him, you didn't have to worry. He would-- mother would hire a private car. And then my sister and I would drive with him to Munich. And everybody knew him at the border, and he knew everybody at the border.

He was a taxi sort of guy?

Yeah, like a limo.

I see.

Yeah, and he made a good living that way.

So if you hired this man, then you knew he would take care of the--

You had no trouble getting through.

--border guard?

Exactly, and we could get back, again. And I mean, basically, when we went to Munich, all we got was new clothes, which, you know, there's nothing wrong with that. We didn't come with arms up to here with gold bracelets. My grandfather wouldn't allow that-- that wouldn't be honest.

As a kid, were you aware that going back to Germany to pick up some stuff--

Nah.

And bringing it back was part of the plan? Or you just--

Nah. We just hated to go to my aunt's, because it was boring. I mean, she'd take us to museums and stuff like that, but I was homesick every time. And she'd buy you-- oh God, she bought shoes-- room to grow in, about this much too big. And you had to stuff cotton in front.

And we these itchy dresses she had made by a dressmaker. Oh, we weren't too crazy about going to Munich, but we never told her.

As a child, did you feel any fear or danger around these situations, particularly returning back into Germany?

No.

Or were you completely unaware of--

My sister and I--

--any political problem?

My sister and I used to talk Italian, make believe we were tourists. And my sister is quite dark, so it was no problem. People would look at us, because we didn't speak German. We had a good time.

Did you ever ask your parents why are we living in Italy instead of living in Germany?

Oh, they told us. I mean, listen, when you have to go to Hebrew school after regular school, and they don't invite you to birthday parties anymore, it doesn't take much to figure it out.

But even so, then you did not feel any sense of danger, returning to--

An 8-year-old doesn't really feel that much. Not unless somebody would be attacked or something like that, and that never happened to anybody in our family-- not while we were there.

But you mentioned a thing which I found interesting-- that you had the identification card with a J on it. Oh, right?

I think we gave that to Joel.

Yes. Now, that was a passport or identification card?

I don't think we got passports as children. Was-- weren't we stateless by then? No, not that early, not that early.

Because did you have to take the Jewish name, like Sarah?

No.

That came later?

My grandmother did. My grandmother was Sarah Cecelia Landauer.

Right.

But we weren't.

You were too young, I suppose?

Yes. Or we left too early. In '36, I don't think they did that yet, did they?

Yeah, I thought that went together with the J in the passport. That's--

I'll have to look. I'll have to-- if I still have one, I'll have to look.

Because if you, with that Jewish identity.

Mhm, I know it's a red J in the upper left-hand corner.

If you crossed the borders all the time--

Oh, it wasn't all the time, like that.

I mean--

It was every summer for what, three years.

Oh, only three.

The rest of the time we went to school.

And what was school like? Can you give us an average day in school?

All I remember was I was always afraid they would take my pigtails and put them in the ink pot, in the inkwell. That was my biggest worry.

Did that have anything to do with being Jewish?

Nah, that was 1st grade.

Uh huh, kids.

And then I remember one girl had a fountain pen. I was terribly jealous, because we didn't have one. [LAUGHS]

No, except for this one little character, we really had no trouble. And one of them, her father-- one girl, her father was a, I think, an army officer. She could be-- she's the one-- you can't come to my birthday party, that kind of stuff.

But other than that really wasn't bad. The teachers were all more than nice. And like I said, in the autograph album, it's amazing what that one gentleman put. I mean, he really was taking a kind of a risk. Because if you read between the lines, you knew darn well what he meant.

Did you tell your parents about the child who would not invite you to her birthday party?

Oh, yeah. But what can you do? And we also told them about the-- when we beat, you know, we beat up. And they told us to stop doing it. I think, if anybody, my brother might have noticed it more, because he was already 16. See, we were only 8 or 9-- 8, about.

He was 15, 16. So I mean, even here, in school, you get plenty of kids say, I won't let you come to my party. And they

don't care what reason it is. It's just for being spiteful or nasty or being 8-years-old.

Was school different in Italy from Germany?

Except-- not really, except we went to a Catholic school. So instead of lay teachers, you had nuns. But I mean, they were perfectly fair.

Was-- did your Jewishness ever surface as an issue in the Catholic school?

Oh, definitely. We didn't have to go to mass, and we didn't have to go to catechism. We only had religious instruction once a week, and they had it every day.

What percentage of students in the school were Jewish?

A couple of refugees. That was it. Maybe 2%, 3%, not more than that. I know one girl, her folks owned a, like, a rest home. She was a native. She was terribly Orthodox. And you had to go to school Saturday mornings, too.

See, you got Wednesday afternoon and Saturday afternoon off from school. And the poor thing had a maid carry her books to school. And she had a hanky tied around her wrist, because she wasn't allowed to carry anything

I mean, that was hard, much harder than what we went through. We just took the books and walked off to school. And then at the end of the day, she was picked up, again. Somebody took her books. She went back home.

Did you experience any anti-Semitism by your classmates in the--

No.

--Italian school?

No.

I know, from personal experience, having gone to lower educational level of schools in different countries and different cultures, it was quite a shock for me as a kid. And I found that school was taught very differently in one country from another country. You didn't have that experience going to school in Italy after going to school in Germany? It didn't seem like a completely different sort of animal to you?

Well, in Germany, we were in grades 1 through part of grade 3. And then in Italy, grade 3 or 4 through 5. You know, they graded differently. In Germany, we had to learn first sonderlich-- you know, the one kind of writing and then the regular kind of writing.

And in Italy, it was more official. There was more officiousness. You had, every time you got a report card, there were a bunch of stamps on it from the government. And when I took the entrance exam to the middle school, God knows how many stamps were on there-- 1,000 lira, 50 lira, and an official stamp, which you didn't have in Germany. You just had the regular report cards.

But the nuns were very, very evenhanded. If you studied, you were fine. If you didn't, you got in trouble. But we had no choice. We couldn't go to public school.

And why was that?

Because we weren't Italian. It had nothing to do with religion. We were not Italian. Because public school was free. I can't really blame them.

No.

Were you a good student? Were you a good student--

Oh--

--in the German schools and in the Italian schools?

Oh, yeah. I always- was a lot of competition with my sister.

Who was better?

I was better. In fact, we had-- oh, she still teases me. Once-- I say the teacher got us mixed up, and she said, no, she didn't, because she got more A's than I did Oh, I cried, and I cried, and I cried. [LAUGHS]

No, we did all right, because we both went through Berkeley. She took Social Welfare, and I was a Spanish major.

So you still speak--

Oh, yes, Spanish, yes.

And Italian, no?

Send me four weeks to Italy, and I'll speak it, again. In fact, I was surprised how quickly it came back to me. But she doesn't like languages. She was-- she's much better in the other fields.

Can you tell us what the boat ride from Holland was like, what an average day was like? As a kid, was this a wonderful adventure?

I threw up five days in a row. [LAUGHS] No, my sister had a good time. I think they showed movies and the usual-- play shuffleboard and lots of meals and hardly anybody in the dining room. We were all very happy when we finally landed in New York.

Then we went to Ellis Island for the processing. And--

What was the processing like?

Well, it was nothing much, because we were all healthy. And my folks had their own affidavit, so you didn't have to depend on anybody. So we just, the six of us, marched in. And then these friends of my dad's picked us up. You know, so it was really quite easy for us.

You were all healthy?

Oh, I mean, really, the way we were raised, why not? So we had no problems in that respect.

Was the boat from Holland, was a large percentage of the passengers traveling on that boat people fleeing the Holocaust?

That, I really wouldn't know. Don't forget, I was-- what was I, 12? Who cared? You know, you played with somebody. You didn't-- probably, you didn't know what language they were speaking, anyway.

Was that a regular commercial passenger--

Yeah, it was, I think the old Rotterdam, one of those. And since it was a one class ship, you didn't feel better or not quite so good as the rest of the people. Everybody was treated the same.



And we had our two brothers with us and dad and mother, so it wasn't any big thing.

Was there ever any discussion of the relationship between fascism in Germany and fascism in Italy, since you had a firsthand view of both cultures?

Well, in Italy, I remember we were, my sister and I, we were just crushed, because they had the boys and the girls organization, Balilla. And since we were Jewish, we could not wear the fascist-- you know, the axe with the bundles of wood. We couldn't wear them on our blouses. We just had plain white blouses and black skirts.

But I mean, we participated in everything. But we couldn't wear that, and we felt quite bad about it.

That was because you were Jewish, or because you were foreigners?

No, no, Jewish. No, that was-- we were Jewish.

But this was the Italian fascist youth?

Yeah, that was Italy. Yeah, well, Hitler and Mussolini, when they became--

Now--

--when they became chummy.

Did you have to join that organization?

We weren't allowed to join it, you see.

Oh, oh.

We couldn't wear the insignia.

Oh, you weren't in the organization at all?

That's it. We could wear--

Oh, I see.

--the skirt and the white blouse, you know. But we couldn't wear the insignia.

So you could wear some clothes. But did you participate in any of their meetings?

Well, no, no.

Or activities or--

No, no, no. No, no. Well, like-- activities was usually doing exercises for some holiday or marching around. But we couldn't wear the insignia.

Also, you would wear a uniform at school then, didn't you? Did you have to wear a uniform?

We wore white aprons and a blue bow, and I think, these sleeve protectors. And the boys had the black aprons with the blue bows. But that was only in Italy. In Germany, we didn't.

But when you talk about that insignia, not being able to wear the insignia-- that was on your school clothes or--

No, no, no. That was just, like, on the gym clothes or events clothes, whatever. Not on the apron, no.

Did they all--

Because don't forget, the school was Catholic.

Yeah.

So they had nothing to do with that. That was like if they had a-- some kind of an athletic event, and you did exercises for all the parents. Then you put those clothes on, the black skirts and the white blouse without the insignia.

So that's actually the only time you were different?

And the religious observances, yeah.

Visibly different, I mean.

Yes, absolutely. That's the only time.

Was-- did anybody in your Italian school ever talk about Hitler?

Nah.

Did the nuns ever talk about--

Was there such a thing as Current Events for 5th graders.

You didn't even have it here 40, 50 years ago. That started with Show and Tell. And you'd be surprised how few kids current events, even now. No, you took your subjects-- your reading and your arithmetic and your handicrafts and what have you-- and that was about it.

Did they talk about Mussolini in your Italian school?

Well, you couldn't help but talk about it, just like they talk about, what-- Roosevelt, when we went to school here-- I mean, after he was the leader.

Was he spoken of--

Oh--

--in reverent terms as--

Of course. I mean, they'd be crazy if they didn't. You had a picture. Just like you have Reagan or Bush in the school, now.

What did they say about Mussolini in your school?

Well, he was a great leader, and he let them out of unemployment. And then they were quite proud of the war they won in Ethiopia, although some people had their doubts about that.

And then, of course, when you write a letter, you wrote the regular day, and then you wrote the date of the year of-- which year of fascism it was. I think it started in 1922 or something like that. So let's say you wrote the 25th of August,

1939. And then you put down in Roman numerals whatever year it was or fascism. I mean that was part of it. But--

Did you ever take any of that homework and show it to your parents? Or did you ever discuss with your parents that in school you were recording the date in terms of--

Oh, well, they knew that. But I mean--

Did they talk to you about that at all?

No, I mean, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. I mean, you're not going to endear yourself to anybody. And I mean, the nuns didn't order it. It came from the Department of Education.

So that was a rule that you had?

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, and you had that on your entrance exam, too-- you know, where they graded you. They had the regular date and then the date of fascism.

Did you keep any of those papers?

That report card I still have. It's a--

Oh, you have--great.

Oh, it's a big thing, like this, tremendously official looking. And then my birth certificate is in German and Italian.

Oh.

Yeah, they didn't recognize the German birth certificate-- had to be translated officially. And then when I applied for Social Security, here, they didn't accept it either. It had to be translated into English.

Yes, right.

As if I'm standing there, it's not enough. No, but I mean, as a child, as it's going on, you don't think about these things. You just-- you're told to do it, and you do it. You may think about it 40 or 50 years later, but not at that time.

Did you have any sense that what you were being asked to do in writing the fascist date system was something that was oppressing you--

No.

--in any way?

No, we were just unhappy about the insignia. And then we were furious that we took the test, and we passed, and we couldn't go into that school, and we had to learn English. That was about it. And I--

Go ahead.

No, no, no. And when you're told, now, you do this, now you do that, in those days, you did it. My granddaughter wouldn't be like that. She'd say, why? [LAUGHS]

You must have had the radio going?

Oh, we listened to the Olympic Games in Berlin. Oh, every day. And my uncle who was still in Munich, he used to send us the Olympic papers, so we used to read those.

What about the speeches? I mean, you couldn't escape that, could you, by Mussolini over the radio?

Well, you didn't turn the radio on. I mean, he didn't come to our school. And he certainly didn't come to that little hick town we were living in.

[LAUGHS]

So and some of the worst Nazis lived there, anyway. So they wouldn't listen to Mussolini unless they had to.

[LAUGHS]

Was Mussolini genuinely a very popularly revered figure at--

Not up there. Not up there. They were--

Not up north?

Way, way north, because they would, any day, still prefer belonging to Austria rather than Italy. And that was what-- that was only about 20 years after the war, after World War I. So they felt much more German still than they do now.

In fact, they're violently anti-German-- anti-Italian?

Anti-Italian. That's what I meant-- that the kids would only speak Italian when they had to-- in school, unless they happened to be in Italian family. Otherwise, all the shopping and all of that you did in German.

And when we were there now, it's about 50/50, and that's 40 years later.

When you drove from northern Italy to Naples, did you sense a change in the political climate? Or were you not engaged in--

At 10, at 11, that's the-- we left so when we were relatively young. We didn't feel any of that. We knew it was a long, boring train ride. And you had to get down there, and then they examined you.

And they looked at your papers, and then you could go back to Switzerland and wait for your number to be called. And that was all there was to it. We really didn't do much sight-- oh, we did go to Pompeii and Herculaneum and all that business. But we didn't-- it wasn't like a vacation.

You did go to Pompeii, though?

Yeah, but we couldn't go inside. They made the-- the children had to wait outside.

[LAUGHS]

Why are you laughing-- happened to you, too? [LAUGHS]

No, I know this is so common.

Oh, well, now, they let you in. But then in those days, they didn't want you to see the paintings on the wall. So then we went back to Switzerland. Oh, there we had a good time.

I know my cousin, he was being readied for bar mitzvah. And the Hebrew teacher came, I think, three times a week from about 30, 40 kilometers, because the-- from Glarus, which was the capital of the canton in--

Switzerland.

In Switzerland, yeah, from that canton to ours. He came to Linthal to teach him his Haftarah portion. And then my sister and I, we were considered too young to go, so we stayed home with the cook and had a very good time.

See, they didn't take kids with them like they do now. You just stayed home with whoever took care of you. And that was the going thing. You didn't question it. It was a very mild case of exodus for us.

But you had your experiences?

Oh, absolutely. But I mean, nothing that I would have nightmares over.

Be glad.

I am. I definitely am.

Well, if you think of anything else, Margaret--

Again, I have one more question I'd like to ask, but you may have covered this.

That's all right.

You've returned to Germany since the war one--

Just that one time for one day.

In the '60s, it was?

Yes, just to visit those people that had taken care of us. That was the only reason we-- you know--

You choose not to go back to Germany?

There are plenty of other places I can go to.

Margaret told us she wouldn't go back to Germany.

I mean, if they say there's a pot of gold under one of the houses that my grandfather owned, I could definitely consider going to look for it. But I mean, there's really no reason why I should.

I feel funny sometimes when I hear German spoken in Zurich, even though it's different. I mean, it's a different country. You just have to get used to it, I guess. No, there's really no need for me to go. And it would have been so-- it's so different now, anyway.

Did you get restitution for missing your education in Germany?

Not too much. Barely, because I only had three years. My brother did. And then my dad got a pension.

Oh, he did.

Yeah.

Did he get compensated for the loss of his--

For the loss of the properties? Yes, oh, yes. Took a while, but--

Yeah.

In fact, I think he got partially from the German government, partially from the US.

The US?

In Munich, yes. In Munich, he did. And I know-- I remember, the Americans paid much better than the Germans-- was a higher percentage.

What would the Americans pay for?

Air raid damage.

Oh. That's interesting.

I think that was only with my dad's side. They only had the one building. With my grandfather on my mother's side it was much more complicated. So the German government-- we had somebody in Germany that took care of it

Yeah.

And so they took care of it I remember we tried to fill out the forms. We didn't know what half the words meant.

It's odd-- legalese, they call it.

Oh, terrible. We looked them up in a big dictionary we have. They weren't even in there.

Are there ever any reunions in your original hometown in which--

I'm still--

--survivors who left during--

Oh, you--

--the war--

That's a sore point you hit. In Stuttgart, they have what they call them-- you know, the Desert Fox, Rommel? Well, his son is Mayor of Stuttgart. And for years, he used to support a kibbutz in Israel.

And now, he started that business that-- I think he takes 50 a year in the month of June, July, and August or something like that. And I do a lot of swimming. And one of the gentlemen that swims, he was there this summer or last summer on one of those free trips. But he's 82. So you can imagine, I have a few more years to go.

So--

Oh, I signed up for that. I figured I might as well get everything I can out of him. Now, my aunt does not agree with me. But we have a difference of opinion. I said, why not?

Because there are so many applicants, right?

No, I mean, why not take advantage of it? My answer says I shouldn't.

Oh, I see.

You see?

No, I mean your--

Oh, I know, there are a lot of older ones ahead of us. That's why you have to wait that long.

I hope I'll make it to 82 [LAUGHS]

Is that-- you're on a waiting list?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Have they given you any sense as to-- if they froze the waiting list like, right now, how many years would it take to get to your number?

Well, they can't do that, because they don't know how many die in the meantime.

I see.

So I know about 3--

More than 500 people on the list?

Oh, it was a big German Jewish community in Stuttgart. And I know the people that live in the little villages. They've all been. And but I think about four years ago I got a letter, saying that they hadn't forgotten us, but we just had to wait our turn.

Listen, if I don't make it, I don't make it. I mean, I'm not going to sit there and bite my fingernails, waiting for them to call me.

If your number comes up, and they invite you--

Sounds awful. [LAUGHS]

That is a horrible way to put it. If you're invited to attend, would you come back and talk with us afterwards?

Oh, absolutely, if you're still around.

Yeah, if I'm still around.

Listen to that-- talk about pessimism.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, I hope I can do it very soon. I have-- I don't have too much hope. I'm sure it's going to be another 10, 15 years. It doesn't matter to me. Listen, if I don't make it-- if I have the burning desire to go, I can always go.

Exactly.

So far, it's not burning.

Well, you have the right attitude. I love your sense of humor-- think you're great.

Listen, if you don't have a sense of humor, you're in a bad way.

Well, you have to come back.

Oh, absolutely.

And tell us all about if you made it on--

If it should happen, I will. If it should happen.

OK.

OK I can put my glasses back on?

We enjoyed talking to you.

OK, fine.

And we really wish you the very best.

Thank you.

And maybe a trip to Stuttgart.

Who knows? Who knows? I'll let you know. I'll tell Joel.

Yes, you do. I'd like--