

Go ahead.

I'm Nancy Magidson and I'm interviewing John Brunn. Also interviewing with me is Julie Rosenberg. And the videographer is Sean Simplicio. Today is May 9, 1996. We were at the Holocaust Oral History Project in San Francisco.

I wanted to start by asking you to tell us a little bit about your childhood.

OK. I was born in Vienna in January 19, 1927. And I grew up in a middle-class home. My grandfather was still Orthodox, but my father was completely assimilated. And so my mother wanted to keep the Sabbath, but my father didn't want to. So the compromised by not doing it.

And I remember my grandfather pretty well, even though I didn't seem all that often because we lived in different parts of the city. And he had a big house with a big stable. He was in the horse business, would be the trucking business today. And he was a very solid Burgher. He had a medal from the Kaiser. And his family had been in Vienna for many, many generations, as far back as my mother could remember.

And he had a large family. He had 11 kids, nine of which lived past infancy. And he sent all the boys to college, the ones who wanted to go, but none of the girls. That was pretty typical in those days. And almost all the sons were in the First World War and my father was also. And it's ironic that of all the ethnic groups in the empire, the Jews were the only ones who were loyal to the emperor. And all the other ones wanted to secede, have their own language, their own nationality, so I was thinking about that afterwards.

And the only really religious one of the brothers was the one who got arrested. It seems ironic. This happened on Kristallnacht. They were burning his temple and he went out and he muttered something under his breath. And somebody overheard it and they sent him to Dachau. He survived. His wife got a visa to England, so they finally released him. But his health was damaged. He died in New York.

And let's see, I went to school in Vienna. And I really liked the public school teachers. I think-- I think they were all socialists at that time and very dedicated to teaching. And so they were very encouraging. And then at age 11. I went to the gymnasium, which is the classical high school. And the reason I went there is because my father went there. So actually, it was a good choice. I didn't know anything about it. So I think he made the right choice for me. I happened to luck out.

Let's see, I should mention maybe a bit about antisemitism in Vienna. It was always there below the surface, but you could live pretty well without being attacked. I heard stories about people in the family who couldn't get certain positions because they were Jewish, so there was discrimination. And I remember once on the street car my brother told me not to talk too loud, otherwise people would say something. So there was a consciousness of it then.

And I think it's ironic that my grandfather, he thought himself as Viennese. And I think my family too. But Viennese thought of us as Jews, so we were never really accepted. And I really became aware of this in religious studies. It was compulsory religion in Austria, no separation of church and state. And once a week we had Bible study. And all the Christian kids stayed in the seats and all the Jewish kids, I think all four or five of us were marched off into some separate room. So immediately, we were marked as being different. And I think once you view somebody as different, then it's easy to persecute him or her.

And let's see, I remember very much the Nazis marching in. There was-- weeks before there was a lot of speculation whether or not Schuschnigg could save Austria. He made a lot of brave speeches on the radio, but of course, he eventually capitulated. And the day before the Nazis marched in, there were airplanes flying overhead all day. It was kind of ominous, this constant roar of airplanes.

And then they marched in the next day. And I remember, all the churches rang the bells in celebration of this wonderful event. But really, the thing that shocked me most was that one day I was friends with all the kids, and the next day there were swastikas written on my desk. So this overnight change-- I couldn't understand how people could change so much

overnight. Of course, now I realize it's probably the parents changing, and the kids just following the parents.

And I continued to go to school for a while. It was starting-- becoming more and more dangerous. I was beaten up a couple of times. And so finally then, they were going to send it to a separate school, and finally, I just stopped going to school. The day the Nazis marched in, my mother started writing letters. I think she had a lot of foresight. She wasn't-- she wasn't fooled by what's happening.

So she wrote a lot of letters. She wrote-- we had family in Czechoslovakia. She wrote to them. And fortunately, they didn't want us, otherwise, I wouldn't be here. And then she wrote to an uncle in New York, who had been there for quite a while. And eventually, he sent affidavits. But it was a long wait to get them. So we waited from September-- from March till December with the Nazis.

And what finally got us admitted was that we came under the German quota. Because Austria officially became part of Germany, so we were Germans. And the German quota is much bigger than the Austrian quota, so we got in under that. And getting out was a difficult process. You needed all kinds of papers. And my brother stood in lines for the various-- this kind of permit and that kind of permit. And it was a long, long process. But he finally got all the papers together.

And we could take possessions, but only a grand total of \$10 and that was it. But I remember being on the train and going to Switzerland, it was such a feeling of relief. Finally, not to have to worry what would happen if the conductor disliked you or things like that.

And under Hitler, life was very chancy because you had no protection at all. If a neighbor had a grudge against you, he could do anything he wanted to. So we were lucky in that, that nothing happened to us. We had a close call. On Kristallnacht they came and searched our apartment. And mother showed them the keys.

And then he asked my mother if she had any more keys. And she said, oh, yes, a whole drawer full and she opened the drawer. And then she remembered that my father's service revolver was underneath the tablecloth there. So that was a close call. In Austria, you could keep your revolver after you were discharged.

And let me think. And my father's family came from Czechoslovakia, from Moravia, a place called-- they call UherskÃ©-- it's Hradiste-- now-- UherskÃ© Hradiste. And they lived in a small town. And my grandmother was a very good businesswoman. Unfortunately, I didn't inherit that gene. And she had a foreign customs shop, which she sold all over Czechoslovakia. And she became very wealthy.

She was a millionaire in krona, according to the family story. But being a big patriot, she invented the whole thing in war bonds. And when inflation came, you couldn't even buy a loaf of bread with that. So she was completely wiped out by that. And so she lived with us for a while in Vienna.

And many members of the family were killed. My grandmother and some aunts and uncles and next generation, they were all sent to Theresienstadt, where they-- that was supposed to be the model camp for the Germans, their Potemkin Village, show how wonderful they treated people. So I don't know all the details of what happened to them. I knew my grandmother starved to death. I heard that. And one aunt was saved because she worked at camp headquarters and she was able to save her daughter. But the other ones were all killed in some way or another.

And my mother's family, almost everybody got out. One uncle fled to Italy and he was jailed there. And he died under mysterious circumstances. I don't really know what happened. And one of the uncles committed suicide in Vienna. He couldn't face the idea. But the rest of them got out-- England or America. Anything else I could recollect for you?

Sure. I'd like to go back and ask you some more childhood questions.

Oh, sure.

So what were your parents' names?

They were Elizabeth, Lily, and Ludwig, L-U-D-W-I-G.

What was your mother's last name?

Greenwalt.

And did you have siblings?

I have an older brother. He's about 2 and 1/2 years older. He did a lot of standing in line for us. He was old enough to do that. I should mention that my father died very young. He died in 1936 of cancer. He had stomach cancer. And they couldn't diagnose it.

The doctors kept saying he had [INAUDIBLE], which was kind of like psychosomatic illnesses. But of course, it was all nonsense. And tried different diets and this and that. But when they finally operated, it was too late. It had already spread. So it left my mother in a lurch. But in Vienna, she got a pension from the place where my father worked.

He worked in the Landerbank, which was a combination of bank and export-import company. And he headed up one of the divisions of the bank. It was considered a good job, but my father hated it. It was a dull job. It's interesting, he had first studied physics-- that's my field-- and at the last moment, he switched over to law because he had an uncle in mining law and he was going to take over the practice. And then his uncle died and the whole thing collapsed. So ended up in this more or less clerical job, which he didn't like. But in those days, you couldn't change jobs. You were lucky to have a job. It was permanent depression.

But it was interesting that my brother and I took up his likes. My brother went into law and I went into physics. I have no idea how that happens. Because I actually didn't know about this until long after. So I wasn't influenced by the knowledge, it just-- I don't know how you get influenced by people. So looking back, I think I have many of the traits of my mother and my father, and also my grandfather. I was very much impressed by my grandfather.

He lived in a big way. He bought wine by the barrel full. He's the only person I ever knew who did that. And he had a huge household. And he was very hospitable and generous. So for me, he's kind of a model on how to live.

And both my parents were big readers. And my mother read to me a lot. And I became a big reader. In fact, I don't remember how I learned to read. I remember going to the library with my father and picking out books that seemed interesting and reading them. But it seemed very easy and natural. And I remember my mother once read a whole thick book to me when I was sick, just in order to keep me from becoming restless. A book by Selma Lagerlof. I still remember that book. Anything else you'd like to know?

What was the name of the book?

Nils Holgersson und die Wildgans. That's a Swedish name. Nils Holgerssons the name and the wild geese. The story was about some kind of magic. He became small and he rode on the back of this wild goose all over Sweden. He had all kinds of adventures. It was a book-- I see that book on different levels, although I probably just got it on the story level. Yeah, she was a famous writer. She got the Nobel Prize for literature. But I don't think anybody reads anymore, except maybe in Sweden.

Could you say more about what your parents were like?

OK, let's see. My father was somewhat moody and withdrawn, perhaps because of his stomach problems. So he-- so a lot of times, my mother told us, he's resting, don't make any noise, which was a little hard for us kids. But I have good memories about him. The time he was available, it was a good relationship, even though he died when I was still about nine. So I never really knew him.

And I remember a long time afterwards, I kept looking for a surrogate father. But, of course, nobody wanted to play that role. And I finally got over that when I married and was my own father. So he was very-- I guess, he was a big reader

and very bright. I think he was-- somewhat acerbic sense of humor.

And my mother was quite different. She was more outgoing. She came from this big family in a big city. And I remember she always felt that he was a provincial, growing up in this small village. So they were very different. And I think it created some conflicts.

What was your house like?

It was actually just an apartment, a small apartment we had. I think-- just I think there's two bedrooms. My parents had one and my brother and I had the other one. And my grandmother slept in the same room with us. So it was fairly crowded. And it had-- there were big, heavy furniture, as was customary then. And we had one servant. Almost everybody had servants over there, even if they didn't have much money. That was customary for the middle class.

And she became-- she was kind of a household friend. And she did-- she did most of the cooking, although my mother liked to make some special dishes. All the members of the family-- mother's family, were great cooks. And they had competitive cooking. They each made things slightly different and you had to praise them for whatever way they did the cooking. And they were very insulted if you didn't eat enough.

I remember once my wife and I were invited and we had this special dish. And they offered some more to my wife, Sally. She said, I've already had three helpings. They said, ah, but they were small ones.

So I think people had a pretty good life in Vienna. There wasn't too much money around in the '30s, but a very close family life. What else can I--

Was the woman who worked for you, the servant, was she Jewish?

No, she was not Jewish. So she stayed in Vienna and we gave her a lot of our things, that we-- we couldn't take out very much, so we gave her a lot of them. And then she finally retired and she went to some old age home. Old age homes in Austria are very nice. They were usually by some lake, or some mountain lake, and wonderful scenery. They had socialized medicine in the '30s already.

Do you remember what your house-- what your apartment smelled like?

Let's see, I remember it was a second or third story you walked up. When I went back-- I went back to Vienna in 1960 and visited the house and the same concierge was still there. This was surprising. And he showed me where my brother had carved his initials on the banister. So he remembered us. He was very decent-- a very nice person. The house hadn't changed, except the houses on the street were much smaller than I remembered. So it was interesting going back. And across the street was a theater, a [NON-ENGLISH] And also, further up the block there was a delicatessen. And my father liked to stop in and buy special dishes.

And further down the street was the city hall. And next to the city hall was a little park, the Rathauspark. And I remember once I was arrested and my mother had to come and get me, because I stepped in the grass. I was running after ball and I stepped in the grass and that was a big offense. People don't realize how lucky the kids are over here. They have so many things that are made for the kids. And over there, the parks were really for the old people. They had chairs where they sat.

In your neighborhood, what was the ethnic makeup?

Let's see, the neighborhood-- in that neighborhood, it was mostly just the Austrians, the Catholic Austrians. There were-- the Ashkenazi Jews were scattered over the city, but there was a Jewish section. Leopoldstadt was a strong concentration of Jews. Most of the Jews who immigrate to Austria relatively recently, they were from Eastern Europe. But the rest of the Jews were scattered throughout the city, a bit like San Francisco now.

Did you practice Judaism in your home?

We didn't at home, but we did celebrate the holidays. And I particularly remember Passover at my grandfather's house. That was always very festive, a very large number of people over, all the families, the children. So usually, a huge table. And I can't remember how many children-- how many people were there.

And I remember drinking up the wine from the leftover cups and I got a little drunk on that. My parents had to call a taxi to get me home. So very pleasant memories of that, a really warm family holiday.

How long would you stay there when you went for the Seder?

Just the evening, just the evening. And then we went back home.

What was your parents' education?

Let's see, my father went to the gymnasium and the university, so he had a degree in law. And my mother had studied French. She had a certificate in French. She would have probably liked a university education, but my grandfather didn't believe that was necessary for girls. They should marry and have kids. So I think it was a real shame, because my mother was a very bright woman, a really good mind. And she read in both English and French, and was a big reader.

When we came to America, it was very hard for her because she didn't have any real marketable skill and she couldn't do much with the French. She didn't have any other skill. And leaving Vienna, she had to renounce the pension in order to get out. So we came over here with essentially no money, \$10. And in the beginning my uncle helped out a bit, but after that she was really on her own.

So she had all kinds of jobs. She worked in factories and in the garment industry for sweatshops at that time. And then eventually, she went to the civil service. And I remember I also worked when I went to school here at various kinds of jobs-- an education in itself.

My favorite job was working in a print shop. So I was kind of doing all kinds of things, kind of a boy Friday for them. And they were very pleasant people to work for. I think they were all slightly alcoholic, but very pleasant alcoholics. Would you like to hear some more about Vienna?

Let's see, on Sundays we usually took the streetcar to the end of the line and then we did some hiking in the Wienerwald and other places. And I remember I thought it was pretty boring, because we went to the same place over and over again. But my parents enjoyed it.

Vienna had a green belt around it. And if you took the streetcar to the end of the line, then you were out in the country already. It's probably changed a lot now. It's gotten bigger. And my grandfather lived on the edge of town. And so it was a very pleasant area. I can remember walking around there.

There was a Beethoven monument there and I remember with a little park. And I remember I did some bicycle riding around that, my first bicycle riding. So overall, I think I had a very happy childhood, until the Nazis came. I was happy in school. I think I was a good student. And I read a lot and I had friends. I always had a few friends. So it was-- so memories are very good about that. Anything else?

Was the Jewish community in Vienna very cohesive?

Very?

Cohesive?

Yes, interestingly enough. There was a famous rabbi-- I read about this later, who kept the Jewish community from splitting, at least the Ashkenazi community from splitting. Unlike here, where you have a reformed conservative Orthodox reconstructionist they all held together. So I thought really remarkable achievement.

So that was the main-- then there were separate Jewish communities. There was a Sephardic Jewish community. And there were some other ones too, a Hasidic community. But these were all much smaller. Most of the Jews in Vienna were more or less assimilated. They tried to become Viennese. And the Viennese always thought of them as Jews. It was a kind of a futile effort.

Were there community wide celebrations?

I don't remember any, no. They had synagogue services, of course. There was a synagogue in my neighborhood and I went occasionally. When I went back to Vienna, I looked for the synagogue, but it was gone. I think it had been burned down on Kristallnacht. A lot of synagogues were burnt down. My schools are still there, but not the synagogue.

I visited my old school. It looked just the same, except it had been whitewashed, a new paint job. And it was part-- it was part of a cloister. Because the public schools and private school-- there was no separation between public schools and private schools in those days, probably still. And I can remember in the summer, you could smell the wine coming up from the basement. And occasionally, you saw a little mouse running around the classroom.

And the gymnasium, I enjoyed the gymnasium. Our classical education started with Latin, and you go on to Greek, and mathematics, and history, and other things. But I was only there for part of a year. I remember my mother was telling me the teacher thought I was very dreamy. I was looking out the window a lot. But apparently, I always did well on the test. Somehow I picked it up. What else would you-- can I tell you?

Do you know how many synagogues there were in Vienna?

I don't.

Did you go to any one other than yours?

I think I just went to my own.

You said that the Viennese thought of Jews as Jews and you thought of yourselves as Viennese.

Tried to think of ourselves as Viennese, but they wouldn't let us.

Can you tell-- can you think of stories about that, how you knew that?

Yes, we knew that with this relative who was with a doctor. And he was apparently a brilliant diagnostician. He was the only one who was able to diagnose my father correctly. And I think he converted to Catholicism, but they still looked at him as a Jew. So even if you are a convert, you still weren't accepted. So I heard a lot of stories about him and his struggles. I think eventually he committed suicide.

And there were positions Jews could have, but it was very difficult to get the academic life. And many of the professions were closed, not officially, but just wouldn't hire you. So that was generally known. But the spirit is very different-- here in America, if that happened I think the Jewish community would unite and fight that, and have protests and letters to the newspaper and all that. But over there, it was accepted that's the way it is, which I think in retrospect was a big mistake.

And also, let's see my father was a socialist. And the only two parties in Vienna, the Socialist Party and the-- kind of a church party, a pretty clear cut division. And my father belonged to a social party. My grandfather, being a businessman, had to belong to the other one. But politics didn't play a big role in family life.

I remember when they had the big putsch in 1936, when Dollfuss took over, they had barricades up in the streets. And I remember it took my father a long time to get home. So I was aware of what was happening. So I think people are much more politically aware over there, because politics intruded into more different areas.

They had-- the government in Vienna, at that time, it was socialist. I think it still is. And they did a lot of things for the city. They had a big housing project. It was called the Karl-Marx-Hof. And that was a scene of some bitter fighting, when they had the putsch in 1934. I remember seeing-- afterwards, seeing all the bullet holes in it. So they tried to-- they tried to fight it, but they were outnumbered.

And so, it was sad, when Hitler marched in, Austria was already fascist, but more of a Mussolini kind of fascism. And I think that took a lot of resistance away from the-- away from the country. The people who would have fought them, the socialists, were already disbanded, in jail, and dispirited. So there was little-- there was very little organized opposition.

Although, there was an underground. And a good friend of my mother, the husband of my mother's childhood friend was in the underground, in the Catholic underground. So he was-- so there were people who were resisting, but they were a pretty small number. He was-- eventually, he was arrested. He was betrayed by somebody. And he was arrested and jailed a long time. And he finally got out, but his health was ruined. And he died not too long afterwards.

And I visited him when I went back to Vienna, and he was very bitter that the people who went along came out much better than he did. He felt the injustice of this.

So my mother's acquaintances were both Jewish and not Jewish. She had a big circle of friends, a big circle of bridge players and other friends. And my father was less social. He was more introverted. Be more happy just being by himself, I think. What else can I tell you?

You said that in retrospect you think that it was a bad thing to accept that Jews can only achieve certain ranks.

Right.

--in society, but that Jews thought of themselves as Viennese.

Or they tried to, yes.

It seems like such an obvious contradiction. How did people bridge that?

That contradiction. Yeah, if they thought they were Viennese, but they knew that there were these limits set upon them.

I think probably by selective vision, shutting out the things that were contradictory. I was reading about Germany, in the middle-- when Hitler was already in power, with respect to the Jews, there was a big debate in Germany whether the Jews should be part of German culture, the German kultur, or whether should be Zionists. It seems incredible. That was already when was with murdering Jews.

And many Germans delayed getting out, because they thought Hitler was just a passing thing. It's understandable, the way they were there in Germany for thousands of years. So I think they were right to think of themselves as Germans. And they were probably the carriers of the German culture.

And I think a similar thing was in Vienna. A large part of the Viennese intellectual life was conducted by Jews. So many of the newspaper people were Jewish and many of the people in various kinds of advanced movements were Jewish. So I think it's understandable why they thought themselves as Viennese. Because they were the carriers of elitist culture.

So there was a lot of consciousness of the culture, but not of being Jewish. The only exception I can think of is my cousin in Czechoslovakia. He was an early Zionist, way back in the '20s. And everybody thought he was crazy. But he's the one who got out and survived. And he was-- at first he was with a kibbutz and then he was in a moshav. And he was a member of the Haganah in the early days.

So there were some Zionists, but some people who were really conscious of being Jewish and wanted to express that,

but I would say the minority. I imagine it was probably strong among the Hasidic Jews. But the Viennese Jews, like my grandfather had been there for how many hundreds of years, generation after generation. And there were periods when the Jews were well accepted and then it varied.

And I remember reading, one time Freud thought of a career in government. And then around 1880s there were a lot of antisemitism. And he realized that was close to him and then he went into medicine. So I guess I shouldn't be too hard on the Viennese Jews.

It looks different, looking at them from over here, than it does looking at them from inside Vienna. Actually, one of the things that the Nazi period did, it made me more interested in Judaism again. So I read a lot about Judaism. And then when Nancy had a bat mitzvah, I went with her and I studied with her. And she stopped going and I kept on going.

So I've been involved in temple for me a dozen years or so. I think the exodus made a big impression on me. And one of the things I realized that you can't escape from politics, whether you want to or not. It won't let you. So I thought it was better to be actively involved than just being a victim, carried along by the tides. So I've been involved in politics ever since then.

And I remember, I joined the American Civil Liberties Union very early. I had some job difficulties because of that, but still believe it was worthwhile. One job required clearance and they wouldn't give me the clearance. And they never tell you why they don't give you the clearance, so you can't really defend yourself because you don't have the charges, sort of Kafkaesque. And then finally, the officer there, a nice person, took me aside and told me what was happening.

There were two things against me. One, that I was foreign born-- that's suspicious. And the second is a member of the American Civil Liberties Union. Eventually, clearance came through. But I got out of that-- got out of the work. It was 75% defense related and I didn't want to do that. And I realized also to get in the company, you had to be a company man. And I didn't want to do that either. But I'm getting away from Vienna. Is there more things I can tell you about Vienna?

Did Viennese Jews, do you remember, see themselves as similar to Austrian Jews or different, similar to German Jews?

Austrian Jews were mainly Viennese Jews. There were a few Jewish communities scattered, but they were very small. So the big Jewish community was in Vienna. In fact, that was the only really big city left after the breakup of the empire. This huge city of people in a country of six or seven million-- unbalanced. And a lot of Jews migrated to Vienna. The persecution in Eastern Europe, and they came to Vienna to escape that.

Let's see, and there was also a Spanish Jewish community, who spoke Ladino in Vienna. And my mother had a friend who belonged to that. She had a wide circle of people, friends, both Christian and Jewish. But when she came to America, most of her friends were fellow Austrians or Germans. She knew a few Americans, but not very many. Her social circle was mainly Austrian and German Jews.

So I think the emigration left its marks on her, and also my aunts and uncles. And I noticed there were kind of two reactions. Let's see, the older ones thought everything was better in Vienna. No matter what happened in America, it's better in Vienna. And the younger ones had the opposite reaction-- everything was great in America and they didn't want to hear about what's the past. So they were really unbalanced in their judgment.

So I feel-- I still feel that I have some ties there, particularly with the language, and I try to read in German to try to keep it up, and speak it, but I don't have much practice anymore. So I feel you shouldn't blame the language for the Nazis. There were good things happening there too. But I remember coming over here, there were some kids about my age who refused to speak German and families hadn't learned English yet, so there was no communication between the two generations. And those kids forgot German completely and then they became completely Americans.

So I feel I'll never be an American, the way my kids are Americans, being born here. So part of my memories are still in Austria, because my formative years were spent there from, 0 to 11. And I don't want to forget those years or all the good things about the culture. But I couldn't go back there.

I know some people who went back after the war. But I wouldn't be able to do that. I think if I went back and met people, I'd always worry, what was this person like during the war? Was he or she a Nazi or not? And how did they behave? And I think that I would get in the way of all my relationships.

And, of course, I can't forget what the Austrians did. They were very enthusiastic Nazis for the most part. At first-- well, they portrayed themselves as a victim, but they were a very willing victim, let's say. And the Austrians probably are more antisemitic than the Germans. And of course, Hitler came from Austria.

And he had a big following in Austria too. They were the so-called illegal-- the illegal Nazis. They wore the swastika on the inside of the collars, where you couldn't see it. It turned out there were a lot of them. Some of them were fascists out of idealism. They thought things would be better under the Germans. And they were very disillusioned. And sometimes some of these were more decent than the opportunists who became Nazis overnight.

And I remember once after Hitler, going hiking with a friend of mine and walking in an underpass, and the kids above throwing rocks at us. So I think it'd be impossible for me to go back. Too many memories.

And one of the things it did too, it made me realize that it's better to be an active Jew than a passive Jew, at least, and to fight for what you believe, rather than just going along, as the Viennese Jews did. What else can I tell?

Those kids throwing rocks at you, how did they know you were Jewish?

I don't know. Now, in Vienna Jews actually did look different. We're darker skinned, darker hair. It was wonderful coming to America where there are so many minorities. I was just one other minority out of a dozen or so. And some people thought I was Spanish. So it's a lot easier to be a minority here than it was over there. I guess in America, the Jews aren't even considered a minority in terms of affirmative action. So it made life a lot easier.

Although, when I started school in New York, I had a difficult time. My clothing were different. My mother-- we brought things over from Europe, and nobody wore those things in America. And so I stood out. And I got in a lot of fights with other kids. So I often came home with a bloody nose, a black eye, and I guess I really didn't know how to handle those situations. I haven't got into fights since then.

But it was pretty rough. And also, I think one of the teachers said, look at him, look how well he's doing and he doesn't even speak the language well. And of course, all the other kids hated me after that. That was a really dumb thing for the teacher to say. But it became a lot easier as I got older.

I went to the Bronx High School of Science and it was just starting. I didn't realize that they were such a good school. I just applied for it and I went there. And that was a good experience. So there I was part of the crowd. And that school actually-- I think at that time, was largely Jewish, probably. I don't know if it still is-- probably. The only bad thing, it was all male, no women allowed. And that has changed, of course. And it was more formal. We had to wear coats and ties-- very different.

And I remember when I came to Berkeley, I wore a suit and tie and everybody looked at me funny. And I couldn't understand what I'd done wrong. I kept looking, did I leave my fly open, what did I do? And then pretty quickly, shifted over. Informal clothing is a lot more comfortable.

Would you like to hear some more about America, or Europe, or Vienna.

I wanted to ask you a little more about the incident where those boys were throwing rocks at you.

Yes.

Do you remember how you felt?

I don't remember. But I do remember the physical things were not as bad as having the kids turn overnight. I think that really affected me. Having rocks throw at me, didn't really matter much. I could handle that. But it was a real shock realizing that the kids could switch overnight like that. And I think it left its mark on me. I think I've been a little bit afraid of people since then. I've overcome most of it, but I still catch myself. So I think that was the biggest impact, that incident.

And also, I remember-- oh, one other incident I remember. They had a big parade, a big Nazi meet, I guess-- how shall I put it, kind of a big assembly of people. And there were some German speakers. And I was curious what it was like. And then the whole crowd went Heil Hitler and I was the only one who didn't do that. And I felt very isolated, very vulnerable. Now I know enough not to go to places like that.

So there were-- and I remember looking out the window once and they were arresting some Jews. And the Nazis were taking them away. They were bending their arms behind their back. A pretty brutal scene. And everybody's pretty much aware of what is happening in Vienna, except we didn't know about the death camps. But I think those happened later. But we knew about the concentration camps and all these things. There was a lot of word of mouth communication.

And I also remember there's a book out called *The Gelber Fleck*, *The Yellow Spot*, where they documented all the atrocities that the Nazis committed. So pretty much, I think there was a lot known. It was really pretty difficult to fool yourself at that time, that maybe it's just a passing thing.

So I think all these incidents left a little mark on me, kind of a shock. And the realization that the police are no longer your friends. If something goes wrong, you can't go to the police. You're just on your own. And survival depended on little circumstances. It's very, very chancy. Some people survive and some people, something happened, some small incident happened and they were killed. And I think that left an impact on me, how chancy life is, how much depends on the small circumstances.

Some people survive and get out and others, just as good or maybe better, get killed. So I think that's stayed with me a long time too.

And then there were a lot of small incidents too. We weren't allowed to play in the park anymore. The Boy Scouts became illegal. It seems amazing. I was a Cub Scout at that time, but they were banned. In fact, Hitler banned just about every organization that was around. So if you were a non-Jew, you belonged to the Hitler Jugend. And that was it.

So I've got a good idea what it's like to live in a dictatorship. I think that really made me appreciate America and the freedom here. And it makes me upset when the Christian right wants to weaken the separation of church and state. I think that is what a great things about America, that they have been able to do that, unlike Austria, most of European countries, would certainly hate to have that taken away.

I think living in a secular culture is wonderful. In Vienna, everybody had to pay a special tax, and litmus tax. So if you were a Catholic, you went to one place. If you were Jewish, it went to the Jewish community. So we were pretty well marked.

There were some people who wrote down [NON-ENGLISH], meaning no belief, so you could that too. A way of avoiding the tax. . Let's see what else you would be interested in.

Before '38, what organizations-- what were you involved in? Sports or clubs-- you said you were a Boy Scout.

A Boy Scout, yes, Cub Scout. I think that was the only one. But I had a circle of neighborhood friends and we played together. So I think it was too young to be involved in many groups. Although, there were many different groups around. There were Zionist groups around. And I think there were people training to go to what was then Palestine. But I didn't belong to them.

So the kids in your neighborhood were both Jewish and non-Jewish. And you all played together?

Although, my two closest friends were Jewish, but I did have non-Jewish friends too. It didn't affect the social life that much. But I think amongst the adults mainly it was mainly Jews. For my family, mainly Jews. Except for this one very close friend of my mother's, whose husband was in the underground. So she stayed friends with them. Even when she was in America, they corresponded. So that there were-- social lives, there weren't any rigid boundaries. Of course, after Nazis, it was a lot different.

Do you think that was typical, that your closest friends would be Jewish?

I don't know. I suspect it might be, but I don't really know. .

When you were a kid, before the war, did you have any idea of what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Let's see, yes. I had a-- let's see, I think I wanted to be a lion tamer. I was very much impressed by the circus. And then later on, I read a lot of Jules Verne stories and that really-- I think it probably got me interested in science, reading those stories. I didn't have much idea of what science was about, but it sounded like good adventures. But I didn't-- I didn't think much about having a career until I came over to this country.

It's interesting, my brother had a very different kind of mind. He liked to-- it was more of an organizational mind. He knew where all the streetcars went and he made a map showing where all of these go. So he had a very good mind for details. And I think that came in very handy when he studied law.

He also had a photographic memory for-- I think he was a very good student. He said he never had to study until he went to law school. And so, of course, he was a very good student. I remember I was always being compared to him, and I really resented that.

And as kids we didn't get along well, but we do get along well now. My viewpoint changed when we went to the same college together and made me realize that we had a lot in common. Whereas before, it had always had been completely different. So even though we are very different, we now get along and I see him fairly frequently, maybe once a month or so. Anything else? What else would you--

What else did you read when you were a kid?

I read a lot of fairy tales. My father had a big collection of fairy tales in his library. Apparently, he liked them. And I liked them. So it's strange how we can have common interests and I don't know how that came about. Because I know he never talked about this. I just saw them in the bookcase and I liked them, so I read my way through them.

And I think my father also had a bit of a mystic touch. He liked-- I noticed some books-- I remember now some books being in there. He liked Edgar Allen Poe, those fantasies. So I remember reading those stories too. And then a big book of German ballads, kind of romantic ballads, and I remember I loved those as a kid. So I read all of those.

So it's hard for me to understand how kids can have such difficulty reading because it came so easily to me. But then I grew up in a very literate household, where both parents were bilingual. My father spoke Czech and German and my mother German and French. Both great readers, so I guess it isn't a big surprise. And my brother turned out to be a big reader too.

I think it's strange how we get to become our own parents. I can see part of my father in me and part of my mother. Well, anything--

So do you have any pets?

Oh, I didn't have any pets-- oh, yes, a little turtle. I had a turtle in Vienna. And here, I've inherited cats from-- first from Nancy, then from my students. It was one of those things-- is it OK if we leave them here for a few months. And then you know how that goes. So that's about it.

Did you have to leave your turtle in Vienna?

I think somebody took it away. I remember it got me very upset. Some lady thought I was mistreating that turtle and took it away. I remember I cried over that. It was pretty hard to have pets in an apartment house, pretty limited. Generally, people didn't have many pets. And, let' see-- let's see, would you like to hear about my wife? Or rather just about myself?

Yeah.

Yes.

Yeah.

I met my wife through politics actually. We both belong to the same club together, Democratic Club, which is commonly known as a [INAUDIBLE]. And there was a party of a-- actually, my wife said she knew me before I knew her because she called me up to do some kind of precinct work, some kind of work. And I went and did it. But I don't remember her phone call.

So anyhow, we went-- it was a party given by a common friend. And that's when I met her. And so I still remember our conversation way back then. So I think that was my great love. Yeah, she unfortunately died a few years ago of cancer. But we did a lot of things together. And she came to my math conferences and I went to her political meetings, so it was a good exchange. I took up some of her interests and she took up some of my interests.

And she was very active in libraries, and schools, and community things. And the local library in my neighborhood is now the Sally Brunn-- Sally Brunn Noe Valley Branch Library. So, I'm very proud of that. She was one of the people who was able to save the library. They were going to close the library and she organized the troops. And several people turned out. And the mayor came, of course, then. Then it would have been politically impossible to close it.

So I think, in a sense, she really saved the building, saved the library. Because I think once they close it and remove the books, then it's pretty hard to ever bring it back. And she was really remarkable. She was such a strong activist, but she didn't make any enemies. I think that's a really wonderful thing.

In fact, she's the only person I know who can do that, or could do that. And I think it was because she wasn't in for anything personal. She wasn't in it for power or money and I think people realized that. And she also had a nice manner of approaching people. She didn't attack people. She stuck to the issues. So even when people disagreed, it wasn't a personal thing.

So I'll try to do some of the things that she did, but I can't live up to that example. Let's see, anything further?

Yes.

OK.

I wanted to ask you another Vienna question.

Sure.

Did Viennese Jews see themselves as similar to German Jews or different?

Different. There was a lot of animosity between Austrian and Germans. I think they irritated us just by speaking German. Because the Austrian Germans had a soft dialect and the Germans had a very harsh dialect. And they used different words for the same thing. So a bit like Britain and America, separated by common language.

And also I guess the personalities, the national personalities were a lot different. The Germans thought the Austrians

were lazy and shiftless. And the Austrians thought the Germans were rigid and authoritarian. So each had these stereotypes. Of course, in America, that all disappeared. I think Freud called it the narcissism of minor differences.

So the Jewish community is pretty much reflected, the differences, the non-Jewish Austrian and German perceptions of each other?

Yeah, we consider them German and I guess they consider us Austrians. So there was at least a surface friction. And the Austrian Jews thought it was so strange that the Germans didn't emigrate sooner. A lot of Germans got caught. I mean, they stayed too long. And then it was impossible to get out. Of course, the circumstances were very different. In Austria, it happened overnight and in Germany it happened gradually. And I think, as I mentioned before, a lot of people in Germany fooled themselves. They thought it was just another pogrom that would blow over, their life would go on. What else can I tell you?

Did the German Jews go to Austria after '33? Did you notice any change in Vienna?

No. They didn't. Those who were aware tried to get out, go to France, or Switzerland, or Spain, or Italy, to try to get away.

How far before the Germans came in did you have a sense in Austria that that would happen?

Well, there was a lot of turmoil, and a lot of worry about things happening, a lot of feeling of uncertainty. I think there were people, particularly were people saw it coming. So I don't know if my family did or not. But I know immediately afterwards they started writing letters. My mother was very levelheaded. I think she saw the world with few illusions.

So most the Viennese Jews try to get out very quickly. And some decided to go to America. Some ended up in Shanghai. That was a country where people could-- kind of a last resort country, where you could get a visa fairly easily. I think you could buy a visa. And some ended up in South America. So I have some distant relatives who went to Shanghai and then from Shanghai to San Francisco-- to New York. So a lot of different stories. So each family had its own story.

Some Jews survived the war in Italy. And they said the Italian people were very decent. So they were able to survive there. And some Jews went to France and they were then caught by the Nazis there, by the Vichy government. Lots of different stories.

So I'm trying to collect all the family stories from my family. They're getting very old, so I want to get that before they die. There are only two cousins left on my father's side, one in New York and one in Israel. Each time I visit the one in New York, I hear a few more stories about that side of the family, father's side of the family, and the extended family. But on my mother's side there's really nobody left that I can ask, just my generation and the next generation.

And in the whole family-- I was thinking about it-- I'm the only one who's consciously Jewish, the only one in the whole family. So I try to keep up the tradition. And Nancy really, my daughter, Nancy, does a lot too. She believes in the family holidays and in keeping the Passover. So I think-- I think she and I are the only ones.

So I don't know why that should be. I suppose everybody-- even people that have similar experience, they view the experience very differently. So I guess-- so in some ways, all the other ones kept the kind of Viennese pattern. They were Jewish, but they weren't practicing Jews. They were Americans more than they were Jewish. They wouldn't deny their Jewishness, but they wouldn't celebrate it either. So I think-- so perhaps they would carry on-- perhaps that Viennese pattern got built in somehow.

One example is Freud, who also was-- he would never deny that he was a Jew and he got into row-- I think the story I heard, in a railway compartment, when somebody made a remark, he was able to-- he was willing to take on the whole compartment. But he was not practicing. And he wouldn't allow his wife, who came from an Orthodox home, to practice. So he was very ambivalent about being Jewish. I think he wanted to be Viennese. It was a one-sided love affair. He wanted to be Viennese, but the Viennese thought of him as a Jew and they never accepted him. So I think

that's fairly typical. There was a strong, I think, drive towards assimilation, but it didn't work.

And actually, quite a few people converted too. And they meant well, but that didn't work either. And I think it probably caused a lot of internal conflict when that happened. So you hear about some more famous people doing that. Of course, a lot of ordinary people did it too. Like Heinrich Heine, the poet, converted. And afterwards, he was sorry he converted. It hadn't made any difference in his acceptance.

So I see that as a big difference between the Jewish community there and the Jewish community here. The Jewish community here is much more aware of being Jewish and look at Judaism as something positive, rather than something get away from. And they're much more active, having classes of various kinds. And I go to a class myself, a Torah study class at my synagogue. So I will, I guess, slowly become more Jewish. It's kind of a reverse trend. I think most people become less Jewish. I become more Jewish. And maybe more radical as I get older. Let's see, anything that we didn't cover? Anything else?

I think a few things.

OK.

Other than voting, do your parents-- you said your father was a socialist, did he do anything political other than that?

No, he didn't.

It was just their party affiliation.

His party affiliation, yes.

OK. A question, I was wondering, you mentioned-- were there any other relatives other than your grandfather and the grandmother who lived with you in Vienna?

Just a lot of uncles and aunts and their children.

Were you close to them?

Not too close. Some of them-- some cousins, went to England, and they went to Wales where they opened a small factory. And Wales is like Appalachia, a lot of unemployment. And so the British government tried to interest people to open up some industry there. So two cousins went over there and they opened this small factory. And I went and visited them twice. So I became very close to the cousins.

But in Britain, it seems different. It seems like the divisions are much sharper. Like, they only socialized with other Germans or Austrians. They didn't have any British friends. And they have two daughters. And the two daughters became completely British. So in one generation, they completely assimilated.

And both daughters married Christians. So they are, for all purposes, they are English and very proud of it. I was really struck by the contrast between a social life there and a social life in America.

And also struck-- I visited the factory and the first time all the factory, girls were singing a beautiful Welsh harmony, and the second time, they were all listening to transistor radios. I thought it was a big loss. Perhaps American influence. So, I'm trying to think if there are other cousins. And of course, my cousin in Israel, I visited him.

I took a trip around the world where I tried to see all the family. And he has three daughters. And he gave them the choice of a trip to Europe or big weddings. And they all wanted big weddings. So now they have children, and grandchildren-- I think great grandchildren. I can't keep track of them all. So he's a real-- became a real patriarch. I think he's trying to repopulate Israel all by himself.

He was originally--

From Czechoslovakia, he was from Czechoslovakia, yeah. He was the one who was a young Zionist and everybody thought he was crazy. So he got out. He was lucky, he got out. And then, let's see, in the '30s, he came back in late '30s, and he couldn't stand the climate over there. He came back.

But then when the Nazis came, the climate all of a sudden got much better. So he went back. And he-- I think he's very happy there. So it's interesting, he's not very Jewish either, even though he's in Israel. He thinks being in Israel is enough. You don't have to do anything else. You don't have to bother going to synagogue or anything else.

And the big Jewish holidays are just long weekends for him. He doesn't have any feeling for them. So in a way, I think that's too bad. So he's part of the secular Zionist movement. But if he's happy, I think that's the main thing.

I was wondering if you could describe your grandmother who lived with you.

Let's see, my grandmother was very-- kind of a-- I want to say stony faced. She was almost like a Buddha, just sitting there. She barely talked. She didn't talk. And when she did talk, she disapproved. She was hard to have around. And I think particularly she was a strain of my mother.

And then eventually, she went b to Czechoslovakia. So I don't know what happened, why she became like that. I'm sure she couldn't have been like that as a businesswoman, so I don't know what happened. And I was too young to think about those things. It's a pity now, a missed opportunity to find out.

So as I mentioned before, she was killed, and many of the others were also killed, almost that whole-- almost that whole side of the family was wiped out. Of course, in Czechoslovakia, it was almost impossible to get out. It happened there so quickly. And I think most of the Czech students perished. And I think it's ironic that the cousin who everybody thought was crazy was the one who survived.

So he went-- he did go back to Israel. And then he was in a moshav. And actually, the climate did get better in Israel. Because they planted all those trees, the climate became much more temperate. When he was there, it was pretty humid and there was a lot of malaria around still. And all that has changed.

I was wondering if you could describe a little bit more the relationship between yourself and the Jewish students and the Christian students, just as you were growing up. I know you had to leave for religion classes. Was there any other?

Just in playing, I mostly played with the Jewish kids, although I did have one or two Gentile friends. I think it just happened maybe through parents association. These were kids of parents-- of friends of my parents. So we kind of became part of that circle, essentially that circle.

Well, I should mention too, my cousin in Israel was very sociable. He said, once a week all the German Jews got together for a coffee. And then once a week, some other day, all the Czech Jews got together. And he said he went to both. He was very outgoing.

In religious school, when you said you were taken out, that Jewish kids were taken out, was that the first time that you noticed antisemitism?

No, no, I think I noticed before, but that was very striking. I think that was the first time-- it was obvious that I was different. And we were looked at as being different. The other times there were smaller things that you could overlook. But you couldn't overlook that.

I think in retrospect, that was a terrible thing to do, to mark people like that. You are one thing and you are somebody else. Particularly for kids who tend to be clannish anyhow and dislike anything that's different. But that was the law. And as far as I know, nobody tried to change it. So that was accepted. And I think in most European countries, it's like that, or it was like that.

I think the separation of church and state, that's really a great American invention, I think. And I think most people don't value it enough. I think you have to live in some other system to really appreciate that.

What were those small things?

Well, small things, like my mother hushing me on the streetcar. So that I think in a way, that kind of dampened my self-confidence. Realizing I couldn't act like other people could act and being marked as somebody potentially persecuted. They're worried that somebody would say something, you know. I think probably overreaction on the part of my mother.

Oh, the other thing I noticed the antisemitism, or really didn't understand it until much later, was that all the traits that the Gentiles said the Jews had, the Jews said these were Polish Jews. So I think they internalized antisemitism and then directed against these other Jews who were different from the good Viennese Jews. So I think I really couldn't understand it then, but it's a pretty common pattern. And I think it was really unfortunate, because in a way it created friction between these two communities. And they really had a lot more in common than they differed.

So they differed on superficial things, but not on essential things. Or language, they spoke Yiddish, and all my family looked down on Yiddish. They thought it was kind of a corrupt German. They didn't see it as a separate language at all. So I think that was really unfortunate. So I believe they should have had a united front.

What did your mother say to you about-- she said to be quiet, but what did she tell you about what would happen if you didn't?

She didn't say anything. But I did hear a lot of derogatory remarks about Polish Jews in the house. And I thought that was kind of strange. But I'd say I was too young to really understand the mechanism there. And I think some of that still goes on here. Like the two big congregations in San Francisco, Temple Emanu-El and Sherith Israel-- Temple Emanu-El was the German Jews and Sherith Israel were the more Eastern Jews. And for a long time they didn't get along at all. In fact, they wouldn't even agree to be buried in the same cemetery. They each had a separate cemetery.

And just a few years ago, we got together and asked the rabbi how this happened. He said, oh, we were always willing to do that, but they weren't. And when they got a new rabbi, then it happened. I'll have to ask Temple Emanu-El to get their version. So I think those differences are finally being overcome. And now they have often joint speakers and joint programs, often together with Sha'ar Zahav, the gay community-- the gay synagogue. They work together.

So I see that as a very positive sign. The unfortunate thing in America, you have this big split between reform, conservative, and Orthodox. I think reform and conservative are pretty close. Conservatives usually do the same things that the reform do a few years later, like women cantors and women rabbis. But I can't imagine an Orthodox shul having a woman rabbi, I think.

So as I mentioned before, in Vienna they avoided this terrible split. Now, once you've had that big split for 100 years, it's hard to undo that. I think it'd probably take a long time. Although, there's some efforts being made to do that.

Can you think of other instances that you witnessed as a kid about antisemitism? Other stories?

Let's see, nothing specific. A lot of it's in the air and you felt it. And then there were the few incidents. But before Hitler, you could pretty much ignore it. But after Hitler, of course, impossible.

What when you first aware of Hitler's name?

I heard him speak on the radio. In those days, everybody had a little radio, and I listened to all the news. And I remember listening to one of his speeches. And he was ranting and raving. And I couldn't understand why people liked him so much. It sounded incoherent to me and very bombastic too. So I think we were pretty aware of Hitler, and Mussolini too, and the Spanish Civil War. I think my family talked about the Spanish Civil War. Of course, they sided

with the loyalists.

And I think some people were aware already of this being kind of the beginning-- the beginning of fascism taking over. I don't know how much my parents were aware, because I didn't know enough about it. But I suspect they probably were. So people who were politically aware saw this cloud on the horizon, kind of saw this thing coming closer and closer. But they couldn't do much about it.

And emigration is such a big thing. Mother really worried about coming to America with two kids and not having any real skills. She realized it'd be a tough life. So there were some people who got out pretty early. I think Einstein got out at '33, got out very early. And there were a few others.

But most of the Germans waited. So I think all the signs were there. If you-- those people who read Mein Kampf certainly would be aware of what Hitler was up to. He spelled it out pretty well in there. But I think it was-- I think it was traumatic for many people emigrating. Like my mother, she lived in Vienna her whole life, and her parents had lived there, and her grandparents, and the great grandparents, and the great, great, great grandparents. So really giving up a lot in leaving.

She realized it, but she never hesitated. For her, it was an easy choice. But she was aware of what she was doing. And she was-- I think she was one of the few of my relatives on her side who was able to look at America in a balanced way, to think this was better in America and this thing is better here. So she was able to make fine judgments.

And most of my other ones were not. They either went-- as I mentioned, either went everything is better over there or everything's better over here. I think somehow the emigration has kind of unbalanced them. I think they-- I think they lost their equilibrium.

And even though I think they all managed pretty well over here, in terms of jobs and things, yet they really had a hard time coming to grips with America. So I think-- and as I mentioned before, I don't think I'll ever be completely American. Because some part of me is still European.

So I think emigration is a kind of melancholy thing in a way. It's really hard to be completely happy in a new country. Because part of you is still back there. I've met a lot of Russian immigrants, and some new immigrants coming over here. And we had-- usually have two of the families over at the Passover. And seemed to me I saw this film about one family, and it mentioned when things weren't going well, then they thought back on Russia. When things were going well, then they could forget about it. So it's in there, deeply in there.

And most of them, I think they're glad to be here, but they're not happy in America. It's too big a change, particularly for the older generation. Although, I must say, we're all learning English, unlike other immigrants. And even the grandparents can speak it fairly well now, can understand things.

And the granddaughter is being brought up bilingual, Russian and English. So they see the value of keeping the language, the literature. I think that generation has such wonderful linguists, they speak so many different languages. And so many speak different Russian languages, a number of them in Polish, and some German, and English. And I'm glad that the granddaughter is learning still to speak German-- speak Russian. I think when you give up your mother tongue, you really give up a lot. I think it really cuts you off on the culture. So part of me is still back there, but of course, I could never live back there. I'd be totally unhappy.

There's a kind of bilingual joke about that. So these two immigrants are talking. One of them says to the other, are you happy in America? And he says, yes, I'm happy, but not [NON-ENGLISH]. So he's happy, sort of superficial, but not really happy.

And then it's hard for the ones who go back. In addition to the memories, also they get used to American culture and European culture becomes strange to them. So they're half here and half there. It's not a good situation.

Let's take a pause and change tapes.

OK.

Maybe I'll stop in--