Interview with WALTER WOHLFEILER

Holocaust Oral History Project

Date: 12/12/90

Place: San Francisco, California

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MS. BACKOVER: Today's Wednesday, December 12, 1990. I'm Judith Backover of the Holocaust Oral History Project, interviewing Walter Wohlfeiler here at the Holocaust Center in San Francisco.

Also with me today are Peggy Coster and Fabian Cooperman.

Q: GOOD MORNING, WALTER.

A: Good Morning.

Q: WE ARE CONTINUING OUR INTERVIEW FROM ABOUT A MONTH AGO, AND I WAS GOING TO ASK YOU TO START WITH YOUR ARRIVAL IN THE UNITED STATES AND GOING TO SCHOOL IN SAN FRANCISCO.

A: We got here the middle of June of 1939. We docked at Pier 35, 37, thereabouts.

My American relatives were there to greet us. I had never met them. The last time they'd been to Europe was about the time I was born, so about 16 years earlier.

And my aunt, my father's oldest sister, who had the good sense to marry and emigrate to the States about 1908, and my uncle, were at the dock side to greet

us. They came aboard ship, and the first words I remember is, "Hi, darlings. We must only speak English." That caused a little bit of a chill because I didn't know any English or hardly any except what I'd learned in school and tried to forget.

We were driven to their very nice home up in St. Francis Woods, in San Francisco. And the drive up Market Street was a bit of a disappointment. I'd imagined somehow San Francisco to be a completely modern city, totally rebuilt after the quake, and I thought there'd be a lot of sunshine.

It was a typical June day. It was foggy. And having just come off the ship and having spent about six weeks in the sunny tropics, down to the Panama Canal and then up the Coast in small increments, it was a freighter that stopped at every little port, I thought, my God, this is where I'll be spending the rest of my life, in fog and amid terribly prosaic looking structures.

I remember they stopped on McAllister Street at one of the deli's, one of the Jewish deli's, which I think are gone now. And we went to their house, which was very, very nice, El Verano Way, and there we stayed for about six weeks. They treated us very nicely, but yet I felt a stranger.

My mother, my sister and I shared one room, which didn't bother me particularly. And we were taken to

movies. We were taken to meet some of their friends and local relatives. Some of them spoke Yiddish. Some of them spoke a little German. And gradually we got to meet more people, and none of them I found terribly appealing.

I think I formed my first impression of American Jews, well-to-do American Jews, and it was not a terribly favorable impression.

I might jump ahead little bit to the -- I don't know if I mentioned the -- our first visit to a Temple, Emmanuel, on our first Yom Kippur. If I did, you can delete it. But let me talk about it anyway.

We were invited, I forget through which organization, to attend Yom Kippur services and went to Temple Emmanuel and were ushered into the small chapel. It looked very, very nice. And Cynthia was married there about 19 years -- let's see -- about nine years later. And there we sat. And one of the U.C. chancellors, a professor by the name of Monroe Deutsch, delivered the sermon in fluent German. And all of us there, we were refugees.

And then came the noon break, and we walked into the courtyard, and there we saw the fur-bedecked and bejeweled Jewish San Francisco elite, gathered about and socialized, and it was a bit of a shocking experience, as a result of which I don't think I ever went to a Synagogue on a voluntary basis ever again, except on such occasions as friends or clients, sons or daughters being bar- or

bamitzvahed.

Now, coming back to staying with my relatives. I met my cousin, whom I'd never met before, and again they were nice to us. I was very sensitive toward what I sensed to be a barely perceptible degree of condensation. We were a couple of refugee kids, and even though they went out of their way to be nice, I somehow felt terribly sensitive.

My cousins were older than we were, several years older. I was almost 16. And my youngest cousin was 19 or 20. And they were the aristocrats and we were the peasantry.

At the end of the six-week period we found -- or I guess my relatives found us a flat on Fell Street, near Filmore, and we moved. My aunt and uncle came up with two gigantic shopping bags filled with groceries and got us started.

My mother went to work as a domestic. I think she was earning 40 or 50 cents an hour at that time. The rent, I remember, was $27.50 a month, and it was a two-bedroom flat.

The place was owned by an old Irish lady. I think her name was Whelan, W-h-e-l-a-n. We stayed there for about two or three months, and at one point I managed to break the living room window. I think I was horsing around on the furniture or something. And she threw a fit

and evicted us.

So we moved to our next stop, which was now three blocks down the street. It was 460 Fell, which was a miserable, small place, but it was livable.

We continually received letters from Europe, from other places where some of my friends had gone: South America, Palestine, England, New York. And I remember living for those letters. My first thought in the morning was going down to the mailbox and seeing if I had any mail. And I remember missing them terribly, feeling totally isolated. I don't think I made any friends for the first year or so.

That fall I started high school. My aunt took me to the high school of Commerce, which is now the Board of Education, at the corner of Van Ness and Hayes, and enrolled me. And my English really hadn't improved all that much after two or three months here, and somebody decided somehow for some reason to enroll me as a low ten. Well, that meant I would have gotten out of school at age 19, and that didn't appeal to me at all.

I never liked school in Vienna. I liked it even less here. And not being able to understand what was going on half of the time, it was, of course, a big part of the problem.

I remember one day in registry being told to bring a dollar the next day for a student body card, and I

was puzzled. I knew what a student was, I knew what a body was, but what is a student body. So somehow I managed to figure out or find out by asking somebody what that involved.

So I started my classes. And I had taken shorthand in Europe, so I figured it might be nice to take that as an elective here, too, and of course I bombed miserably. One day the teacher asked me to stay after school, and she was very kind. She said, "Do you speak English?"

I said, "Not really."

She said, "Well, I don't think this is a very good class for you," and of course I agreed. I forget what I took instead.

I do remember just for the fun of it taking a class in German, and I think I probably embarrassed the teacher a little bit because she was American born and her German was not terribly fluent. That was a fun class.

The other thing I took was typing, which was the most helpful thing to me in later years. What else?

Physical ed, baseball and football were big deals. I didn't understand either one and I don't to this day, and I think that's probably part of my rebellion at being involuntarily transplanted. I've gone to a couple of baseball games in my day at the urging of my former partners. They decided once I understood it, I would enjoy

it. Well, I never wanted to understand it, so I didn't enjoy it and I never went again.

My first job. When I was still living with my relatives up on the hill, my uncle found me a job for a dollar a day with a garment manufacturer, and I was delighted to get that job. A dollar a day was a lot of money. It was a place on lower Grant Avenue, right near Market, and I worked six days a week. It involved folding garments, packing them and taking them to the post office, and alternately, shlepping the cut materials up Stockton Street into Chinatown, through the tunnel, for sewing.

On the first -- let's see. After the first week, on a Saturday, my boss handed me out $5. So I said, "I thought the agreement was a dollar a day."

He said, "No, it was $5 a week," which was, of course, a lie. And I stood firm and I got my $6. I also got fired, and that was okay. It was just a part-time thing, anyway, before starting school.

After starting school, I became a carrier for the San Francisco News, up and down Fell Street and adjacent alleys from Van Ness up to Fillmore, and that netted me about $11 a month, which was not too bad, either. My mother was working and one could live -- a family of three could live for a dollar a day very easily. Milk was, I think, 7 or 8 cents a quart. A loaf of bread was about the same.

I remember walking six or seven long blocks a couple of times a week up to the Langdorf Bakery to get a loaf of day-old bread, which was a penny or two less. I probably used up more shoe leather than what we saved, but that's how we watched our pennies.

After my first -- let's see. This was in late 1939. Early 1940, I had gotten fed up with school. By the time I left school in Europe, we'd had a whole number of subjects. We were not given the luxury of electives, except as additional items, which we would attend in the afternoon. And by the time I'd had five years of Latin and three years of physics, a couple years of chemistry, et cetera, et cetera. What was being offered here was nothing, and I wanted to work and make money.

So I quit High School of Commerce and went to Continuation High two or three times a week, which was a very superficial kind of a thing -- I forget what I studied -- and got a job as a bicycle messenger for a messenger service. We needed a bicycle, so a bicycle cost $20, and someone told us about the Hebrew Free Loan Association, which was located up on Hayes Street, I believe, a few blocks from where we lived. So I went up there, borrowed $20, and every Sunday morning went back up and repaid a dollar. I think the last payment I consolidated into $3, so I was debt-free.

The job was miserable. It involved carrying

letters, packages, rain or shine. And it lasted about four or five months, and it came to an end when we weren't getting paid. The lady who owned it went broke. I think I ended up at the Labor Commissioner getting paid back at the rate of $3 a week. I think she owed me about $20 or $25 at that time, which was an enormous amount of money.

I found another job with another messenger service, and that was okay. We got paid, anyway, but the company was bad. A lot of very tough boys, which I didn't quite know how to cope with because of my inability to communicate and hit back verbally.

That was one of the most difficult points of adjustments, the inability to tell or understand jokes, to pun, all of which was a big part of my life in Europe and that was taken away, it was gone. And it really didn't come into its own in English until many years later. I shouldn't say many years later. Maybe three years later. But it seemed like an eternity.

Now, then after the second messenger job I decided I wanted something more solid, and I applied for a job with Western Union as, again, a bicycle messenger, but this time I wouldn't have to worry about packages, but only telegrams, which were much lighter in weight. I got that job. That paid also 30 cents an hour.

I got a uniform, and in the winter when it rained -- and it rained a lot in those days -- I remember

wearing a rubber cape, which I finally discarded, when I found it, I was getting as wet from perspiration as I would have from the rain.

But I remember going into offices where people were smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, and they were dry and they were warm, and I decided that some day I was going to work in an office. And I think that's how I drifted into my present occupation, via a bunch of detours. But to work in an office was a real challenge for me in those days, not being out in the streets and getting wet and battling automobiles and taxicabs, street cars. By and large, it was fun.

I made my first friend in high school when I was still at -- oh, I beg pardon. After, I guess, a year of that, I decided to go back -- either six months or a year later I decided to go back to High School of Commerce and finish my high school education, and somehow I was not penalized for having skipped out. And I think I was now in low 11 or high 11, but still I wouldn't have gotten out until I was 19.

So I went to the vice-principal, a very nice Jewish man, Henry Chaim, C-h-a-i-m, very loud-mouthed, very aggressive and very popular. And I told him that I could bring proof to bear that I had had many of the subjects that were not even offered at Commerce High, and that I thought I should be bumped into at least low 12 or high 12.

And he said, "Why don't you bring in your reports."

I said, "Well, they are in German."

He said, "Well, translate them." So I spent many, many evenings translating those documents word for word. I forget where I got a typewriter.

I went to Berlitz and had them certified. I guess I knew enough English by then to be able to do this. And I had them certified and went back to see Mr. Chaim. And he looked at them for about two seconds, tossed them back at me and said, "Listen, you should be glad to be in a good country instead of coming in here and making demands." And at that point I walked out of school, never to return until years later.

And I was almost 18. I didn't finish the school year. Nobody came out after me for truancy.

And about that time I had an accident. I rode my bike to visit friends in the Richmond district. I rode back at night. My light wasn't on, and at the corner of Post and Scott, in front of the old Mount Zion Hospital, a car came along and I managed to hit it, I hit the car. I was dreaming.

I had spent an evening with friends who had a piano. I hadn't had one at home for a couple of years now, and we did some four-handed work and I was whistling. I think we did the Mozart No. 40. And somehow I didn't see

the car and I hit him.

And I went off the bike. And I think my forearm hit the pavement, my head hit the forearm, and I was out like a light for about maybe a minute. And the car stopped. People came out of the hospital, and I was taken inside.

The doctor in the emergency squeezed my head. He said, "Does it hurt?"

I said, "No."

And he said, "Well, why don't you go home." So I went home. In fact, the driver of the car that I'd hit loaded what was left of my bike in his truck and drove me home.

And within a couple of hours I was in real trouble. I started to vomit and had a blinding headache. The next day I went back to Mount Zion and spent the next two weeks there with a juicy brain concussion, which was what kept me out of the Army a couple years later, or less than two years later.

When I came back from the hospital, I visited my favorite aunt in Los Angeles for a couple of weeks, had a ball. Came home, got my first full-time job at a wholesale grocery concern for $75 a month, a lot of money.

My mother continued to work. My sister was finishing high school. And that job ended when I was

called for the service and I had no idea I would be rejected. But after I was rejected, I did not go back to that job.

I found another job. This time it paid -- by that time I was making 175, I think, in 1943. That was a very unpleasant situation, which I left to work for Royal Typewriter Company as a payroll clerk. I think I even took a cut in salary, to 160.

And while there I decided to take a correspondence course in accounting. And I finished that. I finished a two-year course, I think, in less than a year. I worked every night on the assignments, and then decided to go for my CPA exam.

My uncle had raved to me about what a wonderful profession public accounting was, so I decided to try for that and enrolled at Golden Gate College, Graduate School of Accounting.

I faked my way in. I passed the entrance exam without too much trouble. My whole undergrad work was through correspondence. And then I found out I had to have a high school diploma to be able to sit for the exam, so I found myself going back to High School of Commerce, evening adult school, a couple evenings a week and two or three evenings at Golden Gate College. And I was busy for a couple of years.

I got my high school diploma at age 23, I

think, and took my exam in '48, the first time, and passed it finally in 1951.

I had several jobs in those days. I worked for about three public accounting firms. The first one was with a big agency, then two other jobs with smaller firms. Then I went to work for the State of California as a tax auditor. And in 1952 I started my own practice, and I'm still doing the same thing, only on a somewhat larger scale.

Now, in 1952 my mother died of cancer. In 19 -- I married in 1948. Minor detail. I almost skipped over it.

I met my wife aboard a train, Southern Pacific train. And she turned out to be a nice Jewish girl, very lovely. And it was love at first sight. We were engaged, I think, a month after our first date and then married three months after that. We were very, very happy.

And in 1953, five years later, my oldest son was born, 1953, and about seven months later she came down with polio. And after three months, I think almost three months in the hospital, she emerged with a paralyzed right leg, spent the rest of her days wearing a brace and walking on a crutch and became incredibly depressed.

We did have another child, Dan, in 1956. Things went pretty well. I was struggling financially,

tremendously, because our insurance was minimal, and I was not really much of a money earner in those days. I somehow enjoyed my work and I didn't really keep the financial aspect in focus for myself, as I would have for my clients.

But we managed, came out of debt. And in '66 Ruth OD'd and died a couple days later. And we managed somehow. My biggest problem at the time, I remember, was trying to find someone for the house who was morally suited.

I remember going down to the co-op, supermarket, and having arranged to meet young ladies there by putting an ad into the U.C. Berkeley appointment office, and I'd have them walk around with me with a shopping cart and I would pop the question, "Do you smoke marijuana?" and that was the big deal in those days. That was in '66. And if they said, yes, I said, "You'll hear from me," and that was the end of it.

I finally found somebody who lasted for a weekend, for a number of reasons. She was incredible. And finally we found somebody who was a very nice young person and who came to stay with the children every afternoon and cooked dinner and disappeared into the fog.

Then the following year I remarried a lovely young lady, a divorcee with three children who lived in Hillsborough. I sold my house in Berkeley. We moved into Hillsborough, built a pool, enjoyed several years, three

years, I guess, at which time she died of cancer.

After that, after -- let's see. About that time Peter went off to college. Sally's three children went back to their father, and Dan and I were left to roam around the big house. And when he went off to college in '74, it was just myself. And at that point I became a little stir crazy.

And the following year I married a lady who I thought was very, very nice. She had three children, was trying to reestablish a family. And that lasted for seven months, at which point I left, divorced her, and stayed unmarried for another -- let's see, in 1976 -- another 13 years.

I remarried Gloria, whom I'd known as a client since 1972, whom I had dated since 1979. And when I had my heart attack in 1988, I said to her, "Look, we are practically living together. If we get through this, why don't we tie the knot and make an honest man out of me." And she consented. This was from the gurney in the emergency. And we were married the next January and things seemed to be very stable.

That brings us up to date.

Q: I'D LIKE TO GO BACK A LITTLE WAY AND ASK YOU TO TALK ABOUT WHAT YOUR FAMILY LIFE WAS LIKE, WHAT THE RELATIONSHIPS WERE BETWEEN YOURSELF AND YOUR SISTER, GERTIE, AND YOUR MOTHER IN THIS SMALL APARTMENT AND WITH

THE FINANCIAL SITUATION BEING SOMEWHAT PRECARIOUS, AND HOW YOUR FAMILY RELATIONS WERE AFFECTED BY ANY KIND OF SENSE OF ISOLATION AND BY THE NEWS YOU HAD GOT FROM EUROPE.

A: Yeah. Are you speaking of the news of my father's death?

Q: WELL, THAT AND WHATEVER ELSE OCCURRED.

A: Because that didn't occur until 1945.

Q: RIGHT.

A: Those years are something of a blur. I can only remember really feelings. And I remember not being -- I remember feeling protective of my mother and my sister, but not terribly close with them.

Paradoxically, I mourned my father long before he died after having lost him, because he and I had a pretty rocky relationship as I grew into my teens. He was -- even though he was a gentle soul and he had a good heart and he was a giving person, he was also an authoritarian and he was terribly quick to anger and scream and to lay down what I thought were unreasonable rules and dictates. Especially toward the very end, in Vienna, we were at each other's throats almost daily.

He wasn't working. He was nervous. He was upset. He was frightened. And I wanted to be able to do what I wanted to do, which was to be with my friends and enjoy life or stir up trouble or whatever, and he didn't quite see it that way.

But after I left him, I began to miss him terribly. And I'm afraid that my missing him resulted in my distancing myself from my mother. And when she was here, I took her for granted. She worked hard. I don't think she had much of a sense for what I was going through, either as a result of the separation from my father and my friends, or as a result of just being a normal teenager, an abnormal teenager, whatever. And we were not particularly close.

My sister finished her high school studies and then went on to take a series of jobs.

And I think we had a group of youngsters about our age with whom we would go hiking on weekends or go rowing out on Lake Merced, which was really sort of a pathetic effort to recapture the kind of a life I'd lived in Vienna. And the relationships were not the same, not on the same level.

First of all, most of the young people here were from Germany. There were very few Austrians. And there was a wall between us. Somehow we would not -- I could not relate to them on the same level as I could to my old friends. Now, whether it was their fault or whether it was my having yearned for that which I could no longer have, I don't know. Probably a little of each.

As far as our home life was concerned, it was very humdrum, very pedestrian. I can't really think of

anything singularly remarkable to relate. The years just sort of went by.

We went to work in the morning. We came home at night. We did a few things together, visiting friends, going to the opera, going to concerts. That was it. I'd lived at home until I was married.

My sister married the year before I did and left, so then I was married. My mother was alone and she managed just fine. And I would talk to her probably almost daily. And she'd visit us where we lived, in Park Merced, I think at the time.

And then she became ill and she died within three months of the diagnosis. That was the end of the family life.

My sister and I maintained contact. There was a long period of about 15 years during which we did not speak. I think it lasted from 1971 to 1986, for a number of reasons that I thought were compelling. I was the one who made the break.

And in '86, my son, Dan, threw a birthday party, for his 30th birthday party, and he said he would like us to be there, but he had also invited Gertie and her husband, would I come. I said yeah. I figured it was time to make Shalom. And we did. And we see each other fairly frequently now, maybe once a month or so.

Q: YOU MENTIONED LIVING FOR THE LETTERS IN YOUR

MAILBOX FROM ABOUT THE END OF '39, CERTAINLY THROUGH THE REST OF YOUR ADOLESCENCE, I WOULD IMAGINE.

A: Uh-huh.

Q: TALK ABOUT THAT. TALK ABOUT WHO WROTE TO YOU, WHAT --

(Interruption in proceedings.)

A: You were asking about the days when I would run to the mailbox.

In terms of relating the things that I read to the things in the letters, to the things I read in the paper, about the only ones I recall are letters from my two friends in England, Peter and Robert, who, of course, went through the air raids, terrible air raids of 1940, and also from friends in Palestine who were caught up in the Arab uprisings that continued, I guess, through 1948.

Others who were in New York or South America didn't really have anything to report that in any way bore on the news of the day.

My remaining aunt -- my aunt who remained in Vienna, who lived with her father, my maternal grandfather, did write for a couple of years and, of course, she had to watch what she was saying because before -- I mean this only went until Pearl Harbor, because after that there was no more mail. But until then, everything that came out of Central Europe was being censored by the Nazis. So she had to really watch her P's and Q's. She ultimately -- she and

her father were deported in July of '42 to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, and died there, presumably. Never returned.

I was really more concerned about the terribly remote possibility of all of us seeing each other again, and in those days it seemed like an impossible dream, and it pretty much remained that way, at first through the war and later for economic reasons. I mean who had the money to travel to Europe or to travel from Europe over here. But somehow I managed to maintain multiple contacts, as a result of which some of my friends who lived in England were able to get together. And several of my friends in the United States who went into the service and went to Europe were able to get together, able to see each other. And I would get pictures of two or three people who were able to get together.

I don't know if I mentioned to you that one of my friends who died recently, his name was also Peter, he was one of my mentors, spent time in Paris right after liberation, and standing in front of the opera house saw one of our old friends walking toward him. It was a totally fortuitous encounter.

The other fellow, Curt, had survived the war in great style. He joined the Marquis and apparently made quite a name for himself in Southern France. His younger brother, who was my contemporary, my friend, was caught up in July of '42 in the German deportations of French and

foreign Jews in Paris and sent to Auschwitz and killed.

I did call Curt on my way to Tel Aviv back in '69, I think. I never got to see him again. I think he's gone now, because I asked Dan to look him up when he was in Paris and he was no longer there.

And over the years I managed to see quite a few of them again. Some of our nuclear unit and some of the satellite boys did come through; they knew where I was, they would call me. And it was always nice. Sometimes a disappointment, but also many times very gratifying.

And I maintain contact with several of my old friends to this day. Am I doing this with anyone I haven't seen again? No, I think only those that I have been able to meet again. And they're dying off, also. So so much for the correspondence part.

I've saved all their letters, by the way. When I went to Australia in 1982, to visit my old schoolmate, Robert, whom I met in September of 1929, our first day of grammar school, I was able to hand him every single letter and postcard he had written me after he left Vienna for Czechoslovakia, for occupied Czechoslovakia in late 1938. And at first he wrote to me in Vienna and then to the States. Then he went to England and wrote me from there, then to Australia. And we stayed in touch. And I saw him again in '82 and gave him all -- I said, "Look, look what idiots we were, the guff we used to write about."

And he enjoyed it. All the others I had saved.

And my wife will have quite a time deposing of some of that stuff when I take off, because I've got boxes and boxes. It would take quite some time to burn it up.

Q: MAYBE THERE'S A BETTER USE FOR IT.

A: I kind of doubt it. It was terribly important to me at the time, and every now and then if I have absolutely nothing else to do, which is a rare thing, I'll browse through them. In fact, last night when I was looking for archival items, such as the ones that you asked for. It's interesting. Some of the letters berate me for not writing more frequently or not writing or didn't get my letters. And I must have communicated some terribly hair-brained ideas and theories, judging by the responses. Of course, I don't know what they were. It can be a little embarrassing.

Q: DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOUR IMPRESSION WAS OF THE NEWS OF THE DAY AS THE WAR SORT OF TOOK OVER ALL OF EUROPE AND THEN THE UNITED STATES WAS DRAWN INTO IT? WERE YOU MUCH OF A NEWSPAPER READER?

A: Yes. Oh, yes. When the war started, I remember very well, we were in our first flat from where we were evicted, and I remember the invasion of Poland. I remember the next morning Chamberlain declaring war, or two mornings later, I guess. It was on a Sunday. And the

consensus was that, hey, this couldn't last. Hitler doesn't have anything. He's a paper tiger. They have no economic resources. The weaponry is a sham and they'll be killed.

And then we were sort of wondering about the phony war. Nothing happened for a long time after Poland. I mean this is quite aside from what we were concerned about regarding my family and the rest of our family.

And then when France was attacked and vanquished in no time at all, we were terribly concerned, terribly upset. And we couldn't understand how this could have happened, because we grew up with a concept that said France and England, who were our enemies, World War I, when we were in school, they were our enemies, were terribly powerful, and the Germans got whipped the first time. And even though it may not happen again, they're just big. And they were there forever. And all of a sudden they were gone, they were nothing. It was quite a comedown.

I remember listening to some short-wave broadcasts. Somehow I got ahold of a set. And I remember getting transmissions by Lord Hoho, the British traitor who broadcast for the Germans. I heard Esra Pound, who broadcast for the Italians. It was very interesting.

And then when Russia was attacked, we also thought that would be the end of Hitler, immediately, but it wasn't. It took them many years to beat them back and

get rid of them.

Yes, we followed the news, especially in the East. That was the only front, of course, at that time, and in Africa. And that was a see-saw, which somehow didn't mean too much to us, except that if the Germans had reached Suez, it would have been a disaster for Palestine, but that didn't quite happen.

And then after Pearl Harbor, for a while we were enemy aliens. We were under curfew. And that stopped pretty quick, as I recall. And I remember my fear was not just getting drafted. I thought I would love to get into the war and go to Europe. I was scared at the same time, but I remember my overriding fear was to be sent to Alaska or to the Aleutians, where it was cold and where the nights were forever during the winter, and, of course, neither happened.

My rejection from the service was something of an anti-climax. It was a mixture of grief and relief. I didn't have to leave my mother.

And then, of course, came VJ Day, and that day we got the definite news of my father's murder, so that spoiled a lot of the pleasure. I remember my mother saying one thing, saying, "This is our victory." So much for the war.

Q: YOU TALKED A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR EARLIER PERCEPTIONS OF WEALTHY AMERICAN JEWS. WHAT WAS IT LIKE,

FROM WHERE YOU WERE MOST OF THE TIME, TO BE A JEW IN THE UNITED STATES IN THOSE DAYS?

A: It didn't mean all that much to me. I think in Europe I wore my Judaism on my sleeve, especially toward the end, as a gesture of protest. There was no need for that here. I never hid it or denied it; never had any reason to.

I've had reasons to assert it, such as not too long ago one of my neighbors mentioned something about, "Oh, the fellow down the block is a Jew."

I said, "Well, so is the guy across the street, and there are quite a few of us here." And he understood and stopped right there.

But I really don't have anything profound to say on that subject at all. I've steered clear of the religious experience, except to the extent that -- let's see. My first, my second and my fourth marriages were performed by a Rabbi. The second one, the one that didn't take, by a Jewish judge, Joseph Karish, and at each of my two wive's funerals, a Rabbi delivered the eulogy. I guess it was the point that we returned to the fold in the extremity, or at least I do.

My sister, I believe, is quite -- not so much as her husband, but they are into the more formal aspects of Judaism. I think my brother-in-law loves the to-do at the synagogue that he goes to in San Francisco.

And he knows the liturgy.

To me, the Jewish chants are terribly unpleasant. They are unmusical, and I think they're ugly, musically speaking. Yet, I can get moved to tears if I hear a musical rendition of the Kolnidre, for example. But to sit in a Schul and listen to the sing-song is torture. And to listen to the Anglosized hymns is almost as bad.

So I guess you have gathered that religion is not my strong suit.

Q: IT MUST HAVE PLAYED SOME PART IN AT LEAST TWO OF YOUR MARRIAGES AND IN THE LIVES OF YOUR SONS.

A: I'm afraid it didn't. None of my wives were into religion. My sons were not bar-mitzvahed, about which they have expressed some mild regret. And I believe my grandsons will be bar-mitzvahed, even though they're only half Jewish. Their mother's gentile.

I think it's time for some new blood. I think they'll grow up as Jews, but somehow I get a little concerned about the inbreeding that goes on.

Q: WHAT DID YOU TELL YOUR CHILDREN AS THEY WERE GROWING UP ABOUT WHO YOU WERE?

A: I don't really remember anything specifically, but I believe they are pretty well informed about my background. I've kept nothing from them, and I think having had them visit Vienna with me two years ago probably reinforced whatever impressions they may have had.

It was a first-hand, hands-on experience for them.

I remember when I told my son, Dan -- I didn't even tell him. I think I told a friend of his in his presence when we went through the pictures we had taken in Vienna about the spot where I committed my misdeed, Dan got terribly upset.

Q: DID HE ASK YOU ANYTHING ABOUT IT?

A: No. I had the feeling he didn't want to know, and it was fine.

I might add that both of my sons obtained conscientious objector status, and they were very forthright in their written presentation to the board. I have saved both of their letters. They both disavowed any religious reasons right at the start, but they mentioned the futility of either taking a human life or being indirectly responsible, such as serving in some other capacity, in a non-armed capacity, because they would free somebody else to take human lives.

And they also mentioned that they had heard a number of stories from me about the things that went on in Europe, and they felt that violence and killing was not an answer, and they could not in good conscious serve. And both of them were accepted as C.O.'s. They are both pretty scrappy. They will argue very convincingly. Even Dan, who's not an attorney.

And Peter has been able -- I think Dan,

also, have both been able to never get into any fights, not even in their early years. I think that's very interesting, very commendable. They have never been in a fistfight, or in a shoving match, even. And neither one of them of could ever have been called a sissy. And that gives me some additional cause for pride.

Q: ON THAT TOPIC, HOW AND WHEN DID YOU STOP SETTLING SCORES WITH YOUR FISTS? DID YOU HAVE ANY FIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES?

A: No. Not that I remember. There was never any occasion. Not in school, not in my later teens or in my adult life. There were times when I felt like punching somebody in the nose, but I've never done it, not since age 15.

Q: BY MS. COSTER: WHEN YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT YOUR SON'S CHILDREN AND THE FACT THAT THEY MARRIED GENTILES, YOU SAID THAT --

A: No. My son, my older son, married a gentile girl.

Q: OH, OKAY. YOU SAID THAT YOU WERE CONCERNED ABOUT INBREEDING.

A: Yes.

Q: WHAT DO YOU MEAN? WHAT ARE YOU CONCERNED ABOUT? WHAT, EXACTLY?

A: Well, it's probably a layman's fear that if there's too much inbreeding within a relatively small

group, it doesn't help, and there is a need for an infusion of fresh blood, of outside blood.

Now, I know nothing about genetics, but that's a constant fad, I think, ever since I read a book when I was quite young, where somebody made that point and it stuck with me for one reason or another. Besides which I had a -- I guess I tried to live this by having a number of relationships with non-Jewish ladies over the years.

Q: SO DOES IT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH --

A: It felt right somehow.

Q: YEAH. DID IT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH, LIKE, THE IDEA THAT BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BREAKS BARRIERS DOWN, SOCIAL BARRIERS?

A: No. No. Nothing.

Q: OKAY.

A: I do have a problem with -- this is a terrible generalization -- with European Jewish women. I've dated some before I was married and after I was widowed, and for some reason, it's a turn-off. I have no problem with American Jewish women, but European Jewish women turn me off. No good reason. They bother me.

Q: WHEN DID YOU FIRST HEAR ABOUT THE CAMPS?

A: When I was a youngster.

Are you talking about the death camps or the concentration camps, or good old fashioned concentration camps like Dachau?

Q: BOTH.

A: Well, Dachau we knew as soon as it was erected. It would have been 1934. '33, '34. Buchenwald we knew about, I guess, '38. Aranyanberg we knew about before that. But those are the only ones we knew about in the early years. And then about the extermination camps, we didn't really know until the war was in progress.

Q: HOW DID YOU GET THE INFORMATION?

A: Possibly newspapers, especially the one German-Jewish newspaper we subscribed to that was published in New York, the Aufbau. They were quite up to date in developments. They got information through couriers and from sources that the regular media did not either have access to or didn't bother with.

Q: SO YOU NEVER SAW IT IN THE REGULAR MEDIA?

A: I cannot say that for sure. I don't know when I first saw it. All I can tell you is that I'd known about it, and we read, really, the Aufbau more than anything else. So it may have been in the other papers, as well, but probably not in a very prominent place until after the war, when the first pictures were published. That made great news. It was worthwhile news, okay?

Q: DID YOU BELIEVE IT WHEN YOU FIRST HEARD ABOUT IT?

A: Yes.

Q: DID YOU WORK TO GET THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

OR THE ALLIES TO BOMB, LIKE, THE RAILROAD TRAINS, OR DID YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THOSE EFFORTS?

A: Did I know anything about it?

Q: THE EFFORTS TO GET THE ALLIES TO BOMB THE TRACKS AND STUFF LIKE THAT.

A: I think we were wondering why they didn't. I wasn't thinking much about logistics in those days, in other words. Today I would probably think along those lines, that if they bombed strategic spots where the tracks meet or converge or diverge, hey, let's get rid of it and stop deportation.

But I don't think we knew about the Hungarian deportations until somewhat later, probably toward the very end. Yeah, that was Eichmann's last grand coupe. I was delighted when he was caught.

Q: WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF BEING CONSIDERED AN ENEMY ALIEN?

A: I think it was a slight feeling of discomfort and annoyance at being under curfew, but it wasn't a terrifying experience.

Q: DID THEY DO ANYTHING MORE THAN PUT YOU UNDER CURFEW?

A: No. I think we had to register, and that evoked some unpleasant memories. But I don't recall anything terribly distressing in a specific way.

Q: DID PEOPLE IN THE STREET EVER INSULT YOU

BECAUSE OF YOUR ACCENT AND THINKING THAT YOU WERE GERMAN?

A: No. I'm trying to think hard, but -- I was self-conscious about my accent, but I don't remember ever being ridiculed or insulted.

Q: DID YOU EVER MAIL PACKAGES TO YOUR RELATIVES IN VIENNA OR TO YOUR FRIENDS OVER IN EUROPE STILL?

A: Yes.

Q: DO YOU KNOW IF THEY GOT THEM?

A: I believe they did. But this was early. This was prior to Pearl Harbor. After that, you couldn't do anything.

We sent money to my father before the Germany invasion of Russia. We'd send one and five dollar bills in letters, and he could do quite a bit with that on the -- I guess, the black market. That's when he was in Russian-occupied territory, in Poland.

We sent -- I think we sent some clothes over, too, and I don't remember sending anything -- my mother sending anything to her sister in Vienna or to her father. She must have, but I don't remember.

Q: WHAT WAS SO SHOCKING ABOUT YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCE OF THE BEJEWELED AND BEDECKED JEWISH PEOPLE IN THE SYNAGOGUE?

A: The very sight and the loudness, the volume of their voices. It was so totally different from what I'd been used to in Europe, where people went to a Temple --

not that I went all that much, as you know, but people would conduct themselves in a dignified manner and not treat it as an occasion to show off their worldly belongings, such as furs and jewelry.

I remember the makeup. I remember the ugly punums and the loud and grating voices. The whole thing was a big, big social event. It bugged me. And I don't think it bugged me only because I was not a participant. It just bothered me. I wouldn't want to be part of this kind of a scene.

Q: DID YOUR PAST EXPERIENCES, THE MOST RECENT ONES ABOUT THE PERSECUTIONS IN VIENNA, DID THAT SIGNIFY A LACK OF AWARENESS OF WORLD EVENTS AND WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO YOU AND TO OTHER PEOPLE?

A: I'm not sure what you're referring to. My recent experiences?

Q: WELL, I'M SORRY. YOUR RECENT EXPERIENCES. BACK THEN THEY WERE RECENT. BUT, YOU KNOW, YOUR HAVING TO LEAVE VIENNA BECAUSE OF ALL THE THINGS THAT HAD HAPPENED TO YOU.

A: Okay.

Q: DID THAT CREATE PART OF THE BARRIER?

A: For the fact that there seemed to be very little awareness?

Q: UH-HUH.

A: Possibly. I never thought it through, but

now that you mention it, it's possible. Yeah.

Q: WHEN YOU DIDN'T SPEAK TO YOUR SISTER FOR 15 YEARS BECAUSE OF COMPELLING REASONS, DID ANY OF THOSE REASONS COME OUT OF, AGAIN, YOUR EXPERIENCES AS A FAMILY, IN GETTING OUT OF EUROPE?

A: No. No. No, nothing like that. I'm not saying they were compelling reasons. I said they were what I thought were compelling reasons.

Q: ARE YOU SORRY NOW THAT IT HAPPENED?

A: I don't think so. I thought it was appropriate. I still think it was.

Q: WHEN YOU BECAME FRIENDS AGAIN, DID YOU EVER TALK ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED?

A: No. No. Nothing has changed in terms of the reasons. They're still there. It was simply my own feeling that I was getting a little bit too old for this kind of nonsense and it's enough already. I don't think we'll ever be terribly close, but I think for the sake of my children and hers and our grandchildren, it's just better this way. We avoid controversial discussions.

Q: YOU KNOW, SOMETIMES WHEN YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES IN VIENNA, I GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT IT WASN'T ALL THAT BAD. DID YOU MEAN TO GIVE THAT IMPRESSION?

A: Well, it wasn't all that bad in comparison to what happened to those who remained behind, to what

happened to those who remained behind. Did I mean to convey -- yeah. It really wasn't all that bad. Not for me, not for us, when we were there.

I think we started on that premise. The fact that it was traumatic in many ways and discomforting and frightening, I mean, that's a fact. But if you compare it to later happenings, it was nothing.

Q: AT ONE POINT YOU TALKED ABOUT WHAT WAS APPROPRIATE TO TELL CHILDREN ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST, AND I WAS WONDERING, WHAT DO YOU THINK IT IS APPROPRIATE TO TELL CHILDREN?

A: Are you speaking of my sons or my grandchildren?

Q: OR SCHOOL CHILDREN.

A: Depending on their age and on their ability to understand, it took us a long time to understand what really happened and why. And at what age should you begin? I don't know. I'm leaving -- in the case of my grandchildren, I'm leaving this to my son. If they ever come to me directly, I'll talk to them. But, again, taking into account their age at the time, as my older grandson is now ten, there's no way I would begin to tell him a lot of the details. I'd keep it rather general. And if that happens to awaken his curiosity at a later point, then I'll address that.

Q: DO YOU THINK IT'S IMPORTANT TO EDUCATE

CHILDREN ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST?

A: Yes. Absolutely. And because of my limited experience, I don't think I'm a very good proponent of this. But I think they should know. Not just children, but adults who don't know anything.

I think it's the only tenuous protection we have against a repetition in too short a time. I mean, it's not really a protection. It's something. It's about all we can do. That's why I think your project is terribly important.

Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE REUNIFICATION OF GERMANY? DOES THAT BOTHER YOU?

A: Well, I can echo Kissinger's pronouncement. He said, "I'd hoped it wouldn't happen in my lifetime." Yes, it bothers me.

I think they have rushed to reassure the Poles they would not make any demands as to frontier adjustments. I think that's really a way of saying that, under current conditions, we're not going to do it. Give us time. Let us get strong enough, militarily speaking. We'll take it back and then some.

I don't trust them.

Q: I THINK THAT'S ALL.

A: That's it?

MS. BACKOVER: EXCEPT FOR YOUR NARRATIVE ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS AND THINGS.

MR. GRANT: Well, let's see. Fabian, do you have any questions?

MS. COOPERMAN: I have a question about your mother.

Q: WAS IT HER RELATIVES OR YOUR FATHER'S THAT SPONSORED YOU?

A: My father's.

Q: SO DID SHE HAVE A COMMUNITY SUPPORT? DID SHE LEARN THE LANGUAGE OR ASSIMILATE LATER ON?

A: Well, like most adults in their 40's, she had a much harder time than the youngsters did. And she never really spoke English with any degree of fluency. She could comprehend and she could make herself understood.

Q: DID SHE HAVE A COMMUNITY OF GERMAN-SPEAKING FRIENDS AT THE SYNAGOGUE?

A: Yes. Yes. Not at the Synagogue, no. No, she was no more Synagogue-minded than I was.

MR. GRANT: I guess I have one question.

Q: YOU TALKED ABOUT THIS FALLING OUT WITH YOUR SISTER. WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO TELL US WHAT THE SUBSTANCE OF THE FALLING OUT WAS?

A: No, because it really has no bearing on what we're talking about here.

Q: JUST SINCE WE'VE ALLUDED TO THAT --

A: Right. Yeah. Nothing to do with it whatsoever.

Q: SO WE CAN LOOK AT SOME OF THESE PHOTOS NOW?

A: Certainly.

Q: CAN YOU TELL US WHO THIS IS?

A: This is my parents' wedding picture, about 1921.

Q: BY MS. BACKOVER: CAN YOU GIVE US THEIR FULL NAMES?

A: Yes. My mother's name was Teresa. My father's name was Wilhelm.

Q: HOW OLD WERE THEY WHEN THEY WERE MARRIED?

A: In 1921 my father would have been 31 and my mother 27.

Q: BY MR. GRANT: TELL US ABOUT THIS, PLEASE.

A: This is myself on the left and my sister on the right. We must have been approximately four and two.

Q: BY MS. BACKOVER: ARE THOSE UNIFORMS YOU'RE WEARING?

A: No. Those are sort of quasi-sailor suits, I think.

Q: OH.

Q: BY MR. GRANT: WHAT'S THIS?

A: This is I in Vienna, in the Vienna Woods, in 1938, blowing somebody else's horn. At that time we were no longer able to wear our Boy Scout uniforms, so we did our thing in civies, and I must have been practicing and somebody snapped it.

Q: NO LONGER PERMITTED TO WEAR UNIFORMS?

A: The Boy Scouts uniforms under the German occupation.

Q: I SEE.

A: So we still went on hikes and did that in civies.

Q: TELL US ABOUT THIS, PLEASE.

A. This is my father in Austrian-Hungarian military uniform in 1915, just before taking off to the front.

Q: TELL US ABOUT THIS, PLEASE.

A: This is a picture of my mother holding my sister, who apparently was a newborn at the time, and I must have been almost two years old, taken in Vienna in one of the parks.

Q: AND TELL US ABOUT THIS.

A: This is myself in Vienna, probably about 1936 or '37, taken at our flat.

Q: THIS?

A: This is myself on the right, and on the left, my old friend Harry Schein, who in Vienna, 1938 or early '39, Harry emigrated to Sweden and became head of the Swedish Film Industry, married the Swedish actress Ingrid Tulin. I saw him again when he came here in 1946, and we've been out of touch ever since. However, my friend Peter did manage to see him on Stockholm about 12 or so

years ago. And my son, Dan, also visited him in Stockholm. And Harry took him to lunch.

Q: THIS?

A: This is a picture of my mother, my sister and myself taken aboard the ship that brought us to the United States in the spring of 1939.

Q: OKAY. TELL US ABOUT THAT, PLEASE.

A: This was taken in June of 1939, together with my relatives who sponsored us. My mother's oldest sister is on the left, her husband's face is partially obscured by my mother. This was taken right after we arrived in San Francisco.

Q: AND THIS?

A: This is a picture of myself with my two sons, taken about, I would guess, five or six years ago. My oldest son, Peter, on the left, my youngest son, Dan, on the right. They're both fortunate insofar as they resemble their mother.

Q: AND THIS?

A: These are my older grandchildren, Ari on the right and Ellie on the left. Ari must have been about eight and Ellie about six. They're Peter's children.

Q: AND THIS?

A: Here I'm holding my older grandson, Ari, when he was about two years old.

Q: BY MS. BACKOVER: DO YOU HAVE OTHER

GRANDCHILDREN BESIDES THESE TWO?

A: Yes, there's one more. They just had a little brother last June who was born on what would have been my father's one hundredth birthday, June 26th, and they named him after my father, Will, Wilhelm, as well as Jane's father, so it all fit.