United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Gerda Haas
September 25, 1998
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Gerda Haas, conducted by Katie Davis on September 25, 1998 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Saint Louis Park, Minnesota and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

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Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection. This is an interview with Gerda Haas, conducted by Katie Davis, on September 25th, 1998, in Saint Louis Park, Minnesota. This is a follow up interview to a USHMM videotaped interview, conducted with Gerda Haas on June 12th, 1995. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape number one, side A. Just -- if we could begin by just having you say your full name, including your maiden name.

Answer: My what?

Q: Your full name, including your maiden name.

A: Oh yes. Okay, I do -- I do begin. I'm Gerda Haas, born Gerda Schild, in Anspach, Germany and I'm now sitting in Minneapolis in my very comfortable home, with the sun coming in on all sides and you, Katie Davis are interviewing me on this September the 23rd, I believe, is it?

Q: 25th.

A: 25th?

Q: Yeah.

A: Right. And I understand that the purpose of the interview is to -- to talk mainly, but not exclusively about life after liberation and I really like to do that. When I first received

the letter from the United States Holocaust Museum about your visit to me, I -- I really, seriously began thinking about my life after liberation. And it seemed a good time, too. This is -- in the Jewish calendar, this is what we call the Assera siamata shuva, the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, where we are supposed to think about our lives and what we have done and have we done it correctly, have we any regrets? Would you like to do it any differently? And it seemed a very appropriate time to -- to -- to go through my 75 -- 75 and a half years on this earth and thank you for giving me that opportunity.

Q: [inaudible] One thing we wanted to ask you, was to have you state the full name of your parents and including the maiden name of your mother. Both your father and your mother.

A: Sure. I'll be happy to do that. My maiden name was Schild, that's spelled S-c-h-i-l-d. My father's name was Siegfried Schild, good German name and he came from a very small town on the Mian river, by the name of Hessdorf. And he was a butcher and in those days, families had to marry off their sons and daughters for a purpose, so since he was a butcher, a -- my grandparents looked for an opportunity for him to marry into a butcher shop. It was as simple as that. That's the way it was in the olden days. And there was this Paula Yoksburger in Anspach, who was one of five daughters and her parents, my grandparents, Sophie and Gabriel Yoksburger were very hard up to marry off their five daughters without money. You see, in those days you needed to have money to marry off a daughter. And finally, they knew of this young man in Hessdorf who was

looking for a -- what they called a shiduch, a -- a match between himself and someone who was somewheres in the butcher business. And it worked out fine, even though my mother was two years older and I'm sure there was no great love, but it was a marriage in those days that was called very appropriate and very good and it -- it was fine.

Q: What did your maternal grandparents do? Wa-Was the -- your maternal grandfather a butcher?

A: Yes.

Q: Oh.

A: Yes, he had a butcher shop in Anspach, no sons and he needed to have a son-in-law that would step into his butcher shop. And, as a matter of fact, he died very soon after his daughter's sa -- his -- his daughter Paula was married to this young butcher boy from Hessdorf and it -- it worked out just wonderfully. He died and the son-in-law stepped into the butcher shop in Anspach and there was my mother and father and soon after -- a year after the marriage there was one daughter, my sister Freidel and two and a half years after that, I arrived, Gerda. And the only regret my father had up to his dying day, that he didn't have a son. In Anspach, it would have been necessary to hand the butcher shop over to a son. But as it turned out, that reason fell completely away and I guess he got over not having a son. He -- he -- he was okay with his two daughters.

Q: Do you know anything more about your family in Anspach, how long they had been there and had been butchers?

A: Yes, I did a little research on my family at one time. The Schild family -- the ones that lived in Hessdorf, my father's side of the family, apparently came out of Spain in the 17th or 18th century with that wave of emigration that -- that -- that was triggered by the e-emancipation in Spain. And apparently that's where my family comes from, because my Jewish na -- my Hebrew name is Sprinza, which is Esperanza for -- for a young girl. And apparently I had a grandmother or a great-grandmother or some female ancestor -- ancestress I would say, a female ancestor, who -- who was a Spaniard. And apparently that's what happened on my father's side. On my mother's side, the story is that we came -- that they came from a very small town called Yoksburg and as you probably know, in -- in the 18th century, the -- the Jews finally got last names. Up to then it was Moshe the butcher or Jakob -- Yakob the shoemaker, they didn't have names. And apparently, when they -- when the time came, when the decree was passed down that the Jews had to have names, many of them took the name of their town -- of the town they lived in. So that's why you have so many Berlinner and Hamburger and -- and of small tow -- Frankfurter or Kissinger. These are all people that came from particular towns and that's how my grandparents were named Yoksburger, because they had lived in a small town called Yoksburg, which is very close to Anspach. You must understand that, in opposition to America, where the Jews are all clustered and -- and congregated in large cities, this was not the case in Europe. In Europe, Poland, Germany and all the many countries of Europe, the Jewish communities -- the strong Jewish communities were in the small towns, because there the people left them in peace. There was always anti-Semitism, but

in small towns, very frequently they were able to buy themselves the protection of the -- of the lord. They were called Markgraffen or whoever owned these little towns and by being servile to these feudal lords and being useful to them, they were able to get the protection and they settled in those small towns and they remained very Orthodox, many of them. There was nothing else, it was Orthodoxy or nothing.

Q: Would you describe the community in Anspach as -- as --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- a strong community by the time that you are aware of it as -- as [indecipherable]

A: Yes. Yes, I would. We had the -- we had a rabbi who was a -- a leader in -- in -- in the -- in the ge -- in the European German commu -- Jewish community. His name was Eli Munck. He wrote several seminal books on -- on the pr -- the prayers, the world of prayer for instance and the call of the Torah. He was just a very great light in -- in Jewish intelligencia. And I -- I'd like to say this, which many people forget. Th-Th-Th-The German rabbis were able to become so great and to devote themselves to writing because they were not hired by the community. Here, a rabbi is beholden to his board of directors and to his president and to the wives, in order to keep his job and he has very little time to -- to -- to be independent, to think stuff on his own. But in Europe -- in Germany particularly, religion was a state -- spa -- state sponsored affair. Each one of us had to pay a religion tax and the Jewish religion tax went to pay the rabbis and upkeep the synagogues and the other -- the Christian religion tax went their way. So the rabbis were very free and we were very fortunate to have just two fantastic rabbis in a row. When I

was very young, our rabbi was Pinhusk Horn, which was also a name that stands forever in -- in -- in Jewish history of Germany. And then we had this wonderful Eli Munck, who devoted himself to writing and to bringing up the youngsters, because he knew that the future of Judaism was in the youngsters. I -- I'd like to say one other thing that only occurred to me very recently. Th-The rabbis in Germany did not urge the Jews to leave and I remember my parents holding that somewhat against Rabbi Munck. Why didn't he say, "Go find yourself another place to go to." He never did. And it only occurred to me very recently that this was for the obvious reason that the rabbis were state employed, you see? Do you understand what I'm saying? They couldn't say that or they -- or Hitler would have knocked them off in a minute. The rabbis were completely dominated by the state. And -- and the outgrowth of that thought is thank God for the separation of state and church in this country. So you -- you live a long time before these things really dawn on you. You know, we adored this rabbi and we believed everything he said and we did everything he said. But he didn't tell us to leave, you see? Think about that. Is -- it's really -- it's a revelation when that thought came to me. He himself left with his family, after awhile and saved himself and his many children, but he didn't tell us to leave.

Q: How did that revelation change how you thought about him or -- or shift how you processed the whole experience? Because certainly --

A: That's --

Q: -- his story, Rabbi Munck's story is something that you mentioned several times in the previous interview --

A: I know.

Q: -- and there was something kind of nagging, I would say.

A: Yeah, first of all, I want to spell his name, so people know who I'm talking about. It was Eli Munck, M-u-n-c-k. Dr. Eli Munck and he is very famous rabbi. He left and went to Paris afterwards and founded a -- a fine, deeply religious Jewish community in Paris, Ru cardet. And I'm still very friendly with many of his children. Now, how did it affect me? I adored the man, you see? In -- in -- in Germany, the rabbi was somewhere between your father and God, equi-distance. And I particularly liked the Munck family. I was like a child in their house myself. And it didn't change my feelings toward him. Also, one of the reasons it didn't change my feelings toward him was when I was liberated -- and now I'm jumping ahead several years -- when I was liberated to Switzerland and ended up in Montrou -- Seulemontre at Laisavont, I found out very soon that Eli Munck and his whole family had fled from Paris and had established themselves in Geneva. And once I knew that, I got in touch with him and he with me. And he was the first person I saw again, of my for-former life. You can't argue with feelings, you see? I loved the man and here I saw him again, after all I had gone through and I credited him in a way with my res -- religiosity. He gave me that strong belief in God and he guided me through my younger years. My parents were busy and making a living and were very simple people, no education. And he -- he gave me a lot. I -- I didn't change my feelings toward him, I have to say. It should have, but i-it didn't.

Q: Can you describe that meeting?

A: Yes. I -- I -- I have several pictures of him. We were very friendly here, in this count -- after Switzerland, after I got to his -- this country, he went back -- he and his family went back to Paris and then he retired and I can't tell you now the year, but it must have been -- oh yes, I can tell you the year. In the 70's -- in the 19 six -- late 60's or early 70's, he and his wife retired and came over here for the same reason we came to Minneapolis. They had children in -- living in New York and they came over to retire in New York. We were still living in Maine at the time and my -- my great admiration and love for him and his wife, went so far as to make a new friendship between them and my husband and myself. And we visited them several times in New York and he came up to Maine and stayed with us for awhile. And I have several letters by him and pictures of him. He was a smallish man, very trim, very neat. Little beard and dark, alert eyes and he had a little French sing-song accent in his voice, because he was actually born in Paris, but I don't remember how come. And his wife was a jolly, roundish, lovely woman, always smiling, always happy a-and I -- I just like them both.

Q: Can you remember back to -- you said that he was the first person from your former life that you saw in Switzerland, but remember back to that meeting and what you talked about -- what you talked about at that meeting and whether or not perhaps you prayed together?

A: No -- well, he was -- I -- I have to tell you a very funny story. When we came to Switzerland -- and I like to talk about that at some more length later on, but just now, in connection with my great friendship with Eli Munck, when I was liberated to

Switzerland, we -- that whole transport, were again put into a lager -- into a concentration lager, it was nothing like what I just came out of, it was the grand hotel in mont -- in -- in Seulemontre, in Laisavont. I might have a picture of it, it was a gorgeous hotel that was emptied out for us, so that we -- these 12 hun -- it wasn't the whole group, it was maybe 300 people, could be put up in great comfort with this gorgeous view of Lake Geneva below us and Montplant on the other sides and -- and all the mountains around us, so don't think it was a -- a concentration camp, but it was a concentrating lager so that we could be controlled. We couldn't roam around. We had to check in and check out, we had guards on the doors. We had to always be in -- tell them where we went. And so, I wanted to visit my beloved Rabbi Munck in Geneva. And somehow -- I don't know how, I got myself a ticket to -- to go there on the -- on the train. It's -- it's very -- it's a very short distance, as you know. It's just a -- a little bit around on the lake of Geneva. And I asked for permission to -- to go and the permission was denied. And you know what I did? I left secretly, on my own, to see my beloved rabbi. And you know what happened? Two Swiss policemen caught me on the train station in Montrou as I was just about to step onto that train and took me back and put me into what was like a -- a little solitary confinement. Again, in great luxury, but it was a locked door and a locked window and I had my food passed in and out. This because I needed so badly to see the rabbi and his family. Can you believe it?

Q: You disobeyed?

A: I disobeyed. I thought -- I thought this was more important than -- I c -- I couldn't even understand why they didn't grant me the -- so then, to follow up on the story, I -- the rabbi heard about it, because I had told them to meet me at the train, so I had to somehow tell them that I was now imprisoned at the Grand Hotel in -- in Laisavont, so they came to see me. And I don't believe that they let me out. I think we talked through the window. I -- I don't have a recollection of actually seeing them, but we saw each other and -- and it was just wonderful. So then afterwards, when things loosened up a little -- this was very soon after I got there and in a way I really don't blame them. We weren't allowed to roam Switzerland at will, so here was my -- my petition was denied, but then after awhile -- this was in February, or say March, then in April, at Paisa -- Passover time, they allowed me to join the Munck family for Paisa. The things that I remember now, after all these years. And the funny thing is, tho-those Munck children, who were then -- well, the oldest daughter is six years younger than I am, so I was 20 -- I was 23 when I got out of -- was I? I think I was 20 f -- 23 or four when I got out of Theresienstadt. So she was six years younger and she remembers this very well. I'm still in great contact with them. She is now l-lady -- the Lady Acobowitz. She is now the -- the wife of the Chief Rabbi of -- the former Chief Rabbi of England -- of Great Britain. And we often exchange little remembrances like this.

Q: Since we're talking about this, I'll just continue on with a few more questions about this. Can you tell us about going for Passover? I'm assuming that would be the first time you really celebrated in your faith --

A: Yes.

Q: -- after the experience of the camp?

A: It was, yes.

Q: Tell us about that.

A: I remember that there was one little piece of chicken for the whole family and frau -- Dr. Munck cut it into very, very small pieces and everybody had just a little bit to eat, but it was the very first time that I ate chicken again. How strange that I should remember that instead of -- instead of some very spiritual emotions. I-It was just an emotional event. It was just a very emotional event. I was, of course, very friendly with the -- with the children that were born in Anspach, but since then they had had three more and so I was involved with those babies and -- and talking -- the one thing I remember, we didn't talk about the Holocaust at all. They didn't talk about their flight to Switzerland and I didn't talk about my time in Theresienstadt and I didn't talk about losing my mother and sister. Of course, at that point, I was still hoping to find them. So, it was just great to be able to travel and to -- to walk the streets and not be picked up by either Ger-Germans or Swiss, that was so funny. And it was great.

Q: Th-There is one question I have about war time, a-and it is -- it is related to this. And it's, when you were in Theresienstadt, if -- if you could talk a little bit about your relationship with God at that point.

A: With God?

Q: During the time that you were in the camp, were you praying, talking to God? What were your thoughts about your faith and your experience [indecipherable]

A: Good question, good question and it's a question that is to date unresolved, but I'll -- I'll try to go back. I ca -- I come from a very basic Orthodox family. No great learning, but just simple, basic belief that God wrote the Torah and whatever is in the Torah, because God wrote it, you obey it. You don't ask why, you don't argue, you don't go into discussions, you just do it. This actually helped me, because I so basically and -- and organically believed all this. You see, you say your night prayers every night, you get rid of all the bad things that happened during the day and you only focus on -- on -- on asking for the good things, for the health of your parents and your grandparents and your sister and your teachers and your rabbi. And this helped me a great deal because unquestioningly, I believed that right through the Holocaust. I remember having the first qualms about it, when I actually learned that my mother and sister had been killed so cruelly. My mother, this religious person who gave me all that wonderful belief, how could she have been killed? And my sister, who believed just as I did? And I -- I remember changing places, actually, with God. I -- my belief was always I had to account for the things I did wrong and all of a sudden it occurred to me, what about the things God did wrong? Doesn't He have a responsibility to me too, that He killed my mother and my sister and my aunts and uncles and cousins. All my friends, everybody I had with the all -- sole exception of my father. And you know, you are -- you were so ingrained with that fear of coming up to heaven when you die and you have to give an account of

yourself and it occurred to me very suddenly, God will have to give an account to me, too. And from then on, my faith reverted itself. I remember that very clearly, because it was a great struggle. My father remained completely religious. I asked him once what he thought of his wife and daughter being slaughtered like -- li -- like -- like the 6,000,000 were and everybody knows now -- we didn't know at the time and we didn't want to know. But once we knew how they died, I asked him once, "Doesn't that impair your faith a little bit?" He said, "That's the way God wanted it. God did it. God gave them life and God took it away." I guess it's one way of looking at it. We never ask why we are born, so we really have no reason to ask why he takes life away from us. But anyway, what was your question? How it impair -- so now my -- I'm still Orthodox. I still observe all the things that I learned in my youth. Number one, because I never wanted to disappoint my father. Number two, because I married a very religious man and number three, it -- it gives meaning to my life, you know? You observe the holidays, it's great, the family gathers around the Yuntive table and -- and you go to synagogue. But that basicness that I have mentioned before, that -- that organic feeling, that's gone. Now I observe the religion for -- for other reasons. Because I -- I have to do something. I have to believe in something. And also, one of the great reasons that I -- I still -- that I haven't changed my ways at all is that actually God was very good to me. Look at my life. I have a great husband, I have four very, very nice children. I have four very nice in-law children. I have 11 grandkids. Not one of them is retarded or has crooked teeth or -- or cross-eyed or club feet. They're all great people. So how can I not be grateful? How can I

-- how can I be so arrogant as to say, “No, I don’t believe any more.” I di -- I didn’t deserve it. I didn’t deserve this 50 years of sunshine in my life. So I live with the --

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Gerda Haas and this is tape number one, side B. Can you tell us about -- can you tell us about how you observed your faith when you were still in the camp?

A: Yes, I -- I’d like very much to talk about that. Let me just go back a little bit. After I left my parents home, at the age of just barely 18, just after my 18th birthday, in 1941 and -- in 1940 -- and went to Berlin to train as a nurse, I did -- I -- I joined the Jewish hospital in Berlin, asking immediately to be put onto the kosher side. At that point there was still a small table of kosher people and actually, I was able to eat kosher throughout those years that I was in -- in the Jewish hospital in Berlin. I don’t think I observed the Sabbath quite the way I -- I should have, but I surely didn’t go out and -- and gallivant around. I may have worked, but I didn’t do anything else. And then when I got to Theresienstadt -- and this is all still radiating from my childhood, you see, unquestioningly what ga -- God does, is the right thing. And then I got to Theresienstadt and then of course the food became a big problem. And I remember to this day, the struggle I had with myself when I finally decided that I’m going to eat that soup that had those little pieces of -- of sinister looking meat floating around in them. I -- I refused them for a long time, but finally I thought maybe I -- I should, in order to keep my strength up. And I remember quite well

what a struggle that was. And after I had decided to do that, I -- I continued to -- to eat that -- that horrible stuff. Whether it did me any good or not, I don't know. But when I got to Switzerland, I again asked to be put into the kosher contingency. I-I-It didn't work out quite that va - mu -- that way, but I'll tell you about that later. And in Theresienstadt, I did continue my -- my nightly prayers. That became a habit, it made me feel good. I could fall asleep easily and I felt it was just very necessary to pray for my people. I knew they weren't sitting on beds of roses. And I didn't know where my father was and how he was faring and of course I always prayed that I would see everybody again. And I -- I think that answers your question.

Q: And you talked about a period when you began to shift and you -- as you said, traded thr -- places with God and -- and thought about how God needed to be accountable. When -- about when was that? You said it was when you realized your mother really had been killed very cruelly. Just approximately the time?

A: Well, I would say -- I would say that was in the 1950's, when I definitely became aware that they were not coming back. Up to then, you know how it is, if you don't see them die, they are not dead. Oh yes, 6,000,000 were killed, but not my mother and not my sister. And that feeling that the next telephone call is theirs. Or the next person you meet in a party is my sister and she had amnesia and she doesn't know who she is and I recognize her and I bring back all the memories. These are the dreams and the hopes and the prayers that you have for a long time, until it finally sinks in that they really are dead. And I -- I kind of remember too, when -- when that finally happened. When it finally

sank in. I guess it was when my father remarried. I guess then I finally gave up. But for a -- for a long time you -- you just -- you just don't want to believe that. I -- I'd like to say something about death as such. Th-The -- my mother, of course, as I have said in my previous interview, was killed in Riga and most probably in -- in the woods in front of the firing squads. And it was a long, long, long, many years before I could say that without breaking down. And I'm not even sure I can do it now. And my sister -- it's not very clear to me whether she was killed in -- in Auschwitz or also in front of a firing squad, but again, after I knew all that, I was still hoping maybe they died already in the -- in the trains, so that they wouldn't have to -- to do that horrible end. But I wanted to say something about my father's death. My father died in 1986, only 12 years ago, at the age of 92. And I, at that time was about 65 years old, is that correct? Or 63? Anyway, I was a -- certainly a very middle aged woman. And until then, I had not seen a relative of mine die of a natural death. And you know, it was almost a jubilation that I was able to see someone die naturally. That I -- I -- that I could sit Shiva, that I could all the things that one does for the dead. And I -- I -- I remember almost a feeling of joy. Of -- of -- of -- of fulfillment. It was very strange.

Q: Were you and your father ever able to formally mark your mother's death in any way?

A: Well, we needed to keep a day for -- for Yahrtzeit, for the observation of the dead and at the time, the rabbis said that we could pick any day we wanted to. There was a choice of picking their birthdays or the day they were evacuated, or -- or Yom Kippur, which is coming up next week. A lot of people simply keep Yom Kippur. I decided, since my

husband's mother died and we kne -- she died a natural death in Frankfurt and we of course knew the death date, I decided to s -- to pick that very day and I observe my mother's and my sister's Yahrtzeit at that particular date and my husband observes not only his mother's death, who-who he knows and who is buried in Frankfurt, but also his two sisters, with their five children -- six chil -- six children -- that were killed an unknown date. And so, at that particular day at my mother-in-law's day of Yahrtzeit, we light one, two, three, four, five -- we light ten Yahrtzeit lits for the people that we -- for the immediate people that we lost. And that's how we resolved that particular problem. But did you ask me whether my father and I ever talked about my mother and my sister? You didn't ask me that, but I --

Q: But I'd like to.

A: Please do. No. And that is a great source of anguish to me. For a long time, I -- I felt resentment that my father had left us, actually. I remember the day in August, the first of Augu -- no, the last days of -- the first of July in 1939, when he left on a transport to -- to Engla-England. And of course we hoped to follow very soon, but then the war came and we were separated, permanently, in my mother's and sister's case, not in mine. And I -- I remember feeling great resentment against that, which was illogical and uncalled for. But again, feelings are feelings and you ha -- you have to deal with them. And I particularly felt very guilty -- or -- about my mother's and sister's death. For some strange reason, I thought that I could have saved them, or I could have done -- done something for them, or I should have gone with them and be there, too. And my father, apparently never had

these feelings. At least, he never voiced them in his long, long life. And to the very end -- I stayed with him a month before he died, knowing that he would be dying and I hung on every word of his that he still said and I was so hoping that he would say a word of -- of -- of explanation or resent -- or regret or sorrow or apology or something. But he didn't and I live with that.

Q: Did you ask about it?

A: No, we didn't have that kind of a relationship. We weren't brought up to question our parents. But I had such a guilt feeling that I actually had to go to a psychiatrist to get rid of it. But he apparently had not. And I also resented a little bit -- again, for totally illogical, because the man was 45 years old when he was alone, I resented a little bit ha -- that he married again. But that was, of course, stupid. But there is it.

Q: Di-Did you ever become close with his second wife?

A: No, unfortunately, I didn't and I'm -- I'm very sorry about that now. Because she too lost a husband and two sons in Theresienstadt. And she looked to me for a replacement and I just seem -- didn't seem to understand that. And just the last few years, I -- I really feel that -- that I missed the boat there. That I really could have done a lot better. But, you know, there is a [indecipherable] we had a -- a friend who was from Vienna and he -- he didn't distinguish himself in any way, he was just a simple fellow, but he will be remembered in my family for something he said. And he always said to us, in his heavy Viennese accent, "You get too old too soon and too smart, too late." And how true that is. I -- I got too smart much too late after my stepmother was long dead, I realized that I -- I

really could have done a lot better. Well, that's one of the things God can call me to task for. And He probably will and He should.

Q: I want to have you think back to right in th-the week or two before you leave Theresienstadt and what is your physical state at that point? How are you doing physically and mentally?

A: Well, I was in very good shape. Number one, I was young. And number two, I had worked myself up into a nurse's position in -- into a supervisory nurse's position in the children home. And that meant I got S ration -- r-ration -- special ration. I had no longer to go with my little food pot to -- to the window where they dished out a little ladle of soup and the next one pushed right after me and I had to leave. The soup was now brought to the children's home and we had enough of that. Also, at that point -- I'm sure I spoke of that in my earlier recollections, I -- I had a young man who -- who liked me very much. It didn't amount to anything because you know, we had curfew, we couldn't get together, but he -- he just adored me. He was the brother of one of the women whose baby was in the nursing home. So he came and he -- he worked in the co -- into -- in the concentration camp's bakery. And he, from time to time, brought me and my f -- and the woman I lived with, Eva, my girlfriend Eva, bread. And of course that was a lifesaver. It really, really was. And also -- you see, the Swiss people -- the -- I'm sorry, the Czech people that were in Theresienstadt were allowed to get packages and from time to time, the Czech women that we -- we lived with in that basement of ours, below the children's home, would grudgingly share their apples or their little bits of f-food that they had, with

us. There was a great divide between the Czech prisoners and us, but once in awhile they s -- they had pity on us. So I was in pretty good condition and I was picked because I was in good condition. We all -- y-you know the story how I was saved. It was 1200 Jews, each one of them had to appear before the Commandant Ram and we were picked for our looks, you see. If we were dehydrated and emaciated, out. So I was number seven -- s -- I was number 1174 and Eva was 1173 and we looked good, so we left. And on the train to Theresienstadt, we got all those delicacies that we didn't even know what they were. Who had [indecipherable] -- who had ever seen a banana before? Who knew what a sardine looked like? So we gorged ourselves before we even got to Switzerland and in Switzerland -- I do need to say something about the feeling that is still so vivid with me, of freedom. Wh-What actually is freedom? Freedom at that point was air that smelled good. Air that you could take in and breathe. And people who were smiling. People on the -- on the station that looked up and smiled at you. People who didn't wear stars and had nice clothes and stockings on. And mainly, freedom was people in uniform that didn't hit you. People in uniform that spoke courteously to you. And freedom was beautiful landscape and -- and -- and -- and looking out the window and not being shouted at or shot at. And -- and freedom was just a -- a great relief. And also freedom was not to have -- I'll say it in -- not in the negative, but in the positive, freedom was to have lights at night, to have a ci -- a -- a city lit up, you see? I had lived 12 years and six of tho -- 12 years in Nazi regime and six of those in war and every night you were taken to prison if you had a little light shining through. And here was this Switzerland with all

the lights blazing. I couldn't get over it the first night. Why aren't they tel -- why aren't they blacking out their -- it was -- don't you forget, it was still war. I got to Switzerland in February -- 12th, I believe. And the war didn't end and they had all their lights on. That's freedom.

Q: At what point did you realize you were free or truly feel free? Was there one moment?

A: That's a good question. That's a good question. I think perhaps it was when they told us to rip off the star and put lipstick on. I don't recall that particular -- I think it was when I looked out the window and saw the people smiling and that was all -- what I have said there in such verbiosity was all just one little moment in my life. We got into Switzerland, th-the SS came thr -- it wasn't the SS any more, it was the -- the Red Cross people came through, told us to rip off the star and put up -- put on lipstick and we opened up the windows. And then the Swiss p -- the Swiss gendarmes in their uniforms came through. I think that was the moment. And they called us nice, with names and smiled and -- and asked what we wanted and we looked -- I remember that, looking out the window, so we would le -- Eva and I -- Eva and I were inseparable at that point and I'll have something to say about that in a moment. But I remember we let down the window and looked out and we smelled that air and -- of course, I'm repeating myself, but that was -- I think that was the moment. I -- I wanted to just say something about Eva and I being so inseparable and it ties in with the questions about religion that you asked before. Eva was not religious and she opted -- wh-when we got to Sengale and we had a list of -- of so -- so-called concentration hotels that we could request and she wanted to

go to Les Auvants, there were others who off -- other ki -- hotels or places that offered kosher food, which I would have chosen. But she wanted so much to go to Les Auvants and I did not want to lose her, that I went to Les Auvants with her. And I remember that I -- that I didn't eat the meat then any more, because I was so close to my old rabbi again. But anyway, I didn't stay in Les Auvants very long and -- and then I went to an old friend of mine from -- from the city of Kissingin, that I found in Lucerne. And there again, you see, Kissinger is named because he came from that city of Kissingin, where I had a close friend. And when this friend of mine from -- formerly from Kissingin whose name was -- was Truda Lustig at the time, but who had married a Swiss guy by the name of Erelinger. When she heard that I was in that Les Auvants transport, she immediately requested that I come to her home and there I was completely rehabilitated to Kashrut and Shomair Shabbat and the whole bit. Oh, what a story.

Q: I -- I want to go back, actually, to the train. And I believe in your -- in your previous interview, you mentioned that an SS officer walked through and he said something --

A: Yes.

Q: -- behave and say nice things --

A: And think -- think of us with nice thoughts. Think of us kindly. What a farce. Oh, you remembered that from my interview? I remember it, too. Remember that we treated you nicely. What a farce. But we were so taken up with our own emotions, oh, the heck with him.

Q: Were you frightened at all when he said something like that? Did you feel that perhaps the arm of the SS, if you didn't say the right thing, could follow you?

A: You know, you -- you know, you are asking a very good question and I need to come back to that later. Because we were frightened, we thought the SS were reaching -- we -- we had been living in fear for 12 years. In fear for our possessions and our lives and our people. Fear doesn't go away the minute you open a window and smell freedom. So, yes, I would say we did. But I -- I -- let's be sure that I say something about that fear that had repercussions to this very day. I'll -- I'll -- I'll say it later, you had some other questions, didn't you? Perhaps I'd better say it now, because i-it does fit into the fear business. When we got to Les Auvants, after he had told us to remember him kindly, I forgot that. Consciously I forgot it, but very obviously, sub-consciously I didn't, because when we got to Les Auvants, one of the first things I needed to do, was to write down things from the past 12 years. I don't know what the other people did, but I si-simply had this -- this -- this need to get rid of all this. You see, here -- here I came out of Theresienstadt into this luxury hotel with all the food I wanted, with that view in front of me and I needed a transition. And so I asked for a typewriter and -- and some paper, which I got and I stayed in my room for several days and just catharsis. And -- and then I met -- how I met Dr. Clay, I do not remember. I think I met him through Eli Munck. I met -- I met a man by the name of Dr. Clay, who was an official with the Swedish embassy -- embassy, I believe. He -- he was high up. And when he heard that I had written things down, he wanted it. And I let him have a copy of everything I wrote, with the condition that he not

use my name. I still have his letter -- I can show it to you, where he answers me that he will of course honor my request. He would like to publish what I wrote, but he will not name me, Gerda Schild, by name. Now, in the 19 -- late 1980's or even 90's, I read a book -- I forgot the name of the author, we can look it up, by the title "Stella", a famous book where a -- a Berlin -- a survivor of the Holocaust who stayed in Berlin, one of the hidden Jews, writes about Berlin. And I read this book with such intensity, because I was there. He talks about street corners where I lived and places where I was. And I come across a section in the book that was my voice. I -- I could -- I could tell, it was -- I said that. It was the story of when the nurses came to -- were taken to the Kasalen to help these people a-at the Fabric transport. And here I am reading, and I said to my husband, "This is my story." And I go quick and I see -- I see where he got this from, he -- it's a very well documented book. I forgot his name, I can look it up. And he -- he documents my story, anonymous nurse from Berlin and I -- I look and see where he got it from and by God, he got it out of the publication of Dr. Clay from Geneva. I wrote to him and I documented -- I wrote him a copy of that letter where Dr. Clay said he will publish it, but without a name and I was really hoping to hear from, but he never answered. He never answered and that was, of course, at least six or seven years ago. But, you see, that's how the ripple of fear goes to -- to 1990. Here I realized -- and this document of Dr. Clay, I see by his notes -- by his footnotes, is in the librar -- in th -- in the library -- in the national library of Paris, the French National Library of Paris. Isn't that some story? I had

goosebumps when I read that. But the interesting thing is that I kept the Clay letter, that I know that is my story without my name.

Q: Other experiences of fear, for instance, when you were stopped at the train station from visiting Rabbi Munck --

A: Oh, yes.

Q: What was your reaction to the people in uniform stopping you and they took you?

A: I know it. I don’t know -- I don't remember. I think it was mostly -- well, I -- I don’t recall that, actually. I -- I do not recall. Some feelings have fallen through the cracks, because there were other things that were important. The important thing was to see Munck. How I felt, I don’t recall. I must have felt embarrassment. I -- I -- I’m sorry, I just don’t recall it. I only remember being taken back by two -- between two Swiss uniformed policemen. It was terrible. And being put into that cell -- that Grand Hotel prison. It was terrible. I don’t remember what I felt.

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Gerda Haas. This is tape number two, side A. Okay. Did anyone ever debrief you about your experience?

A: What do you mean?

Q: You ce -- well, you certainly wrote down things that had happened, but when you got to Switzerland, did the Red Cross people interview you or ask you what had happened to you?

A: No, never. I don't think we would have told them much, either. We didn't feel -- w-we were very afraid. We were -- freedom had to grow on us very slowly. And that's why I -- that's what I like so much on this country. Freedom is their birthright. They don't even question it. I like that and that's why things lik -- like that can't happen here. And I -- I -- I always could see it when I was speaking to classes. They ask such -- such unbelievable questions like after I told them my whole story, how we're driven out of our home and everything, "Why did you have to leave? It was your house." God bless them, they have freedom written all over them. You see? But we had to grow into that feeling of that very slowly.

Q: Do you remember any other occurrences during those first weeks and months where you censored yourself? Where you found that you didn't talk about what had happened? Or that you felt afraid, I guess is what I'm asking.

A: I think so. I think we were afraid. D-During the first few months, I think my thoughts ta -- all clustered around the people that were still missing. I s -- checked every list I could get ahold of to see if my mother and sister would -- would be there. And I needed to find my father, I had no address for him. He had left for England, but then he was further evacuated to the United States. And we had written to each other while I was still in Munich and Berlin, but not any more in Theresienstadt. And so I -- I wrote to the Red Cross to s -- to see where -- what his address was, but before the Red Cross answered, he already had found my name on the list of those 1200 that had gone to Switzerland. And again, through the Red Cross, he sent me a telegram with his address and then he sent money and food and it was just wonderful. But to you quest -- specifically to your question, I think -- I -- I would say with certainty now, that our thoughts were forward and not backward. I'd gotten rid of it all, I'd written it down. D-Don't forget, I was like 22 or 23 or 24 years old. I -- I wanted to live. I wanted to have nice clothes and I wanted to have a boyfriend and I wanted to go out and -- and I -- I was looking forward. I guess it's human nature. I wanted to know where my people were and then I wanted to go on living. And I did. I did.

Q: How soon -- how soon after your liberation did you hear from your father?

A: Oh, I would say within -- within a month, I would say. Because those lists were immediately publicized. Don't you know it was one of the conditions that Himmler set? He said h-he wanted money and he wanted good publicity in American papers and by gosh, he got it. I don't know if it was good publicity, but he got publicity. The list was

published and my father told me later -- he'd by then had a little butcher shop again in -- in New York, that's all he knew. He -- all he knew was -- he had no education, so again he opened a little butcher shop and he said one of his customers came in with the New York Times list and he said, "Siegfried, ist dusnich stanna tauter? Gerda Schild?" And he looked at it and said, "Yes, that's my daughter." And then he immediately -- somebody helped him to ask the Red Cross where to send the letter to and I heard from him immediately then.

Q: What did that first telegraph say?

A: Ah, it was great. And I remember it. I still have it. It said, "Where -- where is mother and -- and sister? Where -- how come you are alive?" You know, "Where are the others?" He gave me quite a gui -- a guilt feeling then, too. I -- I never was on really intimate terms with him because I -- it was like a monolith sitting between us, unspoken. But it was always there. And, in addition to it, I always labored throughout my childhood, under the impression or certainty, I don't know, that he liked my sister more than me. So, you know -- but that's why I spent the months with him before his death, to see if he couldn't say a word of love to me, but he never did. He never did, it was not in him. He never, never did. It was too bad, but I'm over it. So, what was your question?

Q: What did you write back?

A: Oh, I cabled him, but it was a prepaid cable, you see, one of those things. At that point, incidentally, I was as good as engaged to an old boyfriend from home, you see, that again was one of those like arranged marriages and he was here, also, so in the first --

in the first cable that he sent me and he said that he was okay and that this boyfriend of mine, whose name was Lothar, good German name again -- it shows you how integrated we were in Germany, we all had German names. Nobody was called a Hebrew or an Israeli name, this was unheard of. So anyway, this Lothar also wanted to know that I was safe and I was ha -- very happy and so I cabled back, with love to both these men, my father and -- and this young man, Lothar. And I cabled back that I didn't know where my mother and sister was. And I have that telegram too, because my father saved everything and gave it to me afterwards.

Q: Now, when had this match been made? At what point?

A: Oh, it was -- it was really not such a terrible match. It was, you know -- you know, the young ladies -- young girls in -- in Germany weren't allowed to -- to have boyfriends or anything. But this boy, he liked me very much. He lived in Nuremberg and he came to Anspach all the time to -- to -- so to say, visit his relatives, but he really came to visit me. And we had, you know, one of those very innocent, very naive romances. Even so -- oh, I was very young then, I was maybe 15 or 16 and he wasn't much older. And the only way that I was allowed to at all go out with him was that my parents said to themselves, "Well, he'll marry her eventually." Oh, that was the whole shooting match. He liked me enough to really wanted to marry me and he came -- must I tell you all this? On the day of my engagement to my husband, he came to the door with roses and a little package. Very obviously he was going to ask me that day to marry him. So he was more serious than I. But at that point I had already given my hand and heart to Rudy Haas.

Q: Was he somebody you thought about then, when you were in Theresienstadt?

A: Yes, I did -- I did.

Q: Lothar.

A: Lothar, yes, I thought of him a great deal. Why? It gave me like a -- like a -- a little string to hang on to. It wasn't like a lifeline or anything like that, but you know, you couldn't think about the camp all the time and death and dying and Auschwitz and the gas chambers. So you thought of other things. You thought of pleasant things in your former life. You see, in Theresienstadt, everything was the former life, but in Switzerland, zoom to outer space, to future.

Q: So you had found your father and tell us again what you had -- or h-how you had looked for your mother. What were the opportunities available for how you could look for your mother and your sister?

A: Well, in Theresienstadt, I looked for them at all the incoming transports, because at that point, I -- I really hoped that somehow they would show up, too, as I had. I -- I had no reason to be in Theresienstadt, it was God's gift to me that I was there. As you know, it was only for old people and war veterans and very distinguished, prominent Jews and Mishlinger. So wa -- was -- how did I get there? So, I thought, as long as I got there, maybe my sister and my mother would get there, too. So I screened -- I was living in the bar -- in the barracks that overlooked the -- the railroad -- the mouth of the railroad and I was always looking for them. And then when I got to Switzerland, the only way was to call the Red Cross and ask for them, yeah.

Q: Did you find yourself, if you met someone who'd been to Riga, let's say, asking them, or were there other ways you could look, or --

A: Not in Theresienstadt. Nobody from Riga came to Theresienstadt. But I had a distant cousin who was in Riga and who was saved also and I met her in -- in New York again. She was actually the only person I ever met from Riga. And, of course nobody saw my mother, because they were killed the minute they got there.

Q: Well, how did you eventually determine that?

A: Simply by transport. I looked it up in the -- in the Yad Vashem books. I knew the date of her transport, it was -- it was se -- it was nov -- how could I forget this? I think it was November, 1940. No, 1941. Yes, it wa -- no, it was September 1941. Anyway, I knew the date and I don't know how I could forget it at this point and I looked that transport up, from Munich to Riga and the fate of the transport is written in very plain language. They were immediately shot upon arrival, the whole transport.

Q: When did you finally do that?

A: When I found that out?

Q: Looked -- looked -- looked it up?

A: Oh, that was when we first visited Yad Vashem. It wasn't so long ago, maybe in the -- in the 70's. Yeah, I would say in the 70's. But I didn't know that when I met this girl. But I know now why she never met my mother and she would have -- she would have seen her. She -- we were relatives.

Q: So i-in terms of your mother and your sister, there were sort of incremental periods of acceptance? In other words, of their death.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: You said that when your father remarried, you really began to think, well my mother is dead?

A: Is dead, mm-hm.

Q: But in fact, you never knew exactly what happened until the 70's?

A: That's right. That's correct. That's very correct and -- and the mind plays tricks on you, too. The mind thinks, oh, it can't be. You -- you -- you see, that's the advantage of the Jewish ob -- ritual of -- of mourning. It's -- it's -- it's a -- it's a finite kind of thing. You grieve, you get it over with and you go on with your life. If you don't have that, they are not dead. You don't have a grave, you don't have a date, you never sat Shiva. Anyway --

Q: What ki -- tell us a little bit more about the contact you were having with your father, af-after the initial letters where he asks ab-about your mother and sister, when does -- does he begin to propose the idea that you would go to the United States?

A: Oh yes, that -- well, there was never a question about that, that was -- that was the aim of both of us. And it took awhile. I went to the home of my -- of my friend in Lucerne, where I stayed another six months. It took a whole year before I could -- more than a year before I could emigrate to the United States. The war didn't end and the -- the -- the -- the American quota system was still from 1914. It was only after the war that they changed it

and the war board finally acknowledged that -- that we could come over. The Swiss needed to get rid of us. The Swiss were not hospitable, you see. The Swiss took us with the under -- I studied this after -- when I wrote my first book, I studied very closely jus- just what happened. And the condition that they made with -- with -- with Himmler and Muzi and the -- and the Vad har salah, which I have talked about in my previous videotaping, was that the -- the refugees did not stay in Switzerland. Absolutely not. And as soon as we could, we left. And then they handed us a bill for our stay at the hotel, which was -- is really something. But my father gladly paid it, I'm sure. But no, he did everything he could also, to get me over. And we saw each other again in -- just -- just during the Passover holidays of 1946. I arrived by ship and he, being a very religious man, did not come to pick me up. He stayed in that place where he -- he went to Boston, I arrived in Boston. And he had been settled in New York. And he had asked someone -- I guess from the -- from the Joint or something to pick me up. He did not consecrate the holiday to drive to pick me up. I -- I didn't question that at the time. I -- I really didn't. I was so glad to be there and I consecrated the holiday by going in -- with that person who picked me up, I don't remember who she was. And my father had asked someone to take him and me in and we stayed there for the holidays. And th-the -- the predominant remembrance of seeing my father again, he came down the stairs and I was at the bottom of the stairs, coming in the front door and the -- the -- the -- the main impression that stayed with me was that he looked just the way I remembered him. Young and vibrant and black hair and nicely dressed. After I had gone through so much, I expected him to --

to had also gone through so much and be an old, white-haired, little old -- the Jewish man. But he wasn't. He was a young, vibrant man and we took it from there.

Q: And certainly many people that you had been living with and seeing for the past 12 years --

A: Had changed.

Q: -- they had been through so much and

A: -- had changed, yes, had changed very much. I guess I hadn't changed really, either, because I wasn't really in a killing camp. I was real-really not that badly off after I heard how everybody else had suffered. I wanted to say something about living with my friend in Lucerne and that goes to the point I have made before, that the Holocaust governs my whole life. So in Lucerne, in 1945, when I was rescued and my friend took me in, I took care of her two little kids so that she could go to work. I was like an au pair, you know? And that was a very happy time, it was a vibrant, Jewish, religious family. And Rosh Hashanah came and always the -- the husband brought home stray people from the synagogue to have holidays with -- with the family. And, you know, I helped in the kitchen, I was st -- you know, I was busy with the whole affairs and I didn't pay too much attention whom he brought home. He brought home some American soldiers that year, 1945, to celebrate the Rosh Hashanah holiday with him. Now I am going to 1985, 40 years later and I'm -- I'm teaching elder hostel at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine and I -- I am teaching the Holocaust, upon the request of elder hostel. And I have my -- I tal -- taught that for 10 years. It was a very successful course and I -- I have very good

memories of telling people what the Holocaust was all about. Not just what I'd gone through, but the -- the historical background, I -- I started with anti-Semitism in Germany and --and how Hitler at all got to power and -- and somehow, within that two week course, naturally, I legitimized myself and said that I was there, too, and how I had been saved and went to Switzerland and how I had stayed with this Erelinger family. And in one of my courses, one white haired man gets up and he says to me, "You state you were very religious at the time and you went to America and you married a physician, didn't you?" And I was completely taken aback and I said, "Who are you?" And he was one of the soldiers that Erelinger brought home. And I had corresponded with him, I had a little bit of a romance with this handsome soldier, he took me out and you know. And I had rome -- I had co-corresponded with him and I had told him, "Sorry, I got to stop this now, I'm -- I'm getting married next week to this young doctor." So he recognized me from what I told him.

Q: What was his name?

A: His name was Segal -- Larry Segal. And I corresponded -- he -- he went home and found some of the letters I wrote. The Holocaust just stretched out it's tentacles throughout my life. There was never any getting away from it.

Q: Would you have liked to have gotten away from it?

A: No. It's -- it's -- it shaped my personality. I taught the Holocaust, I wrote papers, I wrote two books, I -- I gave lectures and I was able to found the Holocaust Human Rights Center of Maine, which I'm very gratified for. And I -- I was a member of the state Board

of Education because -- in Maine, because of my experiences. What does education mean to you, that you didn't have it, you see? And it -- it -- it governed my life. It -- it governed my children's lives too, but we can talk about that later.

Q: As you are waiting to leave and go to the United States, what are your thoughts about leaving Europe, especially when at this point you still do not really know about your mother and your sister? Do you have misgivings about actually, physically leaving or did you think that you could still trace them from the United States?

A: No, I had no qualms about leaving at all. I remember the train that took us from Baushawitz, which is from Theresienstadt, to Saint Gallen, went through Nuremberg and by -- by implication, it grazed Anspach and there was always this -- this happy moment in former years, when we were on the train, we could see the roof of our house, going through Anspach. And I remember that I didn't even want to look. Out -- out -- out, I wanted to go. Nothing kept me there, nothing at all. Yeah, that was something. I do want to say is something about leaving Berlin, actually. I -- no, I -- I can't recall now what I wanted to say. Ask me something.

Q: Okay. Think back to the -- several days before you are preparing to leave.

A: To leave Theresienstadt?

Q: No. I'm talking now about leaving Switzerland and preparing to go to the United States.

A: Yes.

Q: Ho -- What -- was it difficult to get all these papers in order? Were you doing it or was your father? The visa, the --

A: Yes, I know what you're asking me. Oh no, that went like in a trance, everybody helped. The Erelinger family, my father. Lothar sent part of the affidavit and -- and the Swiss helped, of course, coaxing me along. It was nothing compared to the difficulties that are -- are branded in my brains that we had to go through trying to get out of Germany, you see? And that is something I can't forget either and my mother's letters, which I still have, are filled with that. She says, "Every day I look for the mail and I think, there must be an affidavit for me now." And then she had to wait hours and hours at the Jewish communities in Munich to -- to get a number and she never got one and to get [indecipherable] finally she had the number, then she had to wait hours and hours at the Hapak to get a -- a ship's passage and just terrible. Just terrible. But finally, she -- she gave up. She didn't give up, she was taken away. No, compared to that, getting out of Switzerland was a breeze. And of course there were no airplanes at the time, so I went in a -- in a boat. That was a very happy boat ride.

Q: T-Tell us about the boat --

A: Oh yes --

Q: -- what it looked like, who was on it --

A: -- I -- I re -- it was the SS Mulholland and of course I was ready to fall in love with every person I saw, especially Americans. And by then I was already very -- very much my old self again. And I remember that one of the ship's officers showed me, for the first

time, a Life Magazine, with that glossy picture of some pretty woman on the -- on the front, I don't recall who it was and I remember he's saying to me, "You could be on that cover yourself." So, apparently, at that time, I was already quite nice looking again. And of course, I was glowing with anticipation of going to America after we had struggled so terribly. America, it was like -- like -- like a rainbow in the sky. It's something that you just -- you see, but you can't touch, so I was actually going there and I remember asking him lots and lots of questions. And then he showed me that magazine and tried to tell me a little about America. It was nice.

Q: What did you tell him about yourself?

A: Oh, nothing. Nothing, nothing. I didn't talk about the -- the concentration camp for a long time. I remember when my father took me to New York then and people came to visit -- I remember so clearly, one old lady said to me, "So tell us already, a little bit about the concentration camp." And I was simply horrified. I looked at my father and I said, "Papa," ca -- you know, like get me out of this. So he tried to change the subject. Oh, there was no way I could have opened my mouth about it at all. Not for a long, long time. I had nightmares about it constantly, but I never could talk about it. And except for that strange Jewish old lady, nobody really wanted to know. Nobody wanted to know. I remember when I spoke for the very first time at a group --

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B.

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Gerda Haas. This is tape number two, side B.

A: I remember, when I finally got myself to speak about my experiences -- oh, it -- it couldn't even have been my own, maybe it was just generalization about the Holocaust, I -- I remember -- and that was very much later, that was, I would say, in the 1960's or even -- yeah, in the 1960's, that was in Maine and I spoke to a B'nai Brith group of women in somebody's home. And here -- and was very difficult for me to get up and speak for the first time. And next to me or in front of me sat one of the women -- I knew all the women, they were from town and one of them pulled out her knitting and started to knit. And me being so nervous, I said to her, "Are you going to knit through my whole talk? Am I going to, you know, hear that clappering of the needles all through the talk?" Number one, it showed me that she really didn't care what I was going to say. And number two, it -- it -- it -- it did make me even more nervous. And I remember her answering, "If it's interesting, I'm going to stop." So you see the -- the people didn't really care. This was a Jewish woman, a young Jewish woman. And I started to talk and I noticed that she stopped and she didn't knit any more. And f-from then on it became a little bit easier for me to talk. And it be-became more the thing to do to ask me to talk. Then, after the B'nai Brith, then every other local organization wanted me to talk, then the churches came in, the schools. And it became easier and easier. But there was a definite bar. There was a definite high hurdle that I had to overcome and that the listeners had to overcome. And once that hurdle was passed, then things were okay.

Q: After you left Theresienstadt and perhaps you're still in Switzerland or you're in the United States, did you see any photographs of -- these very famous photographs that were coming out, of when the United States and the British troops liberated the camps, the -- did you see these at all and what were your reactions?

A: I -- one of the most unforgettable moments in my life is when I saw the photographs for the first time and it was in a moviehouse. You recall, in years gone by, the first thing they always showed was the -- the -- the -- the newsreel. And I did see one of those Auschwitz photographs for the first time. And maybe that was the moment when I believed that my mother and sister were dead. And i-it was horrible. And also for the first time, I heard the phrase like -- like animals to the slaughter, from the rabbi in Lewiston, Maine at -- at one of his Rosh Hashanah sermons. And I was terribly shocked. That was long before I was able to talk and long before people wanted to listen. But, you know, it started creeping along and there was no way of holding it back. It was like water lapping the shore and then -- then the whole flood finally came.

Q: When was that that you saw the newsreel? Where were you?

A: Oh, that must have been -- that must have been -- I was married and had one child, so th -- I would say that it was 1948 - '49 - '50 maybe, at least -- at last. '48 - '49, I would say.

Q: So you saw the newsreel not right when it came out, then?

A: No, no.

Q: Okay.

A: I didn't even want to. I was very busy putting my life together. Having a -- a -- a fiancé and -- and a husband and the baby and the house and being able to keep all those things. Nobody was taking them away from me. It was quite something. My nightmares were terrible, but my days were heaven. The nightmares, interestingly enough, never -- I never dream about my mother or my sister. I think about them a lot, but I n -- I never dream about them. The nightmares are always that the Nazis are coming to take my children and the life I have now. Very strange. But they're letting off a little bit now. I still have them. Now, I have nightmares about the grandchildren. My last nightmare was the Nazis were coming and my little granddaughter said, "Oh, I want to run upstairs and get my party dress." Yeah… But that was at least a year ago, so I haven't had one for awhile. I always wake up in a cold sweat with a -- with fibrillations afterwards. One of the more satisfying moments of my life was when I was able to give a deposition against Alois Brunner. I saw a little notice in one of the Jewish papers that people who knew the SS man Brunner should come forward and -- and give a deposition to -- at -- in Boston. I was still living in Maine at the time. And I called that number and I said, "I remember Brunner only too well and I'm quite ready to give a deposition." Nothing became of it. The Syrians didn't release him, even so he -- he -- he was quite guilty.

Q: Where had you known him?

A: Sorry?

Q: Where had you known him?

A: Yes, he -- he was -- he was one of the key figures in -- in Berlin when we were taken from the hospital to the -- to the Jewish community and were told that from now on, we were the agents of our own destruction. We jolly well could pick up our own Jews, the SS didn't have to do that dirty work any more. And that we could -- that we could do duty in the -- on the trains ourselves, so the SS wouldn't have to do all that hard work of herding the people into the -- into the -- into the -- into the freight trains. That was Brunner. And then he stayed for awhile in Berlin and I remember it very well. I wrote it all down and you have that on record. But I don't know if I told then that I -- I had been able to give a def -- deposition, that was much later. I was very glad to do that, it was a long, long deposition. The interesting thing is that the German counsel who -- who took the deposition heard some of the things for the first time. So I was very happy about that.

Q: Was it -- did you have to overcome your own fear to go do that?

A: No, that was much later. That was much, much later. I wasn't very comfortable, but it seemed necessary to do that.

Q: I want to go back chronologically to you being on the ship.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: And you befriended this officer and he's told you some about America. Do you -- can you tell us about your first glimpses of New York?

A: Oh yes, oh yes, I can. I can. My father had met me in Boston and after the holiday was over, we traveled by train to New York and then he took a taxi from the train station to -- to his home up in Washington Heights and of course I kept looking out of the taxi

window the whole time. It seemed difficult to see the tops of the buildings. I had never seen a skyscraper before and I was completely aghast at those. But what even impressed me more were the black people. At that time they were still called Negroes and what I couldn't get over was the colors they wore. Green and purple and -- and red and blue. Loud, loud colors. I hadn't seen colors for a long, long time. Everything was drab for 12 years. Black and gray and -- and green, the Nazi uniforms and -- and that was about it. Nobody wore colors. And here I saw these black people -- first of all, the black color already, was striking. I hadn't seen a black person before. And then their hair was dark and I had only seen blonde. And then they had these -- these -- these rainbow colors on them, dresses and shoes and fingernails. Everything was blazing. I was very taken aback by that. And then we got into the house -- my father took me in and of course the apartments were so different, too. And the people were different, it was -- it was difficult at first, it was very difficult.

Q: Wh-What was -- what was difficult?

A: Well, I was still halfway -- half-halfway i-in my former life and now I had all this -- this to cope with, thi -- it -- I think it was difficult and I was still waiting -- I still felt guilty and I was still waiting for my family. And it was a turmoil. It was a -- it -- it was -- is a tumultuous time. Feelings were impinging on me that I -- and impressions that I -- I couldn't -- that I couldn't digest right away so quickly and -- and -- and pigeonhole.

Q: What did your father -- tell us about your meeting. I sort of skipped that, but what did your father say to you when he first saw you?

A: I don't recall. I don't recall. I don't remember that. I think we didn't talk about the past at all. He was, of course, settled by then and he was very proud of himself to have pulled up a little butcher store out of -- out of nothing in -- in New York, America and he was making a living and h-he was extreme -- he showed me his door, and -- and I remember he gave a -- a religious object to his synagogue in gratitude that I was saved. And the rabbi welcomed me from the -- from the podium in one of -- in his speech when I first came to synagogue. That was unheard of, I was terribly embarrassed. And I -- I don't recall much about that… The name of the man who wrote the book, "Stella" is Peter Wyden, Peter W-y-d-e-n. Simon and Schuster, 1992. And my documentation is in Sumlongin, Dr. Hans Clay manuscript, CDJCXX70, Santre de document mon taisson juivre contemporare Pari. Anonymous parishta Annabelina Crankensfesta. And they were picked up by Gerhard Shernbrenner and were included in his -- in his book, "Vere haben esska sayen." And that's where this Wyden picked it up. If that's important or not, I don't know. But still in -- okay.

Q: Well Gerda, we were speaking about you first getting to the United States.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Can you describe the apartment that your father took you to, that he lived in?

A: Yes.

Q: And also the neighborhood, please.

A: Yes, yes, I surely can. He took me to 719 179th Street. The building is now razed, because it made room for -- actually for -- for the bus terminal, that big bus terminal on

179th Street. And it was a very strange -- i-in Washington Heights, that's in New York, but in the Washington Heights section. And it was a very strange building for me. I had only known buildings where you walk in and you're in the living room and dining room and the kitchen and out the door into the garden and upstairs were the bedrooms. Well, this was an apartment building where a whole city lived. You walked in and you had to take the elevator up to the sixth floor and then you were confronted by long, dark, usually smelly corridors and from the corridor, on each side, doors entered. And little did I know that every single door was a whole apartment in itself. I'd never seen a construction at -- like that. In fact I -- I tried to explain it to one of my friends in letters and they couldn't picture it at all, either. So anyway, we went through a door, number 6B, I think. And there, al-all of a sudden, it opened up into a re-regular apartment. But you just couldn't tell that from that dark corridor. So here we were and of course the Mezuzah was on the door and everything was right away. Then when I came in, all the people hugged me and [indecipherable] me. There was -- my father was living with an old cousin, whose husband had just died and his brother. His brother and he, I think she had one bedroom and the cousin and her husband had shared the second bedroom and fortunately the husband just died so that I could have the other bed. Otherwise, I don't where I would have slept. But how God arranges things for me is just miraculous, really. So I re -- I remember -- of course that -- the ca -- the husband of that cousin absolutely meant nothing to me. I never met the guy, he was ages old, deaf and blind and ready to die. I had never even heard his name. But he died when I was still in Switzerland and my father

-- who by that time corresponded with me regularly -- didn't tell me about his death and only told me on the train from Boston to New York that the cousin had died. And he said he didn't want to tell me that because I had been surrounded by so much death and dying that he didn't want to upset me any more. I think that gives you an idea of -- of how they regarded us. We were like -- like fragile, ethereal things that you mustn't upset and -- and don't tell them anything bad, they've gone through bad enough. And that was very weird. I -- I -- I still -- still remember that, he was afraid to tell me that this anonymous cousin of mine had died. Anyway, I had a good time sleeping in his bed.

Q: Was there some sort of celebration when you came in [indecipherable]

A: Not right away. On that Shabbat -- you see, that was a very -- very religious community. Perhaps I better say a little bit about the community, so you understand what it was like. In a way, it was almost like coming back to Germany. First of all, nobody spoke English, they were all -- also, they'd all tried very hard to learn the language and they eventually did and they all aspired to be citizens and of course they all were. But among themselves, they lived still way back in their little German villages. The gossip was tremendous. Everything was word of mouth. They all went to synagogue, of course, in their best clothes and at synagogue, if -- if you didn't say "Good Shabbas" to somebody, he was insulted with you for the whole week. And it was such a narrow minded, such a petty little community, that I, who had gone through so much, just -- I -- I was aghast. And everybody watched everybody else, that they did everything right and whether they had a new hat on for Rosh Hashanah. And one person said she's not going

to synagogue because she couldn't afford to buy a new hat. So I say, "Go in the old hat." "No, you can't do that, the people will talk about you." It was such a narrow minded, such a pi-pitiful community. They had -- you see, they had all emigrated before Hitler really did his job and so they knew nothing of the hardship we would go through. And so they transferred all their pettiness and all their parochialism and all their pedestrianism to this beautiful city and they just lived within that gorgeous city, still in their old, little hometown of -- of maybe 2,000 people. Was weird. I had a hard time fitting in. And everybody gossiped about everybody else and was not for me. I was glad my husband took me out of there.

Q: What do you think in your experience made you less tolerant of that kind of --

A: Oh, who cares whether you had a new hat? And who cares if you wore a nice diamond pin or not? But if they couldn't catch up -- and -- and my -- my stepmother was -- fell right into that. Although she too had lost people, she too was in Theresienstadt, she worked in the glimmer factory, her hands off and -- and she had gone through just as much as I did. But as soon as she married my father, she -- she joined that -- that stampede of -- of -- of the Washington Heights Jewish women. You had to have exactly the right kind of jewelry and a new dress and a fur coat and -- and she was one of the worst, honestly. I just could -- I think that's why I couldn't get used to -- to her. My mother had been so plain, the only thing she ever possessed was her -- her engagement ring, which I fortunately still have. But my -- my stepmother just wasn't like that at all. The first time I met her, she -- she -- that -- that was then again, much later, after I was

married, she came to visit me in Lewiston with my father, in a fur coat and a fancy outfit, and I ju -- I just couldn't -- I couldn't get used to that. So, anyway, Washington Heights was a community of it's own. My father only had Jewish customers. Only the Jewish religious people from the surrounding s -- s -- few streets came to see him. And once in awhile a -- an inspector would show up to inspect the cleanliness and -- and the exits and entrances and the fire escape. And my father always was afraid of them, because they spoke English and they were the strangers, they were them, you see? So that ghetto mentality was still there.

Q: And even for him, who -- who -- who hadn't experienced the length of --

A: No.

Q: -- of the -- of the Holocaust through the ghetto?

A: That's right.

Q: Appears very --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- powerful.

A: Yeah. He never really -- he never really became Americanized. He's -- he still remained it -- remained just the way he was. And I think that was the -- a source of friction between us too, because I wanted to be American. I sa -- I didn't want to be any more like I was in Anspach. I wanted to be an American woman. I remember when I finally went to college, and then became a librarian and took a job, his comment was,

"Why do you need to work? Your husband will support you." See, that was the mentality. He never understood it.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about more -- your idea of what it was to be an American woman? Eve -- Especially in those -- those first few months in -- you were feeling frustrated by what you thought was the pettiness of the community, what were the things that you want people and yourself to be focusing on, to be concerned about?

A: Well, I -- I didn't like the -- the Washington Heights mentality and -- and environment at all. I -- I -- I just wasn't comfortable. I knew I was being talked about and criticized and -- and -- and I just couldn't relate to these bosoms -- fat woman in their finery and doing really not very much. They just transplanted themselves. So when I came to Maine, my husband -- my husband also felt that way about New York and he wanted to be in a small town where he could make an impact and really -- and really be an American physician. Then when we moved to Maine, actually I ha -- I had a new struggle then. Then I was expected to be an American -- a young American wife and I didn't know how. And then I -- I didn't know how to play Bridge, that was the furthest from my mind, so I was already ostracized because I couldn't ever be invited to Bridge games. What were they going to do with me? I couldn't play. So, you know, that was already a handicap. And my English of course, wasn't so great at the time. I remember -- I don't know if this will sit well on tape or not, but I have a memory of trying to play Bridge and trying to fit in and finally -- and then you had to always say what you put down, what card, the King or the Queen. And finally one of the other three American ladies said to

me, “Gerda, please stop referring to that card as the ass. Call it the Ace.” So that’s how -- that’s how ha -- ha -- I struggled. And I quit after awhile. I just couldn’t learn that stupid game. Also, it wasn’t important to me. And then soon I was pregnant and I had a child and th-that of course, was crucial. And I felt very much that I was saved because I should do something ex -- ec -- other than playing Bridge and learning to say the cards correctly. And so I -- I devoted myself to my kids. So much so that actually I -- I -- I became depressed after awhile. I -- I did nothing but worry about this firstborn of mine, because he was actually the first thing that I could call mine and I -- I knew, excepting my nightmares, I knew that he couldn’t be taken away from me. Nobody could come in and -- and take him, he was mine. And so I -- I -- I was between the reality and the nightmares, I -- I became very depressed and actually I did see a psychiatrist, upon the urging of my husband. And then one of the woman also -- that was also a -- a big factor in my depression -- one of the women, actually the local rabbi’s wife, who was about the age of my mother then and I being without a mother or mother-in-law or anybody and being that poor, displaced person there, she befriended me and she acted as my -- as my dominant guardian. And somehow, without my really understanding it, I -- I just couldn’t get along with her. I just feared her and I -- I -- I never knew how to -- how to talk with her and -- and she -- she was very possessive of me and I was terribly -- actually afraid of her. And after that went on for maybe a couple of years or so, I -- my husband, who -- who n -- who noticed that I wasn’t reacting right --

End of Tape Two, Side B

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Gerda Haas. This is tape number three, side A.

A: -- put me down sometime -- someday and -- and talk to me and try to find out why I was having such a hard time. And he pointed out to me -- as so often an outsider can tell you much better what's wrong with you -- he pointed out to me that she was moving into my mother's place and I, having that guilt complex a ma -- about my mother, I just couldn't relate to her. I j -- I just couldn't deal with it. I was so afraid of her, although I didn't know why and she of course, didn't know why either. And that's when he sent me to a psychiatrist. And then, after a few sessions, when he pointed out to me that it was -- all this was perfectly normal and how I could deal with it, then I was okay.

Q: What was it that your husband saw that gave him concern? I mean [indecipherable]

A: Well, I was always afraid of this person who called me up and demanded that I call her back and I had to tell her everything that was going on in my life. For instance, she was so possessive of me that when I told her that I was three months pregnant with my first child, and I told her as the first person because, you know, naturally I felt some kind of -- of a debt to her for being so nice to me and teaching me English and teaching me how to cook. What did I know about cooking? And teach -- and taking me to her friends and everything. So I felt a certain debt to her, so she was the first one I told that I was pregnant. Very joyously and I thought, "Oh now she'll be just so sweet to me." And she said, "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" And you know, again, I sh-shrank back and

this old fear of her came back to me. And you know, I was just always not just right with her. They invited us all the time and I always feared to go and my husband noticed that something was wrong with me -- with me and that relationship with her. So finally we straightened it -- he straightened it out.

Q: Tell us about your reaction when he suggested you see a psychiatrist.

A: That was okay. I wanted to get over it myself. I didn't know what was ailing me. She was a somewhat dem-demanding and domineering -- a childless woman and she kind of sucked onto me and -- and wanted me to be completely hers and I didn't want to. I didn't want to be dominated again.

Q: When you did go see the psychiatrist, what did you end up talking about?

A: Oh, you know, that's 50 years ago. Let me see if I can reconstruct that. First of all, at that point, it was not so accepted to go to the psychiatrist, so we -- we went to a psychiatrist in the next town, Portland and I think my husband drove me down each time. I think so. And he a-asked about the -- the past and the Holocaust, something about the Holocaust and my life. And he also noticed that I had a guilt complex. And then he told me that I was perfectly normal and that people who go through very great traumatic experiences and come out alive, whereas other people die, as for instance in the plane crash or any natural disaster, do end up with a guilt complex and he thought that was quite normal. And once I knew that, I could deal with it. I didn't go many times. He was very good and very kind and -- and I could deal with it. Interesting enough, though, I -- I got over it and I adjusted okay, but three of my four children ended up going to a

psychiatrist or a psychologist in -- in their formative years. Apparently I did pass that on to them. And I think they talked a lot about me and -- and my past and my relationship to them. They're all very close to me now, but there was a time when they just -- they just -- didn't know just how to act. I know for instance that -- w-we never talked about the Holocaust and we never talked German, but once the children knew that I had been in a concentration camp and -- and I'll tell you in a minute how they found that out, then I began to realize that they were reading under their covers at night with flashlights, books about the Holocaust, but they didn't dare to ask me, so they visualized that I went through the worst of what they were reading and I think that was the cause of their -- of their m-maladjustment. And how did they find out? Because after I went to college, at age 49 and then to grad school and became a librarian -- that was in '74, early -- maybe even before then -- then I became a book reviewer for the Library Journal and for some of the Jewish magazines. And once they realized that I could deal with Holocaust books on an authentic and authoritative basis, they deluged me with Holocaust material. And then my kids, of course, caught on and asked and -- and then we were okay. Was the -- can you talk a little bit about your decision not to talk -- not to tell your children about it? Was it a conscious decision or perhaps a decision where you [indecipherable]

A: I don't believe that it was a conscious decision. I never much talked to my husband about it, either. H-He -- in the beginning, he went with me and heard me lecture, so he knew all about it, but I -- it didn't seem something I wanted to talk with him about. I wonder why? It was okay to talk to the psychiatrist about it and it was okay to -- to talk to

a -- to a faceless audience. But it was not okay to talk to my father or my husband or my kids about it. Or even my closer girlfriends. I -- I did find some -- some of my colleagues from Berlin Hospital here again. One of the friends I was especially close to, I found her again and then my head nurse, I found quite by chance in a little for -- Godforsaken town in Maine and that seemed okay. All we ever talk about was the Holocaust and Berlin and what happened and other friends and od -- it just -- it just didn't seem to come out with my family. I don't know why not.

Q: What about when your friend Eva would visit or you'd visit her?

A: Oh, that --

Q: And then the children might have been younger, would you have been talk -- did you talk to Eva about it in their -- in their presence?

A: There was nothing to talk about. We had gone through the same thing, we were like sisters. Fortunately sh-she had -- she -- she has by now forgotten everything. She's maybe getting a little bit senile, but what -- if we ever say anything, she doesn't remember it. She doesn't remember any of the things that are so vivid in my mind. Like when we washed our hair under that pump that we had to pump. We had to help each other, cause one had to pump and the other one had to wash her hair. I never forgot it. She doesn't remember a thing about it. So, it -- I -- I have no explanation why I didn't talk to my family. There was so much else to talk about. I had to learn English, I had to learn to be a wife. I had to be a mother. There was so much to do. I had books to read. I hadn't read a book in 12 years. Jews weren't supposed to read. I hadn't listened to music,

all of this I had to do now. So, my husband was a big, big help to me. He was just an angel. And I had to get to know him. I married him while being practically engaged to the other guy and I didn't even know him. We only knew each other for three months, but we truly fell in love and I knew that was the man I wanted to spend my life with. We were just really so made for each other. Our background was the same a-and w-we just entered a very happy marriage and we still have a very happy, functional marriage. And it just didn't seem necessary to talk about the past. I somehow assumed he knew it all. You know how you -- when you're -- when you're very close to someone? He knows. You know? And he probably does know. I've -- we never talk about it. It's not important, a-at least in that context. I don't know if that makes any sense or not.

Q: D-Do you have any thoughts about how your history got communicated to your children if, as you say, you didn't talk about a lot, but somehow it affected them, is what you had said.

A: It did, yes.

Q: And wh -- ho-how do you think that's so? How can something that's not spoken still affect someone so profoundly?

A: I have to think a minute -- a minute, how to answer you that, because I had never really thought about it. Well, I was -- I was a walking survivor. It was probably written all over me. I had such different values from other people. You know, I couldn't throw out any food. I -- I would go to people's homes to eat and whatever was on the table and didn't get eaten, was thrown in the waste. I couldn't do that. A-And -- and this business

with having new clothes all the time. Who cares? I had a dress, that was great. And maybe some of those things, surely it must have transmitted its-itself to the kids.

Q: Can you tell us the story about your son and his ideas about having children?

A: Yes, I will, but first I want to say this, my -- my children, in a way, by osmosis almost, surmised what was going on and yet, they didn't really understand. I -- I'm sure I spoke about this when I was interviewed the first time, but it seems important enough now maybe just to touch on it once more without going into too much detail. When I was -- when I was asked to be a member of the state Board of Education in Maine, I accepted, of course, greedily and then I -- a phone call came -- or rather a notice came that my confirmation hearing was on -- on a certain date in September and I looked at my calendar, it was the second day of Rosh Hashanah and I didn't travel then. So, I talked to my husband and he said, "Well, you have to call up and tell them you can't come and probably they'll pick someone else." So I called up and it was the Senator Katz who was on the phone, who was the chairman and of course, obviously he was also Jewish and he was such a nice guy, I became very close friends with him later. And I said to him, "I'm sorry, I don't travel on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. I can't come." And he was quiet for a minute and then he said, "You know, I'm Jewish too, I never even knew there was a second day of Rosh Hashanah." And so we talked about that for awhile and then he said, "Well, then we'll postpone the hearing for a week -- for a --" I don't know how long. And I was just flabbergasted that this senator from Maine ju -- postponed a hearing for me, who was persecuted for being Jewish. And I talked about that werbar in front of

the kids. And my daughter Heddy, the one who's living here now, said -- still ringing in my ears and she said to me -- she was then about, oh, maybe 14 or 15. She said, "Why -- why do you think that's so -- so -- so noteworthy? Naturally, if you can't come because of religious reasons, they have to postpone the date for you." You know, and I -- then I was even more flabbergasted, that my own kid didn't understand what -- what it means to -- not to live in a democracy. I -- I -- I don't know if you understand the bigness of that thing. It was such a revelation to me, such an epiphany. And -- and then -- then I probably explained to her at that point that not everybody grows up in a democracy and has democracy in their bloods -- in their bloodstreams, with their mother's milk. Well, in that case, it wasn't the case but -- but obviously she was American enough not to understand that this -- a senate does not have to postpone a hearing for a Jewish woman. So then I wrote my book. And the book just came out of me, because I thought, "If my own kids don't know it, other kids don't know it either." And I -- I wrote my book then. I -- it was the first one, it's in the preface. The whole preface, that's why I wrote the book, for my kids and for other kids, who grow up blithely and -- a-and then, of course, as I was writing and researching and talking about it and speaking, then the kids know everything. The kids also didn't want to know all that much. The grandchildren want to know more then the kids now. But the grandchildren already don't understand it any more. They don't understand it any -- "What did Hitler look like? Did he come and kill your mother hi-himself?" You know, things like that. "What are you going to say to him when you meet him in heaven?" There, at least I had an answer. I'm not going to meet

him in heaven. I ain't going there, where he is. So, anyway. Yes, now I want to tell you about my oldest son. Somehow I -- I always felt -- or at least I rationalized -- for lack of any other rationalization, that I was saved so that I could have children and -- and somehow continue the -- the -- the re -- the depleted Jewish people. So, I quickly had my four kids and -- and I'm sure that feeling translated itself in -- imbued itself into my kids. They too should have kids and grandkids and the Jewish race should -- should keep going in spite of Hitler. Hitler did not win. He did not eradicate us all. We, the survivors are starting again. And after my son was married for many years and didn't have children, he confessed to me once that this is a -- a very big problem for him because he fee -- he feels he has let me down, that he has not continue -- that I was saved and he -- he is not continuing this. And of course, I was flabbergasted to hear that and I assured him that he has not let -- now, mind you, he's a psychologist himself, he doesn't have to go to a psychologist, he is one. So he and I talked at length and he understood then that -- that he did not let me down and I never felt let down by him. On the contrary, I -- I'm just extremely proud of all my kids and especially of him. And then, shortly after that he -- he adopted a little girl and she's now five and she's -- 10 months ago he adopted a little boy and now he feels whole. He has two children, that name will continue, the children have both come here to our synagogue to be -- to go to the Mikvah to become Jewish and of course the boy had his circumcision here and I ha -- my son, honestly, he's a different person since then. His head is up high and his chest is out and -- and he and I are -- are very close again. So --

Q: Can you tell us the names of your four children?

A: Oh yes, of course I can, my whole pride and joy. With the children, I felt I had paid my dues, at least to God and to the Jewish community. And then the other dues I paid, I want to tell you after I tell you the children's name. So I'm looking at this picture here, which was taken at the brit of my oldest son's little boy. And it's in front of the Kineset Isel synagogue, with the name clearly visible. So there's my husband and I and in the center iv my -- is my son Leonard. Now mind you, all my kids are named after the parents we lost. So Leonard -- which is a burden, actually. The kids say it is a burden. Leonard is named after my husband's father, Leonard. And next to him is my daughter Heddy, who is named after my husband's mother, Hedwick. And on his other side is my son David, who is named after a distant grandfather and here is my daughter Pauli, who is named after my mother, Paula. And then, these are their -- their mates and then in front you have the next generation and of course their names are picked out of a hat and in fact, it is very interesting. You know, Hitler had -- one of the many laws that he made against the Jews was that the Jews had to have what he thought was degrading names like Sarah and Jacob and Moses and Daniel. Those were names that only Jews should have. And the interesting fact is that all my grandchildren have Jewish and Hebrew names, not because Hitler decreed it, because those names are beautiful and they like them. The only one that doesn't have a Jewish name, actually, is the two adopted kids. But it's no problem. So there's Rachel and there is Tally and Ari. And not on the picture are Sarah and Jonathan and Benjamin and Raphael. And the two kids of my old -- of my youngest son's, which

weren't born then -- oh yes they were -- is Jacob and Evan. Isn't that a great -- nice picture of my family and -- and I'm very proud of them. So I have fulfilled my duty there and then -- and then I want to just mention a little bit that I have also fulfilled my duty to -- to this country, because after all, I owe it quite a debt. Quite a debt. And in that way I'm very glad that I moved to small town, but that was very se -- very secondary, only after I lived there for many years in -- in Lewiston, Maine, population maybe 60 -- maybe 50,000. Only after I lived there for a long time, did I realize that the population, the general American population knows very little about Judaism and almost nothing about the Holocaust. And so I -- I really found a fulfilling role for myself. By that time I was a -- a librarian at Bates College in Lewiston and when we first moved there, in 1947, Bates College had only one Jewish professor and did not acknowledge the needs of the Jewish students. Holidays, no time off. Kosher food never was heard of. Jewish subjects were never taught and so the Jewish population and also th-the non-Jewish population knew nothing. And I was able to change that. I -- I got myself some grants from the -- of course then the times were different, too. This was in the 1970's, 1980's, I got myself some sizable grants from the Maine Human -- Council of the Humanities and with the blessing and -- and the encouragement of the Bates College president, I -- I conducted several Jewish oriented conferences. And they really went over big. This was for the whole state of Maine, we had a tremendous budgets, we -- the first conference I did was a month long. Just informational conference on Judaism and we moved from city to city, with people and -- and videos and we talked and we an -- mostly we answered questions and

many people in the hinterlands of Maine confessed that they had never seen a Jew before. So I -- I really felt proud about that. And then the next thing we did -- I was able to get a Jewish library -- a Rabbinic library for Bates College. The -- the -- the husband of the -- of the woman that had oppressed me so, the rabbi of -- of Lewiston died and -- and by then of course I was on -- on even terms with her and I was able to -- to coax her into donating his whole Rabbinic library in toto to Bates College. And it's known now as the Rabbi David Berund Rabbinic Library of Bates College. And I'm proud to say that I did it. And I catalogued it -- took me several years. And it's -- it's -- it's -- it's a nice -- nice legacy. And then we did s -- then again I got f-funding for several Jewish events -- Jewish music. And that was all within that library, I got money for that and I was able to do a David Berund event annually. And once I did a music -- Jewish music and the other time we did Jewish films and next time we did Yiddish. And I got good speakers and we always had standing room only. It was fabulous, it was like they needed to hear about Judaism. Not only the Jews, but the non-Jews as well. The students, the professors, the townspeople, the out of townspeople. Was fabulous. And out of that -- when I realized the need, out of that, I -- then we did Holocaust conferences, especially with teachers. And again I felt this - this void. This -- this -- this -- this magnetic need that I had and then we finally got together and we had a little bit of money left from the last conference -- oh, I don't know, maybe a thousand dollars and of course we were obliged to return it to the -- to the main Humanities Council, but we asked and got permission to keep it as seed money to found the Holocaust Human Rights Center of Maine. And we were just

sailing through that. It was like they just waited for us. The Maine State Library sponsored us, we had our meetings there, they did all our cataloguing, all our mailing, all our newsletter, our videota -- I did a complete video and oral history tape of all the survivors in my -- Maine is such a small state, all we had was 25 survivors and maybe less than a dozen t -- much less than a dozen liberators. And we -- we -- we interviewed them all. We also interviewed non-Jewish people. Our criterion for survivor simply was anyone whose life has been dramatically changed because of Hitler. And that included a lot of non-Jewish, too. We had a lay -- a layer of -- a s -- of a small town in Poland who wouldn't go along with him and had to leave, with his whole family. And we had a former Nazi woman who then completely turned around and married a Jewish soldier and came over to Maine and became completely de-Nazified and -- and talked about -- and she wrote a book called, "Poison in my Roots." She talked about h-h-how she couldn't help being a Nazi, there was nothing else. If she wasn't a Nazi, she was going to be shot, as simple as that. And she explained that to us. So I -- I really am feeling so -- so pleased. We got funding from people we -- we didn't even approach. People came to us with -- with thousands of dollars. It was just fabulous. Today we are a functioning, vibrant, rich, busy center.

Q: Do you go back there from time to time?

A: I'm in very close contact with them. Just a cu -- just a day or so ago, I had on my e-mail on my computer, a message from -- from our secretary, whom I still picked -- she was hand picked by me when I was still the -- the president and she stayed with us all

these years. This was like 15 years ago. And she said one of the synagogues in a small town in Maine was desecrated on Yom Kip -- on Rosh Hashanah and she wanted me to -- to say something that they can put into their newsletter and of course I wrote -- I'm still very much a part of it.

Q: I want to ask you about -- actually I think I will turn this tape. [inaudible]

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Gerda Haas. This is tape number three, side B.

A: I -- I just want to continue on some of the things we did in Maine. After we founded the Holocaust center, we had an annual reception for survivors and liberators at the Blaine House, the State House in Augusta, Maine, with the governor presiding and somebody giving a speech and the Mrs. governor passing around the famous cookies and things like that. And it was always something I -- I personally felt somewhat responsible for, so I always walked around and greeted everybody and made sure they felt welcomed and made su -- and I -- I knew most of them, anyway. And they knew me, too and -- and one year, I saw a man standing aside and I didn't know him and I couldn't place him, he didn't look old enough to be a survivor. He looked at least 10 years younger than I. And he certainly didn't look like a liberator. The liberators by then, all had a certain look. They were a little bit on the heavy side, gray hair -- you know, salt of the earth kind of people. And he didn't look like that, he looked quite elegant and quite aloof and I

thought, “Who is he?” So I said, “Well, no -- no time is lost in finding out.” And I marched right up to him, after all, I acted a little bit like the -- like the hostess in that’s -- in that context and I said, “I’m Gerda Haas. Welcome to our reception. May I ask who you are? Are you one of our survivors or one of our liberators?” And he -- he clicked his heels you know and gave me a salute. He was in civilian clothes, of course, just with a military insignia on his lapel. And he said, “I am Colonel Retired Manfred Kelman, US Regiment --” and I think he named it, which I have forgotten by then. And I was taken aback and I said, “So you are one of our liberators?” He said, “No. I am a survivor. I was in Theresienstadt.” And I was completely baffled. He didn’t look old enough and he didn’t look Jewish and he didn’t look like a survivor. Neither did he act like one. So he and I huddled a little bit, because I couldn’t spend too much time, but we made a date and we met later for coffee. And the fellow tells me he was a Mishling. He was brought up by a Jewish father and an -- and an Aryan SS mother. And he was 14 years old when the Nazis finally yanked him out of his house. Up to now his mother could keep him and kept her eye on him and he was a little bit protected. Also, as he told me later, he had a miserable childhood. He was neither Jewish nor Aryan. So anyway, by the age of 14, he was sent to Theresienstadt and there he was again miserable, because he wasn’t a Jew and he had to wear the star all of a sudden and he had no friends. There was nobody 14 years old in Theresienstadt. And so finally at the -- at the end of the war, his mother sent an -- an -- a still functioning army car to pick him up out of Theresienstadt. But by gosh, the guy was in Theresienstadt just like me, a prisoner of the Nazis, with his star on his left

hand side. And of course we became close friends. I just couldn't get over it. And as soon as he -- that finished it for him. As soon as he could, he took -- his father died in concentration camp and he took his mother out and came to America. And of course he was a youngster, so he got his education, enrolled into the army, rose to the level of Colonel, went back to fight the Nazis and retired to Maine because it was a nice state to retire in. How do you like that story? That's -- I should -- I should write that as a novel -- as a short story. I've told it many times and it's just flabbergasting. So that's again the envelope of -- of -- of the Holocaust, of my life. And he was the nicest, nicest fellow.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like to be -- what I hear you say is somewhat caught between two worlds, when you get to the United States.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Washington Heights, very narrow --

A: Very.

Q: -- that's how you described it. You weren't interested in that world as much. But then you get to Maine and again you don't quite fit.

A: Exactly.

Q: How did you find a place to be? How did you make a place to be for -- for -- for yourself?

A: Well, I -- I think -- I think I was a little bit on the outside, actually. I -- I think I have to say I was a little bit on the outside, by choice and by the rejection of my peers. And -- and I think I made my own little world. I mean, to begin with that I went back to college

at the age of 49. The people thought I was nuts. Here I was, married to a successful physician, why should I go to college like a little girl? And sure enough, I was the age of my professors. And that was kind of funny at times. But I went to college and then when I was done, I went to work. And in -- in 1971 that was not so common in a small town for a -- for the wife of a professional to do. So again, out of choice, I didn't have time for them and they rejected me because I went a different path. So, I had some close friends, but looking back, they were all Europeans. No, I won't say that, I have a couple that were Americans. But, pre-predominantly, my friends in -- in Maine were Europeans. And then I got so embroiled in the -- in all the activities that I have just described to you and then I got completely snowed under with the Holocaust center. And they -- they didn't take part in that at all. They did come through when I did Jewish music and Jewish this and Jewish that. That, they supported me in, but with the Holocaust they didn't support me all that much. And so I was on my own and I -- I was happy. I -- I was satisfied. I was different. That's very funny, I -- I am thinking of -- I -- I had a girlfriend who was also European and we chatted a little bit and our children were in the next room playing. They were small, maybe eight. And I hear one of them say, "My mother doesn't have an accent, your mother does." And I hear my daughter reply, "No, my mother doesn't have an accent, your mother has an accent." So I was different and yet I wasn't, you know? So, to answer your question, you know, it hurt at times when I wasn't invited or -- or I knew they were talking about me, or -- but you see, also I was very happily married. I -- I really -- you know, what did I need? I had my kids, I had my husband, I still had my father at

the time. And also, I did not get along with him as well as I should have. And I had my stepmother. I had them and they were -- and they were a responsibility as they became older, you see? So I -- I -- I was okay. I have no qualms. And then I became interested in other things and I wanted to build a nice life and -- and I -- I think I Americanized myself. I had a career, I was a book reviewer. I was always doing something.

Q: This is a somewhat related question which is, if you could talk a bit about something that you mentioned in your first interview, which is that you were made t-to be -- you were made to feel subhuman and stupid about yourself.

A: Yes. In -- in school.

Q: What -- what became of that self-concept? How did you change it?

A: Well, I --

Q: [indecipherable] change?

A: Well I -- I think for a long time it stayed with me. See, I was 10 years old when I was declared a subhuman, an outsider. A Jew. I was supposed to be -- I was supposed to be ugly, with a big nose and s -- big ears and stupid and the pu -- the real sturmer picture, you know, of -- of kids that were Jewish. And I was supposed to be on the outside of -- of the Aryan world, which was blonde and straight and beautiful and dancing about. And I -- I think when you te-tell that to a kid of 10 for 12 years, I think it will leave an impact. And I think partly that's why I had a hard time for a long time. I had to prove to myself that I -- that I was intelligent, that I could do something, that I was beautiful and that I was a good mother and a good wife. I think it took awhile. I -- I really do. I really do.

And I think that's where all the nightmares came from, also. Subconsciously I was still the fugitive, the haunted one. And I couldn't shake it, for the longest time. And my husband helped me a great deal in that, too. He was very understanding about that. Yes, but it took awhile. In school we were not allowed to -- to answer, because we were not allowed to know. You know, don't rock the boat of their -- of their perception of a Jewish student. We were sitting in the back and we were not allowed to answer. And we to -- we got passing grades, but nothing special. And -- and then, of course, I -- I picked a -- a hands on profession, I became a nurse. But that was also because of necessity. No college would take us. Completely out of the question, because all the colleges were states colleges.

Q: Did you ever think about nursing here?

A: Fleetingly. I was married to a doctor and I would have to be in the same hospital and I didn't want that. And there was so much else to do. I -- I didn't want to be a nurse, I wanted to -- I wanted to be a student and I -- I was.

Q: You said several times that your husband Rudolf has been very helpful. Can you t-tell us how? For instance, how was he helpful in -- in helping you feel that you weren't s-stupid, that -- that's the last example you just gave, but you've mentioned that several times.

A: Yes, well number one, he wu -- he understood me better than I understood myself. He was completely able to pinpoint my problems with -- with the wife of the rabbi and he was able to lift that from me. And he understood my obsession with my children very

well. He was very tolerant about that. And -- and he never probed, he never questioned, he never -- he was never angry, which I -- I don't think I could have taken. And h-he was just -- I never quite thought about how he helped me, but as I'm thinking -- and he was the one that urged me to go to college. And when I was done with college, and I graduated fabulously, coo -- summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, all the honors you can have. So I said -- it was very funny too, for a graduation present, he gave me a new electric stove. Stay here, cook for me. But when he realized that I wasn't very happy doing that, he urged me to go to grad school. He said, "Look into librarianship, that looks like a challenging profession." And he was always the one who -- who advised me right. I na -- just -- he still understands me very well. He still -- he still understands everything I do and -- and he -- he himself is still very religious, but I -- my religion has shifted from point A to point B and he understands that. He -- he -- he knows completely where -- where I'm coming fr -- to use that worn phrase -- where I'm coming from and where I'm going to. That's not what I want to say. H-He really -- he really understands my -- my -- my background. He himself is of course a refugee also, but he didn't go through concentration camps. And -- and so he -- he doesn't consider himself a survivor, although I say he is. Does that answer your question?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Good. Let's see if I have anything else on my thing here. It was funny when I meet all these people again. Did I -- did I emphasize once more why we are the last of the survivors?

Q: Not on tape and I think you should.

A: Yeah, I'd like to -- to really press hard on that point.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I-It's so little known that one of the tenets of Nazi ideology was of course that we shouldn't live. We -- we should all be killed. And that -- that is one of the laws of the -- of the Nazi party, the Jews have to be killed. But then practicality took over and they figured as long as we can squeeze a little labor out of them, let's work around that basic law and make a second law. And this law -- and I have it here, in -- in Xerox copy, th-the Wannsee Conference Law of 1942 states that when the people come to concentration camp, anyone under 18 is to be killed on arrival and anyone over 45 is to be killed on arrival. And so they were. So that narrow gap, between 18 and 45 was allowed to sort of kill themselves. Die of natural causes, namely starvation and -- and h-hard labor and beatings and infections and finally then of course also, the gas chamber. So this should not be forgotten. So after we, who are now in our 70's, are gone, there are very few true survivors left, because of that ominous law of killing people under 18. When I tell that to students, that -- they really sit up and -- and take notice. It was really beastly. It was really beastly.

Q: You spoke many times in your first interview of this sort of ingrained instinct to behave --

A: Yes.

Q: -- you grew up with. To obey.

A: Yes.

Q: You talked a lot about that. Can you speak some about -- about yourself and your instinct to obey now? Is it something that you worked on to change or how has it changed over the years?

A: You're hitting all the right spots and some of them are sore. Yes, that was an ingrained instinct, not only because of the Nazis, but you know, we grew up obeying. We grew up obeying our parents and our grandparents and our teachers and our rabbis. And our -- our elders. That's how we were brought up. That was the Jewish way and of course the German way also. And then Hitler came upon the scene and suddenly we had to obey for very different reasons and -- and really k -- knuckle down and obey, or we were killed. There was no question about it. They came with their sticks and their dogs. And to this day I -- I'm so uncomfortable around dogs and I think it's because of that. They always had their dogs with them. And we had to give up all our animals, you see, so that there'd be no interaction with dogs or cats or anything, because they always had their dogs on their side. So here they came, a-an -- and we didn't even question obedience. We didn't even question it and I'm ashamed to say it today. When they made us the -- the -- the -- the instigators of our own death, we obeyed. Why didn't we just lay down and die instead of -- instead of obeying them and ha -- aiding them? We were going to be killed anyway. You know that -- I don't think that occurred to us. We obeyed and that was all there was to it. That's the way -- you didn't know you could disobey. I -- we didn't know there was civil disobedience. That's an American institution. We didn't know that. So we obeyed.

Now, to come to this -- to the present, how did I deal with it over here? I have to really think. Yeah, we were shocked at the time when the 60's came and -- and the ki -- and our own kids were sitting s-sit-outs or sit-ins? Sit ins. I was shocked. That didn't occur to us. And we didn't al-allow our kids to disobey very much either. It really was ingrained. I guess in a way it still is. I guess in a way it has never quite left. I remember -- I remember very well that I was married for 19 years and I finally one day stood up to my husband. And it's a strong memory. I thought, "My God, I'm married 19 years and this is the first time I'm speaking back to him." I-It -- you just didn't. But, of course the circumstances were different. Nobody yells at me now or orders me to do things. I do it because I want to. So I think some of that is still with me. I -- I think it is. And the obedience to God, that really never quite left me either. That is the best I can explain it. But, of course I'm very much my own person now. I hope. I am. I don't know if that answers your question, but it's about all I can do. But you know, there is a certain freedom in obedience also. I'm free to -- to do as I wish, ei-either to go along with what's expected of me, or not to. And that's very nice too, so if I go along, it's because I want to.

Q: Do you bi -- what do you think the Holocaust and the -- the -- the knowledge that we have, how do you think that affected, in Germany especially, or maybe around the world, this behavior of blind obedience? Do you think it possibly had an impact, that -- that the knowledge that we have of the Holocaust and what blind obedience led to, do you think that has changed that, culturally?

A: It's very hard to say. The wer -- I never thought the world would be in such dire straights as it is now. I really thought they had learned a little something, but they haven't. I -- I don't think things have changed. I -- I -- I don't think the world as such has gotten any better. But I -- I think -- I think this country at least is more aware of not blindly ob-obeying. Of not blindly walking along and doing their own thing and I -- I'm very thrilled about that. But I think they're going overboard now. Th-This freedom to investigate everybody, that's too much. That's almost again like Hitler, this perse -- this -- this persecution of a person or -- of a person, that -- I -- I just can't see that. That can only lead to more trouble. But -- but th-the liberty to criticize anybody, right up to your president, that is a thrilling aspect. That reporters can -- can have a say of what they think, that's unheard -- that was unheard of in Germany. Every newspaper had to print what Hitler told them to, you see? And that's why it -- it became so widespread. So I think the world has learned some things. That people have to be honest and have to say what they think and have to stand up and march for their rights. But i-in other wer -- in other parts of the world, not too much has changed and things are still pretty bad.

Q: Which part of the world were you thinking of?

A: Well, I'm thinking now of -- of where people are really oppressed. Of Third World countries where people ca -- one of the truths of -- of -- of political life is that you can't rebel unless you have already reached a certain level. And Hitler made sure that the Germans never reached that level. He kept them down. But Third -- Third World countries can't rebel. They haven't got enough food in their stomachs and not enough

voice in their lungs. But here, where everything is so great and wonderful and people can do as they wish and have the -- the personal strength to do it, they can rebel. But while they were slaves, they couldn't do anything about it either.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So there's a -- a natural gra-gradient up the ladder where for a long time they can't do anything about it and then as you get a little better, a little higher up, then you can object and can make yourself heard. And you should. But each country and each person has to find th-that uphill grade by themselves.

End of Tape Three, Side B

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Gerda Haas. This is tape number four, side A. Have you traveled to Germany?

A: Yes, I went back at least twice to my town, Anspach, that beautiful, baroque town with the beautiful cobblestones and the [indecipherable] and the castle and the churches and everything. See how pretty it is, with stained glass windows and these gorgeous roofs all covered with that tile. And I -- I -- I -- I used to like my hometown, I w -- I was a v -- a very happy girl there, before Hitler and I used to love it. I remember so many little things. M-My grandmother once took me to the -- to the Hoffgarden, which is like a arboretum, at night when I was very little, because there was a Queen of the Night that was opening up at night and she wanted me to see that and I never forgot it. It had such an aroma to it and at -- it -- I could see the petals opening, I was just a young girl and it was dark and there were these white petals opening up and throwing their -- their perfume at me. I never forgot it. So there were many reasons why I liked my hometown a lot. But I went back and I -- I -- I was most unhappy there. I felt so -- I felt as if I had an itchy skirt -- shirt on me. As if I wanted to scratch myself all the time and get out of there. And Anspach was notoriously anti-Semitic and it was very interesting. I -- I had -- I wanted to see the synagogue, which is a -- a beautiful, historical building. It was built by the same architect that built the castle for the margraff there. At that point the Jews were in -- in good standing with the margraff and they asked for a synagogue and he -- that was in 1745 -- 300 -- 500 -- 400 years ago and he gave them his own architect and helped

them build this beautiful synagogue, here it is. See, this is the castle and the synagogue has the same high windows, that I'll show you in a minute, if I can find it. So, I was very anxious to go back and I had to ask for the key to the synagogue at the -- at the city hall, because now it's closed. There are no Jews living there, so it's just a memorial. And I went to the city hall and I asked for the -- for the key and they told me that -- I asked in -- in German, you know, I didn't want them to know who I am. And -- and I asked and they said I had to wait a few minutes, the fellow th-that -- who I had corresponded with that I was coming, Mr. Lung, will be here in a minute, he's out celebrating his birthday. And I had noticed that on the letters that he had written to me, telling me I had to come and get the key myself, he never used his first name, he always said his title, whatever it was, Raths -- something Lung and there was no first name. And so I waited a few minutes and he came back from his birthday party and I could figure out from the date that where we are now and hi -- this was his 50th birthday party, that he was born right smack in the Hitler regime. And when he came in, you know, the whole office exploded, "Oh, g-glerkil -- glerklishan kiportstak, Adolf." So you see, the whole city was so anti -- so pro-Hitler that they named their little kids Adolf. And that's why he never used his -- his name, he was ashamed of -- he could change it actually, he's sitting right there in city hall. It's not hard for him to change. But you know, you're -- you're fine tuned. You pick up things that other people would -- that then I would never have picked up. He didn't use his name and he was born just -- just 1933 and his parents named him Adolf in -- in -- in adoration of their fuehrer, you see? So -- so everything contributed to my being very

uncomfortable there. And he gave me the key and I went through the synagogue and of course as soon as I had opened up that very beautiful synagogue, other people came, pushing in and of course he didn't allow that, so he cut my visit short and you know, everything was just against me and I da -- I wa -- I wasn't happy there.

Q: Did you go look at your house?

A: Yes. I looked at my house, which again, I was so happy there and I thought, "Oh, I just want to see it once more." But it turned out to be a terrible experience. Number one, I walked up those few steps of 200 Strasserfunfe and I look at the little plaque that's there and it was still the man who drove us out, who got the house from us from prac -- next to nothing. So, by implication, all my furniture and all my belongings and all my stuff must have still been in my house. Cause he surely didn't throw it out or do anything with it, we had left everything. And he moved in. He moved into a ready set table and made up beds. So, I already had that feeling, oh, what am I doing here? And then to make things even worse, he had one of those big German Shepherd dogs that I -- that I feared so much, both physically and mentally. So, of course, I didn't -- I asked if I could walk through and at least see -- see the garden and everything, but -- he said yes, but how could I with that dog sitting there, you know? So that was a very bad experience and I turned right around and walked out.

Q: Did he know who you were?

A: No, but I think he guessed it. Who else would come and look at an o -- a house that had no historical significance? I may have said I lived here once, or something. But I

didn't kno -- but I had my daughter with me, who -- the one who is living in France now and we started out from Strasbourg to -- wh-where she had relatives and we were visiting and it took us very little time to come by car from Strasbourg, just across the Rhine into Anspach, it was maybe -- maybe a two hour car ride and she came with me. And I was extremely taken by her reaction. She -- she couldn't believe that my hometown was -- was there. You see, in her mind, it was some -- someplace on the moon, you know. And that the people who bought my house were -- were there. In her mind they were monsters that were living in Dante's Inferno, you know? And they were here, right there, she saw them. She could touch the doorpost and -- and see their names and everything. A-And she was flabbergasted that two hours from her, there was actually where it all took place. I -- I never even thought of -- she was so moved by that experience, she was just beside herself. And we took her to the synagogue and -- where my parents used to stand and as -- which is a beautiful, beautiful synagogue, I'm so sorry we lost that to the Germans. I made a little bit of an effort to have it transposed t-to Israel, as some synagogues have been, but I didn't get any res -- "No, that's ours now, that's a museum, there's nothing to do with you any more." And then I asked for a -- some records, "Well, we don't have them. We sent them all to Israel." You know. They were anti-Semites and they still are anti-Semites. And they always will be. And my other da -- we took my other daughter, Hedwick, the one that's named after my father's -- my husband's mother to the cemetery in Frankfort where my husband's parents are buried. And she had the shock of her life, too, because she saw her name on the grave-gravestone there. She still goes by her

maiden name, Heddy Haas and there was Hedwick Haas, buried under a stone with her name and she was also -- she finally realized she's named after a person that's lying there, you see? So, really the children open up your eyes all over again.

Q: Did you go to Theresienstadt?

A: No. I -- I don't want to. I -- I just don't want to. And I don't want to go to Auschwitz. And I have a hard time going to -- to Holocaust museums. I have a hard time. At your museum -- at the US Holocaust Museum, I -- I -- I wa -- I was almost sick with anxiety because -- because it was the real thing, once you were in there, you couldn't get out. You had to go through the whole rooms and upstairs and downstairs and this room and that room. There was no way out, just like then. And you had to go through it until you were finally out of there. I -- I was sweating. I -- so I'm not comfortable with those things at all. But I can't -- I can't shake it, either. I can't shake it.

Q: I want to ask you one thing, that your mother was able to send a few things, stuff them into people's bags --

A: Yes.

Q: -- and then -- could you tell us what she was able to send and -- and how your father eventually got them?

A: Yes, I -- I can. You see, when we finally, finally realized that we really should leave -- also our rabbi never urged us to and people began to leave from Anspach, they were packing their belongings, their furniture and the whole business into large lifts and were sending them over here. And my mother was able to give little packages to a few of the

people to take along. “Take it,” she said, “take it. Maybe we’ll show up there too, someday. And if not, you keep it.” So these were friends, you know, it was no great danger that they would walk off with it. And if they did, you know, who cared, nobody knew. But they -- nobody did. So when I came over here -- and also when my father came over here, all of a sudden people brought him things that -- that were his and he didn’t know that. He didn’t know he -- I have such beautiful tablecloths that my mother and my aunt hand did and you know, th-these were important things for them. And then a few pieces of silver, like this here, just a tiny little ashtray. One octagonal and the other ecliptical or what do you call that shape? Very finely chaste and -- and molded and lovingly polished by me, every so -- every so often, because I -- I just love those things. They were my mothers and she thought enough of them to stick them into somebody’s bag and I got them again. And her own -- her own engagement ring, she gave to my father to take along and he kept it on him until he was able to give it to me and I have already given it to one of my daughters and little things like that. Very few things. This Shabbas lamp, for instance, that is an old lamp that the people used before -- actually before wax candles and before electricity to light their Sabbath lights on. It had oil in it and wicks and before Shabbat you would light all the -- all the eight arms of it and it would ga -- go for at least 10 or 12 hours and that way you had light. And I happen to have the one that was in my house in Anspach.

Q: Could you share with us -- you have mentioned before, in your first interview, the letters that were exchanged between your father and your mother.

A: Yes.

Q: And can you tell us about how you came to receive the letters and then I want to ask you to read, perhaps, the last two letters that you wrote to your father.

A: Okay. Okay, these -- my father was already in -- in America and mother was stuck in Munich. You see, we had to leave Anspach and had to move in with some relatives in a big city. My sister was already then in Frankfort, at the Jewish hospital as a nurse and I was in Berlin as a Jewish nurse. So we were all separated and in order to save postage, which was -- was a big deal in those days, we would write to my mother, to Munich and then she would include our letters into hers. But, as you can see here, there's a note from Freidel and possibly a note from me somewheres too, but not right here. So here she writes, on N-November the ninth, on a Sunday, in 1941 -- yeah, I was wrong, was the September date, I -- I blacked out there for awhile. September was her birthday and she wrote to him at that time -- and I think it's in here, too, that she got as a birthday present what everybody else got too, September 19th of 1941 and that was the star. And whether my father caught on or not, I don't know, but she couldn't outright say that. But I -- I understood it when I reread her letter. So I got my dates wrong. On November the ninth, she was beginning to be de-deported and she says, "My dear Siegfried, it is difficult to me to wr -- for me to write to you today, because I have to give you sad news. I have gotten my notification for transport, for the transport that leaves here on Tuesday. I'm so sorry for you and for the children. I know you will be upset, but I beg you, dear Siegfried, don't grieve and don't be pessimistic. I am calm and I'm not excited. The children feared

deporta-deportation already for a long time and have been worried about me all this time. Tomorrow I must call them and talk to them. I only hope that they will be spared. I beg you, dear Siegfried, don't be upset and don't be sad and most of all, do not blame yourself. If anyone deserves to be blamed, it is I, because it was I who urged you to leave without us. We human beings are a thing of naught. I see it clearer now than ever before. All our planning, our hopes and toil comes to nothing when God decides differently. I think now, if only I had done this or that, but it's no use. It's all destined by God. Here I am, making a farewell speech, but as yet I hope that I can write to you where I'm going. I haven't heard anything from mother in Redensberg or from Berta in Aidid. I hope they will be spared. I will write to you a second letter today before I must go. Lovingly, Paula." Yeah, that was the ninth of November, 1941. And she wrote that same day, another letter. "My dear Siegfried, to continue, I have a letter to send you from the children also; it's a week old. I had hoped so much that Freidel would be able to come for a few days before I would be deported, but really, I didn't believe that I would actually be called up. And now it's a reality, as I told you in the first letter. I am in the first evacuation from Munich. I don't imagine it as all too black and I'm not upset and of course I'll write to you from there as soon as possible, but don't be concerned if it takes long. And I repeat, dear Siegfried, don't worry about me and don't reproach yourself. Fate is stronger than we are. If it's God will that we will be reunited, He can arrange that from there, just as it is His will that I could not get to you from here. I've packed already, have taken all my warm clothes along. Frau Kaufman, the old lady who lives with me is

also in the transport and many of my old friends. Together our lot will be easier to pare -- bear. Now my dear Siegfried, I have just talked with the children. Freidel wants to come with me and Gerda too. I don't know if they can get travel permission and at any rate, they should stay and keep in contact with you. Farewell." On the 11th she was deported to Ausch -- to Riga. She was 45 years old. On the ninth she was called and on the 11th she was deported. And the ways of God are indeed strange. My first son was born on the ninth and my second son on the 11th of November.

Q: And when did you receive those letters [indecipherable]

A: My father gave those to me when I came over here in '46.

Q: So it was right away in '46?

A: Yeah. He might not have given them to me, but of course I knew about them. I tell you, he gave them to me when I was writing the book, in '83, but I -- I was aware of them anyway. I knew he had them, they were all still in their original envelopes and of course the envelope had to say, Sarah Paula Sarah Schil-Schild and -- and it also had to say who took the letter to the Post Office and then it was opened up by the Gestapo. It's weird -- weird. Yeah.

Q: We were speaking about your books and the -- the writing that you've done has also sparked letters from various people and you've mentioned this letter from a young girl and I wonder if you could tell a little bit about that letter --

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Q: -- and then perhaps read it.

A: We'll wind up, yes. I have a stack of letters here that you can see is quite an impressive collection of -- of -- of letters that I received from my first book. And you know, I got only one criticism in that whole time on the first book and it was from a Polish man -- a Pole, not a Jew, who objected to my stating in the book that the Poles were the most anti-Semitic nation in -- in Europe and he pointed out to me in that letter, which of course I saved, that the Poles had done a lot for the Jews back in the olden days, which is correct. The kings of Pole -- Poland took the Jews in and let them prosper there and indeed they prospered in Poland. The Jewish community of Poland was outstanding. But during Hitler time, I remain with my -- with my statement that Poland was the most violently anti-Semitic country in Europe. But all the other letters, except for that one, were -- were with me -- were with me. Some were eye openers, that they didn't know what was going on. Some said, "Yeah, I was there too and you described it just right." Others thanked me for opening up and others complimented me for being able to do it. And that was, of course, in '83, after my first book came out. Now I wrote a second book and that came out in '93 and I wrote that for a younger audience and you know, the interesting thing is, I did not get the response that I got the first time. I don't know why. It may have to do with the editor's broadcasting it less, publish it -- publicizing it less. But I give the book to Bat Mitzvah and Bas Mitzvah -- and Bar Mitzvah kids and kids that I think would understand. They are 12 and 13 years old and they should know. And I gave it recently to one of my little -- little 13 year -- 12 year old friends who had a -- a -- a Bat Mitzvah. She lives actually right across the street from me and she writes me, "Dear

Dr. and Mrs. Rudolf Haas, thank you very much for celebrating this special occasion with me. Your gift was wonderful. I finished the book with a completely different attitude toward the Holocaust. I was often afraid to read Holocaust books, because I feared they would give me nightmares. Reading the stories of all these people made me realize how many good people there were. I also need to remember that the Holocaust was a reality and it wasn't a nightmare. Thank you for everything you have done for me. Sincerely, Sophie Rappaport." And that was now -- that's a young girl, that -- the third generation after me. It still lives and they still want to know.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Thank you. Thank you.

Q: This has been a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum oral history interview with Gerda Haas. This concludes the interview.

End of Tape Four, Side A

Conclusion of interview