

Tom Lewinsohn Interview

January 18, 2000

This is the interview of Tom Lewinsohn. January 18, 2000. Okay, Tom, what was your name at birth.

Was Frank Thomas Lewinsohn.

Would you spell it?

L-E-W-I-N-S-O-H-N.

When were you born?

I was born on June 16, 1931.

And in what city?

In Berlin, Germany.

Okay. Do you know anything about the circumstances of your birth? Were you born in a hospital or at home?

No, I don't really.

Okay. What were your parents' names?

Parents' name was Hugo and Matilda Lewinsohn. And my father was a doctor in Berlin.

Okay. And what was... did your mother have an occupation?

Yes, she was a licensed, what could be called here a cosmetologist. Basically, she was manicure and pedicure, sort of a chiropodist. I think they call it a chiropodist.

And did they both practice their professions as you were growing up?

No. My mother did not in Germany. Just my dad had a clinic similar to like a HMO over here.

Okay. Would you describe the other members of your families, their relation to you and their age, their age to you?

Well, I had a, I have a brother, Peter, who is one year older than I am. And then we had grandparents in, near Leipzig - a town called Plauen, P-L-A-U-E-N. And this is where our grandparents lived and we used to visit them. It was maybe like a two, three hour train ride.

What is the fondest memory that you have of your grandparents?

The fondest memory of my grandparents is, is that my grandmother was always very friendly with us and played with us. And my grandfather was sort of a patriarch. In other words, he was a very quiet type of person. And they had a huge department store in the city of Plauen, which covered a whole square block.

Okay. How well off was your family? Did you have...

I would say my family was relatively well off. The apartment complex that we had in Berlin was 14 rooms, which, of course, included the clinics. In other words, in Germany, a lot of the doctors had their offices and their living quarters in the same place. And the front would be the clinic and the back of it would be the living quarters, sort of like a "L" shaped apartment style. And I would say that we weren't wealthy, but we were well to do.

Did you have servants?

No. We did not.

Did your parents own land?

No.

Did you take vacations?

We took vacations like to my grandparents in Plauen. And I remember kind of one other family who lived near a lake, that we used to go there sometimes on vacation.

Okay.

I think the vacations... my memory of vacations would be that it was for Jews only. You know, in other words, that it was already a time that we could not go to any resorts or to

any kind of resort areas. That vacation meant within, within an acquaintanceship within the family.

Family or friends.

Right.

What kind of foods did you eat growing up?

We ate, we were not kosher at all. And we ate good meals. You know I certainly can remember Sabbath dinners, and chicken soup, and noodles a lot, and hamburgers. I would say we ate well. And eating was kind of a time for the family together.

And what were some of your favorite foods?

Well, this will surprise you. My favorite food was liver and ...

Chopped liver? Oh.

No, no...

Liver, and ...

Liver and lentil soup was my favorite food. And... but I really, my mother was a very good cook. And to my dad, who worked many long hours as a physician, you know, that was one of the few physicians left in Berlin that could take care of Jewish people because Jewish people could only go to Jewish doctors. He was a very busy person, so meals were a very important thing to him then and later on in life, too.

What were your family's political affiliations?

Actually, you know, I would have to say it was apolitical. My dad, you know, had friends. Most of his friends were not Jewish. They were attorneys and other doctors. He played cards a lot with them called *Skat*, which was a kind of a game for the German people. And I remember, you know, kind of overhearing discussions always about political things like Hitler. And I always felt that, you know, like my mother would say to my dad, "Don't you think we ought to leave Germany? Don't you think we ought to go to England or United States or to some other country?" And that people at the table, which was the friends of my dad, would always say that this Hitler thing just will come and go and everything will be all right. "You know, after all, Hugo, you are a veteran of World War I. You got the Iron Cross in World War I and nobody's going to touch you."

Were these his non-Jewish friends that said this?

These were his non-Jewish friends. And, in terms of Jewish friends, my mother had more of a circle than my dad did.

Okay. Describe the schools you attended.

Okay. I remember very well starting kindergarten because they, in Germany, it was kind of a thing where you got a tüte. And a tüte was sort of, it's like a, like a big horn and that horn is filled up with gifts when you start going to kindergarten. And I remember that because it's almost like, similar to having a big bag when you go for Halloween. Like what did you get all. And you know, it would be the kind of crayons and papers and things like that. So...

And who gave this to you? Your parents? Friends?

Parents and friends. It's kind of like a celebration of going to kindergarten. And there was a public school. I remember that well. And I also then remember having to change schools when I... and that was, I think, in 1938, because after the *Kristallnacht* we no longer could go to a public school. We had to go to a Jewish school. And I remember that it was a whole different environment going to the Jewish school. I remember the name. It was called the *Josef Lehman Schule*. And in the public school, I used to play soccer and I would have non-Jewish friends. And then, of course, when I went to the *Josef Lehman Schule*, it was all Jewish. And that took an adjustment to be in a not really religious school, but a school that was only for kids who wore the Star of David. And that's when we started wearing the Star of David on our clothing, which, of course, was the law.

Do you remember what your teachers were like at the public school? Did you feel any kind of antisemitism then?

No, I did not. I really did not. I really didn't feel my Jewishness until we went to the Jewish school. I think it was at that time that I felt, "Why am I different from the other children?"

But you didn't experience antisemitism until later?

No. Right.

What were your favorite subjects?

Sports. [laughing]

[laughing] Recess.

My, my favorite subjects were non-scientific subjects, you know. I think I always did enjoy history and writing and reading. But, basically, I was not a mathematical, chemistry, physics kind of person. Never.

Okay. Now were you there long enough to graduate?

I really don't know. You know, in other words...

How old were you when you left?

I was nine and a half.

Okay.

So, and you know, we left so abruptly that I, I really... in other words, there was really nothing of saying goodbye to anybody, you know. We left in the middle of the night.

We'll touch on that. What did you do for fun as a youngster?

Well, for fun, we went to parks. We played a lot of soccer. I always loved to, you know, to play soccer. And we would, you know, go into the stores and look at things and buy marbles and things like that. And also, that we played in the neighborhoods. We played soccer, too. Like in the alleys of the apartment houses you could kick the ball back and forth and, in other words... And the other thing was also that I used to go with my dad when he would make home visits to patients, and wait in the car.

You liked doing that?

Yes, because he always would stop by at the bakery, get some hot rolls and some good sausage.

Okay. Did... were most of your friends, can you describe your friends? Were they...

There were two friends that I really had. One was a girl and one was a boy. And both of them were close friends. And I know that by the time we left, neither one of them were around anymore.

They were Jewish?

They were Jewish. And their families had, in my eyes at that age, disappeared.

Okay. How did you get along with your parents? Of course, you were young. What were you... at this time?

Right. Well, I think that, you know, my dad was like a typical Prussian disciplinarian. He was strict, but fair. And we kind of, you know, whatever my dad said, we obeyed. My mom was the, was the soft one in the family, and that's the person I turned to if I needed, you know, a little extra money to go to the movies. And I did go to the movies. And, she was

sort of a, more of the nice person. That's my memories. In other words, she never disciplined us and would always ameliorate whenever my dad, you know, had harsh words with us.

Were you ever rebellious?

No.

Okay.

I was never rebellious at that stage in my life.

Do you remember any issues that created tension between you and your parents?

No, not really.

At that time, did you belong to any organizations?

Yes. Right of, like, within about two blocks from us was the *Fasanenstraße Synagoge*, which was also kind of like, a little bit like a community center. And we used to go there for services, which were probably in our evaluation here, somewhat close to Reform - between Reform and Conservative. And there were activities through that synagogue.

Okay. Did you have any hobbies that you pursued at that time?

No. No.

What values or standards were most important to your parents that they tried to instill in you?

I think the values, you know, if I was to think back now, would be, you know, honesty, integrity, forthrightness and, and being open-minded when you meet people. In other words, recognizing that human beings are different, but not to prejudge anybody on the basis of how they look. I think those are the values that they instilled and that are still very important to me today.

How did these values affect your daily life?

Well, they affected my daily life, I think, for the, for the time to come because I think they formed a foundation for what was to be.

What was religious life like in your general community, around where you lived and the people you associated with?

I think, you know, I would have to say that we were not very religious. Certainly we observed the high holidays. Certainly we went to services. And also, you know, I can remember, you know, going to Sabbath services. The thing that always stands out to me is the cantor singing. And, of course, you know, in Germany the services are 90 percent by the cantor. The rabbi has a very small part in the services and basically just opens and closes the services. So I remember always the beautiful voices of the cantor.

Did your family attend *Shabbat* services on a regular basis?

I wouldn't say regular. I'd say on a monthly basis.

Monthly. Okay.

You know, and it usually was involved with a meal. But I, but I can remember, you know, my mother lighting the candles and my dad saying the *kiddush* and making the, the *bulkel* for the bread.

Okay. Which, which holidays were most important?

I think the holidays most important was Yom Kippur because it sort of re-emphasized the atoning of things that we had done that maybe were not 100 percent and sort of the starting, you know, of a, of a new book, so to speak, of a new record of what you do in your life.

Did your family celebrate any secular holidays?

I can't recall.

Okay. Describe your reli-... did you want to say something else?

No.

Describe your religious education.

My religious education, really, I don't have a memory of it in Germany. My religious education really started in Shanghai with going to the Talmud Torah. And, the Talmud Torah was very intense in terms of *Humash* and *Torah* and *Gemara*. And my recollection, this will sound funny to you now, is that the reason I went to Talmud Torah is because if you were a good student, you got a pair of shoes. And that was the only way to get a pair of shoes.

Interesting.

That, I remember...

I've never heard that.

... that very vividly. That if you were a good student and attended, then at the end of the year you got a pair of shoes.

That was for everyone who was a good student?

Right.

What impact, in Berlin, did the secular culture have on your life?

I think the impact was one of not really understanding what went on. In other words, when I would see the parades on the streets of the Nazis, I would go down and I would want to wear the *lederhosen* and the things that all the other kids wore in order to show their German-ness, you know, to be recognized as, this is my country, nationalism. And it was hard for me to understand why, you know, that we could not be a part of that. So I think what I'm saying to you is that I don't think I really had any explanations, you know, other than that, you know, you are a Jew and you cannot participate in activities that involve National Socialism.

Before that, were your parents more concerned about maintaining your Jewish identity or fitting in?

I would have to honestly say that my parents were more concerned with maybe, fitting in is not a... with surviving, I think, and being able to stay. And if it meant assimilation, I think that that was okay with them. You know, I just feel that they were very comfortable in Germany. The language, the culture, whatever religious aspect was to their life. I really think that if it wasn't for Hitler, we would have never left.

Were you encouraged to develop relationships with all people, rather than just Jews or were you ...

In the beginning. When I went to public school, I think I was encouraged with finding, you know, good friends and people. And it was not based on whether a child was Jewish or whether the child was a Gentile.

Did your family... were they interested in the secular culture? The art, the music, the philosophy? Did they attend...

About the only thing that I can think of is they were interested in music.

And they attended concerts?

Right. They did. Right. I remember that they liked to go to the opera and to concerts. But I don't remember any deep philosophical lectures, you know, that... I think it was more in the entertainment aspect.

Okay. When and how did you first become aware of the Nazi presence?

I think that I became acutely aware of it on *Kristallnacht* in November of 1938 when, below our apartment, which was on the first floor, below us was a Jewish leather goods shop. A very expensive, big leather shop with coats and purses and all of the leather goods kind of thing, and, and, I remember, you know, in our apartment, of my dad shutting off all the lights and telling all of us to lay on the floor and not to move, not to get up, even though the noise around us was horrendous with the windows breaking and, and the people shouting, and you could see, like flames, you know, torches, that type of thing. And this went on for hours, you know. It might have really been a shorter time, but it felt like it was, it felt like it was like from eleven at night till six the next morning. And the destruction, and the shouting, and the screaming and then, of course, all the signs on the apartment and on the store. I think this is when I really became aware of antisemitism.

But did you have any antisemitic experiences before *Kristallnacht* or recall anything getting there?

No, just after.

Okay. Do you remember your parents having any discussions at home about the Nazis and what was happening?

None. No. You know, there's one other incident that I remember very well. And that was my mother took my brother and I to a park. It was kind of a zoo, you know. It wasn't all zoo, but it was a park that had animals and things like that. And apparently they had special benches for Jews. You know, *Juden* bench. And apparently my mother sat down, you know, on a bench that was not marked for Jews. And a police officer came over to her and just bawled her out unmercifully. And my mother just took it all, and we were both standing there and kind of watching like, you know, how can this policeman insult our mother and scream at her and call her a pig, you know, and all of that kind of really nasty language. And then when we went home, I think this is when our parents kind of explained to us that, you know, the antisemitism and that we were lucky that we were able to get away with just being bawled out.

Did your... what actions, if any, did your parents take in response to the Nazi occupation?

Well, I am aware of two. One was that, I know there was a lot of talk between my parents after the *Kristallnacht* whether or not to send my brother and I to England in the *Kindertransport*. In other words, children under a certain age could still go to England, and this had a very limited time frame. It was only until 1939 that you could do that. See, then

the war started between England and Germany, started in '39. And so I, we could hear the discussion of, and kind of the feeling. And my mother, I think, was always, "Let's send them to England, you know, and then we can join them in England later on." And my dad always saying that everything is gonna be okay here. You know, we're okay. This is where I make my living and we're going to stay here. And so I remember those discussions, you know, whether or not to send us there. And I also, you know, after my father's death, I found a letter that I turned over to the Union Eagle College where my dad, back in '38, had written, you know, to kind of the Foreign Ministry in England, you know, asking whether he and his family could emigrate, you know, to England. And, and the reply from the Foreign Ministry was that we do not need any more doctors at this time. And so I turned that letter over, you know, for whatever meaning it has. But, it showed that we tried to get out but it was declined.

How did the Nazi presence change your life?

Well, it really changed our life when I and this one friend of mine went to a department store, and we were playing with the revolving door. You know how kids do? Keep turning around. And somehow a lady got caught in that, some old woman. And me and... and we both ran because we were afraid. But I got caught and he didn't. And I was taken up, you know, kind of the police or the security people. And they called my dad. And my dad came. And, you know, was able somehow to get me released. But this is when my dad said to me, you know, "I don't think you realize that we all could have been sent to concentration camps." And this is the first time, you know, when I heard, you know, this, the term of concentration camp. They called it *KZ-Lager*. You know that's what the German word for concentration camp was. And this is basically when my dad sort of laid down the law to me and said, you know, "You don't do anything anymore that can get us into trouble. You know, you're not going out. You're staying home. And we need to know wherever you go, but you can't risk the family into this kind of a danger anymore."

So your life did change dramatically?

Right. From then on, you know, I knew that it was school, come home, and that's it.

Now you already described *Kristallnacht*. Do you remember the April 1933 boycott? You might have been too young.

Yeah. I was.

Or book burnings? Do you remember...

Well, I remember the book burnings, you know. And, of course, the book burnings also occurred on *Kristallnacht*.

And what about the Nuremberg race laws? Do you have any recollection of those?

No. The only thing I kind of vaguely remember on that was, sort of like, one of my mother's brothers was married to a Gentile in Germany. And I think, you know, they sent him to America real quick, you know, in order for her not to get into trouble. Because I think in that early part, the onus was more on the Gentile woman who married a Jew than it was on the Jew. You know, it was *Rassenschande*. You know, in other words, it's the Gentile that embarrassed her race by marrying a Jew.

That's right. Okay. Now, you wore the Star of David, you said.

Right. Sure.

What was it like to, to wear it and be prohibited from public places and... can you tell how you felt or...

I mean, it's hard, really, you know, to reflect on that. I think it was a mixture of things, you know. I think on the one hand, you know, it identified me as a Jew, you know, and yet on the other hand, it made people say, "There's a Jew." And I, I really feel I was too young to, to have been inhibited by that.

Did any non-Jews help you during this time?

Yeah, one family. He was an attorney and he and she were, I think, the closest friends of my parents. I think they knew each other for many years. In fact, they took our dog when we left. They came in the morning and picked up our dachshund that we had and were very close with.

How did they help you? What did they do?

I think they helped us. He was an attorney and I think they helped us with some of the legal moves that my dad had to do in order kind of to be ready to go when the short time warning came through, you've got to go.

Was this risky for them to do that sort of thing for you?

Yes.

Why do you think they risked their lives for you?

I think they risked their lives for us because they just could not accept what Hitler was doing. But, again, you know, I think that they were such a small group of people, that by the time we left in '41, that I think they knew, you know, that Hitler couldn't be stopped. You know Hitler was extremely victorious by 1941. He had run over just about everything in Europe.

And at that...

England was close to defeat.

And at that time you were ten? Is that correct?

At that time I was ten. Right.

Were you ever deported to a concentration camp?

No. We never were. You know, and, you know, we kind of put everything together and left in the middle of the night.

How did you manage to escape before being deported? Can you tell me about that?

The story that my dad told us is that he was able to medically help a very high police official at a time when those police officials could not go to Jewish doctors. But he could not go to a non-Jewish doctor with the kind of illness that he had. And so, apparently that he gave my dad a few days notice and said, "Hugo, there's a list up here of people for us to pick up. Your family is on that list. You've got to get out. I can postpone things by 48 hours, 72 hours. But, just go."

So can you describe how you left, what you did?

Basically, the way we left, it was in the middle of the night that my dad woke us up and said that, "Here is your suitcase. Let's go." And we went, it was probably something like 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, and we went to the train station and we went on a train. And I can certainly vividly remember that. You know, going to a train station with all the steam and smoke and noise. And we went to Poland.

Did you leave everything behind or had you... did you have a chance to dispose of anything or sell it?

No. We, we left everything behind. And that lawyer, you know, said that he would take care of everything. So we just left everything and, of course, you know, we never heard again on that. And I'm not implying anything on the lawyer, but, in other words, he probably did what he could.

Okay.

As a matter of fact, of course, you know, years later, when I went back to where we lived, there was again a doctor's clinic and so my guess would be that it always stayed as a doctor's clinic, and certainly the instrumentation has changed over the years, but I could see exactly where we lived and all of that all came back to me.

But your personal belongings, I mean, were you able to take pictures or anything with you?

We did. There was an album that we took.

And that was it?

And I can't find it anywhere. But there was an album of pictures from our childhood. But it probably, over the years, you know, just got lost.

And so you went to Poland.

Right.

Okay, and why don't you tell me what happened after Poland. You eventually went to Shanghai, so let's get to Shanghai.

Well, that, you know, the only place in the world that was left for Jewish people was Shanghai. Everything else, by this time, was closed or very, very complicated. It would have involved a lot of, you know, very complicated things. So Shanghai, you know, was a, was an open port. It was occupied by the Japanese and the Japanese had no problems with the Jewish people coming there. In fact, it was almost, they wanted you there. So the only way to get to Shanghai was what's called, you know, through the Siberian Route. And so, basically, then from Poland, we went into Russia, to Moscow. Then from Moscow, we took the Siberian Express which takes seven days to Manchuria. You go to, you know, up there, to what is called basically Manchuria, Manchukuo. Then you go to Dairen which is North Korea. And then from Dairen, this is all by train, and then from Dairen, you take a ship down to Shanghai. And that was on a Japanese ship. So it was a long, long journey, you know. And I know that in every place that we stopped, that there was a person from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society that would help us all they could in terms of keeping us moving. But sometimes we'd have to, like in Moscow, we had to stay a couple of days for the paperwork to be done for us to go to Siberia and to Manchuria. And when we went to Poland, which was Warsaw, there was already a lot of problems there. And basically, the guy from the highest Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society basically said to us, "Stay on the train. Just keep going."

So how long do you think it took you to get from Poland to Shanghai?

It took us... I know exactly the dates, January 7 to January 21.

So it took a couple of weeks then.

Right.

Okay. And so then you started life in Shanghai.

Right.

Okay. This concludes the pre-war experiences.

Okay.

So you, you spent the war in Shanghai. And you had to stay there. So what do you... what led up to you becoming free, so to speak? You know, when you were no longer in danger.

Right. You know Shanghai had some 12, 13,000 Jewish refugees during the war. And we all lived in a ghetto that was strictly controlled with where you could not go in and could not go out. In other words, it was a concentrated area of people having to live and take care of all their needs within that area. It sustained itself. But as the war in the Far East came to an end in 1945, that, there was a lot of bombings by the Allied plane because Shanghai was one of the dominant naval yards for the Japanese. The Japanese fleet was in Shanghai because of its horrendous port. And so there was, and the ghetto that we lived in was right on the waterfront. In other words, when the bombings occurred on a daily basis, we could see the planes. We could see the damage of the bombs, and sometimes, of course, the bombs would miss. But, there was, you know, a lot of talk about American forces landing in Shanghai or around Shanghai. Luckily, Japan capitulated shortly before that. But right after Japan capitulated to the Allied forces, the American armed forces moved into Shanghai very quickly because you really had three kinds of groups there at that time. You had the Japanese that were basically staying there in order to surrender to the American forces. They had all their military there. You had already the Mao Tse-Tung forces there on the north of Shanghai. And then, of course, you had the forces from Chiang Kai-shek, you know the nationalist government that already was fighting with Mao Tse-Tung. So shortly before the American forces landed in Shanghai, there was a lot of turmoil and a lot of looting and a lot of killing. And people were changing uniforms like we change clothes in order to be ready for whoever was going to occupy Shanghai. And... so there was a liberation, and especially, of course, I remember extremely well, you know, kind of an American commander. In fact, I remember his last name. It was Schumacher. He was Jewish. Not just by name Schumacher, who immediately came into the Jewish community and said, you know, "Everything will be okay here, and we're going to get you all the medical supplies and foods and we'll take care of everything." So there was a liberation feeling and a feeling of great relief that we survived. It was a survival type of thing, and with great celebration.

So you were, you were liberated by the Americans then?

Yes, absolutely.

And were you actually taken out of the ghetto at that time or you just were...

We just stayed. Just the freedom of movement became... in other words, we could go to the rest of Shanghai.

Okay. What was your physical condition of you and your parents? Were you malnourished or ill in any way?

We were not necessarily undernourished because there was always plenty of rice. But we had absolutely never seen any luxuries. There was absolutely a shortage of milk, butter, soap. So a lot of these things where that suddenly, you know, here was plenty of butter and plenty of milk and all of these things, you know. So the, the main thing about Shanghai is the diseases. You know the typhoid, the cholera, and all the kind of diseases for which there was no cure.

What was your mental state at this time?

Mental state was euphoric. You know, in other words, it was like, the time will come now to start a new life. We're gonna get out of here and we're gonna go back to civilization.

Okay. Describe how you tried to put your life back together.

Well, at that time, you know, I had graduated from, you know, what was called vocational high school. In other words, in Shanghai, you could finish school at 16 if you're going into a trade. And if you went to a university, you had to go another year or two. So I started, when I graduated from vocational high school in Shanghai, then I started learning a trade, which was electrician. And I went to the ORT, who trained me to be an electrician. And then I had a job offer from the American Joint Distribution Committee as a clerk, messenger, so to speak. And I took that job, and basically, I then started earning money in order to become independent and to leave Shanghai. And I knew that I would someday have to leave by myself.

Okay. Where did you want to go?

I wanted to go to the United States. I had ample of opportunities to go to Israel. They had ships in the harbor that would take young people like me to Israel. Many of my friends went. They all wound up in the *Haganah* or the *Irgun*.

[Tape ends and then interview resumes.]

This is continuing the interview with Tom Lewinsohn. Tom you were telling me how a lot of your friends went to Israel but you wanted to come to the United States.

There were other opportunities too. There were... You could go to Australia who needed young men. You could go back to Germany where there was certainly a shortage of men as a result of World War II. But I wanted to come to America.

Okay. How... how much longer did you stay in Shanghai? How long was it before you were able to leave?

It took till June of 1948 before I could leave Shanghai.

Okay. And where did you actually go first?

I went by myself and went to San Francisco.

Okay, now why, why did you have to go by yourself? Your family couldn't come as a unit?

My brother had already left. He went with the *yeshiva* to Canada. He left in 1947. My parents wanted to stay because there were Jewish people to take care of. And by that time my dad was the chief physician of the hospital. And so he, just like earlier in Berlin, he felt an obligation to stay and to take care of the people.

Okay.

And so they decided to stay in Shanghai and figured, you know, it's okay over here. And, but, let our sons go and make their own.

So you went to San Francisco.

I went to San Francisco. And...

How did you get there? By boat?

By ship.

By ship?

***General Meigs* was the name of the ship. And I felt for the first time, I think, that my life, I felt as an adult. In other words, I was by myself. I was on a big ship coming to America.**

Were you frightened or...

No. Excited.

Excited.

I really wasn't frightened. And I know we stopped in several ports. You know, we stopped in Hong Kong. We stopped in Manila. We stopped in Honolulu before San Francisco, and in each of those ports, you know, I was able to go ashore as a young man and have a good time. And I certainly can remember that!

I bet! What were your first impressions upon arriving in this country?

My first impressions were unbelievably to describe. In other words, it was a dream come true. That, I think, this is really when I realized that I had survived and that everything was gonna be okay. And, I mean, it just... it's just, un-, indescribable to step off the ship and be in San Francisco. And, you know, and there were people who had come from Shanghai that knew I was coming and they basically... so, you know, there were people to welcome me in San Francisco, and... But they, by that time, already had their own life and I was on my own.

So did you actually live there for a while, in San Francisco?

I lived in a hotel. Hotel Ellis, until my \$80.00 ran out. I had \$80.00 when I came, and even though at the prices of 1948, it didn't last forever. And so I called this friend of mine who was in the Navy who was one of the people that liberated Shanghai who lived in Erie, Pennsylvania. A Gentile person. And he said to me, you know, "Whether you mean it or not," he said, "if you ever come to the United States, please, please call me." So I called him. His name is Bob Ornsbee, O-R-N-S-B double E. And I said, "Bob, I'm in the United States. You told me to give you a call. And I'm here in San Francisco and really don't know what else to do. I have to wait for my first papers before I can join the Army, but I don't, it takes 90 days and I'm not going to have enough money." And he said, "Go to the Western Union and give them your name." I went to the Western Union in San Francisco and there was a railroad ticket for me to come to Erie. And that same evening, I took a train to Erie, Pennsylvania.

Okay. How did you end up in Kansas City?

I wound up in Kansas City. I was in the Air Force and, during that time, my parents had come back to the United States from Germany.

They went back to Germany?

They were deported back to Germany.

Okay.

And, but and then they came legally from Germany to the United States. And, at first, my dad worked in a hospital in Crownsville, Maryland. And, after one year of being there, a fraternity brother of his was in Osawatomie, Kansas as a doctor. A Dr. Engel. And he received a position in Hawaii. And he knew that my dad, you know, didn't like to, the work he was doing there in Maryland, and so he said to my dad, "Come to Osawatomie. The superintendent here will hire you sight unseen just based on my recommendation and the fact that, you know, are a good doctor." And so my parents went to Osawatomie, Kansas while I was in Korea.

Now did you join the Army immediately after, as soon as you were able, after you came to this country?

No. I first went one year to high school in Erie.

Oh.

To American high school, and...

Okay.

...when I finish that year of high school, then I went.

Yeah. Okay.

But, so every time I would meet somebody in the service, officer or whatever, you know, and say, "Where's Osawatomie, Kansas?" And, of course, I mispronounced it. I would always say Osavatomie. Nobody knew where it was. And finally a captain said to me, "Would you spell it for me?" And I spelled it for him, and he said, "Oh. Osawatomie." And that's, then I could find it on the map. Where's Kansas City?

Okay.

And so when I was getting ready to be discharged, you know, which was in 1955, I, of course, wanted to be close to my parents. And so I looked on where is a university close to Osawatomie and it was KU. So that's how I wound up in Kansas.

Okay. What were your first impressions of Kansas City?

Well, I landed at the old downtown airport. And that's the one building airport over on the side there. And it was about a one-hour drive, or one and a half hours, to Osawatomie, and I really loved the open space. It was a wintry day, and there was still snow on the sides and I really felt like I'm home.

You obviously knew English already, didn't you?

By that time, I knew English. Yes.

Where did you learn English?

I learned English in the movies.

In Shanghai or in...

In Shanghai. Right.

Really?

I really never had English as a language. But I went to the movies and I wanted to understand the movies. And that's how I learned English.

Okay. How did you adjust here to this new place?

To Kansas?

Well, yeah. Or to, probably your biggest adjustment might have been when you first came, do you think? Or was your biggest adjustment after you got out of the service, here, starting your new life?

Well, I would have to think that my biggest adjustment was when I came to the United States when I went to Erie, Pennsylvania. See, San Francisco was still a lot of foreign people and a lot of Shanghai people, so it was more of the same in a different land. But when I went to Erie, there was no foreigners. I was the only one in high school.

Did you face discrimination there?

No. Just the opposite, really.

Really?

You know I faced a little bit, you know, like you probably know in high school of their cliques. And, you know, like when you start moving into some of these groups, then there will be people that say, you know, "Hey, he's not one of us." And I really had absolutely, in other words, I wanted to be in sports. I wanted to be one of the boys. And I went at night to the dives and to the dance places, and I went to the lake, you know, with the beer parties and whatever. In other words, I wanted to be... I didn't want to be isolated anymore. I felt that the, you know, the Jewishness should not keep me from being in groups even though I'm the only Jew. In other words, in the high school that I attended, and by the way, the 53 union [sic – may mean the 53rd reunion] letter just came the other day.

Oh!

And I went back to the yearbook, I think, in the class that I graduated was three Jewish people. So the Jewishness in Erie, and that's high school, was not...

Not an issue?

Not an issue, and not there.

What were your biggest challenges do you feel?

I think the biggest challenges were, you know, to be accepted and not to be looked at, as like, he don't understand or he doesn't fit in. I think those were the challenges. Certainly, you know, to, for me to have to graduate from high school again was a challenge. But everything came out fine and I had a scholarship from a Catholic college when I graduated high school.

Really. Did you talk about your war time experiences?

All the time.

Did you?

Yeah.

Who listened?

All the classes. In other words, that, when I went to high school there, it was sort of, almost an instant celebrity. You know, the history teachers, the geography teachers, the civic clubs, all of them wanted me to tell my story.

So you told it in the class then?

In the class and in the clubs.

Okay.

And the other thing I also remember, there was a Jewish department store and when the rabbi took me there to get me American clothing, quote, unquote, it was all given to me.

Who became your closest friends?

In high school?

Not necessarily. Just in general who? After you came here, I guess. Just in general. High school, after you came here... Were they fellow survivors or were they just people you just liked or bonded with?

I think really the bonding, of course, in the military, you know, bonding is essential. In other words, when you live in barracks and when you are dependent upon other people and the necessity to be accepted, you know, you form some close friends. To tell you, until I came to Kansas City, all my friends, closest friends, were Gentile. And even when we lived

in Topeka, for the eight years after I married Alice, our... some of our best friends were Gentile people from the Air Force.

Okay.

Behind us, next to us. You know, and certainly we had a few good Jewish friends, but it seemed that, for some reason or another, I wanted just not to be isolated with just Jewish friends.

Were there any people who were helpful in getting you settled? Like you said, your friend in Erie, obviously was, the rabbi...

Right. There was one other family who also, you know, Jonas was their last name. And they would a lot of times have me over Friday evening. In other words, they knew the Gentile family, it was a prominent family in Erie, but they wanted to make sure that Tom has a Jewish family too. And so they were basically my Jewish family in Erie, those people. Certainly they are long gone by now. But, so, you know, I wanted to have both.

Okay. Now, you, when did you become an American citizen?

I became an American citizen in Japan.

Oh. That's interesting.

Right. There was an issue during the Korean War of that if we, something should happen to us, who are we? You know? And so Eisenhower, at that time, either initiated or gave some kind of an order of the thing, that anyone who served in a combat zone for 30 days is automatically an American citizen. And so...

So you were in the military then?

Right. So, when I, one time when I came back to Japan, there was a thing for me to appear before some judge in Tokyo. And there was like 4- or 500 of us from all the Jewish or whatever they were. And we became American citizens. So, my citizenship certificate, which I still have, of course, you know, says, "Where did you become a citizen?" In Tokyo, Japan.

Was that a significant event for you?

Absolutely. It was a very significant event, and the base commander, you know, made a big deal of it at a parade. So it was a very big event, you know, with pictures and all of that stuff.

What was the significance of it for you personally?

It was very much, you know, in other words, it, that I belonged. I was an American. It's just like, you know, even now, when we travel, and I show my American passport it's something I'm very proud of.

Now you went to KU. What did you study there?

I studied personnel administration, you know, and went through graduate school to get a double masters in public administration and in political science, because I always felt like after I fulfill my career that I wanted to teach. Which all of, all of my objectives have come true.

Okay. Describe what, describe your career and your professional life here in America.

My professional life started when I started as an intern, which was part of the Public Administration Program from KU. You start as an intern. And I started that with the State of Kansas in 1956. And I was, you know, what was called a Civil Service Examiner, which meant I went to agencies of the state and administered selections, classification, recruitment, counseling, grievances. In other words, like a roving Personnel Director. And I worked myself up to what they call Senior Examiner, and stayed with the state for eight years. And then in 1964, my major advisor at KU called me up and said that Professor Drury who is still alive, D-R-U-R-Y, and said, "Tom, the City Manager of Kansas City called me to recommend a personnel person who really knows his business from A to Z. And I want you to know that I recommended you." He said, "I don't know what's going to happen or not, but I want you to know that I recommended you as the person that can do the job." And a few days later, I had a call from the Personnel Director of Kansas City, Missouri, a person named Cole Hendricks, who is retired now from Charleston, Virginia. And, he asked if I'd come in for an interview. And so I came in for an interview. And to make a long story short, they hired me as a, what's called Chief Examiner and Assistant Director in 1964. And he said to me that he wasn't going to stay more than two years, and then I would be ready to be the Personnel Director. And he left to become City Manager in Virginia, and I became here Director of Personnel for a city that employs six and a half thousand people and is highly unionized. I had a staff of 42 people in all facets of Human Resources, and I served there for 29 years as Director and retired in 1993 in order to teach and to take a part-time position as Personnel Director with the City of Prairie Village. And, I'm still actively doing those two things, even though I retired from Kansas City, Missouri.

Okay. What kind of hobbies and recreational pleasures have you come to enjoy?

Well, I think that my enjoyment is our poker group, which, you know, is more than 30 years now.

Of which I am a member.

And, I think, you know, the people in that group is my closest friends. People like Rudy and Theo, but...

Any other hobbies or...

Well, we have traveled as a hobby. And Alice and I play a lot of games almost on a daily basis. We are both excellent ping pong players. So there isn't a day goes by when we don't play ping pong. I like to sort of exercise, but I've fallen down on that a little bit. I'm beginning to pick it up again. I do 30 minutes of treadmill every day now. But in terms, you know, of, like, hobbies like golf or something like stamp collecting, no. But I tell you, Alice and I, we look at each other a lot of times, and we say we don't know how we are able to face everything in it, in the time that we have. But we love to travel, and we do our share of that. And we basically enjoy our children and we enjoy our life.

Speaking of Alice, how did you two meet?

Well, we met through blind dates. I was going to KU and a person by the name of, we were becoming friends with a person, Fred Sachs. And we, you know, started kind of socializing with some of the young Jewish people in Kansas City, and my brother was working at Osawatomie at that time too. And the thing... And so I had a date with a girl named Sue Fine and my brother had a date, and I can't remember her name. And Alice had a date with Fred Sachs. And we were going out that night to the Orchid Room. There was some big jazz pianist there. And, and Alice and I kind of looked at each other, and both of us being able to talk German, we started talking German. And not only was I aware that I was with another date and she was with another guy, but somehow, you know, there was a spark between us.

Do you know what that spark was, other than that you could both speak German, or can you put your finger on it?

Yeah, I think for both of us, it was, this is the kind of person I'd like to marry someday.

You just knew.

Right. And so about a few days later, I wrote to Alice and said, "You remember me?" And...

She did.

And she did. And, so, we dated for about a couple of years and then we got married.

Can you describe your wedding?

Yeah, the wedding was... I think we were, you know, the first ones in the chapel of B'nai Jehudah, 1957. And we did a family wedding.

How many guests were there?

I think no more than 15. And that, and I know that one of my mother's brothers came, and Uncle Paul came. Certainly my brother was there. And, and I was married before him. And so, you know, we had a small wedding and we had a sit down dinner then. I think it was at the Muehlebach. And then we went on our honeymoon to Colorado Springs, and that was almost 43 years ago.

Who, who officiated at your wedding?

Rabbi Mayerberg. And I remember two things about Rabbi Mayerberg. Number one was that he asked me for the marriage certificate for him to fill out, and I told him I never received one. And what it was, was there was this big package from the county and I thought it was all advertising and stuff, so I threw it away. I'm not a person that keeps things. So I had to get another one. And the other thing I remember is when I tried to give Rabbi Mayerberg an honorarium for the ceremony, he wouldn't accept it, because he said that Alice was his favorite.

Nice story. Was Alice working at the time?

No, she was still going to school at UMKC. And, but then, you know, after we got married, she moved to Topeka. See, that's '57, and I was already living in Topeka in '56.

Oh.

But I waited until she graduated. I figured, let her folks put her, finish her through school.

That was a smart move. Tell me when your children were born and what their names are.

Okay. Debbie was born in August of 1960 in Topeka. And Bob was born in 1963 also in Topeka.

Okay. In light of your past experience, the experience you had going through the war, etc., how did having children affect you? And what were your emotions?

Well... I think my emotions were... I mean, first of all, I think that I felt that we were blessed for having healthy children at birth, and for having a boy and a girl. And I kind of felt, you know, at the time, I think maybe selfishly that it would continue the, the Lewinsohn name, you know, on the thing, just like my brother in Oregon. You know he has children who have boy children, and that, so. But I, you know, kind of, now feel that that's all not important really. And both of them are okay. And, you know, certainly, I, you

always look back on children, what would you have done differently and, and, I think, you know, there's kind of a 20/20 hindsight really doesn't work. You know, at a stage in life now where I say to myself, it's, they're individuals. Just love them.

Are your children named after any family members who might have perished in the Holocaust, or did you have any family members...?

No. No.

Okay.

I didn't really know until years later of all the people from the family that perished in the Holocaust because my parents never talked about it and I never thought of raising the issue.

Did you talk about your, your experiences with your children?

Yes. I, you know, have talked to both of them about the experiences. You know, I think they are aware of it. I think they are respectful or proud of it. But I really think to them that's more of really in the past.

How old were they when they found out about what you went through?

Well, they were already, you know, in their 20s. I think that Bob, you know, he and I didn't talk about it 'til he came back from Phoenix, which was in 1985. And Debbie, kind of also one time I sat down with her and we talked for about two hours about it also. I think they know, but they don't know the details at all.

How come... Why did you wait so long, and what prompted you to finally talk to them about it?

I think it's the kind of thing that you put off and you always say to yourself that there'll come a time and that, I think with me it was more that I was waiting for them to ask, that would say to me that they're ready for it now.

But, but were you the one who initiated it?

No. They initiated it.

They did ask about.

They asked about it. They initiated it.

Okay.

You know. And, I mean, over the time there have been enough articles, you know, in the paper about my past and things like that. And they read those articles. So, they were aware of it all. It just didn't mean much to them until ...

How did they... until you told them about you.

Right. Right.

How did they react when you told them your experiences?

I think they reacted to that they were very proud of their dad.

What, if any, post-war events have had a great significance to you, such as the Cold War, the civil rights movement, Vietnam, you know, anything that has happened socially?

Well, I mean, I always, you know, really keep up with what goes on in Israel because somehow I always feel that that's also my home. I think the first time that I really sort of was really taken was the, in terms of something that just shattered me completely, was the assassination of John Kennedy. I can't really explain it all to you, but it just... I think for two or three days, watching, you know, the TV, and all of that, it was just like something was destroyed that, that would affect my life, I think. So, you know, other than that, you know, certainly, I identified very strongly with the problems of racism in this country, you know. In other words, that in my work as a teacher and as a Human Resource Manager, you know, I just absolutely work everyday on trying, you know, to enlighten people against bigotry, against hatred, and so... Even last night, you know, when I watched this thing of the Confederate flag and those things, and, you know, and the Martin Luther King episode, you know, I just, it just reiterates to me that we've got a long way to go to have brotherly love or, you know, to accept each other as human beings and not based on religion, gender, or race, or age or, you know, in other words, just for people to be people. And I, I really feel that I understand, because of my background, what black people feel when we think maybe they are over sensitive. But they are over sensitive because of the same reason that we are over sensitive about our Jewishness. And that we see or feel antisemitism just like they feel and detect, you know, anti-black people. And, so I, you know, that's something that is very much on my mind. That we need to move forward and that maybe our children and their children may see a better day.

Do your Holocaust memories penetrate your life today very much?

They do. It's kind of a... I try to read, and it's an emotional thing. And I think what the emotional thing is, is just like here last October, we went to Washington. And I'd been to the Holocaust Museum before, but Alice hadn't been with me. And it's very hard to go through that. And I think it's the kind of thing of that, where you have the guilt feeling of that of, what was it that made God protect me when really, you know, I, like other millions, could have easily been in that movie of *Schindler's List*. In other words, there was

something there, you know, especially, you know, when we didn't leave till 1941 and, basically, you know, Hitler, at that point, said the Jews that are left, nobody wants. Just like the Voyage of the Damned. You know, the *St. Louis*. You know when it came back from the United States over here that was a signal to Hitler that nobody wants the Jews. And so I think that's part of the thing of that, how can I... Why was I so fortunate to have this kind of a life, to have this kind of success, to have these kind of good friends, when, you know, I could been an ash.

How did the war affect your attitude toward religion? Did you ever stop believing in God?

No. I never stopped believing in God at all. And, and I probably inwardly am more religious than it would look to the outside. In other words, when I go to Temple, I go to pray. And I listen to what the sermon is and I listen to what the cantor or the choir sings. In other words, it's a, it's a, to me, it's a good experience to go to Temple and I enjoy doing that. So I've... you know, I certainly can't explain theology and things like that, but I definitely know that I'm Jewish. I'm proud to be Jewish. And everybody always knew that I was Jewish. In other words, for me to be in the government circles that I was for all these years and still am, you know, there aren't many Jewish executives in the government service. But everybody always knew that Tom was Jewish. And so I never hid it and I, and I never had any repercussions as a result of it. In other words, I always feel that if, if you're a professional, you're a professional, and it doesn't matter what religion you are.

What is your favorite Jewish holiday now, would you say?

Well, probably Passover. It's a good meal.[laughing]

[laughing] What traditions from before the war have you shared with your family here?

That's a hard one. I think the traditions of family, being together, accepting each other. You know, I think that's just like, you know, even though our daughter is divorced, you know, from her husband and our grandchild is just as close to us as our children. And they come for the Jewish holidays, Passover. And so I think it's the, it's the unit of the family and that we have to be there for each other.

You seem to have adjusted very, fairly easily to a normal life. Now what would you attribute your ability to do that to?

I attribute that strictly to the interpersonal skills. That it's not hard for me to move towards people. You know, it's just like, you know, when I started with Prairie Village. It didn't take very long at all for me to know the people, to have friends within Prairie Village and to reach out. I think that's what it takes, is to reach out to people.

So it's kind of a natural ability that you have.

Right.

What does being an American mean to you?

Well, I think, you know, it means to me the, the ability to express one's self, the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion. So the basic freedoms is what's important to me. And certainly, I also appreciate the, the, the good life of the material things that you can achieve in this country. And I do believe, you know, that in this country, everyone who wants to work can have a life. In other words, it may not be the kind of opportunities that once existed for Joyce Hall or for Ewing Kaufman in their basement with the pills and greeting cards. But I think it's still a place where if you want to set your mind to working hard, that you can have a good life.

Do you think most Americans take their freedom for granted?

Yeah, I do. You know, I think Americans come together in a time of crisis. You know, I think it's in crisis that they see the benefits of this country. But when the economy is the way it is, I think some of the young people don't know really what adversity, or unemployment, or lack of basic medical care, what that would be like.

Okay. This concludes the formal interview. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

No. I think we've really covered it well.

Okay. We did. So this is, this concludes Tom Lewinsohn's interview.