

Sylvan Siegler Interview

April 4, 2000

Today is Tuesday, April 4th, and we are in the home of Mr. Sylvan Siegler for the Portrait Project interview. We are in his dining room and are about to begin. What was your name at birth? What was your birth name?

It was spelled S-Y-L-W-E, my first name. In other words, the spelling of that name changed.

And how was that pronounced?

Sylwe.

Sylwe?

Um-hmm.

And the last name was still Siegler. Okay.

The last name was the same.

And you were born where?

In Germany and the name of the town was ... shall I spell it for you?

Sure.

K-A-I-S-E-R-S-E-S-C-H. Kaisersesch, Germany.

Okay. And do you know the circumstances of your birth? Were you born at home or in a hospital or...

I'm sure I was born at home.

Okay. And what were your parents' names?

My father's name was Bernhard, which was spelled B-E-R-N-H-A-R-D, and my mother's name was, at that time, spelled A-M-A-L-I-A, Amalia.

What was the role of your mother ... your mother and father in the household? What ... did they have traditional roles? Did they ...

They had traditional roles.

So your mother was a house ...

My mother was a house, home-keeper but she also had a little store in the lower part of the house where she sold notions and things of that sort and it was one of the first things, of course, that was impacted by the boycott of Jewish stores in 1934 [sic – 1933].

Okay. What was your father? What was his occupation?

He was a cattle trader, as almost all the Jews in that part of Germany were. They traveled, and bought cattle, and sold cattle, and we kept some cattle. We owned some cattle, fed them. We had a barn right next to the house - immediately next to the house. And when I was born my father's parents lived upstairs in the house and they died in the early years of my life, and... But my mother came there as a young bride and took care of my father's mother and father while they spent their remaining years in the home.

So your home was more ... would you consider it more like a farm town or was it ...

Well, it was a fairly rural community. I mean, there was no major business there. There was some stores and other people owned some land. We had a little bit of land there and I know we also had some feeding areas where I would take the cows when I was a little boy and watch them and march them home. And we had some chickens. That was pretty much the extent of our livestock. And then we had a garden. Grew some fruit and vegetables. So it was a semi-rural, generally rural area.

That's neat. Describe the members of your family like their names and ages and relationship to you.

All right. You want my parents?

Sure, go ahead and just go on down from there.

My father was born in, on April 28th, 1896 and my mother was born on November 2nd, 1902. I have a younger brother who was born ... I was born in 1925. My brother was born on February 12, 1928 and that was the extent of our immediate family. My father also had a brother who lived there with his wife. They had no children. And they, in fact, were the people to whom our house was turned over when we left and who later, with his wife and all the other remaining Jews in that town, perished in the Holocaust. And then there were cousins. There were some other Siegler in town. In fact, there was another Bernhard

Siegler, spelled the same way as my father, who was a cousin. And there was another family, also Siegler, and there were probably a half dozen or so Jewish families there, enough so that they could get a *minyan* for synagogue services. And then there were some neighboring towns, which were walk-able, two or three miles away, something of that sort. And people would come over on the holidays, and on *Shabbat* and ... On *Shabbat* frequently and there was always a *minyan*. And they had a little house, which served as a synagogue. Little building, upstairs for the women, downstairs for the men. And they had a Jewish butcher and my father, too, was a *shokhet*. He was authorized to slaughter. A lot of the people learned that there because of the nature of the community and things. But, the whole town probably had a population of around 1500 people, predominantly Catholic. Large Catholic Church which was high steeple which was visible from miles around. And a few Protestant families, but mostly Catholic and I know, when I went to kindergarten, I went to a parochial kindergarten with, taught by the sisters and nuns, and then this handful of Jews that were there.

Okay. So your neighborhood was mostly Catholic?

Right.

The street where you lived, were there a lot of kids? Were there ...

No, there weren't a great many kids but I had some friends when going to school and that continued until, well just a few years when the Nazis came and they went to Hitler Youth activities and things that I couldn't join in. But I had one good friend who was the only person who came to the train station when we left to say goodbye. Years later when I went back for my one visit back to Kaisersesch with my son to show him, because he was anxious to see where his grandparents were buried and where we'd come from, and this young man was one person from my kindergarten class who had perished after the war. There were a number of people that I'd gone to kindergarten with who were still there and they have, they had five-year reunions of that kindergarten class and some years ago, 10 or 15 years ago, they sent me a notice about it. And the year I went was, I think, 15 years ago and I couldn't make it for the reunion itself but I happened to be in London for a bar meeting and our son joined us in London and my wife and he and I traveled to Germany - drove around, and spent the day in Kaisersesch and we visited with some of these people there.

I bet that was awesome.

It was heavy.

Yeah.

It was very heavy.

I bet. Okay. Back to your home, what was the inside of your home like? I mean, do you remember how it was decorated or how it was furnished?

No, I don't remember too many details. It did not have indoor plumbing. We had an outdoor privy that we went to by the barn. Of course, as I say the barn was right next to it. And my mother was a neat housekeeper and we had a few things, mainly religious objects that came from the home such as a cloth that we use every year at *Pesach* for the *Seders*, something knitted, crocheted that we preserved and brought along. But, I don't remember much in the way of artwork or anything of that sort.

Okay. Would you consider your family well off or were they ...

No. They were not rock-poor as we were when we came to this country, but they were relatively middle-... lower-end of middle-class. We didn't have a car. We didn't have a telephone but my father, in the course of his business, he had a motorcycle and he would go to these various places to buy cattle and so forth. And we have a picture of him on the motorcycle years and years ago. But I would say we were probably, probably lived more comfortably than some of the non-Jewish neighbors that we had, but it was not comparable to what those people lived in after the war when they enjoyed prosperity over there. It was probably on the lower end of the scale.

Okay. And did you, as a family did you ever take vacations or ...

No, I don't recall that we did very much with vacations. My mother's parents lived in a town called Gerolstein, G-E-R-O-L-S-T-E-I-N. There's a product that you can buy in the grocery store here called Gerolsteiner Sprudel, which is a mineral water sort of like Perrier. Comes from that town and I recall when I went there, I went there once or twice during the summer to ... during summers to visit my grandparents and it was already the beginning of the Nazi times and the, the labor corps young people marched close to the house so there was no mistake about hearing them and they sang anti-Jewish songs and so forth. Really vicious songs and here I was a little boy of 7, 8 or something like that, but there was no question what they were doing and what was happening.

What were some of your favorite things to eat when you were growing up?

Well, I was ... I liked vegetables. And since I mentioned my grandparents, they had, I could recall they had a garden where they had cauliflower growing. I mean I can recall something like that. And they were probably a little bit better off than we were and so they possibly had a little bit better things to eat, although we certainly didn't suffer. We ... there was always enough on the table, unlike some situations when we first came to this country and had a rough time of it. But, I don't recall specific foods. I mean I recall some foods that were ... like my mother would have a potato *kugel* every *Shabbat* and my wife has done that for over 40 years that we've been married here although she was not raised in that culture. And my father always loved soup and loved certain cuts of meat and so forth. So we had that. And I suppose we had potatoes and chicken and things like that. Little different diet than we have now but ...

Very good. And, did your family have political affiliations that you were aware of?

Well, I mean, I was aware from the beginning before the Nazis came that the political picture didn't look very good. I'm sure my parents voted for parties other than the Nazi Party and they had friends in the town whom they visited with whom I would overhear ... Typically what would happen would be on *Shabbat*, we would walk to the synagogue, come home, and spend some time at home and then the afternoon, go back for afternoon and evening services. And I was old enough at 7, 8, 9 to go along with my father and do that. And I could overhear the conversations. And I was a very early reader and I read the newspapers and I could see bad things coming up. I mean, I remember some of these things as though they were yesterday when Hitler came to power and when it manifested itself in this little town where my family had lived in friendship all this time. My father served in World War I. Was in the German army and was decorated for bravery in the army. My uncle, whom I mentioned, was also a member of the army. All my uncles in this other town, they had ... the older ones had done that. And, it was a shock when the change came and when we woke up, within just a few months of Hitler's arrival, and saw people marching in front of our street telling people not to buy from Jews - which was my mother's little store, you know. Not any grand merchandise enterprise but just a little store that they had.

And how old were you ... you were like 7 when all this was happening or were you a little bit older?

Well, in 1934 I was already 9, almost 9 years old.

Okay. Let's move on to your schools. What kind of schools did you attend? Did you have private schools? Oh, you went to the parochial?

I went to, to the kindergarten that they, run by the nuns, and then I went to public school ... as long ... until the end. I think at the end I couldn't go to school anymore. But we had a religious teacher who came in from a nearby town once every two weeks and taught us maybe in the afternoon, two or three hours. That's how ... the only formal Hebrew education or Jewish education I ever had. And he brought that ... and then, as I recall it, in the last year or two that we were there, it was difficult to go to school. There were, there were some clear people with Nazi mentalities in the school who made no bone about their antisemitic feelings and I would go, I think, once a month, or maybe twice a month, take a train to Koblenz, K-O-B-L-E-N-Z, which was a larger town, good size city, and I would attend a little Zionist meeting group that they had there. Because, you know, it began to be clear that there was no future for us over there. And my parents might never have left as they did were it not for my father's feeling that there was nothing there for his children. Couldn't grow up Jewish, for sure. And so starting probably in 1936 or so, they began to think of emigrating. It so happened that my father had a brother and sister who had immigrated to the United States in the late '20s and then there was another sister who had come to this country probably a year or so before we did. So they were helpful in obtaining the documentation that we needed to be admitted to this country.

And when you were in school, what subjects did you ... what did you take and what did you like?

Well, I took, I took arithmetic courses. Naturally, I took a history course which, I could tell, was being changed even as we went along because there was a great deal of emphasis on German and Aryan background and so forth, which I didn't recall from the early years. I took writing and I learned a type of writing which I still retain, which I don't think is used any more but it was a new thing at the time, they brought that in; and what would be the equivalent of grammar courses and language courses and so forth. No foreign language, though, or anything like that.

What did you like the best?

Well, I always liked math. I liked mathematics and I liked language, anything having to do with language - poetry, music. At that time, I played the violin and I was going around taking violin lessons and learning a little bit about that at that time. Those were some of my favorite things.

Okay. And, how far in school did you get?

Well, I got to the 5th grade, I think, before it all came to an end.

Okay. And what did you do for fun when you were a youngster?

Well, it was pretty unsophisticated. I mean, there were no movies. I don't recall ... maybe once I saw a movie there. They brought something to town. There was no movie theatre in the town and there was no theatre as such. And fun was essentially just getting together with family and younger cousins and things like that, and playing with this one fellow that I mentioned. We would sometimes go and exploring around the area, things like that. Nothing very exciting by modern standards but that's what we had and that's what we did.

Okay. And you had that one friend ... did you have a lot of friends or just a few?

I probably did not but I had two or three like this one man whom I was in contact with when we went back to Germany and he was a, a friend. You know, not a close friend but we remembered each other when we were in touch with each other. Until things got really bad there - until things started to get bad, the people were respectful of each other and they were decent to each other. That included the kids but, undoubtedly, as the Nazis came and the kids heard things at home and they heard things through their teachers and through their Hitler Youth leaders and all the rest of it, it became more and more difficult to find playmates, to find anyone who would play with you at all.

Okay. Did you have hobbies? I know you played violin. Did you...

No.

... collect anything or ...

I don't think so. I don't think either of us did. Stamps, coins, anything of that sort. That all came later.

What were your teenage years like? How did you spend your time?

As a teenager?

Um-hmm.

Of course, as a teenager, I was in this country.

Okay.

I came to this country when I was 12. When we came to this country, we moved to Pittsburgh, which is where my father's siblings were living at the time. This was the height of the Depression. My father tried to get employment as a baker, which was a secondary trade that he had learned when he was growing up. And he had a job there for a brief period of time but there just weren't any jobs. So he had to give it up and we could see we were not going to make it there. So we moved to a farm in Missouri - not terribly far from here in the area of Maysville and Osborn and Dekalb County. When I came to Pittsburgh, I was, as I say, 12 years old. We arrived, I believe, the day before Yom Kippur in 1937. It was my first chance to fast all day. I was given the opportunity one year before my *bar mitzvah* to fast all day. And when we left Pittsburgh, we went to the ... when we came to Pittsburgh I was put in second grade, because I spoke no English.

Right.

Couldn't communicate at all. And then I think before we left, I had moved up to fifth grade. And when we came to the farm, we went to a one-room schoolhouse, which was very good for learning all kinds of things and I think I was in 7th grade then, and eventually 8th grade and graduated from there. And then after that, we left the farm and moved to Omaha where we then ... where I then spent my teenage years and went to high school in Omaha.

Did you have friends of the opposite sex also? Or just guy friends?

I'm sorry?

Did you have girlfriends or just ...

I did not but I had, you know, without heavy involvement or anything like that, I had a girl whose family was, on the farm, who was kind to us and we've kept in touch. I wrote her during the war and I've seen her once or twice and we exchange greetings from time to time.

Okay. And did you have a job when you were a teenager?

As soon as we came to Omaha, and from then on, I always worked. I immediately, upon our arrival in 1939, just before the war broke out in Europe, I started selling newspapers on the corner. And I did that for a period of time. And then I, near the corner where I had my stand on Sunday mornings, there was a barbershop and then I went to work there as a shoeshine boy. And I did that for a while and then I went and became a delivery clerk for a grocery store. And later on I worked as a clerk in a liquor store. But, I worked all through high school and, later on, I worked all through college. I always had a job.

Did you get along well with your parents?

Yes.

Were they strict or permissive or ...

They were not what ... my father was not what you would call a permissive parent. He was a disciplinarian and he expected things to be so-so and he didn't really mellow very much until grandchildren came along, at which point he was a more mellow grandfather and so forth. And my mother was always a gentle soul and good to the children. She had a lovely voice and sang to us and taught us to love music and so forth.

Were you ever rebellious or were there any issues that caused any tension?

Well, I suppose during part of my teenage years I had the usual teenage rebellion. I could see when I was in high school that the war was approaching and that I would have to do something sooner or later. And when I was 17, I left high school before graduation. But I had enough credits to graduate, and I was a very good student in high school and had only good grades in high school. So I left a semester early so I could get a semester of college before I went into service. And then, we were not citizens at this point yet and I thought I would, I had heard about educational programs in the Navy and I thought I would join the Navy and somehow this became known and a judge called me and made me a citizen, sort of on the spot, before my parents were citizens. But then there was an army program that sounded like what I wanted called the Army Specialized Training Program, ASTP. So I went in that and I ended up in the infantry as almost all the people who went in that program did. We did our basic training and then went to college for maybe two months. Then the program terminated and we all ended up in infantry divisions.

How old were you then?

I was just 18.

Just 18?

Uh-huh.

Okay. And what values or standards were most important to your parents?

Well, there was no question that everything prescribed Jewishly was at the very top of their list. They were very ... they had a very strict religious home. Of course, *kashrut* and observance of all the festivals and the holidays. And for people who had really very limited formal education, either secular or Jewish – you know, neither of them had the equivalent of a high school education. My mother had gone to a trade school for a couple of years after she got out of grade school. But they were very much on top of things as far as what were known in the world and kept up with what went on in the world and wanted a good education for their children. They had the, a value sense that was both, as far as Jewish things are concerned, which, as I say, were at the top of their list and as far as non-Jewish things as well. I mean, they were loyal, patriotic Germans until things changed and they, the thought that something like this would ever happen to them was unbelievable, incredible. And that it would ever come to this little town, this little island, was not something credible. And so, of course, when we left, we were just about the first ones in the community to leave. And by the same token, we were just about the last ones to get out.

Okay. The values that your parents had, how did these affect you in your, in your daily life? I mean, did you pretty much do things with your values in mind or were you ever like testing, you know ...

I suppose there came a stage when I was testing and when I objected to some of the strict Orthodox requirements that they sought to impose. But, their values that were important to me, what stayed with me, I tried to maintain a Jewish identity in the military when I was there, and subsequent to that. And I think probably of all my siblings and my near relatives, I have probably remained closer to the Jewish ideals of my parents than any of the others. And, I think they would - you know we say these things - I think that they would be comfortable with me and with my values and would feel that they have done what they were supposed to do in passing them on to me.

They'd be proud of you, yeah. What was your religious life in your, in the general community? There wasn't a big Jewish community but was ...

No, but it was an active Jewish community. I mean, I don't think they ever had a daily *minyan* but they had *Shabbat*, a weekly *minyan*, *Shabbat* and, of course, all the holidays. We had no rabbi, no cantor, but we had a lay person who led the services, who conducted the services. Once in a while I would be at my grandparents home in Gerolstein over a holiday and they had essentially similar things. Excuse me ... this teacher who came from Cochem to give us a Jewish education, he was either a professional or a semi-professional because I think years later I read of him as having gone to Israel and doing something connected with a religious institution over there. At least, I saw a name like his the way I remembered.

Okay. How was Judaism practiced? I think we hit that. And so your family celebrated *Shabbat* and the holidays. Did they go to the synagogue on the holidays or was it just a home celebration?

Oh, no. They went to the synagogue. I mean, they wouldn't have been enough to do it at home. They had to go to the synagogue. And they went to all the services, I mean, and I know I recall some of those holidays were endless, you know. Yom Kippur began before sunrise, I think, and ended after sunset and you were expected to be there the whole day and for a little kid, a restless kid, that was a long, long, long day. And years later when we came to this country and lived on the farm, there were enough people in these outlying communities, either relatives or near relatives, that we had our - were able to have our own *minyán* there at someone's home. We brought a Torah with us when we came to this country. It was, it was used, later gifted to a synagogue in Omaha as I recall it. But again, they went through everything. They didn't do any skipping and they didn't do anything in English. I mean, it was all done that way.

By the way, you said when you were 12 you were given the opportunity to fast all day. Did you make it?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I had already, I had already seen the year or so before a cousin who was a year or two older than I do it, you know. And I aspired to do it, you know, so I could do it.

Did you celebrate any secular holidays?

I don't think so. I mean, I have a recollection of going to the church, the Catholic Church, and seeing, seeing the beautiful Christmas display, the crèches, someone would have taken me there to see that. And we knew, of course, that the, the other children observed Christmas and we didn't have Christmas trees or anything like that. There were also, among the things that you don't forget, they observed a holiday just before the onset of Christmas, undoubtedly has a religious significance. A week or two or three before where they had huge bonfires and they celebrated St. Martin. And I remember some of the songs they sang about St. Martin that were sort of like the things we know about St. Francis of Assisi. Someone who cared for the poor, took off his cloak, gave it to someone who didn't have a cloak. And they had a bonfire on the hill. I recall that scene from my childhood. But we didn't ... we really didn't participate in other people's, in their holidays other than to the extent that I mentioned. And that would go for Easter, too. I mean I don't think we ever went Easter egg hunting or anything like that.

When you came over here, did you celebrate like the Fourth of July or that kind of thing?

Sure, sure, sure.

So American holidays?

Sure.

Okay. And religious education, we went through that. What impact did the secular culture have on your life?

Well ...

Obviously your parents were adamant about maintaining your Jewish identity?

Right. Right. I mean, I'll tell you, in this community, in this whole area where we were, there's a perception in this country which I discovered when I came here that most of the German Jews were not all that strict about their religious observance. We saw a film the other night at the Jewish film festival. The film about Hank Greenberg and they described the distinctions between the ... or maybe it was the one we saw last night about coming to the [unclear]. But, the Germans who were there first were less observant than the people who came from Eastern Europe later on and there was a bit of conflict. But here, in this area where we lived, the Jews were all very observant and I never heard of an incident, say, of intermarriage or anything like that. It just didn't happen. And I think my parents, my mother always stressed the importance of setting an example, knowing that we would be watched as Jews. And there were certain things that Jews just didn't do. Jewish boys didn't do, Jewish girls didn't do, Jewish children, parents didn't do. We were setting an example for the others to follow.

And not shaming yourself as a result?

What's that?

And not bringing shame to ...

Exactly. Of course, of course.

Were you ever encouraged to develop non-Jewish relationships or were they mostly ...

No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I mean, I think my parents were satisfied with the Jewish ... non-Jewish friends that we had such as they were but it was not something that they said, "Go out and don't ... go play some more with them. Or don't play with the Jewish..."

But they didn't discourage playing?

No, no it happened. You know, we had friends.

In general, how well were Jews accepted in the general community?

Well, my family was well accepted until all this came about. And, of course, I was too. I was a good student there and kids would know that sometimes, if they had a question about something that occurred in class, they could ask me about it and I could tell them something. "Yeah, we learned this or we learned that," or maybe help them with math or whatever course it was. I would think my family was well accepted in the general community until things got to the point where the general community - it was made clear to the general community that they should not associate with us. That they should stay away from us. That they shouldn't, for example, work for us or ... I think we used to have a woman who came to the house to have my mother iron and I think, after a while, they

made things very difficult for her. We had a couple that lived across the street from us and it so happened, when we went back over there, they were still there. Maybe their children were still there. And he was a physician, a doctor. And, of course, they tried to keep themselves above this anti-Jewish feeling that was in the town and so they were friendly to us, and kind to us.

As a child, did you experience any personal level, any antisemitism...

Sure.

... like name-calling or anything like that?

Sure, all the time. All the time. I mentioned the instance of going to Gerolstein and having these people march up and down the street singing songs about when Jewish blood spurts from the knife things will go twice as well. I mean, I remember all these things and this is many, many, many years ago. I remember kids calling us names. One time my brother and I were in Gerolstein during the summertime and we went to a, some entertainment or something and some kids followed us home and started throwing stones at us and calling us names and etc. But there was plenty of antisemitism and there was lots of verbal antisemitism where the kids might not even have known all that they were saying, all the bad things they were... But, some of that was there all the time. Even, perhaps even before the Nazis came they had little parodies about the Jews in the community. They didn't think it was all that mean but, to us, it was plenty mean.

Sure. Okay. Skipping ahead. Okay. So during, like in 1933, you were already here? No.

Oh, no.

When were you ...

We came here in 1937.

'37, okay. Do you remember the boycott? Do you remember the book burnings and the race laws, *Kristallnacht*, all that ...

I sure do. I sure do.

Okay.

The boycott, of course, as I say, impacted...

Right, with your family.

... directly and I recall one incident, which I've told my brother about many times because he didn't remember it. But, we had, as I say, a house here, a barn here, and a courtyard there and my father was standing there and some guy in a Nazi uniform with dagger was

threatening my father. I was across the way there just scared to death about what was going to happen and my father was a fearless individual. I mean, he had no fear of anyone. In fact, that's almost kept us from coming to this country because he got into a fight with someone who said some insulting things and that almost put a stop to our efforts to make it. But, he stood in front of this person, and this is the kind of thing that you never forget, and he said, "Go ahead. Go after your knife. I'm not afraid of you." or something like that. And he just had no fear and ordered the guy off our property, which was probably 1935, 1936, or something like that. Pretty late already in the way things were going there.

Okay. Did you have to wear a Star of David?

No. This came after us.

Okay. Were you ever prohibited from going to public places or ...

Oh, sure. Sure.

And, so your mother's store was boycotted, but was it confiscated also? Was it...

No. They just ... essentially, it was never a big thing to begin with, but they made it uncomfortable for people to have any thought of dealing with her. And I suspect after that boycott in 1934, the only customers she had were Jewish customers and maybe some people came at night so they wouldn't be seen or something of that sort.

Did any non-Jews ever help, help you ... I don't know.

Undoubtedly. Undoubtedly there were people there who were still friendly and looked out and ... Like this doctor across the way, he was a kind person and, intellectually could see what was wrong with some of the things that were happening. They all did it at a threat to themselves and they were careful, which is understandable.

Okay. So you weren't in any camps or ...

No.

You came here before?

We did not. That all came later. One of my father's brothers who came to this country, perhaps a year after we did, he was there over *Kristallnacht*, and they sent him to Dachau and he still made it because of the fact that he had relatives in this country. But he was a broken man as a result of all that and he lived only a year or so. And his wife, also, just survived for a couple of years, actually.

Okay. How did you meet your spouse, your wife?

Well, I was in this country. We're now in this country. I was in St. Paul, Minnesota. I was with the Internal Revenue Service at the time. And I was there to try some cases, and one of the people in the IRS office was a Jewish person and he invited me to his home for *Shabbat* dinner. And he had a cousin there who, obviously, he wanted to fix me up with and we got along fine but we didn't get along super-duper. And this person turned out to be my wife's roommate in the apartment in Minneapolis. And my wife came through town and this person told her to call some people here in town that she knew, including me, and it was the day before Christmas she called me and she was at the airport waiting to go to Texas and I was downtown getting ready to go to Omaha. And I asked her if she wanted to have lunch and I went to the airport and we had lunch together. And then she came back through here because she had another distant relative or friend here right after New Years and we had a couple of dates after that. And then we got engaged a few weeks later and got married.

A few weeks later? Neat!

Yeah. Yeah. It was pretty fast.

Yeah. Seems like it's lasted a long time. How long have you been married?

A little over 40 years.

Oh, wonderful. You've got good instincts. Big wedding or ...

No, we had a wedding in St. Paul. Good size wedding, a lot of family. My wife and I, me especially, have always been very family-oriented as far as events. I try not to miss any *bar mitzvah*, wedding, funeral, whatever the case may be. And I did that from way back. I was often the representative of my part of the family to go to these locations and represent the family. And we had a ... my wife lived in a town in Minnesota where they were the only Jewish people there but they belonged to a synagogue in St. Paul and that's where we were married. And that happened to be the place where we were a few weeks ago for the funeral of my wife's mother, that same place.

Okay. And so you were married by a rabbi. You had food, music, the whole nine yards?

Sure. Sure.

Okay. What was your spouse's occupation at that time?

She was a legal secretary. Well, she was a legal secretary before but when we got married, she was a, had a secretarial position with Pillsbury, the Pillsbury Flour Company up there.

Now, you're an attorney now so backtrack to occupations that led to where you are now, you were - from the paper route on up.

Well ... And then I, immediately after that one semester of college, I went into the army and had basic infantry training in Fort Benning, Georgia for 17 weeks. And went from there to a Ball State teacher's college in Muncie, Indiana where we had a very intense college program for about six to seven weeks while the thing lasted. And then were shipped to Texas to the 102nd Infantry Division. I just want to digress about that a moment. And it was clear ...

[END OF SIDE 1]

... shipped over and we ...

Just a second, excuse me. Let's get it going a little bit. Okay.

And I ended up in Germany again. I mean, just a few years after I left. And in November 1944, I was wounded in Germany, early in the morning and I lay there in a foxhole the whole day with the person who was in the foxhole with me and I thought to myself constantly during that day, people were dying all around me, "They got me anyway. I thought I got away from here and here I am. They got me. They had the final word." But, at night, we got out of there and I went to an aid station and then to a field hospital in Liege, Belgium and then I was transferred to a hospital in England. I was there a couple of months and then ended up back with my outfit again. But, this time, my duties changed and I was assigned to interrogating prisoners of war, German prisoners of war, because I spoke the language and so ... And then as the war ended, as the war drew near a close, I requested and was assigned to military government over there. And from then until the end of my tour of duty, I was with the military government in a number of locations in Germany helping to re-establish order and set up American government, German government, and so forth. And also seek out, help seek out Nazis of whom there were none in all of Germany, as I don't need to tell you. There was not a single one that we ever found. They were all people who had done nothing but help the Jews during the war, etc., and that was how it was. And in May of '46 I came back to this country and I had decided I wanted to pursue a law career. And I went to a college in my hometown, Omaha, and went to summer school immediately. And the rest of it ... and in 1948, I started law school. And I was still in the reserves and I graduated in 1950 and the day I was admitted to the Bar, the Korean War broke out so I was on my way again. And then when I came back, I applied for a position with the Internal Revenue Service. I went to Washington to apply for a position with the chief counsel's office. At that time, I had a friend, a female friend who lived in the Boston area and they asked me where I would like to be assigned and I said, "Anywhere in the east." And so they called me and sent me to Kansas City.

In the east? [laughing] Well, that's what I was going to ask you ... so you wanted to live anywhere but where you were? That's good. And ...

But I've enjoyed living in Kansas City. It's nice.

That's a good story.

It was typical, like the army, you know, you tell them you'd like to ... you speak German, you'd like to go to Europe and they send you to Japan.

When you came from Europe, from Germany to here, how did you travel? Did you go by boat?

We came by boat. We traveled on a train from where we were to Rotterdam in Holland. Very, very frightened, all of us, because we didn't know if we'd get across the border and all that sort of thing. And once we were in Holland, we came on the ship of the Holland America line to New York where my cousin, one of these people from ... the daughter of one of the people who had come to this country during the '20s, met us and then a day or two later, we went to Pittsburgh.

Okay. And what were your first impressions when you came to this country?

Oh, I mean, I was overwhelmed. My mother, years and years and years later, recalls the Statue of Liberty and what it meant to them. I mean, to the point that she could cry just thinking about it. Yeah, it was overwhelming. But, I was sort of ... even when I was in my last year or so in Germany, I was sort of looking for things American, you know, and sort of trying to get away from the German things and taking pride in the idea that there was some place that was better than all this bragging and boasting that they were doing over there. And, of course, that was very important later on during the war and during the end of the war.

Where did you live when you first came to Kansas City?

When we first came to ... when I first came to Kansas City, I lived in the hotel on 40th and Main for a week or so and then I learned of someone who was identified to me as a lifelong bachelor and would be a good person to share an apartment with and we shared an apartment. And on Valentine's Day of the ... oh, just a few weeks after I came here, he announced that he was going to get married. And so he left me with this apartment where I couldn't stay and so I looked for a cheaper place in what is now the Hyde Park area near Armour and Gillham, in that area. And then, I next moved to the Twin Oaks and that's where I was living when I got married. And when we first got married, we lived as so many others did when they first got married, at President Gardens. And then we've lived in this house for 30 plus years.

Very good. And at what point did you learn English?

I learned it all only when we came to this country. We had someone come to our house in the last few months that we were over there to try to teach us by the Berlitz Method, I recall, and try to teach us a couple of fundamental things, but we spoke very, very little, understood very little until we came here. Although my brother and I, my younger brother and I, started to pick it up real fast. For my parents, it was more difficult, but they went to evening school and took citizenship courses and they learned it. They wanted to learn it and become proficient. We spoke essentially no English when we came here and my parents certainly spoke almost none, you know. Just enough to get by like some of the

people from Russia who have come over and who have had very little limited vocabulary when they came. But we learned it pretty fast.

When you all get together do you speak German or do you speak English?

Pardon?

When you all get together do you still speak German or ...

No. No. I mean that was one thing the kids were always strenuous about. We had certain relatives when we got together, they never learned English very well, and so they always spoke German. But, we always stressed speaking English and not speaking German although, naturally, when I went back in the army...

It came in handy.

... I had to speak German again and spoke lots of it. Much of which I'd forgotten or as grown into disuse but when we went back to Kaisersesch years ago, I could, you know, make my way around. People thought I should speak it fluently the way they did but it was close, but not quite there.

You got a Yankee accent. [laughing]

I guess so.

How did you adjust to this country? What was the hardest thing?

Well, learning the language. I'll tell you, one of the things, the last thing I was prepared for was the thought that there would be antisemitism in this country. And here we were, my brother and I living in Pittsburgh and dressed differently from everyone. I mean we had our German clothes, short pants and all that sort of stuff that we brought over. And we lived in a tough neighborhood in Pittsburgh, in east Liberty, and we were often taunted by some of the neighbor kids who called us Jews, German Jews, and so forth. It just blew my mind that there would be such a thing because I thought we had left all that behind. But there was quite a bit of adjustment. And then, obviously, we didn't know any of the games. You know, we didn't know football. We didn't know baseball. We didn't understand any of that, how that worked. It so happened that I had one cousin in Pittsburgh who was thoroughly Americanized by that time already and knew all these games, knew all the rules and all that and tried to be of a little help to us on this. But that was a difficult adjustment, you know, just to be one of the boys.

It's good you had a buffer.

Yeah, a little bit, uh-huh. Right.

How did you find the strength to overcome everything that you had to overcome?

Well, I ...

I mean do you attribute to youth or just ...

I think so. I think we were kind of tough. We knew what had to be done and what we had to do and so forth.

Did you ever talk about your experiences when you came here?

No. I don't think so.

Okay. Did anyone ever ask? No?

I've never talked to my children about it very much. I mean, you know a great deal more about it than they do although they've often asked me about it but we never discuss it very much. Some of that is just so totally incomprehensible to them that, I mean it was such a different world 50 years ago. 50 years, it's now over 60 years ago. The world was different here, in this country too, and there was plenty of antisemitism. I mean, when I worked as a shoeshine boy in the barbershop, I mean, I heard so much about the Jews and so forth. I mean, to the point where if it was said in my presence, it made it very uncomfortable for me. That's why I left there. But there was plenty of it going on. I didn't encounter it in high school in Omaha, I might say, because it was a high school that had a pretty significant Jewish population in all phases of high school life. So I didn't encounter it there.

Well, as a, as a German-born Jew, even if you're around a bunch of Jewish kids, did you ever find ... Were you ever taunted, you know, just because kids are kids, did they ever ... were they ever curious? Were they ever ...

Very little. I really don't recall any of that. I do recall, in the older generation, my parents' generation, I recall among them that there were these frictions between the Eastern European Jews and the German Jews and, of course, by that time, the Eastern European Jews were in controlling positions as far as the Jewish community was concerned. But when we came to Omaha, my father worked as a janitor at the Jewish Community Center. I mean, that was the only work that was available to him. My mother worked as a housemaid in Jewish homes and helped clean up and so forth. Did whatever we could. During the war, she got a job in a defense plant so there were some things that were a little bit more productive.

And, let's see... When you came over here, did you have a lot of close friends or how did you meet kids as ... Were you in the youth groups? Were you ...

No, I wasn't. I think I had one semester of Boy Scouts but I can't recall - I think that was in Pittsburgh yet. That wasn't here. And just got introduced to it. When I think of my kids and their social lives versus mine right now, I had a very limited social life.

Did you come across other survivors in your community that you gravitated towards or ...

Not very much. Not very much. I mean we ... the people who came from Germany, for example, and came during the Nazi times, they had ... they stayed in touch with each other. They had a publication that came out of New York that was published in German called *Aufbau*, which means rebuilding, you know, the idea of rebuilding. When we came to Kansas City ... when I came to Kansas City by myself, I was a single person, one of the families that had lived near us on the farm, was living here and they were among the first people I saw and, of course, stayed in touch with and was close to all the time.

Small world. Who was instrumental in finding, helping you get settled and finding work when you came here?

Well, I don't know that there was much in the way of community organizations that did that although, when we got to Omaha, there might well have been. I mean, the fact that my father got a job at the Jewish Community Center probably indicated that someone, maybe a Federation type organization, was instrumental in helping him get that type of employment.

Okay. And, let's see ... At what point did you become an American citizen?

Well, as I say, I became an American citizen just before, just at age 18 when they swore me in so I could go in the military. And I had a little news clipping about that, which was publicized. It was a year or two ahead of the time my parents became eligible for citizenship. And I recall that I was sworn in and probably went in to service a day or a week or so later.

Do you remember much about the naturalization process or ...

No, I don't. I just know I was asked some questions that were easy for me to answer, that I knew the answers to, and I was sworn in. It was that kind of time. It was 1943 when it happened. It was a kind of story that attracted the attention of a federal judge so that he would make room on his docket to do it in an afternoon - swear me in.

So how long have you been an attorney? How many years?

Not all that long. It will be 50 years in June.

Just a kid. [laughing]

My law school class is going to have its 50th reunion in September.

Oh, wonderful, wonderful. And since you've been here, do you have hobbies or recreational things that you do?

Well, not all that much. I go to theatre and musical plays. We play bridge. We do cultural events and I've active in communal organizations, the synagogue, the Center, Jewish Community Foundation, the Academy, and so forth, but those are essentially my hobbies.

Okay. Those are good hobbies. Have there been any post-war events that have had great significance to you like the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, anything that you've just ...

Well, I've taken a great deal of interest in all of those. Frankly, when I left Germany the second time, after the war, my division and the Russians met at the Elbe River and on July 4th, 1945, I was with the military government group in what became East Germany and we vacated that area in order to let the Russians move in and I came away from Germany in May of 1946 convinced that we were going to have a war with the Russians sooner or later. That was one of the reasons I stayed in the reserves. And, of course, when the Korean War broke out I felt the Russians were behind them and I still thought ... and when the Cuban Missile Crisis broke, I thought things would happen. I, as far as the Civil Rights Movement is concerned, I was always very actively interested in that and supported it.

I'm sure you could relate to a lot of it?

Yeah.

When were your ... How many children do you have, first of all?

Three.

Three children ... boys, girls?

Two boys and a girl.

And they were all born here?

All born here. And my sister was born to my parents here. I was in military service, 19 years old, almost 19, and I get the report that my mother is expecting a baby, which sort of blew my mind.

Are you two close?

Yeah, she's coming here this weekend. We all stay close to each other. She's coming to see my wife after the death, and so forth, when she couldn't be here.

That's neat. That's a whole generation difference.

That's right. That's right. And I came back from the army in 1946 and here was this little kid here.

“Say hi to your big brother.” [laughing] How did having children affect you in light of everything that’s, that your family’s been through and ...

Well, I was always very anxious to hope that they would not have to encounter any of these things. I think they’ve been generally fortunate in avoiding them. The boys all sort of had a history not all that dissimilar from mine. They worked their way through high school. They were actively employed. They had lots of friends, mainly Jewish friends. Our middle son, who now lives in Memphis, had friends from high school and college later on and they are all very close yet. Many years later they come to each other as a group. They get together. My older son is in California and he is frequently in touch with another boy who lived on this cul-de-sac. When we came here there were three Jewish families on this five-house cul-de-sac and we’re the only one left now but the kids all got together and they were friendly with each other. Our daughter was in Israel for five years and she met a young man over there and they were married two years ago and they have one child and are expecting another. And he is in Philadelphia going to rabbinical school there, so.

What are your children’s names?

Our oldest son is Mitchell. He’s married, and his wife’s name is Elizabeth, and he has a son named Jacob. Our middle son is named Jeremy, Jerry, and he’s married to a girl from Memphis. Name is Stacey and they have two children, a daughter named Emily and a son named Adam. Our daughter is named Susie. We named her Susan but she’s named Susie and she’s married to a young man who’s name is Moti and they have one child named Elianna and another one on the way. And our oldest son, Mitchell, and his wife Elizabeth are also expecting around the same time so, after all this is done, God willing, we’ll have six grandchildren.

Oh, gosh, that’s wonderful. Where they named ... were your children named after ...

Yes, our oldest son, Mitchell, was named after my father’s brother. The one who was in Germany and who perished. Jeremy was named after another uncle on my side. Mitchell, his middle name was after someone in Merna’s family. And the other one was named after another uncle who also escaped from Germany. And Susie, her Hebrew name is Sara, which is my grandmother’s name, the one who lived in Germany. So we all have names after them. And they, in turn, have got their children named after my parents and Merna’s family and so forth.

I was going to ask you that next, good. And you said that your kids don’t know a lot of what your experiences have been?

They really don’t know all that much.

If they were to ask, would you ...

Sure. Sure. Sure. And one time, in the last year or so, I did sit down with one of my children and we talked a little bit and I let them ask me some questions and told them a

little bit about it. But they focused on parts of it and focused on the Nazi parts of it. And, of course, our oldest son, Mitchell, was with us when we were in Germany and we went to visit the place where the Jewish cemetery where my grandparents were buried and where I had a clear picture of what their gravestone looked like because we had received a photograph of it but it was not visible. And the cemetery was maintained and was maintained by the community but we couldn't find the headstones or anything else like that. But it was there that this one person that I've gone to school with, kindergarten with, showed us a corner where all the Jews were assembled before they were turned out. And since then we've received a book. My sister, the one who was born in this country, her son went to school for awhile in France and while he was there, he went to Kaisersesch and met some of these people. And then when my sister and her husband came through there four or five years ago, they also stopped in Kaisersesch and someone in that area, a sympathetic individual who speaks English, helped in the writing of a book about the Jews of that area and it shows the various Sieglers who were there and for almost all of them from Kaisersesch, it shows that they died in Kiev and shows approximate dates when they perished there. So my son saw a little bit of that when he was there. My second son, I told him that if there was another get-together in Germany, I would try to go and this would be the year for it but I haven't heard anything. And he said he would like to go and see what it looks like.

Very good. I think that'd be an important ...

Yeah, you know, just, just to let them see some of it. I mean they're pretty close in that bunch when we went up for Merna's mother's funeral. All three of my children came with their wives and Susie came with her baby. It mean, it really meant a great deal to me and a great deal to Merna.

That's great. Right. Do you ever have any ... are there ever any things that remind you of ... like when you smell certain things, does it ever remind you of maybe something your mother baked or ...

Sure.

...sights that ...

Sure, special dishes. When I come home on Friday night and I smell that potato *kugel*, it's like my home.

Think back?

Yeah. And my mother had special recipes and dishes that my wife had never heard of before and that we do. Like on *Pesach* we serve celery root salad, which most of the people that we invite for our *Seders* have never heard of them or seen it and don't know what it is and like it but not familiar with it.

That's something different. So you, okay you still practice ... Okay, skipping ahead here because I think we've touched on most of this. What is your favorite Jewish holiday?

Oh, I think inevitably *Pesach* is a favorite for me because it is a family holiday. Last year we had all our children here. This year they've got to go to the other side of the family. Then we observe Thanksgiving in spades and if we miss each other in *Pesach*, we try to get together on Thanksgiving. In all the years my parents were alive, they came in their later years and joined us for *Pesach*. And my mother, who after my father died, she always came for the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur here. She spent her last years in Washington living where my sister is. But, she would always come here, up to the very end.

That's wonderful. What do you attribute your ability to, I guess, live a normal life after ...

I don't know. I think it's just a matter of, you do what you have to do. [unclear] You better do it and I always felt fortunate that I, I thought about this a little bit in preparation for this because the last two nights I've seen, what's her name. Zeldin. She's asked me, "When are you having your interview?" I saw her again last night. I thought about a couple of these things and I thought again about the fact that I was lying in the foxhole there for almost 12 hours thinking that they got me anyway. But my friend, the one I was in the foxhole with, who was also Jewish but totally non-observant, the night before we had had a very severe artillery attack and wasn't clear whether we would get out of there. And that morning when we started out, he said to me something to me along the lines of "No atheists in foxholes," you know, even for him. And he recognized that there is a superior power that watches over us. And I believe that very much during all the time I was in the army and I have a prayer book which I had rebound a few years ago which was issued by the army almost 60 years ago. I still use it. It's a good little book that was handed out to soldiers during that time and I relied on it very much and I have a small Bible. I had deep pockets in the field jackets and I carried the little prayer book on one side and the Bible on the other side and I read them and studied them and they helped quite a bit during difficult times there.

Was there ever a time when you doubted if there was a God or did you ever lose faith?

I really didn't, I...

Did you ever think how could all this be happening and there be a God?

No. Of course, I must tell you, during all the time I was there in Germany, I had no idea what was happening as far as concentration camps were concerned. But in the closing days of the war, and I have a division history which has material on this, we encountered a place where the Germans had burned a barn house with people in it - many, many people in it. And the commanding officer of our unit, excuse me, made the mayor and all the townspeople come out and view it and then give the people a burial. The place was called Gardelegen and it was sort of a camp but I had no idea that, you know, of the extent of things like Buchenwald or Bergen-Belsen or Auschwitz 'til afterwards. But, and the first camp I ever heard of after the end of the war was Theresienstadt, which was sort of the

good camp, sort of. And the reason I heard of it was my mother wrote me and said some distant cousin was believed to have been in Theresienstadt and I should try to make an effort to see if I could get in contact with her. I was never successful in doing that. I did have the idea in, after the war was over and I had been in the military government unit for quite a while, to try and go up to Kaisersesch and see what things looked like. And I started out and it was one of those things where we ran out of gas and we couldn't requisition gas and I was not of a rank to demand gas so we had to head back. But when I got to Kaisersesch 15 years ago, they had heard about me, in turn, and had heard that I was in the army and that I was an officer and had been near Kaisersesch and had done this or that. There was no basis for that, of course, but it was interesting that they had their own version of the facts.

Now when you said that you heard that was the "good camp" ... you were told that was the good camp?

Well, Theresienstadt was the place that they sometimes did as a show place to show that, no gas chambers there and so forth. But frequently it was just a way stop on the way to Auschwitz. But, you know, we've had exhibits The Children of Terezin where they showed the little children drawing pictures or writing poems. It was ... there was no such thing as a good camp, you know. The only place we heard of while we were there was Dachau and that was, I guess, perhaps the first concentration camp that they had and that was a place where they sent Jews for infractions, even at that time, without being an extermination camp. But it must have been so awful. My uncle who was there, I mean, he was just a broken man when he came out of there. And he was just there a brief period of time before he was released.

Last question ... well, two questions. What does being an American mean to you and do you think that most Americans take their freedom for granted?

Well, being an American means a great deal to me, in all seriousness. I have always felt so fortunate that we live in this country and have enjoyed the freedoms. The first year I was in Omaha, first or second year, the Omaha newspaper, *The World Herald*, ran a contest to, on Thanksgiving, for people to describe what they were thankful for. And I entered that contest and I won first prize which, I think, was either five dollars or ten dollars. It was some huge amount. I still have the clipping of it and a picture of it. And I have shown this to my children and my grandchildren when we get together at Thanksgiving. And I describe in there what it means to be an American, you know, not waking up in the middle of the night, fearing the knock on the door and what's there, right to express yourself, say what's on your mind without fear of consequences. And I've always been very much of a good citizen, responsible for doing the jobs of citizenship and all that goes with it. And my mother remembers my uncle who lived in Pittsburgh saying to her, you know, "It's a wonderful country, Molly", and she always quoted that and she certainly believed it. She lived in a Jewish, not a nursing home, but a halfway between a nursing home and...

Like and assisted living home.

... an assisted living home, and was very happy there and she always was the one chosen to sing "God Bless America" at the events and I can hear her now doing it, you know. We were most appreciative of this country and all that it meant to us and have continued to be so. And what was the other question?

Do you think most Americans take their ...

I'm not so sure that ... I think most Americans take it too much for granted because they haven't seen what the contra-indications are and if they had, they would be different. I saw that often in the army - both times, both in the World War and the Korean War, that people took the stuff for granted too much and didn't value it as much as they should have. Although, I must say that most of the people I was in the army with, especially during basic training, they were a good bunch. They were aware of what it meant to have this kind of a country and that it was worth fighting for and they fought for it.

Okay. Was there anything else you'd like to add?

I think we've gone over the waterfront here.

I think so too. It's very interesting. Well, thank you.

Thank you.