**Henny Wenkart Interview**

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**Henny Wenkart Interview**

[Start of recorded material]

00.01.19 Henny Wenkart: Alright. My name is Henny Wenkart and, uh --

Interviewer: How do you spell it?

Henny Wenkart: W-E-N-K-A-R-T.

Interviewer: And Henny you spell?

Henny Wenkart: H-E- -- I spell it H-E-N-N-Y. Sometimes people spell it H-E-N-I. My father spelled it six different ways.

Interviewer: That's why we ask. And never look at me. I'm not here and the camera is not here.

00.01.49 Henny Wenkart: Right, okay.

Interviewer: Okay, here we go. We're going to do a little bit chronologically, so I'm going to start back in time some ways, well before you came to the United States. I'm hoping you can start by just describing some of your earliest childhood memories of your life in Vienna as a young girl.

00.02.18 Henny Wenkart: Well I was born in Vienna in 1928. And, uh, my father was a lawyer. Uh, he, uh, he was a regular, you know, had a mixed practice, but not a criminal practice. He, in fact, uh, I remember when I was very small and the client called him at home.

00.02.48 And I remember him saying, "Well, you know we're going to have to plead guilty. We did do it." And, uh, then he would be listening and then he said, I can remember, he said, "I'll get you a criminal lawyer." So this was not -- he was just a regular business and family practice lawyer, but he did well.

00.03.15 And his office was in a place called the [K-K Palais], which was right on the Franz Josefs Kai. A very nice building. I used to play hooky there from nursery school. [Laughs] He was supposed to take me to nursery school and I cried and cried and cried and so he didn’t want to leave me there, uh, so he took me to the office and he let me type. And I would type and he would try to read what I had typed.

00.03.47 And he was mostly [unintelligible] and he would turn red. When he laughed he, he always turned red. And, uh, he really had a lot of fun when I came to the office with him. But one time, uh, I went to this -- he took me to this nursery school. It was a small nursery school run by some nuns. And, uh, I was crying and she said to him, uh, "You know she stops crying as soon as you leave.

00.04.22 Why don't you listen at the door and you'll see that I'm right."

And what she did is she took me, uh, onto the sofa and said, "Now we're going to watch this second hand go round and round five times and then when it's done five times then you can go and join your dad." And he waited three minutes and left. And after the five minutes we went to the door and he was gone.

00.04.54 And I cried the rest of the morning and I never had to go there again. He was furious with her for, for, for lying to me like that and he never -- I never had to go there again. So he, uh -- and, and people said that he spoiled me, but, uh, clearly he didn't because I'm not spoiled. [Laughs] I came out alright. He trusted me. He believed in me.

00.05.22 He treated me like a person and that was a terribly important thing. And, in fact, uh, I knew you were coming this morning and, uh, uh, I dreamed just before I woke up that my father was cleaning up this room and that he stuck all the stuff that's lying around under the carpet. [Laughs]

00.05.50 You have to realize my father died 50 years ago. [Laughs] But, uh, but that's the sort of father he was.

Interviewer: Your mother?

Henny Wenkart: My mother, uh, had a different story. See, my father came to Vienna from one of the provinces, which is now called Poland, but at that time it was Galicia and it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

00.06.19 And he came when he was six-years-old. Uh, he was 12 years older than my mother, so he grew up in the, in the peaceful Vienna still under the Emperor Franz Josef, who was called The Old Gentleman. And, uh, he -- you know, we went out to the Vienna woods. He took his baby brother there and so on. My mother came during the war.

00.06.46 She was 11-years-old and she -- actually she lived in a community, Hasidic community, uh, you know, [Tenya] and there came a day when the Rabbi said, uh, "The Cossacks are coming. We're all going to Vienna." And they would pack up what they could in wagons and went to Vienna. Now I don't know who pulled those wagons, maybe the men. Anyway, my grandfather got bored and went back to protect his store.

00.07.18 And the Cossacks caught up with him and beat him within an inch of his life and we never -- they never saw him again until the war was over because he was a prisoner of war. They didn't know what had happened to him. And my mother had gone to Vienna with the community and she and her sister and two brothers and her mother lived in one room. And they were poor and the boys went to work, the girls went to school. But I'm sure she must have had an accent and must have -- the kids must have made fun of her.

00.07.49 She never said that, but it's clear that it must have happened. She was 11-years-old, which was just the age that I was when I came to this country. And in a sense, she couldn't go through it all again. She had made it. She had married, uh, a lawyer and was a lawyer's wife and she, she, you know, she, she went to French clubs and, and, uh, English clubs and the opera and so on.

00.08.17 And really, you know, had a good life for just a few years. And, uh, it was very difficult to give all that up. I was an only child. I had a sister who was born when I was nine, but by that time you're pretty much grown up. I was an only child. And, uh, and my personality must have been more like her sister's I think.

00.08.47 She was her mother's favorite, but I think her sister must have been her father's favorite because she was very sprightly and she danced and she played the piano and she did things. And, and I think that my mother, who didn’t know anything about Freud, uh, sometimes said, "You know in my dreams you and Marie are the same person." How do you like that? She, uh, she loved me.

00.09.19 I mean we loved each other, but it was not the same sort of -- she didn't spoil me. My daddy didn't spoil me, but people said he did. Uh, and so -- and, you know, we would go to the Vienna woods every Sunday and it was my job to make sure we got home at 12:00. Mother came if we were going with friends, but not if it was just daddy and me. Then it was just Daddy and me.

00.09.47 And we spoke in whispers in the woods. Uh, and you know we hiked for two or three hours of a Sunday morning from the time I was two-years-old. And Vienna was very beautiful, really beautiful. And, uh, and Daddy loved it and so, you know, I came to love it, too.

00.10.16 And, uh, so, I mean, I had friends. Mostly you went to school in the morning and then in the afternoon, uh, my mother and I would meet one of her friends who had a child or children in some park; one of the many wonderful parks. And, you know, I would play with the child and she would sit and embroider with the children. Actually, you know what I found recently is a pillow which my mother cross-stitched and I have it on my bed now.

00.10.51 But this is the sort of work that she did in the park. And the other woman would also do that and so, you know. And in the summer we went away. Uh, we never spent the summer in the City. Uh, July, my father would take July off and we would go a little bit further away.

00.11.17 Although we never went to the Riviera or anyway I never saw the ocean until I was on a ship in the middle of it. Uh, I was too young. We were going to do that after I was 10. Uh, so we, we went to the Austrian Alps to [unintelligible]. Uh, we went to the [unintelligible]. We went, we went a couple of times to Czechoslovakia.

00.11.48 And then in August, uh, we went to this one place, uh, in [unintelligible] in [unintelligible] and, uh, daddy went back to work. But he came out Friday afternoon on the early train. He was the earliest father to come on Friday afternoon and he didn't leave until Monday morning. And I would hear my parents whispering and then he would leave and I would go back to sleep because I didn't want to wake up into a morning where he wasn't there.

00.12.23 But I would hear the kids walking on the gravel outside and then eventually I, I did get up. Uh, but, uh, you could hear the train whistling into the tunnels, first far away and then closer and they would go rattling. Eventually you heard the rattle of the, the rattle of the wheels. But the, the trains sound different in Europe.

00.12.53 They don't have that hoarse voice that, that they have here, uh, with us. Uh, in Europe, at least at that time in Austria, the train whistle was [imitating train whistle], which is very cheerful; into the tunnel and out of the tunnel. And so those were really wonderful times in the summer.

00.13.21 Uh, school I didn't like so much, uh, because, uh, I went to public school and, uh, most kids of my class went to private schools. I only went to public school for four years and then I went to the [Phonix-Gymnasium], which is an eight-year. It starts with the fifth grade and goes through twelve. Uh, but, uh, but I quit school under the Nazis because Jewish kids didn't have to go to school.

00.13.52 And daddy moved his practice home because he was afraid that the K-K Palais was too conspicuous and that sooner or later they would arrest everybody there so he brought his practice home. And if daddy was going to be home all day I was not about to go to school, so I said, I said that I was afraid to go to school because kids threw rocks at us, uh, on our way.

00.14.21 And, uh, and my parents weren't that keen on having me go to school anyway because they were worried. And anyway, the piano teacher, the English teacher and the Hebrew teacher came to the house anyhow, so I had lessons every day. And then I had a couple of books, a biology book and a geography book, that I picked up somewhere that I promised to study every day. [Laughs] And with one thing and another I quit school at the age of 10.

00.14.53 And -- well, you know. [Laughs]. Most kids would do it. But the thing is that, you know, that I was very bored in school and for that reason, when we had children of our own, uh, I insisted on putting them in private school where they would not be bored. And for one thing, until the fourth grade they came home at noon and had the whole afternoon free to do what they wanted.

00.15.24 Uh, because I think that it's very bad to be bored as a child in school. I picked up all sorts of habits just to slow myself down. I would group -- when I was reading I would group sentences into groups of five and three words and I would group the words into groups of five and three letters. That's a very bad habit. [Laughs]

00.15.55 But it comes from being bored in school and trying to slow yourself down so you don't go nuts waiting for everybody else to catch up.

Interviewer: Some of what you've been talking about pretty much anticipated where I wanted to lead you next. That is, when you first, as a young girl, became aware of what it meant to be Jewish in Vienna in the 1930s.

00.16.23 Henny Wenkart: Uh, well for us it meant, uh, going to synagogue on Saturday. Uh, and, uh, and also for Sukkos and [Simchat Torah] going to the building where the community, the Hasidic community my mother grew up in still lived.

00.16.50 They had a huge Sukkot and they served holishkes, which is stuffed cabbage. And, uh, and then Simchat Torah, you went up into the Rabbi's apartment, tiny place, and the women were in the bedroom and there was a door with an arch and the men were dancing around the table with the Torahs and we were singing and clapping with them.

00.17.19 And, you know, so that was, that was the big [unintelligible]. And for Seders, well, uh, so long as the grandparents were alive you went to their house, of course. For one -- one family for the first Seder, the other family for the second Seder and that's what we do still here. Uh, but I remember when I was six I could read German, but I couldn't read Hebrew yet.

00.17.54 And I was -- up until then my uncle, my baby uncle, my youngest uncle, had always asked the four questions because he was the youngest at the table. But by the time I was six it was deemed that I could now ask the four questions. And they had transliterated them for me on a piece of paper and put it in my Haggadah.

00.18.18 But they said, uh, under no circumstances was I to let my grandfather see inside my Haggadah. And I thought, "Well, why would he want to get up from his seat at the head of the table and look in my Haggadah? That's ridiculous." But I did promise and that was one -- one of the terrible things was that I always kept promises and sometimes I made promises that would have been much better if I'd broken. But in any case, uh, he did.

00.18.47 I started asking the question and he did come and try to look over my shoulder and I held the book up to my chest because I wasn't supposed to let him see. [Laughs] Well how did I ask it after that? I must have memorized it. I must have actually known them. That actually never occurred to me until just now. And then after the meal I had to go to sleep. It was so awful.

00.19.15 If they put you to bed somewhere in another room and then they wake you up in the middle of the night when the Seder is over and you have to walk. And it's, you know, it's terrible to be awakened and have to walk. So, so that was one of the things. The other, I do remember that even then, uh, going to synagogue on the high holy days people would have their masa wrapped in a newspaper, even then before the, before the Anschluss.

00.19.53 I won't say before the Nazis because the Austrians were mostly Nazis, uh, and they were anti-Semitic. And I remember one time, uh, one of my classmates, [Maria Salinger] who was actually the, the, uh, daughter of the, uh, janitor in my building, and, uh, we were lining up and she said, "Go away. Uh, you're a Jew.

00.20.23 You don't belong with us Christians." Uh, and I came home crying and I said, "We have to go to Israel. We have to move to Israel. Things like this won't happen there." Uh, well they wouldn’t have -- there were five or six Jewish girls in my class.

Interviewer: And what are your vivid memories of the Anschluss? At that point you were how old?

00.20.54 Henny Wenkart: 10.

Interviewer: You were 10?

Henny Wenkart: 10.

Interviewer: Just coming up on 10.

Henny Wenkart: Not quite 10.

Interviewer: Not quite 10 in March of 1938.

Henny Wenkart: March 13, 1938. And I was born in July, so I was not quite 10. That's right. And my sister was a baby. She was crawling, not walking.

00.21.16 Oh, well I remember that, uh, I was in bed, but I listened to the radio and, uh, Schuschnigg who was the Chancellor at that time, uh, made an address, uh, on the radio, which I heard. And, uh, he said that, uh, the Germans were ready to [annex] Austria.

00.21.52 That he had called London, Paris, Washington for help, uh, Rome. No one was willing to help us and that he was not about to spill Austrian blood in a futile attempt to fight off the Germans. The Germans were coming. And, in fact, there was somebody outside the studio ready to take him away as soon as he finished speaking, he said.

00.22.26 And then they played the national anthem again for the last time and that was the end of the broadcast. So. . .

Interviewer: As of that moment, Henny, March of 1938, things obviously changed much more quickly for yours and other Jewish families in Vienna then they had been changing from '33 until that point.

00.23.03 Henny Wenkart: Well I didn't know about that.

Interviewer: What do you remember about your family beginning to discuss plans for one or all of you to leave Vienna?

Henny Wenkart: That was that same day. That was that same day.

00.23.28 Uh, daddy took me out to a park away from bushes and away from hidden mics and so on, uh, and explained to me, you know, that -- about the Anschluss. And I said well I knew that. He said, "Well this morning, uh, at four o'clock this morning I was at the American Consulate to get a low number for, you know, so we can get a visa to go to America."

00.24.00 And that was impressive because nobody is up at four in the morning. Just milk wagons, you know, with their horses. Uh, that he was actually somewhere else at four o'clock in the morning to get this number, that, that was impressive. Uh, he said, "And also," he said, "I give you my word of honor that we will be all right." And his word of honor, you know, was bankable.

00.24.30 And obviously, if he said that that was it. And, you know, because I trusted him, I mean I chose to go. If you build up trust and never misuse it, there comes a time when you can actually, you know, build on it when, when it really is -- how could he know we would be all right? He didn't know.

00.24.57 But he wanted me -- and he knew that I would believe it if he said it. And, uh, do I think it's better to lie to children in that way? Yes. I am very much against children being told about the Nazi time and the murder of people in concentration camps and so on; very much against that, until they're about 16 or 17-years-old.

00.25.27 It gives -- I feel it gives the Nazis the victory to spoil, uh, to spoil the lives of children now by burdening them with, with those, those thoughts and those facts. What good does it do? What good does it do? I mean, never again doesn't work. You know, and we're sitting still right now and those same things are being done in other parts of the world.

00.25.57 We're not doing anything about it. And learning about what the Nazis did does not help to make people do anything about it. It just -- people -- it doesn't work that way. And a child who has had a happy childhood, uh, is much more likely, I think, to fight back to that place. Uh, my sister grew up; uh, we were refugees, we were poor.

00.26.28 She had a completely different childhood from mine. You know, I was a lucky child. I was lonely because I was an only child, uh, but I had friends, I had cousins. I'm in touch with all of them wherever they went. Uh, one friend just died in Barcelona, uh, and his brother wrote to me that he is devastated.

00.26.59 And I wrote back to him, "Well I remember your brother was my age and I remember how happy he was to have a little brother. I was an only child," and so on. Yeah, I mean, I didn't see these people for 50 years, so it's that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Between March 1938 and when you left Vienna in May of 1939, 14 months, what are your memories of your family? How you functioned as a family? It sounds as if your father continued to assure you that everything was going to be all right. Outside your doors things were turning very ugly very quickly.

00.27.51 Henny Wenkart: Well, actually not outside our doors because we had moved to the ninth district. We were not in the second district where the sort of ghetto was. Uh, and, in fact, on the 10th of November people came from there to hide with us. Whereas, my father, uh, went to the [Vandoores], to these same Hungarian Jews who wound up in Barcelona because they were Hungarians.

00.28.23 And they did, in fact, hide him, but they wouldn't let him use the phone because they figured that was bugged. And while he was in a phone booth calling home, uh, the Nazis came and arrested everybody in the building, but they let the [Vandoores] go because they had Hungarian papers. Uh, but had he not been at the phone booth he would have gone.

00.28.47 My Uncle [Leo], my mother's brother Leo, who was sort of the one who took care of the family, uh, he, uh, was taken away to Dachau and from there to Buchenwald where he died. And my Uncle [Ignatz], who used to be called Nazi and then we had to start calling him Igo, uh, he was arrested and beaten up, but he was let go.

00.29.21 And he, uh, well he -- his story was that he had torn his shirt and scratched his face and sort of went to sit with the people who had already been taken away and beaten up. And he, he, he -- at least his story was that he had avoided that particular beating. And my Aunt Marie on her way over, uh, in her fur coat had been stopped and made to, uh, clean the sidewalk with a toothbrush.

00.29.59 Uh, well, there was going to be an election, a yes or no election, and that was called off. And the things that people were cleaning off with the toothbrushes were, uh, where it said no; people voting against becoming part of Germany. And I remember my grandfather coming over and saying, "Yes, but there is going to be another election."

00.30.26 And my father saying, "Oh sure, but you and I won't be voting in it." And that happened. There was another referendum, which was yes, but made no difference.

Interviewer: The opportunity to come to America, it sounds as if your father, as you said, had explored that and had gone at 4:00 a.m. to get an early number. So in other words, the entire family, you, your younger sister and both your parents were looking for that early opportunity to leave.

00.31.10 Henny Wenkart: Oh, immediately yes, sure, sure.

Interviewer: And instead, you ended up --

Henny Wenkart: Well nobody -- in Vienna it wasn’t the case that some people were wondering whether or not to leave. Whoever could leave did. Uh, my pediatrician left by jumping out the window and killing himself. People who had no opportunity; had no way of getting papers to go anywhere.

00.31.44 What people don't understand is at the beginning you could get out. Everybody could get out. You couldn't take your stuff with you, but you could get out. You just -- nobody would let us in. Everyone could have been saved, everyone, but the doors were closed.

00.32.12 You know, it wasn't up to this one, it wasn't up to that one and it wasn't up to me. And in the end it wasn't up to anybody and people got murdered.

Interviewer: Do you remember how your parents learned of the Kindertransport?

Henny Wenkart: No, uh, I don't. I have no idea how they found out about it.

00.32.42 Uh, I mean obviously, we were in touch with the [unintelligible], which is the cultural center of the Jewish community. And, uh, they were notified somehow. I don't know how. I know we went there and were interviewed. And now what I recall for sure was that I was told that I had to make the decision.

00.33.16 It was my decision to make. They would take me, but, uh, my parents were warned not to influence me. And I know that. I remember that very strongly. I said, "Can I take my little sister with me?" My parents were horrified to hear me say that because they were afraid that that would scotch the whole thing. But whoever was talking to me said, "No, we're not taking any babies."

00.33.44 "Oh, but I can take complete care of her and she's almost out of diapers," you know, that. But, "No, but if you would like to come we'd be happy to have you." And so I went to bed. I wouldn't eat and I couldn't sleep and, you know. And I heard my parents sort of whispering to visitors saying, "Oh, it's so terrible. She, she has this terrible decision to make and she hasn't been able to eat or sleep the whole week."

00.34.19 And I was so ashamed because it was a little bit like when my parents came home from the opera or somewhere pretending I was asleep when I actually wasn't. I couldn't get to sleep until they came home. But it wasn't like that because it was much more important. Uh, the shame was that the minute I knew that I could go, I was going.

00.34.51 I was leaving my parents and my sister in danger of their lives and I was saving my own skin. And I knew that. I knew I was going to do that. And I was just deeply ashamed of that. At the same time, of course, I knew they wanted me to go. If they didn't want me to go, they wouldn't have taken me there in the first place. They were trying to save me.

00.35.19 And I was told that if I took this affidavit from this group then their own affidavits would be strengthened because they would only have to be for three people, not four. And they were more likely to get out. But that was hogwash. I knew that hogwash. It was true, but it was hogwash anyway. That wasn't the reason I was doing it. I knew that. I knew I was doing it to save my own life.

00.35.50 I remember, you know, all the trains leaving Vienna in every direction and I wasn't on them. When my cousin Edith left I screamed so much when her train pulled out that they never took me to the train station again because they were afraid that something was going to happen, so, you know. And I'm sorry, but I don't think it can be the case that all the children were given this condition.

00.36.24 Because I know personally at least two who were too young to have made such a decision. They were five-years-old and I was nine, 10, whatever. I mean, yeah, I could, but if they couldn't, why was I made to? I have never been able to understand that. Because it destroyed me and it was so unnecessary. Why do that?

Interviewer: You left in May of 1939. Your parents were still waiting to leave.

00.37.15 Henny Wenkart: My parents came the day the war broke out, which was September 1st.

Interviewer: But when you left in May as a 10-year-old girl, of course you did not know that they were going to leave a few months later.

Henny Wenkart: I thought they would because I knew their papers were strong and their number was coming up, yes.

Interviewer: This may sound like a silly question, but I'll ask it. What did you leave Vienna with physically when you got on that train with the other children? What did you have with you?

00.37.56 Henny Wenkart: I didn't have my dolls, uh, although I know where they are now. Uh, they -- I didn't, I didn't -- I just had clothes. I had my prayer book, which was sort of a pet. I forget its name, but it had a name.

00.38.22 Uh, and, uh, and $6.75. Everybody was allowed $10.00, but, uh, my father thought that was an awful lot of money for a child. [Laughs] So I only had $10.75.

Interviewer: Not much. Not much to come to America with.

00.38.56 Henny Wenkart: Well there was nothing -- where was I going to buy anything anyhow? There was nothing you could buy.

Interviewer: You didn't know any of the children in the group?

Henny Wenkart: Yes, I did know one boy. [Quint] something. I don't -- I knew him vaguely. I had met him once or twice because he was an acquaintance of an acquaintance and so -- but we had not actually -- he wasn’t somebody I knew well.

Interviewer: I want to move into the journey from Vienna and landing in the United States some weeks later. I know that there were a couple of stages to that journey; one from Vienna to Berlin and then to Hamburg.

00.39.52 Henny Wenkart: We stayed overnight in Berlin at the Jewish Community Center. And there was a young man who played the banjo and taught us songs. And I've always wondered what became of that young man because he must have done that for lots of people, kids moving through there. And I wonder whether he got out. But I didn't know his name, so there was no way of finding out.

00.40.20 And he taught us some new songs. Uh, I know he taught us Hinei Lo Yanum. Do you know that? It's just very simple. Uh, uh, it basically means that the protector of Israel does not sleep or slumber.

00.40.48 And it's, uh, "Hinei lo yanum; hinei lo yishan; hinei lo yanum; hinei lo yishan. Hinei lo yanum v'lo yishan. Shomeir, shomeir Yisra'el." But he had a lovely voice and he played the banjo and it was nice. After dinner we went to sleep.

00.41.18 In the morning we, uh, were sitting at, uh, these [unintelligible] tables. There were 50 of us, you know, and they had a few tables on sawhorses and having something to eat. And the [Krauses] came by, either to check on us or because they had to take us to the consulate to get our individual visas.

00.41.48 I have my passport, by the way; my, my identification papers and all that. Uh, and I ran up to them and I said, "Here, there's some room here at our table." And, uh, Mrs. [Krause] said, "Oh that's so nice of you dear, but you know we ate at the hotel." And I said, "You are staying in a hotel?

00.42.17 We're traveling together and you're staying at a hotel and we're staying like this?" [Laughs] I'm not sure that she figured out what I actually meant. Uh, but I hadn't, I hadn't become aware yet that I was a refugee now. I was not the lawyer's daughter from Vienna anymore. I was a refugee.

Interviewer: I should back up a second because I also meant to ask you what your first recollections were of the Krauses.

00.43.02 Henny Wenkart: Well, uh, they were just a very nice couple. I had, I had been made aware that he was also a lawyer. And, uh, they seemed very nice and I felt, you know, they had a big responsibility. They had 50 kids that they were in charge of now.

00.43.30 Uh, of course, nobody actually on the ship, nobody took care of us, uh, that I remember. And I'm wondering about that because I know that some of the children are five and six-years-old. Uh, the problem is they don't remember. See, I remember when I was five and six, but most people don't.

00.43.54 And so what actually the story was there, I mean we were in cabins, but nobody watched whether anybody climbed up on the rail and maybe fell. I mean, no, if somebody had fallen overboard, somebody on the ship would have known. But also then after we passed the Irish Sea the gypsies came up. There were stowaway gypsies and they came up on deck. And so the boys had a lot of fun.

00.44.23 They posted guards so that, you know, the gypsies wouldn't steal anything. I mean, people -- there was a lot of prejudice against Roma among everybody. Uh, and I don't even know whether they landed. I, I don't know what happened to those people because they disappeared the day before we landed. Uh, they were illegal immigrants.

00.44.51 Uh, but as far as I know the Krauses traveled first class and we traveled tourist class.

[Director's comments]

Interviewer: We were talking about being on the ship.

00.45.28 Henny Wenkart: And the Roma came up and then they disappeared again. And the boys had a great time because they were posting guards and they were taking care of everybody, you know. The boys always had a better time. You know, when we got to that camp in, uh, Pennsylvania they learned baseball and we learned how to sew. [Laughs] I don't know, maybe girls weren't supposed to play baseball.

00.45.56 It was a different time, I suppose. But, uh, when we landed we were below having our papers checked. I do not remember the Statue of Liberty as -- although one of my friends says he does remember it. So it may be that he was on deck. I was below. Uh, and when we landed the press was there and we were not to speak to the press.

00.46.29 They told the press that we didn’t speak English. [Laughs] But they followed us. The Times, at least, followed us to Pennsylvania where we wound up. And, uh, and they were impressed by the fact that we liked Jell-O and tomato juice, neither one of which we'd had before. Whatever.

00.46.55 Uh, somebody had brought, uh, some relative had brought a Whitman Sampler to the dock and, uh, that Whitman Sampler when all around the bus. We were taken on a bus. And one by one, uh, each of the Viennese children bit into one of these chocolates and began to cry. [Laughs]

00.47.30 Because they tasted awful. Viennese chocolate is so good. [Laughs] I mean they had all these stupid flavors. I don't know. Spearmint and, and something that tasted like toothpaste and, I mean, they were really awful chocolates. They are to this day. Have you ever tried a Whitman Sampler? They're terrible. [Laughs]

00.47.59 Yeah, they're awful. So anyway we got to this place in Pennsylvania. Uh, I was homesick the whole entire time until I was back with my parents. So, uh, anything that happened after that was through a haze of homesickness.

Interviewer: I don't know the answer to this question. Did you share a cabin with --?

00.48.31 Henny Wenkart: There weren't cabins. The cabins were at the camp.

Interviewer: No, I understand that. On the ship.

Henny Wenkart: Oh, on the ship. Yes, I think I shared a cabin with [Elfie]. No, I think there were four of us to a cabin. Two double bunks. I don't remember too much about that. My father had told me that, uh, to avoid sea sickness stay on deck and I did.

00.49.01 I was mostly on deck.

Interviewer: How do you remember spending your days on the ship? What do you remember about what you were doing?

Henny Wenkart: Standing by the rail and looking back and crying. That's pretty much it. I mean, I was very, very, very, very homesick; major homesick.

Interviewer: From the time you left Vienna, do you remember when you first then heard from your parents?

00.49.51 Henny Wenkart: Yeah, sure. I mean, I got several letters a week, uh, from the beginning because they had written to the address before I left.

Interviewer: So by the time you were more or less settling in in the United States, you had word that they were still okay.

Henny Wenkart: Yes. Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: And that everyone in Vienna was okay.

Henny Wenkart: Sure, yes.

Interviewer: And that things were still moving on track.

00.50.19 Henny Wenkart: That about moving on track they couldn't write. I mean, everything was censored, of course. And what I wrote back was about my sister whose nickname was Cookie, "She mustn't forget me. You must show her my picture everyday and talk to her about me. She mustn't forget me."

00.50.52 So mostly that's what I wrote. I wrote instructions about what was to be done to make sure my sister didn't forget me. She didn't forget me. Well she was a baby, she might have, you know.

Interviewer: Did you have family pictures with you when you left? Did you leave with physical reminders of your family?

00.51.19 Henny Wenkart: I'm not sure.

Interviewer: You mentioned the boys playing baseball and the girls doing some sewing at Camp Shalomville.

Henny Wenkart: We weren't in Camp Shalom, you know. We were at the guest house some distance away. We visited the camp after we were out of quarantine.

00.51.48 We visited the camp for evening activities, uh, sometimes. But, uh, from where I was, from our room you could see across to the rec hall and in the camp after hours you could see, but not hear.

00.52.14 And we knew that America was a very violent country; gangster movies and so on. And there was a lot of violence going on there. You could look through the windows and there were, uh, young men just throwing women around and so on. And we didn't hear the music. It was the jitter bug. [Laughs]

00.52.49 So it was a -- but the interesting thing is that two of the popular songs that summer were, in fact, Yiddish songs. One was by [unintelligible] [Duchin], which we learned and one was And the Angels Sing.

00.53.24 And that you don't realize is a Yiddish song until you speed it up. Because if you sing it normal tempo it's, uh, "We meet and the angels sing. The angles sing the sweetest song I've ever heard." You speed that up and it's thump-um-budda-bump-bum, budda-bump-badda-dadah-dadah-dadda-dah. It's a Klezmer song.

00.53.55 And that was stunning, that was stunning. We had one bar mitzvah. There was a pair of brothers, Eddy and Rudy. And Eddy turned 13 that summer and we had a bar mitzvah then. And the people came out from Philadelphia.

00.54.21 Uh, the Krauses came, uh, the grand master of the lodge, his name was [Levine], he came and a number of other people came for the bar mitzvah specifically. Uh, well, there weren't even enough counselors to make a minyon, uh, I don't think; male counselors. There may have been, there may have been.

00.54.46 Uh, they were German-speaking counselors. They made, they made sure to hire, uh, counselors from Vienna who were refugees living in Philadelphia so that we could speak German with them. And, uh, whether we actually had lessons in English I don't know. It wouldn't have affected me because I knew English.

00.55.20 But I was very innocent in terms of boy/girl stuff. Uh, I went to the minyon in the morning and, uh, I was the only girl who went. But I went because I wanted to go. I didn't go to, you know, to make eyes with boys or display myself to the boys. But there were accusations that I didn't understand that that's what I was doing.

00.55.50 But I didn't know anything. I didn't know.

Interviewer: Were you placed in a foster home temporarily?

Henny Wenkart: No, I wouldn't go. I wouldn't go. I wouldn't go. My father came to see me and he said, uh, you know, "We're going to be very poor and I have been told that you could live for a while in the home of another lawyer.

00.56.24 And it would ease my mind to know that at least you were living a normal life." And only recently has it occurred to me that if he had said, "You know, it's going to be very hard for me to support four people. If you went to a foster home for a while it would make it easier on me," if he had said that, I could not have said no, but he didn't say it.

00.56.58 He didn't say it. He wanted me home. And he brought me a little bracelet that my grandfather had meant for me and every time I went to see my grandfather he would put it on my wrist and pull it off. He said, "When it doesn't pull off anymore over your hand you get to keep it."

00.57.22 So my father had brought it to me just, you know, to try on and I begged him to leave it with me and he did and I lost it that night. It fell off my wrist into the grass somewhere and was gone. He never asked me about it.

Interviewer: Did he resume his career as an attorney?

00.57.50 Henny Wenkart: Pardon?

Interviewer: Was your father able to resume his career as a lawyer in the United States?

Henny Wenkart: Oh, no, of course not. No, of course not. No, no. No, he got a job for $10.00 a week, uh, drilling holes in artificial rubies.

Interviewer: I'm sorry; drilling holes?

Henny Wenkart: Drilling holes in synthetic rubies.

00.58.16 And then, uh, after that -- after work he would go and visit doctors as what was called a detail man. He had this heavy bag of samples, which he would leave with doctors; vitamins and things like that. But they enjoyed his company, so they would leave their patients waiting and sit with him and chat. Uh, and then after that he went to, uh -- we were living in Providence, Rhode Island.

00.58.47 And there was a branch of Northeastern University at the YMCA and there he studied accounting. And, uh, this factory was run by a very, uh, charitable man named Adolph Miller. And Miller came to my dad and said, uh, "I'm going to expand the plant. We're going to be a war plant."

00.59.18 This was after December 7, 1941. Uh, "And I want you to be the controller, so take some courses in cost accounting." And so he did and he became the cost accountant, the controller of that factory. Uh, then afterwards Miller retired and closed the factory, but got dad a job with his son-in-law, who was a CPA.

00.59.49 But this was a very dour man and my father got very depressed working for him. And so eventually, he bought a practice from a widow and, uh, went on his own and did well. By the end, when he was 62 he learned to drive. He bought a car and took my mother to Canada. But he died when he was 67. He died just after he had made it and had some stocks and securities and so on to leave and then he died.

Interviewer: So you grew up in Providence?

01.00.29 Henny Wenkart: Uh-huh, I did. And I -- yes.

Interviewer: Went to high school and college?

Henny Wenkart: Well I lived at home, of course, when I went to college. I went to Classical High School, which to this day is a wonderful -- it's a public school, but it's a prep school. And since then I have taught, uh, writing at Harvard. And the kids that come from Classical are as well prepared as anybody from Andover or Exeter.

01.00.57 They are really well prepared. Uh, and then, uh, when I came to graduate dad did the research, uh, to find out which college was the best college in town. And he said, "Well there's Pembroke College, which is in Brown University. That's where you're going." And I said, "Okay," and I went and had an interview and took a test and went to Brown.

01.01.27 But I lived at home and I left the house at 7:00 in the morning and, and then stayed until midnight. Then I came home on two streetcars. I was terrified, but I did it every night. And, uh, I mean, there was no way that I was going away. You know, he was making a living, but not that kind of living. There was never even any thought of it. But I had friends in the dorm who are still my friends.

01.01.59 And so I had -- I would keep a sweater and a bathing suit in different people's rooms. You know, sunbathe on the roof with them and so on. Uh, I, I did a lot of things. I was a DJ on the radio station. I edited the Hillel paper. And oh, my husband and I were charter members of Brown Hillel and I'm still on the Board. And, uh, I was a DJ.

01.02.31 I edited the Hillel paper and I was news editor of the Pembroke paper. Uh, and I worked 40 hours a week. I worked in the library and I babysat and I graded papers. Uh, I loved college. I had such a good time. I just loved it. I mean, the things I was supposed to read were things I would have read anyway.

01.02.58 The idea that, you know, my job was to do all this, I just loved it. I was really, really happy in college.

Interviewer: You graduated when?

Henny Wenkart: '49.

Interviewer: What happened next?

Henny Wenkart: Then I went to the Columbia School of Journalism and got a Masters. And then I worked in New York for a while and then, uh -- and my boyfriend had gone to the Harvard Business School and then moved back home with his parents in Providence.

01.03.33 So, uh, I was in New York and he was in Providence and he'd come down every five or six weeks and I decided nothing was going to happen this way. So I moved to Boston and got a job as an editor at Ginn, uh, Textbook, editing French, Spanish, German, uh, textbooks. And then I got a job on WGBH as a producer; various jobs.

01.04.04 I never kept any job very long. [Laughs] I did; I worked at MIT for two years. Uh, and then, uh, my husband decided that it was time to have a family so why didn't I go back to school? That would be a nice part-time thing to do. So it took me 15 years to earn a Ph.D in philosophy. By that time, I had three kids taller than me. But I made it and I taught both writing and philosophy.

Interviewer: Quite a path.

01.04.42 Henny Wenkart: Yeah. And the ambition -- [unintelligible] weren't ambitious to become a full professor. Uh, I could have gone to Wheaton or some other college. I was offered jobs, but I was walking to work. I was five minutes away from my classes. I had three kids that were, you know, that I wanted to be with. And I had Harvard students to teach.

01.05.14 You know, that made a big difference. It didn't matter to me if I was going to climb a ladder. What if I got a job, a tenure track job in the Middle West? My husband wouldn’t move to the Middle West and I wasn’t going to have a commuting marriage with the kids in one place and him in another. So there was no way really. Uh, and I didn't have -- that wasn't the ambition that I had.

Interviewer: What was your husband's profession?

01.05.42 Henny Wenkart: He's an engineer.

Interviewer: As you were raising your children, Henny, did they always know of your story? Of the Vienna story?

Henny Wenkart: Who?

Interviewer: Your children, your family.

Henny Wenkart: Oh, I think so, yeah. Sure. He had gone to Holland, my husband, from Frankfurt.

01.06.10 He and his little brother had gone to Holland and there he lived in the orphanage for the orphans from Danzig. And his parents went to England and then sent for them just in time, just before the Germans took over Holland and the kids were sent -- the other kids were sent to their death.

01.06.38 So -- and then by the time that family came, there was war and they were in a trans -- they were in a convoy and attacked with submarines and so on. So his story was a different story. But you know it damages you. We're both damaged people.

01.07.04 Leaving your parents in danger and saving your own life is something you never get over. You just don't. Of course, it's a lot worse for those whose parents didn't come out; who lost their parents.

01.07.32 And, you know, you can say, "Well you're parents wanted you to save yourself. You know that." That doesn't make any difference. And they didn't have social workers working with us, you know. In those days you didn’t. Nowadays you would. [Extended silence]

01.08.10 These people had built a, a, uh, vacation home for themselves. A beautiful stone house, swimming pool, luxurious for that time. They had just dedicated it and instead of using it for themselves, they brought out 50 children because they had 50 beds in the place and put us there for the summer and provided us with everything we needed; with counselors who would understand what we were saying, uh, and who seemed kind, you know.

01.08.45 They were kind. And, uh, provided foster homes for the ones that needed them. They did tremendous, tremendous things for us. But when you're a child, you know, you, you don't think about that. You can't, you know. You're sort of in, in this little cocoon and if it's broken, it's broken.

Interviewer: Why do you think the Krauses did what they did?

01.09.26 Henny Wenkart: Why do I what?

Interviewer: Why do you think the Krauses did what they did in 1939?

Henny Wenkart: Uh, what I never knew until I read some correspondence quite recently is that they were worried about doing this. They were Americans, but they were Jews. And they were actually a little frightened of going into Nazi Germany as Jews, but they did it.

01.09.56 Uh, I didn't know that until I grew up. Uh, and I just felt that they must be wonderful people to do it. Uh, I took it for granted at the time, I think, because I knew that if the roles were reversed my parents would have done it, too. It's the sort of thing you do.

01.10.23 And, uh, they were good people and they did what they did because they were good people. But my problem wasn't that. My problem was that I was leaving my parents [unintelligible]. You don't -- as a child -- I mean, you know, maybe I was a very mature child and a very bright child and so on, but I was a kid.

01.10.51 You know, I was a child. And, you know, I mean, I kept a diary. I even know where it is. Like in my teen years I kept a diary and, uh, after a while I realized my mother was reading my diary and I started -- I continued the diary at home, but I kept a real one at school.

01.11.26 And my mother complained. We had a friend who was sort of in the middle. I can show you her picture. She was my matron of honor. I took out my, my wedding album in case you wanted to see it. Uh, and so she is 10 years older than I am and 10 years younger than my mother, so she was kind of a bridge. And my mother said, uh, to her, "Henny thinks I'm reading her diary."

01.11.58 And, uh, my friend said, "That's terrible. Why do you think that? My goodness, why would she think that?" And my mother said, "I can tell by the entries she thinks I'm reading it." [Laughs] So it's, uh -- I don't know really whether the Krauses got to know any of us personally during the journey.

01.12.29 Uh, I don't know that. I just -- I can't tell you it.

Interviewer: So you don't necessarily remember them spending --

[Director's comments]

Interviewer: I had asked you if you recall what your interaction was like with the Krauses aboard the ship.

Henny Wenkart: Well, you know, that interaction , I was so fresh with them when I came to them. [Laughs]

01.13.00 Uh, they came, uh, to our deck about two days before we landed and taught us the Star Spangled Banner, which we, you know, being Viennese children and used to real music, [Laughs] couldn't make head or tail of it. I mean, there is no melody there. It's, it's just about an unsingable song, and, uh, very difficult to learn.

01.13.33 We did all learn it I guess. Well, I'd learned it. You know, I don't know how many of the others learned it, actually. Uh, that's one thing. We didn’t eat together, of course. Uh, but I don’t even remember eating at all. Eating doesn't tend to be one of my big things. I mean, I remember two really good meals in my life.

01.14.03 One was in Paris when we went to a bistro and how crisp the bread was. That bread was so crisp that I broke a tooth on one and it didn’t matter. It was worth it. [Laughs] Things like that. Uh, but, you know, in general I'm not a foody and I don't remember exactly where I ate, what I ate. I remember where we ate in college room because we ate at long tables in a dining hall, but a nice dining hall.

01.14.36 And, uh, I remember some of the songs that we learned there when we went over to the camp with our counselors. Uh, I don't know whether the Krauses established any relationships with any specific children. I just don't know whether they did. I didn't have any particular relationship with them at all.

01.15.04 But I was, uh, I was so homesick that I was hardly talking to anybody. My roommate I talked to. I was also, uh, pretending that I was already a big girl. And, uh, my roommates were in their teens and were having their periods and I pretended that I was, too, though I wasn't. [Laughs]

Interviewer: Henny, where did you meet your parents when they came to the States?

01.15.49 Henny Wenkart: Oh, daddy came to get me. He visited me first, the day after they arrived, and then, uh, said well, you know, I would stay at, at Collegeville until that disbanded; until school would start wherever we would be living. And they, uh, actually, uh, rented an apartment -- no, we first stayed with, uh, second cousins of my mother.

01.16.24 Uh, they had two children, Harriet and [Boynard]. Harriet was my age and Boynard was about three years younger. And they lived on Herzl Street. Do you know how to spell Herzl Street? H-E-R-Z-L. Uh, very nice people. They lived in a very small apartment and they took the four of us in.

01.16.54 And there they called me grandpa's relatives. They called us that, you know. Uh, they didn't sort of realize we were their relatives, too. And grandpa had a little store a third the width of this room. You know, like a candy and groceries and things like that. But he was a wealthy man. He had a store, you know. [Laughs]

01.17.24 Uh, then we had a [railroad] apartment together with the widow of my Uncle Leo, who had died in Buchenwald, and her two children, who lived until -- well, Bruno died 15 years ago and Marlene, the younger one, was my sister's age and she just dropped dead about a year ago. Uh, so we lived there in Brooklyn.

01.17.53 And my first school -- I went to two schools in Brooklyn. One was very modern and built on, on, uh, projects. The project was Hawaii and so we would -- oh, yes, we would color little noodles and make leis and we learned the whole text to Aloha Away, which I still know.

01.18.23 And, uh, in arithmetic, uh, if you got a perfect paper you moved up a seat toward the front of the room. And so you reached the front row and if you kept on getting perfect papers you stayed there. So that was good. But then I went -- we moved and I had to go to a different school and this was a terrible school. Very old fashioned.

01.18.51 We were seated alphabetically, so I sat in the back. And the teacher was not very sympathetic. And one time I had an upset stomach and I kept asking to go to the bathroom and she said, "Why do you have to go to the bathroom so many times?" And I said, "Because I've got a stomach ache, that's why." And everybody laughed. Uh, so that was not very good. But anyway, we, we -- you could not -- if you needed help from the refugee committee, you could not stay in New York.

01.19.23 So they sent us to Baltimore. Now the Baltimore Jewish community was then and is to this day a wonderful community. Uh, we lived in a slum on Utah Place with cockroaches all over. Uh, my father got a job as a file clerk in a department store. But, uh, my parents were invited out to dinner very often by the families of lawyers, other lawyers.

01.19.55 They accepted him as a lawyer from Vienna. And there was none of this business about being a refugee, you know. I, I don't like that pronunciation. I always say refugee. And I guess because refugee is like refuse. Uh, but, uh, daddy didn't want to be -- he wanted to be in Providence because his brother was there. So we did move to Providence.

01.20.24 That was okay. We were allowed to do that. And that's where I grew up. And there a refugee was a refugee. [Laughs] But, you know, it's so weird because who were the other people? The other people were people who had immigrated from Russia 20 years earlier. And they had Russian accents so, you know.

Interviewer: I think I asked you this in one of our phone conversations, but I'll ask it here. That has to do with the times you've returned to Vienna. I believe you said you've been back once or twice.

01.21.04 Henny Wenkart: Well, we went back in '54 and I wanted to show my husband Vienna. He wanted to show me Frankfurt. We went back to our old homes and showed each other the way we had lived. And, actually, on the building where we lived there was only one balcony. That was our apartment. It was a round balcony around the, uh, around the parlor. And, actually, the windows were round, the glass was round.

01.21.32 And there is this wonderful chandelier and I would go in there early in the morning and watch the sun through the glass of the chande -- the crystal chandelier. And we did bring it over, but the thing was eight feet high, you know, and it wouldn't -- for 12 foot ceilings that's all right, but not -- it couldn't have been eight feet. It was six feet, yeah.

01.22.01 Uh, but I had friends. Uh, Olivia [Koppel], whose mother brought a lot of kids over from Berlin, and she went to visit her daughter who was in her junior year abroad. And they found -- I had given them the address and the directions and they found the room, the house where, where I had lived. And she said they stood there looking at it for a long time.

01.22.30 It was a beautiful place, just beautiful. And, uh, it was essentially a happy childhood.

Interviewer: So you were last in Vienna in 1954?

Henny Wenkart: Uh, I could -- well, for three days and then I had to flee again. And came back again when our youngest son was 10, which was the age I was when I left.

01.22.58 And showed them around, but the interesting thing is I didn't show them -- I showed them what I knew. I had never been taken to the Museum of Art because I thought, I always thought that it would be boring. [Laughs] So I showed them the Natural History Museum, which is right opposite the Museum of Art. We went to the opera, uh, and saw [Sigrid], but it was disappointing because there weren't many sets.

01.23.25 I mean, it was -- maybe because it was early after the restoration of the opera, but I'm, you know, I'm used to the Met with lavish sets. I mean, the singing was glorious, but no sets. [Laughs] Uh, and I -- you know, and I knew stories like the, uh, uh, like the Lohengrin story about the swan.

01.23.56 Do you know that story? Uh, you know, Lohengrin, uh, tells his wife that she mustn't ask him who he is. And she doesn't and she gets married, but then her friends keep saying, "You know, you don't know who this is. He could be a crook. He could be a gangster. You've got to ask him who he is. You know, he's your husband now." So she asks him on their wedding night and he says, "Now I have to leave you. I told you not to ask me."

01.24.25 You know, and then there's that wonderful aria where he tells her the story of his life, "ich - bin Lohengrin genannt." And then he leaves. And he leaves, a swan comes by and he gets on the swan and it, you know, leaves. But this one tenor -- I forget his name; you might even know him, a very famous tenor -- missed the swan.

01.24.52 He gets to the edge of the stage and the swan comes by and leaves and he doesn't, he didn’t get on. So he looked at the audience and he says, "When's the next swan?" [Laughs] That story I knew. [Laughs] But, you know, you can get a little book of opera stories. I have it somewhere. I don't know where it is. Uh, I was taken to the opera twice, both times to see Hansel and Gretel.

01.25.22 And I couldn't understand how everybody looked so different the second time. And we were sitting way up in the top balcony and in the second act after they burn the witch and everything, uh, my father kept saying, "Look over there. See that man over there? Over there, that's the witch." And I said, "Oh, daddy, they burned the witch. She's dead." [Laughs]

01.25.51 So, you know -- but the things you remember are things you didn't quite understand. Uh, there was one, one saying about how it's very difficult to be a father. There's nothing to being -- becoming a father, but being a father is very hard. And, and me saying, "Of course, there's nothing to becoming a father. You don't do anything to become a father," and everybody laughing and laughing at me.

01.26.24 And I didn't understand and didn't forget; didn't forget. And what I hated was when people asked me who they were because I knew who they were. But when they asked me that I thought maybe I didn’t really know. Maybe I was wrong and I wouldn't say. It's, it's a -- people tease children. In Europe they do; very different. Child raising here is very different.

01.26.52 Uh, I actually couldn’t do it because they argue with the children and they don't, they don't punish them. I mean, the worst thing they do is send them to their room, but that's not a punishment. Uh, but it works. Walking around the campus I see kids, you know, texting or, or cell phoning their parents.

01.27.20 Uh, in my day, I mean, I lived at home, but the kids who lived away, they never -- they were glad, glad to get away from home, you know.

Interviewer: This episode that we've been discussing happened now more than 70 years ago. That's a long time, right? When you look back over what you've done, all the terrific things you've done throughout your life, as a parent, as a writer, as a teacher, is there any sort of specific memory of what happened in 1939 that is sort of more vivid than all of the others that stands out?

01.28.08 Henny Wenkart: Yes, just that; just making the decision to leave my parents in danger and save my own life. Yes, that's been a shadow. That's not to say that they shouldn't have done what they did when they came and took us away from there.

01.28.37 They were rescuing, in some cases, a whole family. You know, if the family's papers were not strong enough for the whole family, they took one or two of the children away, uh, and then the family was able to come out. They collected affidavits for every one of those 50 children. They did a tremendous job, which we were in no position as children to understand at the time.

01.29.09 My parents must have understood. But it just occurs to me now something I've never thought about because I was so centric of myself, my own feelings. My parents were there in the room. Uh, I don't know if the Krauses were in the room.

01.29.39 There was a woman there and I thought she was the pediatrician, but you're telling me that the pediatrician was a man, so this may have actually been a woman, uh, from the Jewish community center who was doing the interview. Uh, and it may have been her idea to say that they mustn't influence me. Uh, I'll never know that.

01.30.09 Because if the Krauses had been in the room, the men would have shaken hands. There was nothing like that. I think they probably were not. Uh, so -- but I did meet them sometime; on the train I guess. You know, they were on the train, I'm sure. And they must have gone around and shaken everyone's hands.

01.30.38 But by that time, I was in tears and, you know. And the train didn't leave and didn't leave and there came a time you would look out the window and you'd be waving and waving and waving for an hour or two. And I could still see my father's hat. You know, my father standing on tiptoe to see me. And my mother was shorter by some, so I didn't even see her.

01.31.08 And after a while it was just too much. I thought, "Well, if we're going to leave, let's leave." You know, it just gets too much. It's like a damn hockey game. The hockey games are always so hard to watch because there are so few scores. [Laughs]

Interviewer: What haven't I asked that you would like to talk about?

01.31.39 Henny Wenkart: Uh, I kind of regret that I don’t have more to tell you about the Krauses themselves. Because, you know, the strong memories of them teaching us the Star Spangled Banner and trying really hard to teach us that unteachable song. Uh, I know that they came on the bus with us and took us all the way to Collegeville. And they visited, too, but I don't remember how many times.

01.32.11 See, if I'd known you were going to come around and ask me these questions, I probably would have made it my business to remember more. Uh, that they were wonderful people; that they did something they were afraid to do, but did it is the thing to be remembered, uh, and they both came, which says something about the marriage.

01.32.41 Because, uh, many a husband might have done this, but not wanting to bring his wife into any kind of danger. Uh, it may be that he thought, "Well, she's a woman and therefore, uh, would be able to be kinder to these children." Maybe that was her idea. I don't know, see.

01.33.08 Now as an adult looking back, uh, I do think about them and that they did something very hard and not undangerous. And were very good people because here you are, not even a grandson, but a grandson-in-law, right?

01.33.38 And anxious to get as much material about them said as you can. The other people you're interviewing that I know of were younger, I think. So you don't have -- now I know Hannah Brown is dead. How about Elfie? Is Elfie still alive?

Interviewer: Uh, I don't know.

Henny Wenkart: She was, she is two years older than I am, so if she's still alive she might --

Interviewer: But you see I'm talking to [Hanni's] brother, Bob.

01.34.06 Henny Wenkart: Yes. Well, he -- uh, I didn't know him and he, when I first tried to get in touch with him, uh, was, uh -- I don't know. I think he, he may have thought I wanted something. I get that impression that his wife thought I wanted something. I don't know. I don't know. I mean, I didn't know him really. I knew Hannah. She was my roommate.

01.34.33 Uh, but Elfie was older, so she -- if she's still alive and if you're in touch with her. Uh, I don't know what her name is now, maybe Elizabeth something. In any case, she would be 83 now, I think. So she would remember more. She was a very grown up girl.

Interviewer: I honestly don't know how many are still alive. It's not easy to find people, particularly the women.

01.35.06 Henny Wenkart: The women because they changed their name. I didn't change mine. And people say, "How come you didn't change your name?" In the '50s that was very unusual and I say, "Well, we decided not to change our names." He didn’t change his. I didn't change mine.

Interviewer: And what happened to your sister?

Henny Wenkart: My sister lives in Toronto. And my sister became an anthropologist and taught in Regina.

01.35.40 Uh, her husband is a filmmaker, but he is a Communist. And so, uh, he was, he was blackballed by all the networks. He was a very good filmmaker, but he couldn't get a job here and so when she got her doctorate they moved to Canada where she taught anthropology and he actually taught one course. What was the course?

Interviewer: You're asking?

01.36.11 Henny Wenkart: Yeah.

Interviewer: Marxist film?

Henny Wenkart: What?

Interviewer: Marxist film?

Henny Wenkart: Just about. The use of film as a, as a propaganda medium. Uh, anyway he got bored and he moved to Toronto and she -- and got active in the party there. And she, uh, took early retirement eventually when their daughter was raised and had gone through the University of Toronto.

01.36.41 I was recently at her wedding. Uh, and, uh, so they, they live in Toronto and, uh, as retired people, you know.

Interviewer: I didn't ask what happened to your husband.

Henny Wenkart: Oh, nothing much happened to him. [Laughs] You'll see.

01.37.11 You'll read the book of poems. You'll see.

Interviewer: Okay. And just so I have it on film, why don't you just tell me briefly about your children and where they are and what they do.

Henny Wenkart: Our eldest son is Jonathan Epstein. He opened last night in, uh, Paradise Lost by Clifford Odets at the Loeb in Cambridge. He is a very fine actor. He has won the Elliot Norton Award twice and has been nominated four and five times.

01.37.42 Uh, and he has a wife and a son and two stepsons from her previous marriage. Uh, and then our daughter and her husband are both lawyers, except she's given up the law and she now makes pottery and jewelry and so on. And he works for the Federal Trade Commission as a lawyer. And they have a son who is graduating from the University of Chicago and a son who is graduating from high school, both in the same weekend in June.

01.38.17 Uh, and they live in Bethesda. And, uh, our youngest is [Ari]. Ari Wenkart Epstein, who is -- teaches at MIT. He is an oceanographer. And he teaches an environmental science course at MIT. And has a son 11 and a daughter five.

01.38.50 That's, that's the group.

[Audio gap]

Henny Wenkart: Well, uh, I left on Mother's Day --

[Director's comments]

Henny Wenkart: I left on Mother's Day, uh, which was the end of May 1939 and they showed up on September 1st when the war broke up. So it was three months, which seemed very long.

Interviewer: They literally arrived on September 1st?

01.39.19 Henny Wenkart: Yes, on the Laconia, a Cunard White Star ship. We were on the President Harding, which was such a bad ship that somebody told me it sank in dry dock. [Laughs] Terrible ship. I was, I was astonished when I saw her because we went to Hamburg and I always thought of ocean liners as these huge things and here was this little ship, which we were supposed to go across the ocean on.

01.39.52 I was quite frightened. [Laughs] You're going to have to edit that out, the narcolepsy attack.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think you consider yourself now an American.

Henny Wenkart: Of course I'm an American.

Interviewer: When you first came over you probably didn't. So how did that transition happen?

01.40.21 Henny Wenkart: Well, when I came over I was a refugee. I wasn't anything. I was a Jew. I was a Jew. Uh, you know, you can play that game with yourself; what are you first? What are you second? What are you, you know. And, uh, there are people -- well there's the Hannah of the, of the, uh, Hanukah story who sacrifices her children for it. I would never do that.

01.40.49 I mean, first of all, I'm a spouse and parent. That's first. Second, I'm a Jew. Third, I'm a writer, editor, philosopher. Uh, fifth, I'm an American and a New Yorker. Sixth, I'm a woman. That's how far down that comes.

01.41.20 There a lot of women who are a woman first, you know. Uh, so at the time, uh, actually, you know, I don't have my own citizenship papers because I was naturalized with my father because I was under 18. Uh, so I always make sure to keep my passport current. Uh, came back from the wedding in Toronto and went through passport control.

01.41.51 And, uh, the official, you know, took my passport and looked through the visas and he gave it back to me and said, "Welcome home." [Crying] So sweet that I was moved to tears. And, uh, we were going to make a [unintelligible].

01.42.21 We both were going to make a [unintelligible]. It was in our plan, but we couldn't. We couldn't leave our parents again. We just could not. But, of course, originally we, my family, had bought some land in Palestine. We were going to go there. That was the original plan. And, uh, if those papers had come through before, what, before I went to America and so on, we would have gone.

01.42.50 We would have made a [unintelligible] and we would have grown up there and some of our friends did. Uh, and, you know, I feel very comfortable in Israel. People say, "Why don't you take dual citizenship?" But there would be no point in it. I can't live there when my children are here and I won't. And, uh, as far as being buried there, there is no -- you don't, you don't deserve to buried there if you didn't live there.

01.43.17 I did -- somebody sent me a, uh, uh, tobacco can of soil from Jerusalem, which I do want in my grave. But, uh, when did I become -- well I became an American when I became a citizen. Uh, the transition to English was very rapid because I have a poem I wrote in English when I was 12, just a year after I came over.

01.43.53 So that I think in English. Well, unless I'm reading another language. If I'm reading German or French or Spanish I think in that language. But I am bilingual in German, except that I couldn't really write.

01.44.17 You know, I read even a German newspaper or anything and it's such a wonderful language and I say to myself, "You know, I could have been writing in that language if I hadn't switched to English," which is such a simple, simple language. But, you know, they used to -- there was something called Esperanto and they thought it would be a language. English is the Esperanto because it's simple. Everybody has -- everybody speaks English. It used to be that everybody spoke French.

01.44.49 They don't now. They don't now. English is it. And, uh, very much an American. It may be that culturally -- well, I would say maybe culturally I'm more, more European than American, except that, uh, culturally I fit into New York and I fit into Boston, too.

01.45.18 Although, I don't like -- I mean I lived there a long time. We lived in Cambridge a long time and I keep an apartment there because I have kids there, but, uh, you know, I'm essentially a New Yorker and I want to continue living here. I mean I hope I don't get old enough so that I can't live on my own, uh, or that I can live on my own even though I get old.

01.45.53 I mean I'm working and I'm active and so on. I edit the Jewish Women's Literary Annual, which is a very, very good magazine, uh, very well regarded. And I teach a poetry workshop. It's funny that I'm teaching poetry and not philosophy. I did teach philosophy. I taught philosophy at Stern College for Women and at Harvard, of course.

01.46.19 Uh, and I told you that in, uh, this encyclopedia I have an article on [Santa Ana and Irony], which can I hold up the encyclopedia?

Interviewer: Yes.

Henny Wenkart: See? I didn't edit it, but I have an article in it.

Interviewer: How long have you lived in New York?

01.46.54 Henny Wenkart: 30 years, this time around. Of course, I lived in New York for a couple of years before when I was at the J School and worked in New York for a year after that. But, uh, then I moved to Boston and then to Cambridge and, uh, we raised the kids in Cambridge, essentially.

01.47.23 And then when the last one went to college -- they all went to Harvard -- uh, when the last one went to -- he's fond of saying, "I didn't leave the nest, the nest left me." He still had to come home and feed the cats. [Laughs] Uh, and then came down to New York, which is where I'd always wanted to be. What I didn't understand was that if you raised them in Cambridge they wouldn’t think of New York as their home.

01.47.52 And there was a time for about three years when, uh, we did all live in New York in different places. They were on their own in different apartments. Our daughter was married. But then everybody left and I stayed.

[Abrupt end of recorded material]

**HennyWenkart interview**

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