United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with John Meyerstein
July 1, 2004
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with John Meyerstein, conducted by Nina Ellis on July 1, 2004 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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

ZDENKO JOHN BERGL
September 14, 2005

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with John Meyerstein.

Answer: Stein.

Q: John Meyerstein, conducted by Nina Ellis on July first, 2004, in Washington, D.C. This is tape number one, side A. Just for the record, would you tell me your name, where you live now, and when and where you were born.

A: Okay. My name is John Meyerstein. I was originally called Hans Meyerstein, but when we arrived in England after the St. Louis voyage, it was suggested to my parents that -- that they give me an English first name, and the name John was chosen, I'm not sure how, and it's -- from that moment onwards it became that, and my parents never used any other name but that, at the time. I currently live in Oakville, Ontario, which is about 20 miles west of Toronto. I was born in Halle, Germany, on the 21st of March, 1935.

Q: Mm-hm. Tell me, do you have many memories of those first years in Germany?

A: Truthfully I have to say no. I know that some people say that they can remember everything when they were in a pram, or a cradle. I have to be truthful and say I do not recall those sort of things.

Q: Okay. Tell me about your parents, their names, and where they were from.

A: My father was Ludwig Meyerstein. He was born in Rosslau, Germany in -- on March the 10th, 1893. My mother was Alice Meyerstein, born Alice Eisner, and she was born in a -- a place called Gutentag, in Upper Silesia, Germany, on the 29th of June, 1910.

Q: And do you know wh-where they met, and how -- how they came to be married?

A: How they met I don't know, I rather suspect it was one of these arranged marriages. Both my families -- both my parent's families were financially very well off, and I can only conclude that it was assumed that this would be a good way of having a marriage. My mother never discussed it, in fact she probably talked to my wife years later on things which she didn't discuss with me. But how they actually met, and -- I don't know, I rather think it was a -- an arranged marriage, but how that was done, if -- if my assessment is correct, I have no idea.

Q: And your father served in World War I, I understand.

A: Yes, he was -- he served in -- four years in -- in World War I, together with an older brother, who also served fo -- four years, and a younger brother, who was also in -- in World War I, but who did not come back, he was killed in -- in 1918, I think, a week or two before Armistice Day, and was listed as missing in action, and never -- never found again, actually. So there were three brothers, of which my father was one, went to the wars, in 1914 - '18, and only two came back.

Q: You know what -- what kind of service your father performed, or where he was --

A: My -- I -- I -- I think my father's younger brother was in an infantry regiment. My father and his elder brother, Hugo -- and I should say that my father's younger brother, the one who was killed in 1914 - '18, was called Hans, and that was why I was originally called Hans, because my grandmother wanted to have a -- a grandson following that name. My father and his elder brother Hugo both served in cal -- cavalry regiments to begin with, and I s -- I don't know how far the cavalry went, because as you know, things changed, and cavalry re -- regiments then became extinct almost, and presumably went into infantry regiments. My father's elder brother Hugo came out at the end of the war as a captain, and my father ended the war, I think, as a second leftenant.

Q: Do you know where he served, and --

A: No.

Q: -- did he see combat?

A: I -- I -- I think they both did, I do not know where they served. I believe it was always on the western front, because I think that my father would have mentioned something if -- if -- if it had been elsewhere on the eastern front at that time. I have my father's military b-book, you know, of the class of -- of 19 f -- I can't think what they call it now, class of 1914, or -- or something like that. But it doesn't show exactly where all these things were, it wa -- just like a military record book, which I had years later in the British army, when I was drafted. But I've also since, in the last -- since my father's death, found my grandfather's military book, and he was in the class of 1879, in the militia, in an artillery regiment. So, on my father's side of the family, military activity was not a -- an unusual activity, despite what the -- the Germans said, that there were that few -- not that many Jews volunteered or fought, that was totally incorrect. I do recall that my father mentioned to me that he provi -- that his father, my grandfather, provided the horses, and gave them money and so forth, because in the units which they had to serve, particularly since they ultimately ended up in -- with -- in the commission rank, that required more funding, and my parents were obviously in -- in a position to -- to -- to -- to -- to -- to provide that. The other thing which I found rather interesting, contrary to what I sometimes read, is that my father, on one or two occasions, and these were things which we could always discuss, said to me that when he entered the -- the cavalry regiment, or was in -- was -- w-was organized to go to this unit, that the -- the colonel of the regiment said to him, "Well, Meyerstein, you can't say that there are any anti -- anti-Jews here, otherwise you wouldn't be here." So again, I find it sometimes a bit awkwa -- difficult to understand when I read various documents, as to what took

-- actually took place. Obviously there were anti-Jewish Germans, and there were Germans who didn't view this in any shape or form. Whether that's normal, I can't say actually, you know.

Q: Right, right.

A: And they -- and my brother -- and one other thing which I think you might find interesting -- and this was apparently -- this wa -- given to me by my mother, who had a very good relationship in terms of -- of f-friendship with my father's brother, is after World War I, when the German army was reorganized -- this was told by my Uncle Hugo to my mother, they got in touch with my Uncle Hugo, who obviously had a very good military record, and said, "Why don't you come back into the German army?" And he said, "Well, you know, I'm Jewish." And -- and apparently they said to him, "Well, why don't you just say you're Christian, it won't any difference," and -- and left it. He didn't, of course, do that. What I'm getting at it's so peculiar and so strange in what subsequently took place.

Q: What business was your father's family in?

A: My father's family had a -- what you would call a small department store in Rosslau. They were the only Jewish family in this entire community. In fact my grandmother, my f-father's mother, was also born in this -- in Rosslau, and I have the documents, the birth certificate, and the marriage certificate to my grandfather, also i-in -- in my files. And apparently he was quite successful in that respect, and -- and was continued, I think, until the German -- until the Nazis came to power, and of course ultimately that was all taken away from them.

Q: They were the only Jews in that town?

A: Yes.

Q: Huh. So there was no synagogue or community there that --

A: No. No -- not at all.

Q: Were they just full assimilated [indecipherable]

A: Absolute -- I -- I -- I would have to say yes, because I have -- if you look at the birth certificates, and the marriage certificates of both sides of my grandparents, you will find that the names are all traditional German names. M-My father is Ludwig. My elder -- his elder brother Hugo, my -- hi-his younger brother Hans, the one who was killed, and who I was named af -- Hans. My grandmother was named Rosian, which literally trans -- mean little rose. My -- my grandfather was Max. If you look at his parent's birth certificates, it's Magnus, which is really like a Latin name, and the grandmother, I think was -- great-grand -- was Regina. But this also applies to my father's -- grandmother -- my mother's grandparents in like manner. So when people say to me, well what Jewish names did they have, I have to be honest and say I don't honestly know. My mother, for example is Alice, spelled the same way in English as it is in -- in -- in German, except in German it's a different pronunciation. So the documents which I have finally found among my father's papers, after a long time, so far I've -- I've sor -- deciphered that they've gone back to about 1822, and they're all -- the Christian names, the first names, were all literally almost -- you could say either they were English or they were German, but totally integrated. And I suspect that that -- the shock of what subsequent happened, they probably couldn't believe what was taking place.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Your father's family, you said, had a department store in that time --

A: Well, I would call it a department store in the like manner, and I have seen pictures of it a little bit.

Q: And your father worked there?

A: No, my father -- my father became a barrister and a judge, moved to Halle, where I was ultimately born, practiced criminal law. And ironically -- Halle is a very big chemical loca --

area, even I think to this day. And i-ironically, which I didn't realize, he never discussed it, but my mother mentioned it to me, and also my cousin who lives in Australia, whose mother is my father's -- was my father's sister, told me that he was also the outside counsel for I.G. Farben, the big German chemical company, which ultimately made the -- the material which was doing the gas chambers. Course, this all -- we're not talking about that particular period, we're talking in the -- in the 30's and so forth. So my father had a very successful, an-and according to my mother was a very well known criminal barrister i-in Halle.

Q: And he would have been there through the 20's?

A: Ah, yes.

Q: An-And then you were born there in 1934?

A: '35.

Q: '35 - '35. And what about your mother's family, what business were they in? You said that they were also --

A: My -- my mother's parents lived, as I mentioned, in -- in Gutentag, which is an interesting name because it means good day, or good morning -- in Upper Silesia, almost on the -- on the Polish border. My -- she had one brother called Lota, and her father was Ludwig Eisner, and my grandmother, my mother's mother, was Rosa Eisner. They owned what you would call a farm equipment wholesale business. And I have pictures, I found pictures. I have no idea how they managed to keep these particular pictures, or bring them with them considering all the other problems which they were experiencing. Where my grandfather had -- you could see the trucks outside his -- th-the fi -- th-the family business and home, with the telephone number, and on the truck, branded names of things like percil and so forth, even American products. They did farm equipment, I would sort of say, you know, which supplied the farming community, which was

predominantly Polish speaking, although this Upper S-Silesia was of course Germany, and had been for 150 years or so. And very successful as well.

Q: So let's start now with -- with -- your father was arrested, I understand, in -- in 1938?

A: Well, actually, he was initial -- he was arrested twice. The first ti -- my fa -- my father's sister emigrated with her husband to Australia as a result of friends which they had who -- who helped them there. And one of the -- also from Germany, also German Jews. And one of the German Jews had some business things which were required to -- to be handled, and I believe, and this is only -- I'm only surmising this, cause we never di -- I only heard this from my mother, my father took over some activities. This was, or been public perhaps early '38 or so. And for some reason or another, you know, at that time, the -- the German government was already starting to try and take money, or -- and various other things from -- from German -- from German Jews, and their businesses. And he was arrested and held for six weeks in Halle -- but it was obviously nowhere near anything which subsequently took place -- and was released. And then, I think after Kristall night, which was in the latter part of 1938, my father was arrested and taken to Buchenwald. My mother's father was also arrested and taken to Buchenwald. My father's -- my mother's brother, Lota, was also arrested and taken to Buchenwald. And they found each other there, of all -- I mean, most incredible, found each other. All three got out. Now, you have to remember, my father was a first World War veteran, my grandfather, my mother's mother -- father was also a veteran. And I have subsequently read books and documents which indicate that the Germans basically said to some of these people, "Because of your activities as, you know, in World War I, we're going to let you go. But you have so many days or weeks, and if you are still here in Germany, then we -- if when we re-arrest you again, we'll never -- you'll never get out." So I believe my father must have got out, probably in early 1939. I don't know which day, and my

grandfather. My Uncle Lota also got out, but I don't know exactly when, and under what conditions, but they did, and I have proof of the fact, perma -- documentation that my father then applied for visa to the United States in, I think, February of 1939. So between Kristallnacht and entry into Buchenwald, and now it must have been somewhere between that time, and shall we say the end of January, or -- so he was rather lucky to get out at that time.

Q: Let me go back and ask you when your -- your father's sister left Germany to go to Australia.

A: That would have been somewhere in 1938, I go -- I believe.

Q: [indecipherable] in the same year, then.

A: But before Kristallnacht.

Q: Before?

A: Yeah.

Q: And it was an escape in a sense, a sense of -- of being unsafe for Jews and the decision to leave [indecipherable]

A: Well, I -- yes, I -- I think you're right, but I think the motivating factor might have come more from my aunt's husband, as distinct from other things. My mother has mention -- mentioned to me on several occasions as a boy when I asked questions, that I think sometime in '38 -- when, I don't know, I think before Kristallnacht, okay, that the families got together. My father's family, of which really, was really in my grandmother, because my -- my grandfather on my father's side, died in 1929, so th -- you know, none of this would have applied, got together, and sort of said what we could -- what -- what should we do, because at that time you still, from what I've been given to understand from my mother, you could still take out all your money and belongings without any problems. But they couldn't come to any conclusion. And you have to remember, from my father's side of the family, it was -- I have the documents to the early 1800's

and my father always used to say to me it was even before, you know whe -- they were more German than the Germans.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay, if you want to put it this way. Now, I don't th -- I don't think that that was quite as di -- as long on my mother's side of the family, because I understand that from their aspects, my mother's grandfather, m-my gra -- my great-grandfather came from Poland in the days when Poland was under Russian law, and rode across the border into Germany, into -- into Silesia. Because in those days the Russians used to call people up for military service, and it wasn't just a two year stint, it was 20 years before they were released. So I suspect that they -- his parents, great-great-grandparents, sort of said you'd better get out and -- and -- and go somewhere else. But, if you follow what I'm getting at, it's that depth of -- of period. But my parent, when they had the meeting with -- with the two families, obviously couldn't come to lo -- to a conclusion. We're sitting here today saying why not? I can't answer that question.

Q: Yeah, yeah. [indecipherable] interesting to know what that conversation was like, what the arguments were [indecipherable]

A: I -- I get the impression from her mother that -- th-the -- the women on the one hand wanted to go, and the men -- you have to remember that my father was a very successful barrister, even though things had already declined, I don't know to what degree how far. Everything which I read, where everything is stated, regulations do this, yes it's true, but things still somehow, how did they manage to survive and live with no income coming in? Because although things were tightening, you could still spend money, if you had it.

Q: Yeah, right.

A: And, you know, perhaps they just thought that this was just an aberration.

Q: Yeah. And the women wanted to go, the women were clearer --

A: Well, I understand on my mother's side, her mother, and my mother wanted to go. My father's mother was not enthusiastic, but I don't know that, I'm just giving you comments which my mother said to me.

Q: Right, right. So your father comes home from Buchenwald, do you have any memory of that?

A: No. I can only tell you that my mother went to pick him up, so she must have been notified. And she had to go by train because Halle to Buchenwald is not, you know, a -- a bus ride. And my mother said that nothing happened to her physically, they were just, you know, they just told to go sit in a corner in the -- of the waiting room, or wherever. Of the entrance or whatever it was. Nobody bothered her, but nobody was very -- nobody was terribly polite, but nobody was terribly rude, they just said go sit over there, and -- and -- and that was it. And I have to assume that it was done by train. My mother said that, you know, from that day onwards, my father -- there were no -- no more argument about leaving. And I have to conclude that -- that my father was too stunned and shattered at what had happened. And even though he'd been four years in the first World War, I have to conclude that there was -- the -- what -- what he saw and experienced in Buchenwald had no comparison to what we read about, what took place in World War I, where it was strictly military and -- and not the other scenarios, but he was on th -- we never discussed that, he -- he -- he could not -- he could not --

Q: Talk about it.

A: No, or he wouldn't talk about it, let's put it that way.

Q: Well then, we're coming close to the time when you -- you and your mother and father, and your grandfather, you mother's father, left together to go on the [indecipherable]

A: Well, that's an interesting aspect, yes. My grandfather, on my -- ma -- my mother's father, had some relatives who had emigrated to the United States. I think it would have had to be in the very late 18 -- the latter part of the 1800's. How they got in touch with these relatives, I really don't know, but they did. And where the exact relationship was I don't know, because I ultimately met these people in the United States, and they were the ones who provided the sponsorship bond documents. And they couldn't really explain the exact relationship as to how -- whether it was their mother, mother's mother or so. And as you know, when people went through Ellis Island, names got changed, or people married each other on the boat, I -- I really can't te -- I'm sorry, I really can't tell you how that happened, other than that two of the relatives -- and I have [indecipherable] gave me some of the documents, which I didn't know

Q: [indecipherable]

A: Yeah. I don't -- I've met them. Years later I met them, and they viewed me as very distant, we viewed each other as very distant cousins, but none of us could exactly explain where the connection -- the third person shown on those documents, I have no idea, other than it was obviously a very generous individual.

Q: Let's look at that, as long as we're talking about it, because we can mention the names on tape, because I have those document here as well. This is the one you're talking about.

A: Yes. Edna Cohn, when I met her was already in her -- I -- either late 60's or early 70's and we're now talking over 30 - 40 years ago, almost -- or -- or longer. Edna was not married, and apparently she spent her life in -- in a stockbroking -- most of her career in a stockbroking office. When we met it was in California, not in Chicago, they'd retired for health or weather reasons. Samuel Fox was married to Edna Cohn's sister, Miriam. Samuel Fox was not a relative, or any connection, but he was married to Miriam, and had been a pharmacist in [indecipherable] and --

and had his own business in Chicago. Aaron Stein, also from Chicago, who is the third affiant here shown in the documents, I don't know who that is, other than obviously a very generous person. They put up the money for the bonds, which enabled my parents and my grandfather, where the connection was, Ludwig Eisner to -- to put applications in, and I believe the -- the sort of certificates, the -- what do they call them, visa application numbers are the ones shown here as well, for the three of us. This document also shows Ludwig Eisner, which the museum here didn't know who it was, although it was -- he was listed in all the -- the museum documents. But he happened to be my grandfather, and he's shown here actually.

Q: Uh-huh, they didn't know that.

A: And they didn't know that. They do now.

Q: So these three people put up the money, and --

A: These three people, yeah --

Q: -- presumably had never met your parents?

A: Didn't even know my parents existed.

Q: Didn't know they existed until they --

A: Yes.

Q: -- presumably got a letter from someone, maybe your father.

A: Not my father, would have had to be from my grandfather, because he -- Ludwig Eisner, my father's father-in-law.

Q: Right. That's amazing.

A: Yes, and I -- how that ever happened, how they got th -- th -- how they traced each other, I don't honestly know.

Q: Right, right.

A: And they didn't know themselves, when I met them years later. And -- and the re -- the relationship was -- was tremendous. And years later Edna Cohn and her sister Miriam Fox, visited England, and at that time -- to see my parents, and at that time my parents financially were in a position to repay --

Q: The bond.

A: -- the bond. And I have comments -- I have letters in my -- in my father's papers, which I found in -- in -- really in the last year or so, because where my parents -- my father died six weeks short of 93, and my mother subsequently, almost 20 years younger, died two ye -- in 2001, at 91 and a half. So you imagine, I had almost a hundred years worth of com -- amalgamated documents to look through, that which had survived, and so forth. And I found letters which Edna Cohn [indecipherable] written to my father in England, to sort of say -- they were still sending them some money, not to worry about that, so I imagine that must have depressed my father considerably.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: But they were able to repay that.

Q: They pa -- have repaid the bond, how much was it?

A: I've no idea.

Q: Yeah. Interesting.

A: I -- in -- in terms of -- of today's currency, I don't know what the cost, the Holocaust Museum probably, would know what a bond for a visa -- I mean, it was a standard, I would imagine, a standard visa bond. What it was, I don't really know, translated into 2004 currency valuations today, I would imagine is -- might be somewhat more expensive, I don't know. But it was very generous of them. And if it hadn't been for them, we probably wouldn't have been sitting here.

Q: Right, right. I'm going to flip this tape over, while we're at a breaking point here.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with John Meyerstein. This is tape one, side B. So tell me now what you know about the -- the decision to leave, and the purchase of the ticket, if you know anything at all.

A: Okay. I don't know a great deal of how it was done. I can only conclude from my mother's comments, that the moment my father was released from Buchenwald, and them -- and i-in -- in similar manner, I suspect, although probably not on the same day, my grandm -- my mother's fath -- my grandfather on my mother's side. They didn't really have much choice about leaving, because that which I've read in more recent times would indicate that they were probably told you have a minimum period of time, and if we find you again, you have to go. We're -- we're -- we'll arrest you and -- and you'll never be let out again. How they got tickets on the St. Louis, who organized that, and in what manner, I don't know. I do know that my parents -- and this is only what my mother told me, that they already knew that they would have to leave, even though my father and my grandfather were in Buchenwald, something would have to be done, or immediately after Buchenwald. And my grandmother -- my -- on my mother's side, came down from Gutentag, presumably to Halle, and they went -- they bought things, including jewelry, which they sewed -- from what I'm told, stitched into furnitu -- into the furniture, cause in those days, and this is where the anomaly is so incredible is, you could take everything that you had, or you could buy it. So they took two complete containers, which I would be -- the equivalent of say -- I don't know what a container in those days would be viewed. Today, two con -- small containers would be 20 foot containers, which I gather was furniture, stove, fridge, whatever. In

fact, I've often wondered about it, and said to my mother, why on earth would you take electrical appliances, that don't apply when we ended up in -- in -- in England, and -- and so forth. Clo -- everything which they had. And these all came on board the -- the St. Louis with us. We never got them at the end, but I mean, that -- that's a different story, and we can get to that in due course. How they did that, I don't know. I think the jewelry, and it was viewed as being a dangerous thing, but they didn't think that people would -- the -- the Germans would be tearing open the -- the -- the -- the furniture and so forth. They might check your clothing, but they wouldn't do anything else. And that was -- they hope would, if they got to wherever they were going, they could then sell those things and which -- provide some money. Because as you know, when we left on the St. Louis, I think -- I don't know what the amount was, probably, you know, five or six U.S. dollars at that time -- or I don't know, not much more. So in other words, you had money when you -- before you left the ga -- the dockside, you climbed on the St. Louis, and you had nothing left at the time, so we -- we had no money on -- on that. Everything had already been paid for on the St. Louis. But how that actually happened, I really don't know. At th -- it was never explained to me, and I -- I've asked my -- I have some cousins in Australia from my mother's side, and they don't know. They know even less than I do.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Do you have any memory of the ship?

A: Not a great deal. I -- I gather that I was apparently -- I got lost on -- it was -- it was like a luxury liner. Perhaps the word luxury's a bit too strong, but it was -- it was a very pleasant cruise ship. It was like -- for b -- I -- a-again, and it's not something that my parents discussed with me, but what I've subly read is, you know, it was used for -- people would, in better times, go on holiday. And apparently I -- I got lost somewhere, and that caused a great panic for my mother, and then they found me, or my grandfather found me, and with no problem. But that's about the

only thing I can remember. I've got one or two pictures, but they really aren't -- three or four, that you wouldn't know it's the St. Louis, it -- a-and they're not in groups of people, and quite frankly, I don't -- I don't have a big recollection on that.

Q: Did your parents take those photographs? Do you know?

A: I don't know. I'm not convinced that they did. I think my father -- I think my father was too stunned.

Q: Stunned, yeah.

A: I ga -- the pictures which I have, and there are only about two or three, I can see a cor -- wh-whe -- when -- when people were taken to Buchenwald, s -- as I understand it, you know, it was like a -- you know, it was already -- it wasn't a death camp as they subsequent became, but it was already a death camp, so everybody got shaved. And I -- and when we -- the pictures on the St. Louis with my father, you can see his hair growing back again, but he looked still, quite gaunt. My grandfather was always bald, and so you can't tell from those pictures. And of course, they're all dressed again in -- in clothes and suits and ties and so forth. But you can see in my father's picture, at least I can, perhaps to me, th-the trauma of what had happened, and I'm not so sure that he took them. He -- he -- for years he didn't want to be photographed, and whether that was a reminder of the way these things happen, I don't know. Even in better times, you know. But I'm not sure. I don't think so. He wouldn't be standing around. He -- he was not the -- he was not an outward going person. My mother was, he was more reserved. Perhaps it related to his profession, perhaps it related to his -- he was a 19th century person, having been born before the turn of the century. And I -- I -- he once said to me that, you know, he -- he didn't like the 20th century at all, which of course is understandable. He was much more comfortable in -- in that era. And wit -- wi -- reflects itself in the -- the relationship which we had together. It actually

changed a little bit when we had grandchildren -- when I had grandchildren, which of course he always used to say to me he never thought he would have because he was so much older in that respect. And he lived long enough to s -- to see my eldest daughter go to university, which of course was a great thing for him.

Q: Mm-hm. So the -- the stories that you may have from the voyage, are all things that your mother --

A: Correct.

Q: -- and par -- and father --

A: No, my father discus --

Q: No -- not your father.

A: -- scussed not a single thing. No, we could never talk on those matters, and my mother asked me not to. I tried once as a -- as a mid-teenager, and my father started to get emotionally very upset. And my mother came in the room, and -- and saw what was happening, gathered what was happening, and just pulled me to one side and said, don't ask, and stop it, and I said I'm sorry, and he calmed down and that was the end. We could talk on other matters, prior to 1933. Now, the -- the horrendous things didn't really affect -- didn't happen till somewhat later, but in looking back it's that period which he -- obviously he could not look. But he ca -- but as time -- as the years went by, he mellowed -- not that we could talk about these things, whereas my mother still retained the emotional problems which I suspect she experienced having to wi -- watch this in a more active role than I did, as a small boy.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. So the -- whatever stories then are from your mother, from the [indecipherable]

A: Entirely from -- entirely answers to questions which I posed over a few -- period of few -- of a few years. Now, in England, when we had -- and we can come to that later, but in England, where we ultimately ended up at, there again was not a Jewish community per se, and there were also a few other German refugees. Mostly women whose husbands had -- had -- had been left behind, or couldn't get out, and they got together -- and because my mother was -- I was a small boy, and you -- you know, the days of leaving with babysitters was unheard of, so I was always carted around, and then put in a corner and given a book to read. So I would sometimes hear some of these things which they would talk about. And -- and of course all these things also got played out, so it was comments as a result, and further comments, and answers to questions which my mother gave, among a group of three or four other ladies, some a little bit older, with no children, but in the same sort of situation.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. So what -- what stories do you have of the voyage itself, that in --

A: My mother told me -- well, apparently up to the -- up to the arrival in Cuba, it was -- it was very -- seemed to be very pleasant, in fact unbelievably, I mean, not that she said that, but when you read the background, you have to really question yourself. Here they are forced out of a country, and suddenly being, you know, provided with -- with -- with a staff, you know, waiters and everything else, at beck and call, considering what was taking place. But I think a great deal, from what I've read, or what I've heard, would indicate that the captain of the St. Louis was an extremely decent individual, and determined to -- he was determined to -- to have this as if there was no -- no animosity against anybody in particular. And I believe the -- the Israeli government honored him with a -- with a -- with a medal after the war, and I've also read that as a result of his activities, he was relieved of command when the St. Louis ultimately returned empty in -- in -- to Germany. Never given another command, although he was a career naval officer from World

War I days. But he was left alone, which is always again, you do -- you'd have thought he'd have been put on trial for being decent to Jews. That did not happen. So I think a lot the -- the -- the way the -- the -- the staff and the crew of the St. Louis conducted themselves, probably in my -- I can only surmise, was the way the captain felt they should handle themselves. So I think the voyage to Cuba probably was very pleasant. The voyage back from Cuba was not so pleasant. My -- my mother told me that things started to go downhill emotionally for people. And I -- I don't know the name, I can't recall the name of it, I'm sure it's listed somewhere, there was one person who threw himself overboard in -- off the St. Louis in -- in -- in the harbor. I think, you know, t-trying to commit suicide, you know. And my mother knew the wi -- or had met the wife of -- of that ba -- if -- if -- if my memory is correct. Ya -- people talked among themselves sometimes, but to what degree I don't know. On the voyage back, they apparently had to have committees, which were -- the captain requested the men to form, if they were willing, various committees which would -- which would sort of patrol the decks, certainly during the night, or during the day and night, to avoid people from trying to commit suicide, and my father -- my mother told me that my father was -- was a member of one of these committees. I don't know what my grandfather, whether he was that way. It's just that she responded, or she mentioned that to me, because there was serious -- a -- a serious thought by various people that others would perhaps do this. Whether that's right or wrong I don't know, actually. I'm not aware that anybody did do it, but there was that particular feeling. And of course there must have been, and I suspect, although my mother didn't mention it, a tremendous apprehension as to what was going to happen, because if the ship really returned to Hamburg again, then -- or wherever we sailed, the re -- the results would have been extremely dire.

Q: Sure. An-Anything else from the time in Havana, or --

A: Well, we were never in Havana --

Q: Right, I know, in the harbor.

A: You know, in the harbor.

Q: Right.

A: I don't know whether the passengers at the time knew what was taking place, and I -- I-I've got to be careful here now in how I respond to you, because I could be making comments about what I've read.

Q: Right.

A: My understanding is that the Jewish relief agency in -- in the s -- in the United States was trying to negotiate --

Q: Release.

A: -- the -- with -- with the mexi -- with the Cuban authorities, or the Cuban president, because I -- I gather -- and this is only what I've read, is that the -- the entry certificates were not signed by the president, but they were signed by Benito, if that's the -- o-or whoever was the immigration minister, and were already ada -- you know, illegal documents, before we ever sailed.

Q: Right, right.

A: Okay. And I don't know whether -- what would have happened if people had known that. I've also read that one or two passengers, who had tickets, Jewish passengers, never believed these tickets were valid from the Hamburg American line, and went to the Cuban authorities in Berlin or whatever, and got landing visas separately, on their own, before they ever doc -- you know, boarded the ship. And the -- and th-these were people who were, in fact, allowed to land. But how far that's accurate, I don't know. I suspect -- I can only cou -- my mother certainly had no idea, and I could never ask my father, that, you know, they were not going to be -- and all I've --

to be allowed to land, and all I've heard is that there were negotiations on -- whether they knew that, on board, I don't know. The vessel cruised up and down the -- the eastern seaboard. And I think that was done deliberately by the captain from what I've read, in the hope that something would materialize. I gather it was really a negotiating tactic, with the -- again from what the -- what I've read or seen published, and that the -- the then president of the -- of Cuba couldn't -- wouldn't -- you know, wanted more money and there was a negotiating thing, and then suddenly the negotiation dropped down.

Q: Right, right.

A: What would have happened had one lump sum been offered at that time, and they accepted, I don't honestly know.

Q: Right.

A: You know, it's very hard to determine at this juncture.

Q: Right.

A: Nobody's alive today. I don't know.

Q: Right. The -- there's sort of famous memories about people being able to see the lights of Miami. Did your --

A: Yes, my -- my --

Q: -- did you mother mention that?

A: -- my mother did mention that, yeah. It was close enough to do that, yes. But I presume that had to be on a clear night.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay. I mean, I don't know. I don't recall being taken out --

Q: But she did remember that?

A: She remembered that, yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, she remembered that, yeah.

Q: Yeah. And did she have any -- did she talk to you about, you know, what their daily routine was like? Did they -- what they did during the day to pass the time, or do you know?

A: The -- the half dozen photographs which I've discovered, or not even that, would indicate that people lou -- walked along the deck, lounged on the deck chairs, read books. That's about all I can -- she didn't discuss that in great deal -- and I have to be honest and say I don't think I ever asked her what did you do all day long.

Q: Yeah, yeah. But other -- and other than that incident when you got lost, you have no memory of --

A: No.

Q: -- of anything? If it was --

A: None at all. I have to assume that a -- life was rather enjoyable for me.

Q: It must have been, or -- if it was traumatic --

A: You know, playing around with other kids, and -- and not a problem.

Q: Yeah, or otherwise you would remember, yeah.

A: And -- and perhaps my parents -- we were obviously all in one cabin, my parents and myself, and my grandfather in another cabin. I have to assume that my parents perhaps made a point of not discussing these satter -- these matters in the evening or with myself in -- present, you know? Otherwise, perhaps I might have remembered that.

Q: Right. So the -- the ship eventually goes back across the ocean and --

A: Docks at ham -- at Antwerp.

Q: At Antwerp.

A: Yeah.

Q: Some people get off there.

A: Well --

Q: And apparently your parents had a disagreement, I understand --

A: No --

Q: -- about where they would get off.

A: -- what happened was, from what my mother told me is, when the ship docked, I think it was Antwerp, or we -- perhaps it happened before Antwerp. My mother indicated to me that -- that tables were set up on the deck of the St. Louis, everybody but -- now then, at that juncture, knew that there were a number of countries in Europe, western Europe who were going to -- to take. My understanding was -- a th -- and my mother said to me there were tables set out. You know, table to England, table to France, table to Holland, takin -- table to Belgium, or whatever it was. And that you could -- you know, it wasn't a lottery where names were put into a hat. My mother said to me that she perhaps, without ra -- you know, thinking and -- about it, said that she might have been tempted, if it had been her choice, to try to go to France, because as a young teenager, her father had sent her with her brother to do a tour of Europe in the summertime. Lucky for them, they had the money to do it, and that she'd gone to France, and she'd gone to Italy, you know, as a young teenager, perhaps in her seven -- at the age of 17 or 18, and because of that -- and she'd learned French at school, not English [indecipherable] that that would have been, because she'd been there once or so, it would have been nice. My father, apparently, paid absolutely no attention to this, and walked to the English table, and sign up, for which there was not a -- initially, not a big demand. Now, my father could speak a little bit English. He made a

life and death decision, either comprehending a little bit of what might happen, because war talk was already in the air, you have to remember. We're talking now beginning of June, okay, and war didn't -- took place in September.

Q: September.

A: Okay. Perhaps -- and I've often pondered about this myself, m-my -- my mother certainly couldn't give me an answer. And I thought myself, perhaps my father, from his four years in military experience, thought that perhaps being -- th-the 20 miles of channel might be some diversion. I don't really know. He made that decision, and obviously not one in which he was forced to do it, but voluntarily. And it was a life and death decision. So we then ended up in th-the -- in Antwerp, okay. The St. Louis didn't take us to England, another vessel took us, called the Rocosus, if I am not mistaken. My parents belongings, in these two containers and everything else, were offloaded from the St. Louis, the Hamburg American line, and dumped on the dockside. The Rocosus -- and I don't -- and obviously was not -- I don't know, it was not a Hamburg American line, or it didn't matter, wouldn't load them onto the boat to Southampton, they demanded money. And my parents, or my father had absolutely no money. And so these containers remained behind. So other than our cabin luggage, which was put on board, all these things, and I just have often pondered what my parents thoughts were, seeing these, and knowing what was in there --

Q: And the jewelry that she had sewn in --

A: Well, that's what my mother told me, yeah, yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: Which would have helped. And having no ability to -- to do anything, must have caused my father even bigger depression, I suspect, you know, or stunned silence. We've -- I was able to

talk to my mother about this years later, and we just hope that if they were left there, that ultimately they got bombed. If they were taken to Germany when the Germans marched into Antwerp, and they were put into some German storage houses, hopefully they got damaged and burned, because they would never have known what they were sitting on. You know?

Q: Right.

A: So I -- I don't know. We're laughing about -- this wasn't a laughing matter, I don't doubt, at the time.

Q: I'm sure, yeah.

A: And then we took the boat to Southampton. We arrived in Southampton as far as I understand, and were taken by train. And this is really memory -- not really such accurate memory other -- you know, I've read about this. And we arrived in London. And we at -- we ended up in a s -- the four of us -- I'm including my grandfather now, Grandfather Eisner, my mother's father, were put up either in a two, or three, and I really don't know -- certainly not more -- upstairs in a house, in a -- in a -- in an area of London called Camden town. The only thing which I really remember about this is that directly opposite the front of the house was a small park on the other side of the street, and that I -- my parents allowed me, or I was able to play there. It -- it was in summertime, we arrived in June -- all the time. And I think that's where I learned my English. Very quickly, because when -- children have that ability, I think, if you follow what I'm getting at.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And obviously my parents were in no mood to sort of say to me, let's go sightseeing, let's do -- I'm sure they -- I don't know why. So I was able to play there, and that's a recollection which I have, obviously a pleasant one. And I have to conclude that that's where I learned English, and

m-my -- my mother has said to me that within about four or six weeks, I was fortunate enough -- and I then began to act as an interpreter --

Q: For them.

A: -- for them, you know. Not with understanding, but to respond to the English questions an -- and so forth, if required, if required. I don't know who really paid the rent, or provided my parents with funds, or my grandfather. My mother alway -- I -- I'm aware that the Jewish relief agency would -- did -- did provide some funds, but my mother always spoke very highly of Quakers in -- in -- in England, and liberals. Now, when I say liberals, I don't think she meant it in the -- a political context, you know, liberal being democrat or -- or -- or whatever. I think she meant liberal in the sense that there were decent liberal people who felt that yo -- that either part of their life was to be -- certainly not Jews, I -- I -- you know, the Jewish relief agency was doing one thing, Quakers obviously were -- were not Jewish. I think she meant decent liberal people who felt a -- a sense of -- of -- of desire to help people who were in less fortunate circumstances. And she always talked very highly of that, and they provided some means, but to what -- what extent I don't know. But the Quaker thing, my mother always spoke extremely highly of.

Q: What do you know about your father's being taken to the Isle of Man, your father and your grandfather?

A: Oh, okay. Well, I think I have to go a little bit -- back a little bit.

Q: Okay.

A: We were all together until war was declared --

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I-In September. You may be aware of the fact that after the war was declared, the -- the -- the eng -- British government made a suggestion that children in -- living in the London area might

wish, depending upon their parents, to be boarded int -- more into the countryside. Be -- I suppose they assumed that London was going to be a target area. And they also said that mothers could go with them if they wanted to. Now how that was conveyed to my parents, I don't know, but that's what happened to us. My mother and I went on one of these trains, together with other people re -- other ordinary people from lon -- from the London area. Nothing connected with Jews or Germans in any shape or form. And I don't know exactly when, whether it was the end of the year, or the beginning of 1940, we ended up in a place called Bedford, which is 50 miles north of London. And we remained there ever si -- you know, my parents remained there ever since. Now, I don't know when my father and my grandfather -- they weren't -- they never said they were arrested, they were interned. It was not like a German arrest, and it was not specifically geared to Jews. It -- all aliens. German aliens, and other ali -- I mean, other aliens, Austrian aliens, all connected with -- with Germany, were immediately rounded up, for want of a better word. Some went to the Isle of Man, some went somewhere else. My father, and I believe my grandfather, went to the Isle of Man. In what particular month or -- or period, I'm not absolutely sure. It must have been -- I'm -- perhaps end of sep -- end of '39, perhaps early '40.

Q: You're not certain that your grandfather went --

A: No, I don't -- I kno -- he was there, but I don't know in what period of time.

Q: Your grandfather?

A: They were both together, interned there.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: And I'm not sure that they all turned up released. It was not over but -- for my father and my grandfather, I -- I get the impression it was not a long internment. And that's the one thing which my father, he never referred to it as an arrest. He was able to comment to me about that, and he

said it was really like being in a barracks in the military, and I think he was trying to compare it to World War I. And he never spoke ill of that situation, and I suspect if you compare it to what happened in Buchenwald, there were -- you know, there was no comparison whatsoever. I'm sure they were interviewed, perhaps several times, and I'm sure there must have been other German aliens, who may well have been German spies, who lived in England for many years, o- or what have you, and they had to be weeded out. But I don't recall my grandfather or my father ever mentioning anything of what you would call an ill nature. And, you know, the -- the fact that they were sleeping in a barracks or -- or being interviewed, it was not in any shape and form, from what I gather, similar to what would have happened, or did happen in Buchenwald, and what subsequently happened.

Q: Right.

A: So I never -- and they certainly when I came out, there was no -- it didn't look -- you know, I mean obviously it's like being in an army camp, but it wasn't in any other way. And ultimately they both joined us in Bedford. When, I don't know, and where they came together, I don't -- I can't really recall. If it was 1940, then I was already five. And in those days, you went to school at the age of five in England. So my concern -- my ma -- mother's concern wasn't getting me off -- off to school -- and you have to remember, by this time I was speaking English already, and it was not a long distance away, but again my mother spoke that the Quakers in Bedford, it was not a Jewish --

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: Okay, this is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with John Meyerstein, conducted by Nina Ellis on July first, 2004, in Washington, D.C.. This is tape number two, side A. So we're in -- it's 1940 now. Your mother and you are living in Bedford.

A: Yes.

Q: And presumably sometime your father and grandfather come back during that year.

A: Yes, yeah, I don't know exactly what -- when that year. The one thing which is interesting, the -- the -- the -- the German air raids on Britain at that time, had re-really started, and I remember my mother had a school friend, somewhat older. I used to call her Aunt Margot. She was not married, but she was more like a sister to my -- in other words they were school friends, but the relationship was almost like sisters, okay. And she had fa -- I can't tell you how, but she got to London on her own, and she was living in London, and my mother apparently contacted her and said, "Why don't you come and live in Bedford? You can get a job in Bedford. And -- and come stay with me." I think my mother was worried, you know, with the air raids, and nightly bombing, my father not there, my grandfather not being there. And so Margot Lewin, who had a brother in New York, and was also, I think, hoping to get a visa to the States, which ultimately came through, but not until World War II was -- was over, and so forth, said all right, apparently, and -- and came to Bedford, and very shortly got a job in a major manufacturing company, an ironwork company in Bedford, as a secretary. She obviously knew enough English to be able to do these things. And she actually lived with us, and we all lived in one room. And I think it made my mother feel a little bit more safe and secure. I would call her Aunt Margot, you know, and she really became more of an aunt than a real aunt would have been, if you follow what I'm getting at. And you know, we had nightly bombing raids at -- you know, sometimes

two or three times during the night, and ri -- my mother -- my -- and we were living on the top floor of a -- of a building, of -- of a three story ap -- house, okay? And my mother -- you know, you get very tired when you have to get up and dress and all the rest of these things. And my mother said to me -- said to us, and I think it was a general agreement, not bu -- I mean, they didn't ask for my approval, I was -- that they weren't going to get up any more. If it was -- if -- I think my mother said if it was God's will the bomb was going to go down, it won't make any difference if we're upstairs or down in the cellar. It's going to take us all.

Q: Right.

A: So we ended up just sleeping through all this, not getting up any more. And we would be woken up by the air raid warning to say that this was -- the -- the planes were coming, or the all clear siren, when they were all gone. But, you know, we just didn't get up any more. My -- my mother just made that decision, she said ge -- you kill yourself, I think -- or we will -- we will -- we will die out of sheer exhaustion, you know, or I don't know quite, you know, how it's --

Q: Right.

A: -- anyway, they stayed -- they were -- they were there together, and if fact I visited my aunt in New York -- not -- she's not my real aunt --

Q: Right.

A: -- but if you understand what I mean, many years later, as -- as a married person, when I was already married, and she in fact -- and I then brought her from New York in -- in -- in a car. I had a business ve -- trip, and I drove to New York for that specifically, picked her up from her apartment, drove her back to Canada, to Toronto. She stayed with us for two or three weeks, and then we put her on a plane back to -- to New York.

Q: Right.

A: And you know, she was -- she was the type of aunt that, you know, if I needed pocket money, she was the one I would turn to. And years later, when I was in the army overseas, after I was drafted in England, she would write to me, and whenever she wrote, she would always put some money in from New York. So I was exchanging dollars. And she would always put some money in it -- she didn't have any sons or daughters --

Q: Oh, I see.

A: -- if you understand what I mean.

Q: Right.

A: She only had nieces, and -- and to her I was really her nephew in that context.

Q: Yeah.

A: She was that close to my mother, you see.

Q: To your mother, right. That must have been a great comfort to your mother, to have a companion, sure.

A: I think so. And it was a gr -- and -- and you know, it was very nice. She was the type of aunt who was the accommodating type, in the sense that she made no demands on me. If anybody made any demands, it was me on her. And -- and she was always obliging with -- with -- with so forth, so I have my -- my memories of her were -- were -- were very good. Then my father was released from the Isle of Man, and at that juncture we obviously couldn't live together. And then we -- we then moved to another --

Q: Because you didn't have enough space?

A: No, well, we were in one room, and w -- and my -- and -- and my mother's school friend --

Q: Was there.

A: -- was there. So we had to move, and it was -- and we needed a bit more space, or wer -- we -- you know, the landlady was not exactly the greatest. I -- I don't -- she was a -- she had a temper, I don't mean that she was anti-Jewish, I think she was just a -- not a very accommodating person. She rented rooms out to various other people. And I remember my telling how that one of the -- there was an old man living on one of the rooms, and he said, "Don't take any attention to Mrs. Morgan, she's just naturally irritable." You know? So it wasn't anything -- if -- if you understand me, it wasn't anything bi -- against that.

Q: Personal, yeah.

A: She was just making money renting out rooms, okay. And -- but I think the rooms were -- bu -- that money came in from either the Quakers, or other liberal people in the -- in -- in Bedford, in the sense of decent people, actually, until such time. And then at some point, and I don't know when, probably sometime in the 40's, my father came to Bedford, was released, so did my grandfather. We -- my mother made arrangements to move to another place where the three of us could be together, not far away from where we were staying. My -- she also made arrangements for my f -- grandfather to have a room by himself somewhere, in another house. And Aunt Margot, quote, unquote, also got a room for herself, and we went, and we progressed from there. My father then got a job. The one thing which I have always found very interesting is that we -- my parents did not, neither my father, my mother, or my grandfather, particularly after they ki -- were released from -- from the Isle of Man were not request -- did not have to go to the police station daily or weekly or monthly in any shape or form. And I gather that that was a -- I -- I could be wrong, but I read somewhere years later, that that was a decision made by Prime Minister Churchill to say, look, if we've checked these people out, let's not create a problem.

We've got more important things to do than worry about having people go -- but whether that's accurate or not, I don't know.

Q: Yeah.

A: But I'm not aware that my parents or my father, or my grandfather had to report on a regular basis to the police. And we were left alone. Nobody ever bothered us. Nobody ever bothered us. In fact, it -- you -- it was perhaps typical English, you've got your freedom, you're on your own now. Which I found rather interesting in today's context, where immigrants in various countries, when they arrive, want -- make demands on all sorts of things. We were just only too happy. I'm sure my parents, you know, depressed, stunned, whatever, but they were left alone.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: They did not have to worry about being knocked up in the middle of the night by a police warrant or -- or what have you.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: And I think that -- I know from my father's point of view, that that impressed him, years later. We didn't actually talk about that, but I think he -- he -- his indication was that that -- that was something which made him, I suspect, feel a little bit better.

Q: Yeah, I --

A: He was left alone.

Q: -- my guess though, is that for a while -- it would take you a while to relax, and even though you were in a safe community, to feel secure, especially after what he'd been through. Even though nobody was --

A: I think this is --

Q: -- bothering him.

A: I think you're right.

Q: Yeah.

A: But it must -- yeah, let me -- I can -- I'll give you a very funny situation [indecipherable] I think you -- it's -- it's germane to what you've just said. We were 50 miles from London, and on -- on occasion some -- during the war years, we would take the train to London, my mother and I, my father was working, just for a day's outing. I mean here I'm still at school. I remember we were walking down -- this is quite clear to me -- walking down Oxford Street, which is like Fifth Avenue in New York. It's a bustling community, you know? It wasn't exactly empty of people, even in war time. And suddenly we saw, what my mother explained to me, an extremely Orthodox, pious Jew, with a beard and a hat, and I mean, the complete regalia. And my mother stopped to look around, and I had to stop and she said, "Look at that." And the only people stopping to look were my mother and myself, and I said, "Well, what is it?" And she said, "But, that's an Orthodox Jew." And I didn't quite know what she meant at that time. Well I think afterwards, years later my -- I -- we talked about this, my mother and I, is that it was so incredible, nobody paid the slightest attention. It was not an unnatural event. They -- people just all were passing back -- my mother thought it was so unnatural in the -- in the context of what she'd left, to see this. For me, I didn't really think about this until years later, when I began to understand what she really meant. But I remember her saying to me, "That's a very Orthodox Jew." But I think she, a-as I say, she was wondering whether people would accost him, or -- or affront him, or something. But he just walked on, and nobody paid the slightest attention, other than ourselves.

Q: Right.

A: You know. And other people must have looked at us to see [indecipherable] why were we turning to -- looking at somebody else?

Q: [indecipherable]

A: So that, I think, in answer to your comment, perhaps was the thing which may ult -- may have made my father -- my father never read a German newspaper any more. He only read an English newspaper. We talked in English and German, and as the years went by, we talked more English. My father never wrote a letter to me, other than in English. Neither did my mother. Mind you, you have to remember I couldn't, if they'd have written a letter in German I couldn't have read it, because until I went to school years later, where -- where I had an option of learning -- I had to do French, but I also had an option of doing another foreign language, so I took German, but it was just school reading and writing. And that just -- that's how it -- you know, my parents never talked to me --

Q: It's pretty remarkable that, I mean, your father was in his late 30's, almost 40 years old by then.

A: No, when -- in that period of time, my father was born in 1893 --

Q: '93.

A: -- so we're talking let's say, in --

Q: He was almost 50 years old.

A: That's right.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I was a small boy, I mean, he could have had a grandson by that time.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Yes.

Q: And to -- you know, to turn away from his native language at that age is quite remarkable.

A: Well, yea -- this is a little bit off -- off the thing, but I think it's -- again it's -- it's relevant to your question. Years later, when I had -- I made a business trip many years later to Germany -- on bus -- you know, to -- for the business discussions. And I thought, well I'll bring him back a decent German newspaper, me -- meaning a quality pa -- newspaper. And I'll -- and I sat in [indecipherable] bookstore, a book in German, which related to the -- to the period prior to World War I, and I bought it, thinking that he would like it. He barely scanned the paper. He looked at the book. I still have the book, I don't have the paper, but I still have the book. And he looked at the book and the pictures. I think the title of the book was sort of, you know, Germany, pre-World War I days, you know, of how people lived and so forth, which he would have understood. He scanned it, put it awa -- he never read a German book, you know, he -- it was all English books, history and everything else. And he -- that was a period he -- I don't mean that he physically thought about it, and wi -- and made a -- an effort to show people, it just that he did not pay attention any more. He didn't listen to German newscasts on the BBC, it was always in English. Of course his English continued to improve, as you can appreciate, but as far as he was concerned England for him was, I suppose the equivalent of heaven at that moment.

Q: Yeah.

A: In relationship to what he'd experienced, because nobody ever bothered. They didn't ask. English people generally, bit more reserved, so didn't ask questions. And he wasn't the type to want to answer, so he was just left alone. They thought he was a very nice person, he was courteous and pleasant, but he wasn't forced to express himself to anybody. I think that made a major difference.

Q: What kind of work did he get when he get when he -- when he [indecipherable]

A: Well, he couldn't practice law because English common law, like American common law has absolutely no relationship to German law, so he could never practice his profession, and I think he was too old to -- to start all over again. You have to remember he'd been a judge, and he'd been a barrister. And there was no relationship, and w -- and we didn't have the funds, anyway. And -- and so he took a job in a factory, and you know, he -- but really, I suppose any job, you know, beggars can't be choosers, to put food on the table, and pay the rent, and -- and -- and so forth, and th -- perhaps the one thing which one can say is that whilst he was free to do what he wanted, or was free to -- to live quietly, with nobody bothering him in England, that didn't mean that the English government was going to help him get a job.

Q: Right.

A: Okay.

Q: Did your parents have much of a social life? Were friends over, or visiting other people, or --

A: We lived in a one bedr -- one bedroom apartment with a little -- with one gas ring. You don't have people coming over, if you understand what I mean. We'd had money. For a long time we were -- my mother never had to do this, of course, but I can still remember -- in fact, after my mother died, and I went through her personal effects, I found the book -- she used to buy little -- little booklets, you know, and inside she daily jotted what she had bought in terms of groceries or so forth, because she had to make sure that we had enough money for rent and so forth. She couldn't stop herself afterwards, even when -- when it wasn't necessary. They -- it didn't say I'm doing this. They [indecipherable] no, you know, I mean, it wasn't exactly a happy thing when I went through these things. I -- I understood what she was about.

Q: Yeah.

A: And if I asked for any money, she'd have to look through her purse and then check the book, and -- and say so forth, so no, we didn't have -- yeah, people might come for a -- an hour or so, my -- my grandfather would come and -- and -- and so forth. But he didn't have very much, and so my mother -- my mother had to go out to work as well, to do housecleaning for people. Mainly because t-to bring some money in. And my f -- my grandfather couldn't work, he was too old, or it wasn't possible. His English was not that good, so she would provide -- give him money for -- he was -- he smoked cigarettes an-and -- and -- and so forth, but we didn't -- to answer your question in a nutshell, did we have a social life? No. I think my mother, she knew more people as a result of my going to school, because she met other mothers in the process. But that wasn't what you would call a social --

Q: Right.

A: -- although those -- those -- those acquaintanceships continued for many years, if you understand what I'm getting at, but they were not really what you would call -- where people would socialize, invite each other. We didn't have the funds and -- and m-my father certainly w-would not have -- he was -- he was too -- he was what I would call today in a clinical depression.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: Yeah.

Q: That's quite understandable.

A: Yeah, and I think that that went -- I didn't realize that until many years later, until I was an adult, and even then, it wasn't until I got much older that I -- I -- I begin to thi -- thought about this, and understand now. He went into depressions at weekends more than during the week. And there were several times a -- I -- I rather think that my mother thought that he was going to try to commit suicide.

Q: Oh boy.

A: He didn't. But he would leave the house on a Saturday morning sometimes, you know, he worked from Monday to Friday. He'd get up in the morning, no breakfast -- this didn't happen all the time, there were -- it was like a sort of periods, for no reason, and you have to remember his brother was still there, his mother was there. His -- his sister was in Australia, so that was okay. And he would go away. Now, we lived in a town where there was a -- a -- a river, was a very nice little country town, bit like Alexandria down the road, but a little bit broader, with bridge and a major river running down, where every summer they'd have a huge regatta, and still do to this day. Think it was the third biggest regatta in -- in England, and every year. And it was sort of three miles on one side of the embankment, we'd call it, and three miles on the other. And in summertime it was very nice, with benches down there, and I -- I can remember they used to have a -- a bandstand, and you know, they'd play military marches. I mean, that was to keep people's spirits up, you know? And he'd go out, and come four o'clock, or so, 3:30, my mother didn't know where he was. I don't know why sh -- the population was what, between 50 and 80,000. Still really not much more than 80 or 90,000 to this day. It's the -- it's the county town of -- of Bedfordshire. And I don't know where my -- where my mother got the idea that I would find him, and I didn't know where to look, but perhaps it oc -- I don't know why, it occurred to me on -- once, that perhaps he might want to go and sit down on the -- on the bench, and perhaps that -- I didn't know where to go, up and down streets, you know, [indecipherable] find -- and sure enough I found him there. He'd generally sit there on a bench. He would just be sitting alone. And I'd come up, and he still wouldn't talk, and I'd say, well it's time for -- for supper, you know, for dinner, or supper or something like that. Mom said it's ready, you -- and he -- we -- we got up and walked, but we didn't talk. That happened on several occasions. I don't mean, ru

-- you know, every other month. That happened on several occasions over a period of about -- perhaps between nine and 11 or so. And several, I don't mean a huge amount, perhaps two or three or four times.

Q: But over time, enough for you to --

A: But that actually would da -- yeah -- no --

Q: -- understand that was going on for [indecipherable] period of time.

A: -- I didn't really quite know, no, I just thought my father was a moody individual --

Q: Yeah, at the time you wouldn't know.

A: -- I mean, I -- I realize, of course, it wasn't actually.

Q: Right.

A: But that gradually eased to the point that eventually that never happened any more.

Q: What was it like for you in school? Did you have any particular trouble in school, or --

A: Yeah, the first school I went to was like a -- like a typical public school here, you know, grade one, two. Two -- I think grade -- grade one we went in at five, and then at age 10 you went onto a -- what would be the middle school, or something like that, okay. Yeah, I did, but it wasn't an anti-Jewish thing, it was because of my na -- m-my German surname. I mean, John was, everybody understood that, and I'd occasionally get called, you know, German sausage or something like that, you know, but I mean these things happen. And you know, there was a time when I was probably having a fistfight, but not because it was anti-Jewish. I'd reached a point where I wasn't going to take this, or couldn't take this any longer. And you know how kids are, they can bully. Now you ha -- you -- you either come to a conclusion that you have to -- you have to face this up, and -- and I never discussed this with my parents, you know. There wasn't much point, my father was working, my mother was working, he was going to, you know --

Q: What are they going to do, right.

A: -- and but you know, there was a -- there was a period where I sort of had regular fights, but it was -- but I wasn't the only one having these, these characters were doing this with other kids that -- you know, for whatever reasons. And it reached a point where ultimately, I must have obviously defended myself on my own sufficiently, that you become friends with the bully, and years later we would say hello to each other. You know, bullies, when they get taken on straight in, and not backing off as well, they go to the -- to the weakest. I think it was really a choice of either taking a -- a whacking each time, or having to try and see if you could defend yourself, and I -- I -- I -- I've told my wife this, I had to know I -- whether I -- whether I hit and bit and kicked to the point where they didn't want that happening, and gradually, over a period of time, th-that was left alone. That didn't continue indefinitely. But it was no -- I suppose a bit understandable. Meyerstein, that's a German name, German sausage, you know?

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: You know, not a Jewish thing, because you know I don't recall having that -- that --

Q: Right, right. You mentioned earlier that while your father was at the Isle of Man, and you and your mother and your mother's friend were there in Bedford, living on the third floor, did bombs ever drop in your neighborhood?

A: Yes.

Q: They did?

A: They did. When we moved -- when we moved to -- you have to remember this is not a big -- Bedford was not a big town. Lewton, which was 20 miles away, was the home of General Motors, okay, but Bedford was the hub of a -- had a major railway station, it was a hub area for a lot of trains coming in and out, and I think they were always trying -- and about 20 minute -- 15

minutes away by car, was the intake for all the RAF -- Air Force personnel, entering the -- the RAF, you know, if you understand what I'm getting at. So there were --

Q: Targets.

A: Targets. And sometimes, of course the -- the -- the air raid warnings would come on if they heard planes flying overhead, even if they were not been a target, Bedford. And there was one occasion, not when we were on the third floor, but when we were on the second floor m -- of my -- just before my father came to join us, I -- I think, cause that's the time we would have moved there, there was one really major bombing raid, and they were obviously going for the railway tracks. And the landlady and my mother, and I -- and this wasn't a big house, all got up and -- and we went into the living room, and you know, they had these old antique dining tables, round dining tables, you know, solid, you would probably need six people to lift them. And I remember my mother pushing me under the table, and she and the landlady got underneath, because the fe -- the -- the -- I think the feeling was, if the ceiling was coming in, the table was thick enough, and heavy enough to absorb this. But nothing happened, other than the house shook. But there were time -- but you know, you get used to it. You know, I don't say that that's a great way of getting used to things --

Q: Right.

A: -- but we got used to -- you can't panic, that's -- what can you do?

Q: Yeah.

A: And there were one or two occasions when I would walk to school. In fact, my daughters both called me at the time after 9-11 [indecipherable] and they were living there in the States, and said to me, "Dad, what happened when you were a youngster?" You know, and I said, "Well, I went to school." And I said, you know, Grandma was working, Granddad was working, and I was

closer to school than anywhere else, what was I going to do to get home, I couldn't have got in anyway. I didn't have a f -- a key. So I just ran on to school, but I mean, what can you do? You know, they're high up in the sky, you know. For youngsters sometimes that's -- it's a bit of an adventure. I -- I don't mean to demean that, your question or answer.

Q: Of course.

A: This didn't happen every day. But, I mean, you get used to it. What could I do anyway?

Q: Right, right.

A: Ya -- you -- I think people have to le -- do learn to control panic now, obviously some people ma -- take it more seriously than anything else. But this wasn't a daily occurrence.

Q: Right.

A: But people do -- it was a war time, that's why when I mentioned it, I thought my father was very heavily depressed. In today's context, that would probably be referred to for di -- for medical reasons. You have to remember Britain was the only country left in Europe, alone, and a -- a -- America didn't come into World War II until '41, after Pearl Harbor. And that was towards the end of '41.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So, you know, people didn't have time to worry about were you depressed or --

Q: Right.

A: -- or worried. They had far more worries on their mind. I know that my mother -- if anything, my mother's worry, where we stayed. W-We lived in this place that she -- the landlady was very pleasant. Her name -- Mrs. Duncan, I remember her name. And she had a -- her son was a pilot flying Mosquito bombers over Germany, and my mother was always terribly afraid that if something happened to him, Mrs. Duncan would turn on my mother, you know, he didn't, you

know. I -- I don't know [indecipherable] she was very concerned. But I remember one day -- my mother told me this, and I would have been, well, around six, yeah. One day my mother was at home, and there was a knock on the door, and a young army officer bi -- was at the door, and my mother opened the door, and he saluted her and said, you know, "Is Mrs. Duncan in? Mrs. Duncan?" And my mother said, "She's not in." And he said, "Oh, could you tell her, I'm her nephew." You know, also in the military, but in the army side, you know? Saluted her, and wal -- and said, di -- "Would you let her know I passed by, I'm on leave," or something like that. "She knows where I am." And [indecipherable] for my mother to understand. But I think my mother could never get over the fact that, you know, if it had been a German officer, he would have sort of kicked the door, or -- or I don't know whether -- what she assumed.

Q: Yeah.

A: It's just she couldn't understand the courtesy with which --

Q: Right.

A: -- she was wi -- she was treated, you see. No, so that was a sample of little -- little memories of -- of -- of which I have.

Q: Right. Do y --

A: They both survived, and I met them years later as I was growing up a little bit, actually, you know.

Q: Oh. Do you have any r-recollection of the end of the war? V-E day?

A: Well I -- no, my rec -- not really, you know my recollections of D-Day were greater --

Q: Really?

A: -- because when you look -- well, for the simple reason that when you went to school -- and whe -- when I got up in the morning, there was a mass -- and looked out the window, we

couldn't help it, the planes were enor -- constantly, the sky was full of planes, so everybody knew something was happening. That, to me, was far more -- far more -- you know, I mean, the place was dark with planes, all going in one direction.

Q: Yeah, yeah. So, yo -- and -- and I bet that you -- your father probably followed that very closely in the papers, and I'm sure everybody did --

A: Mm, yes, yeah.

Q: -- at that -- at then -- in those times it was quite -- quite momentous for everyone.

A: Yes, I think he did, yes.

Q: Yeah.

A: I -- I would imagine so. We didn't discuss it, I don't recall that -- I -- th-the one thing which, again, which is interesting in the context of how one views refugees today, when we arrived in England, they -- and I have these documents still, or booklets, wa -- they -- I don't know whether wh -- whether the Jewish agency gave them out, or whatever. They just said to the -- to th -- everybody got them, and I found them just recently, that, you know, don't congregate together -- and they're in engla -- in English, but to -- I think to German refugees in particular, don't congregate together, don't speak loudly, don't speak in German. Keep -- keep your head down, and -- and -- and pay attention to what's going on, and -- and go about things, and do your work, and -- and don't get in a -- don't create problems. And I be -- perhaps I'm a little cynical, and I view other refugees, you know, wh-who come to other countries and almost demand -- perhaps an exaggeration, but expect things to be handed over. My parents didn't expect anything. Sometimes I wonder, when I look at this and say to myself, you know, we were [indecipherable] they did what -- they did that, they -- they kept away from public -- you know, they wouldn't

have gone out in the streets to celebrate, because first of all, with accents, they would have had to explain themselves, they were just probably thankful.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But that didn't really mean very much.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Because at that juncture, my father probably wouldn't have known what happened to my father -- to my mother -- to his mother, and to his brother. No idea, you see. Although we had Red Cross letters from my grandmother, up to 1942.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And -- but he had no idea, he -- in 1939, when we --

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: I'm going to ask you to start again with the telegram.

A: Yeah.

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with John Meyerstein, this is tape two, side B. You -- you were mentioning --

A: In 1939, from what I understand, from what my mother told me, my father received a telegram from his -- from his brother Hugo, presumably in ger -- in Germany, I -- I'm not -- I assume so, or from somewhere, saying can you do anything to help me? He was married, no children. Well, my father had no money, and no influence, no way -- and wouldn't have known where to turn, let alone anything else. So presumably that cable never got answered. I don't know where the cable is, I've never seen it -- you know, I've not found it among the papers.

Q: It must have been a heartbreaking thing for your father.

A: Exactly. The other thing, of course, you have to understand is that my father had the problems of his mother and his brother. My mother and my grandfather had the problems of the grandmother, you know, my mother's mother.

Q: She was still there, she was still there.

A: My f -- my mother's brother, Lota Eisner was also at Buchenwald, also got out, and we met each other in London before the war started. And he, for some reason or other, got a permit to go to Palestine. How it happened, I've no idea, he never explained it to me. We met years later and he -- I -- I've spoken to his children, my cousins, they don't know how. And he went to Palestine, and ended up in the British army, joined the British army. My m -- the -- I -- my mother tells me that the reason -- or told me the reason that her mother didn't leave was that he hadn't left before we'd left. So she was concerned that her only son would be left behind, so she wasn't going to go, so she put -- forced my f -- ha -- my grandfather to go with us, but she wou -- didn't come. I don't know, it -- it -- it's a strange story, okay?

Q: It is interesting, yeah.

A: And I'll include this to you because I think you're going to find this rather interesting. She was left behind, but her son got out before the World War. Well --

Q: Right, say -- say her name again.

A: Her name was Rosa Eisner, okay?

Q: Right, Rosa Eisner.

A: She's in Gutentag, still in her own home, hadn't been confiscated or anything, you know. Now war was declared in '39. We were all out, she was alone. That must have been a real problem for my father -- for my mother, and for my grandfather, with no means to do anything any more. Pondering, I suppose, and no communication, as far as I know. She got out on a vessel

which sailed from the Baltic during the war. When exactly, I don't quite know. I don't know the name of it, I know it's in the Holocaust -- Holocaust Museum, people know about it. It sailed, and ultimately ended up with all refugees, the place was packed to the gunwales, I gather, with refugees. I don't know who the skipper was, it was not a -- I don't know, from some -- I don't know. Anyway -- or how the crew was hired, or what have you. It was like a tramp vessel, I suspect. It ended up in Haifa waters. They didn't want to let it enter, so the vessel blew it itself up. My grandm -- mother was on deck when they blew it up, had no idea this was going to happen, they didn't tell anybody. I mean, that th-the -- the Jews decided it's the only way they're going to have to get ashore. So they blew itself up, the vessel started to sink, or capsize. My -- my grandmother told my mother, and my mother told me, they -- and even my cousins don't know the full story. My grandmother was thrown overboard. She was on deck luckily, not below deck or anywhere. And couldn't swim, and the cable, as the ship was turning over, cable came down -- you know, these things don't happen in seconds, and she hung onto this, and you know, of course, as soon as the vessel blew itself up, the military all came out to pick everybody up, you know. Picked her up, you know, and picked up the survivors or something, and put them into a military barracks. God knows how -- I don't know, she said my name is so and so, I have a son who is in Palestine. They checked the records, found he was in the British army, contacted him, and said get here, is this your mother? He goes down to the barracks as his -- my mother explained, to where they were all interned. I mean, it's like a barracks, I mean, with clothing and stuff like that. And he says, "Yeah, that's my mother." And they said, "Take your mother and go, and don't come back."

Q: Unbelievable.

A: Yeah. So that's another story, so we all survived, in that context, except my grandmother on my father's side, and my father's brother, you know.

Q: Right.

A: But that's a different story altogether.

Q: Right.

A: And we didn't discover that until years later. My cousins, to this day, don't quite know how this happened. Now, why my grandmother left, and this is perhaps an even stran -- equally story, they were in Gutentag. It was a predominantly Catholic community, not a big community, Gutentag was not a big -- you would hardly find it on the map, and I don't know what the Polish name is now. The -- a very rural farming community, which is why I think my grandfather must have -- or his father actually started the business, this --

Q: Farm implement.

A: -- farm implement, you know, which grew into quite a sizable establishment. And everybody spoke Polish. The farming -- th-the Poles, although they were German -- born on German soil, still predominantly ethnic Poles, okay. I think Silesia was taken by the ger -- Prussia in 17 -- middle of the 1700's or so. Anyway, predominantly Catholic. My mother's there -- my grandmother's there alone, as my mother -- mother explained to me, and the Catholic priest -- there's a na -- come -- in the middle of winter, and I don't quite know when, '40 perhaps. [indecipherable] must have been, perhaps '40, I presume. Yeah, would have been -- would have had to be '40. Ag -- dub -- my -- as I understand it, and this is what my mother [indecipherable] it, there was a knock on the back door, and you can -- must have been after dark. So you can imagine that must have been a major shock to my grandmother, you know, in the -- to get a knock -- it's bad enough to get a knock on the front door, but to get a knock on the back door.

She opens the back door, and it's the parish priest. He comes in, they're all in darkness. He says, "Don't put on the lights." And says, "You know, the Gestapo is coming tomorrow morning t- to arrest you, or to pick you up." He had obviously heard this from either his parishioners, or some who were in -- who were Catholics, but were in the Gestapo or whatever. Ye -- ye -- there were Germans there as well, but it was a predominantly Catholic community, okay. And you -- you better be going. Yo -- I suggest you -- you -- you're not here.

Q: Wow.

A: And -- and don't le -- when -- and they talked for a few more minutes I presume, or for whatever period of time, and then he left again by the back door. Apparently then -- no lights on, you know. So apparently she -- it was in wintertime, so she got on -- a-as my mother explains it, she dressed in my father -- grandfather's trousers, heavy sweater and everything else. It's snow on the ground. And -- and in those days people had th -- what they call rucksacks, what we call these little --

Q: Backpacks.

A: Backpacks, actually. As much as she could pack together, take whatever she could [indecipherable] documents, money, whatever she may have had, and in the middle of the night, walked away.

Q: Geez. Geez. Alone, she'd been alone. My goodness. Would you like to take a break? Yeah [break] Artev --

A: Okay.

Q: And so where -- we've talked about the war is over --

A: Yes.

Q: -- and you're in school, your parents working. You -- you graduated from high school [indecipherable]

A: No -- well, not -- not in a different way. I -- I can give you a better an -- a -- a different a- answer to that. M-My father's main concern was to make sure that -- always was I would have the best education he could possibly provide, which was pretty limited in those days because we didn't have the money. Now, Bedford had a -- was a small community of between 50 and 80,000 people, and it's not much more than 80,000 or 90 at the most today. But it had a reputation for having the two -- in England they call them public schools, but they're like private schools, of the Ivy League type, and two girl's schools like this, and a convent, which went up to university level. And many people sent children as boarding children to these schools, because of the educational -- Bedford had a reputation for having an excellent educational system, a private educational system. And my father, having no money, nevertheless, wanted to see if he could do the same -- give me that -- or give me that opportunity, and went to see the headmaster, or the principal of one of these two boys public schools, there were no girls, I mean, they're separate actually. These are both Anglican, high Anglican schools, if you understand high Anglican in that context.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: The principal was in fact, an Anglican priest, but a teacher as a career, but had -- but had also been a -- had also become a priest. And my father had a private interview with him, I understand, explained the circumstances. The principal said, send your boy in. If he takes a test like anybody else and passes it, we -- it would -- it's -- it wa -- it was one of these schools which had a great alumni, which --

Q: Endowment.

A: -- yeah, and it was a 400 year old school. I passed the exam, which I don't think was that high a standard, nevertheless, and at the age of 10 in 1940 -- in -- 11 in 1946, I entered the school. I used to walk to school every day, I was a day boy, and the school never sent a bill.

Q: Wow. What was the name of the school?

A: The school was called Bedford Modern School. It was first chartered in, I think, 1566 by then Lord Mayor of London, who had been born in Bedford. The school still inherits the -- the rents from the land which this former Lord Mayor endowed to the school, together, so that's where they get all these -- you know, the o -- the -- plus the -- the other alumni scenario, and not a word was ever mentioned or raised.

Q: Wow.

A: And nobody was dis -- it was never discussed in the school, and --

Q: You weren't singled out in any way?

A: Never singled out in any way.

Q: Hm. Fabulous.

A: And I think there were about -- in total about two or three other Jewish boys at the school. If you -- if you did not want to attend an-and that was the type of school where it still does, I think. Well, I'm not sure whether it does it any more now. The school had about a thousand -- between 700 and a thousand boys at all time. Every morning at nine o'clock, the hall was filled with a -- this is really -- and you'll find this interesting -- was filled with the boys and the masters. Th-The -- the headmaster, the principal, would walk with cap and gown, everybody [indecipherable] masters in caps and gown, would walk through the center of the hall, and the whole school would ri -- ri -- stand up bec -- in -- in courtesy to the headmaster, and he would go up on the dais, and then there would be a small reading, and a small two or three minute sermon, some

discussions, and a prayer which act -- ironically was always interdenominational, it didn't really have any great things, and then it's [indecipherable] been, you know, after that was done --

Q: [indecipherable]

A: -- and if you wanted to attend, you could. If -- nothing was ever said if you didn't want to attend. Everybody did. We all did. Cause there was really no reason not to. There was -- you know, we -- and nobody ever attempted to proselytize, or to try and convert, it was just -- became a matter of courtesy that we all attended. And -- and I mean, nobody knew who was who.

Q: Right.

A: If you understand what I mean.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I've gone back, visited the school from time to -- I mean, in odd years over the years, and -- and -- and they've told me that they sometimes find parents who -- who've come in and said -- cause now the fees have gone up much higher than they are a -- and I said, "What happens if parents can't meet the fees?" You know, and he said well, we've had some [indecipherable] one of the bursars in the school, not now any more, but about 10 years ago was in my class. And he, for some reason decided that he'd continue to do these things. We -- so we knew each other on first name terms. And he said to me, well, he said, that's actually happened, with this downsizing, rightsizing, outsizing thing in the late -- in the 80's, early 90's, and so forth. And he said, but we -- we just told parents the endowment will take care of that until such time as you're in a position to. So the school still continues that.

Q: Has that tradition, that's wonderful.

A: Yeah, as a tradition.

Q: I say high Anglican, only because the -- the -- the principal was a high Anglican, a -- a -- you know, a priest. And he's the one, when you got to the last two years of school, he -- he -- w-we -- they -- they had the what they would call Divinity class, 40 minutes once a week. But his -- and I did attend it, and we all did. It wasn't a religious conversion, it was a discussion of religious philosophy. And each student in a class had to -- in -- in alphabetical order, had to take the notes so that they could be -- and they would have to stand up and -- and repeat that the following week to the principal, the headmaster, to bring him up to date as to what had been discussed the last time. Did you understand what I'm getting at?

Q: Yeah.

A: And it became -- so if I had to do it, there was somebody else there the next week, that -- sitting next to me, taking, making sure -- they would have to stand up and take the notes.

Q: Right, right.

A: And you had to do that -- it was his Divinity course, but it was really courses in religious ethics for 40 minutes once a week.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: Years later, when he retired, I came back. My parents were living in England, I was married, already had a daughter, and I was working overseas and was a member of the Rotary club. And for some reason or another my -- I met somebody from the school who was in fact involved in the Rotary club. And the priest of another parish on this little outskirts of the town, who had also been to -- to the school, but much earlier than I, but who was the person in charge of getting speakers, somehow or another was given my name, and wrote me a little note, and said, "Would you mind speaking? You -- I -- we understand you're working overseas, could you -- would you like to talk on this one?" And so I said yes, and he said, "Oh, by the way, the Reverent J.E.

Taylor," you know, he's retired, he's your -- your -- your headmaster, you know, "he is a member of our club, and he has volunteered to introduce you."

Q: Oh, how great. That's great, yeah.

A: And the -- what was even more interesting is they had the local member of Parliament for Bedford, turned up that day, who happened to be the former -- former Churchill -- former Prime Minister Churchill's son-in-law, and of course I ended up getting preference. He sat, you know, on one side, but th -- they weren't -- this -- they weren't there -- he wasn't there to give them a speech --

Q: Right, right.

A: -- you know, just I was there to speak for 20 minutes, and -- and the -- and the -- th-the -- that the -- that my former headmaster, principal, you know, spoke very -- made no reference at all to how my father might have come to see him or something, other than that this is one of my former students, and he did this and this and this and this and is now this, and I'm delighted to introduce him.

Q: Interesting, interesting.

A: You know.

Q: Huh. Yeah. You graduated from there?

A: Yes.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: In the -- in 19 fo -- I -- I graduated in 19 fift -- I went to school in '46, to this particular school I told you about, graduated in 1953. In 1948, my father became a British citizen, my parents became British citizens. Because my father became a British citizen, that automatically made me a British citizen, I did not have to apply, I was a minor, did not have to apply, okay. But on the

documents, I became. That meant that at the age of 17, I had to register for draft. Now, in England in those days, the draft continued I think until some time of the 60's. Britain was in the same boat as America is now. Whenever there was a call to do something, they had to send troops. And in -- at the age of 17, it was published in the newspapers that in alphabetical order, dates and so and so, and you went to the nearest manpower office, and you registered, okay. And you s -- you explained where you were, what you were doing, were you at school, when did you anticipate leaving school, did you plan to go on early -- to further studies? If so, when and how. And you had to do this, it was a mandatory call up for all males between the ages of 17 and a half and 35. Now you could have deferments, but you couldn't get out of it unless you were a Conscientious Objector, okay. And then you had to -- you would have had to go before a tribunal, and that whilst -- they wouldn't have let you off, but you could have [indecipherable] away for that. So at the age of 17 and a half, as I say, I -- I had to register. And I never finished my last day at school, because at my last day of school, I went to a -- I took the train to another balan -- 40 minutes away to another community, where I was -- I'd been sent documents, this for my medical exam, because I had mentioned that I would leave in -- in July 19 -- or I -- I -- in -- in ju -- in -- in 1953 I would be leaving school, and I'd made the decision not to -- to -- to do the call up earlier than later, not really understanding the consequences of I --

Q: Right.

A: -- about what that would really mean. So I never finished the last day of school. Did the call up, where you have an interview, and they ask you what you'd like to do, would you like to go in the army, would you like to go in the navy, would you like to go in the air force, and I said, "Well I'll -- I'd like to go in the army." I think really because my grandfather, on both sides, my

father, his brothers, my uncle, all been in the army, so I -- it was -- it was like it was like a tradition. It was now my turn.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I said army, and the fellow said to me, the -- the interviewing officer, obviously a retired serving officer, said, "Mo -- any -- any particular preference?" And I still remember this, and I laugh about it. I must have been quite arrogant in [indecipherable] days, and I said I'm here -- I am now, you know, it -- I'd -- I'd turned 18 now, understand. I said, "I'd like to go in the Intelligence Corps." And he said, "Well, why would you like to," -- you know, "what makes you say the Intelligence Corps?" And I said, "Well, I studied Latin and French at school, and I thought I was pretty good, you know. And he nodded, and didn't say anything. And you know, a few days -- a couple -- two or three weeks later, I get a letter and it says report to the follow -- to the infantry unit in my -- in my hometown. You know, which -- so obviously, if I had said infantry, I might have got into the Intelligence Corps --

Q: Intelligence.

A: -- but here, that's how the military sometimes worked. It didn't matter, okay. My mother was not terribly happy about this. My fa -- and -- and -- and mention this, and said she was going to call -- you have to remember my parents are now British citizens, and sa -- so my mother said she was going to -- didn't like this one bit, because it was a pretty sure thing -- I wa -- [indecipherable] it was pretty -- there was a good likelihood that I'd be sent overseas. You know, Britain was involved in -- in -- in Germany, Middle East, the communist uprisings in -- in -- in -- in Malaya at that time, which was British territory. The Korean war, you know, where Britain had, as is normal these days, when America calls --

Q: Britain follows.

A: Britain usually ca -- Britain usually accedes, and sends in troops as well. Quite a strange, remarkable situation. Painful for a lot of people, no doubt, I don't -- I expect, but it seems to be that way, and was then. But it was Britain really in the major role, and not quite the other way around.

Q: Yeah.

A: So my mother, I think, was very concerned, and said she was going to call the Member of Parliament. Now, I don't know whether she meant that, or whether she really was trying to express her irritation. I remember my f -- I remember my father just looking at her and saying, that's end of conversation. You know, in this family we don't -- we don't talk like that, you know. Really -- I mean, you know, it's the first time I actually heard my father talk to my mother -- if they talked like that together, it wasn't in my presence, that's the first time I heard my -- I heard my father being quite curt about this thing. And sure enough, of course, what happened, much to my mother's horror, I suspect, I did my si -- infantry training, and before I knew what was happening, they'd sent me on three weeks embarkation leave, and -- to -- to join another adjacent battalion -- infantry battalion in another county next door. You know, it's like [indecipherable] Alexandria to -- to something, you know, else. Wa -- you're on your way to Korea, this bat -- battalion had been chosen to -- to go to Korea. You know, all people below 18 step back. I remember we -- I came back from weekend leave and we had a morning parade, step back, you -- you are not going, all those 18 and above, pick up your three week embarkation leaves, and sign your -- sign your -- to the effect that if you are late from -- from -- from three weeks leave, you are no longer classified as absent [indecipherable] if you're late, you're classified as a deserter, because you're going overseas as a battalion, and b-by the way, before you leave today, sign your -- all of you sign your wills. [indecipherable] you know. So here am I

at the age of 18, signing a will, which I didn't have anything sign on, but I think it's done for pension, or if something should happen you know.

Q: Sure, sure.

A: And I come home, and I tell my parents [indecipherable] you know, and I'm on three weeks embarkation leave, you know. Well, there was nothing they could do about that. On the morning which we left, I got up early. My father wa -- bef -- we had breakfast together, and then he went to work, but we shook hands. And his only comment to me -- he didn't hug -- we didn't hug each other, it wasn't -- that wasn't -- it wasn't his --

Q: Style, yeah.

A: Style. We shook hands, and he just said, "Don't do anything to dishonor our name."

Q: Oh. We can stop for a second.

A: And we shook hands, and I say, my father said, you know, don't do anything to ho -- dishonor our name, and off he went to work. My mother came to the -- decided she'd come to the railway station with me, f -- on the way back to camp, and she gave me a small plaque, with the 10 commandments. And now she was very qui -- I think she -- she got more religious as time went by, and -- and I think she just said, "This is going to take care of you."

Q: Huh.

A: Now, I don't quite know wha -- why. And she said, "You take it." So I put it in my wallet, and obviously it did take care of me.

Q: Yeah. Which leads me to ask, in all those years, or even -- even before they left Germany, were -- your parents did not live in a Jewish community, but were they religious?

A: I think -- let me put it this way, I don't know how religious my father really was in Germany. Th -- in Halle there was a germ -- a Jewish community, with a jewi -- with a synagogue.

Q: Did they attend?

A: I f -- I -- I think they did.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I -- I think they did. But how -- how, you know, religious they -- they were, I honestly can't tell you.

Q: But it wasn't something that was discussed regularly --

A: No.

Q: -- so if they were, it was -- they kept it to themselves, or between themselves.

A: No, I won't say that, it's just that my father was not what you would call a religious person to discuss religion.

Q: I see.

A: You know. I -- I don't know, at -- it yo -- it's an interesting question. He and I never discussed religion.

Q: Mm-hm. So then there's no way to know, in a sense, what kind of impact this whole experience had on his belief.

A: I initially thought, for a long time, that his belief -- that he'd gone the other way. That, in other words, he just didn't believe in anything any more.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And sometimes I had the feeling that he did things because my mother was a little bit more keen and enthusiastic, and that in order to stop grumbles, he -- he went along with things. He did not attend a lot of -- in the early stages -- you know, it was a small -- there were about half a dozen, my memory of there were about half a dozen English Jewish people living in Bedford, where we g -- where I grew up. Most of them, I think, had been born in London. They were

English -- born in England. My mother -- we would go to the services, they were usually held in somebody's house, at the -- at -- two or three times in the year, okay. And I did have a Bar Mitzvah, but it was in somebody's house, cause there's no synagogue, there was no Jewish community, and there isn't to this day.

Q: Was there a rabbi?

A: They would try and get hold of a rabbi, I believe, from London. If not, then whoever was most conversant and fluent, might take the service, if you follow what I'm getting --

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: During the war, there were -- my mother and I would go to these things. My father was working, and he couldn't afford to take off the time.

Q: Right.

A: It was too important, it was just, you know.

Q: Right.

A: You know. So it wasn't a very big -- it was not a big thing. And the other -- in fact, the -- there were several other -- I think I mentioned this to you, there were several other Jewish refugees. I recall perhaps one or two who were quite elderly, and there were some -- three or four ladies, women, who were married, but whose husbands weren't -- and who husbands never got -- came out, and -- and were killed, unfortunately, in the death camps. And as a result, they, to some degree, adopted me, if you -- if you follow what I'm getting at. You know, they would -- I want to say that they were all -- I became -- they were all mothers, but they looked upon me -- they would always ask, where is -- where is John, or where is Johnny, you know. You know, these ladies -- these women lived in -- by themselves in rooms. Some had to work -- they all had

to work, but they try -- you know, they -- I -- I think they all came from reasonably well-to-do circumstances. Nobody really asked anybody to --

End of Tape Two Side B

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with John Meyerstein. This is tape three, side A. These women?

A: Yeah, these women, and yo -- as I say, you can count the numbers who I can remember, barely on the fingers of, you know, two hands. And perhaps the ones I'm thinking about, not even that many. And they remained in Bedford long after the war was over, and they would always ask my mother, you know -- an-and I can remember sometimes meeting for a cup of tea in downtown Bedford, you know, in a restaurant or a café or something, even during the war years, th-th -- two or three would get together, and I'd come along, and so how's John, or how's Johnny, and -- and so forth. And -- so they, in their own way, I suspect, were almost adopting me without saying so. And I don't mean that in any, you know, affect -- loving way, but just -- it was -- to them, that meant something. And another thing which I thought was rather interesting was that the moment I was called into the military service, my parent's stock went up in the world. People sa -- if -- you have to remember, I grew up in -- in the ca -- in a place -- in England, in a -- in a -- in a community, particularly after World War II -- now we're talking for -- World War II finished in '46 -- '45, I'm talking now '53, I-I'm on a -- I-I'm in the army on a way to -- to Korea. That's only eight years. On the street in which I grew up, or everywhere, there wasn't somebody who didn't have a brother, an uncle, a father, a grandfather, a nephew, a niece, somebody who hadn't served in the -- in the -- in the British military, of which most would have had to be sent overseas. Very similar now to what I -- what we read and hear and see happening to Americans. So now my parents, people who -- English people would say, what's happening to John? So my parents were not long -- refugees in that context.

Q: Uh-huh, they were full British citizens.

A: Well, they were now viewed as being in the similar vein, and I think my parents -- I th -- not that we discussed it, but I'm looking back now, people would say, oh I met so and so, he wanted to know how you were doing. My mother in particular, my father didn't -- wasn't that way inclined, but my mother, among, you know, other English people, neighbors and so forth. And I think that that had something to do with these other now elderly ladies, or quite older ladies, who again would sort of say, what's happening. It -- it seemed to raise the level. They weren't refugees from German oppression. Somebody was doing equal things.

Q: Right, right. It's interesting how --

A: If that mean -- if -- if you understand. I don't know whether it has any meaning.

Q: Yeah.

A: I think it had meaning.

Q: To them, sure.

A: To them, yeah.

Q: Sure, sure.

A: It gave my parents status. They could talk on equal terms.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And in some instances, of course, on more terms, because some of my peer group ended up not going overseas. So here was I now doing something which was far more serious --

Q: Right.

A: -- than, you know, being posted to Scotland or someplace like that.

Q: Right, right, right, right. And how long did you serve?

A: I came out in '55.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I came out in ’55, yeah, we -- I came back on a troop ship, you know came back, and was then -- and then ended up in a -- what is like -- you would have to call now like the National Guard.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Not from a voluntary point of view, but the system was, when you did your two year’s stint in -- in draft -- National Service it was called, English -- but it’s the same thing as the draft, yeah. You then went into -- they call it territorial army, which was like the National Guard, and I would -- I had to do five weekends, and one fort -- two we -- a two or three week camp every year.

Q: Mm-hm

A: Well, this was in ’55, and I was living at home with my parents, looking for a job. The situation was a little bit different. What I’d seen and witnessed, and been involved in was now totally different from my peer group at school, who’d ri -- who’d gone on -- who’d never gone overseas. We were all the same age level, but mentally I was far removed, if you understand what I’m getting.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: It took me a little bit -- it took me several months to wind down from this -- this scenario, if you understand what I’m getting about. So I do understand of -- I -- I -- I -- I have a lot of understanding as to what’s taking place right now, from an Iraq point of view --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- with the United States forces, particularly at that same age level.

Q: Yeah.

A: Cause I came back -- now, was a very funny situation, I came back -- I came out, and I wasn't even 21. Now, in England at that time, you couldn't vote if you're 21. You had to get permission to get married if you were -- if you were less than 21. You couldn't buy cigarettes if you were -- unless you were 21, and you couldn't go into a bar, or a pub, as they call it in England, and order a drink if you were under 21. So, when I came out, when I was released, I was released -- my parents came to the railway station to pick me up. We -- we came off the boat, took the train to Bedford, and my parents came to me, and they'd already called the -- the -- the -- the -- the regimental depot to say, you know, when are they coming in, and they'd said, oh, you know, he's -- he should be arriving at the railway station, and so on. They said, can we go and see him? They said yeah, but have to remember, he -- they're going to come into the -- we're gonna -- he's going to have to come to the -- he can say hello to you, but he's got to come to the depot, but they'll be -- he'll be going on leave later on this evening, okay. But we -- we need to do some forms, and it'll be for three weeks, and then he goes back for a couple of days, and then it's release, you see. So my parents had told me this was happening. So, I was not 21 yet, but I was on three weeks paid leave, but still in the military. So I arrived at home in uniform, and you know, for three weeks I was running around in civilian clothes. And one evening I went to a pub nearby to get a drink, and I -- you know, I had to get a packet of cigarettes. And I walked in -- and -- well, but I've told this story [indecipherable] parents and to my wife and to my kids, and it's hilarious. I walked in, and I went to the bar and I said, "I'd like a half a glass of beer, and -- and a packet of Craven A cigarettes." And the barman looked at me and said, "How old are you sonny?" You know, and -- and the -- and the older people sitting at the bar, I could hear the little titters of laughter, you see. He says, "You come back when you're 21." You know. So I walked out of the bar in a real high state. You have to remember, I'd come back from Korea, you see. I

walked home, I went upstairs -- this in my parents house, and I got out of my civilian clothes, and --

Q: Put your uniform on.

A: -- put my uniform [indecipherable]. And they said, "What's the matter?" I said, "I went to get a packet of cigarettes and they turned me down." I put on my uniforms, which had my ribbons on it, everything else. And I -- I-I think I run back to the pub, you know, got [indecipherable] stood outside, and sort of got myself organized, and I walked in. There was the same barman and the same group of people, it wasn't very far away. And I said, "I want a glass of beer, and a packet of Craven A cigarettes." And the barman had a straight face, and he pulled this beer out for me, and he said, "Which cigarettes did you order?" And I said, "A packet of 20 Craven A." And there wasn't a sound from the -- from the other --

Q: That's a great story.

A: -- you -- you know, from the other -- you know, who were still sitting on the bar, so they were looking at me, but not more titters, you see.

Q: Right, right.

A: And I thought this was -- I was so annoyed, you see.

Q: That's a great story.

A: And that was the end of -- I mean, of course, nobody said anything, and I know -- I drank my beer, smoked my cigarettes, which you know, obviously didn't do me any good, I don't smoke [indecipherable]

Q: Right.

A: Just to prove a point. That had nothing to do with religion, of course --

Q: Right.

A: -- I was just so ticked off, you know, I was ready to take the par -- th-the pub apart, you see.

Q: I bet.

A: Not that that would have happened, but nobody said a word --

Q: Yeah, yeah, that's great.

A: -- they just all looked at me, and -- and then tol -- turned and drank their beer again.

Q: That's right.

A: And I'm sure that same situation is going on --

Q: Everywhere.

A: -- right now, here.

Q: Yeah.

A: In '56 -- and I'm still -- I turned 21. In '56, Britain, with France went into the Suez, and if you remember, Israel attacked from the other side, because Egypt had taken over the Suez canal. In '56, I was -- I forget which day it was now, I was in London on a in -- going -- going for a job interview, or so. And I came back -- I'd taken the train up in the morning, and I'd come back in the -- before suppertime -- it's only an hour each way by train. And my mother said to me, "I think you better stay home this evening." And I -- you know, not with a happy look on her face. And I said, "Oh, why?" And she said, "Well, the police came round this afternoon. They want to give you something." And I -- so I said, "Well, why didn't you take it?" They said, "No, no, you've got to sign for this." So they -- I said, "Well, what did you say?" They said, "Well, I told them you'd be back -- you were in London for the day, you'd be back." They said, "Well, we'll be along tonight at nine o'clock." So I said, "All right." They said -- my mother said, "You'd better stay at home for this." I said [indecipherable] not go out or [indecipherable] that's okay. Sure enough about nine-ish in the evening, police car turn up at my -- at our door, and -- and a

knock on the door, and you know, "John Meyerstein?" I said, "Yeah." They said, "We got a document." And it was in one of these buff colored envelopes, and in those days it was on Her Majesty's Service, you see? You've got to sign for this thing. And inside was a call-up notice to -- to -- to me, to say that if I move from the house for more than 72 hours, I was t -- it was -- in those days they didn't call it Department of National Defense, it was War Office, to say that the document was headline -- headed th -- you know -- letterhead was War Office, to say that if I move from this -- my place of residence for more than 72 hours, I was to notify the War Office, and I was to hold myself in readiness for an immediate call-up, you see? So I -- I d -- well, I don't quite know why, I'm not a reservist, th -- you know, I -- the reservists were people who didn't do anything, but they got paid. I was not a reservist in that way, I was in the territorial, which was like the National Guard. So the next morning, I called the -- the -- the depot where I u-used to do th -- for the training. It was the same ba -- regimental battalion which I'd started off with, you see. And I said, you know, I just had this call-up [indecipherable]. "Well," they said, "yeah you -- there's nothing you can do about it." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" They said, "Well, you served in Korea, so on your file -- we don't have to train you again, you've had training for all these things." And of course, in between that 12 months, I had -- I'd done s-some -- locally, some parachute training, because it gave you extra money, and the wings looked pretty good on your battle dress, you see. And they said, "Well, you've got all these things, they don't have to train you. There's nothing you can do, you know, it's -- it's -- it's been -- it's flagged, you know, that you've served in a -- in a combat zone before. It's different if we have to get somebody and we're going to train them. We don't need to give you 16 weeks training," or stuff like that, in much the same way as it's -- it's -- to some degree it's happening here, as I read in the papers right now.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: So, of course, I showed this to my parents, and of course nothing was said, there's nothing I could do about it. Now, it may have been that my mother wasn't so -- don't forget, Israel was now on the other side.

Q: Right, right.

A: So -- so there was a different s -- a very -- it wasn't the Israeli army calling me up, it was the British army calling me up. And then I got a job interview. I got a job application, you know. And I took it, and that's -- and the company wanted me to s -- go overseas to -- to -- to Singapore on their behalf. And I called the depot -- depot, and said, you know -- I didn't hear anything for -- for awhile. And I -- I called the depot and said, "I've got this job." They said, "Well you take the job, you've -- I mean, you've just been -- you've just been put on notice. If -- you know, if they're going to do something, they're going to get in -- they'll get you wherever you are," you see. I mean, that is how it's d -- I don't know it's done in -- in the st -- in the United States, but in Britain they would know wherever you are.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay. So I went to -- I went to Singapore to work, didn't hear any more about it. About a year after -- all this is over in '56, I get a notice from the depot, "Please report for -- for -- for the two or three weeks annual -- annual maneuvers," or whatever it is, you see. So I wrote immediately back and said, "I'm in Singapore, you want -- you know, you've sent me the thing here, could you send me a travel warrant," which it was the standard thing to do f -- t -- from Singapore to London and London back to Singapore, or how do you wish me to proceed? I got -- never got an answer back. I never got -- I never had another letter.

Q: Never -- never noticed.

A: Yeah.

Q: Huh. Huh. Who knows what that was about.

A: Well, I think somebody laughed -- looked at it, I mean they would all know this --

Q: [indecipherable]. Right.

A: -- and the people, because in a small community like that, everybody know it -- my mother knew the wife of -- of one of -- of the people who worked in the -- in the depot, or something, and they would have known this is going out.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And -- and so they probably said, oh, this is nonsense and --

Q: Right.

A: -- what do we call John back for, we're gonna spend money on an air ticket for him.

Q: Right, right.

A: You know, the -- the -- the battalion's not going to fall or -- or break because he's --

Q: On this guy.

A: -- he's not here.

Q: Right, right.

A: So those are -- those are some rather interesting military experiences.

Q: Yeah.

A: And what is interesting is that that battalion, grandfathered into different names, was the first battalion sent by the British army to Kabul to participate with the united -- or to Afghanistan with the --

Q: Afghanistan.

A: -- with the --

Q: Interesting.

A: -- with the -- with the American forces --

Q: Interesting.

A: -- actually. Interesting to this day, yeah.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: And I know this because the -- the ba -- the regiment, the battalion, the -- the [indecipherable] regiment still sends me, every three or four months, a little brochure of up-to-date happenings as to what is -- is going on, you know, and what they're doing, because of what Britain is doing now in Iraq, as well as in -- in -- in -- in -- in -- still in Afghanistan [indecipherable]

Q: Right, right, right. I'm going to try and make a jump here now, in terms of our narrative, back to making some connections with the St. Louis experience, if I can. You -- and I don't mean to diminish the in-between years, but we're really looking to talk --

A: I understand.

Q: -- to relate to -- to this subject. You end up in Asia --

A: Working.

Q: -- working in Asia, married?

A: Yes.

Q: And your parents are still living in England?

A: Yes.

Q: Yeah. And -- and they live to quite -- both of them, quite a -- quite an old age?

A: My father lived to -- died in -- at -- in I th -- my father -- my father's birthday was March the 10th, he died at the end of 1986, which would have made him, I think at that -- at that period if

I'm not -- yeah, I think I'm right, si -- about six weeks -- almo -- or six or seven weeks short of 93. And he's buried in England.

Q: And -- and your mother?

A: She died in December 2001, and she lived to 91 and a half, exactly.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. And -- and where is she buried?

A: She's buried next -- they -- when they -- they bought graves in a d -- in a -- years be -- before, in a Jewish cemetery, outside Bedford, between London and Bedford. They bought two graves and they're lying side by side with -- each with their own headstone.

Q: Mm-hm. And did she die in England also?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Uh-huh, uh-huh, so sh --

A: And -- and -- and -- in -- in -- in -- in peace and -- and -- and n-no -- no pressure, you know, no ha -- peace and quiet, let's put it that way.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Yes.

Q: And -- and -- in their last years of their lives were you -- did you see them a lot, or -- were they reflective a-about their experience, or had they kind of moved ahead and looking straight ahead --

A: My father never discussed it. Again, I have to tell you that.

Q: Yeah.

A: A-And my father'd become -- we didn't talk about that period at all, but he'd become a little bit more mellow. My mother, I think, emotionally, was still a little bit more, you know -- could really not forget these things, you know.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Despite the fact that, you know, from a physical point of view, because one can say mental stress could be equally as bad as physical stress, you know.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: She, I think, coped with it harder. She did not bury it to the same degree, but, you know, and I'm not sure how one -- how one copes on this thing, you know. Individual people have different situations on this. They -- my mother went to Israel twice to see her mother. My father went once, and they both came to North America to s -- to visit me.

Q: Because you ended up in Canada.

A: Because I ended up in Canada, and of course we had two grandchildren of that [indecipherable]. And my mother even then flew, while she was in Canada from Toronto to New York to spend a week with Margot -- Aunt Margot, quote, unquote, as I mentioned to you before, earlier in the discussions.

Q: Her friend from school.

A: Yeah, and spent -- and stayed with her and then came back again, you know.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I did ask my parents -- my mother was quite keen to come and join us. My father -- we went for a walk, and you have to remember, my father was already now in his 80's, or just -- yeah, beginning his 80's. And I asked him, and he said, "No," he said, "I -- I'm too old." He says -- he looked upon North America, he liked everything which he saw, but he thought it was a younger person's country. And for him I think it would have been re-rooting another tree, took him long enough to plant in England, if you want to put it that way. I think that would have been too much. My mother, I think, was interested in that time. I think my father found his English

solitude comforting. He -- he was very much an island unto himself. You can't really live that way, but he tried his utmost to -- to -- t-to -- to activate that sort of situation, I think. But they didn't come again -- he didn't come again, and -- and -- and that's quite an effort. In those days they really wanted, you know, they didn't like if -- people who were quite old to fly. I mean, he was physically fit okay, but I mean, he was in his 80's. I mean, can you imagine what would have happened if he'd had a heart attack or something, you know?

Q: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And -- an -- as you were then left home, and had your own life, and children of your own, how did you integrate your earlier experiences with your later life, and -- and were you able to move ahead, and did it motivate you in any way, either socially, or politically, or rel -- in a -- in a -- in terms of a religious community, can you -- are you able to -- to sort of understand how those early years formed you and affected you later?

A: I think -- that's not an easy question to answer.

Q: I know, it's a hard -- it's very hard as a -- it's a --

A: I certainly think that the -- the early years made me much more self sufficient, or reliant upon myself. My parents didn't, for a long time, didn't know a lot of people -- and I'm talking about people in England, English people to whom they could ask questions and -- as to what one should be doing, how should we do it. So everything which I thought about, or wanted to do, I would have to sort of glean for myself through my questions, wondi -- wondering whether that person would know what I was talking about or so forth. So, i-it made me stand on my own feet, equally so. My military experiences certainly helped in that, because in those days when you went for a job interview, more or less any company would ask, have you been in the military? In England, what sort of school did you go to, and have you served in the military and the third question was, have you served overseas? And I think the reason for that was that they felt if -- if

those three things all tied together, they had a reliable, disciplined person, who would understand what to do, okay. Now whether that's true today, I suspect not to the same degree at all. M-My father being so much older, was -- wasn't -- wasn't that easy to relate in terms, I mean, when I -- I watch -- I go out to watch our grandkids play soccer or something like that, and we -- and we're not close together, we -- they live very far apart, but when we do -- or we've done for our own kids when they were doing that. Girls play soccer these days now. I don't mean that in a silly way, but --

Q: Yeah, right.

A: -- but my father didn't have the time or the energy.

Q: Right.

A: You know, af -- and probably was still too depressed. And my mother was also working in whatever shape or form to bring some extra money in. Not the nicest of jobs, you know, cleaning floors, and washing clothes in -- in a -- in somebody's house is not exactly what she was used to, but it paid the -- it paid bills, and eventually she didn't have to do that. So, I didn't really have that -- that close-knit relationship. I was very grateful to my father for making sure, and going out of his way, with all his efforts to get me a good education, and -- and a certain standard of -- of -- of decency, and -- and -- and how to live, and how to behave. And the -- and that -- you know, the behavior -- to him, behavior and dignity were terribly important, which I think you can understand. My mother was a much more emotional person, I think became somewhat more religious in later years. But we didn't talk a great deal about it. It -- perhaps that was the way German Jews, who had lived in Germany for such -- and I don't mean that in any demeaning way, had integrated so much that they did not view themselves so much as Jewish as they viewed themselves as Germans of a Jewish religion, i-if you understand, actually.

Q: Quite a different thing, sure.

A: Okay?

Q: Absolutely.

A: And we didn't talk about that. Nobody made any demands upon anybody. And it's very hard for me to understand that. When I went to get a job interview, when I was being inter -- in -- and I'm only speaking about my experiences in England, nobody ever asked, you know, what religion are you, i-if you understand what I'm getting at.

Q: Yes, mm-hm.

A: I mean, just to give you an illustration of how these -- I'm only speaking now from the English point of view. Years later I'm living in Canada, I'm running a business of my own, and dealing with British companies of quite sizable renown and -- renow -- renown in -- in their own fields. And suddenly I'm asked -- I get a call from -- from -- from a senior army officer from England saying we're going to be in eng -- in Canada in a short period of [indecipherable] we'd like you to consider being an honorary defense industries representative for us. It's purely honorary, it doesn't pay anything. Would you be interested? And I thought to my -- well, I -- I said yes, you know, I mean, no reason. And I thought to myself -- he came and in typical English way we met, had a meal, some drinks. He knew exactly what school I'd been to, where I'd done my service, who I was representing. I have to assume that some of the companies from England, who deal with Department of National Defense said we have so and so. And they want -- and he said it's purely honorary, but it opened the doors to a lot of scenarios. And I said to my wife after, isn't it funny a German Jewish refugee, sitting in Canada now, has been asked to be an honorary situation in this way, where I'd come, you see.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I -- I mean, this is many years -- a number of years ago. And I thought, what an achievement for myself, you know, i-if I can view it in that way.

Q: Sure.

A: I just thought it was a great -- it was an honor.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I don't know how much it really benefited me, but it was -- I thought it was an honor to me, as to how far I'd come, and the -- and the -- the -- the feeling of -- of -- of being able to have somebody ask that, and not sort of say, where are your antecedents, and -- and -- and -- and so forth.

Q: Right.

A: And so these things had -- but nobody said to me, are you Jewish? What religion are you? Are you a refugee? Were you the son of a refugee? Now, why would they ask in the first place, but my parents didn't talk about the St. Louis to other people. They talked perhaps, to other Jewish, in that little group --

Q: Right.

A: -- about it. And if somebody who had an understanding, like yourself, they might -- my mother -- certainly my father wouldn't have discussed it with you.

Q: Right.

A: You know. And -- but beyond that, that was an era which had gone, from my father's point of view. I don't think he would have appreciated it. I don't know how best to answer your -- your question that way. I-I don't know. I -- I went to -- I went to visit Israel in 1967 -- '67, yes. And I talked to my mother's brother. I stayed with my uncle and his wife.

Q: Lothar?

A: Lota, yeah. His wife was Laura. She ran a flower business and had the contract to supply the Israeli parliament every day with flowers. And she -- and I had the chance -- she took me with her, and I had a chance to see the -- the Israeli parliament and to explain various other things and so forth. My uncle was also very much an intellectual, eve -- you know, in his own way. Also a lawyer, but never practiced law. Too late for him, you know.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: And never practiced it in Israel either. And worked at the -- the la -- the library in -- in Jerusalem or something like that, you know, he liked -- he was great on books. And he told me quite frankly, he said, "I'm -- I'm an agnostic. I've -- I've become an agnostic." And I said, "Well then, do you go to the synagogue?" He and I were just talking alone quietly. And I said, "Were you always an agnostic?" And I think he said to me no, not initially, but he said, "It wasn't a very deeply religious household in which we grew up in," for whatever reasons, we didn't go into that detail, and I don't know, you know, because what is one man's viewpoint -- personal viewpoint, not -- might not necessarily reflect what actually did happen [indecipherable]. And I said, "So, do you go on the Jewish high holidays to the -- to the synagogue?" And he said, "Well," he said, "I do, but," he said, "but that's really to please your aunt." But he said it doesn't do any harm to sit and reflect, while you're sitting down there. But he said, "Are you asking me would I go voluntarily? No." But he said, "What difference does it make?" He said, "I go. So, after all, I'm free to do what I want." So I don't know how best to answer that situation there.

Q: And what about yourself, do you go?

A: Very occasionally. And it is very occasionally. My wife is not Jewish. I'm Jewish, but my wife is a Catholic. But she has never -- she comes -- she would come to -- comes with me if without that way. She's nev --

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with John Meyerstein, conducted by Nina Ellis on July first, 2004, in Washington, D.C. This is tape number three, side B.

A: I -- I -- I -- I'm not -- I can't say that I'm an agnostic, or an atheist, because I wouldn't have made the same comment to my uncle. And by the way, my uncle always wrote to me in English, you know, from Israel. I would send him books, and he would send me a recommendation on books. Course, his recommendation on books were based on his time at the university, you know, when he was studying in Germany, okay. Whereas my books would be on more current affairs, you know, current affairs, politics, North America, British, or something like that, he -- he loved that. And I would send him the books, and he would read that. In fact my -- my -- my -- my cousin, his son, he had two children, a -- a boy and a girl -- his son, when his father died, when my uncle died, called me up to tell me what had happened, and I -- you know, and I -- and we were talking and he said, "You know, I've suddenly discovered all my father's papers. He made a photostatic co [indecipherable] a duplicate copy of every letter he wrote to you, and he kept every one of your letters." And he said, "I'm looking at a pile of books, now." We were on the phone, and he said, "I'm looking at a pile of books. I had no idea that you'd sent him these things." There's a bit of an age gap between us, you know, he's about 50, and -- and I'm -- I'll be 70 next year. And he said, "I had no idea that he kept all the," -- we didn't know this, you know.

He said, "I'm going to have to go through all this," and -- and -- and this is very important, it was more important for him to tell me this than it was for me to mention it to him, you see.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But, going back to you -- to the -- is it a quick -- that was a quick assignment, ta -- to say to you is my -- my children keep in touch with them, you know, and last year my wife, just a -- and this is rather interesting thing, last year my -- my wife had a -- a f -- a 50th cli -- university class reunion in Bath, England. And it was time for me to do the headstone for my mother, cause you generally don't -- it's in the -- in the grave, you don't put a headstone in in the first few months or a year because the ground tends to move, and the stones can fall over. So I'd had the headstone made, made arrangements for the people in England to carve the headstone to match the duplicate of my father, an-and to have it in there so for my arrival, so I could combine the trip. My wife was very keen, cause this is a one off thing, and if she didn't attend there'd be no second 50th, you know, reunion in Bath, England, cause she went t-to study home economics in -- you know, in Bath, a-as a -- as a student, okay. And -- and she'd been to Washington long before I ever got here. She -- after she'd finished u-university studies, she came to visit, her father sent her through the United States to have a -- to -- to -- to see North America in general, actually, long before I ever got here. While she was at school studying, I was in Korea, you see. I always say to her, my taxes, she got a -- got a free education. But anyway, and we did all this, you see, we -- we went to -- and of course she ca -- we went together to bury my mother and -- and so forth. My children are aware of this. Last year when we were back, my cousin, the older g -- my uncle, a girl. She now has four children of her own, and more grandchildren than I've got, you know. In the last month she's just had two, suddenly. But she turned up with her husband, with her daughter. She was coming on a business trip to Europe, but she was coming to England

because she'd found out that I was coming -- we hadn't seen each other for years -- but -- with her husband. Her daughter was living -- was spending some time in England. Her son, who was married, was spending some time in England as well. We all met in London for a meal, for lunch. And we spent the whole -- we -- I think we met at 12, we didn't break up until six o'clock in the evening. And it's very funny, her -- she is now e-mailing me almost on a regular basis, which hasn't happened. Her son, who's -- is e-mailing me, who I -- the youngest son, w-which we'd never met before, I had no idea what he looked like and so forth. And it -- I don't know why, whether it's because I'm now the oldest, we're a much closer relationship, although we never discussed religion, you see.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So I don't really know how far -- how religious they are. We talk on the phone perhaps once every six months or so. I've -- I've pon -- we -- for -- for -- let me put it this way, I don't know, and I'm not sure whether this is -- whether I'm writing this. We hadn't met -- and I have met my a -- f -- my -- my -- Daniella is her first name. We hadn't met for 35 - 40 years. No, 35 years sa -- easily, in England, cause one of her children was actually born in England when I [indecipherable] not while I was there, but [inaudible]. She is now, I think in her early 50's or so. I don't know whether I'm viewed now as being a rock. And I don't mean that in any arrogant way. I'm -- I -- ma -- my -- my f -- agrees with me on this, we've talked about this, in fact my daughters also, I've discussed this with my daughters, who were -- you know, my eldest daughter is 42, and the other one will be 38 this year, both married with children. I don't know whether my cousins are -- view me now as a sort of rock, because of the worries which are going on in Israel. Do you follow, I'm the -- I'm the person living outside, not under these pressures, and

there -- do you understand? It's almost like my -- am I the person they could turn to if something went wrong?

Q: Oh, interesting.

A: I -- I don't know, I -- I don't even know whether I'm -- I'm theorizing correctly or -- or incorrectly.

Q: Right.

A: But suddenly, there is an overwhelming desire on their part, it wasn't on my part, initially, do you --

Q: Right, right.

A: -- you know, when -- when you've sort of grown apart.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I'm much closer, I've been always much closer with my cousin in Australia.

Q: Mm-hm, interesting.

A: And when, as you know, the -- the -- the German government ha-have agreed, in more recent times, to -- to honor claims which the insura -- German insurance companies have, you know, confiscated from --

Q: Jews.

A: -- from Jews, and others, but Jews as -- in particular, and those are now being checked out. And -- and as you know, the Swiss, you know -- you know, looted all the accounts. I, by sheer coincidence, not without any deliberate scenarios, happened to hit a website about a year ago, and up popped my grandma -- parent's names on my mother's side, and my father's name, my mother's name and my name, with all the right birthdates, places of birth and the time of -- you know, th-the -- the date of birth, with the exact names. Now, I don't know where they got these

things from. So, I called my cousin in Australia, and it was agreed th -- that we would put a claim in for property -- we already had that done before -- we would put in another claim, and we would also put in an insurance claim. And rightly or wrongly, I've no means of knowing. But my cousin in Australia said, "John, will you take care of this?" So I said yes. Now, she physically is not so well any more. I mentioned the same -- I called my two cousins in or -- in Israel, cause they're the direct grandchildren, like I am, of our grandfather on my mother's side. And said, "I've seen these names, and I've seen your father's name on their as well, and my mother's name. Not my name, not your names, but our -- I think you should -- did you notice?" "No, we didn't notice." They didn't even know about this. I said, "I think you should put some -- a claim in." And both of me -- he said, "John, you take care of it -- will you take care of it?" I said, "Well, I -- a-are you quite happy with this?" Because in the application forms -- I'd already downloaded them from the computer, and I'd read them through. And of course, don't forget, it's all in English, the applications have to be in English, and they're not normally speaking English at the -- so, it would -- that's another reason they probably might have thought let John do it, cause he understands the language better. And I said, "Are you absolutely comfortable," because I said that I will -- I sign as the applicant, and I have to state, which I would, and give your addresses of any other relatives who might, should a claim ever be honored, if the -- if there is -- it ever come up, that I undertake to insure that you were [indecipherable] no question, no doubt in my -- please take care of it, I said, "I tell you what, in that case I will do it, but I will give you copies of everything," which I did, and to my cousin in Australia. But I said, "Recognize something, our chances are less than one percent. If you look at it in that light, then you won't get upset. If nothing happens, if it comes, which we -- I doubt very much, then wh -- we'll see what happens. But if you're comfortable," -- and they said, "We're very comfortable." And from

-- and, you know, and somehow or another that suddenly -- and I've wondered to myself whether psychologically they look upon me now as somebody who if something devastating were to happen -- and I mean, unfortunately they are in an area of the -- of the world where, you know, I mean, things can happen elsewhere, but where things are not the most pleasant for everybody -- whether they don't somehow look upon me as being somebody who might be in a position to help, were something to go wrong.

Q: Yeah. History has a funny way of making circles, doesn't she?

A: Mm.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, I wondered about that. Now, I don't know whether -- whether I'm exaggerating something, or whether --

Q: Well, if -- if they're not making that assumption --

A: I never have asked that --

Q: -- intellectually it's easily, it's --

A: -- it's just a question -- I found it a bit difficult to understand why they suddenly --

Q: Right.

A: -- after all these years --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- with complete families and grandchildren of their own -- ma -- my -- my -- th-the son, Uri, he has two daughters, they're not married yet.

Q: Right.

A: My cousin, the older one, the -- the -- a girl, is already a grandparent.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Whether there isn't something in what I'm saying.

Q: Yeah.

A: D-Do you follow what I'm getting at?

Q: Yeah, yeah, think so.

A: In other words, whatever -- and it seems to me that whatever decisions they're now making, they call now to ask what my views were, whereas over the last 30 years, we barely exchanged cards. It's almost as if they're -- we've got to check to see --

Q: Got to have a plan, sort of.

A: Or -- yeah, now I -- I hope that's not --

Q: I hope for their sake that that's not the case.

A: -- that -- that I'm -- you know, I'd rather I was completely wrong in this.

Q: Yeah.

A: And hopefully I am, that nothing is going to happen. Or whether it's they're worried about -- because they have parents and grandparents who went through this.

Q: Right.

A: Now, I asked both my -- I asked my cousin over lunch that time, you know, did -- did your -- did -- did y -- did your father, my uncle and your mother talk to you about all this? They said "No, not really. In fact you're telling us more. Things which we had no idea. And I'm," she said, "I'm going to tell Uri," her brother, "that, you know, you've got more information than any," they have more pictures for some rea -- don't ask me why, they have more pictures. I don't -- perhaps my mother -- my grandmother put those pictures in a rucksack. She couldn't take anything else, perhaps she took some of those sort of things, you know. But I found that rather

interesting. But again, to answer your questions, I -- we never talked about these things. Perhaps we're a bit more peculiar in that respect. I don't know.

Q: Let me ask you another question, coming back to the St. Louis -- and it's a -- it's -- I -- I ask it because I feel compelled to ask it, but given that we've just spent so much time talking about your whole life, and -- and understanding that you -- that experience on the St. Louis, number one, is something you don't remember personally, and was just one small part of a huge journey --

A: Four weeks, or thereabouts, yeah.

Q: -- that your family has taken. Nevertheless, I feel like I need to ask the question. There -- there -- when we look back at historical events sometimes 50 years, 60 years later, we're -- they -- they gain importance, or lose importance, depending on the perspective of the people who are looking. And here we are now, looking back to this event that happened in 1939, in an institution where an enormous amount of human energy has been devoted to documenting this period, this event and the period surrounding it. That aside, how do you look back on the St. Louis? Is it a tiny blip to you, or do you have feelings about it, attitudes about it, in terms of in pol -- maybe political attitudes about it. And in terms of, you know, could there have -- more been done? And God knows that the f -- the entire course of your family history would have been changed.

A: Hm, no, I -- that's a fair question.

Q: Or do you s -- or do you stop and think about it?

A: No, I think, no, I think I can answer that. As far as the -- the memories of the -- of the -- of the St. Louis, I would really just say to you again, I was only four.

Q: Right.

A: Okay. We're talking 1939 in May, I'd only turned four in March, so we left in May, in June we arrived in England, okay.

Q: Right.

A: To me that's a very short period, and obviously nothing untoward happened. I certainly don't recall -- and I don't hear my mother -- I don't think my mother ever mentioned anything of any problem with me, other than that one thing where I -- she --

Q: Got lost.

A: -- I got lost on the -- or some -- or appeared to get lost in the [indecipherable]. I do recognize though, I think, and I've often wondered why, you know, more consideration could not have been given either by the U.S., and also Canada, Canada turned them down as well, no question about it. And Canada turned them down with much greater vehemence, I think, indirectly, than let's say other countries may have down. Just said no. I've read certain documents, or papers which -- in books, which indicate that there was a reason for it, Quebec being French, and Catholic, and you know, not keen to want anything to do with Jews at that time, had influence on the federal government, I don't know. Could something have been done at this end? Yes, I have to ask myself that question. Could, you know, could the federal government, in it's wisdom, ignore -- could the president of the United States or whatever, have ignored the political antennas around him and said, for humanitarian reasons it's a mere 1100 people, 1200 people or whatever. I think they could have done. I mean, when I see the way things are happening today. Would it have made a difference to my parents? Hopefully it would have done. At least they would have had some relatives like these people here --

Q: In Chicago.

A: -- in Chicago. How much they could have done to help beyond, I don't know. It would have been a point of reference, I would imagine we would have attempted to -- to go there, that's the only point, just out of sheer gratitude, and they -- probably knowing them -- they're long dead now, and I honor them accordingly, I'm sure they would have done everything possible to -- to help us, or to put us up, or it wouldn't matter what it would have been. Yes, I-I -- that's always been a disappointment to me. Politics being politics, I'm -- I'm logical enough to know that, you know, somebody would argue that, you know, what are a thousand people in the context of a country's overall requirements? What did that German military store in Klausowitz say? You know, war is just another name for -- and a tactic of politics, or something like that, I think you understand what I mean. I don't know. I -- I -- I -- I certainly don't think that Canada came out of it any -- in any great honor, notwithstanding what they might do today. Say certainly there were people who did go to the Prime Minister in Canada at the time, and say please do something, and I don't mean just Jews. Could America have done something? I don't know. I don't think the European countries who -- who gave sanction -- sanctuary to -- to the -- to us, whether it was England, or that -- did it with great enthusiasm, but they did it, you know. For which, certainly from England's point of view, I'm eternally grateful, actually. And I think I've repaid my s -- my score on that by -- by my military service for U.K. And I suppose in fairness -- and my parents are buried there, and all the benefits I've gained, in -- from a business, or other point of view, have come from the U.K., and were -- it never gonna happen, but were England to call, I would have to assume that I'd have to do something, more than for anywhere else, because of that. But do I believe they all did it because they thought we were the greatest thing, no, I would imagine they did it because we were a damned inconvenience. But it was -- but they were good enough to do it, in whatever way. And whether somebody persuaded them, or somebody put some pressure

on, doesn't matter. It only requires good people to stand up and something can happen. The other argument, if good people stand up and do nothing, bad things happen.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Right. I would imagine I'm being very, perhaps coldly logical in -- and -- and -- and in many ways I can follow that because I an -- my father was, you know, very Prussian in his ways, you know, really. And I can understand those feelings, because actually I was born in -- in what was Prussia then, because Prussia didn't become a non-country until after the war, I think '47 or '48, when they decided to eliminate the country as a country. So I can feel these things. This is not an inheritance of one generation. We're talking back generations here, you know. When I got called up, my mother -- my mother sort of said, "Yeah, that's that German instinct," you know, got to go back into the military again. And my father said nothing and we all laughed, but underneath it, perhaps my mother had a point, you know. I didn't go unhappily, you know. No --

Q: You didn't try to be singled out --

A: Not a chan - not a way.

Q: Yeah.

A: It was my turn now, and to b -- as -- you know, so I -- and I don't want to minimize that, I'm not talking glory here, but this was different. Do I think these things can happen again? I suspect so. Do I feel that things could have been done better? Yes, I do. How can I change that? I've taught my kids about that.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I've not -- I've never tried to impose too much on it, I wanted them to have a normal life, as normal as I could make it, and as normal as I got it. And I am grateful to my parents, or to my father in particular, for not putting me into this position of having to try and almost rethink

everything [indecipherable] continuous, as we talked about earlier. But I've always said to my kids, you know, my daughters, if you have to do something, don't do it at the last minute, do it when it's easy, when there's no pressure, if that's what you want to do. Cause sometimes when you want to do something, it may not be possible.

Q: [indecipherable] wait.

A: Yeah, don't wait and -- to have something done. If it's important -- if you think it's important enough. I find it sometimes very hard to understand how my -- my family, my father's family and my mother's family, male and female, male more than anything else because they're the ones who had the -- the greatest education, and I mean a really good education, could not have seen the writing on the wall. I mean, I have in my father's documents, I found them, the date on which he was made a barrister, or sign [indecipherable] under Prussia. The date when he was made a commissioner of oaths and all these. And attached underneath, the date when he was -- the -- the -- the -- the -- Hitler, under government regulations, starting in 1933 to '34, rescinded all these things. And I've often asked myself, my God, if you saw that, what --

Q: F-Four or five years went by.

A: That's right.

Q: Yeah.

A: Exactly right. My -- my father was a lawyer, my Uncle Hugo, his eld -- my father's eldest brother worked in the financial institution, in a bank. I -- I don't know the name of the bank. My mother's brother was a lawyer, although he never practiced law, per se. But I think he got a doctorate in law as well, he was a -- he -- he liked studies [indecipherable] and my daughter seems to take after that as well, my eldest daughter. Anyway, I -- and sud -- funny enough, so

does my young daughter now gradually, it di -- just takes in different ages [indecipherable]. But how could they not have seen this?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: My mother tells me that they had a meeting, but I wasn't part of that meeting, you know, I -- I was born, but I wasn't like we're discussing here, so I can't really say what actually took place. You know, how did they discuss it, what did they discuss? I suppose the question probably was raised is what are we going to do? And where do we go? One thing is, I suspect, when -- when we didn't get into the United States, or United States made no effort, or -- or Canada, because th -- they were the next two -- the two countries closest, is that the Germans must have chuckled to themselves and said, "Well, you see, if they don't let them in, there's only 1100. And then what you -- you -- no wonder what we're doing is right."

Q: Right.

A: Okay?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Then I have to ask the question, well why did the other countries do it, okay? Holland's always had that reputation for giving sanctity to -- sanctuary, I beg your pardon, to -- to refugees. The -- France, I'm not quite sure, even to this day in my mind -- I'm a bit ambivalent about France, I can -- was it Belgium agreed as well?

Q: I think so.

A: Yes, I'm not quite -- I don't know enough about Belgium. Britain always opened it's doors to refugees in the old days. Course the old days weren't so old any more at that time, okay, but they did it. For whatever reason, they did it. Nobody else did it in Europe. And the Germans must have been saying to themselves, well hooray, we can go full steam ahead, cause nobody's gonna

save these guys. Is that a correct assessment? I don't know. I have pondered about this. I would have to tell you that I became -- I've become very cynical about platitudes of all descriptions. I'm skeptical. I want to see the deeds done. And of course there are good men who stand up. But sometimes they get overwhelmed by other people who say, it's not my business, it's not my affair, and really, I don't want to get involved. I don't know the answer to that.

Q: But the --

A: You know, and -- and -- and -- and it's, you know, not sure whether that's answered your question correctly. I -- I -- I don't think the St. Louis is the only motivating factor in my comments to you. I could say to you that nobody came up to my parents or to my father and said, I know you were a barrister, now you can't practice law -- this was after they got in England -- I'll help you get a job. Which must have been very tough for him. But on the other hand I recognize also that we landed, were accepted, and left alone. Nobody bothered us, nobody threw stones at us. Nobody bis -- painted signs on the -- on the doors. Th -- the -- the homes we all lived in, or rented, were all owned by non-Jews. Nobody marched outside to chastise that person or us.

Q: No.

A: Not that that would have happened anyway, the police would have been round there normally in those days, even to this day. But what I'm getting at is people could turn around and say, you were lucky. And I suppose we were, because I suspect strongly that those people who, for whatever reasons, went to Europe, to the countries, all of which were overrun by Germany, not all of them survived.

Q: Yeah.

A: In fact, I would have to anticipate, I don't know the figures, and we did talk about this earlier yesterday, I have a very great feeling that most of them -- there are survivors, but I don't think they survived in -- I mean, from my perspective, we didn't have a lot of money, but we had clothes, and sho -- and en-enough food to eat, whether it was -- whether we had -- we didn't have meat every day, but we were on rationing like everybody else in England. But it didn't seem to affect my health. I was accepted at school, nobody questioned me, nobody criticized me, no teacher made derogatory remarks. And when my parents in -- or my mother in the beginning, went to see a teacher in her broken English, nobody laughed at her or -- or denigrated her, or talked about her. So perhaps we ha -- we have something to be grateful for, but have I become cynical? I suppose so, a little bit. More so than the St. Louis, do you understand? Cause we survived the St. Louis.

Q: Right.

A: I -- I -- it's -- it's --

Q: It's hard to pull that out and -- and -- and isolate it, and asking to form an opinion about that.

A: I wasn't --

Q: I understand about --

A: -- yeah, you see, I'm sure that it must have been terrible for my parents, and my grandfather, not knowing in those -- in that period when the ship turned around and we arrived in England, or it was finally determined that we could go. And obviously, when my father made the decision, my grandfather must have made the s -- followed. I mean, it would have been ridiculous if he had gone somewhere else, but he could have done, I mean, he was his own man. He didn't. Thank goodness. He -- we all -- perhaps they discussed it, and my -- or my father may have talked to my father -- grandfather about it, and said, "I'm going, we're going to do this." And he

might have said -- they might have agreed on that. I don't know. It was never discussed. But it's very hard for me cause I was not part of that conversation, and you ask me perhaps -- and you started off at the beginning by sort of saying sometimes parents try to shield their children, what could I have contributed to it, you know? I'm sure my father didn't talk to my mother about Buchenwald, or what little --

End of Tape Three, Side B

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: This is a continue -- this is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with John Meyerstein, conducted by Nina Ellis on July first, 2004, in Washington, D.C. This is tape number four, side A.

A: I can recall that on odd occasions -- certainly not by my father because he never discussed those things, but my mother, when we talked about the St. Louis, or she mentioned it to other -- generally German refugees earlier in the war, when they got together in -- in Bedford, you know, three or four people, or something, they would -- or they would talk to each other and -- and the St. Louis might well come up. I don't recall my mother ever saying to me, or in her presence, because they were always -- and I was always taken along at these things, because they had nowhere to leave me, my mother, and didn't want to leave me anyway. And -- and so she would be talking in German, and when she mentioned the St. Louis, I don't ever recall her saying that she had, on the St. Louis, an unpleasant experience, any of the crew, or the staff, or anybody was rude to her. Now usually, if somebody was rude, or crude, or showed impatience or something, I'm sure she would have made a comment about that. My mo -- my mother was rather me-meticulous a-about that sort of thing. I never heard her say anything which was like a derogatory scenario. Obviously, of course, it was from the -- from the point of view of where we were going to land, was serious. But I don't recall her ever mentioning that -- that the people as -- the staff of the -- of the crew, either on the way out, or on the way back to Europe, were unpleasant, as far as she was -- a -- as something which she could have said had impacted upon her. Now, whether that happened with -- you know, in the same way to -- to 999 other passengers, I don't know, and I can't say, you know. But in that context, that's perhaps another way of trying to explain to you that, you know, the -- for me -- for -- I think for my parents it was always the question of where

would they end up. Because don't forget, my father probably -- I mean this is not a -- we don't have a piece of paper saying that, but I'm pretty sure that for my father, he was under notice, as must -- must have been my grandfather, if you are not out of Germany within some things, we will be back for you and Buchenwald will be even worse than it already is. Now, on the other hand, I have the Red Cross letters, of which my grandmother on my father's side was still alive and writing to us in April of 1942. We received it in June '42, okay. Now, in the same year, in September, she was transported to Theresienstadt, and died a month later, we just got that confirmed yesterday, okay, here. I just had that -- your -- your -- your -- your colleague downstairs, Steve oh, whatever it is, found it out. And it's taken me a long time, you know. How many -- over half a century to find that out. So how did these things happen, it's -- it's conceivable that the people would have remained where they were for awhile, before all these really horrendous things, in terms of transportation, death camps, came along. In other words was building up, but it didn't happen in -- in one month. I'm not trying to minimize that, okay. So it's possible that my parents could have lived in Halle from somewhat longer. But I think that my father was under sentence, if you follow what I'm getting at.

Q: Yeah.

A: I've often wondered how he got out of Buchenwald. You know, y -- I -- and I -- I -- I've -- I've -- I -- I -- the only rea -- and there's nothing on paper, and he never discussed it, but I've read documentation to say that, you know, World War I veterans were -- were released with an understanding. However, I've also pondered my father being -- having been the outside counsel for I.G. Farben, and knowing so many people in Halle, in -- in -- where his career was. And my mother would tell me that even in -- even in -- in the period between hi -- '33, and perhaps up to

-- up to the -- '38, they would have like -- they call it in -- in German -- in -- in -- in German, it was like a -- the equivalent of Bridge scart and once a week --

Q: The equivalent of what?

A: It's -- it was a card game, like Bridge.

Q: Oh. Oh, oh, oh.

A: And per -- I don't know whether it's weekly or monthly, my mother would have -- the -- it would be arranged that my parents -- a combination -- my father had his business on a fourth floor of an apartment building. Half the fi -- a -- the floor, was the apartment for living and the other half was his private practice. And the -- you know, this would be a table of four and six, and she would have a buffet done. This is after Hitler still is around, can you beat this, you know. And I s -- used to ask -- I asked her [indecipherable] I said -- I said, "And they were all Jewish people?" And is -- no, there might have been a couple of Jews, and the rest were, you know, people from either a judge or somebody else, who were not Jews. And my -- my -- I do recall my father saying to me, that had things got very bad, he had already made arrangements with people he knew, who would take me -- and they were obviously all known Jewish people, and -- but it never came up, okay. Now who they were, what they were, I don't know. And I've often wondered whether some of these people may not have -- you know, they were not, you know, they were pretty senior people in the city of -- I suspect [indecipherable] people who were known in the city, you know, if it was -- if it was legal or otherwise, whether that didn't help him get out, you know. You can't tell, you know. It's -- it's a strange -- I don't know.

Q: These are questions that you'll always have.

A: Yeah. And I don't know the answers --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- to those, and then nobody's alive to this day.

Q: Yeah, yeah. I wanted to ask you about this -- this is sort of a museum kind of centered question, but since you received this notice that this search was going on for survivors, and you've come into contact with all this information and been thinking about it, and maybe in -- in a different kind of way, or through a different kind of lens, and come here to Washington, and you've answered this question partially, but how has this brought you either any kind of new understanding, or specific kind of information about your family that otherwise may not have happened to you?

A: That's it -- you've got -- there's several questions in that one question.

Q: I know, I know.

A: New understanding?

Q: No.

A: I'd have to say no. I can't understand it to this day.

Q: Okay.

A: Okay. What I -- what has happened is, in coming here, and -- and -- and through the generous help of people like yourself and others, I've managed, after all these years, on behalf of my cousin in Australia who is in her 80's now, to get closure on my grandmothers. I have a -- I have a -- a date on which she died. So we now know where she died, and on the day in which, cause you know, it -- it turns out the Germans were meticulous, it seemed, in stating --

Q: Right.

A: -- where the dates are. That was my main reason, I have to be truthful with you. I can't do anything about the St. Louis. I didn't initiate the project, you're initiating the project, or the museum, and I think it's great. And it -- and -- but I have to say to you, there's not much I can --

Q: Gain from it.

A: -- gain, because even though I was on it, from my personal experience it wasn't horrendous. At least I don't think it was. I can't answer for my parents any more, because they're dead. Whether I ca -- and they really made no reference to the St. Louis -- St. Louis, other than it was a voyage. And they couldn't get into Cuba, and they couldn't get into the States. Well, Cuba was really their -- the -- the -- the -- the weigh station, if you want to put it that way. I don't know, you know, beyond that I don't know. I -- I'm glad that I -- I got acquainted with you all, because the -- the people here at the museum are doing their best to answer some other questions. I got my first answer yesterday. I think I posed three questions -- actually four, but three of the more serious ones. My fourth question really was to the museum, what are you planning to do with all this, you know, as far as the St. Louis is concerned, but that's not a -- that's not a -- a -- a family issue, okay, in that context. I had three serious questions. The first one got answered.

Q: About your grandmother.

A: About my grandmother. And was -- my cousin, I al-already guessed, we had no closure date. So this means I don't have to -- to -- to -- to -- to have a -- a what do they call it, a plaque put up somewhere else to do th -- I do now know where she is, okay, and I can, in -- in -- in any little family book, I can put down died so and so, okay. How she died, I don't want to think about. I suspect that there's a -- she was only in her mid-70's, people live to much older ages these days. So why should it have happened, how could it have happened? I don't even ask those questions, cause I won't get any answer, and all I'll do is make myself angry. If you -- if you understand.

Q: Sure.

A: Okay. So I've got closure. What I really would like to do, perhaps on my father's behalf, is find out what happened to his elder brother, and that's going to be a lot harder.

Q: Hugo.

A: Yeah, now he obviously died early in -- and in -- where, and under what circumstances, we don't know. My mother always said that he had sort of fled eastwards. But if he fled too far east, how did he end up getting a cable -- how did he get to find out where we were in London to send us a telegram? And why did he end up coming back the other way, and dying in a -- as a result of quote unquote, the term hospitalization which my grandmother, well, it was typed out for her, and we have to ask what that means. How would she have known about that so early in the war, okay? So where was he, if she'd have known that. I mean, I can't believe that everybody [indecipherable] these unoccupied territories would have been so keen to start sending out. And -- and I think the museum has mentioned that it's really more in Germany that all these things were kept meticulously, you know. Just as well they were now today, because that means we can trace them, and we can complain about them, and -- and -- and quote for some people, perhaps it may give them some claim in their old age where they might need the restitution which they're entitled to. But I don't know, that's really what I'd want to get out of this thing, and I'm not -- and because if y -- I hadn't been made aware of this, and I didn't even see it in the -- I -- you know, the Washington Post isn't read daily by everybody overseas. And it isn't read everywhere daily in the United States, you know.

Q: That's right.

A: We winter down in Houston in -- for three months with our daughter, younger daughter who lives there permanently, and we had the Houston Chronicle delivered to us every day, so you know, I wasn't rushing out to get the Washington Post. And I didn't -- wasn't aware of it, even though apparently it was advertised in other papers, and a friend of ours, who is actually the -- the godfather of our younger daughter in Houston, who lives in -- here in -- and worked as a --

we met each other years ago in -- overseas, and he became -- he and his wife became godparents to my daughter. He was in the foreign service, and we've kept in touch over the -- over the time, and he called me, and said, "Did you know about this?" I said no. He said, "You haven't seen," -- I said, "Well, I don't normally take the wa -- Washington Post." I said, "The easiest one to get, where we are, is actually the New York Times, actually."

Q: New York Times.

A: And I'm not trying to denigrate the Washington Post. But I said, "I didn't see anything like that in the Wall Street Journal," I get that every day on my doorstep at six in the morning at home, and -- with our other papers -- and he said, "I'll send it to you." And that's where it all started. But for me at that juncture, it was important because your colleagues here all offered to be of help if they could, which was very generous and I appreciate that very much. The other thing is, it wasn't until my mother died, in 2001, that I got a chance to go through all these papers, cause up to that time, she was really -- kept them boxed, bagged, and everything else. And it was quite a difficult process, because when you consider when th -- their ages when they both died -- so the Germans didn't win that game -- it was almost a hundred years of documentation. And the very serious things were all in German, and in all German writing. You know, not the Romanized way we see it today, you know [indecipherable] we're talking about. And I've had to really, piece by piece, and it wasn't until last year that I went -- that I took back with me, or went through the li -- in England, the last box of papers and pictures, which somebody very gener -- kindly and generously kept for me, you know. You know, it's -- it's not easy to take things back in bags, and all the rest of this, you know --

Q: No, I can't imagine it, yeah.

A: -- you understand. And so that has, to some degree, sparked off. And then when my cousins asked me on both sides to submit these claims, I then really had to dig into this material. Luckily, I had it now, but it's still very time consuming, because the answers aren't always there. So then when this thing came up, at the end of last year, al -- I thought to myself -- perhaps I'm being a bit selfish here, perhaps this is a way in which I can get some answers, not so much for claims or anything else, but on what happened to my grandmother, which I did. What happened to my Uncle Hugo. Those were the two --

Q: Right. Pressing -- pressing questions for you.

A: -- priority questions actually. I am a little skeptical about what I get [indecipherable] mind, because even downstairs in the museum, the people who deal with that, the ones who found what happened to my grandmother said it's very -- that could prove to be very, very difficult, you know. And why would he have been rounded up immediately, that's you know, do you under -- do you follow?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: You know, the real serious round-ups -- I mean my grandmother wasn't -- wasn't deported to Theresienstadt until 19 -- 1942. The war broke out in '39, if Hitler was putting all the Jews in, why didn't they all go in wa -- in one fell swoop? So I don't know. It's -- it's very confusing. But who s -- who knows what [indecipherable]. I -- I -- I don't know how other than to answer you -- that question, and then put some of these things to rest.

Q: Yeah.

A: I'm -- I'm not a great believer in dwelling indefinitely on these things, mentally and physically, it doesn't do you well. I can't -- I couldn't stop it then, I can't stop -- stop it now. I don't want to leave my daughters with an inheritance of trying to find something. They know

where they came from. They know how they got from A to B, they know who their parents are, they know who their grandparents are, they both met the -- one set of grandparents, okay. They -- they know from pictures and everything else where they came from, and how far they can -- they can trace back their particular roots --

Q: Pretty far.

A: Pretty far.

Q: Yeah.

A: So they really don't need to do chasing. It's not easy, and sometimes it's really quite -- how can I put it? Draining. You know, for the simple reason that reading or looking at these things can make people very angry. And I must admit it causes me some anger. Other people view it differently, so perhaps I'm being a little bit selfish in having the museum do these things for me. If this is a way in which I can, from my point of view, to aid what you're talking about, do this oral history, of which the St. Louis is a part, then it's -- it's my way of saying thank you very much. And I think it's worthwhile, but how much the contribution is to future generations, I'd like to believe that it will be, but I've lived and worked in quite a few parts of the world, and I've had to step in ironically on behalf of others, purely as a westerner in some parts of the world, for people who came -- I sometimes -- I -- I'm perhaps -- I say to myself -- you know, I -- let's hope that these things don't happen again, irrespective of -- to whichever group of people or otherwise -- and that's about as much as I can say to you.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you. I wish you good luck on the rest of your search.

A: Thank you.

Q: And this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with John Meyerstein. Thank you.

End of Tape Four, Side A

Conclusion of Interview