Andrew Cordes and Geoffrey Gue (editors)

The Memories of Elfa Ernst (1935-2019): Surviving Nazi-Controlled Europe and Thriving in California

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Project: From Hitler's Europe to the Golden State [COPH OHP_253].
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Oral Interview with Elfa Ernst, conducted by Joshua Ornelas,
November 26, 2012, [Mission Viejo] California.

Introduction

The oral history interview transcribed below belongs to a collection held in CSUF's Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), titled "From Hitler's Europe to the Golden State" (OHP_253), a project launched in 2011 and directed by Dr. Cora Granata, Professor of History (CSUF). As of 2019, approximately one hundred interviews have been recorded. The interview with Elfa Ernst was conducted by Joshua Ornelas, at the time a CSUF student, on November 26, 2012, in [Mission Viejo] California. The interview lasted 1 hour, 36 minutes, and 15 seconds, and is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH (see "Copyright Advisory" below). The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in 2018 by Andrew Cordes and Geoffrey Gue.

Elfa Ernst was born on April 21, 1935, in Dahme, Germany. In her interview, she shares that her family had to move rather frequently due to her father's work as a customs officer. Her recollections include that she had to listen to Adolf Hitler on the radio, that a Hitler picture was displayed in the family home on certain occasions, and that her father's nose was measured "to make sure that his features were not of Jewish background." She recalls air raids during World War II, her father's return to the family in 1947 after having been a prisoner of war, and de-Nazification. She talks about her education, about becoming a medical technician, and about working for renowned cardiologist Russell Brock in England. She then relates how she met her future husband while working in an American dental clinic in Germany, their courtship and marriage, her immigration to the U.S. in 1961, and the life she eventually made in California.

This oral history is of considerable historical significance. It provides insights into childhood experiences during the Nazi regime, living through World War II, growing up in post-war Europe, moving from one continent to another, and adjusting to many new and different environments. Elfa Ernst's story is a compelling narrative that includes many "moving" moments: the fear she felt as a child when she had to wear a gas mask; her dream of one day moving to America; the drama of crossing the Atlantic during inclement weather; the

excitement of seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time; and the defining of her identity as a German American–perhaps best summarized in her remark to the interviewer, "Josh, Germans are basically adventurous." Elfa Ernst passed away on March 25, 2019.

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Copyright Advisory

Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 5092)

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR:	Elfa Ernst [EE]
INTERVIEWER:	Joshua Ornelas [JO]
DATE:	November 26, 2012
LOCATION:	[Mission Viejo] California
PROJECT:	From Hitler's Europe to the Golden State [COPH OHP_253]
TRANSCRIBERS:	Andrew Cordes and Geoffrey Gue

JO: (clock ticking in the background) Okay, um, my name is Josh Ornelas. I'm here with Elfa Ernst. It is November 26th, 2012. The sky is blue. It's beautiful out in California today. We are in Elfa Ernst's house, and, Elfa, thank you for taking time to interview and, er—or let me interview you. And, uh, so first let me just see where were you born—uh—when were you born?

EE: I was born (pauses) on the 21st of April, nineteen hundred and thirty-five, that was Easter Sunday, in eastern part of Germany at that time (pauses)

in Dahme, that is a smaller town 80 kilometers south of Berlin. The Berliner area is—a called Brandenburg.

JO: Okay, now the town that you were born, how, how would you spell that?

EE: D-A-H-M-E, you have it on my—

JO: Oh it's on the paper. Okay.

EE: —On that paper.

JO: Oh, yeah, I see it right here. Thank you (pauses). (quietly) Okay. And, um, what was your—what was your upbringing like?

EE: My father was in customs, but this in America, when you think of customs you think of border patrol. No, that's not it. Um, in Germany, people who joined become customs inspectors, they work for an office who will inspect imported goods and, uh, set a tariff that they find it, uh, fair, and he was in the finance department of the customs, uh, offices—

JO: (quietly) Okay.

EE: —He lived in that area not very long as per my parents. Um, they moved then to Anaheim[1] (laughs), there is an Anaheim in Germany—

JO: (laughs)

EE: —And this Anaheim is also named,—was also named by Germans.—Um, where I left my parents at, when I was ten months old—

JO: (whispers) Wow.

EE: —to live with my grandparents in Silesia.[2]—(whispers) Do you have to write that? On that thing?

JO: I—Oh, I'm just taking brief notes, yeah.

EE: There was something physically not in order with me as a baby, and the doctor thought I should move to the mountains of *Sch*—, uh, Silesia. Silesia now is Polish. That area was back and forth in history for 700 years because it was a very, uh um, good area in that it had (pauses) fields, agriculture—the possibility of, uh, a—agriculture. The emperor at that time had sent people to that, that part of, uh, Germany to cultivate the ground and, um um, grow, uh, vegetables and grains. That wa—part was called Lower Silesia, even though it was to the north. The Upper Silesia, which is south of Lower Silesia, (laughs) is, w—wa—was the, uh, coal supplier to Germany. So now we have (pauses) because of these, uh um, um, what do you call these now? When a country goes and gets—the, sometimes I have trouble with English words, gets the, uh, minerals and grains from another country. There is a particular word for that. Um, it will come to me. Um, that's why Austria, Poland have fought to have that

[1] Based on Elfa Ernst's statement that this place was named so by the Germans and located in Silesia, she may be referring to (Sankt) Annaberg, today Góra Świętej Anny, Poland.

[2] Silesia, historical region in Central Europe, today mostly in Poland (with relatively small enclaves in Germany and the Czech Republic).

part of Germany. But in the end, Germany won. *Der Kaiser*, the emperor at that time, um, was firm enough to say that this is ours. Stays here (laughs).

JO: Wow.

EE: So then, um, I grew up in a resort, a summer and winter resort. The name is Schreiberhau,[3] and we had snow there from October to May, and it would reach up to the second floor. It was a beautiful place. E—when my mother was young she had to have skis to get, to go to school—

JO: (laughs)

EE: —so they (laughs),—My mother, her sister and brother, had to go to the cellar and get their skis to go out the kitchen window because the front door was totally *sch*—snowed shut.

JO: (Laughs)

EE: In the summer, summertime was short, but beautiful. We were only three, um, residences there. And was fields, forests, deer—who came grazing at 6 o'clock in the evening in the summer.—There were blueberries very close to the house. Yes, there was one poisonous snake, the—a viper, we called *Kreuzotter*. It has nothing to do with an otter—

JO. (laughs)

EE: —like you find here in the water. But it's a viper and very poisonous.

JO: (quietly) Yeah.

EE: I had to learn how to maneuver around such a snake. It would get three feet long. As I grew older and heard more my grandparents' radio, uh, broadcasts, I was aware that Germany had a *Führer*. And, uh, I had to grow into this and just listen what's all going on. When we went to school, when we went, when we saw people whom we knew, we had to raise our right hand and say, "Heil Hitler," and, uh, keep going. That was like you say "Hello" here, we said, "Heil Hitler," but we went about our life as if there were nothing else to worry about. So, on my sixth birthday, I also got a sled and a pair of skis, so that I could go to school. And school was in the next village which was downhill.

JO: (laughs)

EE: So, one of the boys from the neighborhood and I were in the same class as first graders and here we went. Down that one piece, walk a piece, and down again. It could happen that on the way back,—school was from ten to twelve,—it took very long so that my grandmother had to come and get, uh, look where I was, and yes, my little legs would, um, sink into that deep snow up to the hips and of course it took two hours to walk home.

JO: (whispers) Wow.

EE: And she would come and see whether I'm okay. So then our, like I said, our winter was from October to May. (pauses) Nineteen hundred and forty-three (pauses) I joined my parents,—but I, I, I must not do this yet—.

[3] Schreiberhau, today Szklarska Poręba, Poland.

My father was transferred from this un—town of Anaheim to Poland. He worked in Częstochowa[4] and, um, (clock chiming in the background, followed by a knock) my mother, with my three brothers, lived at the Polish border. This side of the, uh, that narrow river was Germany, on the other side was Poland. So, in the summer, my grandmother would, uh, take me to visit my family, and one day, my mother decided we go on the bus to visit my father who was working at that time in Częstochowa, um, and, eh, fo—for customs. It was a *beautiful* area. The offices were beautiful. The accommodations were very good. The whole surrounding was like a park, but in Europe, a park is not like what you see here.

JO: Yeah.

EE: In Europe, a park has beautiful benches and, uh uh, flowers—

JO: (chuckles) Uh hmm.

[00:09:45]

EE: —trees. (cuckoo clock going off once) Alright, so the next thing my father was transferred from Częstochowa to the—to the so called *Sudetenland*,[5] that was Czechoslovakia. In each of these, uh, places, uh, he stayed two years. He, and, um, and he was settled in so-called Troppau,[6] that's the name of the city, a *beautiful* city, I was able to join my parents and that was in 1943.

JO: Yeah

EE: In all that time that I was with my grandparents and heard the radio and the Führer, and people would sit around the radio and listen what is all being said and required (laughs), which in my very early years, well, was, uh, part of life. There was nothing to fear, I didn't do anything wrong.—I should probably go back a little bit and say what my grandfather did for a living. He was a, um, he had a chimney cleaning, uh, business, and he employed, uh, one German and one Polish, uh, apprentice. But you were in apprenticeship for four years, and then you become, became a journeyman. After two years of *that* position you became, you—after you had done your, your, uh, you were tested, and you, when you passed your test, you became a master in that field. (pauses) My grandfather was very, very well known in this, uh, mountainous region and, um, was influential, but when,—so, this, I will leave it at that. That was, that's that.—Now, my father, in Czechoslovakia (pauses) I joined, like I said, I joined the family (pauses) in the summer of, uh, '43, I went to school there to the third grade, and we had *air raids* twice to three times a week. The

[4] Częstochowa, city in southern Poland.

[5] Sudetenland refers to the northern, western, and southern areas of former Czechoslovakia, at the time primarily settled by so-called Sudeten Germans.

[6] Troppau, today Opava, Czech Republic.

siren would go off, that would mean that all of us, uh, students had to run either to the cellar of the school or, if we lived ten minutes from school we were allowed to go home. But you had to run (chuckles).

JO: Yeah.

EE: I lived twenty to twenty-five minutes away and a girlfriend of mine lived ten minutes away. She said, "You come to my house." Okay. Our classroom was upstairs, so that meant also you had to put your school bags along the wall of the classroom, take your books out, put them under the desk. As soon as the siren went off, I took my books, jumped over the next girl's desk, grabbed my bag, and ran out of the schoolhouse. And I was always the first one out.

JO: (chuckles)

EE: Sometimes the airplanes were already above, so that I learned to hide under bushes, depending on where I knew an airplane would be. I didn't move, and then, when I thought it was passed, I kept running until I reached her house. So, (sighs) these things would go off and on about half to one hour, and then the siren would, uh, sound its, um, sound to let people know (pauses) the danger is gone. Well, things like this usually happened close to noon. On Sunday, uh, in Germany, big meal is at noon. Mother had everything ready to—to sit down at the table to eat, and for goodness sakes, we all just sat down when the sirens went off. So, poor Mama, she had to put the food back in the pots. I, as the oldest, was in charge to grab my youngest brother who was five years old. So, at that time, he was three, and I was eight. Brother Frank was two years younger than I, so he was six. He was in charge to go for a little suitcase and never let it out of his sight. In that suitcase were papers to prove that we were not Jewish. My father's face, he said later when I was older, was measured twice to make sure that his features were not of Jewish background.

JO: Wow.

EE: Is that something?

JO: They actually had a tape measure and—

EE: He (laughs), they measured his *nose*.

JO: Wow.

EE: By golly, everywhere in the world you can have possibly a longer nose.

JO: Yeah.

EE: But to these people? A long nose indicated possible Jewish background. (laughs) Can you imagine that?

JO: Wow (chuckles).

EE: Yeah. So, then there was, uh, the brother in between where we had to make sure that he, him, running along. So, my brothers were 3, 4, 6, and I was 8. After, we lived in an apartment house of six units, three units on the left, three units on the right. Everybody had to go in the cellar (pauses). *Ja*. So, we sat there, (clears throat) waiting out this so-called

alarm. Each one of us had a gas mask hanging on the wall. Everyone who lived in a house had a custom-fit gas mask, and I was always hoping that we never will need it. But, you could hear "bumm" these explosions and airplanes dropping bombs. So, one day I ask Mama, "Who are these people who are throwing the bombs?" "They are Americans and English." (pauses) So, then, we were educated in being alert. Always, wherever we were going, we had to know where there were emergency, um, bunkers or cellars to go into. But when nothing, uh uh, was to be feared, it was a beautiful city. The city park was 7 kilometers long, and they had aviaries and flowers and benches. In the spring and summer you saw couples kissing on the benches, (laughs) you know, something to smile about when you were a young girl. We had a Czechoslovakian maid. The fact that my mother had four children, three of whom were *boys*, that was enough for the Hitler regime to reward a woman like that with a Mother Cross.[7] And also, to supply, um, maids to the woman to help in the household.

JO: So, because of the three boys, Hitler—

EE: Was happy.

JO: —was happy—

EE: Yeah.

JO: —and so in order to help raise these boys, he sent maids.

EE: To make sure that Mama is not overburdened with work.

JO: Wow.

EE: (chuckles) *One* plus, right? (laughs)

JO: (Laughs)

EE: Yeah, so then, also, when I (pauses) came to my parents in Czechoslovakia, one day I asked my father, "Papa, how come the Hitler picture is standing behind the couch?" "Oh, I have to do something on the wall up there." I said, "Oh." I didn't see anything on the wall that needed fixing. Okay. Each district of the city had a person to care about the families that lived in that city. He would come now and then and knock, uh, ring the doorbell and ask mother, "Is everything okay? Do you need anything?" But when we knew,—excuse me—, when we knew he was coming, the Hitler picture went up on the wall. (laughs)

JO: I was just going to say. Um, okay.

EE: (laughing) "Oh, we are fine, thank you. Everything is good. Okay, good. Bye bye." (makes a clicking noise as if taking down the picture) (whispers) Get the picture. (both laugh) And the picture came down again!

[00:20:15]

[7] The Cross of Honor of the German Mother ("Ehrenkreuz der Deutschen Mutter"), an award conferred on eligible German mothers by the German government between 1938 and 1945.

JO: So, now you said you had a maid. Now was she, did she ever say anything about that, or?

EE: No. Uh, my mother had German maids, that is a corps.[8] The *Maid*, we call it "Maid," the corps like you've, have here in the army, you have the medical corps.

JO: Yeah.

EE. That was a maids corps and, no, while, of course, while she is there, nothing was said, the Hitler picture was on the wall.

JO: Okay.

EE: Nothing, our parents warned us, you *never* tell anybody anything that you hear. (pauses) Not your best friend or anybody. But we didn't hear anything. Our parents were good. And then we had a Czechoslovakian maid. After that, there was finished and, um, well she could care less. She had a German boyfriend. She said she was engaged to a German soldier. But even there you had to be, um, careful.

JO: Yeah.

EE: She took us for walks, and one time, as we walked downtown, there was an area on the way back that was so (clears throat) blocked off and I said, "Traude,"—that was her name—, "Traude, what is all this about?" And she said, "Shhh". I said, "Why?" "Don't say that so loud. This is where Jewish people live." So, apparently Troppau had a district where Jewish people lived.

JO: It's called Troppau?

EE: Troppau. T-R-O-P-P-A-U. Now, if I tell a young person from Czechoslovakia the name, they of course don't know anymore.

JO: Mhmm.

EE: And I—nobody can tell me now what it's now in Czech.[9] But it was a—an attractive city. So, (sighs) yeah. We were, okay. I left it at that. I didn't ask anymore questions. So, there was just a little road block there, you know, if you had a car, you had, would probably have to ask somebody if they could open it and get out of there. But, it was very quiet. There were no people visible. Then, i—in August 1944, my father was drafted. (pauses for longer) By Christmas, we were alone. My mother didn't hear much anymore. So, my grandfather, because of all these air raids and the Russians coming closer, my grandfather wrote a letter and said to my mother to come away from there. So, I still remember, in Germany, when you traveled in the winter time, you picked up your, your feather beds. You had big bags, you rolled up the feather bed. So that would mean, how many? Five feather bed bags and some suitcases to take (clock chiming) to the train the night before we left the train station.

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[8] The so-called "Arbeitsmaiden," a divison of "Reich Labor Service" during the Nazi regime.

[9] Opava, Czech Republic.

JO: Yeah.

EE: You put down where you want to go. We went to Schreiberhau, to Silesia. From Czechoslovakia to my grandparents in Silesia. So, the next day, we went on the train. However, when Mama was at the train station, the sirens went off. Which happened once in a while, that in the evening, when it was dark, the sirens would go off. But, it wasn't Americans or British, it was Russians. Russians did not come to bomb, they came to throw these flares to light up the city, just to see what's going on down there. So, apparently, there was nothing of value to them. The, that alarm did not sound very, did not last very long. But, I didn't hear any commotion, so I ran from door to door, ringing the bell, "Did you hear? Did you hear the siren?" "No." "Did you hear the siren?" "No." Ugh. So, by the time I reached the last one, the whole thing, the siren sounded again and the whole thing was over (chuckles). And, you had to, before you go to bed, you had to take your clothes off the way you would put them on in a hurry.

JO: Hmmm.

EE: So, you put out your shoes, then the socks on the shoes, then came your skirt, or the boys the pants, on the chair next to your bed. Then the underwear on top. Then came the shirt, and at the winter time, on top the sweater. So, when the siren goes off, you, I have learned to be dressed within two minutes.

JO: Yeah.

EE: Because you never know (laughs).

JO: Yeah. So, you had to do that every night before you went to bed?

EE: Yeah. And I learned to run those stairs in school. That was a long staircase. Like these are 24 steps.

JO: Mhmm.

EE: Yeah, da da da da, it was a wide staircase. Yeah, but my little legs carried me out there, I was always the first one.

JO: So, you went to train station and you left?

EE: And then, yeah, we left.

JO: And, then—

EE: It (inaudible 00:26:47).

JO: —That's the resort that you had grown up at, right?

EE: That's where we went to.

JO: That's where you went—

EE: We went to that, we went to that resort.

JO: Is that where you grew up—

EE: Yes.

JO: —Like for the first couple years?

EE: Yeah.

JO: And how did you spell that one? Suh—

EE: Schreiberhau.
JO: Okay.
EE: S-C-H-R-E-I-B-E-R-H-A-U. Schreiberhau (laughs).
JO: Schreiberhau.
EE: (laughs) There is an upper, a middle, and a lower, lower Schreiberhau. The upper was more the resort.
JO: Okay.
EE: Summer or winter, the middle, in the middle, you had fields. It was because it was, uh, mountainous. You had farmers coming up from lower Schreiberhau to tend to their fields. Sometimes they would take the horses off and just tie them to the back of the, uh uh, cart, uh, wagon. And sometimes not much, so that (laughs)—the horses would take off with the wagon, and they knew where they were living. They had to go all the way down the hill.
JO: (chuckles)
EE: My gosh, you were wondering would they ever have the, now that I think of it, the wagon come into the hind legs. No. When he went after them and finally got home, they were there—. (laughs and chuckles).
JO: Oh, wow. So, your father was drafted in August of 1944.
EE: '44, yeah.
JO: And then you moved with your grandparents.
EE: We, uh, went to our grandparents.
JO: In Schreiberhau—
EE: By that time, my mother didn't hear anymore from my father.
JO: Really?
EE: We didn't know where he went. He could have gone east, to the eastern front, or he could have been sent to the west. However, we, when we arrived, my great-grandmother was there with her youngest daughter. My great-grandmother had ten children. After ten children, my grandmother was the oldest and Aunt Elsie was the youngest. Aunt Elsie was there with her daughter, so that's three. There was my mother's sister, with her two daughters, whose husband also was somewhere in the war. Then came my mother and us four children. So, we were 11 *ch*—people piled into my grandparents' place. We weren't there very long. Not quite a month, over the news came: Everyone from the east has to continue on. That was us. My grandparents said, "We stay home and hold the fort." Because my grandfather was influentially, he got in touch with the director of the railroad, and he got a whole car for us.
JO: Wow.
EE: That was hung onto one of the trains that started to move. Out of and away from advancing Russians.—(whispers) Can I get you some water?
JO: No, no, I'm fine.

EE: —To go west took us days. This train zigzagged here and zigzagged there and came to a place called Pilsen.[10] You know Pilsner beer?

JO: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:30:22]

EE: Exactly. There in the train station, the Red Cross had set up bunk beds for refugees. (pauses) When we got off the train to stay overnight, because apparently that train could not go any further where we wanted to go. We wanted to go west, who knows where *they* went? There were also, outside the train stations, German soldiers. My mother—that I heard later—, my mother went to ask, could we go with them as they are going west and the soldiers said, "No lady. We take no families." So the next train, next day (pauses), we were able to hook onto another train that was going west.—By the way, that train station, in a big basket, had the biggest apples I've ever seen in my life—

JO: (laughs)

EE: (Laughs) What I liked! (laughs)

JO: No, that's, wow.

EE: (still laughing). So, here were go. That train went *back* to Czechoslovakia, so as we approached (whispers)—I have to get a little water.—

JO: Yeah, yeah.

EE: (gets up and goes to get water; keeps talking while she does this) As we approached, um, Prague, there was apparently another air raid. Outside of Prague was a very long tunnel. There was already a long train, a refugee train in there, and we pulled next to it to wait out the, uh, air raid. So, then when that was over, chug a lug on to the city where we were going to stay. (pauses) Trautenau,[11] that's the name of it. My, Aunt Elsie's husband, was in the German army, and he was there. He found us accommodations, also provided by the Red Cross, where there were a *huge* room with 11 beds. So now, we stayed there for two weeks. What do you do in two weeks? You have a little leisure time. You did not have any air raids or sirens, but, what do you do for food? We had to go into town where the Germans soldiers had set up, um, Germans, uh uh, uh, m—military style kitchen. Soup, um, uh, kettles. Large soup kettles. So you got a bowl, you stood in line for your portion of soup, and then you got a piece of bread and that was it. So, (laughs) *you lived on a bowl of soup*—

JO: And bread.

EE: —And a piece of *dry bread*. (Laughs), I can see that was reducing people's weight (laughs).

JO: Yeah.

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[10] Pilsen, today Plzeň, located in the western part of the Czech Republic.

[11] Trautenau, today Trutnov, located in the northern part of the Czech Republic.

EE: Let me get something—
JO: Absolutely.
EE: (gets up and gets more water)—to moisten my throat. You sure you don't want anything?
JO: Yes, I am very good. Thank you.
EE: Yeah. (she is somewhere in the house getting water) So then, Uncle Herbert was able to get a car for us again. And that car was hung onto the train that went west. (comes back and sits down) On every, wherever the train stopped (pauses), the platforms of the train stations were chock full of fleeing people. The trains were full to the max. But that compartment that we had was already full of us.
JO: Yeah.
EE: So that was, that was impressive to me as a nine-year-old, uh, eight-year-old girl.
JO: So, when did the decision come to come to America?
EE: Oh, much later.—Okay, so now we have arrived west. Because great-grandma had a son in West Germany who had a dairy, which is not what you understand under dar—dairy. It is more of a milk processing plant, where farmers brought the milk. That was,—we arrived in March—. So, we were there in April (pauses) and *D-Day*. We lived, here it came, in that little town of three thousand five hundred inhabitants were German soldiers stationed. And we noticed that they start running. Well, on D-Day, so called D-Day, a flak was positioned at the corner of the house, so that we went in, into the cellar of this house where we were able to stay. A very good cellar, too. And, in Germany, it is custom to buy a good hundred pounds of potatoes to last through the winter. Now, one lady lived there, and she said, "Please don't tell anybody under all these potatoes I have hidden my son, a German soldier."
JO: Wow.
EE: So, here we're sitting, and it goes *back and forth*, oncoming,—I have, right now I have goosebumps—Oncoming enemy, who we didn't know who it was, the flak shooting. Things are hitting the house. We could tell. And you sat with your—with your, uh, fingers closing your ears and your mouth open so you don't have your eardrums burst. So that took a few hours and all of a sudden it was quiet. Somebody came down the stairs, and it was a man in uniform, and we were all tense and he had a gun of course and he told us to come out. I asked my mother, "Mama, is this a Russian?" She said, "I've never seen this uniform before. I don't know." But as we came out of that house, we could see tanks, um, personnel carriers, jeeps, full hang—soldiers hanging on them like ants, and people *cheering*. Well, what kind of soldiers are these? Americans. I could see down the street, because it was a small hou—town, the whole main street was on fire. Everything burned. Ah, okay. That was, that was a relief.

JO: Yeah.

EE: The end of that, then on—then we went upstairs to that apartment that was assigned to us, all the windows were shot out. The walls had, um, shrapnel, um, holes. The beds were full of small glass pieces and *dust*. So, and you could hear all day long, all night long, this back and forth of, uh um, artillery shooting. (clock chiming) The advancing Americans and the retreating Germans. Firing at each other and, uh, the last attempt to, to save everything. So, yeah, the—the older, the—the adults cleaned up the beds, whatever we could, and so we had at least a place to sleep in. Yeah. (clock stops chiming)

[00:39:09]

JO: So, that, was that like basically the tipping point of your family saying well I guess we, we should move to America, or?

EE: No.

JO: No.

EE: No. Then we lived there. Uh, Siemens Company[12] was there, they had built two dup—two duplexes. Two rooms each and a bathroom facility in between and one single. When everything settled down after several months, school started. We were able to go to school. I missed, uh, fourth grade, (coughs) but, uh, most of it, I only had two weeks of fourth grade. And we were seventy-two kids (cuckoo clock going off, and another musical sound).

JO: Wow.

EE: (pauses) Teachers had becoming very upset if they nowadays when they have thirty students. But it worked. We were disciplined. That little town had taken on hundreds of, uh, refugees. The thing in Germany is you have a different dialect almost every twenty kilometers. We couldn't understand them.

JO: (chuckles).

EE: They didn't understand us. We—we spoke high Ger—German. They spoke with a dialect of, a Franconian dialect, it was unreal, to every word they added a syllable which didn't even belong there. But it took a year for us to acclimate, to understand each other. The mothers, Aunt Marian and my mom, uh, became friendly with a small farmer. They went to work on the fields. We went to help on the fields after school, so that we could have something to eat.

JO: Hmm.

EE: At the corner of that little street where Siemens had built these little homes, was a tent with an American soldier in it, guarding, apparently

[12] Siemens (founded 1847), a German company. During the Nazi regime, Siemens benefited from forced labor, including labor in concentration camps.

guarding, the refugees (laughs). The Siemens Company across was taken by an, an American army, uh, I don't know, I don't know how many *peo*— Americans were in there. In front of the, uh, company was a meadow; they had set up a field kitchen there. So that when we came back from school, and, um, mother taught us a few English words, because the parents were educated, and we would stand there and watch. And one day an American comes and offers me something, and points in sign language: you put that in your mouth and you chew it. Hmmm. Like I do, njah njah njah (imitates chewing), yeah, oh, okay. Well, I didn't do that in front him, I did it on the way home. I showed it to my mother. (clears throat) Put it in my mouth. My mother sent me to the post office, I chewed around on that darn thing and it wouldn't go down, and it wouldn't go down.

JO: Was it gum?

EE: (gasps) I finally managed in the post office to swallow that darn thing and I thought I'd choke to death (laughs).

JO: Yeah. Oh my.

EE: (Laughs.) Then, uh, one day he was out there again. "You eat?" I then, um um um, yeah, I made the motion that I am choking to death. He said, "No, no, no, you chew and you spit out." "Oh, thank you." (Laughs)

JO: (Laughs) Did he ever tell you his name or anything like that?

EE: No, no. He must have been a father of a family in the United States. But, it was fun to watch. That was a totally different people, you know? Yeah. So then, 1947, my Aunt is standing at the butcher's. In comes a man with a Po, PW[13] coat, a long black coat and a little, a little suitcase and a chess board and he is asking for the Schönwitz family. My maiden name is Schönwitz. My aunt turns around and sees my *father* (sounds emotional).

JO: Oh, my gosh.

EE: I have goose bumps again. She screams, "Wilhelm," that's a German word—name for William.

JO: Yeah, yeah.

EE: She started, "I, I, I have to run. If you can walk as fast I can, I show you where we live." So then, it was at least twenty minutes away from where were lived, so here she comes. "Lisbeth," my mom's name, "Lisbeth!" We thought, oh my gosh what happened to her. "Your husband is here." (coughs) My mom's heart practically sank (laughs).

JO: That's crazy. Wow.

EE: So here came Papa in 1947 from—He was taken to France to fight. (pauses) And his battalion's in the nor—, in Metz.[14] Metz, M-E-T-Z.—One day we drove through there on the train, my husband and I, when we

[13] Prisoner-of-war.

[14] Metz, city in the Lorraine region of northeastern France.

went to France. I thought, oh my gosh, this is where my father was sent to fight—They were staying out in the country and they were under constant bombardment. So, he and a few s—men went into this empty farmhouse for cover, but something hit nearby and knocked him out. When he came to, there were already American soldiers taking, these men prisoners.

JO: Um hm.

EE: They were sent to Cherbourg,[15] in Cherbourg in northern France.—Cherbourg, how do you spell, C-H-E-R-B-O-U, now I'm not fini—clear about the ending, Cherbourg. Is it an R, and a G-H, I don't know at this point.

JO: I'll put both, uh, just in case. But, I got the gist. Yeah.

EE: Yeah. You, if you have a detailed map, map, you can see it.

JO: It's in Northern France.

EE: Northern France. (pauses) It was a camp of twenty thousand prisoners.

JO: Wow.

EE: The fact that my father temporarily lost his hearing, um, an American medic took him to the field hospital and then whatever they had there, they start, they worked on his hearing. And the restart pretty much what they could, since he was, he—he—he sp—knew English, French, German of course, and some Spanish. So they employed him as a a, um—

JO: Translator.

EE: —Translator.

JO: Yeah.

EE: So these men did not know how long they would be prisoners of war. What he did, he arran—he organized a group in his little bivouac. (laughs). Let's make chess games. We whittle our figures, we cut the boards, we paint the boards. And that's the board he brought back and to this day, am I mad at myself that I didn't save it. My mom didn't save it. That was a *handmade* chess board. And they had chess tournaments. He was chess master when he went to high school.

JO: (laughs). Wow.

EE: So, yeah, that's how they whiled away their time, between, uh uh, helping in the hospital, and translating, and having their little competitions, so they made it bearable. And speaking of what bearable, like I said, if you didn't speak or say anything during Hitler time, you could live your life. (pauses) So, Papa, here he is now.

JO: So, was he the decision, was he the, was he the person that decided to come to America?

EE: While he was there, somebody offered him to go to United States, but Papa said, "I have a family. I need to see my family first. I've been away now for, uh, two, three years." '44.

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[15] Cherbourg, port city in Normandy on the northern coast of France.

JO: ’44, yeah.

EE: So, yeah. It took a year for all the Germans who have been in a German, uh, party, possibly Nazi party, to be de-Nazified. Since my f—

JO: That’s alright, go.

EE: —My father did not belong to a big party, so it took a very short time. Now, after the de-Nazification, you could look for a job, and he decided he’ll go back into what he was doing if it’s available, customs. However, was not available easily, he joined the border patrol. The Czech, between the Czech and the German border. So, Papa was away again. (laughs) In all our upbringing, we didn’t see Papa very much.

JO: Oh, no.

EE: He was always in a different city or, goodness sakes.

[00:50:10]

EE: *Ja*, he was there and then as Germany slowly rose from the ashes (pauses), things started to work, build up again and some took years. Some things took ten to fifteen years to come to, uh, to normalcy. But, he was able to now, again in another city (laughs), go into, uh, customs. And that’s where we moved after five years in that little house, we moved to that city by the name of Weiden,[16] W-E-I-D-E-N. They had a base there with American soldiers, too. Yeah, but from then on things normalized. We didn’t have any furniture. No. (laughs) Oh, but he was able to buy a few beds.

JO: Oh.

EE: Living room. Did we have a living room? No. We all sat in the kitchen. We had a couch in the kitchen. (bag being moved, then stops) And there I was able,—I was Protestant Lutheran, and we went, my father thought my mother went to Catholic school when she was young. They have nuns. They have an excellent Catholic school. Go to that school.

JO: So, your mom, was she pretty religious?

EE: No.

JO: No.

EE: No. But, it’s known here, as well as in Lebanon,[17] Catholic schools provide a very good upbringing. (interviewer agrees) One of this, the school that my mother went to and similar to what I went to, three years, you learned everything you can possibly learn. You have science, you have English, in the second year you have French. You can choose Spanish, history, as—a—astronomy, that was my favorite.—They would let me draw on the

[16] Weiden (“Weiden in der Oberpfalz”), located 62 miles east of Nuremberg, Germany.

[17] Lebanon, at the time and to this day, has a sizable Catholic population and a number of educational institutions run by the Catholic Church and its Orders, including the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth (founded 1875), the Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik (founded 1938), and more recently the Notre Dame University–Louaize (founded 1987).

blackboard what we are going to talk about the next astronomy, um uh, class—No, you learned sewing, she learned cooking in the third year, and baby care. You are a totally well-educated female when you are finished with these schools. You have book-keeping, typing, uh, shorthand. Your, you have a very good education when you are finished with these schools.

JO: Wow. And that's what you mom went through?

EE: My mom did that, yes, and then that was a possibility in that city for me. And the brothers went to a finished elementary school. What it is, we have different high schools. You cannot think of American-type high school. We have what we call *Oberrealschule*,[18] that is an eight-year school. You go into that school if you have good grades from the fourth grade. Again, what I told you I could learn in three years. You learn, oh and you have sports, and in my case one hour a week comes the minister or the priest to the Catholic, Catholic children and you have a little hour of religion. And then, um, that's Oberrealschule. When you graduate from there, you are ready for university.

JO: Hm.

EE: We don't have, uh, two-year colleges that some of them go to here. (clock chiming) Uh, then, of course you can go to university here too. Then we have something called *Gymnasium*. It's spelled like gymnasium, but it isn't a gymnasium where you go for sports. This is now a school where you learn the classic languages of Greek, Latin, yes you have to have English. That was world language. If you wanted to become a doctor, or pharmacist, or a priest, you went to the Gymnasium. Again, eight years.

JO: Wow. So when did you come to America officially?

EE: *Ja*. (pauses) 1961.

JO: 1961. Okay.

EE: I went to, uh, after I was finally finished my school, uh, oh I was 17 years old we moved again from Weiden to Erlangen[19] which is a university city. So now what? I couldn't finish that Catholic school. What now? Oh the universities is having a course where you can become a medical technician. "Okay, Papa, can I do that?" (coughs) They took me. They accepted me. At 17, I learned to do EKGs. I was sent to the EKG station first. And, because I came several months to early, the the the—the course was to start in fall and I came in spring already. So, here I learned, I was sent to the X-ray department, to EEG, Electroencephalogram.

JO: Uh hum.

EE: But I did EKGs. I knew how to read a—a one of these, um, films, that these are long films, the cassette is big, you have to develop in a, in a uh dark room. Fine. But I couldn't do it. I became, I had severe eczemas

[18] *Oberrealschule*, a German type of secondary school.

[19] Erlangen, located northwest of Nuremberg, Germany.

developing from the developer, uh, chemicals. Back to school. Business school in Nürnberg[20] for a year. Jumped right into the second year that was a two-year course. So, when I was finished there, I wanted to be back at the university, but then my father wanted me to work for Siemens. That was, "Okay Papa, I'll give up the university, I'll go to Siemens," and here came the situation where if you go to England for a year, that is a good, uh, recommendation on your resume.

JO: Uh hum.

EE: We had a gentleman working in our big, uh, personnel department, Mr. Alden, from England, I said, "I—would you help me go to England, and I need a refresher course a little bit I'm starting to forget some things in English." "Sure." Every Saturday I went to his house and he helped me. I went to England for a, supposed to be a year, but I started to like it. I worked for Sir Russell Brock,[21] a well-known cardiologist in Wimbledon. Right above the tennis courts.

JO: Yeah.

EE: That big estate. Okay. In order to stay here, I have to do something. I went to the hospital, a big hospital in London and signed up for a nurse's course. So here is already the opportunity to, uh, better my English, but they told me I have to go back home and get a different permit. So, I left everything there, went home and Mama says, "Oh you have to go again?" I say, "Mama, if I can find a job locally, where I can use my English and medical background (pauses), that's all I want." Go to the employment agency. Said, "Yes, we have something out in an American dental clinic. They are looking for somebody to teach to become a dental assistant." Good. I went. I got the job. Dental assisting. After a year, we had two German doctors and one German, uh, dental student. That dental student was finished, he said, "Would you like to take over my job as an hygienist?" I said, "You teach me." "Yes, I will." (pauses) I did. One of the first patients is sitting down there in the den (referring to her husband).

JO: (chuckles) I know, that's crazy. And that's how you met your—

EE: My husband.

JO: —Your husband.

[00:59:58]

EE: And you know, so in, uh, when we were teenagers, my oldest brother and I would sit together and say you know what?—Oh, when I was nine years old and we lived in that little, in that little house and we had this American guard at the corner, all, he sometimes would give us things, chocolate and stuff like this, but we would also ask what is this in English

[20] Nürnberg is the German spelling of Nuremberg.

[21] (Sir) Russell Claude Brock, Baron Brock (1903-1980), British surgeon.

and that in English. I said, when I was nine years old, "Someday I'm going to America. No, I'm going to marry an American." Mother said, "Wha' that's a long time up. How can you say that now?"—That's how fate had it.

JO: Why did you want to marry an American?

EE: I don't know. I've said things or I have dreamed things that came true. What kind of a, what kind of a, uh, (laughs) feeling is going on out there. But, you know, my brother Frank and I, we would sit.—He went to technical university. He became an engineer. Not only that, in Germany you have the opportunity to become an apprentice in anything you want to do. My youngest brother and Frank went to Siemens Reiniger.[22] The x-rays, the x-ray machines that you see here. The MRI machines you see here. Look, it says Siemens.

JO: Uh huh. Is that the S-I-

EE: E-M-E-N-S.

JO: Yeah.

EE: My youngest brother was an apprentice at Siemens for four years. My oldest brother went to the Gossen Company,[23] which was taken over by Siemens. He went to, uh, sorry—

JO: That's okay.

EE: —He went to, uh, the technical college in Nuremberg. When he was finished, in between, we would sit sometimes, boy, wouldn't we like to go to America one day. (pauses) Okay. Yeah. He applied at Honeywell[24] in Frankfurt. Aeronautics division.

JO: Yeah.

EE: He didn't hear for a while, so he got himself on the train went there in person. Knocked on the door. "Can I please speak with your boss? I had sent you a resume. I would like to know where I am standing." The man liked Frank. Said, "Good, come."

JO: (chuckles) Wow.

EE: With his knowledge, he, um, he was accepted, he worked for Honeywell for three years in Hanau near Frankfurt. And then they sent him to Chicago. And he has been here ever since. Now he is in Michigan.

JO: So, he went to Chicago. What year did he go to Chicago?

EE: (exhales) I've been here, I came here in '61. I think he came in '63 or '64.

JO: (whispers) '63. What, what, like, made you come to America instead of staying or going somewhere else?

EE: Josh, Germans are basically adventurous.

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[22] Siemens-Reiniger (founded 1932), a company specializing in medical technology.

[23] Gossen (founded 1919), a company specializing in electronic measuring and testing devices.

[24] Honeywell (founded 1906), a U.S. American company.

JO: Uh huh.

EE: You will see that a lot. That we were told when I worked for Siemens. I said, oh, someday I'd like to go to America. Just. And he said stay in the country and nourish yourself of your bread.[25] Eat your bread, your homeland bread. A girl can just go and see what's it's like, you know. You can always come back. The neighbor girls of ours, they married Americans, however, they came back because unfortunately, these husbands started to womanize over here. But, I married my husband, he was a lieutenant, a second lieutenant at that time, and sometimes I've wondered his family is all from Germany. No matter which side, fathers or mothers, it's all German names. The great-grandfather, uh um, immigrated to the United Stated in the '30s and, uh, to Chicago, and there is a street called, named after them, after the Ernst and, um, I have the feeling that maybe well if I'm here and I find somebody, yeah I'll take her home.

JO: So, what, was his family okay with him marrying a German, a full-blooded German woman.

EE: (laughs)

JO: And what about your parents, were they okay with you—

EE: Yes.

JO: —marrying an American.

EE: They knew already that Frank and I had aspirations of seeing the United States whether we go there and to live or whether we go there as tourists. My father was okay with that and for one thing, (laughs) in Germany at my time, Josh, you didn't go out with an American soldier in uniform. If you came from a good family, it didn't look good. That made people who know you, first of all my father was in leading, in a, uh, a leading position in the customs house. He was the head of the customs house. Erlangen head of customs house, and we lived upstairs in the living quarters and the office was down the hall. You could not bring shame over your father's house. (pauses) You had to know what you were doing. So, when my husband asked me the day I cleaned his teeth, "What are you doing tonight?" I said, "I usually go home and we have our supper and we are going to bed at 9 o'clock." "Well, would you have dinner with me?" I said, "Well, but I need to let my parents know, and I would like for you to come and pick me up. This isn't where I meet somebody, you know, secretly. No, no. But when you come, do you have civilian clothes? Please wear that."

JO: And he did?

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[25] A literal translation into English of the German "Bleibe im Lande und nähre Dich redlich," Martin Luther's adaptation of a biblical/Old Testament saying (Psalm 37:3; King James Version): "Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed."

EE: He did. When he came to the door, he looked like the director of Siemens. He was so well dressed.
JO: Wow. Was it love at first sight for you guys?
EE: His friend, his roommate said it was on his part.
JO: It was on his part really? Wow.
EE: I was careful. (laughs) Because I had heard too much, you know, you just. Yeah, and then after a month, he, we went to Nuremberg for dinner. We went to dinner that day also to the Grand Hotel.[26] Boy, you could have, you see the money at that time was 4 to 1. You had four German marks for one dollar. So, the dinner, a very nice dinner at the Grand Hotel, was ten dollars. American dollars, that was, would have been 40 to 42 marks.
JO: Yeah.
EE: So, then anyway, um, when he told me after a while he will have to go on maneuvers (pauses) over Christmas and, um, okay. And the next time we went to Nuremberg, he went drove up to the castle, it has a beautiful castle. And that's where he asked me. Would I want to marry him.
JO: How long were you guys had been dating?
EE: A month.
JO. Wow.
EE: (laughs)
JO: (chuckles).
EE: I said, "While you are on maneuvers, can I think it over please? He said, "Oh, sure. But I would like for you, if you do say yes, I would like for you to have a ring." Uh, well alrighty. Manipulating, but okay. So he came back from the maneuver (clock chiming), and uh, we had our date went to the mov—went to the dinner, went to the movies in Fürth, that's near Nuremberg, that's all on base. These are American bases, okay? "What did you think? (pauses) Okay, I'll marry you." He's a, makes a good impression as a man, doesn't he?
JO: He does. He's a quite the, quite a gentlemen. That's—
EE: (laughs)
JO: So, you guys get, are en—engaged and—
EE: Got married six months later.
JO: Okay, in Germany, or?
EE: In Germany.
JO. Okay.
EE: Yeah. On post, we had a chapel and that was on American, I mean the officers were invited, *ja*, and my family.
JO: And then, so you guys are married and then that, when you come to America, you, you are married?
EE: Two years, yes. (cuckoo clock going off) Two years later.

[26] Grand Hotel, Nuremberg (opened 1906).

JO: Two years.
EE: He extended he, he had the opportunity to extend two more years.
JO: And he did?
EE: Yes, because he liked Germany, too (laughs).

[01:10:02]

JO: What were your perceptions of America, uh, I mean—
EE: It was just the land of promises. Like so many nations think—look for America, and I told somebody, don't think that Ameri—, in America gold hangs on the trees. You have to work there just like you have to work in your country. And I know one German when we still had the 4-to-1 currency, he said, "Oh I could be so rich over there." I said, "Watch, think what you spend 100 m—marks here, is, uh, equal to $100 dollars there. You cannot think, oh, if I have hundred dollars, I have 400 marks, that's only here. When you go to America, hundred dollars are equivalent to 100 marks.
JO: Yeah.
EE: You cannot do very much so get out of your fantasyland and, uh, realize that, that you have to work. And I have to say honestly, Josh, people really have to work harder here than in Germany. We have more holidays.
JO: Do you think that's just, I mean, California is a, is a state where, especially Southern California, where it's very expensive to live. Do you think that's just here, or do you think that's everywhere?
EE: I like to think that, um, United States, when we came here, uh, Josh, we didn't come to California. We went, ma—um Jerry's[27] parents, uh, lived in Tucson, Arizona. They had moved from Chicago to Tucson. Now, here comes. Time came to come to America. He sent a VW, he had a Buick Roadmaster Buick, wow, that thing is a monster on those narrow streets in Germany. He sold it to the sergeant, bought himself a VW Bug. So, I learned how to drive.
JO: Sick.
EE: In, um, on Soldiers Field[28] in Nuremberg. Well, tuh, ta ta ta, oh, no, I said, "You know what, give it up, I'm going to driving school." I don't know, I got into this car and knew how to drive it, I don't know how. I had two such driving lessons, I knew how to back up and how to, how to stop at little idiodic hills, that's what we call a little hill, idiot hill, it was a traffic light, make sure you don't roll back.
JO: Yeah.

[27] Elfa Ernst's husband, Col. Jerome (Jerry) E. Ernst (1933-2018).

[28] "Soldiers Field," Nuremberg, also known as the "Zeppelin Field," used as party rally grounds during the Nazi regime.

EE: In Erlangen. So then, okay, he took my brother with him (interviewer turning over new page in notes) to drive the VW to Bremerhaven[29] to put on the boat. And then he came back on the train. And in a few days, everything was packed up. The Army came to pack up everything and then, yeah, came a, uh uh uh, sergeant drove us to Nürnberg. Uh huh. Then we took the train to Bremer—Bremerhaven. In Bremerhaven, we had two days in the harbor. We were able to,—oh no, I'm sorry. (pauses) Bremerhaven, the boat went to Southampton—Southampton, that's, we had two days, let's go to London. Let's hop on the train it's not far, I show you around downtown, uh um, London, cause I knew it. I had been there for fourteen months. I had already Cathy,[30] Cathy was eleven months old. Okay. Back on the boat, and here we go. Josh, it was okay, the first two days and then came fog.

JO: Ooof.

EE: Thick fog. And I had to think of the Titanic. Because further up, four days into it, I heard of iceberg sightings, and I prayed, "Dear Lord, please let not this be similar." Then we come closer to United States, and because of that direction underneath Newfoundland, there was a storm. Now I know what happens that the storms back east can be pretty wild.

JO: Yeah.

EE: That boat went *up, and down*, and 35 feet up till you saw the crest of the waves, then it was up again *day and night* and so many people got so seasick and I held the baby crib. My husband got seasick (laughs) after.

JO: Wow.

EE: After dinner, just in front of the door. And all of sudden it was nice and quiet after ten days. Aww.

JO: So—

EE: I look out the peep, the, the, the porthole, and, Josh, here was the Statue of Liberty.

JO: And what'd you think?

EE: I felt like a pilgrim. (pauses)

JO: Wha, like, emotionally, did you start crying, or—

EE: Overwhelmed. I just thought about my life, that God steered it to the point where I do come to the States even though I didn't really work on it. But had, uh uh, an inkling here and there. Then, we pick up the VW, went driving to the, to New York for my husband's release from the Army, and while he was in this office and I'm sitting out there in the hallway, (pauses, laughs) comes a, a lady set with a little fellow up, and comes this couple. They knew each other. "Oh, where are you going?" And they said, "To California." Josh, I thought right then and there, that's where I would

[29] Bremerhaven, a German North Sea port city.

[30] Elfa Ernst's daughter Catherine (Cathy).

like to be. I've never been here before, but something like, uh, this little voice—

JO: Uh huh.

EE: —That's where I'd like to be. But no, we drove up to Chicago for my husband to visit relatives. And then we were there three days, and we went Route 66 to Tucson. (laughs) Here comes the pilgrim again. (laughs)

JO: See, now you said a couple, a couple of minutes ago that you think God made, like, steered you to America. Is that what you, wha, you know, kind of what you said?

EE: My husband has told somebody not too long ago what she wishes she gets.

JO: (laughs) Happy wife, happy life.

EE: I don't know.

JO: That's what I heard when I got married.

EE: Yeah.

JO: (laughs)

EE: I don't ask for anything. I'm perfectly fine as long as I have a roof over my head and something to eat. Not just myself, the family.

JO: Yeah.

EE: I wish this for everybody. (pauses)—So, you know.—So, we are in Tucson. We have to move in with the gran—, uh, parents-in-law. Jerry is trying to find a job. He had a real estate office before he left. He was away for four years. Well, real estate was in the bucket.

JO: Um huh.

EE: It was poor. What now? Oh, there was Montgomery Ward,[31] where they were looking for somebody in the office. Assistant credit manager. He got that position, three hundred and fifty dollars a month salary. Make that today, you starve.

JO: Yeah.

EE: In the meantime, also, then, we arrived there in end of May, that's the time when Ariz—Tucson gets nice and cooking hot. (laughs) It becomes an oven.

JO: It does.

EE: Even my husband was not happy anymore. Oh, ok. So, we took a trip after our little son was born, um, he was, uh, what, ten months old. We went to Muir Woods in California and I thought, ahh, California here we come! And he had written resumes, oh no, one thing, (a plane is heard overhead) that I cannot live with this, I cannot have this income. I said, "Tell me something, can you buy California newspapers in Tucson?" He said, "I think so. I go, look." (laughs). He brought home a newspaper and we looked in the job market.

[31] Montgomery Ward, American retail company (1872-2001).

JO: (whispers) So I thought.

[01:20:05]

EE: (laughs) I say, ah ah, what kind of typewrite you have, oh this little clunker. And, oh gosh, you had to really push hard,

JO: Yeah.

EE: But I typed his resumes. One for California Federal Savings and Loan in Los Angeles, and another similar, uh, inst—money institution in San Jose. Okay. Pack up the babies, here we come (a car drives by). In the meantime, he had sold his, um, VW and bought a big Buick, because we needed a bigger car for family (laughs).

JO: Yeah.

EE: It was a used car, but it was a tank I tell you! We got hit, it wouldn't dent! (laughs) *Ja*, here we came. We went to San Jose first, then saw San Francisco. There he applied in person. Then we came down here to Los Angeles, where his friend was living and, um, we could stay with him. And he went California Federal. Okay. We came back to Tucson. There was already a letter: "Mr. Ernst, we would like for you to come and work for us. California Feder—Federal Savings and Loan." And just one month before we moved out of the in-law house into an apartment, and now I had to pack all this together again.

JO: (laughs)

EE: I went to Mayflower,[32] "Can I have boxes plea—plea—please?" (laughs) So, I packed it up again for two days and late into the night. Good. I don't mind going to California.

JO: How, um, in what ways do you think Southern California has influenced European migrants like yourself?

EE: It's just a very pleasant place to live. And anyone that I, when I went to visit, and especially it took 11 years before I could go home. We didn't really have the money. My husband took up a loan and so that we could go. We flew milit—on a military plane and then when we arrived in Frankfurt, we had to go on the train to *Nürnberg*, change trains and go to Erlangen. (pauses) So then when people asked, "Oh, where do you come from?" I said, "California." "Ah, as if you came from paradise, you know?" (laughs)

JO: Yeah.

EE: (laughs) You lucky!

JO: And is that how you, did you kind of like, "Yeah I'm from California. You, you're jealous of me, I know it."

[32] Mayflower (founded 1927), U.S. American moving company.

EE: I've never ground that into anybody. You know, when they say (inaudible 01:23:18). And then it's raining, I said, "I brought a pot full of sunshine!" (laughs)

JO: Do, do you think if you settled anywhere else in the U.S., do you think, your, uh, experiences might have been different?

EE: Yes.

JO: Definitely.

EE: Yes. Today I know I could never live in Arizona. I cannot take the dry air.

JO: Yeah.

EE: Everything hurts. Chicago (pauses), is a lovely city; my husband took me there two more times over the years. I don't think I could take that winter. But, you know, a human being can get used to anything.

JO: Yeah.

EE: If it has to. I don't think I would love, would like to live in the Midwest. I think this horror, when it comes to tornados, I don't think I could take that (clock chiming). I mean we've had earthquakes, things like that cause me to become like paralyzed. I can't move. It's like a rod suddenly came into my spine. We've had hundred-mile hour winds here one year, eight or nine years.

JO: Yeah, was it two years ago or something like that too, or was it a while ago?

EE: No, no. A while ago. It broke, the big window in the hallway. It was *horrible*. Between the houses it sounded like a big scream all night long and you prayed, "Dear Lord, please let it calm down." But for six hours, I know what a hurricane is. That's a hurricane. Seventy mile an hour winds was already a hurricane, and we've had already eighty mile and hour winds here.

JO: Yeah.

EE: That we did not experience in Huntington Beach because when we, when we came, when we moved from California, I mean from Tucson to here, we lived in Silverlake.

JO: Yeah.

EE: We lived there for no more than a year because my husband then was transferred to, uh, Newport Beach from Los Angeles. So, we moved to Huntington Beach. Those homes were brand new. They stood there for a year and a half, and he made an offer and they took it. They were glad to get rid of it. (laughs) The houses, you got a house for thirty-two thousand dollars.

JO: Yeah. Wow.

EE: But this whole, uh, environment, was somehow, um, made what I am. You know? And all these experiences and I could give to my children experiences what if you do that, (pauses) even today.

JO: Yeah. (pauses) Now, the kind of, uh, other question I wanted to talk—

EE: —Let's turn the light on we need to, it's right behind you, yeah, that little, yeah—It's just really what we call in Germany a *funzel*,[33] a funzel is—
JO: (laughs) looks like we got a—
EE: A bulb is out.
JO: Yeah.
EE: And I need to wash these lights. I know that now.
JO: (laughs)
EE: It's coming.
JO: How—did you consider yourself, while you were here (pauses), religious, like how did religion play into the whole immigrating over here?
EE: Hmm. hmm (pauses). My family was Protestant Lutheran. We, we've never been very, uh, very religious. We went to church Christmas and Easter and Pentecost. Pentecost is a big holiday in Germany. We went, my brother Frank and I, we went to church when we were in elementary school in Rodach. Actually, that, that little town where we lived, that name is Rodach. So, R-O-D-A-C-H, that's 18 kilometers from Coburg.[34] In history, you will hear about Coburg-Gotha.[35] The princes of Coburg-Gotha, but Rodach had thirty-five hundred inhabitants and the refugees added to it. So now, we had to go to church, however, children grow, and I outgrew my shoes and for goodness sakes, you couldn't find any, buy any shoes in 1945. (pauses) Not for girls, so that shoe store said, "When I get some shoes in, I'll let you know." And finally, they got some shoes and they were boy's shoes. (chuckles). I wore boy shoes! Didn't think anything of it. A coat, there was a care package that the minister brought to our, to us at Christmas. A care package from America, with a coat in it for me. It fit. It was a little checkered, but I was thankful that I had a coat. But, what Frank and I wore and we shared, we had to share, because he is only two years younger that I, and we grew, the Germans soldiers wore something towards the end of the the Russian, uh uh, winter. They were thick wooden soles[36] and on top was a felt, was felt, not leather, but a thicker felt, and, and to close it, you didn't have shoe laces, there was just this little mechanism that you pushed into this little loop and then pushed over. *Ja*. Frank went to school one day, and I went to school another day. So, that was for me the fifth and sixth grade. (pauses) And, and such mode, then came the boys shoes and I was happy to have shoes that I can go to school every day. So now that has to fit in to the time of where we ended up in my, uh, great-grandmother's son's town. It goes back now,

[33] *Funzel*, German colloquialism for a lamp that provides poor lighting.

[34] Coburg, town in northeastern Bavaria, Germany

[35] Members of the German ducal house of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha include King Leopold I of Belgium (b. 1790, r. 1831-1865), and Prince Albert (1819-1861), the husband of Queen Victoria

[36] Shoe soles.

now come little details. But, you know, it took 15 years for Germany to really build up.

JO: Yeah.

EE: And have certain things available.

[01:30:49]

JO: The last two questions I have is, how would you define yourself? American, German-American, American-German?

EE: *Ja*. German-American. Because had I come year in younger years, I was 26 when I came, all of sudden you realize what you really have in your genes. Ages, ages, going back and it is, in my mind, it is a quality that I don't want to lose. If I think of my grandparents, my great-grandmother whom I still, uh, knew, all that lies back, wow, and how diligent they were. How smart. How not behind the moon. What I call behind the moon is in knowledge, always well were parents well educated, grandfather's position.—I'll show you my grandfather, I have a picture of that—I mean, uh uh (chuckles), one of my brother's ex-husbands when he saw my grandfather in his hunting outfit, that was a man he shaved his, all his hair, but he was so statuesque. He had these cool blue eyes, and he was a typical German master, who would not allow malarkey and his—his apprentices or the people who worked for him, he did not allow dumb things.

JO: Yeah.

EE: One of them went once to clean a chimney and there was money on the table and a watch. And they came home and my grandfather gets a phone call. The lady complaining, "I had money and a watch on the table." Grandfather knew who was there. "Come here. You empty your pockets right in front of me." He took him by the ear (laughs), he twisted his ear. And yes, here was the money, and here was the pock—, the the the watch. He slapped the kid. Today, if some master does that, he's in jail!

JO: Yeah.

EE: Typical old-fashioned master, you cannot do somethings nowadays anymore.

JO: No. And the last question I have is how would you like World War II to be remembered?

EE: Fearful. We lived in fear (pauses) because the last time that one, one of the last Sundays when we sat in that cellar in Troppau, in Czechoslovakia, there was a need to run for the gas masks. The light went out. Everything was so close by and we did not know what kind of bombs they are throwing, so we each headed for our gas mask. And that to me, as a nine-year-old, eight-year-old, nine-year-old child was so unbelievably scary, everybody looking at each other with these gas masks on.

JO: (pauses) Scary.

EE: If I think of my cousins in Dresden. They had left Dresden to go to Berlin, well Dresden, in Dresden, the Allies threw phosphorus bombs.

JO: Yeah.

EE: People were burning on their bodies. They jumped in the *Elbe* River and when they came out they burned again. War is *horrible*, and I feel so *sorry* for American soldiers, Americans to have been sent (coughs) to Vietnam, to Iraq, to Afghanistan. These people have (pauses) beaten each other up for centuries, why should America, (clears throat) excuse me, why should this beautiful country have to be the policeman for every part, part in the world if they have beaten each other up? Stand back, and let them, and look what comes of it. *They'll never change*.

JO: Wow. Again, I want to thank you for allowing me to come over into your house—

EE: Josh—

JO: —and hear your, uh, great stories that you told today. And, um, thank you very much.

EE: You're most welcome.—You sure you don't want some water or anything?

JO: (laughs) Uh, I'll get some water right now. Okay, yeah.

EE: I have uh—

[01:36:15]

END OF INTERVIEW