

EI-1148

ERICH PLAUT

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GERMANY, 1940

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PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay, today is June 6th, 19—the year 2000.

PLAUT: Right.

LEVINE: And I'm here in Washington Township with Mr. Erich Plaut, who came from Germany in 1940.

PLAUT: Actually, I ca—I left Germany shortly after Kristallnacht, 1938, and went on the Children Transport with my younger brother and sister to Holland, where we stayed in refugee camps until February, 1940 when our parents came and picked us up after getting their visa. And we left middle of February and the Germans marched in on the 10th of May.

LEVINE: Oh. Okay, so you were—when you arrived in this country you were 18 years of age.

PLAUT: Right.

LEVINE: Right. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, well, I—I'm looking forward to hearing exactly what your experience was. Perhaps we could start by your saying your birth date and where in Germany you were born.

PLAUT: Yes. I was born January 30th, 1922 in Elberfeld, which is now part of Wuppertal in the Rhineland near Cologne and Dusseldorf, about 10 miles east of there.

LEVINE: Okay. And your birth date?

PLAUT: My birth date was January—

LEVINE: Thirtieth.

PLAUT: Yeah, 30th.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PLAUT: I did that.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, so you—did you stay in the same area in Germany until you left?

PLAUT: Yes, we lived there. My father was born in Gertingham [PH] and—but his—is something wrong there?

LEVINE: No, it's fine. It's fine.

PLAUT: Okay. His parents lived in Elberfeld at the time when I was born. And my grand—my paternal grandfather died before I was born. And we lived there all the time. My father had five brothers and two sisters, one of whom, the oldest one, Max, came to the United States in 1904. They kept in contact through 1916 until af—after which the war broke out for America. And they couldn't find them when—even when we came here. They never got in touch with him. And about five years ago, I heard from the wife of Rabbi Gunther Plaut in Toronto that my Uncle Max might have gone to Detroit. I looked at the Michigan telephone books and found five Plauts. And I wrote a little form letter to them about my Uncle Max, where he was born and approximately when. And I got an answer from his son, my first cousin.

LEVINE: Oh.

PLAUT: And it was very exciting. Unfortunately, he died within a few months after that and we never did get to see him. But he told me that he had a brother who died in 1980 in Ridgewood, New Jersey—

LEVINE: Oh.

PLAUT: —and that he had a son by the name of Thomas Plaut. Now, I have a son by the name of Thomas Plaut, who lives in Ridgewood.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness!

PLAUT: And he once got a little package with a little class ring that—from an old girlfriend of his who was returning the class ring. And it turns out that his present wife is the daughter of our eye doctor.

LEVINE: [laughs]

PLAUT: This goes all around. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness. Oh, my goodness. Now, were your mother and your father's families from an area near where you were born?

PLAUT: No.

LEVINE: No.

PLAUT: No. as I said, Gertingham is much farther east. It is near Hanover. And my mother was born in Halberstadt, which is near Machdeboch [PH].

LEVINE: I see.

PLAUT: It is on—it—on the eastern part of—of the border—east. It was part of East Germany, both towns.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did you—do you remember seeing grandparents?

PLAUT: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Y—y—

PLAUT: My maternal grandmother came with us to the United States and lived to be 91 years old. And I do remember my maternal grandfather, who was a—a—a doctor. And my grandmother told me that she never knew him with hair. He was bald when they married.

LEVINE: [laughs] Well, let's see. What was your mother's maiden name?

PLAUT: Haas. H-A-A-S.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your father's—what was her first name?

PLAUT: Her name was Gertie [PH]. My father's is Julius.

LEVINE: Okay, okay. And you had a brother and a sis—

PLAUT: I have a brother, Werner—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: —and a—a—who is a year and a half younger than I am, and a sister, Ann, or Anna Marie—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: —who was born in 1926. So she is about four years younger.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, who was traveling with you when you came to—

PLAUT: All of those, including my grandmother.

LEVINE: Your grandmother.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Your parents—

PLAUT: There were six, yeah, and the three children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, okay.

PLAUT: And we first were taking, or were advised by the Council of Jewish Women to a—we were referred to a small hotel on 46th Street west of Broadway, Sharon [PH] Hotel, that in the basement had Trotsky's [PH] Restaurant. Are you familiar with that?

LEVINE: No, I'm not. Really?

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: It's there now still?

PLAUT: No, no.

LEVINE: No, no. Uh-huh.

PLAUT: It isn't.

LEVINE: Okay.

PLAUT: And the owner of the Sharon Hotel, which is a small hotel, kind of family size, told us that she has a house, a bungalow, in Howard Beach, Queens. And if we couldn't find anything else, we could live there.

LEVINE: Oh.

PLAUT: Which turned out to be \$48 a month including heat and hotel linen and fully furnished. So we stayed there for quite a while. The price went up a little bit but not much.

LEVINE: I see. So your family actually settled in Queens initially.

PLAUT: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, well, let's talk about your early life—

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —in Germany. I take it you went to school.

PLAUT: Yes, uh-huh. And I had four Jewish classmates, a pair of twins and two others. And I just was in Israel meeting with one of the two twins, where the other one and their older brother were killed during the wars of—in Israel.

LEVINE: Hmm, uh-hmm. Now, was there anti-Semitic feeling as you were growing up, that you recall?

PLAUT: Oh, yes. In fact, I have a letter here that my brother's friend wrote about anti-Semitism in the school by the professor—

LEVINE: Ah.

PLAUT: —and that my brother did very well in squelching, you could say. And he had the sympathy of the class, apparently. I—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: I haven't read it lately but here is the letter.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. Gee, you know, maybe I could copy this?

PLAUT: Yes. Oh, that's for you. No, it's for you.

LEVINE: Oh, it's for me. Oh, okay.

PLAUT: Yeah, made copy.

LEVINE: Yeah, I can't read it readily.

PLAUT: Oh, no. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: But—

PLAUT: Oh, yeah. Well, it's in German. [laughter] Yeah, wait a minute. Yeah. This—this is it. But you may show it to somebody and—

LEVINE: Yes, yes. Okay, now—so what—how—could you talk a little bit about when you were in school and—

PLAUT: In Germany.

LEVINE: In Germany and—

PLAUT: Yeah.

LEVINE: —the—the forum—you mentioned the professor, who I have a—

PLAUT: Yeah.

LEVINE: —what—the letter your brother wrote.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: But w—were there ways that you, personally, experienced prejudice at that time?

PLAUT: Oh, yes. I remember that the fellow who sat in front of me—once, when I raised my hand, I accidentally brushed his shoulder. He went and brushed it off and blew his hand free. That was during the term. At the end of the term, he came to me to help him with his work. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Hmm. Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And how about your mother—your mother and father? Did they experience, do you think, different forms of—of that as well in their lives?

PLAUT: I—I—I'm not aware of any. Kristallnacht, my father happened to be on a business trip. He called home and stayed kind of driving around, being driven around by the business chauffeur for six days before he—he couldn't take it anymore, and came back. Shortly before he came back, there were two men from the police who asked for him. And my wife—or my mother said that he was away on a business trip. So they left and left word for him to call in, which he did. And then they picked him up and took him, not directly to the police station, but first to another Jewish man, whom they were going to pick up too. And my father noticed that he had his regular address book in his pocket. And while he was waiting with one of the two downstairs, he slipped it into their mailbox, and the wife of the other one returned it to us.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PLAUT: So that was to prevent more people being picked up that way.

LEVINE: Called, uh-huh. Yeah, yeah.

PLAUT: So he was—due to the fact that he was late going into prison, into the local prison, just shortly after he came in, they called out the list of the people to go to the concentration camp. And he was not on it yet. That was his luck. And he stayed there until he was returned home, allowed to go home, after he had signed off his business to be Arian—Arianized. In other—it—it had to be sold to a non-Jew—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: —at a price that was ridiculous.

LEVINE: What business was your father in?

PLAUT: It was a textile business. The town of Elberfeld baumen [PH]—Wuppertal now—has always been a textile company—a textile city, primarily for dyeing. And the river, Wupper, was usually a different color every day when they dumped their pigments or paints.

LEVINE: Hmm. Mmm. So d—were you—when Kristallnacht happened—

PLAUT: Yeah.

LEVINE: —were you aware of it?

PLAUT: Yes. Our mother came into the bedroom—we were asleep already—and woke us up and told us that stores were being destroyed downtown. We

lived outside of town, and that we should hide in the attic. And we, being sleepy and lazy, said, "If they find us there, it'll be even worse." So we went back to sleep and, luckily, nothing did happen.

LEVINE: And what about the next day when you—

PLAUT: Yeah, well, within less than a month, we were taken to Holland. And to us, it was a great adventure, being on the train going abroad. And we can just imagine what it must have felt to—by our parents, how they must have felt when they never knew whether they'd see us again.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. C—can you say anything about what happened in—in that interim after Kristallnacht and—and the arrangements being made and—and how people acted differently or—or not or h—

PLAUT: I do not have any recollection. I—I must have gone back to school. That was—no, wait a minute. That was in '38. I left school in—at the end of the term in—ear—early in—1938. Easter is the end of the term in Germany. And then I went to a welding school while my brother went to an automotive school. He was in—in one part of Cologne and I was in a different part. And, because our father thought we should learn a trade to have something to—to sell once we got here or wherever it was. And I remember that that was during the time—the second time of the—a bout between Schmeling and Joe Louis, where Joe Louis knocked him out in the first round. And everybody was very sad about it. And I felt very good about it but didn't let anybody know. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Had your father and/or mother been interested in coming—in leaving Germany before Kristallnacht?

PLAUT: They had the foresight of asking for a waiting number at the American Consulate already, I would say, in June of '38, and urged my favorite uncle to do the same, which he did a week later. He never made it. He never got out. And so they had thought of it. They had me write to a French school in Paris and to a school in Switzerland to see whether I could get taken in there. I had an uncle and a nephew in Paris at the time. And I visited him in 1937 as a pure visit. But nothing came of those things.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So how did the—what—could you say everything that you can remember that led up to your going to Holland?

PLAUT: No, I don't remember the preparations. They may have told us but I don't have any recollection of it. So we left for Holland, I think, on December 13th, 1938. And we left from Holland around 15th of February, 1940.

LEVINE: And what was it like? Do you remember leaving Germany? Do you remember going—

PLAUT: Well, that—

LEVINE: Do you—

PLAUT: Well, I remember that I had to get a passport and I had to go to the main police station to get that. And I said, “Good morning,” and they said, “Heil Hitler. Why don’t you use the German greeting?” And I said, “I’m Jewish.” And they said, “Oh.” And that was that.

LEVINE: And—and then what was it like in Holland? What—

PLAUT: It—we went to various refugee camps, which were not good, but being young, you make the best of it. [chuckles] I don’t know whether I could do it nowadays. And then we finally ended up in a former youth hostel, actually, a youth hostel in the woods near Deventer, which is kind of in central Holland. And there, things were very nice. We fielded a soccer team, which always lost in the first few minutes against the much bigger Dutch schoolboys. But then, due to our good playing, we won every game until there were sponsors, Jewish sponsors. A—a Dutch congregation put us up against what turned out to be the youth champion of Holland, which is the equivalent of a minor leagues team. And we lost 17 to 1 with me at the goalie.

LEVINE: [laughs] Now, did you know any of the other children or young people who were there?

PLAUT: We didn’t know them to start with. We got to know them. There were a few Berlin Jews who came originally from Poland and there was always a certain animosity between the German Jews, who were more assimilated, and the Russian and Polish Jews. We did see some of them, since we came here, in the very beginning. But we have lost track of them.

LEVINE: Hmm, uh-hmm. When you look back at that period of a few months, right—

PLAUT: No, no. That was a year—a year and two month.

LEVINE: Oh, 1940.

PLAUT: Yeah.

LEVINE: That’s right.

PLAUT: Yeah, right.

LEVINE: Okay, a year and a few months---when you look back on that period, how do you think about it now?

PLAUT: Oh, I enjoy—

LEVINE: [unclear] think about it?

PLAUT: —thinking of our bicycle trip from Gouda [PH]—gouda cheese—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: —where we lived in a early 17th century orphanage—

LEVINE: Oh.

PLAUT: —and were for a while cooped up in there because of diphtheria. And cabin fever is a small expression of what we had. And from there, when were—the quarantine was lifted, we took a bicycle trip for one day to Amsterdam, which is, I would say, about 40 miles each way. And we visited there. We had a “uncle” who was a cousin of my grandmother, who was giving us an affidavit to stay there, and who then loaned us \$15,000. So we came in as capitalists. That’s why we did not go through Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: But we could not touch that money.

LEVINE: I see.

PLAUT: That had to be returned. It was returned to his son, one son who made it out of Holland to America.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, now, just—just to backtrack a minute. How long was—were you guar—quarantined with the diphtheria at—

PLAUT: I would say between one and two weeks. I would—

LEVINE: I see.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And so then you—and then you took your bicycle trip. Now, when you say you came as capitalists, what was the idea for the \$15,000? What did you—

PLAUT: That—we had a cabin. We did not go steerage. And we had money to show that we would not fall a—what you call it?

LEVINE: Be a burden on—

PLAUT: Be a burden on the state.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-huh, I see. So it was really—the money was really for passage and to—

PLAUT: No, no. That was beyond.

LEVINE: It was beyond that.

PLAUT: Yeah, in other—that was the \$15,000 that we were given and couldn't touch. And I don't know whether it was in the bank for interest or whatever. That was my father's business.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: When we came over here, I took the things—oh, yes. I forgot to mention. In Holland, I was able to get a place in a trade school where I learned bench work, machinist work with very little machining, but mostly fitting, filing and chiseling and so forth. I made little things that I showed to prospective employers over here. And I was hired by a German, fairly heavy industry, machine—machine shop and was put on the lathe, of which I had the very slightest knowledge only, and did just about everything wrong. But being helped by the machinist next to me, who showed me how to sharpen the tool [unclear], how to take a cut and so forth, and the—I was there a week. And the last—the next Monday the boss handed me two paychecks and says, "This is for last week and this is for today. We can't use you anymore." And I said, "I'll work for free." And he says, "No, we're not a school here." Which was very decent of not taking advantage of me, although I probably did more damage than good. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, how did you—how did you meet up again with your mother, father and grandmother? How—how did that happen?

PLAUT: Oh, they—they came and stayed with my uncle in Amsterdam. And we then—we were in—by that time, in refugee camps in Amsterdam, separate one, my brother and my—myself. My sister was as a foster

child with a beekeeper in Broikland [PH], which we know as Brooklyn here.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PLAUT: A very nice little town, not far from Amsterdam.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And what was that like for her, to be a foster child?

PLAUT: It—it was very nice for her. She was 12 years old and they treated her like a daughter.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. But you and your brother were in camps.

PLAUT: Were still in camps, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do—do you have any repercussions from your camp life—

PLAUT: No.

LEVINE: —of that time that you know of?

PLAUT: No, not—no, not at all. Uh-huh. In fact, we learned how to get a little bit more ration, that when they came with a coffee can or the milk jug, you held out your cup and you lowered it, so that they had to follow and you got more.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: So little things like that helped.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Could you say anything about, what—human nature? What—what people were like under the circumstances that you experienced, either in Germany before you left or in Holland when everybody was—

PLAUT: Well—

LEVINE: —uprooted?

PLAUT: My—I don't know whether we didn't see each other anymore. I had a classmate who was my direct next-door neighbor. And we had been on

good—good relations with him for a long time. And we didn't see each other in the la—later time. But I had another friend to whom I loaned a book, which was unabashedly pacific. And his father called me over and said how could I give a book like that to his son? Now, he fought the First World War in the German Reisbank [PH]—

LEVINE: Hmm.

PLAUT: —as a bookkeeper. So he really didn't have any reason for that. All my uncles were in the German Army. I'm named after my father's brother, who died during the First War. My middle name is after my mother's twin brother. And he younger brother also died. So there were three uncles of mine who died. All the others got wounded.

LEVINE: Hmm. Uh-hmm. And—and on—some parts of your family were killed in the camps?

PLAUT: W—

LEVINE: Were there any parts—

PLAUT: Oh, yes. Yeah. As—except the oldest remaining uncle [telephone rings]—yeah.

LEVINE: We're going to pause [tape off/on] Resuming here.

PLAUT: Okay. Many years ago, my sister and her girlfriend made a date, a blind date for me with a girl. They told me a little bit about her and told her a little bit about me, my name and family and so forth. And it was decided we would meet at this girlfriend's house on a Saturday afternoon to look each other over. In German, it's persniffeln [PH]. [laughter] You understand that.

LEVINE: Yes, yeah.

PLAUT: And so the Wednesday before the Saturday, she gets a call. "This is Erich Plaut and I'd like to see you on Saturday night." And she figured I wanted to make certain that we had a date, except that we talked for a little while and I mentioned the girl where we were supposed to meet. "Who is that? I don't know her." "Well, where do you know me from?" "I met you at a musical party of your uncle's and he gave me your telephone number." So she had taken the afternoon with one Erich Plaut and a different Erich Plaut at night. And that is my [unclear], who has been back and forth. We have all the time. He had just graduated from Columbia University as a psychiatrist and they had a horrible date, because they argued about psychiatrists in the restaurant so much so that somebody at

the next table mixed into that. They never saw each other again. I married her.

LEVINE: Oh! [laughs]

PLAUT: My former wife.

LEVINE: [laughs] Wow! That's the best "how did you meet your wife" story I've ever heard. [laughter]

PLAUT: Well, this is only the beginning.

LEVINE: Oh.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PLAUT: —and finally introduced ourselves. "Erich Plaut. I know a psychiatrist by that name in San Francisco." Then in '61, when we were visiting in Germany, we were visiting my wife's uncle in Hamburg, and from there we were going to fly to Berlin. You couldn't drive at that time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: And he offered to get the tickets through his travel agent in Hamburg, who said, "But that's impossible. I just booked Dr. Plaut to fly to London." So we crossed at the same—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PLAUT: —travel agent. Then—

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness.

PLAUT: —my wife gets her alumni paper from—at Northwestern in Evanston, Illinois. And they had said the new head of the psychiatric division of the medical center is Dr. Erich Plaut. So since we have grandchildren—grandchildren there, when we were there, I looked him up. And he invited us for a cocktail and Ruth and I got to meet him, my second wife now. They had never seen each other and he didn't remember her. He remembered her uncle, because he was the violinist in the string quartet.

LEVINE: Mmm. So how did you like him after you met him?

PLAUT: Hmm?

LEVINE: How did you like this man with you same name you crossed paths with so often?

PLAUT: Not—not too well. He was a little bit arrogant, let's say.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: But anyway, I talk to him now and again. And then I found out that he said he would be coming to New Jersey because his wife took a job at Rutgers. So now there are two Erich Plautes in New Jersey. The last time I called him up he was not there. And I talked to his wife and we have a granddaughter who just is finishing her first year at Northwestern, which is my wife's family's school—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: —all the way to 1900. And so the granddaughter is there. He has a son who is a junior there. So I got his number and called him up. And when he answered I said, "This is Erich Plaut." And he says, "Pardon me?" And I told him the story—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: —and gave him my granddaughter's telephone number. I don't know whether anything comes of it but it would be very funny.

LEVINE: Yes. Oh, wow. Wow. Well, so—so I was asking you about human nature and h—any observations that you made about it in the—in the—in the particular position that you were thrust into by leaving Germany, going to Holland and being, really, in a—in a camp kind of situation for a while.

PLAUT: But we complained—

LEVINE: Did you notice differences—

PLAUT: —but it kind of ran off on us like water, but—because we had things to do, I, particularly. Because I could go to school by bicycle into Deventer, which was probably about half an hour to three-quarter of an hour ride.

LEVINE: Did you have to speak Dutch? Did you have—

PLAUT: Oh, yes. I learned to speak Dutch. I still retain a little bit but not as much, particularly, since it is somewhere between German and English. It's very similar to both languages.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: So it's a little difficult.

LEVINE: I see. So in a way, your—your life continued without a lot of—

PLAUT: Difficulty.

LEVINE: Right.

PLAUT: Yeah. We had put on plays. I mean, childish plays, I guess without any adult supervision. So it just came out of us whatever somebody had was put out—put up. And we saw each—we took trips. And it was, in a way, very nice.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Were you thinking while you were there that you would be coming to the United States?

PLAUT: Uh-hmm. I remember when we, from Amsterdam, had to go to Rotterdam to the American Consulate where we filled out some papers and learned something. And on the way, we sang the American anthem, "Anchors Aweigh." [laughter]

LEVINE: This is when you were on your bicycles?

PLAUT: [chuckles] No, th—that was by bus—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: —or something like that here.

LEVINE: Mmm, uh-hmm. Uh-huh. So you were in close contact with your brother the whole time? Pretty much?

PLAUT: You—yeah, we usually were together until the very last when we were in different places in Amsterdam.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: But we visited with each other. We visited our uncle. And—

WOMAN: Beautiful.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

WOMAN: It's gorgeous. It came out of Tommy's yard.

PLAUT: Alice called that she's going to come by for the tickets.

WOMAN: Oh, okay. I've got to find them.

LEVINE: So—

PLAUT: Help yourself. Save—

WOMAN: His—your sister was in a different place. Was she?

PLAUT: Who—what?

WOMAN: Your sister—

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOMAN: —was in a different place.

LEVINE: Yeah, we did talk about that.

WOMAN: You talked about that.

LEVINE: Right.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: So when you got—do you remember getting the word that you'd be leaving?

PLAUT: Yeah, I guess in letters and maybe telephone calls. I'm not sure.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And do you remember your first impressions when you arrived in New York and—

PLAUT: Yeah, I remember our ship was covered in ice. All the running—the rigging was covered with ice. And we saw the Statue of Liberty and we didn't see too much of it coming in because the officials were there interviewing us. And we had to be down in the dining room, I imagine. And while I'm on it, it was a Dutch ship called the Nordam. And when I was with the Army in New Guinea, who pulls in there but the Nordam.

LEVINE: Wow.

PLAUT: So I went on there and talked a little bit to the only remaining Dutch man, who was the [unclear] on—

LEVINE: Now, when you were in the Army, when was that?

PLAUT: That was from 1943 to 1945. First, my brother and I were together for basic training. And then we were in an ordnance depot in Atlanta where he was in the automotive section and I was in the machinist's section.

LEVINE: Well, how was it that you happened to go into the Army right—

PLAUT: Oh, the Draft Board. Through the draft—through the draft.

LEVINE: [unclear].

WOMAN: Were you drafted? Or you just volunteered?

PLAUT: Yeah, yeah. No, I didn't vol—there was something there. I think my brother got his notice while I was already getting ready. And so we both went together.

LEVINE: Were you—were you offered U.S. citizenship right away—

PLAUT: No.

LEVINE: —as a—

PLAUT: That came after basic training when we were both in Atlanta, Georgia, or on the outskirts of Atlanta. And I remember that that was during the time of blacks being put—pushed down very much. And here were we, Army recruits, some of whom could barely read or write, becoming an American citizen, and there was a M.D. from, I think, Liberia, who was in the same position as we were. And he was educationally much higher but they gave him the same treatment as they did to us, which was rather military and short shrift.

LEVINE: So were there black people then in your—in your Army—

PLAUT: No.

LEVINE: —in basic training?

PLAUT: Not—no.

LEVINE: No.

PLAUT: No.

LEVINE: No.

PLAUT: No. I did not—that was the only time in Atlanta where there was a lot of discrimination, the blacks in the bus—the back of the bus and so forth.

LEVINE: Mmm.

PLAUT: And I—

LEVINE: Did that have particular reverberations for you?

PLAUT: Yes, it did.

LEVINE: Having come from where you—

PLAUT: It did because we know we were being discriminated against to almost the same, or even more, in a way. Naturally, I mean—

LEVINE: Yes.

PLAUT: —they weren't—

LEVINE: Extreme.

PLAUT: —directly killed.

LEVINE: Right.

PLAUT: Try one of these here.

LEVINE: I did. They're wonderful. [laughter] They're wonderful.

PLAUT: Okay. You had one. Then I take the other.

LEVINE: Yeah, you got that one. [laughter] The tea is great. Thank you.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: So—so you got a little taste of this country then, because you went to Atlanta.

PLAUT: Oh, yeah. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: You were living in New York.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And then what happened next in your—in your Army career, or your Army stint?

PLAUT: From Atlanta, we got a ticket to go to Pittsburgh, California, which is a little north of San Francisco. And it's called Pittsburgh, because they have iron and steelworks and so forth over there. And we got a ticket from Atlanta to there, but a so-called delay en route where we could visit home on our own money. And, which I did and my brother was at a different time. We weren't home together. And then my sister's boyfriend, who worked at the aircraft—he was an instructor at the aircraft repair station school near LaGuardia—offered to get me on a liberator bomber that was going to the West Coast. But due to the fact that I was totally inexperienced, a Army sergeant bumped me, and I was stuck at the airport when he said, "There is a private plane belonging to an oil company going to Dayton, Ohio." And I figured, 'Well, it's west.' [laughter] And so I took the ride. That was my first airplane ride ever. And we were up—I was the only one in there. I was—well, that was la—yeah, I was in a kind of a—a bad place where I was sitting. And I look out and I see the right propeller was feathered. And the pilots were on the—on the radio constantly. And we turned around and made a good landing. And then they repaired it and we went up again. That time, we made it to Dayton and it was a hot, sun-drenched place. And there was nothing going on. And somebody told me, "Why don't you go over to the other end of the airport, which is the military part, and find out whether you can get a ride there?" Which I did, and I got there and that was empty and I helloed, helloed. And finally, somebody came over and he explained to me that it was shut down for the time being because there had been two or more accidents, which they expected sabotage. And here I come with my German accent and nothing but a mimeographed sheet of paper giving my name among all the others. And they [chuckles] were stupid enough not to hold on to me. But then I went to the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and I got a ride from there to Chicago, figuring Chicago is a much bigger place and I get out of there. [chuckles] I almost didn't make it out of there. While all—there were hoards of people beseeching all the taxis coming in where the of—flight officers—and I held back and I see somebody coming out of the bus. And I talked to him and he took me on to Kansas City and finally to Oklahoma City. And there I was the only guy without a parachute sitting in the [unclear]. [laughter] He could have ditched me very easily there but they took me along and in Oklahoma City seemed to be the end of the line. I was running out of money, out of time. And they had just assigned me a bunk in the—in the local garrison when somebody said, "There is a fighter trainer going on to Fort Worth." And I said, "Oh, that's going to my line where my line around the south shore" would get me. So I took that and I was sitting in the seat—in the pilot's seat behind the actual pilot. And it was a very interesting experience.

And from there, I took the train to Dallas. I—no, I don't know. Houston. And from there, I picked up the regular train to take me to Pittsburgh. And I arrived the day late. But that was my day of grace, apparently. So they allowed me. We were in the Pittsburgh Replacement Depot. And finally, with military music, and so we were—we were given olive drab uniforms. And we were marched out of the place across the street into Camp Stoneman [PH] where we discarded our ODs and were given khakis. That was supposed to—to hoodwink the spies, what was [chuckles] very stupid, in my opinion. So anyway, there was money, enough to throw away the olive drab uniforms and get new one. And then from there, we finally went on a—the Willard Holbrook [PH] ship from San Francisco, which was the old President Line, and were taken to Australia, Brisbane, where we were quar—quartered on the oval of the Brisbane Race Track. And we were there for possibly two weeks. And we saw movies there in the grandstand. And the camp commander came by and we all saluted and somebody had a bottle of schnapps that fell right down in front of the commanding officer [laughs] when he saluted, from under his arm.

LEVINE: Wow.

PLAUT: So—

LEVINE: W—just to back up a minute, when you were going across the country and going to all these places to get to the West Coast—

PLAUT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wh—what was your—what was in your mind then? What were you—what were you doing?

PLAUT: Well, I—I didn't want to take the train. And here I had a chance to fly.

LEVINE: But you had to report at a certain—

PLAUT: I had to. Yes.

LEVINE: —place at a certain time but you—

PLAUT: Yeah, I—

LEVINE: —[unclear].

PLAUT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PLAUT: As I said, I ran out of money and out of time.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PLAUT: But it was still a ride. So then from there we went to Brisbane. And after about two weeks, we took a real small rail—a narrow-track railroad up the east coast of Australia to Cannes [PH] . And there we were welcomed by Tokyo Rose, which was the traitor who broadcast from Japan. And they knew our unit and they knew everything about us already. And from there, we went to New Guinea, Auro [PH] Bay and stayed—that's when I was assigned to my unit. And—which was a—a—a repair company for landing craft. And I was given a—a machine-shop truck that I ran. And I had a helper. And we went from there to the Admiralty Islands where—where we were attached for rations to a CB [PH] group until they told us that we—that they didn't have enough food for us, and that we had to strike out on our own, whereupon, somebody painted over a repaired landing craft and got in line as a lighter for the ships in the harbor, got a whole load of food into it and disappeared into the night to the CB. And they kept us on.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOMAN: So it was creative shopping? [chuckles]

PLAUT: Yeah, it was. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, wow. So—so you really—you were—you were fighting for the United States Army—

PLAUT: Army, yeah.

LEVINE: —while your relatives were fighting for the German Army, while your other relatives—

PLAUT: No, no, no. I had no more relatives. All my relatives were taken to concentration camp and not heard of—

LEVINE: Ah.

PLAUT: —anymore.

LEVINE: Okay.

PLAUT: And only my immediate family that, as I mentioned, including my grandmother, were able to leave. So—

LEVINE: So what do you think about your Army career, looking back on it now?
How—how does it—

PLAUT: Well, we were bitching about it while we were there but I found it a good experience. And after the Admiralty Islands, we were—went to the Philippines and then to Japan after th—which was already after the war, after the atomic bomb was dropped and Japan surrendered. And from there on, we went by ship to Tacoma, Washington. And I was released from Camp Dix, Fort Dix.

LEVINE: Fort Dix, New Jersey.

PLAUT: Fort Dix. Yeah, New Jersey.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: And it said, “Welcome home, veterans.” And I was kind of worried about what the life would bring. In the meantime, my parents had moved from Howard Beach to Cue [PH] Gardens, where we had a lot of friends and, including the family where my—my friend’s father had dated my mother before the First World War. And our friendship is still there.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, when you say you had a lot of friends, these were people that you had known from Germany or from—

PLAUT: No, no. These were friends whom I met through my parents because they stayed friends.

LEVINE: I see.

PLAUT: And then we developed friendship. We played tennis together with friends and such.

LEVINE: Was there a big German community in—in Cue Gardens?

PLAUT: Yes, quite—

LEVINE: [unclear]

PLAUT: Yes, quite a big one. Yeah, including the doctor whom we had over here who—

LEVINE: Erich Plaut?

PLAUT: No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Not that one, no.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

PLAUT: That came much later.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

WOMAN: There—I was surprised. We were at the—

PLAUT: My sister lived there too.

WOMAN: —Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem just a few weeks ago.

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

WOMAN: And the—about—about half of the German Jewish population was able to escape, which meant that there were a lot of people who came here to the United States, plus they spread all over, probably, or [unclear] realize—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

WOMAN: He goes so many places [chuckles] where he has—has, you know, German friends.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, right. Right.

WOMAN: It's amazing.

LEVINE: While we're talking and looking back on your life and coming here to this country as an 18-year-old—

PLAUT: Yeah.

LEVINE: —and as a refugee, really. Right?

PLAUT: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you think that made a difference in the kind of person you are? Do you—what [unclear]?

PLAUT: Having had all those experience—

LEVINE: Yes.

PLAUT: Oh, definitely.

LEVINE: In what ways that you could think of?

PLAUT: Well, I think more thinking about the fate of people. Not just about myself, but thinking that other people have different experiences and they are kind of formed by those experiences. And I just read a book called "Children of Israel, Children of Palestine," which is a very serious book about the experiences that they had in the different times, the wars of '48 and so forth and so forth. And I feel that we're do—they are doing injustice to the Palestinian people, very much. And one of my favorite authors from there is Amos Auz [PH], who is a very much middle-of-the-roader, who feels that the Palestinians should be given the same rights as the Israeli, rather than be second-class citizens, as we were to even more of an extent in Germany. So I feel badly about it. I don't know what I can do about it. But I have talked to my relatives over there and they seem to be of similar feeling about it. And so that is—I feel also women's rights, which are being—started to be stepped on now here in the United States. The Southern Baptist Convention wants women to be subdued to their—to their husband and not have any pastoral duties.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: I, myself, am rather agnostic, after having felt that if God didn't help all those innocent people who died in Germany, what can I expect? As my wife says, "It's better to be lucky than skillful." S—so those are the kind of thoughts that I have. I belong to the Ethical Culture in Long Island—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: —and Unitarians in Morristown. And we rehearse at the Unitarian Fellowship here in Ridgewood. But I don't have that much in common with them anymore. I—I feel that I have to make the life that I can. I hope I'll be able to and I think the only good prayer will do is, if I believe it and, hopefully, as a placebo to help—to help me through. So far, I've done quite well. I'm 78 and—and in very good health.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. What has brought you a lot of satisfaction in—in your life? What kinds of things satisfy you?

PLAUT: Well, my older son is doing quite well. He is married, near Springfield, Massachusetts with two children. And he is—he went to St. John's College in Annapolis, which is very much a thinking school. And he is now international sales manager for a specialty paper company. And my wife asked him, "With the liberal education as what you had, which is great books and so forth, how are you able to function in business?" And he says, "Well, it allowed me to think, to analyze, to compact and to project." So he's doing very well.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And it sounds like you have a very active life. We have about a minute left.

PLAUT: [chuckles] Yeah.

LEVINE: Maybe you can tell a little bit about the kinds of activities—

PLAUT: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —that you're involved with—

PLAUT: Yeah.

LEVINE: —at this point.

PLAUT: Okay, Monday nights during the school year, I manage the public boating course of the Palisades Power Squadron. The Power Squadron is a national organizations interested in safe boating that give a free, except for the cost of the books—textbooks and so forth—course to the general public who need it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: And then afterwards, if they pass the test, they can become members of the Power Squadron and take courses all the way up to celestial navigation.

LEVINE: Oh.

PLAUT: On Tuesday nights, we have rehearsal for our choir. We've been going to Europe every two years. The last one was in Spain and Portugal last year. And hopefully, next year we'll go to Sicily and Malta. And I'm working on going to Israel because our guide, whom we had in Israel about three weeks ago, is willing to give us a chamber orchestra at our disposal, which we would—could use very well. Israel is very musically oriented.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: And you can't get into a concert. They're all subscribed to for years.

LEVINE: Oh, really? Yeah.

PLAUT: We heard of somebody who could get a—smuggle us into a concert rehearsal. But we had no time for it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PLAUT: We were so busy.

LEVINE: Okay, now—

PLAUT: [unclear].

LEVINE: Go very quickly over the rest of the week so we can get on—

PLAUT: Oh, the rest—

LEVINE: Wednesday.

PLAUT: Oh, yeah. That's Tuesday. Wednesday, I like to go folk dancing in my group near Morristown. Thursday, we have a few tickets to go to performances of theater and so forth. Oh, one other thing I forgot, I also volunteer for the chorus to take people to the airports or back. And I also se—sell nuts and candy to the members over there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PLAUT: So that takes care of that. This week, we're—

[END OF INTERVIEW]