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FRITZ OTTENHEIMER
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LEVINE: Today is June the 21st, the year 2007, I'm here in the Jewish Community Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with Fritz Ottenheimer who was fourteen years old in 1939 when he came to this country through Ellis Island—from Germany. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If you would say please, again, your birth date and where you were born.

OTTENHEIMER: I was born on March 18th, 1925, in Constance, Germany.

LEVINE: OK. And were you living in Constance, Germany from then until the time you left?

OTTENHEIMER: Yes.

LEVINE: OK. And (clears throat) OK. So for your first fourteen years you were there. Maybe you could describe, for the tape, your life in Constance, up until the build up to World War Two.

OTTENHEIMER: Well, my early childhood was very pleasant, very happy, very peaceful. I was a little kid, of course, going to school, when I reached school age. And things changed drastically in 1933 when I was eight years old when Hitler came to power. And, of course, from then on, it was all propaganda, all tremendous pressure, stress on Jewish people—we were Jewish. And – but still, Constance was one of the better towns in Germany, in terms of Nazi activity. The – we had our S.S. and our Gestapo and our Nazi mayor, but the people generally were not very supportive or very enthusiastic about the Nazi regime. And, therefore, did not participate nearly as much in anti-Jewish activities as people in other towns in Germany.

LEVINE: Do you have a sense of why that was?

OTTENHEIMER: I – I'd say it's very difficult to give a – a complete explanation. Some contributing factors were, one—that it was – Constance is right on the border of Switzerland and people could listen to Swiss news on the radio, could cross the border—non-Jews especially could continue crossing the border into Switzerland—and read in the Swiss newspapers what was really going on rather than Goebbels' propaganda. So I – I think that was one important reason. Another reason was that the Jewish community of Constance was exceptionally assimilated—well integrated in the German social and economic life—and there was much more communication and social connection between Jews and non-Jews in Constance than in most other cities in Germany.

LEVINE: You know, (clears throat) maybe you could address your opinion about why so many Jewish people from Germany considered themselves German – or were – I guess it's the assimilation. Because—

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Mhm.

LEVINE: [superposed] Polish Jews, for example, consider themselves Jewish and not Polish.

OTTENHEIMER: Well, it – it is a, as you said, a matter of assimilation. I think if the Holocaust and the – and Israel's birth had not happened, American Jews would be in the same situation right now. They would consider themselves American, who happened to be of the Jewish religion, just as their neighbors were Catholics or Protestants—that's not their nationality, that's just happens to be their religion. And Germany, during many years of benevolent attitudes towards the Jews—I don't know if I should call it tolerance, that's sort of minimizing it—Jews were very successful in Germany and were generally accepted and given every opportunity to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, businessmen, and so forth. So, it was a very unlikely place for the Holocaust to happen then. Because it was probably one of the most liberal countries in Europe in its treatment of the Jews, giving them freedom and opportunity and such. (cough) So, when Hitler came, it was a – a complete shock to the Jewish population. Jews had volunteered for service in the German army during World War One—thousands of them—and it was just w – we enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity of being good Germans. So when Hitler came to power and accused us of all kinds of horrible things, our first reaction was, "No, we aren't those terrible people, we are good Germans."

We went out of our way to prove that we were as good Germans as our neighbors. And – and that we were law abiding citizens and so forth.

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: So when they accused us of harboring weapons, we said, "No, we don't have any weapons! Look at us, we don't – we don't have any. We – we obey the laws!" (cough) And we just couldn't believe what was happening and couldn't understand why it was happening, or what to do about it.

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: And a lot of German Jews thought this was just a temporary situation and that the German people would get rid of Hitler very soon—

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: Because it seemed so un-German, so completely the opposite of what was happening before Hitler came.

LEVINE: Mhm, mhm. (clears throat) Maybe you could describe the beginnings of your change and your family's change of attitude to thinking that nobody is going to take him seriously and it may just blow over.

OTTENHEIMER: Well, I think the first indication—and the first time that this need had co – come up to look for some other country was, I th – we had – my parents had a little shop in town, and it was not a thriving business, it was barely limping along. My father stressed, you know, honesty and reliability and all these things, and there were a certain number of

customers who appreciated that, but we were just barely above the threshold with our income. So when the propaganda started and people were afraid to go into Jewish stores anymore, customers stayed away, business went down the drain. We had to give up our store very early after Hitler came to power. And, if nothing else, there was an economic need for change. And then – then on top of that, the hateful propaganda. Now, fortunately my parents saw the situation, and fortunately we had relatives in the United States who could sponsor us—but certainly if we hadn't seen it early, at the – and at the time of *Kristallnacht* [literally: "Crystal Night," also "the Night of Broken Glass"] in November of 1938—when my father was taken to Dachau concentration camp—by that time there was no illusion any more about our future in Germany.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: But if we had waited that long, we would – I would not be here today.

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] It would've been too late.

LEVINE: Now, why don't you say what your father ever revealed about his Dachau experience.

OTTENHEIMER: Well, he was a very sick man when he came home. And he was not a fat man when he left, but he had lost a lot of weight and he was barely able to stand on his feet when he came home. So, just looking at him and seeing what kind of shape he was in gave us a pretty good indication of what he had gone through—at Dachau. He did not tell us any details about Dachau while we were still in – in Germany.

He had to sign an oath on – at the time of his release from Dachau that he would not tell anyone any – anything about the conditions at Dachau. And he was not about to take a chance of one of us telling someone what my father had told us about it. So, while we were in Germany he never told me – he never told us, or I assume not even his wife—my mother—anything about D – Dachau. But after – after we came to the United States—well, actually, many, many years later, I asked him once and he gave me some of the details of—the food they had and the treatment they got and so forth.

LEVINE: Now, when was he taken? What year was that?

OTTENHEIMER: That was – to Dachau—

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] That was in 1938. *Reichskristallnacht* [Empire's Crystal Night] also known as Pogrom Night—it was the first nationally organized physical pogrom of Jews in Germany.

LEVINE: [superposed] Why don't you describe what you witnessed of it.

OTTENHEIMER: OK, that was an – well, by way of background, a Jewish seventeen-year-old boy had killed a German official in Paris in the embassy—German embassy in France—and the German official died on November 9th, 1938. And the *Kristallnacht* was Germany's response to this – what they call their Jewish crime. In other words, they held the whole Jewish population of Germany responsible for what this Jewish boy did in Paris, France. Well, actually, they simply carried out a plan that they had set up, I'm sure, months—or even years—before that, just waiting for pretext, for something to happen that

would justify, in their eyes, what they had planned. In my own experience, on November 10th, I woke up early in the morning, practically knocked out of my bed by an explosion. And I couldn't figure out what could've exploded in this peaceful little town of Constance. I looked out the window at the gas station across the street. I thought – that was the only thing I could think of that could've exploded, and nothing wrong there. So then I ran down the stairs to the back window and where I normally would see the side of our synagogue building, there was now a huge wall of fire. So, it was obvious that our synagogue had been blown up and was now burning. I told my parents about it, ran back to the apartment, and they, of course, were quite shocked—as I was—they ordered me to stay indoors. We had a Christian landlady who offered to go out and find out what was happening. And she came back after a while and said, yes, the synagogue had been blown up, but also she reported that it seemed that all the Jewish men in Constance had been arrested by the Gestapo—the secret police. And, well, you know, the first question is why would they arrest these people, they're all good, honest—German Jews were extremely conscientious, extremely law-abiding—why would – what – what kind of reason would they have to arrest these people? And then another question came up, if they arrested all the German men in Constance, how come my father was still sitting here? So we – there was a myth in the early years of Nazi government that any veterans of World War One would be exempt from any sort of Nazi activities. So we thought, well, must that they realized my father was a decorated, wounded veteran of World War One, certainly they could not arrest him as an enemy of the German people—too many people in Constance knew him and knew of him. Then there was another possible explanation; that we had just moved into this apartment a few weeks earlier. Maybe they were looking for him in the previous place. And that turned out to be the correct

reason. Because right after lunch a – there was a knock on the door, it was two Gestapo agents that came to arrest my father. And they took him away. We know today what happened at the time, but at the time of this happening, we were completely dumbfounded. We had absolutely no idea of what was going on or why. We didn't know about this – what had happened in the embassy in France, we hadn't read the papers yet that day, we had no idea of what was happening or why. And we didn't know where my father was being taken, we didn't know what they would do to him, we didn't know whether – whether we'd ever see him again. We simply didn't know – didn't know whether they would come back and get the rest of us, too. So, we did as well as we could until, one day, there was another knock on our door and this time it was my father, who, fortunately, had been released and was – and was able to return home. And recovered after that.

LEVINE: What had transpired before *Kristallnacht*? In other words, before that happened, had your father had to close his business before that happened?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Oh, yes. Yes, long before then.

LEVINE: So you had had certain inklings, but you didn't—

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Well, he had to close his store, not because somebody held a gun to his head, but simply because there was—

LEVINE: [superposed] Customers weren't coming.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] No customers, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: And – but there had not been any violence in Constance—

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh.

OTTENHEIMER: Before this time. And even on *Kristallnacht,* you know, in – in all the towns and villages and cities in Germany, not only were synagogues blown up or d – or destroyed in other ways, not only were the – all the men – Jewish men above sixteen arrested and taken to concentration camp, but also there was a tremendous amount of destruction and looting in Jewish homes and Jewish stores, which is why they called it "The Night of Broken Glass." But in Constance, there was not one incident of destruction of individual property. Not one window was broken on *Kristallnacht.*

LEVINE: [superposed] Hm.

OTTENHEIMER: So we were saved that particular aspect of *Kristallnacht.*

LEVINE: Mhm. Now how long was your father kept in Dachau?

OTTENHEIMER: He was kept for about one month. The thirty thousand men, all over Germany, who were arrested that night were—those who survived the ordeal—were released again anywhere from one to six months after their arrest. At that time, the function of concentration camps was strictly incarceration, prison. It – they had not been converted into death camps yet. That camp after World War Two started. So this was simply a matter of harassment, of taking thirty thousand Jewish men who had d – done absolutely nothing wrong, locking them up under horrible conditions, and then letting them go again. It

was an act of harassment. They were not deliberately killing Jews yet, at that time. Of course, anybody who was disabled or sick or old when he was arrested didn't have much of a chance of surviving the conditions. But there had not been any gas chambers or crematoria yet in the concentration camps.

LEVINE: Was there labor? Did they had—

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] They were not – oh, they had some cases. They – uh – I – well, – re – let me collect my thoughts. The first occupants of concentration camps were not primarily Jews. They were the political opponents of the Nazi party and repeat offenders—violent criminals. In the initial years, those were the main prisoners in concentration camps.

LEVINE: So that's prior to when these thirty thousand—

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Yes, prior. Right, prior to – now, when the thirty thousand Jewish men came, that was really the greatest imprisonment of the Jewish people in Germany. Before that, it was usually for some cause—real or – or trumped up—individual Jewish people that went to concentration camps. But there was no mass incarceration up to that point. So when it was – when the prisoners were mostly political activists—and especially Communists but also Social Democrats and others—and criminals, they were sometimes leased out to industries or organizations, like for a dollar a day or something, to work there, under guard, and then be brought back to the concentration camp. But the slave labor camps that, too, was something that was set up after World War Two started.

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] So they were not really set up to put all these people to work that they arrested at that time. They gave them things to do—pull weeds, pick up garbage, things like that—just stuff – again, as part of making their life miserable. But not – they were not set up for really productive work the way they were after the war started.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And maybe you could talk a little bit about your friends, and how that changed. The friendships that you had as a young boy, or as a—

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] OK. Well, as I said, I was eight years old when Hitler arrived on the scene, and I was fourteen when I left Germany. Until *Kristallnacht*—until November 1938—I was still a student in the public school system. And, now in many towns in and cities in Germany—I would probably say most towns—Jewish kids had to leave public school much earlier than that, simply because of amount of harassment by the other students and by the teachers. They were beaten up on the way home every day, things like that. In Constance, this did not take place. The – the kids were really decent to me, right up to the end. Now, on *Kristallnacht,* one of the quote punishments unquote of the Jewish population was a law that Jews were not permitted to go to public schools anymore. So, at that time, I dropped out of school—November 1938. But, up to that time, the students, the – the – my classmates in school, my teachers, were very decent, tried to avoid and ignore as much of the propaganda as they could. We had to – for assemblies, we had to assemble in the gymnasium and listen to Hitler's speeches, sometimes, for an hour at a time. So, yes, they were forced – they had – they had to introduce a subject called *Rassenkunde*, which means "race study," as part of their – every school, as part of their curriculum. Which, of course,

talked about inferior and superior races and so forth. But, individually, the students and the teachers were not nasty toward us, in any way, towards the Jewish kids.

LEVINE: Hm. So there wasn't a Hitler Youth movement?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Oh, yes – oh, yes—

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh, there was?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] There was a Hitler Youth movement. And I always thought it was kind of amusing. They – the kids would go to the Hitler Youth meetings and they would do all kinds of exercises, and—some of it was strictly Boy Scout type activities, and, of course, it was a lot of propaganda. And they sang songs – they learned to sing songs—Hitler songs, anti-Semitic songs. Then the meeting was over and they would run home and they'd run next door and ring my doorbell and say, "Come on, let's play." They did not make the connection between this hypothetical Jew that they learned about in Hitler Youth meetings and little Fritz next door b – because obviously there was so much difference between the two.

LEVINE: Wow.

OTTENHEIMER: And – and it's – it's – it's interesting that in Constance, not in other towns—

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] In other towns, I think kids were the first to respond to the calls for hostility and hatred towards a minority population.

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: But, somehow this did not happen in Constance—at least not in my experience.

LEVINE: Mhm. How – could you address the idea of "the Jewish race"? Calling Jewish people a race—is that—

OTTENHEIMER: Well, I think for a lot of people it just didn't make sense, and that's why they didn't pay too much attention to it. There – when it was still possible to joke about the government in Germany, one of the jokes that made the rounds was the definition of an Aryan: an Aryan is as blonde as Hitler, as tall Goebbels, as slender as Göring—of course, Hitler was black-haired—

LEVINE: Right.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Göring was fat, Goebbels was – uh – and people thought that was funny! I don't know how – of course, when a kid is brought up in a school that teaches you, "This is a scientific fact about the races of mankind," then this becomes part of a scientific education. And, of course, that's the danger of propaganda and the effect it has on kids.

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: And kids were the prime target of German propaganda. But, I think to a lot of Germans, it – they kind of snickered and – and thought, "OK." But – but hostility and hatred does come through, even if scientific—pseudo-scientific—explanations don't. And it certainly had a

tremendous affect on the German people. They – they might not have bought into the race theory. I really never became much aware of the race theory when I was living there, a – after I came to the United States, then, what about – what did they say race? I don't know. But – but still, the – the hatred and the suspicion and the—you don't become a murderer overnight as a result of propaganda, but you learn to mistrust people that the government describes as untrustworthy—

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] As sneaky and devious. And even if you don't have the experience personally—in that respect, even if all your Jewish friends were honest and good people, it raises enough doubt in your mind about the other Jews—the ones you don't know.

LEVINE: [superposed] The ones you don't know.

OTTENHEIMER: To – not to want to murder them, but to keep from protecting them. (cough) I think that was the main harm that propaganda did—that people would not speak up for the Jews because, well, you never know, there must be something to it. This is a phrase we heard quite often—"There must be something to it."

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: The government would not be saying all these things if there wasn't some basis for it. And that raised enough suspicion, not to turn good people into murderers, but to turn good people into bystanders.

LEVINE: Oh.

OTTENHEIMER: Who would not take any action and defense of their Jewish friends.

LEVINE: And what about the economic climate in Germany? In your experience, was that a big factor in why so many non-Jewish Germans took this Hitler propaganda—because they needed, sort of, a reason to think that their life might change for the better?

OTTENHEIMER: Well, I would say that that was the main reason why Hitler came to power. It was not his anti-Semitic policies—which he made no secret of—but, the fact that the – they – people were getting very frustrated, very disgusted, with conditions. Conditions were terrible. They – they had the unemployment rate of around thirty percent at the time. And when people get unhappy—and especially when people get hungry and find that they're unable to feed their families—they're going to listen to anybody who promises them change. And they are very much aware of the fact that a change is needed—

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: Because obviously this cannot be the normal condition. So Hitler was very critical of the Weimar Republic and he was very critical of modernity, which was – seemed to be brought in by the Weimar Republic with all the political and sexual extremisms. And the good burghers of Germany wanted to go back to the old days of prosperity, hard work, and respect, and so on. And when Hitler promised them all that, they went for it. They may or may not have agreed with what he said about the Jews, but I think that was a secondary importance.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] The primary importance was they had to improve the terrible economic conditions. And also to some extent – extent it was their revolution against the social conditions that they were being brought in.

LEVINE: Mhm, mhm. OK, so, when your father came back, and then you realized – the family realized, "This is very serious, and we need to get out," what happened then? In your experience, in your family?

OTTENHEIMER: [pause] Well, we – I guess – I – I don't know. My guess is that my parents must've written to the relatives and told them, "Do everything you can to get us out of here." Which, of course, was Hitler's objective, too. At that point, the Final Solution had not been spelled out yet. At that point, they just wanted to get us out of Germany.

LEVINE: Could you've just gone to Switzerland?

OTTENHEIMER: (sighs) In the early years, yes. In the early years we could have. (cough) In August of 1938, the Swiss government closed the border and anyone who crossed the border illegally after that was arrested and handed over to the German police. But before August 1938, yes, we could have crossed over into Switzerland. We lived right on the border—we lived a ten minutes walk from the border of Switzerland—we knew exactly where the border was. It – it was not a – a huge obstacle, it was a little creek, and, in fact, we helped hundreds of people cross that little creek and escape into Switzerland—after Austria was taken over by Germany. Now—why didn't we go with them? A number of reasons. We had applied for immigration to the United States—expected any day to get permission to come to the United States—had no idea of how long we would have to wait. We – going to the United States we could've taken all our furniture and

clothing along, household objects and things. Had we crossed into Switzerland, we would've had to wade over that creek, leave everything behind, lose our place in line for immigration to the United States. Those people who did escape into Switzerland were not permitted to compete with the Swiss people for jobs—unless they had someone who could support them completely, they had to move into work camps, which were built by the Swiss government to hold these people, the refugees. Not as bad as concentration camps, but still not very pleasant places to live. And that brings me to the most important reason why we did not go to Switzerland during the early years—I mentioned before that there was no violence in Constance until *Kristallnacht*—1938. We had no idea of how violent things were going to get on *Kristallnacht*, how much more vicious things were going to get just two or three years later, during the Holocaust. If someone had told my parents about gas chambers and crematoriums and millions of Jewish people getting killed, they would have said, "You're out of your mind. This cannot happen in Germany." Until 1938, we were absolutely convinced that the German people would never permit that sort of thing to happen.

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: Had they convinced my parents that we were just years away—a few years away from this situation—we would have been the first ones across that creek. It's so easy nowadays to say, "Why didn't they do this, why didn't they do that?" Even as of the time that we left Germany—early 1939, before the war started—(cough) it would've been inconceivable for us to visualize what happened during the Holocaust, and to believe that this could happen. Even that late. Even for u – those of us who lived in Germany.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: Perhaps the benign atmosphere in Constance made it le – less plausible that this sort of thing could happen. Because it seemed like, yeah, the government is doing all kinds of things, but the people aren't behind them. Well, in Constance, they may not have been much behind the government, but in other cities and towns they sure were.

LEVINE: Mhm. In your research since that time, were there other little towns like Constance, where it wasn't as extreme as in other places?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] I—

LEVINE: That you're aware of?

OTTENHEIMER: Well, the village where my father was born—Wessingen, in Black Forest region—was pretty much the same sort of situation. It was one of the number of villages in Germany where half of the population was Jewish, a very strange situation. Overall in Germany, the Jewish population was less than one percent—

LEVINE: Oh.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Of the total population. But there were some villages that opened their doors to Jews when they were looking for a place to live. And the inrush of Jewish people into these villages—my father was born in one of those villages, my mother was born in one of those villages. Now, the place my father was born never was really anti-Semitic. And, in fact, they brought in people—the S.S. squad from ano – from another town—to build a fire in the synagogue, and

as soon as the S.S. squad ran out of the synagogue after setting the fire, the volunteer fire department dr – rushed in the back door and put out the fire. So they were – well, you know, the same sort of thing as – as in Constance, although for a completely different reason. And – but the town that my mother was born in, which was also a *Jüdendorf*—a Jew town, a Jew village—with half the population being Jewish—in that town it was horrible. It was just the opposite. They went out of their way to make life miserable as possible for the Jewish people. They – on *Kristallnacht* they dragged the people out of the nursing home and had them stand in front of the synagogue while they burned it down. People spat at them and threw rocks at them. So, you know, it's – it's hard to—

LEVINE: [superposed] It's hard to say---

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Generalize—

LEVINE: [superposed] Because that was a Swiss border town, wasn't it?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Yes, it was.

LEVINE: Your mother's town?

OTTENHEIMER: Yes, it was. It was right on the Swiss border, too.

LEVINE: Right.

OTTENHEIMER: And it – the same kind of population distribution of Jews and non-Jews, and yet, the exact opposite. So, I – I think – well – the village that my father was born in, the Jews and the gentiles all starved together, most of the time.

LEVINE: Oh, right.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] It was a very poor – the whole population was poor, there were no rich people in that village. The village that my mother was born in, the Jews were extremely successful. There were cattle dealers who did their business in Switzerland and who were very prosperous—anytime they – a Christian farmer ran out of money or had a bad harvest, Jews had the money to buy up the house. So, after a while, the Jews owned the best houses in town, had all kinds of money, had – the mayor was Jewish. And, so, it could've been a economic disparity problem that created a lot of anti-Semitism in this little village of Gailingen.

LEVINE: I guess there are lots of different reasons for every particular instance.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Lot of different – yes, yes. Right.

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: A lot depended on the population personality, you might say, of what was considered right, what was considered wrong, what – how the leaders of each community got along with each other and so forth.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: It's pretty complex—the interaction between people and what leads to various results.

LEVINE: Right. OK. So. Were your papers denied at first?

OTTENHEIMER: Yes, we went through formal procedure. My – our relatives in the United States made out an affidavit where they listed their income and their property and promised to take care of us, to the extent that we needed it. And they – then we sat and waited until our number came up. Then our number came up and we were invited to – for a final interview by the consul in Stuttgart, which was described as simply a formality.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: And when we came back from there, we got a letter saying that we had been rejected – that our application for immigration had been rejected. And we found out it was because my father had a stiff right arm—the result of an injury during World War One, when he was a German soldier. So we – they – American consul apparently did not think that my father had the ability to hold down a job and, therefore, we were a financial risk. We got a—it is my understanding—we got a supplemental affidavit. The primary affidavit – apparently my father's cousin, who made it out, was not wealthy enough to convince the American government that she could take care of us, if we needed that help. So then we got a supplemental insurance—I'm not sure from whom—from, apparently, another of our relatives. And then, a few months later, we were called for another interview, and this time we got permission to go to the United States—until we landed in New York, at which time apparently another official of the State Department or of the Department of Immigration and Naturalization reviewed our papers and decided that we were still not a reasonable risk for life in the United States. So we were refused permission to land; we had to go to Ellis Island. And – which is why you are here.

LEVINE: [superposed] Here, right.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Today.

LEVINE: Well – could you describe your feeling when the papers were finally approved and you knew you were leaving—

OTTENHEIMER: Well, of course we were quite – we had been – become quite desperate after *Kristallnacht*, and when we finally got permission to come to the United States we were completely joyful and relieved—and anxious to get out as fast as possible.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: And, on the other hand—for the same reasons—when we were told that we had to go to Ellis Island and we could not land in New York City; that was a horrendous shock to my parents. I don't think I understood the situation quite well. But – see, that's the same thing that I mentioned before. Today, we have all kinds of good things that we can say, "Why didn't people do that and the other thing?" People didn't know what was happening, people didn't – certainly did not know what was going to happen. When we were told to go to – take our hand baggage and go to Ellis Island, no one told us what Ell – Ellis Island was all about. We had no idea what – why we couldn't land, why we couldn't go to New York. Why we had to go to this place. And we were taken by boat to this island in the middle of New York harbor and ordered to go into the building, under guard. And, then—once we got into this building—then there were interviews and questions. And we had no idea what this place was all about.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: And didn't know how to respond to this.

LEVINE: Was your father, in particular, given extensive physical examination? Do you remember that?

OTTENHEIMER: I – I don't remember that. You know, we—

LEVINE: I mean, he obviously was a productive worker—

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Yes he was, he was.

LEVINE: [superposed] But that was given as the reason, but it seems odd that the United States would've thought that way.

OTTENHEIMER: Well, I guess United States acted mostly on the basis of paper. "What does it say here, it's says that he has a stiff right arm as a result of a war injury. Well, stiff right arm, OK, so, that means you can't use your right arm." Well, actually, my father used his right arm, it was just stiff—he couldn't bend the elbow, but he would carry suitcases and do all kinds of things with his right arm—and both arms, of course. (cough) But somebody must – apparently looked at the description on paper and, "Oh, this man has a – how come he was permitted to come if he can't use his right arm?" And changed his mind. Changed the mind of the American government.

LEVINE: Hm.

OTTENHEIMER: So, that – now, you know, I was a kid. Fourteen years old. And my – my parents, I'm sure, were questioned. While my parents were questioned, I sat in this huge hall, reading magazines or playing

games or doing something. I was not privy to these negotiations or whatever was going on.

LEVINE: Now, did you family members come to Ellis Island? Were they there at the time that all the questioning was going on about your father's arm?

OTTENHEIMER: I – I don't know when all the questioning was going on, so I – I don't know what the timing was.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah. If they were there. Uh-huh.

OTTENHEIMER: My sister had come to the United States a year earlier, and she did come to visit us – she was permitted to visit us at Ellis Island—not while we were still on the ship, but in Ellis Island. And some of our relatives came to visit us.

LEVINE: Oh.

OTTENHEIMER: And we were treated very cordially, very politely, but, still, it was a jail of sorts.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: And we were not permitted to leave the hall, normally, there were guards. And then I remember that in the evening we were escorted – we were allowed to go to a – an adjacent big room, which was a dining area, and we ate there. And I thought the food was very good. I remember, I liked the food. They fed us well. I think word got around that the – the ship company, the Ar – United States—

LEVINE: The S. S. Washington? The ship you came on?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Well, the – the – the company that owned this.

LEVINE: [superposed] Uh-huh.

OTTENHEIMER: United States Lines, I think it was called. That they had to pay for keeping us at Ellis Island. So, the food was good—it was not gourmet food, but it was good, especially since things had been kind of tight in Germany before we came over. So – and there was plenty of food. But we were always under guard. We had to stay in one room or another. After dinner we went back to the big room and then when it bed – bedtime came, we were ordered to go to the sleeping area.

LEVINE: As a family, or did you – were you divided?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] No, the men and boys went to one area, the girls and women went to another area. And there adjacent rooms, a huge room for – with beds, bunk beds, and an adjoining room with showers and sinks and toilets. And, so, we had what we needed to stay alive, but we were not permitted to leave. And there – the windows were—I wouldn't say they had bars, steel bars, but they had a heavy wire screens, like, oh, I guess eighth inch wires. Criss-crossing. So that it wasn't like a jail, a jail, I guess generally has—

LEVINE: Bars.

OTTENHEIMER: Bars. But there was definitely – you – you looked out the windows through those wire screens and you could see the Statue of Liberty

on the next island. The symbol of freedom. And here we were, being—

LEVINE: [superposed] Stuck. Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: So, I think my parents always made an effort to shield me from hatred, from worry, from danger, to the extent that they were able to.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: And perhaps there was more anti-Semitism in Constance than I was aware of. And perhaps my parents were able to keep me from realizing this, so I could only judge from my own environment, which was the school environment. And the same way—when we got to Ellis Island, I think my parents – I was aware of the fact that they were extremely worried about having to go back to Germany, the possibility. And they – they simply could not hide that worry from me. But, at the same time, they tried to reassure me that, "Hey, we have relatives here, they're going to take care of us. They're going to solve whatever problem this is." And, well, that's how it turned out.

LEVINE: Now, how long were you there?

OTTENHEIMER: One week.

LEVINE: One week. Was it crowded?

OTTENHEIMER: It was not very crowded at that time. Well, the way I would judge whether it was crowded was the sleeping area had many, many, many bunk beds. In general, only the first level of bunk beds—

LEVINE: Oh.

OTTENHEIMER: Was not even completely filled. So there was room there for probably three times as many people as there were at the time. We were told at – at one – I don't know whether this was true or not, but we were told at one time a lot of Chinese immigrants were kept at Ellis Island. Now, I would expect Chinese immigrants to be kept somewhere on the West Coast, but – so that was simply a rumor. But it definitely was not filled to capacity.

LEVINE: And who – do you have any sense of who was there?

OTTENHEIMER: There were quite a few people from Germany—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

OTTENHEIMER: And walking around, sitting around the big room, the big hall, we met quite a few people who came from Germany and were – the same situation that we were. I did meet one little Chinese boy who was about the same age as I was and – which – we became friends of sorts, even though he couldn't speak English, I couldn't speak English, he couldn't speak German, I couldn't speak Chinese. So we did everything by sign (LEVINE laughs) and gestures. But we got along real well. So I know there was at least one Chinese kid.

LEVINE: [superposed] Chinese. Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: Now, whether they were a lot of them, I don't remember.

LEVINE: [superposed] It's not what you remember seeing.

OTTENHEIMER: It's not what I remember.

LEVINE: [superposed] No. Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: And I might not have paid attention to—

LEVINE: [superposed] Right.

OTTENHEIMER: What those people were. I – well – there are times when I've said I could've ex – enjoyed this experience more if I'd known how it was going to end up.

LEVINE: [superposed] Turn out.

OTTENHEIMER: But at the time, we were preoccupied with what was going on, and were not—

LEVINE: Relaxed (laughs).

OTTENHEIMER: Not relaxed enough to take notes or – or even to make mental notes of what was happening to us.

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: We just wanted to get the hell out of there.

LEVINE: Were your family members who were sponsoring you—do you think they were aware of the dire conditions in Germany, and in Europe, more, perhaps, than you were, because of news and information?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] No, no. It's just the opposite. They were not aware of how bad the situation was getting to be. They just knew that we were being discriminated against. Now, some of our relatives had come over after Hitler came to power, in the early years, so they had a pretty good inkling of the atmosphere of the (cough) hatred that was being spread around in Germany. But my parents wrote a letter to my mother's brother who was our wealthiest relative in the United States. He had a wholesale business in Ohio, and my parents wrote to him, explaining the situation, that there was no future for us in Germany, we have to get out. His response was, "The United States is in a state of depression. [background noise] Even those American-born people who speak their – who speak English as their language of birth, and who are in full possession of their health, have trouble finding a job. What chance would you have, with your inability to speak English and you stiff right arm? Your chances are much better in Germany, make the best of the situation. Stay there, don't come to the United States." (throat noise) Obviously he was not aware—

LEVINE: [superposed] Aware. Right.

OTTENHEIMER: Of the seriousness of the situation. To some extent we weren't even aware of it. But he was completely ignorant of what was happening. Then when my parents wrote again pleading with him, he offered to sponsor my sister, who was sixteen years old at the time, and that's all. He didn't think that the rest of the family were a good financial risk. And – so that's – then, after that, we turned to my father's cousin in Chicago, and she agreed to sponsor us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

OTTENHEIMER: But then, at the end, when we got to Ellis Island, we did turn to my uncle in Ohio and told him the situation. He immediately flew to New York with his attorney, posted a fifteen hundred dollar bond for the three of us, and got us released from Ellis Island. So, by this time, of course, he realized that there was no way he could say, "Well, you're not really in trouble."

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: And he did come through with what was needed to get us out of there – out of Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Wow. I'm just going to pause for a sec. OK. So. That must've (laughs) that must've been an enormous, really.

OTTENHEIMER: That was – that was our arrival in the great United States.

LEVINE: And then what transpired? Once you got the word that you were free to leave and come in to the country? What happened next?

OTTENHEIMER: Well, of course, that was as a joyful and unexpected a surprise as was our retention at Ellis Island—a shock, in the first place.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah, right.

OTTENHEIMER: My uncle – well, we – we packed our hand baggage immediately and took a ferry back to New York. Our – m – my uncle and his lawyer flagged down a cab and we all got into the cab and my uncle took me to – took us to a place in town where he had some business to take care of, as long as he was in town. And he told us to wait in the cab while he and his lawyer went up into this building. I still remember

very distinctly that we were sitting in the cab—still couldn't figure out what happened, or why—and the cab driver got out of the cab and walked up the block to a store—I guess it was a supermarket of some sort—and came back with a bag of oranges which he gave to us as a welcoming present in the United States. He – I guess had been told by my uncle what we were here for. And I still remember, many years later, that this was our first welcoming gift.

LEVINE: [superposed] Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: By this cab driver.

LEVINE: Right.

OTTENHEIMER: So then later, when my uncle came back, they dropped us off at New York relative's place. Mean time, my sister, who had gotten a job—as a sixteen-year-old girl in New York—and who had saved all the money that she made, which wasn't very much, until a year later when we arrived. She rented an apartment for us in the Bronx and we now were able to get our furniture and everything moved into this apartment. And we moved in and that was our first home in the United States.

LEVINE: [superposed] Wow. And can you remember any of your first impressions in this country, were there some things that struck you in particular as—I mean everything was new, but—

OTTENHEIMER: Everything was new, and – everything was kind of difficult because of the problem with communicating with people. I – I would say that was the most important difference.

LEVINE: [superposed] Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Is here people spoke a different language. And we had to go shopping, we had to do all kinds of things, without knowledge of the language. But, fortunately, Yiddish is close enough to German so that people could communicate with us, with some difficulty, but we were able to get along.

LEVINE: So you had spoken German, but not Yiddish.

OTTENHEIMER: That's correct.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

OTTENHEIMER: We did not – oh, we had a few Jewish expressions. Things like *ganuf* [thief] and *key* – *keyle* [prison]. And a few Hebrew words mixed in with German when we were talking among ourselves. But our conversational language was definitely German—the local dialect of German.

LEVINE: Right.

OTTENHEIMER: And we also, in school, learned the formal High German. But there was no English instruction in the school I went to. And what we learned from a couple of books that we bought was things like, hello, goodbye; thank you, you're welcome; one, two, three, four, five. That was about it – that was bout the extent of our knowledge of English. So my parents – we arrived in May, and my parents immediately took me down to the local public school. They wanted me to get back into school immediately; that was one of their worries—I had been

missing school since the previous November. So it was just before the end of the school year, and here I—

LEVINE: (laughs) Started school.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Started school again. They went into the principal's office – I guess a neighbor of ours who had come from Germany went with us and acted as interpreter. And – well, in those days – nowadays, most schools—or big city schools—have remedial courses, English as a second language, helping people who come from other countries. No such thing, in those days, the only concession they made was that they – well, I should've been finishing eighth grade at this time, they put me in seven A. Somehow they felt that by being with younger kids I would learn English better than by being with kids of my age. I – I'm not sure what the – what the reasoning was for that. But that's how they handled the people from other countries—was to stick them in with younger kids.

LEVINE: And how was that for you, going to school without the language?

OTTENHEIMER: It was not a pleasant experience. The kids thought it was funny when I talked or when I couldn't understand what the teacher was saying. They made fun of me at times and they mimicked and they – kids can be cruel that way, they don't understand. At the same time, this motivated me to learn English as fast as possible, because I had to get out of this situation of being laughed at and teased. So it didn't take me very long to learn English.

LEVINE: So you stayed in school for how long?

OTTENHEIMER: I stayed in school – well, I finished public school, skipped a term, fortunately, but was still behind my age group. Then came time to go to high school—my parents did not want me to get a job, they wanted me to concentrate on my studies, on my – on learning.

LEVINE: Even though they themselves were working very hard.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] They themselves were working very hard, very tough jobs. Cleaning jobs. My mother cleaned for various families, different days of the week. My father was a porter in a movie theatre. But they wanted me to concentrate on schoolwork. And they saw this as the chance of getting our family back on its feet. And when I – as I finished public school, it was time to go to high school, and I ended up going to a very selective high school in New York City—Bronx High School of Science—which requires entrance examinations, and only the top so many percent are admitted. Everybody was quite shocked to find out that this little refugee boy in P.S. 73 was now admitted to Bronx High School of Science.

LEVINE: And how did you feel when you were accepted?

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Well, this did wonders for my self-esteem. And I guess it probably horrified the kids that were not admitted to Bronx High School of Science who had been making fun of me before that. So it – it was an important part of my return to self-confidence.

LEVINE: Would you say you were – how would you describe yourself—your personality—as a fourteen-year-old, when you first came? Before—

OTTENHEIMER: Oh, I was very timid. I was very – even in Germany. I guess that's one of the things that the Nazi propaganda did to me was to kind of

make me draw back into a shell and I was not good at making friends, at interacting with other people except for the people that I knew from class, that I knew personally. So in – in Germany I was the outsider because I was Jewish, in America I was the outsider because I talked funny. And I guess some of the anti-German propaganda of the – prevalent in America at that time, in response to Hitler's—

LEVINE: Right.

OTTENHEIMER: Some of that was probably also projected to me by some of the kids. Came – when America entered the war, when – after Pearl Harbor, after America was attacked, we became enemy aliens. We were officially classified and had to register as enemy aliens because we came from Germany. So the fact that we were persecuted in Germany at first did not make any difference to the American bureaucracy. We came from Germany so we were enemy aliens. This created a bureaucratic problem but most people knew why we were in America and why we had come from Germany. And it really didn't make that much difference [background noise] later. After I finished high school I became a member of the U.S. Army, registered for the draft, and after I passed my physical I got the point in a procedure where they had to inform me that since I was not an American citizen I could not be forced to be in the United States Army—they could not draft me unless I—

LEVINE: [superposed] Became—

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] [background noise] Agreed to being drafted. So they gave me this document, waiving my rights as a foreign national, and I

signed the waived and therefore – thereby became a member of the U.S. Army.

LEVINE: Did it occur to you that maybe you shouldn't sign it? That maybe, you know, you didn't have to serve, really.

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Well, you know, fi – the war was still going on, and fighting in the war is not the most interesting, most enjoyable experience in the world. It's damn dangerous, (LEVINE laughs) for a soldier. But, on the other hand, I had a better reason for fighting against Germany than any of the American people did. Because I had experienced the hatred of the Nazi regime, whereas Americans had only read about it in the newspapers and heard about it on the radio. So, to me, there was no choice. I had to. If I could stay out of the army, than what right did they have to draft all these American kids into the army?

LEVINE: And did you become a citizen then—once you signed up to go into the army?

OTTENHEIMER: Well, during basic training I was taken to a courthouse and I was given citizenship at that time. I guess it was about halfway through the basic training experience. And I became an American citizen. So, I – I think a lot of the other G.I.s and other recruits were intrigued by the idea of this man who was brought up in Germany now being trained to fight against Germany. And I was sent over to Europe, just about the time the Allies entered Germany, near the end of the war, and took part in the final drive across Germany at the end of the war. Which I was very happy—doesn't mean I wasn't scared—but I was proud of the fact that I could now be part of this operation, of defeating the Nazi government.

LEVINE: And that, of course, is all written in your book—

OTTENHEIMER: Mhm.

LEVINE: [superposed] Which is entitled Escape and Return, and this was the return part.

OTTENHEIMER: That's right.

LEVINE: So, how do you think your being in Germany towards the end of the war and after the victory, how did that influence your whole picture, now, of what happened? I mean, in the beginning, you were really persecuted there, and then you come in as, what—a rescuer, in a sense.

OTTENHEIMER: In a sense. Or conqueror, or liberator. But the idea certainly appealed to me and it certainly gave me a feeling of accomplishment, gratitude. That I had the opportunity to close the loop, as it were, and get back at the Nazi government. Particularly after the war was over, I was transferred into military government and—Special Branch of Military Government, that was the name of this department—which was concerned with de-Nazification, with screening people for positions in the German government, positions with American army units, positions in education and police force and so forth. To make sure that the same Nazis who had these positions before would not get back into the same jobs. (cough) It was only partly effective—successful—at getting rid of the Nazis from those positions. But, I think, to the extent that it was successful it was a very important step in post-war Germany. And it gave me a chance to interact with some pretty terrible Nazis.

LEVINE: Was there a feeling – I think it must be human nature – in a way, you got revenge. In a certain sense.

OTTENHEIMER: In a way, I – yeah.

LEVINE: Revenge is—

OTTENHEIMER: [superposed] Sometimes—

LEVINE: Has more of a negative sound than I think—

OTTENHEIMER: Y – yeah, well, you know, someone who, say, was in Auschwitz and was liberated at the end of the war must've had a horrible hatred of all things Germans because his only contact with Germans was with the S.S. guards.

LEVINE: Oh.

OTTENHEIMER: And for them to hate all things German must've been a liberating feeling at the end of the war. I did not have this luxury. From my own experience, I knew that some Germans were very good people. Some Germans were horrible people. And I had to make the distinction between the two—I did not have the privilege of hating everything German because some of my best friends, as kids, were Germans, and remained my friends. And, so, revenge, I guess—retribution might be a better word. Or selective punishment.

LEVINE: Why don't you mention some of the kinds of decisions that you personally had to make? Which, actually, of all kinds of people, you were perhaps the best to be in those decision making positions,

because of what you just said. That you knew both sides, so you really could weigh them.

OTTENHEIMER: I – well – gave me the ability to write a book, for one thing. And there were occasions with my army unit that I was assigned to initially—as well as during military government work—when I came across some perpetrators and some persecuted people, and was able to distinguish between the two and treat them what I considered to be appropriately. [pause] I – I think I paid more attention to helping the survivors, even though that was done in my spare time, rather than during duty. I paid more attention to helping the survivors than I did to punishing the guilty people. We – in military government we had very specific rules of how to treat the Nazi activists, there – it was done strictly by organizational connections. If someone was a member of the Nazi party during certain years—when it was a privilege to be a Nazi party member, rather than duty—then that was punished. If you were an official in a Nazi organization, that was punished. What kind of punishment? First—and lowest level—you didn't get the job you were applying for. A little higher level, you – your property would be seized – would be confiscated and, in many cases, handed over to the victims. In some cases, there was automatic arrest category—members of the S.S., members of the Gestapo, high off – officials of the party or of Nazi organizations were automatically arrested and – for further investigation, for war crimes investigation. Now, when the war was still going on I was with a company – with a unit which – our – our duty was to follow behind the armored column. The tanks would forge ahead, into Germany, capture a city, and keep moving, and we would move in right behind them, to the city, and kind of clean up.

LEVINE: Which meant what?

OTTENHEIMER: Round up prisoners of war, move them to prisoners-of-war camp, restore normal functioning to the city—in terms of putting out fires and renewing water and whatever else – food delivery, and so forth—get rid of the Nazi mayor and replace him with a – well, we didn't see many anti-Nazis, but at least a non-political person. And then—this would take about eight – about five or six days—and then we would all pile on to our trucks and move on to the next city that had just been conquered by the armored column. And there were a number of security guard detachments like that, and we would sort of leap-frog behind the ar – armored columns. And in some cases there were accusations of somebody had done something wrong, we would have to look into that quickly and arrest anyone who had been involved, and that sort of thing. Not a thorough investigation—we would hand them over to military police or the C.I.C., at that time—Counter Intelligence Corps—and they would take it from there. So there was also a matter of handling the displaced persons. As we moved across Germany, the – there were millions of people who had been brought into Germany as forced laborers, as prisoners, and so on, who were now liberated. And they all wanted to go home, and, of course, they couldn't all go home—the streets were all clogged, transportation wasn't available. So we helped to control and to register the flow of displaced persons—who were mostly Allied lib – Allied nationals, but also people from Romania, Hungary, that were not considered Allies—they were allies of Germany. So th – there was – there were all kinds of complications and things that – some things had to be done immediately, some things had to be put under control until they could be done later. So—

LEVINE: Do you remember when you heard that the war was over?

OTTENHEIMER: Yes, we were in Weiden—in Bavaria—at that time. By that time, it was pretty obvious that the war was practically over. There were some units still fighting and, interestingly, some German army units in Czechoslovakia were still fighting when the German country was practically in All – Allied hands. And they were still fighting over there. But it was just a nominal a – attempt, they just didn't know when to quit—because they were waiting for orders, and such. But before – even before V.E. Day it had become pretty obvious that the Germans – well, we had run all the way across the country and cut it in half. So, what – what's left to fight for?

LEVINE: And so then what happened? How did your duties change then—once victory was declared, and you were still there, in the army?

OTTENHEIMER: Then we – well, actually, I ended up in Czechoslovakia—in what was the German speaking part of Czechoslovakia, Sudetenland—and I was loaned out to the local government as sort of a liaison person between military and civilian government. The civilian administration was turned over to civilians—mostly Czech people—and, so I got a desk and a secretary and – and – was real pleasant, very nice. Not much to do, just give people advice on who to see for their various problems.

LEVINE: Ah.

OTTENHEIMER: And so on. So it – the army unit that I was with – the others that couldn't – didn't have the language capability, they returned to more or less the camp type experience, where they had to stay put and get back to G.I. activities. But since I knew e – German language, I got some more interesting jobs to do. There were – in – in our detachment of fifty people there were three of us who could speak

German—so obviously, we were kept pretty busy, with our language. Although we also did patrols, walked patrols during the nights and during the days, in the various places that we had just taken over. So we had military duties in addition to the translation, and so on.

LEVINE: Well we need to finish off here, but there's so much. Now that you've – now that time has passed and you've written your book—which I want to say again, is Escape and Return—and it is going to be in the Ellis Island Library, for anyone interested, and – but just the whole experience, time passing, and also the writing of the book. How does the whole experience set with you now—at this point in time?

OTTENHEIMER: Well, people sometimes ask me—I – I became a speaker for the Holocaust center in Pittsburgh and speak to many groups, mostly school groups—and they ask me sometimes, how has my experience affected my outlook, my attitudes, my personality. And I think that I am calmer in the face of crisis than most other people, much to the frustration of my wife, who gets upset about all kinds of things, and gets upset because I don't get upset. But – I had a job which involved some high stress responsibility—designing high pressure, high temperature equipment and supervising the use of this equipment, and any time something went wrong there was always the possibility that something could blow up and kill a few people. So I tend not fall apa – not to fall apart under those conditions. I think there is a general feeling of, well, I went through all that and I got out of it OK, whatever comes up I'll be able to handle. Which may be illusory – it may not be realistic, but it's worked so far. I have many thoughts about how this could've happened in Germany, about human nature, about how Germany – German people acted—and failed to act—and, yes, I spend a lot of time thinking about that and

observing people who are acting or failing to act in crisis that are coming up nowadays.

LEVINE: Mhm.

OTTENHEIMER: I guess I've become (coughs) a little cynical about people, about their ideals, and about their education, and about the morals and how long they – what they will do to defend them. I'm grateful that I survived everything, that I avoided some of the worst events that other people were subjected to. I'm grateful that now, at age eighty-two, I'm still able to get around and remember things. So, it's – it's a mixture of optimism, skepticism, faith, and realization that God doesn't punish or reward people—we have to do the rewarding and the punishing. Contrary to what I learned as a kid, God is not the good policemen. It simply did not get confirmed as a base – as a result of my experience, where many terrible people had happy, many wonderful people lost their lives under terrible conditions. I'm still learning, I'm still trying to find answers to some of my questions.

LEVINE: Yeah.

OTTENHEIMER: My book appeared in Germany—in the German language—with the title *Wie hat das geschehen können*, which means "how could it have happened," relating to the Holocaust—I haven't come up with a really good answer for that one yet.

LEVINE: [superposed] [not understood] [background noise] Will you permit one last question?

OTTENHEIMER: Please. (LEVINE laughs)

LEVINE: What do think you learned about human nature—I'm sure you can't cover all of human nature—but some aspects that came out in this very dramatic historical moment that you saw both sides of, really.

OTTENHEIMER: Well, I've learned not to rely on human nature too much. I often say that when we study the Holocaust we're really studying human nature—we're not just studying German nature—we're studying human nature, of how people respond to certain conditions, how people act, and react, under certain conditions. And I do not go along with Goldhagen's claim that the Holocaust was strictly a almost genetic German event. I think (cough) – I have met many wonderful German people after the war, who are very much concerned about what happened during their parents' or grandparents' time in Germany. I lived through—in my earliest life—through a time when Germany was the most – one of the most civilized, cultured nations in the world. And during twelve years while Hitler was in power, everything was turned upside down. And, no, it's not just the German personality, I'm afraid it's a weakness—not a tendency, but a weakness—in human nature. And I am convinced today that the vast majority of Germans during Hitler's time were not extremely cruel, were not extremely good, the vast majority of Germans were ordinary people leading ordinary lives, and permitting the murderers to do their murdering. And I think that is the biggest problem that was revealed in the study of the Holocaust. How do you get people to fight for their moral beliefs? How do you get people to risk helping their neighbors, helping people that are being unjustly treated? If we could learn to do that we wouldn't have to worry about the murderers. But the murderers do their work because people allow them to do it—because people see what's happening or realize what's happening, but don't want to get involved—turn away from it, want to mind their own business. And that's the danger of today's world, as it was the

danger at that time. How do you get people to recognize injustice and to do something about it before it's too late?

END OF INTERVIEW