EI-164
ROSEMARIE OSER WOLFF
BIRTH DATE: OCTOBER 24, 1930
INTERVIEW DATE: 6/1/1992
RUNNING TIME: 59:53
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 12/1993
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 3/1994

AUSTRIA, 1939 PORT: HAMBURG
AGE 8 RESIDENCES: AUSTRIA: VIENNA
US: UNIN CITY, NJ; NYC

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: MS. WOLFF IS INTERVIEWED TOGETHER WITH HER COUSIN GERDA ERMAN, WHOSE FAMILY WAS HERE IN AMERICA AND MET THE OSER FAMILY UPON THEIR ARRIVAL. PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., DIRECTOR OF THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, 5/18/1993.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here today, it's June 1, 1992, and we're in the Oral History Studio at Ellis Island. Our honored guest today being interviewed is Rosemarie Wolff, whose maiden name was Oser, who came from Austria in 1939 when she was eight years old. This will be a rather unique interview inasmuch as Rosemarie Wolff's cousin Gerda Erman, whose maiden name was Pick, is here with her today and will be able to provide the other side or the other perspective to the arrival here of Rosemarie and her family because Gerda was here one year prior to that time. She arrived in 1938 from Austria when she was nine years old. So welcome. I'm very happy to have both of you here today.

WOLFF: Thank you.

ERMAN: We're delighted to be here.

WOLFF: Yes, we are.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, why don't we start, Rosemarie, by your giving me your birth date.

WOLFF: October 24, 1930.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

WOLFF: In Vienna, Austria.

LEVINE: And did you live in Vienna until you left for the United States?

WOLFF: Yes, all the time, the whole time.

LEVINE: And who were you living with? What was your family composed of?

WOLFF: I lived with my father and my mother, and we lived in a little suburb. Although it was Vienna, it was in the more residential area rather than the main part of the city. My father had a, what was called a haberdashery store. He had two of them. One in

Vienna, and one in a place called Moedling which was about ten miles outside of Vienna.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

WOLFF: M-O-E-D-L-I-N-G. And we lived in a very beautiful apartment building. I went to school a few blocks from my apartment building. And my memories of childhood were very, very happy. I was very well treated. We were comfortable, very well off. I wouldn't say we were rich, but we were very, very comfortable. We had help at home. I had a governess. We had a cook. My father, who had been ill, he had had a colostomy, was not able to work all the time, so my mother helped him in the store. Although he was able to work, he wasn't able to work full time all the time because he had a number of operations.

LEVINE: And you were an only child?

WOLFF: I was an only child. And my mother always said because of the colostomy that was the reason why I have no sisters or brothers.

LEVINE: Can you describe the place where you lived, the apartment?

WOLFF: Yes, it was a very large apartment. It had a beautiful entry-way. It had a very large living room, dining room, three bedrooms, and we had a live-in, so there must have been another room for the governess, who lived in. As I say, my mother had to work, so I had to have somebody, because I was little. I did go to kindergarten. I went to an English kindergarten, but I don't think I learned any English (she laughs) but I had a good time.

LEVINE: What was it like having a governess? What are you memories of that?

WOLFF: Well, I called here Teta, and she was very stern looking, but she really wasn't stern, and she was with me for five years I think. And then finally, and I remember my mother telling me this maybe seven, eight years ago, that they let her go and felt that I didn't, shouldn't have anybody any more, that I was a big girl and I shouldn't have anybody. But she was with us for quite a while. And she took me to the park, and she would take me with her to visit her family on vacation, and my mother would run after me because she was afraid something would happen to me in the country when I went with the governess. She was

dressed like a hospital nurse. I have a picture of her with me, like a sister, we called it, as a hospital nurse. That was how her uniform looked, very foreboding.

LEVINE: And what about your playmates? Do you recall . . .

WOLFF: Oh, yes. I had a lot of friends. I remember there was a set of twins. In fact, they're both in this country now, but I have lost track of them. I have one very, very dear girlfriend. Her name was Suzie. And she emigrated to South America and I never saw her again. Then there was another family in our building. There were two boys, and at that time they went to Shanghai, and I think they're in Australia, but I'm not sure. But I had a lot of friends. I was a very outgoing precocious little girl. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Do you remember the kinds of games that you played, or do you remember anything about activities?

WOLFF: Well, I remember playing in the park and on the playground, playing all kinds of games, outdoor games. We lived, as I said, in a wooded, pretty suburban area, so we had parks and we had lots of greenery and we had a beautiful, the apartment has a gorgeous

backyard where we could sit and play, and played all the regular childhood games. I don't recall any particular names of them, but they were children's games.

LEVINE: And how about your mother and father? What were they like, as you remember them from your childhood in Austria?

WOLFF: My father was a very, very loving, very, very, very loving man. I was the apple of his eye, and I don't think there could have ever been a father who adored a child more than my father did. My mother was an interesting person. I don't know how to describe her. She was bright. I imagine it was quite difficult for her living with my father's illness. I didn't realize that until many, many years later. She was a kind of an introverted, well, she wasn't introverted, but she was, how would you describe her? It's very difficult to say.

LEVINE: Her perspective?

WOLFF: She had a difficult personality. Not as outgoing or friendly, at least that I could see, although she always said she had a lot of boyfriends when she was

younger and a lot of friends. She didn't have that warm personality that my dad had, and that caused her many problems in later years where she developed a severe depression and was depressed from the time I was seventeen till the time she died at eighty-seven. So this was part, this was the only way I could describe the personality. I don't remember her that way as a child, but she was working most of the time. I don't remember my relationship with her as much as I do with my dad. Maybe because he was home more because he was ill.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name and maiden name?

WOLFF: My mother's name was Maryann Pick. And she was, she was one of three children. Her mother had been widowed at thirty-nine. And she had a brother. His name was Rudolph. And she had a younger sister named Hedy. Her brother was exactly one year older than she was to the day. My grandmother was a wonderful woman. She, my mother's mother was a marvelous woman. I adored her, and she adored me and my cousin, and it was a fabulous relationship. She adored my children later on. She lived to be eighty-four, and so she knew both my children, and it was, she was a wonderful

person. I remember her very fondly.

LEVINE: And did you have extended family living near you in Vienna?

WOLFF: Prior to the war, my father was one of nine children, so he had lots of sisters and brothers and a lot of nephews and nieces, so I had a lot of cousins, some of whom I was in contact with until they passed away. I think the last, I still have one living in Australia, but I have not seen her. On my mother's side, of course, there was the brother and the sister, and the brother has one daughter, Gerda, who is here with me today. And we were very close as children and we still are, even though we live three thousand miles apart we're still very close. She's like a sister to me.

LEVINE: And how about religious life? Was your family religious?

WOLFF: Yes. Not in the sense that we attended services on a regular basis, but religious, yes. Probably your father, my cousin's father was extremely religious. But we practiced it, we belonged to a temple in the neighborhood. I went to religious school, but we

didn't, it wasn't where we observed every weekend, but we were an observant family, observed the holidays and, yes, definitely. Both my parents were.

LEVINE: And so did you remember each other, you knew each other then . . .

WOLFF: Yes. Oh, we played frequently and we saw each other frequently. It was a very close family, a very close family.

LEVINE: I see. So you were sort of like sisters from the very beginning.

WOLFF: Even though Gerda lived downtown. You have to think of it in terms of New York City and Englewood Cliffs, which is where Gerda lives now. She lived in New York City, I lived in Englewood Cliffs. She lived in downtown Vienna, in reverse, yes, and I lived in Hietzing, which was the Thirteenth District. That's where I grew up. The other store was in Moedling, but I lived in H-I-E-T-Z-I-N-G. And it was called the Thirteenth District or the Thirteenth Bezirk. Bezirk is a district in German.

LEVINE: Well, Gerda, maybe, is there any, when you think of

your childhood before coming to the United States, what are the things that you remember most from Vienna?

ERMAN: Well, I lived in the inner city in the first district which was like perhaps living on Madison Avenue in New York City. I lived a different life, because naturally it wasn't suburban, but we did have a playground right across the street. Our mutual grandmother lived right across the street from us, so I saw her every day. Rosemarie came regularly, you know, many weekends, and we went to visit her. And in a sense we were like sisters because we're both only children, and we're one-and-a-half years apart in age, so it was a very natural relationship, and with her father being sick, I think when Rosemarie's father had surgery I think at times Rosemarie might have stayed with us, or certainly with our grandmother, and we played together a good deal.

LEVINE: How do you remember your grandmother?

ERMAN: Oh, as a loving, delightful person. As a matter of fact she lived with us from, she came to the United States in February '39, and she lived with us until

she died at the age of eighty-four in 1960. The years I was growing up as a teenager, we shared a room. We had a two-bedroom apartment in Manhattan in the Inwood section. And my parents, you know, my father was getting settled. He made a very good living very quickly in the United States, but, you know, space was limited, so we shared a room. But it was a pleasure to share a room with her. She spoiled me a good deal. I never had to make a bed or anything else. But, you know, sharing a room, I do everything. So, the first time I ever had a key, I believe, was when I got married. (she laughs)

LEVINE: What was your grandmother's name?

ERMAN: Olga Pick, Olga Newman Pick, her maiden name.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's see. Well, now, so your family, Gerda came over first?

ERMAN: Yes, exactly, a year before Rosemarie to the day.

LEVINE: Do you remember the situation before the family decided to come?

ERMAN: Ah, well, we, as I . . .

LEVINE: What prompted it exactly?

ERMAN: The arrival of Hitler. As soon as Hitler marched into Vienna my father said, "I'm not staying." And everybody thought he was kind of insane. I mean, here he had a secure, well-paying executive position and he was taking off for a strange continent where he really didn't speak the language. He learned English in school, but it was the typical school English. And he had a mother he was supporting, and my father said, "We're leaving," and he made arrangements right away. Both Rosemarie's mother and my father had an American aunt. She had married our grandfather's brother around World War I. And they were divorced right after the war. She came back to the United States with her two daughters. But our grandmother and our aunt stayed in touch. And she sent us an affidavit, and then for Rosemarie and her family.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the Hitler, I mean, the rise to power? Do you remember anything before you left that relates to that.

WOLFF: Yes, yes, I do. We had to leave our apartment because, as I said, we had a beautiful apartment, and

the Nazis wanted our apartment. So we had to leave, and we moved into a house not too far from where we had lived before where they put up several families, and we had one little room to ourselves upstairs, and there were other families like ourselves in that particular house because the Gestapo wanted our apartment. And I remember very well when they came and said they wanted the apartment. It was, I don't remember any violence because my parents were very, very careful to shield me from many, many things. Now, in retrospect I'm glad they shielded me, but I wish I had more information. But I was told really nothing, and Gerda said . . .

ERMAN: The same thing.

WOLFF: On her way over here that she was told very little. All I know is that we had to leave. And so we moved to this other house, and I was not permitted to go to the same school that I had gone to before. I had to go to a different school, which involved taking public transportation with some other children, and that's where I met this girl Suzie, or at least we became very good friends then, because we took this tram together. And I was only not even eight when I had to

go by myself to this other school, and it was a drastic change, it was a very different school. And yet, my memories are more of the good school than of the new school. I do remember the other school vividly. I remember my teacher. I remember what she looked like in the first school that I had gone to for, look, three years, almost, two-and-a-half years.

LEVINE: Do you feel as though you picked up the anxiety that was around at that time, or . . .

WOLFF: It's not my nature to do that. No, I really didn't. I never was that way, and I guess I still am not. I must attribute it to, again, the way my parents raised me, that I was just, I was not surrounded by it. And even though my mother had that type of personality, I think my father was a very calming influence, and I was not exposed to that kind of anxiety that made me feel anxious.

LEVINE: I see.

WOLFF: It was more treated like an adventure.

LEVINE: And did you experience anything, Gerda?

ERMAN: Well we, of course, left a year earlier. Actually, we

left perhaps fifteen months earlier than Rosemarie. We left in April, about six weeks after Hitler came. I remember seeing the Hitler parades, you know, Hitler's marching, and parades they had subsequent to it. I thought they were very colorful. I was not told what was going on, but my parents felt, I was nine, that, you know, not meaning, I could be their worst enemy, perhaps. I was a shy child but I could perhaps say something that would be the wrong thing. So, and again, I think both of us were very protected by our parents and I did not know what was going on. I don't, there was no violence. We had a maid, and her brother was an S.S. storm trooper. He came to visit. He wore his S.S. uniform, and when he came to the house he took his swastika and put it on the inside of his lapel. And he kissed my mother's hand, much to her chagrin, but, you know, there was nothing she could do about it. But he, you know, he was very nice and he said to my mother, "Well, you know, all this doesn't apply to you. It's, quote, 'the other Jews.'"

WOLFF: When Gerda told me this on the way up it made me shiver. It really . . .

ERMAN: And he was very courteous. His sister had never been as happy as she was with my parents and he, I guess, respected that.

WOLFF: She's still alive. We both visited her in Vienna on the way back, on the way to Vienna.

ERMAN: She's about eighty-four, eighty-six now, and very robust physical condition.

WOLFF: We came to the hotel where we were staying. And in the subsequent year Gerda went and she saw her.

ERMAN: And she was very kind to my parents. We took some furniture, but we had left a lot of things because we did leave so quickly, and our American aunts said apartments are small and you won't be able to afford much, so just take the bare essentials. And my mother said to her, "Please sell these things, skis and sports," you know, whatever it was, and my mother said to her, "And whatever money you get, that's for you." And instead she took every penny and bought things in progressive sizes for me because she figured my parents wouldn't have money and, you know, I would be growing. And my mother found underwear and dresses and skirts, you know, in whatever sizes, ten and

twelve and fourteen and going up, which was very kind of her. And she certainly didn't have any money of her own but she, you know, spent every penny for me.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, do you remember, Rosemarie, how it got decided that you would go, or do you remember any of the . . .

WOLFF: I do. I remember that. I knew that something was going on, and throughout the months that we had moved away from our home to the other building I was told that we were going to be going to America, because my uncle had been there, was there already, and then my grandmother went over in February. So I knew plans were being made for us to also go. And I knew that we had to leave, and again I don't have bad recollections, but I also know that I was being prepared to leave on a trip. And during that time what happened was we were not sure if my father would be able to get an affidavit or a visa to come to this country because of his colostomy. So my parents prepared me by saying, "You're going to be going either to Sweden or to England to stay with some other families until we could join each other." And so they made arrangements with two families, one in Sweden,

one in England. We corresponded with them. I wrote letters. They sent me letters. They were wonderful letters. They sounded like fabulous families. Again, I was made to feel I was going on a vacation. It was going to be beautiful and lovely. The letters were so warm, and I had my visas to go to both of these places, and I had made arrangements, arrangements had been made for me to leave when the affidavit came for all three of us to come to the United States. And so it was all within one or two days that all three things came, and so obviously the choice was made for me to go with my parents. And that I remember very, very vividly because there was such rejoicing that I didn't have to go away. I guess I didn't realize the implications of going away. I was not afraid because I'd gone to the country with the nurse, I'd gone with my cousin different places. So it wasn't where I was afraid to be separated from my parents. It was treated as an adventure, as a wonderful thing for me, and that soon we would all be together. But I do remember that joy when that affidavit came that we could all come together. That was something that I'll never forget.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember what you personally took with you?

WOLFF: Well, I remember that we were allowed to ship all our furniture. It was called a "lift" is what they called it. And everything was put into this "lift." Furniture, clothing. No jewelry, no "valuables", quote, unquote, "valuables." And any jewelry that my parents had, my mother had tried to send something to Switzerland and something to France and everything got lost. We never got any of those things. Well, I was able to take personal belongings, I guess a doll and clothing. But no money and no valuables. The only money we were allowed to take was twelve dollars. Five and five for each of my parents and two dollars for me. And I had two dollars. That was something unbelievable. I had never really had money in my pocket. So when we got to the ship I promptly spent it on a pair of sunglasses which my mother had never let me forget. (they laugh) "How could you spent the only two dollars you have on sunglasses?" But that was me.

LEVINE: Well, now, how did that mesh with that, you know, you weren't supposed to be a burden to the United States?

WOLFF: Well, I didn't know any of this. I just knew that we traveled first class, because all the money that we had we were allowed to spend there, in Vienna. We could spend it on transportation, on the train fare to Leipzig, and then on to Hamburg, and then on the ship. So we traveled first class on the same ship that Gerda came over on, on the U.S.S. President Roosevelt. And it was a beautiful ship, beautiful voyage, but no money. We were not allowed to bring any of the money. Everything had been pre-paid in Vienna. So I had my belongings. I had my clothes. I didn't have jewelry. I didn't know anything about those things at that time. And we came, it was a nice voyage, except that I was seasick the whole time. In fact, my whole family was seasick. That I remember vividly. But it was, as I say, a beautiful ship and could have been very nice, I guess, if I hadn't been so seasick. And it was the middle of August when we arrived here. It was August 12th, as Gerda said, on my mother's and her father's birthday. And they had arrived exactly a year earlier on that same date.

LEVINE: And that was coincidental.

WOLFF: Yes, absolutely. It was, we were on the last ship that carried refugees who had come from Vienna that was allowed to leave. I know there were other ships that left Germany a day or two later, because my husband arrived three days after I did and he's from Germany. And he came on the fifteenth of August. Of course, I didn't know him at the time. He has an interesting, they have an interesting story, too, but they didn't go through Ellis Island. So we arrived in the middle of August expecting to be able to disembark, and we knew that Gerda and her family were going to be there, plus Aunt Elsie and her husband. Aunt Elsie was the lady who had given us the affidavit, and who had supplied the money for the affidavit, who brought her parents over also. And . . .

LEVINE: Do you, is there anything else to be said about the arrangement and how they were made for you?

WOLFF: In what way?

LEVINE: Well maybe, Gerda, from your perspective.

ERMAN: Well, I just remember that Rosemarie and her parents got the usual affidavit and, you know, her parents

assumed that would be all. But then they received word that there would be special requirements because of Rosemarie's father's physical condition, and that's when my father tried desperately to reach this Uncle Hymie and Aunt Elsie before their cruise ship left, and he literally went to the pier and caught them just before they embarked on this, I think it was a two-week cruise.

WOLFF: They had to put up a fifteen hundred dollar bond.

ERMAN: Which was a lot of money. I mean, we're talking about 1939.

WOLFF: Which would guarantee that my father would not be a burden to the United States. And they would be responsible that if anything happened that he could not work here or that the state would have had to support him, that they would support him and his family. And they had signed that, by depositing this fifteen hundred dollar bond.

ERMAN: Because we had come a year earlier with twelve dollars, so to my parents fifteen hundred dollars was an unheard of amount.

WOLFF: Aunt Elsie put that up. And, as my mother always said, "If it wasn't for Aunt Elsie, we couldn't be here. We wouldn't be alive today."

ERMAN: Well, none of us would be here.

LEVINE: Because they arranged for your family.

WOLFF: Yes. She was a beautiful, beautiful woman. She had two daughters. One daughter died. The other daughter is still alive and lives here in New Jersey and in Florida.

LEVINE: And they had been here for some time?

WOLFF: Well, yeah. She was an American. She had been born in America, had gone to Czechoslovakia, married, as Gerda said, our grandfather's brother, and after the First World War. Divorced him after having two children, and came back to this country, because she was an American citizen, so her daughters were American citizens. They were both born here. If they weren't at least they became citizens.

ERMAN: They were born in Czechoslovakia.

WOLFF: But because she was an American citizen, they were

able to become citizens.

LEVINE: I see. And then were they in business here?

WOLFF: Yes. Elsie had a shoe store on Bergenline Avenue in Union City, and that's why we all went to Union City to begin with because, you know, we sort of had roots there.

ERMAN: That's where we went when we finally left Ellis Island, and Gerda had come there right from the ship when she arrived, to Union City, New Jersey.

LEVINE: I see. Do you remember the harbor when you first came into New York?

WOLFF: Yes. I remember the harbor. I remember the Statue of Liberty. I remember the heat. It was so hot. I had never experienced such heat and humidity. We were all out on the deck and it was so hot. And we were looking out and people were standing there waiting to meet people when we pulled into the harbor. And as people were getting off the ship we were told that we could not disembark. And, of course, we had no idea. We didn't speak English. We didn't know what was going on, but I, as I found out subsequently, it was

because we had to go to Ellis Island. My father had been, as I said, he had a colostomy, and the United States government wanted to have us go to Ellis Island so he could go to the hospital here and have a thorough examination and be evaluated to see whether he would be permitted to stay or whether he would have to return, or whether he was bringing in any communicable diseases.

LEVINE: And this was a complete surprise.

WOLFF: Complete surprise. As I said, we had been in first class, and we were put down in crew's quarters almost immediately. Never disembarked. And that, to me, that was a great shock because it was comfortable and cool in our cabins and here in these crew's quarters, and I always feel sorry for the sailors now, and for the crew. There's no air conditioning, and we stayed there for the weekend, because we arrived on a Friday, and nothing was going on over the weekend. All the officials and the offices were closed. So we stayed there until Monday. And then we were taken to Ellis Island. We had no idea.

LEVINE: Now, on this ship, the President Roosevelt, are there

any passengers coming over in steerage at that point?

WOLFF: I presume so. I presume there must have been some. There were other people in the, but not a lot. I think there were very few others that had been there with us. I'm not quite sure. I know there are a few other people, but very few. It seemed to me like we were the only ones on the ship. I remember being, I was frightened. I was frightened, then. I was frightened because no one could explain anything to me. My parents, at that point, could not shield anything because they didn't know themselves, that we really didn't know what was happening. And, of course, the language was a problem.

LEVINE: Well, then, do you remember, then, what, did you take a small ferry . . .

WOLFF: Yes.

LEVINE: From your boat to Ellis Island.

WOLFF: As I recall it was some sort of a smaller ship or, I imagine, it must have been a ferry, now that you mention it, yes. And that's, that's right. And we were brought into the Great Hall. And it was very

interesting. When I came here last year into the Great Hall it all came back. I'd been in this hall before, and I remember we stood on line to be processed because people were coming from other places on our ship. And my father was whisked away.

LEVINE: Let's pause here so that Peter can turn the tape over, and then we'll continue.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. We'll resume here, on Side B of the tape. And you were saying that when you first came into Ellis Island as a visitor more of it came back to you.

WOLFF: Very much so. Because the restoration was quite accurate. It was obviously not changed significantly. Certainly not the entry hall. And at least that's how it seemed to me. And we stood on line and I remember we were being processed and my mother was being asked a lot of questions. And as I mentioned before I was a very talkative, precocious child. In fact, my teacher had written into my little autograph book before I left the school, "Speech is silver and silence is golden." (they laugh) And I remember my

mother said to me, "Don't say anything." My mother had been interrogated by the Nazis many, many times and was very, very careful to watch every word that she said. And she was afraid that I might come out with something saying that we had a maid or a governess or whatever that could jeopardize our staying in this country. So I remember her saying to me that I should be very quiet and not volunteer any information. (she laughs) She didn't know what would come out of my mouth. Not that I had anything to hide, but she just didn't know. And, of course, she was very afraid.

LEVINE: Do you remember the feeling of being in the Great Hall?

WOLFF: Yes.

LEVINE: What was it like?

WOLFF: It was overwhelming. I'd never been in a place that big or that foreboding. It was really a foreboding place to me. It was very cold. It had this yellow tile on the wall. And it was just a great big crowded room. There were a lot of people, an awful lot of people, all different types of people. Of course, I

couldn't speak to anybody, because I didn't know what language they spoke. They spoke different languages. I imagine some spoke German, but I was told not to talk to anybody so I didn't say anything. (she laughs) And I remember the dormitory very well. And, as I told you when I came in, when we were here last year I was confused. I was shown this dormitory and I said, "This is a little room." And I remembered it being such a big room. And this morning you said that it was just a sample of the actual dormitory, which was in another building, because that confused me on my visit here. I remember the large dormitory and all of us sleeping in this big room. And, of course, I'd never been used to anything like that. And it was scary. I remember that being frightening.

LEVINE: Were the beds bunk beds, or were they cots? Do you remember?

WOLFF: I don't recall. Cots. That's why when we walked through the entry downstairs I said, "Are those cots?" And he said, "No, those are just the storage racks or something." But they looked, I remember there were metal beds. I don't think they were bunks. At least

not where I slept. It was more of a cot-type situation, some kind of metal frame.

LEVINE: And then did you sleep right next to your mother and father?

WOLFF: No, not my father. My father was whisked away. I never saw my father after we got off the boat until we were settled in Ellis Island and he was in the hospital. We were allowed to visit with him. I don't recall if we went to his room, but I do remember meeting him on the paths. He was allowed to sit on a bench outside in his pajamas, and my mother and I would go over and be able to talk to him. I have a feeling we were not allowed in the hospital because there were communicable diseases, possibly, in the hospital. So my recollection of being in his hospital room are not there, even though my mother may have been able to go.

LEVINE: Did your father ever discuss with you the treatment he was receiving here?

WOLFF: Not with me. He did talk to my mother about it, but whenever he was with me he just made sure that I was happy and that I was okay, and he said, "We'll be fine

and I'll be with you very soon, and we'll be getting out." And the time just dragged. Seventeen days is an awfully long time to a small child in a strange surrounding, in surroundings that she'd never experienced before. It seemed like forever. And it is a long.

LEVINE: Yes.

WOLFF: Seventeen days is a long time. I think those days, in my mind, I mean, they're etched in my mind, seventeen. Because we arrived on the twelfth, we left on the twenty-ninth, and it seemed like a very long time, with nothing to do during the day.

LEVINE: Oh, is that right?

WOLFF: Nothing really to do. I mean, no real playing. I was used to playing. I couldn't really pay.

LEVINE: Were there other children there?

WOLFF: There were some other children, but I don't think we really played games. I remember the meals, that we would sit down for meals. It was community meals.

LEVINE: What was the food like?

WOLFF: I don't have any bad recollections of it. I don't think it was anything special, but I was hungry, and I ate.

LEVINE: Were there foods that you hadn't encountered before? Do you remember any new and different foods?

WOLFF: No, I don't recall that. I really don't recall that.

LEVINE: Do you remember what your mother and father told you about America while you were waiting to come?

WOLFF: Yes. They said we would be joining my uncle and my aunt, and Gerda. And my father had a sister who was here already, Aunt Bertha, who I'm planning to visit this afternoon. She's still alive. She's the last one left. She's ninety-two. And there were some other relatives who had come. Of course, Aunt Elsie and her children. America, the land of opportunity. It was going to be wonderful, much nicer than anything we'd ever been accustomed to previously. They made it all sound like, as I said, a wonderful adventure. It was going to be beautiful. And that's what I was looking forward to. Even in Ellis Island my mother said, "You know, Daddy's just here to, they need to check out. You know he was sick. They want to make

sure he's okay. Don't worry. We'll be getting out." But I know that the fear was there, are we going to be sent back, or was he going to be sent back? Now I understand that. I understood that later, much, much later, that that fear must have been with my mother. And many of the things that happened to my mother I attribute to all of these things. Given the personality that she had with the encounters that she had it must have been terrible. It must have been just awful. We didn't know if he could work here or what the situation would be. And it was a problem later on. He never really made it. Like Gerda's father did extremely well. My father never really could find an occupation that was satisfying to him or that gave him the money. He was, he never really earned the kind of living that he had learned before, not anywhere near that.

LEVINE: And Gerda, from your point of view, do you remember when Rosemarie and her family were being detained on Ellis Island?

ERMAN: Well, I remember, as I previously mentioned, we came exactly a year earlier, and it seems every few months some other member of the family or circle of friends

arrived. Of course, we did not have money. My mother had a standard so-called, quote, "feast" that she had prepared for everybody, a welcome meal. And my grand, our mutual grandmother came in February '39. Rosemarie's Aunt Bertha she mentioned came some time along there. My best friend from school, whose father was my father's partner, they came. And there were, like, maybe ten or twelve, another cousin of ours, Paul Aufrishtik and his family, must have been twelve or fifteen assorted families who arrived. My mother had this standard meal that everybody was served.

LEVINE: Do you remember what it was?

ERMAN: It was sort of a liver pate, like a liver loaf.

WOLFF: Liver meat loaf. (she laughs)

ERMAN: Like a liver meat loaf. Because that could be prepared in advance and you could just re-heat it. You know, we picked, my parents picked up all these assorted people and you never knew, even though boats were supposed to arrive at a certain time, you didn't know how long it would take to get through customs and the like. So my mother wanted something that would be ready. As a matter of fact, you could serve it cold,

too. And it was a meat, very often my mother put a hard-boiled egg in the middle so, you know, when you sliced it looked very nice. And we, of course, went to the pier to pick them up, anticipating that they would be able to join us, and it was a, my mother had this meal all prepared. I think our grandmother was along. I mean, she must have been. And it was a terrible disappointment, you know.

LEVINE: And were you and your family fearful that they might be sent back at that point?

ERMAN: Yes, of course. I mean, my parents didn't know any more than Rosemarie's parents, and again I was more or less shielded from everything. But most certainly my parents had very real concerns that they would not be permitted to enter.

LEVINE: And then when it was decided that your father was free to go. Do you remember that?

WOLFF: They picked us up and we went to Union City, New Jersey, and they had found a little apartment for us in the same building that my father's sister was living in. Am I correct?

ERMAN: Uh-huh.

WOLFF: Bertha lived in the same, yes, lived in the same building. And, of course, the next step was to try to find some kind of work for my father, and I don't remember exactly what he did at that point. Did he go to work in the shoe store with Aunt Elsie?

ERMAN: That I don't recall.

WOLFF: I don't remember either what he did then.

ERMAN: That I don't recall.

WOLFF: I know my mother went to work as a nurse, as a practical nurse, and went into the city, took care of different people, different sick people.

LEVINE: Now, had she had that kind of training.

WOLFF: Never, never. But she, well, our grandfather was a doctor, and I guess she always fancied herself as having inherited some of this knowledge, even to the day she died. (she laughs) Her biggest thing was always, "My father was a doctor." Wherever we went she would tell people that. Did your dad do that, too?

ERMAN: No, but he had an innate knowledge.

WOLFF: But my mother announced it to who would listen that her father was a doctor.

ERMAN: I remember as a child I was certainly not a sickly child but I had, you know, like some of the, mumps and so on. My father always made the diagnosis before I was taken to a doctor, and it was never wrong. I mean, he would say I have the mumps. And then the doctor would verify it, and this applied to everything.

LEVINE: So they both felt they had inherited.

WOLFF: I guess so.

ERMAN: Well, my father would have become a doctor, but his father died in 1917 and it was just the end of World War I. Austria, of course, had lost the war. Money was devaluated. And my father had two younger sisters and a mother and, you know, there was no money to send him to medical school. So he got involved in the business world and was very successful.

WOLFF: And my mother worked for a number of different families. I remember one family in particular because

they're still quite prominent. The name is still very prominent in Jewish philanthropic circles, was Torczyner, T-O-R-C-Z-Y-N-E-R, I believe it is. And I've read it every so often, and she worked for them in some sort of a capacity, either taking care of a child or practical nurse with someone. I don't remember exactly who. But I remember that name, Jacques Torczyner.

LEVINE: So your mother really rose to the occasion as far as . . .

WOLFF: Oh, absolutely, and always did, as I say, even in Vienna when my father was ill, she ran the two stores. Definitely, always rose to the occasion. It wasn't until much later that she, that she really collapsed, had the nervous breakdown. No, no, she rose to the occasion all the time. She was the strong one, as far as the physically strong one, certainly. And my father really just had odd jobs because he could work that much. He had to be near a bathroom. He couldn't lift. There were many limitations. But his wonderful nature carried him through and people always loved having him work for them. He worked for a five-and-dime most of his adult life in the United States. My

father was fifteen years older than my mother. Then the last job he had before he retired was with the Viking Press and he worked in the mailroom. Again, it wasn't a high paying job, although he loved that job, he just loved it. And my mother didn't work then.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father feel that they had made a good decision to come here?

WOLFF: Oh, yes. Oh, never regretted a day. Oh, no. And neither one of them ever went back. Oh, no. There was never any question.

LEVINE: Even though your life must have been somewhat harder?

WOLFF: Oh, no comparison.

ERMAN: The alternative was death.

LEVINE: Right, yes, yes.

ERMAN: I mean, there wasn't really a choice.

WOLFF: All the relatives perished. My father's nine brothers and sisters, I think three, perhaps, remained, or four at the most. All the others died. All the other cousins died. There was never a question. We were, to the day both my parents died they thanked their

lucky stars that they could come to this country.

ERMAN: Well, you see, that was my father's foresight. Our complete side of the family got out because my father was so insistent. And there are very few families like that, both his sisters and, you know, the immediate circle. Of course, some of our grandmother's brothers and sisters, but they were middle-aged people at the time and they were too set in their ways and they wouldn't even hear about it, and they had children of their own, you know, so.

WOLFF: Even our grandmother's sisters got out. Both the sisters. One went to Rochester . . .

ERMAN: Yes, and their children.

WOLFF: And the other one went to South America, yes.

ERMAN: My father was insistent with all his cousins.
(voices garbled)

WOLFF: He was like the patriot of the family till the day he died, yes.

ERMAN: Yes, he was. And that's why he wrote that book, which was never published, but it mentions all that. If I

had thought of it I would have brought it.

WOLFF: All through the years he was alive he really supported my parents financially. He always contributed to our family financially, always, till the day he died. I think even my wedding was partially certainly financed by Gerda's father.

ERMAN: But my father was never, you know, the type who mentioned this. It was done with generosity and with kindness, but he never bragged about it.

WOLFF: And never wanted anything in return.

ERMAN: No.

WOLFF: My mother frequently told me that. He always handed her a wad of bills when we were together. He did very well here. He was quite successful, and thank God he could afford it. My parents just couldn't. Not that they were lazy, it was just my father's colostomy obviously was a limitation for the rest of his life. He didn't die of that, though. He died of a heart attack at seventy-five. But if it wasn't for my uncle, and even for my Aunt Elsie who all through the years I remember always, "Here's another, here's five

dollars," or whatever. Even when I was married, my uncle Hymie says, "Here, don't you want some money?" (she laughs) And my husband said, "No, she doesn't want any money."

LEVINE: Now, did you both go to school then, right away?

WOLFF: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And what was that like going into school without the language.

ERMAN: I was frightened.

WOLFF: You knew a little bit of English, didn't you?

ERMAN: Well, I had a trace of English. You see, my parents had learned English in school, and they would practice English at home. They would talk about the weather, about anything. Well, at the age of six or seven I couldn't understand that they were talking about the weather, no matter how hard my mother tried. I was convinced that all they could discuss was what to give me next, what to do for my birthday, where to take me, you know. What else can two adults be talking about. And so I got English lessons. This young woman came twice a week, and she was supposed to take me to the

park.

WOLFF: In Vienna?

ERMAN: In Vienna. And, of course, as soon as we got to the park I would see my friends, you know, and off I'd go. And also I had visions of learning English, you know, you just snap a finger and you learn. I didn't realize what was involved. But I had a slight inkling of the language. When I got to Union City, I was the first European child and they treated me like royalty. The principal picked me up every morning. He had a daughter my age. He picked me up every morning in his car and drove me, along with his daughter, to school. And, I mean, I was the sensation of Roosevelt School in Union City.

WOLFF: You remember the name of the school. (she laughs)

ERMAN: It was Roosevelt School. I remember the principal's name. He died, I was told, a few years ago. I had no contact with him. But somebody who taught in Union City, you know, years later, said that, Charles Brown was his name, that he died. It was maybe two years ago.

WOLFF: Gerda is the family historian. She keeps records and she keeps track of everybody in the family.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

ERMAN: I was written up in whatever the name of the Union City local paper was, you know, "European." You'd think Queen Elizabeth's daughter had arrived.
(they laugh)

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful. Now, did she go to the same . . .

WOLFF: I went to the same school, yes. Now, of course, we went to school together. Yes, we went to the same school.

LEVINE: And did you have the same kind of . . .

WOLFF: I spoke, I really spoke no English. I went to an English kindergarten, but I learned songs, English songs, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and songs like that. But I didn't speak any English. But I have an affinity for languages, and I picked it up very quickly. In fact, they were amazed, at the school, how quickly I did learn English. And I lost my accent rather quickly and I understand that I don't have an accent. I mean, I don't hear it, but people tell me I

don't. I still speak German fluently. We both do. We speak it as well as we speak English.

LEVINE: And did you, were you well-received also at the school?

WOLFF: Yes, absolutely. I was her cousin! (they laugh) Miss Royalty's cousin. Oh, yes, definitely. And when we left New Jersey you moved up to Inwood.

ERMAN: Yes, uh-huh.

WOLFF: And we followed you.

ERMAN: But we always lived very close to each other.

WOLFF: Yes.

ERMAN: And, of course, when her mother was working or her father was not well, Rosemarie would stay with us or, you know, after school, would come to our house.

WOLFF: Since our grandmother was here I would come to, we went to the same school. No, we didn't.

ERMAN: No. I went to 52 and you went to 98.

WOLFF: Right.

ERMAN: But, you know, they were right close to each other. And, of course, our mutual grandmother was there, so it was taken for granted that Rosemarie would come to our house after school or whatever it was.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything that struck you as different when you first were getting adjusted?

WOLFF: Yes. I forgot something here. When we left New Jersey, we didn't live in New Jersey very long.

ERMAN: No.

WOLFF: It was just a couple of months.

ERMAN: We moved to New York . . .

WOLFF: Right after we came.

ERMAN: A few months, maybe in October or so of '39.

WOLFF: You moved uptown, but we moved to Harlem.

ERMAN: Oh, yes, yes. St. Nicholas Avenue.

WOLFF: And, St. Nicholas Avenue. In fact, St. Nicholas Terrace.

ERMAN: Right.

WOLFF: And we drove by there yesterday for the first time. I drove by there yesterday. And I remember I had never seen black children before, and I had no problem with it, I just, I'd never seen them. My friends were Chinese, my friends were Japanese, my friends were black, and I had wonderful friends. I remember one little Japanese girl that I was really so attached to.

ERMAN: In those days?

WOLFF: Yes, yes. I remember her. I don't remember her name, but I remember, I can see her today. And everything changed for me. I took the subway by myself. I was just, at that point, had turned nine, and I was going everywhere on the subway. There was no fear of going on the subway or on public transportation.

LEVINE: What was the neighborhood like at that time?

WOLFF: It was, I guess, an integrated neighborhood, but it was fine. There were no, there was no violence. There were no problems. I remember nothing bad about the neighborhood. There was a park across the street. There was a subway there. I took the subway. There was a park across the street. I went to school there, and it was, all I remember, being with other children

that I had never seen before but it didn't, it didn't make, it made an impression on me only in the sense, in retrospect. Not at the time it happened. In retrospect I played with all these children. I was used to it. In fact when my children went to school I was very insistent they go to public school because I felt that it was the right thing for them to do to be in schools with other children. Of course, at that age I didn't know anything, any different, and it was a wonderful experience for me.

LEVINE: Now, did you stay in that neighborhood?

WOLFF: We lived there one year, and then we moved up to the neighborhood where Gerda lived. Not in as nice an area. We were down on Post Avenue, you were on Seaman Avenue. And we lived there one year in one apartment and I think two years in the other apartment, and I went to elementary school there and to Junior High School at that point.

LEVINE: And then how long did you stay in school? How much schooling did you have?

WOLFF: Well, I went to elementary school there, and I was the valedictorian, so it meant I must have learned English

because that was difficult, and I was the valedictorian. I remember that. And then I went to junior high school one year. And then we moved to St. Alban's in Queens, Cambria Heights. And I finished my junior high school there and I was valedictorian there. And then I went to high school at Andrew Jackson High School in St. Alban's. At that point, in my senior year, we moved to Woodside.

ERMAN: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

WOLFF: My father had been working in a five-and-dime in Brooklyn. In Brooklyn first for one of our uncles, and then he worked for a five-and-dime in Cambria Heights where I went to school, where we lived. And then we moved to Woodside. But I continued commuting to Cambria Heights because I was in my senior year. When I graduated high school, all through the last two years of high school I worked for a dentist part-time in Astoria, and then graduated high school, continued working for him for a little while, went to Queens College, and I got a job. I was still working for him part-time while I went to Queens College. I graduated, I was quite young when I graduated. I was, I think, sixteen, not quite seventeen. And went to

school full-time but worked afternoons and evenings. And then I switched from Queens College to Hunter College and worked full-time for a dentist in Manhattan on 57th Street so I could go to school in the evenings. I was married at nineteen. I met my husband when I was fifteen, and the girl who introduced my husband and me was her best friend from Vienna, the one she mentioned, Maryann, whose father was her father's partner. And she introduced my husband and me on 91st Street in Manhattan.

LEVINE: What was the occasion? How did you come to that?

WOLFF: There was a Jewish organization.

ERMAN: Austro-American social club.

WOLFF: Right. And my husband was brought there by his brother, and Maryann brought me. And my husband was in the navy at the time. He was a sailor. He was nineteen. I was fifteen when I met him. I'm still married to him, very happily. And . . .

LEVINE: And he came from Germany?

WOLFF: He came from Germany, from a little town in Germany called Kommon, near Dortmund.

LEVINE: And what year did he come?

WOLFF: He came three days after I did in 1939. His mother had come in November of '38 by herself. Her brother was a very, very famous author who had won the Harper Prize for Literature. His name was Heinz Liepman, and his books are still being sold, a very well-known author. So she was able to come here a little bit earlier. She had gotten an affidavit, and she worked as a nurse. And she then brought over my husband and his brother, and then my father-in-law, who was in a concentration camp for a few months, was able to get out. Don't ask me how, I don't remember, because I wasn't there. I don't know the details. Nobody really knows exactly, but he did get out, and he came over. So she brought each of them over individually.

LEVINE: Wow.

WOLFF: She's quite a woman and she's still alive, still drives a car. (she laughs) She's fantastic.

LEVINE: Now, what are your children's names?

WOLFF: I have a son named David and a son named Stephen. I have four grandchildren. My husband's name is Fred.

LEVINE: Fred. Great. And Greda, what is your husband's name?

ERMAN: Herbert Erman. He's from Germany. He was not as fortunate. He lost his parents during the war. He went on a so-called kinder-transport, like Rosemarie mentioned.

WOLFF: Children.

ERMAN: He went from Holland to England and he spent the war years in England. His parents had gone from Germany to Holland trying to, you know, get away from Hitler. His mother was Dutch by birth. And when he was, as soon as he was old enough, seventeen or so, he joined the Dutch army in the hope of getting back to his family. And after the war he was reunited with his three brothers by the Red Cross. His parents had been killed in a concentration camp, but his three brothers survived. One of his brothers was hidden by a Dutch family on a farm, and his oldest brother ran errands for the underground. He was fifteen, sixteen at the time, and he ran all kinds of missions for the underground.

LEVINE: And do you have children?

ERMAN: Yes, I have three children.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

ERMAN: Brenda, who's the oldest. Cindy, who's in the middle, and then Robert, a son.

LEVINE: Well, we don't have too much time left, but I'd like to ask you just generally do you feel that your being born and being raised in Vienna for roughly eight years and then coming here, how has that affected the rest of your life? I mean, that early segment, and then coming to this country?

WOLFF: I think it's made me a lot more tolerant of many, many different things. I encountered people here that I probably would never have encountered if I had stayed in Vienna. I found out that people could be very kind as well as cruel, but the people that I encountered in this country were kind and helped my family, helped me, and I think I had a much greater chance of growing as a person and being more appreciative of things than if I had stayed in Vienna and lived my little life of luxury because I didn't have that kind of an upbringing. We lived barely on just what my father and my mother earned. As I said, "I earned a living

from the time I was fifteen and I'm still working. I have my own business now. And I think it made me a much better person, a much stronger person, a more valuable person than I probably would have been if I had stayed there.

LEVINE: How about you, Gerda?

ERMAN: Well, some of it I can echo. I really did not lose out on anything by, we had a beautiful apartment in Vienna, I didn't mention our apartment belonged to the Japanese ambassador to Austria and he had all hand-carved doors and, in the living room, and they were really a conversation piece. But we stayed in our apartment till the day we left. And my father was very successful and he made a good living, so I really had all the benefits of an upper middle class upbringing. I went to an out-of-town college and really personally didn't experience any sacrifices. It probably broadened my scope and I was probably exposed to a greater variety of things than I would have been in Austria, but as such I did not personally suffer.

WOLFF: I think the one thing that I feel now having been born

in Vienna. I've acquired over the years an ever greater love of music than I did before. My father was an avid opera lover, and I've become an opera lover. I try to see as many operas. I collect CD's and tapes, and I'm really enjoying the music much more now than I ever did before. And I like to go back to Vienna just to listen to the music and be in those surroundings that my parents were in during happy days, so I've gone back a number of times for that reason.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, I think maybe this is a good place to stop, and I thank you both very much for sharing your stories, and this will be a welcome part of our oral history collection here. So this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and it is June 1, 1992, and I've been talking with Rosemarie Wolff and Gerda Erman here at the Oral History Studio.