

EI-951

FLORA JENNY (JANI) DAVID WERTHEIM
BIRTHDATE: MAY13, 1907
INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 24, 1997
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 90
RUNNING TIME: 53:00
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: EVAN TAPARATA
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

GERMANY, 1938
AGE: 31

SHIP: THE STAATENDAM
PORT: ROTTERDAM
RESIDENCES:
* GERMANY: FRANKFURT am MAIN, BERLIN.
* US: CHEVY CHASE, MD;

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, September 24th, 1997. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Flora Jenny Wertheim. Mrs. Wertheim came from Germany, she arrived here on September 18th, 1938 -

WERTHEIM: Yah.

SIGRIST: -- she was thirty-one years old at that time, and she came through Ellis Island when that happened.

WERTHEIM: Yah.

SIGRIST: I should say for the sake of the tape, that Mrs. Wertheim's daughter is listening to the interview out in the other room, and Peter Hom is running the recording equipment. Anyway, thank you very much for letting me ask you these questions. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

WERTHEIM: May 13th, 1907 (laughs)

SIGRIST: Thank you. And where in Germany were you born?

WERTHEIM: I was born in Frankfurt Main,

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, Which is a city?

WERTHEIM: Yah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What can you tell me about that city at the time of your birth?

WERTHEIM: Well, I was very little and we moved to Berlin - I didn't live long in Frankfurt Main - and we came back at one time, but it was a beautiful city, and it had the Altstadt [old town], which was destroyed during the war, and I heard it's rebuilt.

SIGRIST: What um, how long did you stay in Frankfurt before you moved to Berlin?

WERTHEIM: Maybe I was five years old --

SIGRIST: Do you have any -

WERTHEIM: -- moved to Berlin.

SIGRIST: -- first hand recollections of living in Frankfurt Main?

WERTHEIM: Oh yes, I --

SIGRIST: What do you remember before you moved to Berlin?

WERTHEIM: Well I don't remember the city. I remember the grandparents and I remember going to the zoo and I think that's about all, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the house that you lived in before you moved to Berlin?

WERTHEIM: It could be it was an apartment house where the grandparents lived, and we lived in apartment house. I might still have a picture, but I wouldn't, ya know, recall that.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about your grandparents?

WERTHEIM: Oh, very much. He was - we're Jewish - and he was very religious and he was a banker, a small banker, and they're wonderful family. And I remember, you know, when I was a child and I wouldn't eat (laughs), how my grandmother cooked something for me and was feeding me. And I liked sweetbread. (laughs) That's what I remember. I remember slightly the door from the apartment because it had like -- you know, what do you call this? -- colored paper or something on it. And that's about all, yeah.

SIGRIST: Which parents were these grandparents, your mom or --

WERTHEIM: For my mother.

SIGRIST: They were your mother's parents.

WERTHEIM: And I went back to Frankfurt later on, and I went to a Philanthropien [ph]. That was a Jewish school -- it was for boys and girls, but separate. And we went back to Berlin, so mostly I lived in Berlin.

SIGRIST: I see.

WERTHEIM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, did any family member ever tell you a story about the day that you were born? Do you know anything about the day that you were born?

WERTHEIM: Well everybody was happy, that's all I know. (laughs) Yeah, they were very family minded.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

WERTHEIM: Hans. H-A-N-S.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living in Germany?

WERTHEIM: Well, he did many things. Actually, he was brought up to be a Jewish teacher. He came from Reichelsheim in Odenwald which is near Darmstadt and he didn't like it. And he was still a very practicing Jew, but he didn't like the profession. And he became a business man and he was pretty successful. And he had several things -- mostly tobacco, and he was for a long time with a big company -- Manoli M-A-N-O-L-I. It was the biggest cigarette firm that you can imagine, it was very prominent. And later on, he changed. He was in tobacco -- oriental tobacco-- and that changed, and then he was very good in selling advertising like for movies, you know, advertising films. And he did very well, 'till Hitler came and then it was the end of it.

SIGRIST: This was quite a diverse professional life that he had,

WERTHEIM: Yeah, yeah, he was a very good businessman, so...

SIGRIST: What kinds of things stick out about your father when you were a child? How do you remember him when you were a kid?

WERTHEIM: It was life with father, you know (laughs). And he was very loving and a family man and -- but -- pretty strict, but it didn't mean a thing (laughs).

SIGRIST: What were some of the rules that you had to obey when you were growing up?

WERTHEIM: We had to behave, we had to have manners, and we had to observe etiquette, and, you know. Very cultured, and a good middle class, we always were well to do. And we had poor times -- during the inflation we lost everything. That's why he had different professions too, in business.

SIGRIST: This was the inflation just after World War One?

WERTHEIM: In Germany, yeah it was horrible.

SIGRIST: Well can you talk a little bit about that, because that's a very interesting historical period, what do you remember about that?

WERTHEIM: I remember that my father lost everything, and - it was very very bad, because all of a sudden we were poor, you know? Because the money was so worthless and the Stock Market went down, it effected us too, and, it was very rough going.

SIGRIST: When you say the money was worthless, can you talk about the money itself, and?--

WERTHEIM: I don't remember. It was, just nothing. We had a maid working for us, and she tried to save her money - she worked for us for many, many years - and when the money became so worthless, she took all the money, and took (Sighs) glue, and instead of wallpaper she put it all in one room, and it was very sad.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about the period just after World War One, for instance, what about getting food, or anything like that?

WERTHEIM: Oh, I tell you, we were pretty lucky - even under Hitler (laughs) - because when you live in Berlin, and there were small shops and everybody knew you. And when you had the money, you pay for it and they give it to you. So we were pretty innocent living in Berlin. There was a lot that we didn't know - it was a war in the dark.

SIGRIST: So that implies to me that even during the first World War, things weren't so bad for you? Is that--

WERTHEIM: Yes and no, yes and no. Because my father was very -- we were so German, because we were treated well under the Kaiser, you know. The Jewish were let's say tolerated, yeah. And, he was, he enlisted! He was (laughs) -- I forgot how old, but he enlisted and he was an officer in the German Army! And he did a lot of good and he had a chance to get more food. And, he -- we supplied all the families and friends so personally, we didn't suffer. But everybody else (laughs), most of people did, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your father ever talk about his experiences in the German Army?

WERTHEIM: Oh yeah he was very well recognized because he was an older one and, he was very well respected, and, that was it. He didn't get the things, we had a sign, you know, a certificate 'Der Dank des Vaterlandes sei dir gewiss' [the gratitude of the fatherland is certain] but they killed the whole family -- that was the sayings of the fatherland. So, I don't want to go into that too much, I lost too many people. I had a brother that had no country, and he died. And I had a little sister that was packed and ready to go to England to be -- you know, work as a maid and the consulate was closed,. And she had to do work for the Germans for seamen She had to do welding, and they deported her and her future husband and my mother, they were all killed. So. And I have at least fifteen people from the nearest family. And friends, I don't know how many, that were killed in the Holocaust.

SIGRIST: That was all, during World War Two.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, um hmm. I skipped (Both laugh).

SIGRIST: We should have jumped World Wars here. Is there anything else that sticks out in your mind about the period around World War One, and what you might have seen in Berlin at that time - you would have been a child at that time - but I'm just wondering if anything else made a distinct impression on you..

WERTHEIM: I tell you what was nice. We had in our school - it was a beautiful new school - and I was very thin, despite the good food. I was a horrible child which didn't eat. And we had some special - and it was sponsored from the Quakers - from America! - that we had during intermission. We had hot chocolate, and wonderful rolls (laughs), and I was one of them to get it, too (Laughs). I mean, that's what I remember. It was sponsored by the Quakers, but American.

SIGRIST: So then America was actually, helping with food and things --

WERTHEIM: Yeah, it was terrific.

SIGRIST: -- for the German people. What was your mother's name?

WERTHEIM: Lily.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

WERTHEIM: Wetzler, W-E-T-Z-L-E-R.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your mother's background, her family background?

WERTHEIM: Well, I know a lot, because she had -- in fact there's still family here. She had a brother, even a half-brother but they were very close. He went to the United States when he was eighteen years old - and there's still one brother and his wife living in California. So, that was the background, you know.

SIGRIST: Did she ever talk about her childhood, or stories about her growing up?

WERTHEIM: Oh yeah, she had many, she had two sisters -- they were married in Austria, Vienna, and it was under the Kaiser Franz Josef -- and they were a Hof Juweliener. What this means to you is they, you know, all the ladies from the court they came and shopped because they had a jewelry store. At that time it was Diamanten Königen [diamond queen], was -- And so, my mother was a young girl and she was always invited to all those beautiful affairs at the court, when Vienna was dancing. So that was outstanding.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's personality.

WERTHEIM: Oh she was terrific, very much sense of humor - and, very family minded.

SIGRIST: Did she have a profession in Germany?

WERTHEIM: No, no, she didn't.

SIGRIST: She didn't.

WERTHEIM: A housewife like the old fashioned housewife, and --. She was artistic too, when she was a little girl she did a little painting, and my daughter has it (laughs). We saved that. And the other one, my other daughter, said she wanted one too (laughs) so she made a copy. And she was talented you know, artistic in needlework, and things like that.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that you enjoyed doing with your mother as a child?

WERTHEIM: Oh everything, we had fun. She was, even when I was a naughty girl, she (laughs) couldn't help laughing.

SIGRIST: Is there a story about when you were a naughty girl?

WERTHEIM: Well, I was like a boy. I dressed like a boy. I didn't want to be a girl. And I wore my brother's outfits, like they had at that time, the -- what do you call it? -- the knickers, and matching hat,. And I put my hair under the hat (laughs) and played with the boys. So, it was really of great concern - my mother sent me to the nuns for needlework because she thinks I was not a girl enough, so I had to do needlework (laughs).

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you do as a child for fun? You talk about, you know, wearing your brother's nickers and his hat -- how would you entertain yourself as a child?

WERTHEIM: Well, we had a lot of sports in school, and at home, too. We always went boating - rowboat - and I had to learn how to swim. And very outdoors, always outdoors. We were not dressed like you are now, you know, but always outdoors. And walking--

SIGRIST: And the whole family enjoyed this--

WERTHEIM: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What were some of the kinds of, like what would be a typical family outing for you to do?

WERTHEIM: We went, you know, to the, Grunewald which is near Berlin and

--

SIGRIST: It's in Grunavalt?

WERTHEIM: Yeah,

SIGRIST: The Green Woods?

WERTHEIM: Yeah, Green Woods and (laughs) -- they said, "Where are the woods?" It was so little, you know? And those were the outings, and we walked, and we had picnics, and we went in a rowboat. During the summer we rented a place in the country, and always outdoors, a lot of outdoors.

SIGRIST: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

WERTHEIM: Well, I hate to talk about it, but I had an older sister which got killed by Hitler. She was leaving Germany and they threw her out of the train. And I had a brother, he was without a country, couldn't stay any place. And, my little sister - that's what I mentioned before, what happened to her.

SIGRIST: Can you name them for me? Their names, the oldest sister first.

WERTHEIM: The oldest one was Erna, E-R-N-A.

SIGRIST: Then there was a brother?

WERTHEIM: The next one [pause] no, the next one was I. And then came Fritz, and the little one at that time was Gretel.

SIGRIST: Gretel.

WERTHEIM: Mhmm.

SIGRIST: And what was your name when you were born?

WERTHEIM: Flora...Jani. J-A-N-I, I just found out! (laughs) I never knew, it was in the old credentials.

SIGRIST: So the old spelling of --

WERTHEIM: Was J-A-N-I. I never knew it until now (laughs).

SIGRIST: Now, is, was that your last name, or was that your middle name?

WERTHEIM: No, the last name was David.

SIGRIST: D-A-V-I-D.

WERTHEIM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So David is actually your maiden name.

WERTHEIM: Right.

SIGRIST: Right. And Flora was Flora?

WERTHEIM: Yeah. My father liked the name. I didn't -- wasn't named after anybody.

SIGRIST: Goddess of Flowers (both laugh). Tell me a little bit about your schooling as a child.

WERTHEIM: My schooling, I went -- I didn't go to college, I went to high school. And that was it. And then I took courses in -- at that time it was new to the --what do you call, when you type without the touch? -- touch system. It was new at that time.

SIGRIST: Like a stenographer, or,

WERTHEIM: Yeah, stenography, and typing, and - I had a very good job.. I was secretary to the boss and was very well paid.

SIGRIST: What was the attitude of your parents about the education of their children? How did they feel about education in general?

WERTHEIM: Oh they were very concerned, but they didn't push college. I would never like it, I wouldn't like to go to college. I don't like to study. I have no patience, and I like to be on the go (both laugh). I'm not college material at all.

SIGRIST: Was it, was it typical at that time for a young lady to get a job?

WERTHEIM: Yeah, I think it was more or less, uh-huh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you did with the money that you got paid?

WERTHEIM: Well, when we were so poor, I gave it to my parents. I -- I took part in what we needed, you know. And then I became engaged, and I stopped working, and,

SIGRIST: This is still when you were living in Berlin?

WERTHEIM: Yeah, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: What was the gentleman to whom you got engaged?

WERTHEIM: Well, he was a buyer in a big department store, and he was the youngest buyer and very successful.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

WERTHEIM: Carl. C-A-R-L, initial 'R'. Wertheim.

SIGRIST: And how did you meet Carl?

WERTHEIM: Well, we met him at friend's house, you know, just casually, that's how we - and that was it (laughs).

SIGRIST: So how old were you when you actually were married?

WERTHEIM: Well, I forget, what was it? In '30, so I was almost 23.

SIGRIST: So you were married in 1930.

WERTHEIM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Tell me a little bit more, you mentioned that your family was Jewish -

WERTHEIM: Yeah,

SIGRIST: -- Tell me a little bit more about how they practiced their religion at that time.

WERTHEIM: Well, they practice - we went to synagogue, we observed every holiday, and - very nice, it was very nice.

SIGRIST: Could you describe for me how your family would have celebrated Passover, when you were growing up?

WERTHEIM: Well, we had the full week at that time, you know, the first two days, the last two - last two days, and every service, and every traditional food, everything. Very observing.

SIGRIST: Is there one Passover from your childhood that sticks out in your mind, specifically?

WERTHEIM: Oh as a child we didn't like it, it takes too long (laughs),

SIGRIST: (laughs) Ok.

WERTHEIM: But it was very impressive, it did something for us.

SIGRIST: Tell me - obviously, as the 1930s progress, things are becoming, politically, much more complicated. Can you talk a little bit about how that effected your family being Jewish in Berlin at that time?

WERTHEIM: Well, it was pretty horrible, that's all I can say. And, we didn't realize. And we asked for the affidavits because - our families, my husband's -- both families were in this country. They went back unfortunately, some of 'em, to Germany. So what we had connection with the Wetzler family, and my husband had his family here. So they send us affidavits. And that's - we were just lucky, the quota, our number was ok. And all my folks, they got the affidavits later from the Wetzlers - the quota was filled. This is why I get very upset about this, and, you know how many people died on account of that.

SIGRIST: Tell me, though, before that happened, before you decided to try to get out of Germany, tell me a little bit about what life was like prior to getting out of Germany. I mean, what did your family endure during the 1930s as the political climate was changing.

WERTHEIM: Well, before it was fine - like I say, we were tolerated. The Jews were treated decent. They couldn't be professional, you know,

it was very hard. Not in government -- they could be doctors or lawyers, but government was out for Jews. But, everybody was happy, you know? And the conditions, the living conditions were excellent, especially in the big city, you know.

SIGRIST: Was your father in the tobacco, was he doing in tobacco by then in the, in the 19- in the early 1930s?

WERTHEIM: No, then he already was in advertising, and for a big firm, a big firm. And everybody -- insurance, they threw you out, you know.

SIGRIST: Well how did -- for instance, in your father's business, as Hitler became more and more powerful, how did that effect your father's business?

WERTHEIM: Oh it was alright! Unless -- and Hitler came, and they couldn't employ or work with a Jew anymore. So that finished it!

SIGRIST: So then what did he do?

WERTHEIM: Nothing! We were poor!

SIGRIST: Is that when you were doing, your, you had the job?

WERTHEIM: No, I didn't work anymore when I was married. I didn't -- no, no.

SIGRIST: I see, that was before.

WERTHEIM: It was very bad.

SIGRIST: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about that period -- that of your own experience prior to leaving Germany. And maybe, some of your own experiences in the 1930s -- being a newlywed, you know, just having married your husband and --

WERTHEIM: It was wonderful, it was very good. Everything was wonderful.

SIGRIST: But in connection with the rise of Hitler's power, how that effected you and your husband..

WERTHEIM: Well, my husband worked and then later on he went in business for himself for a short while. And - then, this sort of finished, too, and it was very bad, too.

SIGRIST: Why did that business finish?

WERTHEIM: Hitler! Everything Hitler, finished, you know. And he was supposed to be a partner in a big outfit, and they had to drop him. They liked him so much but they had to drop him. And when he worked in a department store, they had the Nazis coming in in the court, and says - said, "Juden 'raus" [Jews out!]. I mean, that finished it.

SIGRIST: Did you have children at this time, after you were married?

WERTHEIM: Yeah, my daughter,

SIGRIST: You had a daughter,

WERTHEIM: Yeah, she was born in '33,

SIGRIST: And what was her name? Is, her name?

WERTHEIM: Ellen.

SIGRIST: Ellen.

WERTHEIM: Ellen Erna, yes, she was named after my sister -- Ellen Erna, and she's Schuster now.

SIGRIST: So she had, you had one child at that time,

WERTHEIM: Yeah, we came over with one child.

SIGRIST: One child. What about, how was your, how were you effected during that time? How was your everyday life affected as Hitler became more and more powerful?

WERTHEIM: Well, everything was so secret, you know? And, in the big city, it was so hidden. And when you heard things -- as the old people talk, it could never happen, you know? And, it did happen! But we couldn't believe it. And they tried to kill Hitler -- didn't work out. And we were very narrow minded -- especially my husband and I -- we was --. And he was scared to death to leave Germany, he said, "I'm not a salesman, I'm not this," and he was in a good position, "and I can afford to have it nice." And--. He was really hesitant. And my father - he was very smart - he said, "You better get out as soon as you can." and we did. So.

SIGRIST: Was there one particular event that really made you decide that, "We need to get out." Did something specific happen that,

WERTHEIM: No, not really, no, no. I mean only what we heard, and part of it we didn't believe!

SIGRIST: As you say in the city you were sort of sheltered in a way.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, yeah, they did a lot, yeah.

SIGRIST: You said that both you and your husband had family in the United States.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, yeah, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Can we talk a little bit about that family, those family members and where they lived, and when they had come to the United States.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, well one family - his, one sister -- was Goldenberg. And he was a young doctor, and he came over a long time before Hitler -- they had family here, you know. They stayed in the United States so they were sort of permanent here. And the other one came over later on, you know, during Hitler, and--

SIGRIST: And where were they living?

WERTHEIM: The other one lived in Bochum, in Germany, and he was a lawyer, yeah.

SIGRIST: He had been here and then went back?

WERTHEIM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see.

WERTHEIM: And he even was a lawyer for the Nuremberg Trial, they called him.

SIGRIST: How did you think about America before you got here?

WERTHEIM: Oh wonderful, wonderful. I mean this was it -- like when I saw the Statue of Liberty today you know (laughs), you just can't describe it when you see it, how wonderful it is.

SIGRIST: You mentioned earlier about getting the affidavits to get out of there, what else did you have to do prior to being able to leave Germany, other than getting the affidavits?

WERTHEIM: To come here?

SIGRIST: Yes, to come here. What kinds of things did you have to do before you left Germany?

WERTHEIM: We had to go to the Consulate in Berlin, and we had to be checked out to be healthy, so that was--

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about going to the Consulate, in Berlin?

WERTHEIM: Oh, we were scared to death! (laughs) That we were, you know? And they were wonderful there. And the nurse said -- she saw how scared we were, they were wonderful to us, and, "Don't be excited, and everything will be alright," You know. You had the best feeling, I mean they were really wonderful.

SIGRIST: What did you pack to take with you to America? What were you allowed--

WERTHEIM: I think we were one of the last ones that could call -- they called it the lift. You know. We could take furniture - so we sold most everything we had and condensed and bought, you know, small sized

furniture. I still have, (laughs) I still have the dining room. You know, like sectional furniture, and we could bring it here.

SIGRIST: So you bought furniture in Germany to bring here.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, we condensed and changed over to essentials, you know, because we didn't know.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about having to sell some of your possessions?

WERTHEIM: Well it didn't feel good. We didn't like it, but --. And we couldn't take any books whatsoever, anything that was suspicious you had to leave. You couldn't - they censored.

SIGRIST: Was there anything else that you were not allowed to bring, that you can remember?

WERTHEIM: Well no values, nothing, no money, nothing.

SIGRIST: Jewelry?

WERTHEIM: No! You can't bring anything, no.

SIGRIST: Did you and your husband take some of those things though that you weren't supposed to take?

WERTHEIM: No, actually we didn't. I think maybe one fur coat and we had it packed and didn't declare it and it went through. But I think we didn't smuggle because they caught a lot of people too and killed them, sure. In the beginning, it was easier -- but we didn't - we were too honest, too.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt about having to, to be in the situation where you're leaving your family, your leaving-

WERTHEIM: Terrible, like "Fiddler on the Roof," when you had to leave your folks.

SIGRIST: I don't know, I'm not --

WERTHEIM: You don't show the movie, no,

SIGRIST: -- Can you just explain it to me,

WERTHEIM: It's a horrible feeling, because your family, you're close and you don't want to part. That's very bad.

SIGRIST: But, but I, from what you said before, the implication was that your parents would come later,

WERTHEIM: Yeah sure, sure. It was our plan, but it didn't work out.

SIGRIST: Where did you go from Berlin to get on the ship?

WERTHEIM: We went to Holland, Rotterdam. And we had a wonderful ship, the Staatendam. The Staatendam. The second one was destroyed in the World War - the first one was destroyed in the World War. And we came over, there's a second Statendam.

SIGRIST: But you eventually got to Holland and got on the Staatendam.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, oh yeah, it was very difficult -- on the border they almost kept us -- it was very bad.

SIGRIST: Did your family have like a, a little sendoff dinner or some kind of acknowledgement that you and your husband were leaving?

WERTHEIM: Oh we couldn't do that. It was too sad, there could nothing be like this. No, definitely not.

SIGRIST: Ok. We're going to pause just for a second so Peter can flip the tape over, and then we'll get you to Holland and on your way to America.

WERTHEIM: Ok.

SIGRIST: Ok.

END SIDE A,

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: Ok, now we're beginning side two, with Flora Wertheim. We were just talking about saying goodbye to your family in Berlin, it's very sad. What sticks out in your mind about going from Berlin to Holland?

WERTHEIM: What sticks out? That at the border they almost kept my husband, not to leave the country. You know, he had a cigarette case from my father. And it was -- you know, it had a lot of things on it. Pictures from the family, they had from friends once, a cigar, the other one was a café - you know, every friend, or initials, everything put on this case. And it -- actually, there was one coin -- it had no value because it was glued on there. So they stopped him and they said, "You want to bring German fortune to another country, and we can keep you here -- to punish you for that." And they said to my husband, "Take this coin," and they had a box there from the Nazis, a collection box, and he said, "Put the coin in there." And he said, "No." And they said, "Why not?" He said, "I will do it when you say it, but not on my own freewill." I mean, that he did such, it was a miracle that we - that we -- you know?

And, so then I spoke up, and I said, "I want to tell you something," of course in German. "This one is all souvenirs when my father was under Ludendorff ." Yeah Ludendorff was a very famous - a big shot; "And he worked under Ludendorff, and he was in the German Army, and he gave us that, and it's all souvenirs, and I want to keep it. There's nothing wrong with it." And then they said - they were probably impressed, but they made stern faces. "But we have to send you some

place else." So we were scared to death, they send us to somebody else. We came in the office, there was one - what do they call it, in the green uniform, they were not the Nazis. I can't think of it now. Anyway, when we came in and he saw my husband pale; me looking horrible; little girl five years old. He said, "Please sit down."

So, the minute he said that, we felt already better. You know what I mean? And we told him what happened, and he said, "It's alright, don't worry." He was from the old guard, I don't know what they call it, in the green uniform. And he said, "You can leave the country, and you are safe. I see to it." So that was a miracle. And then my husband, when we were in the first one, he forgot his hat, and he said, "I forgot my hat." He went back. I couldn't believe it! You know, I said, "Leave your hat," "No," he said. Everything righteous. You know, typical German. (laughs) That's what it was! So, we couldn't wait to get the train. We had to take the train to the - to the border. And, we saw those awful guys, you know, Nazis walking back and forth. And - we had a blanket, my daughter still remembers it. We were hiding under the blanket under curtains that they don't see us, and we saw them going on the train. So, then at the border line, they had to get off, and then we were pleasing - we were free, you know. It was horrible, horrible.

SIGRIST: You're talking about the border to Holland.

WERTHEIM: Border to Holland, yeah.

SIGRIST: How long did that trip take, from Berlin to Holland?

WERTHEIM: I don't remember. I really - I tell you those things are so blank. At that time it was a long trip, but now it's nothing, you know, so -

SIGRIST: Was it a trip that you had to sleep on the train?

WERTHEIM: No, no, no, not overnight, no. It wasn't that, it wasn't that hard.

SIGRIST: Does anything about the interior of the train stick in your mind?

WERTHEIM: Well it was very primitive, just a regular train, you know, nothing fancy. But they had good trains at that time, it was good transportation.

SIGRIST: Perhaps one of the other passengers, do you remember seeing anybody -

WERTHEIM: No, we stayed alone in one and we drew the curtains on the door. We didn't want to be seen anymore.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to be a mother with a small child in this very tense situation?

WERTHEIM: Very, very difficult. In fact what they did, she had a doll - and they took her doll and they shook it and examined it. And she said to me, "What are they looking for?" I said, "For money," and she said to the man, "I don't - it's not a savings bank!" She told him - it was horrible. She remembers it.

SIGRIST: Well she would have been what, five years old then, I guess, about.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, five years, she remembers.

SIGRIST: What happened once you got to Holland?

WERTHEIM: To Holland we had to spend the night in a hotel which was very nice -

SIGRIST: What city were you in?

WERTHEIM: In Rotterdam.

SIGRIST: In Rotterdam.

WERTHEIM: And then we left the next morning with the Staatendam -- was a beautiful ship, you know, it was very good.

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a large ship before?

WERTHEIM: Yeah, but not the Staatendam, it was a bi-a new experience.

SIGRIST: When had you been on a large ship..

WERTHEIM: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: --growing up?

WERTHEIM: I think we went to, to Sweden or Norway or something. You know I was little. They're not much here. It was a ferry boat, I think, we went on. That the train took us on the boat,

SIGRIST: When you were a kid.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, yeah, so. But not that much, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well tell me about the trip on the Staatendam, and what you remember about the ship.

WERTHEIM: What I remember is they were wonderful, the Americans, and they gave - my daughter still has it, maybe -- a little sailor with Staatendam name on it. And they had parties for the children. And we ordered food and we didn't know when they (laughs), "You want cereal?" We said, "What is cereál?" (laughs) And we couldn't eat because it was pretty stormy, and a lot of people --

SIGRIST: So you never got to taste your cereal? (laughs)

WERTHEIM: -- got very sick. (laughs) No, but - we made it. It was very beautiful, you know, the ship and all. But the eating was (laughs) -- the best food we couldn't eat.

SIGRIST: Could you describe where you slept on the ship?

WERTHEIM: Yeah, we had a nice cabin and good service. It was like when you go on a cruise you know. We didn't even realize anything, it was very nice.

SIGRIST: And, do you remember how much it cost to be on the ship?

WERTHEIM: No idea. No. I do-- no idea.

SIGRIST: Do you know who actually purchased the ship tickets? Who was, was that your husband, who was the person who actually arranged for you to get on the ship,

WERTHEIM: I think we bought it -- maybe -- from a travel company, maybe, you know,

SIGRIST: You think, you were responsible for it, you and your husband.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, oh yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember how long the ship took to get to the United States?

WERTHEIM: I think it took a week -- could be. I'm not (laughs) really sure anymore.

SIGRIST: And this was in September, you told me,

WERTHEIM: Yeah, it was, yeah.

SIGRIST: Does anything else stick out in your mind about being on the ship, maybe being up on deck, perhaps?

WERTHEIM: Oh yeah, we were a lot on deck. Because when you'd - they told us get out, you know. "I want to eat, and sleep there." said, "No," (laughs) That was wonderful, we were on deck all the time, as much as we could.

SIGRIST: What could you see up on the deck?

WERTHEIM: Well, you see a lot, you know. When you leave, when - but it was so exciting. I think the only thing was to see the Statue of Liberty, and I couldn't wait to see it, you know?

SIGRIST: Well tell me what happened when you did see it.

WERTHEIM: Oh it was just - can't describe it. I mean it's just - everybody cried, you can't help it! You know, it was the best feeling

that you can ever have. Now you're free, you know, and it's free, you're in a wonderful country. It was very, very touching.

SIGRIST: Did you know anybody else who was traveling on this ship, or was there someone else, from a friend of yours, who -

WERTHEIM: No, not too many, no. We had a Passengers List and names sound familiar. They still had classes, you know. They had - we had, I think second class -- but it was --. No we didn't have no--.

SIGRIST: Well after you saw the Statue of Liberty, tell me what happened next.

WERTHEIM: The next is when we arrived, you know, and we saw our family. They were there, you know. My husband's two sisters, and a nephew --

SIGRIST: Is this when the ship? --

WERTHEIM: -- and the couple when the ship. Yeah, when it landed, and that was wonderful, it was great.

SIGRIST: Now, you said to me earlier that you had to come to Ellis Island.

WERTHEIM: Yeah. Oh, I skipped that now, I thought that's history now.

SIGRIST: (laughs).

WERTHEIM: I didn't want to repeat, yeah. We had to go to Ellis Island, I think I told you before, you know?

SIGRIST: Well, yes, but tell me again, now that we're recording. What happened, do you know why you had to come to Ellis Island, or?

WERTHEIM: Oh yeah. We knew it all, you know, we knew it all. And we didn't like it. It was so dark, and it was (laughs) -- we had to walk steps I think. And then - it was not pleasant there. It was the atmosphere - you know. We were glad to be in the country, but we didn't like the place (laughs).

SIGRIST: And what happened there?

WERTHEIM: Well they, it was not bad. They interviewed us and I think each one got a orange (laughs), I think. And they were very nice, so, it was good. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was any attention paid to your child when you were at Ellis Island?

WERTHEIM: Not especially, it was just average. We went through the routine and nothing else. And it was just, very easy, nothing. It was very good, and they were very nice.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if there were other people from your ship who came to Ellis Island?

WERTHEIM: Yeah. I had no contact, or no - we were too much involved in ourselves, so,

SIGRIST: Ok. Do you remember how long you were here? How long did it take?

WERTHEIM: It couldn't have taken too long, because our family was waiting, and, it couldn't take too long. I don't think so.

SIGRIST: And what family members came to pick you up?

WERTHEIM: The two sisters of my husband, and the nephew, and another couple, friends of my husband.

SIGRIST: Did you know any of these people beforehand, had you ever met any of them?

WERTHEIM: Oh yeah, uh-huh, all of them, yeah, all of them.

SIGRIST: Oh, you knew them all before they came.

WERTHEIM: Yeah, I knew everybody, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see, from when they had been going back and forth. Where did they take you?

WERTHEIM: To Union Station (laughs) in Washington. And it was a wonderful thing to arrive there, it was very impressive, you know, Union Station, America. It was great.

SIGRIST: You said Union Station in Washington just now -

WERTHEIM: Yeah,

SIGRIST: -- well how did you get from New York to Washington?

WERTHEIM: You know I tried to recall, and I think we - I can't remember, did we take a train, or somebody took us - it's blank. I tried to tell the children, I forgot (both laugh), but,

SIGRIST: But somehow you got there.

WERTHEIM: Yeah. Yeah. They picked us up, the family, whatever it was. I think one brother-in-law did it. He was driving back, I think he was (laughs). I'm not sure, but --

SIGRIST: Tell me how you spent your first night in America.

WERTHEIM: Oh, we went to the Goldenbergs', that's a, Doctor Goldenberg, you know,

SIGRIST: You're saying Goldenberg?

WERTHEIM: Goldenberg, yeah. He was my brother-in-law and his family, and they had a house in Chevy Chase -

SIGRIST: Maryland.

WERTHEIM: -- and we stayed with them. And we stayed with them for two -- two three months. And the other family we spent weekends, back and forth you know. So we were taken care of 'til we could take an apartment - we had no money, you know?

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about some of your first impressions of the United States. The things that you thought were, that have made an impression on you after all these years.

WERTHEIM: Oh everything was just great, you know. I mean - they took us for rides through the city, and they showed us Rock Creek Park which was fabulous, and it was excellent -- you know, very good.

SIGRIST: Were there some things that you had never seen before, that were unusual in some way?

WERTHEIM: Well, various - oh, all the things. The language number one, the shopping, and the conveniences, and everything that was way ahead. And people dress nicer, and stylish -- and colors - entirely different from Europe, you know? You couldn't wear a red dress when you're a grandmother (laughs), in Germany. So it was very different, very impressive.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about learning English, and, and, negotiating the new language.

WERTHEIM: I tell you, I --. We had a comedian here (laughs) on the bus when we came here -

SIGRIST: You're talking about today.

WERTHEIM: -- and it's, I'm still a little green. Because I say things and I don't know it's wrong. And I'm here long enough, but --

SIGRIST: But tell me about then, when you first got here,

WERTHEIM: Oh then! I had English in high school. We had to take English and French. And our teacher was very strict, and she was English, and she impressed me very much. So. I was p-- pretty good in grammar too, you know - reading and writing. But the American English -- always said somebody has a Ping-Pong ball in their mouth, it sounded so different from the English. And, we went to an Americanization school, which was wonderful, you know. You have to do it -- number one, for your citizenship, and we wanted to learn English. So we went to the Americanization school in Washington, it was excellent.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about, about what that process was like - what did you do at Americanization school? I mean, how did they teach you these things?

WERTHEIM: Oh they were wonderful. We had, Mrs. Varsha [ph], and she said, "Don't say 'R-oo-sevelt,' say 'R-ose-velt,'" (laughs). And she was a fabulous teacher, excellent, yeah, so it was a big help then.

SIGRIST: What other kinds of things did they teach you other than learning English?

WERTHEIM: Oh that was English only, I took English only. We didn't have time, we didn't have money. I had to go downtown, I had a pass that - Ellen was free, you know, you didn't have to pay (laughs). And it was very hard to go downtown from Chevy Chase, to go to the school, so we -- but we wanted it, and--

SIGRIST: I was wondering if they tried to teach you other aspects of American life, somehow, like,

WERTHEIM: Maybe they had,

SIGRIST: Like money, and you know that sort of thing.

WERTHEIM: No. If we ask questions she would answer, but it was strictly learning the language.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if there were other nationalities represented in your class, you know,

WERTHEIM: Oh yeah, they had 'em from all over. Yeah I'm sure, different nationalities.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your husband getting a job in the United States.

WERTHEIM: Oh that was very difficult. Because one gave him a letter of recommendation and pat him on the shoulder, "You're doing alright," Because he didn't speak English. And when we came, it was after the Depression. So why do they employ a refugee when there's so much demand. You know, no jobs. So it was very hard for a man, but he was in a good position, you know. It's very hard to come down. And the first job was a jeweler, and he hired him that he could say, "I helped refugees," you know. I mean they meant well, but he couldn't do anything. They gave him fifteen dollars, and he came home every time he was more unhappy - very bad. And one day they fired him, and I said, "Oh, thank God." And everybody said, "Are you crazy? You need the money." I said, "No. I don't want him to get sick, and he will find something," He ended up being a Fuller brush-man (laughs).

SIGRIST: A Fuller brush-man? (laughs)

WERTHEIM: Yeah, and it was good money.

SIGRIST: What's more American (laughs), than a Fuller brush-man?

WERTHEIM: Yeah, but, you know, it was very hard for him. We felt like it's begging. See in Europe it's such a difference, you know. From door to door, you're a real beggar -- you know what I mean? So to overcome the difference in culture, it was very difficult. But you're young enough, you make it, you know?

SIGRIST: What kind of psychological effect did this have on your husband, this experience of,

WERTHEIM: Very bad, very bad, so -. And it was very hard on the man, very -- but he made it.

SIGRIST: Did you get a job?

WERTHEIM: Well I couldn't, because nobody wants to take care of my little girl. And I went (laughs), I did everything. I went from door to door, selling merchandise. And I had it on consignment, and I didn't even know what I was doing, and mostly a made spot for me. And I made five or ten dollars a week, that was a fortune. I could buy food for that, because food was so inexpensive at that time. And I was very limited, what I could do. I had to take her to school - she went to cook school. And she said, "I don't want to learn how to cook!" (laughs) And she did very well in school. And I had to be there twelve o'clock to take her home, so. And, I sold -- at that time it was not a roach motel (laughs) -- I sold, sold that. It came in a sort of like a box that was open, and I had the best customer where the Chinese laundry is. And I made fifty-percent profit. But I had to be back at school at twelve o'clock, sometimes I didn't make it.

SIGRIST: You're saying like a, like a pesticide of some sort, a roach-

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WERTHEIM: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting.

WERTHEIM: And I was scared to death when I saw the picture, because I said, "I don't want to be with the roach." My husband said, "Wait, wait!" He found it (laughs) in a mail order catalog -- you know -- and it was fifty-percent profit, whatever I did sell (laughs). It was very hard.

SIGRIST: How long were you able to maintain contact with your relatives in Europe, with your mother and father?

WERTHEIM: Oh it was very bad, they were deported to Lodz/Litzmannstadt and I had one postcard that was all.

SIGRIST: So that happened not too long after you got to America?

WERTHEIM: Yeah yeah, sure, it was just before the Kristal Night. We didn't know, you know? So, anyway, but we started making living, not spending money, and being thrifty, and,

SIGRIST: What was the hardest thing for you to get adjusted to here in the United States?

WERTHEIM: I tell you. At that time I didn't find it so hard, because I was so willing. And everything was, you know, we greeted it because it's good, you know? And we tried to be on our own, and not from friends and family accepting favors, you know, so,

SIGRIST: Now did you have children once you got to the United States, too?

WERTHEIM: Yeah. Then Hedy was born, this is Hedy. (laughs)

SIGRIST: Hedy, that's H-E-D-D-Y?

WERTHEIM: No, H-E-D-Y, Hedy Lamar

SIGRIST: H-E-D, like Hedy Lamar (laughs)

WERTHEIM: Yeah, uh-huh, and that was wonderful -

SIGRIST: [superposed] You had two daughters here,

WERTHEIM: -- and we were very poor but I didn't care, we didn't care (laughs).

SIGRIST: So you had two little girls,

WERTHEIM: Yeah, right,

SIGRIST: And then any other children?

WERTHEIM: No, no.

SIGRIST: You had the two girls. Can you tell me a little bit about -- as your children were going through school, and you know are, are, becoming American children in a way -- can you tell me about, about how you interacted with your children? Because of course, you're sort of from Europe and Old World and they are American children in school. And, tell me what that was like.

WERTHEIM: It was a culture shock. And who suffered from it is Ellen, my older daughter, because we were green and we didn't know better. And she had a very, very hard time. And we were so poor, and she was fourteen years old. She said, "I want to go to work," and she was skinny, and we didn't want it. She said, "If you don't, I go anyway," because you have to sign. I mean, she really suffered from it. And we didn't live in the right neighborhood - she had very, very hard time, very hard. And then Hedy was like a princess compared to her, you know?

We treated (laughs) in the same way, but Hedy -- Ellen suffered from us being so green.

SIGRIST: When you say being green, just being sort of ignorant of American ways?

WERTHEIM: Yeah, sure! And when she said, "We want to go to Pop's," "Who's Pop's? You're not going there!" You know what I mean? (laughs) We didn't know!

SIGRIST: Were there any ways that your children helped you to Americanize?

WERTHEIM: Oh they helped a lot,

SIGRIST: How, how did they help?

WERTHEIM: Because, with the English, because they spoke English with us, you know, and we tried not to speak as much German. But you can't help it, when you at home you just get into it. And we tried to mix but we didn't have time. You know -- everything was making a living, and, you know, getting accustomed to everything, and,

SIGRIST: And it takes time to do that,

WERTHEIM: Yeah, oh yeah, but we did well, and,

SIGRIST: Did you become a citizen?

WERTHEIM: Oh yeah, after five years,

SIGRIST: Tell me about the process of becoming a citizen, what did you have to do, and,

WERTHEIM: We had to study, and to answer questions, and pass a test, and we did, you know. At that time we were very excited, you know. If we fail -- but it was really not that hard. And when we were sworn in that was fabulous. You know. So, like people nowadays, and we are happy now.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back, to Germany?

WERTHEIM: No, I just couldn't do it. They send us invitations, they would invite us flight, two weeks in Germany, or one week. And I got several invitations. I couldn't bring myself up to go. I want to see the country so badly, but, it's such a hurt. And what do I come back to, you know? So I never went. No, I didn't.

SIGRIST: How do you think of yourself in terms of nationality?

WERTHEIM: Very American. I hate my German tongue on my accent (laughs).

SIGRIST: That's right, you were saying that before we started, that,

WERTHEIM: Yeah, sure, but --

SIGRIST: Why is it a bad thing to have an accent, 'cause you said that to me before we started.

WERTHEIM: -- I don't like it, I wished I would have an American accent, but I never had time when I didn't even know I have it. (laughs)

SIGRIST: Well my goodness, you were thirty-one when you came to the United States, I mean, that's --

WERTHEIM: It makes a big difference.

SIGRIST: It makes a big difference, sure.

WERTHEIM: Because Ellen, she went to school, in two weeks not a word of German and she speaks like a, you know, American born - no problem at all.

SIGRIST: What did you do in your life that you're the most proud of?

WERTHEIM: Raising a family and being very family minded, and having a very good marriage. And meeting the nicest people, I really do. I'm very thankful for it, up 'til now (both laugh).

SIGRIST: Great. Well, Mrs. Wertheim, I want to thank you very much for taking a few minutes out from your tour here at Ellis Island -

WERTHEIM: That's alright,

SIGRIST: -- for me to ask you questions, it's been a most interesting interview, I appreciate it.

WERTHEIM: Yeah,

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, signing off with Flora J. Wertheim, on, let's see, Wednesday, September 24th, 1997, with Peter Hom running the recording equipment. Thank you very much.

WERTHEIM: Thank you too, for Ellis Island (laughs).

END OF SIDE B

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