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Ellen Klein: Today is October 21, 2010. I'm here today with Ellen Herschmann Bernstein. My name is Ellen Klein. We are in St. Petersburg, Florida, in the United States of America. Our language today is English, and our videographers are Nafa Fa'alogo and Richard Schmidt.

So, Mrs. Bernstein—

Ellen Bernstein: Yes.

EK: Tell me about yourself.

EB: How far back do you want me to go?

EK: As far as you like. Tell me your name at birth.

EB: Well, it's Ellen Bernstein, Ellen Herschmann Bernstein. I was born in Bonn, Germany, in 1928. I had a wonderful life with my mother, my father, my sister; I have an older sister. And we had a very nice life.

EK: Tell me your parents' names.

EB: My father's name was Max Mordecai Herschmann, and my mother was Carola Herz.

EK: Okay, and will you spell those names for us?

EB: Yes, M-a-x H-e-r-s-c-h-m-a-n-n.

EK: And what was his date of birth?

EB: His date of birth was May 31, 1896. (laughs)

EK: That's what you told me.

EB: All right, I wasn't sure anymore.

EK: Sure.

EB: And my mother's name was C-a-r-o-l-a; her last name was spelled H-e-r-z, and she was born May 25, a year later.

EK: Okay, 1897.

EB: Eighteen ninety-seven.

EK: Tell me about your parents.

EB: My parents, we had a good Jewish home. My mother was a homemaker, stayed home and took care of us. My father was a salesman, a furniture salesman. He was born in Altona, Germany, which is near Hamburg, and my mother was born in Bonn. They met when my dad came to Bonn on a youth—they had a youth group, and he was—had home hospitality at my mother's house. And that's how they met. They fell in love and got married. My sister came along in 1923, and—

EK: And what's her name?

EB: —four and a half years later I was born. Her name is Ruth Levine, and she lives in New York.

EK: Tell me about your father's family.

EB: My father's family, my grandfather—I only knew one grandfather; the grandmothers I did not know. My grandfather stemmed—came from Lithuania, and we are direct descendants of the Vilna Gaon.

EK: And this is on your father's side?

EB: This is on my father's side. The Vilna's name was Elias, and my grandfather carried that name.

EK: He was Elias Herschmann.

EB: He was Elias Herschmann. And my son now—we carried the name through the family, and my son carries the name Elias, too; and in fact it went on to a great-grandchild already, so we are very proud of that. And my father was quite religious. We had a good Jewish home, we went to synagogue. And I don't know what else to tell you about my parents. They were wonderful. I was very close to my father, especially.

EK: So your grandfather's family moved from Lithuania to Germany when?

EB: I don't know when. Before the First World War, way before, because he was supposed to—they took everybody into the army, and he didn't want to—he changed his name. His name was Rabinowitz; it was the family name way back. And he changed his name; he just took the name Herschmann to escape, he didn't want to be in the army, and escaped to Germany.

EK: And what kind of work did he do?

EB: Something with newspapers. I don’t remember, I really don’t—I do remember my parents providing for him, taking care of him, because in Bonn did not work anymore. He was home, he helped me with my homework, and I adored him.

EK: And your father was one of how many children?

EB: Just two.

EK: Just two.

EB: He had a brother, who died on the First World War on Flanders Field. My grandfather, during the war or before the war, came to America. We had a lot of cousins here in the United States. And they came, my grandmother with him at one time, and she did not like the weather or something and went back to Germany. My grandfather traveled on business back and forth and was here during the First World War. And my father refused to fight against the United States, and they took his German citizenship away from him.

EK: Returning him to Lithuanian citizenship?

EB: No, they—in Germany, that wasn’t like in America. Here you are automatically a citizen if you’re—whatever your parents were. In Germany, that wasn’t so. So they took his citizenship away and he was a man without a country, which later on during Hitler time was very dangerous, because he wasn’t German and he wasn’t anything. Those were the ones that they took on Kristallnacht; they were the first ones that were shipped away. So we were very lucky not to be there on Kristallnacht.

EK: How did he handle that, not having citizenship?

EB: I don’t know if it ever bothered him before the war.

EK: And how did he manage it during the war?

EB: But my grandfather remained—he was here, could not get his family over there. And my grandmother remained in Germany with the two boys. My uncle, as I said, was

in the army. My father joined the Red Cross and worked at the Red Cross. But they—my grandfather wasn't—became an American citizen.

EK: Okay, and what happened to your grandmother?

EB: My grandmother stayed in Germany. He came back afterwards, and they lived in Germany, in Altona.

EK: Tell me more about growing up in Germany before the war.

EB: Well, I could not go to public school. My sister started in a public school. And there came the day when they said no Jews were allowed anymore and she had to leave school.

EK: Okay. Do you remember how old you were?

EB: Well, I was—must have been six. I wasn't in school yet. And she—the Jewish community—the teachers, the cantor from our synagogue—and they started a school in the synagogue, in a building, and all the Jewish children went there. I went later on.

But I do remember one day that my sister came home. She rode her bike to school, and she came home all upset that the Nazis had closed up the school, and asked different families to open up their homes, and my mother was one of them. So the children—I was in school already at that time because we children all went to different homes with different classes, and we continued being taught in people's homes until they decided—they opened up the school again and we went back to school.

EK: All right.

EB: So, that was one experience. I also remember going home, walking home from school with one of my friends, and the Nazis—Hitler was coming through Bonn, and we went and hid. And A, because I didn't want to put my hand up and say, "*Heil* Hitler." And we went into a doorway and sort of hid until he passed and the crowd passed. But these were—it went through us. We knew all this.

Another experience I had was my mother had a maid, a day worker who came a few times a week, very lovely woman who had a young—a daughter my age. And she used to bring her and we would play together. And we were downstairs in the garden playing with our dolls, and we could hear in the distance the Hitler Youth: they would march, and you could hear them singing. And she ran out of the yard and was gone; she followed them. And I got all upset and ran upstairs to tell her mother that she—and there was nothing her mother could do about it.

EK: So her mother didn't support that?

EB: No, not at all, not at all! As a matter of fact we heard after were out of Germany in the United States that the daughter—they reported the parents because we were in touch with the mother yet, my mother was, reported the parents for being friends with Jews.

EK: Do you remember who she was? Do you remember her name?

EB: I don't remember her name, I really don't, but she was a lovely woman.

EK: So she was good to you?

EB: Yes, she was.

EK: And did she take care of you right up until your family left?

EB: Well, she cleaned the house; she didn't take care of us, no.

EK: Tell me about your—

EB: I do remember also hearing as a child that things were short. They couldn't get butter. Eggs were—you couldn't get eggs one day, and whatever was short people would say, "Oh, the chickens aren't laying eggs; the cows are not giving milk." Nobody—we didn't realize that Hitler was confiscating all this food to put away for his army, for whatever he had in mind.

EK: What was that like for you as a child, to hear that you didn't have what your family needed?

EB: My mother somehow always provided; she was a terrific homemaker. And somehow, I never felt I didn't have things. We always ate. We were always blessed. And even when things were hard, when we first came to America, I never felt I was poor. We were never poor; my parents never gave us that feeling. Things were hard, but they never gave us the feeling.

I do remember also another incident of—a friend of my parents had given me—they were giving me from their daughter their doll carriage. And it was a distance, and I was walking to their house, picked up the doll carriage, and on my way back there were kids throwing stones at me and calling me names, and I rushed home because it scared me. Also, across the street a boy that I used to play with, neighbor of ours, said to me one day, "I can't play with you; you're a Jew."

EK: Oh. How'd that feel for you?

EB: It felt terrible. You know, I—it felt terrible not to—why? You know, so I'm a Jew? I didn't completely understand, and yet we knew that Jews were not wanted.

EK: How'd your parents explain those experiences to you, or did they?

EB: I never said anything to them.

EK: Why is that, you think?

EB: I don't know. I knew they'd feel terrible about it, and I didn't want them to feel badly. They knew things; I guess they knew things, of course, were not well.

And then in one day, my father came home very upset. He was, as I said, a salesman on the road, and he had—he used to have lunch; in Europe you eat your big meal during the day. And he used to go to lunch with his customers, and they were very good friends. And this one day my father came to this one customer, and he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Herschmann, I can't buy from you anymore. I was told that I can't buy from Jews." And that hit my father very hard, and he came home and he said, "We've got to leave."

I'm going to backtrack a minute. In 1933 my cousins, his cousins from America, came to Germany to visit us, and they said to my parents, "And if you want to come to America, let us know." "Another time." Things weren't—Hitler had just come to power, and my father said no. You know, you don't pick up a family and just leave, go to a country, you don't know your language or anything. But that day when he came home, he said, "We've got to leave." So in a way, this customer did him a favor. So he wrote to America to the cousins, who immediately got together and sent an affidavit, and within no time we left. We went immediately through all the exams and the physical examination.

EK: Tell us about that. I mean, if he didn't have citizenship, did it complicate the process for him?

EB: No. No, he was fortunate. This was 1938. And he was fortunate. It somehow didn't.

EK: What do you remember about the process of being allowed to leave?

EB: I remember being in Stuttgart, where we were examined physically; everybody had to go there. I remember from there visiting an uncle and aunt in another city, which wasn't far—I can't think right now. Speyer, the city of Speyer. They had a shop, a linen shop, and I remember going with my uncle into the shop downstairs. I was ten years old. And there was a big sign being painted on his window: *Jude*. I remember that very well.

EK: How did you feel?

EB: I don't know. I can't tell you. I didn't—you accepted this, in a way. What were we going to do about it? There was nothing we could do about it. So we came back, and as soon as we could my father immediately—as soon as the affidavits came, he booked passage on the *Aquitania* and we left. My grandfather, who came from Lithuania, had to get different papers and the papers didn't come in time. But my father wouldn't wait; he didn't want to stay and endanger the rest of us.

EK: Did he talk about that at all, or that was just your sense as a child?

EB: No, no, we went. We took my grandfather's—most of his things with us, and we went. And thank God, a month later he was able to come. I will never forget going to the ship in New York, picking him up, and all these immigrants were coming with huge packages and suitcases and lifts, they called them. And my grandfather walked off the boat with a (laughs) little suitcase. Thank God he was all right.

But the rest of my—my mother's sister. She had a sister, and we tried to get them. They tried to give her affidavits for them and my cousins Walter and Lotte, and my uncle. And they went to Stuttgart to be examined: my uncle had a heart murmur and was not passed. And my mother wrote to them, "Send the children," 'cause it would have been easier for children to get their parents out. My uncle wrote, "Either we come together or we die together." And that's just what happened. They never got out.

EK: What were their names?

EB: They perished. It was Paula Tiedel, Julius Tiedel, Walter was my cousin, and Lotte.

EK: That must have been very hard for your mother.

EB: Yes, it was. Oh, it was terrible. She did have a brother who did come out; he got out sooner.

EK: How many siblings did she have?

EB: Just the one brother and the one sister.

EK: Okay, and what was his name?

EB: His name was Arthur Herz, and they went to Milwaukee. And his son is living there with his family.

EK: Tell me about the trip. What's it like to be that age and to leave everything behind and to get on a ship?

EB: Well, my parents could have taken things. They could have taken their furniture and things; but the cousins in America, who had just seen our furniture, which was tall, big, and massive pieces, figured they wouldn't fit into apartments here. So they wrote back and said, "Don't bring anything," which was a shame because my father was in the furniture business. They had no intentions of bringing this; they would have gotten modern furniture, because your—Germany was much ahead and modern furniture was out already. But they were told not to bring them, so they didn't.

They could only take a small amount of money, I don't know how much. But I do—I had a doll that I absolutely adored, a baby doll whose head and arms and legs were porcelain, and the body was stuffed. And I had heard people talking before we left that people was sneaking out and taking jewelry in dolls; they were putting it into the body of dolls.

EK: Sure.

EB: And hearing this, I thought, "Oh, no, nobody's going to take my doll!" so I held on to that doll on the boat for dear life. And I loved my doll—

EK: What was her name?

EB: *Pummelchen*; that means chubby. (laughs)

EK: Okay.

EB: And we got off the boat and for some reason the head fell off and smashed into a million pieces, and I was heartbroken. I was ready to get on the boat and go back, you know; I didn't. And the next day all the relatives that met us, they all brought dolls. I had dolls in all sizes, little and big and—but it wasn't the same, it wasn't my *Pummelchen.*

EK: What else did you get to bring with you?

EB: So, that was hard. I don't remember anything else that I brought.

EK: That was the most important.

EB: That was the most important, and that was gone. The boat trip, the first couple of days I was terribly—I'm a terrible sailor. To this day I don't like going on cruises. I was sick, seasick, but then I was okay again. And it took seven days in those days.

EK: Were you excited, were you sad, were you all those things?

EB: I don't know. I don't remember—you know what, I don't remember, but I do remember the day we came into New York Harbor. I do remember my father—we came early in the morning—my father waking us up and saying, "Come on up to the deck." As we saw the Statue of Liberty and he pointed that out, and I will never forget that.

EK: How did that feel?

EB: That was wonderful, because some years later when I took a trip with a friend on the *QE2* [RMS *Queen Elizabeth 2*] to England and we were on the ship watching the Statue of Liberty, I thought back of the moment when I first saw it, when I came, and here I was leaving. It was a wonderful feeling.

I'm going to regress again. We came—we had a few experiences on that trip. They were supposed—the Cunard White Star Line, which is the line that we went on, was supposed to meet us with our tickets for the ship in France, in Cherbourg. We left from Cherbourg. We had friends in France. And we went by train, and they took our passports away from us. Somehow, they took our passports away from us.

EK: On the train?

EB: On the train.

EK: Okay.

EB: And when we got to Paris—we didn't know why. We didn't—we couldn't—but these friends met us, and thank God she was talking to them; you know, there was a lot of shouting going on. And they didn't want to let us into France. We did not have the proof that we were leaving France, that we were coming to America.

EK: I see.

EB: They were afraid that we were sneaking into France, because we didn't—

EK: Because you didn't have the tickets, okay.

EB: They finally, finally—somehow she persuaded them to give us the passports back. And my father, who wanted—loved art and wanted to look forward to seeing the Louvre, spent the three days that we had in Paris, or four days, whatever it was, at the ship's—at the office of the Cunard White Star Line. What had happened, I don't know.

EK: Who was she that helped you? This was a family member?

EB: No, no, no. This was a friend: they used to live in Germany and they went to Paris many years before.

EK: Okay, so this was a Jewish friend?

EB: So this was a Jewish friend, who hasn't survived either. But that was very upsetting.

EK: And she was able to get the passports returned to you?

EB: Well, yes, she was, thank God. And then we took a boat in Cherbourg, the *Aquitania*, and then it was really a nice trip, now that I think about it. Generally it was nice. Rabbi [David] de Sola Pool, who was a big rabbi, a Spanish, had just come from Israel and happened to be on the same boat. So it was—and he had services on the boat. And on the Friday night he had a service and he spoke. And he said he was so very touched: when the boat left Cherbourg, there was a father who put his arms—I'm tearing up thinking about it—who put his arms around his two daughters and said, "Look, this is the last time you will see land for a long time, and you will probably never see this land again," and that's when we left for America. And he was talking about my father and my sister and myself.

And then we came to America, and it was not easy. It was not easy for my parents. The relatives had rented an apartment on the third floor in New York on Riverside —near

Riverside Drive, a walk up with furniture that was—it was a furnished place. My parents never complained. They were so grateful to be out of Germany, that they had gotten out, but it wasn't easy. It was very hard on my mother. My father couldn't find a job.

EK: Did any of you speak English?

EB: Nobody spoke English. My sister had a little bit of English in school, they started to teach English, and I could say yes and no. But we didn't know English. My parents went to night school to learn English. My father tried to get his citizenship because his father had been a citizen, and he wrote to Washington and all that, but it didn't do any good. He didn't want to wait five years, but he had to. But he tried very hard; he was so thrilled to be here. And he got a job as a—in an upholstering place. He knew nothing about upholstery, but it was furniture, he figured, furniture. So he got a job, and then they threw him out because he knew nothing about it. But each time he learned a little bit.

And my mother worked, cleaned house. She went to my cousins, because they didn't want to just take, because they supported us when we first came; that's what the affidavits were about, that we wouldn't become a burden to the country. And when my parents didn't want to be—they didn't like that, they wanted to be independent. So my aunt—this was a cousin of my father's; I called her aunt—had Mom clean house for her a couple of days a week. So my mother felt better about taking money.

My father—they were part owners of the Loews Theaters, the movie theaters. As a matter of fact, one of the cousin's names was the same as my father, and we used to get telephone calls from California calling Max Herschmann. But so my father used to say, "Give me a job, let me be a ticket taker, let me—I can, I'm able to tear tickets." And they used to say, "Take it easy, don't worry. Take it easy." My father hated the word "take it easy." But eventually, he met somebody. They learned English. My mother learned English through the radio. They had the soap operas on and she learned English that way. Then we had cousins and they could speak Yiddish, so they understood my mother.

EK: Sure.

EB: And this one cousin, she used to take my mother to lunch or meet with her, and they used to—we saw a lot of them, and Adolf and Ida Kobry was their name. I was very fond of them. And she only talked English to my mother. She would not—she understood my mother's German. But that's how my mother learned English.

EK: Right, she was helping her.

EB: Yes, she was. And my father met somebody—I don't know how, to tell you the truth, or where—but they went into the reconditioned zipper business.

EK: Okay.

EB: Because it was wartime, and you couldn't get zippers. You know, the metal; there was no aluminum and metal to get. So, I don't know whose idea it was, but the two of them went into the reconditioned zipper business, which was a filthy, dirty business. There were schmata men, people that collect the—trousers, skirts, old clothes. They would cut out the zipper and they would sell it by the bagful, which my father and his partner bought, and they took the—you had to take the stitches out to get the rest of the material off, clean the—they had to be sized, because the factories that made skirts and dresses needed certain six inch zippers for a skirt. So they had to—they would order the zippers by size. Well, they were all sizes, so they had to be measured and sized. And to this day, I have the tools. I can still shorten a zipper; it's got to be metal, not plastic. And they put new sliders in and all that kind of stuff. Then it went to a dyer, because the zippers were in a million colors, who tried to take out the colors best as they could and dyed it in whatever color the manufacturer wanted. It was a filthy business. My mother did some of that at home. She cleaned the zippers, and we helped.

EK: It's a lot of work.

EB: We kids helped.

EK: What did you do?

EB: I helped clean the zippers. And then with steel wool we had to go over the middle, so it would be shiny. And from the house—and Dad used to send me, when it was first in the house; it started in the house somehow. And he used to send me to the dyer, who was downtown in Manhattan, so I had to take a subway. And these bags were so heavy—I was only ten, remember—

EK: That's a big trip.

EB: And it was so heavy. To this day I think my bursitis and all this, the pain I have, came from the fact that those bags were really too heavy for me. But I never said a word, because we knew things were hard, and we just didn't talk. My sister babysat, so she made a little money babysitting. And I never said a word about that being too hard, too heavy. I never told my father that all his life, because I wouldn't want him to feel bad.

I remember one day my sister came home from school, and it was awfully late, much later than normal. And why? Because she wanted an ice cream cone. Oh, she took her ten cents; instead of taking the bus, she walked. I mean, because we didn't—we were different kids than they are today. We didn't want our parents to feel badly, so we did what we could and we kept quiet.

EK: And you went to school in the day?

EB: Yes. Oh, yes, I went to public school. In the beginning it was very hard, because kids are cruel, you know, and they laugh at you. And they put me into first grade. I was ten years old. And I didn't know what was going on. My report card was terrible, except in math. In math, I got a 100, 'cause—

EK: That's the same in any language.

EB: Numbers are numbers.

EK: Right.

EB: Math I was wonderful in, but everything else I didn't know what they were talking about. It was very hard, and I used to come home crying many a day. But then I learned, I guess, and it just comes to you; you know, you don't feel like you're learning the language. And they skipped me finally into the—till I got into the correct grade. My sister they put right away in high school, which was worse; I was in public school. And they realized she was having a hard time. But they realized, her teachers, that she was very talented, she was very good in art. So they suggested that she goes to school, that my parents take her out and put her into an art school, and she went to School of Industrial Art [High School of Art in Design] in New York.

EK: Okay. If we can, let's stop for a break.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins.

EK: I'm Ellen Klein, and I'm here with Ellen Bernstein in St. Petersburg, Florida. And today's date is October 21, and the year is 2010. And before we stopped for a break, you were talking about your experiences in school. Would you like to tell us more about that?

EB: Well, I can tell you that I missed the Jewishness in public school, because in Germany being in a Jewish school, I—when—the holidays, and I missed that even though we went to synagogue. But so my mother wanted to enroll me in a Hebrew school, and she took me to this one school and they would not accept me.

EK: Why not?

EB: Because I didn't know English. They said that in Hebrew I was far advanced, and they said, "Let her learn English first before she comes to Hebrew school."

EK: Oh. How'd that feel to you?

EB: I felt terrible. But then she found the Jewish center and went there, and Dr. Joseph Kaminetsky, who was the principal there, said, "Of course we'll take her. We'll be happy to." And he was wonderful.

Not only that, he insisted that I go to camp, summer camp. This Jewish center was Orthodox; we were Conservative, but they were Orthodox. And they sent me to this summer camp with a friend, and I was miserable because again, as I said, children—unfortunately, whether they are Jewish or not Jewish, children are children and they are cruel, they hate anything that's different, because our English wasn't good. And I don't know if you know what frenching a bed is? See, you didn't, you're too young for that. That's something the kids do to each other in camp. And that's doubling up the under sheets so that when you get into the bed, you can't straighten your legs.

EK: Oh! Okay.

EB: And they used to french our bed. And of course, I took that differently. I didn't take it as them playing just a trick on us. But I took it as, "See, here I am in America, in a Jewish camp, and they still hate us." This was my feeling, and I hated it. I couldn't wait

to get home. I was miserable at camp. Dr. Kaminetsky was wonderful; he later on became the head of the Orthodox Torah Umesorah in New York.

That was my—then I went to high school. I went through public school. I went to Julia Richman High School in New York. I had good years. By then I knew English, dated—a lot (laughs)—went to dances. And I really had a good life.

I went to college, night school; I went to Hunter College at night. My parents couldn't afford to send me to college otherwise. I really wanted to become a nurse or a doctor. My mother was so against nursing, because "a good, nice Jewish girl doesn't become a nurse, doesn't touch bedpans." Those were the old fashioned ideas.

EK: Sure.

EB: And a doctor, well, that they couldn't afford. So she used to say to me, "Become a laboratory technician." Well, I didn't want to work with bottles. I'm a people person, I love people. So I went in and I taught nursery school. And in those days you didn't need a degree yet, but I was going toward that degree in school—except for the fact that I was told I'll never get a job, because in those days you couldn't have an accent, either. You could not teach if you had an accent. Those things are very different today.

EK: Right, they were concerned about elocution.

EB: That's right. So, I taught in private schools.

EK: Jewish schools or secular schools?

EB: Jewish—no, one was not a Jewish school. One in New York, Hansel and Gretel School, was not a Jewish school. And then later on I got a job at Help and Reconstruction, which was in Washington Heights in New York, and that was for children of refugees or Holocaust survivors where the parents had to work, both parents. And the children were there all day, for lunch and took naps, and they were there the whole day. And that's the school I worked in.

EK: How'd it feel to you to take care of those children?

EB: I loved it. They were wonderful. It was wonderful. And I worked there until I met my husband—

EK: Who was?

EB: —and got engaged and moved to Scranton, Pennsylvania.

EK: And who was your husband?

EB: He was Joseph Kauffman, and he—we met in the country. We were—I was a counselor at country clubs, at two different country clubs. And this one country club I was at, he was working in the office, and that's where we met. And one thing led to the other. He used to come—he lived in Scranton, I in New York. But we fell in love and we married, and I moved to Scranton, Pennsylvania.

EK: When did you get married?

EB: I got married in 1950. And three years later I had a son, a wonderful son.

EK: And what's his name?

EB: His name is Jay Kauffman—Elliot Kauffman; the Elliot goes back to the Vilna Gaon, as I mentioned before. And I lived in Scranton. I sent him to a Hebrew day school, which was also Orthodox. And my friends all said, "What do you want to do, make a rabbi out of him?" to which I answered, "Why not? It's not a bad business." But his father was an accountant, a CPA, and quite well known in Scranton. I taught for a while at the nursery school at the synagogue and then later on stayed home, took care of my son. I was very active in the Jewish community, though, in the Jewish center. I became president of the women's organization. My husband was very active. And, unfortunately, he got cancer and died at the age of forty.

So shortly after that—I remained in Scranton. Everybody told me to go to New York, and I decided to raise a child. I didn't want to be a New Yorker; I'd rather be in a smaller community. I didn't want to move him. And a few years later I met my second husband, who happened to come to Scranton—he was a salesman, a pharmaceutical salesman—and one thing led to the other. He came from Syracuse, New York. We decided—he had

set up somebody—he was vice president of the company. He had set up a salesman here in St. Petersburg, and that didn't go to well. So at the time he said, you know, to his boss, "You know what, I would like to take over the warehouse in St. Petersburg." And we felt that was a good way for him to get away. So we got married and moved to St. Petersburg. Jay was bar mitzvahed in Scranton. And—

EK: And what year was that that you moved to St. Petersburg?

EB: In 1966 we moved down here. And we opened up a pharmaceutical firm, which we named Elliot—the Elliot Company, Elliot Pharmaceutical Company. I forget already. And I raised my son here. He went to—at first he went into public school, but then later on he—no, he did go to public school and graduated high school. Went to college in Tallahassee, met his wife, got married, and they moved back to St. Petersburg.

EK: That's good.

EB: Had four children, so I have four wonderful grandchildren. Three are married; one, the youngest, is getting married this coming year. And I have four wonderful great-grandchildren and another one on the way. So thank God, things are good.

EK: And tell me about your involvement in the community now.

EB: I am very involved. I'm—you can call me a professional volunteer. (laughs) I am very involved in our synagogue. I was very involved in the Jewish community center that we had here. I was the vice president; I also ran their Camp Kadima for the younger ones, I was head of that. I work at the Holocaust Museum now. We have a wonderful Holocaust museum here, and I have been with them since—oh, about twelve years, when we still were very small and were just a room on the beach. We now have the museum downtown, and I've been there since its beginning.

EK: That's the Florida Holocaust Museum.

EB: The Florida Holocaust Museum, and I volunteer there. I used to volunteer twice a week; now I volunteer once a week.

EK: Well, in light of your experience, what does it mean to you to be part of the Florida Holocaust Museum?

EB: A lot!

EK: Tell me about that.

EB: It means a lot. When I first—a friend of mine asked me to volunteer, and the first time I volunteered—they wanted me to become a docent, and I went through—we had the Anne Frank exhibit, and I went through this with somebody. Anne Frank was about the same age as me when she first went up into the—into the house, into the attic. There are pictures of Anne Frank with her little white tam on; that's very well known. I have a picture like that of me. And it affected me terribly. I said, "I can't do this, I cannot go through this." But I wanted to do something at the Holocaust Museum. I felt it was so important. I'm so proud of the fact that we have one here on this coast in Florida, and we're the fourth largest in the country. So we—I volunteer, and I work in admissions and in the gift shop.

But we also have, which was very touching, a—we have a boxcar that was brought over from Poland, and we have that. When that boxcar was brought to this new museum, it was put into the parking lot. And they didn't want to leave it alone. It was going to be put into the museum the next day. So they had it in the parking lot, and like we don't leave a body alone, because there were so many bodies in that particular car, we had an all night vigil, and I was one of those who stayed with it. We had yahrtzeit candles all around it, and it was very emotional and very touching to be there, and it was wonderful.

I had a very exciting experience in 1980, when my father saw it in a German Jewish paper that they were asking—the different cities in Germany were asking for people to come back to visit. They wanted Jews to visit Germany. They knew you would never forget, but they want to give a hand of friendship. So my father wrote, and to make a long story short, I got an invitation: my husband and I went to Bonn in 1980.

EK: How'd that feel for you to be asked to come back?

EB: That was very exciting! It was exciting already when we went on the plane, and I went up and down that plane and I found people I hadn't seen or I didn't know were alive. It was really quite exciting. My best girlfriend, who was in Auschwitz, whose father was our cantor, he was—he perished; her mother and her somehow got out. And she was released; her mother died in her arms of pneumonia, and she had an aunt here in

the United States who brought her over. Her name is Annelie; it was Annelie Winterberg. And she came to New York, where I met her, and she sort of pulled away. I even made a date for her and we went on a double date, but somehow she just pulled away, and she then moved to Philadelphia where her aunt was and she didn't want to have anything to do with anybody. Now, she was a very pretty blonde, and later, as I grew old, I said, "Well, she probably didn't want to be asked." Who knows what she had to do to survive?

But then on this trip in 1980 she was there, and we became very close friends. She came with her husband. And we went right back to where we were. She's been here visiting me since. We are still in touch with each other.

EK: Oh, how wonderful.

EB: And on that same trip, I happened to have had the most people. My teacher from Germany, who went to Israel, came with his wife. And my cousins, I had a cousin [in] South America that came on this trip. So it was very exciting for me.

EK: Okay. So I think we need to stop, because it's time for another tape, and we'll return. Thank you.

Part 2 ends; part 3 begins.

EK: I'm Ellen Klein, here today with Ellen Herschmann Bernstein. This is tape three, and today's date is October 21, 2010. Mrs. Bernstein, would you like to introduce your son?

EB: I would be happy to. This is my son Jay. He is my one and only, and I'm very proud of him. He's very important in my life, and he's the one that's made me a grandma and a great-grandma. And you have questions, Jay?

Jay Kauffman: One of the things that I've always been curious about is how our family became involved with the community and the synagogue in New York, Congregation Habonim?

EB: A cousin of Oma's—my mother was Oma [Grandma]—went to this synagogue and persuaded my parents to join, because it was a German synagogue.

EK: So there were lots of German immigrants?

EB: There were lots of German immigrants. It was a synagogue of German immigrants: the rabbi was German, the cantor was German. So they felt very much at home there. So that's why they joined Habonim.

JK: It was interesting because the synagogue was a Reform synagogue, although the prayers were mainly done on a Conservative basis, and they had actually come from a Conservative background.

EB: Yes.

JK: So I found it very different, very interesting that they because involved with that.

EB: It was more Conservative than it was Reform, really; it wasn't that Reform.

EK: So is the connection more cultural than it was religious?

EB: I guess so, but they were more—it was more cultural, and I guess they felt at home there. And a lot of their friends and cousins of my mother went there.

JK: I think it was a place that they could feel free to speak German.

EB: That's right.

JK: In between the services, speeches were still given in German—

EB: That's right.

JK: —by some of the rabbis that were there. It was a place that they could still gather. I always thought it was very interesting that it took a long time to be accepted by you anywhere. You came from Germany, where of course everybody called you "Jew," and

“dirty Jew,” and then you went to the United States right as World War II was starting and they looked at you and said, “German, you’re German.”

EB: That’s right.

JK: And you got the hatred of being German.

EB: That is so true.

JK: And then it was ironic that your grandfather, not only being German, but looked Japanese, also.

EB: He did.

JK: So had the worst of all worlds at that time.

EB: He was—during the war, there was this [Saburō] Kurusu, I believe was his name. He was an ambassador from Japan, and they used to stop my grandfather on the street because they thought—he was short and they thought that he was Kurusu, that he was the ambassador. He looked oriental for some reason, but he wasn’t. (laughs)

JK: Your grandfather, from what I had read in some of our family writings, had been a United States citizen.

EB: Yes.

JK: That right after he was married—they were married in the early 1890s—they came to the United States for several years, him and your grandmother, and actually he became a United States citizen. And she went back to Germany when she was pregnant with your father.

EB: Right.

JK: At the time. And had he kept that citizenship, it would have greatly changed—

EB: He would have been able to become a citizen sooner. But you had to come back every five years, I believe, to the United States to renew your citizenship when you lived in another country. And because he was a German citizen and an American citizen, dual citizenship—and my grandfather never did, and that's why he lost his citizenship. But my father tried very hard to see what he could do about that, but he really couldn't do anything about it.

EK: Could he not leave to come back to the United States, or did he not want to?

EB: No, he just didn't. My grandmother didn't want to come back, so he just didn't. And my father, when he became a citizen, I automatically became a citizen through him because I was underage. My sister—I think it was fourteen or sixteen at the time. My sister had to take out her own citizenship paper. And talking about children being cruel, we were just as bad, because whenever during the war we talked about anything, we used to tease her after my father became a citizen and said, "Don't talk about it; you've got an alien in the house." So we were just as bad.

However, I wanted to go through this myself. And when I turned I believe eighteen, maybe sooner—eighteen, I think—I went through and became my own—went through the citizenship. I wanted to swear myself and become a citizen myself, and I did that at the time.

JK: Okay. And growing up, we spent a lot of time—you know, grew up in Scranton, we went to New York a lot and we had a lot of time with relatives and with your parents there. And it was never talked about, the Holocaust, or coming from Germany. I don't even recall when I first realized that you had all come from Germany.

EB: That's true.

JK: Do you know—have any idea why that was done? Did they ever consciously say, "We're just not going to talk about it; we don't want the children to know about it"?

EB: No, they didn't, but somehow they never consciously did say that. But somehow we just didn't. We just didn't talk about it. I don't know, I can't tell you why. I don't know.

EK: Jay, how'd that feel for you to have so much silence around that part of your history?

JK: I didn't know too much. I knew a little bit of the Jewish side of it, because we had talked to—my grandfather was very proud of being related to the Vilna Gaon and being a descendant from the family, and that was talked about. And then of course we met all the cousins, and one of our cousins worked with Helen Keller here in the United States, so we had a lot of sense of family and history here. But the German side was really just never talked about, and it didn't really come up at all in the Orthodox day school that I went to. They talked about the Vilna Gaon, but I was never asked anything about Germany. We never talked—at that time, in the late fifties [1950s], early sixties [1960s], about the Holocaust. It was not taught in the school, even in a Jewish Orthodox school. So we just didn't even feel it till later. And because they came out in 1938, I don't think for a time my mother even felt she was a Holocaust survivor.

EB: That's right, that's very true.

JK: Because she didn't go through the atrocities that some of the people that she knew did, or the camps or the numbers and things like that.

EK: And what do you think about that, I mean, considering the loss to your family? You lost—she lost the life the life that she knew before, she lost family members. What do you think about that kind of message to someone who hasn't incurred that kind of loss that they don't constitute a survivor?

JK: In talking with people who are survivors, they definitely recognize—I would almost feel that they would feel, "Well, he didn't go through what I did; you're not one of us." But I really haven't seen that coming from them. They do share a bond of having to have escaped. And, you know, they're more grateful that you didn't have to go through it. But they don't feel any animosity or separatism from it.

EK: And what's your experience been like with that?

EB: He's so right. We didn't talk about it. And you know what? As an adult now, it touches me more than during the years that I was a child.

EK: Why do you think that is?

EB: And, well—I was busy with school and I grew up here, and I had a, you know, good experience with my life. I don't know. And as an adult, as I grew older, I myself first realized what it was that we went through and these things that touched me, where children didn't want to play with me. And, oh, our Holocaust Museum, I must say our Holocaust Museum is what brought everything back out. And it's good, and I want to make sure that we really should talk about it more. My granddaughter went on the March for the Living.

EK: Shoshana.

EB: Shoshana. And what year was that?

JK: She was a—

EB: How old was she?

JK: Senior in high school, so she was just about eighteen.

EB: Oh, she was eighteen. And she came home with hundreds of pictures, and she said, "Grandma, can I show you these pictures?" and I said, "Certainly." She felt her parents didn't want to see the pictures too much, and she wanted me to see them. And I sat here and I went through it with her and I saw these mountains of ashes; she took all these pictures. And I said, "Shoshana, how did you feel seeing this?" And she said, "You know, I didn't. I looked at things and turned off my feelings." But it affected her. It was later on. And I feel the same way. I think we turned off our feelings, because as Jay mentioned, when we came to America, we were German. You didn't talk German on the street, because you didn't want people to know you were German, that you came from Germany. We were ashamed of this, even though we were Jewish, but we were ashamed of it. So I think we just turned off our feelings, and it's only as an adult that I came out of this.

EK: That's a terrible paradox, you know, that you mentioned, to be discriminated against as a Jew in Germany and then to be discriminated in the United States—

EB: As a German.

EK: —here, as a Jewish refugee, as a German.

EB: That's right. But that's what it was.

JK: It was very difficult. Germans have a tremendous amount of national pride. Even the German Jews had a tremendous amount of national pride. And it was very, very hard for them, I think much harder than for refugees from some of the other countries.

EK: How much of that did you absorb as a child, and how much of that is reflection as an adult?

JK: I saw quite a bit of the nationalism, actually, the pride of being German in the relatives. It definitely stood out much more so, and it was ironic how the German Jews looked down on the other—the Polish Jews and the Russian Jews and the other ones. They still felt better. One of the most interesting things going through the Holocaust museums and reading was that, if you look at the percentage of Jews in the different European countries before and how many got killed and how many survived, the lowest percentage that was actually destroyed were German Jews, because it was hard even for the Germans to do that. They didn't mind destroying the Polish Jews and the Russians and Romanians and the others. But the nationalism was very, very intense.

But we—as I said, we just really never learned much about the Holocaust. My education in Scranton and then when I came here to high school in St. Petersburg, it was not mentioned at all. I'm very fortunate that, because of the change in laws, my children did learn about it in the public school system here. And they probably started, as my mother mentioned about my daughter Shoshana, and the other kids start asking more and more questions. And we've tried to impress upon their spouses a little bit of knowledge about what happened and why it's very important to remain Jewish and what we went through as a people.

EB: That's very important to me, that we keep up—that we remain Jewish and that we keep up the Jewishness. And you're right, I don't think I've talked enough about it to my grandchildren. They don't know, really, enough about it, and I don't know if any of them outside of Shoshana have been to the museum, to the [Florida] Holocaust Museum.

JK: I'm not sure in town—they have been to the one in Washington.

EB: Yes, ’cause I went with you there, too.

JK: We took Ben; and I know Sam has been there, I believe; and I think Joe, also.

EB: Sam has been to Yad Vashem in Israel because he takes groups there. But you’re right, I should talk more, because it is important to me.

EK: What do you want them to know?

EB: I want them to remember that when I look at some of those pictures that Shoshana has of ashes and shoes and things, that there but for the grace of God went I, went their grandmother. And thank God I’m in America, in a wonderful country, and they all grew up here and they should be more aware and more grateful of what we have here in the United States. But I don’t ever want them to forget where they came from originally and what could have been. That’s what’s important.

JK: That’s good.

EK: Yeah. Okay, thank you.

EB: Thank you.

End of interview