

Ronald Hauser

[Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back and I'm the Director of the Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo. It is August 24th, 1987, and tonight our guest is Dr. Ronald Hauser. Dr. Hauser, do you mind if I call you "Ronald"? We'll make it informal.]

"Ronald" is great. Yeah.

[Let's start with your story. You've told us that you were born in 1927 in Stuttgart. Will you tell us a little bit about your childhood there?]

Yes, of course. I was the son of a pediatrician, and as the son of a pediatrician, my earliest memories were being hidden, sort of, when, whenever I got sick because I wasn't good advertising for my father's business. But of course my childhood was during a turbulent time and was probably something other than normal even in the earliest years, because the clouds of Nazism really began before 1932. Though like I, you know, myself, have no memory of these things, I do remember in the family life the growing concern very early that things were going to get worse and worse, and my father buying a little cottage out in the country where we could hide out, and more and more time was spent there. And as I learned to read and became somehow aware that, for some reason, I was not a wanted person in, among the kids.

[Did you not have Jewish playmates?]

I had very few Jewish playmates. My family felt itself to be German. And though we had associations with the Jewish community, mainly our friends were, or my personal friends, my childhood friends, were not, non-Jewish, and I had some very good friends that were not Jewish, and that continued to be friends throughout that time. I, but basically, I remember the problem of dealing with a relatively hostile world. I mean, the kids –

[So you felt rejected from an early, early childhood on.]

Right. Right. But, after kindergarten. I mean, through kindergarten, I think things were fairly normal.

[That was about 1933.]

Right. But beginning with the first grade and second grade, I felt –

[Felt not wanted, like you said.]

– I mean, I was not a part of the social life of the school children. My parents put me into normal public school and most Jewish kids were being rapidly withdrawn from the public school and were sent to the synagogue, to the Jewish school.

[The Jewish school.]

And, but my parents, with all three of us, my, I have a brother, an older brother, and sister, all of us remained in the public school system right until we left. I mean there, when we get, I showed you a report card that I had, that was the very last semester, and –

[Before we get to that –]

Yeah.

[-- was there not gran-, were there not grandparents or family to insulate you against this hostility?]

I, I had two sets of grandparents living in the same city at the time in Stuttgart at the time we're speaking of, and they used to babysit me and so forth. And I had a close relationship with them. I think probably the closest family relationship I had, I sensed, and the, the warmest feelings that I have, were my mother's parents who sort of, I had a, I used to go there after school, and, and spend time, but I did not have what one might call a life full of youthful activities because that was the first place where everything was closed out. There were no camps, no –
[after, after-school activities]

– you know, after-school activities. That was all the Hitler youth activities at that time.

[And you were not in it.]

And I was not permitted to be in it anymore.

[So you felt like an outsider very early on.]

Like, so I, so I was sort of isolated very much and being the only Jew in, in the school finally.

Dropped out one at a time.

[Were you an academic achiever? Did that help?]

I was not. Ah, that did not help me to be in this position. I was very much intimidated. I was physically rather strong and I was able to defend myself physically from –

[You mean there were actual physical fights?]

Oh, yeah. There were regular fights, and I was able to gain some sort of personal respect by being big, kind of, I mean.

[And fighting back.]

Fighting back, you know, and keeping them off me that way. But it was not a pleasant thing nevertheless.

[How about relationships with teachers?]

In my rela-, some were, teachers were just terrible.

[Because you were Jewish?]

Because I was Jewish.

[In what way were they terrible?]

And, well, they used to beat me up. I mean, one particular –

[Physically beat you up?]

Physically beat me up. One, one teacher regularly used to take me into a room outside the classroom and used to really beat me.

[And you never told your parents?]

I never told my parents.

[Why not? There are many reasons, but now that you think about –]

There are many reasons, but likely I, I, I really, I mean, the, the beatings were always for some reason which only now, or much later, I discovered were rather trivial reasons to be beating me.

But I did feel guilt. I mean I felt –

[that you were doing something wrong.]

– I had done something terrible and that whatever triviality these beatings were for, were punishable offenses. I did not really connect it at that time with, you know, religious prejudice or anything other. I knew that I was an outsider within the group but I didn't want to tell my parents because I was afraid I was gonna' get punished again. So, I . . .

[So you were really in, in a bind there.]

I felt very isolated throughout my –

[And you couldn't relate to your, to your brother and sister, and tell them about your problems?]

I never told my brother.

[Were they having problems?]

They were having similar problems. But, we, I never talked about this. To this day, I've never talked about many of these things with my, with family members.

[Talk about family members, perhaps you could tell us about a pin that you recently borrowed from your brother].

Yes.

[I think we'll, we'll have that on the screen now and you can –]

Well, it's one of the more amusing stories because of course the, some teachers –

[There it is. It's on the screen now.]

– some teachers, you know, were very supportive and the last teacher I personally had in, in Germany also was very supportive and wouldn't allow me to be segregated from various activities. One of the activities being swimming, for example, going to the local pool. On the pool, on the outside, there was a big sign, “Juden Verboten.”

[Oh.]

Jews prohibited –

[Prohibit.]

– from entering the inner sanctum of the pool. And the teacher just absolutely forced me to go. He said, “No, no”, I've, “nobody goes unless you go on” and so there were such teachers too.

[But they were taking chances.]

They were taking chances.

[Somebody could squeal on them.]

Somebody could squeal on them. And that was the case in my brother's great victory. He was good at, a good runner. And he was one of the best. He was a high school student and he was one of the best high school runners in the city. And they had a all-high school run-off, 1935, as the pin indicates. And he won several races and was one of the athletes invited up to the podium after the race, to be decorated by Gauleiter so-and-so. I have no idea what his name was anymore. But the guy with brown uniform –

[and the swasti-]

– swastika, and so forth.

[And they didn't know they were decorating a little Jewish boy.]

He, as a matter of fact, when my brother came up and – none of the family looks particularly Jewish – he looked kinda' German, and the man held a big speech about this wonderful example of Aryan youth. I was standing in front of him. And gave him this pin and only after that did some of the teachers in, in my brother's school begin to debate the issue of whether it was proper to have had him participate in this race. And in future years, in the two years that were left, the, my brother was excluded from that activity. Although no one ever actually squealed on the teacher for allowing him to participate that one year in 1935.

[So he had a minor victory.]

A minor, amusing victory. It was probably the last one for him and for us.

[So your school years are not happy. What, what about home life and other circumstances?]

Well, home life tended to be, I mean, one did not come home and talk about these things.

[That sounds very German, very proper.]

Right. Right, and especially that impersonal pronoun that I used too. That's right, we did not talk about this much. I mean, what we talked about, in relationship to this, were certain emergency planning that we did. Like if something happens, and the something was never clearly spelled out, we would all meet in this little village and, outside the city, where we have this tiny little cabin, a one-room cabin, among farms and so forth. Very isolated from any kind of scrutiny. And we, I mean, I was maybe 8 years old when we, when that land was purchased, and that little cabin was built, and I remember my parents teaching me the way to get there.

Even as an 8, 8-year-old kid. I could go through the woods. It was 10 miles or so.

[Did you ever have to use that little house?]

I used to go there frequently. I mean, we spent vacation time there. To get you, no, we did not. Nothing ever occurred that caused us to pull the alarm, but it was clear that such things could happen.

[Perhaps you'd like to tell us about the report card that, that has a special item on it].

The report card. Well, right.

[There, there it is on the screen. Now, see, religion's on the top.]

Right. This is, this is not a report card I'm terribly proud of, and perhaps the good thing –

[It says 1937.]

– is that hardly anyone who's liable to see it will be able to interpret the symbols. I can still interpret them all. But, it's not a great report card. It's not failing but it's not great. But the first item in the upper left-hand column is, is religion. And a lot of people didn't know that even under the Nazis, the old German tradition of not separating religion from the state, that every child was required to spend one hour of relig, in religious instruction.

[But I thought at that time, the only religion was, was Nazism. That –]

No, well, I mean –

[Up until a certain point –]

– it continued throughout that time. As you can see the report card, 193 -

[-- you still have religion. '37. So you –]

I think you can see the date in the upper corner.

[Yes, there's a seven up there. So, you're 10 years old.]

1937. Actually, the next page has 1938 on it. Religion was a required thing. There's no grade there, as you will see. And what was required, I mean, now the Catholic kids went to one room

in my class and the, the Protestant kids went to another room. Probably the whole school got, got together. I, I never participated in that. I –

[And a clergyman from that faith would –]

A clergyman from that, that faith would come to the school and they would have a lesson. And, and throughout the whole city, this was a common hour. I think it was Thursday morning at 10 o'clock or something, something like that. Well, I was sent out. I mean, and alone, I mean, there were no other Jews in that year, 1937. Actually the bad year was the previous year, 1936. That was the most formative year in this respect, with me, because I was sent out to the synagogue and the synagogue was maybe 10 minutes walking distance away and I walked to the synagogue. I got to the synagogue and was very badly treated by the rabbi, who in my childish imagination, was angry at me for being late, for which I had no particular personal responsibility, I understand, but I felt very guilty about it, and I was made to feel guilty. It didn't occur to me until many years later that the reason he was angry is because I continued to be in the German school system when I should have been in the Jewish school by this time. But in any case, he treated me very badly and I, and I don't know, if you have a, that other part of the report card on the film.

[Yes, we can put that. There it is.]

But, yeah, that shows a, a very bad grade that I got in religion.

[What does it actually say?]

That says barely passing. The, the equivalent of a D there. And, I can't quite read it on the screen but it's a, it's a report card issued by the Israeli Community School of Stuttgart. And it doesn't say much other than give me, kind of a bad grade. This one here is dated the 13th of November, the 1935. That must have been the bad year.]

[Oh, 1935. 1935.]

1935. Right.

[Well, were you the only child getting religious instruction?]

No, no.

[It was a class?]

All schools including the Jewish school.

[Oh, including the Jewish school.]

It was, it was a Board of Education law that all students have to have an hour of religion at that time of the week.

[So you were with a group of children, but you didn't have a chance to get –]

I was with a group of children. All the other children, of course, knew Hebrew pretty well, and had some sort of connection to the Jewish community. I was a total outsider. I came in there.

[And you were made fun of.]

And well, not really. I, I was just, didn't fit in, in the whole – I had no relationships with anyone there and I was badly treated by the teacher, and who lectured me a lot, threatened me a lot.

[Is the rabbi the teacher?]

And then sent me – right – then sent me out to the other school, you know, at the end of the hour. I then went back to my public school class.

[Must have been late again.]

Of course I was late. I was 10 minutes late getting back to class. And especially in that year, I believe it was either '35 or '36, I'm not quite sure, but I had a teacher named Eichler – I

remember his name to this day – who then used that excuse for being late. First of all, he made me recite a Nazi slogan in front of the class, and then he, he took me in next door and he –

[He beat you up.]

– he, he beat, he beat me up with a stick.

[Oh, what a sad story for a little boy.]

Yeah, that was, that was a real problem.

[And you never told your parents?]

I never told my parents. And the unfortunate victim of that series of events was the fact that it, what it really drove out of me, was, was religion, strangely enough.

[No, it's not strange at all.]

Well, I don't know. I could have blamed it on other things, but somehow I was never able to –

[to relate to]

– to relate to religious organizations since that time.

[Well, did you have any religious observance at all at home? Sabbath? Holidays? Did it mean anything to you?]

Minimally. Minimally.

[But it didn't mean anything to you, especially after this.]

After this – I can never remember really ever comprehending, personally, religious thought. I mean, it, it seemed strange to me from that, from those –

[You just completely isolated from it.]

I, isolated from – right. It, it seemed like from another world to me after that. I mean, this is a repeated action. It's, didn't just happen once, but happened weekly.

[So, it really traumatized you.]

Every time I knew it was gonna' happen. I knew I was gonna' be beaten up. I knew I was gonna' face the satire, sarcastic talk of the rabbi. You know, and it happened week in, week out the whole school year long. And I –

[You never played sick on Thursdays?]

Well, I don't know. I might've.

[Couldn't get away with a whole year of it though.]

No, I might've. I think I, I remember a couple of times cutting the religious class out altogether. And, you know, just not going to it; going for a walk instead. But usually I went, you know, and it was a most unpleasant, unusual kind of an experience for a young kid.

[How much longer did you stay in the school system or in the country?]

I stayed in the school system until the, about a week before we left for America.

[How much longer did you stay in the school system, or in the country?]

I stayed in the school system until the, about a week before we left for America in 1938.

[What month was that in 1938?]

That was in, I think we left in, in March or April 1938. I can't remember the specific date.

[So, that was after Kristall Night.]

No, no it was before. Kristall was, was in the Fall 1938.

[Kristallnacht was, was November, November 19-, oh, November 1938. So, it was afterwards.

So, you, you missed that.]

Right. Right.

[What happened to you? What was – how did you emigrate? What were the circumstances there?]

Well, the circumstances were very lucky for my family. I mean, I was unusually lucky. Many others were trapped, who were not, didn't have that constellation of good fortunes that happened upon, was heaped upon my family. My parents happened to be born in Alsace-Lorraine.

[In France.]

And my father was born in Strasbourg. My mother was born in Milleuve. At a certain point in the emigration process, we were beginning to process a departure for Chile. We were in fact learning Spanish and –

[Why Chile?]

Well, that was the only open, opening.

[It was an easy place to get to.]

Yeah. But suddenly, it was possible to be put, I mean, the problem was that German Jews had way oversubscribed the American visa quota. And so we were suddenly put on the French quota which was wide open, and that allowed us then to be processed for emigration to the US.

[Did you feel badly about leaving Germany?]

Not particularly. I mean, I did have friends as I mentioned before and -

[Did you leave your grandparents behind?]

Yes, of course. And I have very harsh feelings to this day about, you know, kind of an abandonment.

[Did they – they didn't survive?]

I can imagine my parents were terribly injured by that –

[Did they go through the camps?]

They went, one grandmother died just before we left Germany, just a few days. And one grandfather died of natural causes before being, before the other two were taken away to camps and died in –

[in the camps.]

– in the camps.

[Did you lose other relatives in the camps?]

Many other relatives. Dozens of rela, relatives, but –

[Anyone that you were very close to?]

Well my grandmother who –

[Your mother's mother]

My mother's mother. I was extremely close to her. I think I mentioned it before.

[You mentioned that you felt good with her.]

She, of course, disappeared. And my father's father. They had actually gotten married, my father's father and mother's mother, in order to be able to move in together after their spouses died, and things were really tightening down obviously. But there were many other uncles and cousins. One, one aunt of mine got out to Israel at that time. But virtually everyone else who was left in Germany either died in concentration camp or escaped from – there were a few people who escaped from concentration camp and who've got out of Germany, fair-, very late. But most people left behind did not survive the war. I mean, one of the survivor problems that one has is that these people die, and you don't know of it. I mean, so they, in in a certain psychological sense, they don't die at all. They have never died. They're never mourned.

[You haven't grieved.]

So, you haven't grieved. They suddenly disintegrated. They, they, they are no more, but you're not aware of their death. And that's one of the terrible cruel things I, I find I have –

[You have –]

– difficult dealing with in my older age now. I mean I, I repressed all that for many years and now as I'm getting older myself, I think more and more about these problems, especially about –

[About those people you didn't really say goodbye to]

Right. And whose death, in a sense, one, I was forced to deny, I mean, you didn't hear about until years later. You keep hoping that maybe they survived. And of course they didn't. You simply don't hear of them and then you get a little bit of information here and there. They must have been in Theresienstadt between these days, somebody saw them there, you know, that kind of report begins to come upon your consciousness. But the reality of their death is not actually absorbed, you know?

[It's also the trauma of growing up as a little child without grandparents, without uncles, without aunts, without cousins.]

That's right. The family was totally scattered. It was a large and rather close family. I mean, distant cousins and whole large groups of people used to meet once a year at least. They all resettled in an area let's say the size of Rhode Island.

[So they would have family reunions.]

And there were a lot of family reunions. And there were a lot of, a lot of closeness. Everyone knew each other, and the kids got together once a year and of course the closer relatives were also, there were daily contacts. As I said, my grandparents were a part of my daily life, and as a young child. And these people all scattered, all the, all over the world, of those that survived. I

mean roughly, taking my total family as, that I was aware of, that I am aware of now, let's say, half survived, I would say, which is pretty good.

[But they're dispersed.]

But they're all over the world. I mean, they're in Australia and England.

[Do you visit with any of these?]

No. No one.

[No contacts with –]

No contacts with anyone.

[No contacts with any one of them?]

None.

[Not even the one in Israel?]

As a matter of fact, I have a rather well-known relative, whom I recently ran into in Buffalo. She is a novelist.

[Living here in Buffalo?]

No, she's a novelist living in New York. Her name is Marianne Hauser. I said I think I may be related to you, and she absolutely denied that possibility. It happens that just this summer, I got some information which definitely, it's, a matter of fact, that paper I showed –

[Oh, that family tree you showed me before.]

And she's on that. I mean, she –

[Well, why would she deny it?]

Well, for the same reason I would probably deny relationship to someone who came up to me, and said, "We're probably . . ." I would say, "probably not," you know. There are a lot of

Hausers around. But it so happens that I had previously had an inkling that she was indeed related, and she does show up on a list of survivors.

[But you would think that in a family that's lost so many family members that you would cleave to each other.]

Well the trouble is that we spent so many years denying the importance of family, in a sense, because I think that's one of the psychological effects of all of this. A sort of a, in order to survive, you have to deny –

[deny]

– the importance of family and the past, and so . . .

[It's another victory for Hitler. Not only total annihilation but psychological annihilation.]

Psychological, I mean, you know, it, it is a very strong problem that has been, powerful problem that has been vested in, in many millions of survivors.

[In so many survivors.]

Right.

[Yes.]

And it manifests itself in different ways. I mean, my parents, for example, got to California and they anchored themselves in a small town. They would never go anywhere. I mean, they became absolutely rooted to their place.

[That was their security valve.]

That was their security. I'm just the opposite. I mean I cannot stand associating myself with a place. I mean, one of the things I love about Buffalo is that it's right on the Canadian border.

[So that you can run.]

I mean – I can run. I, I, I'm always looking for the exit. I mean, I, when I'm in a room like this room, I, I'm always aware of where the exit is. I'm constantly afraid to put down roots. I mean to –

[that they might be disturbed again.]

Right. I don't want to be disturbed. I want to take off in, in time. I mean, after all, it's a, it's tremendously fortunate thing that my immediate family, my parents, left. My father was a med-, was a leading pediatrician in a large German city with a tremendous practice. These political events begin to to happen. They get worse and worse and worse. And people and how many millions of people said to themselves, you know, "It's got to - "

["It will blow over."]

"It's, it's gonna' blow over, it can't get any worse. So, you know, it's got to get better." And at what point does one say, "No, I'm going to leave all this" to an uncertain future?

[Tremendous courage.]

Well, considerable courage, right. And . . .

[Was your father able to re-establish a practice?]

Yes, right. He was able to do that. Um . . .

[Did you and your family remain close to each other?]

We did not remain close to each other. I mean, we were –

[Cause you were still a little boy at that.]

I was still a little boy. I was 11 when I came to this country and I of course lived in my parents' house throughout my schooling. Right after I graduated from high school, I was drafted into the US Army and I left home and I never returned really from that, I mean in any significant way. I, I ne-, there was never any hostility but there was never any closeness in my family, including right

to this day. I have a brother and sister in California. I visit them and we're perfectly friendly. There's no hostility but there's no real closeness either. We don't really talk, you know. We don't talk to each other.

[That's it. The communication isn't there.]

We visit and we, say, you know, spend an evening, but we don't have any intensive relationship.

[Are you close with your children?]

I try to be, yes. I try to be, but probably not adequately.

[Oh, everybody feels that. And do they, do they know the stories –]

They know the stories.

[-- about your school days and the problems that occurred?]

Yes. I have not stressed these things with my children. I mean, in fact I haven't really thought about them until the last few years. I, uh . . .

[Why do you think you started to think about what happened to you?]

Well, I started to understand that there was certain psychological danger to me in my ultra-ready ability to repress, to get out my mind unpleasant things. And it began to interfere somewhat with my everyday life and I simply had to start reviewing my life and I got some professional help to deal with this business –

[You started to –]

– and this started me thinking and remembering and I remember a great deal more now than I, I've ever remembered.

[Well, you blocked it out obviously.]

I blocked it out, or most simply didn't think of it anymore. I had you know, kind of cut out my family from my consciousness in a certain way. And cut out my memories. I never collected photographs, for example. I had no apparent desire to dwell on the past at all. And . . .

[And now you are collecting?]

Now I'm beginning to collect things, yes.

[I think it's interesting that you asked your brother for that pin.]

Yeah, and not only the pin but family photographs and so forth that were found in my father's house when he died, and things like that gradually.

[Now they mean something to you.]

I've been picking up, I do, I still have more things to go through that I, I'm sort of interested in these things now, and not so much because I, I would like to create relationships with these people, some of whom are still alive, but rather just to, to get to know myself and to get to understand the psychological reactions that I, that I had.

[Have you been back to Germany?]

I've been back to Germany many times, yes.

[To your hometown?]

Yes. Yes.

[How do you relate to that?]

Strangely sentimentally.

[With all the negative things that happened to you.]

I was always surprised. Despite all the negative things. And I have, I do not visit any people there. I do not. I look at places –

[Just places.]

– and I I remember places from my childhood, and I go there.

[Did you go back to the little house?]

I went back to that little house, yeah. Not into it, but I looked at it from a distance.

[Is it still a family house?]

Well, it's still there. I don't, I don't know whose it is.

[It's yours, isn't it?]

Oh, no, no, no.

[It doesn't belong to the family?]

No, as a matter of fact, I think my father gave it to somebody who was very helpful to us in our last days. Simply as, as a gesture of, I mean, it would have been confiscated by the state, as everything else was.

[So this was a gift for helping out.]

This was a gift to someone who helped out. Yes.

[How was your acclimatization to your new life in the new world?]

Rather unconscious, and I, I felt very good coming here, in America, right away.

[Like an escape, you put all that behind you?]

Yes, I mean, all that pressure and all that sense, I mean, I was an outsider initially here too, but it was an altogether different thing, and I immediately began relating with the, the other kids in the school. That, that was the most important thing, as I remember. Because everyone was interested in my experiences. Kids used to come and ask me. In fact, I think a teacher had me give, tell some stories about Germany and it created a, I mean, I was immediately bonded, creating bonds with other kids. I had friends right away even though I didn't know much English at all when I came. I learned it enormously quickly. After 1 year, I think.

[Well, you were probably highly motivated.]

I, I, I sort of – I never had any problems anymore.

[Did you have Jewish friends at that time?]

No, not many.

[Where did you settle?]

San Francisco. Well, the first year was in San Francisco, and after that, my father began a practice in, in, in Vallejo, California, outside of San Francisco, from where, after a year, we had to move because we were Germans suddenly.

[Germans?!]

That's right. We were enemy aliens. But when the war started, we became enemy aliens.

Germans, that is. And we had to leave the city of Vallejo, California, which was a naval city, and was restricted. Germans were not allowed to go there and we had to, so my parents moved to the next town north of Vallejo, which was, it happens to be the town of Napa, where the wine is grown.

[Nice place to live.]

Nice place to live. And they, my father, began practicing medicine there, and that's where I went to high school.

[So that was a, that was a good period.]

I played football.

[And you were happy.]

I was happy even though as an enemy alien I was not allowed to leave Napa. I was not allowed more than 5 miles outside of town, and I have to, after all these years, admit to a crime because I was on the football team –

[And you have to –]

– and we used to go all over northern California with the football team.

[Well, did you know about that restriction?]

Of course I knew about the restriction.

[Did your coach know about it too?]

My coach knew about the restrictions but, but somehow I always lied to my parents. I don't know if they knew that I went or didn't go, but I pretended. Somehow I never told them about the trips. But, we used to like, break, the trips.

[Well, I think we'll be winding up soon. You've talked a lot. Is there something that you want to say in summation, about your own life or in general about what happened?]

What I, I mean, I was, of course, feel very fortunate and somehow feel some of that survivor's guilt. That is to say, having deserted people even though nothing could be done, at that time.

There's a certain feeling of guilt for just being alive, yeah, after so many close relatives die. That becomes a major problem in life.

[Which is expressed by all the survivors I've met.]

I, I think so. I mean, that cannot be escaped.

[That tremendous guilt. Why – but on the other hand, the expression is, "I've been chosen for a reason."]

That's perhaps too religious for me a notion. The secondary effect, of course, is that the family, as it had been in 1930, let's say when I was very young, or 1933 still, that close-knit, happy big family that I only vaguely remember, is totally wiped out. I mean, not dead, but there's no relationship between people. Some people in Australia, Chile, and Bolivia and England, and East Germany. A few in Switzerland.

[East Germany? You have relatives in East Germany?]

I have relatives in East Germany. In Switzerland, in France, all over. No, no one in Germany.

There's not a single relative who has chosen to return to Germany.

[Except for the East Germany.]

Well, yeah. I think he sort of was there. I mean, he somehow survived the war. He had lived in the Berlin area before the war and I don't know, I have no idea how he got through the war but I do know he, one particular person whom I vaguely knew when I was a child – he is maybe 12 years older than me – he is a journalist. I know of him as a journalist, and he's in Germany.

[Are you in touch with this person?]

No.

[No.]

Not at all.

[So you're really dispersed all over the world, not only geo-, geographically but in kinship.]

Well, there seems to be no, I mean, if I could inter-, if it's possible to analyze your own psyche, there seems to be no drive to get together with people because the bond, what can we talk about?

We can talk about those things we don't want to talk about, in a certain way. So there's no great drive to, to, or I have not, throughout my life, felt a great drive to try to look up relatives. I have some inclination to do that now in my dotage.

[You're far from dotage! But it might be of great interest to your children to find their long-lost cousins and other relatives.]

I think so, yes. I recently just happened to make contact with cousins from, from, who live in France, and found it to be a very pleasant experience that I hope to repeat soon.

[So you made the initial effort and you got your feet wet and it was, it wasn't bad.]

Right. Right. Someone I hadn't seen since I was 10 years old, and just saw again, unfortunately 50 years later for the first time.

[Well, since we're all going to live to be 120, so you just pick up and go forward.]

Yeah. That's right. See them again when I –

[So, there's hope and there's, there's more to being together than reminiscing or, or thinking of the negative things.]

Yes, of course, but there, we do share that, or I, I assume we all share that terrible grief and it's somehow, somehow difficult.

[Sometimes it takes one catalyst, one family member to trigger a reunion.]

Right.

[Maybe that will come about. Maybe fragmented or in general.]

Yes, I, I would like that to happen but it's difficult. It, it takes a certain energy, a certain positive desire to accomplish something. I know my grandfather, my father's father, was a chronicler for the family. He was sort of the family historian and his very last letters that are known to me, but that I do not have, speak of the necessity for someone to take over the task of, of keeping track of where people are, and keeping some sort of a, some sort of a relationship alive.

[Maybe that's your destiny.]

I don't know. I don't know.

[That remains to be seen.]

I'm thinking about it but my first attempt to try, to get one of my family members to admit a relationship –

[Oh, this, this journalist.]

– sort of, well, not the journalist, I mean, no, she's a novelist, a well-known novelist -

[A novelist.]

– and and one, right, having quite a celebrity in New York at, just in these last few years. She's been a writer for a long time but she . . .

[But yet you got to home base with your relative from France.]

In France, yes. Actually they came to see us on a, they were on a trip –

[Nice!]

– to America but they, I happened to be in California when they passed through, so I got to speak with them. And it was a very interesting and important experience, I think so, and perhaps there'll be more.

[That's a positive. Is there anything else that you'd like to say?]

Well, um.

[Any message for your children?]

A message for my children. Yes, my children of course are, are also affected by this, perhaps one might point out, because they do not, I mean, their family also stops very short. I mean they are aware of their grandparents, my, my parents, but otherwise there are no relatives, you know, no –

[There's no horizontal line anymore.]

Right. No cousins really to speak of. I mean, their own cousins but no second cousins. All that sense of a large family is gone. But of course that's part of, that's not unusual in America. It is an American phenomenon too –

[Yes, we're more of a nuclear kind of family.]

– because everyone sort of came over at a certain time and the families have all been disrupted so that's not especially isolating. Yeah. So, it's kind of a relatively normal experience.

[But yet we keep in touch.]

Well, not all families do.

[More, more or less. More or less.]

Yes, well, with some members.

[Well, thank you very much for telling your story. It's not easy to go back. It's easier to go forward.]

No, it's, it's not a, a tremendously pleasant thing, but it, I do think it's important that even these minor little things, I mean, after all, I'm only peripherally involved in all this.

[But it's –]

Nevertheless, these things – history is made up of minor things as well as of the major catastrophes.

[It's significant. History is part of the whole. We thank you very much for, for bearing it.]

Well, thank you for having me.

Transcribed by: Andrea Zevenbergen, SUNY Fredonia, January 2023