From Germany to America: The Tales of Hofman

Transcribed and edited by Michael Gordon

Introduction:

Packing for a 1978 trip to visit my grandparents in Florida, I showed uncharacteristic forethought by tossing a tape recorder and a few blank cassettes into my suitcase so that I might record some of their story. I knew well that there was no shortage of family lore to capture. Opa [German for “grandpa”] was masterful in recounting family history and had a world-class memory for detail.

At the time, I was a graduate student in clinical child psychology. Part of my training focused on the burgeoning field of family therapy, which put a premium on genealogy and family stories.

Because I did not inherit Opa’s prodigious memory skills, I could never remember details of accounts that were important not just because they were about our family, but also because they touched upon so much history over the past one hundred years. Their story is woven within the events of both World Wars, Hitler's Germany, emigration to America, and the development of Jewish communities in the Northeast. There were also contacts with famous personages: Kraepelin, Jung, Forel, Goldberger, and Grosz. Toting along my tape recorder was a way of preserving this rich part of our family's tradition.

We recorded these four hours of tapes over two nights. Those of you who had any contact with Opa knew that it wasn't terribly hard to encourage him to tell a story. Oma, my grandmother, was by nature more reticent, although no less insightful or eloquent. She eventually spoke up more, especially on those rare occasions when Opa let her.

Most of the time Oma listened and made quiet comments which the tape did not pick up well. She kept asking me if I really wanted Opa to go into so much detail and seemed surprised by my keen interest. She was even more shocked by the ten or so times I turned down offers for a piece of cake or some tea.

In the years since I made these recordings, I haven't listened to them often. When I made copies for those of you who would ask, I'd keep the volume up because some of the events were fascinating, others humorous, plus it was comforting to hear their voices. I intended to record more stories from Oma and Opa, but it never seemed to happen and then it was too late. I also was remiss in not asking my parents to record their histories.

I've of course been excited about having the family together again for the joyous event of Alex’s bar mitzvah, especially after we’ve had to meet so often recently at sad events. Yet it frustrates and saddens me that Oma and Opa won't be there for the proceedings. I can't imagine anyone more appreciative and satisfied than

Opa were he able to follow along as Alex conducts the services. He would experience a "kvell" attack of monumental proportions.

It dawned on me that typing, editing and distributing to all of you the transcript of these tapes would be a way of at least incorporating their spirit during the course of an occasion which evokes their knowledge, devotion, and goodness.

I've tried my best to keep details as accurate as possible. I'm not sure about the spelling of some of the small villages and certain portions of the tape were difficult to decipher. Let me know if you have any factual corrections. I took many liberties in editing and condensing their narrative so it would be more readable, but I worked to maintain their verbal style and tone.

Enjoy!

Michael Gordon
DeWitt, NY
5/92

Update:

In the 30 years since I first distributed this transcript, I've often thought about revising it so future generations would find it more accessible. It's only recently that I've taken the time to do so.

Why now? The most obvious reason is that my generation is getting closer to our sell by date. It'd be a shame if this piece of our heritage was lost.

I also have the suspicion that my children's generation of Hofman/Schweich offspring might perhaps gain insight into how this side of the family came to be the way it came to be – both because of historical events but also a set of personality traits that were passed down through generations. I think we all find it comforting and helpful to have a sense of our history and family style.

These stories harbor many worthy lessons: the fickleness of fate, the fragility of freedom, the benefits that can accrue from religious practice, the inherent evil of some, and the overflowing kindness of others.

If anything, this account makes the point that showing everyone unwavering respect is at the heart of a close family, successful parenting, and a good and productive life.

Michael Gordon
DeWitt
9/22

Ich liebe Dich so wie Du mich
am Abend und am Morgen
noch war kein Tag wo Du und ich
nicht teilten unsre Sorgen.

I love you as you love me
In the evening and in the morning
There never was a day where you and I
Have not shared our troubles.

IN LOVING MEMORY

Ernest B. Hofman

1897-1990

Elsa Hofman

1896-1984

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Opa: First of all, let me tell you about the origin of the name Hofman. Hundreds and hundreds of years ago, Jews just had Hebrew names: Abraham, son of Isaac, for example.

At a certain time, the governments of most of the European countries decided to give them family names like the non-Jewish people had. They gave different names by several methods. Many Jews got their names from colors, such as Schwarz for black, Weiss for white, Rot (which became Roth) for red, and so on.

Other Jews got their names according to the region they came from. For example, if somebody from Frankfurt married a girl in a different town, they would call him Frankfurter. That is how you have the name Justice Frankfurter. Somebody from Manheim would be Mannheimer, or Hamburg would be Hamburger, and so on.

Now where does the name Hofman come from? My father was born in a little, little village near the Rhine, which was named Hofen. I'm sure that when they went to services to a town next to Hofen, the congregants would say, "Today we will have services and a few men from Hofen, the Hofmaner, will be coming." So it was natural to be given the name Hofman.

They sometimes gave the Jews lousy names to make fun of them. They called them names that meant "onion smell" or "garlic smell" because they always considered the Jews as dirty and smelly.

Now it is my theory that, in many cases, these anti-Semitic officials at city halls made money for giving better names. People would ask, "Please can you give me a better name?" So for the equivalent of maybe a few hundred dollars they changed the name.

For example, my grandmother's maiden name was Bloch. There were many Blochs in Europe and many of them switched to Block when they came to this country.

Now, my theory is that they originally gave Jews the name "Loch" which means "hole". And the Jews would say, "Please don't do that," because you know what kind of hole they meant. Maybe for two hundred Kronen or so they put a "B" in front of it and made it "Bloch." At least that's my theory.

Another example: The Schwarzes, our friends from Woodside, had a friend whose name was Schlochauer. In Germany, the worst expression was "Aschlochauer," which roughly translates to "Beat your butt." I'm sure that money passed hands and the official allowed them to drop the "A".

Now this has nothing to do with the family except the name Bloch.

Michael: They weren't assholes?

Opa: No, I hope not.

My father was a merchant. In fact, his brother had a big business in Worms on the Rhine where they have the famous Rashi synagogue, the oldest in Europe.

In Worms, my father found my mother through his brother, who had married a Bloch. Her name was Elise Bloch, and she was a cousin of my mother's. She probably had a feeling that Gustav, which was my father's name, would be a good candidate to marry my mother.

Elise Bloch and her husband, my uncle, told the family that they would bring over a candidate. He probably came over one Sunday afternoon, at which point my grandparents decided that this was the right man for their daughter, my mother.

I'm sure that they met let's say at 2 o'clock and by 5 or 6 o'clock they announced the engagement. It was all arranged by the family. The parents knew that the couple fit together and that it would be a good match. And it was one of the happiest marriages, made in Heaven, I should say.

Michael: What did your father's parents do?

Opa: My father's father, I don't know what he was, probably a peddler near the Rhine in Hofen, because it was the only thing Jews were permitted to do. I guess; I never asked.

Now as far as my maternal grandfather is concerned, his name was Rosenstiel. My mother was the only child. His father, my great grandfather, was Baruch Rosenstiel.

Baruch Rosenstiel was an outstanding cantor. From what I gather, he had the most beautiful voice. He must have also been a composer because everyone who knew him spoke of his outstanding melodies.

At that time, it was the custom to teach your sons how to chant. He had four sons and one daughter, but she died at an early age.

He said to his sons, “I’ll teach you how to be a Hazan [cantor], but only under one condition: that you promise me to never to depend on a Jewish congregation for a salary. Don't become a cantor and don't become a rabbi. Become a Ba'al Tefillah, a master of prayer, a member of the congregation who does it without pay. You will be respected for doing it. But don't depend on a congregation."

It was the advice he gave them. I think many rabbis wish they had gotten that same advice because it’s so hard to deal with congregations.

I remember how he conducted services when the cantor was absent. He insisted that I should learn it too. He went to our cantor and gave him a nice sum of money. He never revealed how much he had given. He said, "I want you to teach my grandson to conduct services, too." He was so involved as a cantor's son that he wanted me to learn the services. And you know I did.

My maternal grandfather and members of his congregation were among the first Jews to settle in Lahr. He got married in 1869, and he was one of the first Jews to live there.

Lahr is in the state of Baden, which was the first state in Germany where the Jews had privileges of emancipation in the year 1819. The way I was told, until the end of the 18th century, Jews could only live in ghettos. In each town or village there would be a street called "Judengasse" or "Alley of the Jews" where the Jews had to live. But after the emancipation, the Jews were free to buy property and to settle anywhere.

My grandfather immediately bought a house there. I really don't know where he had made the money. And he opened a store with furniture, mostly antiques. And he was such an expert. It was amazing. He looked at something and knew right away the style: Empire or Biedermeier or Louis XVI or the XV or the XIV?

And he had his methods to recognize a fake right away. He kept a knife in his pocket and scraped the furniture. If he found it was plaster of Paris underneath, he knew it was not genuine wood.

My grandfather had a big, three-story house with many rooms and an attic. It was crowded to capacity, filled with antiques.

I gave you this story before: A buyer, I think he was a prince or a baron, came from Paris with his mistress. He stayed for three days and bought so much. It was valued at that time I remember over 20,000 marks, which was a lot of money. And we thought the house would be empty after they carted their purchases away. But the house was just as crowded as before. That is how much inventory they had.

We were given many of the antiques when we got married. My parents and grandparents gave them to us. That's how we still have them and one day you will have antiques from that same store.

Michael: What did your father do?

Opa: He went into the business. When he married my mother, he joined in the business.

Now we talk about the other branch of the family, the famous Schweich family. Opa Schweich [Oma's father] was born the same year as my father, in 1866. He was born near Trier at the Moselle, and I'll let you guess the name of the village he was born. Yes, Schweich. That is how he got the name.

When he was four or five years old, in 1871, exactly after the 1870 Franco-German war, they moved to Metz. There they opened a big store where they made shoes and boots to order.

Metz was then and always had been a big garrison town, a fortress. Oma remembers during World War I, the crown prince was there. He always went around in a big open car, and he always had a girlfriend next to him.

Whenever he was there, the English or the French would bomb Metz because it was German at that time.

Oma: From 1871 to 1918 Alsace-Lorraine was German. The bombings were so heavy because it was a large garrison and the British wanted to kill the crown prince. We got so used to the bombings that we never really thought about them after a while.

Opa: Anyhow, there were four children. One older sister, Hanna [Johanna], married a man from Lahr who was named Berthold Ullmann. Oma had another brother, Julius, who was much older. He was a philosopher and loved the poetry of Heine. In fact, he was a poet himself. We still have a book here of beautiful poems he wrote.

During the war, Oma came very often to visit her sister Hanna and that's how we met.

Michael: You knew Hanna?

Opa: Sure, they lived in the same town.

As for Julius, he became a soldier in the German army, and they shipped him to Serbia, which later became Yugoslavia. He was not wounded, but . . .

Oma: At that time, they wouldn't let men from Alsace-Lorraine fight in the war because they were afraid they would desert. So the army sent them to Berlin and trained them to drive mules.

And then they sent them to Serbia and he wasn't an outdoor person and couldn't climb the mountains. He died of influenza in 1915. Every day, every day we

would wait for the mail to come, for weeks and weeks. And then we got notice from the government.

Michael: How old were you at the time?

Oma: How old was I? I hate to figure. Fifteen or sixteen.

Alsace-Lorraine went back to the French in 1918 because the French won the war. The people of Alsace-Lorraine were very happy because they always felt more like Frenchmen. But my father wasn't happy. He always felt more of a German. He was a German patriot. So we left Metz and we went to Freiburg in 1919. But Hanna was in Lahr, which was close by, and I visited her very often and that's how Opa and I met.

Opa: After that she was more in Lahr than in Freiburg.

Michael: Oma, tell me the story about how you made it from Metz to Freiburg.

Oma: My parents weren't allowed to transfer much money . . .

Opa: Oma's father owned four or five apartment houses besides his store. He sold them and got everything in cash. But they had limits on how much you could bring over.

Oma: And Albert [her younger brother] complained that his shoes were so tight. All the way across . . .

Opa: Albert complained coming over the border. "These shoes are so uncomfortable!" Grandpa said, "Never mind, there is nothing wrong with those shoes." And the moment they came to Lahr, he took a tool and opened up the soles and the money just fell out. There were hundreds of thousands of marks.

Oma: They had rolled thousand-mark bills into the size of peas and built them into the shoes. Later we got restitution, but at the time it was the only way to get money out of what was then France.

Opa: He didn't want to become a Frenchman. And there was such a resentment of the Germans in France, especially the French Jews who resented the German Jews. Despite the Dreyfus affair in the 18901s, they felt they were better off with the French people than with the Germans. In fact, there was a French rabbi who wouldn't permit the German boys even to become Bar Mitzvah, which is why Albert never became a Bar Mitzvah. So Opa Schweich moved to Freiburg and bought the big house you saw there.'

Michael: Oma, how many in your family?

Oma: There were four of us. Aunt Hanna perished in Hitler's gas chambers in Auschwitz. We wanted to get them here. Hitler rounded up forty thousand Jews together in Southern Germany over a week's time.

We sent money to try to keep Hanna and her husband out of the camps, but we couldn't send enough money to keep them out for more than a year. We had first tried to get them to Israel but that didn't work because the quota was filled. So we deposited money in Israel to prove they wouldn't be a burden to the government there, but that failed.

Then we obtained visas for them for June 1941 but the day they were supposed to leave they changed the regulations in Washington. But again we got visas and Jacqueline said, "Make sure to take the American Export Line.” They were scheduled to come here December 10th.

So we had these visas for December 10th and on December 7th we all heard about Pearl Harbor and on the 8th we heard that the American Export Line had cancelled the arrangements. That was the only shipping line that cancelled voyages. We got a telegram the next day that my sister and her husband had lost their visas.

Opa: They had an appointment with the American Consul in Marseilles. We had already gotten them to Marseilles.

Oma: They had gotten to Marseilles and lived there from June to December. The appointment was on December 10th with the consul but, because of Pearl Harbor, it was cancelled. It just wasn't meant to be.

Then we started procedures in Washington to get them here. In May of 1942 Opa and Uncle Albert went to Washington and took a lawyer to make sure they could get visas. But they were told no, they had to go to Israel. I will never forgive Roosevelt for closing all borders to the Jews.

They stayed in Marseilles until one day Laval, working for Hitler, raided all the hotels and took them off to a concentration camp in Gurs and later to Auschwitz. And we couldn't get them out. And my sister wrote, "We don't think we'll make it out anymore. Something is going to happen to us."

We never told them that the visas were denied. We wanted them to hope.

Much later, the peasants they stayed with for a year wrote us, "We wanted to hide them, but your brother-in-law wanted to go the ‘straight way’." But the “straight way” was to Auschwitz. Many others had escaped going to Marseille.

They had money and could have bribed their way out again. My sister wrote at the time, "I would jump over the fence, but Berthold insists we stay."

Michael: Why didn't he want to leave?

Opa: He said, "Only the straight way." He was a German soldier and felt that a German soldier went only according to orders. He was afraid that he might do the wrong thing, that it was against the law. But, of course, what Hitler was doing was against the law.

Opa: Back to our own story. I never had to go to public school, which was called Realschule. My parents enabled me to go to private school to start with for three years. Then I went to the advanced high school, which was called Gymnasium.

In the Realschule they had French and English for only six years, where we had to go for 9 years in Gymnasium. But it was a real humanistic education. I had Latin for nine years every day, sometimes 2 hours a day. Then after the third grade at school (I was 13), I had French for 7 years.

Then I started Greek for 6 years, and naturally German, history and music. My parents encouraged me to play the violin, which I played quite well. Unfortunately, when I was at the end of my schooling, I just gave it up because I was drafted into the Army.

I never was ready to volunteer out of patriotism like many others. I never was a real German patriot.

At age 19, I finally got a letter and was drafted into the Army. Since I hadn't started Medical School, I couldn’t go into the Medical Corp, even as an orderly. So I had to go into the Army and we were told at that time we would get training for three or four months. I was drafted on July 25, 1916.

Michael: That is a pretty good memory.

Opa: Yes, and it was on a Tuesday. You can figure it out yourself if you want to.

I became a plain, buck private. Now before I got into the Army there was an organization like what came later under Hitler. In my day it was called "Jugendwehr.” That means “youth defense” and we were trained to defend the country. It was on a voluntary basis, but nobody could afford to refuse. It gave us better preparation for getting into the Army and becoming soldiers. In fact, I learned in no time to give orders, like “forward march” and so on. It helped me along when I got into the infantry.

One of my superiors had been a teacher but was called back into the army. He took a liking to me, but it didn't help a bit. After 5-6 weeks they said, "Now we go behind the front to France, but you don't have to fight," So we went in many train cars and, believe it or not, around 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, I heard the

conductor yelling out, "This is Metz.” I didn't know Oma at that time, but I remember the conductor calling the name of her town.

After about 24 hours we arrived in France and went to quarters. They said that we would get more training, but a11 we got orders to dig trenches. During the day it was too dangerous to dig, so we had to do it during the night. Everybody got a spade and a pickax, and we had to go to bed after supper.

We were in a destroyed village called "Puisieux" and by 10 o'clock at night they woke us up so that everybody could dig trenches. We were youngsters, 19 years old, and we were so tired that we almost couldn't do it. But we dragged ourselves out with spades and pickaxes on our shoulders.

We had to march for about 45 minutes to the front to dig new trenches. The sergeant stopped by, measured, and said, "That's your part, that's your part. Come on boys, hurry up. At 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning the British airplanes will come with machine guns, so you better dig yourself in and work a little faster." And we had to do that. The farmers and peasants did it with much more ease than I did it.

Anyhow, we dug trenches for about 2 or 3 weeks and then they put us in the front trenches. Our enemy was, at the time, the British at the River Somme. We always had to have our gun ready.

We were in bunkers. It was extremely difficult for the enemy to wound or kill anybody because nobody came out during the day. The only time they could wound or kill a German soldier, or the Germans could kill the British was when they got the food every morning.

It was November by that time, and we had to catch the food in the morning and then again in the evening around 6:00 for dinner. Two soldiers would always be sent. The morning was just soup or coffee, with nothing but water and sugar in it and a slice of dark bread. In the evening you had soup. They called it "potato soup" but it was made with what we called "horse potatoes.” They were like turnips and the only meat they ever had in the soup were small pieces of bacon, and I wouldn't touch it. I fished it out and gave it to other soldiers. I had practically nothing to eat and we all lost weight.

One morning I was assigned to get the so-called coffee at a field kitchen together with another man in the bunker. It was a half hour both ways in the dark with no moon shining.

As I said before, the only way to kill soldiers on one or the other side was to use a cannon with shrapnel because the metal pieces sprayed out and increased the chances of hitting someone. They would try out the shelling during the day to practice at hitting one of the paths they knew we had to take to get to the kitchen.

They knew exactly from the footsteps where the soldiers would go to the field kitchen.

We had experience with how the shrapnel would explode. When we heard a "woowooo," we didn't have to duck because, if we heard that sound, we knew the bomb would be a certain distance away and wouldn't hurt us. If you didn't hear the sound first before the explosion, you knew they were close by.

All of a sudden, I see shrapnel exploding about 30-40 feet high, and I felt all the dirt and the metal pieces flying around my ears and my face. But none of them hit me. And the guy with me, both of us ducked into a grenade hole and I said, "Come on, let's run."

But he didn't run. I saw blood coming out from his neck. Then I knew right away I couldn't run either. First of all, I didn't want to leave him, and secondly, the first bomb was always followed by a second one.

And that one came and again all the pieces flew around my ears. And the guy who had been bleeding and only wounded was killed by the second bomb, even though I was laying on top of him to cover him. I was spared. It was a miracle.

Then we were moved to the second row of trenches and then the first row. The English came over and everything became disorganized.

I could never take my boots off. There was so much mud it was like a plaster of Paris cast. I had ulcers on my feet and my legs. After we came back behind the front after the attack of the British, which we survived, they took me in a hospital train back to Germany because I was wounded. I had these ulcers on my legs, and I stayed in the hospital for about six weeks.

From there I came back to my unit where I saw the sergeant. He said, "Hofman, come over here, I can use you. I have new soldiers coming and I remember from your training that you knew all the commands. Take over the company."

I was in that company for about two months. Then I met the same sergeant again and he said, "Look, I just got a letter. We have to find a man who has a background as an engineer or who has graduated from a school that taught you physics and mathematics. You graduated from one, yes?"

“Yes, I did,” I said. Then he asked me, "Would you be willing to transfer to another unit? They need men for the FLAK companies."

FLAK stood for Flug Abfer Kanonen or Airplane Defense Cannon. He asked, "Would you be willing to join a unit in the north of Germany?" and I said, "Yes.”

They trained me for another 3-4 months. That was 1917 or 1918. They taught me how to use the machines. I just was lucky because it kept me from the trenches. It was like I was protected by a guardian angel. Now I still had to go to the front but that meant to a few cities next to the Rhine, but not in France.

In the FLAK companies we wore something like a stethoscope in our ears in order to determine the location of airplanes which came at night. I would hear this "WooWooWooo" and, when I got the loudest signal, I would say, "That's 75 horizontal and now let's go vertical. That's 32 plus." I gave the coordinates to the FLAK gunners, and they would aim and quickly fire at that angle.

That's how we fought the enemy airplanes.

Michael: You said you were in the Army how long?

Opa: Two and a half years. Then I went on to study medicine.

Michael: Did you always want to be a doctor?

Opa: No. At my graduation, everybody was asked what they wanted to do in the future so that, on the certificate, they could put, "We wish him good luck and success in his chosen field." Mine said mathematics and physics.

Michael: You wanted to be a professor?

Opa: Yes. And an actor on the side. Yes.

Oma: He really wanted to be an actor, but his parents wouldn't let him. That would have meant many tears.

Opa: Whenever we performed a play in school, I had the lead. One play we had to perform every night for a whole week. It was strenuous.

Michael: What was the play?

Opa: It was a patriotic play by Paul Heiser. It was called "Kohlberg" about a city in East Prussia. It was about one man who was a world citizen, named Heinrich. He was a friend of Napoleon, and he told the townspeople not to fight Napoleon. This earned him the contempt of everyone in town.

But then he recognized his patriotic duties, fought against Napoleon, and was wounded. That is how I learned, for the end of the fifth act, how to drop dead and faint. That's how I taught you how to fall without hurting yourself. Didn't I teach you?

Michael: You sure did. I didn't realize you always wanted to be an actor.

Opa: Yes, but then I met Oma and she said, "Why don't you go into medicine?" and I listened to her. It was good advice, wasn't it?

Michael: You were how old when you got out of the service?

Opa: 20 years old.

Michael: Then you went right to Freiburg?

I first went to Freiburg to study medicine. In Germany you didn't have to stay at one medical school. You could have a choice along the way. After one year I went to Munich and then finished up back in Freiburg.

In Munich I heard lectures from the famous psychiatrist, Emil Kraepelin, who would interview patients and then afterward lecture about the signs of dementia praecox [now called schizophrenia] or manic-depressive psychosis. It was extremely interesting. [Kraepelin is regarded as the father of psychiatric nosology].

Michael: What year were you in Freiburg?

Roughly 1918-1919 and then in Munich from 1919-1920. It was dangerous at that time in Munich because of revolts by the Communists. I still remember they called me from home and said, "Why don't you come back. There is so much bad going on there."

I had a free ticket to the opera for that night. A famous singer, Sigrid Onégin, one of the most famous contraltos in Germany at that time, was to sing Carmen. I still regret to this day that I missed that performance. But I was told to go home.

Anyhow, after I was through with my studies, Hanna said, “Why don't you start your practice here in Lahr?”

Michael: Now when did you meet Oma?

Opa: Oh, around 1918 when I was still a student. Our parents and her sister were not happy at all. I loved Oma from the start, and she loved me. But I still had four or five years of training ahead of me. After a while, my father felt some responsibility because it was considered very unusual to be a student and engaged.

But we weren't actually engaged, just going around with each other. And then my father said, "How can we take that responsibility? A boy can change his mind and then Oma's family will blame us."

So he went to Aunt Hanna and said, "Mrs. Ullman, we like your sister and everything is fine, but we feel a certain responsibility because our son might change his mind. After all, he is going to different universities, and we don't approve of him getting so involved with your sister."

And Aunt Hanna said, "Yes, my parents feel the same way." Pressures were applied and Oma and I decided to tell them, "All right, we will give each other up, but we will keep our friendship."

Michael: But that was a ruse to get them off your back?

Opa: Yes. We told them we were just like brother and sister, that's all, just a friendship, and that one day we will part. But we had decided between ourselves, never.

Michael: At what point did you decide you were going to get married? That it was permanent?

Opa: Oh, 1918.

Michael: So you had known each other for about four years before you were engaged?

Opa: Yes, and then when I was through with medical school and received my degree, just before I became an intern, we announced officially our engagement. We placed an announcement in the local paper.

Michael: Was that a big surprise to everybody?

Opa: No, not at all, but then it was official and kosher.

Everybody was happy. Oma called my parents "Mama" and "Papa," and I called her parents the same. We fought for each other and that's how it worked out.

At that time, I stayed with her parents in Freiburg and Oma was in Lahr with Hanna.

Michael: So, Oma, what would you do when you were in Lahr?

Opa She took care of her sister's household. She had gone to the Lyceum in Metz.

Michael: What was a girl supposed to do?

Oma: Nothing. A girl was not supposed to work. It would be a disgrace to her parents. Only the daughters of poor parents would work. When we came to

America and Jacqueline was working as a puppeteer, we said, "Gee, does she have to work?" It was unheard of in Europe.

Opa: She took care of the household for Aunt Hanna. When the twins were born, she needed extra help, although she had a baby nurse.

Oma: And I would go back and forth to Freiburg to see Opa. We went out together.

Michael: What did you do on dates?

Opa: On dates? We were with her parents and sister. Not like today.

Michael: Oma, your father reestablished his shoe factory?

Oma: Not for long. He retired very early.

Opa: He retired in 1918 when they came over to Lahr.

Michael: What did he do after he retired? Was he upset about having left Metz?

Oma: Oh, no.

Opa: Oh, yes. Wait a minute. Don't say no.

Oma Later on when Hitler came he was sorry...

Opa: Wait a minute, excuse me. When he left, he was very unhappy. He said, “I should never have left. Maybe I could have stayed." All he talked about was Metz, and Metz, and Metz.

So we cured him. Oma said, "Look, let's make a trip there to visit,” and I went with them. It was the first time I had been there.

Michael: How far was it from Freiburg to Metz?

Oma: Four or five hours by train.

Opa: Yes, and we went with him, and he looked around. Once he got there, he didn't want to see old friends any more or have conversations with people. He was still a patriotic German and everyone in Metz hated the Germans. I remember on the train back a man was complaining about how the Germans had changed the names of the various towns from French names to German ones. The conversations offended her father.

It cured him about wanting to go back to Metz. He said, "I have my nose full now. Let's go back. I never want to see Metz again."

Michael: He retired early because he was disheartened?

Oma: No, he just didn't want to keep up with the business anymore.

Michael: So he didn't re-establish his shoe business?

Opa: No, just leather. He imported leather and sold it to shoemakers and factories.

Michael: And then he just retired and led a gentleman's life?

Oma: He lived in a nice home. It was nice.

Michael: So, on a date you would just sit with your parents and sister?

Oma: No, we went out together.

Opa: Oh no, we took our walks, maybe with Uncle Paul [Opa's brother]. We went up to the Burkhart, you know those woods in Lahr, when we went to visit my parents.

Michael: Uncle Paul would go with you?

Opa: Oh yes. Oma and he had a very close relationship. He had no sister, so she was like a sister to him.

I started my practice in Lahr on April 23rd. My parents gave us a flat over the butcher shop, where your mother's cousin, Ruth, was born. It was the height of inflation. The money was worth nothing.

I remember my first patient, a Mrs. Durr. She was friendly with my parents. She came as a private patient and I didn't want money because an office visit would have been, let's say 1,000 marks. A thousand marks was not more than a few cents at that time. She brought me after the first office visit for examination a pound of butter and a loaf of bread.

Michael: You finished medical school and got married as soon you were done?

Opa: No, no. We were separated for long periods when I was on internship and so on. But we were married in December and then moved to Lahr to start practice in April.

Michael: You had been supported by your parents during medical school?

Opa: Sure. I was not a working student. Some did.

Oma: Only affluent families could pay for schooling. Schools there were not free like they are here, although high school was free if you made it.

Opa: I started at the worst possible time. I was not at first a part of National Health Insurance even though about 90% of the German population was covered by the program. It paid for everything. But if you were not part of the system, you were paid very little, maybe 70 or 80 pennies for an office call. You could not make a living. But after three months, I was admitted to the National Health Insurance, and I could treat those patients.

Oma: In 1924 the currency was stabilized. But things were bad. So many unemployed people. That's how Hitler could come to power in 1933 so easily. Things were very bad at that time.

Opa: Let me tell him about inflation a little more. We went for our honeymoon while I was an intern. Our parents got together and decided, "Well, we should give them some money for their honeymoon." We went to Munich, which I knew inside and out. Our fathers decided to give us each 15,000 marks and so we had 30,000 marks all together. And on that money we went to Munich.

We arrived on the second day of Christmas, December 25th. We had two days of Christmas in Europe. When we arrived in Munich, I wanted to go to one of the nightclubs and see a comedian I knew was outstanding, Karl Valentin.

We went inside and asked for a table. They said we have no tables left where you can drink beer, only ones where you can have wine. It was like a podium where you were a little elevated and all you could order was wine. Nothing else, just wine.

So the waiter comes and he shows me the wine list and I look for the cheapest one. The first one was the cheapest, but it was still 1100 marks. We weren't drinkers anyhow and wouldn't have appreciated it.

We looked at each other and said, "Oh my gosh, we should never have come here. Eleven hundred marks! And we had also paid an admission fee of 240 marks. So you figure it. Almost 1400 marks without the tip just to sit there.

We looked at each other and said, "This is crazy what we did." And I said, "Maybe we should leave." Oma immediately tells me, "No, you can't do that." I said, "We should try, but if I leave, I want my admission money back."

I went back to the woman and said, "Excuse me, we just came in, we haven't been here for more than a few minutes and my wife doesn't feel well (which was

true because she got sick when we saw the price). Could I have a raincheck or a refund?" And she gave me the money back and I already felt rich. I whispered to Oma, "Let's go!" and we ran like thieves in case the waiter came after us. We laughed and laughed until we had tears in our eyes. At least we had saved 1400 marks.

A week later we went into the Bavarian Alps where there was a skiing resort and I said, "Come on, let's have dinner now." And Oma said, "This time, go in first and find out how much the dinner will cost." I went in and I think they said 1500 marks a person. We didn't have much money left so we went into a butcher shop and a bakery and got a small loaf of bread and some Wurst. We went up a hill near a mountain to eat it, just sitting down on the ground. There was no bench. That's how we saved money.

We felt so rich when we came home back to Freiburg and visited Oma and Opa Schweich. With great pride we said, "We only spent 18 or 20 thousand marks and brought 10 thousand marks back."

A few days later those 10 thousand marks were worth nothing.

After I was admitted to National Health Insurance, I sent in the bill every three months. You can imagine how much my bill was for three months' worth of work. But inflation was so bad that, by the time I got the money, maybe we were able to buy a loaf of bread, maybe a pound of meat.

In the beginning, often we'd have noodles and applesauce for dinner one night and applesauce and noodles the next. We didn't dare to buy meat. And I didn't want to go to my parents for money.

As we said before, the currency was stabilized in 1924 and from that point on I made out well. We saved our money and spent very little. Being frugal enabled us to build a home and office. The one you've seen in Lahr.

Michael: You were in practice how long before you saved enough to build that house?

Opa: Five years. In '28 I started to build it. It was 100,000 marks with the lot, and we paid in cash. I worked like slave.

You worked not only in Lahr but in other towns?

Sure. Kühbach, Reichenbach, Schmieheim, Dinglingen, Sulz, and in the beginning all by bike. I would pedal 5 or 6 miles like nothing to see a few people in the surrounding villages. I worked hard.

I was the first physician, the first of all, to buy a car. It was a little green Opel everyone called the “tree frog.”

Michael: It was quite a status symbol?

Opa: Oh boy. Everybody envied me. The other doctors, too.

Michael: What was your father doing at this time?

Opa: My father had a stroke in '29. My grandmother died in '28 and then a year later my father had a stroke. It was a mild one, but one and a half years later he had another stroke and then he had difficulty.

Michael: He was how old?

Opa: He was not more than 63 or 64. He finally died in 1933.

By that point Hitler had come to power. The Nazis said that Jewish physicians could no longer practice. The one exception involved those of us who had served in the war at the front.

I was one of them and I was so happy. I was one of the few who had this exemption. And the doctors in the area said, "Hofman, according to your papers you can stay." If not for the exemption, we would have gone to Israel in 1933.

Michael: You were prepared at that time to leave?

Opa: We wouldn't have had any choice. But I got the exemption, so we waited and waited.

Michael: You knew in the beginning that you would have to leave eventually?

Opa: No, I didn't know, but we were afraid we might have to one day. Everybody said, "No, this cannot last. He's not ethical. That man cannot last. He is crazy, a clown, a nobody." Well, it was true to a certain extent, but still.

Michael: Mom was born one or two months after you married?

Opa: No, no stinker. We waited. We couldn't afford it. Years after, but no more numbers, no more figures. Your mother would kill us.

Michael: Oma, what did you do as the doctor's wife?

Opa: She knew everything that was going on. No doctor in Germany could afford a nurse. The income wouldn't allow it. So Oma took care of things in the beginning and knew every patient. When a patient had a skin condition, she gave

ultraviolet therapy. She gave diathermy treatments. Remember those metal plates, Elsa? She kept the books and still does.

Michael: You lived in that small apartment for seven years?

Oma: Six years.

Opa: Five or six years. Then we moved to the house. And the Jewish Boycott happened on April 1,1933. What day of the week was it? January 1st of that year was on a Sunday, so April 1st must have been a Saturday.

On a Saturday morning two Storm Troopers were posted in front of every office of every Jewish doctor, lawyer, and merchant. Two men. "Don't go in! He's a Jew. Heil Hitler." I never was busier than that Saturday morning. Most of my patients were non-Jewish, 99.9%. I had most of the Jews in town, but there weren't that many.

I still remember those two guys were standing there.

A patient came in and was she mad. She said, "That guy says, 'Heil Hitler, don't go in, Jew'. And I told him, 'Shut up. He has been my doctor all the time and you can't prevent me from going in.' He whispered, 'All right, go in. He's my doctor, too.'" He was a Nazi and that's what was so crazy.

They were afraid of what would happen to them if they didn't join. But he still was my patient.

I had many Nazis as my patients but gradually they made it more and more difficult for them to see me. They said to them, "We found out that you still have a Jewish doctor."

At first they didn't come officially to them. They would send over a party member who was a friend or neighbor. They would whisper, "Look, Karl, I'm a friend of yours and you can do whatever you please, but in the party meetings they talk about you. It might hurt your business if you continue to see a Jewish doctor. So you had better watch out." People caved into that pressure.

Michael: How many Jews were there in Lahr?

Opa: There were very few Jews in town, very few. Maybe 35 or 40 families at first. Not more than 50 or 60.

Michael: And you were president of the congregation?

Opa: Sure, until I left in '36. I was quite active there.

Let me tell you all the tricks the Nazis used. A lawyer would automatically become a member of the National Socialist Bar Association. Otherwise, he couldn't practice law anymore. Or if a man was an industrialist, he had to belong to the National Socialist Industrial Organization or he wouldn't get any business. And without following their rules you couldn't be a member.

One of their main rules, of course, was not associating with Jews. That is how I gradually lost more and more patients. And I finally saw the light.

Oma: And the end came when your Mom was in the first or second year of gymnasium and she was supposed to get a prize . . .

Opa: Elsa, let me tell him the story. Your mother and another Jewish boy, Goetz Hauser, were the best in their class. At the end of every year they handed out academic prizes.

Every year we got a book with stickers in it that indicated that your mother was going to get an award for being at the top of her class. That year the sticker wasn't there, and your mother was so outstanding, so advanced — especially in Latin and in arithmetic. There was no doubt that she was first in her class.

I didn't know how to prepare that little girl for the awards night. I said, "Don't be too sure you'll get an award this year." And she said, "Daddy, I have the highest grades." "Don't be too sure," I said, "don't be too sure." I tried to explain that they may have changed the rules for political reasons. "But that would be unfair, that would be an injustice, that can't be," she said.

Naturally I didn't go to the assembly. All the parents went, especially those that expected their children would get a prize. But we didn't go. Ruth came home with tears in her eyes.

The principal of the school had been my professor. Steuer was his name. He was one of the finest, most knowledgeable educators. He was outstanding in Greek, Roman, and German history.

When Ruth entered his school, I went to him and asked, "Can I send my daughter Ruth to you?" He said, "By all means. I promise you she will be protected as long as I am principal. But I feel like I'm a bird sitting on a branch about to fly away. I'm not secure here anymore."

Anyhow, after the assembly, he felt so sorry for Ruth that he called her over and said, "Here, Mrs. Steuer and I want you to have this." And he gave her a big box of candy. "This is for the first prize which you deserved. It is not given by the school but by my wife and me."

Michael: How old was she?

Opa: Ten years, nine years old. This was an awful experience, and we felt our time had come. It was time to leave.

Oma: The children couldn't go anywhere. They couldn't go swimming or to public places. On Saturdays the Jewish children were forced to got to school while all the gentile children went with the Hitler Youth on hikes and so on, singing the Nazi songs. This is how he trained the youth and taught them sports and soldiering. We realized that there was no future there.

In 1935 our nieces, Ruth and Edith, went to Israel on the Youth Aliyah. And do you know who brought them over? Ucko, our Rabbi [who eventually married Ruth].

Oma: That's right. He had been our rabbi and he arranged for them to come over. Actually, Hans [the twin's brother] left in '35 and the twins in '36. And we all had the idea to follow them. But by the time we wanted to follow them, the riots had started in Israel [the Arab Revolt], and they closed licensure to doctors temporarily.

I didn't want to give up my profession so finally I felt there was no other decision I can make but to leave for America. But I thought it would be better to get oriented in the States first before emigrating with the whole family together. I went to the American Consul in Stuttgart and got a visitor's visa to the United States.

Michael: When you left Germany, did you know that you had left for good?

Opa: No, no. I just felt I should see how things were viewed outside Germany.

The head of the Gestapo had been a patient of mine and he said, "Doctor, whenever I can do you a favor, anything, please come to me. I will help you." At that time, they had taken the passports from all the Jews so they wouldn't leave the country without telling their destination.

I went to him and said, "Sir, you once promised to help me. I intend to visit the United States. My parents, my wife and two daughters will stay here. I would like a passport."

"Oh sure.” he said,

"Now I have to ask for another favor,” I said. "I cannot make the boat in Hamburg, so I need to go by train from Lahr to Strasbourg and from Strasbourg to LeHavre. My wife and my daughters would like to go to Strasbourg with me to say goodbye because it will be a trip of several weeks or months."

He made the arrangements and that's how Oma and the children got their passports back. They came with me to Strasbourg and said goodbye. "I'll be back." I said to them.

I came here and Uncle Albert as well as some of my fraternity brothers said, "You cannot go back." I read the New York Times every day and could see what was going on and what Hitler's intentions were. You obviously couldn't read that in the German papers.

I went to the Council of Jewish Women and asked, "How can I immigrate?" because you had to emigrate and then re-immigrate. You just couldn't convert from visitor to immigrant status. They said to me, "Up to two months ago you could have gone to Cuba but that's out now. Canada is out. You could emigrate from Canada to America, but they won't let you in to begin with.

I went to a German friend of mine, a fraternity brother, who was a lawyer in Germany, but he couldn't take the bar exam in the US anymore. He said to me, "When I came here in 1933, I came as a visitor also and I went to Toronto."

Michael: So you came in what year now?

Opa: November 14, 1936. A Saturday. I came by ship into New York Harbor. I can still remember Uncle Albert looking up and trying to spot me. I hadn't seen him for two and a half years. All of a sudden, I see him looking and looking when I came down. He had come in '34.

Michael: Why did he come here in 1934?

Oma: He was finished with his medical boards in '33 and for one year he went to Freiburg and then to Switzerland to spend time with the famous Swiss psychiatrists Auguste Forel and Karl Gustav Jung. There he met many American doctors who told him about what was going on in Germany.

While he became friendly with them, they ended up leaving for their own safety. But a year later, out of the blue, he got a visa from one of these doctors. And he had never asked for it. That man had realized how bad things were in Germany and knew that Switzerland could become involved. Albert didn't want to go but spoke to Jung who said, "I hate for you to leave, but you should take advantage of this offer." And so he went.

Michael: Did he ever talk about his experiences with Jung and in Switzerland.

Opa: He had many interesting experiences, but I'll tell you about those off the tape [laughing].

Oma: He came from Zurich once to visit us, and he cautioned us. He said, "Hitler is coming and you will lose everything. Go to America." We thought he was crazy and was saying it because he was not married and could travel easily. But he had been to Berlin where it was easier to see what was coming even before Hitler came to power.

He said, "Sell everything. If you only get 50%, then take the 50%." We thought he was out of his mind.

Oma: He left and we forgot about it. It was at least 8 years before Hitler came to power. But Albert came to the U.S. and became a doctor in a summer camp where he met Jacqueline, who was a puppeteer at that camp. Then he opened up an office next to her parents' apartment.

Opa: On 238th Street, Van Cortland Park, New York, near Riverdale where Toscanini [the celebrated conductor] lived.

Oma: And they got married in December 1936 after Opa had been there about six weeks. She had very nice parents, extremely well-educated. The mother was a pianist . . .

Opa: Aach, another Aunt Hanna. The kindest person and highly educated and musical. She played the piano and that also attracted Albert.

Michael: What was Albert like before he got married?

Opa: He was more interested in literature and poetry than in medicine, but he decided to study medicine nonetheless. He had a terrific library with thousands of books. He took music lessons and had a good voice. He went to a voice teacher and got lessons for free. Maybe not entirely for free [Albert had a bit of a reputation].

Have you heard of Peter Schickele? PDQ Bach? He is the son of Rheine Schickele who was the son of Rene Schickele, the great German poet from Alsace-Lorraine. Albert and Rene Schickele were the closest of friends. Peter Schickele would visit Albert and Jacqueline. He's friendly with Peter Schweich, too.

Michael: You sang a lot, didn't you?

Opa: Oma had 4 to 5 years of music training and I had about 3 1/2 or 4 years. As a student I had lessons and I continued when I was in practice. We both continued our lessons with the same teacher until Hitler came.

In fact, I gave two recitals. The second one when Hitler was already in power, and it was for the benefit of the Red Cross. And the mayor of the town, a Nazi,

was sitting in the front row and applauding. At that time everything was still hotsy totsy.

Michael: You had your own little theater group or opera company in town?

Opa: Oh no, we went to Freiburg. It was only an hour away. I sang Schubert, arias from Faust, and others.

Michael: When did Mom start taking lessons?

Opa: Mom took piano lessons from a teacher in Huntington. She was so good that we decided the teacher wasn't good enough for her and the teacher realized it, too. I remember that fellow standing around looking out of the window. Ruth was better than he was.

Then we sent her to Julliard [School of Music].

Michael: Did she take lessons in Germany?

Opa: Oh sure, she started lessons at age 5 or 6. Mrs. Bergman was her piano teacher and Mr. Bergman was our voice teacher. Mrs. Bergman was also Edith and Ruth's teacher.

Your mother continued her lessons in this country and was so good that we sent her to Julliard. But she would practice 5 or 6 hours a day and developed a numbness in her hands from fatigue. I took her to a neurologist because I was quite concerned at that time there might be an organic disease, but it was just fatigue. Ruth didn't want to stay out of music and so she switched to voice.

Michael: She only switched to voice because of the numbness?

Opa: Yes, she had excellent training in the piano and was very advanced.

Michael: She was how old when she switched to voice?

Oma: It was the last year of high school I guess, and then she went to Smith College where she studied with Anna Hamlin [a renowned voice teacher].

Michael: Now the twins, your nieces, lived right near you in Lahr.

Opa: Sure. Same town.

Michael: And there were three Ruths.

Opa: Yes, your mother was "Kleine" [Little] Ruth, then there was Ruth [one of the twins], and then "Ander" [Other] Ruth Schwarz.

Even though your mother was 4-5 years younger, she always wanted to emulate her cousins, Ruth and Edith. Whatever they did she wanted to do. When she was a little over two she saw Ruth and Edith go off to kindergarten and she stamped her foot down, "I want to go, too!" Edith and Ruth laughed and teased her by bringing her along to school. Believe it or not, your mother was so advanced that the teacher said that she should be in school. She was always ahead.

Michael: Where were Ruth and Eva [their second daughter] born? In the house?

Opa: Yes, not the hospital. We all used midwives.

Michael: That was a big house.

Opa: Sixteen rooms, three stories, and the office. We had beautiful stained-glass windows in the stairways. They were destroyed during the war.

Michael: Oma, you had maids to help you with the house?

Opa: Oh yes, one for the children, one for the kitchen, and one for the house.

Oma: They were not maids like today. They worked not eight hours every day but all day and evening with only every second Sunday off. They would get up at six in the morning and work on until evening. They were usually girls from farming families who came to the city to make money for later. They usually wouldn't marry until they were 24 or 25 and had enough money for furniture, linens, and such.

We only had 2 or 3 changes [of staff] in 14 years. They became close to the children and we to them.

We had one maid named Maria whom the girls loved, but she couldn't stay with us when Hitler came to power.

Opa: Oh, that was so humiliating. When Hitler came to power, they decided that non-Jewish maids could not serve in Jewish houses anymore unless the head of the household was over 40 or 50. I was in my 30's at that time and the girl had to go because of me.

Let me tell you more about when I came to America. Uncle Albert and I found each other at the boat. We got into his car and right away he told me that I had to take the state medical boards. He said that the deadline had passed in October, just two months prior. If I had come then, I wouldn't have had to take the boards and could have begun my practice right away. I asked him why he didn't tell me, and he said, "We just didn't know. We found out later that we could have just signed your name on a list. They would have accepted that."

I moved into Uncle Albert's waiting room and ate my meals with the Weichsels, Aunt Jacqueline's parents. They were very kind to me, and I took to Rhea as Albert had.

As I told you, they tried to teach me English. "This is a fork." "This is a spoon." One day I was thirsty and wanted a drink of water. I said in English, "May I have the water?"

"You don't say that.” Uncle Albert said. "If a lady is across the table you say, 'Would you please pass your water?” Everybody was in hysterics.

Michael: You had to study for your state boards?

Opa: Yes, but you only could get a state board under one condition — that you pass the language examination. I started learning English in the beginning of January. I started right away reading the New York Times and, with my background in Latin, Greek, German, and French, I was soon able to read the paper and understand it.

Before we left Germany, we had some lessons. We had a friend who had been to America and worked for Woolworths. He came back to Germany and opened a similar store there. And once or twice a week we would sit at our friends, the Schwarzes, and learn a few sentences and phrases. That was the entire background in English we had before coming over.

I went to a public school on 46th Street near Grand Central Station for two weeks, that was all. The teacher was talking about Florence Nightingale. We read the story and talked about it so it went into my ears, and I could understand English a little.

Then Uncle Albert said to me, "You know, you will find the finest English in the Sunday Times Magazine." I opened it and saw an article that started, "People are beginning to notice the fact that . . ." I counted the words because the minimum for a conversation on the language examination was 200 words.

With that phrase I already had eight words that could be used in any conversation. I underlined and copied them along with about 20 other sentences that I could apply to any conversation. I memorized them and knew them by heart.

The day of the examination came, and the first part was synonyms and antonyms. I think I made a few mistakes there. And then the conversation started. The selected topic was "Patent Medicine.” How did I start? "People are beginning to notice the fact that patent medicine is much cheaper than prescription medicine." Sixteen words. Almost ten percent of the requirement.

And I went on and on. And then I had to write a little and, according to Jacqueline, I didn't make one mistake.

I got a notice later that, while I passed my examination, I had to take another oral examination to make sure that my pronunciation was good enough to deal with patients. So I went back to the public school for one week, ten to eleven o' clock, Monday through Friday. I learned the difference between W's and V's and how not to pronounce "and" like most Germans, who made it sound like "Unt" because the German is "Und".

After one week I felt I had learned enough and went to NYU to take this examination, which we all heard was strict. There were three English teachers giving the examination.

I had only been in the country for a total of six weeks. During that time, I had more than a few opportunities to talk about my experiences in Germany. Because many people asked me, I had a little routine around that subject. I often talked about Radio Strasbourg and how we could only get real news from that station.

And I had rehearsed and practiced a discussion. I went in there and they asked me my name. "I am Dr. Hofman." "What is your profession?" "I am a physician." I replied. "Where did you practice?" That was my chance. I told them I was from Lahr, in Alsace-Lorraine, and told them a little about the geography and history. And then I could talk about Radio Strasbourg and how the truth we heard opened our eyes.

Michael: You said this after six weeks in this country?

Opa: Yes. And I told them about my friend who was an engineer and how people only wanted him to install radios that could pick up Radio Strasbourg. The examiners became interested, and I went on for a while.

After about 15 or 20 minutes one of the teachers said, "Thank you, doctor, that was interesting. Now would you please read something?" I had to read from the Reader's Digest on the commercial relationship between China and Japan. They thanked me and I left with confidence.

When I came outside, I told the others waiting in line, "It was nothing. They were nice and friendly." Several of them said, "That's what you think." They already had bad experiences. They told some of the candidates, "Sorry, you failed and need to study some more." Several of the men got wild because they had no income.

I was deflated again and discouraged. But ten days later I got a letter from a Mr. Field in Albany. It read, "Dear Dr. Hofman: It gives me great pleasure to notify

you that you passed your written and your oral examinations. This will enable you to apply now for state boards in medicine." I wrote home to Germany and, boy, did I get letters. They thought I was a hero to learn so quickly.

Then I said to myself that it was time to immigrate so I could bring the family over. As I mentioned, I couldn't just convert from visitor's status to immigrant status. I had to emigrate so I could re-enter as an immigrant. But no countries were allowing Jews to enter their borders so that they could emigrate back to the U.S. What I had learned from my meeting at the Council of Jewish Women was that I couldn't go through either Cuba or Canada.

I then went to this fraternity brother, a friend of mine who had been a lawyer in Germany. He wasn't able to study for the three years or so to get his law degree in the US and pass the bar. But he did find an occupation. He spent all his time helping people to immigrate to this country.

He told me, "From my own immigration, I learned all the papers that were needed and figured that I could help others to facilitate things." He developed a connection with the consul in Canada and began helping immigrants. I went to Emma Rothschild and she made out an affidavit. They went back and forth to the consul until the papers were in order. Finally, they said that everything was ready for me to go to Canada so I could immigrate again.

They then instructed me, "There are two directives for you to follow: First of all, when you pass Canadian customs at Niagara Falls, they will see your German Passport and ask you your profession. Don't tell them you're a physician because they will become suspicious. That would be one strike against you. Number two, if they ask you your religion, try not to tell them you are Jewish. Now, we have to prepare a cover for you as something other than a physician. You will go as a biologist."

They sent me to a biologist at Presbyterian Medical Center who gave me material to put in my briefcase. They also told me to go Pullman instead of coach class on the train so I could give the impression that I was a professional and not an immigrant.

I took the Pullman to Toronto and went to bed. I debated with myself whether to stay in bed or get all dressed at 6 o'clock in the morning when the customs officials usually came through to check passports.

I decided to put on my necktie and sit in one of these chairs like a bigshot. At 6:30 the guy came in and said, "Passports please." He asked me my name and profession and I told him that I was a microbiologist doing research work. "What's that?" he asked, and I told him again. He got frustrated and said, "I don't know what you are talking about. The hell with it," and walked away. That was the whole examination.

I came to Toronto by 10:00 in the morning and the secretary at the consul's office said, "I'm very sorry, Dr. Hofman, but I have to disappoint you. The consul won't be here until two this afternoon and you first have to see a physician to check your health." They brought me to a nice fellow. We talked and talked and when I took off my coat to be examined, he said, " No, no, you are a colleague. I wouldn't examine you. You look fine to me." By the next morning I had my immigration papers.

The lawyer told me not to go back through Toronto in case they would recognize me. I took a train to Montreal and back to the U.S. Early in the morning the U.S. customs official came in and got angry when he saw my German passport because he knew it would mean work for him. "How did they let you in to Canada?" he asked, and I said, "I don't know, but they did."

He was getting angry about having to fill out the immigration paper so I started a little conversation with him as you would have, Michael. I asked him where he came from and about his background. He said, "You know, I was in Germany. I had a job in Munich as a driver." "You did?" I asked, and we talked for about 45 minutes and became friendly. Eventually he stood up and I thanked him. "Think nothing of it. It was a pleasure."

Boy, I came back to Albert, Jacqueline and the Weichsels. "I got my papers!" and were we happy. The very next morning I went downtown to the immigration office to apply for immigration papers for Oma, Ruth, and Eva. It was relatively easy to get papers for a wife and children. And I did that on February 7th and they all came on May 24, 1937.

Michael: Oma, had to pack up the whole household?

Oma: Yes. I came with my parents, Opa's mother, and the Schwarzes [friends from Lahr]. Ten of us on the Queen Mary.

Michael: You packed up all of your furniture?

Oma: Because we knew we had to liquidate our money, we bought things, but we had to prove that they had been used. That's how we bought the Steinway piano.

Michael: You had no trouble getting out of Germany?

Oma: No, we had a lot of trouble.

Opa: Oma had a lot of trouble, but she handled it all.

Oma: First I had to sell the house and I had trouble there, because they charged a 25% tax for fleeing the country. Twenty-five percent on all our assets.

Opa: When Oma went to get papers, there was one nasty guy at the Gestapo who said, "Your husband was a liar. He intended to leave the whole time." And Oma didn't keep quiet, and the guy got angry.

Fortunately, the head of the Gestapo, who had been my friend, told the other one to shut up, and he did.

Michael: What was your itinerary?

Oma: From Lahr to Paris to Cherbourg. Albert told us to take only the Queen Mary because it was the biggest and fastest boat. Five days to cross the ocean. We were concerned that it be as comfortable as possible for our parents, so we spent the extra money. They never were seasick, but I was so sick the whole way. I never saw the dining room.

Opa: I had rented a furnished apartment on Riverside Drive in a nice area [of New York City]. It was the first time we saw colored maids. We had never seen colored people before unless they had come with the circus. Or maybe as a doorman at the big resorts in Baden Baden.

Michael: What reactions did Mom and Eva have to leaving Germany?

Oma: They were happy to leave. It was very unpleasant where we were. And they were happy to be reunited with Opa.

Michael: How long had you been separated?

Oma: Seven months.

Opa: Before that I don't think we were apart for more than a day. It was hard. Boy, did Oma write me letters. I never knew she loved me that much.

Oma: After a few weeks I couldn't stand it. It was dirty and there were bedbugs. We looked around for a better apartment.

We found a better place and furnished it with our own things. The furniture had been in storage and many good things were stolen at the warehouse.

My parents had an apartment next to us and we were close to Albert and Jacqueline. We stayed there from May '37 until April '38 when we moved to Huntington.

Michael: What was your parents' reaction to leaving. Was it hard for them?

Opa: Not at all.

Oma: My father was anxious to leave.

Michael: And your mother?

Opa: She was okay. Whatever the family wanted was all right with her. She was extremely kind.

Michael: And your mother, Opa?

Opa: She was happy, sure.

Michael: How old were they when they came over?

Oma: My father was 71 and my mother was 70.

Opa: You should have seen him with his van dyke, and all dressed up. He was happy to be in America.

In the meantime, I prepared for my boards and had to decide where to settle. I got friendly with people I met at the Temple. They told me, "Doctor, you should settle here. We will all be your patients."

But each time I met them I heard, "Oh, did you hear the news? Our doctor from Frankfurt is coming." And I knew if I stayed in that area, I would be an interim measure. I also didn't want to be in a big city. Lahr wasn't a big city and I wanted to make friends and be identified as my patients' friend. I figured I would go to upstate New York or the suburban regions.

But I didn't know anybody outside of Riverside. So what did I do? I decided to go upstate and visit rabbis in each of the communities. I was anxious that each of my two girls should continue their Jewish education. Eva had none, practically. She was only 7 or 8. Ruth already had good preparation.

I told Albert about my intentions, and he said, "I work with a gastroenterologist in Brooklyn by the name of Finkelstein. His brother, Louis Finkelstein, is chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Go to him and ask him."

I went to him, and he was very kind. I told him about my search for a community upstate and I think he was impressed that I would contact the rabbis to ensure my girls' education. "Where do you want to go?" and I told him that I wanted to see Middletown, Schenectady, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo. And he wrote letters to rabbis in each of those communities telling them that I would be visiting and that they should help me along.

This was the pattern: I came to Middletown and met the rabbi. He said, "I don't know about the medical situation here, but I will call a member of our congregation who is a prominent physician." He called and then drove me over to the doctor.

It happened in Middletown that I met a Dr. Schiesel, an ear, nose, throat man. He had a blue book that had the ratios of physicians to the population. And most of the communities in the Catskills had more than enough Jewish doctors. But he showed me another book through Medical Economics which listed names of places where doctors have died or moved.

"By the way." he said, "There are openings in Huntington, Long Island. I have a good friend there, a Dr. Kimbrig. Look him up if you ever visit there."

From Middletown I went to Mechanicville and saw many poor people standing around and I thought that this might be too poor a town. There was no rabbi. I went to a barber and asked him, and he told me that one of the doctors was very busy but that the rest were not. So much for Mechanicville.

In Syracuse, the Conservative rabbi sent me to the Reform rabbi, a Rabbi Friedman, because he was considered to be the most senior and well-connected. He was a real scholar. I could tell that.

I went to Purim services and heard all the rabbis speak. I was introduced to a doctor who wanted to sell his practice for only $10,000, including the house and office. But he lived fourteen miles north of Syracuse and I was concerned how far the girls would have to go for Hebrew School. He told me it would be no problem, but I thought otherwise.

Then I went to Rochester where they almost embraced me. There was a Rabbi Bernstein who later was a chaplain in the European theatre during the War. He said, "There is nothing here but let me take you to Fairport so . . .

Oma: Jesus, Ernest, by the time you finish describing this trip it will be three in the morning. Can't you just say that you couldn't find anything upstate and moved to Huntington?

Opa: I went to Fairport where there was a house I could have rented. And on to Buffalo where I made friends, but I liked Fairport.

I came back and told Oma and the family that the best opportunity was in Fairport. But Albert said, "No, that's too far away. You can't do that to us. You'll take our parents with you and we'll never see them often enough." Little did we know that we wouldn't see them much when we moved to Huntington either.

I remembered that the doctor in Mechanicville mentioned Huntington and Dr. Kimbrig so I called him and we got together for dinner. He said, "I don't know about you coming here. It's crowded here and Huntington is such an antisemitic place (which was true). I'm afraid that another Jewish doctor will make it hard for the rest of us."

Michael: Was the normal pattern for German Jewish doctors to go upstate?

Opa: Not all, but some did. Most stayed in New York City and formed little circles that referred to one another.

Michael: How about the Jewish doctors who were not immigrants. What was their attitude?

Opa: Many of them resented us. One of the doctors in Syracuse treated me like I was poison. He didn't want the competition.

A lot of Americans thought that the German doctors were better trained, which wasn't true at all. The practical training was better here, especially after 1933 when they made changes in the curriculum. In Germany we learned a lot of science and biology.

Oma: They had the impression that the German doctors were good but not the dentists. They made the immigrant dentists retrain for two years.

Opa: Uncle Paul had to go to dental school again in Chicago. I signed the application papers in his name even though he didn't come to this country until '38.

Michael: Uncle Paul came to Chicago because that's where he was accepted into dental school?

Opa: That's correct. Because he was accepted in Chicago Dental School. We couldn't get him into a school in New York. He came in '38 and then Aunt Elsa, Walter [Paul's wife and son] and her mother came in January of '39.

When Paul arrived, he found out that he was missing organic chemistry and zoology from his credentials, so no school would take him. He first had to go to high school to catch up on his English, which he never entirely caught up on. Then he went to Fordham University for courses because it was the most accessible. He lived with us for a few months while he studied. Then he lived in the city with some relatives and came out to us on weekends.

He had no idea about organic chemistry. He was ready to go back to Germany. "For this I had to come here? I had the busiest practice in Ludwigshafen." But I would tutor him.

One day we were behind our house in the summer's heat going over the chemistry. We were perspiring and he was frustrated. "I can't do this anymore!" And I said, "Let's go over about these benzene rings one more time."

And you know how Uncle Paul was. Rather than keep a straight face, he started to giggle. And the more I told him to stop giggling the more he laughed and soon we were both in hysterics. But he finally passed the examination and got accepted to dental school.

Let's get back to the decision about where to settle. There are so many things I want to tell about and the tape is running out.

Even though Max Kimbrig advised me against Huntington, I liked it so much. It was clean and beautiful, like Baden Baden. I thought that the family would like it there.

On the second visit I went alone again. It was the coldest day in February. I couldn't feel my ears anymore. I went to "Charles Gold, Real Estate Agent." I talked to the girl there who later became my patient. They helped me find a house to rent on 424 New York Avenue. It was owned by a Mr. William W. Field, the chief lawyer for Metropolitan Insurance Company, who . . .

Oma: My gosh, couldn't we just talk about the important things? Can't you just say that we found a house and moved in? Why so many details?

Michael: I'm interested to hear how you got your practice going in Huntington.

Opa: You mean about the butcher shop?

Michael: Absolutely.

Opa: O.K. I finally decided to move to Huntington and got the house for $60 per month, which was outrageous. Nobody paid more than $45 or $50 per month. We moved on April 7, 1938. Your mother had a cold . .

Oma: April 4th.

Opa: Now she corrects me.

Oma: If you're going to give so many details you should at least get them right [laughs].

Michael: Your girls had gone to school in New York for about a year.

Oma: Yes. When we first came in May, we put them in school just for three weeks so they could hear the language. And Eva came home from school crying. "All I do is schvitz [perspire] here and I don't understand a word they're saying. It's so hot!" And then we sent them to day camp for the summer close by, about a 20-minute walk. After the summer, they knew English.

Opa: After that summer, they would fight in English, joke in English, and we learned with them.

The moving van brought all our things to Huntington, and I started my practice cold. I didn't know one patient.

One day a patient came in who thought he had a venereal disease.

Michael: Just off the street?

Opa: Yes. He saw my sign and I was the only German Jewish doctor in the area. There might have been six Jewish doctors overall out of seventeen doctors total.

So he asked, "How much is it?" and, to me, it was extremely embarrassing. In Europe you never accepted money. You sent a bill. He wanted to pay me, and I had no nurse.

Michael: Now this was the very first time you had practiced medicine in this country? You had just gotten your license?

Opa: Yes. And I told him, "Two dollars." Boy, I kissed those two dollars.

Then one day the butcher came. We had been to his market to buy meat. He called on me one day. "Doctor," he said, "I have bleeding from my rectum."

The butcher had seen Dr. Patiky, who was a general practitioner but the most popular surgeon in town. He was excellent. He knew his limits and did a good job. But when he saw the butcher a few months before, he diagnosed a bleeding hemorrhoid and operated on him.

He didn't use a sigmoidoscope. I don't think they had them here. Good thing I had mine, which Oma had brought from Germany figuring we could sell it if I didn't need it.

Despite the operation, the patient was still bleeding. When I examined him, I felt what we called a "cauliflower" and then saw a cauliflower lesion with the sigmoidoscope.

There was no doubt. I said, "Mr. Levy, I found something. You come again tomorrow when I've had a chance to look into it." I didn't want to tell him when he was alone. He was 56 years old and scared to death.

Fortunately, he had left his old green necktie. The next morning, I took the tie to the butcher store for an excuse and had a chance to talk to his wife and daughter. "I think your husband has a tumor." "Is it cancerous?" they asked. "I don't know. You have to go to a specialist." And then I talked with the butcher and explained to him the situation.

At that point in my practice, I had all the time in the world. I arranged for him to see a Dr. Howard Clark, who was a colonic surgeon at Postgraduate Hospital near Bellevue. During the previous year I had a chance to see many of the doctors in action and size them up. I thought he was the best colonic surgeon I had seen.

Before we went any further, I called his original doctor, Patiky, because I didn't want to antagonize him. He was a power at the hospital. So I thought quickly and figured I had better contact him right away.

He was nervous when I called. You could always tell because he would start coughing. I asked him if I could bring the patient over for him to examine again because I thought he had a tumor. I drove the butcher over, Patiky examined him, agreed with my diagnosis and recommendation, and told the patient, "You do what Dr. Hofman says."

I went with Mr. Levy to the clinic. He didn't have much money. It was still during the Depression. But Dr. Clark saw him because I was with him.

Clark examined him and said, "You need an operation." They operated on him successfully. The butcher lived until the age of 84. The lesion was completely healed.

They were so grateful to me that I became very popular. Every day at least two patients came by who had been referred from the butcher shop. Someone would come into the store coughing, and they would tell him, "Oh, you should see a doctor for that cough. Go see Dr. Hofman. He's good."

Not a day passed without someone saying, "Mr. Levy, the butcher, sent me." Eventually they kept a blackboard behind the counter so they could schedule appointments to see me.

I went to apply at the hospital for admitting privileges, but they had closed admissions to the medical staff during the previous year. But the chief of staff told me, "Be patient, you'll get admitted." After 15 months I was admitted to the courtesy staff so I could bring my own patients and attend to them.

Michael: Where did you bring them before?

Opa: I gave them to Dr. Patiky or to the others. I gave them away. So they were friendly toward me and helped me along and eventually voted for me. Two years later they made me Associate Attending in Medicine, and then in '45, an Attending.

Then I started for a couple of years going to Montefiore Hospital to learn about cardiology. I had connected with the best in the country – [Emmanuel] Goldberger, who invented the unipolar chest leads, and other pioneers in that field. I learned more and more.

One day, in his nasal speech, Goldberger said to me, "Ernest, would you do me a favor? I'm chief of cardiology at Lincoln Hospital. Could you read electrocardiograms for me there on your day off?"

I said, "Don't you have doctors there on your staff who could do them?" He told me, "There's not one who understands my unipolar leads. You're the only one."

At that time doctors were opposed to using that many leads. They were too lazy to learn it and didn't understand the underlying mathematical concepts. One of his staff told me, "Oh, Goldberger's new unipolar leads will disappear. They will be forgotten in no time." Of course, there isn't an electrocardiogram machine in the country today that doesn't use Goldberger leads.

At first it wasn't hard for me to diagnose new infarcts, posterior or anterior. The most difficult ones were the borderline cases. Is it or isn't it something to worry about? If I wasn't sure, I put "Possible" on the sheet and then wrote a slip, "Manny, what do you think?" When I came back, he'd give me the answer. I really learned to evaluate the borderline cases.

Soon I had my own electrocardiograph and the staff at Huntington Hospital recognized that I was good. They came to trust my readings. So in '46 they put me in the Department of Cardiology. And I did it for 26 years until I resigned.

Back to the family. We had a lot of trouble with the owner of that house on 424 New York Avenue. He wouldn't fix one thing. The first night we were there we had no heat and your mother had a temperature. And the next morning we even had snow. Everyone was ready to go back to the city. The owner was completely uncooperative, so I thought, "To hell with you. I'll move out at the first opportunity."

At that time, NBC broadcast a Toscanini concert every Saturday night from 8:30 to 9:30. I never missed one.

Oma: Here he goes with the details again. It's not important.

Opa: Be patient. You'll hear why I tell you this story. One Saturday night I got a call from the owner of Rosen's Drug store that Al Goldstein had a 104-degree temperature.

I was upset about missing the concert, but I went to their house. It was beautiful. I said to them, "Boy, this is just the kind of house I'm looking for." He said, "It's yours if you want it. We used to have my brother and his family here, but they've moved out. We don't need such a big house." So the interruption of the concert worked out well because we moved in not long after. We rented it for $70 per month.

Every month the owner, Mr. Hogan, would come by for his check and a glass of whiskey. And each month he would ask me if I wanted to buy the property and I played hard to get. I told him, "You know that war is in the air. Long Island would likely be one of the first places the Germans would bomb. I'm not so sure I should buy the property."

But Oma felt we should explore it and not long after we bought it for $10,500. And you know the rest of the story. We all moved in. I had my office on the first floor and the family stayed on the second floor. Eventually we moved out near the water, on 330 Bay Avenue.

Michael: I want to hear for the record some isolated stories. I want to first hear about the origin of the family expression "Yo Phillip" [which roughly translates to "Yea, right" or "Bullsh*t"].

Opa: There was a Jewish family in Lahr that owned a scrap iron business. They had two daughters, one of whom was a hunchback by the name of Bertha. No Jewish man would look at her and they were unable to make a match.

They had a worker there, a laborer, and she became pregnant by him. At that time, it was terrible. Nobody was supposed to know. Bertha delivered the child. Phillip was his name.

Soon after they found a baker to marry her, and they were anxious for her to go with him. So Mrs. Schnurmann, the grandmother, raised Phillip in her household. He was told that his grandparents were his parents, and that Bertha was his sister.

When he was about 8 or 9 years old, he came home and said, "Mama, the boys tell me that you are not my mother, you are my grandmother, and that Bertha is not my sister but my mother. That's not true, is it? You are my mother, right?"

Each time she would respond, "Yes, Phillip, you are my son," which in German with the Lahr dialect would be, "Yo Phillip, du bist mein Kind."

So when somebody argues with you and you give in not to make trouble, you say, "Yo Phillip." which is like saying "Whatever you say".

Michael: Now, you've given all the details about the family history but haven't described too much about personalities, what people were like. For example, Opa, describe your father.

Opa: An extremely kind man. He was a merchant as I told you. Before he married, he was in the choir at the Rashi synagogue in Worms. He had a good baritone voice.

He often gave the following story: They had a choir director who was not Jewish. And if they sang, "Sh'ma Yisroel" and it didn't sound right he would shout out, "Lord Jesus, is that Sh'ma Yisroel bad today!"

Michael: And your mother?

Opa: She was an only child, and she was quiet.

Oma: They always lived with the grandparents

Michael: So the families always lived close together. It was unheard of to stray too far?

Opa: You saw our house in Lahr. My parents lived right around the corner, a few blocks away. Every day I came to visit and had something to eat. We were close.

Michael: When did your mother die?

Opa: She died here but had taken sick before we left Germany. One day she came to me and said, "I am embarrassed to show you" but she opened her blouse, and I could see she had a retracted nipple. I knew the diagnosis.

I took her to the doctor who removed the breast. The greatest pathologist in Germany said that there were no metastases. But she continued to lose weight and we had to bring her over on a visitor's visa because we were afraid otherwise they would examine her and reject the application for medical reasons. We renewed the visitor's visa every 6 months until she died on January 12, 1939.

Aunt Elsa had just arrived with Walter a few days before.

Michael: Now how about the famous Opa Schweich [Oma's father]?

Opa: What should we say about Opa Schweich?

Oma: You knew enough about him. He was a very active, very alert man, He was 71 when he came here. He had his own money and they lived independently from us in their own place.

He understood English but didn't speak it. He would stop people and ask, "Do you speak French?" because he was fluent. And people came to know him as the "old gent with the van dyke. "

He desperately wanted to be an American citizen. He was terribly proud of Albert, who enlisted in the Army and became a captain.

There was a language requirement, though, and he spoke almost no English. But he so impressed the court workers and judge with his charm and desire, they granted him citizenship. I think he was the only immigrant in that area who was allowed citizenship speaking only French to the judge.

Opa: When we moved to Huntington, we found an apartment for them on Elm Street, because my mother was living with us. After my mother died, we brought them with us to the new house and we picked out the nicest room for them.

Oma: The day we were all to move, my mother had a mild stroke. She still walked but she was not the same.

Opa: From that point on Oma had to take care of her all the time. What she didn't do I did. Her mother refused to go to the hospital or be treated by any other physician. So I became physician, nurse, and orderly.

And when the time came that she couldn't get up, I carried her daily to the bathroom to clean her up. And I remember one time she whispered, "You are like a son to me, but you are more like my father. You've always taken care of me." And she embraced me.

Our daughters saw all of this and that's how we tried to instill values in them without giving any speeches.

Now Opa Schweich liked to help around the house. He would sweep every day and so on. When the branches on trees were too long, he would come with a saw and cut them back.

One day, during office hours, all of a sudden, I hear him grunting while he's carrying the ladder. I went out and asked him what happened, and he told me that he had fallen off the ladder and hit the stone wall. He wouldn't go for x-rays or to an orthopedist. He was stubborn just like Oma.

After resting for three weeks, he still wasn't much better. I insisted he go for an x-ray, and it showed he had a broken vertebra. The doctor prescribed a girdle for him to wear.

We went to the drugstore to have him measured and when it was ready, I gave it to him to try on. He said, "Oh no, I don't need this nonsense" and threw it away. "I'll get better on my own." And he did.

Years before, in 1940, he had an infarct. I told him he had to stay in bed for six weeks, which was customary treatment at that time. We practically had to hold him down. "It's nothing." he said. Exactly like Oma.

He told everybody, "I have a son who's a doctor and a son-in-law who's a doctor, but they are both thieves. They stole six weeks of my life by making me stay in bed." He recuperated, but between 1948 to 1950 he developed severe angina pains which could be bad enough to warrant Demerol.

Within the family he could be quite stern and sometimes sarcastic. He had a wonderful sense of humor but, to the family, he could be cutting.

At the same time, he was extremely kind. Let me tell you an example: He died on February 10, 1950 — just one day after his birthday. On the Wednesday before he died, Albert, Jacqueline and their children, Margot and Peter, came to see him because they knew he was quite sick. And Opa Schweich knew they were coming and told Eva to go to the village to get candy for the children. Eva brought him two bags of candy.

Next day they came not only with Peter and Margo but the housekeeper and her child. He became concerned about not having candy for this other child. As sick as he was, he had Eva get a tray and an extra bag, and he carefully divided the candies into three equal parts. This was two days before he died. He could be harsh within the family, but he was also extraordinarily kind.

Michael: You got along well with him?

Opa: Never a harsh word between the two of us. He respected me and I respected him. Maybe with his son and daughter once in a while, but never with me. We had an unusual relationship. I could say anything to him. Like your father can say to me.

How we dealt with our parents and in-laws showed our children how family should be respected. Maybe that's why we almost never needed to scold Ruth or Eva. They might have been scolded once or twice in their lifetimes.

Michael: Now how about Oma's mother? We haven't talk about her yet. What was she like?

Opa: Personified goodness. Unusually kind.

Michael: Weren't there any bad apples? You described everyone as remarkably good and kind.

Oma: [laughing] We are all nice people. Yo Phillip.

Michael: Well, the worst it gets is when we call somebody a "real Schweich." The Schweichs sometimes can be a little peculiar.

Oma: We can be a little nasty [laughing].

Opa: Sure.

Oma: Like me.

Opa: I didn't say that. Silly things bother Schweichs.

Like Eva, Judy [her daughter] and you can't stand people biting into apples or chewing gum. Those little things can make a Schweich crazy even though they are kind. Opa Schweich didn't like it if someone scratched his head or had a minor deformity. Just a little meshuga [crazy].

Michael: So much of your story has to do with fleeing Germany. What was the effect of emigrating on you and your family?

Opa: We were very depressed at first. Everything was new and strange. But we adjusted quickly.

In the beginning, I felt like committing suicide, although I naturally would never do that to the family. When I first came here, I became homesick. Coming from a small and beautiful place like the Black Forest, I would have given anything just for a handful of that soil so I could smell it. Going to that big city from such a small one was hard.

And then the family came, and it was a real struggle. I remember the day of the state boards I was crying as I was going to the bus that would bring me to the subway. I started to cry and said to Oma, "I forgot everything. My mind is completely blank. Look what I am doing to you and the children. I will let you down and I'm responsible." Oma said, "Don't worry." And once I was there, I saw the questions and got into it and did fine.

Michael: Except for the question about lime water.

Opa: Ooof. How do you remember these things? Yes, we had a little course before, and somebody must have made a mistake on the practice exam. The question was, "What is the treatment for rickets?" and the answer that was circled was “lime water.” And that same question was asked in the real exam and I thought, "In Germany we would give vitamin D, cod liver oil, but maybe here they give lime water." So that was the only mistake I know about.

As time went on and we were settled, we were so appreciative and happy. We had a whole new life. Our girls came home and spoke English. They were accepted everywhere.

After one year of junior high, the principal came over to see us. He said, "Dr. and Mrs. Hofman, after being in our school for one year, your daughter has won the Robert Torres Medal for the best English grades in her class." I think she still has the medal. So they got adjusted in no time and made friends and we did as well. We had a much better life. The children were much happier here.

Oma: Especially when we moved to Huntington. It was so nice. There were only 17,000 people living there at the time. And it was good for us that there were no German Jews because it forced us to become friendly with Americans and to become Americanized ourselves. That's why we never wanted to stay in New York City. All the other German Jews lived in Washington Heights and formed their own community. They still speak only German in that area.

Opa: Before we decided to come to Huntington the rabbi invited us out for the weekend. We came by train and the president of the congregation, Herman Weinstein, met us. We were welcomed and participated in the services. At the Oneg Shabbat they asked Ruth to sing some songs and she did. They were all amazed that a German Jew should know any Hebrew.

Oma: They didn't realize that religious education was compulsory in Germany. Twice a week they had to go to classes and the grades showed up on their regular report card. It was taken like any other subject.

Opa: Your mother was so advanced in Hebrew that the Rabbi would give her private lessons after the regular class, which she found boring. That didn't last too long, though.

Michael: Did any of you experience any antisemitism here like you did in Europe?

Opa: Oh, no. Only once Ruth came home all upset. When she was in high school, there were some racial issues. The colored boys and girl were fighting the white ones. She came home pale and excited.

Michael: It must have been hard on the one hand wanting to Americanize but on the other wanting to retain your identity as German Jews.

Opa: As Jews, yes, but not as German Jews. That wasn't important to me.

Oma: We wanted to forget about Germany.

Michael: How was it that, for the two of you, retaining identity as German Jews as so unimportant? For so many, maintaining a German Jewish identity was crucial.

Opa: I came to appreciate so much the American way of life. I wanted to become a part of it. That was just our tendency. When our girls came home, they spoke fluent English. I told them, "From now on only speak English in this house, with the exception of your grandfather. Not one German word should be spoken in this house anymore. And correct us if we are ever wrong in our English." And they did.

Michael: How was it that Uncle Paul and Aunt Elsa kept with German?

Opa: Because it was their inclination to stay with the German Jewish Community. And they stuck to each other. The non-Jews resented the isolation of these communities.

Michael: It took plenty of guts for you to move out to Huntington where you were the only German Jews.

Opa: I realize that now, but I didn't realize it then. It just seemed right at that time. And we've made many non-Jewish friends, as you know.

Michael: When did you become American citizens?

Opa: 1943. It took a little time because we were considered to be "Enemy Aliens."

I stood before the Supreme Court Justice. He asked me if I had any arrests and I said, "No." But then the clerk said, "Wait a minute, he was arrested for disregarding the blackout regulations."

And it was true, actually. An auxiliary policeman gave me a ticket when I went to the store without my headlamps blackened. The doctors had been told that it wasn't necessary since we needed to go out on call. The judge meant to say "dismissed" but said "suspended," which stays on the record.

The Supreme Court justice asked me about it and, when I told him the story, he laughed and said that he had been stopped often himself.

Michael: Before I turn off the tape recorder, let me ask you to review your lives and point out what you consider to be the pivotal time for each of you. What do you remember as the critical juncture?

Oma: When we came to America and were reunited with Opa. Then we knew we were safe and could begin a new life.

Opa: After a few years in Huntington and I felt accepted both in the medical and Jewish communities. It was like being reborn and we were happy.

Oma: It's late now. Let's go to bed.

Michael: Thank you, Oma. Thank you, Opa.

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