

Transcript:

Eric Rosenfeld

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Interviewer: We're interviewing Eric Rosenfeld, this is Gene Sachs, we're in Nashville and this is May 6th, 1990. Eric is a refugee from Germany. Eric, we have a lot of things that we want to talk about. I'd like to ask you first, what was life like for you as a Jew in your town before the war?

Eric Rosenfeld: Before the war, of course I was born in '25 and I started going to the public school in Seeheim in '31. In '34, I had to leave the public schools because of the treatment by my fellow school members and teachers because I was Jewish. I was stoned. In any case, I started going to school in Darmstadt where there was a Jewish school and I could go to...well, you see there were street cars or by train until Kristallnacht of November 9th, 1938.

Interviewer: You were about nine years old when you left school, this must have been a very, very difficult and trying thing for you because you must have wondered, "Why is this happening?" Your parents certainly understood to a degree what was going on but can you recall, as a child, what it was like to you, why were these things happening to you?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, obviously, it was very difficult. I had no understanding at the time why anybody should be mad at me or hate me or not want me around because I had been playing with the other children as...Children, they will play without any consideration of whether I was Jewish and the other children are gentile, anything like that. It was difficult for me to understand, but on the other hand, my parents told me that I would get a much better education when I'm going to school in Darmstadt. Because I was together with other Jewish children, I would

get a Jewish education, which was planned in the future anyhow, but of course circumstances made it imperative that I do that.

Interviewer: Did you have, at this time in 1934, did you have close gentile friends in the public school?

Eric Rosenfeld: A couple of them, two boys.

Interviewer: Did you feel that they had turned against you?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, they seemed to be...tried to keep neutral. They didn't make any overtures to be close to me, but on the other hand, they did not physically attack me but not use words which I didn't care about.

Interviewer: Did your parents try to explain to you why it was that they were treating you this way?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, we all seemed to be aware of it in the papers and everything that was going on. There didn't seem to be an explanation necessary really. It was discussed, it was a fact of life happening for some time, it's just something that was getting worse and obviously, we thought it would pass like everybody else and that was just a passing phase which obviously it was not.

Interviewer: Did you have brothers or sisters?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes, I have one brother.

Interviewer: Is he younger or—

Eric Rosenfeld: He's older.

Interviewer: Was he in the public school at the same time as you were?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, he had gone to a Jewish school in Darmstadt before I went there.

Interviewer: Although I know it's painful to remember and I don't mean to bring it up to cause pain but can you actually remember specific incident which you mentioned that you were stoned? They actually threw stones at you?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, they stoned me not with the intent to hurt me, just to drive me away.

Interviewer: Hmm-hmm. What kind of education did you get following your leaving public school, you went to, I understand, a private school in another town?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, in Darmstadt which is a bigger city and we lived in...which was actually less than 10 miles away, and we got a full education and not only...Jewish education but also studying English and other subjects.

Interviewer: So, this was not just a secular private school, was it a Jewish school?

Eric Rosenfeld: It was a Jewish school, yeah.

Interviewer: I see. And you went to this school until when?

Eric Rosenfeld: Until '38, November 9th, '38.

Interviewer: Hmm-hmm.

Eric Rosenfeld: And of course, everybody is familiar with Kristallnacht. And that morning, we went to school as usual. We, I mean, other children from different towns who would meet on the train and go to school together, and we were walking from the station in Darmstadt near the school and we met other children who were coming back and told them they had been beaten. The synagogue was...we could see the fire, the synagogue was in flames and they told us not to take the train because it might be dangerous to go back by train so I took the street car. And of course, I was very upset. And we went to another small town and saw one of the Jewish businesses they're burning, and I came home and I was crying. And I had gotten home in about half an hour then a truckload of men arrived from different a different town and they started to...came in with hammers and axes, destroyed our store. My father was sick at the time, he died a couple of months later. And he came out, he said, "I fought for the Germans, I fought in the First World War and that's the thanks I get." They just told him to go back to bed and just made a mess of everything and I just hid in the corner and cried.

Interviewer: Can you remember what you were thinking at that time?

Eric Rosenfeld: No, I don't think I was thinking at that time. I was just completely...it was so irrational. I couldn't understand it and there was no cause for it because these people, we didn't know any of them. There was nobody from our town. Of course, in a small town, you know most everybody. Now these came from a town far away because as far as we know, we didn't have any enemies in this town. It was all organized, of course, as it was nationwide. At that time of course, we didn't know it.

Interviewer: Now, this was a small town and I understand that you have some information with you that gives a history of the Jews in this town that goes back to the 16th century.

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, I—

Interviewer: If you might be able to share that with us.

Eric Rosenfeld: I have a book, it's actually [unintelligible 0:08:12.9] book, Alsbach, which is a small town not too far away from where I used to live. And of course, all these towns had a joint cemetery. I have a picture of the cemetery here which is for about eight different towns and here's a picture of the cemetery which dates back to the 16th and 17th century, that's when it was first acquired.

Interviewer: Now, I understand that somewhere in this book, you also have a little graph of the town that you live in, Seeheim, and where it actually shows the number of Jewish families that go back as far as the 1500s. I wonder if you might—

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, yeah, the first entry is where, some Jews lived in this area in 1570. It's at the top.

Interviewer: If I might, these are the years, they're starting in 1570, 1618, et cetera. And this is the town that Eric was from, in Seeheim, and of course, there aren't any recorded Jewish families until 1704 although there are cemetery stones that do go back before that time. And here we see the number of...these are families or the number of people?

Eric Rosenfeld: Number of people.

Interviewer: The number of people going back to 1704 as the time goes up. And then of course, the highest point was 1900 and then down in 1939 to three. Thank you. Are there any pictures of your family?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes, uh-huh.

Interviewer: That you have? That you would like to share with us?

Eric Rosenfeld: I was going to say something else in respect with the cemetery. Well, I can't think of it now. These are my wife's parents and my wife...I'm sorry, my mother's parents and this is my mother over here and her brother.

Interviewer: This is your mother?

Eric Rosenfeld: My mother there on the right.

Interviewer: Right here. And the lady seated next to her?

Eric Rosenfeld: Her mother, that's my grandmother.

Interviewer: Did you know your grandmother?

Eric Rosenfeld: No I didn't.

Interviewer: No you didn't.

Eric Rosenfeld: Of course on the right is my grandfather and my uncle. And I have pictures of my parents, this is my father, this is my mother, and this is my uncle. My uncle had worked in an office for many years and he became blind, I don't know the exact reason for it, but would appear a strain. And so when our local business went down, my father and my uncle would go to surrounding towns to sell dry goods and my uncle would go along. And then he couldn't go out anymore, it was very difficult for him and he tried to commit suicide a couple of times. So, he was institutionalized and from there, he was deported and all the institutionalized, all persons gentile and Jewish were sent to camps and eliminated. That was in '41, March '41.

Interviewer: I understand that during these times, when people from institutions were sent to these camps, oftentimes, a letter was sent back to the family or if requested, the information on the cause of death. Did you receive anything about your uncle?

Eric Rosenfeld: Not that I'm aware of. I don't think we received anything.

Interviewer: I see. I might add at this time...well, I don't know how...let's proceed...let's just go on, yeah. Well now, you were 13 in 1938, November, Kristallnacht and you had a Jewish and a secular education. Were you bar mitzvah Eric?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, there's a good question because about two years ago, I celebrated my 50th anniversary for my bar mitzvah at West End Synagogue, and it was quite a moving experience for me and I think for everybody else. And in preparation for my bar mitzvah, I tried to remember if I became bar mitzvah or not in '38 and I can't, I still can't. I think I did, I can't remember.

Interviewer: It's almost as if—

Eric Rosenfeld: I know we would go to services in Allsbach and then a policeman would sit back in the synagogue. He was told to do that, to monitor the Jewish services. But I've been trying to remember and thought I'd ask a hypnotist to find out if I actually became bar mitzvah or not but as far as I remember, I can't.

Interviewer: Does it seem as though a certain period of time in your life in 1938 was sort of blocked out or blocked out totally from your memory?

Eric Rosenfeld: Now, I seem to have blocked out quite a bit. I don't want to remember what...it's still too painful to remember.

Interviewer: Yes. Do you remember any specific instances of how the Nazi rule in Germany first started to affect you other than the fact that your father's store was destroyed and you had to move to another school?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, it was all pervasive. Of course, after Kristallnacht, I couldn't go to school anymore and then in spring of '89, I went to the Waisenhaus, an orphanage in Frankfurt where about 50 to 80 boys and girls who either were orphans or in similar circumstances that I was in and needed a place to stay in order to get an education because there was no schooling where I was and it was hopeless to even stay there. So, when I was in the Waisenhaus, we had a curfew, we couldn't go out after 8:00 in the evening, we always had to have our identification on us. Just keep in mind we are kids 13, 14 years old, and one time a policeman stopped me, I didn't have my identification for whatever reason, so he dragged me to the police station and questioned me and then he says, "Get out of here," and kicked me out of there. I was glad to be kicked out. But these were some of the circumstances we had to live under. The Waisenhaus was strictly kosher and of course, there was no kosher meat available so the only time we did have meat was on Jewish holidays. It was imported from Switzerland. And there were times we didn't have any meat but because we were on the same boat, nobody seemed to be resentful really, it was amazing how cohesive the Waisenhaus was at the orphanage. Everybody seemed to help each other.

Interviewer: How did you perceive at the time, you were 13 years old, how did you perceive the non-Jewish population of the town in terms of their going along with the, obviously, a repression of their Jewish neighbors?

Eric Rosenfeld: What happened at our town, people would come in at night and visit with my family or bring something but nobody would do it openly. Everybody was afraid, everybody was afraid to say anything, do anything which might be reported to the authorities.

Interviewer: Did they openly share with your parents these fears as far as you know?

Eric Rosenfeld: I don't really know.

Interviewer: Hmm-hmm.

Eric Rosenfeld: And the thing...but you got to also remember, the press was so tightly controlled that it was hard to get any news at all. There was no other news. You didn't know what was going on. You were completely in the dark. The newspapers only reported what they were told to report.

Interviewer: At this point in time, many Jews in Germany started to make plans to leave especially following Kristallnacht, do you remember any discussion with your family or in your family about any plans to leave?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes, we wanted to leave. We had relatives in the United States to whom we wrote asking for visa, asking for affidavits in order to guarantee our...that we will be able to subsist once we get here. And that's how my brother left, he left in '38 through a cousin of ours who got somebody to write the affidavit for him and he left in '38. I was supposed to go to Palestine at that time in '39 but my mother said, I should not go, I should go to United States where my brother is. Otherwise, I would have been in Palestine back in 1939.

Interviewer: So, what did finally happen?

Eric Rosenfeld: With me?

Interviewer: With you.

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, I...at the time that the American government had a quota as you probably are aware, and we had to apply for numbers at a consulate in Stuttgart and my family's number was, I believe I might be off, but somewhere around 30,000. And then [unintelligible 0:19:27.1] without my knowledge, got a number for me which was about 23,000. And through the fact that they got a number for me, which was lower than my family's number, my number came up and I went to

the American Consulate in Stuttgart. And on April 15, 1941, and at the time, when you travel, you had to have permission from the Gestapo to travel, and I thought I would not get the permission so I left without getting permission. I just took a train and went to Stuttgart and I got my visa and there were about 16 or 17 children in my age 16, in the same age range and we expected to leave together by ship. But I made a mistake on my...the American Consulate made a mistake on my visa and they had to send it back so I left a week after the others left. And my visa actually expired the day before we arrived in New York.

Interviewer: Eric, you mentioned that while you were waiting for the time to leave because there was a mistake on your visa by the American Consulate, you had to stay a week later and then you finally did leave and you were relating that story again.

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes, I left on, I believe, about August 7. I left Frankfurt by train, I had to go to Berlin. At Berlin, six other children joined us and then we went by a closed train from Berlin back to Frankfurt and I don't know how my mother got word of it but she was in Frankfurt on the platform waving at me when we were in Frankfurt. And then we went on to Metz in Paris, went around Paris and down into Spain, and we crossed the border at [unintelligible 0:22:00.1]. We almost didn't make it because one German policeman got suspicious because of one of the people who was on the train went back to retrieve something and he thought they were giving messages. So they held us up a couple of hours but then we finally did get across to Spain. Went through Spain and to Portugal and to Lisbon, and from Lisbon, we got into a ship going to New York and we arrived in New York a day before Labor Day in 1941. And the ship incidentally, that was a converted coal ship, there were about 90 people in triple-decker bunks and you can imagine what the conditions were. Actually, there's someone living in Chicago...in Nashville who was on the ship with me.

Interviewer: Is that right? I imagine a lot of people who weren't used to ocean travel might have gotten sick on the trip over...

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, this was the least of our concerns.

Interviewer: The least of your concerns.

Eric Rosenfeld: But let me go back to the Waisenhaus, I would like to say a few words. I have a few pictures from the Waisenhaus and these are all children who were deported except one or two. This was during Hanukkah 1939.

Interviewer: How were you able to learn—

Eric Rosenfeld: And here's another picture of children who were in the Waisenhaus.

Interviewer: How were you able to learn that all but two of them were deported?

Eric Rosenfeld: Through different people. No, I actually know only of one who I don't know...but I was told that he was living in New York.

Interviewer: Hmm-hmm.

Eric Rosenfeld: And this was the director of the orphanage who could have left but didn't because she wanted to stay with the children and she got killed like the rest of them.

Interviewer: When was the orphanage closed?

Eric Rosenfeld: It wasn't closed. It was...everybody was deported, was sent to the ovens and that was the end of...because during the...let me see here, I believe I have a picture of the orphanage here. No, I didn't take a picture. I didn't think it was important. But this is the ship I came over on, there's a date on here too. It says August 20th, 19...I have very few things left from those days.

Interviewer: Eric, there is a period of time between Kristallnacht and August of 1941, a time in which a lot of very bad things were happening to the Jews in Europe and that was the time between the time you were 13 and the time you were 15, can you relate to us what was happening to you personally and your family during this time?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, my father died at home December 30th, 1938. And I still remember when he was buried in the cemetery, the very cemetery you saw a picture of before, and I remember it was a rainy day when he was buried but I remember very little else about this particular day. And then I was alone with my mother until she made arrangements for me to go to Frankfurt. And I would go home whenever I could to be with her, but I guess from a child's point of view we were not as much impressed with the hopelessness of the situation my mother was in. We tried to get her to Cuba because there was a possibility some people could go to Cuba, but she was deported in March of 1942. And here is something which the mayor from Germany gave me, let me read it first before I show it. And it says here, "Abgereist, ohne angabe des ziele's" which means she departed without giving the place where she was going to. That's all they could say. They would not admit that she was killed in the ovens.

Interviewer: So this is something that was given to you by...sent to you or—

Eric Rosenfeld: No, I was in Seeheim in 1980.

Interviewer: I see.

Eric Rosenfeld: And I asked for a list of the people who had lived and of course the Germans are known for keeping very accurate records. And this of course is not only my parents, the total...how the Jewish population of Seeheim, everything is written down, where they went, and the ones who were deported. Only a couple of people left. Besides my mother, an uncle of hers who also was sent to the ovens with the same notation left without giving their destination. And I'm also not sure if this was one of the last letters they received in New York. If you look on top, it shows the 26th of September 1941 of course it will be...but you won't be able to read it. It's a very small handwriting.

Interviewer: So this was shortly after you got...you arrived in New York?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes.

Interviewer: And what was it that your mother wrote?

Eric Rosenfeld: I beg your pardon?

Interviewer: What was it that she wrote to you with?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, she couldn't write anything permanent because if you look at this envelope, it is...you look at the bottom corner, it shows that where, his initials where all the letters are read.

Interviewer: Is that...that's right down here?

Eric Rosenfeld: That's right down here. And in the back, it says "Geöffnet," which means "opened." At least they let you know, that's one thing, that they did censor all the mail that was going and coming.

Interviewer: Now this is 1941, do you remember how early before this it was that they started censoring now?

Eric Rosenfeld: I really couldn't say but I believe as soon as the war started in 1940...of course in 1939. Because the war started with Russia on June 22nd, 1941 and then while I was in Frankfurt, before I left, the British started bombing and remember British bombers coming over and hitting the east railroad station which was not far away from us. And we would stay and watch from the windows. After that, we

had to go down because of shrapnel and the aircraft come, you had to go into the air-raid shelters. We always cheer them on, you know, "Hit them."

Interviewer: You showed me something interesting earlier. This was a copy of your birth certificate and I understand that, on the birth certificate, they were modified. Afterwards, they added the name Israel to all male Jews.

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes.

Interviewer: To indicate that you were a Jew because there was nothing on the birth certificate to indicate that you were a Jew. I wonder if we could see that, okay. I outlined this. This is just the information and this is what is added. I assume that, in this column, this typing is what was added afterwards—

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes. This is an explanation of the date when the law was passed—

Interviewer: I see. And here is the name Israel that was added.

Eric Rosenfeld: And of course, also, in this respect on the letter, you will notice that the name, if you look up here, it says Sara, all women, they have the name Sara, just like men were Israel, had Sara, and be sure they had it on the letter or they wouldn't have noticed that. I don't know if it would have, but knowing how things were going, we probably would not have been accepted.

Interviewer: So, then, it was in Frankfurt in November of 1941, at the railroad station, when it was the last time that you saw your mother.

Eric Rosenfeld: That's correct, yeah.

Interviewer: Of course, at that time, you had no idea that this would be the last time you would see her, I'm sure.

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, considering the circumstances, of course, you don't think about things like that, but everybody grabbed at straws trying to get out.

Interviewer: Other than your uncle, were there any other close family members of yours left in Europe?

Eric Rosenfeld: You mean, when I left?

Interviewer: Yes.

Eric Rosenfeld: Of course, my mother was there. My uncle already had been killed in 1941 before I left, and my mother's uncle also was deported along with my mother; they were the only two left in Seeheim.

Interviewer: And you had no cousins or any other family members left?

Eric Rosenfeld: No.

Interviewer: I understand from what you said that you had considered Jerusalem as a place to emigrate to at the time. Is that because it was one of the easiest places to get to?

Eric Rosenfeld: It was the only place at that time, there was...At that time, we called it [unintelligible 0:32:55.8] and at '38, children were supposed to go to Palestine at that time. And I was all set to go until my mother said, "You should to America, where your brother is."

Interviewer: And you didn't give her much objection. You were—

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, at that time, I would do whatever. In this respect, I wasn't indoctrinated in any of which way or felt very strongly either way. The important thing was to get out any which way and I would have gone to Palestine at that time because, to me, it was just a matter of everybody else to get out.

Interviewer: How did you feel about leaving your family as best as you can recall?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, it was difficult to leave...Well, let me put it this way. I had, in a sense, left already since I was in Frankfurt; my mother was in Seeheim, so I wasn't...The relationship, of course, is always obviously, when I was in Frankfurt already, and I would go home periodically and I didn't sense. Now, I can realize how she must have felt at the time, but at the time, I wanted her to get out any which way, but...We thought we would succeed, but of course, the events overtook us.

Interviewer: How did you happen to come to Rochester where I understand that most of your children were born and where you spent many of your early years in the United States?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, what happened, I went to work for a printing company in New York and they opened a plant in Chicago, so moved to Chicago. And they opened a plant in Rochester, New York, so that's when I moved to Rochester, New York, 1951. No, that was in '46, I'm sorry.

Interviewer: Now, when you arrived in New York, in 1941, you were 16?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes.

Interviewer: 16. Was there some kind of agency to help you or what happened to you when you first arrived?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, my brother lived there with a cousin of ours and we were kept about a week in a Jewish home where I thought we were starved, and I didn't look like I was starved, but anyhow, they gave us nourishing meals, tried to, actually healthy. And then, I went to live with a cousin and I had a variety of work.

Interviewer: So you did not have the opportunity to continue with any kind of schooling?

Eric Rosenfeld: No. The only New York State required at that time that if you're under 18, you got to attend a public school, for half a day a week. So, we go down somewhere, I forgot where it was in New York and just hang out for a few hours so that goes...So, the requirement was met which was ludicrous because it didn't serve any purpose. It just deprived me of my time. But such is the law and—

Interviewer: But what was most important to you at that time was I guess providing for yourself?

Eric Rosenfeld: Exactly. Or paying my way.

Interviewer: And you moved with the printing company to Rochester, that was—

Eric Rosenfeld: Eventually, yes, and then to Nashville.

Interviewer: And then to Nashville. Where did you meet your wife?

Eric Rosenfeld: In Rochester, yeah.

Interviewer: And she was born a citizen of the United States?

Eric Rosenfeld: No. She was born in Germany also, and she had been in...She has a similar story as mine. She lived in Italy where her mother died and her father tried to escape with friends and he was caught and sent to the camps. And she was one of the thousand people that President Roosevelt had a special...signed a special proclamation and let a thousand people in who were then interned at Oswego. And that's how she came to Rochester, New York, besides, her uncle and grandmother lived in Rochester, New York, which was fortunate that they lived there. So, she left Oswego and went to live in Rochester, New York, and that's where we met. And she's going to tell her own story.

Interviewer: What was some of the difficulties that you faced when you first came here? I mean, obviously, your family was not an English-speaking family. Was language a big—?

Eric Rosenfeld: Language was no problem because we had had several years' instruction in English, but I had nobody to guide me, to show me the ropes, so to speak. And of course, in '44, I went in the army, the United States Army, and I was sworn in on January of 1944 when I became a citizen down in Macon, Georgia after only three years. And then I went back to Germany, I went back to the same town where I used to live. And I took the mayor. I took him in my jeep and I was attached to CIC at that time. I could do anything I pleased. I took him for a ride and he was Catholic and he was saying his rosaries and he didn't expect to live. I had a pistol on my side and I could have done anything I wanted to without anybody saying a word and he was just waiting for me to tell him to get out of the jeep. And I couldn't do it. I felt if they are evil, I don't have to be the same way.

Interviewer: So, he remembered you.

Eric Rosenfeld: Of course. He knew exactly who I was.

Interviewer: And he—

Eric Rosenfeld: I interrogated him about my mother, when she left and how, etc., etc.

Interviewer: And he assumed that you were coming back to get even, so to speak.

Eric Rosenfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: But as you said, you couldn't do what they were doing.

Eric Rosenfeld: I couldn't shoot him down in cold blood. I had the best intentions to. And I arrested some of the kids that went to school with me because I had them all assembled in the town square and I sent them back to POW Camp because I didn't have the papers.

Interviewer: This must have given you something of a grave satisfaction, but certainly—

Eric Rosenfeld: Really, I don't think so.

Interviewer: No?

Eric Rosenfeld: I was just numb.

Interviewer: Did you request to...Eric, you were telling me that you went back to Germany in 1944. This was only three years since you had left, probably, a very unique experience for someone who was literally thrown out of your country. You lost your mother and you had become an American citizen, and by that time, enrolled in the army, and you had the opportunity to go back to that very town where these things were committed to your family. I know you described it as a

numbing feeling, but can you related some of the things that you were feeling in anticipation of going back to Seeheim?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, I didn't go directly to Seeheim. I'll put it this way. We came and we landed at Omaha Beach and we went, it was a replacement depot. Somehow, my records were displaced, so I went on a replacement depot all the way up into Belgium and I went back to Paris for intelligence. And then, we went into Germany. We went gradually into Germany, we started in the Alsace, and then across the Rhine. And unfortunately, it was springtime, and it's a beautiful area where we used to live. But your question, of course, is how did I feel and what were my reactions for being back.

Interviewer: No, don't let my question—

Eric Rosenfeld: Yeah, I understand that.

Interviewer: I want you to share with me anything that you care to about this time.

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, I met some people whom I talked to, whom I knew, who said they were, had nothing to do with that, and I had no recollection of actually what happened because I had no idea what was behind all that. I only saw what happened to me. I had no background information. Nobody talked to me about it. Nobody had the information to tell me what actually had happened. That was one reason. If I would have known the mayor had done something specific, I wouldn't have hesitated. But as far as I know, he was just...Of course, they all said they were following orders, but nevertheless, I didn't feel justified based on what I knew. If I knew he had pulled the trigger, I wouldn't have hesitated one minute and this would have been a foregone conclusion, but as far as I know, he had just given the orders and somebody had taken them away; I believe that's what it was.

Interviewer: So now, you're back in 1944 as the occupying force and still, at this time, the war wasn't over.

Eric Rosenfeld: No.

Interviewer: And still, you were not aware of the atrocities that had and were still being committed.

Eric Rosenfeld: I became gradually aware of them, yes. As a matter of fact, after the war ended, I was in Kornwestheim, near Stuttgart, and we had German prisoners, political, and civilians who we were interrogating. And I had some brushes during the war with some Germans, we had to interrogate them. I remember one specific instance. There was some SS men terrorizing an area and they called us, so I went back and took...they had caught one of the SS men and I was interrogating him. And he was sitting in front of the door and he wouldn't answer me, he just kind of smirked at me, and I really got aggravated so I had a thin pair of leather gloves and I hit him in the face. But tears were coming out of his eyes and I could feel he was ready to pounce on me and I had a little gun on the side; it wouldn't have done me much good. But he finally talked, and when I came out of that, he looked at me, I looked at him. He couldn't figure out what could have happened. But, it takes a bit to get me aggravated.

Interviewer: Did he admit any atrocities to you?

Eric Rosenfeld: No, he didn't admit any atrocities. He said there were some other people were the [unintelligible 0:45:05.2] when I asked him. Atrocities, I interrogated quite a few people and none of them would admit any atrocities and said they were untadelig, blameless, they were following orders, a couple of them were in tears when I asked them, when I talked to them, and I knew their background, I could see the files. But they wouldn't admit to anything, but this was all preliminary interrogation.

Interviewer: Did you have any opportunity to visit any of the camps?

Eric Rosenfeld: I did, but I didn't go.

Interviewer: Out of fear?

Eric Rosenfeld: Not fear. I thought I knew what to expect and I didn't want to see it. I still, now, when there is something about the Holocaust, anything like that on TV or in the movies, I don't see it. I should, but I don't feel comfortable.

Interviewer: Have you been able to share your experiences with your children?

Eric Rosenfeld: Not thoroughly, superficially. And I'm still, I'm sure, there's still a lot of things missing which I can't articulate.

Interviewer: Once you were resettled in this country, did you make any attempts to get any other families or friends out of Europe, or did your community, I guess that would be in Rochester, was there any move afoot to do anything to help the refugees?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, I would collect for the United Jewish Appeal. That was first thing I did when I got there. I contribute and I would collect money; that's about the extent of it. But I didn't take an active role or anything, an active role to the extent that I would work in the United Jewish Appeal.

Interviewer: Did the nature of your Jewish practice change once you were resettled here from what it was when you were in Germany?

Eric Rosenfeld: Not really. I'm not Orthodox but Conservative. When I lived in the Waisenhaus, we were strictly Orthodox, and I felt very comfortable. I feel comfortable now. I haven't given up my religion based on what has happened which, of course, I knew a lot of people say, "How could God do a thing like that?"

Interviewer: Was there ever a time when you did question?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, I do it all the time. I question it all the time which doesn't mean, you know, that I don't believe in God, but I might believe in God in different ways. I feel God is inside of each and every one of us and we have the answer to ourselves.

Interviewer: Looking back at the time when you resettled here, what were some of the dominant feelings that you had at that time and how has that changed with time?

Eric Rosenfeld: Basically, the biggest problem has been that I always felt kind of lost. I had no relationships, no people close to me. When you lose your family, you lose a lot of things, and the support and just the psychologic effect that you have somebody to talk to, somebody you consult with.

Interviewer: Were there other refugees that you met that you were able to share or console with?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes, but not many.

Interviewer: How long did it take for you to start to feel at home, for lack of a better word, here in the United States?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, it depends what you call at home. You know, a lot of people feel at home immediately which I suppose for some people isn't saying much. Other people, it means a lot. It's a very difficult question to really address because at home is really a little ambivalent. I mean to feel at home, to feel comfortable, I think when I...and you have to live in a place for some time and I lived in Rochester for some time, I felt comfortable, always tried to belong to a group and be active and that's how I met my wife because we formed a group in Rochester, New York. And needless to say, I became president and—

Interviewer: What kind of a group was this?

Eric Rosenfeld: We called it [unintelligible 0:50:28.3]—it means “Hope,” and we met at Jewish Community Center in Rochester, New York, and we’d take trips and have speakers. And in fact, at that time, that we had a speaker on euthanasia, of all things; that’s when I met my wife for the first time. Of all things. But this is usually where I felt comfortable.

Interviewer: Was this group actively engaged in trying to find out about the lives of family members who were left?

Eric Rosenfeld: At that time, of course, as I was saying, it had been found out. There was really nothing much left to find out, so we more or less tried to support ourselves and have some social intercourse in order to meet people, get better acquainted, and find friends and perhaps find a person you want to get married to and that sort of thing. That was the main purpose besides being educational. Of course, education sometimes has colorful social activities.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you returned to Germany in 1980.

Eric Rosenfeld: I returned '65.

Interviewer: In '65?

Eric Rosenfeld: The first time, yeah.

Interviewer: What was the reason for your trip and how did you feel?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, the basic reason was that Eva’s, my wife’s brother was in the British army, and I don’t need to go a long story about his background, but we went to see

him and he was stationed in Germany at that time. So we decided to take a trip to Germany, went to France, Germany, Italy. So, it's a long trip. And I went back to Frankfurt first where I used to...I was in Waisenhaus, in the orphanage. When we landed, I rented a car and I drove up the same street where the orphanage was and, of course, it had been found out during the war that I had some pictures, don't have them with me which I took right after the war and I couldn't face it and I said, "Let's get out of here." So, we went to Darmstadt and spent the night there and then I went to the cemetery. When I went to the cemetery, it was locked and I climbed over the wall and the next day we got a key, it was kept locked. We got keys so I went there.

Interviewer: This is 24 years after you left Germany the first time that—

Eric Rosenfeld: Yeah.

Interviewer: —you were able to visit your father's grave?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yeah. I felt very uncomfortable in Germany and again in '80 when I went there, I still felt uncomfortable.

Interviewer: Did you have the opportunity to confront any of the non-Jews in the town that you had known on either of these trips?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, let me tell you a story. My son got married about almost two years ago and he went on his honeymoon to Europe, to Germany. So, I wrote that he was coming to somebody who could show him where the cemetery is because he wouldn't know. And then, somebody came forward and told him that he would show him and as a matter of fact, when he went over, he stayed with those people for a couple of days. And he is one of the main forces behind, of course, you've read in the different papers about the new synagogues are being built. One was built in Darmstadt, and he was one of the main driving forces building the synagogue and having a Jewish exhibit in Seeheim itself to educate the young. And I corresponded with him a couple of times, even asked him to come

see me in Nashville. But when I got another letter back from him and somebody else, I haven't been able to answer it.

Interviewer: This is a Jew?

Eric Rosenfeld: No, a German.

Interviewer: A German?

Eric Rosenfeld: Still sitting on my desk, there's two letters I can't answer. As a matter of fact, during the war, I met some Germans, who I got very fond of, very close to during the war.

Interviewer: Did you know this man during the—?

Eric Rosenfeld: No, I didn't know him before.

Interviewer: Did he know your family?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yes.

Interviewer: How would you say that, I know this is a broad question, but how did your prewar and the whole immigration experience, how did it change your life? Do you look at other people—

Eric Rosenfeld: It robbed me of my youth. I mean I've got nothing. I mean from the time I was 7 or 8 years old, I had nothing. I mean that's a vital part of everybody's life, and I never had it which you remember it your whole life. Well, that's something once you miss it, you can't replace it. That's the worst part of it. And besides

everything else as far as I'm personally concerned. And this, of course, relationships, I mean, all the social intercourse I'd formed during those years. At that time, I was in the orphanage and, of course, no matter how nice people are, you're still a part of a group, it's not family. And you got pushed around, I mean let's face it, you're a kid and you can't assert yourself in that situation. And then, you got used to that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Are there any ways that you have been able to see how your children have been affected by your experience?

Eric Rosenfeld: Yeah. I think my, personally, my sons are very conscious of it more so than the girls. But it's difficult to explain your feelings to them. I mean, they, of course, have a different attitude and time and their upbringing has been such where they had everything. They're very conscious of it, but on the other hand, I mean, you can't expect them to understand it fully.

Interviewer: Do you say that based on what you think or based on the fact that you've tried to share with them your feelings and experiences?

Eric Rosenfeld: No, it's...

Interviewer: Have you given them an opportunity to respond to your experience by your telling them your story?

Eric Rosenfeld: Not really. Some of them, it might have been better, you don't want to burden them with it. But that's really not true. It's still a matter of not wanting to let it out of you.

Interviewer: I wonder if...as opposed to burdening them with it, it would be just the opposite experience.

Eric Rosenfeld: I don't know what to say, but it's very difficult to talk about it.

Interviewer: I understand. Has this experience, your entire life, how has it affected the way you feel about being a Jew?

Eric Rosenfeld: I felt positive about being a Jew. I don't...even more so after this experience.

Interviewer: How has this affected the way you brought up your children?

Eric Rosenfeld: Well, brought up...I mean, I never forced them. I tried to set an example, I didn't tell them what to do, and they all have married, all have their own mortgages now and they might not be all members of synagogues, but I know eventually, they all will be. So, I feel very fortunate that my children have done well and are doing well, want to come home and see us and talk to each other all the time and relate to each other. So, I feel very fortunate this way.

Interviewer: I hope I've given you an opportunity to share your story. Now that you've shared your story, what would you like others to know? What that you haven't been able to say that you would like to share?

Eric Rosenfeld: You know, the very basic concepts, that you be kind to each other. Of course, that sounds kind of trite, but unfortunately, too many people have their own motives. And of course you're in different situations and forget that there's a person involved on the other end who's got their own feelings, their own motivations. And I'm not one for giving good advice, but because each one has to face himself every night, every day.

Interviewer: Is there a message that you would want others to remember about yours and others' similar experiences?

Eric Rosenfeld: Universally, that love thy neighbors as thyself. That's a basically what it boils down to. And of course, unfortunately, that doesn't hold true in this world but hopefully it'll change gradually if at all, however, we have to make the best of what we've got. Be kind to each other. Respect each other.

Interviewer: Eric, thank you very much.

Eric Rosenfeld: Thank you, Gene.