Transcript:

Ernest G. Freudenthal

J07

58m30s

Interviewer: This is an interview with Ernest Freudenthal on June 10th, 1990, given at the Temple, and it's part of the Holocaust project for the Jewish Federation. First, Ernest, I'd like to ask you what your full name and date of birth is.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Ernest G. Freudenthal. My date of birth is July 22, 1920.

Interviewer: And where were you born?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Born in Mannheim, Germany.

Interviewer: And what's the name of your wife?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Stephanie Freudenthal.

Interviewer: When were you married?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: We're married in December 1948.

Interviewer: That was December 26th?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: December 26th.

Interviewer: OK. And, Ernest, where did your marriage take place?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: In the Warwick Hotel in New York.

Interviewer: OK. What was your father's full name?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: My father was Leopold Freudenthal. Freudenthal as he would have pronounced it then, of course he never left Germany.

Interviewer: And what was the date and place of your father's birth?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Born in a little town called Tann, T-A-N-N, in Germany.

Interviewer: And what date was that?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: My father was born on June the 30th in 1885.

Interviewer: What occupation did he have?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: He was a businessman.

Interviewer: OK. What was your mother's maiden name?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: My mother was Selma Rosenthal. I'm pronouncing it in German again.

Interviewer: All right. And what was the date and place of her birth?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: She was born on September 20th, 1895. My mother, you didn't ask me, she just died two months ago at the age of 94 here in Nashville.

Interviewer: OK. And what was her occupation?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: She was a housewife. When she came to this country back in the late '30s and early '40s, she worked some different odd jobs, but basically, most of her life, she was a housewife.

Interviewer: OK. What is the name of your children?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: We have two daughters. The oldest daughter is Pamela Houseman(sp), and our younger daughter is Joan Fifield (sp).

Interviewer: OK, and both of them are married?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, they are married to Mr. Houseman (sp) and Dr. Fifield (sp), respectively.

Interviewer: OK. Now, were going to begin the body of the interview. The first area is about prewar life. What was life like for you as a Jew in your town before the war?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, let me…could I modify the question?

Interviewer: Yes, please.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: When the war broke out, I was already in this country. I had been in this country for over two years. I left Germany in 1937.

The dividing line of normal life and what we might call persecuted life was 1933. So, I'd like to, perhaps, interpret your question, what was life like prior to 1933, prior to the time Hitler came to power?

Interviewer: Excellent.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: And, well, we lived a normal middle class life. We went to school. We went on vacations. We participated in the public amenities such as public swimming pools, indoor and outdoor, in the summertime. We were able to go to the theater with our classmates. We participated in soccer games and all the things that the general citizenry of Germany participated in, we were eligible for and participated in.

Interviewer: So, there was no segregation of Jews at all at that time?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: I would say there was probably some social segregation and, of course, I was a child so it didn't really matter, but adults generally entertained in the evening, played cards or whatever they did. And that was probably pretty well segregated. I would think that…my observation and my recollection is that all of my parents' social friends were Jewish.

Interviewer: OK. But all other activities of schools and--

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yeah, business lives, school, public life, we were equals.

Interviewer: OK. And then, what happened in 1933 to change that?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, when Hitler came to power, he took over, he and his cohorts, the Nazi Party, took over all facets of German life. Overnight, newspapers were taken over. Democratic, Liberal, editors were kicked out immediately. Some went to jail. Some went to concentration camps. The courts were immediately made Judenrein. Jewish judges and attorneys were disqualified. Certain professions, the Jews were able to hang on for a while. For instance, in medicine, they were able to, where they had a private practice, they were able to continue for a while. Certain other professions like teachers, for instance, eventually, they were pushed out but not immediately, not in 1933; that took two to three years.

Interviewer: OK.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: So it took about three to four years from about 1933 to ’36 to really sort of completely push the Jews out of all German life, both commercial and cultural. In my case, of course, I was a student, I was in high school, and we were able to continue in high school for some years. I, myself, left school for personal reasons in December 1935, but my fellow students who were still in school at that time, the Jewish students were then kicked out of school in ’36. By 1936, all Jewish children were out of the public school systems, and then, the Jewish communities instituted, they segregated schools of their own.

Interviewer: OK. For those people removed from their public positions, what did they then do, the judges or lawyers?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, they were what you might call underemployed. They took a job, a commercial job, maybe running a store or doing some clerical work, and some of them of course emigrated immediately. For some people, I think, maybe, it might have been a blessing. For some people to have some immediate adversity, so that gave them incentive to emigrate early. Others who were able to hang on for a while stayed and some stayed too long.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: But they made various arrangements to make their livelihood as best they could. If someone was a linguist, if someone knew languages, that was a big boom in learning foreign language then. So, if somebody could teach English or Hebrew or even French, they could gather students around them and they could give lessons all day long, and that was one of the activities that was given a big boost by the prospect of future emigration.

Interviewer: OK. What kind of education, both secular and Jewish, did you receive?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, as I said, I was in high school. The German system was, and I believe still is different than the American system, not everybody goes to high school. There are two tracks. If you go to a university, well, everybody at age 6 goes to a grammar school and that's for four years. And after four years, there's a segregation that takes place. If you would probably go to university, you will then go to high school or you immediately start learning foreign language such as Latin, Greek in the Classical Tradition, but also French, English, or whatever. If you do not go to the university, if you will, in all probability, be a person that has a skilled trade, then you'll stay in grammar school, through the 8th grade at that time. I think they may have changed that. I think they may have added a year or two in there. And after eight years of schooling, you--

Interviewer: You're complete?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: You're completed. And so, typically, young people, 15 years old, 14, 15 years old were apprenticed in some trade, usually the apprenticeship was three or four years. I, myself, went through this even though I had been in high school, but after five years of high school, I dropped out; my father died, we moved away. We moved and the prospect of continuing an education in Germany didn't seem very promising anyhow. So I went to work, at the age of 15, and I was apprenticed in a clothing factory. The idea was, for everybody to learn some practical trade, just mere academic learning wasn't going to enable you to make it in a foreign country, in Palestine or in the United States, wherever you went to. So, you had to learn something else, and I was taught in a factory certain skills about manufacturing suits.

Interviewer: Was the move of the family prompted by your father's death or--?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yes. At that particular time, yes, yes. My father died very suddenly in December 1935. My mother was originally born in Frankfurt, Germany, and so we moved back to Frankfurt and moved with my grandmother who had a house there. And I went to work there, and I worked there for the next year and a half to the middle of 1937.

Interviewer: OK. What types of activities were you involved in such as youth movements, Zionist groups, or other interest groups?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, I was involved early on, say about 1930, when I was about 10 years old, in a group called HashomerHatzair which means the young guardian and this was one of the early Zionist groups. And later on, I was in another one called the [Werklade (sp) 0:10:03.6] which is a German name for another group.

Interviewer: Could you say that again?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: [Werklade (sp) 0:10:07.4] which means the young workers. And the children generally were involved; most of us were involved in some sort of activity. Now, you asked about…did you ask about education? Did you ask religious education? Did you ask--?

Interviewer: I didn't ask about religious education, but that's certainly something that would be interesting.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Maybe, perhaps…I think you asked me that in a previous question and I ignored it and I didn't mean to. We just got off the subject.

Interviewer: Well, it's…

Ernest G. Freudenthal: The way the system, yeah, I'm back to the education system. Now, the way the system used to work over there and, perhaps, it still does, there is, as you know, no segregation between state and church as it is in this country, so that religion is taught in the public schools. And what happens, there were basically only then three religions: Catholicism, Protestant, which is Lutherans, and Jewish. So, at a couple of times a week, twice a week, a clergyman from those three religions would come at a certain hour and the entire class would disperse into three separate rooms and the Jewish instructor would teach the Jewish curriculum and the others would do their thing. In the Jewish curriculum - it was really insufficient - we met twice a week, and once a week, we had history. And once a week, we had Hebrew, and the Hebrew was essentially prayer book, Hebrew, reading the prayer. Most of us had additional religious education through the synagogue, but that was voluntary. The state didn't require that. As far as the state was concerned, you had to go twice a week and that was all.

Interviewer: And it was built into the public schools.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: That is correct. Now, you could be excused from that, but your parents had to make a decision to leave that religion and that was a big deal. And that was sometimes done by people who wanted to opt out completely, and it was published in the paper, the state had something to say about it. You couldn't just say, "Well, I don't want to be a Jew anymore." You had to declare that. And then, they would print it in the paper.

Interviewer: Ernest, how did the Nazis' rule in Germany first affect you? And can you remember a specific example of that and give a date of that?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, perhaps the most benign way, as what I already alluded to a while ago, when I said how things were prior to their coming to power and then when they came to power, things changed all of a sudden. One of the things, we were not able to go along anymore with the other children to the theater. We were unable to go to play soccer with them. We were segregated. We were still allowed in school, but we could not do these extracurricular activities with our classmates. That was, well, I guess, to a small child, that could be also very painful, but it was not like getting beaten up or running for your life or anything like that. One of the earliest recollections I have, I was visiting in my father's hometown, which was a small town in Tann, as I did very frequently, and this was during the Christmas holidays of 1933 and in the New Year's night, '33, '34, the Nazis there, it was what we might call a mini-Kristallnacht. They smashed the windows of all the Jews in that little town. There were probably 80 Jews in the town, so 80 Jews was probably I'd say roughly maybe 15 to 20 families, and all our windows were smashed in the middle of the night. I remember the rocks coming in and everybody scared and running downstairs, hiding in the basement. I remember one of the fun things. My cousin and I then for the next two weeks, we slept with our clothes on. We had a bet going who could sleep the longest with their clothes on. For a few days, everybody slept there with their clothes on because we didn't know what was going to happen. But anyway, that was an early recollection of some terrorism and it was more terrifying probably to the adults than it was to us, younger people. And there were times when you were afraid that a gang would gang up on you and you would learn early on to avoid those situations. And if you see a bunch of people somewhere, you'd stay away from it. Now, life was different in big cities from small towns. There was more of that type of persecution, more of that type of early terrorism in the small towns and the villages than there was in a big city. In the big city, there was more protection early on, and children were not as much molested as they were in a small [town], and I knew that because I was living part of the time in both places.

Interviewer: Was there taunting by kids your age, non-Jewish?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, yeah. Yeah, well, but that is something that you got used to. We were called "Damn Jew," "Dirty Jew," or whatever, but that's minor. That's something that I don't even consider a major event. I didn't then.

Interviewer: The next question is, what changes in general resulted from the Nazis being in power? Can you remember the restrictions that started to make you feel different and that identified and isolated you as a Jew? And so you've alluded to some of them.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yes, well, the fact that the professionals were out, the judges, and eventually, the teachers were out to and it's just…a whole bunch of little stuff took place. For instance, one no longer said "good morning" or "good evening." One said, "Heil Hitler." And of course, that's very difficult for a Jewish person to say, "Heil Hitler." And I remember that this was in the early days when the Jewish professors were still teaching. And this Jewish professor, he'd have to get up and stand like this and say Heil Hitler and say, he would always say, Heil Hitler. And I mean there were just a lot of little things about that sort of thing. Letters were no longer signed with a phrase "hochachtungvoll," which just roughly means "very sincerely yours" or "yours very truly," but they were signed "Mitdeutschemgruß, Heil Hitler," which was "German greetings, Heil Hitler." I mean all language was changed, the whole culture.

Interviewer: So, they infiltrated--

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yeah, yeah. I have a thing about it. To this day, at the JCC, they answer the telephone, "Shalom." I don't like that. It's just like saying, "Heil Hitler." I think they ought to use everyday language and--

Interviewer: So, it's the same instinctive kind of greeting?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: That's right. It's sort of a brainwashing…

Interviewer: How did the non-Jewish population of your town respond to Nazi rule?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, that is a broad question and they reacted in a variety of ways and in some ways, we really learned more about that after the war from the postwar research and literature. Some, of course, were enthusiastic Nazis, and they were marching and singing and doing their things, but they were not…the enthusiastic Nazis were never really a majority although some people then, when they saw the handwriting on the wall, went over to that side, and acted the same way. There were others who did not participate. There was a small minority that was opposed, but they're underground and we didn't really know after the war that there was a constant underground opposition against Hitler and his regime. During the entire period, during the '30s, and during the entire war, some were caught from time to time and were executed. And you know, the famous cases in 1944, when they made an assassination attempt on Hitler's life and all these people were killed, but some of this was going on all the time, but it was underground. So, we didn't know that at that time. There were also people who were hiding Jews, who were helping Jews. In the early days, of course, it wasn't as necessary to hide Jews, but then, when the Holocaust really started in the 1940's and there were people who did this, and they weren't known, well, if they got caught, they were severely punished. But after the war, we found out about many such people. As you know, the YadVashem in Jerusalem is a memorial to the righteous Gentiles. So we know there were people, and now, we're really speaking about Germans or whatever. We know there were people in Poland and in the other countries, Denmark had a great record of that, but there were people in Germany doing this albeit fewer, but there were. Well, as I say, we didn't know that at that time. Now, of course, we know the kind of peril we were under.

Interviewer: And was it…it was subtle and building on a gradual basis.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: That's right. When I left Germany in 1937, and you haven't asked me about that yet, but let me just anticipate, I and all my contemporaries left not because we thought we were fleeing from the gas chambers, not because we thought we were going to be killed, no one would even think about that.

Interviewer: --anticipate--

Ernest G. Freudenthal: We left because there was no economic opportunity. There was no opportunity to lead a normal life. There was no opportunity to be educated, so you got out to where you could have a better life, and that's all we knew at the time.

Interviewer: We were talking about the younger people leaving Germany and that you couldn't possibly have anticipated the extermination and the concentration camps at that time.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: No. No.

Interviewer: Also, Ernest, was emigration difficult because you would then need to leave all your property for the older people?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: For the older people very much so, yes. People who had wealth which they could not legitimately take along and if you smuggled it out, as some people did, but if they got caught, that was very dangerous. And so, people were reluctant to leave all their property behind and that's why some people waited too long. There was one other thing, of course, older people had a greater emotional attachment and investment in that culture. They had lived their whole life there and they had their education there. And so, they felt that that was their country. That's where they wanted to live. They really didn't want to leave unless they were completely driven out. Younger people, aside from the fact, we didn't have much money, but also, we were not as emotionally attached. Well, if it's not nice here, let's get the hell out of here.

Interviewer: And your occupation wasn't formed in--

Ernest G. Freudenthal: That is right. Yeah, sure. I was a teenager, and so, it was much easier for a young person to make that decision.

Interviewer: What was the deciding factor that made you leave?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, I think the whole event. So, from 1933 to 1937, that we have talked about here, so there wasn't any one factor, it was just a given that you had to get out. The question was not whether, but the question was where and when. Those are the questions. You knew you had to get out.

Interviewer: How easy or difficult was it for you to get the necessary documents to make immigration possible?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, I was fortunate that I was distantly related, through marriage, to the May family here in Nashville. And they sent me the affidavit. They came to Germany in 1936 and I spoke to Mortimer May and told him I wanted to leave and come to America and he then sent me the necessary affidavit. And so, in the early '37, they came and then, I left in spring of '37.

Interviewer: Where did you go when you left home? Did you first go to any other countries before coming to the United States?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: No, I came straight. I shipped out of Hamburg for the United States, straight to New York and did not stop in any other country.

Interviewer: Were you on your own mostly, Ernest, or what kind of thoughts were going through your mind as you were making that path?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, I was with some people – older, some adults - and they had children and I was with a couple other young people that were coming to Nashville. I was the only one in my family, but I was not completely alone. I was sort of attached to a group and so… Well, I don't know, the thought, it was exciting. It was very exciting. I was not homesick. The first time in my life I was homesick was years later, many years later, when I was in the army. In 1944, I was homesick for the first time in my life. And this was in 1937; I wasn't homesick about leaving Germany.

Interviewer: Were you due to be met by someone in New York?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yes, yes. I had relatives in New York who met me and I stayed with them about two weeks and then they put me on a train to Nashville.

Interviewer: OK. That's where the Mortimer May family...

Ernest G. Freudenthal: That is correct, right.

Interviewer: So no one in your family did leave with you?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: No, no one in my immediate family. That's right.

Interviewer: Was the plan for your mother to come along later or was that left unclear?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: It was left sort of unclear. There was a feeling that adults who did not have to be educated, who did not have to choose a career - and my mother was a housewife at that time, she was living with my grandmother and the two women were together - that people like that could live out there a life in Germany, that the young people were just being sent out for an economic future.

Interviewer: Better opportunities.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, it got worse and worse and, of course, you know in 1938, came the Kristallnacht, the night where all the glasses were broken all over and a lot of persecution. People were put in jail and members of the May family, Moses May, Jacob May, who is the patriarch of the Nashville branch in the family. Moses May was his brother in Frankfurt who was my uncle by marriage, and he went to jail. He and his son-in-law and so that was where the people got the idea that everybody needs to get out. Now, it's getting dangerous. And this was late '38, so by early '39, people were trying to get out and my mother got out in 1939, I believe in July '39, and the war broke out on September the 1st, '39, so, she just made it. We were able to get my grandmother out as late as 1941. She was an older person and the United States was not at war, and the Germans would still let old Jews out and they put her on a train and sealed it up and shipped her through occupied France, unoccupied France, down to Portugal, and in Lisbon, she got on an American ship and came over here. So, as late as '41, and of course after Pearl Harbor, December 7th, all that was cut off. But a few people still were able to get out.

Interviewer: Was it cut off by German – [unintelligible] or was it cut off by no more acceptance?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, it was I think a combination of both plus wartime conditions that immigration during the war generally ceases, the borders are closed and ships are sank and, well, that's how the things are. So, I think after Pearl Harbor, it was just all closed on both sides.

Interviewer: Backing up just one interest of mine, Ernest. When people were jailed, what was the charge usually?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: There didn't have to be any charge then. You could be jailed for a parking ticket, for trumped-up charges, denunciation for having said something against Hitler. You know, if you told a political joke, that was enough to go to jail. There was no freedom of speech. And anything, any kind of charge, whether you really did it or didn't do it, it didn't really matter. If they wanted to put you in jail, they could.

Interviewer: But it was understood by the community as harassment for being Jewish or--?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, the constraints on speech applied to everyone. If a non-Jew would make anti-government statements, anti-Hitler statements, he'd be thrown in jail, too. People were very careful, of course, to try not to do anything that would violate the rules, but there were bugging devices and people would sometimes inform on their own family members. I'm not talking about Jews now. I'm talking about non-Jews. So, people were arrested from time to time for anti-government activity. Going back to immigration, there's one thing that occurred to me that I didn't mention. One of the problems at that time was not getting out of Germany. If you wanted to get out, the Germans were quite willing to let you get out. Their object was to make Germany Judenrein, that's free of Jews. The problem was you couldn't go in anywhere. Originally, really, I wanted to go to Palestine, but with the British White Papers and there were restrictions, say, you couldn't go except a certain amount…and there was a waiting list there and also there was a waiting list in the United States. The United States since the 1920s had a quota system based on their ethnic composition of this country I believe in 1890. And that's greatly favored the Anglo-Saxon population. It also was not too hard on the German quota. And that helped me. It was very hard on the Eastern European and Italian quota, which is what it was designed to be.

Interviewer: OK. So the other country that you did consider for immigration was Palestine?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: That is right. We've mentioned earlier, in another context, that I was in the early Zionist and had my father lived, I probably would have wound up there. I probably would have gone. He was supportive of my Zionist tendencies, but my mother and her family were not. So after my father died, I was not able to pursue that further.

Interviewer: Ernest, these are more questions about the details of coming to Nashville. Did the Nashville family provide the affidavit for you?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yeah, the Mays. We mentioned that, yes.

Interviewer: OK. And you were related to them by marriage?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, my mother had an uncle by marriage, Moses May, he was married to my grandmother's sister. It's a roundabout way. He had a brother in Nashville, Jacob May. And that's the relationship. But we are, I mean, aside from that 10 year's relationship, we're very good friends. Of course, the old generation, Mortimer May, Jacob May, and he had two sons, Mordam and Dan (sp), they both have passed away now. Dan's widow is still living, that's Dorothy May, and she has a son here, Jack May, and Mortimer has a son, Mortimer and Gerty (sp) May have a son here Leon May. And I'm very friendly with both of them. They're my generation.

Interviewer: OK. What were your needs when you first arrived in this country as far as housing, jobs, English language lessons, and who helped you?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: The job was provided by May Hosiery Mills, same, they gave us a job by running a hosiery mill. Housing was provided…I was put into another German-Jewish family, the Isaac Kahns, you may have run across them in some of the other interviews here. They were here and they were related. They were closer related to the Mai's than I was. And two or three of us, young people, lived there in room and board. And so, I stayed with the Kahns for two years until my mother came over in 1939. Language lessons, young people picked up language easy, but there was a formal effort made to teach us Americanization. It wasn't so much language as the idea of just some basic, what we would call Civics, the three legislative branch or the three branches, legislative, judicial, and executive, just some basic facts of how this government works. I had already had some English lessons so I guess from several years in Germany, so I knew some English. It was just a matter of getting used to it and young people pick it up very fast.

Interviewer: I'm interested in the specifics of the affidavit. Did that have to specify that you would be given a job here?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: No, on the contrary, it could not. Now, the interesting contradiction. It had to specify that they had enough money. It was called an affidavit of support that if I were unemployed, if I were a burden on anybody, I would not be a burden on the state.

And they would take care of me. That's what the affidavit of support said. On the other hand, bear in mind, at the time, since it was 1937 in the midst of the depression, which lasted roughly 10 years, from 1929 to '39. And the government policy did not permit people in this country to say, "Yeah, come on over. We'll give you a job." Because that would interfere with people who were already here, who were unemployed.

Interviewer: The local citizens.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: So you could not promise a job, and it was not in the affidavit, but

in effect, that's how it was handled.

Interviewer: Did you experience any prejudice in this country for being a German during the war?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: No, I don't think so. No, it doesn't stick out. I think there was that prejudice being Jewish as there's anti-Semitism that you'd encounter sometimes but not specifically being a Jew from Germany. I don't think that mattered.

Interviewer: What was the experience that you had with anti-Semitism?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Similar, perhaps, to the early anti-Semitism in Germany is that when they call you a damn Jew or something like that and Dirty Jew or whatever. And we had it in the service. I got into the service in 1944. And had some in civilian life occasionally, you run across. That sort of thing was sort of standard behavior amongst many people until the facts of the Holocaust became known. After the Holocaust and the terrible consequences, then it became unfashionable for some time. I'm not sure where we are now with it, but anti-Semitism became very unfashionable. But back in the '40s and prior to that, it was sort of standard.

Interviewer: Ernest, so in that context, did you have any problems getting a job or were you mostly getting jobs within the Jewish community?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: I got jobs within the Jewish community. I think that was a general statistic; that's no longer true. But back then, 90-plus percent of Jews who were not self-employed and who were not working for the government and who were not working for university, but who were in the private sector working for a private business were employed by other Jews. That was sort of the statistic that was batted around at that time and I think it was from my observation more than that. It's no longer true. For instance, say at a bank, it was virtually unheard of for a Jew to have a job in a bank in those days. But yeah, there was one or two token, and you could point them out but percentage-wise very small. Well, now, you don't have it anymore. And those people will tell us, whatever. But now, you have vice presidents and other ranks within the banking community. The Jewish people don't get on the board of directors of a bank; all that was unheard of in those days.

Interviewer: How about in the universities in terms of gaining entrance to the local colleges? Was it a problem?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, there were always rumors of numerous [unintelligible0:34:51.9]. I never experienced a problem. I went to Vanderbilt. I was older than the average student. I graduated from high school late because of my personal history. I was 22 when I got my high school diploma and the same age when I became a freshman at Vanderbilt. But being Jewish wasn't a problem. There were always rumors in those years about the Vanderbilt Medical School having a quarter system, but I don't know.

Interviewer: But you didn't personally experience that as a barrier in any way?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Not at all.

Interviewer: OK. Once you were resettled in Nashville, did you make attempts to help get out other families or friends out of your--?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: I had two priorities. The first was my mother and then once we got her over here, she and I worked to get my grandmother out. And after that, that was it. It was too late. You couldn't get anybody out.

Interviewer: Did you have any community help in getting them out?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, not community help but help from the May family again..

Interviewer: I don't understand, Ernest, the process of that. Would you go to a state consulate or--?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, somebody…the basic document is the affidavit. You have to provide an affidavit that somebody got enough money to support this person if nobody else will so that the state doesn't have to support him. And that's what they provided. Now, I couldn't provide the affidavit. I mean, if I just sign the affidavit, it's meaningless. You have to have X-amount of money to do this, all right. Now, by the time my grandmother came over, it got to be more complicated. The war was on and an ordinary affidavit was not sufficient. So the immigration service required that a certain sum of money will be deposited in her name in an irrevocable account that she could get her hands on if she had to. So, we borrowed the money and the Mays helped us get the loan from the bank and here was the money 'cause after my grandmother came over, where she moved in with us, we just repaid the money to the bank. It was $5,000. In those days, that was a lot of money.

Interviewer: That's a significant amount of money.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yeah, right. So we repaid the $5,000 which had never been out of the bank anyhow. It was in an irrevocable trust of which my grandmother was the beneficiary. And it was just a matter of paying the interest really; the rest was a formality, but we couldn't have gotten the $5,000 loan without the Mais. I guess they co-signed it.

Interviewer: An affidavit was gotten through a department of the state or--?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, the Immigration and Naturalization Service I believe was in those years part of the Department of Labor. I'm a little vague on that. I'm not positive, but I think that's where it was. So, I think, administratively, that's how it was handled, but it doesn't really make a difference whether it was the state department or Labor Department.

Interviewer: Ernest, did the nature of your religious practices in Europe continue or did they change with your residence in Nashville?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: They continued pretty much. We were, in those days, conservative Jews. We belonged to a conservative congregation which doesn't mean exactly the same as it does here. Conservative congregation here would over there be called Liberal congregation. The shadings are a little bit different. But essentially, it continued, and I became active here really in an orthodox congregation and shared Israel for many years.

Interviewer: What differences struck you about the life here in the United States as compared to Europe?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Oh, it was different, all right. It seemed pretty much all favorable. I like it a lot better, but young people adapt very quickly. In Europe, things were very formal, very stuffy, if you will. You respected your elders and you…everything in Europe was more at arm's lengths. And here, things were much informal. I found it very easy to adapt to things in this country.

Interviewer: Were there any things that you missed? We're talking about the differences between United States and Europe and that you had noted that mainly it was really an improvement for you and less formality. But I wonder, Ernest, if there were some things that you miss such as cultural life in the United States or Nashville compared to--

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yes, I mentioned earlier in my childhood in Germany, one would go to the theater, one would go to the opera. There was very little of that in Nashville in those years. We have it now. Now, we got TPAC and we got all these things. But I did miss that. I miss soccer which, you know, and it took me years to learn about baseball and football. None of which I knew anything about. So, there were some things that I perhaps missed, but it wasn't a big issue. It was something that you did without. Ice skating, I used to ice skate. Well, now, I can do it again. As you know in recent years, we've had an ice skating rink, but back in the 1930's, '40s, we never had any ice skating in Nashville at all. So, I had to do with…I went without ice skating I guess for 35 to 40 years.

Interviewer: And no problem picking it back?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: No, well, the first time, I was a little shaky, but now, it comes back. It's like bicycling, once you learn it, it will come back.

Interviewer: Looking back, what were your most dominant feelings during your resettlement and have they changed with time?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: I don't know that I had. I know it's awful hard to recall. We're talking about some 53 years ago. What were my predominant feelings? I don't know. I don't know that I have any. I tell you. I think all our perspective was changed at the end of the war, when we found out about the Holocaust. The general public here did not know. We knew Jews were being persecuted and things were bad over there, but didn't know that everybody was systematically being killed in these gas chambers, in these concentration camps. When we learned that after the war, and having escaped it, I think that was a profound change in many things in how we look about things and look at things. So, things have changed of course because of these influences, but I don't know that I can compare to at that time of my immigration.

Interviewer: Did you in particular, Ernest, experience any guilt for being a survivor or did any German people that you know, German Jews?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Not on the conscious level, no. Now, I must say this, and this is a technical point, I do not consider myself a survivor. I define survivor very narrowly. I define survivor as a person who lived in Europe, in Nazi-occupied Europe between 1940 and 1945 and survived. That's a survivor. I left earlier. Now, in a sense, of course, I survived. I'm still here. But, a survivor is a special person who lived through this terrible thing and was able to survive.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yeah. And I think perhaps those survivors might have more guilt on a conscious level, I do not have it, not that I know of.

Interviewer: How long did it take you before you and other members of your family felt at home in the United States?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, it took me--

Interviewer: --think about your mother and your grandmother as well.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, it took me at least two hours.

Interviewer: I believe that.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: I loved it...I loved it from the minute I set foot in the New York harbor. Oh, how I loved it. I wasn't quite 17. I was 16 years old. I loved everything, milk shakes, subway rides. It was great. And we didn't have any money, but we didn't need much money. And so, it took me no time at all and I soaked up American culture. I just loved it.

Interviewer: Did you come fairly immediately from New York to Nashville?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yeah, two weeks. I spent two weeks in New York. I had relatives and I spent two weeks with them and then I came to Nashville.

Interviewer: And then took a train to Nashville?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Took a train, yeah, took 26 hours. Slow train. Changed in Cincinnati, and perhaps that was all. We made a change in Cincinnati. We had that for many years, going back to New York, oh, until I guess early 1950s or maybe as late as 1951, '52, still going to New York on a train. After that, we started flying or driving, but back in the '30s and '40s, we always took the train.

Interviewer: Ernest, did you have an amount of belongings with you?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, a couple of trunks, clothing. One thing you could do, you couldn't take any money with you, but if you had money, you could spend it for merchandise, so we bought all kinds of clothes and I had suits, and then it turned out, they were much too hot in Nashville, heavy wooden stuff and it was hot here. I arrived in July 1937 and had nothing real light. So, I had a bunch of stuff, yeah, and a lot of it used up and we replaced it gradually, yeah.

Interviewer: What was the adjustment like for your mother and then for your grandmother?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, for older people, it is much more difficult for some of reasons we mentioned earlier. The culture is more rooted over there. And another thing is the language problem. Young people learn languages very fast. When you get to be older, it's not as easy to pick up a new language. And so, they never became as proficient in English as a younger person might have. But, they got used to it. They settled in. My mother got to live in this country for 50 years, over 50 years. When she died this year, she had been here 51 years.

Interviewer: We're moving on to the next category which is postwar, did you ever try to return to your home in Europe?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: When you say try to return, do you mean to live there again?

Interviewer: No, did you ever visit?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Oh, yeah. Been there a couple of times, yes, yeah, uh-huh. Didn't go back for 35 years. First time we went back was in 1972 and we've been in Europe a couple more times, but we've been in Germany, in our hometown only twice, in '72 and again in '85, about five years ago.

Interviewer: Was there some reason for waiting that long to go back?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: No, not really. I guess we'd had to wait that long until we could afford to make a trip to Europe. But when we go to Europe, we're usually going to Germany. I have graves to visit there. My father is buried in Frankfurt at the cemetery and we go to Mannheim. When we go or we're anywhere near there, we will go, yeah.

Interviewer: Is there still a Jewish community there?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, when you say still, that's not…There is a Jewish community, but still they were all wiped out, and there's a new Jewish community there again now, yes. And that is true also of Frankfurt where I used to live and where I've been, they are there. There are Jews there. My dad-- but mostly not German Jews. The original German Jews over there, they're mostly people who found themselves in Germany as displaced persons at the end of the war, and they settled there. You asked me, it's still a Jewish community living. I'll give a little aside here. It's something that always impresses me of in there a couple of times. At the cemetery where my father is buried in Frankfurt, it is a relatively new cemetery as European cemeteries go. The old cemetery was filled in about 1929 and this cemetery was opened in 1929 and people that are buried there in rows, in chronological years. My grandfather is buried there. He's in one of the earlier rows, 1931. And then my father died in 1935. And others whom I knew, 1936 and 1937. And as you walk through the cemetery, you'll reach a row which is about 1940. And the next row is 1948. There's a missing thing and there's a monument there to those who found no grave. And there was nothing. So, between 1940, what was left was deported to Auschwitz or similar places. And then, after the war, people settled there, again in 1945, '46, and I guess the earliest burials were in '48. And that always [unintelligible 0:48:33.5] at that cemetery--

Interviewer: --listening to it, yeah.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Ernest, is that principally a Jewish cemetery?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Oh yeah, it's a Jewish cemetery, yeah.

Interviewer: How did you feel--?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: However not run solely by the congregation, but the City of Frankfurt participates in it and the public has its hand in that. Again, no segregation between state and church.

Interviewer: OK.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Go ahead, I’m sorry.

Interviewer: That’s fine. How did you feel when you met non-Jewish friends or acquaintances from before the war?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, I have virtually none. I have one. I have one contact that I correspond with, that I’m in touch with, and we’re very close to each other. That woman was my surrogate mother. My mother turned me over early on to a what we might call a governess or--

Interviewer: --a nanny?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Kinderfrau in German. And she and I had a number of these, but she’s the first one that I remember. I was 3 years old and she stayed with me from the time I was 3 to the time I was either 10 or 11; at which time, she got married or else she would still be with me probably. And after she left us and I was still in Germany, I kept up contact with her in 1930. She left us about 1931, and I was in contact with her until 1936 or ’37 right up until I left. And then after the war, we wrote to her and corresponded. And when we went back to Germany, I sought her out, and she’s quite old now. She’s in her 80s and I know her husband. He is still living, and so we do have a contact. But they’re the only contact I have in all of Germany. And I happen to know these people were alright. I happen to know. I wonder, you see, when I deal with a German, an elderly German, a German my age, “What in the world were you doing 50 years ago?” All these terrible death camps were not run just by Hitler and three or four helpers, they were run by thousands of people. And what were you doing? Well, I don’t know. But I have no problem with young Germans. You know, they weren’t even there so they are not guilty, but Germans my generation I worry about.

Interviewer: The last questions are about your personal feelings. How did your prewar and immigration experiences change you? Do you look at other people and or the events of life differently?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Oh my goodness. Well, that’s a philosophical question.

Interviewer: It is.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Look, what is it that Ulysses says in the Tennyson poem? “I’m a part of all that I have seen.” So, obviously, the fact that I was born over there and underwent this persecution in the 30s, and then emigrated and came to this country, all of that had to have a great impact on me and made me a different person that I might have otherwise become. But it’s very hard for me to judge that objectively.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: And I mean there are certain cultural things I took with me and brought to this country and adapted them here. For instance, I always had a love of history which we do not do a real good job of teaching history to our young people in this country. In Germany, not only in Germany, in Europe, they do. Europeans have a much better understanding of history. Well, when I came here, I was old enough to have had a similar education. So I soaked up American History, and I know more American History than most of my contemporaries. I’m a civil war buff, but I’m also quite at home in the revolutionary war and others. And so, this is a mixture I think between my German background, a European background, and having been exposed to things in this country.

Interviewer: But what I observed, Ernest, is that your outlook is such an optimistic one, and such a using, of whatever you had as an opportunity, do you feel that that was the same for your mother and grandmother or was there more of a bitterness or pessimism about things?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, that was my mother. Well, my mother was a little I guess homesick at first and she was a little unhappy at first. But I, I had the opportunity three months ago, yesterday, she died on March the 9th. And I gave the eulogy. And I reflected on her life, how she adapted and how she made the best of it and she did various things. She worked at May Hosiery Mills, as all of us did at one time or another. She never liked that. She had never worked in a factory in her life. And then, she had babysat for a while and eventually she gave German lessons. She did all kinds of things over the years and adapted. And so I think she was an optimist and adapted extremely well. My grandmother was older and I think it's probably more difficult and she did not live that many years here. She lived here from '41 till '46, not quite five years.

Interviewer: Here's another general question. How do you feel about being Jewish?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, I'm very positive about it. I have always identified with the values of our religion, the ethical values, that are really the basis of all religion, and I take pride in our achievements as intellectuals and also I feel very positive about it. I got no problem with it.

Interviewer: And plus your orientation has been to be part of the Jewish community and a lot of organizations.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, I have. I have served as President of the Temple. I have served as President of the JCC and of the federation. And before you get to be president, you serve as secretary, treasurer, vice president. So I've put in my years of service in the Jewish community, yeah. Hey, let me put that in for posterity. I'm the only person alive, I think I can say that without fear of contradiction, who was both a past vice president of the Temple and a past vice president of [Shared 0:54:36.7] Israel. Not a president but a vice president.

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Ernest G. Freudenthal: For whatever that's worth.

Interviewer: Well, that's worth something, of just that crossover between both of those. What effect has your experience had on the way you brought up your children?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: What effect has…Well, I'm what you'd call an old-fashioned Liberal perhaps, so somewhat of a secular humanist which is perhaps pejorative term right now, but it still describes me. My oldest daughter, and she's verbalized this, has felt that perhaps we did not give them enough religious education. We brought them up at the Temple. And they were confirmed. My younger daughter became bat mitzvah at the Temple. But my oldest daughter and family now are active in the conservative synagogue, they moved over to West End. They're more comfortable there, more traditional, and that's fine. That's just great. And I'm very happy with that. So, perhaps, I haven't brought them up as traditional as they would have liked. And now, my younger daughter I think is comfortable with the way we do things, but her husband is more conservative soshe probably would also eventually be more active in a conservative synagogue whereas we're reform.

Interviewer: How much were your children curious or did you and Stephanie take the time to tell them about your experiences in Germany?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Oh, they, it's by osmosis. They're living on it all the time. They pick up some language. They just pick up some German. And they know. There's a whole theory. There's a whole centrum of literature on that, that the children of survivors and the children, in my case, of refugees, in our case, are different because we come from a different culture so that it impinges on our children's upbringing. And they feel that they were brought up differently than their contemporaries. Some of it is economic. We perhaps didn't have the money. We were more conservative on what we could or would spend. But part of it was cultural and so there's probably quite a bit of evidence that we brought up our children a little different than our contemporaries. But it's hard for me to be objective about that. And I don't know that our children are any the worse off because of that.

Interviewer: Is the word itself refugee in any way a pejorative word or do that feel like--?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, I think it was back then. I think in the 1940's it was. I have no problem with it now, none whatsoever. I think it was then, yes.

Interviewer: Ernest, this is the last question. Now that you have told me your story, what would you like others to know? Is there a message you would like others to remember about your experience?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: That's a very broad question. Let me just latch on to, you asked me about how I felt about my Judaism. And one of the lessons I would pass on, there are…I have contemporaries who are Jewish and who do not practice it. And that's all right for them; they can do as they please. But they leave their children in a vacuum, and so their children are really people without roots. I would advise anyone to bring up their children in our faith to give them something to root to because there's enough negative things out there in the world against us, so we might as well reinforce them with the positive values of our experience and our religion and our culture.

Interviewer: OK, is there anything else that you'd like to say?

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Oh I can speak for a long time, but at some point, I guess we'll run out of tape.

Interviewer: Well, we've come to the completion of this interview, the designated interview, and I think you've given us such an enriched experience, Ernest, with sharing your background then coming to the United States and--

Ernest G. Freudenthal: Well, thank you for interviewing me.

Interviewer: You’re welcome.