



Peter and George Ehrenhaft

Transcript of the Oral History of the Ehrenhaft Family

Peter Ehrenhaft was born on August 16th, 1933 in Vienna; his brother George on May 27th, 1937. Their father Bruno Ehrenhaft was a successful banker and was arrested by the Nazis after the "Anschluss" [1]. The family managed to escape Austria in August 1938. They first fled to Czechoslovakia. In September 1938 they arrived in Great Britain and in February 1940, after having received the necessary affidavit of support from a volunteer in the United States wholly unknown to the family, they arrived in New York.

In September and October 2009 Frank Gregorsky, a professional preparer of oral histories, recorded interviews with Peter and George Ehrenhaft on the history of their family. Selected excerpts of these interviews are presented here. The complete interviews are preserved at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, in oral recorded form, and selected portions are available in print form.

Peter: [...] I think that the principal aim of this exercise is to provide to our children some understanding of where their parents came from and how they developed to the point where our children themselves became aware of their own personalities [...] so, to talk a bit about the circumstances of our departure from Vienna and the beginning of our life in the United States and my education here [...]. Since most of these kinds of memories and documents are in my head now, and not recorded in one coherent place specially for them to assimilate it, I think is a good time now to try and record this.

Frank: I thought we would start with your parents, Bruno Ehrenhaft and Ann Polacek. The records show that Bruno was born on December 7th, 1899 and Ann, your Mom, was born in May 1904. She outlived him by a good number of years. [...]

Peter: Well, first of all, it's important to note that they come from really very different backgrounds. My father's family came from a small town in Moravia, which is a part of the Czech Republic today. It was a German-speaking town, Mügilitz [2], which was significantly populated by Jews at the time. During World War II it was apparently totally demolished, so that there was virtually no trace of the town left [...]. I'm not a hundred percent sure what his father and grandfather did, what kind of occupations they had. They were clearly not professionals in the sense of being lawyers, doctors, or anything like that. They were business men, small business men. Bruno's father, David Ehrenhaft, had married a woman from the Nettle Family, who then died and, as was not uncommon in Jewish families at that time and place, he then married his late wife's youngest sister, Olga. So there was a significant age disparity between David and Olga, but less than 20 years between Olga and my father. [...] When I was growing up, there are many photographs of my childhood in which my grandmother Olga appears. She had a house [...] in Reichenau, which is a suburb of Vienna, where we went frequently. Olga came to the United States with us and lived with us and so she was a significant person in my background and, probably, as far as I can see, a source of friction between my father and mother, who were generally very accommodating to one another. But I think that my mother felt that she had a parental figure in her house a lot that was a thorn in her side, in part because my grandmother was a very good cook and insisted on doing a lot of the cooking. In one sense one would have thought that my mother would have been happy about that, but in another I think it diminished her role in our household.

But anyway – to return to my father: He lived in this small town and went to school in Olmütz [3], which is a much larger town. From there he was conscripted into the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during World War I. [...] He was conscripted at age sixteen as many were, and served on the Italian front. He never spoke very much about his experience in the army, but among the photographs I do have are pictures of him in his uniform [...]. My parents, my father, did not speak Czech at all, even though he grew up in Czechoslovakia, and he felt that it was correct to have been brought up in German speaking schools ... But anyway, when released from the army, my father found himself in Vienna, German speaking. He had not gone to any university, he had gone to a middle school in Olmütz and decided he would stay in Vienna. What he did, fairly soon after his 18th birthday I guess, was go to work for a private bank by the name of Ludwig Kantor, which was a sort of an investment bank, in today's terminology. [...] He took some courses while he was employed there and rose rapidly, eventually to become the manager of foreign exchange and foreign transactions and the portfolio manager of the bank.

Frank: But did this happen right after he got out of the Service?

Peter: When he got out of the Service, he went to work for Kantor as a trainee, as an eighteen-year-old trainee. [...] With no college, he never went to any university; he did get some training at some kind of an institution. But I haven't found any diplomas or anything like that, that he received. [...]

Frank: He's having to grow up very fast ... [...]

Peter: Yes, he did and I think the most remarkable aspect is indeed the fact that he was able, from entering the employment by the bank, in 1918, in the 20 year period that he was there, to rise to the top echelon of the bank. He received upon his "voluntary" resignation in 1938, in order to leave Austria, the most glowing kind of certificate of departure from the head of the bank itself. He was obviously a confidante and a very close associate of the people who really owned the bank.

[...] The bank obviously was seized by the Nazis, incorporated into other banks. [...] When we left in 1938, my father agreed that he would

receive a settlement payment of about 1,300 Reichsmark. You were permitted to take 5,000 Reichsmark out if you were leaving as a Jew in 1938. [...] My suspicion is, very strongly, that he could not possibly have financed our trip to Czecho- slovakia, then to England and gotten started in England had he been limited to the amount of cash that he claimed that he had, that he was allowed to take out. And it's my suspicion that Kantor had deposited various amounts in England and/or Czechoslovakia, or even in the United States that enabled us to get to the United States. Otherwise it's very hard for me to see how he could have financed, for example, a flight from Prague to London that we took just as the Sudeten Conference [4] was going on. [...]

To get five people onto a plane from Prague to London at that time required some significant outlay of cash to be available. He had that and then I went to private school when I arrived in London right away. So these suggest to me – but I've never had any hard evidence that this in fact existed – how this was done.

Frank: The five people, being your parents, you, your baby brother at the point and Olga.

Peter: Exactly. [...] Let's talk about my mother's family. She comes from a family – the Picks. If one reads about the history of Austria, the Picks were an important family [...] a Pick was a member of the first Parliament. [5] He was a social worker who was apparently very active during ...

Frank: You're talking about Ann's dad?

Peter: I'm talking about Ann's uncle, the brother of her mother, who was a social worker and very important in providing rehabilitation services to wounded war veterans. He was apparently summoned by the Emperor to receive an award from the Emperor and he went to the palace and I guess was expected to bow or something like that to the Emperor in order to receive this medal, which he refused to do. And he said directly to the Emperor that he was hoping that a republic would be created. And so he didn't get the award and turned to leave and was arrested and apparently was kept in confinement until the end of the war.

Frank: He did this during World War I?

Peter: Yes, in the closing months of World War I.

Frank: And that's why he had been working with war veterans in the first place?

Peter: Right. He then became a member of Parliament and was in the first Parliament after the Republic was proclaimed. [...]

Frank: Did we get the full name of Ann's uncle?

Peter: What his first name was? I know he was a Pick. His first name may have been Karl. [...] But just to say that my mother's mother was a Pick, and apparently quite proud of it. Her father was a Czech businessman by the name of Oskar Polacek, and they had a house in Podebrady, which is a spa in western Czechoslovakia, close to the German border. And they also owned a noodle factory in Vienna, called Austria Teigwarenfabrik (Austria Noodle Factory), at 36, Bergstraße [6], which is really downtown. We visited the site recently and realized there was no factory there. We just saw a very nice apartment house; but looking around the back it could have been a factory at one time. My mother worked at that place in the closing days of our life in Vienna in 1938. [...]

My parents were married in 1925, when my mother was not yet 21, and therefore needed express parental consent to be married. But we heard [...] that the Polaceks were very concerned that Bruno Ehrenhaft was not up to Ann's social class and status. Although they arranged a nice wedding and a wonderful honeymoon in Venice for my parents, of which I have photographs, [my parents] did not live together after they were married. There was a big housing shortage in Austria at that time. [...] My father couldn't find a flat for them, but the Polaceks would not allow him to share a room in their apartment with Ann. So Ann continued to live with her parents and my father continued to live in sort of this one room place that he had, and at some time, I guess in 1926, they finally got a place to live together. [...] My mother had gotten a certificate – she didn't go to university directly, but she did get a type of degree entitling her to be a teacher of English. So she was fairly fluent in English, which was an important element in our adjustment when we came to England and to the United States. She could read and write and speak some English. It was sufficient for her to have a diploma entitling her to be a teacher and I think that she may have tutored people. She never taught in a class. She wouldn't be the kind of a person that could easily get up and speak before a group. But she was a tutor of English, and apparently a bookkeeper at the noodle factory.

[...] It was interesting to me that we had uniformed nannies and a cook, which she preferred I guess, to doing the housework. That was one of the problems we faced when we came to the United States. Olga did the cooking and probably had lots of things to say to my mother about housework that my mother never had to do before.

[...] I have here [...] this book of pictures of my childhood. My father was a meticulous photographer. [...] Interestingly from the beginning I already had a uniformed nurse maid to take care of me so that my mother wouldn't need to do so. This was in 1933. If you think about that date, he started in 1918, and by 1933, when I was born, he was already well off enough that he could do this. He could indulge a passion for photography. He had a dark room, apparently, and personally developed and printed a lot of these pictures.

Frank: [...] "For our younger listener", describe what you mean by uniformed nanny.

Peter: A woman who wore a starched white apron and hat and who was the person who took us for walks, fed us our meals, and really took care of me as a little boy except in those hours when my parents and/or grandmother asked that I be in their care.

Frank: When we think uniform we think "police officer", we [don't] think nurse. [Does] "uniform" just mean she looked the same to you every day?

Peter: No, it was a prescribed outfit, with a white apron, you'll see in the pictures. It was not a source of shame; it was a source of pride the way nurses in American hospitals once dressed. [...]

Frank: A teen listener might also have this question: and some of these questions I try and think of in terms of teens and may be weird – but was there ever a butler?

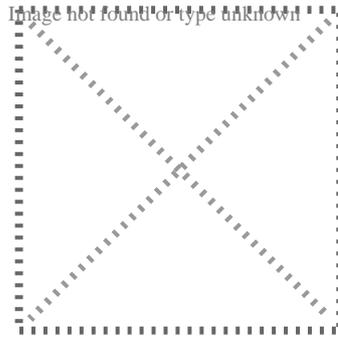
Peter: No, no.

Frank: So the nanny did all the cooking as well as act as a surrogate, not a surrogate, but an assistant mom ...

Peter: I don't see it that way. But, that's an interesting question. I think that Olga may have done some cooking, but they may have had a cook. That is certainly possible but I don't have a picture of that person. I don't recall that there was a cook. But I have a picture with two ladies in white and my father's letter asking the "staff" to stay until we leave, indicates there were two women who worked in our apartment. The second could have been my brother George's nanny or our cook.

Frank: What about this period before your parents had their own space [...]?

Peter: I think by '27 they might have had an apartment by them- selves. My mother did have a child before me that died either in birth, or two or three days after he was born. It was a boy and I think he was born in '31. So, I was the second pregnancy, but the first one that survived. I think that part of the tremendous fuss that was made over me, and clearly there was by the looks of all these pictures and so on, was the joy of having a viable child that was obviously doing well.



Frank: Did he ever have a name?

Peter: Hans.

Frank: [...] Before I knew about Hans I was going to say there was a five or six year or seven and a half year period between the marriage and your arrival which is somewhat unusual in old Europe. I guess you start a family soon, particularly if you had means and a job security and things like that. I mean your parents had the ability as young individuals, especially your Mom, to sort of be part of a couple and really get to know each other. Which everybody wants to do today, but that wasn't that common at that time.

Peter: Well, my parents did travel. They were great music lovers. They were subscribers to the Vienna Philharmonie, and we have a book of the Vienna Philharmonie showing them in the audience in their seats in the fifth row. My mother was a very good pianist. So, I think that they probably voluntarily deferred having children because my father wanted to really work his way up to the top of the bank. These were difficult times in Vienna and I think that he had the view that until they were really ready to provide in a way that they would have liked, that they deferred having children. One of the interesting things about Jewish Vienna was the importance of Jews to the cultural life of the city. They received recognition of achievers and part of local "life", and yet [...] the official positions of the governments of Vienna [were closed to them] and anti-Semitism prevailed. There was obvious discrimination and the necessity for Jews to work only in certain professions and not others. They were very much in the medical field, they were very much in the banking field, but there were also numerous situations in which they were not accepted.

[...] I have no record [...] that my parents did anything to express their Jewish background other than having me circumcised. But otherwise there was virtually no other expression of Judaism of which I'm aware. There was no record either of going to temple or having any Jewish menorahs [7], no suggestion that they celebrated Chanukah [8] at home. All of that flowered when we came to the United States, where we had a very good reform temple very close to our apartment in Kew Gardens. We lived largely in a Jewish community in New York and it got my parents interested in the temple. They spoke no Hebrew at all, and had received no significant Jewish training that I could ever detect. As far as I knew they didn't have any prayer books, no German bible, nothing that would have manifested their Jewish roots.

The facts are that my father was involved in some way with the B'nai B'rith, which is a Jewish organization. [9] On the very night of the "Anschluss", March 13th, 1938, he was awakened at about midnight by some of the "Brown Shirts" [10] and was arrested and taken to a "re-

education" center – which was a grade school converted into a holding station for rounded up Jews. They had bunks in that place and he was confined there until shortly before we left.

Frank: You left on July 1st?

Peter: We left on August 16th, '38, which was my 5th birthday. When my father was mustered out of the army in 1918, out of Vienna, he was required to get a residence permit. If you lived in the city in those days you had to get a residence permit. We have documents that indicate [...] that my father was given the option of choosing Austrian or Czech nationality after World War I. Because he spoke German and was living in Vienna he opted for Austrian nationality. We have a copy of [the] letter from 1921 in which the Interior Ministry of Austria denied him Austrian nationality on the grounds that he was not of the "German race" presumably because he was Jewish. So he was remitted by the terms of the treaty to Czech nationality. He was later granted a residence permit as a Czech national in Vienna and then married my mother who was obviously Austrian. Sometime in that period he also became an Austrian national. After the "Anschluss", he became officially a German national, because every Austrian was converted to German nationality. In any event he was detained at the school in March 1938 and released after saying he would leave and having the papers to enable him to do so.

Frank: He processed his departure while there in the detention?

Peter: Yes. He had to declare his assets and transfer whatever he was holding over 5,000 Reichsmark that he could take out with him. In order to do that, he had to fill out a big form dated April 1938, of which we have a copy, showing all of his assets and providing what he could take out of the country, if he left, property or cash equal to 5,000 Reichsmark. Among the things that he had to do was to cash in his life insurance policies. One of those was written by an Italian company, the cash surrender value of which was something like US \$ 760. So here in this tremendous crisis, he is sitting in this detention place and had to deal with an Italian insurance company to get them to send 700 dollars to Vienna that he could hand in as part of this process. It took a couple of months for him to do so but he finally did and he also listed it on his form as is [listed] the jewelry that my mother had, some gold watches that he had and other things, they all don't add up to 5,000 Reichsmark, which is probably about US \$ 20,000 at the time. So it wasn't totally insignificant. Among other crazy things, we have a letter to a company called Dworak. It's a moving company, Hungarian company, and it says "Please go to my apartment on the Franz-Josefs-Kai [11]. Pack everything and send it to Australia or America. I enclosed some securities that should cover the costs. Very truly yours." Apparently this company came to the apartment, packed "everything" and shipped it to New York, where it arrived in 1938. It was put in storage with sufficient pre-payment so that it was sitting there, beautifully wrapped, when we arrived in 1940 and could recover it to furnish our apartment. This buffet is filled with crystal, silver and dishes from our apartment in Vienna. The bookcase in my study is from there.

Frank: How did they know where to send it, in a wholly different country? Why wasn't it stolen?

Peter: They just selected a warehouse [in New York]. It is really incredible. The letter really has no indication of what securities were given, what they were valued at, no indication of what kind of receipt he would receive. The furniture and contents of the buffet and so on are not listed as assets taken out of Austria within the 5,000 Reichsmark cap of allowable "exports". [...]

Frank: He must have had some friend at the company to guarantee service like this. And it could have been Australia ...

Peter: It could have been. I think Dworak just picked the cheapest place from Vienna. The stuff must have gone by boat via Hamburg and probably arrived in New York in '38. One interesting little side light: the first time that my later wife Charlotte came out to visit my parents was for a Passover seder [12]. We had nice crystal goblets for the four "cups of wine" and Charlotte wanted to help my mother clean up after the dinner. But she was so forceful drying the glasses that she managed to crack one of the crystal goblets that had survived all the way from Austria. She was crushed, but my mother said, "No! It's a good sign." And, so it was.

Frank: Before you got out of Austria, this period from the middle of March to August 16th is five months, five whole months, your father is disposing of his property, trying to get an accounting of it, trying to save and ship out some of it, which was successful, miraculously. You're five, turning five, your brother two, something like that, what is your mother telling you, and what is going on in the house at this time?

Peter: I have no idea. The only thing that I have been told is that when my father came back from the detention place, released in early July, I think, he had a red beard and I did not recognize him. This was a shock to him, my mother, and me, I guess. [...] I have no personal recollection at all.

Frank: Of that three, four, or five months? But you remember other things about those days.

Peter: Well, I'm wondering how much I actually remember and how much is re-created based on these pictures.

Frank: So you can't testify first hand to how your mother dealt with this slow motion shock. Did she talk to you about it later?

Peter: The only things that were repeatedly mentioned were, first of all, the courage of my father who was a self made man. He came out of some hole in the wall in Czechoslovakia to a successful position in Vienna and was willing to say, this is so terrible, we should not try and accommodate, we should get out, and we'll make it somewhere else. I mean, consider he had a five-year-old and a one-year-old son, a mother and a wife who had some commercial experience from her work in that noodle factory, but it was a family-owned enterprise. He just picked up and left everything and went off and started off in a new country where he didn't know the language, invested in a stamp store – in what had been a hobby. He never worked in it as a profession before. He was 38 years old at that time. When I think about myself at 38, or my kids at 38, these were very remarkable, brave decisions that they made and obviously we're here to gratefully acknowledge that we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them.

Finally [...] he had all of these paper things put together, including one of the documents, a letter, saying "Now I've given you everything, and I have less than 5,000 Reichsmark. Please issue an exit visa." He then tried to get visas to enter the United States and Switzerland – and both were denied. In Switzerland he could not promise he would be a bona fide transient or resident as he had no work promised and he had no return or onward travel ticket. The United States Embassy said he needed an adequate affidavit of support if he and the family went to the United States. The B'nai B'rith was getting these affidavits from B'nai B'rith members willing to sign a document promising that, in the event that the beneficiary refugees couldn't find a job, the signer would support them. Amazingly enough we finally got that from a family in Hartford that my parents did not know at all. When we came to the United States my father went to visit these people in Hartford to thank them, via the Merritt Parkway. He recounted how very impressed he was as he had never seen a road like that before. The guy died shortly thereafter. So anyway that's how we got into the United States.

So first we went to Czechoslovakia on my fifth birthday, by taking the train to Podebrady, to his mother-in-law's house, and were there from August until the first week of September when we went on to England. We were admitted in England as refugees from Germany. But my father could not get a job in the banking sector, because he was now regarded as a German national having come from Austria now incorporated into Germany. The fact that he was a refugee was not regarded as adequate to overcome the prohibition on "Germans" working in the banking sector.

Frank: [...] B'nai B'rith was vital to getting from England to the United States. Why England from continental Europe to begin with?

Peter: Well, as I said, we went from Austria to his mother-in-law's place in Czechoslovakia. That was the only place where we could go when leaving Austria. We were there for just a few weeks when he said "We have to get out of here" because the Sudeten Conference began which meant to him that the Germans would soon take over Czechoslovakia as we would be in the same boat as we were in Vienna. We went to England, which allowed refugees from Austria to enter.

Frank: You went through channels? He couldn't call up someone in London or we don't know?

Peter: I don't know. We arrived validly and apparently were allowed in. We went to Hampstead Heath in London where a lot of other refugees lived, and that's where we lived and that's where I enrolled in St. Dunstan's School. He and another guy opened a stamp store in Trafalgar Arcade, called the Windsor Stamp Company. He had always been a stamp collector and so he became a professional in that field and when we finally got our visas to enter the United States, he opened up the New York branch of the Windsor Stamp Company. That was his first occupation in the United States. But he quickly went to school here and qualified to take the exam to become a registered rep at a brokerage firm, which he then did and passed and that's what he did until he died.

Frank: We're now talking about England. What were the mechanics of you getting out of Austria?

Peter: We took the train and left at 11 o'clock at night and the entry documents are dated the next day, not the 16th of August but the 17th, so we must have arrived the next morning. I have no recollection of any of that or our life in Podebrady. [...] There was a picture taken of us in Podebrady which again, looks so serene. I was standing there in the street. [...]

Frank: Once you got to England, I guess your father had this focus on this is just a way station. There was no thought of staying in England.

Peter: I would not say that. The fact that he invested in a store; he could not have counted on getting a visa to the United States so he invested on the possibility that we might have to be there at least for the duration of the war.

Frank: And that's obviously where he became, if not fluent, competent in English, [that] was in England. What else about those pivotal events in England in the whole second half of 1938 with all this big stuff happening? What other details or things have you been told?

Peter: Well, the one thing we were told was that we finally did get a visa to come to the United States, as I mentioned, thanks to the B'nai B'rith, we left out of Liverpool on the HMS Georgic, a Cunard [13] Liner on which George and I were the only children. We left Liverpool to go to the United States and returned to harbor after a day because of U-boats spotted. So we left again a couple of days after that and took a circuitous route which took ten days, instead of the six days it took [for] a passage from Liverpool to New York.

Frank: But this is all in the late 40's now?

Peter: Early 40's. This is February 1940. Apparently, George and I were sort of the mascots of the whole group of people on the ship, and that passage of the Georgic was the last time that a Cunard Liner went without a convoy. After that all passenger ships went with convoys of warships. The circuitous route via Greenland was without a convoy and we arrived in New York in February 1940.

Frank: By this time you're six and a half?

Peter: Yes.

Frank: You must have tangible memories of that boat trip?

Peter: Some, there was a big game room that we used. We were the only kids on the boat. That's virtually the only real memory I have of the boat. One thing my parents told me was that passport pictures to go to the United States were taken of all of us, including George and me. My mother loved George's golden curls that he then had. But in a fit of jealousy or whatever, I cut off George's curls so that when we arrived at the passport check in Liverpool, they said "Where's the girl?" My father said his children were boys, one of whom looks different because the other kid cut off his curls, but he assured the clerk it was the same child and it is the boy. They let us board. Whew!

Frank: Can we talk about Olga a little bit? [...] She had to make, psychologically, a bigger adjustment. She was a lot older when she came to the

States. And, let me get this straight, she was your grandfather's second wife?

Peter: Yes. And, by the way, let me just share with you this: a picture of my father as a kid. It was a long time ago. It's about the only picture I have of him as a little child.

Frank: Still pretty good resolution.

Peter: Yes, and this is I think the only picture I have of my maternal grandmother Mathilde. Very rarely does she show up in any pictures we have. This was taken in 1935.

Frank: And she was the one who came from a horrible end in '42 or '43 that you found out only recently. But back to Olga. How did she come to the States? I mean, did she come just by herself?

Peter: No. She was a widow. In fact, both of my grandfathers died before I was born. David Ehrenhaft I think died in 1920, so quite a bit earlier than my birth. Oskar Polacek died on New Year's Eve 1925/1926 in Salzburg. And he went to a hotel there, without his wife, and why he committed suicide I don't know. No one ever spoke about it, but for the fact that he did commit suicide. The death certificate shows the date of death was January 1st, 1926. We just went to see the movie "Last Year in Marienbad" that is set in that era of the 1920's of fancy hotels to which the rich went. So probably he was in that type of situation. I don't know if he was a gambler, or just one day was caught in a compromising situation. I never heard anything about him, other than that he died on New Year's Eve and that's how his widow became the owner of the Austria Teigwarenfabrik where her daughter occasionally worked.

Frank: David died in 1920, Olga survived him. Did Olga live with your parents in those days?

Peter: No. She had her own apartment, where she lived with her dachshund, to which she was very devoted. We have lots of pictures of her dog, whose name was Susi. She always remembered that dachshund, and in her cremation urn niche in Queens, New York – created in 1946 when she died, when I was thirteen – there is a little statue of a dachshund in there, remembering her dog. We have lots of pictures of her walking that dog. She had an apartment or house in Reichenau, which is about a half an hour's ride outside Vienna in the countryside. We spent a lot of time there and a lot of the photographs we have from that period are from Reichenau.

Frank: She had a lot of time to be on her own, independently, for 17 or 18 years. How did Olga survive during that time?

Peter: I have no idea whether my father supported her. He obviously was quite close to her, as she repeatedly shows up in so many of these pictures. She came with us to England; she came with us to Czechoslovakia. She must have been a very different type of person than Mathilde. When we went to Mathilde's house in 1938 when we left Austria, what the relationship was between those two women at that time would be an interesting fact to know. But I never heard a word about their relationship. All I know is that Olga left Czechoslovakia with us on September 1st or 2nd, 1938 and Mathilde was not there. Supposedly she could not or would not travel with a broken leg – that occurred just before we left. But we never really talked about Mathilde until long afterwards. Olga lived with us – and coincidentally also broke her leg after we arrived in New York. The fracture was poorly set so that she had to walk with a cane for the last few years of her life. I remember George was to put her shoes on her every day and I took them off. I was going to have my bar mitzvah [14] in 1946 and when she died a few weeks before the bar mitzvah was scheduled it was called off. I never actually went through with the bar mitzvah.

Instead I was confirmed in Temple Isaiah. We were not very religious in the sense of going to the religious school or participating in the services. But I went regularly and so did my parents. Temple Isaiah was a very reformed temple run by a Rabbi Landman who came from Cincinnati where the reform Jewish movement in the United States began. He was also a graduate of the "Integrated Liberal Studies" program at Wisconsin University and attempted to urge me to go to Wisconsin and take the ILS course. I did apply after high school but since I got a scholarship to Columbia I went there instead.

Temple Isaiah in Kew Gardens, to which a great number of the Austrian and German refugees who lived in the Kew Gardens went, was very liberal. Hardly a word of Hebrew was used, except for some of the very famous sayings in Hebrew. I went to the religious school, studied the Bible and went to Hebrew school to study for bar mitzvah. But the rabbi was not convinced that bar mitzvah was "the" important rite of passage. He thought 13-year-old kids were too young for it. The confirmation that he had promoted, after you finished high school and before you went off to College, was a more appropriate time for a ceremony for passage to adulthood and membership in the congregation. So that's what I did. I continued with my studies at Temple Isaiah, and had a confirmation when I was fifteen, when I was a junior in high school, rather than the bar mitzvah that I would have had at age thirteen.

Frank: What is your theory or knowledge about your parents' decisions to emphasize Jewish traditions and education in a new country, as opposed to their observance when they were by themselves or when you were very young?

Peter: I thought that they saw recognition of their Judaism as important – but also imposed. I think that they regretted their lack of knowledge about, and participation in, Judaism in Austria. But they were "Jews" whether or not they chose to call themselves that. There they associated the practice of Judaism with much more conservative or orthodox traditions than we practiced at Temple Isaiah. They weren't familiar with those traditions because they didn't speak Hebrew. But that was not necessary here, and here they thought it was important to bond to the community where so many of my friends went too. So it was kind of "the thing to do". And it was very convenient because the Temple was only a block away from our apartment.

[...] Interestingly, before we arrived here, in England we went to church. There are pictures of me participating in the Christmas pageant in Birchington where we lived in 1939. And while we lived in London, I went to St. Dunstan's School and probably was participating in its religious activities. My report cards from there are very detailed but I don't know if they included "religion" or not. [...]

Frank: Did your Dad have any interest in becoming an American citizen?

Peter: He became a citizen almost the very first day he could. I have a timeline here: he was naturalized on June 4th, 1945. We arrived in February of 1940, so five years to June '45 was about as quick as you could possibly be.

Frank: Mom was naturalized on April 10th, 1945, a little over two months earlier.

Peter: Her English was better I guess.

Frank: Olga was naturalized as well, also in 1945.

Peter: Yes.

Frank: What did you and your Dad talk about when you were a teenager?

Peter: We talked a lot about stamps. He continued as a stamp collector in this country and remained a part-time dealer. My first job for pay was working for one of his colleagues in the stamp business in Nassau Street in Manhattan. I wrote a short story about my experience there for a creative writing class in high school. I still have the story, which begins: "It was hot, unbearably hot." It was an appropriate recollection of the days before air conditioning of going around in New York. It's another one of the lines we use like: "Here I am!" That was my entire speaking role in the Christmas play at St. Dunstan's School in 1938 soon after we had arrived in London. I was supposed to bring a tray of cookies on stage and recite that line. I am told I ate most of the cookies while awaiting by entrance but did say "Here I am!" And "It was hot, unbearably hot" is a similar family "in" line.

But returning to my Dad, stamps were something I think we talked about, as well as the stock market. I was very interested in the stock market, and from an early day he had me saving my pennies and keeping books of account. I have a record, I don't know whether I can still dig it up, of what I did with my allowance of I think five cents a week. I had to – and did – record every penny I spent.

We discussed his passion for "Die gute Luft" – "the good air". He was a fanatic, on weekends, of getting out into the air. One of the first recollections that Charlotte has of our family, was how we went out to Rockaway in the winter time. Rockaway is a beach in Queens, which is popular in the summer of course, and in the winter it's all closed down. But there is a boardwalk with a large men's room that had a windshield around its entrance. My parents would bring beach loungers out to Rockaway and we would put them out behind that windshield and sit in the glorious sunshine to take in the glorious air. We did the New York Times Sunday cross-word puzzle. That's an event very firmly etched in my mind in our courtship: going out to the "gute Luft" at the men's room in Rockaway. Those weren't the only times we went. Sometimes my father was very insistent that we go because he was cooped up in his office all day during the week, and on the weekends he insisted on getting out into the good air.

[...] He played tennis when the weather was right, and I was a ball boy for him and later on he played with me. That's about the only athletics in which I was involved. [...]

My parents were more interested in my academics. I was a stamp collector. I liked classical music. I went to the opera. My mother was a fanatic about opera. We used to listen together to the weekly radio broadcasts from the Met [15]. She had piano scores of the operas and we would follow the score. In Vienna they translated and performed all of the operas in German and these piano scores had the German libretto, so we could also follow the language. I could read enough German to read the libretto. I also used to go standing room at the Metropolitan. It cost \$ 1.25 and you had to get there early to be among the first ten to get one of the five standing room places on each side of the Family Circle to see the whole stage. If you didn't have one of those five spots you're already in an obstructed view of the stage. So I would get there at 11 am waiting for the opening at 1:30 pm to run upstairs to get one of those good \$ 1.25 standing room places.

Frank: If your Dad didn't like to talk about what my parents used to call the "old country", was he willing to talk to you about it after you were a teenager? Did he ever tell you stories about, for example, how he built the Windsor Stamp Company or some of the struggles he did have coming to the States?

Peter: No. [...] I think we talked much more about what I was doing in school; we talked about music, current events, and the war. That was a subject we talked about at the dinner table. We had a big map showing the advances of the Allies and so on. There was a lot of interaction with our parents. You asked about music, for example I have a strong recollection that WQXR was on the air all of the time. I have an image in my mind of my mother darned socks in the living room and WQXR playing a Tchaikovsky waltz that was the signature theme for "Flexies" which were some kind of women's underwear. I thought that was so exciting and I hopped around in the living room to this music my mother was listening to, but aside from ...

Frank: WQXR was a classical station?

Peter: Yes. It was the station of the New York Times and still is.

Frank: How did your mother occupy herself once you were settled in the States?

Peter: Well, she was a housewife. And she went to PS 99 [16], where George and I went to school, and there was a guard in the halls against saboteurs! She took piano lessons and accompanied singers – women primarily, but also a couple of men, who had sung maybe professionally in Europe and wanted to sing past their prime and she accompanied them.

Frank: But they were European? Relocates I guess.

Peter: Yes. [...] They would come to our house to sing with accompaniment and just wanted to keep their voices, just to sing. So she would

accompany them, the great Viennese songs like: (singing) "Mein' Mutter war a Wienerin" or "Yours Is My Heart Alone". Then a friend of hers, an American, ran a ballet school for little girls and she played the piano at that ballet school.

Frank: Were your parents happy?

Peter: I think so.

Frank: Certainly satisfied, relieved at least to have avoided something far worse.

Peter: Yes. I think that my father found that his clientele was primarily other refugees, and some of them didn't make it as well as he did. I think he didn't have that much. Clearly he was not nearly at the economic level in the United States he had enjoyed in Austria. When I went to College, he gave me a hundred dollars a month; everything else I had to cover myself. And I got scholarship to Columbia College. I worked while I went to College in the dining halls, worked as a counselor [in a children's camp] in the summer. But at that time tuition at Columbia was \$ 600 a year. With the scholarship and my work, I was able to survive on that. My parents couldn't support a hell of a lot more. It was pretty remarkable.

Both of my parents were only children. They had no siblings. This was an important element in our growing up because they had a number of good friends who had no children and my brother and I became sort of surrogate offspring with some of these other couples. There are quite a number of pictures here with my family where they were always present – where there would be four adults, six adults and my brother and I were the two kids along. Those others didn't have children and we were partly "theirs". [...]

Frank: Now what did you mean when you cut off George's locks, which was a hostile act? How did you in general adapt to having a little brother?

Peter: I think we more or less ignored one another, except if we interfered with one another. You know he lived in the same room as I did [...] right up 'till College. He was much more athletic. And I am really surprised by how much I hated exercise. I never exercised [...]. It's kind of funny because when I entered the Air Force in 1958 [...] the base Commander had every officer participate in exercises daily, and since then, 1958, I've been a nut about doing exercises every day. I did them this morning, and my doctors said I have survived strokes and heart attacks because my exercise has kept my body in pretty good shape. [...] And so this is a big transition which I credit to the Air Force. During my growing up, I hardly participated in sports. I tried playing tennis with my father, who was a good tennis player, and he was very patient playing with me. I was a shitty tennis player. I definitely improved a lot because I kept it up in the Air Force, where I also played badminton, which I enjoyed a lot. Until I was compelled to stop playing tennis because of my ejection fraction being so low, I really enjoyed it a lot. I also did a lot of swimming, I liked doing that.

Frank: Now to George: How would you describe the brotherly connection there in the early days?

George: Well, at that age, who thinks about those things? It's all in retrospect. We began to piece it all together, and that dynamic between us was just something that existed and I never really tried to define it. It wasn't in our nature at that age to define it. But anyway, as Peter [...] told you, we shared a room. Thinking back it must have been a fourteen by fourteen room with a closet and a window that faced out to 118th Street. [...] Because, while we certainly must have ignored one another, I don't doubt Peter's word, but we didn't completely ignore each other. Because we did a lot of fighting, I mean not a lot of fights, but I think the typical fights that any pair of brothers might have. We sometimes hit each other and punched each other and I remember in particular an instance, I believe it happened on V-E Day [17], in 1945, when Peter and I were in our room and somehow we were wrestling with each other, and in the process – I had a loose front tooth at the time – as a result of our wrestling the tooth fell out, and there was lots of blood. I remember that our father was very upset by that because he thought that this was a day that we should be rejoicing and have peace and here we were engaged in this conflict.

[...] The other thing I wanted to tell Frank about was an incident that is still fairly vivid in my mind. In our bedroom there was a single window with a shade that could be pulled down. We often had to pull it down during the war, because we had blackouts. There was one night that must have been during the war: My bed was right next to the window and I could lean right up against [...] the windowsill and look outside. On that one night I opened the shade and started to look out the window and for some reason Peter was annoyed by that, and he tried to convince me to go back to bed and pull down the shade by telling me that it might be dangerous to keep the window shade up. The reason he gave me was that in our room we had two maps. On the wall opposite our window was a map of the United States and on the wall perpendicular to the window was a map of New York State. [...] Well, he told me, and I guess I must have believed him because I was a young kid and figured my elders would know better, "It's dangerous to keep the windows open with the shades up because the Germans have special lights on their airplanes. If they see a map on the wall they'll think we are some kind of military installation and they'll bomb us. So you'd better close the window and the shade." And I guess I did so because I thought that was a pretty frightening prospect. [...]

Frank: And as I understand it, you distinguished yourself as being the more athletic and [your] competitive juices came out in sports?

George: Well that's what I hear. I was a pretty fast runner. When I ran races at summer camp or even with the kids who lived in the same building as we did, Eton Hall, we would often run races, and I was usually the winner. Yes, I was pretty good in that. I used to play softball and things like that. One year – 1944 – [...] we went to YMCA [18] camps in New Jersey. I was just seven years old at that time and went to the young kids' camp while Peter went to the older kids' camp which was across the lake; Camp Kittatinny and I went to Camp Minisink. I remember distinctly that I was just miserable, because I was so homesick. We went there not for the whole summer, but just for three weeks. It was so important to me to catch a glimpse of Peter, just because I was so homesick. As I said I was miserable. The following year I went back to Camp Minisink not for three weeks but for five weeks, and what stands out in my mind about that summer was that early one morning we were all called to come out to the flagpole, where we congregated every morning for flag raising. But this day it was before dawn and we were told that the war was over. There was this bomb that had been dropped on Japan and the war is now over. I was eight years old at the time and it didn't mean that much to me, but I remember that particular instance. [...]

Frank: George, do you remember your Dad being a passionate advocate of "Die gute Luft"?

George: Yes, right. He wanted us to go out all the time and breathe the good air. He thought that was the best thing you could do for your health.

Frank: And also to Far Rockaway Beach?

George: Yes, Far Rockaway Beach. We went there very often. In the early years we would go there every weekend on the Long Island Railroad. I remember that we used to know the stations by heart and that was kind of a little jingle that we would sing when we went from Jamaica to Rockaway. And the place to which we went was called "Roaches Beach". That's what it was called. But later on we got a little fancier, we didn't just go to Rockaway; we went to the Silver Point Beach Club and we had a cabana [19] there for a few years. Many of our parents' friends had a place there, so it was a big gathering place for our parents and our friends and their families. I don't think many of them had kids our age. It was mainly adults.

Frank: What are some of the words, terms, or phrases that you would use to describe your Dad?

George: I think he was a very charming man. I think he was blessed with social graces and people liked him very, very much. He was just a very gentle and kind person. He was very neat in appearance. One of his habits was his hair. I don't know if you've seen any pictures of him, but he combed his hair straight back. No part, just straight back from his forehead; and to keep the hair in place in the mornings before he went out, he would put a hair net on to keep his hair in place for the rest of the day. He often wore a necktie, even in informal occasions. His shoes were shined, and I know that because I often shined them for him. And I think people really really liked him. In fact during the last few years I've been in touch with some of my friends from that era and they often have told me how they liked my father as a person. One of them who happened to have been my high school sweetheart reminded me that there was a time when we were all out at the beach together and my father spent maybe a couple of hours with us together. He was just very interested in her because she was an artist, and he advised her and talked to her about various possibilities for her in art. I had no idea about that, but this woman, now 72, was forever grateful for that conversation. [...] I think he was a very loving father, although he didn't demonstrate that so often. I mean he didn't say it, but he showed us with his actions. He loved going to the beach with us, and taking us out to various places on Long Island. We went on a number of trips together, as a whole family [...]. For some time we went to a resort in New York called the Campbell Inn. We often went to a place in Pennsylvania called Hergouth Farm. We also made some trips – the trips really started after my grandmother died in 1946 –, family trips to Atlantic City, and to Washington DC and to Massachusetts, to Cape Ann. We often, on weekends, went to Jones Beach and Rockaway, as Peter already mentioned. So he was very interested in having family life. He didn't have a driver's license until about 1947 or '48 when we bought our first car. He took the driver's test three times before he passed it. As a footnote my mother never learned to drive, and because of that she depended on us to take her around.

Peter: I think the one important reason both of our parents were so anxious to have a family life was that both of them were only children. Neither of them had a sibling. Therefore they thought that we siblings meant we were a "family" and that meant a great deal.

George: Oh yes, absolutely. I know that Mom, in her later years, was always concerned that Peter and I would get along, and she was always happy to hear that we had talked to each other or done something together – met somewhere. That was very important to her. Another thing I wanted to mention about Dad was that I never knew about, as he did not want to talk about it, what happened in Austria and his experiences with the Nazis. Our Mother talked about it, but I don't think he talked about it, and I know he never wanted to go back. She went back to visit after he died.

Other things about him: well, he was sort of athletic. He played tennis and skied. We have pictures of him on skis. We actually played tennis until he wasn't able to in the '50's. He also at one time took up golf and took some lessons. I don't think he was really good at it, but he tried.

Frank: Did you play tennis with him? [...]

George: Oh yes, a lot. We would often go out after he came home from work and in the summer. We would go out and rent a court, and on weekends we often went for a family outing. So we played often. One thing that we didn't do was play games. We just volleyed, back and forth, and I don't think we ever kept score. It was just so we would learn how to do it. He would often give us pointers and he was pretty good. [...]

Frank: Your father strikes me in addition to be a gentlemen and a reassuring figure, he also seems to have an incredible level of resilience and a lot of times people who are resilient are scrappy and fighter types. They don't normally come across as gentlemen or reassuring types. This man dealt with, I mean he had to grow up in the Austrian army at the age of sixteen. The country is devastated. The country is all over the place in 1918, 1919. He is recruited by a bank and eventually over time he rises to the top of that bank, is forced out by the Nazis, then he makes a whole new life and he's not even age 40. Is that a fair characterization? And then he's taken out too young for that kind of strength.

George: I think that is a fair characterization, and I'm always amazed thinking of what it must have been like for him to tear up the roots that he developed and move to another country. Certainly it was a wonderful and wise decision to get out of there, and what it was that gave him that inspiration I really don't know, but it must have been some very strong aspect of his character.

Peter: Well I think also being arrested by the start of the "Anschluss" and taken away helped to concentrate his mind.

George: Well, it could be, right. And honestly every time I hear stories about the Holocaust and what happened and hear stories of what happened to other families, I just admire what Dad did for us. He basically gave us our lives. Without the kind of decision-making power he had, we wouldn't be here today. [...]

[1] The "Anschluss" refers to the annexation of Austria and its integration into the German Reich on March 13th, 1938.

[2] Today: Mohelnice.

[3] Today: Olomouc (town in the Czech Republic).

[4] This conference led to the Munich Agreement of September 30th, 1938, permitting Germany's annexation of the Czechoslovakian "Sudetenland".

[5]

Karl Pick (1867–1938), social democratic unionist, member of the Austrian Parliament 1919–1934.

[6] The exact address of the factory was 39, Berggasse (9th district of Vienna).

[7] Seven-branched candelabrum, one of the most important religious symbols of Judaism.

[8] Jewish Holiday, commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the 2nd Century BCE.

[9] B'nai B'rith (Hebrew "Sons of the Covenant"): an international Jewish service and welfare organisation.

[10] "Braunhemden", term for the members of the SA ("Sturmabteilung" – "Storm Division", the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party) due to the colour of their uniforms.

[11] Street in the first district of Vienna.

[12] Passover or Pessach: important Jewish holiday, commemorating the Israelites' exodus from Egypt.

[13] Cunard Line: a British shipping company.

[14] Traditional Jewish ceremony after a boy is 13 years old and thus becomes responsible for his actions.

[15] The Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

[16] A public elementary school in Kew Gardens, New York.

[17] V-E Day: "Victory in Europe Day", commemorates May 8th, 1945, the end of World War II.

[18] Young Men's Christian Association.

[19] A little hut.