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Interview mit

Peter Elmer

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Verwendete Kürzel:

SM Sebastian Markt

PE Peter Elmer

Teil 1

PE: …public school at that time and when I was little I did not have that much of a problem. I do remember…maybe…since I was born in 1923 I was maybe eleven or twelve when I could not take *religion* in school. I was told that I would take it by being taught by a Jewish teacher at home. My family was really never particularly religious, we were quite assimilated, which I think may have also caused some of the problems. That a family who was Jewish, who were assimilated did not want to believe as though it was going to happen, when Hitler finally came. I had a fairly normal childhood, though my parents became separated – but it did not seem that traumatic to me when I was little. The person in my family who was really most influential was my grandfather, by the name of Henri Friedländer. He was the kind of patriarch in the family and he made a lot of the important decisions. And when I was…in 1937 he had decided that I should be going to school in England. I am not sure if he knew or anticipated what was going to happen as far as Hitler was concerned but he seemed to think it was important that I would try to learn another language. So I was sent off to a boarding school in England in a place called Herne Bay which is near…in Kent. And I was there from late 1937 until the end of 1938.

I was quite a spoiled child originally, so this was a new experience for me away from home. But once Hitler took over in Austria, it was obvious that I would not be able to come back. It was a traumatic time because I could not be in that much…in touch with the rest of my family. My grandfather, as well as my uncle, were sent off to Dachau and it was a very difficult time for my family. We were very fortunate that during all this time my mother managed in some form or other to finally get my grandfather, as well as my uncle, out of Dachau, which was very unusual, but was still sometimes possible in the very early days before you had more serious difficulties. I think one of the reasons why they wanted my grandfather is that he was a bank director and that made it…the Germans…Hitler wanted to have foreign…evaluations of dollars and everything else and they thought he would have some money hidden away and he never…I do not know…all I know is when my mother finally found out he was coming back from Dachau, she was told when he would come on a train and she met him at the train and she walked right by him because she could not…did not recognize her father after that time. He had a very tough time and obviously was physically as well as emotionally quite changed. All this time I was in Kent and the whole family met in Switzerland once they were able to get out. At that time, my mother was allowed to pack a lift van of some important things, which she wanted to have. And she was also a ceramist, a very good one, a potter, and she had a kiln down in the basement and she took the bricks that make up the kiln and put it into the lift van. And the Gestapo came, as they always do, to look over the lift van and started breaking down the bricks because they were sure that gold or something else had to be hidden…could not understand how somebody would want to emigrate and just bring bricks back. But my mother was very attached to having a kiln set up when she would get here. So finally, we all met in a little village called Wolfgang in Switzerland, near Davos. And in January 1939 we emigrated…to New York.

1/00:06:22

SM: Before we go into that can I ask you a few more questions?

PE: Ask me.

SM: When you were growing up in Vienna did you have any activities that you were interested in or--

PE: --I played…I was always into sports, I played a lot of soccer. And I was not very tall but I…for a long time I was on the school team for playing soccer. And I also played a lot of tennis. I do not really remember going to too many museums or other intellectual activities. I had a small group of friends…who sort of stuck with me. We would meet…we would be like a little gang together doing things. We were lucky, because my family had a large garden and everybody came to play there.

SM: So those friends, were they mainly Jewish or was it mixed?

PE: It was mixed. There were some Jewish friends and some non-Jewish friends. Again, this was sort of typical of the family: we were certainly not brought up with a great deal of religion except…what I was reluctantly being taught by the Hebrew man who had taught me Hebrew – which I never picked up to well. But it was typical of a lot of families who were not at all orthodox and who were, as I said before, assimilated a lot there. And thought of themselves at that time as much Austrians as they thought of themselves as being Jewish.

SM: So did…were you – before the political impact of Nazism – aware…or in what degree were you aware of being Jewish or what significance did it have to you?

PE: It did have some significance in school in the last two or three years because I already…there was already some feeling of anti-Semitism at that time. But it was not so extreme that I was ever beaten up or any other kind. So it was a mixed bag.

SM: Was politics something that was discussed in your family or friends?

PE: A little bit, not a great deal. There was discussion always about…I remember in the earlier days there was somebody who was the chancellor, or whatever you call him in Austria, called Dollfuß, and later on it was somebody called Schuschnigg. And we did talk about him in the family, there was some reaction, but it was never the major source of conversation in some form at home.

SM: Were you ever affiliated with political youth groups or Zionist youth groups?

PE: Not really, no, not at all.

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SM: You said that your mother is an artist or was an artist. [Telefon klingelt.] Did culture play a big role in your education?

PE: Very much so. My mother…she was not only…she was a potter and an artist in painting and so on, but she never did it – during the times we were in Vienna – she never did it professionally. But we did talk a lot about that. She went to school there and…she…we discussed things that she made and we talked about what they would mean and we were all very much involved in that. Though I must say in my younger days that I remember, I was really more involved in sports. I used to be…as I said, I played a lot of tennis, I played ping-pong, I went to soccer matches, and I played soccer and that seem to be…involved a lot of my time.

SM: What was the team you favored?

PE: You know, I am now 77 years old and I am not sure I remember my name all the time, so I do not remember. I vaguely remember something…there was a team called "Red, white, and blue" or something but maybe I am wrong. I remember I had an uncle who would take me to soccer matches a lot and we would go…quite a bit. My father, who had been separated that time already, was not really around that much. Not a great deal of discussion was…had in the family about…explanations of what was happening as far as my mother and my father was concerned. My mother who was…she went during the time when the Anschluss already…she actually went to Berlin to try to negotiate for the release of her father with the Gestapo which was unheard of for a Jewish lady almost, I mean, it took a lot of guts at that time. She could have very well been put in prison herself, but somehow it worked out. I…since I was not there during the time of the Anschluss I only had…second-hand conversation, feelings. And during the time I was in England there was not a great deal of correspondence because they always were afraid that, undoubtedly, letters were being censored and they could not really write a great deal until they got an OK to emigrate.

SM: Was that difficult for you to go to another country, leave your family and your friends?

PE: Yes, very much so. I…initially, before the Anschluss, I remember being very homesick and writing that I did not like it there. First of all, because [the] English, at that time particularly, were not that favorably inclined towards foreigners. And I was a foreigner, and my English was very poor, if any. And I was really an outcast in a way. I then tried to get together with a few other German or Austrian boys, but that did not make for any popularity with the rest of the English. The only time that it improved is when they found out, that I was a very good tennis player and a very good soccer player, and they could use me on one of their little teams. But I was also quite spoiled in my upbringing. My family was at that time very well-off, we had a very nice house with a big garden in Hietzing, I had sort of a nanny and so I remember when I was brought to England and there you had to get dressed in a school blazer and sometimes you had to wear a tie, I had no idea of putting on a tie. And I found that it was always very cold and the basins, which we had for washing, sometimes froze over and I would write home to them about it. And at that time they said it is good for you to learn all these things and they probably were, but it was…not necessarily a happy time for me.

1/00:16:05

SM: Did the fact that you are Jewish play any role at that point in England with the English kids or the Austrian or German kids?

PE: No. I do not think it was…as far as English were concerned, you were just a foreigner and they did not like that. I also remember the first day I was there, we were at an assembly and somebody spoke and I could not understand what the person was saying and so I looked up and around trying to figure out what was going on. Well, it turned out a little later that there was a chaplain who was saying their morning prayers. And five minutes later I had somebody put the hand on my shoulder. And it was somebody who was called a prefect, he was a student but in an upper echelon. And he said: "You are one of the new foreigners?" I said: "Yes." And then he said: "Did you know what is going on here?" I said: "No, that is why I looked around." He says: "Well, this is terrible because you must understand they were saying prayers." I said: "I did not realize what is going on." He said: "Well, you come to my office." And I got caned the first time. Means you pull your pants down and you really got caned as a punishment for what I was doing. And because I never had a caning before, I could not sit down, it was very difficult to go to classes, because it was very painful, so I was the laughing stock of a lot of other kids who were either used to getting caned or whatever…you put a book down there instead. But I got used to it and I got used to a certain amount of discipline, but certainly I was not particularly happy during the first few months that I was there.

SM: Where you at that time aware of what was going on in Austria?

PE: This was before the Anschluss, though. Not really, and I do not think that my family was very much aware of it, too. Because they seemed to have not made any plans for trying to leave or anything of that kind. My father – who was in the textile business, a business which was founded by his father – he traveled a lot in and out of Austria. But…there was not a feeling…in England it did not matter…being Jewish. And at that time my name was Epstein, no question I was…I never denied being Jewish, but it…not that I would now, but…it was mostly, as I said, antagonism towards foreigners in general that I got caught in rather than being a Jewish boy from Vienna.

SM: What did you or members of your family think of the developments in Germany at that time? Did you consider it a threat to Austria as well?

PE: Yes, but somehow…they did not feel that strong as though it was going to happen in Austria because it just happened in Germany which, of course, was a big mistake. And you also have to remember that in the early days of Hitler in Germany, where certainly there was anti-Semitism, you did not have as much violence or people being sent to concentration camps in masses like it happened later, so…somehow the family felt as though it would not happen to them. Which was not very realistic – that is hindsight.

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SM: So, when your family decided to leave the country, do you know how that decision was made, who decided that it would be better to leave?

PE: Well, the time that it happened…once my grandfather, my uncle and actually one time my father was also put…but he was just put into jail because of being Jewish. Obviously, the time had come that you did not want to stay anymore. And it was not as easy, not the usual thing, you had to get affidavits from relatives or friends in the States and…you could usually only have a stopover in England which is really what we did on the way to the States once they finally gave you permission to leave. And, as I said, we…I went back from my school to meet them in Switzerland once they had gotten out and from there we went to London and then by boat to the States.

SM: Do you remember at what point of time your grandfather and your uncle were sent to Dachau?

PE: I did not know…I do not remember my family ever writing to me – or maybe they could not – but there was no communication…I did not know about this until they got out. So, I knew nothing about any that was happening to my grandfather, my uncle, my father.

SM: And how was it…you were told to meet them in Switzerland. By that time you knew that the plan was to emigrate to the United States.

PE: Yes, I think once…I did not know all the details, but…I just remember – which is not connected with being Jewish or not being Jewish –, I was always very short and you had to wear, as I told you, a blazer that is part of the uniform with the emblem of the college on there. And you wore usually long, grey pants and that is how I got to Switzerland. And my whole family was waiting at the train station when I arrived. When I got out of the train everybody laughed at me and I was very upset because I had not seen them for a year and a half. I looked forward to being hugged and everything else. And I did not realize that my jacket had shrunk terribly, that the pants which were all the way down there were up to my knees. I looked like a ridiculous caricature and they could not help but laughing. They realized, by the way, that I was not aware of that at all. I was happy to see them.

SM: So, what was it…was it a problem for you to leave Austria – as you said, you left in [19]37 – and at that time you probably did not expect that it would be for good--

PE: --no, I thought it would be maybe for…I was told I would go to school for a year or two and the primary reason, I was told, was to learn English. And it is entirely possible, for that matter – having talked to my grandfather when we got here to the States – he did say that he had some inkling that things could go wrong and he felt that…not that I represented the whole family, I was still only fourteen, fifteen years old – but he thought that it was important for me to possibly be out of the country. So, he had some feeling that things were not going that well. I mean, it was already the days of Dollfuß, if I remember correctly, and there was a lot of noise and a lot of anti-Semitism coming around. So it was not that surprising that he made that decision, he is the one who made the decision for us.

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SM: And then you all together went to the United States?

PE: We went…I remember the day because it happened to be my mother's birthday. It was in January, we arrived on January 26th, 1939. We had no idea where we would go to settle or anything of that kind. My mother, who, as I told you before, had been a potter and artist and in this very well-known *Kunstgewerbeschule* in Vienna – see, I still remember a few German words – she had one time…this goes back into 1936, she met a lady from the United States, who, I believe, was also interested in pottery. And they took up quite a friendship while she stayed there and when the lady left she gave my mother a card and she said – at that time, nobody thought of coming to the States yet – and she said: "If you ever come to the States, you must call me up." My mother had that card and when we got to New York in 1939, she said: "Well, we do not know, where we are going to settle, let's call, we have no idea what…" We called this lady and the lady says: "You are not staying in New York, are you?" – "We have no idea, we have some friends who are here and some far away relatives, well we do not know." My stepfather had been an accountant in Vienna, did not speak any English at all, so it was not likely that he would get a job that quickly. And she said: "You know what you must do? Do me a big favor: I have a house on the beach in La Jolla." We did not know where La Jolla was. We said: "Where is La Jolla?" She said: "Well, it is on the beach in California. I have a beach house there and I live in Texas, I never use it in the summertime. And you could housesit for me and you would do me a big favor." And my mother, I guess, had some more conversations, and then the lady said: "You probably do not have too much money; I can also tell you that there is now a train that goes…connected with the San Francisco fair which is very reasonable. You take it and as long as you stop at the fair you get a very reasonable rate and you get to see almost the whole country."

So we fled…we went by train the southern route one way and after we finished in La Jolla back the other way. And we had a wonderful time in La Jolla, not very realistic, because none of us really knew what was going to happen. The only one that made any real attempts about trying to find…some way of making a living was my mother. As I said, she was an artist, and she started finding seaweed in the ocean. And she became fascinated with that and started collecting seaweed, bring them home and dry them in paper and found out that they keep their colors very beautifully. And she ended up…the seaweed stank, something awful, the whole house was full of a seaweed smell, but my mother was very determined and she ended up when we came back to New York to do a business…when she made…applied the seaweeds to lampshades. And these lampshades became quite a good business. So that at one time, a year or two later, Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt came in and bought one of the lampshades for the White House. And it was at the White House for quite a long time. And my mother managed to employ three or four other refugees to help in making the lampshades. I, in the meantime – my mother got a scholarship into a private school – and I had a very difficult adjustment: When I was in England, the school was very strict, very conventional; you stood up when you were asked any questions, everybody was only…by their last names, you were caned if you did not do your homework properly. When I went to school for the first time here in New York, this was a very progressive school where it was the extreme difference: Your teacher called you by your first name, the

teacher was like a buddy to you and it was very loose and very free and it took me a while to adjust to this new freedom because I am not being used to it.

1/00:31:02

SM: Where was that school?

PE: It is called Walden School. [Er buchstabiert.] W. A. L. D. E. N.

[Übergang/Schnitt.]

And, well, I went to that school for three and a half years, and then I was seventeen and I had a very nice time in school, particularly socially, because that is one of the things they emphasized. You made a lot of friends, you had boys and girls sleepovers, it was very friendly. We used to take trips to learn something about the country; we used to take trips south. That time I was seventeen and I was probably one of the oldest ones in the class and I had what you called a junior license, which allowed you to drive. So I was one of the backup drivers on that trip when we had four, five cars. And we all had a lovely time going into the South and learning a great deal about history in the United States. That was a very good experience. Soon after that I went to the University of Wisconsin for one year, it was little less than a year. My grandfather, as I mentioned earlier, has been really the one that had the greatest influence in my life…and he decided, when I did not know what I wanted to do, that I should study to become an engineer. I had no qualifications for being an engineer at all. I remember having to take mechanical drawing, that was one of the requirements that you had and I failed it twice. And it was terrible, I could never…before the year was up, I was drafted into the American army. And…I spent four, five months in what is normally basic training and then I volunteered for the ski mountain troops, which was an organization that was just being formed with a lot of…particularly Austrian, German, Swiss, Norwegian skiers because one of the requirements was that you had to be a very good skier to get in there or if you are not a very good skier, you had to be a very good mountain climber and they would then teach you how to ski. So I spent a year and a half in a place called Camp Hale in Colorado, high up at ten thousand feet where we were trained to fight a war, trained to fight on skies, if it should become necessary, learnt how to mountain climb. And the idea was to be prepared, particularly in case the outfit was going to have to fight against Austrian or German mountain troops who were well trained. We did not have any ski or mountain troops in the United States. And the 10th Mountain Division was the only outfit and we were all volunteers, not volunteers for the army, but volunteers to go into that outfit.

At the end of our training we were sent to Italy to fight against particularly German or Austrian mountain troops in an area, which was really called a mountain range, which was called the Apennines, which a lot of American forces had tried to cross, and the Germans and Austrians held it with tremendous casualties for

American troops. And we came in as sort of the elite who was supposed to be able to do something and we did. After a long time we were able to climb a 3000 foot cliff where the Germans and Austrians had huge fortifications into the valley, but had no fortifications in their cliff because nobody could climb it. And we managed to bring up over a 1000 men in the middle of the night – and I was part of that – to…after basic preparations…and we completely surprised the German…and Austrians to the point that we found some of them sleeping. And this was the beginning of the end of that particular…the Germans ended up after a long fight to have to retreat and there was their biggest line of defense. It was pretty bloody, we went out with about 16,000 men, we lost about…about 3000 men were killed, not just in that one action, but also during the combat in the Po valley and so on. And about…I would say we had 4000 or 5000 wounded, so there were a lot of outfits. I still go once in a while to one of these reunions. It is now 50 years ago or something. I am not actively involved in the army at this point.

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One of the amusing things that I remember happening is, after we went and…ran after Germans and Austrian in the Po valley, we captured a wine cellar and we all got drunk and what happened at that time is…of course headquarters had no idea what we were doing, we were ahead of everybody else. And we were ordered, at one time, to move forward – because we were the forward troops – and try to cross the Po valley, the Po River. And what happened is we…you have, in an outfit like ours, or in every outfit, you have a mortar crew. Mortars, if you know anything about mortars, they shoot like that and you contain them in big jukes like this, mortar shells are in there. Well, with the guys being drunk and telling the war was over, which it was not, filled all these mortar shells with champagne and wine and everything else. But headquarters did not know that, when we got to the Po River, we were ordered to start firing mortar shells to protect an advance over the river. We did not have any mortar shells and somewhere along the line somebody had to tell headquarters that they better send up somebody else because that crew of 3000 or 4000 men were all drunk and they did not have any equipment.

Soon after that we were up in…we captured Lake Garda, which is up in the northern part of Italy and a village called Riva, and that time…I felt terribly sick, the first time in the army. I had no idea what I had, so I went to the medics – and this was still combat – and they threw me out, they did not even take my temperature. And by chance I met the captain who used to play bridge with me when we were in Colorado. He says: “What are you doing here, Elmer?” I said: “I feel awful.” To make a long story [short]…he took me in his tent and they did not diagnose what I had, except that I had very high fever, so they evacuated me and found out later that I had diphtheria, which is very unusual. [Lärm im Hintergrund.] So they evacuated me to Bologna, which is rather a bit further back from the frontlines and I was in isolation for six weeks. And at the end of that time, my outfit had gotten back to the States after skiing – when the war was over – in Kitzbühel and other places like that. And I was transferred, as I said before, to Salzburg and then to Vienna. Do you have some questions before I talk too far?

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SM: What was that experience of going into the army like for you? Also, concerning that…did you regard it as something important to fight against the--

PE: --yes. I felt…I am not really an army person, but I felt this was a war which was justified and though I hate war, I felt that I needed to try to make a contribution and I…it was completely justified, though I should say – without going backwards – that I was unwilling…to be a hero in some way. What I am trying to say about that is when we were still in Colorado, I was called in once to headquarters and I was told to swear that whatever went on in there, as long as the war is on, I would not discuss it with anybody. And what it was is: they wanted you to volunteer for OSS, *Office of Strategic Services,* and what that meant, though there is no guarantee, that meant somebody with my background…they probably would have considered dropping me behind the lines into Austria or into Vienna to spy. And a lot of these never came back. So even though…I did not go along with that, so I am not a hero that way.

SM: Did you have any direct encounters with German or Austrian soldiers?

PE: Yes, all the time. We were…you see, particularly in the early part of the war, before we had to climb those cliffs, we had taken over a mountain position from another American outfit, who – typical army style – they were Air Force men and they were deep in ski country. And we came…and we could not understand…and we found out that they had a gentlemen's agreement. They were on one side of a big mountain, and Germans or Austrians, they did not know who, were on the other side. And the Germans and Austrians, I do not know who came first, fired two or three artillery shells at ten o'clock every morning over the heads of them. And they would fire back two or three artillery shots which meant: "We leave you alone and you leave us alone, do not bother us, go, have a good time with your girls, do not bother us."

When we came in, this immediately stopped. I went out…because of my background, I was always involved with every combat patrol that we had, because of my language. For example, one time we…the orders that we had…we had to find out how big the unit was on the other side, so the orders…we were with skies and with snow shoes – this was deep in the winter – and it was very difficult to get up to the top of the mountain. Because this is not skiing country, I mean, there is no packed snow, you are dealing in deep snow and everything else and you are carrying heavy equipment. I was one of eight men…no, I am sorry, four men who were told, if we would make it to the top of the mountain – since the Germans would not expect anybody because they had continued to make this peaceful firing – we were to ski into this village and try to capture one or two prisoners, or three or four, if we could, if we were lucky maybe catch somebody who was more than just…who was maybe more than just a rifle man, maybe somebody who was a captain or something other. I was scared, believe me, but I was willing to do it and we did it. And I had the experience that I skied down – all the other men were on top and they did not have any outposts, just like the old American outfit did not have any because everything was peaceful – and it was like one o'clock in the morning and I got into a

house, found – I did not know if he was German or Austrian or anything – somebody who…was involved with an Italian girl in bed. And I had to interrupt everything and I did not have any time, I was in…no idea where I was. Spoke German to him, told him to get up, put on his ski boots and put on some underwear – it was ten below zero outside. I did not have time to interrogate him, I did not know if he was German or Austrian, he…of course I was holding my rifle all the time because I bet somebody is going to catch me. And I got him…I then realized we did not plan this carefully enough. He…I could not find the rest of his clothes. I did not want him to die because we were hoping to interrogate him. I gave him my…I had a blazer against the snow and wind, I gave him that and it was very difficult to move back up the hill because I had snow shoes which I could put on, but he could not do that. So I had to try to walk him up, up the hill in deep snow. Very difficult, we did not speak because it was much too tiresome. And we were very lucky. Before we got to the top of the hill, an alarm had gone off already, because I was not the only one, three others tried…and they started firing mortar shells to the top, but nothing happened to us. And when we got over to the other side, the first thing we did is try to give him some clothes so he would not freeze to death.

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It was my first experience – which happened quite a few times afterwards – of having…I found out that he was in an Austrian mountain troop and I found out that he was a…I guess he was like a lieutenant, he was…and I questioned him, I asked him and all he gave me was his serial number. [Zug im Hintergrund.] You know, the law only requires…you do not have to give up any information except that. Well, we were very frustrated, so was I, and I do not think I was that bloodthirsty, but I…he said to me: "*Ich bin durstig*." I had a canteen with water and I took the can of water and I poured it over my head. That does not sound like me, people would not believe that I would do that, I was simply trying to get some information from him. Then he said to me: "*Ich möchte eine Zigarette*." I do not smoke, so I did not have any cigarettes with me. And so I got somebody else to finally give me a cigarette. And I am not even good at smoking, but I smoked the cigarette in front of him and I said: "Well, can we talk now? Please tell me a little more about your outfits, I will give you water, I will give you a cigarette, nothing is going to happen to you, you will be treated perfectly well, there will be no change." And so he finally broke down and gave us a lot of information, like, where they had mine fields, how big the unit was. And between myself and one other person we got a lot of information. We only captured two of them and the other two…it was not successful. But that was one of many experiences I had with German or Austrian mountain troops. There was another time, when I described to you when we got up on the cliff, when we finally captured some place called Mount Belvedere that…the Germans were so surprised that there was a patrol out on skis and they came up waving to us thinking we were their friends. And when they came closer they realized it was not so. I started taking a bullhorn and speaking German to them, telling them to drop their equipment, that we will not harm them if they would come up and we would capture them. They did…they had their skis on, but they left the rest of their equipment and this was another time when it was an advantage that I spoke the language, that is the reason why I was usually upfront, not because I was going to be a hero, or I wanted to be a hero.

1/00:50:40

SM: And then, when you finally came to Austria, again, this time, as part of the army, how was that like?

PE: It was a very interesting experience. I was…attached to a medical team, which I knew nothing about, I mean, I had no medical background, but the colonel who…the reason they brought me in there is because of my language, more than anything else, because that colonel was in charge of all medical problems, not only for the army, but really for the rest of the Austrian population. And it was very difficult, initially. Also, everybody started writing letters to me from New York because they had somebody who was left behind, primarily not Jewish – there were not that many Jews left. I had a great uncle who married a catholic, so they managed…they were the only ones…the relatives who I found who survived. But everybody wanted to send me big food packages and everything else and it became a little problem because I want…I did not know these people and you had to…I would have a warehouse of stuff to deliver to all kinds of people. I also…fell in love at that time with somebody who worked for the American army, who was a girl from Vienna and…it ended up with us marrying maybe two or three years later. First it was not easy to get her out. And at that time when I finally got out of the army, I had to settle myself and I went back to school. And in the end, she managed to come out. It is interesting because, her first name is the same name as wife number two's first name. And they always tease and they say…if I should be thinking of Inge number one, you would not know, because it would not be insulting, because I am not really talking about my present wife. But unfortunately, she was…we lived together here for four years, five years…she never…she did not know anybody here in the States, she was not Jewish, and she found it very difficult to acclimatize and to adjust. It was difficult because most of the friends I had…were my friends…it was difficult for her to adjust to them. So we did not have any children, which was fortunate and we had a friendly separation and divorce after that.

SM: Was it…did you consider moving back to Vienna after the war?

PE: No. I…my feelings were not very positive towards Austria in general. I felt…I know there are always exceptions; there are good people everywhere. That I get, but I felt there was such anti-Semitism that continued after the war and I believe it is still there. And I remember – which was just a small incidence – at one time, my uncle, the one that had been in Dachau, got out…we were on vacation together in Switzerland and we found […]. So we were standing in line at a…is it a funicular? *Drahtseilbahn*, is that correct? And with a lot of Germans and Austrians and my uncle looks very Jewish, was very bald already. And he was standing right in front of us and a very blonde, German or Austrian woman came by and knocked him down. Not just pushed him around, looked at him and said to him in German…something to the effect "I do not know how they missed gassing you", which was not very pleasant to speak of, particularly. I mean it was…and I only took…after the war I only came back there once because my wife wanted to show our children where we came from, she also was born in Vienna, born in the same hospital I was born in.

1/00:56:29

But in…I really had a particular interesting experience in Vienna when I was there during the army days. I give you, if it is not too long, a little example of something that is really amusing in a way: We had four power conferences there, as you know, Russian, German [meint: Amerikaner, Anm. d. Red.], French and English and we would meet once a month to have conferences and the medical team would meet once a month. And, at one time, a Russian colonel came to our office – by that time I recognized already – and we did not have that much contact with them. And as to speak to my Colonel Miles, he spoke to me. And I introduced myself and he says: "Look, I am sorry" – [he] spoke fluent English, perfect English. I said: "Colonel Miles is not available, would you like to tell me what the subject matter is?" – "No, I would care not to tell you that. I only want to speak to Colonel Miles." – "So I will see if I can make an appointment. Call us back tomorrow morning." I gave him my card, he called back, I said: "Colonel Miles will see you tomorrow afternoon – under the condition that Mister Elmer was going to be there" – I was Sergeant Elmer – "will be with you at the same time". Reluctantly he said yes. The reason for all this was: this was the time, 1945, when the American army got penicillin for the first time, which was not available to anybody else. It was basically only supplies enough for GIs who had a problem. So, this colonel came and he had a problem: he had contact with a disease and he pleaded… we started talking to him a lot of times, he…we learned a lot about his background: he was an engineer who lived near St. Petersburg. And I got to know him fairly well. And when the colonel decided to make an exception and give him the penicillin, the Russian colonel gave him a card and said: "If you ever have any kind of problem in any way with Russians, call us." And we ignored that. A week later, I was bringing home a civilian, there was…at that time curfew, you had to be…the civilians in Vienna had to be off the street at ten o'clock at night. So I had an open jeep and I drove that girl home. And as I was driving in the middle of one of the few places where they had traffic lights, Ringstraße, they…I had a whole bunch of Russians, GIs, jumping onto the open jeep. Not meaning to hurt anybody, but they had their guns and they were firing up in the air, just very happy, obviously drunk. And I could tell that this was not a good time for the girl to be there. I told her to get out, she better…it is better. So I started driving and they started screaming at me: "*Kvartira*, *kvartira*!" They lived in a district, which was across the Danube, and I knew exactly where. And as we were driving they started offering me big cans, like gasoline cans, said: "Vodka, Vodka!" And I…you had to…so I started drinking it and it burned my…I do not know, if it was gasoline or it was…it burned me so much that on the next curve I spit it out and they would not have known it. Anyhow, we got to the station where they had guards and we had to stop and they were arguing with their guards, they would like to be driven with the jeep. While they were arguing, I decided: I am not going to wait for them. I jumped into the jeep and took off. I do not know, who fired at me, but they fired onto the wheels of the jeep and the jeep crashed into an apartment house, completely demolished. I was in shock, but nothing really happened to me.

1/01:01:02

Next morning, I went over to the Colonel and I said: “I am here without a jeep.” He said: “What happened?” I described it to him, I said: “Let us see what happens.” Called up this colonel, got back to him in about ten minutes, explained that we had an almost new jeep and what did happen. He says: “It may take a couple of days, I will get back to you.” Within two days we had a new American jeep, delivered to us by the Russians. So you see, all kinds of things can happen. And I tried to keep in contact with him, but he would talk about everything, about his family, but he would not talk politics or communism or anything like that. He absolutely would not talk about that. So that was…a bit limited as to what we could talk about.

[Übergang/Schnitt.]

Ende von Teil 1

Teil 2

SM: What was…what were your experiences with normal Austrians at that time?

PE: Well…I think at that time I was in uniform, I certainly did not feel any anti-Semitism. First of all, I do not look that Jewish, second of all I mean they…most of them were friendly because they wanted something or a lot of them did at least. And, as I said, one time I…was so concerned that I was getting too many packages, that the internal division of the army started investigating if I was not on the black market. You see all the things that were sent to you, like cigarettes, you could sell for a small fortune, because they were so much in demand. There was…food was in very short supply.

PE: You asked me about any relationship or experiences with the Austrian population. At the end of the war, which is when I was there, we also spent some time traveling in different parts of Austria including…I think we were in Linz, if I remember correctly. We traveled…just to see…about health matters…that the colonel would tried to meet some people and some other doctors or other people who were in charge of health, to try to get a better feeling of how bad the situation was health-wise for the rest of the Austrian population. So we spent quite a bit of time traveling in different parts of Austria. And…it was interesting, I mean, we were…at that time you were treated with a lot of respect because it was, you know, also…there was a feeling among a lot of Austrians that if they had to be occupied – since it was four power occupation – they would rather be occupied by the Americans than the Russians. So…and I guess my experience was still not unlimited because we took trips all over. When we were dealing with the situation in Vienna we were really dealing more with the four powers. We were not dealing as much with Austrians. At times we did, but not as much…we would have…there would be meetings every week for that matter. The colonel who could not hold…drink that well, when we had a meeting with the Russians particularly and everybody was toasting because that is what you do at that time. And I was not important because I was not an officer, so that I would have to take notes of what went on, because the next morning I had to report to him because he was

drinking vodka which he did not necessarily…particularly like, but had to and really he could not remember anything that went on businesswise during that time. What else would you like to know? What am I missing now? Come back to the States?

SM: Civilians?

PE: Civilians? Well, as I said, I came back to the States and I was married for…I went to Columbia--

SM: --GI bill?

PE: GI bill. And I graduated from Columbia with honors. I did not know what to do jobwise.

SM: What did you study?

PE: I studied economics. Economics and I also studied labor relations. So at that time word came around among far-away relatives and friends that I was looking for a job and somebody, who by the way I am going to see – she is going to celebrate her 90th birthday this coming Sunday and I am invited to a cruise around Manhattan, which is going to be for her – she was also from Vienna, she left about the same time we did. And they had a very small business selling sweaters. I had no experience in that at all, I had no experience in selling. She offered me a job, very little money, but I did have a job and the theory was she would take me around to different mills in Brooklyn and New Jersey to try to teach me how to make a product, how to make a sweater. And I learned – though I do not think I learned it that well…it is nothing which I really loved doing. And after a while I told her that…I appreciated she gave me a start, but I would really like to be involved in sales. So she said: "Good, you know, you sit around here and you listen to what we try to do." And I did, and I decided I did not like the way they were selling. But that is alright, I did not know any better.

2/00:06:20

So at that time I decided I have to go out on my own and they said: "Listen, any business"…I told them I was making so little money, I said: "If I start bringing business in, any business I bring in I want commission on that." I wanted to be a regular salesman. And I did…so they said: "Where do you going to go? Do you have any leads? Can we help you in any way?" – "No", I said, "I know, where I am going." So they said: "Where are you going? You said, you are going to Macy's?" I said: "Yes, I am going to Macy's." He says: "Well, do you know anybody at Macy's?" – "No, I do not." He says: "We do not really know whether Macy's is a good idea." I said: "Look!" – I mean I just had five or six sweaters, seven sweaters and I was very lucky. I found out where the buyer was for this particular group and I managed to go when there was an appointment time, not for me but for other people. When it came my turn, I remember this was like today, her name was Miss Blank and she…I said to her: "I am new in this business and I have a lot to learn, but, here, some of the sweaters." And she liked my approach, she liked the idea and that I did not know everything. And for some reasons she took a liking to me. And so she said to me: "This particular sweater is not bad, but this is what you have to do, these are changes you have to make, if you make them and you come up with a reasonable price, I will

buy some." So she made a lot of…changes and I was very appreciated. And she said: "When you are ready with those changes, you call me and I'll make an appointment to see you." I came back to my bosses and they laughed. They said: "First day out and you are trying to change things that you are trying to do? We have sold these things for a long time." I said: "Look: If Macy's maybe gives us an order, well…" So they said: "I tell you what you do: we will show you the place where you…where they do the beading and you take the sketch she gave you along and you try to change it and make one sample only."

So after a while, it took a while, I did it and I came back and I said: "Ok, now I am going to call up and I make an appointment." And I came back in a week and she looked at these sweaters and she said: "Ok, I think we can try to start doing business. We are going to give you what you call a sample order." I did not know what a sample order meant, so she gave me an order for maybe 5000, 6000 dollars, which to me sounded like a lot and she said: "There is only one condition I have." – this was just before Easter time – "You have to make them quickly, this is the time of the year you have to make them. Has to be done, I will give you two weeks to deliver the goods. And we are having an order and the cancelation is in two weeks." I took the order home, to the bosses, very pleased with myself, and they said: "Well, two weeks is impossible!" I said: "Why not?" They said: "First of all, we have to check credit." I said: "This is Macy's." They said: "This does not make any difference. We check credit for everybody and that is going to take a day or two, we do not move that quickly." So I said: "Well, you have plain stock in hand", that is stock that was not embroidered. They said they do. I said: "Ship the stock to the embroiderer and I will go and talk." – "We cannot do that, we do not know if Macy's will pass credit." So we had a terrible battle and finally I said: "You have books that show credit rating and Macy's is like A1A – they are the best." And they were not very happy with this thing, finally they agreed and they said: "Well, we never get it in two weeks." And I went to the embroiderer, when I said: "Look, is business that good? I have an order here for hundred sweaters of this and fifty sweaters – you have to make them exactly in this style, exactly as it is, otherwise I am in a lot of trouble. And they have to be finished in ten days." And they did it. And we got our first order and that is how I started.

And it was still a very small company, very difficult to deal with. And I could never get…after I got to learn a little more, I started telling them that the only way you can do business…you cannot wait for every order, because there is not enough time, the season is too short, you have to make some stock. They never really wanted to do that, they were always waiting for the order. So they could never go very far. I was with them maybe for a year, a year and a half, I learned a lot and I went…I found another company and I went to another company and they offered me a job. At that time, they offered to pay me 75 dollars a week. And I said: "I do not want that." They said: "What do you want, you have a wife and you have two kids and you are not taking…" I said: "All I want is, I want every order I get", and there were a lot of buying offices I was involved with, "and every buying office that I get an order from I want commission." And they said, they loved that, they would not have to spend…they only spend money. So, I went into…and I learned a lot and most of all, over a period of time, I learned quite a different way of selling. I started getting people confident that I would not fool them and I…sometimes people would come into the showroom and I would say: "Do not buy this." And I had my boss next to it and he would say: "This is the greatest sweater you ever had." So it was very difficult, but in time it got to a point that customers would call me and would say: "I have 4000, 5000 dollars, you pick out what you think." That took a while, but…so I built up a reputation as being very

honorable and also not looking to work just for the company. And after about two years, I started making a lot of commission, I started making more money than the bosses did, the new bosses. Then they offered me to become a partner because they wanted to use that money for the…so I became a partner with three other bosses and after a while two other bosses passed away in one year and all of a sudden, I had this business all by myself. And I did not know everything; I had not dealt with banks or with other things like that. I was…at that time Inge and I went…we started going on trips to the Orient to make sweaters in Hong Kong so we…and in Taiwan. And we started building up a nice little business over time.

2/00:13:49

And…I was still young at that time, we did a lot of traveling. And Inge was primarily involved in style and she was very good at that, and I was not, so we were a good pair. And we built a fairly successful business, it was not that big but it was still successful enough. And then in the end, in 1988, I became 65 and I decided…it was getting too difficult because the traveling became very strenuous, because it just did not mean traveling once, it meant traveling at least three or four times a year. At one time, I did a trip on my own just over a long weekend to Malta because we had an agent in Italy and she said: "I have a wonderful factory in Malta." And she was also a very good tennis player and that was a very…so he says: "You fly into Rome and you are going to have…it is going to be very good." And we bought a lot of t-shirts at that time, cotton t-shirts from this factory and we played at lot of tennis. So it was a very good experience. But then in the end, I retired and I had a chance to sell the business for that matter the year before to an…English conglomerate and I could not see…they wanted me to work another five years and I was not really sure – I would have had to assure them I would continue to travel – and so I decided not to do it. So I had a little less money.

SM: What was it like in general to come to the United States? Did you have any expectations?

PE: I remember when I came here originally I was…this was 1939, I was sixteen years old, my only expectation was really to go to school and…at that time I was just happy to be here. And I got used to…I did not become an American citizen until I went into the army because it usually took five years or more before you could become a citizen anyhow. I guess the expectations were primarily just to go school and to be happy to be in freedom and to have…the fact that my whole family…my immediate family, escaped whereas my grandfather had seven or eight uncles and actually ten brothers and sisters, and all of them – except for the one that married a Catholic, that were still in Vienna – they all perished in concentration camps. In part because they could not see early enough and they did not think it would happen to them. So somehow they never got out. But that was the only ones in the family…everybody else of the immediate family got out. Actually it was my mother, my father, my stepfather and my stepmother – who also had two children – they all came out. We were all very friendly; we always stayed in touch with each other. Everybody's birthday was celebrated together. And it was a very good relationship, considering that we were not of the same family anymore.

2/00:17:43

SM: Did you have contact with people in Austria the first years of your emigration?

PE: Actually, the only contacts that we had, we had somebody who was like my…what would you call it…I do not think I have a good expression…*Kammerzofe* is probably not a good expression. It is…somebody who sort of took care of me when I was a little boy.

SM: A nanny.

PE: And I visited her when I was back in the army in 1945. And we…she had our two dogs, which in the meantime had passed away. Obviously we could not emigrate with the two dogs. And we were in contact with her and maybe with two or three other people. But that is about all.

SM: Did you either…when you came to America or especially in the army find out what was happening to Jews in Europe?

PE: Yes, sure. But nobody…a lot of…it was almost very difficult to believe that it could all be possible, that it was all so terrible. But we did know a great deal, I would say. And that is one of the reasons I was happy that I was able to make some kind of a contribution. During the war I never felt so bloodthirsty that I just wanted to kill everybody who was German or Austrian. But as I told you earlier, I became quite cruel in a way, which I never thought I could do, in order to help people in the army to survive when we had to find out where the Germans or Austrians had minefields or other things. And that is…I was very busy – when we were not fighting – interrogating prisoners, because of my language skills.

SM: When did you start feeling like an American? How did that develop?

PE: I really think I started feeling American when I was…long before…when I went to high school. First of all I was…because this was such a free, progressive school, I was very much accepted in every way. And it was a school that was not only multi-ethnic – Jewish, not-Jewish, also we had two or three Afro-Americans in our class. So it was very much of a new experience for me. But really, on the whole, a good experience. And I felt very much American at that time, even though I was not an American citizen yet. Very much so, it did not take that long.

2/00:21:27

SM: How did you feel about issues in American history like the McCarthy era or the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement?

PE: I was terribly upset during the McCarthy era, very upset. And it was…one of the worst times. But after the McCarthy era I would say I had a lot of ambivalent feelings about the Vietnam War. I do not think – if I had been young enough, which is was not, so I was not drafted – that I would have volunteered to go into the army to fight in Vietnam, whereas I certainly felt very strong and very comfortable in fighting against Nazism. It was quite different.

SM: The…Civil Rights Movement and the race riots?

PE: Civil Rights…I was very actively involved, for that matter. I am still quite active in a couple of organizations like the *Southern Poverty Organization*, the one that fights the Klan and is also…exposes a lot of anti-Semitism. And I have contributed whatever I could in financial support in trying to…I have gone to lectures when they had…*Southern Poverty's* come here to the YMHA [*Young Men's Hebrew Association*] which they…just did not so long ago. Unfortunately, he is a man who has always…has to be on guard because there is so much hatred going around. We had to go…we had to be searched before we could go into that lecture. They had one of these…whatever they are called. But I have always been very supportive of the Civil Rights Movement, for that matter also in my school days.

SM: How was the dropping of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima discussed in the army?

PE: I was…let me see, I am just trying to think…I was already either in Salzburg or Vienna at that time, at the end of the war, I mean, when the war in Europe was over already and the war…my outfit was scheduled to go to Japan and before…I got sick and that was just when the war ended and I was also part of the intelligence service, so they started teaching us Japanese, which was a very difficult language and I am not good at languages anyhow, but it was…I had very ambivalent emotions because obviously it ended the war a lot earlier but I think the opening…the whole atomic bomb is a terrible thing though. Probably – we will never know – there is some research that shows that…if we had not developed it, it could very well be that the Germans would have. They were also trying to develop; they were just not as far as the fastest were. But it is still…you know it has to hang over us at all times because it is…like mass destruction on a world-wide scale. And I do not know how this will ever end. It is not a happy situation.

2/00:26:04

SM: Were you aware when the State of Israel was founded? How did you feel about that?

PE: I think – even though I was never a Zionist, I never was – I certainly was very happy about that. And I think I am…I certainly was very supportive of that, in every way that I could, but I…never was happy about the extreme right wing in Israel. Just like I am not very happy…what is happening in Israel right now. And do not think that…I do not know if there are any solutions, but certainly I would like to have Israel live in peace, but I am not sure that…obviously the Israeli public as a whole feels as though they want to go another way right now, which is, I think, very unfortunate, but maybe they know more than I do.

SM: Have you ever been visiting there?

PE: I have never been in Israel, though I would like to go sometimes. My wife was also Jewish, of course, and who lived in Vienna a lot longer even than my family did. And one of the reasons they were able to stay there is because her father was an amputee of World War One. And so even though he was Jewish, they did not go after them that early. And she went as part of the *Kindertransport*, which went to England where you had, too, *B'nai B'rith*, you had a lot of Jewish children who went to foster parents in England and she did, too. And she was pushed around from one foster parent to another. She was in a lot of bombings when Hitler bombed London and was then evacuated and did not see her parents until 1943 and were out of contact with her for that matter for the longest time because they finally got out and she managed to leave England with a troop transport – empty troop transport – in 1943, in the middle of the war when she came to this country to be re-joined, when she had really been out of contact with her parents for a long time. And she does not have…she really never…I went and took our kids to a film about the *Kindertransport* that was here and she did not want to go. She really would like to block it out in a way.

SM: How did you meet?

PE: We met here through friends of the family. We lived in Forest Hills [Queens/NYC], in a little apartment at that time and…we had both kids when I was still a salesman for the first company I mentioned, and I was really not making a great deal of money. She was working and she continued to work until we had the children. We have had a very good marriage and at an old age are very supportive of each other and that really worked out pretty well. Both our children, and our two grandchildren, both live in the building, which is very nice. So I am able to…like yesterday we babysat for our five year old, which was very nice and we like doing that.

SM: Was there any kind of refugee community that you were in touch with or your family when you came here?

PE: I would say we…I do not think with a specific refugee community, though we did…we were in contact with quite a few other refugees, you know, through their family or through their kids or in some way or another, but not in a formalized way.

2/00:31:08

SM: How do you feel about Austria today?

PE: I have very mixed feelings because certainly I was not very happy when Waldheim was there and I am quite aware of the fact that the basic anti-Semitism, which was so strong is still there and is never going to leave. It is like…it is something that is going to be with…so much of the population is really ingrained in one form or another of anti-Semitism. I have often been asked, as I said before, I have no great desire to go back to Austria…and neither does my wife really.

SM: What was your visit like when you came with your family again?

PE: It was again a mixed bag. We tried to show the children things that I thought were of interest, including…they were still very small, we tried to show them some museums and we tried to show them the *Stephanskirche* [*Stephansdom*, Anm. d. Red.] and other areas of interest. But I think we were there only ten days…maybe not quite two weeks.

[Übergang/Schnitt.]

Well, what else…I do not think I have told you enough. If you have some other questions…

SM: Is there any kind of message that you would like to leave for young Austrians?

PE: Well, the only thing I can say is…I think…I have met quite a few young Austrians in the last few years, because I have also met people who were involved in *Servas* which is an organization that – I do not know whether you are familiar with the name, *Servas* – they bring a lot of young people, also for a year or so, over here and they stay with different people. You know I do not think the young Austrians, as such, have any deep-seated anti-Semitism, but I am sure in some cases it is things which they absorb from their parents who may very well still have very…parents or grandparents still have a great deal of anti-Semitic feelings. I do not want to…I do not want to do a wholesale condemnation of all of Austria, because that is really not the point. I hope that they live in peace and they will be part of the European Union and I am certainly not begrudging them if they do well economically. I think it is very healthy for any young Austrians who get a chance to leave the country – I do not mean permanently – but to leave the country and get exposure to something like an American system or to some other country and get to learn about different cultures. And I think that can only help them to be a better person by themselves.

SM: So thank you very much for your--

PE: --my pleasure, I do not know if it helped any.

SM: Oh, sure.

PE: I probably talked too much.

[Ende des Interviews.]

Interview mit Peter Elmer 2001, New York City/USA, geführt von Sebastian Markt, Austrian Heritage Collection, Signatur AHC 1789; URL: www.austrianheritagearchive.at/interviews/person/181