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Jack Mayer oral history interview by David Purnell, August 9, 2010

Jack Mayer (Interviewee)

David Purnell (Interviewer)

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David Purnell: The date is August 9, 2010. We're interviewing Jack Mayer. The interviewer is David Purnell. We're in Seminole, Florida, in the United States of America, and the language is English and the videographer is Jane Duncan.

Good morning, Mr. Mayer.

Jack Mayer: Good morning.

DP: We wanted to start just by having you tell us your name, and spell your name for us.

JM: Okay. My name is Jack Mayer. That's M-a-y-e-r.

DP: Okay. And the town that you were born in?

JM: I was born in Speyer, Germany.

DP: And could you spell that for us, please?

JM: Sure. It's simple.

DP: Okay.

JM: S-p-e-y-e-r.

DP: Okay.

JM: Beautiful little city on the Rhine River, south of Frankfurt.

DP: Okay. And your parents' names, your father first?

JM: My dad was Alfred Mayer, and my mother was Elsie. Maiden name was Weis; she went by Mayer, though.

DP: Okay. And your father was from?

JM: It was a little town near Speyer, Schifferstadt.

DP: Schifferstadt.

JM: (corrects pronunciation) Schifferstadt.

DP: Schifferstadt. Okay. And your mother was from?

JM: From Niederhochstadt.

DP: Niederhochstadt. And I have those spellings, so if you don't mind I can just spell them easier, 'cause I know we had a little bit of difficulty.

JM: Okay.

DP: The birthplace of your father, S-c-h-i-f-f-e-r-s-t-a-d-t.

JM: Perfect.

DP: Okay. And your mother, N-i-e-d-e-r-h-o-c-h-s-t-a-d-t.

JM: Very good.

DP: Okay. And you have one brother?

JM: One brother, Bernard.

DP: Bernard, okay. All right. So, in Speyer, do you have any recollections of your childhood that you would like to share with us, particularly related to any anti-Semitism?

JM: Sure.

DP: Okay.

JM: I was at the ripe old age of two when Hitler took power, and lived under his regime for five years before we were able to immigrate to the United States. My early years, my parents kept me pretty much out of the loop. I didn't know much what was going on. But slowly, I began to see things changing, even at my young age.

First of all, my brother was three years older than I. When he started school, he started in a public school, and very few months later, a decree was passed that Jewish kids could no longer go to German public schools. We were going to contaminate all those nice gentile kids, and they needed the space; they had all kinds of excuses. But at that time, a school for the Jewish kids was started, and it was held in our synagogue on the second floor. We had one teacher, and they had all of the grades from the first grade through the eighth grade. My brother was in the third grade at the time. And when it became my turn to start school, I was put into the first grade, and I want you to know that I was the best student in that grade—I was the only one. (DP laughs)

But prior to that, I had a lot of children that were my friends. We played all over the town, happy go lucky. As I said, my parents pretty much kept stuff away from me, but I

could see with my own eyes that things were changing. One of the ways, the drastic way they changed, was the kids that I used to play with all of a sudden stopped playing with me. I was a dirty Jew. And that was pretty hard, because these were my best friends, and now they wouldn't even talk to me. Our school was also pretty difficult for us, because the other kids used to wait for us to get out of school in the afternoon and they would beat us up. You know, sticks and stones, they'd break my bones; and words, et cetera. Their first actions were words: "You dirty Jew, you don't belong here," and all that. And then the sticks and stones came later; they physically beat us up. We had to run home many a day. So, that was unpleasant. That's anti-Semitism at work.

My parents were also affected by this anti-Semitism. My dad owned a shoe store, which he opened up after World War I. He had served in the Kaiser's army, had even been given an Iron Cross—although there were many given; it wasn't that unusual a feat, but bravery on the battlefield type of thing. He then moved to Speyer from Schifferstadt and opened up a shoe store, then married—they married in 1925—and he had a fairly decent business going. They opened up a second shoe store in his hometown, which his brother ran. But all of a sudden, life changed for them also, where pickets were thrown up in front of his business to keep customers from going in, wearing the big swastika on their armbands. And they wrote slogans on the windows of his store: "Jew, go to Palestine"; "Dirty Jew," all kinds of things. So, his business began to fall off.

All this time, I'm still pretty much not knowing what was going on. But the town changed. There were parades all the time, where they were showing off their tanks and their guns and their army. They marched right down the street—his store was on the main street, Maximilianstraße, and we lived in the same building. My dad owned that building: it was a beautiful building, still stands today. There were three stores on the main floor, and then there were two floors—three floors—of apartments, and we lived in one of those. Big, beautiful building; big, beautiful apartments. And when this marching occurred, the whole town came out. The Nazi salute was all over, "*Sieg Heil*," and we were not allowed to do that. I, as a kid, of course wanted to do it; I did, and I was punished for it. My dad said, "Don't ever let me catch you doing that again!" I think it took a few times before I realized that I really shouldn't be doing that.

But life changed for us drastically. From being able to do anything we wanted to do in town, now we no longer could. Cinemas weren't terribly plentiful—it was real early; I'm talking about in the 1930s—but we used to love to go to the movies, used to love to see movies. American movies were great; they were dubbed in. Shirley Temple was one of my favorites. We no longer could go to a movie. They had swimming pools in town: no longer could go to a swimming pool. I wasn't crazy about libraries, but I wasn't able to go to the library; that made it tough. Playgrounds, we were not allowed. We were restricted from doing almost anything that was commonly done prior to the Nazis dictating all of these new laws.

The Nazis passed a lot of laws against Jews: they passed over 2,000 laws. The first ones were no Jew could work in the German government, then they began to pick on individuals. They picked on doctors: doctors could no longer practice. A dentist couldn't practice. They could work on Jews, because Jews didn't count. Jews were now beginning to be pictured as sub-human. You could equate them with swine; that was a favorite comparison.

So life, before we were able to leave, changed tremendously, even for this little boy that used to go all over town. Now I had to stay in my house, and I had no one to play with. So, that was my beginning of realizing that we're living in tough times. We didn't realize just how tough it was going to become. We were fortunate enough to be able to leave Germany prior to Kristallnacht, which was really the beginning of the Holocaust. We left in April of the same year that the Holocaust—excuse me, the Kristallnacht was in November of that same year, in 1938.

DP: Now, you mentioned during our pre-interview about how your uncles came to America before all of this.

JM: Yeah. The way we got out was because of these uncles. Let me tell you the story about them. Germany, after World War I, had a very bad depression followed by very high inflation. People didn't have jobs. Germany was a pretty lousy place to live in right after World War I.

But having said that, there was also a pretty severe depression prior, in the 1890s, in Germany and on my mother's side, my grandfather, he was the oldest of seven. And they fell on hard times, as all Germans did, and their father decided to send two of his sons to the New World, to America—a place that has streets paved with gold, opportunities, freedom of religion, all of the good stuff—and sent them here so that they could make their way in the New World. These guys were in their twenties, early twenties, and they ended up in a small town in Ohio—Ottawa, Ohio—and ended up owning a shoe and clothing store. What now becomes interesting is that they kept contact with their family. There were no cell phones, no phones, but letters went back and forth frequently. In fact, they used to visit the family once a year; they'd travel by ship to Germany. And they were able to do this from the end of World War I until the Depression hit the United States.

So, for a good number of years, they kept real close contact with the family. As I said, they knew them. And they decided, when this guy Hitler took power, they decided that they're gonna save their family. Now, at that time, America wasn't too interested in what was going on in Europe. They weren't too interested in what was going to be happening

and what was already happening to the Jews, where they were being picked on big time already. They decided to bring over their family.

Now, at that time, to travel legally you had to have a visa. Most countries required visas to come. And the United States, to get a visa was not very difficult. A visa cost something like five bucks. But the responsibility that went along with it was pretty severe, because they had to promise Uncle Sam that the people they're bringing over will work, and they'll work toward becoming a citizen. And if they couldn't work or wouldn't work, they had to support them for five years. So, we're talking about hundreds of relatives. They, in the meantime, had married German girls, Jewish girls, so there were three sets of families to be concerned about. So they devised a plan that there was no way they were going to be able to get visas for hundreds of people. They didn't have that much money, to be able to support them. So, they brought over the head of the family, of every relative they could find.

Now, there's three families involved. The two brothers had one family, which is mine, and the two wives also had families. So, we're talking about hundreds of people. So they decided to bring over the head of the household, and they made affidavit for a visa for my dad and he came early 1937, the year before we came. And now it became my father's responsibility to bring over his family, and all the other heads of the family likewise. So, having done that, the following statement cannot be made by very many survivors: We lost no one of our relatives in the Holocaust. They all survived. Most came to the United States, a few went to Palestine, and a couple went to South America, but most of them came to the United States.

Now, interestingly, my father, as I told you, had been the owner of a shoe store. And when he came here, he found a job with a small chain of women's shoes in Toledo, Ohio. Now, we ended up in Toledo because Ottawa didn't have enough economic possibilities for jobs, a small farming community. So the uncles placed the people that they brought over in larger cities near them, where they could help them if they fell on hard times. Some went to Cincinnati, some to Cleveland, some to Chicago; we came to Toledo, Toledo, Ohio.

Now, this job that my father found was working in the warehouse of the small chain of women's shoes. He had not really done a lot of physical labor before, being the owner of a shoe store, being able to play cards every afternoon; my mother was in the store to run it at that time. This was tough on him. Plus, the time is 1937: this country had just come out of a pretty bad depression, and the pay scale was not terribly high. I'm not sure just how much he made in those years, but it was something like ten or twelve dollars a week. Now, there's no way that he could get visas for his family—my mother, brother, and me—on that salary.

So, at the same time, there was a number of other Jewish refugees from Germany living in Toledo. One of them had an uncle that had a jewelry store. That uncle gave to his nephew \$5,000 to put in the bank so that he could go the federal courthouse and say, "I'd like to have a visa for my mother and brother." They lived in Berlin, and he was able to bring them over. That \$5,000 went to my dad. He put it in the bank under his name; my dad went to the courthouse and said, "I'd like to bring over my family. Here's my means of support." He got the visas. That \$5,000 made its rounds in Toledo to a number of other men in the same situation. So, that's how I came to the United States, and we were able to come in April of 1938, a year after my dad had come. So, thank God for those two uncles who had the foresight to think of their family, to do something about bringing them over, and they did it very successfully. As I said earlier, in the United States there weren't too many people like that.

The visas were also restrictive. As I said, they didn't cost much money, but they were restrictive in the fact that there was a quota system, and each country had their quota. The German quota was 30,000 Germans could come in any one year, with a visa. Not German Jews, Germans. Not a lot. And Germany had 500,000 Jews. If they all had wanted to come to the United States, it would have taken many, many years to accomplish that. But as a result, there was only like 102,000 German Jews that came to the United States. That was—thank God. That number should have been larger.

DP: Now, you told me kind of an amusing story about the fact that you couldn't bring much money over, so your mother had all these clothes made for you and your brother.

JM: Right, right, right. Well, this occurred before Kristallnacht, when the laws really changed drastically. Jews that were able to immigrate in those years were permitted to bring their furnishings. We were permitted to bring furniture, jewelry—personal jewelry; couldn't go out and buy diamonds to bring. So, we brought all of our belongings in a very large box which was called a lift. Pretty big, the size of a one-car garage, if you will. And you could not leave owning property, so the house had to be sold, and it was sold at a very low price—and the Nazis made sure that we didn't get much money out of even that, so they found some new taxes, some new Jew taxes. So, she didn't get very much for the house. The store had to be liquidated; no one wanted to buy a Jew store.

So, she spent some money on updating our furniture. We had massive old European-style furniture, so she bought some new modern-looking stuff—and had some clothing made for my brother and me. In those days, they didn't have clothing in stores; they didn't have Dillard's or Macy's or J.C. Penney. Clothing was made by a seamstress or a tailor. So, she had a number of different sizes, like three sizes' worth, of winter clothes and summer clothes made for me and also for my brother. And that brought me a lot of trouble when I came to this country, because I was dressed as a little European kid with the short pants,

long socks. I looked like a little European kid, and I had clothes like that that lasted me for three years. And then, even worse, I inherited my brother's, so I had six years of clothing that was funny-looking, laughed at school drastically: funny-looking kid, funny-looking kid that didn't speak English. I didn't know one word of English when I came here. My brother had been given some English lessons, so he knew a little bit. My mother did not bother having me learn anything, because I had an occupation in those years, and that was to play. Study was not in my vocabulary. So, I came looking funny.

So, we were able to bring all of that. Money, we were allowed five dollars per person. That didn't go very far, so we had some tough times when we first came here. I had been in the school in Germany only a number of months, and when I came here they put me in the first grade—wearing these funny clothes. But there was one lucky thing that occurred, because—(coughs) excuse me—they put my brother in the first grade also, to see how he would do. He should have been in the fourth grade. And they kept him there for about five weeks before they advanced him to the second grade, and then the third grade, and then summer vacation came along. When he came back that September, he went into his regular grade.

Those five weeks that he was with me in the first grade was wonderful, because he translated for me. I couldn't understand the teacher. The kids were always laughing if I opened my mouth, so I didn't open my mouth very often. For instance, in the first grade, reading: they put these little chairs, small chairs, in a semi-circle, and we sat in them and the reading books came out. Short stories, short words, and each kid in turn read one line. Well, I caught on pretty quickly what they were doing, so I counted which sentence was going to be mine, and I asked my brother, who was sitting next to me, "Read this to me," and he did. "Read it to me again, and again." I still flubbed it up when it became my turn.

So, I was laughed at a lot. I threatened never to leave my house again when incidents like this happened. And then summer came, and I found friends, played with them—I had learned English that summer, so by the time I went in the second grade I was pretty much okay. Still had funny clothes. (DP laughs) We had three reading groups. They didn't call it Poor, Average, and Good; they had animal names. I really don't remember what they were. But they put me into the slowest readers, and by the time I finished second grade I was in the best reading class. So things, as tough as they were, were not long-lasting. I did okay.

DP: Okay. Is there anything else that you want to share, as far as the difficulty of coming over to a new country and learning a new language, and how that compared to the anti-Semitism that you experienced as a child? Do you feel like the kids here were anti-Semitic, or do you feel like they were just making fun of you because you were different?

JM: Well, they made fun of me because I spoke differently and I dressed differently. I don't think there was any anti-Semitism involved in that; it was just a kid unlike us, a kid different from us, and that was enough to have them pick on me. As I say, that didn't last too long. I made friends very quickly, and life was good. Life was good.

It was harder on my parents. (coughs) Excuse me. My mother spoke very little English; my dad knew some English. He had been captured in World War I and spent some time in a prisoner of war camp in Scotland, picked up some English there, so he was okay. He did fine in that job. However, all of a sudden, we can't afford many things that other people had. We were quite poor at that time. Fortunately, that didn't last too long: my dad ended up owning a shoe store here in Toledo; never got to be in the place that we had been financially.

My mother, who also worked in the store, in the shoe store, never really had to do a lot of manual work. We had a lot of help in our house, which was quite common in Europe. We had a nursemaid for my brother and me, she had a cook, she had a woman that cleaned the house, she had another woman that came in once a week to do the laundry. She didn't have to do much in her home. We came here, and she now had to do a lot of things. We had a little help. We took in boarders, some other German refugee men that were here prior to their family coming lived with us.

Now she had to cook, had to clean the house. She had to cook for all of these men we had—I think the most we had at any one time was four men; there was more than two or three, usually. Do their laundry; the poor woman's hands turned red. She had never washed dishes before. And the amazing thing is she never complained. I never heard that woman complain once. She was safe, her kids were safe, the whole family was safe: she appreciated that. But it took its toll. She passed away very early: she was mid-fifties when she died. They were quite young when we came here. They were always old to me, but my dad was only in his forties, early forties, and my mother was a couple years younger than he; she was in her late thirties when we came. And it was hard for them, really hard.

The first few months, as I told you, I stayed home, vowing never to leave again. A few examples: My dad sent me to the drugstore to buy some ginger ale. Well, those two words were pretty tough on me: ginger ale. I repeated them. He said, "Well, think of it this way. Think of it as (inaudible) ginger"—(inaudible) is a painter—"and *ale*, a beer. So, think of '(inaudible) *ale*' for 'ginger ale.'" So I walk into the drugstore and I say, "(inaudible) *ale*." They sent me back to the pharmacist, and I said, "(inaudible) *ale*." He looked at me, and they couldn't help me. I ran home. I'm never leaving the house again, never.

Other examples where it was tough for us: My brother wanted to join the civil defense, which was big. We were leaning toward a war. So, they had a federal program of a number of different things; among them were air raid wardens. They searched the skies for enemy planes. This was in 1939; you know, the war had just started in Europe and we certainly weren't in danger, but we were preparing. They also had a children's section, junior air raid wardens, and he wanted to be—he was now going to become an American, and he wanted to be faithful and patriotic. So he went downtown to the civil defense office and said, "I'd like to volunteer to become a junior air raid warden." Well, where were you born? Very meekly, he said, "Speyer." Oh, is that in Ohio? (whispers) "Germany." The woman jumped across—practically jumped across the table and said, "You can't become a junior air raid warden. You are an enemy alien!"

Enemy alien, it's a term we had not heard of, but we learned very quickly that we were restricted in this country from travelling. We couldn't travel further than twenty-five miles or thirty miles—I don't remember, but it was not very far—without permission from the government. Now, we had relatives in Cleveland, 120 miles away. We could not visit them without permission. So, why are we enemy aliens? My God, we're on your side! We were thrown out of Germany. Germany is not our friend. Enemy aliens? But that's what we were.

So, little ways like that, it was still hard. But, as I say, we recouped very quickly.

DP: Now, you mentioned that you just recently took a trip. You did the March of the Living.

JM: Yes. Yes.

DP: And you shared that your daughter also did the March of the Living, the very first March of the Living, in 1988.

JM: Right. Nineteen eighty-eight, yes. Good memory, or it's written down for you. (laughs)

DP: No. No, it's not here, anyway. I didn't remember the year; that's good. Okay, so you want to tell us a little bit about that?

JM: Yeah. This is a trip that began in 1988, and kids from all over the world participated in it. It's for high school juniors and seniors, to get them more knowledgeable about what

occurred during the Holocaust. So, the trip, it begins with classes where they learn about the Holocaust. In the actual trip itself, you go to Poland for a week to visit all the horrible places that happened there. We went to about five concentration camps: Auschwitz, Birkenau, Majdanek, and others. We went to the camp that housed the people that worked for Schindler, which is right in the middle of a city.

These concentration camps were all—first of all, they were all on railroad tracks, 'cause that's how they got the people there, but they weren't hidden from the population. And the people could see what was going on, and pretty much ignored what was going on. Nazis were pretty terrible in those camps. I won't go into those, because I'm not a survivor from these camps. I was so fortunate to be a survivor before all of these bad things happened. So this trip takes the kids to these camps, where they can see through their own eyes of what occurred there. They learn some more lessons. The trip then ends with a week in Israel to see the aftermath of what good things happened to the Jews, of the survivors. It's a very worthwhile trip.

I went two years ago, and again this year. The first trip my wife came along with me; this time she couldn't, because we had to get ready for one of my grandchildren's bar mitzvah. They let me off the hook: I could come back just before it happened, but my wife had to go to help make the preparations, to help my daughter. And for this trip, I talked to kids from our area, from the Tampa Bay area, the pre-March lessons where we met for a whole bunch of weeks, like once a week, to get them ready.

As ready as we thought the kids were, when they saw the actual ground where these concentration camps were, their eyes opened. They were changed. It's a life-changing trip. It's a very worthwhile trip for these youngsters. It's not a trip to enjoy, but I enjoyed seeing these kids realize. They're changed. They see what happened, how quickly it could happen, and that it should never happen again. Having said that, you see genocide among us today, and we need to take steps to try to prevent that. So, that was my trip.

DP: Okay.

(to Jane Duncan) How are we on time?

Jane Duncan: (murmurs)

DP: Okay. You think we can do the—move this?

JD: (inaudible)

DP: Do you have anything else that you wanted to—any last statements that you wanted to share with us?

JM: Not really. I just want to inform whoever watches this that I consider myself a very fortunate individual, very fortunate that my family was saved, all my relatives were saved. And I hope that things like this don't happen again. We're safe here; we hope to continue to be safe. And, as I said, I'm very thankful.

DP: Well, you have an amazing story to share, and we thank you very much for your time.

JM: My pleasure.

DP: Thank you.

End of interview