Interview with Otto "Ossie" Langfelder

IM-A-L-2012-026

Interview # 1: June 7, 2012

Interviewer: Carol Esarey

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

Esarey: Hello, this is Carol Esarey. We are in Ossie Langfelder's home, at his kitchen table. The date is June 7, 2012. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Immigrant Stories* Oral History project, and we are going to begin right now.

One of the first things I wanted do was to begin to talk about your mom and your dad. I will read to you just what I have, what you gave me, your mother's name, which is Ruth Maria. Her maiden was Dengler, correct?

Ruth Maria Langfelder, Ossie's mother, a proud, sophisticated and courageous woman of Austrian descent and an anchor in Ossie's and Edit, his sister's, life.

Langfelder: That's correct.

Esarey: She was born in 1900, and she passed away in 1977. We're going to be taking information also from Ossie's book, *My Incredible Journey,* as he talks this morning. I'm going to stop talking very shortly. One of the very important people that Ossie talks about—and we would like to start with her—is his mother, Ruth Maria. So, if you could, begin to talk about your mom a little bit.

Langfelder: My mother was a very sophisticated lady, as I recall, She spent most of the time just raising my sister and I, devoted almost twenty-four hours a day looking after us. We lived in Vienna, in a very small apartment, and her number one priority was cleanliness.

Every piece of furniture we had, I remember, was white. She wouldn't permit any other thing, because she wanted to see fingerprints, if anybody left fingerprints on the stove or the closet or whatever. She scrubbed continually, just to keep everything just perfect. That's how we were raised. That's why I'm somewhat of the same attitude as she's had.

My mother never knew how to cook, because her mother stayed with us most of the day, and she did the cooking, and she bathed us and things like that. So, my mother, like I said, spent most of the time with us.

After she cleaned us, usually in the morning, I recall, we didn't live too far away from a large park in Springfield, and she would walk us down to the park. We were allowed to walk around.

In those days they did not have the type of recreational facilities like you have today. The only thing in that park was a huge, I remember, a huge sandbox. It was probably twenty feet by twenty feet, but my parents—I would say my mother—never allowed us to go into that box for fear that we would get sand in our hair or our eyes. Like I said earlier, she was so particular with cleanliness that I don't ever remember standing inside the sandbox. I could just stand outside, looking at all the other children playing.

Esarey: I remember you have a picture of you and your sister, Edith, walking down the street with buckets.

Langfelder: That's right. Yes.

Esarey: Were those the buckets that you took to the sandbox?

Langfelder: That's the buckets we took for the sandbox, but we could never use them, because we never went into the sandbox. (laughs)

Esarey: You came home the same way.

Langfelder: Empty, and were the same way when we left. I guess, that was just part of our training.

Esarey: What did you think about not being able to play with the other children in the sandbox?

Langfelder: Of course, that was many, many years ago. I don't recall. I never felt I was being punished. That was just my mother's directions, and we just obeyed it, without any questions.

Esarey: You did?

Langfelder: Yes, oh, yes

Esarey: Your wrote about your mom being a very…She wanted to teach you cultural things, as well. She was very well versed in—

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: …in the culture of Vienna. What was that like?

Langfelder: Well, at that young age, we weren't allowed to go to movie theaters. I don't believe I ever saw a movie in Vienna, itself. But on week-ends, if we were allowed to go anywhere, my parents would take us to the opera. So, can you imagine a child that young going to opera? But we enjoyed it, because that's all you knew. You actually looked forward to seeing that. You might not have understood; I don't remember. I remember going to the opera, but I don't remember if I understood it or not. I doubt it very much.

Esarey: Do you remember how young you were, what age you were, when you started attending events like this?

Langfelder: Oh, I think we were probably something around eight or nine years of age.

Esarey: So you were a little older.

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: You had already started school?

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: Do you remember much about being a really young child, before six?

Langfelder: Well, I do remember my first day going to school.

Esarey: Very traumatic, wasn't it?

Langfelder: It was very traumatic for me. Like I say, my mother always accompanied us everywhere, so it was just the feeling that, well, how come she's going to leave me? So, I remember really, not just crying, I was screaming. I guess I threw a tantrum by today's standards. (both laugh) So, my mother took us back home. My father and mother both were with me when I did it. The following day, she just made certain that I would stay, and I did. Then, I actually got over it, like every other child does.

Esarey: Your mother was with you all the time.

Langfelder: All the time. We never left the house without her. I mean, she just…In the house, she always made certain we would do things, like homework or writing. Everything was constructive. You have to realize, we did not even have a radio. There was no radio, no TV or anything. So, you just studied, or you did what your parents asked you to do.

Esarey: Your mother grew up in Vienna, correct?

Langfelder: That is correct, yes.

Esarey: Did she ever talk about her own life in Vienna, when she lived there as a young woman?

Langfelder: She said very little. She's not like me; she didn't reminisce much. (Esarey laughs) When she did tell me stories, she talked about her father a lot, who I never did know, because, like I said in the book—

Esarey: Describe that whole thing.

Langfelder: …he was a salesperson in Russia. He traveled throughout Russia, all those years, and naturally came home. When World War I started, naturally, being of Austrian descent, the Russians put him in a prison camp.

August Oscar Dengler (1875-1921). Ossie's maternal grandfather was born in Russia,

Esarey: What was his name?

Langfelder: His name was Oscar Dengler.

Esarey: What did Oscar do?

Langfelder: Pardon me?

Esarey: What did they do? What was his work?

Langfelder: I don't know what he sold, but he was a salesperson. I understood he spoke very fluent Russian. When he was able to escape from prison camp, he was able to travel back to Vienna because of his knowledge of Russian. I'm sure he knew a lot of people that would hide him, on the way home.

When she [Ossie's mother] talked about him, she always had great admiration for him. The sad thing is that, when he returned home…I believe he caught pneumonia in the prison camp, and he died shortly thereafter. As a matter of fact, he passed away before I was born. That's all she ever talked about, is admiration for him.

Esarey: Did she know Russian?

Langfelder: No, my mother, she spoke some French, and so did my dad. In Austria, we spoke German. The foreign language that was studied mostly was French, because we were just adjacent to France, and we were adjacent to Switzerland, a portion of which is French-speaking. Nowadays, everyone in foreign countries attempts to learn English, but in those days, French was predominate.

Esarey: She had a very scary experience.

Langfelder: Oh, definitely.

Esarey: When she was young.

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: I think you described it as an upper middle class family that she lived in.

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: How did your father get to Russia? I didn't get the connection. He was a salesman?

Langfelder: I anticipate it was by train because, in those days, we had no cars.

Esarey: So, he went there for work.

Langfelder: Oh, yes, and I would say he traveled by train.

Esarey: How long was he [Ossie's grandfather] in the concentration camp?

Langfelder: Well, those weren't called concentration camps then. It was a Russian prison. I just feel that he was probably in that prison between two and three years.

Esarey: A long time.

Langfelder: Oh, yes, a long time.

Esarey: And your mother was about how old when that happened?

Langfelder: Well, my mother was like fifteen or sixteen years of age.

Esarey: It would be a tough time.

Langfelder: Yes. She was born in 1900, like my father.

Esarey: And certainly would have remembered that.

Langfelder: Oh yes. Well, she spoke a lot about him because, like I said, her mother spent almost all day with us. You don't talk about people who are still with you all the time that you depend on.

What is interesting to me is that my mother, she was a mother, but she was not really a housewife, because she didn't do any housework, other than make sure we didn't leave fingerprints on the furniture. (laughs)

Esarey: Yes, and that was an unusual household arrangement. Describe how that all worked, because you had Grandmother; you had Nana; you had your mother. So, that's three women, all working.

Langfelder: Oh yes, and we all lived in the same building.

Esarey: Describe how that happened and what happened there.

Langfelder: Her [Ossie's mother] mother lived on the fourth floor of a four story apartment building.

Esarey: And what did you call her?

Langfelder: "Grosse Omama" because…The only reason we called her that…She wasn't that large a lady—"Grosse" means large—but she was quite a bit larger than my father's mother, who we called "Kleine Omama," which means small grandmother. (laughs)

I was real close to her because she seemed to cater to me more than she did to my sister—that was just my feeling—while my Kleine Omama catered more to my sister than she did to me.

Esarey: That happens in families.

Langfelder: That's how a child feels. But she always took care of me. In those days, although in apartment buildings you had indoor plumbing, you did not have bathtubs or showers. There was no such thing in those years. We had metal bathtubs hanging in the bathroom.

Esarey: But you had a bathroom.

Langfelder: Well, you shared a bathroom with the neighbor apartment. Two apartments shared one bathroom. There was strictly a toilet stool and a wash basin, (telephone rings) plus two tubs, hanging on the wall. You had your tub, and the neighbor had their tub.

Whenever you had to take a bath, you took that particular tub, and they put it in the kitchen. There was no hot water then, either. You had to heat the water on the stove. I still remember my grandmothers heating the water and

pouring it into the bathtub. Today it probably sounds terrible, but my sister and I were usually arguing whose turn it was to take the bath the first time—

Esarey: Who got in the water first. (both laugh)

Langfelder: …because the other one had to go in the same water, after the other one took a bath, because it had to be heated. That's just the way it was. I remember my grandmother giving us most of the baths, although my mother usually tried to wash our hair, which I never enjoyed, because she didn't care if soap ran into your eyes, which really burnt us. I'm still cautious at eighty-five about having soap run in my eyes. (both laugh)

Esarey: And it's still something you think about, right?

Langfelder: Yes I do, every time I take a shower. But, those were fun times.

Esarey: You describe it as a good memory, with your grandmother.

Langfelder: Oh, definitely. Oh, definitely.

Esarey: She would physically give you baths, but your mom really didn't do a lot of the physical kinds of things.

Langfelder: No, right, right.

Esarey: Who did the laundry? Who did the ironing? Who did the cooking?

Langfelder: Well, my grandmother did all the cooking. My mother did not know how to cook. She did not learn how to cook until she came to the United States, when she was in her forties. (laughs)

Esarey: That was probably traumatic for her. (laughs)

Langfelder: That would be very traumatic. Like I said, the only thing my mother did was continually cleaning. It was a small apartment; it was just the kitchen and another room that was used as a living room and bedroom. She continued to clean those rooms. I guess she did ironing; I don't recall any ironing being done. I know people ironed a lot then. They even ironed underwear in those days, so I think my mother probably did that. But my grandmother did all the cooking and washing all the dishes. I remember that.

Esarey: Every day?

Langfelder: Every day.

Esarey: Three meals.

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: Three meals a day.

Langfelder: Yes, I think. Well, I don't know if we ate three meals a day in those days—

Esarey: You had at least two.

Langfelder: …but she did all the dishes and all the kitchen.

Esarey: She lived in the same apartment building.

Langfelder: Yes, she lived on the fourth floor. I never knew finances. They were never discussed in front of children. My parents never talked about money or talked about news. We knew very little about occurrences. Parents kept those kinds of things from the children, because I didn't think they wanted them to know what's happening in the world.

We grew up during the Depression days, really, but at that time, we didn't know it was a Depression. We just knew what was put in front of us, because a lot of meals my grandmother made, we call them new potatoes, little potatoes. She put the whole bowl in the middle of the table, and that's all we had. You could eat all the potatoes you wanted, and that's all you had. We were as happy as a lark. I looked forward to eating new potatoes. (laughs)

Esarey: Well, you don't miss what you don't know.

Langfelder: No, that's right; that's correct.

Esarey: You describe your sister as…She was about a year and half older?

Langfelder: Yes, she's a year and a half older than I.

Esarey: What was your relationship with your sister?

Langfelder: Oh, we were very close. My sister was naturally somewhat dominate.

Esarey: You have pictures together a lot.

Langfelder: Yeah, we were always together. When Edith and I went out—when we didn't

with my mother—My grandfather, he would take us occasionally to what's called Schonbrunn, which was the kaiser's palace.

Esarey: I'm sorry, what was that again?

Langfelder: Because you asked me about my sister, she was naturally like any other older sibling, somewhat controlling. We always try to control the younger one. I never had a younger one, so I don't know. But, we got along just great, because we went to school together. Girls in those days went to separate classrooms than boys. They were never co-educational.

Esarey: The girls and the boys were in separate rooms, correct?

Langfelder: Separate room, yes.

Esarey: You were in the same school?

Langfelder: I think she's really the only girl I knew while I was growing up in Austria.

Esarey: Really?

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: Did you have friends?

Langfelder: I really don't remember friends. I think I had acquaintances in school, but once you were out of school, you didn't play with other children.

Esarey: You came home.

Langfelder: You just went home, and you did what your parents wanted you to do. The only time you played with others was in school.

Esarey: Describe what you and your mom did when you came home from school.

Langfelder: Well, the first thing we did—I remember it clearly—we had to do our homework. My mother, of course…I knew we were doing it, because she would sit down with us. She was particular about handwriting. She wouldn't let us use any erasers. If you made a mistake—I can still see it—she would tear up the paper, and you'd have to start over again. And there were times—I'm certain that it was four or five times—I started writing a paper over, because she would tear it up. But I did have beautiful handwriting. I'm very critical of myself today because, at this age, I write terribly. I'll have to show you some of my papers.

Esarey: I think your handwriting, your printing, is still very good.

Langfelder: Now I just print. But she was very particular about that.

Esarey: Do you have some of your papers that you wrote?

Langfelder: Yes, I still do. Yes.

Esarey: I'd like to see some of those.

Langfelder: I will get them.

Esarey: Yeah, if you could find those.

Langfelder: I will gladly give them to you.

Esarey: Because, obviously, they became very important.

Langfelder: Well, it was important to me, because being criticized about handwriting and things like that, when you do something nice, you're sort of proud of it.

Esarey: Was your mom's behavior the same with your sister?

Langfelder: Yes, my sister, I think, what I recall, was a lot more outgoing than I was. I think I was a very timid person, which is kind of hard to believe now. (both laugh) I think I'm still timid. Don't ask my wife, but I think I am. My sister was much more like a tomboy at times, I thought. (phone rings).

Esarey: That's interesting. But she had to have good handwriting, too, correct?

Langfelder: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Esarey: Because your mom would supervise that.

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: We will talk more about your mom as we go along, because she plays a very, very important role a little later on in your life. We'll come back to that.

Langfelder: Oh, that'd be fine.

Esarey: Are there any other comments, thoughts, stories about your mother that you would like to share about her, just to help us understand what a strong woman she was?

Langfelder: Well, she was a very respectful…By today's description, I would call her a very classy lady. She had the opportunity to be that way, because my father provided well for us, and she didn't have to work, and she didn't have to do things that most housewives would have to do. So she had great opportunity from that aspect. But, like I say, she never left us. She didn't socialize or anything, never socialized. She was strictly family.

Esarey: She stayed with you.

Langfelder: Yes. I don't recall her even ever having any friends. In those days, you just didn't associate—

Esarey: Entertain in your home—

Langfelder: Oh, yes, that was never done. The only one that was outgoing more was my dad. My mother, like I said earlier, just looked after us. Her prime concern was how you treated other people. We always had to be polite. We always were taught, as a child, you say good morning or good afternoon first, when you speak to an adult. If someone is in the room with you, when an adult comes in your room, you stand up. You never stay seated until they say, "Oh, go ahead and sit down." Those are the kind of things I remember.

Ossie, Ruth and Edith on a walk in the hills near Vienna, early 1930s.

Discipline and school work and, like I say, cleaning, they were her priorities.

Esarey: Let's talk a little about your dad. I'm going to read off his name here, Otto Berthold?

Langfelder: Berthold.

Esarey: I wanted to make sure I pronounce it.

Langfelder: Berthold Langfelder

Esarey: Langfelder. He was born in 1900.

Langfelder: Correct.

Esarey: Same year as your mother. And he passed away in 1986. Is that correct?

Langfelder: He passed away in 1982.

Esarey: I'll make that correction. Tell me about your father and his family and where he lived. Just kind of fill in the pieces of his life.

Langfelder: Oh, yes. My father and my mother were as different as night and day.

Esarey: It sounded like it, but it was—

Langfelder: Just totally different. I think they were more different than Midge [Ossie's wife] and I. We're pretty different, too. He was very outgoing. I think it was important to him to know a lot of people and to associate with a lot of people.

He was very active in sports. He played ice hockey. He knew how to play soccer. [That] was important to him. He knew how to ski, and any winter sport, he was very familiar with.

Esarey: This was as he was a younger person, or as he was an adult?

Ossie's father, Otto (middle of the 2nd row), pictured with the Vienna Hakoah Team, the ice hockey team he played with from 1927-1933.

Langfelder: After I was born, too. Yeah, he played ice hockey until the year before we left Austria, even.

Esarey: Tell me about that. I'm not familiar with the…Was it a team sport they played in Vienna or with other Viennese?

Langfelder: Well, ice hockey they play inside a skating rink. After, he felt he was too old, though he was still a young man. It's like any sport. He became a referee for ice hockey games. I remember, he even traveled as far—well, to us it's not very far, but in those days—he even traveled to Italy to referee ice hockey games, which showed his interest. My mother, I guess, she never objected to it. I never heard her argue with him about it or anything.

Esarey: This was something he did.

Langfelder: He was a very independent person, although he was married and had two children at home. He was never involved with us, doing homework or like…Well, he worked most of the time, like any man does, so he didn't spend that much time with us.

I remember, it was interesting though, although he was of Jewish faith, my mother was Lutheran, we always celebrated the holidays, like Christmas and Easter. I remember Christmas Eves, my mother always took us out to look at the storefronts that were somewhat decorated. Not like we see today, but they were somewhat decorated. In those days, we put candles on trees rather than electric lights.

But, when we came home Christmas Eve, my dad would look in the bedroom and say, "Oh, Santa Claus hasn't been here yet." Then he went, "Oh, he just came." He opened the door, and there was a Christmas tree in our bedroom, with all the candles lit and all the chocolate candy hanging. We

didn't have ornaments, with chocolate candy on the tree. So, he enjoyed all those Christian holidays more than anybody else, although he was not of the Christian faith.

Esarey: And he was not Christian.

Langfelder: Oh, no.

Esarey: Did you do Hanukkah?

Langfelder: No, we never did any Jewish holidays. They were all Christian holidays, because—

Esarey: That's interesting, isn't it?

Langfelder: Well, Austria was like 95 percent Catholic. So, they grew up in that environment, although his mother was a very religious Jewish lady. He went to the temple. There were times he took me to the temple. Maybe it's because of that background that I'm very broad minded when it comes to religion. I'm Catholic, but religion doesn't faze me one way or another. Maybe growing up in that environment—

Esarey: Maybe this is an interesting time to talk about that a little more, because there were three different religious influences in your country and in between your parents.

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: And, different people in your life did different things with you, took you took you to different kinds of religious events.

Langfelder: Oh, yes. My mother, she was Lutheran. It's because her family were German, and Germany at that time was mostly Lutheran. So, European countries were so structured in that vain. I never heard any of immediate family, my grandmother or my parents, ever discuss or argue over religion, which was amazing, because—

Esarey: It is amazing.

Langfelder: Oh, yes, because I'm certain that there were some objections, when they were married. Because in those days, you didn't marry anyone of another religion.

Even when we were married, I remember, Catholics married Catholics, and Lutherans married Lutherans; Jews married Jews. I know the difficultly we encountered, so I can just imagine what they might have gone through.

Esarey: But they didn't talk about it?

Langfelder: Never heard any discussion about it.

Esarey: That's interesting.

Langfelder: It's just amazing, yes.

Esarey: Well, it speaks to all the people involved, making an effort.

Langfelder: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, my dad's mother, who I said was Jewish—

Esarey: It's Kleine Omama?

Langfelder: Kleine Omama. My mother would never take us to a Catholic church, because Edith and I weren't Catholic. But Kleine Omama would take us to Catholic church.

Esarey: And she was Jewish.

Langfelder: And she was Jewish. (both laugh) She was a very stout, Jewish lady, very pronounced; that was her religion. She was a strong believer in it, Omama was.

Esarey: Did she take you to the temple?

Langfelder: I don't think my sister ever went to temple, but my dad would take me once in a while. In those days, women would sit…I remember temple, because women would sit on one side, and the men would sit on the other side. They would never sit together.

Esarey: No. Which is probably why your grandmother didn't take you, because you'd be separated.

Langfelder: That's probably true.

Esarey: But she took you to the Catholic services sometimes, and that was okay with your mom?

Langfelder: Oh, yeah, didn't bother her. Grosse Omama never took us to church, but I remember Kleine Omama. (laughs)

Esarey: You describe all that with just like, this is the way it is, like it wasn't unusual or…For you, this was—

Langfelder: For me, it wasn't. It was just an enjoyable childhood, because that's the way things were. Today, when we have grandchildren over, and they don't like the food you put on the table, "Well, let's go to McDonald's." You ate what was on the table. And the strange thing was, you loved what they put on the table, because you didn't know anything else, I guess, when you have no comparison.

Esarey: It was a very controlled…Well, you were in the Depression, as you said.

Langfelder: Oh, yeah, it was the Depression.

Esarey: I get the impression you didn't have any idea that there was a Depression.

Langfelder: Oh, no, had no idea—

Esarey: Or that something was wrong.

Langfelder: …because we didn't know anything about finance or money. I never heard money being discussed. The only thing I recall was, if you had good grades during the week, or did good homework—there was a grocer on the first floor of our apartment complex—that my parents would give us *zehn groschen,* which is like ten pennies, and you were allowed to buy yourself one banana. (laughs) I eat that in one day. Yeah, we have four bananas sitting here on the table. I probably eat that many in one day now and don't think anything about it.

Esarey: I almost brought you a banana.

Langfelder: (laughs) That was a treat, once a week.

Esarey: And still is.

Langfelder: Oh, still is, yes.

Esarey: Still has a good memory for you. What did your father do?

Langfelder: My father was a manager of a paper manufacturing company. They didn't manufacture paper. In those days, we didn't have paper sacks, like we do today. Everything was wrapping paper, and advertising was printed on that wrapping paper. They came in rolls, like the newspaper print. They printed those advertisements. That's what his company did.

Esarey: That's what he did. What years was that? That was the early 1930s?

Langfelder: Yeah, in the 1930s, between 1930 and 1940.

Esarey: What was his specific job? What did he—

Langfelder: Oh, he managed that company.

Esarey: He managed how many employees?

Langfelder: Oh, I wouldn't—

Esarey: Just a guess.

Langfelder: I couldn't…I know it was a large factory. I would be guessing a minimum of twenty or fifty people.

Esarey: He was the manager.

Langfelder: It was a big business then. It was like, today, manufacturing those paper sacks that the grocery stores hold.

Esarey: How did he get into that?

Langfelder: I really don't know, except I know he went to school to study chemistry. He wanted to become a chemist, and he graduated with a chemical degree. Maybe that was the only job opportunity he had; I don't know. It was somewhat affluent. I guess he made enough money to take good care of the family and not make my mother work or anything.

Esarey: Obviously he was able to care for your family, during the Depression. I would like to ask you a little bit about Fritz, because he was your father's—

Langfelder: My dad's brother. He was the only brother he had.

Esarey: Talk about him, because he was an important member of the family.

Langfelder: Fritz, he was a very handsome young man. I always remember him as a young man, naturally. He lived with Kleine Omama, and he was single.

Esarey: He lived with his parents.

Langfelder: Oh, yeah, with his parents. Of course, at that time I didn't know it, but looking back, with the Jewish faith, one of the sons had to take care of the family, had to take care of the parents.

Esarey: That was his job.

Langfelder: I guess, that was his job, because his Dad got married and—

Esarey: They did different things, too. You described their daily routines differently.

Langfelder: Oh, yes. My Kleine Omama and her husband, they owned a shirt manufacturing company. I remember it wasn't a very big company. It had what I recall, maybe eight or nine employees.

Fritz was the pattern maker. He would cut the patterns for different size shirts. He would just take the cloth that was stacked on top of each other, and he would just cut the pattern around that. The rest of the people were really seamtresses, and they would sew the shirts together, the sleeves and the collars or whatever.

Esarey: He had an important position.

Langfelder: Yes, oh yes. He pretty much ran that part, except my grandmother was there all day. I don't think she did anything, except make sure everybody worked. (both laugh) She was the manager, because her husband, my grandfather, all he did was unlock the factory, and then he went to the coffee house and drank coffee, played cards and smoked and whatever men did in those days. Today, I said, they would go out on the golf course. I tried to make a comparison, only we didn't have golf courses then. Then my grandmother and Fritz never saw my grandfather till the next day, or till he got home, I guess.

Esarey: But, he'd be gone all day.

Langfelder: Fritz was a very hard worker, very friendly individual but spent all his time with his mother really.

Esarey: Did you spend any time with Fritz?

Fritz Langfelder, left, visiting with Ossie's family, May, 1939.

Langfelder: Not on a one-on-one basis. The only reason I felt I knew Fritz pretty well is that, once in a while, my dad dropped me off at the factory when I didn't have school, and I would stay there most of the day, just watching what they did. It was really fascinating.

Esarey: What did they do? I have no idea how that worked. He would cut that up, and then what would happen?

Langfelder: It would be like, if this was the pattern of a shirt, the front side of a shirt, they had these…It looked almost like cardboard, heavy cardboard. He would have a stack of cloths this thick, rectangular. He would lay that pattern on top, and then he would cut around that pattern, with a knife, because there was no electrical equipment. It was the most amazing thing to me then. It still is today. I can see it as plain as day. He was extremely strong. Well, you had to be, to be able to do that without ruining all those cloths.

Esarey: Oh, my gosh, yeah, brave, courageous. You said Fritz became Otto, [whom] you called an "affluent gentleman." That would be your, grandfather, Fritz.

Langfelder: Oh, yes, Fritz was my dad's father. I didn't know him very well, except once in a while. I do show a picture, when he would take us to Schonbrunn, to the Kaiser's…He liked to go to the Kaiser's palace to visit.

Otto (Ossie's father), Edith (sister), and Ossie at Schoenbrunn, the former Kaiser's palace, around 1930. Ossie is holding a child-size walking stick.

Esarey: We have some pictures, I think, in here of all of them.

Langfelder: Yeah, I have a picture of him. Yeah, that's him. The reason I remember him so well is, because my parents always made me wear gloves and carry a cane when he took us, because he insisted that's the sign of a gentleman, to carry a cane. I was only like seven, eight, nine years old, but I always had to have a cane.

Esarey: So, you had a little boy-sized cane, and you'd wear gloves. Do you have any pictures of you and your grandfather with you and the cane? Is there one in here?

Langfelder: Yes, it's in there.

Esarey: Is this it?

Langfelder: There's another one in there, but that was he and—

Esarey: And that would be your cane.

Langfelder: But we had to be dressed up.

Esarey: You had to be dressed up.

Langfelder: The interesting thing is, I don't ever remember wearing dirty clothes. (laughs)

Esarey: There you are with your cane.

Langfelder: Yeah, that was me.

Esarey: That's a good picture.

Langfelder: Can you imagine, that was a leisure day? Can you imagine children looking like that today on leisure day? (laughs)

Esarey: No. (laughs) But, for you, this was how it was supposed to be. And your sister went with you, correct?

Langfelder: Oh, yes. We were always together.

Esarey: You were always together.

Langfelder: Always together.

Esarey: Many of your pictures show you almost holding hands. You were together, physically together.

Langfelder: I think, until the day we left Europe.

Esarey: How did your mother and father meet?

Langfelder: Oh, I wish I…I don't know.

Esarey: Do you have any stories about how they happen to meet?

Langfelder: No inkling at all.

Esarey: They didn't talk about that?

Langfelder: No, never talked about it. I wish I would have asked. But at that time, I really wasn't interested. I know it had to be difficult for either side, for either my mother's family or my dad's family, because my grandmother, Kleine Omama, insisted that they be married in the temple. My mother was Lutheran, and they were staunch Lutheran. I don't even know if her parents attended the wedding. I think that's why they probably never discussed it.

Esarey: They were married in the Lutheran church?

Langfelder: No, they were married in the temple.

Esarey: Oh, they were married in the temple. Okay, so her parents—

Langfelder: Oh, yeah. I don't think her parents even went to the wedding. I don't know that, but that was always my thought.

Esarey: They physically didn't live that far away from each other.

Langfelder: Right around the corner. We lived in Hutteldorfer Straser (Street). At the end of the block was Vinegasse [?] That's where my grandmother lived, my Kleine Omama, right around the corner.

Esarey: So, here were these four people, with very different outlooks, but they managed to work with you and your mom and your dad.

Langfelder: I don't recall my dad's parents ever being together with my mother's parents. We never ate together, never saw each other. I saw everybody. Edith saw everybody, but I don't think they saw each other.

Esarey: An effort was made to make sure the children—

Langfelder: Oh, yes, oh yes. Today, I freely discuss my animosities. (both laugh) I'm very outspoken. But, I never heard any of that kind of discussion. You never knew who liked or who disliked the other. You didn't even think about people disliking each other.

Esarey: Well, it wasn't in the culture. It wasn't in your culture as you grew up. So, did you ever get pictures of your parents' wedding?

Langfelder: I never saw a picture of my parents' wedding.

Esarey: So, they didn't have pictures of that in their home?

Langfelder: No, oh no.

Esarey: Interesting. It is interesting, when you think about—

Langfelder: Of course, photography in those days was also very expensive. So, I don't know if they took pictures at weddings. Those are good questions. (Esarey laughs)

Esarey: We're going to come now to you. Otto, Ossie Langfelder, born August 2, 1926. Although you say in your book that you didn't remember a lot about before you were six years old, because that's when things really started happening, you have some vague memories of those early years.

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: Pleasant memories, correct?

Langfelder: Oh yes. About my childhood, oh yes. Of course, in those days we had no car, so wherever we went, we either had to take a trolley, or you would have had to take a taxi cab, which, I think, was probably very expensive.

Esarey: This is you.

Langfelder: Yes, that was in Schonbrunn.

Esarey: And a lot of walking.

Langfelder: Oh, a lot of walking.

Esarey: Your mother?

Langfelder: Oh, yes. Well, because of transportation. Yeah, that was my mother.

Esarey: And where were you?

Langfelder: That was in Vienna, yes. See, that was my father's ice hockey team. Of course, I can't walk anymore now, but maybe I need to tell my wife, I never did like to walk, once I came to this country.

Esarey: Really? You kind of gave that up, because you had to walk everywhere?

Langfelder: I fought it tooth and toenail, because you had to walk everywhere. But you never thought anything about it. That was just part of your lifestyle.

Esarey: Tell me about here, because you were young here. This is you on the farm.

Ossie (five yrs. old), his mother, Ruth, and sister, Edith, living on a farm, outside of Vienna. Summer, 1931.

Langfelder: Oh yes, on the farm.

Esarey: Talk about the farm a little bit, because you spent time there.

Langfelder: Every summer, in order to, I guess, have my mother have a nice vacation and have us see the other part of life, I guess, my dad had made an arrangement with a farmer that was, apparently, a friend of his that we could visit. We would visit for quite a long time, probably like a month at a time. We stayed at that farm. Of course, we never saw any animals, until we went on the farm, because we lived in a big city. It was kind of unique, because that farmer, he only had five or six pigs. He would actually scrub the pigs every morning.

Esarey: Big pigs, too.

Langfelder: Over here, you don't see anybody scrub pigs. (both laugh) We enjoy them being dirty. He had geese, I remember. I think my sister like to probably tease some of the animals, because I still remember one goose always chased her and used to kind of peck her in the calf a leg. Oh, she would scream. But it never went after me, so I think she must have teased it or something, because animals remember things.

But, we enjoyed being there. We were never able to go swimming or anything, because he might have had a pond, but it was probably kind of dirty, from what I recall. I just loved being on that farm. It was so enjoyable, maybe, because we had so many animals around us.

Esarey: Could you get dirty?

Langfelder: No, I was not allowed to get dirty. (both laugh) I never had any dirty clothes, I think. (laughs)

Esarey: Because you're not dirty in this picture.

Langfelder: Oh, no. We weren't allowed to get dirty.

Esarey: Your mother didn't come?

Langfelder: Oh, yes, she was there.

Esarey: She was with you?

Langfelder: Oh, my mother went with us all the time, yes.

Esarey: So, your mother was with you here. How did your mother like the farm?

Otto, Ruth, Ossie, and Edith, vacationing at a small family cottage on the Danube River, Austria, circa 1929.

Langfelder: I don't think my mother enjoyed the farm life, because it's not a clean environment. (laughs) I didn't know. You wouldn't have known she didn't enjoy it. She was always pleasant about it—

Esarey: She was giving you that experience.

Langfelder: …and never critical, to my knowledge.

Esarey: Did your father come out to the farm?

Langfelder: No, never did come. He just sent us there. That probably gave him a vacation, I guess.

Esarey: Now, I'm going to ask you this, because we talked about this before. It was the black doll. Please discuss that a little bit, some of your thoughts. They were very interesting, about this doll.

Langfelder: Well, the interesting thing about that picture…I remember the doll. I don't remember having that picture taken. It might have been fascinating to me, because in Austria we never saw any black people, never saw any African Americans. It was a totally white

Ossie as a toddler, on the farm outside Vienna, with favorite black doll, in the early 1930s.

society. So, that doll must have been given to me, either by my parents or grandparents, because no one else gave you a present. I always loved that doll, and I carried it with me a lot of times, maybe because it was different than I had ever seen or ever had.

Esarey: You don't remember where you got it?

Langfelder: No. I don't remember where. I would have said it was probably a Christmas present, because that was the only time you received presents, at that time.

Esarey: Did you bring it with you, when you left?

Langfelder: No. Like I said earlier, we couldn't take anything out of the country. But number one, we didn't know we were leaving. We thought we were going on vacation. The only thing I had on me was my one book of stamps that they confiscated.

Esarey: If you could, talk about school, entering school at the age of six. There's one picture in here of your school and all of your students. What was your school like?

Langfelder: Oh, I loved school. I always did like school.

Ossie's school classmates and teacher, Mr. Novak, about 1935, in Vienna. Ossie is in lederhosen in the first row.

Esarey: Who were your teachers?

Langfelder: Mr. Novak was my teacher. He was my teacher throughout my different classes, all the time I was in school in Vienna.

Esarey: Which was how many years?

Langfelder: It must have been about six years

Esarey: About six years, six to twelve.

Langfelder: Yeah. We had the same teacher all those years, and—

Esarey: And this is him, in this corner, right here?

Langfelder: This is me over here, on the bottom, on the corner.

Esarey: Mr. Novak.

Langfelder: Yes. I enjoyed school, and it was a public school. What surprises me now is, I see in that picture, they show a priest in the picture—

Esarey: Yes.

Langfelder: …which is kind of unusual. Looking back, I don't remember that part of it.

Esarey: Was it a Catholic school?

Langfelder: It was a public school.

Esarey: A public school?

Langfelder: Yes, but like I say, it was 95% Catholic. So, maybe that had influence at that time.

Esarey: Maybe an administrator or someone like that could have been in there.

Langfelder: Could have been.

Esarey: Well, you described your routine of study, a lot of study. Did you enter into sports at all?

Langfelder: No sports whatsoever. I don't even know if they had sports. I don't think there was such a thing in grade school.

Esarey: Because your father was quite an athlete?

Langfelder: Oh yes, he was, yeah.

Esarey: But you did not?

Langfelder: No, I didn't do it. Well, the only thing Edith and I did is…My mother was an excellent ice skater, and she took us ice skating almost every weekend. She taught us how to ride a bicycle, and she taught us how to ski, although she didn't know how to ski. But those were the only sports that we did. It was strictly a one-on-one basis.

Ossie as a young child in Vienna, mid-1930s. This picture is on the cover of his autobiography, My Incredible Journey.

Esarey: And you had a hobby of collecting stamps.

Langfelder: Stamps.

Esarey: How did that start?

Langfelder: I don't know. I think in those days that was pretty popular, because, like I say, you didn't participate in sports or anything. That was one of the very few hobbies there were. I still collect stamps. As a matter of fact, I was always hoping one of my children or grandchildren would like to have a stamp collection, but they're not interested anymore. It's a thing of the past. But I can tell you the names of different countries that, today, people can't tell you. The stamps on Switzerland, I remember, was Helvetia. You say "Helvetia" to people, they don't know what it is. But, like Austria is Osterreich.

I really learned a lot from stamp collecting. I think my father probably started me in it [as] a way of educating you about geography and things. That's how you learned about all the different countries.

Esarey: Where things were and where people lived.

Langfelder: Oh, yes, and what those countries are actually called.

Esarey: Your father helped you with that?

Langfelder: My dad, with the stamps, oh yeah. He was able to bring me stamps, because my mother had no contact.

Esarey: Because he traveled.

Langfelder: And I think because of his business, although he never collected stamps—

Esarey: He supported your stamp collection very much.

Langfelder: Oh yes, very much.

Esarey: We're kind of at the point now where I'd like you to start to talk about your incredible journey. This would be some of those first impressions that you start to talk about. I'm going to read what you said. You indicated that you did not know about religious intolerance until Hitler invaded Austria.

Langfelder: That's correct.

Esarey: What were your first impressions when that started to happen, around 1938, because that's when your life changed?

Langfelder: Like I said, we never knew, really, anything negative about anything, because nothing was ever discussed in front of us.

Esarey: No radio? No newspapers?

Langfelder: No radio. The only time I remember having a radio, I was sick in bed, as a matter of fact. My father rented it, because it was the Olympics, the last Olympics. He rented a radio, so I could listen to the Olympic Games.

Esarey: In 1936?

Langfelder: Yes, 1936.

Esarey: That was a famous Olympics.

Langfelder: Oh yes, that was famous, very controversial. Other than that…And like I say, we never discussed religion, until I really left Europe. I didn't even know my mother was Lutheran. I knew my father was Jewish, because once in a while he took me to temple. But I never thought of anything about Lutheran or Catholic or Presbyterian. You just didn't think about it.

So, the first thing I remember is when the troops came down Hutteldorfer Strauss, that's where we lived on. That was a major artery; that's like coming down I-55 through town [Springfield, IL], Fifth Street or Sixth Street. The German troops marched down that street. Nothing but apartment buildings are situated on that street, and every window you would look at had Swastika flags hanging outside of it. We didn't have a flag.

I don't remember if I ask my dad or didn't ask my dad, but all I remember him saying, "Don't look out the window, because we don't have a Nazi flag, and they'll arrest you." Which really didn't mean anything to me. I mean, you're a child. I think the only thing I thought of was, "Well, why don't we have a Nazi flag?" because you don't know the circumstances; you don't know what it means. That always stuck in my mind.

Esarey: Yes. Everyone else had these flags. This would have been around April, 1938.

Langfelder: Nineteen thirty-eight. That is correct.

Esarey: When things began to change.

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: Were you aware that, other than the marching of the troops…What happened in your family right around then?

Langfelder: My father, he apparently used to go to work, but he came home. It appeared to me he was home at nighttime more than ever before. He just came home from work, I guess, and wouldn't leave the apartment anymore, which was very unusual at nighttime, because I didn't pay much attention. Other than looking back, now I understand why he didn't leave the house. He didn't want to be arrested, because of his Jewish faith.

When we went anywhere, only my mother took us out. We'd walk down the street, and they had these women, with the mink coats on. Of course, I didn't know what a mink coat was. To me there were fur coats. But later,

Mom, when we got over here, then she explained they were mink coats. There were Jewish women, before Hitler marched into Austria…

The Austrians that were dedicated to the Austrian form of government. We had [what's] called a Krutincross, which was a cross that designated Austria. They painted that on the corner, with some sort of white paint. Not white paint, but whatever they painted it with, the people dedicated for Austrian freedom. Well, when the German's marched in—

Esarey: What was that called? Could you write down that word is, just anywhere on the page? The significance of this cross?

Langfelder: That used to be in the…The Austrian flag is red, white, red, and the Krutincross…I'll show you what it looked like. That was the Krutincross.

Esarey: Thank you.

Langfelder: They [the community] had painted that on the sidewalks and the intersections, and they [German troops] made the Jewish women paint over them, and then paint the swastika over that. After they did that, then they sent them to concentration camps.

I remember my mother when she walked with us. You couldn't help but see them, because they were right there in front of you. But she didn't want us to look over. People were there, and they would spit on them and throw stuff at them. That's the first time I saw really meanness of other people, doing things that—

Esarey: You were about twelve years old.

Langfelder: Yeah, at that time I was only like a little over ten years old.

Esarey: Only about ten.

Langfelder: You don't really understand what's going on, but you see what's going on. What was being done is so terrible, because you never saw anything terrible go on before.

Esarey: What did your mother tell you about that?

Langfelder: My mother wouldn't tell us anything to—

Esarey: You just observed it.

Langfelder: We just observed it, and she tried to pull you away from it. She didn't want you to see it, but you couldn't help but see it. My mother became…I don't think she was ever close with her in-laws—my dad's parents, Kleine Omama—but all of a sudden, she became very protective of her, and she

would go see her every day to make sure nothing will happen to her. Of course, I didn't know why, but it didn't take me long to realize why, because she was Jewish.

Esarey: And that's when you first became aware of a religious intolerance of the Jewish.

Langfelder: Oh yeah.

Esarey: What happened to your father's company?

Langfelder: That company was owned by people who were of Jewish faith. Well, I understood, even while I was so small then, that the owner of the company had left. I heard my dad say that, tell my mother. The Germans let him [Ossie's father] be in charge, because they didn't know how to manage the company. I didn't think anything about it. To me that's the natural thing to do. But the Germans, the Nazis, the SS, they took the company over and make sure that they're managing it. But he managed the company for, I'm guessing, for at least a year after they invaded. Then one day he came home.

My parents had talked about leaving the country. They talked so quietly, I didn't know they were talking about that. My mother, one day, said she thinks we might be going to China, which didn't mean anything to me. China was so far away; it's like America. So, I thought it was kind of exciting. But she had already the necessary papers to go to China.

But, my dad, he took me for a walk one day to get a visa to go to Argentina. (telephone rings) He always wanted to go to South America. He tried to get into Argentina, because that was a country that was very closely tied to Germany, because they were Nazis. I didn't know it, but, apparently, my dad didn't know it either. My mother told me to stay with my dad and never let go of his hand, because he might be arrested. She didn't tell me why he would be arrested, just that he would be arrested.

So, we walked to that embassy and stood in line to wait to get a visa. Well, some gentleman came up to him and whispered something in his ear. I don't know what he said; I couldn't hear it. My dad said, "We have to go," and we left.

Esarey: The line.

Langfelder: Away from the embassy, because, I guess, looking back now, I guess everybody that was in that line was eventually arrested and sent to a concentration camp.

Esarey: Which embassy was this?

Langfelder: The Argentinian embassy in Vienna.

Esarey: And someone warned your father.

Langfelder: Yes, warned my father. So, he must have—

Esarey: Then what happened?

Langfelder: Then, the rest of the day, we just walked about Vienna. We just walked. We didn't do anything. We weren't allowed to go in the restaurants.

Esarey: You held his hand.

Langfelder: Oh, yes. And it was late at night, because we couldn't go eat anywhere, and you weren't allowed to sit on benches. It's just like, over here, [it would] just be whites only or blacks only. Over there, no Jews allowed to sit on a bench. So my dad couldn't sit on a bench, which meant I couldn't sit on a…Well, I didn't know it. But, we walked all day and late at night then the—

Esarey: How many hours were you walking?

Langfelder: Oh, we went to the embassy early in the morning and…probably twelve hours. I'm just guessing, because late that night then a taxi cab pulled up and jerked my dad into the cab and took off. Of course, I stood there. I didn't know what to do, because I didn't know, why did they grab my dad? As a child, what do you do but cry? I guess I cried; I don't know what. But then, pretty soon, somebody came along and took me and said, "I'm taking you home."

Esarey: You don't know who that was?

Langfelder: No.

Esarey: Someone, a stranger, came up to you, then you're standing on the street, you—

Langfelder: And I didn't even know who grabbed my dad, but it turned out to be my mother's brother-in-law. He drove a cab.

Esarey: And brought you home.

Langfelder: No, took my dad.

Esarey: Took your dad to where he—

Langfelder: I don't remember who took me home. I can't even recall how I went home.

Esarey: Where'd your father go?

Langfelder: My mother's sister hid him in her apartment.

Esarey: Where did she live?

Langfelder: She lived on the opposite side of Vienna

Esarey: So, he had to go into hiding.

Langfelder: Yeah, he had to go into hiding. We never went to visit her. My cousin lives over here now. She was the same age as I am. Every day they went to school, their mother would say, "You can't tell anybody your uncle's with us, or they'll throw us in a concentration camp." They were Lutherans, see, they were all Lutherans. But you couldn't do that, so that was illegal.

Esarey: Did you have to go to a special school?

Langfelder: Yes. After that, they sent us to a different school.

Esarey: Why did they do that? Why did they send you to a separate school?

Langfelder: Because our dad was Jewish.

Esarey: And children of Jewish—

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: …parents, either one.

Langfelder: Yeah, one [Jewish] parent or two [Jewish] parents had to go to another school. It was another public school. We didn't know the reason. I don't recall that ever being discussed, because you're still with a bunch of children, and you still do the same studying, but it's just a different structure.

Esarey: You were accepting of that, that this is just what you had to do.

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: What happened to Fritz?

Langfelder: They sent Fritz to…They picked Fritz up at work one day and sent him to a concentration camp.

Esarey: Do you know what camp he went to?

Langfelder: Dachau, D-a-c-h-a-u.

Esarey: Was this in about 1939?

Langfelder: Late '38.

Esarey: Late '38, late in that year. This is a very traumatic year—

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: …because, you know, the Germans came in in April?

Langfelder: Oh yes, everything happened—

Esarey: Everything happened in a short period of time.

Langfelder: …within about six months. Oh, yes.

Esarey: Your mother did some remarkable things.

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: Behind the scenes, didn't she?

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: What did she do? Later on you found out.

Langfelder: Well, my mother and Fritz weren't very close, [from] what I recall. Well, he never visited us, well, because he worked all the time. But, he never visited us. We never really associated with anybody, other than Grosse Omama and us children with Kleine Omama. My mother really didn't associate with other people.

But, after they arrested him, she went to work to get him out of the concentration camp; although, at that time, we didn't even call them concentration camps. They were just prisons. I guess she thought she could get him released. I don't know how she got him out.

Esarey: You don't, to this day, know how she managed to—

Langfelder: Just amazing. My dad, I don't remember his…I wish I could recall his name; one of his co-hockey players from his team was a good friend of his, but he turned out to be, I remember, a Nazi officer, when Hitler marched in. I remember my mother saying something like, "Well, he can't talk to my dad anymore, because he's a Nazi officer." Dad is Jewish. So, my dad didn't even get to play ice hockey, after that or anything. But, I think he, in some way, helped my mother get Fritz out of the concentration camp. That's the only reasoning I can see. You had to have some connection.

Esarey: She had a connection somewhere.

Langfelder: Yeah, you just couldn't do it by yourself, especially being married to a Jewish person.

Esarey: But she did some remarkable things.

Langfelder: Oh, just amazing, oh yes.

Esarey: So you're in this new school. Fritz is in a prison. Your father is hiding, and your mother has the children to deal with. What was the first thing? Then what happened? You came home, and then what did your mother do?

Langfelder: Well, when I was brought home, I'm sure I was crying. I guess she told me not to worry or whatever. To me, her lifestyle continued the way it always was. Our clothes were immaculate. (laughs) No figures on the icebox, because the icebox is white.[1] Well, we didn't have refrigeration then. There was no such thing.

Esarey: There's no change. Everything was—

Langfelder: Everything was the same. My grandmother still came down and cooked and gave us our baths.

Esarey: Your mother had a plan.

Langfelder: Yes, apparently.

Esarey: What plan did she have to get you out of Austria?

Langfelder: I don't know who she talked to, because she certainly never discussed anything with us.

Esarey: She never did tell you?

Langfelder: Never did tell us anything.

Esarey: In your whole life.

Langfelder: Whole life, never did.

Esarey: It's like a closed chapter.

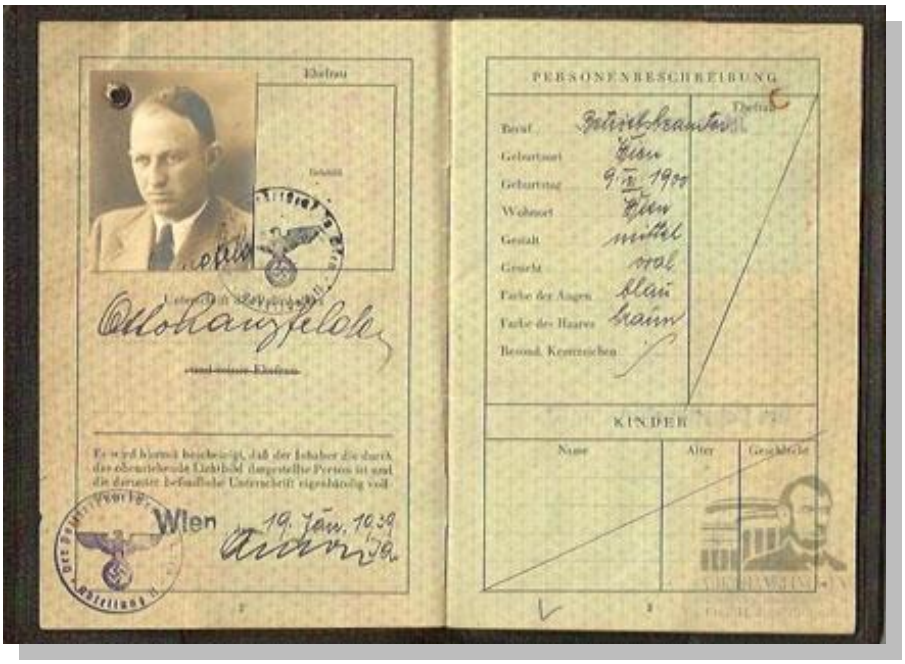
Langfelder: And it had to be difficult to say, even since her mother took care of us, too. I never thought about it until now I'm talking to you that when we left Austria, she told, apparently, her sister and everybody else that, "Oh, we're going to Switzerland for the weekend." She probably said the same thing to her mother, because we couldn't have gotten out of the country.

Esarey: Because she couldn't tell. She couldn't tell.

Langfelder: Couldn't tell anybody.

[1] Into the 1930s, households used large blocks of ice to keep food cold in "**i**ceboxes." By the end of the 1800s, many American households stored their perishable food in an insulated "icebox" that was usually made of wood and lined with tin or zinc.

Esarey: What a secret to have to keep. Oh, my gosh.



Otto Langfelder's Austrian passport, issued in 1939 by the German Reich, prior to the family's flight from Austria to Switzerland.

Langfelder: My gosh, your own mother.

Esarey: So you left, and we'll pick up after. We'll slow down and…I'm trying to picture you and your sister and your mother going to Switzerland. That was a certain day; you were told you were going for a weekend.

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: And what did you take with you?

Langfelder: I'll show you before you leave. I have a briefcase that we took with us. I guess all we had in there was underwear, a change of underwear, because on the weekend…Of course, today in America we change clothes every six minutes. (Esarey laughs) Over there, you kept them clean, and you changed them very four days or five days. The outer garment, I'm sure, we were supposed to wear. All we had was an undergarment, and we had that in a briefcase. I'll show you before you leave.

Esarey: But not your stamps? You brought one—

Langfelder: Well, I only had that one booklet. I had it in my pocket up here; I can still feel it. That's what they confiscated on the train, going to Switzerland.

Esarey: Oh, they took that.

Langfelder: Oh, yes. Well, when we got to the border, the Nazis came through. They wanted to know if we had…They didn't call them valuables. I don't know what they ask for. But, innocently enough, I said, "This is all I have," and they took that, because you weren't allowed to take anything out of the country.

Esarey: Even for a weekend

Langfelder: Yeah, not even for a weekend, oh, no.

Esarey: Did you have to wear the Jewish star?

Langfelder: …and they took my mother. I don't know where they took her to, but I understand they strip searched her. They didn't take my dad. He stayed with Edith and I. But they took my mother. I imagine or think about all the time, is that they really mistreated her, when they searched her for being married to a Jew.

Esarey: Your father was with you then?

Langfelder: Oh, he was on the train with us. Oh, yes. That's why we left.

Esarey: So they humiliated her?

Langfelder: Oh, humiliated her, yes. Thanks for that word, yeah.

Esarey: Did you have to wear the Jewish star?

Langfelder: No. Well, Edith and I didn't, because we weren't Jewish.

Esarey: Did your father?

Langfelder: Yeah, my father.

Esarey: Your father did.

Langfelder: Yeah. They had to wear an armband. They had an armband, with the Star of David.

Esarey: Do you still have that?

Langfelder: No, oh no. He probably destroyed it.

Esarey: Yeah, I can see why.

Langfelder: I'm guessing; I don't know.

Esarey: Well, this is where I think we should stop.

Langfelder: Okay.

Esarey: For today.

Langfelder: I hope I didn't bore you.

Esarey: You were fascinating. It's wonderful story. I mean, it's…it's powerful.

(end of transcript # 1)

Interview with Ossie Langfelder

IM-A-L-2012-026
Interview #2: June 18, 2012
Interviewer: Carol Esarey

Esarey: This is Carol Esarey. The date is June 18, 2012. We are in the kitchen of Ossie Langfelder's home, and we are beginning a recording. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library *Immigrant Stories* program.

Ossie, I'd like to begin our story this morning where we left off last time, which was, you were just about ready to leave Austria.

Langfelder: That's correct.

Esarey: I'm going to read you a little something that your mother said. She said, "You attribute your good fortune of survival to your mother, her courage and Aryan background."

Langfelder: Correct.

Esarey: That seems to happen quite a bit throughout your whole leaving, through your whole story. I'd like you to talk a little bit about your mom and getting out of Austria.

Langfelder: Well, my mother was a very proud individual. I think she really spent her life just raising my sister and I because, after she had Edith, she only worked at home. And since her mother spent all her time with us by cooking and washing and things, my mother spent all her time just cleaning a two-room apartment and keeping Edith and I clean and entertained. Cleanliness, I think, was her number one priority. Like I told you earlier, we had nothing but white furniture, and she was always looking for fingerprints, to see if we'd touched anything or if we were clean.

She was somewhat strict but always seemed pleasant. The strange thing is, as you started interviewing me, of course, you made me think back of how my mother reacted. I'm sure that she hugged me, but I don't remember the kind of affection that I pass on to my children. I'm a hugger, and I'm a kisser. That's the way I treat my children. Like my wife says, they're not children anymore; they're grown people. But, although they're in their fifties, I still hug them. That's just the way I am. I think that's probably a reaction that my mother might never have felt. She might have felt it, but she just didn't do it.

We were never out of her sight, from morning to night, whether we went out of the house to the park to play or whether we went walking up in the mountains with my dad and her or whether learning how to ride a bicycle.

She used to take us ice skating, at least once a week, and she took us to the opera about two or three times a month. We weren't allowed to see a movie, but she was always with us, unless we were with my father or my grandfather. It just was a total different environment than we have today.

Esarey: When she knew that you had to leave Austria and made preparations, what now do you know that she did to help you leave?

Langfelder: Well, I'm sorry to say that I knew very little. Parents didn't confide in children like probably we do today, like I do with in my children. We knew nothing about finances or things that happened in the world, because we weren't even allowed to listen to a radio; we weren't allowed to read a newspaper. The parents, I guess, were very protective that their children [be] brought up in a pleasant environment. That's how I was brought up. That's why I just remember the good things.

So, I knew she had to do a lot, because in those years, in order to go to another country, you had to have a visa. You had to be permitted by the government to go into that country. Then, you had to have an exit permit from your own government. It was pretty thorough.

When she was unable to get a visa for us…She wanted to go to Argentina, because she had an uncle down there. They didn't permit Jews down there, which she didn't know, apparently. I still have correspondence

from her to the Argentinian embassy, and that's where my dad and I was when we had to walk away.

She finally did get a visa to go to China. Of course, all I knew was that she tried to get visas to go to another country. That's all I knew and really didn't know the perfect reason for it, because when you're twelve years old, you don't think in that direction. But I thought it might be exciting to go to China. (Esarey laughs) I'm glad we didn't go. I wouldn't have known Midge [Ossie's wife]. She had all the paperwork and all the travel arrangements made to go to China when, apparently, my dad and she received a visa to go to England.

I guess to her that had to be traumatic, because Edith and I didn't get a visa to go to England. It was just for her and my dad. So, she had to leave us in Switzerland, which had to be awful for a mother that was with her children all the time, twenty-four hours a day. We even slept in the same bedroom. I mean, we were off to her sight.

I don't think I've ever saw my mother cry, which is strange, because I can sit here talk about it; I can sit here and cry about it. She was just…not just well educated, just very proud. She just managed her life like perfection. She just wanted to be a perfectionist, I think.

Esarey: She was able to obtain papers for you and visas and travel through several countries.

Langfelder: Correct, yes.

Esarey: She contacted people. Do you know, did she have a lot of friends that she—

Langfelder: No, my mother really didn't have many friends. My dad was the outgoing person, like he played ice hockey on the Viennese team, and he was well into sports. I think like my sons are. I was never into sports.

It's hard to believe that a woman of her stature that could have really enjoyed life to the fullest, like we do here—we used to like to go to parties when we were young—I never knew of her going anywhere with anybody. We had…They were called the Biases [?] I remember, it was a family; they had two children; they were girls. They were close friends of my mother and Dad's. Those are the only friends I can even remember, and the only ones she ever associated with. And that's like, maybe seeing them once every two or three months.

Of course, people weren't able to visit others, because no one had an automobile, and we had no telephone. It's hard to understand, but a different lifestyle. Her life was just dedicated to Edith and I, and that's all she loved to do.

Esarey: She felt strongly about getting you all safely out of the country.

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: Tell me, before we go on more about Switzerland, what you remember about keeping secrets about your father and where he was.

Langfelder: Secrets?

Esarey: Secrets. Your mother told you some things, and you had to keep secrets.

Langfelder: Well, the parents didn't communicate much with the children about anything. When my mother and father talked to each other, they talked in something like you might call Pig Latin. We didn't understand a word they were saying. They were talking in French, mixed with German. They knew what they were saying, but we couldn't understand a word they were saying. I remember they did that quite a bit. Like I say, we knew from nothing.

Until I came to the United States and learned about the Depression, I didn't know we lived in the middle of the Depression. Like I said earlier, there were meals; all we had were potatoes to eat, and that was just wonderful. But, you didn't realize there was no other food available, or there was no money available. I never knew whether my parents didn't have money to buy more food or whether that was all the food that was available. But we never felt bad about anything, so we never were shorted.

Until the day Hitler marched in, I didn't know anything about anything about world affairs or…I talk in my book about saying that when everybody had a Nazi flag hanging out, and we didn't have one, my dad told us to get away from the window, so not to be seen standing by a window that didn't display a Swastika. I didn't quite understand why we didn't display a Swastika. But he didn't, because he was Jewish. That was really an indication; that's why he didn't do it.

Esarey: When your mother obtained a weekend, was it a weekend pass, so to speak, a weekend visa to visit Switzerland?

Langfelder: Uh-hmm.

Esarey: Who all went to Switzerland with you?

Langfelder: Just my father and my mother and Edith and I. It was on a weekend, and my parents told us that we were going to go just for the weekend. Naturally, [you're] thinking you're coming back on Monday to go to school. So, [I] didn't think anything about the trip. Of course, we had never really taken a trip, other than around the mountains around Vienna. We had never visited other cities or anything, because we had no transportation, and in those days you just didn't do that.

When we got on a train, I'm sure I asked what we should take. Well, my mother took care of everything. As I showed you, this is the briefcase that we left with. I think it was my dad's working briefcase that he took to work when he went to work. It was just filled up with everyone's underwear, because we were only going to stay on the weekend. Nowadays when someone hears that, nowadays we take a lot of clothes, even for a weekend. In those days, we didn't have any clothes, but they were always clean. When you see my pictures, I was always clean; I was never dirty. So all we needed was a change of underwear.

Esarey: What happened to Fritz? How did he get out?

Langfelder: I remember the day Fritz came out of the concentration camp. He came to our house, our apartment. He was almost like an animal. Every time he heard a noise or knock on the door, he'd crawl under the bed. He was afraid somebody was coming to arrest him, I guess, and put him back in the concentration camp.

Well, my mother made the arrangement to get him out of the concentration camp. Of course, in those days, they weren't called concentration camps; they were just considered prisons. But no one ever came out of those prisons. How she ever was able to get him released is amazing. The only thing I knew that she did tell us that Fritz has to leave within two days or has to go back to the concentration camp. So, she was able, within that short time period, to get him out of the country.

Well, flying in the airplane was just almost unheard of. Of course, Austria is a landlocked country, and you had to fly out of the country, unless you had permission to go into another country, like Switzerland and France. Well, she didn't have those kind of permits, so she was able to get him flown straight to England, which was an amazing accomplishment. I wish, when I was younger, I would have thought about asking. But I was never really into that. I was just happy that he got there. How he ever got there is beyond me.

Esarey: And that was a question. It was an amazing accomplishment. To get someone out of a concentration camp was unusual.

Langfelder: Well, just think how long it takes just to get a reservation on a plane to go from here to Chicago. (laughs) Just an amazing feat.

Esarey: Is this picture similar to what you saw?

Langfelder: Yes. Of course, when we looked out of that window, we saw a lot of tanks, something that we had never seen before. Although Austria was a nation, they didn't have any military equipment, just a small standing army. Those were the cars, yes.

Esarey: Did you see Hitler?

Langfelder: No. The only one I ever saw was Rudolf Hess.[2] He's the one that jumped with a parachute into England. But that's the only German dignitary that I saw. Of course, at the time, I didn't know who it was. My dad knew, and that's how I learned that's who we saw. He came in with the troops when they marched into Vienna.

Esarey: You were in the crowd watching this? You were watching this from a window? Where were you when you saw this?

Langfelder: From the window.

Esarey: From the window.

Langfelder: Yeah, from our window, where we lived.

Esarey: When you crossed the border into Switzerland, what happened? What happened to your family as you were trying to leave?

Langfelder: I still remember the train. My mother and sister were facing my dad and I. You know how seats are; they were facing each other. When we got to the border, the train stopped, and the SA—you know there's an SS and the SA.[3,4] The SA, they were just…most of them were really hoods.

Esarey: Could you describe them? I'm sorry to interrupt, but what is SA and SS? What do those terminologies mean?

Langfelder: SA, storm troopers. They were the enforcers of the German ideology. They had the run of the country. They could do whatever they wanted and nobody would ever prosecute them. Well, they did what they were told, but they were free to do what they wanted.

They came on, and when they came to where we were sitting, they looked at my mother and told her to get up. They escorted her out. They wanted to know what valuables we had, but my dad told me to show my stamp book I had right here. That's all I had, so I gave it to them. They kept it. I think I asked for it back, but I never did get it. I'm pretty sure I just sat there and cried. When you're that little and you lose the only toy you had…Well, it's not a toy, but it was my collection.

But they had asked of my mother…She was gone a long time. When she came back, she didn't say two words. She just sat back down. Of course,

[2] Rudolf Hess (1894–1987), one of the most evil masterminds of the Third Reich and the holocaust, was a longstanding personal aide to Hitler and deputy party leader of the Nazi party until 1941.
[3] The SS, the Nazi *Schutzstaffel,* literally the "protection squadron," was the organization most responsible for the genocidal killing of an estimated 5.5 to 6 million Jews and millions of other victims in the Holocaust.
[4] The *Sturmabteilung*, literally "storm detachment," functioned as the original paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party.

like I say, she was very emotional. I never saw my mother cry. She just sat down. But I know they stripped searched her. What they did to her—

Esarey: They humiliated her.

Langfelder: …was pretty obvious, yes. But she never talked about it, never complained. I think she was just glad to get out of the…to get us out of the country, because she didn't have to leave. Her brothers and her sisters were still in Vienna and, her nieces and nephews. She left everything. [It was] very devastating.

Esarey: She did not communicate.

Langfelder: Oh, no, she wouldn't. I'm glad you're interviewing me, because I know I become emotional, but I wish I would have thought about those things when she was living. Being as old as I am now, I wish I would have asked her. I never did. We never talked about it, anything. Now, looking back, maybe she really wanted somebody to talk to about it. [We'll] never know.

Esarey: You respected her privacy.

Langfelder: Oh, my gosh, yes. We knew how she was.

Esarey: Were you able to communicate with anyone from Vienna when you were in Switzerland?

Langfelder: No. Edith and I didn't communicate with anybody. We just were waiting to receive a visa to go to England. Well, I wasn't. I was actually praying that I wouldn't get a visa, because I wanted to go back home. (both laugh) I didn't understand it. The longer it took, the happier I really was. Although my parents were in England, I wanted to be home.

Esarey: When did you leave? How long did you stay in Switzerland?

Langfelder: We stayed almost three months, ninety days.

Esarey: Where did you stay?

Langfelder: I stayed up in the mountains with a lady that had…I don't want to call it a farm. She was raising sheep and whatever you raise in the mountains. She lived by herself. She had somewhat of a…It was a residential home, but people used to come there during summertime for vacation. While I was there, it was just she and I, and she took care of me.

Esarey: Can you give me the dates and approximate months when this happened, when you were in Switzerland?

Langfelder: It was early spring. When I stayed there, you mean?

Esarey: What year.

Langfelder: Yes, that was in 1939, spring of '39.

Esarey: How did you happen to stay with this woman? Who did that? How was that set up?

Langfelder: My mother made all those arrangements. I know, in certain nations, even the United States, there were people that would…There were organizations that signed up to help refugees, not just stay with them, but get [them] out of the country and the financing.

In a way, I don't mean to be political, but I admire [Mitt] Romney because he's a Mormon, and the Mormons did a lot to get refugees out of the country.[5] I've always respected that religion, just for that. I heard my dad and mom talk about it. That's how come I know. I still recall them doing those things. There were people in every country, whether they were…Some churches, like the temple [Temple B'rith Sholom, Springfield, IL], helped us get to Springfield and find an apartment. I know the Catholic churches, they did things to help people and so did other churches. But, no one ever knew who those people were. They were just volunteers, wanting to help.

Esarey: You stayed in Switzerland for three months. Where was your sister?

Langfelder: She was in Zurich. She stayed in the city of Zurich. She stayed with a doctor. We knew who he was. He was apparently also one of those volunteers that wanted to keep refugees. So, I didn't see her in that ninety-day period.

Esarey: How long did you see your parents before they left? You arrived in Switzerland—

Langfelder: Well, it was that ninety-day period. We stayed by ourselves, until we got to England. Ninety days doesn't sound like much, but I'm sure it felt like a lifetime. The problem was that you didn't know, are you going to follow them, or are you going back home? The strange thing is I didn't want to follow them; I wanted to go back home, not realizing the circumstances. (both laugh)

Esarey: So, you thought after the ninety days, you would probably return to Vienna?

Langfelder: To Vienna, oh, yes, because I still had all my aunts and uncles there, too.

Esarey: Your parents were working for someone in England. Could you talk about that just a little bit?

[5] Willard "Mitt" Romney (born March 12, 1947) is an American businessman and politician who served as the 70th governor of Massachusetts, from 2003 to 2007 and was the Republican Party's nominee for president of the United States in the 2012 election.

Langfelder: Yes. Oh, that's really interesting. Like I always say, my mom was a very proud person. Of course, in those days there was a lot of class distinction, like over here we say, "Make the millionaires pay more tax." (laughs) We're trying to create it here, which is really a terrible atmosphere to live in, I guess. But, she was a very proud person.

The couple that sponsored them, they were so aristocrats, and they lived in London. They sponsored them, if my dad was willing to become like the waiter and take care of them, take care of the clothes of the gentleman and take care of setting the table. And my mother, they wanted here as a cook and a maid.

Well, being a maid was (laughs)…For my mother, it had to be just devastating. I know I use that word all the time. My mother didn't even know how to cook, but my dad apparently volunteered, just to get out of the country. They would do that. My dad would do all the work, whether it was cleaning the place or taking care of the necessities, what they required.

I don't know how they got around it, but they never did question that my mother didn't know how to cook. (both laugh) So, I'm suspicious that my father might have been cooking, or they might have had somebody else with them. I remember, one day my dad said that my mother hardly ever left their bedroom. They slept in the house, which in those days they did that in England.

Esarey: How did you happened to fly to England?

Langfelder: One day, shortly before our time elapsed, the postman that visited or delivered mail to the lady I stayed with, came once a week. He came on a motorcycle, because we were up in the mountain, and that was the only mode of transportation. One day, when he delivered mail, he told her and I that he was going to pick me up—he gave a certain day. I don't remember what day it was—that he would pick me up to take me down to Zurich, which was like two hours away or two or three hours away.

He came that day, and I got on the motorcycle and went to Zurich. I stayed overnight, I remember, that day with Edith at that doctor's house. Then the next day, they took us to the airport.

Esarey: What did you think of that plane ride? That was your first one.

Langfelder: Just flying in those days was amazing. It's like saying to you, "You go up in a rocket." People just didn't fly. It was strictly military. By today's standards, it was an extremely small plane. Looking back, they only seats on each side, one seat on each side. So, I bet they didn't have more than maybe sixteen or eighteen seats. We flew in that plane to England.

I was extremely sick from the time we took off. It's like getting sea sick; I was plane sick. All I remember was, there was a little girl behind me that…I don't even know how little she was, because I didn't even turn around. She had something, she kept hitting me in the head with it. I was just too sick to even move. (both laugh) So, when we got to England, I was just really relieved.

The reason you had to fly was we had no permission to go to any other country, so you had to fly out. You had to go to a country you had a visa in.

Esarey: You had no customs to go through?

Langfelder: That's right.

Esarey: Private plane?

Langfelder: No, no, it was commercial. I don't want to say the airline. They didn't have airlines then, but it was a commercial flight. I show the plane—

The plane on which the Langfelders flew from Switzerland to Croyden, London, in May, 1939. English sponsors paid for the family's travel to England.

Esarey: I think you have a picture—

Langfelder: Yeah, of getting off the plane.

Esarey: …of the plane. Was that your plane or is that—

Langfelder: That's the plane. As a matter of fact, that's us walking away from it.

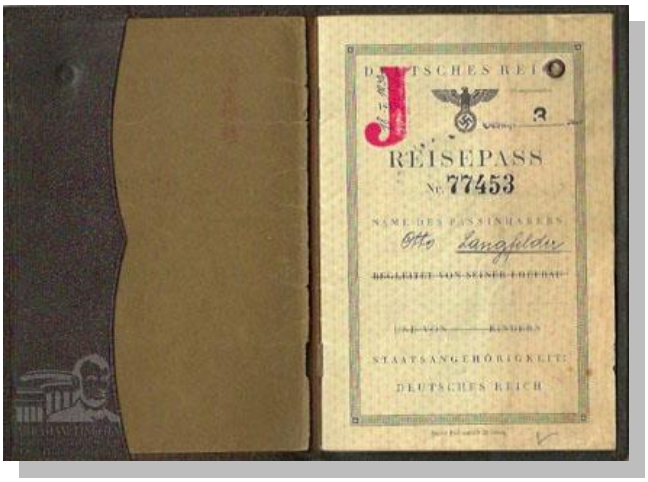
Esarey: Yeah, we'll come back to that one, because I do have that marked in here.

As we're going through, if we could just go back to a few of the pictures that you have here. Did everyone in the family have to have the J on your—

Langfelder: Yeah. Well, we only had 2 passports, my mothers and…I looked at this yesterday, getting ready for you to come. I'm learning by your interview. It was interesting; it says *reisepass*, which means "passport" and the name, Otto Langfelder. But what they crossed out is *regletet von seiner begleitet.*

Esarey: What does that mean?

Langfelder: That means "accompanied by relatives." And they crossed all that out. I thought, What happened to Edith and I? Then, when I looked at my mother's passport, see, here they say Maria Langfelder, *begleited* means "accompanied by" two children. So, she carried us on her passport, which was kind of interesting. I'm learning from you.



Otto Langfelder's passport, 1939, issued by the Nazi officials, bore a red "J" to designate that he was of Jewish descent. The passport indicates he is traveling alone without a wife or

Esarey: We're learning together, aren't we? I wanted to ask you…I saw those crossed out, and I thought, why would they do that?

Langfelder: I never paid any attention to that. It's because [of] who you are accompanied with or by.

Esarey: Thank you. Do you have these?

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: Because we will want that.

Langfelder: Yeah, that's my passport picture.

Esarey: Did you have to show your passport when you flew to England?

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: You did?

Langfelder: Well, that's on my mother's.

Esarey: But when you got on the plane, did you go through any kind of customs? (phone rings)

Langfelder: Well, no. We had all these tags around our neck. That's all I remember. They put all kinds of identifiers, because we were still little, well, not little, but like thirteen years old. (Ossie takes a call from his grandson, Lucas, for lunch together.) Like I said, we had all those tags around our necks.

Ossie's passport, with his picture, required identification and sixty to ninety day visas, issued by the German Reich, as they were leaving Austria to travel to Switzerland in 1939.

Esarey: You are leaving to go to England, and they get you on the plane. What happened when you were reunited with your parents in England? Did you get to stay with them? What is that story? Described what happened, when you landed and what you had—

Langfelder: Oh, well we landed. I remember I was very excited. My parents were standing up on top a roof of a airport building. In those days you could get right up to people, not like now, where you aren't allowed to do that. Of course, I was extremely excited about seeing them.

At the home of the family's English sponsor in London, May 1939. On the left is Fritz Langfelder (Ossie's uncle), who was visiting.

But I couldn't speak to anybody, because we didn't know English. We only knew German. I think we hugged on that day, with my mother. (laughs) The lady that they were working for, she brought them to the airport. They had a car. We rode to their house and stayed with them a few days. Of course, Edith and I didn't have any clothes, really. (laughs)

Esarey: What did you do? (laughs)

Langfelder: That lady made arrangements to what school we were going to go to, because schools had uniforms. She had it all planned as to what schools we were going to attend. So, she took Edith and I and my mother shopping for clothes for those particular uniforms. That's how we got additional clothes.

Midge: Excuse me, remember when she brought clothes to you?

Langfelder: I can't hear you.

Midge: When your mom got the clothes, they were used, and she wouldn't accept them.

Langfelder: Oh, yeah.

Ossie in his school uniform— gray shorts, a red and green blazer and a red and green cap, at St. Alyosius, 1940.

Esarey: What happened?

Langfelder: Well, she was always particular, like what we wore, and when she didn't like something, she wouldn't take them. She'd make them go back and buy us better clothes, although my mother didn't have anything. She was so proud that she always lived up to that stature.

Esarey: She had her—

Langfelder: Oh, yeah, she had a bottom line.

Esarey: Describe your first experiences and feelings when you went to boarding school, because this was all…It was like you were always learning something. The next thing was going to happen, and boom, it would happen.

Langfelder: It was my dad that took me to St. Aloysius, which was really strange. My mother never did go with me to the school or even visited me at the school, which is strange. But my dad took me there. He was Jewish, and it was a Catholic school. He would have had a hard time relating, I would think.

I remember meeting Brother Cornelius Reed, and he spoke German. He was a German teacher, as a matter of fact. But, because of the circumstances with Germany, he wouldn't speak German. The British refused to speak German. So, he was assigned to teach me English.

Brother Cornelius, who tutored Ossie in English and was a patient and valued friend, October, 1940.

Esarey: This happened—I'm sorry to interrupt—this happened when? You're still in 1939?

Langfelder: That was 1939; that was correct.

Esarey: In the fall?

Langfelder: About early summer.

Esarey: Early summer?

Langfelder: Yeah.

Esarey: Is this Brother Cornelius?

Langfelder: Cornelius, Brother Cornelius.

Esarey: Describe him a little bit.

Langfelder: From what I remember, he was a very handsome young man. Of course, he reminded me of Father Hoaks. Yeah, that's him. I didn't know I had his picture in there. He seemed to be a gentle, kind person, somewhat strict.

I had never been in a Catholic school before. (phone rings) I took to it to rather easy, because a school to me was a school. For some reason, having been raised in Austria, which was a Catholic country, we always seemed to have a priest present, although it was a public school. In one of the pictures, we always had a priest in Austria.

Esarey: He taught you English?

Langfelder: He taught me English. It was extremely difficult for me. It wasn't difficult for me to learn the language. It's that mentally I fought it, because my perception was, why do I have to learn another language? I'm going to go back home. I know that's hard for people to understand. I always thought I'd go back home, and so I didn't want to learn English.

So, when he taught me…It was just he and I, and we would sit at a table, and he'd have cups and silverware and plates and things. He would point to it, and he'd say, "Plate." And I would say "*tisch.*" I'd have to say it in German, so he knew I understood what he was doing. That's how I learned English. He had to be pretty frustrated with my learning process because of my stubbornness. (laughs)

Esarey: How long were you in England? How long were you in this boarding school? Something happened then.

Langfelder: Just a little less than two years. While we were in England, the war started with England, England and Germany. They declared war on each other. All the children, as many children as the British could evacuate from London, they moved out of London, so they wouldn't be killed during the bombardment.

So, one day we took a train to a small town called Wisbech—It was a town about maybe the size of Rochester [Illinois, population of about 3,700] or something like that. It was a really tiny community—in the hopes that those small communities would not be bombed. Like I told you earlier, there were so many people that saved other people.

I remember, we walked down the street, because I hardly understood anything that was said, because of my little knowledge of English. But Brother Cornelius was the only one that walked down the street with us. He had, I think, something close to thirty students from St. Aloysius School. He was assigned a certain class. I guess other priests or brothers were assigned different classes and might have been sent different places.

He'd knock on somebody's door, and they'd say—which I didn't understand, but I know he had to ask, "How many children do you want to take for the duration of the war?" yeah, because no one knew what the duration of the war was. It was a war. So they'd say…By the way they'd point their finger, I would know how many. Then he'd let them come out, and

[he'd] say, "Which one of these boys do you want?" They would point at one or the other.

Well, I was the last one, because I couldn't speak English. (laughs) I thought I'd be going back with Brother Cornelius, but he finally came to this house, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson; I'll never forget them. They were an older couple. I shouldn't use that word, because they were a lot younger than I am. (laughs) They had one daughter. I'd say she was in her middle twenties, but she lived at home. They came out, and he explained to them who I was and what, and they took me in. I stayed with them for almost a year and a half that I was in England, and they took care of me.

It was probably the best semi-adoption anybody had, because that family was raising rabbits. During the war, there was no food in England, and people had no meat. I had meat every day. We always had rabbit. (laughs) But we had meat. When I came over here, I said I never look another rabbit in the eye.

But I was very fortunate, and they were just the…Well, everybody I ever met was fine. They were just the best people. They took care of me. Then, on Friday…and they weren't Catholic. In England, most of the people were not Catholic. A lot of them didn't like the Catholics, because they're Episcopalian. You know, they don't recognize the Pope. But, I tell you, they took care of all those children. Every Friday, they respected me enough, their daughter took me down into the downtown area, because we lived on the outskirts, and she bought me fish and chips. I'll never forget that. (laughs)

Ossie rides a bike in his host family's yard in England, 1939.

Esarey: How English.

Langfelder: Yeah, real British. (both laugh) I just love the British. I always said, They saved my life, just tremendous people. I'm sorry. I hope I'm not talking too much.

Esarey: I want you to talk; it's wonderful. You have one of your letters that you wrote while you were on the farm. It was a wonderful letter.

Langfelder: Is that right? I didn't know I had one in there.

Esarey: Well, you said that you—

Langfelder: Oh, that's the plane. You just passed it; right there. This is Edith and I.

Esarey: Yes, there's the plane. We will want that. But, there was a letter—

Langfelder: Oh, yes?

Esarey: …that you wrote to your parents. I don't know if you still have this letter. Can you read that, Ossie, a little bit of that letter, of what you said to your parents?

Langfelder: You see, in Austria you write American script. This is called Corint [a distinctive alphabet] .That how we wrote Corint. [reading] "I'm very happy here. Here is it very nice. The person is very good to me. I got to eat what I like. I got seven pennies from Mrs. Johnson. We have here nice, n-a-i-c, mother." (laughs) Those are the people I talked about. [resumes reading] "We have a nice house and a nice, a nice small cat. We have many trees with apples, pears and plums." I told you it was a small farm. "We have two gardens. I have not many things here, two coats, two trousers, t-r-o-s-e-r-s, (laughs) and the underclothes. I have not my books to learn here. Next week we must go to the school. This is fine. Mrs. and Mr. Johnson are very good to me." Yeah, they sure were.

Esarey: Thank you.

Langfelder: I said I just thought they were old. I bet they were twenty years younger than I am now, thirty years younger. (laughs) They were probably in their fifties.

Esarey: Yeah. (laughs) Did you communicate with your sister at all during that time?

Langfelder: No, I never did hear from Edith.

Esarey: Where was she?

Langfelder: She was in Herne Bay, Which was a strange place to be evacuated to, because that was close to the channel, English Channel. That's where her school was evacuated to. But, no, I never did hear from Edith.

Esarey: I wondered.

Langfelder: My dad came to visit me once, which was very surprising.

Esarey: What happened? What did you do?

Langfelder: I know I introduced him to Mr. Peacock, [whom] we talked about yesterday, who was a very rich person that lived there. I think he was the financial sponsor for me. The Johnsons took care of me, but he took care of he took care of whatever expenses they had.

Esarey: Did you know your father was coming, or was that a surprise?

Langfelder: No, I didn't know.

Esarey: He just showed up.

Langfelder: I just remember that he came.

Esarey: But not your mom?

Langfelder: Not my mother.

Esarey: What happened next in your incredible journey, as you're getting ready to go the United States? Describe what you can about getting ready to leave England, what you know and what happened, the next part of your journey, as you were leaving the Johnsons.

Langfelder: I remember I was notified by Brother Cornelius that we were going to leave. Of course, again, I really didn't want to go. Of course, you don't have a choice, because you actually made new friends, people that looked out for you.

They had put me on a train to send me to Liverpool, England, because that's where I was supposed to meet my parents to catch a ship to go to America. I remember Mrs. Johnson said—They were very disappointed I was leaving—and they said, "Well, whatever you do, don't ever become an American." (laughs) I would tell Midge that. I'll never forget that.

In those days, they might have known history and things like that, but I didn't…and they might not have either. All that I remember is reading Indian and cowboy books, and all I thought in America were cowboy and Indians. I think they sort of visualized America being too…because nobody came to the United States. Certainly they didn't come back, once they came to the United States. So, I just expected the worst, after the way they said, "Don't ever became an American." I just thought, I'll probably be back anyway, because I don't know how to ride a horse. That was the only thing in my mind. (both laugh)

Esarey: What did you parents tell you you were going to do when you got to the United States?

Langfelder: Well, like I say, they were very private. When I met them in Liverpool with Edith…Edith came with them, because she was south of London. She must have traveled to London. When we got on the ship, I'd never been on a large ship. Of course, most of the people on there, they were almost all the children.

They tried to get as many children out of England to save their life from the bombing, so they sent them to Canada. I think we were probably the only ones who came to the United States. But, Canada was a colony, so they shipped them all to Canada or any other country they could send them to. There were very few adults. The only adults on there were elderly people that

couldn't be in the service or anything. Looking back now, that's the way I visualize it.

Esarey: Did you experience any of the bombing?

Langfelder: Yeah, I went through some of the bombing, very little. My parents went through a lot of bombing.

Esarey: What did they tell you about that?

Langfelder: Very little, (laughs) like everything else. I learned more after the war about the bombing than when I lived in England. That's how protective they were of the children. But I knew bombings were going on, and I was worried, because bombing was something new in those days. That's the first war that ever had bombing, and [I] didn't quite understand it. But the way we learned about is that the British built the shelters, and when you did hear about the news, they said, "So many people were saved by the shelters," because they built the underground shelters and stuff like that. That's about the extent of my knowledge of bombing.

Esarey: You left for the United States in August, 1940. Would that be correct?

Langfelder: That's correct, yeah.

Esarey: And you were reunited when you got to the United States?

Langfelder: No, we were together when I got to Liverpool.

Esarey: When you got to Liverpool.

Langfelder: See, I met my parents and my sister, and we got on the same ship together. It was an evacuation ship.

Esarey: Do you know how your parents…although, maybe you don't know this, because they were really good at not telling you a lot of the details—

Langfelder: That's right.

Esarey: …but, they must have had a sponsor

Edith, Kleine Omama (Ida Maier), Otto, and Ossie in upstate New York, with an Oldsmobile after arriving in the U.S. from England in 1940.

in the United States.

Langfelder: Oh, they did. The sponsor we had was an uncle of my dad's. He lived in New York.

Esarey: Uncle Paul?

Langfelder: Yes, Uncle Paul, yeah. He was in the jewelry business. He left Austria quite some time before us. I don't know if I ever even knew Uncle Paul in Europe. I know I met him in New York. But, I don't ever remember meeting him in Vienna. He's the one who sponsored us.

Esarey: You're describing a little about your voyage across the Atlantic on the ship. What was the ship's name? Do you remember?

Langfelder: Yes, *Duchess of Athol*. It's in the book.

Esarey: I've got a spelling for that.

Langfelder: Yeah, A-t-h-o-l, I think.

Esarey: And what was that crossing like?

Langfelder: Well, another bad experience, because I was seasick. (laughs) I guess my mother was so protective of what I ate all my life, any deviation made me sick, I guess. I was very sea sick. But I was also a sleepwalker. My parents told me that; I didn't recall that. But one of the first nights, I guess they didn't lock the cabin door, and during the night, I walked out. They caught me before I reached the upper deck. I didn't remember that, because I was sleepwalking, so I didn't know about it. But, after that, they always locked the door to keep me in. (laughs)

Esarey: You were about fourteen years old?

Langfelder: Thirteen.

Esarey: So you were sea sick?

Langfelder: All the way.

Esarey: Then what happened? You reached the United Stated…You didn't reach the United States.

Langfelder: No, we went to Canada.

Esarey: You went to Canada. What happened next?

Langfelder: When we reached Canada, we only stayed overnight in Canada. I remember it was late at night. The weather was terrible; it was raining. We stayed

overnight. We didn't know what to expect, but we went to Quebec and Montreal. Those were pretty good-sized cities, even when we came over, which sort of amazed me, because I didn't know what to expect. I thought I would see Indians in tents, which fortunately I didn't. We only stayed overnight, then took the train to New York City, which to me was just an amazing city. It was always—

Esarey: Describe your first impressions of New York City.

Langfelder: Oh, the first impression was really a pleasant impression, because coming from Vienna, I liked a large city, naturally. And there were a lot of people. So, the impression of New York was very pleasant, and, of course, the stores were just packed with supermarkets, with food, which we hadn't seen in…I'd never seen it before, because everything was rationed in England.

I always describe, we walked into one supermarket—It certainly wasn't the type that we have today, but it was a supermarket—and they had a huge cube of butter, must have been three feet by three feet, almost in the entrance way, which was ah…, when we couldn't even have butter in England. (laughs) I've never forgotten that picture in my mind. It will always be in there.

Esarey: Who met you when you arrived?

Langfelder: When we arrived, Uncle Paul met us. He took us to an apartment. I don't really recall what the apartment even looked like. I just remember—

Esarey: Did you have to be processed off the ship? What was that process like?

Langfelder: We were lucky, we got off a train.

Esarey: Oh, that's right. You were on the train, excuse me.

Langfelder: Thank God, we didn't land by ship, because we would have to go through Ellis Island. And that, I heard, was just awful. So, we were fortunate. Well, maybe in those days, you didn't even have to show our passport for Canada to America. So, I don't know. I don't remember any crossing problem.

Esarey: It sounds like it was fairly smooth for you.

Langfelder: It certainly was.

Esarey: You landed in Canada. You got on the train. You go to New York. You're met, no barriers—

Langfelder: That's right.

Esarey: …at that point. You lived where, exactly?

Langfelder: I think it was 84th Street or 85th, because we went to…My parents made arrangements for us to go to grade school in New York. So, I thought we were going to live in New York. I didn't realize we were going to leave there. I thought we were going to stay in New York. And ironically, we went to Blessed Sacrament grade school there 9 (both laugh)…because all our kids went to Blessed Sacrament [in Springfield, IL].

Esarey: It was meant to be, wasn't it?

Langfelder: Yes, I couldn't read it. I showed Midge the school, and the school is still there, on 72nd Street.

Esarey: How long did you stay in New York City?

Langfelder: Oh, we really didn't stay very long. We stayed a few months. I think we went to school there a little over one semester. That's when I learned to speak American. I had a terrible time, because I learned British English, and American was slightly different. (laughs)

Esarey: What was American English like?

Langfelder: To me, it sounded sort slang-like. I could relate to that, because Austrians speak German, and Germans speak German, but we have a hard time understanding each other, because a German speaks…we always called it a high class German, and Austrians, kind of low class German. It was more of a slang German. That's how I always related British and American English.

Esarey: High class English and American English. (laughs)

Langfelder: Yes, more eloquent, I should use that term.

Esarey: How long did you expect to stay in America?

Langfelder: Until the war was over. That was always in my mind. I think I dreamt that until the day I got married, and then—

Esarey: When did you leave for Chicago? What date? What year? How did that work?

Langfelder: Well, all my parents told us [was] that my father had a job [with] what's called the State of Illinois, which I didn't know what it was, but that we have to go to Chicago. All I remember them explaining [was] that Chicago was just like New York. It's a big city. I actually was happy because I love big cities.

When we came to Chicago, we stayed a few months in Chicago. But, my dad worked for an oil company, not the oil that fuels automobiles. But, in those days, heavy equipment was driven by belts. Those belts had to be lubricated, so they wouldn't crack. He sold oil to lubricate those belts. He was assigned by that company, which Uncle Paul got him a job.

See, you had to guarantee people [that] you [will] support them or you find them a job. The government wouldn't do anything for you, which is understandable. But, he had to travel throughout the state of Illinois. I don't think he understood how big the state of Illinois was either. My mother thought, Well, we'll stay in Chicago, a big city, and you just walk wherever you have to go. (both laugh) We didn't have an automobile.

So, one day, I forget where my dad said we had to go, and he said, "I can't walk there." So, we sat at the kitchen table, and my mother said, "Oh, just close your eyes and take your finger and point down on the map." I can still see it. He pointed to Springfield, and that's where we landed. That's just how she picked. (both laugh) He could have put his finger any place. It could be Decatur, you know, anything. That's how we picked Springfield.

Esarey: And how were you going to get to Springfield?

Langfelder: We took a train. But I don't know how he was going to sell oil back in Chicago. (laughs)

Esarey: Did you discuss that?

Langfelder: I don't think he thought about it. (both laugh)

Esarey: And how did that work out?

Langfelder: Of course, you probably don't remember, there was a soybean plant way north of town on Dirksen Parkway and Sangamon Avenue [the far northwest part of Springfield], and my dad walked…What is that mall, out there now?

Midge: Oh, that's where the Walmart is.

Langfelder: Yeah, way out there. He walked all of the way out there, because he didn't have a car.

Esarey: To North Dirksen?

Langfelder: Yeah, can you believe it? He went to a soybean plant, because they had belt driven equipment. I remember, Axel Eichel [?] was the owner of the company. He spoke to Axel Eichel, trying to sell him a quart of oil. He bought a quart of oil. He was so impressed by my dad…Well, I'm jumping the gun. He sold him a quart of oil. My dad came home that night…It must have taken him all day to walk out there and walk back home, because we lived on Sixth Street. He came home—

Esarey: Five miles?

Langfelder: Oh, easy, more like seven miles, I think. He came home and said he sold a quart of oil. They fixed a huge dinner for us, celebrating for selling a quart of oil. That's the first quart of oil he ever sold.

Well, Axel Eichel was so impressed by him that…I don't know how he got ahold of him. My dad was a chemist. He studied chemistry in school, and he was a chemist. And soybean oil was just in its infancy, and they were studying what to do with soybean oil. He was looking for a chemist, actually. So, he somehow got ahold of my dad and hired him to become his chemist. He was so impressed that somebody would walk that far to sell a quart—

It's a pleasant story, although it's a tragic story, in my eyes. That's why I look at life the way it is. But, he hired him, and he worked for him, I bet, twenty-five years.

Esarey: When did you move to Springfield? Can you give me kind of a timeline on when that was? It would have been 1940…?

Langfelder: Yes, it was 1940. It was late fall. We were living on North Third Street. (laughs) Remind me to tell you; that's another story.

Esarey: Okay, I want to hear it.

Langfelder: …Living on Third Street, and my mother had found a black cat. She loved black cats. She always had a black cat, even in Europe. She had bought a leash, because she didn't want to lose it.

We'd hadn't been here only a few days that I recall. We walked downtown. That's when all the stores were downtown, and it was a Friday night. That's the first time I ever walked downtown in Springfield. Of course, the streets were busy with people going from store to store. We walked. Woolworth's and Kresge were on the same side of the street, next to each other.

"Here," my dad said, "when you walk on the street, if you don't speak English, you don't speak at all, because Americans don't like foreigners." So we hardly spoke. We didn't think anybody would notice we were foreigners, except we were walking with a cat on a leash, and I had lederhosen on, because I didn't have any other clothes. Well, boys my age here didn't wear shorts in those days. Now, I look back on it, and they didn't think we were foreigners, (both laugh) because we didn't speak? That's how I was introduced to Springfield.

Esarey: And all they had to do was look at you.

Langfelder: Oh, my gosh, they saw us coming. (both laugh). But the story was, the temple made arrangements for us to live on Third Street. It was a nice neighborhood, but the apartment was, it was an upstairs apartment. I still remember, it was

small. But for Mother, it was somewhat run down. It wasn't what she was accustomed to.

She actually told—and she wasn't Jewish—but she called them up and said—I don't know where she called them from, because we didn't have a telephone—but she called them and said she wasn't going to stay there. She wanted a nice apartment, because she's not accustomed…Well, her children weren't accustomed of living that lifestyle. She called the people that were paying for that apartment. They were paying for our food; they were paying to bring us here. (laughs)

I just want to show you a picture of my mother. I admire her. I wish I had her pride. She was such a proud lady. And guess what. They moved us to Sixth Street, across the street from McClernand School. It was a downstairs apartment; she wouldn't live in an upstairs apartment. And Mrs. Crayton, and Mrs. Crayton, her daughter lived with her.

I had never seen a refrigerator. In those days, there was no refrigeration. We didn't have a refrigerator. And I still see the refrigerators that had those huge coils on top. They'd bring ice to the house. You put in to keep it cool, and those coils would keep it cool, see. It was like this thing. But Mrs. Crayton was just like my mother. She was an elderly lady, and she'd come down every day to inspect the apartment, if it was clean. My mother loved it, because that's the way she was. She wasn't insulted; she actually admired it. (laughs)

Esarey: You describe moving to Springfield as being a mental disaster.

Langfelder: Yes. Well, it was for me, when we came to Springfield. I don't like to use the word "burg," but to me… Oh, my god, I have to live in this burg? It was…I'd never been in a small community like this, except for Wisbech, but that was a different, unique circumstance. I was hoping we wouldn't stay here, but we did stay here.

Of course, at time we came here, America had not declared war yet. See, it was just before, a year before. So, I thought when the war was over, I'm going home anyway. What's the difference? And you wouldn't think a war would last five years.

Esarey: You were biding your time?

Langfelder: Yes. But it lasted over sixty [years] for me. (laughs)

Esarey: Your mother had to learn to cook.

Langfelder: Oh yes. She did. She was about forty-one years old. Well, right after we came, because there were no restaurants like today. I think, if we had McDonald's and stuff, my mother still wouldn't be cooking. (both laugh) She didn't want

to cook. The first meal she cooked, my dad was not at home; it was just Edith and I. Oh, my god, I remember as if were yesterday.

She had bought a chicken. In those days, the chicken came stuffed. Inside the chicken, they had, in a sack, the neck and whatever else, the gizzard and the liver. Anyway, my mother made the chicken. She put it in the oven. When it was ready, she called us to eat in the kitchen. She had all this gravy. I remember we saying to her, "Oh, I didn't know you knew how to make gravy." "Why, I didn't make gravy." Of course, we talked in German. "All this is gravy." So, she cut into the chicken and here was all this stuff still inside that chicken. (laughs) That's where the gravy came from. She made us eat it; she was so irritated. (both laugh) We tell that story over and over.

Esarey: That's a good one. (laughs) What do you remember about your school years in Springfield, going to school here, your activities? What did you do?

Langfelder: School years for me…I went to Lanphier High School, and actually my experience was pleasant, because my teachers took a liking to me. You'll find letters in here from different teaches and even the principal. They all took me under their wing. I can go right down the list.

Looking back now, I think the reason some of the students…Today they call it harassment, but in those days, what kids did to you, they did to you, and you didn't dare to complain. I think they were that way because they thought, "Why are they taken to the foreign kid?" They didn't know foreigners; there were no foreigners here. We were refugees, so we were different. So, I knew why the teachers took to me. And now I understand why the students would not, because, well, I would do everything the teachers told me to, because that's the way you were raised. And I think some of them weren't quite accustomed to that. (laughs)

Esarey: Was there any change for you—how you felt or were treated as an Austrian citizen—after the United States entered the war?

Ossie, standing far left, relaxes with other students in the office of "Lanphier Light," Lanphier High School's newspaper in the early 1940's.

Langfelder: No, the only change that…I always liked school; I liked studying. I never cared for sports. Well, like I say,

my mother just was so protective, I didn't even know about sports. I wouldn't play any sports. All I did was ice skate.

This is another story. In those days, you had to take gym when you went to school. That was part of your curriculum. Of course, gym, in those days, wasn't basketball or anything. You had to exercise; it was all exercise. Our teacher was a Mr. Rake, and he was a…By today's description, he was a jock. Well, that's how gym teachers were. When I went to that gym class…because I was kind of a weakling. I was skinny and didn't know what to do. You had to climb ropes. Of course, I couldn't get past the first knot. I didn't have enough strength in my arms. (laughs) He became very irritated with me.

I still remember, he grabbed me here, by my shirt, and he took me into Mr. Stickney's office, who was the principal, and told him that he didn't want this kid in his class. "He just can't do anything." So, he threw me out of class. Well, I'm sure they thought they were punishing me, but in the two and a half years I went to Lanphier, I never had to take gym class. I was the happiest kid in the…because I didn't want to take gym class anyway. (both laugh)

Esarey: Worked out well.

Langfelder: That was my experience in school, but I liked all my other classes. Like I say, I was coeditor of the Lanphier High School paper, and I took mechanical drawing.

And Mr. McCann, he…It was during the war, and during the war, they wouldn't slice bread, because it was too expensive. So, you had to buy bread, and you had to slice it yourself. Well, people were very irate; they didn't want to slice bread. So, he invented this little wooden box that you would slide your bread in, and you could slice it. Well, I helped him build them. He built them in his basement. Then he went out, and we sold them for $2.50 apiece. I still remember that. That's how he made his money. Everybody who bought them was happy with it, because they got a new invention.

Esarey: That's wonderful.

Langfelder: That was my relationship with teachers. Mr. Gerald, who was my English teacher—and there's a letter in here—he became the head of the USO, United Service Organization, for the soldiers. So, he made arrangement that, at the top of the Elks downtown, would be made into a USO room for them to dance…Soldiers, when they came, they could dance, and they could eat there.

Well, it was really an attic nobody ever used. So, he needed somebody to clean it up. He must have asked me to help him, and so I did. I washed all the windows. I really became a janitor. I always tell the kids, when they complain about something, I said, "Don't ever be irritated about work. I was the best janitor there ever was." As a matter of fact, I have a letter in here

from him, giving me…Well, you'll read it. It says, "Thank you for helping me out with the USO, and here's a dollar for your day's work." I just found it this morning. Isn't that something? (laughs)

Esarey: That is great. It's a great story and a true story, part of your life.

Langfelder: You brought the best things out of my life. I remember all the good things, which is good.

Esarey: Did you have friends in high school?

Langfelder: Here in high school?

Esarey: Uh-huh, in Springfield

Langfelder: Well, very few. I'm not the one to seek friends, so a lot of it was my own fault. I was very private. There are people that…Bill Stone, he was a football player. He took a liking to me. You can tell when people talk to you, and they would speak to me. But most of the people that I befriended were really girlfriends of my sister. Like when they had the prom or dance or anything, I had to accompany my sister. And then, she always went with two or three other girls. So, I was accompanying the four of them, and they became my friends.

But, I don't remember really ever having close…Well, the only one was Alan Smith, and he was killed during the war. He was the only one I can truly say was my real friend.

Esarey: You were here when the United States entered the war. What happened when all the young people were beginning to enlist? What was your experience then?

Langfelder: To me it was a pleasant experience, because when they enlisted, we were just seniors in high school.

Esarey: Seventeen?

Langfelder: Yes.

Esarey: Seventeen years, old.

Langfelder: Yes, and they all enlisted. So, I tried to enlist and couldn't. So, I had my principal, Mr. Stickney, write letters to all these service organizations—Army, Navy, whatever—wanting them to take me. They all turned me down, because I wasn't a citizen. In those days, they wouldn't take a non-citizen. Today they do, but in those days they didn't.

Esarey: No.

Langfelder: And then they said that I have to wait until I was eighteen, and then I was drafted. So, today that was kind of disappointing, because I didn't want to join just to fight. I wanted to join so I could get back home. My mind was in going back to Europe. I never even thought about going to the South Pacific. (laughs)

Esarey: You wanted to get back to Vienna?

Langfelder: I wanted to go back to Vienna.

Esarey: You left when you graduated from high school. What did you do next?

Langfelder: Lanphier?

Esarey: Yeah, after graduation, you—

Langfelder: Yes, from Lanphier. I started junior college, Springfield Junior College. After my first semester, I was drafted into the service, and I reported.

Esarey: What branch of the armed services were you drafted into?

Langfelder: Field artillery, into the Army. Well, when they drafted you, they gave you all the necessary physicals and everything, and then they would ask, "What service do you want to go into?" But they knew what service you would go into. They had all of their minds made up. You'd say, "Navy." [They would respond,] "Army." And you'd say, "Air Force." "Army." (both laugh) After they had 100 Armies, then they'd say, "That lucky guy went into the Air Force" or something like that.

Private Langfelder is pictured with a fellow soldier at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, during basic training, 1945.

Esarey: What were some of your experiences in basic training?

Langfelder: Well, basic training was…Like I say, I never took gym class. (both laugh) So, it was extremely difficult, not just the physical exertion. We trained in Oklahoma, and Oklahoma is rattlesnake country.

Esarey: Fort Sill?

Langfelder: Yeah, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Most of the time we were there, we were camping out, naturally, because that was part of the training. My fellow soldiers knew I was scared stiff of snakes, period. We slept in tents, and one morning, I got up—you know, tents are so small, you just kind of scoot out—and there

was this snake hanging dead, put around a stick. I went out there then. I was so scared. It was dead, but it was enough to give me more religion.

One of the biggest shocks was…Of course, Americans learn how to drive automobiles at a young age. I never learned how to drive until I was twenty-one. So, when I was in the service, I didn't know how to drive. But I wouldn't admit that; I wouldn't tell anybody. My mindset…You're raised in such an environment, if I used to see a police officer, I was sort of scared, because of the respect for somebody of authority. Well, I was the same way in the service. I wouldn't dare tell anybody I don't know how to drive, never thinking, "Who cares?" except part of the training was, they drove a truck into a lagoon. It wasn't very big, but it was deep enough. Then you had to shut the motor off, and then drive out.

Well, the truck was running, and they drove it into the lagoon and then left me in the truck. They said, "Drive out." Well, I didn't know a gear shift from a wheel. (laughs) And there I sat, just, What do I do now? I finally had to yell out and say, "I don't know how to drive." You cannot imagine the frustration. I think the sergeant must have thought I was lying, because they can't imagine anyone eighteen not knowing how to drive. I took my grandkids, but I said, "They know how to drive it." But, oh my god.

Esarey: What happened next?

Langfelder: KP [Kitchen Police].

Esarey: No, when you're sitting in this truck, in the middle of the water?

Langfelder: Well, he had to come out and move the truck, and he had to walk in the water. I had to jump out in the water, which didn't bother me, but I'm sure it bothered him. He probably never had to do that before, not understanding a person who…But I drew KP for a whole week. (both laugh)

Esarey: Did he finally believe you?

Langfelder: Oh yes, because I never drove a vehicle again.

Esarey: They didn't put you in charge of anything in the motor pool? (laughs)

Langfelder: Oh no, no they didn't.

Esarey: After Fort Sill, where did you go next?

Langfelder: From Fort Sill, when we completed our basic training, we were shipped to Fort Meade, Maryland, which was a port of embarkation to go to Europe. It's not too far from Washington, D. C. We were staying there a few days before we were ordered to go on a ship. Of course, when those orders came I was in seventh heaven, because I was going to be gone.

We had all our battle gear and equipment on us. I just got up to the ramp to walk up to the ship, when the MP's pulled me off. Naturally, like I said, I respect authority. Of course, you're scared stiff. I was scared stiff; I didn't know what to expect, because I didn't know American way of life. So, they took me back to the barracks, where we stayed, and told me stay there until I'm called. It was late afternoon, and it was before my evening meal. Evening meal, the MP's came and took me to eat, then brought me back, but they wouldn't tell me anything. A couple of days later, they said I was going to go on a train to Camp Adaire, Oregon.

They took me to the station a few days later and sent me to Oregon to be shipped out to South…Well, [I] didn't know where I would be shipped out to. I thought I was going to Alaska, hopefully, because Camp Adaire, Oregon, is so far north. So, I thought, Thank God, I'm not going to the South Pacific; we're going to Alaska." And when they outfitted me with new clothes…The army use to have those real heavy, long coats. I got one of those coats and heavy uniforms. So, I knew I was going to Alaska, until I got on a ship. (laughs)

Esarey: And?

Langfelder: And we did go up towards Aleutian Islands, and then the ship took a turn and went down to…We all thought we were going to Alaska.

Esarey: And you ended up where?

Langfelder: Went down to Okinawa. (laughs)

Esarey: What was your assignment?

Langfelder: I was a radio operator.

Esarey: Radio operator.

Langfelder: It's called a forward observer, what we were trained in. Because I always wanted to be in engineering, they were saying, "You bury microphones in the ground," microphone here, 100 feet away another microphone, 100 feet. That way, when field artillery shoots at your troops, by calculation, they can figure out where their equipment was shooting from, by which microphone picked up how many feet you were away. It's all engineering, and that's how they did it. You were called a "forward observer," so you were ahead of the troops to put all these in. But, it was interesting.

Esarey: Where did you do that? When you got to Japan?

Langfelder: No, in Okinawa.

Esarey: In Okinawa. And that was—

Langfelder: In August.

Esarey: Of '45?

Langfelder: Forty-five, August of '45

Esarey: So, that was before or after the atom bomb was dropped?

Langfelder: Oh, that was after.

Esarey: After the bomb was dropped, which was August 6 of 1945, but before Japan surrendered, correct?

Langfelder: Yes, they were negotiating the surrender.

Esarey: So, you're in Okinawa. What did you do there? You had troops coming back from service?

Langfelder: It's funny that you asked that question. One of my daughters has a boyfriend that's in Okinawa, and I told her just yesterday, "Ask him to send me a picture," because when we were in Okinawa, there was nothing standing. Everything was bombed; it was totally flat. There wasn't even any trees standing; it was that bad. So I'd really like to see what it's like. What we did at the time is, they sent our troops up into the mountains, because the Japs were hiding in the caverns, to burn them out, to get rid of them. But—

Esarey: You were one of the first troops into Japan, correct?

Langfelder: We were the first troops in Japan, yes. But we were one of the last troops into Okinawa.

Esarey: After Okinawa then you went—

Langfelder: We went to Honshu Island; we went to Tokyo.

Esarey: And if I might say this—you correct me if I'm wrong, because I was trying to get like a timeline of where you were—you were assigned to the 77th?

Langfelder: 77th Infantry Division.

Esarey: Yes.

Langfelder: Was a New York division.

Esarey: And that was in Tokyo, or where were you?

Langfelder: That was before I left Okinawa. On Okinawa, I was in the 27th Infantry Division, and as the war went down, they tried to reduce the manpower in the

South Pacific. So they dissolved the 27th Infantry Division, which was also a New York Division, and they put us into the 77th.

Esarey: After that, you went somewhere else.

Langfelder: Then I went to Wakamatsu.

Esarey: Describe what happened there?

Langfelder: Okay, when we landed on Honshu, I went to Tokyo. Then they assigned different troops to go to different communities, so we could control Japan. We didn't really know what to do. I mean, the American hierarchy, they didn't even know what to do in Japan. You're in a foreign country that you've never been to, and you're the invader, and you don't know what to expect.

Well, they sent two of our chiefs to Wakamatsu. It was an army camp. And guess what? From the outside, it looked just like a stockade from the Indian era, you know, how we built? That's how that was. I finally got to one of those. (both laugh) I can still see the sergeant, the highest ranking man. He went up to that huge door, and he just pounded at the door, to let us in.

They opened the door, and there were about a couple hundred Japanese troops inside. They had stacked all their rifles, and whatever they had, in the middle. They were so organized. When they saw us coming—there were just eight of us—they just stood there, turned around, and they marched out. In all my life I thought, If somebody invaded this country, I'd kill them. It was so…I really respect the Japanese for how they reacted. It's just amazing.

Esarey: It is.

Langfelder: Yes, yes, after five long years of war.

Esarey: There were eight of you?

Langfelder: Oh, yes

Esarey: They laid down their arms.

Langfelder: Yes, and all I had was a carbine and about eight rounds of ammunition. (laughs) I could only shoot eight times, if I had to, because that's all the bullets you had.

Esarey: Where did the Japanese go then? What happened to them?

Langfelder: I guess they went home. We never did know.

Esarey: They just surrendered their arms.

Langfelder: Surrender, and you're gone.

(end of interview # 2)

Interview with Ossie Langfelder

Interview # IM-A-L-2012-026.03
Interview date: June 25, 2012
Interviewer: Carol Esarey

Esarey: The date is June 25, 2012. We are in the home of Ossie Langfelder. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Immigrant Stories* program. We'll go ahead and get started here. Ossie, when we finished our last interview, you were leaving Japan.

Langfelder: That's correct.

Esarey: You were leaving Japan or getting ready to finish your time in Japan and then going to be shipped back to the United States. But, before we get back to the United States, I would really appreciate it if you would talk a little bit about your assignments in Sapporo. What happened there?

Langfelder: Well, Sapporo, Japan is on Hokkaido Island. It's the northern most part of Japan. It was just a beautiful part of the country. We were there during wintertime, and the snow was like almost six to ten feet deep. We weren't able to use any motorized vehicles because of the snow being so deep.

We were stationed at a camp that used to have a Japanese cavalry outfit, so all of us had horses to ride, rather than being in motorized vehicles. That's how we pretty much patrolled or occupied Sapporo, Japan, which was really enjoyable because, luckily, I had learned how to ride a horse when I was small, here in Springfield, because that was one of the things that my

mother always wanted us to learn how to do. We used to ride horses around the lake. So, I felt very comfortable up there, because I liked the winter, coming from Vienna, so I liked the snow. So, to me, although I was far from home and was occupying another country, it was somewhat of an enjoyable experience to be up there.

Esarey: How long were you there?

Langfelder: In Hokkaido, I was probably about three to four months; I don't exactly remember. There weren't very many of us assigned to that island. What amazed me about Hokkaido is, there was a tremendous Russian influence, because it's so close to Russia. A lot of the Japanese up there were even taller than even us Americans, because I guess they had like mixed marriages or something, because Japanese were a lot smaller than we were. So, when I arrived there, that was quite shocking.

Esarey: What languages were they speaking?

Langfelder: They speak Japanese. I don't think I ever communicated with hardly any of them, but they seemed very friendly, which was surprising to me.

Esarey: What exactly did you do in Sapporo?

Langfelder: Like any military organization, we did a lot of training. One thing I remember, because I was a forward observer and a radio operator, we did receive a lot of new equipment that we were supposed to be using as radio operators, which I studied and became acquainted with. So, a lot of time was spent studying and installing equipment and riding horses. It was not very strenuous. And like I say, it was probably more enjoyable than strenuous, except for being homesick. (laughs)

Ossie at Regimental Headquarters, Sapporo, Japan, standing near ten foot drifts of snow, winter, 1945-46.

Esarey: What happened after you were finished in Sapporo? What was your next assignment?

Langfelder: When we were transferred from Sapporo, we came back to Honshu Island, close to Tokyo. We were stationed close to Tokyo. Like I say, we were occupational troops. So, we did pretty much the same thing as we did in northern Japan, except we were a motorized unit then. Everything was patrolled by jeeps and other motor vehicles. They were not strenuous appointments.

The great thing was that the Japanese, apparently, were not objectional to us being there. They pretty much accepted the way of life. I know it sounds amazing today; it was amazing then. I don't think we were ever fearful of being attacked or anything. I think we felt as safe there as we would have in the United States.

Esarey: The war was over.

Langfelder: The war was over, yes.

Esarey: You mentioned something in your book about working with or near a group of the black troops.

Langfelder's sleeping quarters in the barracks in Sapporo, Japan in late 1945. Ossie is second from right in the first row.

Langfelder: Oh, yes. Black troops arrived after we had occupied Japan. Of course, in those days, segregation was strictly, pretty much, in existence. Apparently, there was some fear. I think the people in charge of American troops were more fearful of the black troops than they were of the Japanese. The black troops were not issued any ammunition. They all had rifles but were not issued any ammunition. And the cadre, which is the officers and non-commissioned officers in charge of the black troops, were all white.

I happened to be one of the cadre, since I was a T/5 [technical fifth grade]. We were issued carbines or pistols, with ammunition. When it came to sleeping and eating quarters, we had different quarters than the black troops. We didn't mingle with them; we were strictly supervisory. And the only time they were issued ammunition, when they had guard duty. And then, the ammunition was limited, so we could keep track of how many bullets we gave them. To me, looking back now, it just, apparently we were in fear they would shoot us. We weren't fearful of the Japanese, but we were of them.

Esarey: You were fearful of your own.

Langfelder: Of the black troops, yes, which is kind of sad to say but—

Esarey: What happened after that, then?

Langfelder: Well, when I left Japan that was still the situation. Things had not changed.

Esarey: Was that your last assignment, in Japan?

Langfelder: Oh, yes, that was my last assignment, before being shipped home and being discharged.

Esarey: I have a note that you left to go home. You were shipped home in September of 1946. Is that correct?

Langfelder: That's correct.

Esarey: Describe the experience of leaving Japan, sailing to America.

Langfelder: Well, the experience about coming home was totally different than going over there, because on the way over there we were pretty much confined in our cabin. We were always certainly somewhat fearful that we might be attacked by submarines or something. We were always uncertain where we were being shipped to. We were never told where we were going. We had received uniforms for severe winter months, and here we went to Okinawa. They wanted us to think we were going to Alaska, but we went to Okinawa instead.

On the way home, there was no discipline at all. We could do wherever we wanted to on the ship. We could sleep on the deck or sleep on our bunks or wherever we wanted to. I spent all my time on the deck, because I was as seasick coming home as I was seasick going over there. (laughs) I guess I have a very weak stomach. You could eat whenever you felt like it, and they even served some alcohol on the ship. You could have all the Coke [Coca Cola®] you wanted to drink, which I drank a lot of, because I like Coke or Pepsi™. But, at that time, it was all Coke.

There was a lot of card playing, a lot of gambling. In a way, looking back, at that time it was understandable, but a lot of soldiers had a lot of gold, because when they were stationed like we were on Okinawa, they would go up in the mountains and annihilate the Japanese. And, after they killed them, they would steal their gold teeth out of their mouth, because the Japanese didn't replace teeth. They did have a lot of gold. So, there was a lot of gambling going on with that type of reward.

Esarey: Gold teeth.

Langfelder: Gold teeth, yes.

Esarey: Gold teeth would be gambled?

Langfelder: Oh, yes, would be gambled back and forth, because it really wasn't their money. I don't know what worth it had, because I never played cards; I never gambled. Seventy years later, I still don't gamble. (laughs) So, I haven't changed.

Esarey: Where did you arrive when you got to the United States?

Langfelder: We arrived in Washington, in Seattle. From there we were given an opportunity. I don't know how much money they were giving us, but we had a choice of being discharged in Washington or whatever place we wanted to be discharged from, depending on where you lived. Of course, I wanted to be discharged in Chicago, because that was not too far from here. You were given the opportunity. I don't know whether you wanted to go to New York or to Austin, Texas or whatever.

I chose for them to discharge me in Chicago. So, after we arrived there, I took a regular passenger train to get to get to Chicago, at which point I was discharged at Fort Sheridan. It had to be an Army fort, where they discharged you.

Esarey: How did you get to Springfield?

Langfelder: I took a train. I didn't notify anybody I was coming home. My parents didn't know where I was. I think they still thought I was in Japan. I wanted really to surprise them. After I was discharged in Fort Sheridan, I took a train back home, and the train was, at that time, on Jefferson Street, you know, where the old train station is, by the Lincoln Home, Lincoln Library. I caught a cab and went home.

I can still see my parents were at home. I really don't quite remember reunion. I don't think it was as emotional as I had hoped for. (laughs) I'm pretty sure they were somewhat surprised, but maybe somewhat expecting, or maybe they might have been notified by somebody that I was coming.

They had bought a house on North Illinois Street. My daughter lives in that house now. Of course, I'd never seen it before. So, it was kind of nice to see that they had a house.

Esarey: You had never seen the home that they—

Langfelder: I'd never seen it, no. When I left, we had lived on North Sixth Street by McClernand School. They were renting that apartment.

Esarey: But you don't remember too much about the actual reunion?

Langfelder: No. In a way that's kind of sad. No, I don't. I just remember it didn't seem to be as emotional as I was hoping. I'm a very emotional person, so I like to hug and all that. I don't remember any of that. (laughs)

Esarey: How about your sister? Where was she?

Langfelder: She was still at home; she lived at home. She was going to college at the time. She was just finishing up at Springfield Junior College and getting ready to go away to Millikin University [in Decatur, Illinois].

Esarey: You arrived home, and here you are a soldier. What did you do next?

Langfelder: Well, the next thing…I wasn't going to do anything. When you're that age, [of] that young, you went to school and away in the service, I actually thought, probably deep down hoping we'd go back to Vienna. I didn't believe we were going to stay over here, because I always felt my mother was probably very homesick because all her relatives, her sisters and brothers, they were still in Vienna. There was never a doubt in my mind that she wanted to go home. But that wasn't to be.

At that time, they were discharging just millions of soldiers, and, of course, it's just like today, there wasn't that much employment, because there was no need for the factories. There was no war production anymore. The government wanted you to join what we called the 52-20 Club. They were paying each discharged soldier $20 for fifty-two weeks. I was going to enjoy the $20 and do exactly nothing. (laughs)

Esarey: How did that go?

Langfelder: That didn't go very well. When I got home, the first thing, like you asked me, I do remember my dad wanting to know what I was going to do. I told him, "I'm going to join the 52-20 club." He wanted to know what that was, and I was explaining it to him. He was kind of annoyed and said that no way am I going to collect $20 a week from the government, because they don't owe me anything. The government doesn't owe anybody anything. That's the European way of thinking, that you owe the government, not the government owes you.

So, the following day, as matter of fact…I came home on a week-end. On Monday, he took me to a Robert's Brothers Clothing Store, because he knew the Robert's brothers. He told them that I just came home from service, and he wanted them to hire me. Well, they didn't employ me because they said that they had enough employees. Well, most of them were the brothers themselves, and they were pretty close connected. They didn't want any outsiders in that store.

So, he took me down to Arch Wilson's [men's clothing store], because he knew Arch Wilson. That was a really exclusive store, and they didn't like outsiders either. Everything was very cliquish. But, in order to pacify my dad, they said, well, they had a storeroom that needs to be straightened out, and if I could straighten that storeroom out, and if I could prove to them I can do something—because I really didn't know what to do; I never did anything, other than go to school—they might hire me.

Well, I went into the storeroom. I can still see it. It was just a total disaster. I can't imagine a store that was so exclusive, having that kind of storeroom. It took me about three days to straighten that storeroom out. See, they used to just pull shoes out and never put it back into the right place, by sizes. Well, I was always an organized person. I got that from my mother, you know. I can still see, boy, when I was done with that storeroom, it was just perfect.

Well, after I was finished, Arch Wilson told my dad he would hire me. As a matter of fact, he even paid me for the three days that I did that, although I was only there as a trial period; Arch was so impressed. I worked for them part-time for several years to come, even while I went to school.

Esarey: Your father was pleased?

Langfelder: I never knew if my father was pleased with me. I don't think my father was ever pleased with me. He was a very caring person—don't get me wrong—and I admire my father, but I never lived up to his expectations.

Esarey: That's quite a statement, isn't it?

Langfelder: Yes, and it's always bothered me, to his day.

Esarey: Yes. When you got back, were you able to connect with friends?

Langfelder: No, I really didn't. Well, Allen Williams was my best friend, and he was killed on the last day of the war in Germany. He was really the only close friend that I had. I was in Springfield such a short period time before going into the service; I was only here about three years. Like I said earlier, people really didn't get close to me. It wasn't a one-way street, I didn't get close to them either, because I was kind of pampered by my teachers, and I enjoyed that, so I didn't care whether I had friends or not.

Esarey: I need to kind of go backwards just a little bit. You received your citizenship while you were in the service. How did that come to you? Was there an occasion?

Langfelder: At that time, the government had a policy not to send anybody overseas, American soldiers overseas, if they weren't citizens of the United States. I don't know whether it was against the law or not, but it was just a policy they adopted, not like today that they even draft non-citizens. When they drafted me and wanted me in the service, they asked me for my permission to go in the service. Naturally, I said yes. But, today things are totally different. They could not ship you overseas unless you were a citizen of the United States.

After we completed our basic training in Fort Sill, Lawton, Oklahoma and shipped us to the point of embarkation—for me, Maryland—they told me they were going to make me a citizen, so they could ship me out of the country. So, we went to Oklahoma City. Somebody accompanied me to Oklahoma City to swear me in as an American citizen. They took me up to court in Oklahoma City and swore me in as an American citizen.

Esarey: Was there a ceremony?

Langfelder: Oh, no. There's no ceremony. There was just an individual; I guess he was a magistrate or a judge or somebody. He was just a fellow soldier who I believe was a sergeant—I don't know exactly—that drove me to Oklahoma City, because Lawton, Oklahoma is not too far away from Oklahoma City. He just drove me up there. I can still see [it]. To me it looked like our old county building. [We] went into the office, and they swore me in, and that was it.


ORIGINAL
TO BE GIVEN TO
THE PERSON NATURALIZED

No. 6401476

Oswald Cornelius Langfelder

Seal

The Certificate of Naturalization issued to Oswald Langfelder at Fort Sill, Oklahoma on April 28, 1945.

Esarey: May I ask, did you have any particular feelings about becoming an American?

Langfelder: No. I just had my citizenship papers.

Esarey: There it was.

Langfelder: Oh, yeah. At the time, you know, thinking back, I don't think it was very important to me, because I didn't plan on staying here, which is probably a terrible thing to say.

Esarey: Well, you've been consistent with that. That's how you felt. Did your parents become citizens?

Langfelder: They didn't become citizens until about three years after I came back home. You had to be in the country five years, after you applied for your citizenship. I don't know exactly when they applied for citizenship. It was about three years after I received mine. When I came home, I know, I sort of bragged to my parents that I am a citizen, because they weren't. As a child, you think you've accomplished so much more than your parents. It was coincidence.

Esarey: Your sister, was she a citizen too?

Langfelder: No, she became a citizen when my parents became citizens.

Esarey: Have you ever attended one of the citizenship ceremonies, here in Springfield?

Langfelder: I did after I became mayor. I attended those. They're really emotional, which is really impressive to me, because those people really want to be here; they want to be citizens.

Esarey: They still are.

Langfelder: And they work at it.

Esarey: And they work at it. When did you graduate from college? What did you do about college?

Langfelder: I graduated from junior college in 19…that must have been 1947 and then went to Purdue, but I didn't graduate from Purdue. That's when I fell in love.

Esarey: How did you get to Purdue?

Langfelder: I chose Purdue because I love mathematics, and I always loved engineering. I think, sitting here all the time and thinking, I think I loved engineering because my mother's uncle lived in Argentina, Buenos Aires, and he was an engineer. He would write to us sporadically about building a bridge, and that sort of impressed me. How can anybody build a bridge? I think, back in my mind, I think that's how I became somewhat acquainted with engineering, not knowing anything about it. But since I loved math, it all fit, but I've always loved engineering. Still today, I wish I could still do it.

Esarey: Well, that's good. That's a good love, to really enjoy that. When you got to Purdue, you met Midge. Describe that occasion.

Langfelder: Oh, yes. That was really interesting. Well, I had known Midge, because she was a candy girl at the Lincoln [Theater] concession stand. In those days, they didn't have Coke or pop; they had candy. That's all it was. When I worked at Arch Wilson's, it was only a block away from the Lincoln Theater. It's not like today, you can buy candy anywhere. You just bought it at the theater or in a drugstore, something like that. I loved Hershey [Milk Chocolate] Bars. I had

known the manager of the Lincoln Theater, because I had worked there as an usher at one time.

She used to give my parents Hershey Bars, when they were available during the war, while I was in the service. They would send them to me, because you couldn't get Hershey Bars. So, when I worked at Arch Wilson, I walked up there and got a candy bar. I wasn't thinking anything about it, except one day, I noticed her behind the candy counter. So, I think I went back to buy candy to look at her more than to buy a Hershey Bar. (laughs) She was only like seventeen, sixteen or seventeen.

Esarey: Still in high school.

Langfelder: Oh yes, and I was back from the service. When someone is sixteen or seventeen and you're twenty-one, twenty-two, that's a huge age difference. So, I just gazed at her. I didn't say anything to her, other than probably, "I want a candy bar." But I went there frequently. I think I actually fell in love with her right then and there, although she—

Esarey: From afar?

Langfelder: From afar. She didn't know who the heck I was, nor did she probably care. (laughs) Probably [she thought] "Who's that old man staring at me?" (both laugh) So that's when I first met her.

Esarey: And then you went to Purdue, but you met up again.

Langfelder: Oh, yes. I was sitting in the union building, and we were eating or something, in the cafeteria. I was sitting, and some girl came up and tapped me on the shoulder. It happened to be Midge. Of course, I didn't remember her from Adam. (laughs) I just kind of stared at her, because she said, "Oh, do you know who I am?" Of course, I said, "Yes." What boy wouldn't have said "Yes"? She talked. I said, "Oh, what are you doing here?" She said she was going to the College of St. Francis, which was a girls' college. So, I told her, if she didn't mind, I'd give her a call sometime. Of course, I didn't know who I was going to call, because I didn't know her name.

Esarey: You had a problem.

Langfelder: I had a big problem. (laughs)

Esarey: What happened next?

Langfelder: Well, it was quite a while after that, because I was concentrating on school more than girls at the time. One time, I asked her for a date. So, I did go the College of St. Francis. Of course, the teachers were all nuns. This elderly nun—well, she wasn't very old, but to me at the time it was elderly—answered. I told her I was looking for a girl that went to their school. She

wanted to know the name, and I was embarrassed. I said well, "I'm sorry, I'm very nervous, I can't think of her name, but she's from Springfield, Illinois." Well, the nun finally went to get her. She said "Oh, yes, we have a girl from Springfield, Illinois."

I was just standing there hoping it was the same girl, that they didn't have two girls from Springfield, Illinois. (both laugh) That would have been embarrassing. But she did bring Midge down, because Midge is a very private, very quiet person. She never says much, and she hardly said anything. I just said that I'd like to ask her out for a date sometime and that would be by. But, now I knew what her name was.

Esarey: Progress.

Langfelder: Yes, that was progress, (laughs) private investigation.

Esarey: What was your first date?

Langfelder: Our first date, I think I took her out to eat. I wanted to impress her, so I went to this really fancy restaurant. I'll never forget it, because at that time I was on the GI Bill. I forget; we were getting, like $65 a month or something like that. That paid for my room and for my meals.

Midge sat across from me, and we both held up the menu, like this. We didn't look at each other, really. I think we both stared at the prices, which were outrageous. I thought, "Oh, my gosh, there goes my whole check." (both laugh) Finally, I went down, like this, with my menu to see what she was doing, and she goes down with the menu too and stared. We hardly said anything to each other that I recall. (to Midge) You might remember things, but I don't. I know I hate to say it over and over, but I just loved her. I knew she was the one for me.

Esarey: You got married when?

Langfelder: In 1952, in June. We were actually waiting for her to reach the age of twenty-one, because she didn't want to get married until she was twenty-one, because that was adulthood at the time. I was afraid to ask her dad anyway, so I was glad she wanted to wait. (laughs)

Esarey: Well, you were kind of an older man.

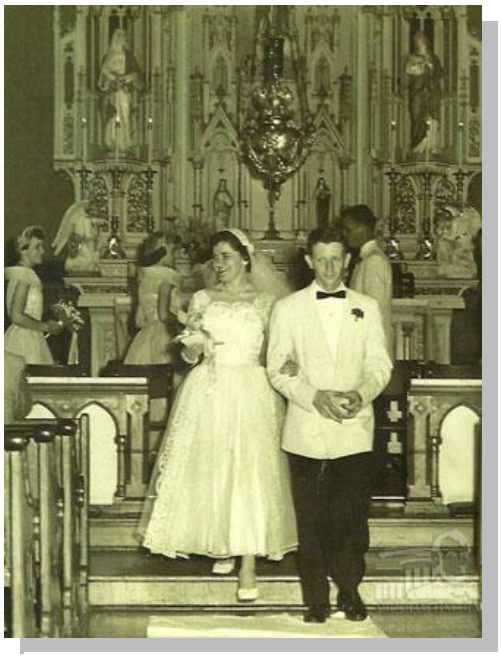
Langfelder: Oh, yes, because by that time…There's five years difference between us. Of course, now, as old as we are, that's nothing, but at the time it was pretty serious.

Esarey: And you weren't Catholic.

Langfelder: No, I was Catholic, but my parents weren't Catholic, and that made a difference. My mother was Lutheran, and my dad was Jewish.

Esarey: What was your wedding day like?

Langfelder: I hate to be conceited, but I would say that I'm a very organized person. Even when we go out today for breakfast, I always plan. Before I even get to the restaurant, I know exactly what I want. I don't like to see anybody wait on me. We talked about that the other day, when I want to the restaurant. The waitress said, "How come you always know what you want?" I said, "I plan everything ahead. That's the way I am."



Ossie Langfelder and Midge Dunham on their wedding day, April 14, 1952 in St. Joseph's Church, in Springfield, Illinois.

So, I really hoped we'd have the perfect wedding, which wasn't to be. We had to send somebody after one of the ushers, who overslept. Then we had to send somebody for our vocalist, who overslept or forgot the wedding; we don't quite know. As a matter of fact, there was a clock on the back of church—we were married at St. Joes' [St. Joseph Parish]—that shows exactly the time that Midge came down the aisle. That was twenty minutes after 9:00, and the priest had been standing there at the altar for I don't know how long. I don't know if I was nervous or what, but it was kind of shocking.

I'll have to tell this story. (laughs) I had very little input on the wedding, because it's the women that made all the arrangements. My parents weren't involved at all, because they didn't want me to get married. They said that they weren't even going to come to the wedding. So, we were almost like divorced from each other. They didn't know what was going on, and I never told them. The arrangements were always made in Midge's parents' dining room. They had this huge dining room table. I can still see them sitting around the table when they checked everything off, the flowers and whatever needed to be done. Then they wanted to have a white runner down the aisle, so she wouldn't get her dress dirty, which I couldn't understand, because she had an ankle length dress. (laughs)

Money was extremely…Well, we didn't have any money, so every penny…Of course, I didn't pay for any of it, but I was conscious of it. I count every penny. I forget what I thought the runner was going to cost, like $10,

which today is nothing, but then was a fortune. I said, "One thing, I do not want a runner. We don't need a runner." Well, when I got in the church, and before Midge came down the aisle, here they rolled out that runner. (laughs)

Midge: Yeah, the florist made us get one. That went with the flowers, but you didn't know it.

Langfelder: So you can just imagine my mindset, "Oh, there goes $10." I know it was her money, but she paid for everything. That's how the wedding started. They were late. The runner went down the aisle. But, my mother and dad showed up, which pleased me.

Then we had a breakfast. (to Midge) What was it called?

Midge: Except they called me Mary Jane.

Langfelder: Oh, yes, the priest called Midge…Her name's Mary Agnes. He said, "Will you, Mary Jane, marry Oswald Cornelius Langfelder?" which totally upset her dad. He said, "You never married my daughter, because you called her by the wrong name." Of course, it didn't make any difference to me. I just thought, Well, if I ever wanted to get out of it, she's got the wrong name…just jokingly. (phone rings) I always held that in front of her. So, my father-in-law was pretty upset.

Then the reception was held in their basement. In those days, they held the reception at home. They were very small. We only had about, maybe forty people there. The men played cards in the basement, and the women stayed upstairs eating or talking. To me it was a very decimating affair. (laughs)

Esarey: I think you described it as a dismal—

Langfelder: Yes, dismal.

Esarey: …and were ready to get on with your life, the two of you. You were ready to move on.

Langfelder: Oh, yeah, very much so.

Esarey: Do you have some stories that you could tell about being a father and raising your children. It's such a wonderful thing; the two of you had a beautiful, big family. I wondered if you had just a couple of memories that you could share about what it was like to be the father of a large family.

Langfelder: In a way, my mindset is kind of sad, because I never thought about having children. When we first got married, I think that Midge was somewhat aware that I really didn't care whether we had children or not. I was never around babies. I was never around other children, so I couldn't even relate to it. I

really didn't want any children. We never discussed it, apparently, because we ended up with thirteen children.

I'm just very fortunate that I had Midge as a wife. She was used to being around children. I traveled a lot while was an engineer. I was gone probably a whole week at a time for several years. I just came home on weekends. So, I had the easy part about raising the children, because I could come home and spoil them and take off on Monday and be gone. Midge really had all the work at home. I always give her all the credit, because she deserves it.

But, when it comes to stories, I'm sure there are a lot of them. This story probably doesn't mean anything to anybody, but it meant a lot to me. We had a very difficult time financially, which stands to reason with that many children. We sent them all to private schools. We never deprived our children of anything. We worried more about did they have enough of this or that than [of] depriving Midge of anything.

All I remember is one day I was working up north in Rockford, Illinois. I called home frequently. Midge said "I don't know, Ossie, but there must be something wrong with our hot water heater. I don't have any hot water." Well, I remembered, I didn't pay the hot water bill. I didn't pay the gas bill. (laughs) It's not a funny story, but I relate to that because, when you think about what regrets do you have that happened in your life, that is really minor to most people, but it was major to me. So I said, "Oh, just use the stove and heat up the water, and take it up to the bathroom." We had a second floor, and they had…All week long (laughs) poor Midge and the kids had to heat the water to take up to the bathtub and fill the bathtub with hot water. So, that pretty much relates to the kind of lifestyle we led.

But, I'll tell you, our children did outstanding, no problems. They all have jobs, and they all work, and to me that's such a tremendous blessing…and always have, you know.

Esarey: Children to be proud of.

Langfelder: Oh, yes, especially in today's economy. Oh, yes.

Esarey: To have all of your children as productive citizens is a really big deal.

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: I would like you to talk about your return to Austria. We're going to skip some years here. This was a really big deal. It was an anniversary gift from your children. Is that correct, when you went back to Austria?

Langfelder: Oh yes, 25th anniversary.

Esarey: What was that like, to go back home?

Langfelder: Well, for me it was pretty emotional and somewhat revengeful. I still remember the war. I still remember the Germans chasing us out, because then we left. So, there was quite a bit of hatred in me, still, for the Germans. I had not really forgiven them for what they did to everybody. I was really eager to go back and almost—if I could find anybody—brag about how well we did. They did us a favor by running us out of the country, because everything went well for us. So, when we went over there, the first thing, we had to rent an automobile. That was in Germany because we landed in Stuttgart. (to Midge) Wasn't it Stuttgart?

Midge: No, Amsterdam

Langfelder: No, when we went to Germany, that's where we had the car. This salesperson who rented me the car was naturally a German, but he did speak English, and I became very annoyed. In German, I told him, "Don't talk English to me. I speak perfect German." Although I hadn't spoken it for ages. I insisted that I speak German to him.

From what I recall I was rather insulting, which wasn't the right thing to do, but in a way, you release your frustrations that built up over the years. Then we drove to Vienna, to the place. I wanted to show Midge the apartment that we used to live in when we were upstairs. The name on the door was Krainz, and Krainz was my mother's aunt. I always wondered how come they have that name plate on, because I knew they were dead. So, I went downstairs to…There was a small grocery store downstairs, and I went into that grocery store to ask that gentlemen if he had any idea about it. He was a younger gentleman. I told him who I was and why I wanted to know. He went in the back room, and he said something to the older gentlemen in the back. "Oh, the Langfelders are here." He came out. He had happened to be the same grocer that was there when we left.

Esarey: Oh my!

Langfelder: I think he cried a little, but I cried a lot. It was really emotional. It was as if time stood still for us. Things hadn't changed; everything was the same, twenty-five years later. Oh, it was more than that that; it was like thirty years later, but it was very emotional. He had a bottle of wine, and he brought the wine out, and we both drank a glass of wine in celebration.

Esarey: That's a good thing.

Langfelder: Yeah, it was very good.

Midge: He remembered his mother.

Esarey: He remembered your mother?

Langfelder: Oh yes, he remembered my mother. Well, in those days, children and husbands didn't do groceries. The women went to grocery store. Of course, we were upstairs. The only reason I remember a grocery store like…I think I told you, in a previous interview, when we were well behaved all week, we got to buy one banana. That's the grocery store we got the banana in.

Esarey: What did he remember about your mother?

Langfelder: He just remembered she was just…I don't like to use the word arrogant; although she was. She was very arrogant, a proud person. Like you know, she didn't cook; she didn't do any wash or anything. She just—

Esarey: She knew what she wanted.

Langfelder: Yes, she knew what she wanted. In her own way, she was an aristocrat, without money. (laughs)

Esarey: I'd like to ask you a few questions about America. What has been your overriding feeling about being an American? That's kind of a hard question, but—

Langfelder: It's very difficult because, over the years, it's been so strange. It took me years and years to develop being an American. It's great to be an American, but I always felt I didn't want to give up my Austrian citizenship. I really always dreamt I would go back to Vienna, never thinking I'd have children. I really believed that Midge and I would someday move to Vienna. I never told her that, but that was always in the back of my mind. With children, you just don't do that. You become a part of the system you live in.

Even today, I'm very proud of being an American. I just don't quite—even at eighty-five—understand Americans. I cannot understand how they can elect a foreigner to public office. See, I would think twice before I'd ever do that, because of such different mindset. It still amazes me. I'm not amazed that our children are elected to public office, but for me being elected, I'll never get over that. I don't understand it. I'm glad I was, but—

A formal picture taken when Ossie was the Mayor of Springfield, Illinois from 1987-1995.

Esarey: You were the mayor of a city.

Langfelder: Yes, that's very difficult for me to comprehend.

Esarey: How did you decide to do that? I know we aren't going to talk too much about the politics, but it—

Langfelder: Well, it's really because her brother…in 19…I think it was 1967, her younger brother…Midge was brought up in a political family. Her father was the vice-chairman of the Republican Party. Of course, I didn't know her dad real well. Oh, I know him to see him, but we'd never really conversed. Being a father, I analyze everybody and everything. I know he always felt, well, Ossie had a Jewish father and a Lutheran mother. Her dad was a very religious person. In those days Catholics married Catholics and Jews married Jews. So, I know, that always was somewhat difficult for him, although he never said anything; I can say that.

Then the second worst thing, I came from a pretty staunch Democratic family, and he was Republican, the vice-chairman of the party. That had to be difficult. That's like a mortal sin. (laughs) Well it is, even in my father's town. That's when they put an X on top of the ballot and voted straight Democrat or straight Republican. That's how they used to vote.

So, her brother—I was working in Rockford—he called me and said that he wanted to run for finance commissioner; would I help him? Which was very strange, because Jimmy and I didn't talk much, and he was a lot younger than I was. I, of course, said "Oh, yeah, I'd love to do that." Although I didn't know anything about politics. I said, "Yes, next time I come home, I'll talk to you about it." I didn't think anything. I thought it was kind of exciting, not understanding politics. So, he got me involved in politics.

Well, the reason he actually called me is because the finance commissioner—I don't even remember—was a Mrs. Hoffman. She was an attorney, and her husband was an attorney, and their son was an attorney. They were highly respected people. They donated all that land for the University of Illinois. They gave that land. They were very rich, but very prominent, just fine people.

But, not understanding politics, I just thought anyone can run in America. So, Jimmy wanted to run for that office. Well, his dad was somewhat unhappy, because he was supportive of Mrs. Hoffman, because she was a Republican, and he was vice-chairman of the Republican Party. And here, his son, as a Republican, was running against her, which had to be a tremendous burden on him. Now that I understand politics, I understand what that poor man went through.

Not having his own father's support, he called me. I said, "Oh yes, sure I will." They probably couldn't understand, why was a Democrat supporting a Republican and everything else? So, that's how he involved me. Since Jimmy knew politics, and I didn't, I started off by doing things that he asked me to do. That's how I got started into politics.

Esarey: Interesting, very interesting.

Langfelder: I'm sorry to take so long to explain everything.

Esarey: No, no. It took—just from what you said—from here to here.

Langfelder: Oh, yes.

Esarey: Being an immigrant affected you your whole life, didn't it?

Langfelder: Oh, yes. Oh, definitely

Esarey: Are there any overriding feelings, other than what you've already told me, about living in America?

Langfelder: At first, not anymore. But, when I was a little younger…Well, even today I think there's always been a fear in my life of someone of authority, like police, I respect highly, not that today I have a fear of them. I did when I was younger, what they might do to you or could do to you, if you do something wrong. I always respected them but not the way Americans would respect a police officer.

Esarey: Do you have any views of the current immigration policy that America has? Do you follow that at all?

Langfelder: Oh, I follow it totally. As a matter of fact, I just heard the Supreme Court ruling.

Esarey: What was it?

Langfelder: They ruled—oh, I can understand why they ruled that—they ruled that…Three out of four decisions [justices] said Arizona was wrong, that they support the federal government's position, that they set policy, immigration policy. They really can't ask people for identification. "Are you an illegal immigrant or not?" That's against the law, see?

I certainly contest; I don't understand it. I feel…well, years ago, when we came here, number one you had to have a visa to come to this country, or you had to have a sponsor to come here, or you had to have a job. I know all those requirements are necessary. But, I think you ought to have a visa. I understand why people become illegal immigrants, because they want a better way of life. I understand all that. I don't understand American policy that you are not allowed to ask for identification.

When I first came to this country, for years and years, I don't know how many times I was fingerprinted. You used to fingerprint people. I was fingerprinted for everything, for my papers, when I joined the service, when I became a citizen, when I started high school, when we came to Springfield. I

never thought anything about it. They could fingerprint me today. I don't understand why people object to having identification, having their picture taken. I think everybody ought to have it—I don't care who they are—picture identification or whatever. I never object. If you don't do anything wrong or plan to do anything wrong, why do you object to it? That's my philosophy. I don't blame the government; I blame the individuals.

Esarey: I didn't know that they had made a ruling yet. So, you've followed this quite closely.

Langfelder: Oh, day by day.

Esarey: Day by day.

Langfelder: She [Midge] knows; I curse the television every day.

Esarey: You curse the television every day?

Langfelder: When I hear the results. No, because people—

Esarey: You feel strongly.

Langfelder: Very strongly. When you're an American citizen, that's a privilege, number one. And why would you be ashamed of identifying yourself as an American citizen?

Esarey: Thank you. When you judge yourself in your own mind, is there a person against whom you measure yourself? If so, who is that person? Why would you particularly look up to them?

Langfelder: I used to work for an engineering company, Crawford, Murphy and Tilly, for twenty-two years, I think, twenty-three years, something like that. One of the partners, Pat Murphy, who is deceased now, he's not the one that…Mr. Tilly hired me. He was a senior partner, and he hired me. He was very abrasive. He pretty much had my type of attitude. (laughs) Maybe that's why I didn't get along with him.

But, when he passed away, Mr. Murphy became a senior partner, and he was like one of my teachers, almost took me under his wing. I was always lagging behind, simply because I love engineering more than anything. It's my real life. I just love it. But, I never received a degree, so that was always a handicap in that field, because everybody else had a degree. Therefore, I actually worked twice as hard as everybody else—not to be bragging—because of that.

The reason I can say that is, they had a lot of projects out of town, like Indiana, Ohio. Like I say, I always travelled, because nobody else would travel. They felt, they had the degree, "I don't have to leave Springfield. I've

got the degree, and that gives me a privilege." That's why I came to work for them. So, whenever they needed someone to go out of town—and Midge knows well—Mr. Murphy would call me and say, "Ossie, we need somebody in Ohio tomorrow. Can you leave?" There was never, "Midge can I go?" or "What do you need?" I said, "I'll be there." So, the burden really fell on her, but I admired him because, I'm sure I made mistakes in engineering, but he always supported my efforts.

One time—I'll tell the story; Midge has heard it a dozen times—I had a very good friend at Crawford, Murphy and Tilly, and he was a much younger man than I. He had graduated, and he was a professional engineer. They get a license, have to get a license. One day, we went out drinking, and we were discussing that raises came out. He said to me, "Oh, did you get a raise?" He was my buddy, so I said, "Oh, yeah." So, I told him what I received, and it was quite a bit more than he received. I didn't think anything about it.

Well, the next day he went to see Mr. Murphy, I guess—I didn't know it—but went to see Mr. Murphy to complain that he was a professional engineer, and I didn't have a degree, why would he give me a bigger raise than he. Well, Mr. Murphy called me in and reprimanded me and said that, "Ossie, I pay people what I think they deserve, and I don't ever want anyone to discuss what they receive here. That is my business. I'm the boss; I do what I want. So, whatever you ever get, you never tell anybody anything, because it's none of their business." I always took that to heart, but that was just a small…He was looking out for me, really. I always respected him for that kind of attitude.

He treated me extremely well, and, as a matter of fact, when he died, I was so close to him. His wife, Blanche, redid her whole house, and she threw out his favorite chair. I said, "Oh, I love that chair." I always loved it, and she gave it to me. It's still sitting in my living room. (laughs) He was just a tremendous human being.

When I talk to my children now, when they complain about this one gets this and this one gets that, which younger people do, I say, "You know"— and I truly can say—"I was never jealous of somebody getting more than I. I always felt they earned it more than I did, and [then] you worked that much harder to get there. I was never envious.

I shouldn't bring up politics, but I'm so irritated. I'm a Democrat, but with the Democrats today, they're creating such a class distinction in America by saying, "Oh, the millionaires ought to pay more." I'm not a millionaire; I'm far from it. But I'm sitting here thinking, I'm glad I live in a country, really, where we have millionaires, because you have a chance to become one. I had a chance to become one. I didn't do it, because I'm married, got thirteen

kids. That's my millionaire. But, that's how I look at life. He was the man that really put that in my mind.

Esarey: He respected **you**.

Langfelder: Oh, I hope he did.

Esarey: It sounds like it.

Langfelder: He had such an impact on me, a tremendous person.

Esarey: Huge. Thank you. What is some of the best advice you've ever been given or that you've passed on? You've given some of the best advice. Let me ask it this way. Is there something you tell your children to remember?

Langfelder: One thing I tell my children all the time is, if you can't speak the truth—my dad always said—keep your mouth shut, which I always thought was a great advice, because I lied once, and I never…I'll be honest with you, I don't think I ever lied since then. I might have twisted the truth a little, (laughs) but not intentionally lied.

Midge: You can cross your fingers.

Midge and Ossie Langfelder relax in their Springfield home, July 2012.

Langfelder: Pardon me? I don't cross my fingers. Very good, Midgie. Like I just got through saying, don't be enviable of anyone else. We all have the same opportunity. If we want to do something, you can do it. I mean, that's what's great about this country, that you can become successful.

In my own way, I think we've become…I always say we, because without Midge…We work together. I don't mean by successful, becoming a millionaire or anything like that. That to me really wasn't it. It's just—since I'm writing the book now, and when I gave you that list about it—just looking at what our children did, to me, that's just spectacular, that they've became so accomplished, because they didn't have an easy life.

It was all hand-me-down clothes and hand-me-down this. I can still see, they all went to Blessed Sacrament School, and some were smaller than

others. When one graduated, the next girl got the hand-me-down skirt. They were too long, and they used to roll them up like this. Midge made a rule, don't worry about how long they are. (laughs) They still remember those things. But, I think those were great days.

Esarey: My last question, actually, was what you were proud of, and I think you answered that. You are proud of your children and their accomplishments.

Langfelder: That's our success, I think.

Esarey: I think what we'll do is stop now.

Ossie and Midge Langfelder in a family picture with all thirteen of their children.

Ossie Langfelder at home in 2012. He passed away on October 21, 2015.

(end of transcript #3)