

NARRATOR: Rosa Kimerling (Mrs. Gaston)

I come from Vienna originally. I was born in Vienna, and I lived in New York for a short while and then I married and came here. I lived in Vienna until I was fourteen. It was a very beautiful city, and it had a nice Jewish community. It was a large Jewish community. I don't know exactly how many, but Vienna was a city of two million, and it had a sizable Jewish community. As far as I remember there were no divisions as far as Orthodox, Conservative or Reform. The synagogue itself was rather traditional. There was separate seating, if I remember correctly. Of course, there were some very small synagogues, which we did not attend. We went to synagogue. Now, traditionally, we went to synagogue Friday night--my father and my mother and the children. Saturday we went to school, public school. It was a six day week. So on Saturday we went to school, but on Saturday afternoons there were services for the young Jewish people, which were geared specifically to youth, around three o'clock. Concerning the school situation, first you went to elementary school, then gymnasium, then whatever you went on to after that. Or after the fourth grade, the decision would be made whether you wanted to go on to study or whether you wanted to go into business or more vocational type training. It was whether you went to gymnasium or whether you went to more like a high school. The parents made this decision. Now gymnasium was not free. It was a question of economics or a question of what you wanted. As far as education, I don't

know if there was a quota. Concerning Jewish learning, well, first of all in the school I don't remember whether it was twice or just once a week. I really don't recall, but we had at least one hour of religious instruction. Now the Catholics would have theirs. Someone came into the school, and the Jewish children would have someone come in to teach Hebrew, and whatever it was. Of course, it was only once a week and you don't learn very much. But then there was also Hebrew school in the afternoon for whoever was interested, and I attended that. We learned at that time modern Hebrew--actually to speak Hebrew--not the way it is taught here. We are just beginning in Birmingham to teach modern, to actually be able to speak Hebrew, which is the way I grew up, learning to speak Hebrew as a language.

I don't know what else you would like to know. Concerning jobs--I was too young; I was in school. My father was an accountant for a large corporation; my mother was a housewife. It was a lovely way of life. It was a rather gracious way of living and quiet and leisurely. Yes, we went to school and then came home for lunch. There was no question of it. My father came home for lunch for two hours, and then went back to work. Now, school also was interesting. First of all, we learned a foreign language in the...I believe it was in the third grade we started. It depended a little on the political situation, because my first language was Italian. Of course, there was great friendship between

Mussolini and Austria at the time. And then otherwise I would have preferred English or French, so I had my English afterwards and some French. And languages were definitely emphasized. We had handwork; I learned to darn socks and do needlepoint. That was in the afternoon and part of the schooling, we would have an hour of handwork. Oh, I could crochet, knit, do needlepoint, as I say, darn socks, and all that was part of the school, but none of that is particularly Jewish. I did not go to a Jewish school. Now there was a Jewish school in Vienna, just one as far as I know. It was, I imagine, the equivalent of a day school, but I don't think secular education was emphasized there that much. I just know we didn't go. Our family was very traditional. We had all the celebrations.

Q. So, you didn't get married in Austria. Why did you leave?

A. We leave because of Hitler. We left in 1940. Well, we were very fortunate; we made it. It was March of 1938 when the Germans came and occupied Austria, until 1940.

Q. Did you have any problem getting out?

A. Well, obviously we would have liked to have gotten out in 1938. Yes, it was a problem.

Q. Did you think about going to Israel?

A. We would like to go to Israel, but, if you remember, it was restricted. Everybody wanted to get out one way or another, so, if you were able to get a certificate,

the British restricted immigration into what was then Palestine. You know also that a ship with immigrants who were sent to Israel were turned back and then they were not permitted to land and they were smuggled illegally, so everybody just applied to whatever would come through first. Now I had family. Most of my mother's family, actually my great-grandparents, had already lived in the States, so I had grandparents here, and even though it was hard to get out, you know they could vouch for us an affidavit and all that. That's why we came here. But there were children's transports to England, and then I do know that some people...this was still in 1938, and I think the beginning of 1939, although everything was already extremely difficult there, there was still possibility of getting out, you know somehow, so people would...you could get to England as a domestic servant, so people would apply for that and try to learn to be domestic servants, you know, people who hadn't the slightest notion of washing a dish, but that also was very few. So we came here.

Q. Did you have any idea what America was like?

A. No, not the slightest, only from books, and they were unrealistic. We had met Americans and had some of the family visit, but Vienna was a big tourist city, and that was another thing that was emphasized in school--to be extremely polite and helpful to tourists. So we had seen some Americans, of course. We didn't go to movies; it was perhaps once a year, as children, if there was a Shirley Temple movie,

of a Mickey Mouse thing. It really was very rarely, children only went to children's performances, either the theater or the movie if it was something special. So I had some idea, but when you're that young, you really don't know.

Q. Did you speak English when you came over here?

A. Well, yes, I spoke English to some extent. I could make myself understood. But I came to Brooklyn, and I went to school, started school, and my accent...now, of course, it's no problem. There's so many accents, and there is so much traveling, and with foreign movies and foreign movie stars, it's really not bad at all. But at the time, I had learned to speak the way I speak now, and if you can imagine, in Brooklyn, being asked what time it is and saying it's half after six (in school), and being laughed at--I didn't speak for another six months. I went to grade school, elementary, etc., and college. I lived in New York for about five years, and my grandparents were there. I met my husband in New York; he was a Birmingham native, and we decided to get married. We came to Birmingham.

Q. How did you feel in New York? Did you feel like an immigrant? Did you feel accepted, etc.?

A. Well, don't forget I came at a very awkward age anyway. And New York was by no means what it is now, and I wasn't used to the way of life. Actually, of course, I came to Birmingham thirty years ago. The way of life here in Birmingham was more like what I had been used to in Vienna

during the good times, you know. I am not talking about the years during German occupation. So, as far as New York was concerned, the way people behaved and the people spoke, and all...after a while, of course, I understood that it's all a question of, it's all just on the surface. But it was hard to get used to, and then people at that time, again, people didn't travel. Americans didn't travel very much, except a certain group, which I did not come into. So, most people, or many people, whom I met, who had come from Europe at the turn of the century or let's say around 1910 or something like that, from small towns in Europe, remembered Europe completely different. They would ask the strangest questions. Most of the time I didn't know what they meant, because Vienna was a world capital at the time. So they would ask me if I'd ever seen a banana, if I'd ever seen an airplane. It was very strange, and at the time, I can't remember, it was not a question of putting out the red carpet for the refugees. Now some people, and our family was just lovely, but generally I don't think people put themselves out as much for refugees then as much as they do now. And also I think it was economical. I'm trying to think, not so much of myself as of people a little older, who had to make a living. Economically, there was a depression, not the one in 1929, but it was very difficult. So, life was just completely different; life was not a European way of life at that time. Now they are getting

closer together, but at that time it was just an enormous gulf.

Q. Did your parents remain in New York?

A. My father had come to the States earlier and then my mother came a year later, and then my father died and my mother remained in New York and my grandparents and my sister.

Q. Describe what it was like when you came to Birmingham. Did you like Birmingham?

A. Yes and no. I came into a very lovely family, into a large family, so I was not really alone. It was not as though I had to make my way alone socially right to begin with. Of course, I had friends who were not friends with the rest of the family, but, nevertheless, I did not step into a vacuum. So I think I was very fortunate, because I see people now who come, you know, sometimes you make friends, and sometimes it's very hard. So that part was very good. I was just out of school and thirty years ago, not only out of school, but in New York. And we were very much aware, we were out to save the world--that was that generation. And then I came to Birmingham, and nobody cared. My generation at that time were the kids who were just in college. Very, very few were interested in any of the social problems, at least if they were, we never discussed it. We never talked about it. So, culturally, it was completely different from what I was used to. But Birmingham itself has changed within the last

ten to fifteen years unbelievably. Of course, I missed theater, concerts and I missed a museum, and I'm sure if I had been in New York I would not have gone every week. But whenever I wanted to, it was there for me. But things have just changed, and I'm trying to remember. Of course, I joined the temple here. My husband's whole family lived here, and they were Conservative. At that time, Conservative...well, my father-in-law was very observant, you know. But the Conservative temple at the time had services that were very traditional, more so than they are now.

Q. Did you find it any different, or a lot different from what you were used to?

A. Services were slightly different. As I say, I was used to a choir. And we had a very nice cantor here. I was used to that. And, of course, here services on Saturday morning are emphasized. Here they have late Friday night services, and we used to go on Friday night. But that's not what I meant when I said we went to Friday night services in Europe. I meant, not at all. There was no Friday night late services. The sundown service, the actual service before your Sabbath meal, we attended. I was used to more people in the synagogue on an ordinary Friday night than here, from Europe. But that was in the good old times, you know. I'm talking before then, and services are really essentially the same all over the world, as far as holiday or Sabbath services. If they are conducted in Hebrew, except of course Oriental Jews,

who have a slightly different way of observing the prayers, maybe they are slightly differently arranged, but otherwise, in the West, wherever you go, anybody...if we went to England or Rome, you would be familiar with the prayers in the synagogue. Now I have two children.

Q. Did you raise them differently than you were raised?

A. I think it was probably a combination, but they did get a little bit more European influence, and I can't quite tell you what I mean by it, but I think in our home we had a little more European influence than other people might. Both of them had Hebrew learning as a matter of fact my daughter lives in Israel right now. I became an American citizen in 1949. It was a little complicated. I was too old to become a citizen on my father's papers. At the time, the laws were slightly different from now, and I was too young to become one on my own, and in order to become one on my own, I had to be twenty-one years old. But then right before then I moved to Alabama and I had to be a resident here for three years. And then just before I was supposed to be sworn I had to be in the hospital with my daughter. So I didn't make it until a little bit later, I think maybe it was in 1950.