Meyer, Greta Interview

Mary Wedegaertner

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Wedegaertner: Probably to start out if you could tell me a little bit about your life in Germany, the make-up of your family, what area you came from, and when you left?

Meyer: I came from a small town near Cologoc, it’s in the industrial part of what’s West Germany now [the... fine] area which is heavy industry and my family owned a store, a men's store, and I guess we made a good living. We always had everything we needed and my parents both were in the business.

Wedegaertner: Men's clothing store?

Meyer: Yes, and I went to school to Gymnasium till that time and then I went, I stopped and we left our business because of Hitler and my parents moved to Cologoc 1937 or 38 and that was about the time when I made attempts to get out of Germany, my sister too. My sister was four years younger and she was a nurse in a children's hospital. Well, it so happens that I was at the, right age where I could get a permit, a work permit for England and someone found me a job in England, and I got out of Germany.

Wedegaertner: How old were you at this time?

Meyer: I was seventeen. So I went to England, not knowing the language as much as [    ]. I had maybe two years of English in school and there I was on my own.
Wedegaertner: Your sister was still in Germany

Meyer: My sister was in Germany and it so happens she never managed to get away. She was too old for the children’s transport that went to Israel at that time, she was too old for that, she was about fourteen, she was older than fourteen or something like that and she not old enough to get a work permit like I did. So, I managed to get out to England, to London, no to [Bornlis] which is on the south coast of England, very beautiful spot and I became a cook to a retired army officer, very nice, very fancy.

Wedegaertner: Had you done a lot of cooking at home?

Meyer: Never, never. There I was, she would come once a week, like Monday morning she would tell me the menu for the whole week and tell me exactly where was this cookbook and said, “you just go ahead”. I was treated just like a servant, no more no less, and I learned my English pretty quick with the dictionary.

Wedegaertner: You didn’t go to any formal English classes?

Meyer: Not in England. There was no time. This was the middle of when we were leaving, so but I did not to [   ]. I was, this was near Oxford, no, wait a minute, Bornlis. Well, they had a library and I went to the library there often, and in 1930 just before war broke out, the war broke out, just at the very beginning, the English rounded up all the people on the coast of England. We were enemy aliens. We were called enemy aliens. There was a little gray police book and we had to register with the police regularly and always get permission to do whatever we had to do. Well, anyway, we were all rounded up and we were sent to the Isle of Man and there were police guards and behind barbed wire which was pretty rough because there were a lot of families with small children and they separated the men and the women. It was really hard but for me I was young and it didn’t harm me. I didn’t actually suffer, but it so happened that after I had been there I really don’t quite know how long it was, six weeks or six months, but anyway, I had an invitation from the American Council General in London to come for my visa. I had applied for the visa and I had a sponsor here in the United States so I was freed. I was free to go to London and the . . .

Wedegaertner: Were you able to talk with or contact your parents before you left London?

Meyer: Well you see what happened, I had a, early in nineteen.... again, I have to get out the letter to find out exactly, early in 1940, I had a Red Cross message from my mother writes very briefly, we are all going away now and that was the last thing, I ever heard so I knew what meant.

Wedegaertner: Had they ever talked earlier before you left about trying to, the whole family trying to move somewhere or trying to leave?

Meyer: They didn’t want to move, because they never thought it was going to happen. There were many conversations, many walks we took with my uncles and with my aunts and my parents and we talked about it many times from 1933 on. We were always great at talking walks. We hated
it as children but this was when talking and when people get together to talk and at the end of
the walk on a weekend usually there was a restaurant and there was a, we get refreshments
there like some farm or something where they served refreshments. It was the only part that
appealed to us. But there was much talk, but my parents just couldn’t see to leave Germany
because first of all the language, and secondly what would they be doing? They didn’t know
anybody.

Wedegaertner: Did you have any relatives in the United States at that time?

Meyer: Just a sponsor which was a cousin of a cousin of a cousin and he was a rich man so that is how I
got sponsored here. So back in England, okay, I had my visa and my quota and it was my time to
be called but nothing happened because....

Wedegaertner: Did you have to stay on the Isle of Man?

Meyer: I stayed on, no I was free. I was free. Then I stayed in London from then on, I stayed in London,
but there was no way at that time that you could. There were no ships available. The ships were
all military and no civilian could go across the water so then I lived in London during the blitz and
there was several other German girls and we were friends and we rented a boarding house we
lived in. I worked at Heinz 57 Variety.

Wedegaertner: Oh, did you.

Meyer: the factory, that was war work. All the men were gone and the women had no trouble getting
jobs so we made a livelihood and it was no problem. But it was work it wasn’t very much fun,
and England I never did feel comfortable. I was just there on the way to somewhere else. I was a
foreigner to the British we were foreigners.

Wedegaertner: I have another question about the Isle of Man. You were put there and segregated but it
wasn’t like the concentration camps or anything was it?

Meyer: Well it was a very [    ].

Wedegaertner: I’m not familiar with that at all.

Meyer: It was pretty much regimented. It was a huge, it was a resort and there was this huge hotel. I
don’t know how many stories high it was, but this is where we stayed. We had hotel rooms and
regular meals, but there was always these guards, but I really don’t remember too much about
that. I wasn’t maltreated or anything like that. No, they didn’t do anything. They just kept us
behind barbed wire. We had no freedom, but there were enough people there though you had
good conversations. There were books but I guess I wasn’t there too long because I just don’t
remember that much about it. It is the hardship of the families that were separated, this really
was the worst part about it. When I was in England and London and I worked at the Heinz
factory. Gee whiz, the stink and the smell was something [    ] I decided to and then in 1933, I
met my husband and we got married, and then we moved away from London. We moved to Oxford, a little place near Oxford and that was beautiful.

Wedegaertner: Why was it you didn’t leave immediately if you had a sponsor and your visa?

Meyer: There was no transportation.

Wedegaertner: Oh, that’s right you told me that, sorry, you told me that.

Meyer: Where we were, we got married and we stayed, we lived in a little place in the country, oh about sixty miles from Oxford from London. My husband worked on a farm and I worked again in some kind of a factory. It was very nice, but we were just waiting to hear and to get out of this because we were just foreigners. We were enemy aliens.

Wedegaertner: He was German also and yeh...

Meyer: He came from the same place I come from.

Wedegaertner: Did he come over to England before you did or . . .

Meyer: No, they sent him to Canada. He was in England, but instead of sending him to Isle of Man they sent him to Canada. He was also an enemy alien. So then eventually he got a telegram one day that there were some cancellations and do we want them or don’t want them. The boat was leaving within twenty-four hours. Of course, we wanted those cancellations, which turned out to be first class too. We had no choice so we packed in a great hurry and most of the things we owned we sold, got rid of it because we just didn’t have the money to transport so we got on that ship and that was our beginning, it was.

Wedegaertner: Did you enjoy the trip over?

Meyer: It was beautiful. It was a Dutch liner and it was just fancy, and England was very rationed. It was very restricted during the war. This was after the war. This was 1947 of course, but even after the war, we’re in 1947 now, even after the war things were pretty much scarce. So, then we arrived in New York and we were met by the wife of the sponsor. It was very nice to have her meet us in New York harbor and they had found, and they had rented a hotel room for us and we were in New York there and the weather was, it hit us right away, the humidity and the heat, it just hit us. You know what it’s like and England it is cool. We were used to cool weather. I mean it never gets as hot as this here, so that was our first impression, this heat, this oppressive climate. We didn’t like it that much. We wanted to get out as fast as possible and they kept on telling us we should, we would find as a job as a catskills, as what do you call it, the name for this, as [cattle].

Wedegaertner: Oh, house caretakers?

Meyer: To work in a hotel as a married couple, Whoo Who, so were really mad because we didn’t want to do that. So anyway, they were anxious to help us, but we didn’t care for that kind of help.
Anyway, we stayed in New York for a couple of days. I had a cousin in Baltimore, we grew up together, we were very close. Well he came to Baltimore. He left Germany a little earlier than I did, and he was lucky he got to go. His quota and everything worked out. This was before the war. He was in New York. He was in the United States and he made a living in Baltimore. He was married by then. And of course, we went to see him and from then on, he helped us to get located in Baltimore. But that was the early summer then and pretty soon it got so hot. We did find jobs, the both of us, menial you know, simple jobs, but enough to make a living but we couldn’t stand the heat. It was just too much so we had a friend here in Stockton who had lived in England whom we know from Germany. He had lived in England the same place we had lived so, we kept in touch. He had left about a month before we did, and he had a sister here in Stockton, so he went to Stockton. So, we wrote to him from Baltimore and he would write to us that it got hot in Stockton but at night it’s always cool so that was enough. We just went. So, we had enough for a plane ticket to come over to Stockton and that was the story.

Wedegaertner: Where did you first live then when you got to Stockton?

Meyer: Milner Hotel. You know the Milner Hotel on Main Street.

Wedegaertner: No, I don’t know which one it is, but . . .

Meyer: On South Main street.

Wedegaertner: It’s still there?

Meyer: It’s still there! It’s incredible, but of course that was almost thirty years ago, 1947-1977, so it’s more than thirty years ago, about thirty-five years ago. Then Main street was Main street. There was nothing else. That was Stockton. And we found jobs before we had a place to live. We lived in the Milner Hotel, but while we were still living there, we only lived there for a few days before we found a room in a boarding house, well we had jobs.

Wedegaertner: What were your first jobs?

Meyer: So Katten Marengo used to be downtown and he got a job right away as a shoe salesman and I got a job selling hose, at Katten Marengo’s. Then I went to Humphrey’s College to take some courses and after I graduated from that I got a job at the Stockton Record and I worked there until Veronica was born. That was in 1953.

Wedegaertner: What part of the Record did you work for?

Meyer: I work. I was a cashier. It was a very nice job.

Wedegaertner: And your husband remained at Katten Marengos?
Meyer: Yeah. He worked there for a long time and then he worked as an accountant somewhere else till he finally went to Tillie Lewis or whatever it used to be called, Flotill, and he worked there for thirty years till he retired.

Wedegaertner: Were there any things those first few weeks or months that you were really disappointed with here in Stockton?


Wedegaertner: Completely satisfied, huh

Meyer: It was just marvelous from where we came from. Everything we did and we tried to do Mary, everything worked out.

Wedegaertner: That’s great!

Meyer: You know, our goals weren’t that high, but everything we did we’ve been very lucky.

Wedegaertner: Did you associate yourself with the Temple very quickly after you became here?

Meyer: We became members. We’ve been members but we’ve never been active, really.

Wedegaertner: There are two Temples in town aren’t there?

Meyer: Yeah. One is Orthodox and one is Reformed.

Wedegaertner: And you were with the reformed?

Meyer: Yeah.

Wedegaertner: Which is which one, Beth . . .

Meyer: Rabbi Rosenberg. Temple Israel.

Wedegaertner: I couldn’t remember the name of it. And I don’t know how many children you have.

Meyer: One.

Wedegaertner: Veronica?

Meyer: One girl. She was born in 53, she is twenty-seven years old.

Wedegaertner: Where did you move after . . . You said you moved into a boarding house? Where you there very long?

Meyer: No, then we found an apartment and that was . . . Are you a Stocktonian?

Wedegaertner: No, we’ve been here for sixteen years.
Meyer: You know the old post office. There’s a park downtown. Well, there’s a little park there. Opposite the post office on the other side of that little park there is an apartment house and you see this was after the war and there was no building and there was all these people who didn’t know where to live and it was very difficult to find anything, but we were lucky. Somebody somehow found for us and had connections that he got this apartment on the top floor looking down on the park. It was heaven! There was a door we could shut and our own bathroom and our own kitchen even. It was old but it was our own. It was the first step up. Well pretty soon we decided we wanted to get something bigger but anything bigger would have been like seventy-five dollars and we decided that we weren’t going to pay seventy-five dollars for rent so, at that time, I mean this was way back when you got sixty-five cents an hour or something. I decided, we decided, Fred reluctantly, that we would look at what people are building and where they are building. Let’s look at some of the areas where they are going to build some houses that we can afford. We had some friends who were doing the same thing. They were Americans but they were doing the same so we went out on West Monterey, the other side of the railroad tracks. It was all mustard fields; yellow mustard field and they had staked out the streets and staked out the lots where they were going to build.

Wedegaertner: Is that East or West of El Dorado?

Meyer: West. West Monterey, way out. You know where Alpine is? Way out by Webster school, east of Webster school. They told me going to be a school too, but there was nothing there, just mustard fields. So, we decided then and there on the lot. We decided to get one and we built. We made up our own floor plans and [all those things like that.]

Wedegaertner: That’s exciting to do that.

Meyer: It was in 1951. The hardest thing was to deal with the real estate man. For me it wasn’t so difficult, but for Fred to sign on the dotted line that we are going to owe X amount of dollars over twenty years. He just had the most restless night that night after he signed it, because for us, coming from Europe, why. You just didn’t do that. You save money then you bought. So, this was a completely...

Wedegaertner: Did your family own your own home in Europe or in Germany?

Meyer: No, we had an apartment.

Wedegaertner: An apartment.

Meyer: So that was a big step. At that time, I worked, of course we both had jobs at the time and we were secure.

Wedegaertner: You worked all the time when your daughter was young?
Meyer: No. I worked before she was born. See in 1947 we got here and in 1951 she was born, 51, 56, 51 we bought the house and in 56 she was born. Well, I worked all that time and I worked at the Record until about a month before she was born. And then I stayed home and I stayed home till she went to first grade and I had one year where I had my friends and we played bridge and we took flower arranging and we had lunches together. After one year I said, “Oh no, that’s enough.”

Wedegaertner: I can remember that year too when the kids were about that age.

Meyer: You had a year like that too?

Wedegaertner: Yeah.

Meyer: And I went through the same that you’ve gone through I’m sure. I talked to a counselor at Delta, a Dr. Green. I don’t know whether he is still alive or not and he wrote down and he said, “Look here,” I was at that time thirty-five years old I think or thirty-four, you have said what way you wish to go; it takes you this long for your education, you have that many years to teach, and he figured it all out a line, on a line and it made sense to me, so I went back to Delta and I had a ball, just like you had the same . . . you know the feeling.

Wedegaertner: Right.

Meyer: That was a great time.

Wedegaertner: Did you go to U.O.P. after that?

Meyer: Oh yeah. I graduated from U.O.P. I had two years at Delta and three years at U.O.P. Then I walked into the job at Lincoln.

Wedegaertner: I was going to say, did you so straight to that job?

Meyer: Straight to that job! I never looked for a job in my life.

Wedegaertner: That was the first time or did you not even have to . . . That sort of came to you.

Meyer: It was just fortunate. If circumstances would have been different I never would have gotten a teaching job, a German teacher, never. I’ll never forget the education when my advisor for education said, “Where do you think you’ll get a job teaching German as a major,” so he advised me take a major in-home economics which I did and of course which I never taught.

Wedegaertner: Did you find when you first came to Stockton, I would gather you didn’t from things you said, but any discrimination against either of you as far as employment or anything?

Meyer: No. Never. But of course, when you’re white you don’t really have . . . Oh, you mean as a woman?
Wedegaertner: Well, I was thinking first as being German or Jewish or anything like that, but then as a woman, right. I’d like to know if you found any discrimination in that way either.

Meyer: Uh, really, the kind of jobs I had I really don’t know. There were no men interested in the kind of things I was doing, but personally I have never encountered any discrimination of any kind. I have known discrimination in Germany being a Jew. We were in a small place. The place we grew up in was small, like 35,000 people and everybody knew us and everybody called us names. I mean not everybody, just people who were so inclined, but we grew up with this and we just lived with that.

Wedegaertner: Did you go to your own schools or were you with the other?

Meyer: No. Oh no. We went to the regular schools and they taught religion there and I remember when I was little and everybody goes to elementary school for four years, everybody. This is actually called community public school, the first four years. I stayed there, this religion is taught in school and I stayed for the religious service and I really enjoyed singing all these Christmas songs. They were pretty. There was no conflict really. Then at the Gymnasium level there was Catholic and there were Protestant and there were Jewish, and we would have separate instruction. We would to the Rabbi. That was our religious instruction, the Rabbi, rather than going to the other schools. But sure, at that time, the Hitler youth, everybody joined the Hitler Youth and we were outside of it. We were not part of it. Anybody who had anything to do with Jews they took a great chance. We were well aware of this. I had friends but it was not a very nice situation so . . . But that’s so far away and . . . We had our own friends, our own Jewish friends so really it didn’t matter. And our families are pretty close.

Wedegaertner: Back in Germany you mean?

Meyer: Yeah. We were a close family so . . . and friends, so this is the way we grew up and we adjusted to it.

Wedegaertner: When you were here in Stockton where did you meet most of your friends? In different organizations through work or neighbors or . . . the ones you were closest to?

Meyer: Neighbors and at work. I’m not an organization person really. But then after work there was never very much time. There wasn’t too much time and we didn’t really meet too many people aside from neighbors and people at work till much later when there was more leisure and we had more time and we didn’t have to struggle so. But we never suffered. We never really thought we were struggling.

Wedegaertner: Its sounds like you had the full support of your husband in whatever you chose to do.

Meyer: Oh yeah. There was no problem. I’ve never had to get liberated! There was never a problem.

Wedegaertner: You always felt that you had freedom.
Meyer: Yeah. And once I went back to Delta he totally cooperated. Even when I talk to Veronica now and say, “Do you feel that sometimes I neglected you?”, she says, “Oh no, no.” Then years ago, exactly ten years ago the two of us, Veronica and I went to Germany for the first time. I wasn’t ready to go back. I didn’t ever feel that I wanted to go back, but ten years ago in 1970 before she graduated, at the end of her junior year, we went to Germany together. It was very exciting and I felt that if we don’t do it then, later on she doesn’t want to go any more you know. They want to be independent and they don’t care to . . . Well anyway we went together and I took her . . . We went all over Europe and I took her particularly to where I come from and it was so depressing. That place had been totally bombed, all around there and his little community, well it wasn’t that little, it was thirty-five thousand people that had been damaged and they still had things popping up, walls that had . . . In other words, it had never been renovated or redone or anything. There were places up to keep things from coming down and there was just no people of which I was glad because I really didn’t want to meet anybody I’d ever known.

Wedegaertner: That’s what I was going to ask you if you knew anyone there still or not?

Meyer: I didn’t want to meet anybody and I didn’t, but since then I have met several. We are friends with several German people who we met since.

Wedegaertner: That had come from that same area or . . . ?

Meyer: No. From Germany. We have several couples that we are very good friends with.

Wedegaertner: Did you find yourself when Veronica was young or when it was just you and our husband, carrying on a lot of customs or traditions that your family had at home?

Meyer: I tell you, just like with the language Mary, we just wanted to forget it all.

Wedegaertner: I can understand that.

Meyer: We wanted to absorb this environment . . .

Wedegaertner: And become fully as . . .

Meyer: as promptly as . . . No, we didn’t realize this consciously, it was so happened. We didn’t talk German and we just integrated very fast. Of course, my ascent will always be there, but what I mean is . . . no, we didn’t keep up any traditional things at all.

Wedegaertner: Not as far as, even like any holiday baking or anything?

Meyer: No, my mother was not that kind of woman. She was business woman and she was not inclined to do this, so I guess you get it from your mother, whatever, and I didn’t get it and Veronica didn’t get it either because of this, but that’s okay.

Wedegaertner: And your husband didn’t have any particular traditions he tried to carry on either?
Wedegaertner: One thing that Rabbi Rosenberg mentioned . . . What he said was that you quite active in a lot of civic activities.

Meyer: Oh, since then, well yeah, I joined the AAUW for several years but I prefer to go to the League of Women Voters because I felt they were more active. I found that AAUW as more or less a fund raising thing and social institution here locally at that time. I enjoyed it because I met a lot of interesting people, but right now I’m active in the league and that’s a fantastic group. When you have time sometime you . . . they do neat things.

Wedegaertner: I read about their activities in the paper all the time.

Meyer: They’re really, I mean, everybody stands up and says straight and here you know the league you know, they are so efficient, but other than that, oh, when Veronica was small I was in Jack and Jill. I enjoyed that a great deal. That gave me a lot of insight because I really wasn’t very educated. I really didn’t know anything about psychology at that time. I was England we just didn’t do much reading other than . . . Well, there was no time and you don’t read a lot if you don’t know the language. In England it was simply a matter of survival in learning the language. That’s how I considered it. And once we’re here again it was a matter of survival and once I got to Delta though of course then it was different. It was just marvelous.

Wedegaertner: It must have been very exciting.

Meyer: Very exciting. And I had some outstanding professors there. They’re not there anymore now, but they introduced me to some marvelous things. Well you’re going through the same thing.

Wedegaertner: I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of taking courses. There’s always something more interesting that I haven’t had. Where does your daughter live? Here in town?

Meyer: Here in Stockton, yeah.

Wedegaertner: It’s nice to have her close by.

Meyer: Yes. It’s very nice.

Wedegaertner: Is she married?

Meyer: Yes.

Wedegaertner: Do you have any grandchildren: Not yet huh?

Meyer: No, they’re not interested. They’re not talking about children at all. They have their own ideas and I certainly. . . I’m not anxious at all because it’s too dim. It’s a very dim future.

Wedegaertner: Is she employed here in town then?
Meyer: Well, she was employed at Tillie Lewis Foods as a supervisor, but they cut down and sold half of their canneries and they laid off a lot of people. They’re just slowly going out of business. So since then she has been very happy just being home, gardening, and doing things that she likes to do and she’s never had a vacation in her life just you know, going through school. She graduated from Davis and she started a job right away so she’s never had a vacation. It’s been about six or seven months now that she’s been off. So, she’s not in a hurry. He makes enough money for both of them. Eventually she’ll feel like I do, that she’s got to get to get out and do things. She’s not a homebody either.

Wedegaertner: What type of hobbies or activities do you like?

Meyer: Travel. I also like gardening especially when I can just sit and water it. I have a nice yard. I like sewing and reading and I like to listen to music. Crocheting, and needlework when I feel like it, that comes in spurts.

Wedegaertner: Can you do that when you’re traveling or . . . ?

Meyer: No, I’m not compulsive about it. I have spells when I feel that I want to some needlework but it comes and goes.

Wedegaertner: I’ve found that so far, I’ve been able to read or embroider or something like that when we’re traveling. It makes the time go. . . .

Meyer: In the car?

Wedegaertner: Uh huh.

Meyer: I can’t do that. Hobbies, well, at this point I don’t want to be too active again. Swimming every morning is a great activity for me.

Wedegaertner: That’s what, two or three hours a day?

Meyer: It’s all morning. It starts at ten but it takes me all morning to get ready which is nice because I’ve been getting up at five thirty all year. Five thirty in the morning. It’s too much. So, I really enjoy doing what I want to do.

Wedegaertner: Did you find that your father was the one that set the principles or told you what to do or your mother?

Meyer: My mother was . . .

Wedegaertner: Did she also hold the purse strings?

Meyer: No. But I really don’t know. We never talked about money. The funny thing is we don’t talk about money here either. Neither does Veronica.

Wedegaertner: That’s one thing you’ve carried over huh?
Meyer: Yeah. And she handles money pretty much the way we did and we talked about it the other day and I said, “Well, Veronica it’s because you’re used to it,” and she said, “No, it’s not because of that.” She doesn’t see it of course, but she has pretty much the same values.

Wedegaertner: As far as disciplining Veronica when she was little, did you and your husband take pretty much of an equal part.

Meyer: No. He had no part in at all.

Wedegaertner: He had no part?

Meyer: Like any Americans, no.

Wedegaertner: Mainly because he just left it to you or his hours just didn’t allow for it?

Meyer: He wasn’t there. Well, yes hours, like any other father who is gone all day, but there was never any problems that I can think of. Oh, and I was saying to her at lunch the other day, “It’s ten years since we went to Europe together,” and she said, “Yeah, I know.” and I said, “Often I have the feeling, (she’s not interested in traveling at all) that I spoiled it for you. That trip to Europe really spoiled it for the rest or your life.” She said, “Why, mother?” I said, “Because we went so fast.” We had a Eurail pass, you know this Eurail pass, and because of this you feel you have to keep on the go, and I said, “I had been dragging you along.” She said, “No, you haven’t. I enjoyed that.”

Wedegaertner: Did she show a lot of interest when you were in your old area. Did she have a lot of questions?

Meyer: Oh yea. She was quite interested and wanted to see it. But of course, there was nothing left and it was a terrible place to show a child that that’s where I lived, because it was all boarded up and miserable looking. The place had two outstanding things. One, they had coal mines. There were a half dozen coal mines around the community and the other thing was the breweries.

Wedegaertner: Breweries, huh? When you went back? Or when you were a child?

Meyer: This was the way people made their living, either in the coal mines or in the breweries. And if you didn’t get the coal dust you got the smell of the brewery. It really was a terrible place.

Wedegaertner: This was when you were growing up or when you returned?

Meyer: No, when I was growing up. But at the time it didn’t bother us. I mean, there was a lot of dusting to do. The windows were black every day, but other than that you walked for ten minutes and you were out in the country where it was green and nice. But pollution wise we grew up with it. We didn’t realize it was there.
Wedegaertner: What do you think your father’s attitudes towards, your mother’s too toward your going on to school or to work something like that. I assume since she as a businesswoman . . . Well your sister was working.

Meyer: My sister, she was learning to be a nurse. For me, you see we had no control over what was going to happen to our lives.

Wedegaertner: Right. So, it was hard to think of the future.

Meyer: But she did insist that I learn something to do with my hands, so I could always make a living. That was her one thing and I learned to be a milliner, you know, making women’s hats? I was an apprentice for three years to learn to make hats.

Wedegaertner: What, when you were fourteen or fifteen?

Meyer: Yes, something like that, but for three years I was making those hats. That was important, that I knew something that I could earn a living with, but beyond this of course, perhaps you know that no Jews could go to universities in Germany. That was out. So, there was no future and it must have been very depressing to them. We didn’t realize it at the time. I didn’t realize it, but it must have been very tough. But they knew this since 1933. Well before, before 1933, it was always, “No, Hitler, it will never happen, it will never happen.” I can hear that so clearly now. “It will never happen.”

Wedegaertner: Did you ever try when you came over here to look for work in the millinery trade?

Meyer: Never!

Wedegaertner: You didn’t like it that well?

Meyer: It was easy to find a job because, I don’t know, I had no problems.

Wedegaertner: Sounds like things went pretty smoothly for you once you got over here.

Meyer: And we didn’t expect too much. We really never had any problems. When I think of it, when I think how smoothly everything went for whatever reason. We never had anybody helping us, never did we need anybody’s help. So . . .

Wedegaertner: How long was it before you become U.S. citizens?

Meyer: Five minutes! Five years. I mean we did it as soon as we could. Oh, we went to night school of course. It was very important to us. 52, 53, I guess.

Wedegaertner: I think I’ll stop this for just a minute. Would you mind repeating what you said? That you felt there were certain things wrong with the country.

Meyer: Oh, first of all I love this country and I love it like it’s my own, like it’s my country and I feel that if I had been a different color that our lives would not have been as smooth and something has
to change, because why should I be so lucky to make a life here so smoothly and other people who were even born here have such a hard time. So, this is something that we all have to work on and it’s not all right. There are a lot of things that are wrong. We know it and we don’t do anything about it.

Wedegaertner: Are there some particular government programs and things that you are really against or that you are really for?

Meyer: Against? Oh, I’m against the money we spend for the military. Oh yes, I’m all against that. I’m against our kind of diplomacy, which really is politics not diplomacy. Europeans have statesman. We don’t have any statesmen. We have politicians who work as diplomats which is a sad, sad situation. Rather than trying to smooth things out they threaten each other with a mightier military. This is scary.

Wedegaertner: I agree with that.

Meyer: That’s how you became so powerful and it could happen here. If we don’t look out for our freedoms people will give them away. Our voting system it’s democratic but it’s something very wrong.

Wedegaertner: We just don’t appreciate our freedoms enough. We have some friends from Chili and he was just telling my husband over the weekend the things they had to go through down there in the takeover by the government and . . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

Meyer: I don’t know if it would have made any difference because Hitler so cleverly organized his organization and had all the children behind him. The children, what do you say, that the children told on their parents. If the parents made remarks in their house conversation wise the children would get rewards for telling to their whoever their leader in the Hitler youth about them and just horrible things happened. This way they became powerful. They scared people with these kinds of strategies. So no, this is what dictatorship is all about and we really have to be very careful. Freedom of the press is something that . . . I feel very strongly about this even though sometimes I think the press needs to be kicked in the someplace because they’re just too arrogant. On the other hand, if they were not the ones to bring things to light you wouldn’t know about them. You wouldn’t know about Watergate and many other things. So, it’s important to have freedom.

Wedegaertner: One thing we might touch upon, and maybe you have, but what was your greatest satisfaction as a mother?

Meyer: That she turned out the way we expected her to, really. She’s a nice kid. She never got into trouble. She did all the right things.
Wedegaertner: Where there any problems as far as . . . since she was Jewish did you particularly want her to marry a Jewish boy?

Meyer: It didn’t make any difference.

Wedegaertner: You didn’t have any strong feelings?

Meyer: She went to Sunday School but after Sunday School that was all for her. She wasn’t interested. She’s pretty much like I am and even now we go to Temple very very rarely and even though she got married in the Temple she is not that interested, but there are some other things in this regard that are too long to talk about. She married a Lutheran boy. Most of her friends are not Jewish. All of her friends are not Jewish. She did have a roommate and it so happens that she was Jewish, but other than that . . .

Wedegaertner: Would you say that the majority of your friends are not Jewish also?

Meyer: Yeah, I would say that. I have some good Jewish friends, but I don’t, it doesn’t make any difference to me, but I don’t need them because well, that’s something else.

Wedegaertner: When she was dating did, she have any particular problems as far as her Independence?

Meyer: No, I was very anxious . . . she dated for five years the same guy. I just wished she would find . . . while she was at Davis, she would come home just to see this boyfriend and I was wished she would have met some other men before . . . but this is not the guy she married.

Wedegaertner: She did finally find somebody else.

Meyer: She found somebody else, but I wish she would have given herself a chance to . . . she’s not a social butterfly. When she went to Davis she studied and she came home to date. But ahh . . ., now she’s been a neat person. The thing, anything that with Veronica the only thing I often think about is that she is so independent that I wish she wasn’t, you know, that she would come to me for advice which she doesn’t ever have to.

Wedegaertner: How about when she was growing up. Did you, was it easy for her to communicate or . . .

Meyer: No problem. At least I don’t think so. She was an easy child but I guess I was an easy mother too. I don’t know. She never asked for many things. She never did anything that was wrong.

Wedegaertner: That makes it a little easier to have a child like that.

Meyer: When she grew up, we did a lot of things together. I spent all my time with her and this neighborhood had all these many kids. It was really nice.

Wedegaertner: Yet you don’t feel do you that you let your own interest go at her . . .

Meyer: I had no interests at that time. I had none. You see I was perfectly happy.
Wedegaertner: That was your life at that time?

Meyer: I was perfectly happy. We’re been in this house that long. Veronica was two years old when we moved into this house so I had a good time.

Wedegaertner: Was this a brand-new house when you moved into it?

Meyer: It was six months old. So, I felt very fulfilled and really when I think of how ignorant I was. I didn’t know about anything. I had no point of view. Nothing at that time. That came going back to Delta. It was really just living that took all that energy and I enjoyed it at that time. But then once I got to Delta I realized how much there is to know.

Wedegaertner: Can you think of any events or happenings in Stockton that might have affected your family in any way? I know back of course there were floods and lots of fires and things. [ ] something that come to mind.

Meyer: Nothing exciting has happened to us. No, you see since we are so secure and we have lived in this house for so long everything goes its happy way. It’s a strange thing Mary. We are very...things go very smooth and I find it’s the same with Veronica. No ups and downs. Things go very smoothly, maybe boring for some people, but I find it very secure. It’s kind of a nice feeling. There’s no anxiety. There’s no need.

Wedegaertner: What about major things like say the Vietnam War or things like that.

Meyer: Oh, I was very involved in this. Let me tell you a story. I was teaching them. I was at Lincoln then. In 1967 I started teaching there, and the Vietnam War was in 1968 or 1969 and I belonged to this group that was called War is Not Healthy for Plants and Other Living Things – Mother’s for Peace. So, I had this little thing and I hung it on a chain around my neck and it was just very unpopular to be against the war in those years. I’ll never forget that I came to class on morning and this student, his name is Jeff, I remember this, and he said, “Frau Meyer is a Hippei!” I’ll never forget that!

Wedegaertner: This was a necklace or was it a larger . . .

Meyer: No, it had an emblem on it. It was square gold with . . .

Wedegaertner: Right. I’ve seen those.

Meyer: It had the words “War is not healthy for plants and other living things” on it. No, I was very strongly against it and I didn’t mind saying so.

Wedegaertner: So, he didn’t have any family here that was affected by it. Did you have any friends who lost their . . .

Meyer: No, but there were students. I remember very well at school the students were very involved in this, and my students too. I remember they had butcher paper and they had all these names
signed on butcher paper with the sentiment against the war and sending this to the President with all these signatures on it. This was Lincoln High. So . . . well really this . . . as Americans we have been very lucky. Well some of us have been affected of course. A lot of people have lost their lives but most of us have been pretty lucky about this. Well I am very concerned about this situation. It’s getting worse. I can see it getting worst and there is no one person who is really big enough to get them all together and see reason. All these people who are making these decisions for us without us being able to do anything about it. It’s our money. That’s something else. I am ready for anybody who will start working on tax reform. I’m ready to join them, where we will stop spending taxes on foolish things and the military is one of them. We have such horrible weapons. If somebody makes the wrong move, we all we’re had it.

Wedegaertner: There were those two articles in the paper a couple of weeks ago about the Malfunctioning of those . . .

Meyer: And the stupid excuses! It shouldn’t even have to come that far. There should be communication which we used to have. We used to have a hotline with Russia, but we don’t have that anymore, I guess. Are you concerned? Are you in anyway . . .? Do you write letters to your legislators or to Washington?

Wedegaertner: No, I’ll have to admit that I don’t. My husband might about it sometimes who especially said I should do this you know.

Meyer: Postcards. Postcards, that’s all you need to know.

Wedegaertner: It’s not that difficult I know. It’s just . . .

Meyer: No, just have a bunch of postcards ready and whenever you’re concerned about something let them know.

Wedegaertner: You should just have them addressed ahead of time of time and just sitting there ready for you to . . .

Meyer: Let them know. Oh, I’ve done a lot of this, but after a while you give up. You think there are some younger people who have this energy to do this. No, but I’ll be ready to be an activist if it’s a matter of peace. I’ll do anything.

Wedegaertner: I think I could be a lot more of an activist than I am at the moment.

Meyer: Oh no, I’m an activist. I am, from way back. I remember one time, in 1967 . . . These were interesting years for me too became in the summer I took seminars and there was this one seminar that was special. It was the nature of prejudice. There were several different professors. There was a Black man, he’s there now. What’s his name . . . a tall man. He teaches there now, Black History at UOP.

Wedegaertner: Ealy? Do you mean Professor Ealy?
Meyer: Yes. He was one of them. Another one was a man who was a professor from Canada and he was an activist and he came for the summer to teach this class. And he drove through Stockton on day and he said, “You have dead people walking through your streets. What are you doing with your old people? Why don’t you take care of your old people?” And there was a city council meeting and he protested and he gave a speech. Then one young man was arrested for some reason, which wasn’t really a reason, just because he was Black, and he went to the City Hall, to the City’s Manager’s door and he pushed the door open and it was glass door, this was just for effect. He pushed the door open because he had difficulty with it. They wouldn’t let him in so he pushed the door and the city manager pushed the buzzer for the policy department so the police came and picked him up and put him in jail. But he was just demonstrating this police kind of thing, and what Stockton needs and of course he got a lot of publicity. Then in class we talked about this whole incident. It was a racial incident. I’m not quite sure what happen. It was a racial incident and somebody had been maltreated by the police and this professor was trying to make a point. So, it was a long story. It was an exciting summer that summer. A group was born called, no Women’s Power, Women for Power or Women of Power. And he said, to us, “You’re White, middle classed people. You are the lease vulnerable. You can go to the policy and tell them anything.” They would never touch us.

Wedegaertner: Did you say this group was organized that summer?

Meyer: Yes, that group was organized.

Wedegaertner: Were you part of this group?

Meyer: Oh sure. I was part of it, and a lot of other people too.

Wedegaertner: It’s not going on still is it?

Meyer: But these people who were part of it are still in the community and very well known. It was a revelation I really enjoyed it.

Wedegaertner: You were mentioning about the old people and that reminded me of something that I wanted to ask you about and that is what your feelings are and your daughter’s feeling about you and your husband eventually living with your daughter when you are old or something like that?

Meyer: NEVER!!! We’ve never talked about that.

Wedegaertner: Or what about going to a retirement home or what are your plans in the far, far future.

Meyer: If for some reason I can’t live in this house anymore because I’m sick I really don’t want to live. If I can’t look after myself and I think everybody has the same idea, I don’t think life is worth living. I don’t want anybody else to have to look after me. I have a friend. Her name is Meyer too, Martha Meyer. She’s eighty-three and she lives by herself and she is the most active person you can ever imagine. She’s got aches and pains but she gets around. She drives.
Wedegaertner: Well there are those like yourself and like Martha but there are others who at a certain point one want to do away with responsibilities of a house and go into a retirement home.

Meyer: No. No. If that’s what I need then . . . Now we’ve never talked about this with Veronica, ever, so maybe . . .

Wedegaertner: Of course, there’s a big difference between like a convalescent home where you need to be cared for and like a senior citizens’ community or a village or something, but that still has no appeal for you?

Meyer: I think that’s awful too.

Wedegaertner: You’re a lot like my husband’s mother then, his mother just couldn’t stand anything like that.

Meyer: No, I’m not prejudiced against old people but I need young people. I need all kinds of people. I don’t want to be put in a category. As long as I’m active . . . Once I cannot be active anymore, one I am helpless . . . I don’t want to think about it. Do you think about it?

Wedegaertner: I’ve thought about it and I have very mixed feelings because . . .

Meyer: Of course, it’s a long way off for you.

Wedegaertner: I love my home and you know, I’m so content there I would hate the thought of giving it up, but then I keep thinking well, it would be a lot of fun to be around a lot of other people too, so, I have very mixed feelings about it.

Meyer: No, I think . . .

Wedegaertner: Still, as long as you’re healthy you can be around then you know playing golf and doing the other activities with them and things. Maybe especially if I was alone, but I don’t know. I don’t think my husband and I would both want to go to a retirement village or something like that, but if I were alone I might. I have thought I might like to do something like that, but still I don’t like the thought of giving my home up either.

Meyer: No, as long as I am healthy . . . No. No. But as far as talking with Veronica and Bill about it we never have. We just feel it’s still so far away and . . .

Wedegaertner: Did you ever have any of your grandparents living with you in your home?

Meyer: I never knew any grandparents.

Wedegaertner: Because sometimes people feel this is such an advantage having a grandparent living in the home for the children to listen to the stories they have to tell and to really learn a lot from them sometimes.
Meyer: Well, but this was the old days when houses were also equipped to . . . People lived differently, but I cannot see myself living with my daughter, no way. Nor can I imagine her living back here with me. It doesn’t work that way.

Wedegaertner: I can see even if it’s an advantage for the grandchildren and for the grandparents maybe who enjoy living with the family but it can be a hardship I think on the husband and wife of the family.

Meyer: And also, the feeling of young people towards their parents are so different than, as far as respect is concerned, it’s so different than what we used to feel about our parents. Something that sticks out of my mind is that I was brought up to be polite. When there was an older person, as a child, I opened the door and held the doors open. I helped them into their coats and whatever. I’ve done it all my life. As Veronica grew up, she saw me doing this, always. Well, as she was growing up, oh maybe she was ten or eleven years old and I said, “Veronica, it would be nice if you would help me hold that door.” “What’s wrong with you, Mother, are you sick?” I mean, what can you say? You think the children imitate you, but this happened with my daughter. I have a niece who is the exact opposite. She’s very sensitive and very helpful kind of person. Well, Veronica just isn’t. If you ask her to do anything, she will say, “Well, why don’t you ask me?” She’ll do anything, but “Ask me”.

Wedegaertner: But you’d like them to think of it on their own sometimes.

Meyer: No. Well, I feel this is probably just the way she is and I have to recognize that.

Wedegaertner: I’m sure as a teacher you can see that those qualities aren’t taught a great deal in homes anymore.

Meyer: Well, it’s not the matter of teaching it, it was just our way of life. Fred still opens the door for me. He opens the car door for me even though I have to keep my hand away from opening it myself, but even so it didn’t rub off. Other things did even though she doesn’t realize it. She is very much like I am, in many ways. Of course, I don’t mention that. She’d go away. She’d get very upset about it. So, to be like mother sometimes.

Wedegaertner: Are you looking forward to your trip this fall?

Meyer: Oh, am I looking forward! At least as much as Phil and Craig. They both have their passports. I’ve asked this now so many times.

Wedegaertner: Yes.

Meyer: Well, we have so much time yet. Is the new business [Jardin]. No.....do you know. They .......

END OF INTERVIEW