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## **German Tragedies**

Robert Nichols Remembers

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1 hour, 13 minutes, 23 seconds

Speaker: Dr. Robert Nichols

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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Time      Transcription

00:00      [The Library UC San Diego]

00:06      [German Tragedies: Robert Nichols Remembers]

00:06      Susanne Hillman: Welcome everybody. Um, I'm very pleased to see that so many of you braved the rain. I was speaking to Dr. Nichols before and we said if this was a normal region, of course, people would come anyway, uh rain, or no rain. But somebody actually called me and asked if it was still taking place, and yes. So you, you all came, that's good. Um I'm, well actually I speak loud so I don't need this. I'm very pleased and honored to welcome Dr. Robert Nichols. Uh, some years ago, maybe two years ago, when I was still working on my dissertation on modern German Jews, I came across the figure of Gustav Landauer. And the more I read, the more I realized that Gustav Landauer was a big name in Germany until 1919. He was an anarchist leader, a theorist, a poet, a writer. And then, my advisor - some of you know her, Deborah Hertz - she told me that his grandson was living in San Diego, and I thought this was very exciting. So um, I think having said this me, myself coming from a German-speaking background, I have to tell you it is, uh, a really great honor to welcome uh Landauer's grandson, Robert Nichols. So please, help me welcome him.

01:33      Dr. Robert Nichols: Well, let me also thank you for coming out in the, what passes for a storm here. Most places, a tenth of an inch of rain is not a crisis, but around here it is often. Now, I have to say when Deborah Hertz and Susanne asked me to speak at this workshop, I was very reluctant - not because it involved public speaking, because I enjoy that as much as all of you do - but in fact, I was reluctant for a more significant reason. I felt something of an imposter or uh, I felt awkward about it because we did not suffer. We got out. We were the lucky ones. Our, my entire nuclear family got out unscathed from Nazi Germany, where I was born, and I didn't want to cheapen or diminish these losses of those who suffered and died under the Nazis. And I told Susanne I would think about it. And in fact, I did think about it for about a week or ten days. And then I decided I would do it for three reasons. The first was because of the historical significance of Gustav Landauer, or my maternal grandfather and his, my maternal grandmother, his wife uh Hedwig Lachmann who, as I'll point out, was a notable poet and translator. The second reason was that in my years as a practicing physician it sounds a little Pollyannaish but in fact, I felt I learned that everybody's life story is interesting really, everybody's. And I also realized that our life story, my extended family, is perhaps a little more interesting than the average because of our, at the time in Nazi Germany, and various tragedies that occurred within the family. And the third reason and it proved to be true is, I felt that in the research that I would do for this I would learn new things about my family. And indeed, I did. Through the wonder of the internet, as I'll point out along the way, I found extraordinary things that I, I

didn't know existed. So, for those three reasons I decided I would do it, and so I will begin.

03:45 Dr. Robert Nichols: There we go. Pardon my two-diopter reading glass up here. Six dollars too, Costco. Okay, this is a picture of my lovely mother when she was, I believe, in her late 30s and the complicated name she was of course born Brigitte Claudia Landauer and her married name, for the bulk of her life with my father, was Nichols. But before that, as I'll point out, it was something else. And then after my father's death, about five years later, my mother remarried a man who later was my beloved stepfather for almost 50 years and he was a doctor Franz Hausberger and I'll mention him a little more later. Here are two pictures at different stages of his life. Oh, by the way, I didn't ask if I could be heard easily with this microphone. Uh, Gustav Landauer. He was an imposing figure. He was about six foot five. My mother said he was two meters, which would be six, seven but in an interview that I found online with her, she referred him as being six foot five. And he was very stern. He was known as a socialist, anarchist, thinker, philosopher - but more than that, he was also a very much a public intellectual, a scholar, an expert on Shakespeare, a translator from works in French and English into German. He translated works of Oscar Wilde and of Walt Whitman, who was a hero of his. In general, he wrote about politics, philosophy, and literature.

05:47 Dr. Robert Nichols: Now I've always known that he was considered an anarchist. But the flaw in my thinking was to, the modern conception of the word anarchy is more or less synonymous with chaos. So, an anarchist to me was kind of a bomb-throwing nihilist. Somebody who believed in nothing and wanted to destroy existing governmental structures, but of course, like in many things, I was completely wrong about that. Uh, to Landauer anarchy was a goal reached through the kind of a perfection or evolution of man to a point where he, he no longer needed a state, a government - beyond government. His idea was not to destroy existing governments but to, to leave them behind. He thought that man could evolve and lose that state of mind which required a state and a governmental structure, and go on to live to, what he described more or less, as a agrarian, communal society, beyond money, beyond government. That, to me, initially seemed idealistic and maybe from the viewpoint of the 21st century, naive actually, that one could achieve such a thing. But, and of course I'm simplifying greatly, his philosophy - which is very complex and beyond me really. I'm in no sense an expert on Gustav Landauer's philosophy, and uh, and I'm skating on very thin ice to to talk about it - but I think of him as a utopian philosopher. And in fact one of the biography, one of his biographers subtitled her book *Philosopher of Utopia*. He was definitely not a Marxist, and he was very anti-communist. And I came across, just within this last week, an interesting quote. He was very anti-Bolshevik and he said, that the Bolsheviks were working toward a military regime more horrible than anything the world has ever seen, and he said that like in 1918 or [19]19. So, he was pretty prescient about that.

07:49 Dr. Robert Nichols: These are just some title pages of books that I have, written by him in German, together, with a idealistic quote at the bottom of uh, pretty much what I just said. That anarchism was a goal that you that you reach through socialism. Here are two books, in English, about him one, a biography written maybe 25 or more years ago, and the other, this book I just discovered very recently and got it from Amazon. It's the first translation of Landauer's work, substantial translation of his work into English, *Revolution and Other Writings*. And it has a very brief but good biographical summary at the beginning of the book, in the introduction. One of the more interesting things I found on the internet was a lengthy interview with my mother uh, by an author of a book about anarchism and I have several screenshots. There was no way to download this from Google Books, unfortunately. So, I had to do screenshots. I was telling a friend of mine in the audience that my medical school sent me a little present after I made a contribution this past, a few months ago. And as I was opening it, I thought the chances of this being useful are about 1 in 100, but in fact it was a laser pointer and it is useful.

09:29 Dr. Robert Nichols: What I wanted to point out is let me just, [unclear] in case you can't back there. And I forgot to print my slides, which would have been a better idea. I'll have to read it from the slides. Father dominated our home both spiritually, father dominated our home both spiritually and physically. He was six feet five inches tall and mother five foot two. What a sight when they walked together people would turn and look. Then there was his fur hat, which made him even taller. But apart from his height, it was his constant seriousness that made me, as a child, regard him with awe. He was very strict and his high height made him all the more forbidding. Now I passed almost a century later, my daughter Julie, when she was about three years old, we visited my parents in Philadelphia, and she had to sleep in a room where there was almost full full-size, life-size portrait of Gustav Landauer. And she was so frightened of it that my stepfather had to take the picture down from the wall and turn it, facing the wall, because she couldn't sleep. She was so scared of this large, imposing, glaring figure. But my mother does point out later that he was warm and loving to her. The other thing she always, she loved to tell the story of how during the blockade, during World War I, when food was very sparse in Germany, she once complained that the dinner - which I think was turnips and beetroot or something - schmeckt wie Sand und Seife. It tastes like soap and sand. And he slapped her. One of three times that she recalls that he had slapped her in his life, in her life.

11:19 Dr. Robert Nichols: Another one is described there, but for technical reasons I won't read it. The other thing I wanted to point out that was interesting to me in her, in her interview, Gustav Landauer himself was born into a secular family. His family ran a shoe store and they were not observant Jews. It was a Jewish family but he was not observant. And neither was he with his own children, as you can see there. They had a Christmas tree, and they went on Easter egg hunts, and

were not observant Jews. And in fact, that carried on into my family. When I was growing up we had a Christmas tree, and we had Easter eggs, and we were not observant at all. I mean, not at all. No, no synagogue, no bar mitzvahs, nothing. My mother delighted in pointing out that, when she was growing up in a Jewish neighborhood, she, she was the Shabbos goy. That is the sabbath gentile. She went around on the sabbath turning lights on and off and all, and she loved to tell that story. And that also carried out into my schooling where, on Jewish holidays at my very Jewish elementary school in New York City, PS9, a Catholic kid named Whitey and I were the only ones who showed up on Jewish holidays. Just as she says here, does she say it there? [unclear] while the others studied religion. And that carried on in my family where some afternoon, Thursday maybe, all the boys ran off to Hebrew lessons and, and I stayed behind. And I'll mention a little later how that made me feel.

13:09 Dr. Robert Nichols: This slide points out that family guests included my uh uh, the Bubers. Let's see, I'm having a, Martin Buber, Martin Buber. Martin Buber, a great Jewish thinker and Zionist and philosopher was a good friend of Gustav Landauer, and a big promoter of him. He published many of his books and regarded him as, as a disciple, and close friend. And he kindled interest in Judaism and reawakened Gustav Landauer's sense of being Jewish. And in fact, Gustav Landauer eventually became important in uh, in Zionist circles, and especially in the kibbutz movement because his idea of agrarian societies, communal societies without government, really resonated with the early settlers, Jewish settlers in Palestine. So he became an important Jewish figure, even though he himself was an atheist and never really practiced Judaism. Also on this page, I believe, is the following. Oh yes, uh he spoke very little to us children about anarchism, although once he painted for us a picture of an ideal socialist village, founded on mutual aid, without money but with comradely affection, where each would work freely and peacefully at his own preferred craft. This was, his hope was that man could, modern man could evolve to that sort of a society.

15:00 Dr. Robert Nichols: Now the last slide has one of the most important bits on it. Remember this is all a lengthy interview with my mother [unclear]. Not long after, not long after that my Uncle Hugo gave us a task, he had an old vineyard on a hill that was full of stones. He gave us, myself, his children and the Eisner children, the job of picking up the stones and carting them away. I still remember how much it hurt to go barefoot on the freshly cut grass. While we were doing this, Uncle Hugo called me aside and quietly told me that German soldiers in Munich had murdered my father. I stood there bewildered. Later on she goes into the woods and made two little graves - and I'll say why there were two in a moment. I put flowers and made a cross from branches for each grave. No one knew anything about this. Making a cross again emphasizes how un-Jewish she was, and I'll talk more about that a little later, her un-Jewishness. Although she was, of course, Jewish.

16:16 Dr. Robert Nichols: Now, late in Gustav Landauer's life he became politically active, even though he basically was against politics and hoped that we could go beyond it, and he became a member of a government formed in Bavaria immediately after the end of World War I. There was a revolution in Germany, not terribly well known, the November Revolution 1918 which carried on into 1919 in which, it basically was a reaction to the horrors and the defeat in World War I and a provisional government was set up with Gustav Landauer as a Minister of Education and Culture. It was called the Council Government of Bavaria in Munich, and there was all sorts of turmoil. The Central Government eventually, after fighting in the streets, and a Red Army, a communist army which had killed some important people soldiers, including paramilitaries known as the Freikorps, free corps, were sent. And these were ultra-right-wingers and inherently antisemitic, certainly anti-socialist, anti-communists, and they killed about a thousand people in Munich over a few days, and arrested many, uh, of the leaders including Gustav Landauer, who was taken to Stadelheim Prison brutally beaten and murdered. And in Richard Evans really superb three-volume history of the Nazis, his death is described in the most shocking and explicit way and I was deeply shocked I read it. I didn't know about it.

18:09 Dr. Robert Nichols: To make it a little less shocking, he was beaten and then shot, and then basically kicked to death, and he was 49 years old at the time. My mother, at that time, had just turned 13 and her mother, Hedwig Lachmann, had died the previous year when she was just barely 12 - or had not yet had her 12th birthday - in the influenza pandemic, Spanish Flu. So, when she was 13, she was orphaned. Now, Gustav Landauer had been married earlier to a woman. All I know about her; she was described as a seamstress and they didn't get along after a while. And he met and fell in love with Hedwig Lachmann who was his intellectual equal, to say the least. And he eventually, they lived together and had a daughter Gudula, my mother's older, uh, sister. And the oldest sister Charlotte, but known as Lotte in the family, was born in that first marriage of Gustav Landauer to Margarethe Schuster, Schuster I think her name was. And she was 14 years older than my mother, so. And I would cut short her life history to say the sad story that in 1926, when I believe she was 33 years old, she had her gallbladder removed amazingly enough, at home in her apartment. And the book I read said that, no it wasn't the book, it was my mother in her interview said, that while the doctor and her husband were toasting the success of the operation in fact that she didn't wake up from it. She died, so. Comment? Probably, it was probably the anesthesia, yeah, but I was astounded that they would do things like a gallbladder at home in 1926. Well anyway, that was Charlotte.

20:18 Dr. Robert Nichols: This is Hedwig Lachmann, a very significant poet, and I do have a volume of her collected poems. She was this the daughter of a Cantor, so Judaism enters a life for the first time. And strangely enough, Gustav Landauer's pet name for her was Juden which means Jewess, which I found strange, if not

bizarre really, that he would call her the, how are you my little Jew. You know, it doesn't make sense to me. Here are some books by her *Gesammelte Gedichte*, the collected poems. And I have, in the volume my mother gave me of hers, a leather-bound volume of her works, I found on a tissue-thin piece of paper a handwritten poem almost certainly by handwritten by Hedwig Lachmann of the first poem in the book, about her father. The next book is *Salome* by Oscar Wilde. As you may know, Oscar Wilde wrote *Salome* in French, for reasons known only to himself, and my grandmother translated it from French to German, and it was a much lauded translation. And it became the libretto for Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* which was just performed here within the last 10 days, to two weeks, here in San Diego. And my mother got royalty checks for *Salome* throughout her life, and in fact, my stepfather continued to get those checks after my mother passed away. Uh, and there's a gruesome picture of the beheading. Well you know all about that story. My grandchildren are here, I won't go into detail. Now Hedwig Lachmann as I say died so the remaining two girls were left without parents. This is a biography of Hedwig Lachmann by Hanna Delf von Wolzogen and a, uh, a collected works of hers that I also have.

22:22 Dr. Robert Nichols: Now this is my father, born Pavel Nikolaevich Peschkowsky. And you might wonder how did Paul Nichols come around but when you see the two names Pavel is Paul and Nikolaevich, his father was Nikolai. He translated Paul or Pavel Nikolai into Paul Nichols. And I've wondered all my life if my father knew, or realized, that he was changing his ethnicity when he changed his name. I don't think there are many, if any, Jewish Nichols besides my brother and me. Uh, so I, I don't know if that was conscious or not. He was also highly secular, so secular as a matter of fact, that he did not believe in a certain - not to put too fine a point on it - of certain neonatal surgical procedures done on masculine beings. He does not believe in those, so they were not performed. My father was Russian. He grew up in Irkutsk, near Lake Baikal, in Siberia when the Russian Revolution occurred, he was, my mother described him as a [Alexander] Kerensky supporter and at other times described him as being a White Russian. At any range, at any rate, I don't strictly know if there were Jewish White Russians, maybe there were. But he was Kerensky and he was anti-Bolshevik and so he fled. And what he did was drive across the Gobi Desert to Harbin in Manchuria, or China where there was a sizable Jewish community as a matter of fact. And as a side comment without details that his brother remained in Harbin, and was basically Dr. Zhivago. He came home from the hospital, he was a doctor too, he came home from the hospital once and had lunch and then went back, but he never reached the hospital, and he wasn't heard from again for like eight years. He had been grabbed by the Red Army and taken off. And that's all I know about that story, but I like it.

24:26 Dr. Robert Nichols: This is his father. Now is this a cool looking guy? Nikolai Peschkowsky. This was taken during World War I when he was an army doctor. So, he too was a doctor. So, my grandfather, my father, and I were all doctors. Uh,

Nikolai Peschkowsky died of, let me remind myself, excuse me, he died of yellow fever at age 48. He was a specialist in internal medicine, skin disease, and venereal disease. Now this is my paternal grandmother Anna Distler Peschkowsky. Her family had a gold mine in Russia and presumably was wealthy. She died at age 93. She was one of the few long-survivors in the family after having lived - she died in Moscow - and had lived in Shanghai, Berlin, Harbin and Jerusalem. Now this is me, lying flat, and my older brother when, in 1936. Let me get my trusty laser pointer, if I can find it. Sorry about this. Here it is. I wanted to point out one thing, you can see that I'm attempting to regain this state of [unclear] and I've been working on this for about 30 years now, but I'm on the way. At that time, when this picture was taken, my father was a successful practitioner. When he left Harbin, after two or three years, he made his way to Berlin, arriving in 1922. And he went to medical school, became a physician. He went to, finished his university training, of course in German, and went to medical school, and passed his examinations in 1930 when he began a practice. And at that time he also married my mother, who I believe was a social worker in the hospital where he was working.

26:46 Dr. Robert Nichols: She was born in 1906. She was 24 at that time and he had a practice which was heavy in artistic people, theatrical people, and Russian émigrés of course, as he was, as he was. Now, that introduces the most important question that I want to address here. 1936. Why was he there? That question has puzzled me the entire time I've thought about it, most of my life. Why did he stick around so long? He did not in fact leave until 1938. And things were not subtle. I have two timeline slides here because they don't, they they overlap a little bit but they have different things on it. But it didn't take long. Hitler became Chancellor, I think, January 30th 1933 and in less than two months, April 1st, there was already a boycott of Jewish shops, which had been more or less organized and supported by the governor, or government. Jews were being beaten up, laws were beginning to be passed restricting their rights. By 1934, Jewish people banned from having health insurance. In 1935 the Nuremberg Law, Jews could not intermarry, having sexual relations with non-Jews was a crime, etc., etc. These were not subtle things. Jews were no longer able to serve in the civil service, in 1936 lawyers could no longer practice, rights of physicians were restricted, they could only see Jewish patients at that time, and it got worse, and worse, and worse. I think the next slide is a little more informative on that. 1934 Jewish students excluded from exams in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and law. Jews excluded from military service. Nuremberg Laws denied Jews many basic civil rights. Jews no longer, were no longer allowed to vote and lost their citizenship, etc, etc. It kept going, as I said, it was not subtle. Why did he and so many other Jews stick around? It's an interesting question.

29:08 Dr. Robert Nichols: The fact is, in the immediate aftermath of Hitler becoming chancellor about 10 percent of German Jews did leave and there were maybe



525,000 at the time Hitler became chancellor. So roughly 50 or 55,000 Jews left and of those, about 10 percent or 15 percent returned within the first year, when they thought things over, I guess, and thought it wouldn't be so bad. Uh, but the question remains, why did they - including my father - stay so long? Now, I should have made a slide about this, but I didn't. There's a book, an interesting book, Deborah Hertz knows about this book and told me she didn't really like it. She thought that the author was a bit too harsh on the Jews who remained in Germany. It's called *Bound upon a Wheel of Fire* by a man John V.h. Dippel. Bound upon a wheel of fire is a quote from *King Lear* and it's an interesting book, and I learned quite a bit from it, and I accumulated six reasons that I could think of. The first is that there was a widespread feeling that Hitler was a transient phenomenon, that he wouldn't last, that it was too cultivated and refined a country to put up with a ruffian like that, and his followers. We know what happened about that thought.

30:37 Dr. Robert Nichols: The second was that Jews were notoriously assimilated into German life. They were quote, more German than the Germans. And I, I was going to say unfortunately, but I would draw that my mother was like that too. She was proud of German heritage, German culture. She knew a lot more about German heritage and culture than Jewish culture. They, there's an amusing quote in *Bound upon a Wheel of Fire* is that, for many Jews being Jewish was quote, an inconvenience and embarrassment, like being left-handed or bald. It was not an important thing in the lives of many secular Jews, as opposed to, I think, the majority of Eastern European Jews, where it was the center of their life, being Jewish. Our family was typical. We were entirely secular and non-observant, I mean, when we were children, when I was my brother and I were children. Jews did not define themselves primarily as Jews, German Jews, and they were insufficiently aware that the Germans did. After a while it didn't matter how secular you were. It didn't matter if you had converted to Christianity. Initially Jews who had served in World War I, and there were many of them who proudly served - they were very patriotic - that exempted them from some of the harsh laws that were being passed, but eventually even they were swept up in the antisemitism. The fourth reason is, I believe, that the ultimate fate of European Jews, concentration camps, and extermination was literally beyond the bounds of their imagination. They didn't have the example that we know of. It's not beyond the bounds of our examination, imagination. We've seen it. Gulp.

32:33 Dr. Robert Nichols: They couldn't imagine. I have to remember not to look at you and that you're not gonna stay composed, uh and also, there's kind of an admirable and human tendency to think that this too shall pass. Alles geht vorüber, in German. Tomorrow will be a better day. Things will pass, and we know what happened there. The fifth reason was a more practical one. It became increasingly difficult for Jews to leave, for these very restrictions made it almost impossible to work eventually, and they had no money, and it cost money to get out. It really did. You had to have connections and you had to have money to get out. Ultimately of

the 525,000 Jews about a third left before Kristallnacht in 1938. I think it was November of 1938. Another third left in the 10 months between then and the beginning of World War II, and the remaining third did not leave and were largely exterminated. The percentage of German Jews who died in the war, who were exterminated, was much lower than almost any other European country, uh, certainly lower than Poland where virtually all of the three million Jews died, and in Russia where 7 or 800,000 died, and in Hungary where something like 450,000 of the 700,000 Jews died. So the percentage, one-third, is shocking enough, but it was relatively low. On top of that, in addition to the relative impoverishment of the Jews who couldn't get out, doors were closing. Many countries, including unfortunately eventually the United States, made it harder and harder to to immigrate into those countries.

34:36 Dr. Robert Nichols: Even Palestine began eventually to restrict the numbers because, for one thing, there were kind of Arab uprisings of fear of hundreds of thousands of Jews pouring in, and the British started limiting the numbers of Jews who could enter Palestine. As again, I am skating on thin ice with some of this historical detail. I'm certainly not an expert on them. That's just what I have read. So anyone who knows better, please speak up, and I'm sure there are many who do know better. Now again, why did my father leave? I have one ridiculous clue, as that he might have been thinking of leaving earlier, in 1938. A lot of the delay was probably involuntary, simply uh getting the requisite papers together to leave. But I had one little clue that he might have been thinking as early as 1935. My other, my mother always told me that he wanted me called Robert because one day he was hoping I would be Sir Robert. Now, they don't have Sir Roberts in Germany, nor do they in the United States. So I wondered whether he was thinking in 1935 of possibly emigrating to Great Britain. The only person who ever called me Sir Robert was my late good friend Tom Waltz, who occasionally called me Sir Robert, but he was the only one. I don't know why. I don't know why he was the only one. It should be obvious. Okay, then this is the certificate, certificate of arrival when he did finally leave. One thing that hastened his departure I'm sure, is that as of 1938 Jews could no longer see any patients, Jewish physicians. They could function as light, as practical nurses, or orderlies for Jewish patients but otherwise they couldn't practice at all after mid-1938.

36:28 Dr. Robert Nichols: This is the SS Bremen a mighty ship and on it were two little boys, my brother age seven, and I age three. My mother was not aboard. My father studied for his New York State medical boards, and passed it within four months of his arrival, after studying in English, which is pretty remarkable, I think, that he was able to do that. And then he sent for us. My mother was in a convalescent hospital because she had deep vein thrombosis and for fear of pulmonary emboli - in those days they did the reverse of what we encourage now - absolute bed rest is what she had, like for a year. Uh, so it's very remarkable she didn't get more, and more, and more deep vein thrombosis. But anyway, my

brother and I, under the watchful eye of a stewardess, my brother says, who was assigned to keep an eye on us, crossed the Atlantic to New York City alone. I, of course, have virtually no memory of that. I have two memories, one is of being sent to our room because we, our state room, because we behaved badly. And I, I have a mental snapshot of the room with a chest of drawers and the door closing as we were put into the room. I think we acted up during a meal. My other memory is being picked up by my father, and looking at the enormous side of the ship, this tremendous black wall with portholes. That's all I remember. My brother has more useful memories. He, he remembers that while we're, when we're about to board the ship everything stopped, everybody stopped in their tracks, because over loudspeakers a speech by Hitler came on, and everyone was required to stop and listen. And that went on for a long time, he spoke for a long time. He also remembers roaming about the ship, and playing in a nursery with a giant stuffed lion. I don't remember any of that. And he also remembers an interesting memory that, when our father picked us up, across the street was a Jewish probably a delicatessen, or a butcher shop, with Hebrew lettering in the window. And my brother said, is that allowed? And my father said, here it is.

38:41 Dr. Robert Nichols: Okay, now here's the passenger manifest. Where's my trusty laser pointer? On the bottom you see Michael and Robert Peschkowsky, identified as Hebrews and nationality USSR. My father was Russian and this may be another reason why we got out. We weren't German in their eyes. Now this delightful little person, I must say, is me. Robert Peschkowsky, age three. And written around the margin of the photograph is, uh Gudula Landauer als Tante fur Robert Alexander Peschkowsky, or Gudula Landauer as aunt of Robert Alexander Peschkowsky. So, she presumably took us to the consulate, and to the ship because my mother was still in the hospital. I return now to the story of my mother, and as I wanted to say at the beginning but I think I forgot, the story I tell is largely a story of losses suffered by my mother. She finally came in 1940, after the war started, and again, I have a passenger manifest for her. She's identified also as, I guess I don't need my laser pointer, identified also as Hebrew and USSR, or Russian nationality. And, as you recall, at that time there was the Nazi Soviet non-aggression pact. They were, it was a cynical pact, but nominally they were friends at that time, so she could get out even after the war started. The details of payments made and all, I don't know. I think we had a, we had a wealthy cousin who lived in San Francisco. As a matter of fact, I think I visited him once when I interned in San Francisco and in his dining room was what looked like a full-length portrait of the Golden Gate Bridge. But it wasn't a full-length portrait; it was the Golden Gate Bridge. He lived, he lived in Seacliff and had this magnificent view through a big rectangular picture window of the Golden Gate Bridge.

41:12 Dr. Robert Nichols: Okay, now our life, after my mother arrived, was good. My father had a successful practice. He began, his practice was heavy on show business people, theatrical people, uh, singers, musicians. Vladimir Horowitz was

a patient. The impresario Sol Hurok was a patient. My father apparently was a very magnetic guy, very raconteur. My mother liked to describe him as a sad, mad, glad Russian. He uh, by the way, one of, two of his patients were Jan Kiepura and Mártha Eggerth. Probably almost nobody remembers them, but they were - he was a Polish and she was Hungarian - they were singers, kind of a European Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald. They sang, they were in the movies, and I recently found out, amazingly enough, that Mártha Eggerth is still alive, alive and singing. She uh, she's going to be a hundred next uh, in April and lives in New York City. Well, they were, uh, patients. He had a new Packard Clipper, which my brother remembers, he was enormously proud of. Life was good, finally. I don't remember much about my father, and that troubled me quite a bit when I had four little kids, that if I died at that point, that they would only have a handful of memories, as I do of him.

42:41 Dr. Robert Nichols: Okay, next. Now this is fascinating. Here's one of the things that research found. This is a letter from my mother, a handwritten letter, which I think I'll have to read. She had kind of idiosyncratic writing, about Gudula, her older sister. This was written in 1941, October 1941. October 1941 and one of the things that amazed me was the extraordinarily good English in this letter. My mother had only been in this country about one year. Now both her parents were fluent in English and French, and my grandmother also in Hungarian, as well as German. They translated many works, so I presume my mother learned English in Germany because she couldn't have learned all this in a year. Dear friends, let me thank you with all my heart, also in Gudula's name, for your understanding and your very great help. I hope that we will be able to save Gudula, and to make it possible to have or with us in a few weeks. I succeeded in getting, getting the rest of the money from other friends, a small sum from each. And for the rest, I am going tomorrow to give my jewelry to get a loan. I saw the lawyer today and he promised me that we shall get the visa in two to three weeks, so that she would be able to leave for Lisbon in about one month. I only hope that it won't be too late. I would be very grateful if you could send the check in my name as soon as possible. Immediately after receiving it, I can file the application. Altogether it will cost \$1,115, of which \$650 will be returned after she left Cuba. Be assured that Paul and I will do our best to repay the money in the shortest time possible. With all my sincerest wishes and best regard from house to house, yours, Brigitte

44:43 Dr. Robert Nichols: A couple of interesting things. One, I looked up, with inflation \$1,115 in 1941 is \$17,000 now. So it was a lot of money, a lot of money. The other unfortunate thing is that it was too late. She didn't get it. She remained hidden away throughout the war. And here, one thing I found in the Leo Baeck Archive in New York City, rooting around on the internet, was a little biographical note about her, and that included the name of the woman who hid her, hid her, Anna von Gukelle, who was a social worker uh, in Berlin and she had a house just outside Berlin where my aunt was uh, sequestered throughout World War II. Now after the

war, my mother always pointed out - let's call him gay - a gay piano teacher friend of ours who had served in the Army and was in Germany uh, immediately after the war, or perhaps at the end of the war uh, met her. She lived through the war, and when he got back - as a favor to my family, to my mother - he married her by proxy. In those days you could do that, you know the war brides. She was married by proxy. Pregnant pause.

- 46:19 Dr. Robert Nichols: I hope you can read German. It's hard for me to translate this now. Whoops, that's the wrong slide. We have got out of time sequence. This is not the wrong slide, it's the wrong side of the presentation. This pertains to my father. My father was a physician, as I mentioned and I don't, I should have said this at the time. I mean, I said I have a few memories of my father, and I got sidetracked by my personal comment that it bothered me because of my own children. One memory I do have of my father, which is very clear, it's of him standing when I was eight years old with his hand on his throat at the threshold of our living room. We had two steps down saying, I have a terrible sore throat. I remember him saying that very clearly. And this isn't his blood, but he went downstairs and looked in the microscope and he was, he, as I said, he had a sense of drama. My mother, who helped him in the office, was standing next to him. He said, du armes Kind, ich hab nur zwei wochen zu leben. You poor child - I'll translate - I have only two weeks to live. And in fact, he did die in about two weeks.
- 47:34 Dr. Robert Nichols: I'll put, I put off Gudula's story a little more and I will be able to compose myself at the end, I trust. Okay, I've decided to introduce myself into this talk now, aside from that cute picture, by talking about how I felt as a little immigrant boy. I absolutely hated it when my mother spoke German in public, as you can imagine. For one thing, it was during World War II, and immediately after. I was embarrassed the way my parents and their friends ate. You know American, European style - the fork in the left hand, instead of putting down the fork, I mean, putting down the knife transferring the fork together, and they ate sandwiches open face with a knife and fork, bizarre. I just, I couldn't abide at that. I was also incredibly patriotic. I don't know, do little boys still go around saying, it's a free country, isn't it? We said that all the time, my friends and I, with any, any kind of a challenge. As I said, Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, I loved them all. I loved them. I, I just loved the idea of America, and being an American, and I wanted to be a real American boy. I wanted an American home, defined - this is all by me of course, we're an eight, nine, ten-year-old talking - a front yard, a backyard, apple tree, upstairs, downstairs. I didn't want to be a little Jewish immigrant boy living in the tiny apartment in New York City. I, I, I was betwixt and between. I was a Jew in a non-Jewish country. The country that I saw in the movies, and on the radio, and later on television, wasn't my America. That was an America I wanted to be part of but, but I wasn't, and I wasn't really a Jew either. In school, as I mentioned earlier, I was sitting there with whitey when all the other kids were out during Jewish

holidays, and getting bar mitzvahs. So I was, I was a Jew in a non-Jewish country, and a non-Jew in a Jewish neighborhood and school. I wanted a life like I saw, the movie *State Fair* stuck in my mind. First of all, I had a crush on Jeanne Crain who was the star of that - she was a beautiful woman - and Iowa has always been to me the quintessential American state. Iowa: barns, and corn, and barn dances, and hay rides, etc., mom and dad at the breakfast table. I wanted to be part of that life.

50:02 Dr. Robert Nichols: I'm not proud of this but I still maintain a, what I would call, a visceral distaste for things German, including the language. Gutten abend Fräulein, you know, I wish my parents had been Italian. Buonasera signorina. I mean, doesn't that sound a little better? And you know, swaying in taverns with beer steins, all of it, it just made my blood run cold. And I admit, not an entirely rational attitude. I want to talk a little bit about my mother's neo-Episcopalian nature. She, I think she would have been happier as an Episcopalian. When when she remarried Dr. Hausberger in 1950, they moved to Philadelphia where he was, became a very long-standing admired, and very beloved professor at Jefferson Medical College. And she fell right into that non-Jewish circle, that non-Jewish life, Christmas carol's sung at somebody's home, and Christmas cards, and Christmas trees. And she wasn't a practicing or believing Christian but neither was she in any way a practicing Jew. And once I remember, in a social situation, she was talking to people and a lifelong friend, a young woman, was sitting next to me and my mother said, I am of Jewish background. And my friend muttered in my ear, and foreground. So she was diffident about being Jewish. And I'm afraid, if I'm really honest which I occasionally am, that I shared that diffidence at different times in my life. Not now, but sometimes in my life. And I remind reminded of Harry Golden's comment when when uh, Barry Goldwater ran for president and Harry Golden said, I always knew that the first Jew to run for president would be an Episcopalian. So, my mother was a neo-Episcopalian.

52:10 Dr. Robert Nichols: Okay well as I said, I eventually found my real American home, and real American life in that I got married, and I trained in neurology at the Mayo Clinic, and there I bought a house, and had a front yard, and a backyard, and an upstairs, and a downstairs, and I had a lovely wife. Mom and dad, me and my wife, were at the table and first we had one, and two, and three children in Rochester. The first one was born in Denver when I was in the Air Force. And eventually we had our only native Californian, a fourth child when we hit La Jolla, Eva. So I found my real American life, in my own life. All righty, now I'm sorry I, I do get emotional talking about my aunt. I didn't think I would, but I did. There she is. Now, I found this picture in the Leo Baeck Archive. I've always wanted a picture of her. What do you do to overcome this? Oh, fake it is even better. I like fake it. I'm going to fake it, right. It doesn't bother me. It's only been what, 65 years? She was very, very sweet. She she always told me, I love you heaps and loads. Which again, is an indication of her her language skills. That's very idiomatic, really and she said that

in English. I didn't even know how to say that in German. I do speak German but I, I always tell people I speak, I speak German with no accent to speak of, but I speak like a well-educated eight-year-old because my mother always addressed me in German - all the way into medical school - but I answered in English after. So I can't express myself on any important or deep subject, you know. When do we eat? I'm good at things like that. Nuclear fission, or fusion, politics, I can't talk about in German, luckily. Well anyway, here's what, uh yes, I will fake it. I'll read it for you. A few weeks after her arrival from Berlin, my beloved sister Gudula Landauer-Clay - Clay was the name of the piano teacher - was taken from me on the 30th of October 1946 by an auto accident. Actually jah entrissen, it actually means torn away from me, taken from me. That's the incredible irony. She lived throughout the war and like a couple of weeks after she got here, she was hit by a bus in Central Park West.

- 55:07 Dr. Robert Nichols: Now on to happier things. What happened to those two little boys? Well one of us became rich and famous, and the other didn't. This is my brother the illustrious Mike Nichols, a Broadway and uh, Hollywood director, producer, winner of an Oscar, multiple Tonys, a Grammy, and an Emmy - maybe two Emmys. That is my brother. And this is his even more illustrious wife, Diane Sawyer Whitman. I nominated her best looking 66-year-old woman on the planet. This was taken two years ago when she was the best looking 64-year-old woman.
- 55:58 Speaker 1: This is really bizarre, we were [unclear] about two years ago and sitting right over here was your brother and his wife. [unclear]
- 56:22 Dr. Robert Nichols: No, he and Elaine. Of course, were partners for a long time and still work together on movies uh, at times. Yeah, I, I introduced myself once too, I visited the set where Mike was making a movie and the producer was there, a very nice woman, and I introduced - I said, yeah Mike's brother. I said, I'm the smart, funny one. She got the joke. Well anyway, my brother's not the only one who married well, and married above himself. Here's my favorite picture I ever took. You want to take it from here. No, this is my late wife, Carol. I took this picture 47 years, over 47 years ago. Carol with our older daughter Julie. And as I said, it's by far my favorite picture I ever took. Now like most families we, I have maybe 5,000 pictures of Carol, and 8,000 of my children, and 16,000 of my grandchildren, and there are three of me. And this isn't one of them. This is my four children taken some, probably 15 or so years ago. The little baby in the background is my first grandchild, our first grandchild, uh Catherine and with her father, my son-in-law, Chris, there also, and David and Julie, Eva and Paul Nichols, my four children. And as you can see, my wife's beauty and the beauty of my mother, I think, are perpetuated in their faces. And my daughter said, you must show a picture of you with your children. I said, I don't know that I have one, and in fact there is one, and this is it. The only known picture of Robert with his kids. And here to conclude my presentation - as soon as I sit down, I'll see that I left out 40

percent of it, by not looking. Oh yes, before I conclude - I, I did leave out one thing - and that is just how very hard my mother's life was after my father died. I was not linear enough. I'm sorry.

58:41 Dr. Robert Nichols: She had no marketable skills really, and scratched out a living. She typed manuscripts for dissertations and theses for graduate students. She sold leather goods and things out of our tiny little apartment. We had a two-room apartment and I might add a two-room roach-ridden apartment. We were genuinely poor, not bourgeois poor, really poor. Some friends gave us gifts, including food sometimes. She borrowed so often from Household Finance that she got a plaque eventually from them to put on the wall for being such an honored borrower and payer back. Uh, life was very, very hard for her. She struggled with her health. She had asthma. She had migraine. She was beset with anxieties, and who can blame her. When she was 40, she had lost both parents, as a child, both sisters and her husband. She had only my brother and me left by the time she was 40. So, I should not have left that out. It was very, very hard. And I remember, I you know my, my kids know and can hardly let me get away with it, I love to tell anecdotes. I'm very anecdotal. And I do remember one anecdote about her typing. We had a little cat and my mother had stayed up literally all night, all night typing a doctoral dissertation. And in those days of carbon paper, there were piles all over the coffee table of the various copies, with a vase with, with flowers and water in the center. And the cat leaped up onto the table, and I became a great hero at that moment because the vase started swinging, and bucking, and I grabbed it. And I tell you, it would have been a catastrophe - a catastrophe for my mother and for the graduate student who had to hand in his thesis that very day. So that's, that's an anecdote from those hard times. But when my mother remarried, the hard times dissolved and her life was good after that, her life in Philadelphia. My brother was enormously generous with her, and they had a fine home, and a home at the beach, and everything was okay after that. Now, here's the concluding slide - my excellent grandchildren. So let me compose myself enough to say the last thing I'm going to say, because I didn't die when I was a child. That's it. Okay, that's all I have to say.

1:01:26 [applause]

1:01:38 Dr. Robert Nichols: I was so certain that I would not become emotional doing this because I went over it so many times. I put like a hundred hours into this presentation.

1:01:46 Susanne Hillman: Are you all for taking questions?

1:01:49 Dr. Robert Nichols: Of course, of course always. If there are any questions or comments.



- 1:01:54 Speaker 2: You mentioned that, what was it, your great grandmother burying in two different plots.
- 1:02:00 Dr. Robert Nichols: Oh yeah, yeah. She said in that interview that she was very composed after her uncle had told her that her father had been killed. And in the interview it said she later she went on with the task of gathering stones and later she went off into the woods and made two little graves. One, with each one with a cross, and the two graves were for her two parents because I hadn't mentioned at that point but her her mother had died the previous year when she was just 11, actually. And so there were two little graves she made. And then she said, I suppressed my emotions and then the the, the interviewer - the guy who wrote the book - says begins to cry. And then my mother said, I guess I didn't suppress them completely. Of course, this was like 50 years later, 60 years later. Just as I haven't suppressed completely.
- 1:02:53 Susanne Hillman: Any other questions? Yes, at the back please.
- 1:02:56 Speaker 3: Who did your mother live with after um, her father's first, she lived with her father's [crosstalk]
- 1:03:02 Dr. Robert Nichols: Remember her older sister Lotte was 14 years older, so that she was already in her mid-20s when the mother died and - her half-sister Lotte - lived with them. She lived with uh Landauer and Lachman after her mother died - her mother, Landauer's first wife - died early. And after that Lotte was the third child in the family and she took care. And then later they went to live with the grandparents in Karlsruhe which is where Gustav Landauer was born, in southwestern Germany.
- 1:03:37 Speaker 4: I was emotionally involved as you were talking about this. But I can't help but comment because there are deeper issues you are trying to avoid. Or searching to answer yourself. That is, when you describe your relatives not practicing Judaism or their rituals, you were very conscious of what you said, that they were participating in Christmas; it was a conscious effort to participate in a ritual that was outside of their own faith. I'm not criticizing but simply making you aware, there was a choice. That choice had to be made for some reason. And as I from my own memories, I happened to have a grandfather who was Jewish, I was witness to Christmas trees myself, but the choice of where you go from there is up to you. And it was very pleasant environment to be part of the community that you were living in. You wanted to be respected and appreciated in the culture of Germany, or Austria where I came from, and the sacrifice that you had to make to be part of that was pandering, in one sense, and identifying with that source to gain, what? At the end you've got the shaft just as much as everybody who didn't shift. You're struggling with it right now. You haven't answered it for yourself. I can see that struggle.

- 1:05:24 Dr. Robert Nichols: Well. You may be right of course, but -
- 1:05:27 Speaker 4: Your brother married a non-Jew.
- 1:05:29 Dr. Robert Nichols: So, did I. Carol was, my wife, was Catholic. She started as a Catholic. She didn't end up a Catholic. She fell away as they say, as Catholics say. Yes, now I can't comment about a Christmas in Germany because I was too young. I don't remember it at all. I can only talk about our Christmases. I think it was an entirely secular Christmas. It was just presents, tinsel, stars, trees, I don't think that's -
- 1:06:00 Speaker 4: Absolutely. But matzah and dreidels would make the same sense.
- 1:06:06 Dr. Robert Nichols: Yeah well, for Easter yeah, but uh well, as I say my, my wife was raised - she was a convent-bred Catholic. She was very Catholic when we got married. It was an issue, uh of course, with her mother.
- 1:06:26 Speaker 4: My mother was baptized.
- 1:06:29 Dr. Robert Nichols: Yeah well, my first three children were baptized and Eva, the last, was not. Eva says, I'm going to hell. She's joking.
- 1:06:41 Susanne Hillman: Are there other question? Yes, please.
- 1:06:43 Speaker 5: Um I, I'm so impressed with your insight that one of the greatest failures of the Jewish people in Germany was their lack of imagination. And I find, as I look around our own nation about things that could occur, that that's a human pride. I think the Jewish people could send out to lots of Americans is that you need, you need a more vivid imagination about what could happen, if you don't make wise choices, and a sense of history and historical context. So, thank you for drawing a fine bead on that insight.
- 1:07:24 Dr. Robert Nichols: I think what you say is absolutely true but I have to also say that because of my own fears in that direction say four or five years ago I did read the three-volume history of the Nazis by Richard Evans, a Cambridge professor, and the two-volume biography of Hitler by Ian Kershaw also an English, professor in England because I wanted to see to what extent we were walking down the same path. And I have to tell you that I was very reassured because if there are a hundred steps in that path, we were perhaps somewhere between step one and two. As you can see from the timelines and what followed, we're nowhere near the climate that existed there and we have the protection of our constitution. I mean, that's what America really is, is the constitution. Well anyway, maybe I'm too optimistic.
- 1:08:20 Speaker 6: Could you say something more about coming as two little children across the North Atlantic? Was there an adult with you?

- 1:08:30 Dr. Robert Nichols: My brother says there was a stewardess who was paid to keep an eye. I wrote him an email just a few weeks ago saying, tell me what you remember of the trip and who was looking out for us. And he says there was a stewardess aboard, an attendant, I think he said on the ship was paid to keep an eye, an employee of the shipping company was paid to keep an eye on us and make sure we ate and things like that. And unfortunately, I have only those two fragmentary memories myself and my brother doesn't have a whole lot more uh, in the way of memories. But he does remember uh, what I said about the Hitler speech and about the Jewish sign, but that was before and after. The actual trip he remembers only wondering about the ship fascinated, and playing with a stuffed lion in a nursery that they had on board. And I had asked him, were there other children like us - unaccompanied minors - and unfortunately, he didn't answer that question. So, I don't know but, you know, everybody gets upset when they hear that two little boys all alone on that big boat. I'm sure it was a great adventure for us actually. I think that I think my grandchildren would just love that.
- 1:09:40 Susanne Hillman: You had a question?
- 1:09:41 Speaker 7: Well, I'm a little hesitant because I don't, I don't want to be intrusive. But I got the impression that at some point in your life you did reclaim your Judaism or -
- 1:09:45 Dr. Robert Nichols: Not in any religious sense, only in the sense - it's my anti-Nazism basically that makes me uh, affirm that I am Jewish. They're not going to scare it out of me basically, I'm saying. Even though my name, because my father isn't Jewish and I, I, I never attended services. I wasn't bar mitzvahed et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I'm in no sense observant or believing - fortunately or unfortunately - but I am Jewish by character, heritage et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and to deny that would be to throw a bone to the evil other side. In that sense, I affirm it. But as I say, I mean, I'm no hero. I think at different stages of my younger life I was it's it's easier and there were times in my life when it was easier in conversation or social situations just to let it pass, to not be Jewish but not in many. Eight or ten years ago I had a hospice patient - I'm a hospice volunteer - and he at one point said, and while he was referring to something, he was a Jew boy. And that was the last time I ever saw that patient, I just quit the case immediately. I just will not have anything to do. I informed him that I was a Jew boy and I didn't come. Because people don't often don't take me for Jewish, probably because of the name, and because they're not seeing me from the side.
- 1:11:34 Susanne Hillman: Are there any other questions, or maybe we allow the people to approach Dr. Nicholas individually. Yes?
- Speaker 8: [unclear]

- 1:11:47 Dr. Robert Nichols: Yes. Linda has just made me a very good suggestion. My, my two sons are here, and three of my seven grandchildren are here. Rise and be recognized. Thank you, Linda. I should have done that but as usual I was thinking about number one and not numbers two, three, four, five, six, seven.
- 1:12:17 Susanne Hillman: Well, I would like to thank you Dr. Nichols. To all of us, very moving and insightful. And from my historian point of view, I think you did great. I haven't caught any mistakes. Your um, context is great. And I also would like to say, I've had a chance to uh - I told you this before - to actually read some of um your Aunt Gudula's letters. They are kept in an archive in Germany and from that - they weren't written to any family member - to a friend - a woman that I studied - and she does, I will remember her, and do remember her as a very loving and warm personality. So, I was delighted when Dr. Nichols told me, when we first met, that she always said the thing about I love you heaps and bounds. I thought that that's just wonderful. Um so, please stick around if you like, and please take a flier on the way out for our next events, and thank you so much for coming. Have a good evening.