

My name is Dr. Sidney Langer, and I'm the director of the Oral History Project of the Holocaust Studies Resource Center at Kean College of New Jersey. I'm very pleased that Dr. Susan Lederman, who is an associate professor of political science here at Kean College, has consented to come and talk to me today about some of her experiences and insight into the period of the Holocaust. Dr. Lederman, thank you very much for coming.

Thank you, Sidney, for asking me.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I was the pushy one.

[LAUGHS] No, not at all. Can you tell me a little bit about when you were born, what town you were born in, the country?

OK. Well, all the details-- I was born in May 1937, and in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. Bratislava was the capital city of Slovakia, which is the eastern province of Czechoslovakia; and my family, as many Jewish families in that town, was quite a cosmopolitan family-- three languages spoken at home. My mother tongue is German because I had a German nurse, and German nurses were considered to be the best because they were most concerned with baby hygiene and all those important things. So German is my mother tongue. Hungarian and Slovak was also spoken at home. As well as, at times, English and French.

Were you an only child?

Yes. I was the only child. I don't know whether that was necessarily what my parents had originally intended, but the Holocaust I think pretty well curtailed the number of children that many families of my parents' generation had.

Yes, you had mentioned that to me before in private conversation. What was the relationship between the fertility rate, the number of children, and the stresses associated with the period?

I think-- clearly that's just my perception, and I don't have any scientific evidence to this-- but from my own experience, families who were my parents' contemporaries seem to, if they had their first child around the late '30s, have no further children because shortly after I was born, tensions in Europe increased considerably, and life became more precarious, and I think people chose not to bring children into that world, if they had any choice at all.

What was your father's occupation?

My father owned a printing shop, a printing plant. It was a fairly substantial printing plant, and shortly prior to the time that I was born, he bought out a partner. It printed textbooks and sheet music, as well as more ordinary business kind of printing, and I think it was doing financially quite well at the time that I was born. My mother worked part time as his bookkeeper, and in terms of-- both my parents' background was farming, actually.

My grandfather on my mother's side owned large landholdings. Really, gentleman farmer. I remember that he had a car with a chauffeur, drove around the farm, and the center of the farm was I think a 12th century monastery. It was quite an electrified farm, even back in those days. He had electric milking machines and that sort of thing. My father's farm, my father's father's farm, was rural Eastern Slovakia, and it was less prosperous and less modern, but still a pretty good operation.

Can you recall anything about the economic situation of the Jewish community, what you know?

I don't know the general Jewish community. I can really-- obviously I was very young, so my memories of the early possibly quasi-normal days are only memories of my family's, and there tended to be comfortable households in terms of the surroundings, and plentiful food, and help, that sort of thing. I'm talking now about the late '30s, which would be my earliest memories; and early '40s where, although there was political tension in terms of sort of comfort of life--

food, clothing, that sort of thing-- those things were still available.

Do you recall the Jewish population in the town that you lived in?

Only what I read afterwards. I don't have any memory of it. I know that there was-- this is an old Jewish community with considerable culture and education. I know, again because of hearsay, that my parents had a good, solid Jewish education. However, the Jewish community was fairly well integrated into the community. My father attended university in Bratislava. My grandfather had attended a yeshiva in Germany, but I would consider it a modern orthodoxy.

Although my family was observant in terms of observing the laws of kashrut and Sabbath, in terms of dress and integration, it would be sort of the modern German orthodoxy. My father participated in the social and political movements of his youth in terms of making, forging a new Czechoslovakia; and my mother went to school in Germany, some sort of finishing school, and then did some courses in France because that was the fashionable thing to do, and play tennis in Baden Baden with the King of Sweden. She was an excellent tennis player.

With the king of Sweden?

Yes.

Who won?

She was his partner.

[LAUGHS] She was his partner?

I suppose they won. I would think the royalty always wins now.

Of course. How large was the town itself? Do you have any idea of the population?

Bratislava? My goodness. I think about 100,000, but I might be way off. I haven't looked at this for a long time.

Do you have any recollections of the nature of the relationship that existed between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish community in your town as you were growing up?

Only, again, individual cases-- and that I survived obviously depended on many courageous acts on part of the Gentile community. I could not have survived without that kind of help, and that help came partly because my father had good friends who were not Jewish. And much of that help dealt with information, forging papers as well as actual help in finding safe houses and surviving.

You say that your father had been involved in a number of secular organizations. Was he involved in any Jewish organizations?

Yes. My father had been active in B'nai Brith, as far as I know, way back, and I don't know what other Jewish organizations, but I'm sure synagogue. But again, I don't have any memory of that. But I know of B'nai Brith because I know he had been a long term member of B'nai Brith.

Was it a vibrant Jewish community?

Oh, I would think so.

Where did you go to school?

Well, I went to school-- I started school in Bratislava in 1943, and that was sort of an interrupted year. That was first

grade, and I was able to start school because I became converted. If I had just been a plain, ordinary Jewish child in 1943, even though Slovakia was a protectorate--

So in 1943, you were how old? You were--

Six.

In 1943?

Yes. I had attended some sort of kindergarten of some I -- but I honestly can't tell you the nature of that kindergarten. I would think would be some sort of private group.

Right.

But first grade was 1943 through 1944, and that was a somewhat disjointed school year, although I did in fact complete that year. Then I was in hiding-- 1944, Slovakia had been a protectorate, so we didn't have any German soldiers invade or be on the premises. It was a protectorate in the sense that it had a pro-Nazi government, a government headed by a priest.

In 1944, however, there was a partisan uprising in the mountains. Actually, one of my uncles was involved with that partisan uprising, and he and his family died when that uprising did not succeed there. They were shot. When Nazi soldiers-- German soldiers-- actually came into Slovakia in 1944, and the whole scene changed, both for the general population and certainly for Jews.

Prior to that, there had been some deportations, but they were generally teenage, older teenagers, young people, for supposedly work camps. I'm not sure that they necessarily ended up in work camps, but there was no general deportation of the population. There were a great many unpleasant events, but no deportations till 1944. And then they managed to do a very thorough job in that subsequently.

Now in 1943 and '44, you were six and seven years old.

Right.

And you have vivid memories--

Yeah, sure.

Can I just take you back for a few seconds to the time when you entered the first grade?

Yeah.

In 1943. You said something about the fact that you were converted.

Prior to that, and I'm not quite sure exactly when, but I-- from my memory, I would imagine it was the spring of '43. It was in Trnava. Trnava was a town about, I would think, an hour's train ride away from Bratislava-- I suspect about 40 miles or so-- and that was the home of my grandparents; and our seamstress came. I was playing outside my grandparents' home-- seamstress came over, and just changed what I was wearing. I'd been wearing some sort of a play suit. Changed me to a dress, and took me to a church.

I remember the church quite vividly-- it was a Lutheran church-- and I was converted.

What kind of a dress?

I don't remember the dress per se. I just remember that--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I was wondering if there was any significance.

No, I don't think there was. necessarily a white dress or whatever. I don't-- but I do remember kneeling on a red plush, some sort of blanket of some sort, and there was a priest there, and he went through a conversion process, and our seamstress acted as my godmother in this procedure, and it was a Lutheran priest. Now Lutherans were a minority in Slovakia-- Slovakia's predominantly Catholic-- but I'm sure this priest-- not priest. He would have been a-- yeah, I guess.

A priest-- a minister, would be more appropriate-- did this, quite consciously, was converting a Jewish child. The Catholic state considered conversions as legitimate, and we wanted to treat those who converted differently than Jews who did not, and had in fact-- I later, read-- negotiated with the Vatican for the rights to do that; so it was perceived, I'm sure, by my parents that this would be a way to protect me. And certainly did enable me to start regular public school, which I could not have started had I not converted.

Did you have any-- I know this is difficult, going back to when you were four years old or three years old, but did you have any sense of consciousness as a Jew wherein this conversion actually created some kind of metamorphosis in your self definition? I mean--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I don't know that it changed any kind of deep held feelings. I think I still knew that I was Jewish.

You see, what I really knew that--

[LAUGHS] I think throughout all this-- because this was the first of many, if you will, shams-- deceptions, changes of name, that I knew full well, I understood in whatever way a child could understand, that what this was, for what purpose.

You did?

Yes, I think I did.

In other words, you knew that you were Jewish.

Oh, yes.

And you knew that you were being converted to another religion.

Yes.

Was there any discussion that took place prior to this conversion--

Oh, I think there was a definite understanding. We could not help but have an understanding that one was living through a crisis that was precarious to be a Jew. The changes about the nature of Jewishness before, that you had asked me before, what were my earliest memories, and among my earliest memories is first of all that my German nurse had to leave. One of the first edicts that came with the protectorate was that Jews could not employ Christians, and my German nurse was Christian, so she had to leave our employ, and we only could have Jewish servants, so I got a Jewish nanny as opposed to this German nanny.

And how old were you at the time?

Two.

Three? Two. Do you remember her actually leaving?

I remember. She was my primary caretaker, and I remember her leaving, and I must have overheard some discussions. I have a sense of that. And there were times of tension, and there were tense train rides to go and visit grandparents in different parts of the country, and a lot of upheaval and discussion; and among the other edicts that I remember vividly is that Jews could no longer just live in-- we lived in a house.

It was fairly spacious. Two other families moved in with us, Jewish families, so all the furniture that we owned had to be moved from the first floor to the second floor, where we occupied much smaller quarters, and the other families moved in with all the furniture, so you have an image of furniture on top of furniture, many more people in the same house.

And you knew why they were moving in?

It was discussed-- I don't know that I necessarily sorted that logically, but I clearly associated the fact that we were Jewish, and this is-- Jewish people couldn't have radios, and Jewish people couldn't have furs. That's another thing-- I had a lovely little fur bunny rabbit, fur coat, and was very warm, and that disappeared, and it had to disappear because Jews could not have fur coats. I later found out that my parents, instead of turning over all these things, had put them behind the coal bin in the basement.

And much later-- 1940, between '44 and '45, apparently, Nazis came to our house. People who had been in the group that had been rounded up before told us that after the war-- and they thought we were hiding behind that coal bin, and what they found was only furs and the other things that were being hidden. My parents had made an attempt to try to leave Czechoslovakia before World War II broke out, when after the problems in Vienna and-- well, in Germany and then Vienna, the Anschluss-- they made a concerted effort to try to get visas to the United States.

My father had a brother and uncle here, and we even had boat tickets, but Hitler moved too fast, and our silver didn't make it.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Our silver survived the war in the United States.

And that was what year? That was in 19--

'38.

'38?

Early '39, but by the time all the visas came through and whatever, it was too late-- borders were closed.

What were some of your recollections going back again to the conversion and going to school? Did you ever sit down in--

There were German soldiers then, OK? Just the local population, which-- there were sufficient Nazis among them to make it uncomfortable. It is the Slovaks, the Nazis among the Slovaks, that had incorporated all these edicts. I don't remember much about first grade. I do remember some training for air raids, but I really can't-- I don't remember much of it. I don't know why. I can't tell you that-- any kind of vignettes.

I remember vividly my father walking me to school the first day. I also remember that for some reason, the school-- physically, the school in which I started was not the school which I ended the year in. I don't know why the whole school got shifted, whether there was an air raid-- I don't think so. I think most of the air raids occurred in, till fall of

1944, but I do remember that. But beyond that, I don't have much memory of it.

Do you remember anything about the relationship that you had with students in the first grade? Do you remember anything about the fact that --

Not particularly, no, no. I also don't think that schools generally in Europe tend to be quite as social as schools do here, and one's friends tended to be people in the neighborhood, and you went to school, you went to school, and those were not necessarily people with whom you were friends. Because I remember that later on, when things were if you will, after the war, that there-- I don't have any particular memories as focusing on schools as those of my friends. Friends came from other areas.

Right. Now how long were you in the school? I know you mentioned--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

That would be a regular school year, more or less. It might have been a shortened school year. Probably-- it was an interrupted school year because, during the middle of the school year, there was-- my parents decided that it might be a good idea to get me to Hungary. My mother had a sister in Budapest, and it looked as if Hungarian Jews would be more protected.

And the pretext to getting us to Hungary was that supposedly I had inflamed tonsils, and that the operation for tonsillitis would be better in Budapest, so we made the long train trip and visited family in the eastern part of Slovakia, which is sort of the way to Budapest, and I do remember vividly being in Budapest, which had been bombed considerably, and being with my aunt in a hotel, part of which was bombed out, and my father decided that he wouldn't do that, and he brought me back.

He feared for his safety and [? yours? ?]

Yes. That was one of those fortunate decisions that, I think, had a great deal to do with the fact that I'm alive.

And this was still 1943?

This was '43, yes; and because, as you know in terms of the history, Hungarian Jews did not fare so well either, and I think my aunt might have had-- my aunt ended up leaving Hungary, coming to Slovakia, and actually, she did end up in a concentration camp, and perished four days after her camp was liberated.

Do you remember any discussions in the family at the table at home about what the plight was?

I don't--

Again, it's so hard to ask these questions because--

Well, I don't remember that many specifics, but I certainly do remember that these things were discussed, and obviously there was a great deal of discussion of how to protect me. In 1944-- summer of 1944, slightly before the whole uprising business started-- my parents placed me with this family of our seamstress, who had been my godmother in this conversion, and that whole family went to a small village in Slovakia, really quite a rural little place, to spend the summer, and I spent the summer with them.

Summer '44?

Summer '44. And my father only visited me once, and I remember very much the day he visited-- it was a rather idyllic day, it was beautiful. I know-- he'd said afterwards it was sort of like a break in incredible tension because meantime, there had been deportations [? enough ?] where there was really a constant daily-- every moment, a tension as to whether you would--

[LANGER COUGHS]

--survive, and I was in this lovely little village, with fresh milk from a cow, and fishing, and all these very idyllic sorts of events, and the plan had been for me to stay in this village-- and as a matter of fact, I did even start school in the fall in this little village, and some clothes were made for me so I'd look just like the other village children-- and several events caused some problems.

The first one-- again, we walked to a Lutheran church at some point in the summer because the village was predominately Catholic, and the only Lutheran church was a couple of villages away, and we walked there-- and-- I recognized at this little Lutheran church, there were two of my friends, sisters from Bratislava, also Jewish children, and we spoke to one another. And obviously none of us children thought it was particular, but I remember there was a great deal of tension afterwards among the people who were sheltering me because, you know, what if people noticed that I hadn't known them? Obviously everybody's cover would have been blown.

Did you know why?

I didn't at the time, OK? But something was said to me afterwards, to be more careful. And the other time that I made an error that cut short this whole thing in the village is that German soldiers in the meantime had come to Slovakia to fight the partisans, and some German soldiers appeared in the village and asked directions in German, and I was the only peasant kid who understood German. German soldiers didn't think anything of it, but some of the villagers started talking, and so I left the village. And then there were some questions as to what to do with me and where to place me.

Let me take you back just for one more second. The seamstress took you into the village.

Yeah, her family.

Do you have any idea why she did that? I mean, what her--

She had very close ties to my family, and I think out of the goodness of her heart-- and I'm sure that there were financial-- that this was not a financial burden to them in that sense. My family had sufficient money, and I guess sufficient friends with whom money was kept among the Gentile community, that one could pay for my upkeep. But in terms of why she did it, I think there were many cases of Christians who risked a great deal to save the lives of those who could.

One of the potential sites for where I was to end up was a Catholic orphanage-- there were Catholic nuns who were taking in Jewish children-- but my mother hadn't seen me for a long time.

I was going to ask you.

And so she asked that I be smuggled back into Bratislava, to the city, from-- first from the village, we went back to Trnava and then they got me back to Bratislava; and at that time, my parents were living in a bombed out factory. They were in hiding, and they were in this bombed out factory--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--an apartment building.

In '44?

In '44, and I remember I stayed with them for a couple of days because my mother hadn't seen me in all this time, and again that was one of those-- who knows? Luck, because in the meantime someone had turned in the nuns. The nuns were taken to concentration camp, all the children were taken to concentration camp, and that was the end of that. Then I ended up in Bratislava.

How long were you with the nuns?

I was never with the nuns. Instead of taking -- you know--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

That was one of the plans.

I see.

But before that plan could be actualized, it was decided that we'd have a reunion, family reunion. And so then the next year, and then there was-- the rest of the war I spent in hiding with a Christian family who was originally Hungarian, lived in Bratislava, just staying in my hometown, but on the other side of town, and they were willing to take me. They had originally rented a room for my mother's aunt, a young aunt-- they were almost contemporaries in age-- and her husband.

But before my grand-aunt and her husband could go and take up residence in the room, they were caught in one of the dragnets. And as they were being marched to the station, they were going through a market, and my aunt told her husband, listen, I'm going to try to get out of the market. Why don't you try to-- and she risked, and he did not, and she survived the war. But in any case, they no longer needed this particular place, so she went with me to these people and asked, could I stay with them instead?

And because I spoke fairly good Hungarian, and because I had blond hair and blue eyes, they were willing to risk it. And I lived the rest of the war with them in this-- they lived in a small apartment house. He was a writer, and crippled by polio, and they had no children. And I was supposed to be their niece, from an area where there was fighting, and I lived under an assumed name, and to make sure that I got the story right, we practiced.

They woke me up several times in the middle of the night to make sure I would give them my assumed name, so that there wouldn't be any question, and there were German soldiers living the apartment house, and I was not to understand them. I had to pretend I couldn't understand German, because that would have given me away too.

I'm having difficulty comprehending all that behavior.

[LAUGHS]

How the age of six years old, seven years old--

When I had my own children that age, I could not imagine that they would do that either.

But you knew--

I did not know the nature of the risk. I really did not know what would happen to me if they took me away, but I knew that it wouldn't be good, and I knew it would be terrible. And so I knew--

You knew that the potential for taking you away would have been because you were Jewish?

Absolutely

There must have been a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety that you yourself experienced.

Yes, I'm sure-- there was, but there was also the added anxiety at this point. There were aerial bombings periodically, so there was also that anxiety. My parents would visit me. My parents were in hiding again all this time, different places, and they would visit on a night where there was no moon because of course, there's blackout.

And one time they came, and there were some neighbors visiting us, and when I opened the door, my parents were there. I pretended I did not recognize them. That was an unrehearsed thing. Yes, I clearly knew, and I clearly understood, and had to act on it. And I can't tell you what brought that perception of the reality that was there, but it was there.

When you were in hiding with this family, you went to school at the time?

No. No school, and things were somewhat disrupted at that point, and I don't think there was a great deal of concern about children not going to school because this was already towards the end of the war. We were liberated in April by the Russians, and I started there probably about October of 1944, liberated in April. So I'm sure that--

OK. How long were you separated from your parents at that time? Before you said --

Well, I don't know exactly what month I started in that little village, but I assume that it was about June, and I had seen my parents for a brief visit about October, and then next April.

In the next April?

So not quite a year.

What happened when you were reunited with your parents?

Well, my parents-- as I said, my parents did keep contact. They did manage to visit me roughly once a month, and also managed-- they kept track of my doings because somebody who lived in that building had a little store, and you know there were an awful lot of people who knew about this. Obviously they-- one had to trust to their goodwill, and my mother's aunt, who looked Aryan and was not known in Bratislava, risked going out to the store and to periodically find out that I was all right.

Now you say you were liberated--

In April of 1944

--of 1944. What happened then?

Well, one of the things. First of all, my parents were in hiding. My aunt and my mother had rented a room from a man whose family went to the country to escape the bombing. My father lived in that room, and this man never knew that my father was there. He did not even know after liberation because they did not want him to realize the kind of risk he was placing-- he had been placed in. That room that they had rented was literally two blocks away from our original house.

I'm sorry-- this is a room?

My parents, my parents and my mother's aunt, lived in one room.

OK. In that period of hiding?

During that period of time. This man-- come the liberation [INAUDIBLE] I had to spend about three or four days in the cellar because of the fighting you know, Russians.

And when you said--

And when that was over--

Sorry.

They told him the story, said my father had just come, and they are really Jewish, and that they've got this child across the city, and he volunteered to come and get me. And he was the one who presented himself the day after and said, I've come to bring you to your parents, and I remember walking through the city where there were still-- there were still corpses from the fighting-- and joining my parents.

I know this is difficult, but this is a man you had never seen--

Right.

--before, who was all of a sudden coming to you and saying, he was coming to take you--

Obviously, I would assume that the people with whom I stayed, there must have been some arrangement. I don't know. Like you know, there were no telephone lines up, I'm sure.

Was there any discussion-- I mean, during this time when you were with his family in hiding, about what was going on? I mean, why were people getting killed?

There was a great deal of discussion, and a great deal in terms of like what?

I mean, did you understand what was happening? I mean you said--

Oh, I knew there was a war going on.

OK, you say now that you were walking--

And I knew who the good guys and the bad guys were. [LAUGHS]

I mean, you were saying-- you saw corpses lying all around.

Not -- but I remember one or two that looked like corpses-- I mean, we didn't go that close to look, but this was so soon after the fighting was over.

Right. OK.

You know, there was a lot-- it's incredible what people pick up. I mean, one of the things-- there was a lot of discussion that-- there was a lot of fear of the Russians as liberators, too. Rapes-- I didn't know what rape was, but there was obviously a lot of fear among women as to what would happen when these soldiers came, because Budapest had been the last city, big city, prior to that liberated, and Budapest had a long siege-- six weeks.

So there was a lot of concern. Would we have enough food? How awful would be the fighting? There wasn't that kind of stand for Bratislava, and the soldiers-- the pillage and rape was not nearly as severe because after all, these were Slavic friends that we were liberating as opposed to the Russians liberating Hungary, which was considered an enemy country for Russians.

But they were fairly primitive people, these Russians, and the jokes that we have about Russians wanting watches up and down the arm wasn't so funny when some drunken soldier came in and demanded watches and was really being rather ugly. I was still in the cellar till someone who was-- I don't know, a higher up officer came and got him out.

I just want to ask you one more question about when you mentioned thing about deportations. Did you know who was being deported?

Yes, again because there were people with whom we had contact. One of, if you will, one of my governess, nurse, whatever-- young women who had replaced this German nurse was being deported, and I remember her crying. This is

about '43, and so I do know-- I did know that.

And you knew that she was deported because she was Jewish?

Oh yes. Now we were not at risk during the time before-- or not at great risk in terms of life because my father had an exemption in Slovakia. There was exemption granted for what the state considered necessary work for heads of families, and then their whole families. My father had an exemption because even though my father, of course, no longer owned his printing plant-- it was Aryanized-- in order for the printing plant to run, they needed him.

And so there was a great deal of concern about getting the exemptions, and keeping tabs-- I know my father was active, or in good contact, with the Jewish community because there was a great deal of concern for keeping information going. What are the changes in the edicts and laws? Who would be deported next? And trying to get word to those to try to escape and leave when people-- to find safe houses, and you know, then the volume of all that just became so great in 1944 that nobody could deal with it.

Right. What happened when you came and saw your parents, when you were reunited with your parents? I don't remember that. I mean, we lived together in the-- there was still a bit of upheaval. I remember then we started getting stories of who survived and who didn't, and that was a very sad time, because my mother's mother and father and sister died in concentration camp.

My father's father, his sister, their child, his brother, and his family lost their lives, and [? my ?] [? aunt ?] [INAUDIBLE] in the partisan uprising. I remember-- there was lack of food, and I remember my mother trading one of my coats, outgrown coats, for a goose, and trying to put together whatever food we had, because refugees from the camps were beginning to come through on trains.

And I remember going with my mother and my mother's aunt literally carrying whatever food in big pots that we could to the trains so that we could help feed those that were coming from the camps. And shortly after though, I had uncles who were in the Czechoslovak army in exile, and they were coming through, and tried to get us food parcels. The Czechoslovak army in exile got as far as Plzen, and then some of them managed to-- they were looking for their families too.

And one of the things that they managed to bring was chocolate, and I never remembered eating chocolate-- I was rather skinny-- and the only way I would eat the chocolate was to swallow it down with a glass of water in one hand, chocolate in the other. I wish I still had those same taste buds because [LAUGHS] it kept me skinnier.

Was your family in a displaced persons' camp at all?

No, no. Slovakia returned slowly back to normal. Obviously, we never went back to our house-- we got an apartment. The furniture in that apartment must have been left by Germans. Oh, the other thing that I remember is that there was Germans who had lived there and left in a hurry, and my mother's aunt took me to loot some of those apartments, much to my father's horror-- he thought that was terrible-- for things like dolls.

There were then no toys, and a doll that I acquired that way after the war. But most of what we had owned had been destroyed or taken away. A few pieces of furniture were left in my grandfather's house in Trnava, which was a good substantial house. It turned out ultimately that the person who lived there was the person who turned my grandfather in to the Nazis. He had-- or he was a Nazi himself, but he also managed to be a communist.

In Slovakia-- things in Czechoslovakia things were fairly normal till 1948, till February 1948, and my father regained his printing plant. I started-- I went back to school for the last month of 1944, finished second grade that way.

OK.

[LAUGHS]

Right.

May.

Right.

And so that people started coming back, a few people that were left of my father's friends; very, very little family; and tried to rebuild lives, and some people stayed there after the Communist coup in 1948. My parents started talking about leaving because my father's perception was that he had had enough. He didn't want to go through this again, and besides, he had been after the war somewhat active in publishing a democratic journal.

And his brother had been with the Czechoslovak government in exile, and then at the founding of the United Nations at the Bretton Woods Conference, and was with the International Monetary Fund, and my uncle here in Washington had the perception that it wouldn't do him any good to have family behind the Iron Curtain, and nor would do us very good to have family who was associated here. So we were able to get an exit visa on the strength of a visa to Canada. We never did go to Canada, though. We got to the United States, and both sides-- both my mother and father had family in New York.

It's very interesting that you say Canada. The Canadian government came over to Europe, and they were looking for farmers.

That's exactly what we got as an exit visa. My uncle, the one with the IMF, married a Canadian. Her family had [a farm in Winnipeg, and on the basis of farming-- of course, my parents both had farm backgrounds, so it was legitimate. My father and mother--

That's unbelievable, because a number of individuals, survivors that I've spoken to have told me precisely that, except that--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

They were not farmers.

They were not farmers?

Well, my parents at this point weren't farmers either--

No, I understand--

--but at least they had a legitimate farm background in the sense that they understood crops. They, believe me, hadn't had much to do with the cultivation of those crops, but they did know how to manage farms.

Can I come back just for two minutes? '44 to '48, you know, those four years.

'45-- '44 was war. '45-- I'm sorry, I think I misspoke when I said I went to school in '44. '45.

'45, OK. Right. '45 into '48. Was there a revitalization of the Jewish community? Do you--

Not really.

--have any memories of that?

No. There was-- I'm sure there was this small synagogue. I remember attending very few services. I had no Jewish education to speak of. There wasn't any.

What about-- you had mentioned your father prior to that time, prior to the war, had--

My parents, as I said, kept a kosher home. That ceased with the war. And as I said, my father was an observant Jew. He still remained an observant Jew in spirit, but not in a literate sense. The first time he traveled on Sabbath was to get his sister out of Vienna after the Anschluss, and I think he sort of-- a compact had been broken, and he had never shaved on Sabbath till Hitler.

Did he ever talk about that with you?

Oh yeah. We discussed it. So he still was observant in terms of being a believing Jew. I don't think my mother believed again.

So you went to public school then, between '45 and '48?

Yes I went to public school. I went to what was considered elementary school, and at the end of fourth grade, one could take an exam. Public school, elementary school, was for five years. At the end of four years, you could take an exam to get into the Gymnasium, which is like first form, sixth grade. And I passed that exam, and so I started-- I sort of skipped a year, and started Gymnasium.

And then the second-- then we started making-- at the end of that, that would taken me '47. '48, I was first year Gymnasium. And in the fall of '48, they redid the schools, and Gymnasiums were considered too elitist, so they reshuffled the whole thing, and I remember starting some other school for a month or so, and then we left Czechoslovakia.

OK. So-- in 1948, you were how old?

11.

11 years old. Was there any consideration of going to Israel in '48?

I'm sure there was, but I think our family was very much concerned about trying to get together with whatever family that was left, which was mostly in the United States. And although I do have a cousin who did go to Israel, they're now living here in the United States, but really the quest was to just go. And as long as this Canadian opportunity existed, then we could come to North America. We got as far as New York, and petitioned to stay.

And actually, one of the efforts was to pass a bill through Congress, a special private bill, to let us stay in the United States on the basis that we had family here, and all the destruction of the family to the extent that it had been, and then that wasn't necessary. I do have a copy of that bill, but that wasn't necessary because the Displaced Persons Act was passed, and we qualified under that to stay in the United States.

This may-- I'm not sure how to ask the question, but you know, you're 11 years old, you're finding yourself all of a sudden in the United States. I mean, did you have any--

I hated it at first.

Really?

Yeah. Oh, for one, you know it's a very hard time to change. My English-- I had had some private English lessons. I joke in saying English is my fifth language. It's probably the fourth or fifth because German, Slovak, Hungarian, and then Russian-- we all had to study Russian, and so I had Russian in schools, but I had some private English lessons, and my mother particularly spoke good English, and my father spoke English as well, and that's what they spoke when they didn't want me to understand, so it was a good incentive to learn.

I spoke some English, but clearly with an accent. I wore the wrong kinds of clothes, we wore short little dresses when

we were 11 in Europe, and come here, and there are sophisticated people, and I was sort of out of it. And when I came to the United States, we first came to Bayonne, because that's what my family was, and first day, besieged by all these people I'd never even heard of-- distant relatives, near relatives, whatever. They all wanted to know, how do you like America? And I thought-- the most absurd thing, you know. Here I was in Bayonne one day-- right, come on.
[LAUGHS]

And clearly it was upsetting in that sense, and then we moved to Woodside, Queens, where I attended junior high. Because my English wasn't terrific, they placed-- they had a homogeneous grouping, and I got in with all the dummies. So that was also upsetting, because except for the English, which perhaps was somewhat challenging, nothing else was. That was sort of-- we got here in November, and I started school in Bayonne for six weeks, and then off to--

And I didn't miss any schooling because they transferred me directly to seventh grade, although I was a year younger than seventh grade should have been. But then, off with the dummies in Woodside, and next year they promoted me to a better class. And I think after the first year and a half, I was fairly well adjusted. For one, I had a second cousin who took great pains in making sure that my English pronunciation was good, so I got the "th" sound right. I think I was young enough not to have an accent and to sort of fit in, if you will.

During this whole period of transition-- I sort of alluded to this before-- was there any attempt to sort of describe the sequence of events that were taking place between yourself and your father, yourself and your mother? Now we are going to America because, we are leaving Slovakia because?

Oh, yes. Oh, sure.

It was clear, in other words?

Oh, yes. I think-- yeah, I'm sure I was a good deal more politically aware and savvy than one would consider children of that age normally to be because that ruled my life-- politics mattered in a very significant way. So I knew exactly why we were leaving Czechoslovakia.

Right.

I remember vividly the time, the radio announcement of the Communist takeover. [? We'd ?] visiting family, some distant family in a little village. This must have been some little school vacation-- February, I don't remember why I was there. I remember having eaten too many pickles that day. [LAUGHS] And then came this announcement, and-- I knew what it meant. And among my friends-- and as I told you, my friends were children of my parents' friends, Jewish.

We discussed the pros and cons of communism and whatever. Some of them, by the way, stayed. One of the families' man was an attorney, and did very nicely under communism. Some of those young people have subsequently come to the United States-- they managed to get out in the Dubcek era. One of the most astonishing things is that the people I met last when we were 11 ended up being not very different from me. I thought what really shaped so much of me was my growing up in America, and yet here they went to school and university in Czechoslovakia.

One of them is now an urban planner for the Meadowlands Authority, another one got a PhD in psychology. Very similar paths in terms of interests; and yet I'm sure that I'm as American as can be for heaven's sake in many ways in terms of what motivates me at this point. They didn't come here till they were adults.

Right. Going back again to when you were 11 years old-- coming to the United States. How did you see the war? I mean, was this a war against between superpowers, between countries that were fighting? How did you see the Jewish question, the issue of--

Well, I knew that war very much involved Jews, and me particularly. It was a very personal thing, and very much part of my conscience and being. And in that sense, political events were very much more part of my being than any of my contemporaries during adolescence. This is the Eisenhower era during which I became a teenager, went to college, and I think my perceptions of the world were very different than my classmates, my friends, and I always did feel myself

somewhat apart.

Not set apart-- I certainly did all the right things in terms of dress and activities and whatever-- but inside, in terms of my relationship with my peers. There were things I knew they did not understand, and I remember very much when Diary of Anne Frank came out, and here was something with which I could really identify, because those feelings, emotions, were very much mine, although she was of course older during that time. And I remember being very upset with some of my friends who didn't have the patience to read it. And I knew there was a tremendous distance in that sense.

Did you know that six million Jews had been killed?

Oh, yes. I mean not just-- I'm sure I knew that. I mean I knew the totality of the horror, as well as the personal horror and emotions of people I knew.

When you were 11 years old? When you--

Well, before.

OK.

As soon as information became available after the war in terms of the totality of it.

Did you want to hear it?

And there was always stories to who made it, who did not, and how; and the stories that were told-- how did you survive? And how did you survive the camps?

So there were-- I mean, between those years-- for example, '45 through '48. Before coming to the States. I mean, there was great discussion in your family, between their friends.

As a matter of fact, one of the things that we found very upsetting when we came to the United States is, in contrast to the attention that people paid to the Holocaust now, how very little of the family that was here wanted to know.

That's exactly what I was going to ask you. This is a family that you came to.

Yes.

Did they ask?

Very little. They really wanted to not know.

Did you want to tell them?

I don't know that I wanted to tell them, but I know my family-- my parents did, and my aunt and uncle did, who came with us-- my father's sister and her husband and son came with us simply because my aunt decided she was going to be the last member of the family left there. They were not in any kind of political danger. My uncle was a civil engineer, and he would be valuable, even to a communist state. And my cousin was two years older than I, had been bar mitzvah'd in Czechoslovakia, and was much more upset. I mean he probably would have wanted to go to Israel, but he certainly didn't want to-- if he was leaving, he certainly wouldn't come to the United States.

Why do you think they didn't want to know, they didn't want to ask what had happened?

It's something I never discussed with them afterwards. I think-- I'm not sure whether they had a sense of just this was too morbid, or because there must have been guilt-- they were there, here, whatever.

Did you yourself wonder where anybody else was during this period of time? I mean, after all if you were cognizant of the fact--

You mean, why weren't they doing more for us?

Yeah.

No, although obviously we paid very close attention in clandestine radio to what was done.

In particular, don't-- in '46, '47, '48, when you were already nine, 10, 11?

No. No, as was to why they weren't-- no. I did not sort of dwell, how come this happened? I think the one thing that you sort of skirted-- you asked me, how what was your relationship with your schoolmates? I think even after the war, one had the sense that there was an underlying tone of anti-Semitism among this segment of the population. Someone didn't ask, how did this horrible thing happen?

Because there was anti-Semitism, and it was pervasive. We also had tremendous experience with people who risked a great deal-- if you will, the righteous-- but this anti-Semitism had existed for a long time, it was there, and that there was a mechanism to put into place is something that I only understood later on. But no, I don't know that there was a question-- how come the United States did not do more?

There was concern about immigration, there was concern as to what you can do in terms of-- In a personal way, our family was very helpful. There were packages, support, and there wasn't that sense that they abandoned us in anyway, or that they personally could have done more. I don't think we ever felt that.

When you came to the United States--

And you know, it may also be unfair to say [? that ?] they did not want to know. I think it also may have been if you will, a politeness not to upset. So who knows? And I certainly didn't ask, how come you didn't ask questions? And all sorts of other things in mind, like getting to like ice cream sodas. I don't mean to be silly about it, but you know, there was a different kind of adjustment problem rather than sort of a retrospective evaluation.

When you came to the United States, I mean, did you feel that-- you clearly felt when you're in Europe that you were-- that your life was definitely threatened?

You mean 1948?

No, before. When you were in hiding.

Oh sure.

When you went to the village.

Oh yes.

It was clear to you that you could easily be killed?

Yes.

Because you were Jewish?

Yes.

And when you came to the United States-- I mean, after. I mean 1945, '46, '47, '48.

Back then I certainly didn't have that feeling that my life was threatened because I was Jewish, right.

Did you feel that you had been saved? I mean, was there this all of a sudden tremendous relief? I mean, obviously you were under tremendous duress.

No, I don't remember that sort of sensation. I was very happy to be back with my parents.

OK. So you came in '48 to Bayonne, from Bayonne to--

Queens, then to Forest Hills.

To Queens, then to Forest Hills.

That [? I ?] [? remember. ?]

And-- OK, then to Forest Hills.

Right.

You know what we're going to do now?

No. We're going to take a break?

We're going to take a break for a few minutes, OK?

Great, OK. Oh, let's get some water. How are you doing on time?

Good.

Not bad.

We just did an hour.