

We're were talking about, you know, your life when you came to the United States again from Bayonne to Queens--

To Forest Hills.

--et cetera. Just going back for a couple of minutes, we were talking off the camera about whether any Jewish agencies had helped your family.

Yeah, I think so. I remember that there was the HIAS involvement. I think HIAS facilitated things like boat tickets. Although they were paid for by our family's money and our family here had to put up essentially bonds so that, you know, we could come to the United States, HIAS did act as a facilitator in some of the whole travel procedure.

Because we left Czechoslovakia as soon as we could, as soon as we got any kind of exit visas because there was always the risk that the communists would change their mind. And I remember the nervous tension on the train till we crossed the border into bombed-out Germany. And traveled through Germany.

We stayed in Brussels with my mother's sister whose family was living in Brussels at the time. We stayed there for about a month, and then caught a very slow boat in Rotterdam. The earliest tickets we could get was on the SS Flying Independent, which had a total passenger roster of 12. And from Rotterdam we went to--

It had a passenger roster of 12?

12 people on this whole ship, and it was a fall passage. And so not only was it slow, it was rough. And the ship ended up docking in Hamburg for a couple of days to take on cargo. And I remember we went ashore, and I remember images of really bombed-out Germany. Of course, Rotterdam was in no great shape in 1948 either.

And then slowly made it to the United States. And although-- I just remember that there was talk of HIAS help in Rotterdam, and I think there was some help, especially to my father's sister's family because my uncle and aunt had less command of English, had no funds in the United States.

We had some limited funds in the United States. Again, funds that some of them had gone here before the war that just had them banked. But we weren't totally without means, whereas my aunt and uncle essentially had been. And I think they got some HIAS help and got help from us, and I know all that was repaid and built a successful life for themselves and their family.

What did your father do when he came to the States.

My father was a printer by trade and a publisher and did get his printing union-- lithographic union membership here that ended up working initially with the Czechoslovak newspapers in New York, the Czech and Slovak Newspapers. So we kidded him that his Czech improved considerably after he came to the United States. It's a slightly different language than Slovak.

He worked for them for quite some time as production manager and always had the dream of, again, purchasing his own printing shop, which he did manage to do but, of course, in a very limited scale. He put all his finances in. Competition in the printing business in New York is fierce, and the business ultimately failed because a couple of companies did not pay promptly and it was a cash flow problem.

So he ended up losing a good deal of the money that he had-- it wasn't a good deal of money-- and then ended up getting a job really as a clerk with the United Nations Postal Administration doing some of their production and publicity and managed to work himself up into a special category and was still working in 1976 when he was 72 years old, 73 almost and still was working on a full-time basis in a special category when retirement age is at 60.

It was very interesting when we were, again, off camera before you were telling me about the time when your father was carrying some bibles to [INAUDIBLE]

Uh -- so much of the little survival that there was depended not just on the goodwill and heroic efforts really of Gentiles but also a lot of luck and courage. My father was particularly concerned with trying to communicate to family members about potential dangers. And because of some contacts he had, he sometimes did get warnings of potential roundups earlier.

In one case, he and my mother traveled to Trnava, that neighboring city where my grandparents lived, to warn them of an approaching roundup and were stopped by some Nazis. I don't know whether SS or whatever. And before they even had a chance to ask my parents for their identification, my father pulled out a Bible, which had been printed in our shop, a Christian Bible full of beautiful color illustrations.

I have a copy of that Bible now and very beautifully printed and with a lot of loose holy pictures, again, printed. And my grandparents' home was right next to the archdiocese in Trnava. And my father said, I'm going to see Archbishop thus and such to show him this new Bible that we've just printed and started distributing the pictures and managed to sort of weave his way out of that difficult spot.

Interesting. Coming back to the United States, you continued education in the public schools in Queens. Did you ever discuss the experiences in Europe? I mean, after all--

Very seldom. I think-- I remember how upset I was that when Diary of Anne Frank had been published-- and of course, we got a copy I read it and I felt not only kinship with Anne Frank but also a way of sort of sharing my experiences with my friends and asked them to read it. And some did, and some just couldn't bother plow through it, and I sort of realized there was a distance between us that they never really could share my experiences.

There was just no-- there was tremendous distance between what I had experienced as a child and the way they lived their childhood. And I don't think we ever bridged the gap. As a matter of fact, recently we had a 20th year reunion of my sorority pledge class-- this is a Jewish sorority in Michigan-- and got together with some of the people and started talking about my background then.

We had not done that when we were young women, 18, 19, 20 years old because we were much too-- they were much too concerned with who's your date to the next dance and how are you going to pass this final. And I will say I was caught up in that too, although I always sensed that there was this sort of part of me that just wasn't shared.

Yeah, we were also talking about the fact that, in general, people today are talking about their experiences in the Holocaust and--

And I'm glad of that. Clearly I'm doing this interview as part of that effort. I've done some other things. I've taught religious school and did that in Baton Rouge where we lived for a while and, whenever it is appropriate, bring in the Holocaust as a part of the Jewish experience.

And I've talked-- was invited by Baton Rouge Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and their young, whatever the youth group to come and give a discussion-- lead a discussion on the Holocaust. And I agree that it's an experience that needs to be told because otherwise it will be forgotten, and it can't be forgotten.

But I think many survivors have often felt that not just that the telling is difficult but that there is sort of a perception gap that those who experienced it think differently in ways that, you know, are sort of almost unfathomable. I'll give you another example. I don't know whether you saw as a result of the American gathering of the Holocaust survivors, the Washington Post put out a publication. I don't know whether you've seen it?

No.

They had run a series of articles, and they put it together in a publication that was sent to my children as children of survivors. And it came last week, and I opened it. And it was a terrible thing to open it right away because inevitably I was late for class because I got so caught up in reading it.

And one of the vignettes really sort of struck home-- it was a little thing. I think it's Charles Fenyvesi. He writes for the Washington Post, and he's a survivor from Hungary. And he says one of the things that passes through his head at times and thinks about his Gentile friends he wonders, which are good enough friends to save him, risk their lives? And I've thought of that, and it's a strange thought.

That's right.

And I never even expressed it to anyone else till I read this article, and I thought, my god, there's another person who thinks like that.

Right. Have you transmitted your experiences to your own children?

Yes, I don't know that-- you know, not from alpha to iota. Just you know, little stories here and there. But not in a systematic enough way. I know my uncle has written down-- I actually wrote in a diary for him as well so he could remember his own family's experience.

I wish I had done that with my father while he was still alive. I don't say I wish I had done that with my mother simply because my mother died when I was 16, and I don't think at 16 it would have occurred to me to do it. But I thought about it and doing it with my father, and we shared reminiscence. And we just never did.

You were telling me that when your mother passed away, the cause of her death was--

My mother-- no. My mother had an aneurysm, and she had a cerebral hemorrhage and was in a coma for a period of days and then died. She had, however, experienced very severe headaches at the back of her head for a period of about three years prior to that. And the doctor she'd go to attributed those awful headaches to the fact that she had lived through the Holocaust, and they never probed further.

And of course, those headaches, in retrospect, we can say are associated with an aneurysm that perhaps should have been diagnosed. I'm not sure-- because she died in 1953, I'm not sure that medical science would have necessarily been able to rectify the situation to the extent that could now occur in terms of surgery. But certainly, the diagnosis wasn't there because the assumption was, well, those were such horrible times, and if you've got such bad headaches, that's why.

I guess we sort of, you know, talked about the lessons to be learned of the Holocaust. Has your view of, you know, America, American life, been changed?

I don't know if it changed. In terms of what America had done or had not done, surely more could have been done to prevent it. Not just by America but by so many countries, including Canada who was very happy to have our family in 1948 but wasn't admitting any Jews eight years earlier when it could have been crucial. I'm afraid I'm enough of a political scientist to understand political forces too well to be as judgmental as perhaps I should be.

Right.

I still think we have-- you know, despite the many failings of the United States, what we do have is a much more open and accepting society. And I must tell you, I'm an optimist. I guess I'm inherently an optimist. And I think we need to be vigilant that that freedom is preserved for all minorities. I feel that keenly.

But I think ours is still enough of an open society and an accepting society basically despite the many horrors, especially if you look at periods in the '60s-- early '60s when you look at the Civil Rights problems and progress we've made since then, that I don't think a similar pattern could occur here.

You do not?

No.

You know, at the risk of being trite I was going to say something about could it happen again? I mean--

Look, man's inhumanity to man is unfathomable. I mean, what happened in Cambodia is totally beyond anybody's understanding of how human life should be. Clearly there is that awful edge to mankind. And when it can be guarded with efficiency of what the Germans did is just overwhelming.

But then, you know, how do you test one's own sense of sort of optimism about what potential for good is against the tremendous potential for evil? And I guess my tendency is to always come down on the potential for good.

OK. I want to thank you very much for taking time out of your schedule [? to spend time. ?]

Glad to do it.

Thank you, Sue.