

We continue our interview with Robert Mansfeld. Mr. Mansfeld, you wanted to backtrack a little and tell us about an incident that happened earlier in your narrative. Would you like to tell that now?

Well, I think once we were liberated and back with my father-- I mentioned earlier in the interview that he was picked up by [Personal name] who was the Gestapo commander of Holland if not of Amsterdam. I'm not sure.

In any case, he was being tried in Holland for war crimes, and this man called up my-- yeah, I think that he called up my father and asked my father to be a witness for him. And my father said, of course, no, but it's interesting. He must have felt that, because he gave the provisions back and let him go or whatever the reason was, that he felt that my father might be a witness for him rather than against him. Well, I don't think he was a witness against him but certainly not a witness for him. So that is kind of interesting how history kind of turns around.

But after the war, I went back to school and finished my high school, and then I was at my-- well, let me back up. The children who were born a certain day-- there was conscription, so we had to go into the army. And there were some dispensation given to who were born a certain year.

Well, as it turned out, mine was not in there. That is to say, I was called up, and I could have left if I wanted to. But then I said, to heck with it. I might as well serve it out. And I went into the Dutch army, served for two years. I was fortunate enough, after basic training, because of my high school degree, that I get to general headquarters in The Hague, where I was assigned to the G5, which was at that time the office of training, and occupied as a-- there were only two non-professional soldiers on the staff. There was another guy and I.

You're about 18 at the time?

No, I was 19 at the time already. And so I finished up two years, and I had a really unusual army career. That's to say that, since I knew everything, since I was in-- I was in the bureau where I replaced a master sergeant, and a sergeant, and a corporal. So they had very cheap labor. For \$0.25 a day, you can't ask for too much.

That was the spending money.

Well, that's why I [INAUDIBLE]. That was the pay for a soldier. [INAUDIBLE] got \$0.25 a day. That's American cents. It was a guilder a day. And I was working with an officer who had been in the fighting underground, and unfortunately, this man really had a nervous condition. And after I had worked with him for a while, I could, of course, tell in the morning if he had slept or not because he looked terrible. And I said, you didn't sleep too well, did you? He said no. I said, why don't you go to sleep? I'll take care of it.

So as it turned out, he was then finally sent to a sanatorium to recuperate in the woods. That they only gave him a [INAUDIBLE]. He did look much better when he came back, but then he was honorably discharged and all that. But in any case, so now I was handling this office all by myself, and they never replaced anybody there.

And I must say that I really had some very unusual incidents, and I kind of worked very hard. But then, of course, I took advantage of everything that was to be had. So then came the day that my boss, who was a captain, said that he wants me to go for exam for private first class, which was OK. I did that. I got private first class, and then came that he wanted me to become a corporal, make the corporal's exam.

Well, we went down with 20 guys, and 19 flunked. And we all had the same education. They were all from the same-- and I never forget that young second lieutenant, who had the same education that we had, but he went to officer school-- he dressed us up and down, and he swore that we would be back because we answered all yes and no, regardless of what it said. We didn't want to because, at that time, we were at war in Indonesia. And if you become a non-commissioned officer, you might stay in there for three or four years, and who wanted to stay in there for three or four years?

Because I had the offer from the head of the department, the youngest colonel in the Dutch army, very nice guy, who asked me to-- he wanted to send me to officer school with the promise to come back to the department because I had

done some work which nobody had ever done before. And I had a letter from the chief of staff to tell me that I did such fantastic work.

I did a chart for them for each army-- not division but part. You have the infantry. You have the--

--each branch of the service.

--of service, and what I did is I made charts for them when they went to the staff meeting, when he went to the staff meeting, that they had these charts. They knew exactly how long the training is for soldiers, for non-commissioned officers, for technicians, for officers. And I had it all on a beautiful bar graph. They had never seen anything like this before.

So he wanted to send me to officer school with the promise to come back, but I thanked him very much. And I said I was flattered, but I really want to get back to civilian life. And I must say that they never took it out. They were always very nice, and I really had an interesting career at the army. I could have had an interesting career in the army, but I didn't want to.

So once I was out of the army, I went to a department store as an assistant to a buyer, and that was through the help from my father, who knew the owner of the department store. And I got my training there, really, and got into a department which is called the notions department, with 150,000 items. I had to price them all.

And at that time, we had price control, so you have to dig into invoices from previous ones. So with the price control, you always pick out the highest one so you can get your margin and-- what a job. It was interesting, but after a while--

Was that under the OPS as they call it here, the Office of Price Stabilization that [? we had? ?]

Well, that probably was it. They were much more regulated there. For instance, an inspector could come in, and he sees some wool. Wool is a big item in Holland because a lot of women were knitting their own things, and so wool was a big item. So the buyer went out, and she bought a great quantity of wool. And so it had to be priced, but then I had to go, and with the different categories, I had to go and research what was the highest price we got previously so we can price them.

And so bureaucracy makes work, so to speak. But so then we have to price them, and I learned a great deal and handle people who'd come to sell you something and the agents. And you call up, and you need to order, so you have to reorder. So it's all kinds of things, very interesting.

But I wasn't really happy, and finally, a cousin of my father's, who lived in Canada-- he had financial interest in a small outfit who was distributing beauty supplies to the beauty parlors, shampoos, and rinses, and the whole bit, whatever. And so when I showed an interest that I wanted to get away from things--

And I'll be honest with you. The reason that I wanted to get away is my father, after the war, started to study economics and became an economic advisor to the textile industry, a Dutch textile industry. And one of the buildings which he worked very hard to get going was a building where all the manufacturers could have showrooms in one building rather than that the foreign buyers have to go through the narrow streets, can't park, and it's a real mess. And that was kind of project, and so he was very much involved with that, was knighted by the Queen for Jewish philanthropic work.

So he knew her. He knew Prince Bernhard. He was later promoted to-- there are three grades in that, so he was promoted. And so he was a prominent citizen, but I felt that, since he was so great, it's very easy for all the friends to say, oh, I'll take him. And if he is good-- see, he is so good because we took him in. If he is a flop, they'll say, oh, he did it for his father's sake. And I didn't want that.

You wanted to be on your own.

I wanted to be-- if I accomplished something, I wanted to accomplish it on my own. And so I told him that I want to

immigrate, and I had a job waiting for me in Montreal. So I immigrated in January of 1952. And it looked fantastic from Holland, but as salary was concerned, it was really poverty. But that's OK, too.

Where did you go in Canada?

Montreal, and it's \$0.50 an hour. And look, you had to make do, and I had a room which I got through my so-called aunt, this is, the wife of my-- my cousin, unfortunately, died just before I left. Had he not died, I don't think the situation would have been as bad. But I guess promises were made, but they weren't kept. And there was a son there, so that's all right. Look, I'm not out to cut anybody's throat, so if that is the case, that is the case.

So I went to school at night.

University?

I went, yeah, at that time, Sir George Williams College, which was the YMCA, which is now called Concordia University. And I almost got my degree, but in the meantime, I met my late wife at a-- well, I was in a room with somebody who was recommended to me by the wife of my father's cousin, a very nice lady. But that was really not the thing.

And I finally moved around to a couple -- and finally ended up with another-- it was a Jewish-- that was also Jewish, but a Jewish family on Saint Urbain Street. And I stayed with them until I got married, and they had a cousin in America. And she and her grandma came over to look over the merchandise, I've always said.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Literally and figuratively.

--and boy, do I have a boy for you.

Things don't change.

Right. And so that is how I met my wife, and we did get married. And we were married almost for 30 years when she died, but that's how I came to Canada. So now you know why I chose Canada. But on the other hand, I had already looked into the United States, but as a Dutch citizen-- at that time, there were quotas. I had a seven-year wait to get into the United States. Canada was almost immediately.

And I'll never forget when I was at the consulate and all these farmers were sitting there with their large family because, at that time, Canada was asking for farmers to come. Here comes one guy, and he speaks English. Well, these guys-- they weren't speaking English. So here there was somebody, at least, who spoke English. They were so delighted that they didn't need a translator, that I understood what they were saying.

When did you learn English?

Well, at school.

In high school?

Oh, yes, you need three languages in-- you need four languages. Even it was a technical high school where the emphasis is on maths, chemistry, physics, and so on, we have to have German, French, English, and Dutch. And the final exams-- we do an oral and a written exam. The oral exam consists of a list of 10 books in German, English, and French, 24 in Dutch, and then you have to give that list to a federal examiner. Your teacher is sitting there, but you give it to a federal examiner. And he picks out a title that you have to talk to, and you have to talk in the language in which the book was written in. You have to give him the plot.

Now, let me tell you that that's impossible with all the homework they have because I worked until 1:00, 12:00 in the morning for the homework that you could read all these books. So what you did is, with your group of friends that you had, you divided up the books, each doing a certain book--

Study groups.

--and giving an excerpt of it. And then you learn the excerpt, and you do the same thing for them. And that is how you get through because otherwise you'd never get through.

Could I for a minute just take you back to Amsterdam after liberation? I've been wondering if you were ever able to see your housekeeper again and the maids.

No.

They were gone?

Well, the maids I don't know. They might have married by that time, and so that's hard to say.

But the housekeeper?

But the housekeeper never came back. It is ironic maybe, or maybe it's not ironic, but we did get-- not the same apartment back, but in the same building, only a little higher up, actually, almost on the top floor. We got an apartment back there, but no, we never heard from our housekeeper again.

But she was not Jewish, was she?

Oh, yes, she was.

Oh, she was Jewish.

Yes. Yes, she was Jewish. Yeah, I don't think my father would have taken a non-Jewish housekeeper.

Yeah, yeah. How about the people with whom you lived during the occupation?

The people concerned lived in-- first of all, I still keep contact with them. I always have. Every time I was in Holland I went to visit them, took them out for dinner, had a real nice time with them. So the others, the father and mother died. The oldest son died, and as a matter of fact, he died after the war. And I was in the army. I took leave because she died of, I think, what they call this here now leukemia, terrible, terrible thing.

And I visited him in the hospital just before he died, just incredibly terrible, very nice guy, strong, wanted to be a merchant marine officer. But the other two sons are still living. They're all married, have children. Every time I'm in Holland, I go and see them. We reminisce, and I take them, the family, out for dinner. And I write them. So we keep in touch.

You have kept in touch?

Oh, definitely. There's no reason-- they are really like--

They were your surrogate parents.

They're my brothers, and that's the way we feel. And I think I owe them at least that.

Yes, absolutely.

You came to the United States in 1955. What finally brought you from Canada here?

My wife.

Your wife?

She didn't like Montreal.

Was she a native-born Canadian?

No, she was Dutch, born as an American citizen in Paris. My father-in-law was a Dutchman who came to the United States in 1917 and joined the army. And because he joined the army-- at those days, you were naturalized automatically. So he joined the army in 1917, and then after the war, I think he went back and married my mother-in-law in Paris but kept his American citizenship and kept in contact with the embassy. He had friends there, evidently.

And then when both my late brother-in-law and wife-- when the war came and Paris was occupied, they got papers to be on the last boat which left with all the consuls and consular people from Europe. But they had to be in Lisbon at a certain date.

So their problem was to get from occupied France to unoccupied France. Still there was a part which was unoccupied. It was run by the Vichy regime, but it was unoccupied. And they made that and then into Spain and from Spain across into Portugal and Lisbon. And they made that boat, and that is when they came back to this country.

In talking and thinking about your life and your experiences during the war, during the war years, what perspective has this experience or these experiences given you today that is a value to you or of meaning to you that you might not otherwise have if you hadn't undergone them?

Well, I think there are really two things. One thing I think is that I feel one should help your fellow man, regardless of religion, because you never know. I was fortunate enough that Christian people helped me, so what that is concerned-- and I never make, actually, a distinction between that. I never did. Even in Holland, I had Jewish friends, and I had non-Jewish friends. And they knew when the Jewish holidays were there, and I knew when their holidays are there.

We kind of celebrated them together, not that it was a real religious experience. But we respected each other, and that is, I think, what, unfortunately, is-- a little bit is lacking in this day and age.

As it was lacking then.

We do not have respect for each other, and one has to have respect for each other's religion. And we don't have to be attacking each other. There's no reason for it. So I think that I'm very much involved with that. I'm right now very much involved in the Jewish community, but that doesn't mean that, if I hear something, that I wouldn't help somebody else either.

I know you have some personal experience.

Well, in any case-- so that is one thing. And the other thing it has taught me-- I think that we have to wake up the American people, that what has happened in Europe with Nazism is not something which is history. It's something we have to guard against in this country and guard, beware that it ever will happen. And I hope it never will happen, but we have to be vigilant. We cannot let one-issue parties come and rule our lives. There are more things in life than just one thing.

Everybody has a right to believe what he believes, but it should not be that he is forcing you to believe what he believes. And in today's world, I think that there is a lot of polarization of this, and I think we have to guard against this because life is just not a one-thing issue.

So I think that has taught me another thing. And I guess I really haven't thought that much about it, but you have to survive. You have to do the best you can to earn the best living you can, and you have to educate yourself. You cannot let it just slide and let somebody else do it for you.

Knowing you as I do-- I know these are not just words and that you really live those beliefs in your own life, and I thank you. We both thank you for giving us the time to interview you and for sharing your experiences with us. Thank you very much, Bob.

Thank you. Good luck.