

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good afternoon. My name is Peggy Dunn. I'm a member of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at the Sterling library of Yale University.

Sharing the interview with me this afternoon as Bernard Weinstein, Director of the Kean College Holocaust Testimonies Project. We are privileged to welcome Dr. Hans Fischer, a survivor presently living in Highland Park, New Jersey, who has generously volunteered to give testimony about his experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. Welcome, Dr. Fischer. Would you begin by telling us a little bit about your early life and your family?

I was born in Breslau, Germany. Breslau today is Polish, and the name is Wroclaw or Wroclaw. It had a large population. I believe it was about the second largest city in Germany in population, about 600,000, and roughly 10% were Jews. So that makes it about 60,000.

My mother was also born there. My father came to Breslau to study, studied law. And I think members of my family go back quite some time in Breslau. My wife's family also comes from Breslau, and she was also born there.

The early remembrances that I have were of a very pleasant early youth, enjoying life as any youngster would. But I do very vividly remember the time when things started to be not so nice, when there were bullies who would shout "dirty Jew" at us, and who would try and catch us and beat us. And I remember a number of instances like that. I also remember the two older sons of a family that lived in the same apartment building who would do these same kinds of things, and that there were times when I was very apprehensive about the leaving or coming home and furtively making sure that they either would or would not be around to see me entering.

Do you recall any particular time when these actions were triggered or were there incidents that precipitated them that you're aware of, or that they just seemed to happen randomly?

No, they seemed to occur randomly in relation to anything that I might have done or any other common events of the day. That is, they were probably time-related, that is, sequentially related to the greater and greater importance of Hitler and Nazism in Germany.

About how old were you when you first started experiencing these or when you became conscious of them?

It's difficult for me to recall at this point, but I would guess around 1934, '35, somewhere around that time. That's my guess.

And you also had a younger sister?

I had a younger sister. She was a year younger.

And did she experience the same kinds of things?

Interesting that you ask. I don't know. I never discussed it with her. I really don't know.

You don't remember having to shield her on the way home? Big brother protector?

No, I don't ever remember even discussing it with her, so I'm not sure whether that was more related to boys preying upon other boys or whether that was more uniformly related to just anyone. I really don't know.

Was this associated in your own mind with being Jewish?

Yes, absolutely it was. We were very conscious of this because you had to go to a Jewish school. You were not allowed to go to a public school. And so many other of your fellow schoolmates would tell you similar stories, and you mingled and played only with other Jewish children that you met in school. And that used to be a very common topic of

conversation amongst us, how we would evade these kinds of things.

They weren't always terribly repressive or nasty in the sense that we had to fear for our life. It was nothing like that. But it was that you were in fear of physical blows and public-- what's the word--

Harassment?

Becoming sensitive to this being done in public.

Humiliation.

Humiliation, the humiliation of other people on the street, for instance, noticing this going on.

Did your parents experience similar kinds of treatment, the older members of your family, in any degree? Do you recall?

I don't know. I'm not aware. It was not something that we discussed. I don't ever remember telling my mother about these things, and I was very close to her. And this was not something that I shared with her.

But even though you went to an all-Jewish school, the building that you lived in, the apartment building, was not exclusively Jewish.

No, absolutely not. It was right in the heart of downtown Breslau. There was no ghettoization at that time at all.

Had the schools always been segregated like that, or did that start just a few years before you would have gone to school?

Well, this particular school had started quite a few years before because it had a certain Zionist orientation. But I don't know that anywhere near the majority or even anywhere near a very large percentage of the Jewish children went to this particular school or any other Jewish school.

I don't think they could've gone to German school.

The vast majority certainly went to public school.

They could. At that point, they could still.

At the time when these earlier things were happening-- I assume this is in the late '20s.

No, I was only born in '28.

'28.

So it's early '30s.

In the early '30s. I'm sorry. Yes. Hitler hadn't even come to power. What was your own particular sense of being Jewish? Were you religiously involved? You mentioned Zionism. Was that--

Yes, my family was what we would call in America conservative. We were observant, we had a kosher household, and we attended services very regularly, including on Saturdays.

So that there was a strong--

There was a strong-- yes, I would say so. And we had a family that had moved to Palestine that early, in the early '30s already. So we had that link as well.

When did you first experience real danger? When did you feel yourself to be threatened?

Probably not until period '38. I recall 1938 very vividly because in the summer of '38, there was a big move to round up Polish Jews living in Breslau and to eject them and to throw them out into Poland. And there were a number of fellow schoolmates who were among these. And that represented the first real physical threat that I recall, where I woke up and said, if that happens to them, what's to prevent that from happening to the rest of us?

Even though I recall our elders deprecating this and saying, oh well, they're Polish Jews and they're not native Germans, and there was this mixed loyalty. We are good Germans, even though we're also Jewish, and so that was being played down. But I don't know that that washed well with me at the time.

So you were already--

I was aware of it, yes.

--quite sensitive to the identification with other people and the fact that this happened to them, it might also happen--

Yes.

--to you as well.

So then, of course, this led up to November of '38 when-- well, the earlier events occurred in the summer of '38. And then in the fall, November 9 and 10, the infamous Kristallnacht, that is still very, very vivid in my mind.

Night of Broken Glass.

Yes

Could you tell us about that?

Yes, I can tell you. I got up, and there was a lot of commotion out in the streets, even early in the morning, because of all the broken glass. And as I said, we lived on a main thoroughfare, and you'd see people standing around the storefronts where the glass was on the sidewalk. And yet, my parents did not necessarily associate this with anything terribly untoward because I did leave to go to school.

And I walked past a lot of these places, these storefronts with the broken glass, and I got onto the street where the school was and there was a barrier in the street. And suddenly, a bunch of kids from the school came from the direction of the school, that is, away from the school, and screaming and yelling that the school building is on fire and that the synagogue is on fire and not to go any further. And then, sure enough, looking up, you could see the smoke and you could see black smoke. I mean, you couldn't tell that it was from that exact area, but you could see that. And I very vividly remember just breaking out into a run and just running all the way back home and telling my parents about that.

And you were about 10 years old at this time.

I was about 10 years old.

How did your parents respond to this?

Well, they didn't have much time to respond to anything because within a very short period of time-- hours, maybe not even hours-- the two Gestapo men came to the apartment and told my father to take a few clothing and to come with them, and he was sent to Buchenwald.

And was this because he was a lawyer or--

No, they rounded up all Jewish men, whomever they got. I remember my mother called a close friend of hers who was able to hide and was never rounded up after that. And his friend was also a lawyer, and he was instrumental in ultimately getting him out by-- in those days, you could do all kinds of things. So he had a-- what you call it, an award for, meritorious award for having been a soldier in the First World War, and my mother gave his friend that to show to the Gestapo.

And as I mentioned, the ones before, they were able to get a visa, actually, for Panama. And armed with this award and with the visa for Panama, they were able to get him out, and he got out maybe-- I don't remember the exact day, but maybe January 2, 1939. So he was in maybe six weeks in Buchenwald.

And he then left on January 19, about two weeks after that. He left for Panama, but the only way to get to Panama was by way of New York, and in New York, he had to wait for a boat to Panama. And while he was in New York, people told him that would be better to go to Cuba. So he got a visa for Cuba, and that's how he got to Cuba.

And that entire period, I remember very vividly there was no school this entire period of time because the buildings were either burned down or-- in fact, the school that I had gone to never reopened at all because of the damage. This was just a branch school. The larger, main school was in a different location, and I vaguely remember may be going for very few days to the other branch, to the main branch.

So that Kristallnacht, in a sense, was the rupture of the last vestige of normalcy in your life.

Yes. After that, there was no more normalcy. In fact, after that, A, my father wasn't home anymore. B, all kinds of plans were being made to leave. And my father left, as I said, on the 19th, and we made our preparations to leave shortly thereafter. But I came down with scarlet fever at the end of February, and that had a long quarantine period. And that's why we didn't ultimately-- that is, my mother, sister, and I didn't leave ultimately until May when we left on the St. Louis.

What did they do in the meantime?

Who?

How did you and your family live? Were you harassed? Were you threatened? Were you--

Well, again, we're talking about a very short time. Are you talking now--

About the period between--

Your father being--

My father being taken to the concentration camp.

--taken to the concentration camp and your own--

I only remember that until the time that he got back out, those six weeks it seemed my mother was never home. She was constantly gathering documents or speaking with lawyers or doing other things, trying to get information about my father, trying to help him get out. And my recollection is that we, my sister and I and friends, were caught up in all this. We were just living in a kind of unreal-- unrealistic kind of a world, waiting for every possible word and hoping. It was just totally unrealistic. I mean, we had nothing to do all day long. We didn't go to school.

Did your mother-- would she want you to stay in the house? I mean, was she fearful that something--

I don't remember that. I just don't have any recollection.

Just everyone caught up in trying to find him.

But I just remember it was just, today, almost surrealistic kind of a world. And then after my father came back out, he never told us about Buchenwald. It he just said that he just can't talk about that. And he never did, never. He never told us a thing until the day that he died about what went on there. So he just couldn't talk about that.

And as I said, he left on the 19th. And between the 19th, maybe another five weeks later, I came down with scarlet fever, and all I just remember was lying in bed. I remember little nuances of this period, for instance, while I was sick with scarlet fever. One of the great and this was one Friday night getting a piece of chicken. We hadn't had any meat-- or since we ate only kosher, there was no kosher slaughtered meat available. But a chicken every once in a while would be brought in surreptitiously from the countryside, and the shokhet, a ritual slaughterer would kill it in somebody's bathtub.

And we were no longer living at home then. I stayed in a kind of a children's home, and I don't remember where my mother was staying. She was probably staying with her parents, possibly with a parent. I'm not 100% sure right now where she stayed at that time, but not with me.

Yeah.

And your sister was not with you?

My sister was not with me either.

Do you know where she was at the time?

I don't remember right now. I don't know whether she was also in this children's home or whether she was with my mother someplace else. I don't recall.

Do you have any particular memories of the children's home?

Of that children's home? Yes.

Can you tell us a little about it?

Yeah. It was in one of the buildings surrounding one of the major synagogues and very close to that school to which I had gone, kind of in the back yard.

Was it run by a Jewish organization?

Yeah. No, it was run by a Jewish family. It was not a large home. It was very small. Don't ask me what small and large is. But it was in an apartment, so it couldn't have been enormous.

How many children were there

That's what I don't remember exactly. I don't know. Could have been 20, 30. I don't know. But not more than that.

Were they sick or orphaned or just--

No, no, no. I think that most of them were in similar situations that I was in, namely a father may have already left, or maybe both parents may have left and there were some constraints upon where the children could be kept while the final disposition was made of everyone leaving. It was of that nature. It was not a kind of children's home--

Like an orphanage.

--like an orphanage or anything like that, no.

Was there a chance while you were there for any kind of resumption of education wherever you could find it?

Well, I don't recall. I really don't recall. And as I said, most of the time I was there, I was sick with scarlet fever and I was off quarantined in a room off to one side all by myself. Maybe, for all I know, my mother may have stayed there, too. That's what I am beginning to think. She may have stayed in one of those rooms where I was. That's very likely.

At what point were you-- I assume you were reunited with your mother and your sister at some point because you--

Yeah. Well, I saw my mother every day. I mean, she was nursing me. So it wasn't that she wasn't there. But I don't remember whether she actually lived there and whether she did-- maybe she did sleep there overnight. I just don't remember that anymore.

And then as far as I recall, we probably-- I probably left from there to go to Hamburg and then to get onto the boat.

Did anything happened on the way from Brussels to Hamburg that you remember?

No, nothing.

You just were on a train?

We took a train, and this lawyer friend of my father's who had originally helped him to obtain the visa that made it possible for him to get out, he accompanied us. He went with us to Hamburg. And I remember we stayed in a hotel in Hamburg overnight, and I remember he slept in the bathtub in the bathroom.

And the next morning, he-- we went first-- I think this is a rather interesting and important recollection that I have. We went to the Cuban consulate in Hamburg to pick up our permit, the infamous permit, you know, that wouldn't permit us to get in. And I remember distinctly standing knee high to my mother, who was waiting in line to get this permit, and eventually she got it.

She turned around and, of course, I tagged along with her. And when we got to the door, exiting this office, to the right-- I'll never forget that-- there was a little table, a little desk, and there was a lady, a young lady, sitting there. Turns to my mother and says, lady, don't you want a visa stamped in your passport? And my mother said, I don't think I need that because I just got the permit. Had she gotten that silly stamp--

It would have given her--

We would have been able to get off. It cost nothing, and here was this young lady offering it to her. And my mother said, no, thank you. Don't need it. I've always remembered that. And then the next thing I remember was walking up the plank onto the boat and feeling very much relieved, as though you were entering a new country.

So even though incidents that happened on the train to Hamburg, there was still that sense of danger.

Yes, because there were signs-- "Juden raus," "out with the Jews," and these kinds of things wherever you went. So I mean, that part of it never left you.

And did you have to show your papers at all on the train to anyone? Or was the--

I don't remember that.

The lawyer was probably--

I don't remember.

How far did this lawyer accompany you?

He-- right up to the boat. He may even have come on board. I don't remember exactly, but I remember him at least up to the gangplank.

Yeah. Were there any others you knew, members of your family or friends who were on the boat?

Yes. There was a distant relative of my father's and his family, who were from a small town near Breslau, whom I didn't know very well, but I knew of them. They were on the boat. We didn't have too much contact with them on the boat, for no particular reason, or the reason being that my mother was always terribly seasick, even though we had beautiful weather all the way to Havana.

This, of course, was the boat that has been memorialized, if you can use that word, in the book about The Voyage of the Damned--

Yes, right.

--film and so on. So to your knowledge, were there other boats like this also that were carrying people away at the time? This one seems to stand out in my mind.

Yeah, there were others. I've read about others. For instance, this lawyer friend took a boat. I think its name was [? Surinoko. ?] I don't know how one remembers something like that, but I happen to remember that--

Exotic name.

--which left, I don't know, days, weeks after this, and because of the fate of the St. Louis, turned around early and went back to Hamburg. And he was very, very lucky because he was able to get out a second time and went to Chile.

So in a way, the St. Louis was one of the first.

It was one of the first, yes.

Can you tell a little bit about life aboard the ship or the conditions in which you lived?

I remember several things. Number one, the boat stopped on the way to Havana, I think in Cherbourg. I'm almost sure.

Yeah, that was written in the book.

Yeah. And the reason why this was important to me personally was because my very best childhood friend, who was also a schoolmate, got on in Cherbourg. His mother and the rest of his family had gotten on in Hamburg, but he had been in Belgium. He had left for Belgium before this time, and so he was sent to Cherbourg to get on and join his family. Again, the father was already in Cuba.

And so I was overjoyed when he got on because he, as I said, was my very close friend and we were quite inseparable on the boat after that. I remember only fantastic food, again, of the type that we never had, or hadn't had for a long time in Germany, not only in terms of quality, but in terms of quantity and variety. I mean, this was just-- so for a child, this was really heaven.

Do you remember the sleeping quarters?

Yes. We had a very nice cabin, and I just remember it was beautiful. On the other hand, my friend was all the way down on the lowest deck, and his was not as nice. But that was a question of money and being able to afford.

What can you tell us about your perceptions of the mood of people aboard the ship?

My perception is that the mood was a happy one.

This was your--

I think all of us felt we were--

Exhilaration.

--we were 90% out.

How long did the voyage last?

We left on May 13. Two weeks, as I recall vaguely. But I don't have any firm feel, but--

And your first port of call was Havana?

Yeah, after Cherbourg.

After Cherbourg.

But before we got there, the rumors started.

What rumors?

Well, the rumors that we wouldn't be allowed to land. But again, you don't want to believe this kind of--

Would you as a child have overheard those rumors, or did your mother share those with you? Or how--

No, I overheard those. And that began a kind of semi-panic.

From other passengers?

From other passengers, yes. Never heard anything from any crew members. I must say that my experience was that the crew members behaved impeccably properly, never had any untoward--

Experience.

--experience with any of them. And they were very nice. As I said, my mother suffered from sea sickness all the time. And there was even a doctor who looked after her and stewards and all kinds of people, and they were very pleasant.

So given any other situation, it would have just seemed like a pleasant shipboard crossing.

Yes, absolutely.

Nothing untoward happened in Cherbourg either.

No, nothing that I recall. I don't remember anything untoward happening until we got nearer to Havana.

And what happened then?

Well, as I said, these rumors, if I'm not mistaken-- but I could be mistaken. It could have been on the way back. I am of the opinion that some passenger died and that there was a funeral, but I could be mistaken. Could have been on the way



back. I just remember seeing this funeral at sea.

Were all of the people on the ship Jewish?

Not all, but 99%. For instance, we became extremely friendly with a lady and her daughter, and she was not Jewish. She was from Berlin, but her husband was Jewish. And so she had left to join him. And life is made up of these incredible coincidences.

It turned out that her husband had met my father in Havana independently of us meeting on the boat. And the coincidence was that this man and my father were of the same age and had exactly the same birthday, July 18. Isn't that a coincidence?

That's incredible, yeah.

And my mother and this lady became inseparable friends. And even though this lady had an opportunity to go back, and when the ship went back had an opportunity to go back to Berlin since she wasn't Jewish, she chose to stay, and I would like to think as much for my mother's sake as she did for her husband's sake at that time, at least, because the alternative was to stay in France, and France was already being besieged by German armies at the time. So it was a very difficult period for her.

Were you in any kind of contact with your father once he had gone to Cuba and before you left for the boat, and then maybe on the voyage over?

No, none that I am aware of.

So it was just, this is where you should go, and this is where I will be when--

I mean, my mother clearly must have had correspondence with him, but I am not aware of any of that.

But there wouldn't have been transatlantic phone calls?

No, no. There was nothing like that.

Telegrams, wires?

Nothing like that.

What happened when you actually were ready to dock and--

Well, when we were ready to dock, all the motions were for embarkation-- the opposite, debarkation. Debarkation. All the suitcases were brought up on deck, and we couldn't wait. And then we saw Morro Castle in Havana, and then the long wait began. Nothing happened, and then we saw the little boats and see your father way, way down in the water. And you really couldn't talk. I mean, you could yell, but there were dozens of others doing the same thing, so you really didn't understand. At best, you could make out the faces and--

So you actually saw him.

Yes, saw him, no question. He'd come every day in the little boat, in the rowboat.

Were there are a lot of families that had people in Cuba waiting for them?

Yes, clearly. It looked like--

Many little rowboats out there.

No, it looked like pictures that you see of the big Navy vessel making a port of call, and all the local merchants arrive in their little vessels and all trying to show off all their wares. That's what it looked like. The boat was just surrounded with these little boats.

So even at the landing point, it seemed like a totally conventional--

Yes, yes.

--landing of a luxury liner.

Except, of course, we very quickly noticed that nothing was happening. And then, of course, we heard that the permits were invalid and only those who had visas could get off. And then I think they were maybe 20 people who had visas, and they did get off. And then there was this famous episode of one man slashing his wrists and jumping overboard, and then he also was taken off. And then there were some relatives of the Annenbergs, of friends of the Annenbergs, who were also taken off and flown to the United States.

I don't remember anymore how long we stayed and in Havana, but I remember very distinctly that one day my friend and I were playing checkers and suddenly we noticed that the boat was moving and was moving out, away from the harbor into the sea. And then--

You were totally surprised by this.

I don't know that we were totally surprised, not really.

Was there any change in the crew's--

Attitude?

Attitude towards you?

No, I don't recall any change in the crew's attitude. But of course, there were vast changes in the availability of food, no longer any choice, no longer any great luxury, very different. I mean you just got a meal, period, you were lucky. But you weren't very hungry, either. I mean, you were much too concerned with what was going to happen, what was going to be.

And then I do remember seeing what was told to us to the Miami. You could see some large buildings. And then, of course, hope was very high again that--

You might be--

--the great President Roosevelt would permit us entrance. And then that was dashed and we were again out at sea.

Did you kind of make a hard right turn off of Miami? Or did you go farther up the Eastern coast?

I don't remember that. I don't remember that.

And would rumors fly more fast and furious at this point?

Yes, there were rumors continuously about all kinds of things, good and bad.

Did the captain like-- do you remember him either--

I only remember one event that I attended where I heard him. I'm not sure which now. And he just made a very pleasant

impression. But there was always talk that he had virtually guaranteed that he would not take the boat back to Hamburg.

And then we kind of settled into a very slow voyage back. And then one day we landed in Antwerp, and in Antwerp we were divided into four groups. If you had a choice, you could indicate that choice, and you would go either to England, France, Belgium, or Holland.

How did you get that-- you said, if you had a choice.

Yeah, well, if somebody had relatives, or if you had a preference, if you could indicate why or something, then they would honor that.

So in other words, you had the freedom to--

Yes. And my friend, for example, who had come from Belgium before, chose to go back to Belgium. And that's where he and his family went, and they survived the war. In fact, he was the go-between the Gestapo and the Jewish community in Brussels because he spoke German. And he survived, and he lives in Israel.

And we didn't have any relatives any place and no choice, and we were allowed to go to France. So we were transferred from this boat to another boat, but not a luxury liner, just a ferry type of boat with dormitory-like accommodations, one deck for women, one for men. And I don't remember how long it took, I think overnight. And we went to France, and I think we landed in La Bourgogne, or Bourgogne was the name of the port. And there we--

From Antwerp?

From Antwerp, yeah. And there we disembarked, and I was separated from my mother and my sister because I was over 10. All children over 10 were put in camps that were run by a Jewish organization called OSE, meaning help, kind of a French joint distribution committee. And they ran three camps near Paris in a town called Montmorency.

And I stayed there for some time in June when we landed until maybe October-- October, November, at which time the camps were beginning to be dissolved because of the bombing. You know, the Germans were bombing Paris and this area almost every single day, and it was becoming very difficult by this time.

By this time, of course, Poland had been invaded and--

Yeah. And they had already started to invade France, too.

Yeah, although they didn't--

War broke out--

--officially do it until 1940, until May of 1940.

Yeah, but they were bombing, and it was very difficult.

Seemed very official to you.

Oh, yeah. I can tell you we slept only in the air raid shelter, and there were air raids every single day and often during the day, not just at night.

Was your sister with you?

No, she was not, no. So was under 10. She was a year younger than I was, and she was with my mother in Laval, in the province of Mayenne in central France.

Were they just with friends or just--

No. They were together with others from the boat, sent there. The vast majority were sent to a nearby city, somewhat larger. The name escapes me right now. It's a much larger city than Laval. I can't really call it at this moment. But a smaller contingent was in Laval.

And eventually, in October, so when the camps were dissolved, I also came to Laval. And my recollection of Laval was what I had read in some of the famous literature, like Ivanhoe, about what a medieval town was like. And it was very similar to that. There wasn't a single house that had a bathroom, for example, running water. Didn't exist. You have to go outside the house. It was very, very primitive.

On the other hand, lots of food. I remember going to a market on Fridays or whenever it was, and butter in enormous amounts such as I'd never seen in my whole life. So it was very interesting.

Also, another interesting experience, my mother and this friend, whose husband had become friendly with my father, they had met a man who owned a big estate in Laval. And he'd come to see them, and he told them that he had never seen a Jew in his life. And when they asked him what he had anticipated seeing, he said that he really thought that they might have horns. So it was interesting.

More than the architecture was medieval.

Yeah. I had another interesting-- life is made up of interesting little side issues. I remember this man invited us to visit his estate, and on his estate he had this beautiful apple orchard. And like any youngster aged 10, I was after those apples. And this was fall, remember, October, November, and they were just ripe. So I did what I think anybody else would do, and I grabbed one of these apples and I bit into it and spit it out as quickly as I could. These were cider apples. In France, they make hard cider, and these were bitter. I've never seen anything like this, but I remember that to this day.

Yeah.

Anyway, the story continues with eventually my father, through the joint distribution committee, once again succeeding in getting a visa for us for Cuba, and so did the friend of ours for his family. And so we left sometime beginning of December, by train, to Le Havre. And there were two memorable events about the trip. When we arrived, within minutes after we had gotten off, literally minutes after we've gotten off the train, there was an air raid, and the engine of the train was hit, steam engine. And the explosion of the steam made such a racket, such an incredible amount of noise, that we would just forcefully thrown to the ground. All of us had bruises, not being hit with metal or anything else, just from the impact of this noise. This is one thing.

And then I remember we stayed in a hotel overnight, and there was another air raid overnight. And I only remember that my mother and friends said, we're not going to go down to any air raid shelter. If it's going to hit us, it's going to hit us. We're not going to do that. And so we just stayed in our beds till the next day, and then we boarded a boat that had been pulled out of whatever you call it when they--

Dry dock?

Yeah, had long been retired.

Yes.

The name of the boat was Degrasse, I think, D-E-G-R-A-S-S-E, French boat because they weren't going to risk any good boats because this was the height of the German submarine warfare. We boarded this boat, and we were probably among the only Jews on the boat, not to mention probably the only ones from the St. Louis.

Did this include the other family as well as yourself?

Yes, just this other lady with her daughter. And all the other passengers on the boat were Spanish loyalist refugees. This is the same time that the Spanish Civil War was over. So this was full of Spanish refugees, and these people were in a real state of shock. I mean, they saw submarines even on dry land, without meaning to be facetious. They really were. They were constantly walking around in lifebelts, and they were terribly, terribly, terribly afraid.

Anyway, we left, and I think a very short trip to England to Southampton. And then the boat stayed in Southampton for two full weeks to gather a convoy, or to wait for the assemblage of a convoy. There were all together-- I was told, I certainly didn't count them-- 200 boats in that convoy, including cruisers and destroyers who were supposed to protect us against German submarines.

And then the boat left for New York. And as I said, these Spaniards were constantly seeing submarines. And I only remember being totally impervious and immune to any of this. The only thing that I was worried about was the weather, which was terrible. My mother was deathly seasick because the weather was absolutely stormy, and this time we were also all the way down in the lowest deck.

Bowels of the ship.

And she was really-- if it hadn't been-- I'm convinced to this day, if this lady friend hadn't been there, she would have died. She was so deathly sick, I mean. She at least would give us some food and speak to her and prop her up a little bit.

How else was that trip different than the original voyage across the Atlantic?

Well, nothing was luxurious. Nothing was luxurious. I only remember that the weather was absolutely terrible. But I didn't suffer from sea sickness at all.

I remember playing ping pong with one of these Spaniards on one of the ends of the boat. And I can remember the ball staying in midair because the boat was going up and down like this.

Defied the force of gravity. How long was that trip?

That trip, I think--

An eternity, I should think.

Yeah, it was an eternity. It probably took seven days to reach New York from Southampton. All in all, it must have been the end of December, the beginning of January, something like that.

And then I had another very interesting experience which is, I think, fairly unique. We were going to Cuba, of course, and the boat landed in New York. So you were not allowed into New York. So we had the unique experience of being perhaps among the very last immigrants to be put on Ellis Island. And I've read so much about Ellis Island, and most people hated it. To me, this was heaven on Earth-- fresh milk, great food. I thought it was absolutely wonderful.

So we stayed, I think, the better part of a week in Ellis Island until a boat was going to Cuba. And then we went to Cuba, and it took, I don't know, three or four days. That was, again, one of these Caribbean luxury liners. And I think some of the other passengers had heard where we were from, and they just spoiled us rotten. So it was just-- I just remember it was just an incredible feast in terms of food, once again.

And your father was still in Cuba?

My father had been in Cuba all the time, and then we arrived in Cuba. We arrived in Cuba about the beginning of February, I remember. And we stayed in Cuba just about a year and then came to New York.

Did you believe you would ever see each other again after Havana, after--?

I don't recall that I ever had any doubts about it. My guess is my mother didn't. But, you know, youth is very optimistic and resilient, and I can remember all kinds of very silly things. I can remember in Laval going to the post office and looking under the counters for little coins that people dropped invariably. You remember silly things like that.

Yes.

And when you had come back from the first voyage, now that this lawyer friend was not around to--

No.

Your mother was really on her own to solve all the problems.

Yes, but, of course, she was so lucky. She had this wonderful friend. So that was it. And then we arrived in end of February 1941 in New York.

With your father.

With the whole family. The other family had left a little bit earlier already, maybe half a year earlier. That had to do, again-- might be worth for the record to mention that immigration until relatively recently was based on quotas of nationalities back in 1924. And where my father was born, that little town was Polish in 1924, so he was Polish quota. And the Polish quota was much smaller than the German quota.

And so my mother, my sister, and I were German quota, but he was Polish quota. But we didn't want to separate, so we had to wait till the Polish quota opened up a bit, which only happened after war really made it impossible for anyone else to come from Poland. And this other family was all German quota, so they had entrance earlier.

I think we're going to pause at this point, Dr. Fischer, and we'll get back to your experiences after you arrived in the United States as soon as the break is done.