

We continue our discussion with Dr. Hans Fisher. Dr. Fisher, during the break, you mentioned that there were some gaps in your experience already recounted that you had mentioned. And I would like you to talk about them now, if you will.

Yes, I'd like to fill in a few salient features, which I think help round out the picture a little bit more. Things that I think many a person wouldn't put into the context of the story that I've been recounting here, which has been primarily the events leading up to, and on, and following the trip voyage of the St. Louis.

But something that perhaps very few people realize, and that may be of interest, is that my family, we mentioned very early on, if you remember-- one of the earliest comments had to do with the fact that the school that I went to was a Zionist school. My family had very strong Zionist feelings and tendencies. And as I indicated, members of the family had already gone to Palestine in the very early '30s.

Well, one of the things I went to recount is that, in 1937-- can you imagine, as late as 1937, my grandfather on my mother's side celebrated his 75th birthday by going outside of Germany. It was actually celebrated in Czechoslovakia. He had just come back from Palestine, from visiting two daughters. There were three daughters, my mother was the third one. The other two were in Palestine.

And he had gone there and came back, and went back to Germany in 1937. His feeling, I can still see him, was, I'm an old man, they're not going to do anything to me. This is just going to be another storm, we'll weather it, and so on. That's one aspect.

The other aspect is that my father and mother decided also that they would emigrate to Palestine. And started in early 1938 to plan to go to Palestine. And they applied for what was called a certificate. In German, [GERMAN]. These were the permissions that were granted, or had to be granted, by the British government to enter Palestine.

And towards that end, they had built special furniture. Special in the sense to fit into very small, tiny apartments. Very utilitarian. They got a very good cabinetmaker to make the kinds of [caster?] convertibles that we see today. But this was back in 1938. They had couches that could serve as beds simultaneously. And bookcases that could also serve as storage cabinets. All kinds of things like that.

And everything was geared for Palestine. In fact, sometime in the early fall before Kristallnacht, they had had a lift built. You know what a lift is? A lift is a huge wooden box in which you pack all your belongings, and it's then transported by boat to another country. They still use them occasionally nowadays.

And everything was packed for Palestine. The only problem was clothing. All clothing for a warm, semi-tropical country. But of course, the certificate never arrived. And then the events took place that we laid it before. Ultimately, strange as that may seem, we did get that lift in Cuba.

Oh, for heaven's sakes.

Of course, much, much later. Because Cuba wasn't at war. So it somehow got out. But the point that I wanted to make was that again, had things been normal and the British hadn't imposed its infamous white paper restricting immigration to Palestine, again, this whole thing might have been avoided.

Yes.

That was one thing that I wanted to mention. Another thing that I wanted to fill in was the impact of all these experiences really can be measured, obviously, in terms of the immediacy of one's reaction. Hopefully, I'm also not one of those who suffered unduly from any of this. But it took its toll on my mother. I know that she had a major nervous breakdown in Cuba.

Yes.

Which was clearly the accumulation of everything. I remember it happened at the time that word reached her that her parents had died of starvation in Theresienstadt. You know, that was one of the--

One of the camps.

--model concentration camps. And of my wife's. Actually saw them still. She survived Theresienstadt. And she saw them in that particular concentration camp. And the death certificates actually exist. The Czech government made them available to us. And I remember it was at that time that this happened to my mother.

In the family of this non-Jewish lady, even though they were-- she certainly was somewhat less affected, because her parents were not in danger. She also suffered enormously from immigration-related problems.

There were two other children, older children, from a previous marriage. And since she had taken her own youngest child along and gone to join the father, and the other two older ones were left behind-- even though they weren't Jewish, and weren't, to the best of my knowledge, discriminated against in any overt way, even though their father had been Jewish-- they never forgave her.

They later came to the United States and they never forgave their stepmother for having left them behind, as they saw it. And she suffered a great deal over this.

Yeah.

So there are all kinds of nuances that go way beyond the immediacy of the events.

Yeah, yeah.

In any case, to get back where we had left off, we arrived. It was a very auspicious arrival, because within four weeks, I was bar mitzvah in New York. In one of the very large synagogues right off Broadway on 91st, 93rd Street, somewhere around there.

And my parents-- my mother had no difficulty finding work. She worked as a nurse and did very well financially. My father, who was already over 50 years old, couldn't find anything. He'd been a lawyer and a businessman, and in neither capacity could he find any work.

And so he was persuaded by some friends to seek the help of the Jewish Agricultural Society, and got a loan for a mortgage, and bought a farm in Vineland, in South Jersey.

Yeah.

And so in October or thereabouts of 1941, we moved from New York to Vineland and started life on a chicken farm. And so from 13-- I was 13 at the time-- until I graduated high school four years later, I grew up on a chicken farm.

Which must in itself have been quite a jolt.

Well, I thought it was great at the time.

Yeah.

It was a great experience.

Well, there's some jolts too, I guess.

And in a sense, it ultimately led to my career.

To the work you have now.

Indirectly, yes. Because my father took me aside. And when I told him that I wanted to study mathematics and languages, he said that he would strongly dissuade me from doing that. That I should learn a lesson from his educational experiences and not go into law, or go into something esoteric like that, but to study something that would be useful in every country in the world.

Yeah.

I didn't decide on anything except the sciences.

He thought I should go into the sciences, and so I started out. And then I had a very good teacher in college in biochemistry, and veered into.

Where did you get your education?

I went to Rutgers as an undergraduate.

Yeah.

And was strongly influenced by an excellent biochemistry teacher. And then I went to the University of Connecticut, got a master's degree there. And then I went to the University of Illinois and got my doctorate there. And that was-- those were the best years of both my wife's and I lives, really. We had gotten married when I graduated from Rutgers in 1950.

How did you meet your wife?

Well, our mothers were friends in Germany. And I had mentioned that this lawyer friend--

Yes.

--had gone to Chile. He was my father's best friend. And my wife's mother was my mother's best friend. So in the meantime, my wife's mother had written me a birthday greeting on my 21st birthday. Because that was-- she had gotten engaged, I believe, on my birthday 21 years ago. So she remembered that. She had called up her best friend to tell her that she had gotten engaged and was told that her best friend was in labor.

So in any case, so we had started to correspond. And I decided right after college, I deserved a little vacation. So I pawned a 1935 Ford and a few other belongings, and went to Chile. And met my wife's family and the renewed acquaintance with my father's family. And found many, many others.

It turned out that there is a much larger German Jewish community from Breslau in Cuba than is together in any one place in the United States, at least that I'm aware of. So there were many others. Many other families that I knew or knew about.

Is this Cuba or Chile?

Did I say Cuba? I meant Chile.

Is this in Santiago?

In Santiago, yes, yes. I'm sorry, I meant Chile.

Yeah.

So we got married at that time. And we had a wonderful time then in Illinois. My wife is a musician. And Illinois just opened a whole new vista of musical experiences.

And this is while you were working on your doctorate?

I was working on my PhD. I got my PhD there in nutritional biochemistry. And it was just fantastic place.

When you-- I'm sorry, go ahead.

Could I just leave back a second? When you were growing up in Vineland, which the war was still going on, right?

Oh, yes.

Were you aware of what was going on in Germany?

No, no. We did not know that. No.

Yeah, that--

We had no idea. So this was as great a shock to you at the end of the war as it was everybody else.

Yes.

Yeah.

How do you think the-- as you look back from your perspective today, how do you think these early events that you had shaped your future life and your future thinking?

Well, they certainly made me much more serious and much more mature than the average person my age, say, going to college. There was certainly no interest in and no desire, say, to join a fraternity, which was very much in vogue. Although it was also the time when I went to college in '46, the war was just over. So there were also many veterans who also had very little use for fraternities.

But the whole attitude was one, you know-- this was not a period just for entertainment. This was a period of serious study. My parents were not doing all too well financially on the farm and they needed my help. I would come home weekends. And certainly, summers I would work.

And as I said, my father in 1941 was over 50, so he wasn't a youngster. And farm life did not particularly agree with him. My mother was much more adept. She was considerably younger at this.

Did he remain on the farm? Yes, he remained on the farm until 1959, when my mother tragically died in a car accident. So until then, he stayed on the farm. And they adjusted easily, aside from the economics?

No, they didn't. My father never adjusted easily at all. No, he was a typical Yekke, if you know what that means.

Yes.

German Jew. I always see him in front of me with a book or with a magazine and an English-German dictionary, always. He would always look up every word that he didn't understand in English, look it up. He had to look that up.

When you look back now at German Jewry before the war, certainly.

Yes.

Between 1933 and 1939, do you feel very, very strong regrets? Not, of course, for yourself, because thank god you came out of it, and your family did intact. But how do you feel about the identification that German Jews had with Germany? And very often the feeling that they could survive and they could withstand and all of that?

Yeah, well, of course, that's something that I never shared with them. I mean, I grew up and have always felt, from my earliest recollection, that I was a Jew first and everything else second. German, American, anything, it doesn't matter. Perhaps a human being second.

But not nationality. Nationality wasn't all that important. Because when the chips were down, you were always the dirty Jew. And whether you wanted to hide in a cloister like Edith Stein, when they found you, you were the Jew. And you were killed because you were Jewish. And that was something that somehow became a part of me.

I think there were many great things in German Jewry, which I think the world has a lot to be grateful for. There are a great many things that I ask myself, how could they have been so blind? How could people who had the brilliance of an Einstein, and I can name you dozens of biochemists and physicians who were world famous, Nobel Prize winner-- how could the same people have been so utterly blind, did not see this?

But I had it in my own family. I mentioned my grandfather. My father went out in 1935 on a trip, I think, to Palestine, also. And they came back.

Yes. We hear stories about people in Poland who happened to be on the eastern border and might have escaped into Russia. And because they didn't want to be taken over by the Russians, went back to the west, where they were sure certainly engulfed by Germans.

Unless you were in that same position at that time, it's very difficult to judge.

The old story about hindsight having 20/20 vision.

I know. I know. It's very, very difficult to.

But has your Judaism been strengthened by your experiences?

Yes, I would say yes. It's hard to say whether it's been strengthened or whether it's always remained more or less equally solid. But I've always been very involved in the Jewish community at the University as well as in the community at large. And I feel I have made my contribution by instilling it in my children.

Yeah.

And that's very important.

If I may ask one more question. We use these tapes, obviously, for educational purposes. We'll use them for educational purposes. And we have many young people who, hopefully, will see them or segments of them. If you had to leave an enduring-- what you believe to be an enduring message on this tape that you're making. What would that message be regarding the Holocaust and your experience with it?

Unfortunately, I'm not a Hillel who can stand on one foot and say that so easily. But let me try.

It's easy to be on one foot when you're sitting.

That's true. I think I would want to say that one has to try and brush away the immediate emotional impact of your surroundings at a time when things are difficult and bad and try and see what's going on in a more universal, and a less parochial, and a less personal way.

In the hope that perhaps a little bit of the gravity, a little bit of the overall sense of importance of that moment can sink in. So that one can make a value judgment that won't be purely emotional. There won't be of the type of my father and my grandfather, who said, ah, they're not going to hit an old man. It's still going to just go away.

And I think, also, one has to have an optimistic outlook on life. Because ultimately, life isn't all that bad. I mean, the Holocaust, with all its trauma, is over, and we are here. And lots of good has come from people who have gone through much, much worse than I, and from people like myself, who are contributing every day to what's going on in this world. And everyone is capable of doing that.

I think it's a question of one's outlook, one's optimism. And again, as a Jew, I feel that my outlook on life is in part influenced by being Jewish. I studiously have avoided saying by the Jewish religion. I don't mean that.

I think to me, Judaism is a way of life. It's when I sit and talk to you. It's how I act and behave. It's how I study, that I do study, that I have certain interests. It's how I bring up my children. That to me-- and there are many other non-Jews who can be Jewish in that same sense. That's what I mean. And so it's very dispersed what I have said. But maybe there are a few grains that will have meaning to this or that person.

Thank you.

Peggy, is there anything you want to add?

No, I just thank you very much for sharing the very commonplace things and the very nice little pieces of philosophy that I certainly will carry with me and think about. And I know the people that view the tape will, as well.

I would just like to add that we who interview draw a great deal of strength from you and from other survivors. Because you give us faith and hope, too. Thank you.

Well, then it was all worth it.

It certainly was. Thank you, sir.

Even the heat.

Even the heat.

You can always get your visa stamped.

That's right.

Yes, OK.

[MUSIC PLAYING]