

This time I'm going to-- because I'm going to let you talk as much as you want just about different things. What I would like you to talk about is, first about your parents, about-- but without maybe the history of Russia.

We're going to get set. Stand by, and we're all set now. Ready when you are.

Ready.

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview conducted by Peggy Frankston, with André, Lucie, and Joyce--

Joyce.

--who were born Zalc, all-- a brother and two sisters. And it's going to be-- and it's on July 23, 2009, in New York City. And it's a continuation of the three separate interviews that we've just done, talking about wartime experiences, and perhaps some of the experiences after the war, or some experiences before the war.

So I'd like to start with some of the things that you know about your parents.

Yeah. So my mother, she came from a family living in Latvia. And not in the Riga. She were Ventspils. That's a different city. It's a harbor in Latvia.

And she had two brothers and two sisters. And they owned a farm of cattle, the cattle farm up there. And, of course, in Latvia there was a certain amount of a Jewish population. And that's why Latvia also was a-- belonged to Russia.

But before it belonged to Russia, was a part of Germany, was a colony of Germany. And the people spoke German. And later, they learned Russian from the Russian occupation or because the Russian got the territory.

And she-- they were selling cattle to Finland, and Sweden, and everywhere. But then the czar of Russia had a brother. And his name was Peter.

And when they went in war with Germany, [INAUDIBLE]. He was afraid of the Jewish population because in those days the Jews were friendly with the Germans. And then they spoke Yiddish, which is an old German. It's a dialect of German from 500 years ago.

So Peter decided with his brother, the czar of Russia, they decided to take the Jews and send them to the other part of Russia by the Iranian border, by the Caspian Sea, by Astrakhan, by Baku Astrakhan. And they were sent there. And up there, they started a new life with different businesses to survive.

And the grandfather, my mother's father, started-- because up there, there's a lot of fish. The caviar comes from there, and the best fish, and the oil from the whales, too, which was like very important in those days. So he started a factory of smoking fish.

And he was very successful with that, because in those days in the First World War, the Russian Army had no sea rations like today. And they used to use a piece of smoked fish and a piece of bread. That was the food of the Russian soldier.

And he couldn't produce enough smoked fish for the government. So the government wanted they should produce more fish. They were working day and night.

So he complained about it. So they told him, don't worry about it. If you're short of labor, we give you workers. So they gave him Turkish prisoners, and German prisoners, and Austrian prisoners from the First World War. And they used to work in the factory helping to smoke the fish.

And two prisoners fell in love with my aunts. And they married my aunts. And when the revolution of Russia started, the war with the Germans and Russians stopped because the Germans made the Russian revolution. I don't know if you know that, yeah, because they got Lenin in Switzerland. And they gave them money, and they send them back to Russia to make the revolution.

And when they made their revolution, the war stopped. So the-- those two prisoners took their wives with them to Germany and then went to United States. And one uncle and aunt went to Belgium.

And my mother, she was younger. She wasn't married. So she stayed with her folks. And the two brothers went to the Russian army.

And after the war, my mother was the only daughter home with her two brothers. They went back to Latvia from Astrakhan. But her parents died in Astrakhan. They got the-- what's that disease?

Typhoid?

The fever. Huh?

Typhoid?

Typhoid. They got typhoid, and they died from that disease, [NON-ENGLISH] it's called. And-- typhoid, yeah, in English.

So they died from that disease. So my mother became an orphan. So the Russians-- Russian government gave her a visa as it was already after the revolution. But because she was an orphan, they gave her a visa to go to her sisters. One lived in the States, and one lived in Belgium.

So she went to Belgium to go to the States. And by going to Belgium, she stayed by that other sister, and she married my father. And that's the-- we were born in Belgium from that wedding. And--

And we had a--

--my sister Joyce was born in France during the wartime, yeah.

Where was your father from?

My father was Polish from Lodz. And he came to Belgium, too. But he didn't have his birth certificate from Poland. He couldn't get the birth certificate. He had to go back to Poland to serve in the reserve.

In Poland, after the-- after being in the army, you have to be four or five years in the reserve. So he couldn't go back there because he was married. He had no way of going back there.

So he couldn't get married officially in Belgium. So he was just married by the Jewish law, yeah.

But he was from Lodz.

He was from Lodz, yeah. But he served in the Polish army in the war with Pilsudski. That's the German-- the Polish general who freed Poland from the Russians.

And Poland invaded Ukraine, Kiev. Poland took Kiev. But after that, the Polish lost the war. And the Russians came all the way to the capital of Poland.

And things got very bad in Poland. And so he left Poland, and he came to Belgium. And he didn't serve in the reserve.

Is that why your name is Ulmam on your--

Right.

Yeah, and that's why in Belgium I didn't have my father's name. I was named Ulmam after my mother. And being that I was under my mother's name, I became a Belgium citizen automatically, because she came from-- from foreign parents in Belgium, you didn't have the Belgian nationality. You had to go-- you had to serve in the Belgium army to become a Belgium.

So I was a Belgium automatically. And I was considered the son of the King Albert. King Albert, I was his son. I've never seen him. But [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah.

Lucie, do you remember what it was like arriving in France, you-- going to the different camps?

Well, we were on a train going to France. And I think a bomb fell on the train.

About two weeks.

And it took us a long time. And we had to get off the train to go to the bathroom and all that. And when the bomb fell on the train, it divided the train in two. And part of the train was left behind.

And we were lucky. Our train went on. And that's how we got to our destination.

To the south of France.

And that's-- it's unbelievable, you know.

And also, by the-- when we traveled to France, they arrested the German fifth column. You know fifth column?

They had German spies. They were dressed as priests. And the French police arrested them.

No.

But we just want to know about Mommy and Daddy.

No, no. It's just the different things that happened there.

Yeah. And then they, you know, when they ask you for your identification, if you don't have one, they automatically put you in a camp.

When you went to the first camp, were you all together? Or were you separated?

I think we were--

All together.

We were together. We were together. And then Récébédou?

In Brens too, we were together.

In Brens, Récébédou we were together. Even in Rivesaltes, in the beginning we were together.

And then they separated us.

Right. And then when Joyce was born, that's when we escaped. I was there for quite a while. And which Illo are they making the museum? Is it K? I think I was in that Illo, which is very unusual.

Something else, the people from eating the [NON-ENGLISH]. How you call the [NON-ENGLISH]? The--
Turnips.

Oh, yeah.

They used to get water in their legs from eating that without stopping, because that's the only food they gave you. The used to get water in their legs. Their legs used to blow up.

A lot of people just didn't make it.

Used to get sick and die from them. Some of them made it now.

You remember crying a lot. You mentioned crying a lot.

Yeah. Mama--

Did you have any friends your age?

I don't-- I remember they made a party. And they gave us some food. And it was very joyous. There was music and everything.

But I think that was around the holidays. And that's all I remember. I even remember smuggling out a little piece of bread in my underwear for my mother, because she always saved everything for us.

And in camp, too, there was a certain rumors going around that if you volunteer to go to work in Germany, you get more food, and you get better things. And a lot of people volunteered for it. I don't know if they went to Germany. But there was all kinds of rumors going around. Like people, to get more food, they did anything they could, no?

Did you meet other children, the Spanish children or the Roma children?

No, they were in a different part--

Gypsy.

--of the camp.

There were gypsies, too.

The gypsies, too. There were different part of the camps. The gypsies were in a special part of the camp. And the Spanish, too.

Some time we came together with the Spanish. But they spoke different language. We couldn't talk to them.

And they were very good in throwing stones. They were throwing stones at electric wire, you know? Yeah, the Spanish kids, yeah. In those days, I couldn't speak Spanish, you know?

Right. I have two friends that I was with in Villa Marianne, which is Elizabeth Silverberg. And she passed away in Canada. And her sister's still alive. But I haven't met her sister. I talked to her on the phone.

Where does she live?

She lives in Montreal.

How long were you in Villa Marianna?

Not that long. I don't really know.

Couple months. It was three months.

I don't know because they send me--

That's--

I think they send me back, right?

--on the Riviera in [PLACE NAME].

Yeah, [PLACE NAME].

Yeah, three months.

Is it because you cried a lot?

I cried a lot, so they send me--

[INAUDIBLE] send us up there--

But I made everybody--

--to be on vacation, to make it easier for our parents in [INAUDIBLE], you know?

It was like summer camp. It was in the summer?

Yeah, in the summer.

Was no summer camp.

But it was terrible. There was no food. And we used to, at night, I woke up, and the kids were like having like a meeting, the boys, and because the boys slept different with the girls.

And then they were talking about stealing tomatoes. So we went out at night. We stole some tomatoes. And we ate.

And the next day, the French police came over the place. They knew that we stole the tomatoes. And they put us in a line. And they wanted somebody to tell that we were the ones that stole them. But nobody said nothing.

They had fig trees.

So the French police left. And--

Remember, they had fig trees?

Yeah, outside by the houses. Sometime they send us to buy stuff in the city. We were on detail to buy stuff in the city.

And as we went to the city, we passed houses where there were-- figs were growing. So we used to climb over the fence and grab some figs. But it was dangerous because it was the people-- people had villas. They didn't want nobody to steal their figs, their tomatoes, too.

And Masgelier, the Chateau du Masgelier, was that--

Oh, this was after the war. This was in 1944.

Yeah, this was at the end.

Between '44 and '45. This was when the--

Oh, they gave you food there.

--they were not occupied no more. The French was free.

You mentioned Lyons.

Yeah, I was in Lyons when they took me to--

To Masgelier.

--Villa-- Masgelier or Villa Marianne?

No, Masgelier.

No, no, this was different. I was in Lyons when somebody took me to the Villa Marianne. And she was an underground girl. And I had to be very quiet.

She took me to her apartment. Had to be very quiet. Nobody had to know that I was there.

And I just enjoyed being with her because she was very pretty. And I was a little girl. I was fascinated her combing her hair, putting on makeup, things like that.

And also eating.

Yeah, she took me to a restaurant in Lyons. And she taught me how to eat artichokes, which I had never eaten before. And never eaten-- I mean, I've eaten it since then but never before.

And we had a nice evening. And then she took me back. And then she took me to the Villa Marianne.

Was she Jewish?

I don't know. I don't know. All I know is I had to be very quiet, you know, which I knew how to be quiet.

And then she took you to the Villa Marianne.

Mm-hmm.

And what happened when you left the Villa Marianna? Your parents came for you?

Was I-- I went to France, right, from there?

We went back to Trets.

To Trets. Yeah, I went back to Trets. And many things occurred in Trets, too, that we could have been caught a million times. And we were just very lucky. And remember when they put us in that circle in the park?

Oh, yeah. This is when they looked for the people who derailed the train.

Right. I thought it was something [FRENCH], they wanted to kill the priest.

Oh, this is-- they find the resistance.

Ammunition.

They put-- they hide in the church parachute and other weapons. So the Germans find all that stuff. And they wanted to execute the priest.

So the mayor of the town swore to the Germans that the priest is not-- he blamed everything on the--

He's not involved.

He's not involved. He blamed everything on the resistance and the communists now.

But then after a while, they let us go. And my mother had a lot of Jewish, like a Jewish book and a lot of Jewish things that she put-- you know what a [FRENCH] is?

A what?

A [FRENCH].

It's feathers. It's a feather blanket.

It's like a feather blanket. She opened up the seam and put a lot of things in there--

She hide a lot of things in there, yeah.

--so they wouldn't find it. Her pictures from our family and everything. She had pictures from her brothers in the Russian army.

That's how we got everything. She put all that stuff in there. And the Germans came in, but they never dreamed of opening up the thing.

And also, she threw a lot of things away in these public bathrooms, you know where you throw things in, like in that movie. What's that movie where that little kid hid in there?

The public toilet?

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

See, in France in that town, there wasn't-- we had toilets in where we lived. But a lot of the houses had no toilets. And in the morning, they used to come to the public toilet.

They had like, at night they used to go in pots, like a bucket. And in the morning, they used to come to a public toilet and empty everything in there. A public toilet was very important.

[INAUDIBLE]

Because there wasn't-- a lot of the houses had no public toilets in France in that town where we lived. Now, not in big cities, of course.

OK, what do you want to say?

She also hid her wedding certificate. And if you-- and my father's tallis in his coat, in the lining of his coat. Now, had they found that--

Yeah.

Was your--

We--

We were all surrounded by Germans, you know? The Germans in Oradour-sur-Glane in France, they put all the population in the church. And they burned them all, and they machine-gunned everything. And we were like minutes away from something like that, too, because the Germans wanted to get even for their train, because the train that went to Italy used to carry German troops, ammunition, and used to carry women who went to see their husbands in Italy.

And the women who went to see their husbands in Italy brought their babies in there. And when the train derailed, they all got killed. And so it was-- the Germans wanted to get even with that.

But they were a little bit afraid in the South of France to do crazy things because there was too many-- too much resistance, too much resistance in the woods. And they know if they do something very bad, they're going to pay for it in the South of France, because in the mountains, they cut off the roads. And they would have killed a lot of Germans.

Yeah, so that's about it, yeah.

Yeah.

Your father was in the resistance?

Yeah.

I knew he were-- he was in the woods. Whenever the Germans would come in town, he would be in the woods. But I didn't know what he-- what exactly for sure.

But he knows.

But he knows.

But he knows.

Yeah.

But he was working as a lumberjack. He was cutting--

A lumberjack. He was cutting trees.

Right.

But was he with other people who were Jewish? Or was he with other resistance fighters? Or was he part of a work brigade?

No, he was-- the resistance were in the woods. And they used to hide by the lumberjacks. In the wood, where you hide the woods, where the pieces where you cut the wood, they used to hide their weapons, yeah.

And they used to go out to derail trains. But there wasn't mentioned nothing, you know? I used to say to him, how you got so many sardines? Boxes full of sardines from Portugal.

In those days, one little can of sardines was like \$100. You could sell it for \$100. Nobody had it.

And he didn't say. He'd say, oh, we got it. We got it, no.

And then I find out that they're by the train. By the derailment of a train they got all this stuff. And their weapons, too, came from the trains. They used to have German weapons, grenades that come off from the trains they used to derail.

To derail a train was very easy. They didn't derail it with dynamite. They used to unscrew the rail.

And the train used to come and go down in a-- off the mountain, no? And a ravine, no? And that was it, no?

Did the people in Trets know that you were Jewish, apart from the woman who--

Yeah, yeah, some people know we were Jewish, yeah.

I'm sure they knew.

Yeah.

I'm sure they knew.

But we were lucky they didn't stamp a Juif on our passport, which saved our life.

Yeah, the newspapers say that you've got to go to the police and ask the passport to be stamped. So my mother sent me to the police with her passport. So the guy in charge of the police, he say, go home, and come to me no more.

Yeah, they were-- we were lucky. It's all luck.

I run back. I say--

And when you went to school--

We didn't realize that we were so-- it was so dangerous at times.

You knew you were different, that you were foreigners. But did they know that you were Jewish in the public school?

I don't know. I don't know.

In school, they knew. But they couldn't speak German, the French. That was because one French teacher, he-- you could-- I could see in his eye the hate, eh?

I could see in his eye when he talked to me that he hated me. You know, it's easy to see. You understand me?

Yeah, and then the Germans came when they took too long. In the war, when they took too long, the Germans. And when they came, they came to Trets. When they took too long, then they came from Stalingrad, the German troops.

And they needed to buy paint, and screwdrivers, and nails. So they asked the principal if somebody spoke German in here. He said, maybe there's a Belgium kid, meaning me, who speaks German. So this principal told-- this teacher told the principal, take the guy and send him with the Germans to translate to buy things for them, to speak French for them.

So I went with them. So the Germans-- I translate. So I said to the Germans, why do you need so many things?

He says, we're going back to Russia. There's nothing there in Russia. There's no nails.

There's no hammers. There's no screwdriver. He bought a lot of tools.

So the next day, again, he came to school. And I went with them and the German officers. So the third day, he said to me-- the guy in charge of the German troops, he must have been a brigadier general or something. He says, he would like to meet you because we told him we have a kid who speaks German for us. Would you like to meet him?

I say, yeah, if he wants to meet me, I mean. So I went with them to the base. In the wood, they had a tent. And they had all the German officers in that tent. And outside were the trucks, and the tents, and everything.

So I went in the tent with them. And the guy in charge there, I don't know, he was a big German officer. They all clapped their heels for him. I don't know who he was.

Well--

So he says to me, sit down. Have some tea. I have no coffee. I'll give you tea.

So he gave me some cake and tea. And then he said to me, you see, all those officers, he says, they're dummkopfs. You know what dummkopfs were?

I says, I thought you were joking. And then the officers, they got quiet. They didn't laugh. So I see it's-- I saw it was serious.

So we said, why you saying that for? He said, because they went to Heidelberg to the best universities, he said. And they don't speak another language. They only speak German, he says. And that's why we lose the war, he said to me, the guy in charge.

Yeah, but you always knew not to say that you were Jewish. You always knew that they didn't like the Jews.

And then he-- I stay there maybe a couple hours, have coffee and tea with him. And then he told the officer to drive me home. So he drove me back to Trets.

And I came home. I brought back a bread and some other food that they gave me. You know, they gave me some food, the Germans. So I never understood that. He predicted that they're going to lose the war, this German. The big German officer, he predicted that they're going to lose the war.

You mentioned, Lucie, that the Madame [PERSONAL NAME] was trying-- was thinking that maybe you could be baptized.

Right.

And maybe that was to protect you?

Could be.

Did you got to catechism?

Yes, I did. I went to church. And I used to [FRENCH]. I used to know everything.

And in France, it's not like here in a little town. You see the priest. You kiss his cross when you see him.

And I thought it was beautiful. You know, I was a little girl. This is, you know.

My mother did say the priest did approach her and wanted to baptize us. She said no. She said, I was born a

Jew. I am a Jew, meaning us as well.

Yeah.

And they will die Jews.

Yeah.

Even if it meant that you would die.

Yeah.

Did you still speak Yiddish at home, even though you were in France?

Yeah.

We always-- We did.

I learned Yiddish when I was-- after the war. I did not speak Yiddish.

I did.

I spoke French.

Mm-hmm.

That was my first language.

Yeah, we spoke Yiddish. But the French thought it was Flemish. They didn't know the difference.

The French, they don't know the difference between languages. They just know French. Half the languages they don't know. They're like--

Yeah.

OK. I'm just going to change tapes really quickly.

We're going to change tapes.

Yeah.

OK?

The French-- I used to be home kids. And I spoke Yiddish to my mother. So the kids used to say, stop speaking the Flemish. Teach your mother French, you know?