

OK, we're good to go. This is Rebecca Dillmeier conducting an interview for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on March 28 with Peter Kory over the phone. March 28, 2013. All right, Mr. Kory, can you please state your name for the record?

Peter Kory, spelled K-O-R-Y.

Perfect. Was this your name at birth?

My name at birth was Peter Korytowski. And that's K-O-R-Y-T-O-W-S-K-I.

Perfect. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born, when you were born, and your early family life.

I was born in Berlin, Germany, lived there till I was about a year and a half-- less than two years, in any case. And from then, we moved to Belgium, stayed in Belgium until the blitzkrieg started, which was back in 1940.

OK. We're going to get to that, but we're going to try to do this chronologically. So can you tell me a little bit about your life in Belgium and your parents, where you went to school, what your religious life was like?

Life in Belgium was pretty normal. I went to school during normal hours. And I did that between 1932, '33, and 1940. And I lived with my parents. We lived in Brussels. And it was a average middle income kind of a life in a middle income suburb of Brussels. Want me to go on?

Yeah, can you tell me your parents' names and what they did?

My father, his name was Eric, Erich, that's the German Eric, Korytowski. He started out as a concert pianist. And he did some concertizing in Germany and Berlin. And then he was drafted by Kaiser Wilhelm II.

He fought in World War I on the German side, and eventually he was taken prisoner of the French. And he reinvented himself after that war, after World War I, to become an architect. My father was born around 1894 thereabouts. My mother was roughly the same age.

Her name was Lily. My father was born actually in Poland. My mother was born in Silesia, which was a country that could not make up its mind as to whether it was German or French. Excuse me-- German or Polish.

And she [INAUDIBLE] my father in Silesia. They lived in Germany. They both moved to Berlin. And she was not a nurse exactly, but a kindergarten executive. She headed a kindergarten.

And after they got married, I came along, of course, in 1931. And they lived happily until they were captured ultimately by the Germans, but that's another part of the story, I'm sure, that you have slotted someplace else.

Yes, we will definitely get to that. Can you tell me why your family immigrated to Belgium? Do you know what prompted them?

Yes. What prompted their departure from Germany was the fact that A, they were Jewish, and B, Germany was becoming gradually Nazified. The Third Reich was not yet the law of the land. Hitler was a politician at that time. He was not a dictator.

But the writing was on the wall, and it was clear that things were going to go rather badly for Jews. And my parents were identified as being Jewish. They didn't practice any religion, but they were identified as being Jewish. And this, among other things, prompted them to leave and find a fortune elsewhere in the world.

Unfortunately, they did not go far enough-- simply escaped Germany. In fact, my mother put her jewels in my soiled underwear-- was a way of absconding with the jewelry using that as a startup nest egg in Belgium. And all of that

occurred around 1933 thereabouts-- '32, '33.

I wasn't quite two. I think that says whatever I need to say at this point. So I'll ask you to tell me what the next question is.

Of course. You said your family didn't practice any religion. Was that true in Belgium as well? Did you go to just a regular school? Did you live in a Jewish neighborhood?

We did not live in a Jewish neighborhood. We did not practice any religion. We were basically not religious. My father's religion was music. My mother's religion was health. And it's something that is hard to understand, but we never were religious.

And they were not in the least bit interested in forcing any kind of religion on me. I was their child, and they looked at me for other kinds of comfort and joys.

I read in your memoir that your family celebrated Christmas. Did you also celebrate Hanukkah? What were your celebrations like if you weren't religious?

Christmas was there because of a fellow which we used to know as St. Nicholas, who is known here in this country as Santa Claus. And we knew that we loved the idea of a Christmas tree, we liked all the rites of Christmas. I remember we had real candles on that tree.

And there were always presents. And St. Nicholas was assumed to be a person, at least as a kid I thought it was a person. And I had to be good so I could get the gifts. And one particular incident is that I had always wanted an electric train which I never got.

All I got was a wind-up type, and this was always a deep disappointment, until one day I found out that St. Nicholas really did not exist. It was just my parents wrapping presents. Anyhow, without question, we were not religious. We lived a secular life in every conceivable way.

OK, perfect. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your early life before the Nazi blitzkrieg in 1940-- what your family life was like, how you did in school, anything like that?

My first recollection was when my mother pushed me in not a wheelchair, but a baby carriage, under one of the arches of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. And I must have been about a year and a half old. For some reason, I had a premonition about that gate. And I think the gate itself triggered that premonition.

I had a moment of irrational fear. And evidently, I lost my cool-- we can use that word. And it was evidently quite a scene from what I've been told. And it's an incident that's been stamped in my mind forever. And it was a clear premonition as to what was to come. But of course, I had no idea what was to come.

We lived in Berlin too short a time for me to recall any details of that life, so that my real memories, conscious memories really started after we had reached Belgium and set up housekeeping in Brussels. Life in Brussels was, as I'd indicated, quite normal.

I went to school every day, Monday through Saturday with Thursday as a religious day that the French and Belgians used to catch up on the Bible and other things. So it was a pretty normal life. And I recall living on a middle income street.

There was, I remember, a small bar, restaurant maybe, but certainly a bar across the street. And every morning, they refilled the barrels and made one hell of a racket. Anyhow, life unfolded itself. I walked to school. I remember those walks to be a fairly painful, particularly in the winter, because the winters in Brussels were mostly wet.

In fact, Brussels was known as the piss pot-- piss pot of Europe. So it was always raining. And I was always soaked. I

always walked to school in real short shorts with a beret. Just like the other kids. It was not a religious school, it was a regular public school.

And Belgium was at that time ruled by a king, Roi Baudouin, who later had to give up not only the throne but the country to the Germans. Anyhow, Rebecca, this is as far as I should go for this chapter.

OK. My next question is if you can tell me about the blitzkrieg, what you remember about how that happened, and what it was like for you and your family.

Well, the blitzkrieg started one morning. It was May 10, 1940. Of course, that date that I realized entered my consciousness much later, but it was May 10, 1940. The blitzkrieg had started in Poland, and we were barely aware of that.

By the time it hit Belgium, the way we found out about it is that we were woken up one morning by a noisy rumble. And that rumble, we thought, were the beer barrels being loaded and unloaded across the street-- the little bar. Well, it turned out to be not that. It turned out to be, as we later found out as the rumble continued, it were the Stukas, German warplanes, bombing the Brussels airport.

And this was, for us, the start of the blitzkrieg. I think that your institution probably knows what led to the blitzkrieg, and the fact that they tested it back in 1928 thereabouts in Spain. That story of Guernica, where this German pilot decided to bomb that little village to test out new weaponry, which was later used in a blitzkrieg.

Right.

The blitzkrieg was a terrifying experience for me, because from a quiet morning, it was a Friday as I recall, and on that Friday, I did what most kids had to do, which is to chalk and talk in front of a blackboard and repeat the lessons that we had learned during the course of the week. But in this case, I was relieved on one hand in that I did not have to do my chalk and talk presentation before the class, which I absolutely hated.

But instead, we found ourselves thrust into this unbelievable situation. On one hand, the local police came and arrested my father, because it turned out that he was an enemy alien, having been a hero for Germany in World War I. He became an enemy of the Allies when the Germans attacked in 1940.

So of all ironies, he was taken prisoner, but this time by the Allies. And he was sent to points south we don't know. We did not know where. And in the meantime, my mother and I were left alone in the house. And we had a little yard, and I remember trying to crawl inside the wall that surrounded our little yard in order to avoid the Stukas who were strafing the city and bombing the city.

The moment of terror was when the Germans had equipped their bombs with whistles, and those whistles made it appear that every bomb was headed directly on our heads. So terrified as we were, we naturally panicked, and we set out to collect whatever we could from the banks and so on in downtown Brussels. And that's how we finally left with a minimum of a baggage-- only what we could carry down the road towards France.

We had gotten through the grapevine the information that other enemy aliens were being shipped to France. So we decided to go in that direction and continue the search for father. Anyhow, the blitzkrieg was continued for at least two weeks.

And during those two weeks, the number of air raids increased. Knowing that there was the potential of a war, there had been preparations and we had all dug trenches. And there were some air raid shelters. And every time the sirens blared, we rushed into the shelters.

And it was after the rumble of the bombs all that had ended that we wound up just going out of the shelters and waiting for the next attack. It was a not only a terrifying experience, but one that seemed to have no end. This is what finally drove us out of Brussels and put us on roads, like a long line of refugees, towards France.

What was happening in a broader context is that this was the time that Dunkirk, the Battle of Dunkirk, was being fought. It was during that time that the British Expeditionary Force and the Belgian army decided to get out of Belgium, giving the country up to the Germans. And the term blitzkrieg really applies to the speed at which all of this occurred.

So Belgium did not last very long. It lasted maybe two or three weeks before the Germans moved on and started to invade France. I think I better stop at this point, Rebecca, and you turn the page.

You talked briefly about your mother and you fleeing to France with other refugees. Can you tell me what that was like? How many people were on the road, just what the feelings were, where you found shelter, that sort of thing?

I can't tell you how many people there were. It just a very, very long endless line of refugees. We walked basically from Brussels into northern France. And during that time, we had no food, no water, and we had to sleep wherever we could. In fact, we slept one night in a church that was bombed and the next day was totally destroyed.

And there are all kinds of images that crowd my memory of those days. But we spent about a good three weeks walking from one country to the other. There were people on the side of the road who gave us water and gave us food. And we always found some public accommodation where to sleep. I remember being extremely cold. We were in absolute misery during that trek, and we were in the middle of, as I said, an endless crowd of refugees who, frankly, did not know where to go.

In the meantime, the drama of Dunkirk took place, and the continent was basically abandoned to the Germans. We were finally picked up in a place called Douai which is a city in northern France. And there, we were loaded onto trucks. And I remember my mother preventing me from watching outside, because those cities were all in flame. There were scenes that were very horrible-- people burned, people wounded.

And everybody-- absolutely everybody-- completely panicked as they moved further and further into France. And it was at that time-- this may have been already 1941, but I'm not sure-- that the Vichy government was installed, that Petain-- Marshal Petain-- was installed as the head of state. And it's from that moment on that the French were known as collaborating with the Axis, with the Third Reich.

In any case, it was a turnover of control and so on. In the meantime, what my mother and I were doing is searching for father. He had been interned in a camp in southern France near Perpignan which was half on the Mediterranean. It used to be a resort city. It wasn't quite that.

And it was in that place that we did find him through a network of information that the refugees had improvised. And we managed to have him escape from that camp, because a rumor was-- and it was correct-- that that camp, which was under French control, was going to switch to the new government, which would have been under German control-- if not German control, at least to control of German collaborators.

And the French had decided to make common cause with the Germans. We did manage to spring father from that camp. And then we lived in Toulouse for a while.

Real quickly, do you know how you were able to get your father out of the camp? And do you know what the name of the camp was that he was in?

Yes, I do know the name. But we got my father out of it by bribing the guards. I remember those were French guards at the time. That was before the camp was put under German control. The name of the camp was in a little town called Saint Cyprien, which happened to be the melon capital of France. And I don't recall any further name of that camp, but Saint Cyprien was the little town where it was located.

Can you spell the name of the town for me please?

The name of the camp?

Yeah, yeah. Spell it.

The town? Yeah.

The town, yeah. Saint is S-T-E-- you know, Saint-- Cyprien, separate word, was spelled C-Y-P-R-E-N.

OK, thank you. And no, we can get back to the story. Can you tell me about your life in Toulouse with your parents?

Life in Toulouse was really precarious. We lived in a small apartment on a third floor or something like that in the shadows of one of Toulouse's two great cathedrals. This one was known as St. Sernin. Saint, Sernin is spelled C-E-R-I-N. St. Cerin was a beautiful Gothic cathedral.

We lived on I think it was the third floor, maybe the fourth floor of a very old house. We cooked on-- didn't have a stove or anything like that, we had one of those camp like affairs where we used some chemical fuel to gain some heat. But we lived in that area.

And I went to school. And this was a religious school, because we were so close to the cathedral. And I remember getting into street fights, because I was one of those foreigners. And I was out of the norm that people in that area were used to.

So I was like an interloper in the affairs of that neighborhood. And we were basically strangers. Yeah, it was a short time. We decided, then, to leave Toulouse. My father had been, of course, not liberated, but he had escaped. So he was with us.

And my mother, my father, and myself, we set out to go into the countryside, because it was safer than the city. The city was full of informers, it was full of collaborators. And we were sure to be captured. Because at that time, remember that France had been invaded by the Germans. And it was basically German territory.

The cease fire that had been negotiated divided France into the free zone and an occupied zone. And this didn't mean very much, because the two types of zones melded, and all of France was occupied by the Germans. But in any case, we decided to escape, to leave the city.

And we did that. It was not an escape, really, we just left and set up housekeeping in a little village called Mane-- M-A-N-E. In Mane, and by that time it was 1942, in Mane, money ran out, and my parents decided to find a way to make a living. One of the ways that they tried and, in fact, succeeded beyond their expectations was to do something that the French don't do very well, and that is to make butter and dairy products.

At the same time I was a little older, I was able to learn to ride a bike, which was a particularly painful experience, because that bar in the middle of the bike always kept hitting me between the legs. And the only thing my father was able to get was a man's bike, and I was a little kid at that time. So I went out and I got the milk from the surrounding farms.

And my father would skim the cream off the top and shake and put that cream in bottles and shake the bottles until eventually butter came out. What was left beyond that was used to make yogurt and cheese and other dairy products. And they became famous-- known through the region as the cheesemaker. And I think I'm going to stop at this point, Rebecca, because a whole new chapter unfolds.

OK. At this point, were your parents-- were you all living under your own identities-- your own names and all that? Or had you already adopted false names?

I'd already adopted a false name. The name Korytowski was a dead giveaway. And at the same time, we all had ration cards. So as we falsified those ration cards, we had to have the same number of letters. This is why we changed our name from Korytowski to Engglenger and from Peter to Pierre. So I was known as Pierre Engglenger. And that did not

sound particularly Jewish.

It would be anybody's guess what the origin was, but it wasn't anything that would give us instantly away. Am I coming through, Rebecca?

Yes, you are.

Good.

Yes. Do you remember when you adopted the false names? And you said you had to change your ration cards. How did you falsify your ration cards?

Well, we did that, actually, in Belgium before we left before the blitzkrieg. We felt that, having left Germany, in certainly clandestine way. Namely, we simply went from Germany to Belgium as if we were going to go on a vacation.

So it was around that time that we decided to go in a very shallow form of underground living. And the ration card was, of course, used in the same way as the identity card. And for this reason, we felt compelled to change the name. I'm jumping back and forth, I realize that.

No, no, no, that's OK. Sometimes we'll jump back and forth, and that's completely fine. I just wanted to make sure that we talked about your false identities. So you mentioned that as your parents were becoming more famous in Mane that things were about to change. What were the things that were going to change for you, for your family?

Well, for one thing, we became known. Famous is probably an exaggeration. But we became known. And in those days, you did not want to be known. You do not want for people to pay attention to your existence. And that made things a little dangerous.

And so we realized that this was a situation that would not last forever, particularly as the Germans were getting tighter and tighter, France was no longer a free zone and an occupied zone. It was all an occupied zone. There were some rumblings about the resistance that started to become more and more active.

And so the German security became tighter and tighter. And we felt as if it was a net that was closing in around us. It's that which made my parents realized that they had to find another solution. We tried to go to Switzerland, and the Swiss, of course, were more interested in protecting the fortunes that they were holding on to their-- not independence, but the Swiss never took a side, either German or allied. So they wanted to remain not independent, but--

Neutral.

Neutral. Neutral, exactly. So the Swiss wanted to preserve their neutrality, which they considered to be their one major asset, and also their task to hide the fortunes of anybody who needed to have their money hidden. The corollary of that was that they did not want to endanger that by allowing immigrants to cross their border.

So we tried Switzerland, and it was absolutely impossible to get through that border. And we were basically trapped inside the borders of France. It was those circumstances that-- I'm moving on now, Rebecca-- that led my parents to decide to try and escape outside of France.

And in doing whatever research they could do, they realized that the only way to escape was to actually go across the Pyrenees. Because, ironically, Franco, who had a really bad reputation, turned out to be the one dictator who did allow Jews to go through his country. So we decided to go across the Pyrenees.

We met a guide, met an organization that specialized in escaping and saving immigrants-- or at least managing their escape. And the idea was to then cross Spain and finally wind up in Morocco and go to Casablanca, and Casablanca to, reputedly-- at least that's what the word was, that you could probably catch a tramp steamer or some boat that would take you to America.

America was always looked upon as the salvation, as the true sanctuary for anybody trying to escape Europe in those days. The time was 1942. And things were getting worse and worse and worse.

So we did attempt that escape. And we set out to cross the Pyrenees, I recall, on the eve of Easter 1942. I might as well go on to the next chapter.

Yes.

These are not chapters in a book, these chapters in my--

Chapters in your life.

In my life. The way I'm talking about it, haltingly as it is, it's mourning. But this is all from memory. And incidentally, I'd rather do it this way than write an outline or a PowerPoint presentation or something, which in my mind would be entirely too slick.

In any case, we set out for the mountains on the eve of Easter. And the guide and I were marching ahead-- I was a young kid at that time. I must have been 12 or 13. And at that point. Hold on for one second. Our housekeeper has a very loud voice.

OK. Would you like me to pause the recording?

Pause it for one second.

OK.