

We're rolling. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Felix Heilpern on July 28, 2015, in Albany, New York. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Heilpern, for agreeing to speak with us today to share your story and your experiences. It's much appreciated.

I'm going to spend a great deal of time trying to learn more about your early years, your family, your childhood, the world you were born into, the forces that shaped you well before we come to the issue of the impending disasters of what happened in Europe. So I will start with the very basic questions. And the very first one is, can you tell me the date of your birth?

3/8/27.

So that would be March 8, 1927? OK. Where were you born?

Vienna.

Austria. And what was your name at birth?

Pardon me?

When you were born, what was your name? How were you named?

Same name I have now.

And that is? I'd like you to say it.

Oh, Felix Heinz Heilpern.

Felix Hans?

Heinz.

Hans.

Heinz, like the 57 varieties.

OK.

[LAUGHTER]

Heilpern. And tell me, did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes.

And were they boys or girls? What-- who was it?

Two girls.

Younger or older than you?

Older.

Both of them? Oh, so you were the baby in the family.

For a while.

What are your sisters' names?

Wilhelmina and Gertrude.

And when was Wilhelmina born?

Wilhelmina was born in '22. Gertrude was born in '21.

Ah. So they're-- well, not of a huge age difference, but nevertheless--

Three year.

Yeah. And your mother and your father, what are their names?

Hans.

Hans.

And Sidonie.

Sidonie? What a pretty name. Are they both-- what was your mother's maiden name?

Ehrenpreis.

Ehrenpreis.

Ehrenpreis.

Ehrenpreis. Are they both from Vienna, as well, your parents?

Yes.

They both grew up in Vienna and were born there? And so both sides of your family?

Yes.

How many generations of your family had lived in Vienna or in Austria?

That I can't tell you. At least two generations. But my mother's parents-- he was a chief judge for Poland.

Really?

Still was after the war. And that's it.

So your grandfather was the chief judge?

Of Poland.

Of Poland.

Yes.

And this would be after 1918, as well-- that is, when you were--

Yes, that's right. After 1918.

So some of her family lived in Poland, then, that she was born into.

Well, I think, yes. Started from-- well, yeah. But most of them moved to Vienna-- sister, mother, [INAUDIBLE] parents.

You may or may not know this, but Poland-- whether-- what part of Poland were they from? Were they the part that was controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the war, or the part that was controlled by Prussia, or Russia?

No, the Austrian empire. They were born in Lvov, L-V-O-V.

That's in Eastern Poland, yeah.

Pardon me?

That's in the Russian part of Poland, near Ukraine.

I don't know.

Yeah. Lvov. So your grandparents were born there?

My grand-- no, my grandparents-- I think that's the ones that moved to Vienna. I'm not sure.

At any rate, what was the language you spoke at home?

German.

German. Did your parents speak Yiddish, as well? Did they know Yiddish or not?

Oh, well, my father did. But we didn't speak Yiddish because Yiddish is equal to German, basically. But he could read Yiddish. And he spoke Yiddish when he came here.

Oh, here to the United States?

Yeah.

And how did your family make its livelihood?

My father was a-- what-- a [GERMAN]. That's a-- he had a moving business.

Ah. So for household goods or for products that were--

No, household goods mainly.

Was it his own company?

Oh, yes.

Was it a large company?

Well, I was just a kid. He had a big truck which was [? an ?] [? Audi, ?] at the time. And then he had a couple horses.

And that's about all I remember.

What was the part of Vienna that you lived in?

Leopoldstadt.

Leopoldstadt. And is that a residential area or is that--

No, it's a residential area.

Yeah? Can you describe to me-- did you have a single family house or did you live in an apartment?

In an apartment.

Can you describe to me the building and the street so that I'd get a mental picture of what it looked like?

Well, I think Taborstrasse-- that's the street we lived on-- is the main street of the second borough. Vienna has 21 boroughs.

Aha. It was a borough. 21 boroughs, and that was one of them.

Yeah. 21. It was the second. And I don't know if you've ever been to Vienna.

I have, but not very-- not very long. Pretty city, but I've been there only for a visit.

Yeah.

So the street-- was it all apartment buildings along the street?

No. The hospital I was born was along the street.

Oh, so it was close by.

Pardon me?

Close to your home.

Yes. It's still there.

Can you tell me how many stories there-- your home had-- your building had, where you had the apartment?

Four.

And on which floor were you?

Second.

Was there shops on the ground floor?

Well, it was-- the way it was located was, the ground floor was on Taborstrasse, the main street. And there were shops over there. But to get to the apartment you had to go sort of through a tunnel.

So it was sort of like a courtyard area.

Yes.

That sounds very European, where there's-- the way-- the entrance to apartments are from the inside, from a courtyard. Describe the apartment itself to me. How big was it? How many rooms? I mean, you were a rather large family.

Well, there was five of us. I have two sisters and my parents and myself.

So the rooms-- how many rooms did the place have?

Well, there was 3, 4, 5 rooms, I think it was.

And did your mother help your father in the business? Or did she take care of the household?

She took care of the house most of the time.

Did she have any help doing it?

Yes, she did for a while.

Who? Would it be a cook, or a maid, or a nanny? A maid.

A maid. A maid. And was this an Austrian person?

Yes.

Your family, was it very religious?

Well, no. Yes and no. My father prayed every morning and every night. Just as far as-- and we observed all the Jewish holidays, naturally.

Did he go to synagogue every week?

Mm-hmm.

And did you work on Saturdays? Did you observe these rituals?

Most of the time we did. There was no reason to work. And even the food.

Did you keep kosher?

Yes and no, I guess. We usually had richard and-- I don't know if you know what that is.

No. Tell me.

It's a mixture of barley and beans and corned beef. And I took it to the baker on Friday night. And he put it in his oven. And in the oven, during Saturday night-- and that's when I went to pick it up.

And what was it called, this mixture? What was this food called?

Richard.

Richard?

[INAUDIBLE]

Yes, richard.

Richard?

Yes, like the name.

Like the name Richard? And how did it get such a name? Was this how your family referred to it?

No. It is a very common dish.

I've never heard of it before.

Well, I'm sorry about that.

[LAUGHTER]

So am I. It sounds very delicious. So it had corned beef in it. Barley.

Barley and beans.

And beans. And you left it there from Saturday night to Sunday night. So--

No, from Friday night to Saturday.

From Friday to Saturday.

Remember, we were Jewish.

I know.

[LAUGHTER]

I know. My mistake. My mistake. So that you didn't work. I mean, that is, nothing was done on Saturday. But you'd have the food prepared for--

Saturday night meal.

Saturday night meal. What was Friday night's meal like?

Usually soup and a meat course. Soup meat. Do you know what soup meat is?

Tell me that, too. I don't know soup meat. No.

I don't know, actually. But if we didn't have the meat for it you went to the butcher and he gave you bones.

And so you made the soup from the bones.

Yeah. Nowadays those bones cost four dollars a pound. But--

Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

In those days, no. Was there a special meal on Friday nights?

No. Well, we had a challah and-- but-- and my mother lit the candles. And that's it.

But you did go to synagogue.

Yeah. But my father prayed every day, every morning and every night. But he prayed at home.

Yeah.

But he did the tefillin, if you know what that is.

Repeat that, please? I didn't hear it properly.

The tefillin. You know that--

Mm-hmm.

You know, you put-- wind one around your arm. And there's a box with things.

Yes. Tefillin? Is that what you're saying? Yes.

You know what it is?

Explain it to me.

I think-- I don't know. It's just a little strap with a box on it. And I always presumed, in the box were the Ten Commandments or something like this, because the box was never opened. It was just a-- do we have one?

Yes. Would you like me to get it?

If you--

Yeah, sure. And then we'll show it later and you can explain a little bit more. Now, did you-- did he take care that you also got religious instruction, your father?

No, he didn't.

He didn't.

It's mandatory. At that time in Austria, it was mandatory to take-- from kindergarten on up, you had to take religious instruction. If you were Jews a rabbi came in, and Catholic, a priest came in.

Into school?

Oh, yeah. And they divided up the class according to religion. And you took instructions.

I didn't know that. I didn't know. So when you were in grammar school, when you were starting out in school, you used to have religious classes as part of your curriculum.

That's it. From grade one, you would call it, [GERMAN].

And so you didn't-- your parents didn't have to-- they didn't have to concern themselves to make sure you got it outside of school because they already knew you were getting it in school.

That's true.

Was your mother a religious person?

Not very much. In those days the women did what the husbands wanted them to do. Nowadays I do what she wants me to do.

Well, this is the proper order of things--

Is it?

--the way it is nowadays.

[LAUGHTER]

I'd like to change [INAUDIBLE].

You'd like to go back to the way it was? So that brings me to one of my questions. Tell me a little bit about your parents. How did they meet? How did their--

I have no idea.

They never told you. No, it wasn't-- you have a picture of them.

Mm-hmm. I do. I do.

That was never discussed.

Were they part of the same community, the same circle of friends in Vienna?

Yes. And my father owned a summer home.

Where?

On the Old Danube. You don't know what that is.

The river?

Well, it's not the new river. It's the old river.

Then where are they in relation to each other? The Old Danube?

Well, almost side by side. There's about a mile difference. I don't know. They both flow into Hungary-- Budapest. So I really don't know what--

Is the old river as wide and as large as the one that we know as the Danube?

I think so. I couldn't swim. But we had a beach front. My father went there for the summer. And we had a cabin.

Mm-hmm.

I have pictures of that, if you want to see it.

Later on it would be nice to see. But now, describe what it looked like. You said he owned this summer house, this-- did he own the cabin or did he own a lot more area and--

No, no. It was a nice sized house. We [? stayed ?] there all summer long.

That sounds nice. How far from Vienna was it?

Pardon me?

How far from Vienna was it?

It was in Vienna.

It was in Vienna.

Yeah. On the Old Danube. And then we had beachfront property.

And did he also spend the summer there?

Oh, yeah. I've got pictures, if you want to see them.

Yeah, later on. Later on.

I know.

Tell me a little bit about home life. And what were some of the activities? Did your father and mother have much time to spend with the children?

There was no television at the time. Yes.

Yeah? And what were some of the things that you would do together as a family?

Well, my wife keeps laughing about it.

[LAUGHTER]

But my father used to take us on trips.

What kind?

Walking trips.

[LAUGHTER]

To Czechoslovakia.

And when I tell her, she laughs. We used to walk from Vienna to Czechoslovakia.

That's a hike.

Oh, yeah. But we stopped at night at a farmhouse or something. And then you walked.

And did everybody go willingly?

Well, my father never had a whip. Oh, yes he did.

[LAUGHTER]

We has the horses.

Well, I can imagine that some people who like hiking or like taking walking trips would enjoy it. But some others might start complaining.

It was really very enjoyable.

Yeah?

You walked from Vienna to Czechoslovakia.

And that would take how many days?

Oh, I really don't know. Maybe three, four days. And just, it's nice. There was farmhouses we could stay in. You know.

You saw something of the countryside.

Yeah.

Were people in the countryside different than-- did they behave differently than people in Vienna?

I don't think so. But they were Catholic.

Did that make a difference?

No. I don't think so.

So when you were-- you didn't experience any sorts of problems.

No. Not until Hitler came.

We'll come to that. We'll come to that. So did you do this often, these walking trips?

Well, maybe once a year.

And did you cross over and stay in some part of Czechoslovakia?

Well, we went to Prague.

You didn't walk to Prague, did you?

Yes.

You walked to Prague?

Mm.

From Vienna?

Yeah. Not in one day.

My goodness. That takes--

Pardon me?

I've driven from Prague to Vienna, and it's at least four hours. Could be more. I don't remember exactly.

Well, we didn't do it in one day. But we never drove.

You never drove?

No. My father never learned how to drive.

So you said that you walked to Prague.

Yes.

And you walked back from Prague.

Yes.

And nobody ever complained?

Well, it usually was just my father and me.

Oh, I see. It wasn't the whole family.

No. The girls wouldn't want to walk as far.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, this is why I was thinking-- if it were girls and-- man, oh man.

But I have two-- I have two sisters.

So this had some special meaning, too, if it was yourself and your father.

Yeah.

Then you had a chance to be together, just the two of you.

Oh, yeah.

Did you talk about things? Did you just-- is this the time you got to know him, during these types of walks?

No, we had a good relationship. It's not like father and son relationships over here. If I didn't behave I got hit.

There was much more strictness involved and discipline involved.

You know. And I learned a lot by that. I was bad and I ran through the apartment, my father says, it's OK. You keep on running. But tonight you're going to go to bed.

So was he a strict parent?

I don't-- yeah, he was strict, but I don't think in a bad way.

Was he an outdoorsman? Did he like exercise? Did he like being outdoors?

No, I don't think so. But--

But he liked walking.

Yeah, well, everybody walks in those days.

Yeah. Not everybody walked to Prague.

Huh?

Not everybody walked to Prague.

That was a long time ago, talking about.

No. But it's-- if it's a four-hour, at least, I think, today, by car, if my memory serves me well, then I can imagine-- well, it rains. And there you come under all kinds of landscapes. And it wasn't always sidewalks.

But there are always farms. Austria doesn't have 100-acre farms. They're little farms. And you can stay at those. Always welcome.

Well, you do see something of life outside of the city, that's for sure.

Yeah, sure.

Did you do this more than once, or was this--

No, we did it maybe once every other year.

Same place? Always to Czechoslovakia?

No, we went all over. We went all over. Went to the Vienna woods. It's a long hike. Things like that.

And what did the girls do? When you were gone with your father, what did your sisters and your mom do at home?

I don't know. They never told me.

So it wasn't like they had their own separate vacation.

No.

No. Tell me a little bit about your social circle. Did your parents-- were they a very social couple? Did they have a lot of friends come over?

I think they did. They went away overnight on weekends. They had a thing called trip in the unknown. And my parents really loved that. It was-- you took a train ride someplace. I never went. They never took me. They just wouldn't take me anyplace.

Except Prague, for walking.

[LAUGHTER]

No, my uncle took me all over.

Oh, did he really?

Oh, yeah. Apparently I was kind of cute, and it attracted women.

Really? And so he took you as bait?

Yes.

[LAUGHTER]

It worked out well for him.

Did it really?

Yeah. I'm serious.

So yes, tell me this. Did your father have many brothers and sisters? Or your mother?

My mother has-- had a sister. And my father has-- had a brother. I think the brother's still alive. I don't know. Not alive?

You mean your cousin? You mean your cousin, not your father's brother.

Your uncle, the one who took you with him-- was that your father's brother?

No, it was my mother's brother.

So your mother had a sister and a brother.

Yes.

What was his name?

Hugo.

Hugo. And your aunt, her sister?

[LAUGHS]

I don't know.

OK. It's all right. And his last name was Ehrenpreis, like your mother's had been?

Yes.

So it was Hugo Ehrenpreis.

Yes.

And your father had one brother, or more?

I only knew one.

Did he have sisters?

He had one sister, but she didn't live in Austria. I never met her. She moved to England before World War I. And we never met her.

Did you have any other relatives of the family living in other countries besides Poland?

Well, after Hitler came Hugo-- that's my uncle-- moved to Romania for a while. And then Hitler kept marching. And my uncle kept leaving. He wound up in-- finally, he wound up in Israel.

So he got to Palestine before-- through Romania?

Yeah. Well, it was Palestine at the time. It wasn't Israel.

So what was Uncle Hugo like? Was he a lot of fun to be with?

Oh, yeah.

Tell me in what way.

Well, first of all, he had money. And I guess he was pretty good looking. And I think he had the first American car that was ever sold in Austria.

Really?

Yeah. That was a big deal. But it was [INAUDIBLE] Chevy--

[LAUGHTER]

--from Chevrolet.

It was a Chevrolet?

Yeah.

Well, for a little kid it must be fun to ride in it.

Oh, he took me all over.

So what are the-- some of the places that he took you to?

Oh, I don't know-- Baden-Baden. That's a resort town. But wherever we went, he asked my mother, can I take him? And my mother trusted him.

Should she have trusted him?

Or maybe she just wanted to get rid of me. I don't know.

[LAUGHTER]

I doubt that. But you had fun with him.

Oh, yeah.

And so you'd go to these spa towns. Did you go to Marienbad and-- in Czechoslovakia there are spa towns, too. Did he take you there?

No.

No. So he took you to the German ones.

Yeah.

How did he have enough money to be able to buy a Chevrolet?

He had more money than that. My grandparent--

So Uncle Hugo had more money than just what it took to buy a Chevrolet. How did he earn his money?

He didn't.

Did he inherit it?

My grandparents apparently were pretty well off.

The ones in Poland.

No, they moved to Vienna. And the thing was, in those days the eldest son inherited everything. That's how he had money.

Did he work?

Well, I don't remember him-- he acted in a couple of movies. Things like that. I don't think he worked.

So he was an actor?

Well, part time, I guess. He used to act in Austrian movies.

Did you see any of those movies?

Oh, yeah. So he acted with Pola Negri. Did you ever hear of Pola Negri?

No. No. Pola Niedrich?

Pola Negri.

Pola Negri.

Negri. She finally went to Hollywood and made a lot of films in Hollywood.

Well, it sounds like a very glamorous life, to be an actor, to be in the movies, to have some income coming in, to have some wealth, to have a cute little nephew who can-- you can take out on rides and use as bait. He sounds like a very colorful figure.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. But it didn't go on forever.

Yeah.

When the-- Hitler came into Austria they were after him, the SS, because he was living with a married woman who happened to be Catholic. And they didn't like that. So he fled Austria and got to Romania. And didn't last long in Romania. Finally decided the best place to go was Palestine. It wasn't Israel in those days. And he didn't have no money over there, because he drove a cab.

Really? Is that what he did to earn his living in Palestine, huh? How-- did he end up staying in Palestine?

As far as I know.

So you lost contact with him.

Oh, yes. We all did, because he didn't have much money left. And he always wrote to my mother to send clothes for his daughter. He had one daughter. And things like that. But--

So it must have been very hard for him to go from that kind of a life to another kind, where you have to scrimp and save.

Yeah. That's life.

Was he your favorite uncle?

Was he my favorite uncle? Yes, I would say that.

What kind of a personality did your mother have?

I don't know what that means.

Let me see if I can explain it different ways, ask it in a different way. Was your mother someone who was very outgoing, or was she a more reserved person?

Well, in those days women's rights weren't the women's rights we have today. Those were happy days.

For some. For some. So was your parents' relationship one where your father gave orders and your mother obeyed them?

Oh, yeah. But they were very happily married. When Hitler came the-- I think one of the first [INAUDIBLE] they picked up was my father.

We'll come to that. We'll come to that. Your mother, then-- did you-- were you close to her, or were you closer to your father?

Well, I was close to my father, but I was very close to my mother.

Were you? Yeah?

She loved me, for some reason.

It's an amazing thing, isn't it, how mothers love children?

Yeah. And when she came to the United States she lived with me.

Did she? Yeah?

Well, my father did too, but he didn't live with me. They were working very hard in New York. And I said-- told my father-- he had a business, diner, in Maspeth. You know Maspeth?

Mm-hmm.

And they worked six days a week. It was sort of a factory neighborhood. But they were closed on Sundays. Very [? odd. ?]

Did they work together in this diner?

Oh, sure.

So it was your father--

Somebody had to do the cooking.

So he owned it. It wasn't that he worked there.

No, he owned it.

He owned it. We'll talk about life in America in a little bit. Now I still want to concentrate about life in Vienna. Did your father's and mother's siblings come to visit you often in your home? Was it a situation where the family members lived close to one another and were part of each other's lives?

I don't understand the question.

You said that your uncle would come by every once in a while and ask your mother could he take you for a ride.

Yeah.

Now, your mother also had a sister.

Yes.

And did your sister-- did her sister come visit you in your home much?

No, not much. She lived with her mother.

And where did they live-- in Vienna, as well?

Yeah.

So who were your parents' circle of friends? Who did they usually spend leisure time with?

Well, I really can't tell you that. Life in Vienna, in those days, was a lot different than life over here.

In what ways was it different?

Well, my father went in the morning to the cafe house and made friends there. All he had was a cup of coffee. But read all the papers were there. It was different.

More leisure time. I mean, a business man today wouldn't do that. Not in the United States. They'd go straight to the office.

Well, he didn't do any manual work. He owned the business.

I know. I know. I know. But he had the time. And this is something that was done, is that people would go there and--

Oh, sure.

Did you ever join him there?

No. I was too young for it.

And were you close to your older sisters?

No. Well, I have sister living right now. She's in Florida. My [? good ?] sister. And she's called me this week and said she wants to come up. And I said sure.

I'm asking as children. They had their circle and your sisters had their own friends. And they didn't-- you didn't really spend too much time together.

That's right.

Did most the kids that you knew as a child-- were they Jewish or were they Gentile?

Well, the friends I had were at least 60-40-- Catholic 60 and Jewish 40. I can't tell you about my sisters. They're older than me.

And were these friends from the neighborhood or from school?

In the neighborhood and from school, like over here, where you [INAUDIBLE] friends that you make in school.

Tell me, what was your schooling-- what do you remember from going to school in Vienna?

It was hard.

Was it really?

Oh, yes. In Vienna the school system was different than here.

In what way?

You had four years of public school. And then you went either to what's called [GERMAN]--

[GERMAN].

That's right. And that was four years. And my older sister wasn't that swift. And at age 14 she finished school.

Well, that sounds like she was pretty swift, if she finished at age 14.

No, school was over. My other sister went to Gymnasium.

Ah, OK.

And that would have been-- that was an eight-year school, not a four-year school.

I see what you're saying. I see what you're saying.

But she didn't finish either. We left before she--

Yeah. And what about yourself? What do you remember from school? From school life?

Well, it's a different educational system. First four years is it. And then, if you're smart enough, you go to a Gymnasium, which is eight years. Or if you weren't smart enough then you want to [GERMAN], because it's four years.

And what was taught in [GERMAN]? Were they vocational courses or were they--

I presume so. My older sister went to it. She was just 14 years old. She was finished with school. My younger sister-- and my father always said she was going to be a doctor. She didn't make it.

And she didn't make it because?

Well, Hitler came.

At home, when you were growing up-- you were born in 1924, you say?

Pardon me?

You were born in 1924?

Twenty-s--

'27, excuse me. '27. So that means that you were six years old when Hitler came to power in Germany.

No. I was 12 years old. Oh, in Germany.

In Germany. Something.

I don't know much about that. But during the-- annexed Austria, I was 12 years old.

At home, did people talk-- did your parents talk about the Nazis before they came into Austria?

Oh, yes.

What were some of the things that were being said?

Well, they were marching around in uniforms and every-- but they had no power at that moment. Then, when Hitler took over Austria, the SS and the SR became very powerful. They came and got my father at 4 o'clock in the morning.

That must have been a surprise.

To my father, too.

Did you see all of this happening? Did you see them come? Were you awake?

Oh, yes. They knocked on the door and took him and sent him to Dachau. You know Dachau?

Yeah, yeah.

And he was in Dachau. And then they transferred him to Buchenwald.

Why?

I don't know.

Why did they take him?

Because he was Jewish.

Was your father very well to do?

No. We were middle class, but not wealthy. But we lived a good life. I mean, there was no food shortage or anything like that.

Before this happened, were you still going to school?

Before what happened?

Before your father was arrested.

Oh, yes.

So you were still going to school even though Hitler had come to power in Austria.

Oh, yes. But I would have had to transfer to a local school after four years of public school. You either go to [GERMAN], which is four years, or you go to Gymnasium, which is eight years. I was in my third year in Gymnasium at the time Hitler came.

So you had already been in Gymnasium. And did the atmosphere at school change when Hitler came to power in Austria?

Well, yes.

In what way?

Almost every way.

Could you describe some of the--

All the kids were-- Austria's officially a Catholic country. And most of the kids were Catholic, naturally. And then they joined the Hitler Youth and all this stuff. So, yeah, it changed.

Did you lose friends?

Yeah. I didn't lose them. I knew where they were. But they didn't have much to do with Jews after that.

Any close friends?

Oh, yeah. But everybody knew I was Jewish because I took-- you had to take religion in school, in the public school. And naturally, the Jews would-- had a rabbi come in. And so everybody knew you were Jewish. It was no secret.

When you-- at that age, you're just about to enter teenage years. And to lose friends is a huge thing for a kid.

I guess, but it didn't bother me that much.

No? Why not? Were you not so close to them to begin with? Or you--

No. We played together until they got more indoctrinated into Hitler's policies. Then they started drawing away. But before it was OK.

And how did life change in other ways, when Austria was annexed to Germany, for your family?

It changed very much. First of all, they-- the Stormtroopers, the SR and the SS were unbeatable. They did whatever they wanted to. And naturally, they came at night and took my father.

Did they tell you where they were taking him? Did they tell your mother where they were taking him?

No, they just took him. But then he wrote from Dachau. And I don't know why they were transferring him to Buchenwald, but they did.

Had you ever heard of these places before then?

I think I knew-- Buchenwald I never heard of before.

Your parents had a radio at home, yes?

Pardon me?

Your parents had a radio at home?

Yes.

Is that where you got-- how you got most of your news of what was going on in the world?

No, newspapers.

Newspapers. Did you read these papers when you were-- now, at this age?

No.

Just your parents. Or your father.

Yeah.

Did he ever talk about what he was reading in the papers?

No.

How did life change at home once your father was arrested?

Well, there was no money coming in. So my sisters and my mother had to go to work. And it was tough work.

What did they do?

And then we moved into a small place, small apartment.

What had happened to his business?

Pardon me?

What had happened to his business?

They took it.

Before his arrest?

Yes. About the same time.

About the same time. What was the name of his company?

Heilpern.

Heilpern [GERMAN]? Is that--

[GERMAN], that's right. How do you know that word?

[GERMAN]

[LAUGHTER]

Is that-- was the name of his company?

Yeah.

And what kind of work did your mother and your sisters end up doing so they could bring in some money?

When they-- after they arrested my father? They stood on line. They still do that today-- not my sisters and my mother. But they got up at 3 o'clock in the morning, got in line by the American embassy or the English embassy. And they usually were maybe second or third in line. They were also big lines. Then people came along and gave them so much money to take their place.

That's how they made some money, is that they would take-- they would stand in line for other people?

That's it. Well, they had to get up at 3, 4 o'clock in the morning to come to the head of the line. For instance, if the American embassy opened up, let's say, at 9 o'clock-- but it didn't-- there would have been a mile-- there was a line a mile long. So people paid.

And this went on for how long?

Till they left.

And that-- do you remember the date of your father's arrest?

Do I remember the date? I used to remember it. I don't really remember. I think it was-- let's see. I think it was in April of '38.

That's pretty early.

Pardon me?

That's pretty early.

Well.

And you left when?

I left?

Yes.

I left in 1939.

Which month?

July.

So over a year. So your sisters and your mother would stand in line to bring in some money for about 14 months or so. 14, 15 months.

Well, they didn't leave. They stood.

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, that's what I'm saying, is they took-- they were bringing in money into the house by doing this for well over a year.

Yes.

And you say you moved to a smaller place?

Oh, yes.

Were you forced out or was it that you just couldn't afford it anymore?

My mother couldn't afford it.

How did she manage? Did she panic or was she a strong person who held it together? How did she react?

I think my mother was a very strong person, I think.

And you-- when your father was arrested in April of '38, you were still in Gymnasium, yes?

Pardon me?

You were still in school in April.

Yes.

Did you finish the school year?

Yes. I went to school, sure.

And did you continue in the same school the following fall?

Yes. I went to three years of Gymnasium.

And then-- so the following fall was the third year, or was it--

Well, I was 12 years old at the time.

So by the time you left Austria you had finished three years of Gymnasium. You never had to go to another school.

No.

So how did the teaching change? Since you were in school for well over a year after your father was arrested, did the atmosphere in the classes change? Did the teachers start talking in a different way?

No, I don't think so. But the kids did.

And did you experience them mistreating you?

Well, they tried, sure.

In what ways? What did they try and do? What were the things--

Beat you up.

Did that happen daily?

Well, not to me. See, I always did the unexpected. And the regular Jews did the expected. For instance, there were three kids walking across the street. And if there was a Jew walking in front of me and-- or wherever, I crossed over and walked in the middle of those three Jews. And they never knew I was Jewish. Now, the other kids started running. Well, they usually caught them.

So in some ways, you outwit them.

Pardon me? You outwit them. You outwit the kids who were--

No I didn't go with them, but--

No, no, no. You were smarter. You used your brain to keep them--

Yeah.

So you never exp-- you were never beat up yourself.

No, because they were never sure I was Jewish. You see, smart people don't walk into danger. They stay on this side. So I figure I better not be smart. I walked on the other side.

Did your sisters experience any of this?

No, I don't think so. I don't think so. They never complained about anything like that, so I don't think so.

What about when they stood in line at the British or the US embassy and were standing in line to earn some money? Did they ever stand in line for themselves, that is, to try and find a way to leave the country?

No.

So your mother and your father, before he was arrested, didn't talk about leaving Austria?

My father was arrested about three, four weeks after Hitler came into Austria.

Yeah. That's pretty soon.

Yeah.

Well, then, afterwards, your mother-- was there any talk and any thought in her mind that, yes, we've got to get out of the country?

Well, she got rid of me.

But what about all of you?

Well, that's the best she could do. An American couple came to Austria, and they wanted to adopt Jewish children. And my mother cried all the way to the place because as soon as I walked in they adopted me. They wanted to adopt me. And she cried. But they took me.

How did she know of them? How did she get to know about them?

Well, I think they published-- publicized it.

And she went and said, I have a child who--

Well, she took me and they spoke to me. And then they took me.

You were 12 years old?

Yes.

Did you want to go?

I wasn't asked.

Do you remember the day you met them, this American couple?

The date?

No, no, no. Do you remember what it was like the day you met them for the first time? What they looked like, how they spoke?

Well, they had money. They looked good. And they interviewed-- I don't know how many kids they took. Well, they took 50.

Did your mothers-- and how long between the time you met them-- how much time passed between the time you met them and the time you left?

Very shortly. Maybe two weeks.

How did your mother explain this to you, that she wants you to go with them?

I don't think she explained it to me. I don't remember her explaining it to me. My father was in a concentration camp. And she was basically saving my life. I think that's what she thought.

And was that clear to you, just evident, even though you were 12 years old? You didn't need an explanation.

Well, she cried a hell of a lot.

Yeah. And you? Did you?

No.

Were you upset that you had to leave her and leave your sisters?

No. They were very nice people.

How did they behave?

The couple that-- well, there's a book out of it.

[RATTLE]

Excuse us just for a sec. OK. I know, but at that time, when they came to interview you and you met them, what was their manner like?

Oh, very friendly. A lot of kids came. And they interviewed I don't know how many children.

And do you remember where they interviewed you, what kind of a place it was?

It was the American embassy.

Oh, I see. So you went to have the interview at the embassy itself.

Yes.

And did they arrange, then, for your papers? You know, all of the official paperwork?

Oh, they did everything.

When you left, did you take any-- what did you take with you?

Nothing.

No clothes, no suitcase?

Oh, the clothes I had. But I didn't have any good clothes anyway, so it-- and they took us to a camp in Pennsylvania.

Oh. We'll come to that. I'm still back in Vienna still. Did you take any books or any particular toys, anything that had any meaning for you that you wanted to take with you?

No.

No photos or anything like that?

Nothing.

By the time you left had you heard from your father often, or only once or twice?

Well, my father wrote on a regular basis--

He did.

--to my mother.

So you-- she was able to get postage out. They were allowing him to write letters. They were posting them. Did your mother share everything that was in those letters? Did everybody read them? Or did she keep some of the details to herself?

No, she didn't share them.

She didn't share them. What kind of a place did your mother move to with you and your sisters? What was that apartment-- what did it look like after she could no longer afford to keep the one you had lived in?

It was a very small place. She had a friend, and the friend's husband also was arrested. That's how they really became friends. And she moved in with them.

What part of Vienna was this in?

What part of Vienna?

Yeah, you said there were 21 boroughs, and Leopoldstadt was where you had been.

The second borough [INAUDIBLE].

It's still second borough? Yeah. Do you remember the street address?

Of where we lived?

Of that small apartment. The second place you lived.

No.

No.

No.

So this friend-- did she also have children, this other person?

No.

So it was you, your mother, your two sisters, and this lady whose husband had been arrested as well all in the same place. Did you take any household goods from the first place, or did you-- did she have to leave it all behind?

I really don't know.

I'm just wondering how many-- when your father is taken away, your source of livelihood leaves. His company is taken away. That means you don't have any ownership of assets.

That's true.

You can't afford-- her mother can't afford the apartment and--

But I have ownership now.

Oh, you do?

Well, if I go to Vienna I get it.

Was there any compensation after the war?

I was not aware of it. But lately Austria has said that they will compensate anybody that comes there for it, for the ancestor were taken. But I figure it would cost me more to go to Austria.

Of course it would. At this point, yeah. But in those days-- so the business is lost. Your father is gone. Your mother can't afford to keep the apartment. She needs money coming in. So your sisters and she stand in line in order to keep the place--

Every night.

--every single day.

Every night, not day.

Every night. Every morning. Every morning until 9 o'clock.

Well, 3 o'clock in the morning. Yeah.

Yeah. And so the last thing I was thinking is, the items you have at home, whether it was furniture or anything like that-- did that all just get lost?

I honestly don't remember what happened. I have no idea.

When you met this American couple that came, did you know their names?

No.

And how did you speak with one another? Did they speak any German?

Oh, they spoke German fluently.

They did. Oh, OK.

I don't know how my mother found out about them. But one day she said we have to go meet some people. So I went with her And they interviewed me. And they took me.

They accepted you to be one of the 50.

Actually, they expected me-- to adopt me.

Really? To adopt you? Not just to be a child that's taken over, but to adopt you.

Well, they had a 12-year-old daughter, apparently, and they wanted a son. And I want-- I didn't want to be adopted.

That's different. That's different than the other children.

Well, I don't know. I don't know what happened to any of the children.

I can imagine. Why would you want to be adopted when you already-- when you still have parents, when you still have a family?

Well, the family was going to be in Europe and I was going to be in the United States.

Did you tell your mother, I don't want to be adopted?

Oh, they knew. And I was able to get my family over here.

When you left, do you remember the day that you left and what that was like, to say goodbye?

The only thing I remember was my mother crying. That's it.

And what about your sisters? How did they react?

They stayed in Vienna. Then I was able to bring them over to the United States, all four of them.

That's huge, for a little boy to be able to do that. How did you leave Vienna? Was it by truck, by train?

By train.

By train.

We went from Vienna to Berlin. I remember that. And from Berlin we went to Southampton.

From Berlin-- how did you get to South Hampton from Berlin?

By train.

By train.

Yeah. You know where Southampton is?

England.

Yeah.

So that meant you had to take the train to some port, either in the Netherlands or in France, and cross over by boat?

I don't remember that. I thought about it a lot lately, but I don't--

You don't remember.

No, that part I don't remember.

And from Southampton-- were you with the other children? Were all 50 children there together.

Yes.

Did you get to know the other kids?

Did I know the other kids?

Did you get to know them?

Well, yeah, but not close. We would--

So did you know any of them before?

No. The 50 children that were taken were not just from Vienna. They were from Berlin, from other parts of Austria, other parts of Germany.

I see. I see. Were you with-- you were aged 12?

Yes.

So that must have meant you were amongst the older children.

I was. There was one girl was my age.

And how did you-- what did you take to-- from Southampton? Was it by boat that you left?

That we left Southampton? Oh, yes. The President Harding.

The President Harding?

Harding.

Harding?

Yeah, he was one of our presidents.

Yeah, yeah. No, no, no, I just wanted to make sure I heard properly. President Harding. And was it a huge boat or a smaller one? And do you remember the trip over?

Oh, yeah. But for me it was a huge boat. Actually, it was a ship.

Was it an easy journey?

Pardon me?

Was it an easy journey?

No. I got sick when I got on a boat. As soon as I step on this thing I'm seasick.

You weren't alone. I have interviewed other people who also were. That's why I asked.

Well, if I don't know how-- when it was the army over here, and they told me, you've got to go to the mess hall. And I couldn't go. When we went overseas. And I couldn't get-- I got as far as the stairs, but I couldn't take the stairs down. The smell just hit me. All I did was eat plain bread. No butter, nothing for-- an American ship. And I was in the army.

This is when you come back to Europe, yes?

No, I didn't go to Europe. See, the army's always very smart. They ask me, when they drafted me, do you speak German? I said, I speak German fluently. I went to schools there. So they said, well, we need to interpreters. The war was still going on. I said, do you mind if you send you to Germany right now? I said, no, just give me a gun so I can protect myself. The war was still on. They gave me a gun. They sent me to Missouri.

To Missouri.

Yeah. For basic training. And then where did they send me? To Japan.

To Japan. So when you're talking now about seasick, you were seasick on the way to Japan.

Oh, I-- and the way back was worse. Because they put me in charge of 12 women, chorus girls.

[LAUGHTER]

I didn't even do [? smart jokes. ?] I couldn't-- I stood in front of the door all the time, but I couldn't open the door. We were all sick. All these beautiful girls, and I couldn't do it. But that happens to me.

So none of the boat trips that you were on that go across the seas were particularly happy. That is, they weren't easy.

No. The last time I took boat trips I was surprised how easy they was. But then I found out the difference.

What's the difference?

They put stabilizers on the new boat. Kaiser-- I don't know if you know Kaiser. Kaiser built a boat a day. He made a fortune. He didn't put the stabilizers on the ships. And the ships were like that.

Well, this is important to know, of what was the experience coming over.

But that was not coming over. That was going to the Pacific to fight.

But on the President Harding you had the same thing. You were seasick.

Oh, yeah.

Were lots of the other kids seasick, too?

No.

No?

No. Actually, I was about the only one that I can remember. The other soldiers just [? went to ?] [? the mess ?] all day. I don't know why I couldn't get down the stairs. Went down two, three stairs and I almost had to throw up. So I go back on deck.

How were some of the other kids behaving? Were there many who were crying? Were there many-- were they quiet? Were they just kids running around and having fun? How was--

I don't remember anybody crying.

You don't remember that. No.

No.

Was there any way that kids could play on that ship?

That I don't-- yeah, I-- the boat had shuffleboard. That's about the only thing they had.

Shuffleboard, huh?

Yeah.

And did you get to know anybody in particular? Did you become friends with anybody as you were going over?

With the other kids?

Mm-hmm.

Oh, yeah. We got close together. But then they were-- when we landed we all went to a camp. And then we started getting picked up by relatives or somebody else. And I figured nobody would pick me up.

But weren't you going to be adopted?

Hm?

Weren't you going to be adopted?

Well, not if I could help it. But finally I got a hold of my mother's cousin.

The one who was in England?

No. That one lived in New York. Actually, he was health commissioner of New York City.

The house commissioner?

Health.

Health commissioner of New York City.

He was a doctor. And, well, he came to see me once. That was it. But I made him do something that he wasn't willing to do before.

And what was that?

Sign an affidavit. In those days, if you wanted to get to America you could go if you had an affidavit from a family in America that they would financially support you, that you will never become a charge of the state.

And so--

And he wasn't willing to sign that.

But once you met him?

Once I met him I embarrassed him. I'm always [INAUDIBLE] for embarrassment. The guy that took us there was a doctor, a prominent doctor, in Philadelphia. And he wanted to know what he could do for me. I said, well, I have a-- my mother's cousin.

I'm going to get lunch.

Can we cut for a second?

Mm-hmm.

Let's just cut for a--

So this doctor, this prominent doctor in Philadelphia, said, how can I help you-- asked you how he could help you?

Well, he's the one that took us over there.

And his name was?

Kraus.

Mr. Kraus. And so he asked. And he was the one who going to adopt you. Is that right?

Oh, yes. Everybody wanted me. I mean it. And I said no. Somehow, I'll get my parents over here, my family. And I did.

I think it's an amazing feat.

Pardon me.

I think it's amazing for a 12--

[LAUGHTER]

Truly-- for a 12-year-old boy to manage to do that.

Well, you can ask my sister. She's still alive. The other day I was talking to her. I was mad about something-- at her. And I said to her, Winnie, I need \$25,000. I know she's got it, by the way. She says, what the hell do you need \$25,000 for? I says, didn't I save your life? She says, you should have done it anyway. Oh, don't get me started. It's a good thing I didn't need \$25,000.

You didn't need it, huh?

Pardon me?

You didn't need it.

No. I wouldn't get in debt like that.

I'll think of my-- I'll phrase my question. So in what way did you manage to have this cousin of your mother's embarrassed? How did it happen?

Well, he was a doctor. And all he had to do was sign an affidavit to my mother that he could be responsible for the upkeep and everything.

Of course.

So then he made a mistake. He came to the camp where I was. And the doctor that brought us over knew him. So he said, I'll leave you. Stay with your mother's cousin. Talk to him. I said, no, I'd rather you stay here. And I told my-- my mother's cousin, who had money-- I said, they won't be anything. All you have to do is sign an affidavit. They'll take care of themselves, my mother and my sisters. And my father will work. But we need the affidavit. So he finally agreed to it.

Because Mr. Kraus was in the room, because Dr. Kraus was in the room when you made the request?

Yeah. I think that was the reason for it. I may digress because of that. But I don't know why I did it, but I did it.

And then what was the process?

The what?

The process. After he said yes and he supplied the affidavit, what happened then in Vienna? Did your mother--

Well, they came over. They were able to come to America.

What about your father?

Well, he was-- they released him as soon as I sent affidavit. And he was going to leave the country. Basically, history is not always correct. Hitler wanted to get rid of all the Jews-- not necessarily kill them, but just get rid of them. It was called the cleansing of--

Mm-hmm.

And that's all they needed to get out.

So it was the affidavit that helped even get your father out of prison.

Yeah. And it didn't cost him anything because I'll never forget, my mother and my sister came, my father. And my mother had \$5 to her name. And you know she did?

What did she do?

She bought a present for her cousin. It's the thing to do-- it was. And my sisters got to work right away. It was tough work, where they were working.

Did your father look different than when you had last seen him?

He lost 50 pounds. Yeah, he looked a little different.

Did he ever talk about what had gone on in Dachau and Buchenwald with him?

No. He was telling us what he ate, what they fed him over there-- whale meat.

What did they feed him?

Eh?

What did he eat?

Whale meat.

Veal meat?

Whale. You know the fish? The big fish.

Whale meat?

Yeah. That's what they were serving him.

I wonder what that tastes like.

He couldn't go to the corner store and get something to eat, you know.

No. No. Was he tortured?

No.

Did he have hard labor while he was in the prison?

Yeah, he had to work hard.

Were your parents storytellers? That is, were your parents people who would often talk about their lives? I mean, was he somebody who kept things to himself, your father? Or did he share these things?

He wouldn't share things like that with his children. I'm sure he shared everything with my mother. But just never shared. Then, when they came over, finally I met my mother's cousin. And I said, they're not going to be a problem for you. They'll work and take care of it. And my sisters got a job in a fish market.

Where? In Brooklyn? Or in--

In Manhattan, at the--

Mm-hmm.

And I didn't know that my mother could sew on a sewing machine. But that was a surprise to me. And she got a job as a sewing machine operator. And that was piecework. She was making-- what's it called? Shoulder pads. You know the--

Uh-huh. Shoulder pads. Mm-hmm.

And she was getting four cents, I think, for each one of them. [? She made ?] [INAUDIBLE]. And my mother was really good. Then she got a job for the sisters. But they didn't like making shoulder pads.

And what about your father? What was going on?

And my father had no-- had nothing to offer. He was a business man. And he certainly couldn't start a business over here, even if he had the money. He wouldn't know Broadway from--

Yeah.

You know. And so it was all basically up to my mother. And that's [INAUDIBLE].

Were you the only one who spoke English?

I didn't speak English.

You didn't speak-- I thought at the camp-- they told me many kids started learning English there, going to English lessons.

Oh, yeah, I-- after I got to America.

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah. But I didn't speak a word of English before I came here.

And did anybody from your family know any English? That is, your sisters, your mother, your father? Nobody?

No.

Did you learn it at the camp? I mean, were you able to pick it up?

No. They didn't teach me English.

They didn't? Oh, OK.

No. But after a while you learn it. By the way, I'm very good at languages.

Yeah? How many do you speak?

Now, only two, because if I don't use the stuff it's just-- forget. But I was in Japan for occupation. And I spoke Japanese fluently.

Wow.

And now I can't even count to 10 in Japanese. I don't speak-- but--

So you spoke Japanese. You speak German and English.

Yeah.

That is a tough language to learn, I'm sure.

Well, not-- language-- well, languages are pretty easy to learn if you live in the country.

Yeah.

You understand? Now, if I was to tell you, go out there and learn Japanese, you might never be able to make it. First of all, you can't read it--

That's right.

--because it's different typing and everything. It's not-- but as far as language is concerned, I can always learn languages. But I have to use it. If I don't use it you lose it.

Lose it.

Even now I have trouble with German. I mean, I have to think everything out when someone speaks German to me.

And yet it was the language you were born into and that you spoke as a child.

Sure. But I don't use it. As long as my mother was alive I used it all the time. But my mother passed away about 20 years ago.

I want to go back to landing in the United States. Do you remember when you first-- did you pass Lady Liberty as you were coming in?

Yeah.

Do you remember what you-- the first time you looked at the harbor and the buildings and the impress-- do you remember what you remember seeing?

Well, it was the biggest skyscraper-- skyscraper we had in Vienna was 16 stories high. Over here you see buildings that

are 100 stories, like the Chrysler Building, Empire State Building, things like that. It's completely different.

Did you stay in New York before you were taken to the camp? Once you landed and you got off, what happened then?

Well, they took us to a camp in Pennsylvania. And we stayed at that camp for about three months. And by that time all the kids were gotten rid of. The parents came or relatives came, et cetera.

And no one came for you?

No. I came for them.

You mean for the-- as somebody who might be adopted? Is that what you mean?

No. I made sure that they knew how to come to the United States. If it wasn't for me my family never would have made it. It's funny, the way things go. My father thought that FDR was God. You know who I'm talking about.

Mm-hmm.

And I kept trying to tell him, the son of a gun is an anti-Semite. What the hell do you want to call-- now it's coming out, by the way, that I was right all along. But for instance, one day in '56 there was a revolt in Hungary. You don't remember that.

No, but I know of it. I know of it.

You know what they did, the United States? They brought all the Hungarians over here. They put them up in [INAUDIBLE]. They fed them and everything for months. They didn't do that for us Jews.

Were you angry about that?

Was I angry?

Yeah.

No, I don't get angry about things I can't help. I get angry at myself if I did something that I shouldn't have done, that-- but I never get angry at what people do. If you expect the worst you can never get angry.

When you were at the camp and you saw other people picking up children, were you the last one at the camp? Were there any other children who were left?

I was close to last. There were maybe four or five kids left.

What happened with you?

Pardon me?

What happened with you?

I got my family over.

So you never stayed with another family?

No.

You never, then, lived with the Krauses at all?

No.

So you left Germany in July, 1939. You were at the camp for three months. So that would be August, September, October.

Yeah. It wasn't-- August and September, maybe. Yeah.

When did your parents-- when did your mother, father, and sisters arrive in the United States?

That's easy. When the day the war started, that's when they landed.

December 7, '41? No, excuse me, September 1, '39? Then when Germany invaded Poland?

Yes. September 1, 1939. So that-- you were able to get them out in three months. Wow. Less than three months. That's less than three months.

Yeah. See, my mother's cousin-- I told you. He had money. And he had a beautiful house in Brooklyn. But his wife wasn't happy with the idea of us living there. So at first they would-- when my parents and sisters came over we rented a furnished room on 15th Street and 7th Avenue.

In Manhattan?

Mm. Because that's all we could afford.

Did you ever see your cousin after that?

My cousin?

Your mother's cousin. Did you see--

Oh, the one that brought us over?

Yeah.

Once. I guess that his wife wasn't too happy to see me. [INAUDIBLE] but my sister got married. And she invited the cousin and his wife. The wife never came, but he did. Of course, [? with all my ?] money-- the wedding.

What year did your sister get married?

Pardon me?

What year did your sister get married?

'46? Something like that. But I can look it up, because it's easy for me, because I was just discharged from the army.

In 1946.

Yeah. January '46. And the war was over. And she got married. But she didn't have any money. And she wanted a big wedding. And here I came home with a lot of money, \$600. They went fast.

Well, it would be nice if \$600 could pay for a wedding today.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah, well, maybe not. I went to a wedding where they served tomato juice for drinks [INAUDIBLE]

So you-- do you want to share the name of your mother's cousin who did write the affidavit?

You want-- what name do you want?

What his name was.

Hm?

What was his name?

Ehrenpreis.

Ehrenpreis?

Ehrenpreis.

And his first name?

Bernard.

Bernard Ehrenpreis.

He was a doctor. I think he was health commissioner of New York City.

And he--

After we came he moved to South America.

[LAUGHTER]

He figured he's not going to take chances like that.

[LAUGHTER]

But he did come to your sister's wedding.

Yes.

And you never-- and after that you never saw him again.

No.

Tell me, so when they-- your parents came on-- they-- on September 1, 1939, they landed in New York?

Yes.

Did you go to pick them up, to see them in New York? Or did they come to the camp in Pennsylvania?

No. By that time-- no. I don't know.

You don't remember?

I really don't remember. You've got to excuse me for a second.

OK. Can we cut?

So when your parents arrive in September, the whole family, you move into a rented apartment-- a rented room on 15th and 7th Avenue.

That's correct.

In Manhattan. And it's all five of you in one room? How long did you live there?

Well, that was way before you were born, but my father found out that if you rented an apartment-- in those days you couldn't rent apartments. So they gave you the first month, or the second, or three months off. So we did a lot of moving.

So you went from one place to another to another?

Sure. It was free.

It was free?

Yeah.

How did that happen?

Well, it's-- not for us. It was for everybody. If you went to-- you live in the city? No.

No. Not anymore.

Anyway, they were renting apartments. But they couldn't rent apartments because people didn't have any money. So if you went in and said, well, I want to rent an apartment on the fourth floor-- there's no elevator-- they could never rent those apartments. So they said, well, if you move in that one you don't have to pay any rent for next-- for the first two months or so.

Ah. So you would move in this way. But you had no-- you needed to save some money.

Yeah. Yeah. For stuff.

Did you finally find a more permanent place to live?

Yeah. Well, what happened is my father was very put out all the time because he didn't like the idea that the girls were supporting us instead of him supporting them. And he had no skills. And he-- well, the sickness wasn't too bad. [INAUDIBLE] pretty fast.

So finally he decided he's got to do something that he can do. So he put a luncheonette in the Bronx. He didn't know where he was buying it. Happened to be an Italian neighborhood. We were the only Jewish in the whole neighborhood. And they couldn't understand why, when Yom Kippur came, the place was closed up. They couldn't figure that one out.

[LAUGHTER]

But we-- I get along with Italians. I married one of them.

So in the Bronx, he opened the-- a luncheonette. And did everybody then move to the Bronx, your whole family?

Sure.

And did your sisters then work in the luncheonette?

Everybody did.

You did, your sisters did, your mother did? How did he get the money to be able to buy it?

That I really don't know. It wasn't that expenses-- really expensive. And my mother and the two girls were working all along. And they were making pretty good money. My mother shocked the hell out of me because I never knew she knew how to-- a sewing machine. And there she was making shoulder pads at, I think, four cents a-- and she was very good at it. My mother could do anything, I guess. She was good.

And so you all moved there. And you lived in an apartment in the Bronx?

Yes.

Did you go to school?

Oh, yes.

Did you continue school? So what grade did you go into when you came to the United States?

Seventh.

You went into the seventh grade.

And I couldn't speak a word of English.

Well, that must have been difficult.

Well, I don't know. Did you go to schools in New York City?

No. I was raised in a different place.

Well, in New York City the school system they had was-- they probably still have it. If there was a seventh grade, there was maybe 8, 9, seventh-- things. And the best one to be in was 7-1. The worst one to be in was 7-9.

Oh, I see. So there were different levels of seventh grade that you could enter into.

Well, the levels were determined by your grades. Now, when I went to school the first day I didn't speak a word of English. So they put me in, I think, 7-6 or something-- way up there. But I was good in a couple subjects.

Which ones?

Geography. In those days they taught geography. Arithmetic was a snap. English was very tough for me. But otherwise I was good. And I moved up to 7-1. I'm not as stupid as I look.

Don't look that way at all. Not at all. So you were in 7-1 in almost no time, huh?

About a year. And then I-- then I will tell you how stupid I am. I never know anything. Down the street-- we lived on Fordham Road. I don't know if you know Fordham Road.

I've heard of it, yes.

And there's Fordham University.

Yes.

And I said to my father, I'll go to Fordham University. And one of my friends says, what, are you crazy? You're Jewish. It's a Catholic University. What the hell are you going to do down there? So I went-- I said, what's the next university? What is it?

You tell me.

Columbia.

Whoa. That's not bad.

[LAUGHTER]

That's not bad.

I didn't know that. I didn't know that, that-- went and I took a test and got accepted to Columbia.

This is after having finished seven-- 12th grade?

Yeah.

So you went to school for six years starting in--

Not really. I got to the seventh grade and I skipped a term. Yeah, but I don't know. I did a little [? skip. ?]

So you skipped a year or two years?

A year in high school and a year in college.

So you went from-- so you had five years still. So you had seventh grade and eighth grade and then three years of high school. So you were finished in five years--

Well,

Yeah.

--from arriving to the States.

But once I went to college it cost money.

Of course.

Now, Columbia had a policy-- they probably still have it. You can take 12 credits. And after that you can't work. If you take any part-time job, any job at all, they find out, you get-- flunk out automatically. I'm sure you still have the same policy. So I didn't know. I didn't want to go to Fordham. It's a Catholic school. So I went to Columbia.

This is what year?

Pardon me?

What year?

What year? I graduated in '54, I think.

So this is after you're discharged from the army.

Oh, yeah.

So did you finish high school before you were drafted into the army?

Yes.

What year did you finish?

'45, I think it was. Yeah, '45.

So you finished high school in 1945. And you were drafted into the army when?

1945.

What month? Do you remember?

Pardon me?

Do you remember what month?

No, I don't know. I don't remember that.

So was the war over in Europe when you were drafted?

Was the war over in Europe? They didn't send me to Europe.

I know. But I'm asking, was the war over in Europe when you were drafted?

No.

So it must have been before you finished high school, because the war ended in May 1945.

Yeah.

And high school ended-- usually would be May or June.

Yes. You're 100% right.

And you were drafted in June, or in May, or in April, or--

Well, I was-- I became 18 in March.

Oh. That's when you were eligible for the draft.

Well, I wouldn't call it eligible.

[LAUGHTER]

Because the [? key ?] was that I didn't have to-- if I didn't want to go in the army I could have got out. But I always felt, I will do my job. I volunteered for the army, but the army-- I wanted to be in the Air Force. I wanted to be a pilot.

And they gave me a good physical. And I got a little mad about that, because here I took a mental. Eight hours steady. And I think I was number 2 on the list that came out. And then they said, now you've got to take a physical. And they gave you a good physical for the Air Force. They found out I can't hear in my left ear.

Oh.

My mother couldn't hear in her left ear, either.

So this was hereditary?

Pardon me?

This was hereditary?

I think it was. I'm still going to an ear doctor. He says he don't believe in hereditary. I don't know. But what difference does it make? Anyway.

So the Air Force was out of the question after that.

Oh, yeah. The Air Force was out of the question. And the next day I was drafted. Now, I could have got out. But the physical they gave you for the Air Force was a physical. The physical they gave you to the army-- if you [? would have ?] been dead [? I would ?] have passed it.

[LAUGHTER]

[? I'm telling. ?]

A difference, huh?

Yeah. I could have not gone if I didn't want to. All I had to do was point it out. I don't take advantage of things like that. I think it was my duty to go. And one thing we didn't want to be was a draft dodger. And when I came out they asked, did anybody get injured, discharged? Since they didn't know about the ear when I went in I could have said, I can't hear. I didn't do that either. And I got-- would get a pension for the rest of my life.

Oh my goodness.

Oh, yeah. But that-- I don't like taking advantage of things like that. Cigarettes, a lot of things, but those things--

Not that.

Huh?

Not that.

No. Those kind of things I never took advantage of.

So were you asked, when you went into the army, about your German abilities, your--

Yeah.

And what happened after that?

I told you. I said, yes, I speak German for fluently also. And they said, well, we'll send you to Germany tomorrow, because the war was still going on. It was almost over, but it was still going on. And I said, could you show me a gun so I know what to shoot? So they sent me to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri.

So you never went to Fort Ritchie? You never went-- there were many young men who came from Austria and Germany who were Jewish who got out in time and then were of a draft age or military age between '43 and '45, and they got sent to Camp Ritchie because of their German language skills.

No.

And then they went over with the army and became intelligence officers or so.

No.

That didn't happen with you.

No. After I said that I don't mind going tomorrow, but at least show me what a gun looks like. [INAUDIBLE] so they sent me to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri.

And this--

For basic training.

For basic training.

Yeah.

And you were there--

14 weeks.

14 weeks. And then they figured, as long as I know German-- they sent me to the Pacific.

[LAUGHTER]

Where's the logic in that?

[LAUGHTER]

And then I got real lucky.

I think we'll break now for lunch. And then we'll--

There's a question I forgot to ask you before about your father. When some people come out of a prison experience their personalities change somewhat. They're a little different than they were before they went in. Did you notice this with your father? Was his personality changed?

Yeah, he changed. Not towards the family, but he got very tough.

Did he?

Hm?

I'm saying he did, huh?

Yeah.

In what way did that show itself?

You didn't fool around with him anymore. I mean, not me-- strangers. He just-- all of a sudden, he just didn't give a damn anymore.

So that meant he would not be as polite, or he would--

Yeah, he was being polite, but you better not say the wrong things to him.

I see. Did he trust people less?

I don't think so.

But to the family he was the same.

Oh, yeah.

Again, did I-- when he worked in the diner, what was he-- what was his job in the luncheonette that he bought in the Bronx?

He made sandwiches, took money. You know.

Did he ever think of starting a moving business in the United States?

No. He wouldn't have known how to.

When he was in Vienna and had the business, had he started it, or had he inherited it?

No, he started it.

He started it. And how, in general, did your parents adjust to the US? Was it hard for them to adjust? Was it easier? What kind of--

I think-- I think my father adjusted very well. My mother had a little problem because she was a little hard of hearing. But that's what they did.

Were there people and family-- she had family from Austria, her parents. Were they still alive when she left?

When she left? Yes.

What happened to them?

Oh, they were killed.

Did she find out any of the details?

No, but she found out after.

After the war?

Well, it was towards the end of the war.

Did she find out the fact of their death or did she find out how it happened?

I think the fact. I'm not sure. But she knew that they were killed before anybody else knew. But she still had friends.

What about other people whom she knew, like family friends? Did you have other people whom you'd known in Austria who didn't make it?

No, I didn't know any.

And throughout the '40s, when you were in high school, were you hearing much of what was going on in Europe? Were you either reading the newspapers or hearing it via radio--

No.

--or anything like that? Was there any correspondence between your parents and people they knew in Austria?

No. Not as far as I know.

When was the first time you went back to Austria?

Oh, about 10 years ago.

Really?

Yeah.

So over 50 years had passed.

Oh, yeah.

50, 60 years had passed

But in Europe the cities don't change much.

Were you able to find the street your old house--

Oh, no problem. All the same. Same store, same everything.

Did you go to your old apartment?

I went to the house where we lived. And I didn't go into the apartment. Somebody probably lived there. And what was there to be gained.

Did you go back after that?

I was there once or twice more. My children wanted to see where I was born and stuff. And then my grandchildren wanted to see them.

Had you told them much about what your early life was like?

No.

Did they not ask before? Was it--

Well, no. They don't really ask. They wouldn't understand.

And has that changed?

No.

That is, have you spoken about it now?

No.

So you don't talk much about what your childhood was like or anything like that?

No.

And what is it that-- what would it be difficult-- what is it that-- in your story that would be difficult for them to understand? You said they wouldn't understand.

Well, I don't think-- most people wouldn't understand. You can't visualize it. You have to see it or experience it one way or the other, but you just can't understand.

Did you tell-- had you shared much of what your childhood was like and what those Nazi years were like with anybody--

No.

--here in the States? Your wife?

Oh, my wife. Once in a while we talk. Or she [? move to ?] Vienna, said, [? let's-- ?] but, no, we-- bad memories are bad memories. Try to forget them. At least I do.

Has it been successful?

Yeah, I-- well, I guess I am successful, because I never talk about it. It just [INAUDIBLE] me.

In what way, when you had to-- when you saw your father arrested, when you saw how your mother struggled and your sisters struggled, and you left by yourself, how did that shape you? How did it make you the person that you are?

I don't know. I think I just took over my father's place.

Those are big shoes to fill for a 12-year-old.

Yeah.

Did you feel like you had to grow up very fast?

Well, somebody did. And all I had was two sisters. And neither one was married at the time. So I think they must have had other things that they wanted to see or do. I don't know.

Let's go back, now, to when you're drafted into-- or, you go to the army and not the Air Force. And you're sent to basic training in Missouri. And you say that lasted about-- four weeks, was it, or nine weeks? I forget.

14 weeks.

14 weeks. 14.

That's basic training.

What were the other-- I mean, you're somebody who comes in who already had experienced, personally, the enemy. Most of these other kids who were 18 don't know what's going on. Did that make a difference in basic training, when you met these other young guys?

Oh, I couldn't tell you that. I don't know. They never expressed anything like that, so I don't know.

Did they ever ask you what the Germans were like, what the Nazis were like?

No.

No. Were there other guys in there who were like you, who had come from either Austria or Germany?

Not as far as I know.

What did basic training involve in Missouri? Tell me a little bit about what they did. How did they train you?

Well, right from the beginning they trained you how to march, how to shoot a gun, how to camp overnight, these things.

And is it there that you were asked about your German language abilities, when you were in Missouri?

No, before you even got to Missouri.

And after those 14 weeks, then what happened?

They sent me to the Pacific. The war was still going on.

So when you were in the Pacific, what happened-- what were your experiences? Were you involved in any battles at all? Were you involved in-- tell me a little bit about that.

Well, by the time I got to the Pacific the United States had already recaptured the Philippines. And we were island hopping in those days. [INAUDIBLE] so the last island to hop was Okinawa. And then we were ready to invade Japan.

And?

And they dropped the atomic bombs. And instead of landing in Japan in the water and getting wet, we [? got to head to ?] the pier.

So by that point, when you landed, Japan had surrendered?

Oh, yes. Oh, sure. Are you kidding?

And what was your job? What did you do?

In the army?

Mm-hmm.

Well, for a while I didn't know why they always let me-- gave me these jobs that I didn't have training for or was

qualified for. So finally, one day I got a little ticked off and went to the commanding officer. Colonel, I says, why are you always getting me to do these things? I'm a [? lance ?] corporal. And I had a master sergeant working for me. I says- and a [? tech ?] sergeant. I said, it doesn't make sense.

And he says, you got any problems? I said, sure, I've got problems. I mean, they know I'm a corporal, and I'm telling them what to do. And he says, well, you can tell them. He says, did they ever check your IQ score?

Did what?

My IQ. I said, I didn't even took a test. He says, you took one.

[INAUDIBLE] He said I happen to be the highest score he ever had.

Oh my goodness.

I didn't even know what it meant. He says, you got 186. I said, what's the highest score you can get? He said, [INAUDIBLE] you could get 200. That's the top score. But most people were getting-- on the IQ score were getting 80, 90, 110. You know.

So what-- how did that affect how your army experience continued?

Well, they took advantage of it.

In what way?

Well, we had civilian personnel working, for instance. 7,000 I had working for me.

7,000 people?

Japanese, yeah. And I had to see that they get paid and everything else.

And describe a little bit the facility you were at. How--

It was a nice place, because right outside Tokyo they had the Naval Academy, Japanese Navy Academy. And we took it over. We occupied it. And that's it.

And so what did it become, become like an army base, a US army base there?

Yes. We took it over.

And your job was what?

My job was in charge of civilian personnel.

So all the workers--

Well, civilian workers.

And you learned Japanese there?

Sure.

Because how can you manage people who don't speak the same language and who had just been the enemy.

You can manage them. They understand what you wanted them to do. They were fast.

And I had to pay them. Actually, I didn't pay them. The Japanese government paid them. But I had to pick up the money. The first time I went there I didn't know. I drove up there by Jeep, walked in the bank, and says, give me 8 million yen or something like that. And the guy gave me the money and I walked out and drove back to the base.

And the colonel called me in. He says, when the hell are you going to go pick up the money? I says, here it is. I picked it up. He says, what happened to the MPs? I said, what MPs? He says, you have to-- if you pick money up, millions of yen, [INAUDIBLE] Jeep full of MPs in front and a jeep full of MPs in back. You in the middle.

And so on subsequent trips, is that what happened?

Oh, you bet your life.

[LAUGHTER]

The first Jeep pulled up at the bank. The guys got out with machine guns, stood in front of the door, didn't let nobody in except me. And two guys went in with me. It was a lot of money the Japs paid us.

I can't imagine how much it was.

Oh, millions. The conversion rate, I think, was 15 to 1.

And so when you got that-- you got this cash, and that's how you would pay the workers? In cash?

Oh, yeah.

Well, I didn't pay them. I got the money back to the base. And then I had one of our enemies, who became a real good friend of mine-- he was German.

Really?

Yeah. He found out that I spoke German. And he wanted to be on my good side, because he always was afraid I'm going to turn him in and he's going to be in trouble, deep trouble.

Well, explain this to me a little bit. How did he come to cross your path? How did you come to meet him?

Well, he was in Japan.

So he was a German who was working in Japan at the time.

Yeah. They were allies-- Japan, Italy, and-- well, Italy didn't count. They don't fight.

[CLEARING THROAT]

[LAUGHTER]

And what would his role have been? Did you ever find out what he was doing in Japan?

What, the German?

Yeah, as-- yeah.

He lived there.

Did he work for the government? The Nazi government?

The Japanese government, maybe. I don't know. But he was an interpreter at a house.

And so how did he come into your circle? How did he come into your life?

Well, we hired people that could speak the language. It's not that easy to find people who speak Japanese.

And did he speak English, as well, or not?

He spoke English.

So he could interpret between the workers and--

Yeah.

And in addition to that he spoke German. And so did you.

Yeah.

And what job did he have when he was hired by the Americans?

When he was fighting the Americans?

No, no, no. When you had already occupied Japan and you had-- you were running this army base.

Well, he was in charge of the fiscal office.

What did that mean? I don't really understand.

Well, the money that came in. And we had payroll. We-- the whole army.

And did-- he was in charge of the payroll?

Yeah. The Japanese had to pay for everything. Once we were in Japan I got paid. But actually got paid by the American army. But the American army got paid for me.

And what was he afraid of that you would do, this German person?

Well, you never knew what I would do. You know, it's-- you don't take chances like that. He knows he was basically an enemy. So I could have put him in a prisoner camp. It was easy.

Because I couldn't imagine that the Americans wouldn't know who they're dealing with.

We knew.

Were there many Germans in Japan when you got there?

No. Actually very few.

Do you remember this person's name?

No.

Just wondered. Just wondered. How long did you stay?

Pardon me?

How long did you stay in Japan?

I was there for about a month-- a year, I mean.

A year.

Yeah.

So you got there-- if the bomb was dropped in August, so you probably entered the country by mid-month, late August, something like that?

No, a day later.

A day later.

We were on board ship to invade Japan anyway by that time. Instead of invading them and getting killed we just landed on the beach. They surrendered on a battleship, the Japs did.

Before then had you been involved in fighting, in actual combat?

Yeah, in the Philippines and Okinawa.

What were some of your experiences during these times?

I don't know what you mean.

I mean, what do you remember from that time, from when you were fighting in the Philippines and Okinawa?

Nothing to remember. Keep my head down.

OK. Yeah.

Yeah. Well, when I think about it, in March of 1945 is when you get your draft notice or you're eligible for the draft. Then you finish high school. And you enlist. But you go for Air Force and are transferred to the army. And you go through basic training. And then you're sent to the Pacific. And immediately, you're involved in combat. That's a huge change.

Well, they don't give you more training if you want it. They just say, go out there.

What was the job that you had that the-- that you went to complain about? This part I didn't understand very well. You said you went to your commanding officer and there was something that you were not content-- or you're not happy with the tasks you had been assigned.

No. I mean, some of the work that I had to do was done by a major. And since he was in charge of civilian personnel, put me in charge. And the only thing was, if a beautiful girl comes in, send her to my hut. And I did. Huh? My wife's shaking her head.

And so you were at this army base for a year. Is that right?

I was what?

You were outside Tokyo for about a year.

Yes.

And are there any other things that you remember from this time that-- some experiences or some incidents that happened that stayed in your memory?

Well, they wanted me to reenlist because I haven't seen my mother in about a year- over a year. And if you reenlisted for three years they gave you a 90-day furlough in the States. And I was ready to do that.

But then I asked them, what happened after the 90-day furlough? Am I going to come back here? They said, we can't hold jobs for you. You might wind up over here, but that's unlikely. You could probably wind up on the North Pole some place. I said I didn't like the cold too much.

You could--

I didn't like the cold too much. So I didn't reenlist.

He said you could end up where, in North something?

On the North Pole.

Oh. OK, fine.

Wherever we had troops.

So then you ended up leaving in August of 1946?

It was sooner than that, I think. It was beginning of '46.

So you were in this area for less than a year, in Japan.

Oh, yeah.

And so you come home, or you come back to New York. And what happened then? Where did you go?

Well, the first thing I did-- I paid for my sister's wedding.

That's right. You mentioned that.

Well, I don't forget it.

[LAUGHTER]

And after that I went to Columbia. Got my degree.

What did you major in?

I majored in history.

European history? American history?

American history.

American history. And explain again-- you said before the break that they had a rule that you could not have any work, you could not be employed working while you were going to school.

You couldn't take more than 12 credits. But the price for 12 credits and 19 credits was the same. So, being a Jew-- a cheap Jew--

I'm shaking my head again.

Yeah. OK.

I took 19 credits every time. So I got out 3 and a half years and saved 300 bucks. Tuition in those days was only \$300 a term.

It's gone up.

A couple--

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah, it's gone up.

Yeah.

And when you finished did you go back working in the Bronx with your-- in your parents' luncheonette?

No.

Or did you do something else? What did you do?

Well, I went looking for jobs. A degree from Columbia was worth money. And I had all kinds of offers. Every time I went in they took your resume. And there would be five, six people waiting to be interviewed. And I sat down. I said, oh, [? the hell, ?] it's going to shoot the whole morning. And the next time the person they called was me. That degree from Columbia was worth money.

But I didn't take any jobs. I was offered a managership of a restaurant in Orlando, Florida. Disney World wasn't there yet. In fact, they offered me land in Florida, \$25 an acre.

Oh, gosh.

And it was a swamp. I said, who the hell is going to-- I'm very smart. I said, who's going to build anything? What am I going to do with a swamp? Very smart.

Who knew? Who knew?

Next year Disney bought the whole land. And I think they paid \$1,000 an acre.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, they filled it in.

They certainly did. They certainly did.

But how do you know these things?

So you went and you took the restaurant job, the restaurant manager job?

Yeah, in Florida, yeah. Restaurant manager.

Can you--

Yeah.

Oh.

And how long did you work there?

Well, in Orlando I was a restaurant manager. I took over a restaurant. It was a big chain. I took over a restaurant. And they were losing money. They were supposed to make 20% profit a month. And they were losing 8% every month. In the first two months I had it up to 28%.

Profit?

Profit. So they gave me the biggest restaurant they had, in Philadelphia. And I said to them, I didn't ask to be transferred. Company policy is, if you want to be transferred you have to ask. You can't be transferred without asking. And they says, well, this is a much bigger store. And you could make much more money.

I said, OK, but I just wanted you to know I didn't ask for that. And I called [INAUDIBLE] had them ship all my furniture and everything to New York City. That's where my parents lived. And then I went to Philadelphia.

And as soon as the furniture arrived my mother called me. Your furniture's here. And I went in and said, I quit. They couldn't understand why I quit.

Why did you quit?

Because they didn't keep their word.

I'm sorry, I'm confused. I thought that they-- got it. Got it.

Ship it to New York.

And because they-- yeah.

Well, I don't fool around. And then, when the bill was paid I went and called up-- Texas was the headquarters for the restaurant chain. And I told them I quit.

And then what did you do?

Then what did I do? I drove a taxi in New York.

For how long?

Drove it for about three, four years.

Had you parents still had this luncheonette in the Bronx, or had they bought the diner in Maspeth by then?

They were in Maspeth by then. But my father didn't know anything about running a restaurant. And I went in there and I

said, Dad, how much is a plate of spaghetti and meatballs? Because the waiter's going by, and he said to put another meatball on here. I just said, how much are getting for this? And he says, I don't know. It was 85 cents, something like that. I says, but that's-- you're losing money.

He says, no, it's costing me \$0.30 to do it. I make 100%-- more than 100% profit. I says, Dad, that's not the way to calculate profit. You could never make 100%, because if something costs you a penny and you sell it for a dollar, you might make 90% profit, or 99%, whatever it is. But you can't make 100% because there's a cost involved.

Well, by that time I had bought a house on Long Island. And I made them-- a mistake. I made them sell off the place and had them over in with me.

So they sold their business or they sold their home?

No, their place. They didn't have a home. And they moved in on a Friday night. And I had them for dinner. And I says, I'm going to go to the track, Roosevelt Raceway was going-- Do you remember Roosevelt Raceway?

I've heard of it, yeah.

And when I came home my father was dead.

Oh.

Happens.

What year was this?

Pardon me?

What year was this?

What year was it? 1954, I think. Something like that.

And I didn't know. Came home, my mother was crying. She said he's in the hospital. So I rushed over to the hospital. And then there was a doctor there. A beginning doctor. What do you call it?

Oh, an intern?

Intern. And he says, why did you let your father die? I says, he didn't-- I didn't let him die. Well, he had a blood clot on the brain. Very easy operable.

Oh.

I said, well, I took him to three doctors. And they didn't find it? And I said, no. I said, I'm going to sue them now. Will you testify for me? Oh, I can't do that.

What a bitter disa-- what a horrible thing to happen.

Happens. So my father moved in the house for a half hour. He had tried to save [? him, ?] work and everything. Didn't work out.

So stay-- after that it was your mother and yourself?

Well, I was married.

Oh, you were married.

Well, she was a baby.

[LAUGHTER]

So how did you meet your first wife?

My first wife?

Uh-huh.

How did I meet her? She was a nurse, registered nurse. And Fordham Hospital, in the Bronx, had a school of nursing. And in those days you didn't go to college to become a registered nurse. You had a nursing school. And after three years you were a registered nurse. And she was-- became a registered nurse.

And what was her name?

June.

June. Was she also from Europe, or was she from the United States?

No, no, no. She was-- actually, she was from the border. Niagara Falls.

Really?

Oh, yeah.

So tell me a little bit about your life in Long Island and when you came to Albany.

Well, when I came to Albany every Saturday I went to the track. Me and a friend of mine, a very good friend. And this Saturday he says, I can't go till 12 o'clock. He says, I got to take a test.

So I said, what the hell are you taking a test for? You've got a good job. He was working for a public aircraft. And I says, well, it's a good job. It's a state job. He says, well, I'll tell you what. In those days they only had one daily double at the track.

You don't know much about horses. Now you've got 15 different bets on every race if you want. In those days they had the whole-- our favorite money was one daily double, the first two races. After that it's straight betting. You understand?

So I said, well, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'll go with you. I'll take your test with you. And then we go right from there to the track. We'll make the first race.

And I took the test and forgot all about it. I wasn't interested in a job in Albany. Who the hell wants to go to Albany or anything? And about three months later I get a call from a Dr. Shafer. And he says to me, would you come in for an interview for the test? I said, test? What test? I wasn't even interested. And I said, test?

He says, don't you know it? You didn't get your results since we get them ahead of time. You came out number one on our list. So I said, well, I'm sorry. How much do you pay for me to go from Long Island to Albany? He says, we can't pay you for that. He says, after you work for us then we'll pay you. But we can't pay for--

For moving, yeah.

--for working, [INAUDIBLE] not working. So I said, forget it. And I didn't know that I was number one on the test, but

he told me. He got released before I got even a notification that I passed. So I said, forget it. I'm not-- you want to pay me to come down to Albany, I'll come. But otherwise, forget it.

So he called me the next day. He says, well, you don't have to come down Wednesday. I'll stay till Friday if you come down for an interview. And I says, no. Don't stay until Friday, because I work Fridays. And I'm not taking time off for an interview. So Thursday, he called me again. He says, I'm going to stay over at the Hotel Taft this Saturday. Can you come over on Saturday?

So I says, well, I can't make it in the afternoon after 12 o'clock. I didn't tell him why, but I was going to the track. So he said, well, I'll stay over. Can you come down just to the city? I'll meet you at 11:00 at the hotel he was staying at, the whatchamacallit. So he said OK.

So I went down. He met me in the bar and bought me a drink. I figure, what the hell. So I had a drink and he offered me a job in Albany. So I said, I'll think about it. I thought about it. I read the book and everything that they give you. And I says, what the hell. I don't need all the money I'm making anyhow. So I took maybe a 50% cut in salary.

Wow. What was the job?

In the health department. So he called me again. And in the meantime I read the book. I'm so smart I can read. And I got up there Monday morning and they call me into the personnel office in the health department. And they said, Dr. Fleck-- what was his name? Fleck?

Whose name?

You worked for him.

Andy.

Andy, yeah. He says he-- I want to see you. I didn't even sit down at the desk yet. And the office was in there with two other guys and a woman. And she said, what does Andy Fleck want to see you about? I said, who the hell is Andy Fleck?

But I went to see him. And he said to me, have you got a place to stay tonight? I said, no. I said, good, because you accepted a 14-- grade 14 job. I got a job opening for you in Syracuse. Can you go to Syracuse? I said, yeah, but what for? He says, I'll make you a 23 right away.

So I says, you can't do that. I said, what are you, crazy, I told him? I just read the book. You've got to be in a grade for one year before taking a promotional exam. And here he's jumping me two promotions.

Right away.

So I looked at him. He says, maybe you better stay here.

[LAUGHTER]

He became a very good friend of mine.

And what year was it, then, that you moved to Albany? When was-- when did you move here, to Albany? What year? '60.

In 1960. Did your mother come with you? Did your wife come with you?

Well, I was going to leave the wife. But my mother, sure. My mother-- well, it's my mother. I loved my mother.

You said earlier-- and so you've been here in Albany for the rest--

I what?

You've been here in Albany for the rest of your career.

Yeah.

What would you want people to understand about your experience?

About what?

What would you want people to understand about your experience as having to have-- leave Vienna when you were so young and under the circumstances that you did?

There was no choice. Nothing to understand. Even when I worked for state, I started out as 14-- grade 14. They go to grade 38. And there was no 38 in the health department that was not [COUGH] a doctor or an engineer or a biostatistician. I figured, what the hell. I never [? started ?] anything. They weren't promoting ding dongs. I made 38.

You made 38. I'm going back to the beginning of what we were talking about, and that is your formative years in Austria and the fact that you had to leave. And you said there was no choice to-- about whether you could stay or whether you could go. But I'd like to ask you, what would you want younger generations to understand about that entire time, about what it was like to be a young boy during this time?

Well, like I said, there's no choice. You have to accept the choices. I mean, you had nothing. You were a non-citizen, basically. And I don't understand why anybody would stay like this. And particularly with Hitler coming in there, it really was crazy for anybody that [? stood-- ?] that could get out.

You had to have a whatchamacall from-- in those days you couldn't come in the United States. You couldn't visit the United States unless you gave them a name of person that would take care of you, because they weren't paying welfare or something. Not like today. So it really was not much to discuss [? on this ?] thing.

Did you stay in touch, after your parents came and you moved to New York-- did you stay in touch with the Krauses, with Mr. and Mrs. Kraus?

No. No. They were very nice people. And they wanted to adopt me very much. And I would have been a rich man, because they were-- I think they were top richest family in Philadelphia. But I wanted my mother. And not that.

[INAUDIBLE]

[LAUGHTER]

Well, you had a mother.

Pardon me?

And you had-- you had a mother. And you had a father.

Yes.

And it's very hard to be adopted when you already have parents.

Well, that was before they were coming over.

That's right. That's right.

And they didn't know they were coming over.

Well, is there anything else you'd like to add to what we've talked about today that I have not asked you about? Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Not that I know of. I think you covered most everything. It's just, it's-- what's important is that you have to remember you're Jewish.

Did that become much more important to you after you went through this than it had been before?

Well, you look at things a different way. You're not an equal citizen anymore. You're not. You might think you are, but you're not. Even in the United States. My father thought that FDR-- did I tell you? Was a god. And I said, he's the biggest anti-Semite that we have. How could you think he's god? But then I never argued with my father too much. As it turned out, I was right. But--

Tell me, why do you think he was an anti-Semite?

Well, the Jews who were able to charter a ship out of Europe. And they had a visa for 500-- for 1,500 Jews. That they finally got, because nobody wanted Jews. But Cuba gave them 1,500 visas to live in Cuba. And they were on a boat. And by the way, you can look it up. It's history.

And when they go to Cuba Franklin Delano Roosevelt called Cuba and sent two warships over to Cuba. He says, if you let that ship dock over there we're going to sink all your navy. And that's a fact. You can look that up, too.

So the captain of the ship says, we've got to go back. But he said, we'll try and land in America. Roosevelt gave orders-- if they cross the three-mile limit, sink them. And that's a fact. And they had to go back to Europe. And they were all killed instantly-- 1,500 of them.

Tell me-- some people say the difference between how many children Great Britain took from the Kindertransport and how many children ended up in the United States--

Great Britain did a much better job. They took so many children, it wasn't funny. Really. I wasn't interested in going to Great Britain because my parents couldn't make it. They'd snuff us out. But they were willing to take children. The United States wasn't willing to take anybody.

And yet you're one of the 50 who got in.

I'm one out of 50 that got in because I was sponsored by an American citizen who had a hell of a lot of money.

The Krauses.

Not me-- the kids were sponsored.

And for Americans, then-- what should we, as US citizens, take away from this story?

That Jews aren't welcome in America.

You don't think so?

No. Did you ever go down South?

I've been--

Did you live in the South?

No, I haven't lived there, no.

Well, you go to Miami. It's Jew land.

[LAUGHTER]

So here, even being in the United States for so many decades, is it that what you learned in Austria is that you can think that you're an equal citizen, but don't believe it, you're really not? Is that what it is?

Oh, sure. Don't you know, back before the war the German marched on Second Avenue in full uniform? You can look that up. They were welcomed. I mean, there's nothing wrong with-- do you know how many Jews there are in America?

Tell me.

Hm?

Tell me.

Six million. Total population of 300 some odd million people is six million Jews. And read the paper-- who's got all the money? The Jews. Who controls Hollywood? The Jews. Think about it sometime.

Has that meant that you've been nervous for life?

Who, me? I'm not nervous. What's going to be is going to be. And as long as the times are halfway decent and people-- most people are employed and everything, everything's going to be OK. But if you've got a depression like we had in 1930 then we're going to have a big problem again.

Those are very sober thoughts. But--

It's true.

Yeah.

It's true. Especially the depression we now have.

If there's something else you'd like to add to what we've talked about today, this is the moment. No? Well, then in that case, what I'll do is I'll say, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Felix Heilpern on July 28, 2015, in Albany, New York. Thank you very, very much.

You're welcome.

Thank you.