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This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr Andre Waksman on October 23, 2015 at his office in Paris, France. The interview will be conducted in English by Peggy Frankston. Good afternoon, Andrea.

Good afternoon, Peggy.

Could you please introduce yourself?

Yes. My name is Andre Waksman. I was born on June 12, 1943 in a small town in France called Elne, E-L-N-E, which is near Perpignan. It's in the South of France near the Pyrenees.

Well, could you tell us a little about your parents and your family?

My family-- my parents left Poland. From what I understand, my father left when he was 18. That would be 1928. I'm pretty sure it was for economic reasons. He didn't really ever mention a question of anti-Semitism, though obviously there was, in those days.

My mother, as far as I understood, left at the age of 9 or 10. And her father ran a business of-- I think he had a wholesale business of beer, and maybe other alcohols. And that's where my father met her, because he went to pick up some beer.

Where did he--

In Antwerp. Sorry-- Antwerp, Belgium. In those days-- I may be wrong about this, because I haven't checked it. But apparently, in those days, it was fairly easy for immigrants to arrive fairly illegally in Belgium and find work and not have any problems. Again, I'm not 100% sure. It's just things that I was told, more or less. But I never checked out.

I heard, because I interviewed somebody in Belgium recently, that Polish and other immigrants-- if they agreed to sign up for three years of work in the coal mines or in some heavy industry, then they were allowed to have a residence card. So the father of somebody I know, actually, did that. He worked in Charlevoix in the mines for three years. And then he got his residence card.

My father never mentioned anything like that, so I really don't know. And neither did my mother about her father, so I have no idea. Just as I say, from what I understood, they were pretty cool about the whole thing. In fact, when my uncle, who left Poland after the war in-- I guess it was in the late 1850s. They managed to get him out.

And then my uncle in Belgium on my mother's-- the husband of my mother's sister, who was still living in Belgium. And apparently, with some connections, it wasn't too difficult. So it was a country which-- I mean, historically, from what I know from the family, it wasn't too difficult at the time for quite a long time on refugees. But again, it's just based on family stories. And I have no idea what the validity of that statement is.

And why did they settle in Antwerp?

I have no idea. But I would assume that-- well, I would assume one of the reasons may have been-- [COUGHS] excuse me-- that Flemish is obviously much closer to German, which is closer to Yiddish. It would seem logical that, for a Jewish person, Antwerp would be preferable to Brussels.

But there may have been other reasons, which I never inquired about. Just that's the way it was. And from what I remember, my father had two sisters, I think, who had come to Belgium earlier. So I know very little about them, except they were killed during the war.

Also, there might have been a small Jewish community already of diamond cutters.

I have no idea. Well, there was my mother's father and her mother, my grandmother, and my grandfather. So there were at least two other Jews. I really don't know. Again, these are questions you don't necessarily ask when you're a kid, or

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when you're young.

So what was the family language? What did they speak between each other?

I assume they spoke Yiddish because, as far as I know, Yiddish is my maternal language, even though I don't speak it very well anymore. And I never really spoke it very well, because it was a family language. So it was very limited in vocabulary.

And I managed to forget it till my grandmother came. And I had to speak to her in Yiddish. And she was crying every evening because, apparently, I would translate from English. And sometimes, the translation wasn't so great, from what my mother told me. But that was for a very short period.

I can still, as we say in French, [NON-ENGLISH]. So I can get along in Yiddish. But I don't have many occasions to speak it. But it's still, I guess, my maternal language. I can't think of any other language they would have spoken during the war. They would, obviously, not have spoken in Flemish.

Would the people have spoken to you in French at the maternity ward? Of course, you were an infant then.

I have absolutely no idea, absolutely no idea.

So I know this happened before you--

I was born.

--were born.

But maybe you can give me a condensed version of what happened in 1940. I have another question. Were your parents religious?

Absolutely not.

Did they belong to a synagogue? Did they go--

Absolutely not.

Not even on Yom Kippur?

Never.

OK. They have no religion.

I only remember one Passover with a family member. They lived on the same block. Maybe there may have been others. But definitely, we never went to the synagogue. I was bar mitzvah. So is my brother. That's about it. I never saw my father go into a synagogue, except on those two occasions.

And they didn't eat kosher?

No.

No.

Never.

And they didn't keep kosher. And they didn't celebrate Shabbat.

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No. But I did go yeshiva, and so did my brother. My brother made sure I did, because my mother worked. It wasn't for religious reasons. She ended at 5:00 instead of 3:00. That's all.

You mean his secondary school.

No, I'm talking about primary school.

Oh, primary school. OK.

Secondary school, I refused to go to. They wanted me to go to a religious school, but I refused.

So it was half a day in Hebrew?

Half a day in Hebrew, and half a day in English. Yeah.

OK. Well, yeah, we're jumping ahead here.

OK.

OK. So according to what your parents told you-- oh, by the way, do you have any siblings?

I have a brother who passed away a couple of years ago.

And his name?

Sam, Samuel-- Shmuel in Hebrew. My Hebrew name, by the way, has nothing to do with my French name, which is Alexandre, because apparently, from the story goes-- I don't know if it's true or not-- Alexander the Great was nice to the Jews. So it's one of the rare, non-Jewish names that's acceptable. I have no idea if that's true or not, but that's--

That's your Hebrew name, Alexander.

Alexander, yeah. Yeah.

OK. So what did your father do to make a living in Antwerp?

In Antwerp, as far as I know, he had a small furniture factory-- or factory. I think it was more--

A workshop?

--in a workshop. There may have been one or two other people working with him. I don't remember. And that's it and whatnot. So when he went to the United States, he worked in a similar profession. He also had an uncle who he thought was going to help him, but landed up maybe getting into business in the United States. But if you want to know why they stayed in the United States--

We didn't get there.

We didn't get there. OK. Because that's very important.

I am sure it is, but we're not there yet. OK, the war started in Belgium in May, 1940. And what happened to your parents?

The only thing I can tell you is that I interviewed them about that. And I taped it and typed it, or half of it. And the best way to know what happened is to use that document, because that was done when they were both alive. So that's over 20

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years ago, and I don't remember. I would have to reread it.

But as far as I know, the main point-- if you like the details, they're in that document. The main point was they wanted to go to Switzerland. This is the way I remember the story, from what I was told. They wanted to go to Switzerland.

They found a smuggler, or [FRENCH], as they say today. And there were two Jewish kapos. And my parents, with my brother-- I don't know if the other couple had any children. And the [FRENCH] said when they were passing through France-- and I'll tell you where I think that may have been, and I'll tell you why-- that if we're stopped by the French police, gendarme, whatever you do, don't say you're Jewish.

And according to what my parents told me, that's what happened. They were stopped by the gendarme. And the gendarmes said to them, if you're Jewish, we'll send you back to Belgium. And if you're not Jewish, we have to arrest you. So the other couple said, we're Jewish, and they were arrested.

And the most significant thing for me that came out of that and is still something that is valid today was when my father-- when they were arrested, they were in one of the train stations, which I'll tell you what I think it was in a minute. But the main point is my father started yelling, they're arresting us because we're Jewish. He didn't expect people to save him. But what he had hoped for was just somebody to look and say, my brother, I always like to help you, but-- just a regard. And there were none.

There were none. But that was early on, before the French started saving Jews. And it's still something that's a valid lesson till today. And it's happened very rarely in my life. But I have been part of groups that have prevented people from being arrested in Paris simply because they were Black, or Arab, or whatever.

And I had a dispute with the police on this very street because they were harassing a young man, and I was watching. And they said, why are you watching? I said, I'm watching so you don't beat him up. They said, well-- at the end, they threatened to beat me up. But anyway, they didn't do it. So that was a very important lesson for me that came out of that very unfortunate situation.

So apparently, they went back to Belgium.

No, they were arrested. They were put in jail and then sent, I guess, to Rivesaltes. But one of the interesting things that came out in the interview that I did with them was one of them said it was in Dijon. The other said it was in LÃ©on that they were arrested.

Now, of course, we know that-- and I, because of my work as a filmmaker, because I did films with witnesses-- that memory is not a very accurate thing. And that's been proved 1,000 times. But what I did learn is that there is a way to find out.

It would have been to check the train schedules in those days. If somebody's trying to go from Belgium to Switzerland, would they have passed through LÃ©on or through Dijon? I didn't go through that effort. That's not my line of business.

But it was something I also learned from doing this interview with my parents, that witnesses-- if you listen to them, it's very funny, because they're actually fighting about, no, I was there, I told you, it's LÃ©on. No, it's Dijon. They were both there, obviously.

But they also aren't right about the date, because your father insists that it was 1943, and you weren't born yet.

No, I know. That's why, I think, I corrected him. That's the other thing with witnesses. Within the film I made on one of the things I think you're going to ask me about, I had to actually correct one of the people who was there-- he was 18 at the time-- who got confused about the years. It's a normal thing. But mistakes get made that way, and then remain historically true, because nobody corrected them.

So that's the danger of what we're doing today and what happens in all these interviews, which I've seen many of them

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from the University of California archives. I can give you cases where historians told me it wasn't possible, and I was able to prove that it was possible, something that they said couldn't have happened. But because of what I learned in working on these kind of projects, I was able to prove that it probably happened.

If I remember correctly-- because I read the transcription of your parents' interview.

You read it more recently that I did.

You asked them what was going on in Belgium in the beginning of the war. They said, well, not much, we didn't really leave until '42. It wasn't '40. They trudged along, slipping through the net of all these anti-Jewish measures. And it seemed that they didn't decide they wanted to leave right away.

No. That's true. I didn't ask them about that. But I think this was the case. There were Jews who remained in Germany throughout the war in Berlin.

And I think I remember you asking your father, so what about your business? He goes, oh, yeah, well, I sold the business. Well, they made me sell the business, but OK. So that's not the essential thing.

But my father, from what he told me-- because part of the family was in the diamond business. And apparently, my father's an extremely honest man, as far as I know. I think he really was. And I say, as far as I know. Obviously, I wouldn't be a very good witness in a court of law.

But he also told me he hid diamonds for people and was paid for doing that. And I said, why didn't you keep some of the diamonds? He said, no question of doing that.

But they may have had-- one of the main problems and questions that I've been asked in the past is, how did they live? And I asked that question. I said, where did you get money? We had money. But where? And when they were in Italy-- I'm jumping a little bit ahead.

And when I did my further research after I did that interview, I was asked, did they get money from Desalem, which was the organization that helped Jews in Italy. And I said, that's a very good question, which I didn't know that I had to ask them at the time. If they had said, yes, that would mean that they got money from Desalem. But if they had said, no, that didn't mean anything.

So it's very difficult to-- I imagine, in all the interviews you've made, it's very difficult to get historically accurate. The only thing witnesses can tell you about is what they suffered or what they went through. But how, and why, and especially things like money-- the answer was, we had money.

I think, in the interview he said, we sold a ring.

He sold a ring. And he worked a little bit. Since he was a carpenter, he told me that, when he was in-- I guess he was in Rivesaltes. He worked outside of the camp and was able to get food and get some money.

He worked for one of-- I didn't know if it was a French commander or German. I don't remember what he told me. But he worked outside of the camp.

Which was a privilege if you were Jewish.

A very privileged situation. Obviously, he had to go back, because his wife was there.

You told me that they knew about the lists of people being deported.

No. What happened, as far as I was told-- as far as I was told. I don't know, again. When they were arrested, my grandfather-- and that's one thing. I, unfortunately, missed my uncles and my aunts.

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My grandfather, and my grandmother, and two of their children-- therefore, my uncle and my aunt-- were in Pertuis in the South of France. I don't know exactly what year. They had been living in Belgium as well. I don't know what year. My grandfather had a long beard. He was deported two weeks before the end of the war to Auschwitz.

And they had all been living in Pertuis.

They had been living in Pertuis. He was apparently very close to the chief of police. And even when the Germans invaded Marseilles-- Pertuis is very close to Marseilles-- the chief of police of the town would tell him when he could go to Marseilles to the synagogue or not go. And he somehow saw this Jew with a long beard who was able to survive in the south of France in the German occupation.

Don't ask me how. I don't know. You know how it is. We know about people who helped Jews during the war, the-- how do you call them in the English, [NON-ENGLISH]?

The righteous.

The righteous, right. But there is a case. So anyway, why do I mention that? Because when they were arrested-- and I guess initially, went to Rivesaltes. There was a French social worker who my brother at that time-- I was not born yet, so he was six and a half or something like that, 'cause he's seven and a half years older than I was.

I don't know how she knew that my grandparents were in Pertuis. Or now that we mention it, I don't even know how my parents knew they were in Pertuis. But I guess there were postcards or letters. I don't know.

And the French social worker managed to get my brother-- not out of the camp, but not into the camp. And he stayed with the grandparents for a certain amount of time. I don't know the whole story about that. And then my parents came into the camp.

And then there was a medical examination. This is the way the story was told. And the same social worker said to my mother, did you tell the doctor you are pregnant? My mother was not pregnant. And she said, no.

She said, well, you should go back, because tomorrow there is a convoy leaving. I don't know how specific she was about where the convoy was going-- obviously, to Drancy. I don't know if my mother would have understood what Drancy meant in those days, but probably not. But I think she understood enough to go back to see the doctor, who miraculously said she was pregnant.

So the one question I never dared ask my parents-- who were, obviously, of another generation-- was, how did you do it in the camp? Obviously, it wasn't that easy. And just being able to succeed in creating a kid at a specific time in time is not always that obvious. [COUGHS] Excuse me.

But in a place like Rivesaltes, I would have had to do more research on how people were living in Rivesaltes. But I don't think they had a lot of intimacy. I would doubt it very much. That's why I never investigated it. And I knew I couldn't ask them that question.

But you were sort of like the baby that they take bone marrow out of. You were the person who saved the family.

Well, that's one of the reasons-- the interesting thing in the family is that I was the favorite son. And my brother was never jealous, because I think he realized that-- I mean, I saved the family. I didn't do anything specifically. But I never had any problem with my brother in that regard.

We never discussed it, either, so it may all be my imagination. He may not have had any problems with it at all. But I'm pretty sure-- again, it's a son talking, not the parent-- that I was the favorite son. I was also better looking than my brother.

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Well, so your parents succeeded in creating a situation that would keep your mother in the camp and prevent her from being deported.

Well, somehow. What I don't know is-- because when I was born, my mother came from Gurs, which is another story. And my father was working in a work camp near Toulouse.

What was the name of the work camp?

Clerfonds, C-L-E-R-F-O-N-D-S. I was born in Erne, as I mentioned, which is in the Pyrenees. But Gurs, as I found out many, many, many years later when I filmed some things there, is about 150 kilometers from the place I was born. I assumed they were very close, because why would they send somebody to maternity that was 150 kilometers away? But--

Erne was the maternity ward for Rivesaltes, because it was quite close to Rivesaltes.

The Rivesaltes, yeah, over there. But Gurs was--

Are you sure that she was in Gurs at that time?

It's on my birth certificate. And I met a young lady whose mother was probably in the same train as my mother, because she was born almost the same time I was. No, there was, as you know-- what's her name? The woman who ran it.

Oh, "Eddenbons," "Eddenbence."

"Eddenbence," right.

Eidenbenz.

Eidenbenz, right-- who was a Swiss German lady who herself worked with the Red Cross and created the maternity for the Spanish War refugees. And then--

I think she worked with Secours Suisse. At any rate, it was a Swiss aid organization.

A Swiss aid organization. And I met her in Geneva when she was 95 or something. They were honoring her for what she had done during the war. And so I asked her, how did you get my mother out of Gurs? Because she didn't go back. I assume that, if you let somebody out of a camp, they're supposed to go back.

That's what they did in Rivesaltes. Sometimes, they left the baby at Erne. And then they sent the mother back.

Anyway, Madame Eidenbenz said, there was no problem. And this was when, at the end of the ceremony, she was quite tired. And she was with two relatives.

They said, write her a letter, which I have the answer somewhere in my file. And I asked the same question. How did you do this? And she said, it was nothing.

Generally, people who-- from my experience in doing a little bit of what you did in the film I made-- people who saved Jews, they just did it. There wasn't a problem. There wasn't something you worried about or thought about.

It was just done. That's it. So there's nothing to talk about. Or maybe she was just too modest to explain the danger there was for her. I don't know. I don't know.

Or maybe she had a little system there.

I assume. Yeah. Yeah.

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And not only that, she had not only Jewish women. She had Spanish women--

Right, before. Yeah.

--and Roma. So maybe your mother could have passed for something else.

I don't know. But she had to-- I mean, she signed the paper, my birth certificate, which says she came from Gurs. So there was no hiding the fact. I don't know. There are things we'll never know.

So at one point, your parents met up again.

Yeah, that's the other thing that I-- according what I was told, but I didn't quite understand, my mother was going in one direction on the train. My father was going-- he was on the station or one of the other trains. Anyway, somehow, they met up again.

And somehow, they picked up my brother in Pertuis. And somehow, they learned from my uncle, who had passed through-- who is my uncle who is not-- who was the husband of my mother's sister, so my uncle by marriage, I guess, who had been to Saint-Martin-VÃ©subie, which was an Italian occupation zone. And they heard about that and went to Saint-Martin-VÃ©subie, which I assume, since they left Saint-Martin the 8th of September or the 9th of September, 1943.

And I was born June 12, 1943. I don't know how long I stayed in maternity. I assume between a week and a month. Probably, in those days, it was obviously longer than it is today when they throw women out after three days.

Did your mother nurse you?

I assume. I have no idea. In the mountains, definitely. Or in the Italian Alps in the winter, I don't see what she would have done otherwise.

So I assume that we left for Saint-Martin when I was maybe a month old, or somewhere between two weeks and a month old. So that would be sometime in July. So we didn't stay there very long-- a month, month and a half, two months, maximum. And so they had-- from the research I did on that very specific subject for the film I made, it was something that was known, that it was pretty easy to go from the Germans on to the Italian zone.

Just to explain to people who don't know about the film, you made a film about--

I made a film. Well, I never wanted to make a film about the war because, when I was very young, when I was a kid-- when I say a kid, we lived in Hoboken, New Jersey. So I was maybe eight, nine years old, or whatever, maximum when we left, maybe younger than that.

So my parents' friends-- who many, similarly, had been in concentration camps-- they would come. And I guess, as far as I know, it's a Jewish tradition-- you don't chase kids away from the table. They stay with the adults.

And I remember, when I opened my first book about the war-- I guess I was still in Hoboken, so I was seven, eight, nine maximum. And I saw that it said that some Jewish people had gone to the cinema during the war. And to me, because everything impresses kids-- like when they go to visit their apartment, or their house when they were a kid, and thought it was so big, and they turn out to be very small.

I remember very distinctly thinking, but how could Jews go to the cinema during the war? Weren't they burning Jews day and night? So my problem was really not forgetting all this, but just getting it out of my system, because it was a little too heavy for a kid. And so I didn't want to make any films about the war.

But I went to see Saint-Martin. And I went to where I was born, but before they built the museum. And I went to Saint-

Martin, just out of curiosity, and went a second time just because it's a place in the mountains. And I saw there was a monument to the Italian Occupation Army, which aside from the monuments that were in the communist countries to the Russian army, it's extremely rare there to find a monument to an occupation army.

So I mentioned this to some Italian friends. And all of a sudden, this project sort of got-- I got stuck. I got stuck. Somebody had to do it. Somebody made a film about [? Erne, ?] about the maternity. So I said, OK, I want to do that one.

But on that particular subject, there was only one film made about 30 or 40 years ago by an American, which Saint-Martin was one third of the film. There was one Italian film made by [INAUDIBLE] and two short poetic Saturday religious programs made by [INAUDIBLE], which I used in my film, which is extremely rare. The amount of films made on the war-- it is very difficult to find a subject that's untouched. And so I was happy that I got caught into making this film, because it's basically one of the three films that exist on the subject, which is really extremely, extremely rare.

What is the title?

In English, it's A Pause in the Holocaust.

A Pause in the Holocaust.

Yeah, because for nine months-- which were, in Eastern Europe, probably some of the most terrible months during the war. From November '42 to September 8 when Germans invaded the Italian zone was one of the most terrible moments in Poland where ghettos were being destroyed. And in all of Europe, it was a very bad year, very bad year.

And in this one small town of 1,000 people, Jews were-- there were about 30,000 Jews in the south of France in the Cote d'Azur and the Italian zone went from Grenoble to Toulon, basically-- or Bordeaux, to be precise. It was a pretty big zone. And there were probably about 30,000 Jews who were protected, pretty much, by the Italians.

But in this town, who had a special status-- which I won't go into, because there's no point-- there were between 1,000 and 1,200 Jews in the town of about 1,000 to 1,200 people on the Italian border at an altitude of 1,000 meters. And so you could hear as much Yiddish, Hungarian, Polish, as French, or the local dialect, which was close to Italian. So it was a very-- and the Italians were very nice to the Jews there. And the townspeople-- I mean, there were obviously a few incidents and things.

But Saint-Martin-de-VÃ©subie is on the border, but it's in France.

It's in France. You walk over the mountain. That's what we did. So it's the only thing between Saint-Martin and Italy is a 2,200-meter mountain pass, or two of them. So it was a long walk in those days. I've done it once-- twice.

They do a pilgrimage once a year.

Once a year, they do a pilgrimage, yeah. But the pilgrimage has nothing to do with what it was like in those days, because the 8th of September can be very nice weather or very bad weather in the mountains. Secondly, the first 14 kilometers now are a road that's paved. So you can go by car. And secondly, the rest of the trail has been fixed up. It's not like it was.

And thirdly, in the 8th of September, 1943, the weather was pretty bad. And people were trying to carry suitcases. And they didn't have proper clothes and proper shoes. So it was a very rough climb over the mountains. But maybe I should explain what happened.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah. What happened was, in the November of 1942 when the Allies invaded North Africa, as you know, France was divided into two zones-- the occupied zone, and the so-called Vichy, or free zone, or whatever you want to call it, which

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was the south of France. And when the Allies landed in North Africa, the Germans were afraid that the Allies might land attack through the south of France. So they invaded the Vichy zone. But they gave a big piece of that territory to the Italians.

And then, in the 8th of September, 1943, General Eisenhower announced the armistice with Italy. The Germans had suspected that the Italians were doing some funny business. So they were poised, pretty much, to invade the Italian zone of France and northern Italy, which is what they did.

And the Italian army-- a lot of them were caught. Some of them either went to jail or were obliged to fight on the Russian front. That was pretty much the choice they were given. And the rest tried to escape as best they could. And from Saint-Martin, the officers led a march over the two mountain passes, about 1,000 people.

Some went back, because they couldn't do it. Some were caught on the other side. Since there were no cell phones in those days, nobody-- most of the people thought the Americans had already come to the north of Italy. And there wasn't really good information.

Or some people thought that, anyway. They weren't sure what they were going to see on the other side. But they figured they were going to be safe. 350, 340 were caught.

As they went over the border.

Not as they went. They were caught because the first things the Germans did when they invaded the zone was put up signs saying, anybody who helps Jews would be shot. And then they asked the Jews to come to San Donato, go to San Donato to the-- I forgot what it was called-- to the camp that was there, and that they would be treated, whatever. So a lot of them went thinking they would be OK. But they were then deported back to France, into Drancy, and to Auschwitz.

But some of the people who were hidden by Italians went to surrender-- I guess you'd call it that-- because they were afraid of what would happen to the Italians who were hiding them. And there were many cases where Italians said, don't go, don't go, we're not afraid. Some people went, some people didn't. Some people didn't read the notices.

But my family, we were hidden in a barn somewhere in the mountains. I was not able to-- and I was told where it was. But it was not a village, just a hamlet. I wasn't able to find it-- in a barn, where my mother had to melt snow to get water, things like that.

So that was the winter of '43?

I don't know exactly when they left for Rome. But they were there at least part of the winter of '43, which was probably not a great year.

We didn't get to Rome yet.

Oh, no, I know. I'm saying they were in the mountains. But as I said, I don't know exactly when they left, or why. Well, I don't know why they had the idea to leave. I didn't ask them that. I can assume what it was.

But what they said was the villages would come at night and bring them food, because during the day, they were afraid that they might be denounced by other villagers. There were people, as you know, all over Europe, including Germany and other places, who helped Jews and people who denounced the-- and there were Jews who denounced Jews and who sold them to the Germans. That's the way it was.

OK, so your parents left France through Saint--

Saint-Martin in Italy.

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Saint-Martin-de-VÃ©subie in July, 1940--

No, September 8.

September 8. The weather wasn't-- oh.

The mountain, yeah. That was when that exit is happened.

And they stayed in Saint-Martin--

Until September 8 from, as I said--

From July till September.

I guess July, since I was born on the 12th of June. So it wasn't-- may be maximum, two months. It might have been a couple of weeks less or a week more. But again, I imagine I stayed at least a week in the maternity.

Was this expedition organized by somebody?

Yes and no. The young-- I mean, the best thing is to see my film. But there were two schools of thought. There was actually somebody who came to Saint-Martin who told them what was going on in Eastern Europe. But most people-- well, most people didn't believe it.

Well, we won't go into about that, about Renier and all the others who went, and nobody believed them. That's another story. But they were young people-- 17, 18, 19, 20-- who began to organize. There was some organization. And they were starting to train themselves in climbing over mountains, things like that.

But most of the people were not at all ready to do anything like that. But there was, apparently, some organization. And because I interviewed some of these young people-- who were, obviously, not young anymore-- they confirmed something that my brother had been very annoyed about. But he was wrong, because he thought my father had almost left him behind.

What my father had done-- which he explained to me, and which was confirmed by these young people, which I'll explain in a second-- was that it was a very difficult journey, very difficult journey. And a lot of people had kids and baggage. So these young people, who were the organized ones, would go back and forth helping people go up.

And as far as I understood, my father left my brother behind, because he took me in the baggage up the hill with my mother. And then he came back and got my brother. Otherwise, my brother wouldn't have arrived in the United States if he had left him. But he had felt very deserted. It's not the right word.

Abandoned.

Abandoned, right, that's the word. And he later felt abandoned when we get to Rome when Rome was liberated as well. He was seven years old.

So they got over the border into Rome.

No, they got over the border into the Alps. And then they managed to go to Rome by train. I think it was in Florence where they met some fascist on the train who invited them to their house.

When they were going, they hitched rides on German trucks. And going into one story that they said, my father was talking to my mother in Yiddish. He said, stop talking in Yiddish with all the Germans, because the Germans could obviously recognize Yiddish. Italians, maybe not. The Germans could recognize Yiddish with no problem.

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And somehow, they got to Rome. There were thousands of people trying to get to Rome, because people were looking for the Americans, obviously. And again, they said there were no portable phones, and CNN didn't exist. So it was not that easy to get information about what was going on.

And so they landed up in Rome in a hotel near the Fontana di Trevi, which I was able to find. It seems to be-- what was it called-- [ITALIAN]. I managed to find it after many years of looking, a little bit by accident, I think. I think I just went on the internet, actually.

And there was a film made many years ago, I guess maybe over 50 years ago, called Three Coins in the Fountain. And then, when I went to see it with my mother, she was crying, because that's where she used to take me for a walk.

It was a tearjerker anyway.

Yeah, it was a tearjerker. But for my mother, it was even a bigger tearjerker. So then my brother during that time was apparently in a convent, because one of the things-- even though there's a lot of controversy about the popes. I won't go into that.

But what is for sure is that the priests and nuns, many of them-- it's a story that's been told, but not enough-- they opened convents where no man had ever entered before. Specifically in the Piedmont, which was the part of Italy in the north in the Alps, my parents were-- it's one of the things I mention in my film.

The archbishop of Genoa was very important in getting funds from Switzerland, things like that. And Italian priest would go to Switzerland and get money to help Jews and then go distribute it, at the risk of their life, obviously. They risked their lives. So that's pretty much, as far as I know, an untold story.

What was his name?

I don't remember. It's in my film. It's in my film. I made the film a few years ago, and I'm not very good with names in general.

Did your brother ever talk about the fact that he was in the convent? Does he remember? Did he have to go to mass--

Oh, yeah.

--and say the rosary?

I suppose. I don't know. He had two experiences in Rome, which I think clouded over everything. One, he was bitten by a dog and had have rabies shots. And in those days, it was 60 shots in the stomach, or some incredible amount of shots. And when Rome was finally liberated, again he felt he was abandoned, because my parents didn't take him into the hotel.

I assume-- I never asked my parents those kind of question. They didn't exactly have a suite and had, already, one baby. And I guess maybe they wanted to have some kind of rejoicing, which they didn't think it was a good idea for a young boy to be witness to. I don't know-- again, one of those kind of questions one didn't ask about parents who were born in the beginning of the 20th century.

It's just not something-- it wasn't discussed. My sexual education was a book called From Egg to Chicks that my parents gave me. So they were really of another generation. So there are things-- never know. So what else can I tell you? How we got to America.

Well, first of all-- yes, please. Henry Gibbins, and Ruth Gruber. And did you ever hear or meet Joseph Sharp?

No.

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He was involved in that.

So was Morgenthau. I didn't meet him either. But I did apparently meet-- for the speaker-- Mrs. Roosevelt, who I think-- I mean, that's my own opinion based on nothing, just on the air-- that it was more her than Roosevelt, her husband, who was responsible for her coming to America. And Roosevelt was supposed to be known as a "Jew lover," and put that in quotation marks. But apparently, he was not as much of the Jew lover as he was thought to be. And the problems with Breckinridge Long, was in charge of immigration enstatement--

And Cordell Hull.

--and Cordell Hull-- they weren't too nice. So there was a lot of anti-Semitism in the United States, which is one of the reasons that probably all this was blocked. And Breckinridge Long-- Morgenthau would be asked to send-- would approve sending funds to Europe to help Jews from the Joint and other organizations to Switzerland. And six months later, the organization would come-- the money hasn't arrived, because the State Department had not approved it. So that's probably why--

And then there was the Bermuda Conference much earlier on when both America and Britain said-- or Britain said, if we let Jews in England, it will create anti-Semitism-- a little bit of what's going on now, a little bit of what's going on now. If we take the refugees into whatever country, they have to be Christians, because otherwise it's going to-- so the world doesn't change, unfortunately. A lot of things don't change.

But anyway, from what I understand-- well, what happened was Rome was liberated in August of 1943, or July of-- I think it was July. And the boat left, I think, in August. But that's easy to check, the Henry Gibbins. And the idea was to bring over 1,000 refugees from Europe, mainly Jewish.

Apparently, some Yugoslavs were not Jewish. Most never went back after the war, as far as I was told. Again, I don't-- and there are statistics on the subject, which I also have somewhere. But I have to find them.

And the problem was-- well, first of all, 1,000 people. These were 1,000 people brought over outside of the quota, which were not filled during the war-- very important point. And we were brought over, supposedly, for the duration of the war and supposed to go back afterwards. That was the agreement. And I'll explain what our status was in a minute.

But my brother made a very important point, which was Rome was liberated. We're already free. And America brought us over on a convoy, which was bombed, because the American-- it was a military convoy. The war was not over yet.

So in fact, that was one of the things that I never said to Ruth Gruber, who was an incredible woman. And her books-- she's written books. There have been books written about her. Safe Haven is the title of the book she wrote, which I'm on the cover of, because I was a very beautiful baby-- one of the later editions.

When she saw the picture, she put the picture in the inside. When she found out it was me when I met her, she put me on the cover with my mother, who was also quite pretty at the time, quite beautiful at the time. But Ruth was a incredible human being. As I say, there have been films made about her, and books, so I won't go and try and explain who she was.

There were two things. One was the fact that they weren't saving anybody, because we were already saved. And two-- one of the things that I criticized in an article when I was interviewed when I went to Fort Ontario was that America has this gung-ho attitude. And Ruth, because she was very American, did incredible things. She is an incredible woman.

I think she's still alive, and 104, and had an incredible life. As far as the last time I looked on the internet, she was still alive, so she's 104. When I went to this reunion in Fort Ontario where we landed up--

When was that?

That was, I think, maybe the 50th anniversary. It was--

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'94?

I think it was '94, something like that. It must have been '94. It was the year that CBS made a--

It was '94.

--a film. And she started saying, look at all these lawyers, and doctors, and things. And my feeling was, you don't save lawyers and doctors, you save human beings. And even if they were crooks, they don't deserve to die. It's very simple. Even if they're illiterate, they don't deserve to die.

One of the stories I read during the war was a guy in one of the concentration camps who had been arrested, a Jewish guy who had been arrested as a political prisoner in '33. And he was he was the one who had to choose who went to the gas chamber. And he wanted to put himself on the list.

But he said, maybe the next guy won't be as good a chooser as I was. And he did the same thing. He saved doctors and lawyers, because they're more "useful," in quotation marks, to society. But when it comes to saving people, everybody is useful, because everybody's a human being.

But anyway, that's just a very minor point. But the major point is America did nothing. That's the major point.

I mean, 1,000 people-- now, the interesting thing about our-- we were probably the first Guantanamo in a way, because we didn't exist. We were not officially-- we didn't go through Ellis Island. We were not immigrants. We were guests of the United States government. And--

You were the personal guests of--

President.

--President Roosevelt.

Right. Right. Right, personal guest. So one of the stories I didn't go into in great detail-- I mean, not in any detail. But which I had read about was that there were children born during the two years in Fort Ontario. And there were some lawyers who said, well, they can't be Americans, because they're not really here. They never entered the United States officially. So they can't be American.

And somebody must've said, Charlie, forget it, because this will take 20 years or 30 years of discussion in the Supreme Court, and whatever. And that's my idea and my imagination. But I did read that that question was brought up because, officially, we came in the United States in August of '44. And officially, I entered the United States in 1946, because what happened was the Jewish organizations and maybe some others said, these people are here, so you got to send them back-- those who want to go back, obviously.

Oh, no. No, I'm sorry. You're going to send them back later. When the final decision was made, some people did choose to go back. You're going to send them back and bring in 1,000 other refugees, or 1,000 other immigrants, or whatever. Immigrants-- America's always had immigrants. 1,000 other people will come. So why not let them stay?

So in order to be able to stay, we crossed the border into Canada-- because Fort Ontario's very close to Canada-- and were given American visas and officially entered the United States in '46. And I became an American citizen in 1951, and as I discovered today, not on the same date as my father-- by looking over some of the pictures with you, which he didn't answer to that. I'll never know why he was in June and I was in December.

Can we go back a little?

Sure.

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You were very young. So I don't imagine you have any memories of--

Not any.

--being on the boat.

No, neither on the boat, nor on Fort Ontario.

You have none at all

None whatsoever. My brother had, but he passed away.

And so you don't remember where you lived, what it looked like, whether you or your parents ever interacted with people outside of Fort Ontario.

My father had an uncle who lived in New Jersey, I think. And he was supposed to help him. But at the end, he didn't do very much. He also had some family in California that I knew later. I had some cousins, I think. And that's it.

But you don't remember playing with other kids? Do you--

Other kids at the age of two? I don't think I played with many other between one and two. I don't think I did.

Well, there's pictures of you with other kids.

Oh, yeah. No, I guess I played with other kids. I don't know. The only thing I remember was I look like a girl, because my mother wanted one. And when I had my haircut, finally I began to look like a boy. So that's in the pictures. I have proof of that.

But are there any family stories that were told about you? Like, oh, you were seasick the whole time.

I didn't look seasick in the pictures. I don't know.

No, there are pictures of you on that boat. You look very happy.

No, I have none. There was never any question of anything like that.

And you say your first language, your mother tongue, was Yiddish.

I assume. I assume, because how come I speak Yiddish? I didn't go to school. So I assume I learned it at home. I don't see why I would have learned it any other way. But when they were in the United States, I assume, before that, that's what they spoke, mainly. In Belgium, they probably spoke some Flemish, or maybe spoke it fairly well. I don't know.

During the war, my mother spoke some French and Italian. But my father wasn't too good with languages. So I don't think he-- they basically had to keep quiet most of the time. But I assume my mother tongue had to be Yiddish, because otherwise--

And do you remember at all leaving Fort Ontario and going to Canada?

No.

What are your first memories that you can--

Hoboken-- Hoboken, New Jersey.

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That's where you settled once you got--

When we went to-- yeah.

--out of--

Out of Fort Ontario.

--Fort Ontario.

Yeah. But the main thing was-- we were talking earlier about my parents had a business in Belgium. And they probably could have gotten some money from the Germans for that, or whatever. But they al--

Wiedergutmachung.

Yeah. But there were also-- what do you call it?

War reparations.

War reparations for the business they lost, because they did get to wiedergutmachung. But they also had family who was in the diamond business. My brother also always felt that they should have gone back to Belgium, where they would have had a better economic situation than they had in the United States.

But I think my parents, after spending four years in the war or five years in the war, were just glad to be in America. And they were a little reluctant to go back. They did go back in '48 on a visit. But I guess, by that time, they felt-- I don't know. They felt they were in the United States, and that's where they decided to stay.

But I know that probably my brother objectively was probably right that they would have been better off economically had they gone back to Belgium. But they were thinking about the kids. Could it be a better life for them in the United States? Europe in 1945 or 1946 was not a great place to be. So there were still restrictions, and rationing, and all that kind of thing.

What did your father start doing when he got to New Jersey?

I assume-- I know he tried to start some kind of business that didn't succeed in cabinet making of furniture making. He did all the cabinets and stuff in our house. But he worked mainly for a company that made displays for conventions and things like that called Ivel Construction Company, I-V-E-L.

What was the name of it?

Ivel Construction Company. If you spell Ivel backwards, it will give you some hint of who owned the company. In those days, it wasn't necessarily good to call yourself Levi.

So do you remember your family keeping up contact with people with whom they were in--

Yes. They came over on the boat, and then they're best friends. Yes.

I have a mother question. How did they get to be part of the 1,000 people?

That's a good question, because when I read some of the materials I think, theoretically, they should not have been on that boat, because I think-- I don't remember. I can't remember what they were. There were criteria. I would have to look up what the criteria was.

But I had the feeling that-- I don't know. I guess they didn't-- I don't know how they-- I guess they heard about the boat.

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And I guess maybe they didn't fill all the quota of people who filled the criteria. I don't know.

But as I said, I remember vaguely having read the criteria for getting on that boat. And I had a strange feeling my parents didn't quite fill that criteria, but I may be wrong. I may be wrong. Again, it's just impressions of things. These are--

Did they tell you where this was posted? Obviously, it went from it was word of mouth, or it was printed somewhere.

I have no idea, no idea. But it's amazing how, even in the days before cell phones and even telephones, information somehow traveled.

And so they applied. They got in. And you met Ruth Gruber at the 50th--

At the 50th anniversary, yeah.

You didn't meet her before. You don't--

No.

--remember.

No, no, I know I didn't meet her before. I mean, she--

She may have seen you.

She may have seen me on the boat, yeah. But she saw 1,000 other people, too, so no. No. No, I never was too-- I wanted to do a film about the idea of refugees.

No, I'll put it otherwise. In 1962, when I had sort of gone to film school, my father had a cousin in-- not sort of, but I had gone to film school. It wasn't quite the course the way it works today.

My father had a cousin in California who was a film editor. And he had asked me to write the story of my parents. And I wasn't interested in the least bit, because all the stories I had heard as a kid were a hundred times worse than my parents' story. First of all, they survived, the whole family. Or at least the nuclear family survived.

There's nothing to be embarrassed about.

No, no, no. It's not embarrassing. It wasn't a question of embarrassing. I just didn't think it was interesting enough. Then, when I began learning about America's attitude during the war, I had come up with the idea of doing a story in parallel of America of how America finally allows in these 1,000 refugees and all the crap that was going on in Washington.

And the family-- not necessarily my own, because I would have to have had to invent most of the story, because the few details I know are not enough to write a new film script-- and do a story in parallel between what was going on between the Bermuda Conference, and State Department, and Treasury, and all the Nazi Bund and all, and everything, anti-Semitism in the US, and all that. And then, I was going to do that in parallel. Finally, the two stories come together-- the family that's fleeing through Europe, and the great possibility of coming to the United States.

The one thing, the one gesture-- aside from what they did with Varian Fry , and letting in people like Chagall with two tons of his paintings, things like that. So America, on our end, saved other people, which is great. But the everybody else-- the others, the rest-- deserved to live as well. What can I tell you?

So your family settled in Hoboken. And you said you went to the yeshiva.

I went to yeshiva.

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In Hoboken?

I think it was a little bit outside. The school bus came. And then I went to yeshiva in Brooklyn. And that was the end of primary school. And that was it.

And so it was fairly religious?

Yeah, it was religious, but not me, not my parents.

Well, how come parents decided-- if they wanted to stay in the states and integrate, and they weren't quite religious themselves, what made them put you in a yeshiva?

Well, in Brooklyn, I know it was because my mother worked. And the normal schools in America ended at 3 O'clock. And my mother came home probably 5:00 or 6:00. And the yeshiva ended at 5:00. That's what I was told.

What did she do?

She worked in a jewelry shop. She worked with her brother. Her brother was in the United States at that time. His claim to fame was he brought over Buffalo Bill to Belgium before the war. And he was the only person outside of the United Nations who had the right to call his shop a United Nations gift shop, because he had the name The United Nations Gift Shop before the United Nations existed.

So she worked with him for a while, and then worked-- he was in Manhattan on Lexington Avenue-- and then worked in a store in Brooklyn, in a jewelry store in Brooklyn. So that was the reason for the yeshiva. They wanted me to go to a yeshiva high school. There was no question of that.

So then what high school did you go to?

Brooklyn Tech.

And after, you graduated in what year?

Well, I graduated in-- I left Brooklyn Tech after three years and went to the local high school, because I wanted to get out. Brooklyn Tech was a special high school in New York, therefore. And I wanted to go to the university as quickly as possible. I didn't want to be an engineer.

So I went to the local high school for three and a half years where I made my applications to university and was accepted in four universities. I went to the University of Chicago. So that was my dream.

And you majored in?

I didn't major in anything, because I left after six months and went to Brooklyn College. It's a long story. I was a college dropout on my own volition, not because-- it's a long, complicated story-- and then did various courses in various places, in NYU, and Columbia, and different places. But my dream was Chicago, and I got in, which is-- you know. But then I left. But that's another story. It has nothing to do with the war. It has to do with my [NON-ENGLISH].

Well, it's your story.

Yeah. I mean, when you're 17 years old, you do some stupid things. That was a very stupid thing I did to leave Chicago. But on the other hand, what's stupid, and what's not stupid?

Life is a series of encounters, and changes, and decisions. And when you make one decision, it turns in one direction. And you make another decision, you go in the other direction. So that's what happened with my education.

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And what did your brother end up doing?

My brother was in a psychiatric social worker. He finished. He got his master's.

Do you have something you would like to add?

No. the. Only thing I would like to add is books have been written about America's attitude during the war. It's not so much the attitude. It's the kind of arguments they used in not allowing immigrants, starting with the St. Louis, and going on to the Bermuda Conference, and all the arguments that-- I mean, what's going on today is to me--

I was born a refugee, a stateless refugee. I mean, I don't know the solution to the problem in Europe today that we're having with Syria, and the Africans, and all the rest, and people dying trying to get into Europe. But obviously, I can't help with being very much touched by that, because that's how I start out my life.

And I chose to come to live in France as an American because-- for various reasons. And I don't feel French. I don't feel American. I believe everybody's entitled to their own identity. If you want to feel whatever you want to feel, that's what you are.

And one of the good things America does is when they do the census-- in France, as you know, they're not allowed to do a census and ask you what your religion or your color is. In America, you choose. You can be Black and say you're white. You can be white and say you're Black.

And I think there are white people who feel they're Black and Black people who feel they're white. And somebody like Obama can choose. Why is Obama Black? He's just as much white as he is Black. He's probably more white then Black in terms of his upbringing.

So I've always felt very strongly about the fact that I was lucky to be able to choose, as an American, to come and live in France and not have any problems getting papers, and stuff like that. And that's the way it should be for everybody.

Also, you were born in France, technically.

Yeah. Yeah, but that's not why-- before I got my French citizenship, which I was entitled to, I was just a resident. For many years, I didn't even have any papers. It was a long time ago. And there was nothing strict about it.

If I had been from North Africa, it might have been a little different, even in those days. But as an American, I didn't have any problem. So I've always felt very strongly about the fact that just because you're white and come from a, theoretically, civilized country-- I say theoretically, because America did a lot of nasty things, which most Americans don't know about.

And I had the privilege of being able to choose, because I wanted to-- I liked France. And today, with Europe, you have-- I don't know-- 200,000 French people living in London and 100,000 English people living in Paris. And so what are they?

They're whatever they want to be. Why do English people choose Paris, and French people choose London? Because that's the way it is, and that's the way it should be. And that's the way--

As I said, I started out life being nobody, nothing. And I still feel my identity. I can't escape my Jewish identity, even if I want to. But people say, are you French, are you American? I say, ah, I'm neither.

I chose to be just a human being who was unlucky enough to be born in that period of time when it was not very good to be Jewish. And therefore-- I used to say when I was a kid, the day they stop persecuting Jews I stop being Jewish, because there's-- but that hasn't happened yet. So I guess I have to go on being Jewish.

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Is that one of the things that influenced your-- do you want to continue?

Yeah. I don't-- it doesn't seem [INAUDIBLE].

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