

This is part 1 of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Dr. Alfred I. Fiks, taking place on August 18, 2016, over the phone between Washington, DC and Costa Rica. Thank you very much, Dr. Fiks, for agreeing to be interviewed. We very much appreciate it.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Yes, sir. And so in part 1 we'll talk a little bit about your family, some biographical information, and the years leading up to the war. So we'll start at the very beginning. Could you please tell us your date of birth, your place of birth, and your name at birth?

My date of birth, place, and what else?

And your name at birth, if it was different.

My name. My name was-- I've never changed my name. Anyway, the date of birth was 2 June 1931. And the place is Berlin, Germany.

And did you always go by Alfred, or did you have any nicknames growing up?

Did I what?

Did you have any nicknames growing up?

Any--

Did you always go by the name Alfred, or did you have a--

In Berlin I was always Alfred or Alfred-chen, which is diminutive. It's Alfred or little Alfred.

Oh, yeah, Alfred-chen. So you were born in Germany. Were your parents, as well?

Were my parents?

Were they born in Germany, as well?

No. And so the real beginning for me goes back to their birthplace, actually-- their birth places. Would you like to hear about them?

Yes, please.

My mother was born in Poland, in the capital city, which is Warsaw. And she was born in the year 1894. The date, in case you're interested, is May 9. Anyway, she was born into a family with-- she had one sister that I know of and several brothers. And they lived in the Jewish Quarter of Warsaw, in an apartment.

And they were very industrious people. During the day, that apartment where they slept at night was turned into a small factory of neckties. They would design, cut, and sew men's neckties and then-- and sell them to the stores. So my mother was always-- she always prided herself in being a big city girl.

My father, on the other hand, was born in the country. And the country is really somewhat indeterminate. The territories in some areas between Poland and Russia and Ukraine kept changing hands. So it's difficult to know whether he was born in Poland, Ukraine, or Russia.

He was born in a small town called Rasalowska, if you-- the best spelling I know about, the only spelling I know for it

is-- let's see, here-- R-A-S-A-L-O-W-K-A, Rasalowska. It was what was called a shtetl. A shtetl is a village, a Jewish village, from the German word stadt, which is city. So it was a shtetl where all the men were bearded and every other one was a rabbi. And if you've seen Fiddler on the Roof, you know what I'm talking about.

Anyway, so he was born in this country town. But he was looking for wider opportunity for work and creativeness than he could find in that little village. And at some point he moved. He picked himself up and moved to Warsaw.

And I don't know how they met, but they did-- he and my mother did meet. But before that-- I guess-- well, I'm not sure if it was before or after. But at some point-- my father was born in 1893. So he was one year older than my mother.

And he was in Warsaw taking courses. His love in life was playing the violin, just like Fiddler on the Roof. But he realized that it was difficult to make a livelihood from playing the violin. And so he went to Warsaw to learn-- [COUGH] excuse me-- to learn the craft, art and craft of making ladies fur coats-- fur, F-U-R--

Fur coats.

--from the design of the coat to getting these animal skins, making a design for the coat, cutting the animal skin to appropriate shape, sewing them together-- the whole thing, from beginning to end, because in those days, of course, there was no central heating in the homes. And the houses were cold. So he went to--

So he learned the--

And at some point he married-- no, he didn't-- at some point he met my mother. Also at some point, apparently, the Russians moved into Warsaw. And they conscripted him. They forced him to join the Russian army. This was World War I, which, if you remember, started in 1914.

Yes, sir. And what were your parents' names, before we talk more about that?

My father was David Fiks.

David.

And my mother was Estera.

Estera. OK.

E-S-T-E-R-A.

Thank you. And so he was drafted into the Russian army?

He was drafted into the Russian-- that's-- anyway, you understand that a lot of the information about this period are things that I learned as an adult or an adolescent. They were not things from my childhood. I didn't know anything about where my father came from then--

So he never talked--

--with one exception. On vacations my father would not-- would usually not go on vacations with us. My mother and I would travel alone, and sometimes with my other brother. But-- and sometimes we would travel to Poland on vacation and meet one of my mother's-- he would-- we would meet my mother's favorite brother, who was a very tall man, almost three-- well, almost six feet high.

So we would meet him on-- in a seaside resort called Zopot-- Z-O-P-O-T, Zopot-- which was near the city of-- at that time it was called Danzig. Now it's called Gdansk in Polish, G-D-A-N-S-K. And so I knew that there was a Polish connection. But everything else I learned as an adolescent or as an adult.

So your father never talked about his childhood? Never about the war or anything like that?

Did my mother-- what was the question?

So your father never talked about his childhood in Poland or his experiences during the war?

Well, a little bit. And--

Oh, I see.

And the stories were not always the same, which makes me a little bit suspect of what really happened. But there was always an element of self with time and old age. There's an element of time where the story's growing and making oneself more and more important.

But anyway, the-- he was drafted into the Russian Army. And the story I heard was that he was taken prisoner by the Germans. And as a Jewish soldier, he was treated better as a prisoner in a German camp than he had been as a soldier in the Russian army.

Really?

So he decided that Germany must be a pretty good place to live, one that might give him more economic opportunity to develop. And after the war, which would be 1918, 1919, he moved to Germany.

Really?

Yes.

Just because of the way he was treated as a prisoner of war.

Well, I'm sure there were other factors, but I don't know what they were. Well, it was generally known that in Poland, the Jews lived in their own little-- well, it's a self-imposed ghetto, really. But it's in their own areas, their own neighborhoods. Whereas in Berlin they were more integrated into the city.

I see.

And there were neighbors who were not Jewish next door. So it was-- that was generally known. So he knew that there would naturally be more opportunity in Germany than there had been in Poland.

And so--

And then, in 1920, he sent for my mother. This is a story that I hear. And they got married in Berlin. I know that's true because I have a photo, a wedding photograph from Berlin, 1920. Now, did I get off your question, or--

No, no. This is-- you covered a lot of the questions I had.

Good.

So what were your parents like? What were their personalities?

What were they like?

Yes, sir.

That's an interesting question. My father, his whole life-- well, while he was actively working, his whole life was his work. As soon as he could he set up his own little store with his own little workshop behind it, making the fur coats. And he would devote all day, and I mean all day, to working.

My mother was the sociable one. My father was not at all sociable. And he was-- and I think he tended to be a perfectionist. My mother would handle the customers in the front of the store, in the showroom. And she liked to meet people and talk to people, unlike my father, I think, generally. And I don't have any memory of ever playing with my father, for example.

And so they--

The only thing I-- the only time-- well, I didn't realize I was playing. Once, in my childhood, there was a happening that I just-- I don't remember-- I don't know if it was from my own memory or what I was told in adolescence and adulthood. But I believe it was true. I was very young in getting my adult teeth, were coming in.

And so I don't know what happened, but I think I did something that my mother told me not to do. And so she gave me a slap in the face. And one of my baby teeth fell out as a result of the slap.

And so I was going to get even with her. I took the little baby tooth to my father, who was in the shop. See, we lived near-- the apartment we lived in was near the store. So I didn't have to go far to go to my father and show him what my mother had done to me.

[LAUGHTER]

But I think that was the last attempt to get my mother into trouble that happened.

And so your parents owned the store where they both-- your father made the coats.

Yes.

And your mother worked out front.

Yes. It was a small retail store in a residential neighborhood in Berlin. It was not a Jewish neighborhood. There were lots of other people around.

It was in a building which was an apartment house, which had about four or five stories with an open courtyard inside the buildings. And the store was in front of the building, on the street, at street level. And the apartment was inside, also on-- at street level, but inside the courtyard. We had about three or four rooms back there. Apartment-- nice apartment, middle class.

My parents, both my father and mother, were not religious. And their families did not seem to be very religious. I don't know for sure. But for example, I never met-- well, I met my maternal grandmother once. Of the four grandparents, that's the only one I ever met.

And she of course, as partially remember and partially I was told, she would embrace me and kiss me on the cheek. And I started crying because she was all wrinkly and very ancient, it seemed to me. I was a baby at the time, or a very young child. Anyway, I started crying because a strange-looking woman was hugging me and kissing me.

And that was-- yeah, the--

So I started crying. And my mother says, it's ridiculous what you're doing. When I get old and I kiss you, will you also cry?

[LAUGHTER]

I was beyond words.

I remember in one of our past phone conversations you mentioned that your mother was a feminist?

Well, yes. Her attitude, I think, was very enlightened. I don't think she belonged to any organized group of feminists. But she didn't like housework too much, for example. In Germany we had a-- well, I really had two mothers, you see, because I had my real mother, but she was-- during the day she was always in the store, or much of the time. Sometimes she would cook meals.

But usually the one who cooked meals was Marie, Mary, who was with us for many years that I remember. And she was a combination housekeeper and nanny. So I really had one and a half mothers.

And while your mom was at the store, Marie was there.

While my mom was at the store Marie would care for me, take care of me, whether in the apartment or whether she would take me out for a walk through the park. That was one of our favorite activities, going to the main park in Berlin, which has a zoo inside it. It's a wonderful part called the Tiergarten, the garden of animals.

And everything went all right until some yellow benches appeared in the park. This would have been in-- I don't know, after-- between 1935 and '39. Maybe '36 or '37. Yellow benches appeared in the park. And the yellow benches, I found out later, were for Jews only. Jews were not allowed to sit on benches with normal people.

And before we jump too far ahead--

Sorry?

Before we jump too far ahead, let-- could we go back to your family a little bit?

OK.

So you said you met one of your mother's brothers a few times.

Yes.

Did you ever meet any other aunts or uncles?

No. Well, not in Poland. I did meet some later on, in France. But that-- we leave that for after 1939. In my early childhood I did not meet any other brothers or sisters. So in my earlier years the only one that I met was my Uncle [? Shia ?] and my mother's mother, whom I cried when she embraced me.

What about siblings? You mentioned a brother.

Now, I also mentioned that my parents were very-- they were not religious. They wanted to assimilate into the German culture. And in 1921 they produced their first child. And remember, they got married in 1920.

Yes, sir.

In 1921 Max appeared. A boy appeared, and they named him Max, which is not exclusively German, but very German. In-- I don't know. A few years later, a second boy, a second son appeared. And they named him Fritz, F-R-I-T-Z. Can you imagine Fritz Fiks? Poor boy.

Anyway, Fritz died of diphtheria. The injection they give to babies now against diphtheria was not yet developed-- or just coming out. I'm not sure. But anyway, he died of diphtheria sometime before 1931, because that's when they had me

as a replacement for Frtiz's death. Well, I shouldn't say that. I don't know if that was actually true. But I like to say that. But I never met Fritz.

But what I'm trying to-- what I'm trying to point out is that they were-- they wanted to assimilate into German culture. They named a son Max, Frtiz, and then yours truly, Alfred. Pretty German names. They're not Jewish names or biblical names.

So they made a choice to choose very--

Huh?

They made a choice to choose very German names?

They what?

Your parents-- they chose to pick very German names?

I'm sorry, I can't understand. Are you speaking into the phone?

Is this better?

I think so.

So your parents specifically chose very German names.

Did they specifically--

Chose German names?

No, I just-- I'm a social scientist, so I use that, as an adult, to indicate that they really wanted to assimilate into German culture.

Yes.

For example, they had season tickets to the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra based on my father's love of music and the desire to really belong into Berlin culture. And so he wanted to be part of something bigger than he had been in Poland.

Yes, sir.

And they-- in terms of religious training, we just went to synagogue once a year, on the high holy days. I'm going to change ears. Hold on. OK.

And so Max was 10 years older than you?

Correct.

So what was he like, having an older brother?

Well, Max was-- he was OK. He was very studious, a very studious boy. They put him-- they wanted him to learn to play the piano. But in order to get him to practice his piano they would put a box of candies on the piano. And after every-- after so many minutes or quarter hours, I don't know, he was able to take a chocolate candy.

He was a little bit pudgy, not very physical. He was very studious. They gave him a nickname, Lekko, L-E-K-K-O, Lekko, which is short for lexicon. Lexicon, in German, means something like what you call the Britannica--

encyclopedia. Lexicon means encyclopedia.

And that was his nickname?

That was his nickname.

[LAUGHTER]

Lekko. Lekko.

Lekko. So he was very studious, very smart, it sounds like?

Very studious. I guess he was smart, yeah. And he was the intellectual light of-- hope of the family. In my mother's eyes, Max was the intellectual one.

Now, I was-- my specialty was psychomotor ability. I could fix anything with my hands. So I was going to be a super duper arts and craftsperson. Oh, and Fritz, he was the extrovert. We judge from his one-- I've only seen one photograph of Fritz. He was, I don't know, eight years old or something. And he had a chocolate cigarette in his mouth-- we assume it was chocolate.

So he was, like you said, the extrovert of y'all?

Was he?

So you think he was the more outgoing one of the brothers?

I'm sorry, I'm having trouble. I get an echo in back of your voice.

Is this better?

Maybe. I don't know. Say something else.

So Fritz was outgoing?

I didn't under-- I didn't catch that.

Fritz was the outgoing brother?

Fritz? Well, you understand, I never knew Fritz, because he died before I was born.

But from what your parents said, he was--

He was-- yeah, he was outgoing and devilish. And that was his specialty. And then I came along. And I was very good with my hands. And later, it turned out, they wanted me to take over the store when my father would retire.

And they told you this later?

They told me what later?

That they wanted you to take over the store?

No, but it was obvious from their comments. They never told me that outright.

Oh, I see.

It was obvious from the comments they would make.

And you said that your parents wanted to integrate into German society?

Yes.

So what--

Hm?

What languages did you speak at home and outside of the home?

Well, outside of the home, German. Inside of the home, my parents would talk, I guess, something-- a combination of German and Yiddish. Well, Yiddish is a dialect of German, you may or may not know. So they talked this combination German-Yiddish, except when they didn't want me to under-- to hear something or to understand something they were saying. And then they would switch to Polish.

When they didn't want you to know what they were talking about?

Right.

Did you ever learn Polish?

No.

No.

Just a few words.

Just a few words?

[POLISH], give me a kiss.

Let's see. So you said your family was middle class?

Very middle class. Very bourgeois.

Had they been affected by the depression at all?

Well, they lived through it. They lived through it. But I don't see that-- it didn't destroy the store. I was born in '31. So '31 was kind of during-- well, I don't know when you want to put the depression. But we were OK. I didn't see any-- as a child, I didn't see any lack of food or the necessities of life around. And we stayed in the apartment. So far as I know, all my life in Berlin we were in that apartment with that store. Should I go on?

Sure. Yes, please.

Hello?

Sure. Yes, please.

OK. Let me-- I have a few notes down here. Let's see if I covered all this. In 1930 my parents became German citizens. They took out German citizenship. So they were naturalized German citizens. And then I already said the three names of three sons. Season tickets to the philharmonic orchestra. Hitler came in in 1933. And after that things became more and



more uncomfortable and ugly and threatening.

And what was Berlin like at this time? You mentioned the Tiergarten.

Berlin-- well, the neighborhood we lived in was very nice. It was a middle class neighborhood with a tall building. We were-- one of the main drags in Berlin is called the K-damm, the Kurfurstendamm, which was just two blocks away from us.

Oh, wow.

It was a very commercial avenue full of cafes and fancy shops and department stores. It was quite developed. And I was quite happy there.

And--

Until Hitler showed his presence.

Yes. And at this time you said you did not live in a Jewish neighborhood?

I'm sorry?

You said that you did not live in a Jewish neighborhood?

No, it was not a Jewish neighborhood. I don't know if there was-- I don't know if there was any such a thing. There may have been a particular street, maybe, where mostly Jews lived and the stores were mostly Jews-- the kosher store. We did not have a kosher house, for example.

So Berlin was--

Although I don't think they ate pork if they had a choice.

So you remember Berlin being very integrated. There weren't really differences--

Yes.

--the way you saw it.

I had some-- I had friends. I don't know if they were all Jewish. You don't ask what's your religion to friends. And, as a matter of fact, if and when we get to talk about Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glasses-- do you know why they call it the-- you know why they call it Kristallnacht? That would be around November, 1938.

The reason is that German hoods-- Nazis mixed the SSR, the Brownshirts mixed with unemployed bums and no-good people who really disliked Jews-- they went around and burned and broke into a lot of Jewish property and burned a lot of synagogues, broke a lot of stores, stole a lot of merchandise. And we were hit, too. I don't know if you want to hear about it.

Yes, absolutely. But before we get there-- going through my list of questions here.

Before you-- we get there, what?

Oh, I'm just going through my list of questions.

OK.

So what--

What is the question?

So how-- I guess we could talk about, how did you receive news? Did--

How did I what?

Receive news? Did you have a radio?

I think we did have a radio. But at my age I don't remember listening to it. I don't know about my parents. They would-- their social activities would consist of, as I said, go to the symphony orchestra performances and have social events in the house and play cards with their friends.

And I know you mentioned you liked going to the park. What--

Yes, I liked it when Marie would take me to the park every day-- not every day, but maybe two or three times a week. And it was about a-- oh, I don't know, maybe about a 10-block walk to the park and 10 blocks to come back. And so we got plenty of exercise that way-- until we had to sit on yellow benches. I hate the color yellow to this day.

What else do you remember about the Tiergarten or anything else you use--

About?

What else do you remember about the park or what else you did for fun?

Hold on. I'm going to change ears again. OK. Let's try it again. What else?

Do you remember about the park or other things you did for fun?

Well, the-- what else? The animal-- the zoo in the park was always of great interest to me. And we would not go to the zoo all the time, but I liked doing that. And what else? Let's see.

That's the only thing that stands out in my-- I had a very sophisticated scooter which was a-- you stood on it. And you stood on a pedal and you pumped the pedal, and it pushed you. And you pushed you ahead on the scooter. So that was a-- and I have a photograph of that. And it's very-- that was the best activity I had.

And what else? Oh, and I was very happy about Berlin until, one, the yellow benches, and two, in 1934, I don't know. Let's see. I must have been-- it must have been '37 or '38 that they threw me out of public school because they wanted Jewish children to go to their own school, not to be mixed with Aryans.

And so were you in elementary school, then?

Elementary, early elementary school. And I liked my public school and the friends I had there. And I did not like the Jewish school. That was one price I had to pay.

Yeah, so this was the Grundschule?

Hm?

This was the Grundschule?

This is the what?

The elementary school in Germany, is it called Grundschule?

I don't remember the official name of it. If I ever knew it, I don't remember it. My early development was also interesting, I think, from another point of view, which is that my personality development was a constant competition between Hitler and the picture he painted of Jewish people and what my mother told me.

My mother thought I was the cat's meow. She thought I was great, not intellectual like Max you understand. But with my hands, I was great. And I was a great child. And when I didn't get her into trouble with my loose teeth to my father, she thought I was the greatest child in the world.

And Hitler, of course, in the cartoons and the propaganda he was putting out in the newspapers you saw and the posters you saw was that Jewish people were on one level with the sewer rats. They were under people. They were not normal persons.

So you grew up with these--

I grew up with this dichotomy, this--

These two conflicting--

--conflicting picture of myself and my personality. Maybe I'm a-- well, I'm a Gemini anyway, so I have these two aspects.

And one day we had a German military parade, a local parade coming through the neighborhood. And it was soldiers marching and then a whole bunch, maybe 100 or more, soldiers on motorcycles, but motorcycles with sidecars. And they-- to me, that was the greatest form of transportation I had ever seen. And there would be soldiers with guns.

And it had the appeal to me that it has for most young boys. I wanted to see the parade. But a little kid dressed in a Hitler-Jugend, Hitler youth outfit, came up to me. And he said, [SPEAKING GERMAN] Jews are not allowed here. So he chased me away, essentially.

And this was another--

Well, you learn to retreat into yourself. And that has an effect on personality development, as well.

So at that--

But the big event was the thing that happened in November, '38, the Kristallnacht, when they came in and broke into our apartment.

And so if this-- if Kristallnacht was in '38, you were seven years old?

Correct. And I remember we were sitting and eating, having supper in the kitchen. And I was eating tomato soup when we hear the kitchen windows breaking. And flying pieces of glass come into my soup.

And I knew this was not normal. And so I ran away from the kitchen. And I went to hide under my parents' bed. Oh, I had a friend with me. And we both ran away to my-- and went to hide underneath the bed. And these hoodlums came into our apartment.

And the reason the thing was called Kristallnacht is that a lot of Jewish people had crystal chandeliers in their living rooms. We did not. But a lot of Jewish people did. And one of their favorite targets, the hoodlums, was to break those crystal chandeliers. That's why it's called Kristallnacht, night or the broken crystals.

Anyway, I heard them coming into the bedroom. We didn't move or say anything under the bed, but obviously it was the

first place they looked. And I learned later they were looking for my father. But they pulled me out. And they realized I was just a child. So at that time they were not interested in children.

And this--

My father had been warned that there would be this raid, this attack from the hoodlums this night. He was warned by some non-Jewish friends not to be at home that night. And he wasn't. He had gone to hide with some non-Jewish, nominally Christian people.

At one of their homes?

Yes. And he stayed with them for about four or five days.

How long were the men in your home?

I don't know. My memory, of course, is very partial and very rusty. But my impression is that it wasn't more than an hour. Probably something between half an hour and an hour.

And how did they act towards your mother and you once they--

Well, she took advantage of-- the Germans are supposed to be very gallant and very courteous to women. And she threw that in their face. Also, the policy is that they were only arresting Jewish men on that date. They did not go after the women and children until a later date.

And was Max home?

No. You see, when I was thrown out of public school he was thrown out of public university.

So in--

And we were able to organize visas for Max to go study in the US because my father had a cousin living in Brooklyn who offered to take him in while he was going to study. And Max was lucky enough to get that student visa from the American Embassy. And so he had left-- I don't know when he left-- around '37, '38.

And so he was able to get a visa.

Sorry?

Max was able to get a visa. But the rest of the family was not?

That's correct.

That's correct, because the rest of the family applied for visas in 1938. And I don't know if you are aware that at that time, the visa program was on a quota basis. The quotas were based on what percentage of the US population comes from the country that you were born in.

And the Polish quota-- although I was born in Germany, we were under the Polish quota because of my parents. And the Polish quota was very small and very over-subscribed, because most of the Jews were from Poland. Plus, there were some German Jews, also, who had it much easier. But the visas, as you will learn from my later tale, we did not get the visa until 1943, five years later.

Five years.

And in those five years a lot of applicants were gassed and burned in the concentration camps. We were very lucky

getting out when we could.

Yes, sir. And so after Kristallnacht, your dad returned home after four or five days?

I don't remember him returning home. But something else happened in-- well, I'm jumping around in that period. Remember, I told you that in 1930 they became German citizens?

Yes, sir.

In 1934, the German citizenship was revoked, nullified. You are no longer German citizens because you are unworthy.

So after they finally get the citizen--

So after '34 it was quite evident-- well, now it's quite evident, in retrospect. It wasn't evident at the time. But in 1934 they lost their citizenship. And in 1938, at about the same time as the Kristallnacht-- since they didn't find him at home, you see, to arrest him and send him to Poland or whatever or some camp, the police president sent him a letter, my father, saying that you have-- I don't know-- a number of weeks to get out of German territory.

And this was from the head of police?

Yeah.

And if you don't comply, you will be ejected forcefully. But you see there's several problems in the soup. One is that if you don't have citizenship in a country that means you can't get a passport. And if you can't get a passport it's impossible to get a visa anywhere, because there's no place to enter the visa. So this was all part of the soup, the anti-Semitic soup that Hitler cooked up.

And so in 1938, I think-- I believe right after escaping from home-- oh, they also appointed an administrator, an Aryan administrator, the Nazis did, who were essentially controlling all of our goods and property. And anything that got left behind he would inherit, so to speak, as our inheritor. But to make a long story short-- well, no, I don't know the long story is the truth. I only know the short story, which is that he escaped to France, my father did. I don't know how.

He escaped to France. And then in Paris-- he had a brother in Paris, my father did, who also had a fur store in Paris. And he went to stay with them. And he wrote a letter to Max, who was in the US, describing his experience in Kristallnacht. It's a 23-page letter handwritten in German, the original of which is now with the Holocaust Museum in Berlin.

Telling him about what happened?

About what happened to him in Kristallnacht, yes. But anyway, the-- I'm looking here. In 1939-- so my father was-- the letter was written in about January of '39, to Max. And we had to get out of Germany, as well, because in the letter which ejected, which warned him to get out of Germany-- [COUGH] Excuse me. It said, "including your wife and son."

So it named all of you.

Sorry?

The letter named all of you, that you all had to get out.

Right. Right. Right. Right. And, let's see, so happily-- the other problem with getting out of Germany was that no country was accepting Jewish refugees, because every country had their own social problems, and they did not-- they were not looking to accept a whole bunch of refugees who would bring their own-- their additional social problems.

So let's see. Where am I here? So then my-- I guess my father, through his brother, had a contact with the French government, because at that time, perhaps luckily, the prime minister of France was the first Jewish prime minister in

French history. His name was Leon Blum, B-L-U-M. And through contacts with Leon Blum, the story goes, they were able to organize visas for us to go-- to my mother and me to come to France.

And so early in 1939 we received a postcard from the French consulate, my mother and I did-- my mother did, from the French consulate in Berlin asking us to appear at their office on such and such a date for the purpose of receiving a visa. And that postcard probably saved our lives.

And so both you and your mother had to go to this office.

Right.

And did they interview you, or they--

I don't know if I went. I don't remember going.

I see.

So maybe my mother went by herself. I don't know. Or if I went with her, I don't remember it. But anyway, we were-- you may or may not know that the European war started on 1 September, 1939, when Hitler attacked Poland. And so we left, oh, in one of the train service after-- see when Hitler attacked Poland, Poland called on a treaty that Poland had with England and with France which said that England and France would come to the aid of Poland if Poland is attacked. And that's what happened. And that was the start of World War II in Europe. In US, of course, it didn't happen until 7 January, 1941.

So you were still in Germany when the war started.

We were still in Germany, but we had-- they gave us visas on an official-looking piece of paper, since we didn't have passports to put the visa in. They stamped the visa in their-- on their own official-looking piece of paper.

And so when--

Sorry?

When did you leave Berlin?

Well, I think it was June or July, as I remember it, of 1939-- just in time before September.

And what--

Because I mean, obviously, even if you'd have stayed there would be no train service between Berlin and Paris once the war had started between the countries.

And you were about eight at this time?

In '39 I was eight, correct.

And how much of this did you understand--

[LAUGHTER]

--having to leave home and all of this?

Well, there's still a lot of it I don't understand.

Yes, sir.

How much of it? Very little. All I know is that Hitler didn't like Jews, and apparently I was one of the group he didn't like.

[LAUGHTER]

Because I was thrown out of school. And I was kicked away from parades and made to sit on ugly yellow benches. But, as a senior citizen who has survived all this crap, one has a balanced view of everything.

So we were what would-- well, no, we're not finished yet. But we were not there for the worst part of the Holocaust, because I would not be talking to you if I had been. We looked up the records. In Jerusalem there is a big museum for the Holocaust. And all the victims are entered into a big, big register.

And we found a lot of the names of-- see, the Germans were very meticulous keeping track of all the names of everyone they murdered. And apparently they never expected that they would be prosecuted on murder charges. But anyway, we found a lot of the names of my mother's family on that list.

So we are on '39, and we're leaving Berlin, heading to Paris to join my father. And wherever we were we had to check with the American embassy to see what had happened. How far along are we on the waiting list? Shall I go on?

Yes. But what was that train ride like, from Berlin to Paris?

The train ride? Well, it was-- I liked trains. I still like trains. I like European trains more than American trains, but--

Was it very crowded?

No. They had the train organized. Everybody has a seat number. So there's no problems about-- they don't sell more tickets than the space, or didn't, in my experience. But no, it was not yet-- I don't remember seeing any people in the train in the same situation we were. They may have been.

But anyway, I remember we went first to Belgium. The capital of Belgium is Brussels. And we had a friend, or my parents had a friend in Brussels who said he would meet the train in Brussels. And he was organizing a big national holiday for us. And we arrived in Brussels, and sure enough, there was a national holiday going on, not knowing that on this date was a national holiday of Belgium. And I was impressed, as a kid, by the sense of humor that our friend had.

And I don't-- did much of this make sense to me? Well, I understood the basic concept of survival. That was clear-- and that people would do almost anything to survive. But we were not in the concentration camps yet. And so we were not as bad off as some people would be later on.

So in '39 then, we got to Paris and discovered that we would still have a long wait for the visas to US. So then the problem became-- oh, then what happened was that in 1940 the Germans occupied about half of France. And there was an occupied part of France and then there was a frontier running from the northwest of France to the southeast of France. I don't know. How did that work?

Anyway, there was the two sections of France. And the Germans occupied the section we were in. And the other section had a government made up of pro-German French political leaders, Petain. But that frontier between occupied and unoccupied France would also play an important part in our troubles pretty soon thereafter.

And in Paris did--

In what?

In Paris, did you stay with your uncle?

Yes, as I remember it. Yes. In Paris-- oh, OK. In Paris-- that's true. In Paris I met my father's brother who had the fur store. And then I also met my mother's sister, her only sister I believe, who had three children-- one of who was about my age.

So we didn't stay in Paris very long. We-- on the advice of I don't know whom we were advised to go to a small town by the name of Niort, N-I-O-R-T, which is in the southwest of France, near the city of Bordeaux. And so that's the city we went to live in. And we rented a small apartment. And I have been back to visit.

And what were your parents doing at this time? Were they trying to find a way to leave France?

Well, they were checking with the embassy to see what had happened with their visas. And then they were arranging for-- at some point-- and as a kid, I don't know what point it was. At some point they developed a plan B, which was just as well they had a plan B.

Plan A was to go to--

Sorry?

Plan A was to go to the US?

Right.

And so what was the backup plan?

Well, let me say a word about plan A first.

Yes, sir.

Max-- by this time Pearl Harbor had happened and the US had joined the war.

So this is early 1942?

Well, hm. I'd say, I suppose so, yes. I'm not sure. I'm not very precise on my dates because my memory is fuzzy anyway.

That's OK.

Max, who had this visa-- this student visa, decided that in order to help us get the US visa more rapidly he had his own plan. His plan was, he would join-- he would volunteer for the US Army. And he would write a letter to President Roosevelt explaining the sacrifice he was doing for his new country. And could the president do anything to get us visas more quickly?

[LAUGHTER]

Really?

That's what he did. And we will never know if it did any good or not. But in 1941-- This was '41. And in '41 there was no sign of visas yet-- American visas. And so my parents had to come up with plan B. Plan B was to find another place that maybe would accept us that would be a safer place to wait for the American visas. And they found such a place in Cuba. But I don't know if you want me to start on that.

Well, would-- does this seem like a good stopping--



Sorry? Can you speak louder and slow?

Yes, sir. Do you think this is a good place to stop part 1?

Yeah. Yes, I think so.

OK. Is there anything that you wanted to add at this point? Or should we end part 1?

No. At this point, no. But the next time we talk I may have an addition to make--

Yes, sir. Absolutely.

--if possible.

Well, Dr. Fiks, I want to thank you again for taking the time to talk with me today. And this concludes part 1 of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Dr. Alfred Fiks on August 18, 2016.