

This is Part Two of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Dr. Alfred I Fiks taking place on September 29, 2016. We left off Part One with you describing your travels from Berlin to Brussels, and then to Paris, where you met up with your father, and where your parents continued their efforts to get visas out of Europe. But before we go on, I think you had wanted to make a summary statement about Part One.

Hello. OK. Thinking about my early childhood in Berlin, I was thinking of some way to summarize it adequately and accurately. And I would like to say the following. I consider that my early childhood in Berlin was very pleasant, and I was a happy little kid until the evil of Hitler and Hitlerism came out.

So that-- I was happy until I get thrown out of public schools. I was happy until I got chased away from a military parade that went through the neighborhood by the Hitler-Jugend. And I was happy until Kristallnacht when glass splinters flew into my soup, and I was pulled out forcefully from under my bed hiding from hooligans who were coming around to break up our property.

And I was happy until my father had to go into hiding and become a fugitive. So that's-- I would say that that summarizes it for me.

Is there anything else you would like to add about Part One before we pick up in Paris?

Well, to set a larger frame, perhaps, for the whole-- for the whole interview is to say that our-- we claim to have survived the light part of the Holocaust, because of the 10 year period of anxiety, tension, and having to escape from place to place in order to survive. And I would say that the 10 year period started in '33 with the arrival of Hitler, and ended in '43 with our arrival in New York City.

But at the moment on the details, I think we are-- we had left Berlin, my mother and I, just before the war started in Europe, and we were now in Paris. Shall I go on?

Yes, sir, please.

OK. Well, we arrived in Paris, and in a sense, it was a family reunion because my mother had a sister living in Paris, and my father had a brother living in Paris. So in a sense, it was family reunion. But it was also a period of very, very high tension and anxiety, because it was around summer or fall of 1939. And the European war started on the 1st of September, 1939.

So the French were expecting an attack from the Germans any moment. And in the-- in all their foresight, they were predicting that there would be an attack using gas. And so the problem was to protect the citizens against gas attacks, as had been the case in World War One, which had ended some time ago.

But the problem was that there were many refugees in Paris. We were not the only ones. There were refugees from many countries, not all Jewish-- some Jewish, some not. There were many refugees in Paris.

And the government was about to issue gas masks to protect the civilians, only there was one little problem that, although a large percentage of the population of Paris were refugees, there were only enough gas masks to hand out to French citizens. And so the advice that they gave by radio to refugees who wouldn't qualify for the gas masks, it sounds kind of funny now and we can laugh about it. But then, it wasn't so funny.

They said the best-- the best substitute you can-- if you don't have a gas mask and there is an attack, the best thing you can do is to find a used diaper, a baby's used diaper, and breathe through the urine smell of the baby.

Really? That was the advice?

That was the advice given us by the government to people without gas masks. Anyway, it seems like a long time ago and a different period of history. It was. But we-- it was decided that we and my aunt and her-- two of her children, we

would leave Paris to go live in-- to live in the countryside where things were quieter and there wasn't so much tension and anxiety.

And we decided to-- not we, I mean, I was a little kid, and I'm speaking now as an adult so a lot of years have filled in between. But the adults decided that we would go to a city called Niort, N-I-O-R-T. And the reason being that somebody in the family, I believe, knew a man who worked in the local municipal government of this little town. It was a little town of about maybe 50,000 inhabitants, something like that.

And that he would-- he might be able to give us some protection in case the Germans came and occupied.

And where is Niort?

Niort is in the Department of Deux-SÃ©vres, which is near Poitiers and Bordeaux, Southwest of France.

Oh, I see.

N-I-O-R-T.

Yes, sir.

OK. Well, anyway, so that's where we went. And the first place we lived in was a place out of a dream. Everyone called it the Chateau, meaning the castle. Because it was a large house, and it was on the edge of a-- there was a river running through the property, and there were large gardens.

It was idyllic. It was something out of a dream. So everybody called it the Chateau. And I can-- we were there-- I don't know how long we were there.

There was a group of us, not only our own immediate family, but other refugees were there, too. And it was a large house with many rooms. It seemed like it, anyway. I'm remembering as best I can.

And it was a dream, not only in its location because of the river the children had-- could play all day long in that area. There was even a rowboat down at the-- down at the bottom of the walkway to the river. So it was a dream come true.

I had food. I never had before in Berlin, including artichokes, which seems like something very luxurious. And I was enchanted with the place. And I believe my parents were, as well, though I am talking from supposition.

So we were there for, I don't know whether it was a few-- it was at least a few weeks. And it might have been longer. But then for what-- for reasons unknown to me as a child, I was eight at the time. I didn't know why, but we moved downtown in Niort. We stayed in Niort, but moved downtown to a street called Melaise, M-E-L-A-I-S-E, to Number 28, Melaise. And that was a memorable place for me.

We had a-- we rented a single-- a one-- we rented a single second story room for my parents and myself. But the room had no bathrooms. So I remember very, very well the pail-- the bathroom pail that everybody used at night, for example. So that-- which had to be carried down in the morning and emptied out. And that was not a-- it was not painful, but it was memorable.

Did your aunt and cousins stay at the Chateau?

No, they did not, no. They also moved to different little places in town. So my aunt lived about a block away. My aunt and my cousin lived about a block away.

And so-- and our address, I think the-- I don't know exactly-- the Germans arrived sometimes in 1940. They occupied half of France, and including the-- including Niort. And across from our second floor room was no bathroom.

We noticed that there was a place that at night played a lot of music, fairly medium loud, and had a lot of pretty women in it. So it was obvious that this-- later on, I found out that it was a German soldiers' bordello, or prostitution house. But you see, the Germans are very, very orderly, even when they're carrying out evil missions.

The military police would come around every night very, very late, I am told-- I was told, and make sure that everybody-- all the soldiers were out of Niort. The soldiers could not spend the night there. And this music had to stop at a certain hour so people could sleep.

So that's why 28 women there was very memorable to me. And when I returned to France after the war, it was one address I visited with a great curiosity. OK. But then life went on.

Being in the center of town didn't-- it meant you had to play in the street, and the street was with cobblestones. So that was interesting, but slippery. They were slippery when-- especially after the rain, cobblestones were.

One memory is one evening, my mother and I were visiting-- I don't know whether it was my aunt-- no, it couldn't have been my aunt. We were visiting some friends who lived on the other side of town. And we were on our way home-- now, I should preface this by saying that my mother was a fairly attractive woman.

And so-- that was obvious. So when my mother and I were on the way home, we suddenly heard that someone was walking behind us. And it turned out to be two German soldiers.

And we got scared and began to walk a little bit faster. And then they walked faster. And it seemed like they were beginning to talk to my mother, and it seemed like they had had a few drinks under their belt.

So we began walking really fast hand in hand, walking in the direction of our apartment, our room, as fast as we could, and feeling a little bit of-- a little bit of anxiety. Of course, they didn't know that we understood German. When they said-- one said to the other one-- no, he didn't say it to the other one. He said it to us without knowing that we understood German.

He said, [GERMAN], which means, don't be afraid, we're just Austrians, not Germans, you see. But of course, they were in the German army. And my mother and I looked at each other and smiled, but walked as fast as we could anyway.

And that was-- that experience-- that instance got recorded in my memory. Another instance that I remember was, once-- about once a month, I believe, each Jewish family had to report to the German command office, or the Kommandantur, with a K, K-O-M-M-A-N-D-A-T-U-R. [INAUDIBLE]. Somebody from the family had to come with documents to have them stamped once a month, because they were tracking their prey quite assiduously.

Now what-- while my mother and I were standing in line, a German officer who was kind of in the-- walking around the office to make sure that everyone was behaving, he came over and he picked me up in his arms. And this really-- well, he-- I don't know if he was-- I say German, obviously. He was an officer in the German army with German uniform. He might have been Austrian. I don't know.

But this officer picked me up in his arms, and I thought he was about to eat me alive, which is funny now. But at that time, it wasn't so incredulous. And now, he-- what he did then was to take out his wallet from his pocket, and take out a photograph to show my mother his child, to show her a photo of his child.

And this showed an amount of humanity that one was not used to witnessing from German soldiers. So perhaps, he indeed was Austrian, possibly. And what was-- what was my-- what was his motive in doing that? I don't know.

As I say, my mother was an attractive woman, so he might have been-- he might have wanted to start a conversation with her. But-- or-- I don't know. Maybe he was just being a human being. And I remember that as an unlikely event during the war.

In the following year in 1940, I had an interesting experience in that my parents, my father and mother for reasons unknown to me, were arrested by the French police and placed into the local jail.

In Niort.

In Niort. This was all in Niort. And I had the memorable experience then of carrying a meal of-- of carrying a good meal to jail for them every once a day that my aunt would cook, and I would carry the food to the jail. And then after about two or three weeks, they were released. I don't know why they were arrested, and I don't know why they were released.

And somehow after we got to the US, very, very seldom that anyone ever speak of the period since 1933. The period was so traumatic that one did not want to recall anything. And I being a little kid in the new country, I was more interested in learning about the new country than in learning ancient history.

During the time that they were in jail--

Sorry?

During the time that they were in jail, were you by yourself in the apartment?

I don't remember. I don't know if I moved in with my aunt, or if I stayed. It's unlikely that I would have stayed alone. I probably moved in with my aunt, but I don't know.

I see.

All right. Now, as I say, in 1940, French was half occupied and half free. The word free in quotation marks, because the Germans put in a French-- a government of French leaders, but friendly to Germany. So that was the free part.

I think it was a fig leaf to-- not to take-- see, because France had declared Paris an open city, which means they were not going to fight the Germans to take it, because they did not want to see Paris get destroyed. And so Paris was declared an open city. The Germans moved in almost casually, and not being noticed.

And they set up this half-- this government and half France, the southern half, with Nazi leaning Frenchmen in the command. Also at this time, '40, '41, my parents-- and especially, I guess, after the jailing, my parents decided that they needed a Plan B, because we might never get the US visa as we might be dead before we got the US visas. And so Plan B was put into effect.

What did it consist of? Well, first of all, the key to it was that Max, my brother in New York, was going to try to arrange visas to Cuba. Cuba, at that time, was one of-- one or two countries that was accepting Jewish refugees. No other country was accepting Jewish refugees, as the incident with the ship called the St. Louis in 1939 proved that the US certainly wasn't going to accept Jewish refugees.

And nobody among the refugees ever thought about entering illegally. They wouldn't know how, anyway. Anyway, the first part of the plan was-- not the first, but the principle part of the plan was for Max to arrange visas to Cuba as a place to wait, a safe haven-- a safe place to wait-- to await the US visas, if it took another three years or five years or 10 years.

So he had-- so he was working on that. Meanwhile, we had to make our-- we had to put in to-- get to a place where we could get transportation to Cuba. From where we were in Niort, the closest place would be either Portugal or North Africa. So we had to sneak illegally across the border-- quote, end quote-- between-- we were in the occupied part in Niort, you see.

And we had to walk across the frontier to so-called free France, or Vichy France, because the seat of the government was in a town called Vichy, V-E-I-C-H-Y, I believe.

Yes, sir.

Same place where they make a lot of bottled water. You may have heard of Vichy water. We had-- we worked-- they would look-- they were local farmers who were leading groups. I don't know how often. I don't know if every night, or just once a week, or once in a month.

But in order to make extra money, they would lead groups. I don't know. A lady in our group was between five or 10 people in it. And they led the group-- at first, they took the group from places like Niort to a central meeting place closer to the border, and then in trucks.

And then getting off the truck, one would have to walk across the border. And then on the other side, they would have arranged another truck to take us to Limoges, L-I-M-O-G-E-S, which is a city in the so-called free part. Anyway-- but Limoges was the first step in the free part.

So we walked across the border one night, but-- and we-- my mother begged my-- her sister, my aunt, to come with us, and she wouldn't, because she thought she was protected by the fact of being a French citizen, and the fact of having two out of three children born in France. So she thought she was safe. But she wound up in Auschwitz several years later.

And my mother, of course, and the rest of us, we feel bad about that she didn't pay attention to us in '41. Walking across that border was interesting, because it was not-- it was hilly, it was a hilly walk-- not mountainous, but small hills. And my mother, unfortunately, on the trip, panicked.

And the reason she panicked was because we were at the top of a hill, and we were heading downward. And in the valley below, she saw what she believed was a lake of water. And she panicked. And she said she is not going to go into any water.

And it was dangerous because there were German patrols with dogs that would control that border periodically. We could hear the dogs in the distance barking. But it was explained to her-- to my mother, eventually, that it was not water at the bottom of the hill in the valley, it was fog.

So first, she didn't believe that. But she came around to believing it and calmed her down a little bit. And we made it through safely, and we got to the truck on the other side, and got as far as Limoges. In Limoges, we had the address of a safe house that would put us up for the night.

So we went looking for that safe house to rest our weary heads. But we found out it was full-- it was full up and there was no room-- no room at the inn. And-- well, I don't know. As a little kid, I didn't-- I missed a lot of information, obviously.

But luckily, we found-- we made contact with a lady, a local lady, who rented us a one bed in-- one bed for three people-- for the three of us in her attic, no blankets, and we had to use a mattress to cover ourselves with. And of course, you understand that since we were illegal now in the free French zone, we had no papers. If she had called the police on us, we would have been finished. But I remember that night in that it was one of the experiences that will stay with me for the rest of my days.

Another one is we were heading-- our objective was to head to Marseilles, the big port in the South of France, where we would catch a ship to take us from Marseilles to Casablanca in Morocco, which is in North Africa. Where in theory, we would catch another ship which would take us to Cuba. I didn't know this-- all of this ahead of time, but I know it now.

Yes, sir.

But back in 1941, you see, food was rationed-- food was rationed. And maybe for any readers or listeners to this treatise, we should mention that it was before computers, and it was before cell phones, so that communication and information flow were still a little bit-- well, how shall I say it-- checkered, like Swiss cheese. And we-- happily, we were able to find the holes through the Swiss cheese, because the people-- the German-- neither the French nor the German authorities on the free side knew that we had left our abode in Niort without official permission. Because when you're

going to sneak across the border, it's best not to alert your hunters.

Yes, sir.

So being in Limoges without papers, we didn't have food-- and food was rationed-- food was rationed. You couldn't do-- even if you had the money, you couldn't buy the food unless you had coupons for whatever you wanted to buy. And we were hungry.

And so we-- I helped my mother make half a bread heist, I think of it. It wasn't really a heist because we paid for two-- we bought-- we had a coupon for one loaf, but we needed two in order to last us the day, the three of us. And so thanks to our own abilities, and local confusion, and maybe the bread lady's connivance, or liberalism, or humanity, we were-- we carried out two loaves of bread.

We were only allowed-- officially, we were only allowed one. Although, we paid for two loaves, we only had coupons for one. So that was that that was..., that put the dot on the Limoges I.

OK. Though, now we were on route, we made our way to Marseilles--

And can-- I'm sorry, Dr. Fiks, can I ask you a question?

Sure.

So back when you said that it was the local farmers that were helping people get across the border--

Yes.

--do you know how your parents came into contact with them, or how they found out that these farmers were doing this?

I had no idea how they came into contact. Everybody-- my aunt, for example, in Niort, once a month, she would do a-- everybody would-- people-- in war time, people have to-- often have to do things that are illegal according to the authorities to survive. My aunt, for example, she was earning her livelihood by once a month taking a trip to Paris by train.

And in Niort, chickens were plentiful, because there were local farms around. So she bought, I don't know how many, maybe 10 chickens, and she put them in a big sack, like a flower sack. And she traveled on the train with this.

And in Paris, she would sell those chickens. I don't know if she sold them all at once, or one at a time. And then-- then in Niort, the thing that was scarce was coal.

And so in Paris, you would buy coal, which was available in Paris, and fill that same-- I don't know if it was the same sack. I hope it was a different sack. And fill another sack with the coal to take back to Niort to sell it in Niort. That's how she made her living.

I tell you, I bring up the story to indicate that in order to survive, many people who do not have independent money-- sources of money have to do things that are not officially blessed or authorized. So these farmers, they are hurting for money, too. And I don't know how the contact was made-- how my parents made the contact, but just talking to people and asking for what kind of services you were looking for, somebody would know about someone who did that. Should I go on?

Yes, sir, please.

OK. So we made-- we made our way to Marseilles and we boarded the ship without any problem. Now, here what's important-- here what's interesting is that if it were-- if it were today, we wouldn't be able to do that because they would pick us out easily from a computer list. But there were no computer lists in those days.

And I think through the lack of computer lists, we were able to get away from Marseilles.

So you were able to--

But I noticed that-- we notice and my parents talked about it afterwards, that although this was free France, the last man down the gangplank from the ship was a German officer to give the permission to leave. So if he had known that there was any illegals on board, he could have said, no, the ship won't leave unless-- until we get this person off.

But you were able to successfully sneak on.

Huh? Say again, please.

But you and your family were able to successfully sneak on. You were able to get on the ship.

We were able to get out of France, right.

OK.

And now, that ship, to get from Marseilles, we sailed through the Mediterranean westward. And then we had to sail around the corner of Africa there. But there is a straight, it is a very narrow border between Africa and Spain.

They come together very-- in Gibraltar. The Rock of Gibraltar is right there. And that's-- the waterway between Africa and Europe are called the Straits of Gibraltar.

At that time, Gibraltar was still an English possession. I believe now, they're more-- they're independent, or part of Spain. I don't know.

But in those days, we were buzzed-- in other words, we were inspected by an English airplane while we were going through the Straits of Gibraltar. They wanted to be sure that this wasn't a ship to-- friendly to the Germans, bringing supplies to the Germans. They didn't know whether the ship would turn right or left after crossing the Straits of Gibraltar.

But anyway, we were also lucky when we were buzzed by the English Royal Air Force with their round red, white, and blue emblem. And I was happy that they didn't shoot us, or sink us, or bomb us mistakenly. Anyway, we arrived in Casablanca, which is right around the corner from Gibraltar.

And I'm sorry, but before we talk about Casablanca, could you tell me a little bit about the ship and the trip from Marseilles? Was it--

It was-- well, we stopped at a few places on the way. One of them was called Oran, O-R-A-N. I think that's Algeria. So I can't really say very much, because I have no memory of anything memorable that happened to me on the way.

All we notice is dark people on the shore, dark colored people. And that was proper, because we were looking at Africa. But there was none-- I can't think of any memories in the few days that it took us to go to Casablanca.

Do you remember if there were a lot of other people onboard, maybe other refugees or--

Oh, yes, there were a lot of other people onboard.

So it was a big ship.

It was a big ship, yes. Yeah, it wasn't a small launch. It was a big ship. It was a big ship, and we arrived in Casablanca.

Do you remember if-- were there other refugees like your family onboard?

Well, looking back as an adult, I would suspect there were, but I wasn't aware of it at the time.

And how did-- I guess your mother, you mentioned that she was afraid of water when you were crossing into free France. How was she-- how was she on the trip?

She didn't swim. But she didn't-- in a big ship, she didn't mind it.

So is-- like you said, kind of on an uneventful trip to Casablanca.

Yeah. Yes, I would say that, at least to my memory. I was 10 at the time. Shall I go on?

Yes, sir, please.

OK. We were-- I don't remember exactly how long-- I think we were in Casablanca about three or four weeks waiting for another ship that should take us to Cuba. The other-- the new-- the other ship we were waiting for was Portuguese, which was deliberate on someone's part, because Portugal was neutral in the Second World War. And so that increased our safety margin that nobody would torpedo the boat, or bomb the boat.

But Casablanca gave me some memorable experiences. The place where they put us was interesting. They took us-- and we-- it must have been more refugees onboard than just us. I believe there must have been a maybe 100 or 200.

The building was a large, large building, three or four floors tall, and it had an atrium in the center. And it had only one door, and no one was allowed out without permission. And in order to enforce that, I could see looking down into the atrium from a balcony that was all around the circle of the atrium, I could see a big Moroccan soldier, a big black skin soldier.

He was wearing a fez. I don't know, maybe it's something not everyone knows what a fez is. A fez is a red, round hat made out of felt with a tassel in the middle. And he was wearing a fez standing guard every hour-- every minute of every hour that I could see the front door.

And he had on his shoulder a rifle all day long. And the rifle had his bayonet attached to it. So that would call the attention of a young boy. And it did.

The menu-- the daily menu was interesting. We would get bread, hard boiled eggs, green olives, and water. That was it-- every day, once a day. I don't remember if it was brought once a day or twice a day.

So that was our existence in Casablanca. But we were very happy that we were not in worse conditions. After some weeks, our ship arrived. Everyone was taken to the port by bus.

The name of the ship was Serpa, S-E-R-P-A, Pinto, P-I-N-T-O, Serpa Pinto. And that gave us a very memorable-- gave me a very memorable experience, the boarding process for the Serpa Pinto. It seemed like the Serpa Pinto was entirely for the refugees. And I'll tell you why in a moment.

There were several buses heading down to the port. And when people got there, they lined up. The-- they would check people's passports and visas before being allowed on board. It was a long line, as I said, but our turn finally came, but there was a problem, a memorable problem.

The Cuban visas that we had had an expiration date on them, which was about two or three days before we would get there. So that the visas would be expired by the time we got there. The captain was so exacting that he wouldn't let us on the ship.

Now, we felt our-- we felt ourselves so close to success on Plan B, to have this happen was destroying to my parents.



Negotiations went on between the ship's captains and the refugee organization people, who luckily were there. My parents and I were back on the dock walking the length of it back and forth, back and forth.

All the people who had already boarded lined up at the railing to watch our drama below. My parents and I were very upset at this, and gradually felt more and more hopeless. I was afraid that my mother and father-- or father were thinking about jumping in the narrow stretch of water between dock and ship and drowning themselves in order to end their agony.

I kept walking between each of them in the edge of the dock trying to push them further and further away from the edge by convincing them that all would end up well here. I don't know if I convinced them, or myself, either. But after what seemed like an hour or two, the problem was indeed solved because they allowed us to board.

Even our spectators clapped and cheered. My parents and I were crying with joy, and relief, exhausted.

And you were 10 years old at this point?

At this time, I was about 10 and a half, something like that.

So at this point, even though you might not understand all of the details of what's going on, you-- while you're down there waiting, you understand the importance of getting on that ship.

I get the drift, yes.

Yeah. Yeah.

I got the drift. So now we were crossing the Atlantic. The Serpa Pinto was a cargo ship. It was not a passenger ship. The cargo was us. We refugees were the cargo.

So bunks were built in the cargo hold below the waterline, three bunks high, three beds high, no portholes, if you get my picture. When the sea was rough, some people would get seasick and vomit. The ventilation left a lot to be desired.

And so my favorite place was always up on deck, but my mother was not very keen on about that. Routine set in after about a week, and kids found other kids and started playing around until land, ho. Finally, after three weeks, we landed at a port.

But there was a surprise in the port we landed at, because it was not Havana Cuba. It was Jamaica. Nobody had told me that, but maybe they told my parents. I don't know.

Now, at that time, Jamaica was still a British colony. And so the reason for stopping in Jamaica was the following. The Brits wanted to check over the passengers cause-- presumably looking for Nazi spies who were sneaking in with the refugees, kind of like ISIS Jihadis sneaking in with the migrants from the near east.

But I was happy, because for a few days, we stopped in a bright and clean detention camp. We each got a clean towel and soap, which were luxuries then. The beds had blankets on them, which we didn't really need.

And after a few days, we went back to the Serpa Pinto. We were not-- I was not told if they found any German spies, of course. A few days later in 1942, we arrived in Cuba. Probably in January, '42 we arrived in Cuba, very excited. And lo and behold, the problem of the expired visas never came up.

Really?

Joy of joys.

Yes.

We were beginning to learn the refugee routine. First, you're taken to a detention camp. Then they sort you out. This camp was called-- in Cuba, this camp was called Tiscornia, T-I-S-C-O-R-N-I-A, on the outskirts of Havana.

We were there about two or three weeks before we were dropped in Havana proper to find lodging in the private economy, in private houses.

And what were-- what were those two to three weeks like in this camp?

Oh, it was a ball. I mean, for me, it was a ball because it was just dawn to dusk playing with other kids. We couldn't-- we couldn't go outside the gates of the camp, but nobody bothered us inside the camp.

So I was-- I don't know what the state of mind was of my parents, because I was a 10, 11-year-old kid. But we were happy to-- when we transferred from the camp to a private residence. We found an adequate room for the three of us to sleep in, with kitchen and bathroom privileges shared with the owner.

The owner was a very nice older widow living with her grown son in a row house in old town-- in Old Havana-- Havana Vieja. The address was Obrapia-- the name of the street was Obrapia, O-B-R-A-P-I-A, Number 506. We had an upstairs bedroom with a balcony on the street.

I liked Havana very much, except for large cockroaches sometimes in the house, and sometimes in the street, which I had never seen in Europe. I was-- it was a different world to me. I enjoyed it-- the climate, the people, the language, the food. I loved mangoes and fried plantain.

And of course, as soon as we got into town, my parents would contact the local US Embassy to let them know that we were still alive and still waiting.

Were your--

OK. We're getting pretty close to the climax here, because in 1943, the spring of '43, success arrived. Our US visas were finally granted five years after my father applied for them in Berlin.

Wow.

How many refugees, I asked myself afterwards, with less luck or less resources had died in the interim.

What was it--

But we-- huh?

What was it like when you found out that the US visas had come through?

Oh, it was unbelievable joy. It was unbelievable joy. And it was-- I would see my brother again, and I would be free again. And, well, I don't know any of that at the time, but I mean, looking back now. And it would be my first flight.

But taking Pan American Airways from Havana to Miami gave me a memorable experience, as well. Of course, everybody wanted to go to Miami, because that's where-- to the US because that's where the streets are paved in gold. That was a myth that refugees believed in.

It was my-- as I say, it was my first flight and-- but when we got on board the plane, I could hardly see outside to see what the airport looked like. All the windows had cardboard covers kind of jammed into them.

Really?

So to keep people from looking out, I suppose. But as you know, little boys are curious animals. So I bent the cover of my window cover-- I bent the cover of the cardboard on my window, just one corner of it, to see a bit of the airport that we were sitting in. And that apparently set off an alarm because a stewardess came over. I got nervous, especially when she asked for my wristwatch.

Now, you'll never guess why she asked for my wristwatch. They had to examine it to make sure that it was not a camera, and that I was not a spy.

Really?

Even though 12 years old-- 11 years old.

Oh, wow.

It sounds funny in retrospect, but it wasn't funny at the time. In those days, the world was at war and values changed, and people's reactions changed from what they are in normal times. You want to ask me anything?

I guess, when she took your wristwatch, did she tell you why she was doing that, or was it just--

No, no, she didn't.

--give it to me?

I don't know if she did or she didn't. I really don't know.

And what did-- what did your parents think?

But if she didn't tell me, then I imagined it-- I imagined the reason. It's the only one I can see as an adult doing an analysis on cardboard covers or the windows on airplanes.

And were you sitting with your parents when this happened?

Yes. Yes.

And were they worried? But what did they think?

Well, I don't know. It was a relatively-- it was not a major thing. I think it just took a few minutes so that-- it passed over very quickly and I think I'm the only one who remembers it. I doubt that my parents would remember it.

And before we go on, I want to go back to the time that you're living in Havana. What-- besides working on the visas, what were your parents doing while you were living in the city? Were they working or--

Well, OK. That's an interesting question, because they-- on the refugee visas that we got would not have permitted my father to work. Because if my father worked, he would take a job away from a Cuban-- from a Cuban.

I see.

And the government wouldn't like that. So during the day, they wouldn't do very much of anything. They would read and write, you go for walks. My father would report down to the Cuban office-- the Cuban police office very frequently. I don't know why.

But we had a funny event happened there. My father being German in his behavior, and much of it-- and some of his behavior, he would not-- I mean, Cuban-- Cuba is a tropical island, as you know, with pretty fairly warm temperatures. But he would not leave the house without a jacket on.

So apparently, his visits to the police were not welcomed by the police. There was no point in him going down there. I don't know why he was going there.

But the funny part of it was that on one occasion, they grabbed him by the scruff of the jacket, and they pushed him out the door. They couldn't communicate, because of the languages. So they would put-- they pushed him out of the door, and he nearly fell on the road-- in the road, in the street.

But he-- then he understood that he shouldn't come down there. But that was funny. And we were living-- we were getting a small amount of money from the-- the Joint Distribution Committee was an organization devoted to helping Jewish refugees who were fleeing Nazism.

And so I believe my parents were getting a small monthly sum. I don't know how they were receiving it, but they were receiving it to keep them with some cash. Should I go on?

Well, I was going to-- I was going to ask, so while your parents are not working, I know there was the language barrier. But did you go to school at all, or did your parents maybe continue your lessons in some way?

I do not remember going to a school in Havana. Well, I remember going to some classes to begin learning English, but I don't remember going to school. It's interesting, I'd never thought about that before.

Good question. Yes, I-- that's interesting. I wonder why I didn't go to school. Maybe they didn't want refugee's kids in the school to take up room and teachers. I don't know. I don't know the explanation.

But you do remember going maybe not to a school, but somewhere to start learning English.

I do.

Did--

But that was maybe one or two hours a week.

Did your parents go to these classes, too?

No. They were-- I don't know. They should have, but they didn't. So--

And during this entire time, y'all are writing to Max so that he knows what's happening and he knows that y'all are coming to the US.

Yes, I assume so. Although, I did not write to him, but I assume my parents did. Max at this time was doing an interest-- no, no, not at this time. Well, yes, at this time.

At this time, Max was going to university in New York. That was his-- that was the purpose of his visa-- the visa he had gotten. And that's what he was there for.

But he decided to drop out of university and volunteer-- now, this was-- we're talking about-- well, OK. Now, the US went into the war on December 7, 1941, I believe--

Yes, sir.

--with Pearl Harbor. So it must have been after that, because he volunteered for the US Army because he was-- one, he was patriotic and he wanted to beat Hitler. And number two, he thought it might help his parents and brother get American visas faster.

So after he volunteered for the US Army, he wrote a letter to President Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to call his-- to call his action to the attention of his president to see what he could do for our visas. I doubt that President Roosevelt ever saw the letter, or that it helped at all with the visas. But it was a memorable event, memorable story to keep in mind.

Yes, sir.

OK. Then shall I go on?

Yes, please.

OK. So I got my watch-- I got my watch back on the Pan Am flight. And I just got-- just got scolded not to bend the cover back of the window. They didn't want people to take pictures of airports, you see, in wartime, because it might have some military significance if some other country wanted to bomb the airport, or something like that.

We landed in Miami. But-- so the irony of me-- of Pan Am thinking I might be a spy was one small point. But a larger irony appeared when we landed in Miami. Because when we were going through immigration, each one of us got a small identification paper slip.

It had on it our names. I don't remember if it had our photograph. I don't think so. Date of birth, et cetera, and then it has a stamped sign-- stamped information sign on it, which said, enemy alien.

Really.

My father and mother and me enemies? We had just come from Germany where we had been considered enemies. So now we come to our safe haven and they, too, consider us enemies.

The irony was great not at the moment, but a few years later when I looked at that slip of paper, it came through to me and hit me on the forehead.

So you finally got to--

It was-- it was not understandable till many years later, because our last nationality had been German. So that might be the reason they considered us enemy aliens.

So you finally get to where you want to go, and you're given an ID that says you're an enemy alien.

Right.

Yes.

But at least we did not get sent to another detention camp, which was a big accomplishment. And how marvelous a landed was where the door-- those streets were not paved in gold, but the doorknobs were round instead of European style. And the windows opened up and down instead of European in and out.

And everybody had a refrigerator. So I was in heaven. I hated drinking milk in Germany, because it was room temperature. And it usually had a skim on top of it. Whereas, in the US, I loved drinking milk because it was refrigerated.

And so how long did you stay in Miami?

How long-- not very long. Man, less than a week, I think. We took-- we would take-- we had arranged that we would be received by a cousin of my father who lived in Brooklyn, New York. So we were looking for trains to get to New York City.

And our plan was that on the way to New York City, we would stop en route in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Because Spartanburg was home to Camp Croft, C-R-O-F-T. Camp Croft, in those days, was a US Army Infantry School where Max was in training, or refresher training. I don't know.

So we stopped in and saw him. It was really something to meet my brother again after several years of separation and in US Army uniform. Yes. I would have loved to have been in the US Army to fight the Nazis. But my brother got to do it, even though I would have made a much better soldier than he.

Now, the train connections from Miami to Spartanburg, South Carolina, and then again from Spartanburg to New York City were very, very challenging in 1943, especially without knowing English. One funny incident that happened on the way, after we saw Max for a few days-- visited Spartanburg and Max a few days, we continued on north on the train. And we knew we had to go-- to get to New York, we knew we had to change trains in Washington, DC.

So we got on the-- Spartanburg was no problem because Max put us on the right train to get to Washington. In Washington, DC, we had to-- we had to get off and look for the train to New York. Here's where the incident occurred.

We were looking for somebody to ask, where's the train to New York in any several-- any of several other languages, not including English. So we were walking through-- in the train station, and we saw a young man with a sweater on. And on his sweater, he has a large-- the letter F, like in Frank. The letter F was-- a very large letter F was sewn on his sweater.

So my mother reasoned that that must indicate that he speaks francais, French. But unfortunately, that theory didn't work out very well. But we did finally find the train to New York, and we did finally make our way to Brooklyn, to the Brooklyn apartment of the cousin of my father who was going to put us up for a [CUT OFF] established in the new world. So that's the end of that second part of my life.