

This is part three of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum oral history interview with Dr. Alfred I. Fiks on November 3, 2016.

At the end of part two, we got cut off. The phone shut down. But we left off with your arrival in Brooklyn and staying with your father's cousin. So Dr. Fiks, could you please tell me a little bit more about Brooklyn? What was it like?

Well, OK. I was quite happy in Brooklyn trying to adapt to a new life, a new language, new foods, new customs. But even though I had taken some language lessons in Cuba, some English lessons in Cuba, I was having a rough time with the language. I'll give you one example. Now at this point, I am 12 years old. It's 1943.

So they sent me to the candy store. They give me a quarter and told me to go to the candy store to buy some candy. So I went. I did not understand the instructions, but I was going to repeat them monkey wise. But when I came back, everybody had a great time laughing at me because I brought back two candles.

Instead of the candy?

So I still had a lot of work to do with my language and my comprehension. But that came. I believe I went into sixth or seventh grade in school. I started that as soon as we got to Brooklyn. And that helped. And a lot of kids were friendly and helped me. Without knowing anything about baseball, I was told to-- when people asked me what kind of baseball fan I am, I was told to reply, Yankee. I had no idea what that meant, but that's what I replied.

So when you started school, you were learning English as you went along.

I'm sorry?

So when you started school, you were learning English just as you went along?

It was an English school. It was in Brooklyn public school. Yes. Yes. OK. The apartment where we were living with my father's cousin was very close to Ebbets Field, where at that time, the Brooklyn Dodgers were playing all the time. That was their home court. And so all the cheering and the yelling and the applause could be heard clearly from the apartment because it was only two blocks away, this stadium, Ebbets Field.

And I think it was a few years later, a few years after that, it was about '49 that the yelling even became louder because Jackie Robinson, who was the star player of the Brooklyn Dodgers and the first Black American to play in the big leagues, was playing. And it was part of the Brooklyn Dodgers. And so we were quite aware of what was going on in the baseball world.

Let's see. So how-- I'm sorry. Go ahead.

We didn't stay too long with the cousin. We soon took our own apartment because my father obtained employment, landed a job in Manhattan working in a fur factory. And so we had an income now, which we didn't have for a few years. And we got our own apartment, also in Brooklyn, maybe about a mile away from my cousin's house.

And then I went to a different public school. And that worked out OK. Public school, I don't have any particular memories about it. I guess you graduate from eighth grade, if I remember correctly and go to high school after that. And that's what I did. When I graduated public school, I went to Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn. And I felt quite grown up there because well, first of all, in June of '48, I wrote an essay describing our escape from Hitler. It was called We Sought Freedom. And lo and behold, I entered it in an essay competition, and behold, I won first place with my little essay.

Oh, wow.

And I still carry the prize around with me until this day because it was a very useful tool for a wordsmith. It was a

thesaurus, Roget's Thesaurus. And it's inscribed, First Place Winner Richard Young Essay Contest, Alfred Fiks, da da da da da, 1948. So it's one of my prized possessions, as you can imagine.

Yes, sir.

About this time, our family grew by one member. Not that my mother had a baby. But what happened was that when we were living in France, in Niort, and my mother's sister was living nearby, about a block away, she had living with her one boy and one girl. And the girl, of course, would be my cousin. And they would both be my cousins.

But we're now after the war, you see. And Faye, my mother pleaded with her sister to come with us when we left Niort to walk over the frontier and make our way to Marseilles to escape to North Africa and Cuba. But she thought she was safe. She was safe because she was a French citizen and she didn't believe that the Germans would touch French citizens.

About a year after we left, the Nazi doctrine of Jews had to wear a yellow star to identify themselves, that came into existence in France the year after we left. And soon after, one day short of walking on the street, and the police came and arrested her and put her on a truck, she and my cousin, my girl cousin.

And it seems that there were two kinds of French citizens. One would be citizenship through being born in France, and the other was citizenship that is granted to you because you stayed in the country a certain number of years and applied for citizenship. And she was the latter kind of citizen. She was not born in France. She was born in Poland.

And so they picked her up, and she ultimately-- well, I'm getting ahead of the story. And she had her daughter with her. And her daughter would be my age, so that would be about nine years old, around nine. And she told her daughter she was going to hand the daughter of to a stranger in the street to show that the daughter would not be arrested. And the guards did not insist on it because her daughter was actually born in France, so she was a native born citizen.

And it saved her life because her mother, my aunt, wound up in Auschwitz. And she was murdered in Auschwitz along with several other relatives. But the point is that after the war, she had two brothers, also my cousins. My cousin had two brothers. And so they were trying to organize their life again after the end of the war. And they decided that it would be best if their little sister went to live with her aunt, namely my mother, in Brooklyn. And that's what happened.

So my cousin Faye came to live with us, and I suddenly had a sister. So that was a memorable thing. And it always made us feel bad that they did not come with us when we left Niort. And instead, my aunt was killed.

So now, by the time that my cousin arrived, I was an established American, quote unquote. So I could take her under my wing and help her with her assimilation process.

So meanwhile, at this time, I was in high school, as I said. And after the essay experience, there was one other memorable event when I was in a group of high school students, and we were working on a project, which was the following. Modern day Israel was established, was voted on by the United Nations in 1947. And Israel was re-established in 1948.

And among the Jewish group, there was a lot of pro-Zionist feeling of helping this new Jewish state, which would be natural. And if Israel had existed in 1939, we would have had it much easier, and many, many people who are dead, who died, who were killed during the war would be alive because they would have had a place to run to.

Well, anyway, this student committee wrote the story of an American Jewish military officer by the name of David Marcus, rank of Colonel, US Army, trained in West Point, because he volunteered to help the Israelis organize their army, train them to get them in better shape to withstand the attack by their Arab neighbors when independence was declared.

And that's what happened. He was quite well-known there. And as a matter of fact, they made a movie out of it called Cast A Giant Shadow with Kirk Douglas. Probably before your time. But that was about the same person that we wrote

the children's book about with illustrations and all. And it got published by the Brandt-- I think it was the Brandt Publishing Company. So that was a high point of my high school education.

And then after that, I got a BBA degree, a Bachelor of Business Administration, from the City University of New York. We're up to 1953 now.

And before we go any further, let's jump back to when you arrived in Brooklyn. And so your family is there. What was Max doing during this time? I know he was in the army, and y'all visited him in South Carolina. But where did he go from there?

Max is not with us because he's in the army. I think I mentioned that we visited him in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where he was stationed in the military.

Yes, sir.

Camp Croft. And so he was in the army. And he spoke perfect French and German. And so the army, in all their wisdom, they sent him to the Aleutian Islands, which were off the coast of Alaska, where there would be no use for his German and French ability. Maybe they had him classified as an enemy alien, too. I don't know.

Let's see. So he was still in the army when we arrived in Brooklyn. That's the answer to your question.

And once he went to the Aleutian Islands, were y'all still able to keep in touch with him? Was he able to tell you about what he was doing?

Well, he wrote to us, and he told us what life was like in the Aleutian Islands, that there was a girl behind every tree, but there were no trees. My brother was not a very physical person. He was more intellectual and chubby. So the army correctly, probably, made him a personnel clerk in the army company where he was assigned. So that's where he was.

Happily, the Japanese had left the Aleutian Islands before the US Army arrived there. Otherwise, the ending might have been different. Any other questions?

Yeah. So I know you went to school. You started learning English. And your father started working at the factory. How did your parents adjust to life in America?

How did--?

How did your parents adjust to life in America?

Well, they were very busy working trying to make a living. My father did not stay long in his job because he liked to be self-employed. He didn't like to work for others. So he opened a little store, first store right in Brooklyn, as a matter of fact, in the same building as we were living, which follows a pattern that they had been used to in Berlin, where the store also was in the same building as where we lived. So there was no commuting problems.

I think I mentioned also that my brother had volunteered to join the army because he thought it might help our US visa application. But I doubt that it did. But in any case, he was trying all he could to get us to the states, and he succeeded. OK?

Yes, sir. And did your mother work in your father's store?

Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. Just like in Berlin, they really set up the Berlin model and replicated it, I guess, which would be normal. Rather than start from zero, they would repeat what had worked for them before. And so my mother was in the front receiving customers and talking to them. She was more sociable than my father, so that worked out fine because my father was in the back in the workshop where the work was done, and my mother was in the front receiving customers, talking to them, and making them feel important.

And so she always worked, although-- now one difference with Berlin is that in Berlin, we had Marie, who was the housekeeper, baby sitter, baby nanny, et cetera. But in Brooklyn, we did not have such a person. So my mother was doing double duty.

How much news did you receive?

Sorry?

How much news did you receive about what was going on in Europe?

Well, both my mother and I, we were always tuned into a radio and news station. So we were quite aware of the news. When we got to Brooklyn in 1943, the war was still going on and would not be finished until 1945. So we were quite interested. And they would read the New York newspaper that came out. One came out in German and one came out in Yiddish. They would read the newspapers and I would listen to the radio.

So you were able to follow the events of the war as it was going on.

Well, yes. Yes, because we had great interest in the subject. I remember to this day, in 1947, the United Nations General Assembly was voting on the resolution that would split. The resolution was on the partition of the land that was a British mandate, the land that now occupies Israel in Jordan, Transjordan. At that time it was Transjordan because it was on the other side of the Jordan River.

And I remember my father and I listening to the vote as they called out the names of each country to receive their votes, yay or nay, on whether they were in favor of partitioning that territory between Jews and Arabs. And that resolution passed, to our delight. It passed. I'm very happy that it was supported by the US and all the European countries.

The cynics in the world said that, well, that was just a squashing of their own guilt feelings. That's why they voted for the partitioning of that territory. But I think that was a great occurrence. And modern Zionism was set up to construct a Jewish homeland in the historical homeland, in historical Israel. And to a large extent, they did what the Zionist leaders of a century ago were planning.

Of course, they hadn't counted on Hitler or the United Nations. But I think there is a point to be made that if there had been no Holocaust, there might be no Israel today. So in a way, we can say that maybe the innocent victims of the Holocaust who were slaughtered like animals, worse than animals, maybe they didn't die in vain.

There are those fanatic Jews, whom I disagree with 1000%, a group of orthodox Jews who say that the reason for the Holocaust was that the Jews had stopped following the laws of Moses, the laws of God. That was the reason for God sending Hitler to punish them. And I think those people are either psychotic, idiotic, or worse. Anyway, I don't have any use for that kind of attitude.

Let's see. Where was I? So you were asking about the news. And yeah, we were very much interested in news and the books that came out in that era, a book called Exodus after the name of a ship which was bringing refugees to what was then Palestine, and the British would turn them back. There was a lot of drama and a lot of passion that was used by both sides of the issue there.

But I'm very happy. I'm a big friend of Israel's, not of the illegal settlements on the West Bank. But I'm supporting Israel that adapts to the 21st century as they are doing in the technological field. But that is not a half theocracy because I think the orthodox religious people have too much power there for the well-or the well-being of the country. But that's just my opinion.

Well, OK. I graduated from high school. And then I went on to the City University of New York, which was a very convenient circumstance because New York and San Francisco were the only two cities that had free universities. And so I was able to attend City University of New York without having to worry about where do I get the money to pay for

it. And I would go to my classes every day by subway from Brooklyn to Manhattan.

And after my classes, usually in the morning, I would come in the afternoon. And in the afternoon I would have various part time jobs. I was a delivery boy for a drugstore. And then I worked for my father as well, helping him in the workshop. I was a delivery boy for fur coats when people wanted them brought to them. I would be earning \$0.25 an hour, which enabled me to even save some, even though I spent a lot on going to the movies once a week with my friends.

And what made you study?

Hold on, please. OK, I changed ears again.

I see. What made you decide to study business administration?

Well, I was kind of forced into it because I had no other outstanding interests. And my parents were pushing me to study something that would enable me to take over the store when they retired. But you see, the best laid plans of mice and men, we know what happens to them. Even though they thought I was studying business administration, my major was in a new field called industrial psychology.

So you told them that you were studying business administration while you were studying--

And the degree I got is a BBA degree.

Oh, I see.

And I was attending classes at the business school of City University. But my major was industrial psychology, which was not exactly how to administer a store or set prices or customer relations or stuff like that. Industrial psychology dealt largely with learning and training of your workers, how to train them. And it dealt largely with psychometrics, mental measurements. I was in a part of psychology, which tries to be more scientific than the clinicians with the couches.

And so based on the axiom in science that everything that exists in some quantity, so if you were looking for a person that had good aptitude in assembling small units of objects, then you might want to measure how good each applicant is in their psychomotor ability that they demonstrate on a test in their job interviewing situation.

Or if your job requires high intelligence, you might want to measure the intelligence to see who were the smartest ones. That is psychometrics. It is the scientific method of constructing tests that would measure some aspect of human behavior.

So this major, incidentally, set me up for a problem later on which I'll come to in a minute. But after I graduated from City, at that time it was called City College of New York. It was 1953. And I had to get a master's degree in order to be able to do anything in industrial psychology or to get a job. And so I applied to Penn State University. And in 1954, I received an MS degree, Master of Science in research psychology. And that was my first experience going to a US university with a campus. It was quite eye-opening.

And this was at Penn State?

Yes, at Penn State. And it was my first time of moving out of the house, out of my parents' house, or apartment. So I was becoming independent. And I had a normal interest in girls and women. So things were developing according to plan. I got my master's degree in 1954. But after that, I knocked around in a few different jobs, all with psychology, but in research psychology, not in the clinical counseling end of it.

And in 1962, I have a PhD degree from Purdue University in Indiana. Now by that time, I am married and have one daughter, I guess. Yes. So life goes on. But I don't want to go into too much detail on my resume here.

But after the doctorate, I worked for an outfit called Humrro, H-U-M-R-R-O, which is a Human Resources Research Office of George Washington University, who had a contract with the US Department of the Army to do research on psychological applications to their needs, whether it's marksmanship or interviewing prisoners or training their own people, or what have you.

And I worked with HUMRRO for several years in problems of selection and training and language learning. We developed a course totally on tape in Vietnamese for American advisors who were heading over to Vietnam, which you may remember from your historical readings.

And what interested you in psychology? How did you become involved with that back with your bachelor's?

Well, I got interested in psychology because it was the only course I got an A in. And looking back, I don't know if it was the best choice for me. One never knows. You know, you can't do experiments with your own life because you never have a control condition. You never know what might have happened if A,B, C, D. So I could have used some psychological vocational counseling of my own, maybe. But I think that psychology fit me pretty well-- not perfectly, but it fit me pretty well. And then the application of it to languages fit into my background because I was able to speak almost four of them. So that worked out OK.

And after HUMRRO, I had some friends who worked with Peace Corps, the US Peace Corps. This was a program set up by President John F. Kennedy, which caught the imagination of many people for its idealism and its practical aspects. But I worked with them on foreign language training and on doing evaluation of their foreign language training.

Let's see. From Peace Corps, the next project was with USAID, which is the US Agency for International Development, our so-called giveaway program. And AID would come to Congress every year asking for money. And Congress would say, well, how do we know that your projects are achieving anything or doing any good, whether the project is road building or setting up a clinic or setting up a health project.

And so USAID put in a big effort to evaluate their own projects. And they evaluated them not using their own people, but using people like me who were hired on a contract basis to do the evaluations. And so I did evaluations in about a dozen different countries for USAID.

And it was challenging work because on the one side, you got to see a lot of places and travel. But on the other side, the project people on whom you were dependent as the evaluator, they were not too happy to see you. And so there was a question of local resistance to giving you any information that you might find negative, for example.

But everybody did their best pointing out strengths and weaknesses of projects, shortcomings, how can they be corrected. And then you had to have the people. But you couldn't force the people to read your report, your evaluation report. So my evaluation reports did not have too many readers, and that was a source of frustration to me. But it's one I had to live with. The money was pretty good, not wildly big, but it was adequate to live on.

I was now a married man with two children. So this work with USAID led me to a job offer in West Africa as technical advisor to the West Africans Examinations Council. Now this would be 1970, '72. West Africa was largely-- at that time, many were still colonies of various European countries. For example, Nigeria, where I was stationed, was a British colony until 1960.

And as a British colony, how did they pick their high school graduates? Well, they used a British system of O level and A level examinations, which largely consisted of essay questions. And the essay questions would have to be sent to England for grading. The grades would have to be sent back to Nigeria. And the system was wide open for corruption, where the students who came from families who had money could afford to buy their child a certificate that they had graduated, graduation certificate from secondary school. But the poor people couldn't.

So the US came along, and they were interested in getting the English influence out of there, US government was. So we were trying to set up the West African Examinations Council to do their own testing, not with essay questions, but

with multiple choice true false questions and things that could be scored mechanically, maybe. And we were setting up the multiple choice examination models for the Nigerian Education Council, which was for all of West Africa, really.

So I was working in Nigeria and Ghana for two years on that project with some success. And then the contract finished, period. And I returned to the United States.

And so over the years, even going back to high school, did you ever talk with your family, or maybe your friends, about your experiences during the war?

Very little. My best friends, they knew. But it was not a popular subject of conversation. No. And I was not especially interested in emphasizing that, either. I wanted to become better at my new life rather than talk about my old life.

So instead of looking back, you wanted to focus on--

Move forward.

Yeah. Do you ever talk about your experiences today?

Yes. I'm talking to you.

Yes, sir. But guess, have you talked to your family, your wife or your children?

Yes, yes. As a matter of fact, my Costa Rican son, he works with sound systems here. And so he also interviewed me, doing something similar to what you're doing on a less professional scale, of course. But he did the same thing because he had curiosity. Yes. And you know, you get to my point in life, you begin to look back and say, well, if I have any messages to leave people, you better get busy writing the message because your time is limited. So that's what we're doing.

And Sigmund Freud was right. Sigmund Freud said sex is the most powerful motivation that there is, for, especially for men. And that's true, except when you get to be my age, when it becomes equally important to be able to point to some significance in your life, this question of what have I done with my life? Have I done anything significant?

Well, not really. I did not get a Nobel Prize for any specialty. And the stuff I've written will never compete with Hemingway. So it's very difficult to find things that matter that you have done in your life. And that's why I was attracted to your program of your museum.

And so you mentioned wanting to leave a message.

Sorry?

So you mentioned wanting to leave a message, your reason for recording the interview. If there's one thing about your experiences that you wish people knew or you think it's important to emphasize, what would that be?

Well, that's the \$64,000 question. Well, I don't know. My experiences have brought me to a position on God, for example. But I'm not so sure that my opinion about religion is relevant to other people because other people are reacting to the needs that they have experienced. They don't care what conclusions I have come to. If I come out and give you some short statement on why I believe that atheism is the most defensible position on the question of God, I'm not sure it's going to affect a single person's views.

But anyway, you've tempted me, and I'll tell you now. I will state the basic reason why I am an atheist, because I try to live logically and scientifically and only believe things where I can have evidence of its existence. And I have had no evidence of any God or afterlife for anything like that.

In addition, Christians and Jews, too, I suppose, they believe that-- well, Jews call him Adonai or Yahweh or Jehovah.

The Christians call him God the Father because the Christian God, it's a three-headed God with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But talking about God the Father, who, incidentally, is the same God as the Muslims call Allah. Allah is God the Father to the Christians and God to the Jews.

And I believe all three religions believe that God is one, all powerful, number two, all knowing. He knows everything. And three, all good. And my own thought about what happened to me in my childhood, and what happens in the world repeatedly in different places, is that there is so much unhappiness and misery and sickness and death and cruelty and injustice that where is this God who is all knowing, all powerful, and all good? He or she must be on strike. Anyway, that's the funny answer I come up with. But I think you get my message.

Yes, sir.

But you see, every person is working with their own history, not other people's history. That's why history is irrelevant. And that's why most people ignore history, and they commit the same errors over and over again because they don't learn from other people, because it's not natural to learn from other people's histories. You can only learn from your own history.

And so here we are. My delight at being successful in reaching US soil, US territory, my delight will be shortened and diminished if it turns out that next Tuesday, the citizens of the US elect Trump president. If that happens, I will seriously re-examine my decision of having taken out American citizenship.

And well, I don't live there anyway, but I'm still a US citizen. But if that event happens, I will be destroyed in my belief about the US because if anything else-- I don't know, you may have read-- do you read The New York Times?

Some. Yes, sir.

Anyway, Tom Friedman last week had a good column on with all the shortcomings of Hillary Clinton, the minimum requirement to become president is decency. And you know that Hillary Clinton, aside from all her other errors and faults, she is a very decent person. And you cannot say that about Trump because he is most indecent. And if that doesn't come through to the American voters, then I will be terribly, terribly disappointed.

Anyway, I don't know. I think I've given you sufficient catharsis here.

Is there anything about your wartime experiences that we haven't talked about that you would like to add?

I don't know. Maybe I would have been better off in philosophy than psychology. But no. The short answer to your question is no. I thank you very much for having great patience and listening to my ramblings.

No, thank you, sir. Well, if you don't want to add anything right now, we can always do an addition later. But it sounds like we will conclude. So thank you again, Dr. Fiks. This is very much appreciated for all three parts of your interview. And this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Dr. Alfred I. Fiks.