This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Peter Schulhof on May 1, 2017 in Brooklyn, New York. Thank you very much, Mr. Schulhof, for agreeing to speak with us today to share your experiences and that of your family and tell us a little bit about how you all were affected by the Nazi repressive policies in Europe during World War II that culminated in the Holocaust. I'm going to start our interview with the most basic questions.

Sure.

And we'll build from there.

OK.

So can you tell me what is the date of your birth?

June 13, 1937.

And what was your name at birth?

Petr Schulhof.

Petr Schulhof. And where were you born?

In Prague, Czech Republic now, Czechoslovakia then.

OK, do you have any early memories from being in Prague?

It's hard to tell whether my memories were direct memories or ones that I've been talked to with my parents about, but there a couple of images I would say that I was a little child because I was three at the oldest when we left, a couple of images that I have for whatever reason. One was looking out the kitchen window of our apartment in Prague, watching my parents cross the street. And I had a babysitter. I don't know. I think they were going to the movies or something, but, for whatever reason--

You remember that.

--I have that image. And the other is not so surprising I guess, but I remember walking into my grandparents' home in Cesky Brod, which is a little west of Prague, and there was a big wooden cabinet on the right side in which they stored chocolates.

Well, of course, there are things that are important in life, and chocolates is one of them.

That's right. After that, it's more not direct memories, you know, just little snippets like that.

Well, that's how-- that's what children remember. It's an episode. And do you know now what area of Prague you lived in, what neighborhood you lived in?

Yes, when I was born, it was in Nove Mesto, which is a part of Prague. And then my parents moved to a larger apartment a little further out. I think it's on what they called [NON-ENGLISH].

[NON-ENGLISH]

Yeah, Black Church Street, [NON-ENGLISH].

OK.

Out a little ways, but still in the city.

Still in the city?

Yes.

So was it a residential neighborhood?

Yes, in both cases.

Single family homes or apartment buildings?

No, these were apartment buildings.

And would have they been built, do you think, in the 19th century, like so many city apartments were?

The apartment house in Nove Mesto was probably. I would say probably the late part of the 19th century. The other apartment was newer. So I would probably say 1920s or something like that.

Really new, really new.

Oh, yeah.

For that time, really new.

Yes, yes. No, it's not an old part of Prague, that second apartment.

North? South? I lived in Prague. That's one of the reasons I'm asking.

I think it's more east, the second apartment.

OK, so was it on the side where the castle was, on the side of the river where the castle was?

No, it was on the other side I'm pretty sure.

That's right. Excuse me, the east would be that way.

Yeah, and it was near what they call the New Jewish Cemetery, rather than the Old Jewish Cemetery.

OK, OK. What were your parents' names?

My father's name was Joseph Schulhof. He was called Pepa. My mother's name, maiden name, was Charlotte Poras. She was born in Hungary actually.

Poras?

Poras, P-O-R-A-S, yeah. And that was her maiden name. That was my mother's maiden name.

How did they meet?

My father's first job was as an electrical engineer in a mining-- with a mining company in the northeastern part of Bohemia, near Poland. And my mother-- my mother's mother, my grandmother, died at a very young age. And her father remarried her stepmother.

And she and my aunt didn't get along that well. My mother ended up with her aunt and uncle in Poland. I've forgotten the name, I'm afraid, of the town, but very near the Czech border. And so they both went to a dance, and that's where they met.

Wow. What was their common language?

It must have been German because my mother did not speak Czech at the time. She subsequently spoke it quite fluently, but, at that time, she may have spoken some Polish because of where she lived, but I think they probably spoke in German because they both spoke German quite fluently. And that's probably what ended up happening.

Do you remember about when this was? Was this after the First World War that they met?

Yes, it was in the early '20s.

OK, so there was no Austro-Hungarian Empire anymore.

No, no.

Everybody had become independent. Poland was independent.

And the Czech Republic was formed our of Austro-Hungarian Empire, right?

Right, OK. Did you have brothers and sisters?

No, I did not.

OK, so you were the only child?

Yes, probably as a result of subsequent events.

Yeah. What about your father? Did he have brothers and sisters?

Yes, he did. He had two stepbrothers and then a full brother and a full sister. So that would be five siblings?

Five siblings, yes. My grandfather's wife, first wife, passed away at a fairly young age. And he had had two children with her. And they were his stepbrothers. And then he remarried my grandmother, and they had three children.

And were they all from Prague?

All that area, yes. My father and his-- well, I think all of his siblings were born in Cesky Brod, which is a small town east of Prague. May we break?

Yeah, sure. So they were born-- the family, you say, it sounds like they were really based in Cesky Brod. Is that right?

Yes, that's correct. They moved subsequently, the brothers and so on, into Prague. They all lived in Prague as adults, but they were born in Cesky Brod and brought up there. It's a small town.

OK, so what did your grandfather-- how did your grandfather support his family?

He had a shop in the same building that he lived in and that the family lived in. And it was like a general store I would say, mainly focused on materials and clothing from what I gather.

And do you know anything of the family history, how the family had ended up in Cesky Brod, where they had come from?

Well, my grandmother, actually, originally, was from Austria, from Vienna. My grandfather and the Schulhof family went back many generations in Bohemia. How they actually ended up in Cesky Brod, I'm afraid I don't ever remember talking about with my parents, but they had been there for quite a while, many years. And then, before that, they were a number of different places, including-- well, I don't remember all the names of the towns.

But, nevertheless, in Bohemia?

In that area, in Bohemia, in the, more or less, towards the eastern part of Bohemia on the east side of Prague.

What language did your grandfather speak with his children and his wife? What was the--

Czech.

Czech. Not German?

Not German. Well, they may have known German, but, no, they spoke Czech at home.

OK.

And so did my parents and I.

OK, because many, many-- well, of course, Czechoslovakia had many Germans. And so there was German spoken, but many Jews also spoke German--

Correct.

--rather than Czech.

Correct, especially, relatively well-educated people spoke both languages.

That's right. That's right. Do you know if what your family-- now and this could be any member of your family-- how they identified themselves? Because, in a place like Czechoslovakia, you could have an identity that is primarily Austro-Hungarian. You could have an identity more that is affiliated with the new Czech state. I think I'm talking more political identity, you know, where they saw their-- what they thought of what was going on. And this would have been before your birth.

Right.

But it was a new country.

Yes.

And, of course, it affected its citizens.

Right. Now you asked how did they identify themselves. And I would say, if they were asked point blank, well, what are you, they would say Jewish.

OK.

But they didn't speak Yiddish at all. It was like, no, we don't do that. It was German if not Czech, Czech primarily. And, in terms of you mentioned politics, my father looked back at the time after the First World War, until the beginning of the Second World War, as a beautiful time for Czechoslovakia. Sorry.

It's OK.

No, don't need that. I'm afraid I get emotional at times. Yeah, it was a democratic state, and he tended to be more on the I would say socialist side of things, but not very active in politics. He thought of himself as an early Zionist in a way, but, again, more in his thoughts than in his actions. But that just gives you a little idea, I think, of where he was coming from.

And my mother was a different story because of her background. She was born in Kaposvar in Hungary and, as I mentioned earlier, had to be moved around because of her family's circumstances. So, in fact, later on, without being derogatory about it, my uncles were saying that my mother didn't have any problem moving around because she was from Hungary just like the Gypsies.

Rootless.

Yes.

Rootless.

Which was probably correct in a way.

Yeah. Well, yeah, there is a lot to be said. In our modern age, we are more rootless. But, at that time, it was sort of at the cusp.

Right, right. And, well, all of them felt very Czech, but Jewish.

OK, that's what I wanted. That's what I wanted to get a sense of. Was your father's family religious?

Not so much, I would say. And I don't think my parents were all that religious either earlier on. I think my father, in particular, got more so as he got older and then when we came to them-- after we came to the United States. But my impression is that it wasn't so much.

You know, they went to services occasionally and so on, but my parents never kept a kosher home for instance. And so I guess you can get the feel from that.

Would you say that they were more assimilated then?

Yes, I would say so. I mean, my father had a good position. He had his own firm before we had to leave Czechoslovakia and a lot of friends, family, neighbors who weren't necessarily from the same background. So I guess you'd say they were pretty well assimilated. And that's one of the reasons why it was so hard for them to yank themselves out of there.

Let's talk a little bit about-- well, let me ask about your mother. I made an assumption, and it might be the wrong assumption, that you knew your father's family better than you knew your mother's family, but that may not be true.

No, I think that's true. But, of course, I didn't know any of them very well because I was a tot. But we were in Prague, and my father's family was all around us. And we met up all the time.

There were older cousins, but not that much older. The youngest of my cousins was my aunt Marta's daughter, Daisy, who was probably five years older than me. And we got together a lot.

And, your father's siblings both the half siblings-- the step-siblings and the full ones can you tell me their names?

Sure, there was Jarda, Jaroslav.

Jaroslav.

And I'm having a senior moment here.

That's OK.

Well, let me tell you about his full siblings first. Marta was his sister, followed by Rudolf, Ruda, who ended up coming to the United States before we did. And how can I forget my uncles'-- other uncles' name?

It's OK. But, if it comes to you later, then we'll just stop, and you can say, oh, it was so and so. That's fine. But he had two older-- they were both boys?

Yes.

OK, the step-siblings were boys.

Right, brothers, right.

Brothers. And then--

They were pretty close.

--was one of them Karel?

Karel, thank you very much.

OK.

Thank you, yeah.

It's just from the Facebook post.

Well, yeah, Karel and Jarda, right.

Karel and Jarda. And then Rudolf--

Was youngest.

--the youngest and Marta.

Marta.

Marta, his sister.

Right.

All right. And did you see-- was he closer to any one of them?

Well, I think he was closest to Marta and Rudolf because the others were quite a bit older. And it wasn't so much because they were half brothers. They were fairly close anyhow, but, as you say closer, then I think it was, particularly, Ruda because he was nine years younger.

And so, when he was born, my father was already nine. And he sort of was there to bring him up in Cesky Brod. And Marta was somewhere in between. I think she was four or five years younger than-- maybe less, three, four years younger than my father.

So he was smack in the middle?

No.

He was the oldest--

He was the oldest.

--of the three.

Of the three.

Right.

But, of the five, he was in the middle, correct.

How is it that Rudolf came to the United States?

Well, he actually was following his to-be wife who was originally from Berlin and whose parents and she had moved temporarily from Berlin in the '30s, in the late-- mid to late '30s. And his to-be father-in-law was in the greeting card business. And he took that business along with him and was able to come to the United States.

And, in 1939, my uncle Ruda was able to follow them because they went to Belgium first. And he followed them to Belgium where he was married to his wife. And they then came here to New York.

That kind of story, that's a sort of German-Jewish exodus story. And '39 is pretty late.

Yes, yes.

It's after Kristallnacht.

Right, and the hand writing was definitely on the wall to most people and especially in Germany. And he was young. He was not nearly as founded in Czechoslovakia I think. And he had no problem just running after his to-be wife. So that's what happened.

OK.

And he actually joined his father-in-law's firm here, and they did very well.

What's the name of the firm here?

The firm was called Reproducta.

Reproducta. And was it based in New York?

Yes, it was.

OK, and so he got out.

He got out before everybody else, and he was able to come here, yes.

In later years, how did your father-- I mean because I think that Czechoslovakia was occupied when you were a year old.

Correct.

And you would have no memory of it.

No.

But how did your parents speak of that? How did they speak of this experience? Had they been surprised? Had they been shocked? I mean, was this expected?

I don't think it was expected. I don't think anybody expected it, given the history, at least, people who-- general people who didn't have inroads into the politics or contacts. I think the Germans were more aware of the situation than the Czechs were.

I think, when it happened, they were pretty horrified, my mother in particular, whether it was because of her fact that she had a young child or just her personality, but she immediately thought of it in worse terms than my father because, probably, as a result of influence of the fact that his family had lived there for so long and that his situation with his business and his work-- and I think he was hoping, at least, that it would pass.

Do you know what year your father was born?

1903.

So he was a young man.

Yeah.

He was in his '30s, and he was building his career.

That's correct, and he was doing quite well.

And had all of the siblings gotten higher education?

I don't know. You know, I don't think so they certainly went through high school. And I don't remember whether any of them went beyond that. I know that my uncles, my older uncles, one of them was in the First World War and had actually been sent to Russia, met his wife there, and then ended up bringing her back.

So he was in the Austro-Hungarian army?

Yes, yes, as was my grandfather on my mother's side. He was an officer in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It didn't do any good later on, but, nevertheless, he was in the army then. So I'm afraid I can't tell you too much about their level of education beyond high school. I know they all went through the gymnasium.

OK, yeah. And what were their professions?

Well, starting from the youngest--

Ruda.

--Ruda was a salesperson. He had that kind of personality. My aunt didn't have a profession. She was a mother and stayed home. And, my two older brothers, one had a lamp manufacturing company. I still have some of the lamps he--

Really?

Yeah. And, my other uncle, I think he was in some kind of sales, but I'm not sure exactly what.

Do you know the name of the lamp manufacturing company?

No, I don't. No, I don't.

What about your father's business? Do you know the name of your father's business?

I used to. I don't remember at the moment. I can think about it.

OK, OK. So your father went at least through gymnasium.

My father went beyond gymnasium.

So he might have been the only one?

He might have been, but I'm not positive about that. That's why I'm saying I'm not sure about my-- I don't think Ruda went beyond gymnasium, and I am pretty sure Marta did not either, but I'm not positive of either of that, any of that, I'm afraid, certainly, not of the other siblings. My father went to, yes, university level technical school.

In Czechoslovakia?

In Prague, but it was a German school.

OK, after the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia by Hitler and the Nazis in 1938, I believe, was it--

'39.

'39. Oh, was it '39? That's right. It was '39. It was '39. I got my dates mixed up. How did this impact your larger family and your immediate family?

Well, while we were still there, it didn't seem to have impacted them that much. There were all sorts of restrictions being put in place I understand, but they were leading their lives, more or less.

So your grandfather with his store in Cesky Brod?

Yes, but, unfortunately or maybe fortunately for him, he passed away in his 60s, when he was in his 60s. So he passed away just before all of this happened.

Ah, many people would say fortunately for him.

That's right my grandmother, his wife, was still alive until after we left, but shortly after we left, she had a heart attack and also passed away. So she was spared.

On my mother's side-- and, as I mentioned earlier, I didn't know them quite as well. We visited Kaposvar, and I was tiny. And I met my grandfather, my mother's father, and my step-grandmother, but I can't remember any of that.

And, some of the other parts of family, my mother had a full sister, Kato, Katalin, who was two years younger. And we can talk more about her later on if you want. And then she had stepbrothers and sisters. And so I was a tot, and I got to know them, but not that well. And I didn't hear all that much about them.

They were still in Hungary. So they were not invaded by the Nazis until 1944 or thereabouts. And that's when things really went downhill.

Yeah, that's right.

So, when the Germans first occupy, it's ominous, but it doesn't yet have a direct impact.

Right.

OK.

And it was my mother who felt that impact more than any of the other parts of my family, and she expressed it. And her personality was rather-- he was very outgoing. She was not so much. And so I would say, in their marriage, he tended to be the stronger one of the two in terms of his personality, in terms of his willpower and so on, but, amazingly for me, thinking back on their relationship, she was extremely strong about getting out of Czechoslovakia at the time because she felt threatened.

So she's the impetus?

Absolutely.

Because that was one of my questions. It is unusual to-- not unusual to leave, but, in a family that is so grounded, to be the only ones of the family. Very often, in Germany, we hear of one branch trying to get out, and then another branch trying to get out and some later and some earlier. And, sometimes, the later ones, it's too late, but they all do want to leave. And this doesn't sound like it's the same thing.

Not so at all, no. My father's brothers-- of course, Ruda had left, but his older brothers were quite vehement about trying to convince him and, therefore, my mother to stay because they thought it would pass. And their roots were so deeply in Czechoslovakia that they thought it would be horrible for my parents to leave and then especially when it turned out the only place we could end up going to was China because nothing else was open to us by the time my parents finally made up their minds that, yes, they were going to leave. My mother convinced my father thoroughly.

It took him-- it took her some time, huh?

Yes, a little bit Well, it was not years because there wasn't years to be had. It was months, but, nevertheless, it took some time. But he ended up being convinced to the point where he really was active about doing something about it.

But the rest of the family, as you probably know from reading some of our other material, his older brother Karel tried very hard to convince him to stay. You're going to go to China? You'll be dying in the streets.

You don't have a position there. You don't have much money. They won't let you take any. How are you going to survive, stay? And it must have been very difficult for my father to be torn in a way, but I guess my mother must have been very convincing.

And do they ever tell you about their process, their actual attempts to leave, and what that meant and which consulates they visited and so on and so forth?

Oh, yes.

Tell me about that.

Right, they tried very hard to get out in other ways. They went to the American consulate and registered there and were told that they would be heard-- they'd hear from them and that they should let them know if anything changed in their situation.

But time went by, and nothing happened. And they went back again, my father in particular, and was told that, oh, well, it would take at least five, six, seven years before they would have any chance of being under the quota, I guess. And so it became quite clear more and more that things were not getting better there.

You were all Czech citizens?

Absolutely.

Your mother as well?

Yes, my mother had become a Czech citizen. She spoke Czech quite fluently by that time and didn't, I don't think, consider herself a Czech, but would have stayed right there. They had a good life-- theater, social life, what have you.

It's a beautiful place to live.

Yes, still is.

Still is. Still is.

Anyhow, yeah, so where were we?

We were at the consulates, the various consulates, and the Americans saying it will be five, six, seven years.

That's right and there were no other opening places which weren't being occupied by the Germans anyhow. So they were left with very few options, in fact, only one, and that was to go to China, to Shanghai in particular

how did they get a visa to do that?

They didn't need one because Shanghai was an open port. That's what made it possible. And so--

Did they need transit visas from any countries to get there?

Well, the Germans needed to let them out. And, well, the story is that my father applied to get an exit visa and was soon visited by Nazi officials to document everything that they owned in their apartment. I mean, my father says down to the last toothpaste tube.

That's thorough.

Oh yeah. And they assigned a value to each piece of their property, as well as whatever they had in terms of banking arrangements and so on, and then said, OK, double that amount, and we'll let you get out.

So, of course, he said to them-- and, of course, I don't remember this, but I remember him telling me about this. He said, well, you know exactly what our assets are. You've written it all down. And now you're asking for twice as much.

Obviously, we don't have the resources to do that. Oh, yes, but maybe your family will help. And so, in fact, he had an aunt who was married to his uncle, and they were well off.

And this was a father-- his father's sister or his mother's sister?

No, this is--

I mean his father's brother or mother's brother?

His father's brother.

OK, so also a Schulhof.

Also a Schulhof, right. And she was kind enough to, quote, "lend him" the money, enough to double the value of all of his assets.

How cynical.

Yes. And I guess that startled him or whatever, but they did provide them with exit visas.

What was her name? Do you remember?

Yes, I do. I should, but I don't at the moment.

OK, we'll come to it. We'll come to it.

Yeah. Rosa.

Rosa.

Tante Rosa.

Tante Rosa, I remember seeing a Facebook post with her picture.

Yes.

And so, surprise, surprise to the officials, they came up with the money and got the visas, exit visas.

Yes.

For all three of you.

All three of us, right.

Were they able to take anything out, any money out?

Very little, but some, very little. They had enough to get to Genoa, which is where the ship that was going to take us to Shanghai originated. And that's about it. And I'll tell you more in a minute, but the process of getting out was not simple either in that they had to pack up whatever they were allowed to take, which was a very basic few things plus, again, cynically, crystal, which the Germans packed with almost nothing in the box.

So they would break.

So they would break so much of it did arrive, and some of it was still intact, but much of it was not. Anyhow, and a few clothing things and some few things. And my father, fortunately, was a document keeper. And he took along things that others may not have ever thought about taking, but he did.

Such as?

Well, for one thing, they were not supposed to have their Czech passports with them. They were not allowed to have them, but they lied, which is unusual because they were very straight. They said that they were lost, and they got the Czech police to verify that.

And so they were lost. So they got a substitute passport, which was a German passport, but they kept on their bodies, as we went out, the original Czech passports, which helped us a lot later. And I was on my mother's passport. So I also had a passport.

And they made all the arrangements for the ship, paid for that with money that came from themselves and my aunt. And, actually, not so, actually, it didn't happen until they were in Genoa. They found themselves without enough money and cabled my relatives in Prague, as well as my mother's-- I should mention my mother's side, her side of the family, had people who had been living here, in the New York area, for quite a while prior to the war and who had been in contact somewhat.

And she had written them about their situation. And they actually-- that sort of ties in with that visit to the consulate because they had written, providing assurances that they would take care of us if we needed, had we been able to come to the United States.

So that you wouldn't have been a burden on the state?

State, correct.

OK, and that didn't help?

Apparently not, apparently not.

Wow.

Well, I mean the American, what you call it, State Department had a reputation at the time of not being very friendly towards Jewish people. I don't know whether that played in directly or whether there was some other situation, but that comes to my mind at least from other things that I have read and heard about.

In any event, yeah, no, that didn't help. But, when they were in Genoa and needed some money to provide for the rest of the trip just to have some cash and so on-- I guess the trip had been paid for prior to that, sorry. But they, basically, ran out of money.

They contacted my mother's father and my father's relatives in Prague and my mother's relatives here, as well as my uncle Ruda who had already then been here in New York. And, within I guess it was a matter of hours, they got telegraphed money from all over. So they ended up with more than they needed.

But, even that, to get the passage was a problem, as you may have read in some of the material that we've--

Tell us.

--put on Facebook. Yeah, everything had been arranged. My father was very organized. And, as I think I mentioned earlier, he was-- well, maybe I was speaking to Gus, but he was what now may be called a-- what's the term? He contacted people and got to know them.

Extrovert?

Well, he was an extrovert, but he-- oh, anyhow, I'm sorry. I'm having my moments here.

That's OK.

It was fortunate that he was outgoing, got to know people, became friends quite easily. And it was helpful, not only for his business purposes, but for social and, in this case, life purposes. All arrangements were made. He was, as I say, very organized, extremely organized.

And, the night before we were meant to leave, they were in a taxi having gone somewhere, perhaps visiting my aunt I think.

In Prague still?

In Prague. And, on their way back to their apartment, they were going to stop Vaclavske Namesti--

Central Street.

--street, main square in Prague at the shipping company to pick up the tickets. And it was just a matter of, supposedly, going up there, getting the tickets, coming right back So my mother stayed in the taxi while he ran up, ostensibly, to get the passage tickets, and it took a long while.

And, finally, he showed up white as a sheet, my mother was telling me, because, when he went up there to get his tickets, he was told there weren't any tickets. But he said I paid for them. What do you mean? I've got a receipt and so on.

Well, sorry, tickets are not-- no tickets are available. Well, here's where his contacts came into play. And he was a nervous kind of person, but, when it came to difficult situations, he was all there.

I mean he rose to the occasion.

Yeah, he calmed down and was thinking about things in a rational kind of way, which turned out to be a lifesaver because he remembered that he had met-- I think it was on the train. I don't know where it was between Cesky Brod and Prague or someplace. He had met a man who was the director or the head of the transportation department for Skoda, a major manufacturing company.

Skoda being the automobile manufacturers?

Well, among other things, heavy machinery, optics, auto manufacturing later on. And he remembered his name and how to contact him. It was like 5 o'clock in the afternoon on a weekday. And he called that man and found him at his desk fortunately, told him the story, and he said wait about half an hour and then go back. So my father nervously waited for half an hour and then went back. And, sure enough, now they had the tickets.

Oh my goodness, oh my goodness.

Networking, that's the word I was thinking for, networking.

Networking, he knew how to network.

Yeah, they didn't call it that.

No, they didn't, but it's also on the slimmest-- on the slimmest margin, this stranger provides that linchpin, that life or death situation. He might have found another way out, but, in this case--

Doubtful, but, yes, you're right.

This man, did you ever know who he was, what his name was?

I don't know. I have-- I have a letter opener from Skoda. No, he knew the name, obviously, and he may have told me it, but I don't recall it. I would have liked to have contacted him. We've been back to Prague-- who knows what happened to him by the way-- to thank him, but that never happened.

Yeah, my father said on a number of occasions that our story was a combination of using one's wit and luck, pure old luck. I think of it as little molecules bouncing around in a box, and some got out, and some did not.

Yeah, and it depends on what other molecules they hit.

That's right.

Some of them were kind and some of them not so much.

And what openings there were and whether they managed to find those openings or just happened to find them.

Yeah, yeah. So, from Prague to Genoa, do you know how you traveled?

Train.

Do you remember any of it?

No, I do not. I can't. I remember, again, scenes from the ship. We were on that ship, the Conte Verde, an Italian liner, from Shanghai to-- I mean from Genoa to Shanghai.

How did it-- what was the route?

Through the Suez Canal and then through the Straits between what was called Ceylon and India and then to Manila-- to Singapore and to Manila and then, finally, to Shanghai.

Do you know how long it took?

A month.

A month.

That was May of 1940.

May of 1940.

Yeah, and so we got the train through--

Austria?

Austria and Italy of course.

Before we go to your China story, which sounds very exotic-- we don't have that many people who can tell us directly what that was like-- I'd like to go further on the European story and ask about all the people that you've introduced us to. What happened to them? Let's start with Karel, Jaroslav, Marta, Daisy, your mother's side of the family, your aunt Tante Rosa. Could you let us know?

They all died in the Holocaust. The only survivors, besides us, was my aunt Kathy who went through Auschwitz.

Katalin?

Katalin. Her nicknames were Kato. And then, when she came here, it became Kathy, but her official name was Katalin, K-A-T-A-L-I-N. And she survived. And we can talk about it more later on. That's part of the China experience in a strange way.

And my uncle Ruda and one cousin, Jarda-- Jaroslav's daughter who also survived Auschwitz and who went back to Prague after the war and stayed there and married a fellow there and who died not too long ago. We met when we went to Prague.

So was she able to provide you with details of what happened to the rest of the family?

No, because I don't think she really knew any more than we did. We knew the dates of their deaths because the Nazis kept very good records of that kind of thing. And their names appear on one of the synagogue walls in Prague with the dates. And my parents found out about it not until after the war, and they were all gone, all of them.

Did they-- were they taken through Theresienstadt or direct to--

Yes, the Czech relatives were temporarily, but I don't think the Hungarian relatives were. No, they wouldn't have been. And they were taken directly to Auschwitz, most of them. But some of them ended up not in Auschwitz. I think Tante Rosa was in one of the other camps, and I've forgotten the name of it, Bergen-Belsen maybe.

Your mother's instinct.

Yes, that's--

When was the next time that any member of your family went back to Prague?

My parents went back in 1968 I think it was.

So that's already 23 years after the war ends.

Right.

And they had, by then, found out and knew?

Oh absolutely. It hit my father very hard. It was one of those what-if situations, if he had prevailed on them.

Did he feel guilty about that?

I imagine not that direct guilt because it wasn't like he could have done any more than he did, but he escaped. They did not. That creates guilt just in itself. And, probably, he wished he had been more forceful in convincing them that he was doing the right thing and then that they were not.

But he also didn't know that.

He didn't know that.

He didn't know that. It was all such an unknown.

Yes, and, nevertheless, I know there were things that he was sorry about that weren't his fault.

No, no.

And, as far as my mother's side, there was just nothing that we could have possibly done. And there were some distant cousins who survived by converting to Catholicism. And they ended up coming here to the United States, but they were never close relatives.

And we didn't have that much to do with them. We met, and we had some getting togethers, but they were short lived. And they went out on their own. And so there was no close connection there, and they were distant cousins anyhow.

These would have been from Hungary from your mother's side?

Yes, my mother's side, right.

OK, what a loss. I mean, when you think, it's such a large family.

Yeah, my cousins were, from all indications, lovely, bright children the ones that I probably met and knew well in Prague.

Well, I remember-- and we'll come to this in more detail towards the end of our interview-- but the Facebook posts that is it your son who has put them together?

Well, it was his idea.

His idea.

And he relied on me to put together which documents and photographs I wanted to scan and send to him to put on the Facebook thing with each paragraph of my father's memoir.

What a beautiful-- I mean lovely, lovely photos. And, Daisy, I mean such a sweet girl.

And so, from what I know from my parents, so were my other cousins. They ranged in age. Vera, the one who survived, was the oldest. She was something in her teens when she was taken.

And the rest were somewhere between Daisy, who was five years older-- so she must have been eight or nine and then in between. They were all several different ages. Jarda had another child, and Karel had two. And Marta had just Daisy.

OK, China, what are the earliest memories that you would have of China

OK, that's a whole different period because not only were my direct experiences much more positive, strangely, but the way I felt about things also was much more positive my parents were very protective, not to the point they wouldn't let me do things, in fact, quite the opposite once we were established in China. But I did not feel any weight on my shoulders as a result of what was going on, even after they knew the specifics. I heard about it, but in a way that didn't make me feel very negative about things at all.

Were your parents storytellers? Because you know the stories.

I do. Well, I was the only child. We were close. We were off in our own world so to speak. And we had a close relationship. So, yeah, I heard a lot of stories.

OK, but I can understand that it wouldn't have been-- when they heard of them, that it would have been at a time when they would feel that you could handle it, understand it--

Right

--cope with whatever the fallout is.

Yes, and they did it in a way, which, as I say, didn't traumatize me in any way to the point where, when we arrived in the United States, I said something to the effect that I felt very sorry for people who aren't Jewish.

And what made you say that?

Just the way I felt I guess, at which point, my parents thought it might be a good idea to make me realize what's really going on. And they sent me off to a summer camp the first summer here in New York, which was run by Quaker people. And it was a nice experience actually, but it opened the world for me a little bit. Anyhow, I can go back.

That's OK. So what were your parents' first experiences then? How did they establish themselves when they got to

Shanghai?

Well, because of the generosity of our family, they had a little money, and they were able to rent a small apartment in the French Concession. I can tell you about concessions if you like.

Yeah, what are concessions?

The major coastal cities in China at that time, like Shanghai and like the city we ended up in, Tientsin, which is now called Tianjin, were divided up, in large part, by the Western powers. And so, Shanghai and Tientsin, there was a very Chinese part, but the core of the cities in both cases were divided up by the Western powers so that there was an English Concession, so to speak, and a French Concession, and other countries' concessions that were physically part of-- let's say the British Concession was the law of England prevailed in that part of--

Oh, really? I didn't know that.

Yes, and so, the French Concession, the same thing for the French. So this apartment happened to be in the French Concession. That doesn't mean that we couldn't live there if we weren't French, but the law of France. And so they had-- we had a small apartment of which I have some photos. My father-- mainly, my father collected these things and kept them of the apartment.

And they got to be friends with neighbors who were in similar circumstances, not from, necessarily, Czechoslovakia, relatively few people, but some. And, being who he was, my father started joining things. So he became a member of the Czech platoon of the British-- I don't know what they call them-- armed services kind of organization in Shanghai.

And he got to know a lot of people as a result of that. And they had as one of their functions, to go around in middle of the night and just see that things were all right and also pick up dead bodies because there were poor people who just passed away from hunger, not Europeans so much as Chinese. That was one of--

Were there many Jewish refugees?

There were a number, yes. And Shanghai probably became the largest such concentration in China of people, most of which or many of whom stayed there during the war. But so he was doing that, and he-- making friends. And so was my mother, actually, with neighbors.

And the one little recollection I have from my Shanghai time, because we were only living in Shanghai for about nine months, was I befriended some child in the playground right near where we lived. And I used to like to play with him almost daily in the sand or whatever. I was four, thereabouts.

I learned to speak his language, which I was convinced was English. It tuned out it was German. And that was pointed out to me at some point by my parents. You know, that's not English. That's German. And I refused to believe that. [SPEAKING GERMAN], I said.

What do they know?

It took a while for me to get the picture, but I did. So I do remember, again, a little scene of being in the playground with him. That's pretty much all. I don't remember much of that. And it was a short period of time.

Well, you know, there was another route to Shanghai that some Jewish refugees took, and that could have been mostly Polish refugees and Baltic refugees. They got visas from Sugihara, who was the Chinese-- Japanese diplomat, and came with Trans-Siberian Railroad.

Right.

Did you ever meet any of such people? Do you know?

There were I think a few that I, personally, didn't know. They were my parents' age, and so they knew them. But we ended up in what was then called Tientsin because my father found a little ad in the local paper looking for an engineer, which he was. That's one of the reasons that I ended up getting my degree in engineering because he felt very strongly that he could practice his profession anywhere in the world, unlike some people who were doctors or lawyers or other professions. So that made an impression.

In any event, he answered that little ad. It was a little ad in the local paper from a Swiss firm who operated all over the world. And their main headquarters in Asia was in Japan at that time. It was pre-Pearl Harbor. And it was in Kobe in Japan. And he answered that ad and was called in for an interview, left my mother and me in Shanghai, and took a ship over to Japan, was interviewed, and was accepted for a position in Tientsin, China.

Was that far from Shanghai?

Quite, it's about 1,000 miles.

Oh, wow.

It's way north, not the utmost north of China, but it's near Beijing, a little east and somewhat south of Beijing. It's 60 miles, I think, in between. And it's a port, but not a port like you think of on the ocean or the sea, but connected by canals to the ocean. It was really the Yellow Sea or even the Gulf.

And so he was over there and got the position and then cabled my mother and said pack everything up and come over. And so she had that job, and that's what we did. We went over to Japan, and he had a stay there for several weeks before going on to Tientsin to get oriented and so on.

Do you remember going to Japan with her?

No, I've been back since coming here to the United States. We stopped over, and I remember that. And then we've been back to-- Carol and I, my wife and I, have been to Japan, but I don't remember that part of it.

Again, I know stories, which I was told, nothing major. But the people-- the fellow who hired him was married. And my mother told the story of they wanted to invite us to dinner, but they said we're being rationed and very severely rationed.

And they found some way of getting some food, and we ended up having dinner with them. And so it was getting to be a little social kind of situation. And I was a happy little four-year-old. So that was in--

With all this stuff swirling around you.

Yeah, exactly.

OK, so then you go. After the several weeks in Japan, you leave for Tientsin.

Tientsin, right.

Tientsin.

By ship.

By ship.

Right.

Any memories of that?

No.

OK.

I do remember after that.

OK, so tell us first how-- tell us first the adult part of the story. That is how you got established, what your father did, where did you live. And then we'll go to your memories.

OK, sure. So my father had this position. He became manager of a factory that they wanted to build and develop of electric electrodes for welding and other purposes. And he was no expert in that particular area, but he was bright enough, I guess, to learn enough about it. And he successfully did establish that factory and that part of the company The name of the company was Liebermann Waelchli and Company, a Swiss firm.

Liebermann?

Waelchli.

Waelchli.

W-A-E-L-C-H-I.

OK.

And Company. And they did all kinds of import, export, manufacturing. You name it. They did it pretty much all over the world, including--

Are they still in existence as far as you know?

I don't think so. I don't think so. Anyhow, and his-- he had a boss there, and he had a number of people working for him to develop the factory and then after the factory-- and, by the way, material was very hard to get. And he had to use his ingenuity to get the required materials and his engineering background to take care of some of the technical stuff and so on, but he ended up successfully developing that factory and opening it and running it afterwards.

And there were a lot of Chinese workers there, as well as some of his officers let's call them. I mean, they weren't officers of the company. They were just his-- they were supervisory people.

And we first lived in a hotel for some period of time called the Talati House, which was a hotel that was owned by an Indian immigrant whose name was Talati. And we lived there for I'd say several months. Unfortunately, during that period, I developed a mild case of TB, and so my parents took me to a German Jewish doctor who had been an earlier immigrant to Shanghai actually to Tientsin. I'm sorry. He was in Tientsin.

And he diagnosed it and told my parents that I should have bed rest and that there wasn't a hell of a lot more to do about it, which they dutifully did for me. And I was in this small apartment in the hotel and, basically, bedridden for some period of time, but, eventually, not too-- fairly quickly, got better so that I was up and around. And so it was OK after a while.

Were there concessions also in Tientsin?

Yes, there were. We were in the British Concession at that time. The French Concession adjoined it. They were almost like wedge shaped, running to the river.

And was there a British presence then?

Absolutely, and, after Pearl Harbor-- I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit.

That's OK.

But, after Pearl Harbor, those British and American, Dutch, Belgian citizens who didn't figure out that they were should get out of there or didn't want to were interned by the Japanese. It was not anything like the German concentration camp, but they were, much as the Jewish community in Shanghai was also-- sort of the ghetto was made into a more official internship.

So you're saying that the Japanese occupied this part of China?

See, I did get ahead of myself.

OK.

So let me backtrack.

Yeah, let's backtrack a bit, OK.

So here we were in the Talati House Hotel.

In Talati House, yes.

And I guess there were other people around, and there were some younger kids. And I got to be friends. And there were some older, but still children. I have pictures of me and a couple of older girls up on the roof of the Talati House.

And then Pearl Harbor hit while we were there. My father had just-- my parents had just registered me in a British school. It was kindergarten. I guess it was a British grammar school. So there were more levels above that, but I was that age. So it was maybe even prekindergarten. I was four or five, maybe getting close to five at that point.

He had registered me, and it was like opening day and then Pearl Harbor hit. And, all of a sudden, the Japanese who had occupied large parts of China prior to that, but had not ventured into these cities where these Western nations had their concessions-- so they were not in Tientsin, for instance, or Shanghai for that matter, except after Pearl Harbor, they were. They occupied those places.

So they showed up, soldiers and what have you. In fact-- and this, I must say, I think I remember it, but it's hard to say whether I directly remember it at this point. But I was allowed free rein in the hotel. And, apparently, after the Japanese had occupied the city, some of the soldiers occupied the hotel or, at least, the lobby part of the hotel. And they stacked their rifles in the middle of the lobby.

And my parents were getting ready for breakfast. They were all ready. They told me to go downstairs. So they didn't realize what was going on down there.

And I went down there with my pop gun, a cork pop gun. And I got down there, and there were these Japanese soldiers sitting around with their rifles stacked. I came over, and I stacked my pop gun in there.

[LAUGHTER]

So they thought that was kind of funny.

Funny.

Here's this little blond kid. I was white blonde at the time. And they thought-- so my parents came down. And here I am, sitting on a Japanese soldier's lap with my pop gun, but it was OK.

Now did the fact that your father worked for a company that had its headquarters in Kobe help? Did that have any impact?

I think the fact that it was a Swiss firm is the thing that helped because they were allowed to operate right through the whole war. And I don't know that it was the fact that they had offices in Japan. Maybe that didn't hurt.

In fact, again, this is my father's story, not mine, but, while he was being interviewed and then being allowed to move from Japan, get out of Japan and go to China, he was being interviewed by a Japanese woman who was a Nisei who had been in the United States and then went back to Japan and now was thoroughly Japanese, but spoke very good English. My father, by then, in Shanghai, tried very hard and somewhat successfully to learn English as well because he thought that may be useful, which it was.

And she was asking him all sorts of questions, including, oh, I see you were from Czechoslovakia. Which part of Czechoslovakia were you from? Now this is 1941 by now, right? And, of course, the Germans had occupied not only Czechoslovakia, but much of Europe, Poland, and so on.

And which part of Czechoslovakia? And, my father thinking, he said, oh, I'm from Slovakia because, at that point, Slovakia was like a puppet state. And she said, oh, OK, that's fine, boom, end of the conversation. So that's another instance.

So it could have been that she could have informed her German friends?

Yeah, and squelched the whole process maybe. I don't know.

Yeah, but he had to be aware of these things.

He not only realized what could have happened, but figured out how to deal with it right there on the spot.

Yeah.

Yeah, anyhow, back to Tientsin and the Japanese.

And the Japanese and the soldiers, yeah.

Yeah, and, my father, I started telling you my father had-- my parents had enrolled me in this school. And my father realized what was going on that first day. He had already gotten me into the school, physically into the school.

Now he wanted to go back in, by which time the Japanese soldiers had fully occupied the city, and they wouldn't let him in. Or, at least, first, he had to convince them that all he wanted to do was take me and get me out, which, somehow, he did. And so I got out.

And, subsequently, they enrolled me in what they now realized was a Tientsin Jewish School that existed and was still operating just fine, thank you. So that's how I ended up at the Tientsin Jewish School. I can tell you more about that as we go forward. Yeah, and then--

What was the Chinese power that was overrun by the Japanese? Was it the Kuomintang?

Kuomintang, yes. Later on, during the war, there was a three-way war going on between the Japanese, the nationalists, Kuomintang, and the communist guerrillas. They were guerrillas at first and became much more an army eventually, but I can get into that as we go forward about our China experience.

More about the Japanese occupation, they then put barriers along the borders of these concessions. And it was not like you could go back and forth anymore, as you were able to before and after the war, by the way, because, for a little while after the war, until the communists took over the country, the concessions still existed.

Anyhow, yeah, to the point where, again, the passports my father had kept, the Czech passports, they were fine. In other words, we were-- according to Japanese, my father used to say, we weren't a big enemy. We were a little enemy.

Plus, we were taken over by the Germans. So having Czech passports helped. In fact, being able to go from one concession to the other was possible because my parents had those passports.

So it was--

It was also possible for them, by the way, to go from Shanghai to Japan and into Tientsin because of the fact that they had Czech passports.

Isn't that interesting? I mean, maybe it's the distance that the bureaucracy doesn't get that far. It would have-- if the Japanese are allies of the Germans, so you would think that they would be requiring German-issued identification papers, given that they're allies and so on, and it's now part of the Reich.

The connection wasn't like they were part of the Reich. In fact, their attitude, for instance, towards Jewish people was nothing like the German attitude.

What was it? What was the attitude?

A combination, I think, of ignorance and who cares kind of an attitude. They, themselves, most of the Japanese are both Shinto and Buddhist. And I don't think that mattered to them too much.

It wasn't something that was part of their world.

That's right. Later on, a little more so because they got a little pressure, and I can tell you more about that later as we get into that. Anyhow, so here we were in Tientsin. my father had his position. He's just getting started doing what he needed to do.

They found a nice place for us to live, eventually, not at the Talati House forever. And it was in the British concession. It was on a-- not in the middle of the-- they don't call it downtown, but that's what it boiled down to, the core of the British Concession, a little further out. And there was a nice, big house that was a European-style house.

I was going to ask that.

Yeah, it was a European-style house made of stone I remember, large enough so it was split by the owner into two with a barrier between the two, internal barrier. And we rented one part of it, and others rented the other part of it. And it was on [MANDARIN], which is the Chinese for 68th Road.

[MANDARIN]

[MANDARIN] is 60. [MANDARIN] is eight, 68 Street.

The languages that you were exposed to, it's amazing.

I spoke Chinese, Mandarin, but, still, I can count, and I can curse a little. Although I retain some of the other languages, Chinese has left me. I went back there, and I thought maybe it would come out, but it did not.

It didn't.

And, when I came here, I spoke the language, Mandarin, however. And I went to people, Chinese people, and started speaking to them, and they did not understand me because most of the people who were here spoke Cantonese. They came from the southern part of China.

And they do not understand each other at all. It's like two different languages. The characters are the same. They can read and write to each other, but they cannot speak to each other.

Well, and it could not be like Serb or Croatian for example, where you can understand.

No, no, not at all. So I would walk up to people and speak in Mandarin, and they would look at me like, what, are you making fun of me or something like that. And the attitude was let me get out of here with few exceptions. I did have one case where I was on the Long Island Railroad coming back from my uncle's house. They had moved out of New York City and moved to Great Neck.

Uncle Ruda?

Uncle Ruda. I'm getting ahead of myself with this. It's a little part of the story and I overheard a young-- they weren't young to me, but they were, apparently, a young couple speaking Mandarin on the train. And I went to them and started to speak. And they--

They kind of thought, huh?

They didn't know what to do about me, but we had a conversation. And, sometimes, you sit there, and you realize you're being watched. So I turn around and see this car full of people looking at me, this little blonde kid speaking Mandarin.

So I tried, but, after a while, I wanted to be American. I didn't want to have all this stuff, and I couldn't find people to speak to anyhow. And so I forgot it.

Well, you lose a language that way.

You do, but I thought it might come back, but it has not. Anyhow, so we lived in [MANDARIN], but it was called by the English Dumbarton Road.

Dumbarton Road, OK.

Each of those streets had two names, the Chinese name and then the English name.

Was it a single story building, or was it several stories?

Well, a part of it was two stories, the bigger part, which we were not in. We were all in the single-story part I remember. And there was a nice like a terrace, veranda kind of a slate area outside.

How many rooms?

I can't tell you for sure, but I had my own bedroom, and it was a living room my parents had a bedroom. And so--

Modern?

--there was a kitchen. Relatively modern, yes.

Electricity?

Oh, yes.

Indoor plumbing?

Yes.

Heat?

As far as I remember, yes. I mean, I was never cold.

Coal heating or some other kind?

I can't tell you that.

That's OK. That's OK.

I'm not sure.

That's OK.

But it was heated for sure.

I take it that, at this point, you didn't have monetary problems anymore.

No, because my father had a good position, and he was paid in the equivalent of American dollars. And so it went a long way. He used to say that, to live well, well-- we're talking with servants-- before and during the war and after the war, a little bit after the war, you could live very nicely for $1 a day.

Oh my goodness, oh my goodness, yeah.

It was a poor country.

Yeah.

Which I was very well aware of in terms of the poverty and the fact that we were very well off. And, when we lived in that first place, we didn't have servants.

Talati, you mean?

No, no, no, in that--

In that place that you're talking about?

In that place that we're talking about in Dumbarton Road, we had someone who came in and did maybe a little cleaning, cooking, and that kind of thing, but they were not full-time servants. Later on, we had full-time servants.

And it was a little out of town, not really, but it was a long walk to get, for instance, to my school. So I would have to take the rickshaw. And I would do that sometimes. It was a little bit like Uber these days.

You put your hand up, and a three-wheeler rickshaw, [MANDARIN] I think, [MANDARIN], three wheels, three-wheeler, would take me. And my parents were OK with that. They let me go by myself after a little while, not right away because I was too young anyhow. Yeah, I was pretty independent.

So how did you-- how did that poverty make itself aware to you? How was it that--

Well, it was not earlier because, first of all, I was too young but second of all, we, eventually, moved from there more to the core, central part of the British Concession on what was called [MANDARIN] Road. And, when we lived there,

there was a lot of commerce going on. It was residential, but not all residential. And there was a warehouse nearby.

And I'll give you just one example, first of all, dirty. The Chinese were not the most-- unlike the Japanese who every little spot got removed, not so with the Chinese, completely different personalities. And, everything that they wanted to do, if they wanted to throw out, they threw out. And it was really-- and poverty was obvious in that regard because of what some of the kind of things that were being thrown out or left, not always nice.

And one particular thing I remember so vividly that impressed me and made me realize was this warehouse. They called it a go down because you had to go down a couple of steps to get into the warehouse. They were bringing donkey or mule train wagons full of big, big, probably 100-pound sacks of flour to store in that warehouse. And, two men-- they were called coolies-- would take one on each end of the bag and carry them, heavy bags, into the warehouse.

And an old lady-- at least, she looked old to me-- had made an arrangement apparently to stick around. And, as they were carrying the bags of flour, she had a little dustpan and a broom. And she'd skim off the top of the bag a tiny bit of flour just with her brush into her pan. And she had a little bag and dropped a few bits of flour in the bag. She would do this all day long. By the end of the day, she had a little bit of flour.

Oh my goodness, that is hunger, you know?

Probably fed some family doing that. Well, by then, I was more like seven or eight. So I'm jumping ahead a little bit, but that's OK. And it made a big impression on me.

And right across the street from us was a nice Victoria Park that I played in, very English park. And, in the building we lived in, we had this very large apartment. I still have the Chinese rug-- we have it in our bedroom-- that was in the living room, but there were two identical ones next to each other, butting up against each other, which didn't fill the living room, 9 by 12 rugs.

Wow, wow. So it was a large living room?

Big, big, big apartment divided by sliding wooden doors to our dining room. And by that time-- I'm jumping ahead of myself, but my father was doing quite well, and we were part of a European community. I'll talk about the school in a minute.

And we had three servants-- a cook full time, and it's an unfortunate term, you know, the boy who would clean up and so on, and an amah who would do the laundry. But that's pretty much all I didn't have a babysitter amah kind of person.

I think we should break in a minute, but I wanted to ask a question before we do. And that has to do with the Japanese and the occupation of these concessions. As far as-- I want to just repeat it back to make sure I understand. In Tientsin, when they occupy Tientsin, the result is that you have to have-- there are difficulties going between one concession and another. They're walled off. They're--

Barbed wired.

Yeah. But, within each concession, people are fairly free to move around.

That's true.

OK, and, if you were a citizen of the enemy countries, are you taken out from these concessions and put into another kind of internment place?

Yes.

So because you were not citizens--

Out of the city by the way.

Out of the city.

Not too far, but out of the city, closer-- go ahead, I'm sorry.

Yeah, if you were British, for example, there are no British people then left in the British area?

Correct.

OK.

And it really became not a British area. It became a Japanese occupied area.

OK.

And it extended itself, eventually, quite a bit during the war.

So which Western-- which Western citizens were left over?

Mainly, the stateless ones, people who had been in Tientsin for a long time who had come from elsewhere with some exceptions, and I'll get to that in a second, mainly Russian people who had come from Siberia, Harbin, for instance, north of there, and had, for whatever their reasons, business reasons, family reasons, had emigrated to China and had been there for quite a long time and formed their own communities, including a group of Jewish people of that Russian background.

There were also some people more like us, very few Czech people by the way. Even in Shanghai, there were a few, but not many. Czechoslovakia wasn't a big country compared to Germany in terms of population and so on. Mainly, those people were mainly of German Jewish background who found their way to Tientsin, a few, not many, but there were a few, mostly not, mostly, as I say, people who spoke Russian at home.

And what about Germans then? They wouldn't have been taken out. Were there--

There weren't that many Germans there. Although-- or, at least, I don't know of them. Let's put it that way.

Oh, OK. Because I would have thought, I mean, from a friendly, allied power, they wouldn't have taken their citizens.

No, I imagine not but I don't think there were too many of them at all.

So they would--

Although, there had been a German concession, but I'm not sure what happened about that during the war.

OK, because my thought was that, if there were Germans, then it wouldn't have been very good for the Jews because they could have told the Japanese listen.

Right, right. Well, apparently, that did not go on.

OK, that wasn't--

Or, if it did, it went over the Japanese. As I said before, they didn't seem to differentiate between us and other European people.

OK.

And there's did a little story you may have read about that you talked about those barriers. So my parents had befriended the fellow who was of German Jewish background who was there, and he owned a restaurant in the French Concession, but lived in the British Concession. Before the war, it was not a big deal. It was walking distance. It turned out to be quite a good restaurant I think.

And he, obviously, wanted to go from home to his business and was stopped. And they wanted to see his passport. Well, he didn't have a passport because he had come from Europe without one because it was confiscated. And so he went home, and he figured out, well, what am I going to do.

So he took one of his menus that he had from his restaurant, and he found every rubber stamp he could possibly find. And he stamped things all over the place, put a picture of himself on there. And then when he was asked for the [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], he showed them this, and he was waved in. So that's a light side story.

That's pretty cool.

Anyhow, so--

A menu, a menu.

Yeah.

Schnitzel.

Right.

Stamp, yeah. OK, so, before the break, we were talking about life under Japanese occupation and the concessions and the kind of restrictions that they imposed, the barbed wires around the various quarters that made up the concessions, and the citizens from enemy nations, the larger enemies, who were taken out. How did-- first of all, how old were you when you moved to Tientsin?

OK, I was 4 and 1/2, something like that.

And how many years did you stay there?

About eight.

So from 4 and 1/2 to 12 and 1/2?

Well, actually, I'm off there a little bit. I must have been younger than 4 and 1/2 because we were-- I was almost 12 when I arrived here. So maybe I was four when I got to Tientsin.

OK, but, at any rate, your key childhood years were spent in Tientsin.

That's true.

And tell me a little bit about those childhood years.

OK, as I mentioned before, there was no heavy weight on my shoulders. I was a kid, and I did what many kids do, most kids do. I went to school.

The Jewish school?

In the Tientsin Jewish School, which was, more or less, like an English grammar school except with some special aspects. So the curriculum was quite broad. Many of the-- it went through the high school years, and many of the students who went there, not many, but some ended up going to universities at places like Stanford and other places because it was a very fine education.

Was it an old school? Had it been recently established?

Well, that's a relative term, but it couldn't have been very old. It was sometime in the 20th century for sure and probably not more than a couple of decades old when we arrived, maybe even less. And the Jewish community there, as I mentioned earlier, was, primarily, made up of people who started out as Russians, but not entirely

and it was a very close-knit, very self-contained, in a way, community. They had a hospital. They had a synagogue, which still exists, but not as a synagogue. They had the school and various charitable organizations and all kinds of organizations. The Kunst Club, which means art, Kunst, art club, is part of that with all kinds of activities going on and programs going on there.

And people were pretty open. I mean, when we arrived-- again, not from a child's perspective, but, looking back and from what I heard, we were open-- brought in with open arms.

What was the language of instruction?

English.

English?

Yes.

Oh, that's very helpful.

Oh, yeah.

OK, so you were picking up Chinese at home and sort of outside of school--

In the street, basically.

--in the street, yeah, and learning English in school.

Yes.

And, at home, what language? Did you still speak--

Czech.

Still Czech, OK.

Yes, and I had to learn Russian because, first of all, many of my friends were from that background, but then they had, I remember, a nature studies course, which was taught by a man who spoke nothing but Russian. I didn't know Russian.

Yeah.

And I guess, as a young child, languages are much easier to pick up than when one gets older.

But wonderful, just wonderful when a kid is in that environment--

Yeah, well--

--that you can

--you know, I just absorbed it. And then I heard a lot of German at home and, also, my parents speaking to other people and that little child in Shanghai that I thought I was English. And so I could understand German very well, and I could speak it fairly well.

Just by absorption?

Yes.

No formal instruction?

That's true. English, I had more formal instruction in school. Chinese, I began to have. Just before we left, we started learning how to read and write characters, but that obviously stopped. But the other languages were more or less picked up.

Although, there was a Russian course as well it was a part of the curriculum in the school and we had math of all kinds. It depends on the grade level. We had English dictation. We had grammar. We had writing, all the various components that you would think of. And we had Russian language. We had Jewish history.

What about religious instruction?

It was not really religious instruction. It was-- they were, by the way, not all Jewish children. They were mostly Jewish children, but there were some were not. [? Varya ?] [? Kagansky, ?] I remember.

[? Varya ?] [? Hagansky? ?]

[? Kagansky, ?] yeah.

[? Kagansky. ?]

She was not a Jewish child. Anyhow, and what else? The curriculum-- oh, and Hebrew we had, but it was not-- it was Jewish history and Hebrew language, but not religion. That was left to being in the synagogue and in that aspect of it.

OK, now I'm speaking to the adult, not the child at the time. Do you know if this community was established post-Bolshevik Revolution from emigres or people who had escaped from there or after that?

It was a combination. There were people there from before, and there were quite a few people from after that.

OK, because a lot of people who would have been religious, for example, might have left right after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Right, I would-- this is a generality. It probably went from soup to nuts, as far as that subject is concerned, but I would think that, on a general, average kind of level, they were not all very religious.

OK.

It was a conservative synagogue and observed many of the holidays, Jewish holidays, most of them I guess. And we spent a lot of time, even as kids, at the synagogue. It was quite a nice building, relatively new at that time, and probably built in the late '30s.

And I remember playing outside the synagogue, games of all kinds and what have you. It was near a stream, which is now a highway. And the synagogue is no longer used as a synagogue. It was then turned into a restaurant, I think, at one point. And then, interestingly enough, I think the Catholic Church owns it at this time.

And so I spent quite a bit of time there, but it's mostly with my friends from school kind of thing. And I don't know. Does that answer?

Yeah. Now, at home, were your neighbors also Westerners of some kind?

Yes.

So you were in a kind of an expatriate community?

Yes, it's a bubble. It was a bubble, no question. And it was a lovely place for a child to grow up. We were relatively, compared to the most of the population, very well off. We, as I mentioned, had servants. I had to learn my lessons sometimes about that.

I remember one occasion. I don't know how old I was, eight or nine. And I was sitting in this big living room, and I had put a glass of water over the other side.

And I yelled for the boy to pick up that. I got slapped for that, lessons to be learned. Anyhow, that was one. And then the cook-- well, maybe I'm getting a little ahead of myself, but we got into the subject.

Yeah, sure.

During the war, there was a curfew the Japanese imposed. And, one New Year's, my parents went off, having a great time at a New Year's Eve party, and left me, basically, without a babysitter. That was fine. It was not unusual.

And our cook lived in the back of our apartment. It was a big apartment. And his kitchen and his living quarters was way back there. He was trained by some British people in India who had lived in India, and then he learned a lot from my mother. Although, he would turn his-- literally, turn his back on her when she was telling him what to do, but he absorbed it and then used it.

But, anyhow, this night, New Year's, they were, I guess, either feeling what they had to drink or playing the big shots, not just alone, the whole bunch of them. Curfew schmurfew, they were going to go out, out of wherever they were, and go home. And, PS, they got picked up by the authorities and put into jail just for the night.

Well, I woke up in the middle of the night and no parents. I got a little concerned. And hours went by and still no parents. So I woke up the cook, poor guy, and he was very sympathetic. And he decided he would make me handmade potato chips in the middle of the night, sliced them paper thin, fried them up for me. And that made the time go by. And my parents--

How sweet.

Parents showed up, and that was the end of the story. So, yeah, and I had the run of the town, but more after the war than during the war because there were restrictions, but there were some very nice facilities. There was Racecourse Road, which was the English name for a road that went out to a racecourse they had a little further out of the city.

And there was a beautiful country club-- I can't think of any better word for it-- which was active before and after the war, but not during the war because it was like an English, American country club. I can get to that later on, but, anyhow, so I was starting to tell about the school. I mean, do you want to hear about that a little bit more?

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah, well, most of my friends were from that school eventually.

OK.

And we played. We played in the schoolyard a lot. We played in-- there was a courtyard in the building, the apartment house next door to us. And we drove the neighbors crazy, I'm sure, playing in there. And we went to each other's homes just like normal children.

So the war is far away.

Well--

Aside from the Japanese presence.

That's right. There was no active warfare going on in the city. It was occupied, period, and controlled, but there was no fighting going on, not right in the city or the part of the city that we were in. Now there was a vast portion of the city that was mostly Chinese, which was also occupied. And they may not have been treated exactly the same way unfortunately.

Well, that was one of my questions. Was there news of occupation policies, occupation activities? In general, I know nothing about the Japanese occupation of China during the war, but the little that I read is that it could have been-- it was, in some places, very brutal.

It was. Fortunately, not where we were and I suppose it depended on the general in charge. I'm not sure of that, but that's the logical conclusion because there were parts of China where it was terrible. But our part of China happened-- as we were, again, very lucky, it was not so bad at all. There was no, at least not to our knowledge, atrocious acts going on.

What about the people who were in charge? Were they Japanese? Or were they local Chinese who were working for the Japanese?

In charge in what regard do you mean?

Municipal things, the police, any sort of--

They were under Japanese supervision. Let's put it that way. Now they didn't quit their jobs. They continued to make the city run as well as possible. And the Japanese, you know I'm sure, controlled that.

OK, OK.

Yeah.

Was it corrupt at that point?

I'm sure there was corruption. I don't know of any specific instances. I know more about that sort of after the war when the Marines came with all of their equipment that they gave to the nationalist government, which ended up not used, in the fields, being cannibalized and sold.

So this is the US Marines?

The US, no, the US Marines just provided this stuff. The nationalist, communist bigwigs or whoever-- I don't know who they were-- were the ones who then took advantage of the situation because you could buy-- there was a black market. It was like a real market, and you could buy a Jeep. I mean, it was that open. And it didn't come just out of nowhere.

No, of course not. It had to have blessings from on high in order to operate.

That's right. That's right.

But that's post-war you're saying?

That is.

OK, so, during the war--

During the war, I don't know about it. Let's put it that way. I just don't know. I can't imagine there wasn't any. I can't imagine there wasn't some collusion. There must have been because that's always the case when you have an occupied force.

Of course. Now what about news? Was there-- did you have a radio at home?

Yes, we did, but I'm not sure there was much to listen to. I remember the cook's Chinese music on in the background, which could drive anyone nuts sometimes, but this high-pitched singing. So there was radio. We had radio, and I think my parents listened to it, but I'm not sure what they could listen to and what kind of news they got. I think most of the news that they got was by mail.

OK, were there any--

So it was always old news.

OK, were there any letters that came from family members back in Europe?

Early on and then, of course, not. There were some early on. And my parents wrote. And, whether they got there or not, I'm not sure. I know some of them did because they got responses. And I even have some of that correspondence.

And then-- well, that's again after the war. So I'm getting ahead of myself. There was another piece of correspondence, which is key or very important for my family, and that was a letter from my aunt Kathy. When Carol was talking about aunts, she had one aunt, my uncle Ruda's wife, Hannelore.

Whom he married in Brussels.

Who he married in Brussels. And the other aunt, who was my aunt Katalin, who, when she found that piece of Nakashima, she was the the aunt, not the one who suggested Nakashima, but she came along with us. So, all of a sudden, her letter showed up.

Hang on a second. Just to explain, off camera, we were talking about a piece of furniture in this home that is done by a Japanese artisan craftsman, very famous now. It's a sideboard. And his name is Nakashima. And it was your aunt Katalin who had gone through Auschwitz--

That's correct.

--who recommended him.

No, no.

No, oh.

It was my aunt Hannelore who recommended him, but my aunt Katalin happened to be with us when we were buying things.

Oh, that's right.

And she saw that piece.

And put her hand on it.

Put her hand on it and purchased it, and now we have it.

OK, OK. So let's talk about that piece of correspondence, even though it's going on a little bit. You say that she wrote to you, or she wrote to your father?

Just after the war, she had been liberated by the Swedish Red Cross from a train that went all around Germany, getting away from Auschwitz and figuring out what to do. The people in charge, apparently, didn't know what to do. They went there. They went back.

Anyhow, they finally ended up going to a place where the Swedish Red Cross was able to take the people on that train off and rescue them and took them to Sweden. And she was in Stockholm for a good portion of a year and doing pretty well, considering.

And she wrote a letter addressed to Joseph Schulhof, Liebermann and Waelchli Company, Tientsin, China. That was it. And it got there. And here, by the way, if you don't have the apartment number, it gets sent back. Yeah, that's just a by the way.

And this letter came and told my parents where she was and what had happened and so on. And my parents then got busy making arrangements to bring her to us in Tientsin.

And did you?

And which she did. She flew. And this was right after the war, 1946 I guess by then. She flew, had many, many hops of flights, eventually, getting to Beijing, and then got on the train to come to Tientsin. And that I remember very clearly.

What did she look like?

She's tiny. She is tough as nails on the outside because that was just her personality, not nasty tough, just resilient. That saved her life I'm sure. She was a lot softer on the inside. I called her the sabra, you know, thorny on the-- sabra is a pear, which has prickles on the outside, and it's soft on the inside.

Is that why Israelis are called sabras?

Yes. Anyhow, so she came to us in Tientsin. And people there, our community, were very interested in her experience. And so she was convinced to write it down, which she did in German, but that wasn't useful because most of those people did not speak or understand German.

So she then, one day, at the Kunst Club, the art club, literally, and read her very detailed description of what had happened to her in the time that she spent at Auschwitz and another concentration camp, a very tough-going reading. And there was a translator from German into Russian while she spoke so that everybody could understand.

And that was part of our Facebook project by the way. It's there for people to read. And she stayed with us for several years until we got visas to come to the United States. I'll backtrack.

But then she did not have a visa to come here and ended in Israel for several years. And then my mother convinced her to join us again here in the United States, which she did. She lived mostly in New York she was a seamstress by her profession. And Vogue picked her right up. So that was part of her career here.

Story, yeah.

Anyhow.

So that's Katalin after the war, your mother's sister.

Right.

OK, and so she would have been taken in '44 because she was from Hungary, yes?

Correct.

All right, let's go back now before the war. And we're still in Tientsin. It still has Japanese occupation.

Right, right.

Does your father's business, working for the Swiss company, sort of develop and proceed, more or less, uneventfully, other than looking for materials and raw materials and things?

It proceeded, more or less, normally. I guess everybody still needed welding electrodes and whatever. And so that did not stop.

OK.

And, because it was a Swiss firm, as we earlier discussed, and some portion of it located in Japan, I suppose that was helpful. Yeah, so life went on, so to speak, as usual, as far as that was concerned.

Within this very strange circumstance.

That's right.

Yeah, how did your mother pass her days? I mean, what took up her activities?

She was, basically, a housewife. She didn't work as a business. Later on, she began to do that, especially when it seemed like it was likely that we would come here to the United States. So she started gathering some Chinese artwork or vases and things like that and actually ended up opening a little shop here in New York for a while.

Anyhow, no, she, basically, stayed at home and was in charge of the servants and the household and so on. And then she had a social life.

Was your parents' social life pretty active?

I would say so.

Were they happy?

Do you mean as a couple? Or--

As a couple and at this time in their lives.

I would say remarkably so, but, unlike me, with being a little kid, they had that weight on their shoulders of what was happening in Europe and what was happening to their families. And then, when they found out, especially, it was tough for them. But, locally, together, they were just fine.

When did they find out?

Not until after the war.

OK, did they get newspapers of any kind?

Well, there were newspapers, like The Peking Chronicle.

English language?

English language. But I don't know. During the war, I don't think those newspapers were in operation. So the information was slow to come and not very frequent.

Do you remember where you were in May '45 when the European war ended? Do you remember hearing about the war in Europe ending?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

OK, what were the circumstances of that?

You know, I don't know exactly. In other words, I don't know who told us, how we found out. We just did. But what I do remember was when the Marines came.

US Marines?

US Marines.

And when did they come?

In '45.

After August or before August? Because August is when the Pacific War ends, after the bomb.

It must have been after. It was after, definitely after then.

So do you remember news of the atomic bomb being dropped?

I'm sure. I don't specifically remember that as a--

You were eight.

I was about eight, right. Yeah, so I don't-- I don't specifically remember that and how we found out about it, but we did find out about it for sure.

OK, and did the--

By that time, it was after-- the war just had ended or very close to being ended. And the Japanese were, more or less, in retreat.

That's what I wanted to know.

Yeah, in fact, the Japanese people who were part of the occupation were pretty much abandoned by Japan. And they were-- that's how-- we can't see it here, but the kimono that's hanging there is one of the results of that. Those people were in dire straits, and they wanted to sell anything they owned that was of any value. And my parents bought some of those things, including that--

That Japanese kimono?

--kimono. There's another one we have elsewhere. And, you know, I guess it enabled them to survive. Others did the same kind of thing. And it wasn't just out of being nice. It was we were getting something for it, something of quite nice value, my parents were. But they were in bad-- finally, they ended up going back to Japan. And I don't know what happened to them of course, but--

Was revenge taken on the Japanese occupying forces?

I imagine so, at least, to some extent, because, during the war, there was actually a three-way war going on between the nationalists and the communists and the communists and the Japanese. And both the communists and nationalists banded together, to some extent, not very nicely, not very well, against the Japanese. So there was a three-way war going on.

So this is-- you mentioned earlier about corruption. And you mentioned in one sentence the nationalists and the communists and corruption. And I thought, oh, but those are two different forces, but not necessarily.

Well, there were-- they joined the effort, but they weren't necessarily melded.

OK.

And they fought against each other whenever the opportunity arose as well. So, getting off on a somewhat different tack because it's another subject, but associated, my parents and I, especially my mother and I, spent much of our summers during the war period and after in a small town northeast of Tientsin called Peitaiho. We used to call it "pay-tie-ho." And it was a resort town.

On the water?

On the water.

OK.

It used to be called the Gulf of Chili, C-H-I-L-I I think, but it was really just an arm of the Yellow Sea. It was a beautiful spot. There were hills on one side and the water on the other. And my parents and a friend had a home there that they owned, a small place. And my mother and I would go there for the summertime.

And I had a ball, the beach, walking up in the hills, the donkeys. The donkeys were the mode of transportation there. You hailed a donkey. And, sometimes, the poor guy who owned the donkey would get scared because I'd run away with the donkey, but I'd come back.

And I had a great time. I learned how to swim there. Actually, my father's boss' wife taught me how to swim. They were--

In the ocean?

Yes, but there were-- some times of the day because of the tide, there were shallows. And so I learned how to swim in some of those shallows. And she helped me learn how to swim. It was a great place for a kid. But getting back and forth was not so easy. First of all, even if there was nothing going on, it was a good six-hour train ride

Oh, wow.

But it was a slow train. And then there were some not such great times because, towards the end of the war, the communists were getting more brave I guess or whatever. And they would blow up sections of the train-- of the tracks or bridges. And, sometimes, it would take us days to get back.

I remember one time very clearly. We were in this town of Tangshan, which was devastated not that many years ago by a tremendous earthquake, basically, leveled. But it wasn't so at the time.

And we were stuck, however, at the railroad station there because we couldn't go any further. Some bridge had been blown up or something. And we slept on a table in the railroad station.

And my mother would go out to get some food, and she always-- and that was true all the time. She would never buy anything from the street vendors that she didn't see deep fried, bananas included, skin and all. And so we stayed there for a couple of days until they fixed whatever needed to be fixed to go on. And that was part of the landscape there.

You just highlighted something that I wanted to ask about, and that was food. Two questions about food, was it plentiful during this occupation time, during war? Was there a shortage? And, second, what kind of food was it? Was it Chinese food, Western food?

It was English, Czech, and Hungarian.

That's what the cook made, huh?

That's what the cook made because he learned how to do so. He had the English part. We got served curry, curry dinners. They were the formal curry thing, and they had little condiments of all kinds and then curry and so on. He would do that very nicely. He was an excellent cook.

Anyhow, no, there was no shortage for us. I'm sure there were shortages elsewhere and for the Chinese but there was no shortage for us because we had enough money to afford it more than enough. And the cook would go out to do the shopping. Carol, my wife, mentioned I should say something about because it was maybe of interest.

Yeah, the cook did not want my mother to come along with him. And she thinks she figured out why. First of all, he kept some of the money she gave him, but he spent a lot less than if it were my mother going out for the exact same food. So it was a win-win.

So it was kind of his commission.

His commission, he got paid

Yeah.

But, yeah, he got a little extra that way. And he always came back with whatever we wanted, whatever my mother wanted. And it didn't seem to be a problem if you had the right amount of money.

And what about Chinese food? Did you get acquainted with it?

Yeah, every once and a while, we went out for Chinese.

Just like here.

[LAUGHTER]

That's true. It was terrific. I remember that. And some of our farewell dinners when we were leaving, finally, were given by my father's Chinese associates. So we were really good for a treat there.

Yeah, no, the food was quite Western that we ate at home. It was not Chinese food necessarily. If it was, it was something special, on a special occasion or whatever, or maybe the cook's whim. I'm not sure. And, no, but it was Western food.

What about Indians from India? Was there a presence of Indian people?

A few, a few like that hotel owner.

OK.

Talati.

Talati.

Yeah, and there were a few entrepreneurs and what have you, but not many that I'm aware of.

OK.

Some Sikhs doing the traffic.

Really?

Yeah, yeah.

Was it a pretty city, Tientsin?

You know, I didn't have-- I had free rein sort of within the area, particularly after the war, but even during the war within my area. My parents-- I don't know. Maybe it was the European way of bringing up children. They weren't helicopter parents by any means.

And I did some things, which I don't think-- which we ourselves don't let our granddaughter do at this point and her parents don't let. She's 10 years old. When I was 10, I was riding a bicycle all over Tientsin, all over my part of Tientsin at least. I wouldn't go out to the Chinese area, though, because it wasn't always safe.

Drastic things may not have happened, but I got mugged once, even in the area. It's a sad story for me. I was presented with my first good watch at a birthday, and I wanted to show it off. And my parents said don't take it over to your friend who lived a little out on a farm. And I did

And, sure enough, on the way back, two older boys saw me with my watch. And what they did is, basically, held me. They held my arms behind my back, took the watch and ran. So nothing happened, but my watch was gone. I had a little few things to explain to my parents.

Anyhow, and there was a tension between European children and Chinese children because, thinking back now, you can't blame the Chinese for resenting us. Here we were in their land and then especially in the concessions where that's not even their laws that were prevailing in there. And they're not their people.

Well, some people worked there. They didn't really live there. And so there was resentment, and it was felt. I mean, we had some bouts of rock throwing at each other and that kind of thing occasionally, not very often, but it did happen.

Now let's go to when the Japanese retreat. And you say the US Marines arrive. Do you remember--

Big deal, that was a big deal.

Yeah, did you expect them to come? Were you surprised when they came?

No, my parents knew ahead of time that they were coming. I'm not sure how they found out, but they were told. It was not some secret or surprise. Unfortunately, I was in bed with some kind of jaundice that day when they showed up because I really wanted to see this. I mean, they paraded into town.

Yeah.

And then, shortly after that, we moved from that house that I told you about to that apartment near to where the things were going on. And there's a canal that goes-- it's what makes Tientsin a port, the river. Really, it's a river, which connects from the Yellow Sea.

And only a relatively small craft can come down there, but the LSTs-- Landing Ship Transport I think it stands for-- were able to do that. And some of the sailors came in that way, and the Marines came in that way and got off those ships and then occupied. And not in a-- they just pushed the Japanese out, basically, and then stayed there for quite a while.

So what happened with all all of people who had been interned in those Japanese camps? What happened with them?

Well, they were released right away and either stayed on and became-- the British came back and established. They still had their British concession and all the I'll call them governmental agencies and so on. And I'm sure our upstairs neighbor in the apartment house that we lived-- I remember his first funny name that I thought was funny was Bunny. And he was part of that group.

And they came back and picked up where they left off more or less. And some of them must have left. You know, they had enough. But some stayed. And, the Marines, I had good memories. I was a little gutsy boy.

Tell us.

So the LSTs were moored on the river, and it was-- I don't know-- three, four blocks away from where we lived. So I would go over there, and I would wave at the sailors kind of thing. And they-- look at that blond kid. Hey, shorty. And I thought they were talking about my pants.

Oh.

[LAUGHTER]

And they said come on up. You know, and I'd go up on the ship and climb all over the ships.

Oh wow, what fun.

Yeah, and they'd give me presents, a box of tools. I brought that home. My father said bring it right back. And I said I don't know even who to bring it back to. Anyhow, long story short, we kept them, and I still have that box.

No kidding, no kidding. And why did he want you to--

It's olive drab by the way.

You what?

It was painted olive drab, you know, the color. Anyhow, and I had a great time. I had a great time. And my parents befriended one of the officers, a Marine officer. His name was Joe Burke from the New York area. He loved coming to my parents' house.

Did he?

He could have a bath. He could have a great meal. And he became a good friend. We were still in that other first house. It had a-- it was a nice, nice spot. There was a big like alleyway, more than an alleyway, just a passageway to the back part of the house where we lived.

And there was I told you like a patio there. I remember being sick one day, and it was winter. And my mother would put me out there in the sunshine. And there was something in the air, a winter day air. And it felt great. The sun was shining.

But along that little alleyway was acacia trees. They had beautiful, white flowers when they kind of came out in the spring. They dropped all over. It looked like a carpet of snow.

And there was a gate, a metal gate, one of those wrought iron, which was locked, but I would always climb over it. And he would park-- Joe Burke would park his Jeep there, which was a big attraction for the neighborhood. You know, look at this Jeep.

And I'd go into that Jeep, make believe I'm driving it. And I would step on the gas, and it would get flooded. And he would get so angry, but he was OK.

Anyhow, when we came to New York, we met up with him again and his wife. And it was nice. He was a very interesting guy. He was an expert bonsai collector.

Oh, really?

He ended up being. Yeah, he was a teacher in a high school here. And there were others that they befriended. So it was a nice time.

So when did your parents' sites turn to the US? When did they thinking--

They had put in their name again and again. And, lo and behold, just a few months before the communists took over the area of China that we lived in, all of a sudden, our visas came through.

You mean-- do you think it has anything to do with putting in those visas before leaving Czechoslovakia?

It was a continuous effort. And the records were there. I don't know whether that was influential and finally getting them or whether the more recent applications were. I assume it's the more recent ones.

OK.

But we got visas. And so that's when we were able to come here.

And then were they connected with the affidavits that relatives had sent earlier or on your own?

I think it was pretty much on my own-- on our own, on my parents' own, because I don't know of any evidence that they had to re-- maybe my uncle did so just because it was a good thing to do. I don't know if it was necessary because, at that point we had our own-- my parents had their own assets.

Assets, yeah. Had they owned the houses that you lived in?

No, no.

They had rented them?

Rented.

Even the one on the sea side?

No, that one was owned.

OK.

That was by the way-- a little more about that. It was-- we were there only during the summers.

Right.

My father would come there for his vacation and some weekends, but it was a long trip. So it was primarily my mother and I and a friend sometimes. And we had a caretaker there. It was called a Chinese term, [MANDARIN], I remember. And it looked like an older man and his wife.

I remember his wife sitting outside their little home, which was on the one end of the property. She was sitting outside smoking this long pipe. And he would plant tobacco for her and for selling, I guess, and also sweet potatoes. And you have to turn the sweet potato-- they were vines, and he'd be turning them with a special kind of instrument all day long. And he had a garden put up in front of us, a vegetable and flower garden, full of sunflowers and other kind of flowers and nice vegetables.

And it was a typical, beautiful day. I'd go to the beach with my mother, spend the morning at the beach, and, when it's time for lunch, get up, walk up-- it was not a very long walk to get to the house-- walk through the garden, pick some cucumbers and tomatoes or whatever, and have them for lunch.

Oh, gosh.

Sounds like the southern part of France, doesn't it?

Yeah, it sounds lovely.

Yeah, it was.

OK.

Anyhow, so where were we?

So did they sell that too when they were planning to leave?

No, that was just abandoned.

It was just abandoned.

It turned out that Mao Zedong took over that whole area because he loved to swim there. And so the place got changed completely. All the Western houses were either absorbed or taken over or leveled or whatever.

Did you fear one side or the other? Was there fear of the communists? Or was there fear of the Kuomintang I think it was, the nationalists?

Not on our part in fact, sometimes, towards the end of the war, to be safe, the whole group of us from Tientsin traveled from the town to the railroad station, which was several kilometers away. And we traveled together in a caravan just for safety purposes.

And we got cover by some of the communist guerrilla troops. It was weird. It was really weird in some ways. So who knows?

OK, OK. Well, it sounds like chaos, and it sounds a bit confusing.

Oh yeah, well, but there was no real fear because that was your question.

Yes, that was my question, OK. So do you remember leaving?

Yes, very much. I was almost 12. I was 11 and 1/2 or so.

Tell me about that.

Well, I looked forward to it very much. Boy, I wanted to be American. Strangely, I regretted not having freckles because I thought that was my image, you know, Tom Sawyer or something. I read Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, and I was really looking forward to it. So it wasn't so hard to say goodbye, but it was.

And I corresponded. I wrote a letter to our school. I got an answer from one of them, a personal answer, that little girl, [? Varya, ?] who wrote to me. And, strangely enough, there are not that many people from in that path here. Although, a couple were. And we weren't close, but we kept in touch.

As a matter of fact, in 1995, a whole group of us from all over the country came and had a little reunion, but they were mostly people who were four or five years older than me. So there were only three of us-- I think three in that whole group who were my age and who knew each other at the time.

One of them still lives here, and the other does not. She, strangely, went back to Russia for whatever her reasons. She was here she had been married here. She had children here and then went off to Russia. I never found out why.

And then, another a little story about my friends from that period, we were going to go to Australia, my wife and I. And, in fact, we ended up doing that in 2001. Yeah, I think so, 2000. That sounds too far away. No, it wasn't-- whatever, it was not that long ago.

And, just before that, out of the blue, I get this email from a fellow who was my classmate in Tientsin who lived in Sydney and he said he found out about me through a magazine that came out of Israel that my father corresponded with and wrote to them and so on. And he had written some little article that they'd published, and this fellow's mother had seen it and mentioned it.

So he got in touch with me and said, you know, I'm living in Sydney and da da da. And we were going to go to Australia. So, long story made a little shorter, we went to Sydney, and he had arranged, first of all, to show us all around Sydney.

Mind you, he and I were about 11 when we last saw each other. This was about-- I think it was I said-- I think it was 2011. I know there was a one involved. Yeah, that was more like it, 2011.

And, that evening, there were several other people from my class who had come to Sydney also. So there were five of us in a Chinese restaurant. Talk about surreal.

Wow.

And those people, for the most part, were there longer than we because they just didn't have their luck and weren't able to come here or anywhere else for a while. And they were-- the communists by then had taken over. They did not like any Westerners in China. So they were, basically, pushed out eventually, some with some issues, like this fellow's--

[RUMBLING]

What is that I'm hearing? This fellow's father who was a dentist by the way, who was interned for some reason by the communists. Anyhow, he was finally let go, and they went to Australia. And, a number of them, we were sort of all over the place.

Many of them came to Israel. Some of them came to Canada. Some of them came here to the United States, a few. And some of them went to Australia, some, I think, maybe even to South Africa. But, anyhow, they were kind of dispersed. I'd say the majority went to Israel. And so that was quite--

Interesting to kind of find out the destinies of all of these classmates or many of them and really scattered from what you're saying, really all around the world.

That's true.

How did you-- what was your transport in leaving China? We flew Northwest Orient Airlines. There was a-- there was a strike, shipping strike, on the West Coast of the United States at that point. And that resulted in two things.

First of all, we didn't want to wait around until who knows when that strike would be over, that kind of thing. And, secondly, unfortunately, that meant that my parents could only take so much along. Although, they took a few things with them.

What we did was we flew from-- and that was a little adventure. We flew from Tientsin to Shanghai on a DC-3. It was supposed to leave at some hour, and it didn't leave until like 12 hours later. And we were happy that it did.

We flew over communist-held territory. We got to Shanghai. My father tells a story-- and I sort of wonder about it, but that's what he told me-- that we were flying along, flying along.

And, all of a sudden, he felt a little bump, and then there was silence. And he thought oh my god. Well, it turned out it was a beautiful landing. Anyhow, I wonder about that story, but, anyhow it's a good story.

So here we were in Shanghai for a few days until we got our flight from Shanghai to Tokyo. And then, from Tokyo we stopped at one of the Aleutian Islands, Shemya, in the middle of the night, cold, dark. They had a little Quonset hut, basically, and they had a pool table. And I played pool alone, by myself, while waiting to be-- to have I guess refueled and what have you.

And then the next step was to Anchorage, Alaska. And that was our immigration point. We held up the whole planeload of people because we had to be checked out health-wise and paperwork and all of that stuff. But everybody was patient, and we then flew to Seattle where we met my uncle, Ruda.

So were you the only immigrants on that flight?

Yes.

And the other people were military?

No, I think there were business people mostly. I mean, there may have been some military dressed in civilian clothing. I don't know.

But not tourists. I can't imagine that they would be tourists.

No, no, I doubt very much there were any tourists at that point.

And what year was this?

That was 19-- end of 1948, November the 13th, to be exact, of 1948.

'48.

I know that because there were two of them.

Oh, really?

Yeah, two November 13ths because of the timeline.

That's right.

The date line.

That's right. So you lived in China for three years post-war.

Yes.

And you were then 11 years old when you came to the US?

Yeah, 11 and 1/2.

11 and 1/2.

It was November. My birthday is in June so yeah.

Yeah, wow. So, yes, you had not only a good chunk of occupation time under the Japanese, but a solid chunk of the immediate post-war years.

And I had a ball. I had a ball. It was like everything opened up. I rode my bicycle all over the place. I told you about our country club. It was great. It had tennis courts. It had a swimming pool indoors.

It had-- oh, I learned about baseball there because there were a whole bunch of American people who were taking advantage of the country club. And I remember watching baseball. I even remember one of the big sluggers named-- his last name was [? Coffey, ?] which I thought was interesting.

[? Coffey. ?]

Anyhow, yeah, I came here, and I was a Yankee fan before I even got here.

Talk about being well integrated.

Yeah, and we arrived.

In Seattle? And then--

In Seattle and then took some time to go down the coast to San Francisco and Los Angeles and took across-country trains across to Chicago and then from Chicago to New York.

With your uncle Ruda?

No, he was busy doing his business, and he met us in Seattle and then left us when we went to San Francisco.

Now did he know of what had happened to all the family members--

By then?

--on your father's side?

By then, yes, of course, because my father and he corresponded if nothing else, but he may have known before we.

Yeah. And when is it that your father told you about these things, about the losses?

You know, I can't say that I remembered one day, that bad day, and that's when it happened or that kind of thing. It just happened somewhere along the line.

Did your father write a journal? Did he keep a journal?

It wasn't like a daily diary or a journal. It was more an after-the-fact memoir, you know? That's what we based that Facebook post, those postings on. We took each paragraph of his memoir.

Let's talk about that a little bit.

OK.

One of the ways that you came to our attention at the museum is through this really creative, unique project on Facebook. Please explain its genesis and how it came to be.

Sure, it was actually our son who came up with the idea.

Your son's name is?

Paul, Paul Schulhof.

And he is the architect you mentioned?

He is the architect, right.

OK.

And he's into all that stuff. And he thought about the fact that he and my father got along very nicely. And he learned a lot from him. And he said, hey, you know-- by that time, my father had passed away. He was over 101 when he passed away in 2005, in March of 2005. And my mother passed away three years later at the age of 98.

So, anyhow, he had this idea that, hey, what if we used Facebook for something a little more serious than it's often used for with the purpose in mind, in his mind, that grandpa would be talking to us again. So we posted it in his name so that it--

As if it's him speaking.

As if it's him speaking.

As if it's your father speaking.

Right.

OK.

And we used, paragraph by paragraph, his memoir. And, as I mentioned I think earlier, he was a great-- he was very organized, and he was a great keeper of documents that he thought were of interest or value and picked photos and so on. And he kept them in some albums, as well as in other places. And I inherited all of that. And he brought those, many of them, right from Prague so that they had a long journey.

Yeah, they did, didn't they?

And so we did that. And my thought was this is a great idea. And why? Because I felt it was a way of getting to a lot of people, especially young people who may be on Facebook, and having them know a little bit about this portion of history and, also, avoid the denial that occurred sometimes. And so we did that like week after week for several months.

When did you start the project? What year was it?

It was early 2016 in the last year.

OK.

And I think it was successful. I think-- I don't know.

How many entries did you make? How many different--

Oh, there must have been a good 15 I would say.

And you and your son worked on it together?

Well, so to speak. The way we actually did it was that he would rely on me to, OK, let's do the next paragraph. Now what's in that paragraph?

I chose the photos and documents that went along with that paragraph, looking through all my father's things with some care. And then I scanned those and sent him those documents. And then he actually put them on Facebook.

And then what about the writing? Would he choose the writing? Or had you chosen which part of your father's voice would be known?

No, we went through the whole thing piece by piece, one after the other, almost entirely right from his writing. So we didn't make any of that up. He did.

OK, so it was the writing-- the writing was the generator of whatever documents would be used.

Correct.

So, whatever your father had written about this event, you would look for the corresponding relevant material, what you had.

Exactly, exactly.

OK.

Now, in a couple of cases, I intervened a little bit by adding some things because either they weren't so obvious, or, for instance, when he came to my aunt's description of her experience in the concentrate camp, that was not part of my father's--

Story.

--story. So I intervened and explained who she was and what I thought about her. And we had that as a place that people, if they so chose, could click on to separately from the whole Facebook postings because we thought not everybody would be wanting to go through that. I think, as it turned out, I think most people did end up doing it.

So there's a Facebook page called--

Joseph Schulhof.

And, if you look up Joseph Schulhof-- and that would be spelled J-O-S-E--

P-H.

--P-H, the English way--

Right.

--and then Schulhof, S-C-H-U-L-H-O-F--

F, one F, right.

--one F, they'll come across this page.

They should, yes.

OK.

And, yeah, the way they should do it, if they wanted to look at it, is to scroll all the way down to 1903, where you can see my picture-- my picture, a picture of my father when he was probably one-year-old or less, and then chronologically go up from there. Click on places where the photographs maybe overlap to get the individual larger photographs. And you click on-- there are places where we just didn't have room for all the words we needed. So it says See More. Click on See More, and you'll see the rest of the explanations.

What a cool idea.

Yeah, I thought it was a great idea.

And how much-- what kind of response have you had?

Well, hard to say because we know of people who, quote, "liked it," funny expression for the subject. But, anyhow, that's what they use on Facebook. All that means is that they thought highly of it I guess.

We know how many of those there were, and there were over 100 or so. But there are many, many more, I know, because these people then passed it on to other people who read it without saying anything. And I know that for a fact because I've heard it from friends who got the thing and read it and then sent it on to their children or whoever. So I hope it's spreading, the word is spread. That's the whole purpose of it.

Yeah, did you ever go back to Prague?

We've been back many times.

OK, you've seen where your parents lived?

And where I live with them, yes.

Where you lived with them.

Yes.

OK.

And we visited, early on, friends of my parents who were neighbors and who were still alive. We were there, the first time, in 1978.

Oh, when it was still the good old days.

Yeah, it was the 10th anniversary of the Soviet tank occupation of Prague. And so the place was relatively deserted because, all of a sudden, people were getting permission to go out of the city for the first time, even though they tried many times before. All of the sudden, they wanted them out because they didn't want any demonstrations I gather. People went on a, quote, "vacation." And it was a little bleak in 1978.

Yeah, it would have been. It would have been Prague winter, not Prague spring.

Yeah, right. I would have liked a scaffolding business in Prague at the time. And then we've been back.

Why do you say that, the scaffolding?

Because it was all over the place. They were just afraid things would fall down on people's heads. They weren't fixing it.

Well, you see the other thing is that many people who had been protesters and dissidents during Prague Spring ended up being window washers on scaffolding. That was another--

Yeah, oh yeah.

Yeah

Yeah, so '78 was interesting. I met up with a friend of my parents who was a neighbor, an older lady by then, who had children who, more or less, are my age and then also my nanny.

No kidding, no kidding.

Yeah, she apparently loved me.

What was her name?

[? Manya. ?]

[? Manya, ?] OK.

Yeah.

And you had a relative still in Prague.

Yes, and we met up with Vera, yes.

OK, she was a cousin?

She was a first cousin, yes. Well, I don't know how you would refer to her because she was the daughter of one of my step-uncles.

Right.

No, it's not step. It's whatever the term is.

Half-brother or your father's half-brother.

Right.

Yeah.

Right. So I don't know what-- it's cousin, I guess, of some kind.

It's cousin. It's cousin, yeah.

Yeah, the war affected her, no question she was a beautiful young woman. She still was quite pretty, but it affected her, no question. How could it not? And she was needy. She married.

Unfortunately, her husband passed away not too-- not that long after. I'm not talking about one or two years, longer than that, but not that long. And she's buried with her husband at a grave site in the so-called New, which is not so new, Jewish Cemetery in Prague.

Where is that? It's that the-- there is a huge, huge cemetery outside of the city center, Vinohrady, and then a little bit beyond it near--

No, Vinohrady is in the other direction.

OK, so it's--

From the center of Prague, Vinohrady is--

South?

I'm looking at it. I'm not sure. Yeah, it's on the same side as what--

Vaclavske Namesti.

Va-- the old town.

Right.

And that's downriver-- or upriver, upriver. But the cemetery is in the other direction.

Oh, then I don't know where it is.

Yeah, it's near the [NON-ENGLISH] home that we had, not too far from there. We could walk, or it's a short ride from there. And it has-- it's a pretty big cemetery. But the grave of my grandparents is there and the names of all the other perished family members. And Vera and her husband are actually also buried there. There are famous people buried in that cemetery.

What about-- did you go to see Terezin? Had you ever--

No. No, I wasn't up to it. Maybe now I'm more used to the idea or something, but we saw the names of my family on the wall of the Pinkas Synagogue. And those synagogues were going to be museums. The Germans were organizing all sorts of Jewish--

[CHIMES]

Sorry.

That's OK. OK, so, yeah, I mean, Prague was spared because somebody didn't want to bomb it. I think one of the major German--

There was nothing to bomb there except the fact that the Germans had occupied it. And there were lots of other places that are more important to bomb. And, yeah, there was only one thing that happened. As the Germans left, they blew up the so-called city hall.

Yeah.

So that was the biggest damage to the entire building-- city.

We're coming to the end of our interview. And I wanted to ask this kind of a question.

[CHIMES]

Sorry.

It's OK. Why don't we-- so, earlier, you said that your parents really sheltered you and protected you from this information and the fallout from that information, the consequences of it. And, yet, I sense that you feel it very deeply. There were some things that were not so easy to express and articulate. How did this affect you? How, in the end, have you been touched by what happened that you eventually learned about?

I'm not sure exactly what the process was, but the end result has been some very deep feelings on my part, anger. And, for whatever reason, probably because of our similarity in age, Daisy always comes into mind. And it's just unbelievable what happened. These were vital, beautiful, young people. And for no reason-- it's made me question religion, period.

Did you ever have faith?

Yes.

Did you lose it?

I'm in that process.

Oh, oh, how sad.

Yeah, I mean, most people get more religious as they get older. And I seem to be going the other way because I ask myself how can that be. How can there be the kind of God that people speak of who overlooks each individual, not possible for that to happen if that were the case. That's the way I feel about it. So that's my answer to your question.

What about in your personality? Did it affect your personality?

That's hard for me to know.

I know. I know.

I don't know. I suppose so. How could it not in some ways? I hope that I care about people. I think I do. I think, perhaps, that's, in large measure, a result of this which may be some silver lining.

Your own parents did you see how this affected them?

Sure, absolutely. My father tended to be a nervous wreck, except when it came to these crucial moments, which didn't happen very often after we came to the United States.

How did he make his living here?

He was an engineer. He worked for a utility upstate, Orange and Rockland Utilities. That's why they moved to Middletown, New York because that's where the engineering offices were. He joined the congregation there, a Jewish congregation.

He was very active in all sorts of causes there in that area, very highly respected actually, huge crowd for his funeral, but there was a lot of respect. So he ended up, I think, feeling good about himself, but he was a nervous man, and it showed in many ways I'm sure. I mean, your nerves get frayed after going through all of that.

And my mother was still relatively calm. Unfortunately, after he died, the next three years were really rough on her. And she had a-- it was a bad time for her.

Yeah, well, they had been together most of their lives.

Right, through all sorts of stuff.

Yeah, yeah.

So it was understandable. Anyhow, it certainly affected them. He had some good memories, some bad memories, and some regrets, as all human beings do.

Is there anything I haven't asked that you think would be important to include in your testimony today?

Well, let me think for a minute. I think we've pretty well covered it. I'm trying to think of any small, personal things. There's some small things that I forgot to mention, which might be of a little interest.

But, after the war, when the Marines came in, there were not many-- there was not much material and so on. You couldn't find much stuff in the shops yet. And I noticed, all of a sudden, these nice metal toys were showing up, nice, shiny metal toys, you know, little cars and so on. And they were of interest to me at the age of eight, nine.

So I started looking in the shops and looking at them carefully. And I looked inside a truck. And there I saw Pabst. So what the Chinese had done is they took beer cans, flattened them, turned them inside out, and made toys out of them.

How cool is that?

Yeah, they're terrific when it comes to salvaging things. Then cigarettes were in big demand. In fact, we boys in school, you know the way they trade baseball cards here? We traded cigarette packages Chesterfields were worth two Lucky Strikes or something. [BOTH TALKING]

Oh, really? Full packages or empty packages?

No, no no, empty packages, just the package, just the outside.

OK.

And, for a while there, the streets were littered with cigarette butts that were thrown out by Marines and so on. And, the next thing you knew, they weren't very many of them. Then I saw why. There were people with long sticks with like a nail or a needle at the end who were picking these up. And, before you knew it, Chinese cigarettes were showing up. These were pre-filter days.

[LAUGHTER]

So a little bit of used tobacco goes a long way.

Long way, yeah.

These are a little lighter kind of things that come to mind.

Yeah, but talk about thrifty. And, also, talk about need and demand. And you mentioned a black market.

Oh, yeah.

And, you know, cigarettes are the currencies of a black market.

They were people to be contended with.

Yeah, I love hearing about those things because it tells you volumes of what a place is like, what's going on in that place, what are the circumstances. Thank you.

You're welcome. Thank you.

Thank you very much.

Thank you so much.

OK, I will say then this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Peter Schulhof on May 1, 2017 in Brooklyn, New York. Thanks.

Thank you again.

[CLAPPING]