

We're speeding. OK. Speeding, speeding. OK.

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Lothar Meyer-- or Lothar Maier-- on January 19, 2019, in Delray Beach, Florida. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Meyer, for agreeing to speak with us today.

It's my pleasure.

This interview is going to be one of our more unusual ones because it will have two parts to it. The first part will be about your own family's experiences. And the second part will be about your involvement in a very crucial program that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has benefited from and seeks to have others benefit from as well.

So we'll start with part one.

OK.

Can you tell me the date of your birth?

November 9, '39.

And what was your name at birth?

Lothar Leopold Meyer.

Lothar Leopold Meyer. So you never pronounced it in the German way of Lo-tar My-ar?

I actually spoke German before I spoke English.

Did you really?

Yes. Because when I was born, my family was my parents, my aunt, and my grandparents all living in one little house. Everybody was working but my grandmother. And my grandmother was the one that brought me up.

And she spoke German.

And that's all she spoke was German. And she lived until I was five years old, and then she passed away.

OK.

And I actually learned to speak English from the kids on the block. And this was all in Johannesburg.

In South Africa.

Yeah.

OK. Do you have brothers and sisters?

I have one brother, six years younger than me.

So he was born in 1945?

Yeah.

What is his name?

Stanley.

Stanley. And tell me a little bit about your parents. What was your father's name?

My father's name was Julius.

And your mother's.

Hermina.

Hermina?

Yeah.

And what was her maiden name?

Levy.

Levy. Your parents, were they from South Africa?

No, all from Germany.

Tell me, where did they come from?

My father's family came from a village on the Moselle river called Ediger an der Mosel.

Ediger an der Mosel. OK.

My mother's family came from Zeltingen an der Mosel.

Are they close to each other?

They are close to each other, but they are on either side of the Moselle River. The Moselle is a tributary of the Rhine River.

And what part of Germany is this in?

Like central Germany.

OK. Could it be the Rhineland, or Bavaria or?

No, Germany itself.

OK.

But I don't know. I don't know how else--

You don't know what the area is.

I do.

OK.

I know that the Moselle River is a tributary of the Rhine.

OK.

And my family, my father's family, were the only Jewish family in this village.

In Ediger.

In Ediger an der Mosel.

How did they get there? How did they come to be there?

They were there for a long time.

Like several generations?

Several generations. From the history I've been able to find, it looks like the family was three 300 years in Germany, and possibly came from Spain.

That would make sense. That would make a lot of sense. But you don't know whether or not they moved around from other parts in Germany to Ediger?

No, no, no.

They were there.

That's the place they were. They had the only four-story house in Ediger. And my father-- there were six children. My father was the youngest of the six children.

Do you know the names of the other siblings?

Yes, all of them.

Please tell me.

David was the oldest.

OK.

Sarah. Leo. Bertholt was the second youngest. And Tegla.

OK. And then your father.

And my father, the youngest.

And his name was?

Julius.

Julius. Excuse me. You told me. Did you know all of your aunts and uncles?

I knew none of them. Because none of them survived.

All right. Let's talk about-- well, we'll come to that. We'll come to that in a minute. Right now I want to explore a little

bit more about the family's past.

OK.

Do you know what your grandfather's business was in Ediger?

Basically, they were moneylenders. They lent money to the people of the village who were mainly growers of grapes on the hills.

OK.

And. If they paid the loan back, that was fine. And if not, they carried them for another year until they had a good harvest to pay back the loan.

OK.

They also sold some clothes in this house.

Was there any other banking or financial possibilities in that town?

No, not to my knowledge.

OK. And your mother's family, where was it from?

From Zeltingen an der Mosel. And my grandfather, my mother's father, had a hardware store. And these are all the hardware store in the house.

The shop was above the house. The house was above the shop.

"The house was above the shop" is the correct way of describing it.

OK. And what was the name? Do you know the name of the hardware store?

H Levy.

H Levy?

Yeah.

OK, did your mother have siblings?

My mother had a sister and a brother.

And what are their names?

Erna and Max.

And did you know these aunt and uncle?

I knew Erna because she came to South Africa also.

OK.

And Max went to Israel.

[PHONE RINGING]

I see. Excuse us. Let's cut for a second.

Sorry.

That's OK. Not a problem.

Speed.

OK. So Max I forgot.

Max was the oldest.

And did he come to South Africa?

No, Max, there was a day when they had a Hitler Jugend in front of all Jewish stores.

OK.

And so you had H Levy the store, front door, Hitler Jugend standing in front. And Max wanted to take a picture of this. So a lady was walking past with her pram. And he asked her if she'd like to have a picture taken of her baby. To which she said yes. So he positioned the baby so that he could get a picture of the front of the store, the Hitler Jugend, and the baby.

That evening, there was one policeman in the village who was a friend of my uncle's. And he came to my uncle, and said "Max, don't be here tomorrow morning, because I've got to arrest you." And Max left that night and went actually to Israel. And unfortunately in 1948, during the war, he passed away.

Was this a natural death in 1948, or was this part of the fighting that was going on at the time?

I think it was part of the fighting.

OK.

I don't have exact details of that, though.

So you never met him?

Never met him.

But you know this part of his story.

I know that part of the story, and I know his daughter.

You know his daughter?

Yes, I knew his daughter.

OK.

Yes.

And she was born in Israel?

Born in Israel.

OK. Now, you mentioned a grandmother who brought you up until age five.

Right.

Was she your maternal or paternal grandmother?

There's a story to this one.

Tell us.

My father was the youngest. In 1936, he decided that he needs to leave Germany, because he already saw problems that were coming. So he was able to take 50 marks with him, and--

[PHONE RINGING]

Excuse us. Can we pause?

Sorry again. I think my wife got it.

[INAUDIBLE]

Speed.

OK. So your father, how old was he in 1936, by the way?

I'm not sure.

Do you know what year he was born?

I could look it up.

OK. We'll talk about that later.

I can look it up, but I don't remember.

All right, so here's another way of asking this question. Was he already working? Was he already an adult?

Yes.

OK. Did he have a profession?

Yes, he was a butcher.

All right. So now we can continue.

So he left Germany. He was able to take 50 marks with him.

OK.

And the only country he could get a visa to was South Africa.

And this is in 1936.

1936.

We have to cut.

Yeah. OK. Speed.

All right.

OK.

So he was only able to take 50 marks, and he went to South Africa.

Right, and he spent the 50 marks on the ship. So he arrived in South Africa penniless. The Jewish community met met the boat and got him a job in a store on a mine.

Aha. So like if there's a quarry and there's a mining activity going on, there was a store there.

There was a story there on this mine. And the family that ran the store employed him. And he slept in the same little house that this family slept in. A year later, he wrote a letter to his siblings, saying I've got enough money for a visa. Which one of you wants to come?

OK. And what was the answer?

The answer that they wrote back was, "we're all fine. Everything's fine for us. But that girl you used to take out, she would like to come to South Africa." Which is what happened.

And what was that girl's name?

Hermine.

Hermine.

Levy.

Levy. OK.

And so she came to South Africa. She was working. My father was working. And a year later, they wrote another letter to his siblings. "We have enough money for a visa. Which one of you wants to come?" "We are fine. Her sister."

OK.

So my aunt came. A year later, who wants to come? "Her parents." And then it's Kristallnacht.

After that.

At that time.

Right at that time.

'36, '37, '38.

That's right.

Kristallnacht. My grandfather is locked up like all German-- all Jewish males were locked up. Next morning, they were let out. He went to see that his wife was fine. She was fine. And then he went across the river to the Meyer family, to see that the Meyer family was fine. The synagogue had been-- Oh, I didn't mention to you about the synagogue.

No.

The family had built a synagogue. They were the only Jewish family in the village. They'd built a synagogue attached to the house.

Wow.

And the surrounding Jewish families came Friday night for Shabbos to--

The synagogue.

To the synagogue. To stay over. So on Kristallnacht, that synagogue was destroyed, and the three Torahs were thrown in the street. So when my grandfather went to visit the Meyers, he took the three Torahs, built them into a piece of furniture that he was taking with him to South Africa, and he took them to South Africa.

So this is your maternal grandfather Levy.

Levy, Herman Levy.

Herman Levy. So he's arrested. He's released. He first sees if his wife is all right. And then he goes to the Meyer family, your father's family to see what happened there.

And they're all fine, but the synagogue's destroyed, and the Torah's--

OK.

So he takes them to South Africa. Took him until 1950 to have enough money to have them repaired. Two of the Torahs were not repairable and were buried in the Johannesburg Jewish cemetery. The one Torah was repairable, and he then donated it to the retirement community he was living in, in Johannesburg called Our Parents Home.

Oh. Wow.

We, as it happens, visited South Africa because my wife's sister's husband was ill, terminally ill. And when we left South Africa-- let me interrupt on that-- when we left South Africa, I spoke to the head of the Chevra Kadisha, which owned this retirement community, and asked them if we could reacquire the Torah.

They said, fine. Give us a Torah. You can have your Torah. We're about to leave, and I said to them, Where's the Torah? He says, take any Torah. I said, I don't want a Torah. I want the Torah. So we left South Africa. Then a couple of years later, when my wife's sister's husband was ill, we went back to South Africa, and we spoke to, again, the head of the Chevra Kadisha. He said, look, go see what you can do, but the deal's different. I don't need Torahs now. I need some money.

I said fine. How much? That was easier than reacquiring a Torah. And we went into the synagogue of Our Parents' Home. The second Torah we took out in a metal plaque on the bottom, Herman Levy, the whole thing. So we knew that was the Torah.

That was the one.



And we arranged for Chabad to bring the Torah to Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, we had somebody go through it and make sure that it's all perfectly written. Because the letters get old after a while. And we then had that Torah for all these years here in America. And recently I gave it to my brother. And he has it now in Texas.

Wow.

And in fact, I know that this morning he was in shul reading from the Torah.

That one.

That Torah.

Wow. And how long do you think it might have been part of your family's synagogue, the Meyers' synagogue, before your maternal grandfather rescued it?

I don't know the answer to that, but it's probably something like 50 to 100 years.

Wow.

It was a long time.

Yeah.

Yeah.

What a story.

Yeah.

What a story. So did you know your maternal grandfather as well as grandmother?

Yes.

OK. So that side of the family, except for Uncle Max, were part of your life growing up.

Correct. Absolutely.

But the other side, no.

No, no. I didn't know any of them.

Did you know anything of their lives, of their stories?

yes

Tell me what you do know.

The only one that was married was David, who was the eldest.

OK.

And he was married, and he had a son. Whose name was Lothar.

Lothar. OK.

And the reason for it is that the grandfather's name was Leopold Lothar.

Ah. On his mother's side, on the child's mother's side, or on David's side?

David's.

So your grandfather.

David. My great-grandfather was Leopold Lothar.

And so they continued. After Kristallnacht, what kind of communication was there between your father and his family?

There were some letters. David was the only one that was married. And he had the child. And he had moved from Ediger to another town. I can't remember the name at the moment. But when I was at Yad Vashem, they had documents of him being transported to Belzec. And we have a copy, and Yad Vashem has a copy, of the transport where everybody is listed.

So David's listed. His wife's listed. And Lothar's listed on that transfer to Belzec. And Belzec was a camp where if you arrived there, you were killed.

Extermination camp.

- Yeah, "extermination camp" is the correct word.

Do you have a paper trail for other members of the family?

Yes, we do have. And you have them at the Holocaust Museum. Interesting one is the one Bertholt's.

Bertholt. And he's now the second youngest?

Second youngest.

All right.

And just before they were sent away to the camps in April of '42.

So this is quite late, April of '42.

Yeah, correct. And two weeks or a week before the family was sent away, they locked up Bertholt for committing a crime.

And what was that crime?

And the crime he committed was, he gave a piece of furniture to his neighbor. But all Jewish assets had been donated to the state. So he gave away a piece of furniture that had been donated to the state to his neighbor. And he was locked up for two weeks. So when the rest of the family was sent away, he was still in jail. And then a week later, he was sent away.

And that you find in the documentation.

That's all in the documentation at the Holocaust Museum.

But originally where did those documents come from?

The original documents, the way we saw the original documents came from Bad Arolsen.

Ah, second part of our interview.

Yes.

We'll talk about that in a minute. And are there any other documents for other family members who perished on your father's side?

No.

That's it?

That's it.

So do you know what camps the others were sent to?

We don't. If the documents do not show-- the only one they show is the one for David, which shows he was sent to Belzec. But the other ones, some say they were sent overseas, but there's nothing clear of which camp it is that they were killed in.

OK.

All we know is that they didn't survive.

OK. Let's go back to South Africa for a minute. Your earliest memories, do you have some as aged three, or four, or even earlier? All of us have something, but it's usually quite fuzzy in our minds.

The memory that I have is of being with my grandmother.

Tell me what kind of a person she was.

She was just phenomenal. She was really my mother. Because my mother was working. My aunt was working. My father was working. And my grandfather was working. They were all working.

And so they would all come home at night from having worked. And I, one year, two year, three year, four year, five year was brought up by this lady who was not my mother but my grandmother.

OK. Did she tell you stories?

Yes, but I don't remember any of their stories.

OK. How did you learn-- well, first of all, did you have an interest in your family's immediate background from Germany as you were growing up?

My father-- my mother's father was in the hardware business. That was a hardware store.

And so he continued being in the hardware business in South Africa?

In South Africa, he was not business, but he would make things for people. He was always working on things that a hardware man would know how to make.

OK.

And I would go after school to be with him. Once a week, I would get on a bus, go to our parents' home, help him. And we had a great, phenomenal relationship.

Was he a storyteller?

Not really. Not really.

So did he talk much about his hardware store back in Zeltingen?

Not really. Only about-- one of the things I knew about Max is that Max had been on a motorbike, fallen off. And he made me promise that I would never drive a motorbike.

Now, that picture that Max took, was it ever developed? The photograph?

We never saw it.

You never saw it.

No.

OK. And did he talk, your maternal grandfather, about Kristallnacht itself and how his business was affected and how he was taken?

No, just that he was locked up. Came out next morning. Didn't affect his business. The windows were smashed and things like that, which was happening all over.

And about how long after that happened did he leave with your grandmother?

Like weeks.

OK. OK. On year. Then did your father continue working in this store where there was a mining place going on?

For a while. And then when he got to a point where he was able to, he actually went to work in a butchery in Johannesburg.

Because he was a butcher.

Right.

OK.

And then he worked in a butcher, kosher butchery. And then he established his own butchery. And then he bought another butchery. And not only was it a butchery, but it also manufactured sausages, and bologna, and things like that.

All that you'd want. Was there a large Jewish community that you had in Johannesburg?

Oh, very large.

Most of them from Germany?

No. The vast majority of South African Jews were from Lithuania. My wife's family were from Lithuania.

I see.

I was one of the few Yekkes.

And what's a Yekke?

A Yekke is a German. And Litvaks did not like Yekkes.

And was the reverse also true?

No, not at all.

OK.

But in my particular case, my wife's family liked me, and were happy that I asked them if I could marry their daughter.

When did you first start becoming interested in your own family's background?

I was interested in it from a number of points of view.

OK.

I was able to graduate from high school two years younger than my sibling, than other people were. And in 1956, I went to Israel on what was called the [SPEAKING HEBREW], which is a youth leadership training course for a year.

OK.

So I happened to be there during the time of the war. I learned how to use--

A weapon.

--a weapon. Went to 10 kilometers from the Suez Canal.

Wow.

And one of the interesting things about that road through Gaza to El Arish is that there were gun emplacements built by the Egyptians on the Sinai along this one single road, so that they would be able to shoot down Israeli tanks that came.

When we were driving on this road, I expected to see some of these shooting places or some tanks that had been destroyed or something like that. But the reality is, I saw something else.

What did you see?

Thousands of army boots.

What does that mean?

It means that when these Egyptians saw the Israeli tanks coming down the road, instead of shooting at the tanks they took off their boots and ran away.

That's a powerful symbol.

It stuck in my mind since then.

OK.

And '56 is a little while ago.

It is a bit. It is a bit. But did that reawaken something that you hadn't had an interest in before?

No, no. It was always--

OK, it was just one part.

Just another part of the puzzle.

OK. In your mother's side of the family and your father, did they tell you of their life in Germany? Did they talk about it much?

Yes, because the village that they came from had a number of Jewish families.

Zeitlingen.

Zeltingen, yeah.

Zeltingen. Sorry.

And it was also a wine-- I mean, the Moselle was where the wine--

Yeah, sure.

But they had a number of neighbors that they knew well. And that's what it was. Another thing happened, by the way, which-- with my mother. And I think it was 1953. My mother decided to go back to Germany.

Was this the first time anybody from the family goes back?

Yes, and she went back for a purpose. Because my mother's family had sold their house when my grandfather left Germany. But the Meyer family never sold their house.

OK.

They were just taken to the camps. So my mother went back to speak to the person that was occupying the house, saying you're living in our house. So she went back, spoke to the person who was living in the house. The synagogue had been made into a stable, but she was able to get them to purchase both the house and the stable. And the money from the stable, which was the synagogue, was donated to Etz Chayim Synagogue in Johannesburg.

And the house at least-- and when she went to speak to the people in the house, she said to them-- they say to her, how do you know this is your house? How can you prove that this is your house? Said, let's go down to the cellar. In the wall, she knew that they had embedded in the wall some jewelry and some silver. And she found it, and it was three sets of cutlery, and some jewels, some watches, and things like that. And that proved that this was her house.

Was there no paperwork at all in the town?

No.

And nothing that would-- like a registry of deeds or anything like that?

Nothing that we knew about.

OK. And the people who had occupied your paternal family's house, had they been people that they knew before?

I don't know the answer to that.

OK. And do you know whether or not she got a fair price in 1953?

I don't know. She got one. She did the best she could.

Which is pretty good, considering. And your maternal grandfather, when he sold his hardware store, do you know under what conditions that was?

It was again leaving when Hitler was already--

Usually it was for a fraction of the real value.

A fraction, absolutely.

OK.

But they actually sold it to somebody, it was the price of the time. Whereas the Meyer Family house was never sold until my mother went back to try to do a deal with the person that occupied it.

Did she talk about other things that she experienced or felt when she came back to South Africa after that visit?

Not really. It was a very difficult trip for her, but my father couldn't do it, but she did it.

Did he ever go back?

No.

Did she ever go back again?

No.

This is the one and only time.

Yeah.

And what about you?

We went back. My wife and I went on a trip to Germany. We went to see both where my father's family came from and where my mother's family came from.

And what year was this? Or approximately what year would it have been?

I don't know. Maybe '60 something. '69, maybe.

So a while ago.

Oh, yes.

It would be now close to 50 years.

Yeah. Yeah, something like.

All right. And what do you remember from that trip?

What I remember from the trip was that when we went to the house, my father's family's house, the lady asked, what are you coming to ask for more money? I said, no we just would appreciate it if you could let us see the house. And she showed us around, and she said-- and then she gave us a siddur.

What is that?

A prayer book. A book that she'd found in the ceiling, a Hebrew book.

Do you know her name?

I don't that.

But it was the same family that your mother had met?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Same family.

And your father's-- your mother's home, where the hardware store had been?

The family-- the people when we were there were very nice to us and all the rest, but there was no dispute or anything between them. They hadn't been bad to my family, and my family hadn't been bad to them. So it was neighborly.

But otherwise in 1969, which was still pretty early on--

Right.

--this is where your roots were.

Yeah, but I'm not sure if '69 is the right date. I'm just thinking that it was that date. I'm not positive on that.

It could be any time in the '60s.

Yeah, it could have been. Yeah.

The overall question is, is what kind of a feeling did this leave you with?

It was a very strange experience to go and see this house that I had always heard about, and my father's, both families' homes, and to see these neighbors who had lived with them, lived through this experience with them, and yet didn't do anything to stop it from happening. That's what I always thought was-- why did they not do anything? And they didn't.

Was there a Jewish cemetery near the synagogue?

There was a Jewish cemetery where my father's family are buried.

Was it still--

It's in a town called Beilstein.

[INAUDIBLE]

Beilstein.



Beilstein?

Yeah.

That must have been close by.

Near. And the tombstones of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother are still there.

OK.

Well, at least they were there when we went to the cemetery.

And have you ever been back since then?

Not since then.

Wow. Because the country has changed.

Oh, we've been back to Germany many times.

Oh, but not to that place.

No, no, no. We went to-- we ended up being in the hardware business. And there was a trade show in Cologne every year. So we would go to the show every year.

The Kolnischer Messe.

Yeah.

And did you retain your German? Or did you lose it at some point?

No, I can still speak German.

OK.

I guess not as well as I used to, but I can still speak German.

After your grandmother passed away what was the language that you spoke with your parents?

English.

English?

Yeah.

And they amongst themselves, that older generation?

English and German.

Both?

Yeah. But the more time they spent in South Africa, the more they started speaking English.

OK. OK. Did your aunt ever go back?

Not to my knowledge.

All right. So your mother was the only one.

Yeah.

What are some of the questions for you that remain unanswered about your family's story, your family's history, your family's experiences?

The thing that I find-- the only unanswered thing is, you had the family living in this village as the only Jewish family with a great relationship with the neighbors. And yet, when the Holocaust happened, when Hitler started, none of them did anything to protect the family to the extent of somebody moving into their house when they were sent away, moving into the house without doing anything about it.

So that is the unanswerable question for you.

Yeah. What type of relationship do you have with your neighbors if that's what happens? And that's what happened.

In your own life, have you had relations with Germans?

Yes. We had-- the company that manufactured piano hinges was a German company. And we were their largest customer. And every time at the trade show, we would go and see them. And we had a great relationship with them. We'd be invited. After the show we'd do a little cruise on the Rhine River, and we had a good relationship.

And everything's normal.

Normal. Very normal. Spoke German, too.

Do these questions, do these topics ever come up?

No. No, to speak to Germans, whether it's today or 10 years ago or whenever it is, about the Holocaust, it's like sticking something in their face. And not only that, but people you're talking to, very, very few of them were involved in the Holocaust. I mean, most of the people that were involved in the Holocaust have passed away.

And yet something remains.

Yes, very much so. But I'm just saying that it's--

yeah you say that the documents that you found for Bertholt--

Yes.

--were at Bad Arolsen.

Yes.

Did you first approach Bad Arolsen directly?

That's a story on its own.

Tell us. Tell us what that story-- how were you-- what was your journey, or your odyssey, or however one would describe it, of trying to find documents about your family?

OK, I had written a letter. It became known that there were documents, and that there was an international tracing service. I had written a letter to them, asking them if they were documents for my family.

This was about what year?

I don't remember the year, but--

Well, approximate. 10 years ago, 20 years ago.

Oh, more. Maybe 30. Maybe 30 years.

30 years ago.

Yeah.

So it would have been like late '80s.

Something like that.

OK.

Unfortunately, we've moved into this house, and a lot of my documents are in storage. Otherwise I'd--

You'd have them right at hand.

I'd have them all at hand. I've got a lot of documents about this, and copies of documents from Bad Arolsen and from the International Tracing Service and Yad Vashem, but I don't have them here.

That's OK. That's OK.

We go to Washington normally once a month to meet with AIPAC.

AIPAC being American--

Israel Public Affairs Committee. My wife's on the National Board. I'm on the Foundation Board. And I ended up going, once we were in Washington, to the Holocaust Museum.

When it was opened in '93.

Yes.

OK.

And met with a lady that was the chair and the head of, I think his name was Shapiro.

Paul Shapiro.

Paul Shapiro.

Well, the head of the museum is Sarah Bloomfield.

Sarah Bloomfield. But I met with them, and Paul told me that International Tracing Service has got documents, and they're trying to, but they're 11 countries, and have to have a unanimous decision, et cetera. And he's trying to do something about it. I said OK, I'll give you three months. Get something done three months, I'll try my way.

Three months later, he still hadn't got it done. I said fine. I'm going to see-- oh, it's just slipped out of my head. Clay Shaw, Congressman of Florida.

For this area, for Delray?

I don't remember what area. I think it was, yeah. But we knew him as a United States Congressman. We had a good relationship with him. I went to him, told him the story, that there are documents in Germany, in Bad Arolsen, the International Tracing Service, and they're not giving us copies of the documents.

Had you on your own already received any answer from International Tracing Service?

Yes, that they would contact me later. Well--

That was in the late '80s.

Yes, [INAUDIBLE].

"Don't call us. We'll call you."

That type of an answer.

OK.

So he called in his assistant, dictated a two page letter, which I have a copy of, to Condi Rice.

Condoleezza Rice. And her position at the time was? I think she was Secretary of State.

I think she was Secretary of State.

Under the George Bush administration.

And she wrote to Merkel.

Angela Merkel, who was Kanzler. Chancellor.

Chancellor. And the two of them got the International Tracing Service at the next meeting, because now you had two countries of the 11 countries to agree that they would provide a digital copy of all of their records to each one of the 11 countries.

And that's the first time it's raised.

And then we had to get each one of those 11 countries to agree to what their person of the committee had agreed to. So that each country would-- and we were able to get all 11 countries to.

Were you part of the process for each country?

Not each country but the last two countries.

What were the last two countries?

Italy and France.

And walk me through what was that process.

It was just explaining to them. There are documents there that need to be made available to the world. And your country should get a copy of these digital documents. They claim that they've got 40 million documents. It's a lot of documents.

Was there resistance from any of these governments?

Just another thing that you've got to ask, and beg, and--

It was inertia.

Yes, that's what it is.

OK.

But the fact is that the 40 million documents that they claimed they had, it transpired that there's 120 million documents.

Before Condoleezza Rice contacts Angela Merkel, had they already been digitized?

No.

Were they in the process?

No.

So it was all in hard copy.

Not only was it in hard copy, but they had files. Like when we went there with-- I still can't remember the guy that wrote the article for the US News & World Report, but when we went to the Holocaust-- to the International Trace at Bad Arolsen, they gave me files of my family. So they gave me David Meyer's file. But in David Meyer's file were not only documents, original documents of David Meyer, there was also documents of another David Meyer with a different birth date misfiled in his file. That's how good they were at filing documents.

What kind of documents did you find for David Meyer?

I found a number of documents. I've got a copy of them all, but at the Holocaust Museum they've also got copies of those documents.

I realize that. But you see, I'm asking you as-- I mean, you're involved in the process and as an end user.

These are Gestapo documents.

Oh, jeez.

These are all Gestapo documents. And one of the things, by the way, that meeting that we had at Bad Arolsen, they showed us a book where the Germans had made notes of every Jew that died. And in this book, part of the pages, they showed us where there were 200 Jews who were killed every 2 minutes. One was killed every two minutes. And across these 200 names was written "in celebration of Hitler's birthday."

This is what you saw when you went there.

When we went to Bad Arolsen.

Did the people who were the custodians of the documents at Bad Arolsen, did they realize the powerful material that they had?

They believed at the time that we were there-- that's before it was all opened up and all agreed to--

And give me a year again, if you can, or approximate year.

I really don't remember.

13 years ago?

Oh, more than that.

20 years ago.

It must be 20 years ago, easy.

George Bush was elected in 2000.

Yeah, something like that.

So we're talking 18 years ago that Condoleezza Rice becomes secretary of state.

Right.

And if this happens afterwards, then it must be already in the 2000s.

Could be, yeah.

OK. But sometime there. And the question remains, OK, before it all becomes open, I was asking did they realize?

They believed that their mission was the preservation of the paper, not what was on the paper.

OK.

And that's the attitude that they had when we asked them any questions. Why don't you want these documents digitized? No, our mission is to keep them, to make sure that the papers survive. But what about the fact that you've got a David Meyer with a different birth date filed in my uncle's file?

And you got no answer for that.

They had no answers to that. I mean, they had files, and files, and files. They knew they had millions of documents, and they were trying to file them, and they were trying to sort them into some kind of categories that they were trying to do. It's not that they were not trying to do anything.

But the real history of that was that in 19-- I don't know if I mentioned this to you-- 1950, the 11 countries had documents of the Holocaust. And they said they wanted to have a meeting to see how they preserve these documents. Came up with the idea that the Red Cross would be the best place to have these documents preserved.

Red Cross said fine, we'll do it. But German government has to pay the budget, and we'll do it as a subsidiary. It won't be the Red Cross. It will be called the International Tracing Service. And then the German government said yes, well, Bad Arolsen, there used to be a Nazi camp there. It's empty it's got some empty buildings there. That's where we can do it. That's where we'll create the International Tracing Service.

Nazi camp, labor camp?

No, it was a-- I don't know.

Barracks?

Barracks. It was a building. And that's what Bad Arolsen was. And that's how Bad Arolsen became the International Tracing Service residence. You know, the place for the International Tracing Service.

So the discussion started in 1950, you say.

Yeah, I think so.

And that was then the solution, is that it organizationally, administratively, is a subsidiary of the Red Cross.

Red Cross.

As International Tracing Service. Now, was its status an international organization or German organization?

International organization.

OK.

It was the 11 countries, and they had a meeting once a year. But nothing could get done unless all 11 countries agreed to it.

That's almost impossible.

Yeah.

Usually.

And that's what happened.

What are the 11 countries?

I don't remember.

I just wanted to know if we could have them for the tape. We have the US. We have Germany. We have France.

The guy you mentioned.

Paul Shapiro.

He'd probably know.

Yeah, he'd be able to rattle them off.

Yeah.

He'd be able to rattle them off. Was there resistance for other kinds of reasons or emotional reasons to change the way that things were operating at Bad Arolsen, to make sure those archives were open?

I would put it this way. The person that was in charge thought he was doing a good job. And he didn't have the personality to have somebody tell him what to do, or to tell him that what he is doing he could be doing better. That was the sort of reaction that one got from trying to get them to give us a copy.

Physically, when we're talking about millions of documents, 120, you say in the end, that's not something that can be done fairly quickly.

Why not?

Well, when you have only paper copies--

Yes.

--to physically digitize them, how much personnel do you need? How much funding do you need?

You just need equipment. You need scanning equipment. All you need is a scanner.

Or two.

Or two, or three, or 200.

Yeah.

Yes. But all you need are some scanners.

So how long did it take to get that collection--

A few years. A few years.

OK.

But at least it got in motion. And it became something that they had all agreed to, and that's what was going to happen. And it did happen.

Would you say it was about five years?

Oh, easy.

Easy?

Yeah.

Between the first meeting and when there's an actual digitized copy.

Well, I think it was more that an actual digitized copy was even after the first year. And then after the second year were some more. And after the third year were some more. It's not that they waited until they were all done before they gave.

It was incremental.

Yeah.

OK. And was this funded by the German government?

Yes. Yeah. And they were the easy part of the equation.

And the difficult part was?



The Red Cross.

Really?

It was the International Tracing Service itself.

OK. But Red Cross as oversight, was their involvement on their part, too?

Very little.

So International Tracing Service more or less acted independently.

Correct.

OK. And so in other words, they were also not accountable to anybody.

That's exactly the type of attitude that they had, was that they were not accountable to anybody, that they were an independent organization. The fact that they'd been set up by the Red Cross was like Red Cross is Red Cross.

Can we cut for a second?

Right. Speed.

So--

OK. The documents existed in 11 countries. 11 countries knew that they had documents of the Holocaust for whatever reason. And when they got together at a meeting the question was, how do we do this? We've got this. You've got that. You've got that. How do we organize? And that's when they came up with the idea of asking the International Red Cross, which was an international organization, in all of these countries, to become the--

Repository.

Depository is a good word.

OK.

And they then, in my opinion, typical Red Cross fashion, said, well, we'll make it happen. But it's not our budget. We're not going to do it. It's got to be a separate organization. And that's what they created. But by doing that, it was like--

Washing their hands.

They washed their hands of it. And the International Tracing Service's job then was to collect the documents, which they did. And then to start looking into the documents. But they had numerous inquiries once it became known that there were documents. Like my letter to them, a couple of letters to them, asking, do you have any information about my family?

They had numerous of these. And they didn't have the time, or the personnel, or anything else to deal with it appropriately.

Did they see that as part of what their mission was?

Again, I said they saw their mission as being to preserve the documents, not to know what is in the documents and provide that information to the people or family of those people whose documents the documents are. And that's where the problem was.

OK.

And not only that, if you think about it, employing-- I don't remember how many people International Tracing Service was employing, but it was a relatively small number of people. All of these documents, from 11 countries, and don't forget the Germans had a document of everything. I mean, I have copies of the documents that are in these files of my family. There's a document of just about everything, of like Bertholt. That Bertholt was put in jail, why he was put in jail, that Bertholt was let out of jail. All of the stuff is there.

And the surprising thing that I found, from my point of view surprising, was that what Bad Arolsen had in regard to David, his wife, and son being sent to Belzec, that was not in Bad Arolsen. That was in Yad Vashem.

How do you explain that?

I don't-- I can't explain it.

OK.

All I know is that something that when I was at Yad Vashem, which I was a number of times, as I was a number of times at the Holocaust Museum. They were able to find this document, and showed it to me, and gave me a copy of it.

So this was the post-war reality-- documents scattered all over the place, amongst these 11 countries, an effort to centralize them, to put them in one place. And then how should it be handled?

Yeah.

And I wonder, in the post-war years, Germany also enacted an awful lot of laws actually to prevent what happened with the Gestapo. That is, they had these laws to protect personal information, so that personal information is not released about a private individual to someone. I think they call it Datenschutzgesetz. Did that play a role in these discussions on opening up?

I don't think so. I don't know. Nobody mentioned that. At least, I don't remember them ever mentioning that.

OK.

I don't remember that at all.

And when you were at Bad Arolsen for the first time and you got the file for David Meyer, did you get the files for--

I got all of them.

You got all of them?

All of them. Yes.

All right. And then later did you get the same files digitally from the Holocaust Museum in Washington?

I didn't get into the digital files.

You never got digital files?

No, I got the original. I got copies of the original files.

OK. Can we cut?

--In 1938.

OK.

The brothers were sent to Dachau, but only for a very short time. And then they were released. They went back home. And it was only in '42. This is '38 we're talking about. '42 that they were actually sent away. Why they were sent to Dachau we don't know. And why they were released from Dachau we don't know. But I do know that they were sent to Dachau.

We're rolling.

OK. So tell me, why is this important for us to know? Why is it important for you to know?

I'm not understanding.

Why do you need to know this?

I would love to know where they were actually killed. In the same way as I know from that document that I got from Yad Vashem that David, his son, and wife were on this list. This is number so-and-so, number so-and-so, and number so-and-so, on this list of 2,000 people that were sent away. I know that that was where David was killed.

The other brothers and sisters, the four of them, I don't know where they were killed, because none of the documents that I've ever been able to find, whether it was from Bad Arolsen or from the Holocaust Museum, or Yad Vashem has been able to determine the date of death and where they were killed.

And my question is, why does a person need to know this?

Because it gives you-- it closes the book.

Does it?

Yes. With all those documents that there are there, and like the document of Bertholt selling a piece of-- giving a piece of furniture to--

The state property.

Yeah, the state property. The fact he was released and then sent away, but it doesn't say where he was sent. I don't know for the four of them where they were sent to, when they were killed, how they were killed. I don't know any of that. For David, at least for David and his wife and son, I know that he was on a train to Belzec, and that when the train got to Belzec, they were killed. That I know.

Did these questions plague your father?

I don't know to what extent they plagued him as much as they played me. I don't know. No. My father was-- my father's mindset was to have his family come to South Africa. And none of them wanted to come and gave the opportunity to my mother, and her sister, and her parents to come instead of them. And that's something that has plagued me my whole life, is as to why did that happen.

Why did not one of them come? Four of them were unmarried. David was the only one that was married, and my father was the only one that was married. The other four that remained in Germany until they were killed, none of them got married. And they were the only Jewish family in this village.

Were there any letters that they sent to South Africa between '38 and '42?

Yes, I've got some copies and letters.

Did they give you any answers in those letters?

Not to this. Only the fact is, we are not ready to come. We are still fine, but Hermina wants to, Erna wants to, her parents want. Those are the letters that I have.

Were there other people like you who had tried to get an answer through Bad Arolsen and didn't?

I'm sure. I'm sure there must be many.

But then took it one step further and contacted-- in other words, I'm wondering if there hadn't been a Lothar Meyer doing it, would we have ITS today?

I don't know the answer to that. I can't give you an answer. All I know is that Clay Shaw made it happen, and it was easy for me to get Clay to do it. And it opened up. And if you can get the copy of the US News & World Report--

Of course I will.

I'm sure you'll be able to get it online.

Yeah.

I just keep on trying to think of the guy's name, the author of it. But it's a three page article.

I just wanted to say, seeing it from the other side of what a phenomenal-- what a phenomenal treasure it is, for the people who seek to know some information, who also want closure. I mean, I asked the same question to one of those people that I interviewed, that I told you about, who had never seen such documents. He told me he had been in Mauthausen.

Oh, yes.

And then all of a sudden here is a document from the International Tracing Service saying there's a card that says he's in Mauthausen. I said, what difference does it make to you now? You knew you were in Mauthausen. You know? And he goes, but it's there. It's independent of me saying it. It's concrete proof. It's confirmation.

Right.

And in some ways what I'm asking you is a question that is hard to answer, but why do we need these pieces of paper? What do they give us?

They give you confirmation. They give you information that tells you what actually happened to them. We know that they didn't survive. We know that if they would have survived, they would have contacted my father, because they knew how to contact him. So they didn't survive.

Yeah. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you very, very much.

Thanks for coming.

I will say this then concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Lothar Meyer on January 19, 2019.

Thank you.

In Delray Beach. Thank you.

Thank you very much.

OK. You can cut.

With all of this--

What is the shame of what happened?

Is the fact that we've had people preventing the truth from being properly recorded.

Yeah. Any archive is not complete, but all of them are pieces of a puzzle, and this is such a huge piece.

It's a huge puzzle. It's a huge puzzle. And we know we keep on talking about six million. The reality is that, in my opinion, it's a much larger number.

Of course, of course. And because these are individual files, I don't know-- I don't know how they are filed. I do know that my colleagues told me you need training in order to be able to use the databases properly.

This Rabbi Dubois--

You mean Father Dubois.

Sorry. I mean Father Dubois.

Yeah.

The people that were killed in--

In the Ukraine.

In the Ukraine. Not only the Ukraine but wherever--

Mm-hmm.

Poland and--

The Baltics.

Lithuania.

By shooting.

Yeah, the Lithuanian. Those are not included, in my opinion, in the six million.

Ah. Ah. That's interesting.

Because they were never registered. There's no lists of them.

There are lists being made up now. I know Yad Vashem has tried a certain list.

Father Dubois has tried to do that, too.

Yeah.

I mean, when we went to the village that her family had come from, it's clear where they were buried. The cemetery was destroyed. All the tombstones were destroyed. But who kept a record of who they were? Because what had happened was, the local police came. They knew who the Jews were. And by the way, do you know why they knew who the Jews were?

Why? How?

In Lithuania, if you lived in a house and you were Jewish, your front door faced the street. If you were not Jewish, your front door did not face the street.

I have to look at that.

It's a fact.

OK. Isn't that interesting.

That's what we learned from being in Skuodas.

What was the village?

Skuodas.

[SPEAKING LITHUANIAN]

Skuodas.

Skuodas?

Skuodas?

Ah-hah. This is your wife's family?

My wife's family comes from Skuodas, which is on the Latvian border.

OK.

And then houses with front door faced the street were Jews. And those Jews had stores in those homes.

Skuodas. That's what--

Yeah.

OK. Now I I know where it is. I know where it is. OK. Wow.

Yeah.

I don't-- I never heard that before.

We found it phenomenal. I mean, to think that every house would be identified as to who its resident, what religion its resident was, whether he was Jewish or Christian?

Yeah. OK, now we can cut. Now we can cut.