

And I am going to start this interview by saying this is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Frank Cohn on Wednesday, June 24 2020, and Mr. Cohn, you are in Fort Belvoir. Is that correct?

That's correct. I'm in a retirement community at Fort Belvoir.

In Fort Belvoir, Virginia?

Yeah.

And the reinterview is in Falls Church, Virginia. So this is a telephone interview conducted during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, which requires that we are kept at a social distance, a safe distance for everybody, and we're just grateful that we can even connect and have such an interview. So thank you very much, Mr. Cohn, for agreeing to it.

No problem.

I'm going to start our interview with some very basic questions. So the very first one is, can you tell me the date of your birth?

I was born on August 2, 1925. That makes me right now 94 years old.

Oh my goodness. You don't sound it at all. You sound very young and very chipper. Can you tell me where were you born?

I was born in a Breslau, Germany, and that town doesn't exist anymore. It's now Wroclaw in Poland.

Wroclaw in Poland-- so it was in the eastern part of Germany?

That's correct.

And now it would be the western part of Poland.

It was at least at the time when I was born, and now it's the western part of Poland.

And this is, if--

I've never--

Yeah. Yeah, you've never been back? Or have you been back?

Never.

Never?

Mm-mm.

Well, this is the territory that Germany lost-- part of the territory that Germany lost after World War II, where Germany's borders shrank, and Poland's borders expanded westwards.

Well, they lost some on the east, so they just moved westward.

That's right. That's right. And when you were born, what was your name at birth?

My name was Franz Cohn, and Franz doesn't sound very good in the United States. So the Z became a K, so I'm Frank

Cohn.

And did that happen in a formal way?

Not really. When I came here, I immediately used the name Frank, and my immigration certificates are all Frank.

When you were grow-- oh, and let me ask a few details about your family. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

No, I was the only child. I was spoiled like an only child was. It probably still shows up today.

Well, you're speaking to an only child, too.

I see. Well, in the same boat.

Yes, in the same boat. So tell me a little bit about your parents. Let's start with your mother. What was her name?

My mother's name was Ruth Potlitzer when she was born, and she was born in Briesen, West Prussia, which was German before World War I. She was born in 1899, and the same thing that happened to me happened to her. After the war, it became Polish, and she moved westward to Breslau.

And the same happened with my father. He was born in 1886 in a small town named Wronki, and that, too, became Polish after World War I. And he moved to Breslau, and that's where they met and got married. And that's where I came in.

I see. So these towns-- because when I looked at them in your questionnaire, Wronki and Briesen. They're unfamiliar to me. I had never heard of them before.

Yeah, well, it was near Poznań.

I see. I see. So it was all in that area that today is Poland and was, as you say, after World War II.

That's right. So Poland was a very fluid country. It kept moving around.

Well, Poland also was a country that disappeared for over 120 years, and it's--

Yeah, you had to look in Russia to find it somewhere.

That's right. That's right. So did your parents come from large families themselves, or were they also only children?

No, they were not only children. They all had brothers and sisters. I don't recall the numbers off hand, but I had names of all of them. And I had made a document showing all the people in the family.

So like a family tree?

Yes, a family tree, both on the father's side and mother's side.

Do you know the year that your parents got married?

I believe they were married in 1923.

In Breslau?

In Breslau.

And when you were growing up, did you know your aunts and uncles, your parents' siblings?

Oh, yes. There were a lot of them in Breslau, although my mother's family was a little more scattered.

I see.

They were in Kemnitz and in Berlin. As a matter of fact, when I was about six years old, they put a ticket around me and put me on a train, and off I went to Berlin to have a vacation with the relatives there.

Oh, well, that's quite an adventure--

Yep, it was.

--for six-year-old. We don't do those things anymore.

Oh, no, no. But in those days, it was still-- let's see. I was six years old. It was 1931, and for a young kid it was still safe.

Yes, the idea that something could happen to the child was not part of what was the daily reality in those days. It was a time of feeling of safety, at least in that regard.

Yeah. Yes, it was.

So can you tell me about some-- so it'd be mostly your father's siblings that you would have known in Breslau?

Yes, there was an uncle by name of Hugo Cohn, and he had become a captain in the German army during World War I, which was the highest rank that any Jew could attain at the time. And he was very proud of that, and when Hitler came to power, he kept telling us, don't worry about it. We have Hindenburg, and General Hindenburg-- he will take care of me, and I'll take care of you because he's taking care of all the frontline warriors. And I was one of those, so nothing will happen to me as long as Hindenburg is around.

And of course, he died one year later after Hitler took over power. So in 1934, when I heard that Hindenburg had died, it was another nail in getting the fear moving. Yeah.

So whatever happened to Uncle Hugo Cohn?

Well, Uncle Hugo had his wife and two children, and they went to Palestine. So they were saved.

I see.

But they had a very hard time. They were on a kibbutz, and the girls were what a little bit later was used by horses. They had to plow with their own strength, and they were pretty miserable. It took them a long time until they finally got their feet on the ground and were living reasonably, but that was very hard life apparently.

And what year did he leave Germany with his family?

They left a little bit after us. We departed in October '38. That was my mother and I. And they came into Palestine in '39.

So in other words, between the time Uncle Hugo told you and your parents that everything will be OK, there was a 180-degree about change when he realized that he would have no protection?

Absolutely, yes. When you're a young kid, they don't explain things to you very much. You usually get information by just listening, and if you try to ask a question, you're usually put down and say, no, no, no, don't worry about that. That's for the adults to worry about. But the kid gets it-- the kid gets it probably even worse by the failure of an explanation,

SO--

Of course. Of course, because it's a vacuum, and in a vacuum--

I can think because three incidents that put the fear into me about the Nazis.

Tell me about those.

The first one was in 1932. This is before Hitler. My uncle, Max, who lived in Kemnitz with his wife-- and his wife was my mother's sister, and they had a boy and a girl. Both the boy and the girl escaped. The girl was in the Kindertransport, and the boy went through Italy and got to the United States. And he got into the army when I got into the army, so we had a sort of similar experience in that regard.

And the mother died in a concentration camp. The father in 1932 was attacked by a bunch of Nazis on the street, and they killed him. And nothing ever happened by the police. Nobody investigated it, and of course, this was an item of conversation among the adults.

Now, I was seven years old at the time, and I heard all of this. And that was probably the first time that I understood Nazis, and this is before Hitler, that Nazis were our enemy. And they were to be feared because they kill people. And I was a Jew. He was a Jew. They could kill me. So it came up in the very early part of my life.

And the other incident was Hindenburg. That was two years later, so I was nine years old, I guess.

You're saying in 1934 Hindenburg died?

That's right. It was in 1934, so I was nine. And I was in sort of a camp, I guess, at the time because I remember I was woken out, and the adults were talking about Hindenburg dying. And immediately my conversation with Uncle Hugo came to my mind, and I said, oh my God. The protection I had from getting killed has just been removed, so I'm now exposed.

The last item was in 1935. Now, there I was 10 years old, and there was a business partner of my father. And again, the conversation came that the Gestapo had come to his house, and they had taken him to Gestapo headquarters, which was apparently on the fourth floor of some building in Breslau.

And a couple hours later, they found him on the pavement outside. He had either jumped or had been pushed out of a window, and of course, he was dead. And that came to mind in 1938 when the Gestapo came to our door when my father was away in the States looking for her affidavit. They wanted him, and immediately my mind came the name of Michaelis. That was the name of the person who was my father's business acquaintance.

That was his last name?

Michaelis, Michaelis.

And what was his first name if you remember?

I have no idea, no. It was always Herr Michaelis, Mr. Michaelis.

Of course. And I take it he was Jewish as well?

Oh, yes, yes, yes, of course.

Because, of course, there were also political resistors and political prisoners who were being arrested by the Nazis at the time who were--

Well, they were-- it's very early in the game. This is around 1935. I think all the people who were communists and social democrats and such-- they had already been taken care of. So he was not political. He was definitely taken because he was Jewish.

I see.

But he had a business, and I guess they wanted the business.

Well, thank you. This is a very important part of the interview. It is like answering one of the questions I hadn't asked yet but which always comes up is, when did the political events that were surrounding you implode on your life or explode in your life? And these clearly did.

What I'd like to turn to now, though, is a normal kind of life. I want to get a sense of the world you were born into, and your parents, and your own personal world so that we can get a feel for what there was before it was gone.

Well, it did. It impacted me also very dramatically in a way because I had some German friends, and there was one particular friend that I used to play in the sandbox. We played-- there was a vehicle, a little car that my uncle, Isidore, had given me. That was the uncle who was a brother of my father. And it had sharp edges, and I remember he pulled. And I pulled, and I had my thumb in the window of the car. And that was very sharp, and I remember I was bleeding profusely. So he was a blood friend of mine in a way, a blood brother. So in 1933, as soon as Hitler came to power, I never saw him again.

Really?

We used [AUDIO OUT] in the playground. He didn't show up. I showed up. He didn't show up. The parents took him away because he wasn't going to play with a Jewish kid, so that was pretty traumatic for me. And I knew about the Nazis, too, in regards of what happened to my uncle, who was killed in '32, but also, looking out of our apartment-- it looked right across to a finance office in Germany, and they used that as a focal point for demonstrations. And they had battles between the communists and the Nazis in the days just before Hitler.

Oh my. So it's right outside your windows?

Yeah, and we were on the second or third floor. I don't remember. Anyway, I was on the balcony, and I could look out and see those. And of course, my mother pulled me back into the apartment. She didn't want me exposed on the balcony. But I could still see what was going on between the Nazis and the communists. The Nazis were all in uniform, and the communists were not.

And what kind of uniform were the Nazis wearing?

That was the SA uniform, the khaki uniform that they had.

So in other words, it was brown shirts?

--had the brown uniform, yes.

This was the group, when Hitler comes to power, that actually-- there's a demise. I believe one of their leaders is ordered killed by Hitler because the SS comes in. My history is a little bit fuzzy in this area, but the--

No, you're correct. You're quite correct. The Nazis purged the SA. There were some internal struggles going on, and all of a sudden the SS became the governing force out there, and the SA was just about disbanded.

Yeah. So the SS became the muscle on the street, and this is what--

That's right.

And this is what the SA was doing, so this is what you saw.

What I saw was the SA.

Yeah. Now, when you say they were in uniform and the others were not, that suggests that they were more orderly, more organized, more efficient, and the others would not be. It's not necessarily true, but uniforms imply that.

What did you actually see? Did you see fistfights? Did you see-- did you hear gun fights? Did you see people being hurt?

It was strictly a fistfights. There were no shootings, no.

And were these young men? And do you remember whether there was hundreds of them, or maybe tens, or things like that?

Oh, it wasn't 100. So it was more the line of 30, 40 on one side and 30, 40 on the other side.

Well, that's pretty substantial.

But evenly split in terms of manpower.

Were there casualties?

I don't know. I don't remember any ambulances coming in. I think what happened-- the Nazis seemed to have been the more powerful because they ended up chasing them down the street, and everybody disappeared.

Did this happen once, or did this happen often in your street?

Well, they had demonstrations pretty often, but what I'm relating to you now was just a one-time fistfight. Usually there weren't fistfights. They were just demonstrating.

And why was the finance office there, whatever finance office it was? Why was it a flashpoint?

Good question. I have no idea, but they picked it.

Was it a government office?

Oh, yes, yes. The finance office was the office that took care of taxes and things of that nature.

I see. So it was municipal. It's not like it was a Jewish financial organization, or a bank, or something like that that they would have been picketing.

No, no, it was official German finance office. They have a finance minister in various parts of the country, which is funny because later on in my military police career in the army after the war, long after the war, I was working with these finance directors [LAUGHS]--

In Germany?

--at the time. And he was a very nice man, as a matter of fact. He was an old German, before-Hitler aristocracy type. Of course, I'm sure he was working with the Nazis at the time that he was finance minister, and he stayed finance minister somehow after the war. And he was actually the only person-- no, there were two people who were reciprocated later on. We always had German-American festivities where we invited the Germans, and there were only two people who reciprocated. One was that financial officer, and the other one was one of the generals that was retired. And all the

others-- they just came to us and partake whatever was offered, but they don't reciprocate.

Interesting.

That's way later, and that probably doesn't belong for this.

No, no. It is very-- no, it does belong insofar, as it is part of your postwar experience, and it ties into your coming from Germany. And because you came from Germany, that is a reason why you were in the particular forces that you were in on the US side, so there is a tie-in that way.

I had three three-year tours in Germany as an officer after the war because I spoke German. They always sent me to Germany.

This man-- was he the finance minister of the Bundesrepublik? Is this it?

That's right.

So that's a high position. That's a very high position.

It was a high position. As a matter of fact, we're still in contact with his daughter and her children. One of the children who is the grandson lives in the Boston area. He came to the States. Both of them were born in the States. As a matter of fact, they had dual citizenship, German and American, but the girl--

Did you call his name?

Yes, Moritz-- let's see. What's the last name? It'll come to me in a minute.

That's fine. That's fine.

Names are a problem.

That's OK. It's OK.

[AUDIO OUT] so quickly.

Pardon?

The girl was Nora, and his name was Moritz. And I'll think of the last name eventually.

Of course, of course. I want to turn back, though. We've gone in many different chronological areas, chronological points, and I want to turn back now--

Yes, I jumped around.

That's OK. That's OK. We tie it up all in the end. Sometimes it's a straight line, and sometimes it loops a bit. But it's all relevant.

So I want to go back to the beginning now and the world, as I said, that you were born into. And it starts with one's-- when you're a toddler, your world is really your parents and your home. So I'd like to find out a little bit more about both of your parents' personalities, and I'd like to find out about your earliest memories.

Well, my parents-- that goes back awhile, too, because my mother had sort of a romance with a German officer, a lieutenant at the time, and the parents obviously broke that up when they found out about it. But she remembered him very well, and that man became a two-star general during the war. And he survived the war, and I met him after the war,

which is really another jumping forward many, many years. And do you want a quick story about him?

Sure, but let's put some dates to it, not specific but approximate. So your mother, as a young woman-- she's born in-- did you say 1899?

1899, yes.

So as a young woman, she has a romance with him. Would this have been during World War I, after World War I?

This was after World War I, yes.

And was it in Breslau already.

No, no, no. Well, wait a second. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. But since it was after the war, it would have to be in Breslau, come to think of it.

And what did you-- did she ever tell you when you were growing up about this romance?

Not really. I just somehow found out about it. No, she never gave a story to me about how that developed, so I have no background information on it.

So what does this tell you-- when I asked you what was your mother's personality like, this is what popped into your mind. Is that because she was somebody who-- tell me why. Tell me why, basically.

Well, what happened then-- they broke this up, and they arranged the marriage with my father, who was about 17 years older than she was. So this was never a real love affair between them, and--

Did you feel that? As you were growing up, did you feel that?

No, I didn't understand it at all because father was a figure who went out to work, and mother was a figure who was more involved with me. So I was closer with my mother than I was with my father.

And what kind of interests did she have?

Well, she was a very friendly person, and all her life she always had lots and lots of friends. And I remember when she died about 10 people came up to me saying that she was their dearest friend. That's how she was throughout her life, really. She always had girl friends, and she used to drag me along to meet some of them.

Which is, of course, fascinating for a young boy, absolutely fascinating.

They would meet in a konditorei, a place to get coffee, and I would, of course, be happy to get my cake and milk or whatever it was. But I was certainly bored stiff in the conversation. And I was very pleasant to my mother because I kept nagging her, let's go home, let's go. I was just a real spoiled brat.

Well, I don't know. I think that's very typical for any child, particularly if mom is gossiping with her girlfriends and you've already had your cake. So what else is there?

Now, with my father, these were much rarer occasions when I was with him, and I can recall a couple of incidents with him. The first one was-- and I must have been about six or so, and we were going to learn to ski. And he took me to what was called the Riesengebirge. Those were mountains near the Czech border.

Oh, yes, I think the south, near Dresden or south of Dresden. Is that right?

Well, I'm not sure of where it is, but it was near the border. Anyway, we were going to see the sun go up in the morning

and then go skiing, and of course, he told the hotel to wake him up at sunup. And they did wake us up, and we looked out. And it was sleeting and snowing, and it was just miserable. So we didn't get the goal of skiing that day, but he took me across the street to a cafe. And the street was icy, and suddenly he froze because he was afraid to fall on the ice.

And that was the first time I realized that my father was vulnerable. He was not the almighty who can take care of everything. Here he was very vulnerable, trying to cross the street and was holding my hand very tightly, and I had to help him get across the street. This is just a little thing, but it really stuck in my mind, even to this day.

Well, I can understand why. I can understand why because exactly what you said. It is children are not used to seeing their fathers being vulnerable like that. They are supposed to be the stalwart heroes who protect you from-- who give you security and protect you from all dangers.

The next incident I recall was many years later. I must have been about 10 or 11. This is after Hitler, and he took me to fly a kite. We constructed the kite at home, and of course, I wanted to fly it. So he took me out on the outskirts of Breslau on a little hill that used to be the dumping place for trash and so forth, and they filled it in, and it had a nice little flat surface that I was able to run and get the kite to fly up. And looking over, we could see the railroad, and I remember you could see the conductor of the railroad. And there I was on the hill, and the conductor was coming by. And I started to wave, and he waved back at me.

What a thing.

And something hit me. I said at the time, if he knew I was Jewish, I bet he wouldn't wave back at me. And that hit me, and we had some conversation with that. But I don't recall the conversation. I just remember getting hit, that here I'm a Jew, and I wouldn't be worth being waved backed to by this conductor.

So that had internalized itself in you?

Yes.

And pretty early on.

The fear was in there, and the downgrading was in there because we were not at the same level with the Germans. We were at a point lower down.

Did you ever feel yourself to be a German?

Never, never. I lived in Germany, and I was a German Jew, a German Jew, yes. A German I never was.

And what about your parents? For them, was it a transition from having--

Yes, definitely because they considered themselves German, no question about it, both of them. I remember we had a German flag that we always had to put out on certain holidays and whatever when the flag was to be displayed. But then all of a sudden around us Nazi flags came out, and my father still put the German flag out. And one fine day he never did anymore, so he must've gotten a word, don't you put that flag out anymore.

Or maybe he no longer felt to be a German.

Possibly, possibly.

Yeah, that's a very painful transition to realize that you thought you were part of a body politic or a society, and then you realize you're not wanted in it and you're being pushed out of it.

Of course, I felt inferior, and I knew I wasn't wanted because you went around, and restaurants we used to go to you couldn't go anymore because they had a sign "Jews not desired" or "Jews verboten" if they were more rough. And a kid

understands that if he's not wanted in there, he's not at the same level. He's somewhat below and not acceptable.

The only place I was acceptable and felt acceptable was within my Jewish crown. For example, I was on a soccer team, and it was strictly Jewish boys. And the only people we could play with were other Jewish boys, and that gave me a degree of security. But alone in the street I always felt very insecure after a while because, well, there's a big story about me in the third grade.

Tell me about it. Tell me about that.

Let me go back a little bit. I went to school at the age of six, and that was 1932, before Hitler. And I had an old teacher-- he must've been at least 50 years old, and I thought he was--

That's ancient.

I can't remember anything about him because he was just too ancient. Anyway, in the second grade, I'm getting a wonderful, young teacher, and I'm all enthused with him. And I sort of got the idea he liked me, and I'll tell you why I thought he liked me. The way the German educational system went was that you would get a mission to write a paragraph, and you were to put a title at the top of a paragraph, skip a line, and then do your paragraph.

So I did it like all the other kids, and some of us forgot to skip the line. Well, you had to be taught not to skip a line, so you had to line up in front of the teacher. And one after the other, he took a long stick, and he whacked you over your hand.

That'll teach you.

That's how you were taught not to skip a line. Anyway, when he whacked some of these kids, I could see that he really put gusto into it. But when he came to me, the whack was not that hard. And I knew he loved me, and I knew I loved him. Even so, he hit me over the hand.

Anyway, when the third grade was to start, I heard that Mr. Schumann-- his name was Schumann. I'll never forget his name. And he was going to be our third grade teacher again, as he was the second grade. I was all excited to see Mr. Schumann, Herr Schumann. I never knew his first name. His first name was Herr.

Yeah, mister.

Yeah. Anyway, here he comes in in full SA uniform, Nazi uniform, in my back. I felt personally betrayed, and fear came in. And things changed because pretty soon the kids all came with some paraphernalia of the Hitler Youth uniform. They either had a hat, or a scarf, or a belt, a shoulder belt, and even an arm that sometimes they had from the Hitler Youth.

And then they were singing Hitler songs, like this "Horst-Wessel" song. I remember the name of the tune. I could still hum it for you. Anyway, when that was sang, they had to stand up at attention, and I was not allowed to stand up because I was a Jew. And I was the only Jew in the class.

Now, I will say one thing about Mr. Schumann. When the kids started to pick on me, he wouldn't have it. He wouldn't let them do that, and the kids in the class never bothered me. Now, after school some of the other kids somehow found out I was a Jew, and they chased me. But I was a pretty good runner, and I got home before they caught me. So they never caught me, really.

But I was very uncomfortable in that class, and after the third grade my parents took me and put me in a Jewish private school. And I never saw Herr Schumann again. But I will say this, after the war was over and I had a lot of business in POW camps, every POW camp I always checked to see if they had a guy by the name of Schumann in there. Of course, that was ridiculous because he probably was on the Eastern Front, not the Western Front, and he probably got killed in the war. Most of them got killed. But I looked for him, and of course, I never found him. I don't know what I would

have done if I had.

But this was one of my questions is, despite the uniform, had his manner towards you changed?

Not really, not really, except that he made sure that I was not getting up when they sang the Hitler songs. He made sure I stayed seated. That might have been because people would come into the classroom, supervisors, I guess, and he wasn't going to be caught short on that. But he was very correct with me otherwise. He never bothered me.

It's very hard to try to discern what his motives might have been in his manner, but it could have been, if he still was kind towards you in most ways-- if what I remember from the "Horst-Wessel" song that you referenced-- there's a phrase in there about cutting Jewish throats and Jewish blood spurting. I don't know if I'm correct in that, but maybe he-

You're right

--didn't want a young Jewish boy having to sing that.

That's Juden blut.

Yeah, that's Juden blut. It's very hard to-- it is very hard to discern when someone cannot speak to you freely because clearly he couldn't do that. He couldn't take you aside and say, pay no attention to any of this, or despite I have this uniform, I still like you. He couldn't risk such a thing.

Oh, no, he never did that. As a matter of fact, there was definitely a change in tone because he was much more pleasant to me in the second grade, and he was very correct with me in the third grade. I could never remember doing anything that I felt was unfair. It was very correct, but we were not friends anymore. That was for sure.

How sad. The picture you're painting for me of yourself as a young boy is you needed friends, and needed somebody who you could rely on.

I adored him when it all started. I adored him, and suddenly there was this Nazi uniform, which immediately-- well, I guess even on my side I was not going to be friends with him anymore, so it was correct from both sides.

But you know something? The picture you're painting of your childhood, your early years and your memories in many ways is-- there is no such thing as the majority or minority of interviews, but one thing that is distinct in this is that, for many other people who were about the same age you were and who were born in Germany and were spending their early years there, the political events and the repercussions of those political events somehow didn't make their way into their consciousness until much, much later, or if they were, they were separate incidents.

What you're telling me is that you never had a buffer. There was never any time that you didn't know that life was dangerous, that, outside of the few safe circles that you had, which were Jewish, that the world at large was not a place to be trusted and that it was hostile to you.

That's true. That's correct, yeah. I had a friend in high school and college, and we were friends later on. He came from Austria, a different childhood because until 1938-- well, it was later than that. No, yeah, 1938-- that's when the Anschluss happened, when Austria became part of Germany, so his childhood was free as an Austrian until 1938.

So much later he was offered-- because he became stateless just like me after he had left the country. Our passports were stamped "No Longer Valid." Well, that's a different story I don't want to get into that now. But he had the option to get his Austrian citizenship back, and he took that. And so he became both American and Austrian dual citizenship. If Germany had ever offered me a citizenship, I would have spit on them because I certainly wouldn't have taken that citizenship.

I see. It is much different. It is much, much different and harsher. The other thought that I had as you were speaking is

that all of these things that you're experiencing you're experiencing at an age when a person is a child and is developing, and so you're much more vulnerable. The way things affect you will be much deeper. There are fewer defenses than a teenager, for example, would have had at the same time.

And some of it stuck with me because all the time that we were in Germany-- the point was, don't make any waves. Don't make any waves. Never get any attention on you. So when things happen, my first reaction always is, don't make any waves, and somehow sometimes that's very wrong.

Did you feel that the rest of your life, like that was a part of your personality that was formed?

Yeah.

I see. I see.

It's ingrained. I have to specifically reverse myself from my first impressions when things happen so that I can move forward in a more correct manner than trying to retreat and not make any waves.

The situation doesn't always require that, or put it differently, the situation often doesn't require that and calls for something else.

Absolutely.

So I wanted to make sure now-- Uncle Max-- do you remember his last name?

Max Berdass, Berdass.

How do I spell that?

B-E-R-D-A-S-S.

OK. And did you ever find out the details of how he was killed in 1932?

Only that there were a bunch of Nazis, and they beat him to death.

In the street?

On the street, yes, on the street.

Had you ever visited them in Kemnitz before that?

We visited Kemnitz, yes, but I don't really recall-- I'd seen pictures, and I have pictures in mind when I see them. I don't have his face in mind otherwise because I was too young.

Now, what about grandparents? Did grandparents figure in your life in those early years in Breslau? Did you meet--

Well, yes. My grandfather on my mother's side lived in Berlin. His wife died when I was one years old, so I never knew her. But I visited my grandfather when I took these trips to Berlin.

Did you stay with him?

No, I always stayed with somebody else, with some younger people.

And were they also relatives?

They were all relatives. Some of them were cousins and whatnot. I don't really recall some of who I was with, except one aunt I remember, Tante Greta. She had four children, and they all fled to Australia because the younger son was an electrician. And he went to Australia first as an electrician. They needed him. And then when he was there, he got the rest of them out.

So this was in the 30s?

'39, after we left.

After you left, OK.

We said goodbye. On my way out, we stopped in Berlin and said goodbye to that aunt, and I think her son was already in Australia at the time.

So your grandmother, your mother's mother, had died when you were one year old.

That's right.

Your grandfather still lived, and you would visit him in Berlin. And what was his name?

Yeah, he died in a concentration camp.

He died in concentration camp.

I think.

What was his first name. Do you remember?

Sally, S-A-L-L-Y, I think, something like that.

Would that have been for Solomon?

I don't know if that's his official name, Sally Potlitzer, P-O-T-L-I-T-Z-E-R, Potlitzer.

Potlitzer. Now, when you mentioned that your parents had come from these parts of Germany, which are now Poland. Were they all German citizens?

Yes, they were German citizens.

So it wasn't like they were Jews from Poland.

Never Polish. Nobody was Polish.

Nobody was Polish, OK.

Nobody spoke Polish. They all spoke German.

And so German was your language at home?

Yes, it was. Yes, I spoke German at home.

And your father's parents-- were they alive when you were growing up?

My father's father had died long before I was born, and his mother was still alive. She was in Breslau, and I remember--

and she was with-- she lived with Uncle Hugo, the one who was in the war. She lived with him.

And I remember when-- we always visited those people because the two girls-- one was two years older, and one was four years older than me. But I was able to play with them, so I love to go to Uncle Hugo's, except that they always had to nap in the afternoon, which I never did. And I was forced to nap in the afternoon there.

What an interruption.

I hated that.

What an interruption.

But the rest was fun. But I remember my grandmother. She was always sitting in a chair. That's all I remember, the figure in the chair with a blanket over her legs, and then one fine day I was told she died. And that was the end.

So she didn't really interact with you?

No, not really, no.

And what about your grandfather, Sally?

Which one?

Your mother's father did. Did he interact with you? Did you have--

Oh, yes. [AUDIO OUT]. He talked to me sometimes, yes. He did interact. But I can't recall any conversations or what. I just know that there were some.

Yeah, OK. Were your parents and the family in general-- were they very religious? My father was-- in Germany there were two synagogues. One was Orthodox, and one was Reform more or less. But the Reform probably wasn't as reform as Reform here. They were probably more conservative.

But we went to the Orthodox synagogue, and we had kosher in the home. But my father wasn't that dedicated to observe every Jewish rule. He was much more flexible in that regard.

But when we went to the synagogue, we would always walk, even though there was a street car that we could have used, because it was quite a way away from us. We walked because there was the Sabbath. And we had kosher in the home, and then, of course, when we came to the States, again, he found an Orthodox synagogue where the women were separate from the men.

Was that the case in Germany?

Oh, yes. The women were upstairs, and the men were downstairs. And I remember when I was a young kid I used to be with my mother upstairs, but then I got rebellious and said, I'm not supposed to be up here. I'm a man. So then I went downstairs, and I was with my father.

I remember my gym teacher in the Jewish school-- he had a seat also on the side, and I snuck over to him quite a number of times. I loved him.

Do you remember the name of the Jewish school? Did it have a name?

It had a name, and I can't recall what it was.

That's OK.

It should because the Jewish school was also associated with that schul.

I see.

But I can't remember the name. It was the Orthodox synagogue.

And tell me a little--

The name related to the street that the synagogue was located on, so the name was associated with that street. They called it what that street's name, but I can't remember what it was.

Do you remember your own address for your home?

Yes, there were three addresses. Salvatorplatz Number One was when I was born, and they moved out because it was too small. So then we went to Kleist Strasse Number Six. That was the one that was across from that financial office I talked about. And then when my father lost a store that he had and had money problems, we had to move out of that to a less expensive apartment on Guttenberg Strasse Number 12.

I'm going to repeat these, and I'll start from the last one just because I want to get the spellings right. So Guttenberg Strasse would have been G-U-T-E-N--

G-U-T-T, Guttenberg.

OK, G-U-T-T-E-N-B-E-R-G--

That's right.

--Number 12. Kleist, the one before, was K-L-E-I-S-T Street.

K-L-E-I-S-T, that's right, Kleist Strasse.

Six?

Six.

And the first one I didn't quite get. How do you say it, and how do you spell it? Salvatorplatz, S-A-L-V-A-T-O-R platz, the other word, P-L-A-T-Z.

And Number One?

Number One.

So Salvator, Salvatorplatz Number One. Were these are all located in the center of Breslau or in residential areas?

I think Salvatorplatz was pretty well in the center of Breslau. The Kleist Strasse was a little bit further, at the outskirts. It was near [GERMAN], the southern-- well, it was a sports area, I guess, a wooded area, and it had a number of sports fields in there.

Did you live in single-family homes or in apartments?

In apartments, and about two blocks away from Kleist Strasse Six was my uncle, David. He was the uncle of my mother, actually, my mother's uncle, and he had a villa and a garden, and we went over there quite often because we were in an apartment on the second or third floor.

And so for a place-- yeah?

I liked my uncle's villa much better.

Well, it's a place for a kid to play.

Apparently.

It's a place for a kid to play if it's outside and there's a garden there.

Uncle David-- I'm not sure whether he died in a concentration camp or still in his villa. When we left, he was there, and then he died. And he was with his sister, and the sister and his son went to Brazil. And the son in Brazil came to visit us a number of times. So he survived, and the sister survived, too.

Well, it really is this time of the 1930s-- this larger family that you were part of gets scattered all over the world. You have Australia--

Well, let me give that to you right now. I can relate of-- let's see. I think I made a note of it some place. Oh, here it is.

Yeah, six out of 12 of distant family-- the extended family, let's put it that way. Six out of 12 from my father's side died in concentration camps, and four out of 18 on my mother's side died in concentration camps. And they were distributed-- I got all the countries listed that they had to go to to flee. There was Holland, which was a very bad place because they got caught and put in concentration camps after that, England, Italy, Australia, Brazil, Haiti, Palestine, Israel, and the US.

Oh my goodness.

Dispersed that way, yes. So any place that they could find that would let them in they were willing to go. They realized they were fleeing for their lives.

Many people-- one of the points of-- let's say, a discussion that could not have an end is when did people realize, and why didn't they leave earlier? And it sounded like there was this ongoing, should we stay, should we go? And for some people in Germany-- I'm talking Jewish people in Germany-- it came upon them much too late. That is, we'll be fine. We'll put our heads down. We'll live through this. It will get better. And only when it's too late do they realize, we should have gotten out of here.

Well, you're absolutely correct. I have it in just a little bit different tone. That is, the word was, whenever something happened, like the Nuremberg laws in 1935, they say, well, all right, but it can't get any worse. It can't get any worse, but of course, it got worse each time.

It got worse. It got worse. And yet, in the family that you describe-- there are different kinds of, let's say, repercussions is that by leaving and going to any place where they could be accepted, and taken, and allowed in, they saved their lives.

Yeah, well, for example, the daughter who went on the Kindertransport to England--

--from Uncle Max?

When she finally could, she came to the United States. The people who went to-- let's see. Where else did go to the States? Well, the ones that went to Australia, a couple of them went to Israel from Australia. They felt better in Israel. So there was moving. The people who went to Italy went to the United States. The people who went to Haiti went to the United States. So a lot of them ended up in the United States.

But the ones who went to Holland-- after the concentration camp, there was a family man, and it was a cousin of my

mother, and his wife, and one boy. The boy was my age. The kid in the concentration camp died. David Josephson was his name. And Kurt and Fanny Josephson survived the concentration camps. How she survived I don't know because she was a very meek and very fragile person, but she survived. And they met each other again after the concentration camp in Sweden, and then they came to the States.

They went back to Holland first, but they felt insecure in Holland and came to the United States. And they were never the same mentally because somebody was always poisoning them, or they had gas next door, or whatnot. There was always a problem. They never really recovered from the concentration camp.

Oh my. By all this scattering, one could lose the sense of family. Did that happen?

Yeah, well, the family completely broke up, really. There were some evidence of visitations, but certain people were never seen again, even though they survived. They were too far away. My mother didn't see some of her sisters again and so forth. My father with her-- my father's family was really broken up.

Tell me, how did your father support you?

Well, when I was born, they had a sporting goods store, and it was a nice store, obviously, because he made a good amount of money. First of all, there was the maid for the house, and then there were some maid for me. When Hitler came to power, the maid for me had to be dismissed because he could see his income was going to be much more reduced, but maid for the house-- her name was Berta.

She stayed, and she stayed until she had to leave in 1935 because that was when the law brought the segregation between Jews and Christians, so no Christian could work for a Jew anymore. So that's when we lost her, and she was my second mother. But she did some bad things. Like when we went out, she would give me a ham sandwich and say, don't tell your parents.

I didn't hear all of that. She would give you a ham sandwich, and then what happened?

Pardon me?

I didn't hear everything that you said. She would give you a ham sandwich, and then what had happened?

And then she would tell me, don't tell your parents about it. I wouldn't. And then she took me-- one time Hitler came to Breslau. She took me to see Hitler because she wanted to see Hitler, and she had me in tow, so I had to go with her.

And she told me, when he comes, you've got to give the Heil Hitler salute. And I said, no, I'm not allowed to give a Hitler salute. She says, don't you dare not give it. You gotta give the Hitler salute. And I was scared to death that one of my schoolmates or my old schoolmates might see me, the Hitler salute, which I wasn't allowed to do. But I was lucky. Nobody saw me.

And did you see him?

Pardon me?

Did you see Hitler?

Oh, yes, yes. He came in an open convertible, and he gave his Hitler salute all around. And the boys-- they screamed, and hollered, and boy, did they carry on. Oh, they loved him.

And Berta?

They loved him. But I was with my mouth shut, scared to death, giving my Hitler salute of Hitler.

And Berta-- did she love him, too?

Oh, yes. She was screaming bloody murder. She loved him, and yet she worked for us. And she loved me, no question about it. I cried like hell when she left, almost like losing my second mother because I was with her. My mother always took off and had all kinds of things on her plate. She met a lot of people, and then she worked with my father afterwards, schlepping around big bales of cloth that he was selling.

In one room in our apartment at Guttenberg Strasse, they had shelves, and they had it all filled with bales of cloth that he was selling. And of course, his customer base kept getting smaller and smaller and smaller, and that's why in 1938 he finally gave up. He said he had to leave.

And all this was to our advantage because when he had his until 1938-- excuse me, until 1933, when Hitler came to power. The minute Hitler came to power there were SR people in front of the store demonstrating with signs saying, don't buy from Jews, and he recognized immediately that that was the end of the business. And he sold it, and that was a wonderful thing to happen because a store would have been a drag on him not to leave Germany. But he didn't have a store anymore, so by 1938, when he didn't get enough money anymore, he was ready to leave.

So between 1933 and 1938 after he sold the store, was it that he was selling goods from that store until they all ran out? Was he still selling sporting goods, or had he tried something else?

It was something else because the bales of cloth that he was selling was more in line with one of his relatives that had a different type of store that needed material and a tailor shop where they made clothes and whatnot. So he decided to get bales of cloth, which he stored in his apartment, and he sold those to the various Jewish stores that were still in operation. And of course, as I said, there was less and less customers as he went along, and by 1938, he hardly had any customers left.

Was there a discussion in your home--

Pardon me?

Was there a discussion in your home was similar to the one we mentioned a little while ago of, should we stay, should we go, should we stay, should we go?

Well, that discussion didn't happen in front of me. That went on behind the curtains, you might say. Well, I need to tell you the story of getting out in order to tell you of the discussion because that happened in--

OK, tell me that story then.

Well, it was 1938. He took me on a trip to Poland to Wronki, to show me where he was born, and I remember this happened either in early 1938 or in 1937. I think it probably was early '38. He went with me to Wronki, and I met a lot of the Polish-speaking relatives that were there. These were not direct brothers and sisters, but these were more distant relatives who stayed in Wronki after the Germans lost that territory. So he had--

After World War I?

Yeah, after World War I. So he had--

Excuse me. Excuse me. I'm interrupting right here, but I wanted to find out-- so does that mean that the family originally were Polish Jews?

No, I don't think-- certainly not his direct family. His mother and father were German, and all of my uncles and aunts were German. But he must have some questions or something like that, or some uncles, or whatever who must have lived in Poland, yeah.

So you go to visit them.

I recall there was a beautiful little 12-year-old girl that took me under her wing and introduced me to all her friends, but she only spoke Polish. I only spoke German. But somehow we communicated, and I was enthralled with her. She was really cute, and all these kids-- and then thinking back later on, all those kids-- they all died in a concentration camp. They didn't survive. None of those people survived. All those people I met then-- they were all dead a few years later.

Anyway, we came home, and my bar mitzvah was in August. And everything was fine until my bar mitzvah, and he supported me in learning my bar mitzvah. I recall, there were two kids that had bar mitzvah that day. I thought I was going to be the only one, but no, no such luck. There was another kid. We both had bar mitzvah on that day, but I won the toss.

So I had a little bit of Torah, and I had the maftir. So I was happy with that. I remember that, and I must have done OK. And the presents were wonderful. I got my first bicycle, a BMW bicycle.

Oh my goodness.

Yes, I got that for my bar mitzvah, and I had a lot of stamps for my stamp collection. And I had a wonderful position on my soccer team. Half-left was the name of the position, feeding for the center, who would kick it into the goal. But I loved that position.

Anyway, I had all these friends, and there were so many friends with the name of Cohn. There was a Hines Cohn, and there was a Manfred Cohn, and there was an Axil Cohn, a Joseph Cohn, Heindrich Cohn. All these were Cohns, all my friends.

But not relatives? These are not relatives?

Not relatives at all. Ezra [Chollach?], I recall, Kato Friedlander. So I still remember the names of those kids. I don't remember of anybody in my high school. I can't remember a single name there, but here these kids that were my Jewish school I remember. Anyway-- and no girls. I can't remember any girls' names.

They were not out of the picture at the time.

Right. And yet, I liked that little girl in Poland, funny. Anyway, as soon as the bar mitzvah was over, my father said, we're going to try to emigrate to the United States, and I have some distant relatives in the States I'm going to try to find. And I'm going to try to get an affidavit for us to emigrate to the United States.

Well, what he didn't know was that there was about a five-year backlog. If he got an affidavit, it would have been five years later before we would have been ready to emigrate. And 1938 plus five-- you know where that put me.

Of course, of course.

It would've worked.

In hindsight, but-- so what happened--

In hindsight. Anyway, he went to the States, and he found the relative. But it was still the Depression in those days, and none of them were in a position to give us an affidavit because the affidavit was the guarantee that the persons who have the affidavits would never become a burden to the state, which means they would have had to be able to support us, and they didn't have the financial backing for that. So he told us he has to stay longer to see if he could find somebody who could do that, and that was--

Where did he go? When he came to the United States, what city did he go to?

New York. This is all in New York. And he had a visitor's visa, and a visitor's visa was finite. I don't know how long it was for him. But anyway, he was due to come back, of course. When he had to stay a little bit longer, that was the time two Gestapo agents came to our door looking for my father. Of course, when that occurred, immediately the name of Michaelis came to my mind, of the one who taken to Gestapo headquarters and ended up on the sidewalk a few hours later. So I knew just as much as my mother knew that this was absolutely a dangerous thing for my father.

Of course, she immediately wrote him, don't come back, and how was going to work out she didn't know. And I don't know if he knew anyway because later on we found out he was at the mercy of the relief organizations, and the relief organizations had told him, hey, this is finite because we can't support you forever. Eventually, you're going to have to go back.

Well, anyway, this was not in our minds particularly, but what was in our minds was the Gestapo not only had come to our door but a couple of days later, a so-called British lady came with a document that instructed us to provide her with a room. We had to sublet her. She was obviously a Gestapo informant.

Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.

So she moved in, and my mother got me on the side and said, don't ever say anything in front of that woman because whatever you say is dangerous. And the next thing that happened was the passports of all the Jews were brought in to be stamped with a big J. Now, she thought that that might be the first step before they would get confiscated, and she started to talk to me on the side and said, do you think we should go? So here now I was in the discussion with her. Should we go?

I see. That's when the discussion happens. And it's after your bar mitzvah in 1938?

This was in October 1938, October 1938, and the discussion was such that I remember I just had gotten my bicycle a couple of months before. I loved my bike. I loved my position on the soccer team. I loved my stamp collection. I loved all my friends. I said, let's go.

Tell me about this Gestapo lady.

Fear was in me. The fear was in me. Let's go. And what she did was she went to the American consulate and got herself a visitor's visa, and of course, they didn't have computers, so they didn't realize that my father was already in-country. Had they known he was in-country, she never would have gotten the visa because they didn't want any refugees. Visitors OK, refugees no.

And then she went back the next day and bribed somebody in the German consulate to put my name into that visa in her passport. I was in her passport. By the way, I donated the passport to the Holocaust Museum--

To us?

--they have it--

OK, thank you.

--with a brief description of every page that I went through because she had some trips to Italy with her sister before that and whatnot. And then we got to the States, her visa expired. She would have to go to the German consulate to get it extended, and the last time she went they stamped the passport "Invalid--"

Invalid, ungtig, ungtig, it would--

Yeah. Anyway, the passport was-- anyway, one fine day then we had to sneak out of the apartment because she had told me, don't say a word to anybody about this, and I had had a soccer match just the day before. And when I left the kids, I said, see you next time, and of course, I knew there was not going to be a next time. But I was very good. I didn't tell

anybody anything. We snuck out of the apartment and--

Excuse me. Can I interrupt for a second?

Yes.

The Gestapo lady-- how long was she in your apartment? Was this a month, two months, three weeks--

It's about a couple of weeks. Well, one thing she did nicely-- she gave me two English lessons, and they were much more valuable than she knew because that's the only English I knew, what she had taught me in those two lessons, when I came to the States. That was funny.

Anyway, one fine morning--

Do you have any-- excuse me. I know I'm interrupting, and you want to go on. But I want to find out more about her as much as you can remember.

She was really British, at least I think she really was British because she was fluent in English, no question about it, and she had taught other people English. So I really believed she was British.

But she could have also been, at the same time, an informant, a sympathizer or something like that.

Oh, I'm sure that being an informant for the Nazi Gestapo was a side job. That was not her job.

Did she ask you questions? Did she want to engage in conversations? Did she stay in her room the whole time, or would she go away during the day and come back in the evening? For the few weeks she was with you, how much presence was there of her?

Well, I don't know because my mother told me to stay heck away from her, except for those lessons. And then I knew she wanted to stay away from her, and I don't know how successful she was on that. I have no idea.

So I'm sorry that I interrupted. Now let's go back to--

Any time you wish interrupt is fine.

Thank you. Thank you.

Anyway, we snuck out. We each had one suitcase. I packed mine. She packed hers, and we each had 10 marks. That's all what we were allowed to take out. But she had made arrangements in advance, and she could do that. She had made first-class passage on the Holland America Line. The name of the steamer was the Statendam. The Statendam ended up at the bottom of Rotterdam harbor when the war broke out with Holland because they bombed that boat. It was a beautiful boat.

And she made two weeks of hotel reservations in one of the nicest hotels in New York and various other things that she could do and pay for in advance. And anyway, we took the train to Berlin, and there she said goodbye to her father and goodbye to her sister, who ended up in Australia, Tante Greta. And I said her son was already in Australia.

And I think we stayed overnight in Berlin. That's all. And off we went to Holland. We went first to Amsterdam, where she had a cousin, Kurt, who had escaped to Holland with his wife and kid. That's the one who was killed in the concentration camp, that boy.

Yeah, and the couple who never really got over the war, never recovered, you say.

They never recovered, no, no. And then she went to the Rothschild, the Bank of Rothschild. She had found out that the

Bank of Rothschild would help refugees, and apparently she got money there. And dumb me, I never asked her how much money she'd got, but it must have been a sizeable sum because it helped us when we got to the states. And then we got-- yeah, we went to--

Well, there is a discrepancy in that you were allowed to leave only with 10 marks each, and yet she's able to make-- before she gets to the Rothschild's, she's able to book this passage. She's able to pay for the train ticket. She's able to also reserve a hotel in New York for a couple of weeks. So that means there must have been some kind of funding or some kind of income from somewhere.

Oh, yes. She had to pay for it in Breslau. As long as the money stayed in Germany, it was fine. She could do any arrangements while we were in Germany, even the long-distance ones, and they all had some sort of offices in Breslau so that this could be done, even though the hotel must have-- I don't know. She never explained that, and I never asked.

Anyway, the 10 marks was the spending money overseas. You really couldn't do very much.

No, you can't.

But she got money from the Rothschilds, and my father got it all from the relief organizations in New York.

So in other words-- so in other words, they really had no more money of their own.

Well, they still had money in Breslau because whatever was there we abandoned. There was a bank account, which she couldn't touch after she got to the States, but technically we were visitors going to the states and coming back. So we were not emigrants.

Got it. Got it.

We were visitors. Anyway, we got her on the boat, on the Statendam in Rotterdam, and it was a wonderful boat ride, first class. Since I remember, there was a movie with Freddie Bartholomew. Don't ask me the name of it. And then there were-- in eating, they had a bowl of what I thought were plums, and I took a number of them because I liked those plums. And I bit into them, and it was a black olive. To this day, [AUDIO OUT] any black olives.

And then we had ping-pong championship, and I was a big ping-pong player. And I ended up number two in that championship, believe it or not. I was 13. So I had a wonderful time on the boat.

What an adventure. It sounds like it was--

It was my vacation. I really didn't worry. Now, I'm sure my mother was worried stiff, but at 13, you didn't have to worry about nothing, although I had been worried a little bit going across the border because my mother had told me, keep your mouth shut. And then the border police came in. The German border police said, anybody have a camera? And the first thing-- I have a camera. And my mother was ready to kill me. So I took the box camera I had, and he said, oh, that's OK. That's OK.

Oh, so they didn't take it away?

Anyway, with a camera, when we came into the New York Harbor, I got there, and I took my pictures of the statue of liberty, of the skyscrapers. These were all things that were told to me before I left Germany, that you got to watch about the Statue of Liberty that has a big meaning because it means that you don't have any more problems with the Nazis because I was told by some of the teachers in the Jewish school.

And there was one teacher who had been to New York, and he said, you're going to be impressed by all those skyscrapers and also that they have a restaurant there called Horn & Hardart, where you put in the American coins, and a little door opens up, and you get your food right out of that automat. Over to that-- so coming into New York Harbor was very exciting for me.

Do you remember the date?

Yes. It was the 30th of October, 1938. The 9th of November, 1938 was Crystal Night.

10 days later, 10 days later.

That was a catastrophe for all the Jews. For us, it saved our lives because with the publicity of this pogrom against the Jews painting all the papers all over the world, President Roosevelt issued an executive order that stated that any person in the United States will not be forced to go back to Germany. That was an executive order that he issued right after Crystal Night.

He saved everyone's life.

And that's what saved us. We stayed.

He saved everyone's life.

Only those in the United States, Paula. That's my wife listening to me in the background.

Well, that's huge. That's huge because that was something hanging over your parents' heads on these visitor's visas.

Yes, because my father had been told by the Jewish agencies that this is finite. We can't forever support you. And for a while, he was still at the mercy of the Jewish organizations until he finally got working papers. What happened was he had found a room with kitchen privileges with a Greek family, and we moved into that room after our hotel reservations ran out.

We moved into that room, and it was a little bit rough, the three of us in one room. And my mother had to cook in their kitchen when the others were not cooking, very different, I guess, for them. The people had three kids, but one was younger than me, and the girl was about my age, and the boy was a little bit older. But they didn't play with me. I was a foreigner because I couldn't speak English very well, so it was--

Where was this place? Was it in New York City?

It's all in New York City. Yes, it was on Broadway and-- let's see. Broadway and 100-- gee, I always knew where it was.

Was it Washington Heights? Was it in the Washington Heights area?

No, it wasn't. It was around 100th Street, 100 and--

130?

Maybe. We moved from there to an apartment over at 145th Street. This was 130th Street, yes, 130th, so it wasn't at 180th Street, where all the Jews were. Yeah. Anyway-- yeah?

I have a question here. Do you know how long your father had been in the States until the executive order? Had he been there a year? Had you been there half a year? Had he been--

No, no, not that long because he stayed with me at the bar mitzvah, which was on the 2nd of August, so he must've left about the middle of August sometime. So he got the--

Excuse me. In other words, he really wasn't there very long.

September and October, two months, yeah. And we were just there from the 30th of October until the 9th of November

on the visitor's visa.

And then that goes away, and-- yeah?

Our passport got voided, and we were stateless. My father's passport obviously got voided, and he was stateless. So we were stateless, and later on, technically, we were enemy aliens because our citizenship was German.

So when it got voided, it had got voided by American authorities?

No, no, by the German consulate in New York. My mother had to go and try to get the visa extended because she wanted to keep a valid passport. That was our only valid identification. So when she went, they stamped it "Invalid," which meant they wouldn't allow us back into the country anyway, which didn't matter because we didn't want to go back to the country.

But does this executive order allow your parents to also look for work?

Well, not automatically. He had to get permission to work separately. And I don't know how long that took, but it took a while. And that was the time we were at the mercy of the relief organizations. And I don't remember whether it was HIAS or whether it was one of the other ones.

And you were living in this one room in an apartment with a Greek family?

Yeah. Well, it's really been-- it's funny saying it. It really didn't hit me that badly that we were stuck like. It was OK. And then we moved out to a apartment on 142nd Street or 145th Street, rather. That was a basement apartment. Half of the apartment was below street level, and half was above street level. So it couldn't have cost a lot of money.

But in the back we had a little bit of a garden, and I was very busy watching the ants building their ant housing or whenever it was, the ant hill they were working on. That was my recreation. And I was enrolled into Junior High School 43, which was at 129th Street.

And how long did it take for you to learn English?

I would say about six months. Everybody was very helpful to me. The teachers were wonderful. They took me aside. It started out, I'm in class with no knowledge of English, and the teacher says something like, take the wastepaper basket around, and collect the trash. And she was looking at the window. I had no idea what she said, so I went to the window and opened it up, and of course everybody laughed like mad. And a kid doesn't want to be laughed at, so I had an incentive to learn English real fast.

And the English was learned in two ways, really, the radio, which was difficult because I had to get a clue of what the hell they were talking about before I knew what I was listening to, but the other one was movies. And movies was about \$0.10, and I earned the money to go to the movies. It was very easy how I earned the money. They really--

Hello? Excuse me. I lost you for a second.

Oh, you did?

I did, but just for a second.

Where did you lose it?

You will say, it was very easy how I earned the money, and then I didn't hear anything.

I think there's a call coming in. That's why it interrupted, but I'm ignoring it. Anyway, they gave my name to Time Marches On. It was one of the newsreel organizations that had-- when you went to the movie in those days, you first had

a little bit of news that is shown before the film went on, and in that newsreel that was placed next to a blackboard, it said something about Jews.

And there were two kids, one on each side, with their head hanging down. We were the Jews. And the teacher taught from the blackboard that Jews were not desirable elements. I don't remember what it said on the passport, but all I had to do was stand there with my head down. And that was my first movie appearance, and I got \$100 for that.

How much did you get?

\$100.

That's a lot of movies.

I think they were being generous.

If you do \$0.10 a movie--

Pardon me?

If you do \$0.10 a movie, you can see a lot of movies for \$100.

Right, that's the money I used to learn English by going to the movies, and I loved going to the movies.

So tell me, this newsreel came to actually film you in your school?

No, I had to go someplace where they took that picture. I don't remember where that was. It was downtown in New York somewhere.

And did you ever see yourself on a newsreel in the movies then after that?

Oh, yes. I went to the movies, and I saw myself in that newsreel. But it only appeared one time, though.

But what you were doing was simulating as if you were still in Germany?

That's right. That's what they were doing. It wasn't very kosher, really.

No, no, but even though the basis was the truth, but it wasn't-- no. Anyway--

Yes, they say the truth, but they didn't tell people that this picture was being taken in New York.

That's right.

The people would think that it was taken in Germany.

Yeah, yeah, not the first time such things have happened.

So I was a part of the hoax, but nobody sued.

Well, propaganda efforts are sometimes very subtle and sophisticated, and sometimes not so much.

I was still 13 years old, yeah.

Yeah, yeah. So--

I was getting to another point that I wanted to make. It was that this lasted for over a period of time, and we were invited for Passover to Delancey Street to a community Seder. We got tickets for that community Seder, and my father decided that he couldn't hold the Seder in that's one room, so we would go to Delancey Street and participate.

We got into that hall where it had a lot of very poor Jewish people, mostly elderly people in there, and they were not really very anxious about the Seder. They were anxious about the food, and all they were worried about was about the food that was coming. And there was a lot of noise since people were talking, and I was absolutely dismayed how these people were not listening to the Seder that was being conducted. It went against my upbringing and my brain where I had to really be quiet and listen to everything that was being done at the Seder and then participate in finding the afikoman and saying the [Hebrew] mah nishtanah, one of the sayings that the kid has to contribute in the Seder.

And all this went by the wayside because all these people were anxious to get the food, and that was the first time that I realized, my God, we really belong to this group, and they were all poor. We were poor.

Oh my. It hit you.

So I realized we were poor, and that was months after I arrived in the States, amazing that I couldn't catch onto that earlier.

Well, in some ways that's a good thing.

Well, for me it was a good thing, but it wasn't a good thing when I realized I was poor. That really struck me.

Well, this is the other side of the coin of something I wanted to ask you about, and that is-- you said that in Germany you never felt safe. You were always on your guard and always had to keep your head down, not make waves, not go into any conflict because your safety and your life could depend on it. When you arrived in the United States, did that feeling go away?

Not completely. It left it a lot because I was no longer undesirable. I could go almost any that I wanted to, but there were some caveats to that. The first thing was, when I understood things on the radio, I also understood that there was this America First committee that was against England and against us getting involved in the war, and it had people in it who were anti-Semitic. The name of Henry Ford. I got the name of Charles Lindbergh, and I got the name of Father Coughlin.

That's right.

And I remember listening to Father Coughlin on the radio, and I was aghast that he was talking about Jews. And I turned to people, and I said, we don't have that here. But they said, well, no, no, no, no. They have anti-Semitism here, but the government is not anti-Semitic. The government is what counts. Don't worry about it. As long as the government isn't anti-Semitic, you don't have anything to worry about. You just ignore these people. Don't listen to what the heck they're saying. You're fine.

And did you believe that?

I wasn't quite fine. Oh, and another thing. My uncle, Hanz, the only brother of my mother had emigrated to the States, and he had gotten himself a job as the maitre d' of the New York Athletic Club. And in the talking of the adults, I found out the New York Athletic Club would not accept any Jews as members, and he being Jewish-- as the maitre d', he couldn't tell people that he was Jewish because if he had told them they would fire him. So I knew there were some anti-Semitism that was not just to be ignored because it was actual within our family, because there was some connection there with this anti-Semitism. I was not completely at ease.

So in other words, could one say, you're not quite safe, and now you realize your poor?

That's right. That's right. So that was a double-whammy.

That's a double-whammy.

And because the war broke out, that some of this thing went away because my parents were able to work. My mother did some millinery work. She had learned how to make hats, but once the war started, people didn't get to buy hats anymore. They weren't even wearing them anymore. So she had to end up doing catering jobs, and she ended up doing catering jobs for the Temple Emanuel in New York.

I see. And your father? What was he doing?

My father ended up with a job at the Eagle Pencil Company as a stock clerk, and he died in that position. Well, he died right after I came back from the war. I came back on the 5th of May, 1946, and he died on the 14th of May, 1946 with a heart attack. So he was [AUDIO OUT] for the two weeks that I-- even a little less than two weeks that I saw him back in the States, and they brought him from work into the downtown hospital in New York. And he was kept alive there for two days, and then he died.

Oh my. Well, he had had a lot on his shoulders in the past-- what would it have been-- 13 years since Hitler had come to power.

Well, I know he was very afraid that they might not let him back into the States because he had heart problems because in order for them to finally get a permanent status they had to go to Canada for one day and then immigrate from Canada as immigrants.

When was this?

That happened while I was in the army, and that's how they became legitimized.

So this is after 1943. You went to the army in September '43, I believe.

Yes, so that happened probably in '44.

How did your parents adjust to these very reduced circumstances?

Well, they went to night school very quickly, and I wasn't very helpful because when they started to speak German to me on the street, I said, no, I will not answer. You have to speak English. On the street I will not answer in German. I won't speak German in public. And I meant it, and I didn't. And that was helpful to them because they had to learn English, and they went to night school. And they did pretty well. Yeah, they did well.

What about their mood? Contrasted to your uncle, Kurt, in Amsterdam-- of course, your uncle, Kurt, and his wife lose a son, and they go through concentration camps. But some people who come to the United States, like your parents did, never really were able to adjust to the fact that they lost a particular way of life that they had left behind.

When the war started, all contacts were lost with Germany from the States. We never knew what happened to these people until after the war.

That's right. But I'm asking now more about-- you say your parents did well. Did they mind being in these reduced circumstances? Did it hurt them? Did it hurt your father that he had been the owner of a store, and now he's a stock clerk?

That's hard for me to assess because we just never talked about these things. They were just never talked about. I was a kid, and when I was 18-- the minute I was 18, I was drafted, so they never really thought of me anything but a kid because I was in school all the time.

But you didn't notice it? Some kids would notice at home that their parents are just not doing-- you're saying yours did

OK? They were able to cope with all these changes?

Yeah, and they never discussed the financial problems with me. They must have terrible financial problems which they only discussed among themselves, never with me, but that's why it took so long for me to realize we're poor.

Well, that was protection of a kind.

Yes, no question about it. I was protected. I was spoiled as could be. Whatever I needed I got, and I've asked for certain things without realizing, my God, they have no way of getting it that easily. But they always came up with it.

For example, for my graduation of junior high school I was supposed to-- the kids were going to have white pants, and I said, I should have some white pants. And they said, goodness, we'll have to see how we can do it. They came up with them. They came up with. I don't know how they did it.

Another thing was, when I arrived in the States, I was in the European clothing, knickerbockers or something like that. Anyway, I stood out like a sore thumb. Everybody else had shorts on or whatever, and I had this European clothes on. I went back and told my parents, I have to have different clothing. I can't go with these clothing. I stand out like a sore thumb, and I'm differentiated like I was in Germany when I was the Jewish kid. And here they point at me as the European kid.

They got me the clothes somehow. Maybe they went to the relief organizations and helped that way, but take it they got it but never told me that they had a hard time getting it. They must have had a hard time getting it.

So tell me a little bit about those years in between, before you go to the army. You arrive in October, the last days of October 1938.

The 30th, yeah.

Yeah. Then you very quickly learn about Kristallnacht, your status changes as a result of it through the executive order. And you described something of what your parents were going through, but these are very formative years. You are now how old-- I'd say 13 years old-- when you come to the States? Wasn't August 2nd your birthday?

That's right.

So you're 13 through 18. Yeah, those are the teenage years. How did they go for you?

The first thing that happened was that I spent my two weeks in the hotel because my parents couldn't get the money back for that, so we stayed there. For the return passage, they were getting a refund, so they got a little more money that way that was refunded to them.

So after the hotel reservations ran out, we moved into this one-room apartment with a Greek family, and my mother somehow had gotten to know a lady who was the secretary in Junior High School 43. And she went to her and said, can you get my kid enrolled? And apparently she must have told them that I had been a very good student or whatnot because when they enrolled me they enrolled me into the rapid course of junior high school, even though I had very few words of English on my plate.

But it was a very good decision because these were the best teachers in that school, and they took me under their wing. I remember there was a Mrs. Simon who got some magazines, and she took time to write the name of everything that was displayed on the picture in that magazine. And I would take it home, and I would study the name and associate it with the picture that was shown. So they helped me get across the first few hurdles, and then I immediately listened to the radio.

And the radio-- if I didn't understand it, at least I got the tonality of what was going on, the English inflections and such, so that I could get away from that German accent. I realized that immediately that there were people who we knew.

They had this terrible German accent while the other people spoke English in a different way, and I wasn't going to have that German accent. So I listened very intently on the radio, and I went to the movie to get knowledge of the vocabulary. And I was able to expand that rather quickly.

And it's a matter of about six months that I was in a real funk with the language, but after that first term, after I got out of the seventh grade-- the eighth grade I did pretty well. And then I went into the ninth grade in junior high school, and when I graduated junior high school, I had progressed from being excluded from everything to being included with everything because I was able to converse properly.

There was one other Jewish kid from Austria by the name of Paul who I met in junior high school, and he and I got together. And we leaned on each other and helped each other on the language abilities and whatnot, and that that was a good support that I had, a support system. I was his, and he was mine.

Tell me, did you still speak German with your parents at home?

Pardon me?

Did you still speak German with your parents within the walls of your home?

Oh, yes. I still spoke German at home, yes. I couldn't do my parents [INAUDIBLE] that much. I only could insist on it when we were out in public. And of course, they took me to German-speaking places. Like there was a Breslau organization, and they took me to that. And I wasn't really very comfortable going to the Breslau organization. I'd like to go to an American organization, not a Breslau one.

But the Breslau one I would have thought would have been Jews from Breslau. Is that right?

They're only Jews, only Jews.

Yeah, only Jews. So did your parents continue to go there, and were there people in that organization that you had known even in Breslau?

Oh, absolutely. They knew a lot of the people in that organization. That's why they kept going and kept dragging me to it, because they felt very comfortable with them. They were more comfortable there than any place else while I was uncomfortable.

Both kinds of reactions are very logical. They were already-- they had formed so much of their lives and lived so much of their lives.

I understood because I didn't put up a fuss about them going or me going with them. I just felt uncomfortable, but I didn't-- even though I was a spoiled brat, I did understand that this was their comfort zone, and they wanted to go to that. And I had no reason to repossess that. I didn't--

I want to interject here a little bit. From the examples that you have given me, it doesn't sound like you were a spoiled brat at all. It just sounds like you were a child who was loved and the needs--

When I was eating or something like that, I suppose as could be. Oh, don't give me that. I won't eat this. You know.

Well, maybe I'm also defending myself as an only child because I've been on the warpath thinking that only children get a bad rap.

Yeah. And I wouldn't go to sleep when I'm supposed to go to sleep. I certainly wasn't going to go to nap in the afternoon, and things like that I was--

At Uncle Hugo's house, yes, understand. Was there a time when you actually stopped speaking German?

That was when I got into the army, at 18. At 18 I stopped because when I came back-- and I don't know whether I spoke German to my father or not, but with my mother later on I only conversed in English. I made her speak in English when I came back.

That is when you came back from the war?

Yes, yes. So we spoke English at home at that point, but we spoke German at home until I went to the army.

I want to bring up a few things now, and one of them is some of the events that happened, some of the key events that happened between the time you arrive in the States and the time you go in the army-- and the very first one is, of course, World War II. Do you remember where you were on September 1, '39 when Hitler marches into Poland?

Absolutely. Well, no, I don't remember that, where I was. I remember where I was when Pearl Harbor occurred.

That was my second one. That was my second point, yeah. OK, so tell me about that.

December 7, 1941. Yeah, that one I remember. I was in front of my house, outside on the stoop, even though it was cold outside. I guess it was a Sunday. And somebody came running up the street yelling, "The Japs just bombed Pearl Harbor." Pearl Harbor? What's Pearl Harbor? Nobody knew what Pearl Harbor was, so we had to research and see what Pearl Harbor was.

And finally we found out it was awake and understood what was happening, and then we were talking about it. I was 16 at the time. It was all-- in a sense, I was relieved that we got into the war because I knew now Germany was done for because before they were just fighting the British. The French had already left the war, and it was very precarious. And we were afraid of Britain.

But now Pearl Harbor-- I knew it was good because we would get into the war, and we would win the war, no question about it. And as far as I was concerned, well, personally it wasn't affecting me. I was 16 years old. It took not too long before I said, whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop, whoop. Some things may very well affect me because this war is dragging out, and I'm going to be 18 in 1943, and this war is going to affect me. But it took a while.

So when Pearl Harbor happened, that was like one of those seminal moments, and Britain was alone. Britain was alone for a very long time. You're absolutely right. And it was iffy whether or not they would succeed.

September 1 in '39, I don't remember where I was, but I was-- most of the people that I was talking to, the adults-- when I listened to them, they were concerned. This was not a-- this was not an easy thing, that now the war is over, that Germany is done for. They didn't think that way because Germany had been very aggressive. They had walked into the Rhineland, and they had annexed Austria even before we left.

And we knew they were getting ready for war because I remember in Germany and Breslau the blackouts. When my father took me on the street, everything was dark, and we were just groping around in the dark because there was this complete blackout, practicing for the war. So my father knew a war was coming, and that was another reason why he wanted to get out of Germany.

So in other words, when September 1, 1939 rolls around, and Germany attacks Poland, and the war begins, this was no surprise for your family?

No, it was no surprise. It was just a question of when it was going to happen, and how it was going to happen, and who was going to be involved. And I guess they were a little bit surprised that it was England because it seemed more that we were worrying about the communists in Russia. It would have been no surprise had they attacked Russia at that point.

Well, and here's the irony, that instead of attacking Russia, what allowed Hitler to actually March into Poland is an

alliance with Russia, an alliance with the Soviets.

Yeah, well, the war started because they marched into Poland, but we never realized that they were going to have a deal with Ribbentrop and Molotov, that they were going to divide Poland between the two of them. So we never suspected that that was going to happen, nor did we suspect that the first war would go against England. It was all a surprise but not a surprise that there was a war.

So you were surprised that Germany and England became enemies. Is this what you're saying? That's right because Chamberlain had made a pact, "peace in our time."

Of course, and sacrificed Czechoslovakia for it or the Sudetenland, yeah.

Of course, right, right. By then-- here I was 13 years old, but I was very much attuned to the politics of things. While the rest of the kids didn't care about it and never even worried about it, I was definitely more attuned to political things. And they had a German-language newspaper that we immediately subscribed to when we came into New York, and I read it very-- not the sports or the funnies but the political part of it-- I always very religiously read the politics, what was going on. I always wanted to keep informed.

What was the name of the paper?

That was because I was still a little uneasy. I was uneasy, and this was part of it.

What was the name of that paper?

Oh my goodness. I don't remember. I haven't thought of it. But everybody-- know, there was a Jewish newspaper called The Aufbau but that was not a daily one that was a weekly one and that has only the things of interest for the Jews, like how you can make contact in Germany or what could be done to substantiate any future claims against the Germans and whatnot. That was The Aufbau.

But this was a paper that was not a Jewish paper at all. The German-Americans were reading that same paper as well, so it was a paper who wanted to keep both the Jews and the Germans, so they were very careful of their editorial position.

Well, that's interesting. So it wasn't a Nazi paper?

No, no. It wasn't a Nazi paper, but it wasn't a Jewish paper either.

Well, we've come to a point now-- we've been talking for over two hours.

Oh my.

Yeah, I know.

And I just get the-- and I just got to New York.

I know. I know. So I think, though-- tell me what you're feeling, but I think this would be a good time to break for lunch, perhaps.

Let's have lunch. What the heck.

Yeah, let's have lunch and then come back to this maybe in an hour, hour and a half. How does that sound to you?

Oh, 1:15 would be fine.

1:15? OK. Let's cut. I will call you--

You'll call me at--

I'll call you again at 1:15.

OK. That's it.

All right then. Bye-bye. Until next time.

Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.