

Here we go. I'm turning the recording on. Do you see an indication of recording on your computer?

Yes. Yes.

OK. So we begin. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Peter Stein on September 4, 2020. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Stein, for agreeing to speak with us today and to share a little bit of your life story and that of your parents and their experiences during World War II. I'm going to start the interview with very basic questions and we go from there. So can you tell me what is the date of your birth?

First, thank you for interviewing me and asking me these questions. I was born on September 22, 1936 in Prague, then Czechoslovakia.

And what was your name at birth?

Petr, P-E-T-R, Josef J-O-S-E-F, Stein.

Just as it is today.

Yes.

OK. And what was your mother's name?

My mother's name was Zdenka Kvetonova.

How would I spell Zdenka Kvetonova?

Zdenka, Z-D-E-N-K-A, Kvetonova, capital K-V-E-T-O-N-O-V-A.

OK.

And then of course, she became Stein once she married.

Yes. And do you know the date of her birth, approximately?

Yeah. I know exactly, April 16, 1904.

OK. And your father, what was his name?

Victor Josef Stein.

And do you know the date of his birth?

September 19, 1903.

So he was a year older than your mother.

Yes.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

No, I'm an only child.

OK. And were your parents both from Prague?

My dad was born in a small town called Cesky Brod, which is probably 50, 60 kilometers outside of Prague.

In which direction-- south, north?

North-- northwest.

OK.

Close to a large Jewish community in Kolin, K-O-L-I-N, which I think was the second or third largest concentration of Jews in Czechoslovakia.

OK. So he was born in Cesky Brod. Did he have brothers and sisters?

Yes, he had two sisters and a brother.

What were their names?

So one was Karla Stein, second one was Kamila, both Ks. The brother was Richard Stein, and my father was the youngest of four children.

OK. And his parents, do you know the name of your paternal grandparents?

Yes. So Josef was his father's name, Josef Stein. And the mother is Sophie Markus Stein. Her maiden name was Markus, M-A-R-K-U-S. And she was one of 10.

Whoa.

And that was a larger group.

It certainly-- well, in those-- for that generation, that was more common than it would be in subsequent generations to come from large families like that.

Sure. For sure.

Let's turn to your mother's side now for a little bit. Did your mother have brothers and sisters?

Yeah, the sister named Olga, about two years her junior, O-L-G-A, who was also a Kveton, Olga Kvetonova, married a Perutz, P-E-R-U-T-Z. So both the sisters were Catholic, and the two men they married were Jews.

Ah, OK. That's unusual for those times that there would be intermarriage-- well, maybe not so much for one sibling, but for both.

And I often wondered how the grandparents felt about their two beautiful Catholic daughters marrying Jewish guys.

Did they ever say?

They never did. And I have no indication that they were unhappy. I just wonder. But it's actually interesting, Ina, because in Prague, Prague had the largest intermarriage rate in Czechoslovakia. And Katerina Capkova is the historian at Charles University and NYU, reports that it might have been as high as 25% or even 30% in Prague itself.

Between Christians and Jews?

Exactly. Mostly Jewish men and Christian women.

That's really unusual, even for that time.

Much less so in Bohemia and Moravia. Typically, was the larger cities-- Brno and Bratislava were the others.

And was-- did she give any explanation, or do you have any explanation as to why this was so?

Why the two of them married, or the large--

No, no, no, in general, you were talking in general. Was there any explanation given?

I guess, my sense was socially. They met, they both like music, they both like art, and the universities, as far as I know, Charles University, and some of the other colleges, did not discriminate against Jews. And so my impression is that was a reasonable place to meet.

You're talking about your parents specifically. And that's one of my questions. I will come to that. But you mentioned an historian who said up to 25% of people were intermarried. And my question was, did she give a reason why there was such a high percentage for that generation at that time?

Yeah. You're going to make me reread the 35 page article. But I think partly, again, that they were in similar social circles. I mean, my mother's parents, the dad was a professional. And my parent-- my father's parents were professional or educated. So I think in terms of social class, it was not a stretch.

Were they are more secular people?

Yes, absolutely. My dad always-- sorry.

The question-- yeah, were they more secular people?

Really, he was much less culturally Jewish than were his parents. His father was a major of-- supporter of the synagogue in Kolin, where I said there was a significant Jewish population. I did some research on people on the financial-- finance committee of the Kolin synagogue, and my grandfather was one of the major donors, and then became the head of the finance committee. It's hard to be more involved than that.

This is true. This is true.

And my dad moved to Prague and had Christian friends, as well as Jewish friends, and somehow met my mother that way. And I think the same thing for her. My mother's sister, Olga, who married Robert Perutz, also they met each other socially.

Do you-- do you know what kind of profession your-- both grandfathers had from your father's side and your mother's side?

I mean, they were really more business persons. My grandfather was a grain merchant who supplied, among other things, supplied ingredients to breweries. And my-- our-- sorry, I get a little weepy. Our son, Mike, is a historian, but also he brews beer. [INAUDIBLE]. He was fascinated with his great grandfather what he was selling all the various ingredients for beer, both in Czechoslovakia--

Hops and things.

Yeah, hops-- I'm blocked here. What else? Malts and other kinds of ingredients.

Now, this is Josef Stein.

Josef Stein.

OK. What were your mother's parents' names?

So the-- my Catholic grandfather was Antonin Kveton, Anthony. And the grandmother was Zdenka-- also Zdenka Kveton. And he was trained in lumber and trees and forests.

He had some kind of commercial college degree, and he worked for Count Von Schwarzenberg who was very successful-- economically successful family. And he was their major-- I don't know exactly what his title was, but overseer of vast mileage of trees and forests.

And was that within Czechoslovakia?

Czechoslovakia. And he overran-- he was in charge of a mill, which was about maybe 20 miles or so outside of Prague, and where we used to go as kids, even during the German occupation. The mill was working. They were cutting logs. And on some days, we would go with the grandfather and get a sense of the forest and the trees. And they had a small, small railroad that transported the logs from the logging area to the water, the [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], and they were loaded. So that was his domain. That's how he made his money. The grandmother, I don't think, worked outside of the home.

OK. So the person who owned this was nobility.

Yes.

Austrian nobility, German nobility?

I think, Austrian. And there's a building with his name near the palace in Prague, where among other people, Václav Havel used to live when he was president. And there's a lovely gallery in the Schwarzenberg Palace near the castle. So yes, they're well off. And a descendant-- I'm sorry if I'm going too far afield.

No, no, no, I like the detail. I really like the detail because it gives us the picture. So don't feel self-conscious about that at all. So yes, tell me.

So here's one of his descendants, I don't know how many generations away, was the Czechoslovakian Ambassador to the United Nations, Schwarzenberg, when Havel was the president. And so there were certainly nationalists, but that's fine.

Well, it is interesting. It speaks to the fact that this family had roots, this aristocratic Austrian nobility family, had roots in the country, and that those roots were not for just one generation. The time period you are speaking of is not so long ago. It's maybe 20 to 30 years ago when Václav Havel was president of the Czech Republic between 1990 and 2000. And so one of the descendants of this man who owned this vast forests where your grandfather was an overseer, apparently, his family stayed. They didn't leave.

Yes.

OK. Did you ever meet him? Did you ever meet them-- the people who employed your grandfather?

It's conceivable, but I would have been too young to remember. That would have been when I was three, four, five years old at the latest. So I don't know. But he certainly knew him, my grandfather, because he was employed by him.

And did you know both sets of your grandparents? Were you-- were they part of your life?

They were. We would visit periodically with the Catholic grandparents. And when I get to the war, they became very important in my life. The Jewish grandparents, so Josef, my father's father, my Jewish grandfather, died of cancer in 1937, which is just a year after I was born.

So you never knew him.

I have-- I have no memories. I see photos of him, but I'm never in the same photo. So I don't know him. My grandmother, I knew because she would come over periodically. I think, perhaps, not as much as the Catholic grandparents. But I'm not sure.

My most dramatic memory of my grandmother, Sophie, was when we lived in a section called Branik, B-R-A-

N-I-K, which is 20 minutes outside of downtown Prague on--

South, north?

The direction of Pilsen, so going west. Pilsen as in Pilsner.

Oh, OK. So it was going in the western part of Prague? Branik, is it on the side of-- is it on the same side of the river as the castle?

No, the other side.

OK.

The other side. But yes--

It's on the side where Václavské náměstí is, where the Wenceslas Square is.

Yes, yes. And the National Theater, and other landmarks. So the Tram 21, I believe, ran from downtown Prague to and through Branik where we lived, and continued further west.

I lived in-- for several years in Prague myself, and we lived near Pankrác. And so Branik is familiar to me.

Roughly, what years would you have been there?

'95 to 2000.

Wow.

Yeah.

So after the Velvet Revolution.

After the Velvet Revolution, yes. Yes. Yes. So-- OK. So I was asking-- I forget what I was asking.

The grandmother-- the grandmother.

The grandmother, Sophie. Yes.

So this--

So she would visit you in Branik.

Exactly. And I was five years old. It was 1941. She was wearing a black outfit, and she even had a ribbon still memorializing her husband who had died. And the mood was very heavy, very somber.

She did bring a small dish of chicken livers and a casserole for my dad. This was one of my father's favorite snack foods was to put a little chicken liver on a cracker, or small piece of rye bread, something of that sort. So that part was very lovely. She brought it and she offered me a taste on a cracker. That was lovely.

And then she and my father and mother go into the living room and I stay in the kitchen. And I don't know whether I was reading or playing or whatever. It seemed like a long time.

They come out and she's in tears. My dad is upset. They hugged goodbye. She comes to me, gives me a kiss and says, I love you. And she leaves.

And it was a week or 10 days later she's on a train from Prague to Theresienstadt in one of the earliest waves of Czechs, Czech Jews. So my feeling is, it's also the last time, or one of the last times, that my dad

saw his mother.

And is this the last time you see her?

Yes.

And did anybody explain to you why they were upset?

I didn't-- throughout the war, I would ask my mother, especially, my-- I'll talk about my dad. He's in and out. He would always say, don't ask those questions, or I can't-- where's my father?

My father's on a business trip. When will he be back? As soon as he can. Don't worry. He'll finish his business and come back.

So she was very concerned about protecting me. And I think my not having information that would get me into trouble. That's the way I understand.

So the thing about my grandmother, I don't even know what they said. I'm not sure I asked, what does she mean, I'll-- why was she so upset? They might have said, well, because your grandfather died not that long ago. So--

OK. So they wouldn't have told you-- they wouldn't have told you any real reason. Whatever reason they would have told you, it would have been one to try to protect you one way or another, either emotionally or even so that you don't pass on information and get yourself or them into trouble.

Absolutely. Absolutely. And her stern warning was, never tell anyone that your father's Jewish.

This is from your mother?

My mother. I started school in 1942 at age 6. And I often took a tram alone from Branik to downtown Prague, usually 7:00 in the morning, thereabouts. And to-- always she would walk me to the tram, which was almost in front of our house, and to be careful, and don't tell anyone that your father's Jewish. It's none of their business was--

Let's go back a little bit.

Sure.

Did your mother have higher education? And did your father have higher education?

My father got a degree from a business college, and I don't know the exact name. It wasn't Charles University, but it was in Prague. He majored in economics, and he worked for some other companies, including a bank, for a while, before he started his own business.

My mother went to also a commercial college. And I don't know-- she had a major or what exactly she studied. But she loved the arts. And this family story that goes around that she really wanted to be an artist, but her parents did not encourage that. And in fact, they discouraged it.

And she studied painting and art with some Czech artist. And I don't know what the full-- she had a crush on him. He had a crush on her. She winds up leaving for Paris, and she works outside of Paris. This would have been in 1932, 1933.

She got a job with a French nursery, so she took care of small French children. And her French was quite good so they hired her. So I think--

It's unusual for a young woman of her situation and her class at that time, in that generation, to by herself go to Paris. And was she there to study something? Was she-- was she there as an au pair, for example, as

young women sometimes do even today? They go to foreign countries at a certain age, a young age, to look after children, do you know?

The only story I know for sure, and I'm going to ask my cousin who is four years older than I, and she might know exactly. I do know that she worked for this French nursery, but she might have worked as an au pair before or after that. That would make sense. And that would be a way to learn French, of course.

But was there a connection to art? When she travels to Paris, she travels to France, does-- was there something with her desire to learn how to be an artist or participate in the arts in any way? Is that any compelling-- is that a factor in why she was there?

I would think so, because she did, as I said, studied art. We still have some of her oil paintings, primarily, of still objects-- flowers, vases, oranges, those kinds of things. But she also had an eye sort of in a Monet kind of style.

I mean, I don't know how else to describe it, but sort of still life, a lot of nice colors and things. So maybe she fancied that she could become an artist, or maybe was a way of getting it out of her system, then coming back and having a more normal middle class life.

Do you know how long she was there for?

Apparently, a year and a half. But I will check with Gerti to see if I can get you a specific date.

And tell me a little bit about your parents' personalities, your father's and your mother's.

Well, my mom was much more introverted than he. My dad was more the life of the party, felt comfortable socially. And as a business man had a fair amount of interaction selling-- tried to sell his products. He had a bentwood manufacturing company near Branik.

Can you explain that?

Sure. So it's furniture and sporting equipment made out of bentwood, so rocking chairs, or recliners. They made carriage-- baby carriages made out of wood, tennis rackets, skis, ping-pong paddles, those kinds of things. His one-- his major achievement was that one of the four Frenchmen who were on the French Davis Cup team, Borotra, Jean Borotra, played with his racket for a while.

So I don't know if that meant 10 minutes with the racket, or a couple of matches with the rackets. But he was very, very proud of that. That would have happened before the War, of course.

So he was more comfortable in social gatherings. She was more reticent at a party. I have photos after our son was born, so she would have been in her 70s or 80s, typically sitting as far away from the interaction as possible, observing, periodically, involving herself. But not-- none the center of interaction.

That was just-- I think similar to her dad, in a way, she took her dad's style, the woodsman, who-- whose major recreation from what I could tell, was to take walks in the woods, which kind of-- he's not at the bar getting drunk. He's in the woods.

Well, it's-- the irony is is that your grandfather, your Catholic grandfather, is sort of involved in the same business as your Jewish father, both has to do with woods. I don't hear you very well right now.

Yes, that's a very interesting, yes. And I don't know whether some of the wood that my dad used came from his father-in-law. Quite possible.

Now, I go back to the other question that I had. Do you know how your parents met?

So this is Chapter 2 of my book. Everything I know is in there. Apparently, he-- thank you. He was-- his factory was on the same road as the grandfather's lumber mill, much further down. And my mother would

see him periodically driving down this road.

And one day she was walking, and he stopped, asked her if she wanted a lift. She said yes. And that was the initial meeting. Then they had some other meetings on this road, and they discovered they both like to dance.

So on Sunday afternoons, they would go to Prague. And at one of the hotels, they would dance. And they liked that. So-- and they were both liked skiing, and tennis, and swimming. They were both athletic.

So that's another way they met. The question of marrying out of the religion was in a way handled by her younger sister first, because she met Leo Perutz, who was in textiles, and a major, major firm. I think three brothers, the Perutz brothers-- excuse me. So whatever objections her parents might have had to a Jew joining the family were worked out by the time my mother fell in love with my dad.

So even though she was the older one, she married second, rather than first.

Did you ever have-- did you have any other relatives on either side of the family that you would often get in touch with, that you would interact with, that you socialized with?

Yeah. So before the war, I do have a lot of photographs of my father's two sisters, and especially, the brother. The brother is Richard. They called him Richard, [INAUDIBLE], who was married to Elsa, a very energetic, lovely young woman. But they had no children.

So they would visit us regularly and always bring a toy. So I had so many stuffed zebras, and horses, and goats. They spoiled me.

But-- and he introduced me to classical music. Because somewhere before-- and he also disappeared in 1942. Before that, he would-- he brought me a Victrola, or my-- somebody did. And he gave me these RCA red label albums with the dog listening to the--

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

And Beethoven and Brahms, [PERSONAL NAME], [? Smetana. ?] And so this is what I listened to when I work, when I write. I have classical music. Calms me down.

It's pretty heavy stuff for a little kid.

That's true. No Louis Armstrong, no Benny Goodman, none of that.

And did you have any extended family on your mother's side?

Well, there was this-- the sister, Olga. And they-- she has two kids, both this young woman Gerti, who I'm going to-- who I am in touch with and lives in North Carolina in-- she moved. No, not in Chapel Hill. Where does she live? King-- Kingston-- doesn't matter.

So we would see her. And sometimes she would even come over during the war and kind of babysit me. Just a four year difference, but a playmate. And her brother, Robert, who is 9 months older than I am.

So these were first cousins.

First cousin-- two first cousins. So we would see them. And the major get-together was at the Catholic grandparents on Sundays, particularly, during the war with food shortages and everything.

And somehow, my grandmother would put a meal together for everyone. And was a wonderful baker, so there was chocolate, vanilla, whatever it took. And my mother used to joke that why don't we start with the desserts and then work our way-- I mean--

A woman after my own heart.

Well, you've been to Prague. You know about good desserts. Straight out of the Austria Hungarian Empire.

Oh, wow. So it sounds from what you're telling me that you were born into at least a very comfortable, middle class family, would you say so, or were you even well-off? Would you say that you're well off for the times?

I think more middle class. But my dad did own a car.

You know what kind?

A Tatra, the two-seater convertible Tatra. And I know it was convertible because it leaked.

And this is before the war?

Before the war. Before the war. During the war, it stood in a outdoor garage looked after by one my father's Christian friends who lived in the same area. And then he got it back after the war. Quite amazing.

Did you say outdoor garage?

Outdoor.

So the garage was not enclosed?

It had a kind of a wooden roof, but it was not part of a building.

OK.

And it was-- when it was cold, it was cold.

OK. Well, I remember you were describing in your book trying to turn the car on and get the engine turned and rolling. And so I wondered what the circumstances of all that was.

Exactly what it was, yes.

Yeah.

But it did-- they were comfortable, let's put it that way. They weren't struggling.

Well, what do you remember of your home? Tell me about the kind of place that your earliest memories, the place you were born, you grew-- were you born at home or were you born in a hospital?

In a hospital.

OK. Do you remember which one? Did your mother tell you?

It was in downtown Prague, but I don't know which one. I don't. The story was that it was difficult for my mother to give birth. And it was a long birth and that was induced, so she had a C-section.

And-- which somehow led them to decide-- it's a convoluted story. But what I heard was her mother made her promise not to have any more children because-- I don't know how bad the pregnancy was or the delivery, but it sounds like it was difficult, certainly difficult. So from the hospital-- so they had a nurse maid who was with me when I came home.

And I don't even know if my mother-- I guess, my mother-- I came home with my mother. I don't know, right? Otherwise, I would have been in the hospital. But-- so anyway-- so we live in Branik in a four story

apartment building with one family on each floor.

So we lived on the third floor. And we had living room, dining room, my room, their bedroom, kitchen, a room off the kitchen where the nurse maid lived, slept, and a bathroom, and a stove in the center as you came into the apartment, coal heated stove.

OK. And was it the kind that you-- in German, they're called kachelofen where they're tiled, and they're usually sometimes very decorative, and sometimes they heat a room. And sometimes if they're big enough, they heat several rooms.

That's exactly what we had. All the heat came from that central stove and was spread out in the apartment, which--

I take it you had electricity.

We did. We did.

And you had indoor plumbing.

Yes.

And do you know if your parents had a telephone?

We did have a telephone. And telephone, I think, rested in the living room. I think that's where the phone calls-- yeah.

And what about a radio?

We had a radio that was, I'm going to say the kitchen. I'm not 100% sure, but we did have a radio. And I have a funny radio story later during the war.

OK. Was there-- were your parents very social? That is, did people come by and visit all the time?

I think before the war, but my memory, of course, is much hazier because I was so young. They did entertain. Again, mostly either his family or sometimes my mother's sister and her husband and the kids. But we had some other friends. But during the war, I really don't recall much social activity.

Was Branik in a residential-- I mean, was this apartment building in a residential neighborhood? Well, did you have a yard? Was there a garden or anything like that, or was the building next to building next to building?

Actually, neither. It was sort of-- there was a field across the-- across the street. There were several small stores, a beer garden probably 50, 60 yards from the building. But the back sloped up. I never went all the way up a long, winding set of wooden stairs, which led to another neighborhood.

So it wasn't really a neighborhood in the sense with some stores, and some other houses. The closest house is probably another block away, because I used to play there. I had some friends in the neighborhood.

And I don't know why my father picked that house to live in. Apparently, it was fairly modern when he bought it. It would have been the 1930s.

Did he buy the whole building?

No, but he owned the apartment.

OK.

Yeah.

OK. And he had a car. Do you remember riding in the car?

Oh, yeah. Well, again, after the war.

Not before.

There must have been one or two before because-- well, I have that scene of him starting the car, but that was really after the war. So I honestly don't know if I was ever in that car before the war.

Do you have any-- you mentioned an early memory with your grandmother, Sophie. Do you have any other early memories from being a toddler? Children, we have-- when we think back to those early years, we have like phases or we have episodes or not an entire narrative, but something happens, or a snapshot. Do you have anything like that in your mind?

The first that comes to mind is Richard, the uncle, who I really liked. And I have, for example photographs of my being on the grass as an infant. So I was-- if I was a year old, maybe I was seven, eight months old. And he's wearing a jacket and a tie, but he's next to me sitting on the ground, a couple of photos, and his wife, as well. So obviously--

So he liked to play.

They liked to play. Sorry?

Did he like to play with you?

Absolutely. Absolutely. Often, he had this just a little ball that we would push around or kick or-- he would've made a good dad. And she would've made a wonderful mother. But for whatever reason, they had no children.

So I remember him as sort of gentle, giving kind of a fellow, even though apparently he was also in the bank-- he worked for a bank. I think more as a clerk than as the manager. And the two sisters are fuzzy in my memory.

I think they both lived outside of Prague. One lived in the Sudeten area. And he was also in textiles, and they apparently were the most affluent of the four siblings.

One of the girls who married somebody who was in textiles?

Exactly. The other one, I'm not sure what the other husband did. But there was one other person who was my father's first cousin. She was also a Markus.

So your grandmother Sophie's relations.

He married a Procházka, Fred-- Frederick Procházka, who was a Protestant. And the fact that she married a Christian saved her life, because she went to Theresienstadt late-- late 1944, early '45. So those were the two people out of that family who survived.

Everyone else-- there were eight people in the Markus family. My father, the two sisters, and the brother, the father, the mother, they all perished in the camps. So what a major issue that my dad struggled with was why me, the survivor guilt, which I heard him talk about when he was in his 50s or 60s when I would see him socially.

So your father survived and this particular cousin survived.

Yes. She was probably, I'm going to say, two, three years younger than he. And they both survived--

And was what?

Two or three years younger.

Yeah. What was her name, again?

Her nickname was Emča. And her name was Ema, E-M-A.

So it was Ema Markus Procházka.

Exactly. And her sister-- her daughter lives in Canada. I'm in touch with her. They left when the Communists came, took-- it's a whole different story.

Well, this is Central Europe, and Central Europe has seen an awful lot of activity. You're born at a very particular time. There's a lot going on in the world in the mid-1930s.

Do you-- did your parents ever tell you-- did they ever explain to you what was going on? I mean, as a child, how would you know? But did they have views about the Czechoslovakia as a country?

It was a new country. It had been formed in 1918 and-- out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And so-- and there was the Sudetenland. Which was heavily populated by ethnic Germans and figured in all of this. Did you-- do you know whether or not your parents followed politics? Were they politically interested, aware?

My father-- my father very much so. He, in fact, spent probably five or six months in Berlin in 1923 or '24, because he was sent there by the bank, or he was training there with the bank. I don't know--

He was bank-- he was in banking before he started manufacturing.

Yes. Why he left, I don't know. Well, he wanted to be on his own, I know-- I know why. He didn't like to be told by other people what to do.

But I remember him talking about the inflation and the fact that at lunchtime, a loaf of bread cost 1,000 marks. And by the end of the day, it was 3,000 marks. I mean, that-- he had several stories like that.

And he knew about Hitler. He said that he had read Mein Kampf in German. And I asked him years ago when I was in college, having read that, why didn't you leave? And he said what so many other Jewish men and women said.

He said, we knew it would be difficult, but we thought we would survive, that we never had a sense-- an idea of how bad it would be. And another time, he said he thought the Germans would rise up against Hitler, a mad man, that the German business people were rational. They wouldn't stand for this.

So he knew. And at one point, they had a plan of going to Switzerland.

Your father?

My father and my mother and me and the nursemaid. In fact, I think in 1938, thereabouts, but they never followed up. For-- I don't know the reason they decided not to go. Then he said, well, we were going to send you-- me-- and the nursemaid. And that never happened, either.

My mother wasn't as political. I think her major focus was, how do I keep everyone safe. How do I feed them, pretty nurturing kinds of concerns. Yeah.

So your nursemaid, the one that you come home with from the hospital, is she someone who is part of your life?

Yes. Her-- I guess-- I never knew her real name. I named her Paka, P-A-K-A. She was a German-- a German Czech. She was from the Sudeten.

She never-- she spoke Czech very haltingly. But my parents got her to be my nursemaid, because my father's sister, an older sister, had used her to raise her son, Eric, several years earlier. And they found her and they asked her to come to Prague.

So is this the sister whose husband had the textile factory, and who lived in Sudetenland?

Yes, yes.

OK.

Who-- and the two of them and their son, Eric, were all killed in Auschwitz. I know-- I know-- I know that history. But anyway, so Paka-- Paka was interesting, very similar to my mother. Not terri-- didn't-- not a motive, not showing, a lot of feelings, but very dedicated to me and always there.

She helped me with ice skating. She even could kick a soccer ball. So in the absence of playmates during the war, she really became a key person, my sister, older sister.

Was she-- was she much younger than your mother?

I think by 10-- I'm going to guess 10 years or so. Eight, 10 years. So already a young adult.

I take it I made an assumption, but let me ask the question just to find out. What was the language that you all spoke at home?

Yeah. It was Czech, but I had German, of course, starting with grade one. And Paka was of great help in my learning that language, doing the homework.

Did you know anything of her family at all?

Only that the parents lived on a farm, or worked on a farm, or owned a farm. Farming was her background. I don't know anything else. And I don't think my cousin does, either. No. No.

And--

But she was no fan of Hitler. It was clear that she was apolitical, pretty much like my mother was. I don't think they had long discussions about will democracy come back to Germany. That wasn't part of it.

Well, I mean, in some-- at times like that when there were such-- when life is not normal, even things that you do that are not political statements say something about what your values are. So she worked for a Jewish family in Sudetenland, and then goes and works for another family that is half Jewish. So that's saying something.

Yeah. Yeah. That's a very good point.

Did she-- yeah. Did she stay-- how long did she stay with you? How long was she part of your life?

Well, she was still with us in 1945 when it was clear that the war was about to end. She was with us in May of 1945, right, May 8. My dad comes back to-- from Theresienstadt on May 9. She would always pick me up after school.

In those days, I didn't get on the tram by myself. She would pick me up. And I'd come out of the school building in downtown Prague near Václavské náměstí, and there's my mother.

And so I said, where's Paka? Well, I'm sorry, Paka had to leave. Leave? Her father became ill and she had to

go back.

And I was destitute. I was really broken because it was-- and then I got angry. How could she leave me like this? I went-- had a whole episode.

Well, it turns out the reason she left is they rounded up-- the Czech government decided it was time for retribution and rounded up 40,000 or 50,000 German speakers from Prague and throughout Bohemia Moravia and shipped them to Germany. She had never lived in Germany. She lived in the Sudetenland.

So-- and apparently, my parents tried to find her and they never reconnected.

How sad.

Yeah. Really sad.

How sad.

Yeah. Yeah.

But also, how telling of what was going on in those years. Significant that she is with you throughout the entire war.

It was a bedrock. She and my mom kept me going, and the Catholic grandparents. Yeah.

Let's talk about the events. I mean, when you are two years old, when there's talk of you, your family, going to Switzerland, that's a crucial year for Czechoslovakia. There are a lot of events.

There is-- Czechoslovakia is more or less abandoned by her allies through the Munich Agreement. Did that have an impact on your family, the outcome, the ramifications of the Munich Agreement?

Well, I'm going to answer that first by a slightly different story. It turns out-- it turns out that my cousin, Gerti, and her brother, Robert, and their mother, Olga, took a train from Prague to Romania. Why? Because the father, Leo Perutz, told them to get out because he didn't think that Munich would work.

He didn't think they would ever reach an agreement. And he thought Czechoslovakia would be invaded in November-- October or November of 1938. And Gerti told me the story.

They went all the way to Romania where they had some relatives. And in a few days, they came back once the Munich Agreement had been signed. Knowing that I don't know what-- if my father and mother had any inkling of that they should leave. Apparently, they might have had conversations, but they didn't do anything.

Plus, my mother's parents are smack dab in Prague. And she is the older of the two sisters with a reputation of being family-oriented and sort of more aware of the parent's needs than her younger sister. And I'm partly reporting family lore. But the younger sister had a busy social agenda before she found a husband. So [INAUDIBLE].

Olga.

[INAUDIBLE]. So I-- it's a good question. How did they--

Well, it's clear from that, from what you tell me, that they were following-- that generation, your parents and your mother's sister and her husband were following these events and were thinking what should we do in light of them. And for people who are going to be watching this interview later, and who are not familiar with the Munich Agreement, that is when Hitler wanted to take the Sudetenland away from Czechoslovakia and needed to make sure that no one is to come-- Czechoslovakia's allies will not declare war on him. And they renege, the British and the French renege on their alliances to Czechoslovakia.

And Chamberlain goes home, Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, goes home and says, we will have peace in our time. And more or less abandoned the country. So being right in Czechoslovakia, that has an effect on how life continues.

And I should add the following story. My dad was also in the Army Reserve. He was a First Lieutenant in the Czech Army.

And before the Munich Agreement in September of 1938, there was-- it was-- it was clear, or becoming quite clear, the Germans will invade the Sudetenland. Right? This was Hitler banging the war drums. So the Czech Army was mobilized.

And there is a wonderful 10 minute clip of the Czech Armada, they called it, A-R-M-A-D-A, getting ready to fight. And a young man waving goodbye to their wives, or girlfriends, and all of that. And the Czechs were pretty well equipped. They had the French build tanks, and they had arms, and they were in good shape.

So my dad and his regiment went to Sudetenland, but other than the few skirmishes here and there, there was no fighting. The Munich Agreement was signed. And the Army came back.

So I don't know, I guess he felt, OK, it's not going to happen. We have an agreement. But just stop me if I'm getting too far afield.

But-- so my grandmother is one of 10. She's the oldest of the Markus children. Among those children were several other men who were in the Czech Army, one of whom, Kurt Markus, is a socialist, or a communist. And he decides to flee to the Soviet Union with a Czech General whose name is Svoboda, "freedom." Svoboda, S-V-O-B-O-D-A.

And the first Czech Army is housed in the Soviet Union. And Kurt, being Jewish, spent the war there, fought with the Russians, and eventually came back. There were other Markus's who left for Palestine.

Sister of my grandmother, [? Thena, ?] and her husband decided we're getting out of here. And it might have been as early as 1934, '35. So under these 10 children, there were different kinds of responses to what happened.

Interesting.

All being made with limited information, as you suggested. I mean, who the hell knows what's going to happen?

Yeah. Yeah. And that's something that is hard for us to imagine when we already know what happened. And when we have more information, it's hard to place oneself in that situation, where truly, you don't have enough information upon which to make decisions. So your parents decide to stay.

Yes. Again, I imagine the pressure must have been very strong. Yet another relative-- this is the Austrian part of the Markus's. Another sister of my grandmother marries an Austrian who is a major stamp dealer in Vienna. The name is Ehrlich.

And as we know-- so the Germans, Hitler's army, goes into Austria by the Anschluss in the fall of '38, and they face the same decision. Do we leave? Can we go to the states? Will we stay here?

So the stamp dealer and his wife decide to stay in Vienna because they're too old to leave. Their daughter, Marianne, urges-- urges them, pleads with them, everything. They're clearly not going. She's on one of the last planes from Vienna to New York and works at Macy's in the stamp department.

I'm sorry. I think partly because we're in a covirus time and we don't know what's ahead. But these folks were trying to make decisions in their best interests, but also the family disagreement. What do we do? A or B.

Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. And they were compelled-- with the absence of information, then there are compelling, contradictory reasons. That is, each side has str-- compelling arguments. And which ones are actually the ones that matter?

They don't know. They just make their decisions with that.

Yeah.

So what happens then? So '38 happens, and Munich Agreement happens. Your father comes home, and there is no skirmish. There is no fighting. There is no bloodshed. How does life proceed for your family?

He has this factory called-- it's called Standard, S-T-A-N-D-A-R-D. And they make this bentwood furniture. So as far as I know, he's back there trying to sell his goods.

My mom is taking care of me. I'm now two years old. Paka is there. And I think they try to resume as much of normal life as possible. Read-- my dad read the paper, The [? Novi Listy ?], every single day. And my mom went to church on Sundays.

He didn't go to synagogue on Saturdays, although, maybe he snuck in. And until March, right, March 15, the German troops march into Prague, into Czechoslovakia. So--

And this was '39, March--

'39. So six months after Munich, we see that it was a phony piece of paper, right, despite what Chamberlain waved, the piece of paper, peace in our time. So I don't know-- so what goes through his head? I think, partly this question of Switzerland must enter into their calculus somewhere along the way.

But my dad also had a history of having a lot of interesting ideas, only some of which he pursued.

OK.

And maybe it just fizzled out, or it got too complicated. Who knows? So--

How does life change after the Germans march in for them, for your family?

I think the changes were slow. I mean, at first, it was the Germans were there. There were signs. There were now photos of Hitler all over downtown Prague and elsewhere.

And in our neighborhood in Branik, this I found out later, but they knew, there was a detachment of the German Army that was stationed-- I think it was a transportation unit because mostly it was trucks coming in and out and being serviced. But they saw German soldiers every day. And yet at that point, there was not yet any action against Jews, which pretty much started, I think, when Heydrich came in.

But there was another German soldier General who was in charge of affairs in Prague. I'm blocking on his name, but it was a Von--

Well--

Well, anyway--

--half a year-- half a year after they march into Prague, actually, World War II begins on September 1.

That's right, September 1.

Yeah. So a year after Munich, I remember-- was it in your book that I read this, or somewhere else, that Churchill responds to Neville's claim that peace in our time, he says-- well, he said-- he criticizes it, he goes,

there will be no peace, and they will have war. They wanted to avoid war, but they're going to have it now.

Yeah, that's in my book, and I got that out of Churchill.

That's a wonder-- I mean, it's so true.

Yeah.

That's what happened.

Yeah, yeah. So I-- yeah.

At that point then, after-- a year after Mu-- a year after your father returns after having been in the reserves to fight in this iss-- in the skirmish or war with the Germans, which becomes a non-issue, there's an actual war that begins. And does life change at that point for your parents?

That's a wonderful question. I'm not sure I can answer right now.

OK.

So I'm at that point five years old. '36, '41-- no, '39. I'm three years old.

No, '39, you're three years old.

How would it have changed for them? I think not yet. I think probably by 1940, I think the first group of Jewish men are sent to Terezin in '41 to develop it. And it had been a military barracks, and they were sent there to do some more housing and to clean it up, or whatever. And then--

Terezin is not so far from Prague. I believe it's like an hour north?

Exactly, hour, hour and a half, exactly. Exactly. And when my grandmother was put on a train in 1942, it apparently took a little longer because it was-- whatever. But under two hours.

And virtually all Jewish men and women and children from Bohemia and Moravia were sent to Theresienstadt somewhere along the way.

So it was-- that's interesting. I didn't realize that it was like a central holding point for all Jews in Bohemia Moravia, the Protectorate, in other words.

I think that Slovakian Jews went to a different-- I'm not 100% sure. But not necessarily Terezin. So I think as many as 30,000 to 40,000 people died in Terezin itself. Most were shipped to Auschwitz or Maly Trostenets, and that's where my uncle-- but, yeah, they all went through Terezin pretty much.

Who was shipped to Maly Trostenets?

My-- that favorite Uncle Richard, Richard and his wife Elsa. And the little bit of research, it was in the Ukraine at that point, now Belarus-- sorry?

I think it was Belarus.

Oh, it was Belarus then?

Yeah.

OK. But apparently, 99% of people died, and they died within a few hours of arrival. Sounds a nightmare.

Yeah. It's not one of the better known camps, because it's so far east. But as you say, it was pretty lethal.

And Belarus was also a very tough, tough place with a lot of bloodshed going on.

Anyway, let's go back to Terezin. And so in the beginning, you say the changes were gradual as far as what you were told, as far as what you understand. You mentioned Heydrich. Tell us who was Heydrich.

Reinhard Heydrich was one of the major functionaries of the Nazi regime. Thought of-- sort of a handsome, tall, I guess, somewhat blond haired, blue eyed, prototypical fascist, who as I understand it was brought to Bohemia Moravia to clamp-- put the clamps on Jews, and to really figure out-- because the previous Reich protector-- I think that was his title-- was not-- was a little too lenient on the Jews.

So Heydrich comes in with very clear orders to start evacuating Jews. And later, of course, he was assassinated by two-- one Czech and one Slovak who ambushed his car. Very interesting plot where they knew his movements every day. And there was a turn in the road before you entered Prague where the car slowed down. And that's when they opened up.

But one submachine gun jammed, and the other guy threw a bomb, or something, detonated the car. Heydrich lived for another five, six, seven days, and then he died. And then all hell broke loose because the Nazis wanted revenge and destroyed a town called Lidice, and a second one.

Basically, killed all the men, rounded up the women and children, and sent them to camps. So Heydrich is of course called-- the nickname-- his nickname was The Butcher of Prague.

And you say after Heydrich's assassination, is that when life changed for your family?

It must have. I wish I could give you a specific chapter and verse, but certainly, my father then had to register. And he was sent to a-- became part of a labor group that worked in, around Prague, and outside of Prague, doing manual labor of various sorts. He still remained at home. So that-- there was-- in my mind, he was a shadowy figure. That is, he would sometimes appear and then he would disappear-- appear and disappear.

And I'm asking my mother, where is he? Excuse me. The standard answer was, he's on a business trip and he'll be back as soon as he can. I knew he was a businessman, I knew he had this factory. He often wore a shirt, tie, and a jacket, either a suit or sport jacket.

And so he-- when he left the house, he looked like he was on his way to a business trip. I didn't question it. But how long he went on these labor assignments, and where exactly, I have a very sketchy understanding of that. All I know, he wasn't in my life. Well, he was-- he was back and forth.

And at this point, his business had been confiscated.

Yes. The Germans were running the factory. And among the new products were barrels for rifles made out of wood, the stock, with a certain bent, or a certain shape. And I think-- I don't know for a while, I don't know how long, they used my father as-- his knowledge of how the machinery works to do whatever construction they wanted.

And then somewhere along the way, he was let go, or he was arrested. I don't know the exact details.

So he was in these labor brigades, but he would come home sometimes.

That's my memory of it. At least several times when we then all went for lunch at my grandparents' house.

Your Catholic grandparents.

Right. Earlier, Leo Perutz was also part of that. And I wish I could tell you when it ended. Was it '42, '43? I'm not sure. But after a while, Leo wouldn't come. And then my dad would show up.

And was it-- at those times when he didn't come anymore, he didn't show up, what had really happened to

him?

He was somewhere in the Bohemia Moravia doing manual labor.

Was there a point where he gets deported to Terezin?

Oh, yes, towards the end of 1944.

So it-- oh, I see. So up until 1944, he's in labor brigades.

Czech-- Czech Jews, men and women married to Christians, were typically put on these labor groups. Again, the research by Capkova. In one case, they say it's 15,000-- 14,000 Jewish men and 1,000 Jewish women working on these labor brigades, which was the same program that they used in Austria and Germany with Jews.

Who were married to Christians. OK.

Right. Right. And I know my-- this cousin of my father, Ema, Emča, her husband who was Protestant, was also in the same labor group as my father some of the time. So he had-- they had similar experiences where he would go and work, and then sometimes come back, and then, I don't know, I suppose--

Did your father-- your father survives the war. He does come home. Did he ever talk about any of this in later years? Did he ever talk about what he was doing on those labor brigades?

He did towards the end of his life. He-- my dad died of cancer at age 80. And for the last two years of his life, he had a lot of appointments with an oncologist in New York. And I would often go with him.

And I wish I'd had a tape recorder. I asked a lot of questions, and I'm not sure how much I remember, or how much was clear. It was clear he was on this labor group. They did various kinds of jobs in and around and outside of Prague.

I never heard any stories of encounters with German soldiers or overseers. They were not fed very well. It was hard work. It was cold. It was pretty miserable.

And I don't know when they came back and then left again. I never fully got clear on that. But it was difficult. I mean, there was no way around it.

So it sounds like your father has his hands full just barely trying to keep alive on these brigades. Now, who puts food on the table at that point? There's you, your mother, and Paka at home. How do you folks survive? What happens there?

Well, they had a system of coupons, the Germans did. They were coupons for meat, for butter, for milk, for bread, all kinds of things. And I think there were monthly coupons. I don't think they-- there were weekly.

When I did some research on it, it wasn't fully clear. But that was the essence of what we ate. So either my mother or Paka would go shopping. And I'll tell you about Paka in a minute.

But my-- but the coupons got small-- the rations got smaller and smaller and smaller. So at the end of the war by, I would say, four-- winter of '44 and spring of 1945, we became vegetarians. Not because we wanted to, but that's pretty much.

And I have one-- I have to tell you quick 30 second story. I learned how to ice skate on Saturday afternoons during the day. I would go skating on the Vltava, which froze over, with my buddies from school. And we would finish, and one day, we were all very hungry and there was a hot dog vendor on the banks of the river.

So we went and we each of us ordered a párký, and he sliced this rye bread and a huge párký, put mustard

on it. And he said, all right, boys, here you go. I need five crowns and a coupon. Well, I was the only one with the coupons. The other boys had money but no ration cards.

So I gave them mine and he punched it four times. And when I got home later, my mother was very, very upset, because pretty much the four boys had ate the weeks quota of meat.

Did you know at the time that that was something that was a bit risky? Did you feel it as a child? Or you only realized it when you got home?

No, I sort of knew that. Well, they all said, well, I'll give it back to you.

Did it ever happen? Did they give it back?

No, because the mothers knew they wouldn't give that limit.

Yeah.

But my mother's specialty became potatoes with mushroom gravy with really good mushrooms.

That's not bad. That's not bad. Did she work? Did she go to work?

No, she-- in '44 and '45-- was assigned to work in a factory, a German textile factory that made either socks, or underwear, or T-shirts for German soldiers. And that's where she worked during the day. And then they put her on a night shift. And it was very hard work.

I-- somewhere in the book, I recall her coming home sort of in the morning as I'm about to go to school, and her face looked tired. She had blue ink on her hands. So she must have been doing something with the cloth, or with the material, to mark it off. I don't quite know what.

It was difficult for her. I could see how hard it was. And thank--

Was it far from home? Was this factory far from home?

It was on the other side of the Vltava. So I imagine she would go street tram there. And the one time Prague was bombed in April-- no, February 1945, the same day that Dresden was bombed, Kurt Vonnegut's book-- it's a long story.

But basically, it was American airlines-- American planes and British and Canadian planes. And one squadron of American flyers misread the bombing site. Because from 30,000 feet up, Prague looks very much like Dresden. There's water, a lot of small bridges, and they bombed some hospitals, some schools. They bombed Prague.

Something like 700 Czechs died, 1,200 who were injured, not-- but no German factories were hit, and no Germans died. And I remember being in school that day, which was again downtown Prague, worrying that why are they bombing with my male friends with Jiri and Tomas, trying to figure out why would the Allies bomb downtown Prague. And then I thought, well, maybe they hit the factory where my mother worked. And it was a very scary moment.

Yeah.

Yeah.

You hit upon something I wanted to ask you about, and that is school life. I mean, the irony is that you enter school during a war. You start school during a war and during an occupation, which means that it's not the kind of schooling that would have existed in normal times. That's the assumption I make.

Can you-- do you have memories of your school? Do you have memories of the classes? Do you have

memories of the teachers?

Fortunately, I have all of the above.

Wonderful. Wonderful.

It had some-- I don't think it was a public school. I think it was private, because my cousin, four years my elder, was in the same school.

Gerti?

Gerti. And she has good memories of it, too, being older. But it was not far from Václavské náměstí in Prague. And a lot of the kids had parents who were professionals, at least one was a professor. His name was [? Mahotka ?], Pavel [? Mahotka ?]. And out of the classroom of about 15, two became sociologists.

And you're one of them, huh?

I'm one of them. But his specialty was sociology of art. So he also liked to paint. But-- so that's where we went to school. And that's why I took the tram.

In your book, you mention is the reason you go to the school because you were thrown out of the public school?

I don't know if I was thrown out, but maybe I was asked to leave, or maybe my parents were told, I'm sorry, we don't take kids who are half Jewish.

OK.

But I suspect so, because my cousin, who is same as me, half Jewish, half Catholic, went to the school. And several of the other kids were from mixed marriages.

OK.

What's interesting, another area of research I should think about. But wonderful teachers-- an older man and a younger woman. The woman, her name was, I think, Novotná, taught Czech, and art, and music, and biology. So we had biology in the second grade.

The gentleman-- I don't know his name-- math, German, science. But he was very strict but fair. But we had the feeling, the boys and I, that he didn't like the Germans. Because whenever we were asking questions about German, the language, he'd say, it's in the book. You can look it up.

So he wasn't very proactive in getting you to be actively learning.

Absolutely. And yet, they were told by the administration to talk about German victories. So periodically, we would get a mini lecture about how well Germany was doing. And at least twice, we were taken to parades around the main square, Wenceslas náměstí, to welcome the German soldiers back. This was during the war.

So I had this cognitive dissonance, because my grandfather on Sundays would make it clear that the Allies are progressing and will eventually win. And then we get the lectures in school that, no, the Germans are doing very well and--

Well, what were the sources of news for your grandfather?

Well-- so this is a great story. My-- first of all, it was against the law to own a radio. And it was equally against the law to listen to a radio, if you had one, which he violated regularly listening to the BBC.

Oh, gosh.

So on Sunday at 5:00-- so we'd have a nice meal-- this is partly answering your question earlier about the food. We had-- we knew we'd get a really good meal Sunday afternoon at my grandmother's. At 5:00 Prague time, which I think was 6:00 London time or was it the other way around?

I think it's the other way around.

Other way around. So in Prague, it would have been 6:00, London 5:00. Big Ben chimes and Beethoven's Fifth comes on-- da, da da, da, da, da, da, da. And here comes the news.

And in the news one day, we weren't there, but my grandfather told us about it, was the landing in Normandy. So the next time Robert and I-- was typically Robert and I sat with him. And the two mothers and my cousin Gerti were in the other room. But sometimes they would come in.

So he would lay out a checker cloth on his table, on the study table, red checkers for the Allies, and black checkers for the German positions. And he would outline the Normandy landing. Who knew? And whenever we ended, he would always say, well, don't tell any of your friends.

Well, of course, the boys in school exchanged stories. But he was endangering all of us and himself by listening to the radio. And it would drive my mother mad, because my grandfather was slightly hard of hearing. And you could hear his radio coming in. It would start with music, but then it would turn to the BBC.

How-- was-- did he live in a single family home, or did he live in apartment house?

Also, an apartment house close to downtown in a different section from ours.

Do you know the name of the neighborhood?

Yeah, but I'm blocking on it right now.

That's OK.

Yeah. We took two trains-- two trams. We took a tram from Branik, to Václavské náměstí, and to tram number 12, I think, to their house.

By the way do you remember your address in Branik, your street address?

Give me a little. I have it here. I don't have it in my memory.

OK.

Partly because it's two addresses the way-- we had a blue sign and then there's a red-- different blue with the one set of numbers, and red with another set of numbers. And I'll-- I'll get it to you.

OK. OK. So at any rate, grandpa lives in another apartment house and listens to the BBC, and kind of turns up the volume because he needs to hear it.

Exactly. Exactly.

OK.

Which drove not only my mother, his wife, mad because they knew of the danger but, yeah.

So which one did you believe, the teachers at school or your grandpa and the BBC?

Well, I learned to listen to my grand-- granddad knowing, and of course hoping, that that would happen. And there must have been other-- I mean, it was clear as the bombing-- in 1944 and '45, there were more frequent allied flights over Prague. So in the school, we would have drills, just like they would for a fire drill in an American school, which when the sirens went off, we were to leave our books in the desk.

Our coats were hanging on a hanger in the back of the room, and we would go down one or two flights to the basement, which was kind of dark and somewhat dank. But that's where we rehearsed what would happen in case there was a bombing. And we liked it, because often, these drills happened during the German class, just by chance.

So nobody-- nobody minded. But if it happened during math, then we had to make up the subject. But that went on certainly from all the fall of 1944 till spring of '45. And then the bombing occurred. And that really changed things, because it--

The missed bombing on the way to-- on the way to Dresden. I mean, the time when it was--

The mistaken bombing, yeah, yeah, yeah.

What was the name of the school?

It was, before the war, called the Czech English School. So they taught English, as well as Czech. But by 1942, it wasn't English, it was German-- Czech and German.

OK. So was it known then as the Czech German School?

You're asking questions I should have, I feel, on the tip of my tongue. They're not there right now.

It's OK. It's OK. I mean, I ask them simply because it helps in anchoring the information that you give me.

Of course.

But it's not necessary, and it's something that if you find later, we can always add to the interview at another date. So it's OK, not to worry.

My last trip to Prague must have been three or four years ago. And I went searching for that school with my aunt, who is 10 years older than I. She knows it. And we spent an hour and a half looking for it and I never quite was sure which building, because it's no longer there officially.

So it's there somewhere. I'll try and find out.

OK. OK.

Yeah.

But it's also-- it's at these years that children begin to have memories. It's actually the war years. In the late '30s, you're still a toddler, and so what you remember would be episodic.

And now, when you start going to school, it can-- there can be more of them. And that's also interesting to learn more about what is life under occupation, during wartime. Is it a-- is it-- did you feel fear?

Did you ever have encounters with German soldiers? Did you-- those are the sorts of questions that come to my mind.

No, absolutely. The major encounter that I had was on a tram from Branik going to school on something like close to 7:00 in the morning, getting on the tram, pretty empty. So I took out a book and I was reading the book. And maybe 10 minutes into the ride, I notice-- I'm looking at the book and I see a pair of black leather boots.

And I look up, I see a green gray uniform, still looking up, and I see a cap with the cross had the bones, cross-- crossed had bones, and the German eagle. And I knew right away this was an SS man-- I mean, a [INAUDIBLE]. And he in a very loud German says, get up and give me your place.

And it petrified me. I mean, I didn't know. But I quickly put the book in my knapsack, and I went as far away from him as possible, thinking, does he know who I am? Does he know that my father is Jewish? Does he know where my father is?

I really had a major, major, I don't know, episode, the-- scary. I was paranoid. And he-- so I got to school, and the-- Mrs. Novotny saw that I was really very upset. And she tried to calm me down and reassured me he didn't know who I was.

He didn't know my father. He just wanted a seat. Was it-- by then, it was crowded. Here's a kid sitting there where an adult should be sitting. But to me, it was very, very scary.

And that whole-- with the SS, because we all knew that stayed-- crossed the street or stay away from them. That was a major thing that stayed with me.

At this point, did you know that-- did you know that Jews were in mortal danger?

I did not. I knew that my mother kept saying, don't tell anyone you're Jewish. One of the boys-- we had a bully in the second grade. His first name was Joseph also, sort of a husky. And I've got a photo of that classroom in the book, and he's sitting in front of me.

He would bully whoever he could. And a couple of points-- a couple of times he said, Stein, you're a Jew. And I said, no, I'm not. He said, your father's a Jew. No, he's not. And we got into a fight.

And he was-- got a couple of punches in, the teacher broke it up, and went down to the principal, who was not at all a German sympathizer. But he somehow worked it out. And when I got home, my mother said, well, why did you tell him? I said, I didn't tell him. But he was-- the parents clearly were antisemitic.

And that's-- and I was with him in school the rest of the time. And so the teachers sat me in a couple of the rows away from him so we wouldn't interact. But that was-- I didn't understand. I never comprehended that the Jewish relatives who disappeared were on their way to their destruction.

That was my next question. That was my next question is that when they disappear, was it simply they're away on business, like father was? Did you ever wonder what had happened to grandma Sophie?

I did. My cousin Gerti had exactly the same story with her mother, my mother's sister, that Leo Perutz, who was also a business man, was on a business trip. That was a standard-- and then I checked with my other cousin Robert who's closer to my age, that was the family-- somehow the two sisters, or the grandparents, decided to don't tell the kids anything.

And then I think about it, because as a teacher, how much should a seven or eight-year-old know about that? What if it's a prison, say in the States, your dad, your older brother's in jail, do you tell the kid? So I never knew.

And I wondered-- I mean, I did wonder, well, where is he, really? Where's the business? What's going on? But I can't say I pursued it.

I tried pursuing it with an older relative once, and I didn't get very far. She said, well, it's just-- it's the war and things are happening, but never-- no one ever told me Jews were being rounded up and killed. So that I didn't learn till after the war.

There is-- the funny thing is is that when you say that phrase, well, he's away on business, there's actually a movie that was made called, When Father was Away on Business by, I believe it was Bosnians, or Serbia

Croatians, or something like that. And I believe the father was away on the same kind of business that your father was away on in-- is that the whole thing is is this little kid doesn't know where his dad is. He's just gone on business.

And it's a legitimate-- it's a legitimate question to ponder is, was there damage? Sometimes I've talked to people who were young at that point and not knowing was worse than knowing. But it depended on what. And depended on whether or not the false answer actually satisfied them.

If it didn't satisfy them, then it's in the vacuum. You can fill in the worst kind of information. But if it's an answer that satisfies, then it makes a lot of sense.

My guess is that my mother didn't want to open the door unnecessarily. Just knowing that I'd have more questions and more questions. What if it somehow comes out that the mother's telling is complaining, because the father's in the camp, or the mo-- the mother-in-law disappeared. Yeah.

Did you-- go back to another question that I had is, did you have a-- were you afraid just this one time when you had the encounter with the SS officer, or were you constantly afraid, or wary?

I think I was pretty fearful. I think that's-- it sort of partly in my nature and partly what I learned early, never having an explanation as to why there were German soldiers in the streets, in the trams, in the neighborhood, this trucking depot. I didn't have much interaction with it, but I would see trucks of Germans going out or coming back, including the fact that when the war first started, those soldiers were of normal age and looked pretty healthy and pretty mean.

I remember by the time 1945 rolled around, some of those kids were a few years older than I. And then there were these older war veterans that looked like my grandfather. I mean, that-- literally, that's who was fighting with the Germans at that point.

But the fear was there. And the bomb-- the flights were fearful. We try and make light of it. I had one of my friends loved the engines and he claimed that he could tell from listening to it whether it was a Rolls-Royce engine, or an American Boeing. We thought he was kidding, but I think he could.

So your father is sent away in Theresienstadt to Terezin in 1944. Do you know whether that was early in the year or later on in the year?

Later-- later on in the year, in the fall or early winter, because he spoke-- after the war, many years after that, I went to Terezin with him, and he took me to the area, the men's barracks, which were terribly overcrowded. And he talked about how cold the winter of '44, '45 was-- very few blankets, little heat, and the terrible conditions. But he survived.

He-- apparently, there's a woodworking area in Terezin. And that's where he worked given his background in wood. And very little food, and dysentery, and constipation, and all kinds of things. It was difficult. But he was never sent out of Terezin, unlike so many other Jews. Yeah.

Did your grandmother die in Terezin, or did she die somewhere else?

Died there 19 days after she was sent there. Because she was a Type 1 diabetic, and the Germans took away all the medication that any prisoner came in with, including her diabetes, which she needed, which she took regularly before the war.

And how do you know this? How do you know that it was 19 days and that they took away her medication?

Because they sent-- the German authorities sent back a postcard saying to my parents and to my father, your mother Sophie Markus Stein died on August 19, 1942. Cause, health complications, something-- some generic thing. But it was there with a picture of Hitler on the other side.

And I think they have maybe-- yeah, in those days for whatever reason, they really sent these death notices

to relatives.

So that's what told you. You knew when she was taken, and then you have the postcard that tells you when she was-- when she died.

Yeah. I suspect that he also knew because she was sent in, what did I say, in August? No, she died in August-- July, so she sent in July. Then her-- at least one sister daughter is sent the next month, and then the next month-- so they all came.

And there was still communication between people in Theresienstadt and my parents back home. And I'm sure they sent a card saying Sophie died.

OK. OK.

And they even sent packages. My understanding is that for a while, they were able to send some food packages. Now, I know, did they arrive? I don't know how that worked. But there was at least some of that. And I heard the same story from other relatives who were sending food.

Well, this brings us close to the end of the war. What was that like in Prague? Did you-- did your grandfather Antonin know that the end of the war is coming from the BBC? Did he let you know? I mean, were there signs that-- were there signs that this is not going well for the Germans, it's going to be over soon.

Absolutely. Absolutely signs. So the same BBC News work was sometimes broadcast in Czech. It turns out BBC is something like 45 different languages in their reporting. And so we heard regularly on Sunday the progress of the war.

So that was one. And also, you knew with increasing flights, more and more allied flights going over, it suggested there's more and more action against Germany. And at least once, maybe twice, I saw wounded German soldiers from the tram car. The tram went around downtown Prague and left.

You could see a couple of-- I saw at least one soldier on crutches. And then another time, someone who looked-- so these little signs were there. And then in 19-- so on May 5, 1945, there's an uprising in downtown Prague.

The Czech resistance and Czech citizens took up arms against the Germans, and there was fighting in downtown Prague. We heard some of that-- the explosions, and the shooting at a distance. There was no direct action in Branik. But we know it was in downtown.

And then-- so we lived in this house, my mother and I, and the super comes to our house. This would have been, I think, May 7. He knocks on the door, knocks on everybody's door, he says, the Germans are planning to blow up part of the street, because this is a street that leads from Prague to Pilsen.

By that time, Patton's Third Army, the US Third Army, is in Pilsen. And he'd like to come to Prague. Big ego, he was splits-- [? take him. ?] And apparently, he had a serious exchange with Truman, who forbade him, right, to liberate Prague because of the Yalta agreement.

But that was somehow in the air. So anyway, so my mom and I and the super said be fast, couple of minutes. And so there was a basement that they-- in an empty house maybe a block and a half away. We grab some stuff, a sweater and whatever else, and we go and hide.

And the same super was in charge of this hiding place. And he basically said, OK, if you need to go now, you've got to go now, then I'm closing the door. Nobody gets out at night.

And then somebody in that basement, one of the men, said, we heard that the Germans are going around knocking on doors and shooting people. That's-- so that-- everybody panicked and they stayed nice and quiet. And I had a dream that night in which my Catholic grandfather comes and saves us with food.

So he was one of my heroes in those days. And fortunately, the next day on the 8th, the Germans withdraw, even though there's still some action and the shooting going on. That took, I guess, four or five days in all. One day later on May 9, we're-- we know the war's over but there's no fa-- no dad.

So I'm sitting at the window looking at the road. And in the middle of the day or so, I see a Russian Soviet Army truck with a five sided star and olive colors. Two Russian soldiers stop the truck. They come around the back, and they help maybe a dozen men and women wearing the yellow star in ragged clothing, and one of them is my dad.

Oh, my. Oh, my.

So we-- I told my mom. She ran down the stairs-- we ran down and had the most joyous hug. I mean, my world was full again. And he was wearing the same jacket that I knew he had with the yellow star that my mother sewed on this jacket, an overcoat.

You never had to wear one, or did you?

No, I did not wear the yellow star. Because officially, I was a Catholic, as was my mother. But I remember earlier before he was-- went to Terezin, my mother putting-- sewing all those stars on his jacket that he took with him. I was told on a business trip. They knew that he was going elsewhere.

Well, father came home from business.

Right. Absolutely. Absolutely.

And what was that like? Now, he is home for good.

It was joyous. It was-- sorry?

Had he changed?

If he did, I didn't notice it. There wasn't much talk of what went on. I mean, we knew there were German soldiers, and the Russian soldiers liberated them, and there were-- people found it difficult, and there was very little food, and all of that. But he didn't go into the people dying or being shipped to Auschwitz, as was my Uncle Leo. He was on one of the last trains from Terezin to Auschwitz.

This is Olga's husband?

Olga's husband, yeah, yeah. Which also like all those questions, how come one of these guys dies and the other one survives? That's-- and there was tension between the two sisters from early childhood on.

And I think there was some other kind of bone of contention between them, what happened. But anyway-- but it was-- so then what happened in the next couple of years is a reconnection with people who survived, which I also wrote about, including the two brothers who survived Auschwitz and the death march. Then my Aunt Manya, Manya was her name, and her 15-year-old daughter Sonya also survived the death march.

It was astounding because they were all in Auschwitz. And they wound up in Terezin where my father was. And she was-- they tried to escape, she and her daughter. And they were put in an isolation chamber in the Theresienstadt camp.

And my father knew the chef from his soccer playing days, and they somehow gathered enough food for the two women to survive. And I learned this--

I know you said earlier that from your father's family, only two people survived-- your father and another cousin. And now these are different people, I believe, you're mentioning.

These are all Markus's. So Sonya was my-- around my father's age, but her mother was the sister of my

grandmother--

OK.

--of those 10 people or families.

OK.

But anyway, after the war, we kind of had some reunions with the people who survived. And it's then that I first began to realize-- have some sense of the magnitude of the Holocaust and what people had to do to survive. It was really--

And when did you really know-- I mean, that's when you first start to realize it. When did you realize that this was continent wide in scope, not just my family, not just our country?

Probably not till the history class in city college. And then I also had that encounter with a Holocaust denier. And I decided I need to teach about this. So I learned a lot more.

But it really takes a while to understand the magnitude and the evil intent of what the Germans and the Nazis were doing, much more than just one family or another family. My cousin Gerti got a Master's degree at Indiana University. And she wrote about some of this.

And I read that, and that was really helpful, both from the families' perspective and the larger question of what happened.

So in other words, it wasn't-- it wasn't like all this knowledge is open at once. It comes in phases and it comes in pieces. Is that-- is it-- is that how it was?

Absolutely. For example, we were liberated by the Soviet Army. And that was clear. Anybody could-- any adult child could see the Russian soldiers and the tanks, wonderful heroes. A year later, [PERSONAL NAME] Markus, who is a Czech guy, who is a communist--

Well, you mentioned him, yes.

[INAUDIBLE] Czech Army. And where was he stationed? In the Ukraine. And he talked about the terrible conditions that the Ukrainian peasants encountered and what happened and some of the-- and so this, again, cognitive dissonance. These are heroes and yet they behave very badly, including towards the Jews.

His wife was a nurse in the Soviet Army, but she was also Jewish. So a conversation in my parents' house, I began to get a better sense of what it was like for some Jews in the Ukraine under the Soviet occupation. I think that's why I became a sociologist, try and figure some of this out.

It's-- and it's difficult to teach, very difficult to teach, because you get a little slice of life. But meanwhile, there's a much broader horizon out there of--

Well, you used the phrase cognitive dissonance a couple of times in our interview today. Do you-- do you feel, or do you think that-- has your experience been that people tend to want a simplistic explanation of things, and when something contradicts an initial impression, they dismiss it?

I don't want to talk about American politics in 2020.

OK. That's OK.

But one sees around a virus, which is a scientific issue, it's biology. It's not political. Some see it as one way, and other people see it another way because they cognitively understand it in different ways. My wife just entered--

Here.

--bearing a cup of coffee. Thank you.

Tea, tea, tea.

Tea.

Do you want to say to Ina? This is--

Hello. Hello. Hi, how are you?

Michelle [INAUDIBLE]

OK.

Whose college roommate was--

No, it's not roommate but good friend.

Good friend--

Yeah.

--was [PERSONAL NAME]--

Yeah.

--at Trinity College.

Yes.

Where they serve tea. Anyway, thank you.

OK.

Yeah. That somehow-- I'm going to use the word bamboozle. We got bamboozled into seeing the world a particular way. I mean, this is what Hitler did, right?

The Germans are going to win. They have your best interests in mind. They'll take care of you. We set up the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. What could be wrong with that? We're protecting you.

By the way, we're going to take all your Jews and kill them. But-- and so-- I do a lot of teaching. I've been a college professor for close to 40 years.

How do you-- how to present this information and make it-- and open student's minds to understand that there are several realities of the world, and somehow we have to make some choices. But use evidence, use the truth, use evidence to formulate your hypotheses about the world.

Did you when you were growing up, feel this kind of confusion?

Yeah. Partly having to do with the disappearance of my dad, of my grandmother, and I'm not sure how I processed it, if at all. And this uncle that I really loved, and even other-- my father's two sisters, who I didn't know very well, but where did they go? And then towards the end of the war, the disappearance of Paka, my second mother.

Why? She was great. So try to understand that. And one other quick photo-- 1948. So February 1948, we're

in Prague. I'm in school.

I said that my dad read the paper every day. He comes home from work and the front page is full of white columns, missing stories. Why? It was taken over by the Communist Party and they began censorship on the daily newspaper that up until then had honest reporting every single day.

And it's such a dramatic vision for me of cognitive-- I don't know-- cognitive disappearance, a whitening out of what's really going on.

Well, 1948 was dramatic, unbelievably dramatic in Czechoslovakia. There was the defenestration, of Masaryk, and the various ministries that are taken over by pro communist and/or communist from-- I mean, key ministries-- the Ministry of the Interior, things like that. Did that affect your family? Did these post-war political events affect your family?

Absolutely.

In what way?

Certainly upset my dad. So my dad was trying to get the factory back after the end of the war. And it just got very, very complicated. And my understanding is he was on the verge, or getting close to getting the factory back and starting it up again. Well, communists came into power and they nationalized it. Because at one point, he had up to 50 employees or somewhere around that figure.

Well, it was-- and we spent-- even when I came to the States, I went back to Prague. I hired-- Mrs. [? Chermakova ?]. She was a character. I went into her office near the main railroad station, and I've never seen so many stacks of folders as the last time I went to the library.

Anyway we're trying to get some recompensation. And about 20 years later, I think I got a check for about \$1,500 for that factory. So--

Well, you eventually-- you eventually leave Czechoslovakia.

We do, in 1948. So my mom and I got the visas. And it took them almost two years to get the Czech visa, because the quota was very small based on the 1924 population of the United States. But my dad was still trying to get some money out of Prague, out of-- he also had partial ownership of a building, or something. And he wanted to keep doing that.

So it's just my mother and I and my father get on a train from Prague to Amsterdam. He gets off at the last stop in Czechoslovakia, because he doesn't have an American visa. I mean, we knew that.

So he goes back, and there's another 2 and 1/2 years when I don't see him. One year he's in Prague, finally gets a French visa. He goes to Wiesenburg and works for French furniture dealer, and then comes to the States in April 1951.

How did you get an American visa?

Well, there was the quota, and I guess our numbers came up.

OK. OK. Did you need sponsors? Did you need sponsors to get into--

Yes, so my two cou-- again, Marc-- Markus, who got out of Vienna just around Anschluss came to the States. Maryanne [? Aldheim ?], this is the father. Her father was a major stamp dealer in Vienna.

And that's the family, they perished, and she survived. Husband couldn't get an American visa because, again, trying to get his parents to come out, didn't happen. He spent the war in Shanghai.

And just yesterday, or two days ago, I saw the preview of the new film about Shanghai, Safe Harbor, which

is going to be on PBS next week. Great. I kept looking at the film to see if I could recognize this face. I didn't, but it was astounding. 20,000 Jews saved there.

So they were our sponsors. They sponsored our visit.

OK.

Can I just jump in one other thing that happened with the cognitive? So I was a young assistant professor at a college in New Jersey. I'm sitting in my office. These four students come in. They're very upset, young woman crying.

One of my colleagues turned out to be a Holocaust denier. And in a sociology class, it was in 1993 when Schindler's List was released as a film, he questioned the number of Jews in the camps and what really happened. And he had a handout. I have a paragraph of his handout in the book.

He says the actual number, according to the latest research, it was only 700,000 to 800,000 Jews who perished in the camps. And the reason they perished is the Germans didn't have enough food themselves to feed them. I talk about the cognitive dissonance here.

And so these kids asked me to come-- they wanted to have him fired. Well, he had tenure. You don't lose your job just because you're lying through your teeth. And that got me started on becoming a Holocaust educator, to really focus on that. So I somehow wanted to include that in.

Well, I think it's important and I'm glad that you did. I'm glad that you did. It is-- it leads up to kind of my final question, which is-- which was, what is the most important-- why do you do this?

What is it that you'd want people to take away from the interview that we've had, the experiences that you've shared, and how would you like them to understand what you have shared, what you have explained? And we touched on it when you were talking about cognitive dissonance. But this is sort of the final question. How would you-- how would you address it?

Oh, boy. Well, first of all, I think all humans are alike in some fundamental ways. And they have a right to live. They have a right to do the best they can to develop themselves, to love others.

And it's-- one of my jobs is to try and support people who are learning about the world, who are growing, who are grappling with truth, trying to understand how does one survive so that everybody else can survive. And so education is the avenue that I've chosen. I like to teach. I like to work with students. And I like to examine what happened.

And I'm hoping that in a way that I encourage people to seek the truth and to do things that support diversity, oppose racism, antisemitism, all of these terrible anti things that prevent full human development. And so that's my little part, and in a way, honoring the relatives who perished, and my dad who survived, and others.

Thank you. Thank you very, very much.

Thank you.

And I will say-- I will say that this then concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Peter Stein on September 4, 2020, in Washington DC. Thank you very, very much.

You've been a wonderful interviewer. I appreciate it.

Thank you.