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Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back. And I'm the director of the Holocaust Resource Center in Buffalo. And this evening our subject is Marcel Lissek. And Marcel was born in Paris, France in 1937. And he's going to tell us his story. Marcel, will you tell us about your family?

Yes. I'll take a deep breath, it seems. I think I'd like to start by saying something I put on paper, which seems to make a lot of sense. And that is that I can't remember all the details. But I can't forget them either.

There hardly goes a single day in which something triggers my thoughts of things that happened to me long ago, because it's a lot of years ago. But some of the things seem like they were just yesterday. Because something happens to you, you just don't forget it. You try to, but you don't.

Tell us about your parents.

OK. We have a picture of them. We could start with that.

My father's name was Max Samuel Lissek. And my mother was Hannah. And they met in Paris in the early '30s, around 1933. He was born in Cologne, Germany. She was born in GÅ‚Ä™bowice, Poland. And I believe she was one of 12 children, eight brothers. In fact, I even forget that one.

Yes, she had eight brothers and four sisters. And my father, he was one of two brothers and four sisters.

And you said before, you told me that your father came from Cologne, Germany.

Yes. Yes.

And why did he leave Germany?

Well, he left Germany. There were a lot of things going on in the early '30s in Germany. And there was a lot of pressure put on the Jews, a lot of antisemitism, a lot of fighting in the streets. If they found that you were a Jew, people just came and literally fought you, and stuff like that. And the government was starting to create a lot of pressure. And they found that those who could, literally ran away. And a couple of his friends that he played soccer with, if I say football, I'm really meaning soccer.

Your father played professionally?

Yes. He was I guess an excellent soccer goalie, and very popular with the players. And some of those players who were not Jewish saw that he was in danger, and began to help him cross one boundary after another, leaving Germany, going onto Luxembourg, Belgium, and eventually France.

When did he arrive in France?

He arrived in France I guess around 1933, and thereabouts he met my mother.

And I guess she worked and lived at her older sister's home. And she's the one who introduced the two of them. And I guess there were a lot of good fun times with soccer. But I guess there were a lot of problems, because he was a refugee. And the French government was pretty strict about who could live in Paris, and you had to have working papers. And I guess a lot of people were trying to help him to get extensions.

You had to have, I guess, a monthly extension to remain, or else leave the country. And I gather, I even found out just today, that my mother even went to the authorities and even spoke to Leon Blum, who was a big part of the history of Paris and France, and the French Jews. And upon her insistence, he was able to give her another month, and then another month for him to stay.

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Well, what did your father do in Paris?

Well, I guess he got odd jobs. He couldn't do-- he was professionally an electrician, a plumber. But he got odd jobs. He worked in restaurants. And he worked at other things. But very quickly the authorities did come, and they took him away to detention camps. They seemed to have things that were happening. It got to be from detention camps, to work camps, to concentration camps. Things just got progressively worse. Although the people who went through it at the time were not aware of what they were going through.

Do you know what year your father was taken away?

I believe that it was around 1936 that he was actually taken to these camps. And he was taken especially to a one camp that I remember quite a lot was said about it was a town called Pithiviers, where he was not even allowed to work. He was just kept there.

And from there, he eventually, in 1941, I believe he was taken to Auschwitz.

Wait a minute. We're jumping. You have an older brother. As a matter of fact, we have a picture of your parents with your brother. So this is what year?

This is 1936. Leon was born, in February of '36, and I was born the following year, and I have another brother who was born in '41. So your father was around then. You said--

He was around, but he was also in these camps. He was detained, and kept in these camps. And he was allowed, early on, he was allowed to come home for a week. Later on, he was allowed to come home only for a weekend. Later on, he was not allowed to come out, but my mother was allowed to visit him.

And you remember this? Did you go with your mother?

I really can't say that I remember that, because I was really a small child. These are the stories that my mother told me. And they were substantiated by other people that who were in Buffalo I have met who knew my family in Paris, and knew my father in Cologne.

How did your mother manage with your father being away with three small children?

Well, she's still living, God bless her, in St. Louis today. And she's over 80. And to know her, is to understand that she's definitely a survivor. How she managed, I can't answer that. I don't know if any of us could have. But she did. She's always been a hard worker and always has been very insistent in whatever it is that she was doing. 0

So at any rate, literally she was fending for herself and working as a tailor in our home. She, as a matter of fact, I understand before the war she had as many as eight men working on sewing machines doing men's clothing.

So she was a professional.

Right. And so she was able to make ends meet. And in fact, I had a very nice living, from what I understand.

So what do you remember? You were born in 1937. What do you remember about your early, early, early childhood? How far back are we going?

I really don't. It's very hazy. It's very-- I just don't remember things technically before the war. My first remembrance is really like being in kindergarten.

You don't remember your father very much?

No, I don't. No.

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That's unfortunate.

It's good and it's bad. I mean the good even is a bad point. But I never knew him. And--

So you can't grieve for somebody that you don't know.

Something like that, although I certainly pray for him, in all the various times that we light our candles in the year, in remembrance of the dead as we do. But on the same token, he's given me, within myself, a feeling that I want to achieve in being a father to my children, like the kind of a father--

He would have wanted to be?

Right, exactly.

So when did he die?

He died in '42 in Auschwitz.

And you have records? You have substantiation of that?

Yes. The Germans were very good at keeping records. And they, I guess, actually we didn't get the information from them. They had the French government send us a letter which my mother has, which says that so and so passed away at such a date in Auschwitz.

Did she get it then in 1941 or '42?

That, I don't really know when she got it. But she was in Paris throughout the war, even though we were--

But we have a picture of you as a baby in Switzerland. So maybe you want to tell us about that.

OK. Actually, before the war, we were sent, my brother and I, were sent to Switzerland, like for summer time, and stuff like that. And we had a very nice time, with very nice people. And I guess the most important thing about that story is the fact that my parents were being told by other friends, leave the children there. Because they could sense war was coming on. It was imminent. And leave the children there. If anything, leave them there and maybe join them. But don't bring them back.

But in those days, people were very hesitant. They didn't believe that what was to come was coming. Nobody believed it. Nobody thought anything of it. They said, oh, no. Well, they'll go to war, or whatever they'll do. The governments will end.

It will pass.

Why should they bother us was everybody's attitude. I mean, let's face it. In previous wars, armies fought armies. Armies didn't fight civilians.

Yes.

And so nobody really thought that anybody was going to bother you. So bring the kids back to Paris. So we came back.

Well, everybody wants normalcy. And--

Right.

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And your parents wanted that too. So you had that memory of Switzerland. And so tell us about your childhood. What happened to you during these war years, or--

Well, the first thing I do remember is that I guess I was in kindergarten.

We do have a kindergarten picture too.

And one day, I guess I'm the--

Where are you?

I'm at the top row, the second one from the right, holding a little--

What are you holding?

Dolly.

I thought was an animal. It's a doll?

Right. I guess we're all holding little Teddy Bears, or horses, and so forth. This school was just two short blocks from our home. But I remember one day that a lady came to get me. And I guess she also got my brother from another higher grade. And she took us home. At one point of interest about this photo is of all those children, I'm the only survivor.

You know that?

And I know that for a fact, even though not all of these kids were Jewish. It's just that the war did take its toll on everybody. But the Jews were heavy victims without a doubt.

But so we were taken back home, and mom told us. She was ill at the time. And probably more ill because of what happened to our father. And she says, this lady is going to take care of you. Go with her. And my mother was going to be put in the hospital. Because she was very ill. And--

What was her problem?

Well, she had a heart problem, probably a broken heart, probably slight-- I don't know. I don't think it was a heart attack. But probably extremely high blood pressure. She was going through a lot of trauma. And she paid this lady quite a lot of money to take us away from Paris and to safety. And very soon thereafter, we were put in an organization which oddly enough had its main office about around the corner from where we lived in Paris. And we lived in the fourth district, which was like between the Hotel de Ville, where Notre Dame is, and the Bastille, a wonderful section of Paris, an old section, and also really in the thick part of the Jewish section, a street called [FRENCH].

But the organization was the OSE which is in French [FRENCH], which means the organization for the safety of children. And for the remaining years of the war, they really were responsible for taking us from one place to another, literally one step ahead of the Germans, one step ahead of the Gestapo. And they were responsible for feeding us, keeping us in health, as far as giving us all these various vaccinations, and keeping us away from trouble, safety as much as could be.

And that safety led us to many, many different kinds of places. We were kept in-- I remember going to castles, various castles, where they had actually moved all their very rich furniture, and tapestry, and other antiques, and all that stuff was put upstairs in above floors. And we were literally living and sleeping on the floors of these castles.

And I remember being in caves, where there was very little light. And all they cared for was safety.

Were you schooled?

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What's that?

Did you have some schooling?

There was some individual schooling when things were very quiet, a little at best. And we were constantly moving. We also stayed in private homes, and one other important ingredient is that we stayed in quite a few churches. We found that the priests, the nuns, the Catholics were very helpful. Many of them were literally staking their very life in danger for our safety.

There was even some time where my brother and I and one other boy was actually taken by a parish, and we melded right in with the other boys, and we were brought in to be part of their normalcy of life. And we actually learned the catechism.

That sounds so similar to Louis Malle's Au Revoir Les Enfants. I presume you saw it.

We saw that movie just a couple of months ago. And it brought a lot of--

Did it bring back--

Yes, yes.

--similar experiences? Of course, you survived fortunately.

And so in order to survive, the only way you can do it really is to be the acceptable person that the times are allowing. You couldn't be yourself. And so this was another part of it.

But at this time, I just want to say that some of these people were just wonderful, and treated us with a lot of love, and a lot of care. And if not for them, I wouldn't be here.

Interestingly enough, I didn't know this till after the war. But my younger brother, because I stayed really with my older brother, Leon throughout the war. My younger brother, Jacques, was separated from us right from the beginning. And it wasn't until 1947 we found him in a convent in the city of Lille, which is Northeast of France, near Belgium.

And we didn't know what was happening to him. He didn't know what was happening to us.

Why were the three of you separated?

Well, I guess because he was that much younger. He was four years younger than me. And at that time, if I was seven he was only three.

So maybe he stayed with your mother a little bit.

Right, right. But interestingly enough, in some of these camps that we were in, the Boche, as we called them in France, it was a very nasty word that the French used for the Germans. Le Boche.

What does it mean?

It just means dirty Germans, as far as the Nazis were concerned. And there were some incidents. I remember one specifically where they came into the camp where we were. And they would come in, and they were always looking for young men, such as we were, young boys, to bring to a youth camp, and make you work, make you grow up to be whatever it is they want you to become, a soldier, or whatever.

Even if you were Jewish?

Oh, yeah. Because at one time, they just wanted people behind the gun. Because a young boy, if you tell him to shoot, he'll shoot, whatever. At the end of the war, they show you films where they had 12, 14-year-olds in the army, and stuff like that. But they were always taken to youth camps. And at one point, I guess I was like six years old. And they wanted six and under, which made my brother seven. That means he was not part of it. And he quickly roused me out of the group, and literally locked me in a bathroom, until they had gotten their quota and left.

So technically, unfortunately, somebody else had to go in my place. But--

But you stayed with your brother.

--once again, I was saved because of my older brother's smarts. You had to be smart. You had to be one jump ahead of things, because you didn't know what was around the corner. And you had to almost smell the situation where you were, as to is this trouble, is this not. Can we go here? Can we not?

So unnatural for little children to be put in that position.

But it's also-- it's very true, but it's also a fact that if you're put into a situation, either you swim or you don't. You sink.

Yeah, survival.

And so there is a factor of survival. And we're all animals. And we all want to survive to some extent. And if you don't, you're just-- you become a number. And I guess we weren't ready to do that.

Now during this time, this was about five years that you were going from place to place, were you in touch with your mother?

Yes. We saw my mother maybe three, or four, or five times during the war. She was mostly in a hospital called Maison Blanche, which is White House, and it was owned by the Rothschilds outside of Paris.

And one of the oddities-- and the only thing that makes sense to me even to today, is that why she's alive is because she was very sick, and always in hospitals. And the Germans always made sure that even in the gas chambers, concentration camps, they only took the healthy ones. If you weren't healthy, they didn't take you in the gas chambers.

And it seems like they left the hospitals alone, and let those people probably become healthy and then start picking at them.

Well, that's this story. We've heard stories where they went in, and just shot everybody in the hospital.

Well, OK. That could be.

So she was very, very lucky.

Very lucky, indeed. And many times I didn't know where we were being taken. All I know is that we do a lot of walking. And all of a sudden you knew were in a building that was with a lot of heavy ether. And you start seeing beds and people. And you'd walk from ward to ward, and all of a sudden, you're up against this one bed. And there's mom. So they didn't tell you where they were taking you, and why they were taking you.

So when you saw your mother, was to visit her in the hospital.

Right. Right.

So these were good people who took you and your brother to visit your mother.

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Oh, yes. Sure. Yeah. And so after that, we just went back and things went on as they were before. I remember one time being in one of the small towns, and periodically things were a little quiet. And they actually would take you down to this downtown area the, [FRENCH], this center of the city. And they had a barber, and they'd give us a haircut.

And I mean most of the time, they give you haircuts behind the forest and whatever. But this time things were seemingly quiet. So they took us. And at that time, I remember wearing the yellow star. I think we had to be six years and older to do that. So, in fact, one thing about the yellow star, I remember my brother was wearing it for at least a year. And at that time, I remember feeling like I was missing something.

Because here he was wearing what he was, and I couldn't do that. I mean it's really a strange kind of thing to say. But once I was finally able to wear it, I felt like I was as good as my brother.

You were accepted.

And that kind of thing, although certainly it was a terrible thing to have to do.

But while you were in the churches and in hiding, in the caves?

Well, no. Sometimes when we were in with the churches, you wouldn't wear them. You'd wear actually their black outfits that all the boys would be wearing the identical same thing. So every boy looked the same.

Right, I should think that they wouldn't want you to wear it too often.

Yeah, right. Right, but the one little story that I've got here is that I remember being under the cover in the barber's chair, with my white star underneath, and of course, he covers me up to do my haircut and all that. And we're there with a bunch of other little guys. But they were younger than me. I was like the older of the group.

And all of a sudden come to Boche. And they're quite loud, as many of them were. And one of them says the next star I see, I'm shooting it.

Ooh. And all of a sudden I realized, I'm the next star, because none of my friends, I was the oldest one. So very quickly, as they realized it was about finished with the haircut, one of the boys started making some noise, a lot of commotion, distracted them, and I quickly removed the thing and ran outside. And they were too concerned with the commotion to realize what was going on. So it's another survival.

Another incident of--

Right, and somebody even younger than me are realizing we've got to do something.

So it sounds like you're always helping each other, and on the constant alert.

Oh, there was a very, very close fraternity of those of us who were together. Now, you'd go from group to group, and city to city, and people would go to the left, others go to the right. They'd separate by age. I'm talking about this organization. And so sometimes you wouldn't see those people anymore. And you'd meet with others, who were just coming this way or going your way.

But you're always with your brother?

Always with my brother Leon. Leon and I were totally together for the entire duration, which was definitely a very big plus, because in many places that we went to, you didn't know who to trust. So at least you had each other to trust.

And you didn't know who was going to-- I mean even if you meet other kids in the street, and they're not part of your group, the first thing they want to do is fight. So at least if you have your buddy system, and Leon was a real good buddy system. He was a strong boy, and willing to fight anybody who was coming, you know, obviously it was around

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his age and stuff like that. So the two of us together within our groups, we were a force to be reckoned.

You were true bonds, strong bonds.

Yeah, very extremely strong bond.

Do you ever keep in touch? Have you ever kept in touch with any of these boys from that time?

No.

I know you were a little but--

No.

I thought perhaps maybe someone surfaced.

No, I never did, although I do remember that when we were in Fontainebleau, a city southeast of Paris, we were there from like 1944 to '47, the reason we didn't go home after the liberation of Paris, although we were in Paris during the liberation, but mom was still not well enough to take us home. We'd come for longer and longer visits. But we were still staying at this place in Fontainebleau, which was a huge villa just on the outskirt.

And it had right in its backyard at the back entrance, it was the beginning of the forest that extended 60 miles to Paris. In fact, right in back there, was still the trenches from World War I, with still shells and ammunition, that type of thing from the First War.

I remember even playing in there after the war. Here we are playing war, and we just went through a war. It seems unreal as I'm sitting here and talking about it. But I remember that-- and I'm jumping a lot of years now-- but I remember that we would have, especially American groups, coming through, as well as Canadian groups. And they would literally-- we'd all be lined up, and they would pick the either boys or girls that they were going to adopt.

It just so happens, even at that time, I didn't even know that my mother was still alive. You didn't know until you met again if she was alive. And so everybody else around us was an orphan. And so these people were being sponsors. They were adopting these children. I remember two particular brothers who were adopted and taken to Canada.

Everybody was totally thrilled for them. This was just to go to America was everybody's dream, one to escape what we had gone through, second to go to the land of gold in America.

And we were hoping to be picked that type of thing, not realizing at that time that mom was still alive. And I still remember even in Fontainebleau, now this is after the war. And we had to walk through the city to go to the school. And where we passed there was actually a very large court, fenced in, and the Germans themselves, the prisoners now, who were prisoners of the American GIs, were in the courts. And we'd always taunt them.

Because this was our way of--

Getting even.

Well, if we could possibly ever get even, a small boy doing whatever to the enemy soldiers. But the one thing I still remember, we were really very jealous one time because here we were walking, certainly we were being fed. But we're not being fed the steaks that these son of a bitches were being fed, because the Americans were treating their prisoners in a humane way, something that these other people didn't know and didn't do. So this is one slight thing that I remember about that.

It's interesting that you do remember that. It must have been a very strong-- Certainly, when you see them holding a healthy piece of meat, a steak, like they are not deserving of that, that type of thing.

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We have a picture of you in the orphanage. Maybe you can tell us where you are.

Oh, yes. Well it's actually a very small photograph. But this is-- we have two friends sitting up on a ramp and I'm leaning up against one of them on the left side, third from the left. And we are actually on the steps of the Chateau Fontainebleau. It's the castle of Fontainebleau, a very famous castle. I believe built by Henry I, and I think Napoleon made history there as well.

In fact, I think he relinquished his flag there or something. But it's very historical, very everything from the kings of France, it was like outside of Versailles, this was the second biggest choice they had in getting away from Paris. And so we were on the steps there. It's like a horseshoe step.

Who took this picture and how did you get it? It looks like it's been through the war.

I don't know. It could have been one of the counselors. And those were happy days, as we're looking at that photo. This is after the war. And you can see the boy on the left is wearing a little-- probably an American GI's hat.

Oh, he is.

That was another thing too. During the war, we were very cautious. We were told not to talk with the soldiers. Of course, we're talking about the Boche, not to have anything to do with them, to run away from them, to just have nothing to do with them. Don't take anything they give you. And they were very famous of giving chocolate that was poison.

And very soon you'd find that your friend ate some of that chocolate, either he had a severe stomach ache, or the next day he died. And so--

Did that happened to anyone in your group?

Oh, yes. Yes, definitely. And so therefore when it became time for the Americans to liberate, and they came around with Hershey bars, we wouldn't take them.

You were very scared.

And it wasn't until we saw that our friends were OK, one or two days later, that we realized this stuff's OK. They are good guys. We'll take it. But you'll go hungry before you take it, and obviously suffer the consequences.

What did you do all day? You didn't have school. I'm talking about during the war years?

Well, first of all, there was a lot of escaping, of getting away from the war itself. The war was constant around you. There were bombings. There was an awful lot of air raids. There were curfews. You'd have to go in caves. If you were in the city, the basements were used for air raids, and you were there for hours. And the worst part about all of that was that you didn't have any lights. People didn't have flashlights. There were no lights in these caves.

And you were led down there with somebody holding a candle. But soon, the candle burnt out. And you had to sit there, be very quiet. Many of the caves were very damp, wet. Some of them had obviously rats and mice running around, and you had to hold your tongue and not breathe heavily, let alone squeal and commit any noise. We heard one noise, and everybody around you would be dead, because the outside, the Boche would know you'd be in there.

The bombings were very, very disturbing, because you never knew when the one that was coming at you. And when I went back home after the war, Paris homes are made so that you live in flats really. And you'd walk through the concierge into a courtyard. And so you'd have four buildings all around you. And our building was the only one that stood. Everything else was demolished down to the ground. And as little boys, of course, we played in there thereafter. But when you think about it as an adult, somehow--

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Somebody got killed in that bombing.

Oh, sure. Sure, there were an awful lot of destruction. And interestingly enough, Hitler loved Paris. And he had given orders not to destroy it or else it would have been a lot worse than what it was. So it's interesting. He had certain likes and dislikes. And that was one of them, the city of Paris.

That's interesting. Because I heard just the opposite, that he wanted Paris destroyed, but one of the Germans--

Oh was that-- well I know there was a--

And as Paris was burning, and as Paris was burning, it came out that one of the Germans just couldn't see that, and rescinded the order.

OK, well maybe my story may be wrong on that. But I know that somebody high up.

But thank goodness, for whatever story it is. Thank goodness that it wasn't totally destroyed. Because I'm sure that was in the plan.

Definitely. The one thing, going back now to the early '40s, like 1941.

Please.

My younger brother Jacques was born in January '41. And one of the things that happened a lot was that, as I said before, the Germans did not come to our home. The French police did. They did the leg work.

The dirty work.

And they'd come and bang on your door, and roust everybody out. And take you to the police station. And at the police stations, the Gestapo was waiting. And what they would do is they'd line you up. They lined the adults up, put the children to the side. And they'd count. And if tonight they'd count 1, 2, 3, 4. And they'd take the fourth one away. And for every fourth one, was to be gone, taken away.

And then everybody else was told, go on home. Now, of course, you thought you were a little smart next time they did it, and of course, when they roust you out, it could be 3:00, 5 o'clock in the morning. They're not there for your convenience.

And so people say, oh, I'm going to be the fourth one in line. But now they're picking every third one, or every fifth one. And they'll get you one way or the other. So there's a lot of luck involved in being able to survive that kind of a silly system which brought death to so many people.

The one time that it really-- that we lucked out, is that at that particular time, my mother was actually picked to be taken away.

Really?

And as any mother would cry out, she did. I guess she had come with me and my older brother. But she had left my baby brother who was in a crib at home. And she says, you can't separate me. I've got a baby at home and all that. And one of the German officers said, if she tells the truth that she has a baby at home, she will go free. This one time.

So they send someone.

And if she's not, she's gone.

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Oh, my goodness.

And so they went back. They took us to our house. And Jacques was there crying in the crib. And they left us to be, and went on to the next order of business.

These stories that--

Many of them, they liked to play games.

Right. It raises the tension.

Yes. Yes. They'd see, there's a curfew. And all of sudden, a little child runs out in the street. A child doesn't know. We're talking under five years old. And Gestapo is walking down with machine guns in hand. And they see a little child running in the street. They shoot him. And of course, the French yell out, why did you shoot that?

It's curfew. He's not supposed to be out there. And a little child doesn't know any better, doesn't know anything about a curfew. But he becomes a victim. That's one of the few wars where people are shooting children just for the hell of it. It's a savage thing.

So if your brother was born in 1941 and you and Leon are taken away, you really didn't get to know him, did you? Not very well.

Well, not during the war. You mean Jacques?

Not during the war.

No, definitely not. Because we were not together. We got to know each other after the war, obviously. It was different life. Everything was changed.

Do you want to tell us something else perhaps of your life during the war?

Well, I'm trying to recall some of the items. And I'm feeling good that I'm able to speak this openly, and that many of the things are coming on in some fashion.

Were you hungry during these years? Do you remember being hungry?

Well, yes. There were many, many, many times we had to share whatever there was, and we-- it's one thing I really commend everybody around us, adults and children, is that whatever there was, it was split. And everybody got a piece of it, and that type of thing. It was never enough, very little meat, if any at all. Many times a soup they've just put a little more water, and thin it out, and you were glad to get party of that.

Did you stay well? Did you have any incidences of--

Well, I think maybe the fact that we did so much walking, they also were very strong and making sure we had calisthenics. Because the one thing, you'd stay in the caves. And your back would hurt, and you'd stay in cellars, where it was damp. And your bones just didn't feel right. So they had us doing a lot of gymnastics, when we could, some running, climbing rope, and stuff. That's in places where we could do those things.

So they really were doing a fantastic job in keeping us healthy, and giving us the shots.

Where did the money come from for this organization?

That I honestly don't know. But I know for one thing that the name Weizmann came--

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Chaim Weizmann? It must have been, that came forth several times, and especially when we were at this camp in Fontainebleau, which also was the main camp for this OSE group that I mentioned before. Probably moneys came from abroad.

Yeah, so probably from Americans and Canadians, because I remember even after the war, we'd get boxes of t-shirts and pants. And we couldn't read what was on. So, it was obviously in English. It might have been Cincinnati, or all these funny looking words that we were not familiar with.

But we all want-- everybody wanted something that said something in American, because there was a pride involved with that. Of course, the American GIs were the heroes. They liberated us. And-- and we were very happy and fortunate that it happened, and to have lived through it.

It's very hard. You have hundreds of little children who are growing, and they have to be kept in clothes and shoes. Now this is an organization, I presume, just kept ahead of what was going on.

Yes, a lot of tying in with the underground, the French FFE, which was the underground which were marvelous young people, men and women, who--

Did you ever meet any of the partisans?

Oh, yes. Yes. And we were in some of their camps as well.

What do you remember about that? Well, I remember them getting in front of you. So that if there was danger, they would take the abuse or the punishment, or the firing rather than you. They realized that so many of their families and compatriots were taken away and were killed or whatever. And they were just going to go down fighting. They just were not going to let it happen that at least they had the weapons, and the savvy, and the togetherness, the brotherhood.

And they were going to do whatever damage they can, I mean to some extent at times it was like a mouse biting the foot of an elephant, as far as power was concerned. But little by little, a lot of sabotage was going on. And they were slowing down the machinery of the enemy. And unfortunately, the Germans in turn were doing reprisals. For each one German dead, they'd kill 10 French Jews, or 100 Frenchmen, or whatever. And this was tough to swallow.

But on the same token, you felt you had to keep doing what you had to do. I remember as a young boy, my brother and I would talk. And we'd say, if we only could have a gun, at least we'd shoot them if we saw them, that type of thing. Well probably as a little boy, you couldn't do it. But at least you had the--

You had that feeling.

--that urge. You had that wanting of--

Well, you knew your normal you knew your life for whatever normalcy it was, was disrupted.

Oh, sure.

You weren't in a house with normal kinds of activities. You were on the run all the time.

Well that too, being as young as I was, I didn't know what a normal house was. And--

Oh, you did. You had a few years of your family.

Right.

Very few.

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But I was an infant. So whether the subconscious remembers that or not, all I remember was going from city to city, and having war all around me, having soldiers all around me. I thought that was normal.

You thought that was, right.

I mean you go down the streets of Buffalo. You don't see soldiers all over. You're lucky if you go downtown and meet a policeman on the corner, you know? So there it's a different form of authority.

Do you remember liberation? I remember liberation day very well. We happened to be visiting in Paris. One of the things that was happening is that at that time, we were actually staying with a family. I remember the name Barel. That was the last name of the family. They were very, very brave. The father was I think an electrician. He had a shop in Paris. In back of that is where they lived. And in back of that there was a little shack, and this where they kept my mother and my brother and I.

And there were quite a few times when the Germans came in the store and inspected, and really fished through the whole place. But for some reason never got as far back as where we were. And we'd have to hide down there and get under the mattress, and swallow your breath, and hope that they'd go away soon. And each time, they did. And I remember they had a young boy about 18, who was always riding a motorcycle. Of course, in Paris, you didn't own a car. You were lucky if you had a motorcycle.

And I remember riding on the back of his motorcycle in Paris with him. And they had a home outside of Paris. And they would take us there a couple of times I remember. That's like getting away from the tension. But we could only stay there for so long, because there were certain times when we could get back in, and not be seen and not be taken away. And these people literally by--

They saved you.

--keeping us, saved us. Sure. There were wonderful Gentile folks, which again, who again put their life on a limb. I mean if the authorities, if the Germans knew that they were doing that, they'd be dead right on the spot.

And at this time your mother left the hospital, and she was together with you?

At this time we were together, for this one time.

With your little brother?

I can't place-- no, not with my--

Not with the little one.

Not the younger brother. wasn't there yet. This was still like near the end of the occupation, but not-- because I remember mother was with us during the liberation in '45.

Are you in touch with the Barel family, or was your--

Never saw them again, never saw them again. I wish I did. I wish I could.

Yes. Sure.

Right now I'm in the midst of trying to do some research, and having the French government, the consulate, doing some research on some of the things we're talking about, some of my family that's still there.

I know I have one uncle. My father's brother is alive, and he has two children. And we're hoping that maybe somehow we'll get in touch.

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It would be quite wonderful.

Oh, it would be--

A new family.

--to me, it'd be a miracle, if this were to happen. I've never been back. That's something else that I'm--

Do you want to go back?

Right now, I'm at a point where I'm actually itching to go back. I-- we, my wife and I, we've wanted to go back many times. We always kept saying our 5th anniversary, 10th anniversary, and so forth. But we just have never made it.

But you will now, because you really--

I have the urge, and she knows it too. And we're going to do it, especially since our youngest is now in college, and so they're pretty much on their own. So that means we have more free time. And one of these vacations it's going to happen.

But she's going to college right now. So I can't interfere with that. So maybe after she graduates or something like that.

Your wife?

Yeah, my wife. Yes I'm-- right now I'm living with a college girl. Because she's going to school.

Good. Let's go back to liberation. Tell us about it.

I don't remember all that much. What I do remember is the overflowing of excitement, the people in the streets, the flag, the French flag, and the American flag, and the English flag being raised, and flying all over the place. And one of the main reasons I remember that more than anything else, is because we were at the Place de la Bastille, for that celebration. And my brother Leon got injured. He very silly, like went underneath one of the swinging boats, one of the rides, that was going on.

And we were like almost next in turn. And he ran trying to get in the boat, and the boat was still swinging and hit him over the forehead, and we had to all of a sudden during liberation time, look for a doctor, that type of thing. So that's one of the reasons why that day is very clear in my mind. But a lot of parading, a lot of hoopla, and--

And good feelings.

A lot of good feelings, also some nasty stuff going on. But we didn't feel it was nasty. Those who collaborated were dragged out of their homes. The women's hair were cut off, spit upon, throwing anything you want.

You remember that?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. But it was like the day had finally come. It was our turn to in one fell swoop to do something, to release the tension that was built in for all these years.

You certainly suffered enough.

We have a picture here of, I think you told us 1948. Yes.

This is a family reunion?

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Well, I think it was actually a picture we took, so we could send actually to Buffalo. We were in the midst of-- there is my younger brother, Jacques on the bottom left. I'm on the bottom right. My brother Leon is obviously behind me, and my mother. And the gentleman behind Jacques is actually-- was soon to become my stepfather. He had-- he was also born in Cologne, Germany. He had gone to school with my father. And so my mother knew him from before the war.

And she actually bumped into him after the war. And he had been liberated. He was in the French army. And he was a prisoner of war for four years And--

He suffered as a prisoner of war?

He was definitely a victim, as you can see from his right hand, he had a middle finger missing. And his insides were pretty well messed up. His intestines and stomach couldn't take much food, even though my mother was cooking all day long. She'd give him five meals a day, and he never gained an ounce. And he was really heavily affected by the war.

Psychologically?

Psychologically, nervously. We were after the war, we would be going to school, and at night he wouldn't allow us to have a light on to study. And he was very adamant about it. And he felt the bombs were coming. The enemy, the Boche were coming, and stuff like that. So shut off all the lights. Close the curtains. And so he was living that nightmare for the rest of his life, technically till he died. So but he was really down deep a very wonderful man. And my mother brought him back to health, and fed him a lot, and gave him a lot of TLC.

And we found out that he had a family in Buffalo, two brothers and his parents were in Buffalo. And we started writing. I personally was writing to them in French, of course. I couldn't write English. We didn't know a word of English. And somebody here obviously had to translate. And after about six months of that sort of stuff, he got a letter from them. And we took it to French consul, I think to read what was being said.

And his parents wanted to bring him back to Buffalo, get him away from all the atrocities he had experienced. And by the second or third letter she said, why don't you bring Hannah, my mother, back with her children? They've been good enough to help you. Let us help them.

And so we found out that the only way it could happen is if they married. And so they went through the ceremony. And then we went through the procedure which took over five years.

Five years?

To get the papers, the visa to come to the US. Although at the time, we were eager enough to leave Europe, that we also went to the Canadian consulate. We went to the Israeli consulate. And we figured whichever one gives us the visa first. That's where we'll go.

We figured if we go to Toronto, and come down to Buffalo, that's something which a lot of Europeans did who are in the US. We also had a great desire to go to Israel at the time, because even late in the war, even though we were going through what we were going through, we were listening to high-powered radios that some of our consuls had, some of the underground people had. And they were giving us the actual radio contact from Israel dealing with the war there for independence.

And my brother and I at that time kept talking. He said, we come out of this, we're going to Israel. We're going to join the Haganah. And we're going to fight for the Jewish cause. And so all of a sudden, this was part of our way of believing.

It just so happens that the visa to the US came. And we came here in 1950.

1950?

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So you were 12 years, 13 years old?

Yeah, I was bar mitzvahed two weeks later.

How was that? What do you remember about coming to America?

Oh, it was really quite an exciting trip, especially I mean, we can go back to the point where we're leaving Paris. Because we're supposed to go up to Le Havre, and then take the maiden voyage of the LibertÃ©, the grand old ship of France. Except we're all on the train and just about 10 miles outside of Paris, they abrupt halt. And to make a long story short, they had a strike, and they took everybody back to Paris. And we're stranded, because everything we owned had been sent out to the ship.

Oh my goodness.

And so they put us up in a hotel for a couple of days. They wanted to fly us to New York and Buffalo. But Leon said, no. He was scared. So we didn't. So they eventually told us there'd be a ship out of Naples, Italy. So we took an all night train, went there. And the ship was supposed to leave the next day. Well, it took us a month and a half to leave Genoa. So we had a wonderful time in Italy.

And then the ship was supposed to take six days across the Atlantic. It took 14.

What ship was this? 14?

It was the SS Saturnia, a very grand ship from Italy. And because of World War II, I guess the Italian line had some kind of a contract and they went up to Halifax, Canada, before we came back down to New York. And I remember very well entering New York Harbor. We all were running up to be at the top on the top deck. And it was cold, February. And it was first time I really saw everything frozen. Because Paris really has mild winters compared to what New York City showed us that day.

But there was the Statue of Liberty. And then we inched our way to Ellis Island. And I guess that was probably one of the last groups in 1950. Because I think Ellis Island closed down in '52. It was a long, long line just even within the boat to finally get on to the Ellis Island system, where you were just waiting in line for the longest time.

And then you had to go through a health examination?

Oh, Yes. Yes, well the real arduous difficult thing to go through to come to the US happened in Paris, because we had maybe a dozen visitations to the consulate, American consulate, where they checked your records, your family, as well as your health records. And really if you were not healthy enough, you were not a candidate.

So I was the one who was kind of leading. I was like a little lawyer, they told me, being the spokesman for my family. My mother really couldn't speak French that well. She was from Poland, originally.

Oh, she spoke Yiddish.

She spoke a beautiful Yiddish. But to speak to the American people, we needed to speak English, or at least a good French, at least to communicate. So I was the one that was doing it. And it seems like it's a role that I just took naturally. Like nobody else wants to be the leader. Well, I was the leader. And I enjoyed it. I met some wonderful people.

And people-- and the family, in Jacob's family, your stepfather's family, was waiting for you?

Yes, in Buffalo. In fact, an interesting thing, it kind of explains a little bit how people think, especially in Europe. In order for my mother to-- my mother always gave gifts. And one particular girl in the American consulate was very helpful. And my mother felt without her we couldn't have gotten here. So she went out to one of the big boulevard boutiques, and bought her a very expensive gabardine, as we call it now. It's probably comparable to your London Fog

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today.

And she gave her the present. The lady opened it up. And she says, oh, I'm sorry. I can't take this. And the reason she couldn't take it is the color was red. And in those days, even after the war, anything your wore that was red, meant you were a communist.

Oh.

So we quickly took that, went back to the store, bought her back a beige or whatever. But see, now that the Nazi regime is over, now we start dealing with the Communist regime. And that's one of the reasons why we as a family felt we had to-- it was time to leave Europe. Most people say, oh, the war is over. Well, one was, and another one was starting to begin, which was obviously the Cold War, which was beginning in earnest.

Because actually if you study the history, even of World War II, and even the liberation of Paris, there was a war going on within the Allies that between even the Russian and Americans, whoever came first in that Township or in that country, was controlling that country. So everybody was like hoping the Americans would get here and so forth and so on.

Well East Berlin and--

Sure, exactly. So it was really a very wonderful time when we finally said good--

Good timing. Marcel, we have to sum up, and before we see the picture of your family, is there anything that you want to say in conclusion, any message, anything to--

Well, yes. Probably the very reason why I'm here talking, I haven't really talked about this. In fact, if my very adult children when they see this on videotape, will not have heard any of these stories. This will be the first time. And I think the reason I'm here tonight, it's finally become my time to speak about it. I went to this year's Yom HaShoah services. And it really, this particular one touched me very deeply for some reason. They had a children's choir.

I saw some of the friends that I've known for many years. And something just got inside of me and say, don't keep it inside of you. It's time to talk about it. And this is why I'm here really. For many years, I always felt these were atrocities. They were bad times. Nobody wants to know your tsuris, we say. Nobody wants to know your troubles.

And don't tell them bad stuff, only tell them good stuff. But at least if it's on record, if somebody can benefit about my one story, by the way, there's a million stories just like mine. They have different variations, but also many similarities. And I'm one of the lucky few.

And I do. I feel very lucky. And that's why maybe I'm not such a materialistic person as many other people seem to be, that so many other things seem to be important. The big thing that's important to me is life, and love, and caring for other people, and being good to other people.

And your family, and I think it would be appropriate to conclude with a picture of your priority.

Yes, this is my loving family. My wife, obviously in the center, and my three sons. On the left is Daniel, Jeremy, and David. And Daniel on the left is presently engaged to be married in October to Ellen. And on the right is Carol, who is with David in San Francisco. And this was two years ago at our 25th anniversary. And that picture represents my heart. This is my dearest family. Of course, my brother, and mother in St Louis, we get together once or twice a year. But to me, this is my material thing.

Thank you very much, Marcel.

Thank you for having me.

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Thank you.

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