

Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back. And I am the Director of the Holocaust Resource Center in Buffalo. We are at Channel 4. And it's November 15, 1990. Our guest today is David Dattner, formerly of Poland. David, will you tell us about your life in Poland?

I was born in end of November 1908. And I was five years old when the World War I started. And our father, who was at that time-- was drafted. First, he was working in a factory in Bielitz, Bielsko in Polish. But later on, a year later, you know, he was sent to the front, the Russian front.

To the Russian front as a soldier.

And unhappily, he was killed in 1916. And at this time, we were eight children, seven boys and one girl.

We have a picture of that. Maybe you'll show us-- and we'll see the picture and tell us about your brothers and sister. Look at the picture and describe and give us their names and their ages and tell us about your family.

All right. My oldest brother Natan was a junior in high school at the time when this picture was taken.

This is 1916.

1916, August 1916. And mother wanted to send this picture to our father on the front, on the Russian front. And second is Leo, who lived in Buffalo since 1920. And the third is Jacob. And the other brother was Bruno, living now in Israel. The next brother is Joseph, who lives in Toronto, Canada. And number six boy in the row, that's myself.

And then we had a sister, Hilda, three years younger, and the brother Adolf at the time, during Austrian times. And now, his name, he changed it to Alexander.

And where does he live?

At this time is three years-- he lives now in Toronto.

In Toronto. And how many of these children survived World War II?

The two oldest brother came to America in 1920, Nate and Leo. And the next five brothers survived the war in Poland.

And you'll tell us about that. And the little sister, what happened to the little sister?

My sister got killed by the Germans, and so did my mother.

All right, so let's continue on. Your father was killed in World War I. And your mother is left with all these children. And how does she manage?

That's almost like American. We knew at the early age that everyone had to help. In fact, for instance, the older brother would help the younger brother. Now, at age 16, in 1918, after Armistice Day, my brother had a brother in Teschen, Cieszyn, which was half of the city was in Poland and half in Czechoslovakia. She sent me to bring home some flour, a 10-year-old--

10-year-old boy. How far away was that?

This was about, oh, 45 miles away.

It was quite a responsibility.

Yeah. But had to change trains also. And those trains, they had outside stair, not like here, the Pullman, you

know? So I had to hold on with my heavy load.

And you remember that well.

In fact, there was a river dividing Bielsko and Biala, the Biala River. There was an inspection. And at the inspection, I was allowed to go through and go to the next step to catch the train. They were asking me, what do you have? I said, flour. Who's it for? No. Then they asked me, are you going to sell it to the Jews? I said, uh-uh, this is for us.

Oh, they didn't know you were Jewish.

No.

And that was forbidden, was that it? Or was just--

I mean--

Discriminatory. Now, when your two older brothers went to America, did they send money back to the family to help out?

No, they couldn't yet. They were too young yet. They had no language, you know. And one brother was sick, and--

So tell us about your life after World War I.

Life in Poland, we were lucky. We were living in the mountains. We had the beautiful mountain river. So there was swimming. We played tennis. We went skiing. I started to ski at age 14 in 1922.

We have a picture of that geographical area. Maybe you'll tell us about that picture.

Yeah, this picture is taken-- this, in the front, is-- there are some brothers. In front is my youngest brother. This was taken about 1934 on top of one mountain, Pilsko. That's in the mountain range of Beskids, which continue later to the east, to Tatra and later the Carpathian Mountains, go far east. So we had a wonderful time.

The story about skiing in 1922, my older brother brought home from Bielsko to Zywiec some rental skis. And when he was in school, you know, I grabbed the skis and go out skiing.

Oh, so you practiced and that's how you learned.

That's how it started you know.

I see.

Later on, I told my brother, I found an ash tree in some neighborly big garden, you know. And I asked my brother if he couldn't try to buy this tree. He did. And we chopped down the tree and we made our own skis for the whole family.

Oh, my goodness.

That's how we could afford it.

That's how you afford it. Did your mother ski too?

No.

But how did your mother manage with so many children? Did she--

Just telling you, everybody helped.

Everybody helped. Everybody pitched in. Now, did you go to school?

Yes.

Was it a public school or a Jewish school?

In the first four years it was German school, during Austria. 1918, Poland became into being again. So then we went to Polish schools.

Did you get a Jewish education too?

Yes, in cheder--

You went to a--

--at a early age, but--

And you had a bar mitzvah, I presume.

No, we didn't have because we were orphans.

Oh. And the community couldn't take care of that?

I mean without a father, you know.

So that was a poor community.

My oldest two brothers were bar mitzvahed.

Because the father was still alive. Now, you told me that you were employed as a young engineer. Do you want to elaborate on that?

Yes. After I graduated, it's a short vacation, a week. And then through the school, I found out that there was an opening in a rubber factory in Wolbrom. So I suddenly grabbed it and--

And what kind of work did you do?

I was an engineer between the offices and the manufacturing.

And what happened when the depression came?

No, I was there not too long, about three or four months. And then in Upper Silesia, where my brother was, my brother Bruno, who is now in Israel, I tried to get in into this big steel mill. So finally, when I got the job, I just gave them notice. And I went to-- this was in Wielka [? Hajduki, ?] near Katowice. And we were living--

And what year are we talking about now?

The year was 1928.

So you lived there?

I lived together with my brother.

And you were 21 years old then.

Right.

You were very young.

And then came the Depression. It started in '29. And somehow because I was less expensive help, I stood on the job till '32.

Oh, they kept you-- until 1932.

1932.

And then what happened in--

And then I was unemployed but not-- went home-- and not too long because I started to find something or create something. And since I was an amateur photographer, I got a job in a photo shop, where they had darkroom, was making enlargements, and started to deal in cameras, you know.

And that was your major occupation then?

For one year.

And what happened after that?

During one lunch hour while I was on this job, I had some ski boots, improved ski boots, which my brother, being home, improved. And I went to a sporting goods store, to a big one, and got an order for 100 pairs of shoes. And this all of a sudden, we would become manufacturers, wholesalers. And I started to open up stores. Incidentally, before this one winter season was over, we delivered to this one store 800 pairs of shoes.

And you had your own factory--

But not only--

--then?

No, we were farming out everything to shoemakers, give them the materials, you know.

So you became an entrepreneur.

Right.

And there were not only ski shoes, but the fellow, the owner of the sporting goods store, gave me samples of skating boots also, skate shoes.

Skate shoes.

So we manufactured those. And we delivered 800 pairs of shoes, everything.

My goodness, for such a young man. Now about this time you get married, don't you?

No, not yet.

Not yet.

Not yet.

But we have a picture of your mother at a resort. Maybe you can tell us about this picture.

Yeah, since we were living on a mountain river, we were also kayaking. Those boats were called Faltboot. That means collapsible boats--

Collapsible boats.

--where you make packages out of it while you go by train. In those days, we didn't have cars yet, you know.

No.

And we would assemble the boat, go down river, sometimes for three or four days expedition. It was just beautiful. And go back by train with those packages.

And this picture was taken in 1936 where my mother was vacationing. My mother on the left side. So we visited.

Now tell us about all the people in the picture.

On my left side is my youngest brother, Alexander, my mother, myself, my wife, Ella.

Are you married already?

Not yet. No.

No.

Not yet.

And where is your wife from?

My wife is from Zywiec also.

So you were--

We grew up together.

You grew up together.

Same age. And to the right is my mother's friends. They were vacationing together.

So you're visiting. You and your fiancée, or your girlfriend, are visiting your mother and little brother, is that it?

No, the brother was also--

Oh, visiting--

--in a Faltboot with another friend. We usually were quite a few boats, you know. There were quite a few of those so-called Volksdeutsche in Bielitz also.

Ah, so they were interested--

We worked together. Yeah, and it was a beautiful spot.

So you had a good childhood and a good young--

We were playing tennis, hiking in the mountains, skiing.

And when do you get married, David? What year did you get married?

We get married In 1936.

1936. I think we have a picture of you taken shortly after you were married, another picture here. And maybe you'll tell us about this picture.

This picture was taken in 1938. Our son is one-year-old. My wife's parents and my wife's oldest sister--

In the background is your wife's oldest--

In the background, my wife's sister and her son. All except-- I mean, my wife and my son are only survivors. My wife's parents, her sister, and her son got killed by the Germans, and so did another sister and a daughter also, who was living in Bielsko.

And where were they killed? Were they taken to concentration camps?

Yes.

And--

They were killed in Debica. It's between Kraków east towards Lwów.

And how do you know? Do you have proof of-- how did you trace that?

My one brother was in Kraków with whom they were always in touch, my brother who is now in Israel.

And he--

Yes.

--heard about their execution? Is that they were killed, is that it?

Yes.

All right, so it's 1938. We're moving along. And the next year, the Nazis come into your hometown. So does that change your life at all when the Nazis came to Poland, September 1?

Very much so.

So tell us about it.

All right. My brother Bruno, who was living in Wielka [? Hajduki, ?] and he rented an apartment in Kraków just about a week before World War I--

World World II--

World War II broke out. So their wives-- he had two children, small ones. They are all now in Israel. So we were running from Bielsko-- I send my wife and my son also two days before the war broke out to Kraków. So she was with my brother. And when the war broke out, on the second day, I took off on a bike from Kraków to-- no, from Bielsko to Kraków.

How far away is that?

It's about 70 miles.

So that was several days?

No, this was one day and overnight. The next day, morning, I was in Kraków bicycling all--

All the time. You were in good shape. And did you feel that being in Kraków was safer than being in your hometown?

While we were in Kraków, it didn't take long, just around noon or in the afternoon, you know. Everything got itchy and people started to run also. So we had an idea. We saved some-- we had a store in Katowice also, a sporting goods store.

A sporting goods stores.

We had three stores in three cities. So some of those kayaks, those--

The collapsible boats.

Collapsible boats, we had an idea we would be escaping on the Vistula, on the river.

Yes.

And when we got with some belongings to the River Vistula to find out that the water level was very high. And with little children, Bruno's son was only 10 months old. And their maid and our maid was with us. We turned back. And we tried to get on a train.

And on this train, we were my brother's family, wife, two children and the maid, my wife, and our son, and our maid. We were six days and six nights in this boxcar.

And where were you going?

East.

East. Did you have a direction?

East from Kraków.

Did you know where--

Just east to run away from the Germans.

And did you have to wear identification? Did you have to--

No.

No yet, it was too early.

At this time, we were not under the German yet.

So you went east. And after six days, where did you finally land? Where did you finally go?

We wound up at Jaroslaw. And the reason we got off the train-- those trains were standing more than moving.

Than moving.

And in front of us, bombs were falling. They were bombing the railroad tracks, you know. And it was very, very close. So we decided to get out in Jaroslaw.

Luckily, we rented with some peasant people outside the city because it didn't take much longer, maybe three or four hours later, the Nazis were rolling into the city.

Into that city.

And whichever city they conquered, at night they got Jews out and just killed them. And they killed 600 Jews in Jaroslaw that first night.

And you knew about that?

Originally, we didn't know because we were away. In fact, the next morning when we got up-- so the women went to the kitchen, wanted to make something warm for the little kids-- there were some Germans in front of the kitchen window in the backyard.

So you continued--

They were bombarding over us.

I see.

And they were waiting.

Now, what did you do for food and provisions? Did you take money with you?

Luckily, my brother Bruno had some money. And my sister-in-law took whatever we could take with us. We even talked to those Germans. The German was terrible. I could hardly understand them.

Where were they coming from if their German was so bad?

From all different parts. Some Germans don't understand other Germans.

Maybe they weren't educated either.

Some-- no, some dialects.

Oh, the dialects.

There were some different dialects in some villages, you know.

So here you are after six days and the Germans are coming in. And what do you do then?

Luckily, we were away from the city. It was a nice garden where the kids would play.

You rented a house? Is that what you did?

Yes.

And was it considered like farmland? You said you were with peasants.

Yeah, this was-- I mean farmland, yes, outside. And we had to wait because there were no trains going back. So the Germans overtook us. And, you know, what the irony is that within 2 kilometers there was the River San which became later the border between German occupied Poland and Russia.

Russian, I see. I see. Now, how long did you stay there? What was your life like?

We stayed about, oh, two weeks or so.

And then?

Till they repaired the railroad tracks. And then we tried to go back to Kraków. There was, again, the Juden verboten to use the train.

Jews were forbidden.

So we were not Juden.

Did you have false papers?

Pardon me.

Did you have false papers?

No, at this time, no. It was--

You just said you weren't Jewish.

This is was in the very beginning.

So you went back to Kraków?

Back to Kraków.

Oh, my, what a back and forth with all these people. And what was Kraków like at that time?

Kraków wasn't too damaged because there was no fight. You see, the Polish army, the orders were always retreated mostly, mostly. One of my brothers was in office in the Polish army, Jacob the one in Florida. So he wasn't too well when the war broke out. He had like paratyphus. It was very weakened, you know. And he was in the artillery. And they took him just the same. He fell off the horse twice.

Because he was so weak.

And he was the one who told his colleagues, come on, let's fight. No, orders were retreat. So they were retreating.

So in Kraków, [PAUSES] it wasn't easy. But my mother was still in Zywiec and my sister. And Ella's parents were also in Zywiec.

And somehow we were looking for a way to see if it would be possible to move the families on the Russian side, under the Russians. So my brother, who was in the army, and my brother Bruno couldn't make up his mind if he should leave the family, you know. But this brother, a friend of his, of ours, and myself, the friend bought the horse and buggy in Kraków, and we took off for Lwów, east.

Oh, you went east again.

To try to find a way later for the families to come.

Oh, so just the two men went, is that it? Not the whole family.

Right. Just the men. My wife went to Zywiec with our little son. And so it took us eight days to reach Lwów. And we had to cross a border again, a river.

So the fellow, the owner of the horse and buggy, he went and found an easier way to cross with the buggy, right. And my brother and I, we were wading through the river. It was already the second half of October.

So it was cold.

And a Russian soldier on the other side was just waiting for us, so for interrogation. It took about half a day.

They thought you were spies or Germans?

No, interrogation. So all kinds of questions. And one of the questions was, were you are an officer in the Polish army? And my brother luckily said, no. I don't know if you know this story about Katyn.

Oh, the massacre of the officers.

The mass grave of 10,000 Polish officers massacred in the woods of Katyn.

By the Russians.

That's where my brother would have wound up.

That was fortuitous.

I don't know, I have a cousin, first cousin once removed, her father, when I was little, came to visit us during World War I. He was an officer in the Austrian army. When Poland became into being in 1918, he was an officer in the Polish army. And he got murdered in Katyn.

It was terrible.

Rita Sharp, Rita, Steve Sharp, Steve was with Chrysler. He was on the board of Chrysler. He was a vice president, the right hand of Iacocca.

Oh, that's an interesting story. So you're there. And you're interrogated. And what happens next then?

All right, then they let us go. So we continued to Lwów.

And did you think that you would settle the families in Lwów.

Under the Russians, they were just the registering always for something, and nothing ever happened. The Russian soldiers, they were getting to those stores where they could buy things. They couldn't buy a thing in Russia. Things were very bad.

Like for instance, I had a Polish Gentile friend from Zywiec. He was a doctor. He was also running east. And then I met him in Lwów. And he was on his way back to the German side. And he had a nice Tissot watch--

A Tissot watch then--

--with a black face. And I ask him, would you sell it to me? You are going on the other side. There's no problem. You can buy it over there easily. And I bought the watch for him. And from the profit, I could live one month.

So that's what you did.

And there were stores with woolen materials from Bielitz, Bielsko.

From the textile place.

There were long lines to buying it and sell it later on the black market. That's how I made a living.

That's how you survived. So you came back from Lwów to your family, is that what happened this time?

Then-- all right, we didn't accomplish a thing. Then, in December, I had some young people, smugglers, who were going back and forth. And they were going to Zywiec, our hometown, you know. And they kept me informed what's going on.

They came back once in December and told us that they annexed this part of Poland to Germany. And all the Jews had to leave this annexed part of Poland within two hours, just to take a suitcase and go to--

That would be your family then.

And this was my mother and sister and my wife and little boy--

The baby--

--and father-- and her father and mother too. They came to Kraków. Now, I was in Lwów under the Russians. But when I found this out, I decided to go back.

So there was some other young gentleman, Jewish fellow, from Bielsko, he wanted to go too. In the last minute, he got cold feet.

You're doing a lot of back and forth. So now you're back in Kraków.

I had to smuggle myself again back on the German side.

And how did you do that?

I was very lucky. I came to a little village. The name was Uhnów, U-H-N-O-W. And it was winter. It was just December 31. And it was pitch dark already. We had the sled from the railroad to this village. But I didn't want to go to the village. I was afraid.

In the meantime, there were two other Jewish youngsters. And they came along with me. So I paid him. And then we walked to the village. It was pitch dark. There was no light anymore.

And I somehow got to a Jewish family and asked them you could stay overnight, you know? Absolutely not. Death penalty for strangers, harboring strangers.

Even though they knew you were Jewish?

Right.

And they were Jewish.

And they were Jewish.

And all I wanted to just on the floor and just a warm place. But he told me there is a synagogue. And we had to find our way somehow. We got to the synagogue in this little place. And they were just starting the services.

So there's is a young fellow-- he looked to me like eight years old, but he told me he was 13 years old-- sat next to us and asked questions, what are you doing here? I told him, I have my wife and kids on the other side. I would like to smuggle myself on the other side.

So he gave me an advice, which was very, very, valuable.

Very?

Valuable.

Valuable.

He told me, look, after the services, you stay here. At midnight, there will be inspection here. The Russian soldiers will come. And when they ask you what you are doing here, tell them that you came from the German side for some reason. You know what I mean? And that's what I-- and they will send you back. [LAUGHS]

Oh, they'll send you back. Oh, so that's how you got back. I see.

Now, sure enough, those two youngsters were hanging on with me already. And at 12:00 midnight, there was inspection. So the soldiers took us to a house, where the whole interrogation would start again.

Well, while we were there, there were all kinds of people. There was an elderly woman with the grandchild going back and forth. There was a couple. There was all kinds of different people.

And I tell you-- and those-- yeah, there's one thing what I did when I tried to smuggle myself, I bought a loaf of bread so I would have something with me. All those people had loaves of bread. And they interrogated all the people, and looking all over what they have and so on, and ask them also, is there something in the bread? No, no, no, absolutely not-- those two fellows were also interrogated before me-- absolutely not.

They cut it. And they found in each of the six breads cut before me there was something. They confiscated it.

You mean gems?

Yeah. This old woman with the child to camouflage smuggling. And an elegant couple also smugglers, you know. And then I came.

So they didn't trust you either then?

Well, and they asked me all kinds of questions. Do you have money? I said, yes, I have a little money. I showed it here in my belt. But they didn't asked me to show it to them.

And I also had the bread. They asked me, is there something in the bread? I said, no. They didn't cut it. And there was nothing there. [LAUGHS] Can you imagine--

That is--

--how smart those fellows were?

Very strange, and the irony of it all. So you got back to your family now because they sent you back East.

So it two hours this whole interrogation. And then they gathered all of us together. It was 2 o'clock in the morning, in the night. Nearby was the bridge of the brook to cross. This was the border.

And I was afraid, we will fall in the hands of Germans. So I didn't want to continue on the highway. And I took off into the fields, and those two guys behind me. So we going in open field in winter in shoes like this.

And then we come again to a brook. So back, you know, and I jumped. I made it. The second guy after me, he just about made it, got a little wet. But the third one right in the water, got all wet.

And it was cold. And this froze later. And every step we made, it was like--

You heard the frozen water.

And at one point, I could make out the highway from the trees, far away. We had a big flashlight coming in our direction. Oh, did we take off further into the fields and made a big.

And we got to some village. Nobody would open. Finally, we found the place. They let us in. So we stayed for the rest of the night.

And then we made plans to get to a railroad. So the fellow with this horse and sled was preparing. And he gave me some peasant coat with the fur inside with the-- looked like a peasant. And those two guys, they look too much like Jewish. We hid on the big sled and covered them with straw.

And at one point, we are going towards Zamosc, the city to catch the railroad. At one point, I noticed that the guy turning some other direction. Oh, with some strong voice, I asked him, hey, where are you going? So he turned.

Oh, so he was going to detour.

They were being paid for--

So when did you finally reunite with your family?

It took me about five days to get to Kraków.

Oh, my goodness.

But I got them. And I found them.

And then what did you do after that? Did you go into hiding then?

No, not yet. No. Then the thing came up with the armbands.

Oh, you had to wear your identification.

When I was alone, you know, I never wore the armbands. Only when I was with my wife and child, I didn't want to take a chance.

So what were conditions like in Kraków under the Nazis?

Just to tell you a little story, it was March. And we were-- Richard was in the carriage, my wife-- and I somehow walked a little ahead. And there was the main post office in Kraków. And there were some German soldiers in front. And the sidewalks were icy. And I had my armband on.

So they wanted me to chop the ice. I said, look, I am here with my wife and my child, in German.

That was a little chutzpadik of you.

What?

That was chutzpadik of you.

That's right. So the guy again, you know, and so on. Finally, it wasn't until-- he was an elderly soldier. Finally, he was reaching for his, you know-- so he was trying to hand me this. So I started to chop this.

Then I went to him and asked him, all right-- and then they tried to catch others too. I asked him, how much do I have to do? So he showed me from over there, you know, and so. So I took this pick, instead of

chopping, I started forcibly to raise it. And I was done in no time.

Then he comes to me and tells me, gee, I never knew that you could work like this. I said, if I want to work, I can work.

[LAUGHTER]

It was taking a big chance there.

My wife got all pale when he was--

So how long did you stay in Kraków before you left?

Till we arranged that we were hidden.

And what year was this? What year did you go into hiding?

In '42.

So you were in Kraków for what? A year, two years?

Over a year.

A year. And that must have been hard. How did-- you didn't work then.

Luckily-- no, we tried to whatever. Luckily, my brother had some-- he was in the wholesale wine business.

Wine?

Wine. And he had a big customer in Kraków, Gentile people. They were extremely nice to him, very nice. And he had some good friends, also the inspector, because they were handling Hungarian wines. The owner of this was Hungarian. And they have a duty free sellers in Wielka [? Hajduki, ?] distribution for Poland. So they were very nice, advised him and everything, and give him money, extremely--

But there was a chance to go in hiding. So we did. My brother later was in the ghetto. And he was working. And the people were very nice. And my mother was living with my brother and my wife's mother too. And when things got really bad, when they took away my mother and his wife's mother, he got somehow tipped off to leave the ghetto. So they went to Warsaw.

And how long did they stay in Warsaw until the--

They were over there the rest of the war.

In hiding?

No, not in hiding. Living as-- his name, he changed his name from Bruno Dattner to [? Frantisek ?] [? Czechwin ?]

Oh, but as a Pole then.

As a Gentile, yes.

Yeah. Well, tell us about you and Ella and Richard. Where did you go? What did you do?

All right I later-- those people were extremely nice. We helped them. And when the Russians came and liberated, so we were lucky. Ella's brother was in the travel business. So he helped us, and we got to Cuba.

No, but wait a moment, where are you in hiding in Poland?

In the peasants, in Zywiec, near Zywiec.

And how long are you in hiding there?

About two years.

Two years. And you have to pay them for being in their house?

Yeah, we did some work.

And how far from the city was this farm?

This was farmland already, not too far.

And how did you make this contact with the--

Oh, those were neighbors from people who knew. Ella's parents had the grocery store. And they knew a lot of those people.

But weren't they take a terrible chance to take Jews in and hide them? Where did you hide? Were you in a haystack? Where were you hiding? In their house?

Yeah.

But weren't the Germans coming in and investigating to see whether anybody hid Jews?

No, this was out of the main--

And did you have identification papers that identified you as non-Jews?

Yeah. One brother made. So we just--

Made papers for you--

We were just fortunate. The other brothers didn't have it so easy. It was--

They weren't in hiding, the other brothers?

No.

One was--

Working, all of them were working. The youngest brother was working for a German fellow. He needed him. He spoke Polish and German perfect.

But they all had papers as non-Jews--

Right.

Did they not? But that was still very chancy.

In fact, the youngest brother kept his name, you know.

What was--

Alexander [? Dulembra. ?]

And that's the name that he keeps today?

He kept his initials, A. D.

Oh. Oh, I see, Alexander Dattner, Alexander whatever the name was.

So he went--

And how is the life in hiding? Were you hungry? Was it a difficult life?

No.

It was all right?

Yeah.

So what-- do you know what's happening? Do you--

There was some-- my brother Bruno had very extremely good friends, who really helped him too.

Now, did you know at this time what the Nazis were doing? Did you get news about the concentration camps? Did you know what was happening?

Not too much.

Pardon me.

Not too much. No.

Not too much. So you lived a fairly normal life then?

Yeah.

And when did you come out of hiding?

No, in [PAUSES] the latter part of '44 when the Russians got through our hometown.

But did you know at that time that your mother and little sister were taken away?

At that time? No.

No. So who did you think was taking care of your mother and your sister?

My sister was living in Kraków too. And my mother was living with my brother Bruno.

But you didn't know they were taken away?

My sister, unfortunately, they were trying to enlist some people under some lie, that they need him. And they were just taking him to the camps.

Now, did you ever come in touch with any Nazis, in contact with any Nazis or Germans when you were in hiding?

No, no.

So your life was serene or--

Right.

--very normal. And now, you say your brother was in the travel business?

No, my brother-in-law, Ella's--

Ella's brother. And the travel business was functioning during the war?

No, he was in Paris. He was living in Paris. He goes through Marseilles still in 1940. He got to New York.

Oh, so--

With his family, yeah.

Now, so how did he get in touch with you or you got in touch with him?

Yeah, we found each other.

And he got you visas for Cuba, was that--

Yeah.

And what year was that?

That was '45.

So do you want to tell us about that?

So we came to Cuba. And I had to make a fast course in Spanish. [LAUGHS] And I learned diamond cutting. And my past experiences helped me and--

Were you in touch with your other brothers at this time?

Yes, later, yes.

And how long did you stay in Cuba?

Oh, over a year. And we came, in August '46, we came to the States.

And who--

Again, to learn a new language.

Ah, that's right, you didn't know English. And who brought you to the States? Your two brothers?

My brother Leo. My brother Leo wrote us. That's how we-- we came first to New York where my wife's brother lives. But things in New York were not so good. I couldn't get a place to live.

So we came visiting my brother Leo--

Here in New York, in Buffalo?

In Buffalo. And then we moved in with Uncle [? Anshel. ?]

I see. And where was your--

Who was a widower twice.

Oh.

So my wife would cook for him. I paid for it. And we didn't pay any rent. I couldn't find a place to live in Buffalo in '46.

Oh, it was after the war. And there weren't that many places. And what kind of work did you start to do?

In engineering, but no language. So I couldn't find anything.

So what did you do?

So I was desperate. And I made up my mind I will take the very first thing I can get.

So what was that?

At night school, we met some Polish-- four Polish people, two brothers and two sisters. They were all born in the States of Polish Gentile parents. And they went back to Poland when they were little.

So they were American citizens. So they came to the States, to Buffalo, in May '46.

Oh.

Three months before we did. So we met them at night school. But they all worked, both brothers and both sisters, the sisters in cleaning shops. And one of the two brothers worked in the foundry, iron foundry.

So we exchanged telephone numbers and asked him, could you please ask if they need somebody? The next day, he calls me, his boss wants to talk to me. So I go over-- Buffalo Standard Foundry on Hertel, off Hertel, near Elmwood, near the viaduct used to be. So then they send me to the doctor, and the next morning I was working.

And what kind of work did you do?

This was [LAUGHS] was hard work. I was pouring water pumps for Plymouth cars.

Oh.

So there were three. There were two machines. One machine, one fellow made the lower part. The next guy, the upper part. And I laid the core. And then we put together. And I was pouring.

How long did you do this?

About five months. I had to catch my breath and learn the language. I was working with my dictionary in my pocket.

I see. You learned quickly on the spot. And you went to school besides.

Right.

And what did you do after the five months?

After the five months, I already felt that somehow I can do something better. So, first of all, I went for a while for a few weeks to help out Leo.

And what was he doing?

Leo was in the wholesale produce market in Clintonville.

Clintonville.

[? Dattner ?] Frontier Food [? Heimer, ?] for many, many years, all his adult life. And then there was another brother who came-- who actually came three months earlier than I did to the States through Germany, Jacob, the one in Florida. He somehow got to Monticello, New York, the resort. He wanted to live in mountains. He was a dreamer.

So he wanted to build a house. So I didn't have anything yet for myself. But I figured I'd go out there and help him build a house, which I did.

Oh, my goodness. You're diversified--

Pardon?

You're diversified. When did you go into the gem business, into the jewelry business?

Not yet.

Oh, not yet.

Not yet. I spent there about 2 and 1/2 months, helped him build the house. Vacation time came already, and I was not through yet. So Ella came with Richard for a couple of weeks. And then we came back.

And then again, I was with Leo for a few weeks. And then I knew people in the diamond business. So I just went and took a plane, went to New York. I had a customer for a diamond, for Leo's customer in the market, for a carat and a half. I went to New York, brought one diamond back, sold it to this fellow, made some profit, went back again, you know--

And that's how you got-- and that's how you started?

And then I got-- so one fellow had the secondhand diamond watch and bracelet, all diamonds around. So I showed it to some people on the market there. This was my customer's, \$3,000 then. The fellow offered me \$3,100. And Leo said, take it, take it.

And you held out for more probably.

All right, anyway, I took it. I went back. But the people I took it from, there were two partners. And one partner pulls me on the side and tells me, all right, tell him, you got 2,500. So I worked it. And I actually made \$600 profit.

Wow, you did well.

In those days this was--

Those days, that was a lot of money. David, we don't have too much time left. And we have some pictures that perhaps you can explain to us. Do you want to tell us about this picture.

This is to the right is Leo.

Your brother.

Yitzhak Rabin, at the time, ambassador in Washington, Israeli ambassador in Washington. And next to him is my brother Joseph from Toronto. And my brother Leo at the time was chairman of the Israeli bond dinner-- drive.

Oh, and you have this picture. And the next picture, we have another one.

The next picture, my son was interested in his roots. And he was born in Poland. So in 1978, we decided to go to Poland. And Ella's brother, who was in the travel business, his son living now in California, Richard, my son, and myself. And my youngest brother married a Polish lady and later divorced. And this is his daughter in the middle. And her husband to the right.

And let me see, yes, and to the right is a brother, my brother's son also. And this is my nephew and my son to the left, my son, Richard.

And where is this taken?

This is in front of the monument for the Polish heroes in Warsaw.

Oh, in Warsaw.

Warsaw, Poland.

And how was that trip? Was that hard for you to go back to Poland?

Oh, we went all over. We went to our hometown. We went to Bielsko. Richard was interested to know where he was born. I showed him the building. And my son, the architect, was surprised to see such a modern building.

Was that hard for you and Ella, though, emotionally--

Ella didn't go.

Oh, she didn't.

Ella wouldn't go.

Oh, she wouldn't go.

I couldn't get her to go.

But was it hard for you emotionally to go?

It was. But yet, I'm glad I went.

Did you see anybody that you knew from those days?

Yes. In our hometown, we're standing in front of Ella's house, the parents' house. And there's some people gathering together. And sure enough, they recognize Ella's brother. We're talking with them.

And it was really surprising still to see the name Rubenfeld, my wife's maiden name.

Maiden name.

And who was living in your house, in your family house?

My house didn't exist. The whole street didn't exist.

Oh, was it bombed out.

No. It was razed.

It was razed.

Because there was nearby a factory. And they made it so much bigger and took to this whole-- they razed some beautiful buildings even.

That's too bad. David, our time is almost up. Do you want to say something in conclusion about what you've been through?

In conclusion, I would say how lucky we were to come to the United States. It's really a blessing to live in a country like this where there is no limit, where somebody who wants to work and really succeed, even if there are some failures on the way. It's just beautiful to live here.

My wife was very happy to be helpful to some Israeli students about 20 years ago or so.

Oh, yes, I remember, very helpful.

--when they came here with nothing. And she--

She organized a warehouse of clothing and furniture.

So next thing, she tries to mix in with the Russian.

You've been there. You've been there. So you know what it's like.

Yeah, we were in Russia last year in July. And it was a very beautiful, very informing trip.

But you've been new Americans. So you know what it's like to come to a country without having anything. So you can help out in a very understanding way.

Right. And also we have some, many Polish Gentile professors here. And one sends another. So we have quite a few friends here.

Well, you've made a very good name.

In fact, three years ago we were on a trip to Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia. And in Prague, we met a friend of this Polish professor. When we were in Prague, they were our guides for two days. Now, this fellow from Prague is now here, and we had him for dinner last night.

It's a small world. Thank you very much, David, for telling us your story.

OK, my pleasure.

Thank you very much.