

Hello my name is Rich Newberg. And I have the privilege of talking with Dr. Sol Messinger who grew up in Berlin in the 1930s and was a passenger on the ship St. Louis, a journey that was later documented in a book, entitled Voyage of the Damned. Dr. Messinger, you were born in Berlin in 1932. Do you recall any joyful periods of childhood?

Actually, most of the things that I recall were not so joyful. But yeah, I remember that my aunt, and uncle, and cousins lived in the same apartment house as we did. We used to play together, like all kids do. And I remember going on some picnics. And I think one year, we went for a vacation to a beach somewhere. And I have some vague memories of those things.

You say, also, that some of the memories that are vivid are the memories of when you became scared.

Yeah, well, I was born in June of '32, which was six months before Hitler came to power. Now, of course, I remember anything when I was a baby. But I guess, my first memories were very, very early, like maybe three or four years old. I remember being told by my parents to be careful when I walked on the street. And actually, they really didn't let me walk on the streets by myself. I think the fear that I had communicated itself from my parents to me. They were scared of what was happening.

What was happening on the streets?

Well, almost immediately when Hitler assumed power, the campaign against the Jews was started in earnest. And well, first of all, you were insulted on the streets. You were spat at. If anybody knew you were Jewish, in some ways, you took your life into your hands. People would throw stones at you. God only knows what they could do.

Did this ever happen to you?

No, but I saw. I may have been walking with my parents and I saw this happen to other people. It never happened to me.

What do you remember? What did you see?

Well, for instance, there were-- this was, I guess, when I was a little older. I remember, probably in 1936-1937, the Germans began to break into Jewish stores, perhaps a year later than that. And they would simply take the goods out of the stores. And there'd be policemen standing around. And they, of course, didn't interfere. In fact, they would help themselves to the goods also. And in this way, eventually, most of the businesses that were owned by Jews simply became bankrupt.

Well, you know, I watched this. And in fact, I remember standing at the window of our apartment looking down. There were some stores across the street, which were owned by Jews. And I remember actually watching this crowd of people taking stones, breaking into the stores, and just helping themselves to the goods. And it's just a horrible feeling. I mean, I understood that what they were doing was aimed against Jews, and consequently, aimed at me. I mean, I was young. But those things, you understand right away.

What was going on inside your family, with your family at this point?

Well, my father was working as a tailor with my uncle, who was a tailor as well. And at first, I think my parents, as well as most Jews in Germany, thought that this was a flash in the pan, that it would blow over and so on. But then soon after Hitler took power, legislation came out which was antisemitic, anti-Jewish, made it difficult for Jews to work, limited Jews in the professions, and so on. It became clear that there was little, if any, future for Jews in Germany. And so a lot of people began trying to find a way out, just wanted to get out of Germany.

Well, I think those who decided to get out very early, like in 1933, '34 were able to manage it pretty well. But after a little period of time-- '35, '36, '37-- it became progressively more difficult because those countries that had allowed Jews in felt that they had done their bit. Well, we let a few hundred in, we let a few thousand in. It's enough. We don't want any more.

I think most Jews in Germany wanted to go either to the United States or to what was then Palestine. It was difficult to get to Palestine because the Arabs were making all sorts of protests against further immigration. And the British, in spite of the obvious danger that the Jewish community was in in Germany, simply gave in and severely restricted immigration to Palestine.

As far as the United States was concerned, there were immigration quotas. I think the first immigration bill in the United States history started in 1924. And it was under that immigration bill that we labored. And it was a severe limitation. And consequently, it difficult for people of any number to get into the United States.

So at this point, your family is looking for a way out. What happened?

Well, my father began to try to get a visa to the United States. And well, you had to make all sorts of applications. And you had to have some relatives here who would vouch for you. And you had to have certificates and test-- well, certificates saying that you wouldn't be a burden on the United States, that if you couldn't find a job, someone would take care of you, and so on. Well, you had to amass all that. And you had to have some money too. And then you could go to the consulate in Berlin or the embassy and try to get a visa.

Well, there was a problem. As I mentioned before, it was difficult to get visas because of the immigration quota. So what the United States did was they didn't give you just a visa when they had one available. What they did was they sort of gave you a number so that you would know, since you knew how many immigrants were admitted each year, you could figure out in how many years you might get into the United States by whatever number you got. But once you got a number, you knew that you could get into the United States eventually.

Now, did your parents have connections in the United States?

Well, my parents-- we didn't have connections. The only connections that we had were we had some relatives. Actually, at first, we just had some very distant relatives in the United States. Then eventually, my uncle came to the United States. But that was in 1938. By that time, I believe-- I mean, I don't remember those details. This is hearsay from my parents. I think by that time, we already had a visa number. But we knew that we couldn't get to the United States for several years. The number was a high one.

So we looked for another place to go. And really, we were willing to go anywhere, just to get out of Germany. It was really getting to be-- well, it was life-threatening. And so naturally, if we couldn't get into the United States, we wanted to get to some country that was close to the United States, as close as possible.

And so there were South American, Central American countries, and so on. And they had taken some Jews. And we, I guess, heard that Cuba was admitting Jews. And so we tried to get permits to enter Cuba.

And not only we did, but two of my aunts lived in Germany. They did get visas into Cuba. And they left in late 1938, early 1939. And they took ships. And they went. They were admitted to Cuba. My uncle, my father's brother, who also lived in Germany, he was very lucky. He got a visa to the United States. And they left in October 1938 and settled in New York.

Now, how did the St. Louis come into play?

Well, before I tell you that, just to show you how bad things were getting in Germany-- and this is a terribly vivid memory for me-- at the end of October of 1938, in the middle of the night one night, there was a knocking on the door. And when we opened it, it was the Gestapo. And they said, they had come for my father.

My mother, of course, was hysterical. She wanted to know where they were taking him. And in their usual-- well, they didn't treat Jews very well-- they just said, it none of your business. And they just grabbed my father and took him away. Of course, my mother had no idea where he was going.

The next day, she took me and went to the police station, which took a great deal of courage. It wasn't something that one just did. I mean, there was a certain danger associated with it. When we got to the police station, I remember-- I actually remember this-- there was a crowd milling in front of the police station. And it became clear that many men had been picked up the night before.

But still, no information, there was no information as to what had happened to them. It was only a few days later that we learned that what the Germans had done was they picked up all the men who were Polish nationals, Jewish men who were Polish nationals, and simply deported them back to Poland. My parents had come to Germany a few years before I was born from Poland. They were born there. And they grew up in southern Poland. So my father was deported.

And curiously enough, the episode of my father's deportation led up-- the whole episode led up to one of the more horrible episodes of what happened in Germany before the war, which was Kristallnacht. One of the men who was also picked up that night was a guy by the name of Grynszpan. And he was also of Polish origin. And he was shipped back to Poland. He had a son who lived in Paris. I guess he was 19 or 20 years old.

And he was so upset by what had happened that he decided he would get revenge. And he attempted to assassinate the German ambassador in Paris. This attempted assassination served as the pretext for Kristallnacht. Now, Kristallnacht took place on the night between November 9th and November 10, 1938. What the Germans did-- and it was an organized thing-- actually, what the Nazis did was they broke into and burned down almost every synagogue in Germany that existed.

I remember, I think, in 1935 or some time like that, it became a law that Jewish children couldn't go to regular schools, they had to go to Jewish schools. And of course, I was-- at that time, I was, I guess, in first grade. The school that I went to was a part of a complex. It was a Jewish complex. It was a school, then there was a courtyard, and then there was a synagogue in the back.

After Kristallnacht, I didn't go to school for a couple of days. And then school resumed. And I remember, the first day I came back, in order to get to the courtyard in order to get to the synagogue, they had broken into the school, first of all. Then they had gotten into the synagogue, and broken into it, and burned it. Now, I was five-six years old, I guess.

I remember so vividly going into the courtyard and seeing the synagogue burned down. You could smell it. You could still smell the smoke. It was such a terrible feeling. It's hard to describe. I mean, it wasn't just fear. It was such an empty feeling, as if somebody had-- I mean, this was a synagogue that I had gone to with my father and my mother. And it wasn't there. Well, that was terrible.

Anyway, by that time, my father was in Poland then. But by that time, we had already applied for some sort of entry permit into Cuba. And of course, my father had been running around to whatever offices he could go to and doing whatever he could to get us some papers to get us anywhere. Now, my mother had to do it. And again, it was just-- sometimes, I think to myself, if I had been in her place or my father's place, would I have been able to do what they did? I mean, I guess you do it when you have to. But it boggles my mind now.

Where had your father been taken?

Oh, well, what happened to my father-- they just put him across the Polish border. And he was fortunate. He just took a train and went to the town. He went to Kraków, which is-- he had a married sister who was living there, my aunt. His parents, my grandparents, lived in a smaller town nearby.

My uncle, who also was deported, was put in a Polish concentration camp. And I mean, the Poles also-- I mean, the Poles didn't want these guys back either. I mean, they were, if anything, more antisemitic than the Germans. And so they provided-- they set up these camps. So a lot of men stayed there.

In the meantime, my mother did what she could to further whatever needed to be done to get us out of Germany, with the added complication now that my father wasn't in Germany, that even if we got papers that something would have to be done about that. And then about a month or two after my father was deported back to Poland, I developed diphtheria

and I almost died. So I think of my mother and what she had to go through at that time, and I really don't know how she did it.

In any case, finally, I guess, in April of 1939, we got word that we got an entry permit to Cuba. And we made arrangements to book passage on a ship. And the ship that we booked passage on was the St. Louis. And we somehow-- my mother, I don't know how it worked out-- they managed to arrange for my father to be allowed back into Germany for 48 hours so we could leave. I mean, we had to leave from Germany. If he weren't allowed into Germany, he couldn't leave.

Well, I remember, it was two days before we were leaving. We were supposed to leave Berlin, and go to Hamburg, and get on the ship there. And my father wasn't home. And my mother was beside herself. And she thought that he wasn't going to be able to come. And we would have to leave by ourselves. And I remember, my aunt's mother-in-law, who was our neighbor, was in our apartment trying to console my mother.

And there was a knock on the door. And my mother said that it was my father. She recognized his knock. She opened the door. And it was an incredible reunion. I mean, we hadn't seen him for six or seven months. We wouldn't know whether we would see him again because we didn't know whether he was going to be allowed back in Germany. Well, he was there.

My mother had shipped whatever we could to the United States because we had this-- remember, I told you before, we had this visa number to the United States. We shipped what we could to the United States. We took a train to Hamburg. And we boarded the St. Louis, which was a-- it was a luxury liner, actually. And it was May the 13th, 1939 that we sailed.

As you're boarding the ship, what are you thinking about?

Oh, I can't remember, personally, boarding the ship. But I know, I mean, I know that I boarded it because I have a picture of it. Some photographer must have been standing around and took pictures of everybody boarding, as if it were a real cruise. And then afterwards, he found the people. And he sold them the pictures. And we happened to have bought pictures. I also have some other pictures from the voyage itself taken by the same photographer.

I don't know what I thought. I'm sure that my parents were tremendously relieved. But they also must have thought, god only knows when they would see their relatives again. And of course, as it turned out, they never did because all my relatives, their relatives who were-- all of them were in Poland, all died in the concentration camps.

You board the St. Louis, bound for--

Yeah, well we were bound for Cuba. I don't remember getting on the ship, but I remember, as we were leaving, as we started sailing, and I don't remember what I felt, but I remember my parents sort of heaving this sigh of relief, as if this tremendous weight had been lifted from their shoulders-- and of course, it had.

Anyway, the trip to Cuba took approximately two weeks, as a matter of fact. We got there on May the 27th. And I remember some of the things. There was a swimming pool there. I remember playing with kids and swimming in the pool. And we were treated beautifully. It was an amazing thing. The Germans in Germany treated us like dirt, and attacked us, spit on us. You couldn't go into a-- I mean, they used to have signs on the stores, [GERMAN], which means, Jews and dogs are requested not to come in. So it was horrible.

And yet on the ships, which was manned by Germans, and had a German cabinet-- it was a German ship-- we were treated as if we were just normal passengers. I mean, it was surrealistic. The reason, I think, was-- and from the reading that I've done about this voyage-- the reason was that the captain of the ship was, really, a decent guy. And he, apparently, ordered the crew, among which, there were, apparently, some Nazis-- I guess they had some Nazis on every ship and so on, just to make sure that nothing untoward, as far as they were concerned, happened-- anyway, he ordered all the crew men to treat us as if we were just ordinary people. So it was wonderful.

We were on a cruise. We ate, danced, there was music, there were movies. I mean, it was fantastic. And we got to Cuba on the 27th of May. I don't know, I think it was a Friday. And we got there in the late afternoon. And the boat didn't dock. It stayed in the harbor.

And as soon as it stopped in the harbor, people began to be afraid. They felt that there was something wrong. And they were right because what had-- and of course, I didn't realize this. Nobody realized it at the time.

But apparently, what had happened, even before the ship sailed, the entry permits that we had gotten, that we had actually bought, that the Cuban government had issued, I guess, the minister of immigration had issued these entry permits, were invalidated. The president of Cuba had gotten the legislature to pass a law that these permits were invalid and that, from now on, you could only enter Cuba if you had a valid visa which had to be issued by not only the Department of Immigration, but other departments. I don't know the details.

And so there we were in the harbor. The next day, we just stood there. And of course, then the rumors really were rampant that we weren't going to be allowed to disembark and that we were going to have to go back to Germany. People were already, I mean, at this early stage, in a real panic. My two aunts, and uncles, and my cousin, who had lived in Berlin until a few months before, were already in Cuba.

And of course, many of the passengers on the ship also had relatives in Cuba. What these relatives, including mine, did was they hired these little fishing boats so they could-- excuse me-- so they could come close to the ship. And so there was this parade of fishing boats going around the ship. And there was this yelling. People would yell. They would spot their relatives. And they would yell to each other, hello.

And I remember, once, we noticed that the ship that my aunts, and uncles, and my cousin were on was near our cabin. So we ran down to the cabin, we opened the porthole, and sure enough, they were right there. And we were able to actually talk to them. And we had brought some gifts for them. So my mother threw these gifts to them on the boat. And she said, god only knows if we'll be able to give them to you otherwise.

I remember yelling. I remember spotting my cousin another day on one of these boats. And I was yelling to her. And I remember, some lady was standing next to me. And she said to me, why don't you shut up? I have more important things to tell to my relatives. This cousin, by the way, lives in Buffalo now. She's here.

Well, anyway, what happened was that the Joint Distribution Committee of the United States sent a representative to Cuba. And there was some attempt to persuade the government to-- I mean, the boat was already there. There were all these people there. It was clear that if we were sent back to Germany, we'd go to concentration camps. And that would be the end of us.

And they tried to talk them into letting us land. They guaranteed a certain amount of money, that we wouldn't be a burden on the economy of Cuba, that they would house us, et cetera, et cetera. And for a variety of reasons, apparently, this was all to no avail. I still don't understand exactly why. One thing was that I think many of the Cuban officials expected to be paid off. And either it wasn't forthcoming or it wasn't large enough.

And the other thing, I guess, there was a whole political battle going on between some of the ministers and the president. And anyway, we were docked in Havana Harbor for a week, a whole week. And you can imagine, here we were. It was the end of May. It was hot. It was just hot as hell. And everybody was scared to death. I mean, you can't imagine what-- I mean, here we were, we finally got out of Germany, and we were on the shore of freedom. And they wouldn't let us get off.

There was one guy who actually attempted suicide. There was another guy who-- I think he-- there were a couple of people. I don't remember this exactly, but I think a couple of people jumped overboard and tried to swim to the harbor. But of course, the Cubans had their little police boats around. And they returned them to the ship. Anyway, since all the negotiations with the Joint Distribution Committee failed, we finally set sail, I think, on June 2nd. We were there a whole week.

Now, the ship's captain was really a decent guy. And he tried to calm the passengers. I mean, you can't imagine the pandemonium that broke out when the ship started sailing because we were ostensibly going back to Germany. So he tried to calm us. He said, look, we're going to sail along the coast. We're going to sail in the waters of the Caribbean for a little while and along the coast of Florida.

And we're going to-- we knew that there were all kinds of appeals being made. And hopefully, something will happen. Well, the continued negotiations were held with the Cubans, hoping that perhaps they would change their minds. There was some plan to put all the passengers of the ship on the Isle of Pines, which is a little island off of Cuba. So we wouldn't even be on Cuba. I guess this was a deserted island or something-- anything to get off.

Then we sailed along the coast of Florida. And there were telegrams sent to President Roosevelt and to Mrs. Roosevelt. And of course, there was never any response. The only response that we had from the United States was a patrol boat, a couple of patrol boats came out to make sure that nobody jumped overboard and swam to the coast.

Looking back on this particular episode, does this make you bitter toward the United States during this period?

No. Look, I can't be bitter towards the United States. The United States eventually provided a haven for me and my family. But it is, I think, one of the really most shameful chapters in American history. Think about it-- the United States is made up of immigrants. Almost everybody in the United States was, at one time, an immigrant.

And yet for 900 people, who were desperate, they couldn't-- and most of us were coming to the United States anyway, eventually. I mean, we all had these-- or 700 of us had these numbers, visa numbers, for the United States. We were going to be allowed in eventually. I mean, how could the United States not have allowed us to come in? I just don't understand it.

But you're now here.

Well, I think, I'm bitter about that episode, I suppose. I can't be bitter about the United States. I think it's a fantastic country. But just like every country and like every person, they make mistakes. And I think this was a dreadful mistake. I looked up, I went to the library downtown, and I looked up the New York Times from 1939, when we were on the ship. And of course, there were editorials, and there were front page articles written in the Times about this.

Of course, I was fascinated to read this. As a matter of fact, I made copies of these articles. And it's amazing. There were editorials in the Times saying how terrible it was what was happening in Germany and how terrible it was for Cuba not to let us in. But there wasn't one whisper in those editorials about the United States letting us in. I mean, it was incredible to read that, those articles.

I remember, one night, I guess, it was one evening, my father and I were standing on the deck. And I saw lights in the distance. And I said to my father, what are those lights? And he said, oh, that's an American city called Miami. And I've been in Miami several times since then, since we came to the United States. I always get a weird feeling when I'm there because I always remember this episode. And you see, Miami then, when I was on the ship, was like the moon is to me now. For me to get the moon today was like for me to get to Miami from the ship at that time.

Well, anyway, nothing worked. And finally, we set sail. I mean, we were sailing slowly along the coast of Florida. But finally, the captain couldn't keep this up. And we set sail for Germany. And then efforts were made to have some other countries take us. No Central American country, and the United States, and apparently, Canada-- I'm sure that Canada was asked also, and they wouldn't let us in.

Anyway, they made representations. I guess Jewish organizations, the Joint, and so on made representations to a lot of governments in Europe. And of course, these governments had the same line. They said, oh, my god, we've had so many refugees already, so many Jews, I mean, we can't take any more.

But finally, imagine, I think, two days before we were going to have to land in Germany, in Hamburg, we got word that the passenger ships were going to split up among four countries-- England, Belgium, Holland, and France. And of

course, we were tremendously relieved. We weren't going back to Germany.

OK. So my parents and I ended up in Belgium. All of us landed in Antwerp. And then those who went to England somehow got to England. I don't know how that was taken care of. We ended up in Brussels.

Before we discuss Brussels, can you tell me a little bit about life on the ship before you landed in Cuba? Were people praying? Were they practicing Judaism on board ship? What kind of conversations, what kind of life was it when you set sail?

You see, I can't-- the things that I remember, I've already told you. I can't remember. I'm sure there was a synagogue. I mean, there were synagogue services there. I know, from what I read subsequently, and I vaguely remember that there were some obviously very religious Jews on the ship.

What about these Nazis? Do you recall seeing them? Did you know who they were?

No. No, nobody knew. I mean, they were just ostensibly part of the crew. You would never-- you couldn't recognize them unless they made themselves known. No, I don't. I really can't remember anything specific, except that it was a great relief, and that people were happy, and just, I mean, the contrast was so great between what we had left in Germany and what we had on the ship that it really was unreal.

What happened in Brussels?

Well, we were helped by Jewish organizations. I can't tell you the details because I really don't know them. My father was not allowed to work because that was one of the conditions under which we were allowed into the country, that he wouldn't work, because they were afraid that we would take jobs away from the inhabitants. But we managed. We were given subsistence by the Jewish organizations. And we just waited for our visa number to come to the United States.

But you had another stop to make.

Well, yes. What happened, we landed in Belgium on June 17th, which, by the way, was the day after my seventh birthday. I celebrated my seventh birthday on that ship. So we got there in June. And as you remember, in May of-- well, the war, Second World War, started in September of 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland. And then France and England declared war on Germany right after that. But nothing happened on the Western front. War was declared, but nothing was going on.

In May of 1940, the Germans invaded France. And they went through the same route that they had gone through in World War I, namely Holland and Belgium. And I remember that was the 10th of June. I remember, we had some friends. And we were walking home one night. And there was this air raid, everything became dark. And I mean, there were no shelters. We just ducked into a doorway.

And you could hear the bombs falling. It was just awful. And then there was an all-clear. And it became clear from the news very rapidly that the Germans were advancing very, very quickly.

And my father said, well, we've got to run away. It's unreal. I mean, you can't believe that this-- I can't even believe that it happened, even though it happened to me. My father took a sheet and he put some of our most treasured possessions, like some pictures and so on, into it. And he made a bundle out of it and slung it over his shoulder, took my mother and me, and we started to walk to France. I mean, it's incredible, walk to France. It was ridiculous. But when you have no choice, you do these crazy things.

But again, we were extremely fortunate because, as we started walking, we happened to walk past one of the railroad stations. Now, this was the 15th of June. And the Germans were, I think, maybe 15 miles outside of Brussels already. And there was this train standing there. And it must have come in to transport soldiers. But there were no soldiers there anymore.

And somebody said, this train is going to France. And suddenly, there was this swarm of people getting on the train. I remember my father pushing us and trying to get us on the train. Everybody was trying to get on, fighting people, I mean, people were clawing at each other. And we got on the train. And we got to the French-Belgian border that evening. The train stopped.

As soon as we got out of the train station, there was an air raid. And of course, they were bombing the railroads, the Germans were. And so there was an air raid shelter there. And we ran down into it. But there were so many people. There were thousands of people trying to escape from Belgium. There were thousands of people in that little air raid shelter. And we literally thought we were going to suffocate. I remember it. I mean, we couldn't breathe.

And finally, the all-clear sounded. We climbed up. We were on the platform, on the train platform again. And the siren, the air raid siren started again, another air raid. And my father said to my mother-- I remember it as-- I mean, I can hear him saying it-- said to my mother, we're not going back down there. If we're going to die, we're going to die up here.

So there we were on the platform. It was dark, couldn't see the planes. But you could hear the bombs falling, that whistling sound. You could see them exploding. And occasionally, you could see a plane catching fire and zooming down.

I'm sure you've seen this in movies. I want to assure you that when you see it and hear it in person, it's not the same thing. It's not amusing. It was horrible, horrible because when you heard that whistling sound of the bomb, you didn't know whether when the whistling stopped, you were going to be blown up.

So we stayed there all night. And those air raids continued all night. And we were just lucky we weren't hit. The next morning, there was another train going. And we got on the train. And it was going to Paris. But as I told you, the Germans kept bombing the railroad lines.

And every either few minutes or every hour, the train would stop. We would be told immediately to get out and lie flat on the fields. And we would look up. And there were these German planes flying overhead. And it was obvious that we were not soldiers, that that wasn't a troop train. But they could have mowed us down. They chose not to-- again, just luck. And this happened several times.

We arrived in Paris. And again, fortunately-- I don't know how my parents made these decisions, or whether it was just luck, I really don't know-- we decided that we weren't going to stay in Paris. We wanted to get as far away as we could from the Germans. There was a cattle car that was going south. We got on this cattle car.

And I guess we traveled south for-- we were on this cattle car for days, I don't know how many days. And we would stop somewhere. And people would bring us some water and maybe some food. And we finally ended up in Southern France, about 20 miles north of the Spanish border, in the Pyrenees.

And there were all these refugees-- not just Jews, I mean, everybody was running away from the Germans. And so they split us up among little towns and villages. And we ended up in this little village of maybe 300 people called Savignac. And there were four Jewish families that ended up there. And of course, these people, these French people lived in this village, the only thing they knew about Jews was what they read in the Bible. They had never seen a Jew in their lives. And here we were. But I must say, at first, anyway, they treated us very nicely. We were able to get quarters, and food, and so on.

However, things didn't go that smoothly because what happened was that the Germans got to Paris, the French capitulated, and France was really split into the occupied zone, which was the northeastern part, which was occupied by the Germans, and into the southwestern part of France, which was called free France or Vichy France. And they formed a French government, which, of course, was fascistic, and sympathetic to the Germans, and so on.

About three months after we got to France, the Jews in that whole area were picked up-- not only in that area, in I think most of what was called free France were picked up and taken to French concentration camps. And we were put in a French concentration camp on the Mediterranean, near Montpellier. It was near a town called Agde. And we were in



this concentration camp.

Now, I don't want you to get the wrong idea. It wasn't like the concentration camps in Poland, where people-- it wasn't a labor camp. Well, it was in a sense. But it wasn't an extermination camp. But it was a horrible, horrible-- you can't imagine. I mean, the men were separate, the women and children were separate. There were perhaps 300 people in this cabin-- not cabin--

Barracks?

--barrack, right. And there was no furniture. We slept on hay. There were lice. The food was, I mean, to say minimal is gilding the lily. I mean, what we got, I remember, was some watery what they called soup. I mean, it was almost water, basically water. And what I really remember were the toilets. I mean, there was one huge toilet in the middle of the camp, where everybody went. And you really couldn't get near it. It was so horrible.

And of course, people were on top of each other. And you were treated-- I mean, remember, this was run by the French. You were treated not very well, not very well. I only found out later when I read about this-- in fact, a book was published recently about Vichy France and the Jews-- that I always assumed that our being picked up and being put into a concentration camp was at the behest of the Germans.

It turned out that wasn't so at all. There was a long history of antisemitism in France as well. And the people who took over Vichy France, the government, the new government was quite antisemitic. They promulgated this law that all Jewish refugees who were not French citizens were to be picked up and put in these concentration camps.

So we got there in the concentration camp in November. My mother and I, the women, were allowed to see the men once a week across a barbed wire. And I can't say that I remember exactly what happened. But I know that some sort of underground was formed, not in the camp, outside of the camp by Jewish people. And they were set up to help us escape.

And indeed, my mother-- well, my father and my mother one day talked. I don't remember it, but I know that it happened. And he told my mother that there was this possibility of escape. And she had to take it with me. She said, I'm not going without you. And he said to her that she would have my blood on her head if she didn't take me and get out.

Well, she did. We did, my mother and I. And we escaped on Christmas Eve. The French soldiers were drunk. And we and several other people escaped. And that I remember so vividly because, you see, we had to-- somehow, we got to the town. You see, we had to get to the town where there was a railroad station. The only place we could go was to the place where we had originally ended up in France, this little town of Savignac.

So we got to this town. And there was a train leaving at noon. We got to the platform. And I looked around. And I recognized one of the gendarmes from the camp. And I was afraid. I said to my mother, I said, look, this guy is from the camp. She didn't recognize him. And we were afraid that we'd be recognized.

So we ran out of the station. And we went into this little coffee place. And we sat in the back, scared to death that some gendarme would come in, and recognize us, and take us back to the camp. We sat there for six hours until the next train came. And we got on the platform, no soldiers were there. We got on the train.

But that wasn't so easy. You see, during the war, you had to have a permit to travel. And you had to have identification papers, neither of which we had, because we had escaped from concentration camp. If anybody had asked us for those, we would have been-- it would have been obvious who we were. And we would have been sent back. Fortunately, we weren't sent back. We managed to get back.

Well, this little village didn't have a train station. There was a little town about a mile away that had a train station. But we were afraid to get off at that train station because there was a police station between that town and the little village where we were living. So we got off a station before that. And it was about five miles away from the village. We had to walk.

Now, this was in December, the end of December, in the Pyrenees. It was cold, very cold. And the only shoes I had were these sabots, the wooden shoes. By the time we got to our little village, my toes were frostbitten. And fortunately, nothing happened. I mean, I recovered. But in the wintertime, especially when I go skiing, I still have-- I really have pain in those toes. And it's strange.

How about your dad? How did you meet after this?

Right. Well, of course, again, we had no idea. My father said, he would try to escape too and meet us back in this little town. New Year's Day, he showed up. He escaped on New Year's Eve, same circumstances. And again, it was just a series of I say luck. Who knows? I mean, maybe God was watching over us.

Anyway, we lived in this town for another year and a half. And finally, in May of-- I guess before May, April of 1942, our visa number for the United States came up. Now, the luck was that we were living in free France. And the United States had relations, diplomatic relations, with free France. There was an embassy in Marseille. My father used to travel there all the time, begging the United States people to let us in.

Finally, our number came up. Then we had a problem of getting to the United States. I mean, it wasn't only that we needed a visa. We had to find some way of getting there. Well, we found a ship. All of Europe was at war. The only neutral countries were Spain and Portugal. We found a Portuguese ship that was going to the United States. Then we had to get a transit permit through Spain and Portugal.

I mean, all these things were tremendously difficult. I mean, I talk about it as if well, you just go to an office and you get a permit. It wasn't like that. It was you almost died before you could get any of these things. Well, we finally did. We got permits to go through Spain and through Portugal.

And we got on this ship called the Serpa Pinto, my second ship. And we sailed. And we sailed for Casablanca, where we stayed for a couple of days. And then we sailed for the United States. And this was a very small ship. This was not a luxury liner.

And I tell you that I was seasick from the moment I got on that ship till the moment I got off. And not only that, it was a very small ship. The men and boys slept in the hold, I mean, right near the engines. They had set up these bunk beds, slabs, actually. And of course, people were seasick. It was hot as hell. There was no ventilation on there. People vomited. It was incredible.

Where did you get the money to travel?

Fortunately, in this little town in France, even though my father was not allowed to work, when the people found out that he was a tailor, they begged him to work, because there was no tailor for miles around. In fact, somebody offered to give him a sewing machine. And so he worked. We managed to get a little money from some of the Jewish organizations in France. And then we had relatives here who sent us some money.

What kind of man was your father?

You wouldn't believe from what I've been telling you, he was a very quiet, unassuming person.

He must have had an inner strength to pull you through these times-- and your mother.

I don't understand how they did it. I really don't. I mean, I know, I remember my father. He's been dead for 20 years now. I know my mother. I don't know. I don't know how they could do that.

There must have been something in their character.

Yes, I suppose. Either that or if you have to do it, you just do it. I mean, necessity makes you do these things. But you're

right, they had a lot of guts.

So you land in New York.

Well, before that, we stopped in Bermuda for a week. And they interrogated all the passengers because they wanted to find-- they were interested in any kind of information about free France, the German lines, what the Germans were doing, and so on. So they interrogated every single passenger on that boat. Then after seven days in Bermuda, we set sail. And we landed in New York.

My uncle, my father's brother, was living in New York at the time. And we had-- my father also had some aunts, and uncles, and cousins in New York who had come to the United States years and years before. And so anyway, we stayed in New York for a month. My father couldn't find work there. The two sisters of my father, who had been in Cuba, and before that, in Berlin-- we had all lived together, I mean, in the same city-- by that time had come to Buffalo. So we got on a bus and we came to Buffalo.

My father found a job. We found a little apartment. I mean, apartment-- it was really a tenement. I mean, in today's world, you would call it a slum apartment. But for us, it was heaven. I mean, it was such a-- we were free. We didn't have to worry about being picked up and sent to a concentration camp. And again, we had phenomenal luck because as I told you, we left France in May of 1942.

In September, I believe, of '42, the Germans came to free France, including this little town, took all the Jews, and sent them to Auschwitz. And of course, they all were killed, including a very good friend of mine, who at that time was studying for his bar mitzvah.

Where did you settle in Buffalo? We settled in the Humboldt section, on East Ferry Street. That was a very, very-- that was the Jewish section at that time.

How were you received?

Well, in a way, I mean, here we were-- and then this was the middle of the war, we arrived. We were sort of, in a way, celebrities. Of course, and we stayed with my aunt and uncle for a little while until we found our apartment. Everybody was very curious to talk to us. I think everybody tried to help us. And I started school. I didn't speak a word of English.

And their idea, in those days-- they put me in sixth grade, which was where I was supposed to be. And of course, I couldn't say anything. And I really didn't understand very much of what was going on, either. So they figured, well, the way to teach him the language is to-- we'll put him in first grade. And then he'll go up rapidly.

Well, that was a terrible thing to do because here I was in these little seats with these little kids, not speaking the language. I would have learned just as fast in sixth grade. But by January of that year, I spoke English fluently. And they put me up to the fifth grade. And then I stayed there and made a lot of friends. And then I became a regular American kid.

And now you're a doctor.

Now, I'm a doctor, yeah.

It's 1983. You look back over the decades, do you understand what happened? Do you comprehend what happened to you and the world?

Yeah, I guess the world went crazy. You see, the reason I think it's important to know about what happened to me, both on this ship and the fact that no country would take us, except finally, those four countries in Europe, and what happened to us in France, I think it's important because one might think that the whole Holocaust was just Germany, it was just Germans.

Well, yes, the Germans were the ones who did the positive things. They did the killing. But there were a lot of other countries who inadvertently helped, in other words, they did negative things. They wouldn't let people into their countries. For instance, I can't understand it.