

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Peter Phillips, conducted by Gail Schwartz on June 16, 1997 in Bethesda, Maryland. This is tape number one, side A. Could you give us your full name?

It's actually Ernest Peter Phillips, but I generally use only Peter or whenever possible, Pete Phillips.

And what name were you norm?

I was born Ernst Pieter Phillips.

Where were you born, and when were you born?

In Essen, Germany, December 5th, 1931.

Let's talk about your family. Who were the members of your immediate family?

My father, Bruno, my mother, Lily, and I have twin brothers, who are about four years younger than I am, Ervin, spelled E-R-V-I-N, and George.

Where were your parents from?

My father was born in a little town called Oberhausen, and my mother was born in an even smaller town called [PLACE NAME.] And my brothers were born in Mulheim an der Ruhr.

So when did your family-- or what brought your family to Essen?

My mother was working in a dress shop, which was a very fancy store that catered to the elite of Essen. The wives of the steel magnets would get their dresses made to order in that shop. She was an apprentice to her aunt. And my father was, as well, a apprentice in a international hide and skin export trading firm. And my parents met there, actually, during an opera performance.

How much education did your family have?

Incredibly little. My mother admitted that she hated school, and I think she probably had the equivalent of the sixth grade in this country. My father, likewise, never went to what you would call junior high school in this country. [INAUDIBLE] was a very well educated, self-educated man.

He read voluminously, was a great lover of art and music, taught himself to play the violin and the piano. And did so well enough to be able to play chamber music with friends. In his own way, I think he was a genius.

Did your mother have other interests, or once you were born did she stay at home?

My mother was-- I can say without fear of being contradicted, a genius with her fingers. She designed clothes. She could go into a store, look at a dress on a mannequin, go home, and duplicate it. She made men's neckties during the war. That will come up later.

She even made-- assembled cigarette lighters during the war for the army. She could take a set of curtains and make a dress, or she could take a dress and make another dress out of it. She just was fantastic. She never used a pattern. She knitted, crocheted, she made her own clothes, she made clothes for other people. She was really very gifted with her hands.

Did she make your clothes?

No, but she would have if she could-- if I had been a girl she certainly would have done so.

How religious was your family?

That's a difficult question. My mother was very anti-religious. She could not reconcile the hypocrisy she saw in the world with the religious aspect of it. I may not be too articulate on that, but she only went into a synagogue under duress, such as my bar mitzvah, my brother's bar mitzvahs, and that's about it. She never went even on the Jewish holidays.

She always made a big fuss about not wanting to have Seder and things like that. She just was intolerant of any kind of organized religion. Whereas my father grew up very devout, and even wanted me to later fill in when I was 12 and 13, which I did once or twice and rebelled and didn't do it.

And it was a constant source of friction between my parents. Which I, of course, suffered from, if you will. And as a consequence I went through various religious phases myself in my 65 years.

We will talk about your childhood, but obviously, as you said, there are stages. And my next questions are going to be really the first stage, the first part of your life. And so whatever you can remember, or what was told to you would be very helpful, because you were so young. Was your father a Zionist?

Not that I'm aware of, no. No.

Was he interested in political matters?

Oh, yes, very much so. Very much so. As I said, he read the New York Times, I grew up with that. He read Business Week Magazine. Not that he had much time to read, but yes, he was very much politically aware. As was, indeed, my mother, too.

What language did you speak at home?

In the early years in the United States we spoke, of course, German. But my parents were very keen to learn English. And my brothers and I, being young, we very quickly picked it up.

But I'm talking as a child--

We spoke--

In your early childhood, you spoke German?

Yes, in Germany certainly we did. But in this country then we spoke English.

Yeah. But in Germany, did you speak any other languages, or just German?

Just German.

What was your relationship as a young child with your parents? Were they very outgoing type of people? Or was it a more reserved type of relationship?

I would say reserved. Europeans of that generation tended to be reserved. They were not touchy feely, huggy type-- it wasn't done. I mean, I never hugged my father the way kids do nowadays. We never expressed love in so many words. It wasn't done. It wasn't the custom.

What is one of your earliest memories?

The earliest memory I have-- oh, I have quite a few, actually. That I had a very strict father, and very controlling I guess

would be the term one would use today. So that even when I had my own money from my meager allowance, I was not able to do with it what I wanted.

Other early memory, I may be skipping ahead here, but I certainly remember the Germans marching into Prague when we lived there. Playing with the German soldiers who were bivouacked in the playground across the street from our apartment house.

Yeah, we'll get to Prague in a minute. But let's stay in Essen for a moment. Do you know where your parents-- where your home was? Was it in the town? Was it on the outskirts? Did your parents tell you?

It was in the city proper. But I don't have any recollections of Essen as such, and didn't go to school there.

Right. And you were how old when you left Essen?

I was about five or six.

So as you say, you don't have any recollections of playing with children or any sense?

No.

OK, do you have any-- probably not, but do you have any recollections of your parents talking very early on after Hitler came into power? Again, you were very young up to 1935, '36. Did you sense any tension in the household?

Yes, I did certainly. I don't remember any conversations, but the tenseness, the tension, was always there. There was no way for my parents to hide it. The vigils they kept listening to the radio. I remember the gas masks on the wardrobe, things like that. There was all-- and jumping ahead to Prague for a stop, I certainly remember air raid drills and things like that.

You said they had gas masks in Essen?

No, I'm sorry, the gas masks were in Prague.

Yeah.

Yes.

OK, do you know why or what precipitated, or what went into your father's-- your parents thinking about moving?

I happen to know that, yes. First, my mother's side of it is that she worked, as I said, in this fancy dress shop. And when Hitler came to power the customers stayed away, because the store was owned by her aunt who was, of course, Jewish. They just stayed away.

She was snubbed by the family doctor and by friends. So the ascension of Hitler was immediately manifest in her life, and she couldn't make a living. She was one of the early feminists, I guess, by working full time from the very beginning.

So your parents had non-Jewish friends in Essen and mixed with non-Jews?

Yes, they did. My father, I remember very clearly, telling me that he was on his way to the home of a good non-Jewish friend to play some music. I think the friend was a pianist. My father must have been carrying his violin that day. And when my father went into the living room, he saw a big portrait of Hitler on the concert grand-- no, it wasn't a concert grand, but it was a baby grand, I guess, piano.

And that was the signal for my father that this thing-- this Hitler thing-- was not going to blow over. That it was serious.

Because this was a man, this pianist, who was an amateur pianist of course, but evidently some sort of intellectual. And my father realized if people of erudition and education took this madman Hitler seriously, then it was time to leave. That was for him the signal.

Do you remember leaving Essen? Is that part in your memory?

No, I don't, no. I imagine we went by train.

Now, your brothers were already born?

Yes, they were.

Do you remember your brothers-- do you remember becoming a big brother?

Not really, no. I was three years, eight months, I think, when they were born.

So your family then went to?

To Prague, Czechoslovakia-- what was then Czechoslovakia.

And why did they decide to go to Prague?

The firm my father worked for, which was headquartered interestingly enough in Argentina, an opening appeared in the Prague office. The man who-- it was a one man office, I think. The man who held the job was Italian. He wanted to go back to Italy, and the firm offered this post to my father. So we moved to Prague. In later years, my father would say we left Germany, but we first went in the wrong direction.

What month in 1936, do you know?

I don't know, no. I don't remember.

Or a season, or time of year-- beginning, middle?

No, I have no recollection of that.

OK. Now you're living in Prague. Where did your family live, again, in relation to the center of the city?

We lived in the center. It was an apartment house. I think we lived on the ground floor. And we may have, in fact, lived in more than one place in the approximately three years we lived there. I certainly remember that one of those apartment houses was across the street from a park, which had a sandbox and kind of a playground for kids where I played.

Were your parents able to bring everything with them?

Not a thing. Nothing.

What did they bring?

Just the clothes on their backs-- on our backs. That was about it. We had a gigantic duffel bag, which is bigger than any duffel bag that you would find today. It was given to us by a woman by the name of Molly. I don't remember the connection. She was not a relative, I don't think. And it was referred to for years in the family as Molly's sack. And we stuffed a whole lot of stuff in that.

Did you have any favorite game or toy at that time?

I liked to play with flashlight batteries and a little flash light bulbs, and made little theater prosceniums and that sort of thing. But it was difficult, because I never had any money to buy anything.

Would you describe your parents as middle class, upper middle?

I would say middle, probably-- yes, middle class. Yes.

So now you're living in Prague, and your father's working. It's sometime in 1936. And what is your mother doing?

My mother was working at getting us out. I guess in the beginning she worked at home. I mean, she was a housewife. But she evidently carried the brunt of trying to get us papers to leave. And she struck up a friendship with some Nazi. My mother, I might interject at this point, was a rather beautiful woman. She did not look at all Jewish. No one believed she was Jewish.

And my brothers, I don't think we've established that they were twins, my brother. They were not just blonde, they were white blonde. So the assumption was that my mother had married a Jewish man, and was not herself Jewish. That helped us enormously evidently in those years. And she played on that, and worked hard at getting the exit visas and whatever other papers were required to get us out.

How did she do that? Do you know?

She-- I think it was a matter of standing in line at the consulate day in, day out, from early morning til early evening. My mother was fearless. She was aggressive. She was a tiny woman. She had sharp elbows when she needed them. And she didn't take any guff from anyone, not even the Gestapo.

And the Jews needed a red J in their passport, which my parents didn't have when they left Germany. And that was object number one to get that while they were in Prague. A Gestapo guy that my mother was referred to promised to take care of that for them for 4,000 kroner. I don't know what that would be in today's dollars, but I know the amount was 4,000 kroner. In other words, a bribe.

My parents scraped together this money. I don't know what it represented in terms of their annual income in those days. But my mother did sell her jewelry in order to raise that money. And this man disappeared.

My mother then kept a vigil at the window. She went without sleep, evidently, for a long time, for some weeks. I mean, she didn't deprive herself of sleep for weeks, but she must have taken catnaps.

But she did spot the guy one day and charged out, and told him that she was the friend or relative of some high muckety muck in the government. It's a pure cock and bull story. But the guy believed it. And my mother threatened him, and he took it seriously. And the next day they had their passports.

Why did they want the J, the red J and the passport?

The red J was a requirement. It stood for Jew, and it was a requirement of the-- I guess the German government. Every German passport had to have that, as well as the Israeli-- the Hebrew name Sara and Israel. Those my parents also did not have.

So your parents wanted to be known as Jews rather than as Gentiles?

Yes, absolutely. My mother just did not correct people when-- particularly not government types who assumed that she was Gentile. Because it was going to stand her in good stead. And in fact, it did.

Did you go to school in Prague?

I went to school in Prague. I went to a Jewish school. And I had my first love affair in the first grade. Because I was the

smallest kid in the class, and sat in the first row. And I fell in love with my teacher, whose name was Fraulein Baga.

Somehow, I was as impulsive at that age as I am today, and unable to restrain myself one day. I jumped on my desk and threw my arms around Fraulein Baga, and hugged and kissed her. This somehow led to a meeting with Fraulein Baga with my parents in the school. And, of course, after all these years I can't explain what happened, but a friendship developed between this young teacher and my parents.

And she got married. And I do remember going to her wedding and crying bitterly that she was marrying somebody else. I would love to know whether she survived. I don't know.

This was a Jewish wedding?

This was a Jewish wedding, yes.

And there was no problem with that at the time? You don't remember any difficulty with the wedding?

I don't know. I just-- I was too young to-- I was-- I would not have noticed anything, no.

When did you first hear, or when were you first aware of a man named Hitler?

I'm not sure I know the answer to that. I think my parents tried to shield us as much as possible from what was going on. Whether they spoke of Hitler in the home, I don't know. I don't remember. Certainly, there was always a great sense of agitation and anxiety in the home.

How did you know that?

Well, when your parents are anxious, I think kids pick up on that. Hushed conversations with friends, just looking worried, I think. You can't hide that thing from kids.

Did you talk this over with your parents, your concerns?

No, I don't think I did. No. I think to the extent that it's possible at that age and in those circumstances, I had a fairly happy childhood. I think my parents did their best to protect us from the anxiety that they were enduring.

You said you went to a Jewish school? Did you have any non-Jewish friends in Prague?

I only remember one. His name was Herbert. And that's all I remember about him. We were pals, we did things together. But beyond that, I don't remember, no.

What did you do besides going to school in Prague?

I think the same thing that anybody in those days did. We went to the park in the afternoons, or I should say afternoon weekends with my parents. We had picnics. I think we did a lot of walking in the city. I remember crossing the bridge across the Danube on walks.

One of the family stories is that my brothers-- who were devils, particularly my brother George-- they were not much older than six or seven when they had their first brush with the police, in fact. They used to urinate off the bridge into the Danube, and making a spectacle of themselves just for the fun of it.

Were you a very physically active child? Did you like sports?

No, I didn't, and I don't like sports to this day, not even spectator sports.

What about music? You said that's part of your heritage.

Yes, I'm a great music lover. I think music is my one and only passion. I think because I grew up hearing my father playing with his friends and by himself, violin and piano, and the radio was always on to classical music. So I knew all the major classical works, probably before I was in-- before I was bar mitzvah, certainly.

Did you take music lessons?

I took more music lessons than most people. I took violin lessons on three separate occasions in my life. I took piano lessons on two separate occasions. The last time I took music lessons was as a 40-year-old I took piano lessons. The first time I took piano lessons I even was taking them with a private teacher in Juilliard, in New York.

I never could get the hang of it. I cannot play any musical instrument. I cannot read music. It is one of the great-- tragedies is overstating it-- but I'm sorry that I just don't have that facility.

But when you were in Prague, you didn't-- as a little child, you didn't take-- did you take lessons?

No, the first time I took music lessons was in New York.

Now, you said your mother was not religious. Did you have anything in the home? Did you celebrate the Sabbath? Was there anything done in the home when you were very young?

We celebrated the high holy days-- Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and that sort of thing. But my mother always rebelled against it. She did not see any point to it. She was very Jewish in her feeling. She was very pro-Israel, but anti organized religion.

Did you know you were Jewish in a strong sense?

Yes, I did. There was no question about that. And there was no denying that I was Jewish. In fact, one of the stories they tell about me was riding with my mother in a streetcar in Prague, I offered a seat to what seemed to me then a lovely lady. And she said, what a nice boy you are. And I babbled, yes, and I'm Jewish. And I have twin brothers.

When did you notice difficult circumstances in Prague? When did things start to get more tense?

I think the air raids in Prague, which seemed like the actual war for me, were very frightening. We did have gas masks. I don't remember ever seeing the masks themselves. They were in canisters on top of my parents clothes closet-- the wardrobe.

And there was always a lot of talk among my parents and their friends about getting visas and affidavits. So you picked up the pieces of conversation here and there. You became aware that there was some kind of a threat, that we were in danger.

Now, the Germans occupied Prague in March of '30. So you are talking about air raids when?

I said air raids, I didn't mean air raids. I meant air raid drills-- excuse me-- practice air raids. But they were very realistic, for some reason. Because in addition to sirens and such, they were-- if I remember correctly-- there were explosions-- simulated explosions.

How did your parents explain this to you? You're only seven or eight years old.

I don't remember what they told us, I really don't. I do remember seeing the sky lit up with what one could describe as fireworks. And I do remember the anxiety I felt. But beyond that, I don't remember.

Did you stay in your apartment during these drills?

I believe we had a terrace, and we stood on the terrace looking out over the scene, yes. There were searchlights, of course, piercing the sky.

And did you wear the gas masks?

If memory serves, the children did not have gas masks. There were just two of these canisters for the adults. I don't know why. And I'm not sure I remember that correctly, but I think I do.

Did you have any-- were you the butt of than any antisemitic experiences while you were in Prague?

I probably did, but I don't remember them, no. The first ones I remember vividly came later, but not in Prague. There well were from school age kids on the streets, but that's speculation. That's conjecture on my part.

So life went on for you in Prague? And you went through the drills, and then what happened?

Well, we finally got those the necessary papers to get out. And Italy was one place we went. I don't know why it was Italy. One went where one could. I guess it seemed like a safe haven at the time.

We lived in a place called Nervi, N-E-R-V-I , which was on the outskirts of Genoa. I understand nowadays it may not exist any longer. I think it has been incorporated into Genoa Proper.

Let's back up a little bit before we get to Italy. You hear that you're going to be leaving. Your parents tell you. What were your thoughts about having to leave? Here you've left one home already. You left Essen to come to Prague. Now your parents are telling you you have to leave again. As a young child, what did that mean to you?

I'm blessed or cursed, whichever way you want to look at it, with a memory that doesn't remember that far back.

You also were very young, right?

Yes, I was young. But I do remember the train ride from Prague to Genoa. Because the train was stopped in the middle of nowhere. And several Gestapo came aboard and took all our passports. And--

Did you know what the Gestapo was?

I think by that time my parents must have told us. Because my parents were frightened. You couldn't be anything but paralyzed with fright. I don't remember there being a station. I think there was just a shack that they disappeared to. And for a long, long time, a couple of hours maybe, and then they reappeared and gave back the passports. And we went out on our way.

You stayed on the train during this time? Were you in a compartment, or just in a seating car?

I think in a compartment. I think most European trains in those days had compartments, yes.

Did you take anything special with you on that trip, knowing that you were moving to a new city-- a child's?

I don't think so. I don't-- if I had any toys, I sure don't remember them. Toys we're always a scarcity in my life. I don't remember having had anything that I recall before I was nine years old. And that was years-- that was in New York already.

Did you feel bad about not having a lot of toys?

Oh, I think yes. I think these deprivations, if you will, is something that you feel all your life. It has a psychological impact on you. It tends to make you either covetous of other people's material belongings, or happy with little that you have as you get older.



You're on the train ride to Italy. Any other stops that you made besides the one time that the Gestapo stopped you?

No, I don't think so. It was-- and I don't know how long that trip was. A few hours, I imagine.

And then you arrived in Italy?

Yes.

You are still only speaking German at this point?

Yes.

To back up, did you have any religious training? Did you have any-- when you were in Prague, did you have any extra religious training besides the Jewish school that you went to?

I went to synagogue with my father in Prague. I believe there was one seemed class Torah, when we arrived and all the candy for the kids had been given out. And my father was furious. I do remember that.

But you went on a regular basis with your father to the synagogue?

I don't think we went every week, no. But I guess we went with some regularity.

Did you understand any Hebrew?

No.

So when you get to Italy your only language now is still German?

That's right.

OK, now you're in Italy. And you-- what were your first impressions?

It was a nice climate. It was warm, and my parents had no work and no money. I don't know, frankly, how they lived-- how we lived, what we lived on. All I know is that I was in charge of my brothers, and took them to a park every day, which seemed like the rational thing for my parents to do while they went scrounging for work, as well as for the next exit visa to the next way station.

But the park was a daily misery for us, because we were Jewish and we spoke German. That is to say we did not speak Italian. So the kids not only taunted us, but actually beat us. Actually beat us with chains and things like that. We never had any money. There were concessions in that park, little pedal cars, but whatever it was that they cost we never had the money. We never had a cent or the Italian equivalent of cent.

So we would hang around this little amusement park. And when kids were finished with a ride we would try to push the cars to their parking place and arrange them before the owner caught up with us. So we would maybe ride the car a couple of feet for free.

But that was a rare occurrence and a rare luxury for us. But the longing to have the money to ride one of those things was always there. And to run away from these toughs who were always after us.

Did you understand what they were saying?

No, I don't. But when you are chased with chains and sticks and fists and so forth, that's sort of a universal language.

So you are an eight-year-old in charge of two four-year-olds? What were your thoughts about having to move to Italy?

I don't know that I had a particular thought. It just seemed my parents moved there, you don't do a lot of questioning when you are eight years old, and that's where we went. I imagined that my parents explained to at least me why we were moving. I think they instilled in me a sense of responsibility for my brothers, which in a way made me grow up very fast. And I might add, my brothers have never really forgiven me for.

You said you left Prague in 1939. What month in 1939?

I don't know. I think it was the summer. It was certainly after the Germans marched in.

But it was before the war had started? Before September invasion of Poland?

Yes.

What did the Germans look like to you in Prague? Were they frightening? Were they overwhelming? What impressions as a young boy did you have?

They were soldiers. I remember what the uniforms looked like.

What did they look like?

They looked big, but not menacing. They played with us. That is to say, they patted us on the cheek, and watched us we-- by we I mean my brothers and other kids-- played in the sandlot, and whatever other equipment was in that playground. And they just-- I think they were bivouacked in that park.

And they were just-- the kids there were a distraction for these soldiers. They were something to be amused by. And they had no idea that we were Jewish, of course. They just left us alone.

So you didn't have any particularly frightening experience with German soldiers?

Not at all. They seemed to be friendly.

Did you think of them as your enemy?

No, I don't think so. No, certainly not that I think of it. Because I don't think my parents questioned us about any fraternization, for lack of a better word, with them. No, I think they just went about their business, more or less, and we went about our business of playing in the playground.

This is tape one, side B, and we were talking about the year 1939. And you have arrived in Italy, and you were in charge of your two little brothers in the park. What other memories do you have from that time in Italy?

The weekends, or at least Sundays, were spent with my parents and their small circle of friends who were all like us, refugees from Germany.

Let's talk a little bit about that. When you left Essen to come to Prague, did your parents come with other relatives in a bigger group? Or were you just the five of you?

It was just the five of us. There was only one grandparent still alive. She was my father's mother. She lived with an uncle in Amsterdam. And she later perished in Auschwitz.

And then when you were in Prague, were there other relatives around?

No.

Did you have friends from Essen in Prague?

No, I don't think so. I think we were basically by ourselves.

And then you went to Italy by yourself? But you said once you got into Italy there were German friends?

There were others like us. And the people-- refugees-- have a way of congregating, of finding each other out-- people who are in the same situation. It was a comfort, a moral support. It was a way of exchanging information. It was a way of having some kind of a tie to there being no community any longer. That was what constituted, the closest thing to a community was a small group of similarly situated friends.

Was this also true in Prague? Did your parents congregate and mix with other German refugees?

Yes, yes. Not many, I don't think. There were two bachelor brothers who were, I think, living in the same apartment house whom they befriended. It was a very small circle. We were basically alone.

What did you do besides go in the park?

That was about it. Looking forward to Saturdays and Sundays and being with my parents. And I seem to remember there was a water-- not waterfront, but a beach. Maybe it was-- I guess Genoa was close enough to the ocean, yes. Sort of a Mediterranean setting, and walking along the strand with my parents and their friends.

As I said earlier, I don't know how my parents bought food, but I do remember that it was scarce. I know when my mother came home with cherries or grapes and things like that, they were carefully counted out and divided equally among all of us.

What about clothes? Did you have enough good clothes to wear?

Clothes were always a problem, even in later years. I don't think we had a heck of a lot. But I just had a thought-- going back to the previous question-- I think, but I'm not sure, that my father's company, although he did not work for the company during the stay in Italy, I think that may have helped. Because otherwise I don't know how my parents could have survived.

Did your mother do any kind of work in Italy?

No, there was no opportunity at all. If for no other reason than that there was no-- she didn't know the language.

Did you pick up any of the language?

I don't think so. Maybe a smattering of words. But I don't think so, no.

What are your memories of this time? Was it a very difficult time? And for how long were you there?

We were in this little town of Nervi about six months. It was difficult only because every morning was the same routine of being sent to the park and being in fear of going.

Did you tell your mother you were afraid of going?

I don't remember. Probably not.

Why not?

I felt a sense of responsibility, and so I think I kept my mouth shut.

This is at eight years old you felt the sense of responsibility?

I think so, yes. It was a, I think, a heavy burden. And that, too, has left its scars.

Any other memories of your time in Italy?

No, I do remember one particularly amusing man, one of my parents' friends. He was a women's fashion designer, and I remember that he wore a monocle. And he had a big mustache that he used to twirl. He was very engaging, and highly educated, and always told amusing stories. And my parents, I think, doted on his company because he had a way of making them feel-- he was kind of an entertainment for them, if you will. Because there sure were no theater or movies or things like that for them. He you had a way of helping them get their minds off the crisis that they were living in.

Now, there were restrictions, racial laws enacted in 1938 in Italy. Were you aware of them? Did you feel any restrictions?

No, I was not. I was not. But that may also explain why my parents couldn't get any work.

Were you limited to where you could be, or times of day or evening?

Not that I'm aware of. I think our role was very circumscribed from apartment house to the park to the beach. That was about it.

Did you feel comfortable near the water?

Yes, I think I did. It was nice strolling there.

Did you go swimming?

I don't remember that. I don't think so. That may explain why I'm still a bad swimmer.

Now, what did you know about this man named Hitler, now that you're eight years old?

Strange as it may sound, I don't know. I don't know that-- I don't remember him being talked about. Whether it was probably because of my age. That's the only thing I can explain. The first time he actually came into a conversation, that I recall, was later on when we were living in our next way station.

Now, what month did you say you came to Italy, or what time of the year?

I think it was during the summer of '39.

And then the war started, World War Two, and when Germany invaded Poland in September, does that bring back any memories for you?

It does not. But I can't imagine not hearing about it at the time. Certainly, my parents and their friends must have talked about it. It's inconceivable that we didn't hear about it. But to actually remember it, no.

Do you have any memories-- just going back a year-- of Kristallnacht at all? Of people talking about it, of knowing about it, of hearing about?

No, I didn't. I really didn't.

Now, your mother, your parents are trying desperately to leave Italy. And where were they talking about going to?

They were willing to go anywhere that was possible. My details are very, very sketchy, but I do know that ultimately at the choice of Ecuador or Australia they chose Ecuador. I don't know why. I think Ecuador, certainly, was one of the few countries in the world that let Jews in. Why they chose Ecuador, I don't know.

How did your family arrange for you to leave?

Again, the long process of standing in line at the consulates, getting the exit visas, the passports, the affidavits. Somebody in Ecuador must have provided an affidavit, I would think. But who that was, I don't know. Again, it may have been my father's company that helped. The company probably paid for our passage.

Did you notice any change in your father's demeanor during this time as the situation got more tense?

No, I don't remember that. No, I don't. There was never time for horseplay or lightheartedness. There was always tension somehow that a young kid senses. And certainly there never was any money for entertainment or doing anything that was fun.

I'm not saying this in a complaining way. It was not a-- obviously, not a carefree childhood.

You must have felt much older than your years?

Yes, I still do. Someone said to me recently that I never had a childhood. I don't know that I agree with that, but I certainly had more careers and responsibilities than a kid born in this country at the same age.

Did you say anything to your brothers as they got a little older? Of course, obviously in 1939 they were, what, four years old? So did you try to explain anything to them?

No, I think all I did was try to encourage them to behave. Not to be rambunctious and things like that. But they never cooperated. They always gave me a hard time-- still do.

And now your parents were able to get papers to leave. What were your thoughts then, on the next move?

We're now going to Quito, Ecuador.

Had you ever heard of that place?

Certainly not, no. And it must have been a traumatic decision for my parents. I mean, my father then was approaching 40. My mother was a year older. The thought of going to a Latin American country where they had no facility with the language, and no way to earn a living. But at least they had the foresight to get out of Europe. And I'm forever grateful for that.

And you packed your bags to go to Ecuador? And again, by that time, did you have anything special to take with you?

No, I didn't. And you say bags, it again was Molly's sack, that great big duffel bag. I think the whole family's belongings fit into that thing. No, I didn't have any toys or anything like that-- notebooks, nothing.

Did you like to read?

Yes, I did. Unfortunately, I think because of the many languages that I had to learn, I vocalize to this day. And although I read constantly, I'm a very slow reader. I have actually tried to rid myself of this habit. I've gone to reading school, but to no avail.

I enjoy reading. I love reading. But I can't read as much as I would love to.

You said your father was very musical. Did he or your mother ever sing songs to you?

I don't remember that, no. No. European parents had, at that time, had a different relationship with their kids than is the case nowadays. Kids were to be seen and not heard, and whatever the expression is.

They were expected to live by a series-- by the set of decorous standards that certainly wouldn't obtain nowadays anymore. And there were severe punishments for stepping out of line, including being sent to bed without dinner. Which nowadays would be considered child abuse, probably.

If I can backtrack for a moment, my father tried to the best of his ability to teach me a few things that I would have been learning if I'd gone to school in Italy. He taught me the multiplication tables and things like that. He was very strict about it. It was not a good pedagogue, but it was a lot of browbeating and learning by memorization. But it was the closest thing I had to his schooling during that time.

You say your family has packed the bag-- packed Molly's bag, and now you are told you're going to Quito.

We went on an Italian steamer. The name was the Conte Grande. And I have two memories of that trip. A constant seasickness, a lot of throwing up, and a lot of smells of oils and other fats emanating from the kitchen.

Were there many other refugees on the boat with you?

I don't recall. I don't recall. I had the sense that we were always by ourselves, but I could be wrong.

What did you do on the boat?

Besides throwing up, what one usually does on a boat as a kid, I guess. Just walking around, trying to get fresh air, nothing memorable. Nothing that I really remember. Watching the ocean, got of an aversion to the smell of the sea from that point on.

Did it make any stops?

I don't think so. [CLEARS THROAT] Excuse me. Well, we went through the Panama Canal. And I do remember that. The ship was towed by mules in those days rather than-- I think they were drawn by mules. I could be wrong. But it was-- I do remember the sight of being pulled through the Panama Canal. Of course, it was the first of two trips. We ultimately went back through the canal in the other direction.

This is summer of 1939?

As far as I recall. You asked me earlier if we made a stop. I think we stopped on the Canary Islands for a few hours, but insignificant.

What did the canal look like to you as an eight-year-old?

It looked like a fascinating spectacle, which I don't think I understood how it worked. I'm not sure I understand it now. But it was a great sight to see the ship going into the locks, the locks closing, the water rising-- that is to say the lock filling with water and the ship rising, moving onto the next one. It was fascinating to see that. It took many hours, as I recall. And I think I watched the whole thing.

Was there now a difference in your parent's demeanor? Were they a little more relaxed now that they hadn't gotten out of Europe? Did you sense any difference?

I think so. I think by nature the ocean voyage must have been a tonic effect on them. But I don't remember any particulars. My mother was, what you would call nowadays-- I don't think the term even existed in those days-- a manic depressive, or at least she had those tendencies.

And while I remember her being mostly depressed, there were moments when she was in the opposite phase. And she would laugh hysterically and tell hysterical stories, the same stories over and over again. But she would laugh at a pitch that attracted attention. I do remember that. And she was fun to be with then.

But you did notice a relaxation on the part of your parents?

I think so, yes, yes.

At this time, did you talk to them at any greater length about what was going on in Europe? What was your perception of what was-- what was an eight year old's perception of what was going on?

Strange as it may sound, I don't really recall. I imagine that my parents told me why we were going. The Nazis were bad guys. That they were going to do bad things to us. Obviously, a kid of that age is going to ask questions. I'm sure I did. I'm sure I got some answers. But I do not remember specifics, no.

And so did you mix with any non-Jews on the passage?

I vaguely remember other people sitting at the table for meals. But I don't have any concrete recollections of any specific person, no.

Did you tell them why you were leaving Europe, or what your story was?

I don't know. I don't remember.

And were there are other children on the boat?

There must have been. It was a pretty big ship for those days. A two-stacker I think it was, but no concrete memories.

And you had a private room with your family?

I think we all had-- we shared-- the five of us shared one cabin, yes. Very cramped.

And now you've landed in Quito?

Actually, the ship stops in Guayaquil, of course, Quito being up in the mountains. Yes. And I do remember the pilot both coming out, and the customs, and again, the uniforms creating anxiety that was palpable, even though that wasn't necessary at that point. But it's just one of those things that you live with, you can't shake it. And I believe the process of health examinations, the immigration papers, and all that took forever and ever. The long lines-- on the ship we had to stand in line until it came our turn to disembark.

I'm not positive, but I think we had to leave the ship on a tender. I don't think the ship docked at a wharf. I could be wrong. And that was scary for me, because I do have this tendency to get seasick. I get carsick as well to this day.

And again, you said seeing uniforms or whatever upset you. Did you verbally express this to your parents?

No, I don't think so. I think the fear was-- the anxiety was not only mine. I think it was my parents. I think it rubbed off on me.

I don't know that my parents ever said anything to assuage our anxiety. I think that they were just so anxious that they perhaps didn't know how to do that or didn't think of doing it. You just felt it through them, even if you didn't feel it directly.

Do you think your little brothers experienced that also?

No, they were blissfully out of it, I think.

Now you're in Ecuador, and where did you settle?

We moved to Quito right away. A long, long train ride, and Quito is up in the mountains. And the train ride, in those days at least, was interminable. The train would go forward and backwards. It was sort of a stepped kind of railway line. It didn't make the trip in one continuous path.

So it took a long, long time. I got sick on the train. I remember standing between two cars, my father holding me, and throwing up. But yes, we then ultimately settled in Quito. And--

What's it like for a child to land in a country and hear language that he's not familiar with? Is it very confusing?

It sure is, it sure is. And in this case, of course, my parents didn't know the language either. So I imagine that the first months, at least, were very difficult. Finding a place to live, finding a place to purchase goods, getting money somehow. I'm not sure how that worked in the beginning. But somehow my parents managed.

How did they know what to do when they got on dry land? You said we did this, we took a train. How did they know? Did someone meet them?

In Ecuador, I don't know. I think there were other German refugees who had preceded us and helped us. I think there was sort of a community of people who helped one another. The later arrivals then subsequently turned around and helped those who came after them.

It was a very small German Jewish community, I believe. Not enough for a synagogue. I don't recall ever going to a religious service in Ecuador. So whatever religious observance we had was at home.

And of course, it's a Catholic country. We stood out not only as Jews. We stood out as speaking German.

But I went to school. I was-- I went to a private school, in fact. But when I say private school, it doesn't mean what it might mean in this country. It was really the only decent school. It's where the diplomats and the wealthier people of Quito, and perhaps other cities of Ecuador, would send their kids.

It was very strict, very demanding. The standards were incredibly high compared to the United States. I remember learning things in the United States in junior high school that I had learned years ago in Ecuador. So it was a fantastic school.

The classes were taught in Spanish?

The classes were taught in Spanish. I was called Ernesto then by the teacher. And if you did something that displeased him, he would pick up by your side burns-- very painful.

Was it difficult for you to pick up Spanish?

No, actually Spanish is one of those languages that is, relatively speaking, easy to pick up. And for a kid it was quite easy. So although I don't speak it any longer, I learned it fluently very quickly. And was quite good in school, to my great surprise. But always stood out. My clothes were different.

In what way?

Well, we lived from hand-me-downs. I don't know incidentally how my parents got the money for the tuition. Again, I think my father may have gotten money from the company that employed him. My father had started with this company, by the way, when he was 13. And he may have received loans from them. He never told me about those. I don't know.



What was the name of the company?

It was Kaufman. They were well known, they still exist today, although on a much smaller scale. It was a hide and skin exporting company. And I think at one time, or various times during our sojourn in Quito, my father did some freelance work for the company. In that he went to slaughter houses and bought hides, and made arrangements to have them sold and exported to other countries.

But early on, he teamed up with a Czech engineer, who in fact lived with us in a two family house. The name was [? Rovichek, ?] it just came to me. And they made margarine in an abandoned garage, margarine out of vegetable oils, I think. Very primitive. They employed a few Indios, which is the native Indians are called Indios. And the water out of the margarine was squeezed out by hand, made into balls of margarine. That was our first-- that was my parents' first income.

They as well got the idea-- I don't know how it originated-- to make thermos boxes, very primitive thermos boxes. Two layers of wood with-- what do you call that packing material, excelsior-- in between as insulation. This goes years before Styrofoam and all that, and plastic. And they made these food storage containers which they sold.

And he was also a Jewish refugee, Mr. [? Rovichek? ?]

Yes, he was.

He was-- it was someone that your father met in Prague? You said he was Czech.

I think they met in Quito. Again there was this network of people. You didn't need a telephone, which didn't exist. People knew about you in the small German Jewish refugee community. They clung to one another, actually. And it was this network of helping people out. I think that's how it came about.

Were you aware that World War II had started?

Yes, I do remember my mother telling me that Hitler and Stalin had signed this agreement. I don't remember what-- I don't remember what she said about it, or what it-- what the implication of it was. But I do remember her telling me that.

And the invasion of Poland?

I do not remember that, no. We had no radio, of course. My parents couldn't read the newspaper, so there were no newspapers in the house. Whatever news there was came from word of mouth.

Can you describe the living conditions?

Relatively primitive, the buildings were made of clay, I guess it is. And once there was a-- well, of course, Ecuador has a lot of tropical rains. And once we actually had to leave our house and move to another house because the roof just caved in from the weight of the water. But it was very primitive.

The-- strange as it may sound, our next door neighbor lived in a cave. He was a tin smith, or some metal worker, may have been an ironmonger. But it was a cave. And our house was-- the house that we lived in before we had to abandon it-- was right next to that.

The streets were not-- where we lived, we lived on the outskirts of Quito-- were not paved. There were a muddy mess when it rained. And much of the shopping was done by Indios coming to the house with their trays of fresh fruits and vegetables. Which incidentally had to be very thoroughly washed in some pink stuff that my mother got that would disinfect it-- disinfectant it was.

How secure did you feel?

I never felt secure. I had one friend, also the son of a refugee family, I seem to think his name was Klaus, but I cannot say that with any security. And there were no, again, no spending money, no toys to play with.

This fellow, Klaus, or whatever his name was, we would go after school to a local canning factory and play with the scraps of metal. Which was, by the way, kind of dangerous because it was easy to cut yourself with. But we made soldier uniforms. We made a belt and Sam Brown belt kind of thing out for this scrap metal, hats and such, and swords. That was our playtime.

Did you consider yourself German at that time?

German as a nationalistic German, or-- no, I don't think so. No, we wanted to assimilate. That is to say we wanted to be-- live in peace, and be left alone. So we did what had to be done. My parents learned Spanish-- learned quite well, in fact.

And we tried to live with our neighbors. The second house we lived in then was one of a-- we lived in a compound. A rich family that had this guesthouse, we then moved to this guesthouse. And one of the things I remember the great excitement when they were going to show a movie, to which we were invited. Black and white, of course, and it was the Story of Jesus.

Which I didn't quite understand. And I asked one of the daughters-- I think that two daughters, this family-- some question about what this was all about. Some question about the movie I didn't understand. And she said to me-- and that was not the first time in my life I heard that-- well, you killed Jesus, and you should know all about this.

That was the first experience of antisemitism-- not that I experienced, but certainly the first one that I vividly recall. I was very upset. I went to my parents to ask them what this girl, who was I guess my age or a little older, was talking about it. I don't remember what they responded, but I remember being very upset by this incident.

Were you frightened after what you had left in Europe?

I think I was always frightened. I think I was always-- if not frightened, at least uneasy. Because my clothes were different from my classmates. The food I ate was different.

My Spanish, I'm sure, was with an accent. So I always stood out, little Ernesto. And that was always a sense of discomfort and never feeling quite at home. Never feeling quite one of the boys. It was an all boys school, incidentally, no girls.

Were there many other refugee children in your school?

No, I was the only one. I don't know why. I was the only Jew. I still have my report cards, by the way, from that school. And I have a picture of me with the teacher. There were probably about 15 or 20 kids to this class. It was very rigorous.

Did the teacher ask you about your past history?

I don't think so. If he did, I don't remember. This was, I think, the other kids were probably from elite families. So I guess there was a certain amount of discretion on the part of the administration. It was not the school where ordinary kids would go. And I guess I was lucky to be able to go there.

Now, things are tightening up in Europe even more and more so. Were your parents aware of that? And if so, how did they get the information?

Again, the network and I guess somebody had shortwave radio. And there was-- sure the news of Europe reached them. And again, the process of getting out and getting on the quota. Ecuador, of course, had a separate quota-- I mean, the United States had a separate quota of Ecuador. And that helped.

So we spent something like two-and-a-half years in Ecuador, '39 to '41. I went to two grades of school. And I don't know how difficult it was for my parents to get the affidavit and exit visa and all the other papers that were required. But they managed, once again, to do so.

Did you want to leave?

Yes, I'm sure there was-- I don't think there was any fear of a concentration camp or anything like that in Ecuador. Surely not. But it was not-- it was just such a primitive country to live in. And I think my father felt that he could do better economically. And the United States was the Mecca, if you will, that all the refugees there wanted to go to. All aspired to go to America.

Were you taunted at all for being Jewish?

Oh, yes, that was always-- always being chased and beaten and pummeled. And it was a never ending thing.