

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Michel Margosis conducted by Gail Schwartz on August 20, 1998 in Arlington, Virginia. This interview is part of the museum's project to interview Holocaust survivors and witnesses who are also volunteers with the museum. This is a follow-up interview that will focus on Mr Margosis' post-Holocaust experience.

In preparation for this interview, I read the summary of the interview you conducted with me, Gail Schwartz, for the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington on February 26, 1989. And I read a 20-page memoir that you wrote in December of 1988 as well as the section of the book, *Triumph and Spirit* by Nicholas Del Calzo. I will not ask you to repeat everything you said in that interview.

Instead, I will use this interview as an opportunity to follow up on that interview and focus on your post-Holocaust experiences. This is tape number 1, side A. What is your full name?

Michel Margosis.

And your date of birth and place of birth.

September 2, 1928 in Brussels, Belgium.

As I said, you've been interviewed extensively already, but just to put this interview in a framework, let's summarize where you were during the war. Both of your parents were born in Odessa. Your father was a journalist, an active Zionist, and he was sent to Siberia. He was married at the time. He later escaped from Siberia and went to Persia where your parents became Iranian citizens. And your older brother and sister were born in Iran.

Then your family later went to Belgium, and your father published two weekly newspapers in Yiddish and in French. And you three children belonged to Hashomer Hatzair. There was not much activity immediately after September 1, 1939 when the war began until May 10, 1940, when the Germans invaded Belgium. Four days later, the five of you went by train.

You were strafed by German planes. You had to hide under the benches of the train, and you crossed into France, just south of Toulouse. And in the summer of 1940, you hid and worked on a farm. Your father tried to get a visa but then had to flee to Portugal. Soon after, your mother decided to go to Marseilles to go to the Persian Legation for help. And the four of you were detained in Toulouse in a camp, but you were able to escape that night.

On October 1941, you arrived in Marseilles. Your mother was able to support the family by selling on the black market. And the order arranged for you to go to a scout camp. After the Allied invasion of North Africa, your mother made plans to leave and got papers to go through the Pyrenees. You took a train to Toulouse where your mother pretended to use sign language when you all saw the German soldiers.

Two days after arriving at the resort, two gendarmes offered to guide your family to Spain, and your mother was able to pay them \$40,000 for that. Then another guide offered to take you further to Barcelona. Along the way, you were all arrested and you were taken to an orphanage. And the other three members of your family were taken to a jail in Barcelona. After two weeks, you, and your mother, and your sister were sent to a hotel sponsored by the Joint Distribution Committee, and your brother was sent to a concentration camp near Bilbao.

The Joint Distribution Committee then arranged for your brother and your family to get together in Barcelona. And they sponsored a convoy for children under 16 to go to the United States. You took a train to Lisbon and were able to see your father for a whole week. And then you got on a small Portuguese ship with a group of children to make the voyage. Some German U-boat sailors boarded your ship during the voyage but did leave you alone.

And then on June 22, 1943, you landed in Philadelphia, went to New York, eventually to your cousin's house in Brooklyn. You became a citizen in 1949, graduated from college, was in the army for two years, got a master's, worked for the Food and Drug Administration of the federal government. You are married and you have two children.

Before we go on to your post-Holocaust experiences, I just wanted to clarify some points. How would you describe yourself as a child? Were you very independent? Were you able to be by yourself?

I must have been quite independent, because my parents were working. When we were alone in Marseilles, my mother was looking to survive, dealing in black marketing. And we were alone very much of the time so that we were independent-- in fact, so independent many times I didn't come home. I had a friend whose father had a restaurant or bakery and I was able to get in there and be fed that way on many occasions. So we were very much independent. I'd go to the beach every day or do whatever I wanted.

Were you a very optimistic child even though the conditions were difficult?

I think I've always been optimistic. Back then, I never realized the danger I was in. But it's when I came here I found out what I had escaped.

What kind of relationship did you have with your mother? Was it a very close relationship?

Pretty close with the whole family-- not my sister, my brother. Four years apart from my sister-- she had her friends, and I had mine. And my brother, three years difference, we were fairly close. We got closer as we got older. But as I said, we were very independent.

What language did you speak with your sister, brother, and parents?

Well, we had a three-tier language in the family. My parents spoke Yiddish to each other, Russian to the children, and the children spoke French to each other. So my Russian is strictly kitchen Russian. I learned Yiddish here when I came because my cousin could not understand anything else except English, and I certainly didn't know any of that. And the words that I did hear from my parents, I remembered. And Yiddish came back to me.

You were 12 years old when Belgium was attacked. What is it like to experience something like that at age 12?

It's difficult to get back to that age and remember how it felt. I knew that something terrible was happening. And I remember seeing movies about World War I even when I was younger than 12, and particularly seeing things about the French building the Maginot Line, and we felt so secure-- and caught up in the false security, but it was still a feeling of we were practically impervious. We could do anything.

So as I said, I was optimistic then. And I don't know the thing about the safety of the time, but I was not too worried. My father was, my parents were, because they went through the Russian revolution and internment over there. But I never had any of that.

Did you go to your parents for comfort when the invasion started?

I do not remember being worried about it and seeking support. I know that my father, even before the invasion of Belgium. From 1933 on, he was looking to migrate. So being a journalist, he kept up on all these affairs of state of Belgium, and Germany, and what was happening, and the plight of the Jews in Russia. He kept up with that.

And he it's obvious that the world is going to the dogs, and the best place to go was the United States. But we were never allowed to come.

Why weren't you allowed to come?

Because they had a quota system. And the quota system was particularly favorable if you were British-born or German-born, but not to the Slavic people or the Middle Eastern. We were the last ones. So I don't know how they managed to come here in '46, but there were patient.

You said your father even since 1933 was very concerned about the conditions. Did he talk this over with you, or your brother, or your sister? Or did he try to protect children?

I do not remember him talking to us about it. He talked to, of course, his colleagues, and he wrote about it in the paper extensively. At that age, I don't think children are involved in the world's politics. And I don't think they worry about these things. I know that after the war we talked about it quite a bit.

Did your parents treat you like a child or as an adult after the invasion?

Well, my father left soon after that-- just a few months. I think around June 1940, he went to Portugal. At that point, we had to be treated like adults because we had to work on the farm. They expected us to do certain things and not just live as a guest of the people there. But we worked that adults would do, I guess.

When you left Belgium four days after the invasion, did you take anything special with you? Again, you were only 12 years old. Do you remember anything about that?

I don't remember taking anything with me from Belgium. But I remember that while I was in France, I had acquired a few things. And as I crossed the border to Spain, I remember carrying a big dictionary-- Le Roux's dictionary. And somehow when I got here to the States, that dictionary had disappeared. Later on my brother admitted that he purloined it from me. But I had that, and I also collected stamps which I managed to save. But from Belgium, I don't remember having anything.

I was just wondering if there was something particular that a 12-year-old boy would bring with him.

Well, Belgian candy was not bad, but I didn't even think of it.

Well, how did you feel about leaving Belgium? You were born there, did you feel Belgian? Was it difficult for you to leave?

I just went along with the family. And my family didn't feel Belgian-- although we felt welcome there and well-treated by the administration there. We had no problems with it. And when I left, I didn't know that it would be a permanent move. We were just refugees, and we were just going to go to another city in Belgium. It just happened that the city, as we get closer to it, it got further away from us. But I had no thoughts about leaving, or returning, or--

You said your family did not feel Belgian. Did you since you were born there?

Not really. Being the only Belgian-born doesn't make me really more Belgian than anybody else. I married an American, and I don't know whether she felt any more American than I did.

How would you have described yourself at 12, then, if it weren't Belgian?

As a happy-go-lucky kid. I was going to school. I didn't have any worries. I was just living a childhood life.

When you were on the train, and got strafed, and you hid under the bench, did that bring back memories of the invasion a few days before?

No, that's a totally different experience. The invasion, to me, consisted of the morning of May 10, hearing strange noises which happened to be bombings. But that was the only experience that I had known directly. And then that wasn't even a worry because it was in the distance. My father recognized it immediately.

The strafing is a lot more immediate, where most of the people run ran of the train, and many of them didn't make it back. My father had the foresight to hide us under the benches, where if we were going to be hit, the shots would ricochet off the seats in the cabins where they were. So again, I was too optimistic or too worried to be scared. I wasn't afraid-- might have been silly, but I was not afraid.

In France when your father left, did he say anything special to you before he went?

When he left, we were in Cazerès, in that small town. And my father had gone to Vichy hoping to catch some of the foreign legations there. By the time he got there, it was too late. Everybody had moved, although we had heard that some had gone to Marseilles, and that's why we went. But by the time he got there, he had papers for himself, he could not get anything else.

And he wrote a letter, actually, I don't think he phoned. Telephones were not as popular back in those days. Just saying that he had to go, and he would do anything he could to try to get us with him as soon as possible. That took a little time, but eventually my mother had to do it on her own.

When your family got the letter, what was your reaction? Was it frightening to know that your father wasn't coming right back?

No. My mother cried, of course. But she was strong-- very strong. And she was able to carry on and do what had to be done for four of us to survive and go on living. The communication with my father continued for a while, even though it was in Portugal. We were able to write to each other.

The letters were, of course, censored. We could see that was taped and plainly written, censored. And after a while, it stopped. But I don't think my mother ever flinched, at least none that I could detect. I'm sure she did.

But when the letters stopped, was that upsetting to you?

I think the letters stopped more on our side than from Portugal's side, because I don't think they allowed too much mail to go out from France. At that point, I don't know where the communication stopped. I don't know whether it was a government thing. Portugal was dominated mainly by the Allies in policy, even though it was a dictator there too. I don't know what happened at that part.

You did say your mother was a very strong woman, and she did sound very courageous and very strong. Can you just talk a little bit more about where she got this strength from? Do you know?

Well, she left Russia when my father was in Siberia and joined him in Palestine on her own. She left her family-- her mother, and sister, brother-- I never knew she had a brother until many years later. But she joined them and became a family again. In 1939, my father had to go to Geneva to report on the Zionist convention at that time.

And when he could not get back because war had been declared, that delayed his return for many months. She was there, and she did what she had to do. And as time went on, she showed more courage than I had ever seen.

Would she confide in you and talk to you about her concerns while she was dealing with all these problems?

I don't think so. She kept very much to herself. She might have talked once with my sister. She was the older one. But she did not confide her plans as to what she was going to do. We found out she was dealing in black market only, because we saw the chocolate and cigarettes in the house. And sometimes I would borrow them.

But as events developed, we found out then-- oh, we're going to the Pyrenees. That's good. My sister needed some treatment. So we had a paper to show from the doctor that she needed treatment of Saratoga-type waters. So we went there, and I thought it was natural.

When we decided to cross the borders, my mother said, well, we have some money we can spare to take us over. But as things developed, as we found out about these things-- maybe it was for the best, because then we could not dissuade or discourage her from doing anything that she wanted to do. She made the decisions and stuck to them.

When you were detained in that camp in Toulouse, were you very frightened?

Originally, it was a reception camp for refugees. I didn't know that we were being detained. We were received there as refugees and know that would feed us a little bit and blankets. But as we talked to a few inmates at the time, my mother was particularly discouraged about what this might be.

So after everybody was asleep, we just raised the canvas of the tent and just snuck out, never to return-- which is a good thing, because I believe that all these people ended up in Drancy and Auschwitz.

Did you want to leave the camp? Were you frightened about leaving?

Leaving at midnight? That's so romantic. No, I didn't want to leave the camp. I didn't mind leaving the camp. The camp didn't appeal to me in a military barracks. That was no fun. So leaving, it was just what we needed to do [INAUDIBLE] lifted our spirits in a way.

Did you feel very brave? You were just 13 years old. Did you feel 13?

No, I felt probably older, like most teenagers. Brave? No, I don't think so. I did things because they were there. I was hungry and I lived in the country. I lived in a small town and I was able to go in the fields. And when I was hungry, I'd stop and eat five, 10 pounds of grapes-- just not worrying about the consequences, or climbing a tree and having fruits or even climbing on a truck and having watermelons from somebody else. And I wasn't brave. I was hungry. And it was an exciting youth, I guess. It's different from most of the kids that you talk to these days.

Were you upset that you weren't able to have a bar mitzvah when you turned 13? Was that important to you?

My brother had a fabulous bar mitzvah. One of the foremost honors of Europe was invited-- Joseph Schmitz. He was well-known back in those days. He escaped to Switzerland, but he never made it. His car was blown up-- a well-known personality. I remember some of the preparation from his bar mitzvah, so I was envious.

But I always gave myself the excuse that, well, the Germans didn't allow me to do that. So I didn't miss it too much. I could have made it up when my son was bar mitzvah'd, and we were thinking of doing a double bar mitzvah, but then I chickened out-- too much work, I was too involved professionally, and that just didn't pan out.

When you were on the train and your mother had to resort to sign language because she saw these German soldiers, what did the German soldiers represent to you?

The enemy. Again, I did not know what they represented and what they could do. But when I saw my mother gesticulating sign language, I was amazed that she had the thought to do this. And in retrospect, I think it was extremely courageous, number one, to stay on the train with the troops. And it was just fantastic.

Again, I was not too worried. I considered more or less like a native, and my French was as good as any of the natives. When I left Belgium and lived in Marseilles, I acquired a Marseilles accent, and I lost my Belgian accent. Nobody could ever differentiate me from a local.

Were the German soldiers are fearful sight to you?

No. I didn't talk to the strangers. They kept to themselves, and they were laughing, and they were talking. That didn't represent anything at that point. I remember that back then before '39, we always referred to the Germans as the Boche. It's only now that they differentiate between German and Nazis. And back then it was strictly-- I didn't know about the Nazis philosophy that I found out later on.

Did you know about a man named Hitler at that time?

Oh yes. We used to sing dirty songs about him. Maybe that's why he invaded Belgium, who knows? Yes, I knew some of the things. I used to read the paper. And that I skipped some of the details, but I knew about Hitler, and Goering, and

even the propaganda. Propaganda became a big word back then.

And then I knew there was something to fear-- that the continent was going in that direction. But being as optimistic as I was, I didn't worry too much.

At that time, did you talk things over with your brother or sister?

No. We were fairly isolated from each other. And he had his friends, she had her friends, and I had mine. And that age group, when you are 14, you have 14-year-old friends. When you are 17, the 14-year-olds, you want to have nothing to do with them. And the same with the girls. My sister was much more mature. And she wouldn't have anything to do with the little kids. No, we didn't talk to each other.

I meant at home, let's say, in the evening--

In the evening, we just had our dinner. And I guess we went out. I don't know. I don't remember much of what we did evenings. During the day, we were active. I used to go skating and go to the beach. And I got to know the city pretty well-- almost every street there, but also hiding in the slums, and I knew those slums better than any other part of the city.

When your family was arrested and you were put in the orphanage, was that separation difficult for you?

No, that separation was not too bad, because there were other kids that were in the same situation as mine. And I knew we were in a code neutral country. So I had no thought of being returned to France, although I heard that before the invasion of North Africa, the Spanish authorities did return many of the refugees back into France. But I didn't do that.

So you were confident that you would see your mother again.

Oh yes. There was no problem, no fear of that. I even thought that the little problem of being separated for a while was strictly because we didn't have official entry papers, like a passport and visa and being able to travel. But I figured within a few days, I should be able to see my father even. So I was looking forward to that.

When you heard your brother was sent away, was that upsetting?

That was a little more upsetting because it was more of a residence for adults rather than for children in my group. And I'd heard that there was quite a bit of violence in that camp from the residence. But I had heard it was mainly due to the Poles-- refugees who were arrested there. And there were still some prisoners from the civil war in that camp. But I didn't hear too much about him, when he wrote just to my mother, not to me.

What was your reaction when you heard that you'd be going to the United States? You'd be leaving your family behind. We made plans for that. In fact, my mother asked me first if I wanted to go. And I said, well, it's only for children under 16. And if I go there, I'll be able to be in a better position to work on the papers so that you can join us later on much faster. Otherwise, it may linger even more.

So in a way, I was happy that I was able to go. And as soon as I got here, I made myself a pest of my uncle. I said, why don't you send the papers? And I went to different people. I went to the consulate, and I got in touch with the State Department. And they said, you'll just have to wait. That was frustrating, but I waited.

So it sounds like you were acting when you came older than a typical 15 and 1/2 year old, 16-year-old child.

Yeah. I was acting-- I wanted them to come and join me. At that point, I was close to 15 already. And I had to go to school, which was a new experience for me. I hadn't been in school in about three years. And so I had a few more responsibilities. But getting them over here was a primary responsibility.

What thoughts were going through your mind when you were on the voyage to the United States and then those German

sailors boarded your ship?

Being a Portuguese ship, I said, this is strictly neutral. They're not going to do anything. They can't. It's not legal. Indeed, they left everybody alone. But we did know this somehow or other when we started the trip again that one of the cooks was missing. We don't know what happened. Somebody thought that he jumped over. I don't know why-- must have been something there. And maybe they were looking strictly for him. I wasn't afraid. Again, being as optimistic as I am.

What was it like to put your foot down on American soil when they landed?

Actually, when we first landed, it was more scary than I would have expected, because I saw all these dirigibles in the sky covering the whole port of Philadelphia, and then the same in New York, and the whole coast-- just nothing but those balloons that are petroleum. What's going on? I know it's wartime, but it felt pretty good-- especially when I saw all these goods, all the stores open, and all the activities. I didn't think the war was touching anybody here.

What did you know about America before you came here?

I knew they spoke English here and they made a lot of good movies. I know the American Indian was strictly an American feature and the cowboy. And we didn't have cowboys in Belgium-- not much more. I didn't study it. Well, I knew that it did become independent from England. But I didn't know about the feelings-- it took 200 years for the feelings to dissipate. I didn't know much about it.

I certainly didn't know anything about the racial problems that we had here. And I hate to use the term, but some of my best friends in France were not white. In fact, my best friend was Black. I think I might have mentioned that before-- his mother was Danish, and his father was Cameroonian. And in retrospect, I remember that Cameroon was under German domination as a protector until the end of World War I.

So he might have had still these German attachments, and he did work for the German government when we were in Marseilles. But these kids couldn't tolerate that either. So we were active. We did a lot of things together. But again, he was too young either for my brother or for my sister to consort with.

How good was your English when you came here?

I think I could say, love, and that's about it. I don't even know if I knew how to say, thank you. I heard the word, love, in many songs-- that's all I knew.

And so when you went to high school, was that a very difficult adjustment for you?

Well, I received help from a teacher who registered me, because he was a French teacher. So for the first year or two, I took French. So in the French class, I was able to learn English, and the kids would learn French, of course. And that's where I learned most of it. But I had a hard time in English and all the other courses.

Civics-- I had to learn about New York government. And I couldn't care less by that time. But second year, I did much better. I was able to read Shakespeare by the second year. And we had to analyze *Midsummer Night's Dream*-- but I would cheat. I would read in French first. But by the third year, I was good enough to join the senior society-- the honorary society. And that was gratifying.

I felt pretty good to be able to communicate with the rest of my neighborhood, because the first words I learned in this country were Italian cusses from the neighbors-- you have to learn this. This is the nicest thing you could say to a relative. But I got over it.

This is a continuation of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Michel Margosis. This is tape number 1, side B. And we were talking about your adjustment in high school when you came to this country. Did you talk about your European experience, your childhood, and what you went through with the other

American teenagers?

Not really. I was interviewed once in high school, and I remember just when apparently I spoke well enough English, but it was reported in the local school paper. The neighborhood kids were particularly-- I don't know what the word is-- surprised whenever I would jump and hide when a plane would fly overhead. My kind of reaction was to hide against the curb. But outside of that, I think they were pretty good.

What did you say to them why you did that?

Well, I said, I don't know is it a friendly or enemy plane. I'm not going to try to look. I can't tell anyways. But I said we will protect ourselves.

What was their reaction?

No problem.

How long did that go on, that you reacted that way?

About a year. Then I realized that the enemy didn't come here yet. Well, they still had the bund over here, and other organizations, and the spy system, but the neighborhood was fine. I made friends with most of the neighborhood kids, and we did quite well. We had Jews, we had Italians, we had Greeks. I learned a few words in Greeks, little Italian. We got along beautifully.

How meaningful was it for you the day you became a citizen?

That became a very important day in my life. The witnesses were naturalized citizens too that were the aunt and uncle of young man who came with me on the same ship. And that's a strange feeling as I'm now an American. I'll be able to vote. And I was very proud.

Did you really feel American then?

That's difficult to say. What is really American? I don't know what really American is. Does the American Indian feel he's really American, or somebody who came on the Mayflower? I don't think I'm any less American than anybody else here.

I don't know if I'm more American. I worked for the government for so many years, and I don't know if that's part of the repayment for taking me in. I feel as grateful today as ever that I'm here. And I would never change that for anything. I don't miss Belgium. I don't mind taking a trip over there, you know?

It's nice to visit Belgium, but I don't think I want to live there. This is fine. I'm very happy here. I don't think I could have found any greater contentment anywhere else as I have found here in every respect, with all the problems we have. I wouldn't change anything for that.

What were your feelings when you put on an American army uniform?

Goody goody. I'm part of the system. I accepted the uniform better than I accepted the soldiering. I didn't think much of the NCOs or even the company commander at Fort Dix. Of course, we were told that we were going to be treated like pack animals or numbers. They just called his buddies, but they didn't like to use our names.

That's a little humiliating. Escape a world where we are animals, and then go back to the pack animal feeling. It sounds pretty good. I'm glad I did my service. And I enlisted too, which most my friends do not understand. But I enlisted. And like I said, I served my time.

Do they treat you any differently knowing the childhood that you had?

I don't think anybody in the army knew my childhood. I never told anybody about it. And I didn't have anybody in the army that I could talk to. I did not make any friends there-- not even when I changed my occupational specialty from rifleman to medic. I just didn't have any friends I could talk to about it.

And back then, I didn't think of myself as a survivor. I was a refugee, like so many others. I was elevated when the museum came into being. But before that, I was proud that I was in the army, and it was a worthwhile experience. I would not repeat it. I would not reenlist. I don't think that a career in the army would have been good for me. But yet I have a friend here who's career army, and he's from Germany.

When the war was over in 1945, did you celebrate particularly in a special way?

I went to Time's Square. I keep looking for myself on all the pictures on that show. I think I saw not just a sailor kiss a girl, but there were a lot of people kissing everybody. It was extremely exciting-- all the people and say, well, things has to improve now. My sister and brother were in Palestine. My parents were still in Portugal, but at least they were together.

So that was a step ahead. I said, that's important. The world is going to heal, it's going to get better, and just go forward. It was exciting. It was healing, especially for the young, I would think-- so many things to look ahead for.

Do you think you would be a different person today-- a different adult if you had not gone through the difficult times that you did as a child?

I don't know if anybody can answer that kind of question. There are so many variables there that I wouldn't even venture to try to answer that. It's quite possible. I don't know how it would affect me. I don't know how much the war has affected me, actually. My values, I guess, are mostly American values. And in that respect, I differ from the rest of my family-- although my sister has been here for many years.

She recently lost her husband who was a hero also during the war. And I wish he could have told his story, but he never allowed it. I think my family by and large has accepted American values also. How different would I have been? I have always been optimistic, and I don't think that would have changed.

If I'd been in an annihilation camp, I would have been a totally different impact. But I was extremely lucky that I was always one step ahead Thanks to my mother. How else, how different would I be today? I don't know. Maybe I would not have survived, I don't know.

What made your mother as strong and courageous a person as she was?

I think, number one, being Jewish. I think that always gives a person more resilience to the world. Having a husband, being sent to Siberia, and surviving that-- that should increase the backbone of any person, I would think. Although on the other hand, some people go the other way. I think motherhood and being a woman, I think, gives her more strength and more of an equalitarian, I guess.

Did you inherit her strength and her courage?

Physically, I look like my father. Otherwise, I don't know. I don't know if I'm strong. I don't know if I'm as dedicated as she is, or she was. I don't know. I would hope that I have acquired the best traits of both of my parents. That's a good thing to aspire to.

Are there any sights or sounds today that would bring back [INAUDIBLE] times in Europe, which were difficult. I remember you did allude when you were younger, the plane flying over were frightening to you for at least the first year. Were there any other experiences that kind of triggered your memories of being a child?

When I first came here, I moved to Brooklyn. That had a few neighborhoods where they still had trolleys. Whenever I

heard the clang clang of the trolley, sometimes that reminded me of the trolleys in Europe. In fact, we have been to Europe a few times, and more so in Holland than any other country, they have trolleys and that reminded me of when I was more audacious as a kid. And I used to sneak onto the trolleys and go from place to place.

Not much else. The food is totally different. The restaurants-- I suppose as a kid, I never went to restaurants. In Belgium, they had two major department stores at the time. And they were not that much different department stores of today are different from back then. But I don't think they were too different from when they were in Belgium. I used to love to ride the escalator, and try to run down the escalator going up.

I don't remember any specific sounds. The smell of the French fries in Belgium-- they had little street carts where they would sell French fries. That is something that is particularly heartwarming thinking about it.

Is there anything today that brings back that negative feeling of running away or your life being in danger?

No, I don't remember of any of it. It was a bad time when I was in the army. I was stationed in Verdun part of the time, which is a cemetery of France. And that is depressing, even more so than working in the museum. There's still have fields where people walk and they can still find the human bones and shells.

And being stationed there was no picnic. But I did it. And I was a medic by that time, and I did my tour of duty. But in fact, when I finished there, I went to Belgium for annual leave. I did not feel Belgian at that time. I felt American. When I went into Paris, I felt American.

I could speak the language, and the people did not look at me-- they didn't know I was not French, but I did not feel at home until I came back to Brooklyn and to the States. When we travel outside the country, the first thing we do when we come back is they say, thank you for having us. In fact one time we came back-- when we had a one-year sabbatical in France, in Paris, we came back, the agent said, both my wife and I, welcome back to the United States.

Quite an experience. My wife said she was ready-- ready to cry again too. This is where we feel totally at home, totally comfortable. And I think people should go out periodically to visit other parts of the world so they can appreciate their own home a lot more. And there is a strong feeling for that.

I still love to travel. And I still love French restaurants, and I still love the sites. We love Paris-- it's the most beautiful city in the world. Even after seeing the museums there, we come home and say, I don't know, the National Gallery may not be as good, but we love it just as much. So it's great to be back and to appreciate this. Are we more American today? Just as American. It's a good feeling.

Is your wife from Europe?

My wife is at least second or third generation American. Her parents were born here. One grandparent was born here. Her father went to Cornell. She went to Cornell-- can't be any more American than that.

I went on a date once up in New York State on an Indian site-- what could be more American? She doesn't have the same appreciation of this, I guess, as I do. But after traveling, and then having that feeling, and being welcomed back, she appreciates that.

How did you convey the Jewish religion or Jewish culture to your children?

Well, when I was in the army, we used to have what I called GI parties. Every Friday evening, we'd take everything out of the barracks and hose are down with strong soaps and detergents. Then I found out that these same Friday nights, they had services. I became Jewish. My parents were orthodox. Every year for the Yom Kippur, my father would have to drag me by the year practically to go to services.

When I was in the army, I didn't have to be dragged. But that was mainly reform services. And lo and behold, I knew what was going on for a change. I never had a chance to study Hebrew. And when I did go to services, I began to

appreciate what I had. Then when I met my wife, she was reformed, because she became reformed when the father was refused entrance to services when he walked six miles from school. They wouldn't accept him without a ticket.

If you had not ticket, you can't pray here. And that was orthodox. He went to a place, and they accepted him, and that was reform, and they converted. And then when we got married, we got married by reform rabbi, because their family were sponsoring it. And when the children came, it was just natural to join the congregation. We belonged to Bethel in Alexandria since we came here-- came here in '67.

Were you ever angry as a child that you were Jewish and these negative things were happening to you because you were Jewish?

I remember being called dirty Jews in Belgium. Belgium is no purer than any other country there-- except maybe France. I have a special feeling against the French. I didn't have any feeling against being Jewish. In fact, I did know when they told us we are the chosen people, that means something to us-- we were chosen by God to be his representatives.

But my father had very strong Jewish feelings-- being a Zionist, and being trained in the cheder by a foremost poet of the century, I think-- Bialik. He had strong feelings and he tried to impart upon us. But it wasn't until we were old enough and on our own to be able to appreciate ourselves. But I've belonged to Bethel, and we belong to Bethel since we came here. And we still have the attachment.

When your children were your age when you had to leave Belgium and start your own journey here, did that bring back memories of those times? You said your two children, and when they were your age, teenagers, when it meant that you had to leave Belgium and make the dangerous journey that you did, that bring back memories of those years to you?

I don't relate my children to my experience. When my kids went through a Jewish education, that was also under duress, I guess-- no kid wants to go to Sunday school if he can help it. But Sunday go through confirmation age 16-- but even then, he said he had doubts. The rabbi says, fine, we all have doubts.

But when he married, he told me that he was going to have to convert because she's conservative. They go to services. They belong. My daughter did not marry a Jew, but the rabbi talked to her before that. In fact, he married her, the rabbi. He says, I have no problems with her. She knows who she is, which is good. But I don't relate it to my own experience.

I not only meant religiously, but just generally when your children were young teenagers, as you were when you had to leave, did that make you recall the time?

Again, I don't see any relationship between one and the other. I don't know how my growing up affected my father growing up, for instance, in Russia. It's a totally different experience. I don't see any relationship there.

What are your thoughts today about Germany?

Well, it must exist. It's still there. I know that in one that the first compositions that I wrote when I was in high school, I said it would be nice if Germany did not exist. But I realize that's not possible. Germany has tried to make restitution and to-- I don't know whether to seek forgiveness, that's just not possible. But they've tried really hard to be part of the world of nations.

To my sorrow, they still have too many Nazis around the world. We should try them, as ever, like we did before-- do away with them. I guess we'll never be able to get rid of all Nazis and Nazi-like sympathizers. The Germans are not Nazis, and I don't think Nazis are really German. So they're two separate philosophies.

Germany today is all right. And sometimes I tend to forget the past or want to forget it. The Austrians want to bury it. And with things happening now in Switzerland with the claims, I don't know what that's going to lead to. Is that what you had in mind when you ask about?

No just tell me what your thoughts were-- have you visited Germany?

The first time we went back was when I first was in the army. We ended up in Freiburg. And because I was an interpreter, I was sent to Europe rather than to Korea. When we got to Freiburg, they didn't know what to do with me because I was a chemist, I had my degree, I was there as a interpreter for French and Spanish. What would they do with me?

I said, don't leave me in Germany. I said, send me anywhere else you want to-- Korea, whatever. I do not want to be stationed in Germany, because I will not be able to answer for my own actions if I do.

Why did you say that?

Because I was too angry from the war. That was 1952. War was not that far behind me. So they sent me to France, and I was stationed in France. And on our 15th anniversary, we took the family to Europe, and in a way retracing some of my steps-- through Belgium, to France, to Spain.

And as soon as the train left Amsterdam, I knew exactly when we crossed the German border. I said, we're in Germany. Someone said, how do you know? I said, I can feel it. And the sooner we leave, the better it will feel. They were nasty. We felt very uncomfortable. I wanted to leave as soon as possible. That was 1972.

I've been back to Germany, but that was more professional. We had a international meeting in chemistry in Vienna, in Salzburg, in Baden-Baden, and I went to these meetings. And I associate with Germans-- I have no problem with them. They were individuals that did not present any political philosophy, so I had no problem with them.

And while also in the army, my father died while I was stationed there. And they flew me out from Frankfurt. I didn't feel too comfortable being in Frankfurt to catch a plane. Again, that's another feeling that can't be expressed. It's just the feeling of being sick, of not being there, of being uncomfortable-- not belonging, totally alone, not being welcome.

I have no desire to see Germany today. Austria, because of my great love for Mozart, I'd be willing to go to Salzburg again. Of course I'd be willing to go to Bern to listen to Beethoven. But to this day, I still don't understand that period. How can such cultured people become such gross animals? That's beyond anybody's belief.

When the war was over and the information came out very publicly about what happened to the Jews, how did you express your feelings when you learned that?

Well, I heard about six million very quickly. And on the first [INAUDIBLE] my father had had was the Constitution of Israel put in the frame and put in the house. It says that's the price we had to pay to get a state. I don't know if the price may be too big, but that's a strange feeling. I'm trying to recollect the question too.

When you found out about the camps, and survivors, and the amounts of people that lost their lives.

The feeling that I had was more intense when I did some of the work on the museum, because I found out certain things on certain dates. Like on September 2, 1943, the Nazis were scouring through my neighborhood in Brussels, picked up everybody there. And then two years later, in 1944 on September 2, they were scouring my neighborhood in Marseilles. But again, I was one step ahead of them.

But that is more personal. And that really touches me. I was doing the translations of the deportations. I found out a lot of things that really touched me at the time. But six million people, it's so impersonal. I knew quite a few of them, actually, but it's almost out of the realm of possibility.

Did you lose any relatives?

Not directly that I knew of. I think we lost some in Russia, but we didn't know about it until much later. And they were more distant. Also by that time, anybody left in Russia became communists. And we never talked about my mother's

brother, who became an administrator there, I guess.

Most of our family had not left Russia. My father did because he was taken to Siberia. In Belgium and France, we never had any relatives. So it's only in 1972 that we found out that we had cousins who left Russia. Then we got a telephone call here.

Do you feel sometimes like you're two different people-- somebody on the outside and somebody on the inside?

I have a friend who says it's a different life. I'm not the one that came here, but the one before I came here. It seems almost like a bad dream. I've been here now over 50 years-- 55 years. That's a whole lifetime being in this country. And yet I have this kind of attachment to the old country? That doesn't seem real.

And yet when I go to Belgium, to France, I know where I am. I know where I can go. And I know my way to go here, to go there-- I know exactly where it is. But it is not my home anymore. And I don't know if it ever was. So yes, it feels like it's a different life, it's a different person.

What were your thoughts when the Eichmann trial was taking place in Israel?

Of course, I knew he was guilty before he was tried. But that's not the way the system works. My thoughts is we have too many Eichmanns too loose in the world. And I would like the Israeli intelligence to be able to catch up to them, because nobody else will have the interest to do that. Not only that, but I felt that this country was hiding too many Nazis, strictly because we wanted to find somebody who was better qualified than what we had to fight the communists. So we hired the best Nazis to do the job. That's all terrible.

And I don't think we should have done it. And I guess many people in government feel that we shouldn't have done it. But there's no government that's pure. They all make mistakes, as we found out again this week.

Do you feel that because of your childhood and having to leave under terrible conditions, that you're more attuned to, let's say, the Civil Rights movement here than others that didn't go through what you did?

I probably mentioned also that while I was in Spain, in Barcelona, it was a strange feeling seeing the American flag next to Nazi flag flying side by side. The two embassies were next to each other. And it was a strange feeling. Whenever I looked at the American flag, I was proud. I felt good.

The British embassy was further up. I didn't have the same feeling for the British. But somehow, the stars and stripes, there's something about it. Did I diverge from what I was trying to say? What was the question again? Sorry.

I was asking if because of your background and having to leave, are you more attuned to the Civil Rights and the goals of the Civil Rights movement than others who weren't?

I was thinking about that. So that when I came here, the only thing I knew was that Roosevelt had been in power for so long and so entrenched with his values, and I had heard that Roosevelt is really the one who saved the world. He got all the credit. I did not know that the St. Louis was not allowed to come here.

I did not know that there was a Father Coughlin and a lot of people who refused entry to refugees because they were Jews. I don't know if that would have helped. That might have made me more angry about the country, but I did not know these things. So when I came, I was more attuned to Roosevelt.

To me, Roosevelt typified the nation. And then shortly after that when Truman ascended to the presidency, he seemed like a real man of the people. And I guess I was a Democrat at heart. And in my experience back then in Europe, all my friends-- most of them were non-Jews. A best friend I had when I came over was a young man who was born in the Congo. And I never could understand why he wasn't Black.

But I guess I was attuned to people working together that got along together. If you didn't like somebody, you didn't

associate with. But if you like somebody, you don't have to find out what he is to be able to have fun with them, or play with them, or to work with them-- it didn't bother me. So being attuned to democratic principles of this country I guess made me more attuned to being able to live together. Melting pot?