

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Regine Ginsberg conducted by Gail Schwartz on April 23, 2010 in Washington DC. What is your full name?

My full name is Regine Ginsberg. No middle name.

No middle name. And what was the name that you were born with?

In Belgium, in Brussels, and probably in Poland also, it was Zylberstejn, which was spelled Z-Y-L-B-E-R-S-T-E-J-N.

And where and when were you born?

I was born in Brussels on November 19, 1925.

Let's talk a little bit about your family, your parents. Their names?

Leah and Volvish. In America, he became John.

And your mother's maiden name? Do you know that?

[? Sillerman. ?]

[? Sillerman. ?] And were they also born in Brussels?

No. They were both born in Poland. They met in Poland, from what I understand. They married in Poland by a rabbi, had a child. And then when they moved to Brussels, they had to have a civil ceremony. So the three of them went and got married again.

Where in Poland were they from? What city?

From what I remember, mother was always talking about Biala Podlaska. Mother and dad never talked too much about their experiences in Poland except that I remember dad saying that he had to leave Poland because he would have been inducted in the army, and he didn't want to be. So he went to Brussels. And my mother followed him shortly after.

Do their birth dates?

Mother was-- Dad was July the 8th And the year--

OK.

[INAUDIBLE] perhaps? 18-- one was 1896, and one was 1898 [LAUGHS].

OK. That's fine, that's fine, that's fine. And what kind of work did your father do?

He was in the leather goods wholesale business. He manufactured leather goods like wallets, anything made out of leather goods. And actually, we had a very nice house in Brussels. But the factory was at the back of the house. And I remember coming home from school and often going up there and visiting with some of the workers. And it's really interesting because I must tell you that I'm 84 years old, and I've never talked about this before.

Well, we're very appreciative that you're doing this now. It's wonderful.

I felt it was time.

Yes. Did you have a large extended family in Brussels, or were they in Poland?

I had two grandmothers and two grandfathers. I remember them. My mother's mother lived across the street from where we were living.

So they all came from Poland--

Yes.

--with your parents?

No. They came afterwards. And it must have been in the early '30s when they came.

Oh.

I remember my mother's father passed away. And of course, at that time, we were too young to be allowed to attend funerals.

Right.

And my maternal grandmother, as I said, lived across the street. And I remember I went often over there after school. She used to fix me omelettes fried in oil [LAUGHS] which seemed to be delicious at the time. For some reason, my paternal grandmother, very sweet little woman, I remember her. But I don't remember where she was and where she lived. So perhaps she didn't live in Brussels.

What about aunts, uncles, cousins?

My father had a brother that I remember also. Quite a bit younger than me, about 10 years younger. And he came to Brussels at a certain time. And my mother had a sister and three brothers. She lost all three brothers during the war. Her sister had gone to Israel. I remember that.

Did you live right in the center of the city?

Yes. I did. I lived close to the Gare du Midi I remember, because we didn't take the train very often. We didn't have a car, and we traveled either by tram or by train. And every summer, mother and dad would rent a house at the beach, Blankenberge, and the family would spend the summer there. And my father would come out on weekends. And it was nice.

Now, you mentioned that you had an older sibling, a brother?

I have a brother. He was seven years older.

And he was born in Poland.

He was born in Poland, and I was born in Brussels.

And his name?

Jack.

And that's the name he was born with?

I think so because that's the only way I know. In [INAUDIBLE], Belgium, it was Jack, which was spelled differently than the American spelling.

Were your parents religious? Observant?

Yes. They were very observant in Belgium. Mother kept kosher and kept all the holidays. I remember the holidays very clearly. I really do.

Can you describe one of them?

Well, Passover was just wonderful because mother would start cleaning the house and cleaning the silver and bringing baskets of eggs and baskets of onions. And I even remember her [? slogging kapparot ?]--

Right.

--[LAUGHS] for the chicken.

Right, right.

I mean, it was a lot to do, I remember that before. And mother even would do-- she would put-- she would make her own wine for Passover because behind the bed-- and this is just now coming to me-- there was a big-- what would you call them? Those great, big jars that you keep wine in?

Barrels, barrels?

Well, it wasn't a barrel. It was made out of a glass, but it was huge. And she would do cherries and sugar. And they would ferment until Passover. [LAUGHS] And it really was delicious.

And I remember we finally got our own bathroom because we didn't have one for the longest time. Not a bathtub. I mean-- because I couldn't-- if I remember clearly, we used to go to-- what would you call 'em?

Baths? You mean public baths?

Public, yes.

Mm-hmm.

And for Pesach, we all had to clean up. We all had to dress up. And we all had to sit at the table. It didn't matter if it was 11 o'clock at night.

But, you know, there was a sense of peace, really. I do remember that. We never complained about being hungry. Mother must have had the family over because it was always more than the four of us. But I do remember Passover. I do remember Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur because the women and the men sat separately. Mom and I sat upstairs, while papa and my brother were downstairs.

And I do remember my brother's bar mitzvah, how he used to have a rabbi that used to come in and tutor him but not me. Girls--

Girls--

--were not as important at that time, really, which I thought was very interesting. Now, I think that's very interesting because he could read Hebrew, and he had a good understanding even when he got married with his family. And I never did until I was bat mitzvah.

What language did you speak at home?

French.

Oh, you spoke--

Oh, at home? Yiddish.

Oh.

At home, we spoke Yiddish. And when mother and dad didn't want me to understand, they spoke Polish. And of course, French was the language--

Yes.

--that I learned over there. I mean, I went to school.

Right. Right. Were your parents Zionists?

I don't know. I really don't know about that. I don't know.

OK. OK. Let's talk a little bit about your neighborhood. Was it a Jewish neighborhood?

If it wasn't, we didn't mix with anybody who wasn't Jewish--

Oh, really?

--because it was very interesting. We all had identity cards. And I don't know what year that came to be. But our identity cards were a different color than those who were Belgium and Gentile. We had a yellow band across the identity card, and I was not allowed to mix with anybody who was not Jewish.

So you never played with--

I never did. No. It was ingrained in me. I don't know whether I thought I was going to burn in hell. [LAUGHS]

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

It was a real scandal, as mother would put it.

Right. Right. So what about the school that you went to? Was it a Jewish school?

No. It was not. It was a public school. And I very much remember my father walking me to school in the morning, holding my hand. But I only did-- I couldn't have gotten too much past elementary school because, well, I went to school-- I don't know how the school was divided over there because I was 14 when I left Belgium, but a very young 14. Very protected. No independence.

I was going to ask you how independent you were.

No independence at all. No independence at all. I was under the protection of my parents. In fact, now that I think about it, I don't think I was ever, until I got married, without one parent or the other or both of them, which is very interesting.

What about any hobbies? Did you have any hobbies as a young girl?

No.

Did you like to read or art or music or anything like that?

I don't remember studying-- I did have a piano teacher that came to the house and gave piano lessons. I don't know that I was that interested in it. I did not become an artist. [LAUGHS] But I don't think they had the arts in school as much as they do now. It was mostly academic at that time because I remember I had a Latin teacher already because she would-- I remember one thing about her. She read palms. And as she read my palm-- this was before the war-- she said I would have a very short life. And she was very-- and you know, that stayed with me my whole life. And now that I'm 84, I'm all right. [LAUGHS]

Oh, my. Oh, my. So in your class, there were Jewish students and non-Jewish students?

Yes. Because I remember we celebrated Santa Claus, which was on December the 6th.

Oh.

A different time.

A different time. Right.

Yes. Yeah.

Would you describe your childhood, your young childhood, as a happy time? A relaxed time?

I don't remember it as a happy time. And I often try to think why. My mother was a very beautiful woman.

Mm-hmm.

My father was busy during the day in his business. And mother was gone when I came home from school. She loved to dress up.

Did she work?

No, she didn't work. She loved to dress up and go for tea in the afternoon. And she would come home later. I remember myself as being a lonely child because my brother was seven years older, and I was always in his way [LAUGHS] so that I don't remember a lot of family gatherings.

Did you have any religious training yourself?

No.

No.

The training was at home. You knew you were Jewish, and that's all there was to it. You practiced Judaism. You light the candles on Friday night. You celebrated the Sabbath. And I don't think mother celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday by staying home and meditating all day long. I don't remember that. But I know that the Jewishness was ingrained in me.

Were you proud to be a Jew?

Yes.

Why?

Because I was born a Jew. And I just wouldn't think of any other way. And you must remember that I only grew up in Brussels until I was 14.

14. Yeah, we're talking about this young--

And a 14-year-old at that time would be like an 11, 12-year-old in comparison today.

Right. Now, Hitler came into power in '33. When did you start hearing about him? Or did you hear about him before you left?

The only time I started hearing about it that I would have become aware is that a little later probably, around 35 or '36--

So you'd be 10 or 11?

-- maybe even '37, there were Germans who were fleeing, German Jews who were leaving Germany, trying to get to Israel and other parts of the world. They would come through Belgium. And I remember that we had some of them for dinner. Now, how they came to my mother and dad's house? There must have been an organization that placed them in different homes for dinner, for hospitality.

Right.

And I do remember that. And that was the only way I knew, not realizing what the problem was because I really wasn't included in the conversation. But I do remember that they were German Jews who had ran away from Germany. And they were talking about some of the problems I'm sure at that time. But there were many Jews who didn't believe that they would be touched.

And obviously, my parents didn't either because they waited until the Germans attacked Belgium. But my father was very wise. We didn't find that out until we were here. And I didn't find that out until-- before my brother died that my father in the '30s wired \$10,000 to the Chase Bank in New York.

Oh, my.

And that money was here when we came to the United States. That was very wise of him. Very. And \$10,000 was a lot of money--

Amazing.

--at that time.

Now, what year was that?

It was sometimes in the '30s--

The '30s, yeah, mm-hmm.

--because by the time we came in 1942, apparently, his handwriting, my brother told me, had changed a little bit. And they were giving him a hard time [LAUGHS] about it. But he did collect the money, and he opened up a leather goods store in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

So let's talk a little bit about the 1930s. You said your first indication was when German Jews would come to your house. Did you know of a man named Hitler at that point, in the mid '30-- when you were 10, 11, or 12, you know?

I might have heard the name. But I think I was protected from hearing too much or being afraid about too much because, again, the atmosphere and the thought must have been at that time that it wasn't going to be so easy for the Nazis to overtake Europe the way they did. I'm sure that that's what was in their mind because, I mean, we really ran the day they attacked Belgium.

So up to that point though, you just had a regular childhood? Went to school?

Regular childhood. Yes.

And you played with friends, I assume?

Yes.

Jewish friends only.

Jewish friends only. And I don't remember the playing with friends, and I don't know why. But I must have had some friends because I had some letters after the war from a couple of people who said they were my friend. [LAUGHS]

Then Hitler invades Austria in '38. Did you-- does that mean anything?

It didn't budge--

Didn't register.

It didn't register with my parents. And of course, I heard about the Maginot Line. But didn't do any good. They went right around it.

And Kristallnacht. Did you know-- do you have any-- Kristallnacht. The Crystal Night when they destroyed synagogues and--

No.

OK. So you didn't hear--

No. No.

But your parents had a radio and--

I'm sure. But I don't remember listening to a radio.

You don't remember listening. Did your parents understand German?

No.

No.

No. There was Polish, French--

And Yiddish.

--and Yiddish. And I spoke Yiddish.

Yeah. Yeah. So what's your first memory of the difficult times? What's the first memory that you have?

That was the day that we had to leave our home with nothing. I mean, we really just closed the door.

How did your parents know this? What was the-- what was the condition.

Because--

--what were the conditions?

--the Germans were invading Belgium.

Right.

And they were bombs coming down.

OK.

And some of the people, I remember, were boarding up their windows.

OK.

And mother and dad--

You're 14 at this time.

I'm 14 at the time. Mother-- in those days, you didn't sit down with your children and explain what the situation was and what we needed do. You just said, we're going. [LAUGHS]

So she tells you that you're going to have to leave.

We just started running is what we did. I remember the running. I don't know why we were running, but I remember that we were chasing after a train who was leaving full of refugees. And that train took us to the southern part of France.

OK. Before we get to the train, so your mother tells you that you have to leave.

We're leaving.

And what did you do then?

I just went with them.

Well, did you pack any-- did you take anything with you, especially? What did she take?

No. Because I think we really felt we were coming back. I really think that they felt they were coming back.

So did you take anything special as a 14-year-old?

Maybe mother did. I didn't.

Just clothes and stuff.

Well, very little.

Little clothes.

Very little. I mean, whatever we took was something that you could walk past with. You could run if you had to and--

So you didn't take a lot of suitcases?

No. No suitcases at all.



No suitcases?

We just packed something little for us. Or maybe mama packed something for all four of us. My brother was along with us. And all I remember is the train.

So you go to the train station. And you see a train filled with--

With refugees, people who were trying to get out. Mostly Jewish people.

Belgian Jews.

Yes. Belgian Jews. This was still in Belgium.

Right, right. This is in the Brussels train station.

Correct.

And you got on the train.

We got on the train. I don't remember anything about the train. But I remember that we were let off in a French village.

OK. Again, we'll get to that. I wanted to finish with Belgium first. Did you see any German soldiers when--

No.

You did not.

No. We did not. No. They were still behind us.

OK. So now you're on the train with extended family? Or just the four--

Just the four of us.

Do you remember saying goodbye to your grandparents?

No. They must have been gone already because we didn't-- I don't remember saying goodbye to anybody.

Do you remember being scared?

Pardon?

Do you remember being frightened?

Oh, yes. I really didn't understand what was going on. All I know is that we were running. Why, I wasn't sure.

Did you know about Hitler at that point?

I had heard about him, but I didn't know exactly what was going on. My thoughts were about boys. [LAUGHS] I remember that.

Right, right, right.

And I--

So you were sad about leaving your friends? Your boyfriend.

I didn't have one. God forbid. Mother would have absolutely-- [LAUGHS] but no. I was just dreaming at that time. Those were dreams of a 14-year-old.

On the train, were there other people that you knew?

I don't remember anything about the train. All I remember is running--

To the station.

--to catch the train. I don't remember being on the train. I don't remember getting off the train. My next scene in my mind is that we were all brought together in one place, and then we were distributed to different farm areas.

Now we're in France.

Now we're in France.

OK.

And we stayed with the farmers for a few days until they could relocate us. We were refugees in France. Now, whether there was a committee like HIAS that was working with the French, I don't know. There must have been somebody working with the French at that time.

And after we stayed there, we were relocated to--

Well, the first location, do you know where that was?

No.

The South of France?

It's South of France, yes. And we must've been very close to Spain because they relocated us to a town called Saint-Gaudens where you could see the Pyrenees from the house. So it couldn't have been too far from where we were.

So it's still the four of you.

There's still the four of us.

What were your parents' state of mind? Do you remember? Were they calm? Was your mother frightened?

You know. I've often thought about this feeling of survival. I don't know what their state of mind was then. But I do know by what they did and what they accomplished that they only thought of survival for their children first and then for themselves. And they were successful in accomplishing that.

What about your brother, Jack? Was he calm. Do you remember what his state of mind was?

He was very busy being unhappy because he had left a girlfriend that he loved very much behind. And he was already 21 years old. And he really wanted to go back to Belgium. I remember that. He and mother were having some violent words about all that because he either wanted to go back to Belgium or being able for her to come with us. But all of that didn't work out.

Right.

So he was very busy being unhappy.

But as far doing anything, neither he and dad were allowed to do anything. None of us were allowed to do anything. We just waited, mostly, in that little apartment, which was maybe a room and a half or something like that. We were given food stamps, and that's the only way we could get our food. We couldn't buy it. We had to get it with food stamps. And I remember mother used to go get a little bit of groceries that we had.

Were there many other refugee families with you in that town?

Not in the apartment where we were.

In the town though.

I don't think that we were busy mixing socially with anyone because it was a bad time of our lives. We didn't know what was going to happen.

Did you see other refugee families?

I don't remember seeing other refugee families except we were arrested while we were in Saint-Gaudens. And I'm not sure why we were arrested at that time. We were arrested by the French. And we were put in prison right there in Saint-Gaudens.

I always had the impression that it was because mother's little town, Biala Podlaska, might have been on the border between Russia and Poland. And perhaps, at that time, there were bad feelings between France and Russia. I'm not sure. We might have been arrested because, you know, this was the Vichy government. And perhaps that they were already working with the Nazis because the Nazis were really being very clever, now that I think about it.

They didn't want to do too much to the Jews because they wanted the Jews to come back to where they were living before because for the longest time, you would hear rumors come back to Brussels, they're not touching anybody. They're not doing anything to anybody.

So my mother, probably in 1941, and because she was a woman, she smuggled herself back to Belgium. And she did salvage some of the jewelry, you know. She brought back her Sabbath candles, which I have. She brought back my father's tallis, which I have. And she brought back my father's tefillin-- the tefillin--

The tefillin.

--which I still have also. But she bought her diamonds, her jewelry, not anything beside that. And she made it back.

Did she tell you where she was going?

No.

Did you know?

Not till we we're in the United States.

So you did not know.

I know that story.

You just knew she was going away.

I didn't know where she had gone, yeah. To go back to one of the time we were in prison in Saint-Gaudens, I remember they walked us through the streets of Saint-Gaudens. And I remember the French people standing there and spitting at us. I've never forgotten that. And I thought to myself, I remember thinking, what did I do? Because I didn't quite understand.

Mother and I was sent to a special place in Toulouse. And dad and my father were put in a French concentration camp for seven weeks.

Your father and your brother, you mean.

And my brother, I'm sorry, my brother and my father. Mother and I were released because I was 14 years old. She had a child with her. At that time, that was a child. Today, it's a [? gantse mentsh ?].

Right, right.

And I remember we went to visit my brother and my father. And I remember that they came to the fence also dressed in pajamas with wooden shoes on.

You went to their prison.

Yes.

Was that also--

It was like a concentration camp. It had barracks outside.

Was that also in Toulouse?

It must have been somewhere in that vicinity. Now, the story goes in my family-- and I don't know it, and I don't remember it, but they seem to remember-- that mother told them that she, with some of the jewelry that she had, she either bought off some of the principal there or the guard there, and after seven weeks my father and my brother were released and came back to Saint-Gaudens. We had been in Saint-Gaudens--

Right. that was the town.

--all that time.

Right.

So I thought, that's probably true because I can imagine that the French guards probably could be bought off at that time.

And what condition were your father and your brother in when they got back?

They had lost weight. And--

Emotionally?

--it was a frightening-- it was a frightening experience for both of them.

Did they describe anything about their experience?

If they did, they didn't do it in front of me. The protection [LAUGHS] was immense. It really was immense. Even when I was a grown woman, we didn't discuss it. And this is really from memory, going back and seeing some of these images from the past in my mind.

So what did you-- you're 15, 16-years-old. What did you do all day, in this town?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Could you get out and walk on your own?

No. That I wasn't even allowed to do in Belgium.

Oh, OK.

We really did absolutely nothing for two years--

For two years.

--that we were there. But my father had a first cousin in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania whom we had never met before. And he wrote him as soon as the war broke out. [? Hymie ?] [? Morowitz. ?] They owned the OK grocery stores in that area. Very comfortable financially. And he decided that he was going to save this family.

So my father went to Toulouse, which was not too far away. And that's where the consulate was. And he would stay every day in front of the consulate to see if there was any news. And they would have raids really arresting people. For what reason I don't know because I remember my father telling me that he would hear the whistles blow, and he would run. But he would go back again in a day or two to see-- because, of course, we couldn't leave without a sponsor. And we finally got the papers in 1942.

What month in '42?

We left in June.

Those were papers for all four of you?

For all four of us. We left in June. And in July, two months-- two weeks later, all of France was occupied by the Nazi. They took over all of France. And whoever was left was sent to concentration camp. That's how lucky we were. We just got-- we were the last boat out of France with Jews coming to America.

Did you have any contact with or did your parents have any contact with the extended family when you were in this small town? Your grandparents, your aunts, uncles?

If they did, I did not know. I do know that my grandparents, both died. I don't know how. I do know I have a cousin. My father's sister left her children with nuns during the war. And I do see my cousin now. She comes to see me. I go to see her. And my brother-- my mother lost all three brothers in the war with some of their wives and children. She had one sister left who went to Israel.

But the ones she lost had stayed in Belgium? Is that what you're saying?

No. Everybody ran.

Everybody ran.

I know everybody ran.

But none of them were with you--

No.

--in this small town.

No. No. None of them were-- why everybody went in different directions--

Different places.

--really I don't-- I honestly don't know. But they did.

So then you get on a boat leaving--

A very small one.

--leaving from?

Marseille.

Marseille.

And that was under the PÃ©tain government.

Under Marshal PÃ©tain.

And the Vichy, I mean, they were really very helpful to the Germans. They did everything [INAUDIBLE].

So when you saw them, the Vichy people, and saw them in uniform, French police and so forth, what were your thoughts?

You know, it's amazing because I see that in children today. We have the ability to unfocus when we're afraid. I see children do that today. They act like they don't see and they don't hear. And I must have done the same thing. I just-- I adored my father. And I remember holding his hand a lot.

When you're out on the street, you mean?

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. The boat we were on, I remember the conditions were pretty bad because where they keep the luggage, they call that-- the hold I guess, they had fixed that because nobody had luggage, really. So they had fixed that with cots all over the place. I might be wrong, but I remember that it was so small, it was only about 2,500 on the boat. And it took us six weeks to get to the United States. I do remember being very ill because we were rocking a lot. And we stopped in Casablanca.

What was the name of the boat? Do you know?

No. I don't know. And I would love to know really.

Do you know what line it was, what country?

Nuh-uh.

What did you do on the boat?

I was sick. I remember that.

You mean seasick.

Seasick.

Seasick.

Yeah. I remember that. Otherwise, the rest of it is locked out pretty much. I remember we stopped in Casablanca, and we must have stayed there for a couple of days, I guess, to replenish on the boat.

Supplies.

My father had a wonderful sense of humor, and he was trying, obviously, to make me feel better. Was negotiating with an Arab, trying to sell me. [LAUGHS] I still remember that, and I remember being so scared. [LAUGHS] And I can just see him talking.

That's wonderful.

My father did have a wonderful sense of humor. And after that, from there, we went to Veracruz.

Do you have any other memories of Casablanca besides the one incident that--

I think we walked around a lot. We did some sightseeing. with the markets. I remember that we walked through the markets. So we must have been there a couple of days.

Now, by that time, did you have any more knowledge of what was happening in Europe and what Hitler was doing? Did you know about the conditions and what was happening to the Jews?

No.

You did not know.

No. And by that time, I was already 16.

Right.

But as I said, a very young 16.

Yeah, yeah.

Very young 16. It was not a time, in my time anyway, where the family would sit as they do today and talk and explain why we are in this situation, why we're doing what we do.

And you never asked.

And I never asked. I think almost didn't dare. [LAUGHS] So perhaps it was not like that in every family, but it was like that in my family at the time growing up. I didn't ask any questions of my brother because we really were not that close until we got older.

When you were on the boat with all the other refugees, did they sit around and talk about what was happening and having to leave home?

I had a very lonely feeling, a very frightened feeling. By that time, I was in my teens, but I wasn't doing what teens were supposed to be doing at that time. I wasn't growing up, and I didn't have a chance to grow up. Actually, I lost all of my teen's year, all of them. I mean, I didn't have the teen years that a teenager will have from the time she's 14 until at time I got married.

Were you very sad about leaving Belgium-- Belgium?

No.

Did you feel--

[INAUDIBLE]

--Belgian? Or did you feel Jewish when you were there or both?

Did I feel--

Belgian when you were living there and then--

Well, you know, when I went back there as a married woman, I realized my roots were in the United States.

But I meant when you were a child, young woman, young girl [INAUDIBLE].

Did I feel--

Or on the boat, did you feel like you were leaving your home country?

No. I felt relief.

You felt relief that you were--

I felt relief that we were leaving--

OK.

--because, I mean, even though I tried not to know what was going on, you would want to know what was going on and that there was real fight about whether we were going to get out of this alive or not. And now that I think about my parents, really, it was a miracle.

It's amazing.

It was a miracle what they did. And it was a miracle what my family in Pittsburgh did because it was just, as I said, two weeks later that the Germans took over all of France and arrested the rest of the Jews.

So after Casablanca, you get back on the boat.

We get back on the boat.

And your next stop?

And we stop in Veracruz. And we must have spent the day there too because I remember they must have had some kind of a festival because there were young women in their full dresses and young men. And I remember somebody telling me that if you wore a flower on your left ear, you were not married. If you wore on your right ear, you were. These were the things that a young 16-year-old was interested in.

Of course.

So we didn't stay as long in Veracruz as we did in Casablanca. But it was six weeks, that much I know, before we finally came to New York.



You landed in New York.

Yes.

And what was your first vision of New York?

The Statue of Liberty. [LAUGHS]

OK. Now what did the United States mean to you as a 16-year-old? You didn't know any English, I assume.

I didn't know a word of English.

What did that country mean to you?

Well, it meant that I understood that we were safe, that we were not going to be killed, and that we had a chance for a future. Whether I thought that at that time I'm not sure. But I'm sure thinking of it at this time. [LAUGHS] I remember my mother, God bless her, because she still had some of her diamonds with her, and I guess she didn't want to declare all of them. So I remember her putting one down in my pocket, and she said, shh. Don't say anything. [LAUGHS] That frightened me, and that's why I remember that. It's really frightened me. I was very scared.

What did the Statue of Liberty mean to you when you saw? Anything special?

No.

No.

No. No. It didn't at that time. Though I must tell you that ever since I came to America, I worship this country because I realize-- and I mean this most sincerely-- what this country did for us and the freedoms that we had which we never had in Belgium when we lived there before the war.

Even before the war.

Because we were certainly branded as Jewish.

Well, what was-- let's go back to that time. What restrictions did you have before the war?

What [INAUDIBLE]?

What restrictions did you have in Belgium before the war? Yes, you were Jews.

And I knew I was different. I felt very different from everybody else.

But was there anything that you wanted to do that you couldn't do because you were Jewish?

I wouldn't think of doing anything [LAUGHS] that was not permitted. [LAUGHS] It's really interesting that the questions in today's world can be answered that way. But not in my world.

So you're on the boat, and you see the Statue of Liberty, and you dock.

It must have been a very strange feeling for me also at that time. I mean, I was in this strange country. I didn't speak a word of English. I hadn't been to school in two years. And--

Who met you at the boat? Your relatives?

I don't know. And I'm trying to remember if daddy's cousin must have met him at the boat and taken us back to Squirrel Hill. And we stayed with my relatives for a few days or maybe longer.

This is in Philadelphia.

No. This was in Pittsburgh.

Oh, excuse me. In Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And they lived in the community called Squirrel Hill.

Squirrel Hill, yes.

And dad must have tried to look immediately as to where we were going to go settle down because for some reason they picked McKeesport, Pennsylvania, how long it took him to go into business. But dad had had a wonderful personality. He and Jack went to New York to buy merchandise-- leather goods, handbags, suitcases, anything that's made out of leather goods. Went to the place on Main Street in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. And I understand that some of the wholesaler loved dad so much that they sold them on credit. Those days, people did that. And then we rented an apartment, and I went to school.

And that was the worst day of my life, that I do remember, because mother, God bless her, put me-- it must have been a high school class-- at 16. I didn't speak a word of English, and I was told swim or sink. [LAUGHS]

Right, right.

But everybody was wonderful. They really were wonderful. If for some reason-- I still remember the first question-- this country was so isolated, I guess, still at that time, they wanted to know if we had real floors. Were we living on dirt floors. [LAUGHS] Did we have commodes? Did we have running water? I remember being asked those questions. But I learned the language very quickly.

Did you?

Yes, I did.

What were the teachers like? Were they helpful to you?

Yes, they were. They were very nice. They-- obviously, because I do remember being miserable. And particularly, I had never dated before in my life. And then all of a sudden I was asked to date. And this was very, very foreign to me. And it didn't work for me [LAUGHS] because I really didn't know how to act. I didn't know what to do. And I do remember being very disturbed by that facet of life in the United States. But I adjusted.

You arrived in '42.

In June of '42.

June of '42. So you started school in September.

Mm-hmm.

OK.

By that time, I was almost 17 because my birthday was in November.

Did the teachers ask you about what you had gone through? Did they ask you those kind of questions about--

No, because my language capacity--

Oh, right.

--was very low.

Yeah.

And I don't think I could have answered those questions at that time. Now that I think about it, it must have also been a very lonesome, lonely feeling. And like I said, between those ages, I mean, I just lost that time in my life completely.

Besides, the other kids are asking you questions about what life was like.

Yeah.

Were they friendly to you?

Yes. But it was a very difficult adjustment, very difficult adjustment for me.

Sure.

I was very lucky that I married the kind of man that I married. I really was so lucky because I was very insecure, frightened by many things. Many things frightened me. And it took me-- I don't know that I ever adjusted during my school years. I did graduate from high school. But I don't ever remember being at peace in high school because it was a different country. It was a different style. And the kids here-- it had a lot more independence than I had had. But I was very popular in my senior year. [LAUGHS]

Oh, OK.

I remember that.

So what year did you graduate from high school?

Oh, my. I'll have to look up in the paper. [LAUGHS]

OK. Did you do the four years of high school?

Yeah, I did the--

You did the four years.

Yeah.

OK, OK.

Well, did I? Let's see. If I came in '42, and I got married in '47, and I was 21 when I got married.

Well, that's OK.

And I was 16, yeah.

Did your parents pick up English well?

Yes, they did.

Quickly? They did.

Yes. They did pick up--

And what was your mother's state of mind? Do you remember?

She was very strong. She really was still very, very strong. And she adapted well. Because she had to go buy groceries, she had to adapt to completely different life. And she did.

Did she make friends?

After a while. But she was so busy working with dad and working in the store--

Oh, OK.

--that I don't think she spent too much time in that direction. Her life changed completely from the life that she had in Belgium. She was a queen in Belgium, really, and she had to turn to a completely different lifestyle. And she did. She did.

And your father's business was successful?

Yes. It must have been since we had the money-- well, no. No. I mustn't say that. It was successful. And it would have continued to be successful except that being a Jewish mother, her son got married, and he moved to Texas. And mother just couldn't stand it.

This is your--

My brother.

Your brother moved to Texas.

And my mother made dad sell the business. And they moved to-- they moved to Dallas.

Oh, my. But I understand that that's very natural. [LAUGHS] So I was already-- I got married. I met my husband in the small town of Athens, Texas.

Oh, so you moved-- you finished high school--

Yes.

--in McKeesport.

And I started working in the store--

In the store. And then?

--helping my father. My brother met a young woman from Kaufman, Texas. And her first cousin was my husband. And he lived in Athens, Texas, which was about 35 miles away. When she and Jack were engaged, she wanted me to come to Texas and meet the family. And I came on the train, I remember, to Dallas, Texas.

And there were four sisters. And every Sunday, because there was nothing else to do, they all had dry goods stores in

the little towns. The four sisters would get together with their children and bring food or whatever and meet on Sundays and then go back home. So on one Sunday, I went with the family to Athens, and there was my husband, Reuben.

And the story is that he fell in love with me [LAUGHS] the moment he saw me.

Of course, of course.

And it was interesting, actually. We didn't date very much. My mother was very anxious for me to get married. I was already 20 and 21, and I wasn't married yet. So there was an engagement party in McKeesport, Pennsylvania for my brother and his future wife. And Reuben decided to come. And we talked. And then I went to New York with my father, I remember too, because he was going to Columbia Law School. And I went to New York with my dad to help him buy inventory. And I met with Reuben again. And he asked me to marry him. And it must have been instinct [LAUGHS] because we had a beautiful marriage. We really did have a beautiful marriage for 61 years.

Oh, isn't that wonderful.

61 years.

That's wonderful.