

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Hans Ziegler conducted by Gail Schwartz on December 21, 2012, in Washington, DC. This interview is being conducted over the telephone. What is your full name?

My first name is Hans.

And your last name?

My last name is Ziegler, Z-I-E-G-L-E-R.

And when were you born, and where were you born?

I am born on the 12th of June, 1925 in Brno. It was the former Czechoslovakia.

Yes. But let's talk a little bit about your family. Tell me about your parents. How long had they lived in Brno?

My father, Alfred Ziegler, had lived in Brno from-- I think he was born 1886 86 to 1942 when he was taken to the Holocaust.

Yeah. And your mother?

My mother is born on the 24th of November, 1897 in Ostrava.

1897.

Yes, of course, 1897. You're right, 1897 in Ostrava, which was former Czechoslovakia. But at the age of two years she was taken by her family to Vienna.

OK. Tell me a little bit more about your father. What did he do? What kind of work did he do?

My mother, actually, was most of her time in just the family, and then the war started. Then she took several jobs just to make any money because she lost her husband.

Yeah. We'll talk about that in a minute. I want to do a little bit about the pre-war story of your family. What did your father do?

My father was actually the owner of a factory for a textile.

Oh, OK. And did you have any siblings, any brothers or sisters?

I do not have any brothers or sisters. And my father was, beside of that, the Consul of Uruguay, of the Republic of Uruguay.

Your father?

Yes.

So what did he--

He was the owner of the textile fabric, but he was actually also a consul of the Republic of Uruguay.

How did that happen? What was that about?

He just applied for it, and he got the job.

And did he go there at all?

Pardon?

Did he go to Uruguay at all?

No, he was never there. He was just a--

A representative?

--a representative, yes.

For textiles or for everything?

No, no, no, no, no. The textile business is not dependent on his consul. The consul actually is a diplomatic job. This is a honored consul, yes.

I see. And did he spend-- did he spend a lot of time doing this work for Uruguay?

Oh, of course, he did, yes. It actually was-- the consulate was in Brno, and actually the main office was in Prague.

What religion was your father?

He was Jewish.

Yeah, and your mother?

She was a Christian.

She was Christian, yeah. And growing up, you went to elementary school?

I went to-- yes, I did. Yes. I was at elementary school for five years, and then I was in what we call a gymnasium here in Europe, yes. And at the gymnasium I was for four years, and then I continued at, actually, a chemistry school-- it was called a higher chemistry school-- for four years. So actually I attended school for 18 and a half or something years.

Now, when you were growing up, did you consider yourself Jewish? Where you raised that way or raised a different--

No, no. Actually, I was raised more Christian because, actually, my father and my mother got, at 1934, divorced, yeah. And then I lived-- from 1934 I lived just with my mother. It was my Christian mother. And so actually I was educated more in the Christian way.

I see. Did your father have a big family?

Oh, yes, my father had a very big family.

Yeah, so did you know these relatives?

Yeah, of course I know the-- do you want his father and his mother, my grandfather and my grandmother?

You mean the names? That's fine, yeah. Yes, what are their names?

My grandfather was David Ziegler, and David Ziegler was actually the owner of the textile--

--factory.

--factory, yes. And my grandmother was Caroline, Karoline Ziegler. Both of them were Jewish.

Were they practicing? Did they live openly as Jews?

My grandmother yes, but my grandfather-- I don't think so.

And so your father was raised as a Jew?

Yes.

Yeah. Was he observant at all? Do you remember when you were living with him if he did any of the holidays or things like that, Jewish holidays?

He sometimes took me to the--

--synagogue?

Yes, and even to the cemetery and to the-- to the synagogue?

Yeah, yeah. And so you didn't-- you didn't go to Jewish religious school. You said you were raised as a Christian. How did your parents meet? How did they find each other?

My mother was adopted, actually, by her aunt, yes. It was a sister, actually, from my grandmother if you understand what I am meaning. And the sister of my grandmother was living in Brno, and she was actually married to a man named [? Liebl, ?] which was Jewish. And this was actually a friend of my father, and so actually my father met my mother in this family. You understand what I'm meaning?

Yeah, yeah. No, I do. I do. Yeah.

It is a little bit complicated.

That's OK. OK, so you went to school. Did your friends know you were half Jewish? Your school friends-- did they know that your father was Jewish?

I think so, yes, because actually I attended a school-- the first school I attended was a German school and just for four years, and there were not only half-Jewish people like me but even Jewish people and Christian people, all together.

Did anybody make fun of you when you were young because you were part Jewish? Any of the other children make--

I don't think that at the time when I attended the school-- it was in the early 30s-- the children were caring about who is Jewish or who's Christian.

Right, right. OK, well, let's move on a little bit. So you were going to school. And when did things start to change? When did conditions start to change?

Actually, the conditions start to change when my parents divorced because my mother took her flat in Brno as well, but apart of my father. And then I started actually to see my father only once a week.

Now, they got divorced in 1934, you said.

Yes, 1934, yeah.

You were eight years old in 1933. Had you heard of a man named Hitler at that point?

Say it again, the name, please.

In 1933, when--

The name.

--when Hitler came into power, did you hear about him when you were a little boy of eight years old?

No, no, no.

You didn't? OK.

I did not. I didn't know of that because this was a time-- I was too small to understand what is going on, and nobody talked about it.

Did you speak German?

Yes, I speak-- actually, I spoke both, German and Czech.

Yeah, Yeah. OK, so then you're living with your mother, and then what happened? When did the next thing--

Things actually changed very late, and this was because of-- the factory actually got out of business in 1937. This was the time before Hitler. And so my father actually was only the Consul of Uruguay, and this was his job for the time that Hitler came in.

OK.

And so actually my father, because of his job-- it was actually a higher job, and so actually he got to the Holocaust, I think, just a little bit later, just in '42.

But let's say in the 1930s for the moment. Now, were you aware of the September 1938 Munich Agreement with Chamberlain and so forth?

Oh, of course, I were. Yes, I was.

You were 13 years old.

Yes, I was. But I was aware of that, yes.

Yeah, and do you remember talking about it with your parents or what your feelings were?

Actually, I did not have the opportunity to talk to my father about this because I think my father was trying to hold me out of the saying. So actually, I talked about this just with my mother, and my mother was, I think, not the right person to explain all these things to me. So actually, I got my information just from other people, and what I actually find out at this time-- by the newspaper or by the radio.

What were your thoughts? Do you remember what your-- were you frightened? What kind of--

No, I was never frightened.

You weren't?

I was never frightened. I was just getting aware of that with my father will be-- in the future something happen. And actually, it happened then, yes, but I could not-- I was too young, actually, to make a decision or to tell my father it would be better to stay out of the country or go away. And my father was still very, I think, sure that, because he's a consul, nothing can happen to him.

But he was staying-- he was staying in Brno still?

He was still staying in Brno. This was a mistake.

Yeah, yeah. And what did-- at the time, in 1938, what did Hitler mean to you as a 13-year-old boy?

Actually, he meant very much to me because at the time then the Germans came in. So actually, immediately, because of my appearance, yes they could think that I'm Jewish.

Oh, really?

So when I met some of the soldiers, for example, in the streets or outside of my home-- so they started to ask me about that. So I was very well-aware what's going on and what can happen in the future.

How-- I mean you were a young boy. You're talking about the spring of 1939, when the Germans came in?

Yes, Yes. That was the time.

OK. And so--

Because this was actually the time that I could understand what's going on. I was, at that time, 14 or 15 years old, and at that age you can understand what's going on.

Could you--

And the second thing was that-- yes? What was your--

Could you understand Hitler's speeches? Did you ever hear any of Hitler's speeches?

Oh, yes, I heard it. I heard very much of the speeches because my mother was listening to it. And we could understand it very well, and we were aware of what it going on.

Did you talk these things over with your other school friends?

No, never.

Why not?

Because, at the time, I was in a Czech school, and in the Czech school there where-- the political talking, yes, amongst the pupils, the students, yes, was actually not common.

Yeah, yeah. Do you remember spending time with non-Jewish children your age? Did you do sports or things like that?

Not Jewish?

Yeah, your friends who were not Jewish. Did you have non-Jewish friends?

Of course I had non-Jewish friends, but I had even Jewish friends because at that time, when I started to go to the

gymnasium, this was the late 30s. So I had Jewish friends. Later, I did not. I think from 1940, when I changed from the gymnasium to the chemical school, yes, at the age of 15-- so I actually had no Jewish friends anymore because at that time no Jewish people were in the class with me.

Yes, yeah. Were you interested in sports?

Oh, yes, I am interested in sports from my very--

So what did you do when you were that age in sports with the non-Jewish students?

These are not Jewish-- actually, I started doing some athletics, and from 1940 I started to swim.

Oh, OK. So let's get to 1940. So now you're in a new-- you said you're in a chemical school?

Yes. I can't tell you why because, at that time, at 1940, it was forbidden for people with a Jewish parent to go to the gymnasium, to the higher classes. It was allowed only to go to a chemical school or to what they called actually-- not a gymnasium, yes. I don't have the right expression for it now.

That's OK. Well, what were your thoughts-- what were your thoughts when you couldn't go to the-- they told you you couldn't go to the gymnasium anymore?

No, actually, it was not bad because I decided at that time I want to be a chemist. So this actually was not actually something I didn't like or something like that. I wanted to be a chemist.

Yeah. Did other Jewish students go with you, switch, go over?

No. No Jewish people in my classes anymore.

Oh, right. You said they were not in class anymore, yeah, yeah. But there were other half-Jewish students still in the class?

No, not in there.

You were the only one?

I was the only one, yeah.

Oh, OK. So now it's 1940, and you started the new school. And then what happened?

Well, first I went-- maybe the moment was-- yes, I got three years without actually anything happened.

Did you know what was happening in the rest of Europe, what Hitler, what the Germans were doing in the rest of Europe?

Of course I know, yes. I knew about it because my father actually was taken to the Holocaust in 1942 and--

Where was he taken? Where was he taken? He was taken to Terezin, to Theresienstadt, Terezin and not only my father, but my aunt and my grandmother as well.

Were you able to say goodbye to him?

Yes. I was able to say goodbye to him, but I actually did not know-- I just thought that he will not return, but of course I didn't know it by sure if you know what I mean.

Yes. So what was it like to--

Because there was still a hope that something will happen in the meantime, so my father can return. And so nobody was sure about it.

Did he say anything special to you when you said goodbye?

He did not. Actually, he did not, and I actually was-- I didn't talk to him so open how I should and how he could. And we were aware-- I thought that, actually, he is holding back something to be open to me because I was at the age of 16 at the time, and I think he was not of the opinion that I can understand the whole thing and that I-- he wanted probably to hold me out of it.

Yes, yeah. So did you have any contact with him after he left?

No, I did not have. I only got two postcards, and there, of course, was nothing important because this was everything censored. And he couldn't actually be open or tell me something.

Then how long was he in Terezin?

Just a short time. I don't know actually how long but I think not longer than a couple of weeks.

And then what happened?

Then he was transported to other areas, and actually, I don't know where because I have more-- when I investigated about that, so I got more answers, so actually, I don't know for sure what happened to him.

So he did not survive?

No, no, no, no. He did not survive.

He did not survive, OK, yeah. So now you're with your mother. And it's, as you said, 1942, and you're going to school. And did you talk about the war with your other friends? Or did you talk about the Germans among the other--

Oh, yes, for sure we talked about it because I can tell you something. In our school, which was a Czech school, at the beginning of the fourth class, which was in 1933, the Germans came in the school and took out of--

You mean 1943?

1943, yes. Did I say something else?

You said 1933.

No, no, no, 1943.

1943, the Germans came to your school?

The Germans came to the school and took the most part of the class to Berlin for some forced work. We were, at that time, in our class a number of 39 people. From this the 39 people were five girls, and the other were boys, yes. And they took from the class 23 of us, and we went to Berlin for forced work.

Forced work means we just were taken for help after the bombing, and actually, we took the people who actually died by the bombing and took them into the-- so there couldn't, for example, happen something with [INAUDIBLE] or something like this with the corpse. Would be a longer time in the bombed area.

Yes. Yeah, so you were 18 years old by this time?

No, no. I was younger than that. I was 16.

Oh, I thought you said it was 1943.

Yes, but at 1943 I was-- oh, yes, excuse me. I was 18. Yes, yes, of course.

What did your mother say to you when you had to leave?

My mother actually was so surprised that she said nothing because she didn't know what to say because this was something this never happened before. This was not before-- because I was a half-Jew. This was because I was actually in a Czech school, and even the Christian-- all the people were taken to Berlin.

Yes, yeah, yeah. And how long did you stay in Berlin?

Half a year.

And then?

Then I returned to school, and in a short time I made my examination. And after that, I went to-- I got a job. In the job, I actually was just one or one and a half months, and they took me because I was half-Jewish.

How did they come and take you? Can you describe that?

They didn't take anything. They just sent the letter. I had to come to a certain place, and there I was told that I will be taken to a camp.

Do you remember where the place in Brno was?

I'm afraid not.

So were there other students, other young men with you that day that you had to report? Where there other boys?

I had, of course, to report with other people, but I didn't know them at that time.

And so did you take anything special with you?

No, I don't think so. I just took what I had on me and some very, very few things, almost nothing.

Yeah. Did you say anything special to your mother?

I said my mother she should not be afraid because I'm young enough to-- if I will be able, so I will come back.

Yeah. Were you very religious? Was your mother a religious Christian?

She was not very much religious, but she went to church sometimes. And she prayed, but she was not actually a religious woman. She was not.

Did you go to church with her?

Just sometimes at Christmastime or something like that.

Yeah. So now you're reporting to be sent away in-- what month in 1943? Do you remember?

It was September.

This is '43, you said? Is it 1943 or--

It was '44.

'44, oh, OK, right. So September-- and where did you go? Where did they send you to?

They sent me first to Prague, to a place where all these people were collected together so they could do further things with them. But at that time, we didn't know what actually will be done with us. We just there collected.

It was a former school building, and at the school building, actually, we met with other people. And then they transported us to the camp.

Which camp?

The camp was-- the name was Postelberg.

And what kind of a camp was it?

Actually, it was a camp for half-Jewish people and Christian people who were married to Jewish women.

And where was it near? Where was it located? It was located by-- it was already on the area which was occupied. It's a German area. It was not anymore in Bohemia if you know what I mean. It was behind the border of the Republic.

How do you spell that? How do you spell Postelberg?

P-O-S-T-E-L-B-E-R-G, Postelberg.

Yeah, yeah. And so you went there, and can you describe the camp to me? The camp were actually situated in a wooded area, which was, from one side, bordered by a small river, from the other side, by a rail track. And so it could be very well-watched by few people because they watch the rail track and they watch the river. So we actually could-- nobody could actually go out of the camp.

And what was the living arrangements like?

The living arrangement was very poor. It was actually barracks, yes. You know the barracks, which are in concentration camps, so wooden buildings. It was a building. It's just a small area, yes.

And we were actually situated with about 10 people in one room, and actually, what we did-- we were jobbing, actually, for a construction company which built in the outside area from Postoloprty an airport. Actually, it was an underground airport for planes which were able, when they landed, to go into the ground, actually, to be hidden before everything, yes. There was just an area for landing, and actually, the planes were underground. But actually this was actually what they wanted to build. We just started here on the field, and we never finished it.

Was it all young men? Or were there women there?

No, because there were even older men because they were, for example, married to Jewish women, and they refused to divorce. So they were taken to this camp. This was a-- actually, there were people of all age.

But all men? All men?

Just men.

Just men, yeah. And what about-- did they give you enough food to eat?

Excuse me?

Did they give you enough food to eat?

The food was actually very poor. There was, of course, a kitchen, which actually was-- the cooks were out of the taken people, and the food was very poor. But we actually worked in fields, and the fields where we worked there were some-

--potatoes?

There were some food growing on the field, so I don't know how it-- it was the plant which the sugar made from.

I'm sorry. The what? Say that again.

Sugar, sugar.

Oh, sugar cane. You mean beets?

Yes, sugar.

Beets?

So actually we--

Are talking about beets?

We tried to dig this out of the ground and to eat this because we didn't have enough food.

Did you wear a uniform?

No, not a uniform. We had just what we had all the time from home, and it was getting-- from day to day it was poorer and poorer, and the shoes actually were replaced by just wooden--

--clogs.

--clogs. And we had nothing there. From day to day it was worse and worse.

So what did you talk about with the other young men?

We actually talked only to men who we actually knew about that he is safe because nobody knew if there, for example, is somebody who is just listening to what people are talking about. And then so we were very careful about that.

Did you talk about trying to escape?

Yes, sure we did, yes. Sure we did it, and I tried to escape. And I did escape.

Oh, you did?

Yes, I did.

Tell me about that. When was that? What month?

This was in April '45.

Oh, OK. So you were there from September--

In April '45 I escaped. Of course, it was a very-- it was a dangerous time, yes, to escape. We knew that some of the people who escaped before me-- they just took, and then they came to other places, for example, to Terezin. And this was very much more dangerous at the time.

So there were no Russian-- were there Russian troops around or not in that part of the country?

No, there was-- at the time I escaped, April, there were no Russian troops, no, troops at all, not American troops and not Russian troops at that time because this was the beginning of April, yes. And in April, actually, at the end of April, the Russian troops came to Brno. And this was at the time I was already back at home.

Oh, OK. Can we go back in time? I meant to ask you--

Yes.

--were you aware of what happened when you were younger? Were you aware of what happened in Lidice? Am I pronouncing it correctly, Lidice?

No.

You were not aware?

No, no, I wasn't. Of course of the moment, yes. When it happened, yes, I was aware of that because I was aware, for example, that Heydrich was killed. And I was aware that something will happen to punish the people and to get, actually, the responsible people who did that. So I was aware of that.

But do you remember it as a very frightening time for you?

Excuse me?

Do you remember that as being a very frightening time for you?

Actually, I was never frightened because I was too young to be frightened, and then nothing happened, actually, to me right at the time. It was the time before I got to the camps and before I went to Germany. So I actually was not aware, so I was not-- I was never afraid at the time.

When you were in the labor camp and then in the later camp, did you have any connection with your mother?

At what time do you mean?

Well, when you were--

When I was in Berlin-- so I had because there was a possibility to write home and to be actually in connection with the home. But later, then, of course not. When I was in the camp, it was very bad.

You had no connection with your mother when you were in Postelberg?

No, no, no.

So how did you escape? What did you do?

I actually-- I told you before that the camp was bordered by one side by rail track, and under the rail track there were some openings for water to escape, yes, because-- and through this-- actually, it was a tube, yes. You could actually climb through the tube and go on the other side of the rail track because all the area was in the woods. I told you that. So actually, you just had to go through this, and ended in a wood, and then you could escape.

Did you do it by yourself?

No, we were three of us.

Oh, OK. What, in the dark? You did it in the dark, at night?

Yes, at night, of course. And then after that, we had to avoid any areas with people, and just we tried to find out a train which is transporting, in the morning, some people to work. And we actually got among these people going to work, and so we avoided, then, to go to Prague. We have to go around Prague. And so we got in, maybe, six or seven days to Brno.

Oh, you went back to Brno?

Yes, of course. I went home.

Were the other two young men from Brno also?

Yes, we were all three from Brno. Do you remember their names of the other two?

OK, that's all right.

Excuse me. One was from Prague, and the other was from Brno. I can remember. The name was-- I never--

That's OK.

I talked just one time to him after that.

Yeah. So you get back to Brno. Do you see German--

I got back with the train, which arrived at 6:00 in the morning when the war started, Brno, and then I went-- because I knew very well the surrounding from Brno, I went to a wooded area where I was hidden during the day. And when the dark started, I went through Brno, then at home.

You went back to your home, you said?

Yes.

Yeah. And your mother was there?

My mother was there, yes.

Oh my, oh. What was that like to see her again?

I can't even tell you, but she was very happy that I came back.

Yeah, of course, of course.

You can imagine that.

Yes, yes, yeah. And so then the next thing to happen?

OK, then it was just maybe a week or 10 days before the Russians came into Brno, so it was not a long time. Nobody knew about this because I got home-- it was already dark, so nobody could recognize me over in the street where was living before that. So nobody knew that I am home.

Yes, yeah. Did you stay inside?

Yes, I stayed inside and stayed inside until the Russians came to Brno.

What was it like to see the Russian troops coming in?

It was awful.

Awful?

It was awful.

Why was it awful?

I could tell you why. Because I was living in an area where some cellars-- wine cellars, yes. And the Russians found very well and easy out that there is wine in the cellars, and they just got into the cellars, and all the time were drunk.

--were drunk.

It was very, very bad at the time.

But you must have been very glad in the beginning to see the Russians coming?

No, no. You was not very happy about that.

Well, it meant the Germans were defeated. Didn't it mean that the Germans were defeated that the Russians were there?

My mother was also German.

No, I know that, but I meant, weren't you both happy that it was now Russians instead of Germans?

I don't think so.

No?

No. We just regret that [LAUGHS] Americans came not yet, but the Russians. It was actually the first time after they came, so two weeks, yes, were very, very bad.

And then the Americans came?

The Americans came just to the western area, to Plzeň and to the western area.

So they did not come to Brno?

No, no, no. They don't.

OK, so then what happened?

Yeah, then I got the repatriated. I just remember that I got-- at the day I was born, on the 12th of June, I got my repatriation registration. And when I actually got the repatriation registration, I was able then-- because I already finished-- I had finished my secondary school, so i tried to get the inscription to the university.

You're now 20 years old, right?

I was, right, 20, yes.

Yeah, yeah. What did it mean to you that the war was over?

I was very happy that the war was over, and actually, I could actually study chemistry, which I did then. And I just felt very happy that I survived it.

Yes. And then at the end of the war, did you think your father was still alive?

No, no, no. At the end of the war I was 99% sure that he's not alive anymore because nobody was actually alive, not only my father, but my grandmother and my aunt which stayed in Brno as well. So actually, half the family stayed, and half the family escaped.

Where did they go to? Where did the other members go to?

So my cousin went to the United States, and, yes, actually, he became a very famous man there. He was a very well-known medical doctor at the University of San Francisco, where they actually made some research work in the blood studies.

What was his name?

Brecher, George Brecher.

And where did some of your other relatives go?

The other relatives go to Israel, but my cousin, my other cousin-- actually, two of my cousins went to Israel. When did these relatives leave?

Before the war.

They all left before the war, OK.

Not all, but most of them.

Yeah, no, but the ones who did leave left before the war, yeah, yeah. And the other ones did not survive?

No, they did not.

Yeah, yeah. OK, so now you're 20 years old, and what do you then do? You start university? I started university, yes, of course, and I studied at university for three years. And then came the Russians. And then came the Russians, and I have to leave the school.

Oh, really?

Yes.

Because?

Yeah, because of my relatives, because of all the things happened. My father actually was, they think--

--a capitalist?

--a capitalist and actually consul of a South American country. And so I have to leave the school.

Oh, yeah. This is, what, 1948?

Actually, it's the beginning of 1949. I was almost done with the school.

Yeah. And so what did you do?

Well, actually, I went to the military because I was the age of 20, and this was the time to go to the military. So I went for two years to the military.

What was your reaction when you found out-- after the war was over, when you found out what happened to all the Jews, do you remember your thoughts?

That this was actually, because of my father and because of the family, a very sad time because I knew that half of my family actually went through the Holocaust and the other part of the family is in Israel, which I had not actually any knowledge about what they are doing because it was interrupted. Everything was interrupted.

Yes, yeah yeah. So now you're in the military for two years?

Yes.

And did you just stay in Czechoslovakia? Did you sing Brno, or where were you?

Yeah, because I told you that I started with the age of, actually, 15 to swim, yes, and this helped me even in the military because I was very good at the time. And actually, I was what they called a representative which represented the country in swimming.

So actually I got, even in the military, in a company which were just able to, in the main time, to do the sport, to continue the sport.

So you did a lot of swimming in--

I did, actually, the last time of my military only swimming.

Really?

Yes.

OK. Just in the country? In the country?

Yes. This was even possible that they knew that my father was Jewish, and that he was a capitalist, and everything. So everything was pardoned, yes. And I was good in swimming, so do the swimming.

Yeah. Then when you got out of the army, what did you do?

Then I started to do my-- because I was educated in chemistry, so I started to do my chemistry work.

In Brno?

In Brno.

And who did you work for?

Zbrojovka Brno, which is actually the-- zbrojovka means arm factory, yes. In the war time, they made guns, and rifles, and things like that, and in the normal time, they made some office equipment and hunting--

--rifle.

--rifles and something like that.

And so you worked there?

Yes, I worked there as a chemist in the laboratory.

And you lived with your mother?

I lived there with my mother, yeah.

Yeah. And then how long did you work for that factory?

For that factory I worked, actually-- let me see-- many years.

OK. Yeah. And what was it like under the rule of the Russians, under the communist rule?

Under the communist rule it was everything very bad still. In the 60s then there started a time which was called the Prague--

--Spring?

--Spring time, and this actually helped me to get a better job, and because I was speaking some languages, I actually got even out of the country.

Oh. Where did you go?

First I went to Egypt.

Egypt?

Yes.

Oh, my. OK. To do what?

To do work for zbrojovka Brno, which actually was delivering some military equipment to Egypt.

Oh, OK. And then where did you go after that?

Then I went to Afghanistan.

Oh. Oh my. And what did you do there?

The same thing.

The same thing?

Yes.

And did you have a family by then? Were you married or--

At the time I was already-- I had a family, of course, but I was already, not divorced from my wife, but we lived--
--separate?

--separate, yeah.

Do you have children?

Yes, I have three children.

OK, so you were in Egypt. Then you were in Afghanistan. And then where?

Then came the Russians again. Then came the Russians in '69, and then I escaped again to Germany.

You got out to Germany. And did you work in Germany?

Yeah, of course I worked in Germany for maybe-- wait a moment. From '70 to '83 I worked in Germany.

When you said you escaped, how did that work? How did you do that?

At that time, I worked in Afghanistan, so I just, from Afghanistan, didn't return to Czechoslovakia. I went to Austria, where-- you remember that I told you that my mother was actually Viennese?

Yes.

So the other part of my family was living in Vienna, in Austria. So I actually went to this part of the family to join them, and from there I went to Germany.

Oh, OK. And where in Germany did you live?

In Neuss, which is actually one town with Dusseldorf together.

Now, why did you go to Germany?

Yeah, because I was actually-- in Germany, I was actually-- how is the right word? Because my mother was actually a German and my father was actually of German origin, So actually, the Germans actually--

--accepted you?

--accepted that I am German because, actually, you know that I even went some years to a German school, so I actually spoke very well. And then so they actually granted me for German.

But how did you feel--

I didn't have any problems to prove that I am of German origin.

But how did you feel living in Germany, knowing that Germany was the one to start the war and--

Well, it was a very long time since that because it was already-- you imagine that it was already 1970, and it was actually 25 years--

--25 years later, yeah.

--later. So actually, these thoughts were a long way away, and even the Germans, at that time, tried, actually, because they knew where I am coming from and who I am-- and they tried to help me. And after 25 years, there were other people than the Germans, than the Nazis.

There were no Nazis. There were younger people who understood the situation and who actually were feeling that the Germans at the war times did not the right thing. And so actually I did not have any problems to settle there.

Yeah. So then you stayed in Germany, and when did you leave?

Then I stayed in Germany for maybe 12 years.

And, again, who did you work for in Germany?

In Germany I worked for-- you want the name of the company or--

Sure. Do you remember the name?

The company was Longbine and Fundhauser. There I worked for seven years.

As a chemist?

As a chemist, yeah. And then I worked for Hillyer and Knur again as a chemist and the leader of the chemical laboratory. And then I went to United States.

Oh. Where did you come? Which city?

I came to Warren, Ohio.

Oh, OK. And who did you work for here?

Thomas Steel.

For who?

Thomas Steel.

Oh, Thomas Steel, yeah.

Thomas Steel Company.

Yeah. And how long did you stay in the United States?

I stayed in the United States maybe nine years.

Oh. And you lived in Ohio the whole time?

At that time I lived in Ohio, yes. And actually, I retired there because I was actually of the opinion that I will stay there forever for good. But what happened was that-- you know the situation, that, 1990, they opened the borders to the Czech Republic. And so I just several times went to the Czech Republic and met the friends there and the people I knew

before, so actually I decided to go back to Europe.

Yeah. And so now you live in the Czech Republic and in Germany?

I live in Germany.

You don't live in the Czech Republic anymore?

You cannot say-- I have a flat there, but something between. I pay my duties and my taxes in Germany, and in the Czech Republic I am only to visit.

Yeah, yeah. Tell me, do you think this wartime experience made you feel more Jewish, or it did not have any effect?

I always felt more Jewish and Christian-- I can tell you that-- because I even better knew the Jewish part of the family than the Christian part of the family. I spent a lot time with the Jewish people and a few times with the Christian people. So I actually felt-- even when I was educated in a Christian way, I felt more to be a Jewish people.

How do you feel now? Do you still feel that way, or is that--

Yeah, I still feel that way, yes. I was already-- last year I was in Israel, and there I have a cousin still living. Actually, it's not my cousin. It's my grand cousin, the daughter of my cousin.

Yeah. What are your thoughts about Israel?

Oh, I was just surprised how it changed by the time I was there before.

When did you first go?

In the 90s, sometimes in the 90s, in the late 90s, I think, '97, something like that. And then, after 15 years, I went again, and I was just surprised what happened, and--

The development? You mean all the development? What do you mean you were surprised?

Yes, I mean the development, and I mean the amount of the people. There were a lot of new people coming there and doing their business, and a lot changed. I could already see on the airport and on the way, actually, to [PLACE NAME] where my cousin is living. And I've met, actually, a lot of the family of the young people and spent a lot of time with them.

Do you feel that the world has learned any lessons from the Holocaust?

Oh, I definitely think that, yes, even the German people. My sons, actually-- two of my sons are married to German girls, yes, and the girls and even the families of the girls, yes, are absolutely thinking that the Hitler time was something which shouldn't happen at all. So actually they are very open people, and even if they know that-- my sons are actually half-Jewish because my wife is half-Jewish as well.

Oh, I was going to ask you about her. Really?

Yes, yes.

Is she from Czechoslovakia? Where is she--

Yes, but I didn't know. I didn't know. At the time, I actually-- we met the first time when we spent our early times together, so I didn't know about that.

And so how did you raise your children? Did you raise them as Christians or Jews? Or how did you--

No, I raise them-- I didn't raise them religious.

You did?

I did not.

What about your wife's family? What happened to them? Did she lose any relatives?

Of course she lose their father.

She did?

And the mother was Christian, and so she survived.

When did your mother pass away?

My mother?

Yeah.

My mother passed away in 1976.

Yeah, yeah. Do you know where your wife's Jewish relatives were taken to?

I don't know about anything. I'm sorry about that.

Yeah, yeah. And your children-- what are their thoughts about the war, and the Holocaust, and everything? They obviously knew what happened their--

Of course they knew, yes. They knew, and actually, they are-- especially one is actually even knowing the relatives, and even some relatives from Israel was there to visit with our family years ago. So actually, they know about that.

And then you said you have a third child. Where is your third-- two are living in Germany, and where's your third child?

Two are living in Germany, and one is living in the Czech Republic. He just refused to immigrate because his wife didn't want to go away from the parents, from her parents.

Yeah, yes, yeah, yeah. So what do you consider yourself today? Are Czech? Are you German?

I consider myself German.

You consider yourself German now?

Yes.

That's very interesting.

Because I've paid my taxes in Germany, so I consider my-- I cannot tell you that I am a Czech even when I am just living between these two countries. And sometimes I am in the Czech Republic, where I have a flat, and sometimes I am here. Half the family I have here. The other half is in the Czech Republic, so what shall I do?

Right, right. So you're retired now?

Oh, I'm retired very many years because I'm a very old man already.

Do you think about the war often as you've gotten older?

Oh, yes, I think about the time, and especially the last years I'm very often thinking about my father and about his time, what could happen after the war if my father would survive.

Oh. You mean what he'd be doing? Is that what you mean?

Actually, yes, what he will be doing. And actually, I didn't actually get very much education of my father's side because you know my father was out of my life in 1934, which-- I was nine years old, so he had very few possibilities to educate myself and to think what he's thinking what I should be in my life if you understand what I mean.

You have three sons?

Yes, I have three sons.

When those sons were the age that you were when you were in the labor camp and in the other camp, did it make you think of those-- when they were that same age that you were, did it bring back memories of what you were doing when you were their age, the hard life that you had in--

I don't think that they are thinking about that because, in my family, I actually told very few things about my former life, about the Holocaust and about my experience in the camp in Berlin and the camp in the Postelberg. And I don't think that they were very-- they know about it, yes, but they didn't question too much about it.

But my-- yeah, go on.

Two of the sons are medical doctors. And the third one-- because my wife was a medical doctor. And the third one studied construction, and he's a construction engineer, a building engineer. So actually they did very well. I am very, very happy with my family and even with my sons because they developed in very good and useful people, and I am very happy about that.

Are there any--

Pardon?

Are there any sights or sounds, or smells, or something that make you think of the wartime years when you were in Postelberg or in Berlin? Today, is there anything that reminds you of that time?

Of course it does because about the time in Berlin I wrote a book. I wrote a book with a friend of mine which spent the time in Berlin with me. So actually I had a lot of possibilities to think about the time, and I even visited Berlin many years later to see about the areas and about the places where I actually spent my time in Berlin.

Tell me a little bit more about the book.

Well, it's actually a book which handles was about the time when we were at the school, and how we were taken about the school, and what we actually thought about the whole thing on the trip because nobody actually knew where he's going. We didn't know that we are going to go Berlin, that they care about the dead people and about the ruins there. And we were actually astonished when we landed at Berlin, the capital of Germany, and had to be there almost one half a year and do the job.

So this handles about the book, and then it had about, actually, the time when the Germans came to occupy the Czech area. And then it handles even about the time when the Czech Republic changed to the communist republic, and both of

these things were actually, for us, a very hard time to survive this. So actually, the book handles was about the surviving both of these times, the German time and then the communist.

What is the name of your book?

The name of the book remembers a little bit of the Hemingway book because Hemingway wrote a book about the Lost Generation. And our book actually got the name-- let me translate it-- The Damned Lost Generation.

Who was the other author?

The other was named Fisher, Josef Fisher.

Was he also half-Jewish?

No, no. He was Christian.

He was all Christian, yeah.

Has the book been translated?

Because you remember, at the time we were taken from the school because we were half-Jewish.

Has the book been translated?

No, never, no, no, no.

It's in the Czech language?

In the Czech language, but-- in the Czech language, and sometimes some chapters are in English-- no, in German. So-- excuse me-- some chapters are in English because we reproduced some flyers which were coming from the Americans and from the English from the planes down to Berlin.

So you say, as you've gotten older, you think more about your wartime experiences?

When I actually got older, I thought, actually, more at the time in Berlin because I tried to forget the time in the camp with half-Jewish people. It was something which I didn't like and what I actually wanted to get out of my mind.

Yeah. Do you have grandchildren?

Yes, I have two children.

So you don't speak of the war years now with your children, with your sons, anymore, right?

When I try to speak about that, they tell me, father, we don't want to speak about that because we already know everything, what you told.

Yeah. And what are your thoughts about the United States? You said you had thought maybe you would retire here but then obviously changed your mind.

Oh, yes, I actually-- what I wanted to do is retire and stay in the United States, and it would happen when there was no possibility to return back to the Czech Republic. And then I still thought that I will stay there because I thought that some of my sons will come to me, to United States, and actually, it would happen that one will stay in Czech Republic, the other one in Germany, and the third one the United States, so I didn't know what to do. Yes, it was a little bit complicated.

Do you still have a son in the United States?

No. He then decided to go to Germany because there were some difficulties with the-- when he studied at the university, they didn't want to actually acknowledge that he started in Germany the studies and then ended in the United States. There were some difficulties. So actually, he said he would lose two years, and he didn't want to lose the two years. So he stayed in Germany. You understand what I mean?

Yes, yeah. Have you been back to the United States since you left?

Oh, yes, several times.

Yeah. Have you been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington?

No, I have been to the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem.

Ah, and what were your thoughts there?

Oh, this is great. This is just great. This is something which I didn't even expect to see because it's actually a new one. When I went to Israel the first time in the 90s, it wasn't built yet, and actually it is a pretty new museum. I was just astonished, and I was very-- actually, I was very glad that I can see things which I actually wasn't aware of. I was very impressed about that.

Such as? You said you learned some things, that you--

Yes, of course. I learned some things. I learned that--

Such as what?

Mostly about how people care about the time and how they are able to reproduce things which actually, I thought, were forgotten because nobody actually-- right after the war, actually, nobody talked about this time. There were other sorts of people, and people actually tried to get in their lives again. And I think they hadn't time to talk about this.

And when I saw, after all this time, this museum, I was very impressed by the way how it handled things. And even there is another part of the museum which handles just children, and it is extremely interesting, this part of the children, because how the children survived and how they actually got through this time.

Yeah. Do you think the Holocaust can happen again?

No.

Why not?

Yeah, because people are thinking-- in Germany, the people are-- there's a part of the people who are actually still having in mind the Nazi area. There are very few people, and they do not have any influence at the politics. And I don't think that the people, since that time-- it's now 50 or 55 years right after the war. They just changed in thinking, and they are not anymore racist, I think.

Well, is there anything you'd like to add to what you said, any thoughts that you have?

I think we almost covered everything I wanted to tell you about this.

And any other things--

I am just happy that I could-- yes, there is something because the family of my cousin I told you was a medical doctor in--

--San Francisco.

--San Francisco. So actually, when I spent my time in the United States all these 10 years, I met this guy very often. And we met even several times a year, even when I was actually in Ohio and he was in California. So we met at least twice or three times a year and spent very much free times with him.

And this family is a Jewish family. He married then a woman from Prague. She's Jewish. And he adopted, actually, her five children, and even with this family-- I was very close to this family and spend a lot of time with this family.

Wonderful. How do you spell his last name?

Brecher, B, like Berta, B-R-E-C-H-E-R, Brecher.

Yeah. And his first name is George, right?

George, yeah. Yeah, he's a very famous man. You can find it on the internet and his work. And he was all over Europe, and he's very famous.

Is he still alive?

No, no. He died maybe-- he was 12 years older than, so actually, he died at the age of 92 home several years ago. I think it's several years.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, that's wonderful. Anything else you wanted to add before we--

I don't think about anything else, no.

Why did you want to do this interview?

I wanted, actually, to do the interview because I am very glad that people want to talk to me, and actually, the interview was-- it was a supposition from [? Mickey ?] that I could do it. And I wanted to talk to somebody who can understand what I actually went through and who even cared to make sure that it won't be forgotten.

You see, my English-- since I am now 20 years-- it may be over 20 years I'm out of United States, so it's a little bit rusty. But I would live in the United States, I think I would brush it up a little.

Yeah, yeah. Well, your English is wonderful, and it's wonderful--

Thank you about that. It's not so wonderful. Some expressions-- I'm just seeking some expressions which are disappeared in the time.

When is the last time you came to the United States?

The last time I was there?

Yes.

Wait a moment. The last time I was there in 2006, competing.

What's that? Competing?

Competing, yes.

What do you mean?

Competing in swimming.

Oh my goodness.

There was a--

Where were you swimming?

In Palo Alto.

Oh my. That's wonderful. So are you--

There was the world championship of seniors, yes. I go competing with the seniors. It's called the Masters, the Masters Championship of the World in swimming.

Wonderful. And how did you-- how did you do?

Oh, I won. I won.

That's wonderful.

It's my best. Swimming is my profession. You know that.

What stroke you do you do?

If you want to be good, you have to know every stroke.

OK. And are you still swimming?

Yes, I'm still swimming. I am swimming three times a week and, in summertime, every day.

Oh. Well, that is a very good note to end on, unless you had anything else you wanted to talk about.

No, no, no, no. I think this is all.

Well, we'll end on that high note of your swimming success. That's wonderful.

I'm still glad that I can do it at my age because I am now 87, and I can still compete. And it doesn't make me any problems, so I'm happy about that.

Wonderful. So we will stop the interview now. I just wanted to say that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Hans Ziegler.

I thank you