

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Alice Barzilay, conducted by Gail Schwartz on January 23, 2014. It is taking place over the telephone at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and in New York City. Please tell me your full name.

Alice Schachter Barzilay.

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

I was born in Vienna, Austria, November 3, 1926.

Yes. And your parents-- please call me their names and a little bit about them.

My father's name was [? Hosea ?] Schachter. And he was born in what was then Poland, [? Brochow, ?] and was a textile merchant, imported and locally as well in the wholesale business and textile business. My mother's name was [? Niza ?] born Kramer, Schachter. And she was born near-- in the same area as my father and married him, because he was living in Vienna at the time of their marriage.

What brought your father to Vienna?

All right, I don't know the post-war feeling, post World War I. I don't know. Wider horizons, I think.

OK. And did you have any siblings?

I have had a sister who died in 2006.

And she was older or younger?

She was four years younger.

And her name?

Her name was Ruth Schachter Morgenthal. She was married to Henry Morgenthal III, and she was living in Boston-- in Cambridge, actually, and Rhode Island. And she was very active politically. And she was very highly educated.

Let's talk about your schooling. What kind of school did you start out at?

I started in a public school in Vienna, which was an academic public school.

And was it a coed school?

No, girls only.

Girls only. And any experience at that time of any anti-Semitism among the children or the teachers?

Not that I recall I was aware of yet.

Was your neighborhood a mixed neighborhood of Jews and non-Jews?

Many Jews and some non-Jews. It was a good neighborhood, overlooking a beautiful park and the Danube.

Were you in a house or an apartment?

In an apartment.

In an apartment. And how would you describe your family's status? Was it middle-class, upper-middle?

Maybe upper-middle. I mean well well-off and growing quite well often comfortable Yes

and what kind of sports did you take part in as a child

I did ice skating regularly from the age of three on ice and my father left to go ice skating he did a lot of schooling and bicycling as well but I did skiing with the school once I was in the gymnasium, which was above the 5th grade we went with the school skiing. So I skied a bit until we left for Cuba.

And what language did you speak at home?

At home, we spoke German.

Now you said you were interested in sports. Any other hobbies that you had?

I can't recall.

OK. And let's talk about how religious your family was.

Quite religious, modern religious. Secular education was stressed rather than Jewish school. But we did have an education in Jewish Studies as well.

This privately with a tutor at the house? Or did you go to a Hebrew school?

Actually, no Hebrew school. Actually what was done in Vienna was several times a week or maybe-- I don't know. May have been only once a week. The various kids and children in the class would go to their religious class.

And so I would go to the religious education with the Jewish children and so forth. And at home, my father saw to it that we learned a lot through ritual. And later on, we had private lessons, but that was in this country.

Yeah. And you observed the holidays and--

Very much so.

And Shabbat?

Shabbat as well.

OK. Yeah. And so at that point, you said you had not experienced any anti-Semitism.

Well it was prior to the age of--

Yes, right. What about in your extended family-- grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins?

My grandparents lived in Poland, which was 24 hours by train from Vienna. So I saw them once. We went there once. My mother took us to meet them once. That's all. I had no real contact with them because it was a tremendous distance.

Yeah. But no aunts, uncles, cousins?

No. My father was the only one that came, and I had lots of friends.

Yeah.

And people came to visit us.

Yeah. Were your parents Zionists at that time?

My father was quite Zionistically inclined in his youth, from what I understand. He once decided he was going to walk to the ocean, and then go to Israel. But we were not-- I mean, not that I'm-- and not in my life. Let's say I wasn't that much aware of. I knew there was a Palestine, and I was for it. But we weren't very much involved in the organizations.

And you had Jewish and non-Jewish friends, you said.

Definitely.

Yeah. Now when did you start hearing about a man named Hitler? Do you remember your first time that you heard about him?

It was a sequence of various political upheavals in Austria. I don't remember the details too much. But I remember somebody being president called Dollfuss and then somebody being shot. And then somebody by the name of Schuschnigg and then--

Right.

But I do remember that in March, 1938, I think it was, the--

Yeah, the Anschluss.

The Anschluss was there. But I had the flu, and I was home. And so when I returned to the school a week later, everything had changed.

In what sense?

Well, children-- we were seated in the back of the room. We were treated totally differently.

These are the Jewish students?

Yes, the Jewish children were moved to the back of the room. And everything outside was unsafe on the streets and otherwise. But I may have heard of-- I mean, that over-- the night that Hitler marched into Vienna, of course. My mother got sick and knew right away.

And my father was-- they knew immediately that we had to get out. But I wasn't totally aware of it until I got back to school. And eventually, we were told that our school would have to close, and that the different system was going to be taking effect.

What were your feelings at the beginning when you first came back to school, and you had to stay in the back of the classroom?

I didn't understand.

Were you frightened? Were you frightened? Do you remember being frightened?

I-- just totally amazed. Amazed. Didn't quite understand it.

Because up to that point, you had not experienced any anti-Semitism.

Not terrible. I had many friends that were not Jewish.

Jewish, yeah.

Yeah.

And you would go to their house and play, and they would come to your house?

Yes.

What about the--

We played more in the park than in the houses. It wasn't as many dates as there are in this country.

Yeah. So there you are in the back of the classroom, with these other Jewish girls. Did you talk among yourselves about what was happening?

Oh, I'm sure not. I'm sure we were frightened, now that you get to it. I'm afraid we did not talk. Because immediately, we realized that it was dangerous to walk in the streets.

How did you know this? You're 12 years old, right?

Yeah. So when we went back from school or going to school, going back from school, there were hordes of other kids attacking us.

Physically attacking?

Yes. I mean, my sister, who was four years younger, they spat in her face and pulled her by the pigtails. And then there were big signs on the benches saying, "No Jews allowed." And we were not allowed in the parks overnight. So this all happened really very quickly.

And what is the reaction of a 12-year-old child to this? Is it something you talked about with your parents?

We talked about it, but we just existed from day to day and watched what was going on. Our maid was leaving because she wasn't allowed to work for Jews anymore. And we got somebody who had already been a refugee from some other part of Austria.

This was a relative who came to your house you mean?

No. This was a poor soul who had a sister and a father, and they were-- they came from Klagenfurt, which was the provinces. And they had been chased out the very day that Hitler arrived. And all she could do to get food on the table was to do domestic work, so she came to us. And a very sad soul whom I remember to this day.

How did she know you all?

Oh, she didn't know us. My mother sent out recommendations. I don't know if anybody recommended a needy case. My mother was always ready for needy cases. And my father--

Before the Anschluss, before '38, had you heard of a man named Hitler? Because he got into power in '33, and I was just wondering.

I'd heard of it, but it didn't affect me. I mean it didn't hit home.

Right. Had you ever heard him speak over the radio before '38, any of his speeches?

I remember sitting in the living room and my parents listening to the radio. But I didn't take it seriously. But I was 11.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

That was when you were a child, right.

I was 11 when they marched in. And I was even younger before when it began.

So that's when the big change happened, the Anschluss. Yeah. Did you see Hitler at that time?

I never saw him.

You never saw him?

No, but I saw the guy you know the SS and SR marching in front of my windows and screaming. And that was immediate, the night that he marched in. And we still had the Gentile woman working for us. And my parents happened to be at the theater that night.

They weren't home. And actually, yeah, it was very frightening. Who was-- and who are those people marching in front of the windows. And my sister was even younger. I was 11, and she was seven.

And how did your nursemaid handle-- your governess handle that?

That was actually the maid. And the other one was our governess, and she didn't handle it all that well. And when my parents came home, they found that the gas was on.

Oh, my goodness.

Yeah, so she didn't stay with us much longer. But if they hadn't come home when they did come, God knows what would have happened.

Right. What was it like to see these soldiers marching and hear--

Frightening.

--the sound of the boots and things like that?

That was frightening.

Yeah. Did the swastika have any meaning to you

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

At that time.

It conveyed a lot of enthusiasm of the masses, from which I was excluded. It didn't quite hit me just what they were doing.

At that time.

Yeah, that they were going to kill my grandparents and everybody else.

Oh, god. Yeah. Yeah. OK, so the Anschluss happens, and then you go to school, and you have to stay in the back of the

room.

Right.

And then what was the next development?

The next development was we were told-- at my school, that was a gymnasium, an academic gymnasium. We could not continue there at the school. It was closed down. And that only the top students in the city would be allowed to enroll in the one Jewish gymnasium. That existed.

But the gymnasium you were in was not a Jewish--

No, it was a women's-- not institution, but a women's school. So they had to qualify for that at the gymnasium with grades and so forth. And I did qualify. And I was accepted to it. So I was happy that I could continue my academic education. And my sister was younger, so--

She was in the earlier school.

Yeah, and that could continue till 4th grade, so there was no issue. I went to that school in September, 1938. But it really didn't have the greatest effect on my life, except that I felt good about being there, because we left several months later-- yeah, four months later.

With your relationship with your parents, did they talk over things--

They were generally supportive all the way, whether here or in Cuba or anywhere else. It was fantastic, when I think about it.

No, but I meant when you were younger, before you left Austria. Were they open with you in discussing what was happening?

They didn't hide it. I didn't feel that they were hiding that. It couldn't be hidden. It couldn't be. They were open, I think. Maybe not completely-- I mean, we were children. I just can't gauge that.

But you weren't allowed to go out on the street then?

By myself, anyway.

Yeah.

And we were-- I was afraid to be-- and going away in the summer and went on this-- the ski trip with the school. That was just the week before March or so. But you could-- there, you could feel the Nazism in the mountains. It was completely so.

How did you feel them? In what sense?

You just felt it-- that we were surrounded by enemies. And the amazing thing is we were on the slopes. And it was a second year gymnasium, which is sixth-grade class. Skiing and on the slope with us was the Duke of Windsor.

Oh, my goodness.

Who had just abdicated, I think, or something. He was in the process of marrying her, the Duchess of Windsor.

Right.

We felt it there, I mean, totally, because we stayed at the type of place that-- in the mountains where they were no Jews. And it was obvious that it was their time.

Yeah. But you yourself didn't experience any direct anti-Semitic--

Well, it was coming pretty soon. I mean, in my father's business--

What happened with that?

A commissar was put in, which meant that he oversaw the whole business.

Yeah.

And eventually it was taken over. And he had a lot of good friends in among the Gentiles who suddenly became big shots in the Nazi parties. So I think that he was somewhat in better shape by some unseen protection, you know, so that the business was going. And what else? How did we--

Do if they had any-- if your father or mother had any relation or communication with their families in the other-- you know, far away?

Well, us-- they immediately tried to get us out. I mean, they knew we had to leave, so.

To go into the countryside, you mean?

No, no, no, to go abroad.

Oh, OK.

Is that what you're asking?

No, I was asking-- your relatives, you said, were not in Vienna.

No.

They were from--

They offered to take us into Poland. My father didn't think that was a good move.

Right, oh, OK.

We didn't move. He wrote to relatives in other countries.

So that's when he started to write to--

Yeah, immediately. So they wrote to Palestine and to the United States. And I had some cousins in Palestine-- and his brothers. And the cousin didn't answer, and so. My sister, years later, said it's a good thing. Yeah, but anyway, they didn't answer. But I had cousins in New York who did answer.

Who did answer.

They did answer-- who gave us an affidavit and helped us then elaborate the roads through Cuba and all that.

Yeah. At that point, what did America mean to you as a 12-year-old?

An unknown promised land.

Yeah. But something very positive?

Yes. Yes, I had met, actually, those relatives who were on their honeymoon in Vienna a couple of years before. And other people, too, whom-- it sounded like it unknown, wonderful place.

So your father got papers, got the affidavits, from New York?

From the family in--

In New York.

In New York. And then there was another issue that-- you know the Kristallnacht in the-- you know that, don't you?

Yes.

So do you want the-- the sequence was that they came to our house, and they went from door to door and took out all the men from the whole building. And when they came to our door, they read the name. The name was Schacter. And somebody gave the order, skip that door.

Oh?

So they skipped our door and went on. And we could hear the screams in the streets and the glass breaking and everything else. But we were saved for the night.

Do you know how that happened?

No, I never found out.

You never--

We were sitting in the ante room, the large ante room, actually waiting to be invaded. And my father said, would you like me to go out, so that we get it over with?

Oh, my.

And so we said, no. And that's when they skipped us, then. And but we could hear everything, and I've never forgotten it in the streets and otherwise. And then after Kristallnacht, when the others were transported to God knows what destinations.

My father was contacted by some Aryan friend of his, or formerly friends, and now Aryan, but still friendly, and was told that he had to leave the country by December 31, '38. Or otherwise, then nobody could vouch for anything.

Yeah, yeah.

It wasn't likely to leave. Anyway, so they intensified their efforts to get exit possibilities.

And so America was-- I mean, the United States was a possibility. But we also needed a document called an Unbedenklichkeit to get out of the country, which had to be gotten from the Nazis, and which wasn't available so quickly. And he might not have it by December 31. So we decided, my parents decided, to split the family up so that my father and my little sister, who was adorable, would go on New Year's Eve and try and cross the border, because the guards would be drunk, they thought.



And we would stay and wait for the paper and then see if we could exit properly and perhaps ship some of our stuff overseas-- so later. That's later on. At any rate, they did proceed accordingly. In the meanwhile, the people from-- the cousins-- helped us get a visa into Cuba, which was obtainable at that point by depositing \$500 per person as a guarantee in Cuba and sending us tickets to go to Cuba.

This was your American cousin who told you this?

Yeah, that there is no other way.

What were their names?

Their name was Max and Ida Rothschild. They lived in Great Neck. So they-- it was my father's first cousin. And anyway, they-- where was I? They arranged for Cuba.

So my sister and my father got through. They were drunk. And they went-- it was really amazing-- to Switzerland, and then went on to England very soon after with the idea that we would join them in England, where we had very good friends.

How did he stay in contact with your mother?

Well, we didn't stay in-- I mean, there wasn't much time involved. And we left two weeks later, it so happens.

No, but when he got-- once he left your house and got over, do you know how you stayed in contact with him?

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. Oh, and when they got to England, they call us for sure. But I don't know. I just don't know. Anyway, we stayed behind, and we did not have the paper. I can't imagine how my mother felt when they said goodbye to each.

Oh, my God. Yeah.

Yeah. At any rate, eventually, the paper came. And they packed a lift van with our belongings, with an SS watching every bit of the way what we're taking, what we're not. And my mother was very smart. And she'd give some away. You know, she'd bribe them all the way. So we got some things together and they were shipped to the United States to await our eventual arrival.

What did your mother take with her?

With her to the--

Well, or send on?

Send on? We had furniture and everything, everything. Rooms full of belonging-- you know.

She was able to ship all that over?

Yes. Quite a bit, yeah. So the first apartment that we had, which was Washington Heights here, was furnished with stuff from Vienna.

Now what did you take as a child? What did you take with you?

What I shipped was all my books and--

Your books?

It was ridiculous. And it was of no value to me. In the end, I gave it away. It was really-- I loved my books. I didn't want to give them up.

And did you take any personal-- besides books, anything very personal? Any--

Well, I'm sure we did.

--dolls or things like that?

I'm sure I did, but I don't recall too much. We went with minimal luggage to England.

OK, let's back up for a minute. How did you feel about leaving Austria? Did you feel very Austrian?

I felt this was home until that March. I felt this was it. You know--

You were Austrian.

Jewish-- always know we're Jewish.

OK, and now you have to leave. What's that like for a child?

It's rough. Will I have no shoes when I need them when my feet grow? All sorts of things. And we won't have money. We knew that, you know.

Did you tell your friends you were leaving?

Everybody was leaving. Everybody was leaving.

Yeah. Was it something you talked over with your friends?

We talked about it, I'm sure. But many of my friends had already left.

Oh, OK.

And others, and I made new friends because I was in a new school.

Yes, that's right.

So there wasn't a continuous friendship that was possible, actually.

I also meant to ask you with Kristallnacht, did you see any damage, any building damage?

Oh, we saw a lot outside on the streets. They demolished the showcase, the windows on the stores and everything. And I heard screaming men in the back. We had balconies in the back and in the front. And you could hear them lugging the men away from their homes.

Was your father's place damaged-- business damaged?

Not terribly that I'm aware of. No. I think that the commissar must have been in a high position.

Oh, my.

I don't know.

So now you're leaving Vienna with your mother.

Yes. And joining them in England, where they--

How did you get there? How did--

We took from Vienna a train, and the channel. I think the train went over all the way to-- I can't remember whether it was-- it was via Holland, and I think then a ship to England, and then on to London. I'm not quite sure.

Did you know any English at that point?

Well, yes, because when Hitler came to Vienna the French governess left. She went-- she disappeared almost immediately. And my mother decided to hire somebody else because she was working part time with my father. And it was a large business. And the one she decided to hire was English-speaking. She thought it was better for the children, and it was. Oh, yes, I knew some English.

You knew some English.

Not perfectly, but I knew, yes.

So now you're landing. You're in London.

Yes. And we went to school, to a public school for about two months, and then we left.

Yeah. What was it like living in London, and what were your memories of it? What are your memories?

It was positive, I believe. We were living with an elderly lady in her 80s in her home. And there was nothing permanent about it, just she was-- they were friends with both her sons and her. And they were very willing to keep us. But it wasn't-- and the people were very nice.

These were people your parents knew?

Yeah, knew from Vienna.

They knew from Vienna? Yeah. Did you go to school? Or you just--

Yeah, I went to school for the two months. Yeah. I didn't know how long we were staying because they were trying to convince us to stay. And my father said, no, we got to get out of here.

And what were the British children's-- girls'-- reaction to you, or boys and girls' reaction to you?

They were all right. They sort of ridiculed the English a little bit, but that's OK. There wasn't enough time to form great relationships in--

Right. And so then the next steps is what?

The next step-- we sailed on March 9, 1939 from Liverpool to Havana. We went from London by plane, actually, which was a foolish thing, because my father wanted the children to experience an airplane. And it was a very bad flight. But at any rate, we did experience the airplane. And then we took the boat. And it was a 17-day trip to Havana.

Oh, my. Do remember the name of the boat?

Yes. It's Oropesa-- O-R-O-P-E-S-A.

On what line?

A specific line? I don't know. I did know, but.

Again, what were your thoughts about leaving Europe? Here, you're going--

None. At that point, one was in motion for the best-- getting to the best possible destination. I mean, it was an interesting crossing. And there were others going to different parts of Latin America, different ports, and similar families, similar situations.

And when we landed in Havana, men came up to inspect the boat and the papers and everything, and then transported us into small boats in the harbor and told us all to go into small boats. And we went into these boats.

And we thought we were going into Havana, but we weren't. They shipped us to a small island off the coast, where they had an orphanage for Cuban children. And they separated the men and the women. And they wanted us to buy our way out.

So were you with your mother--

We left with my mother, and my father was in the other--

Yeah.

They were bunk beds, double-deckers. We weren't the only ones taken off the boat. There were other people landing there. And so we stayed there. And none of the people that were there had money, really, to buy their way out.

But the Joint Distribution Committee in Havana did it. They helped, and we eventually got out. And we went into Havana Harbor a number of days later.

Now you said there were many refugee families and children. Did the children stick together?

Yeah, so we made friends on board the ship. A total of 17 days-- you do under those conditions.

Right, and did you--

It was a nice, pleasant experience.

As kids, did you talk about Hitler? Did you talk about Germany? Did you talk about those--

I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I can't be sure. Probably did, but I don't know.

Yeah. OK, so now you're in Havana.

In Havana, we went-- the first step was a hotel called the Muralla-- in the Calle Muralla, in the street. Each family got moved into one room, the four of us.

How old were your parents at this point?

My mother was 33. She was young, so 33, and my-- she was young. And my father was, I guess, 44 or something like that-- 32, 33. Yeah. My mother was born in '05, and my father in '94. But they were young. She was particularly young.

Yes. Was she a strong woman?

She was a terrific woman, and was loved by everybody, whether they spoke her language or not. She was absolutely

wonderful in relating to people.

And in handling crises that you were going through?

Terrific, terrific. Yeah, absolutely terrific. And my father was able in his fashion, too-- very business-like, and not as broad a horizon. But my mother was absolutely an unbelievable woman. And my father was-- I mean, he made all the right decisions. So they were both terrific in their way. I don't know. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here, I don't think.

Right. Did any of your extended family who were far out from Vienna get out when you did?

Just one sister of my mother's, eventually, many years later. And her husband was actually at the World's Fair buying machinery when war broke out in Poland. They were living in Poland-- and couldn't get back. It's a whole story in itself.

So yeah, so that one came to this country. And that sister only just died at the age about 104. And her husband, the same-- 103, 104. But others-- none of them got out.

None of them got out. So now you're-- to get back to Havana.

Yeah, we're in Havana. And we were in this one-room arrangement which has semi-walls, like in offices, where--

Yeah, halfway up?

That's correct, with family next to each other. Anyway, we got to know some families. And three families moved together to a lovely section in the suburbs, splitting the cost that way. So each family got two bedrooms.

So it was a beautiful house, and a huge kitchen, which was shared, with a coal stove. My mother had to light the stove.

Oh, my.

A big change from what she was brought up with. But she was terrific. She used to wash the marble floors and everything.

And my father went into town and tried to establish relations with the textile trade. I don't know how because he didn't speak Spanish. And the first day that he went to town, he was robbed of his good watch, gold watch, which was inherited from his father. But anyway, he managed.

He did establish friendships and relationships and imported textiles for the trade there. I don't know how he man-- I mean, really I don't know. And they arranged for us. They didn't like the schools. The public schools were impossible.

So they arranged for us to go to private school. And they found a very good private school which-- without money-- called the English School at the time. And my father used to pay it with fabrics, and suit links, and this woman, Miss-- she took us in. And we were very fortunate, I mean. So we went to school with all upper-class Latin children.

Now you were learning the language?

Yes.

Did you pick up easily?

Very easily. I had Latin in Vienna, and I had French in Vienna, and I spoke German. And I had Hebrew lessons. I mean, languages are not my problem.

OK, wonderful. Yeah. And were you with a lot of other Jewish children?

No, no, there were not in the school. No. But in the community, yes, a lot of--

Refugees?

Transit refugees waiting for visas.

Right. What did you know at that point that was happening?

Well, I knew that, for instance, we came in March. And in June, another boat came with refugees called the St. Louis.

Yes.

And I saw it in the harbor. And I saw--

You did? Oh, my.

Yes, it was. We used to go down to the harbor and watch it every day. And then one day, we went, and they left.

What were your thoughts?

That was very stressful.

Did you see the people on the railings and things like that?

But in the distance. It wasn't that close. But yeah, we could see forms, but not-- it was really bad.

Oh, my.

Yeah.

Yeah. Again, did you talk this over with your parents?

Oh, I'm sure. My parents took us down to see it.

I see, yeah. Were they noticeably affected? Because they obviously knew what was happening.

Well, there's nothing you can do. I'm sure they were affected. I can't judge that this late in the game.

Yeah. How was your younger sister doing? She was so much younger at this point. She was OK?

She was OK. She was OK. She was an exceedingly able person, and she was doing--

Even as a young child?

Well, yeah. It wasn't as obvious as later, but she certainly did exceedingly well.

Yeah. So the life just continued on? You were going to school.

Yeah, but my sister, she was always a leader, I mean, like the president of the high school at Hunter College High School and all that type of-- so this was-- she was always--

The seeds were there when she was younger.

Yes, definitely. Maybe this instigated it, you know? She says-- it said so in her obituary in The Times. But anyway.

Did you do anything besides go to school? What else did you do in Cuba, in Havana?

Well, the community was many factions of Judaism, so it was funny. There was a large contingent from Frankfurt. They had services in each other's homes. I mean, that wasn't the children. But you're asking the children, or the community?

Both.

OK. So they were different people. Some were religious, and some were not. Of the three families where we lived, the ones came from-- they had lived in Italy, the one family, and had two teenage boys.

And the second family were Germans and were totally-- were not educated and didn't have the same vision of wanting the kids to be that well educated, either. So then you got used of various types of people. What else did we do? The school day was long enough. And the community was friendly. But we mixed mostly with our own. Yeah. My father mixed with the trade.

I'm sure.

Yeah. And we stayed friends with those Cubans for years later.

Really?

Yeah.

Wonderful.

Yeah.

Again, any communication with the people back in Europe?

A letter and a card came once from my mother's parents. And that was it. That was it. Yeah, and I know she lost her grandfather. This was-- anyway, they all perished, except for this one sister who lived underground in Poland whose husband was here, and who eventually got out and then moved in with-- moved to Lakewood, New Jersey.

So life just went on in Cuba?

Yes. And we waited for the visa. Some people went sooner, and some went later. It depended on where your parents were born. And some people had nervous breakdowns in the process. I remember several.

Really?

Yeah.

That must have been very frightening to a young--

Yeah, I do remember that the mother of one child went berserk and never was allowed into the country and in the end. Had to stay in Cuba. And the father and the child went.

Oh, my.

It's very terrible.

Yes. So you stayed there in Cuba for how long?

18 months.

18 months. And I'm sure you were very fluent by that time.

I was. I eventually worked in using my Spanish, yeah.

Yeah. And then the papers came through?

Yes. And we came-- and we went-- I'm just trying to say ho that went-- from Havana to Key West by boat, and from Key West to New York by Greyhound Bus. Anyway.

Well, how did you feel leaving Cuba?

I wanted to go on.

You did?

I mean, I liked it, you know? But it was time to go. It wasn't a permanent thing.

Yeah. And so you left. What month did you leave?

We left in September, 1940.

1940. OK, let's back up, and September 1939, and--

Oh, wait a minute. Yeah, September '39-- I was in Cuba during the war.

War, yeah. So you heard about this, obviously?

About the war? Yes. And it was followed very thoroughly in the newspapers and discussion groups. And I kept a diary. I have a diary.

You did?

In school, yes. In school, they made me keep it-- a rather than nice diary. I'm glad to have it for the grandchildren.

Absolutely. So what kind-- do you remember some of the things you wrote in the diary generally?

The diary is actually a strictly political one because it was an assignment. You know, they progressed from the Maginot Line to this or that. That's the type--

So it was a description?

Descriptions with some maps from the newspapers and--

Oh, I see. It wasn't your thoughts?

No. But my thoughts-- I did what I could and wrote some things for the children down-- for my grandchildren.

Oh, later on. You mean later on? Yeah. But at the time, war has what kind of meaning to a young teenager? What?

Terrible. At the time-- but you mean in Havana? I didn't feel it that-- I mean, it was frightening. That's all I can say. Yeah.



Yeah. And how did your parents get the news? From the radio? From newspapers?

Yes, radios and newspapers and discussions. There was multiple people living there and meeting, getting together, and following it very eagerly and hoping for the best.

Oh, yes.

You know, you can't get frightened every day. You live from day to day as a child. So you're just hoping for the best-- that the right people would win.

Your health was good and your parents' health?

Yes, knock wood.

Yeah. And you had enough food?

Yes, never felt deprived, even though God knows, we didn't have much money. Never felt it. That I must compliment my parents for always making us feel positive.

Yeah. And so then you get out, and as you said, went to Florida?

Well, no, only to get the bus.

Yeah, right. And then you got on the bus?

Yeah, and got to New York.

Got to New York. And again, your thoughts, or were you just exhausted?

I guess we were eager to see what's going on and what's the next step and positive, hoping for the best. I can't really recall exactly.

Right. But you were saying that your parents always had a positive--

Yeah, precisely.

Wonderful. Were you met by your relatives when you arrived?

--an elderly aunt who was-- actually, she and her husband-- they were the parents of the Rothschild-- Mrs. Rothschild-- Ida Rothschild. And she wanted us to stay with her. She actually had a grocery store and a small apartment in Brooklyn. I don't know if she thought my mother was going to work in the grocery store, but we stayed very briefly.

And my brother-in-law, the one that had come from Poland and to the World's Fair to buy some machinery, had by then lived in Lakewood and purchased a farm. They thought that the most intelligent thing in the way of moving was that my mother and the two children would go to Lakewood, and my father would try to establish himself in New York and make connections during the week, and come just on the weekends. Anyway, we moved the whole furniture, everything, to Lakewood.

And we stayed there. And about five days after we arrived, we had an episode at night, where somebody was climbing up the ladder. And my brother-in-law took a shotgun that he used to-- and looked out the window. And it was my father-- and he didn't shoot-- who had come to say that the family has to stay together, no matter what. This is not good.

And that's a good thing because my brother-in-law was ultra-orthodox. And it would have turned out much different. But at any rate-- in general, too, I mean, this is a very Orthodox community in Lakewood.

And anyway, my father got us. Now my father and mother went to New York and got an apartment in Washington Heights. And we moved to Washington Heights and have been in New York ever since and had this-- with the whole furniture and everything.

Right. So you had all the Viennese furniture?

Yeah, not all of it, but a good part, yeah.

Right. And so now you're a teenager, and you're in Washington Heights. And your English is good?

Yeah, good enough. I was valedictorian of the graduating class.

Oh, my. So then you went to--

That's junior high school.

Yeah. And did you live in a community of other refugees?

Yes. Washington Heights was such a community.

Right. And did you think a lot about Vienna at the time? Did you miss it?

I don't think so. No, that wasn't an option. I mean, that's over. That was over. Onwards.

Yeah. What was your mother very protective of you girls?

No, she was always encouraging us to--

To be independent?

Independent and-- yeah.

Yeah. So then you started high school?

Yes, I went to Hunter College High School, which is one that you have to qualify for and test and so forth-- a rather competitive school.

And what was the reaction of the other girls there at the school? Did they ask you about your background?

No, no.

They did not?

No. There were others also like it. By that time, it wasn't that relevant, I think. I mean, it was relevant, but I guess I just didn't make the cut of the upper crust. So whatever. It was just a question of performance. I don't think so. I mean, I don't--

No, but they didn't ask you what your experience was? That's what I meant. Did they ask you what your experiences were in Europe and Vienna?

They weren't that eager to talk about it as they are now, this generation.

Right.

We didn't talk about it that much.

What about the teachers? Did the teachers ask you anything about--

Not that I recall. Not that I recall. It was just a question of achieving there. And I--

And you made-- yeah, go on.

I had lost a year by the system in Cuba, so that I was eager to accelerate, which is what I did. And I only stayed at the high school for two years, and then graduated.

Oh, I see.

So I didn't really take full advantage of it because I think you need the full three years or so. Anyway, so.

And you traveled by yourself to school?

Oh, definitely. Yeah.

And what about your sister?

Everybody. Oh, yeah, I traveled by myself on the double-decker bus. And what about your sister-- your younger sister?

Well, she was in public school first. And then four years later, she went to the same selective school.

Oh, she did?

Yeah.

And are you still following what's happening in the war?

Oh, I'm sure. Yes, I'm sure. I'm sure. Yeah.

And again, no more communication for your folks from relatives--

No, no, no. No, I had that one cousin in Israel, but no. No communication.

Did your parents know what was happening to the Jews in the 1940s in Europe?

In Europe? Of course, yes.

No, while it was happening?

Yes, yes, they knew. They tried whatever channels, but it wasn't that easy.

Right, yeah. And did they share this information with you about what was happening?

Yes, yes. yes. Yes.

Yeah. But you don't remember being frightened in the United States?

No, I felt good.

You felt good?

Yes.

So now you finished high school.

Yeah.

And then what?

I went on to college. I wanted to go to a coed school.

Because this one was all girls, yeah.

It was all girls. So I applied to NYU, and I got a scholarship. And I went. I mean, a partial, but anyway, I went. It was so cheap anyway. Anyway, and so I went there, and I made Phi Beta Kappa. And I did well, and then I was out.

You went for four years?

I went so four years, yes. And I loved going to college. And I loved school in general, all the way.

What did you study there? What did you major in?

Languages, actually. Yeah. So for a while, when I graduated, my father wanted me to help him. And I did. But eventually, I went and worked for the Israeli Mission to the United Nations in the Latin American Department, which was people that spoke Spanish.

Oh, my. Now what year did you graduate?

I graduated in '48. So it was just the interesting part of Israel was coming.

The state hadn't been declared-- wasn't made?

I was working at my father's then. And then in '50, I started to work--

Oh, I see. So there was a State of Israel. Yeah.

Yeah. I think in '48, it was.

Yes, May '48.

So it was about the same time, yeah. Did I graduate in '44? '48? I can't even remember anymore. '48 it must have been. Yeah, '48. Yeah.

What was your father's business when he came to the United States?

Well, he, again, started with the fabrics. At the beginning, he went back to Cuba to continue with it, because he had nothing. So he'd go for six or eight weeks, and we'd stay alone. And then eventually, he came back, and he established-- and he got a job with a very good textile firm, A. Steinem and Company.

But he was the kind that wanted to be independent. And so he didn't continue there, but opened his own office and did his own selling here, too, in the fabric market and textiles and so forth. I mean, he always-- he was super careful about not making too much money on his customers. He didn't want to charge too much. And he didn't make a fortune, but he managed.

And it was all-- we were all right. Both of us went to college. My system went to Barnard, and then to Oxford, and, as I said, the Sorbonne. And then she went on to Africa to become a specialist on African affairs. Yeah. So far from the Anschluss beginning.

Yes. But when the war was over, and it all came out what happened to the Jews and the camps and stuff, you were beginning to be a young adult at that time. Any memories of what you--

I didn't have people in the camps that I knew.

No, I know. But just when it came out, generally, what was happening?

Well, thank god for this one.

Yeah.

Yeah, but I did not have-- you know, it's not immediate that I was aware of, because the relatives that I had didn't live in the same country as I did.

Right. So now you're working for that Israeli mission, you said?

Yes.

And then?

I don't know if it was '50, '51, whenever. Yeah. And I worked there for a number of years. And I got married in-- when did I get-- '55.

Is your husband from Europe also?

No, far from it. His great-grandparents were born here. He has a Sephardic background from Holland.

Oh, interesting.

Yeah.

How did you meet?

At Park Avenue Synagogue at a meeting. A friend of mine brought me. She was going out with him, and I wound up marrying him.

And you got married when?

In '55. And he was working for The New York Times.

As a journalist?

Yes. So he worked for The New York Times all the way. I mean, he'd been in the war, but he worked for The New York Times.

And his name is?

Robert.

Robert Barzilay.

Robert A. Barzilay.

And did you work? You had children, you said.

Yeah, we have two children and five grandchildren.

Wonderful. And did you work?

I worked in the Israeli mission. And then eventually, when I had my son, I didn't work full time. And then I worked somewhat again. And then I started to work in admissions at the Rodeph Sholom School eventually, once I had the children. And so I worked there from 1970 on.

Wonderful. Yeah, wonderful. Can we talk just now a little bit about your thoughts and your feelings about what you went through? At this point in your life, do you feel Austrian or Viennese in any way?

No. I feel American.

Yeah. What are your thoughts about Austria and Germany now in today's world?

I don't quite trust it. I'll always like a Viennese waltz. We were there briefly about 10, 15 years ago. And I remember sitting in a restaurant, where they had big tables.

And we sat-- because everybody ate jointly. It was a pub of some sort. And they were talking German, and then they were talking to us. And I answered in German. And they asked me how come I knew German. And I said, I was born here. And after that, nobody talked to me. So they figured it out.

Yeah. Do you mind speaking German? Is it--

No, I don't speak it well, but I haven't--

But you don't have any negative--

I don't speak it. I have no need, no need for it at all. That was the only time I had a need for it.

Yeah. But do you have any negative feelings towards speaking German?

I haven't. I haven't done it. I haven't done it.

Yeah.

Yeah, I wouldn't do it. I mean, I just-- if I had the need, then I would communicate using that, if that's the thing to do. But I have had many more positive experiences with the Spanish-speaking world.

Oh, OK. When your children were your age, and when you had to leave Vienna-- you know, it was a time of your age during Kristallnacht and all that. Did that bring back memories for you about the frightening sounds and sights that you saw then? Did you connect your children's age to that time?

My children's age? I sort of blocked it, I think. I didn't think about it too much. I didn't think about it too much. I mean, I do occasionally think about it. But my granddaughter, for instance, is now the age that I was exactly. You know? And I think, how different it is what she's into living, you know, television, it's just a fantastic difference.

How much did you talk about your experience when your children-- to your children when they were young?

Less than I do know-- not so much.

When they were growing up?

Somewhat, but not tremendously-- more so now that I'm older.

Because?

I don't know. It's somehow removed, different, and also because I'm the only one surviving at the moment.

I see, yeah. Now, in your relationship with your sister, of course, you both went through the same thing, though you were at a different stage life.

Yes.

Was that something you two "girls," quote, spoke about a lot-- about life in Vienna and--

I did not. I did not that much. She talked about it more, I think.

She did?

Yeah.

Yeah. How did it affect her? She was younger-- four years younger.

I don't know how it affected her. But she devoted herself to helping the hungry. And she did a lot for the-- I'm sure it affected her. She had a big write-up in The Times, and it affected her and what she did in life.

Yeah, what she chose to do. Yeah.

Yeah, doing-- working with people that need help and so forth and education and hunger and--

Wonderful. In a government capacity or private?

No, no, no, in the government capacity she worked, yes.

In what sense?

Well, she was a-- you don't really want me to take out the-- should I take it out and read it to you?

No, but just generally.

Generally, well, she worked for the United Nations, one of the committees. She worked in the World Bank.

Wonderful.

She worked on the hunger in Mexico. She devoted a lot of time to that and various other things of that nature, and Africa, particularly. Her interest in Africa was her specialty, and just everywhere. That, I would say, to a great extent-- so she individually. As a family, they also do things. But that's a different story.

When she was alive, did you speak to her in English?

Oh, yes. We spoke English from the day we came here, and didn't speak anything else.

Really?

Yes. Even our parents-- nobody spoke German, yes.

Because?

I don't know. We just did. We wanted it, and then we did it. That's how--

How did your parents learn English?

They spoke at home only English also.

No, but how did they learn it?

By speaking it, I guess. I don't know why people don't do it now.

Do you think that you lost a part of your childhood because you were exposed to such terrible times in Vienna? Did you grow up more quickly? Did something change?

I'm sure it had an effect, but it would take some professional to determine that. I can't judge, but I feel I had a good youth. And I was lucky to maintain my parents. And I was lucky to be able to do what I-- I now have terrific grandchildren and children.

Are you angry that you had to be uprooted and leave your home?

No. I mean, I'm angry at the events that took place. It's just part of life. No, I can't say--

Well, then you had to do that, and other people who lived here in the United States didn't have to--

Well, a lot of people have to do it in various generations. I don't give it too much thought. It's all right. At this point, it's even interesting to be born elsewhere. At some point, I thought you were a refugee. But at this point, I don't feel that way. Yeah, I mean, it's added an extra dimension to my life. I mean, you know, it wasn't easy for my parents, particularly. But I don't think the effect is all negative fortunately, in many experiences.

What about your political views? Did it affect your political views or influence your political views at all?

I imagine so. Yeah.

I mean, here you all were deprived of your civil rights. You couldn't sit on the benches as a child. You couldn't go to the--

It was briefly, though. You know, it wasn't-- it was briefly.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

You were deprived of your Civil Rights for a time.

I certainly feel that it's very important not to be.

Yeah. So were you active in the Civil Rights movement here in the United States in the '60s? Yeah, OK.

No. I think I was afraid of joining things to a great extent in my youth. You know that? Now that I'm thinking about it.



That's interesting.

Yeah, I wouldn't have joined that. I remember being in college, and people were being in the Communist Party, and this. All sorts of things were going on then. And I wouldn't have joined anything after I saw the mass eruptions all over the place. Yeah, I think I was not eager to join. I think that persists.

Because it had a negative connotation.

I guess it must have, yes. Yes, yes, marching en masse and all that business.

Could the Holocaust happen again?

Hopefully, not, but, yes. I don't want to predict such a terrible thing. The hatred is gathering. But hopefully, it will not.

Yeah. So traveling back to Europe, did you do it frequently?

We traveled, but not back to where I came from. Yeah.

So you never--

I went back once or so when we won a trip. But I didn't want to go back. But I did go back.

Why did you not want to go back?

I had no nobody to see. And I was more interested in seeing other countries where I didn't have all those memories. But I did go.

Yeah. What was that like?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

In other words, you saw the house where you grew up?

That's right. I saw the house, and I saw the school. And I saw the frame of mind in the restaurant.

Yes, in the restaurant, right.

Yeah, so it is a beautiful city, and that's it.

So you've just been back once?

Once, and then on a cruise for one day as well, but really once-- once for five days when we won a trip. Not to Austria, but we won a trip through the United Way and went to several countries. And then we went to Vienna as well. Yeah.

What are your thoughts about Israel?

Oh, I'm very enthusiastic about it. But I wouldn't emigrate.

Have you been there?

Yes, several times, yeah-- when I was younger, and then once with my husband.

Yeah. Do you remember the Eichmann Trial? And if so, what were your reactions?

I don't remember too much, but I-- well--

Of what your reactions were?

No, I don't remember. And I can imagine what they were, but I-- no. I can't give you too much of a recall on that. He deserved it.

Yeah. Yeah, that's it.

And I assume or do you feel totally assimilated into American life?

I really do, yeah. I have no other possible roots.

You are American. You are not Austrian. You're not Viennese.

No. No way. No way. No. I mean, I'm Jewish, but that's-- you know that.

Yeah. Do you get or did your family get any reparations?

I get \$400 a month or something like that-- \$500-- \$400. It depends on the rates.

And what about your parents? Did they get reparations?

Nothing great-- and also something like that, and then only briefly, because they died. And you know, it wasn't settled that early in the--

Right. Yeah.

But no major reparations, no-- nothing. We have nothing there.

So in what way are you who you are today because of what you went through as a young--

Well, in many ways, the experiences have formed me.

In what sense? Has made you what?

It's not for me to judge, but it's made me more a citizen of the world, I think. And I feel at home in-- you know, I love travel. And I just can't do it now. And I think perhaps it's made me more accessible to different kinds of people and vice versa. But I really totally feel American, so.

Yeah. But you are comfortable around people from other countries?

Very, very-- and I enjoyed it, and to the citizens of everywhere. And I relate well to people from many countries.

Yeah. And you are fluent, of course, in so many--

In a number of languages, a few languages, and that helps.

Yeah. So you do feel that lessons have been learned from the Holocaust?

What type of lessons?

Well, what happened. As you said, you think it could happen again, but.

It might happen again. I don't know that lessons are learned. It's a new generation-- has no hatred.

Yeah.

These-- different ones, but it needn't always be directed at us.

Right.

But it's terrible. And it's more dangerous now than ever.

Did you raise your children very Jewishly?

Not very. No, not very. We're Reform. But they should know who they are

and where they come from. And I'm part of that. That, they're aware of, and very much so.

Well, is there anything else you wanted to talk about or any message you wanted to leave to your grandchildren? Anything that we haven't covered that--

I think we've covered-- I love my grandchildren. They're interested in their roots as well.

Oh, good.

Very interested.

Are they?

Yes, in their fashion, you know.

In what sense?

Well, I mean, not an Orthodox upbringing. But they wanted to be bar mitzvah. And their parents left it totally up to them. And they're very warm and receptive, great human beings. And I have two granddaughters, one at Harvard, and one that graduated from Harvard in the summer and is now at Cambridge in England.

Wonderful.

And then I have three here, three littler ones. Wonderful. And they're from eight to 16 in school in New York. And all are very loving and caring human beings. So I couldn't have wished for better-- and willing to do good and wanting to do good. And that's, I feel, is the achievement of the long life that I've been fortunate to have.

Well, do you feel that part of that was a byproduct of what you went through and how you imparted your message to your children?

It may be so. It probably is. I don't want to take total credit for that. I think a lot of things enter it-- their parents and so forth.

Right.

But I think that did have an effect and made them also more receptive to people from other nations, I think.

Did your sister write down any of her experiences?

I don't know if she wrote the experiences, but she wrote several books. But I don't know it. You'll have to ask her. Her

husband is 97 and--

Oh, my.

--in Washington. And I told you that, I think. Yeah, he lives in Washington in that-- you knew the name of the place. [INAUDIBLE] Military Road.

Right.

Yeah.

So I don't think-- I'm sure she's written something, yeah.

But it sounds like you two girls, close, you two sisters, shared in some kind of very special, terrible time in history.

But we were fortunate because--

Quite fortunate.

--our parents and immediate family alive. And the ones that sacrificed, I didn't really know that well. It doesn't affect you the same way. You would've wanted to have grandparents and relatives, but you didn't really know them. It's not quite as--

Yeah. And your relations with-- your connections with your relations in Israel?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

We don't have very close relations at this point.

Yeah.

My sister's children and my children are very close.

Are they? Wonderful.

They're very close, yeah. They are like siblings--

Wonderful.

They are very close.

Wonderful. Well, that's a nice note to end on, unless there's something that--

I don't know.

--else that you wanted--

Thank you very much. And I wish everyone, and certainly my children and grandchildren, all the best. And I want to thank you for making this possible.

Well, thank you for doing that. Thank you for doing that. And let me just close off by saying that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Alice Barzilay.

Thank you. Thank you.

You're welcome.