United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Joseph Sucher
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PREFACE

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JOSEPH SUCHER
July 23, 2014

Gail Schwartz: The following is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Joseph Sucher. It is being conducted by Gail Schwartz on July 23rd, 2014 in Silver Spring, Maryland. This is track number one. What is your full name?

Joseph Sucher: My full name is Joseph Sucher.

Q: Do you have a middle name?

A: No.

Q: When were you born and where were you born?

A: I was born in September 10th, 1930 in Vienna, together with my twin sister.

Q: Who's name?

A: Is Erika.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family. How long had they been in Vienna?

A: They came to Vienna towards the end of World War I together with my mother's, other relatives and her father. They all arrived in Vienna between 1915 and 1918, something like that.

Q: What was your mother's name?

A: My mother's maiden name was Robinson, or Robinson as it's pronounced in German, Robinson.

Q: Her first name?

A: Well her first name was **Taube** which is a German word for dove, but people called her Tony, but her Yiddish name was **Toibe**.

Q: And where did they come from?

A: They came from Poland.

Q: What city?

A: Well, my father came from **Kuti,** K-U-T-I, maybe with a Y. And my mother came from, she was originally born in Romania, but moved to Poland at a young age. It was near the border of Poland and Romania.

Q: The city, the name.

A: I think the name of the town was probably **Vashkovitz.** Figure out how to spell it.

Q: And your father's name?

A: My father's name was Max in Germanic, but his Hebrew name was Mendel. Sucher, right yes.

Q: Did you have any other siblings besides your sister?

A: Yes, I had an older brother and sister who were also twins and also born in Vienna but five years earlier. So my mother was very economical. She had two sets of twins which was very rare at that time. Still but not as rare as it was in –

Q: And their names were?

A: My Lily or Cecelia was the technical name and Harry so Lily and Harry, that's what they were known as. That was their running names.

Q: Was your family a religious family?

A: My mother was very religious. My father went along. I mean he knew a lot. He could have been a rabbi but he was never you know seriously religious and so but we, you know my mother ran the home and we were kosher and it was, she was religious until the end of her life.

Q: You observed the holidays?

A: We observed the holidays. And my older brother continued to observe the holidays cause I think he promised my mother that he would. But when my mother died, we were, I was already in Maryland for many years.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

A: Well, my father had a PhD in Semitic languages from the University of Vienna in 1924. I still have the diploma, but he couldn't get a job with that.

Q: Because he was Jewish.

A: In part because he was Jewish and also there were very few jobs for Semitic experts and I'm not sure exactly how much the anti-Semitism at the time played a role in his not being able to find a job. But my mother was very able in many ways and she ran a textile store and he helped her with that. So they sort of did it together, but my mother was the driving force behind the store, which her father I think helped – her father helped all the – she had seven brothers and sisters and all of them came to Vienna. And so he, my grandfather sort of engineered for all of them to go into what I call the **shmata** business. It's really textiles.

Q: Do you know your parents' birthdates?

A: I have it written somewhere, you know. My mother was born May 10th I think, 1898 or 97. And my father was born November 1, I think the same year or a year later, something like that. I know them roughly within a year.

Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: At home I spoke German but my parents spoke Yiddish so I understand Yiddish perfectly essentially but I never have a chance to speak it except in emergencies, which I may tell you about later. But so German basically. In Vienna I spoke German. But as soon as we came to this country, my parents did not want to hear a word of German so I spoke English quickly and they learned to speak English or they spoke Yiddish but they didn't speak German.

Q: You had a large and extended family.

A: Yes, in Vienna, right.

Q: On your mother's side, yes. On your father's side?

A: On my father's side too but my father's side, almost nobody survived. They were taken to concentration camps. On my mother's side all but one of her brothers, for various reasons didn't leave Vienna on time and died at Dachau, I think. All of them managed to get to Palestine as it was known at the time except for our family and my mother's youngest sister who was also a twin. Two of us, these two families came to, well they came via Cuba to New York and we came via Portugal to New York.

Q: We'll talk about that later. I want to get the prewar, some of your prewar information. So what would you say is your first memory? Obviously you were born in 1930. Hitler came into power in 33 in Germany.

A: Well that's a good question is my first memory. My first, well I have a couple of distinct memories. You know I remember the place where we lived.

Q: Can you describe it?

A: It was on the fourth floor of an apartment house which overlooked the northwest **bahnhof** which was the beginning of the northwest railroads which went to Czechoslovakia. And I have a vivid memory because I was eight years old. Not, and Hitler –

Q: This was 38.

A: This was 38. This is actually before I was eight. In March 1938 the Germans essentially annexed Austria and we were within, and Hitler gave a speech the next day on the northwest **Bahn Platz** and we could see him from our window, except there were SS men all over the neighborhood to keep people from being at the windows. I would go to the window and I would be shooed away. So I have a vivid memory of that event and I remember you know these swastika banners that they had and I can't even look at them now, you know with that, so that was an early memory.
And I was already eight. I have earlier memories of the school that I went to which was a Jewish school. **Ancostalitz Gasse** which was a street nearby. And I remember the park. We lived near the **Altgarten** which is a famous park in the, in Vienna which still stands and various things that happened there.
So I remember and I guess I also remember we used to go to a resort when I was four or five called **Vöslau**, V-O umlaut – S-L-A-U, I believe. And we used to go there in the summer. I have memories of that too, learning to swim which we weren't allowed for three years later on. I forgot how to swim. And I didn't realize I had forgotten it and we lived in Milwaukee and I jumped in the pool and I sank. I was told you never forget how to swim, but you do.

Q: Hitler came into power in 33 in Germany. Obviously you were too young to know what was happening. Was your first knowledge of him when they annexed Austria?

A: When they annexed Austria. I think so.

Q: Let's talk about up to that point. Up to your childhood. Was it a happy childhood, or did you experience any anti-Semitism?

A: I think up to that point, my childhood was pretty happy and I experienced anti-Semitism only very rarely. I think.

Q: As a young child?

A: As a young child because we lived in a sort of they called it **Leopoldstadt**, which is a largely, it's the second **bitserk**, or district of Vienna and there was largely Jewish populated so I didn't encounter too many gentiles.

Q: So it was an entirely Jewish neighborhood?

A: That's right at that point, exactly. So I didn't –

Q: You went to a Jewish school.

A: I went to a Jewish school, that's right so.

Q: Did you like sports when you were a little boy?

A: Not particularly. I was not, I was more interested in books than sports and I had a stamp collection. I remember I had a collection mania which I think very young kids sometimes have and I was collecting stamps. In my last memory of leaving Vienna was in our apartment which was on the fourth floor and had a kind of oven, you know a stove, not a stove. What do you call it? You know you heated it with wood or coal oil, what it was and I remember my mother

saying I could not take my paper soldiers with me and I, the last thing I remember is seeing them burning inside. You know kids have these memories.

Q: Devastating. Were you close to your sister?

A: Yes, very close. We had –

Q: Played together?

A: We even had a language of our own and so forth. In fact, she was sort of the dominant one. I'll show you a picture of the two of us when we were six years old. I have it up over there. And I'll show it to you later if you like. And so we were very close and as I said, as twins sometimes too, they develop a language of their own. And she was, it was, she was more forceful than I was and she sort of, she dominated the relationship you know. And we had a game playing that. Ok. We each had special names for each other and it lasted a long time. Instead of when I see her now, we used to make faces like this and it was what we called it a **nuchi** face and for many years we would still do that. It's just built in.

Q: Would you say you were an independent child up to the age of eight, granted life changed at eight years.

A: Yeah I was pretty independent. I think I, I didn't have any memory –

Q: Your mother was working.

A: Well we had a maid.

Q: You did?

A: She was, I think Czech. You know cause she was, but it was in the same building. The store that they ran was in the, in the same building or next building next door –

Q: They were close by.

A: They were close by right yeah.

Q: Life went on without any problems so to speak until 38. Or did you hear, ever hear your parents discussing –

A: I never heard them discussing what was happening.

Q: This man named Hitler or anything, before 38.

A: I don't remember.

Q: You were a child.

A: That's right, I was focused, all I remember was focused on my collection and reading. I read the Greek what do you call those stories, hero stories.

Q: The myths?

A: The myths when I was six or seven years old and I remember reading it and actually it paid dividends because well there was a picture of Hercules in this book and it showed him you know with a big muscle bringing in the skin of **Nimean** lair or something for some guy. And it was sort of a model, a role model for me of a strong man. Had several, like these strong men would come to my rescue if anything bad happened. It was a fantasy but I had. So I was not sports minded at all. Jewish kids of that period were relatively not sports minded.

Q: Now comes 1938, March 38. And you described, and you saw Hitler.

A: I saw him at a distance you know. I got a peak of him before the SS –

Q: How did you know who this man was?

A: Yes, I knew –

Q: How did you know?

A: Well I think I must have read about it. I must have learned that Austria was going to be annexed, that the Germans were invading Austria, coming in or being invited in. I must have heard that a few days before and, I must have been aware that bad things were happening.

Q: Were you frightened, do you remember – it being a frightening time?

A: I was frightened somewhat later. No, but I mean in that year. I was very frightened, sometime in the spring of 1938. My father, I went along with my father to a synagogue but it wasn't the same place we usually went. Maybe that temple had been closed. And when we came out there were SS people waiting to corral the people who come out and take them away. But my father was with me and since he had a small child with him, they let him go. So then I knew that things were very, very bad. And were getting worse and it was, you had asked me when I became very aware of it after the annexation. And then my feeling was that the Austrians were as, more anti-Semitic than even the Germans.

Q: Were there any creeping restrictions before 38, before the spring of 38?

A: Not that I was aware of but I'm sure there were because I think people could no longer teach at the university and so forth. I'm sure there were lots of restrictions of which wasn't aware of, aware of them as a child.

Q: Here you are and you see this man. Do you remember any visceral feelings on seeing him?

A: No, I – I went to the window and it was just, it was a fleeting second before the SS men chased – they stationed themselves at the windows. They came to all the surrounding –

Q: What floor were you on?

A: We were on the fourth floor I believe. They came to all – so we were high enough to sort of take a shot at him if we had a rifle. So they were guarding Hitler in the surrounding neighborhoods by going to the high apartments and watching the windows.

Q: Did they actually come upstairs?

A: Yes, they were in the apartment, I'm trying to explain to you.

Q: They were in your apartment?

A: They were, they were in our apartment. They came in to watch the windows.

Q: Oh my.

A: That's, and I remember that.

Q: What is a soldier in uniform like that –

A: I don't think they were in uniform. The way I remember it they were plain clothes, belonging to the SRESA, I don't remember

Q: When you did see some in uniform did it mean anything to an eight year old boy? Was that frightening or did it look pretty exciting?

A: It somehow, I'm trying to remember whether I saw any people in uniform, where I was. We lived very near the school so the only way that basically I went out to go to school just a couple of blocks away.

Q: What was the name of your school?

A: It was called I'll tell you in a minute cause I don't remember it. It'll come back to me. It was a pretty famous school and the principals stood by with the students. You know he wasn't going to leave. It'll come back to me.

Q: Hitler comes

A: Hitler comes.

Q: And Austria is annexed.

A: Is annexed. My next memory is of my, well at some point we had to so to speak give away our store. You know for almost no money. And so that was the end of that.

Q: What was the store called?

A: It was a textile store. I don't even remember what name it had. I don't think it had a main name on it. It was a sort of generic name for textile. And my next sort of big memory is that my father left in August.

Q: Of 38.

A: Of 38. And we couldn't, we wanted to leave Austria but we couldn't get visas anywhere. But my father apparently managed to get a visa to Luxembourg so he left in August. I don't know how he did it. I don't know those details, but the upshot was that my mother and the four children didn't get to Luxembourg. He managed to get us transit visas through Austria and

Germany. To visit him in Luxembourg. And we, I remember that we, my mother and the four children took a train from Vienna. I don't remember the train ride but I remember what happened at the end. And I think the train, we took a train as far as **Coblenz**, which is a town in southeast Germany. A big town. And from Coblenz we went to Trier the next day. I think by, we went to Trier, T-R-I-E-R. Trier, it's actually it's the birthplace of Karl Marx I discovered many years later. And from there my memory of that is that we had no place to stay. But my mother found a synagogue and she pounded on the door. And somebody eventually opened it and we slept on the floor that night.

The next night, the next day we took a taxi to the frontier and this had all been prearranged with my father. I knew nothing about it. And we arrived at the frontier. I have a picture of the guard house in the thing that I wrote about. And to make a long story short, they patted us down and without my knowing it my mother had sewn some money inside my **mitze** [ph]**,** you know it's a sort of an overhead cap that ties at the neck. And anyway but the German guards were very friendly, especially with the children. And at 10:00 at night my mother took the four of us. We were at a bridge which crossed the river which I call the, it was called the **Sauer** or the **Sûre** in French, it had a double name. The river separating Luxembourg and Germany. And we walked across this bridge and it was all icy and snowy. We walked across and waited 20 minutes and then a man came in a car and my mother spoke to him. And my father had hired him to smuggle us into Luxembourg cause it was Christmas eve and there was nobody around from the guards, from the Luxembourg guards. It was sort of a forlorn place. And that's how we got into Luxembourg.

Q: This is December 38.

A: December 38.

Q: Let's talk about an eight year old boy leaving his home. Did you know you were leaving or did you just think you were going on a trip?

A: No, I knew we were leaving. Cause I had to leave everything behind. You know I knew we were leaving.

Q: What were your feelings about that? Were you angry?

A: You know it's hard to remember. You know my parents always managed to make us feel secure and I had my twin sister to be with so that was sort of a mantle of safety. I don't remember being afraid at that time.

Q: What did you take with you?

A: The only thing I took with me was a sort of little bit like a lunch box in which I had some treasures. I don't remember. You know that was it. Cause I couldn't take my stamps and I didn't take any books. But I had the lunch box. It was, I think it was maroon colored and it had little handles, the way, the kind of old fashioned lunch boxes that you can see on the Antiques Roadshow. So that's all I took with me and I guess some clothes. I didn't have a suitcase of my own.

Q: Did you feel like you were leaving home?

A: You know I don't remember these feelings that I may have had. I was –

Q: Had any of your friends left?

A: Yes.

Q: Before you?

A: Either before or afterwards and as a matter of fact I have a very close cousin who is a cancer specialist in Israel named Leo and he -- I was, I felt some of the class knew that I was leaving. You know I was still going to this public school, this Jewish public school. Already still in the fall of 1938. And at some point my parents, or my mother said we're going to leave and anyway I quit the school. And I felt a little bit guilty because they had given me a going away present. I

remember it was a silver pencil. The class gave me that but we hadn't left yet. It took a few months before we left so I sort of felt I was under false pretenses getting this gift. Apparently I loved pencils as a kid. So anyway that's how that went down. And my mother had six or seven brothers and sisters and all of them lived in Vienna and all of them got away except for one, you know one of her younger brothers named David. And the fact that he didn't get away, that's another black mark I have against very religious Jews because apparently they could have gotten away, but they went to consult a rabbi in Poland. He and his wife had had a child after 15 years and anyway he was like no don't go to Israel. You know there are still people like that. It's a Zionistic place, you don't want that. So I don't have a soft spot in my heart for any of those people.
So but the others all got to Palestine and we –

Q: You are in Luxembourg?

A: Well they are in Luxembourg.

Q: There are four children and your parents

A: Four children. We were living in a hotel called the Hotel Select cause it select 200 refugees lived in this hotel. In fact I eventually I went back with my wife to Luxembourg and I found the hotel again. It had changed its name to something very fancy, British name which I've forgotten. But we went back and I couldn't believe that all six of us lived in this one bedroom basically. That's all that there was. So it was and I remember that hotel very well and my sister and I went to the public schools on the street. The instruction was in German but –

Q: You stayed in Luxembourg?

A: We stayed in Luxembourg til October 1940. We couldn't get out. We had to get visas to go somewhere. And my father eventually got us transit visas through France and Portugal.

Q: It was almost two years that you were in Luxembourg.

A: That's right.

Q: What was life like there?

A: Well Luxembourg for a while, the Germans invaded Luxembourg or the Benelux countries in May 1938 and a few months later they went through the Maginot line and took over most of France. But before May 1938, before May 1940 we just lived in this hotel together with a hundred other refugees. And I think, we went to school. My sister can still sing the Luxembourg national anthem. The locals of, now go is called the **Letsebourg**. That's actually the local name for Luxembourg. That's the French name. So we went to school and outside in the playground, kids spoke Luxembourg to each other. We sort of picked up some of it.

Q: There is a language?

A: There is language, yes and it's like many such places. In New Orleans you might, the Creole and so forth.

Q: What was the name of the hotel again?

A: The Hotel Select. That was, I thought that was very appropriate. That was the name of the hotel. It's not as an English name which I discovered. I discovered – somebody who lives in this area, a retired psychiatrist I think, who discovered, who also was in Luxembourg but as a small child. And he discovered my -- this thing that's at the Holocaust museum and he looked me up. And so we went to visit him and so forth and it was an interesting experience and he was a sort of a baby but he was trying to reconstruct his childhood and he came across my name somehow in some of the archives of the Holocaust Museum. That was apropos of that hotel.
He got on the phone. He said you know I think I once lived where you lived. And I said the Hotel Select and he said that's right. He knew the name of the hotel.

Q: You were there for almost two years?

A: Almost two years.

Q: And you went to school. What else did you do?

A: I think –

Q: Played with friends?

A: Yeah, well we didn't have too many. No, I remember now what we did, my sister and I. She was more courageous. There was a couple of kids, and the four of us would go out and we got very interested in these, it's the equivalent of a comic book with these little pictures and there was sort of heroes. Like there was a guy named **Rolf Tore** and I still remember the name. He was an adventurer in Africa. And there were 64 pages, these booklets. They still exist. And there was a sort of Sherlock Holmes type named Elon Cling and I remember getting very interested in these books. I could read them, but the thing is we didn't have any money, as children. There was hardly any money. Just my mother managed to sew and make some money. But now I remember, now that you mention it, I'd forgotten this. We used to go steal comic books or these equivalent books. And I think the boys were named Katz. They were very daring. They did the stealing and my sister was the lookout and I sort of stayed I don't know where. She was the lookout for them for the – and so we read those books. That was one thing we did. And I sort of became interested in chess at the time. I didn't play but many of the men played chess. And I remember there was one guy who was regarded as the best player, named Solomon. I remember his last name. He was just known as Solomon. And I decided gee I want to be a chess master when I grow up. Although I didn't play at the time.
Those are the things. Oh and I remember something else. This hotel had a sort of nightclub, eatery or something like that. And they had a floor show. And the floor show consisted of women, almost nude and I just, my friends and I discovered the lure of semi naked young women. And at some point they would come down for the show. They would come down some stairs and I remember – these are the things you remember. And we would be under the stairs. You know the stairs, waiting for them to come down so we could catch a glimpse. So it was

quite a place. We found it again. My late wife and I went to Luxembourg. I couldn't remember the name of the hotel, because it changed its name. But we went to a local police station and there was an older guy there who knew what it was and where it was and eventually we found it. I wrote about that in this essay, the memoir that's at the Holocaust Museum.

Q: Did your father work?

A: He couldn't work but my mother worked, not allowed to. She worked clandestinely. She was a very good seamstress so she –

Q: So that's how you lived?

A: Well and I think we must have gotten some sort by HIAS or by the – there were two American organizations that helped –

Q: Joint?

A: The Joint, that's right. The Joint. In fact we had a visit, how we got, when we first came to Luxembourg we were so to speak excommunicated. They didn't send us back once they discovered that we had no papers, but they let us go to a little down called **Esch. Esch sur Selio** [ph], **Esch-an-der-Zowa** [ph]. And we had a visit there at one time who came.

Q: So that's where you lived?

A: We lived in Esch for about four months, til we were allowed to move, for four or five months, til where, they allowed us to move to the big city, which was Luxembourg City. It had 50,000 population, something like that. So for the first four or five months we lived in this small town and I went to a one room school there. And it was, the teacher was a father, meaning a priest and he wore this hassock in the head back. So I went to this school and I didn't know. I don't remember, the school was going on but I hadn't had any mathematics and he gave us a long division problem and I didn't know how to do it. And I felt very ashamed somehow. As I once

said to somebody I think it was, that's what interested me in mathematics and physics later on, as a counter to that. But because I didn't, I couldn't do long division. I guess we hadn't learned. Well I went without school basically for two years I guess, except for that stint. I didn't go to school in Portugal. I had other adventures. But I remember that and I remember my father. We lived in a hotel, at this little town called Esch and he was studying Spanish because he was trying to get a visa to Ecuador or wherever he could get it, any place, but here so to speak. But all he had was a dictionary. So I remember him walking around using the dictionary as a lecture book. And many months later he knew enough Spanish to be the guide for our, we went through occupied France and Spain and we spent Yom Kippur night in 1940, it was October 1940 in a barracks in a town called **Irun**, which is now a sort of resort town. At that time it was a small town and they had a **amelig** [ph], I guess that's what you call it and the refugees. And we were several hundred of us or a hundred and we stayed overnight at that place. It was Yom Kippur night and I remember my father leading some kind of service. And he was able to communicate in Spanish with this dictionary with the guards. So it goes on like that. There's so much to tell you. I don't know where to stop.

Q: It's all important. So you were in Luxembourg.

A: We were in Luxembourg.

Q: While you were there had you –

A: We were invaded by the Germans. Because we were there in May and then there was – in fact my father tried to get away because knew the Germans were going to come. There was no opposition. Luxembourg is a small country. And he tried to escape to Belgium. And luckily he did not succeed. Because many of the people who did get to Belgium never got out, because they were trapped there. And most of them perished probably. So it was lucky. He said there was too much fighting going on at the border. So he came back and eventually we got out by the way.

Q: He came back.

A: He came back and then we eventually got these visas to go to, we got transit visas through unoccupied France and Spain to go to Portugal.

Q: How did your father get the –

A: Well I don't know. I was, didn't ask later on what was going on.

Q: Was this a very frightening time for a nine year old, ten year old?

A: Yeah, it was frightening but somehow you know big things were going on. For example, while we were in Luxembourg City a British fighter plane was shot down over the city and we heard about it and we went to see the wreckage, something to do. Somebody said well let's go see that and so forth. But otherwise we were, we didn't encounter any – the Germans didn't manifest themselves in the town. I didn't see any, at least I don't remember seeing any German soldiers.

Q: What about sensing anti-Semitism?

A: Well none in Vienna, certainly. In Luxembourg I didn't sense that. The people were pretty friendly and they were –

Q: Let's go back to Vienna while I'm thinking of it. Before you left were there any signs around about Jews, any signs on park benches?

A: I think there were signs in the windows. And the fact that we had to give up our store for a song basically. We eventually got some reparation from Germany but, and from Austria but it was maybe a thousand dollars, nothing basically. But it had to be shared by the various cousins. As I speak to you, I'm beginning to remember things that I haven't thought about for a long time.

Q: You're in Luxembourg. Your father gets the visas, tells you that you're leaving. How do you feel about having to leave the second time?

A: Well we didn't know that one. My mother just told us that father has gone to Luxembourg. She didn't say exactly why but we could probably sense it. And that we would sooner or later go to, but it took him a long time to arrange the smuggling. We never did get visas to enter Luxembourg. We just got visas, transit visas to leave, to -- I don't know the details of that. I just infer it. All I was aware was that we were going on this long train ride and we have yet to find a place to sleep. I think from Coblenz to Trier, my brother had a different memory about some of these things which I didn't realize.

For example from Trier we had to get to the border. It's about ten miles away or something like that but we had to get there and there was no public transportation. So we hired, my mother hired a taxi and what I didn't realize, that my brother said, there were two border stations not far from each other at the river, going across to Luxembourg. And my brother told me that there were two taxis that came and one of them took us but he wasn't sure he was going to go to the wrong one. He was, where this man from Luxembourg was going to pick us up, we had to be at the right station. And according to my brother, he understood the discussion between these two taxi drivers. He heard it, that this taxi said no you have to go to this other station. So there were many little things that could have gone wrong. That's why I call this essay that I wrote, luck was on our side. Maybe I can find it before you leave. But anyway, it's in the museum. I can send you a copy if you want.

Q: Ahead to you were leaving Luxembourg. Your father got the visas.

A: We got, but we eventually we left Luxembourg because we had these transit visas to Portugal. On the way, presumably to Ecuador. We didn't have any visas from Ecuador yet.

Q: Where did you go from Luxembourg?

A: From Luxembourg we took, there were two buses that left Luxembourg in October 1940. The buses stopped in Paris. I remember my parents waking me up to see the Eiffel Tower. It was the first time I saw it. My sister thinks it was a little bit more complicated but I do remember seeing the Eiffel Tower from the bus. I was fast asleep. They woke me up to see it.

Q: You're ten years old?

A: I was not quite ten. No, maybe I was. I guess I was ten. In October, September 1940 I was ten, ten and one month that's right. So these buses took us all the way to the border of Spain and occupied France. And then we went, got on this train, a Spanish train which went without stopping. Not such a long distance. I looked at a map. We got on this train in Irun. That was the name of this border town, I-R-U-N. It's still on maps, Irun. And we took a train and we got to the border of Portugal and Spain. On the opposite side was a town called **Vila Formosa**, beautiful village which still exists. And but we were held up for a day before they let this train go over the border where some of us were allowed to go into Lisbon. We were not allowed to go to Lisbon because our papers weren't right. So we stayed in this border town for about four or five months til we got permission to go to Lisbon itself.

Q: Did you become very fearful at this time? You were moving around a lot and uncertainty.

A: First time I knew that things were very bad. Months after we had been in this town and we lived in a **pension** with about ten other refugee families who were not allowed to go to Lisbon. Another train came from Luxembourg and we knew some of the people on it. And this train was also stopped at the border, the Spanish Portuguese border. And eventually the train was allowed to go into the Portuguese side, but people were not allowed to get off. And the train stood there for eight days and a woman died on there I remember and we would bring food to the – and I was among people that we would buy, get food at the pension and bring it to the people there. And they could open the windows but they --

Q: Were these Jewish refugees?

A: These were many, more Jewish refugees from Luxembourg. That was a second so to speak train load that came. Later on we heard that some of these people were able to escape from the train, which was sent back to Spain and I don't know where, but they made it to Marseille and

from Marseille some of these people got to Israel, or Palestine at the time. But that's all that I know about them.

Q: When all this was going on, did you hear more about Hitler or what the Germans were doing?

A: Well I must have. I don't remember.

Q: Did you ever hear him speak over the radio? Any of his speeches?

A: Yes, well I think I heard him speak that time he was, I mean the time that he came to the **Gotwestbahnhof** to give a speech, the day after they had, the Anschluss.

Q: And you could understand it?

A: I could understand it but I mean I could hear it on the loudspeakers but I wasn't interested in hearing it. Now these memories are confused. I don't know whether I actually heard it or whether I saw the newsreels about it. Ein Fuhrer. But now my memory is faulty about that. But my parents mentioned this in the talk, I gave a talk about this here. That they shielded us a lot and not only then but when I was a mature person I could think of how much agony they had gone through getting us out. And we'd sent two children, the older twins. There's a whole thing, were able to leave Luxembourg on a kind of mini, **kinder** times but with some other people who'd gotten visas to go to Palestine. And they went with them. They were 13 or 14 years old. So our six person bedroom became now a four person bedroom.

Q: How did you feel saying goodbye to your –

A: Well I didn't like it. I was very close to my brother, but I knew they had to go somehow. I don't remember the –

Q: How did your parents take it?

A: Well they sent them.

Q: Was it an emotional parting?

A: Well I wasn't there when they went to the buses and so forth. So it was, there was a lot that I don't, wasn't – I only inferred later. I wasn't -- my sister was more mature at our age cause girls usually are. So she remembers some things that I have forgotten. So she wises me up. So anyway so we got to Luxembourg. I mean we got to Portugal. To this town called Vila Formosa, which is also I remember it pretty clear because for two items. I write about one of them. One is that we didn't go to school there. But we played a lot with each other. And with a couple of other Luxembourg kids named Monique and Roger. I still remember the names. They were the children of very wealthy Luxembourg store owners who also had become refugees. And so we met them there and we spent a lot of time palling around. And I remember this town stored cork boards. Portugal is a cork producer and they were 20 feet high and we would bounce around among them. It was very innocent play, I still remember those. The other thing that I remember is that at one time, a British sailor came into the town. And I remember he had a blue pea jacket and he had his boat had been sunk somewhere. And he had made his way from Spain to Portugal hoping to go actually to Lisbon to sail back to England, get back. And he sort of took us under his wing and my sister and I maybe some of the other, went with him. We walked around. And at that time I was obsessed with getting a sling shot. I guess it was sort of David and Goliath. And I had, the interesting thing is that I found the fork, a piece of wood that could serve as a fork and I had a rubber band which I could use to tie. But I didn't have a little piece of leather that you could use for putting a stone in when you – and I mentioned this to this guy. And I'll never forget what he did. He had a pocket knife because it's one of the things he saved. And he bent down and unlaced one of his shoes and he cut off the tongue and he gave it to me to use as a – I think I wrote an essay once but I never finished it called a gift of tongue about this. I didn't know his name so I lost sight of him. There are others, these things that you remember.
So anyway, eventually we got to, we were allowed to go to Porto, **Oporto**, which is the second biggest city in. We were not allowed to get to go to Lisbon but we somehow were allowed to leave Vila Formosa after about four months. And we spent four or five months in Oporto and that was memorable for various reasons. One of them was that I became more aware of women

or girls will I say and I fell in love with Olivia De Havilland for a peculiar reason. Somehow, I guess we were pretty cute kids and the owner of one of the restaurants not far from where we lived, knew we would like to go to the movies and he arranged for waiters to take us, Erika and me and two blond girls who also lived in the same building with us. We would come every Saturday or something like that, to this **Plaza de la Libertad**, that was the name of it. And we would got to his restaurant and the guy would send a waiter with us and we could go to any movie that we wanted to. So we went to the movies as often as we could. Although we didn't understand the language, a lot of it, I didn't realize til much later I was living in a fool's paradise, cause they were showing Superman, Batman, a lot of the American serials. But we saw them as a continuous movie. I didn't realize that when we came to the States I realized they had the same stuff but only got 15 minutes so there was an explosion and you come back the next week to see the rest of it. But we saw all these movies and we also saw Robin Hood. And there was Olivia De Havilland with her long tail and so I fell in love with her. I'm sure I'm not the first one with Olivia De Havilland. But I knew that we wanted to get to Lisbon because that's where the boats left from.

And eventually we got permission to go to Lisbon. It took us about – my father would go to the consulate every week and so forth and there are all these jokes about that. You go to the consulate trying to get a visa and so forth, and you have to have an affidavit, all very complicated but the stories of the guy who goes to the consulate and they, you tell him well come back a year from now. And they guy is very excited, morning or afternoon. You know this joke. Anyway that's the kind of – **garde** humor, that means sort of hangman's humor. Anyway so we eventually got this, well we eventually got an affidavit from some not so rich relatives in Milwaukee. You needed an affidavit to come to the States. And we had some very rich distant relatives in Kingston, New York but we never got anything from them, but anyway somebody, my cousin's grandmother who lived in Chicago persuaded – her daughter was married to a furrier named **Bine** and he sent us an affidavit so when we came to America eventually we went to Milwaukee, cause my mother could sew very well and he needed a finisher for his furs. Anyway that's how we wound up in Milwaukee for a while.

Yes, apropos of getting on the boat in Lisbon. Many years later there was a PBS program about the difficulties Jews had getting out of Europe and how hundreds of thousands more could have come if it weren't for the policies of the State Department. And there was a guy in the State

Department, whom they showed a picture of who deliberately tried to limit the number of Jews coming to the States. More than necessary. And he sent messages to the consulates in Europe. Don't give anybody visas and so forth. And the place he was most insistent about was the one in Portugal, because that's where most, by that time, most people who were trying to get to the States were coming from Portugal. I've forgotten his name but I look it up every once in a while. His name was Eagleton or something like that. He's well known for having been a sort of Machiavellian guy from the State Department.

Q: What was the name of your boat?

A: The **Serpa Pinto** which I thought meant painted servant but it doesn't so I had to look it up. It was the name of a man who explored Africa early on. The Portuguese went to Africa early in the 15th century. Like Vasco De Gama and all those people and he was among them and there's a river I think in Africa now named after him and the boat was named after him. That was his name. And I thought it should be Serpa **Pinta** because Serpa is feminine. It was just a name. It was the name of this guy. So –

Q: What were your thoughts about what America was? Did you know anything about it?

A: The only thing I knew was that America is a place where they make Packards. See in Europe the big American car was the Packard and I had heard about that. And I knew they were going to have Packards here. When I met my wife long ago. It turned out her grandfather had bought a Packard while he was – I think they no longer have that. It was sort of the Cadillacs of the time. I don't know if they still make Packards or not but for a long time it was the car to have. So I didn't – I had learned some American songs or English songs from that sailor. The sailor whom we had met and who cut the shoelace for my slingshot. He taught us My Body Lies Over the Ocean. We didn't know what the words meant but we learned that song. And there was another song. Something, Give a Dog a Bone. This old man is rolling home. Anyway we learned these songs by rote and we never forgot them, but I forgotten it. It was my introduction to English. I really didn't know any English when we came except when we came to Milwaukee my sister and I were put into a class for backward children. And that was very good because we crocheted and

made lanyards and stuff like that. But we were learning English at the same time and after a sort of semester they put us into a regular classroom.

Not only that, I became the English star of the place because they were putting on a Christmas play called The Little Pine Tree. And the biggest part was the little pine tree. And they decided that I was the only one who could memorize all these lines so I played the little pine tree that was cut down in this Christmas play.

Q: What was the voyage like?

A: I was seasick nine days out of ten. My sister wasn't. I couldn't go down stairs. It was all oily. If you go into a ship's hold where our places were, it's not just oil. I discovered later what the bad smell came from. Cause I found something on the web about a guy who had been on the same boat and he had been older. And he mentioned it was soy beans which were being transferred from one place to another.

Q: You were talking about the soy beans.

A: The soy beans were responsible in part for that odor. I had never realized that. Because I found some references on the web by people who had been on the Serpa Pinto and I found this essay by this guy who was already 16 when he was on that boat. And he talked about the soy beans. I had no idea that was –

Q: Were there many other Jewish refugees on the boat?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you talk to them?

A: Well I'll tell you a very interesting thing. One of the people who was on the boat, and my father spent a lot of time talking to, was the Rabbi **Schneerson**, who eventually became a **Lubavitcher** rabbi. At that time he was not, he was a refugee. He and his wife. I even got a

copy of the book, the people on the boat, from the Museum here, the archives. They have the manifest, the ship manifest, the manifests and he's there with his wife and we are there too. And I knew some of the names, I recognized but I never knew the other people.

Q: Were there other children?

A: There were other children.

Q: Did you play with them?

A: I was not in a position to play. Basically sat there. I was so sea sick that I didn't have any energy to go anywhere. But my twin sister Erika brought me food like zwieback got for example. She never got sea sick and she would sleep and in the morning she would bring me some zwieback or matzos or whatever there was that I could hold down. Until the last of the day I was sea sick for about eight days and ate very little. But I think on the last day or day before the last day we were coming close to New York, I got better. I was able to move around. But my main memory is of not going anywhere on the boat, just staying on this chair.

Q: What was your first view of New York? Statue of Liberty?

A: I thought, I thought it was the Verrazano bridge but I discovered that I can't be right. I don't think the Verrazano bridge had been built by that time. Maybe it had. So when we got to the – I think we were let on a boat which was at the – someone on the Hudson River. You know there are some piers there and –

Q: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

A: I'm trying to remember whether I did or not. You know I can't remember but I knew about it. I knew about it. But actually my first experience of being in the States, Erika and I and my father were waiting on the deck, no. Pier. Waiting to see where our luggage was coming down from. My mother was doing something else, I don't remember. And so there we were. And an

ice cream man came by in a little thing. And my father decided to buy us ice cream. So this was my first culture shock. So we each got a little Dixie cup. We needed to have it and I opened the top and I couldn't figure out how to eat it cause there was no spoon attached. And then the ice cream guy pointed out to us that at the back of the flap that you remove, there's a little wooden spoon so that was my first introduction to America -- the wooden spoon in the ice cream thing. And then we, my father and I went to live in a hotel on Lafayette Square next to where John Wanamaker store is, somewhere. I don't know if it's still there or not. And my mother and my sister went to live with her younger sister who had already been in the States for a number of years, the one who had gone to Cuba. All the other sisters and brothers managed to get to Palestine. So there were these two families who got, lead to the States. And from Cuba they were already in the States when we arrived. So she stayed with her and Erika did too. And after about a few weeks we managed to go to, take a bus to Luxembourg. Not to Luxembourg, to Milwaukee which is to stay, there was a man. This relative of his, really the husband of a distant relative who sent us the affidavits. And my mother could work for him. And my father was trying to find a new vocation. And he studied accounting and he did that for a while. In any case but cause he couldn't do anything with his PhD in Semitic languages. It was just not – but there were a lot of people like that. And I remember feeling very strange once. When I was 16 or so I got a job working as a messenger on Wall Street. My uncle from this – was married to my mother's younger sister, the one who had been in Cuba, became a stock broker. So he got me this job and it was **Sutro** brothers, got me this job as a messenger. And I would go there maybe on the weekends or in the afternoon. I don't remember. But it was in a room full of other people who were also messengers. And I felt a little bit bad. I was the youngest one there. And a lot of these people were older men. One of them had been a professor of music in Russia. You realize when you come, you do whatever is necessary to make a living. And I felt a little bit guilty about taking the place of some older person might have been -- just put there. I was a very bad messenger because I got interested in crossword puzzles and you know when you walk. As a messenger I would take stock from one company to another. That was my job and I would be walking on Wall Street whatever it was. And there were a lot of trash cans. And the New York Daily News was probably among them and they always had a crossword puzzle you could do so I fished them out, all these sales. But anyway that was a --

Q: But you went to Milwaukee first before New York

A: We were in Milwaukee for –

Q: How long?

A: Three. I remember it was three years.

Q: For high school years?

A: No, I went to junior high school out I think. And then when I came here, went back to public school because I was in the first day of junior high school I think and then –

Q: You left Milwaukee and came to New York?

A: Came to New York and I went to eighth grade or seventh or eighth grade cause I had been in junior high school which starts at that time went from seven to nine. And I came back, went to PS 241. I still remember it. Still exists I think. So we were there for –

Q: But life in Milwaukee was pretty calm?

A: Yes.

Q: The war was going on then.

A: Yeah but –

Q: Did you know what was happening? To the Jews?

A: Well I knew, I wasn't so aware. The thing that preoccupied me, we were trying to bring my brother and sister from, who had gone to Palestine in 1940 from Luxembourg where they were

staying. We were trying to bring them to the States now that we were there. And I remember it was a long voyage cause it was a freighter and it went around the Cape of Good Hope and so forth. And my brother would write to us and we would get the mail late. But somehow in the classroom I would go to the blackboard and I would show on the map where the boat was at the moment. I remember that. So then when he came, he was made into a, he was already 17 or all of going on 18. And he was made a citizen immediately and then he could be drafted. And he was drafted. And the interesting things about is that he went to the medical corps and when D Day came and he was, he came with the medical corps and a number of weeks later. He went back, he was stationed in Havana you see but he made a side trip to Luxembourg. So he, the way he tells us, we had been there four years before the refugees when he was 14 or 15 and very skinny and runty. And he walked into this hotel, the Hotel Select and the landlady sort of recognized him and she almost fainted. Here was this scrawny kid and he's coming back as an American soldier with a tote bag behind him. It was quite an experience. Carlton. That was the name of the chain and it was fancy name. The Hotel Select was renamed the Carlton. So it was very British and it still exists apparently.

Q: You knew what was happening, your folks knew what was happening, in 43, what was happening to the Jews?

A: Well they knew, they knew. But I was sort of shielded from it.

Q: When did you move to New York?

A: We moved to New York when my brother came back from the army. In 44, late 44, 45. That's a good question, when did we move to New York.

Q: The war was over? Sometime in 45.

A: Sometime in 45.

Q: You went to junior high school.

A: No, in New York. We moved to Brooklyn where my mother's younger sister was and Erika and I went to public school because we went back to the eighth grade. We went, and from there we went to high school. Both of us to Rasmussen high school where I met my best friend for many years. A piano teacher who was also from Vienna. And I discovered him because he heard me speak in the gym class and he detected my Viennese accent so at some point he taught me the piano and I taught him chess. We still see each other. He's in New York. But many of us went to Rasmussen. And from Rasmussen many of us went to Brooklyn College. From Brooklyn College I went to Columbia as a graduate student.

Q: When the war was over and the news really came out about what had happened to the Jews, do you have any memories of the response of your parents and the full import?

A: No, they didn't speak about it.

Q: They didn't speak

A: They didn't speak about it. It was like --

Q: Too painful?

A: It was too painful for them to speak. And they stopped speaking German completely already.

Q: Oh you started to say that, when you came to –

A: When they came here, they start, stopped being German completely. So I learned Yiddish as a result and I more or less forgot my German but it came back eventually when I went to Europe. As I like to say I speak no language without an accent. There's a difference in the Ls. My twin sister has a good R because she practiced whereas I did not practice. If you don't practice, you say pwactice and so I can do it but I have to wind myself up to do it.

Q: Then you go to college. When you were in high school were the American kids interested in your background or any of the teachers?

A: You know some of the teachers were sensitive to it. Some were, especially my math teacher, Mrs. **Macovsky** and we were very good in class and some of the teachers invited us out for lunch or something. We went to teach in New Jersey and together with Frances cause we were there in high school together. So we were sort of treated in a slightly special way because we were refugees, I think.

Q: Did you feel very different than the other kids?

A: I felt, in some ways yes, I felt very shy with girls because these other kids, the boys they sort of belonged to clubs and they had jackets and there was this whole thing. But I found nice girls anyway who weren't impressed by jackets but I was very shy, I remember it. But Rasmussen was a good experience because I had two excellent math teachers which got me interested in math and I was on the math team and also there was also a chess club and I joined that. So but I did try a sport once. Not long after I was going to go to Rasmussen, I said you should try for the track team. So I went early one morning just for this purpose and Rasmussen, the building sort of has a surrounding the original building. Rasmussen is the oldest high school in the United States, it's very old. And the old building is sort of in the middle so set up in the ___ . And the track was just going to go over. We could run around it but I had never done this before. So I did join the track event. I tried out and I ran around as much as you had to and then I laid down and began to be sick right away. You know if you run a lot, you should not lie down. You should keep walking and slowing down instead of collapsing. You have to keep walking, keep walking. That was my one attempt at sports. Decided it was not for me.

Q: You graduated from high school.

A: Graduated from high school and went to –

Q: Did you feel very American then?

A: Yeah I always felt, wherever I was I felt sort of at home in some way. And when I go to Europe, I feel very European. Even though I was very young.

Q: What year did you graduate?

A: I graduated in 40, from high school, in 1944. I'm getting a bit confused. 1948.

Q: Then you went on to?

A: Then I went to Brooklyn College for three and a half years and then I went to some fellowship was available in the middle of the year which my teacher managed to inveigle for me. There's an interesting story about that too. Because maybe, let me come back to it. But from there I went to Columbia and I graduated in 57 from Columbia with a PhD in physics. And then I got a job at Maryland which was my first and only job. I stayed there, worked there for 41 years and so I retired about 10, 12 years ago, something like that. I wasn't ready to retire but my wife was ready for me to retire. She was a writer and a psychotherapist and so forth. There's a picture of her. That's the broad outlines.

Q: Were you ever in the service?

A: No. I was not in the service because I was studying physics. And at that time physics was a reason for being exempt for a while. But in fact I would go, every six months I would go to the draft board in Brooklyn and in Brooklyn they were very severe because there were lots of smart Jewish kids going to school but they're only doing – my brother was in the first, in the Second World War but I would be drafted for going to Korea or something like that. And a friend of mine, **Ranny Rachma**, who was also called in and after a while we were the only people who came were Rachma and myself. All the others had lost their exemptions and so forth so physics is what kept us out of the army. Then the war ended.

Gail Schwartz: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Joseph Sucher. This is track number two and you were talking about not being drafted because you –

Joseph Sucher: Because I was a physics student. And so then I was able to stay until I got my degree. And then the war ended sometime before that so the draft was off but there was a period where I was very draftable and I wasn't taken right away. The Korean War.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

A: I met my wife in Brooklyn College. And I met her indirectly, you know go back because I used to play chess. And I had given up chess. And I met somebody in Brooklyn College on the campus. We recognized each other and I played with him when I was in high school, a guy named **Flato** and he said we ought to go play chess. Oh I don't play chess any more. No we, you know he says we should go. At Brooklyn College they had two lounges. There was a popular lounge of people listening to popular music and a classical lounge. And they played bridge. And the bridge went to the popular music. There was another lounge called the classical lounge where they had chess tables and they played classical music. So we had to go to that classical lounge cause there were chess tables there.
But also at Brooklyn College there were hundreds of clubs. And it so happens that the tango club was giving tango lessons in the lobby of this lounge. And as I walked in, I said to this guy maybe we should to do the tango. You can't do the tango, could you? Yes I can. My sister taught me. So they were teaching. There were couples going around and there was this cute girl standing by the desk, not doing anything. And I went up to her and I said would you like to tango. She said well I'm not teaching. I said well I'm not learning. But that was, we cut our next class and we were engaged in two weeks. It was just a terrific –

Q: What year was this?

A: This was 1951.

Q: You were 21.

A: I was 21. That's right. I was so unbelievably young and she was not yet 19. She was18.

Q: Your parents were able to get jobs? Once they were settled.

A: Once we were settled. Well when we moved to New York there is a whole other sidelight to this which may be that my brother and, when my brother got out of the army and my father, they became diamond cutters. And the reason for that was I had a very clever cousin, the cosponsor of my – his mother was my father's sister. They were also in Vienna. They had gotten to France, escaping. But they were overtaken by the Germans at some point. And Henry my close cousin and his sister and his family, he is now about to be 90 in August, were on their own. But he was very clever. He learned French very rapidly. So he got along as assistant to various people. And he managed, he got to the States and he managed to get his parents out of a, an internment camp in France and brought them to the States.
And he, Henry had sort of began to study diamond cutting and when his father came, he got him into the diamond cutting business also. And when my brother and my father so eventually all four of them were diamond cutters. My cousin Henry eventually became a dealer. He invented a stone which was called the queen's cut which was for the queen of Thailand for her 60th birthday or anniversary or something.
But the patent was stolen but he told me it's too expensive to pursue patents. But anyway that's a whole other story that side of the family. But he was also like my brother, cause my brother was in the army and he was like a surrogate brother. He was very close to me. So that's how we got to New York. It was via the **Grossbart** family and my brother getting out of the army. And my mother's younger sister, my aunt, **Tante Lotte** as we used to call her, she was living in Brooklyn so that all helped to make things –

Q: What happened with your sister? Did she go to Brooklyn College too?

A: Erika went to Hunter. And my older sister had graduated. She had been going to Brooklyn College but she had some problems passing gym, Phys Ed. Eventually she did get a degree. But I have a very – Dorothy had a very close cousin, who's still alive. She's also like Dorothy was, and she went to Barnard and she never got her degree because she didn't take Phys Ed. She didn't take the Phys Ed. There are people like that. Nowadays they still require it but she, her name is Joyce Johnson. She's a very successful lawyer. So there are a number of stories.

Q: What year did you get married?

A: We got married the next summer. We met in December and got married in the summer, in fact it was August sixth 1952.

Q: Your wife's name?

A: Dorothy. Her maiden name was Glassman. And occasionally I see Glassmans around. Her father was transplanted from England. Her mother was the youngest child of the grandparents. No, she was not the youngest child. But anyway she became very Americanized. And I just heard something about people who become Americanized don't have anything to do with the old country. Of course she was a child, but I heard about somebody, somebody's mother around was born in Vienna but she wanted to be completely American. There's that feeling that you want to discard it completely. But there is that thing of domains. What's the old saying. You can take the boy out of the country, but not the country out of the boy.

Q: Did you have any children with Dorothy?

A: We had four children and but two of them, my middle son was a very talented musician and he contracted Hodgkin's disease when he was 14 and he was saved by NIH. There was a new treatment that he took, months or something like that I remember. Various and via chemotherapy and he took it and seemed to be cured and it came back, had radiotherapy. Anyway the third time he was cured for many years but he eventually and this is not uncommon. Once they have some kind of cancer you are more susceptible to other types. And 30 years later he got some kind of

lung cancer which couldn't be treated so he died a few days before his 49th birthday. And my daughter was a brilliant girl but she was depressed all her life. And she eventually took her life.

Q: And your other?

A: The others. I have a son, younger son who lives in San Francisco and I wait for him to come as often as possible to help me clean out the room. And he works at a lab. He's a lab manager at the University of California at the hospital. You know the San Francisco hospital. And my other son, going to come, he lives in Rockville and he comes to visit me every few weeks. Not so bad. He used to be a lawyer. He went to law school and he also had his problems. But Dorothy was a pearl.

Q: When did she pass away?

A: Almost four years ago. August fifth, August of 2010. I almost can't mention her name cause I end up crying. There is a beautiful picture. Dorothy's best friends in Vermont. And we would play bridge together. They're all gone now except me in the corner there. Here are some of her paintings. She was a writer and a painter and she was – I'm writing a book about her now. Not really a book. She gave some terrific lecture here about going back to Belarus where her grandfather came from. And it was very popular. She had to do it twice and she kept a journal and I have the journal and I put it in my computer and I'm now trying to put the – she did a, what do you call it.

Q: PowerPoint?

A: PowerPoint and I did it for her. She told me what pictures to do and I didn't know how to do it and so now the talk she gave, she had a PowerPoint demonstration. I have a copy of it here somewhere. I could send you the copy if you'd like to see it. I'm sure you have a lot of other stuff to do. Now I want to make a kind of book out of this. And I've written a preface and I've written introduction to her life. And then there will be a prologue which I also have in the computer which is her explanation of why she went back to Belarus. And then there's her journal

which I also have on the computer and the things that I have not yet done because I'm having a problem is put the pictures into these documents. You know there's a way to put them in, in which you wrap it around the text. So it doesn't take up so much space. I'm working on that at the very moment. I'm letting other things go. In fact today I should have been in chess club and I forget about that. I give a lecture at the chess club. I'm very busy here. Because last night I went to, somebody's giving a Hebrew class. And I always wanted to know Hebrew and it's sort of fun. Yesterday it got very good. It was the best class so far.

Q: Can I ask you now some questions, some of your thoughts and feelings. Do you feel very Austrian, very Viennese?

A: No. But I know that I am compared to other people. I don't feel Viennese. I feel American. Especially when I'm in Europe, I feel American. I get along easily. I speak French and I speak German but I feel that the Europeans don't really understand the Americans. This came home to me many years ago. I was at **SERN**, that's a European nuclear physics research place. And Kennedy was killed. And all the people there thought well Johnson must have engineered it and I said no you're completely wrong about that. That's the European thing. Who is the next one? Somebody assassinates the king so new king. That made me realize that they don't do really get America somehow. So anyway I feel very, I feel both natural and American at the same time when I go to Europe. I have a lot of friends in Europe. And I enjoy visiting them.
I'll tell you a quick story about what happens when you become an American.
Well you were asking me about do I feel Austrian. I said no I never feel Austrian, but I feel European occasionally but my main feeling is being an American and it's especially keen when I go to Europe, I feel very American. I don't know for what reason but that's, I feel more American in Europe than I feel here.

Q: What are your thoughts about Germany?

A: Well they're sort of complicated. For many years I did not want to go to Germany. I didn't want to enter the country. And there were occasions too. And I once, many years later I changed my mind because there was a conference in Hamburg that I wanted to attend. Reason of physics

and so I was there. And I would go to a restaurant with my friends and there would be German people sitting next to me and of course I understood what they were saying. They didn't realize that I understood it. And every once in a while somebody would say something about the **Juden** and this was 25, 30 years later. So but the people that I know that I became friends with, there are some Germans among them and I feel they were among the good guys. But I feel very guarded when I went to Germany. In some way that is difficult to describe. I didn't want to ask them what did you, what did your father do during the war. I just sort of played it cool.
And I have a good friend who's here now who actually was born in Germany, joined the department. And he lives in Greenbelt and he became, families became fairly close so under certain circumstances. I'm always when somebody is really German, German, I'm always guarded. I've never gotten over it so to speak. But it's a feature that doesn't impinge much on my life.

Q: Do you feel like a refugee? Or you feel totally 100% American?

A: No, I don't feel like a refugee and I don't feel 100% American. I feel I like to think of myself as a man of the world, sort of live anywhere in some sense because I'm not wedded to any – I'm wedded to, for peace and justice and doing the right thing. But not to any, well I feel American for example during the Olympics I'll often root for the American runner, think of it. I root for the store of American chess players when they play in Europe but I think it's – it just, I think it, in retrospect, it makes it more enjoyable to root for somebody. If you can root. I mean I could do without it but I enjoy it.

Q: Do you think you're a different person because of what you went through? As a young child? Uprooted at such a young age? Moved from one country to another country?

A: Yes. Yes. I feel I'm a different person. Because I feel I don't get annoyed at small things. I know a lot of people who specially here when people talk about this and the food wasn't this and the food wasn't that. And all of it is not important to me. And I think it has to do with really what is really important. So the answer is yes, I do feel different about things that many people would also have the same attitude if they had to undergo what I went. But I sometimes feel guilty

being classified as a Holocaust survivor because I wasn't in a concentration camp but I'm looped with those people and Serena **Wolich** has all generations dot com. She is a very worthwhile woman because she does real good. What she does, I don't know if you know what the organization does. She puts people in touch with each other and so in fact I have to call her because I sort of tried to clean up my huge list of telephone numbers. I've tried to put you in actually. Because I want to put you into my cellphone. And right next to put in, I want to write in Gail, there is somebody named Danielle **Marconi** or something like that and I couldn't remember who she was. She's somehow connected. Do you know who she is?

Q: She used to work at the Holocaust Museum.

A: Maybe that's what it is because – I once went there with this lady whose father was a – I mentioned her before whose father was a consular officer in the Vienna in the 30s who saved thousands of Jews by getting them visas to Turkey and many other places. There's a woman, her name is there somewhere. And so I went with her and I met her at the Holocaust museum on the fifth floor. I never went inside and my wife took her cousin Boris. That's a whole other story, to the Holocaust museum. But I stayed outside.

Q: Why?

A: Cause I didn't want to be upset by seeing the shoes and so forth. I didn't want to, I felt it wouldn't do me any good. It would not improve my – try to stay away from stories about the Holocaust because I feel it would just make me feel bad and not do me any good. I mean that's the answer to why.

Q: Did your experience make you more independent as a child? You did not have a typical childhood. Did it make you stronger?

A: I think it made me more introverted. I can be by myself very easily. I enjoy people but I don't need to be with them so to speak and so some people need to be with people because they don't do well by themselves. I think I started and becoming a theoretical physicist is a way of having a

job and not needing to be with people. It's more fun with people. But you can sort of do it by yourself. Like mathematics too, you can do by yourself. But I don't feel antsy or edgy when I'm not with people. I don't feel – I guess if I were holed up for a week in this department, I meet feel the need to go out. But I don't need to see people every day.

Q: Are you angry that you had difficulties in your childhood or leaving, whereas children your age who were living here didn't have to go through that?

A: You know I don't think – I never thought in those terms about being angry. I always –

Q: You had to go through it.

A: Yes, I felt lucky instead of angry. That's why I call this essay Luck Was on Our Side. Cause many, so I feel lucky that I, not only that I feel also lucky with my temperament. I have a good temperament. I recover from blows without being devastated.

Q: When you see pictures of the swastika now, what –

A: I tend to look away. I still look away.

Q: All these years later.

A: All these years later I would look away. I just don't want to see it. Cause it's a very story

_____

Q: You were at such a vulnerable age.

A: That's right. Somehow it was – even though now I understand about swastikas intellectually and so forth but the image just drives me away. Although Dorothy in her essay about Belarus, with all the anti-Semitism in Belarus, she found a picture of a Nazi flag and she said, she reads

her essay and then at the same time she saw this PowerPoint pictures and she said at a young age, she knew there was danger somewhere and so she had me show a swastika flag as a symbol of it.

Q: When you were younger the civil rights movement was at its height in the 60s and 70s. Were you active in it? I mean Hitler took away civil rights.

A: Yeah I was very active in the women's movement cause my wife was. We participated. I was the only male delegate to the Prince Georges, Northern Prince Georges chapter of NOW. My wife was active in that and she led consciousness raising groups and so forth. I have a picture – I want to show you the picture later of her with a good friend of hers at the march in Washington in 19 – and I'm in the subway. I had lost the picture but the three of us are in there. So I was in fact, my one attempt at politics was among the physicists was to propose a, that we boycott those states that are not supporting the Equal Rights Amendment cause it was 40 years ago. And to my surprise and chagrin, most of my colleagues didn't agree with me. That was my attempt to sort of do something political.

Q: The reason I ask is Hitler deprived people, Jews, of their civil rights so I was just wondering –

A: Well I was always very sympathetic.

Q: You were –

A: That's right and I gave money to the causes and so forth but I wasn't myself active. Not the way my wife was active about the women's movement. And she really put a lot of work into.

Q: Are you more comfortable being with people from Europe, Europeans than Americans?

A: Not particularly. It depends.

Q: The European Jewish refugees.

A: I'm very comfortable with refugees because we have a lot in common. So it's easier to make conversation but I feel fine with, I guess I'm somewhat more comfortable with people who are Jewish. Because we have a shared experience in some ways. And you can make jokes which you can't make with –

Q: You talking about refugees?

A: No just Jewish Americans in general. All the Jewish Americans that I know are not that long here. They're not. Occasionally I meet somebody from the south whose family has been here a long time and they even have a southern accent and I always find it very strange. You know the joke about the family moves to the south and the boy's got to be bar mitzvahed but there is nobody to do the ceremony so they write to Brooklyn and to make it short, the Brooklyn man comes down and he arrives at the railroad station and he's got **payess** and a hat and a **shtal** and whatever it is and the kids had never seen anything like this before so they follow him like the Pied Piper. And he gets more and more annoyed as he's walking along the street. And finally he turns around and he said what's the matter? You never saw a Yankee before? That's the way it goes.

Q: Is there anything you wanted to add that we haven't covered? Your folks lived, how long did your parents live?

A: My mother lived til she was 90 years old but my father died of a heart attack when he was 58 and so while I was doing my graduate, finishing graduate school at Columbia. And the thing is about parents' death that I realize. Of course, it's painful but what is sort of independently painful is when good things happen to you they're not here to share the joy. That's sort of a very difficult thing. My father never knew how successful I would be. And my mother knew but she was somewhat of a depressive parent but she lived a long life.

Q: Did she talk about the war time experience?

A: No, but it was from her that I found out – I wish, as usual you wish you'd asked your parents more. And I never knew about this relationship my father had with **Menachem** Schneerson. She just told me that many years later. I never knew that they had walked the decks together for eight day. My father had done mathematics and Schneerson was an engineering student and so this was before he was the Menachem Schneerson, off the deep end. So there are always things that you wish you had asked.
I wanted to ask you, you're very skillful at this. How did you develop your skill?

Q: We can talk about that later. Your relationships with your siblings?

A: My relationship with my twin sister has always been very close. And my –

Q: Did you talk about the war at all?

A: No, only if I – she has written a few essays about our time in Portugal which I didn't know about, how our mother sent her to buy chicken for the refugee doctor she was cooking for and how she considered that a great honor. Her mother trusted her when she was ten years old or whatever it was. She bought chicken. We talk about it only sort of in trying to remember something. Do you remember this?

Q: Do you speak in English to her?

A: Yes, we speak in English exclusively. In fact we both became English speakers very rapidly. The only difference among us was that she, for many years, I did the alphabet in German. You know I'd look something up but she did the alphabet in English but she did numbers in German. And I think we do everything in English now but there was an interesting difference as to how we approach certain things. So we are still – I talk to her almost every week. She lives in lower Manhattan. Sometimes I stay with her. My older brother. I didn't see. He was away during my most formative years. He was in the army so my cousin sort of became my brother basically. They were great friends. When they passed away I sort of lost a big chunk of togetherness so to speak.

Q: Your older sister?

A: My older sister died a few, half a year ago but she was in her late 80s, I think she was 88. I hadn't seen much of her. She was in a nursing home so to speak, in Brooklyn. Erika and I would sometimes go to visit her. It was a long schlep but we would do it. Erika the only one that I have left. My family, my mother's family and my father's family, the only one who is left in the United States is my cousin Esther who lives in Texas and who is going to be 90 in August. And I'm trying to think whether I can muster the energy to go or not. But I also have energy, I like to go to Vermont where my only grandchild lives in Vermont.

Q: How old is your grandchild?

A: She's now going to be 14.

Q: Have you talked to her about your childhood?

A: No. Her mother is extremely protective of her so I don't get much time alone with her. And the mother took very good care of Michael when he was sick and she's very, extremely protective of her child. To a fault, I would say, because she's so protective, if I offer to take Rachel somewhere then she would have to be alone. It doesn't happen often. That's sort of a painful side of my life that I don't get to see her much.

Q: How do you feel about the Holocaust Museum being in Washington, DC?

A: I think it's a very good idea. I think it's, because a lot of people come there and I think there's a lot of children come there and so forth. And they are aware of what happened. I couldn't think of a better place. New York would be too insular. I think it's better in Washington because it becomes more part of the national consciousness.

Q: People say it didn't happen here. It happened in Europe.

A: Yes, but we were involved. I mean the fact that – I never heard that remark before. It struck me as completely natural that it be here. They have an Indian museum in Manhattan. Except for the $24 to buy Manhattan, there's no close relation to the Indians. I never even heard that before. If they don't like something, they find a reason not to like it.

Q: Have you been to Israel?

A: Once. And it was a very sort of joyful experience. And my mother had been there several times by herself in late 60s and so forth. When she came back she was just glowing. The thing that amazed her was to see a Jewish policeman. I should go more often but hasn't happened. But I have a fair number of – but I have my cousins in Israel. And we once got together actually. We all met in Vienna. And the oldest cousin, **Yoshi** is his name. He was old enough to know where all the stores that the cousins had were. We walked around Vienna and so forth and he said here was so and so and here was so and so. So that was very interesting. That was the last time I saw him. I have another cousin who is a cancer specialist, used to be the head of the **Rambam** cancer institute but he comes every few years to attend some kind of conference and so I see him from time to time. My other cousin, Louis **Shwalaba**, Lilly Spiegel, the daughter of my Tante Lotte, she has children who live in Israel and so she goes to Israel very often so there's that connection. And she lets me know when he's coming. Sometimes I go to New York to meet him in her apartment. Lives in Queens and Erika comes too. But there are all these shall I say these gray relationships like in the ____ but to enjoy life while you can.

Q: Is there anything you wanted to add that we haven't covered?

A: Let me think a little bit about that. I'm sure there are. In Vienna I had a strange experience. I went to the – my sister and I used to play in the Altgarten which is the big park in Vienna which was very near our house and I used to go there as a child. I think I still have a bump in my head in some way here. A slight bump cause I slipped and fell against a steel railing but never mind. But the strange experience I had there. I was going, walking through this park and in this park there were two huge antiaircraft towers from 50, 60 years ago from when the Germans were

afraid of bombing from England and these towers like circular. The walls are six meters thick and they're still there because they tried to dynamite them away but it was too difficult so they're there. And I saw them and as I was walking through there are some plantings in front of them, little six feet by four feet plantings. And one of, it must be the name of a plant and there were some sticks in the ground which have the name of the plant. I assume it was so because it said **Traumlant**, which means the land of dreaming. And I thought that was so – it sort of was just a juxtaposition of these antiaircraft towers. It just struck me as an odd thing. I mean that somebody would plant just these flowers there. Many of these little events that take place that have a big meaning because of some memory that you have. I remember that. And I remember, I was going to. I want to show you this picture of Erika and myself. . I'll show you later.
Yes, when I went to – the time I was in Vienna, I tried to visit the school that I went to. And you could visit it but you had to go through a lot of guards before you could enter inside.

Q: What are your thoughts about Austria?

A: I have mixed feelings about Austria. Because they were, they were such anti-Semites and it continues to this day with our forces in France too but I don't feel about Austria the – Austria I have sort of mixed feelings. But Germany is more distant for me. I could visit Austria.

Q: You grew up –

A: I grew up there and it was sort of a, and until Hitler came it wasn't as bad for the Jews. And I have physics friends in Austria and so forth but I gave a talk there once and, you know as long as you don't dig too far into the past you're sort of ok. I don't feel awkward about going to Austria. Whereas I would feel somewhat awkward about going to Germany. Because there was a source. I'm sure there's more to say but I'm not so far. I did get interviewed by somebody once. I think I told you. This woman named Doris English who was writing a book about either teenagers or older people who succeeded in academic life in the United States and she was interviewing these people. You probably don't know a very good friend of mine. She was Dorothy's best friend. Her name is Evelyn **Tortenbeck**. You know the name? Because she appeared in – actually somebody interviewed people in Montgomery County and she appears in that book. I don't know

if you know that book or not. She goes back, she doesn't feel the same way that I do. She goes back to Germany if necessary, she doesn't hesitate to go, whereas I would think twice. And she grew up in Vienna and then she escaped via Italy and Turkey, whatever it was. That was the name of the book. She came over. It was the SS Manhattan and I looked it up. You know what makes the SS Manhattan famous? You'll never guess. Some of the Charlie Chan episodes and so forth were filmed on the SS Manhattan, which doesn't exist anymore. These curious things you find out when you go to the web. You find out this and that. And so people react differently about going back.

Q: Has the world learned any lessons from the Holocaust?

A: Not if you ask me today, at the moment. It's just I feel very pessimistic about the future. You know there's a book by Max Frankel. I can't remember the name of it but it's a famous book. I didn't read all of it, but I read the first few pages. And he says that civilization depends on about, at least 25% or 30% of the people have to be on the side of right. If it goes below that stupidity takes over and such a thing that the world is going to go to hell and all the states, that that's the – Max Frankel. I don't remember the name of the book. I have to look it up every once in a while but it was a very – and that's why, look how unstable the world is. There are these three teenage kids who start that and then in the first year they start. And it's just shows how unstable -- and I like to say about religion, I like to misquote the priest Savonarola who was sort of a radical priest in Florence and who burned people at the stake if they weren't doing the right thing. He was called the scourge of God. That was his nickname and my statement is I say religion is the scourge of God. That's my feelings about it. Not that there might be something else about it. I'm sure there are lots of things more that I can tell you that would be of interest but they don't come to mind at the moment.

Q: Thank you very much for doing this.

A: Thank you for coming here.

Q: This concludes the interview of Joseph Sucher.

(end)