

My name is Julie Kopel. And I am interviewing Ava Schonberg. The date is Monday, July 21, 2014. And the interview is being conducted for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. We are in New York City. Good morning, Ava.

Good morning.

Like we discussed, I'm going to go through a list of questions. And please just feel free to tell me your story as best as you can.

You're going to start me some questions first?

Yes.

OK.

OK. What was your name at birth?

Well, it's the same. Instead of Ava, it's E-V-A. But in Europe, you say "Ae-va." I didn't want to be called "Ee-va." so I changed the first letter of A. That's all. Ava Schonberg, that's my name.

And can you spell Schonberg for me, please?

Yeah, sure, S-C-H-O-N-B-E-R-G.

Great. And where were you born?

Antwerp, Belgium.

And what was your date of birth?

1/18/37.

Now, can you tell me a little bit about your family, please?

About my family in Belgium?

Yes.

There's a lot of things. I don't know. But my mother, I think she had, I think, four or more brothers and sisters, two brothers that were in Belgium. The rest were in Poland. The two in Belgium, they died during the war. They were married with children. My father, I don't know how many there were, four or five also. And I don't know what happened to them. They must have all died in the war.

And were both your parents--

No, my father maybe-- yeah, they came from Poland in '35 to Belgium. Now, my mother came earlier. Then my father, came in '35. My mother came around '34, I think, something like--

So both sides were from Poland originally.

Both sides were from Poland. My mother came to Belgium because she had family, an uncle or something. And she got a job here. She was working in diamonds. She was one of the first diamond cutters in Belgium. Right.

And your father?

And my father also was in diamond business.

And he came--

He came later. He came in '35.

And did you have any siblings?

No, I don't have any children.

Siblings.

Any siblings? Yes, I'm sorry. I have two, an older sister and a younger sister. I'm the middle one.

And what are their names, please?

Celine is my older sister. Alice is my younger sister. And my older sister is 15 months older. My younger sister is four years younger.

So you're in the middle. And can you tell me a little bit about what your parents' roles in the household were? You said they were both in the diamond business.

They were both in the diamond business. My mother's working as a-- which is unusual in those days. My father was also in the diamond business. That's all I know.

Because you were very young at the time.

I was young. I was 3 and 1/2. I don't know why.

So do you remember anything, or do you know from speaking to your sisters about who looked after you guys when your mother was working?

I think we always had somebody taking care of-- my mother, she had the kind of job she could work at home because in diamonds-- we always had maids, even later on. So I assume my mother had help. I assume. In those days, before the war, I don't know. But my mother, I think she was able to work at home. I assume she worked at home. And she probably had help. But in those, years after the war we had a maid. Before the war, I don't know.

Mm-hmm. And your father worked close by to home?

No, my father, he worked in the diamond business. There's a diamond center there. So I assume we went to the diamond center. There wasn't-- yeah, right, it was between '35 and '40, so he must have been working, right, in the diamond business, right.

And what was the nature of religious life in your family?

Very religious, orthodox.

Orthodox.

Right. Not Hasidic, orthodox.

Can you explain a little bit what that means?

Orthodox means you follow all the traditions. Saturday you didn't work. You didn't put on the lights. You didn't drive. We ate kosher. We didn't carry on Saturday. You were careful about milk and meat, all the traditional rules of orthodoxy, right.

And were there a lot of orthodox Jews in Antwerp at the time?

Yeah. Most of the Jews in Antwerp were orthodox.

And the area where you lived, can you tell me a little bit about your home?

None that I remember now. My mother just lived a few houses away from the diamond center, very close, like less than five minutes walk. So maybe that was very easy for her because of her business. We lived near the-- not far. And it was near the train station. That's all I know.

And do you remember if the direct area you lived in was all orthodox Jews?

I don't know exactly that street. But in Antwerp, it was mostly the Jews that lived in Antwerp were orthodox. The Jews that lived in Brussels were not-- mostly were not. Most of the orthodox or the Hasidim lived in Antwerp.

OK. And do you know anything about your family's political affiliations?

I have no idea.

You had mentioned before that some members of your extended family were living in Antwerp as well.

My grandmother. I don't remember her. But my grandmother was there, my grandfather.

On your mother or your father's side?

My grandmother was on my mother's side. I assume my grandfather too. What was the question again? I'm sorry.

No, that's OK, just your extended family.

My extended family, OK. I had uncles. I had aunts. I had cousins. I had a lot of cousins. There were about 200 members of the family that perished during the war, so it was a big family. We lost everybody.

And many of them were living in Antwerp at the time?

No, many were in Poland. But those I didn't ever met. In Antwerp, I had cousins. I had aunts. I had uncles, two aunts, two uncles, many cousins and girls and boys. But I don't remember them.

Do you remember anything sort of about your daily life? I know you were really young.

Nothing.

Nothing. So you obviously weren't in any sort of schooling system.

I don't remember anything from as a child. No.

So nothing about school?

If I was kindergarten or anything like that, I don't remember, no.

No memories, really.

I have a bad memory to start off with, right. I always had a bad memory.

Do you have any memories of what your home looked like, maybe your room or your parents' room or anything like that?

The only thing I remember is there was a bed in bars. What do you call that? I think a crib? What do you call a bed with bars?

A crib?

A crib?

Mm-hmm.

For my little sister. Me, I don't remember where I slept. My older sister, where she slept, I don't remember. I don't remember. When the Germans picked us up, we were all in my mother's bed. But I don't remember where we slept. No, I have no memory.

And I don't suppose you have any recollection of any anti-Semitism that was happening at the time.

No, I can't. I was too young.

Do you remember when your family started hearing about Hitler or the Nazis or any sort of German presence in Antwerp?

No, I didn't understand. No. You're talking about me knowing, right, not history, right? I was not aware. Oh, I'm sorry.

That's all right.

I was not aware at all. And no, the only time I was aware, when the Germans picked up my father. That's when I became aware--

That's your first recollection?

--that something was wrong. Right.

So you don't remember anything about wearing a yellow star or anything like that.

Nothing. I don't remember anything about that. I've only one memory of my father, only one. I think so. I was a little girl. He had given me a glass of milk. And I bit the glass, and there were pieces of glass on my tongue. And I remember him slowly removing the glass on my tongue. That's my only memory of my father.

Anything about your mother?

No, nothing.

So let's talk about the recollection that you do seem to have, which is when your father was taken.

OK.

How old were you? What year was it?

It was '40 or '42. So I was 4 and 1/2. The only memory I have from that period was-- what I know is what happened. But

you're asking me my memory. My mother had put us all of us in her bed. And she had a doctor's notice that the three children were-- so she had one 5 and 1/2, 4 and 1/2, and maybe 6-- 4 and 1/2 and 1 and 1/2 all in the bed. We were sick. And so that the Germans-- I don't know-- maybe they weren't picking up sick children. I don't know.

The only recollection that really is strong for me I don't even remember. But to this day, if I hear a knock at the door, I jump. As a matter of fact, there's two things. I jump if hear-- even to this day. I know somebody's coming. I expect somebody. And I hear a knock on the door, and I freeze inside, to this day, it's the same way if I hear a plane because they were bombing in those days, and I was crying. It was disturb me. I couldn't sleep. I was crying.

The moment I hear a plane, I said, my first thought is, where is my passport? And why is that plane? Usually there's no plane around Manhattan. Why is there a plane? That's my first thing. So there's certain things that remain with me. And I had one other incident, which must we go to those days.

About two winters ago, I was walking on the street near Central Park West, someplace between Columbus and Central Park West. And it was a cold night. And somebody was walking behind me with boots. And the boots were getting closer and closer to me. And I was panicking. And I turned around, and I said, don't you know that in New York you don't walk with boots somebody so close? They must've thought I was crazy.

It was like I had a German behind me. And it was getting closer and closer. And I just exploded. And I didn't know where that comes from. That I really don't remember. But it had such an effect on me that he must have think I'm crazy. He must think I'm crazy. But really, I think the one thing that really terribly bothers me still is a knock at the door. That is a very frightening thing to me.

I understand.

So that's when the Germans-- what happened, the Germans--

Well, Ava, can I ask you to stop for one minute? I want to turn off the tape just for a minute so we could close the window because I'm afraid that some of the noise from outside is going to get on the tape.

OK. I'll close the window.

Wait.

Oh, yeah, I can't. No, you do.