

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Jack Ophir. This is track number two. And you are now in Israel. Did you have any comment about when you arrived in Israel? You thought maybe that it was a little bit later than you first mentioned?

Maybe a little bit later. I do not--

September '46, you think?

Maybe September '46, yes. But I don't remember my first-- going around in Israel are kind of very murky in my mind. I don't remember friends. I don't remember people necessarily. I don't remember that. I just remember that my mingling with other kids was very difficult for the first few years.

Because of what you going through as a young child. Yes, of course.

Yes, yes. I wasn't a nice kid, and all the other kids on the street-- they were afraid of me. And I was using my hands for excess.

So you were very physical and fighting?

I was very physical, and if I didn't like something or I did like somebody I used my hands in excess. There's no question about that.

Did you get in trouble?

All the time I was in trouble.

Which is why you were sent to the private school?

That's why I was sent to a private school, absolutely. But when I left the private school, by the way-- I just ran away from the private school, which was quite far away from Tel Aviv. It was on the outskirts of Haifa, which was quite away. And at that point, I was a young child, but I couldn't care less.

You left on your own?

Completely on my--

You walked off the school grounds?

I left off the school grounds. I had maybe 1 or 2 pounds in my pocket. I got on the bus, and I traveled all by myself to Tel Aviv. And I made it from the bus station back to my parents' home. And a matter of fact, when I arrived, my mother was in shock to see me. You know what had happened. And I explained that I will never ever go back to that place.

And this is when my father came back from work, and they had some conversations. And all I know is that I stayed at home, and they had to work out the school for me, et cetera, et cetera. And from that point on, of course, I stayed in Tel Aviv.

And so you're in high school, and then what happened?

I started high school. My bar mitzvah was, of course, in Tel Aviv.

What was that like? Can you talk about it?

Well, I remember, there was--

1951, it would be--

A lot of people came to my bar mitzvah, and that was--

--1951.

--in 1951. And from that point on, I became, in many respects, a different person. By that I mean my aggression kind of left me, and I became much more friendly with people, much more friendly with children my age. I joined the Boy Scouts of Israel at the time, of which later on I became a guide in the Boy Scouts.

I went to high school. I went to some of the better high schools of Tel Aviv, and I became-- I matured somewhat, I would say.

Describe your bar mitzvah. Where was it?

Where was it?

Yeah.

The bar mitzvah was in our apartment.

Not in the synagogue?

In the house, not in a hall or-- for a matter of fact, at that time, people made what we call [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] celebrations in their own homes. It was very customary to do it at home, not in a--

--synagogue.

--public hall.

Did you read from the Torah?

Of course, I read up to the--

You had a service in the home.

I read the Torah. I went up to the Torah. At that point, I still was a semi-religious boy. I was wearing a yarmulke until I went to high school, and I went to high-- when I went to high school, that was already a non-religious school, but I was not accustomed to it at the very beginning because I still went, as I remember, with my yarmulke on my head, and some of the kids in school were kind of making fun of me, which didn't sit too well with me at that point.

But it took maybe six months to a year until I removed my yarmulke and I continued high school with all the other children until, of course, I finished high school and I was called to the duty by the army.

So you went into the IDF in '56.

Yes, '56. End of '56, I went into the army, and I went to the [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], which, at that time, was a special unit in the army that the end result was a membership in a kibbutz. However, while I was in the army, I decided to have a military career, and I was asked to go to a corporal's school in Israel prior of-- I should say, in Israel, you don't become a corporal because you are a good soldier. You become a corporal because you go to a special corporals school. If it is a fighting unit, you have to go to school.

And since I belonged to a fighting unit, I went to corporal school. I finished it. I was an instructor in the military for

recruits that came into the army, and shortly thereafter, maybe a year after, I went to the military academy, which I finished. And I became an officer in the army. I went to a paratroopers unit, and that's how I finished up my army, as a retired officer.

Was your name still Jacob Feingold?

At that time, it was Jacob. Some of my friends referred to me as Jankele. That was a nickname that I carried since my very early age in Israel.

And what did you do after the army, when you left the army?

When I finished the army, most of my friends were already either in the university, some of them working or building careers, and I kind of found myself a little bit lost because I didn't know what I want to do. And I had to make up my mind.

And being persuaded by some good friends that I should go and continue my education, the question became, where should I go, and what should I do? And as I had finished my matriculation in Israel, there was one subject that I was somewhat weak with, and oddly enough, that was English.

My English was very weak at that time, and of course, when you were seeking for higher education, English had to be one of the subjects that you passed. I did not pass English, and therefore it was somewhat difficult for me to make up my mind how to proceed.

It took about a year or so until-- and I did all kinds of odds and ends, all kinds of different jobs until I made up my mind that I'm going back to school. And from all the places that I decided to go to came the United States of America. So I parted from all my friends in Israel.

What made you decide to want to come here if your English wasn't so good?

Then I came to the conclusion that the only place where I will quickly command a language will be if I would be able to speak the language but the language of the country. And I had many other choices. I could have gone to France or to Germany, but I kind of felt that the United States of America should be best, and I decided to come to America.

It took maybe six months for me to make the proper arrangements. I left my friends. I left everybody in Israel, and I traveled to the United States of America, a country which I am in until this very day.

What did the United States mean to you as a young adult at that time? Did it have any special meaning besides the fact you were going to learn English?

It meant to me-- America meant to me the country of success, a country of big achievements, a country of being able to do what everyone wants to do, a country that has really no limits. That's what it meant to me.

So you land--

And I land here.

Did you fly or take the boat?

I took a boat. I was sick as a dog.

What boat were you on?

And I made myself a promise that I will never ever put my foot on a boat again.

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

Actually, I came through France. I came on an Israeli-- on an Israeli boat of that time to France, and from France I traveled on the virgin voyage of the French into the United States of America, into New York City.

And putting your foot down on American ground--

--on American ground--

--what was that? Was that special?

It was not, not that it was special. To leave the sea was very special. I was sick as a dog, and being on the ground--

That's what it meant.

--gave me a great pleasure.

Then where did you go?

As a matter of fact, I had an aunt, one of my father's sisters, who lived in the United States since the Second World War. She escaped from Poland through Morocco into France and ended up in the United States of America with her family.

So I met her. I lived in the first few months with her.

In New York?

In New York City. And of course, when I first came and looked at New York City, it was like a story from "1,000 Nights of Stories." It was an unbelievable scene to see the size of the buildings, to see all the people, and most disappointing at the beginning, that everybody spoke English and I did not. But that did not take a long time.

So we're talking about what year? 1960?

1960, 1960.

OK. So then what did you first do?

And then, in 1960, through a very pleasant and unforeseen connection, I was guided into CCNY in New York City.

City College, yeah.

And I went to school in CCNY. After that, or a matter of fact, part of it, at the same time, I went into Fashion Institute of Technology, and graduated, and started my career in New York City.

You obviously picked up English.

Modestly picked up English, and by the time I finish, I was pretty fluent in the language of English, yes.

Did you go to language classes.

No, I did not.

Or you just picked it up doing--

No, I got myself a girlfriend, and that's the way I learned my English. No, no. That was many years before I got married.

So you graduated from the schools.

I graduated from the school, and I worked for an engineering company by the name of Bertram Frank Associates, and then after a year and a half or two, I worked for another company of engineers as well. And while working with this engineering firm-- the name escapes my mind for a moment-- I met some people who were in the midst of building a large factory farm in Puerto Rico, from all places.

And we finished it up, and they came back to New York. And they offered me a job to work with them. I wasn't sold on it because I had a very serious job, and I was happy with the job. At that time, I was making a lot of money for a young man-- or that's what I thought, anyhow-- and I was very comfortable.

And they invited me for a few interviews, which I did go, and I met a fellow by the name of Charles Greenberg who happened to be a nephew of the man that owned the company. And they convinced me to join them. They better than matched my salary, and I joined them to find out after maybe a year with them that the men who hired me, a fellow by the name of Leonard Sherman, decided to sell his business without telling me anything about it.

And he did sell the business, and we became a part of a much larger company. But after selling that business, I got together with what was at that point my partner or my associate, a fellow by the name of Charles Greenberg. And we decided to leave the company and go on our own and open our own manufacturing facility, which we did.

We produced women's lingerie or women's underwear for over 18 years. And in and around 1985 we parted company, and the business was sold. Of course, much prior to that I have met my wife, who happens to be my wife until this very day, a lady by the name of Theas Otehea Hornstein of that time and today, of course, Thea Ophir, which I'm still married. I should say happily married.

Was she from Europe also?

She was born Israeli, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], the way we refer to--

How did you meet her?

We met through some mutual--

--mutual friends, actually, in the--

--here in the United States?

--here in the United States. She used to be a stewardess with El Al, and on one of the flights to New York City she-- I don't know. I don't remember any more-- happily or unhappily came to my apartment, the place that I was entertaining on Sundays. And that's how we met, and the rest of it is history.

Do you have any children?

We have three children, and we have a daughter that came first and two more sons. All three are married and have their own families. The youngest was with me until this very day.

And when did you become Mr. Ophir?

I have changed my name very shortly-- or I should say, while I was in the army in Israel. Before I went to officer school, one of my units worked as regards to David Ben-Gurion. And he was very influential on us to change the names to Hebrew names.

One of the members in my family, a son of my father's brother-- he changed the name first to the name of Ophir. And I

had another job in the force, and being that I did not want to have too many names in the same family, I took it upon myself. And I changed my name to Ophir, the same way he did. So the Hebrew name remains the same within the family.

And did he choose the name Ophir for a specific reason?

Yes.

How did he come to choose that?

That's a good question. The name of Ophir is a biblical name, and it is the land of gold, the land that Queen Sheba mined her gold for King Solomon. It was the finest gold found at that time, so that's the relationship to--

--to Feingold.

That's wonderful. Are you still working? You said your son is in business with you. Are you still working?

From 1985, we have-- I should say, prior to that, my wife was in the antique business, and being that we sold our lingerie business, she raised the question one day, said to me, Jack, what would you like to do when you grow up?

And it wasn't a question of finances. It was more a question of peace of mind, I would say, among us. And I thought about it, and I said to her, you know what? I will go into the antique business, the same business you are in.

And to make it clear, I always had an interest myself in the other antique business, so it came rather easily to go into that business. And my wife at the time handled very-- I would say very small collectible items, and by virtue of maybe importance, I would say not very important items, but more collectible items and decorative items.

And when I went into the business, I made the decision that I would like to handle more important type of objects. And that took a little time to recognize where we want to be and what type of merchandise or objects we want to handle, and came a moment where we decided to handle the Art Nouveau period as Europe was concerned, mainly French and Austrian type of objects and parallel, American Tiffany studios or objects that were made by Tiffany in the 1900s. I would say late 1800s and early 1900s, a business that we are in until this very day.

Wonderful. Can we now talk a little bit about your thoughts and your feelings about what you went through? How do you feel about Poland today? What are your thoughts about Poland?

About two, three years ago, I finally made the decision that I would like to take a look at Poland.

You had not been back at all--

I have not been back to Poland since. I have been back to Germany, which I will tell you in a second about. And we did go, and the first place, of course, we went to Warsaw. And before we toured Warsaw, we went to Lodz, a place I was born in.

And when we arrived in Lodz, a force from stories I knew that we come from a very, very well-to-do background, and the homes were very serious homes, very elaborate homes. And it was natural for me to look for those homes. I couldn't find those homes, and Warsaw-- I know from a story that my mother-- when she was still alive, she went to look for her home and couldn't find it because the Polacks burnt everything down to the ground and built some apartment buildings there.

To be completely candid, our first visit was the cemetery in Lodz, which is a huge cemetery. Nevertheless, half of it was completely ruined by the Germans, and none of the graves could be found. And we looked, we tried. Nothing was found there.

And some of the older cemetery-- that was in place, and the only place that was evident was the place where some very well-to-do Jews lived and were buried right before the Germans came in. And those, of course, are stones, still stand, and they are absolutely unbelievable in the construction, looks, and important, meaning they look like celebrity stones, celebrity people were buried there. This was Lodz. As far as city is concerned, it meant nothing to me.

Are you still fluent in Polish?

I am still completely fluent in Polish.

So when you were there you could talk to the people?

I talked to some people. I talked to people. As a matter of fact, our guides all were fluent in Polish, and they couldn't believe that I speak the type of Polish I do, but I am fluent. And from there we returned to Warsaw.

Warsaw is being rebuilt completely, high-risers, beautiful homes, and that was another city that had absolutely no impression on me, none whatsoever. Like all the feelings were burnt out. We went to see the old city of Warsaw, which actually Warsaw totally rebuilt. There's nothing old about the old city, with the exception of a rebuilt city.

We were in the places where the ghetto was existing, of course, and couldn't find anything with the exception of some insignias of families that lived there or stayed there. To be perfectly frank, I like-- I always did-- some traditional Polish food because that's the way I was brought up in my mother's kitchen. However, I must say with a little humor that you can get better Polish food in Greenpoint in Brooklyn than you could in Warsaw of Poland, and that's the gospel truth.

We stayed in Warsaw, for a, relatively speaking, short time, and we left. And to be very frank about it, I have absolutely no feelings or no memories of what Poland was to me or is to me, just with the exception of it was nice being there just to have a memory that I was born there. And that's about it.

We did take a trip, of course, to Germany. I used to do some business in Germany. And at one point that long ago, I made the decision that I would like to see Bergen-Belsen, a place that I really, for many years, didn't want to see. And I had a conversation with my wife about it, and we made the decision to go to Bergen-Belsen.

We traveled to Berlin, stayed in Berlin for a few days and by the way, from all places, much more so than Poland or Warsaw. Everywhere you turn on the Berlin street you find Hebrew insignias and Hebrew names of families that used to live all over Berlin. And they are impressed with bronze signs, and it's absolutely impossible for you to visit Berlin and not know the influence that German Jews had on Berlin.

That being said, we had an appointment with a driver, a young fellow, that took us directly to Bergen-Belsen. We asked him if he would like to join us or whatever he would like to do or maybe meet us later on, and he kind of insisted for us to take him into Bergen-Belsen, which we did.

We explained to him who we are and who I am, that I was there during the war. He was a young woman that knew very little about it, or maybe just what he was taught in school or told by his father. But I would say the driver was in his early 30s or late 20s, so he couldn't know too much about it.

But he knew that it did exist. We came into Bergen-Belsen, and we were greeted by one of the chief guides in Bergen-Belsen of today's guides in Bergen-Belsen. Of course, it was turned into a museum. And when we said hello, the lady that intercepted us or met us-- she thought, at the beginning, that we are visitors, and my wife had explained to her, yes, we are visitors. But you have in front of you a person that spent some time here in this childhood.

She was taken for a moment, and then she said, yes, that her boss, who couldn't meet-- he's the general manager of the museum. He couldn't meet us, but he prepared for us some items, and he prepared for us the complete double book of all two volumes, two large volumes of books with an agendum of all the people that were in Bergen-Belsen as long as Bergen-Belsen existed.

And the first [INAUDIBLE] she said that she would be very happy to give us a tour, and she did bring us. We spent some time in the general hallway that is-- it looks just like a cave. And all the personal artifacts and things of this nature are displayed, which wasn't a very comforting type of a memory. But those cans that I told you about that the Germans used to bring the soup in-- a few of them were there, on display. And when we went through all those displays, we wanted to go into Bergen-Belsen, into the camp, which we did.

When you saw the cans, did it bring everything back?

And the first place-- they had no barracks, no buildings. Everything was taken off, and where the crematorium was where they were exterminating people-- that was completely gone. And the only thing that you could find were outlines of the barracks and where the barracks were located.

And as we went into the camp, I requested to meet in barracks number 10, and I was led to it immediately as we entered the camp. And believe it or not, I sat in person right on the grounds of the barrack that I lived in when we were in Bergen-Belsen.

My wife was, of course, with me and there was very little that I could say. For a moment I just wanted to be left alone and just look around, and it was a little bit difficult. It really was. Many, many, many years passed by, but all of a sudden, some memories came by. And I was right there. I was right there.

We spent a few hours in Bergen-Belsen. There's a big stone right in front of the camp with the name of the camp, and at first I took a picture in front of it. And it's on my Facebook.

And we came back to Berlin, and in the taxi the guy was kind of telling us and thanking us that we allowed him to come with us, that he knew about what had happened, but he never really had the chance to see it in his own eyes.

However, we came back to Berlin. We had a pretty good time in Berlin. Berlin is a very large city. And we stayed another day or so and came back to the US, came back home.

Came back-- is the US your home?

That is our home, yes--

Poland is not your home.

--absolutely our home.

And Israel? Is Israel your home?

Actually, I happen to be, by now, more American than anything else because I'm in this country for over 50 years. Israel is a home, too, but in a different way. [INAUDIBLE] after my children were brought up here. They have a home. They have their own family here. It is a little different. We still have some family in Israel, mainly my wife's family, but it's different.

Speaking of your children, when your children were the young age that you were when life changed, a little boy, five years old, six years old-- when your children were that age, did that trigger memories of what you had to go through when you were their age?

Absolutely not. When my kids were small, of course I had the memories of where I was and what I did, but it was already so far away that I started my own family in the United States on totally different grounds.

The only one that kind of reminded me of it at the very beginning was my mother when she came to visit us, and she kind of memorized. She said, you have small children. At first, she was happy and very much attached to them. From time to time, she said, I remember when you were that age.

But I did not relate to it anymore. To be very Frank about it, I think that my wife had related to it not as an experience over there but as a happening that she wanted the children to know and understand what their father went through. So she was the factor of me really translating or telling my children--

So she was the one to tell them your story?

Yes, not my mother, my wife--

Your wife, yeah.

--was the one that really forced the issue because, for a long time, I didn't want to get there. I didn't want to repeat it for many reasons, and some of them are personal reasons of my own of difficulty sharing those experiences on the one hand. On the other hand, I really thought or think that they don't have the full understanding what going through this type of experience means. To them, it means a horror, something that was terrible, but not necessarily the bad experience.

And that gave me always a little difficult time to relate with it to them until my wife had convinced me, Jack, they really should know some more about this. And at that point, I tried to give them a little bit more knowledge of those stories.

You had mentioned that when you still, in today's world, go past something that's burning, that it brings back the memory of the burning [INAUDIBLE].

It certainly does.

Are there any other sounds, or smells, or sights that trigger a similar response in today's world? Or just the burning.

Absolutely not.

Just the burning.

Absolutely. As a matter of fact, the view of hundreds and thousands of corpses of dead people did exactly the opposite in my own self, meaning when I see a body, it's meaningless to me. And I don't say it in a positive way. It's in a painful way, but it is a fact of life.

Sometimes somebody may fall down and break a leg or hurt themselves. It means very little to me. And again, not because I don't feel sorry for the person, but because I had seen so much, those things become relative. And when I take a second look, I say to myself, so what? You understand?

Yes, you were exposed--

And this is--

--what you were exposed to.

It's a very difficult thing for many people to understand, but it kind of burns out a certain nerve in your own body. It's dead. It's not existed.

You had to protect yourself as a young child to what you saw.

Absolutely, it was probably a protection mechanism--

That was protection mechanism.

--when I was a child, but now as I'm a grown-up man, it doesn't exist. In the times, I almost have to make it up as it exists. But it doesn't exist, and it's not an easy thing to admit. It's not an easy thing to live with all the time, but it's a fact.

Are you more comfortable being with people with similar backgrounds to you than native Americans, let's say, more in common with--

Absolutely not. I feel comfortable with people that had my background or have my background.

--been through the war in Europe.

But it doesn't mean anything to me. Many times when other people discuss my background, meaning not necessarily my background, but the history of that background, I sit, and I listen. And sometimes I laugh in my heart because I know that they really don't know what this is like. But it doesn't give me any hard time or any indifference being with them. I listen, and I listen very thoughtfully and very openly with no anxiety of my own whatsoever.

You obviously lost part of your childhood going through what you had to go through. Do you feel you got it back ever?

I lost all my child, not part of my childhood, all of it.

Yeah. Did you get any of it back or not?

No, not really. Maybe some of it I'm getting back now when I look with when I look at my grandchildren or sometimes my wife.

Do you feel like you're two different people, someone to the outside world and something different inside? Or are you one in the same?

People that went through the experiences that I have, in many respects, are different people. The common denominator is that we are people, and we try to care for one another. That's the common denominator.

But since the experience, the young or the earlier experience, is so vast, sometimes we are very different.

Yeah. You were a young adult in the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement here in the United States, and since you and your family were deprived of your civil rights, did it strike a chord? Were you involved in any way in the Civil Rights Movement?

Not really.

Yeah, you were still getting adjusted to life here.

Not really. I did not relate to it at all. I just related to it from the point of view of people being dealt with not as even, not as the same type of people. But I have no relationship whatsoever to my background.

Going back to your youth, was there an advantage, do you think, to being so young during the war, or would it have been-- if you had been older, would it have made a--

I would suspect that, being as young as I was-- many of the circumstances or many of the situations that I went through I took as granted that that's the way it is.

That's what life is.

That's what life is, naturally. I just started to maybe think about it differently immediately after the war when I have been associated with some other children my age, and this probably was why I was so aggressive and difficult because, as a child, this was my existence. This was what I had seen as a young child.

And in the violence that you saw.

Absolutely.

Do you remember if you had any specific thoughts during the Eichmann trial? Did that mean anything to you at that time in the 60s?

Would you repeat that?

The Adolf Eichmann trial-- did you have any thoughts during that time?

Well, the Eichmann trial-- the thoughts that I had were very simply that what he received-- this is what he deserved. That's all I can say about it. Sure, I had followed it through all the time, and there were some memories, of course, involved from the Eichmann trial. But the relationship to it as what had happened-- some of it disappeared. It stayed in my memory, but some of it disappeared.

Did the experience make you more religious, less religious, have any effect on your thoughts about religion once you became an adult, obviously?

My experiences did not make me any more or less religious. I must say that my father tried to send me to a religious school when he came to Israel, and I did attend a religious school. And I had a pretty good background of religion in my young age.

Nevertheless, the question that you're asking, if my experience had change my mind about religion, no, it did not, nor did it enhance it by no means of the imagination. I understand why I am a Jew, but the religious part of it is something totally different to me.

You mean more in the sense of peoplehood is what you're saying? It's more of a sense of peoplehood type of--

It's more of a sense of peoplehood, yes, absolutely. I am not fanatically religious. I never was. I never will be. I just know what it means to be a Jew, and I'm proud of that. But to translate fanaticism of Judaism or strict Judaic laws-- I can't do it because I'll have to do too much comparison to what I went through and there will be too many question marks.

Are you angry that you had to go through the terrible, terrible times that you did because you were born in Europe as opposed to being born here and those of us not having to go through that?

I'm not angry at all because I didn't know any different. The anger actually came when I started to understand what my parents went through. This is when the anger came in. But I'm not angry about my upbringing because I didn't know any better.

But you had to go through terrible times when those of us were here playing.

When I went through those terrible times, I did not know that they were terrible times, so there was a very fine line as starting being more educated and starting understanding what my parents went through and how they had to raise me through all what had happened. That's what brought anger to my heart, but not the physical upbringing up to the age of maybe six, seven of my own because I thought that that's the way it is at that stage of the game.

There's a very fine line that today, of course, being a little bit older and a little bit more understanding of how people act or react, then I can put it into a logical sense of how I feel about it.

Can the Holocaust happen again?

It may. It may. We wish from day to day to educate the population and to educate all human beings that it should not happen again. But to have guarantees, we do not, and I don't think we can have those guarantees. But we should do anything and everything possible through education and through showing other people what was it all about so they don't think about it, that it can happen again.

Before we close, is there anything, any message you want to give to your grandchildren that you have? Any special words you wanted to say?

I'd like to say to my grandchildren and my children that it will be very wise to study that era in their parents' and grandparents' life. Relate to it from a point of view what human should not do rather than do and to understand that not all people are the type of people the Nazi generation used to be. And I want them to appreciate the fact that their grandmother requested or influenced me to have that interview in the Holocaust Museum.

Well, thank you very much for doing the interview. Thank you.

It was my pleasure.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Jack Ophir.