

Where were you born?

I was born in Heilbronn.

Did you grow up in Heilbronn?

I spent approximately six years in Heilbronn. Then we move to Schweinfurt, where I went to school for a while. Then I went to Frankfurt. And then we came to America in '38.

Do you remember going to school in Schweinfurt?

Only Jewish school, not secular school, because I couldn't go to school anymore in secular school.

When you were in this Jewish school, did you have any non-Jewish friends in the neighborhood? I wouldn't remember.

Don't remember. At what age did you go to school in Schweinfurt?

I suppose up till the age of eight, I would think-- eight or nine. Oh, I guess eight. And then I was sent away to Philanthropin, where I went until I was 10, 10-ish.

You were sent away from home? You were living in Frankfurt?

I was living in Pension with somebody in Frankfurt, yes.

Did you like it there?

No.

Why not?

Well, for many reasons, but the primary one was that I felt very much out of my element. I was away from home.

How old were you at the time?

Eight, eight to nine, nine to 10.

Were you able to go home at all?

I don't recall. But I recall my parents visiting me.

You recall talking to them about being unhappy that you were away from home?

No, I don't recall it.

While you were in Frankfurt in the Philanthropin, the Philanthropin was a Jewish school, right?

Yes.

Do you remember associating with any kids other than Jewish kids?

No.

Remember seeing any signs, Juden Verboten or Juden Unerwünscht?

No.

None at all?

None.

Were you ever restricted in any way?

As far as I recall, no.

When you say you were living in Pension with someone else, was this a family?

It was a family of a man who was a bachelor, who lived with some spinster sisters and his elderly mother. And they took in students.

Were they nice to you?

I think so, yes. They were not negative, put it that way.

Were you in Frankfurt during the Kristallnacht?

No, we were in America already.

When did you leave Germany?

We left in the end of February '38. And we came here, I think, March 4, '38.

Up to that time, while you were in school, do you ever remember any discussions by your teachers about emigrating or about the situation in Germany?

No.

How'd you feel about the situation in Germany?

I didn't know anything about it except that once or twice, some kids called me dirty names about being Jewish. Or once, somebody, I guess, beat me up. I sort of remember it very faintly. But I really was very sheltered.

Did you understand what Jewish-- being Jewish meant in Germany?

Oh, I think so. Well, I knew what being Jewish meant. I knew what it meant be-- in Germany, I don't know.

What did being Jewish mean to you?

I went to synagogue. I knew my cantor and rabbi. I practiced Jewish things at home, things like that.

Did you go to synagogue in Frankfurt?

I don't recall.

Did you go home to Schweinfurt before you left for America?

No, I did not. I went from Frankfurt. I was picked up, we went to Hamburg, and from there, directly on the boat.

Did you know you were leaving Germany permanently?

No. I was not--

What did you think?

I don't recall.

Do you recall the trip coming to the United States?

I recall it very well. I recall, first of all, that on the boat, one evening, I was told that my father had been in jail, which is the first real situation as it approached me in terms of being Jewish. But that made a deep impression on me to the extent that I remember it always.

Why did his being in jail make an impression on you?

Well, because my father was not the kind of man who belonged in jail. He just-- in general terms, you don't associate your father with being in jail.

Did they explain to you why he was in jail?

Yes.

What did they tell you?

Told me that he was in jail because he was Jewish and that they thought that he was being dishonest. And only because he really was not-- that is to say, because he was honest, was he able to get away. And that's why we were able to get out. I don't remember now to what extent they explained it to me at that time or whether this is all just coming together as it was explained over the years. But that was, in essence, what happened.

You said that you didn't understand that you were leaving Germany permanently. What was your idea of where you were going?

Well, I didn't know. I had such implicit trust in my parents that when they said, we will go to Hamburg-- I suppose they brought it to me in stages. First, we went to buy me some clothing. Then they went to Hamburg. Then they went on the boat.

So I suppose that in the course of time, there, I was told, we went to-- we go to America, in addition to which, what I'm saying to you is not quite true, as I think about it. Because we had to go to the consulate or whatever this was where we had to get permission to go. So I remember being there. And I remember being instructed that I must bear in mind that the capital of America was not New York, but Washington and that the capital of New York was not New York, but Albany, which, of course, made absolutely no sense to me.

Did they, in fact, ask you those things that the consulate?

I don't think so. I don't recall.

Just in terms of your parents, when you were away for a little while from your father and mother, did you notice any apprehension on their part or any change in them?

No. I was mostly concerned with myself.

As a child.

As a child.

OK. What did America mean to you at that time?

Absolutely nothing, just a distant place.

Did you think you were coming back to Germany?

I think I was told that we're not coming back. But I really had not so much that I left behind. It wasn't-- just my parents who left their parents and brothers and sisters, whereas I was by myself. I had my parents. We were contained to a family unit. So why should I care?

Do you remember saying goodbye to your grandparents?

No. But I remember saying goodbye to my aunt. And I remember that she gave me a very lovely kiddush cup in silver, which was inscribed. And I use it to this day.

When you said goodbye to her, I know that you were a child. But did she react? How did she give you that silver Kiddush cup?

I don't recall. I know it was given to me. In what context and where, I don't recall.

When you were on the boat, did you meet many other German Jewish kids?

Well, I suppose there were quite a few. I just remember with one that I became very friendly right away, with a boy, whom I even met later on in New York. And we talked to each other every once in a while, but then lost contact. But I had a very good time on the boat.

Did you speak English?

No, of course not.

Just German?

Just German.

OK. When you arrived here, who met you at the boat?

The wife of our sponsor.

Was the sponsor related?

The sponsor was related through my mother, yes-- I suppose a cousin, some kind of a degree cousin. I don't know to what. And the wife met us and took us to a hotel. And she had two children also. We are still in contact with the wife and children.

Were the children your age?

Younger.

Younger, OK. And you were what about?

10 and a half.

OK. When you got off the boat and you went to this hotel with the wife of this cousin, what did you think about New York that first day?

That's very hard for me to remember. I think that it was probably that I had very great difficulty in adjusting to that this was a new place. The same time, we were also happy to get off the boat and simply to be able to walk on solid ground. That was--

Being on the boat bothered you?

No, it didn't bother me, but it bothered my parents. They were-- my mother, especially, was sick from the very beginning. And I suppose, I had sympathy pains.

She picked you up. Your sponsor's wife picked you up.

Yeah.

And you went to a hotel?

Right.

Where did you go to this hotel?

Somewhere in the 90s, I don't remember. We had one room for the three of us. And that was to serve us for approximately a week or more until we found another apartment. Apartments at that time were readily available.

Where did you look for an apartment?

In Washington Heights.

Why did you want to come?

Well, because everyone that we knew lived in the area. So of course, we-- like joins like.

Did you yourself know other kids in Washington Heights?

Oh, I don't think so. I don't remember. Later on, I met one or two kids whom I used to know. But that was in the course of time.

Did your parents let you go outside in the 90s by yourself and wander around a little bit.

No, not at all. Not at all. I only went outside once we had moved uptown to Washington Heights.

You mentioned that you were not too happy when you were in the Philanthropin being away from home. How'd you feel about being in a new environment like New York?

I adjusted very well, I think. I was always happy in America.

When you say you adjusted very well, what-- was New York different from Frankfurt or Schweinfurt?

Well, that's a very, very difficult question. First of all, of course, it was different. The houses were different. The-- above all, the language was different.

How did you find it-- was that-- when you first started to go out and you only spoke German and not English, did that pose a problem for you?

It did, but not for long. First of all, I remember, later on, that my father told me, he once came home, and he saw me standing by the side of the house, and everybody else was playing. And I was left out. And he was able to overcome my feeling of rejection by being nice to me and by-- and folding me. Because he realized what it was.

And I suppose that I was very secure at home. Now, the most important thing that happened to me was that my cousin, with her two children, lived in Westchester. And she offered to take me for a period of time during that first summer so that I was able to learn English with an American accent immediately from native-born Americans, which was, of course, an enormous advantage to me later.

You mentioned that you came here March 4. And this was the summer. Did you start school?

Yes, that's another thing. I started school in the neighborhood, of course, in public school. And there were only-- in the class, I would say, not only, but 90% refugee children. And incidentally, that's where I had to change my name to an American name. And that's where Robert came from. My original name was not Robert.

When you-- what made your parents-- or how did you feel about changing your name?

Meant nothing to me at the time. I realized that certain-- I realized it. I don't recall that it meant any traumatic kind of thing as today I might-- knowing some psychology. There was no lack of identity.

Well, when you were first-- when somebody first suggested to you that you change your name?

I think it meant absolutely nothing because, probably, my family still called me all by my original name. And it was only in school and it was only that I was called the new name and that-- over the course of months or so that this whole thing changed.

You mentioned, you started school right away. Did you start in the 90s or did you start in Washington Heights?

No, Washington Heights. Washington Heights.

Do you remember that first day of school?

No, not at all. Not at all. I remember the school and the class, but not the first day.

Until you found out that there were more refugee children-- try again-- how did you find out that there were more refugee children in the class?

We looked different. You could tell. We could tell each other. We dressed differently. We had different modes of conduct. We behaved differently. But above all, we looked differently. And of course, we spoke differently.

In what way did you look different?

Our clothing were different. We had European clothing.

What kind of clothing?

Oh, I don't remember now. But to this day--

Short pants?

Some-- I don't recall if we wore shorts. I don't think so. No, I had long pants. I remember that very distinctly because I was made fun of in Germany for wearing long pants. That I remember. But what was the question you had about?

How did you-- you said that you were so distinguishable that they read that you're Jewish.

Yes. And to this day, if some group of people are walking down Fort Washington Avenue and, let's say, of 20 people, 10 are American-born and 10 are European-born, I would venture to say that I could pick out the European-born to this day.

How would you pick them out today?

By their walk, by their mannerisms, sometimes, even by the way they wear their American clothing.

At that time, I don't think you were 10 years old or something like that. You were that--

Astute is the word you're looking for.

Yes, that's right. Did you meet a lot of American boys in the class?

Probably, yes, of the lower classes.

How did you know they were of the lower classes?

Well, because they were very-- they were not like we were. That is to say, they were not interested in the same values that we were. First of all, they went around beating up people. They were not interested in studying. We knew that their fathers had different occupations. They were bus drivers, trolley drivers, really, they were working in breweries. They were postal employees. And they were, of course, Irish and Italians. So we knew that these were of a different group of people.

What did Irish and Italian mean to you at the time?

Foreign, foreigners-- not like we, foreigners--

And what was a native?

--and not American, not American.

Oh, a native, then, was a German Jew?

A native was an American.

OK. Are you sure?

To us.

In the class?

To us.

Well, OK. You mentioned that their fathers had--

Excuse me, there was only, for instance, one sure American. That was our teacher.

What made you so sure that she was American?

We don't know, but we took it for granted. When you-- you said that these kids beat you up and they were different. Who were they beating up?

Foreign kids. They were as afraid of us as we were of them. When you say foreign kids, did that include you?

What do you mean?

You said they were beating up foreign kids.

Yes, of course, me, certainly. We were the foreigners to them.

That what-- yeah.

Yes, of course.

How did that make you feel?

Well, mad as hell. Well, no, it took us a long time to get used to these things. And I don't really think it's that germane.

How do you think-- how did you know what their fathers' occupations were?

Because we talked about it in class. I remember that very distinctly. We were thinking-- we were talking about what would happen to us, what we would be like, and what would-- how we would develop. And it also then came out about the others. So this was, somehow, a part of this grade.

What were the occupations of your father, as well as some of the other refugee children's fathers?

Well, we only spoke, of course, of what they were. They were-- my father was the president of a local bank. My other friends there were doctors, lawyers, or business executives, and store owners, things like this, which was we understood was quite different from a man who was a trolley car conductor.

What were your fathers doing at that point when you were going to school?

Probably nothing or-- that is to say, looking for jobs, which created all kinds of conflicts because the women, the mothers had an easier task of finding jobs than the men. And I would imagine that this created a lot of problems, most of which I was not aware of. But in retrospect, I can understand.

Did your mother go to work?

Yes. She went to work very quickly.

Was this the first time that you could remember her going to work?

Oh, of course.

How did you feel about your mother going to work?

That depends. From the point of view of going to work, it didn't bother me because I understood that this had to be done. And as a matter of fact, within a year or two, I was going to work also during vacations. And I was always working. I knew that this was part of the situation.

I was, however, very upset when my mother came home suffering from having been at work, like she would have to clean the laundry of the people. And in those days, there were no washing machines. And you washed laundry on an ironing board. And she would rub her knuckles raw and would come home with these raw knuckles or bleeding knuckles and fingers. And this would upset me greatly because she was really hurting.



How did you know that she was hurting?

It was talked about very openly.

How did your father feel?

Well, I don't know. I don't know.

Was he working at the time?

I can't tell you. I don't know precisely. I just know that he started to work much later than my mother did.

You said, it was talked about openly. Did he talk about the difficulties he was having in finding a job?

Yes, everybody knew those things. People talked about it. There was no real shame in this, in not being able to find work because it was the Depression. And some couples were lucky, they went to work as couples.

And as a matter of fact, they did extremely well because they could expropriate, which is a better word than pilfer, all kinds of goodies-- food and money, to some extent, but mostly food and the little comforts. I know of one couple which worked on-- in a very-- what at that time was a fashionable neighborhood. And they used to give the most fantastic parties for their friends of immigrants. And of course, it was all charged to the other people and was quite a deal.

I lost track. Do you remember when you were discussing with your family-- I'm making the assumption that you came with the 10 reichsmark, that you didn't have much money from Germany. Is that a safe assumption?

No, I'm not so sure. Money matters, to this day, don't bother me very much.

Well, did you feel in any way that you didn't have that much money?

Yes, we felt that there was need. We always had enough to eat, but we also knew that it was touch and go at times. And I must say, also, that we had some kind of money which we brought along, more than the 10 reichsmark that you're talking about, which I think was only after November 9 there, wasn't it? But I don't know.

But we had some money. And we invested this money. And then we needed the money. And we sold it. And I recall that one was an extremely important and favorable stock. We had money. And how we did this, I don't know.

But we sold the stock to get some money. And we also sold dishes, and paintings, and stuff that we had brought over in our lift. But this particular stock which we sold, had we been able to keep it, would have made us a-- well, what would have been a small fortune in the course of time with splits and so on. But of course, who knew these things?

How did your father get all this-- did he know people to give him this advice-- stock market and everything?

Oh, I have no idea. I have no idea. This was all beyond me. But of course, you are entering into one of those things which ought to be discussed. And that is the fact that people took in roomers. And I think-- [AUDIO OUT]

Did you take in-- did your family take in roomers?

We took in a roomer almost as soon as we moved Uptown, took in one person. And he was somewhat of an eccentric person. But we learned to live with him. And it meant a great deal because he helped to pay for most of the rent.

Was he also a refugee?

Yes. Yes, but he was a single person.

How did it feel to have someone else living in your house?

It was a strange kind of thing. But we were used to it. And we had to get used to it very soon.

Did your mother provide him with meals?

I really don't remember. I don't recall. I would imagine she provided him with breakfast. But I don't know how that worked anymore because he-- she had to go to work. So I don't know.

Did this man work?

Yes, he worked. Yes.

So he wasn't home when you came home from school?

No, no, no. He had a very good job with some corporation. I don't know anymore what he did.

Speaking of when you came home from school, was anybody home when you came home from school?

Well, thereby hangs a tale, you see. He-- we-- when I came home from school, there was no one home because my mother and father both worked. And I was told that I began to get into the wrong company. How that manifested itself, I don't know. But I was told this.

And as a result, my parents decided to move from 140th Street to 157th Street, where they then took a six-room apartment. And they-- of those six rooms, they rented out three. And my mother stayed home to take care of the large apartment. And the idea of her being home was that she would be able to control my activities better, which we did within a year and a half or two years of-- because I remember, when I was bar mitzvah, we were already living Uptown.

Do you remember-- when you said you got into the wrong crowd, do you remember what this wrong crowd was?

No, no, I say, I don't know. But that's what I was told.

Were you unhappy about moving?

I don't think so. I don't remember, but I don't think so.

I'm just asking in terms of those friends.

No, I don't recall, no. In each of these instances, I had a-- well, in the second instance, I know that I had a bath right next to my room. I had a room, of course, of my own, which was just great. And I learned to be by myself. And I don't mind being by myself.

When you say a room of your own, in the first apartment, where were you living?

I don't remember. I don't remember. I sort of block it out. I may have only lived in the living room. But I just don't know.

Getting back to school just for a minute, when you first started school, you mentioned that you were with the refugee children mostly. Did you stay with them?

As opposed to?

As opposed to either the native Americans or the Irish and Italian foreigners.

I think we stayed among ourselves because we all had difficulty communicating. Our word-- our vocabulary was very limited. I remember, always, that when we learned the national anthem and came to the words at the beginning-- oh, say, can you see-- that I never-- I thought that, at one point, they were-- it was a takeoff on Oseh Shalom, a Hebrew phrase. And I never could understand why they were singing Hebrew, and why I did-- if they were singing Hebrew in America, why didn't I understand it? Because I had some knowledge of this.

What-- when you mentioned that you were together with the refugee children, did you communicate in German? Or did you communicate-- amongst each other?

I suppose, in German, I suppose.

What did you think of-- as you were growing up-- I don't mean at 10 now, but as you were in junior high school and entering high school, what did you think about your future in terms of what you would become?

We were-- well, I don't know. I think I've always wanted to become what I am now. But I think that we were all pushed enormously to succeed. And the drive was on for us to enter the special high school, like Townsend Harris and Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech, those type of things.

How did that drive to succeed-- how did that show itself? You say you were all pushed.

Oh, my parents were enormously interested and-- in terms of my education, and consulted with the teachers, and checked up on my work. And there was nothing haphazard. I was never left to myself. As a matter of fact, I was not a very good student at all. And it caused endless problems at home.

Why were you not a good student do you think?

I don't know. Well, I enjoy doing-- I enjoyed listening more to the radio and being outside, playing stickball with my friends. I became Americanized.

I was just going--

And I roller skated all over Washington Heights. So it was much more interesting, of course, than sitting and studying.

Did you have any idea what becoming Americanized meant at that time?

No.

I think that's--

No. But I think that I became adjusted to American values, that the hit parade, for example, American music, which was a big thing in my life every Saturday evening, or for example, American humor. For instance, my father and I differed enormously on just-- on listening to American humor and understanding American humor. Jack Benny, for example, was totally meaningless to him, whereas I thought he was the funniest man in the world. This-- these type of examples could be multiplied many times.

Did you-- you said that the push was on to become educated. Was the push also on to become Americanized within your family?

No, at least not that I remember. It was-- the push was on to become cultured. And we went to theater, we went to concerts. Even in those days, which was quite an achievement.

I was going to say. You had-- you remember having the money, that the money was not a factor in doing these.

Well, I'm sure it was a factor. And to this day, I sit in the last row of the balcony because I remember these things. But I

remember going to the movies and seeing American films-- and especially my mother and I. And later on, as I was already, of course, in high school, very frequently, my mother and I-- when my father was working, we would go to what one-- at that-- what were at that time better restaurants, just to see what life was like in the world. And this was very important.

When you were in high school, did you go to George Washington?

No, I went to Stuyvesant.

Stuyvesant. You met-- other than refugee boys--

Yes.

--did you notice a difference in terms of your being now with mostly Americans, as opposed to being mostly with refugees?

At that time, it didn't make so much of a difference anymore because the more-- you see, this whole refugee problem was superseded by the war. In other words, we were all part of the war effort, were immediately Americans, and not only that, but as the war progressed, and as we grew older, we became closer and closer to being drafted. So the whole picture changed. After a while, it might not have changed for my parents, but it did change for us.

When you say that the war superseded it, when you were in high school, I take it that was around war time.

Yes.

Did the American boys know you were of German Jewish descent?

Don't know whether that mattered because everything was superseded by the war, which was already in progress. And we became part of this whole process since we were getting closer and closer to being drafted. But at the same time, in terms of education, there was a factor that all of us were able to achieve something in terms of education, going to graduate school, and the professions, whereas anyone who was four or five years older immediately had to go to work upon coming here, and therefore, was never able to attain the status and this-- which was associated with education. And that's a key factor in terms of my generation.

You mentioned-- I guess we were talking about the need to go to work and that you went to work almost immediately after you came-- well, when did what kind of jobs did you get?

I got jobs of-- well, it depended. When I was in the neighborhood, my parents did not want me to go Downtown. I had the kind of a job that would give me-- in local factories. I would fill in, for example, hair shampoo. Or I would fill in soap powder into boxes. It was all done manually, of course, in those days. And I remember walking around with a mask over my face because otherwise, you would be sneezing constantly. It was a terrible job.

And I remember, also, that I was sent, after a while, Downtown. And I worked near Fulton Street as a soda jerk. And that was something that I did for, I think, several weeks. I also once worked in a hat factory, where I pressed the inside of the hat band into place on a press.

And when I recalled that I was quite young because-- and very naive because when everybody went out to celebrate the fact that it was payday, and they all went to-- asked me whether I would go with them to have a beer, I said, no, but whether they have a chocolate soda, so I would go along. And I think I was pretty-- that I was not being-- this was not a joke on my part. I was really being naive.

What did you do with the money that you made?

I really don't remember. I think I put it in the bank.

Your own bank account?

I suppose. But I don't recall.

Do you ever remember contributing at home?

No. No. I must have. But I mean, I'm not sure. I would-- I couldn't answer you.

But there was no-- OK. You also-- I wanted to pick up on something you said before about the draft. By this time, what were your feelings about what was going on in Europe?

Oh, I knew that exactly because I was following it in the newspapers. But at this time, of course, I knew how to speak and read English and then read the newspaper. And not always, of course.

When you weren't listening to the hit parade.

Yes, right. And of course, baseball became very important. I developed heroes in baseball, which has to be mentioned because Joe DiMaggio was my idol, as Jack Benny, and those people in other fields. So I developed war heroes too. And I was very much incensed about what was happening and began to take a greater interest all the time.

In addition to which, I had a marvelous teacher in high school, who brought history into focus and made it come alive for me. And as I-- I was very unhappy at Stuyvesant. But as I came more and more into contact with certain trends of thought, which I found that suited my person and my intellectual capacity more, I became happier studying and reading. It took me a long time, though.

Why did you say you were unhappy at Stuyvesant?

Because it was a school for science, which we didn't know, of course, at the time. You went to wherever it was special. Incidentally, I didn't go to Townsend Harris, where I was at once accepted-- at one time because it closed down, which is where I should have gone, which was a plain academic high school, whereas the emphasis was on science, which I couldn't care less. And I was very bad at it.

You also were talking about you developed American-type heroes.

Yes.

How did your father feel about the heroes that you were developing?

I think he was-- well, he probably felt it was quite healthy.

Did he have similar heroes that became important to him in the American--

In America? As far as I recall-- well, of course, first of all, my American heroes were balanced by pinup girls, which was just the right time for me age-wise, as well as part of the war effort. All of these things entered into. But I suppose my father appreciated that also. But your original question, whether he had heroes, I think that the only hero they had in those years was Roosevelt that I can recall.

OK. That brings up a whole different thing. But anyway, the reason I asked you that is just in terms of father-son bonds, whether that was-- your baseball heroes and Jack Benny-type heroes were a bond between you?

No, no. My father never understood baseball. He even went to a game once. But this was totally beyond him. And now, our bond was on different levels entirely.

Did you ever think of your parents as particularly old-fashioned or particularly European now that you were an American boy?

I don't think so. I got along very well with my parents. As a matter of fact, I recognized the fact that my friends would often come to them to get guidance or sympathy because their own parents were not able to give this to them. And I was pretty proud of them.

Did you feel that the other kids who were not of German Jewish background had a different kind of lifestyle, had a different kind of upbringing?

Absolutely. This was all--

In what way did that--

Well, it made itself felt in their-- in what they did. I mean, the fact that they went to the local bar to drink beer, which German Jewish kid went to a bar?

How do you spell bar?

Bar mitzvah is the only one that we know-- that they ate different foods, they talked of different things. They had also-- here's an interesting fact, that they were of large families. We all had very small families, which, of course, we didn't know why. But now, of course, in retrospect, we know why.

And speaking of my father-- and I think there's a point that has to be made, going back, somehow, in this. When we said before whether he Americanized, whether he was able to adjust-- not only was it difficult for him not to be the bread-earner at the beginning and let us say our mothers were the bread-earners, and they must have felt negative, or downbeat, or what have you until they did find something. And then, of course, it was not in their professions.

But all of these things, we understand. And my father started as a dishwasher, and then worked into a factory, and then finally became independent to Fuller Brush, which incidentally, would be the subject of a study for someone again, the German Jew in the Fuller Brush Company. But the point that I want to make is-- on other levels, also, they had a great deal of trouble.

For example, my father was not used to shaving himself in the morning. A man of his standing didn't do such a thing. He went to a barber. And he didn't shine his own shoes. He had this done by someone. So that, for example, at the very beginning, my father went every morning to have himself shaved in a barber shop, which in those years must have cost, I guess \$0.10 or \$0.15, which, in a sense, was, of course, a fortune. But he did it anyway. And it was probably something which took them a long time to get over.

Why do you think he continued to do that even though those \$0.10 or \$0.15 probably meant a lot, a lot more than the shave?

Well, he just didn't-- it was not part of his psyche to do this. He was of a certain level. And on those levels, you didn't do certain things. So it took them a while to adjust.

Do you think it also was-- just a comment-- you think it also was the one thing that-- or one of the things that would leave him a sense of what he was, as opposed to the job that-- the job?

Very possible, very possible.

It's just a--

Yeah, it's very possible. I wouldn't want to psychoanalyze it.

No.

I just-- I would say that, yes, to be treated by someone was very important. Also, of course, excuse me, if you want to go into the psychology of it somewhat deeper, the way one presents one's face to the public is very important. So to have it shaved by someone and to be placed into a perfect setting is probably very important. Don't forget, my father, in those years, was just above 40 years of age, which when I was 40, I probably had the same thing.

What about--

Of course, I have matured.

What about the feeling of standing among the refugees in the sense of was there a hierarchy built within the refugee community?

Well, I would say so. But it was not based on what you were now, but what you were then. And I think that shifted only after many years. And my father always was a person of respect. Regardless, we, of course, looked up to others who had made some kind of adjustment. But position-wise-- but I think when the friends got together or the local community people-- I don't think that was a factor.

I just want to go back a second. You talked about restrictions on you, or at least I interpreted restrictions on you as opposed to some of the other kids that you were finding in Stuyvesant. Did you feel restricted at the time compared to these boys that you were seeing from large families, who were going to bars?

Oh, yes. I was restricted not so much in terms of these-- well, I was restricted in terms of time because I had to study. And I had to sit. And I had to be home. And my parents always wanted to know where I was, and even if it was only being downstairs and playing in the streets. It could be done only at certain, specified times. My parents were very much in control. Very different. So in retrospect, I suppose I resented it. But again, in retrospect, I don't think it hurt me.

No. And again-- well, OK. When did you-- while you were in high school, did you formulate any ideas of what you wanted to become?

Yes. I never had any doubts.

Never meaning from when?

I don't recall. I always wanted to become either a teacher of some sort-- and I always wanted-- I always liked being Jewish. So the obvious combination of the two, the rabbiner. Whether I would have-- it's possible that I might have become a college teacher, a college professor, or whatever. That's very possible. But just-- it never entered into my mind.

What brought the rabbinate into focus?

I don't know. As a matter of fact, my father, at one time, toyed with the idea of becoming a rabbi. But then he couldn't continue because-- or even begin his formal studies because the First World War intervened. And he had to take over his father's business. And then he went into the army and so on.

But there was only one other rabbi in our family, whom I didn't know, the father of our sponsor. I didn't know him. But Judaism was always a very pleasant kind of an experience. And I felt at home in the synagogue. And I-- it was a worthy thing.

And I felt that I could be happy that-- and I don't think I might have-- now, I don't know this for sure. But I don't know if I could have ever have become a rabbi in Germany. Because my life's road would have been very much set for me. But in America, it's just the right combination. And I found out what it meant to be a liberal Jew.

I was going to ask you. Were you from an Orthodox home?

Well, my father comes from an Orthodox home, but we were mostly, as you would say, Conservative. And I, of course, chose Reform.

Did you join a congregation when you came to New York?

Yes, we-- join is a loose word because we didn't have the money. We associated ourselves with a congregation on 149th Street. And we were there for one or two years. But then we came to Washington Heights and joined the Hebrew Tabernacle for my bar mitzvah. And we've been associated with the congregation ever since.

When you say you found out what it meant to be a liberal Jew, where did you find out what that meant?

I can tell you this. It was probably reading, and discussing, and hearing, and attending services. The synagogue played a very important part for us kids because it became a social center. And oh, there were-- for many, many years, I would go to synagogue every single Friday night with my parents. And so did every other kid in the block. But of course, after that, we left our parents. And we went to-- by ourselves.

Where did you go, [? Silver Palm? ?]

No, I--

It's not a question.

I went before that. I antedate that. We all went to [? Nibby's. ?]

Where?

[? Nibby's. ?] That was a candy store, 160th Street and Broadway.

OK. But then, in other words, the Tabernacle did become a center of social activity for you.

Absolutely.

How about for your parents?

Yes. More and more of their friends became-- were part of the synagogue, yes. And my father became active here at one time, at the time of his illness, which lasted for a long time. But he was a vice president of congregation, so a member of the board for many years.

Did you ever feel in any way that you would rather be among the kids that you were going to school with, rather than among the kids that you were finding in your own neighborhood? Was that a conflict for you to go to school outside of your own neighborhood?

No, it only meant that I had to travel an hour by subway.

Well, I wasn't referring to the traveling as much--

No, no, no. I had little contact with these kids. I was-- I told you, I was very unhappy at Stuyvesant. So I just as soon went away and came back home. No.

Just getting back to the rabbinate for a minute, by the time you graduated from high school, had you already decided to become a rabbi?



Oh, absolutely. Do you think your experiences had-- in emigrating had anything to do with your decision?

Subconsciously, I'm sure. But I could not put my finger on it anymore.

Were your parents happy with the idea that you were going to?

Extremely.

What was it about Judaism and the rabbinate that-- it must have interested you a great deal, more so than just plain history, to become a college professor. I mean, it's history in a specific vein.

Well, I mean, my whole background, the fact that it was a responsible and a respected position, that it was something that was attainable to me. And I also was inspired, of course, by some of the rabbis that I came to know.

At the Tabernacle?

At the Tabernacle and outside, but especially at the Tabernacle, where I had contact.

You also were talking about this drive to succeed before. Could you elaborate a little bit on what you meant by succeed? What did success mean?

For myself or for my parents?

Both. Each.

Well, of course, for my parents, it meant stability. At that time, they had begun to let go of the large apartment and move to a smaller apartment. And certainly, we must get back to this roomer thing. So they were wanting to expand. My mother, of course, was not working anymore. But then she started again working part time. They wanted to get some money in the bank.

It became a matter of where would one go for vacation. The idea of going to the mountains, to the Catskills, was-- became an accepted thing. But my parents always had their sights set slightly "higher," in quotation marks, which meant New Hampshire, Bethlehem, or the Poconos, which, of course, to go two weeks to there was the height of achievement. And this was a very important factor in my life. I remember this very much, very well.

The fact that vacation became--

The fact that these things were important and that I was-- incidentally, I went along several times. Of course, I worked during the summers also.

You mentioned that's what success meant to them and stability.

Well, I sort of think it meant that to them, that they could come from zero to the point where they could afford to go for two weeks to the Poconos in a fine hotel indicated to them that they had achieved something. I think that was important.

And what did success mean to you?

Well, finishing the next term in school, really.

OK, short-term. But what about long-term?

Yeah, very short-term, no, no, not very long-term, especially not at the beginning. Later on-- because don't forget, you're talking of high school days, which is quite different from post-high school. Because what everything with me ended with high school because of the army. And everything thereafter is already a different road.

But at the beginning, any time after 1942, as I turned to about 15, I knew that 17-18, if the war was still on, that would-- there's no reason why I should feel that I would not be drafted. Because I was a healthy guy.

Were you drafted?

Certainly.

How did you feel about the draft?

Well, I was very unhappy with it. But I was-- it wasn't that bad anymore. The war with Germany was over in May, 12, I think. My 18th birthday was the beginning of May so that there was only Japan still left. And so when I went into this-- when I was drafted, I knew that I would probably be sent to Japan, which didn't thrill me because it's no place for a Jewish boy.

Would you prefer to go to Germany?

Oh, yes. I would have much preferred because I had something against the Germans. Whereas the Japanese were unknown, silly kind of people to me.

At the time, you said you had something against the Germans. How did you feel about the Germans? At that time.

I don't understand that question. I was a gung ho American boy, in addition to the fact of being Jewish. So I would gladly have participated in the war.

My-- did you understand about-- did you know about the concentration camps and so on?

Well, I don't know when this came into focus. I don't know. I know that my parents were very-- of course, I knew that my family was not there. I knew that one of my cousins had gone to England.

I knew, generally, what had happened to the families. And I know that my father suffered enormously about the separation of families. Now, whether this had anything-- not his parents. They had died peacefully. But-- and those-- so I knew that something, I don't know exactly how.

Was there a discussion? It sounds like you discussed a lot at home. But was there ever a discussion on the difference between 1938, let's say, and 1941 or '42? I mean, the fact that you left in 1938, and had that not been possible?

What would have happened to us, you mean?

Yeah.

I suppose, I don't recall two compensations.

OK. I don't either, I just was wondering.

Yeah, I mean, it's possible. Sure, it's possible.

You talked about getting back to roomers. You said that you lived in a six-room apartment. And your mother stopped working specifically to keep her eye on you.

On me, right, right, right. But more than--

Assume that was necessary.

I suppose, because of this bad company that I was told I was in contact with. But in order, then, to make up for the fact that she was no longer working, we took this apartment of six rooms. And we took in three families. Now, these were found-- that is not with children, but I think that there were always two families-- a husband and wife and a single person. I don't remember exactly. It could have been three couples also.

But imagine, now, with us, then, it was four families using one icebox, one kitchen. And just to keep some sort of peace in the family, it was very hard. And I think that looking back at the personality conflicts and what went on, I think my-- not so much my father, probably, but my mother must have been an absolute saint in those years to be able to deal with these people. And I know that we attained some measure of friendship with all of these people-- all of them, some of whom we knew beforehand already. So they came from the same neighborhoods, but not all.

How did you make these arrangements with four families using one bathroom and one kitchen?

I don't know.

You don't remember any?

No.

How about a young kid likes to go into the kitchen at night and--

Was not-- those things did not exist in those years, certainly not as far as I was concerned. I don't remember. I think this was strictly off. First of all, there wasn't that much to eat. Then probably not knowing which is ours, I was probably told, stay out. And I did. But I remember, at one time, one of the roomers threw down a whole set of my mother's good dishes. And I remember what consternation that caused. That was a disaster, absolutely disaster. There were a lot of tears in those days.

Tears is a good word. Why do you use tears?

As opposed to what?

As opposed to unhappiness, as opposed to--

Because tears is literal. There were a lot of tears. I remember it very distinctly and on many levels-- tears on a personal basis, tears for what had happened, tears for this kind of accident, material thing. But a lot of tears were shed.

Tears for change in lifestyle?

For whatever, yes. Yeah. And I think that, all in all, my parents and some of their friends were able to adjust pretty well, especially when I see how badly others did.

But that's a lot. OK. Were you seeing that at the time? Or this is an observation post?

Well, I don't know.

I mean, among your friends' parents. Did you feel your parents adjusted better?

Oh, there's no question about it. Yes. Some of my friends had violent disagreements with their parents over the process of Americanization-- like choice of profession, staying out, or going out with girls, spending money. This was a big thing. Because there was none, certainly at the beginning-- freedom to go Downtown.

Were you given this freedom?

I had a lot of freedom, yes. Yes.

How about money?

I had to earn my money. And I think that I was able pretty much to do with it as I wished.

Do you think today-- I mean, a lot of time has gone by. Do you think the idea of [? Spahn ?] and that money was very important has affected your life?

Absolutely.

In what way?

I beg your pardon?

Hold on.

Of course, I think it's very important that one saves, that one is conscious of the spending of money. But of course, I today turned it all around. But that is a different story.

In what way did you turn it around?

Well, because today, I'm no longer as interested in these things because I know that life is a fleeting kind of thing. And that by virtue of what we've experienced, I would like to-- I've become more hedonistic, certainly, than my parents. But I-- today, I'm in a situation where I can always make a living. And they were not.

You also mentioned-- before we got on to that--

There was a-- [AUDIO OUT]

--comes back to what you wanted to ask me. In terms of the work of our parents in saving, there was a frustration built into our situation, too, as kids. Because even if we-- I would deliver a newspaper once or something like that-- that I could not really help my parents. And that was really a part of our problem of growing up. And it was all about. Whereas somebody who came who was five years older went to work could at least give their parents \$10 a week. Where did we get this kind of money from?

Did you feel a sense of responsibility in that context?

Yes. I don't know anymore whether I-- how it manifested itself. But in retrospect, I certainly think so. I don't know what I did about it, frankly. I'm sure that I gave my parents a hard time as any normal teenager would. But I-- deep down, I think so, yes.

How do you feel-- that's what I was going to ask before. A lot of Americans believe in buy now, pay later, which is very different from a German concept. Have you Americanized in that sense? Can you accept that philosophy?

Oh, yes. I can accept it. I don't really-- I mean, I do it too. We have charge accounts. And I have charge accounts. Of course, I do. But not maybe-- but yes, let's say that I approve of it. And I do it within certain limitations that I can know that I can meet my obligations. Whereas I know that the general thing is just to go spend and the hell with it.

OK. I was just-- [AUDIO OUT]

Start there. While you were in high school and then in college, you were dating a lot of girls. Did you date American girls as well as German Jews?

Never.

Come on.

Never. I didn't-- no, no. Not-- I am here, well, I am serious. Yes.

Why not?

I wouldn't know where would I meet an American girl.

Not in Stuyvesant, but you had friends in Stuyvesant when you went to college.

No. Never.

Why not?

Well, excuse me. Yes. What do you mean American?

American-born.

American-born? Never. Wait, maybe one. No, it's not true. It's not true. Now that I think of it, there could have been two, three, yes, two or three. That's all. Most of the kids that I associated with were German-born of my generation, of my age group. And they were all part of the neighborhood or the Tabernacle.

Now, when you went to college--

Yes.

--did you break away from that at all?

No, did not. No. I-- those are the girls that I'm talking about, that there-- I might have met. One, I think of that lived on 110th Street, one that lived in my neighborhood who was East European, which incidentally was an interesting situation.

She was from Eastern Europe or she was--

Eastern European family.

OK. But she was born here?

Born in America, born here.

All right. That's what I'm referring to.

Yes.

But I don't-- offhand, I cannot think of many more.

Why did you call it an interesting situation?

Well, because the conflict between Eastern and Western Europe of the parent was handed down to the children.

Were you aware of it?

Certainly.

What did you think?

I was aghast.

At?

At my parents' attitude. And not only that, but to get into a different thing, I dated also some years later a Chinese-- a Eurasian girl, a Eurasian girl, a non-Jewish-- half-Jewish, whom I liked very much. And I once tried to date a Black girl, who was part of my school. So that we have many friends, these things would have been--

Go ahead.

Yeah, these things would have been impossible in Europe. But here, they were possible.