

--10 seconds for all the equipment, but we are recording now. I'll let you know when we can start.

OK, anytime.

Today is Monday, June 13, 1994. I'm Judith Antelman with the Holocaust Oral History Project in San Francisco, and I'm interviewing Helene Steinlauf. And producing is John Grant. Helene, can you tell us where and when you were born?

I was born in Antwerp, Belgium on December 6, 1942.

And what is your full name, if it's been changed?

My full name is Helene Chaya Steinlauf.

And what are your parents' names?

My mother's name is Rachel Steinlauf. My father is Jacob.

And if you have any siblings, what are their names?

I have a sister. Her name is Ann Steinlauf.

OK, I'd like to start with a few questions about your childhood-- what your family life was like, school, friends, what Antwerp was like, if you were brought up religiously. We can start off by talking about the school that you went to, if it was a religious school, or was it a mixed?

I went to Tachkemoni, which was a Jewish school in Antwerp. And we had both Hebrew subjects and regular subjects. And it was a school that started from kindergarten and went through 12th grade. And I went there from kindergarten. I started when I was five years old, and I went there till I was 12, at which point we came to the United States.

And what was your neighborhood, what was Antwerp like, or the neighborhood in Antwerp? Was it mostly a Jewish neighborhood, or was it a mixed neighborhood? And did you have a lot of friends in the neighborhood?

It was-- well, where we lived, it was predominantly non-Jewish. And I think the kids who went to the Jewish school where I went lived all over Antwerp. So although there was a Jewish neighborhood, but I think the Jewish neighborhood was predominantly very orthodox. And they lived closer together. But the Jews who were less religious lived all over Antwerp.

And what was your family, your home life like? Were you brought up religiously? Did you go to Hebrew school? Did your family celebrate the Jewish holidays?

My parents-- well, we weren't religious, although I think my parents were brought up religious. I think their parents were religious. But no, we weren't very religious, although we went to temple during the holidays, you know, New Years and Yom Kippur. And we celebrated Passover. And Shabbat was-- my father would occasionally go to temple on Shabbat morning, and he would come home. And my mother didn't go, but she would prepare some food.

Usually, she would call [INAUDIBLE]. And it was usually chopped eggs and onions. And we'd have some challah. And so Shabbat was a little bit more special because of that. But we didn't eat kosher food at home, particularly. But we never ate pork, but it wasn't very strict, as far as mixing meat and milk. But I don't remember ever really having milk with meat meals. So it wasn't real orthodox.

And then I went to a Jewish school. So at the school, I learned Hebrew right away, in kindergarten. In first grade, we would have Jewish lessons the first two hours, usually. From 8 to 10 was Jewish studies, which included Hebrew and

Bible study and Israeli geography. Some Israelis, but not-- it wasn't religious.

None of it was religious. We didn't learn Jewish religion. But we did get a lot of Jewish background. And I got my Jewish-- I started learning about Jewish religion when I joined a religious organization called Bnei Akiva, which was an Orthodox Labor Zionist movement. And I was 10 years old. And I spent a lot of time there. Usually, it was Friday night, Saturday afternoon, Saturday evenings, always Sundays. I spent a lot of time there from age 10 till we left, when I was 12.

So you started school when you were five or six?

Five.

Five.

Right.

That was '47, then.

Right. Yeah, that was '47.

So obviously, those first two years, what do you remember between '42 and '47 in regards to the war? And what was your family like? Did anything happen to your family in [INAUDIBLE]? What was happening in Antwerp?

Well, in '42, I was too young to really remember. So what I remember is more when my parents told me. And well, I know from history that Belgium was invaded by the Germans in early '42. And I'm not even sure that-- and I was going to research it, and I didn't get around to doing it.

But by December '42, when I was born, my mother was living in a house. And I guess Jews were not allowed at that point any-- or it wasn't safe anymore to go to hospitals. So I was born in the house where my mother was living. And she was renting, I believe. I'm not really clear.

And my father, for some reason, was not there. He had left and gone to Switzerland prior to this time, sometime. And I don't know exactly why he left. I think that maybe he went to see-- he went to Switzerland to see what the conditions were. And maybe it was too difficult for my mother to travel because she was pregnant. I don't know exactly. But I know that I was born in this house, and that the landlady was my mother's midwife, that she helped my mother.

And the landlady had two sons who were maybe teenagers. They were maybe 13, 14, something like that. And they were very excited that I was being born on December 6, because December 6 was called Saint Nicholas Day, which is equivalent to Christmas here, Saint Nicholas being Santa Claus.

But then from what I gather from things my parents would say, a few months or soon after I was born, and I think maybe a few months after that, my landlady told my mom that there was a rumor that the Gestapo was coming to the neighborhood to search the houses, and that it would no longer be safe for her to stay there.

And so I think there was a lot of question in my parents' talking later whether the Gestapo, in fact, did come, or if my landlady was starting to feel uncomfortable and wanted us to leave. And so my mother left with me. And the stories I heard were that she-- well, eventually she ended up in Switzerland. And I never have been clear what route she took getting to Switzerland, but I would hear stories about that she was walking. Could you stop the camera?

OK. Well, as I was saying, my mom then left. And she would talk about how she was walking in the city, and didn't know what to do or where to go. And she got to a bridge, and there was a river. And she would talk about how she thought about jumping in the river because she just didn't know what to do. But a man came up to her, and it turned out to be a priest. And she told him what was going on, and he took her to a cloister.

And so we stayed there. And she wore a nun's outfit, and the nuns took us in and took care of us for a while. And I was baptized there, too. And so I've always been grateful to the Catholics for that, for doing that. And I always joked that if-- I could always boast of being Catholic. If I had to go to heaven, I could say, well, I'm Catholic, too, you know?

And I don't know how long we stayed there, and I don't know why, at some point, we had to leave, if it was unsafe or why. But at some point, we had to leave. And then the next story that I always hear is that my mother and I were in a Belgian prison. And not as prisoners, but hiding. And the prison guards would help my mother. And they would help her with my diapers, and washing them and drying them. And we stayed there a while, too. And I don't know how long.

And then I guess my mother's plan was to get to Switzerland. And so when she got to the border, she gave me sleeping pills so I wouldn't wake up and cry. And then she crossed the border. And I don't have details, unfortunately, on any of this. And I wish I did.

And it took a long time for me to wake up. And she was very concerned that it took me so long. And she was worried she had given me too many sleeping pills. But it all worked out, you know. And so we got to Switzerland, and somehow, she met up with my father. And we stayed in a Swiss farm with Swiss farmers.

And I have pictures in Switzerland of me and my parents. And they're all in different cities, all over Switzerland. And I have sort of traced the route. And I should have brought that information. I didn't do it. But anyway, they did finally end up on this farm, and with these farmers who were about my parents' age. And they also had their first child, who was my age.

And they were prejudiced against Jews. They took my parents in, and my parents worked on the farm. But after the war and later, when Israel was established and became a state, they wrote to my parents a letter, and said how much respect they now have for Jews because they have their own country. And they eventually had seven children. And there was some correspondence for a while. But then when my parents came to the United States, I guess they stopped writing. And you know how it is, you lose contact.

And I've often wanted to go back and visit these people, you know? But I don't really know how to find them exactly. So that's basically my story.

After the war, my parents went back to Belgium, to Antwerp.

In '45?

In '45. And they went back to the house where I was born, the landlady. And because my parents had to leave everything, because my mother, when she left, she was on foot, and so they had furniture and things. But the landlady said that they didn't have any of these things anymore, that the Gestapo had taken everything or they had to sell things to pay for the cost of-- they couldn't keep these things.

So there was nothing left. And my parents were very upset because there were a lot of valuable things. And I think that they were justified, or the cost wasn't such that-- I mean, my parents had paid them or something, you know, but there was nothing left. So there was a lot of bitterness on my parents' side about these things.

So after that, my parents decided they didn't want to stay in Europe, and they started to get papers to leave. And a lot of Jews left. Well, I can't talk for a lot of Jews, but all of my parents' family left Antwerp. None of them wanted to stay in Europe.

And some went to Israel, some went to-- one aunt went to Argentina. She and her husband ended up there. And one aunt went to Canada. One went to New York. And my parents started to get-- it took a long time to get papers and to find sponsors to come to the United States. So they did get sponsored to come to San Francisco.

And it took about five years. So I don't know if they started, but we didn't leave Belgium till 1955. So maybe it took them a few years until they decided what to do. And so in 1955, we left and came to San Francisco. And we came by

boat to New York. And then we stopped and visited relatives. And my parents thought maybe they would stay in New York, because we did have a lot of relatives. But after being in New York for a few days, they decided they really didn't like it at all. So we took a train and came to San Francisco.

I'd like to ask you, back in 1945 when the war ended-- so you were three-- I guess your first real clear memories about being in Europe, being in Belgium, how old were you?

I guess it must have been in kindergarten. I don't remember anything, really, in Switzerland. I have a vague memory of-- well, these farmers had a cattle-- it was a dairy or a cattle ranch, and I have a memory of watching a calf being born. But I don't know how old I was. Probably two. Oh, and I did learn Swiss German while I was there. My parents said that my first language, that I did speak Swiss German, although my parents spoke Yiddish at home. We spoke Yiddish.

But when we came back to Belgium, I remember going to kindergarten at Tachkemoni. And it was a Jewish school, so they were all Jewish children. And I remember all the grades, going up through the grades. But nobody ever talked about the Holocaust. There was no discussion about that. And all these children had to have lived through it, one way or another.

And it's not until recently that I actually thought, wondered how they lived, what their life was like and what their experience was. And nobody ever talked about it, not kids between each other, or nor did the teachers talk about it. The non-Jewish teachers never talked about it, or the Jewish teachers. It was never addressed in any form or shape.

And of course, now, I understand that it takes many years before you can talk about-- I mean, and I just recently met a German woman who is my age, and was born in Germany and raised in Germany. And she said that when she was 15, so she was probably in 10th grade, they started addressing the Holocaust in the schools. So I think maybe then they might have, in my school, started talking about. But when I left at 12, nobody talked about it, you know? So and my parents only talked about it in reference to what happened to them and, you know, the incidents that happened. But never the feelings that they had.

Did they ever tell you any more detail about what happened about either their journeys to Switzerland or living on the farm or coming back to Antwerp? Or did they speak about Liberation Day?

No, no, they never talked about it. They never talked about those things. Or if they did, I don't remember. I do remember my father talking about his journey to Switzerland a bit. And I guess he went with a group of men. And again, I don't know exactly where, but that they came to a place, and they didn't know if they should-- which road to take, if they should go right or left, and that it was a mountain.

And so the group divided up in two, and one group went one way, and the other group went the other way. And that after they separated, my father went to the right. And the other group, they heard gunshots. And they never saw those men again. And so he felt very lucky that they did get to Switzerland. This group did make it to Switzerland.

Also, when he got to Switzerland, the men came to a place where they-- they called it a work camp. And I don't know very much about it, but I guess they had places where Jews would come in and work in Switzerland. And that's where he was until he met with my mom.

Have they ever told you any more stories about that, about their time in Switzerland [INAUDIBLE] like recently or years later?

Yeah, no, not a lot, just sort of the things that I heard. And later, when I would ask questions, they wouldn't talk about it. And so I don't know very much about it. I do know that both my parents had large families. And they all survived, except for my mother-- my mother, there were seven children in the family. There were six girls and one boy. And the boy did disappear, and nobody knows about his whereabouts. So there is always a lot of sadness about him because he was the baby in the family, too.

And my father, there were four children, and only two survived of the four. So two brothers did disappear or die. And I

don't know very much about them. I brought a picture of my mother's brother, which is-- I'd like to put this on video.

We have to do the interview [BOTH TALKING].

Oh, all right. And the other thing I have of the time in Switzerland is this thing.

--close up--

Do this later? OK. Well, it's a little pendant. Anyway, I'll read it later if you want. OK.

So I know you were so young. You were three. But do you remember anything of your journey back from Switzerland to Antwerp?

I have no memory of that. I just really don't.

How did you feel when you started kindergarten? You were five. Was there any post-war talk with you? While you were going through school, was anything brought up about World War II?

Absolutely not. Nothing at all. I have no memory of that at all. Nothing. Until I joined the Bnei Akiva, which was the Labor Zionist movement, there was a lot of-- and I was probably 10, maybe towards the end of being nine. But I think I was about 10. And there was a lot of talk about Israel and why was it important to have a country because of the war and what happened. And that it's important to have our own country and a home.

It's not until then that I really started understanding what had happened, that there was a war and that it was a horrible thing. And I started hearing about the camps. And that's what I also started experiencing anti-Semitism, when I started to get a little older. And I don't know if you want me to talk about that.

Yes. yes. If you can tell me your experiences in the group and discuss your experiences with anti-Semitism. What was that like?

Well, the house we lived in-- the first house I remember living in when we came back from Switzerland, it was an apartment house. And we lived on the second floor. And below us lived the owners of the house. And they were not Jewish. They had a lot of children. And there was also a store. They had a store, like a little grocery mom-and-pop kind of store.

They were pretty nice to us, but I guess my parents had a lot-- there was always talk at home about who was Jewish and who wasn't Jewish, and they're goys and we don't want to talk to them too much. And you got to be careful about what you say. A lot of distance, a lot of fear, and a lot of-- so I very early learned that there were people you didn't talk to, and there were people that were OK.

In fact, we spoke Yiddish at home. So that was really the only language I knew. And when we went out in public, especially on street cars, my parents would tell me not to talk to them because they didn't want anyone to know we were Jewish. And because I could only speak Jewish, they didn't want me to talk.

Well, anyway, so I remember some incidents on the street where people would walk by and look at us and call us dirty Jews and spit at us. I don't know how they knew we were Jewish. I mean, I look a little bit Jewish, but. Anyway, they knew that.

I remember later an incident when I was a little older, walking with my friends on the street, and some non-Jews walking by and telling us to get off the street, that they wanted to walk by and we had to get off the sidewalk. So there were some incidents like that on the street.

But anyway, I was getting back to where we were living, the house we were living. There was another apartment above us. I guess the people who lived there moved and then new tenants moved in. And they were very anti-Semitic. And

they really didn't like us at all. And it got very uncomfortable to live there. My parents didn't move, but there were a couple of incidents when my mother opened the window and the woman upstairs threw hot milk down on her.

And then we had coal cellars. Because the heating was with coal, we had a coal stove. So you had to go downstairs to get coal and bring it up in buckets. And one time, coming up, this other woman threatened my mom. So we had to move. It just got too uncomfortable. I think that they put pressure on the landlady to get us to move, too. So we did move.

And there definitely was-- I felt a lot of separateness between us and even the children, the landlady's children. There was separation and fear, which is kind of surprising after the war and all that stuff. But it was there. And I think these things were the things that made my parents decide to move. So anyway. I just thought that--

I'm wondering during this time that you were experiencing anti-Semitism on the streets, what was it like in school? Did you feel any of that there?

No. Not at all, because everybody was Jewish, and the teachers were Jewish. However, the secular studies, the non-Jewish studies, the teachers were non-Jewish teachers. And I personally remember clearly because they were not Jewish, I felt not quite as comfortable with them because of the way my parents brought me up. And the principal was not Jewish also.

So I always felt a little uncomfortable with these non-Jewish teachers, not that they gave ever any indication of being anti-Semitic or anything like that. But I think I always felt that they were a little bit. And I don't know if they were, in fact, or not. So that's my experience at school.

And can you talk more about the Zionist group that you were in?

Bnei Akiva? Labor Zionist--

You said that's where you first started talking about the Holocaust a little or Israel.

Right.

So that was a social--

It was a social group. Yeah, it was a social group. We had uniforms. We had a uniform and a bandana. We learned a lot of Hebrew songs, a lot of Zionist songs, so we did a lot of singing. And we learned the hora and Israeli dances, and we did a lot of dancing. And we played a lot of games, the kind of games a 10-year-old would like-- dividing up in two teams and having questions, and a lot of competition like that.

And there was a lot of storytelling, mostly kind of-- oh, what kind of stories? Jewish stories, [YIDDISH] type of stories about Poland and maybe life in shtetl, and humorous little anecdotal kind of stories. And then we went on hikes on Sundays.

And this was a religious organization, so we weren't allowed to turn on lights or use electricity or take streetcars or things like that. And so that's where I learned about being kosher. And then on Sundays we would take hikes. We would go hiking in parks. In the summer, we would go camping.

And so there was a lot of fun. But there was also a lot of education. And a lot of the education was about labor, about the importance of physical work, which was the whole idea about the kibbutz and about the importance of building up Israel and having a homeland, and that kind of stuff. And so I became very, very, very zionistic. Yeah, that's the word. Zionistic, yeah. And that's all I wanted to do, is go to Israel at that point on.

In fact, when my parents decided to come to the United States, I really felt embarrassed a little bit that we were coming to the United States and not going to Israel, because America had kind of a reputation for being very materialistic--

Hollywood and easy life. So there was some embarrassment, because when people did leave, most people went to Israel and not to the United States.

In the Zionist group, did you have any discussions about the war, about the Holocaust? Did anybody share their experiences or were there questions?

No, there was never any specific talk about that. It just wasn't. There was general talk about how would it-- like I said, I know that there was-- I do remember one girl. And she was a little bit older than me. Maybe she was 14 or something, 14 or 15. And she was very beautiful, but I also remember she was very sad, kind of a very solemnness about her, a very sad look about her, very skinny or something. Maybe a little bit unhealthy.

And I remember at camp one night she sang a song. And, god, we just all started to cry. It just so heartrending. Yeah, she did. She sang-- sorry. [SNIFFLES] I remember the song she sang was in Yiddish. It was so sad. Everybody was crying.

Later, I found out that she was maybe in a concentration camp or something, and that she had lost her parents, and that it was very sad for her, that she had a very sad story. But I don't think at that point I really knew what a concentration camp was, or really exactly. I think I was maybe too young to really understand. I think maybe that was the first time I really had an experience like that on a feeling level, that I got in touch with the sadness, the real sadness and horribleness of the war, although there was discussion about it on a more theoretical or intellectual level.

Were there any other experiences in that group that you want to talk about?

I don't really think there was too much in regards to the Holocaust. All the kids were very healthy, were all pretty normal kids, I think. I don't know. We just didn't deal with it or talk about it.

If I may, can I ask you what the song was about?

I think the song was [SPEAKING YIDDISH]. It's an old Yiddish song. And it's about-- well, the translation exactly, I don't-- somewhere burns a fire, and the rabbi sits around with his students, teaching them the alphabet. But it's a very solemn, kind of sad song. I think that's the song. I don't remember exactly, but I know it was a Yiddish song. It was a very sad one.

Was your sister born yet? Because she was-- when was your sister born?

My sister was born after the war. She was born in 1946 in Antwerp. And she started going to the same school, but she was transferred to another school, to a non-Jewish school. So her upbringing really was very different from mine. She didn't have the experiences I had. And she never really got involved in the Zionist movement. Nor did she get a Jewish education. So she really had a different experience than me.

Was there a specific reason why she went to a non-Jewish school?

I'll explain it. Well, Belgium speaks French and Flemish. Antwerp was predominantly a Flemish-speaking city, but the school that I went to-- and I think the Jews liked French better, so it was the more favored language. But I think the school had to have a certain number of people in the Flemish classes. They had to have a quota.

And I was put in a Flemish class, so all my studies were in Flemish. And then we had French as an elective, the Flemish classes. And then the French classes had Flemish as an elective. But the language in the school that was spoken amongst the students-- this school-- was French. So I spoke French more than Flemish, although I learned Flemish really well.

But when my sister started to go to school, my parents wanted her to be in the French classes. And the logic of the school administration was that because I was already-- her sister was in a Flemish class, they wanted to put my sister in a Flemish class. My parents became very unhappy about it, took her out, and put her in a school that was predominantly French. [LAUGHS] So that was the story.

And the Flemish classes in my school were a lot smaller than the French classes. But anyway, I did end up learning to speak French because everybody spoke French. And French was spoken in the Zionist movement, so I did get to learn French, too.

How long were you in the Zionist group? How many years were you in it?

I was there from when I was 10 till I left, which was-- well, I was almost 13. I was 12, almost 13. And I was in it for that whole period of time.

Were you bat mitzvahed?

No, I wasn't bat mitzvahed. Nobody was. Well, I mean, at that time. And in Europe, girls didn't do that.

Were there any discussions at home regarding leaving Belgium and going to America or Israel? Or were your parents set on going to America?

Early on, I think there was discussion about going to Israel, because all my four grandparents were in Israel. All four of my grandparents were in Israel, and two of my mother's sisters and one of my father's sisters. So I think there was a lot of discussion about going to Israel.

And I think what I seem to remember hearing was that life in Israel was very difficult, that people worked very hard. And we were always sending little packages to my grandparents, oranges and food, coffee. That's what I remember my parents always doing, is making up little packages. And I know really well how to make packages, because I learned early how to make packages.

So I think my parents decided at some point that-- and they'd heard America was-- there were a lot of jobs. Life was easier. And California, my gosh, that was like the ultimate decadence. And San Francisco. The streets in America were lined with gold. Literally, in California, of course, there was gold all over the place. So when my parents got sponsors here, this is where they decided to come. So there didn't seem to be a lot of question about that, about coming here.

Were there any discussions within your extended family regarding the Holocaust or the war, or any of their experiences? I know you mentioned there really wasn't much talk at home.

I don't remember. I think the whole family, after the war, was scattered already. I think my grandparents must have been in Antwerp briefly because I have pictures of them and me in Antwerp. But I don't remember. Well, no that's not true. I remember visiting my father's grandparents a couple of times. But, no, there was no discussion. And if there was, I didn't hear about it.

One of my mother's sisters was living in Antwerp also. She was married and had two children. But I didn't hear much talk about the war. I can't remember. I'm not sure who left first, but this other sister, aunt of mine, left for Canada. So there must have been discussion about leaving, and where to go, and what to do. But clearly they didn't want to stay in Europe.

What were your thoughts as a 10, 11, 12-year-old girl, your thoughts in regard to some of the talk you might have heard about the war? I know you mentioned this girl in camp. Your personal feelings about what was going on and about the move, both of your parents' move to America? Did you have any rebellious feelings, that you were going to go to Israel alone?

[LAUGHS] I think I did. I think I did have that. I don't think, at that time in my life, I thought I had much choice about-- and I don't think I was the kind of child to be rebellious, or to make a decision for myself and say, I'm not going to go to America. I'm going to go to Israel. I think I was a very typical obedient kind of child. But I think I remember wishing that they were going to Israel.



But as far as leaving Belgium, I remember being very happy that we were leaving. I didn't want to stay there. I felt very claustrophobic. I didn't feel happy in my life. I didn't feel happy at school. I didn't even feel happy in the Zionist movement, in the group that I was in, although I liked it a lot and I really enjoyed going there. I wasn't happy.

I was excited about leaving. I was excited about the change, about going to a new place, about escaping. It felt like just getting away from this place. I hated being there. I had to walk to school. I had to walk a long ways from my house to school, and I hated the walk. So I was very happy about leaving. I was very, very happy to leave.

And you were 13?

I was 13 when we came here to San Francisco.

Can you describe those last months leading up to the move? Did your parents-- I guess there was a waiting process for the papers. Did they discuss it with you, that they were waiting for the papers? Or was there a lot of discussion at the time?

There was discussion, because we had to go downtown to some official building, government building, and take a lot of pictures for our passports, and fingerprints, and a lot of paperwork. There was a lot of paperwork. So there were a lot of trips to this office building. And there was also packing, a lot of packing of things. We didn't take a lot, but we did take some things. So I do remember that.

Those last few days, how were you feeling?

It was pretty exciting. I was pretty excited. I mean, I don't know. I think maybe it was just a typical kid's reaction to going to a new place and big change. So I was pretty happy about it.

When your friends both in school and in your Zionist group found out that you were leaving, did their treatment of you change? Were they resentful or jealous, or happy for you? Was that ever an issue?

They were happy. I think they were happy. And they gave me a going away party. I took people's addresses. We took pictures. There was a lot of well-wishing and a lot of wish I was going with you kind of stuff. Maybe a little bit of envy, but also a little judgment about the choice of going to the United States versus going to Israel. But on the whole, it was a pretty happy time.

And I remember there was another boy in my class. His name was Charlie. Gosh, I forget his name. Anyway, Charlie. I can't think of it. And he was going to New York. So I always hoped I'd run into him somewhere. Charlie Eichhorn. That was his name. We shared desks. People sat in twos at a desk, so.

Did you ever find him?

No, I didn't. I didn't.

Can you describe as much as you remember of your journey, the boat trip from Antwerp to New York?

I was seasick the whole time. [LAUGHS] I really was. We took the boat in Holland. I believe we took a train to Holland, to Rotterdam, and then came to New York. The boat came to New York. I think we went by England, and I remember seeing England at night, the lights. And it was very beautiful. And then arriving in New York.

And the boat ride-- like I said, I really was seasick the whole time. I don't think I ate for 10 days. They kept all the food in a lot of vinegar, and I was throwing up the whole time. And it was in October, so the ocean was a little rough. It was already kind of rough ocean.

But it was a normal passenger boat. It wasn't a refugee boat or anything by 1955. It was pretty comfortable and everything. We had our own little room.

And then arriving in New York, I remember having to wait a long time for our luggage. And relatives came to pick us up. They took us to their house. And we stayed for with them for about a day. I think we only stayed in New York for three days, and then we visited with other relatives.

The second set of relatives I remember treated us with a lot of compassion. I remember them being very sympathetic to us. They were very sweet and very nice, and loving, and very kind, and wanted us to stay. They lived in Brooklyn. And they wanted us to stay. But the other relatives weren't quite as pleasant. There was something. I don't know. But my parents decided to come to San Francisco, so.

When you docked in the New York harbor on the way, did you pass the Statue of Liberty?

No, I slept through it. It was very early in the morning. I'm really pissed about that. I remember it was like 5:00 in the morning. I was looking forward to seeing it and very excited that I was going to see it. And I was very upset that I didn't get to see it. I missed it by just a little bit. Right. That's right.

[INAUDIBLE] memories [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, you do remember that.

When you did finally dock in the harbor, do you remember any of your feelings about being in New York or being in America?

I think I remember the bigness. Everything was exaggerated. Humongous buildings, streets that seemed to me as big as-- inconceivably incredible streets, even crossing them. Very, very big. A little overwhelming, yeah.

And so you were in New York for three days with relatives. Did you just visit relatives? Did you go out?

No, we didn't do any of that, I don't think. I don't remember doing that. No, we didn't.

I meant to ask you this earlier [INAUDIBLE]. What are your parents' occupations? What did they do in Belgium?

My father was, in Belgium-- well, Antwerp is a big diamond center. And he worked in the diamond industry. He was a diamond cutter. And that's what he did. He worked in a factory. But I guess while he was in Switzerland-- or I'm not sure if it was while he was in-- or before the war, he studied watchmaking. So he was a watchmaker by profession.

And your mom?

She was a housekeeper. I mean she was a house person. [LAUGHS] Housewife. That's the word. She was a housewife.

You said you took the train to San Francisco?

Right. We took the train from New York to Oakland. And we were picked up in Oakland.

How was that ride? Do you remember that?

I do remember that. I remember I thought we were going to see Indians. I was sure. I don't know why. I'd read a lot of comic books and seen movies. And I was absolutely sure that when we got to New Mexico or Arizona-- I'm not sure exactly where-- that everything was going to change, that all the passengers were going to have to get off or something. Or that the conductor was going to get off, that it was going to be taken over by Indians. And it never happened.

And I kept looking out the window to see Indians. And I was waiting for the Indians to take over. Other than that, it was just kind of a long, long ride, three days and two nights or something.

Where in San Francisco did your relatives take you? Did you stay--

We didn't have relatives in San Francisco. We had sponsors. And they're the ones who picked us up in Oakland and drove us to San Francisco. And it was one of the first times I'd been in a car, so it was kind of a big deal for me. They took us to a hotel on Venice Avenue. And there was an earthquake that night, if you will.

[BOTH TALKING]

Yeah. My dad ran outside in his pajamas to see what's going on. It wasn't a big one, but it was definitely an earthquake.

Did they have second thoughts?

[LAUGHS] Yes. I think we only stayed there one or two nights, and then our sponsors found us-- and I should tell you their name. Darn it. Well, if I think of it. I'll tell you. OK. They found us an apartment on Ellis near Venice. And we stayed there for maybe a month or so, maybe two months. And it had a refrigerator. And we had not had a refrigerator before that in Belgium.

And then I had problems because I was still feeling-- well, I was still religious from my Zionist movement, but my parents were not religious. So we had conflict over that. I didn't want to use the refrigerator. But after a few years, I just stopped being religious. I don't know what you want me to talk about at this point.

So how long did you live in Ellis? You said about a month?

Probably. I think two months.

Was the sponsor, was it a family?

It was a family.

Was it a Jewish family?

A Jewish family. They tried to help my dad find a job, and then a regular apartment, and also to put my sister and I in schools, and to get us to learn English, to go to learn English. Although I had already had one year of English in Belgium, so I spoke some English. But I was the only one in my family who spoke English, so I was the interpreter.

Kind of to help get them all out.

Yeah.

Did your father continue working as a watchmaker?

No, he didn't. He got a job working for a company called Victor Equipment, actually probably somewhere around here, Brannan or somewhere downtown. And they made fine mechanical equipment, some kind of very fine things, because he was used to working with small things. I think he looked for work as a watchmaker, but I don't think he found anything that he liked. I think he was offered some jobs, but I don't know why he didn't go into that.

But he always worked on watches at home. He had brought from Europe some tools. I still have those tools. So he fixed everybody's watches, all the people at work, and all our friends and neighbors. He was always at home fixing watches.

And my mother did get a job when she came to the States, although she never worked in Europe. She worked as a housekeeper briefly. And then later, she got a job in a print shop. And then she worked for the telephone company as a cashier.

How easy was it for you and your family to acclimate to San Francisco, to America-- new language, culture, people?

Well, let's see. I'll talk about my parents first. I think my parents were homesick a lot, although it wasn't so great. But they still missed a lot of-- and I think, as the years went by, they seemed to miss it more. You know how you kind of do that. But they found a lot of people in San Francisco who had gone through the Holocaust in Europe. And those became their friends.

In Belgium, I didn't see my parents having any friends. But once we came here, suddenly they had a large group of friends. And actually it was very joyful. They were always partying, going over to each other's houses and having dinners. There were lots of people. I mean, there would be 20, 25, 30 people. They got together regularly, all the time, all the time. Big, huge dinners, tons of food.

And everybody got fat. Everybody just immediately got fat. Everybody was heavy, because we just ate too much. And I got heavy because I was eating Mars candy bars all the time. After school I always-- it was just terrible. I got really heavy. It's very embarrassing when I look at my pictures from that time.

So I think it was a happy time for my parents. And they call each other [YIDDISH], the green ones, because they were green. My parents learned English pretty good. They went to night school to get their citizenship. They never got great at English. My father a little better than my mother maybe, but enough to get by. They both worked, so they learned enough English. But when they got together with their friends, they spoke Yiddish, [INAUDIBLE], English, and a little Polish, and a little this-and-that.

They started to go to temple, for social reasons more than anything. So I think it was very good for my parents here. Within five years after they were here they bought a house in Sunset. So you could say they thrived. And I think they were pretty happy.

What about you and your sister?

Me and my sister. I'll talk about my sister. She was nine when she came here. And she went to Madison Elementary School. Oh, we lived in-- I don't know if it's still called Laurel Village, at Locust and Sacramento, which was all residential. Now it's completely changed.

And my sister, it seemed like she learned English overnight. It was like one day she spoke French, and the next day-- which is not uncommon. She just made a transition very easily. She just fit in right away. She had friends, and she became a typical American kid.

I think I had a little more trouble than her, because I was older. And I went to Roosevelt Junior High School, which was on Arguello and Geary. Because I didn't speak English so well, I was allowed to sit in a classroom and listened for two years, which was wonderful, because I didn't mind. [LAUGHS] Although I think I pretty much had command of the language a lot sooner than two years.

Let's see. As far as friends, I didn't feel-- I was very critical of American children. I just found them very superficial and very materialistic, very concerned about looks and how they were dressed, whereas I don't remember ever talking or discussing that in Belgium. I mean, they would look at how your bobby socks were, if they were crooked. It didn't happen in Europe. So I felt very alienated from those kids.

And I looked for Jewish kids because that's what I felt comfortable with. I joined B'nai B'rith, but I didn't like it at all because, although it was Jewish, it was just still materialistic, just like all the other kids. So I eventually found a group, Habonim Labor Zionists. And I finally felt like I fit in.

So that was about the late '50s now?

Right. '57. Yeah.

I'm curious. At what point, if any, did you think about or was discussion, whether it was about the Holocaust or about

what happened to Europe, about the war? Was there any point that, all of a sudden, all of that became more louder, or clearer, or just discussed, if any?

Yeah. In fact, it just happened just a few months ago. That's why I'm here, actually, talking about this. Do you just want me to start and go on and on and talk about it?

Exactly. I want you to tell me everything.

OK. I guess we have lots of time.

We have plenty of time. Details.

OK. Well, let's see. This last December, I started to have problems between family members. I just felt like I needed some advice or help, and I went to see a therapist to deal with the specific issue of the family.

Your kids or your parents, or?

No, my in-laws, my sister-in-law and her husband. Well, actually, I'm not married to Bruce, but it's like a family. So I'll just call them my sister-in-law and-- I was starting to have problems relating with her. Very serious problems. And I just needed some help, so I went to see a therapist.

My therapist listened. And then, like therapists do, she wanted to know about my childhood. And I told her I really didn't feel that was relevant. I didn't want to go back and delve into my childhood. I wanted to deal with my problems today.

And she really thought it was important to talk about my childhood, to understand what my early childhood was like and what my family life was like to understand why these things were happening today. So eventually I gave in and started talking about my childhood, which led me to talk about the Holocaust, and my birth, and my very early experiences.

Let's see. How am I going to talk about this? Maybe I need to kind of sidetrack here.

OK, whatever you need. You can go all over the map. Don't worry about chronology. Just however it's comfortable.

All right. I'm going back. When I was about early 30s, maybe 32, 33, I started having very serious psychological problems. I started having anxiety attacks and a lot of fear, a just tremendous amount of fear. I didn't understand why this was happening to me.

Eventually it started getting worse and worse. And I was not able to drive at one point. I had been driving. I drove all over the place. And developing tremendous anxiety. And I now know that it's called agoraphobia. And I started becoming fearful of going in crowds, crowded places, open places, down hills, in tunnels, elevators, escalators, movie theaters. It was an awful time for me.

It gradually wore off. Gradually I started to-- but anyway, the period it lasted was probably 10 years that it took from the onset to when it started. I started to get better. Or I started to learn to deal with it, some through therapy, and readings, and just meditation and learning how to gradually wear off the fear and understand the fear.

But it really affected my life because there were things that I couldn't do. I couldn't drive on bridges. And it really limited my activities. This is very embarrassing to talk about. I still have a lot of embarrassment about that, but.

We appreciate it.

But I really want to be honest about what happened. Let's see. Maybe I'll have this water. Is this water?

That's water. It's from a bubbler, so it's good.

OK.

Take your time.

Let's see. So getting back to therapy, I was seeing this therapist. By the way, her name is Judith also. [LAUGHS] When I was telling her about this, she was trying to place when the anxiety started. And I told her that all I know is that I went to visit my sister in Holland. She had gone to live there for a few years. And I went to visit her. And I was there for six weeks.

We drove through Belgium and to Antwerp, because I hadn't been to back to Antwerp and I was-- well, I left when I was 13. I was now 33, so it's 20 years. So I was really anxious. I wanted to go back to where I was living. And we went back to the school. We visited the school. And I saw one of my teachers, my fourth grade teacher who had become principal. And I didn't feel like spending a lot of time there, but I did just go and say hello to him. And he remembered who I was and we sat.

Then we went on. We left Belgium. Oh, and we walked. We drove through Antwerp a bit. It seemed like a very small city compared to what I remembered as a little child.

So when I came back from this trip to San Francisco, suddenly this anxiety started. And I got very depressed. I just never could understand why that happened then. But this therapist, as I was talking to her and telling her these events, it just clicked in my head that there was a connection. And then she said, you know, have you ever heard of post-traumatic stress syndrome? And she explained that when you go back to a place where you experienced a lot of fear or trauma or anxiety, it can trigger reliving the experience.

And because I was a child, because I was a baby and I didn't have words-- it was before I had language-- so it was hard to talk about it because I didn't have the words. But the feelings were there, and the fear that my mother had and my father, and being born to a woman who was experiencing a lot of fear and going through a lot of fear. The fear was that I experienced the fear as a small child.

It makes sense to me. I mean, this is why I had these experiences. And it suddenly became extremely important for me. [SOBS]

Well, I always knew that the Holocaust had an effect on me, because you could not be affected by it. But I guess I never realized how much of an effect and what an impact it had on my life. So I started to want to find out more about the Holocaust.

And I started to go to the Holocaust lecture series, which are given in Sonoma State in Rohnert Park, which is very close to where I live. And I met some wonderful people there who directed me here and told me about the Oral History Project. And I started to read books and to talk to people and make connections. And that's why I'm here, because I felt, although maybe my story isn't as horrible as people who were in camps and lost parents, I thought my story is worth telling, too. And so that's why I'm here, basically.

We really thank you for bringing us all through this.

Yeah. It just felt really important. I really, really wanted to do this. I really want to do this.

[INAUDIBLE]. We really appreciate that [INAUDIBLE]. The period that you were going through in your 30s, did you discuss this with any other family members? When you realized that this was connected to your birth and your childhood, did you approach your parents [INAUDIBLE]?

No, I didn't. In fact, I was very embarrassed about it. I never mentioned it to my parents. I did mention it to my sister, because she lived in Oakland and my mother later moved to Oakland, and I couldn't drive over the Richmond Bridge. I just could not do it.

So I would drive around. I would take 80 to get to Oakland through Vallejo, so my sister knew about it. I had gradually gotten myself used to driving over the Richmond Bridge. And I was able to do it mostly always with great anxiety and tremendous fear, but I was able to eventually.

And then one day I was visiting a friend in San Francisco, and I was headed to Oakland. And I thought, well, I think I'm ready to try the Bay Bridge. And I tried to get over there. And just before I got on the bridge, I realized just there was no way I was going to get over that bridge in one piece. So I turned off and got off the bridge just in the nick of time, the last exit. It was awful. So my sister had to come get me. And her boyfriend had to drive my car to Oakland, and she drove-- anyway, it was a big deal. So I was very embarrassed.

So my sister did know about it. She was somewhat sympathetic, but not too terribly. She thought, here's my crazy sister, you know? She's crazy. That's all there is to it.

But nobody knew. I mean, until just a couple of months ago, I really didn't know there was a connection between that and the Holocaust. And I definitely never told my parents. I think I told them I didn't like driving and things like that, but I didn't say that I wasn't capable of doing that.

And now you're driving?

I'm driving, pretty much. I've learned a lot of techniques to deal with it. I still don't feel very comfortable, and I know that I can work at it with the new knowledge that these last few months have brought to me. I can learn desensitization. I still don't like elevators. I didn't go up this elevator here. This one looked very intimidating. Bruce took the elevator up and opened the door, and I walked up the stairs [LAUGHS] and he let me in.

But I know I can get over these things. But a lot of fear is there. I know a lot of it is fear of fear. But I think I understand where a lot of it comes from, and it was fear that was never dealt with, ever talked about. I feel very lucky that I'm doing this work and dealing with it now.

Have you been back to Belgium again?

No, I have not. I have not. I would like to go back to Belgium, and I would like to go back to Switzerland. And I would like to find out the route my parents took to get to Switzerland. I would like to find the people in Switzerland.

The only person that-- I called my mother's sister, the one who was in Antwerp. I called her last week and talked to her very briefly, and was glad to find out that her mind was clear and that she's well. And I intend to call her and talk to her because I think she might have some of these answers.

And how was she involved in--

She lived in Antwerp after the war, so she had to have been somewhere during the war. She was somewhere, either hiding in Belgium or-- and I don't know where she was.

And this was your mom's sister?

My mom's sister, right.

[INAUDIBLE]

Yeah.

If and when you ever-- did you ever ask your parents, years later, about their routes, their journeys and what their experiences were like?

I did, and they wouldn't talk about it. They just kind of brushed it away. Oh, we don't want to talk about it, you know. In fact, even last year, I have a cousin who lives in Albuquerque, and I went to visit him. And he's older than me. He's 70. And I went for that purpose, to talk about family, to find out more.

And he was very reluctant to talk. He did not want to talk. And he said, oh, I don't want to talk about this. It's too depressing. I don't want to get depressed. I don't want to get sad. Let's not talk about it. Let's go out to lunch. [LAUGHS] And I wasn't very pushy. I didn't push. And they had pictures, and I really wanted to see them. But it was very hard to get them down to talk about it. I'm hoping to go back this summer to talk to them again and to bring Bruce. And maybe it'll be easier. But I really do want to find out more.

Maybe the people in Europe, like you said, the aunt.

Right, she's in Canada. She lives in Montreal now.

Maybe somehow you can track down the couple in Switzerland on the farm. Put some pieces together. Did you ever visit Israel?

I did, yeah. After high school I went and lived a year in Israel in kibbutz.

Can you talk about that?

Sure. Yeah.

When you graduated here?

Graduated high school. And right away I went to what was called the Habonim Workshop. It was a program put together by the Habonim Labor Zionist Youth Movement. I was there for a year.

We lived on Kibbutz Geshar Haziv, which is in the north of Israel, in Galilee, very close to the coast, north of Haifa. It's mostly an English-speaking kibbutz with mostly Americans and English-speaking people from England and Australia. Some Hebrew speakers and other people, too, but mainly English.

We worked there. I worked in the chicken house. Because I spoke Hebrew and I had gone to Hebrew school all through high school, in San Francisco also, so my Hebrew was fairly good. So I worked in the children's house, and chickens and bananas. We worked in the banana fields, and cotton fields, and potato fields. And then we studied. The first six months, we studied and worked half time. And we studied history, and Hebrew, and education.

And then we did a lot of traveling in Israel. We had free time, and I went to visit my grandparents who lived in Jerusalem. They were very old at that time. This was in 1960. And they were in their 80s. And my grandmother was blind. My grand-- I really liked them. I really liked my grandparents. It's very sad to think about them because I didn't know them very well. I just met them when I was very little and then when I was 18.

But they were very sweet. I spent the night with them. They lived in a small-- not even an apartment. It was a room, a large room below the ground floor. I think they were very poor. They died soon after I left, within a couple years. So I was glad I got to see them.

And I also met my mother's parents, who were very different than my father's parents. They were a lot harsher kind of people. They also were living in Israel. And I met a lot of relatives, some aunts and cousins. It was a very exciting time for me. I loved being in Israel, and I was just so happy there.

The plan was after the year to come back to the United States, go to college, and then go back to Israel. And I was sure I was going to come back to Israel. But I never did. I didn't go back. I went back for a visit about seven years ago, but I didn't go back to live. I felt very fulfilled to be there. And I still, when I think about it, it's hard for me to believe that I didn't go back to live in Israel, because I have a very strong connection to Israel.



Did you study there at all that year?

Yeah, we studied Hebrew, and a lot of education because it was a leadership-- the Zionist movement. So we were to come back and become leaders. So we learned history, not too much Bible, Jewish history, a lot of Zionist history, a lot of Labor Zionist history. And we had a lot of fun, too. We did a lot of hiking and singing. We had a choir. We did dancing.

Did you have the opportunity to travel throughout Israel?

Yes, I did. Absolutely. We went to listen to the-- I guess it's called the Philharmonic, the Tel Aviv Philharmonic? And we were special guests. And we sat behind the stage. And the mayor of Tel-- oh, maybe it was in Jerusalem. Oh, gosh. I'm getting mixed up. I know-- Ted Kollek. We got to meet him. It was in Jerusalem.

We went to the Negev. We hiked there. We spent a week in the Negev, which I loved. I loved the desert. I know other kids had blisters, and they were getting sick, and they were fainting. I was just-- I was blossoming. The heat didn't bother me.

We did go to Yad Vashem, but I think we didn't want to stay there too much. I don't think I went inside. We went there, but I know I didn't go inside. I decided it was too depressing or something. I don't know if other kids went. Some went, some didn't.

We went all over. We went to Haifa. We went to Jerusalem. We spent a week in Jerusalem studying. We had a week-long workshop there on all kinds of subjects, education and history.

Then there was a special conference we went to near Tel Aviv, [INAUDIBLE], and I was one of the three people chosen to go from our group. And that was very exciting. It was some kind of World Zionist meeting and we met-- there were thousands of kids there from all over the world. So we did a lot of traveling, a lot of sightseeing, and social sorts of activities.

Not to belabor the point, but since we're here, again, was there a discussion or did anyone talk about the Holocaust?

I think there might have been discussion, but not-- surely when we went to Yad Vashem we talked about that. But, no, there wasn't too much focus about the Holocaust.

So you were there for a year and then returned back home?

Right.

And then what did you do?

I went to college.

In San Francisco?

Right. I went to City College for two years. Then I started going to San Francisco State. And I was majoring in speech therapy. But then I dropped out of school. I went one semester and I dropped out. I didn't go back to school till I was older, till I was 35, when I moved to Sonoma County.

Does your sister live here, or is she in Holland.

She came back. She's still living in Oakland. She's a RN at San Francisco General Hospital.

And what are you doing here now?

I'm a potter. I'm doing pottery. I also work part-time, and I work as a public health aide. I go into people's homes and help older people, to keep them out of homes. And they get to stay at their house.

[INAUDIBLE]

It is very important. So they can still stay in their own home. I cook for them, and shop, and keep them company.

Do you do that in Sonoma?

Yeah. Santa Rosa.

Do you have any hopes or plans to get back to Israel?

I hope to go back to visit, but at this point I don't see myself going back. I don't see myself going back right now.

And possibly Belgium, just to visit or gather information?

Right. Right.

Are there any other thoughts that you have and that have been left out?

I can't think of anything. I think I've said it all, maybe. I'll probably think of things later. But right now I think I've said a lot.

What we're going to do is [INAUDIBLE] and if you think of anything.

All right.