

OK, Alfred, I'd just like you to describe your trip from Poland back to Germany.

It was a lot more comfortable than the trip there. First of all, the trains weren't so crowded. Secondly, they became a lot more polite. And I think the world press must have done something, too. I don't remember it that well. I probably slept a lot on that trip.

Remember that we had been up for two nights and then a whole day in this underground thing. I don't remember much even about how we got out of there with all those suitcases. I certainly felt a lot better also about my parents being there. On the trip back it was with my parents. So no particular memories.

And when you got back to Frankfurt, what did you find?

Also no particular memories. And I wouldn't swear to it that I went back. I may have gone back to Saarbruecken right away, right from Frankfurt. But I came back to Frankfurt, obviously, before Kristallnacht, so I don't I don't remember exactly. Maybe not. Maybe I just stayed in Frankfurt. Because school was still on. School didn't interrupt because a number of kids had been transported away.

The school was mainly non-Polish kids, so the decrease in population wasn't all that significant. So I probably stayed in Frankfurt then, but I couldn't say that there were more feelings of insecurity. Nothing in particular. It was sort of a partially unpleasant adventure. It was somewhat of an adventure, after all, going three days on a train for a kid. Something to talk about. And nothing very grim about it.

And your home was as you left it.

Yes. Yes. Well remember, my aunt hadn't left. This was my Aunt Raischa's home. They were stateless and they had stayed put. They hadn't been transported. And I know my Uncle Leo's home at that point in time I didn't go there very often, so it was probably the same way. It was left in a mess because they had packed their suitcases and-- Now I wasn't present when they packed the suitcases. I was taken from the other uncle's home.

And all those suitcases, did they make it back with you?

Yeah, I'm sure they did.

OK.

What languages, did you learn in school? Only English, but I spoke a fair amount of French because we went to France in vacations. And every time we went to France, as I told you, I had an uncle in France, and every time we went to France I relearned the language.

Which uncle was this?

This was Itzah and Zelma.

Do you speak did you speak any Yiddish?

Oh yes, I speak Yiddish. But I learned not at home so much. In Bolivia, after the war, a lot of people came from Europe from the camps and they became my friends, a lot of people my age. And they spoke mainly Yiddish, or they spoke a lot of Yiddish. There was very little Yiddish before that. Everybody spoke Spanish in my age group.

Why did you change the place of your vacations from Germany?

Yeah, of course it was uncomfortable to go to Germany. Even though the vacations I remember in Germany, I must have been five, so when I was five that was, no that was before Hitler actually. I don't think we vacationed in Germany

after Hitler, even though, as I told you I went to Frankfurt in '36, '37 and I didn't feel the atmosphere terribly oppressive in the sense that, as I told you I kept getting more and more uncomfortable as a kid trying to avoid things. But not in '36 even.

I remember that most bicycle rides, that must have been '37 even. One incident, you like incidents, I rode the bicycle mainly on the periphery of town. But once I went through the middle of town either because I didn't know where the road was or I was curious to see where it was going. I came right to the center of town, the main point where all sorts of roads converged, and I wasn't very familiar with that situation on a bicycle.

And there was a policeman-- of course, in those days there were no traffic lights-- a policeman directing the traffic. And he motioned me on from that direction-- I think there are six directions-- and I was hesitant, so he yelled over the whole square so everybody could hear it. I mean, he had a good voice. If this isn't the Jew I will eat a broom.

It's a German expression, I will eat a broom. I am so sure of it that I will eat a broom. How did he recognize me from 100 yards or 200 yards distance as a Jew? Probably just because the beret. And that occurred to me only much later.

Were you frightened?

No. Interesting, no. I was just somewhat embarrassed, but not much. Didn't affect me a lot.

When did you first become aware of Hitler?

Oh, I became aware of Hitler certainly in '34, '35. But in '37 I was in Saarbruecken when he came through town and he has this hypnotic face. I remember even thinking of him as, this is an interesting fellow. Looking at the face, he had some kind of something attractive. Of course, later on this wasn't very attractive, but I remember as a kid not thinking of Hitler as a particular monster. And in the house it wasn't talked about. Other Nazis were talked about perhaps more. I mean Nazis as such but not Hitler specifically.

You saw him when he came to Saarbruecken.

I saw him. We were actually warned not to look through the window. As I told you, we lived in the center of town in the latter days, and so he came up that street with a parade and I did look, of course. We were warned not to look not just because of Jewish but because of the protective measures. They were afraid somebody would take a shot at him. It was a little different than in the States. So they had guards looking at windows.

Who warned you not to look?

I don't remember. Probably my parents. Probably my parents, but it was talked about in school. It was just talked about.

Hitler was coming.

Yeah, that's right. Don't go to the window.

Can you describe what was hypnotic about his face?

I'm just telling you how I felt about that. I was a kid. I'm saying hypnotic. I don't know. Not repelling.

Was he in a motor car?

He was in a motor car then, yeah, in an open motor car. And in fact, I was tempted to go where he was speaking, which was only about three blocks away, but didn't go. I don't even know that my parents would have had major objections if I wanted to.

Was there any discussion after he came to Saarbruecken?

Not that I know of.

You never talked about him?

My parents only talked about him sort of in the abstract when they talked about German policies and what was happening in Germany. Then the name of Hitler was mentioned as typifying, as not typifying but as representing the German procedures.

When my uncle said nothing will happen, he said, Hitler isn't going to do anything to the Jews. They're economically constructive or whatever. I don't know what went through his mind, but he said, Hitler, he didn't mean Hitler personally. He was talking about the regime. And I think when we said Hitler we usually were talking about the regime and not about Hitler personally.

Did you ever hear him speak on the radio?

Oh, yeah.

What did he say?

Well, as a kid it was hard to understand. And he talked very fast. It was just an impression of how he talked. And it's also hard to remember what was the impression then and what was the latter-day impression. I know that we listened to the radio, but I remember only a stream of verbiage just as when you hear him today in the newsreels or whatever. It's sort of this stream of somewhat hysterical verbiage, but I didn't think of this hysterical then.

When do you recall seeing men in Nazi uniforms on the street?

I was conscious of it I think only in '37, '38. I don't think before that. There were many Nazi uniforms all the time, usually. Not SS, but SR, the Brownshirts and they weren't particularly menacing. Neither were the SS in those days particularly menacing until that Polish experience. Because we were guarded by SS and I saw SS hitting people, slapping people, slapping an old woman, for example, and that made an impression, of course. So after that I was concerned and frightened and stayed out of the way.

did you have any encounters with them?

I vaguely remember something, get out of the way or something. I don't remember the specific instance. I remember some, Jew boy, get out of the way something, but I can't tell you when that was or where that was.

You mentioned that your parents went to the opera. Did you also?

No, my parents went to the opera because of acculturating. They didn't go to the opera to hear opera. And in my house classical music was not part of the culture, Jewish music, yes, classical music, no. So when I grew up in Bolivia later on I bought myself a record player and records and I started listening to music, also not so much because I love music but because it was something you needed to do. And then eventually I acquired a taste.

Did you have any music lessons as a youngster?

I wanted to learn the violin, but in Bolivia that wasn't-- And they knew I wanted to learn and they were going to give me lessons. And I don't know why. I wanted to learn the violin, but I know that I asked to be taught, and there was no opportunity.

In Germany.

Well, at that time, that was probably towards the end, I mean, I didn't ask for that when I was six or seven, probably

when I was 11 or 12. At that time, things were already a little bit in turmoil. And in Bolivia there was no opportunity, no desire.

What kind of activities for fun would you have in Germany? Were there movies or clubs?

OK, clubs. I did belong to Agudath Israel, which was a religious organization. It still exists. It has political representation in Israel. And there was a youth organization of that and I went to that. So we had meetings and I don't remember even what we did there. It wasn't too memorable. I remember a youth organization in Bolivia, not in Germany. We probably had a meeting every couple of Saturdays, and I don't I can't recall what happened in the meetings.

Did you go to any movies?

Yes, we went to movies, but not later because I don't remember when the Jews were not allowed in movies or whether we were hesitant to go to movies, but from '37 on I don't remember going to movies.

Did you do a lot of reading?

Oh, did I do reading. I read everything. Both my parents and my aunt had loads of literature which mostly they hadn't read. I think it was something to put on you shelf. But my mother read a fair amount, I suppose. But I read everything. I read Goethe. I read Shakespeare in German.

I read every book that I could put my hands on. And actually when I did this I already told you that I had school till 1:00 or 1:30 and then again from 3:00 to 5:00, and I don't remember when I did this, but I remember whenever I had time.

I didn't do a lot of homework. I was very lazy and I had a very good memory, so I remember, for example, when we had to recite poems-- in Germany we had to recite a lot of m but usually short poems-- I wouldn't read them. I would go to school and then three or four people had recited and I knew it.

And if I had the misfortune of being called on first I didn't know it. Didn't happen too often. Because the teachers knew that I knew, so they didn't call me too often. Now, they didn't know that I didn't know when I hadn't learned it, I was learning it at the moment. I would open the book at the time and learn it very quickly. So I didn't do a great deal of homework and I was very sloppy, did sloppy homework when I had to do it. So I spent virtually all my time reading.

You were a good student?

I was a good lazy student, yeah. Whatever I had could learn without any effort I learned, and what required effort I didn't learn. But nothing much required effort in grade school or even in the few years of high school that I went, of the so-called high school, which would be great school here. And later on I went to school in Bolivia where nothing required any effort.

I'll tell you about Bolivia. If I come back, I'll tell you about Bolivia. This was a whole different world. So which subject I was interested in? I was very interested in history. I read everything about history. I read even textbooks in history. But I read historical novels, those were my preference, about Rome, about mythology and all of that stuff.

And in fact, history in school was very boring because I knew it all. And also I had the habit, which I haven't lost in life, of talking when I think of something. So whenever the teacher asked the question, I would yell the answer, which was very disruptive and unpleasant for them, but that was my mode.

What kind of future did you envision for yourself as a boy growing up?

In Germany? None. I had no thoughts of future.

Something you wanted to be?

Not in Germany. I decided what I wanted to be when I was 13, 14, having read some books in Bolivia and I thought I would be a biochemist. Ended up being something like it, not exactly biochemist. I changed my interest slightly over the years. But in Germany I can't remember. If you had asked me before I was 13 or 14, what do you want to be, I have no idea what answer I would have given. I wouldn't have said the fireman, but that's about--

[LAUGHS]

The same business as your father? No, I don't think so. I was not very interested in business. And in Bolivia I did do some business. I wasn't all that good at it. It wasn't bad at it, I was not good at it. And when I started thinking about it, I certainly thought, I don't want to be in business because at the time I thought that's a totally nonconstructive way of living and a total unnecessary activity. Of course, now I know better but I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to be that.

From your friends or your cousins, were there any bar mitzvahs that took place that you attended?

No. I don't remember a single bar mitzvah before mine. And bar mitzvah in Germany was not that big a deal, not among the Eastern European descendant Jews. In fact, in Eastern Europe, what my father told me, the custom was to take the kids to shul on a Monday or Thursday when you read the Torah also and put on his tefillin and that was it, that was bar mitzvah.

And my father in effect said that his uncle took him and he said, [YIDDISH] which sheigetz means-- sheigetz, put on the tefilin, although he was a yeshiva boy, but that's what he said. And not much was made of it. In Germany, I don't know what the German custom was with bar mitzvah. It was not what it is here, even for the German Jews who were a lot more formal than the Eastern European Jews.

What was life with your sister like in Germany?

Incidentally, I may have the wrong memory. I'm not sure she went to Poland with us because she spent the last year-- my parents became very concerned, this must have been in '38-- about safety. Or it may have been after the Kristallnacht, I would have to ask her. But she went to France to go to school.

My sister at home, we were very good friends and we still are very good friends. In Frankfurt, I felt a little bit abandoned. My one aunt just took care of me. She was not, my Aunt Raischa, the first Aunt Raischa, was not very mellow. She was a businesswoman and I was a nuisance. She did that because she had an obligation to do it and I felt that.

And so my sister was a mother, actually. She gave me a penny or she gave me some chocolate. And if I had any problem, although I wasn't all that open with that sort of thing, about I would discuss it with her. That's the relationship.

What year did she go with France? That's what I said, I don't know whether it was after the Kristallnacht or just before, but it was no more than a year. I think it was a partial year. She and one of my cousins from Frankfurt, one of Raischa's daughters, also went to France. And they ended up in some town. I don't even know exactly how they did that.

My uncle was in France, but they weren't in that town. They were in some other town. They needed to eat kosher, for example, so they must have been in some place either in an internat, in a boarding school which was kosher, or else it must have been living with the kosher family, because it couldn't have been any other way.

Can you remember any large family gatherings in Germany?

Life in Germany was different from here. In my father's and my parents' house there were always guests. I can't remember a night where there wasn't somebody dropping in, sitting around talking. It was not so much parties, it was just talking. They came in, they had a glass of tea. Maybe they came and played some cards.

In my aunt's house, I don't remember quite that. They were much more tied to the business, I think. I don't remember

that life. Large gatherings, other than when we went on vacation or that one seder that I remember, I don't remember large gatherings. Yeah, weddings. Some weddings, weddings of the cousins. Those were gatherings. I remember two of them, and we kids--

In Frankfurt, I had a cousin was my age. That was a son of my Aunt Raischa Aftergut, not Diller, Aftergut, the one that I lived with the last year. We were close friends. His name is Iggy. He lives in Schenectady. And we always got skits together. Actually, next time I come I'll bring a picture with him and me dressing up for Purim, which isn't all that funny, but that's a part of it.

You went to a wedding together?

Well, there was a wedding of a cousin, his cousin and my second cousin, my first cousin once removed I guess. And we made up some skits for that, I remember. I remember the engagement of another cousin, the one who was in Israel.

I think those were the only ones. I don't remember. And these weddings were in the home, as I remember, they were not in a hall. This was already in '37 or '38; '38. This was somebody I hadn't even talked about. Also an aunt of my mother's who had three daughters. And this daughter got married and went to Venezuela, so we had family in Venezuela.

What was her name?

Her name was Zelma. The names recur.

Her mother's name?

Her mother's name was, her last name was Heller, and her mother's name was Tony, also Tony. So you see the two generations had the same names that went back to a previous generation of somebody who was dead. So my grandmother and my great-grandmother gave their children the same names. So she had a Clara, Tony and Raischa and she had a Clara, Tony and a Raischa.

And so Tony's daughter got married.

Tony's daughter got married, and that marriage we had the skit. I think we had some skits also. Maybe on Purim we sort of made up some things that kids make up and that parents are obliged to watch because the kids put some effort into it. And it was a Purim, so they want some expression of religious attachment and it belongs.

Any memories of what was in the skit?

No. The skit at the wedding we were poking fun at her. For example, she used to sing. She used to like to sing. She was a very good singer, so we poked fun at that I think. Actually, she knew that because she became very religious, much more religious. She became super religious afterwards, and she's now still alive and very religious.

And religious girls aren't supposed to sing in public, so it was a little bit peculiar, I guess. But that's what we made fun of. He was somehow also there was something to make fun of him. I forget what, her bridegroom. So that was about the content of it. I'm sure it wasn't a very profound.

What is the earliest memory you have of your mother?

Oh. I can't place it in time, really. She was always there. I mean, my mother was very a dominating person. She ran the business. She was a businesswoman. She decided what we did, but I don't think my father ever felt dominated.

He just realized that she was a better businesswoman than he was and that she maybe had in certain areas more intuitive common sense or whatever it was. I'm sure that when we decided to emigrate she did all of the things that we need. But my first memories are I don't remember. Mother the protector, mother who reminds you that you have to do things.

My sister and I always talk about that we always feel guilty when we're not doing something because Mother, always when we weren't doing something, said, why I'm aren't you doing anything? Or you have to be busy.

Mother told me, for example, one of the big things in life was make yourself indispensable. Must be indispensable to something, to somebody. Mother survivor certainly. I think that describes her pretty well.

And you father, memories of him?

Oh, Father is very different. Father was a mellow person. Father was the philosopher. He did take some part in public life under duress, but he was looked up to. In Saarbruecken, towards the end, there was nobody-- All of the people who were involved in the community business had left or were not involved anymore, so he reluctantly took over running the community.

So he was a man people came to. He was the helpful fellow. As I told you, we always had these guests from Eastern Europe in the house and my mother was complaining. They weren't always that clean. I guess Eastern Europe was not as clean and they occasionally had fleas or something. She would point that out.

My father was unflappable in his helpfulness. He also was a fellow people came to, to borrow money when they needed money. And my mother was always negative. Not always.

I would say that, yes, she was negative in the sense that she had a keen sense of what people really needed, what they didn't really need so and somebody came and said, I need 1,000 mark, she would say to my father, he only needs 500. But my father would give him 1,000. So it was a very big difference. Father, the man, the person you could really talk.

Mother, not so much. Not when I was a kid. Later on, yes, but then she was, after my father's death, she was changed and she was a little bit in need of conversation, even though she still ran the business and ran things, but was much more-- And we were older. She was leaning on us a little bit more. Before, she wasn't leaning on anybody. Leaning in the sense of looking for support.

Did this money get repaid to your father?

I have no idea. No, I'm sure not, because of her loans usually to the family. And my uncle, the uncle that went to Poland, was not very successful ever. So I always heard in the house, you're giving him too much money.

No, I'm sure that he had no means to repay that. Possibly if he had come back and lived and made a significant go of it he might have. I don't know what other loans, but I know there were other loans, quite a few other loans. I don't know how much the others got paid back. In this particular instance, I know for sure that didn't happen. It was called a loan. It was a gift.

Have you been back to Saarbruecken?

I went back a couple of times. I found the place where I lived in but I don't remember the town very well. In fact, I have a date with my cousin to meet, my 84-year-old cousin, to meet this year and he'll show me the places I missed, the places I don't know. So maybe this will happen. I think maybe it'll happen in June or July.

It's a town that I don't remember at all because it's not a very busy place. It's at the border with France. There's a lot of commerce, a lot of traffic. It's a nodal point for the railroad, so lots of railroads meet, and it's not terribly pleasant all this traffic. And you stand on the main street, you can hardly cross the street.

But I haven't really explored the arcane areas of Saarbruecken. The ones that I very vaguely remember, I looked for them and I can't find them because they are-- So when I meet with my cousin I might be able to go back to those.

Which cousin is this?

This is the dentist in Israel. His name is Manny, if haven't gotten his name.

How were you told that the family had decided to go to Bolivia?

I can't remember any specific moment when we were told that. There was talk about that for a while and then finally the visas came through. There was talk about going other places, too. You could buy visas to Cuba, for example. You could buy visas to Santo Domingo. They bought visas, for example, when they were in Buchenwald, in the concentration camp. And you had to show that you could get out.

This is part of history. I mean, you remember perhaps a boat that was sent back from Cuba that tried to get into the States. And we went into that boat. As we were going to South America, we met that boat coming back in Antwerp and we actually talked to the people who came back on that boat. And in fact, one family I know ended up in Bolivia. They may have gotten on our boat. But, anyway, we met that boat.

The Consuls of these countries sold visas which had no value, which somehow when you got to the country it was known these visas had no value. I don't know whether they identified them in some way. So the people who were on that boat had visas to Cuba, but the visas were not valid. They were meant to get people out of the concentration camp.

Was there any input from you or from other family members about whether you should go to Cuba, of course, not knowing--

From me? No. I don't remember ever giving an opinion. This was my parents' business. My parents were protecting me, they were taking care of me. I was totally confident that whatever they did was the right thing to do.

What did you know about Bolivia? What did you expect it to be like?

The only thing I knew about it is we tried to learn about it a little bit and there was a book called The Green Hell. I never read the book, but I know that the title made a big impression on me and I expected to fall into this green hell. Well, Bolivia of course, is not a green hell and it was rather not-- It was civilized in the sense that there were streets and there were cars, there was electric light, there was running water.

All of that we didn't expect. We didn't know what it was going to look like. Although we could have had that communication from this uncle's brother who was in Bolivia since '37 or '36. He came from Poland, actually. Heinrich's, brother.

So when we came there, it was partially a pleasant surprise. First of all, acclimating we came directly to the high altitude. That wasn't easy to acclimate to. You can't-- For the first week or two as a kid I got that much better, but for the first week or two you can't really walk up a hill. You breathe hard. You may have had similar experience when you were there.

And then we came there and tried to find the place. We did that very well. I was the speaker for the family because I had taken Spanish lessons in Germany. Being good at languages, my parents decided that I was going to be the one who learned Spanish. My sister was in France, as you may I remember. We actually picked her up in France on the boat on the trip to Bolivia.

So when we came there, I had to talk to the first thing, of course, was the authorities. Nobody spoke any German. Then came the Customs. Then came renting an apartment and talking to the owners, the landlord. And I did all of that. I was the interpreter. And particularly it was very good when you came to an authority because a kid talking they were rather mellow. And we cleared Customs very nicely. They hardly looked because they were talking to me and it was sort of cute.

What was my impression? I know what my parents' impression was. My impression was it's OK, it's valuable. We came to Bolivia-- The most impressive thing that happened is the first immersion in Bolivian politics. About two months after we came the president was murdered, and this was the first negative point that, well, this is a little bit chaotic, this place.



Until then, it really didn't have the appearance of chaotic because, as I said, the interface were authorities and they had their bureaucratic-- In fact, they are a lot more bureaucratic than I can remember anybody else being. They have to go through five instances, get all the seals.

And my mother, to some extent, was familiar with that procedure because the Germans are a little bit like that. The French are a lot more like that. And she also bought merchandise in France and had to do with the French authorities and had to export. And she knew she knew that approach, even though there were a lot more pieces of paper in Bolivia than in France or Germany.

So it wasn't a very disruptive or very unpleasant thing then. I never felt at home in Bolivia at all. I told you before, I sort of rejected this culture altogether. I thought they had nothing to offer. I was not happy with what I had there. I was not happy with the people. I don't know why.

I was displaced. And I was out of, even though you might say that from age 8 or so when I went to Frankfurt I was displaced already, I wasn't in my home, I wasn't with my friends, I had to find new friends. But I lived through. I did feel a little bit out of place, but not very much. In Bolivia a lot more. I had not a single Bolivian friend.

The Jewish community in Bolivia was very tight, closely knit, but of course, it took a while for a kid to fall into that community. And when I was teenager it was a little bit easier. But that feeling of being an outsider, that persisted throughout, even within the Jewish community, until I was in my 20s.

And I don't know whether that was-- I mean, this may happen to anybody. It may have been a consequence of the early life, but I'd have to undergo some serious analysis to find out and I don't know whether I would whether that was a consequence.