Picture a seam like this. You have to lift up the seam, and that's where the lice hide.

In the clothing?

Yeah.

Not on your body?

Well, they get on the body, too. And there is a very unusual sensation of a louse moving on your body. It's a very, very light sensation. And it's as if something is thrashing in a small spot. And that's what a louse movement feels like.

And squashing the louse is usually how you get the disease. Because it's in the fecal matter of the louse. And you rub that in the skin, and that's how you get sick.

Hmm.

So animals groom each other. Well, prisoners sit around and groom their clothing this way.

So you spent a lot of your day doing that, then?

Yeah, doing that, and just walking around, and staying out of the way of guards and work details. When they come around for work details, you find something else to do, or you look as if you were on a work detail. Suddenly start pulling weeds or something so they think you're on somebody else's work detail. You avoid work like the plague.

I thought that aspect was more relaxed there.

Yes, yeah, but you know, this is, again, this is the end of the war. They don't know what to do. They've got no places to send you.

There is no factory to send you to. The railroads are tied up or bombed. The system is now screeching to a halt.

Did you have trouble with rats?

No, no, I don't remember seeing rats there. I don't even remember seeing rat droppings there. I don't think there was enough food left.

Were people dying rapidly at this point also?

Yes. Well, every day we'd be taking bodies out. And yes, people would die during the night. Then they would be taken out in the morning. Every day, the death wagon went by.

And how did they dispose of those bodies?

I don't know. We never got out of camp. I suspect they were burned at Dachau, I'm sure. But in Dachau, I was simply in the camp. Then we were marched out to the railroad station, so I never got any other view. And then I haven't been back.

What about the level of the brutality of guards and capos?

It was less in Dachau at the time I got there. Then the worst was Kaufbeuren. Kaufering was OK. It wasn't particularly brutal.

Birkenau was terrible. Next was, as I said, worse was Kaufbeuren. And Dachau was catch as catch can in relative terms.

Do you think this is because it was getting late in the war, as you say?

Yeah, there were a lot of prisoners there, crowded. So the more prisoners there are, the lesser chance of getting hit, because they only have so many guards.

I see.

And there was really not very much to do. I don't ever even remember going on a work detail, as I said, in Dachau. But I remember going on work detail. They were stupid work details, so we knew it was make work in Birkenau, but not in Dachau.

How about the sleeping conditions in the barracks? You said it was so crowded, was it--

It was always very crowded. But by that time, that's what you'd expect. The least crowded conditions were in Kaufering. In Kaufering, we were in essentially an underground-- you build it, and you dig out the ground, and you put a little, small kind of roof.

Then you cover the roof with dirt. And grass grows over the whole thing. So you can't tell very much from the overflight, except the entrance to this.

The advantage of this is that it's very well-insulated. So it's relatively warm in there. And we did have sort of a potbellied stove in the center of this thing.

So if you're in a good location, in other words, if you were in a good barracks where they would allow everybody to crowd around. In nasty barracks, where there are killers, they won't let you get near the stove. And they'll take you bodily and throw you back. So that's the luck of the draw.

Mhm. And how about your barrack?

I was in a relatively good barrack. So we all crowded around and took turns when I was in, keeping warm, that is. And people who seemed in more dire straits, they made sort of a special place for.

When I was in Birkenau, the way people kept warm early in the morning-- they throw you out of the barracks about 5:00 or so. And it's very bitter cold outside. Everybody stands tightly in a human stove. We just press together.

And then they break up so that the outside people can come to the inside. So you keep forming and reforming, forming and reforming. And that's what keeps warm.

You made reference to having a clot removed. Was it then? I believe you said in Dachau.

In Dachau, right. I could hardly walk with this. And I had a clot in my foot.

So I went to the dispensary. And they looked at it. And they said, OK, we're going to remove it. And they marched me in, put my foot up on the table, and I stood on the other.

And this French Moroccan guy was there. And I don't know whether it was an inmate doctor or just an inmate who was there. I suspect he was a doctor, because he sewed it up OK. And he cut in and made about an inch and a half cut and removed this clot and sewed it up again.

And it didn't become infected. So it was OK. And then I went back to the barracks.

So there was some form of medical attention?

Oh, yeah, there was in this. And there were people in the hospital with various diseases. But there was very limited things that they could do. I was hoping that the knife hadn't been used before and such. So that was all right.

Well, by the time, as I said, I got to Dachau, it was the end. I don't know what happened with the prisoners who were liberated right there. I haven't met anybody who was liberated at Dachau. But I met soldiers there.

I remember one guy saying, he says, I saw them come out. And I just pulled the trigger. And I didn't care. And I feel bad about it now.

But he did say, I just-- I saw that. And I said, these guys did it. He was sitting in a tank, you know.

What about your fellow prisoners? Did they talk about vengeance also?

They would have. But they were so weak.

Mhm.

And then I remember one incident where a German comes in a prisoner uniform, tries to hide among the prisoners. The prisoners tried to hit him. Well, you know, a prisoner's reactions are so slow that it's like watching slow motion cameras in action.

And he wasn't harmed a bit. He was merely trapped by the number of bodies. And when GIs used to sit on the side, and they said march by, and they'd watch for the bobbing head, and they'd say you.

Because prisoners shuffle. They don't bounce. And then they pick them out. And all they have to do is take off his clothes. And then you say, oh, I can't see your ribs. Where did you get to eat?

How much did you weight?

65 pounds when I was liberated. Yeah.

Well, what about your health in general? Do you feel like you have any long term health problems?

Yeah. I had, well, the TB, which I got. I had this on my foot. I was beaten with rifle butts on the side of my hip here. I have scars there.

I've had two open heart bypass surgeries, one in '75 and one in '83. And I don't know whether that's directly or indirectly connected. The stress probably didn't help.

The diet probably reduced my arterial clogging. It's the only good thing came from these studies, was that you showed that, in severely starved prisoners, the arterial clogging decreases. But this is not a good way to treat heart disease yet.

No. So the arterial clogging for the time of the starvation--

Yes.

--or for the future?

No, I suspect that for the future, it increases. Because the area is prepared. That's what I suspect.

Because there is an area there already that's initiated. But what initiates the area is still not really completely proven.

I think that my most severe loss is the loss of my loved ones. And it's not just a person. It's a connection and a sense of isolation and loneliness which is difficult at times.

I think the loved ones of survivors are left with an absolutely hopeless task. Because people who love each other would always like to make the world good for each other. And in many ways, that can be done. But you can't restore dead people. And you can't restore those wrenching-- those wrenched ties, I should say.

And unnaturally wrenched.

Yeah. Well, it's I think sudden losses are never really well-borne. But it was a little early. And I had no idea that what happened to me would affect my children and may even affect my grandchildren. That-- I thought that it would stop.

And I think it has. It certainly was the only-- if I think of did any good thing come out of the Holocaust, yeah, I can think of only one, the state of Israel. You know? And that's the only good thing that came out of the Holocaust. The other things were simply losses.

I don't know that we've learned an awful lot yet. But I thought that there would be more tolerance and at least regard for people's lives. And the traditional reactions that I see in this world contradict that.

I think there's very strong evidence that there is no such thing as inherited memory. I think what this points to, that supposedly we inherit what we learned in history at some subconscious level. And this is the evidence that the learning level here is zero.

So we're left with the burden of passing it on by the traditional cultural methods to change the values. Because all of those things that we call inherited, it leads to the knee jerk xenophobic reaction.

I should say also that as a result of this, had there been no Holocaust, I would have still left Europe.

You feel certain?

Oh, yeah, yeah. I could see no way of-- I could only see adapting under stressful conditions, under forced conditions. I mean, I could have stayed and I could have-- but I wanted to live like a human being. I was not satisfied living like a subject.

I didn't want to live by influence. When I grew up, the way you got places or did things, you worked hard. But then, either with the money, or the brains, or the influence, you had to have a connection to the powerful.

I wanted to have rights on my own. I didn't want to have rights because my father knew somebody, or I knew somebody, or I had a connection. I wanted to have a house that is not built on a quagmire. I didn't want to live-- I wasn't willing to work with the ambivalence of my existence every day for the rest of my life. I probably wouldn't have put it in those words, but that's how I look at it now.

I wanted to get out of Europe in 1945. And if you'd have asked me in 1945 why do I want to leave Europe, I would have said, because nobody wants me here. And I'm tired of holding the door.

I dearly hoped that my kids would never face that. I remember an instance when my son was terrorized by somebody on a bus when I was in Davis. And I literally saw red. I saw my life before my eyes.

And I went to the principal of the school. And he was going to give me a standard song and dance. And I told him, I said, now listen. I went to school, for my elementary school and my gymnasium, in the fear of my life every day.

That's not going to happen to my son. And you're going to see to it or you're going to have to deal with me. And I'm a very tough cookie.

And I hit this table and things jumped on it. I said, that's not the way children should show up. It's your job to catch the bully right now.

Because we didn't do it in time in Europe. And there was nobody to do it for me. But I'm here for my son.

Did he?

Oh, yeah, he read me right. Because I'm very persistent. And I went to the parents, and I explained to them just exactly how I felt. And they also knew that I wouldn't go away.

But I wish that those issues wouldn't arise. Well, after the war, I went to work, as I told you, at first in the displaced person camps and then in the--

From-- is it Seefeld? Is the name of the town Seefeld?

Seefeld, the town that I was-- where the guards ran away, was Seefeld, spelled S-E-E-F-E-L-D, Seefeld. And the town that we encountered Germans in was Mittenwald, when they took us in the gymnasium and they gave us some food and allowed us to sleep there, which was very nice. Because it was very much warmer than out in the snow.

And then we left Mittenwald and walked toward-- we had heard that they were setting up a camp in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. And we walked in that direction. And then an American major came along on one of those Jeeps, tremendous Second World War Jeeps with this big pole in front. The pole was made to cut wires.

The Germans used to put wires in the middle of town. The people drove with Jeeps with the windshield down, because they often broke. So as they were driving, the wires would cut it off. So to counteract those wires, they welded this big piece of steel in front of the Jeep. And it's an angle iron that faces forward and pitches a little forward.

So he put us all in his Jeep. It was seven of us all together. And I sat in front, holding onto that thing for dear life and drove us into the Garmisch-Partenkirchen prisoner-- displaced person camp. It wasn't a prison camp, a displaced persons camp.

And we got there. And the next morning, bright and early, I went to the commander's office and I said, I can speak languages. I want a job as an interpreter. And I got a job right away.

There was another applicant there who was a PhD, actually. But he couldn't speak rapidly. He read very well.

Mhm.

And they needed instant translation. So I got the job.

Did you have a medical exam at any point early on?

No.

No?

No, I was still in these clothes. And then I got some throwaway clothes. The UNRRA people were there, and they gave us some clothes. And we got some clothes here and there.

So we went through delousing. They loused up the whole camp. We were in DDT up to our eyebrows.

And you know, DDT is awful now. But we also have to remember how many millions of lives were saved that would have died because there was no vaccination. There wasn't enough-- there was not enough antibiotics. They would have died at the end of the war.

But they used to literally surround the village, put the DDT sprayers. They had a nozzle like a nozzle on a gas pump.

And it goes-- there are these air compressors going boo, boo, boo, boo, boo.

And they grabbed you by your shirt. And before you know it, they stick this down the front, and they twirl you around and stick it down the back. And you're in this cloud.

[LAUGHS]

And then they propel you on the other side. I saw an American production line in action. And man, woman, and child, mayor, lieutenant, colonel, I've seen GIs grab a Colonel steps out of the car. Sorry, sir.

[IMITATES AIR COMPRESSOR]

Everybody comes sputtering and this white dust all over. But it stopped epidemics. And you can draw lines when those epidemics stopped.

So that was the medical care?

Yeah, that was. And then I worked, as I said, for this war criminals camp. And then there was an opening in a transportation section of the military government in town. And I heard about and I tried for that job. And I was an interpreter there.

What about the war criminals job?

The war criminals camp, we prepared these people. Once they were processed, there was no more job for me there. They were interesting to see. They had all kinds of people working.

A woman with a PhD in chemistry, and a PhD in philosophy was single-handedly responsible for 8,000 deaths on experiments, unbelievably bad experiments, unbelievably bad. Never learned anything from it. You just killed the people. Oh.

Did you meet any of the former guards that you knew?

No. No. I never. No, they scattered.

These were higher level people. We also had-- a famous German film star was there. And there was a women's section there also. But I worked mostly in the men's section.

There was an American agent who came from Czechoslovakia. His name was Karl Friedman. I don't know what he did. It turns out my adopted parents met him before I had met them.

Oh.

And he sure prepared terrific dossiers on people. Because we knew the name of their high school teacher. We knew which high school they went to. We knew which party they were in, which section of the party they were in, what time they were where.

Even got some idiosyncrasies of various schools, so if they said which school, he says OK. Who was the math teacher? And we could check it out.

Mhm.

There was a considerable bit of information piled together. They were not innocents.

So you said you were interrogating people?

Yeah, interrogated people. And then that was for a period of about three weeks or so, three or four weeks. Then I got this job with the military government.

And I used to go out a lot with GIs. In fact, I lived in a house that GIs lived in. I lived in the loft, so to speak.

And I went to a USO show. And at this USO show, I ran into-- a member of the USO show was trying to buy a camera from a German. And he was sputtering in broken Yiddish.

And then I translated for him. And the name of this guy is Harry Hines. He was a small bit actor in old cowboy movies.

He's sort of a poor man's version of this character who always had a beard on-- now I can't remember. He was known as a character actor in a lot of cowboy movies. His name was Harry Hines.

And Harry Hines introduced me to the people who eventually became my adopted parents. And they came from the United States, originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota. And they moved to California in the '30s.

And my adopted father's name is Ben Rashal, R-A-S-H-A-L. But his professional name was Rochelle, R-O-C-H-E-L-L-E. And my adopted mother's name was Jane Rochelle. And they were known as a dance team of Rochelle and Bibi. And they were headliners. And they played at the Paramount in New York, and on The Strand in New York, and other places.

They had no children. And when they came to Europe with the USO trip, they wanted to help somebody.

So I ran into them, and we started talking. And when I met them, somebody was visiting there, a singer by the name of Jane Froman. And Jane Froman was a very well-known, a popular singer in the United States.

And she was in the crash, I think, of a Pan American clipper. And she had lost a leg. And even though she had only one leg, she was still a very popular singer. And I met her there.

So we started talking. And I went back the next day. And they asked me, would I like to go to America. And I said, let's go.

[LAUGHS]

I did go back and tell the people at the military government that I'm leaving. Because otherwise, they would have had a patrol out looking for me. Because they thought there might be some people-- they were still arresting people. And I worked with the CIC there when they did some interrogation and whatnot.

So ironically, the major who was in charge of the military mission in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, his name was Major Heil, H-E-I-L. Very nice man, but I told him I was going to go.

So I traveled with this USO show. I was in charge of operating the spotlight. That was my job and to bring water to the acrobatic dancer, a very nice lady called Nina Nova from Denver, Colorado, who spent her precious coupons to buy me new boots. And I was so small, I only wore the women's clothing. But I outgrew it within weeks. I changed sizes.

But we traveled together from Garmisch-Partenkirchen through Salzburg. We were in Mozart's town in Salzburg. And then, eventually, we traveled together to Paris.

You could just travel like that with no papers, no nothing?

Well, if you're traveling with the USO show, you just sit with the guys and you go across borders. They don't ask. They think everybody-- and they gave me an American uniform.

Now when I got to Paris, there was a Romanian ligation in Paris. The ambassador-- not the ambassador, the consul in Paris from Romania, hadn't been in touch with his government in two or three years, you know. He had a flag.

He had a house. I think his wife was French. He obviously must have had enough money to last out the war there.

And when we went there with my adopted father, I told him in advance. I said, look, the Romanians are all very rank conscious. He's probably going to call you general. If he calls you general, don't correct him. If he calls you Colonel, don't correct him.

Because they'll start at the top and work down to where you say that's what I am. I said, don't correct them. The USO's insignia is a bird, a sort of a wide-winged bird. I wouldn't call it an eagle.

But I knew that this guy, all he knew about American uniform was that an eagle is a colonel. He called my adopted father a colonel. Well, a colonel was next to God in 1945. I said don't correct him.

So he didn't have passport forms, either. So we said that's OK. Just type it out. All we need is a stamp, you know, and his signature.

So I was officially adopted there at the Romanian embassy. And then with that, we could go to the American embassy, which is at the Rue Gabrielle Number 2, just off the Place Concorde. And I got to know that place very well.

We went to American embassy for the adoption, to apply for my visa. And they play an interesting game. They say sure, we'll get you a visa. But you have to have a steamship ticket.

Then you go to the steamship company. And they say, sure, we'll give you a steamship ticket, if you give us a visa. So I got the steamship company to say we will guarantee passage between these two dates. And that was good enough.

And then they gave me a visa. And actually, my last name is Benko, with two dots over the O in Hungarian. But at the American embassy, they didn't have an umlaut on the typewriter. And they asked whether I really wanted that, then I'll have to wait and go to the other building or see if they can find. I said never mind.

Right. I'm Benko.

I became Benko as of then. I didn't want to change my name, although my adopted parents would have. Because I said, I'll never find my aunt. Because she knows what my last name is, so she'll be looking-- and not, as it turned out.

But really, they were very nice. But they helped me get in the country. It was understood that I was going to be on my own when I got here.

But they were very generous. And they arranged for me for a place to stay in Paris. They found out, for example, that in Paris, the Rothschilds, the much maligned Rothschilds, well, they do a lot of good, too.

And they ran a block long rooming house, which they owned. And the name of the street is Rue Guy Patin, spelled G-U-Y P-A-T-I-N. Guy is the first name, Patin is the last name, some French hero. I looked it up once, but I forgot what Mr. Guy Patin did.

It's right where Boulevard BarbÃ©s runs into Boulevard Magenta. And they run in at right angles. And this street connects that at a triangle. And it's right near the BarbÃ©s-Rochechouart subway station.

And that's where I lived after my adopted parents went back to the United States. My papers hadn't come through. I had to wait in Paris till my papers came through. Meanwhile, they had to go back to work in the United States.

How did you support yourself?

They left me some money. And then I did interpreting for various GIs, or GIs who wanted to go someplace in Paris. And I'd be their translator.

And I got to know Paris. I got to know the Louvre very well. Every day I used to go to the American embassy to find out whether my visa arrived. And they'd say no.

And I'd have the day to myself. Or I'd go out with people. And there were a lot of interesting people in Paris. An American composer by the name of Mark Blitzstein was there. And he was just a GI writing music.

And I'd go with GIs sometimes to classes at the Sorbonne. And I'd go to concerts. And I lived like a GI loose on the town in Paris.

So were you going out with young women, too?

Oh, yes, yes. And that's why it was difficult to go to high school after that. [LAUGHS] I had unlimited hours.

When my adoptive parents were living in Paris, I lived in a suburb called Chateau de CrÃ©cy. And the Chateau de CrÃ©cy was the headquarters of the USO. And I saw every act of vaudeville that ever existed between 1930 and 1945 at the USO in Paris. And there were some big stars that came through.

And there was a huge dining hall that was presided over by an American sergeant who ran it like a very strict cafeteria. Anyway, I remember him telling some very well-known star, put her tie on. She couldn't have her breakfast without her tie on in his dining room.

But they were very generous with food. My adopted father would sit down, and he would take something like a half of a quarter pound of butter, and mix it in my cereal. And I ate incredible amounts. People used to watch me eat. [LAUGHS]

Because I'd eat two bowls of cereal and two servings of eggs.

Really. How old were you then?

I ate an awful lot.

Your teeth were OK during all this, too?

No, I had problems with my teeth afterwards, but not immediately then. I had, mostly, a sore foot. And my foot was sore, mostly. But that was the most obvious sign, that my foot would drag after a while.

And I saw a good deal of Paris then. The French dealt very badly with foreigners is the truth. I was brought up as a great admirer of French culture, because they sponsored Romania. And my teachers had gone to school in France. And they went to the Ecole Normale.

And France was very highly thought of. But they treated strangers like dirt. And eventually, I had to bribe myself to get the police permit to leave France. I literally bribed my way by giving cigarettes and cigars to the various officials.

I got the stamp to leave France. Because you had to have a permit that showed that you hadn't committed any crimes from the Paris Prefecture of Police. The Paris Prefecture of Police's line up is like an old-fashioned bank with little teller windows. Well, there are about 25 in a row. And there's nobody at 24 windows.

And on the 25th window, it says etrangere. And the line runs out and around the entire block. And the other guys are sitting with their green shields, you know, like old poker dealers, doing nothing. And the etrangeres are running around. And then they let you through.

Well, that's how I got my permit. My adopted father was very resourceful in getting me a room on a boat. He went to the

editor-- one of the writers on The Stars and Stripes, he had a lot of friends at The Stars and Stripes, which was edited in Paris.

And at that time, a story was going around that a general had shipped something like three racehorses and I don't know what else back on a ship going back to the United States. And he said, look, he said, either this kid who's been through the war gets a place, or I'm going to publicize that this guy did it. And we've got the goods. We've got the pictures and so on. So I got a place on the boat.

So the pressure--

Yeah.

You were saying about giving cigars, so why don't you talk about that? That must have been--

My adopted father, he bought the cigars at the PX, and the cigarettes. And that's what helped me get the permits to get out.

So when you traveled, you were going by yourself?

Well, no. I traveled with a document that I got from the Romanian consulate.

True, but the Rochelles had left already.

Yeah. But I was in Paris. They left from Paris. And so I had my passport from the Romanian consulate. And then I had my visa from the US and my ticket.

And they even arranged for me to have fake papers to go from Paris to Bordeaux. I traveled as captain US. Because we had a friend at the USO. And the USO had papers with temporary rank. So you could get a priority place on a railroad car.

So I traveled from Paris to Bordeaux and caught my ship. And, well, it's a historic irony that you probably remember sometimes in American history about the Nelson-- it's called the Aldrich Nelson tariff.

Tell us more.

OK, well, this was an anti-trade measure. Because it was a trade. Well, I came over on a ship named the Nelson W. Aldrich.

[LAUGHTER]

I always thought it was ironic to name a trading ship-- it was a Liberty ship. So I came to New York. And my adopted parents' agent was supposed to meet me there.

But he couldn't get there in time. And a man from the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society met me. He met every boat that came from Europe.

Amazing.

He was a wonderful man. His name was Mr. Schwartz. I didn't know him from a hole in the ground. And he just looked at me.

And he says, Mr. [NON-ENGLISH]. And I said yeah. So we started talking. And usually, he met people who hardly spoke English. And he was very nice.

And I told him that I will be picked up. But he already took me to a hotel, arranged for a room for me. And then he says, just in case they don't show up, you'll be taken care of.

And he didn't know that you were coming, in particular, did he?

No, no, he didn't know that I was coming. His job was sit there and meet the boats. You know, people contribute money for things like HIAS and they never know what they do.

Mhm.

And what they did was wonderful. Yeah. And anyhow, my adopted parents' agent picked us up. And so next thing, I'm riding in his car.

Next thing, I'm in Scarsdale, New York. Of course, I didn't know Scarsdale from a hole in the wall. It was a very elegant neighborhood. And we were riding home on the bus. We take the train to Scarsdale. I'm going to his home.

My entire assets consist of a suitcase in which there are two wool blankets. There's one shirt, one pair of underwear, everything else I'm wearing. [LAUGHS] I wasn't going to give up those blankets.

So we were riding on the bus. And he says-- to this day, I don't even remember was it NBC? He turns around and he introduced me. He says, this gentleman here, he's a president.

And I still don't know. It's NBC or CBS. And I said, what's that?

And they both-- they had a roaring-- [LAUGHS] but when I said, what's that, and I still don't know what I said that's so funny. So I stayed with him for a while. And then I--

This was the agent or--

The agent, yeah. Turns out the agent originally came from Romania to this country in the First World War and he now lived in Scarsdale. His name was Smith, Eddie Smith. And he had an office in the Paramount building just off Times Square. And he had been my adopted parents' agent for a long time.

And where were they?

They were playing someplace in Chicago. So I stayed then with a friend of theirs, because they wanted to show me New York. And they gave me some money. And they said, when you get lost, call up. So I didn't get lost in New York.

It sounds like it must have been a lonely time for you being in a brand new country on your own.

Yeah, but I was very joyous, you know? Actually, I really didn't expect gold in the streets or things like that in New York at all. I really wasn't all that uninformed.

I was amazed at-- what struck me most was that I had come from someplace where everything was war torn. And every face that you looked into had the scars of wars and, you know, friend or foe. It's as if you'd been stamped with age, and pain, and suffering, and being dragged down.

In Paris, especially in Germany, Paris was a little more cheerful. And there were elements of cheer. But people were so bad off in terms of hunger. And the only thing you could buy with that ration tickets were bread and tomatoes. I ate so many tomato sandwiches. [LAUGHS]

And everyone was trying to sort of primp themselves out of the war mentality. But Paris was as filthy as New York is now. And it had suffered a great deal.

And when I arrived in New York, New York was incredibly friendly. And it was clean. And I remember thinking that newsstands, papers in newsstands regularly? And that was unheard of.

And people actually went in restaurants and ordered things and were served. And you ordered whatever was served instead of this is what we have today. And I used to watch people eat outside Horn & Hardart. I couldn't believe there was so much food in one place.

And then people told me a long story about how they suffered during the war. And their hardship was that they only got half a pound of butter or something. And that was very strange. I went to the Hayden Planetarium and some museums in New York. And then I went to California. And California was much stranger for me. And I went cross country--

New York to--

--to California. I took a bus trip. And that's where I first ran into Jim Crow. The bus lines were on strike. So I went on American Bus Line. That went to Chicago, from Chicago to Indianapolis. Indianapolis is the first place where I saw Jim Crow.

I was riding with a Black ex-GI who had this emblem, it's called the ruptured duck. It's the symbol that you were a veteran in the Second World War. And we had been in some of the same places. And we were chatting.

And I said, well, let's go eat together. And he said, we can't. I said, you don't want to eat?

I assumed that he didn't want to eat with me because I was a kid. He says, oh, no. He says we have to go to separate rooms. And I couldn't believe it. [WHISPERING] I couldn't believe it.

And then I got to Los Angeles. And I stayed at my adopted parents' house for a short while. And then I got in touch-- there was an article about me in the LA Times.

And that's how I got in touch with my aunt. Someone they knew, someone I'm actually distantly related to lived in Los Angeles and came to the house and talked to me in Hungarian. I remember he said, in Hungarian, you look just like Ilus. Ilus was my mother's name. So I knew he knew me.

Really.

Yeah.

Was this just a wild coincidence?

No, there was an article in the LA Times. And he was a barber in the Paramount Studios. Had been there since the mid '30s or so. And he read the article. It was in the Sunday LA Times. And a lot of people called up from that article and wished me happy life. And they were very nice.

But he came to the door. He wanted to see me. And then he told me where my aunt lived. My aunt had moved during the war, and therefore she didn't have a telephone. You couldn't get telephones during the Second World War in New York.

So then I got in touch with my aunt. And within two weeks, I was on my way to New York.

That must have been--

Yeah.

Extraordinary.

Yeah.

To have a relative.

It was. Well, I knew I had an aunt. And it was really shocking. My aunt resembled my mother.

When I got off the train in New York, she wore an identical shade of a green suit my mother had. I thought for a moment it was my mother. But it wasn't.

And my aunt was very good. She had little formal education. She came here in 1928, married her husband. It was an arranged marriage. They came from villages not too far apart.

And she had three children, twin boys and a girl. And the girl was a little younger than I. And the two boys were about two years younger than-- no four years younger than I. So they lived--

What were their names?

Oh, Friedman, Martha and Louis Friedman were their names. And her daughter's name is Charlotte, Charlotte Friedman. It's now Charlotte Pritikin. And she lives in San Fernando Valley now. She's married to her husband, Pritikin.

And her two brothers were George and Frank Friedman. Only Frank is alive today. George was murdered in 1969. We still don't know who.

But they were a wonderful family, a very viable family. They were very crowded in a two bedroom apartment with three teenagers. So the girl had the bedroom. The parents had a bedroom. And then the three boys slept in pull out beds in the living room, this including me.

And she just refused to treat me as if I was disabled. So she told me things about this country. First she told me, what I'm going to tell you now, you won't believe. But I'm going to tell you anyhow. It's just your reminder.

She said, first of all, education is free. Impossible. You can go to school as far as you want. You can work and go to school-- unheard of in Europe.

Why was it? You wouldn't have time? Kids don't work in Europe until they're adults. It's not the custom.

Only English kids work in Europe. All the others don't. They're really trained to be parasites. And sometimes they get to be middle aged parasites. And she said, you know, working.

In Europe, my father, one summer he wanted me to become an engineer. So he apprenticed me. So I would have the apprentice training. Because you have to pass the apprentice exam in order to get to the better engineering schools.

His friends called up and said, are you short of money? Your son's apprenticed? What's the matter with you? It was a dishonor for a middle class person to wear the blue uniform of a blue collar worker.

But she taught me more about civil rights than anybody. Did I tell you that story, when she--

No, you haven't really talked about your wife.

OK. She was a woman who lived in the United States as an American. She came here with a deliberate purpose of adopting a new country.

She didn't bring her old culture. And it didn't wear away. She reached and embraced it.

And she learned American customs. And she knew American law and what her rights were. And she took them very

seriously.

The day I arrived, the day after I met her at the railway station and I was still overcome emotionally because she looked so much like my mother, [CRYING] Aunt Martha, she takes me home. And it's lunchtime. And her kids were going to come home from lunch for school to meet me.

We hadn't been in the house maybe 5 minutes, and doorbell rings. This is a typical New York apartment, a long front corridor and then rooms off the side. And the doorbell rings.

She goes to open it. And I could see past her. There was a cop so large he darkened the hallway. And she was about 4 foot 10, small, thin. And she says yes?

And he says is this the resident of Mrs. So-and-so? And she looks at him, what's the matter with your hat? What's the matter with your hat?

I'm looking-- at this moment, I'm looking for windows to climb out of. We're on the fifth floor, I'm thinking of jumping to the next window. And I know there's a fire escape there. I wasn't going to get arrested by a cop, whatever, you know. Cops is what I avoided.

So I see he removes his hat. And he says, may I come in? And she says no.

Have you got a warrant? He says no. Then stay there.

I was petrified. I thought the Earth would end and it would open up and swallow us both. Or we would both be in jail and the key would be thrown away. I only knew absolute authority. There's nobody could stop a cop in Romania or in Hungary.

And here was 4 foot 10 telling 6 foot 2, must have been 260 pounds. I remember that darkened hallway. And she said no. And then she closed the door and we had lunch.

[LAUGHTER]

Now that, to me, from then on, I knew that I had rights.

What did the policeman want?

He was looking for somebody.

Oh.

Or other. It was-- and I knew.

Marvelous.

She was-- yeah. She told me everything. She told me about the government printing office.

She knew how to write to the government printing office and get a pamphlet. Says people around here throw away money like mad. But you can get the best books on certain subjects here. And you got them from the government printing office.

And I had a hard time getting along with kids, again, because my cousins were 12, and my other cousin was 15 and 1/2 or so. And our lives had been so different. But gradually you--

Did you have any trouble with things like nightmares or other kinds of--

Oh, yeah, yeah, I had a lot. When I first stayed with my adopted parents, they would wake up because I talk in my sleep. And I'd be talking in my sleep, you know, in German and Hungarian and French and English. And then I'd be screaming and such. And then they would wake me up.

Yeah, I did. But gradually that subsided, gradually. Yeah, I had them for a long time. But they do subside.

At times, I was depressed. I felt very lonely when I went to college. As I said, during holidays I was very-- I felt I didn't fit anywhere.

And I did have a great sense of loss. It's like you keep looking at what you're missing. And that is there.

And once in a while, I see my kids. And my parents would be so overjoyed to see them. I missed them an awful lot. When I had to make decisions, I missed the fact that I couldn't consult with somebody that I really, really both trusted and regarded highly.

I was overprotective of my children because of it. And I tried not to be. But I think I tend to be.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

Yeah. It was. And as I said, I still feel that I didn't understand my son during a crucial time of his development. And he's fiercely independent. He's very good-natured and very kind-hearted.

And when he was 9 years old, we were living together when I was going to graduate school in Davis. And he was dying to have a bike, like all the other kids. So graduate stipends being what they are, and I'm just divorced, we didn't have much money.

So I went and I bought him a used bike. And as we were walking out of the store, I would have loved to buy him a new bike. And he said to me, don't worry, Daddy. To me, it's a new bike.

Oh.

And it touched me. It still does.

Well, that's the best of your values, that he said that.

Yeah. But he had a hard time. He was in school, I think, because he thought that I was very strong in a certain way. So he had to show that he was very strong. And I think it cost him an awful lot in his social relationships to be very strong and very rigid.

You know, these things you say, how your being a parent is more affected--

Yeah.

--I mean, in a way, that's a kind of terrible, long term after effects, the kind of childhood you had. I mean, the kind of childhood in the camps.

Yeah.

Did you talk with your children about the Holocaust and your experiences?

I've talked with my son gradually. I didn't tell him a great deal. Above all, my son and I were very close. And we are close.

And I knew that if I told it without some gating, without some stepping, he would hate Germans on sight for the rest of his life. And I know that hate is very destructive. It has its function on a short period of time. I mean, it empowers destitute people to do incredible things.

But long term, it is a powerful negative. And I didn't want him to carry that cross on him. And my bouts of being very serious and very earnest are probably outgrowths of this. And he saw that, anyhow.

So I tried to tell him some things gradually. I haven't told him a great deal. But he's certainly aware of it.

And I told Eleanor, my daughter, who's 11, gradually, a certain amount. And I tell her in bits and pieces.

And then, actually, she brought it up. Because one day-- she's very bright. And one day she said, the holiday came. So where's the other set of grandparents? She was about four then. So I told her that they died during the war. I didn't want to say they were killed. Because then a four-year-old can't handle it.

I'm thinking maybe it would be a good idea to stop the formal--

Oh, yeah, sure. Oh, my God, I didn't realize.

--anybody has questions. And also allow time for the filming of the documents that you have.

Oh, yes. I'm sorry.

Do you have any more questions you would like to ask right now? No? How about you, Dan?

We'll need a few seconds here for the tape to roll. And then--

OK.

OK, tell us about this picture, who these people are, and the date it was taken.

This was a pre-wedding photo of my father and mother, taken about in 1928. Going from--

Left to right.

--left to right, this is my aunt. Her name was Irma Salamon at the time. This is my father, Rudolf Benko. This is my mother, Ilus Benko. That's spelled I-L-U-S.

And this is Martha Salamon, her sister, her older sister. She's the one who came to the United States and lived here and has three children here. And this is her brother, Daje, who emigrated to Israel after the Second World War and passed away there.

Roll tape here. OK.

This is, again, pre-wedding picture with Rudolf Benko, Ilus Benko, Martha Salamon, Daje Salamon, and Irma Salamon. By the way, that Salamon is spelled S-A-L-A-M-O-N.

This is my mother at age-- about 16, dressed to go to school.

And so what town would this have been taken in?

This was taken in a village called Gyeres. That's spelled G-Y-E-R-E-S in Transylvania.

OK. And what about this one?

Now this was a dress up ball where the two sisters went. And this is my mother Ilus and her sister Martha. They're about 17 and 15 here.

And this same picture graced both their homes. It was in my mother's house. I remember it in Europe. And the same picture was at Aunt Martha's house in the United States.

That's my mother, baby Paul. If you take a look at the crocheted collar on my mother, she made that. And if you take a look at the baby outfit that I'm wearing, that was sent by my Aunt Martha from the United States.

Reframe this for a moment.

Paul, same picture as before. That's 1929.

I have to let it run for a minute.

Oh.

And this?

This is at about age two when my parents lived in a house, a villa outside my hometown of Cluj. And we had a little cherry orchard behind the house. And that's my mother, holding me on her shoulders. That must be about 1931.

And that's about the same-- no, that looks like a younger picture. That's my mother holding me as a baby.

I can see what you mean.

And this is--

The same picture.

--a reiteration of the earlier shot.

Yeah, same picture of the earlier shot. And I got those from my Aunt Martha. She gave me all of these pictures. I have literally nothing left from Europe when I came to the United States.

This is?

This is me. I'm not sure what age. I'm guessing about three or so, two or three. And that's my mother in our backyard, where there was a cherry orchard on the back.

And this is the carriage, my summer carriage.

Convertible.

Yes, right. I'm guessing, again, it's about 1932, '31.

And--

Probably '31.

--what town would this be in?

This would still be Cluj. This is all Cluj. It's also called Kolozsvar in Hungarian. And it's called Klausenburg in German.

OK.

This is my mother with a new, contemporary hairdo. And that's me. The outfit is made by my mother. And the outfit my mother is wearing is also made by my mother. She was very accomplished in dressmaking and suitmaking and designing.

And this?

This is the dining room of our house. We had moved from the cottage that you saw in front of the cherry orchard into town. This is an apartment that we lived in.

And in this apartment, my Aunt Irma was married. If you take a look at the tablecloth there, that was made by my mother. And if you see that crochet cover of the sideboard, that was made by her, too.

I just want to get a little larger look here.

Yeah. On the left is a stove. That's how the rooms are heated there. They're fairly high ceiling rooms. And I remember that quite well because that's where my aunt was married, in this apartment of ours. She lived with us at that time.

This is?

This is-- over here is the mother-in-law of Irma, whose name I don't know now. This is my mother. And this is a guest at a wedding down here. And the other person is I, at a wedding.

OK.

Oh, this is a picture of my-- oh.

This is your mother?

This is my mother at a bath. These are high salt baths near my hometown. It's called Szamosfalva. This is a resort. It's like the Salton Sea. It's very high salt content, the water.

OK.

Oh, this is the same wedding. The people you see here, this is a friend at the wedding. Sorry. And so is this.

The next person is my mother. And the person down here is her brother-in-law here. His name was Gombi. That's G-O-M-B-I, with umlauts over the O. And that's me. That was at a family get together.

OK. And here?

Oh, yeah, that's the picture of-- it's out of sequence, actually. It's in the backyard of the place where we lived near the cherry orchard. And that's my Aunt Irma holding me.

Oh, my. This is the wedding of my mother's brother Daje, who was in the first picture. And you can see that this is his bride.

Is Daje the one over-- there you go.

This is his bride. This is the bride. The groom, unfortunately, is not in the picture. I don't know who this is, but it isn't the groom. He must have been taking the picture.

This is her mother. This is Irma over here. And her husband is-- I'm sorry.

It's easier if you look at the photograph, I think, rather than the monitor. And--

Oh, OK.

--point with your--

There. OK. It's hard to see upside down like this.

OK.

OK. And these are various kids at the wedding. Oh, I know who that is now. I'm sorry.

This is Irma's husband right over here, standing here. And the others are various guests at the wedding, including the fiddler. And you can see I'm wearing the sailor suit over here.

[LAUGHS]

OK.

OK. And this is essentially--

Whoops. Same thing.

This is the same shot. You can see that Daje, who was sitting next to the bride before, is now kneeling before her. Here's the bride.

And here's her mother and various kids. And I don't recognize the rest. So they must be guests at the wedding.

OK. And--

Oh. Well, let's see. We're over here.

Same sailor suit. This person over here, his name is Otto. He was a Salamon.

And he immigrated to Israel shortly after his 18th birthday from Romania. This was in the '30s. He was smuggled across borders to get to Israel, much to the dismay of his father. But he got there and lived happily there. He's done very well.

Oh, this is a summer resort, or rather, I went there. I spent my summers with my aunt, who had the cross over here. That's my Aunt Irma and her husband Gombi is there.

And this is the daughter of the host of this party. This is the host, whose name was Zsuzsi. That's Susan and her brother, whose name I don't remember. And that's me. And this is the host's mother-in-law sitting here in the corner.

OK.

And this is a picture by our house, which was on a hillside. At this time, I'm about seven years old here. It's not unusual in Europe, during the summer, to really cut the hair off completely. And kids sort of vie about who has the more shaven head. And I won that competition.

[LAUGHTER]

OK, let's see. That's mother and son?

That's mother and son, exactly. If you take a look at mother's sweater, she made it. If you look at son's sweater, she made it.

What an amazing woman.

Yeah.

And designed it, then made it, I should say. Yeah, I got a new suit. And that picture was in honor of the new suit there, about eight or so.

Did she make it?

No, not this one. But she made others for me. But those are all, everything you see there, you can see the same sweater. Those were taken-- I was about eight at the time

Same set of pictures. She just had a whole set. And my Aunt Martha gave me all of these.

Oh, this is a statue in the center of my hometown called Cluj. On the statue, you can see the figures at the bottom. Those are nobles greeting King Mathias.

This statue was for King Mathias, who was a Hungarian King who was supposed to have been born in Transylvania. And that's why he's honored in the main town square. And the statue is over 100 years old. And the church behind it is, I think, about 600 years old. You can't see the church in the picture, unfortunately.

Oh, this is the Opera House.

In Cluj?

Yeah, this is the Opera House of Cluj. You can see it's drawn after French models. There's a carriage entrance. And that's a usual European opera house. I saw my first opera there, Carmen, and enjoyed a lot of concerts there and operettas.

Oh, I don't know whether you can see that. But that says Drogerie. That's a drug store. And the reason we have a picture of this one is because my Aunt Irma worked in that drug store. This is off one of the squares in Cluj.

And Drogerie is a Romanian word?

Means drugstore, yeah.

Romance language, very similar to-- Yeah. If you saw the cobblestone streets, that was a Roman road once. We still use the same street. And they were just cobble stoned since then.

OK.

This came from a camping trip that Irma and her husband Gombi took. And this is the remains of a Roman tower, the ruins of an old Roman guard tower in Transylvania. A lot of these ruins around, because the Romans were there for a long time. And they have viaducts and these guard towers left.

OK.

Well, you can see that the war intervened. And there are no pictures between 1939 and 1945. Actually, this picture was taken in the fall of 1947. This was my high school graduation picture. I had a little more hair.

From Stuyvesant?

Yes.

This is my first year in college in Berkeley. I came to visit my aunt. And we're standing in her backyard on South Orange Grove Avenue in LA, Los Angeles.

OK.

Again, I'm in first year college. I'm in front of her house, South Orange Grove Drive. And that's my cousin Franklin, who now lives in Palos Verdes. That's, again, 1948, spring of 1948.

Oh. This was taken on my first trip in Golden Gate Park with my cousin Charlotte. That's spring of 1948. She took the picture.

This is my aunt's backyard on South Orange Grove Drive in Los Angeles. And as soon as she got out of her New York apartment, she grew a lot of plants. [LAUGHTER] And that's, again, 1948.

And this?

Oh, that's my Uncle Louie, Louie Friedman, who was my aunt's husband. And we're in front of the Chinese Theater, I think, in Chinatown in San Francisco. They came for a visit. This is about 1950.

OK.

This is Ben and Jane Rochelle, who adopted me in Paris and helped me get into the United States. This is their apartment in North Hollywood, though they don't live there anymore. She passed away. And he's still alive.

They were both dancers, very disciplined dancers, played for a long time, the sore backs and hurt joints. They were wonderful people.

Where-- OK.

This is Irving and Dora Klein who lived in Los Angeles. Before that, they lived in New York. She was my mother's aunt. And in a distant way, we're related to him also.

But they were wonderful to me when I came to the United States. They were very kind.

OK.

This is a picture of my son at age, about, three, at the Child Development Center in Berkeley. And he holds a saw exactly the same way today. It's amazing how posture is conserved. That's my son, Peter.

OK. This is a picture of my son Peter, age about eight when he was going to school.

OK.

This is a picture of my son at his 21st birthday celebration. He came to visit us in Puerto Rico. I was there as a visiting professor for a year. And he came down to see us. And we're celebrating his birthday together.

And this is your wife?

And that's my wife, Sandy. Oh, that's right. We hadn't introduced her before. Actually, I have other pictures of her.

OK. Anytime.

OK. This is 1991, a picture of Eleanor, Sandy, and myself.

How old is Eleanor here?

11.

Well, you have a handsome family.

Thank you. I think so.

Yes, I mean all of them. In this--

OK. This is your daughter.

Yeah. This is my daughter, Eleanor Ilus Benko. Her middle name is--