

Today is September 7, 2003. We're at the home of Erwin Friedlander, whom we are interviewing in Oakland, California. My name is Peter Ryan, interviewer. And Anne Grenn Saldinger is doing the videotaping and interview.

Could I ask where and when you were born, Erwin?

I was born on May 29, 1925 in the city of Cluj, which is the capital of Transylvania, the northern province of Romania.

And how many people were in your family?

My family consisted of my father, my mother, and myself.

Could you give us their names?

My father's name was Bruno Friedlander. My mother's name was Sophie, maiden name Horowitz.

And do you know how long they had been in Romania?

My mother was born in Romania. On my father's side, I'm not even Romanian. My father comes from Czechoslovakia. And our whole family and many families like ours come from a little city called Friedland, which is at the border of Czechoslovakia and Germany.

In Czech it is written with F-R-Y, in German F-R-I-E. And since for a long time Czechoslovakia was part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the name Friedland with I-E has stuck. And most people who stem from there have carried with them the name of Friedlander.

Especially the Jewish families are all more or less related. I found a Friedlander from South Africa who comes from the same little city going back in the genealogy as my own family was.

So if you look in the telephone book in that city, you'd find lots and lots of Friedlanders.

Yes, and in Berlin too. Many have emigrated and then have been killed.

What did your father do?

My father was a banking expert. He was an expert in international trade. And he managed a branch of a bank in Cluj for a while. And then he was transferred in the year 1930 to Bucharest for a more important appointment, after which he worked for a long time for the Romanian government in economical matters.

When he was transferred to Bucharest, did you then move to Bucharest?

We moved to Bucharest, and that's the first time I really learned Romanian. Cluj is a trilingual city. Everybody speaks more or less Romanian, German, and Hungarian because that's the mix of the population.

But I really didn't speak a lot of Romanian. We spoke German at home. And I grew up with an Austrian governess. And when we moved to Bucharest was the first time when I really met children and really met people speaking Romanian. And I learned very quickly.

How old were you then?

Five.

Five.

And then by the age of seven, I had learned French. By the age of nine, English.

You speak English very well.

Thank you.

And then after '44, I had to learn Russian. There was no way around it because there were no manuals to learn physics from. And they had forbidden any Western literature as poisonous disinformation. And so we had to rely on Russian manuals, so I sat down and learned Russian.

Can you remember your early schooling?

Yes. It's a very adventurous schooling. I went to the German evangelical school in Bucharest. It was quoted as one of the best schools. And my father wanted me to have a good education. He always have it hammered into my head that very dark times are coming.

Hitler was on the horizon. And he said, there is one thing nobody can take away from you. And that's your knowledge. So you better sit down on your butt and learn and learn and learn. And that's what I did.

Did you like learning?

I beg your pardon.

Did you like learning?

Yes, I did. I had an uncle, my father's brother, who was an accountant, but a frustrated naturalist. He wanted really to study natural philosophy and geology and astronomy. And whatever he couldn't do because life didn't allow him that, he tried to put it on my shoulders. He tried to make me become what he never managed.

My grandfather died very young and left the two boys orphans. And they were taken care by an uncle. But they were forced to go and study business instead of doing what they wanted. My father wanted to be a painter. And my uncle wanted to be a naturalist.

Well, he couldn't make it. They went, studied economics. My father studied higher economics. My uncle not. But these two people then had an enormous influence in the rest of my life.

Was your uncle older or younger?

He was older than my father by two years.

Your father wanted to be a painter.

That's what he really wanted to be.

Did he ever do any of that anymore?

Oh, he did some very good paintings. They've remained in Romania. A distant cousin by marriage has them now, some of them with holes from the bullets shot during the revolution in '89, which came through the window and lodged into my father's paintings. I saw them when I visited.

So you liked school.

I liked school. I must say something for the German school in Bucharest. It was extremely fair and ecumenical. We had a rabbi to teach us religion and Hebrew. That's in a German school.

Now, was this a private school or a state school?

No, it was a private school.

OK.

It was a parochial school. It was a parochial school of the evangelical community in Bucharest.

Were there many Jews in the school?

Were quite a few. Because it was a sought-after school. It was good. Excuse me a moment. Rosie, can I get a bit of water?

OK.

I'm sorry for the interruption, but my tongue is sticking to my gums, and I can't speak clearly. And that lasted for a while. Thank you. Then-- should we pick up again? OK.

Then Hitler came to power in Germany. And his influence extended into the German community in Romania. It was a big community. The whole southern part of Transylvania was populated by Germans.

And they recruited youngsters for the Hitler Jugend, the Hitler Youth. And they started activities around the school. They were not-- and I repeat that-- they were not supported by the teachers or by the principals.

There was just one teacher, the physical education teacher, who later turned out to be an SS instructor. And this one really persecuted Jews, beat us up and so on. But all the other professors behaved gentlemen-like, perfect. In '38--

How about the students?

The students were a mixed bag. It will sound funny, but the worst Nazis were the ones of Austrian extraction. There were Austrians who were really wild Nazis. And the worst of all were the girls' school. The schools were separate. In Romania there were no co-ed schools.

So we came to hate the girls from the girls' school because they always incited the boys in the boys' school to beat up the Jews.

Did you experience any of that?

Yes, once seriously. But I fought back.

Could you describe?

They ambushed me when I was going home in the evening, around the corner from the school and attacked me from behind and started raining fists on my head and on my shoulders. And I kicked back with my legs. I think I hit one of them where it hurt most. And he gave up. And the other one ran away.

And were they calling you names or saying--

Yes, obviously.

--they were--

Obviously.

How old were you then?

What years?

That was in the year '37, so I was 12 years old.

Did you tell your parents? Yes, I told my father, and you said, good for you. It didn't repeat itself. They were isolated cases in my class. And I hope I taught them a lesson.

Were there other incidents that you were involved in?

At that time, no, except that we had every year a sports festivity at the end of the year, which was strictly regimented along Nazi lines. And we had the girls next to the boys. And it was taunting and insults from the girls who made the thing most unpleasant. But amazingly, the majority of the boys didn't take part, didn't follow the girls in beating us as they incited them.

Now, did you have friends in your classes?

Beg your pardon.

Did you have friends in your classes?

Yes. I had a Sudeten German, if you know what that means.

Yes.

And then there were a few Jewish boys. And there was a very-- hard to define a friend or not. There were a couple of brothers, Swiss, correctitude personified. They were also the first in the class, the best regarded students.

And with them, I was on very good terms without saying that I was on very friendly terms. It was all very correct like the Swiss are. I never had problems with them. I didn't have real friends among the Germans. Maybe there, there was a sort of barrier which couldn't be crossed, but no open hostility.

So most of your friends were Romanian.

No, there were almost no Romanians, and the Romanians were nasty. No, most of my friends were Jewish.

OK. Did they consider themselves Jewish or Romanian or--

Beg your pardon.

Did they consider themselves Jewish or Romanian or both?

Jewish. In Romania, the word nationality has another meaning as in America. In Romania and in most of southeastern Europe and even in Europe-- when you get an American passport, you see you have American nationality. Over there, this is completely wrong.

The country has a number of nationalities considered as ethnic sections of the population. Jews are considered if you want descendants of the old tribes of Israel. And they constitute a nationality. They would ask you or tell you citizenship, Romanian, nationality, Jew. And that was what was put on your identity card.

Even before Hitler.

Even before Hitler.

OK.

As a Jew, you were already a different nationality. You had Romanian citizens of Hungarian nationality, of German nationality, of Jewish nationality.

So they treated them as a nation.

They treated them as a nation, not as a religion.

Yeah.

Religion came by the way. There was no essential point because we got Jewish religious instruction in the middle of the German school as I told you. There was no problem about that.

Had your father fought in World War I?

Yes. On the Austrian side. And he was interned afterwards by the Romanians.

For a long time or a short--

A year.

A year.

Order of a year.

Yeah. Did he talk about that much?

No, he didn't talk very much about that.

Were you a religious family?

Very strange. Split right down the middle. My father was a freethinker and a Jew, considered himself as a Jew, but nonobservant. My mother came from a rabbinic family. And it was exactly the opposite. My grandfather was a small rabbi in an even smaller town.

So they were split down the middle. Which side did you fall on?

Rather on my father's side.

The freethinkers.

The freethinkers. I stuck very much to Jewish history and tradition but not religion as such.

So you didn't get bar mitzvahed?

No, I didn't.

And did you go to synagogue?

I did go to synagogue quite a number of times. I learned some Hebrew. I very much regret that I didn't have time to really learn Hebrew. The [INAUDIBLE] which I have are too small. When I went to Israel, I had the funny sensation

that everybody around me was talking something incomprehensible and which still sounded familiar.

That lasted till '38. In '38 we were called to the principal of the school-- we, the Jewish boys. But the principal told us that to his great regret, he is obliged to fire us from the school, to send us away. The German embassy didn't allow him anymore to keep Jews in the school.

What he could do was run around for a whole day like crazy to get us a spot on a Romanian school, in a public school because the next day was the day where you passed the-- what it was called-- the capacity exam, which is the exam between the fourth and the fifth secondary grade, which gives you entry to the higher part of the secondary school.

If you didn't do too well, did your education stop at that point?

No. I just got into the exam. I took it with medium grades because I had prepared it in German and had to take it a second day in Romanian. But then I accommodated and went along quite well. This lasted for a year. Then I was kicked out by the Romanians, who didn't tolerate Jews anymore.

This is in '39.

Yeah. At that moment, a number of teachers--

[INAUDIBLE]. This was in '40. [INAUDIBLE]

Maybe. Maybe here my memory fades me.

Yeah.

I only go by one year more, one year more, though, because that's all. One year after they kicked me out from the German school, they kicked me out from the Romanian school. Then a number of Jewish teachers and university professors who had also been kicked out of their positions rallied and created a Jewish school.

Now, was this before the outbreak of World War II?

Right before the outbreak of World War II.

So the government was really beginning--

Romania was neutral.

But it was beginning to lean in a--

It was beginning to lean, but it was still neutral. Romania entered the war on 22nd of June, 1941. And so we had a very good school, ran in a sort of apartment house like this one. They had just managed to get, let's say, a grant. Some Jewish family which emigrated left the school the house.

And we learned, one here and one there. And we had very good teachers. Some of them were first-class university professors. And that lasted till the Romanian government closed down the Jewish school and then in desperation--

You were actually kicked out of the Romanian schools before there was any Nazi influence. The Romanians--

No, the influence there was. The Iron Guard, if you know what that is, was gaining importance in the country.

But they were still officially neutral.

Yes, they were still officially neutral.

But the government was willing to take a position where Jewish children were not allowed in Romanian schools.

Yes.

Doesn't sound very neutral.

Yes.

Now I must mention something which I didn't mention in the beginning. Maybe I said it. I'm going to say it again. I was not Romanian, even by formal standards. I was born a Czechoslovakian citizen. My father, my mother, and I, we lived on Czechoslovakian passports.

When the Germans took over Czechoslovakia as a protectorate-- they called it the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia-- they confiscated our Jewish passports, and they gave us, of all things, German passports with swastika and all, saying German Reich passport in red ink added protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the big red seal J for Jew on it.

Do you remember about what year that was that--

'39. Jo must be wrong with the '40. I don't know.

[INAUDIBLE]

Here my memory is not sure enough.

Now, you were living in Romania.

Yes.

Why did they give you a German passport?

Because I had been a Czechoslovakian citizen. They had taken over Czechoslovakia as a protectorate of the German Reich. So they issued us German passports because a protectorate is already part of the German empire. And the Germans are systematic people.

Whose issuing this? The Romanians? Germans?

The German embassy.

The German embassy.

I have the passport. I can show it to you.

Yeah, I believe you.

And then there came an order. OK, then my parents looked desperately for a place for education. And they found one, and that was the French high school of the French Institute for Higher Studies in Bucharest, which was run by the French Education Ministry.

They couldn't take Romanian Jews. That was against the law. But they could take foreign citizens of any kind because in this respect, the French embassy was sovereign. The French embassy was run from Vichy, from the collaborating French, the traitors who had gone over to the Germans.

But the whole diplomatic population of the embassy were Gaullists were people adhering to the free French and considered their own ambassador as an enemy. So they took me in. And for a while I went to the French school with very good professors, a very good school, until on orders from the German embassy I was sent to forced labor because the Romanians could not touch me formally.

I was a foreign citizen. They could not send a foreign citizen to forced labor. But the German embassy demanded expressly in writing that the Jew Erwin Friedlander should be sent to forced labor along with Romanian Jews.

Now, is this still before Romania is in the war?

No, at that moment Romania was in the war.

OK, now--

We have a clear delimitation. It was after 22nd of June, 1941.

Right. When they invaded Russia.

Yes.

Yeah. When you were studying in school, what courses did you like?

Mathematics, physics, chemistry.

You were always--

And languages.

--the scientific part.

Yes.

And languages.

And languages.

And did you know what you wanted to do?

Yes, I wanted-- obsessively, I wanted to do physics.

Physics.

Yeah. I didn't care. I mean they could tell me anything they wanted in the world. I had decided I want to do physics. I can give you a very-- how should I say-- amusing or strange incident or example.

When I was 16 years old, when I had my birthday, a good friend of mine who lives now in Germany made me a present of a book on the most modern discoveries in physics. This book contains a few photographs, photographs of tracks of particles in cloud chambers from cosmic rays and the photograph of the cyclotron, which is an accelerating device which produces artificial cosmic rays, if you want, which was located here in Berkeley.

The magnet of this machine, which is now obsolete beyond obsolescence, is standing out in sun and rain in front of the Lawrence Hall of Science, if you know where it means, on top of the hill. Can you imagine?

For me, it was always a dream to get to Berkeley. Can you imagine the sensation when I got to Berkeley and found this



old relic which had triggered my imagination standing there in the rain?

It was like an old obsolete airplane.

Yes. And from the day I read this book, I told my parents they can say whatever they want. I'm going to do physics.

Did they support you.

Yes.

Both of them?

I went to the Romanian University to study physics.

So were you 16 when they said you had to go to forced labor?

'41-- 16 years.

Yeah.

And that went like this. I got a paper saying the Jew such and such has to be present for forced labor at the territorial recruiting center because we were placed under military rule. Among other things, missing a day of forced labor was cause for court martial and could have you ended in front of a firing squad. We were perched-- we were about 200 boys in a room like this.

Now, you were not living at home then?

Oh, yes.

OK, you were.

We were sent in the morning to be at 6 o'clock or whatever it was there in a room somewhat smaller than this, 200 boys, all schoolboys, all from high school.

So your father, was he made to come?

No, he was beyond 50. I'm a late child. And we were cramped in that room with the leaky roof and the rain falling down our necks. And then we were divided into groups, which were assigned to a dual command.

We were assigned formally to the municipality of Bucharest. And the municipality gave us over to the passive defense of Bucharest. Now, passive defense is the opposite of active defense, which meant anti-aircraft artillery. Passive defense is what begins after the bombs have started falling.

Cleaning up?

Beg your pardon.

Cleaning up the damage.

That would be the simplest thing, cleaning out unexploded bombs, which could go off any minute.

Well, sure.

And where one had to dig with one hand, the dirt away, to liberate the fuse and to make it possible in principle for the

engineers from the army to come and defuse the bombs. Some of the bombs were simply duds that didn't work. American production was not uniformly good.

And some of the bombs were set for delayed explosion, to explode three, four, eight, 12 hours after having fallen, so as to disorient the people who took care of that. And some boys lost their lives this way.

So your job was to locate the bomb and take--

And clean--

Clean around it so they could get to it and defuse it.

Yes. They didn't let us do this because we weren't trained for that.

Sure.

We were given a lot of assignments. That was not the only one. We had to dig trenches, and we had to repair old trenches. Bucharest was full of so-called air raid shelters, which was an irony. They were simply trenches covered with planks and some earth.

They were good if a bomb landed within 50 meters or 100 meters and only the shrapnel was flying around. If the bomb fell closer, you were squashed in the trench.

This was dangerous work.

Very dangerous work.

Were you afraid?

Yes. I would be lying if I said I wasn't.

Did they have you digging around these bombs in a team or one person?

Usually two persons.

Two persons.

And then there happened something which the boys thought was a miracle, but it wasn't such a big deal as it looked like. They went around looking for people who knew how to handle a typewriter. And I was one of them.

So they assigned us to centers for passive defense, which were really run by officers who were practically illiterate, but they needed to do some bureaucracy. So they used us for the bureaucracy.

Now, this would have been a nice and cushy job, but the assignment was-- we were assigned as couriers which meant that if an air raid was on and the telephone communications were disrupted, we had to carry messages by hand in the middle of the raid and with bombs falling all around us.

Now, who would be bombing? The Russians?

Well, I think I have had the special distinction of being bombed by the Russians, the Americans, the British, and the Germans. I think I am the only-- I and my group are the only ones who have had this distinction.

At the beginning of the war when Romania invaded Russia in June '41, the Russians tried a few bombing raids on the oil terminal at Constanta. That's the main Romanian port on the Black Sea.

They tried to reach the Romanian oilfields but didn't and bombed a few places in Bucharest very ineffectively. The standing joke was that the Russians couldn't hit an outhouse. The Russians never had a long-distance bombing force, and so their rates were more or less ridiculous, very ineffective.

Then for a long time there was nothing. Then there came one American raid.

'43.

Yes. I must warn you that I am an air war buff, so stop me if I go off.

Feel free.

When America entered the war, they needed some planes in a hurry in Singapore and sent them over the Atlantic to North Africa to Singapore. But Singapore had fallen by the time the planes reached North Africa. And then somebody, a colonel called Harbison, decided that it would be a good moment to attack the Romanian oilfields.

You must understand something. Romania had the biggest oil reserves in Europe. Romania is the worst place in the world wherever oil was exploited. Before Oklahoma and before all the other oil finds, before Saudi Arabia, before everything, the first oil extracted and used for industrial purposes was a Romanian oil in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains.

With a number of big refineries built in and around the city of Ploiesti, which means [? reigning ?] city.

Which means what?

[? Reigning ?] city. And in the First World War, that was already a problem. But in the Second World War, the Germans ruled from the north cape to the desert of Africa, and from the fields of Romania to Stalingrad, all on Romanian oil.

It was essential to keep this oil intact for the Germans, so the Americans tried an attack with a few planes, which happened to be in North Africa. It was a washout. They came in at very great risk, flying very low, did some damage, but the damage was repaired in a few months. They didn't really do a lot of harm to the Romanian oil industry.

Then Romania got heavier and heavier involved in Russia. And the Allies told Romania to get out of the war or else. And the "or else" meant the fact that-- meanwhile the Americans had conquered the south of Italy. And on the Adriatic Coast there are planes and an excellent territory for building airbases.

So they built a huge complex of airbases around Foggia in Southern Italy. And suddenly the Romanian oilfields were within range of the normal American bombers, the Liberators, the B-24s. And the warnings which Romania got implied very clearly that now we're in a position to bomb you on a regular basis, not just as a hazard.

And since I was in one of those passive defense organizations, we got more and more strong indications that real air raids were coming. And on the 1st of April, 1944, the Americans came in force, some 400 bombers and one Bucharest.

What they really wanted were two objectives. The German Kommandatura, the German supreme command for Romania, which was located in the military academy, a very distinctive building on a hill, and the big marshaling yard.

To understand what this marshaling yards meant-- Romania is a centralized country, very much like France. All the important rail lines in Romania ran through Bucharest. You wanted to go from Moldavia to [NON-ENGLISH] from the eastern province to the western province, you had to pass first through Bucharest. So the marshaling yards in Romania were a nexus, a very important point.

At the moment when the Americans attacked on the 4th of April, '44, the marshaling yards were full of trains with

people waiting to be evacuated from Bucharest who just wanted to flee somewhere. Well, the bombing raid caught them there. According to rumor-- I don't know. Nobody ever gave exact figures. But the rumor went that some 5,000 people perished on that day.

I was missed by four American bombs at about 100 yards' distance. I was in the command post of the passive defense with my captain. And I looked out the window, and I was very good at aircraft recognition. I told my captain, Captain, these are B-24s.

He said, I don't care what you see. I've just returned from the front. And what I hear, whistling, those are bombs. Get the hell away from that window. I made one step back, and then the four bombs exploded. A shrapnel the size of the hand went by my nose and into the wall, after which we were lying on the floor and trying to identify ourselves with the floor.

The next big bombing raid was in the oil refinery region. And then these bombing raids went on with regularity, Americans by day, British by night. Somehow, the British accuracy in bombing was much better than the American one. The American would miss their target by miles. The Americans managed to place within a couple of hundred yards their bombs.

We were sent out to investigate what happened to bombers which had been shot down. I had the experience of having to go to look after a British bomber which had been brought down. I found the corpses of the pilots and so on.

The worst thing was I tried to lift the wing, which was very light. It was a very special construction which allowed them to build very light wings, carry more bombs. And I found a bomb standing up like this, sticking in the wing, with the fuse still on.

And I told the sentry which was watching the plane, and the sentry beat all European records for running away, which was stupid. I walked away very carefully after leaving down the wing and walking very slowly not to give any shock to explode the bomb.

Now, were you actually part of the Romanian army at that point or--

We were under Romanian army's orders. We were on loan from the municipality. All they gave us as protection were helmets, French helmets from World War I, just a bit of tin. It still saved me.

On one occasion, one bomb exploded pretty close, or it was shrapnel from antiaircraft. I don't know. Fact is there was a bang on my helmet here, a hole made through it just above my head, went out the other side, went into my sleeve, and stopped on the other side of the sleeve.

How did the Romanian soldiers treat you?

Badly. It was like this. We had civilian overseers over the soldiers. They kept the soldiers to keep us under the guns, incapable of reacting. And when they had any reason or opportunity, they beat us up.

I lost my teeth in one beating simply because the civilian overseer, who was by profession a gardener, overheard a friend of mine, who died a few weeks ago, and myself repeating a lesson of chemistry or something.

Repeating a lesson of what?

Chemistry, I think.

Fact is, he got angry. And they said, oh, the gentlemen are intellectuals, but I'm going to show you what is more important, your intellect or my fist. And then he started beating us in the face with his fists for about two hours and with soldiers with pointed guns to make sure we didn't react. And there were many beatings like this.

I can show you a picture of the place where I lived last time before I left Romania. There is a beautiful park there with a

little lake. During the war, this lake didn't exist. There was just a pit which was a sand quarry.

And we had to carry the sand out of the quarry, two people carrying a tray built for four. And it wasn't fast enough for him. So this guy would run after us with nail boots and tread on our heels. Our heels were all bloody, all of us. And he really worked us to the limits of our capacities there. Now there is a beautiful lake there, and people entertain themselves by rowing boats.

Now, you still went home every night?

Yes. They let us go home every night. Around 5 o'clock we had to be back at work.

5:00 in the morning?

Yeah. And it went according to the whim of the supervisor. Could be 8 o'clock in the evening. Could be 10 o'clock in the evening. They made us, for instance--

Erwin?

Yes.

Want to have the oxygen?

Yes. Maybe I should--

Take a break?

--take a break--

OK.

--and take a bit of oxygen because-- a couple of things which you should know.

Are you on?

Yes.

OK.

One was our regiment. As I said, we were subject to the military rule. We had a little booklet. And every day we had to get a stamp in that booklet stating that we had done our labor for the day.

Being caught in the street without the today's stamp in the booklet was court martial. So we were really very much terrorized by having that little booklet stamped every day.

Would it be stamped at the end of the day?

At the end of the day.

Yeah.

So you went home every evening to sleep.

Yes.

And what did you do for eating?

Whatever our parents were managing to give us. They didn't give us food.

Didn't give you food all day.

No. And my father was out of a job.

When did he lose his job?

I beg your pardon.

When did he lose his job?

I thought in '39. He had a pretty high job. He was at the time responsible for the Romanian civil airline. And he got it out of bankruptcy and in the black, even got a favorable mention in the Romanian parliament. Imagine a foreigner and a Jew to boot and still get a mention in parliament.

And then he was involved with Romanian sales of the enormous wheat reserves of Romania. Romania had such an excellent agricultural soil that it was competing in the same league as Canada for quantity and quality. Can't imagine that, the size of the countries and everything.

By the way, Romania is not such a small country as it seems. It's one and a half the size of Michigan. And it houses a population equivalent to that of California today.

We also had a period where we were assigned essentially as slaves for a big crook deal. Knowing that Allied air attacks were coming to Romania, they wanted to have a fire brigade station located outside the city so that after a raid they could come in and extinguish the fires.

Was nice and good, but the deal was crooked. They were an Italian family who owned the construction company. They had managed to get from the Romanians the concession of this mountain, a national exhibition of Romanian industry, which had run its course.

They had then the contract to build these huge garages, which you see now when you go to the Jewish cemetery. They confiscated the land of the Jewish cemetery to build on. And they had Jewish slaves to do the building.

Then they were bringing the old materials from the demolition of the exhibition to the building site. They were bringing the new materials for the building, which were just formally put in the book and then put back into the trucks and sent to private construction sites of that Italian family.

We were under the command of the younger of the two, the son, who was an Italian submarine lieutenant, who had found the going too hot in the Mediterranean with the British and preferred to have a cozy job in Bucharest commanding Jews. Now, we did all we possibly could to sabotage the whole thing.

What kind of thing would you do?

One of the main construction materials was the stuff which was called [INAUDIBLE], which was pressed concrete over wood shavings. You have wood shavings, and then you mix them with concrete, have the whole thing pressed, which is a very good insulator for cold, for sound and so on.

There were huge blocks of it about as far-- as long as from here to the couch. And we had two boys carry one. And every now and then we dropped one and broke one of the old ones. And so they had to replace it with the new ones, which was loss for them.

A few times we got beaten up for that-- we played dumb-- and excused us that we didn't know how to handle the thing. Actually, we did it on purpose. And other things-- we didn't fix the poles well enough, hoping that some big wind would tear the whole thing down.

And we did it, really, at the risk of our lives because then there were the big blizzards of '43, '44. And we had to climb on top of those garages to hammer tar paper to cover the buildings. And we knew that we had weakened the posts, but there were always two of us holding the ladders and two of us working up there.

Somehow we made it. But wherever we could, when they set us to work on some vegetable gardens to feed the population of Bucharest, when the people were out on the front, we undercut some of the vegetables at the root to make sure they don't grow.

We considered ourselves at war with the people who commanded us. You cannot imagine the hatred which was brewing there. And we didn't care. We didn't care if the Americans bombed the daylight out of us. As long as they killed sufficient Germans and Romanians, it was enough for us. And if we went, then we went too, and that was it.

It's hard to express the feelings after you've been humiliated and beaten and insulted. You just don't want anything-- excuse me.

Did you have to wear the Jewish star?

No, we didn't.

Did your father?

No.

No.

Another thing about the administration of slave labor in labor camps-- the Romanians played a double game. Marshal Antonescu, who was the military leader of Romania, hedged his bets. He refused to deport Romanian Jews to the German extermination camps.

He wanted to have them in his rear pocket if at the peace table Romania was losing the war and he would have to show something. Because the Germans insisted camps, Romania built a few, not really extermination, but very harsh treatment camps in a region which is called Transnistria.

You must imagine Eastern Europe like an highland from which rivers flow almost parallel down to the Black Sea. There is the Dniester, which is a normal, natural border between Romania and Russia, which doesn't serve this function today because the Russians have captured the Romanian province of Bessarabia.

So the Prut is the real river which runs down to the Black Sea. And then there is the Dnieper. And--

In Romania is Dniester.

No, no, Dniro.

Yes?

Dniester, Dniro. And between the Dniester and Dnieper-- Between the Dniester and the Dnieper, there is an area which is called Transnistria, the area beyond the Dniester and inside the Dnieper. And there the Romanians built a few camps, where people were very harshly treated.

The worst thing which they did to them was to feed them some sort of peas which are fit only for cattle and horses.

Humans are being paralyzed by this food. A cousin of mine came back paralyzed from there. And a cousin, an uncle of Jo's, came back but not paralyzed.

But very sick.

But very sick. A lot of people died in those camps simply for lack of medical treatment and for bad food. So the Romanians had their own, not extermination camps but very harsh regime.

These weren't even work camps, were they?

Oh, there were some things there. I don't know what. But really, they were selected out for bad treatment. And among us, the Jewish boys, in what we call the schoolboys' detachments, from time to time they would pick up at random a few and send them out there. Nobody knew why. It was on a whim.

Once they brought all of us and the older people who were also working-- they took everybody up to 50 to the velodrome to the bicycle racing track. And there they started selecting people and sending them away.

And I can remember to this day the rest of us who were there, led by the elderly people, saying Kaddish over those who had gone.

Another thing which I remember is-- I told you that when they had this crook deal going for building those garages for the fire brigade they confiscated the territory, which was still unused, of the Jewish cemetery. So we worked in immediate proximity with the cemetery.

And from time to time, the rabbi would come out and bribe one of the soldiers or one of the supervisors to let a few of us come to the cemetery because they didn't have a minyan. They didn't have the necessary number of Jewish grown-ups to be able to hold a valid burial ritual.

And once we were called out, and there was no coffin, really. There was just a wooden box. And when we inquired, it was a box which was stolen from a German regiment and which was soap from the grease collected from the ovens at Auschwitz and places. And it was called Juden Seife, Jew soap. And--

You actually saw that?

Yes.

And so we buried it with Kaddish and all. It was a terrible experience, I must say, something I'm not going to forget.

How did your father spend his days?

Selling whatever he had in the house. He had a wonderful collection of painting reproductions, and he sold, he sold. And he also, from time to time, got from some friend some work accounting or economic or something to be done on the black, and she would get a small fraction of the money. And we would have food for another few days on our tables.

Now, they never made an attempt to have him work in a labor unit?

Beg your pardon.

They never made an attempt to have him work in a labor battalion.

But that was a labor battalion where we worked.

Not you, your father.



No, not-- he was beyond 50.

And they never sent him away.

No, they never sent him away.

Do you know why?

The law said up to 50.

But they sent people away who were over 50 to Transnistria, no?

Yes, but they sent them from among those who were working. It was a catch-22 situation. You couldn't be sent if you weren't part of the working situation, and the working group was up to the age of 50. Also--

[INAUDIBLE]

Also, there is a possibility which I have considered. And that is the rigidity of German bureaucracy. They were rigid enough to send me by name, not by class. I don't think there was another German citizen working anywhere in Romania.

And since my father wasn't 50, he wasn't sent at that moment. If he wasn't sent at that moment, he was dropped from the registers. So I think it was just German bureaucracy which saved him.

But he-- you mentioned about the important jobs he had held.

Yes.

He was then fired or made to leave from--

Fired.

Fired. Because he was a Jew.

Jewish. Yes.

Did you have any experiences while you were in the labor battalion where people treated you well?

Yes, without discussion. I wouldn't conclude what I say without a couple of such-- to begin with, when I was sent off to civil defense, there was a captain there. He really saved my life when he told me to get away from that window.

But when we were there without water and food for a few days after that big bombing raid, he was delivered by a truck some bread, and he shared his bread with us. And provided we just did the work he wanted us to do, he was extremely decent.

He was a simple elementary school teacher from somewhere in a village. But he behaved better than many educated people.

And he knew, of course, that you were Jewish.

Sure. I mean, he knew the whole setup.

Yeah. Did he ever allude to that?

Never.

One way or the other?

One way or the other. Then one day we were sent from one place to another. We were carrying our spades and shovels. And we were in rags, really, and suddenly-- I am being hailed from the opposite side of the street, and a man crosses the street. He was my teacher all along the elementary school.

He came and hugged me and told me to keep my spirits up, that this bestiality cannot go on forever, and I would be free again. And he wanted me to know that he felt for me and wanted me to be free. And that was a pure German, 100%.

And another thing-- when they kicked us out of the German school, two brothers got up and said if our Jewish colleagues go, we go.

Is that the twins?

No.

No.

But they went. Funny thing is the first people whom the Russians wanted to deport when they came were this family. Well, everybody did what they could to give them a good reference.

Did any of the boys try to escape?

No.

No.

One of the boys once lost his patience after he got too many rifle butts and laid out flat one of the soldiers. And we expected him to be executed on the spot. Well, this being Romania, we collected enough from everybody to pay a bribe and have the soldiers transfer somewhere else. And that's how this boy got away with it.

Did you know what was going on in the war?

Yes. We had clandestine radios. I myself am a radio buff and radio builder. And I had a big medical textbook left from a friend. And I excavated the cavity inside the book, cutting page by page to form the cavity. And there I built a little radio. And I got news from the BBC during the war.

So you did that at quite some risk.

Very great risk.

So you would really keep your family informed about--

Yes, but they didn't know how.

They didn't know how. You didn't tell them.

I didn't tell them.

You didn't tell them because you didn't want them to worry.

No.

Where did you keep this radio?

It was in a book. And the book was sitting among my books. But who would look in a book of anatomy? And it was--

Pretty clever.

How did you keep your spirits up?

BBC mainly. When the war was over I wrote to the announcer at BBC. She wrote back. And it was a pleasure. She really kept our spirits up. We had what was called IPA, if you ever heard that word.

There was a rumor. There was always a rumor. Some people had access to radios, one way or another. There were people who were called Jews of second category. These were Jews who had fought along Romania in World War I. And they were given certain rights.

They were excluded from the worst of labor. And they were allowed to keep their radios for a while, some of them. When you inquired from whoever you talked to where you got your information, it was always IPA. IPA was a joke, an acronym of a joke. It was-- you speak Yiddish?

No.

It meant [YIDDISH]. This meant the Jewish rumor mill press agency. It was a mimic of the German press agency. And everybody knew what IPA meant. It meant you had heard it through the rumor mill.

The comic part of it is when there was the Iron Guard rebellion in '41 in the provincial capital of Iasi. That's the capital of eastern Romania-- the German Gestapo went out in force to stop the Iron Guard revolt because the Germans were not interested in disorder behind their front. So they preferred to have the military Romanian government keep the country under control.

What was the revolt about?

Oh, they wanted power. The Iron Guard thought they were the real representatives of fascism. They were just a gang of hooligans. They went from house to house and picked Jewish families and took them to the slaughterhouse and hung them up on hooks.

They missed Jo's family simply because they had a wolfhound. And the dog started growling, and the guy pulled his gun. And another one said, don't shoot the dog. He's not a Jew. And he went to look for victims somewhere else.

And we were saved by a carpenter who used to work for my father who planted himself with a green shirt, which was the emblem of the Iron Guards, in front of our house, telling everybody that the team had already passed and had taken away the Jews.

And that lasted only one night. In the morning, the Romanian army simply shut them up in the public place with tanks on orders from the Germans, or rather with the permission of the Germans. And--

So the rebellion was squashed very quickly, but--

Very quickly, because the Germans--

--many Jews were killed.

Many Jews were killed. The Germans didn't need the disturbance. They wanted order. And now comes the ridiculous part. Once they went out, the Germans, to create order in the city, they wanted to arrest the leadership of the IPA, which didn't exist. It was a joke about an inexistent press agency.

But the Germans, knowing that it is an acronym, assumed automatically that there must be files and officers and an organization and went like crazy around Iasi trying to find the organization of IPA, which did not exist, which illustrates the way of thinking of the Germans, always methodical.

When I was in 1967 in Poland and I went to Auschwitz, I inquired, and I was led to a ledger where my family was registered-- dates they were delivered, how many gold teeth they had recovered, everything. All orderly, nicely, bureaucratically.

How did people feel about Antonescu?

Mixed feelings, you see. In a way, he saved us because he wanted, at the end of the war, to show he didn't kill the Jews.

He wanted to have a bartering tool.

He wanted to have a bartering tool.

Yeah.

It didn't help him in the end, the king arrested him on the coup on the 23rd of August. By the way, another miracle-- I was warned of the coup the evening before by two Romanian colleagues from the school, from the French school, who had very high connections in the family.

And they told me the very shaking secret that in a monastery outside the city there were politicians in the military plotting the coup. And the coup took place next morning. And around there we were proclaimed free citizens in a free Romania. The king has arrested Antonescu and they proclaimed Romania's neutrality in the war.

And then the Germans unleashed a terrible air raid against Bucharest. It was Hitler's vengeance. My parents and I were machine gunned in the open square close to where we lived. We were out to buy some newspapers, some new newspapers, which had appeared overnight.

And then the German [? Wehrmacht ?] screamed overhead and started machine gunning the pedestrians. And we just locked it out. And then we spent three days in the shelters. We learned about the liberation of Paris, which was two days later.

And then finally there was a last critical moment. There was a German Panzer division in a wood very close to Bucharest which wanted to enter into the city. And on orders from Hitler, they wanted to raze the city.

And for the first time, there was a welcome raid of about 500 bombers from Italy, Americans, who just blasted that forest to pieces. You'd find Germans hanging on all the branches and everywhere. And that frustrated the German effort to destroy Bucharest.

Now, the coup that you say happened in August--

The coup happened on the 23rd of August, which is today's national holiday of Romania.

And the king arrested Antonescu.

The king told Antonescu that he has to sign an immediate armistice with the Western powers.

And he did.

And Antonescu refused.

And the king shouted at him and told him, it is your duty. You have to do it. And the marshal said, sire, you don't have to shout at me. I'm not deaf. And the young king answered, oh, yes, you are deaf because you can't hear what the people say. And then he arrested him.

Finally, the Russians took him away and executed him. It is an open question even today if he deserved that execution. In many cities in Romania now they have built statues to Antonescu.

What is your feeling about it?

He was doing a double play. You see, Antonescu was a typical military and a typical Romanian nationalist. He wanted a single thing, a fixed idea. He wanted his two provinces, Bessarabia and Bukovina, back from the Russians, which the Russians had taken in '41.

He was willing to go along with the Germans until he got his provinces back, only the Germans would have nothing of it. They wanted him around to Stalingrad all the way. And they lost most of the Romanian army along with their own army at Stalingrad.

But Antonescu didn't really want that. He was a very typical nationalistic Romanian. He wanted to recover the two provinces, which had been stolen. And then he was caught in a trap. I don't think he is as guilty as some people thought him.

He had brought to Hitler a very good army, about a million people, very well trained and very well motivated. They wanted to get their provinces back. Everybody went enthusiastically. The enthusiasm stopped when they wanted them to go beyond the Dnieper all the way to Stalingrad. That's what they didn't want.

And what finally turned him against the Germans was when the German retreat began from Stalingrad. I mean, they were caught in a sort of cauldron but some escaped. And those who escaped escaped in trucks.

And when Romanian soldiers tried to climb aboard those trucks to escape along with the Germans, the Germans hacked away at their fingers with their bayonets. They didn't want to carry Romanians out with them. And that turned the Romanians furiously against the Germans.

So when Hitler ordered the bombing of Bucharest after Romania had offered neutrality and free passage out for the Germans, then the king declared war on Germany. And he ended up amongst the victors.

To give you one detail which will tell everything, the king was decorated by Stalin, who you can imagine was anti-monarchical by any standards. He got the same decoration, the Order of Victory, which they had bestowed on Eisenhower, Montgomery, and Nimitz, because he had played such an enormous role.

The Romanian army went to Vienna and to Prague to create-- to open the way for the Russians. So Romania has played an important part in this war, both at the beginning and especially at the end.

How long did you keep working in the labor battalion before you were freed?

One hour. Not true. The two of us who were assigned to that particular passive defense station, we went there for a few days to help the captain get his papers in order. He had behaved so decently to us that we went out of gratitude to help him close up his books.

You mean even after the war was over.

For us, the war was over. We were free to do what we wanted. But we went there for a couple of days and helped the captain get his books in order so that he wouldn't have to suffer from that. He had behaved decently to us. And we thought it was the least we could do to help him get his papers in order.

So all together, how long were you working in that forced labor?

'42 to the 23rd of August, '44. Sometime in the end of November of '44, when they called us in.

We were lucky. It could have been worse. Any of those damn bombs could have exploded under our fingers. One of the bombs I found in the courtyard very close to the office of the passive defense. The captain just told me go and see. It looks as if somebody fell into so-and-so's garden.

And I went through the bushes. And there the bomb was sticking out. I went away, told the captain, and called in the engineers.

Now, when you would go back home where you lived, was that at all a Jewish neighborhood, or were there many other-

No, it was a normal neighborhood. When we went back in '91, I went to visit the house. It was almost unchanged, although all around Bucharest had been razed by Ceausescu, who was crazy and had wanted to create his own Champs-Élysées and had cut it down through the middle of Bucharest. But my parents' house was spared.

It wasn't especially Jewish part of the town. It was a normal part of the town. Actually, the only special thing about this part of town was that all streets had names of physicians. It was close to the medical school. And perhaps because for this reason, there was a Pasteur Street, and there was a Lister Street and so on.

And what was it like for your mother during that time?

Terrible. My mother was terrified by one thing, getting something, anything on the dinner table. She knew I didn't have anything to eat during the day, so she made a little package of the leftovers or whatever she could cook.

The point is she didn't have money to buy things. My father was selling his reproductions, some pictures, some very, very, very interesting editions of books. He had a huge library close to 2,000 books. And he sold and sold and sold.

He had a friend who was in antique books. And he was willing to help, but he couldn't pay more than the going price. So from time to time, he would come, and almost in tears he would buy for a ridiculous price very valuable books.

I remember my father had once presented me with a wonderfully bound and illustrated book of the words of Goethe. And it broke him, really, to have to sell it, but that's what the buyer just wanted.

We lived selling. And then from time to time, one of Father's friends would bring him a bit to work. And he would get a part of the money. Actually, this is a policy, which we rediscovered later under the communists. They had thrown so many people out of work because they had tried to emigrate and were refused. They were called refuseniks.

And those of us who had connections went took work for translations or editing and so on and passed it on to those who were out of work so they could get the money secretly. It was legally forbidden. But we did it, and we kept some of the boys alive. Some of my students are now professors in Canada, in Germany, France.

Now, the Germans never took over the country like they did in Hungary.

No, they didn't. They didn't because they wanted Romania as an ally. You see, they had formerly Hungary and Italy as allies. And those were very reluctant allies and were completely ineffective. As long as the German offensive went through Bessarabia and Bukovina, which meant reconquering Romanian territory, the Romanians really had a motivated army.

And then this slackened off when they were being asked to go to the [PLACE NAME] and to Stalingrad and the [INAUDIBLE] and whatever. They lost a lot of people there. Then when the Germans capitulated at Stalingrad, the Romanians capitulated with them.

And the Russians sorted the Romanians out from the Germans and started reeducating them. Some would say brainwashing them. Finally, they made out a division, a communist division within the Soviet army composed of Romanians, which they sent back to the front to conquer Romania.

After the coup in '44, the whole Romanian army was reconstituted, rearmed, and went in first to reconquer Transylvania, which the Hungarians had taken, and then into Czechoslovakia and Austria.

Was this {PERSONAL NAME} army?

Beg your pardon?

[PERSONAL NAME] army? The Russian commander who had surrendered and they got him to lead an army of--

[INAUDIBLE] Paulus.

From where?

[INAUDIBLE] Paulus was the commander of the German army at Stalingrad.

No, no, no. I'm talking about the one who led the army into Vienna. I think it was a Russian.

Oh, it was a Russian. But the Romanians went along and played an important part. Romania had a good army as long as it was motivated.

What do you think your experiences in the labor battalion have done to your outlook on life, on your view of people?

Well, this added to the life under the communists, which was much longer. I didn't trust anybody anymore. I completely lost trust in people. When I started noticing that information about me was appearing where I didn't expect it to appear, I started doing a very old, very common, but very effective trick.

I made a list of people who are around me, and I gave to each of them a specific lie about something happening in my house, family, and so on. And I waited for that lie to come back. And I knew by which way it came. I really had lost confidence in people.

I started out life as a very-- how should I say-- I was a very confident man-- man, boy, whatever you want to call it. I believed people. People were telling me things. I believed they meant what they thought and so on.

And gradually I lost confidence. I remained with a small, small circle of friends, which I had exchanged so much forbidden information that we should have been 10 times over in jail. If any of them would have told. And those I trusted. And the rest, never.

I was reminded once in a discussion which I had with somebody of a word in George Bernard Shaw, in Caesar and Cleopatra, when Cleopatra tells Caesar, but Caesar, I never betrayed you. And he says, you couldn't, my dear. I never trusted you.

And that applies to most people with whom I had dealings in Romania. I didn't trust anybody. That's probably one of the big losses of my life with all these bad experiences. One would like to live a trusting life with the people around you. But it was destroyed for me.

I wasn't going to tell people what I felt and what I-- and I'm normally an outgoing person. I'm not a man to hide his feelings and so on. And I learned to do that.

You see, from 1938 on until 1975 when I ran away from Romania, I considered myself permanently in a state of war

with the authorities. I could have, without the slightest hesitation, killed people if I had the means.

Please believe me. I am not a criminal. I am not a brutal person. But these people who exerted their power in order to torture us, I would have machine gunned them down. I don't know. I would have killed them like cockroaches. And that's not-- it is not my normal attitude to life and people, but you cannot imagine how much hatred the state can generate.

Now, after the war you resumed your education.

Yes.

And the Russians supported your going to school.

Well, the Russians didn't have much to say. The Romanians supported me. There were two professors who supported me. I had already a bad political fight and had been in jail under Stalin. And--

When did that happen?

In 1946.

So what happened right after you finished the forced labor? You went back home.

Yes. And I started learning.

You did? That was-- but you weren't in university yet.

Immediately I went to university in the fall.

Oh, OK.

And there I met this lady. And--

How did you come to be jailed?

Oh, because I'm an idiot. I gave them plenty of reasons, one after the other. The only thing to astonish me is that it happened so late, not so early. You must understand that between 1944 and 1946 there was an interregnum, if you know what I mean.

The Russians were trying to gain power in the country. Because Romania had helped in the war, it wasn't treated as a conquered country, really. There was an armistice in place.

And there was an armistice commission composed of American, British, French, Czechs, and Poles, who were in Bucharest to supervise the armistice and the Russians, obviously. I admit, it's a main component.

And the Russians were gradually taking power by the simple trick that they first-- the first government which was formed was formed by General Radescu. If you can imagine a word which sounds like a contradiction in terms, it was the first and only Democratic government of Romania, a military government.

Usually when you see a military government, you think of a dictatorship. No. These were officers dedicated to building democracy in the country and to protecting it. You could protect it only with the force of the military.

So these people were trying to do the right thing by the people. And they co-opted politicians from the four pre-war political parties. Before the war the main-- I mean, there are tiny parties which don't matter.



But there were four main parties, the Liberal Party, which was, if you want, the Bourgeois party-- let's say the equivalent of the Republicans-- the National Peasant Party, which was the equivalent, if you want, ideologically, of the Democrats, the Social Democrats, which were on the left, and the Communist Party, which really didn't exist as such.

It was a fiction. Really, it was mainly Jewish boys and girls from better families who had ideas and hoped that a Communist Party would bring an end to Jewish persecution. They were very quickly disabused of that, but then it was too late. They were caught in the Communist Party and couldn't get out.

So you had these four parties affiliated with the military government. And that lasted for about two years, in which the Russians started like this. First they accused the liberals of being traitors, judged them, executed them, or sent them to jail. Then they did it to the Peasant Party. Then they did it halfway with the socialist party.

They co-opted some of them into the Communist Party. And some of them they executed as traitors. So they did half and half.

Then they built a single Workers' Party out of the Communist Party and the rest of the Social Democrats. And finally, they renamed the whole combination of the Communist Party. And at that moment, the power was completely in their hands.

How was your father viewed by the Russians?

They used him because he was-- the Russians were stealing everything which wasn't nailed down and even what was nailed down. I've seen them carrying full trucks of doors or toilet seats out of the country.

And my father had some experience in the trade of cotton. And they kept him on to do the transfer of cotton from Romania to Russia. It was robbery, plain robbery, but it was done with all the forms.

And they needed an economist, so they kept my father for a few years. And then they offered him a early retirement to get rid of him.

Did he do it?

Yes. He took it. And so they grabbed power gradually. There was this interregnum of about two years where this happened. And in this time they changed the constitution, I think, twice, Jo, didn't they? Oh, she's asleep.

They changed the constitution. And I was stupid enough in one of the discussions they organized for the constitution to ask idiotic questions like, is the new constitution going to have anything like the Bill of Rights? And then they chased away one of our professors.

Where did you ask that question, in the university?

At the university, in a public meeting about the constitution. And then they chased away one of our professors. They even brought some hooligans from outside to chase him away. And they got up, and I protested, and I say, I'm not going to have a repetition of the Reichstag here and went out.

And a Communist friend of mine came after me. Erwin, you're crazy. You'll get-- talking yourself into trouble. Then I was doing radio amateur work and was transmitting all over the world.

You were personally?

Yes. I built my own radio transmitter. And that was, again, a thing, which was not looked well upon. Normally for such a thing if you don't have a license you just get a fine. The end result was a few more things like that. And one morning at 4 o'clock, they burst into my house with guns and took me to jail.

And these were the--

The security police.

Security police of the communist Romanians?

Romanians, yes.

Communist rule.

I will use for practical purposes the name KGB for them because the Romanian acronym means exactly the thing as KGB means in Russian. It means Committee for State Security, CCS. But nobody knows CCS, and everybody knows KGB.

Did they consider you a spy?

Yes. And I was under interrogation for six weeks. I wasn't touched. Nobody hit me. During the Germans I was hit repeated times, beaten up, whatever. These people didn't beat me. They just deprived me of sleep. They kept a huge light in my eyes the whole day.

When I finally fell asleep on a cot of concrete, then they would pour cold water over me and take me to interrogation. And you cannot imagine how bad deprivation of sleep becomes after a while.

Disorienting.

You get disoriented. It's very bad. And I got out of this mess by a miracle, by a simple coincidence. My father met on the street by pure accident one of the last socialist ministers still tolerated in the government.

I told you that they had shrunk the socialist contribution. They had executed some of them. And some of them they had kept. And this man managed to get me out two weeks or three weeks before the big show trials began. If I would have been caught in the show trials, I would never have gotten out.

So one night, they took me by the scruff of my neck and deposited me in front of my parents' house. And the inspector told me, do you like the moon? I said, yes. Well, make sure I don't have to see you again ever.

And then he said, be tomorrow morning at my office in the Ministry for Internal Affairs. So I went next day. I was afraid he would jail me again. He said, well, how is it outside? Is it OK? I said, yes, sir. OK, make sure I never have to talk to you again. And that was the end of it.

But from now on, I had a black spot on my file. So when I graduated from university I couldn't get a job in teaching. I couldn't get a job in research. I got a job as an editor in a publishing house.

You were a troublemaker.

I was a troublemaker. I had a black file.

Yes.

So you were allowed to finish university then.

Yes, I was.

But somehow-- and those files, that government file would go with you to [BOTH TALKING]

Wherever you went. You see, that file pursued you your whole life, wherever you went. And whoever wanted to add something nasty to it did. I mean, there were so many informers who just slipped in a sheet of paper. They had discovered that you can kill a person much more easily with a pen and paper than with a gun or a knife.

And so I was sitting there in that publishing house. And finally, two of my professors managed to slip me into the new research institute which had been built as a technician. So I went in as a technician, and I worked my way up.

The research work, senior research work, a head of laboratory, head of division, member of the Academy of Sciences. I went all the way up the hierarchy, and all the way I felt persecuted. All the way I felt isolated.

I was a member of the scientific council of the institute, of the biggest research institute in the country. And if I said an opinion, I wasn't on an equal footing with the other people. And there was some decision to be taken. And I was asked, so I gave my opinion. And then the director would say, Friedlander, we can do without Talmudic advice.

But would they take your ideas?

Sometimes they did. Sometimes they didn't. But just pointing out the fact that I was Jewish. There wasn't less antisemitism under the Russians than it was under the Germans. Under the Germans it was more organized.

Under the Russians, I was criticized several times for the fact that my laboratory did not have a naturally corresponding national composition, which meant I had three Jews, a Hungarian, and a Turk among my crew. And that was always held against me.

I wanted to ask, in the light of your experiences in the labor camp and then later under the Russians, how you felt about being Jewish and whether being persecuted for being Jewish affected you.

It made me feel more Jewish than I was. And I've been trying more and more to get back to Jewish tradition. It has increased my ties to my roots, and especially more than my ties, but my search for roots, if you want.

I was only once to Israel. I would have liked to go back. I don't think I will ever be able to go back because I probably can't fly anymore because of my respiration problems. But I'm a strong Zionist. I always was.

As a kid, I was walking around with that little blue white box from the Keren Kayemet Israel collecting money to buy trees or a dunam of territory in Israel. Even without being deeply religious or anything, I felt a strong attachment to my people. And I feel it today.

Under communist rule, were you able to practice any kind of Jewish customs or--

It was very badly looked upon. When the two of us got married, I was called-- I was at a publishing house. I was called to the deputy director, a Jew himself. And he said, I hear that you're going to get married. Yes.

He said, congratulations. Thank you. Now, if I ever hear you having a religious marriage, you can say goodbye to your job and so can your wife, wherever she is. That was told in as many words.

This was the same guy-- to give you an idea with whom I had to deal. I wrote a little book about atomic physics. It was a popular book. There had been a lot of bad conceptions bandied around, and I wanted to set matters straight.

And also at a time when the Russians were pushing to prove that everything in the world had been invented in Russia, I had very carefully inserted in the book everything which had been done in Germany, Britain, America, and so on.

So finally, I get the-- how do you call that-- the proofs of the book. To the feel it was thicker than when I had written it. Looked as if there were more in it than I had written. So I looked carefully. And there was a whole chapter which I hadn't written.

It was about the fact that the Russians had exploded their first atomic bomb. And it was the genius of Stalin which had done this and this and that. And I said, but I never wrote that. Said it doesn't matter. Don't you agree?

I had a family. I had to live. I remained silent. And he said, you shouldn't worry. You'll be paid for the whole text. You don't lose anything in the bargain. I said, I don't want to be paid for something I didn't write. Never mind. Never mind. That's the end of it. The book is appearing tomorrow.

And that was the same man who had said that if he ever catches me marrying my wife religiously, he would have us kicked out of wherever we are.

What language was that book written in?

Romanian.

Romanian.

I just thought something else, though. But I don't remember it was.

What did you say, Jo?

I thought of something else, but I don't remember what it was.

How do you feel about being interviewed today?

Very well. I feel I need to get certain things out. I cannot keep them for always hidden in here, pressuring.

Now, when you left Romania, were your parents still alive?

When I left Romania, my parents were not alive, but my mother-in-law was.

And you had to leave her behind?

Yes. She was a remarkably perceptive woman. I managed to get permission to leave the country for five days to attend some scientific discussions in Germany. And I went and said goodbye to my mother-in-law and said I'll be back in five days.

She looked me in the eyes. You're not coming back in five days, she said. But let me tell you something. Whatever you do, your judgment will be best. Just do what you feel you have to do.

She supported you.

Yeah.

Yeah. Did you leave Romania with your wife?

No, that was impossible.

Right. So how did she get out?

It was a fight of one year, led by a group of some 15 prominent American scientists, some seven Nobel laureates among them, who knew me, knew my work, and who lobbied the Senate to include us into a bargaining list, which the Romanians were bargaining over. They wanted-- if you know what most favored nation status is--

[INAUDIBLE]

And they started bargaining, if my memory serves me well, for 49 families. That was in spring. The signature of the treaty was due in the fall. By the time we had reached the fall, I have been a number of times at the State Department.

And I was told the list had shrunk from 49 to 40, but you're still on the list. It has shrunk to 35. You're still on the list. It drives you crazy. And then at the last moment, there remained 19 families of the 49.

At the last moment, there was a meeting which I wanted on neutral ground. That means it's the Ways and Means Committees of the House. I had already given a statement to the Congressional committee.

And the Romanians sent another KGB man from the embassy, first of all, to protest that I am being kept in America against my will, upon which the guy from the Senate said, the door is open. You can walk out together if you want to.

I said, no, thank you. Let's discuss it, and let's talk in English so that everybody understands. Then he started a long complaint that we are a small country, and it's very expensive for us to educate people. And now you have them. And all he wanted was money.

We need to take a break.

OK.