

We're at the home of Walter Gelnay in Rossmoor, which is a housing project in Walnut Creek. Today is February 19, 2003. My name is Peter Ryan, interviewer; and Anne Green Saldinger is doing the videotaping. Could we begin, Walter, by my asking you where and when you were born?

I was born in Vienna, Austria on December the 8th, 1910.

And how many people were in your family? We were five-- the parents and three children.

Do you want to give me the names?

My father was Dr. Adolf Gelnay. My mother was-- her maiden name was Mary [? Lustig. ?] My older sister was Matilda. My younger sister was Edith.

And do you know how long your family had been in Austria?

Well, from-- the grandparents were living. I don't know. My mother's grandparents were living in Hungary, Ny~Aregyh~;za. It was the name of the town.

And my father's, who was-- I don't know. My grandfather-- his father-- was-- I don't know where he was born. But he came from Cadca in Slovakia. Where his antecedents were born, I don't know.

OK. What kind of living arrangement did you have in Vienna?

In Vienna, the-- when my parents returned with us from the United States to Vienna, they lived in homes in Dianagasse in Vienna, and in [PLACE NAME] which is a district in Vienna, in a villa, because my father had-- even being a dentist, he had learned quite a lot in the United States about the building industry. So when he returned to Vienna, he did not take up the dentistry. He started to acquire rundown buildings, and either renovate them or start on a new building.

He was quite successful in this because he was very bright. And he built, for instance, the first hotel in Vienna. It was called-- not the first hotel. The first hotel with running hot and cold water, and with central heating. This was the first hotel. It was in the second district of Vienna, on the Leopoldstadt, on the Taborstrasse. And where he had finally started-- this was before the First World War-- that he had started to build a block of six so-called high-rises of five stories. This was high-rises at the time.

One high-rise was built as a hotel, and it was mainly for travelers-- professional travelers. It was not a five-star hotel. But it had hot and cold running water. It had a heating system and things.

And one was built-- one of the houses had also the central Kino, a movie house. And this was the first movie house in Vienna built without supporting a balcony. There were no--

No supports.

No supports, which used to be, when you got a-- went to a movie, and you were behind of this, and you had to be bent to see the--

So no poles to obstruct the view.

Yes.

Tell us what your father was like.

Father was a very active, very industrious person. He was, personally, a bit of a heavyweight even as a youngster. He was heavy-set. And with a very, very-- how do I say that? A temper. Temper. Very hot temper.

That's why I decided to return to Vienna after Hitler had occupied it, because I knew that he would have never stood for any insult. He would have--

Blown up, huh?

Yes. He would have blown up, and might have killed or badly hurt a person who would have called him [INAUDIBLE] Jude. He was just very, very hot-tempered person.

Yeah. How about your mother? What was she like?

The opposite.

The opposite.

Yes. She was a lady who we were-- due to the fact that he was a entrepreneur and involved in so many projects, we were very well off, according to the circumstances in Vienna at that time. We had, in one of the houses, which were the main object where the hotel was included and the movie house was included, we had two apartments made into one flat. And father was the owner of the company which owned the place.

When war broke out--

You're talking about World War I?

World War I. Father was called up, and worked under a famous regiment which was stationed near Bratislava, Slovakia. So he [? fought, ?] and at the same time, the buildings-- these six buildings in Vienna were confiscated by the outbreak of the war for the Ministry of War, which had a small building in the first district, which was circled by the Ring. And they kept it for the four years and used it as for officers. But of course, they paid compensation after the war.

During the war, the family lived-- including the servant-- in Bratislava, on the outskirts of Bratislava, in a villa.

Now is this where your father was stationed?

My father was stationed not in Bratislava itself, but there in Slovakia, in the headquarters there. I don't know which town it was.

OK. Did he see active duty?

Certainly.

Who were they fighting? The Russians?

The Russians. Of course, he seen active duty in the Red Cross of the army. He was there serving as a dentist.

And we had, at home, a picture of the commander of his unit. I forgot the name of the man. He was a noble man. They had the main-- it was the top officer of the regiment. And it was dedicated to my father, who was the only one who had dared to touch him. He was wounded by shrapnel, this--

The officer. This officer. And his jaw was damaged. And nobody dared to touch him.

It was not far ahead already. In the United States, acquired some knowledge of artificial treatment. And he had with platinum or something which they had, I think, had made a connection of the two parts of the jawbone of that officer.

So he did reconstructive surgery?

Right. Right. And this was dedicated to Dr. Adolf Gelnay, who saved my jaw. And you couldn't see. The picture was taken after he had the jaw made. He was very capable.

Was he changed when he came back?

Yeah.

Tell us how. He had lost some of his confidence in himself, and relied very much on his business lawyer, Dr. Heller, who was an old gentleman. At that time, 70 or so was a very old gentleman.

And he thought that he had lost the concept of what he had done before. So he relied on the advice of his lawyer, Dr. Heller, who was a lawyer, and his older brother, Charles.

And as it happened, after the First World War, Austria was like Germany, in a very sad condition.

Unemployment.

Unemployment.

Inflation.

The inflation was terrible. And the inflation was very terrible for my father, because the people started to offer him more and more than whatever he had to invest. He had, for these times, enormous credit for this building project of six big buildings.

And they brought him-- they offered more and more. Every few months another company started to offer him this. And he was working very hard. He ran everything himself-- the hotel. I mean not-- he wasn't standing at the counter. But he was running the hotel. And he was running the movie house.

He's responsible for all of this.

For all of this. So they said, you're crazy. You're driving yourself nuts. After the war, you have four years of the war behind you. Stop it. Sell it. You can never get more than what they offered you now.

He did. And he went blank --

And he what?

He went bankrupt, because he invested in money, in Mark, in franc, in everything which was bad. But he thought, when he looked back, they have to come up again. Instead of that, he lost most of it. Not everything, of course.

So did that affect where you lived?

No. No.

But you had moved back to Vienna after the First World War.

Yes. Yes. Well, they handed over back. It was not their property. It was still his property.

Now tell us about your early schooling. Do you remember?

Yes. This is a sad chapter. My early schooling-- I was born in 1910. So in 1914 we went to Bratislava. And father was, of course, inclined to have us, according to the grandfather, who was a veterinarian and employed by the government of

Austria, which was German. The Viennese government was the government of the whole Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. So he wanted us to have German schooling. He thought that we can have careers in Vienna.

So my younger sister-- not younger than I, but the younger of the two sisters--

Who were both older than you.

Both older, yeah. The older was seven years older. So she was over the primary schooling, and already was on the *BÃ¼rgerschule*, what they called *BÃ¼rgerschule* in Vienna. This was already three classes after the primary schools. Primary school is six-- five or six.

And the younger sister and I, we had a teacher coming from Bratislava. I said we were on the outskirts. And he came to the home. And we got tutored by a tutor.

In German?

In German. And we were brought to the school in Bratislava only for the tests.

So I had five years schooling-- primary schooling-- by a tutor. When we came back to Vienna, I was just 10 years old, and was registered at the *Realgymnasium*, which had eight classes. And after finishing the *Realgymnasium*, you made the *Matura*, which is the [GERMAN]. It's the test to admit you to university.

I had only one semester at the university in Vienna-- no, in Prague, the Charles University in Prague. And then I was taken out, because the system had started to set in.

What had started to set in?

The system of Adolf Hitler.

So that was--

[RINGING TELEPHONE]

I'm so sorry.

One second. Is it OK?

Mm-hmm.

All right. Go ahead.

So I was enlisted in the *Realgymnasium*, and [INAUDIBLE] *Matura*, [INAUDIBLE] the admission to the university there, but was taken out because my father was then in the States.

There's another thing which is perhaps not so important. He went back to the States for the simple reason that after he lost the money, so he went back to the States by himself. We stayed in Vienna. We had the apartment. And the mother and the two sisters, we stayed at home.

And he got there the agency for the whole of Europe of the Dayton tire company. And so he had opened offices in Prague, and wanted me to work with him there.

Unfortunately, the Dayton tire company did not fulfill their contract with him, because suddenly he sold it. He was very adept at anything he did. So he sold through salesman. But he sold it quite some tires in Czechoslovakia. It started off there, because we had to-- he had the office there in Prague. And we got complaints that these tires were not good.

So it came out they sent seconds.

Came out what?

The tires, which they sent from the States, were seconds. So no wonder that their customers were complaining, that there was a run and refunds and things. So he went back to the States to straighten things out, and was involved. He started to sue them. Of course, he didn't get very far.

What year was that?

What year was it? I was 10. And then -- '30. '30. Eight years since I was 10. It was '30. '31. '30 or '31. I am not so sure now.

No, no, just to have an idea.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Yeah. And when you say he went back, he had been in the United States before you were born.

Yeah.

OK.

Yeah. Before the turn of the century they went there-- he and the uncle.

Did you like school, Walter?

Absolutely not. I will tell you why. The reason was actually pretty simple. I was not used. I was 10 or 11 years old when we went back to Vienna, and I had never been in-- I had always a private tutor. I was sent to the first class in the Realgymnasium in high school. And this was in Vienna. There were about 40 in one class. And they were all strange to me.

[DING]

Oh, yes.

I get another call from my wife. She is somewhere for acupuncture. But she will call me because she doesn't know how far.

OK, let's continue.

Yeah.

Let's see. Where were we?

We were talking about school, and you didn't like school.

No. So I came--

Wait, wait, wait. Are you on? Oh, OK.

So in Vienna, when I went first to the Realgymnasium, there's all boys of 10, 11, 12. And I was the first time in a class, in a school. But the-- I don't know how you call the one who is in charge of a group of-- in the schooling system. The

main professor there. So he started to read the names of the newly arrived people. They came from primary schools. He wouldn't know. So -- the name.

Then he came to "Gelnay," and nothing happened. And he repeats, Gelnay. They started somewhere with Brown, and Frieda, Friedrich. And then they said, here, here, here. They came together and nothing happened.

So he repeated it a couple of times, and I didn't answer. I didn't know. What the routine was. I was hypnotized by watching what all these kids are doing. So he thought that I'm a cheeky kid or something. Don't want to cooperate or something.

So finally, one understood me, and I looked up and -- I said, yes? He thought I'm a cheeky kid. He didn't know. They didn't make a note that I never had-- that I never was in a class. That's the first time that I was in a group of 40 kids.

So he said, you get up and say, yes, sir. I said, good. So -- I said, OK, I will do it. I was agreeable. And he thought again that-- he didn't grasp.

So I was not so happy there. But I soon had a group for myself. They are all in little cliques. So I had found two or three others with me. This, I got used to it.

But I never got used to the system. so easy. And then, when I was a little bit understanding on what's going and the things--

So first of all, I got sick, and I stayed away. And my mother was very gentle lady. I said, I have to bring this to the school sign. And she signed.

And then next year already I had prepared a pack of these things. And I said, sign them all [INAUDIBLE] so that I don't have to bother you when they are needed in class. So she signed them all.

And I went always to the-- how do you call them? The police courts, where you only make-- like Judy-- Judge Judy or Judge Brown. And I went to these.

Oh, you would go to the courtrooms--

Instead of to school.

You listened to the trials.

Yeah. Yeah. To listen to the trials.

Was your family very religious?

No.

Did you get any religious education? Oh, yes. I had to have religious education through the eight years in high school. I didn't have any at home. And when in Bratislava, I never had any any -- Well, then afterwards when we went back, Father wanted us to keep the Holy Days always.

So did you celebrate the Jewish holidays at home?

Yes, but in a very easy way. There was no proper reading of the Bible or something. This was not arranged.

What about the neighborhood where you lived?

Completely Jewish. These buildings were in the Leopoldstadt, which was the Juden-- the Jewish-- town in Vienna.

This was one district where there were practically only Jews-- well, "only." We were 40 people in the things, and we had perhaps four or five Christian boys. All the others were Jews.

Did you have friends who were both Jews and not Jews? Or were all Jewish? I don't know. Both.

Both.

Yes. I was not used to it. I told you. I was never among kids. That we had neighbors in the villa where we lived in Bratislava. There were Christian people. And we played always with these kids. We didn't have any Jewish contacts there.

What courses did you like the best in school?

Courses in school? Well, I was good in Latin. Yeah, I was good already in languages in school. This was not hard for me.

And apart from this, what is I like? Not much. [LAUGHS] Not much.

But still, there were teachers which I liked better, and teachers which I did not like.

What did you hope to be when you got bigger?

I wanted to be a mechanic-- a car mechanic. And I had bikes. And I had bikes and then motorbikes.

I had it easy because my mother was not hard on me. It was-- she was very--

Well, I was the smallest. I was the youngest. I don't know. My sister always says, you were the favorite of mother.

Were you spoiled?

Yeah. Yeah, I was spoiled. Father spoiled me. I was born in Vienna, and I went to, in Vienna, to the Realgymnasium, but I had to pay much-- I think it was either three or five times more than the kids in Vienna because I was a Slovak. So I had to pay [INAUDIBLE].

And I was very frugal, and also frugal in money-- spending money-- and very frugal in-- what I spent I spent always with my friend. It's a very close friend. And always we went together, and I paid. I had always money.

Father was a very-- we had such folders for paper money, which went like this, and to open two ways. And he always give me pocket money. And he enjoyed it too, giving me, because I was frugal, and did not spend it.

And I also ate frugal whatever they bought-- the chocolates. So every child got it. But they liked to give it to me because I ate one, and then I put three, four, or five into my wardrobe. I had a place for them somewhere in the wardrobe, or in a little [GERMAN].

Bureau.

Bureau. Yes, I had a little bureau.

So your father had Slovakian citizenship, and you did as well?

No, my father never had. He had Austrian. And then, when-- the thing said Czech, because he was established in Prague. He asked for the things. He worked in--

And he was very dictatorial when he dealt with. He never dealt with some employee of lower class. Always only with

the bosses. That's how he really got accepted everywhere.

He was for the-- he was manager for the prince's-- René of Bourbon, who had property in Slovakia. And he developed for him there a electro-- they have a word in German. Electric-- [GERMAN] [? Werk, ?] a plant where you produce electricity. And he made one there for this prince, for the properties there.

So what did you do when you got out of school?

When I got out of school I had still, in Vienna, in the Jewish district, a friend who was the son of a dentist. And he was a bit older than I. And he obtained agency from Germany where they manufactured car parts in Germany and sold them cheaper to Austria than the original producers, which were the Steyr cars-- there was a car named Steyr-- in Austria in Graz; not in Vienna. In Graz.

But they manufactured the car there. But the parts they got cheaper from Germany. And my friend had the things.

So he said, you can work for me. I am busy getting business to go around with a car. And you can stay in the office and storeroom which I keep in this place. So I worked there for him.

And then Father wanted me back for the tire in Prague. So I had to, of course, to quit the job with my friend. But it was very-- he didn't pay me much, but I could get a loan of his car-- a Steyr car-- when he doesn't go out. He was tired after the whole week. Already got out. So he had girlfriends, and took them out during the week. And at the weekend I got it very often. And I could take the girls out.

So that was a big deal.

Yeah, a big deal, yes. And then I went-- I worked for my father. And after my father went back and had the claim against Dayton tire company, I started to work for my brother-in-law, where you see [PLACE NAME] That's where I worked. This was in the Sudeten. And I worked for him for two and a half years.

Then I got-- then I got a job in '36 in Beirut for the--

When did you go to Prague?

Well, when my father had the office there for the Dayton tire company.

And your mother was still in Vienna?

In Vienna, yes. And that's when he wanted to come, where he was then in Baghdad. And I knew that he would end up dead if he would go back to Vienna. So I said, you stay. I will go back.

And before I went back to Vienna, I went first to Prague, because the Orient Express was leading me to Prague from Greece. When I gave notice in the Skoda works in Beirut, I took the boat to Athens. And then, from Athens, I took the Orient Express to Prague.

And there were living these, what I told you, the relatives of my younger sister, who had his little factory for ladies' garments, where the free-- frei people went to the things. But then they were not yet in the concentration camps. They still had it.

So I went there. And I said, do you know where my people are from here? What [INAUDIBLE] she said this was the sister-in-law of my sister. She said, oh, yes, they are at the Pensione Flora here in Prague. So I didn't have to go to Vienna.

Oh, your mother had come--

Come already, immediately, yeah, with her sister-- older sister-- and my mother and my grandmother. They were

already gone. My grandmother was back in Slovakia, where we had-- we don't know them. We didn't know them. But she had some relatives still there.

Now what year was this?

This was '38.

'38. If I knew you at that time, and I asked you, what is your nationality, what would you have said?

I would have said Czech.

Czech.

Yes. I didn't realize it. We didn't know that he will split this small country. But he wanted Moravia and Bohemia for the industry in weapons. He didn't care about Slovakia, which had only productions for farm products.

No, he wanted all the machinery of the--

That's it.

--the Czechs.

Yeah.

So your mother left Austria after Hitler had marched in?

Yeah.

Mm-hmm. And went to Prague.

Yeah.

And you were able to meet them there.

Yeah.

And you had been, before that, in Beirut then?

Yeah.

For work.

Two years, yes.

Two years.

So then--

[RINGING TELEPHONE]

Excuse me.

At this time, had the Germans taken the Sudetenland yet?

Not yet.

Not yet.

Not yet. It was during the time that I was a full year there. And during that time they had taken the Sudeten. And then, when it was nearly a whole year, also in March, they marched into Prague. And the people were standing in the streets, and the tears were running down their cheeks.

So your father was in Beirut, and your--

Was in Baghdad.

Baghdad. OK. And the rest of your family was now in Prague.

Yeah.

What did you want to do at that point? Did you want to stay there? Did you want to leave?

No, I was working there. When I came back. And I came back, and only wanted my mother and my sister and grandmother out of Vienna.

And that happened.

Then this has happened. So I went immediately, and started to work for one of the biggest exporters of Czechoslovakia. He needed somebody with the languages. I started to work for him.

And he sold for instance, wood to England. There was a buyer from England who came to Prague, and he sold him the wood from the Carpathian Mountains in Slovakia. So I worked there.

But he was clever. The man who owned the business, this was a firm called Marcus and [? Werner. ?] You had him there in the things. He closed his business.

He was one of the biggest exporters from Czechoslovakia. He closed the business. He had all the money in England. And he left for England at the end of the year.

Of '39. No, 38.

'39.

'39. And then I started-- I lost my job. Then I started to say, oh, I better follow him, or go out somewhere. But I had correspondence-- you wouldn't believe it-- to Baghdad, to Basra, to England, to Dutch asking if they can get me a job in these places. I still have the copies of my letters.

Did you get a job?

No. Everybody said no, we wouldn't get the visa for you.

So you were stuck in Prague?

Yeah. And this is when he started to separate Bohemia and Moravia as a protectorate, everything done from the Gestapo, where I have the exit visa in the passport, because I got the permit from them to go to Slovakia. And Slovakia was independent.

And allied with Germany sort of, hmm?

Yeah. And of course I didn't go to Slovakia. There was no visa necessary for Italy. So I got the card, and I got-- I had some money, because I was working these two years in Beirut. And I didn't-- I started to work when I came back for this exporter. So I had money.

And I had two big-- this is more than suitcases. It was what you used in these old days.

Trunk.

Trunks. Two trunks. And they had there photo apparatus, Leicas and watches and gold coins and things. Packed all this. And when I said, I'm going to Slovakia, I took a ticket, first class, to Italy, and arrived in Italy. And had sent-- I did there to take these trunks with me, because this was already-- I had to exit the German border-- this protectorate. So I did that.

So there was, at the travel office there, [INAUDIBLE] and Rosenbaum or something like that. And I heard on the grapevine that they get your luggage out without things. They had some way.

I called them. And they sent somebody up to my flat, to my apartment there. And he see that these two trunks. He put wire around them with-- [? plumbed ?] it, which with a lead [? plumb ?] things. And I paid more than I paid for the ticket to that company.

And when I arrived in Trieste--

That is Italy.

Pardon?

Was that Italy? Or, no, that was--

Italy. Italy. Trieste it were Italy. Arrived in Trieste. And I went to look for the trunks. And already, from outside, I could see through the wire gates there, I could see my two trunks there.

Untouched?

Untouched.

Then I had to bring them to Baghdad but to go to Baghdad, I had to go to Beirut. And that's it came -- That was my first mishap. They wouldn't let me down from the boat.

So you got on a boat in--

In Trieste.

Trieste.

In Trieste.

To Beirut.

To Beirut.

It was a week's travel. And I thought I'm saved.

So you knew that you needed to get out of Europe at that point?

Well, I knew that I can't get a visa anywhere.

Now you felt that you had to leave because it wasn't safe.

Yeah.

How about your mother and your sisters?

They were gone.

They were gone already.

Yeah.

Where did they go?

When he occupied the Sudeten, this younger sister, who had the factory and her husband and the house and everything in the Sudeten never went back. They had been in Holland, for they had this factory of Hugo Strauss & Son. [INAUDIBLE] is there.

So they stayed in Holland?

No. They came to-- yeah, they stayed. They came first back to Prague. But then they went back to Holland, because the sister was pregnant with her second child, and they wanted it born in there, in Holland.

So then they went back to Holland. And she was born there. And the older one, the older one was two years old. And the little one was born in Holland. And--

Was your sister considered an American?

She is.

Because she was born here.

Yeah. Both. Both.

So they could go from Holland to America without any trouble.

Yeah. And the one in Vienna had one daughter. And she was staying with my mother. And first my younger sister wanted my mother to go to things, because she know she will follow her.

She-- [? Dita, ?] the sister who still lives here, and who was going to Holland because of the child, she knew that my mother will be ending in the States. So she paid her her trip from Prague to the States. And my mother was the first back. And the older sister was the second back.

But her husband didn't want to go. He said, we will come a whole group of people. I can't ask them to care for us. I don't know the language. I don't know anything. He was an insurance salesman.

Now he was Czech? What was he?

I don't know. He was born in Poland.

Poland.

But I don't know whether he still was Polish, or whether he was Czech at that time.

So he didn't speak English.

He didn't speak English.

And that's why he didn't want to come.

Yes.

So he stayed where?

He stayed there, and he was taken by the Gestapo.

"There" is Prague? Where?

In Prague. And in Prague it seems they grabbed him. His appearance was very-- I think he made a great-- he was doing something very foolhardy--

With his appearance?

Yeah. Yeah.

Why?

He was blond. Had blue eyes and things. He looked 100% like a Christian. And I think he put on a Gestapo uniform, and then they must have caught him. He never came back.

OK. We now know what happened to your mother and your sisters. You got to a Trieste. You took a boat, and it went where?

To Beirut.

To Beirut. But you said that you had a mishap. They wouldn't let you off.

No. When the boat arrived in Beirut, the purser took all the passports, went into the customs there, and came back. And everybody got his passport back, but not Gelnay.

I said, what's that? I don't know, he said, but they canceled your transit visa through Beirut.

Who's "they"?

The police there.

Oh, OK.

I said, why did they cancel it? It was normally obtained in Prague from the French consulate. I never could find out until we went back to Israel.

Then my wife, the first wife I had, had some acquaintances in the secret police in Beirut. And he found out for me. She said, my husband had trouble landing here. What was that? So he on and examined the records.

I was blacklisted by the police in Beirut. Why? Well, during the two years I worked there, I was-- you have here a Mr. Wagner, who was the boss there two pages of--

References.

--references about me. Because I was supposed only to be there because of the languages, and to look after the commissioned goods which Skoda had installed in that things, in that branch.

They did this because they had this big office there with several employees. They had pumps, electric motors, diesel engines. Machinery was there. And I was there only for to see that this consignment is properly handled, that what goes out is paid for and sent to Prague, the money. So there were five, six salesmen there. One sold a pump, and one sold this and that.

Everything worked fine. And it was not too hard on me. So I started to help them. I started to--

First of all, I knew French. And I started to also acquire a bit of Arabic. I was there in the restaurants. Where I was living was Arab people.

They were very nice, and very, very generous to me. The lady got up at 7 o'clock in the morning to make me a breakfast. You haven't seen anything like that.

Well, I was an employee from that company. And they try to do their best.

So I was not so busy. And I thought, whenever I'm not busy, I will also treat customers who come in. Why should they wait? They were waiting for this one to finish with selling this or that.

And so I started. And if there was nobody, I enjoyed the view. It was a beautiful entry, a beautiful store. They put money into it and things. So they did make, very nice.

So I was standing in that doorway, watching this. This was the main Avenue de France. This was the port where these consignment. There was.

So I was standing there and watching the-- there were people going by-- Arabs, customers, dressed in European clothing. There were porters who were carting already goods from their way or things, or bought something. So it was a big street it was an avenue. It's like you stand in the Avenue St. St. Elysee.

And as I stand there, there's somebody I see. It's a European from the clothing, from the red hair. He comes closer. And he stands near me.

He says, is that a Yid? That means, are you a Jew? I look at him. I say, yes. Why?

Oh, he said, we ought to visit. You want to come up for a beer with me? He said, you ought to get a different way of doing business there too.

But a customer comes in, you don't say, what do you want, or he doesn't say, I want a pump, or I want things. You say, hello, it's i -- Say please take a seat. Do you want a coffee? Do you want a beer? Here's a cigarette.

It's altogether foreign for us. But there, that's how it goes. Talk about the family. Then slowly he says, oh, well, what is this there? He knows exactly what it is.

You say, oh, it's a pump, and it is a good pump. It goes for oil, or for things, and that. Then you start business. It's altogether different.

So I said, OK, so let's go. I didn't do anything against the business, because I had my job very well done. And it was just usually I was working with the sales staff. But this time I was watching the street go by.

So we went. And we went to the next door. And we had a beer each. And he said, I see it's a big company here. What are you doing? Let's talk.

Yes, Skoda is a big company in Czechoslovakia, and thinks I am from there. So he said, are you having a handguns or a rifles too. He knew. I said, no.

And of course, we didn't have it, because this was business, which was only done by head office in Prague. They didn't give anything like this to the branch offices in other countries. This was all dealt with on the top level.

So he said, why? Are you interested? He said, yes, perhaps. I said, but I have a friend here. He's the agent for the commerce department in Prague. There's a special agent.

And he has a partner. He's Italian he's the agent for Beretta. And I know Beretta has pistols. I said, if you are interested, here is the address. They are not far. They're in the port area there. You can go there and make business with them.

For me, I was naive. We were not educated to that way. We didn't have any idea what was going on.

What was going on was that he said, I have to go back now. I have a business appointment. I have to go back home now. But how about it if you could find out-- of course, you can write to me, and we can do some business perhaps. But don't write to me pistols or rifles. Write to me-- I don't know-- pajamas, so and so fee, costs so and so fee, And a suit or a coat, so and so fee.

I said, OK. So the guy is up. And how naive I was, is already [INAUDIBLE] that I went there and said to my friend, this agent from the business part of the Czech Republic. And he gave me this and this and this and this.

I used the Skoda paper-- the writing paper-- my writing paper-- but I wrote the reports to Prague-- we have so much this, and so we need more of this, and now this. I was just stupid and naive.

He answered back, and then I didn't hear anything anymore. And I had forgotten altogether anything about it.

The guy was caught by the CID in Palestine. And he had caught my correspondence in his place. And they were clever enough-- the CID was clever enough to know that no pajamas, and the guy was in the business of selling--

Armaments.

Armament. And they assumed that I am a person who was working for Skoda works, but also in the side business of armaments, and put me on a blacklist. Don't give him a visa, don't let him into the country.

So I said, what will I do? They are sending me back. They didn't even ask if I have the fare or not. They say, you're going back to Italy-- and from there back to Germany.

So I had the passport back, yes. Crossed out the transit visa, and signed by the police there. And I'm standing at the railing-- on the railing of the boat which we have come.

And I see one of the porters there. No sandals even. No shoes, no sandals. Just here I am, and I can cart a piano. They could carry on their shoulders.

So I called him. And this is one item which I also why I used the [INAUDIBLE]. So I called him [INAUDIBLE]. He comes to me. And I take from a notebook which I had, make a page.

And I write for him, Dear [? Schoenmann, ?] I am here in port, and they have canceled my transit visa and the things. I knew that he's very, very close with the police in Beirut. He's a official. And they won't let me down. See if you can help me.

And I put a note, or a lira note-- into an envelope with this note and throw it down to this guy and said, there is-- I don't know-- 50 lira or whatever it was in that. You go to this address, which is written there, and hand it to this man, and you will get another 50 lira.

So the man drop it off. He run off. And in about 25, 30 minutes, my friend comes to the boat. He says, hey, what are you doing there?

I said, well, I wrote to you to show you they cancelled me. And I don't want to stay here. I only want to go through to Baghdad. In Baghdad I have a job.

So he said, throw me a passport. I threw him the passport. In an hour and a half or two hours he is back. And he said, here is the passport. He gave it to the guard there on the pier there. And he said, this belongs to this guy there.

So the guard comes up and gives me his passport. There's a replacement visa, transit visa, for two or three days to be out of the country. But I can go where I want from there.

So they let me off the boat. And I get down. And I go. I had friends there-- Krauser-- Dr. Krauser-- who was married to a Lebanese girl. And the mother had a hotel. So I went to the hotel for these two days. And then the next day, I took the bus to Baghdad, and really got out.

But the trouble was that. That I had no idea that I was involved in such a intrigue.

Now Baghdad, was that under a British control?

British control. Habbaniya was completely British. Habbaniya was the airport.

So you made it to Baghdad.

Yeah.

And your father was there.

My father was there, and he was working already for one sheikh in the desert there to make the ground. I was the big Muhandes. Muhandes is the engineer. So I was the big Muhandes for that man, who had bought an old brick factory somewhere, and wanted it transferred to the land which he owned, because then he didn't have to pay to all these peasants which were on his land. They had to work for him. And he didn't pay.

And so we started to work there. But it went too slow for him. Father had, of course, exaggerated. He said, when the big engineer comes from Prague, it will go fast. But it didn't go so fast. So then they said, oh, no, I found somebody else who can work faster.

So by the time you got to Baghdad, do you know what year that was? When that was?

Yeah. This was still '39.

'39.

This was-- oh, it was so quick, because I had to be very quick.

And in Baghdad you felt safe.

Oh, yeah. But then I heard-- there I heard-- I got a very good job after that. I was sacked by this sheikh. I got a very big, very good job. You have it there too-- [INAUDIBLE]. These were Damascus, people from Damascus, who were in Baghdad, established as one of the biggest importers there. They imported Coleman stoves and [INAUDIBLE] from

England-- everything. Tiling.

But that then still the old Baghdad. So I came. There was no proper roadway. This was only-- how do you call it if there's no--

Unpaved roads.

Gravel?

Unpaved road. And with the cars going up and down. In Rashid Street, the main street, there was no building higher than one story. This was all built on sand.

And so he had the biggest-- he had practically two or three car factories. And I was good. The manager was a Indian-- not an American Indian-- an Indian-- India-- India Indian.

And he signed the things. And he was very nice to me, because I had learned codes. I don't know whether you ever heard of them. Morse code, and ABC code, where merchants only continued with Morse telegraphically with sales and buying and shipping. So it's all done on this book-- big books, ABC and different codes.

And I was very good. And so this Indian was very happy that he had somebody who know the languages and knew all the codes.

So was it your intention to stay there.

No. The moment I heard that they are recruiting Poles, Czechs, Slovaks--

[BANG]

No, no, it's only the mail. They put the mail into the--

Polacks and things. That the French are recruiting them in Beirut. I gave notice to others, and left. This was again the end of the year. And left to go back to Beirut to join the army.

Which army?

The French or the British army. The French army from there because they had it like the Foreign Legion they had established there. There were so many in that Middle East. There were so many Poles and Yugoslavs and things which had run away from home.

There were many from Poland and Czechoslovakia?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

And they were able then, earlier on, to get into the Arab countries?

No, they came sometimes with guides. There wasn't traffic.

So they were not there legally.

No. No, no. But then, the moment they applied to the British or the French army, they became legalized immediately-- and so was I.

Now the war had already started.

Oh, yes.

That's why you--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

They were already in Poland. So I got back.

And I wanted to join the army as a matter of principle?

I wanted to join, and I said-- pardon?

On principle?

On principle. I wanted to go back to Czechoslovakia. On principle.

But I had him-- I can show you him in one of them there, I can show you a copy where I had, in Prague, I have written to the British consulate that I want to apply for the British army for principle's sake.

So they took you in the British army in Beirut?

No. They don't. They had a section for every country. There was a colonel there for the Czech army, and I was due to the Czech army.

Have you seen the big pictures with the whole--

Not yet. We'll take a look after.

Are you hungry? We will go and have something to eat.

The trip was nothing, and it was just the end of the year, I think, when I arrived in Beirut. As I said, I had a friend there whose wife had, and the mother of his wife, had a hotel. So I had a room there. A room there. And I was applying there to the army.

The Czechs I would have had, instead of the Realgymnasium, instead of-- or university, I should have had served. And I went and presented myself. And they rejected me two or three times, whenever I was due to apply, because of my sight-- my eyes.

And so I was forced to look for a job. And I got a job with the best hotel in Beirut, which was the Hotel St. George. It was a hotel which was like the Shepheard in Cairo, a high-class chain. And I worked there as a accountant and chef de r ception.

There is also the certificate in there among the things. And to the manager was a certain [INAUDIBLE], Frenchman. And everything went on until war started more elaborate in Europe, Poland, and then further on. Hitler marched his famous march.

And after-- I will have to have this folder. I don't know what--

Ah, here is. [INAUDIBLE]. I have to see what they did this.

Can I ask you-- see if you can-- oh, can you without glasses?

Which one? The hotel St, George.

The French. Yeah, the Hotel St. George.

And what are you looking for? The date?

The date.

Let me see. It is 1941 already.

What--

This is dated for May '41.

May '41.

Yeah. 15th maybe.

Yeah. May of '41. So this was already into the war-- into the proper war.

Russia was about to be invaded the next month.

Right. Really? You remember that?

Oh. yeah.

Oh, very nice. So I quit there because I noticed being accountant and a chef de réception, I noticed that the people who came were forerunners for the German army. This was the time when Rommel tried to go through Egypt into-- they wanted Palestine, because this was the links of resistance because in British hands.

So they tried to-- yeah. One day two gentlemen arrive-- one Monsieur Girard, the other one Monsieur Renoir. I take one and register him. And the hall porter, Christo, who was a Cypriot, helped the other one to register and to take the passport. You had always to have the passport and the things to show who you are.

And suddenly he kicks me under the counter, Christo, the porter. And I look up. And I see that the guest he served was pushing a German passport. I know the German passport-- gray, you know, with a cross. They push it back into things, and takes another passport out from the other side of the coat, a diplomatic passport of the French.

So I had Mr. Girard, who was a real Frenchman. And he had this Monsieur Renoir who had a German passport on him, but had also a French diplomatic passport.

Well, Christo was a very devoted British citizen. He was from Cyprus, but he was very partial to the British. And after the two guests go upstairs, he says to me, did you see? I said, yes, he's German.

And he didn't speak a word at all. Only gave the things, you know. So we knew he is German. The other one, he was French-- real Frenchman.

And we hear on the grapevine that they assemble in Aleppo-- Alep in French in Syria. They assembly airplanes, German, to move into the Middle East. I decided that's high time for me. I had a year and a half, from May till-- this said this also till May of '41.

So I gave notice at the hotel. And I decided to go to Palestine, because there was still traffic going there among the Palastinians and the Lebanese and the Syrians. There was still traffic.

And I had--

Was the train still open at that time?

There is no train. This goes around the coast on a road like here. When you go up north also on the coast. The road's on the coast. Cars. Taxis. Big taxis.

So I book for a trip two days. I got the visa from the British consul for Palestine. And I come to the border. And here was my second greatest surprise.

We are six people in that cab. They are big cabs. For this purpose-- five or six we are in one cab. The driver takes the cabs at the border. Ras Al Naqoura is the border station. Al Ras Naqoura. And takes it in, and he passed the French. The Lebanese pass. And we come to the British pass and hands in the passport. And everybody gets it back, but not Gelnay.

What happens? I don't know. They say they still have to-- something not quite OK.

Did you have a passport at that time?

Yeah, the Czech passport.

Your Czech passport.

Yeah. And nothing doing. They canceled it. They canceled the transit visa. And I couldn't get out of Lebanon.

So I went. The driver said, listen, I can't hold it up I don't for how long. The others want to get into Haifa. They went from Beirut to Haifa.

And I had my father already there.

Your what?

My father was already there.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah. Because he--

He had gone to Israel; to Palestine.

No, to Lebanon. From Baghdad to Lebanon. But I had sent him. I knew that he can't get a visa. But I had applied to the army, and I was taken in reserve. They didn't take me immediately because of the eyes. They took me in reserve. And I had still the job in this St. George Hotel.

So I stayed still, and had my father already in Haifa. So the driver asked me, what about our things? I have to go on with this other persons who want to go into Haifa. I can't wait here. I'll give you a note, and the next driver, who hasn't got a full cab, will take you.

So I said, OK, so take the luggage. So he took the luggage, and off he went. Then, in a half an hour, they come in and they say, no, it's canceled, we were on to Jerusalem, and they told us to cancel the transit visa here.

I was flabbergasted. So I had to go back to Beirut, where I had given notice. And my luggage was already in Haifa curiously. But I had still the friend with the hotel there. So I went back and stayed at the hotel.

And so I said, well, if I can't do anything else, I will do the same what I arranged for my father-- to go with a guide, illegally, into Palestine. I had, from Palestine, my father there.

So I hire a guy. It took me a week or so. And this time, I didn't go via Ras Al Naqoura like the guide which took my father, but I went, because I thought I had the sejour in my stay in Lebanon was legal. So I thought I can go the other way via-- the north way. No. Not with Ras Al Naqoura. This was the south way that I go, the south way.

You were trying to get to Egypt?

Not to Egypt.

No? Where?

To Palestine. To Palestine.

Palestine wasn't below Lebanon?

Lebanon.

Yeah, south of--

Palestine was in the north of Lebanon, not in the south.

OK.

So anyhow, I went through the things. And I said, there is-- the town is named as something with S-- Saida. So I went to this town, like by bus. And there, with a guide, I went across country to just in such clothes. And at night, the guide said we have to hide in a stable from the peasant on the way there. And you cross the Litani River.

And so when crossing the Litani River, he told me to take off your things. I will swim first, and you will come. Give me your clothes. I will put them on my head so they will be dry when you come across the Litani.

He did as he said. And I was silly enough to give him the coat. And I had here, on the shoulders, gold coins in the coat. And he found them when he put the coat around his head. He felt something hard, and tore off the lining, and took the things.

But I didn't notice that. When I swam across, we are wet, and come out of the river. You just swim. So I just put on the coat and [INAUDIBLE].

Anyhow, so we continued. And we arrived at a hill. And he took me up to the hill. And he said, you stay here till night, and then you go down this stair. He showed opposite there was a road in between. Is the kibbutz. Is the kibbutz. He knew the name and so on.

So later on, in the afternoon, and we waited until it got dark. And then I went into the kibbutz. I went down the hill. Then on the road near the border was a Jeep. That Jeep had come. And I seen from the headgear that it's-- these are Palastinenser, British things with-- which police, assistant police.

So I told him. I showed him that I had come legally from Syria, from Lebanon, that I had a Lebanon permit, and that I told him I wanted to get into Palestine. They took me into the kibbutz, which was a very substantial kibbutz, and to the mukhtar. That's the manager of the kibbutz-- the director.

And the director had said, OK, you can have here something to eat, things. And then I will tell you something. We'll take you to the police station here-- the British police station-- and we will be there overnight. And then they will let you go. They will bring you to the magistrate, and he will let you go and give you a week in the hoosegow there.

I didn't know better, and I followed what he said. So I passed in Palestine, in the-- in this border town. I passed in the hoosegow in the police station the night.

There were two tribes of Arabs in the same prison. We were all in one great cell, which is as big as this place here. And there were one tribe here and one tribe there. They were fighting each other.

And I was sitting there against the wall trying to sleep, which I couldn't with all the dirt and the-- little black cockroaches. I don't know whether they were, or-- they were like cockroaches. Till the next morning. And still nothing happens. Nothing happens.

Even the most patient loses patience. So did I. And it was 9 o'clock. And I go go a things, and I-- "I want something to eat! I want something to eat!" And I talk there English.

So the police came, opened up, and they said, OK, come out. We will get something to eat. And here they gave me something, a breakfast.

Not the others?

Pardon?

Not the others who were in--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

No.

[LAUGHS]

Just the one who made the noise. OK.

I had really a proper, like their breakfast. They gave me, like, their breakfast.

And then they say you have to wait until the corporal comes in, the one in charge of that station. And so he comes in, and he looks at me, and sees this, and sees the cancellation in the passport from the old one from the river, from the ocean, from the Mediterranean, where they wanted to send me back. They canceled visa.

So he gets on to things, and he says, no, you can't stay here. And I heard him on the phone. Somebody told him, well-- like, told him, let him stay or put him into this holding camp and the judge will release-- no, no, I'll get rid of him. A Englishman, but he was a lousy one.

So he keeps me there till late in the afternoon. But they gave me to eat. But it didn't help. So the late afternoon, he says, I will send you now down with the constable to no man's land. You will go back into Lebanon from where you come, and he will see that you don't come back.

So the guy comes. It's an Arab with-- but a hefty guy with a rifle. And he gives me a shovel. And he says, let's go.

So we go. We come to the border. And he says, so now you're going [INAUDIBLE]. Go. Run. And he takes the gun. There was nothing I could do but just marching to no man's land.

But still, from time to time, I try to look back, and I see that when he's seen that I'm quite a bit-- well, perhaps only 100 yards or something, that I was in no man's land, he shouldered the rifle and went back to the station.

So I still continued a little bit further, and then I laid down, and I stayed there till night.

And this night was-- this, you have what I gave you, to the 47 pages in writing. I give you the whole thing there how they caught me in no man's land.

So you stayed the night there?

I stayed there in no man's land. And then, in the evening, I thought he is not there anymore, because they had also waited in the morning for him. So I went back.

And there was a guy there who had said-- a Jewish assistant-- police probably. And he said if the corporal sends you again into no man's land, later I will bring you back.

But he didn't come. So I went in on my own. They seen me, and one recognized me, and he said, I seen the guy in the police station. He said don't. Come. You'll go back to the police station. And again, I was at night there.

Next time, the same repeated itself. The corporal comes. He takes a armored car and a driver and another guard, and he drives along the border to a customs station there, where Lebanese customers-- custom agent-- were there-- Arabs. And he told them in English that I came from there, and he's bringing me back.

I was cheeky, and I knew enough Hebrew. I said, I don't-- no, I talked French then. And I said, no, I don't want to-- everything in order from things. I have the permit from the things to go to Palestine, and I don't want to go back there.

So they said, oh, no, you can't bring him back. Now he's in Palestine, he can't come back into Lebanon. They made it a federal case out of it, because they seen that I don't want to come back.

And so he was angry, but he couldn't do anything. They were there more than he was, and they said no. And they said-- they say and --

So he took me back and said the same story. Repeated itself. The next day again, you will do the same.

And he did, really. But this time I was careful not to go out. I went out, as they had said, and laid down. But I didn't go back on my own. I thought, well, they guy might come today-- the guy who told me that he will bring me back. There's another entry to the kibbutz-- to the police station there.

And so I waited. And suddenly I hear-- this was already-- the moon was already out, so it was already night. And hear "hello." And I think, that's him. And I say, hello.

After a while I hear it much louder. Hello! I don't get up. I still wait, and I make it louder. Hello! And then a third time. And I thought, no. No, no, that's not -- that's here.

So I get up. And I am here. And one, two, three-- there are three guys with their rifles on me.

But they were [INAUDIBLE]. I don't know whether you ever heard of them. They are from the French military. They were French troops. They had these bandoliers. They were very famous. They were known as [INAUDIBLE]. They were known in France, and also with other countries in Europe, they were known.

And this is--

Arabs, actually.

Ah? Yeah.

And this is the time when they say what I said, and how I titled it. Turn around, one says. With three rifles pointed at me, I could not do anything else but just creep up to that guy and hold my papers.

It was dark. It was moonlight only. And they didn't have any flashlight or something like that. So he said, I can't read this.

But we will take you, and we will see. We'll take you to our things. They were up on the hill where they had their barracks.

They took me there. They gave me to drink. They gave me to eat. And he examined my things. He said, this is nothing which I can decide. You will have to go from here to [PLACE NAME] which is a small town. And there is the headquarters of these troops for the border-- the headquarters.

And there is the lieutenant there. He is a Frenchman. He will decide what to do with you.

So they bring horses-- one horse. And I said, look at me. It was things. My ankles were swollen like this because all the time in this no man's land. It is uphill, downhill, through rough-- through no nothing. There's no pass. Nothing there. You have just to do what you can.

So I said, look, you see, that I am very incapable of walking such a distance. I knew where [PLACE NAME] was. I mean, it was not 100 yards or something. It was riding, far. But he said, never mind. He will let you ride a part of the way, and then you will walk part of the way until you come there.

We came there, and really to [PLACE NAME] And they, again, they gave me something to eat and to drink. And we waited until the lieutenant came, which was already he had a good-- had a place in the bigger town next to there.

The only thing that I finally done, got into Lebanon. And I was working there because they still had these no use, because the sight was so bad.

You finally were led into Palestine?

No. But while I was-- while I was in [PLACE NAME] in this little town where he had taken me-- so the lieutenant-- this I am not sure anymore whether they brought him. But two officers-- no, they took me-- I have forgotten how it worked, that they let me go, and took me into [PLACE NAME] is a fortress very near the border, but on the Palestinian's side.

And this fortress was-- they brought me to there. Somehow I got there. You will find it out from the writing I did.

And I was sitting there outside on the fortress and waiting for the top. It was a major or a colonel that came. And when he came, who was in charge of the fortress, I seen that I know him. And he just marched by me to his office without a second glance.

And after a while, they said, get up. And he took me in into his office in front of his desk. And I'm standing there, and look at him.

And he looks at me, and he say, [SPEAKING FRENCH]. In French he says, hey, I know you. And I says, certainement. Sure. I was the accountant and receptions clerk of the Hotel St. George.

And why did he remember me immediately? Because when I was there, his wife and he-- had his wife there, you know. She was staying at the hotel. They came and stayed at the St. George. And she had taken off, in the bathroom, a ring, and had forgotten it there. And the maid was very honest, and brought to me. And she said, I found this ring in this girl's bathroom.

So I took the ring, and I wrote a note. And I said, [SPEAKING FRENCH]. And you can get it when you come the next time to the hotel.

So it was not the ring was so valuable, but it was in her family. I don't know. They were noblepeople. They had titles. So I don't know how long it was in her family already. And that's what she was so grateful for. And that's why he remembered me so well.

But I looked, of course, dirty, with hair-- facial hair, and the other things, and you don't keep nice in the cross country prisons. I was not like I am today here.

So it was so terrible. So he says, so why are you here? So I told him the whole story. And I said, I'm quite honest, that I must tell you. I can't wait to get into Palestine, because I am Jewish. And if they catch me, the German here, and I know that they are where they are, that they're coming from Aleppo, I don't want-- I can't go back.

So he said, well, as much as this corporal thinks, we have much more brains than they. And he said, wait here, and I'll be back, and you'll go and have a wash and have a things and eat and, and -- And it happened like this.

And he brought a staff officer who knew every detail of the border there, and also that at the present time there was, in the next kibbutz, no police and no military. So they said, you stay here.

And they went with me-- these two officers went with me into the foreign land, into the no man's land, and brought me through the post where the kibbutz was. Near the post was a stand of trees and things where I could-- and bushes-- sit down and nothing there.

They say, stay in these bushes. Wait until they come out to work. They come every morning out to work, these people here. And then ask them to get you in.

And exactly I did what he said. And they got me in, and got me back to Haifa, where I got together with my father again.

Real good; OK, that's a good place to break.