

OK. Do you want to pick up where you left off?

Yes. I really don't know--

Well, you had just finally gotten across the border into Palestine, and then made your way to Haifa to meet your father.

Right.

What did you do then?

Now then? Then I worked for one year. I worked for a company which it was called Levant Bonded Company in Haifa. It was stationed in the port. And I worked for them.

And then they called me to the military.

How old were you then?

Pardon?

How old were you then?

'41.

Then you were 31, huh?

No, no, no.

No.

No. At '41, I left Beirut. I worked one year in Levant Bonded. Is '42, '43.

Yeah, you were about 33, because it was 1943 that they called you.

Yeah.

Yeah. And so you had been born in 1910.

'10. Yeah. So 33. And what did I do then? After '33 I was in Haifa.

What did your father do there?

My father had-- I had some money when I worked in Baghdad and so on. He bought the equipment and did dentistry without asking for a-- he had diplomas for dentistry. So he just was in the room, and the dentistry there-- especially for very difficult cases they came to him, where he had made teeth with other dentists, and they were still complaining it hurts them. And he corrected them. So they had no reason to tell on him that he is not registered there.

Right. So where did you train when you went in the army?

Anti-aircraft but I was very lucky because I had the regular training, and that damaged a couple of ribs-- you know, when you had to run and fall down quick, and with a rifle, and with a pack. So I had this.

And I was sent to Jerusalem-- from the camp to Jerusalem-- for a little bit-- how do you call it now? Aftereffects.

Mm-hmm. To cure you.

And then they had there my records. And seeing that I knew so many languages, so I got there immediately transferred to the top echelon.

I have to show you the [MUMBLING]

Show after. Uh-huh.

Yeah.

The picture?

Yeah, afterwards we'll get the picture on film.

Yeah. In Jerusalem.

And then there I met my wife. And I think this was-- I was there four years, until the end of the war. Even after the war I was in a unit which was connected to the army somehow.

And then I married. This was during the time I was in the army. And she persuaded me to stay on. And I stayed on after my discharge, and became a-- you have it there. You have seen it there too. Black with a--

And Kovatch was my partner. He was also a husband of one of my wife's sisters. So we were brother-in-laws. And we opened in Jerusalem an import-export business.

And there we had the misfortune to get in touch with somebody who-- his name was Koenig. And he was some kind of an engineer perhaps, but he declared himself as a chemist. And that he is the only one who can make and supply DDT.

And he looked for agents. But the agents had to be capable of buying stock from him against cash only. He said, I don't have the money to manufacture. Only I bring the-- do you know what DDT is?

Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah. It was there famous, because the Middle East was chosen by God to be the heaven of all the flies in the world. So everybody bought them and sprayed.

And they had-- he had a certificate from the first lots from the university in Jerusalem that the merchandise is 5% DDT. It was in-- what is it?-- petrol. Or how do you call it, what do you put in lighters? In cigarette lighters.

Butane?

Huh?

Butane?

Butane. No. But it's like--

Kerosene?

Kerosene, yes. And there was 5% there was DDT in it.

And again it started wonderful off. And we had many people who were serving with us in the army. They were glad that we gave them a job to sell this product. And they were running around with backpacks and selling them.

And he came. And it was always bigger and bigger and bigger, the quantity. The first was in a small truck, like, I don't know. And then, as it got bigger and bigger, until he came with an enormous truck. And we had to pay cash for him. We had to pay in cash. And this was 2,000 pounds English-- a big sum.

And the salesman came back and say the customers complain it doesn't work. They spray it. It doesn't work.

So we go and immediately make the tests. And the university says it's correct. There are some bottles which are 5%, some bottles which have only half a percent of DDT. And some have nothing. So whatever he had, he had used up.

And as well as swindle, he didn't make that at all. He bought probably from some head sergeants or master sergeants who were in charge of stocks in the army. And he bought from them whatever they could put aside. So we went to them.

And anyhow, we got-- we took them to court. And they came to court. And they offered to pay-- I don't know-- \$0.30, \$0.40 to the dollar what they owed.

So I said, no. Let him sit. Let him go to prison. I won't make for a third that he goes free. We are losing a lot of money.

So my brother-in-law-- the brother-in-law with whom I was in partnership-- he said, well, you know, perhaps it's better days. We will find something else. And I said, OK, you do what you want. It's out for me. I go back.

I can't make business where the partner goes to cheat you from the beginning. I can't. I can't think that way. It's not for me.

So we went back to-- so the baby was born there in-- Ben was born in Jerusalem. And when he was about a year, a year and a half, this happened, and we went back to Czechoslovakia. And of course, I had been with the headquarters in [INAUDIBLE] you know and I got immediately a nice apartment. And I got a car. And I got-- we started to do business.

This is in Czechoslovakia?

Yeah.

Around what year was that? That was after the war.

This was after the war.

And before the War of Independence in Israel.

Oh, yes.

Uh-huh.

And before the takeover of the--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Before '48. It was before '48 because in '50 we already Ben was four years old. And we arrived already in Melbourne-- not in-- we arrived in Canberra.

Did you leave because of the communists?

Yeah. Yeah.

Was it hard to get out? It was hard because you couldn't take anything with you.

You couldn't take anything.

So again, I had to give up everything. And a baby two years old. And we went to Switzerland. So my wife had a pot for him-- a chamber pot for him. And they even examined that at the border, the communists. Yeah.

Why Melbourne?

Why Melbourne? Because we landed in Melbourne. I don't know.

Were you headed-- where did you want to go?

Nowhere. We were promised citizenship later. We knew that we will be able to be-- for two years we had to work for the government and they paid our transport there. They brought us there.

They kept us until we got-- until we got through the government jobs. We had to go where they put us. We couldn't, for two years, pick our own jobs.

So when communism was coming in to Czechoslovakia--

We arrived again.

--then you--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--were able to arrange with the government of Australia? That's--

Yeah. Yeah. We were actually registered. There was, then, after the war was there, in Switzerland, the organization to place refugees.

But you went first to Switzerland.

Yeah. And I worked for two years there, until they found somebody. Then, when they had this [INAUDIBLE], we took the things to-- they didn't force you if you didn't want to go to that place.

So did the Australian government help you in Switzerland?

Not in Switzerland. They had us then to go from Switzerland-- the trip was already on their account. And you didn't have any trouble getting into Switzerland?

No, because I had a permanent transit visa-- not transit visa; a permanent visa-- back and forth because I had friends in Switzerland, and they were connecting. We were also looking for material from the war, to buy it cheaply and to settle in in Czechoslovakia and things. And I had good friends there.

So how did you find Australia?

Well, obviously, I worked for the two years, from '50 till '52. I worked for two years for the Bryson company, which was the agents for Jaguar-- Jaguar and things. So this is what was to my liking-- to be with the cars. And they had also the agency for two small cars, British ones?

What kind? Vauxhall?

No, no. Morris Minor?

No.

Small car? Small cars, but they were more or less the sports cars. Like--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

No. It was one or two different brands. And one is the-- I forgot.

Austin-Healey?

No, but similar to the Austin-Healey in the shape and in the form.

So you liked that, huh? Working on these cars.

Yes. And I could have stayed on if I would have wanted. But I wanted more money. I had a family. I had the boy and the wife.

So then I worked for a big department store there. And then not--

Doing what?

Accountancy. And then I went and worked for this company where you have to [? lease ?] the-- I worked for them from 1950-- nearly, I think, 13 years or 14 years. 13 years I worked for that company. They made-- they were a Jewish company.

The father had several sons. Two sons perished in the camp. One came out from the camp, and two came with him first. And he was at home, and he was just selling clothing.

But then, when the war broke out, he became rich. He sent one son to the States here, and he became an expert to cut for suits from uniforms.

And then he bid in Australia for a big contracts and made a lot of money. And when he had his own building-- a big building and a factory there. So he got me as a accountant. But then they had already 80 seamstresses working. And when I left, they had already 150.

So how did it come that you went from Australia to Canada?

Very simple. My mother was here--

"Here" being--?

Not here. She was in New York. But then she came with her daughters here. With one daughter she came here-- the older daughter.

And she was still in New York when-- my sister said she-- my sister called me in Australia and said, you know-- no, she sent me a letter. You know, mother is not so young anymore, and I'm afraid if you want to see her-- we've had 27 years we were not connected. We were just separated 27 years. So the siblings sent her mother and her son.

Were you able to have some contact or communication during that time?

Very little. No, from Australia we had. But until then.

Right.

Also Switzerland. But then, before then, it was army. There was no way of communicating.

So she said-- so I got a flight, and I said to my late first wife, I said, listen, I have to see my mother. I have to go.

I might be back in two weeks. I might be back in two months. I haven't seen them for 27 years. I don't know what. I don't know how it is.

And so I packed up. I had acquired, in the meantime, a small plot to build a home in Australia. And so I sold it. And of course she had to have money there, with her child, and I had to have money to go to the States.

And when I arrived at the airport-- both my sisters were redheads. And despite the long separation, I come out from the airplane, and go a long-- the long way to the main air -- there, and I see the two redheads standing there.

And I look at them because they look at me. And we laugh. And then we couldn't believe it. After 27 years.

Was your mother there too?

No. She was at home. But she was not ill to the extent that she was going to die. But my sister had made it a bit worse than it was.

To get you to come?

Yeah.

And then they started to welcome me. They said, you don't have anybody there. What do you want? Try to come here.

And then I went to the things. Seven years, eight years it can take, your quota, Vienna.

So then my wife said-- and then she-- after she seen that my family would like us to come, she said, you know, I have a cousin there somewhere. And perhaps you should get in touch with him. We'll see.

So when I came here to New York, where my sisters lived, and my mother, I took off and went also to Toronto to meet the cousin of my wife. And they said, there's one.

And one of them was very bright. And he said, I think you can come easily here. You were in the army.

So I went up to the things. and I said, here, these are my papers. I'm an Australian citizen. But I would like to come. Things -- can I work here in Canada? Sure.

So that was the finish. I got my wife to come. I never even went back. I found myself already--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

You never went back to Australia.

Not then. So I went back after they went, after my son went and married a girl there.

Yeah. No, but at that time you didn't go back.

No.

Your wife came here.

Yeah. Yeah.

And so you got to Toronto, because she had the cousin there, and it was closer to your family.

Of course. They passed every year we came.

So you've done a lot of globe-hopping in your time.

Yes. How has that been for you? Do you wish that you had put roots down one place and stayed, or did you mind moving from place to place?

Well, I would have liked to come straight to the States, and not to things. But after I lived there so many years-- 26 years I lived in-- that that's a lifetime in Canada.

Sure it is. 26 in Canada?

Yeah

Huh. How do you think your Jewishness has affected your life?

[RINGING TELEPHONE]

Very much so.

But yes, what was it you-- it was a pertinent question you asked?

What I asked you?

Yeah.

I asked you if you felt that your Jewishness affected your life?

Yeah. If I wouldn't have been Jewish, I wouldn't have left Prague. I would never have. I might have gone somewhere for a Czech company, but I don't know. No, I didn't--

So that was the part that was imposed upon you.

Yes.

What has your Judaism meant to you?

Not much, really. I don't want to paint a picture that I am very-- I'm not a great believer. But I was never-- I never denied that I'm Jewish. I always had, in the main, Jewish connections.

These people in Melbourne, they were Jewish. They wanted somebody Jewish. My boss there paid even for the bar mitzvah of my son. They were very Jewish.

I wanted to ask what happened to your father. We left off with him still being in Beirut.

No, in Haifa.

In Haifa.

In Haifa, yeah. From Haifa, he went back to-- I think he went then back to Prague because we still had-- most of our connections have always been in Prague. And stayed in Prague-- I can't say anymore how long he stayed in Prague. But he died in '55 in Vienna.

Were they still married after the war?

Pardon?

Were your parents still married after the war? He never tried to join her? She was in America.

Yeah.

He never tried to join her.

No.

Did he get divorced?

I think he wanted to get divorced.

He wanted to.

Because I know that he lived with a woman then in Vienna. Somehow, he got, again in Vienna or in Prague-- I don't know from where-- some subsidy or something as a compensation. Because his records were there that he was working this and working that, and had-- that there were no records anymore.

This was things I went when I went to Vienna, about-- when was that? Those must have been already-- no I went also to Vienna once when I only visited my son in Melbourne. But I went through Vienna once, I think.

And I went to the-- there is the titles offices. And I went to the title to-- I wanted to visit. And the original titles had been burned. And they were only from '48, something. During the war they started new, the titles office. So I couldn't find any more out what-- when he had-- but he died in '55.

Did you ever see him again after you left to go to Australia?

No.

No. And he and your mother never saw each other again.

No, I don't think so.

And did your mother ever remarry, or what--

No.

No. Stayed single.

Yeah.

Do you know what she felt about him not ever trying to see her again or hook up with her?

No, not really. I was not so much together with her. It was only in the beginning. But then I had already a job in Toronto.



She was once coming, and visited my place, but she was then already not any more-- she was [INAUDIBLE] incontinent. And we wanted to keep her there. We would have been very glad. But she didn't want to let go of her too.

She got very close to her granddaughter of the younger sister. She was very-- this girl was very attached to her. And that's the lady, probably, who-- through who we got together. I think so.

Peggy Diaz is her name. Now I know the name. You see, before I couldn't find out. But Peggy Diaz is her name, in Burlingame. Yeah. She's living in Burlingame.

And she was very much after that, she, because they know many of these things about my life. And she said, you have to. But I'm--

Very good.

My wife-- nobody's interested in it. Forget about it. Nothing. Throw out everything. Throw this away. Throw all the photos away.

Which? First wife?

No.

Second wife.

Yeah. The berlinerin.

But, well we--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

She had such a different way in life.

She had gotten rid of her past, like she advised you. Yeah.

Yeah. And I don't know. I don't know whether her first marriage was-- was very successful money-wise. He made a lot of money. He was a very good businessman. He was a doctor, a surgeon, and a gynecologist and obstetrician. You can imagine.

And had two offices in San Francisco, one in Sutro, and another one somewhere else there. And she is very well off. Had no family. Didn't need and didn't want any children, and is very well-off. And everything goes only to charity.

I wanted to go back a bit to know, when you left Prague after-- actually, the Sudetenland had already been annexed, and you saw that it was not a good situation-- had you experienced at that time antisemitism? Were you limited in any way, or--

No. No. No. The [BOTH TALKING] I told you, this was the Jewish state in Austria-- this district in Vienna where we were, where the buildings were, where we lived. I would say we went through the things, must have been 80% Jewish. No-- or perhaps 90%.

I never had any experience with that. And even in school, where we had also this prevalent percentage of Jewish people, I still had friends which were not Jewish. There were only five, six in the class from the first to the 20th-- to the eighth class. And I always had there two or three friends which were not Jewish.

Now you were in Prague when the Germans came in.

Yeah.

How was that for you? Were tears just streaming down other people's faces, or yours too?

Well, perhaps I was affected then. Yes, mine probably too. It was more because I knew already that my sister had lost-- that nobody--

It's very hard to tell you that correctly. But there were already rumors around, but there was nothing which was really where people could say they are in concentration camps. They started only afterwards. There was already Theresienstadt, but nobody was killed there, like later.

So we seen them as robbers. They are robbers of our bread, of our way of making a living.

And of our culture, no?

And of our culture. But when the Gestapo was active in Prague, there was no way there of considering them as equal. Then you were already afraid of the Gestapo.

And the example, when I first wanted to get a exit permit, when I didn't know that the Slovaks had opened an office and got the exit permit for people like me and for people who were from Slovakia. So I had met people-- not friends of many years, but friends-- short-term friends. And their name was [? Bellach. ?] [? Bellach. ?] And they were half-Jewish. Jewish and Christian marriage came from this.

And he had-- how do we call it, this cross?

The swastika?

The swastika. He had a swastika, a medal. And when I wanted to get a-- I said, I will put this on and go to the Gestapo headquarters, just to get in and ask there, make a case. I get a visa for Baghdad. And to ask whether they can-- they will give me an exit permit.

I didn't know then yet about what-- that they have this office in Prague, the Slovaks, because they didn't know German. And there they needed this exit permit to show. And so it was a blue card like this.

And I go down. I said to [? Bellach, ?] and I said-- read it to me. And I told him what I wanted to do. So he gave it to me.

And I went down to the Gestapo, which was in the inner city-- in the city, in the middle of the city. And it was closed. It was closed because I did not have paid attention. It was what they call [GERMAN], All the Souls. Is a German holiday here in Germany and in Austria. And it was closed for this reason.

But silly and simple as I am, I thought, this is a sign of God.

We shouldn't do this.

I shouldn't do that. So I turned around and went home, gave him back, and I said, no, I don't want anything to do with it.

And then, after a while, people told me. There this office there, and they do something for the Slovaks. So I went up. I didn't know what they do for them. But I thought, well, they consider me a Slovak. I might as well know what they are doing for us.

And I went up. And I called one of the clerks-- a young clerk. He was in his mid-20s perhaps, and gave him a note with a handshake. And I said, what is going on here?

So he said, well, most of our people don't know German. So we are making them-- I and other people here-- are making out the applications for the transit for these passports. So I said, can I have one too? He said, sure.

It is hard to describe for-- to be a believer if such things happen to you out of the blue. It's very hard. I don't know.

Very hard not to be a believer or to be a believer?

To be a believer-- for me.

Yeah. But did you think when the office was closed that day, that--?

That day I thought, yes, it's a sign of whoever.

Maybe there's someone.

Yeah. Yeah.

Do you have other questions you want to ask him?

Well, had you told your son about all your travels, and the many places you had been, and your life experiences? No, I don't think he was anxious to know. That's what my wife means when she says, well, he lives in another world. And so as not-- it will be just thrown out.

Well, we often see that the adult children want to know, and sometimes it's too late by that time. So he may still want to know.

Are there things that you've learned from the twists and turns that your life has taken that you would want to pass on to future generations?

Yes, I would like to. Yeah.

Any particular lessons that you've learned that you'd want to tell us?

Well, the main lesson I would advise any person. For instance, my wife has adopted, more or less-- not really adopted, but just adopted in the sense of company or so-- two young couples. And what I feel is that people shouldn't take the different conditions.

That people shouldn't what?

Should not take different conditions very seriously.

How do you mean "different conditions"?

Well, if something happens which you don't like, don't surrender and be immediately desperate. You never know how it turns out.

So be patient.

Be patient.

And keep trying to do what you were trying to do.

Yeah. This one young couple, this is very interesting. The one couple is a young woman from-- "young woman"; she's

40-- from Switzerland who divorced her first husband, who was American because he wanted to live in Blackhawk and to be the-- I think he inherited quite some money and wanted to live the high life. Golf. He's an instructor of golf. And wanted to live the high life.

And she was from a Swiss family, where the man-- where the father was a small man in some kind of government office, and the mother, who was mentally disturbed. They were married-- so she married here a second time. And the second husband is-- he is about 50, or near 50-- nearly 10 years older than she is. And she had-- they had a child one year ago.

And she's not so healthy, the woman. And they overdo-- they are quite taken by their child, the baby. Nothing is being done without consideration to the baby first.

Now you're talking about the parents.

Parents. So she's 40 and he is 50. So according to my wife they made a big mistake that they had a child at all, because she is from a marriage where the mother is mentally not right. So this can jump.

The other couple, she's 50 and he is 58, or-- probably 58. He didn't want any children. And it was either that or divorce. So she gave up.

And he's living a good life. Now he is a professor at St. Mary's. She-- for 16 years my wife supported her financially so that she could study and become a-- what do you call it? For mentally. What, what, what--

A psychologist, or--?

Pardon?

Psychologist?

Psychologist. Yeah. And she went through the whole things to become-- and was in Kaiser and has her own things.

My wife says they have sacrificed everything for the sake of the child, because she is not a very strong woman. She's nothing. She had something done with her knee, or something. She's very slim and straight. And he's very simpatico. The husband too. The husband calls himself a music director, but he's not very famous. He's nothing like Andre Rieu or anybody with big talent and big income.

So she said he should never have married. They would be excellent off because it's the wife who is the moneymaker. She's the-- what did you call her? A--?

Psychologist.

Psychologist. Yes. The other couple, they are both-- they have a beautiful home-- 4,000 square feet. They don't have a family. 4,000 square feet in Broadway, here in the [INAUDIBLE]. What is it? The Broadway Leeds Hotel?

You're talking about in Oakland?

Yeah, it's an Oakland in the hills.

Oakland Hills?

Oakland Hills. Yes, Oakland Hills, up in the hills. Broadway or something it's called there. And it's a beautiful home. And she was very efficient. He's the professor at St. Mary's. She's a very good saleslady, has connections with Japanese importers, and does business with them and things.

Who is right and who is wrong? The one who has the child or the one who has no child? He didn't want any children, this professor. So she gave it up.

But you wanted to tell us, using that as an example--

Yeah, it's the things that my wife thinks that she did it-- she did wrong. She was not anxious before she married this music director. She was not anxious to have a child. She was married. She didn't have a child. And she always said she doesn't want a child.

Then, apparently, she met him, and he persuaded her.

Then what? Say that again.

And he persuaded her, probably. So now she has the child, but she's not in good health anymore. She has-- carrying on laryngitis, and a hernia, and this, and all kinds of things. It's very hard to tell you what to do.

You see, that's why I say, don't worry. What comes, comes. You can't help it.

We shouldn't take these dilemmas too seriously?

Right. Right.

Well, you certainly faced a lot of changes--

Oh, yes.

--in your lifetime.

Yeah.

And we want to thank you very much for having been willing to tell your story, and for sharing your life with us.

Oh, yes, it is-- it is my pleasure.

We really appreciate it.

Yeah.

Thank you.

Thank you. By the way--

OK. These are your parents?

Yeah, the picture is of my parents-- Dr. Adolph Gelnay and his wife Mary. They were born in Rustig. They were, at the time, at a resort in Czechoslovakia, and thought it might be a nice picture, both of them sitting together on a tree trunk or something.

OK.

I think this picture is of the six buildings which father built before the First World War. They are situated on the main street of the second district in Vienna, which it was known as the Leopoldstadt. The street is a business street. And there are two street cars running down that street with different destinations.

One of the buildings is that of a hotel. It was called the Hotel Central, and it was the first hotel in Vienna built with hot and cold running water, and with central heating.

And next to this building, there was-- the other building had, in the basement, a movie house, which later was taken over by the UFA Tone company. This movie house was also one of the first in Vienna built without pillars or any other supports for the balcony.

This is a photo of myself and the Hupmobile, which was on loan from Dita's husband Otto for a short trip into the area of the-- I forgot the name. The area is part of the-- German part of--

Of Sudetenland?

Sudetenland.

And that's you by the car. Yes, I said. The photo is for myself with the Hupmobile.

This is the headquarters of the general staff of the Czech forces in the British Eighth Army in Jerusalem. It's all these officers were serving under--

[RINGING TELEPHONE]

OK. We interrupted. You were explaining about--

Oh, yes, this was the-- the staff was headed by General-- I'm sorry. I think I forgot the name of the general. But he was-- General [? LaGok. ?] General [? LaGok ?] was the head of the staff there.

But of course, every pay, and every type of utensil or clothing was supplied, or locations were supplied by the Eighth Army under General [? Riesen. ?] The British Eighth Army under General [? Riesen. ?]

And you were in the British Army in Jerusalem for about how long?

I was with them for nearly four years.

This is a photo of my son Ben Gelnay with his small family-- with daughters Sonara and [? Riana, ?] and son Caleb-- This is wife?

And his wife.

And his wife Marie. As you can see, they are well-fed and they are happy, and I'm happy for them.

Very nice. And with that, the next generation's going on. On behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Project, we thank you again.

Thank you.