Interview with JOHN POLT
Holocaust Oral History Project
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BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q COULD YOU TELL US YOUR BIRTH NAME, WHEN YOU WERE BORN, AND WHERE YOU WERE BORN?

A Sure. I was born on August 20th, 1929, in (ousic) or (usic) on the Labe, that's the river it was on. It was also known by its Czech name, Ustinad Laben, which is a city in Bohemia on the Elbe River, northwest of Prague and really quite close to the German boarder. And I was born as Hans Pollatschek, that's my--

Q SPELL IT.

A That's the problem you see. P-o-l-l-a-t-s-c-h-e-k, and you've just seen why this name was changed to Polt. My father offered $5 reward to a person who would find a suitable alternative, excluding Polk, because Polk was a name of a president, and he was eager not to appear to be trying to pass himself off as an old line wasp and descendant of presidents. And my mother won the $5 by eliminating seven of the eleven letters in Pollatschek, and she spent the $5 buying strawberries for her family.

Q COULD YOU TELL US YOUR FATHER'S NAME AND YOUR MOTHER'S NAME AND MAIDEN NAME?

A Yes.

Q AND YOUR SIBLINGS?

A Yes. My father was Fredrick Polt or Fredric or Fritz Pollataschek, and my mother is Elizabeth and her maiden name was Lederer, L-e-d-e-r-e-r. I have one sister, Renata, who was christened Renata Harriett. And when she came to this country, Harriett seemed the proper thing to call herself. But after many years she decided she really had never liked that name, and she went back to

calling herself Renata, and that's what she is now. And she was also born Pollataschek and became Polt, and she's married to Fredrick Schmidtt, with two T's, but continues to use the name of Polt in her activities as a writer.

Q HOW DID YOUR FAMILY SUPPORT ITSELF?

A When or where?

Q WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG.

A As a child. Yes, well, my father was an attorney and a member of a--a partner in a very successful law firm. He specialized in tax and business law and I think he had a good practice. His partners were Dr. Mauler--old Dr. Mauler and young Dr. Mauler. Young Dr. Mauler had a daughter about my age. And my aim as a child of four or five or so was to grow-up, become a lawyer like daddy, marry young Ms. Mauler, and take over the firm. But it didn't work out that way.

And after we left Czchoslovakia, I guess we supported ourselves from basically by investments that my father had made. My father, after he left home, never really worked again on a regular basis. He tried something once, but he couldn't practice law in the country without studying a radically different legal system, and taking Bar Examination and so on. And he worked for a while as sort of an independent financial consultant.

But basically as of 1938, which is when we left Bohemia and when he was 42 years old, he never had any regular employment again, which I think was one of the--I don't know what you want to call it--tragedies, because there are a lot worse tragedies of the world, but it was one of the difficulties of his life, because although there are some people who would be happy to retire at 30 and would have no problem dealing with the time, he wasn't that kind of a person. He didn't

really have so many absorbing outside interests, and I think it was very difficult for him to live like that.

Q COULD YOU GO BACK AND TELL US WHEN YOU BEGAN, EVEN AS A SMALL CHILD, TO KNOW THERE WAS TROUBLE THAT YOUR FAMILY--WHAT WAS THE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE AND HOW, YOU KNOW, WHEN YOU STARTED TO REALIZE THAT YOUR FAMILY WOULD HAVE A CHANGE IN YOUR LIFE?

A That's very hard to say. The oldest memory I have of this kind of thing was probably shortly before we left. That would be maybe 1937 or 1938. Really only two things impressed me at the time, maybe three. One was that my parents were called from the school and told that I shouldn't dress the way I dressed. I went to school wearing short flannel pants; gray flannel pants, and I guess some sort of socks and shirt, and so on. And it turned out that something very much like this was the uniform of some Nazi youth organization, and the school didn't think I should be wearing this. But when my parents demonstrated to them that this was English flannel and that the trousers had been made by some tailor and not according to the pattern of the Nazi group, there was no more trouble about it. So this was a very minor matter.

More impressive really, and something that I remember very distinctly was that on the way up to our house, you had to climb a little hill and on that hill lived a cousin of my mother's. And I remember seeing in front of that house, hanging from a flagpole, the flag of the Sudeten German Party. That was a flag which was red and in the middle of it was a white area. And in this white area were some black, very jagged letters S-D-P, Sudeten German Party, which was obviously from the inscription copy of the Nazi party flag. And I remember being impressed by this uncle, as I thought of him as an uncle, flying this flag. And my mother

subsequently told me, I wasn't aware of this at the time, that these people who had been on very close terms with my parents, suddenly began to find it impossible to have social relations with them, but it that's not something I was aware of at the time. On the same street, I remember a balcony in an apartment house, where when I went to school in the morning, the Czechoslovak flag was draped from the balcony and next to it the Nazi flag, but by the time I had come home from school, the Czechoslovak flag had dropped to the ground for whatever reason, and the Nazi flag was there. It's a trivial thing.

I don't remember apart from this, anything in the way of difficulties. I remember when I was a child, this must have been about '36, that we took a train to go on vacation in Austria, and the train passed through German territory. The conductor came into the compartment to check the tickets and greeted us with "Heil Hitler." First, and I'm happy to say only time I've heard that greeting. And my parents answered with "Grace God," which was a civilized reply, but again, this was just a trivial matter really.

Other than that, I was not aware of any sort--I can't remember being aware of any kind of problems until we actually left home.

Q TO GO BACK TO THE SCHOOL, WHERE THE SCHOOL CALLED YOUR MOTHER ABOUT WHAT YOU WERE WEARING, WAS THAT A PUBLIC SCHOOL, OR WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL?

A No, that was a Protestant elementary school. Founded by some ancestor of mine, as a matter of fact, on my mother's side, and that's where I went to school.

Q NOW, TO COME BACK TO WHERE WHEN YOU WERE SAYING YOUR FAMILY GOT READY TO LEAVE, CAN YOU REMEMBER

RIGHT BEFORE THAT, MAYBE SOME OF MAYBE THE FEELINGS, OR COULD YOU TELL US HOW THAT CAME ABOUT?

A Well, we had in the summer of 1938, we spent an extended vacation in Switzerland, the on shores of Lake Lucerne. I subsequently found out that--I mean much later did I find out that there was--this is the summer of '38--there was a great deal of tension and my father thought it prudent to be out of the way for awhile. But I was not aware of any of this. I was just having a good time there, swimming in the lake and taking hikes, and so forth.

And then at the end of the summer we went back home, and school started, and I started in the 4th grade. And that grade I remember as being different from all the others, because for the first time we had Czech instruction in the school. Prior to this, all schooling was conducted in German, but beginning in the 4th grade it was still conducted in German, but Czech became one of the subjects of study.

And--but not long after the school started, it was in the middle of September, I think it was probably the 14th, 15th, or 16th. I'd have to look it up. My parents suddenly decided, or suddenly told me that--and my sister--that we were going away again for another vacation to Switzerland again, and I think probably my mother has told that--what really set this off was that my uncle, my mother's brother, had been in Germany on a business trip and had come back and told my parents that he had seen massings of German troops near the border, and if they were thinking of getting out, the time was now.

Prior to this, my father had already talked about it, and my mother told me long, long afterwards, that her mother-in-law, my grandmother, my father's mother, in other words, had called her aside and had urged her to get my father to see a psychiatrist, because she considered him, unfortunately, unduly obsessed by

what was going on in Germany, and by possible danger to himself and his family. He should get counseling to get over this.

Well, so the decision to leave was a very sudden one, as far as I could tell. But I don't think we were--I don't think we were told about impending horrors of any kind, which is going again.

Q DO YOU REMEMBER PACKING? DO YOU REMEMBER PACKING YOUR THINGS?

A No, I don't. I remember--yeah--I remember that we packed, naturally, but I don't remember actually doing it. And we didn't take an awful lot with us. The worst thing was that my sister and I had to leave almost all our toys behind. But we had some little animal figures, mainly, that we took along, in which were our mainstay for our next many years, because they could be carried with us wherever we went. I don't remember putting up any fuss about going. I was 9. If my parents said we were going to Switzerland, I went to Switzerland.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q DO YOU REMEMBER ANY REACTIONS TO THE FLAGS THAT WERE PUT UP? WHAT YOUR FRIENDS SAID, OR WHAT NEIGHBORS SAID, OR WHAT OTHER PEOPLE DID?

A No. No, I don't. I remember that in school, some boys in school collected little pictures, you know, sort of like baseball cards. But they were not of baseball players, but of SS officials or SA troopers. But these things were kept very much under the table because they were officially frowned on. But I don't remember any reaction to this flag business.

Q YOUR COMMUNITY WAS BASICALLY PRO-GERMAN?

A I think it was. I think that the--I think that the inhabitants of that area, not all of them, of course, but my impression is that they welcomed Germans

with open arms. Now, of course, one also has to remember all kinds of other factors. These people--before the first World War, was not that long ago. When I was a child, it seemed to me ancient history, but for my perspective today, it had ended only 20 years before. That didn't seem so long anymore. And before the first World War, these people had been Austrians. It had been their country. All of a sudden, at the end of the war, they found themselves willy-nilly, citizens of a country that had never existed before; Czechoslovakia. They had suddenly become a minority in their own country.

Now, it's a fact that they enjoyed privileges that would be unheard of in any other country, as far as their language and culture is concerned. But by now I can in a way understand, not that they should be pro-Nazi, but that they should not be entirely happy with this arrangement, which they had never asked for.

Q WHAT YOU SAID, THE TEACHING IN GERMAN, AND JUST RECENTLY THEY STARTED TEACHING ABOUT CZECH HISTORY, WHAT DID THEY TEACH IN SCHOOL?

A Well, they didn't start teaching about Czech history in the 4th grade, they started teaching the Czech language in the 4th grade. Now, actually I already knew some Czech. My father believed that one should know Czech, and ever since I started school, I had had a tutor that came to the house and taught me Czech. It was very difficult for me, but by the fall of '38, I thought I was really sort of catching on. Unfortunately after that, I had never had occasion to use it again, and I don't know it all by now.

Now, what did they teach in school? Well, you know, I really only went to the first, second, and third grades in this school. So what they taught was reading, writing, and arithmetic, and little bit of what they called (hiematcondae), that is what you might call local lore; Bohemian history, and legends and things like that.

But no, you know, no organized history studies or civic studies or anything like that. I think that was premature.

Q DID YOU HAVE ANY TROUBLE--DID YOUR PARENTS HAVE ANY TROUBLE GETTING THINGS OUT OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA WHEN THEY LEFT?

A Well, they took this luggage with them to Switzerland, but of course it was just what one could carry; suitcases. And then subsequently, I remember my grandmother sent at least one trunk with stuff; linens and things like that. And some of these things we have to this day. But of course, other things they never got out; furniture, paintings, piano, books. That was all left behind. A lot of it was transported to Prague, because after the annexation of the so called Sudatan regions to Germany, there was still an independent Czechoslovakia. Not for long. And my father had a lot of this stuff transported to Prague, where he rented an apartment, in which we never lived, but which we would have lived in if we had returned, which was a possibility. But those things were all--who knows what happened to them--all lost, really.

My cousin, who was in the Czechoslovak Army during the war and returned there after the war, retrieved some things; little napkin rings, a few paintings, and things like that. But most of it was just probably stolen by various people along the way.

Q HOW DID YOUR FATHER--YOU WENT TO SWITZERLAND A SECOND TIME?

A That's right.

Q YOU NEVER WENT BACK?

A No.

Q OKAY. HOW DID YOUR FATHER GET HIS BUSINESS ACTIVITIES--HIS INVESTMENTS OUT OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA?

A Well, they were already out as far as I know. I was not privy to his finances. My father was, as a matter of fact, quite secretive about things like that. He never discussed his income or things like that with us children. But he had foreign investments before this already, and that's what kept us afloat. So I don't know.

He had, of course, investments within the country. My parents owned some real estate. Not only the house we lived in, but also some rental property, and we also had stocks and bank deposits and life insurance policies and what not. Well, I think, more or less, all of that was just lost; real estate, obviously; and other things I think were also mainly lost. Maybe he was able to get some bank accounts out, but I don't really know.

Q COULD YOU GO BACK AND GET THAT REAL ESTATE?

A Yes, I could maybe. It's a complicated matter, and I think it's one that's not worth pursuing. Our house is still there. My sister has seen it. My son has seen it. It's been divided into several apartments. I don't know who owns it now. Whether these people own the apartments, or whether somebody else owns it and rents it to them. I don't know how, whoever owns it, got title to it, perhaps quite innocently. I think it's just asking for endless lawsuits to very little avail, to try to retrieve anything like that. I think that's finished.

Q WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FAMILY THAT STAYED IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA?

A Well, they could be divided into different groups; having to do largely with the degree of their Jewishness. Now, according to the Nuremberg laws, which were the operative laws, my paternal family were all Jews. My

grandmother, my aunt, her husband, and so on, and almost without exception, they died--they were murdered. That's what happened to them. I was thinking on the way over, "Did they die in the Holocaust?" Yes, but I think, in a way, I prefer to say that they were murdered. It's not just that they were part of some large process, which somehow caught them up, but that they, as individuals, were murdered by other individuals unknown to me.

The only one to escape, really, was my cousin Peter, who when these things began was in France and who joined the Czechoslovak Army there, and was evacuated with it at Dunkirk in 1940, and went through the war in the Army, so and he survived.

Now, on my mother's side, my mother's father was Jewish by birth, subsequently baptized. But, of course, that meant nothing in this context. And her mother was gentile. So my mother and her brother were half Jews. My mother, of course, was out of harm's way. But by uncle, who married a non-Jewish woman, remained there through the war. And although he was subject to certain restrictions, he told me once he was arrested by the Gestapo. The first day they came to our city, picked up on the street, just didn't come home one day, and interrogated and questioned about things which he had done, about which they were very well informed. "Why did you visit such and such a place on such and such a day?" You wouldn't think that they would have such files on ordinary citizens in foreign countries, but they did.

He was not only half Jewish, but of democratic persuasion, and I believe also a mason. So this made him a very suspicious character. But he was also a chemical engineer and therefore very useful, and he survived the war. And then at the end of the war, when the Czechs came, he was classified as an anti-factious German, having been arrested by the Gestapo. And so he and his mother, my grandmother,

and his wife and children, my cousins, were allowed to leave on their own for Germany, and take their things with them. They left in some sort of trucks or freightcars; I don't know. And they took their furniture with them and what not. Other people who didn't have this kind of background were classified as Germans, plain and simple. And they had to leave without some of these privileges of taking things with them. So I had relatives in that category also. Notably, my uncle who had been flying the SDP; the Sudatan German flag, he and his wife were thrown out after the war. I had the questionable pleasure of seeing him again at my grandmother's 90th birthday celebration, but I--I think successfully avoided shaking his hand. So there are a number of these relatives that survived, but they were all really on my mother's side. Well, I'm mistaken. There is also--we just discovered, not too many years ago, a cousin of my father's, a person of the same racial, as the Nazi's would say, background as my father, who survived through the whole war. Now, she married a man called Povolny, a Czech and a Christian.

Q SPELL IT.

A P-o-v-o-l-n-y. A Christian and evidently--I don't know really the ins and outs of their story, but evidently he must have kept the fact of his having a Jewish wife somehow quiet, and thereby saved her life. Because under that regime, he could, of course, got a divorce from her at any time and sent her off to the murder camps. But he didn't, and they are still alive today in Bohemia.

Q COULD YOU REMEMBER ANY CONTACT YOUR FATHER HAD WITH HIS PARENTS, THE LATEST AFTER YOU LEFT?

A Oh, yes. Well, my grandfather; his father, died before I was born, so he had no further contract with him. But my grandmother lived in the same house as did we. That was the house that my grandfather had built, I think in 1898, or so. And after the grandfather's death and my father's subsequent marriage, it

was divided into separate dwellings. So that my grandmother lived on one floor; we lived on the others. So of course, we had daily contact with her while we lived there. And after we left, I think she still came--I think she came to visit us in Switzerland, and unfortunately she went back again. And then she lived in Prague and they kept up contact through letters from 1938 until 1941, I believe. And the letters from my father to his mother are gone, of course, but the letters from her to him, he kept them all.

And my sister, Renata--I have read them once, and it's a very shattering experience to me--but, my sister has selected some of them and sort of, you know, edited them; taken the most interesting parts and translated them into English and formed a book, which she is, as a matter of fact, trying to publish. Which I hope she does succeed in publishing, because it's a very moving story--because--and it's probably representative of many people, because, you see, as you read these letters, my father was constantly trying to get her to leave; to come to Cuba, and subsequently to the United States when we were in the United States.

And, you see, there are two things. On one hand, the reluctance of this woman to leave. She'd lived her whole life in this country and she spoke German. That was her native language. Three of her sons had fought in the first World War in the Austrian Army as allies of the Germans; two of them had died. I think, like many people, she couldn't believe that anything truly dreadful would happen. And then once she started to think that maybe it would be a good idea to get out, she couldn't bring herself to do what my parents had done; pack a suitcase and leave.

She worried about how she would transport the furniture, what she would do with the silver and the linens, and so on, so forth. Not from any, I think, excessive attachment to material possessions, but simply because I think she couldn't conceive of moving her existence to somewhere else and starting afresh. She had

her household, so she was going to move her whole household?

Well, the other things that you see in these letters at the same time is the gradual tightening of the noose. You can no longer do this. You can no longer do that. You can only go out in certain hours. You can only shop in certain places, and so forth. And of course, ultimately this noose became so tight that even by that time she might have been prepared to leave her linens and her furniture, it was no longer possible for her to get out. And I think this was the great tragedy of my father's life and bittered his years from then on, that he was unable to save his mother.

Q WHY DID SHE GO TO PRAGUE?

A Well, because to stay in (Ousic) was most unrecommendable, because it was being annexed to Germany. So, I mean, that much she realized, or maybe my father convinced her finally. And so the idea was to move to Prague, which was still an independent area, and start a new life there, little knowing of course, that only six months later the Germans would be in Prague, too. But between the Munich Agreement of September '38 and the German march into what remained of Bohemia and Moravia of '39, there was this period which Czechoslovakia was at least still nominally independent, and where she and I'm sure many other people, thought that they could rebuild their lives. But, of course, they were quite mistaken.

And so then my father lost contact with her because the United States entered the war and you no longer could have direct mail. You could get some kind of messages through the Red Cross. I don't recall whether he got any from my grandmother or not. And then after awhile that became impossible too. And not really long after that, she was deported, first to Theresienstadt and then from there to Treblinka.

Q WHAT ABOUT THE--I'M SORRY. WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF HER FAMILY?

A Well, her daughter, my aunt, lived with her in Prague, and she was taken away also.

Q AT THE SAME TIME?

A Yes, about the same time and murdered. Although I think in a different camp. And she had sisters living there also; old ladies like herself. And they were also--they were all liquidated.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q TO GO BACK TO YOUR SECOND TRIP TO SWITZERLAND, YOU WENT BACK TO THE SAME PLACE NEAR LAKE LUCERNE?

A Well, not quite. Because where we had been in the summer is a little village Buochs, B-u-o-c-h-s, on the shores of Lake Lucerne. And then when we went back in September, we went to the city of Lucerne itself and that's where we lived from September of '38 until April of '39.

Q FROM SEPTEMBER TO APRIL, COULD YOU MAYBE TAKE US THROUGH A TYPICAL DAY DURING THAT PERIOD OF TIME?

A In Lucerne?

Q UH-HUH.

A Well, my typical day would have been to go to school. And I would get up in the morning. We had an apartment in a hotel. I think probably my mother may have told you. But at any rate, I am told by my mother that we were not allowed to rent an apartment. The Swiss, who are very hospitable to well-heeled tourists, were perhaps, understandable less hospitable to refugees at

that time. Partly I think they were worried, as everybody was, about employment problems. Everybody was fretting about unemployment. They didn't want people coming--at any rate, for whatever reason.

Mother says we were not allowed to rent an apartment, but that the owner of the Hotel Belvedere, a certain Mrs. Geiger, G-e-i-g-e-r, said that she had, as a matter of fact, a sort of what we would call a mother-in-law apartment. So it was sort of a set-up where her own mother came to stay with her sometimes and which had some cooking facilities and so on. And that she would let us use that, and then we could use her bathroom also. I think there was a toilet there, but no tub. So we could go down and use her bath also. And that if anyone came to ask any questions, she would say that we were guests in her hotel.

So that's where we lived, in the Hotel Belvedere, which is still there, although by now it's something else. I was in Lucerne a few years ago and I saw it there. And then I would get up and I would walk to school, and the school was a private school, run by a certain Fraulein Rey, R-e-y. A very remarkable woman.

This school met in an, I guess, an apartment or whatever. Anyhow, on one floor of a bigger building--it didn't occupy the whole building, it just had this one floor--and on this one floor what it had was two rooms, and in the larger room were classes or grades one through five, I think, maybe six. And then the other room were another two or three grades; very few kids in each grade. And in my grade, which was the 4th, I think, there were only three of us--no, four, and Fraulein Rey was the teacher for all these grades, and taught them all simultaneously somehow. She was teaching, let's say French to the 3rd grade, and in the meantime the others were doing something else. She had one young girl as an assistant to help keep order, I guess, and it was extremely succussful. It was an excellent school. I leaned a great deal there and that occupied my day.

Q WERE THE OTHER STUDENTS ALSO REFUGEES?

A No, they were Swiss.

Q THEY WERE SWISS CHILDREN?

A Yes.

Q AND DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOUR PARENTS STARTED TO MAKE PLANS TO LEAVE, OR HOW YOU HEARD ABOUT WHERE YOU WERE GOING TO BE GOING?

A Well, I think probably in the spring of '39. I know that-- I can remember that my father would take trips, I think to Geneva, but I may be mistaken. Anyhow, some other place where there were foreign consulates and that there was a question of getting visa to go somewhere. I don't really remember any details about it. I just remember that subsequently I was told that we were going to Cuba, and so we went to Cuba.

Q HOW DID YOU GO TO CUBA?

A By ship.

Q COULD YOU DESCRIBE THAT?

A Yes. We took a train to France, and this is a very clear memory I have, the train stopping in Paris. I don't remember whether we stayed there at all or not, but I remember being on the train; in the station in Paris. And my cousin, Peter, come to say good-bye to us. He was always a sort of hero for me. He was a very handsome looking man I thought. He was 15 years older than I, so even when I was a little child he was already a young man. He was a dashing fellow. And so he came to say good-bye to us.

And we went on from Paris to La Rochelle, which is on the coast, just below Brittany somewhere. And next to La Rochelle is (La Poulisse) which is a port--the transoceanic port of La Rochelle. And there we boarded a British steamer of the

Pacific Steam Navigation Company called Reina del Pacifico, the Queen of the Pacific. And it was in the Atlantic, but it was so cold because it would go ultimately through the Panama Canal and down the coast of South America. And I guess it was a very lovely ship with salons and so forth. It was--it was divided into three classes, as ships were in those days. And I believe we had a first-class cabin, and I think we were treated very well. But I don't think we had been on it 24 hours before my mother and my sister and I all had to go below with seasickness, and the next several days were extremely disagreeable. And I declared--I remember declaring to my parents that I wanted to go home. Well, of course this was not really possible, because the ship was not going to turn around.

But, I remember also they talked to me about how undesirable it was to go home. That there were very disagreeable people there called Hitler and Mussolini and other such people, and that it is better to get away from them. But after a few days we felt better, and we came up on deck. And my sister and I had a really very lovely time playing on deck with some French girls, who were also on the ship watching flying fishes and other novelties. And some people from our town were also on this ship, but were in the third class. And I remember that my parents would sometimes meet them and talked with them, and so on, over the barrier which separated classes. And I think they also took them food from the dining rooms. Food and things like that, because third class was not treated, by any means, as well as the first.

And I remember the ship arriving in Havana Harbor. And I especially remember two things; little boats came out to meet it, flying tri-color flag, which I subsequently learned was the flag of the Spanish Republic. And men were on these boats, and they were giving these clenched fist salutes. I don't know whether you do that with your left fist or your right. But whatever one, they were

using it and all of a sudden there were other people on board, returning this salute. It didn't really mean much to me, but I remember it quite vividly. And, of course, subsequently I've leaned what it meant. We must have had on board the ship Spanish Republican refugees of whom a great many went to Cuba. And I guess some of them were already there and were greeting their arrival.

And the other thing I remember was boys diving for coins in the waters there. The waters are full of sharks, so this is not a very desirable activity. But there they were. I think in the Bahamas, they were doing that too. And many of them were black, which is almost the first time I've ever seen a black person.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q TELL ME, YOU SAID WHEN YOU WENT TO "A PROTESTANT SCHOOL"?

A Yes.

Q WHY NOT A PUBLIC SCHOOL?

A I can't really say. I don't' know. It's a decision my parents made. I think my mother and her uncle--I mean my mother and her brother; my uncle, had gone to that same school. I don't know.

Q WAS THERE A LARGE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN YOUR CITY?

A I can't say whether there was or not. I don't know what's meant by large even. There certainly was a Jewish community; I don't know how large it was.

Q WERE YOU INVOLVED WITH IT?

A Not at all, no.

Q NO?

A No. My sister and I were both baptized as infants, as was my mother. My father had some sort of rupture with the Jewish community as a young man. I don't know what about. He had no connection with it whatsoever. And in the census, people there were asked to state their religious preference, which had certain significance for tax purposes, because the religious synagogues, churches, and so on, received tax monies. And he listed himself as unaffiliated. He had no official affiliation with the Jewish community. And I don't remember ever having any connection with it.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q TO GO BACK TO CUBA, YOU REMEMBER YOU HAD TWO VERY CLEAR MEMORIES; THE BOATS ARRIVING TO GREET YOU, AND THE CHILDREN THROWING COINS--

A No, no.

Q THEY WERE RETRIEVING THEM, I'M SORRY. THEN YOU LANDED. WHERE DID YOU GO THEN FROM THE BOAT?

A Well, we went to a hotel called the Hotel Savoy. I remember that too. It is unlike any place I'd ever been in, because everything was so open and the floors were tiles. Something I'd never seen before. And the next morning at breakfast, we were waited on by a Chinese waiter--many Chinese living in Cuba--and we were offered something which he called, "corn flake," which turned out to be corn flakes.

I'd never seen such a thing in my life, and, of course, we had no idea how to eat this stuff. We'd put it in a bowl and my sister and I ate it with spoons. It seemed terribly dry. Crunchy, tasty, but dry. It never occurred to us to pour milk on it. Among other reasons, because neither of us touched milk. We never drank milk, and the idea of putting milk on the cereal was totally repulsive. And we continued

to eat cereal that way for a number of years before we could reconcile ourselves to putting milk on it. Now I eat it with milk.

Q HOW LONG DID YOU STAY AT THIS HOTEL?

A I can't say for sure, because it must have been at least some weeks because my parents set about looking for some kind of place to live other than this hotel. But I don't remember how long it took them to find one. And they did eventually find one; a villa in one of the residential areas. A very nice place, I must say. And so that's where we lived then for the rest of our time in Cuba.

Q COULD YOU DESCRIBE THAT PLACE A LITTLE BIT TO US?

A Yes. It was a--as I remember it--it was what here we call a Spanish style. In other words, sort of a stucco--a white stucco exterior with tile roof and tile floors in a lot of places. Bars over the windows. The windows had shutters and bars, but no panes.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q No glass?

A No glass, no. It was considered unnecessary. No one would want to close them. And it was a two story house, with the bedrooms upstairs. It had a living room and a dining room and so forth. A kitchen with a stove, I think it was a wood or coal stove. And it had a water cistern of some kind on the roof from which the water came down, and in which frogs produced their young, which sometimes came through the pipes, in the form of tadpoles, in the bathtub. It had a garden. I remember it was a very lovely garden with strange and exotic things.

This was a very exotic place for us. Coming from central Europe like that Cuba was an extraordinary place. One thing, the people you saw. You saw people there of all types and shades and so on, that we'd never seen before. The climate; very different from Bohemia climate. And then the vegetation. We had a banana plant or tree in our garden. Wow, this is something, of course, quite impossible in Bohemia. We had bougainvillea and hibiscus and other such showy plants growing there. We had enormous ants marching up and down in the garden. It was a strange and new place, really.

Q DID YOU HAVE HELP THERE?

A Yes. My parents hired a woman called Leila or Leila Benjamin, who was a Jamaican black woman. She was considered a very desirable person to have because as a Jamaican she spoke English. My parents knew a little English, not too terribly much. I think my mother perhaps more than my father. They'd studied it in school and so on, but of course they had not had to use it very much. They traveled in England, I believe, but they knew no Spanish at all. So this Leila was a cook primarily. I don't know whether she did cleaning also or not, but she certainly cooked. And she was sort of an intermediary between us and people who would come to sell this or buy that, and so on, because she would interpret.

Q SO SHE WOULD COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR PARENTS IN ENGLISH, BUT THEN SHE WOULD SPEAK SPANISH?

A Yes, that's right. She'd lived in Cuba, I don't know for how long, and she had children who were Cubans in effect. I don't know if she had a husband, but she was a very fine person.

Q DID YOU LEARN SPANISH?

A I did, yes. As a matter of fact, this affected the subsequent course of my life, because my professional activity was as a professor of Spanish. I certainly would never have became that but for this stay in Cuba. My sister and I went to school there called Miss Philips School. As you might guess that was an American school. A private school again. Miss Philips School. It had a lovely old house in that residential area of Havana with a beautiful big garden around it.

And the students were primarily Cubans--Cubans, of what, in retrospect, I would guess to be the upper and upper middle classes, who thought it was desirable for their children to know English and to know it well. And so the instruction there in the mornings was in English and by English teachers; that is, American teachers. But in the afternoon there was instruction in Spanish by Cuban teachers. And my sister and I went to school in the morning and then we came home for lunch. And then my sister didn't go back. She was just in the, I guess she must have been in the second grade or third grade, I don't know. I don't remember. I was in the fifth grade. I started out in the third grade because I knew next to no English. My parents, in Lucerne, called a certain Mr. Wahl from the Berlitz Language Schools to come and teach us English. And he would come out to the house and teach us English, including nursery rhymes, which he would illustrate on a little sketch pad he had.

That's all the English we knew. So when we started in Miss Philips School, we were really rather behind and I started in the third grade. But before very long, I was promoted and put in the fifth grade, which was where I should have been according to the normal progression of things. Now on the ship coming over, I had started to study Spanish. My father had always been very much interested in foreign languages, had a series of books. They were published in Germany, and they were all called, "A Thousand Words of..," whatever, Spanish, Italian, English,

and so on. He had a number of them, including, "A Thousand Words of Spanish." They were designed mainly for tourists who wanted to know a little of the language. And they were quite clever, rather good little books. And I started studying this when we were on the ship.

And then at Miss Philips School, my parents enrolled me in the afternoon session, also. So there I took the Spanish instruction about Cuban history and Cuban geography, and so forth. I mean, they didn't teach us Spanish. The students knew Spanish. That was their native language. But they learned in Spanish. So I was in the position of taking school at the same time in two languages; neither of which I really knew too terribly well. But it worked anyhow.

Q DID YOUR PARENTS HELP YOU IN GERMAN AT HOME? DID THEY TRY TO SPEAK SPANISH AT HOME?

A No, we spoke German at home.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q WHEN DID THEY LEARN HOW TO SPEAK ENGLISH?

A Well, they made efforts to improve in English, of course. As I say, they had studied English before we ever immigrated.

Q WHY?

A Why? Well, because people of certain class studied foreign languages as a matter of course, I think, and the most obvious ones were English and French. So I think they had both studied English and French, but you know, not to any great extent. Just as people here maybe take Spanish in high school, but that doesn't mean they are really very fluent in Spanish. And I don't know what they did about improving their English in Havana. They may have done

something, I really don't know. And then after we came to the United States, of course, they had to speak it. And in a way I suppose easier and easier, because they were surrounded by English constantly; the newspaper, the radio, the movies, and so on. I know that some people in Havana, for example--I don't think my parents did this--but, some people would go to the movies--to these movies that would show, I think we call them continuous sessions. You pay your entrance and you can stay as long as you want; see the same movie over and over again. You windup leaning English dialogue that way. So sometime after we came to the United States, we stopped speaking German at home.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q HOW LONG WERE YOU IN CUBA BEFORE YOU CAME TO THE UNITED STATES?

A Well, from April of '39 to September of '40, so almost a year and a half. About a year and a half as a matter of fact, yes.

Q AND THEN YOUR PARENTS DECIDED TO--DO YOU KNOW HOW THEY DECIDED TO COME TO THE UNITED STATES?

A Well, I think they had in their mind to come to the United States from the outset. My mother would know better than I, but I think that was the plan. The problem was that, as you know, immigration to the United States was governed by a system of national quotas, and particularly at that dreadful time in history, the quotas from central Europe were chock-full. Thousands and thousands of people were trying to get out. So you could apply for an immigration visa, but you'd be put on a waiting list, and you might have to wait for years. So my father, who was a very foresighted and intelligent man, realized that Switzerland was not the place to wait.

For one thing, there was no way to work there. You were made unwelcome. For another thing, I suppose I don't remember discussing it extensively with him, but Switzerland is really pretty close to Germany. And although, as a matter of fact, the Swiss escaped being invaded by the Germans. That was presumably because the Germans didn't want to. At any rate, I think he wisely decided that the futher away from these people, the better. So the question was then, where to go? You can't go to the United States without a visa, so you have to find a place that would issue you a visa, and Cuba was one such place .

Cuba, at that time, instead of exporting refugees, was accepting refugees. Thousands of people were in Cuba. Now, you've probably seen this movie, I think called, "The Saint Louis," about the refugee ship, and these people are not allowed to land. But,of course, many people were allowed to land, because there were many people there. I know that there was a substantial refugee community in Cuba, particularly in Havana. What I don't know is whether perhaps the Cuban consulate authorities overseas, collected something for some of these visas. I suppose the American consulate authorities were incorruptible on the whole, but I think most people in the position of my parents, much preferred to pay if necessary and live, than to be sentenced by incorruptible officials, to God knows what.

As I said, I don't know whether they collected money, but it won't surprise me. But at any rate, Cuba was one country which did allow people--at least some people--to come in. And so that's why we went there, but I don't think there was any intention of remaining in Cuba permanently.

Q YOU WENT THERE TO GET A VISA. YOUR FATHER WENT THERE TO GET A VISA?

A An American visa.

Q TO GO TO THE UNITED STATES?

A That's right.

Q AND THEN YOU GOT THAT BEFORE SEPTEMBER OF '40?

A It was in September 1940.

Q WAS THERE A LOT OF TIME THAT ELAPSED BETWEEN THE VISA, OR WAS IT JUST A FEW DAYS OR A WEEK?

A I don't know. I think--well, as a matter of fact, my birthday is the 20th of August and I had this--but, you know, these are vague recollections long ago--but I have this vague feeling that about the time of my birthday, we were notified that our number had come up, but I may be wrong. The actual leaving Cuba and going to the United States was September 23rd, 1940. So that would have been about a month before. It was not very long before, at any rate.

Q AND THEN YOU BOARDED ANOTHER SHIP?

A No. We boarded a Pan-American clipper, which was a flying boat. And I remember that also--I remember sitting there and the thing would rev up its engine--go along the surface of the water and you could see the water splashing up over these portholes, and then it took off. And of course, we go sick again. And it flew to Havana--I'm sorry--from Havana to Miami, and that's where we landed and entered the United States.

Q INTO MIAMI?

A Uh-huh.

Q AND THEN WHAT DID YOU DO WHEN YOU GOT TO MIAMI--YOUR FAMILY?

A Well, we were in Miami for a few days, where my sister and I played on the beach. And then we took trains north. And I remember we stopped in Washington, and looked around there a bit just as tourists, and then

went to New York City. And in New York City we checked into a hotel, and my parents looked for an apartment, which they found. Again, I don't remember how long that took, but they found an apartment in Forest Hills, which is part of the borough of Queens. It was one of these--it was called Yellowstone Boulevard, which sort of conjures up visions of mountains and pristine nature. But it was a street lined on both sides with sort of cubic brick apartment houses. They were not run-down tenements by any means. They were mainly quite new, but they were certainly uninspired and uninspiring. And they were probably about eight stories tall, and they were apartment houses, that's all. And we had an apartment in one of these. And we went to school once more. This time to public school.

Q DID YOU FEEL THAT YOUR PARENTS HAD ANY RELIEF OR HAD BEEN RELIEVED THAT THEY HAD BEEN ABLE TO COME TO THE UNITED STATES--THAT THEY HAD BEEN ABLE TO AVERT DANGER TO THEMSELVES? THAT THEY HAD BEEN ABLE TO ESCAPE?

A You know--Do I feel, or did I feel? That's very different. Did I feel? I knew that they wanted to come to the United States. I knew that they were happy when they got the visa. I knew that they were happy to come to the United States. Just why, I think, was probably a little unclear in my mind. The exact nature of what was going on. First of all, you know--I mean, the worst things had not yet happened, and second of all, probably--well, we know that most people, to their sorrow, couldn't even imagine them happening. And I don't think I had any very clear vision of why they might be so eager to do this. I think I understood that the Nazis were nasty people, that Hitler was a swine, that Comrade Henlein, the Sudeten German Fuehrer, was another swine, and so on.

But just exactly what these people were doing, and so on, I don't think I had very clear ideas about it.

Q SO YOU SAID THAT YOUR FATHER DIDN'T WORK AFTER HE LEFT?

A Not on a regular basis, no.

Q SO IN NEW YORK WHAT DID HE DO?

A Well, he did, as I say, while he was in New York there, for one thing, he did certain kinds of work for a family that for which he had worked in the past, and for which his father had worked, and which is related to us; the Petcheck family. And these were people with very substantial interests, and for whom he did things. Petcheck--do I need to spell that?

Q NO. HE DID LEGAL COUNSELING, BUT HE WASN'T--

A He couldn't practice law. He--I think yes, he counseled people perhaps on certain, both legal and financial matters, because he was very well informed about investments and markets and laws and so on. So he counseled them, but he couldn't practice law. He couldn't represent himself as an attorney, so he worked for these Petchecks on sort of an ad hoc basis.

And then he did set up as a financial consultant to the extent of having an office. I don't know whether he had any office help, but he had an office and he had, I think, business cards and things like that. But I don't know how successful this was. And at any rate, it didn't last too terribly long, because for one thing, my parents decided to move out of the city of New York, and for another, then his health wouldn't permit him to stay in that part of the country during the cold weather. So it was just sort of temporary thing he did there.

Q SO THEY HAD PLANS TO GO SOMEWHERE? THEY KNEW THEY WERE GOING TO STAY IN NEW YORK FOR A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME?

A I don't know whether they knew that or not when they first got there, because I think it was sort of an accepted wisdom among many refugees that you had to live in New York. But at any rate, after awhile they decided that they did not want to live in New York and for a variety of reasons.

Q WHERE DID YOU GO FROM THERE?

A So they moved us to Lake Placid in up-state New York, which is about as different from New York City as you can get. Lake Placid was and still is--because I went back there just five years ago--a village of about three thousand. And it was actually a wonderful place for my sister and me to be kids. It was marvelous. We didn't live there for many years, but they were very important years. They were my high school years, and my sister went to school there, too. And I think in the long run, it might have had its drawbacks, but for us then it was wonderful.

Q SO YOU GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL?

A I Did.

Q IN LAKE PLACID?

A Yes, I did.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q TWO QUESTIONS. ONE: WHY DIDN'T YOU AND YOUR SISTER HAVE MILK WHEN YOU WERE IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA?

A Well, I think that it's not just an idiosyncrasy of ours. I think that in that culture people didn't drink milk once they stopped being babies.

Now, I did drink what we called, "sour milk," which I think what you called clabber milk.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q BUTTERMILK?

A Well, it wasn't quite buttermilk, but it's--if you leave milk standing out--unpasteurized milk, then it clots and so on. And also, I think, also kills the bacteria so it doesn't matter if it's not pasteurized. And I liked buttermilk also, but I didn't drink it with every meal by any means. But just sort of milk--and I think that's true not only in Bohemia, but in most European countries. And I dare say until this day, I think, certainly adults don't drink milk.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q WHAT WOULD YOU DRINK? COFFEE, TEA, WINE?

A WATER.

Q THAT'S GOOD ENOUGH.

A For breakfast we would have coffee, I think they called it, I'm not sure--it was really coffee. It may have been ersatz coffee or some sort of malt beverage with a lot of milk in it; boiled milk. But you see, it was flavored with this other stuff. But the taste of milk just by itself; I could never drink it until I was in the Army. And in the Army I was so ravenously hungry all the time that I downed whatever they put in front of me, and I drank my milk.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q SO WHEN YOU GOT TO CUBA THERE MUST HAVE BEEN A LOT OF FOODS THAT WERE BRAND NEW TO YOU?

A Oh, yes. Yes, exotic foods.

Q AND FRUITS?

A Fruits and strange vegetables.

Q WAS THERE ANYTHING FAMILIAR TO YOU?

A Well, yes. You know, potatoes and tomatoes and carrots and a lot of things. But the mango, I've never seen a mango in my life. The idea of going in the backyard and picking bananas--I knew what a banana was, but we didn't have them growing in our property--or pineapples. All these things were to us new. And then some of these root vegetables that they eat--and I don't remember the names of them right now, but they are tropical plants which we never had.

And then also novel to me was these people that would come to the house selling things like live chickens. The man would come selling chickens. He would have their legs tied together. They'd be hanging upside down; several of them bunched together on a rope over his shoulder. And he would come along, selling these chickens; 25 cents each, 5 for a dollar. And then Leila would have to do them in.

Q DID YOUR PARENTS SOCIALIZE WITH PEOPLE WHEN THEY WERE IN CUBA--WHEN THEY STAYED THERE?

A Well, I'm sure they must have to some extent. But only I think really with other refugees. They had some very minimal contact with our neighbors, who were the Swedish consul and his family. I know that mother said that they were invited to some of the functions at their consulate residence. And that she remembers that someone was introduced to her and said, "How do you do?" And not being really very fluent in English, she took that to be an inquiry after her health and she started telling this person about her various ailments. But I don't think--I'm sure they had no social contacts with Cubans at all.

Q BUT WITH OTHER REFUGEES?

A Yes.

Q AND THE PEOPLE THAT CAME--THAT WERE IN THIRD-CLASS FROM YOUR HOME TOWN, DID THEY KEEP IN CONTACT WITH THOSE PEOPLE?

A I don't know. I don't know whether they got off in Havana or not. Some people went on, you know, to Peru, Chile, and so on. There were some people from our town who lived there. I remember them quite well. They had a young son who used to come and play with us, and they may have been on the ship, too. I just don't remember.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q HOW DID YOUR MOTHER'S PARENTS FAIR?

A Well, my grandfather, my mother's father, who was, as I said, Jewish by birth, fortunately I must say, died in 1936. Her mother, who was not Jewish, lived throughout the war in our home town in (Ousic), and I don't think she was unduly molested. She had some soldiers quartered on her at one time, but I don't think she was singled out for that. She had a big house and they boarded soldiers. I don't think she was molested in any way. And then when the war ended, she was expelled by the Czechs.

But she was, as I said before, she was allowed to leave with her son, who was the one who had been classified as an anti-fascist. They left together and they took their things together, and they went to live in Germany.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q THEY WERE FORCED OUT?

A Yes.

Q WHY WOULD HE BE FORCED OUT IF HE WAS CLASSIFIED AS AN ANTI-FASCIST?

A Well, because he was also considered a German.

Q WASN'T HE BORN IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA?

A Well, he was born in Austria--Hungary, as a matter of fact, but Austria--Hungary had disappeared and Czechoslovakia had been invented. So now he was Czechoslovakia. But Czechoslovakia was a multiethnic-ethnic state, in which lived Czechs and Slovaks, as the name suggests. But also Poles, Hungarians, and for want of a better word, has to be called Germans; that is, people who spoke German, whose culture was a German culture. And in the census and so on, people were asked not only their religious preference, but also their nationality--it was called the nationality; could be German, it could be Jewish, it could be Hungarian, it could be Czech, it could be any one of these things.

Well, my uncle, yes, he was a citizen of Czechoslovakia. He had been born there before there was a Czechoslovakia. It was also true that his native language was German, that his whole life he had spoken German, that is he was culturally German. If you prefer Austrian, but anyhow, not Czech.

And the Czechs, it seems to me, after the war or before the war, there were, of course, frictions between these groups. But on the whole, I think Czechs who had the upper hand were relatively tolerant of these groups; who, for instance, this German speaking minority which in our area of the country was a majority, had its own schools, including the public-- not only the private, but the public schools was conducted in German. But you could use German in the law courts. The newspaper was in German. Theater was German. German was the normal language and the street signs were in German and all the rest of it.

Well, I could only think that the Czechs decided at some point that this tolerance had not really got them very far with these people. And if these Germans--if these people who wanted to be Germans and if they really believed, as

many of them proclaimed before the war, that they wanted (Heimensreich) they wanted to go home into the German Reich, that they had never been a part of it, well, they were going to give them this chance and send them there. And they were going to stop having this multinational-national state, because it had brought them nothing but grief.

It seems brutal in a way to expel whole populations like that, but on the one hand, I think one can see that in some ways it makes a certain amount of sense, and it was certainly an awful lot less brutal than what the Germans had been doing for the previous 6 or 8 years.

So he had to go. But as I said, since he was deemed to have certain merits to balance against this defect of being a German, he was allowed to sort of leave on his own and contract to carry his goods with him, and so on, where some of the others were just put on cattle cars and shipped out. And I can't feel very sorry for most of them. I'm sure that they were decent and innocent people who suffered, through no fault of their own. But I think that the--I suspect the majority, and I wouldn't be surprised if a large majority of the population had been enthusiastically in favor of what happened there. Well, they were lucky to get out of it alive, as far as I'm concerned.

Q WHAT WAS THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE IN AUSTRIA? DO YOU KNOW?

A In Austria? Before the first World War?

Q YES.

A Well, here I'm not speaking from personal memory, mind you.

Q RIGHT.

A But I think that, of course, was a multinational-national state to end all multinational-national states. And I think a number of languages were--had a certain degree of official status. Although I think that the German language was the most important and the one through which the government in Vienna tried to hold things together. Of course all the other groups, with the spread of nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th century, all the other groups tried to push for their own language also, and get increased status for it. The Hungarians, of course, and also the others.

Q CZECH WAS THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA; RIGHT?

A Well, it was one of them. But as I said, you could, in official matters, use also other languages.

Q EVEN IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA?

A Yes, yes. My father practiced law, for example. He knew some Czech, but he was by no means fluent in Czech. He was able to practice law in German.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q SO IT WAS THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE IN EASTERN EUROPE--IN THAT PART--TO USE GERMAN?

A Well, I mean--but I mean it had official standing within the Czechoslovak republic. I mean--unlike, for instance, here, you know, if you go to court--well, you really have to know English. You have to be able to cope in English, to some extent in Spanish. But you cannot expect, for instance, that your public schools will be run in Spanish or in Chinese or in Albanian or whatever.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q HE COULD GO TO PRAGUE AND PRACTICE IN GERMAN?

A Yes.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q CAN YOU TELL US AFTER YOU GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL, WHAT YOU DID THEN?

A I went to college. I graduated from high school very young. I was almost 16 when I graduated from high school. And that came about because when I was starting Lake Placid High School, I guess it was in 1943 or so--yes, because I went there in the 7th and 8th grades, but then also entered high school. All these grades, including high school were in the same building, so the difference is not so marked.

The principal of the school called my father and said, "Look, this boy is doing very well. He's a good student, but eventually he'll be 18 and he'll be drafted to go into the Army. And it would be advantageous for him if he could get a little college in before he's drafted. So why don't we see whether we can get him through high school more quickly. And then he'll have a chance to do some college before going into the Army." So my parents agreed to this. And the way it worked was that in order to graduate from high school, you had to have a certain number of units. By which was meant a one-year course of study and also certain required subjects. And since I knew German, I went and took the regents examination. The New York state education system is governed by the board of regents, so they had these state examinations. I took the regents examination in--I don't know--the third or fourth year of German and, of course, passed it and got three of four units that way.

And then I went and took the Spanish examination, because I had gone to school there. And then my father, who was a great believer in foreign languages, made me--much against my will, really--continue to take Spanish lessons, because Spanish was not taught in the school. But once a week I went to the next village and took lessons from a man there. Well, I took the Spanish exam and I passed it and I got another three units. So what with that and taking the required courses, one of them during the summer, I was able to graduate from high school in two years. And so instead of being 18, I was just shy of 16.

In the meantime, my father had decided that the place for me to go would be Princeton. And I don't remember being consulted about this, but maybe I was. I don't remember it. But it was a very good choice, because there was no way to go to college in Lake Placid. There are no colleges there, and so I had to go away. And my father wanted to send me to a good university, and I didn't know that New York state at that time had a state university, at least not that amounted to anything. And now it has, of course, has a fine and wide-spread system, but I don't remember that it did then. I may be wrong.

So he had to send me away and he wanted to send me to a good place, but he didn't want to send me to a big city, because I was really just a kid. I would be 16 when I started and I had spent my high school years in a village of 3,000. So I think the idea of sending me to New York or Boston or Philadelphia or someplace like that was probably not considered very advisable. Princeton was the ideal solution. It's a good university. It's in a small town. It's more than an hour's train ride from either New York or Philadelphia. Students were required to live on campus in dorms. They were forbidden to have automobiles. It was a safe place to send a kid. I think it was a good decision.

Q DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR PARENTS DISCUSSING INFORMATION AFTER THEY GOT TO LAKE PLACID--INFORMATION THAT WAS COMING FROM EUROPE ABOUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING--DISCUSSING IT?

A I can't remember any individual instance. I know that they received these Red Cross messages for some time, at least even after the United States entered the war, from my maternal grandmother, certainly. So I think they did talk about these things, but I really don't remember any specific instance. And I certainly don't remember them talking about specifics of what was happening there, at least in front of us children.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q DO YOU REMEMBER MEETING ANYBODY OF YOUR AGE FROM YOUR COMMUNITY FROM CZECHOSLOVAKIA?

A Well, this boy that was in Havana, yes. I mentioned him before. These people from our town were in Havana when we were there and he would come over and play with us, with my sister and me. That's the only person.

Q I MEAN AFTER.

A Oh, afterwards. No, never.

Q YOU NEVER WENT BACK?

A No.

Q YOUR SISTER WAS TOO YOUNG TO REMEMBER?

A My sister certainly must remember things from there, but logically enough, probably less than I do. My sister has gone back. I've never gone back. I hesitate to say that I never will, because who knows. But I don't want to go back, at least as of now. Even now that the communist regime there is at an end. For awhile I thought, well, with the sort of regime that they had and the

sort of stained relations between that type of regime and the United States, you run a certain risk when you go to those certain countries, because if they want to fabricate an incident, then they start saying that you are taking pictures of military installations. And so not that they normally would, but you're a little exposed, especially if you're a native of the place.

But more than that really, I don't want to go back even now, because I have really, I think, only or perhaps almost only happy memories of my life there and I'm afraid that if I go back, the present reality, which is so very different, all those people whom I associate with the place being gone, my house being inhabited by somebody else, that the present reality will somehow overlay and contaminate and destroy the happy memory of the past. Now, maybe that won't happen, but I think it could happen and I wouldn't want it to happen.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q DID THAT HAPPEN TO YOUR SISTER?

A I don't think so, no.

Q DID YOUR MOTHER RETURN?

A No. My mother and my father--well, my mother says that she doesn't know if she ever would have returned. My father, after many years of trying to cut all ties with that world, actually was on his way to going back there in 1964, and my parents were in Switzerland, preparatory to going for the first time to Czechoslovakia and he was planning to go to (Usti) or (Ousic) while they were there. But while they were in Switzerland, there he had a very severe stroke and that was the end of that project. So he never got to go back, but he was planning to.

Q DO YOU THINK HE WANTED TO GO BACK TO RECLAIM SOME OF HIS PROPERTY?

A I don't think so. I don't think so, because I think that at that time, would have been completely impossible. He had filed claims against the Czechs with the American Government. The United States government at a certain point came into possession of a certain amount of Czech gold, or I don't know what, some sort of Czech assets. And it held those and used them to satisfy a very small part, claims which the American citizens had against the Czechoslovakia regime. Because at the end of the war, you know, some people thought naively that all of their things which had been stolen from them by the Germans, they would somehow get back. Well, they had another thought coming. Because I remember my father's indignation when not too long after the war he received a letter from the Czech authorities saying that he had failed to pay the property tax on his house and apartment houses since 1938, and that if he didn't pay these back taxes, they would confiscate the property. And I remember his indignation, and I think completely justified indignation. I mean those properties had been stolen from him by the Germans. They had stolen our house and set up some sort of party officials in it, and then seven years later he was supposed to come and pay property taxes for this.

Well, so these properties were confiscated by the Czech authorities and I think they were not about to return them to him even if he had gone there. No, I think he had no hope of getting anything back. Now, since the end of the communist regime there, the Czechs are much more forthcoming about such things, and they are making some sort of efforts to make restitution to people. But it's a complicated matter, and I don't know the in's and out's of it, but I think that one of the things is that they make restitution to their citizens. One would have to claim Czech citizenship, and then there's the question sometimes about exactly, you know, who has title to what as of what time, and what is the validity of this or

that acquisition under those circumstances. So I think it's very complicated and frankly not worth it.

Q WOULD YOU TAKE US BACK TO PRINCETON? DID YOU GO THERE FOR TWO YEARS THEN?

A Four years.

Q SO YOU WEREN'T DRAFTED RIGHT AWAY?

A No. As it turned out, you see, I started there--well, I mean, I graduated from high school in June of '45. Well, by that time the war in Europe had ended, and by the time I started Princeton in November--it was late November of '45, the war in the Pacific had ended also, and as a matter of fact, I wasn't drafted at all then until eight years later in 1953, so--

Q DID YOU SPECIALIZE IN SPANISH?

A No, I didn't. I specialized in what was called public and international affairs, which was what here at the University of California we would call an interdepartmental major, where you took courses primarily in the departments of history, economics, politics, or political science. And my aim at the outset was to go into the United State foreign service. I always had some sort of career goal in mind ever since I was a little child and planned to marry my father's partner's daughter. But one thing I never thought of doing was teaching, least of all Spanish. But I wanted to go into the foreign service, but then I discovered, much to my chagrin, that under the then existing legislation, which may or my have not since changed, foreign service officers had to be either native-born American citizens, that is American citizens by birth, or had to have been naturalized for at least ten years.

Well, I was naturalized in 1945, the same year in which I started college. So you know, I would have wait six years after graduating from college before I could

even start on this kind of career. So that had to be discarded and--but, that was my major, so to speak.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q DID YOUR PARENTS BECOME CITIZENS?

A Yes, we all became citizens at the same time. My parents became citizens November of 1945. And as a result of their naturalization, my sister and I also became citizens because we were minor children.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q SO YOU LEFT PRINCETON, AND WHAT DID YOU DO AFTER THAT?

A Well, after I graduated from Princeton in June of 1949. Now, by this time I had decided to think about going into graduate studies in Spanish. This was a decision that I made in my last semester. I still remember it at Christmastime when I was home for vacation in 1948, my father said, "Have you ever thought of going into teaching, John?" And I said, "Certainly not." My father knew me really much better than I knew myself. But I had signed up to take this Spanish course in my last semester with a very distinguished and well-known professor, (Donimerico Castro).

And when I went to take the course I discovered that Mr. Castro was not giving it, but somebody else. And so I tried to get out of it because I had signed up just to study with him, because I had studied with him before. And they told me that I would have to pay them $25 to change my program. And this so incensed me since it seemed to be it was they who had changed the line up and not I, and $25 was a lot of money. This was 1949. I wasn't rolling in money. My parents sent me an allowance, but it was not so that I could chuck $25 around. I said I

will take the course before I pay you $25, and I did. And I became very enthusiastic about it and I decided I would like to see about that.

So then my father said all right, I'll stake you to a year of graduate school, and I applied to the University of California, Berkeley, and I was accepted there. Probably a mistake, because I think my preparation was really very insufficient. If I had been a graduate advisor, I never would have accepted me, but they did. And I had to make up a certain amount of work, which I lacked. And then still, in the summer before I started at Berkeley--because the option I had that attracted me was going into business, either banking or the oil business, or something like that. And two Princeton alumni from Los Angeles whom I somehow contacted in this connection, invited me to come down and talk to them. And they took me out to lunch and I remember coming back and saying it was just dreadful. It was so boring. These two men sat at lunch and they talked all the time about the profit margins of their respective companies, and so on. And my father said, "If you think that's boring, then you should not go into that business; this is not for you if you think that's boring." So I went to Berkeley instead. And the rest is history, really. That's where the rest of my life--

Q THAT WAS BRAND NEW, TO YOU?

A That was brand new too.

Q SO YOU WENT TO GRADUATE SCHOOL AT UC BERKELEY?

A I went to graduate school at UC Berkeley in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. And I got a master's degree after a year and then I was admitted to a doctoral program. And I met my wife and I married and I was drafted, in that order. And I left the Army after a while and came back

and finished my doctorate, and then I was hired by my department. And that's where I worked for the rest of my career.

Q WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE ARMY?

A First I went to basic training in Fort Ord, which was a very disagreeable existence.

Q INAUDIBLE.

A Well, from a tourist point of view. But at six in the morning, or when you're running with your rifle, it's less agreeable in the fog. And I'd only been married 17 days when I was drafted when I entered the Army. So I was not really spiritually attuned to this. Also, I was older than most of my colleagues there, and I think in a way this was very good.

There were two of us that were older. The other man was even a couple of years older than I and he had had the real misfortune of being drafted in World War II, right toward the end, and then released in the general demobilization. But he hadn't been in long enough to be exempt from the next draft. So he was drafted back again. So we were a little older, but I think it was good, because it gave us more of a perspective of what was going on. Those 17- and 18-year-old kids were really quite crushed by it all.

I was sent east. The idea was I would go east to some sort of intelligence school. And then when I reached there in one of these transient areas, I met a man from the east who was being sent west to learn Czech. It seemed to me a wonderful commentary on things, but he was going to the Monterey Army Language School to learn Czech. Well--but then I did not go to any intelligence school. But instead it was discovered that I had the magic key to success in the military, which was I knew how to type.

So I was sent to Fort Banks, Massachusetts, which no longer exists. But which was the headquarters of the anti-aircraft defenses for the Boston area. It was located in Winthrop, Massachusetts, in Boston Harbor. And I was a personnel clerk for a small detachment there in this place. I disliked being in the Army and I counted every day toward my departure. But I really can't complain at all. I was never sent overseas, let alone to any place where someone might take a shot at me. I was given permission to live off the base; I had an apartment; my wife came to join me. Essentially I had an eight-hour clerical job; not very well paid, for which I had to wear some special suit of clothes.

And so I really can't complain. And I think it was actually in many ways a worthwhile experience. I think the good that came out of it could have been gotten in a good deal less time. But I think it's a way of meeting other people of all kinds, which in ordinary life we don't have, because there you are all on the same footing. And the hillbillies and other people, whom normally you know they're there, you may even see them someplace, in a gasoline station, but you don't really have any contact with them. And you do meet people and I think it was extremely valuable and interesting from that point of view. But I hated it while it was going on.

Q THEY DID NOT WANT YOU TO WORK IN INTELLIGENCE?

A No.

Q DID THEY ORIGINALLY WANT YOU TO WORK BECAUSE YOU WERE MULTILINGUAL?

A Well, I suppose so. Naturally, I wasn't privy to why they made these decisions. My guess is that they thought, yes, here's a guy with some education and he knows various languages and we can use him, but then I think

they decided that-- my cousin, who was a naval officer, explained to me, and I think he's right--to work in some of these things you have to have a security clearance and this is very difficult at the time, particularly for people coming from these countries like Czechoslovakia, where you know, they had little access and always the suspicion that maybe this person has some sort of relatives there who might influence, who might be a factor in his behavior, and he's only in for two years anyway, and why are we going to spend all this money doing this extensive background check. And then sending him to this training school and then before you know it, he's gone.

Q WERE YOU DISAPPOINTED?

A I don't really care. I went where I was pushed. And when they asked, "Does anybody here know how to type?" I said I knew how to type. "Well, they need a clerk over in Fort Banks." I said, "Where's that?" They said, well, this was in Massachusetts, in Fort Devons, Massachusetts. Well, it's down by Boston, and I said, "Okay, I'll go." It was a good move, really. As I said, I had a really quite relatively decent life there. And we had a small office in which I worked under the supervision of a Master Sergeant, who was a very fine person. We visited him and his wife five years ago also, and we still exchange Christmas cards every year. It was congenial except for the strange clothes that we wore and the fact that we didn't decide things for ourselves, it was a congenial place to work. And even now and then, there would be some rumor they're sending us to Greenland or sending us to Indochina or--but none of that materialized. I can't complain.

GAIL MOSCOSO: LET'S TAKE A BREAK.

JOHN POLT: Okay.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q I WANT TO TAKE YOU BACK--YOU SAID YOU HAD BEEN MARRIED 17 DAYS AND THEN YOU WERE SENT INTO THE SERVICE?

A Yes.

Q AND THEN I WANT TO ASK YOU WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE SERVICE, WHAT KIND OF FAMILY--HOW YOU GOT YOUR FAMILY AND WHERE?

A Okay. Well, I was drafted for two years, but actually they let people out after 21 months then, if they were going back to continue their education. So, since I not really developed any enthusiasm for the military as a career, I took that and I returned to Berkeley and finished my doctorate. So I got out in September of '55. And then I finished my dissertation and I received the doctorate in June of '56. I was hired then by the department in which I studied as an instructor. Which at that time was a faculty level rank, no longer is. And my wife and I lived in Oakland, where her parents lived also. And she finished her undergraduate degree at that same time.

Q WHAT IS HER NAME?

A Beverley, with an l-e-y. Beverley. And her maiden name is Hastings. So we lived in Oakland in a rented duplex, and eventually we bought a small house in the Montclair district of Oakland, and we eventually started having children. Our first child was born in 1964, the day after our 11th wedding anniversary. He was born in Madrid, where at that time I was working for the University of California, which has a education abroad program center there for mainly junior-year undergraduates to study there. And I was an associate director of that center. So our son Richard was born there. We hadn't wanted necessarily any children immediately after being married, but we had hoped to have children

before this. But it just wasn't to be. But eventually once we started we had two others then. So now we have three.

Q AND THE TWO OTHERS?

A The two others are daughters. And then our son is called Richard, and as I said, he was born in Madrid in 1964 and our daughter, Elizabeth or (Eissa), was also born in Madrid in 1969. We didn't--we weren't there that whole time, but we were back there again, again with this University of California program, of which this time I was director. So we had another baby there, which was a very good place to have babies, really, for a variety of reasons. And then our other daughter Anne, with an "e" on the end was born in Oakland. She's the exception, because in our family everyone was born in some strange place. My wife was born in Algiers, I was born in (Ousic), and our first two children were born in Madrid, but Anne is an exotic--

Q AREA?

A Yes, she's an exotic element in this context. And she was born in Kaiser Hospital in Oakland.

Q AND THE YEAR?

A In 1971, September 21st.

Q YOU TAUGHT IN MADRID AND HAD TWO OF YOUR CHILDREN AND CAME BACK TO BERKELEY AND HAD ANOTHER CHILD, THE LAST CHILD?

A Yes. I didn't actually teach in Madrid. The director of these programs doesn't actually teach, but acts as sort of dean and banker and confessor and handholder and so on, but doesn't actually teach. It was a very worthwhile thing to do, I felt.

Q AND THEN YOU RETURNED TO UC BERKELEY?

A Yes.

Q TO TEACH SPANISH?

A Yes, that's what I did both before and after I became a member of the department in 1956. And I was away at various times on sabbatical or with this program in Madrid. And once for a year I was visiting professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara, which is where my parents lived. But basically and inbetween I was always at Berkeley teaching there in the department of Spanish and Portuguese.

Q I WANT TO ASK YOU ONE QUESTION ABOUT HOW YOU FEEL--IF YOU FEEL THAT WHAT HAPPENED IN WORLD WAR II CAN HAPPEN AGAIN?

A Well, one's tempted to say no, but then again, if you'd asked reasonable people in 1936 can it happen now, they would have said no. So who can say that it can't happen again.

BY SIMON LEVINE:

Q WHAT WAS YOUR FATHER'S FEELINGS ABOUT THAT?

A About what?

Q ABOUT IT HAPPENING AGAIN?

A Oh, I don't know. I don't know. I think, you know, if you think about it, if you try to think about it rationally, and as much as you can dispassionately, it seems to me that these things must have occurred because of certain combinations of circumstances and personalities, and who is to say that that can never happen again. And of course to some extent, you already see it in Rwanda; people butchering each other. They're technologically not as advanced

as the Germans were, but so they're less efficient at it perhaps. But one gets the impression that the goodwill, if you want to call it that, is certainly there to do a very nasty job. So who knows? I would hope not. I hope not. I think it would be rash to say that it would never happen again.

Q WHAT DID YOUR WIFE DO WITH HER EDUCATION? DID SHE TEACH?

A Well, she did teach for some time in elementary school. And she also taught for some time--she taught Spanish in elementary schools, largely in programs that are financed by PTAs and groups like that. They don't normally teach Spanish in the elementary schools in Oakland, but several of them have programs. She's also taught in private schools; elementary schools in Oakland. And then for the last several years she's been active as a financial planner.

Q YOU SAID THAT SHE WAS BORN IN ALGIERS?

A Yes, yes.

Q HOW COME?

A Well, because the simplest and most obvious reasons were because her parents were living there, but then the question is: Why were her parents living there? Well, her parents were both were--her mother is alive, but her father is not. They were both Americans. My father-in-law was born in Paris, as a matter of fact, also to American parents. And he studied architecture there as a young man, and that's where he met my mother-in-law, who had come over from Berkeley to do post-graduate work in Paris. And they were married in the early '30s.

And after he finished the studies at the E'Cole Des Beax Arts--I think that's where he studied, he got a job with an architectural firm in Algiers. Which at the time was officially a part of France, at any rate, certainly a French possession. So I guess that appealed to them, besides this was in 1931, I believe. Jobs all over the world were hard to come by. He was not about to turn it down. So they went and lived in Algiers, and in the natural course of things my mother-in-law became pregnant. And my wife was born on July 10th, but I am told my father-in-law developed appendicitis at the same time. So he was hospitalized in the same room as his wife, but this meant that--of course, very cozy, but it also meant that he couldn't go and report the birth to the authorities.

So when he got out he was forced to give a fictitious date, so as to avoid sanctions for not having reported it on time. And so officially she was born on Bastille Day, that is July 14th of 1932, but she's really four days older than that.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q WE'LL KEEP THAT A SECRET.

A Yes, I hope so. Actually if you saw her, you'd think she was a great deal younger than that, so--

GAIL MOSCOSO: ANY MORE QUESTIONS? WELL, THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMING. ARE WE GOING TO SET UP AGAIN FOR PICTURES?

SIMON LEVINE: YES.

GAIL MOSCOSO: OKAY.

JOHN POLT: OKAY.

GAIL MOSCOSO: THANK YOU. WE ARE GOING TO SET UP FOR PICTURES.

MR. POLT: ALL RIGHT.

BY GAIL MOSCOSO:

Q WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THIS PICTURE?

A Well, there are two of them. That's me at the age of six. The picture was no doubt taken by a professional photographer. That was a very disagreeable experience in those days because they had very intense, bright lights, which produced a lot of heat, and you had to sit very still. But at any rate, there I am in my best and wearing a tie, which I still have as a matter of fact, which probably tells you something about me.

Q IT SURE DOES.

A I think it's rather a cute boy, and it just goes to show you, you can outgrow these things.

Q WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THIS PICTURE?

A All right. This is a picture taken in Havana in the summer of 1940. And that's my immediate family sitting in what appears to be a park. You can see--barely see tropical vegetation in the back, but in the foreground you have my mother and my sister, Renata, and my father and myself. Here I'm still wearing short pants. My first long pants I acquired that same year when I graduated from the 5th grade.

Q ALL RIGHT. WOULD YOU TELL US ABOUT THIS PICTURE?

A All right. This picture is historic in the sense of family history. It was taken on the 23rd of September, 1940, in Havana at the airport or wherever we boarded this clipper. And it's the day of our departure from Havana for the United States. It's the day we entered the United States. And I suppose my father must have taken it because he's not in it. My mother is here with the

hat, and this is me and here, this little one, is my sister, and the others I think are members of the Petcheck family, but I'm not sure of that.

Q AND THIS PICTURE?

A This picture was taken in 1943, I guess, in the summer. So I was either just 14 or just shy of my 14th birthday. And this one with the hair is me and then next is my father, and we're visiting (Scroon) Lake, which is a resort in New York state, where we had spent a very happy summer. I think a year or so--a year or two before that. That's all I can say about it.

Q OKAY. WOULD YOU TELL US ABOUT THIS PICTURE?

A Yes. These are my three children. This picture was taken in the front yard of our house in Oakland. And it was taken a number of years ago, but it's the only one I could find handy that showed all three of them together. And in the center is our son Richard, and to his right and to viewer's left, is our daughter, Elizabeth or (Eissa), and then here on his left, is our daughter Anne.

Q TELL US ABOUT THIS PICTURE?

A This is a picture taken at the wedding of our son, Richard, and with Julie Gifford. And that took place in Chicago in March of 1989. It was a very happy occasion, and she was and is, a very lovely bride. And there they are.

Q THIS PICTURE?

A This picture was taken about four and a half years ago on the occasion of our 38th wedding anniversary. And it shows Beverley and myself in our house in Oakland.

GAIL MOSCOSO: WELL, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

JOHN POLT: You're welcome.

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