

Wednesday, June 26, 2013

1:00-2:00 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: MICHEL MARGOSIS

Held at:
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW
Washington, DC

(Remote CART)

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>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 14th year of the *First Person* program. And our *First Person* today is Mr. Michel Margosis, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2013 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring *First Person*. And I'm very pleased to let you know that Mr. Louis Franklin Smith Foundation is here with us today.

[Applause]

Thank you, Louis.

First Person is a weekly series of conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. We will continue our program through the middle of August. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Michel Margosis will share with us his *First Person* account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If we have time toward the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask a few questions of Michel.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Michel is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. And we begin with this portrait of Michel Margosis. Michel's parents were Russian-born Jews. His father had been a

policeman in Russia, who had been deported to Siberia for being an outspoken Zionist. He is on the right in this photo. After escaping, Michel's father and mother made their way to Belgium.

On this map of Europe, the arrow points to Belgium and on the map of Belgium the arrow points to Brussels. Michel Margosis was born September 2, 1928 in Brussels. This photograph shows Michel, his mother Jenny, and two of his three siblings.

In Brussels, Michel's father owned and edited two newspapers, one French and one Yiddish. Here we see the cover of his Yiddish newspaper and here we see a photo of Michel's father's press card.

In 1940, when the Germans invaded Belgium, Michel and his family fled to the south of France where they ended up in the slums of Marseilles. The arrows show the route from Belgium to southern France.

Here we see 14-year-old Michel walking on a street in Marseilles.

The Margosis family hoped to get exit visas and sail for the United States. However, they did not succeed in obtaining visas, and instead they walked over the Pyrenees into Spain. The yellow arrow on this map shows their escape route over the Pyrenees.

Arrangements were made for Michel to come to the United States. This photograph is of Michel saying goodbye to his father in Portugal before he leaves for the US.

In 1943, Michel immigrated with other children to the US on the Serpa Pinto, shown on the postcard on the right. On the left we have a newspaper article about their departure. The arrow points to Michel.

We close with this photo of Michel as a soldier with the US Army during the Korean War. He

served from 1952-1954.

Following his service in the US Army during the Korean War, Michel pursued his chemical education in graduate school. Today, he resides in the Washington, DC area following a 26-year career with the US Food and Drug Administration as an international expert in the chemical analysis of antibiotics.

Michel's wife Barbara passed away 13 years ago from Parkinson's disease. Michel strongly promotes stem cell research into Parkinson's and other neurological diseases. Michel is very active in his community. He leads a French conservation group that meets twice monthly and participates in the Spanish and Italian groups. For several years, Michel has served as Commissioner of Human Rights in Fairfax County, Virginia.

Michel's son Aaron and his daughter Leah both reside in this area. He has two grandsons, ages 12 and 10, and a 16-year-old granddaughter. Michel and his son attended a "Hidden Children" conference in Amsterdam in 2005. As part of that trip, he went to Brussels, where the Belgium government arranged for a token settlement for Michel for his losses due to the Holocaust.

Michel speaks frequently about his experience during the Holocaust. He has spoken at such places as Fort Belvoir, where he received his 50-year anniversary pin for his service during the Korean War, as well as at the Veterans Administration Hospital in DC and to other veterans and other military groups, as well as to various schools in the local area, including the one that his granddaughter attends.

Michel is especially proud that Virginia now has an annual Day of Remembrance thanks to his work with his representative in the Virginia Legislature, and he proudly notes that by persevering,

Fairfax County, Virginia has also now established an annual Day of Remembrance.

His volunteer work at the museum has included working for Visitors Services, as well as translating deportation lists from Belgium, Luxembourg, and Marseilles. This work has also provided Michel with new information related to his own experience in Belgium and Marseilles, that we will hear more about that later.

Before that, we also have a special guest today, Mr. William De Baets, with the Embassy of Belgium in Washington, DC, and has come to hear Michel. If you wouldn't mind a wave so folks know you're here.

[Applause]

With that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mr. Michel Margosis.

[Applause]

Michel, thank you so much for joining us today and for being willing to be our *First Person*.

Thank you for being here.

>> Michel Margosis: You're welcome.

>> Bill Benson: You have so much to tell us. We have a short hour. I think we should begin right away. You were just turning 11 when the Nazis overran Poland and World War II began, but the war came to you and your family in Belgium less than a year later, in the spring of 1940, before you tell us about your journey to safety and what you experienced during that time, tell us first a little bit about your early years, about your family and your own life before the war began.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, I think I was like any other kid. I went to school. I learned about history and geography and the language, how to speak French and Flemish, and since I didn't have much supervision, because my parents were trying to make a living in a new country, I was able to roam through the city and got to know the city quite well. Even trying to sneak into the back of movies.

>> Bill Benson: You became quite a movie buff, didn't you?

>> Michel Margosis: I became a movie buff. I just love movies.

>> Bill Benson: Who did you see in those days?

>> Michel Margosis: I saw Tom Mix, if anybody -- a cowboy of the 1930s, American cowboy. We didn't have cowboys in Europe.

[Laughter]

Ken Maynard. In evening, Margaret Taylor.

>> Bill Benson: Laurel and Hardy?

>> Michel Margosis: They were all speaking French. When I came here, I was surprised to see Spencer Tracy speaking English.

[Laughter]

It was natural growing up like anybody else.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little about your father. He had been a policeman, now he's a newspaperman.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, he was sent to Siberia, which I believe was Kazakhstan. Then he escaped. He arranged for 500 to escape, he was one of 50 who survived. Out of 500. He walked through, all the way back to -- actually, went to Palestine, through Persia, which is now a different

country, same place, different name. Very hospitable then. Today it is unmentionable. But somebody helped him to become a Persian citizen.

Before I was born, I was a Persian citizen already. That seems strange.

>> Bill Benson: That becomes important later on.

>> Michel Margosis: That becomes important, right. Because of my sister's problems, medical problems, we thought -- he thought it would be better to have care in Belgium. They seemed to have good medicine, especially around the coast. That's where we were, then he decided to settle there. Started from scratch. He had nothing. Managed to get first a little shop selling cigarettes and other things, then he became a newspaperman. As a newspaperman, he reported, he was firmly against the fascism, communism and the new rising of Hitler.

He reported, he wrote strongly against it. When war came, he felt that he had a price on his head, and especially being Jewish, and he read the "Mein Kampf," the book by Hitler.

>> Bill Benson: When Germany invaded, you remember that day?

>> Michel Margosis: Yes. We were shopping, with my mother, trying to buy me shoes. Bells were ringing. War is coming. Well, Germany invaded Poland. The next day, France and England gave Germany a day to respond to their ultimatum. The ultimatum was rejected, and September 3, my birthday gift, France and England declared war on Germany.

>> Bill Benson: On your birthday?

>> Michel Margosis: On my birthday. I remember the British and the French troops coming into Brussels. The British were singing "Tiperari." Remember that song? And the French were singing "Who is going to wash the laundry on the Siegfried line?"

That was the equivalent of the line the French had. The Germans went right through it. Also, around it, because Belgium was there, so Belgium was in the way. So France attacked Belgium.

>> Bill Benson: What can you tell us about the circumstances that you found yourself and your family and your community found yourselves in when Germany invaded Belgium in May of 1940, and what led, and you said a little about it with your father being both Jewish and an outspoken newspaper editor, the circumstances that led to fleeing Belgium?

>> Michel Margosis: My father didn't have much choice, he didn't think. He had escaped communism once. He knew what that could have been liked. He had read about the plans Hitler had for Jews. As soon as Belgium was invaded, within a very short time we packed as much as we could on our back, walked to the railroad station, and we tried to get tickets, but the station was mobbed. We tried to take --

>> Bill Benson: With people trying to flee?

>> Michel Margosis: With people trying to flee. I remember sleeping on a suitcase. The train we were going to take initially to the coast to go to England was too crowded. We couldn't get on. The ship we were going to take was sunk before it was even leaving port.

So we waited until we could take the next train, which went south, to a city called Morse, about half-hour from Brussels. When we got there, the city was flattened, completely bombed out. We were delayed, because two nuns were arrested. They were dressed as nuns, but they were German paratroopers, soldiers.

>> Bill Benson: Dressed as nuns?

>> Michel Margosis: Dressed as nuns. The train kept going, seven days, seven nights, through France. People threw us food threw the window. We were bombed and machine-gunned a few times. We finally got to a small place called Cazerres Sur Garonne.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about that, tell us more about the train trip. You said you were machine-gunned. You were strafed by planes?

>> Michel Margosis: Most don't know what that means. We were hit, some bombings. My father pushed me under the seat. Thought I would be safe to not get hit by ricochet. Got back on the train, it kept going.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember if it was a terrifying time as a 11-year-old child? It had to be for your parents?

>> Michel Margosis: I didn't ask my parents. As an 11-year-old, I don't think anything is terrifying. It was just an adventure. What happens later too, I was just following my family.

>> Bill Benson: From there, after a seven-day train trip, you end up in a small town.

>> Michel Margosis: Small town, 70 kilometers, roughly 45 miles south of Toulouse, which is now a big city.

>> Bill Benson: Are you pretty well into France by this time?

>> Michel Margosis: Oh, way down.

>> Bill Benson: OK.

>> Michel Margosis: I had no problem communicating, because same language, southern French is just a little different from northern French, which is a little different from Belgian French. But it's like American and English, the same language.

>> Bill Benson: Does a good job of explaining that. So what was your life like in that little town?

Was it filled with other refugees?

>> Michel Margosis: It was a small town. We had a few refugees. I don't remember who took care of it, but the administration sat us in the empty house with a few bunk beds, with straw beds, cots, nothing else. We had company there, like animals, little rats or mice. We didn't mind them, as long as they didn't take our food.

We stayed there for a while. Then my father -- then France, I think in June, because shortly after France capitulated, and the new government was formed, by a man who was the savior of World War II.

>> Bill Benson: In World War I?

>> Michel Margosis: World War I. Well, I got acquainted with him later, when I was in the army. He became the chief of state, and with his prime minister I believe was Pierre Laveur, who was a fascist to start with. I began that program, but my father thought going there we might get papers for us. He had his own passport, but the passport my mother had, had expired.

We got together, and he couldn't, so he felt that we had to leave France as soon as we could, and he went to Portugal.

>> Bill Benson: He left at that point?

>> Michel Margosis: He left us at that point.

>> Bill Benson: When he left you, where were you at that point? Were you in Fontenilles by that time?

>> Michel Margosis: No, when he left, he had contacted some old friends that he had from Russia who had a farm. We stayed there for a while. I don't know, weeks, months, and I learned how to farm. I learned how to cut wood, take care of cattle and ride a horse, clear a field, corn, potatoes; how to climb trees to get cherries and figs, all kinds of food. Food was beginning to get harder to get. We appreciated what we could get on that farm.

Then after a while -- was your father gone which this time?

>> Michel Margosis: He went to Portugal.

>> Bill Benson: He was gone?

>> Michel Margosis: He was in Lisbon, trying to get papers for us there.

>> Bill Benson: Was he traveling under an Iranian or Persian passport?

>> Michel Margosis: He had a Persian passport. My mother had a Persian passport, but it expired.

>> Bill Benson: Now your mom, your brothers and sister and you.

>> Michel Margosis: Right. From the farm in Fontenilles, my mother decided we can't stay there. He said maybe there was a diplomat delegation in Marseilles, the biggest port in France, big city, and probably the second largest city in France. Then we would enter Marseilles.

>> Bill Benson: Before you went to Marseilles, Michel, at some point you were put into a detention camp.

>> Michel Margosis: Oh, yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, we decided to go to Toulouse to connect with the train. We were advised there was a detention camp there the French had. We were received there. We were fed, and they

assigned us some bunks. The place was more like an army squadron, the kind that can accommodate over 20 people.

Everything was fine, but in the middle of the night my mother didn't feel safe. She had some angst, so she got everybody up. We lifted the tarp that comprised the wall of the tent, and we sneaked out.

Later on, through the work I do here, I found out that most of the people that were there, possibly all of them, were shipped to -- were collected by the police and shipped to Germany. Probably to Auschwitz. That was another escape we had.

>> Bill Benson: Your mom had the presence of mind to sneak you and your siblings out?

>> Michel Margosis: She didn't feel right about it. It seemed too easy.

Also, I wanted to mention that on the day that Belgium was attacked, May 10, the Belgian government sent out 10,000 refugees from Germany, Austria, on the same day, to a concentration camp in southern France. I couldn't believe it. I found this out too, because I had a friend who was there. He retired from the American army as a colonel. But he escaped from that camp in southern France.

>> Bill Benson: So if you hadn't left Brussels, you may have ended up someplace like that yourselves?

>> Michel Margosis: Oh, absolutely.

>> Bill Benson: So now --

>> Michel Margosis: Also, maybe it will be mentioned later, on my birthday after Belgium was invaded my neighborhood was swept by -- I don't know whether the Belgian police or the German

police, but purified of any ethnic undesirables, particularly Jews. And they were shipped out to Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: That was right after you left, right?

>> Michel Margosis: The birthday after I left. I left May 1940. That was September 1941.

So I got to Marseilles --

>> Bill Benson: How were you able to travel from Toulouse to Marseilles?

>> Michel Margosis: Travels was still available at that time. You needed special pass, later on, from the police to travel anyplace in France. Whether to take a bus from one town to another, or particularly train, but to have a safe conduct. When we went to Marseilles, we didn't need it.

We got to Marseilles and we found a little place near the railroad station, but we considered slums. The slums were a good place, a safe place for people like us to be there because the police were afraid to get in there. The police were not safe in those slums. The slums was a very diverse community, including opium-smoking Chinese. We had, of course, Armenians, Arabs, Corsicans, everything you can imagine in that neighborhood. Except for the police. They were not there. So we felt pretty safe.

>> Bill Benson: This was still Vichy France?

>> Michel Margosis: It had become Vichy France.

>> Bill Benson: Explain what that meant.

>> Michel Margosis: It meant an ally of Hitler. Many countries had right wing organizations. In Belgium we had the equivalent of a fascist in France, in Belgium we had Leon Degrelle, who was in a party that was an ally of Germany. The Dutch had it. Every country had it. Hungary was actually

more active with Germany than most of the other countries. But every country had their own German sympathizers.

>> Bill Benson: So in Vichy, France, the German presence wasn't quite as direct?

>> Michel Margosis: Well, my brother-in-law, before I knew him, in Paris, talked about his mother who they were called to Paris to report to the Velodrome, the arena where they staged races. They asked for all of the Jews to report there. And she did, and she was never seen again. She was -- all these people, several thousands, were picked up by the French militia and turned over to the Germans and sent them to Auschwitz. That was done by the French police, the French militia. That's when he escaped and joined the French underground.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us more about your life during the period in Marseilles, and particularly tell us about your mother, who sounds like she was an amazingly resourceful person.

>> Michel Margosis: She made decisions, my sister might have -- my sister is four years older, but my mother made a decision, the decisions, and she felt like she felt in that reception camp that she didn't feel right, and she was right.

In Marseilles, as food became difficult to get, rationing came in, we had a paper that we're allowed to come in, and that we were extended, but then we decided not to report anymore, so that we had to survive on whatever we could. To be able to feed ourselves, to get food, my mother started black marketing, which was a very rewarding type of activity if you were not caught. Being caught for black marketing in France meant the guillotine. If you can buy a little milk at one price, sell it at a very good profit, milk was getting to be difficult to get, maybe once a week, meat, any kind of

meat, even horse meat. France, of course, had witches that specialize in horses and rabbits, whatever. Food was difficult to get. So black marketing was the way to survive.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about some of the goods your mother black-marketed.

>> Michel Margosis: The most profitable goods were cigarettes and candies, particularly box candies. And I used to sneak a cigarette here and there. So instead of 20 in the pack, there might have been 19 or 18.

[Laughter]

But I was allowed to smoke then. Then when tobacco was difficult to get, I found a substitute. I don't remember which one, some kind of herb.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: And your living circumstances, as you described, you're in a very tough place, you considered it a slum. I think you said that you had bed bugs and your mom cooked on a little alcohol stove.

>> Michel Margosis: A little alcohol stove that she cooked on. We had one room, we had a lot of company. The living livestock in that department was smaller than the mice we had. Bedbugs were plentiful, but not edible. Then I made friends. Two particular friends, one was Algerian, the other one called himself Café Ole. His father was from Cameroon, which had been German in World War I, close to France and England.

And his mother was from Denmark. He called himself Café Ole and we became the best friends. We did everything together. I was young enough I started to learn how to grow up. I started to smoke. He taught me how to swim, to skate, how to steal. Food was an item to be stolen, of course. And we

did so much together. I used to go to his house at least twice a week. He had two sisters. He also had two records that I particularly remember. One was Strauss' "Emperor Waltz" which I listened to all of time, the other was an aria from an opera called -- from "La Boheme" and also from Tosca, and the one from Tosca particularly got to me. That's how I started to learn about music, which I really enjoyed. I heard we had classical music in Belgium, but it never affected me the same way this one did.

I was also able to go to the section where he lived, which was right by the old port, and lots of bookstores. I used to stop at the bookstores and just read and read. I remember reading "The last of the Mohicans" in French. Cooper, a lot of his novels. I even read Tolstoy, and I read La Mancha in French. Later in Spanish, and when I came here I read it in English.

>> Bill Benson: In addition to reading and listening to music, you also were engaging in all kinds of other activities.

>> Michel Margosis: One of the activities we did was we had a little -- not canoe, kayak. We had a two-man kayak. I used to -- we used to go through the port, and we used to survey the coast for some nefarious activities, I guess. I don't talk much about these activities on the coast, but with swimming that he taught me, he also taught me how to rest in water, just swim on the back. We swam all the way to the Chateau D'If. The Count of Monte Cristo talked about it. Anybody read that? Where he escapes from the prison by substituting for a dead body, and throws it overboard. Chateau D'If is, I guess, a couple miles off the coast. We swam over there. By the time we got there, we couldn't land because it was occupied by troops. I don't know whether they were German, French, but we decided to swim back. I had -- he taught me how to float and relax.

We also did some spearfishing because it was right below the Cousteau Laboratories, and Cousteau was active in that area.

Also learned to fish for squids, and octopus, not the big ones.

>> Bill Benson: During that time, Michel, your brother Willy was arrested, wasn't he?

>> Michel Margosis: He was arrested early on, when we first got there, because de Gaulle who escaped to England, to free the French, he wanted to continue the fight, and he had quite a few supporters during France. My brother marched with those supporters and he was arrested. But I guess it was not as bad, because they didn't examine him thoroughly to make sure he was Jewish. He was released the next day. Lucky.

>> Bill Benson: As you were running through the streets of Marseilles with your friends, while your mother was doing her black marketing, one of the real fears or worries that people had, of course, were the raffles. Will you tell us about that?

>> Michel Margosis: It started in Paris, when they called the people to the velodrome. On my birthday, in 1940 in Belgium, they started the raffles. What they did was to seal both ends of the street, police at each end, stop everybody in there, in between. If you did not have documents, God help you. They'd pick up everybody. They did that, I guess, all over the country. I remember those, I escaped one in Marseilles because I knew how to sneak from one how to the other without going out into the street. It was even better, because the communication in Leon between houses was even more sneaky.

>> Bill Benson: They'd seal off each end, you scamper between houses to get out?

>> Michel Margosis: Right.

>> Bill Benson: At some point, Michel, your mother concluded that you needed to get out of Marseilles?

>> Michel Margosis: November 1942, the American allies invaded North Africa, Algeria, Morocco and the following day the German troops were in Marseilles. It's a pretty deafening sound to hear those boots in Marseilles. That was scary.

We immediately packed whatever we could. She managed to get false papers. She bought forged papers, telling us that my sister, because of her medical problems, needed mountain air, and the Pyrenees offered good mountain air. The Pyrenees, about 6,000 or 7,000 feet high. Air was pure. So we managed to go there with the papers, and we got onto a train that was loaded with German soldiers.

Now, I had no problem with my siblings, my brother and sister. We all spoke French, like any native. But my mother could speak only Russian and Yiddish. At one point, we decided to take a risk and started signing. She didn't know how to sign, but she made believe she was signing. We took her up on it, and we responded in kind. So we were able to go through the several-hour travel without any problems.

We got to the border, stopped at an inn, then we had after dinner two gendarmes, two policemen asking if we wanted to go into Spain. Of course, we didn't. We were French. Why would we want to go to Spain? Eventually, she relented, and took up the offer to take us across the border into Spain for \$10,000 each. 1942, \$40,000. We had it, and --

>> Bill Benson: That's the money your mother made through her black-marketing activities, the equivalent of \$40,000?

>> Michel Margosis: In 1942.

>> Bill Benson: In 1942.

>> Michel Margosis: We didn't know that at the same time many of these guides took the money and turned the clients over to the authorities. This I found out also by working here at this museum.

>> Bill Benson: She took a huge risk?

>> Michel Margosis: She took a huge risk. We never took any risk. I don't know, my mother did have a poker group in Marseilles, for diversion, for entertainment of some of them were old friends from Belgium. I never had any friends. As far as I know, I didn't know any Jew in Marseilles or in France, until I got to Spain. I never felt we should rely on them, on any friends or natives for anything we wanted to do. But my mother did have all those guides, who were French.

They took us through the mountains in November, through the snow, through the woods. We heard dogs. We heard some guards. We were able to evade them. We left at sundown, and got into a small town in Spain just about sun up.

>> Bill Benson: It's you, your mother and your --

>> Michel Margosis: Brother.

>> Bill Benson: Brother and sister. These two guides, taking you over these 6,000 to 7,000-foot mountains.

>> Michel Margosis: Right.

>> Bill Benson: I have to have you share this --

>> Michel Margosis: One of the things they valued while I was --

>> Bill Benson: You know what I was going to ask.

>> Michel Margosis: I love reading. In Marseilles, one of the things I acquired was a big dictionary. I valued it. I don't know why. I hooked it to my belt.

>> Bill Benson: We're talking one of those big dictionaries, right?

>> Michel Margosis: One of those big dictionaries. I hooked it to my belt and walked over the mountain with it. When I came to the States, I didn't have it. I think my brother just borrowed it.

>> Bill Benson: You were able to make it over the mountains. You get into Spain?

>> Michel Margosis: We get into Spain. We stop at an inn, where we slept behind the counter. The inn was closed. Then we were told we needed two more guides to take us through the city. We said we were going through the woods. That took us by the railroad. Just follow the tracks, that's the easiest way to get into town. Why go through the woods?

Within a very short time, we were arrested.

>> Bill Benson: By Spanish police?

>> Michel Margosis: By the Spanish police. Carabineros. We were taken to the nearest town. We were fed, lodged, then they arrested us. They arrested us for -- the rest of the family was sent to jail. My sister and mother to one, my brother to the other. I was sent, because it was all the rage, I was sent to a little town, Province of Catalonia, which is the reluctant ride of Spain. Because it was just a few years after the Spanish Civil War. Francisco Franco was the dictator there, and he did not allow the Catalanian culture to prevail. He forbade the use of the language or any culture, cultural Catalanian, like dance and singing.

I picked up Spanish in no time, but soon after that we were released. I tried to get in touch with the Persian consulate, or the British, because Persia at the time was a protectorate of England.

Since we didn't have a Persian consulate there, the English consul came, and he couldn't do anything except give me a few coins. I bought some onions and cooked them to eat. We got up every morning at 6:00 to go to mass. I didn't know anything about mass, especially done in Spanish. Or French, really. But we had a priest over there, who took refugees, and he took us around and told us about the culture, about Spain, about Catalonia, and he was very helpful to us.

Also, that region where I had been -- that had been historically from way back, had been a place of Roman culture, the Roman baths over there, they took us to a few of those, and I have pictures of those.

Then we were released and sent to another town --

>> Bill Benson: All of you were released?

>> Michel Margosis: All of us, except my brother. He was sent to concentration camp in Spain. Which had been a concentration camp for the Franco Civil War, he had his enemies there.

>> Bill Benson: Why do you think he was sent to a concentration camp, but you and your sister and mother were released?

>> Michel Margosis: I was underage. I was -- I guess the age there was 16. My brother was three years older. Miranda was a pretty nasty place to have a lot of Civil War prisoners. Many were still there. Occasionally, they had riots. My brother didn't like those.

Soon we were released from there, and my brother was eventually released, and we all went to Barcelona where we were subsidized to live with a family. Barcelona is the biggest city in Spain, the most European cultured. From there, my mother heard that there was an agency helping children under 16 to come to America.

America during the war did not allow anybody to come in, just rejected all refugees. Whereas England allowed 10,000 kids, children from Germany and Austria to go to England. Between 1939-1940, England allowed 10,000. The United States allowed, between 1933 and 1945, allowed 1400 children to come here.

>> Bill Benson: You were one of them?

>> Michel Margosis: I was one of them. My mother heard that an American agency was helping, was enlisting. My mother signed me up, and June 1943, I took a ship and I came here. I said goodbye to my mother, brother, sister, I saw my father in Portugal while I was there.

>> Bill Benson: You went from Spain to Portugal to catch the ship?

>> Michel Margosis: From Barcelona to Madrid to pick up another load of children. From Madrid to Lisbon. Lisbon, here.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother didn't go with you to Portugal?

>> Michel Margosis: My mother stayed behind, and she eventually, after I left, my brother and sister signed up to go to Palestine, because my sister had fallen in love with a Palestinian, who had gone to Paris to study. She met him in Marseilles, and again in Barcelona he too escaped. He wanted to go back to Palestine.

>> Bill Benson: At this time, your mother and father are still separated?

>> Michel Margosis: Then my mother hired another guide to take her from Spain to Portugal. Illegally again. So we went from country to country illegally.

>> Bill Benson: You're by yourself with all of these other kids on this Serpa Pinto coming to the US?

>> Michel Margosis: Right. On the Serpa Pinto. Well, in Portugal, when I saw my father, stayed with him for a few days, as soon as he saw me, greeted me, hugged me, then offered me a cigarette. I was 14. He said "You're a man now. You can smoke."

He took me around. We had a great time. I had bought some cookies that my mother had made just for him. And then I finally got to the ship, and we stopped in Oporto to load up with cork, which was then a major export of Portugal. And the ship made a stop in the Azores, Portuguese island in the Atlantic. While we were there, there were a lot of little boats sharing wares and I bought two pineapples, which I didn't eat for a few days. By the time I got to them, they had ripened, and fermented.

[Laughter]

That was a good trip.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: But there was also some adventures on the trip, of course. This is the middle of the war, and there's -- U-boats at sea.

>> Michel Margosis: It was a Portuguese ship, so the food was more plentiful. At tea time, I had a good friend that together we made believe we were a little sick. We went to the side of the ship a little bit, made believe we were sick. Many other kids followed us. We came back and finished the tea, the teas that we had the pastries with the tea. That was a good thing. But halfway through, I remember -- I don't remember how far, we were stopped by a U-boat. U-boat is a German submarine. I don't remember how long we were delayed, but we went on, and the only thing that I heard was that one of the cooks was missing when we got on again.

>> Bill Benson: Portugal was a neutral country?

>> Michel Margosis: Portugal was supposedly neutral. It also had a dictator, Salazar, the dictator. It seems like so many countries have dictators.

>> Bill Benson: So June 22, 1943, you arrive in the US?

>> Michel Margosis: In Philadelphia. The sky was full of dirigibles, navy ships, I think to protect the skies from enemy airplanes.

We stopped there. We went through customs. They confiscated my collection of stamps that I had in Marseilles. I collect a few things. But stamps, and we were immediately --

>> Bill Benson: You had hung on to your stamps going over the Pyrenees, as well as your dictionary?

>> Michel Margosis: Yeah. But the stamps were really light.

[Laughter]

They put us directly onto the train to New York. A place called the Bronx. I think that's where the Giants used to play. I learned pretty soon when I came here about baseball. But the Bronx is one of the boroughs of New York, up north. And I had a cousin that we had contacted, my father's uncle, who lived in Brooklyn, which is totally on the other side of New York.

My cousin came to see me. She wanted to show me America by taking me to Radio City Music Hall. I couldn't believe it.

Then I went to live with them for a while, then decided they couldn't afford me, because he had suffered the Great Depression. Then turned me over to the foster home bureau of New York. They put me in a foster home, and I was there until my parents came.

>> Bill Benson: In 1946?

>> Michel Margosis: Right. I knew little English. In Brooklyn, the first word I learned was from a neighbor who taught me a few choice words in Italian.

[Laughter]

That my cousin told me not to use again. Then I started high school. That was first term high school. I managed to get a -- just barely passed English and Civics. The following term, second term already, I really began to read Shakespeare in English. "Midsummer Night's Dream." I remember that. In 3 1/2 years, I made the honor society. My last year in high school I took -- also they put me in French, French so I could learn English. The only point I lost in the regent's exam was when I translated from French to English. I didn't know English that well.

>> Bill Benson: You were with a relative to begin, then into the foster care system. You ended up with several different families. It would be three years --

>> Michel Margosis: One family, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Short time with another one.

>> Michel Margosis: Right.

>> Bill Benson: It would not be until 1946 your parents made it.

>> Michel Margosis: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the reunion with your family and your siblings.

>> Michel Margosis: I remember one time my father had complained to the embassy here that he hadn't heard from me, the Persian Embassy.

>> Bill Benson: From the Persian Embassy?

>> Michel Margosis: That I should contact my parents. My parents came in 1946. They came into Philadelphia. I took the train, I went to Philadelphia, and the ship hadn't arrived yet. So I went to the movies. I waited. I remember the movie, it was Rex Harrison and Irene Dunn in "Anna and the King of Siam" which became a musical a few years later. I remember that so well.

I finally came here. My father befriended one of the customs officers because he said his nose looked Jewish.

He brought back a lot of pottery, so he could do something with it. But before that, when I came to the states originally, he had given me a couple of old Bibles that he thought were very valuable and I could possibly sell to the cardinal in New York, Cardinal Spellman. I don't know what happened to those things, but I never was able to sell them.

>> Bill Benson: I think they were actually confiscated from you by the --

>> Michel Margosis: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Yes. Michel has come across recently the case file notes from when he was in the foster care system, and they're really amazing to read by various social workers. But one is that you were complaining about your Bibles being taken by the US censor, as it was called. Eventually, they were able to get them back for you somehow. But it took several years to get them back.

>> Michel Margosis: The same with the stamps.

>> Bill Benson: You got your stamps back?

>> Michel Margosis: Eventually I gave the stamps to my brother-in-law, who says they probably were valuables. Well, you can have all of the stamps. If you don't like it, you can return it. I'm willing to. He said no, I will keep them.

>> Bill Benson: You would later, of course, go into the US Army and find yourself back in Europe. To go back to Europe, after what you went through, what was that like for you?

>> Michel Margosis: Well, I went into the army, that was after graduation. I had received a deferment, because I had become a chemist. I had my degree in chemistry then. I decided the deferment was well and good, but I didn't feel I was contributing to the war, during the Korean War. So I decided because I could speak Russian, I could help in the Cold War. The army, the Russian may not be good enough, but they'd send me to school to learn how to read and write. I was disappointed they didn't need me anymore.

So I looked at my MOS, my military expertise, and decided that already I was already an interpreter, why send him to Russian school?

So everybody went to Korea, I stayed behind. I finally got my orders, then the first ship that went out went to Europe. I didn't mind going to Europe. Instead, they sent me to Germany. As soon as I got to Germany, I said get me the hell out of here, because I don't know what's going to happen. So they sent me to France. Crossed the border. France was still having American troops. They put me on one job translating with a count, who was organizing a party for the American troops. So I was helping with that. As soon as that was finished, they didn't need me anymore as an interpreter. They looked at my records, see well, you have a degree in chemistry. The chemical corps. That's a good place. So I went to the chemical corps. I learned how to move the gas mask from here to there and how to move the smoke grenades from there to here.

[Laughter]

That was finished. They reversed the process. Soon after that, I got message that my father had

taken ill, and they sent me home on emergency leave. By the time I got here, my father had died. After 30 days' leave, I returned to the chemical station in France, and within the short time they needed a medic in Verdanes, which was a few miles away. Verdanes was a famous town, of course, a cemetery of France in World War I, over 10,000 casualties. I still have leftover bones, shells, still on the field. There was a little station hospital there that needed a medic. Of course, chemistry is medicine, it's pharmaceuticals. I became a medic.

>> Bill Benson: They made you a medic?

>> Michel Margosis: They made me a medic. I became a medic, on-the-job training. I learned how to give shots, 16-gauge needles at the time was pretty big. They told me just wait to shoot it. I did pretty well. I took care of a lot of -- I worked in the hospital for quite a while. Until they needed a medic in that chemical station back where I was. So now I went back to the camp, and I became one of the three medics taking care of all the GIs there.

>> Bill Benson: We're at the end of our program. I'm going to turn back to Michel in a moment to close our program. I want to thank all of you for being with us, remind you that we'll have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August, so if you live locally, come back, if you can. If you don't, come back next year when we resume our *First Person* program.

When Michel is finished he's going to step down off the stage, so we didn't have an opportunity for questions from you. If you want to ask Michel a question or say hi to him, absolutely feel free to do that, or get your photograph taken with him, if you want. He'll step down off the stage in a moment.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. On that note, I will turn back to Michel to close our program for today.

>> Michel Margosis: As much as my mind is not as strong as it used to be, I'm going to read it. I'm here recounting what I remember was the Holocaust. I escaped from Europe and my arrival alone in this country 70 years ago, and that was 4 days ago, as a refugee, now I'm a Holocaust survivor.

I recall my father's illusions to pogroms and resistance to the Bolshevik revolution and his own escape from Siberia. It was so long ago, just like the inquisition. I am immensely grateful to have found refuge and become a citizen of this great nation, where I've had the freedom to plan my own future, to worship, or not, as a Jew. To obtain an education, to become a successful research chemist, to serve my country in the army and in the civil service, and to have a loving family to be immensely proud of.

This reaffirms the legacy of my heritage, with memories from those dreadful days, as well as those happy days afterwards. I'm bearing witness to the Holocaust. I will leave it to this great museum and to you, to you all, to ensure that we will be remembered.

Hate and genocide must be held in check for this earth to survive. To the young people here, I would simply admonish you to study and learn with purpose as much as, as far as you can go, that you may be as fortunate as I have been in truly enjoying my years of employment and freedom.

This nation became a world leader mainly because of its innovative science and technology, that you can embrace without fear. Learn about your country and the issues troubling it. Know your rights and use them, and most importantly vote. But vote for the right people, of course.

[Applause]

[Ended at 2:00 p.m.]