

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM  
FIRST PERSON SERIES  
FIRST PERSON MICHEL MARGOSIS

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning 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 today. We are in our 16th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Michel Margosis, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2015 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation with additional funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

*First Person* is a series of weekly 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 serve as volunteers here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid- August. The Museum's website, [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the Museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card in the program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater when we finish our program. In doing so you will also receive an electronic copy of Michel's biography so you can remember and share his testimony after you leave here today.

Michel will share with his First Person account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows at the end of our program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask Michel a few questions. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with the introduction.

We begin with this portrait of Michel Margosis taken in 1943. 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. After escaping, Michel's parents made their way to Belgium.

This photo is of Michel's parents on their wedding day.

On this map of Europe the arrow points to Belgium. On the map of Belgium, the arrow points to Brussels. Michel Margosis was born September 2, 1928, in Brussels.

This photograph, taken in 1938, shows Michel's brother, his mother, his sister, and Michel who is on the far right.

In Brussels, Michel's father owned and edited two newspapers, French and Yiddish. In the background we see his Yiddish newspaper and the picture in the front is 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 end up in Marseille. The arrows on this map show their route from Belgium to Southern France.

Here we see 13-year-old Michel walking down a street in Marseille.

The Margosis family hoped to get exit visas and sail for the United States. However, they were not successful and escaped over the Pyrenees mountains into Spain. The yellow arrow on this map shows their escape route.

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 United States.

In 1943, Michel immigrated with other children to the U.S. on the Serpa Pinto, which is shown on the postcard on your right. On the left we see a newspaper article about their departure. And the arrow is on Michel.

Following his voluntary service in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, Michel pursued his chemical education in graduate school. Today he resides in the Washington, D.C. area, following a 26-year career with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as an international expert in the chemical analysis of antibiotics. Michel's wife Barbara passed away 14 years ago from Parkinson's disease. Michel strongly promotes research into Parkinson's and other neurological diseases.

Michel is very active in his community. He leads a French conversation group that meets twice monthly and participants in Spanish and Italian groups. Michel has been serving as a Commissioner of Human Rights in Fairfax County, Virginia, for about 10 years. Michel's son Aaron and his daughter Leah both reside in this area. He has two grandsons ages 14 and 12 and an 18-year-old granddaughter who will attend Rice University in the fall with a great scholarship, as Michel knows.

I'd like to note that Michel's daughter Leah is here by his side. If you would raise your hand. There you go. Thank you.

Michel and his son attended a Hidden Children conference in Amsterdam in 2005. He went to Brussels where the Belgium government arranged a token settlement for Michel for his losses due to the Holocaust. Michel speaks frequently about his experience during the Holocaust. He has spoken in such places as Fort Belvoir where he received his 50-year anniversary pin for his service during the Korean War, as well as to the Marines at Quantico, the Veterans Administration Hospital in Washington, D.C., and to other veterans and military groups, as well as to a number of schools including those his grandchildren attend.

Michel is especially proud that the Commonwealth of Virginia now has an annual Day of Remembrance thanks to his work with his representative in the Virginia legislature. He proudly notes that by persevering, Fairfax County, Virginia, has also now established an annual Day of Remembrance.

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

With that I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Michel Margosis. Michel, welcome and thank you for your willingness to be our First Person today. I know we have a very limited time and you have a lot to share with us so we'll go ahead and start.

Michel, you were just turning 11 when the Nazis overran Poland in 1939. 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 in the United States, please share with us a bit about your family, your community, and yourself in the years before war actually began.

>> Michel Margosis: I went to school. I did everything that we do in school. We learned arithmetic, education, French. In Belgium we have to take a second language. The two official languages then. Today it's three languages. So I picked up some Spanish, which I've totally forgotten as soon as I left. Dutch, it's not an easy language so French is basically my language.

>> Bill Benson: Along with several others.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, French is my second language. Because my parents were from Odessa. When I was born, we spoke Russian. As soon as I went into the street, in schools, speaking my natural

language. Never learned to read or write Russian. I call it kitchen Russian. Needed for home, eat, sleep, whatever. It was in Russian.

>> Bill Benson: We got a little glimpse with your father from the slide presentation in the introduction. Tell us a little bit about your father.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, when he escaped from Siberia, he escaped by foot, arranged an escape for 500 people. He made his way to Persia and became a Persian citizen. Today it's called Iran. Not as welcoming as they used to be. My siblings were born there, my brother and sister. Then he went on to Palestine where he wanted to settle until my sister contracted Polio. They didn't have facilities in Palestine then so he took her to Europe, to Berlin and then to Belgium which she was operated on in Belgium.

>> Bill Benson: Was that your sister Anna?

>> Michel Margosis: My sister Anna. And then when he tried to get back to Palestine, he was not allowed. So we were stranded in Belgium. I guess we were not allowed because -- well, I could think of several reasons. Number one, the British mandate was interfering to some extent. The Jewish agency was running the show there. Didn't want intellectuals. They wanted farmers. My father had become a newspaperman by then. Later on the competition from Germany. So we settled in Belgium. That's where I was born.

>> Bill Benson: You had a normal --

>> Michel Margosis: Normal kid.

>> Bill Benson: I enjoyed when you told me that one of your pastimes, you loved to see the old films, American Westerns. Normal life as a kid.

>> Michel Margosis: I loved movies.

>> Bill Benson: Moving forward, what can you tell us about the circumstances which your family found itself when the Germans attacked Belgium in the spring of 1940 and what led to the family's decision then to flee to France?

>> Michel Margosis: Well, my father wrote extensively about the plight of the Jews in Russia, the events of Communism, the evil of Communism, read Hitler's "Mein Kampf." He knew what was coming. He expected Hitler to do what he wanted to do. So on my birthday, I got the war came, just about September. My father, we packed whatever we could, went to the railroad station and waited for the train to come. The first one we wanted to take to go to England we missed. Fortunately -- [Inaudible]. The next morning, sleeping in the railroad station, we took the next train. We were supposed to take a half-hour ride to [Inaudible]. I think today it is one of NATO's. When we got there, the city was bombed. It was flattened. So we stayed on the train. The next seven days, seven nights we rode through France. We were fed whatever they fed. Occasionally we were strafed, bombed.

Everybody knows what strafing is?

>> Bill Benson: Say more about that. What do you remember of that?

>> Michel Margosis: What do I remember? Different from anything I've ever known before. It was scary.

>> Bill Benson: German planes diving in.

>> Michel Margosis: In most. Police arrested two nuns.

>> Bill Benson: Arrested two nuns?

>> Michel Margosis: Two nuns. They were actually people dressed in nuns outfits that were arrested as spies. Then the train went on. There was no further event. The train was moving very slowly. Usually takes a few hours. It took seven days and seven nights.

>> Bill Benson: It normally would have been a few hours?

>> Michel Margosis: Well, [Inaudible].

>> Bill Benson: Ok. Come back to what you remember about the bombing and strafing. Were you forced to get off the trains?

>> Michel Margosis: The first thing that I noted was the bombing in Brussels when the war started. I didn't know what it was. My father recognized it was bombers. Later on when we were on the train some people got out of the train but we didn't. My father pushed us under the seats, thinking any

bullets might ricochet. So we were safe. A few people did not make it back to the train. We just kept on going. We were lucky.

>> Bill Benson: After seven days where did you end up?

>> Michel Margosis: In a little town south of Toulouse, about 50 miles south of Toulouse. Toulouse today is the center of the airplane industry. A little town about 5,000 residents. We were welcomed. We were placed in an empty room. The other inhabitants in that room we didn't care for. There were little animals running around. We stayed there for a while. Hardly any furniture. We were provided with food. And, of course, because of the war, I went out -- especially grapes. Full of grapes. If you go out, you can find some.

>> Bill Benson: That became one of your food sources.

>> Michel Margosis: That became one of my food sources. A lot of the trees, pine. Cherries, apples. I learned to climb trees.

>> Bill Benson: Was this the town of Fontenilles?

>> Michel Margosis: No. This was Cazeres.

From there, my father went -- about two weeks roughly after Belgium was attacked, France gave up and signed the treaty with Germany. Vichy became the capital. My father had papers. He was stranded in Switzerland during the war. So he thought -- he went to Portugal. This was 1940. He stayed there for six years.

>> Bill Benson: So he went on alone.

>> Michel Margosis: He went on alone.

>> Bill Benson: So it's your mother and three children.

>> Michel Margosis: Mother and three children on the same passport. We stayed behind. We couldn't move.

We decided then to go to a farm, friends of the family. We stayed there for a little while. I learned about farming, what does a farmer do: wood cutting, take care of the livestock, cows, horses, chickens, feed them, clean them. Help wherever I can. Nothing like fresh milk from a cow.

>> Bill Benson: At one point I think during that time you were sent to a detention camp.

>> Michel Margosis: We were not sent. We were advised that there was a place -- the train in Toulouse, big city. There was a reception camp for refugees. So we did. They provided us with a bunk. My mother didn't feel right about it. In the middle of the night she decided let's get out of here. Strange feeling she had. The barracks with tarp on the side. We lifted the tarp and sneaked out.

>> Bill Benson: Just sneaked out of the camp?

>> Michel Margosis: Just sneaked out of the camp. Through the Museum I found out many years later the people in that camp were taken to Auschwitz, arrested by the French militia, the French police, and sent to Auschwitz. So we escaped that one.

>> Bill Benson: I think as we'll hear from you in a little bit, as we hear more, it becomes real clear that your mother's senses or instincts were really powerful and a key to your survival.

>> Michel Margosis: After that, my mother decided she was running the house. My sister might have helped a little bit. Decided perhaps there were diplomats. The diplomats left Paris. None of them had come to Vichy, I don't think. She thought maybe the Persian ambassador or at least the consul may be in Marseille, Marseille being the largest port in this France and the second largest city. So we went to Marseille.

>> Bill Benson: Just so we all understand. The reason that your mother wanted to get to the Persian embassy is because her citizenship was from Persia.

>> Michel Margosis: Right. To get papers and visas. So we got to Marseille. Down from the railroad station, which seemed like thousands of steps, we found -- a very safe place for people like us.

Marseille is a pretty tough city. So we stayed there for a while. I remember years later I took my wife to visit and she thought she saw people in the windows with knives in their mouths, like pirates. She was scared.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what your living conditions were like. Here's your mother, she's got three children with her, three kids, and you move into the slums of Marseille. It's safe, as you say, but what were your living conditions like?

>> Michel Margosis: Our neighbors were all the minorities you could think of: Italians, Corsicans, Arabs, Chinese. Remember the Chinese were the people [Inaudible]. Food became scarce. Everything became rationed, including milk and potatoes. If you wanted meat, would have to stand in line if a store had meat. The last people in line wouldn't have it. Maybe a pound of meat a week. I don't know exactly but I remember it was getting scarce.

And because our situation became a little difficult, our permit expired so we became illegal at that point and as illegals we could not get ration coupons. Then my mother decided to – she went into the black marketing, which is not recommended today. Black marketing, especially of things like tobacco, cigarettes, candies, sweets, you buy at a certain price and resell it with a very good profit. She did that. Penalty, court, hanging.

>> Bill Benson: Because you were illegals, as you said, you could not get rations. Your situation was desperate. Your mother had to do what it took to feed her family.

>> Michel Margosis: And she did. Did very well.

>> Bill Benson: I think you told me one time because you were obviously in a very small, little place but she kept her goods under the bed.

>> Michel Margosis: I took once in a while.

>> Bill Benson: Including the cigarettes.

>> Michel Margosis: The cigarettes.

>> Bill Benson: Mainly the cigarettes.

>> Michel Margosis: I was 13 by then.

>> Bill Benson: You told me -- described Marseille as a rough, in its own way international community. That was a time when you had to grow up really fast.

>> Michel Margosis: I had a best friend. I don't remember where I met him but he called himself Cafe au lait. His name was Rafael. His father was from Cameroon and mother from Denmark. He was, in my mind, a pretty handsome young man with two sisters, younger, who lived by the ports. They used to go there practically every day. He taught me to swim, to skate, to steal, especially food. We were pals. I also got to listen to music in his house. He had records, the opera, a piece of an opera, the waltzes. I liked music there even more.

>> Bill Benson: Did your mother get to the Persian embassy?

>> Michel Margosis: There was nothing left.

>> Bill Benson: Nothing left.

>> Michel Margosis: So we stayed there until November --

>> Bill Benson: Before you continue on from where you went after that, you described something to me that I think the term was raffles. Tell us about it.

>> Michel Margosis: I think they were called roundups over here. Instead of cattle they had people. They would block one end of the street and block the other end of the street and sweep all the people inside. If you don't have the documents --

>> Bill Benson: Which you did not have.

>> Michel Margosis: Which we did not have. You were picked up and shipped out. Again, through the papers here I found out that that happened, people were picked up. I don't remember how many but they were sent to Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: Wasn't your brother Willy snagged and grabbed in one of these?

>> Michel Margosis: No. Early on my brother was arrested. That was early on. There was a raid. After that he was released. They examined him. Back then it was not as bad.

>> Bill Benson: You told me during one of those where they sealed off the ends of the streets you, because of your friends -- you knew how to slip out.

>> Michel Margosis: We slipped out from one house to the other. My mother, they also -- my mother might have been playing poker with her friends someplace. That was one of her entertainment. She

found some friends. Because we were in the slums, too, it was a little safer than the rest. So where my friend's house was, I could come back.

After we left Marseille, Rafael's neighborhood was completely -- by the French militia mainly.

>> Bill Benson: Because you were in the part of France that was the unoccupied part by the Germans, there was a German presence there, though in Marseille. Right?

>> Michel Margosis: Yes. Even though it was not occupied officially. It had Germans there. We suspected, at least I suspected, that because Rafael's father was from Cameroon, he spoke German, Cameroon had been a German colony that was to the League of Nations 1918, became -- Cameroon became half French and half English. He spoke German. We suspected he probably worked for the Germans.

>> Bill Benson: At some point, Michel, your mother decided it was not only necessary to leave Marseille but to get out of France entirely and head for Spain. Tell us what you think prompted her to make that decision to pick up and move all of you out of there, how you think she arranged that. And then tell us about your journey to Spain.

>> Michel Margosis: We were pushed into it. Of course we were pushed to do everything. But November 1942, the Allied Forces, American forces mainly, invaded North Africa, Algeria, Tunisia. When that happened, the German troops marched into Marseille, the rest of France. That was terrifying. Hearing those German boots. They must have had some special steel in those heels because I remember them coming in the streets I used to work on.

At that point my mother said we have to get out. With the money she had earned she bought papers allowing us to travel. And because my sister has the Polio, we had special documents allowing us to go to the mountains. Fresh air from the mountains is better than below the sea air, I guess. So we were allowed to go to the border. We had a good meal there at the inn. And then after dinner we were accosted by two French policemen.

>> Bill Benson: How did you get from Marseille to the border?

>> Michel Margosis: The train.

>> Bill Benson: Took the train. And because you had these papers saying you were going for health reasons.

>> Michel Margosis: We had these papers. Got on the train and collected -- on the train we noticed a few German troops. So we were sitting, facing those troops. We didn't say much. At one time my mother started signing, making believe that she couldn't speak and started making signs. We immediately understood. We were natives, basically, including the French Marseille accent, so we were able to talk and then sign to my mother. The cops, the Germans, never caught on.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother's accent would have been a giveaway.

>> Michel Margosis: My mother could not speak French. She only spoke Yiddish and Russian.

>> Bill Benson: So on the spot she had the presence of mind to pretend she was signing.

>> Michel Margosis: That was amazing.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember when you were a kid, 13, 14 years of age -- I know you said to me in the past that as a kid there's some parts of it that were, you know, sort of like an adventure but do you remember feeling fear that time yourself? And did your mom ever communicate the fears that she must have felt?

>> Michel Margosis: I never sensed any fear from my mother. She was the valiant one. I had fear occasionally. Not show the troops. I was scared.

>> Bill Benson: You were scared. If you don't mind, what's your best knowledge of how much money your mother had to pay to be able to pay both the smugglers and for the papers that you needed?

>> Michel Margosis: Well, that comes after.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. We'll wait on that.

>> Michel Margosis: The cops finally asked my mother do you want to go to Spain. My mother said, no, no, no. We're French, why would we go to Spain? My sister was French, from the sign. Eventually we relented because we had no choice. They were willing to take us into Spain for \$10,000 each, \$40,000. November 1942. Today I think that's about half a million. They took us over.

>> Bill Benson: She had that money from her black market?

>> Michel Margosis: She had that money from the black market.

So after dinner we packed again. November 19 -- November, in the mountains, gets pretty cold. So we packed sugars, candies that she was able to get. We walked through the woods of the hills, through the snow, through the woods. Found out later -- it took about nine hours. I was the slow one. We finally got in Spain.

>> Bill Benson: Say a little bit more about a nine-hour walk. The first time I talked to you about this, you downplayed it in a way, the walk, as you put it. I went online. What are the Pyrenees like? They're steep and have a few masses.

>> Michel Margosis: About 7,000, 8,000 feet high. We didn't go there. We went through it. I guess cold. Wild. We didn't see any animals. I understand they have boars in the Pyrenees. I don't know about snakes. We were more worried about humans than animals, although we did hear barking. We didn't hear any voices but the barking told the guys where to go. Those guys were very good.

>> Bill Benson: You had to trust them. You're paying them \$40,000 and you have to trust that they are not going to just take the money and run or denounce you; that they're actually going to guide you over the mountains.

>> Michel Margosis: I found out again later that many of these guys turned over their customers to the militia, the police, the Germans.

>> Bill Benson: So you were just, in a sense, lucky.

>> Michel Margosis: Lucky again that we went through. My brother-in-law, my sister's husband, went through the same thing. Not quite. He was in the underground. He went through Spain. And he led a group through the Pyrenees. But they were detected by the police. Many of them did not make it. So different groups, different licks.

>> Bill Benson: When you and your family went over the Pyrenees in Spain, what did you have with you? You had a little bit of food. What did you have with you? I want you to share this. I have an amazing image of you in my mind.

>> Michel Margosis: When I was in Marseille, I loved reading. I used to stop by the bookstore, me and my friends. I couldn't buy it so I just read. I read a lot of the things, detective stories, whatever. I fell in love with a big French dictionary.

>> Bill Benson: Literally a big one.

>> Michel Margosis: About this big. I decided to take it with me. I put on my belt and I crossed the mountain with it. 10 years later, I realized that I didn't have it. I was wondering why. I think my brother borrowed it.

>> [Laughter]

>> Michel Margosis: Soon after we left Spain -- well, I'll come to that later.

>> Bill Benson: You made it over. You're in Spain. But it wasn't necessarily a warm greeting awaiting you.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, we slept -- they put us in an inn that was closed for the day. We woke up in the afternoon. The cops had gone. And two Spanish guys came in. They offered their services, which we accepted gladly. They said, "We'll take you Barcelona." Big city in Spain. They decided to follow the railroad tracks. So much easier, straight road. Within a short time, within an hour or so, we were arrested. Everybody was sent to jail except me. I was sent to an orphanage because I was so young. My brother, sister, and mother, jail.

>> Bill Benson: Were they in the same jail?

>> Michel Margosis: My mother and sister in one jail, my brother in another. Soon after that my brother was sent to a concentration camp in Spain. It was opened a few years before, Civil War in Spain. We came there about a few years after the war ended, Civil War ended, in Spain.

>> Bill Benson: They still had their concentration camps.

>> Michel Margosis: Still had their concentration camps.

From there I was sent to an orphanage. From there a few weeks later we were sent to a small town. It was an old -- the road was used.

>> Bill Benson: The Spanish authorities let your mother and sister out of their jail?

>> Michel Margosis: Several hotels reserved for refugees. I think it was subsidized by agencies. We stayed there for a while.

>> Bill Benson: Was your brother with you?

>> Michel Margosis: My brother was still --

>> Bill Benson: Still in the concentration camp. Ok.

>> Michel Margosis: From there we were allowed to go to Barcelona. We lived with a family there. Given a certain amount of money. Then my mother found out about an American organization tried to save children. She signed me up. Within a short time, I got ready to leave. I said goodbye to my brother, sister, mother.

>> Bill Benson: Why couldn't she sign up your brother and sister? Were they too old?

>> Michel Margosis: They were over 16.

>> Bill Benson: You had to be under 16.

>> Michel Margosis: Under 16. So I said goodbye. I left.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about that, when you were in Barcelona, a major city with embassies and diplomatic places, was your mother able to go to the Persian embassy? What was happening with her attempts? Your father's in Portugal somewhere.

>> Michel Margosis: Yeah. I don't remember any embassy contact. I went to the British embassy. British protectorates. I thought maybe they could help us. There was nothing.

I remember Barcelona, other things, the two consulates. Barcelona was not a capital. So the German consulates and American Consulates were next to each other. Seeing the Nazi flag next to the stars and stripes was a sight I could never forget. I used to sneer at one and hail the other one. That was really something.

>> Bill Benson: So your mother finds out about this program where kids, under 16, are sent to the United States. So you leave your mother, Willy, Anna, your brother and sister and you leave Spain.

>> Michel Margosis: I leave Spain. Took the train. We stopped in Madrid, picked up another group of kids. They went on to Portugal where my father was, where he greeted me. I stayed with him for a few days.

>> Bill Benson: And it's been almost three years since you had seen your father?

>> Michel Margosis: Three years. And the first thing he does when he sees me is offers me a cigarette.

>> [Laughter]

>> Michel Margosis: I took it of course. Talked about a lot of things.

>> Bill Benson: Because he was in a neutral country in Portugal while you were in Marseille, was your mother able to stay in touch with your father? She knew where he was?

>> Michel Margosis: Stayed in touch most of the time. I remember some letters were blacked out to a large extent.

>> Bill Benson: Censors?

>> Michel Margosis: By the censors. I remember before I left, my mother baked cookies. I remember the family saying those cookies were too hard. They bounced pretty well. They were hard to chew. But loved it. First he had in a long time. So I said goodbye to him. We went on the Portuguese ship. I made friends with some new kids.

>> Bill Benson: So it was just a bunch of kids under 16.

>> Michel Margosis: Just a bunch of kids. The ship had a few adults. Stopped in the port for a load of cork and wine. Then we stopped in another Portuguese island.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember -- you left your mother and siblings in Spain. You were reunited with your father in Portugal. Now you're saying goodbye to him. You're under 16. You're maybe 14 by now. You board a train with a bunch of -- a ship with a bunch of kids. Do you remember what that was like? You did not know what the future held with respect to seeing your family.



>> Michel Margosis: Nobody knows the future. It was a real adventure. It was safe. Leaving my family was not pleasant. But I knew that my mother wanted to sacrifice. Seeing my father was, of course, pretty great.

>> Bill Benson: But then you had to leave him behind.

>> Michel Margosis: I had to leave him behind.

>> Bill Benson: On your ship, as you said, you got to Philadelphia but you're leaving out at least one detail that's significant about the ride on the ship.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, we stopped -- one of the things, being a nice ship, we had tea, tea at 4:00 as part of the meals. I made friends, I think seven friends, we made believe we were sick. So many people followed us. We came back and finished the pastries.

>> Bill Benson: I was thinking -- you had a U-Boat encounter.

>> Michel Margosis: Oh.

>> Bill Benson: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

>> Michel Margosis: That was not as important.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: I think we'd like to hear about the U-Boat. That sounds pretty significant.

>> Michel Margosis: We were stopped by a U-Boat. I don't have a good recollection of this. Vaguely remember we were stopped by a U-Boat. The ship stopped. We were boarded. We were kept out of sight. Then we were let go about an hour or so later. The only thing I was told was that one of the cooks was missing after we left. So basically because it was a neutral ship, we just went on.

>> Bill Benson: As Portuguese, it was neutral so that's why you were not sunk.

>> Michel Margosis: Right.

>> Bill Benson: What can you tell us -- again, you may not remember the details. What was it like other than having tea, to be on a ship for probably several weeks, a couple of weeks?

>> Michel Margosis: About 10 days.

>> Bill Benson: About 10 days.

>> Michel Margosis: I had never been on such a big ship. It was an experience. We were kids. We played most of the time. I don't remember what we did but I made friends with a few of them.

>> Bill Benson: After the U-Boat encounter, you made your way, came to Philadelphia.

>> Michel Margosis: We were greeted in Philadelphia. A pilot came on the ship to take us in, barrage of airplanes and everything. Somehow I didn't think they were greeting us with all of these things. We went through customs. They confiscated my stamp collection.

>> Bill Benson: Which you had also carried with you.

>> Michel Margosis: I carried a few things that I felt was important.

>> Bill Benson: Why did they confiscate your stamp collection?

>> Michel Margosis: Well, I found out later, much later, that stamps were used for spying. They returned it to me about two years later. This is the position I make. I don't know why else. It was not an important collection.

>> Bill Benson: So you don't have family with you. You're in Philadelphia. Where do you go?

>> Michel Margosis: In Philadelphia, we were placed on a train going to New York, a place called the Bronx which is on the opposite side of Brooklyn. In a home there for the kids. A few of them received visitors. A couple came to greet me, a cousin who was 25 days older than my sister. She came with a big straw hat, big French dictionary, French/English dictionary. She wanted to take me to America, big city musical. Every time she wanted to communicate with me, she paged through the dictionary looking for a word. Finally she asked me if I could speak Yiddish. I said sort of because listening to my parents speaking Yiddish to each other, I picked up some. So that's how we communicated.

We went to Radio City, fantastic show. She says it was good. Came back. A few days later she took me to a home in Brooklyn. I went to live with them, my father's uncle who came here in 1908. From there, took me to the Foster Home Bureau of New York. September that same year -- about 11 days from now I'll celebrate my 72nd year? Took me to high school. I had vacation for three years.

Took me to high school. The advisor was a French teacher so that was great. I went to school every day.

>> Bill Benson: Did they put you on -- in an age-appropriate grade?

>> Michel Margosis: First term. I was not 14 yet. Well, September I became 14. I went through first term, took English, civics. I flunked almost everything. I made high school in three and a half years with honors in spite of that. So French 5 and 6 because that's where I learned my English. My second year we were studying Shakespeare.

>> Bill Benson: The war ended 70 years ago, victory in Europe was just a few weeks ago 70 years ago, V.J. Day a little bit later. When did you reunite with your family?

>> Michel Margosis: After I left Spain, soon after that my brother and sister went to Palestine. My sister had had met a Palestinian who went to Paris to study. He escaped to Spain. He went to Marseille. Then she saw him again in Spain. She fell in love with him. He wanted to go back, back home. She decided to follow him. My brother was strongly urged to accompany her as a chaperon. On the train she met somebody else.

>> [Laughter]

>> Michel Margosis: The underground I mentioned before, through Spain. Met this guy on the train. So one time I remember receiving a letter. Who should she marry? Well, we told her to follow her heart. She can't marry this guy. My mother found another guy with a little money to take her to Portugal. So my parents came legally in 1946.

>> Bill Benson: 1946.

>> Michel Margosis: So the day -- days after the war started in Belgium. My sister came with her husband and baby 1950. And my brother came from Israel 1953.

>> Bill Benson: So by 1953 everybody was reunited in the United States.

>> Michel Margosis: After 13 years we were finally reunited.

>> Bill Benson: You wrote -- you still are working on your autobiography. It's still in progress. You wrote in the draft that I saw, the way you put it, some things happened to your father. You wrote on his way to America, namely some pogroms, two revolutions, two world wars with short integrals of peace thrown in between. Just say a little bit more.

>> Michel Margosis: He was a newspaperman. He reported what he felt was coming on, particularly concerned about the type of Palestine, with the Jews in Russia, with all the pogroms. He left the whole family behind. My father's brother was killed in 1936. He did not want to become a Stalinist. He was killed. My mother's brother found a job in Siberia and became --

>> Bill Benson: In Siberia.

>> Michel Margosis: My mother also had a sister who looked exactly like her, according to pictures I saw. We never saw any of them. I never knew an uncle, cousin, or anything until I came to America.

>> Bill Benson: Many other things I'd like to ask you but I think in the remaining time, if you're ok, I'd like to turn to our audience and ask if there's any questions in our audience, if anybody would like to ask you.

We have a couple of microphones in each aisle. I'll ask that you ask your question once you have the microphone; then make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat it just to be sure that everybody including Michel hears it. Then he'll respond.

Do we have anybody who has a question for Michel? If not, I'm going to ask a couple more. We have a gentleman in the middle here. The mic is coming down to you, sir.

>> You mentioned where your brother was put into a concentration camp. But I don't recall hearing. Did he escape, was he released?

>> Bill Benson: Your brother Willy was in a concentration camp. How did he get out of there?

>> Michel Margosis: He was released. When we went to Barcelona, he was released to join us. So he was part of the family. The Spanish concentration camp was nothing like the Germans. It was not -- they didn't care if you were Jewish or not. Spanish policies would be different. Franco was kind of Hitler but he didn't care about being Jewish or not. He was not involved in the final solution.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. Do we have another one?

While we're waiting to see if somebody else has a question --

>> Michel Margosis: There's one up there.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. Thank you.

>> I'm curious to know if anyone in your family thought about renouncing their Jewishness. And also, did you consider all of the times you had close calls to be luck or did you feel that God was protecting you?

>> Bill Benson: Let me pick up on the second half of that. You had many close calls. Was -- did you have a sense that it was just luck or that you were being protected by God?

>> Michel Margosis: Well, we were never religious. Probably because we could not avail ourselves of the religious facilities whenever we were on the run. In Marseille I never [Inaudible]. My father was a Zionist. He had a great teacher. When he was in Portugal, he became the acting rabbi. Because of his training he was able to do that.

Later on, after I got married, my mother became kosher so she could entertain her friends from Brooklyn. Today, well, I go to Torah study every Saturday morning and go to services every Friday evening. But I'm slowing down.

Is it religion or is it luck? Probably a combination.

>> Bill Benson: That actually is a nice segue to a question I want to ask. Several years ago when you were with us on a *First Person* program, a local poet was in the audience. And after she heard your *First Person*, she went home and wrote a poem as a tribute to your mother. She named it "Lokshen." Tell us what is significant about that.

>> Michel Margosis: Lokshen back in Marseille was the equivalent of dollars, American green backs, black market. And because she survived on that, this poet decided this would be a good name for it. It was lokshen that enabled us to be able to escape. And she came here, listened to my story here, and asked my permission to write a story, the poem which I carry with me all the time.

>> Bill Benson: As a tribute to your mother.

>> Michel Margosis: As a tribute to my mother. My mother was the brain, the energy, the whole thing behind being able to be here. Without my mother, we would not be alive here today.

>> Bill Benson: Do you have any other questions? We had a question over here. Sir? We'll get a microphone down to you.

>> It sounds like your friend Rafael was a pretty important part of your life. Did you ever re-establish contact with him?

>> Bill Benson: Your friend Rafael who was so important to you. Did you ever have other contact with him?

>> Michel Margosis: I took the family back to Europe one time. We stopped in Marseille. I got in touch with the authorities trying to find out what happened, if anything happened. I tried to find out also about the farmer who took us in. There's nothing. I also got in touch with the records in Germany, where they keep the best records in Europe. There was no mention of his names, which to me means that he was safe.

The area that he lived in, the whole place blew up. The Germans just blew the whole area up. They took everybody, whoever they could, and arrested so many. As far as I know, he was not in that roundup.

>> Bill Benson: Because you're not able to find any records of him.

>> Michel Margosis: Because his name was not in that list. He was not arrested. He was not part of the German.

>> Bill Benson: I think we're at the end of our period. We'll do one more question. We have one more question right here. I have to get a microphone you. Then we're going to have to close our program.

>> I was just curious to know if during all of your ventures if you understood what was going on in the concentration camps as far as the atrocities that was going on in there. Did you all understand that?

>> Bill Benson: When you were in Marseille and going to Spain, were you aware of the full extent of the Holocaust, what was happening elsewhere in Europe? When did you become aware of how awful -- the extent, the scope, the magnitude of what happened?

>> Michel Margosis: Well, we could not have a radio. It was forbidden. We came here -- I came here in June 1943. That was just about two, three weeks before the invasion of Sicily. That's when I started reading the papers and I found out what was going on. Before that, I didn't read the papers. I didn't want to spend that kind of money. I was not that interested. I had my friends who escaped the police. Never looked at them. The Germans were not visible in Marseille. They were behind the scenes. So I didn't know too much. I did see in the movie news reels about Russia, about the effect of bombing of the troops from Germany. Otherwise not much.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to turn back to Michel to close our program in many just a couple of moments. It's our tradition at *First Person* that our first person gets the last word. But before I do that, one, I would like to thank you for being with us. We have *First Person* programs every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. So I hope that you might have the opportunity to come back. If not, we'll resume again in 2016 and hope you can return next year if possible.

I'm going to ask two things of you when Michel is done. One is that our photographer, Joel, will step up on the stage and will take a photograph of Michel with you as the backdrop. So I'm going to ask you to stand at that point so that we get this photograph of Michel. It just really looks wonderful with you as an audience behind him. I know there's, no doubt, other questions folks will have. Michel will stay up here. If anybody has a question you'd like to ask him, please feel free to come up and chat with him afterwards or just shake his hand, whatever you want to do.

>> Michel Margosis: Or maybe I'll go down there.

>> Bill Benson: I think we'll put you up here. Lighting is better. We'll get you up here. Keep you up here.

On that note, I'd like to turn it over to you, Michel.

>> Michel Margosis: I did not memorize this but I'll read it. We recognize the Holocaust as a time when the spark of evil was a raging fire that swept over much of Europe. I recall as I came to this country in June of 1943, a couple of weeks before the invasion of Sicily, that I also remember that about a month later a race riot blazed in Holland. That was also the time when Jews were not accepted everywhere in society. We have come a long way and achieved much in this America but the residual of this bigotry and intolerance have never been extinguished and have been reignited mostly in Europe by older anti-Semitism and radical new ones from the east who have learned that the people -- the lessons from their predecessors. Those have turned into genocide and racial and ethnic conflict in the world over. Latin America is currently facing a Muslim world that also chose to be in this array with good and bad guys. We must expand diversity and support education on all levels and get to know our neighbors better for America and the world to become a better and more secure place for our children and grandchildren to grow and prosper.

I am once more reaffirming my legacy with memories from those dreadful days as well as those happily arrived afterwards as I am bearing witness to the Holocaust. I leave it to this great museum and to you all to ensure that it will be remembered. Hate and genocide must be held in check for this earth to survive. He became a world leader mainly because of innovative science and technology back in the days without fear. Learn about your country and the issues. Know your rights and use them judiciously. And most importantly, vote. Vote for the right people.

>> [Laughter]

[Applause]