REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON MICHEL MARGOSIS
MAY 24, 2018

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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*. We are in our 19th year of the *First Person* program. Thank you for joining us. Our First Person today is Mr. Michel Margosis, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2018 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of twice-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 serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Michel will share with us his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Michel a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our online conversation: *Never Stop Asking Why*. The conversation aims to inspire individuals and new generations to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises, and what

this history means for societies today. To join the *Never Stop Asking Why* conversation, you can ask your question and tag the museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy. You can find the hashtag on the back of your program, as well.

A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's YouTube page. Please visit the First Person website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.

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.

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 and on this map of Belgium the arrow points to Brussels. Michel was born September 2, 1928 in Brussels. That also means he has a landmark birthday here in a few months.

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

Michel's father owned and edited two newspapers, one French and one Yiddish. In the Picture is the Yiddish newspaper and here we see his 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 Marseilles. 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 Marseilles.

The Margosis family hoped to get exit visas and sail for the United States. However, they did not succeed in obtaining visas 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 U.S.

In 1943 Michel emigrated with other children to the U.S. on the Serpa Pinto, shown on the postcard on the right. On the left, we see a newspaper article about their departure. The arrow points to 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 17 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 monthly and participates in the Spanish and the Italian groups. Michel served as a Commissioner of Human Rights in Fairfax County, Virginia, for 12 -- 13 years.

Michel's son Aaron and his daughter Leah both reside in this area. Aaron is a senior scientist with Microsoft. Leah is a make-up artist For PBS television. And I'm happy to say Leah is with us in the front row right here.

Michel has two grandsons, ages 17 and 15, and a 21-year old granddaughter. The 17-year old is a high school junior playing varsity baseball and about to compete in the state

championship. The 15-year old plays lacrosse. His granddaughter is finishing her junior year at Rice University. She speaks French, Spanish and Portuguese. He 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 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 Ft. 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 DC and to other Veterans and military groups, as well as to a number of schools including those his grandchildren attend.-- or had attended.

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. 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 Visitor Services as well as translating "Deportation Lists" from Belgium, Luxembourg and from 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 would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Michel Margosis.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our FIrst Person today. I know with all that you have to share with us, we'll just get started right away if that's ok with you.

Michel, you were just turning 11 when the Nazis overran Poland in September 1939. The war came to you and your family in Belgium in the spring of 1940, so less than a year later. Before you tell us about your journey to safety in the U.S., start first by sharing with us a bit about your family, your community, and yourself in those early years before the war.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, I went to school. My first language was Russian because my parents came from Ukraine. Then when I got out of the house, I learned French. My schooling was basically French until the war started. I attended school as much as I could. Sometimes I didn't. I played hooky once in a while. It got to be enjoyable because I used to visit the city, Brussels. And I listened to the radio. That was a new device. The radio was fairly new back then. And I read some. But nothing exciting.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your siblings.

>> Michel Margosis: I hardly -- well, my sister was four years older than I. We had little in common at the time except our parents. My brother was closer. He used to advise me about everything. He loved to -- he talked a lot about sports, like the Tour de France bicycle race, and soccer. And the best teams, of course, were from Brussels and the best bike riders were Belgian. He also told me about a lot of things. We spent some summers on the coast chasing jellyfish occasionally. We did everything that kids do.

>> Bill Benson: You had a sister that passed away tragically very young.

>> Michel Margosis: Yeah. I hardly remember that one. It was an infant.

>> Bill Benson: Your father had a printing business where he printed his newspapers. I think if I remember right, you used to, even though you were young, you did some work in the printing plant.

>> Michel Margosis: Yeah, well, my father had to learn a new language to work there. He was

able to eventually succeed in getting the printing plant. I tried to get in there and do what I can.
>> Bill Benson: As a young boy.
>> Michel Margosis: As a young boy.
>> Bill Benson: Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939. You remember pretty vividly the next day, September 2.
>> Michel Margosis: I remember the first day. We were in the market. My mother wanted to buy me shoes. I heard there was an ultimatum to Germany and the following day the war started.
>> Bill Benson: So by the 3rd, England and France declared war on Germany.
>> Michel Margosis: And that came into Belgium. Singing "Tiperari" and stuff. It was quite a thing.
>> Bill Benson: What can you tell us about the circumstances in which your family found itself when the Germans attacked Belgium in May 1940? And what led to the family's decision to flee for France?
>> Michel Margosis: Well, my father was basically self-educated to a large extent. He had read "Mein Kampf." He believed what Hitler had written.
>> Bill Benson: So he took him seriously.
>> Michel Margosis: He took him seriously. And my parents also experienced the Russian revolution. My father was an antifascist and he had written a lot about the coming of Hitler.
>> Bill Benson: In his newspapers.
>> Michel Margosis: In his newspaper. So when the Germans came, when they attacked, my father felt he had a price on his head. We decided to leave as soon as possible.
>> Bill Benson: How did you get out?
>> Michel Margosis: Well, the war in Belgium started to make sense when the Germans bombed Brussels.
>> Bill Benson: Which is where you were.
>> Michel Margosis: Where we were. I remember hearing it, hearing the bombs. We immediately left. We took whatever we could on our backs and walked over to the railroad station and waited to get in because it was packed.
>> Bill Benson: So thousands of others were trying to do the same thing. Right?
>> Michel Margosis: Right. We finally got in. And we wanted to take the next train out to the coast, to go to England. We missed the train. We missed the boat; gratefully because that ship was sunk. So we waited for the next train which was supposed to stop in Morse, about half-hour away from Brussels. When we got there, the city was practically wiped out from the bombs. Two nuns were arrested.
>> Bill Benson: Two nuns?
>> Michel Margosis: Two nuns. Well, they were dressed as nuns but they were German paratroopers. They were discovered. But that elated everything and we were not allowed to get off the train.

The train started again, and for the next seven days, seven nights, we went on to Southern France. We were fed by the French people wherever we stopped. We were strafed a few times. Strafing means German planes machine gunning the train.
>> Bill Benson: And you remember that?
>> Michel Margosis: I well remember it. Many people -- the train stopped a few times and people got off. Some did not get back. My father pushed us kids under the seats in the train.
>> Bill Benson: When the planes --

>> Michel Margosis: When the planes were coming. He felt it was safer than being outside. And then eventually, about 50 miles south of Toulouse, big city in Southern France --
>> Bill Benson: What did you do when you stopped there?
>> Michel Margosis: We were taken in by the local people. We were settled in a vacant apartment with a couple of bunks and a few other residents that we stepped on occasionally. Mice.

We stayed there for a while until France signed the Armistice with the Germans. Every diplomat left. Said the French government was established in Vichy with Monsieur Petain who was the hero of World War I, but he was also not nice. The Nuremberg Laws that the Germans had were applied with even greater vigor than the Germans actually.
>> Bill Benson: In France?
>> Michel Margosis: In France.
>> Bill Benson: So with the capitulation with France, France was in a sense, divided into two. The Germans occupied --
>> Michel Margosis: The coast, the western coast, was occupied by German troops. And the other part was not occupied by troops but had a lot of German civilians.
>> Bill Benson: And that's what we call Vichy France.
>> Michel Margosis: Vichy France was a collaboration country with Germany.
>> Bill Benson: That's where you were headed?
>> Michel Margosis: That's where we were. My father went to Vichy to see if he could secure a passport for my mother. The passport had elapsed and he couldn't do it. He felt because he had a price on his head, he had the papers to be able to go and he went directly to Portugal where he thought he might have a better chance. Because in Vichy, all the diplomats were gone and there was nobody to work on the papers.
>> Bill Benson: While you were in Toulouse, I believe French gendarmes took you to a detention camp.
>> Michel Margosis: Not quite. That was later on. Then we went to a farm. Friends that we had known from Ukraine. We stayed there for a little while. And then my mother decided -- she heard there had been diplomats maybe in Marseille.

Also, we were Persian by that time because when my father escaped from Siberia, he found refuge in Persia and he became a Persian citizen. So we were a little safer than being just Russian or whatever back then.
>> Bill Benson: And Persia, which we know is Iran today, your father had Persian citizenship and was trying to get to the Persian embassy, wasn't he, to get papers?
>> Michel Margosis: Yes.

So we went to Marseille. We kept hiding there. And just down from the railroad station, a little place I call the slums.
>> Bill Benson: Before you get to that, at what point did you end up in the detention camp?
>> Michel Margosis: That was later.
>> Bill Benson: That comes later. Ok. When did your father leave? He left before you.
>> Michel Margosis: He left in June 1940 before we got to Marseille.
>> Bill Benson: How did he get out?
>> Michel Margosis: He had the documents, he had his passports.
>> Bill Benson: But your mom did not. So he went.
>> Michel Margosis: And all the kids were on my mother's passport.
>> Bill Benson: And where did your father go?

>> Michel Margosis: He went to Portugal, Lisbon. We were in Marseille and we were hiding there, in the slums.
>> Bill Benson: Your time in Marseille, I know you've described to me that for you personally, as a young boy, that was a really important place and time for you. It forced you to grow up very quickly. Here under Marseille with your mom and your brother and sister and you, and as you said, you were moved into what was essentially the slums in Marseille. Tell us what that was like.
>> Michel Margosis: It was safe for us because the police did not want to go there. It was not safe for the police.
>> Bill Benson: It was that rough?
>> Michel Margosis: It was that rough. It was about as diverse as could be. We had Chinese across the yard from us, Corsicans, Italians, Arabs everything was there. And we were safe. I could communicate with all of them. By that time I had lost my Belgian accent and my Toulouse accent and I acquired the Marseille accent which was unique. So I was basically living as a Frenchman there.
>> Bill Benson: What was your living environment like? What were the circumstances in which you found yourselves living day to day?
>> Michel Margosis: It was a small room.
>> Bill Benson: With four of you in it.
>> Michel Margosis: With four of us in it. We had the coal stove which we cooked occasionally. I made friends with other kids, mostly with kids whose parents were involved with foods, like restaurant owners or chefs. Food became scarce. Everything was rationed. Everything from eggs to milk. It was in short demand. When the store had something to sell, people would still stand in line. Could not get milk or meat or whatever. So it was hard to get.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that your mother, in order to be able to feed her kids, to be able to pay the rent and do what she needed to do, had to get very creative and enter the black market.
>> Michel Margosis: Right.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about her black market skills.
>> Michel Margosis: Well, because our papers elapsed so we became basically undocumented aliens. And that means that we could not get ration coupons. So in order to survive, she went into the business called black marketing. The penalty was fatal if you were caught. That was it.
>> Bill Benson: Shot on the spot.
>> Michel Margosis: Well, I don't -- the slide with the noose and it said black market is a crime against community.

But she did pretty well. She was able to get things at a low price, relatively low price, and sell it for a better price. Things like cigarettes, candies, chocolates. Not so much necessities but luxury items.
>> Bill Benson: That she used to sell --
>> Michel Margosis: At a good price. She did pretty well.
>> Bill Benson: And you'll tell us more about that, I think in a little bit, about how well she did do.

Even though you didn't know this at the time, I believe your brother, Willy, was arrested during that time.
>> Michel Margosis: Willy, there was a parade of French who wanted to follow De Gaulle. De

Gaulle escaped through England to keep fighting for the French. And he was in the parade and he was arrested by the French police. But I guess they did not examine him too closely because he was released the next day. I didn't even know that.
>> Bill Benson: I'm not pronouncing this right but you described to me the authorities would set up these essentially people traps or raffles tell us about that.
>> Michel Margosis: Raffles were the police would seal both ends of the street and pick up everybody inside the street.
>> Bill Benson: So everybody's trapped in there.
>> Michel Margosis: Everybody's trapped. And if they cannot prove or justify their existence there, they would be taken away.
>> Bill Benson: And you escaped a couple of those.
>> Michel Margosis: I escaped several of them.
>> Bill Benson: How were you able to do that?
>> Michel Margosis: Well, the house was so connected that I was able to go from house-to-house until I got to a free street.
>> Bill Benson: So in other words, as you had said earlier, you sort of got to know the neighborhood and the folks and you knew all the nooks and crannies and were able to find your way out of these raffles.
>> Michel Margosis: But they also made friends with other kids who knew the area better.
>> Bill Benson: So follow them to get out.

You've hinted in the past. I think you know what's coming. I always ask you about some of what you called the nefarious activities you engaged in.
>> Michel Margosis: I had one particular friend who called himself cafe au lait. His father was from Cameroon, he was black. His mother was Danish. He was cafe au lait. And we did everything together. He taught me how to swim, how to skate, how to ride, how to steal. Stealing was important because we needed food. We went fishing. We did some spear fishing. That came in handy. We also had -- he had a little kayak that we were able to use and that enabled us to go along the coast and see what was going on. And some of the activities that ensued, I keep secret.
>> Bill Benson: Ok. Ok.
>> Michel Margosis: Even my kids don't know about that.
>> Bill Benson: Ok. Someday I'm going to pry them out of you.

At some point, even though you felt safe, hidden, in this area that the authorities wouldn't typically come into, your mother was able to allow you all to survive through her black market skills plus what you and your siblings did. But at some point your mother decided it was necessary to get out of Marseille; in fact, get out of France entirely and go to Spain.
>> Michel Margosis: Right. So we stayed there for two seasons. I used to go to my friend's house, Rafael. He lived by the forts. I used to spend my time in book shops around there. The beach, in the season, I used to go there every day. I did gymnastics, learned how to swim and everything.

Then in November 1942, the Allied Forces, the Americans mainly, invaded North Africa. When that happened, the German troops came down into Marseille. That was very scary. I was scared because the marching of the troops on the main drag, you saw the picture, was really scary. Those boots are really noisy, thunderous. I was really scared.
>> Bill Benson: So what had been unoccupied France now was fully occupied by the Germans.

>> Michel Margosis: Fully occupied by the troops. And my mother decided this is the time to get out of here. She was able to buy forged papers to be able to get out. My sister had had polio. And the paper said that she had to go to the mountains to get fresh air for her health. So we got out of the train as soon as we could. We had to connect to Toulouse to get to another train to go to the Spanish border. That train happened to be a German troupe train. I had no problems with my siblings because we talked but my mother could not speak French. She spoke Yiddish and Russian.
>> Bill Benson: So you're on the train with the German --
>> Michel Margosis: We were on the train with the soldiers sitting across from us with their weapons. And then my mother -- while we were talking, she thought maybe she didn't feel right about not saying anything so she started signing, as if she were deaf/mute.
>> Bill Benson: But faking it.
>> Michel Margosis: Feinting it. We caught on and we responded in kind. And we had no problem. We headed to the Spanish border. It was scary.
>> Bill Benson: I would think that was very scary.
>> Michel Margosis: We got to the border. We stopped at an inn. We had a nice meal. The food was better than we had before.

And then we were approached that same evening by two French gendarme, national police, offering to take us into Spain for a small fee. And the small fee was $10,000 per person, $40,000 in 1942. Imagine that. I think I looked it up recently about a year ago about how much it would be worth today. Too many zeros.
>> Bill Benson: Infinitely more.
>> Michel Margosis: My sister was the translator. She said, Why are we going to Spain, we're French? But eventually my mother relented. Took us over --
>> Bill Benson: So stop for just a moment. $40,000, an immense sum of money in that time. This takes us back to our conversation about your mother's black market skills.
>> Michel Margosis: Very profitable, rewarding.
>> Bill Benson: Very profitable. So she had made that kind of money black marketing.
>> Michel Margosis: Right.
>> Bill Benson: And that bought your opportunity to go.
>> Michel Margosis: Right.
>> Bill Benson: And I would think that the risk -- you didn't know these gendarmes were for real. You didn't know that they were really going to take you or did you?
>> Michel Margosis: Well, I found out later on that many of those gendarme would take the money and then betrayed them and turned them back either to the French police or the Germans. I don't remember any German police but the troops were there.
>> Bill Benson: So you were really lucky these guys honored that.
>> Michel Margosis: My brother-in-law encountered troops, police on the border. And I had heard from others who were betrayed.
>> Bill Benson: So you crossed the Pyrenees Mountains, into Spain.
>> Michel Margosis: We started at sundown. We took whatever we could, especially with energy food, sugars, candies, whatever, to sustain because November 1942 was still cold, even in Southern France, especially going up over mountains that scaled up over 7,000 feet.
>> Bill Benson: And I've read that there are very few easily passible routes over the Pyrenees. So trails and things like that you were following.
>> Michel Margosis: But we did a good job. We heard dogs and we heard some things but we

never encountered any untorrid --
>> Bill Benson: I have to bring this up. Essentially all you could take was what you could carry and it had to be relatively light --
>> Michel Margosis: Except --
>> Bill Benson: Except for something you brought with you.
>> Michel Margosis: As I mentioned, I used to go to book shops and things. I used to love to read. So I got myself a big French dictionary which I attached to my belt and walked over the mountains with it.
>> Bill Benson: A big dictionary. [Laughter]
>> Michel Margosis: I was crazy. What can I say?
>> Bill Benson: So fortunately you made it, the four of you got into Spain. Then what happens?
>> Michel Margosis: We were stopped at an inn, left to pay them, the gendarme, left. We slept through noon. The inn was closed. The chairs were stacked on top of the tables then we were advised to take two more Spanish guys to take us into the country, into the city. We got them. But instead of going through the woods, they decided to follow the railroad tracks. After all, that's the most direct way to get into town. But it's also the easiest way to be spotted. So we were in a very short time, within an hour or two. We were arrested. We were taken to another restaurant that fed us that evening and then sent everybody to jail. Mother, my brother another, and I was too young for jail so they sent me to an orphanage.
>> Bill Benson: So you're separated now.
>> Michel Margosis: We were separated. I was in that orphanage for several days, going to mass every morning at 6:00. And then at one time, took all the refugee kids. I was not the only one. He took us around town to tell us a little bit about Spanish history, the Province of Catalonia, where we were.

From there my brother was shipped to a concentration camp in Spain. The Spanish concentration camp from the Civil War. Spain had just experienced the Civil War just three years or so before that.
>> Bill Benson: And at this time Franco was still the dictator.
>> Michel Margosis: Franco was a dictator, a friend of Hitler and Mussolini. And had recently opened the borders to refugees so we were able to get in. At one time they were sent back to France but we were able to stay in.
>> Bill Benson: When did your mother and sister get released and when were you reunited with your mother and sister?
>> Michel Margosis: I don't remember just how long. Two, three, four weeks. I don't know. Then the American rescue service helped us, mainly the joint committee. The Jewish American service. We were released. We were sent to another town, which was an old Roman bath town that set up several hotels for refugees and provided everything there.
>> Bill Benson: And Spain, even though Franco was a friend of Hitler and Mussolini, it was a neutral country.
>> Michel Margosis: It was theoretically a neutral country.
>> Bill Benson: Theoretically, yeah.
>> Michel Margosis: We were there for a while. The food was pretty good. But also, the Province of Catalonia was the one that resisted Franco most and he took his revenge on the Province. Still resounds today when we talk about wanting to separate.
>> Bill Benson: Interesting. And your mother, of course, still wanted to get -- needed to get proper documentation.

>> Michel Margosis: Well, she wasn't too worried at the time. We were, of course, illegal immigrants. But the joint committee helped refugees in Spain.
>> Bill Benson: Did she still try to get in touch with Persian authorities?
>> Michel Margosis: I don't know but I did. I got in touch with the British embassy, because Persia was British protectorates came to visit one time and left me a few currency and that's it. Said they can't do anything for me.
>> Bill Benson: I was struck by an image you shared with me in Barcelona of the U.S. Embassy side-by-side with the German Embassy, with the star and stripes flying.
>> Michel Margosis: From that place we were sent to Barcelona to live there with families and they would subsidize us. But as I walked around -- Barcelona is the biggest city in Spain. I was struck -- I don't know about the word struck but having the German consulate right next to the American Consulate.
>> Bill Benson: With the swastika flag flying.
>> Michel Margosis: Both flags flying next to each other practically. At that time I was not too interested in that. I wished to go mainly to the British consulate because it was more open to us. Of course we listened to Churchill's speeches to fight on.
>> Bill Benson: Your mother was able to make arrangements for you to leave.
>> Michel Margosis: My mother heard they were trying to save children. By that time, way before that, 1939, Britain had a program to save children with the Kindertransports 10,000 children, 10,000 children from Germany and Austria, were able to go to Great Britain. But here the American government did not allow any refugees practically. Immigration was closed. Well, America was still in the depression in a way and refugees were not welcome. They were afraid of jobs to be taken with a or whatever. This agency tried to save children. Eventually they were able to save about 1,600 kids. My mother signed me up. We had to be under 16.
>> Bill Benson: Which meant that your brother and sister --
>> Michel Margosis: My brother and sister did not qualify. My mother was three years older, my sister four years older. So she signed me up. We said goodbye. I don't remember crying but I must have been. The train picked up a few more kids in Madrid. And from Madrid we went on to Portugal.
>> Bill Benson: Do you remember saying goodbye to your mother, brother and sister?
>> Michel Margosis: Yes. That was a pretty sad day.
>> Bill Benson: I bet that was a really sad day.
>> Michel Margosis: We never knew whether we would see each other again. My sister had fallen in love with somebody she had met in Marseille who came from Palestine and he wanted to go back. He made his way to Spain also. And she again saw him in Spain.

So when I went to Portugal, my father greeted me when I got off the train. He said, Gee, now you are a man. And he offered me a cigarette. I was 14.
>> Bill Benson: You're a man now.
>> Michel Margosis: In our religion 13 is when we become men. And I stayed with him for a few days he was allowed to do that. Because he was -- refugees in Portugal were sent to a small town a little north of Lisbon. He was able to come to Lisbon to meet me and stay with him until I had to leave.
>> Bill Benson: So when you left, you were saying yet another goodbye, this time to your father.
>> Michel Margosis: Yeah. I also brought some things that my mother had baked.
>> Bill Benson: For your dad?

>> Michel Margosis: To give to my dad. Cookies. I used to say those cookies if they fell on your toes would probably break them. But it was very good. But when my father opened the box, he kissed each cookie first.
>> Bill Benson: I wanted to ask you, when your father left France and your siblings and your mom were in Marseille, were they in contact with each other?
>> Michel Margosis: We corresponded.
>> Bill Benson: You were able to do that.
>> Michel Margosis: A lot of letters were blacked out. The censor was very effective. Blacked out anything that revealed anything. But we kept in touch. We knew where he was.
>> Bill Benson: So now you're about to leave Portugal and come to the United States. You said goodbye to your father. We're in the middle of war. There was risks involved in taking a ship to the United States. Tell us about that trip.
>> Michel Margosis: It was a Portuguese ship, neutral. And I think it was respected by both sides. From Lisbon we went to Oporto to pick up a load of cork which was exported from Portugal, and wine, and we went on to Azores. We made a stop. From there we went on to Philadelphia. But on the way, we made a stop. I didn't know why? We were told to stay below because the stop was made by a U-Boat. A German submarine stopped us. For an hour or so we were delayed but then it went on. And the only thing that I learned after that, I was told, is that one of the cooks had disappeared. And that was it.
>> Bill Benson: But you don't know anything more about it. So the submarine then takes off and leaves.
>> Michel Margosis: I assume so.
>> Bill Benson: So you make it to the U.S.
>> Michel Margosis: We made it to Philadelphia. And then I see all of these airplanes and nettings. I didn't think it was to greet us refugees. It was wartime. We were immediately put on the train. And the train went directly from Philadelphia to a place called the Bronx. The Bronx? Never heard of it. Later on I heard about the Bronx bombers, and there was Jerry Lewis. But otherwise, then I and out there was also a place that played baseball.
>> Bill Benson: One of the other things that you had hung on to besides your dictionary was a stamp collection. That was important to you. When you got to Philadelphia, what happened to your stamp collection?
>> Michel Margosis: Oh, the customs confiscated it.
>> Bill Benson: After you carried it with you all of that time.
>> Michel Margosis: Well, I didn't even think about it. But they confiscated it. I think it was returned to me about four years later. Maybe every stamp was examined under a microscope.
>> Bill Benson: Why was it confiscated, do you think? Do you have any idea?
>> Michel Margosis: Later through the movies I found out many secrets were transmitted through stamps so I assumed this was checked. Even 14-year-olds can be spies, I guess. I don't know.
>> Bill Benson: So you're now safely in the United States. Where do you end up?
>> Michel Margosis: In the Bronx.
>> Bill Benson: In the Bronx, I know, but living where?
>> Michel Margosis: In the Bronx, I had a cousin. My father had an uncle in New York. A cousin came to visit me and wanted to impress me with the new country that I came to. She was 25 years -- 25 days older than my sister. She came with a big brimmed straw hat and a big French-English dictionary. She took me to a place called Radio City Music Hall. She

wanted to impress me. She said this is America. Well, the Rockettes were nice but it was just another show. And then she started trying to communicate with me. She would page through the dictionary, point to a word and say, right here. Eventually she said, "Do you speak Yiddish?" And I said no.

At home we spoke Russian. The diversity in my family is that my parents were born in Russia, my siblings in Persia, I was born in Belgium. My parents spoke Yiddish to each other, Russian to the kids, and we kids spoke French.

>> [Laughter]

>> Michel Margosis: So that's diversity.

>> Bill Benson: How quickly did you learn English?

>> Michel Margosis: I'll come to that. But then I said I know enough Yiddish to be able to understand. Because after living with my parents for so many years, you pick up a few things.

So she puts the dictionary aside.

>> Bill Benson: Now you can communicate.

>> Michel Margosis: Yeah. And then a few days later I went to live with them. And that was for a few months until they could not afford me. And they turned me over to the foster system in New York and I became a foster child. That September they took me to high school.

>> Bill Benson: While in the foster system.

>> Michel Margosis: I was still -- no, that was when -- just before. That was just for my birthday, 1943. I was 15. I started high school. I didn't know a word of English. I think I got 59 on my term, my grade, passing grade was 65. But they passed me anyways. The second term I was reading Shakespeare. "Midsummer Night's Dream". I made it through high school in three and a half years with honors.

>> Bill Benson: With honors.

>> Michel Margosis: That put me in French 5 because that's where I learned most of my English. And I went on.

>> Bill Benson: Our time is getting close to the end and there's a few mores things I'd like to ask you and I think we'd to see if our audience has a few questions. Tell us about your reunion with your parents and your siblings.

>> Michel Margosis: To the day the war started in Belgium, May 10, and six years later, May 10, 1946, my parents landed in Philadelphia. After I left, my sister went to Palestine to follow her boyfriend and my brother was to accompany him as a chaperon in a way so he also went to Palestine. My mother got more papers to go to Portugal and reunite with her husband. And they finally got the quota system approved and came here in 1946.

I went to Philadelphia sometime before their ship came and waited and waited. And finally went to a movie. I saw "Anna and the King of Siam." I remember that. And then I went to the ship and I climbed on the ship and a big reunion.

>> Bill Benson: What was that reunion like?

>> Michel Margosis: Heartwarming. It was wonderful. I recognized them. We had a big thing. It's hard to describe.

>> Bill Benson: A couple of other things I want to ask you. Because of your work with the museum reviewing documents pertaining to Belgium and Marseille and through additional investigation that you've done over the years, you've learned about two horrible events that occurred just after you left, one in Brussels and one in Marseille, right after you left. Tell us about those.

>> Michel Margosis: In May 1940, after we left --

>> Bill Benson: After you left.
>> Michel Margosis: On my birthday that same year, my neighborhood was completely wiped out of Jews. They went through it, the troops went through, and picked up all the Jews, shipped them out to concentration camps 1942, after we left Marseille, within I think a couple of months, that neighborhood where my friend lived --
>> Bill Benson: Rafael?
>> Michel Margosis: Rafael. That neighborhood was completely blown up.
>> Bill Benson: The Germans blew it up.
>> Michel Margosis: I think it was the Germans with the help from the French. The French -- it was not the police. It was security. They picked up all the inhabitants there. They went through and checked. Anybody who didn't have the proper documents was shipped out or executed.
>> Bill Benson: And that was, again, right after you left.
>> Michel Margosis: Right after I left.
>> Bill Benson: My last question before we turn to our audience. Several years ago after you were with us on a *First Person* program, in the audience was a local poet, and she wrote a poem after hearing you in this program. She wrote a poem that was a tribute to your mother and named it "Lokshen." Tell us about the significance of the title.
>> Michel Margosis: My mother playing such a key role in all of that she asked a permission to write a poem. And lokshen -- black marketing was also very important in selling currency, American currency that had very high value. And instead of calling it dollars, they called it lokshen. And that's what saved us.
>> Bill Benson: And she wrote that poem as a tribute.
>> Michel Margosis: Which eventually came into a book about women of valor who were important.
>> Bill Benson: Oh, I didn't know that.
>> Michel Margosis: I have it with me.
>> Bill Benson: Let's do this. We have a little bit of time to turn to our audience and ask if you have some questions you'd like to ask Michel. We have microphones in the aisles. We do ask that you go to the microphone to ask your question.

I see one brave soul already go. Ahead to the mic if you don't mind.

I'm going to ask you to make your question as brief as you can. I'll try to do my best to repeat it so that we make sure we all hear it correctly before Michel responds to it.

So please.

>> Did you ever think about changing your religion to get out of going through the Holocaust?
>> Bill Benson: Did you ever think about changing your religion to get out of what you were going through?
>> Michel Margosis: I never thought much about religion in the first place. I had to be dragged to go to services on high holy days and during my stay in Marseille I never talked to anybody about my religion. And I never thought about that being a factor.
>> Bill Benson: Do you think your mother may have thought about it at any point?
>> Michel Margosis: No. My father made a point of it when he came here. I never thought about it.
>> Bill Benson: Ok. Thank you.
>> What was the hardest part that you had -- about escaping to America?
>> Bill Benson: What was the hardest part for you when you think about all you went through to escape and then come to the United States? What was hardest for you?

>> Michel Margosis: That's a difficult question. The whole period, the whole experience was one long misery of sorts. I don't know that there was any -- I think probably the scariest moment I think when facing the German troops on the train. That was about as bad as could be.
>> Bill Benson: With your mother pretending to use sign language to communicate.
>> Michel Margosis: Right.
>> Bill Benson: Incidentally, Michel has made a long list of all of his close calls in life and it's really remarkable. That's certainly on that list.

We'll take these two questions and then we'll close our program. And I ask you all to stay until the very end because Michel will talk to us for a couple of moments at the end of the program.
>> Do you still have your French dictionary that you carried?
>> Bill Benson: Do you still have your French dictionary that you carried with you?
>> Michel Margosis: Actually, no. I think my brother found it before I lost it.
>> [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: Ok. [Laughter] Great question. Thank you.

Yes?
>> What was your thought process coming into America?
>> Bill Benson: What was your thought process coming to America? Yeah, so what was your thoughts when you came to America? What was your reaction?
>> Michel Margosis: Well, I got acquainted with cold cereals which I never had before. Hotdogs. I had new shoes.
>> [Off mic]
>> Bill Benson: What was your thought process? What were you thinking? What were you feeling when you got here?
>> Michel Margosis: It was a new experience. I was trying to enjoy it. After all, I could eat anything I wanted at this point if I could find it.
>> Bill Benson: Was it, along those lines, though --
>> Michel Margosis: I wasn't worried anymore.
>> Bill Benson: You weren't worried anymore. All right.
>> Michel Margosis: School was a new experience. Learning English, my fifth language. I don't know.
>> Bill Benson: Did you have worries that the rest of your parents might not make it here or were you pretty confident about that?
>> Michel Margosis: Oh, I was confident. I used to contact the Persian embassy all the time and push my cousins to get on it. We had affidavits drawn in the mid '30s, so I pushed everybody.
>> Bill Benson: And again, you're just a youngster doing that.
>> Michel Margosis: Yeah. At 14 I had to make all the decisions about going to school, doing that, doing this. I had nothing else to do except survive.
>> Bill Benson: We're going to -- I'm going to turn back to Michel to close our program in a moment. I want to thank all of you for being with us. I remind you we will have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We hope you can come back. But all of our programs, including today's, will end up on the museum's YouTube page so you can see our other programs. And we urge you do that.

When Michel finishes, our photographer, Joel, is going to come up on the stage and

take a picture of Michel with you as the background. So we want you here for that because that's a nice memento for Michel. And then others may have questions that we didn't get to. We invite you, when Michel finishes, to come up on the stage. Please feel free to do that. Get your picture taken with Michel, say hi, ask the question on your mind if you have one. So please know that we really do encourage you do that.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. So on that note, I turn to Michel to close our program.

>> Michel Margosis: In as much as my memory doesn't help me too much anymore, I put it on paper so I could read it.

I came to this country in June 1943 when Europe was engulfed in the global conflagration just a couple of weeks before the invasion of Sicily. I also remember that just weeks later a race riot blazed in Holland. That was also the time when Jews were not really tolerated in America. Still, I recall my father three years later stepping off the ship, kneeling and kissing the ground, thus embracing America. He had waited at least 10 years before reaching his Shangri-la.

Despite restrictive immigration laws, my whole family was ultimately reunited after long, bitter 13 years. Yet, I also know that many Nazis were allowed here, too. The allies achieved victory. Concentration camps inmates were liberated and tried to return to their homes, though thousands of Jewish survivors could not consider themselves free. A great many were not welcomed back as they were robbed of land and properties by their friendly neighbors who in many cases, had betrayed them. It took another 12 years to resettle these refugees. Although that was many distant years ago yet is still etched in my mind.

No matter how much we try, we cannot banish the misery, suffering, despair, depravation and hunger from my memory bank. We have made great strides and achieved much in our country since World War II. But the discrimination, bigotry, intolerance and hate had been smoldering and has actually been reignited by greedy, racist nationalists, political Neanderthals such as those anti-Semites who strutted and torched the parade in nearby Charlottesville last August shouting Jews will not replace us.

Today the world stage is dreadfully reminiscent of the prewar days. While important partisan politicians are squabbling, administrations are globally revising historical truths while genocidal, racial, and ethnic conflict have reawakened. Seemingly the persevering media and valiant young electorate are brave enough to come to the fore to be the real defenders of democracy today.

I firmly believe the adherence to the constitution and the firm separation of powers with love will realign our path. We must embrace and support diversity, education and truth for I believe that freedom cannot exist without real truth.

In contrast to the politician, I am bound as a scientist to accept the truth as it smacks me in the face. "God Bless America" was composed by Irving Berlin, a Jew, an immigrant, a refugee from the Russian empire, just like my father. That to me, makes America truly great. This nation became a world leader mainly because of its moral values and innovative science and technology that you can embrace without fear. Keep learning about the issues troubling it and what truly makes your country great. Know your rights and use them judiciously. And most importantly, vote. But please, vote for the right people.

>> [Applause]