

Raymond Federman

[Good evening. My name is Toby Tickin Back and I'm the Director of the Holocaust Resource Center. This evening our guest is Professor Raymond Federman. I'll call you Ray.]

Right.

[Yes. Will you please tell us your story? Start with your childhood.]

The whole thing?

[As much as you can remember.]

Let me, let me start with my family.

[Please.]

I was born in Paris, France, but two sisters, one older than me, two years older. One younger.

Sarah was the oldest, Jacqueline the youngest.

[We have a picture so we could – ]

Yeah.

[-- illustrate that right now, of your siblings. You want to tell us when that was taken?]

And that's the oldest one, the tallest one is Sarah. I suppose this picture was taken around 1935.

She must have been 9 years old. Jacqueline must have been 6, and I was 7 years old, give or take a year. Both my sisters were deported and died at Auschwitz. Let me tell you a bit about my parents, and then bring the whole thing together.

[Please.]

1:28 My father was born in Poland in a town called Siedlec. S-I-E-D-L-E-C. It's a, I tried to go there incidentally. I visited Poland in 1981, and when I came there, they told me that's all is left. There was nothing. They had to rebuild the whole town. It looked like an an army camp, with these barracks.

[It must have been a small place.]

Yeah, it was a small place. I thought if I got there and look in the archives, but they told me everything had been destroyed.

[No archives.]

But probably came from, you know, a middle-class Jewish family. I think you have a picture of that, which you, which you can show.

[Yes, we have a picture of your family that we can show right now. Do you want to show us where your – ]

Yeah, my father is the the, right at the middle of it, the center one, tall one.

[At the back.]

I don't know how old he is there. He must be approximately 20 years old. That's one of the few pictures I have left. I don't know all the others. Only the the one man to the right, my right, is my father's left, is an uncle who also lived in Paris, who was deported. And the uncle sitting down, the man with the glasses, next to the woman with the child on her lap, his name is Nymack, David Nymark. Was a brother-in-law of my father. He is the uncle who brought me to America. When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, he he was a journalist and he was in Russia, doing some sort of reportage and then was locked out of Poland, literally, and his wife –

[fortunately]

– his wife and two sons were deported and died, but he had a very interesting life. From there he went to China and he ended up for a few years in Shanghai, then to Tokyo, and eventually to Canada and then to New York where he was working for the *Jewish Daily Forward* as one of the editors. And he was a prominent political writer. And, in in fact, they are trying now to publish a volume of his political writings. He was a member of the International Bund –

[Okay, sure]

– the world Socialist movement, etc. But that's a digression. Anyway, my father came to France probably, I mean, the dates I'm not sure, around, right after World War I, around 1918, 1919.

Yeah, he was 17 years old.

[As a single person?]

As a single person. The grandparents stayed in in Poland. But some of his brothers and sisters also came to France. But he he came with a friend on his way to America. This I learned much later. But he was then already leaning toward becoming an artist. He was a painter.

[Your father?]

Yeah. He has already studied in Poland and I suppose found in Paris the perfect media for an artist. So while his friend left for America and became very rich in America – I met this friend in the Bronx years ago. He owns a shoe factory. His name is Berkovitch – my father stayed in Paris and became a starving artist.

[Oh.]

And soon after that married my mother.

[You want to tell us something about your your mother's side of the family?]

Yeah, so then you can show the picture, the picture.

[Yes, sure.]

On my mother's side, this is even a stranger story. The grandparents – I only knew the grandmother, who died during the war a natural death, or just soon after the war. Originally my grandparents on my mother's side lived in what is now known as Israel but was then known as Palestine.

[Oh in the 1800s.]

In the 1900s. Three of their children, the first three children, were born there. I always imagine them living in tents, you know, going through.

[Maybe, perhaps.]

Perhaps that is why I love the desert. When I went to Israel, I fell in love with the desert. I thought I was a real nomad. They left there, well, must be 1890, around there, for Poland.

[Oh.]

Can you believe, the reverse trip.

[It's, it's the reverse.]

No one makes that trip. Settled in Poland where three more children were born. So that, you know, five, six years, I don't know, and then came to France. And my mother was the first one to be born in France, in Paris, in 1901. And then there were two more.

[So they had nine children.]

They had nine children: three born in Palestine, three born in in Poland.

[That is strange.]

And here is a picture of my father and mother. I think it is soon or when they got married, or one of those pictures you take.

[Now your, how did they meet, your mother and father?]

This too is unclear to me. There is a lot of gaps in my early years. It may have been a sort of pre-arranged or an arranged marriage, as often happens in Jewish family. My grandfather on my mother's side died of pneumonia in 1910. This I know because the story was told.

[So there were a lot of children.]

In 1910 there was a, quite a devastating inundation in Paris. It happens every 50 years where the Seine overflows. And he was going to work, and he – I think he was a shoe repairman and caught pneumonia and and died soon after and –

[And left his wife with nine children.]

With nine children. The youngest was 6 months old. So she –

[How did she manage?]

She put 5 of them in orphanage. My mother was one of those. And so my mother was raised. I don't know, in 1910 she was 9 years old and she stayed in that orphanage until the age of, I think, 18. So, yeah, she stayed 9 years in that orphanage. And I think when they let them out, they start looking for husbands for –

[Oh, and then that's when our father surfaced.]

It's something like that. They don't just release them into – they look for work and, or for, and –

[ – and the, and security.]

And I wouldn't be surprised even if the orphanage may have given a small dowry or something.

The orphanage, by the way, was called Rothschild. It was subventioned by the Rothschild family.

[Is it still existing?]

I think, yeah, it still exists in in –

[In Paris?]

In Paris. I have never went there. I should have gone.

[Interesting.]

Yeah.

[So tell us a little bit about your childhood.]

Not a very happy one that I can remember. Let me say this. I was born May 15, 1928, but I consider July 16, 1942, to be the real beginning of my life, and I explain that later why, that July 16th. That fatal bleak day of July 16th. And it seems that everything I know from the 14 years that precede that day is all mixed up, all blurred. And much of the information I don't know, I have gathered from other people. My wife keeps saying to me that's because your parents were not there to keep telling you the stories.

[Perhaps.]

I suppose that that we don't really remember what childhood is, remember for us –

[-- others, through others –]

– by the parents to show us “look at how cute you were in this photograph and such.” I didn't have that. Anyway, I was an orphan at 14. It may be that. And and part of it I may have blocked. But the things that I really remember, we were very poor. Extremely poor.

[Your father was a struggling artist.]

He he was a painter and I mean he spent his time with artists in Montparnasse, and on top of that he was also a gambler.

[That didn't help with the nonexistent money.]

Whatever money he made, he gambled away playing cards or at the race track. And on top of that he became extremely sick soon after he came to France –

[Sick.]

— with tuberculosis.

[Oh.]

He had, one of his lungs was removed.

[Oh dear.]

I don't know whether – those days – the word stays with me – they used it call it a pneumothorax, in French, and what they did, they put a balloon literally in his chest, and once a week he had to go and have oxygen pumped into it with a needle. And by the end of the week, when the oxygen was there – we'd, we all lived in one room apartment – his breathing became like a whistle. So, you could hear it. Oh it was –

[Oh, so you remember that.]

Oh yes. I remember that at night, it, and we knew that this soon he'd have to go get his, his oxygen.

[It was the end of the week.]

He was a man who really suffered I think physically and intellectually because he never achieved what he wanted to do. He died too young. None of his paintings survived except for a few. And this is also a lovely story. Digression. They are in Argentina and in Brazil. Two cousins of my father left Poland and went to Brazil. When, I don't know. One day, 1958, in Paris, the first time I went back, I was staying in a little hotel and a young woman about my age, blond, didn't speak French – spoke Spanish and a little Yiddish – oh, she spoken English too, by translating, and so, and she wrote her name and she wrote the name Mandelzweig, who is, which is one of my father's sisters married. So we started talking, and it turns out she's related.

[Oh my.]

Her father is a famous reisendeder [trans. traveler], a famous painter. And when I tell her [she] said, “Of course, my father as some of your father's paintings.”

[Oh, have you gotten them back?]

I lost track. I lost touch with this poor girl. She was a bit crazy. She was a strange woman. And she was trying to arrange a show for her father who had died in Mexico City of a heart attack in

the middle of a huge show. I have some - she did send me some – the catalog of her father's work, but I don't know where the other paintings are. But anyway.

[It's worth a trip to Argentina.]

I will go soon. And all of my father's work, whatever existed, you know, was stolen or with everything else. I mean, when I got back after the war, in our apartment, it was totally empty for a couple minor things. But I'm jumping ahead.

[Oh there are so many stories. It's understandable.]

So but with his sickness, with his gambling, with his, and and more important, politics. My father was a fanatic Trotskyite, and spent, I think, most of his time in cafes arguing. And he spoke seven languages, you know, like all the Eastern European. Arguing in English, in Hungarian, in Russian and Yiddish and I admit, he was always, my mother, she'd send me to those cafes, "Go get your father" and was there arguing in all these languages. And I think that's his his great obsession. And I found out later, after all they, my parents and sisters were deported, and I tried to document myself, that my father had never managed to become a French citizen. They had refused to give him the French citizenship for political reasons.

[Oh for, oh so when you wanted to get reparations, you you couldn't.]

I couldn't. They said go to Poland.

[But you're naturalized. You were – ]

It didn't matter. It was then. He he was not eligible because he was not a Frenchman.

[And –]

And when my mother married him, though she was born in France and was French, she lost her citizenship.

[That doesn't seem fair.]

The French, oh but the French have such intricate subtle laws to protect la patrie [trans. the homeland]. You know, they -

[Have you inherited any of these tendencies? Politics, art, well, English writing is art. ]

I've done my political activism, including some in Buffalo. You don't remember The Buffalo 45?

[Oh yes, oh yes.]

I was one of the Buffalo 45.

[45. All right, but -]

These were the good old days, but we'll skip that.

[All right. We should get on to the stories. So your life is rather vague, your childhood.]

But in fact they, this is also the period of the the Depression. You know my mother –

[In the 30s.]

– with shame used to take us to what was then called the soupe populaire [trans. soup kitchen].

We used to, we used to – this is me approximately 12-13 years old. Just before, I mean it's already during the war.

[You look very serious.]

Yeah.

[This is –]

You think I look like I could become a famous writer someday?

[Absolutely. Why not? I hope you don't have that hungry look. As you say, you went to the soup kitchen. So, your father didn't provide very much.]

No.

[So I guess there must have been tension at home, in this one room.]

There was some tension. We lived in that one room. There was a curtain that separated my parents' bed from the rest.

[Were you close to any of the relatives?].

On my father's side, yes. You know, you know in France, Thursday you don't go to schools. So every Thursday you would go visit Tan Basha, Tanta, whatever, you you would go. There was always a family gathering. Oh and on my mother's side too, though my mother's side, we never went with my father. They hated him.

[Because he didn't provide for the family?]

They called him a lazy, a bum, crazy, irresponsible, you name it. So, he would never go to on my mother's side. So this was, it's, it's kind of a, you know.

[You hear about this in families.]

Let me jump to July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

[When you realized maturity.]

Well, you know what happened in in France. No, you have one document that is important, 1941.

[So we, we could show that now if you'd like. As soon as – this is it. Would you like to explain that?]

So, as soon as, as soon as the Germans settle in France, you know, and divided France between the occupied and not occupied zone, Jew, Jewish people had to declare themselves. They had to go to wherever. You had to go to the city hall and declare, "I am Jewish" and therefore wear a star.

[Well, you have the star. Maybe you want to show the star.]

And you you you were not allowed to go into public places. This is the Jewish star that I was wearing. Can you get a shot of that?

[Right, there's the star. It's on the screen.]

This is the star that I wear. I took that off one of my coats. We were not allowed to go to public swimming pool, libraries, movies, and so on and so on.

Well, we lived just outside of Paris, in a suburb, 10 minutes from the city, communes [tran. commune] Rouge. And my father thought, "Nobody knows. We won't declare ourselves" but some neighbors in the same building denounced us. And my father was arrested, not serious. He was not deported. They they kept him overnight, and he came back the next day. And the, then the next day, we all had to wear stars. And the paper, this document, there is the one that calls him and that he had to go to court. And this is to go to to the court and to officially declare his estate, to translate from the French, their quality of Jewishness and their and their and their wealth, their possessions. And I remember the next day, the first day I had to go to school with this yellow scar, star on my thing. My mother had devised this nice little principle. We were all gonna wear this long scarf, which we would sort of let hang loose above the scar, the star, but that didn't help very much.

[No, people saw it nevertheless.]

No. My best friend, best friend, Fran, I was on a swimming team then at the time, approached me and said, "My mother said I shouldn't play with you anymore" because they saw the star.

[" . . . because you're Jewish."]

There were the little things that -

[- you remember though.]

Oh yeah. July 16, 1942. It's known in French as "le jour de grand rafle." Rafle is the great round-up.

[Yeah.]

That's when they they arrested all the Jews in Paris. I think altogether about 80,000 French Jews were deported and died. But that day, the July 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, it went on for about 2 days, they must have picked up I think 12,000, something like that, and these were the people. It's interesting, this I found that in this, the Klarsfeld book, were, were called "stateless." That is, not French citizens. Those who were not French. You see my father being non-citizen, that was one of those, see, these were the people that.

[Right. They were the first ones.]

And then after that, they picked up the French citizens, Jewish French citizens. At 5:30 in the morning, the French police and the German Gestapo came, but the Germans would stay downstairs. We had a little courtyard, and I, they they were down there. And there was three French police who came up, and as they came up the stairs, making noise, and already asking, and some neighbors already opened the door and we could hear, "Federman, troisieme etage [trans. third floor], third floor, up there." My mother quickly grabbed my shorts, a pair of boys shorts, a shirt, no shoes, she forgot, shoved them under my arm and pushed me into a little closet that was right outside the door to our apartment, on the landing. See there were two doors, two apartments, apartments, one room with a kitchen there, and a closet that was outside. She put me in this closet. And the police came and called the name. My father, my mother, the two said my name, and I heard my mother said, in French of course, "Oh, la campagne [trans. the country] he's in the country." They didn't question, they didn't ask, and they left. That's the last time I saw my parents and sisters.

[You must have been very frightened.]

Well people say that. I'm not sure what I was. I mean, yes, a little there was fear. But there was incomprehension; I think is the word.

[Didn't quite know what was happening because they, perhaps they might have come back the next day.]

I was suffering of incomprehension. Not that was not a physical pain and a little fear because I was alone, and I, and these people downstairs. I mean we knew that these were the people who had said "ca Juif" [that Jew]. You know, I was afraid of them. So, I stayed in that closet from 5:30 in the morning until –

[And there were no other Jews in the building?]

My – on the second floor, it was a 3-story building but quite wide, so with apartments on each side – my mother's sister lived there, but they had left three days earlier.

[Why didn't you go with them?]

You know, there were, there were good French people and there were bad French people, and there were some French people they knew. I mean, this preparations for this round-up was known, and someone – my uncle was a tailor, a very good tailor, and all his clients were from the neighborhood, and some come and, "if you were smart, you, you'd leave." And then my aunt came, I remember that very clearly, and told my mother, "Look if you want to come, you and the children, but not, not the lazy bum of yours." My mother says, "I'm not leaving my husband behind. I'm staying here with him." They left. They survived. They went south.

[They survived?]

Oh yeah. They all survived. Now, they are, well, she's dead now, all of them, but they felt very guilty for a long time.

[So you have cousins from that family still alive?]

The cousins are still alive. The cousins I'm still . . . I tell you how they satisfied their guilt.

When every time I went back to France, first time I went back after I came to America, in '58, and then we were there in '63, for a year I had a Guggenheim Fellowship, and we'd, we'd go often, I would go visit them like that, and my aunt Mary, Mary, would say, "Why don't you go to the cemetery? We have a family plot and you'll see that on this stone we have inscribed the name of your mother and sisters." Not my father's name.

[Oh.]

And what they buried there was their guilt. I refused. I kept saying to them, "There's nothing there. There's nobody there." And I refused to go there. It bothered them, but, but that's their guilt. The place where I think is the real, this this place, that this is where I think my parents, in Israel, when I found this memorial to, can you get a shot of, I think yeah, *The Memorial to the French Jews*.

[This is Serge Klarsfeld's book.]

This is the book by Klarsfeld, the French, and and at least all the names of the 80,000 Jews who have –

[80,000 names, you have, you have the names of your family?]

And in there, when I was in Israel in 1982, '83, by pure chance, we were driving around and we came upon this memorial, and with all these names inscribed and there I found the name of my mother, sisters, and father. And the date when they were deported and when, and when they died, and in fact, here you have, this document is one of the four documents in here, which is convoy number 21 in August 19, 1942 is a convoy of when my two sisters left for Auschwitz, and if you pull it up, I bet you will see the name of my two sisters down below. Sarah 15 and

Jacqueline 13 in 1942, August, were deported to, left. In this train, they even give the number of the car, I mean, the number, the name of the kids.

[It's so efficient, the Germans. Do you want to tell us what it said on the other page, while you're talking about – ]

Yeah. While we're talking about this.

[And then we'll get back to you at age 14.]

The, this book, I, right there at this memorial there was an address and a phone number in Paris.

So when I got to Paris, I, I called –

[You called.]

– and they send me this book. It's a document that I, I think I should have. And in this convoy, my my, then, I I I will give you this too because that's interesting. My mother was the first one. They were all arrested the the same date but I wrote it down July 16, and they were, I suppose in Drancy or Pithiviers or wherever they kept them, and my mother left on a convoy 14 on August 3rd. She was the first one to go to Auschwitz. My sister left on convoy 21 on the 19, and my father left August 28, convoy the 25.

[So your family was separated in – ]

Yeah, immediately. And he was there a month and a half. I don't know why. I remember he was very sick and I suspect my father must have died before he even arrived there, I mean, if he was not treated. But for each of these documents, they list the people and at the end of the documents, and I'm translated, I'm translating from the French, "at the arrival at Auschwitz, 138 men were left alive and were given the number, and they give 60,471 to – in this convoy, there were 151 mens from the age of 20 to 45. Forty-five women were kept alive and were given the

numbers 17,875 to 17,919. The rest of the convoy, 817 people, including all the children, were immediately gassed. To our knowledge - “

[Well, they never even had a chance.]

– “To our knowledge, 5 people survived from this convoy.” And this is a whole book. It's it's a scary book.

[Sure.]

But I thought I should have it.

[All right. So you were left in the closet. Let's hear what happened.]

I'm left in the closet July 16th. Inside the closet, I'm feeling my way in the darkness because people are going up and down the stairs. They're even coming up to our apartment to, all these things, but, so I'm scared to come out. So, I'm feeling the wall. I found there were clothes hanging from the wall and a stack of newspaper and behind the newspaper I found a box of sugar cubes. You know, this is the days of the black market.

[Yeah, that's contraband.]

This is where my parents were hiding the box. So I sat and ate pieces of sugars. By mid-afternoon, it was hot. Remember this is July. I'm sweating in there. At one point, I open the door a little bit just to get a little air. I had to go to the bathroom. This is very important in my life.

[Sure. How do you manage that?]

I had to go to the bathroom so I, I feel ashamed to do that, but I open a newspaper and I took a crap on a the newspaper.

[Right.]

And I wrapped it up nice and neatly and left it by the door, and when later, when it got dark, I left this closet. There was, we were on the top floor, but there was a little stair that went up to a skylight, and I carried my little package. I felt the warmth there, and I opened it, and put on the roof. In 1945, when I came back to Paris –

[You looked for that package.]

– after the war, that's the first place I went. I wanted to know my package because I think inside this package was a great deal of symbolism that I've not understood yet. This book –

[This is food for therapy.]

This book which I've, one of my novels. It's a strange one.

[*The Voice in the Closet.*]

Called *The Voice in the Closet*. In French, *La Voix dans le Cabinet*. Cause I, it had to be written in two languages. The experience was in French; the telling is in English. This is the idea.

[Is it a parallel? Does it –]

Well, it's overlapping.

[It overlaps.]

It's an overlapping technique. It relates to all the closet, what I call the closet moment.

[The voice in the closet.]

And it makes a great deal of this package of excrement which contained the symbol of my survival I think.

[Yes, yes.]

Anyway, that's the kind of metaphors I, I can deal with. The rest of that day or the next day are amazing moments in my life. And I suppose that this is where much of my writing is fed from.

I left this closet in the middle of the night, quietly walked down the stairs but the stairs were creaking and I was scared but nobody opened anything and I ran outside. I had enough presence of mind to remove the yellow star –

[Well that was good]

– which is the one I kept all these years, and I had no money of course.

[And no shoes.]

And I had no shoes, but that's all right, it was July, and none of those ration tickets.

[Oh.]

And without them you could not buy anything: bread, meat, anything. You needed those ration coupons. But I walked, and it was quite a long walk, but I stopped, slept in doors, course you know there was a curfew, so you were not supposed to be out. So I was hiding in doorways.

And I arrive early morning in what was then known as the Jewish neighborhood. This is where all the Jews live in in Paris. It's on the other side of Notre Dame. It's on the island. It's called Le Marais. It's the old –

[the old Jewish neighborhood]

– Rue des Rosiers. Famous place. Now it's beautiful. They build that beautiful new, that gorgeous museum: Barbour, the poet.

[Oh yes.]

I got to tell you, digression. On that very spot used to be an apartment building where my oldest aunt, Tanta Basha, the oldest sister my mom, that's where she lived. In a novel that I'm writing now, I'm saying what a lovely piece of substitution. They replaced his art, his story, with what I call the imposter of history with the imposter of art. They put it. But it was exactly when I went back and looked for her building, I couldn't find it. It was right there.

[It was there.]

Corner of Rue Bateaux and Rue . . . there I remembered it. Anyway, that's the neighborhood I walked in. And I went directly to one of my father's younger sisters, you know but we were very close, because they had three children our age.

[Your age.]

I always play with the two boys and their daughter, Sarah, was also somewhere, in a farm at the time and survived. She now lives in Israel. Has been in Israel since 1948. She went there when she was 16 and she fought in the war of independence.

[She has stories.]

She's been of, a marvel. She lives in a, has been in kibbutz for the last 40 years. Marvelous woman. Has two children. Married a Romanian man. I got to give you a parentheses here. His name is Aryeh. I never met Aryeh until I went to Israel in 1983. He speaks some French. He's now in his middle 50, but he showed me picture when he was a colonel in the Israeli army. And I say, "When did you come to Israel?" He said, "I came in 1943."

[How did he get - ]

"How did you, how did you come?"

[Illegally.]

He said, "I walked." He said, "My parents had been arrested." He was my age, about, and he know Palestine is down there. I mean, you know, you walk, you took your boat, you, but he he went on foot and arrived. And he was the founder of the, of this socialist kibbutz called Gvulot, which is not far from the Gaza Strip. I visited there and Gvulot in Hebrew means outpost. And it was a real outpost and we went to it and he told me marvelous stories, and they were there.

[And they're still there?]

No. They stayed there 17 years and now they moved to a kibbutz near Haifa called Dalia. Very wealthy and – end of parentheses.

[Yes, let's get back to you. So you're trying . . . ]

I'm going on to see – how much time we have?

[Well, we have –]

We're okay?

[Yes.]

And I arrive at my aunt, and my aunt, uncle, and the two cousins are sitting there with their little suitcase and I tell them, "You gotta leave or they arrested." "Where are we gonna go? We have no money." And it's true. But people didn't, really a lot of Jews were arrested because they had nowhere to go and no money to go.

[Otherwise they'd bribe their way out.]

In order to, in order to get to the Free Zone, you had to pay a lot of money to the, what they called the passeur. They were people who passed you across. The Germans knew this, split the money with them. Trainloads, boatloads used to go across the river, there was a river, but you had to pay a lot of money or jewelry or something. And those, and it was known, and if you didn't have it, you had nowhere to go so the poor died and the rich survived. But that was a well-known. And, "no," she said, "We we can't go." So I sat with them. We talked and then the police arrived and took them. They asked who I was and I, she said, "he's a friend of the boys" but I was not on their list.

[So they didn't take you.]

I walk with my aunt, my uncle –

[Such a normal kind of activity.]

– my two cousins, to this marvelous square, called the Place de Vosges. It was an old 17<sup>th</sup> century gorgeous place, and it was lined with trucks, and they were, all the Jews were going up on the trucks and I kissed my uncle, my aunt, my cousin goodbye, and they took off.

[And that's the last time you saw them.]

And I stood there.

[That's incredible.]

It's as though someone had said, "No, not you. You, we are going to hold you back. We need a witness" maybe or something. From there, I mean, I wandered around, and finally what do you do, because you are aware you have to go, that much I knew. I got to find a way to get to the Free Zone. So I went to the train station. And you sort of hang around the train station. Well, my luck, just as we, I am at the train station, there is a the Gestapo, or the German arrive, and gather all the men and they're checking all the papers and they are picking up people. And I am lined up against the wall with these guys. And they ask us to drop our pants.

[Oh, they want to see if you're Jewish.]

If you're circumcised, you're Jewish. In those days it was true anyway. And I found myself on the train. Where going away, I don't know. And this train was going, you know, 2 minutes, stop 3 hours, 2 minutes, stop 3 hours for the other trains to come by. It was hot. It was unbearable hot.

[And you didn't have any food.]

No food. This is my second day and a half without food. They did finally stop and give us a little water and a little piece of bread. This was the third day. All day the train made maybe 10 miles. And mostly young boys. Little girls is crying. It stinks in there. They were pissing in their pants. And we managed to open, you know, this is not a regular train, it's a

[- cattle car?]

– freight car, and we managed to pull the door opened. And I'm a little taller than most, they're younger than me, so I managed to, I'm at the door. And we stopped. It's the middle of the night now. And another train comes this way and stops right there. And I'm looking and I see over there a kid who jumps across. And I jumped not to escape, to find food. And I pulled this door and this car is full of bags of potatoes.

[Raw potatoes?]

I mean full of, of – and I tore one open and I sat and I put some in my pockets first. And I began to rub them and eat raw potatoes until I got so sick. I vomited right there.

[Sure.]

Have you ever eaten a raw potato?

[Never.]

Try it. And then, you know, I go to the door. I've got 5, 6 potatoes, and, and I look and my train left.

[Lucky.]

Is it lucky? I had a panic. I was all alone and let me say two things: I was 14 years old and I had two big fears: I was afraid of the dark and I was afraid of rats.

[And here you're probably meeting both of them.]

And I thought this car was full of rats, I had imagine. And it was dark so I climb on top of the bags and I sat like this. Maybe the rats wouldn't come up. I didn't know. And my train left. I didn't, I didn't know where I was going. And then this train started moving out. Obviously, my train was going east and I was going west. Well, eventually I jumped off. I hurt my knee and so on, and.

[Where did you land when you jumped off?]

I was not far from Paris. I was back in Paris. I mean, not too far. I went back to my neighborhood to see if my parents were back because, in my mind, I always thought they're coming back.

[Sure, sure.]

I looked, "no." And this is when, I told you this story earlier, this woman, neighbor, who knew my mother, saw me, "eh, what are you doing?", took me to her house, fed me, and gave me some milk and thing, and and then I could tell that, "What am I gonna do with this this boy?" You know? And you know, she could get in trouble. And finally she suggested she could take me to the police station –

[Oh, the worst thing!]

– where where they would solve everything, because they would tell that I got lost, and they would put me with my parents and everything will be fine. And I believed her. I'm walking with her to the police station and we're almost there when "ah!" I pulled away, and –

[You had this gut sensation that it was wrong.]

Yeah. So then, well, you go back to the train station, cause it's the only way out of the city.

[And you wanted to get to the Free Zone.]

I went to, yeah, I went to the train sta, and I hooked up with two Belgian fellow. They were older than me, I don't know, maybe 18, 19, and they were going to the Free Zone, I mean, one way or another, to join the resistance. I mean, they were, they, in fact, they wanted to go to Algeria. And the, we we took the train. They paid for it.

[They paid for you?]

Yeah, it was not expensive. You know we started talking. I told them my sad story and but we got off. And the name of the town is Vierzon and I remember it cause everytime we go take the train, you have to go Vierzon. Was, was the little town where the line of demarcation was.

Well, they got off the station before because they had a plan. And they, they, we found Bonne. We stay in Bonne, and we stayed there almost a week. And every night we would walk to the train station to observe, to find a way to get across. Then we'd go back. It was end of July now, but you know, and there was food all over, so we had food. We, there was a little river there. We'd go swimming in a river. And then at night back to the train station. And one night, we're there and there is an alert. You know an air raid.

[Air raid.]

The sirens. So everybody's running to the air, to the shelters –

[Shelters.]

– so those two guys say, “Let's go!” We rushed to the railroad track and we hid in a little shack between, you know, the the tracks, where they change the, whatever, the the railroad. We, and there only three of us, and suddenly 20 people come in. This is where these passeur, these guys, would get, this is where they would also –

[Oh, this is where they would pass them on.]

– we didn't notice that, they would hide them there. The train would arrive, the Germans would inspect on this side. When they would pass, they would open the door, and everybody would come.

[Oh what a lucky break that you had a chance to –]

No, we didn't pay because the two guys had seen this.

[I know, you chanced it.]

So we got on the train and this train was packed with people leaving with suitcases. Everybody knew. You know, Germans knew on one side, and the other guys, the French, they were making a lot of money. And then, whew, we got on this train. And eventually I got off this train near Toulouse and bummed around, and I ended up on the farm, working.

[With the two Belgians?]

No, these two guys went on. But I, I didn't want, I had a fear, no, this is gonna finish soon, this, this is only, I think you will find that it's true of a lot of children, "This is temporary."

[Yes, it's not – ]

This is, you know –

[Right, that you would go back to your parents.]

– everything's gonna go back, and then school's gonna start all over again. This is our one thought, and then it went on for 3 more –

[Okay.]

– and 4 more years. But, so, and so I stayed on. First, you have to understand that all men, adult men, were in Germany. And, and not not in camps, but in factories. They had all the French men, so there were no farmers. So women and children were running the farms. So when they saw a 14 year old arrive, even though I was very, you know, nothing, they grabbed me, and whew, I mean, that's it. There's food and sleep. But I worked on it, I worked on three different farms. And one I stayed about the last year and a half.

[And they took care of you?]

Yeah. They they suspected maybe I was Jewish. They didn't ask questions. I mean, there's been so many films made of this story.

[Sure, sure.]

But I worked hard. And became a very good farmer. And then eventually the husband, they sent some of the men back, there was a big farmer, he returned. And then there was an old man who was very mean, but but I spent 2 years, 3 years on this farm, not talking. I talked to the dog, to the cows, but people didn't talk. It was amazing these people, very primitive, but we had food. [But were there other people there with whom you could talk? Other children who had escaped or?]

No no.

[No. So for all these years, you didn't talk.]

No, no. There was a little town where I used to go to once in awhile but no, there was really, there was, it was all inside of me, imagining things. Maybe that's why I became a writer. I was making up stories. But that, that's basically the – it was rough. The work is hard. You know, you get up at 5. You go to bed at 10. And it's all the days, 7 days.

[Well, you have no normal life. Nobody to love you.]

And no schooling. Nothing. It was hard. And then, and this was the southwest of France, very active in the underground. And gradually I became involved with the underground. Not as a fighter. I was too young and they wouldn't let me carry a gun, but as a messenger.

[Courier.]

And they used to have what is called pas d'etage [trans. dropoff]. They used to drop weapons, the the Allied forces, and we knew that, and so we'd all get – so at night, I had to sneak out of the farm to go, and I was hiding guns in the barn under the the haystacks and so on. And so I –

[You could have been picked up right there.]

Oh yeah.

[That was frightening.]

There were a lot of – there was a little town there which maybe had 800, normally 800 people. They had 2000 inhabitants at that time. They all knew. They were all – but, you, one – This is important. I almost forgot. Crucial. November 1942. I'm on this farm. Now the first farm. And in once in awhile I go to town, to, you know, to buy bread, or to the market with the farmer and so on. And I see a notice posted at the city hall. "Displaced Children." This is in French. "The Swiss Red Cross is trying to gather all displaced children." They should go to Perigueux – Perigueux was about 50 kilometers from where I was – for a medical examination. And then they will be sent to America. So I told this, the old man and the –

[Was that authentic or was it just a Nazi roundup?]

Oh yes. So they say, "Okay, we'll give you a, a, we'll buy the train ticket." So I went to Perigueux. I packed a little bag and I had a big raincoat, I remember, and I passed the medical examination. It was a Swiss doctor that spoke French. He did question why I had a crooked nose and I explained that maybe it was broken, but but can I breathe correctly? Yes, I can breathe. Said you have to go to Marseille. You will meet with these these people from there. They will put you on a train and you will go to Marseille. And so the following day, I slept somewhere, I forget where, and I went to Marseille. In Marseille, and I still remember because we spent some time there a few years ago. There's a big stadium where they play soccer. And in that stadium, they had 2-, 3000 kids that they had gathered from all over France from the Free Zone. From 2 year old to 14 year old. And they all put, we all had a tag around our our neck with our name. And they, and this. And they fed us. And they told us the boat is waiting and tomorrow you're going to America. This is November 1942. And they explained. "There a family will greet you. They would not adopt you. You will stay with them until the end of the war, and if your parents come back, you would return, or if they don't return," or whatever. Or

they oh they give us all this explanation. During the night of November – I wish I had the exact date, 1942 – the Allied forces invaded North Africa. The Germans invaded the Free Zone.

[So that was the end of it.]

In a couple of hours, they were in Nice. The boat left. And they were stranded with 2-, 3000 kids, the Red Cross. They didn't know what to do with them. Well, the oldest one, they say, "Look, we put you on a train. Go back where you were." I went back to my farm. But I don't know what they did with the kids, the young ones. This was November. So, it's an amazing story.

[That would be interesting to trace that episode.]

I remember it rained that night but it was an open – it was warm. And I had this big sort of rubberized raincoat that went to my feet and I went, I was, I was going to –

[And the family took you back willingly?]

Well, I went back to the farm.

[They were happy.]

Sure I told I would work and they needed me. But then I switched to another farm, and so.

That's this strange period. Very introspective. I didn't know what – but always thinking, when it's finished, and they all come back –

[That eventually you'll have normalcy.]

Yeah, but then I got back to Paris, soon after the liberation.

[After the war was, it, right.]

44:09 May 1945. I think I was back in Paris. And slowly my other aunts came back, people came back, and they were very surprised to see me. They thought I was I was dead. There was a family council. [What to do with with the little boy?] I mean, this kid shows up with a pair of

short pants, a pair of sandals, and a shirt, and nothing else. And all these strange stories. They didn't believe I was even alive. This is on my mother's side. I will never forget this family council. They're all sitting around the table talking Yiddish and drinking tea out of a glass with sugar, you know, and little cookies and I'm sitting on a chair. And the one is saying, "Well, I can't take him because our apartment is too small" and "I can't. I have a daughter and I can't let him sleep in the same room as my daughter", "I can't, I work all day." And then, "What do you want to become?", "You want to become a mecanicien [trans. mechanic]",

[A tailor.]

"You want to become a tailor?" "I don't want to be a tailor." "What do you want?" "I want to go to school." You know, I stopped school. I had not schooling for all these years, and in the middle of the family council, I left. They didn't even notice me.

[Oh, they didn't even notice you!]

I didn't –

[Where did you go?]

I moved in with some friends in Montparnasse. I got involved with black market. And I worked in a factory, and so on. When I left for America, I felt I should go see them, and tell them, "I'm going to America." They said, "Don't go! You are going to starve. They won't take care of you."

[They, and they weren't ready to take care of you. Now, how did you get to go to America?

We're talking about 1947.]

We, no it's 19 – soon after the war – 1945, 46. My parents are not back. I'm starting to inquire and it's obvious they're not coming back. I got a letter from America, from Detroit.

[Where was the letter sent? To your old address?]

To my father's address.

[To your father's address.]

And, you know, they sent – my aunt was back in that building.

[Oh, in that building so she could take care of it.]

So, so she would, you know, the apartment had been rented by now, and I finally gathered a few things I had, those papers I found up there in a shoebox, but so if a letter came for my father, she would get it. A letter from America. And I would go once in awhile to see, and this was before the family council, whatever. It's in Yiddish. I cannot read Yiddish so they had to translate for me, and it, we discover I have an uncle named David Nymark who is in America, and he's asking, "What happened? Are you alive, and all your children?" And so I wrote a letter in French to David Nymark in Detroit. And we started corresponding. He would write me in Yiddish and I would always find someone to translate. Sending me packages.

[Oh, you must have felt real good. Someone was caring for you.]

And the first package he sent me, was full of, I remember, Lucky Strike. You know those –

[Lucky Strike! Lucky Strike.]

47:01 But I didn't smoke, but on the black market . . . So, I kept telling him, hey, send me more cigarettes. He sent me a green sweater that was atrocious which I sold on the black market. In 1945, 46, there was, there were nothing in France, you know, so you –

[So you were 17 years old.]

I was 17 and he sent me all these packages and one day he writes me, "Why don't you come to America?"

[So he has to send you an affidavit.]

But he he couldn't, because he wasn't even an American citizen. He was, he was a, a, he was a, he was a newspaper man, but he didn't have the, the means. So, it, there as an organization called HIAS.

[Oh, HIAS! Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. So he, they did it, he did it through them.]

They got me both the ticket. But I waited a year and a half – How are we doing? Five minutes? – a year and a half for my visa.

[That long?]

Yeah.

[Well, the numbers were . . . ]

And finally, yeah, and finally – the quota, you know – they call me and it was, well, on my passport it said that, I think I got the visa, I think, in May 1947 and then I left in, in –

[We have a document here, a picture from 1947, and we have –]

Oh yeah, this, this is after the war, you know. I was one of those who survived deportes et internes – those who were deported. I became a member of this federation. Supposedly they did research for your family, and so this is a card, the 1947 card that I, that I carried to show that I was. Those who were in the underground also had cards like this. You, you had some privileges.

[Oh, so this is – Oh, this is you and your, this is – what year is this?]

Yeah, this is me. This is 1947.

[So you're 19 years old.]

And yeah, notice what it says, the job. It says, "metallurgist." Metallurgist. Means that I, I was working –

[You're a metallurgist.]

Yeah, I was working in a factory that made, they made tubes for toothpaste. Yeah, anyway, this is what I was doing.

[I think we might as well show the rest of the documents, and you should show, tell us what they're about.]

Oh, this one is a, yeah, yeah, in, right after the war, you know, I did some research to find out what happened to my parents. And this is a document that points, that states – and it's given by the French, and it's it's part of the archives – the exact date when they were arrested and the exact date when they were shipped to Auschwitz. And it's like a death certificate, that's what they they give you.

[Is this given by the French government?]

By the French government, yeah.

[So you come to your, to your uncle. Can you tell us, what happens to you?]

My uncle and I had never met. Anyway, finally, I leave for America and he's meeting me in New York. Little man with glasses. Well, we had a picture of him there. Doesn't speak a word of French. I don't speak English.

[How do you communicate?]

I I don't speak Yiddish.

[Yiddish.]

I understand enough but we don't speak. We don't speak.

[Oh, that's so sad.]

We we we we took the subway, I mean, I expect the rich American uncle, you know, with a huge Cadillac. No, no he took me at the pier with my black suitcase with a rope around it, and we took the subway to the Bronx because we had some friend of his that we, we were staying there.

Cause we only stayed in New York for four days. He showed me the Empire State Building, the Statue, and then we went to Detroit. But we couldn't talk.

[Oh, that's sad.]

And in Detroit, he had already reserved – because he was living in, you know, in those days you rented a hou-, a room at somebody's house, with kitchen privileges. So he had reserved a room for me with some people, and two weeks after I arrived, I was working at Chrysler, on the line.

[Oh, on the line.]

I was working, and I say, "Why did I have to come to this damn contract?" I hated Detroit.

Terrible city.

[And you didn't know any English. Where did you learn English?]

One day I was walking. I was working at night. I was the night shift, from 8 to 8. So I slept and then I would wander in the city and I saw a place, the "school." I knew what it meant. I went in there and I talk with the principal, and I explain my case, that I'd not been in school for many years. But, I, "Sure, and you should take Engilsh, government, and dot, dot, dot.

[Was this a high school?]

Yeah. It was called Nordin High School.

[Nordin High School.]

The one, the most amazing thing about it, it was a Black high school. There were only two white kids there. That's okay. I loved it. I became a jazz musician.

[Oh!]

I played jazz with some of the leading jazz players today. We form a little group. I don't know if you follow jazz. The piano player was Tommy Flanagan. Maybe the leading ja-. Kenny

Burrell was the guitar player. Frank Foster was the saxophone. Anyway, I was a saxophone player and –

[And you learned –]

I should have brought some pictures!

[Yes, that would have been interesting. And you learned English quickly.]

And I, And I also moved from this room that my uncle. This was a, you know, a few months later, where my uncle, because I didn't like that neigh-, and I moved on the East side, which was the Black ghetto. And one day my uncle found me and came over. By then, we, I could talk a little English, and explained to me, "In America, you're not supposed to live on this side. You're supposed to stay on this side of Main Street. In the East side you don't go. You stay on the West side. I was living with the Black kids and we spent time.

[You felt comfortable.]

Oh yeah. And I graduated from that high school. I was older than most of them, in 1949. I got a high school diploma from Nordin High School. I was on a swimming team. I was on the band, the marching band. I was in the senior play. Anyway, I was really part of that –

[You were Mr. Big.]

Mr. Big in high school. And with a high school diploma – I was still working in factories – I went to Wayne University, which was then, it was strictly a city school. It was not Wayne State then. It was all Black. And I majored in music.

[That's funny for an English professor to start that way.]

And and then I got fed up with Detroit because the the factory is, you know, the factory is three months and then they lay you off. Or you make good money but it swallows you.

[Yes.]

They can't wait for you to come.

[Yes, you, you lose your, your reality there.]

So, I saw 50 dollars. I bought a plane - the first time I got on a plane, to New York. I had a girlfriend. Oh, I should mention, during the summer, I had work in the Catskill as a waiter.

[Oh.]

I met a cute girl there. Lived in New York. So I flew to New York, arriving there with 50 dollars. In 19-, well, January 1950, and I couldn't get a job. It was a real recession. Literally I starved for 6 months until I finally found a job, you wouldn't believe, as a dishwasher at Horn and Hardart.

[Horn and Hardart.]

That's where I work, until I got - and then, then I got a job in a lampshade factory. The great irony of my life. And in 19-, March '51, I was drafted in the Army.

[Oh.]

I think that's as far as I can almost go with my life. The rest is just -

[Well, you should tell us about your, your books, how you got to be an English professor.]

I, quickly, in the few minutes remaining: I spent 3 years in the Army. I was sent to Korea and then to Japan. And I had a good life in Japan. I stayed there for almost 2 years. But, when I got out, I found out I had a G.I. Bill, and this was -

[Oh, so you went for higher education.]

I was a freshman in college. I was 24 years old. A freshman. They were all younger. I devoured the books. I couldn't believe that. I read Shakespeare when I, first when I was 26.

The kids were bored and I couldn't stop.

[Where did you go?]

Columbia University.

[Columbia.]

I had it fully paid by the government. And I started writing then. Stories, poems. Wrote two novels when I was at Columbia which are bad, unpublished, unfinished. But, and then I got a fellowship to UCLA.

[Oh, is that where you did your doctorate?]

Well, I did my Ph.D. and wrote my doctoral dissertation on Samuel Beckett. But, and then I got a fellowship to UCLA.

[Oh, is that where you did your doctorate?]

Well, I did my Ph.D. and wrote my doctoral dissertation on Samuel Beckett. The first one written in English.

[Oh, the first one in English.]

And I met Samuel Beckett in Paris in 1963. And he was probably the most important encounter in my life, in terms of not only meeting a very great man, and may, but a man who would talk for a long time. And I told him I want to write, I would, you know, I'd written, but nothing to say, and he really taught me in his book and himself.

[Oh, well, what a –]

“If you're gonna write, don't compromise. Don't sell out. Don't write for money. If you write for money, do something else,” he said to me.

[So that was a a very strong influence.]

And I believed, and then came back and I moved, I came to Buffalo in '64. I was teaching at Santa Barbara at the time. I got my Ph.D. in 1963, but I'd been teaching for a few years there.

[So you, you got your first job, your second job, here at the university. You've been here –]

At Buffalo. I came to the French department. I was a French professor. But I, 1973, after I published my second novel – first novel - I was working on the second one, the English department, and Joe Fradin was the Chairman, needed a a novelist cause John Barth, who'd been teaching, had left.

[Oh yes. Yeah.]

And they could not hire. And so I moved from Eng-, from French into English. The best thing I ever did in my life.

[So you wore two hats and that was a success.]

I call that recycling myself.

[Exactly. In summary, in the next minute, do you want to give some sort of message or say –]

Message?

[Message or anything in summation?]

Quickly. Quickly. If I can squeeze that in. Do you remember Madame Fenelon? I don't know if you know; she was this woman who survived Auschwitz because she played the violin?

[Yes, yes, Fania Fenelon. Yes, right. Played, right.]

She was being interviewed on a Dick Cavett Show because they were making that movie *Playing for Time* –

[Yes, *Playing for* – ]

And she didn't want Vanessa Redgrave.

[Vanessa Redgrave.]

And Dick Cavett asked Madame Fenelon, "How was it?" and so she described, you know, "We would play and the the conductor was the the granddaughter of Mahler" or whatever.

[Yes, Mahler.]

“And then behind us there would walk these people in their pajamas to the gas chamber.” And she stops suddenly and obviously she’s there again, and a smile comes on her face. And after a moment of silence, Dick says her, “Why were you smiling?” And she says something so profound: “We must have looked so ridiculous.” And she smiled. That is my message. If you cannot smile at it, if you cannot look back at all these things with that little smile, and say, “How dark we were, how ridiculous,” then you have missed the whole story.

[You are the optimist.]

Absolutely. I am a survivor, that’s why.

[You were a survivor optimist.]

And as I wrote in one of my poems, “My death is behind me.”

[Your future is ahead.]

Before me.

[Thank you very much. Thank you very much.]

I don’t know if I covered it all. Out!

[He would still be talking.]

Oh, this, I go on, my life story is.

[Thank you very much. We have to read these books now.]

Transcribed by: Andrea Zevenbergen, SUNY Fredonia, November 2022