United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Al Jaffee
May 21, 2016
RG-50.030*0878

PREFACE

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AL JAFFEE
May 21, 2016

Question: This is a **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with Mr. **Allan Jaffee**, on May 21st, 2016, in **Manhattan**, **New York**. Thank you very much Mr. **Jaffee**, for agreeing to meet with us today, to share part of your story, to let us into a world that is no longer there, and in this way to kind of leave for the future, a picture of what once was. We much appreciate it.

Answer: Well, I'm very happy to do this for the Holocaust Museum.

Q: Thank you. I'm going to start with the most basic questions, and we'll take the story from there. So please tell me – can you tell me the date of your birth?

A: 3-13-21.

Q: So that would have been May 13th, 1921?

A: March.

Q: March 13th.

A: March 13th, 1921, yes.

Q: '21. And where were you born?

A: I was born in **Savannah**, **Georgia**.

Q: And what was your name at birth?

A: At birth my name was **Abraham Jaffee**.

Q: Okay. Tell me a little bit about how it came to be that you were born in **Savannah**, **Georgia**.

A: The reason I was born in **Savannah**, **Georgia** was that there was a – a pawn shop in **Savannah** that was operated by a – a – an elderly Jewish man, and he wanted to have somebody take over for him in the – you know, the daily duties. So he sent word out to **New York** that he would be prepared to move a Jewish couple down to **Savannah** and get them lodging, if the – the man in the family would take over the running of the pawn shop. And he interviewed my father, and he felt my father was qualified, and my father had recently been married to my mother, who came over from **Lithuania** to – I think she was encouraged to come over to meet my father, but I wasn't there, so I don't know anything about that. Anyway, they did get married and go – and went down to **Savannah**, and s-so that's where I was born, and my three younger siblings were born there, too. Eventually the pawn shop turned into a large department store, and my father became the manager of the department store.

Q: Ah, I see.

A: And i – the – you know, and our life in **Savannah** was quite interesting and exciting. As a young child, I remember adventures in **Savannah** that – that I really cherish.

Q: Well, I'm going to get – want to explore some of those, but right now I'd like to talk a little bit more about your immediate family. You anticipated one of my

questions, which is, did you have any siblings. And so you did, and it sounds like you were the oldest of the – of the children.

A: Yes, I had three siblings, and I was the oldest, and sadly I've outlived them all.

Q: Oh dear.

A: It's – some of them died fairly young. Two of them actually contracted illnesses in **Lithuania** during the very severe winters that we experienced there. One of them had spinal meningitis, which –

Q: Wow, wow.

A: – did not affect his life, other than it was a great shock to us to find out that –he was just a little baby – well, not a baby, but he was about two years old, or so, and – or three. And after he – he recovered from the spinal meningitis, we discovered that he could no longer hear anything. So he became a deaf mute. But he – he –

Q: What was his name?

A: **Bernard**.

Q: And when was he born?

A: You know, I don't know.

Q: Okay.

A: I – I don't know the birthdays of anybody.

Q: Okay. That's okay. I ask, but if it – and if it's there, it's fine –

A: Yeah.

Q: – and if it's not – it's just to –

A: Yes.

Q: – it's just to get a sense of –

A: Yeah,, I wish I knew all these things, but since our family was pretty much broken up with all the trips back and forth, and my father losing his job as – as a consequence of these interruptions in our lives, we didn't have family affairs like birthday parties, and – and celebrations. I mean, it was just get what you could get out of life, you know, so that's why I don't – I really don't – I – I never put much store in anyone remembering my birthday, or – or me remembering theirs. In any case, he did – he did grow up as a deaf mute, and worked, and had a family, and had a – a reasonably successful life. My brother **David**, the youngest, was actually spirited out of **Lithuania** as the Nazis were invading.

Q: We'll come to that. Right now I just – I'm sorry that I interrupt.

A: Yes, that's all right.

Q: But right now what I want to get a sense of is just who your family – the names of the people, a little bit about your parents and so on. So when we come to chronologically, let's say 1939, 1941 –

A: Yes.

Q: – things like that, then we – we'll explore some of these important parts of their lives.

A: I understand.

Q: Okay.

A: Yes.

Q: So right now we have you as the oldest, then who was the next brother in line?

A: **Harry**.

Q: **Harry**. And then –

A: **Bernard** –

Q: **Bernard**.

A: – and **David**.

Q: Okay, and how many years were there between you? I mean, were you very much an older brother, or were they close to you in age?

A: We were approximately – we – each one of us was separated from the next one by a year and a half.

Q: Wow, close.

A: Yes.

Q: Pretty close.

A: Very close.

Q: Yeah. Tell me –

A: And I suspect that my mother took us all to **Lithuania** so she wouldn't become pregnant again.

Q: That's a rather drastic trip, you know, a lot of distance.

A: Well, my father stayed in **America**, so –

Q: Yeah. Well, we'll come to that. But let's now stop with your – no, not stop, but turn to your mother and your father. Tell me your mother's full name and maiden name, if – if you have it. What was her first name, and her – yeah.

A: Her first name was – the English version was **Mildred**. In – i-in the – in Jewish it was **Miechla**(ph).

Q: **Miechla**(ph), mm-hm.

A: Yeah, but it became **Mildred** in – in – in English. My father's name was **Moishe**, but which became **Morris**, and –

Q: Were they first generation immigrants to the **United States**? Had they –

A: Yes, they were.

Q: Okay.

A: First to general – first generation.

Q: And where did your fa – you said your mother came from **Lithuania**. Where did your father come from?

A: The same town they – as a matter of fact, it was at my father's urging that my mother's sister, who was here in **America**, negotiated to have my mother brought over for my father.

Q: Oh, as a potential bride?

A: Yes.

Q: I see, I see.

A: They may have had contact in **Zarasai**. I'm not sure, because eventually our family got so separated, that with all the trips and spending time first with both parents, then with one parent, you know, you lose a lot of –

Q: Yeah, of course. It sounds like chaos.

A: Yeah.

Q: So y – both parents are from **Lithuania**, from the same town.

A: Yes.

Q: They've come over to the **United States**, your father first. Did he have siblings, by the way, your father? Did he come from a larger family?

A: Yes, he came from a large family, and curiously, considering what I mentioned earlier, as just an observation, my father was very angry at his father, because he – his – his mother was pregnant all the time, and he had a – a large number of siblings. So, it's ironic in a way that I – I think that maybe my mother felt the way

he felt. But i-it wa – it was really not unco-uncommon at – in those days for large families –

Q: Absolutely.

A: – to grow and grow and grow. And of course my father loved his mother so much that she – she started to become sickly with all the work attendant to having lots of children, that I think he felt like that – that – like, you know, a lot of children felt, that as they got more and more siblings, and their mothers were being –

Q: Worn down.

A: – worn out –

Q: Yeah.

A: – they worried about that.

Q: Of course.

A: So – but my mother's family, there were a lot of siblings also. Some remained in **Lithuania**, and some went to **Russia**, and two of them – two of my mother's siblings went to **Russia** and became doctors. So –

Q: In the tsarist times? During the tsarist regime?

A: No, it was – it was probably the Soviet.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah, because during the tsarist regime, everyone was fleeing, I d – from what I've heard, and I – I have no reason to know whether it's true or not. They mainly feared being in the tsarist military, and being sent to fight in **Japan**, or some – you know, strange place in the world. So tha-that was the reason why a l – a lot of young Jews took off and emigrated. So –

Q: It's a reason I also heard. Nobody wanted to fight in the tsarist army, you know.

A: That's it.

Q: Nobody wanted to – particularly as it wasn't their home and their fight.

A: Yes.

Q: Did your family always come from this part of the world? I mean, this is the **[indecipherable]** settlement, and a lot of Jews weren't allowed to live in other places of the Russian empire. Do you know anything beyond th-the stories and the lives of your grandparents, of where they ca – their families came from, or does it pretty much start from there?

A: I don't know a-a – I don't know where my grandparents came from.

Q: Okay.

A: I – the only rumors that I heard as a child was that they – when they could, they escaped to **Lithuania**, and in fact, **Lithuania** is surrounded by lakes, and one of the thrilling stories that we cousins would talk about was that our various parents spent

nights in the lakes, breathing through straws to avoid being recaptured by the Russian military people who were looking for – for the young men. So –

Q: Can we cut for a second. **[break]** Rolling? We're rolling. Okay. So – so **Zarasai** was surrounded by lakes, and you heard stories and rumors of some of the relatives staying underneath –

A: Yes.

Q: – breathing through straws, to not be captured.

A: That's – that – that's – those are the stories I've heard when I was in **Lithuania**, and of course to me, these were very brave people with great adventures. And I was caught up in it, I – you know, as –

Q: Of course, there's great – they're grand stories, and it's very dramatic.

A: Yes. And survival was really – you know, was a daily business. Whether it was a shortage of food, or – or you're being persecuted by one group or another. My cousin **Daniel**, who is my age, and was very bright, he was so happy about the fact that **Japan** defeated tsarist troops. Oh, he celebrated, he had little soldiers, and he would play the Japanese knocking over the Russians. For some reason, tsarist **Russia** was very unpopular in the circles that I was in –

Q: Yeah.

A: – which was predominantly Jewish.

Q: Of course.

A: Not all – not a hundred percent. My – my father figure was a Polish man.

Q: That's **Zarasai**, yes?

A: Pardon?

Q: That's when you're in **Zarasai**?

A: When I was in **Zarasai**, yes.

Q: Hold that thought.

A: Okay.

Q: We'll get there. Right now though, I want to find more out – more about your parents, as personalities. What kind of a person was your father, what kind of a person was your mother? Can you tell me that, can you talk to me about that?

A: I ca – I can tell you as much as I know about my parents, which is, considering our frequent separations, is limited. One thing I can tell you for certain is that both my parents had amazing senses of humor. Unfortunately, they didn't deploy it all the time, because they were in a certain – in certain areas of conflict. My father disdained the religious community, my mother embraced it. So there was a –

Q: Tension.

A: – there – and of course, when my father took me and my brothers out on a weekend trolley ride to some amusement park, he would buy us hot dogs, and he

would say, do not tell your mother. You know, these were not kosher hot dogs. So – but as far as humor is concerned, my mother, when – when we – when we visited **Lithuania**, and I met her relatives, and friends of hers when she was a young girl, and they would say, oh, your mother, the greatest entertainer in the world. She could mimic people, and she could do skits about the tsar and the tsarina and – and e-everyone was rolling on the floor with laughter.

Q: Is this a mother you knew? Did you recognize that?

A: I – I – yes, she was very creative, and she was also very intelligent. I mean, she went to night school in **America** as soon as she arrived, to learn English. And she became so proficient at it, that she collected books, and she would read to us every night to go – when we were going to sleep.

Q: In English?

A: In English. And even when we were in **Lithuania**, every day sh – almost, she would come to me and say, write to your father and tell him to send English books, because you need to keep up with your English. And she constantly corrected our grammar.

Q: Wow.

A: I can remember so vividly, her look glaring at me and saying, who is her? You refer to me as your mother, not as her, or she. I mean, she – she was a stickler for –

Q: Propriety, and –

A: – correctness.

Q: – yes, yeah.

A: And it's – it's – has served me well, because I've written tons of material myself, and I – you know, I – I think I learned to speak properly because of her. When I returned from **Lithuania**, and they stuck me into classes that were younger than th

–

Q: **[indecipherable]**

A: – where the people were younger, I was skipped frequently, because I knew – I knew the stuff. My mother –

Q: She made sure you didn't lose the language.

A: Absolutely. Read wonderful stories to us from English books.

Q: Now, at home in **Savannah**, that begs this question of what was the language you spoke to one another in? If English was something that was special, does that mean you spoke another language with one another?

A: No, we spoke English en-entirely.

Q: No Yiddish?

A: No Yiddish whatsoever. When I – when we landed in **Lithuania**, it was first yi – I did hear some Yiddish. We had an – an elderly – not my aunt, but my mother's

aunt, and my mother would talk to her in Yiddish, and my Aunt **Frieda** would talk to my mother in Yiddish if she didn't want us to understand what she was saying. So I heard Yiddish. I had no idea what it – any of – anything meant, except maybe a few simple words. But when I arrived in **Lithuania** I knew none of it, and – but I learned to speak it fluently.

Q: Okay. Now tell me a little bit about your dad. You said he also had a sense of humor, but he had a different value. He was not religious, whereas your mother was religious.

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of a personality did he have? What do you remember from that?

A: He – he was – I met people in **Lithuania** who would, when they heard who I was, and they remember going to school with my father would say, oh, your father was the smartest guy in the classroom. He also was – he became a well-known calligrapher. He could write a s – a Spencerian hand, that was – people used to ask him to fill out papers for them.

Q: Wow, mm-hm.

A: All self-taught. And he was an avaricious reader, but of newspapers –

Q: Okay.

A: – and magazines.

Q: What were the newspapers in your home in **Savannah**? What were the newspapers that he would read?

A: Well, there was a local paper – papers, but I – I don't remember the – the names of the papers. My only interest in those papers were the Sunday funnies, and the daily funnies as well. My brother **Harry** and I were crazy about the cartoons, because we were bo-both had art talent. And part of the art talent we had came from copying the cartoons from the newspaper strips, which were taught to us by our father.

Q: Really?

A: Oh yes. He would sit us down on a Sunday, and take out a large sheaf of white paper, and start drawing **Jig – Maggie and Jiggs**, and **Dick Tracy**, and all the car – cartoons of those days, and it was like magic to me and **Harry**, and we became professional artists, and – but my father was very good at it. He – I think that had he pursued it as a career, he could have succeeded. But –

Q: But isn't that interesting, that he bequeathed to you – in some ways you se – you talk about sense of humor as something your parents both had, his talent in calligraphy, and how that translates to – to kind of fostering this – this drawing talent in young boys to – you know, copy the funnies out.

A: Yes.

Q: That these are sort of like legacies in – in a way.

A: Yes, they are.

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, he – he was – he was, unfortunately, a beaten man. And that took a lot out of him. Took a lot of the fun out of him. And the reason he was beaten is that, because of his frustration at not being able to keep his family in **America**, my mother was constantly taking us to **Lithuania**, he lost his job because of that. He – the first time we went to **Lithuania**, h-he – he ga – he just took off from his job as manager of a department store, and spent months and months trying to get us to come back. And when he returned, of course the Great Depression struck, I think that was 1929, and his job was eliminated. And he – the only job he could get was in the post office, because he had veterans benefits.

Q: He fought in World War I?

A: He was in World War I.

Q: Where did he fight?

A: He was – he was captured by the Germans, and suffered terribly in World War I.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: And I remember I was so fascinated with World War I when I was a little boy, because there was still a lot of talk about it –

Q: Of course.

A: – there was a lot of – a lot of veterans around. And I would constantly say to my father, you know, typically, Daddy, tell me what you did in the war.

Q: Yeah.

A: And he – I'll never forget his answer, it was always the same, I shot lions.

Q: Oh God.

A: I said, Daddy, you didn't go hunting for lions in the war. He says, oh, I did. The rest of them were shooting each other, but I was looking for lions. He didn't want to talk about it.

Q: Of course.

A: I later found out from his brother, my Uncle **Harry** that he was captured by the Germans. And **Germany** was not – did not have the Nazi –

Q: Of course.

A: – anti-Semitic attitude at that time, so he was not mistreated as a Jew, he was di – mistreated as – as an – as an – not only as an American, but by the fact that there was not enough food for the German people, the captive Americans were given no food at all. So he – he starved, and s – like they all did, all the captives. So, he didn't want to talk about the war at all, but my Uncle **Harry** filled me in on the months and months and months that he lived in – in a – in hovels, and –

Q: Was this when you were older that he filled you in on this?

A: Yes, when I was older.

Q: Yeah.

A: When my father was no longer alive, he told me. I think my father must have told his brother, d-don't – don't tell them about – you know, what –

Q: People want to spare their children these things.

A: Yeah.

Q: They really do.

A: I think so. He never wo – he never once mentioned a single thing about the war, and he would hide photographs of him in uniform.

Q: Really?

A: Yeah, I – I – I foun – I got some sent to me by relatives, cousins of mine who inherited photographs from their mothers, and their mothers were sisters of my father. And there he was, looking very, very snappy in – in a doughboy uniform. I think I included a picture in the book, if I – but I'm not sure.

Q: Oh. But what di – I mean, in some ways, for someone who doesn't want to talk about it, what a charming answer he gave you, you know. I was shooting lions. And so you have to go on that tread – on that thread of, no Daddy, you weren't, it can't be that way. Oh, yes I was, and –

A: Yeah, it wa –

Q: – and he's distracted you from the real question.

A: Well, he distracted us and he entertained us. He took me and my brother **Harry** to all kinds of wonderful places, in and around **Savannah**. He took us to an airport to see airplanes doing their stunts. You have to remember that these are little – they look like model airplanes. And we were overjoyed. And of course, again, the admonition, don't tell your mother what I bought for you to eat, you know, cause it's not kosher. But – and he took us to merry-go-rounds, and loop-de-loops, and you know, all kinds of –

Q: Fun things.

A: – fun things. He – on his day off, he was wonderful. By the way, one of the things that was thrown at him when he was fired, was hi-his children's destructiveness. He used to invite me and **Harry** – **Harry** and me – I hear my mother correcting me – to the toy department of the big department store, and give us leave to play with the toys.

Q: Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.

A: Well, we broke them, and we did all kinds of terrible things, which my father told us not to worry about, he will pay for it. But just the same, they threw that up against – to my father when he was being let – let go.

Q: He sounds like a very doting father.

A: He was. He would lie on the floor, copying those cartoons half the Sunday, you know, we – and he took us to the park, and introduced us to this – the friends he made in the park, and you know, h-he – he – and he bought us candies, and he did buy us hot dogs, cause we begged for it. And candied apples. You know, he wa – he was – he was a good daddy, and we loved going places with him.

Q: So what happened at home? Was home life tense because yo – you – your – we're going to come to that part when you're leaving, but did they get along, as far as you knew, your parents?

A: They seemed to get along, but there were little problems that from – from a child's point of view – and you have to remember that I'm six years old, five or six years old – my mother would complain about how much work there is to do. You know, typical – you have a lot of children, and you – you – you're tired, and you complain.

Q: Sure.

A: And my father would take charge, and he'd hire an African American lady – where he got her, I don't know, be – probably by asking questions. He was very friendly towards African American people. In fact, his – his favorite helper in the di

– in the store was **James**, whom he would send on his bicycle to pick me and **Harry** up and bring us to the store, on a bicycle.

Q: Whoa.

A: Which my mother wasn't crazy about either, but no – nothing bad ever happened, and we li – we li – we loved **James**. But then he would send – probably he would ask someone like **James**, do you know somebody who could – who could help out in the house and clean and wash dishes? And then he'd come home and my mother would be hysterical and say that she mixed the milk dishes with the meat dishes.

Q: Non-kosher.

A: There are certain basic things that do stick with people, even if they're not strictly observant. You have two sets of dishes, just the way Catholics have certain things.

Q: No fish on Friday.

A: Yeah, no fish on Friday.

Q: Yeah.

A: I mean, no meat on Friday.

Q: No meat on Friday. I'm sorry, you're right, no meat on Friday, yeah.

A: No meat on Friday. And you put a – a hamburger on their plate and they'll – they will recoil.

Q: Yeah.

A: And with my mother, if you put a hamburger on a plate that's used for dairy products, she wouldn't touch it.

Q: Yeah.

A: So, these are centuries of religious practices, but they're not religious, they're customs. They become customs. And even non-religious people are observant of customs. So she would become hysterical and then say, I have to throw the dishes out. And my father would argue and say, you can't throw dishes out just because someone made a mistake. You know, and that – those are the kinds of conflicts that they would have.

Q: That the children would hear, that you would hear.

A: We would hear it and it would be upsetting. But – and sometimes m-my mother's creativity – she was very creative – aside from being a fi – an unbelievable mimic, she could act out poems and – and things like that, but she also had picked up notions that – about bathroom habits, and she decided that we must – that the children must go to the bathroom every day. And the only way to guarantee that was to serve castor oil every day. Well, we rebelled against that, we wouldn't –

we'd disappear. So, her creativity, she built a witch in the closet that was so real, and she would say, you will take your castor oil, or I'm putting you in the closet. And she'd open the door, and there was this living witch.

Q: Oh my God, oh my God.

A: By today's standards, this is abusive treatment of children.

Q: But – but it – you're right, it's very creative.

A: It was very creative. We took – we took our castor oil.

Q: Castor oil.

A: Yep, we did take it.

Q: Oh my God.

A: But she had an obsession about that because even in **Lithuania**, she would send me to some woman in town who was – had a – a private apothecary, you know, not – not licensed by anybody, it wasn't a drugstore or anything, but she made up potions. And one of the potions she made was a – a laxative. It was made from boiling the leaves – those little things that come down from a maple tree.

Q: Oh, the little – the little –

A: With two wings.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah, the – I don't know what they're called, but I know what you're talking about.

A: They would float down like this.

Q: That's right.

A: She would boil them, and it would turn into a black sludge of some kind, and supposedly my mother believed that that was a good laxative. But we wouldn't go near it, witch or no witch.

Q: So – well, the – you get older and the witches lose some of their power, you know.

A: That's right.

Q: You know.

A: But I don't look back on it with bitterness. I – you know, I thought it – I – I really thought she was very inventive, and I – I kind of admired that, and it's – has stood me in good stead all these years because being inventive is the name of the game for me. I've created a lot of stuff, physical stuff, intellectual stuff, artistic stuff, and I think she imbued me with that idea. She inf – she created a lot of o-other things as well; a good deal of her own clothing.

Q: Mm-hm, what about your clothing?

A: I – I can't recall that – that she specifically sewed anything, she must have. But she did take us to specialists in **Lithuania** who made shoes, made shirts, made **volekkes**(ph) and –

Q: I don't know what that is, **volekkes**(ph).

A: It's a – a boot made out of felt.

Q: Oh, wai – what are they called? Boots made out of –

Q2: **Veltiniai**.

Q: **Veltiniai**. In Lithuanian it's **veltiniai**.

A: **Velkiniai**?

Q: **Veltiniai**, with a **T**.

A: All right. So in Yiddish they – they pronounce it **volekkes**(ph).

Q: **Volekkes**(ph), **volekkes**(ph), yes.

A: You know.

Q: Yes, yes, yes.

A: But it was a felt boot.

Q: Right.

A: And you put a galosh over it to keep the –

Q: The water out.

A: – the water out.

Q: Yeah.

A: And we wore it all winter.

Q: Were they warm enough?

A: Oh, they're warm. They're very warm. It's a very clever boot. It didn't smell too good, but – but anyone who goes around smelling **volekkes**(ph) –

Q: Has an issue.

A: – deserves what he gets.

Q: Yeah, exactly, yeah. Was she a warm mother?

A: She could be. At times she was very warm, especially when she put her arms around us and read us the stories, or told the stories from her experiences as a young girl growing up in **Zarasai**. And – and talking about – you know, holidays were very, very big time things, just like Christmas is for non-Jews, **Simchas Torah**, which is celebrating the Torah, well it's a joyous holiday, where you give each other gifts, and bags full of nuts and candy and all that kind of stuff. **Simchas Torah – Torah**, yes, the happiness of the Torah.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Well, a lot of holiday – Passover was another holiday where – for – that children loved, and –

Q: And this you remember from **Savannah**?

A: Not from **Savannah**, no.

Q: From **Zarasai**.

A: From **Zarasai**.

Q: Okay. Tell me a little bit about – now let's get to – to the part where – where you – you leave. I mean, what are the conditions of the first time that you leave, how did it happen? It sounds like from what you've told me so far, the picture that's been painted, it kind of comes out of the blue. Why would she want to leave?

Q: The reason my mother wanted to leave, as far as I can understand it, was really very simple one. She had a father in **Zarasai**. She had a sister, **Liefa**(ph) in **Zarasai**, who was married to **Moysai**(ph) and – and they had a son, **Danke**(ph), **Daniel**, and – and she had friends that she had left behind. So she convinced my father that she would just like to go for a visit. Now of course, I wasn't old enough to know – to be privy to their conversation, did she say to him, I want to go for a month, or two weeks. There must have been some kind of time limit discussed. Well, all I know is, the time was dragged on and on and on.

Q: When did you leave, by the way, what year was it, do you know?

A: 1926.

Q: So you were four years old – five years old.

A: I was five, yeah.

Q: You were five. Do you remember the leaving?

A: Oh sure.

Q: Tell me about it.

A: We left **Savannah**, and got on a train, and arrived in **New York City**.

Q: Was the first time you see **New York**?

A: The first time I – I saw **New York**. And ostensibly, we were in **New York**, where the ship would be, and we stayed with relatives. And it was exciting for me, but also terrifying, because my mother took all of us – well, there were four of us. The youngest, **David**, must have been around six months old, I mean, he was very –

Q: A baby.

A: – he was a baby. He may have still been nursing, for all I know, I'm sure he was. And I remember she – she took us on a subway, and the doors were opening and closing, and people were getting on and getting off, and I would – I remember being so terrified that either I'll get off and she'll stay on the train, she'll get off and I'll – you know, and we'll all get lost. Well, I couldn't wait to get out of there, and then we wound up at some **Muma's**(ph) place, an aunt. And – and that also was kind of crazy, because these were not mansions. They were lit – tiny little apartments in – in poor neighborhoods, and all the people squeezed into one big room, you know.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I – I don't even remember if we ate there, or what we did, it was – i-it was – the – the experience was terrifying, but eventually we were schlepped onto a boat, and we – we left and arrived in – I believe in **Hamburg**, **Germany**.

Q: That would be logical.

A: Yeah.

Q: That would be logical, that's where a lot of the boats –

A: We were on the German **Lloyd** line, I know that. We arrived in – in **Hamburg** – and by the way, we had return tickets on the German **Lloyd** line.

Q: Okay.

A: Which my father, when he came over after a year – I suspect that he was expecting us to come back every month, because my grandfather, I heard him yelling at my mother, go back to your husband. Are you crazy staying here with this whole bunch of children? Oh, they used to have terrible fights, because he really thought she had it made by going to **America** while they're all stuck in **Europe**.

Q: Sure, sure.

A: And –

Q: This was a poor place.

A: Yes.

Q: Y-You know, it was –

A: I mean, she was a return immigrant.

Q: Yeah.

A: And it was just not logical, no one was doing that. So –

Q: And so what was the train ride? Then you took a train from **Hamburg** into **Lithuania**? Do you ha – do you have any memories of that train ride?

A: I – I have very little – I think it went into **Kaunas**.

Q: Okay.

A: Bec – and the reason why I think it went into **Kaunas** is because on the way home, we got on a train in **Kaunas** and got off in **Hamburg**.

Q: Okay.

A: So –

Q: It had to be that way the other way too, yeah.

A: Yeah, it had to be that way the other way.

Q: Do you remember what your first impressions are when you come from the **United States**; from **Savannah**, which you knew well; and **New York**, which you had gotten just a glimpse of, and you come into either **Kaunas** or to **Zarasai**; what kind of image there was in your mind of these places that you had arrived at?

A: Well, I – I – I really thought that I was going into pre-history. I mean, people were barefoot in the street, and we were surrounded by – my brother **Harry** and I were surrounded by local little kids who were all barefoot and – and wearing ragged clothes that were patched, and – and we wear – wearing our little fl – Lord

Fauntleroy s-suits that my mother insisted on. We hated those clothes, you know, we felt like clowns, you know, those little –

Q: Oh God, it's death to a little boy when everybody else is dressed the other way.

A: With a **tam o' shanter** and – I mean – and – and – and neither shorts nor long pants, but something that came just below the knee. And we – we felt so out of place.

Q: This was **Zarasai**?

A: Pardon?

Q: This was in **Zarasai**?

A: In **Zarasai**, yes.

Q: Okay.

A: And of course we didn't understand, we were surrounded by little kids who are yammering away in a foreign language, and we didn't know what they – the only thing that I understood is one kid said, you boxer. He goes like – you boxer. And then a chorus of them, you boxer. And I looked at **Harry**, I said, what is he saying? I didn't understand. It was only later on that I found out that their hero was **Jack Sharkey**, a Lithuanian boxer in **America** who had won the heavyweight champion, and had become wealthy. The dream of wealth was just the only dream anyone had in those days. So – but also –

Q: Do you know if these were – do you know if these were Jewish kids, or these were Lithuanian kids –

A: These were Jewish kids.

Q: These were Jewish kids.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: We – we lived in the – in the Jewish section –

Q: Of **Zarasai**.

A: – o-of **Zarasai**. Although, the area that we rented a house in was not Jewish.

Q: Can we cut? **[break]** Okay, this is just to say that we cut the camera because there's drilling outside, and unfortunately the noise is such that it will be captured, but we're going to keep on going.

A: Okay.

Q: Okay. So you lived in the – in the Jewish section of **Zarasai**, and so you remember these little kids surrounding you when you first arrive, and you couldn't understand what they were saying.

A: That's correct.

Q: And how long did it take until that changed?

A: I c – I couldn't be sh – I – I – I couldn't place a time as to how long it took me to integrate with the li – local language, but it – for one thing, my cousin **Daniel**, who was my age, grew up in a house with my Aunt **Leifa**(ph) and Uncle **Moysai**(ph), where they spoke French and English in addition to knowing Yiddish.

Q: That's pretty –

A: They did – they did not speak Yiddish among themselves. Of course they knew it because they had to speak it to certain clients and people like that. So I – I could have conversations with **Daniel**, and he would translate what the kids are saying, and then I would question **Daniel**, and I would say, tell me again, what does this mean? And he would explain it to – he was very bright, and he would explain it to me, and little by little I picked it up, and before long – you know, kids can learn things very quickly through experience rather than by rote. And just having the need to find out something, you learn the words, so you can do what you want to do. I learned Russian that way.

Q: Well, that was one of my questions, is did they speak Russian as well, did they speak any Lithuanian, did they – what were the number of languages, what were the languages that they spoke?

A: Li-Lithuanian was not spoken within the family f-for whatever reason that I don't know.

Q: Did you hear it outside?

A: It – not often.

Q: Okay.

A: You heard it in the post office, and you heard it in the movie house. Of course, Lithuanians would come in. Th-The – the land around the town was the Gentile area, where the Polish landowners and Lithuanian landowners had farms and orchards and things like that. J-Just like my landlord, **Karowlka**(ph), he – he and his brother and sister were of Polish descent, but they had a very large orchard, and a bath house, and a – an estate, really. And it was a beautiful place, they had cows, and provided us with milk.

Q: Was he the person you said was your father figure?

A: Yeah, he became a f – at least a big brother. He wasn't that much older, he was like – I remember when he went down for the test to be conscripted into the Lithuanian army, so he was 21. But to – to someone who was, at that time maybe 10, 21 is – is –

Q: An adult.

A: Yeah. And he would take us s-spearfishing, regular fishing. He would – he – he – once a month it was his assignment by my mother to take us to our little bathhouse, which was a steam – a sauna. And we had great times with him, he was

– he was – he really was like a big brother or a father. He taught us a lot, and we didn't speak – he di – he could not speak a word of Yiddish, so even by the time I was fluent in Yiddish, I knew enough Russian. And Russian was the **lingua franca** there during tsarist times.

Q: Yes.

A: So, whether you were Jewish, Polish or whatever, ye – if you wanted to get by you had to speak Russian. So I learned a lot of basic Russian, and I could communicate with **Karowlka**(ph), with **Anna** and **Ziegmund**(ph) very, very easily in Russian.

Q: How did they come – how did they intersect with your life: **Karowlka**(ph) and **Anna** and **Ziegmund**(ph), and how did you meet? What was – how was it that you got to know them?

A: I – my mother was looking to rent a place, and they had one big house which they lived in, and then they had a little cottage next – nearby – next door, that they rented, and my mother rented it. And so we were on the same grounds, really.

Q: How did she pay for this?

A: Pardon?

Q: How did your mother pay for this?

A: Pay for it?

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, my father sent money regularly. As a matter of fact, she was constantly telling us to write to our father that we are desperate for money, that we have no food. And later my father told me, I was sending money – he had postal receipts that he showed me, about that high. He was sending money all the time. But she was also giving money away. She believed in the Talmudic, or Torah thing about **Tzedakah**, which is giving to the poor. And whoever – who-whoever she found out about through the synagogue or people she knew, that so and so was desperately out of money and couldn't survive, she would give them a chunk of money. So I – I didn't object to that really, except, you know, we all have the feeling of, your first duty is at home.

Q: Yeah.

A: But we survived, so it – there were other people who were good to us. So –

Q: Tell me a little bit about your wider family there. You mentioned that your grandfather, your mother's father, still lived there. How did – what was his way of – of making a living? What did he do?

A: He was loosely called an **avokat**(ph), which is an attorney.

Q: Okay.

A: Now, I don't think that he had a formal lawyer's education. First of all, it was a big joke about getting into the gymnasium. You could only get into the gyna – gymnasium if you found a Gentile kid and got him in, then the two of you could get in. That was the rumor.

Q: And gymnasium is – is – is the high school?

A: The high school, yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: So going to – going to higher education was virtually impossible –

Q: For a Jew?

A: – for Jews, yeah. They – well, you know, I was too young to know the details, and I would really love to know what the restrictions were. Maybe – maybe they just couldn't pass the test, I don't know. But f – from the information I was getting, if you're Jewish, you can't get into the **gymnasia**.

Q: Okay.

A: Okay. So we accepted that.

Q: Okay.

A: And a lot of Jewish kids did not go to public schools, they went to cheders or yeshivas.

Q: And what about you when you were there? Did you go to – which kind of school did you go to?

A: My mother sent us to a cheder, which I hated and I stopped going to it, because I was not interested in the religious part of it. I mean, I must have gotten that from my father, but my mother wanted us to – so then she hired tutors, and I found the religious part interesting, as long as it wasn't hammered into our heads.

Q: In that cheder, can you describe to me what it was that you hated about it? What was – what were the instruction like, what were the teachers like? What were some of the other kids like?

A: Well, there was a lot of hitting, you know, rulers on the hands and there was a – a lot of disciplining, and since I didn't understand what the discipline was for, it was frightening, and – and I really did – I hated going to school. But I enjoyed having the tutor because my mother hired a – a very bright young man who not only went through the Bible and made it – made the Bible stories interesting, like Noah's ark and stuff like that, but he also dealt with science, and explained science and geography. I remember him telling us – and I used to be able to recite all the Japanese islands, because he – he taught us all about **China** and **Japan** and **India**, and it was like going on a trip. It was – that was very enjoyable. But that was one to

one and he wasn't threatening us and telling us if we don't behave we're going to get hit, you know.

Q: Yeah.

A: So school was – first of all, in school, you had a – a lo – a – a lot of unruly kids. I like to believe I wasn't one of the unruly ones, but the – the guy running the thing was – didn't care about distinctions, he just walked around with a stick or a ruler or something and it was very scary. I guess I – I just didn't like the discipline of the – the religious discipline –

Q: Well, you hadn't been old enough to start school in the **United States**, had you? When you left at age five or six, had you already started any kind of education here in the **States**?

A: I did go to – I – I did go to something in school. I – I ke – I don't want to use the term kindergarten. I started school in **Savannah**, I remember that. And I remember being bullied by the older kids, and especially with my name, **Abraham**, which, if I didn't get bullied by anti-Semites, then I got bullied by confederates, you know, because the name **Abraham Lincoln** was poison in **Savannah**. I mean, you gotta remember, it's almost a century ago.

Q: So this is – this is still living me – in the 20s, with still living memory of the Civil War.

A: Sure.

Q: Yeah.

A: Sure. I mean wa – the minute I would mention my name in polite company, people would look at me like – with daggers.

Q: And your parents would have had no idea when they named you that it could have this kind of effect?

A: No.

Q: They're totally from a totally different tradition.

A: Yes, the Bible.

Q: Yeah.

A: Now th – it happens that the southern people are very – they're very Bible conscious, and the – the – the Old Testament and the New Testament are, I think revered by Christians everywhere.

Q: That's right.

A: So that wasn't the problem, but the association they were making – nobody was naming their child in the south, **Abraham**.

Q: Yeah.

A: I mean, any more than after the American Revolution, I don't think anyone was calling their kid King **George**.

Q: Exactly. No **Georges**.

A: No **Georges**.

Q: **[indecipherable]** we had **George Washington**, so –

A: No, **George Washington** was the revolutionary.

Q: That's right, but we have a King **George** who was defeated, and we have a **George Washington**, so maybe **George** is a neutral name, cause both of them had it.

A: Well, **George Washington** had his name while he was a subject of the king of **England**.

Q: Absolutely.

A: Yeah.

Q: Absolutely.

A: He just didn't change his name after defeating King **George**.

Q: That's right.

A: So anyway –

Q: Right. So you experienced – there's something I wanted to pick up on. Did you experience, you know, anti-Semitism in the world of children, when you were in **Savannah**?

A: In **Savannah**, yes, to some minor degree.

Q: How did that express itself?

A: No, it – I can't say it was anti-Semitism. Maybe from the neighborhood that I lived in. You know, people of similar interests tend to congregate. It – people of color, of course, were segregated by color. But very – I – I – I remember when I mo – came back from **Lithuania** and moved – moved in – my father and I shared a r – a room, and rented a room in the **Bronx**. And the building I lived in, I made friends with a couple of Jewish kids, and they warned me not to go on certain streets, where the Italians lived, and on another street where the Irish lived. And it wasn't that there were – they were – none of these streets had a hundred percent Jews, a hundred percent Irish, a hundred percent Italian, but they were predominantly of one ethnic or religious group. And if you – if I walked to school on the wrong street, I'd be sure to get beaten up. I was chased, and I found out. So then, after being chased, my friend **Hilton** said, never go on that street. They'll catch you, they'll – they'll take your shoes, they'll take everything away from you. So I said okay. It was just – those conflicts go on and on. I mean, even in **Ireland** where they were all Christian and they were killing each other, you know.

Q: Well, what about – what about **Lithuania**? Did you also have – I want to make a comparison.

A: Yes. We s – we stayed pretty much in the Jewish areas. Now, that's not to say that there weren't some Gentiles living in Jewish areas, and some Jews living in Gentile areas. There are people who find acceptance because they integrate and they're not threatening, and they – they just don't develop friendships, they don't eat at each other's houses and thing – they don't have coffee klatches, but they leave each other alone. They don't hit them –

Q: Pick on each other.

A: Yeah, they don't hit each other. So – but I knew all the areas in – in **Zarasai** that were – that had Jewish homes mixed in with non-Jewish homes, and no one was likely to attack me, because they knew that I would run to the Jewish home, and then it would be a whole big hullaballoo between grownups.

Q: So it was a safer area.

A: A safer area, yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: We – you automatically – but I didn't feel threatened anywhere. I – **Harry** and I wandered all over town, and into non-Jewish areas. And certainly no grownup would ever do anything to a child in **Lithuania,** that I never even thought of it, but you ought to watch out for the – for kids your own age, because fighting was, you know, what kids do –

Q: Yeah.

A: – for any reason, you know, that they can think of. So –

Q: When – when you came to **Zarasai**, what was, if there is one thing, or two things, that struck you as the strangest things you'd ever seen? Because you'd come from a different world. You'd come from – I mean, **Savannah** is certainly different than **New York City**, but that's the world of the **United States**, and you come to this one, and you've mentioned that it's like being in pre-history, but what was the strangest thing that you saw?

Q: The strangest thing to me in **Zarasai** on my first experience was the lack of automobiles. There was not a single automobile. In fact, when one would be coming in from **Kovno**, that we had heard about, all the kids would gather to run after the car. And we used to stand behind the car to smell the gasoline from the exhaust, because it was such an unusual smell. And that struck me. The other thing was that you could find food on trees everywhere. All you had to do was walk in a certain area where the apple tree was hanging over the street, and get a stick and hit it, and get an apple and eat it, or a pear, or a bunch of cherries. We used to go after those things.

Q: Well, that sounds lovely –

A: Yeah.

Q: – you know? That's –

A: We were constantly eating fruit of some kind or another. The currant bushes were hanging over fences everywhere. You could walk along and just with your hand pull off big loads of yellow and red, what we called **paretsky**(ph).

Q: Mm-hm. And – and what about – you said your grandfather was sort of like an **advokat**(ph), maybe without formal training, but nevertheless, that. What was – what would he do? What was he –

A: He – he interceded on behalf of Jewish people who needed to go to court about s-some – some matter. It – it wasn't things like divorce, or – or suing a storekeeper. What it was, I think, is these people received a notice that there was a – some kind of violation. Either they left their horse out in the street, or who knows what? And my grandfather – now, I never heard him speak Lithuanian, and I suspect that he really couldn't speak Lithuanian because they really were refugees from **Russia**. But he did speak Russian fluently, and he might have learned enough Lithuanian to get by, for all I know, I just never heard him speak it. So he would – a – a Jewish person who had received a notice that he has to come to the court, my grandfather would represent him. And as a large landowner in town, he – he did, he ow – he owned a – a very big house on what would be in **New York** a sw – an entire square block.

Q: Wow.

A: Yeah, it was a large property, filled with lumber that my unc – Uncle **Moysai**(ph) was dealing in, and – and also poppy fields, and fruits and vegetables growing there –

Q: In town?

A: Oh, it was a fantastic garden. Fantastic. And we used to go there all the time to pick fruit and stuff. So he was a prominent landowner. How he got it, I have no idea.

Q: What was his name?

A: **Haim Gordon**.

Q: Gor – so is that your mother's maiden name?

A: My mother's maiden name was **Gordon**.

Q: So she was **Mildred Gordon** in English, but in – in Yiddish it would have been **Milcha**(ph)?

A: **Michla**(ph) **Gordon**.

Q: **Michla**(ph) **Gordon**.

A: Yeah.

Q: **Michla**(ph) **Gordon**.

A: Yeah.

Q: And – and his name wa – again, his first name, your grandfather's?

A: **Haim**.

Q: **Haim Gordon**.

A: That's **Hyman**.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Yeah.

Q: And can you paint a picture for me about what the house looked like that he lived in? Was it a brick, a stone, a wood? How many floors, things like that.

A: My grandfather's house was a wooden house, but very, very elegant. It was not very wide, but very, very long. When I say not very wide, it – it – I – my guess would be, let's see, it had bedrooms on each side, and then a long hallway. It might have been say 50 feet wide, but maybe a – a 120 feet long, so –

Q: That's large.

A: It was very large, and made of wood, and it had many, many big rooms: music room, bedrooms on both sides, a huge kitchen and a huge dining room, where my grandfather entertained local big shots, which is – was where he got his power in the courtroom, because he was – now he must have spoken a language – I'm sure he was fluent in Russian, and probably all the big shots in **Lithuania** were fluent in Russian.

Q: Yes, they would have been.

A: Yeah, because it was a part of **Russia** –

Q: Right. They would have –

A: – shor – you know, I was there in the 1920s. Well, in 1914, it was **Russia**.

Q: That's right, that's right.

A: So it's not that far back.

Q: Sure. Educated people got their degrees, their higher education at Russian universities.

A: They did.

Q: Yeah.

A: I mean, there was no university in la – in **Zarasai**.

Q: Yeah.

A: And in **Kovno** there was a university, but who could travel from –

Q: **Zarasai** –

A: – **Zarasai** to – there were no cars.

Q: Yeah.

A: So –

Q: How did you get from **Kovno** to **Zarasai**? So did you take a bus? Was there a bus route, or –

A: We took a bus.

Q: Okay, so they did have bus routes at that point.

A: They did have a bus that came once in a while.

Q: Okay.

A: Once in a while. I did have a fantastic experience wher – all the kids did. It was in the winter, and the Lithuanian air force – I'm saying this slowly, so it should sink in, we found out that the Lithuanian air force was going to land on the lake.

Q: So it must have been winter, with – it's frozen.

A: Pardon?

Q: The wi – lake must have been frozen.

A: The lake would freeze. They pulled out six foot slabs of ice from the lake in the wintertime.

Q: Wow.

A: They used to saw it, and then pull it out, and put it in a barn, and cover it with straw, for it – later in the –

Q: Right.

A: – spring, you know, to preserve butter and stuff like that. Well, the air force, three airplanes came in and landed on the ice. And all the kids and half – a lot of the grownups, we all ran out on the ice. And there was some talk, what if the ice cracks,

you know, and we all go down into the lake. But it couldn't. Th – I think the ice froze to six or eight feet.

Q: That's how far north it was, huh?

A: Yeah.

Q: Mus – then it was cold in the wintertime.

A: It had a nickname.

Q: What was that?

A: **Lithuania** is the **Siberia** of **Lithuania** – **Zarasai** is the si –

Q: **Siberia** of **Lithuania**.

A: **Siberia** of **Lithuania**.

Q: Wow.

A: Yeah, we used to kid about that, but it was a – it was a lovely little town, and you have to picture the town – I-I-I'll draw a word picture.

Q: Sure.

A: Here is a big lake. In the middle of the lake is a mountain. And you cut off the top of the mountain, and you build a town on it.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: So, in the wintertime, any road going down to the lake became a sledding thing.

Q: Opportunity.

A: Yeah. We would ride the sled down, out onto the ice, it would go out 500 feet out onto the ice after going down the hill. It was terrific. And everyone had a sled. So –

Q: You – going back to your grandfather's house, it sounds like a very well-to-do house, actually, if he had separate rooms for different functions, and a large kitchen.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Now, to get a sense of, you know, the differences in modernity, did it have electricity?

A: No.

Q: Did it have indoor plumbing?

A: No.

Q: How was it heated?

A: I – it was heated by fireplaces.

Q: Coal, do you think, or by wood?

A: By wood.

Q: By wood, okay.

A: I mean, my Uncle **Moysai**(ph) had 2,00 logs out in the – in the big garden. No, they – they had plenty of wood. I di – I – I don't remember seeing fires going in a lot of fireplaces. I – I – I slept there during the winter and y-you climbed under

quilts this thick, and it was cold. I mean, if you got out of bed it was freezing. And you didn't want to have to go outside to the outhouse. That's – that was the plumbing.

Q: So, during this time, you're – you're still a little boy, even though you're the oldest in the family.

A: Yeah.

Q: You're still th – you know, you're little. Did you miss your dad?

A: Oh sure, but you know, children are amazingly adaptable. They – they can be put off, you know. You may not be – be able to put them off if you promised them an ice cream cone. They'll nag you for that ice cream cone forever. But if you tell them, you'll see your father in six months – you don't even know what six months are.

Q: Exactly.

A: You know, so you say, all right, so I'll wait, so I'll wait. And – but you nagged. Now, don't forget my father wrote to us all the time, and we looked forward to those. He would write to us in a roll of funny papers that would be a roll like that.

Q: So he'd send you funny papers.

A: Sent. We got a notice every month or so, to come to the post office and pick up this roll of funny paper. And **Harry** and I would like on the floor reading these

things for hours on – we maintained our English – our abilities in English, I think by reading and rereading these funny papers over and over and over again. And then we would read them and translate them to our friends as well.

Q: Well, that's so cool.

A: Yeah.

Q: They get to see these, and – did they have – did they have anything like funny papers or cartoons that were from the area, from **Lithuania [indecipherable]**

A: Not – not from **Lithuania**, but from **Germany** –

Q: Okay.

A: – there was something **Ziegmund**(ph) and **Ignatz** or something like that, you know. Little – little mischievous kids who were playing tricks on older people, and stuff. And we used to laugh hilariously at those. But they were hard to get. Only once in a while someone who traveled came back and brought papers with them, and we were dropped off at my grandfather's house, and then my cousin **Daniel** would bring it to us, and they were s – they were very cosmopolitan so –

Q: Well, it sounds that way, with that many languages in the home –

A: Yeah.

Q: That speaks of not – it could be a remote area, it could be the Siberi – **Zarasai** being the **Siberia** of **Lithuania**, but it still means that there is a wider perspective of the world.

A: Yes. **Daniel**, we never spoke Yiddish with him, only English. But his parents spoke English to him, as well as French.

Q: And so where would they have gotten those?

A: I cannot figure it out, they – they must have been eager beavers. Or you could chalk it up to upwardly mobile, you know, pretentious. Snobs, even, you know. I mean, let's face it, if you learn a language – if you learn Chinese and you live in a country there's not a single Chinese person, then it's out of curiosity more than anything else, but the – English and – and French were considered very high class. And just being able to flaunt it was –

Q: What about German in the 1920s? Because for so many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, **Germany** was the land of culture.

A: Yes. And we saw many, many German language films in my Uncle **Moysai's**(ph) theater, and –

Q: This is in **Zarasai**, or in **Kovno**?

A: In **Zarasai**, and in **Kovno** as well.

Q: So there was a – so there was a theater in – in **Zarasai**, there was a cinema there.

A: He had the **Bongo** there, and then he opened another one in **Kovno**.

Q: So he owned a cinema?

A: He owned two – two mo-movie theaters.

Q: Well, that's a good uncle to talk up, my goodness.

A: Yeah – no, **Moysai**(ph) was – oh, he was such a spectacular guy. He even survived the war, and he survived his wife, survived his son, and wound up with a family in **Israel**. He – he – he was doer.

Q: **Moysai**(ph) **Gordon** was his name, or –

A: He took the name **Gordon**.

Q: Mm-hm, because of his wife, yeah **[indecipherable]**

A: Because of his wife, yeah, I don't know what his real name was.

Q: Who was your mother's sister. Okay.

A: Btu he was like adopted by my grandfather, I guess, and lived with my grandfather. But **Moysai**(ph) was a go-getter. I mean, he was a very big, tall, handsome guy. I mean, I used to look up to him. And – but when the German films, when he showed the German films, I could understand everything because of Yiddish. It's close enough, and it's especially when they – they're just using common everyday things like **[speaks German]**

Q: Yeah.

A: **[German]** you know. It's easy enough to understand. If s – if someone recently – in recent times asked me if I had any interest in the Jewish newspaper in **New York**, and I said –

Q: You mean **[indecipherable]**

A: "**The Forwards**." I said, I can read it, but I said, you gotta remember that my Yiddish speaking was up to the age of 12, I – so I don't have an intellectual connection to Yiddish, I just know basic Yiddish. And if you start going into complicated philosophical stuff, I don't know what it – what it's about. But the movies, everything was, are you going out, are you coming in, are you – you know –

Q: Do you love me, do you not?

A: Do you love me? Are you going to eat? You know, so that I could understand cause it's the same.

Q: So **Zarasai** itself, it had a movie theater, I didn't know, in the 20s.

A: It had –

Q: You say it had a movie theater?

A: And it was named **The Bongo**.

Q: **The Bongo**.

A: Yeah.

Q: And did it have any kind of like, department store, or general store? What did the town square look like? I'm asking two questions at the same time, my apologies.

A: Since I didn't have any money, and shopping was also somewhat of anathema, I'm not aware of store – everything was made to order. All my shoes were made to order, all my shirts, my coat. When winter was approaching, my mother started to schlepp us to the –

Q: Tailor's.

A: – to the tailor's, to the bootmakers, to the – you know, to the – stockings. I had to go to a place to have stockings made. So –

Q: What about bakeries? Were there bagels?

A: There were places where you could buy bagels. There were also ladies who walked down the street with strings of bagels, shouting **[speaks Russian]** That's in Russian. There were bakeries, yeah, you could – you could buy bread. I know we didn't bake anything. And we scratched for food.

Q: Were you hungry?

A: I was hungry a lot, yeah. My mother didn't pay much attention to supplying food. That's one of the things where she fell down. And we'd be waiting and starving and she'd – finally she would come home and we figure, maybe there's something to eat. And you never knew what it would be. Sometimes it would be –

once it was a big bag of grapes. Somebody brought it in from somewhere. But on – another time – and I hated this – she brought like a pound of butter, and a pound of white cheese, and mashed it all together, and – and we ate that with bread, and it was not fulfilling.

Q: Was that a change from how she had been in **Savannah**, if in **Savannah** she was so careful about kosher food?

A: Oh, all of this was kosher.

Q: Still kosher.

A: Yeah.

Q: But sh – it sounds like you never went hungry in **Savannah**.

A: I don't know, I wa – in **Savannah** you c – it's important to remember that I was not yet six.

Q: I know. I'm asking such unfair questions.

A: No, no, it's –

Q: If someone asked me, what were you doing at five years old, and I – you know, in details –

A: Yeah, I –

Q: – I couldn't do it.

A: – I honestly don't remember what food was about. The thing we looked forward to in **Zarasai** was something called cholent. Cholent is a big iron pot, about the s – bigger than a basketball – about the size of a ba-basketball. A s-s-solid iron pot. And all kinds of stuff went into it: sliced carrots, peas, chicken, potato, even onion. And **[indecipherable]** water, and it was just a huge stew in there. Must have been five pounds worth of food in there, and I had to carry it to a communal oven, Friday before sundown. And it would be shoved into a communal oven. And then Saturday night, after sundown, I would go pick it up and carry it for five kilometers. Oh God, what a chore this was. I'm not yet 12 years old, I'm a – maybe 10 or 11. And a – it – well, we built a wagon, **Harry** and I, and we used to pull it. Someone gave us broken parts of yo-yos. They were making yo-yos in a mill, a wooden mill.

Q: Really?

A: Yeah. And they would break apart, and they wouldn't bother putting it together, so they gave it – we had a friend there, and he gave me a bag full of –

Q: Yo-yos.

A: – y-yo-yo discs. We made wagons out of it and all kinds of toys out of it, and I think one of them was a wagon that we could pull –

Q: The cholent –

A: – with this heavy thing in it. Now, I gotta tell you that when that came home, it was still piping hot, because it's –

Q: The iron kept the heat.

A: – an iron pot, and – and that stuff was boiling when we picked it up. And it cooled off enough to be able to eat it, and it was delicious. That – you know, it's a great stew, I mean, potatoes and carrots and chicken and – I think she put some honey in it too, I – but it was – it was just delicious. And that's the best meal of the week that we had. Otherwise it was a lot of herring. It re – herring was easy to get. Is – this comes in a barrel. So we'd each get a herring and a piece of bread. But it's not a fulfilling diet.

Q: How – how did your mother spend her days?

A: Either with friends, or she was in the shul, I don't know which one she was doing. We – I – I'm – I'm sure she had a lot of friends, or she pref – or took care of sick old people. That was part of her charity work.

Q: But her kids na – it sounds like you were kind of raising yourselves.

A: We were raising ourselves, yes, we were. And then **Karowlka**(ph) and **Anna** and **Ziegmund**(ph), they would – they would grab hold of me and **Harry** – my mother very often took the younger ones with her.

Q: Okay.

A: They'd grab hold of **Harry** and me and they'd bring me into their house, kitchen, big dining ta – table, and they'd say, are you hungry? And we'd say yes. And **Karowlka**(ph) would say, well, we have some good food, but if you tell your mother, you will never, ever be able to eat here again. So we s – **Harry** and I would say, we won't tell, we won't tell. And I think we even got pork chops. But we didn't care.

Q: Do you remember that kind of food? Was it very different from the food you were used to at home? Or was it just, it's a meal?

A: Not the chicken, very – chicken and fish, you know. You used to go out and spear fish. So you get a nice big pike, about that long, and that was delicious, you know. Had a lot of little **Y** bones, but you learn to spit them out.

Q: Yeah.

A: And oh, I loved going there, you know, that was great. And they were very sweet people. **Ziegmund**(ph) was a tailor by – taught himself to be a tailor, and you know, freelance tailoring. **Anna** was the housekeeper, she took care of the cow and the sheep and the chickens and all of that kind of stuff, and the garden. And they had a lush garden, so we got plenty of vegetables. And fruit galore. In fact, his orchard was so productive that he would rent it out in the summer to a entrepreneur who would come and pick loads of the stuff and sell it to the stores. But we could go in

there and pick apples and pear and currants and gooseberries, wonderful stuff. But that's in the summertime. In the wintertime you have to rely on slaughtering the chickens, and – I had pet chickens, too.

Q: Did you?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did they have names?

A: Hm?

Q: Did they have names?

A: They did, but I forget. I had one favorite chicken and – and I thought she was lost. And then one day, she's found, she marches out from under the outhouse, I think, I can't know where she was. And she's followed by little chicks. So I – I became a father. And I know that was very exciting. I really thought that either somebody had grabbed her and eaten her –

Q: Yeah.

A: – or she just got lost, but she just was in confinement. And she marched out with the little things peeping. It's very exciting life, you know I – I feel like I was a Jewish **Huckleberry Finn**.

Q: You know, it sounds that way. There sounds li – the picture that you're painting alternates between a place that is backward technologically, but has a lot of wonderful features to it, you know.

A: Oh, it – I had a wonderful time. We did – we did have a certain amount of fear, because there was conflict, and it wasn't – it's – it shouldn't be confused with institutional anti-Semitism, such as Nazism. No, it was just the conflicts of religious belief. And this goes on between Muslims and Hindus, between northern **Ireland** and southern **Ireland**, you know, it goes on all over the world; **Nigeria**, you name it.

Q: So you wouldn't say if I – if I – it doesn't sound like it would be more different than in other places of the world. It would be what you have in other places in the world.

A: Absolutely. It's just that there were – there was tribalism, cliques. But tribalism is really what it is. Gentile kids hung out with Gentile kids, Jewish kids hung out with Jewish kids, and if the two came together, there would be conflict. So – and then, of course, there were terrible rumors that were spread about Jews drinking the blood of Christian children on Passover, you know. Someone starts a terrible story, and it gets passed along, because people – there are people who want to create trouble.

Q: Well, you know, I don't know enough about this, I would like to research it more. But, you know, sometimes I connect dots and I have to research to find out whether or not the connection is really valid. But the part of the world you're talking about, which we've already emphasized, was part of the tsarist empire at one point.

A: Yes.

Q: And when the revolutionary movements were happening in the 19th century, that alarmed the authorities that were in power.

A: Yes.

Q: That there were these revolutionary movements. And the secret police, the **Okhrana**, secret police – this is what I have heard, and I'd have to research it – created The Protocol of the Elders of **Zion**.

A: Yes.

Q: And so, if this was the place where this was created, and it then had a power, you know, it got disseminated, this is in those territories.

A: Yes.

Q: Something sticks. Something –

A: It was even picked up here in **America** by –

Q: Yeah.

A: – the head of the **Ford** motor company, **Edsel Ford** –

Q: That's right.

A: He picked up the –

Q: Protocols.

A: – Protocols of **Zion**, which is why he was – he favored **Hitler's** solution, and he was a major anti-Semite, and – because he believed The Protocols of **Zion**, which was a fabrication.

Q: Yes, complete.

A: Complete fabrication. You could do this with any group, you could do it with black people, you could do it to Irish people, to a-anybody. Just pick some little –

Q: Thing.

A: – thing, and enlarge it into a big fairy tale. So – and the – the spreading of notions like **Christ** killers.

Q: That's right, I was going to mention that too. So that comes from one force, and then you have – and then you have unfortunately, the Catholic church and other Christian denominations. But mostly, it would have been the Catholic church that, for centuries, talked about that, you know.

A: Yes, well, I – I'm – I'm not well enough educated in these matters to – to take sides as to who the guilty party is, and who the innocent. The innocent party, as we

always know, are the ones who are singled out for attack. They – no group is as guilty o-o-of any crime – first of all, you can't make a group guilty, they're – they're – within a group, even a – a group of bigots, there's somebody who says, wait a minute, we're going too far with this. This is not – yo-you know –

Q: That's right.

A: – this is not a human attitude. So I'm sure there were Nazis who had doubts about what they were doing, but you either go along, or you're – you become part of the pariah group. So it's – it's a – it's a tu – it's a tough call, but it – tribalism has been going on since the – since time began, and it un – it undoubtedly will go on forever and ever.

Q: Yeah.

A: The best we can do is learn lessons from these things, and try to pass along the notion that people aren't inherently bad. People are born into certain circumstances beyond their ability to do anything about, you know, and – and if they become part of the cursed, they are in terrible trouble, that's all there is to it. So I think the Holocaust Museum's function, in my view, is to set the record straight about bigotry, and depression, and indiscriminate intolerance –

Q: Absolutely.

A: – and – and – and creating victims. We have to – we have to not do that to any human being. I wouldn't torture **Hitler** if I had a chance to do so. I would – I would separate him from – from others so that he can't do any more harm, but I certainly wouldn't take revenge on him by, you know, doing terrible things to him. He's a – he was a human being as well, but – this is just my feeling is that revenge gets you absolutely nothing. The only – the only terrific revenge is to educate, so that terrible things are looked upon as terrible things, and they turn everyone's stomach, and no one wants to do them any more.

Q: We can hope. We can hope.

A: That's what we want.

Q: Yeah. Can we cut here? **[break]** When did your father show up? You know, you – I'd like to get the chronology straight, because you say there was some back and forth, and that your mother took you to **Lithuania** not just one time.

A: Yes.

Q: So that means there was a time that you had to come back to the **States**, or you did come back to the **States**.

A: Yes. The chronology of events with my father were basically; one year in **Lithuania**, 1926 to 1927. Then back to – my father comes to **Lithuania** and takes us back to **America**.

Q: Does he take your mother, too?

A: Yeah, all of us, we all come back.

Q: And do you – do you remember what that was like when he arrived?

A: Oh yes. It was a – well, it was a great relief and a great surprise when I – we found out, **Harry** and I were – we got a message to come to our grandfather's house. So we go there, and there's our father. So our father said, well, I've come to take you home, on and on and on. And I don't – here my memory is a little shaky. I don't know if he came with me and **Harry** to the house that my mother was renting, and told her – or if she came to my grandfather's house. But in any case, we were all ordered to pack up and get ready to go back home.

Q: So that's pretty sudden.

A: That was very sudden. It – I don't know if my mother had any warning. She probably received mail that said I'm – you – if you don't come back by such and such a date, I'm coming to get you and I'm going to drag you all back here. So it wa – now this is 19 – somehow I'm remembering prohibition, because my father picked up a – a – a – a prized bottle of wine – **[sirens]** have to wait til that –

[break]

Q: So you were mentioning something about your father and prohibition and a bottle of wine?

A: Yes, and it –

Q: Tell me about that.

A: When he opened the suitcase, and it was Prohibition, I think he wanted to celebrate in **New York** with the family that we were staying with, relatives, and he went for his bottle of wine and it was broken in the suitcase.

Q: Oh.

A: I mean, during Prohibition, to lose such a valuable – I thought I – he was gonna cry.

Q: Poor guy.

A: Anyway, that's –

Q: So did your mother not protest about going back?

A: I think there must have been a m – an ultimatum of some sort. He – she – I'm sure she didn't want to come back, but in any case, we – we did come back, and – but she didn't want to go to **Savannah**, she wanted to stay in **New York**. So she made him rent a house in the **Rockaways**. So I had a year of living on the water in **Rockaway** beach, and becoming an American beachcomber, you know. Another experience entirely. But my father was out of a job, because of this problem of –

Q: You mentioned that earlier –

A: Yeah.

Q: – that he had – he – because he took off to get you, he was away from the store.

A: Too much. And he was threatened with being fired if he went – if he went off, and sure enough he was fired. So when he came back – however the son of the man who owned the department store had a bank in the – one of the **Carolinas**, **North Carolina** or **South Carolina**. And he offered my father the opportunity of operating a refreshment stand in the bank, with **Coca-Cola** and – you know, sandwiches and stuff like that. So my father hired somebody down there to help him, and established this little business, from which he was ma-managing to send money to my mother in the **Rockaways**, to pay for the house we lived in. And that went along smoothly for almost a year, when she hysterically notified my father that I was – I was – that I was in the hospital, after being hit by a car. Which was true, but she made it sound much worse than it really was.

Q: Well, being hit by a car does sound kind of serious.

A: Well, it was Christmastime.

Q: What happened?

A: And I was on the street, in ra – in **Rockaways**, and across the street was **Santa Claus**. And I wanted to run over and see **Santa Claus**. Now, I was probably around eight at this time, so I ran across and got hit by a car and was in the hospital. So my father came to the hospital. At this point, the thing in the bank collapsed, that he

had. That was taken away from him because what happened was, the man he hired to help him, stole everything, and moved it out of the bank. So, you know, it's like a soap opera.

Q: Well, he had – you know, if he didn't care about his family, then he probably could have saved everything, but it – clearly, he cared about you –

A: Oh, he did, he did.

Q: – he cared about – and so, that took priority.

A: We survived the Holocaust because he cared. And that I can get to very quickly.

Q: I'd like to hear that part, yeah. We can talk about it now and then go back and fill in the gaps.

A: All right. You mentioned that he cared about us. Well, here's how he cared about us. In 1933, **Hitler** became chancellor of **Germany**, and was going to clean all of **Europe**, if not the world, of Jews. **Judenrein**, it was going to be. Well, my father ba – at that point, the only way he could survive after losing the thing in the bank, was to apply to the post office for a job, which, he took the test, but because he was a veteran of World War I, they gave him extra points so that he – he was one of the chosen. Otherwise, he would have had to wait for years in line –

Q: To get a job at the post office.

A: – to get a job at the post office. But his – his ex-extra points from being a veteran, made it happen quicker.

Q: What was his job?

A: He was a – a postal car – not a postal carrier, he was a substitute postal carrier. He only made money when he was sent out on a job. He sat in **Grand Central Station** waiting for a 59 cent an hour assignment. But those were – it was the great depression. This is 1933 – '32 - '33. So he borrowed money from – his father died, and left a little bit of money to him and siblings, and he bother – borrowed some of the money from siblings, and he went over to get us, to save us from **Hitler**, or whatever is gonna happen in **Europe**. I don't know that he specifically decided that he was saving us from **Hitler**, I think he was just simply getting very lonely after all these years. This second time, we were in **Lithuania** for four years. First time, one year, this time, four years. So he wou – I – I was – we were living in **Kovno** at the time, or the – the suburb of **Kovno**, called slub – **Sluborda**(ph).

Q: **Slobodka**, mm-hm.

A: **Slobodka**. And **Slobodka** was essentially a Jewish enclave.

Q: Poor. Very poor.

A: Very poor and Jewish and with yeshivas and synagogues, and later became a concentration camp when the Germans came in.

Q: A ghetto. It became a ghetto.

A: A – a ghetto.

Q: Yeah.

A: But sort of like a concentration camp. You couldn't leave it.

Q: No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

A: So my father came and we got a notice from our – from relatives to – to come in and visit them. Their name was the **Simonses**' and they lived in **Kovno** proper in a very nice place, with a courtyard and wagons and horses, and very nice. So they used to invited us periodically, and feed us. And we always looked forward to that. And we had a couple of cousins there, too, relatives of my ma – my mother's. So, we arrived there and my cousin takes me and **Harry** into another room and says, look who's here. And it was my father, whom we hadn't seen for three and a half years. Well, it was a shock. I mean, he embraced both of us, and it was very shocking. And he – then he told us, he said, I've come to take you all home, and let's go and get your mother and the younger brothers, **David** and **Bernard**. So we went there, and they had a big discussion which I – we – I – we didn't listen to, they held it in private. And finally they came out and they had an agreement, and the agreement was that he should take the three older boys to **America**, and leave the youngest one with her, and she'll join us later. Well, I don't think she ever had any

intention of joining us later, she – we went to **America** with my father, and she returned to **Zarasai** from **Kovno** from –

Q: With your youngest brother.

A: With my youngest brother. And – and that's the last we ever saw of her.

Q: Now this is what year?

A: 1933. May of 1933. And the reason I remember that so well is that when I came to **America**, I had to be put into school in – it was May, it was still school.

Q: School time, yeah.

A: So –

Q: What about your brother? Did he ever – what happened to him?

A: My youngest brother?

Q: **David**, mm-hm.

A: Now we go back to my father's caring. When – when my father brought us back to **America**, he o – he obviously couldn't take care of us. He was a substitute postal carrier. He took me to live with him in a furnished room. My Uncle **Harry** and my Aunt **Pauline** in **Brooklyn** took my brother **Harry** in. And **Bernard**, the deaf mute, was put into the **New York** School for the Deaf, which he never stopped crying.

Q: Oh, the poor fellow.

A: It was so sad, because he had grown up with us through thick and thin in **Lithuania**, and we'll – had our own language. He didn't know sign language or any of that, he knew our language. But things settled down a bit, and throughout my school days, every Friday I went to the **New York** School for the Deaf to pick **Bernard** up and bring him, and we all slept in one double bed, my father, **Bernard** and I, in a furnished room. And then on Monday he had to be – no, Sunday night he had to be taken back to the **New York** School for the Deaf. And that's how we lived. But now going back to my father's caring. He took care of all of us. He did. He checked on **Harry**, who was living with my – his brother, and he – for the summer he sent me to live with his sisters in **South Fallsburg**, and it was a wonderful treat for me, because **South Fallsburg** was as close as to **Zarasai** as you could get, surrounded by rivers and lakes.

Q: Where is it? What state is it in?

A: It's in new – upper –

Q: Oh, it's up near –

A: – in the **Catskills**.

Q: I see, okay.

A: **Catskill** mountains.

Q: That's why I didn't recognize it, yeah.

A: Yes, **Catskill** mountains. We had rivers and lakes and fishing, and everything that I had in **Lithuania**. And I had cousins, and I did everything with them. And then, much later on, in s – when the war was already starting, and –

Q: 1939?

A: 1939. My father made arrangements for a young Polish man, who was emigrating to the **United States** – he must have done this through **HIAS**, or one of the Hebrew organizations, or Jewish organiza – I think it must have been **HIAS**, but I'm guessing. He arranged for this young Polish man, on his way to **America**, to st – to go to **Zarasai**, and to go to the address where my mother was living with ber – with **David**, and tell **David** that he has tickets for them to go to **America**. And I guessed they must have discussed the fact that if he told his mother, she wouldn't let him go. He was 14. So they kept the secret, and he wound up on a train to **Memel**.

Q: **Klaipėda**, yeah, the port city. The port city, mm-hm.

A: No, first they – they – they wound up first in – in a Dutch city.

Q: Oh, then it wouldn't be **Memel**, that would be further west. **Memel** is what – in 1939, March 1939, it had been part of **Lithuania** and then **Hitler** took it back, right after **Czechoslovakia** –

A: Right.

Q: – he took it back.

A: It wasn't **Memel**, it was – it – it was a Dutch city.

Q: Okay.

A: And the reason that I re – now remember that it was a Dutch city, is when the – this Polish young man and my brother went to the hotel to – to a hotel, to stay til their boat left in **Antwerp**, they were told n-no Jews. By that time the Fifth Column of **Germany** had already invaded the low countries of **Holland** and –

Q: **Belgium** and –

A: **Belgium** and **Holland**. And they couldn't find a place to stay, so they made their way to the port city, and just went looking for the – their –

Q: Could it have – could **Hoek von Haven** – could it be – there's a – a town called **Hoek von Haven** or something like that.

A: I don't know the details, but I – I do remember one fact that – that I think may stir something in your mind. They were on a train from the Dutch city that they had landed in, they needed a train to go to where the boat was. When they got on the train – and I don't know where the train was going, but it was filled with German soldiers, and my brother told us that he started speaking Yiddish, which he was fluent in, to the German soldiers, and they shared their lunch with him, and with the Polish fellow. They thought he was speaking some kind of –

Q: German dialect.

A: – germ – German dialect. And they all got along swimmingly, and they safely got off the train to where they were going to catch the boat, and eventually they did – they must have had to go to **England** though, to get on a boat, because they came over on – my father had tickets for them on the German **Lloyd** line, but they couldn't be used, so they had to go on a different boat. Now, we were switched – originally we were switched from a German boat to the **Gripsholm**, which was a Swedish boat. But I don't know what –

Q: That was in 1933.

A: In 1933.

Q: And would have that been for political reasons, because the Nazis were in power by then –

A: Yes.

Q: – and they weren't going to take Jews.

A: They weren't going to take Jews on their German **Lloyd** line boats.

Q: Okay, okay.

A: So we sw – we switched to the **Gripsholm**.

Q: Okay.

A: And that was a wonderful trip, wonderful. And – but now, my memory is sort of – none of this was written down, so my memory is getting a little shaky with my brother's experiences. I remember he told us all about this, but that was in 1940, or 1939, 1940. I can't even remember –

Q: And 75 years later we're asking you details.

A: I – I – the **Rotterdam**, I think he was on.

Q: Ah, okay.

A: I think it was the **Rotterdam**. But he – he and the Polish guide were – just barely got onto it. They arrived late, they barely got on, and so he arrived here, and unfortunately he brought – he brought his – the Lithuanian winter with him, in the form of rheumatic fever –

Q: Oh.

A: – which he contracted in **Zarasai**.

Q: Yeah.

A: That's why earlier I said, two of my brothers got sicknesses from winter, that's all, it's – and – and –

Q: They're cold winters and they're damp winters. And it –

A: Damp and cold, yeah.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: Everybody was a little sick. You know, you just couldn't get enough heat in the houses.

Q: You know, but it really does speak to the extraordinary devotion your father had. For somebody who was earning a living as a substitute postal carrier, to – to care and borrow and – you know, his own career, such as it would have been, was kind of shattered.

A: Yeah.

Q: But to care to that extent, that even if he had nothing, he was going to get his kids out.

A: Oh, he gave us everything. He – he even eventually got a – he was still in the post office, he'd never le – never got out of the post office, but he did take the test to become a regular, so he had a regular salary, not just a pick-up salary. Cause he was a temp really, before. So now he was – had a regular salary, and he got a small apartment, it was a – a one bedroom apartment, but we used the living room as a bedroom also. And he – he installed me into that apartment, and of course, every Friday I'd pick **Bernard** up and brought him to that apartment. And – and then later on **David** arrived, so he – he ministered to all of us. He didn't let a single one of us down. And when **David** was in the hospital with his rheumatic fever bouts, my father was there all day long. Certainly on his day off. And on his work days he

came up as soon as he could, skipping dinner and just going straight to the hospital. No, he was – he was a devoted father. There's a lot he couldn't do for us, but I'll even tell you this little anecdote: I had – I had to cut class in the high school in music and art, a class that went on beyond the school day, which required us to go to a museum, a art museum, and I cut it, and I went to pick up my brother **Bernard**, brought him home. Subsequently, I was called down to the dean's office, and was reprimanded, and I explained why, and the dean was sympathetic, but she sent a note home to my father that I'd – it was her duty to report that I had cut a class. And my father gave me a note to take back to her. And she called – and I met with her, and I sat with her and she opened the letter that my father sent, and it said, how do I know where he was? You see him more often than I do. But he – he was going to ride herd on me, you know? It's –

Q: Yeah.

A: And – no, it was at that point that I explained to her what it was all about, not before. I said, well, Mrs. **Dorkin**(ph), let me tell you why I cut the class. I have a deaf mute brother who is waiting at the gate for me to arrive, cause he is dying to be with us, and I can't –

Q: Leave him there.

A: – be late for him.

Q: Yeah.

A: And she said, don't worry about it, never happen again. You don't have to ever worry. So, you know, it's like a soap opera.

Q: Well, it's – it's –

A: But it's real life.

Q: Yeah, it's real life, and when you hear of – this is also real love, you know? It's real devotion. It is when you sacrifice because they're your kids, and they come first.

A: Yes.

Q: And –

A: My father did that with whatever means he had.

Q: Yeah.

A: And sometimes he had no means at all, and he borrowed money, and hopefully he repaid it, and I'm sure knowing him, he would have. So –

Q: I mean, tha – I thi – I'm very touched by it. I really am.

A: Yeah, well, when I think about it, I sometimes think, Pop, I wish you were here, just so I could show you what I've done.

Q: Yeah.

A: You know, that – I'm – that I've – I've followed your principles.

Q: Yeah. And that what he first – with – with the – with the funnies, you know, that it started with the funnies that he introduced you to?

A: The funnies, the people in the funnies became part of our family. **Maggie and Jiggs**, and the **Katzenjammer Kids** – we identified with the **Katzenjammer Kids**, but the **Maggie and Jiggs** were real weirdos to us, because she was always throwing a rolling pin at **Jiggs**, which I couldn't understand. It would have killed him.

Q: Yeah.

A: But no, it – it's – he created – he – he did create in us, a desire to be something, succeed at something, to follow our hearts and our – our imaginations and our creative impulses. He had them, but he had to subdue them in order to be loyal to us, and take care of us. He never let us down. I can't remember him ever letting me down.

Q: That's amazing. And that's a wonderful tribute. It's just – it's just a wonderful tribute.

A: And we had our arguments, and we – I was – at times you can't help – when you're a callow youth, you can't help be a ca – but be a callow youth. And I would – I would say things to him like, you won't let me have that white sweater, so I can wear, you know, the letter that I won in basketball. And he'd say, get a job after

school and get yourself a sweater. And I said, the other kids parents pay for these things, and then we'd get into a –

Q: Yeah.

A: – squabble over it. But I, of course, with the benefit of time, I realize that he had enough on his plate that he just couldn't carry off everything. He – looking back, he did more, I think, than most people would ever do. A majority of people would not – they would have given up.

Q: Yeah.

A: They mu – they – even good people would have said, I can't – I can't handle this. I can't raise four little boys by myself, and take care of all their needs. I don't know that I could have done that.

Q: And first of all pull them out of **Europe**. He pulls you all out of **Europe**.

A: He pulled us out of the Holocaust.

Q: Yeah.

A: I mean, you know, when he came over, people were not able to escape the Holocaust by then. 1933 was a rough time in many parts of **Europe**. I mean, he was a bit prescient.

Q: Yeah.

A: I mean, he beat – he beat the – the system, because it wasn't, I think, until 1936 that things started to get really bad.

Q: Well, in **Germany**, it was, of course, some people i-i-in **Germany**, as – as you probably well know, the depar – the de – the – amongst Jewish families, the question of to leave, to stay, should we leave, can we ride this out? If we leave now will – what will we lose? You know, all of that.

A: Yes.

Q: Some people left earlier, some people left later, some people left in 1940, almost unheard of.

A: Yeah.

Q: But – but this – this whole question became very relevant after **Hitler** came to power, and from other countries, like **Lithuania**, it was – it were – other – there were other issues –

A: Yeah.

Q: – that came up. But it was – then, it would have been – you know, when I've interviewed people who were – it would have been 1940 – 1941, that's when the cutoff is, you know, that you can't leave, because the Germans have come in.

A: Yeah.

Q: And before – so, but let's go back to – let's go back to your mother. When you leave in 1933 to go back with your father, is that the last time you saw her?

A: That is the last time I ever saw my mother. We did get a couple of pieces of mail, and very warm, loving letters pleading with us not to forget her. Very touching.

Q: Any explanation? Was any explanation ever given to you why she did not come to the **United States** again? Why she stayed?

A: None that I know of. I have never heard any explanation. The – the counterpoint to what we were talking about, my father's loyalty, and his dedication to saving his children, the counterpoint to that – to that puzzle is my mother not seeming to care. I mean, you would think that she would have rushed – she would have written letters to my father – she could have communicated, there was no question about it – and saying get me out of here, I want to see my children. Now, the – the only thing I can conclude is that there must have been some kind of mental breakdown, which would be understandable, certainly in the co – in the context of her letting her husband take three children away, and eventually losing the fourth one as well. So, I could see a – a breakdown, but I have no – I tried, through the Red Cross to – to – I wrote to the Red Cross and asked them if they had any kind of way of tracing someone in **Lithuania**, and the answer I got was basically that while the Germans

kept meticulous records of everything, which is typically German, the Lithuanians did not keep records at all, she s – they said. So I didn't turn to the Holocaust Museum, I thought about it many times. But I wonder if the Holocaust Museum might have a record of what happened in **Zarasai**, and –

Q: Oh, what happened in **Zarasai**, we probably do, and we will see ho – what we could supply. But for this interview, it is that you've never found out. Is that –

A: I never found out anything.

Q: So, do y – and was it a handful of letters you got since 1933? You know, between the time she could write, until the time she could not write any more? Was it once a month, like you said –

A: No –

Q: – your father would send you something once a month when you were in **Zarasai**.

A: I – I don't recall getting – I – I think we got one – one thing that – there's a little bit of a mystery here. When my book was being done, I – I received a package from my cousin in the **Catskills** with – whose family I had lived when I was a bo – a little boy, and **Bernie** sent me a package that his parents had left behind when they died. And one of them contained a whole bunch of photographs of my mother and father, including my father in uniform. These were things that ma – apparently

wound up in my father's sister's hands. And there was also a picture of my mother, and written on the picture wa – back of the picture was – it was in **Lithuania**, and it says, do not forget me. That was where that came from. So there were mix – a mixture of – of artifacts, but I have no direct mail, nothing that I can recall that she wrote directly to us. She might have written to my father, she might have written to her sister, or other people, but I have nothing. I don't recall anything.

Q: It's quite a gap. It's quite a gap, you know.

A: It is a gap there.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah. And you'd think something would have happened after she lost my youngest brother, when he was wi – whisked away by –

Q: Yeah.

A: – this fellow who brought him to **America**. No, it's all a mystery.

Q: Did you think about it much over the years?

A: Yeah, I think about it periodically. It's – it's unfinished – it's unfinished, important in – life story. But you know, our defenses rise up. You – in order to survive, you can't dwell on – on horror of the past, or a-any – anything. You just have to move on. And so, that's been my defense, I – I just move on. Fortunately, my father didn't have that attitude.

Q: Well, you know, it sounds to me like you lost your mother more than one time. You lost her in a very personal way, as a family, as a mother, and then you lost her because there was the Holocaust.

A: Yes. I had heard that, like in all the countries of **Europe**, and that includes **Italy** and **Spain** and **Bulgaria**; and you just name them all: **Hungary**, **Romania**, they all had local Nazi sympathizers. And so the – the story I heard was, once the Germans came in, even in a small group, and empowered the local se – sympathizers, they had people joining their group, local bigots, anti-Semites, or what have you, opportunists, and they just did what the Germans wanted them to do.

Q: It did happen.

A: That happened.

Q: That happened.

A: Yeah.

Q: Now, had you heard about that in general, or about your mother's pi – situation, or **Zarasai** in particular.

A: In sizi – yes, I heard about **Zarasai**. I can't remember fr – exactly from whom, but the thing that I heard about **Zarasai** was the main road out of town was cut off, so that the Jews were trapped with no –

Q: In the town, mm-hm.

A: – in **Zarasai**, with nowhere to go. And then they were all rounded up and taken to the woods that I loved, where I used to get my fishing poles, and pick strawberries, the little ones.

Q: They're delicious.

A: They're wonderful, the little, tiny things. And we used to get baskets full of them. And well la – you know, it was like **Huckleberry Finn**, I'm te – I'm telling you, **Tom Sawyer**. And we lived the good life when – you know, when we were able to go to these things. So th-the story is that they cut off the exit from town on the main road, and then rounded them up and took them to the woods and killed them. And this di – not only happened in **Lithuania**, it happened in **Poland**, it happened in **Hungary**, **Romania**, **Yugoslavia**, every – you know, everywhere. It's a strange kind of opportunism to curry favor by killing people, but that's what people did.

Q: There's some things that we try to find answers for, and sometimes we find partial answers, but some parts of those always remain inexplicable.

A: Inexplicable is the correct answer.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, because we just don't expect human beings to behave in an inhuman way, and – but they do, oth – if they didn't, we wouldn't have any more wars.

Q: Well, you know, this is one of the reasons why earlier, when we were talking about relations between Jews and non-Jews, and whatever your personal experience might have been in **Zarasai**, I wanted to get a sense of how you viewed whatever was going on there, in the context of other places, because if – if the message is that this was just as normal, you had a normal kind of life there, as there could be in any other place, that means that – that means a very spooky thing. That means that you put the right kind of forces together, and these things can happen anywhere. They didn't ha – genocide didn't happen everywhere. It happened in particular places, within a hor – historical context, when there was a final solution.

A: Yes.

Q: But it's the ingredients in the cauldron.

A: Yeah. I think self-preservation is a consuming motivation, because you either – the thinking among certain people who are very scared of everything, if you don't join them, you become the victims. You – your choice is to join the bad guys, or die as the good guy.

Q: Oftentimes, that is how people saw things.

A: Yeah.

Q: Oftentimes – is that a full answer?

A: No.

Q: I still think that there is –

A: Well, I just can't picture being with a large armed Jewish group, out to have sport by killing Gypsies, or some other unfavored – black people, you know. I – I just can't picture even entertaining such a notion, it's – it's – it's so preposterous. And yet, there are people who get down to where they say to themselves, if – if I don't join that gang, the gang is gonna kill me, so I better join the gang. That's how gangs recruit people, they threaten them.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I think it would be very easy to threaten a non-educated farmer in **Lithuania** and tell him, if you don't get rid of the Jews in the next farm, we're gonna burn your farm down, you know. So what are you going to do?

Q: Well, you know, that's how – what the – that's what we do when we don't know – we suppose. We suppose. And it could very well have been this, it could have been, I want his cow, I want his – the one car that's in town.

A: Yeah.

Q: It could be –

A: It –

Q: – it could be –

A: It could be any number of things.

Q: It could be any number of things –

A: Yes.

Q: – but there is something different when a war comes on when – when you have a force that, you know, an occupying power that has this policy. And so what do they do in order to convince you to take part in somebody else's repression and – and annihilation? You know, how do you – how do you explain that?

A: It's **Schadenfreude**.

Q: Yeah.

A: Thank God it's not me they're after, you know. It takes a lot of courage to stand up with the persecuted and say, you want to do things to them, you do them to me, too.

Q: Oh yeah.

A: You know. So – but it's – it's – courage is not an easy thing to come by.

Q: No.

A: And I don't claim to have any of it.

Q: Well, we don't know what we'd be like in – in any sit – I mean, unless you're tested, you don't know how you'd react.

A: You don't – you really don't know. And that's why I appreciate the Holocaust Museum's efforts so much, is that it's not – in my view, it's not so much

remembering the fallen as to hold a mirror up to humanity and say, you want to be like these people, you want a world that – like that to live in? It's – it's horrible. Let's not ever allow this to happen again. And course it can – you know, of course today it's Jews, tomorrow it's black people, the day after it's Chinese people. It – it's always a –

Q: Take your pick.

A: – you can pick a victim anywhere you look. But no, we're all part of the same race, we're human beings and we need to treat each other that way. Of course, I'm only, you know, sounding off about something that's – everyone knows is a basic truism. But it bears repeating. I mean, I'm not ashamed that I repeat myself with these kinds of things. Yes, we're all in it together. It's one world, we're all brothers, we're all eating – eating and drinking and – and trying to preserve things for our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and the millions of others who are yet to come. And hopefully, by example, we can – by doing something about it, by at least talking about things, showing how bad things are not to be – that shouldn't be repeated, perhaps someday it'll happen, that people will no longer hate each other.

Q: Well, the point – I think also, if we don't do it, it will be a lot worse.

A: Yes, it will be a lot worse, because the world is becoming more crowded, and there's less of it, because of climate change, which is encroaching on the lowlands. Islands are disappearing slowly, continents are shrinking and populations are growing, and food sources are becoming less abundant. And so we're either gonna have to get along together, or perish together, eventually. I mean, I know a lot of people say I won't live long enough to see the horrors of – o-o-of – of global warming. And in my case that's certainly true, I – I mean, I don't have to worry about it happening in the next 25 years, because I'm not going to be here in 25 years. But my great-grandchildren, whom I love dearly, will be here in 25 years, and I want them to have a future, as I want everybody's children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren to have. So that's wh – that's why we – we talk about remembering.

Q: Thank you, thank you.

A: You're welcome.

Q: I couldn't have thought of a better way to conclude our interview today than that. I really, really appreciate it.

A: Thank you, **Ina**.

Q: You're welcome. And I'll say with this, that concludes the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's** interview with Mr. **Al Jaffee**, on May 21st, 2016, in **Manhattan**, **New York**. Thanks again.

A: Thank you. **[break]**

Q: Okay, so we started talking about a few things off camera, that I really asked if we would be able to repeat on camera. So this is going to be an accretion to the interview with Mr. **Al Jaffee** on May 21st, by the **U.S. Holocaust Museum**, and we were talking about – about legacies in some ways, so if you could – if you could give me a sense of what is it that you got from having lived in **Zarasai** that you couldn't have here, and what is it that you got from here that you couldn't have there?

A: Oh, what an interesting question. I can quickly tell you what I brought from here to **Zarasai**, and how – how it helped me integrate into s – z – the children's society of **Zarasai**. First of all, most of the little guys that I met in **Zarasai** had never seen a train, a plane. They have seen maybe one or two automobiles in their lifetime so far: they were six or seven years old. But there's – there's so much that never arrived in **Zarasai** for them. And I would regale them with stories about subway trains that arrive every five minutes and 2,000 people shove their way in, and go to work.

Q: The ones that terrified you so much.

A: Yes, the one that terrified me. And – but they – you know, their mouths would hang open, and they would ask questions: how fast does this train go, and is it above the ground? And I said, well, some of them are above ground; they're known as the elevated tracks, and some are subways, they go underground. And there's a new train every 10 - 15 minutes. And the kids would say to me, how many trains are there? And I would say oh, there are – they go around the whole city, and it's just a continuous train tr – bunch of trains every 10 - 15 minutes. And I would tell them about trips I had taken in buses and cars and with my father. And air – airplanes that we watched take off and land. And they – they were staggered with – with curiosity. And – but then, I learned a lot from them. I learned how to – I – I didn't know how to swim, so I learned how to make swimming – what do you call a –

Q: A raft of some kind?

A: Thing that you lie down on that supports you in the water, and you – you practice swimming.

Q: Oh well, it's not a raft then, but I know what you mean –

A: Water wings, or something like that.

Q: Yeah, something like that, mm-hm.

A: Anyway, I learned how to make so many things. We made our own toys, we made our own wagons, we made our own sleds. We – we – **[phone ringing]**

[break]

Q: So, you said you learned how to make things.

A: The – I learned a lot of how you – in **Zarasai** you didn't have **Woolworth's** and other stores that you could go in and buy whatever device you needed. If you needed a device, you either made it, or you went without. And the way to find out how to make it was to consult the local people. My friend **Karowlka**(ph) taught me a lot of things; how to – how – how to – I'll give you an example of something – to go fishing was a – a very interesting occ – pri – you know, business for us, and – because the town was surrounded by lakes. But you need a fishing pole. Well, that's very easy. You go to the local woods, and you find a sapling that's just the right length and the right size, and you cut it down, and that's your fishing pole. Now you need fishing line. Well, you can't use just anything. But there are white horses, and white horses have long, white tails, and you just pull out a few strands here and there, and you braid them, and it turns into the – a-and then you – you have like a – maybe a two or three foot length, and you get about six or seven of those, and now you have a terrific fishing line. The – the bobber is simple, a goose quill and a cork, and you put a hole in the cork and you put the goose quill through it, and then you

run your line through it. The only think you have to buy is the fish hook. Nobody knows how to make a fish hook. And the store always has fish hooks. So we went fishing all the time with these things, and we caught the fish, we fried the fish and we ate the fish and we had a wonderful time. But we also – you could buy sleds in the wintertime, but my brother **Harry** and I loved to play – play with wood, and we would make our own sleds, they were simple things, but – but we di – we didn't bother wi – sl-sleds were really so cheap that we were able to get a few pennies to buy sleds. But we made our ice skates.

Q: You made your own ice skates?

A: We made our own ice skates because all it took was le-leather straps, a piece of wood, and then you go to the local blacksmith and he puts a little strip of iron underneath as – as a runner. And you put the straps – nail the straps to the piece of wood, and you put it on your feet. It worked. I mean, we went ice skating with these things and had a wonderful time. So, we learned how – we learned how to swim, we learned how to ice skate, we learned how – how to catch fish. In the wintertime we got – we got sp – poles that were similar to our fishing poles, only heavier, and we put a – a spear at the end of it, and you could spear fish through holes made in the ice. So – but all these things were local lore, and you ask people, and they showed you how to do it, and then you did it, and – also, there were no street lights. And

when we would go visit our friends at night, you would overstay too long, and no – there was no one nagging you who said you better go home, it's going to get dark and all that. It just got dark, and the p – the parents of our friends said, you better go home now. And now we got a couple of kilometers to walk in absolute pitch darkness, imagining that there are wolves out there. So, you make a lantern. And it's very easy to make a lantern, **Harry** and I made so many lanterns, all made out of little pieces of wood, you – and you – you go to a glazier, they cut you a little – a little rectangle of glass, and you slip it in – on thr – three or four sides of this little thing. It's not easy to describe, but just –

Q: But you made it, you made it.

A: But we made it. And we felt very jolly marching home in the absolute darkness with our little lanterns. And we did this with everything. We did this for capturing fruit from trees. The same kind of pole that we made the fishing pole out of, also served to have a hook at the end that you could reach up and snare an apple. So we never went hungry, because the whole town had nothing but apple trees and pear trees and plum trees, and – depending on what time of the season, we could always get something to eat that way. And – but being creative, making things, making what you need instead of going out to buy it, was an experience I'll never forget, and it has served me well in the rest of my life because before I go out to buy

something, I think, what do I have around that I can make it out of? And when I had a house and a basement and a – and some tools, I made a – a lot of things. I made toys for my children. I made, you know, all kinds of things. So I learned a lot in **Zarasai**, **Lithuania**, which I will never forget, and it's – any time I'm feeling a little bit blue, with nothing to do, I think back to those days when I made all those things that gave us so much pleasure. And so **Lithuania** – for me, **Lithuania** was a wonderful experience. I – I enjoyed the country boy life. I mean, it was – it was just like **Tom Sawyer** or **Huckleberry Finn**.

Q: Well, thank you.

A: You're welcome.

Q: Thank you for bringing it to life for us. Thanks again.

A: My pleasure.

Q: Okay. Okay.

Conclusion of Interview