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**Interview Transcript Title Page**

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<b>Interviewee Surname:</b>	Wolf
<b>Forename:</b>	Isidore
<b>Interviewee Sex:</b>	Male
<b>Interviewee DOB:</b>	26 August 1928
<b>Interviewee POB:</b>	Antwerp, Belgium

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**REFUGEE VOICES**

**Interview No.** RV244  
**NAME:** Mr Isidore Wolf  
**DATE:** 9<sup>th</sup> July, 2019  
**LOCATION:** London  
**INTERVIEWER:** Dr. Bea Lewkowicz

[00:00:00] [silence]

*Today is the 9th of July 2019. I will conduct an interview with Mr. Isidore Wolf. My name is Bea Lewkowicz, and we're in London. What is your name, please?*

Isidore Wolf.

*When were you born?*

1928

*Where?*

Antwerp, Belgium.

*Mr. Wolf, thank you very much for having agreed to be interviewed for Refugee Voices. Thank you. Can you tell us a little bit about your family background?*

Yes. My father, zichrono livracha, was a diamond dealer. And I grew up in Belgium until the age of 11, and then we left Antwerp because the situation was getting dire. I think that Denmark and Norway were invaded. We had visas to go to the States. We arrived in the States on the 25th of April, which was [unintelligible Pesach] , and Belgium was invaded on

the 10th of May. And so, I grew up in New York, various boroughs of New York. Started off in Queens; Kew Gardens, Forest Hills; and then Manhattan. That's where I attended primary school and then high school, and then Talmudical Academy of Yeshiva University, and City College, and then Columbia University School of Architecture. And then I was drafted into the Army at the end of the Korean War in 1952, and because I speak German among other [00:02:00] languages, I was sent to Germany and acted as an interpreter for my Topographic, Topographic Engineering unit, which mapped the American sector in Germany. I was there until 1954. And then I came back to New York and practiced architecture, and went to South San Francisco for about a year and a half and practiced architecture there. I came back to New York. And then I came back on a visit to relatives where I met my wife in 1960, and then I came back in 1961. We got married in Antwerp, Belgium. I went back to New York. We stayed there for two years, but my wife wanted to be with her family in London and in Antwerp, and we came in 1963. We've been living here happily ever since.

*Okay, so that's everything in a nutshell. Let's [crosstalk] --*

That's everything in a nutshell, right.

*go back. Tell us a little bit about your parents and the milieu they grew up, and how they met, and the grandparents.*

Oh, I see. Well, my grandparents, I think on both sides, came from Poland. Galizianer section of Poland. And my mother was born in Holland in 1904 in Scheveningen and my father was born in Antwerp in 1904 also. And I think they got married in 1925, and I was born in 1928. Then I grew up in Antwerp and went to primary school École Communale numéro trois, on Avenue de Belgique.

*Avenue de-?*

Avenue de Belgique. It's- now it's called Belgiëlei because the Flemish don't want any French names anymore. I left in 1940, and I was glad to leave because of the anti-Semitism.

*Tell us how did you experience anti-Semitism?*

Well, I was called [inaudible] and *sal juif*. I remember one day I was going to the shul on a Friday night and I was followed by three louts who tried to trip me up. I turned around with my- I had a fist closed, it landed on the nose of one of them. Luckily, there was a young man

that saw what was happening and he rescued me from these louts. So, I don't have very good memories from Antwerp. That was pre-war Antwerp. And of course, during the war, a lot of them collaborated with the Germans. Until this day, I don't have very fond memories of Belgium. And I remember when I first came to Belgium in- after the war in 1961, I was stopped at the border and I was accused of being a deserter. And then I showed them my discharge papers - my American discharge papers, which I had with me, and I had to renounce my Belgian nationality, which I did very gladly. [chuckles] [crosstalk] --

*Deserter because you didn't do [crosstalk] --*

Because I didn't do service in the Belgian Army. [00:06:00] You see, I was born in Belgium and so they had my papers. When they asked me, I said I don't speak French or Flemish- which is a lie because I speak both- and get me an English interpreter, and he came, [chuckles] spoke very badly English. Then when I came back to Antwerp, I reported them to the Consulate - American Consulate. The American Consular was a very nice Jewish lady. She came to my wedding. [chuckles] So [crosstalk] --

*So, you came back as an American citizen.*

And I am still an American citizen. I have an American passport. I'm not British. My wife's British, my son's British. My grandchildren are British, but I'm not British. I'm American and proud to be so.

*Important for you?*

It's very important for me.

*Okay, we'll talk about that towards the end. Just a little bit more. How religious were your parents? What sort of synagogue did you go [crosstalk]--*

Well, I mean, Orthodox but not very, not extremely haredi but modern Orthodox. I belong to the Golders Green synagogue.

*I mean, your parents in Antwerp. We're still talking about Antwerp.*

My parents were, you now, modern Orthodox the way that we are.

*Which synagogue did you go to as a child?*

I went to the synagogue where my grandfather, my mother's father, was a [inaudible] in Wipstraat. It was an Orthodox synagogue. Not radical, you know, but Orthodox.

*Describe it for us a little bit. What did it look like? Do you remember anything?*

[00:08:00] No, I don't remember anything about the synagogue. It no longer exists.

*And what neighbourhood? Where did you live with your family?*

I lived in Rue Conscience, which was very close to the Avenue de Belgique where I went to school. It's sort of a middle-class neighbourhood. It was a flat- you know- an apartment block- and I remember very little of it.

*Had your mother come from Scheveningen to marry your dad from Holland, or was she already in Antwerp?*

No, she was already in Antwerp. You see, the Jewish community mostly were from Poland. And in Scheveningen, there were Jewish hotels. It was a religious neighbourhood. She was born in August, you know, when they were on summer vacation. Then in 1914, the whole Jewish community went to Holland because they were all Polish nationals, you see, they were considered aliens, enemy aliens so they all had to go to Holland. They stayed in Holland for quite a while. My mother went to Holland, to the high school there. And then after the war, they came back to Antwerp because most of them were in the diamond trade, you see, but that's what happened during the First World War.

*Where did they go to Amsterdam?*

No, they went to Antwerp.

*No, I mean, when they had to go to Holland, in the [crosstalk] --*

When they went to Holland, they were in Scheveningen and Den Haag, around that area, because I suppose they had apartments there.

*Right, and then returning [crosstalk] --*

Then after the war - First World War, they returned to Antwerp because they were diamond dealers.

*Did your parents have large families in Antwerp?*

Yes, relatively large families. I remember two, two of my uncles were GPs- doctors. And the rest of my family; my father's family is mostly in New York- or now they're in Florida- and they were also in the diamond trade. Most of the Jews in Antwerp were in the diamond trade.

*Okay. Tell us a little bit about- you said things you have bad memories in terms of the school. Were there other Jewish boys in your school? Was it [crosstalk] --*

Well, there were some boys in the Jewish schools. I never understood why I wasn't sent to Jewish school because there was a very good Jewish school called Tachkemoni. But I suppose, initially I was a sick child and studies were too long, so they sent me to a, a public school. And then I had a private Hebrew teacher at home that came once a week.

*Why were you a sick child? What were you [crosstalk] --*

Well, I was, I was a pretty sick child. I had all the children's diseases. My mother told me I had diphtheria, and so on so forth. And... yes, that was a thing. I remember when I was about nine or ten years old, I developed pneumonia, and my uncle who was a GP helped me through it with God's help. Yeah, and that's when my father was called up. He was a reservist- a Belgian Army reservist- he was called up during the Munich crisis [00:12:00] in 1938. And that's when I developed pneumonia. It was a very heavy winter. And my mother swore that she would never go through that again without my father, and she went to the American Embassy and asked how she could get a visa. And they told her if my father invested a certain amount of money in New York, she'd get a visa automatically. And that's how we got a visa because my father sent over money to America. And so we had a visa to come to the States.

*So, it was prompted by the separation [crosstalk] --*

It was prompted by separation and the fact that I had pneumonia, yes, right.

*At that point, she wasn't that worried about the Germans they're not coming in or [crosstalk]*

--

At that time 1938, no, because, you know, it was the Munich Pact, but then it got much more serious, and then they knew that war was coming. So, my father decided to go to New York, and we came to New York just before the Belgian invasion.

*And did you remember- was there talk about emigration as a child, do you remember- or they just told you we're going or...?*

No, they just said where we're going, and we took the last neutral ship from Antwerp.

*Yes, so you were saying you-*

I don't have very fond memories of Belgium at all. [chuckles]

*Do you think it was partly because you were in that school and you had these encounters or...?*

Yes, I had these encounters. I remember when I told them that I was leaving to the States, you know, I heard one of them said, "The rats are leaving the sinking ship," as a very clear memory. So, there you are. [00:14:00]

*Did you have any friends? Do you remember any school friends?*

Not really. Well, I remember just before leaving, I drew horses for them- I still draw horses- but no, I don't have very fond memories from them.

*Any positive, any memories at all of other childhood related any holidays or outings?*

Now, I used to remember going to the summer camp on the beach. I think in Knokke, Ostend, and so on. Otherwise, I used to belong to a Hashomer Hadati group, which was a Hebrew-Jewish group; but otherwise, no. I mean, relatives and so on, grandparents, yes; but otherwise, no, I can't say that- I can't say I had any fond memories of-- I mean, Antwerp is a beautiful city. It's got a lovely harbour and so on.

*What about language? What did you speak to your parents?*

My parents, my parents spoke Yiddish and French, and at home we spoke French. I still speak French to this very day. I have French television, and my son speaks French, and my current language with my wife is mostly French- English and French- but my parents spoke Yiddish and that's where I know my Yiddish from.



*Galician Galitsianer?? Yiddish.*

Galizianer Yiddish, yes. Not Litvish but Galizianer, I teach Yiddish at the Sobell Institute, and I can read Yiddish and I love Yiddish. [00:16:00] It comes very naturally to me.

*So, it's familiar, but you spoke French with your [crosstalk] --*

Yes, with my family I spoke French, and in school I spoke French because the school was divided into a French department and a Flemish department, and I belonged to the French department. Nowadays, it's all Flemish. Even the street signs are in Flemish now. They took off all the French signs.

*What about the grandparents? Did you speak Yiddish to the grandparents?*

Yes, I spoke- I spoke Yiddish and I think they spoke a bit of French. I think they spoke a bit of French, yes.

*By the time you were leaving, what happened- what happened to the other family members?*

Well, a lot of the family members had gone to the States, you know, because there was a diamond trade centre in the States. During the war, some of my family were hidden- were hidden but some of the family perished.

*The grandparents, what happened to your [crosstalk] --*

No, the grandparents were saved, and then they came to New York after the war.

*How were they saved?*

They were hidden. They were hidden in France. And... That was my mother's parents. My father's parents were in, were in Palestine- had gone to Palestine in the '30s.

*So before?*

Before the German, yes. So, they were all right.

*You said that at that point, people knew the- they thought the war is imminent.*

Oh, yes, absolutely.

*[00:18:00] At what time do you think when did it turn? When did people really think, "Okay, it's going to..."?*

Well, I don't know when- I mean, I was young at that time, so I can't really remember. I can only remember my own circumstance, but I think that at the time, Denmark and Norway were already invaded. So, they knew that the next thing would be Belgium, Holland, France, and so on.

*What was your reaction when you were told that [crosstalk] --*

I was leaving? I was as happy as could be. I was as happy as could be, after having suffered name-calling and so on.

*Tell us a little bit about the journey.*

I remember the journey that was very interesting because we were on an American- on a Holland-American boat, and we knew it was going to be Passover, and so we brought along matzas and, I don't know, salami and so on. My mother went to the Captain and she said, "*[Ben een Hollands meisje]* I'm a Dutch little girl, and we're Jewish, and we have to prepare for Passover. Can you help us?" And the fellow was very decent. He said, "Well, you're in luck. One of my chefs is Jewish. I'll assign him to you and you can have a [inaudible] [00:19:41] at the kitchen. I will give you all new china and cutlery and plates, and whatever food you need and eggs and vegetables and fish, and so on. You can have whatever you want." And I- we celebrated Passover on the ship together with a lot of [00:20:00] other refugees because the ship was full of refugees. I remember one day I came out wearing my kippah outside, doing my prayers, and a priest came over and he put his head- his hand on my head and said, "Bless you, my child", and so on. I remember that very clearly. Then we arrived in Chol HaMoed Pesach we arrived in New York. I think one of my father's nephews, came to fetch us. We lived in Brooklyn at that time.

*The journey, you said how many people were there on the- what was the boat called?*

The name escapes me. I remember it was a Holland-American line. The name of the boat escapes me.

*And did you have a - how did you travel with your parents?*

I travelled with my parents, yes.

*But you had a compartment- what do you call it- a [crosstalk] --*

Yes, sure, we had a compartment, we had a room. I forgot the name on the ship. I knew at one time.

*Was it quite a large ship?*

It was quite a large ship. It had a lot of refugees, you know, hundreds of people.

*How long was the journey?*

I think the journey was about 12 days- 12, 13 days. I think we had to stop in Dunkirk for a time because they had to clear the mines away so that the ship could come through. I think it took about 12 or 13 days.

*And the visa - your parents got the visa because your father [crosstalk] --*

Yes, had money in the States.

*And did- no other relatives travelled with you or-?*

No.

*Just the three of you?*

Just the three of us, yes.

*All right, but there were already other people in America? [00:22:00]*

There were already relatives in America, yes, and they welcomed us, yes, right.

*Did you parents know that they wanted to go to New York or-?*

Yes, they knew because New York was the centre of the diamond trade.

*What were your first impressions going off the ship - landing?*

Well, I was, I was very happy to leave Belgium. I was very happy. I didn't know a word of English. [laughs] Then it took me a little while to learn English, but I learned quick- quite quickly. Right?

*And you had no English when you came, not [crosstalk] --*

Not a single word.

*Your parents?*

No, my parents neither, so they learned.

*Were they helped in America by any organisation or institution?*

No, I don't think they were. My father immediately went into the diamond trade and he was fine.

*Where was the diamond trade in New York?*

The diamond trade was on... West 47th Street. It still is. The Diamond Bourse.

*The Bourse, yes. So, did he work together with his brother, or did he have a brother there or?*

No, I think he was a partner with one of his nephews ...for quite a long time.

*Did they specialise in something or-?*

No, in diamond, diamond trade. My father originally was a cleaver, which is a very highly skilled job, but then he became a merchant afterwards. And that's what he did in New York. He was a member of the diamond club, was a revered member of the Diamond Club and had a very good reputation.

*So, he was lucky that he could [crosstalk] --*

Yes, he was lucky [00:24:00] that he could, yes.

*-find work.*

Yes, he quickly found work, there was no trouble whatsoever.

*And where did you live?*

Well initially, initially, I think, we lived in Brooklyn for a little while. I remember Brighton Beach, I remember Manhattan Beach. And then we moved to Kew Gardens in Queens and that's when I went to primary school in Queens. And...and then shortly thereafter I was in primary school for a year or two years and shortly thereafter, I went to high school at the age of 13. I went to Forest Hills High School. And then we moved to Manhattan because my mother really wanted to go to Manhattan. That's where my father worked. I went to Talmudic- Talmudical Academy for two years, part of Yeshiva University, and I went to the teachers institute also in Ben Menach Lemorim [?] Then afterwards, I went to City College, and in the evening I went to Herzliah Hebrew Academy, where I got my degree in- as a Hebrew teacher. I studied in- Bachelor of Science in City College of New York. And after three years, I was accepted in architectural school in Columbia University. I was there for four years and got my degree as a Bachelor of Architecture.

*So, what was it like to come as a Belgian Jewish boy into the American school?*

Great. I was immediately accepted. I had no problems [00:26:00] at all. I quickly learned the language. I had no problem whatsoever.

*And your parents, did they join the synagogue? How did they place themselves?*

Yes, they joined the synagogue in Kew Gardens. And afterwards, we had a synagogue made up mostly of Belgian people in New York. It was called Moriah and the rabbi there was Rabbi Brod who was a- had been a rabbi in Antwerp. Then afterwards, he was succeeded by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, great rabbi who was there. I remember going with my father to shul and going to his lectures on a Tuesday evening.

*What's the name of that synagogue?*

Moriah. I don't think it exists anymore.

*Where was it?*

It was in Broadway and 80th Street on top of Woolworths, I think it was.

*Near Columbia?*

No, Columbia University is 116th Street. This is 80th Street in Broadway. And we lived on 79th Street. 150 West 79th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus, right next to the Museum of Natural History. It was a very nice area.

*You had a good location there?*

I had a good location, yes, right.

*The parents, they were involved with that synagogue?*

And my parents were involved with that synagogue, yes.

*You say it was mostly Belgians?*

It was mostly Belgians, yes.

*Was it founded for that purpose or it was just happened that Belgians [crosstalk] --*

No, they joined with that purpose in mind. Rabbi Brod was originally from Antwerp. So that was -it was known as the Belgian shul. I don't think it exists anymore. [00:28:00]

*And did it help them to sort of settle?*

Yes, it helped to settle, and my father-- we quickly got settled in America.

*At what point did you become American?*

I became American at , I think, at the age of 16 naturalised- yes, 16? I think so. At 16 I became naturalised.

*So, in the late '40s?*

It was late '40s, yes. We arrived in 1940 and I was 11 years old, and after five years, I got naturalised as American and my parents got naturalised as American. I had to wait, I think, five years, but they had no problem.

*In the time, while the war was going on in Europe, did that have any impact on you?*

Well, it had an impact on us because my mother's parents and there were relatives in Belgium, and of course, we were worried, and of course, we had very bad news of what's happening in, in Europe. Of course, we were all affected.

*Did you have correspondence with members of the family?*

No, we didn't. It was the occupied Europe. I remember my uncles came to New York. One of my uncles was in Cuba, one of my uncles was in Australia, and my father had brothers and sisters in New York, and some of them were in London. Most of the relatives were either in New York, or in [00:30:00] London, or in Cuba.

*You said, after the war the grandparents [crosstalk] --*

They all came - all joined us in New York. That's my mother's parents. My father's parents had already died in Palestine.

*All right, so they sponsored them probably, the grandparents, to come out after the war?*

Yes, right.

*So, there was a concern [crosstalk] --*

Yes, of course, right.

*Did you join a youth movement or were you active in [crosstalk] --*

Yes, I was active in youth group. I used to go to a Hebrew summer camp in New York and that's where I perfected my Hebrew. And I was there as a senior, I was there as a junior counsellor, I was there as a senior counsellor.

*What was it called?*

It was called Massad. Very well-known Hebrew camp. Unfortunately, it no longer exists.

*Ran in Hebrew?*

Ran in Hebrew, yes.

*The whole camp?*

The whole camp was run in Hebrew.

*Zionist, wasn't it?*

Of course, it was Zionist, yes, sure.

*Did you have any inclination of going to Palestine [crosstalk] --*

Going to Israel?

*-or Israel later?*

No. I mean, I wouldn't have minded to go to Israel, but it didn't happen. If it weren't for my family here, we'd be in Israel because we got lots of friends in Israel and both of us speak Hebrew.

*All right. What made you to want to study architecture?*

I always wanted to study architecture. I was always interested in the arches and I always wanted to study architecture. I was fascinated by it. [00:32:00] I was fascinated by Frank Lloyd Wright. I designed a synagogue in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright. I loved it.

*Was it built, the synagogue?*

No, my synagogue was never built, unfortunately. I've got drawings of it but it was never built, no. That was my graduation thing- my thesis- was an Orthodox synagogue. And so I worked for- I worked for a while for an American architect who did synagogues, so I was doing synagogues, but most of the work that I did was either residential or office blocks, or I used to work for Michael Rosenauer who specialised in hotels. I did a lot of work on the Inn on the Park Hotel, and a lot of the hotels on the, on the Spanish islands in the Caribbean.

*You were not tempted to go into diamonds as well?*

No, I was never interested.

*There was no expectation [crosstalk] --*

Well, I don't know. My father, I think, would've wanted but I was never interested, no.



*How did you manage between your secular and Jewish studies? How was the balance at the time? Because you said you went to Talmudical [crosstalk] --*

Well, when I went to the Talmudical high school, I went to the teachers institute there. And then when I finished there, I went to college, and at night I went to Hebrew Institute- a Zionist school- where I got my degree as a Hebrew teacher. [00:34:00] So I was always connected. Then I went to summer camp, which was a Hebrew camp, so I was always connected with Hebrew and other business.

*What triggered the connection? What was important for you in terms of the Hebrew [crosstalk] --*

Well, because my parents were religious, I always went to synagogue. We were always strongly Zionist-inclined, we were always interested in Palestine, we were always interested in Israel, and we still are connected. We're strongly connected with Israel.

*The teaching aspect of things, how...?*

Well, well, I taught in Sunday school and so on, but since I'm an architect, I didn't go into teaching, which my son did.

*You carried that - you passed it on.*

I passed it on, right.

*Tell us a little bit about your time in the American Army.*

Well, in the American Army, it was very interesting because, because I was in the American Army and I keep kosher so in the American Army, I became a vegetarian. And I became a vegetarian and I blessed the Catholics because on Friday we had fish. I always put on my tefillin in the morning, so the boys, everybody knew that I was Orthodox Jewish. I never had any problems. One day I put on my tefillin and then a fellow comes in, a typical character of a, of a Jew; hook-nosed, thin, and so on. [00:36:00] He said to me, "You're not going to put these on here." I said, "What are you telling me?" I said, "You're crazy." I said, "My friends here sweep up for me so that I can put on my tefillin, and you're telling me not to put on my tefillin. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" [chuckles] And he went away. Then when I went to Fort Belvoir, where I learned topographic surveying, I went over to my Captain. I said, "Sir,

I- it's Pentecost. I'd like to go to my parents in New York. Could I get a leave?" He said, "What's Pentecost?" He starts saying New Year's, Day of Atonement and tabernacles and Passover. "What's Pentecost?" I explained Pentecost; 50 days after Passover, when we accepted the 10 Commandments. He says, "Wolf, permission refused." I said, "Okay, sir." Right. So, I went over to the chaplain who happened to have been a counsellor in the same camp I was. I said, "Look, I, I want to get home for Shavuot." He went over to the Captain, and the Captain come in there, "Okay, Wolf, you can go home for three days." So, I went home for Shavuot. Then when I came to Germany, I went over to the Captain. I said, "Sir, I'm Orthodox Jewish, I'd like to go to services on Saturday." And so he says, "Wolf, you're trying to get out of inspection. Permission refused." I said, "Okay, sir." Several months later, the Master Sergeant comes to me. He says, "Okay, Wolf, put these on, you're now Private First Class." I said, "Sergeant, you know what you can do with these." He says, "What do you mean?" I say, "An army who has no respect for my religious obligation is an army whose promotion I don't want." He says, "Wolf, there's going to be trouble." I said, "Sir, I don't give a-" [chuckles] And so a couple of days later, I was in Bamberg at the time, which is in Bavaria. He says, "Wolf, the Captain," who was in Frankfurt, "wants to see you." So, I had to go back to him. He says, "Wolf, I understand you've refused the promotion." I said, "Yes, sir. An army who, who doesn't recognise my religious obligation is an army whose promotion I don't care for." He says, [mimic] "Wolf, if I gave you permission to go to services, would you reconsider?" Begging me- I said, "Yes, sir. I'll reconsider." [chuckles] I went back to Bamberg. There were no services there, but he learned his lessons. They all learned their lessons. One day a guy comes to me, he says, "Isi, you speak German and you won't fraternise with the Germans?" I said, "No." He says, "Why not?" I said, "They killed six million of my people." He says, "Can't you forgive them?" I said, "No, only God can forgive them." He says, "Well, Jesus Christ would forgive them." I said, "I'm not Jesus Christ. End of the conversation." But they all respected me, they all liked me. They liked me, you know, because I used to go with my tray, and I used to say to the guy that handed out the steaks, "Give the steak to the guy behind me," so they all wanted to be next to me. [laughs] I never had any trouble in the Army. Never any trouble. They all respected me, they all liked me. I had a very good time.

*What was it like to come to Germany not that long after the war?*

Well, it was in 1952- 1953, '54. Listen, it's a beautiful country. I always said, "God, how can you leave such a beautiful country to such a lousy people?" You know. I mean, it was absolutely fantastic. It was the best thing that could've happened.

*Did you have any contact with Germans- [00:40:17]*

None whatsoever. The only time I had contacts with the official is when I had to interpret, but otherwise, no contact whatsoever. I refused.

*And with the local Jewish community there, did you?*

There's a local Jewish community in Frankfurt. And so - I remember going to the kosher restaurant one day and being sick as a dog because I wasn't used to eating meat anymore, but otherwise, no.

*What was, you said you had? It was a topographical unit. What was [crosstalk]?*

Topographic surveying.

*Surveying.*

They went and measured and so on. And on the basis of the measurements, they used to correct maps. And I remember I used to draw church steeples for identification purposes. That was my job.

*Because that was used in the war, wasn't it?*

Yes, of course. No, I had a good time in the Army.

*Stationed at Bamberg?*

Well, the thing is this, we went throughout the American sector Kassel and so on and we ended up in Bamberg, but our parent station was in Frankfurt am Main but we travelled throughout.

*It was a good experience for you.*

It was a good experience. Yes.

*Then you managed to get Saturday off or Saturday--?*

Well, no. I mean- when we travelled, there was no problem, but there were no [00:42:00] communities. No.

*You had to adapt yourself slightly. I mean, for example, on Shabbat, if they had [crosstalk]*

Well, I didn't have to work on Shabbat.

*You didn't?*

No. There was no work on Shabbat.

*So, you managed to?*

Oh, yes. Sure. I had no trouble and whenever the Jewish holidays fell, that was another interesting thing. I always took my leave on Jewish holidays. For Passover, I went over to Paris where I had relatives in Paris. I remember I was in uniform and I knocked on the door and the little man comes out and says, " *Qui êtes-vous?* " I said, "My mother is a cousin of your wife." So, they invited me and said, "Why are you staying in the hotel? No, you're staying with us." And so, I remember going to the local PX store and bought them a big, what's it called? The thing for making dough. A mixer and so on. I said, "Now, you can make me Bobalach and Matzah Brei and so on." And so, I became very good friends with these people. Then they said to me, "You know you have another cousin in, in Paris." I said, "Oh yes." It was my first time in Paris. So, I went to all the museums, the churches, everywhere, and I never saw them. And then - that was in- I was in the army 1954 and then six days later I came back and it was Shavues time and they said, "You have a cousin in there, you should go and see him." I went to see him, Gutwirt, where he lived, not far away from the synagogue and that's where I met my wife. That's how we met.

*At that time?*

At that time, [00:44:00] 1960. And we corresponded and then a year later, we got married. She went back to Antwerp. I went back to New York and then we corresp- and then we... And that's when I got stopped at the border in Belgium.

*When you went back after the army to New York, you practiced, you started working.*

I practiced architecture in New York and then in San Francisco, was it for a year and a half? Then, I went back to New York and I took my exams and became a professional architect.

You had to practice three years before taking exams and when you took your exam, which was pretty tough because I had to go to night school. And when you passed your exams, then you were a registered architect. When I came to this country, I had to go through a board in order to be a registered architect. I was a registered architect here in in London. So-

*Did you stay with your parents when you went back to New York after the army or?*

I stayed with my parents for a while and then I went to San Francisco and then I came back to my parents and so on.

*But what made you then come to Paris?*

Well, I was on my way to Israel and I had relatives in Paris. I went to visit them. And that's how I met my wife.

*At that point, did your parents have any-- did they want to go back to Belgium or...?*

No. My father regularly went back to Belgium on business.

*But they didn't want to come back, they wanted to stay in America?*

Oh, yes. They didn't want to go back to Belgium. No, but my father came to the Belgium on business. But that summer, my [00:46:00] parents both were in Belgium and that's when I got married.

*But the expectation was that you would live in America after you got married?*

Oh, yes. Right. I would never live in Belgium. To be quite honest with you, I wouldn't live on the continent either. I'm glad that, I am glad of Brexit, very glad.

*Why? Tell us.*

Well, what happened to the Jews on the continent. I can't forget that. I cannot forget that. I can't forgive the British for what they did during the mandate either. I've got a long memory. Right.

*Tell us what happened to your wife during the war and how she survived it?*

My wife during the war, she was, they went- when the war was declared, they were going to France, but then they were stopped and so on. And my, my father-in-law who was British and, but she had two aunts and a grandfather who had Polish nationality. When my father-in-law wanted to take them on a British ship, the captain said, "I can accept you, your wife and children, but I can't accept the other two, the other three." My father-in-law was a great man. He was a banker. He says, "I can't leave them here." And so, he stayed in Belgium and he hid them in Spa. The three of them were hidden and he, because he had British nationals, [00:48:00] they allowed him to stay. They were in Spa. My wife didn't know she was Jewish until the end of the war as it was too dangerous, because she was dark and my brother-in-law was dark. They said they were Italian. His name is Romeo and her name is Rosette. She said, "I'm Rosetta, I am Italian." And so, they were able to save their relatives and themselves during the war.

*In Spa?*

In Spa. Yes.

*But he was British, so-*

He was born in Australia so he had a Commonwealth British nationality.

*His wife?*

His wife who was Polish, got British nationality through him and the children got British nationality through their father. So, they're British.

*Nevertheless, they said they were Italian just because [crosstalk]?*

Well, the kids said they were Italian.

*She found out after the war that she was Jewish?*

After the war, she found out she was Jewish.

*So, they didn't- it was too dangerous.*

It was too dangerous. Right.

*Let's come back to you. So then when you got married, you moved to...?*

New York.

*When was that?*

That was in 1961. We stayed in 1961 till 1963 and then my wife, you know, longed to be close to her parents who still lived in Antwerp and she had relatives in London. She knew I wouldn't go back to Belgium, so we came to London in 1963 and then Claude was born in [00:50:00] 1967, and that's when my father-in-law died. Then her mother had a sister, stayed back in Antwerp, and then the mother got dementia. My wife, my wife and brother-in-law moved them to London. They stayed in London and she died and then my aunt, Cecile, died, she was 101, but they lived in London in one of the Jewish care homes.

*So, the reason was London was English-speaking but close enough to Belgium?*

Yes, that's right.

*What was it like for you to come to London?*

Well, look, I had a job right away because my brother-in-law got me a job with this architectural game, originally from Austria. But during the war, he taught in America and so he got me the job immediately.

*What is the name of the company?*

Michael Rosenauer.

*Rosenauer?*

Rosenauer. R-O-S-E-N-A-U-E-R. He's very well-known because he built a lot of the hotels in London and in Spain and the Caribbean islands in Spain.

*You worked for him as a...?*

I worked with him until he died, I worked for him seven years. And afterwards, I worked for various architects, British architects, but then there was a depression and so on. Finally, I ended up in the Borough of Lambeth and I worked in Lambeth for almost 14 years.

*Doing what?*

Doing residential buildings, you know. I was mostly supervising architects, liaison between the Architectural Department [00:52:00] and the construction. And I remember, one year I was employed in order to - with a law firm in order to save the council from fees that the contractor claimed, so I worked a year with- you know, to fight the, the contractor's claims.

*Were you working on Building Council but for the--?*

For the Council for, yes, for the Architectural Department of Lambeth, right. And then...

*What was it like to be- because you were used to being Jewish in America?*

Yes.

*How was that than being orthodox in that- in England?*

No, I never had any trouble, I never had any trouble. They knew that on winters [unintelligible] on Friday I had to leave early and Jewish holidays- I never had any trouble with the firms.

*No problem?*

No, no problem whatsoever.

*You didn't experience any discrimination?*

No. No, none whatsoever. No, I had no problems, no, neither in America nor in Britain, no, no. And then Margaret Thatcher came in and then she absolutely ruined the councils. And then work got sparse and then I decided- I was offered a job with Fitzroy Robinson, it's a very well-known firm. So, I worked for them for a year, and then again there was a depression and I was let go, but by that time, I was 62. And work started on computers and I'm not computer savvy. [00:54:00] So I worked for the Jewish Bookshop in Woburn Place, that's where there was a Chief Rabbi. I worked there for three years and then in 1965, that was it. I retired in 1965. I used to do some private work, but very little.

*Not 1965, 19--?*

Sorry, that was in 1990, I was 65.



*When you worked in a bookshop, was the Jewish Museum still in there? [crosstalk] was in Woburn House.*

I think the Jewish Museum was still there, in Woburn House, yes. I worked in the bookshop for three years until I retired.

*You had your son here, and you- did you join the synagogue in London?*

Sure, sure. I was part of a synagogue in various places, and the last synagogue I went to here, which I'm still member of, is the Golders Green Synagogue on Dunstan Road. But it's too far from me, so I go to a closest synagogue on Finchley Road, Keshet.

*To Keshet, yes, yes, I know Keshet. [crosstalk] You had your son here, what sort of identity did you want to give to your son growing up here?*

He grew up in an orthodox home. He always went to Jewish schools. He, he went to Menorah first, then he went to Hasmonean, then he went to JFS, then he went to college, and in college, he, he, he specialised in Human Relations maybe, so he got a Master [00:56:00] in Jewish Studies I told him, "Claude, that's personnel, that's hiring and firing," "Oh, no, Dad." The first time he got a job was, I think, an Israeli security company. He had to fire somebody for some reason, he refused, so they fired him. So, he decided it wasn't for him, so he went into teaching and he taught IT. Then he taught IT for various years and so on, and then he went and worked for the Jewish Welfare, and you know - and now became a Rabbi. That's his certificate. He was always a religious boy, more religious than we are. He always had a Jewish education and so on- and he's a very good son.

*You're pleased that he's a Rabbi?*

I'm pleased that he's a Rabbi, I'm very proud of him.

*The Jewish aspect is something which stayed with you all your life?*

Absolutely, it was Cardinal, essential.

*What is it about Judaism or your Jewish identity which is...?*

I was born a Jew, I lived as a Jew, and I'll die as a Jew. [laughs] That's my identity. Right. I was a Belgian and I'm American, but I'm Jewish. I'm Jewish-American, not American-

Jewish, I'm Jewish-American. My Jewish identity is the identity, is the "I", that's my being, very important to me.

*How would you describe yourself if somebody asked you? What do you say your identity?*

I'm, I'm a proud Jew and I practice as a Jew and I only eat kosher, [00:58:00] and I pray every day, and I identify with my people, and I love Israel, and I speak its language, and I would go to Israel tomorrow if it weren't for my family here.

*Do you have any particular views on British Jewry on, on- I don't know? On...*

No, not really. I mean, no, no. No views at all. A Jew is a Jew is a Jew is a Jew.

*Tell us, you're a very active member of the Sobell Centre, so tell us [crosstalk]*

I'm very active of the Sobell Centre, yes. My- I remember being in the old Sobell Centre, and I helped them with drawing and so on. And with the new Sobell Centre we're all both very active. I teach Yiddish on a Mondays from one to two, and when Hebrew teacher isn't in on Thursdays, I teach Hebrew. My wife teaches French on a Wednesday from two to three, and we're both very active in, in Sobell. We love the place and on Tuesday afternoons, I do my drawings.

*You draw?*

I draw, yes. I draw minutes? from a book, and then I paint them. I can show with you some of the paintings later on if you wish.

*Okay. For how many years have you been going to Sobell Centre?*

Oh, God, ever since, ever since it's founded, I think six, seven years.

*All right. That's before [crosstalk]*

Yes, so we go there. We go there every day and take part in the activities. I do a lot of exercises and I paint and [01:00:00] I teach and, you know, we participate.

*It becomes like a second home.*

It's a second home. It really is a second home. We love it.

*Who are the other people who come to the Sobell Centre?*

Pardon?

*Who are the other people who come?*

Well, they're mostly elderly. They're mostly retired. A lot of volunteers, lovely people. The people that work there are also very nice, very nice ambiance. We help each other. It's, it's a lovely place for people who are retired. Lots of volunteers.

*Do you have lots of students in the Yiddish class?*

No, no, no, no, actually very few. Most of the time- most of them don't speak Yiddish so I play Yiddish records, Yiddish music.

*That's nice. What do you play?*

*I play Hasidic music and sometimes Yiddish songs.*

*Having come here, Belgium to America to Britain, do you see yourself part of the, say, British Jewry?*

No, I'll tell you, to be quite honest with you, most or all of our friends are continentals. [01:02:00] We have very little contact with British Jews because we're still continental. That's how it is.

*Do you think it was important that, for example, your wife had a shared background? Or- you know, that...?*

Sure. Well, comes from a strictly religious home, orthodox home. And, yes, it was- it's very important. My parents knew her parents before the war. They were friends before the war. So, you know. I think my mother when she was a youngster was in love with one of her uncles.

*So, they were pleased?*

Yes. They were pleased and my parents were pleased. And... they were pleased. I really like my in-laws. I get along very well with the family.

*You do see yourself as continental?*

No, I see myself as American, not continental. I'm American and I stayed American. I'm very fond of the States. It's so happens I'm very fond of Trump.

*Are you?*

Yes, I'd vote for him. Even though I'm a Democrat, I'd vote for Trump.

*Why?*

Because he's a great friend of Israel. He's a great friend. It's very important to me. Israel - if I had to change any nationality, it would be Israel. I'd become Israeli.

*Not British.*

Not British. [01:04:00] I'm afraid British history has a bad- during the date of the mandates. Did you realise it was a British General that led the Jordanian forces in 1948? [John Bago] Glubb I think he was called. No, I'm sorry.

*Even after Brexit, you wouldn't become British?*

No. I'm afraid not. And I'd be very happy with Brexit. Very.

*Do you think it's better for Britain?*

I think it's essential for Britain to be associated. You see, the initial European community was based on economic factors and then it was all right, but then it became political and when once it became political it's no longer democratic. I mean, it's rules, and I think they have no business in ruling somebody else. And I am very happy - I think Britain will do very- it'll be hard at the beginning but I think it'll do very well. It'll have- it's got American backing. It's got Commonwealth backing. It'll will deal with China, it will deal with India without any constraints. So, I don't think - even if it leaves without a deal, it should have left without a deal on March. That was a big mistake. I now I- I think that Hunt is a better man than Boris because Boris and Europe don't get along. [01:06:00] Hunt could, could get a deal, he's much more reasonable than Boris. And if I had a vote, I don't have a vote, I'd vote for Hunt rather than Boris but I think Boris will get it.

*Well, let's see what's going to happen. How do you think that your early experiences of leaving Belgium going to America affect your later life?*

Well, it affects me in the sense that I'm very conscious of Jewish history. I'm being very conscious of Jewish history, pits me against the continent completely. I cannot forgive them for what happened to my people. I simply cannot forget nor can I forgive.

*And this is not only Germany, Belgium as well. Belgium, Germany.*

This is Belgium, Germany, France. The worst Western European country was Holland. Did you realise that Holland, that 104,000 Jews were killed because of Dutch collaboration? It's not commonly known, but that's history. I so cannot forgive them. I'm sorry. I cannot forget what I went through in Belgium as a child. As far as I'm concerned, they can go to blazes.

*It stayed with you.*

Yes. I'm, I am a very proud Jew and I'm conscious of Jewish history. And I'm very attached.

*So, what lesson do you think needs to be learned [01:08:00] from that history.*

Well, the lesson to be learned from history is that Jews can only trust Jews. That's the lesson that I learned from history. And that Jews have to stick together even though they're separate, they have to stick together. Very important.

*Based on your own life experiences, do you have a message for somebody who might watch this interview?*

Now- my message is that, if you're Jewish, you have to be proud to be Jewish and you have to know your background and you have to study your background and you have to keep on studying your background. You have to study. I mean- every Shabbat, I go over the the sedra, go over the portion, and I go over Rashi and I continue my Hebrew studies and my home is full of Hebrew books. I'm not surprised that my son became a rabbi because he was taught from, from early age that it was important to learn. I'm very proud of him. Very proud of him.

*Do you think it passes on to the next generation as well?*

He'll pass it on to the next generation. He is passing it down to the next generation.

*Did you talk a lot when your son grew up? Did you talk about your past about Belgium? About what it...*

No, not really. I didn't speak to him. He knows, he knows my wife's history. And, but he knows of Jewish tradition [01:10:00] and so on so forth.

*Did she talk about her past?*

Well, I mean, he knows, he knows the history. She doesn't speak much about it. But- you know...

*How old was she when she was in Spa? How old was she?*

Well, she was born in 1937.

*So, she was quite young.*

She was quite young.

*Do you think it affected her, that period?*

Yes, of course, of course it affected her. Of course, it affected her.

*In which way?*

It affected her in the way that ... she became conscious of what happened during the war and she became- as a result, she became a social worker. She worked for Norwood for many, many years.

*As a social worker?*

As a social worker. When she was in Belgium and at the age of 18, 19, she worked for the Joint to get in touch with Jewish children who were in non-Jewish homes and to bring them back to Judaism.

She worked for many years doing that job and she brought back, I think, quite a few children who were Jewish, who weren't aware of it, you know, but she taught them.

*Who were put into--*

In non-Jewish homes to, to save them.

*How did they find them after [crosstalk]?*

Well, they had records of the children and where they were.

*So, what did they do? It's quite a delicate situation, obviously.*

It was a very delicate situation. So, my wife, she had the whole history, you know. You have [01:12:00] to ask her. She went and, she went to these homes and said, "We know that you helped the Jewish children in the war and we've got quite a bit of money that paid for their education." And they gave them a lot of money and so on. Then she spoke to the youngsters. When they finally found out that she was trying to get the youngsters out, she was no longer welcome in their home so she used to go to the school where the children were and during recreation, they came out and so she talked to them during that time.

*And what was the aim?*

The aim was to bring them back into the Jewish community to get them out of the non-Jewish homes and get them back into the Jewish community where the Jewish community helped them.

*And did they manage?*

I think she managed about 50.

*That's really interesting because you see it applies also, you could- it could have applied. I don't think it happened to the Kindertransport, to the main children who came from Jewish homes and who also didn't know something [crosstalk].*

Right.

*I don't think there was ever anything like that tried?*

No, but there was a, was - I think it was a Joint distribution committee that did that sort of thing.

*Really interesting. When, when did that happen, which years?*

That happened when she was 19 years old. That was during the '50s.

*Very interesting. Is there anything we haven't discussed you'd like to add or you think is important?*

No. My wife was very interested in the arts. [01:14:00] We, we both paint. We used to do sculpture. We love classical music. And we participate in the activities of the, of the Jewish Welfare Board and of Jewish Care. We're very much involved.

*Jewish Care in general.*

Yes.

*What other things? What?*

No. That's it. Now, would you like to see some of the drawings?

*We'll look at some of the drawings. I'm just thinking. My last question is, so what comes out that Judaism is very important?*

It's essential.

*It is essential. At the core of it, what is the core for you of that? You said you were born, if you continue...?*

The core of it is the Jewish feeling that we have, and a- the feeling that we have for Israel. And we feel that we have for anything Jewish.

*What would you say to somebody who- you know after the war, some people sort of lost their faith?*

Well... I can't really explain it. I know- either people left everything or they became even more religious, and I can't blame either. I mean how - I cannot explain how God left his people to die, 6 million people. I can't explain it. There's no explanation. [01:16:00] There's really no explanation. I might explain once I'm dead, but now I can't explain it. I can't explain it, and in a way, I can't forgive. That's it, I'm only human. He's God and I'm human, but that's it. There's no explanation. Maybe the older people maybe, maybe they deserved it, they didn't deserve it. Did the children deserve it? 1.5 million kids died. How could that happen? How could it happen? No explanation. People who don't believe, are left, I can't blame them. I



can't blame them. The people who became even more religious, I respect them. Great. I, myself, no explanation. No explanation, and no forgiveness, that's how I feel, but it hasn't affected my Judaism.

*It has not?*

No.

*Thank you very, very much-*

You're very welcome.

*-for sharing your story.*

My thoughts.

*We're going to look at some of your photos and drawings. Just one sec.*

Did you obtain what you wanted?

*[01:18:00] Absolutely. I did.*

Great.

*Yes, please.*

Hey, it's me. I think at the age of 16 or 17, my mother and my father taken in New York.

*The names, please?*

My father Charles Wolf, my mother, Laura Wolf, and I.

*Which year?*

I think it was probably 1947, '48.

*Thank you.*

That was me and my wife, Rosette, taking on board of the Queen Mary. Taken in London 1961. November 1961.

*Yes, please. Who is in this photo?*

It's myself, Rosette, Claude, and my mother

*When was it taken and where?*

It must have been taken in London and must've been taken about 1967, '68.

*Thank you.*

That was taken during my 90th birthday. That picture shows my wife, my four granddaughters, my son, and myself on my 90th birthday. That's a picture of my mother, which I painted in her '90s, probably around 2000. **[01:20:00]**

That's a picture I painted when I was a member of the Hampstead Garden Institute back in the '1990s.

*Who was it?*

*It's just a, a sitter, I also did a piece of sculpture on.*

*Mr. Wolf. Thank you very, very much for sharing again, your story, your photos, and your beautiful paintings. Thank you.*

You're welcome. **[01:20:46] [END OF AUDIO]**