

Al Langer

Al's foster parents risked their lives to hide him from the Nazis, and the Kindertransport changed the course of his life.

Chapter 01 - 0:50

Introduction

Announcer: It was September 1, 1939 when the life of Al Langer drastically changed. The Germans invaded Poland and the persecution of the Jews soon began.

Al's family was on the run to stay ahead of the advancing Germans. His parents contacted a Christian family who agreed to keep him as their own, for a price. Sometime in 1942 Alfred Langer became Stefan Lorek. From that point on Al's life took on many twists and turns. While thousands of Jews were destined for death camps Al's journey took him to England, South America, Israel and eventually to Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

Al tells his story to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive still haunted by the memory of his parents and what became of them.

And now you can hear Al Langer's story on the oral history website VoicesofOklahoma.com

Chapter 02 - 3:34

Born in Poland

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is April 5, 2017.

Al, first of all, would you state your full name?

Al Langer: My full name is Alfred Langer. I like to go by Al.

JE: And you did not have a middle name.

AL: I did not have a middle name. If I had one, I don't know what it is.

JE: Is there anything to Langer? Was it always Langer?

AL: It was always Langer. Of course, Langer is not a Polish name. Actually, Langer is a German name because for about 146 years Poland did not exist. It was divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria, Hungary. And we spoke German at home.

JE: Your date of birth?

AL: Four/one/'thirty-four.

JE: April 1st, 1934. So your present age is?

AL: Eighty-three.

JE: Just celebrated that birthday, as a matter of fact.

AL: Yes. I like to tell people I turned thirty-eight, but I actually turned eighty-three.

JE: Uh-hah (laugh). Where are we recording this interview?

AL: We are recording this interview at my home in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Where were you born?

AL: I was born in Bielsko-Biała, Upper Silesia in Poland.

JE: Did you have brothers or sisters?

AL: I had one sister, now deceased.

JE: Let's talk about your mother. Your mother's name and a little bit about her.

AL: Well, I don't remember much about my parents, since I was about eight when I last saw them. And I never found out what happened to them. But they apparently did not make it.

JE: Your mother's name?

AL: My mother's name was Elizabeth Langer, Elizabeth Robinowitz Langer.

JE: And then your father's name?

AL: Was Oskar, Oskar Langer.

JE: At eight years old, and now you're eighty-three, can you even see them in your mind?

AL: No, I have some pictures. At one time, I looked quite similar to how my father looked, you know, there was a resemblance.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

AL: And I have some pictures I look at. That's all I can remember.

JE: What was your father's profession?

AL: My family owned a textile business, a textile factory, in Bielsko-Biała, where I was born. And the whole family worked there.

JE: When you say, "whole family," what does that mean?

AL: That means on both sides, the Robinowitz side and the Langer side, most, if not all, were an employee of that company. It was well-known.

JE: You probably were pretty well off?

AL: Yes, yes we were well off. And actually, the factory belonged to my mother's family. My dad was a foreman at the factory.

JE: And your mother's last name was Robinowitz?

AL: Robinowitz.

JE: So then did you all live together? Did you have aunts and uncles?

AL: We had aunts and uncles and most of us, if not all, lived in that one apartment building.

JE: Was it owned by the family?

AL: I don't recall, I would assume it was.

JE: So it was what? Was it two or three stories tall?

AL: Yes, uh-huh (affirmative), and uncles and aunts, they all lived there.

JE: And the whole family was right there. (laughing).

AL: The whole family, the whole family. As they say, "[*Hebrew, time 3:15*]" was there.

JE: Heh-heh-heh (laughing). You do have a fond memory of that, I mean, it had to be with that whole family around.

AL: Yes, but it was so many years ago.

JE: Yeah.

AL: And so many things have happened—

JE: Yeah.

AL: ...that I have trouble remembering, as much as I try.

Chapter 03 - 5:32

New Identity

John Erling: We're about to talk about what happened September 1st, 1939. I want to ask you, is this painful to you to do this now? And if it isn't, was it at some point?

Al Langer: It was at first, not anymore, because I had a story to tell and it's important.

JE: September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and, Al, you were five years old, right?

AL: I was exactly five years and five months old.

JE: Obviously you wouldn't have any memory of that day.

AL: No, not that particular day.

JE: Or maybe even hearing anybody in your family talking about it?

AL: Believe it or not, as long ago as that was, and as young as I was, I can still remember, because my parents started worrying. And the persecution of the Jews started almost right away. And for the next three years, we were in hiding.

JE: Where did you hide?

AL: With friends, with Christian friends. But officially, we didn't exist, as I recall, for the next three years, and I know this because of some documents that came into my possession.

JE: Then on the 17th of September, 1939, Russia invaded Poland. Their point of invasion, was it near your town?

AL: It really wasn't because some of my older relatives, who are still living, said that the Russians never entered the part of Poland where we lived.

JE: You didn't feel their presence at all?

AL: No, I didn't have any interaction with the Russians, at that point.

JE: Isn't it true that some Russian soldiers were Jews?

AL: Yes, it's definitely true. The one thing I recall is that one of my grandmothers, she was deported to Siberia. And at the time, we thought that was so terrible. It might have saved her life because she survived Siberia and passed away a natural death in 1961, in New York City.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). That would have been your maternal grandmother?

AL: That was my maternal grandmother.

JE: Wasn't it true that the Russians just rounded up people at random?

AL: It was at random, yes. They didn't have to be Jewish, you know, they would just round them up and send them to Siberia. I guess they needed some forced labor. And it was no picnic. But you survived.

JE: Did you ever see her again?

AL: Yes, I did see her. I didn't see her in New York but I saw her before she came to New York.

JE: Where?

AL: In South America.

JE: Okay, and we'll get to that story. So then your family, basically, is on the run?

AL: We were on the run from 1939 to 1942.

JE: What does that mean, you were on the run?

AL: Well, that means, like, we officially did not exist. We'd be in hiding, or with some friends, some Polish friends.

But sometime in 1942, my parents found a Ukrainian peasant family who agreed to take me—for a fee—and I ceased to be Alfred Langer.

JE: Did we establish the fact that your family is Jewish? We need to do that.

AL: Oh, yeah.

JE: You're not Polish. You lived in Poland and—

AL: Well, we were Polish Jews.

JE: Right. You did live underground, in a sense, that Polish families took you in, apparently?

AL: Yes, but I got a new identity and I ceased to be Alfred Langer. I became Stefan Lorek. I posed as a good Catholic boy. Knew my catechism by heart and was very well behaved in church. In fact, I was so well behaved in church that they became suspicious. Because no boy of eight or nine is that well behaved in church. You know, they get rambunctious. But fear will do that to you.

JE: Okay, I was going to ask that. So do you believe that was fear?

AL: Oh, yeah. Fear was the motivator.

JE: You were a fearful young boy at eight years old. You were taken in by this family. Did your parents contribute to your well being financially?

AL: Well, after that, no, they gave them the money.

JE: Your parents did give these foster parents, we'll call them—

AL: You might call them that.

JE: ...money for your care and keeping?

AL: Yeah, to the best of my understanding, they did. And really, they never mistreated me, that I recall. If they did, you know, memory's a funny thing—you can blow things up. But no, I think after a while they accepted me. They didn't care for Jews but I think they grew to love me. You know why?

JE: Hmm (questioning sound).

AL: Because I'm so loveable.

JE: (laughing) Well, you are charming. (both laughing) You know, this just kind of points out a story here that if they were anti-Semitic to the Jewish population at large, they got to know you as a person, and then all that prejudice went away. You think?

AL: I'm not so sure.

JE: Really?

AL: I'm not so sure.

JE: Okay.

AL: I may have been the one exception. I was a little boy that was well behaved and, like I said before, attended church regularly. So I think they grew to accept me. Will that have changed their outlook? I have no idea.

JE: Yeah.

AL: In fact, I can remember very little.

Chapter 04 - 2:47

Al's New Family

Al Langer: And in fact, let me tell you how I became Alfred Langer again.

John Erling: Let me just ask you this question though, if the German officers found out that you were a Jewish boy there, that family could have been really severely punished?

AL: Yeah, they could have been killed because that was a crime.

JE: So they were taking a huge risk in protecting you.

AL: They were taking a risk, yes. But I spoke perfect Polish, despite the fact that we spoke German at home. But, you know, a little kid learns languages fast. I couldn't do it today.

JE: So at that point, it was Polish and German you were speaking, as an eight-year-old boy?

AL: Yes.

- JE:** Can you tell us anything more about the family? They were a Catholic family.
- AL:** I remember very little about the family. I remember there was a young couple and there was an older woman. I don't know whether it was his or her mother, but I called her Bubcia. Bubcia means, like, Grandma. And like I said, I don't recall them really mistreating me.
- JE:** Didn't Jewish boys have a tougher time passing themselves off than girls?
- AL:** I'm glad you touched on that. Yes, much tougher. And do you know why?
- JE:** Why?
- AL:** Because at that time, only Jewish boys were circumcised.
- JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).
- AL:** So that was a bad giveaway.
- JE:** Yeah.
- AL:** That's why I learned early never to disrobe in front of the other boys.
- JE:** Did you really feel the fear as an eight- and nine- and ten-year-old boy that you were a Jewish boy being protected from harm? Did you feel that sense?
- AL:** No, I don't recall really after I established my new identity feeling fear, except that I would never admit to being Jewish. Because I knew that if I did that, I was a goner.
- JE:** So that then was the fear that drove you, right?
- AL:** That was the fear in the back of my mind, but I didn't live in constant fear.
- JE:** Nor did you know the Holocaust was going on. You couldn't imagine that as a young boy.
- AL:** Eh—no. I knew that Jews were being targeted.
- JE:** Okay.
- AL:** And anti-Semitism was rampant in Poland, for the simple reason that Poland had more Jews than any other country in Europe. Ten percent of the Polish population were Jewish. It's always exponential, anti-Semitism becomes stronger the more Jews you have.
- For instance, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, there's very little anti-Semitism because there are only about eighteen hundred Jews in the whole city of Tulsa. So there's very little of it.
- JE:** Yeah.

Chapter 05 - 3:50

April 1945

- John Erling:** I think it was April of 1945 you had the shock of your life.
- Al Langer:** The shock of my life. We were liberated by the Red Army and the Russian soldier, who happened to be Jewish, came by the house where we lived, and he says to me, "Your name is Alfred Langer and you are a Jew."

Of course, I denied it. I was kicking and screaming. I said, “No! My name is Stefan Lorek and I am not a Jew.”

So anyway, he wanted to take me away. The family didn’t want to let go. Some of my relatives thought that maybe they wanted more money. But I truly believe that they, like I say, they grew to love me.

But anyway, what happened is that he did take me away.

JE: How old are you at this time? When they take you away?

AL: Eleven.

JE: Eleven years old?

AL: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Well, Al, how did the Russian soldier know where you lived?

AL: You know, that’s a good question. I don’t know whether I have the right answer but some of my surviving relatives who are older than I am, they claim that Kitty, my sister, who was six years older than I was, actually went back to Bielsko-Biała where we were born, and she somehow got the information.

Now that’s the closest I can come to an explanation for it because I wondered about that myself throughout the years.

JE: So she went back to your hometown, learned where you were, and then, innocently sent it to somebody?

AL: Sent it to somebody. Now how that came about, why this Russian came after me—

JE: Was he nice to you at all?

AL: Yeah, he was pretty nice, he just insisted, you know, that I have to go with him because my name was Alfred Langer and Stefan Lorek like I claimed to be. So I had to leave. But that is the closest I can come to an explanation.

JE: And do you have any recollection of the fear? You’re taken by this stranger, you’re put in a truck. Do you remember any of those moments after you’re—

AL: No, not the moment. Only I know that I was taken away. And wound up in a DP camp, which is Displaced Persons.

JE: Were you put in that DP camp right away? Is that where he took you?

AL: That’s where he took me.

JE: Took you straight to that DP camp?

AL: Yeah.

JE: Did you see Kitty, your sister, immediately? Or did it take days after you were there at the DP camp?

AL: I—didn’t take very long, I couldn’t give you a time line again.

JE: And that’s got to be one of the joys in your heart today, that moment—

AL: Oh, yes, definitely, definitely. She was my only sister and she survived. But she would never speak of her experiences, they must have been too horrendous. She never talked about them.

JE: What was the age difference?

AL: About six years.

JE: She was six years older than you?

AL: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And her name was Kitty.

AL: Kitty. I never spoke about my experiences for about fifty years. Who wants to rehash all that? Until I learned about all those Holocaust deniers, who claimed that it never happened. Yet quite a few in the United States and all over the world. So then I decided, "Well, it's important to set them straight." There are too many of us survivors and too many documents, captured German documents, because the Germans were proud of what they were doing.

That's when I started to speak out. In fact, now I'm a docent at the Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art. And the main reason I do that is because we have a sizeable Holocaust exhibit.

Chapter 06 - 5:12

Kindertransport

John Erling: Tell us about this Displaced Persons camp. Did you get clothes? Food?

Al Langer: Yes. There was a United Nations fund, you know, and then there was the Jewish Agency. So yeah, we were given food and clothing.

Then about a hundred of us orphaned children went on a boat, what they call the Kindertransport, from Poland to England. So I lived in England for about a year. That's when I first learned English.

JE: It's just hard to imagine, here we've got to keep reminding that you were eleven and twelve years old when this is all happening.

AL: Um-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

JE: And I guess you just go with the flow. You had all these other children around and there was some playing and kidding around and all that, so it helped to have all those kids with you.

AL: Yes. And I'll never forget, on that ship, a young rabbi came with us. He was kind of in charge of the whole operation. And he was wise enough to realize that we were all traumatized. So he didn't go into the real serious rabbinical stuff. He was a jolly fellow, as I remember.

And I still remember some of the songs that were taught. There was one that was really funny, that was, "Solomon had a thousand wives, and that's the reason why, he always was late for the bus, kissing them all goodbye." I mean, that was funny.

JE: Yes.

AL: Yeah. And then he told us the famous English song, "My bonny lies over the ocean, my bonny lies over the sea."

So we arrived in London. As it happened, one uncle of mine, my mother's brother, lived in London. In fact, he was in the Polish Brigade of the British Army in World War II. But I was put in a boarding house.

JE: Did you connect with your uncle there?

AL: Yes.

JE: How could you have ever made that connection?

AL: I imagine that it was on his part that the connection was made. But I wound up in a boarding school.

JE: You became Al Langer again when you went to that Displaced Persons camp.

AL: Yep. You asked me about first time I went to school. What I recall, it was in England.

JE: At eleven years?

AL: At eleven years old.

JE: That was your first time in school?

AL: First time in school, so because of my age they had to put me in a certain grade. So there are big holes in my education. They couldn't put me with the little kids.

And then I had another uncle on my father's side who lived in South America in La Paz, Bolivia. They wanted us to come to South America.

JE: But when you were in England then you had to learn English.

AL: Yes.

JE: Was that difficult for you?

AL: At that age, no, no.

JE: So there you were at eleven, in command of three languages.

AL: Yes, except that I kind of forgot my German. I may have willed myself to forget it.

JE: Yeah.

AL: I didn't want to have anything to do, that had to do with Germany.

JE: Yeah.

AL: Which is not a rational thing to do, but like you say, I was a little kid.

JE: Was that school that you attended a Jewish school?

AL: Yes, that was another culture shock. Because going from posing as a Catholic to going to a Jewish school, so I had a lot of adjustments to make.

JE: (laughing) Wow. You think those experiences formed who you were, who you became?

AL: Well, it really taught me to go with the flow, so to speak.

JE: Right.

AL: You know, I had to make adjustments.

JE: Yeah. So that was temporary in England. What was that, a year you were there?

AL: About a year.

JE: Then we go on—

AL: Right.

JE: ...to South America.

AL: New language, had to learn Spanish.

JE: Yeah. And where in South America?

AL: La Paz, Bolivia.

JE: How was that experience on the ship going to South America?

AL: It was interesting because at the time, my sister, my uncle, and my grandmother, we all went to South America.

JE: The family members connected with you then?

AL: Oh, yeah.

JE: Somebody was looking out for everybody here, weren't they? I mean, the fact that they were all in England and they connected with you—

AL: Well, actually, my uncle was in England and he had my grandmother, his mother, she got out of Siberia. So there we were in England. And from England we went to South America at the behest of my uncle in South America, in La Paz, Bolivia.

JE: Having a strong family really helped you, didn't it? The connection. They remained close.

AL: Yes.

JE: As much as they could.

AL: As much as they could. Of course, it wasn't easy to do.

JE: No. But you had that.

AL: Yes.

JE: And I imagine a lot of those orphaned children didn't have any family.

AL: That's right, that's right. Well, some of those orphaned children, of course, those were children who never found their parents—

JE: Right.

AL: ...because they had perished, so many of them, I think, were adopted by English families.

JE: Right. This extended family of yours obviously felt bad for you because your parents weren't around and they were going to take on the parental role.

AL: Right.

Chapter 07 - 3:06**Bolivia**

John Erling: You're about twelve years old now—

Al Langer: About twelve.

JE: ...in La Paz, Bolivia.

AL: In La Paz, Bolivia. New language, and because of my age, they put me in the fifth grade.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

AL: Couldn't speak a word of Spanish. I went to a school called the American Institute. It was a private school. My uncle in Bolivia was able to finance that. Of course, everything was taught in Spanish except they had a larger English curriculum than most schools over there.

Fortunately at that time, there was a girl there who spoke English, and, of course, Spanish. She served as my interpreter. And to this day, I think I was the only kid there that had an official interpreter.

JE: (laughing)

AL: But it didn't take me long to learn the language.

JE: Your uncle in La Paz, he was in a business there?

AL: Yes, he managed tourist hotels.

JE: Okay.

AL: Several there. Several.

JE: So he was of some means?

AL: Yes he was, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And he could hire that interpreter for you, that you know—

AL: No, no, she did that on a voluntary base. I mean, she was a student there.

JE: Okay.

AL: I forgot to mention that, she was a student.

JE: How long were you there then in La Paz?

AL: In La Paz, I was there about six years.

JE: And that would make you eighteen years old.

AL: About eighteen years old.

JE: Is that a pleasant experience for you there?

AL: Aaah, well, of course, it was a different culture there. They didn't like any kind of *gringo*. You know what a gringo is? Gringo is kind of a newcomer, but especially Jews, of course, they didn't like.

I remember the kind of culture, you know, that they like to start fights like drawing a line in the sand and daring you to cross it. Stuff like that.

There isn't an awful thought I remember except that I went to school there for four years.

JE: You were into your teen years; those are tough years anyway.

AL: Um-hmm (affirmative). And I was always kind of small in size, so I learned rather than to stand and fight those big fellows, I could outrun them.

JE: There was some anti-Semitism going on because your family was Jewish.

AL: Yeah, some. There was some going on, you could see it, but they didn't really persecute us.

JE: By the time you're eighteen years old, did you learn of the history at what happened to the Jews in Auschwitz and other camps?

AL: At that time, I didn't really know. I was beginning to learn about it because I never saw the inside of a camp.

JE: Sure.

AL: My experience was different. Different from Eva Unterman, you know.

JE: Yeah.

AL: Who was in several.

JE: Eva Unterman lives in Tulsa and we have her oral history interview on our website.

AL: Oh, she's, yeah, she amazing. Yeah.

JE: And so it was just beginning to come to you then about those ages?

AL: Right, but again, I didn't dwell on the past. And that was the first time where I decided to go somewhere. I decided to go to Israel.

Chapter 08 - 3:57

Israel

Al Langer: So I went to Israel.

John Erling: Now did your family embrace that, that you wanted to go to Israel? Were they okay with that?

AL: Aah, they weren't too wild about it, but I was of age, I was eighteen, so I could make up my own mind.

JE: Why did you want to go to Israel?

AL: Well, it's like they called out in Hebrew to make *Aliyah*. To make Aliyah is to go up, step up. Israel was only about five years old at the time when I went in 1953.

JE: Because in 1948 is when they became a state.

AL: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So they were a young nation.

AL: They were a young nation and I was what they call a *Halutz*, which is a pioneer. My destination was going to be at *kibbutz*, which is a collective farm over there. But I knew nothing about farming or milking cows or whatever, so I had to go to what they call *hasharam*. [*Hebrew, time :49*] Hasharam is a place where they kind of train you to do things. That place was in Montevideo, Uruguay.

JE: Oh?

AL: Because that was my next stop. I stayed there for approximately a year, then I went to Israel. Stayed in a kibbutz for about a year. A kibbutz is a place where you don't get paid but you never go hungry. Everything is provided for you.

JE: Communal living.

AL: It's communal living. I soon discovered that it wasn't my cup of tea. A kibbutz had to contribute a certain percentage of their young men and women to the IDF, which is the Israel Defense Forces, the Army. They didn't particularly want me at the time because I went for my physical and they discovered that I had a heart murmur. So I didn't rate very high on my physical. The person they really wanted, another member of the kibbutz, was an A1 but he wanted a deferral because he was married and had kids. So I went in his place. I would have had to go eventually anyway.

So I went and I served in the Israel Defense Forces from 1955 to 1957.

JE: I thought your heart condition would have kept you out completely.

AL: No. In Israel, if you breathe, then you serve.

JE: (laughing) Okay.

AL: Because they will find something for you to do. I'll tell you what happened there. They must have been hard up for intelligence because they put me in the Intelligence Service. At that time, of course, it wasn't what it is today, we actually listened in to the enemy. At that time, Morse code was the thing.

So I would get the messages in Morse code.

JE: Who was the enemy then?

AL: Mostly the Egyptians. All the Arab states.

JE: All the Arab—

AL: But mostly the Egyptians. Yeah.

JE: Yeah. We should point out, you had to learn another language there.

AL: Oh, yes. Well, I learned Hebrew pretty quick but I was still illiterate because I didn't know how to read and write. Well, I'm talking about the difference in alphabet, you know, Hebrew, you write from right to left instead of from left to right.

JE: Right.

AL: And you learn a new alphabet, so they had to send me to school to learn how to read and write.

JE: Right. Were you able to read the other languages you learned?

AL: Pretty quick.

JE: Okay. All right.

AL: I mean, it was the same alphabet.

JE: So this was more difficult then?

AL: It was.

JE: And you were sent to a school?

AL: Yes, it's called an *ulpan*. Ulpan is for that specific reason—to learn how to read and write Hebrew—even if you already spoke it, already spoke Hebrew.

JE: And you ultimately ended up learning how to read and write Hebrew.

AL: Because I was always an avid reader, I was glad to be able to read and write Hebrew. But, of course, in Israel, you can find material in any language. Just about everybody there speaks English to some degree.

Chapter 09 - 5:58

Army and Merchant Marine

John Erling: You did enlist in the army. How long did you serve?

Al Langer: The required two and a half years.

JE: What form of the military were you in?

AL: I was in the army, in the Intelligence Service.

JE: How long were you in that work?

AL: For almost two and a half years. The only time where I had to wear a uniform, carry a rifle, was in boot camp. But our operation was so hush-hush that we were in Jerusalem in a run of the mill building, listening in to the enemy.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

AL: It was interesting.

JE: We talked about the Arab nation. Was Israel then fearful that they were going to be invaded?

AL: The threat was always there. I was there during, what you know here as the Suez campaign. We called it the Sinai campaign, it's the same thing, in 1956.

JE: Tell us about that campaign.

AL: Well, that campaign, most of course, Egypt and Jordan and, you know, they all invaded. Fortunately, we were able to repel them. It started when Egypt located the Suez Canal.

That particular was actually was joined by the British and the French too. Because their ships were involved. The war was after—you heard of the six-day war?

JE: Yeah.

AL: Of course I was already here during the six-day war.

JE: But you were in Jerusalem in that building, listening in on Morse code while that invasion took place.

AL: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And you continued to then monitor the enemy.

AL: Right.

JE: Do you think the information you obtained was pretty valuable so that it really helped?

AL: I imagine it was. See, the whole thing is the decoders, there was a decoding section, they were the real brains of the operation.

JE: So you were the collectors?

AL: My job was to get it right, which wasn't easy because they knew that we were listening in on them, our earphones on. It was dit, dit, dit, dit, and all of a sudden, there's a beeeeeeee right in your ear, you know, because they knew we were listening in to them. So it took a lot of concentration.

In fact, it was so strenuous on your nerves that we only did it in four-hour shifts.

JE: Wow.

AL: So that was interesting.

JE: Two and a half years of doing that.

AL: Yeah, close to that.

JE: Did—

AL: Didn't do much for my hearing.

JE: Yeah. Then what happens?

AL: After I got out of there I went to work as a bellhop in a hotel in Haifa, in Israel. The owner of the hotel was too cheap to buy us bellhop uniforms so I had to wear my only good suit I had to my name. And I turned out pretty well because I would carry the suitcase. And the guest would complain about something but I was there in my suit and tie, and I'll tell them, "Well, I will see what I can do about it," you know. See, I sounded more important than I would have been in a bellhop uniform.

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

AL: And I'll never forget carrying a suitcase of an Englishman and he gave me a tip. I said, "Thank you, sir."

He looked at me and he said, "I haven't been knighted yet."

JE: Oh.

AL: See, only a knight is higher.

JE: So, “I haven’t been knighted yet.” (laughing)

AL: But later I decided I need to do something not to have to serve in the Reserves. Because in Israel at the time, you had to serve in the Reserves until age forty-nine. And I had enough of the military, so one way to get out of it was to join the Merchant Marines. But you had to have some kind of trade.

So I went to waiter school. There was a waiter’s and cook’s school. I still have the notebook on that. We had to learn about wines and foods—which wine goes with what. We had to wear the cummerbund and the little bowtie. So I eventually, after working on weddings and bar mitzvahs, finally joined the Merchant Marines.

And that was an interesting experience—I got to see the world. I came to the United States before I ever immigrated here.

JE: But you were a waiter then?

AL: Yes I was.

JE: You worked in food service in the Merchant Marines?

AL: Yes, I was not a seaman, I was a waiter. What I didn’t like about the job was that the customer is always right. You had to smile no matter what, you know.

JE: (laughing) Yeah.

AL: Frozen smile on your face. No matter how obnoxious the customer is you have to smile. But it kept me out of the Reserves and I got to see the world.

I remember one experience when we arrived in Mobile, Alabama, that was, of course, during segregation. At that time, they didn’t have separate buses but the whites would sit in front and the blacks in the back.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

AL: Of course, the whites could sit anywhere they wanted to. There was no room in front, so I sat in the back. Kind of a bench seat by the back of the bus. Presently, an elderly black gentleman came with a cane. So, remembering my good manners, I got up and offered him my seat.

Well, the white guy beside whom I was sitting, I’ll tell you, if looks could kill I wouldn’t be here talking to you.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

AL: And he tried to spread himself so there wouldn’t be enough room for anybody else to sit. That was an interesting experience.

JE: And you gave your seat to a black man?

AL: Oh, yeah, yeah.

JE: And the white man, he didn’t—

AL: He didn’t appreciate it.

JE: Didn’t appreciate it.

AL: He didn't appreciate it at all. Those were different times and I'm glad they have changed. Some of it has changed for the better, but not everything.

JE: Right. Are you feeling anti-Semitism in that period of your life there?

AL: No, not really. But then, don't forget that I'm not like traditional Jew wearing the skull cap and all that, so...

JE: Yeah.

AL: I hadn't really experienced this since I've been here.

Chapter 10 - 3:28

Sapulpa, Oklahoma

John Erling: Did you ever have flashbacks—

Al Langer: Yes.

JE: ...to your experience?

AL: Yes.

JE: Tell us about that.

AL: Well, my flashbacks even go back to my parents. Like sometimes in the early days I would dream, you know, that my parents would come back to see me. But those are long gone.

I was working for the Israeli Merchant Marine and we were docked in Bremerhaven, in Germany. One morning, I wake up, look out of the porthole—the little window in a ship—and what do I see? I see a swastika. That's when I thought I was seeing a flashback because this was 1957, '58, about a dozen years after the war ended. How can that be?

Then I came to find out that that swastika was an emblem of a Scandinavian shipping company.

JE: Oh.

AL: Long before the Nazis came to power. And now the interesting story about the swastika is that I had some Native American groups at the museum and they told me that they have a similar emblem, turned a little different, and had no sinister overtones.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

AL: In fact, it was a happy symbol.

JE: So then when you leave the merchant marines, how old are you?

AL: Approximately twenty-eight because it was at that time that I decided to immigrate to the United States. The way that happened is that my only sister, Kitty, who survived, married an American citizen. And she wanted me to come. If it hadn't of been for her I probably wouldn't have come because I was at home in Israel.

JE: And she wanted you to come to the United States?

AL: Yes.

JE: Where was she living in the United States?

AL: In Sapulpa, Oklahoma, because Fred, my late brother-in-law, he was a county surveyor for Creek County.

JE: She wanted you to come, were you happy about that?

AL: Well, I wanted to be reunited with her so I decided, "Yeah, I'll come."

Here's an interesting story about this. With her pulling from here and me trying to get my papers in order, it still took me quite a while to get my papers in order because of all the red tape. That's the main reason I'm against open borders because you have to earn it. They had to vouch for me. In other words, I wouldn't be a burden on the state.

JE: Did they have to prove that you'd have a job too?

AL: Well, I didn't have a job.

JE: No.

AL: But if I didn't get a job it would be their responsibility—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

AL: ...to provide for me.

JE: How long did that process take, to get your papers?

AL: It took about at least two years.

JE: And you came to Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

AL: Yes I did.

JE: In 1962.

AL: Nineteen sixty-two. As it happened, a second cousin, or a cousin of my mother's, lived in New York and still does. He just turned a hundred a couple of months ago. So I stayed with him for about three days in New York. And then boarded a Greyhound bus and came to Oklahoma.

JE: It's interesting how this family, the thread discontinued.

AL: Well, as it happens, some of the family, because they survived by being somewhere else. This particular cousin, Otsik, he was in Belgium at the time on company business, when it all broke up.

Chapter 11 - 3:12

OTASCO

John Erling: So you come to Sapulpa.

Al Langer: Come to Sapulpa.

- JE:** And that had to be a joyous reunion with Kitty.
- AL:** It was, it was, joyous reunion with Kitty. Two weeks later I went to work.
- JE:** What was that job?
- AL:** I worked for OTASCO. You remember OTASCO, John?
- JE:** Oh, I sure do. Oklahoma Tire and Supply Company.
- AL:** Uh-huh, uh-huh (affirmatives). I worked for them for twenty-six and a half years, until they folded. They went out of business.
- JE:** There's a Jewish connection there.
- AL:** Oh, yes. The Sanditens of Corzone owned OTASCO. Five brothers, came from Eastern Europe, they formed the company and the first store was not in Tulsa. The first store was in Okmulgee, Oklahoma.
- JE:** Yeah.
- AL:** And later, when I worked for them, at their peak they had about seven hundred stores in Oklahoma and surrounding states.
- JE:** Do you think it helped that you were Jewish, that you got your job there?
- AL:** I don't think so, no.
- JE:** Right.
- AL:** It helped that Kitty and her husband knew one of their top salesmen in the Sapulpa store.
- JE:** OTASCO, of course, was a big presence here in Tulsa, this is where their headquarters were.
- AL:** Oh, yeah.
- JE:** Right here.
- AL:** Oh, yeah. For a short time, I worked in the Sapulpa store, and then I transferred to the warehouse.
- JE:** For twenty-six years in the warehouse?
- AL:** Um-hmm (affirmative).
- JE:** What did you do there?
- AL:** I was a stocker and order filler. Mostly a re-stocker. It was a big operation.
- JE:** So that was a good job for you.
- AL:** It was good. Well, to tell you the truth, warehouse work, I chose it because I just didn't feel like waiting on customers. Again, you have to smile all the time.
- JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).
- AL:** And you get flak from both the customers and your supervisors.
- JE:** Yes.
- AL:** Now in the warehouse, it's only your supervisors you have to interact.
- JE:** Did you meet any of the Sanditens brothers?

AL: Yes I did, they were still alive. I met Herman Sanditen, one of the brothers.

JE: I think there was Sam and Morris.

AL: Yes. And there was Julius at the time. Julius was the CEO of the place.

JE: It was a good company to work for.

AL: It was, it was. Of course, they didn't pay well. But we had something that the company offered, it was called their retirement trust. You didn't contribute to it, only the company did. And, of course, for the real young guys, that wasn't much of an incentive because you don't think that far ahead. But they paid very minimum wage until the union came in. You know, the teamster's union came in there. But they didn't do too much for us because teamster's union is mostly truck drivers' union.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

AL: So we were kind of like, "They're stepkids." But yes, it was a good company to work for.

JE: But that retirement fund, that was good for you?

AL: Oh, oh, yes, ah, yes, definitely. Of course, the company went bankrupt.

JE: Yeah.

AL: For about a year I couldn't get to my money because it was tied up in bankruptcy court. That's the one time that I was really happy the government was involved.

JE: But your retirement fund, you eventually received—

AL: I eventually received it. And I was able to reinvest it in an IRA and that's part of my retirement.

JE: To this day?

AL: To this day.

JE: That's wonderful.

Chapter 12 - 3:27

Religion

John Erling: Is there some point that you were married?

Al Langer: Oh, yes. I was married twice. The first time didn't really work out.

JE: And when was that?

AL: The first time was about '63, '64.

JE: In Tulsa?

AL: Yeah.

JE: And that didn't last very long?

AL: Didn't last very long. The second one did.

JE: And what was her name?

AL: Her name was Flena. We were married for twenty-two and a half years until she passed away. I still miss her. That's been twenty-five years ago.

JE: Did you have children?

AL: No, we never had children, but she had. She had this son, my stepson.

JE: Is he around today?

AL: Oh, yes.

JE: Is he close to you?

AL: Yes.

JE: So he checks on you and you're back and forth?

AL: Oh, yeah, yeah, they take care of me.

JE: That's great.

AL: Yeah.

JE: He and his family?

AL: Yeah. Which is good. In my later years, I like to get along with people, you know? But some people, they don't feel complete unless they have some kind of feud going. I don't have time for that.

JE: Through all these years we've talked about, I didn't talk about any religion. Did you ascribe to any religion at all? You had the Catholic faith and the Jewish religion.

AL: Yeah.

JE: Did any of them become part of your life?

AL: No. Let me put it this way: I believe in God, okay? There is a God above. I also believe that part of my life he was taking a long nap. See what I mean?

JE: Part of your life he was taking a long nap?

AL: Right, like that part when the holocaust occurred.

JE: It's hard for you to understand?

AL: Yeah, it's hard for me to understand, I mean, it's supposed to be the benevolent God, but if you look down in your Bible, all the New Testament, there's a lot of brutality and strife going on. I don't have anything against organized religion, but I like to tell people, "Now if you attend church, once, twice, three times a week, and you're a good person, and I never set foot in one and I'm a good person, you are not a bit better than I am."

JE: Right.

AL: And some of them don't like that.

JE: Right. When you understood the full impact of the holocaust—I don't know when that came about in your years, if in your twenties, your thirties, or forties—

AL: It was kind of a learning curve.

JE: So eventually you did learn the full impact of it. And then you thought about where you were while that was happening. How did that make you feel? We hear about survivors who have guilt feelings about surviving.

AL: Aah, I'm glad you mentioned that, yes. We are talking about survivor guilt. I had that, not for very long, but I had it. It's not unusual because you think, "How come I survived and some of these other people who could have accomplished greater things, they didn't make it?" It's not a very rational line of thinking but it happens anyway.

JE: Yeah. What was your attitude about Germans, about Germany? Was that sensitive? Talk to me about that.

AL: I'm glad you asked about that. I don't have any animus whatsoever towards today's Germans. Several generations passed since, so no. At first, yes. I want to block out anything German, including the language, by the way. Again, that wasn't rational but it was understandable.

Chapter 13 - 4:42

Race Riot / Holocaust

John Erling: Let me talk a little bit about Tulsa then. And we're talking in the '60s?

Al Langer: I arrived in '62, 1962.

JE: Can you tell me a little bit then as you moved on and you worked for OTASCO?

AL: I worked for OTASCO and then, of course, I married twice.

JE: What did you do for entertainment? Did you go to movies?

AL: Yeah, I was an avid movie-goer. Oh, I tried some dancing but then my partners, you know, they came down with mysterious foot ailments, so...

JE: (laughing).

AL: So anyway, traveled some because my wife, Flena, she liked to travel. I wanted a dog, so we compromised. We got a dog and we traveled.

JE: There you go. And dogs became a big part of your life. I want to talk about that. Did you feel any racial tension with blacks here in Tulsa? Did you in the Greenwood area?

AL: No, but, of course, I didn't frequent the—

JE: Right.

AL: ...Greenwood area, so...

JE: Did you even know of the 1921 Race Riot?

AL: Yes, of course I read about it.

JE: You had read about it in the '60s?

AL: Well, maybe a little later.

JE: Okay.

AL: But I knew that it had happened because to this day, that's one of the biggest, if not the biggest, race riot in US history.

JE: Yes.

AL: And you'd be surprised how many people don't know about it. People who come to the museum. We have a little exhibit of the Race Riot, and they didn't know it had happened.

JE: And these are Oklahomans?

AL: Some of them black.

JE: Some of them black, yeah. Well, there was a great cover-up, it seemed like for a long time nobody wanted to talk about it.

AL: Exactly, like it would go away. Like some people say with the holocaust, "Why do you keep talking about it?"

Well, because it needs to be talked about.

JE: Yes. And why does it need to be talked about?

AL: So maybe, just maybe, we can prevent it from happening again. The only reason I do is because I think it's so damn important.

JE: Yeah.

AL: It's really important for people to know. We can't undo what's been done, but we can use it as a cautionary tale that it can happen. I don't think it will ever happen in the same magnitude. I think that genocide has been happening before and after the Holocaust but I don't think it will ever be of the magnitude that the Holocaust was. Because now we have the social media and word gets around. So somebody will do something about it.

JE: We can only hope.

AL: We can only hope, that is correct.

There was a gentleman by the name of Jan Karski. He was a Pole, he was not a Jew. He came to the United States trying to warn the powers that be, trying to tell them what was happening. Nobody would understand.

JE: How high in our government do you think he went to tell that?

AL: I don't know how high he went. But, of course, it was a different world then. And it was really hard to believe, that atrocities like that could be happening.

JE: And that there was a system. Eva, and maybe others have called it, a "killing machine."

AL: Absolutely.

JE: It was, it was their business to kill.

AL: In fact, I can tell you, I saw a video. It was called *Conspiracy*, where they were planning it, the so-called final solution to the Jewish person. And it was very civilized. They were drinking champagne, eating finger food, and calmly discussing how they were going to go about it.

JE: They could have been talking about making cars.

AL: Exactly. Speaking of making cars, did you know that Henry Ford was a sympathizer?

JE: He was anti-Semitic.

AL: Yes he was.

JE: Yes.

AL: And he was a sympathizer. So was Charles Lindbergh.

JE: Yes.

AL: You know, they both heroes, accomplished quite a bit, but they had this little flaw.

JE: I think when the war broke out, I don't know how many years later, but Charles Lindbergh would never, as I understand it, publicly denounce Germany.

AL: No.

JE: And he was obviously one of our heroes.

AL: Yes he was. Well, you can't take away any of his accomplishments. But I think that's a big flaw that they had. And, you know, the way I look at it, anti-Semitism is something that's always going to be with us.

Chapter 14 - 2:10

Kitty Never Told

John Erling: As you said, you came to Sapulpa in 1962, and, of course, you and Kitty remained close.

Al Langer: Yes. After I first arrived I was living with them, with Kitty and her family.

JE: Now Kitty died in 1992.

AL: New Year's Day, 1992.

JE: So from '62 until '92, my math says that's thirty years.

AL: Yes.

JE: Thirty years of seeing her, talking to her, families back and forth because you were married, and back and forth and all that. Did you and Kitty, in that thirty years, ever talk about the war?

AL: No, we did not. It was something we really didn't want to remember. And Kitty would never talk about her experiences.

JE: Did you ever try to talk to her about it?

AL: No, I did not.

JE: Do you think she spoke to her husband about it?

AL: I doubt it, I doubt very seriously.

JE: So she kept this very much to herself. I just think it's so remarkable that brother and sister, there would have been some time you were alone in the house or whatever, and the two of you just broke down and talked about it.

AL: No.

JE: But you didn't do it.

AL: No (laughs).

JE: Well, you told your wife when you eventually married.

AL: It's just something that I wanted to forget. It's not something I really dwelt on.

JE: And it wasn't in your heart that you wanted to talk either, so you were both keeping it to yourself.

AL: That's right. There are many, many people who never ever gave testimony, would talk about it, because it was just too painful.

JE: And they went to their grave never talking about it.

AL: Never talking about it.

JE: As you've said, you're a docent at the Sherwin Miller Museum of Arts.

AL: Yes sir.

JE: And there is the Herman and Kate Kaiser Holocaust Collection.

AL: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Have any deniers ever come through to challenge you?

AL: Oh, no, no.

JE: No?

AL: No.

JE: Any experiences from your discussion with the visitors there?

AL: They want to learn so people who come there, they are not the ones who are going to argue with you.

Chapter 15 - 6:17

Look Around YOU

John Erling: We talked about dogs.

Al Langer: Oh, yeah.

JE: And you love dogs and you love to write and you're a good writer.

AL: Well...

JE: And here's a booklet, *Dogs Who Owned Me* by Al Langer. Tell us what dogs meant to you.

AL: Well, the thing I like about dogs is, that if nothing else, they are faithful. They love you no matter what.

JE: Yeah.

AL: That's why I always says, "If you are brimming with self-confidence, get a cat."

JE: Right (laughing).

AL: Because you know, cats don't care.

JE: No, they don't.

AL: But like here with Gabby, if I'm gone for an hour, when I come back, she goes, "Where have you been all my life?" You know.

JE: Yeah.

AL: So that's what I like about dogs. And, of course, I have lived alone for the last twenty-five years, so they're my companions.

JE: Yeah. And you've had many of them?

AL: Well, actually, in the last fifty years, she's my fifth one. One at a time.

JE: Gabby is your fifth one.

AL: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And she's been here checking in on us every once in a while.

AL: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: You've written about these dogs, that's pretty remarkable.

AL: Actually, it's in their words.

JE: In their words, right. And here's Gabby's story: "As barked to Al Langer."

AL: (laughing)

JE: And I'm such a dog lover myself.

AL: Yeah, well, I thought you might like that.

JE: Yeah.

AL: So I want to make sure you got the copy of it.

JE: It is absolutely wonderful.

AL: Oh, they're a delight. They can be a nuisance sometimes.

JE: So can people.

AL: Well, and you know, the nice thing about dogs is that they wag their tails instead of their tongues.

JE: (laughing) Yeah, right.

What do you want visitors to our website to take from our time here today and your story?

AL: Well, I want it to be like a cautionary tale because the famed philosopher George Santayana, in 1905, said, "If we do not remember the past, we are condemned to repeat it."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

AL: So that's basically what I want people to take from that.

JE: And we hear recently too, the anti-Semitism in Germany among the young.

AL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, there are still Neo-Nazi groups and they're everywhere and it's so ironic

that the whole thing started in Germany because the German Jews were the most assimilated of all.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

AL: They considered themselves German first. Times do change, that's the whole thing.

JE: Well, we have survivors, Polish and German survivors living in Oklahoma. We have a former CEO of St. John Medical System, Sister Gottschalk.

AL: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: In her interview, she was eight years old. She was German and she talked about as children they had to greet each other with, "Heil Hitler." She talks about how silly they thought that was, and, "Us children, we didn't do it," until some German officer heard them and reported them to their parents that they hadn't greeted as Heil Hitler.

So in our town, we have the German side of a child who, at that age, saw this as ridiculous.

AL: Yeah, and some people, they feel guilt where there shouldn't be any. Like I know a lady, she was born in Germany and her parents were German, so she felt guilt.

I said, "Don't, if anything, you can feel shame, but not guilt."

JE: Yeah.

AL: Because she didn't do anything.

JE: Right.

AL: You know, you just happen to be German.

JE: Was there a poem that you had, "Look Around YOU"?

AL: Yeah.

JE: Can you recite that? Or can you (dog barks), oh, there's Gabby.

AL: (laughs).

JE: Must be a mailman or something.

AL: Maybe a mailman, yeah.

JE: Can you recite that poem?

AL: Look around you and what do you see?

Do you see things as they are, or the way they ought to be?

The poor yearn to be rich, the weak want to be strong.

Some fit right in while others never belong.

The old wish to be young, the young want to age.

Some people are mellow, others are seething with rage.

The world is a stage, full of grouchers and clowns,

Some filled with laughter, others bearing frowns.

The clever act like fools, the fools pretend to be smart.

Some reach their goals, others know not where to start.

We hear voices of hope and those of despair.

Some denoting glee, others gloom beyond compare.
Dreams are ephemeral, yet dreams can come true.
We stumble and fall, then we start anew.
Some hear heavenly melodies, others nary a sound.
Some reach for the stars, others never leave the ground.
Look around you and what do you see?
You see things as they are, and the way they ought to be.

JE: That was a poem written by you.

AL: Yes.

JE: Al Langer.

AL: That was by me.

JE: How would you like to be remembered?

AL: Well, that's a good question. I think I would like to be remembered as an amiable fellow. You know? That really doesn't bear grudges; I don't believe in grudges. Of course, I know even in some families, for years, don't even speak to each other over something that happened years ago.

JE: Yeah.

AL: And nothing of consequence, really. But those probably are the more, how shall I put it? Are the more determined ones, that their way has to be right. It's like saying, "My way or the highway."

JE: Well, I just want to thank you, Al, for taking time to do this. You've told it many, many times and I know there's a good reason for you to do it. We need to remember the past. So thank you. Do I say, "Shalom"?

AL: Shalom is good. Shalom is an all-around greeting. It's kind of like in Hawaii, it's Aloha.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

AL: That's shalom. And of course, shalom means peace.

JE: Peace, right. Can you do a parting greeting in Hebrew?

AL: עַד שֶׁנִּפְגָּשׁ, "until we meet again."

JE: All right, thank you.

AL: How was that?

JE: That's good.

Chapter 16 - 0:33**Conclusion**

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