

Edward Francell interview
Wednesday, July 9, 2014
Kennesaw State University
Interviewer James Newberry
Transcriber Lauren Hohn

Full Transcript

Interviewer: This is James Newberry, and I am here with Ed Francell on Wednesday, July 9th, 2014 at the Sturgis Library, Kennesaw State University. Mr. Francell, do you agree to this interview?

Francell: Absolutely. Glad to talk to you.

Interviewer: Thank you. Would you please state your full name?

Francell: Edward Gilbert Francell, F-R-A-N-C-E-L-L. Our family name was—before the war was—Fraenkel, F-R-A-E-N-K-E-L, and my father changed it.

Interviewer: And when and where were you born?

Francell: I was born in Paris, France.

Interviewer: And what year?

Francell: 1934.

Interviewer: All right, Mr. Francell, what did you parents do for a living?

Francell: My father was a salesman for a...fabric company, and they made dresses out of those fabrics and other things like that and curtains and things, and my mother was a—I guess you'd call her a housewife.

Interviewer: And could you tell me a little bit about your early family life, what you remember?

Francell: I was born in 1934, and I grew up in a nice section of Paris in France—in Paris, they have what they call *arrondissements*, which are zones, and I—we lived in one of the better ones. They were always proud of being the seventh *arrondissements*. So we grew up there and I didn't go to school much there. I don't remember going to any school, 'cause I was four years old when we talked about coming to the U.S.

Interviewer: Okay, could you describe your mother's connection to the United States?

Francell: My mother was actually an American citizen, but she was born in France, because my grandfather—her father—was named Alfred Rothschild. He was born in Columbus, Georgia, not too far from here. And the house that he was born in still remains there, and I've visited it, and therefore, by the fact that she was born of an American citizen, she became an American citizen, too.

Interviewer: And talk about her family, the Rothschilds.

Francell: The Rothschilds were not the exclusive Rothschilds that you've heard about. We were just the plain, run-of-the-mill Rothschilds, but that doesn't mean they were paupers or anything. They were pretty rich people, too, but not nearly as much as the ones you've heard of, probably.

Interviewer: And...your grandfather made his way to New York—or that the entire family did—and then, why did he immigrate back to...

Francell: They—they moved to New York from Columbus, Georgia during the Civil War, or as they call it here, the War of Northern Aggression. But they came here in—came to New York in 1865, and actually my great-grandfather had been captured by the Yankees and removed from the scene. My great-grandfather in Columbus was a owner of a cotton mill that made uniforms for the Confederacy. So they...left—he and his brother, my great-grandfather and my great-uncle were both captured and taken away to the North, and my grandm—great-grandmother (great-grandmother? Yeah) great-grandmother brought the whole family in a covered wagon to New York, or actually they went to Washington, D.C. first, looking to see if they could find out where their father was, and they were directed to go to New York because New York was where they had big prison camps for the captured rebels. And they did find him.

Interviewer: And what was your grandfather Rothschild's full name?

Francell: Simon Rothschilds was his brother, and Frank Rothschilds was his name. So he and his brother Simon lived in the same house in Columbus and they both owned that mill jointly.

Interviewer: And then your grandfather immigrated to France?

Francell: Well, he did in...late part of the 19th century. He was sort of a...playboy kind. He wasn't very big entrepreneur, but he was the—you might call him the black sheep of the family. But his—his first wife had died in New York, and he wanted to see Europe and he wanted to travel the world, so he said, "I'm going to Paris," and there, he met a French woman, who is my grandmother, and they lived there, more or less, happily ever after until World War Two.

Interviewer: And what was her name?

Francell: Marguerite Blume, B-L-U-M-E.

Interviewer: And their children?

Francell: They had two children: one was my mother, and the other one was my aunt, Yvonne, her sister. My Aunt Yvonne was born in 1898. My mother was born in 1902.

Interviewer: Okay, Mr. Francell, what role did your Jewish faith play in your childhood?

Francell: I can't remember anything...before the time when—as a matter of fact, I didn't even know we were Jewish until after World War Two. I—I had no idea. My father—which you'll hear about maybe later—lost his brother, who couldn't come with us because he was not an American citizen or a relative of one, he was killed in Auschwitz, and then my Aunt Yvonne, who was my aunt on my mother's side, was also captured and taken to Auschwitz, but luckily, she came out.

Interviewer: So, would you say your parents were not...they weren't practicing?

Francell: They weren't, no. And my grandmother R—my grandmother Rothschild, née Blume, she was almost an agnostic, or at least e—she was an atheist. She said, [*he imitates her by raising his voice*] “Puh! I don't do religion,” and that sort of thing. I remember her doing that.

Interviewer: So, did you experience Anti-Semitism in Paris?

Francell: No. No. The only thing that maybe I did experience was later in—when I went to a summer job in Maine, about 19...57, when—'55 when one of the owners of the hotel was asking me about a friend of ours who was named Peterson, and he would say, “Oh, is he Jewish? You know, we don't allow Jews here.” And I said, “Well, I don't know if he's Jewish. I don't even know if *I'm* Jewish.” And that's...basically was a kind of a revelation to me.

Interviewer: So, what did your parents tell you later about the...sort of political, the social climate in France at this time, 1934 to 1938?

Francell: Nothing. My father didn't wanna hear about it, he didn't wanna talk about it. He was so angry at the Germans for killing his brother...and also for deporting his sister-in-law that he didn't wanna talk about it, didn't wanna tell me anything. I didn't find out until one day I was reading a book and then there happened to be...a German passport in the book, and I saw it and said, “That's my father's name,” but it wasn't Francell, it was Fraenkel. I said, “How come we were Fraenkel, I thought we were Francell.” My father had the...“poor insight”—I call it—to change his name only a little, where if he could change it to...you know,

Farnsworth or something like that, then I wouldn't have made any connection at all. That's what happened and I found out pretty much on my own.

Interviewer: So, when did your—your parents—and did you have any awareness of the rise of Nazis in Germany?

Francell: No. Not—not at that time. Now, of course, I've read everything. But at the time, I didn't—even after the war, I didn't know too much about it.

Interviewer: So, at some point, though, there was a decision made to—to leave France behind?

Francell: That's right. After *Kristallnacht*, which was November of '38, I believe, and...my father had already talked about leaving, I think, and when that happened, he said, "I've got an idea.¹ My mother—my wife is an American citizen. We might be able to get out through her." And he was right.

Interviewer: So, when did you leave?

Francell: We left in February of 1939. I forget the name of the ship, I think it was—I think it was *The America*, but I'm not sure.

Interviewer: And your arrival?

Francell: We arrived in New York, of course, where most of the ships were going, but we didn't have to go through the immigration since my mother had an American passport. We just came right in with everybody else, the *non-Jews*.

Interviewer: And what do you remember of that?

Francell: Not much, 'cause it was...I was only four and a half years old. I remember we moved to a little suburb in New York called Cedarhurst, which is near what they call now Kennedy Airport, it was called Idlewild Airport at the time. That's all I remember.

Interviewer: And when were you then—when did you move to—you later moved to California?

Francell: We did. Yeah, about two years later, my father had an opportunity to buy a dress store—not a dress store but a dress...making factory, and he had some money and my mother had some money, and they invested it with another partner in this dress company and he bought that. It was actually called Classy Lass Dress Company.

¹ *Kristallnacht*: A state-sanctioned anti-Jewish pogrom the night of November 9th, 1938 throughout Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland that resulted in 91 deaths and mass vandalism, leading to the name that translates to "night of the broken glass" (*USHMM*).

Interviewer: And where was that located?

Francell: Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles.

Interviewer: So, talk to me a little bit about growing up, coming of age in Los Angeles.

Francell: Well, first of all, they sent—they chose to live in a Jewish neighborhood, even though they didn't wanna be identified as Jews. But they...they sent me to a school that was about 80% Jewish, and so...I was told—and I was told I was now an Episcopalian, and I went to the Episcopal church in Hollywood—and they didn't tell me why, but they just said, you know, they didn't tell me I was Jewish, and nobody really hinted at it. And then I was told that I was going to be going to that church, and that was fine with me, and when they sent me to the...school, Fairfax High School in Los Angeles, which is now ethnically quite different, but at the time it was about 80 to 90% Jewish. I said, "In September when the Jewish holidays come around, nobody was in school." I said, "Where are all the students?" They said, "They're celebrating the Jewish holidays." They said, "Well how come you're not there?" Well, I said, "We're not Jewish," which is what I knew at the time. So, that's what I learned, and I kind of put things together after that.

Interviewer: And what was Hollywood like in the early 1940's?

Francell: Hollywood was still pretty glitzy, I mean we lived near Beverley Hills, which is still a very beautiful neighborhood. And, you know, they didn't have any of the stars on the sidewalk on Hollywood Boulevard, but we were—we were actually in the Los Angeles District, and Hollywood is actually a separate district, but it's connected and it's part of L.A. And I went to...I had a friend who lived in Hollywood, and he was not Jewish. He was a refugee, also, from Belgium, but because we spoke French, we got along pretty well.

Interviewer: And...what do you remember of the war at that point?

Francell: I remember once summer, we were at summer camp—not summer camp. We were camping out. My parents had a tent, and we went to Lake Arrowhead, which is about...forty miles East of L.A. near San Bernardino, it's up in the mountains. And one day, they said, "The war is over." I said, "Oh, that's great. You know, at least"—but that's not the whole war. It's only war in Europe," they said, "There's another war going on in Japan or in the Far East." So I said, "Okay." But...I figured the war for us was over, but it wasn't, of course, you know what happened after that...the...Japanese gave up later and...then the war was *really* over in August of 1945.

Interviewer: Did you do anything with your school or your community to contribute to the war effort, to refugees?

Francell: Yes. Well, I was—in fact, they filmed us—we collected pennies, and...in those days, a penny was worth something, and they gave us...“Everybody go out and collect as many pennies as you can.” And then we gathered all the pennies together, and I was photographed with a couple of...I guess we were about twelve years old at the time—or maybe less, eleven—and we were counting the pennies, and then we came up with a grand sum of...\$70—71, all in pennies! And that was a fortune in those days! And we gave it to the war effort and the...they called it C.A.R.E. at the time—Cooperative American Relief for Europe—and it was care package, they used to send a lot of packages to—to Europe and to the refugees.²

Interviewer: So, tell me about your grandparents, what your grandparents in France—your mother’s parents—

Francell: Right.

Interviewer: How did they escape?

Francell: Well, they left—they stayed in France at the time, but then when...when the Nazis took over, the Germans took over...for a—for about two years, there were two zones of France: one was the Occupied Zone, which included Paris and most of the Coast, and the other part was the Southeast part and the Riviera and the Mediterranean Coast, which was so-called Unoccupied France, “Free France,” as they called it. And my grandfather, as it turned out, had a summer home down there in a little town called Cavalaire, which still exists. I’ve been there and I’ve seen the old house and I...but they went there. And my aunt, Yvonne stayed in Paris because—she also had a house in Cavalaire, but she came—she wanted to stay with her husband, who was not Jewish, by the way.³ And so they went—they stayed in France, and then they went down to the...their summer house when the Nazis took over, and they stayed by the beach, and my grandfather’s house in the same town was a little bit further up the coast, I mean up into the city, but then...we’ll come to that, but she was captured and deported.

Interviewer: And your grandparents, they eventually had to flee where?

Francell: They went through Marseilles and there was a—if you’ve read a book—there’s a very outstanding American council called Varian Fry, and I’m convinced that they were helped by that person because he helped a lot of people escape.⁴ And he was the council in “Free France,” or he was based in Marseilles, and he helped them get to—by train, eventually went...along the coast, and they ended up in—in...Portugal—no, first Spain. They went across the Pyrenees, and they ended up

² *C.A.R.E.*: Founded in 1945 from “[twenty-two] American organizations [uniting] to rush lifesaving CARE Packages to survivors of World War II” from May 11th, 1946 onward (*CARE*).

³ *Her husband*: Henry Horace Klug, jr, who was also arrested but released. She divorced him after the war (*USHMM: Collections* “FFI Free French Pin Engraved 193476 to a Jewish Resistance Member”).

⁴ *Varian Fry*: (1907-1967) An American journalist who was stationed in France by the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC). There, he created the American Relief Center and helped around 2,000 people leave France until his expulsion in 1941 (*USHMM*).

in, I believe...Madrid, one of those cities—they being a neutral country, so-called. And then eventually they got to Portugal, and they ended up getting a ship to New York at that time. And my grandfather was helped by his brothers who were all born in Columbus, Georgia, and he had one sister, and he was helped by him to get to New York.

Interviewer: Were your parents able to communicate with your grandparents at this point?

Francell: Limited, it was limited. During the period when they were living there when the—when it wasn't occupied, that would be from '40 to '42, they were able to write letters and everything, and after that, it was censored heavily, so there was no communication basically. They knew...and the other—the other point that I wanna make just real quick is my grandmother on my father's side, she was living in Paris. She wasn't able to come with us at all, and she was hidden—or not hidden—but she lived in a...“senior citizens”—we'd call it—home. And she eventually she came out and joined us in California.

Interviewer: So, both your mother's parents and your father's mother—

Francell: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: a—eventually came to the United States?

Francell: And they all ended up in California.

Interviewer: Okay, your father's mother staying in a senior citizens home in Paris *throughout*—

Francell: Yeah, she was there for the whole war.

Interviewer: Is there any accounting for how she escaped the attention Nazis?

Francell: She was...they just never came for her, and I don't think anybody—I guess “ratted” on her would be the word we use today—but nobody “denounced” her is the word they used in those days, so she just had to stay indoors and she couldn't go very far from where she was, and she—unfortunately—she became very overweight just by being sedentary like that.

Interviewer: Did your grandparents—your mother's parents—talk to you ever about that escape through the mountains?

Francell: I read about it, and my grandfather told me a little bit, but not a whole lot. I figured it out, and they told me to read some of the stuff—some of the letters that my grandfather had written, which I did.

Interviewer: Talk to me about your Aunt Yvonne who was living in Paris, and what did she do for a living?

Francell: She was a ballet teacher, dance teacher, and she had a studio in one of the nice buildings of Paris, and when she left, she had to leave that behind when she went to—the Riviera, as Americans call it. We call it Provence.

Interviewer: And when was she deported to the East?

Francell: Well, first she was deported from—she was captured, she wrote a book about this.⁵ She was captured in Cavalaire and taken to Marseilles or Toulon—which are the two cities that are right on the...coast—coast there, then they eventually came to Paris and...there was a book written about some of the camps that were in Paris, also, which we have a copy of now, by this...Jewish scholar, young man like you, and he teaches in France and he also teaches in England—he's perfect in both languages—and he wrote about the camps in Paris, which were...Austerlitz (which is a former railroad station), and they had a former department store where they plundered—took all the goods that they had plundered and arranged them in like...settings where they could come and—the Germans could come and pick out what they wanted for their home, and then there was a third one—and I can't remember the name of the third one off the top of my head.⁶ But then, eventually, they were gonna start taking the people away, and in 1944, June, she was taken to Drancy, which is a suburb of Paris on the North, basically the North side of Paris. And she stayed there for a couple of months, and then eventually about July or June 30th or something of 1944, she was on one of the caravan trains that took them all to Auschwitz, and you've probably talked to people who've been on those trains, so she was on there and she got to Auschwitz about six days later.

Interviewer: And what can you tell me of her experience there?

Francell: Well, I—from what I've read in her book, she was—she was very—first of all, she was a ballet dancer—that's important because she was in good physical condition, and she was like, I would say, 46 years old. Let's see, was born in 1898, so 46. And, what they did—you've probably seen the movies and things where they sent the people to the right and to the left, well, she went through the selection process, and they wanted to send her to the left...and she—no, they wanted to send her to the right, but she wanted to go with her friend who went to the left. Her friend was sort of frail and not very...healthy looking, but Yvonne, being—you know—a ballet dancer and in great shape...they said “We want you to the right because you can work for a while.” And that's how she escaped death.

Interviewer: And...what did she say about liberation from Auschwitz?

⁵ Her book: *Survivre: Souvenir d'une résistante d'Auschwitz*

⁶ A book: *Nazi Labour Camps in Paris: Austerlitz, Léviton, Bassano, July 1943-August 1944* by Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger, Translated by Jonathan Hensher (*Berghahn Books*).

Francell: Well, first of all...she went—she knew that the Russians were coming. The Russians were the ones that liberated Auschwitz in January of 1945. And they knew they were coming because they heard on—from the underground inside the camp that the Russians were coming this way. And she said, “If I can only make it until they liberate us,” and she did. And she was always finding ways to get out of work. She would kind of back off when they were selecting people to go work. She knew how to slide to the back of the ground and avoid work, so some of the days she just spent on the latrine, basically. The latrines were very basic. I’ve been to Auschwitz and I’ve seen them. It’s just basically a...a rack of holes, and they went there and...she was able to stay there and avoid work, and so she didn’t—she wasn’t tortured and she wasn’t work to death, but she did lose a lot of weight. When she was there when—her original weight was probably 140. She was 5’7” tall. And when she finally came out, she was like 85 pounds.

Interviewer: So, where did she go when she finally came out of Auschwitz?

Francell: She...they were going to—well, first of all, she was on the...on a sort of a death-march where they took all the prisoners out. The Nazi soldiers wanted to get them out and take them back to Germany, ’cause they thought that they could get some more work out of them or something, and so they all left in a caravan and the people who couldn’t keep up basically were killed. You know, if there was somebody who fell down—you’re dead. She was able to keep going and she was able to...run along with the people at the front of the line ’cause she was healthy, and the other people, well, they were out of luck. And then one—maybe one day or two days after it, they noticed there were no Germans around, and they realized they were taking off and they went somewhere else and they never came back. And so she was...basically free, and they were walking towards the town near Auschwitz, a big town called Katowice, K-A-T-O-W-I-C-E, which I’ve been to also. And that’s where they—they were found by people that they went door to door and saying “We’re escapees from Auschwitz and could you help us?” And they were finally—they finally knocked on the door of a convent, Catholic convent, and I have a picture of the Mother Superior that...that said, “Oh, we have to take this woman in”—actually, she had her friend with her. They both Jewish but they were both taken in, and these wonderful nuns took her in, and they nursed her back to health and they were able to basically keep her alive for three or four months, and then eventually they were found by the Red Cross, the International Red Cross.

Interviewer: And when did you meet your Aunt Yvonne?

Francell: Well, I had met her when I was four years old, but I don’t remember her. I met her when they—when she eventually came to California and—came to Los Angeles where we lived—and they moved into an apartment with my grandfather and—basically, her mother and father—my grandfather and grandmother—and she had a separate bedroom in that apartment, and they moved in there. We lived

about maybe six blocks away, so I met her for the first time—actually, the first time at that time.

Interviewer: And when did she start speaking about her experiences?

Francell: She...she ta—she showed me her number almost immediately. She said, that's where—how they identified her, and her number was A-6161, or something like that, and I have a picture of it, and she said, "That's how they identified us." And...she didn't tell me a whole lot about what happened. I got most of it out of the book that she wrote.

Interviewer: And did she have some trouble getting that book published?

Francell: She did. She tried to get a lot of people in New York that she knew—publishers, like some of the big ones today, even one that related to our family's...Strauss & Company, and they wouldn't publish it. They said, "We've got too much of that stuff right now. I mean, everybody wants to publish this." So she was disappointed, but she kept the manuscript, and it took...myself and my daughter and a few other people when it was found in...Paris by this author, this...Jean-Claude, I believe, Jean-Claude Dreyfus.⁷ And he's a teacher, as I said, at Manchester University and also at the Sorbonne in Paris, and he said, "We need to publish this. Somebody needs to publish this." So they published it in French, and to this day, it's still only published in French. We have the English translation, but we would like to get it published in English, as well, and we're trying.

Interviewer: So, let's return to your—your childhood, and the war ends, and so...when did you become aware of the atrocities against the J—

Francell: I'd say in the next two or three years after that, and...my father was so angry that he didn't wanna talk about it at all. My mother told me a little bit about it, but basically from reading, reading books when I was like like 14, 15 then, and I read some of the books and I saw some of the movies...at the time they were newsreels, but there was no actual...drama like they have with *Schindler's List* and those kind of movies...but later on, about two years later—and my aunt started talking about it herself. She was in Los Angeles, and she was on kind of a lecture tour within L.A.—she would go to Optimus Club and various kinds of social groups and give a presentation and actually get paid for it (just expenses, very little), but she wanted to spread the word, and she kept saying "If we don't...stop this thing from happening now, there'll be a Third World War." And she was sort of right, there has been a—but it hasn't been a world war...and that's what she tried to do.

Interviewer: So when you began to learn about these events...how did you relate your family's personal experience with the more global...event?

⁷ Jean-Marc Dreyfus

Francell: Well, first of all, I had to come to terms with the fact that I was Jewish, and I didn't really realize it until I got into college, but it was pretty apparent to me that we were part of that...tribe, if you will, and...I'm sorry, I messed—I'm going off...I missed the point of your question.

Interviewer: Sort of relating the personal experiences of you—or your family, your family members—with what had taken place.

Francell: Okay, well I read Yvonne's book after she wrote it. She had it—she had it published—not published, but typed into a manuscript, and it was about 1946, '48, I'd say when it was—when I was able to read it and understand what happened.

Interviewer: And where did you go to college?

Francell: I went to Columbia University in New York.

Interviewer: And what did you study there?

Francell: I studied Advertising and Marketing, and I eventually became a marketing research manager in several different companies, ended up here in Atlanta working for Kimberly-Clark Corporation.

Interviewer: And you said discovering that you were Jewish, what did that mean exactly when you haven't grown up thinking of yourself as Jewish?

Francell: Well, first of all, if I can be very blunt, I didn't even know what circumcision was at the time. And I noticed that...I guess I was! And I didn't know what it meant, but then I found out that's how they identified, at least the men—they couldn't identify the women because they weren't—but they certainly could get the men right out the...very quickly, and the...so I learned about that...there was these awful camps, like Auschwitz and, you know...Dachau, and all the ones that the Americans liberated.

Interviewer: So, tell me about your family, your descendants?

Francell: My descendants? I have 4 children. My youngest child is 44 or 45. She was born here in—no, she was born in Indiana. My other—I have another one that was born in Muncie, Indiana. And then two of my children were born in St. Clair, Michigan where we were working at the time. And there—so I have a 46 year old daughter, a 50 year old son, a 52 year old son, and a 53 year old daughter, all—the three—the only one that still doesn't live here is the...first son.

Interviewer: And your wife?

Francell: She's living here, too. She's still in good health. She's older than I am, but she's doing well.

Interviewer: And her name?

Francell: Claire.

Interviewer: And...so you began to do research, research on your family—

Francell: Mm-hmm...

Interviewer: And, specifically with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in DC, talk to me about that process.

Francell: Well, we collected a lot of material. My wife, I've gotta give her thanks for putting it all together. You've seen the books that I've collected that she put together, and you have some of our material already and—and that was very interesting because that put it all together. You could see the documents that they had, the pictures that they had, the history of the family and all—going all the way back to Columbus, Georgia in 1864, some of those older pictures. They were one of the first Jewish families in Columbus, Georgia at the time.

Interviewer: So have you ever share your experiences like this before?

Francell: Never. Not in this format.

Interviewer: And why is that?

Francell: Well, because I never had the opportunity. You know, we went to the Holocaust Museum a few times before we donated all the material to them, and we were interested and we wanted to see—and I've also been to the Museum of Tolerance at—in L.A., which is similar to the Holocaust Museum, and I just was interested in everything about it. And I've read just about every book that you can come up with on the subject.

Interviewer: So why did you decide to share with us today?

Francell: 'Cause I believe that we shouldn't forget, that the new generation should understand what happened before they were born and probably would never happen to them if they were Jewish, but if they—you know, at least—if they were—weren't Jewish, it would not have happened, I should say, and if they were Jewish, it might have happened to them, but they didn't know...so that's...you know, I wanted to share this with the newest generation. I'm 80 years old now and...I won't be around very long, and you've probably talked to some older people than I, but they're the ones who can really tell you about it because they lived through it and we didn't actually.

Interviewer: Thank you, Mr. Francell.

Francell: Thank you.