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Exile in Ecuador

with Moselio Schaechter

February 11, 2016

59 minutes, 25 seconds

Speaker: Elio Schaechter

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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Time Transcription

00:00 [The Library UC San Diego]

00:02 Susanne Hillman: Good afternoon,

00:05 [Exile in Ecuador with Elio Schaechter February 10, 2016]

00:06 Susanne Hillman: I'm pleased to welcome you all to our second event of the new year, the year 2016. I would like to acknowledge our sponsors, the UC San Diego Library and Jewish Studies - oh there's more people coming in wonderful. Before I introduce our speaker Mr. Elio Schaechter, I would like to draw your attention to our fliers out there. Some of you have already signed up for a lunch seminar with Darcy Buerkle, on March 3rd. If you want to take a flier now and think about it you can email me to confirm, but it's all out there. There's also fliers for the public event on March 2nd, Charlotte Salomon's Interventions which is going to take place here at the usual time 5:00 p.m. on a Wednesday. So now, it is my pleasure to introduce somebody who has a very illustrious career. I told Mr. Schaechter that I had some fun looking at his CV [Curriculum Vitae]. I printed it out and there were so many wonderful achievements that I just sort of highlighted what seemed the most interesting to me personally because it would be impossible to go over them all.

01:19 Elio Schaechter: Oh, come on, you can try.

01:21 Susanne Hillman: [laughter] Well, that would take half an hour. So, Mr. Schaechter got his MA in bacteriology from the University of Kansas in 1952 and his Ph.D. in microbiology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1954. He did his postdoctoral work in the US Army at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and at the State Serum Institute of Copenhagen; this was from 1955 to [19]56. His first job was at the, then newly founded, medical school at the University of Florida, where he spent four years followed by 33 years at Tufts in Boston. He and his collaborators worked there on a number of issues related to cell growth, to growth, and cell division. He was also the Chair of the Department of Molecular Biology and Microbiology for 23 years. Needless to say, he has published a lot - textbooks, reference books, articles, and you can find all that on the Internet. His main honors, and as he notes some deserved, Tufts University Medical Students Teaching Award was awarded eleven times. And that really pleased me to just hear that somebody was so beloved by his students eleven times. That's an achievement.

02:49 Elio Schaechter: I bribe them! [laughter]

02:52 Susanne Hillman: He was an honorary, or is, an honorary member of the Ecuadorian Society for Microbiology, an honorary member of the Spanish Society for Microbiology, the U.S. delegate of the bacteria - bacteriology division the International Union of Microbiological Societies, the scientific advisor for the TV Microbial Literacy Project and his hobby are wild mushrooms. In 1997, he has written and published a book called In the Company of Mushrooms, to show that he takes his hobby seriously as he writes on his CV, and it was published by Harvard University Press. If you want to find out more about Elio Schaechter's amazing achievements you could go to his blog which has a delightful name; it's called Small Things Considered and that's where

I got some of the information. So now, please join me to welcome Elio Schaechte.
[applause]

- 3:57 Elio Schaechter: Thank you. Let's see, so thank you for coming. I always like an audience. I have to explain that I feel a little bit awkward or self-conscious about speaking to a program dedicated to studies of the Holocaust because I was only touched by the Holocaust in a broad sense. I was not a part of the concentration camp story. I left Italy, where I was born before the Germans had a chance to do that to me. So my story is not the story of the heroic survival of people who managed to make it. Mine is the story of the changes, the influences on your life that come about when you're tossed around a little bit from here to there. So it's a different talk and I hope you don't mind. I'll start out by telling you, as I just said, that I was born in Italy and my problem started with my name. I'm widely called Elio, which is a common Italian name. But my official name is Moselio and, best I know, I'm the only person with that name because my parents invented it. And why did they invent it, because for reasons that I, escape me, they did not like to give me two names but they wanted me to have a Jewish identity and an Italian identity and Moses and Elio go together to make Moselio. Now nobody's ever called me that, so don't try because I won't respond. Okay, I'm Elio.
- 05:39 Elio Schaechter: But it tells you that my parents were conflicted, like many Jewish people in Europe and in the United States, about we try to go, to go with the side of assimilation and to what extent do you want to assimilate to the local culture and the side of maintaining a Jewish identity above all. So in these two extremes, there is all kinds of variations and I am an example of those variations. So my family came from a shtetl. This is my maternal grandma- er - grandfather, very distinguished-looking guy and these are some tombstones that you can find all over Poland. I'll come back to that because, at the end of my talk, I'll tell you a little bit about the shtetl they came from. I have a slide that I think is interesting. On your left is my paternal grandmother; on my right my maternal one, and they represented two cultures. This is a balaboosta from a shtetl, and this lady is not. This lady's a Viennese intellectual, sophisticated and elegant, and so this is part of my upbringing. My mother was more influenced, of course, by her mother than she was by her mother-in-law. So it, it followed that my mother - and they went, both my parents went to Vienna during the First World War because the place in Galicia, in southern Poland where they lived, was the battlefield between Austria and Russia. So it was time to leave, people went to Vienna and survived the War there.
- 07:20 Elio Schaechter: My father eventually went to Italy, as I said, and the reason for that is simply that he was an adventurer. My father did not do what other nice Jewish boys did, maybe stay in Vienna, maybe try to go to New York, perhaps Berlin, something like that. That was too conventional for him. Italy was the wilderness. To go, to go to Italy, for a Polish, young Polish Jew, was unthinkable. There were very few Jews in Italy, to begin with. They were all mostly Sephardim. He was an Ashkenazi, of course, and so he did that with gusto, I mean he just loved the idea. And eventually asked his aunt in Vienna to find him a girl and they found my mother and he brought her to Italy and the rest is what happened. So, here I am and I'm very cute. So we had, and this shows you the kind of life that I led. It was upper, upper middle - middle class, something like that. I was dressed elegantly, especially for pictures, and I - we had a maid.

- 08:39 Elio Schaechter: I have to tell you a little story about the maid. Being a good Catholic and taking me for walks, she thought nothing of going into the church with me. I don't think my parents would have been delighted with that but she didn't tell them and I didn't tell them. But one day we come out of the church and lo and behold my teddy bear is missing. Oy gevalt. What do you do? So we looked all over and where did we find it - we found it in the confessional. And I think, that's where I put it, I think that teddy bear had expiated all his sins. It was pure of spirit. Anyhow, so I grew up in that environment and the environment was not particularly inimical to Jews until about 1938, which is when Mussolini decided that he had to follow the mandates of Hitler and promulgated, whatever called, racial laws. And I do have the memory of seeing people on the sidewalk, look in the newspaper, and saying [unclear]. What kind of the race is that? They're not yellow. They're not black. What kind of a race is that? So, to Italians, that concept that Jews were something that different, was alien. And in fact, as you probably know, the Italian Jews of the North, not the ones in Rome which has the law the longest continuous community in the world, but the ones in the north in Turin, Milan, Genoa, Venice. They were a mixture of Ashkenazi in Sephardic. They all became Sephardic, but they were originally from various places and they were very high-class. They were quite assimilated and their assimilation was very interesting because they were, they were, they had an amazing amount of social conscience. I'll come back to that later in my talk demonstrating an example of what made these people tick.
- 10:32 Elio Schaechter: So anyhow, that is my experience in Italy and, but fascism was the dominant thing, and so, like it or not, I had to be Balilla [Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB)]. If anybody knows the term, this is like Hitler Jugend in Germany. Balilla were the the Mussolini Jugend in, in Italy and this has a Balilla Polizza and this is really an interesting document. What this is, is an exaltation here, in very nice simple language, to the children saying please save some money. And you could put in ten Lira and you had this document. And so, you were supposed to put in money and save for your higher education. Kind of strange, but acceptable, I suppose. So I, I was in fact a member of the fascist youth movement for not, not very long. Because eventually, when the, the racial laws were promulgated, what that meant is that Jews who had been in Italy less than 20 years had to leave. My father had just been there just over 20 years. In addition, they could not have government jobs. So, a lot of professors at the university, many of whom were Jews - by the way in Italy the achievements of the rather small Jewish community, in the north about 10,000 people, is off scale. There is no other group anywhere which has achieved so much out of such a small number. Jews are pretty good at achieving things, but this is our - this is off scale. There are six Nobel prizes in 10,000 people. It is really amazing. Some from the same lab. They learned from Giuseppe Levy, in Turin.
- 12:21 Elio Schaechter: Anyhow, so I had to go to a Jewish school because I couldn't go to the public school, and here is my diploma. There I am looking, looking fresh, pretty cool right? And this is my diploma from the second grade and says Talmud Torah - school - and the curious thing is it has a seal of the King of Italy with a cross and a Magen David [Star of David]. So I have both in one. Anyhow, I was not particularly bothered by what was going on around me because I, as I said until things matured you could live quite comfortably. Let's see, I, I'm gonna show you, my class. This is me, so these distinguished-looking people were University professors who had lost their job and went to teach in school. Okay, and they were not shy about expressing

their opinion. So, in my earliest Latin class, somebody wrote on the board the following: man is a wolf to man. That was said to young children okay. Anyhow, I am, oh let me stay with that for a minute. I - in time things got a little bit difficult and we tried to go, to leave. My father was quite aware of what was going on because we had relatives in Vienna and they kept coming down and telling us what was going on in the north. You didn't always know, but Kristallnacht became a very real reality with them and so they decided to leave. So, here are stories that are so weird. We, my father, went to the Australian consulate and got a visa, miraculously okay and he had enough money because he had been a very successful businessman to buy a ticket on a ship to Australia.

- 14:30 Elio Schaechter: So we go to Genoa, the port city, and they take our luggage up. We walk up the plank and they said, sorry, you have to go to the office here. And in the office, they said the following: you have a ticket, you have a visa, and you have a valid passport. However, if for reasons that we cannot foresee, the Australians decided not to take you in, your passport will not be valid on the trip back. Nobody could believe that. My wife, who was born in Germany and has a similar history than I, tells an analogous story. They got, in Germany, a visa - this was earlier, 1938 - a visa to Argentina but they needed a stamp, a special stamp for it. So, they went to the friend, the Argentinian Consulate in Paris and the Argentinian consulate looked at the paper and ripped it and said we have enough Jews in Argentina. So, not being able to make it meant that we had to live under so restrictive conditions. At that point you're not supposed to rent a - to rent a place. So we rented it through the help of some deserving Gentile who helped us out. This was dangerous in a way, so you had to sort of stay out of sight. The result was my parents spent all their time in this two-room apartment and other people came early in the morning and left late and played endless games of chess. I mean this was chess in the morning, chess at noon, chess in the afternoon, endlessly. And then they left and so forth. But one day my father came and said I found a Consul I could bribe and this was the Consul of Ecuador and then he says, and I don't know where it is and I was a bright 12-year-old and I said, it's on the West coast of South America. Okay, that's what we're going.
- 16:26 Elio Schaechter: And Edith, my wife, has exactly the same story in France. In Paris, they went around, they made the rounds and they found that the Ecuadorian Consul would give him a visa. Now I should explain that Ecuador was, at that time, about as primitive a country as you can find in the Americas. It's a, was very, very underdeveloped and they had the bright idea that getting Europeans in may help their development, their economy, their well-being as a country and so they decided to give visas to Jewish people with the proviso that they should go and either work in a farm or build up some industry. Now that was probably not unreasonable when you think about it. But it was clear that was not easy to do either thing, especially farming because the farming was done by the peons. It was not what you do in Iowa or something very, very simple but they - so Edith's family and her parents, a brother, and an uncle, with their kids, rented a farm and went and worked in the farm.
- 17:44 Elio Schaechter: My father looked at that document on the visa and said, well forget about it. And that was perfectly reasonable because everybody else forgot about it. I mean the enforcement of laws was not the high point of Ecuadorian jurisprudence. So but, people, people that felt honor-bound, did that and they didn't rather with a lot of difficulty. It was a - Edith should come and give you her talk because it's even more

vivid than mine. Okay, so we left Italy in September of 1940. The war had started earlier, but in Italy, it started in, what did I say, in June of 1940. So I remember having to, there was a blackout. We had to close the windows, not use lights and we had a fire, we had, what do you call it, we had alarms because the French were coming and bombing us. So I remember that, but it didn't last very long because soon we left. And I said it, to that point - I had not suffered from lack of food, lack of shelter, or lack of comfort. So that's my point. I don't, I don't have that kind of a story. But, so how do you get from Italy to Ecuador during the War? The answer is, with difficulty. So we did it by going, from taking a ship from Genoa to Barcelona, Spain - which is about a two-day trip and then a train to Portugal, to Lisbon. We made it, on the way back that ship got sunk by a French torpedo with the loss of all lives.

19:39 Elio Schaechter: So we made it, barely. We went through Madrid. I, I was very very eager to see art. I had done that in Milan on my own and I went to the Prado and the Prado was closed. Years later I went again. I was in Madrid. I went to the Prado and the Prado was closed - again the third time I made it. The trip across Spain was a little bit of horrendous because it was - the Civil War had just ended and it was really ruins all over the place. But we made it into Lisbon and the site that I remember seeing, and we got there at night - oops - was like this, totally lit up. In Italy, there was no light at night, and in Spain, it was perished because of the Civil War. So, I see this and I say, my goodness I'm in heaven. I had a small problem, when we got through the border and I heard people speaking Portuguese, I had a problem. I don't know if you know what Portuguese sounds like - but it does not sound like Spanish, it does not sound like Italian. So, I said to my father, I think we made a mistake. We went East instead of West. That wasn't the case. Anyhow, we lived in, in Lisbon for about four months. We got a transit visa to the United States because we had to go through the United States and waited for a ship. It took three, about three months to do it, and I was feeling beautiful. We lived in a pension, a boarding house, and a lot of young single men were living there and they treated me like their adopted son. They took me to soccer games. They made me read Italian magazines. One of them had a magazine stand, stuff like that. The only problem I had was with a kid my age, a Portuguese boy because he was absolutely convinced that Christopher Columbus had been Portuguese. And that's him, okay. I couldn't, I couldn't take that.

21:44 Elio Schaechter: So, but we spent about four months there and we eventually got a ship to come to America. But I'd like to read to you a little thing that I wrote many many years later if you allow me. And this is an experience of joining what was then the Elderhostel Road Scholar Program on the Jewish heritage in the Iberian Peninsula. So we went to several small towns, all notable. In each place we heard lectures by local professors and visited a number of synagogues, Juderías - it's a place where Jews used to live - and toured the sites. I found that becoming immersed in matters that happened over 500 years ago is not a predictable endeavor. I was unsure of my reactions to events that occurred so long ago, laden with both misfortunes, and happy times. How does one identify with one's predecessors? Never mind that I'm Ashkenazi. I wasn't Sephardic, which is what the people were there. Does one imagine being one of them, garbed in medieval clothes, musing about abstract religious matters, anxious about survival, tormented about conserving the faith? Who would I have been? A modest craftsman, an early day professor, perhaps a botanist. Who would, who would I have been? A true believer, an apostate? Would I have been living during one of the better times, when the Jews could probably walk

through the narrow streets feeling they truly belong in Sepharad? Sepharad is the name for Spain. Or would I have been - and Portugal by extension - or would have been cowering in fear from the enemy of the day, the fanatic Muslim or the frenzied Christian, hell-bent on forcibly converting as many of us as possible to the faith? I - I felt fear in me when we learned that, of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who stood at the quay in Lisbon awaiting ships to take them away, when the ships did not arrive, within a few days they were forcibly baptized. Four centuries and a half later, in 1940 as a twelve-year-old, I stood on such a quay with my parents running away from Italy to Ecuador. Our ship did come.

24:22 Elio Schaechter: So how do you get - this is the ship the Magnificent Serpa Pinto. You cannot read, oh yes, yes it says here. Serpa Pinto was a great Portuguese navigator. And this ship was not exactly a luxury ship. It was stacked in the holes about five - five stacks of carts for you had to tie yourself in, otherwise, you'd fall off. [cough] And when we got to New York they let for us to go. So we went into, we got into Ellis Island for five days and Ellis Island felt like heaven. I was like, my goodness. They have it. They have clean sheets. They have clean food. They count you every time you go through a door, but who cares. So it felt pretty good, but then my aunt was living in New York. Was living, for those New Yorkers among you, she lived on Ocean Avenue and Church Avenue. Sounds familiar? Okay. She posted the bond and we could get out of Ellis Island and spend about three weeks there. And I had to make a bee-line for the Metropolitan Museum. That was the first thing that I did.

25:37 Elio Schaechter: Anyhow, we finally got the ship to Ecuador. And so, where is Ecuador? And it's here. It's a - this is the equator; so it's right at the equator, but below Columbia, and on top of Peru. Okay, it's a very small country has, it had, at that time, about five million people. Now it is about 15 million people. The capital city is Quito. The main port and site of commerce is Guayaquil and Ecuador is the jumping-off point for the Galapagos because they own the Galapagos, which are over here someplace under the 'E.' Okay, so some of you must have been there and you know what I'm talking about. When you do this you spend the day, you tend to spend the day or two in Quito because it's a lovely, lovely, lovely city. It's full of magnificent colonial buildings and it's on the, right underneath a very tall mountain - 16,000-foot mountain. So Ecuador is a mountainous country. This is Cotopaxi [mountain].

26:46 Elio Schaechter: And [cough] we get to Quito which is where we wanted to live. And most of the Jews who came in the dropping heat, about three thousand. There were only about 300 or so in Guayaquil and the reason was that Guayaquil was a tropical hellhole at the time. I mean it was hot muggy and full of insects, but full of insects. Quito was at 9,000 feet, although being at the equator, it was really quite, quite comfortable. And one could live a more reasonable life there so most of the Jews went to Quito and you went there by a train because it was the only way to go. There were no flights and the train - this is a modern version of it believe it or not - if you notice, it goes down here but it can't make a curve can it, so what does it do? It goes down here, around the corner. Keeps going and then reverses direction. It goes down here. This is called the Devil's Nose. It does this three times. So it's picturesque, okay. I don't know who tells the story. I don't think it happened to our family. There were all kinds of saleswomen trying to sell you something, food and so forth - like baked guinea pig, delicacies like that. And one of the things that somebody bought was a whole stalk, a huge stalk of bananas, for very little money. I couldn't believe that

bananas could be that cheap. Well, it turns out, they weren't bananas. They were plantain. You couldn't eat them. So, we have a lot to learn. So, this is sort of what Ecuador looks like at the time, very, very simple - primitive - country. In here is a group of these Jewish kids and this is where are you?

28:35 Mrs. Schaechter: In the front.

28:37 Elio Schaechter: This is you, yeah. This is my wife and these are other friends. And they were taking a refuge from the rain. So, this is the way it looked and inside you have mud floor and the guinea pigs would run around. So it was...

28:50 Speaker 1: May I ask, you went from New York down to Ecuador, how did you get there since one is in the Atlantic and the other is in the South Pacific?

28:59 Elio Schaechter: Through the Panama Canal. So this is what it looks like, looked like, and but there were these magnificent churches and cathedrals. So, Quito has this spectacular baroque gold leaf decoration, a major cathedral there, and so forth. The contrast is, of course, stark. How did we make it? So this is what it looked like. Very steep, you can see how steep the streets are and how high up they go up again. And what I want to relate is the feeling that people had who came to Quito in 1938, 1939, 1940, as we did. It was really like being on the moon. It was really as remote and as distant and it's totally strange. There were not, there was not in Quito a pre-existing Jewish community, like in Argentina, in Mexico so that - where Jews could come, they could be given some pointers, they could be given some help. In Ecuador, before 1938, there was a small handful of Jews. And there was not a - there was not a kahal; there was not a community. So everybody had to invent a way of life and this was formidable; it was really demanding infinitely.

30:20 Elio Schaechter: The result was that of course, it's understandable, that everybody stuck together because they were trying to help each other. So the people that had been there a couple of years earlier became the, the people who taught those who came later, okay. And this was pretty much the spirit of the community. It was a very tight community. Three thousand people is not small, but it's not really big either. There was a synagogue. There was a sports center. The sports center, I should tell you a story that I was maybe 12 years old and I was boxing with a friend, don't ask, and my wife Edith was then eight, seven. You were 12? I was 12. She's five years younger than I, anyhow. She looked at me boxing and she and the girlfriends were laughing and laughing and laughing. I can't imagine. So what did I do? I went over to her, put my hand in the pocket. I took a coin out and says, here, when you grow up call me. What a line, huh? And she did, 40 years later. She stayed in Ecuador, married there. I came to this country and I married. I became a widower. She divorced her husband and we - I was in Boston at the time and we met and the rest is that part of the history.

31:28 Elio Schaechter: So I want to dispel...whoopsy, what have I done? Thank you. Now I want to dispel the impression that this is the way it's now, very far from it. This is what Quito, Ecuador looks like now, it's amazing. There are high-rise buildings all over the place. The, the volcano is still there. There is this magnificent office buildings and favelas, like, going up the mountain, of course. The higher up on the mountain, the poorer you are. That's convenient, okay. So today this is a thriving - thriving is wrong, it's not a thriving thing. I'd say, it's a poor country with elements of progress and the

Jews had something to do with it. Why do I say that, because they started out in a very simple way. This is what they did. They hired a schlepper. They hired somebody who carried goods. Now, in this case, I don't have a picture of the goods, this is not the goods they carried, but I can see that this is an old, old story. And they carry this on, they peddled. They went from house to house and say, would you like to buy my merchandise? It's on time which was dangerous because who had the money and this is, was very simple. There were people all over the street perfectly willing to do that. But notice, this is a picture from a shtetl in Poland. They did the same thing, in Poland. So, what happened was that slowly, but maybe not so slowly, they made a living. And when they started to make it a little better living, they would open a store. And when they opened a store, maybe they would make a little better living. And some of them went into making textiles, making some metal, some metalwork, other kind of industry - fulfilling the requirement that they contribute back what they had put on some of them. And by and large, they became fairly well-off.

34:00 Elio Schaechter: What happened was that there was not a breakthrough - Oh I'm going to show you my father's store. This week he sold sewing machines. The next week he sold coffee. The week after he sold shirts. He sold whatever he saw. He was a see dealer and what a see dealer is, someone who deals with whatever he sees. That's what he did and he made something of a living, and other people made it much better living. Schaechter and the closest to Schaechter in Spanish is Chester. So that he called that. Anyhow, so the Jewish people did reasonably well. Some became Ecuadorianized. This is a document that bestows Ecuadorian citizenship to my father. Notice the formidable collection of stamps. That's the way you do it. And we, we live. We live there in relative comfort, some people more than others. Neither Edith nor I belong to the higher stratum. We had to go to public schools instead of private schools because our parents did not have enough money. But some people did very well. So it was a mixed bag. Some people did better than others. Her parents left the farm eventually and went into some manufacturing.

35:28 Elio Schaechter: The thing I want to talk about a little bit, I wanna stay with it a little bit, is the relationship of the Jewish community to the Ecuadorian society. There was relatively little antisemitism. There were some, when we first came because the German Embassy was very busy and they promoted antisemitism. But when they left, in the War, they had to. They were kicked. That disappeared because the Ecuadorians didn't have a clue. To them we were gringos. We were blond, tall, light in complexion; we were not Ecuadorians. That's, what do they know everybody's a gringo. So we were gringos. Okay so, the - our generation were scared. We're scared of what? We're living in this strange place - living in this place - although it was a welcoming place, nothing happened bad. But still, the strangeness was threatening and so there was relatively little in the way of socializing. And even, I would say there was a fair amount of, sort of a prejudice against the fact that Ecuadorians were poor, many were dirty, about half are native Indian, American Indian so they were - and they were very poor. They had been slaves to the Spaniards. So that attitude was fairly prevalent. Eventually, it went away because the children of our generation grew up there and they married Ecuadorians and all is well. But at that point, it was really quite distant. And I have to tell you that I felt sufficiently guilty about that because Ecuador had, after all, taken us in, unquestionably saved our lives, and treated us very decently. So, why not be nice?

- 37:28 Elio Schaechter: And so I wrote - I had one Ecuadorian friend. This is interesting because, among my Jewish friends, I was the only one with an Ecuadorian friend. This guy went on to do great things. He was a pathologist - became a pathologist, a very distinguished pathology professor at the University, and so forth. And we became very, very good friends but nobody else had an Ecuadorian friend. As I say, a little bit later they did but not during our phase. So years later, I had sort of an attack of nostalgia and I wrote to Galo and I said, I'm going to come back and I want to do something like I'd like to teach a course. Okay, so he set me up to teach a course in molecular biology, which was reasonably well attended. I enjoyed it and we had a really good time. And I thought that this was really quite something.
- 38:26 Elio Schaechter: I'm gonna read you something else that happened years later. Years later, I went back to Ecuador. I went back a number of times. I taught courses. I made it possible for Ecuadorians to come to our institution and stuff like that. But I was asked by a classmate of mine, who had become the principal of the high school I'd gone to, to go and talk to the students. So this is what I wrote. I find myself in one of the same classrooms where I had sat all those years before, talking to senior biology majors. I chose as my topic - how does one become a scientist? With a lively discussion that included rather sophisticated questions. The curiosity of the students manifested was high, highly gratifying, and their insight surprising given their relative isolation. The gap between us soon vanished and I found that I was talking with them instead, instead of at them. In addition to other technical questions, I remember being asked - what does one do in science when one gets scooped and others publish the same results first? Well, how much credit does one give to one's collaborators and so forth? I was duly impressed and pleased that these youngsters were the worthy successors to my generation. I believe that I said as much, rounding up what seemed to be a perfect hour. After I ended the session, two of the students came up and said - this is in Spanish - [in Spanish] and doctor, what now, just like that you're leaving? I could not give him an answer. I felt touched and helpless. I could only retreat in vain, fighting back my tears.
- 40:22 Elio Schaechter: So I had a very rewarding experience with that Ecuador. But let's give you a few examples of what happened when you were there. So this is the at the equator. Your latitude zero - zero - zero, turns out it's wrong but what's a few feet among friends? This is an interesting story. I went to work in an outfit called LIFE not life - LIFE, what does it stand for? Laboratorios Industriales Farmacéuticos Ecuatorianos, Pharmaceutical Industrial Labs of Ecuador. And this was run by a group of Italian Jews, back to my origins, who came over and took on this company that had been sent over by the Germans. The Germans had to leave. They left their stuff behind. These Italian people took over and built a very nice company. Eventually, it was bought up by Dow Chemical, so they did very well. And here is the first paper I ever wrote, which is about ringworm of the scalp in the province of Manabi. Okay, so this is my boss and I acknowledge him because he was such an incredible guy. He made me into the research department of the company. Everything new and different, he gave to me to do.
- 41:40 Elio Schaechter: Now, oh so I fast forward. I came to this country. I became a citizen. I, in the army. I have to tell you though that this was, this happened in the morning and Captain Edgar Snyder had just gotten started and his breath blew me away. He had, he had been drinking all night apparently. So I don't know. I look a wreck there. He

looks a wreck. I don't know how he did it but I became a citizen. Okay, now to go around. A couple of years ago we were in Eastern Europe and we went to, to Poland. And from Krakow, it is about two hours to this town Tarnobrzek which where my mother's family came from. So I, I rented a car - hired a driver - young, wonderful young Polish guy who took me around and we had a great time. Now, I knew that I won't see anything because my, my family had left during the First World War, since a hundred years ago. I thought I'd like to look around. I like the existential experience of being there and it was nice. So I saw what it looked like - this is the old and this is the new. A town of about 30,000 and we saw that there was a sanctuary with a Star of David.

42:58 Elio Schaechter: And my, my driver was very nice. And I was sort of wandering around figuring out what is this, when somebody came over and said, look the lady across the street is the caretaker of this. So this guy goes across the street. Walks into a house without knocking, brings her out babushka and all, and keys and she opens it up. And so we saw this sanctuary, which looked like this. It had a plaque in Hebrew, and some writing in Hebrew, and a whole bunch of candles that had been used. And I really don't know more than, more than that. So I had the experience of being in there, of being in a place where my mother's family had grown up. And this was a cemetery, which was fenced in and the lady had the key. And I couldn't believe it, there was a rusty lock and I thought, no way. She opened. She put the key in and there it opened. Anyhow, so we went in looked around and there was not a great deal to see; that's about it. So, now a lady from our group by the name of Eva Zelig, who's a professional videographer made a tape which is called An Unknown Country. And it's a magnificent tape. And if you would like to get it, you have to go to her because you cannot buy it. At least, I don't know where you can buy it. And I've written some memoirs and if you'd like to see what I wrote - some of what I read is from there - so you go, and just Google Elios Memoirs. Thank you [applause]

44:42 Susanne Hillman: Should we take questions?

44:45 Elio Schaechter: What do you think?

44:46 Susanne Hillman: Let me walk around with the microphone.

44:47 Elio Schaechter: Yes, sir.

44:50 Speaker 2: How old were you when you arrived in Ecuador?

44:53 Elio Schaechter: Twelve years old and twenty-one when I left. Yes ma'am.

44:57 Speaker 3: Where in Italy were you from?

45:00 Elio Schaechter: Milan. I spend - elegante - we spent seven years, I think, in Milan. Then a couple of, several years in Turin. Then went back to Milan, yeah.

45:13 Speaker 4: I have two questions. When you, at that time, when you were in Portugal - the 3,000 - were they mostly Ashkenazi Jews who had left because of the Nazis?

45:23 Elio Schaechter: Yeah, yeah. There are very few authentic Portuguese Jews, in Spain there were none.

- 45:31 Speaker 4: My other question...Right, right, but, but none of the Italian Jews - who were Sephardic - had come to, to Portugal.
- 45:41 Elio Schaechter: They left Italy in the War. So I don't know if they went through Portugal or not, but they didn't settle in Portugal.
- 45:47 Speaker 4: They didn't. They weren't there. No. And my other question was, when you were going through the Panama Canal it was during the War, do you remember if there were any difficulties? If there were any delays because that was completely - very well guarded by the US government.
- 46:04 Elio Schaechter: Sure, I'm sorry I don't remember. I was 12 years old and I had other worries [laughter]. Yes.
- 46:11 Speaker 5: Were any of your relatives swept up in the Holocaust and lost their lives? Cousins that were in Vienna for instance, or back home?
- 46:20 Elio Schaechter: Except for a couple of cousins, yes. Unfortunately what happened to us is that when my father went to Italy he lost track of a lot of family. So he didn't, I didn't know what happened to a lot of people. But I have a cousin in Israel. When my aunt and husband went to Israel, they had two children and I'm a professor of microbiology and my cousin is the professor of microbiology at Hebrew University. So it must be in the genes but other than that I don't have a lot of family.
- 46:56 Speaker 5: I did have one other question and that was in your lifetime did you ever see a German in a Nazi uniform?
- 47:09 Elio Schaechter: No, no.
- 47:10 Speaker 5: Basically, you were one step ahead of them the whole time.
- 47:13 Elio Schaechter: I was one step ahead of them. I saw Fascists, in the black shirt. You know that I did see. And umm, I tell you, my father was probably so careful not to make waves, which is what a lot of Jews do, that he didn't tell me anything about fascism. It just wasn't...
- 47:33 Speaker 6: What percentage of the young people left Ecuador, are there any of them still there?
- 47:40 Elio Schaechter: Most. Very few are there. Of the 3,000, I think the, the community is now about 300 people, with one odd thing. They have a community center that will do justice to the JCC. It's huge for the 300 people. There are two sanctuaries, all kinds of activities, areas. It's incredible. Well, I'm telling you this because, what it means, is that the people who stayed made a lot of money.
- 48:08 Speaker 7: Did your parents die there?
- 48:09 Elio Schaechter: No, they went to Israel. And they died in Israel.
- 48:15 Speaker 8: I see that you use a lot of Yiddish expressions. Was Yiddish spoken at home in Ecuador?

- 48:20 Elio Schaechter: Yes. Oddly, here's the problem. In Italy my parents spoke Italian with me but then at the end I told you we live in a very constricted area very - and they spoke Yiddish among themselves - and I picked up Yiddish, okay. Then we get to Ecuador and all my friends are from Central Europe from Russia, from Germany, from Czechoslovakia. They all spoke German. They had none, not Yiddish, no no, no, no. They took German. They didn't speak Yiddish at all. They had not learned Spanish. So here we are, what are going to use Italian? That makes no sense. So we adopted our Yiddish as a family language and my Yiddish is very Germanized. It's not a very good Yiddish but I used it for all the time I was at home. Unlike most American Jews of our generation, who say my parents spoke Yiddish to me when they didn't want us to understand. Polish people, Russian people, French people, German people, all say the same story.
- 49:21 Speaker 9: There's a question in the back.
- 49:23 Speaker 10: So in the communities in Quito, what kind of observances did you have? What kind of practices did you keep in the home? Were the rabbis?
- 49:32 Elio Schaechter: No there wasn't. Yeah, a good question. There was not a rabbi there was a cantor who thought he was a rabbi. And there was a very thriving synagogue. It was on the model of the European - you'd call it Orthodox - but here they would be called, who knows what, very open to personal interpretation, very Eastern European like, in other words, it was not orderly. So I went there. I was Bar Mitzvahed shortly after I got to Ecuador. I was taught by an uncle of Edith's who was German. And it wasn't, it wasn't much of a Bar Mitzvah - but I had a Bar Mitzvah. And so, the, the community was active, along a bunch of activities. Oh, there's a slide I missed. We had conferences, talks, discussions - all kinds of things like that. There was a guy who would write little funny things, reviews. He would write sort of scenes from Ecuador. They were very funny. And then we had the theater, and the theatre was in German. And I played in *Candida*, from George Bernard Shaw, and I played in something else and I even played - you won't believe this - not the only it was a play, it was called *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. It was a comedy, nineteen, end of the 19th-century comedy and it was not in German it was in Swabian dialect and we were supposed to understand that. I mean this is how, when they, when the Jews came to Ecuador, they brought our culture in a suitcase. They brought it that way. They unpacked it and that's what they had. So, they didn't have anything else. They could not import anything else. The jokes we told were the jokes that you told in Vienna or Berlin in 1938. Nothing new, nothing, nothing was possible. So, anybody here from Austria? Okay, no. I won't, I could, I could sing your little ditty but it wouldn't make sense. So, so we, we had a lot of activities and sports. We had a sport field. not only [unclear] boxer but also we played basketball, we had running, high jump, long jump, stuff like that. And there were, there were people who were very involved in training the young people, very committed to taking care of the young people having an identity. So, I would say that worked really well.
- 52:14 Speaker 11: You've touched on what amazes me about many Europeans, your facility with multiple languages. I was just telling, though you started with Yiddish and Italian, learning Spanish, when did you pick up your English well enough?
- 52:28 Elio Schaechter: Who says I did? [laugh] Well the joke in the family is, I speak four languages but the English is my best. It's the only language that I have good

command on. I've written a whole bunch of books, and it's the one language where I have an accent. In my other languages, I have a local accent, but not a foreign accent. So, when you're young, you pick it up.

52:56 Speaker 11: Did you learn it when you came to the U.S.?

52:59 Elio Schaechter: Well, I'll tell you a story. I'll tell you a story. I studied English in high school but that was like not studying. But I had friends, American friends, who went to this laboratory, came to this laboratory, to spend the summer there and so I had to speak English with them. So I came, when I came to this country, I went as Suzanne said to the University of Kansas. Doesn't everybody from Ecuador? Anyhow, so I go there and of course, I am learning English. And one day I thought, I'm gonna show it to this labmate of mine, a good old boy from the Kansas farm. So I strut in and I say, 'well Bill, how's everything? Pretty good, right? And he says, don't know about everything but I'm fine. So I knew when, I knew when I was being put down.

53:59 Speaker 12: How primitive was it when you got to Ecuador?

54:01 Elio Schaechter: Plenty. The streets were not paved. The water, there was water coming out of the faucets, some of the time. If you threw a switch the electricity would come on, some other time. Very few cars. It was extraordinarily simple. There were no big stores to speak of. There was no supermarkets; it was all an open market. And the Jews contributed a lot because they brought in a lot of commerce. And so to this day, in fact, there was some major undertakings are owned by, by Jewish people. So, I think in fairness they gave back. They gave back what they got.

54:41 Speaker 13: What year was it, when you arrived in Ecuador?

54:44 Elio Schaechter: 1940, late 1940. The War started in June. We got there, actually, we got there in 1941 - January 1941. So, and then I left in 1960, 60? Yeah, 1950, 50. 1950 I left.

55:02 Speaker 14: After you decided to leave, Ecuador...

55:04 Elio Schaechter: Why?

55:06 Speaker 14: After you decided to leave, how difficult was it for you and others to get permission and how long did it take?

55:12 Elio Schaechter: Um, I don't, I think it was reasonably hard to get a visa to the United States but if you have patience you got it. This is what happened, my father - who had no intention of coming to the States, he was an adventurer this is too conventional for him, besides he didn't speak English. So he, on a lark went to the American consulate and signed up for the visa and four years later - he'd forgotten about it because he had no intention of using it - four years later, we get a postcard says, come and pick up your visa. So we had the family council - I was the only child by the way - and it was clear that I was gonna go and my parents decided to stay. At that point, my father was doing better in business okay. So, he had friends. He didn't have relatives, but he had friends. So he was comfortable there, and coming to this country at the age of - what was it 60 something, who knows - would have been very hard for him. So I came and went back a number of times and I was allowed to do that. It was quite gutsy of my parents, I think.

- 56:24 Speaker 15: I have a question. So you describe your hegira and it's quite interesting but the woman here also had a hegira and I wonder how she got together with you. That frankly is the thing that interests me the most. Can she join you?
- 56:42 Elio Schaechter: Give her, give her the microphone.
- 56:50 Mrs. Schaechter: No, no. I'm not going up there. Well we, I had an aunt and uncle that left for the United States from Ecuador, and Elio his [crosstalk] from Ecuador to Israel and they were friends and they got together and the husband of my aunt died, and Elio's mother died in Israel and they were a couple.
- 57:18 Elio Schaechter: They became an item.
- 57:19 Mrs. Schaechter: They became a couple, the two of them. Which he never told his son, but I knew it all the time because my aunt wrote long letters to my mother every single week. And she told her about her boyfriend and the boyfriend told her about his son. So that's what she wrote to my mother and she gave me to read those letters so that's how we eventually got together.
- 57:55 Speaker 16: That's a huge distance physically arrive [unclear]
- 58:00 Mrs. Schaechter: Well there were other things, too.
- 58:02 Elio Schaechter: I was wrapping up my career and I could leave at times and Edith would come to Boston and the question was - this is an interesting question and it was obviously a problem. Would Edith come to Boston? Would I come to San Diego? And it wasn't the climate, I can tell you that. It just wasn't. But I felt that in Boston, I, where I had been for years and years - and I thought I knew half the city - everybody was so busy. Husband and wife had no social life. When my wife died, the phone didn't stop ringing for two weeks and then it stopped ringing. And if I wanted to make, see my friends, I had to make an appointment two weeks from now, let's see if we can get together. That didn't seem much of a life. In addition, I thought that I probably had another adventure. And in my case the adventure has been that I became, let me call it, a commentator of microbiology. I write a lot and I enjoy that tremendously. So I don't have a lab. I don't do research, but I'm still in it and it's just very satisfying so I can do that just as well here if not better. So I'm very glad I came here. Well, I guess we wrap it up.
- 59:18 Susanne Hillman: Ok well, thank you very much. Thank you Elio and thank you all for coming. Have a good night.