United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Renee Schwalb Fritz
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Renee Schwalb Fritz, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on November 22, 1989 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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RENEE SCHWALB FRITZ
November 22, 1989

Q: Will you please tell me your name and where you were born?

A: My name is Renee Fritz, and I was born in Vienna, Austria.

Q: Can you tell us your first memories of your childhood?

A: My first memories of my childhood were I remember leaving Vienna when I was around 2 years old and I remember my mother carrying me all the way. (laugh) Always having to, you know, carry me because I was, you know, a real little one and we had... It was really a lot of walking, no other source of transportation, and that's basically you know what I remember.

Q: Do you recall what happened... Of course, you were very young then... when the war broke out.

A: I...The only thing that I basically remember as far as that was that my mother carried like a suitcase along with her and as we went along, I remember she periodically had to open that suitcase and give away certain, you know, articles like a little...she had a brown handbag...and when she gave that away it meant having another meal. And I remember she took with her jewelry and every time she had a piece of jewelry to give away that...and when I saw her giving it away it mean that, you know, we were going to have a little bit more food to get us through to the next trip and the next meal.

Q: You were separated from your mother at a young age. Can you tell us about that?

A: Yes. Uh, when we reached Belgium, uh, I was separated from her and, uh, through the..the underground really did all that. We had moved into a...into a room where this woman who belonged to the Catholic church and she got a hold of the priest who then in turn worked with the underground and I was taken to a convent at that point.

Q: What happened before you separated from your mother? Where did your mother take you?

A: Uh, Before I separated from my mother what we did is we went to a...from Austria we...most of it was really again through walking or sometimes a truck would pick us up. And we went to Calais, France. And in Calais, we were all--I do remember, we were put in jail there. And, uh, somehow we got out of there. That..I..we..I don't know how we were able to get out, but we did get out and the march started again until we finally reached..uh..Belgium. And once we..we got to Belgium that is when, uh, people who were just taking us...in other words, the head of some of these groups were able to make various contacts; and that is how we got to this woman, Mrs. Degelas. And she then, in turn, contacted the...the priest.

Q: Tell us about Mrs. Degelas?

A: Mrs. Degelas was, uh... Well, to me, of course, she looked old. I was young. So, I would say...now that I recall, she was probably a woman in her 40s, who lived with her husband in a very nice...in Brussels, Belgium. Uh... She seemed like a very lovely lady. She owned quite a large house. I think the best way describe it would be here it would be like...it would like a townhouse, I believe. And this townhouse was divided into separate rooms and she gave us... Now when I say us, that means there were 30 of us. She let us utilize that room as long as we had a need for it and, uh, the only problem was that I could not stay with my mother at that point because number 1, I was a child and number 2, my mother also had to take care of my grandparents who were with her and in the room with us. But I think what they were afraid of more than anything was the noise level because I didn't have a full understanding of..that a war was on or what the idea of all this was. I mean I knew no other life, so this was just part of, you know, everyday living. And, uh, when they told me that I had to, you know, go away for awhile, well, I just...I just went. (laughter) I didn't have any choice.

Q: Where did you go from here and what are your recollections?

A: From..uh..uh.. there I was put into a...into a convent which was also located in Belgium, and some man came and picked me up that I had never seen before. That scared me slightly. And he told me on the way that the reason for all the things that were going on was because I was Jewish which, of course, didn't mean anything to me. I was just too young to understand what Jewish meant. But that I was going to go and live in...in a school. And when I got there..uh.. I saw nuns which scared me a little bit because in Europe, of course, not like today, the nuns were all in habits and it was a very, very strict order. And he took me to the Mother Superior and the Mother Superior tried to explain as much as she felt I could understand that I was going to be into school and that I was going to be living with other children there during the day. However, those children leave at the end of the day and I was going to be taken care of by the nuns. I was also told that I was going to be taught religion and that my name would be changed to Susanne Ledon, and this was name that I would... that I can only answer by. I have to forget my other name, that there was no more name like that because this was going to be something totally new and I just have to follow these rules. So I...I did. And she handed me some medals and with a safety pin and she told me every time that I memorized what each metal meant that I would get a new one. And I did. I started memorizing different..uh..prayers for medals and she gave me a rosary and she taught me how to do the rosary and this went on for periods of time. Uh, I think the most frightening part of the experience was the evenings because I was taken to what seemed like a dormitory that had miles upon miles of just corridors and they were just all partitions in between and I was put into one of these partitions that had a bed, a sink, and a huge crucifix and one of the nuns was..was in charge, and I was left in this dormitory at night. That was rather scary. And, uh, I would just say in my prayers. (crying)

Q: Can you recall for us some of the things you did from day to day in the convent?

A: Uh, well during the days...on some days when they felt it was safe, I would go to a class with the rest of the children but (crying, crying, crying) I'm sorry... Thank you. I don't mean to do this.

Q: Just relax. Take a drink.

A: I didn't mean to do this.

Q: It's alright. Take as much time as you need.

A: Am I holding you up? Oh, God.

Q: We're here for you.

A: I swore I wouldn't do this. (Crying)

Q: You don't know what to expect.

A: I know, it's just as... I hope they stopped the cameras from rolling. There goes the mascara. I'm okay. I'll be fine.

Q: You were tell me about the day-to-day.

A: Yah. The day..day to day was...there were certain days I could go to school, uh, for maybe an hour or 2 and that was just to get me to mingle with the other children, but the problem was that they would start questioning me and there was always a nun that had to stay by me because they were always so afraid that I would say the wrong thing because if I did, I mean, everyone in that convent would have been exposed. There might have been other Jewish children in the convent, but, of course, I was not aware of it because I was always by myself. I did know that these children did come..uh.. in the morning. They did leave at night and I was left. The minute that they left the nun would actually take me with her and I would go and, uh, to the chapel and again we would go through the religious..the religious end of it so that I would know catholicism backwards and forwards and this was the main training that I got. The actual schooling part of it was not because I could never stay long enough in a classroom to pick anything up, but the religious aspect, because religion was going to save my life basically. I mean, this was obviously what they, you know, tried to do. And, uh, in case the Germans did come..and a lot of times, Germans did come over. I remember seeing them come into the convent and be talking to the Mother Superior. So, this is really what, you know, day-to-day life was like. Uh, once in a while we went out and, you know, walked around some of the gardens and so forth, but I would say basically I was, you know, indoors and really kept busy religiously. That was the main thing that I really understand catholicism more than anything and, uh, the...of course, the incentive always was the more I knew about it, and I would get another medal. I mean by the time I left the convent, I had a safety pin that was...had so many medals on it. It was wonderful. (laughter) I thought that was great.

So, you know, it was a great incentive to me to keep going and I did that way.

Q: You mentioned one nun that was sort of assigned to you.

A: Yes.

Q: Can you recall something about her?

A: I just recall what she looked like. She was a very tall, very masculine type of a woman. She never smiled, and I always...I was scared silly of her. That I will tell you. I felt I was...Well, now I feel I was probably, you know, quite a burden on her. But I was really really afraid of her and I think what scared me the most was at night when she...she would just take me over to this little cubicle and she'd say, "Now get down on your knees and let me hear your prayers." And then she would just turn around and leave and then all the lights were shut off, and I was left completely in the dark there. And that...that really scared me. That I found very scary.

Q: How long were you in the convent?

A: I believe I was in the convent for almost 2 years because periodically, uh, I...after the convent, I went...I remember when I had to leave the convent which happened one day....came very sudden..uh..that a strange person picked me up and they told me that I would have to leave, that this was not a good place for me anymore. What I found out later on was, of course, the Germans became aware that the nuns were hiding..uh..Jewish children and their safety was becoming a problem, so they felt that they couldn't jeopardize their whole...the whole school system and so forth. And they had..they just had a get me so they contacted the underground which..uh..worked with the priests and they felt that I just have to leave, and I just left there.

Q: Did you see your mother before you left the convent?

A: Yes. I did. I saw her once, uh, for like a day. I never stayed overnight. I was never able to stay with her. I just saw her for like a day and then I had to leave right away again.

Q: Where was she?

A: My mother was still living in..at home with this Mrs. Degelas and her whole family. The only thing that had happened there was that her parents were very ill. And my grandfather took my grandmother to a doctor. And while my grandmother was inside with the doctor, the Gestapo picked him up on the street; because he was a very, uh...he was a real orthodox Jew and he had a beard and everything. And they...they just picked him up, and he was never to be seen from or heard from again. And the doctor somehow got my grandmother.... I don't know how this happened, but somehow got my grandmother..uh..someplace. And uh...but that was the end of my grandfather. That was it.

Q: Now this person came to get you from the convent. What are your recollections after that?

A: Well, after they came and got me from the convent I went to, uh, out in the countryside and I was taken to a farm which was...which was wonderful. I just loved the farm because I was with a private family who had a daughter who was, I would say, about 3 or 4 years older than I and, uh, they had the grandmother live there and this was really... My fondest recollections, you know, of the war was really the happiest there, was just a big farm, and it was just really wonderful except that now I became a Protestant. They told me I was no longer a Catholic. So now I was taught how to be a Protestant. Uh, This...this was fine. I mean, it didn't matter. I mean that...it didn't matter. It was just another learning experience, I guess, you know, learning something.

Q: What did you have to learn in terms of becoming a Protestant and how did that make you feel?

A: Well, they...they took away some of the metals and...they took away the rosary. That's the first thing they did. They took away the rosary beads, and..uh..I was not too happy to let go of that. Uh, but they told me I had to do it. So I just, you know, I just did it. You just don't ask questions. You do what you're told. And I wanted to stay there so bad. I really wanted to stay that I would have done anything there just because I was really really happy living on the farm, but unfortunately that was my shortest stay.

Q: Can you tell me the name of the family? Did you keep your same name?

A: I kept my Susanne Ledon, which was my name all during the war. Uh, I do not remember their last names. Their daughter's name was Jeanine. That I do know, and, uh, that was about, you know, all I could really remember from that that except it was a great...it was just happy there, but I didn't stay very long.

Q: What happened after that?

A: After that, uh, I think the most...I think the most traumatic thing that happened there was that I was woken up in the middle of the night and..uh..it was rather frightening and a strange man came and Jeanine's mother said, "You have to get dressed now because you have to go with this man." And I do remember I was very, very upset about that. I didn't want to go, but she gave my suitcase or whatever and she told me that I had to leave and she hoped that she'd see me again someday, but I must be good. That I remember her saying to me. And, uh, we took around midnight a long train ride, and I remember getting to a home then. It was like a very large house, and there were lots and lots of children, and he took me to an orphanage. And, uh, I would say there were about 300 of us in the orphanage and I know there were a couple of adults taking care of us, and we ranged from about the age of 4 to about 18. That's where the older took care of the younger, and the only good part of it was that I was able to remain a Protestant there. I didn't have to learn another religion.

They...However, we had... I do remember one thing though that I had outgrown all my shoes and, uh, I remembered that. After I...well, this was at the farm already, I only wore wooden shoes. I do remember that distinctly and, uh, that...I don't know why that made an impression on me. But..uh. that's what happened.

Q: Can you tell me about your day-to-day life?

A: Uh, day-to-day life was really...we lived...there were, I would say, maybe about 10 to 15 rooms there. We crowded into any room where we found a space, but most of the living was done underground. Because there were loads and loads of tunnels, uh, underneath, and..uh.. we were shown how when air raids came, ..uh.. how to survive on our own, what we had to do, what kind of procedures because we really had to know how..how to do this alone because nobody could really do it for us. Like I said, there were only 2 adults there with us. Food was extremely, extremely scarce. If you had a slice of bread a day, that was wonderful. You sort of hoarded it to last, you know, for the whole day. Uh, you really...it was really a survival of the fittest there. Whatever you did, that's how you survived. I remember getting very ill, and you just...well, you just..you just got better. I mean that was it. I remember getting caught outside in an air raid. I wasn't room enough to get...there wasn't...I wasn't fast enough to get in the shelter, because in order to go into the underground shelter you had to go out of the house and go in there, go into the shelter. And most of the time it was always very, very dark because directly across the street from us were German headquarters and we didn't want to arouse too much suspicion. I mean they knew this was an orphanage, but I am sure that they never thought there would be Jewish children hidden right under their noses. Uh.. I don't know if all of us were Jewish though or not. There was very little...there was no communication amongst any of us. I mean there was no play time. There was none of that. It was just you live from hour to hour.

Q: What did you know of the people who ran the orphanage?

A: Nothing. I really knew absolutely nothing about them. They were two women, and that was it. And...like I said the olders...the older children would take care of the younger ones. But, uh, we just...you know, we just went along. I mean, we did...the only thing that we really did do is go to church a lot. That we did do. But, uh, otherwise there was...there was really, you know, nothing to do.

Q: Was there any contact with your mother during this time?

A: Just once. There was one more contact with my mother where I did see her for a day and then I went right back again and I could not, you know... Of course, I didn't know the name of the place where I was. I was told nothing. I didn't even know the town I was in. I was told absolutely nothing so that then I was not able to repeat to her anything. That I remember. And, uh, uh, you know, she...I...I do remember her sort of very upset because she thought...I...I remember she thought I didn't look very clean and I, uh, I had..I had scabs all over my head because we all had lice. We were all pretty sick in that place, but we all...we

all managed. (laughter) That was, you know, in the orphanage.

Q: Did you have any contact with the Germans?

A: No. None whatsoever. We...you know, we would see them and, uh, come across the street because that's where the lights all were, but we had absolutely no contact with them. None. They would walk by periodically. I mean, they were just like a few yards away. Sometimes they would walk by but it, they'd never meant anything. I don't know if they ever came into the orphanage. I never saw them. They might have gone and spoken to the 2 adults, but otherwise that was the only contact I recall.

Q: How long were you in the orphanage?

A: I was in the orphanage til the war ended in..in 45. I can't really, really say how many years, you know, that was. I really can't.

Q: How did you feel during that time? What were your personal feelings?

A: Uh, I don't know how I... You know I can't really say how I felt because, uh, I was basically, you know, a loner. Uh, that I do remember. I stayed by myself considerably. Uh..I remember from...this is from when I was a Catholic that Saint Susanne Day was going to come up, and I did tell the... one of the ladies that ran the place that that was Saints Day and on Saints Day that everybody usually got a gift. That's when you were a Catholic. (Laugh) So I remember them saying, "Well. Fine." And I remember that they got me..uh..like cookies. They got me like 5 cookies. I'll never forget it. And those...I remember making those cookies last for about a month. I would take one bite a day in order for them to last. And I thought that was the greatest thing that ever happen to me in that orphanage, and..uh..that I had a Saints Day so that's the only really positive thing that I remember, I think, from the orphanage.

Q: You mentioned something about an underground system of tunnels.

A: Yes.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

A: Well, the..the underground system, it was like, uh...they were like dirt walls and dirt floors and I know they had beams on the side and..uh.. the two ladies that were in charge there, they had like a lantern and when the air raids would come..they..they would take the lanterns and go down there, and we would just lay down anywhere until the raids were over. I mean some of us just stayed there, and some of us went back afterwards, but I do recall one day having...not getting down there fast enough, and I was caught out on the..out between the house and the underground passage and I remember seeing the planes and the bombing planes. And I threw myself down on the ground and I looked up and I thought, "This isn't so terrible," and it was like paper streamers coming down. It looked like tin foil. Streams of tin

foil coming down. And I thought, "Gee, this is great." And, you now, it certainly beat being in the darkness and, uh, I don't think that was so terrible and I didn't know what I had to go underground. That I remember. And I do remember when this landed on the field, I was playing with the a...with the tin foil. It looked like tin foil now that I think about it. They were just streamers. I don't know what that...you know, what that was. And it was just coming down, but..uh.. I do remember seeing the air raids right up above me and watching. The only thing that did frighten me was the noises, the bombing. That really used to frighten me terribly and, uh..I think that's why I am afraid of thunder up til this day frankly But..uh..that was one of the things I remember the most.

Q: Did you have an understanding or what was your understanding of what the war was about?

A: No. I don't think I did. I felt that this is the way things were, and this is...this is it. I mean, I think the only thing that bothered me, now that I think about it, is that I...I wish I had some of the things that my mother used to give away and if I had what my mother used to give away, maybe I could have some food. That was the only thing that really bothered me. Uh, I do remember picking berries though,...uh.. finding fields that had berries, and eating berries. I think just the hunger part of it bothered me. Sometimes I was very cold. That I got over for some reason. The hunger I think was the worst part of it. Really! But I felt, you know...I never...this was the way life was. I mean there was just no other way, so you just...you just go along and..it didn't.. There was really no real association with my mother.

Q: What were the facilities like at the orphanage. Did you sleep in a room? Did you sleep in a bed?

A: Uh, the facilities in the orphanage were, like I said, they were bad. Everywhere from 10 to 15 rooms and we would all crowd into these rooms. Uh, there were some blankets thrown around. They were maybe 2 or 3 beds. Whoever got to them first got to them or we'd sleep on the floor. Uh, it was like you did for yourself wherever you could. There was nothing...it's whoever came first. I mean, that's how it was. Bathrooms, I think maybe there were two bathrooms, not that it really mattered. I mean it was, you know I mean, sanitary conditions were just terrible, absolutely terrible. But, uh, I think...I really feel that most of us stayed by ourselves. We really did not interact too much with each other. We just didn't. Uh, we all spoke French and...uh... Flemish, uh...but there was not a lot of communication. There really wasn't. There was really...you knew you had to survive on your own from day to day and you just had that...you just had that instinct..that's...you just have to do it. That's it.

Q: What do you remember about liberation?

A: Well, I remember about liberation was where German headquarters were, we were liberated by, uh, by the Americans and I remember that the American soldiers when they knew there was an orphanage, they came. Oh, they came over bearing, you know, food, which was the most wonderful gift of all. They would bring chocolates and candy bars and little cookies in packages and that was really, really, you know. That was wonderful. I think we always used

to look forward to it. The soldiers used to come and visit us. You know, every day and we...it did mean getting food, which was, you know, really great. So that was I think the main recollection that I have of it.

Q: And what happened after that?

A: Well, after that, I, uh, or I should say this... One American soldier, he really got very, very friendly with me. And he would bring me things. He would come every day to see me and every day he had some..uh...some...either chocolate or just some food. And he would spend some time with me, and it eventually got to the point where he wanted to adopt me. And, of course, I didn't know what it meant except that, you know, it meant having somebody that cared for you.

Q: And then what happened?

A: Well, then what happened was that..uh..I guess he went ahead with this, with the fact that he wanted to adopt me, but in order to get the proper clearance and everything he had to check out some of my background and he had to give all this to the Red Cross which in turn had to get a hold of the underground and they had to start doing a lot of tracing, uh, back to, uh, exactly where am I coming from, what kind of family. Is there anyone that has survived? So the procedure took really a very, very long time, and then...uh...while this was going on, one of my mother's brothers who had been living in the United States..un..since right before he war, he was also in the Army, and..uh..the Red Cross was able to..uh..find him and he made contact with this Jack and..uh..they found out that I had a father living in the United States and Jack said to me that he couldn't adopt me and that was...that was terrible. That was very upsetting because my mother at that point had not come back from Auschwitz yet. So, but I was very upset about that. I...I remember that. And, uh, he tried to explain that I had other family, my father was in the United States and they would find him, and all that. So that's really what happened and then in the interim, my mother appeared who had once she was...after she was liberated from Auschwitz, she was in a hospital because she had typhoid. She was sick for quite a while, but the minute she was better, she was able to get a hold of the underground, and the underground told her where I was in this orphanage. And, uh, then my mother came and, uh, you know, this was again somebody new in my life. So..

Q: Did you mother ever tell you when she was taken to Auschwitz?

A: Uh, Yes. Uh, she did. She..it seemed that after my last visit...the last time I had seen her when I was in the orphanage, she...the whole family, uh, was taken to, uh, to concentration camp and, uh, they were all exterminated except her. And, uh, they felt she was young enough to work in the ammunitions factory and, uh, what happened...the other thing that happened with her was, uh, she was..uh..ready to go into the gas chamber which, of course, she didn't know was the gas chamber, and..uh..there was a soldier that was standing in the line to get her to go in. And he walked over to her and he tapped her on the shoulder, and he said, "I know you." And it turned out this SS man had gone to school with her in Vienna.

And he said, "I know how old you are." He said, "You can go and work in the ammunitions factory." And that's...that is how my mother was saved, because he had recognized her.

Q: What do you remember about your reunion with your mother?

A: Uh, what do I remember? I don't...I had...I had very mixed emotions about it, because I was very, very upset that I wasn't going to go with Jack. Because, like I said, Jack visited me every day and he was very good to me. And now another strange person comes into my life. Of course, I had been separated from my mother so long that, uh, you know, Mother didn't mean anything to me. And, uh, (crying) I think it was just...it was just a strange woman who came. I mean, I vaguely remembered her. (Crying, crying, crying) Uh, I'm sorry. There goes the mascara.

Q: You're okay.

A: I didn't mean to do this. Uh, well, like I said, it was a strange person who appears in my life again and, uh, you know after Jack, I though, which was so wonderful, you know, for the time that it lasted. And she, of course, wanted me, you know, to leave the orphanage which the, uh, which I told her I could do and, uh, there were these Jewish organizations..uh..overseas also affiliated..uh..with the...with the underground that made certain provisions, gave you, you know, some money and they found a place for you to live, and..uh..I did go with her, of course. And, uh, she, you know, proceeded on, of course, getting me healthy because I was just infested, absolutely infested with lice and I had to have all my head, my whole head shaved off, and I was..I was really quite sick afterwards but I got over it. And, uh, with the underground, you know, helping out, uh, because they had doctors look us over and things like that and they provided..uh..a living, a room for us that..uh..we lived in. And, uh, I, of course, at that point I remembered very, very little German and she spoke no French at all so I had a start learning how to speak German with her because it was very difficult communicating with her. And, uh, we...you know, we started...she got a hold of my uncle through the Red Cross and got a hold...who got a hold...and then got a hold of my father and, uh, with that point had to start saving up some money in order for us to come to the United States because you had to prove that you...there was somebody here in the States that could take care of you. But not only that you had the Austrian quota that we had to wait for which was not the best quota. And, in the interim,..uh..my mother, after she more or less got me back into a healthy state, she tried to send me to school, but it was extremely, extremely difficult for me because here I was learning German, I was one day I am going to one school, and then the underground would move us again to different quarters and I would go to another school so it really amounted to, as far as education, to nothing, to be very honest with you. I never learned anything. And, uh, I...My mother would pick up these books from the underground. They were written in French and, uh, I taught myself really how to read and how to write French and Flemish because those were the two languages that were spoken, uh, predominantly in Belgium. And..uh..German, of course, I got from my mother and I always knew how to speak Yiddish because of my grandparents so that I found the German rather easy to come by so at least we

were able to have some form of a...of communication going.

Q: What was your relationship with your mother like during these years?

A: It was very estranged. Uh, this was just another person coming into my life, and, uh, it (pause)...and I am sure it was very difficult for her because here's this woman who has just gone through all this and now she's got this child to take care of. Uh...It was a very estranged..uh..relationship. Not that she didn't love me, I know she did. But it was just very different. I think because, you know there was a lot of lack of communication, and from...first of all, I wasn't used to anybody really ever taking care of me. I was moved here and moved there, and I was just...I was almost like I was waiting for when am I going to leave here kind of thing. You really do. You're always...nothing ever seems permanent so I really was waiting to leave again because I understood from the war what I could understand. I mean, war was war and that's what life was. War! It...When, you know, when they said, Liberation. The war is over. You can do this. You can do that. Well, it didn't...it really didn't mean anything t me. It really didn't.

Q: What was your day to day life like at this point? Was your mother working?

A: No. My mother...my mother could not work, uh, because she was...her health was not that good. Uh, day to day life,..Well, I remember I once found a kitten on the street and I picked it up. I do remember that. And I brought it home and, uh, that didn't last very long, unfortunately. I...I do...I remember taking a, uh, having a ...box of some kind and, uh, I remember trying...I wanted the kitten to go to sleep and the kitten wouldn't go to sleep. And I remember I picked it up and I threw it out the window. I remember doing that which...I don't why I did that, but I did. It wouldn't do what I told it to, and it was like almost, you know, I had to...you had to do what you were told. And I don't know why that left an impression on me. Uh, I remember helping my mother scrub floors and we had a little pot bellied stove that we had to fill everyday with brickets in order to get warmth into the room. I remember that. And I remember one winter it getting so so cold and my mother washing the floor with a knit rag. And I remember one day she put water on this little stove and she started washing the rag out in it and I said to her why was she doing that, and she told me she was going to make me a beautiful sweater. And I remember taking a rag with her and helping her unwind the yarn and I don't know where, but she got some knitting needles, and she showed me how to start knitting and out of the floor rag, I got a sweater. I do remember that. (laugh) And, uh, I think that was sort of the highlight of my (laugh) my togetherness with my mother. Uh, I also remember, you know, I was able to go for walks and I was able to go out alone on the streets. That I thought was really great. And I remember during the day leaving my mother... by myself and I would go to the downtown area of Brussels and,uh, they would have like...like shows, I guess you could call like variety shows here. And I remember standing by the door there after everybody got in and I would sort of sneak into the variety shows without, without telling my mother and without paying. I do remember that. And that was wonderful. And, uh, that...those were really the...the best parts, just that I was able to go out by myself. I also remember, uh, going to the market places and we really could not afford anything

because we were really rationed money-wise that the underground would give us. And I remember picking up dead flowers and, oh, I would pray so hard that they would come to life at night. Uh, and that I did every day. That I would...I would do that every day after the market would close up around 5, 6 o'clock. I would run down there real fast and hope that some of the flowers were left on the ground. I remember that.

Q: At what point did you start planning to immigrate to America?

A: Well, my mother kept..uh..getting news as to how our quota stood and, uh, then finally, I was almost 13. I was just about 13 that the...it looked rather promising that we would be able to come and, uh, I remember my mother saying that we would have to go to Sweden and we were going to get on a boat and we were going to come to the United States. And, uh, at first I thought I was coming...I was going alone again because this is how I was used to doing things. But she said no, she was going to go with me. And..uh..but that's...I feel that's one..you know, it really started like around, I think it was like around 1948 or 49, around that time.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about coming to America? How you traveled and what that was like?

A: Well, we...I remember we left...we left Belgium and we...we took a train and I remember the people from the underground, they gave us some food and they gave us some clothing to take with us and, of course, we had to have a passport and I do remember the train ride because we were taking the ship from our Göteborg, Sweden. And the train ride was, I remember, rather long and extensive. I also remember that at the border, when we got to the German border, we had to do a pass check. The passports are checked and at that point, some...of course, they were German people...they were not the German soldiers anymore, that they boarded the train and my mother got very scared. I do remember that. And at that point she started pointing out all the terrible things about the Germans and she also, uh, showed me some of the...the children that were out on the platform of the station and they really looked raggedy and sort of worn out. And I remember having a candy bar, something in my hand, and the windows on the train, they open half way cause there're the European trains where you sit in compartments. And then there's like a long hall and I was holding this candy bar and I was eating it or something and I pointed part of it out the window, and I remember my mother slapping me. I do remember that. And she said, "Don't you ever, ever give anything to those Germans." And, oh, I remember that so distinctly. She got so upset with me because I had the candy bar and I was willing to give them some. But, you know, it wasn't until years later of course...I got upset at that point, but years later I understood and believe me, I understand (laugh). But from there, then we went to Sweden and we boarded..we boarded a ship and we were all the way...I guess it's like almost in the hull of the ship, and..uh..we were just all thrown in there. I mean there was so many of us and long, long passage. (crying)

Q: We are going to take a break now. We are going to change tapes. Perfect timing.

TAPE #2

A: I don't mean to...to get upset with this. I really...

Q: What happened when you got to America.

A: Well, uh, when I got to America, uh, we landed at Ellis Island, New York and there was a lot of commotion. My mother's brother was there. And they...he then took us to...to meet his wife; and I remember we did stay in New York... Oh, I think it was like about a couple of days. Uh, we did not reunited with my father immediately because he was in Connecticut; and for some reason, he just...you know, he just couldn't get to us right away. Uh, however, when I did meet with my father, uh, it...it was not what I would call a very great reunion. Not on my part, anyways, because I think I resented him immediately. Because here was somebody who was going to come and take my mother away. And I had my mother now for a little bit; and, of course, this was a stranger in my life. So it was...I found it very, very difficult. Extremely difficult. Uh, we moved to Connecticut. And now when I think about it, I think that my life was easier in Europe than it ever would have been in the United States; because the turmoil here was just incredible. I can't even describe it. That's how...how traumatic this was there. Uh, I found there I had just those finding my little niches. I was going in Europe; that is...running about, doing my own little thing, and now I come to this country again. I cannot speak a word of English. My father speaks, uh, some German. He's not very fluent in it, but enough to communicate with my mother. He was a very poor man. Uh, we moved to a very small community. And by small, I mean a small Jewish community; but there were only like 30 families living there. However, they're all very, very affluent. We're living on the...shall we say, wrong side of the track, and in an old apartment house. I have to go to school; but my father decides that I have to go to a Yeshiva. And I think at this point, I really was very rebellious against the Yeshiva. I really feel I was very sick and tired of learning all these religions, because all my mother had done right now was, since the war over, she told me I was Jewish and that was it. But I didn't really know anything about Judaism. She tried to explain to me persecution is because we were Jews, which... Well, that was...that's all right. I mean, this is all I understood anyway. So it didn't really make any difference. But my father decided I definitely had to go to a Yeshiva. And I went to the Yeshiva, and I lasted 6 weeks. Uh, first of all, it meant learning another language, which was Hebrew. I could not...I had a terrible time with that...terrible time; and, uh, I couldn't understand the English part of it either. So I was ever...I was just nowhere. Learning another language, and not understanding the language I am supposed to speak. And nobody could converse with me. I did speak Yiddish, though, to the Rabbi. That was about it. But I didn't last. I just...I really carried on until they finally...so my father finally took me out of there. So that immediately started even more resentment toward him. And, uh, from there on, they decided I better go to a public school. However, seeing that I was twelve and a half years old, I had to be Bar[1] Mitzvah at the age of 13. So the first thing they did after they took me

[1] **NB:** Bat.

out of the Yeshiva was I was enrolled at Sunday school and 3 days a week, I had to go to Hebrew school, which I did, and I had to go to public school. Public school was a problem because here I am almost 13, and I belong in 8th grade. They don't know what they're gonna do with me. They put me into 8th grade. I don't understand one word, at least...I mean nobody even speaks Yiddish there. I don't know anything. I have had no formal education at all. I have never had a day of math in my life. I mean I have had zero. Zero! Zero! So, the only good part about it was that I became a novelty in that school, because I could sing the French National Anthem. I mean, I could do things in French and nobody else did. (laugh) So they all started paying a lot of attention to me because of it. But they...that didn't matter. They didn't know how they were going to do this with me through school. So they devised a plan that every day I would spend a half hour in first grade, a half hour in second grade, a half hour in third grade. Well, it was a little humiliating because here I am with these 7 and 8 years and I am almost 13, but there was no other way to get me caught up. I did do it. Uh, I didn't do it the first year, but they did get me through 8th grade enough so that I could read enough so that I could write. Math, I knew the multiplication tables and I could do some addition and some subtraction. Math is still not my subject (laugh), but I got through. And I also got Bar [**NB:** Bat] Mitzvah, because I had to; and I did read the HafTorah in Hebrew, because I had to. And the other thing is that I wanted to be like the rest of the children. I was 13 years old. And it's very, very difficult when you're going into high school to be different; and I wanted to be like the rest of them. And (sigh), it meant...I remember buying sheet music and standing in front of a mirror and practicing how to lose this accent and I practiced so hard. I really worked at it. And I made some friends. The friends that I did make though were... I would always seek out the ones that scholastically were way up there, because those were the ones I wanted to be like. And when I went to high school, they only...there were only two courses given. One was a college level course; and the other one was a business course. But the kids I wanted to be with were the college level kids. So I made up my mind I'm going. I'm going to go to college. Which it was quite a struggle. The only thing that I did do was, the...the uh teachers were sympathetic to me and they did work with me for many, many hours. And like I say, I practiced really, really hard. I took some courses that were easy for me. Like I took French, which was wonderful; and I became President of the French class which was (laugh)... That the best thing that happened to me all through high school. Uh, I did join the choir; and at Christmas time, of course, I could sing all the Christmas carols. Because in Europe the tunes were the same, only the (laugh) language was different. But I could sing it in Latin, and they couldn't sing it in Latin. So, you know, I excelled in that. Uh, I had a lot of...the kids that...a lot of them that I was friendly with, uh they were...a lot of them were Catholic. And I would go to confession with them, and I knew what was going on. So that way, it was great to have had that background in other religions. I mean, it was really my own religion that I knew the least about. But I was getting...you know, I was Bar [**NB:** Bat] Mitzvah anyway, so it didn't matter. And, uh, but the Jewish families, like I said, they lived on the other side of town. And this I could not...those are the ones I would have liked to have kept up with, but I just couldn't. And uh...so I felt the only way to do this was then to uh...to go with the kids that were...did excel in school. The ones that were the cheerleaders and things like that. And uh... As a matter of fact, in 8th grade, I remember they even made me Captain of the cheerleaders, which was a great boost to my morale. So they

did...you know, they did try; but I think one of the most difficult thing is you want to be like your peers. And it was terrible. It was really so terrible. And losing that accent, which I wanted to in the worst way! Well, I finally did; but with a lot of, a lot of practice. And I got to my senior year of high school and, of course, I was taking a college bound course. Which... I mean, they just let me do it. They didn't know how I was going to achieve that. And I made up my mind I wanted to go on to college. And the principal of the high school called me down. And he said, "You are trying to do the impossible." He says, "You'll never..." He says, "You...you just can't do this." He says, "You can't go to a..to a 4 year school." And I says, "Well, I'm going to." My SATs were disgusting. They were just terrible. So I told him I had to go to college. And he went ahead and he wrote letters to the presidents of the different colleges that I wanted to go to; because I had made up my mind that the first school I wanted to go to was Boston University. The second one was University of Connecticut. And as a fallback, I would go to a two year school. But that was a real fallback. And (cough) I had in the interim become friendly with one gal who belonged to the Temple with us.... "Well, if she can go to Boston University maybe that's where I'll go." I wanted to be so much like the rest of them. But it was one of the most difficult things to do. And he did. He wrote; and they told him that they would consider my coming up and taking an interview, because the written part I couldn't do. I mean, half the things I was reading, I didn't even know what I was reading because the vocabulary. I...I just didn't have any vocabulary. And they all granted me interviews. And (pause) the...I remember going up to Boston, getting on a bus and going; because my...neither one of my parents ever saw the inside of a school. I mean, I just went. I did. I mean, even when they had meetings and things like that, they couldn't communicate. Plus they had their own...their own problems. And I always sort of took care of myself. And I think they always figured as long as I had a roof over my head and food on the table... I mean, what else did I need? So I...I really I...you know, I made my own way. I took a bus. I went to Boston. I had my interview, and I remember sitting near begging them, please, to let me in. Uh, frankly, I think they let me in cause they felt sorry for me. I really do. Because I don't know how they could take a chance on this. Uh, they did. They...They said to me, "Fine." And I was called down by the principal; and the Principal told me I was going to find it extremely difficult, extremely difficult, and they were taking me only on probation. I said, "Okay." That was...that was good enough for me. And my parents, at that point, when they heard I was going...you know, I was really determined to go. They...in the 50s, everybody went in to be a school teacher. But I didn't want to be a school teacher. I didn't want that. (laugh) So...I wanted to be a art major. So I made a deal with them. I was going to be an art major for a while, and then I would switch. Anyways, I went to...went to Boston; and I was an art major my first semester. And if life was ever difficult, it was when I went to college. It was like Greek. It was like learning Greek; 'cause no matter what I picked up, it wasn't where I was going to get that extra help anymore... that I... I mean, you just don't do this. It was so, so difficult. And my first semester, my grades were not too good. And seeing that I was there only on probation, I marched myself over to the Dean's office again. And I said, "I want to switch my major. Give me another semester." And what I did in the meantime is, this gal from Manchester, she was in liberal arts. And she also decided she's switching her major. And I said, "Joyce, how would you like to be roommates?" Because I needed tutoring so bad. And she said,

"You know, I am switching." I said, "What are you switching to?" And she said, "I am going into education." Well, I didn't want an education [major]; but if she was going to education, I'm going to education (laugh) with her. I said, "Let's be roommates, and I am going to go to education." I said, "Let's sign up for all the same courses." Which is what she did. And to make a long story short, by my senior year I made Dean's list. And Joyce could have two degrees; because what Joyce went through with me, I don't wish on anybody. She could have had two diplomas. And if it wasn't for her... But I got through college, and (sigh).. Where there's a will, there's a way.

Q: How did this make you feel, and how did this make your family feel?

A: My family, uh... Well, I mean, they were glad that I did. I was my own motivation though. I mean, if I had gotten through, I would gotten through. If I hadn't gotten through, they would have been extremely upset; but that was it. I mean, their lives were so affected from the past that..uh... (pause) I was...I was like the offspring of the two, and that was it. Do you know I am saying? They had their own lives. And it's, you know, like I've told my husband. I tell him these little stories that happened to me periodically. I mean, one day when I was in high school we had a health class; and the health class, it said you should go see a dentist twice a year. Well, I had never seen a dentist in my whole life. So, as I was walking home one day, I saw a plaque outside that said, "DENTIST." So I marched myself upstairs and I went to the Dentist. I mean, I was 16 years old. This is the first time I have ever been to a dentist. I came home. I told my mother I went to a dentist; and she said, "Well, that's good." I mean, she didn't even know...she said, "Did you have a tooth ache?" That's when you went to a dentist. You know, there these things that you...I think that we take for granted, that just people... People just don't do them. They just don't! So if you take your own initiative, I think if you're self motivated, you can do just about anything. But that's really what it takes. I don't...I don't think there's anything else that can keep you going.

Q; How did you finance college?

A: Finance college. Well, when my father heard that I had to go to college... And, uh, he was working in a factory; and uh, of course, college was not terribly expensive then. I mean, it was $10,000 for 4 years at Boston University. Now, you can't even have a semester out of that. But I did that; and then I would...as far as my books went, I would... Joyce and I would work our books together. Uh, but my father did get me through. And he would...he gave me like uh $5 a week; and uh I don't know I got..I got through. I got through.

Q: And what happened after graduation?

A: Well, after graduation... What happened is I graduated on
June 14, and on June 21st I got married. So, you..you know, I...I didn't have to go back home again either.

Q: Tell me about when you met your husband.

A: Well, my husband met me...I think I was 16 at the time. And uh, first of all, he did not know very much about me. Because I had no accent whatsoever. I never told him where I was born. The only thing that struck him funny was that my parents had an accent; but, of course, it didn't mean that much to him because his grandparents had accents. And, I mean, it..it just didn't mean anything. And uh I met him at a USY[2] dance. We were introduced; and it was sort of an on and off type of a courtship that lasted for... Oh, I would say for about 5 years. I do remember that when I was... I think I was a junior. He...I mean he saw, you know, school was really tough on me. Real tough. And he...he really wanted me to quit. He really did! And, you know, we could get married and... But I wouldn't. I just wouldn't! There was no way, when I got this far, no matter how hard this was, that I would ever quit. I was determined I was going to march down the aisle and pick up that degree. And...

Q: Can you tell us about your reunion with the soldier? And do it briefly because we're...

A: Yes..uh..this was after my husband was in business. We had a convention in New Orleans. And uh I had this little picture with me, that he had given me after the war, that was taken of the two of us; and he had put his address in the back. We went to New Orleans. I took the picture with me. We went through the phone book and there were a few Jack Schultz in the phone book. We figured we'll go through each one of them. Called up, and I asked each one of them, "Were you in ____, Belgium, at such and such time? And are you familiar with uh...a person by the name of..." Which was "Susanne Ledon," because, of course, my real name would mean nothing to him. And finally, I hit upon the right person. And uh when I did there was total, total shock at the other end of the receiver. There wasn't a word uttered. And within 20 minutes, he was there. And I guess he must have told somebody, so the New Orleans press had covered excerpts of it. And it was quite a reunion. It really was. It uh...it was just, you know, great seeing him; and he couldn't believe it was me, and where I was, and... But uh it was really, really nice.

Q: Have you kept in contact with him?

A: No, we lost contact again. And I...I really don't know, you know, if he is still alive; because at this point he is a man way into his 80s already.

Q: Thank you.

[2] United Synagogue Youth.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Q: Very briefly, tell us who these people are.

A: This was the family that hid us during the war, my mother. This was Mr. and Mrs. Degelas, who hid the 30 people in the room.

Q: Next.

A: This was the mother where I was living on the farm.

Q: Okay. Next.

A: This was the daughter who was having her communion.

Q: Okay. Next.

A: That's myself just in one of these interims when I went to visit my mother.

Q: Next.

A: That's our Jack Schultz--the soldier who was going to adopt me. That is Jack when I called him in New Orleans.

Q: Do you have one of your mother?

A: Yes. This is the one now. That's my mother and I about a year later, after the war.

Q: Is this your father?

A: No. No. This is a cousin of mine in uniform. I don't have one of my father.