

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Hiltgunt Margret Zassenhaus**  
**May 26, 1994**  
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## **PREFACE**

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## **HILTGUNT MARGRET ZASSENHAUS**

### **May 26, 1994**

Q: Can you give us your name, and where you were born and when?

A: Yes. I'm H. Margaret Zassenhaus. And the "H" is an old German name, Hiltgunt. Almost too difficult. That is why I shortened off. And I was born in Germany, in Hamburg, quite a few years ago as you can guess.

Q: What year? Can you give it to me?

A: (laughter) Do I have to say this? Yes, I was born in 1916. That means really during world war number one. And I will tell you my father was a rather known educator in Hamburg. I had a mother who was just a mother but a mother who I remember as probably the best mother ever could be because she really would over and over encourage us, have the courage to form your own opinion. This is what I remember when I think of my parents. I had three brothers. My oldest brother, Hans, was a professor, became a professor in mathematics was he in Princeton and in America. And my second brother, Guntra (ph) is a physician as I and he lives in California. And then I had a third brother, who was also a physician. He was killed in the war, in Germany.

Q: And what was his name?

A: That was Vilfreet (ph), which means in English will peace. And he was the one who was killed in the war. So, we lived in Hamburg. As soon as the Nazi's came, my father was . . . Three SS (ph) men came into his office and took him by the arm and led him out. He was the head of a very fine school in Hamburg where he really taught the liberal ideas and the classical ideas of and how people should live with each other. So, we were very grateful to a point that at that point he already had Parkinson's disease. So they, for the time being, did not arrest him because he was a rather known man in Hamburg. He had written several books about the history of literature, and so they tried to go light about it. So, I can only say almost fortunately soon after the Nazis came, he died, because his fate otherwise would have been to be in one of the prisons. I had three brothers. My eldest brother, my oldest brother, Hans, he was a professor in mathematics. And later as I came to America where he was both in Princeton and in other universities. And my second brother, was physician as I, and lives in California. Then I have a third brother, Vilfreet (ph) was his name, but really means to will peace. But he was the one who was killed in the war.

Q: What was it like as children together in your household? How do you remember it?

A: Well, one of my most wonderful memories are those days. And one of my saddest memories is that day when Hitler finally came to power. We didn't have televisions, but we had the radios. And everywhere, even in the streets, they blared out the Hitler music. And I remember very well my father. He assembled us that same night in 1933. And he said, "Look now, you see what has happened. And I want you to know that in our home,

nothing will change. We will have the same values. We believe the same thing. We will be the same as we always are." But, he said, "We've got to be extremely careful now because we are known." My father was a very known educator in Hamburg. And he said, "You must learn to be quiet, not to shout 'Heil Hitler', but to be quiet on the outside because this is the only hope we can survive this." And true enough, the next morning several of his SS (ph) men came to our house early in the morning. They wish to come early so that they knew you were there. They asked for my father. But my father at that time already had a rather advanced case of Parkinson's disease, which really was a blessing because they couldn't transport him and they would have had all kinds of things to get him out there. And since my father was a rather known man, a rather known educator in Germany, they were a little bit afraid to begin this, to rock the boat too much. So, they left him alone. And I can almost say since and very soon afterwards, he died. So, he was spared. But the very same day after that happened, that the Nazis came to our house, I remember too well my father got us all together -- us four children and a mother. And he said, "Now you see what has happened, what is happening. But in our home everything will be the same. On the contrary, for now on we will be much more together than we ever been before. And I urge you not to be afraid." I remember that today. "Don't be afraid." We were afraid. Because known as my parents were in that community, we were really very much a target of being arrested. And the only reason that my father was not arrested because they came . . . At that time he was already so far advanced in his disease that they just let him alone and said, "Well, he's dying anyway. He's gone." So, that was the beginning. And I will tell you from there on, we really were about the closest knit family you ever have seen or ever have experienced. Because we lived in our own

home. We had our values as we always had. We could be open with each other. And very soon we got a tiny little radio. You see, many, many years ago, you didn't have all these wonderful television and radios. You got a tiny little radio. We never were very interested in radio, but for now on we always start to turn. Do you know what we were looking for? Finally, one day we found it. The radio from London. That was . . .

Q: From London?

A: From London, yes. We lived in Hamburg. From London. Finally we got a voice from freedom. And from there on really morning, noon and night, whenever we had a spare minute, we listened to that radio which gave us the truth. I never forget that because it was almost an obsession. Don't ask me for television because we didn't have it at that time. We had only very tiny little radio. So, it was not all terrible grief because somehow this brought us together. And our Jewish friends -- and we had quite a few Jewish friends -- we'd gather together. Not anymore in the daytime. We came to them in the dark, after night. Or they came to us in the dark of the night. And very soon, of course, things got very dangerous. I mean, Hitler was very smart. He had a way of finding the elite and try to decapitate them. It's an old system of any dictator. If you do that, of course, the rest will go. And, so, the arrest came at night. And I must tell you that my father not only was a very known educator, but he had also written the books about the literature (ph) and was really known all over Germany. And the Nazis knew that he was quite ill already, so they let him be. But I remember one day an SS (ph) man coming to us and he said, "Just remember you better be very quiet because you are observed." And that we felt very

much. But now, none of us has ever been arrested. So, we were very fortunate that way. And now, so, it was very difficult so far because what they did indirectly they tried to harm us. We didn't have too much money. To study in Germany was very expensive. This was really a question of having money. And what they did is they simply cut out all the assistance, which otherwise gifted children and people who didn't have all the means to study, all this was cut away from us. Because they said, "Well, you are not Nazi. You're not in the Party. If you show us good will, we will help us." And that good will did not come forth. So, from there on really our house was more or less like a beehive. From morning to night -- and that started about in '34 -- we had children from all kind of schools whom we tutored. And this really could get the money for our daily living. Because the very same day when Hitler came to power, three SR (ph) men came through the house of my father and was to the office -- the office school -- and said "this is it", and led him out. It was a tremendous fortune that they didn't arrest him. We understood why they didn't do it. My father was a very known educator all over Germany because he had written quite a number of books. And to begin this, they went rather lightly on it, of the very prominent people.

Q: Was he a known anti-Nazi?

A: He was a known Democrat.

Q: Social Democrat?

A: Yeah -- No, he was the Democratic Party. He was a very religious man. My mother was a very known Social Democrat. My father always called her his left wife, you know?  
(laughter) He was more . . . I think he was a thinker. He was a philosopher. A man who really stood for political and this kind of thing. He was an ethicist, I would say. A man we admired greatly. The good this was first he was invited out of school. That had to be expected because they all knew where he stood. But the good thing that he wasn't arrested was that he, at that time, already had Parkinson's disease and was really rather ill. So, they left him alone. They even came one day and they said, "Well, at this point, we will leave you alone because you are rather known in the community" -- over Germany, really, his name -- "But we warn you. We warn you." With that they left.

Q: Dr. Zassenhaus, you had an incident in school, in high school . . .

A: Yes, yes.

Q: . . . when the Nazis took over. Could you talk about that?

A: Very soon after Hitler came to power, the new order was passed. For now on, whenever a teacher entered the class at the end of six times every day -- different teachers - we had all to race and then we had to throw our right arm in the air and shout as loud as we could, "Heil Hitler". Now don't forget, I was at that time about 15 or 16 years old. I immediately said, "That I can't do." And I came home and told my parents about the new order. I was very disturbed about it. I'd look at the faces and hope that they would give



me some advice. I remember so very much my father said, "What will you do?" I said, "I will not do it." And he said, "Well, are you aware of the consequences?" And my mother said to me: "Hiltgunt, this is something you must decide for yourself." I never forgot that. And I looked at her, because somehow I hoped she would give me some advice. So, the next morning before I left, they asked me both, "What have you decided?" And I started to cry. I said, "Tell me." My father said very quietly, "You must decide this for yourself." It was one of the days which were very decisive in my life. I remember I come into school. I was on the last bench in school in my classroom. All the girls knew about me. They knew because not -- I was not very important, but my father was rather known. Everybody knew where he stood. And know since the order had been passed. Whenever the teacher would enter, we would have to raise our right arm and shout, "Heil Hitler." And so the teacher comes in. I stood there, my arms glued at my sides. She beckoned me to her and she said, "Now as of tomorrow you will say "Heil Hitler" and you will raise your right arm. I give you 24 hours to think about it." That was one of the most upsetting days. I came home. I told my parents. I asked them, "What am I to do? What shall I do?" I never forgot the answer. My mother said, "You must decide for yourself." In the evening, I remember my father came to my bedside and he said, "Are you aware that whatever you do might be the end of your education?" I spent a sleepless night. I've never forgotten it. I still remember it as it was today. The next day I come to school. All the students in my classroom they're very eager now they all knew about it. My father being so known, they wanted to what is she going to do. I remember as today, it was a beautiful day in Spring. The windows were open. Everything was so beautiful outside and inside. There was not a decision to make. And don't forget, I was just a very young person,

probably very immature. The teacher comes in. All the heads, arms up. The heads all turn to me, what will she do? In my desperation, I raised my left arm and I put it right through the open window until the glass broke. There was a general scream: "What has she done?" Blood poured from my arm. I was rushed to the hospital. That was the end of that story. And I must tell you, nobody ever looked into my direction. They just left me alone. Somehow, and as today after so many years, I think maybe it was very foolish. But somehow for me it was the beginning of the way I had to go. So many times now I think about it. Why did I do it? Why not just go along with that little? But, no, in retrospect I feel that was the decisive moment. I had to do what I later would do. The interesting thing is for now on, from then on, never anybody looked into my direction. They just let me do as odd ball (ph). They said hear no nothing, see no nothing. Since then, I passed my examination. They let me go to school so that I could study later on.

Q: Why do you think they . . . Is it because of . . . ?

A: Certainly not for me. I think it was because of the reputation of my father. He was himself a very know educator in Germany. He had written books. Books which are still studied and learned about, learned from. And so I think it was really more a silent gist -- hear no nothing, see no nothing. So, they let me through. I passed my examination -- the only way I could to enter university. However, my feelings, the feelings of my family, were exactly the same. I had the feeling I could not live any more in Germany. I would not be happy there any more. I just couldn't wait any more. So, what I decided is that I one day said I have somewhere to go that is next to me. And next to Hamburg was really

Denmark. Not far away. About five hours away. This is where I went. This is how I started to get interested in the Scandinavian languages.

Q: And that was the summer after high school?

A: The summer after high . . . When after I had my examination, it was really finished. So, that began the idea why shouldn't I study Scandinavian languages. Yes, and that is what I did. And that took off. Of course, at the time I had all my examination, my degree. And the amazing thing is now in retrospective, maybe really there is somebody higher than me who leads us to what we have to do. Because it was an outrageous idea to study Scandinavian languages. It's very rare, and really not much you could do with it. And my parents always asked me, "Is it really what you want to do? What will you really do with it?" Somehow I felt . . . I had been there on a visit that was a visit that was a free country. I liked that country. There was no Hitler. So, here comes the war. Here come all the arrests of the Scandinavian people because Germany invaded Scandinavia, as you know. And, of course, the old principal of Hitler prevailed. He always arrested the elite of the country to decapitate the country. That was a very cheap little trick to do, which it somehow always paralyzed people. So this elite now came to . . . I'm jumping now. I come now from '33 to the war -- to '39. And as soon as he invaded Scandinavia, the same thing. He goes to the elite. Spiritual (ph) elite was arrested. Anybody who resisted Hitler, they were arrested. And now they had the problem. They got them, brought them to concentration camps where people simply were murdered. As you know, as we all know here. But they such overflow, and also there was one good thing for the Norwegian and

Danish. They were non-Jews. This idea of Hitler -- northern (ph) -- this idea. So, somehow that saved them from coming there in the concentration camp and being killed. They were sent to the prisons. The German prisons were no fun either, I can assure you. But yet they starved there. They were ill. But they were not murdered. And now these things where I come in. They needed now for these prisons somebody who spoke the Scandinavian languages. And here comes the mystery of life. Believe it or not I was the only person in Germany who had the necessary academic degrees for this. That I could work at the prisons. Supervise them, send out the mail (ph), send out anything, any outside connection they might have. Why would they be sent there in the first place? Why was no one killed? See, there was. In the prisons, you didn't just kill people. That was in the concentration camps. So, they needed to do the academic way. And Hitler himself had to agree that I was the person, because I was the only one who had all the academic examinations in it. That was very important for that kind of position.

Q: And was your being a woman an issue?

A: And the problem was of course the anger, deep anger of the Nazis. I was not only a woman, I was only a woman. That was very hard for them to swallow as I noticed in the years that follows --these four numb years where I know for now on traveled from one prison to the other in German whenever there was Scandinavian prisoners. What kind of prisoners were they? It was the elite of the country, because, as you know so well, Hitler's method was whenever he invaded another country, simply to arrest the elite in order to decapitate the leadership. It was an old trick I think that's been done for a long time. And

he did that very skillfully. So, we had the prisons and the camps full of the elite of all the countries wherever he invaded. And people who resisted, who did anything of resistance. If you didn't do anything, you could probably get by pretty much. But you can imagine the spiritual elite this will always be in the leadership if ever it is to be offered. So that is how I came into this.

Q: What was the first job that you had?

A: The first job was first they asked me to come into a prison camp in Hamburg. And then they saw, of course, affluent in Scandinavian languages. I had all my academia. I was the only one. That was the aggravating thing. There was no other person in Germany who had that degree. And the much worse problem was I was only a woman. That was very hard for Hitler and his people to accept. But still it was sent to Berlin and it took a couple of months. These things are always slow, as you know. Yes, take her because we have nobody else. Now why did they at all allow people into prisons in and out? See, there is again the German bureaucracy. You had in Germany -- and people usually don't know that in this country -- we had two ways of imprisonment. The one was the concentration camp, which we all know about. That was simply, I mean, you were poisoned or you were hanged or you were killed. I mean, that was death by chance that somebody survived, as most of them were killed. But in the prisons of Germany there was still a system. And there was still the German authority who had done it all their lives. This was done this way and this way. And lucky those, the elite, who were shipped off to the prisons. Why were they shipped off there in the first place? Because Hitler had somehow

tend to adore all Norwish Aryan (ph) types. I guess it is known in this country. And somehow it must be this. I mean, I cannot find any explanation. These people more or less were shipped off to the prisons. And the concentration camps were, of course, so filled already by all the countries that somehow the Norwish people lived, by this idea of Norwish are special. So, that's really probably saved their life. Now the situation in the prisons was awful. However, you did not have the Gestapo there. That's what people don't realize. There you still had the old functionaries, the old rules of prisons. The people starved, they died of illnesses, but they were not put in the gas chamber. And also they had the old order. For example, they could write letters and they could also get once in awhile a visitor. And see this is where I came in. The Scandinavian ministers --they one day applied in Berlin to Hitler. They wanted to visit the prisoners from time to time. And since again the Nazis had somehow an adoration of everything which was Norwish -- non-Jewish, you know? Norwish. He said yes, fine, they can do that, but only under strict supervision and only a person who is totally accepted and has all the examinations. And, believe it or not, the only person in all Germany was I who had this famous stand. It was a famous stand. And much to the horror of the Nazis, not only did I have this stand but I was only a woman, which was really an offense to them. But there you see again the German -- what should I say-- the stick stick to it. They wanted to have done by the letters in the prison. From there on for the next following four years during all the war time, I traveled from one prison to the other. What was what I have to do? I had to send out all mail, which went out and in. Because, yes, in the prisons, the prisoners could send letters. But they were, of course, you should strike, strike out whatever you wanted not to be read.

Q: You were a censor.

A: Yes. They told me to strike out as much as possible. Whatever you don't like, you strike out. However, I was the only sender there, so I was the sender of a sender of myself. So, more or less I could really do this. And that is how it begun. I, little by little, only read the letter first. I didn't see the people. I only read the letter. And when I saw that a letter was too impersonal, too badly written by a prisoner, too much afraid, I put some things in. I put some little notes by myself. This and this, and everything is alright, don't worry. I put that in. Of course, not in my own handwriting. I tried, at least, to do other hand writing. So, little by little. And then, of course, the good thing was I again had to send out also what came back. So that I struck out. So, I mean, it was very good. That went about almost a year. Then came the idea about there in the prison. Any prisoner is allowed to have so many visitors.

Q: Could we go back for a moment?

A: Yes.

Q: Wasn't there, before you were doing those letters, at some point you were given a special assignment to get the letters from the ghettos that were going?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you explain what you did?

A: That happened . . . since I had this examination, I was hired for the censorship between Germany and Scandinavia. Both Denmark, Norway and, not Sweden -- Denmark and Norway. And so whatever I did not like, I found objectionably, I could strike out. You see? And so what I used to draw in the course of years -- not right a way of course -- but later on when I was feeding the Scandinavian prisoners, I'd send little notes to them and let them know what was going on. Because I was the only one who sent out these letters. And that is the letters between the prisoners and the relatives. So I could do this. For example, it was very important for me to give them one message which was very harmless but of most important, most important. These prisoners really were starving to death. But since they were in prison, there was one rule. They could get every six months a peso (ph). And in that peso (ph), they could have some chocolate, something to eat. What you say oh what does it mean every six months? Well, it was two pesos (ph) a year. It was some little light. And so what I did in my letters going to them with a thick (ph) hiding my own writing, I put to each "send pesos (ph), send pesos (ph)". Because the relatives didn't even know that, of course, that they could send pesos (ph). And very little, very fast where it goes. It took about three, four months. The first pesos (ph) arrived. The authorities were furious. They were furious because it was work to them. Why should we? But it was a rule. In these prisons there was rule they could have a peso (ph) twice a year.



Q: So, were you supposed to cross out . . .

A: Exactly.

Q: . . . if a prisoner asked for something, you were supposed to cross it out.

A: That was the rule, idea now. I was asked whenever they would say send food, I should simply cross it out. The good thing was that I sent out the letters. Very soon, of course, I'm sure they were told you must not even ask for it, because it was not anywhere in it. But I would scribble it myself, "send food", in the letters. "Send food", you know, with a different handwriting of myself. It was reaching them and so the pesos (ph) kept on arriving. The authorities were furious and they came to me and complained. I said, well this is really unheard of, but if I were you a rule is a rule. Do you want to break a rule? That's fine by me. I don't mind. But it's your responsibility, of course. And, yeah, no we cannot break a rule. We have to give it to them. So, they got these pesos (ph). That was one good thing. They kept on hiding. Mind you, we had two systems in Germany under the Nazis. That's very hard for people to understand. One was a concentration camp where people simply were gassed or killed or starved. But the other was still a system with certain rules. This is where I had come in, fortunately, and could really do my part.

Q: How did you come to think of doing this?

A: Well, that was very interesting. I had studied Scandinavian languages. I loved Scandinavia.

Q: No, no, no. I don't mean that. I mean you were adding things. This was dangerous for you.

A: Certainly it was dangerous for me. But you see, I was the only one who sent that . . . I was really in charge of the whole mail. And so the only thing I had to fear, of course, that somebody eventually would get the good idea to send the mail again. But they never did that. See, they were not all that smart as you think.

Q: Were you in a room alone?

A: See, no, I put the letters from the prisoners mailed directly to my home.

Q: To your home.

A: To my home. And then from my home, I mailed them back to the prison, and then they were mailed by postage over to Denmark and Norway. But they also had to pass them the censorship. See, the ordinary censorship. But they again didn't know the rules of the prisons, you see. So we had two forces working against each other, and it worked marvelously. So, I was tremendous in hiding in different handwriting so that I had to be very careful because, you see, there were some people that might pick that up. But it

worked. Amazingly, it worked. This went on for years. That was one way I could help them. But very soon fate came to me in the form that the counsels and the people in Scandinavia, the authorities, they started to talk with the German Nazis in Berlin. They said, "Look, this is a prison our people are in. Why can't they have visit from us?" And so they asked at last, "Who is us?" They said, "Well say, for example, two ministers could come. Two people who are appointed by us." They said, "Yes, we accept it. That will be alright." Because it was a prison. It was not a concentration camp, you see. That was a rule. In Germany, a rule is a rule. They said, "But then we will have to have somebody who supervises these visits again who is on our side." And this somehow, of course, had to know Scandinavian languages, had to be fluent in Norwegian and Danish. And, you know, in Germany, again, it was . . . that was not enough. There were many people who spoke Danish and Norwegian, but you had to have the academic examination, a doctorate, the whole thing. And here I really can only thank God interfered. I was the only person in Germany who had that examination. And I was only a woman. That was very difficult to swallow for the authorities, but they had no choice. The order had come from Berlin. Yes, that would be alright now. Because it was a prison, it was not a concentration camp. And from there on, for the following years and years and years, I would be the person totally in charge of the mailing, of the censorship, and of any visit they would get. Now they would have to find people who would visit them. There was a good thing that in Hamburg -- Hamburg is a seaport, of course. We had always had a Norwegian and Danish pastor as evident. Because he was there not for prisoners, but he was sent for the sailors, for the Norwegian and Danish sailors. So, the news idea came from Scandinavia. Why don't we try to get these pastors there? And so this happened.

One day, I get the visit of a Norwegian and of a Danish pastor. They identified themselves. They said to me, "We have gotten our permission." It took them about months and months, of course. But we have got the permission from the prisons in Hamburg that we can visit the prisoner if you would be willing to take the censorship of the letters and of our visits. And I said, "This is fine. That can be done." I said, "But I have to see how far this goes in my". And so I contacted the authorities, the German authorities, and was very angry and said, "Now here's another work I have to do, and how would that work because I have soon had enough of it all." And anyway I put my words in a way that they started to beg (ph). They said, "Well, an order is an order, and you're the only person who can do it. Couldn't you please help us out?" I said, "Well, I don't really will so, but I will do it. It will be my duty." I said, "If that is what the authorities want, I will do it." That was where it started. From there on now, we had everything the way we wanted it. To begin with, it was very amusing because these two pastors . . . understand that these are two ministers very afraid of me. And they mistrusted me. I could very well understood this. But it took about, I would say, 35 minutes, and they began to feel (laughter) . . . they began to feel that this was alright. From there on we started to do our work the following four years about. We traveled first in Hamburg. We saw first in Hamburg the prisons. But little by little, the prisons were filled all the political prisoners from Scandinavia. Then we got the bombs. We got prisons that were bombed out. Little by little, they were all removed into all kinds of parts in Germany, away from where the main attacks were. And so there it started now that we would have to travel from one prison to the other in the following years. Officially, I was the supervisor of these two pastors who visited the prisoners. I was to, of course, make sure

that nothing was said which was not allowed. I had to do censorship of all their mail, all their contacts between Denmark and Norway and the prisons. Of course, I was in total charge that nothing was done which was a... So, this started the work which now then followed in the four years. I was very happy to say that I did it my way. I did it frankly in a way that my two pastors were sometimes very angry and felt I took too many chances. They said one day very angry, "We can't go along with it any more. You do too much. First you lose your head and what happens then?" They were, of course, I could understand, they were afraid for their life. I never forgot that moment. I looked at the two of them and I said: "You know, I must tell you. I would rather lose my head than my heart." And so that's a tune (ph) for there on. I'm happy to say that they will not die, that maybe soon I can say at that time I did all that was necessary and what could be done. It still makes me very, very happy.

Q: Can you describe to us specifically, when you first went into the prison in Hamburg with the ministers, how did you begin to think about the things you could do? Because you begin to bring in things to the prisoners that were . . .

A: You know it was obvious from the letters they wrote that they would instruct their wives not to write anything. But you begin to read between lines when you read many letters. You know, I read thousands and thousands of letters in the following years. I could see what enormous need they were in. They were starving. They were simply starving. I mean, they got minimal rations which was-- how do you describe? I mean, the lunch I just had would have been two full days of nourishment. I mean, it was just -- it was very

hard to describe. They were all, of course, emaciated (ph) people who saw them and who once in awhile had maybe a commission to see them where they barely could recognize them. They were like muscle (ph) men, we called them. I mean, it's hard to describe. But I could see that was the first thing. They needed something which would keep them alive. To begin, I had only my bag. You know? I always made sure that I had a big bag, like this bag back here. I started with vitamin tablets. I thought that is easy to put in the bag. Now my two ministers could not have done anything who visited. You see, they were the one who had gotten the permission to visit once in awhile, because it was still prison. There was a still a certain order and aggravation. They couldn't do this, and they didn't want to do it. They were probably very afraid. I could very well understand it. And so what I did was really my own risk. I felt I needed to do this. So, I started with this. And in this bag, what could I do? We saw on a day maybe 30, 40 prisoners. Very little, very little you could have in such a bag. Little by little, I got a very good idea. Then about on the second month, my goodness, we have all these terrible air raids in Hamburg. I have to think for myself. I have to carry around all I belong. So, I start first with a little handbag. And they looked, the authorities. And they said, "Well, what is that?" I said, "That is all I have." "How do you mean?" "Because we travel now over all Germany." I said, "If a bomb comes, if I'm bombed out, that is the only thing I have." And wouldn't you think that they would have done the bright idea and said wouldn't you open it. Because everybody else who entered and left had to open. However, they came to think I was appointed by the highest authorities in Berlin. And I always, of course, very leisurely said I'm so and so. They all knew it. They were afraid of me. So, nobody ever in all these years asked me just once, "open it". By the grace of God. I think there was again the idea

of authority. Very often they looked at me and I knew exactly what they thought. I would have thought the same. They would think how is it possible that she can do all these things. Come in and out, and especially I was only a woman. That was very hard to perceive. I think that was the saving grace because I could read it. They thought if that is really a woman only, there must be very special with her. She must be special. So, more or less, I think they thought I was over and beyond the Gestapo. And, believe it or not, in all these years this worked and was really I can always say by the grace of God.

Q: Where did you get the vitamins from?

A: Now, of course, I knew the first thing to do is what can you do in the luggage which is of greatest importance. And I felt these people were starving. I wish I could have afford to give them bread or anything, but the most important thing was something which was small and which could give some general strength. So I needed now vitamins. Now I went around begging for vitamins. There were not much vitamins because everybody needed vitamins. Everybody was in a very deplorable situation. I mean, Germany itself as the years went by, really had not much to eat. But nothing which could be compared with the miserable shape in the prisons. So, little by little, I said in the letters, who I send them myself. I was the authority. I said send parcels (ph), send vitamins. "Send vitamins" -- I put that and scribbled that in. And not long the settings came in. Came in, came in, came in. Then I said again, I want to be in charge of these parcels. And since I was in charge of the whole thing, they . . . . So, we had the vitamins. What they couldn't send, I got through my underground in Germany, which, of course, by that time also built up.

Q: Now is this Mr. Jenkins?

A: It was Mr. Jenkins. You see, I left in Hamburg. Hamburg is a posh town, which is very good because all the Danish and Norwegian moved. They had to come to Hamburg and deliver the merchandise. And they had a man there. I had met a captain there by circumstances who was in charge of these boats and loading. And so very soon I developed a very hearty friendship with this man and I think he knew exactly what was going on, but he was a good man. He was a German. A very good man. So, we never spoke about what we did. But we did it in silence. He brought me the things I needed. He came whenever I wanted to help and he gave it to me.

Q: Did you ask him for vitamins?

A: I told him that I needed vitamins for myself. I said, "You see, I'm only woman. I have a very important job." I told him, "I have to deal with the Scandinavian prisoners. I have to keep my strength up." He didn't say, he didn't make a comment, but at the end of our conversation -- I never forgot it. He got up and he said, "You know you're really a very tiny person. But I think you need a lot of them." I looked him straight in the face and said, "And a lot, and a lot." And he said, "I will remember." From there on, I got all the deliveries. It was really wonderful. It all was somehow . . . I must tell you, I'm not a person that goes to church. You know, people are different. But I began to believe that help is given. Where you really pray for help or you want to help or you really wanted



this all your help. Because I can only say I could not have done all this work alone. Help was given to me. And there came in these vitamins by the most wonderful circumstances. It would take much too long here to tell you. I was never running out of vitamins. Even if I wrote my brothers, who were now as physicians in the army, sent me vitamins. "I need vitamins. I am very hungry." They knew, of course, what I meant (laughter). And so I got them from everywhere. Help was given. I never ran out of it. And that would somehow help these people.

Q: Did you get medicine as well from this doctor . . .

A: Of course, little by little also the medicine. There was no medicine, certainly not for the prisons. I began to collect medicine. I had our own doctor. Our own physician was a man, a very right-winged German, very -- how should I say -- patalotic (ph), and yet he was a human being. I mean, I could see what the Nazis did, he felt. You see, there was still a little different being a patalotic(ph) German, but being a Nazi. There was a little bit difference.

Q: This was in Hamburg?

A: That was in Hamburg, yes.

Q: Von . . .

A: Dr. Vonburg (ph). And so I went one day to him and I said, "Look, I need your help." I remember this today. He said to me, "I think you need help. You look very pale." I said, "This is precisely why I come to you. I feel all starving." It was very difficult. I mean, all throughout the German because there really not much to eat. But, "I need vitamins. I need vitamins very much in order to keep my job up. I need a lot of help." He said, "What would help this?" I said, "Well, to give you some idea, I work for people who need help, who are very much in help." And he said, "What is it?" I said, "Well, very sick at work. I would rather not speak about it. So, please allow me not to speak at all. But I need help." And from there on, I will say this wonderful man gave me . . . he could do it as a physician. At that time, I was not a physician. I was the linguist. I got all the vitamins I needed. The wonderful thing was, I went with this heavy luggage in and out of prisons. The prevalent regional Danish from, he couldn't understand what I did. And the people at the prison asked my, "Why do you have all this luggage?" I said, "Look here. I come from Hamburg. This is all I have. That's all my possessions." They never dared to ask me to open the luggage. Do you know why? Because they were so afraid of me because I had a rather high position. And I also once in awhile said, "See Hitler, as he's asked me to do all these things." They were afraid of me. That was the reason that we could be alone with the prisoners. Usually, if you ever have been in a prison, you are never alone with the prisoner. I don't know how it is here, but in Germany it would be there would always be a man in there to supervise -- a guard. But I always said, "Look here. I don't want a guard. I'm the guard." The only thing they needed to do is one day to say open your luggage, and it all would have come out. But they never dared to ask the question.

Q: Did you see the prisoners one by one, or did a group come in and see you?

A: I tried to do it by groups because, see, in Hamburg I had 800 prisoners. In order to cover as many people as possible, I always tried to have four, five, six people at the same time. See, there is a miracle of the human heart. The miracle. I call it the miracle. None of these people ever revealed me. See, if only one of them had said something -- one of the prisoners -- they would have had some. They would have gotten more bread. They would have gotten some things, some reward. None of them. See, and that in a time when I believed in the human heart was almost nothing anymore, that restored my belief. That these people in the greatest need they were, they knew exactly why I did it and they knew that this had to go on. Of course, don't forget these people were not criminals. These people were the elite of Scandinavia who had been arrested solely for the reason that they had been brave enough to try to lift Hitler's regime. But I will say still people who were starving, who . . . hopefully you've never starved. People who really starve -- I had learned that in my own life -- it takes a tremendous ethical way of being and thinking. That you don't almost do anything just for a piece of bread. I learned that in my life how difficult it is -- what starvation really means. So I will say this experience with my prisoners, my 800 prisoners, which little by little I had to deal with, that nobody ever revealed on me. Why I'm sure that particular prisoner who would have done that would have been emptied the water (ph). That have really restored my belief in the human being. A belief which had been always distorted by the Nazis and by the things I had to fear in my life. And whenever I have moments where I'm still sad about the human heart and what people can do, I think of that. I think that was for me the greatest reward.

Q: Did you get to know some of these prisoners better than others?

A: Oh, they became my family. All of them. All 800. They became my family. They became my friends. I loved them. I became for them, you know, I think really, it was for them, that was there home. That was all they had. Don't you see that went on over four years. The hardest moment was to part because there the one day in the middle of the night, and all shipped back to Scandinavia. The best we could hope for. They were not gassed. They were not killed. And so now it started. They became extremely for me. I remember one day shortly after the war, a man totally knocked at our door. One of the great moments of my life. We opened and he said, "I'm coming for Hiltgunt." He said in Norwegian. I said, "Are you?" He said, "I am. But, I'm not one of your prisoners," he said. "But they sent me. They want you to know that they have not forgotten you and that we try everything possible that we can come in contact with you. And so it took about one and a half years. I mean, Germany was really hermetically sealed. But little by little, the first pastors arrived, it was so beautiful. And little by little, the first people arrived in uniforms, and English uniforms and American uniforms, whatever they could get a hold of. My former prisoners came.

Q: So they came.

A: They came to visit me after the war, you see. It was very beautiful. So the British authority, they were very strict, of course. They didn't know even of what's going on. But

they very soon came and told them all about it. And so the connection was there. Not long afterwards, I was given the official invitation to both Denmark and Norway to visit them on our official state visit. It was one of the great moments of my life when I arrived there and in front all the prisoners who had survived. It's one of the great moments of my life.

Q: And you received the medal . . . ?

A: Yes. I received these decorations. I was very happy about. But, the greatest decoration was really that I could get them out alive. That was something so wonderful a feeling. Yet I was very grateful for all the honors later that came. But the importance was really that I could do when it was needed. And I think that we need to remember now how much we human owe to each other. I think sometimes we forget that because now we have times, of course, where we have relatively comfortable situations. We have no wars going on, or big wars. But I think we must never forget what we as individuals can really do for each other. So often, for example, in this country, I hear that they should do this and they should do that. "They" meaning this unknown authority, whoever. And each time I cannot but say who is "they"? Well, that authority. Well don't you think it's a good idea to ask myself what I could do? And so little by little, of course, when the things -- when I wrote my book, "Walls"(ph), and when things got known, the universities got very interested in, to hear about it more. And so I now since several years that you might know have been traveling from one university to the next. They wanted to find out what really was happening at that time. And more and more, they also ask the question, why

would you do it? Why would you have taken the risk? It makes me always a little bit sad. And I look at them and say, "Why should I not have done it? What would you have done?" And sometimes the answer is silence. And I don't resent that because that is really the question each of us has ask yourself. If you come in such a situation, what would you do? I mean, this is somebody can decide that for you. What makes me sad, I must tell you this, is how today in our community of people how often I hear these kind of things. Well, those Jews or those blacks and those this and those that. How much of prejudices we still have. I think in many ways, the war is still going on. It's my prayer, now I'm old, that we begin to learn that the human condition is really one we all have in common. And before we don't fully understand it-- yes, before we don't fully understand it -- there will always be the possibility of another Hitler. And that is really my prayer, if I have any prayer left, that we begin to understand that the human condition is that what we all have in common. And if we fully understand this, and I'm proud to say that in this environment. If we begin fully to understand it, then I think there is hope for this troubled world.

**Tape #2**

Q: Dr. Zassenhaus, can you describe your family life with your brothers and your parents and how they raised you, and with what values they raised you?

A: Yes. I must tell you that my father had studied religious literature and history. He was an educator and very soon became the head of a rather prestigious school in Hamburg, in Germany, where he also taught a little bit. He taught mostly ethics and literature. My mother was a free spirit, which you can see in those days this was very unusual. Already with age 15, she moved into another city because she came from a very small city, where she was the first woman in Germany to take her full education, her full degree in school, which was very unusual at that time. Fortunately, she met there the head of that school and fell in love with him. And that became my father. So they married. She never went to the university, which she actually had wanted to do. Don't forget, it was a different time. My father very soon was called to Hamburg to a very prestigious school there where he became the head. Not only that, he also taught history and religion, and wrote the history of Germany, which became a very important book and it's still read in the universities in schools in Germany. So that was a background I had. I would say the ideas of Hitler were as far from our family as the moon. And I remember so very well the very day, the 30th of January, when suddenly now through all the loud speakers -- televisions we didn't have at that time. Loudspeakers came "the Fuhrer has the power. Adolf Hitler has come to power." It was to us almost as somebody shook us and said "the whole house is on fire". We didn't know. Especially we were four children. I had three brothers, all one year

apart, and I was the young sister. When my brother studied at the university, I was still going to school. I remember as it had been today, although it was, I think, 200 years ago. Our parents assembled us all together at the table and my father said, "From now on, things will be different. Everything has changed." And my mother added, "But one thing remains the same. In our house, everything will be same. We will be now one family who totally stands together. But this house has to become a fortress. Whatever you say outside, it has to be mainly in silence because somehow we have to try to survive." And very well the next day we found out what she meant with it. I woke up to a total dark room, although it was a light day. I could not know what had happened. I saw at the windows and a hush through the whole house. And I saw all our windows were sealed with swastikas, with paper, and darkened by that. Because my father was a rather known educator in Germany who had written books about education and so they wanted to show us now what had happened. And if we didn't know, my father, of course, immediately was without a job. He was the head of the school. At that time, he was already quite ill. He had Parkinson's disease in a rather progressed shape already. And I think that really saved his life. He was so well-known a person that to begin with, the Nazis more or less tried to tread lightly. And so they let him be at home and let him die in peace. A couple of months later, he was dead. And now here my mother was with four children. I was the youngest. I was about 16 or 17 years old. I remember my first school day. The teacher, a wonderful teacher whom I adored, she taught us history. She came into our class. She was very pale. That is what I noticed immediately. And she said, "Well girls, I must tell you from now on everything will be different. And the first thing I will tell you from now on whenever a teacher enters the class, you all have to get up. You have to raise your



right arm and have to shout as loud as possible 'Heil Hitler'. That's the way it will be." I knew her well enough. I saw the tears in her eyes. I was disturbed by it. Why would she even tell us that? How could she tell us? I came home. I was very upset. I told my parents. I saw they became very silent. And somewhat later, they came to mean they said, "Well, what will you do?" And I said, "Well, what am I to do? What do you think I should do? Give me advice. I cannot raise my right arm. I will not do this kind of thing." And they said, "Well, I think we will all think about it somehow." And so the next morning before I went to school, they came again to mean they said, "Now what have you decided?" And I said, with tears in my eyes, "What do you think I should do?" I was desperate. It was probably one of the really most desperate days of my life, because my father looked very seriously at me and he said, "Hiltgunt, you must decide for yourself." Totally in that moment, it was the first time that I really felt very alone. So, I come to school and I had my place at the window. It was a wonderful day in spring. That was about when this order had been passed. Simply for now on should all raise our and place our arm "hail Hitler". The teacher enters the classroom, the windows were open. Now all these girls stood straight, raising their right arm. Curious as they were and as much as these little girls were, they knew where I stood. The heads all were bent to me. What will she do? And in my desperation, I took my left arm and I threw it through the open window! The glass fell, blood fell from my arm! Here you see still the scar. (laughter) I was rushed to the hospital to be sewed up. And I must tell you, I still consider it the scar of my honor. And from now on, I will tell you, nobody ever looked in my direction. They simply left me alone. And I stood there alone some down there and thought, well, well, but they didn't say anything, and just did nothing. Really it was by the grace of God, or

maybe rather by the doubtless respect they had for my father who was really a known educator, that they simply overlooked me. They let me be. That was really the reason that I still was allowed to remain in school, that they simply ignored me. That was the best they could. The other way they would have simply would have to tell the Gestapo. They didn't do that, thanks to the reputation of my father. I passed my examination and I was on my own.

Q: Tell me, before that incident happened, you were given an assignment to go to a Hitler rally. This is before January 30 . . .

A: That was before January 30. That was before all this happened, before Hitler came to power. I went there and I was . . . I'd never been to such an assembly. Hearing these people scream like absolutely mad. Seeing this man . . . I mean, like I had fear but also I had to laugh. I mean, it was almost as you have seen a clown. And so I came home and the next day . . .

Q: Did you talk with your parents when you came home?

A: I talked with my parents. I was totally . . . I couldn't believe it. My parents tried to calm me down because here I was a very young. I think 15 or 17 years old. I couldn't understand what was happening. My father said, "What will you do?" I said, "What can I do?" I asked my parents. And I remember that my mother said, "You must decide that for yourself." And for the same time, I remember this. Suddenly this feeling of total

loneliness. Finally, nobody could give me advice. My mother said to me, "You must really decide which way you will go from now." And the next day, I remember we were told now that for now we should raise our right arm.

Q: But you wrote an essay. Didn't you write an essay?

A: Yes. I wrote . . .

Q: What did you write in this essay?

A: I wrote the essay about Hitler. I remember I closed with the words "Hitler is psychotic." With all the rest of my 17 years. And only two days passed and I saw my teacher coming very pale to me. And she said, "Take this back. Take this back and tear it apart." And I said, "Why? That is what I mean." And she looked at me, "Can't you see what you're doing to me, and what you're going to do to you?" And so she just simply didn't want anything to do with it. Now, of course, being a much older person, I understand. But I couldn't understand this at that time. Then when the order was passed that for now on whenever the teacher entered the class and for each class, we would all shout together and raise our right arm and shout "Heil Hitler". I came home. I came very upset. I told my parents about it. And I saw how serious they looked. Give me advice. What can I do? What shall I do? I will not do this. And I never forgot, my mother said, "You must decide that for yourself." That was a moment I felt very lonesome. So the next day arrived and I had to go to school. The school girls in the class then knew, of course, from before where

we stood, and what I would do. The teacher comes into the class. She had told me the day before, "Hiltgunt, don't make it too difficult for me. Just think now." She was a very dear teacher. "Don't make this difficult." And she had said, "Don't make it too difficult for yourself." And so I stood there and all the eyes of the class were on me because they knew that this was going on. Would I break? Would I give in? And I remember the words of my father, "Do you realize that you can destroy all your future if you don't give in?" In my desperation, when she comes in, all these girls raise their right arm and shout, "Heil Hitler", I take my left arm and threw it right through the open window! Glass was breaking, blood was pouring from the arm! (laughter) I was rushed to the doctor. I had to be sewed up. And I will tell you, this scar I still have now. I call it really the most wonderful decoration I ever got. No decoration I got in later life could ever. It was a very childish action. I know that now, but I think it started the way I was about to go from then on.

Q: What happened with your relationships, your friendships, with the girlfriends that you had or people you were friends with? Once this happened, did people remove themselves from you and your family?

A: You know, it was very difficult. They said, "Why are you stubborn? You want to study, you want to -- just give in. What is so difficult that you give in a little bit and do it?" I felt I couldn't. What they did, I will say that my father was very known person in Hamburg. He has written the history of religion. That book is still taught in school, the same book, at the universities. So he lost, of course, his job. He was ill anyway. That was very good.

It was a thing where the Gestapo could let go and say, "Let's see what they're doing." So, he was, I would say, ignored. And that was our luck. But, it was very, very difficult for me to give in and to raise my arm. How it was resolved that I was sit in the last bench in my class and they simply ignored me. They just let me go, let me do.

Q: And when you went home, did you have friends outside of your family?

A: It was very difficult. We had, of course, a few friends. We would always have a few friends who thought the same way like we. And this friendship got even deeper. But the separation between the others got altered. It was very difficult. From that time, I really felt my house was my fortress. The effect was my father was very ill by that time already with Parkinson's. That was the only saving grace because as known as he was, originally they wanted to arrest him as one of the people that instigated of the liberal movement, of the democratic party. But they left him alone because to begin they tread lightly with the known persons. To begin with, because they wanted first to get really in. So, they let him very soon, I must say thank heaven, he died, because that was the only saving grace for him. My mother was a very known liberal person. She was at this point, of course, only concerned about how far she could bring this family through to those times. We really tried as best we could. How did we do it financially? Because there was no money left and my father was not anymore in the situation he was. So, we started now to teach. All the years when we studied at the university, every day for hours and hours, we all had students.

Q: Everybody; your mother included.

A: My mother, my brother, we all. You know? I called it my tuition. (laughter). Because it was the only way how we could survive. I taught. I was at that time, I barely had passed school myself, so I was not much of anything yet. I had to start to study. But I had all these children who didn't do so well in school. I taught arithmetic. I was not very good myself but I learned arithmetic with them, you see? Languages. Every day I taught them, you see, and that way we could take the money to study at the university, because it was very expensive to study at the university. Only those who join the party, and they, of course, got all the advantages. We didn't do this. And so we had no choice. We had either to pay and then to get the money or else. And, so, for years and years, I just tutored, and we all tutored.

Q: Now your mother also was helping Jewish people in Hamburg.

A: Yes, that was the other thing. We had quite a few Jewish friends. Very soon, of course, it came that these Jewish people were arrested. And so we tried, and I will say mainly my mother because I was still a very young person, but we tried to help as much as we could. We had quite a few Jewish friends and we tried to help them as much as possible. For example, my mother, as my father, had very good connections to embassies, to people from abroad. And so, many times she went to them to the English Embassy and asked for help. And little by little, they knew my mother. They knew of my father. He had a very good reputation all over Germany because he was a scholar, you know? And so, we could

help to get these passports for Jewish people to get away. That was where my mother was very, very helpful.

Q: Did she do it for people she knew or as well for an underground group so that it was . . . ?

A: For people she knew. And, you know, it always starts small. And they brought other people, and they brought other people. That gets bigger and bigger. It's amazing when you get involved in the work, how one comes to the next. These things develop. So, for example, I studied then. I was not finished for my school and what study would I have to do? My three brothers studied medicine. We all had government assistance before. But, of course, now where we had not joined the Party, everything was and we had to do it ourselves. It was very difficult. So, what my mother did, what we all did, we tutored children who did not do good at school for hours and hours every day. Sometimes I had the feeling our house was like a little cage with many birds in it, you know, as we tutored them. It worked. It was years of very hard work, but it was the only way we could afford the money.

Q: Tutored Jewish children?

A: No. Jewish children by that time, they were probably dead already, you know? No, they were not there any more. No. Children simply . . .

Q: You're talking about after '39?

A: Yeah, after '39. Yeah. But also, I mean, after '33, you didn't have many Jewish children. I mean, very few. I mean, everybody who had to go. Because '39, I don't think there were many Jews left. I mean they were simply arrested. The Jewish people. I don't talk any more of the Jewish people. They were very soon that started after '33. I cannot really give you the dates. It was too long ago. But, they were simply arrested.

Q: Do you remember seeing Jews arrested?

A: But our Jewish friends, you see, we had . . . that was a different story because my mother, and again my father, we had very good connections to the English Embassy. And so, I remember all the days when my mother was ready for days and days trying to go from one embassy to the other to try to help them out. That we were very successful in. I shouldn't say we. It was my mother and my father, as much as he was still . . . he was very ill later on, but he always was in it. So, that was very beautiful. We helped quite a few of our Jewish friends out. But, you see, all that was so fast. Very soon. I mean, I think it started then. Was it '39? When was the big arrest in Germany? Correct me. I think much earlier already, wasn't it, that the Jewish people were arrested. And, of course, it was too late.

Q: Do you remember Kristalnacht(ph)?



A: Absolutely I remember that, too. See, certain things you never forget. I remember it to that point that I very often dream of it. This is very bad, you know? You never quite shake the things you have seen. They will stay with you.

Q: What do you remember about this?

A: I remember the mob, the screaming people. People I had known as neighbors who suddenly were screaming and raiding Jewish homes. You could do anything that you wanted. Anything, just kicked in the windows. There was nothing. The Jewish people were arrested, of course, as much as they were there. My mother was very instrumental of getting Jewish people passports, passbook, whatever. Whatever worked. She did wonderful things at that time. And she was away sometimes for days. When she came home we would ask her. She would say, "Please don't ask me." Because the less we knew, the better for us. And the less again she knew of my work later on, the better for her. So, we never talked much with each other because bear in mind the Gestapo had methods which aren't known here. Methods of torture where not anybody could have . . . I mean, it was simply humanly impossible. So, more or less, they could find out everything they wanted once they had you. So the best thing was really not knowing. And those dreaded years where we all got very silent, because silence was the best thing. I knew my mother was often away for days. I did not ask any question. Then little by little when all the arrests came and the war came, then when the Germans invaded Norway and Denmark, I had already my exams at that time. Then I was asked to take totally control over them. That was one of the highlights of my life. I thought, "My God, here is a

chance. I can really do something." But, again, it also meant that I had to become very silent. Because under torture nobody was holding up. So, it meant that more or less I had to remove myself from my friends, from my mother as much as I could, so nobody knew what I was doing.

Q: So you had . . . clearly, you would not be able to be intimate with anybody about what you . . .

A: Under torture, you can get everything out, everything out. I learned that from experience. There is nothing so the main thing was silence, and doing what you felt yourself was necessary, but not involving anybody else because I felt really what I did myself I had to respond. I would have to be punished myself. But to involve anybody else was extremely dangerous. And also the more other people knew, the more danger for you. Believe me, this country, you see, it's very hard for you to envision. Under torture, nobody holds up. Once you are tortured, there is nothing which can hold up. I knew if I would be discovered. I didn't even know what my mother was doing, because I knew she did a lot of things. I didn't even want to know it, because not knowing meant really gracious that you couldn't even invent anything because you wouldn't know. You have never had the system in this country. How fortunate you are. It's very hard for you to envision. But under the pressure of the Gestapo, nobody could hold up.

Q: Were you ever questioned by the Gestapo?

A: Yes. I was several times. I think two or three times I was summoned by the Gestapo. The interesting thing was we had two systems in Germany. The one that was the, the legal system, which was the old Germany, and the system you have here. And I was hired by the legal system to supervise all activities of the political Scandinavian prisoners. But on the other side was the Gestapo who knew no law and no order. And they, of course, could do with you what you wanted. So here was the interesting thing. I was appointed by the Minister of Justice of the old legal order to take over the total supervision in the prisons. But, on the other hand, I had the Gestapo who were looking for that woman. Why would she have such a . . . waiting for that moment where they could tug(ph) me and clearly give me what was due me according to them. That was a very interesting relationship. It's very hard for you people to understand. So I walked a very thin path. I had all my credentials there from the highest Minister of Justice from Berlin. Whenever the Gestapo started to answer, I showed this and said, "Look here, you have to answer these people." And that was this little double game I led that's really practically saved my life. That gave me that authority because the interesting thing was again in the prisons there were also very sharp laws. And I knew these people were practically my prisoners but practically starving to death. So I said we have to do something. And I put in the luggage heavy with bread, with medication, mainly vitamins. I mean, things which we either concentrated which could keep them up. They did not dare to open my luggage because I again was a very high authority appointed by Berlin. You see, it's funny how for people here in America don't understand. It's worked very much by authority and since I had been appointed by high authority, they did not dare examine what I was taking in. Why I was doing these things because they were afraid of me. This other world(ph), such a system as

we had in Germany, the Nazi system, which is a system which other countries could have too, which is always a potential. It works on the fear. The one fears the other. And he who can instill the most fear will have the upper top. So my whole policy in dealing with the authorities was to have continuously referred to my connections in Berlin. And the connections in Berlin had certain for them like Hitler, didn't quite know what they should make of me. There was another thing they couldn't understand. They couldn't understand that I was a academic, that I had all the essential examinations for that particular examination exactly understood. But why oh why would they appoint a woman? And I was only a woman. That was very hard to understand, especially for these high Nazi officials. And so, little by little, a saga developed. Somehow she must have very high connections to Berlin. (laughter) And since I very often said Berlin doesn't like this. (laughter) I had to play my game because not only did I have to save my beloved prisoners but also my own life, the life of my siblings at stake. If I had really been found out, it would have been tragic, you know?

Q: Were you frightened throughout this?

A: Very much so. Don't think that I . . . The greatest insult I still had when my Scandinavian people tried to stop and tell me I was a hero. I said, "Please don't say that I'm a hero. I was ever afraid of the next . . . there's nothing, no hero in me." But I felt I had to go my way. That is what I had decided even to the point of this: I would have been killed or hanged. I think I had to go my way. When you're very young, I think you can make that kind of decision. And I must tell you, if such a situation would arise again today, I think I

would be able to act the same way. Thank heaven it has never . . . that was one of the reasons I came to this country. I needed, after all this was over and I had survived, I needed to forget. You see, when everything was over, Scandinavia was so good to me. You have no idea. They treated me, I mean I can almost start to cry. There never was anybody treated better. They came to me. The very first moment they came, they sent food. They then finally invited me to Scandinavia. I could study. I could finish my medicine. There was not a thing they didn't do for me. And I will never forget that. The gratitude was overwhelming. But still when all is said and done and I had passed my examinations, the one thing that had never left me – my memories. This what was so totally destroyed. Because I loved Germany. I loved my country just as you love your country. And I haven't seen it for years and years. This total destruction of all I had loved, of the spirit of good, of all these things which was for me Germany. Somehow I had to try to forget. I felt Scandinavia was too close to it all. So after the war I had my examinations there, I studied medicine there. They were extremely good to me. And they said, "Now you will stay with us." Instead, I think, I have to leave. I have to go where I can forget what happened. First, they couldn't quite understand that. But they said, "You have to ." But they forgave me and they finally said, "If that's what you must do, we will bless you and we will wish you our good wishes." And I can assure you even today after so many years, if somebody comes from Scandinavia, they will always come to me. They will not only come to Washington, they come to me. And that maybe has been even a greater reward for me than all the wonderful kinds of decorations they after bestowed on me. This gratitude, this remembrance, this love. That will forever be in my heart. I'm very grateful for that.

Q: Tell me about -- you and your mother were baking loaves for bread and you were taking them into the prisons?

A: Yes. That was what I did because it's hard for you to imagine because even in this prison system here in America, it certainly is not very comfortable because I have been visiting prisons here. But certainly they get fed and, I mean, it's absolutely according to schedule and all this. But there, it was really was so very little. starved out. I mean, they got rations. It's hard for you to imagine. Of course, don't forget you only hear about the people who survived. You know, of course, of the 2,000,000 of people who died. And not only Jewish people, but many, many of our political prisoners from wherever. Simply overstuffed finally, but there was a certain order in prison still. It was a minimum. A minimum of rationing, but it was so that they just could get by if they were strong. So the young ones survived. The older ones it was more difficult. And so what I felt I had to do when I was appointed from Berlin to this special situation, to supervise the visits my Scandinavian political prisoners got, I felt not only do I have to supervise there my way, that's not enough. But I have also to give them help as much as I could. And so I had a wonderful idea. Everybody in Germany was afraid of the air raids and that they would lose everything. So, I had two very heavy pieces of luggage. And each time when I went into the prison or into these camps, I filled my luggage with bread, with vitamins, with anything possible to give them nourishment. And I locked them in and that they never ask you to open it. They couldn't because there again was the idea a very high position. I was appointed directly by Berlin. So whenever they even made a little ask what have you

there, I showed them my thing and they said, "Well, but all the luggage. Why don't you leave it here? We can keep it here." I said, "Oh no, that goes right with me because if we are bombed, I will have my luggage. That is the last thing I have." And they never dared. And that is never anybody dared to say, "open the luggage." Because one opening they would have known what was in it, all these things for the prisoners. Why did they not dare it? Because I really had a very high position. I was above them. I came more or less as if you think your controller comes to control what you're doing. So, that was really the tremendous blessing I had. So isn't this awful how the one fooled the other? That was the whole game the Gestapo played. To some extent, they were afraid of me. I was, of course, very much afraid of them. (laughter) But if you knew how to play it, somehow you could really give them help. What kind of help could I give? You see, these prisoners were . . . It's very hard for you even to envision that. They were at an absolute zero. But they mostly needed . . . they needed, of course, nourishment. They needed medication. Now, it was nice to carry in bread. I tried to carry that in. But that was so little. What they mainly needed were vitamins, I mean, just to give them the most basic. Somehow to keep them alive. And, see, that's what I had in my luggage. I had two rather heavy pieces of luggage which I had to carry myself because the Norwegian and Danish priests, I could very well understand it, that they could not do this because that was really my risk. And so I had to carry them myself. And also by carrying them in myself, since I had this rather high position directly appointed by Berlin, anybody who would ever had dared to say, "open your luggage", and there was a good possibility, I would have said, "Look here, you don't know who your talking with." And would have uttered a few names off. The whole system of Nazism, which I think you have found out and understood, is that the

one feared the other. And if you worked on the fear, based on the fear the other had for you, then you somehow could get away. At least you took a very good chance to do it. That was really my whole work, and somehow I could do it. You see, what took place already, very much the prison systems all used different . . . different prisons. You see, I went from prison to the other. How in the world could a woman get such a high job? Because I was only a woman. In Nazi Germany, the woman was really just there to give children. That already somehow made them a little bit suspicious. There must be something special with her if she would get this permission from Berlin. So, that was already a very good thing. And so they tried to stay as much as possible out of it. And at least if they would have said, "open your luggage", which they usually would have done, I would immediately said, "Do you realize who I am?" That would have been the end of that. So, the whole system of Nazi, which I think is hard; it's very difficult to understand here is that the one intimidates the other. It was a system of intimidation. That is what I had to pay. It worked very much with me. Because the good thing was I was a woman and they always felt if a woman really would get . . . that's such a hard thing, then she must be something special. You see, it is a system that the one is fearful of the other. Because I was just afraid of them, of course. (laughter)

Q: Dr. Zassenhaus, when you first had the job censoring letters, they gave you letters from ghettos from Poland, isn't that right?

A: Yes, yes, yes.



Q: Were those the first letters that you were . . . ?

A: Those were some of the very first letters. You see, I was in the censored system because due to by my language ability. You see, I had also studied English. It was very by circumstance. It's all about education. Scandinavian language, English language, French. So, they could use me for all these things. That was how it all started.

Q: But was this a shock to you? Had you known about the ghettos in Poland?

A: Yes. I knew that because, see, we had for years and years every night we listened to the English . We knew about it. Oh, yes, we were totally aware of whatever the English people knew. The BBC we knew. Because night by night we heard that. Yes, we were fully aware of it.

Q: These letters were not on regular pieces of paper, I gather. These were on tissues of . . .

A: They're tissue! Toilet tissue! All kinds of things. Whatever they could get on. And they sent food, you know? Send food. I mean, of course, I was there in order to throw it out. So what I did -- Yes, of course, I put the tissue out. But, see, they had also form letters. They had the form letters. And the form letters, they went through. That was "Dear mother and father, I am doing well. They give me a wonderful time, plenty enough to eat. Don't you worry." And then there I put in "send food".

Q: So you wrote it in?

A: I wrote this. I tried to get my handwriting . . . yes, I wrote that in. That was the only way. "Send food". See, that was the risk I took. It was a risk which I simply ignored. My parents, my mother, who was very unhappy about it, said "Why do you do that, because you give them little evidence." If that letter was found, of course, yes. But there again I based it on the stupidity on the (laughter) again on the prison authorities. Because, see, I was the final and the highest authority. I was the final authority to send out these letters. And so they, of course, were very afraid of me. That's Nazi system. To understand the Nazi system, you have to realize that the one is afraid of the other. It's just a thing how far can you play it. And the mere fact that I was a woman made the Gestapo think she must be of the highest order, otherwise she would never have gotten this job.

Q: Now one day there were no more letters from the ghetto.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And you asked somebody.

A: And I thought where are my letters. I asked, you know. And there was this deep silence. They had been sent away, you know? Then, of course, it was up to me to find out where that is. It's probably just the same in America, I would think. The prison authorities had different prisoners. One didn't know about the other. So now I had to try to trace them.

And, you see, by that time, I had built up a system already. My prisoners knew that I expected them to let me know. They found some ways. It was wonderful. You have no idea what humans can find about when they are in a tough situation. They always found somehow a way to let me know where they had come.

Q: You're not talking now talking about Jews in Poland. You're now talking about -- you didn't know . . .

A: I talk now about my Scandinavian prisoners. See, the Jewish people . . . you must understand they had nothing to do with the prison system. They were merely . . .

Q: Those were your letters that you got. They just stopped . . .

A: But my letters from the Jews, that stopped. That I could do nothing anymore for them. No. That was over. You see, now I had only the Scandinavians where I could follow through to the other system. It's very hard, I think, to understand for anybody here. We had two systems. The one was the prison system that was still the old order. Very strict and very awful and very mean. But the Gestapo system was simply -- I mean, I hated it. Once the order was given that the Jewish people -- and I hate it. I could nothing do. However, I saved one Jewish people. I thought whatever, that means one. That one means better than nobody. Because we had, in my prison, in one of my prisons somewhere in Germany, we had one Jewish person who by error, by simply error, had landed in a prison instead of the concentration camp. See, now, that was my favorite child. I always

called him my favorite son because I had to have a special eye on him that they didn't find out that he was Jewish. And all through the years, you know, I had a special eye on him.

Q: So he was one of your Scandinavian boys?

A: He was one of my, yeah . . . (laughter)

Q: There were no girls in this Scandinavian prison.

A: There were many men. Most of them I had men.

Q: Most, but you did have some women.

A: I had also some women, yes. But, most were men. You know, it's a usual thing. When Hitler came to or raided a country, he first took the elite of the country. I really had the elite of the country. He simply in one life they were all put to the next prison or jail or wherever. So, they came to the German prisons. It was really the elite of the country. From the universities, from the government. Fine, most wonderful people. The minute they came, there again came the system bureaucracy. They needed somebody who spoke there who was perfect in the language who had all these academic examinations. Because there were many people who talked Norwegian or Danish. But it has to be academic

degree. And, thank heaven, before I had my medicine degree, I studied Scandinavian languages. I had my full academic career in it. That was which got me this position.

Q: You worked with Mr. Jenkins. But there was also a daughter, Anna Jenkins, who you met later on and then realized there was a much wider connection in helping you than you knew. Can you talk about that a little?

A: Well, Mr. Jenkins was really the hero of my life, I can only say, you know? I never saw him afterwards again, because he died too. He was killed finally. But, he sent me his daughter. This daughter helped me very much in organizing and finding. You see, the problem was these people are really dying. This was a question of life and death. It was not only a question of encouraging them. They needed some medicine. I needed vitamins. I needed all these things. Where could I get it in Hamburg, which was bombed out? So I built it up little by little -- connections like Anna. Like these people who could get them from other countries who came. Who could get them by their connections. So I had a whole network of people who helped me in this, that I could do this. And, you see, the important thing was that we knew very little of each other. Because whenever anybody was caught, were tortured by the Gestapo. I have seen how people got tortured. Nobody would hold up.

Q: Where did you see that?

A: Oh, I saw that in the Gestapo quarters, for instance. I saw these things. I mean, these were also known things, but I saw them. I saw the people afterwards -- how they looked. They have told me about it. And I saw what they did. I mean, it was inhuman. That was the terrible fear, of course, of the people who were close to me. My God, would you ever be able to hold up afterwards when and if you're caught? And, see, there was a thing that I admitted. That was a danger point. Under torture, nobody is holding up. Don't ever think . . . there is no hero who can hold up under torture. And, so, there I had always a poison with me. Always I had a medication with me which I would have taken and would have made it end. But, of course, my mother always said "Please, don't do it too fast." You have to find the proper moment to do it." I was very fortunate. I never came to that moment where I felt I had to do it.

Q: Where did get the poison from?

A: I can't remember. I think from this captain. You see, poison was easier to get because, as you may know, many of Jewish people, lots of our Jewish friends, simply poisoned themselves. It came in a little capsule. Stric (ph), stric (ph) -- how do you call it? I don't know what you call it. Something which would kill you instantly. Many of these Jewish people did do it this way. And, so, I had that. It was good for me. It gave me a sense of liberty. That if it comes to the worse, I can do this. And my parents knew about this. I was totally open to them. They totally agreed. Becasue to submit to torture -- that's also one of the wrong ideas in America. They say, "Oh, some people got tortured and they hold up." No. Under torture, nobody holds up. If you ever come to that, it's lost. And so I

felt I knew too much. I had no other way out. I would have to do it. So whenever, and it was not often, I think twice, I came under these intensive feelings from the Gestapo. There was intensive -- that hours and hours and hours. It's simply a thing to wear you down. You won't believe it. I had a great sense of freedom. Because I had it right in my pocket. It was just one movement. Before that, jump at me and I would have been dead. It was stric (ph). I don't know how you call it. But something which you can end it immediately. And, no, it did not make me unhappy. It gave me a sense of I was in control. This is very hard for you to understand nowadays. And now I'm an old woman. You might ask me would I do it again. Yes and yes and again, yes. I would do it again. I'm very grateful that I could get away from it from all these memories. Have I forgotten it? No. There are certain moments in your life you will never forget. Maybe that is the punishment God gives me. I don't know how you're going to . . . But you never . . . it lives with you forever and forever. For example, very hard for me to come today to you. I hope you appreciate it.

Q: We appreciate it very much.

A: But, the only way I could go on living and could get reasonably happy again is that I could say, God, I tried everything that was in my power to do what I had to do. And also in later life to pass on the truth. Because the truth is the only beauty we finally have in this life. I thank you for giving me that.

Q: Thank you so much.

A: Forgive me, please. It was very hard for me.

Q: But it really is an honor.

A: If you had not been such a beautiful woman, believe me, I think I would not have come through it. But I feel it has to be done because, my God, how children know that. It is very.

**Conclusion of Interview.**