

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Marion Wolff
October 16, 2010
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Marion Wolff, conducted on October 16, 2010 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Rockville, Maryland 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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MARION WOLFF

October 16, 2010

Question: This is the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with **Marion Wolff**, on the 16th of October, 2010, at the **Kindertransport** Association Conference in **Arlington, Virginia**. So, **Marion**, I guess we should start from the beginning, and could you please tell me your name, your name when you were born and the date of your birth and where you were born.

Answer: Okay. I was born on May the 8th, 1930 in **Berlin**. My father was Austrian and my mother was German.

Q: Can you tell me their names?

A: Sure. My mother was **Lotta**. Her maiden name was **Meyer, m-e-y-e-r**. My father was **Rudolf – Rudy Pollak, p-o-l-l-a-k**.

Q: And do you know much about their families, did they come from big families?

A: Yes, I know goo – I – I have pretty good history of – well, not my father's side, my mother's side. I know very little about my father's side.

Q: So, you were born in 1930, do you have any siblings?

A: No, only child.

Q: You were an only child.

A: I was an only child, yes.

Q: And what did your parents do?

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A: My father, when I met him, when I was born, had movie theaters in **Berlin**, and he became the north German distributor for – don't tell me I'm gonna forget here. One of the big film industries.

Q: That's okay, take your time. If it comes –

A: I'll th – I'll think of it in a minute. I don't know how I could ever forget, but anyway he – he owned three movie theaters in – in **Berlin**.

Q: Oh, wow.

A: And my mother – my mother didn't work, I don't think, at the time, no. She worked very hard afterwards. My father died when he was 35 – 36.

Q: And do – do you know the birthdays of your parents? How old were they?

A: My father was ni – 1903 – no, 1901, my mother was 1903. And she lived to be 93, and followed us into – here to **America**, actually.

Q: Oh, good. Okay. So, what are your earliest memories from – sorry, where were you born again?

A: **Berlin**.

Q: In **Berlin**. So what are your earliest memories from **Berlin**?

A: You know, I have absolutely no memories of **Berlin**. I – we left there in '35. My father thought we would be safer in **Vienna**, in **Austria**, where he was from, he was

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Austrian. So he had us – he had my mother and me moved from **Berlin** to **Prague**,
Czechoslovakia –

Q: From **Berlin**.

A: – for nine months, so that he might have a chance to sell the movie theaters,
which he did, but he got very little for the movie theater. And then he came to
Prague and we all went to **Vienna**.

Q: In '35?

A: In 30 – yeah, '35. I'm not sure whether it was '35 or '36. He died in – he died in
'36, so –

Q: Mm-hm. So, do you remember anything of the trip? You – you said you have no
memories from **Berlin**, that's all.

A: Well, you know, I have none – no memories from – I – you know, it's very diffi
– I've written a book, and the book is up – up on the – on your desk upstairs. It's
very hard sometimes to distinguish what my experiences were, as against what my
mother told me, what I've read, what I've – you know sometimes you pick up
things and then you think you've lived them.

Q: That's always [**indecipherable**]

A: Yeah, it's always that –

Q: There is also the child's mem-memories from the childhood –

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A: Right.

Q: – sometimes you have flashes, so like –

A: Yeah, the only thing I remember of my father are two really crazy things, and one was how he washed his hands, and how he dried his back. And this is – this is so weird and my mother couldn't understand why I didn't remember he – cause he said he, you know, he loved me so much and he was with me as much as he could be, but I remembered nothing. So, the – the only thing I remember of before we were in **Vienna** was my going into a store in **Prague, Czechoslovakia** and saying [**speaks Czech here**]. That's the only thing I remember. So whenever I meet somebody –

Q: And what does that mean?

A: It actually means, can I have a quart of butter, or a [**indecipherable**]. My mother sent me to the store for some butter. And that's the only thing I remember [**speaks Czech**]

Q: So, did you learn any Czech, or that was the sentence that you learned to –

A: Did I what?

Q: Did you learn Czech?

A: No, well that's the – no, I didn't. We were only there nine months, so –

Q: Yeah, right.

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A: But th – I remember that and I – I – it's weird. So when I meet a Czech person, then I say that and they sort of look at me and say, you want some butter? And I say oh, you understood what I said [**indecipherable**]

Q: That's funny. Do you know why he first send you to pra – to **Prague** before going – why not directly to **Vienna**?

A: That I don't know why – oh, I – yes, I do know, I do know. We stored – we had to store whatever f – we could bring out, which was some fur – lot of furniture, and – and personal papers. We had to store them in **Prague**. And I don't know why we had to store them in **Prague**, but we did. And they were stored there all during the war, and when I was in **England** already, and my mother was too, she paid for storage, all during the war she kept up the payment through – through an aunt we had in – in **Zurich**, in **Switzerland**. We – the aunt forwarded the money to – to –

Q: Oh, so it was still being stored in –

A: It was still being stored. And in 1946, when my mother wrote to – to bring it over, they wrote back and said it's not there anymore. The – you know, first it was the Nazis and then it was the Russians. And they had no idea what happened to it, so – there was a lot of – all our personal stuff was there.

Q: So did you have a big house back in **Berlin** with all –

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A: No, we – well, it was a – I-I guess a big apartment. But it was personal papers, cause my – all my father's stuff, I wish I could have had access to that, cause photographs and things.

Q: But you have no idea what happened to it?

A: No idea. I wrote afterwards, I wrote to the company. Was a big – it's a big moving company. I wrote to them and I researched it, I **Googled** it, I did everything I could, re – nobody – they said that from during the war years it was just totally cut off and the company now is a different comp – with the same name, but it's a totally different company.

Q: Yeah. So when you went home to **Vienna**, you didn't bring – you didn't bring your belongings with you there –

A: No, no –

Q: – so you had just [**indecipherable**]

A: – we – we had very little in – in **Vienna** and certainly no money, because both parents were so young at the time. We had [**indecipherable**]

Q: And so what did your father do in **Vienna**?

A: He died. That was – sorry to laugh about that, but that's pretty much –

Q: Yeah – as – when he arrived?

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A: Well, it's – you know, what happened was he apparently had some money on him when he was in **Berlin**. He had tried to sell the movie theaters. And he – there was a robber, he was going through the forest, and there was a robber, and he was shot very badly, and managed to get to the hospital in **Berlin**. [phone ringing] So he was shot – oh – he was shot in the forest, he got – he went to – he got – dragged himself to the hospital in – in **Berlin**. And so he had – when he came to **Austria** he was – still had some problems with that, and then he got peritonitis, which is a – you know, a burst appendix, a-and the two interacted and h-he died, so –

Q: So when he arrived he was already very sick and –

A: Well, he really – he was a very strong man, he was very sporty. He was an amateur soccer player for **Czechoslovakia**, actually, and all the photographs from the newspaper and that were in – in **Prague** and – which were lost. But he was very strong man, and I don't – he – appar – we-well, the story from my mother was that they – at the hospital, when he was hospitalized they told her, after a while, that she could come and pick him up the next day. He had – he had had tubes in his stomach. And so when she went the next day with his clothes, he wasn't there, and they said he had died in the night. She went sort of crazy for a while.

Q: Do you remember that period, or only from your mother's –

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A: That is from what my mother told me. I – I know that I was not with her. She was wandering around **Vienna** in a daze, and she told me later that she actually went to the soup kitchens to eat. And sh – I was with some fr-friends that they had made, she played bridge a lot my mother, and these were bridge friends from **Vienna**.

Q: From **Berlin**?

A: No, they were from **Vienna**.

Q: So you met – they met –

A: She met them in **Vienna**, yes.

Q: And your father was from **Vienna**, right? He wa – from aus –

A: He was actually from **Brataslavia**(ph)?

Q: Mm-hm. **Bratis** – yeah –

A: Bratis –

Q: **Bratislava**.

A: **Bratislava**?

Q: Okay.

A: But he – his – his father was Viennese. **Bratislava** became –

Q: So – so you did have family in **Vienna** when you went there?

A: No.

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Q: So the –

A: There was no –

Q: They had all left?

A: There – I never met anybody, so – I think his father – I think his father, from what I hear, died in the concentration camp in '42 or so. But I never – I – I don't remember meeting him. **[phone ringing]** Yeah, i-it was many, many years later, in **California** that I, by accident, met another member of my father's family, and actually a second cousin.

Q: Second –

A: Second cousin, and I heard some history from him.

Q: And he was from **Bratislava** too, or from **Vienna**?

A: No, he was Viennese, yeah.

Q: Okay. So you did learn about the family from –

A: Well, this person wrote a biography, and in fact, I was just reading through it, I was trying to find something about my father. But it's not a lot. What he said was that there was a split in the family between those that had some money, and those that didn't have money. The ones that didn't have money were sort of artists. Artists kind of were black sheep of the family, and he would b – he belonged to the black sheep of the family, but I-I didn't learn anything very much **[inaudible]**

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Q: But he did remember your father? **[phone ringing]**

A: Okay.

Q: So your father died soon after –

A: He died – right, he died in 1936.

Q: In 1936.

A: And left my mother and me without any resources, because they – there was no mon – had no money, so my mother had to – my mother was a perfectionist, and whatever she did, she did perfectly. So she learned how to make leather flowers, and she bought a – the equipment for it and then she made the flowers and went up and down stairs in **Vienna** trying to sell it. And I think this was the – this – well, I'll get onto that later on. Because of the ec – our economic conditions was – helped to put me on the **Kindertransport**, because they tried to get chil – people – children out from – well, both those that were well connected and those that were in need.

So, I guess **[inaudible]**

Q: And where did you live in **Vienna**? With the family friend?

A: We lived eve – no, we lived in an apartment right in – in the first **[indecipherable]**. And I went to school, to the **Volksschule**.

Q: So, did you rent an apartment there?

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A: Yeah, I ki – I – I don't know how much help my mother got from these friends, I'm not sure. You know, there are all these questions that I wish I would have asked.

Q: Yeah.

A: My mother lived long enough, to 93, and she did tell me, I mean, I – I know a lot of it, but there, the questions like this –

Q: Yeah, you never asked.

A: – I don't know where did the money come from, that she – but – but knowing my mother, she probably worked night and day and made enough money, I don't know, made enough money to pay for the apartment. But it was not for very long, cause you know, '36, I was **[inaudible]**

Q: So, what do you remember from **Vienna**? You say you went to school there?

A: Yes, I **[coughing]** excuse me.

Q: No problem.

A: The things I remember from **Vienna** are not happy memories. They're probably the worst memories I have of the war. And that's why it's so ironic that my father said we should go to **Vienna** because it'll be safer in **Vienna**, because as far as I'm concerned, if anything could have been worse than **Germany**, it was **Austria**. I'm sure you've heard that a lot. My memories are of people – well, of ki –

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Kristallnacht, of people marching in the streets, with the boots, and the **heil**
Hitlers, and what have you –

Q: Yeah, we'll get –

A: Yeah, we'll get to that.

Q: We need first, like what would you remember before **Kristallnacht**. Do yo – do
you – do you have any good memories, like any memories? Wha – you started
going to school, did you –

A: I had a – I have all my report cards and I remember one of the teachers who had
to tell me that I couldn't go back to school.

Q: When was that?

A: Thirty – I think I went until early '38. And I – I've tried to research that, I wrote
to the school, and I – I have the report cards and I have her name. And I've asked
people to – when they go to **Vienna** to see if they can find her name. But she was
very, very nice, and she was – she had tears in her eyes, I remember that, she had
tears in her eyes when she told me I couldn't come back. And I remember being
stoned – having stones thrown at me in **Vienna**. A-And I have – I have no good
memories of **Vienna** whatsoever.

Q: Did you have any friends at school?

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A: I had one friend called **Litzie(ph) Barotti(ph)**, and she came over to **England** too but I – not on the **Kindertransport** I don't think. I'd lost touch with her once she moved to – to **England**. But otherwise I have –

Q: It's okay.

A: – I have no memories, unfortunately. Or fortunately. I think it's probably fortunately. And I – oh, okay.

Q: Go ahe –

A: No, I was going to say one of the memories I have is – this was **Kristallnacht**, but you don't want to come to that yet.

Q: Oh, I first wanted to learn more about – cause you did spend like – it was two years, you came in '36 and there was '38, so –

A: I think yeah – I think probably my lack of memory there is due to the fact that we moved from **Berlin** to **Czechoslovakia**. This is, you know, as a six year old child, or a seven year old child at that time. And then my father died, and then, you know, we were – I was pretty much alone in **Vienna** cause my mother went sort of crazy for a while. And I think, you know, psychologically, if I probably went under hypnosis it would come back, but it could well be that I've just – as a child it was too much. And I was very protective of my mother, so I subdued any fears and

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feelings that I had that were – that were probably pretty ghastly. I didn't want to worry my mother anymore, because I knew she was, you know, very –

Q: So she had a breakdown –

A: I think it was a – probably a breakdown, yes, she just – I think it was three days that she was gone, just wandering around **Vienna**, you know.

Q: And you were all by yourself?

A: I was with these friends of hers, yeah.

Q: What about your parents, were – were they religious?

A: No.

Q: They were not religious.

A: Absolutely.

Q: They were Jewish.

A: They were like – yes, Jewish, but they were like most German Jews, they were –

Q: Would they go to the synagogue?

A: – they considered themselves German first, and then Jewish.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah, I – I think we had Christmas trees –

Q: Oh.

A: – and I – I never – I don't ever remember going to temple.

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Q: Oh. So now let's go to the **Kristallnacht** and your memories from –

A: Okay, my memories of that –

Q: Was that the first time that you experienced the anti-Semitism, or was it before that that you –

A: Well, the – at school I wa – when this – this **[phone ringing]** Cut it out. It's okay. When I was being – when I had stones thrown at me, I don't know now whether I realized that that was anti-Semitism, that it was because I was Jewish, I don't know. I just – I was very, very feisty, very – and I would throw stones back. And I was – you know, I defended myself. I was always very independent, and –

Q: Was it other children at school were –

A: There weren't many – as far as I remember, there were only – in my class, I think there were three of us, and I do remember having to sit at the back of the class with two or three rows e-empty between us and then the non-Jewish children were at the front. Now again, I don't – I can't honestly say that I knew why I was there, why I was in the back. I obviously knew there was something wrong with me, oh – I was having to sit at the back, but that it was anti-Semitism, I don't know. It's very – I wish I could sort that out in my mind, whether I knew or not, but it was –

Q: Do you remember when you first realized that you were being discriminated because you were Jewish?

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A: Probably in **England**, which is interesting. Where I was being called German Jewish refugee, and then I – oh, how I hated those – being called a German Jewish refugee. But I – I can't be honest with that and say yes, I remember that, I – I don't.

Q: So **Kristallnacht**, the memories –

A: Okay, the memories of that, what really stands out is I – I ha – must have had some friends that I played with at the central synagogue in **Vienna**. It was the big one, apparently. We played inside or just outside and **Kristallnacht**, I remember coming out of the temple, and seeing on either side of the temple were Nazis in uniform with their guns. I came out, and there was a cobblestone – all cobblestones in front of the synagogue, and there were the old people on their knees, scrubbing with toothbrushes. And I remember kickings to go faster, a-and – and people laughing. I remember people laughing. You know [**indecipherable**] sort of like if you saw it on the film they were just sort of like, you know, pieces of – of memory that – th-that are photographic in my mind. You know, th-the boots, the laughing of the – the people there, the kicks that they got, and the cobblestones with – with toothbrushes. And then I remember the – the fear I had of going home to the apartment and not knowing whether I could get in or not, because apartments and houses were being sealed, they had seals on them, and if they had seals on them that means you couldn't go in any more. And I remember that fear, am-am-am – am I

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going to be able to get in or not? And of course all the – the glass, and seeing all the – the damage. And the people, the friends that my mother had, that she used to play bridge with, and that really helped us during this time, that took me in. They had a – a tie shop, men’s tie shop at the bottom of the building, of the apartment building, and na – seeing all of that glass and broken, and I remember that.

Q: Do you remember their names, the people who ha –

A: **Klempner**(ph), yes, **Polly** and **Julius Klempner**(ph), uh-huh.

Q: Did they have children?

A: They had children that they had a boy and a girl who were probably – I was eight, 18 – who were probably 12 years older than I was. And – and I – we kept in contact, they also came to **England** and we ke – did keep in contact with them.

Q: Okay. So you went home, was it – did you manage to get in to the apartment?

A: Yes, our place was not – as far as I remember, was n-not locked – sealed.

Q: And was your mother home?

A: And – yes. I don’t ever remember my mother talking with me about what was going on. I-I think she was probably in such a psychological turmoil that I don’t know whether she was even able to talk about it. She did play bridge, so she must have had – it’s very confusing.

Q: So you did not understand what was going on, or did you learn from other –

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A: I don't remember that it was a religious thing that was going on. I just remember turmoil, you know, dreadful turmoil. But because we were not religious, and I never went to temple, I don't know if – how I probably was able to relate that to religion, I don't know. And I never actually had to wear the Star of **David**. I never wore it.

Q: And – so by that time, were you already expelled from school, or was it after?

A: The last report card I had, where it said that I had been terminated was the s – the spring of 1938, was like May '38.

Q: And were you given reasons why you were being expelled? Why – why you couldn't come back to school?

A: I'm sorry to be so vague, but I – I – you know, I – I – I must have asked questions and I must have been given some answers.

Q: Yeah.

A: But I – I don't remember. I remember being very sad that I couldn't go to school any more, but I don't –

Q: Why did you feel sad, cause –

A: Because I wanted to school.

Q: Because you liked studying, or –

A: Yeah, well, going to school, I guess, with other children [**indecipherable**]

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Q: Yeah, so what happened then? You couldn't go to school any more, what – what did you do?

A: Well, that was spring of '38, and I don't know. I know I – I was in the store, this – this tie shop down below, with these friends of ours. I know I was in the store a lot. So I think I probably – that's how I spent my days, with them, while my mother was trying to sell her leather flowers.

Q: And did she manage to sell –

A: Yeah, she – she became, I gather, I say she was a perfectionist, she became really good at that. And she took that hobby, by then, to **England** with her and continued making leather flowers over there.

Q: And do you remember your mother – when did the decision come up to – of you leaving? Do you – do you remember when it was?

A: De-Decision to?

Q: For you to leave **Vienna**.

A: Oh. Well, that – that came – again, I was playing around the temple. I came out of the temple and saw a long line of adults and children. They were lined up and they were slowly moving forward to a desk. And I joined the line, but I had no idea why I was joining. And when I got to the front of the line, I signed something. And

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three or four days later, my mother got a – a letter from this group, whatever they were, as-asking –

Q: [**indecipherable**] So were – you were standing in a line and you signed something.

A: Standing in the line – yeah, and my moth – my mother got this letter from this committee, refugee committee, I – I guess it was. A-And she went sort of crazy again, cause she turned to me and said, what are the – what have you done? And I said, ah – I signed something.

Q: So you just signed [**indecipherable**] you had no idea what you signed?

A: And a – it – no i – no idea. And it turns out, as I ask around, that I appear to be the only person who signed themselves up for the transport. So my mother, having just lost my father, and – and having no means of income except her, you know, what she was doing, the flowers, apparently had to make up her mind within, I think it was 13 days, 12 days, whether to send me on a **Kindertransport** or not. And I'm an only child, so she must have gone through hell making that decision. Cause she was in a foreign country to her, you know, **Austria** was not her – her country. And so I now understand why she was a very nervous person, I – I un –understand so much now of why she was who she was because of what she went through. And I

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wish I would have, you know, I really wish I would have understood that better while she was alive. But anyway, she did make the decision to send me, and –

Q: Do you remember, did you talk to her, did you have conversations about it, or –

A: Again, I was trying to protect my mother, and I remember saying – I remember pretending to be very excited about this. I'm going to – I'm gonna travel, I'm going over to **England** and it'll be fine because then you will come and everything'll be fine. I was just trying to cover up. I think what I did was I took my fa – tried to take my father's role. And – and anyway, so she had s – I think it was 12 days to – to get everything ready for me, so she had to go out and buy clothes for me, and sew in nametags onto everything. And I, you know, I don't know whether she ever realized that she might not see me again. I don't think I realized that. I don't think that entered my thoughts.

Q: Of course you don't think that.

A: No. So that's how I did, I signed myself up for the **Kindertransport**. And actually, in the book that I wrote, I – I – I wrote that I really unconsciously, subconsciously saved both our lives, because by my going over there, I was able to also get the Quaker family to finally get her out.

Q: So the day came for you to leave, do you remember that?

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A: Yes, I remember that. I remember the night, I remember going to the – to the station, where I come –

Q: What were your thoughts?

A: Hm?

Q: What were your thoughts?

A: Of protecting my mother. So I was the, you know, that eight year old child sort of laughing and smiling, and don't worry about it, I mean, it'll be fine. Everybody was crying – or, a lot of people were crying around me. The – the families, the parents and the children, and here was this brave little kid, suppressing everything, I guess.

Q: Did your mother cry?

A: I don't know. I don't remember. And quite honestly, we never really talked about it. You know, there was so much that wasn't talked about. One of the things was my father's death. It's – my mother never, ever talked about my father afterwards, after he – he died, and nobody explained to me what happened to him. But in my protective mode, I removed everything from the apartment that could possibly remind my mother of my father, and I hid it somewhere. And it was – I don't know.

Q: When did you leave **Vienna**? What – what day was it?

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A: December 10th, '38.

Q: December 10th. And the train was heading to – where did it go?

A: Well, a lot of this was from research afterwards –

Q: Yes.

A: – th-the route.

Q: Did you know where you were going?

A: All I we – her – knew is I was going to engla – **England**. And again, my memory is, I didn't know anybody there on the train. And I was alone, and being an only child – there were several people who had brothers, or siblings on the train, or friends. But I was – I was alone and I remember the – th-the fear. Every time we stopped there was tremendous fear because these Nazis would come on board and – and go through luggage, the little luggage that we had, and would throw things around and would take stuff, like dolls and bears and things, you know, from the children. I remember – I just remember my internal fears there. **[indecipherable]** And then really – and I remember crossing into **Holland** like you know, I read now the stories, how everybody – for everybody going into **Holland** was just such a relief, and ho-how nice the people were there, by contrast, so – so –

Q: Is that true? Is that how you felt?

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A: Yes, oh yes. Yes, yes, yes. I have a wonderful feeling for Dutch people, although I know that there were a lot of Dutch who also were not that nice. But –

Q: And your arrival in **England**?

A: My arrival in **England** was freezing cold, I remember that.

Q: It was December. It was –

A: Well, it was apparently the coldest – the coldest winter in living memory in – in – in eng – in **England**. It was snowing and we went to this place that had some cabins, **Dovercourt**. But it was snowing and the snow was coming inside the building and it was freezing cold, but we were all very happy, and we were – everybody was – was happy t-to be there.

Q: And did you have parents – foster parents already, or – cause I know that some people went to the **[indecipherable]**

A: Well, th – it was a huge dining room, that had in one corner of it there was an area where we could play darts, we could play games, table tennis and darts.

Another corner was where people gathered to learn English. Then there was somewhere where we could write letters to our parents, or postcards. And then there was this big dining area. And in the dining area, every few days, I don't know, or every once a week or whenever it was, people would come and stare at us, and some children would be taken out, would be picked out. And I have a memory there

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of thinking, why is nobody picking me out? Cause I was still sitting there and then children were sort of being taken away. Why is nobody picking me out? And when I did my research – I thought it was – I thought I'd been there for ages. When I did my research I was actually there for nine days, I think it was.

Q: Where was it?

A: **Dovercourt, Harwich, in England.** It was a – a family holiday camp that had been converted to receive the children and be the reception area. And then finally some –

Q: Did you write to your mother from there?

A: I did, and I have – I have my letters. And th-that's amazing, how my mother saved those. I wish I had the lett – I do have a few letters from my mother too, not too many, but their mostly – I have a pack like this of my letters to her. And that is so interesting, because it shows the progression of the language. How, you know, all German at first, and then less and less German and then no German, and – and I was, I guess, having a good time in **England**, and I wrote very little about it. I was thinking – you know, as I was reading them I was thinking, oh my goodness, my mother probably wanted all this information, and I just wrote three or four lines, you know, and so –

Q: So you spent nine days at the child shelter?

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A: Yes.

Q: And then what happened?

A: And then I was taken by a Quaker family up to **York**, in –

Q: So it was one of those families who came to pick children [**indecipherable**]

A: Yeah, somebody came on their behalf from the Quaker meeting in **York**. They picked me up, they – and I went by train up to – to **York**, and it was just before Christmas. And I got there and it was a – a – I-I was so lucky, a wonderful family with – it was a couple, Quaker couple –

Q: And what are their names?

A: **Jessie**(ph) and **Walter Robson**. And they had no children, and so they sort of treated me as their own child. And next door to them was – **Jessie's**(ph) mother lived next door, **Jessie's**(ph) mother and father lived next door on one side, and then the other side was **Jessie's**(ph) sister. So it was like a family compound almost, and [**inaudible**] And they, you know, there were two, four – four or five cousins there. There were – four of them I'm still in touch with.

Q: Did they speak any German? How did you communicate?

A: So my mother arrived – every day I would – I would badger my foster parents to get my mother – to bring my mother over. And I would badger and I would badger and I would badger. And eventually the Quaker meeting in that area, in **York**,

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managed to get her a domestic servant permit, and so she got out three weeks before the war started. And th – which was nine months after I had arrived. And when she came, I couldn't – I couldn't speak any German, she couldn't speak any English and we couldn't communicate. So she –

Q: That was fast.

A: Huh?

Q: That was fast, nine months?

A: Yeah, well I – you know, I didn't hear any German around me, it was all English. And so she got a dictionary, and she followed me around with this dicti – when she finally left her job down s – south of **England**, she came up north, she followed me around with this dictionary. She used it so much that it became all loose-leaved. And after she died, which was just 14 years ago, my – we were going through her things and my son, who is the sentimental child o-of the three of them, said he – oh, he want – that's – he wants that dictionary, and it meant a lot to him, so he had it rebound, and he has it, so that was very –

Q: So, how did you learn engl – did you go to school there? Did you start going to school there immediately, in **England**?

A: Did I go to school?

Q: Yes.

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A: Yes, I went to a – was sort of an unusual place, it was – I don't know whether you've heard of **Rowntree's** Chocolates, have you? Okay. It's now been taken over by **Cadbury's**, but there was a chocolate cocoa – cocoa chocolate factory in **York**, and it was started by **Joseph Rowntree**, and he was a very well-known Quaker, who started the first village – wh-what do you call it, new – a new village. He had a – he had such a social conscience that he was able to build a – a village which actually became a small city, one of the first – what do you call – designed cities that kept wi – which – I'm getting fuzzy here.

Q: So that's where you went to school?

A: Yeah, I went to that – to the – it was a local community school, where I really became the – for the first time conscious of anti-Semitism, which is interesting, because there were a lot of English people who really resented, I guess, us coming over, because they regarded us as German, and forgetting that we were Jewish. And you know, I had names thrown at me, and again I hi – you know, I fi –

Q: What kind of names?

A: Like German Jew. German – just things like that, which was sort of hurtful. And then I had a – learning English, I had a teacher who – she was very nice, she thought she was doing the right thing, but she would make me stand up and say baker's man. Pat a cake, pat a cake, baker's man, bake me a cake as fast as you can,

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right? And she would have me stand up and recite this, and I would always say, pat a cake, pat a cake, **becker's**(ph) man, because that was the German pronunciation of it, and the class would just roar with laughter, right? So she would make me repeat it. So I-I be – you probably realize by now the very stubborn nature, feisty nature. The more she made me repeat the thing, the more I would say **becker's**(ph) man, I just refused to say baker's man. And it was just, you know, funny memories like that. And then I had somebody who called me a guy – a young boy, and at the time, of course, what was I, nine, probably – who called me German Jewish refugee. Those were probably the worst words anybody could call me, for some reason. It just made me – made me so mad. And so he – so I got into a fight with him. And we came out onto the playground, and we fought, we wrestled, and all the girls were supporting me, the boys were supporting him. And I ended up sort of winning this thing. And years and years later I met this guy at the theater. I was sitting next to him, and we talked about it, and we were just laughing our heads off. Funny memory.

Q: So did you make friends there?

A: I did, yes. I made friends there, mm-hm. And then in '42, 1942 – so I went to this school for three, four years – 1942, by which time my mother again through working very, very hard and never, never taking a bus, she walked wherever she

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could go, to save her money, I had the opportunity to go to a Quaker boarding school. And again, it was with a scholarship from the Quakers and my mother paid so much too. So I had five wonderful years at a Quaker boarding school.

Q: And so, while your mother still was in **England**, what was she writing to you? Do you remember getting letters from her, and what were the news from **Vienna**?

A: I don't have her – well, my mother then moved, cause she was all alone in – in this strange country, she moved back to **Germany**, to her mother's house, to **Aachen**. And from then for th – she left from there, when she finally got her domestic servant permit, she left from her mother's house, and she tried to get her mother out too, because we had a – my aunt – my – my great aunt, I guess it is, my mother's – my mother's aunt in **Switzerland** could have gotten my grandmother out, but she said she – my grandmother wouldn't move cause she said she was too old, that nobody would hurt her, her age, and she was 66 at the time.

Q: What was her name?

A: **Amanda Meyer**. And I have all this in the book, so later on [**indecipherable**]. So she left from – from a – my mother left from **Aachen** without her mother, leaving her mother there.

Q: And when she arrived in **England**?

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A: She arrived in **England**, she had to go to a – a farm in the south of **England**.

And my mother, of course, had lived all her life in the big city, had never been near the – near a farm, was terrified of animals, the cows. And these people had saved up all their dirty linen and everything. And – and she had to go into the – into the servants' quarters and do the cooking and the washing, you know, with the washing – with the washing board, this way? And she had to spend any free – they were out – way out in the country, and any free time that she had – she had – was out in the fields with the animals, and she was terrified. She had such a bad time there, that she wanted to go back to **Germany**, actually. She wanted to go back to **Germany**. Luckily, she couldn't go back.

Q: Did you meet her when she arrived in **England**?

A: No, I didn't, no, I was up north and she was down south. So I don't know how we communicated. I guess we wrote letters. But th – it wasn't for very long, cause she was really unhappy there, and the people really mistreated her.

Q: So what happened then?

A: And they were – I think they were very angry, cause my mother was probably dressed better than they were, and she was a servant, you know, and – and anyway, the – my Quaker parents there, foster parents, were – realized what was happening, so they – the – the meeting that they were with, it's called a meeting, Quaker

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meeting, they managed to get her up to **York**, and be a – a house – housekeeper, I think it was. Housekeeper, where she kept house for a widower who had a child, a boy. And she – they loved her there, she was doing such a good job. And I would visit from my place to hers, occasionally. And I remember, another one of these blurbs that I remember, going in there and seeing this boy on my mother's knee, she was caring for him. And I was so mad. What was he doing on her knee? I remember that, so jealous.

Q: What were your foster parents like?

A: They were wer – they were very simple, wonderful people, who – he – he was a conscientious objector. And again, the family was sort of ostracized by the people in the village around them. First of all because they – he was a conscientious objector during wartime, and then because they took me in, and they – they didn't like – like that. So they – they were very strong people, who did what they believed. And they didn't try and convert me, or do anything, but I – they invited me to come with them to the Quaker meetings, and I did do that occasionally. And the family – she treated me like one of the family, and it was – I was very fortunate.

Q: And the wider family also accepted you?

A: Not so much **Walter's** family, because **Walter's** brother was in the air force, I think it was, not the army, he was in the air force, and he became a prisoner of war

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of the Japanese, and was very mistreated. So they, you know, they were angry at **Walter** for being a conscientious objector, and of course everything that came with **Walter**, which was me. But **Jessie's**(ph) family, certainly, yes. All her family accepted me. I – I guess I just figured I was one of the family. And then when my mother came over, she lived with us for quite a while. And she took on a new inco – wa-way of making income, she studied hairdressing with a French hairdresser in town. And in her way, she beca – became better than he was, so people wanted her, not him. So, I – actually, it was fine with him, he – he didn't mind, as long as she was getting lots of customers. And then one day my mother thought that maybe she could do this on her own and not be working for him. So I think she gave indication that she may leave, and he didn't want her to leave. So he said he would do anything she should stay there. So she said, okay, I'll stay if you provide me with cigarettes. Cause at this time cigarettes were – were rationed. And he actually went out and kept her supplied with – she hadn't smoked before she came to **England**, but it's a habit she started, she started chain-smoking. And he kept her supplied with cigarettes. And eventually she had her own business, but –

Q: So how was the relationship between – cause you had – when your mother arrived, you had your own mother in town and you had your foster parents. How did you feel? Was there – was it conflicting for –

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A: I – I don't th – I don't reme – remember any struggle between the two of them for – for me. My mother was too busy, you know, working. And she did everything she could to pay back what they were giving to – she would stay up all night to make – she would do embroidery. Embroider pillow – cushion covers for birthdays and Christmas and that sort of thing for the family. And so – I mean, actually my foster mother died in my mother's arms. So it was – they were – they became very close, they became best friends almost. It was a – it's – that's sort of a very nice story.

Q: That is a very nice story.

A: Really, it – yeah, it – it's a very nice story.

Q: So how long did you stay with them?

A: I was at the s – Quaker boarding school til '47. I think it was about til f – I would come home for holidays, vacations, til about fi – til the end of the war, maybe. Til '45, and then my mother got her own place, and then we lived in the town.

Q: In **York**?

A: In **York**. [**indecipherable**] That was – that's amazing, because that place is now being turned into a – a – a hotel. The people who bought my mother's house, bought the two houses on either side, it was sort of terraced housing, and broke through, and it's now a fairly big hotel. And I **Googled** it and I saw our bedroom,

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which has been converted into a – I mean, it was just – it was an out of body experience. I can see it, I can get it any time. I **Google** it and our bedroom is there, now converted into – it's strange.

Q: Do you remember how the war ended in –

A: How it ended, yes, I remember **Churchill's** speech, hearing it on the radio. I was actually at boarding school. My birthday is on **V-E Day**, which is – you know what **V-E Day** is, yeah?

Q: Yeah.

A: Maybe that's why I've been so lucky, cause I was born on Mother's day and my birthday was **V-E Day**. Yeah, I – I remember that, I remember all the celebrations, and –

Q: And what about your relatives in **Berlin**? It was your mother's mother?

A: My mother's mother died in there – no, not in **Theresienstadt**. She was in **Theresienstadt**. I'm – I again have a package of letters from my grandmother, on –

Q: To your mother?

A: To my mother. On paper that is like tissue paper almost, you know, it's – it's airmail, and it's in the old German handwriting. I can read it. My mother never read it, ne-never read any of her letters, she wasn't able to. [**indecipherable**]

Q: She couldn't read the letters?

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A: She couldn't get herself to read anything from my grandmother. She had all this guilt about leaving her there, and –

Q: So, would you read the letters?

A: I have read – yeah, I have gone through them. I can read most of it, not all of it.

Q: But did you read them at the time when you were **[indecipherable]**

A: No, no, I read them after – my mother, you know, after she died, I – I got all this stuff.

Q: So you didn't even know what was going on? At the time when she was writing, your mother was not reading them?

A: Well, the last letter was when she had gone to an old age home. They had gathered all the old people – old? She was 66. They had gathered all the elderly people, and the last letters from there, that she was there, and she was happy, and everything was fine, I mean, there's a lot of cover up. And how were we, and she hoped we'd be fine. And they were going on a journey, they were going to be taken somewhere else, which was to **Theresienstadt**. And then from **Theresienstadt**, again from my research, I understand she was sent to **Minsk**, and died there at **Minsk**. And I have a couple of different reports. One is that she was in a – one of the cattle cars, and they were shunted aside, I guess left there, and the people just died of starvation and – and cold. The other was that she went to the ghetto in

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Minsk, and that again there was starvation [**inaudible**]. And I ne – I never told my – I never told my mother. I had done some research before she died, but she was under the impression she d – her mother died in **Theresienstadt**, which was not quite as bad as some of the other places. And I never told her anything about **Minsk**. And it turns out that my husband's grandmother was also in **Theresienstadt** at the same time as my grandmother. So we keep saying, I wonder if they ever met each other?

Q: Yeah. So, I just want to clear something. So your mother was re – she was not reading the letters as they were being sent, or you're saying she did not want to read them after the war? Did you know what was going on with your grandmother when the wa-war was still going on? Do you remember your mother talking about it?

A: I certainly did not know what was going on.

[**break**]

A: – no memory of ever knowing what – what was happening to my grandmother, until after the war, I had no idea. And I – I don't think my mother knew, either. And I don't think – I don't think she read her letters, I don't know. She always told me that she had these bundle of letters, that she can't get herself to read them. Now, whether it was re-read, that's possible too, I don't know. But my mother – you know, I told you that she didn't deal with my father's death, she wasn't able to talk

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about that, she was never able to talk about her – her mother, and it was just a – a series of suppressions that she had.

Q: Were there ar – other relatives?

A: Oh, all my grandmother's – there were – there were – how many of them were there? Seven. Seven siblings. One came to **America**, to San Francis – to **Los Angeles**. And her f – that family lived there and I'm in touch with the cousin.

Q: What's her name?

A: That was **Feidelberg**(ph), the **Feidelbergs**(ph). He survived. Four of the sisters died in the concentration camps. Two of the children of those sisters died. One was a really, really young, just four or five years old, died.

Q: And you knew them all from **Berlin**? Do you remember any of them?

[indecipherable]

A: I don't really – I don't really remember them, no. My mother knew them and she talked about them very often, but –

Q: And so you learned all that after war ended?

A: Yes, mm-hm, yeah, one of the – one of the brothers was a pediatrician in **Berlin**, and he was the one actually, who brought me into the world. And he – he wa – he became quite a well-known doctor in **Berlin**, and the Nazis said he could stay, he didn't have to leave, because one of the – one of them had –

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Q: What was his name? Sorry.

A: What was his name? Was actually the husband, so it wasn't – the husband of one of the sisters.

Q: It's okay.

A: It's in my book. Sometimes I have to go to my book to remember names. One of the Nazis had a child that was very sick, so they came to him to help the child. And the child was so sick that the uncle did not want to work on him, because he knew that if the child died, he would be blamed for it. So he said he didn't want to take it on, the child was sick. So, by doing that, they – of course they sent him to concentration camp. That was –

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

Q: So – and how did you end up in U.S.?

A: My mother's sister and fr – my cousins and th-the family, four of them, came to **San Francisco**. They first went to **England** and then to **San Francisco**, at a time when my mother came over, about the same time. And they had for years said that I should come over and visit. Now, I was –

Q: Sorry, when was that, when did they leave?

A: When did they –

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Q: Which year?

A: Hm?

Q: Which year was that?

A: That they went over?

Q: Yes.

A: Probably 40 si – from **England** they left probably '47.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Yeah. I – it was after the war. After the war. After the war.

Q: Okay, so, they – they sponsored you?

A: So yeah, they kept asking me to come over and visit with them. And I just – I was working at the time in – in **London**, at the American Chamber of Commerce. And I had, you know, I'd never – I didn't have enough money saved up. Then finally I decided okay, I was going to go. So I worked in a coffee shop at night and saved up the money for the travel, an-and came over in 1960. And my husband's sister, and my cousin were friends and played bridge together. And when I came over, my cousin said to – said to his sister, could you get your brother to take her around **San Francisco** in the evening or something, and show her **San Francisco**? Well, he – we were both engaged at the time. I was engaged to a German, and he was engaged to a Japanese woman, so neither of us wanted to go on a blind date.

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Anyway, we did go, and we kept going. So it's our 50th wedding anniversary this year. Yeah.

Q: Oh, congratulations.

A: Yeah.

Q: And you have children?

A: Yeah, I have three children and five grandchildren and there's a sixth one on the way. And, yeah.

Q: And do you ever talk to them about your history? Are they interested?

A: Yes, they're all very interested. And they're all, which – which is sort of intriguing is that they're all in sort of service oriented jobs. You know, not making much money, but –

Q: They [indecipherable] people.

A: Yeah, they're with people, and yeah, they enjoy – and one's in **New York** with her family, and we're go – on our – we're going to visit there when we leave here. And then one's in san fran – in **Berkeley**. And – the son's in **Berkeley**. And then the other daughter and her family are near us in the same – same – same area. And that daughter married a man from **Bhutan**. I don't know whether you know where **Bhutan** is. **Bhutanese**.

Q: It's [indecipherable]

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A: It's up in the **Himalayas**, yeah.

Q: I just want to be sure I have it, I'm sure I asked it in the beginning, but, your birth at name? A-At – your name at birth, I'm sorry.

A: What i – birth – my birth name, **Pollak**.

Q: **Pollak, Marion Pollak**, right.

A: Is that what you say – wanted? **P-o-l-l-a-k**. Which is a very common Austrian name [**indecipherable**]

Q: Well, thank you very much for this interview, it was very interesting, very [**inaudible**]

A: You're very, very, very welcome.

Conclusion of Interview