

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Marlies Plotnick.

I told you that I tried to work, and I did work every summer between high school and college, and certainly during college, to make enough money for my wardrobe, which was so important to us in those days. We dressed well. Everybody dressed well in college. People were not sloppy at all. You wear high heels and suits. And at any rate, one of my jobs was as the English editor of the Aufbau.

This was incredible because the only reason I got the job-- and I guess it was my senior year, between my junior and senior year-- the English editor was going to go to Europe. In those days, people were beginning again to travel. And she was going to be gone all summer. So they hired me and they paid me guild wages, which was enormous. And what my main job was, they got out a newsletter every week as to what was going to appear in that weeks Aufbau.

Tell us about the Aufbau.

Yes, the Aufbau was a publication that was in German and went all over the globe and was sort of the connection. That's how people could reconnect if they were in China, or if they were in Australia, you read. For instance, my parents put my marriage announcement into the Aufbau. And unfortunately, when my grandmother died, when my father died, we put it into the Aufbau to let the rest of the world know.

Well, they hired me as English editor. It was enormously impressive because-- oh, they hired me because I had written to them. Because it dawned on me, the Aufbau was all in German. And I said to myself, they are losing my generation because there was nothing there in English. The English editor there had been there simply for this newsletter. So I proposed to them that there should be an English page.

And lo and behold, they went for it. And I suggested that it have a quiz because I wanted to-- I thought that would be a lot of fun for me to do, and that it should have a jobs column to interest young people who read English. And they went for it, and then they hired me. First of all, they ran my stuff, which I still have. And when I worked there for the summer, I met these very high powered men who had been very important newspaper men in the Frankfurter Zeitung, which was a top, top newspaper. And they were all on their high horse because they'd all been these very famous people.

Manfred George was the editor. And what I went through with that newsletter, they let-- my English stuff, they left alone. But they would hand me what they thought was important in that week's news, and then I wrote it up in English. They nitpicked every word. Everything was challenged because they were all these prima donnas. But it was fascinating because they were all super intelligent and just terrific people.

But for me, it was very painful, except that it was also a very good thing to have on my resume. And I was paid guild wages. I was never paid anything like that again for quite a while. But they were very impressive people. And the Aufbau still exists, but I think it's entirely different and it's not run by German Jews at all. And I have no idea-- I did hear that it does still exist, but--

Were you ever in contact with an organization called Selfhelp?

I only heard about it. One of my mother's cousins was active in it. That did-- I think that was very helpful for German Jews. And by the way, there is something now about feeding very old German Jews, The Blue Card, or something like that. I contribute to this because it makes sense. And unfortunately, some people are in dire straits because they didn't have social security here and didn't have time to amass a decent retirement money.

Your father came over and he was no longer a lawyer.

Yes, and--

And could you elaborate on that a bit?

Yes. I mentioned before that he went in through the jewelry business. And this was-- he, I think, was very disappointed and found everything humiliating because he had been-- by the way, I should mention-- and I'm conscious that I'm not finishing sentences-- right after the war, the Germans made several offers that he should return. They would make him all kinds of big wheels, and he turned everything down because he had no intention of going back to Germany.

I have to mention that in the Wiedergutmachong he set it all up. I said it was a substantial firm that they were in, in Germany. He had two-- and in Germany, you clerked in some kind of an office. Bretano, who was an Aussenminister or something like that, was one of the people who had clerked. And another man, Willy Barend, who became-- do you know these names? Barend was in Wiesbaden. These gentlemen helped with the Wiedergutmachong.

When Brentano came here with Adenauer and I got on the phone, and when everybody said to me, this is nonsense, he's not going to talk to you, when I mentioned who I was and whose daughter-- my father was dead already-- his name, Brentano got on the phone immediately and said, how can I help? What can I do? And when I mentioned that Willy Barend was taking care of it. He said, you are in very good hands, but if you need anything contact me in Berlin. This was very nice.

When was this?

In-- well, this must have been-- when was this? When could Adenauer have come here because he also-- we lived on Central Park West. And the Adenauer car was in front of the house with the little flags. I'm going to take a guess. My father died in 1952. So it must have been something like '56 maybe. I don't know. Maybe '55, I don't know.

The Wiedergutmachong came-- my mother got a-- for my father's practice, she was paid a monthly amount. And I was paid something because I went to Barnard. I was paid-- excuse me-- more than my sister and my brother because they did not go to schools that cost money. It was idiotic. So I shared my larger amount with them because I thought it was so totally unfair. This is idiotic thinking because they were replacing because my father paid for school for me. I mean, that's-- instead of paying people who were in real need when you couldn't afford to go to school, they deserved more. But this business that my father felt humiliated by the kind of work he had to do here was there.

Yes, and also, I have to admit, for my life, there was this shadow all the time. Everything was quite good here. I had this wonderful husband. I had these adorable children. And I always had the fear that it was always-- that it could all be taken away from me. And this has haunted me. My sister had something of it, but not the same. I think it was the age difference, and also that I was in Darmstadt and saw all this business that she didn't witness. It was frightening enough for her not to be at home when all of it was happening.

But I think this business that I felt that I was in a certainly well functioning family but in a very dysfunctional society left its mark. And to this day, I have a fear of abandonment because I think that can be traced directly to this business that I was afraid my parents would not come home. But who knows? We were spared a great deal-- the fact that I wasn't in a concentration camp, that we never experienced that, that we were out of Germany when the worst was happening. We were not there through the Final-- what was it called? The Final--

The Final Solution.

The Final Solution. I will say, just before we left Germany, my mother and my sister and I went to visit to say goodbye to people in Berlin. My father had to stay for some reason. We were no longer in the house. He was in the one villa that some woman ran-- gave rooms to people for the few days that we were in Berlin. That trip was heartbreaking, which also, I think, marred my life, because we were saying goodbye to people whom we knew we would never see again and my mother's family in Berlin.

You know that there were many children-- there were many people who were waiting to go someplace. One family was going to China. One family was going to South America, my mother's favorite cousin. To say goodbye to these people was heartbreaking.

And that trip, even though I loved going-- traveling at night in these very opulent sleeping cars and all this, but I describe in my memoir, and I see it so clearly still, as the train would go through small towns, you'd hear the clanking of-- and you'd pass street lights that were naked bulbs. In Germany, you never saw a naked bulb. It was-- you just didn't. Here, we have many occasions to have naked bulbs. Many of our light fixtures are done this way. So these were naked bulbs and with this clanging of the train.

I remember also, somehow, the train already represented something because I'd heard the stories of the people in cattle cars being taken to Buchenwald. My father's partner talked about this. And maybe I should relay the story, it's not a very pretty story. He said, there were no bathroom facilities. So the people did their thing in somebody's hat, and then they threw the hat out of the window.

That story alone, and that they were packed like sardines standing up when they were taken, are vivid memories, even though I wasn't there, just hearing about it and that it was possible and that it could happen again. And somehow, there were books here that said, it can happen here. There was a very famous book that came out--

[DOORBELL RINGS]

Oh.

[DOORBELL RINGS]

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I do have to say that, yes, there was this shadow that has hung over my whole life, even though I've really had a very good life and I have to be so grateful that we didn't go through the really bad stuff. And I wrote the memoir because I feel-- and I'm talking here because I feel that anybody who had anything to do with it has to speak up because of the deniers. And the denying seems to be growing. And the Mel Gibson type of denial is just lovely.

And I think anti-Semitism is growing. It was so refreshing that it was unfashionable to be anti-Semitic for a long time here. And unfortunately now-- and it's very understandable because people think that the trouble with the Muslims is because of the Jewish problem with Israel. It's complicated and so sad that it is growing again and that maybe my grandchildren have to worry about this.

So I feel that I'm doing my little part here as I can. And I hope that my memoir, which was really written for the children so that they know where they come from, but mainly, I must admit, because I wanted to say what I went-- whatever touched our family, that it is known and I did not exaggerate one word. Because there is this theory that everybody, they used to joke about this, that in Germany-- here, I'm a dachshund. In Germany, I was a huge-- what's the largest dog we can-- Bernhardiner was--

A doberman or a Saint Bernard.

Yes, a Saint Bernard. The [GERMAN] had a Great Dane, which was a beautiful, beautiful animal. Well, at any rate, basically, I have had a very good life. I'm 82 years old. I'm terribly sorry that I lost my husband who would have chimed in here, and who would have been very supportive, and who was very supportive when I started the memoir. And well, at any rate, I am grateful for this opportunity to say something more so that it's on the map. So I thank you very much.

Well, I thank you for letting us interview you today. And this is a conclude-- this is the conclusion of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview on August 19, 2010 with Ms. Marlies Plotnick. Thank you again.