

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Suzanne Coppel**

**October 30, 2012**

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## PREFACE

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Transcribed by Michelle Keegan, National Court Reporters Association.

## **SUZANNE COPPEL**

**October 30, 2012**

Question: This is an interview for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Leah Woolson, and I am interviewing Mrs. Suzanne Coppel. The date is October 30th, 2012. This interview is being conducted over the phone. The language of the interview is English.

Q: Mrs. Coppel, could you tell me, where were you born and what was your name at birth?

A: I was born Mannheim, Germany. And my maiden name was Mann, M-A-N-N.

Q: And how old are you today?

A: I am 79 years old. I was born on July 3rd, 1933.

Q: Where were your parents born?

A: My father was born in the Rhine region in Germany in a small town named Hannheim. Do you want me to spell that for you?

Q: If you could.

A: H-A-N-N-H-E-I-M.

Q: And where was your mother born?

A: My mother was born in Eastern Germany, Leipzig, L-E-I-P-Z-I-G.

Q: And were your grandparents born in Germany as well?

A: Yes, they were born in Germany, but I did not know them too well.

Q: Did they die before you were born?

A: They did not die before I was born, but you see, my parents were married in 1932 and moved to the city of Mannheim where I was born. And my grandparents -- my maternal grandparents remained in Leipzig, Germany, and my paternal grandmother was in the Rhineland in Germany.

Q: So how long had your family lived in Germany? Do you know?

A: Oh, I believe since -- the only thing I know, way back in the 1800s.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your home life before you had to leave in 1935?  
Can you tell me a little bit about what life was like?

A: Well, what I remember, of course. I was born in 1933, and we left Mannheim, Germany, in 1935. So I was two years old. And I don't -- I don't remember too much. My father was in the shoe business and director of a shoe factory. My mother was a homemaker. And we went for walks. My dad carried me on his shoulders. And that's about what I remember except that I know at one point we had to move out of our apartment because they found out we were Jewish and had to find another apartment to move into.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about that, either from what you remember or what you've learned, why you had to move out, when you had to move out?

A: Well, as I said, I was born in 1933. That's when Hitler came to power. And my father was allowed to stay at the factory. He was managing director of a shoe manufacturing company. He was allowed to stay awhile because he had connections in Holland to where the merchandise was exported. And you see, his father had fought in World War I and never returned.

Q: So did that allow him certain privileges?

A: Yes, until 1935 when the SS demanded his dismissal. And that's when we were asked to move out of our apartment. And we managed to find another one. And shortly thereafter my father left for Italy, for Milan, where he started a business with a gentleman that he knew, and my mother and I followed.

Q: Do you happen to know how you found the apartment in 1935, how you got --

A: No.

Q: -- from one place to another?

A: No. I think they just -- my parents just went looking and asking, but that's all I know.

Q: And tell me a little bit about how your family was first affected by anti-Semitism. You started talking about that a little bit with your father's dismissal. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

A: No. He was just asked to leave. He said that the owner said, "I'm sorry. The SS is demanding your dismissal. We don't want any Jews working for us." And that's about all I can remember about that. As I said, I was only two years old.

Q: Do you remember anything about when your father left?

A: I remember my father leaving. And he left -- I think he went to Italy through Switzerland. And then -- but he often went on business trips. He went to Sicily on business. He often -- and to Holland. And so I guess at the time, as far as I can remember, I just felt, Well, he's either going to come home -- but we did -- my mother said, "We have to leave. They don't want us here any more. We're going to Italy to meet Dad in Italy, in Milan."

Q: Do you have any other early memories of living in Mannheim?

A: Not really, no. And I haven't been back there since.

Q: What do you remember about the journey to Italy?

A: Well, I remember my mother and I taking the train. And I don't even remember arriving in Italy, but I just remember parts of times while we were living there.

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

A: Well, my father, as I say, went into business with this gentleman. And we lived in -- we had a very nice apartment. And I always remember going downstairs to see -- the manager of the apartment building lived downstairs with his wife, and I always remember going down there and having a few meals. And my mother used to get angry because I wouldn't eat at home. I was a very picky eater. And I remember having my tonsils out and coming home, being in bed. And I remember my father sitting by the bed, and he was crying. He cried very easy. He was a very sentimental person. And then I remember lots of walks we took in Milan. He always carried me on his shoulders. I remember a time being in a sort of a nursery school with a nun, and we went on a walk. They took us out to take us somewhere in the city. I don't remember where. And then my mother and father coming for me and taking me out of -- I was being among the other kids. Taking me out. They said, "Come on. We have to go." And that's about all I remember about Milan.

Q: And when were you in Milan? From 1935?

A: From 1935 to 1939.

Q: Do you remember any anti-Semitism in Milan at the time?

A: No. I just remember my parents saying that -- about Mussolini. They were collecting all the gold from people, even their wedding bands. And so they bought themselves, I think, stainless steel wedding bands and hid theirs so they wouldn't have to give them up. And I remember that much.

Q: So how would you characterize your childhood up to this point, up to 1939?

A: Up to 1939? Well, I suppose it was fairly normal. That's when we left Italy, when it started.

Q: Tell me about how and when you left Italy.

A: Well, in 1939 or in 1938 -- I'm sorry -- all immigrant Jews were asked to leave Italy. This is when Mussolini and Hitler became close. And we didn't know, of course, where to go. And we didn't want to return to Germany, and we could not obtain affidavits to go to the United States. My parents had cousins and distant relatives, but they were bringing their own families over, so they couldn't do anything for us. So my father, who had business acquaintances in Holland still dating back to when he was working in Germany, called them, and he procured a position in a shoe factory. So we gave away -- we gave up all of what we had because we had to leave our possessions, most of them. And we took the train to Lugano. And there a gentleman accompanied us across the border into Switzerland. And in Zurich we took a plane to Amsterdam via Paris. We arrived in Amsterdam and we were denied entry because we had German passports which had a big J on them. And they wanted to send us back to Germany, but of course we did not think that was a very good idea, so my father did a little persuading. And they agreed to let us stay overnight at the airport and we would leave the next day. And from Milan we went to Paris, but there is a story in between. We were waiting for the plane to leave, and I had never seen a plane take off. This was in Holland, I mean. And my father lifted me onto a heat register and didn't realize how hot it was. He sat me on it and burned my derriere. And I was very badly burned. But we got on the plane. And the doctor -- a gentleman noticed that I was very uncomfortable sitting, so he approached my parents. And he happened to be a doctor from Vienna: And he and my parents began a conversation. And he apparently told them to go -- the best thing was to go to Paris. He advised my father that the situation for the immigrant Jews in Milan was bad, not to go back there, and to stay in Paris. And he even suggested a hotel there where we might stay. And we were there for about three weeks and then obtained permission to go to Caen, C-A-E-N, for the next six months. And now we go to the year of 1939. My father joined the French Army, and my mother and I stayed in Caen at a hotel where she was a waitress. And very soon thereafter the Germans occupied the city and took over the hotel. So my mother was supposed to be a Swiss citizen because she couldn't speak French by that time and could only speak German.

Q: Was she posing as a Swiss citizen?

A: She was posing as a Swiss citizen. And she took me aside and told me -- warned me that if any of the German soldiers approached me and spoke to me, to pretend I didn't understand them, to answer them in French or Italian. So lo and behold, a German soldier did approach me and asked "Wie heißen Sie?" What is your name, in German. And I answered, "Je ne comprends pas ce." I don't understand. And he persisted, and another

German soldier joined him. And they were talking between them about the little girl who they left in Germany. And so after a while they let me go. And I was scared to death.

Q: Was this in the hotel in Caen?

A: In the hotel, yes. They were going -- I remember being at the bottom of the stairs, and the restroom was on the side and they were going to go into the restroom and they happened to see me.

Q: And how old were you at this point?

A: I was six.

Q: So were you already enrolled in school or not yet?

A: No, I was not. I was not because soon thereafter it was time to flee again. And this time we went to Le Mans, France. That's capital L-E and then capital M-A-N-S.

Q: And what caused you to flee?

A: Well, the German occupation. We were running away from them. And we stayed in Le Mans until 1940, until the Germans approached and began bombing the city. So I guess my father came -- was on furlough from the Army, I don't remember which, but talked to a French citizen who accompanied us across the boarder to what we thought was the unoccupied zone. That was southern -- southwestern France, to the village of Castelmoron-sur-Lot. Did you want me to spell all these words, these names?

Q: If you can.

A: It's C-A-S-T-E-L-M-O-R-O-N, and then next word is S-U-R, and the third name -- word is Lot, capital L-O-T.

Q: And can you tell me, how did you get from one place to another at this point?

A: Walking. And all of us were walking very leisurely. And all of a sudden my mother asked me to go down and make pee pee. And I responded that I didn't have to. And she said again, "Sit down and make pee pee." And I said, "I don't have to." And finally she slapped me and pushed me down. And of course, I started to cry. I was hurt. I was -- And then later she explained to me that the Germans from the occupied zone of France were watching us with their binoculars and we were supposed to make it look like a promenade, a leisurely walk, and not an escape. And then the gentleman who was with us led us to the nearest farmhouse. And I remember hiding in the shed where tobacco was hanging, hung drying. And the next two days we slept in stalls and different barns. And I remember noises at night. There were rats and mice. We had no green card, so we were at the mercy of the farmers who did give us food and shelter. And we trusted them that they wouldn't turn us in to the Germans.



Q: Can you tell me for a moment what you mean by "green card"? Do you mean a special transit card?

A: I'm using that as an example. As we have green cards here, it was -- I can't think -- an identification card. Being noncitizens, we had to have identification.

Q: So you were walking from one town to the next?

A: We were walking. And we continued to make our way then to the town of Castelmoron. And of course, we had to find a place to live. And my parents did. It was very, very primitive. The entry was just dirt and had wood to burn in the fireplace, and living quarters were upstairs. And there was just one bedroom and a very primitive kitchen with a wood-burning stove and a fireplace. No bathroom, indoor or outdoor. We just used a bucket, which had to be emptied every day. And my parents got jobs. They acquired jobs in a belt factory, doing assembly work. And then I started school.

Q: When you started school, did you have to pose as a non-Jewish child?

A: You know, I don't -- we were the only Jews in that little village. The children probably didn't know, but I'm sure their parents knew. People were very, very good to us there. There was never anything that I remember said from any of the children, anything derogatory. And then in 1940 of course the Vichy government came into power, whose leader was Marshal Philippe Pétain. Capital P-E-T-A-I-N. And of course, he -- his bosses were the Germans, were the SS, the Nazis, even though he had fought against Germany in World War I. He just turned around completely. And from that time I guess until the end of the war, we were hunted. We lived underground most of the time. Our neighbors knew we were refugees. And then the next thing I remember was that my parents told me that they have to leave or they were warned beforehand by a sympathetic official from the police that there would be a house-to-house search and that they had better flee.

Q: And this was still in Castelmoron?

A: Yes. Oh, yes. And they left me in the care of the French family who owned the hotel. And of course, they didn't say where they were going. I had no idea where they were or when and if I would see them again. So I was sent to Catholic church on Sundays and catechism after school. They told my parents, "Well, if she can't practice her religion, she should have something. So send her to church and to catechism."

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about the family who you were hidden with?

A: Well, they also owned the factory. And of course, they gave my parents a job. So my parents felt that they should listen to them and send me to church. And they were very, very sympathetic. Very nice.

Q: And how were you hidden? Were you taken in as part of the family?

A: Yes. I was like part of the family. I had no problems, except I was very homesick. I didn't know when and if my parents would return or when and if I would even see them again. It was months before we were reunited. And I guess my parents had gone to a different town where they knew a German-Jewish family who owned a farm. And this family had two daughters a little bit older than I was. As a matter of fact, they had their daughters converted to Catholicism so that their lives would be saved. They were -- Both girls were baptized. So they went into hiding there and I stayed with a French family.

And when I started going to church, my father even bought me the New Testament, prayer book, and a rosary. He was not an Orthodox Jew, but he was fairly traditional, so that was an unusual thing for him to do, but then our lives were in question. So I continued attending church and catechism. And then one day the priest approached me about baptizing me, and he mentioned that I needed to have a religion. And I responded, I said, "I do have one. I'm Jewish." And he said, "Well, that's really not a religion, but I have to talk to your father, and he's going to have to convert first." So he did. He spoke to my dad. And my dad told him, "Father, I'm very sorry," he said, "I'm not a very good Jew. I'd make an even worse Catholic." So that was the end of that.

Q: How did the priest know where your father was?

A: Well, my father was -- my parents were back at that time, back from their hiding.

Q: And about what year was that?

A: That was sometime, 1940, I think. 1941 perhaps. It was a small village. There was one Catholic church, and he was the priest in that Catholic church. And we lived in that village. So he knew where to find my father. And that was before my father joined the French Underground. And we had no idea where he was. He mentioned to us after the war that their job, the Underground, called the French Forces of the Interior, their job was to blow up German ammunition trains. And he did come home occasionally for a couple of days. And then in late 1940 -- In 1942 my parents decided to have another child. I guess it was rumored that the Vichy authorities would not arrest a husband of the Jewish women who were pregnant. And of course, that was all foolishness. It wasn't true. But my mother at the time was then two months pregnant when the gendarmerie, the French police, came to arrest my father. And I remember clearly that they took him from the house where we lived, had him remove his belt, and handed him three safety pins to hold up his pants. And I heard them say to my mother, "We don't want him to keep his belt. He might hang himself." And of course, I started screaming, "Please don't take my father away." I was nine years old. And this is an episode which is in my mind always. And the chief of police was very nice to us, very sympathetic. And I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for him. He told my mother to obtain a letter from the

town's only -- one and only doctor, stating that she was four months pregnant instead of two, and that he would try to have my father released. And she did that. And she did so. And my father came home a couple of days later. But from then on, he was a hunted man. So my sister and I -- you'll have to forgive me. I tend to be a little emotional. My sister Annie was born in Villeneuve-sur-Lot -- V-I-L-L-E-N-E-U-V-E, next word S-U-R, and the next word capital L-O-T -- on August 5th, 1943. And this was the nearest -- the town with the nearest hospital. And I was 10 years old and, of course, very excited to have a sibling. And then my dad was in and out of the woods or wherever he was with the underground. He would come home once in a while. He left his bicycle at the next-door neighbor's back yard. And our bedroom window would -- you would go onto the roof of the house and then you could jump into the neighbor's back yard. On one of his visits in the middle of the night, there was a knock on the door. So he quickly jumped out of the bedroom window to the adjoining yard and took off on his bicycle. The authority -- now, this was the French authority. I guess they had to do their job, or so they said. They came upstairs -- Oh, and what I have to preempt this with was that they had tried to warn us that they had to come and inspect the house. And they looked all over, under the beds. And my mother held my two-months-old baby sister and said, "Here, do you want to take her too?" So they mentioned they were under the orders of the SS and then they left.

Q: Now, was your father back and forth from the forest to your home through the entire period from 1940 to 1943?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember him coming and going?

A: Coming and going, yes. And I remember him vividly jumping out the bedroom window and onto the roof and then going down the neighbor's yard on his bike. So I was -- every night I laid in my bed and I was terrified. I knew that they -- that the Germans or the Vichy government were picking up the Jews in trucks. And whenever I heard a vehicle during the night I was just trembling. I was terribly frightened, and I knew they usually came in the middle of the night. And then about my school attendance was of course very erratic. I'd go to attend class one month and then we went into hiding two or three months.

Q: Where did you go into hiding?

A: In farms outside the city, the town. And we had one particular farm we always went to where we worked. And my -- when my father was not serving with the resistance, he worked on one farm while my mother and I and my sister and on another farm. And we worked in the fields. We picked tobacco, tomatoes, potatoes, green beans. I milked cows. I took them to pasture and had to tend to them so they wouldn't stray into neighbors' property because there were no fences anywhere. And the living conditions

were also very primitive there. And no indoor or outdoor facilities. You just went out in the field and that was it. In the morning you went to the pump outside and you washed face and hands. And once a week my mother would heat water in the fireplace or on the wooden stove in the farmhouse and take -- put it into galvanized tub, and that was my bath in the middle of the kitchen. And that was my bath.

Q: And so who was hiding you? Were these local farmers?

A: The farmers. The farmers.

Q: And you were moving from place to place so that your father wouldn't be found?

A: Well, my father was in a different place.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah. And of course, I still remember the chickens, the ducks, and the pigs and running in and out of the kitchen throughout the farmhouse. And my poor sister and I were infected with lice. My mother was always working on our hair with kerosene to get rid of the lice. And rodents were all over the place. And the only time I really had any fun was during harvest season. Harvest the grapes. We were in a region that's not too far from Bordeaux, which is a wine region. I'll spell it for you. Capital B-O-R-D-E-A-U-X. And then in a couple of months or three months when we thought it was safe, we would return to the village and I would resume school. I also -- my husband is reminding me. My fun during grape harvest was to get into the barrel with the grapes and stomping on the grapes. That was a lot of fun.

Q: Can you tell me about what year this was that you were going from place to place?

A: Well, this was -- we were doing this off and on until the end of the war in 1945.

Q: So from 1943 or so?

A: From around 1940 to 1945.

Q: Okay.

A: And of course, when I returned to school I didn't have a very understanding teacher. I had missed a lot. And she would give a test. And of course, I would get a bad grade. But truthfully, my father was not very understanding where school was concerned. Where education was concerned, he was extremely strict. And the only slap on the derriere I ever got from him was when I brought home a fail grade or a bad grade. And oftentimes I would come home from school and find my mother waiting with the baby carriage and off we went to hide again. This time my father was hiding with the underground. And then the word came that the Allies had landed in Normandy. And everyone was excited. We could hardly restrain our emotions. And my father and his

group aided the American troops. And then when he returned from one of these missions, he'd bring us powdered milk and toothpaste and chocolate and soap. And by the way, during the war we had -- everything was rationed. We had coupons for meat, for bread, for everything. And my mother used to make her own soap. She used to save all the grease from -- I don't know what. Save it and use -- and cook it in the fireplace and then it became hard when it cooled. And that was soap. And then the Allies advanced into our vicinity, and the Germans and Vichy troops left the area and we were able to breathe a bit. And my father was much decorated. He got the medal of honor. And he got the medal of voluntary firer of the resistance as well as the commemorative medal war with clasp of liberation.

CHK) SEE HIDDEN NOTE ->

And by the way, I didn't write this in my story. My father was in Who's Who in France in a book. And my father was discharged from military service in 1946. And he accepted the post of tax inspector in Le Saar, which is capital S-A-A-R, which is a region between France and Germany. During that time, of course, it was occupied by the French military, and during that time we became French citizens.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about what liberation was like?

A: Well, everyone was dancing in the streets of that -- in Castelmoron, in that little village. It was just unbelievable. Especially when Dad came home and he said we survived. And after this my dad was appointed director of police for the Saar province. And when his job was -- ended with that, he became a co-owner of a shoe manufacturing company. He had met a gentleman who had the funds, a French gentleman. And my father had the know-how, so they opened the shoe factory. And we at the time, as I mentioned before, had relatives in the United States, cousins. And I was really sick and tired of war-torn Europe. And I used to read magazines of New York. I thought at the time that New York was -- literally the streets were lined with gold.

Q: What made you sick and tired of war-torn Europe? Was it the conditions? Was it the way people were treating you?

A: The conditions and what we went through. And prior to my -- that comes later. I just wanted to go. My parents agreed to send me to New York, to relatives for a year or two, where I could study, learn the language, and come back.

Q: And how old were you?

A: 16. But while I was here I met my husband whose family had -- my husband's name is Werner, W-E-R-N-E-R. His family fled from Germany in 1935. They were smart. But they had relatives here in the United States. My husband's father had a sister in Pennsylvania, so they obtained affidavits and came in 1935. And my husband and I were

engaged in 1952. That same year he was drafted into the Army and was sent to Germany where he served in the military intelligence in Berlin.

Q: And I want to take you back for just a moment. How did you get from Europe to the United States?

A: I came on a ship named capital D-E, next word is capital G-R-A-S-S-E, with a friend of the family. At the time she was also going to New York to visit people. So I came with her. She sort of looked after me during the voyage.

Q: Is there anything in particular you remember about that journey?

A: The journey? Yes, I do. It was in April. And the waters were rough, and most of the people on the ship were sick except me. And it was, of course, we came tourist class. In those days those ships have tourist class, second class, first class. Our cabin was next to the engine room, I believe. But it was pleasant.

Q: And can you tell me the first thing you remember about New York?

A: New York, I was picked up in New York by a daughter of -- a cousin's son and his wife. And this cousin with whom I stayed for a while, the first thing she did, took me to Woolworths and bought me a Hazel Bishop lipstick. You're probably too young to know what Hazel Bishop was, but that was very popular back then. She said, "You must wear lipstick." My parents were very strict. I was not -- I had to dress -- I had to wear what my mother wanted me to wear. And I was not allowed to use any lipstick or anything like that. And I had a fairly strict European upbringing. You were to be seen but not heard. But I had very loving parents.

Q: And where did you learn English in New York?

A: I just learned. I went to school for a little while until this -- the uncle with whom I was staying, the cousin, became ill. In between the time, I met my husband, who was to be my husband. Of course I was only 16 years old. Nothing -- I said 16. I was only 16 years old when I first met him through relatives of the relatives. And that was that. But then the cousin became ill -- the cousin with whom I was living in New York -- with cancer and passed away. And as I said, my husband and I reconnected, my future husband and I. We met -- we became engaged, 1952. And then in 1954 I went to France with my future mother-in-law on the Queen Elizabeth I. And my husband and I were married in Saarbrücken. S-A-A-R-B -- I'll start over. S-A-A-R-B-R-U-C-K-E-N, in Le Saar. And my husband was still in the service at that time. That's why. And I was due for a visit home to my family. So we got married there. And then he was discharged. And we lived in Williamsport, Pennsylvania: And we have two wonderful sons, Gary and Stephen. And after the province -- the Saar province was returned to Germany in the 1950s -- so my parents did not wish to live in Germany. So my parents and sister moved

to Strasbourg, that's S-T-R-A-S-B-O-U-R-G, France, where my father became director of an import/export rubber distributorship. And my father passed away March 11, 1997. He was 91. And he was a very courageous man, a man of vision. Very intelligent. He was always self-taught. You could discuss with him any subject under the sun. And he always no matter how difficult life became, he never gave up. He was my mentor, my hero. And my mother passed away April 30th, 2011, at the age of 103. She resided in Strasbourg. And my husband and I went to Europe for the last 17 years twice a year, sometimes three times, to see her. And then my sister was married, has one daughter, but she was widowed in -- about 11 years ago, in 2001. And she resides in Annemasse, A-N-N-E-M-A-S-S-E, France. It's near Geneva but on the French side. She took care of my parents all those years. My father started with his illness in 1997. And she took care of my family. And as I said, we made our trip twice a year to try to help out as best we could. But the war left scars, and in 1945 I fell ill with typhoid fever and hepatitis. And I was fairly sick for about a year. And I have chronic headaches, migraines, and tend to suffer from depression once in a while. And my mother suffered from chronic bronchial problems throughout her life. And my mother's family, now, my mother had three brothers and one sister. Now, her sister somehow managed to escape from Leipzig to London, England. And my maternal grandmother -- my maternal grandparents and three uncles, my mother's brothers -- my mothers -- pardon me -- yeah, my mother's brothers, were sent to Auschwitz. And my father's mother, his sister -- her husband and two young boys, ages eight and six, were deported to Dachau and none of them returned.

Q: Do you remember their names?

A: No. I barely saw them because, as I said, my parents moved away. And I don't even -- I have pictures. And my mother -- my mother never spoke too much about her family. Whether it was too difficult for her, I don't know. I think my grandfather -- her father was in the -- was a furrier. And I remember her saying her mother was always ill and she had to take care of her. Other than that, I really -- I don't know. I remember seeing them once. And my aunt, my husband and I went to London years ago. She has -- she passed away about 10 years ago. And I met my aunt. I have a cousin in London named Monica and a cousin George.

Q: And what is your aunt's name?

A: You know, at the moment -- I knew it. I can't think of it. You must -- I can't remember. Monica's mother, do you remember her name? Oh, I know. Elfreide, E-L-F-R-E-I-D-E.

Q: And where did they live before the war?

A: Well, before the war she was in Leipzig. And she managed to escape and lived in London during the war. And she got married in England also to a man from -- whom I didn't know from Vienna:

Q: I want to take you back for a moment. Do you remember as a child, either when you were in Mannheim or then when you were in hiding, being aware of what was going on in Germany or what was going on throughout the rest of Europe to the Jews?

A: Oh, yes. Not in Mannheim and perhaps not in Italy, but after. Very aware.

Q: About when would you say did you become aware of what was going on?

A: Well, I became aware when I heard the car or truck at night. I must have been eight or nine. And I knew they were taking Jews and transporting them to concentration camps. I grew up very fast.

Q: Do you remember how you heard about what concentration camps were? Did you hear your parents speaking about it?

A: Probably my parents, yes. Uh-hmm.

Q: Do you remember overhearing conversations from your parents or your mother talking about anything in particular during the war?

A: Well, yes. I remember my mother saying, "Well, your father is away." Of course we didn't know where he was. She didn't know where he was. "But we have to" -- and every time we had to go into hiding, I knew that we were hunted by the Vichy government or the SS.

Q: What sticks out for you the most in those moments when you were traveling from one place to the next, trying to stay one step ahead? What do you remember the most?

A: I remember the conditions under which we lived, having to stay quiet. My sister was a baby. She wasn't even allowed to cry. And by the way, my sister wouldn't talk to anyone outside her immediate family. Not even to my husband when he and I became married -- were married. She couldn't talk. I know she went to a psychiatrist. We're 10 years apart. I was already gone. But she had problems. And it was not until she became engaged to her husband that she really opened up. But what sticks out the most to me was when they came to get my father and have him remove his belt so he wouldn't hang himself. And what sticks out were the terrible -- the big rats running around all over the place. To this day, I'm deathly afraid of them. My father would set traps all over when he was home. The noises at night from the rats and the mice and the cars, when there were any, and being afraid of being taken away and worried about would I see my father ever again. I tried to put a lot of this in back of my mind and tried to forget it, and yet I



consider myself very fortunate, I guess, thanks to my father's vision. But through the grace of God, we were never in a concentration camp. And that's very fortunate.

Q: What do you remember the most about those people in the French countryside who you were hiding with?

A: Well, they were farmers. They tended to their land. They helped us out. I think they were -- they were socialists, maybe tendency towards communism. So they hated the Germans and they hated the Vichy government. And we worked. We got food and lodging, but we did work. But they took care of us, too. So we're very grateful to the French people. They saved our lives, really. And they saved us from deportation and death.

Q: And what do you remember the most about your interactions with the French gendarmerie while you were there?

A: While I was there, well, I can -- the captain of the gendarmerie was very, very kind to us. That's what I remember. He felt very, very sorry for us. And he really tried his best, tried to warn us whenever he could.

Q: Tried to warn you about?

A: About "You be careful. We may have to come tomorrow night to your house and inspect the house," or "Perhaps you better flee." They had to go through the motions of coming and doing their job. So they tried to warn us whenever they could.

Q: And were they warning you about your potential arrest or about your father's or both?

A: Both. The whole family. But my father was taken away first. And at the end, I'm sure it would have been the whole family. I don't remember what happened when we weren't home, when we were in hiding. People may have come. They may have been coming to look for us anyway.

Q: Have you been back to that region of France?

A: I was back shortly -- Let's see. In 1954. And that's the last time. We've gone to Provence, my husband and I, which isn't too far away from there. And I've often wished to go back and see what it all looks like now. Of course, the people who were there at that time are now gone. I'm almost 80. So they are no longer there. I just wish I could go back and see what the whole area looks like now. I still have a vision in my mind about it. But we both have some health issues, so I don't think that overseas travel are in our stars any more.

Q: What's the vision in your mind that you were talking about a moment ago of that region of France?

A: Oh, always very -- well, I remember there was an old castle not too far from where we lived. And it was a water pump. I remember walking over there and getting water. We had no running water. And I remember walking in the countryside. I remember tending to the cows. I remember milking the cows. And the village, it's a very picturesque countryside, southern France. The climate was fairly mild. We did get a few snow flurries once in a while. I remember walking to school. There was a girl's school and a boy's school. And I remember -- I remember seeing the girls in the Catholic church taking communion in their white gowns. And I remember going shopping with my mother. I remember her chasing me with a broom around the kitchen table when I was misbehaving. I remember the neighbors across the way from where we lived, they were ladies who were elderly, dressed all in black with the long skirt still, widows. And I remember rodents crossing from one -- from one home to the other across the street. They were almost as big as -- there were sewer rats almost as big as -- some of them as little cats. And I remember my mother taking out a box with tea bags to make tea -- I wasn't feel well -- and a mouse jumping out of it. I remember her getting letters from my father once in a while while he was in the Army, and she would say, "Dad is okay. He'll try to come home." I remember her having -- after my sister was born and my father had to leave again, I remember her trying to breast-feed her. And my sister couldn't get any milk. And she would -- my mother had an infection. Her breast was all blue. And I remember a doctor who came on his bicycle, was a Jewish man who made the rounds to all the regions, I guess, to the people he knew were in hiding, coming to check her health. And that's about it.

Q: Were you a religiously observant family in any way?

A: Well, we couldn't. My father always told me, "Don't ever forget you're Jewish." He was very observant, but we went to church. We had to hide the fact that we were Jewish. And after the war I did go to synagogue, but we never kept kosher or anything like that. My father went to shul, to synagogue, after the war until the day he died, every Saturday.

Q: So during the five-year period that you were going to one place to the next, you were actively hiding the fact that you were Jewish?

A: Right, right.

Q: Did you feel that the community knew anyway?

A: Most of the adults did, yes.

Q: When was the first time that you told your husband your story from the war?

A: I don't think he really knew up until 2001 -- bits and pieces probably, but my children didn't -- in 2001 when I wrote, to put it down on paper. And my sister who came to visit last January, I gave it to her to read. She's quite proficient in the English language. She read it and she said, "I didn't know half of this." So my parents after the war, as I said, my mother never really spoke too much about her family, up until the very end. She mentioned one of her brothers whose name was Harry. But she was already I think a bit of dementia had already set in.

Q: So what was it that made you want to tell your story now?

A: I heard other people telling. And I decided perhaps it would be a catharsis for me or it's a story that really -- the Holocaust shouldn't be forgotten. And my -- the temple we belong to, we're looking for a speaker every year, Yom Ha'Shoah. Someone comes to speak. So I decided, Well, I'll write my story down as best as I could. And that's how this came about. And it's still -- I don't know -- it's still some of these things still come back to me when I read them and I get all upset, unfortunately.

Q: If you were to pick one moment of your story that you think is the most important, what would it be?

A: That's the most important. Our survival. The way we survived. What my father did during the war. That, I never knew until afterwards.

Q: How did you find that out?

A: Well, after the war he just talked about it. And not everything. I saw he was in Who's Who, and I read his stories. And he really was in harm's way. And they liberated cities. He really did some extraordinary, wonderful things to fight Nazism. And as I said, I'm grateful for the fact that unlike a lot of our Jews, that we didn't end up in the concentration camps. And my husband and I took a trip to eastern Europe a few years ago, and we went through Auschwitz. And that was -- I don't know. I can't find the words. I figured that if my grandparents, my uncles died there, that the least I could do is visit it. But it was very, very difficult. It's unbelievable what we saw there. Unbelievable that they're human beings who could inflict such things to other human beings. And my father also wrote a poem while he was in the Marquis, the French Underground. And this poem is now in the archives of Yad Vashem. And if you like it, I have an English translation. We could e-mail it.

Q: Do you have it with you that you can read for the recording?

A: I have it here. This is an English translation, originally written in German. It's dedicated, "To my dear children, by Bernard Mann, 1943." I am lying on hard straw and I keep pondering over and over what could be done to alleviate the suffering of the Jews, but no solution comes to me. I can only describe to you, my dear children, what this or

that person was doing. One, who did they round up? Who did they not allow to sleep and drive around like shepherds drive sheep? The Jews. Who do they lock up and put in chains? I would like to bet it would be the Jews. Why must they suffer? Why must they waste away? People will explain to you it is because they are Jews. It did not help to flee. It did not help to run. They watched them. They burned them. They are living corpses, the Jews. They had many friends, in quotations, but none would or could help but rather left them to the hungry Wolves, the Jews. There were many democratic states. I will tell you what they did for the Jews. Nothing. They demanded florins, dollars, and pounds. Whoever did not have them had to end like miserable hounds, and whoever did not have enough Swiss francs was left locked behind the border gates. Only the Jews. They wandered around, families torn apart, their homes destroyed, thrown into camps, in the grimmest cold and without bread. They held out until they would be redeemed by the death that they longed for. The Jews. Men worked hard and dug coal while their wives were sent to Poland. Where did the children stay? Where had they remained? They were frustrated, longing for their parents. In some instances there was a person with lots of dollars who flew over borders. Even America stood open to him, could help to spend the war there in security, wrote long pages with many words, spoke on the radio now and then, and so the good man believed that he was doing a lot of good for the Jews. Others fought in that distant land. They fought the enemy in desert sand. They merited great honor worthy of the Maccabees. Their graves have been covered with sand. For them all, that remains is to say Kadish for the Jews. That's it.

Q: When did you receive the poem?

A: Well, we found it among my father's -- after his death, among the papers. He told us that he had written a poem which is in Yad Vashem. There's a number, Register Number 7521.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about that I haven't asked?

A: That you haven't asked? No. I would only say that my father always spoke, "You must forget or try to forget. Live on. Enjoy the future. We must go on." Our immediate family survived, and we must go on. But my mother never forgot. And she always said to us, "My heart is like a stone." But she said, "You have to live for the future." And I have to say, that's the last 52, 53 years, I had a rough childhood, but I've had a good life since then. And I'm grateful to be in this wonderful country. I wouldn't be anywhere else. And I think that's about all I can think of.

Q: Thank you, very much, Mrs. Coppel. I'm going to stop the tape now.

A: Thank you.

#### Conclusion of Interview