

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Beatrice Muchman, now married to Larry Abrams, on September 27th, 2016 in Chicago, Illinois. Thank you very, very much for agreeing to meet with us, to share your story, to share your experiences and your thoughts.

You're very welcome.

We're going to start the interview at the very beginning, like we do with everybody. And I'm going to ask you a few basic questions and then we go from there.

OK.

Can you tell me your date of birth?

June 5th. I'm sorry, I'm croaking. June 5th, 1933 in Berlin, Germany.

What was your name at birth?

Westheimer.

Your first name?

Beatrix Westheimer. It wasn't the best year. It was the year Hitler came to power. But my family was very integrated, young, German, and reasonably unaware of circumstances.

Do you know what part of Berlin your family lived in?

Yes. It was the Bavarian area, which is where young people would move. I just revisited Berlin recently.

Oh, really?

Yes. Survivors were invited. And I saw the area, which is now full of posters and indicating what Jewish families were living through. Jews cannot visit parks. They cannot sit on benches.

It's historical now, but at the time, it was real. And it made me realize that as a little child, being wheeled in a buggy, I knew nothing, but my parents must have been aware.

I want to ask, you say it was the Bavarian part of Berlin. Would this have been in the former Eastern section or the Western section?

No, it was actually the Western section.

Do you know the name of the region? Was it Lankwitz, Lichterfelde, Zehlendorf, Dahlem, Charlottenburg?

It was not Charlottenburg, but I don't know the rest.

OK.

I don't know.

OK. Because I couldn't recognize what the Bavarian section would have been.

Yeah. Yeah.

Do if it was the center of town or whether it was a residential area?

It was very much a residential area.

Had your family been there for generations?

For generations.

OK, so they were old Berliners.

They were old Berliners. And my great grandfather fought in the First World War, like many Jewish Germans, with medals. My grandmother had a large family, and everyone would meet on Sundays. These are hazy memories that I have. But yes, they were Berliners.

OK. Do you have any memories of your home?

I have memories of visiting an uncle on Sundays and getting very wet kisses. Now, that's about as far as I go. I mean, when I went back, I saw my nursery school, but only because I've researched that. Could I really tell you memories? Not until Kristallnacht.

OK.

What I'm trying to find out now is what kind of a place you lived in. Was it an apartment or a single family home? Would you know that?

It was an apartment.

OK.

Actually, people didn't live in single family homes. It was an apartment. And it had to be somewhat spacious, from what I have now seen. But actually, I don't have pictures of that.

Do you know what your father-- how he supported your family?

My father did something with the meat business, as many of the Westheimers did. And my mother worked for her father. My grandfather had a printing business for artists.

Oh.

So my mother was one of four sisters, and all four sisters were educated in some kind of a career. So they were somewhat ahead of their day.

Do you know the names of all four sisters?

OK. The oldest sister was Frieda Hurwitz. Well, they were Boas, B-O-A-S.

Their maiden names were Boas.

Were Boas. So it was Frieda Boas, the oldest. And then came Margot Louis, but at the time Boas. After Margot came my mother, Meta.

Meta.

Boas, then Westheimer. And then the younger sister was Hella Boas, later also a Hurwitz.

OK. So that's your mother's side of the family?

Correct. What were you your grandmother and grandfather's names on your mother's side of the family?

Baruch, B-A-R-U-C-H.

Boas?

Well, my grandfather was Boas. My grandmother was Baruch.

Oh, I see. I see. Her first name?

Her first name-- Mimi is what I think of-- was Johanna.

OK, Johanna Baruch. And she married? His first name?

Bernhardt.

Bernhardt Boas.

Correct.

OK. And they had four girls?

That's correct.

Did you know your grandfather and your grandmother?

I knew my grandmother very intimately. My grandfather died the day my parents got-- the day before my parents got married. So he died long before the Holocaust. It was 1932.

Do you know how the story of how your parents met and became engaged and how they found each other?

I don't. I don't know the story, but I picture it had to be a wonderful love story.

And let's turn to your father's side of the family. What was his name, first and last?

His name was Julius Westheimer. And my father, as far as I knew, was an orphan. So there wasn't very much history. I knew that my father was a very sports-like person. He liked a crew. And of course, all of this came to an end with the Holocaust.

Sure.

But he took to my mother's family. And that's the only family that I ever heard of, and therefore my entire life has been the maternal part of the family.

I see. I see. And you say he worked in the meat business somehow, and your mother worked in her father's printing business?

And got married and stopped working.

And got married and stopped working.

And how would you describe your family's financial footing? Was it well-to-do? Was it middle class?

It was middle class. It was definitely middle.

Did your mother have any help at home, anyone coming in?

I don't know. I don't know. I mean, at the age of five, Kristallnacht had already happened, so a lot of these things I don't know. My grandmother did, that I know.

I'm going to ask a few questions. The reason for them is to get a sense of the level of development. I'm talking about economic, mostly development, within a place. And I'm assuming in Berlin, it would be quite high, but not always. Did you have indoor plumbing?

Yes.

OK. Did you have electricity?

Yes.

Do you know how the place was heated? Did you have coal ovens or coal heating?

No. No.

OK.

I would consider the apartment about as modern as an apartment would be today, except there was a depression in Germany, and so things became very tough. And when my grandfather died, of course, there were other hardships, but the apartments were normal. [NON-ENGLISH]

OK, [NON-ENGLISH]. Did your family have a radio?

Yes.

Did they have a telephone?

It was confiscated.

OK. Did they have a telephone?

I don't know that. I'm assuming they might have, but I don't know the answer to that.

OK. And there was a bathroom and toilet facilities within the apartment?

Yes. Yes.

Did your father have a car?

Yes, my father had a car, because I distinctly remember, when I was about probably four years old, we had a car accident going on a trip. It was very traumatic, but that's how I know. Of course he had a car, yes.

OK. And did you have your own room?

Yes, I had my own room.

OK. Can you remember how many rooms there were in the apartment?

Not.

I know. If someone asked me, at five years old, whether I would remember--

I don't remember that.

OK. Do you have memories before Kristallnacht about your life in Berlin?

The memories I have are about one uncle who was partially owner, or had some relationship to Tietz, which was a German Marshall Field's.

A department store.

Kind of a department store. One uncle was a pharmacist. My grandmother had about eight brothers and sisters. And I remember some days, we would visit and just people floating around. But that's about the extent of my memory.

The Baruch family.

In the Baruch family, right, and lots of cookies.

Do you remember walking in parks?

Yes. I remember walking in parks, and I also remember when you had to stop walking in parks. But I must have been so sheltered that none of this rang as a terrible thing. We walked in parks and then we didn't walk in parks. And we walked on the street and then we didn't walk on the street. This was Berlin. Things changed drastically.

OK. So let's come to Kristallnacht. What can you tell me from your memory of Kristallnacht.

From my memory, I had woken up and I thought my drapes were on fire. Of course, it wasn't drapes at all. It was a reflection, but I had no idea. And my father came and just scooped me out of bed and we ran out on the street. And our synagogue was burning. It was down the street.

And having revisited, I know it was really down the street. And I just knew it was a disaster. Did I understand that it was the end of something and the beginning of something else? Really not, but it was frightening.

Do you remember now the street name that your apartment was on?

At this moment, I can't tell you, but I do know it.

That's OK. That's OK, Trixie.

Kaiserallee.

Kaiserallee. OK. It's fairly central, if I remember.

Yes. OK, it is. It is.

Yeah.

I have absolutely no sense of direction. Sorry.

That's OK. And I just called you Trixie without letting people know how.

Oh. OK.

So tell me about how people called you.

I had two nicknames. One was Puppe.

Puppe.

Which meant that my cousins would look in the buggy and decide it was a doll. Because in German, puppe means a doll. And the other one was probably taken from Beatrix. And Trixie.

So did your parents call your Trixie or Beatrix?

I think Puppe.

Puppe. Puppe.

Puppe, Trixie, Trixie Line, a number of names.

So you're out on the street and you get a sense that something had ended and something new was beginning, and there was all of this chaos. Did you see other people, do you think, on the street?

I just remember fire and scary destruction, as it would scare a child.

Sure. Sure. Then what happened?

You know, I jump from that point to the family falling apart. I'm from a very sheltered background. I remember meetings and whispering, and wanting to lie down on the floor and listen to what people were saying that I couldn't understand.

And then of course, the next thing I knew we were emigrating. By that, I mean we were literally fleeing, because you could really not emigrate anywhere. So how we got to the border between Berlin and Brussels I don't know.

So you were going westwards?

We were going to meet my aunt and uncle, Frieda, the oldest sister, her husband who was a lawyer but had been blackballed, and their youngest child, their only child, Henry. And it seemed like the logical place to go.

And they lived where?

They lived in Brussels, outside of Brussels.

OK, well, the trek from Berlin to the border is quite long.

Is quite long. And I can't tell you if it took a day, if there was a train, if there was a bus.

Or the car.

I don't know. I don't know.

Do you remember anything else from that trip to Brussels?

Oh, from crossing the border?

Tell me.

Yes. What I remember about crossing the border is being-- we went with Margot, who was the second sister down the line.

The second oldest.

Her husband was very tall, and my cousin Bernt. All we could do is take whatever we could put on ourselves, because really by this time, you could not leave. This was after Kristallnacht. I believe it was March.

And I remember, for the first time in my life, that I was told, one sound and you're decked. So as a five-year-old child and now a grandmother and great grandmother, I know how scared I must have been. I never talked. I was on my father's shoulders, and there were dogs all around. And this was a stretch of forest with army.

It's a very familiar story, because so many thousands and thousands of people did the same thing. We had guides, and of course, guides were not particularly trustworthy, but these people obviously got us to where we were going. Did I really understand any of this? I only understood to be afraid and to have to leave things behind.

So how many people were in your group of people?

So altogether, there was my grandmother, who had barely, I think, told anybody that we were leaving.

So your mother's mother?

My mother's mother, my mother, my father, myself, and my uncle and aunt, and my cousin, their son.

So this was another uncle and aunt who had a son? So you had one that was waiting for you in Brussels--

Correct.

--and one that was coming with you.

Correct. This was the oldest cousin, and the one in Brussels was the youngest cousin, Henry.

OK. OK.

Who takes a life of his own in the next part of this.

So you were rather a large group, actually.

We were a large group to be kept quiet, yes.

I mean, did people just leave everything behind?

People left everything behind.

And you left everything behind?

And I had to leave everything behind, except what you could wear, and whatever you could take that wasn't too cumbersome because it was a long journey in March.

Now, at the time, you wouldn't have known this, but later, did you know how soon after Kristallnacht you all fled?

It was March.

So several months later.

Several months later, because obviously, this had to be arranged.

So it was March 1939?

Correct.

And Kristallnacht had happened November 9th, 1938.

Correct.

So there you are, March, which is still winter, and you're in the forest. Do you remember leaving it? Do you remember of being on the Belgian side of the border at some point?

I remember getting in and the relief of the entire family that these guides had taken the money and actually delivered us to the other side of the border.

OK.

And then I remember a reunion and I thought everything was fine, because now we were again together with my youngest cousin, who I adored. And I thought it was over. That was it.

Let me step back a little bit here.

Go ahead.

I want to ask a little bit about the people who were in your world at that time when you were a little girl and about who they were and their personalities. So let's start with your mother. Tell me, what do you remember of her? What was she like? What were some of the things that she liked to do? What were her interests?

My mother was very art-- she was a very soft woman. She was beautiful. She was a wonderful seamstress, an industrial artist, because that's actually what she studied to be. And my father was a very tough guy. He kind of ran the show, but having been raised an orphan, that was quite understandable. So basically, my father set the rules.

Was he scary?

No, not to meet. And I doubt that he was scary to my mother, but it's just sort of the way I remember the flow in the family.

OK. And did they play with you?

Yes. Yes. They played with me to a point. But if I got in the way, well then, you know, bye. But my Uncle Werner was the star. He eventually became my adoptive father, and he was definitely the star. Everybody loved my Uncle Werner. So he became my children's grandfather later. Always beloved, so I have just very long-term memories of him.

So was he part of the group that was coming with you?

He was part of the group. He was part of the group.

So it was your Aunt Margo.



Right.

And your Uncle Werner, who were married together.

Correct.

And their last name was?

Well, at that time it was Loevy, L-O-E-V-Y.

Oh, Loevy in German.

Right.

So it would have been lion. That's what it means.

Right, exactly.

OK. And they had a son named?

Bernt.

Bernt, OK. And your grandmother, Johanna.

Yes.

Boas.

She was the matriarch. She also set the tone, and I think my mother would never have left Berlin if my grandmother would not have gone. And my grandmother hesitated to leave because of her family. It was her life.

OK. That's huge.

It's huge. It just becomes more understandable the older I get.

Yeah.

And I have questioned it.

Well, that's part of the process, isn't it?

It is, indeed.

When you have the skeleton of a life story, the skeleton of what happened, but you have many places where there is no meat on the bones and you want to find out.

Yes. Yes, absolutely.

So your grandmother was a strong personality. Your father was a strong personality. And your uncle Werner--

My uncle Werner was very funny. I don't know that he was necessarily as strong-- not in the sense that a child would remember. He was just the one who would make everybody laugh and who had tons of patience, and he was very tall so he would stand out in any crowd.

And so you as a group now make it to the Belgian side.

Correct.

And do you remember that moment when you've made it to the Belgian side?

Not exactly. I remember being met by family, and from that point on, I felt, oh, it's over. This is now wonderful. Mistake.

And then what? And then what's the next place?

OK, so then the next several months, actually, were a joyful reunion, as I remember it.

So it's the mid of March 1939. The war hasn't started yet.

March, April. No. But then my father was arrested.

By whom?

Actually, by the Belgian authorities because he was German. So there goes this double-edged sword, not realizing the Jews are really escaping. It was just bureaucracy. And my father, as well as my uncle, the uncle that we went to meet--

Not uncle Werner.

Not uncle Werner. This was Uncle Walter. These two men were sent to France, Gurs, which was a common place to-- at the time it was a holding camp.

Run by the French?

By the Belgians.

In France?

In France. This is where, frequently, people would be sent.

And their crime was that they were in Belgium with German passports?

Well--

Because you all--

What we now would call green cards. I mean, they were not citizens.

Of Belgium?

No. They were allowed into the country-- I didn't realize all this exactly-- but they were allowed into the country as passersby.

Transit.

Exactly. Refugees. And the country took them in, which is more than other countries did, of course. But if they were German, they were enemies. So there you go. No one understood they were Jews. But here were these women, my mother, without a husband.

My mother was sewing. I'm assuming she was sewing for other people, and for me, for sure. And life went on. I don't exactly know how. I went to first grade, whatever first grade was then. And my father did come home. He escaped.

Do you now know how many months incarceration there was?

It was months.

Months.

It was a lot of months.

OK.

And the Jewish star had already happened.

So that was the German occupation had already happened?

So the German occupation had already happened. But my father had managed to escape. If you're asking me my memories as a child, I don't know how. I just remember seeing my father looking like a skeleton, and just being thrilled that he was home. But I was scared, too, because I already recognized him.

So by this point, the war has started. By the time he escapes, the war has started. Germany has occupied Belgium. And not only occupied, but now you, personally, have to wear the star that distinguishes you from anybody else.

And between that, between the star and the occupation, there was the outpouring of Brussels going toward the French borders. This was like reliving the First World War. I didn't understand that, either.

You saw people leave?

Oh, en masse. People were leaving en masse. And there were dead horses on the road and bodies on the road. And my mother and my aunt-- my cousin and I got the measles. I remember we were sick. But you know, everything to us was half a game.

So you were trying to leave Belgium as well?

We were trying to leave Brussels because the Germans were going to invade, and these women were scared. They were reliving the First World War. Actually, we were going into the fire, so it didn't do much good. But we turned around.

You went into the fire, you say?

Well, the fighting was actually taking place on the border of France, where all these people were escaping. So we were going toward more war. And by the time we got back, Brussels had been overtaken.

And your father was still in prison?

Yes.

OK, so you remember that flight?

I remember the flight. And I remember eating strawberries in farmhouses and drinking milk in farmhouses.

Where was your grandmother?

And my grandmother was with us. My grandmother was very strong. Anyway, she wasn't that old, even though I

thought she was.

[CHUCKLES]

And so you go partially, and you see that it's going into more chaos and more fighting. And so you turned around.

Everybody turned around.

Everybody turned around.

Right.

OK. And you make your way back to the same place?

To the same place. And the landlady had taken care of our apartment, as well as, I imagine, my aunt's.

In general, what was the attitude of local Belgians to you, to other refugees? What was the atmosphere like there?

We had a wonderful Christian landlady. Belgium was a-- I know this now as an adult-- Belgium was basically a Catholic country, and heroic in the way-- this is Belgium, only Belgium. It's not Poland and it's not Russia. There was an atmosphere of helping Jewish, especially children.

And I was never afraid. I was extremely uncomfortable with the star, and my mother pulled me out of school, because I didn't know why I had to wear the star. And of course, children must have made fun or stared or wondered, and at that point my mother took me out of school. And that is about the time that my father came back into our lives.

Oh my gosh, all that chaos.

It was nothing but chaos.

Yeah.

It was nothing but chaos. It was nothing but chaos, but my mother continued not school, but dancing lessons. And the imagination kept going. She turned everything into a game, and it stood me in such good stead in my life.

So was that your way of coping?

Totally. Totally.

So things became games.

Everything was a game.

I'm reminded of that film *Life is Beautiful*.

Yes. There was something quite realistic about that film, that parents-- I don't know about all parents, but my mother especially. And my father was an optimist. My father never believed any of this would really come to an end. So there was not only being loved so much, but being given the opportunity to remain as just possible a child and looking at life as a child.

That's amazing. That's amazing.

Is it?

Yeah.

Or parents pretty much shelter children, or try.

Sometimes.

We are talking sometimes, of course.

Sometimes.

It's a huge generalization.

Yeah. But that ability to have had it succeed.

It succeeded. I think that I probably was born thinking I was going to be Shirley Temple. I remember wooden curlers in my hair. And I remember there's a war going on all around us, in horror, and my mother managed this. And no work. There were committees, of course, the Belgian Jewish Committee helping. But she must have been quite a wonder.

So your father returns. You've seen all of this chaos. You've seen the occupation. You see you have to wear the yellow star. By this point, I assume you must have already spoken some French?

A lot of French.

Did your parents also?

Not. Barely. Barely, which was obviously some part of the downfall. And my grandmother never. But children-- I became a foreign language teacher for good reason-- children just assimilate language so quickly.

Sponges.

Oh, yeah. It was no problem.

OK. Did you often have to be the interlocutor then between?

Yes. Yes.

How did that happen? You're six years old maybe, seven years old?

Six. Did I love it? I think so. I think I was very impatient. I think I felt my mother should definitely have learned French better than she did.

Did you have to translate for her?

Oh, sure, at times. At times. And my grandmother was-- well, my grandmother was my mother.

Tell me about her personality.

Oh, my grandmother, she was a very tiny person, but you didn't cross my grandmother. She just knew what she wanted to do. She would navigate between her two daughters. She had my mother, who was her favorite child, and my oldest aunt, Frieda. And my grandmother would take turns, navigating between the two sisters.

So what happened to Margot?

Margot had already left for the United States.

Oh, how did that happen? They were able to leave and the others weren't.

It was quite a sad parting, because we all loved each other. And of course, as I later found out, Werner and my father, Julius, went for visas. I didn't know this as a child. But my father's name was misspelled. A letter was missing from Westheimer, so he didn't get a visa and my uncle did.

Did your uncle, who was married into your mother's side of the family, did he get an affidavit from his own relatives?

He received an affidavit from two brothers, who were lawyers in Chicago, and that's how he received an affidavit. They would have done the same for my father, had bureaucracy not intervened.

So your father didn't get it because his name was misspelled.

By a letter.

By one letter in the alphabet on the letter, on the affidavit itself.

On the affidavit.

Oh, that must have been such a--

Well, it cost them their lives. Did I understand all of it? No, I just understood the parting was awful. And of course, everybody wanted to come to America. And I don't think anybody realized that America's borders were closed. I think we just thought Roosevelt was God and was going to make everything happen. And none of this was quite understood as a child. I do remember watching as the war evolved and hearing so much about Roosevelt.

Everybody's hope.

Everybody's hope. Roosevelt was everybody's hope.

So of the four sisters, one had already been in Brussels.

Two-- one had already been in Brussels. The youngest sister had left in 1937 for the United States.

Hella.

Hella, and her husband Walter, and a little girl, Florie. And then Werner and Margot and Bernt. Just everybody left on the last boat. They supposedly left on the last boat.

And so who was left was Frieda and her husband, who was also in prison?

Yes.

And Henry, your youngest cousin.

Yes.

Your mother, your father, and yourself.

Exactly.

And your grandmother.

And my grandmother.

And so that's when you said, when she goes between the two daughters--

It's the oldest sister and my mother.

The third?

Right. And so she sometimes lived with us and sometimes lived with Frieda. And she babysat for me. Well, it was not called babysitting at the time, but she stayed with me a lot.

And why was your mother her favorite child?

I can't exactly answer that, but it isn't because she lost my mother. My mother would never have left her mother behind. I think the other daughters were quite willing to make their own way, maybe rightfully so. I don't know. But my mother would never have left her mother. So she was very attached to her own mother, and maybe it went both ways.

OK. OK. That's not an easy question to answer, I know.

I don't exactly know, either. I do know from later stories that she was definitely the favorite daughter.

And your father reappears. Is he able to-- I mean, if he looks so different from when you had last seen him, and I think you said he looked like a skeleton?

Yeah.

Was he unhealthy? Was he sick?

He had typhoid. And he had actually hidden beneath cadavers to escape, and escaped with typhoid. And was held up in between, but eventually made his way, because my father, he was just like that. You could have great confidence in what he set out to do.

OK. Was he able then to help put food on the table once he came back?

Once he came back, yes. And within, I can't remember a span of time, but there were then good times again. There was a lull, and we moved to a bigger apartment. My grandmother came to live with us, and we even had a little yard. And for immigrants in Brussels, that seemed to be wonderful.

Well, tell me, at the same time this was happening and in your family, the minute that German soldiers would march into a Polish village, Polish Jews would be rounded up and taken to a ghetto. Do you know why that wasn't going on in Belgium?

There was a committee, and I found this out. We moved a lot. The minute you had to register, my father moved.

So he didn't register?

He never registered, and didn't do him any good anyway. But he never registered, figuring that these committees that were set up to register Jews were a trap. And in fact, that was the case later.

Who set up these committees?

These were Jewish committees set up by Jewish--

Organizations.

--organizations, that were told by the Nazis, if you can round up Jews-- not round up. No, no, no, no. Wrong term. If you can get us names and phone numbers, these Jewish families will be saved. Well, it was quite contrary. And history tells all kinds of other stories about these committees.

OK.

But my father didn't trust anybody, and he had decided that he wasn't registering. So the minute we had to register an apartment, we would move. So we moved a lot, and sometimes in little places and sometimes in bigger places. And the place I remember best was the last apartment, which, of course, was probably the worst apartment because that was 1942.

So you were able to live in Belgium for almost three years after the war starts?

Correct. Correct.

Now, did you, as an adult or later on in life, learn what the Nazi policies in Belgium themselves were against native Belgian Jews, not only the refugees?

OK, against Belgian native Jews, they were better than against-- the first Jews that Nazis were after were non-Belgian Jews.

OK.

Belgian Jews were more protected, both by their own government probably, as well as the Nazis' disinterest. But we would have been first. And in 1942, of course, as we all know now, my parents noticed people disappearing all around, which was the "final solution."

And that's when they made the decision, along with an underground committee that was set up, made up of Christians and Jews, to find homes for children.

I mean, did I know this at the time? No, I did not. I thought I was going to summer camp, as a matter of fact. But Christians and Jews and people-- nuns, priests-- people would gather and decide how many Jewish children they could save. And my parents found a family.

You were how old?

At that time I was nine. Was I nine? Between eight and nine. And they found two sisters to each other who were able to take two children. That was my young cousin Henry, younger by a year, and myself. And my father said we were going to summer camp.

How did you get there?

He took a train.

With the star on him?

No. He hid the star, and we did, too. But we were on a train with Germans. And I remember being told, now you don't understand a word, so just hush.

Pretend you don't know German?

Exactly. But we were so excited. We thought we were going to a regular summer camp. So we were on this train, all three of us. My father must have been panicked, but never acted it, not in my memory.



So where did you end up?

We ended up in a little town called Ottignies, which is maybe 25 kilometers outside of Brussels, but I thought it was the other end of the world at the time, of course. And the train station was at the very low end of the town, and the houses were way high up.

Now, we were city children. We had been raised in Berlin and Brussels, under surveillance of the tightest kind, as you can imagine. And here we were suddenly in a village. And we loved it. We just loved it. Now, arriving at this little-- to us it was a fire. It was not really a farm, but it was a house with a big backyard and they were growing vegetables, and we saw all this.

Tell me, why would there be surveillance of the toughest kind?

My parents. Oh my God. I mean, we couldn't go anywhere alone is what I meant. I'm sorry. Wrong-- well, wrong word.

No, no. The right, but needs explanation.

Yes, of course. I mean parental surveillance, because wherever we went, our parents were with us, or somebody had to be. They were scared for us.

Got it.

So now we seem to be in a place that, number one, we thought was a summer camp. Number two, was just wide open countryside.

And nobody had to be with you.

And we thought, after my father left, that nobody would have to be with us. But when my father left, we knew it wasn't a summer camp. It was just only the two of us, so what kind of a summer camp could this be? But it didn't really take long.

What was that goodbye like?

Pardon me?

What was the goodbye like to your father?

He just said, "mon petit bébé," "my little baby." And I knew something was just terribly wrong. But I think either we were very well taught or we knew just to do what children do best, which is really survive. I know, watching him go, it was not a summer camp kind of parting, although children going to summer camp can be very sad, too.

Yeah, yeah. It was just heavier? You felt it was heavier?

It was heavier than some kind of a summer separation. I think I'm more than, perhaps, my younger cousin.

What were these two sisters like?

Well, one of them was absolutely wonderful, and she eventually became my godmother. She was tall, always a cigarette dangling from her mouth, wearing an apron, and a little angular. Wonderfully natural. No fuss. We just knew this was going to work out. And her sister was more in the background.

What were their names?

The sister's name was Adele [? Ponsiss ?] and Jeanne Duchet.

Jeanne Duchet.

Who became Marraine, my godmother.

Does Marraine mean godmother?

Marraine means godmother, correct.

OK.

So basically, within a few days, we were home.

What was that new home like?

It was a wonderful, little house, another thing we had never lived it, with a basement where vegetables were kept, one kitchen that was like an everybody room with a little oven, and the oven was both there to heat the room and cook. There was a salon, which was the front room, the living room.

Upstairs, there were two bedrooms. One belonged to the sisters and one was for us, but we all slept together. It was just decided that this felt better, and warmer. [LAUGHS]

And warmer.

And warmer. In the winter, it was pretty cold.

Why was it that your mother didn't go to see you off there?

I don't know. I think, from what I heard, that my father looked very Gentile. He had blue eyes, blondish, and he could pass. I don't know that my mother felt she could. I don't even remember saying goodbye to my mother. I think my mother couldn't handle this, and I have since seen letters. And I'm sure she couldn't handle this.

When you left that time, did you see her again?

I never saw my mother again. I never saw my mother again. And my greatest regret was not even remembering saying goodbye, or perhaps even as a child, not thinking that it was important. I don't know. I don't know.

But you did enter a world that was good for you. That's what I'm sensing.

It was amazing. What a gift. What a gift. It was a world so separate from the reality in the world. And we really didn't know. Did we choose not to know? I don't know.

It's perfectly understandable, even if you had, but you wouldn't have known you had.

We didn't know. We couldn't go to school, but we learned how to pick berries. We were roaming. I've gone back many times. And when my cousin, who lives still in Brussels, shows me where we walked, we would walk in the woods and the German Army was stationed right above us. I mean, if anybody had asked us questions, I don't know what would have happened. And we were totally unafraid.

You both spoke French, however.

Oh yes, fluently. It had been decided we would be the niece and nephew of Jeanne Duchet, our eventual godmother. So we had an identity. And of course, we found out later that nobody really believed this. Everybody knew we were Jewish

children, which was very interesting in itself.

Tell me a little bit about the village itself. How large was it? About how many people lived there?

You know, I can't tell you how many people-- to me it was very small. People knew each other.

OK.

You knew the place you would walk to to get milk, unpasteurized, and you knew the neighbors. You felt perfectly free. There was no one you ever had to-- I mean, we would walk in front of the city hall, and the Germans occupied city hall.

Hiding in plain sight.

We were totally visibly hidden children.

Wow.

And there were other Jewish children in the village.

Could you recognize them?

Well, recently, there was a monument erected in this town for the rescuers, and our godmother was, of course, memorialized on this monument. And I could not recognize, but they recognized, my cousin Henry and myself. Oh, you were the little Shirley that danced or sang. Or whatever it is that we did, they remembered. Did I ever recognize anyone? Yes. Shortly after the war, when we went back, with my late husband and our children, we did recognize some of the villagers. We were now grown.

But did you recognize other hidden children as being hidden?

No. You weren't allowed to do that. Everybody had a story. So the way you would unite would be, more or less, as oh, we belong to a scout team. And all those children were Jewish.

But you didn't know it.

No, we didn't know it. We didn't know it. And they arranged all ages. I mean, some were 18. Some were 16. Somewhere were five. And they were hidden in what was considered to be an orphanage, but was once, upon a time, a school for disabled. And these children were together under the auspices of someone else, who took care of them. And since I did write a book and the story is out there, I have received phone calls from people who were hidden right in that institution-

Oh my.

--and didn't have such a wonderful experience. So we were quite fortunate. We did.

OK.

And this doesn't mean everybody, it's just some, two people that got in touch with me that did not have a good experience.

So what made Marraine special?

I think the fact that she was so not fussy, and caring in the way that we weren't accustomed to being cared for. We didn't have to be home for dinner. We didn't have to be home for lunch. She trusted us completely. She didn't have any children of her own, ever. And I think that this non-fussy caring was just the best thing that could have happened to us.

Because you had, for understandable reasons, up until then, parents who are nervous for you.

Always. Always. And we were so loved. We were so loved. She genuinely loved us. And my cousin remained with her. His mother went back to Germany because she married someone who was on business there.

After the war?

After the war, he remained with her and went to university. He would commute every day. She was a genuinely loving human being. Anyway, you couldn't do what she did. You just would have to be-- I don't think she thought of herself as anybody heroic. I think she just was a little piece of the history that made good things happen.

You couldn't go to school, you said.

No, not formal.

Not formal. So was there informal school?

Informal was the words, and learning what mushrooms that you could eat, the ones that weren't poisoned.

That's also important.

That was very important. And learning, really, how to navigate the countryside--

Did you have chores?

--and how to be on your own. Pardon me?

Did you have chores.

Oh, we had enormous amounts of chores, which was another wonderful thing. I think basically, we were never given chores. I took dancing lessons. I'm not sure what my cousin-- he wasn't given chores, either.

You mean at home with your parents?

At home with our parents. But we loved the chores. We were competing with each other who was stronger, who could peel more green beans, who could be more potatoes. We loved it. We would gather what was leftover from corn, on our knees and kill ourselves, but we never minded it.

That's a help. That's a real help.

It's a real help. My cousin now says it really made a strong. Well, maybe in a way, it really did. It was that part of education. Then I became a teacher. I always tell my kids that there is no way you can learn as much behind a desk as I learned in this part of my life. No, I didn't go back to school until seventh grade.

Wow. Wow.

Where I had a year in Brussels, and then I came to the United States.

So you have a gap of a good three years or so, if not more.

Yes, four years.

Yeah. Religion, did it come up?

Yes, that was the best part. We had to go to catechism.

Was she religious, by the way?

Not at all.

[LAUGHS]

Not at all, but I became so religious. I wanted to be a Carmelite nun of the non-speaking order. Because we had visited the Carmelite nuns, who were just lovely and floating around in these incredible outfits. And I thought, continuing the Shirley Temple routine, that this outfit, this habit, would be wonderful on me. And if I didn't have to talk-- oh, it would have been a disaster. Those poor sisters.

[LAUGHS]

But religion became, I think, surrogate parents. I think Catholicism became enormously important to us.

So what would be the routine? Would you go to catechism classes?

At 6 o'clock in the morning. So there goes schooling. There goes reading in Latin, and language, and a wonderful parish priest.

What was his name?

Father Vaes.

Father Vaes?

V-A-E-S. Right.

Father Vaes. What did he look like?

I have pictures. He was probably a very ordinary, middle-aged man. I think to us, everybody looked old. But he wasn't. He wasn't old. And just a very protective person, who also was aware of all the Jewish children. And I don't think there were any expectations laid upon us. We just did.

So did Marraine arrange for you to go to catechism every day? Was this on her initiative?

Well, she had to. I mean, the idea was that we were in a Catholic village. If we had been anything but Catholic, it wouldn't have appeared--

It wouldn't have supported the story?

Not at all.

I see. OK, so that's the tradition. So all the children of the village go.

All the children of the village go to catechism. And then, of course, comes with this a preparation for a first communion.

Yes.

Which was the highlight of my life. And I borrowed a dress and shoes, and my cousin was a choir boy. It was a huge part of that life. We loved the church. To me, the church looked huge. As we went back to visit, later as an adult with

our children, the church was very small. It was not huge.

It shrunk in the meantime.

It shrunk. But it gave us something. It gave us hope. There was the after life. I never understood death anyway. But if you're afraid to lose someone and you can believe that there is a life hereafter, how wonderful. And we believed. So there was nothing about the Catholic religion lost on us. Plus the kindness that was extended to us.

That is the key.

That was the key. It was all so much love, and so much love on the other side that we didn't understand.

The other side meaning?

Meaning my parents.

But you didn't know it at the time? Well, you did.

No, I didn't.

Why would you say that you didn't? When you say you were such a loved child at home, and had dancing lessons and your mother sewed for you and your parents played with you, and so on.

I knew I was loved, but I didn't understand how much love it would take for a parent to give up a child.

Did you feel like your parents had given you up?

No. I felt like they had sort of just abandoned me. Where were they? They were really not coming back. And I found that out the second time my father came to visit with clothes. And the clothes were indicative of the fact that we were going to stay. Otherwise, why would he bring clothes after summer was over, and supposedly, camp was finished? So then I knew.

So in other words, you end up in a good place. You're happy there. But you're not being told the full truth as to what this is all about.

Right.

And you fill in the gaps with your own interpretation.

Yes.

They're abandoning me.

I could have helped, or maybe not help, but they left me. In those days, or in those times-- let me put it that way-- you just didn't tell children why they were going away. The truth was beyond explanation. Too scary, too frightening. So I found out that my father had been killed through the parish priest. This was in 1944, and my grandmother had gotten those news through the underground to my parish priest.

What happened? How did he tell you?

I was on his lap and he told me my father had been killed. And I didn't even quite understand what it meant. I just knew I would see him again, so it couldn't be that bad a thing. I had not lost a dog. I didn't understand death.

You hadn't seen a corpse.

I probably saw a corpse, but it didn't fall into place for me. So it was a very sad thing. But I had my mother.

So tell me, what did you learn at the time about the circumstance?

Not much.

OK.

Not much. I just knew that he had been wounded and hurt and he was dead. But I knew my mother would come back.

Let me pause for just a second.

And I'm going to take my jacket off.

OK. And I will apologize in advance because the question--

OK, so I wanted to ask a question, and I'm apologizing in advance for it because it is borne out of the world we live in today, rather than the times then. But in the past several years, there have been many scandals within the Catholic church of priests being inappropriate priests, exploiting the trust that children have in them. And when you mentioned Father Vaes told you about your father's death while you were sitting on his lap, in olden times, no one would think twice about it. Today people's ears would perk up and they'd say there's a red flag there.

OK.

Is there any reason to have that red flag?

There is no reason. I have no explanation for this, but in that village, Father Vaes had a housekeeper, and Father Vaes and the housekeeper had a child. So this little boy would walk around the village. Everybody knew he was Father Vaes' son and the housekeeper. So it was a different time altogether. But inappropriate with me, never. Or my cousin, never. So I don't think anything like that ever even entered our minds.

So he was just an affectionate person that, when he wanted to tell you this--

He didn't know how to tell it. And you would automatically-- what would you do? You wouldn't put a child 10 feet away from you. You would, of course, hold the child on your lap and tell the child the story.

I just spoke to the Catholic dioceses in northwest Indiana, and it is so amazing to me where we were and what we've come to. Maybe it's just one story. I doubt it, but this is really just this story and this little village, and the life of this particular priest and his housekeeper and this son that they had. And everybody knew it. I mean, there was nothing peculiar about it.

Can we cut for a second?

So you felt you like you were in safe hands when you were with him, when you were with Mairaine, when you were in the village, even though the Germans were right there.

In total safe hands. We were stopped once by a German soldier, who told us we reminded him of his children, and it was sort of a sad encounter. Were we a little intimidated? Yes. But genuinely frightened? No. We became frightened when the Allies began bombing. Now that was horrific.

So it was something we had never really expected, but that particular train station was a very important train station and the Allies were trying to get to it. So we had to dig a shelter at the end of the yard. And of course, even building it was fun. Going into it wasn't so much fun.

But the lights, the glares that the Germans would send up to find the Allied planes were frightening, because we didn't understand what they were. And parachutes. We would find parachutes. And I always thought somebody must be after us. But that was frightening because every night, the sirens would go off. And every night you would have to get out of bed and go into the shelter.

Well, that's war coming to you.

It was real war. And at that point, it was as frightening to the two sisters as it was to us, as it was to the whole village. But then the next day, we would go play in the craters, so go figure children.

Yeah.

And I've seen enough documentaries to know children still do these things now, even mines.

Sure. They'll pick up a grenade that doesn't explode.

That doesn't explode. And mines all around them, and they're still playing.

And so about how long did that last, that period of time.

The bombs? That period of time seems like forever, and probably not as long as I think. Probably a few months. And then we were liberated by-- I didn't know this, but it was General Patton's army. I just knew they were soldiers on tanks, and I expected to see these glamorous American soldiers.

Looking like Shirley Temple.

Oh, I don't know what they were, just totally. But it was a Black army. I had never seen a Black person, except chieftains from the Congo. So I thought, oh, then America must look like this. So the fact that I never understood racism, I come by it honestly, because this was really my first encounter.

What was interesting, that I didn't even understand, is the sergeant, or whoever led the battalions, were all white. And when I did research for my book, I found out that African Americans were not allowed to carry arms, except when armed in wartime. But as they were filing through in tanks, they weren't allowed to carry guns. So they only had chewing gum and candy, but we weren't even allowed to take that.

Why not?

I think the villagers were scared. They didn't know what was being-- they had never seen chewing gum.

Were they apprehensive about the liberators?

Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

Oh, really?

And there were still various sniping going on. Snipers were around.

So they didn't greet them with flags and wave and everything like that?

Not really. We knew we were being liberated.

And why was this apprehensiveness there, do you think?



Well, I think this was a village, and the street is very narrow. And when huge tanks and dust comes through, with helmets and soldiers, so close to your front door, I think it was very intimidating. I don't think it had a thing to do with the color of anybody's skin. No one told me, this one way or another, but I doubt it. The children had to go inside.

OK.

And we had to give back all the chewing gum. [CHUCKLES] We didn't know what it was. We would have swallowed in anyways.

OK. Well, I could see a logic for this, in that if you were occupied and if it's wartime, you don't know what's real until it's lasted for a while.

Exactly.

OK.

Exactly.

And then how did life progress further?

Well, then it was not good because, and this is really strange, we knew we had to go back, Henry to his mother, which survived. His father had not. And of course, my parents, I knew, had been murdered. And I didn't know where my mother was, so I had to go back to my grandmother. We did not want to go. We did not want to go.

His father was the one who was also imprisoned along with your father.

In Gurs.

So what happened to him in Gurs? Did he ever leave Gurs?

He never left. He didn't understand that my father would want to escape. He was a lawyer. And he'd felt that if he obeyed the law-- even wanted his wife to come with his child. He figured if he obeyed the law, he was doing the right thing and everything would work out, not understanding. And eventually, he was on transport to Auschwitz and never heard from again.

And my father escaped and it happened anyway. As I found out later, they were reported by a Jew by the name of Jacques, who was a notorious person in Brussels, and who was told that if he saved all these Jewish whatever for the Nazis, his own family would be saved.

There was a lady in Berlin who had similar infamy.

I'm sure.

Yeah.

I'm sure. The same person? Because he was famous?

No, no, no. She had a different one. I don't know. I think her name was Helga, but I'm not exactly sure. I don't want to go beyond that because I would be guessing.

Right.

But she was a very famous what they called [NON-ENGLISH].

Oh, sure.

Yeah, known amongst the Jews.

Yes, yes. And my parents had broken the curfew and were on their way to a card game, and this man knew all the comings and goings. So this is how they--

They were picked up.

They were picked up. And this I found out later when I did go back to my grandmother, unwillingly. My poor grandmother. And Marraine brought us back to Brussels. That was a terrible goodbye. We didn't want to go.

Was the war still on or had it ended?

The war ended. And my cousin and I would spend hours navigating the lakes of Brussels, making escape routes, how we would go back to the village. It was a wonderful 2 and 1/2 years. But I stayed with my grandma. My poor grandma, oh my God. And then, of course, came the search for coming to the United States.

Oh, and prior to that, I had told the parish priest, when I didn't want to leave, that I was going to be a Carmelite nun, and I just wasn't leaving. And this incredible, incredible parish priest said, oh, you know, your roots are Jewish. And when you grow up, you can do whatever you want to, but right now you belong with your grandmother.

Now, if we transpose this to today's times, we know what it would mean for a Catholic priest to make this decision for a child, who I would not have left. I would have stayed. I would have missed out on this interview.

[LAUGHS]

Yeah.

It's quite a story.

Yeah.

There were such people.

There were such little pieces. Each person could do something good. They didn't know they were part of a bigger history, but they were just good people and they did what they considered to be the right thing.

But you when you left, your heart, in some ways, was still there.

Oh, yes.

Did it ever return back to Brussels, back to your family?

It took a long time. It took a long time. I did want to come to America. What happened was that every day, we would look for my mother. I mean, this is what people did. They would go to railroad stations. They would look at lists. My mother never showed up.

So after she is arrested with your father for not having made it to the card game, did you know what had happened to her after that?

I knew that she had been taken back. She had been caught. She didn't leave my father.

So they stayed together?

She did not leave my father. They stayed together. My father died in a Christian doctor's home. My mother was transported to a hospital, and could have been saved if somehow the story hadn't gotten out. The Nazis were all over. And so they recaptured the people that had been saved.

In the hospital?

Right. And so the 20th transport, which is a very famous transport at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum tour, that transport where people tried to escape and were helped. No one really escaped. And my father was killed, and my mother was then re-transferred out next day in another transport, 21. But no news. No one ever knew what happened to her. But she was such a small person, she probably didn't stand a chance, and I believe she was hurt. But even the Museum can't get the details.

Our Holocaust Museum in Washington.

Right, even Washington.

So that's as much as you know.

That's all I know. I have never known more.

Oh my.

And the waiting. You know, the thinking that, oh, on the street, I would see that face. And as other people have told me, had the same experience. And as a child, you keep thinking, my mother's going to certainly show up now. And of course, she didn't.

And leaving Marraine was very difficult, and leaving the Catholic religion, because of course, my grandmother was totally unaccepting of this. She neither understood it nor wanted to understand it. Well, my aunt was very smart. My aunt would organize-- well, we went to church.

So Henry's mother.

Henry's mother.

Frieda.

Frieda was a very smart lady. We would go to church, the two of us.

In Brussels?

In Brussels. And she never said much. My grandmother was horrified. But my aunt would organize, with her food stamps, picnics. And she would have food, things that we hadn't seen in years, whatever she could get her hands on. And my cousin was a traitor. Within a week, he was gone out of church.

[LAUGHS]

Not me. I continued.

How long did you last?

Oh, maybe three weeks. And she pulled it off. I mean, she got these two children not to go to church, although I have her letters. And she never cared what Henry would be, as long as he was the best at whatever he could be. And in effect, he became a scientist, and he's a total non-believer.

That was his choice.

It was his choice, and she was a wonderful person. My grandmother wasn't a bit as tolerant. She was a grandmother.

Yeah.

But she wasn't that old. She was only 65. I mean, I just thought she was ancient.

But she lost her favorite child.

And son-in-law and every member of her family.

Back in Berlin?

Brothers. Yes. Sisters.

Oh my.

[PHONE RINGING]

Let's cut here. Is this your phone? You're doing fine.

This is actually improving.

Yeah.

Speak whenever you're ready.

OK. So your grandmother had losses upon losses. How old were you when you went back to her, even though you wanted to stay with Marraine? How was your relationship with one another?

Well, she took me to a lot of movies, and that worked out very well. We would sit through the same movie. It was Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald. And now I wanted to be like Jeanette McDowell. It was always a choice between a movie star and the Carmelite nun. So now the movie star thing was winning out.

And she was smart. She would take something to eat and she would sit with me through the same movie for hours and hours. And I would help to get a visa, because at this time, through the Red Cross, through Quakers, through HIAS, we had been found in the United States, because we had been looked for through the whole war.

By your--

By Uncle Werner. And all these letters that I later found went to him. And when they found us, because I was going to be adopted, I was going to go to the United States without any camps. As you know, people had terrible experiences. But we were allowed to live with them. Becoming adopted was difficult because I thought-- it took a couple of years-- if I have another mother and father, what happens if I see my mother and how would she understand this?

You didn't know at the time that your mother had wanted you to be adopted by her sister?

Yes, I did.

Oh, you did.

I didn't know she wanted me to be adopted. Thank you for asking that question. I didn't know that at the time, but later,

in 1991, when my adoptive father died, one of the letters that my mother wrote had told her sister in the United States-- Margot, Uncle Werner's wife-- that if anything happened to them, everything was for their child. And please, you are the one to take care of the child. But I didn't know that until then.

Did that change your feeling of having been abandoned?

Oh, yeah. And long before that, when I lost my son. I knew the hardest thing to do is to give up a child. Because in 1984, right after graduating from law school and getting married in two months, my kids were driving to see us and were hit by a drunk driver.

And my son, Robbie, was killed instantly. And speak about darkness and Holocausts, I knew I hadn't been abandoned. I knew my parents had to love me more than life itself to give me up. So slowly, but surely, I worked my way out of the abandonment.

It's natural that you would have felt that. You were a child.

As a child.

You were a child.

Yes. And I think children somewhat feel responsible, in a way. If I had been there, I could have saved them.

If I were good, it wouldn't have happened.

It was, certainly in my case, if I was good. Certainly.

So your grandmother had you to also look after. Did she come with you to the United States?

I think she lived to bring me to the United States. I was not that easy, on retrospect, having grandchildren. I think that I made her life very difficult. And the letters later showed that, oh, she spoiled me and Trixie can be difficult. I'm sure I was. First of all, I did not understand not managing a language. I felt that if you just had managed the language, you would be fine, but you didn't know how to speak French. And yet, my grandmother was never caught.

Yeah. How was it so that she and your Aunt Frieda survive?

Oh, my Aunt Frieda spoke French. My grandmother used to call that mazel, which means luck. And I believe it is.

So she loses her daughter when the daughter goes to a card game for an evening's entertainment, something innocent. And yet she herself, throughout the war, is never caught.

And survives running everywhere and doing everything, although she was sheltered by a Christian landlady to a point. No one ever gave away her apartment or her residence. But yes, and my grandmother had to live with that. She had to live with that knowledge, that not only was she older and her daughter had so much to live for, but she had to live with the fact that she was so careless about her comings and goings.

So she comes with you to the United States. Do you remember the journey over?

Yes. I still get sick to my stomach on a rowboat.

Oh, really? [CHUCKLES]

Yes, but it was fun. I mean, I don't remember it as anything drastic. That was going to be a real new beginning for me. It wasn't as easy as I thought it was going to be.

In what way?

Well, it was being adopted into a family that now had never had a daughter, number one, that had been given the responsibility of raising this child that, supposedly, came out of the wilderness, practically. Now there was breakfast and lunch and dinner and homework and hours, and never mind that you come home or go anywhere or without being--

Where was Bernt?

He was also there. He was a year older.

It wasn't that they were out of that and they were free and then you come into their lives. They still were raising a child.

Oh, they were raising a child, but not a daughter.

OK.

And I think that that generation felt you raise a daughter differently than you raise a son. So he had a lot of freedom. First of all, he had been their son forever, and I came out of nowhere, and I was a girl. So he was allowed to come home at midnight. I had to be home at 9:30. I mean, there were different rules. I wasn't used to rules, and I wasn't used to them and they weren't used to me.

And practically, the day I came, I met a neighbor. She happened to be my age, going to the same school, and she was also German-Jewish, but they had escaped prior to the war. And I used to tell her, if I had my mother, my mother wouldn't do this.

This is just because I'm adopted. She would say to me, I assure you that my mother does the same thing and I'm not adopted. And for years, these conversations would go on. And I hate her. She's doing this and she's doing that, and it's because I'm adopted. But at base, it was difficult.

And it sounds like a teenage voice, too.

Sort of, yes, on retrospect.

Yeah.

On retrospect. But I missed the security of the Catholic Church. I missed confession. I did all these awful things and I had no one to say to that I did this.

[CHUCKLES]

And I missed Marraine, and I was not allowed to correspond with her.

Oh, really?

No. I think the greatest fear was that I would be pulled back. I did it anyway, and I would put money into the letter. But really, for Henry and me, it was a huge separation and the connection kind of got lost for a long time. That was difficult.

I loved high school and I loved everything American, and I wanted to be more American. I was going to learn English in a minute, and I sort of did. And I wanted to be more American than any American child could possibly be. So I took to everything that was American, and my parents were complete immigrants and totally didn't understand it.

Did Bernt understand it? Was he called something else by now?

Bernie.

Bernie.

Bernie, Bernie [? Lanbernchen ?]. Did he understand it? We get along to a point. Looking at it from his point of view, he must have been terribly jealous. He was always an only child, and I was an only child. I don't know. I mean, his friends sort of took to me, and that upset my mother. There were all kinds of issues that are probably natural, but didn't seem natural to me.

So you didn't have the same connection to him as you did to Henry?

Not at all. Not at all.

So in some ways, you're putting all of this out of your mind. Everything that you left in Europe, you leave in Europe. Is that the case?

I did so much that when this book was published in 1997, and I remain friends with the same people I knew then and still now, people had no clue. People did not know that was me. Or acquaintances would say, what? You were really an immigrant? Wait, you're kidding. So I knew that I really did leave everything. I just blocked it.

What unblocked it?

Robbie, losing Robbie. And maybe a while before that, because we went back with our children. We went back to visit my cousins, as young children. But as visitors, and Wendy, my daughter, would tell you this, it was fun memories. I would tell all the wonderful things that happened and the village. But really getting in back in touch took losing my son.

And I think that's when all this became therapy, to touch base with the things that I was able to do when I was a child. I knew I could do the rest then. Because I felt, well, you did this and you managed. And you did this and you managed. And you did this and you managed. And always, there were wonderful people around to help, always, continuing. And so lucky in my life today.

Earlier today, we had a separate interview with Renate. Tell me about that, in the sense of now we know more about your father. We know who your father was. And in some ways, this is almost like part of your father's world being brought to you.

It is unbelievable, really. I think that-- well, let's put it this way. In 1999, I lost my late husband, Irwin Muchman, and within a year I met Larry Abrams. And we became very good friends and got married. And Larry has a huge clan of kids.

And I never felt that I had a big-- I never felt I had family. It was always either my late husband, who had a big family, too, and other people's families. But I had, for years-- I knew about my maternal family, but I never knew anything about my father.

The orphan.

The orphan, that's all. And I had searched, because in 1990, Wendy, my daughter, found a cache of letters. And these letters contained over 100 letters and documents and artifacts that are now all in Washington. Many, many are in Washington. My rosary is still with me and my Bible is with me, but other things are mainly donated, and given back to me gloriously in huge, beautiful books.

Somehow, the mystery remained, because there was a letter written. I had the letter, which was in this box, Marshall Field box, and it was addressed to a Max Westheimer in Houston. And his answer was somewhat abrupt. I don't know that he would have ever sent for my father. He was going to tell his nephew about he wasn't feeling good.

So your father had gotten in touch, or your--

No. Werner's wife, my adoptive mother, or together, they had written a letter to Houston. Because I'm sure they scrolled all the Westheimers. We're the Westheimers in phone books. And since they were in Chicago, they found a Westheimer in Houston. And there were so many Westheimers in Houston. Westheimer Avenue is in Houston. So they wrote to Max Westheimer, who would have been an uncle of my father's. And they received this letter in return, which I have. There were two.

And I thought, what a terribly unkind answer. Such a wealthy person, and he was. He owned a big insurance company, and went to Houston to look for it. No Westheimer was willing to admit anything. Now I know why, because no one really was related. But after that I kind of dropped it because it was useless.

And then Muchman cousins of my late husband's. This young woman would have been my late husband's first cousin. She decided to do ancestry.com, she found the whole Muchman clan, going all the way back to Russia and then when they came over. And it's a wonderful story of a very big family, all Trotskyites.

[LAUGHS]

Wonderful, wonderful gang. It's really when I learned to be Jewish.

OK.

And then we got to know them, and they read my book and we got friendly. And she decided they were going to look for Westheimers, because the letter was sort of weird. And within, I'd say, almost not more than six months, she discovered Westheimers in New York on the East Coast. And up came Renata and a tree, an unbelievable tree, going back to Germany, all the Westheimers in my line of Westheimers.

Your father's line.

My father's line, going back to before 1800. And it's all proven because Ancestry, in order to belong to Ancestry, you have to really go in search. The Museum is connected to Ancestry, so I know they can have all this material. And when she found all this, I realized but nobody recognized my father, another tragedy of the Holocaust, because he perished and they were all able to come here.

So fine. Now I found all the Westheimers. And then Renata decided-- she was a six degrees of separation. We lived together within a half a block of each other. We went to the same high school. We went to the same university. We didn't know each other and our families didn't know each other, which is amazing.

She decided to come visit with her children. And so I had planned a dinner and CBS was coming in, and it was very chaotic, because Sherri Goodman is an organizer and she organized you and she organized everybody.

Her daughter.

So her daughter, Sherri Goodman. There's Lauren McCloud, and there is David, who's her son from New York. And they all came. So we just figured, OK, nobody knows. I had talked to other Westheimers. Nobody quite placed Julius Westheimer, until today, moments before you were all set up, she looked at the letter. Coincidentally, I had shown her what the Museum does, because she felt maybe she wanted to give her pictures. The Museum would be thrilled to hear this.

But she saw the letter that the museum had copied, and of course, everything is cataloged. She looked at the letter. And she said, this is when my grandfather died. This man in Houston also died, coincidentally, around the same time. And she said, I suspect, and I'm pretty sure, the letter was written to the wrong Max Westheimer. Had it been written to her grandfather, who would have been my father's uncle--

In New York.



In New York.

Not in Texas.

No, no, no. There's nobody in Texas. They were all in New York. Then the rest of the Westheimers, we would have been here. Because the man Herman, I think--

Humberger.

Humberger was in the diamond business. He sent all these people visas. But my adoptive mother and father made the error of looking for a Max Westheimer, logical, and found one in Houston. And there you are. And Renata and I were together alone, just moments ago really. And I can't even believe this. So not only did they come here and you're here and we're finding each other, but here she is, solved the mystery for me.

Why was this Max Westheimer so standoffish.

Now it's logical. I talk a lot to a lot of groups and I'm always talking about this complete indifference, which made me think of the Holocaust and Jewish life in America. Because I figured, Oh my God the indifference. These people could have helped and they were so indifferent, but they weren't even related. And there was a hint of I'd like to do something, but--

But some reserve as well.

Well, sure. He probably, who are these people?

Who are writing to him.

And do they have a ticket? Do they have-- those questions, those things were important, if you didn't have any money. So we're sitting here in 2016 and you've still learned something new that you never expected.

But you know where this takes me? Because it's 2016, this takes me to what I hear every day on the news. It takes me to the repeated tragedies, the orphans, the refugees who are going to repeat-- and never mind now. This has been going on.

There was Bosnia, Rwanda there. I mean, we can just go way back. It has never stopped. And where are the little pieces of good people, who are doing something? It is really not just about this Holocaust. It isn't just about my life anymore. I mean, I'm sure it was for years.

And that's OK.

But at this point in my life, if I can't do something or try to do something, I've wasted all this. And of course, that's the wonderful thing about the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, is all the things that they do with little pieces of people who are willing to help.

Thank you for that. I think we've kind of come to the end of our conversation.

I believe so, and you've been so kind, and it's been a pleasure knowing you anyway.

Likewise.

Thank you.

Is there anything else you'd like to add before we wrap up?

No. I used to think that there has to be a time when we can say no, it's enough. I hope we find the time.

I hope that time comes.

I hope it's here. It doesn't look it. I'd like to leave it on a positive note.

There's a lot that's positive in what you've shared with us today.

Thank you.

So I'll say, with that, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Beatrice Trixie Muchman on September 27th, 2016 in Chicago, Illinois.

Thank you.

Thank you again.

[APPLAUSE]

Oh, you guys.

I'm rolling.

This is the rosary.

And what is that rosary from? Who gave it to you?

Well, it was a gift of my first communion, and given to me by my godmother, as well as the Bible.

Let's take a look at this.

And the little Bible.

Looks like a prayer book.

It's a little Bible. It's a prayer book, and it was given to everybody.

Let's hold it up like this in the picture.

So here. So it says, [FRENCH]. So it's a souvenir of a solemn occasion, given to Beatrix Duchet, because my name was changed, of course. And the church is the Church of Saint Joseph, St. Joseph of Ottignies, 30th of May, 1943.

Why don't we show both sides of this? Let's hold it like that so that you can get all of these words. That's what's on the flip side, and now we'll turn it this way. And that's on the occasion of your first communion.

Of my first communion. And this was given to me by Father Vaes, the parish priest.

And that's the little card or the Bible and prayer book itself?

No. This is the card that was within the-- it's a little Bible.

It's a little Bible.

Yes.

OK. And let's open the Bible so we can see at least a few pages of it. And you have kept that all these years?

Yes. And I think this came recently. That's why you donate things to the museum.

Let's just see this. It's very well kept for so many decades.

It's amazing, isn't it?

And this is just a random page?

It's just a random page. I'm not sure where we opened it.

And so you told me earlier, or did you say no on camera, you know all the prayers?

In French, I think I could still go through them. I was punished a lot after confession because I would steal candy purposely so I could go to confession.

[LAUGHS]

And then what you have to do is you have to just recite your beads several times, and it was my pleasure to remain in the church and recite the beads.

More candy, more beads.

Right.

More prayers.

More prayers. So in a way, that's an education.

Thank you so much for sharing that.

Oh, you're so welcome.

We got it.

Thank you.