

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Margot Stern on May 8, 2017, in Englewood, New Jersey. Thank you very much, Mrs. Stern, for agreeing to speak with us today.

It's a pleasure.

And I'm going to start with the most basic questions. And from there, we'll build your story.

Can you tell me, what was the date of your birth?

May 29, 1930.

And what was your name at birth?

Margot-- well, people call me Margote in German.

Margote, yeah, OK. And your maiden name?

Kahn, K-A-H-N.

Kahn-- and where were you born?

In Bonbaden, Germany.

Bonbaden, Germany?

Bonbaden.

I haven't heard of it.

It's a small town. I believe it's about 40 minutes north of Frankfurt.

Would this be Frankfurt an der Oder or [BOTH TALKING]

Frankfurt am Main.

Am Main, OK, so it would be the western Frankfurt, because Germany had the two--

Yes.

40 minutes north or 40 miles north?

40 minutes around.

OK. What kind of a place was it? Was it a town or a village?

It was a town. It had, I think, about 10 or 12 Jewish families living in it. And I think not more than 1,000 or 1,200 inhabitants.

Was it sort of like a bedroom community of Frankfurt, or was it further away that it wouldn't be considered a suburb?

I think it was probably further. It was an independent kind of area.

OK. Did it have a town center?

That I don't recall. I think it had-- it had a baker where people would bring their prepared breads to the baker. And the baker would make them right there. I think that was a little bit of the town center.

Tell me your father's name and your mother's.

Gustav.

Gustav Kahn?

Yes.

Gustav Kahn-- and your mother's name?

And my mother's name was Erma Kahn.

And her maiden name?

Liechtenstein.

Liechtenstein-- and did you have brothers and sisters?

I didn't have any brothers and sisters. My parents always said, if they would have had more children, we would not have gotten out of Germany, because we just made it.

Tell me a little bit about each parent. And I'll start asking some questions. Did your father himself have brothers and sisters?

My father was also an only child. My mother had three brothers.

Were both sides of your family from Bonbaden.

Only my father and his family-- his parents and grandparents and great-grandparents.

They had been there for generations.

They had been, my father's family, yeah. My mother's family was from Munster.

Where the Pied Piper comes from? No, that's Hamlin I think. Sorry. From Munster-- and that's not so far away, is it?

I don't know. But I know that they always said that my-- it was a blind date when they got married. And my mother came by train for the first visit to Bonbaden. And my father saw her and he fell in love with her.

That's lovely.

All these stories, like you say, I'm just beginning to remember.

Did you go to Munster as a child to visit relatives.

Yeah, we visited the grandparents.

And where did they live in Munster. What kind of a house did they have, or apartment?

It was a large house, kind of in an intersection of the town. I don't really remember it well.

Were they well-to-do people, or were they--

Yeah, they were comfortable. Yeah.

Your uncles-- how did your grandfather support his family?

I don't really remember that. I think he was probably also dealing with cows and cattle.

That seems to be a very common trait.

Yeah, as was my grandfather in Bonbaden.

Did they know each other?

No.

OK. And did your mother have the opportunity to go for higher education?

I don't believe so.

And your uncles?

My uncles, I don't really know.

OK, do you know the names of her brothers?

Yes. The oldest one was Siegfried. Then came Hugo, who perished in the Holocaust. Siegfried and his family were able to escape to Argentina. And then I think the oldest one was actually Albert, who had served in World War I.

That was anticipating one of my questions.

Yeah, he had served in World War I. And he died in the war.

In World War I?

In World War I.

OK. And so there were two of them left.

Yes.

So Albert and then Siegfried and then Hugo.

Right.

And did they have families of their own?

Hugo never married. And he was-- he had a large men's clothing store in Cologne. And Albert, I don't know. He was evidently a soldier.

But Siegfried?

And Siegfried, I don't know either. He lived in a different town, which I don't know. But he went with his wife and two

children. They were able to go to Argentina.

Oh, so he did have children. He did have children of his own.

Yeah, Siegfried.

Yes, Siegfried, Siegfried did.

Yeah. And they were given a very poor piece of land in Argentina that they farmed for many years before they were able to go to be in Buenos Aires.

We'll come to that. Right now, I am-- I forgot to explain this part before we started our interview. I like to focus as much as I can in the beginning on pre-war life and what was life like before everything changes. So that's why I ask a lot of detailed questions that have almost nothing to do with anything, like how large was the house, was it in the city center, was it in-- but it is to get a sense of, what was your world, what was the world you were born into, who was the family, and so on. And so questions that relate to when things change usually we talk about a little bit later.

So you visited your grandparents at their home in Munster.

Yes.

OK, but their sons by that point had their own homes elsewhere.

Yes, oh, yes.

OK, so Hugo with his clothing store in Cologne, and Siegfried where? Where did he live?

I don't remember the town, but it was elsewhere. It was no longer in Munster.

OK. Did your maternal grandparents-- did they still work? Did your grandfather still work or would he be retired by the time you knew him?

I think he may very well have been retired by the time I was a child.

And did you know them well?

I did. My grandfather was a very kind man. He always let me climb all over him and comb his hair and--

Do the things that kids love to do.

Yeah, and we have pictures. And I think I look a little bit like my grandmother from Munster.

Did I ask you what was her name?

Carolina.

Carolina-- and do you remember--

And he was [PERSONAL NAME]

[PERSONAL NAME] And they were Liechtenstein.

Liechtenstein.

Liechtenstein-- had they been native to Munster for generations, or had they come from somewhere else?

I think they lived there a long time, but I don't know about generations.

OK. Were there more Jewish families in Munster?

I can tell you that either. I don't know.

OK. Your knowledge of it was visiting them.

Yes.

OK. How would you get there from Bonbaden?

By train.

By train-- and do you remember those train rides as a little girl?

Yeah, I do, somewhat, yeah.

OK. Can you tell me any of your own earliest memories, whether they're connected to a big event or a small event, but for you, in your mind, as a little girl?

As a little girl in Bonbaden, well, I went to school there. I remember that. And I remember being hit on my hands by the teacher because he knew I was a Jew. And I remember taking my hands and putting them under my-- they were hurting so much I put them under my legs because they were hurting so much.

You were born in 1930?

1930.

So in conscious life, you were three years old when Hitler comes to power.

Right.

And by the time you go out of the family home, it's already a Nazi environment.

Yes. It was a very scary environment from what I can remember. I may have been five, six at the time. So it would have been 1935, 1936. And I-- as the years went by, things became harder and harder for the Jews. And it was very frightening. And I remember my parents being frightened.

This is what I wanted to ask too. As a little girl, your security from the world and to the world is through parents.

Yes. Yeah, and they were frightened.

What was your father's business? Or how did he support his family?

He had a store, which was located in the downstairs of our house. And he had like linens and towels and tablecloths in the store.

And had that been something he had started, or was that in his family for a long time?

I think that may have been his. Because as I said, his father, my grandfather, also dealt with cattle.

And did you know your paternal grandparents?

Oh, yes, well, we lived together. We lived with my paternal grandparents in Bonbaden. I remember it being a large piece of land. My grandmother had a very large garden area. And I remember her growing vegetables, many in a very large area. And I remember her grinding coffee to make fresh--

Really? One of those machines?

Yeah, one of those machines. Because sometimes making butter with a butter churn--

The old-fashioned ones that you go up and down, yeah?

Yeah, right. And she made her own pasta. She made noodles for the noodle soup. I remember that.

It sounds delicious.

She had some kind of a machine that she flattened out the dough. And then she rolled it through this machine. Then she cut it to very thin pieces. I can remember that.

Tell me a little bit about your dwelling. Was it a detached house?

No, it was a rather large single house.

And how many stories did it have?

Two-- possibly there was-- on top, there was--

A third?

A third, yeah.

OK. And so the ground floor would have been the store?

The ground floor was-- yes, was the store.

And then the living quarters above it?

Right, right.

And was it a house that was fairly new and newly built, or was it one that was from the 19th century?

I don't really know that. But I guess it was fairly new, I think.

Here are some of the questions that I usually ask.

Did you have electricity?

Yes.

Did you have running water, plumbing, indoor plumbing.

Yes.

And do you remember how the house was heated?

How the house was heated-- I think we had-- I don't really remember that.

Did you have a radio at home?

Yes.

Did you have a telephone?

I don't think so. I don't know.

Did your father--

It's amazing how much I've forgotten.

That's OK. That's OK. It's an unexpected question. But the reason I ask it is because I want to get-- Europe was at different levels of development and modernization. And some people were-- this was standard and taken for granted. And in other places, it wasn't so. They had wells and they had kerosene lamps. And it was not all the same.

I think much of this was farmland so it may not have been so modernized.

Yeah, so that was what was around Bonbaden, were farmers mostly?

Yeah, I think mostly, yeah.

OK. And was your home in the center of Bonbaden or more to the outskirts?

It was in the center.

OK. So was it close to the baker?

I imagine so, yeah.

Do you have a picture of how it looks, how it looked at that time in your mind's eye?

Well, I've seen pictures of it. I think maybe my memory of the house itself is not that secure. But there are pictures of the house.

And what about the various rooms inside? Do you have any mental image of the rooms?

I do. I do some. I remember we had a large living area, living room. And I can remember the drapes. They made an impact on me.

What color?

Long drapes, and there was some gold thread in the drapes. I remember being impressed with those drapes.

And did you have a pet?

No.

No pets. Was it so that your mother and your father then lived in your grandparents' home, or was it that your mother and your father established their own home, and your grandparents came to live with them?

No, my parents lived with my grandparents.

So they owned it.

They had the house. Yeah, and I think it was not uncommon for the young couple to move in with the grandparents at that time.

OK. What about-- you said there were 10 to 12 other Jewish families.

About, yeah. There were not many Jewish families.

Did you all know one another?

Yes. And I think they-- some of them were related.

And did they all live in the same proximity?

Yeah, they did.

OK. So could it be said that, even for such a small number, there would be like a Jewish neighborhood, or not so much?

I don't think it could be said as a Jewish neighborhood. No, they were more scattered than that.

OK. So your immediate neighbors, were they Gentiles?

Yeah, some, yeah.

OK. And do you remember anything about your relations with your neighbors?

Well, they were very close with-- my family was very close with neighbors, until the Hitler-- the ordinance came down that they were not to associate with Jews. And so that got more and more so. And so--

Did you remember seeing things like that?

I think so. I think I may have some memories that are kind of repressed, but that are somewhat there, of the neighbors that had been very friendly to my family, and then suddenly turned their backs on my family and refused to speak to them. This became harder and harder. And the same held true for my father's store.

Well, yeah, that was one of my questions.

Yeah, my father's store, his business suffered tremendously. Because where he was first a very popular store, it suddenly-- it went down, down, down. And he would say, people were not coming in. They were afraid. And because it was a small town and people knew each other-- the townspeople all knew each other. And they were refusing to come.

Did you have any children in the neighborhood that you would play with or did you have any playmates at all?

I think I had one playmate, yeah.

From the neighborhood?

Not many-- there were not many children my age. There were two boys. That were a little bit older. There was a girl that was also older while I was child. And so there would not have been much communication between us.

And they're in your neighborhood?



Yeah.

OK, so they're not necessarily Jewish, or were they?

Those were Jewish kids, yeah.

OK, what about other kids, anybody like that in your life outside of school?

Yeah, there was one child that was not Jewish that was a friend, but that also refused to come to play with me at some point, maybe by the time I was six, seven certainly, certainly by the time I was seven. There was-- to a point where my parents couldn't live in Bonbaden any longer.

Tell me a little bit about their personalities, your father's personality and then your mother's personality.

My father was-- he was mostly a businessman and taking care of business. And my mother was the one who mostly cared for me and played with me and took me to various places.

Was she an extrovert or an introvert?

Yeah, she was an extrovert.

Did she have some distinct interests of her own that she would pursue?

Yeah, she was very good at sewing. She did a lot of sewing by machine. She made clothing. And she was a very good baker. I remember that. And yeah, she kept very busy. But it was my grandmother who tended the outdoors, the garden area.

How was it with, if you can remember, the several generations under one roof? And some people say it's really hard when you have two women in the same kitchen.

Yeah. Yeah, I think it went pretty peacefully. I don't remember arguments. I would probably remember that. But I do remember that my grandmother was in charge of doing the bread-baking, while my mother was in charge of the cake-baking. So there was a division of labor. But I think they got along pretty well.

What was your grandmother's name?

Johanna.

Johanna, Johanna Kahn.

Johanna Kahn.

And your grandfather again was-- not Gustav, that's your father.

My grandfather was Isaac Kahn. There was a great-grandmother of mine that was living in town. And she actually died in 1939. I think I was still at home. I had later gone to Frankfurt. And I used to visit her frequently. She was not living far away, so I could easily go to her. She always had coffee ready. And she lived until she was 95.

That's a quite old age at the time.

Yeah. I also had-- I remember another great-grandmother, my grandmother's mother.

So your paternal--

Bonbaden grandmother. The 95-year-old, her name was Matilda. Matilda was the mother of my grandfather. And Babetta was the mother of my grandmother.

It's amazing that they were still alive.

Yeah, I think my great-grandmother Babetta died at 89. And I think she had a case of Alzheimer's. So I never knew her very well because she didn't live in town.

That would have been your grandmother's mother?

My grandmother's mother.

OK. Did she have brothers and sisters? And did your grandfather have brothers and sisters?

My grandmother had brothers and sisters, yes.

Did you know them?

I knew them, but they were not living in town. My grandfather had a sister and two brothers. And they were all living in the town.

So they're part of the 12 families.

Yeah, I guess, yeah.

So did you have cousins?

I had cousins who emigrated to South America, to Argentina.

Along with your mother's side of the family.

That was my mother's side.

That's right. That's Siegfried and his family.

Yeah, since my father was an only child, I didn't have any cousins likely.

Second cousins, yes, it would have been second cousins.

Second cousins I had. And I was still in touch with one of them who recently died.

And was your family very social?

I think so, yeah.

Do you remember parties? Do you get-togethers?

Yes, I do remember the men playing cards together and getting together. Every birthday was celebrated, I remember that. There was always [SPEAKING GERMAN]. And yes, I remember that. I think it was mostly with the Jewish families. And as I said, some of those families were our relatives.

Were your parents very religious?

Yes.

Did they observe all of the holidays?

Yes.

Did they keep a kosher home?

Yes, that was a part of our life, our Jewish life. Although there was no synagogue in Bonbaden. The men usually-- the women didn't go. But the men walked to the next town to synagogue.

What was that town's name?

That was Braunfels.

Braunfels-- I think I've heard of it. I just don't remember in what capacity.

Yeah, it's a pretty town.

And so that's how they-- did you ever go to Braunfels to the synagogue.

Yeah, yes, I did.

And what would be the occasions? Would it be weekly or would it be for holidays?

No, I think it was mainly for the holidays.

You were a child, so I'm going to ask questions that usually children don't know. But you might have. You said that you remember people coming over and playing cards, and so there were get-togethers with the adults. Was politics and what's going on in Germany a topic of conversation?

I think the situation with the Hitler situation was a large topic of conversation, because it made an impact on me even as a young child. I don't remember other politics specifically.

Well, this is mostly what I want, yeah. Did you ever hear him over the radio?

I think so, yeah.

Do you remember other types of things that you'd hear over the radio? Was it music? Was it news?

Music, we had a lot of music in the house. There was always music.

Did you have a record player?

I don't think so. I think it was probably mostly the radio.

I'm surprised in some ways to learn that you still attended school, because a lot of children were not allowed to attend school as the time went on, a lot of Jewish children.

Well, I was attending school until Kristallnacht, which the Germans now call Pogromnacht. They don't want to call that Kristallnacht, because that's what the Nazis called it. I attended school until the day after my father was arrested, my father and my grandfather.

Let's talk about school for a while, and then we'll come to Kristallnacht. You said that you had a very mean teacher, who

hit you across the hand so hard that it was physically painful, because you're Jewish. There was a discipline at those times that was corporal punishment, whether you got the right answer or the wrong answer or misbehaved, that was far more acceptable then than it is now. But do you remember other children being singled out for this kind of drama?

No, I don't. I was the only one that was being hit. And it was very, very plainly because I was Jewish. And the man-- it was a man teacher-- he said so.

He said so?

He said so, yeah.

So what would it be, you're five, six years old?

By that time, I was probably six or seven, yeah.

OK. And he would say stand up? How would he do it?

He would call me in front of the class. And I think he was belittling me at the same time. It was a very difficult situation for me.

Of course it would be. You're a little kid and this is the authority figure.

Yeah, my mother went to see him. I know that. And things were a little improved.

Do you remember his name?

No.

Do you remember what he looked like?

I just remember he was a tall man. That's all I remember.

And was he--

I think there's a lot that I wanted to forget.

And the other children, do you remember how they reacted?

Well, knowing that I was a Jewish kid, they were not allowed to come over to me and sympathize with me. So they were--

You were alone.

Yeah, I was alone.

Did they join in, and in their own way--

I don't think so. I think they were made to sit quietly in their seats. But they-- it was clear that it was something that they were invited to watch.

I just imagine, in all of the things that happened to Jews in Europe, there was horror, upon horror, but when you think of a little girl powerless, really powerless at six years old, seven years old, and a teacher picking on her because of something that she is.

It's quite phenomenal, yeah.

Yeah, and very distasteful, very distasteful, and that he would. People had leeway into what they implement and what they don't implement.

Yes, exactly.

Did you go-- how many grades did you go through school?

Even that, I don't really remember.

OK. Do you remember any subjects that you particularly enjoyed studying?

No, I didn't like school at all. It was made so difficult for me.

Would you come home-- when you came home, would you then tell your parents what was--

Of course, yes.

I could imagine that you came home in tears.

Yes, I probably did. I don't remember the tears, but I was upset. That's for sure. Yeah. And then one day, I was told, you can go home and don't come back.

Oof. And do you remember who told you that?

Yeah, the teacher told me.

The same one?

The same one, mm-hmm. And I went home. I was so happy, you know? Finally I was told I don't have to come to school.

So in essence, one could say you endured this for a good two to three years.

Yeah.

Were there other Jewish children in your classroom?

I don't remember that really. I think the Jewish children in the town were older than I was. I was the youngest one. So they would not have been with me.

We talked about your father's store and how business was going down and down. But did he still keep it open? Was he still--

He kept it open until Kristallnacht, until the Nazis came and asked for the keys and the books that he was keeping to keep his accounts. And they locked the store.

But that also means he had some customers. It couldn't have also been just Jews, if there was so few Jews.

No, it wasn't just Jews.

So there were people who were coming to buy from him, despite the discouragement, despite the ostracism.

Well, as I said, it was less and less. And it was substantially less, to a point where his business was suffering.

Do you remember seeing the officials-- I don't know what to call them-- who came and asked for the keys?

Those were, at the time, SA] men. They were local people. And the day or two before Kristallnacht, there were people with the armbands and the brown shirts that were marching up and down in front of our house, watching us. And we couldn't leave our house. That was probably two days before. And then they were the ones that came in and took my father and my grandfather.

You saw this?

I saw this, yes.

Did you recognize any of the people in those brown shirts?

I think they were all local people. There was--

Would your father have recognized them?

I'm sure. I'm sure.

All right. And so what happened to the store itself?

The store was locked. I think they later must have helped themselves to whatever there was.

Was it-- were the windows broken in the sense of Kristallnacht, like so many other places? Or was it kept--

I don't remember that. But I remember them coming into the house and destroying things inside of the house. And also, one of the [? SR ?] people had a big bag and went to a closet with lots of silver trinkets, silver Judaica things, and just swept all these silver items into this big bag. That I can remember. That's one of my memories, that he just opened this closet and just--

Helped himself.

--just emptied it into this big bag.

Where was your mother and your grandmother as this was going on?

We were all in the house. We were not allowed to leave. It was a very frightening situation.

I can imagine. I mean, can't imagine. I can't imagine it. But thinking of-- I'm particularly thinking of a child. It's terrifying for adults. But for a child, it must be even 10 times more terrifying.

Yeah, I think that's why I've told this many times over, because it's very harsh in my memory. It's very frightening.

Does it get easier with each telling or not?

Does it get easier? I imagine, yeah. I don't know. Some of these memories are very bitter memories. And I was still frightened when I-- after my mother arranged for me to go to school in Frankfurt, to a Jewish school, because that was the only way you could go to school. And I remember at that time, I was still frightened. And there were air raids every night at that point while I was in Frankfurt. And the Jews, we all had to go down to the cellar during the air raids.

So this is, the war zone is on.

This is wartime, yeah. And planes would be coming every night. And we would be going down into the cellar. The Jews had to sit separately from the Aryans, from the other people. And I remember some of the people saying, why don't they bomb harder? The Jews were saying this, because their lives at that point were-- they wanted to rather have the area bombed than to live their life.

That way.

And that was very frightening. I remember that the air raid siren was very close to our house and was very loud. And I was very frightened by that, and the bombs being dropped.

Let's go back to Bonbaden for a minute. There is Kristallnacht. And it is after Kristallnacht that your father and grandfather are arrested, or is it before?

That they what?

Are arrested.

They are arrested during that night. During

Kristallnacht.

During Kristallnacht. My grandfather was sent back home because he had a heart condition. And at that point, the Nazis were not bothering with sick people. And so he was sent back home. My father went to Buchenwald. And he was in Buchenwald until the end of January of '39.

OK, Kristallnacht is in November of '38.

So he was there for several months. And at that point, the Nazis were interested in getting the Jews to leave. What are you doing to leave Germany? And I think my father was working-- while he was in the camp, he was trying to work out areas where we could get out.

Now, had that conversation, had that taken place even before Kristallnacht during those years that you remember the adults talking of-- was that a question that would come up of, we've got to get out of here, how should we do it?

Yeah, there was already talk. And there were some of the families in the town that had left. I had an aunt and uncle-- actually, an aunt and uncle of my father's, who somehow got all the papers to go to America. And they later were trying to help us to get out. And when they sent their affidavit to the American Consulate in Stuttgart, we got a letter in return from the consulate, from the American Consulate, saying that the affidavit was not high enough. The aunt and uncle didn't have enough money to bring us out.

To guarantee you.

To guarantee that we would not come to America and be on welfare, I guess. So that was one very large setback for my parents because we didn't have a lot of family in America that could be helping us.

Do you-- when your father came back from Kristallnacht, from his imprisonment in Buchenwald, did he look different?

He looked emaciated. And he-- this was just before I left to go to Frankfurt. And I remember him coming home by train and coming into the house and sitting down and crying. And he looked very emaciated. Had you ever seen him cry before?

No.

Tell me about how your parents came to the decision to send you to Frankfurt and where they were going to send you

and about when you left to go?

Well, it was shortly after Kristallnacht that my mother worked out-- that I had to continue school.

So the teacher sends you home after Kristallnacht and says, don't come back.

Right.

And then she then thinks, OK, now what do we do? And she starts arranging it.

Right. And it was uppermost in her mind that I was to continue schooling. So she made an arrangement, I don't know through whom, for me to be with a foster family in Frankfurt while my mother, and later when my father returned, and my grandparents resolved their own situation of leaving Bonbaden and going to Frankfurt. That was later. So I think I was in foster care about a year before they came to Frankfurt.

What were your foster parents like?

It was a family by the name of [? Greenbaum. ?] It was at an orthodox family, Jewish family, retired. It was a husband, wife, and grown daughter. And the grown daughter was working as a secretary. I remember that. And the man was a spastic. He sat in a wheelchair. He was unable to use his fingers and his-- he was handicapped, seriously handicapped.

And he was a very kind man. He was very kind to me, more so than his wife. His wife was the manager in the house. And this family perished, unfortunately. And to this day, I eat-- for lunch, they always ate a piece of bread with butter and sliced radishes. And to this day, I always say to my husband, this is in honor of the Greenbaums who perished, because I'm eating a slice of bread with cream cheese and slices of radishes. It was a good family.

Where in Frankfurt did they live?

They lived in the Sandweg.

Sandweg?

Yeah.

And was that central or was that residential?

It was a residential and it was central. It was near the Zeil which is a very major thoroughfare.

And can you describe a little bit about that place? Was it an apartment, was it a house, was it a--

It was an apartment. I remember-- I don't know if you are wanting to hear this.

Sure.

I remember walking to school from the Sandweg. I had to walk along the Zeil which was a major street. And along the Zeil, there were signs posted, long strips of placards, with pictures of, supposedly, Jews. And under there, it would read, [SPEAKING GERMAN].

And what does that mean?

I think that's what it was.

Or [SPEAKING GERMAN]



Right.

And tell people, what did that mean?

Yeah, so there were these big placards. I remember passing them.

But what is that that phrase in German? What does that mean in English?

Jews are our downfall-- something--

Misfortune.

Misfortune, misfortune. People were being fed lots of sayings like that.

That must have been like a weight on you as a child.

Oh, yeah. I was really a very poor student, I'm always saying, until I came to America. I didn't have room in my head for studies. I was worried. I was a worried kid. First, I was homesick. I was very homesick when I left my parents. I was eight years old.

And did you protest about going? Did you want to just stay home?

I probably did. I don't remember exactly, but I'm sure I did. I'm sure I didn't want to go.

OK. And what was this school like? Was this a Jewish school?

This was a large day school. Yeah, I think there were two large day schools in Frankfurt. I went to the more Zionist-oriented school, the Philanthropin.

It was called Philanthropin.

Philanthropin.

Philanthropin. OK. And what grades did it cover?

I think it was a grade school. I don't think it was a high school. I don't think it went that far.

And do you remember the grade that you entered?

I don't remember the grade. I later found out that, in 1942, they had to-- by that time, all the Jewish children had been taken out. And they had to close the school.

And it was a large school, you say?

It was a large school.

About how many children were in your class?

Oh, I guess maybe 20, 25 were in my grade.

Were in your grade?

Yeah.

OK. And what were the teachers like here?

They were all Jewish people. And they were all very pleasant. I remember they were trying to be helpful. But I think a lot of the children at that time were suffering in one way or another, you know?

They were probably traumatized.

Yeah, all the children, so I was not alone in that. So their attention had to be not only on me.

Did you have any friends in this school?

Yes, I had some very good friends, one I later learned perished. And one made it. I don't know where to.

What were the names of these friends? Even first names is [BOTH TALKING]

One was Claire. The other one isn't coming to me right now. Yeah, they were good friends, very good friends. And I remember at that time, we-- of course, the synagogues had been destroyed. But we went to synagogue in-- they formed little minyans in different homes. And I remember going to synagogue in some home in the Sandweg. And then when we were finished with services, we were let out, two people, one person, another person, slowly we were able to leave.

So that nobody sees a group leaving.

Right, exactly.

Was the place where your foster family lived-- [? Grunbaum ?] was their name?

[? Grunbaum. ?]

[? Grunbaum, ?] OK. Was that a Jewish neighborhood or was that also mixed?

Yeah, that was a Jewish neighborhood.

OK, so you didn't have Gentile neighbors around that you knew of.

There were Gentiles around, but not that we were communicating with, no. And at that point, by that time, Jews were not speaking to-- the Aryans, the other people in the town, wherever, were not speaking to Jews, were not communicating in any way with Jews.

This is that process of ostracization-- no, it's just ostracizing, taking a group and ostracizing it bit by bit from society.

Bit by bit-- well, I remember even before that how the Jews were not allowed to go into parks. Jews were not allowed to go to a concert or to the opera. All of that was forbidden.

Did you ever go see a movie in Germany?

Yeah, but that was-- again, there was a point when that was forbidden also to Jews.

Do you remember the movies that you saw?

No.

Sometimes people will tell me-- generally, this is from Poland-- that they saw some Mickey Mouse film or they saw some Disney film.

Yeah, no, I don't remember.

And it feels so incongruous, you know? We're talking about World War II, and yet these saw Snow White.

Yeah, it could be.

And why was Mrs. [? Grunbaum ?] so-- not as kind?

Businesslike.

Oh, so businesslike.

Yeah, well, she was doing her work. She was busy. And she had a husband and she was caring for that was handicapped. She was a good woman. I know she cared for me. I had measles while I was with them. And I remember she blacked out the windows. I shouldn't have light. And she took good care of me. She was a good woman.

Did your parents pay her, do you think?

Yes, my parents paid for it.

OK. And did you see them during this year that you were in Frankfurt? Did they come to see you? Did you go back to Bonbaden?

Yeah, I would have vacations sometimes. And then I would go home for a week or two weeks for the time of a vacation.

And what was going-- was it during-- what was going on with your great-grandmothers? You say one of them passed away.

Yeah, Matilda passed away at 95, when it was 1939.

And what about Babette?

What about--

The other one, Babette was her name?

Oh, Babetta lived with one of the families in another town.

And she continued to?

Yeah. And she died, also, before the Holocaust, before the killings.

OK, but was this after your family had already left?

No, she died before. Can I take a drink?

Absolutely. OK, so we were talking about your great-grandmothers. And you do remember Matilda dying-- Matilda passing away in 1939. And then, Babetta was her name?

Babetta.

She passes away before she could be killed.

Right.

But that's later on, not at this part.

Yes.

Now, when you go back for vacations, do your parents tell you how things are progressing? Did you know that there were plans for you to leave?

Yes, I'm pretty sure that I was told what they were planning to do.

And can you tell me what were their plans and how was this progressing?

Well, it was very difficult, for one thing. We wanted to go to America, as I mentioned. The American Consulate gave all the Jews a number. I remember our number was 13,000-something.

Oh, my goodness.

But we did get called at one point and turned down because of this affidavit not being right.

Did you go to Stuttgart?

We went to Stuttgart, yes. And it was after that they informed us that they were not going to give us a visa.

Can I-- I want to stop just for a second. Do you have any memories of the American Consulate in Stuttgart? Do you remember going there? Do you remember the lines?

I do remember. I do remember going. It was a trip to go. And it was a difficult thing to do, and because the American Consulate was very tough on who they were going to let in. For example, my mother was afraid because she had varicose veins. And she was afraid that she would be turned down by the consulate.

Because of that?

Because I think we had to take an exam. And she was very worried that we wouldn't get through because of that. Now, that, fortunately, did not happen. But there were many difficulties that we encountered.

Do you remember the building itself, the American Consulate?

No.

Do you remember the actual being there?

I remember actually being there.

And was it a crowded place? Was it an empty type of-- I'm wondering, were there lines of people around the consulate waiting to get in? Was it something that-- whatever you can remember.

I think we took turns with people going before the consul.

Did you meet him separately just by yourself?

And then he interviewed each one of us. And they interviewed us together.

And was this--

Later on, we went a second time later on, when we finally got someone who would give us an affidavit. But that was after many trials of trying to get out. And my father, once he got out of Buchenwald, had to go and report to the Gestapo on a weekly basis and give them his update on what he was doing to get out, what progress he was making.

And in the meantime, he was doing forced labor for the Nazis. He was working on laying cables in the town of Frankfurt. And I remember my mother commenting that he always had such smooth hands. And all of a sudden, he had a worker's hands because he was laying cable for the Nazis.

And he received-- and we were, of course, on ration cards for food. And our ration cards were not as good as the other people's ration cards, as the Aryans. And so we didn't get as much food. But Dad, because he did the slave labor, got one egg every week for his labor, I think.

Was that his payment?

He didn't get paid. He didn't get paid.

So this was all he got as a result of the slave labor, the forced labor?

Yeah.

Yeah. Did he talk about that work and other people who were working with him?

He must've. I don't remember much about that, no. I just remember the hands that suddenly got very tough.

Yeah. Do you remember some of the ration cards norms, that is, how much of this you got, how much of that you got?

No. I know we didn't get any meat. There was no meat, no poultry, nothing like that. And I know my mother, after they had moved to Frankfurt, she would go to the other side of town where no one knew her. And she would try to get-- I don't know how, but she would try to get some extra food for my grandfather who was ill with a heart condition.

Your father's father?

My father's father.

What was going on with your mother's parents?

My mother's parents left Munster to go to a senior residence in Frankfurt. I think life for them, I'm assuming, also got very difficult in the small town. And they retired to a senior residence in Frankfurt. And while I was in Frankfurt alone, I remember going down the Zeil and visiting them in that home. And my grandmother died.

There.

My grandfather was later rounded up with all the other people when they emptied out this whole senior residence.

And what happened to him?

They took him. He got killed.

So you don't know the details of where?

I think he got killed in Majdanek, as many of the Frankfurter Jews. Because of my grandmother, my father's mother, also was killed in, we think, Majdanek. And my grandfather, who had been so ill, died as we were going-- as we were leaving.

Were they on the plans to leave, as well, your paternal grandparents?

They were not. There was no way to get them a visa. There was no way. And shall I tell you about my father's plans to get us out over Russia--

Yes, absolutely.

--and Vladivostok, Siberia.

Sure, yes. OK, so we want to loop back a little bit to ration cards and the difficulty in getting food. You mentioned that your mother would sometimes go across town to try and get food where she wouldn't be recognized.

Right.

Did she not look Jewish?

She was blonde. She was a blondish lady, and so she didn't look too Jewish.

She could pass.

She could pass. Yeah, she was also very brave. She did many things that were very brave, in how she tried getting my father out of Buchenwald also. I don't know exactly what she was doing, but she kept trying to get him out. And she eventually succeeded.

Do you think without her efforts he might not have been released?

They were releasing some of the men at that time with promises of getting out of Germany. What are you doing to get out of Germany?

Now, did you feel hunger during the time when rationing was--

Yeah, we did. We did. We were not overfed, no. We were very careful about eating and what we ate because we didn't have a lot of food. But there was a neighbor-- I think it was a shoe repairman, if I'm remembering it correctly-- who had somehow befriended my grandparents. Keep in mind, my parents were still living with my grandparents.

This was in Bonbaden?

No, this was while we were in Frankfurt. This continued. This way of living continued when we were in Frankfurt. And they had somehow befriended this man who would leave-- he was afraid to come to us. But he would leave like small baskets of food and different things at our door for us to eat. And that was a Christian man.

Do you know his name?

No. Was this the only time you remember a kindness from Aryans during this time?

Yeah, there was no kindness. There was only hostility. This was a very unusual thing.

When-- a couple of questions-- why, when, and how did your family move from Bonbaden? That is, you're in Frankfurt going to school.

Yes.

Why did they leave.

I was there about a year when they were able to move.

So they left everything behind?

They left everything behind. I think they sold the house at a very low cost. It was taken from them, more or less. And then they moved. And at that point, my father was immediately doing this forced labor. And he had to keep apprising the Nazis of his progress. And so he was trying-- when it fell through that my aunt and uncle could not give us an affidavit, he then progressed to other means, whatever country was going to open its doors to us. And there was a possibility, evidently, that we could go to China, over Russia and Siberia, and into Japan, and then into China.

Many Jews did.

Yes, it became a community. And somehow, it fell through. Because between Germany and Russia-- during the war, I don't know what transpired. But something transpired that closed that avenue. So that fell through. So now we had the second--

I'm making an assumption. I don't know. But between 1939 and 1941, the Soviet Union and Germany were allies. And that might have opened up the possibility. And in 1941 in June, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. And so they became an enemy.

Well, it was before that.

It was before that?

It was before that. It must have been before that. It may have been 1940, late in 1940.

Then they were still allies. And yet, it closed.

It closed.

The possibility closed.

Yeah, it finished. People were not getting out that way. Then there was a cousin of my paternal grandmother. No. Yeah, my paternal grandmother's cousin lived in New York City. She had never married. She was in America for a very long time, since she was a young girl. She had two brothers in Baltimore.

And my grandmother, my father's mother, decided-- all the avenues had closed to us. So she decided to write to this cousin in New York City, asking her to go to her brother's in Baltimore and ask them if they knew somebody, if the brothers could help, if they knew somebody who could help get out a couple with a child. And sure enough, it worked.

One of these brothers in Baltimore evidently went to a man who they knew, a businessman, who owned an electrical supply store or something, business, and said, can you help us to give an affidavit to a couple with a child in Germany? And the man said yes. He didn't know us. He did not know us.

And so the process, again, went to the American Consulate in Stuttgart. That was our region. And they called us. And they questioned my father. And they asked him, who is this man who is giving this affidavit? And my father must have said, he's a cousin, something, like he's a cousin.

Well, how many children does your cousin have? And my father guessed three. He said three. He had no idea how many children or if he had children. And the man said, this is your cousin? He doesn't have three children. But he okayed it. Do you know if it was the same consul?

I don't think so. I don't think it was the same one. He okayed it. And so--

Where were we? It was about this consul who says, that's not how many children that man has, but he passes it anyway.

So in our lengthy efforts to escape, we had some miracles. And that was one of the miracles. That this man who did not know us gave us an affidavit, and that this consul in Stuttgart said OK. So we had a number of miracles like that. And there are some more to follow.

OK. Before we go forward, because I know we'll talk about this and I want to capture the steps involved with leaving, because many people don't understand just how complicated and obstacle-ridden it was, I want to ask a few questions about the war itself. Very few people that I've interviewed actually still were-- German Jews were still in Germany after the war starts. Most succeeded in getting out before. But since you already talked about the air raid shelters, I wanted to find out a few other things. Do you remember where you were when the war started, when September 1, '39 came around and Hitler marches into Poland?

Well, I must have been in a Frankfurt.

OK. Do you remember a war footing-- that is, soldiers in the streets or news or something like that?

Well, I can remember soldiers. And I remember the bombings. They were very frightening. And I remember walking to school. And of course, there was always this anti-aircraft ammunition that was sent up against the planes that were coming over. At that point-- at some point, the British were coming over. And at some point, the Russians were coming over. That was a little later. And so we were going down to the air raid shelters every night.

Every night?

Almost every night, yeah. And I remember walking to school and picking up a little nugget from the anti-aircraft ammunition that was sent up against the planes. It must have shattered and dropped into pieces. And I remember picking up a piece.

And someone had given me a little red purse. And I had put it into this little red purse. And I had a pocketbook when we left for America, and I had this in my pocketbook. And at the border, the guy said to me, little girl, you better leave this with me. And he took my little nugget out.

This was a German border guard?

Yes.

Interesting. Do you remember seeing different--

One of my memories.

Yeah. Do you remember seeing different kinds of posters? Do you remember-- did you ever see a newsreel that would have been a war newsreel? But that would have meant that you could go into a cinema.

I don't remember that at all, no.

OK. Do you remember people talking about the war in Poland and what's going on there?

I think they were very careful about what they said. I mean, I was among Jews. And the Jews were very careful about what they said and how loudly it was being said. That I remember. And they did discuss it, and their hopelessness.

Yeah, because once war starts, a lot of avenues close. Almost all of them do. Nevertheless, your family, in September, '39 when it starts, you're all still together in Frankfurt? Or they will come soon to Frankfurt, because you said you were about a year without them.



Yeah, right.

So in 1940, they're there.

They came already in maybe late '39.

OK. And what kind of place did you live in Frankfurt?

We lived in an apartment. And I can remember the large hallway. And at some point, my-- there were chairs. There were big chairs in different areas. All the rooms were off this big hallway. And there were chairs set out in the different areas. And every chair had a backpack that my mother had prepared for each one of us. Because the arrests had begun, had already-- by the time we left, there had been major sections of Germany where the people had been arrested and put into concentration camps, including my neighbor next door.

Really? Did you see that arrest or hear about it? Did you see that arrest or did you hear about it?

We heard about it. We knew that people had been taken to camps, to a camp by the name of Gurs. I guess Gurs was a city maybe.

In France.

In France.

Yeah. Now, the Grunbaums do you remember saying goodbye to them?

Yeah, I said goodbye to them.

When your parents came.

Yeah.

And did you see them after that?

No, I don't think we did. I don't remember seeing them after that.

OK, so we get this affidavit from America. The consul passes it. What then happens?

Then my father had to try to get ships tickets, which I think the relatives in America helped him with. And there was a ship called the Nyassa, N-Y-A-S-S-A, from Portugal, that was ferrying refugees across the Atlantic at that point. By that time, it was 1941. It had gotten dragged out. It was ever more difficult, ever more difficult.

And I think the early arrangements were-- you could only get out, in 1941, over France and Spain and Portugal. And my father had arranged for a train transfer across Europe. But again, there was a difficulty with the bombing and the war. And that fell through. So another avenue closed.

At that point, the only way that people could get-- Jews could get out was from Berlin. And in Berlin, the HIAS and the Joint Distribution Committee were working to ferry people out. And so somehow-- I don't know how far along my father was with his tickets. But we went.

My mother, father, and I left at night, in late March, 1941, to go to Berlin. And there, the HIAS and the Joint helped us continually. For one thing, Jews were not allowed in hotels, so where were we going to stay? They helped us, and we ended up staying in a brothel.

No kidding. [LAUGHS]

And I remember running through the halls. It was a nice hotel, as far as I was concerned, right? And while we were there, they were helping my father with various things. We also heard, at this point, while we were in this brothel, that my grandfather had died. My father's father had died.

I have to interrupt here for a second. OK, so we're in a brothel. And you have a hotel room there. And you don't know what it is, actually, this place. And you learned that your grandfather has passed away, your paternal grandfather. What happens then? How long did you stay there?

I think we were there about 10 days. My father kept in touch with the HIAS and the Joint. And he had all his papers, but couldn't get out of Germany. And they said, go to the Lufthansa and see if you can go that way.

Just buy a plane ticket?

The HIAS told my father that because we couldn't go by train across Europe anymore. We had to reach Lisbon to get the boat.

This is something I didn't know, that Germany had the commercial airline Lufthansa way back at that time. I thought it was a post-war creation, but apparently not.

No, they were flying. They were little planes. So he went to Lufthansa and he wanted a ticket. I don't know whether he realized what stops they would have to make in order to get to Lisbon. But they said to him right away, don't you know, Mr. Kahn, Jews are not allowed to fly. They are not allowed to get on an airplane.

So my father went back to the HIAS and said, they're telling me we can't fly. We're Jews, we can't fly. And so they told him at the HIAS, keep going back every single day and see what they say. In the meantime, my father wanted to sit Shiva for his father. And he must have consulted a rabbi.

And the rabbi said to him, you do whatever is possible to get out. You continue to make your connections to get out. And you sit Shiva whenever you don't have to do that. So that's what he did. So he kept going back morning after morning. They kept telling him no. Until one morning, one of the guys said, come back to me tomorrow morning and I'll see what I can do.

I wonder whether or not it was a shift thing. That is, you had to get to the right people who were on that shift, who would sell the tickets.

It was a miracle, one of our miracles, one of our miracles. And so we went the next morning.

All of you?

My mother, my father, and I.

And you with your little purse with the rock in it.

Yeah, right. And my father had said to the guy, here is my last German money, he said to the guy. I wrote my mother's-- his mother, my grandmother-- address on here. Could you please send it to my mother in Frankfurt. And he left the envelope with this guy. The next morning, we come and we get a plane to Stuttgart. The guy says, you can go to Stuttgart but we--

He said, you can go to Stuttgart.

You can go to Stuttgart, but we don't know if you can make connections to get out of Stuttgart. So my father turns to my mother and says, should we stay here or should we go? And she said, let's go. Let's go to Stuttgart.

So we went to Stuttgart. And sure enough, in Stuttgart, there was a plane to France. We went first to Lyon, and then to Marseilles, then to Madrid-- no, no, then from Marseilles to Barcelona, from Barcelona to Madrid.

So once you get off of the plane in Lyon, how do you get to Marseilles?

And at each stop, there was somebody who was meeting us at the plane from-- and this was the other--

The Joint.

The Joint, the Joint Distribution Committee. There were people that were giving us money on where to stay, telling us where to stay overnight, money for a little food or whatever. And we went from stop to stop like that. By the time we got to Lisbon, we were a small group of refugees, nine people who had been coming that same route.

And was this all by plane?

All by plane.

Wow. Wow, how unusual, how unusual.

Another miracle.

Did you stay long in each place or was it just until another connection--

No, it was just a matter of like overnight or two days, not long.

From Berlin to Lisbon, how long did the whole trip take?

It couldn't have taken that long. I don't remember. It could have been maybe five days.

And when you get to Lisbon, then what happens?

And then we get to Lisbon and we-- and my father had to pick up our tickets for the boat. And he always said that it was Good Friday and the office was going to close at noon.

So this is around Easter.

And he got there at a quarter to 12:00 and still got us onto this boat.

The boat that you had planned on taking.

Well, I think we still spent the night in Lisbon. And the following day, we got on the boat. And this boat Nyassa was a fishing boat, but it was a very large fishing boat. And it was beyond capacity with refugees. And all the women were on one side of the boat and all the men on the other side of the boat, separated. We were separated from my dad.

Do you remember the boat trip over?

I do somehow. I remember it was Passover and there were matzos. That I remember. And I was a little seasick for a day, and then I was fine, running around the boat.

So this is March, April, 1941?

This is April 1941. And it took two weeks on this boat for us to come to America. And we landed in Brooklyn. And our aunt, who gave us the affidavit that didn't work, picked us up.

And where was your first night in America?

With that aunt and uncle.

In Brooklyn?

In Washington Heights in Manhattan.

Ah, OK. And after that, what happened?

And after that, my parents worked very hard. And they-- and we lived with my aunt and uncle for about two weeks. And then we lived with a family with a very large apartment, a German-Jewish family, that had a large apartment. And every room was rented out to another refugee. And the refugees were all so happy to be here and to be together. And I remember that, on Sunday afternoon, they all got together in the living room and they danced. That I remember.

Oh. Who spoke English in your family, anybody, mother, father, you?

No. I think my parents had taken lessons, but I don't think they spoke a lot of English. And I also had English in school, but I don't think I remembered anything. It took a month of me going to school. And I found school very easy here, where I found it very hard going in Germany. All of a sudden, it was like a stone had been lifted from me.

Do you feel like some of your childhood was taken away?

Absolutely. To this day, I tell my husband, whatever things are wrong with me I can date back to my childhood like that.

How did it influence you? What kind of impact has it had that you think has been lasting?

Lasting-- well, it stayed with me. It never left me. The story that I told you has never left me. It just stayed with me. It's part of me and part of my personality. And as I say, if I have different problems, that's where it comes from.

Did you ever go back to Bonbaden?

I went back once. And I really-- I couldn't stay. We just-- we left right away. We went back to Frankfurt on a visitation program. Even that was very difficult, very hard. In the beginning, I couldn't even listen to people speaking German. By the time we went to Frankfurt, which is about three years ago--

That's the first time that you--

That was the first time in Frankfurt, yeah.

So that would have been-- three years ago would have been 2014, which means over 60 years after the war.

Oh, yeah, yeah.

Wow.

70 years.

70 years, yeah-- I knew that my math was not quite there.

So it was-- and as I said, by that time I could hear the German, but not before. It was like a painful thing to hear the language.

Do you still speak and understand?

Yeah, I do.

What was that trip like, though, in general, the one in 2014?

It was an OK trip. I went back to my old school. And I suddenly had a memory while I was visiting the school. I had a memory of a song that we sang in that school.

What song was that?

A German song about Israel.

Did you ever have a conversation with a Gentile German about the war and post-war and the Holocaust experience?

Yes, I correspond with a woman in Germany who is not Jewish. She found me through my father, who was corresponding with a friend of his, a school friend of my father's that he was corresponding with. She found me. And I had-- she turns out to be the town historian for Bonbaden.

Wow.

And she has done many things to keep the memory alive of the Jews that left and the Jews that perished. She has done many things. And that's why I'm corresponding with her. I've been very open with her and she with me. She told me that her father was in the Wehrmacht, which was the German army.

Your father's friend or your father's classmate or-- the same person that he was [BOTH TALKING]

No, this is a different person. This is a friend of the person my father was friendly with.

I see. And did you see her when you went to Bonbaden, or you didn't know of her yet?

We saw her. She came to Frankfurt to see us while we were there. I didn't want to go to Bonbaden?

Was there a Jewish cemetery in Bonbaden?

I think it was also in Braunfels, the next town.

Is there anything that you would like to say-- and it's not necessary, but anything you would like to say to the generations of young Germans who came after, about what it was like to be part of Germany and part of German society, and then not?

While we were in Frankfurt for the visitation program, we were asked, would we speak to schoolchildren. And we did. And I told some of my stories to these schoolchildren. And we actually found, this time when we were there, that the younger generation of Germans, non-Jewish people, are beginning to honestly look at what their grandparents, what their grandfathers did.

And that goes also about the woman that I corresponded with. She's very open and very eager to learn what her father did, possibly, that he could have been one of the people that arrested one of my people. We have talked about that.

In Frankfurt, while we were there, we learned that my grandfather-- my paternal grandmother and my maternal grandfather had both perished.

You didn't know before how?

We did. We had looked into that. But we found it again while we were there. And there was a cemetery, a Jewish cemetery we visited. And on the outer walls of this cemetery are plaques of all the Frankfurt Jews that perished. And that included my grandmother, my grandfather, and an uncle.

Hugo?

No, not Hugo, an uncle of my husband's.

And Hugo, how did he perish?

He perished I don't know exactly where, whether we ever found that out. I think my parents found that out.

Is there anything else you'd like to add to what we've talked about today before we wrap up?

I don't think so. Is there anything?

I don't think so.

Then in that case, thank you very, very much. And I will say that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Margot Stern, on May 8, 2017, in Englewood, New Jersey. Thank you again.

I thank you very much.