

Maria Irmgard Weissenberg Barrows
RG-50.030.0972

Summary

Maria Irmgard Weissenberg Barrows, born on April 8, 1925 in Vienna, Austria, discusses her father's medical practice in Bad Vöslau, a suburb on Vienna; her father's service in World War I; her mother's side of the family, from a Czech-speaking part of the Sudetenland; her mother's Christian upbringing; her paternal grandfather's conversion from Judaism to Catholicism and how her father, who was baptized and raised Catholic, was considered Jewish by law; her aunts' deaths from cancer; her uncle's professorship at the Kaiser Wilhelm Society for the Advancement of Science in Berlin, Germany; the Anschluss in March 1938; her older sister; her paternal grandmother's emphasis on education and her and her sister's time at a Catholic convent boarding school; her sister's study abroad program in Torrington, Connecticut; her mother's and father's family histories; her father, who was an Austrian citizen but born in Romania, and his struggles to get a visa to the United States; growing up in Bad Vöslau; her parents' separation in 1928 and later divorce; her father's move to his parents' apartment in Vienna after his father's death; her father's work at the Allgemeines Krankenhaus der Stadt Wien (Vienna General Hospital); living with her mother and maternal grandmother in Vienna after the separation and becoming much closer to that side of the family; staying at a sanatorium and school in Tyrol, Austria for six months when she was five years old; her mother's Vienna apartment; her thoughts on the teachings of the Catholic Church as a student at the convent boarding school; the school closing after the Anschluss and transferring to public school in fall 1938; asking her mother to join the Bund Deutscher Mädel (League of German Girls) so that she could take part in meetings and helping on farms, only to be told that she was not eligible because of her Jewish ancestry; having to leave public school after eighth grade; her mother finding a group of Quakers who were helping children of mixed ancestry to get exit visas; securing a visa to the United States and leaving Vienna in 1940; her sister's return to Vienna and dance performances under different names; making American contacts through her father's medical practice, including the Weiss family; her uncle's scientific work in Berlin, dismissal from the Society because of his Jewish background, and escape to Southampton, England in 1933; her father's escape to England in 1938 with his brother's help; her mother's care of her ex-husband's mother after his escape due to her refusal to leave Vienna; her father's second wife; her father and uncle's internment on the Isle of Man for one or two years; her father's immigration to New York in 1944; learning years later that her paternal grandmother had not died of a sudden stroke in 1942, but had died trying to escape from her Vienna apartment before her transport to Theresienstadt; her mother and sister's clerical work in a law office during the war and later work as translators in the American zone after occupation; propaganda in the streets of Vienna; receiving training on how to put out fires from bombs; leaving Vienna in 1940 with three other children who had received visas from the Quakers program and taking the train to Genoa, Italy; traveling by ship first to Naples, Italy and then to New York; interviewing for a foster home placement and staying with an Irish family in the Bronx, New York with another girl from Vienna, Lori; a teacher in the Bronx who helped transfer her and Lori to a different family in Manhattan who spoke German; attending high

school; Lori's aunt who lived nearby in Manhattan and became a surrogate mother to the two girls; improving her English by going to the movies during the summer; beginning to communicate with the Weiss family, who had met her parents in Vienna and had sponsored her sister's study abroad program in Connecticut; a member of the Weiss family coming to New York to get her and bring her back to Honolulu, Hawaii, where the family now lived; hearing rumors of the killing centers in Eastern Europe; her experiences during the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941; helping the Weiss family and their neighbors to meet blackout regulations; being interned for seven weeks at the Honolulu immigration station after the attack and its impact on her thoughts on becoming a U.S. citizen; an officer at the immigration station, who arranged for custody of her to be transferred from the Weiss family to the Reverend Mother of a local Catholic convent without her knowledge; receiving her final year of high school education at the convent; the conditions of the internment at the immigration station; the bombing of London during the war; the loss of life during World War II and her pacifist views; gaining U.S. citizenship in 1947; moving to Walla Walla, Washington with the Weiss family during her last year of high school; paying for tuition at Whitman College through a teaching assistantship for German language courses; meeting her husband at the grocery store they both worked at during college; studying to become a doctor; speaking about her wartime experiences from an early age; wartime food shortages; specializing in pathology; her husband's work as a merchant mariner and then as a teacher; living all over the world; her son, daughter, and grandchildren; visiting Vienna multiple times; hosting an American family friend's son for a year while she and her family were living in Malawi in Africa; setting up a clinic in Dhaka, Bangladesh and her experiences there; and how grateful she is for all of her life's experiences.

Family photographs and descriptions follow the interview.