This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Isabel Langsdorf on December 5, 2019, in Kensington, Maryland. Thank you very, very much for agreeing to speak with us today.

You're welcome.

I'm going to start with really basic questions. And we'll develop things from there, OK?

Fine, mm-hmm.

So my very first question is, what is the date of your birth?

It's November 4, 1937.

OK. And what was your name at birth?

It was Ilse Bauer.

OK. And where were you born?

I was born in Frankfurt, German.

Frankfurt am Main?

Frankfurt am Main.

In Germany, OK.

Right, correct.

So one of the largest cities in Germany.

Yes.

At that time.

I guess it is.

Tell me, what was the name of your mother?

The name was Ida.

Ida?

Ida Bauer.

Ida Bauer.

And your father?

There was no-- she was not married.

OK. So your father was never in the picture, as far as your life was concerned.

I do-- we did find information and names, but she was not married. And I do have his name. I have to look it up.

OK.

But he was not-- I don't think he was much involved besides--

In her life or in your life.

That is correct.

OK.

Her life, maybe a little bit.

OK. And do you remember his name?

Yes, I do have-- I mean, I do have information about his name. And I have-- he came from Mannheim.

OK.

And we did find out-- my daughter Julie did quite a bit of research at one point about where-- different family. And we were able to get the name of my father, and the fact that he also had been-- left Germany around-- he must have left, we figured, somewhere-- maybe in late '37 he actually left, and came back again to Germany in the '50s.

Oh, I see. So he survived World War II.

He survived. They came-- yes. He came-- he didn't go. He didn't stay. He went to Uruguay and Argentina and came back then in the early '50s, when I think Germany was offering some compensation for having the fact that you had to leave and lose everything.

Did you-- did your paths ever cross?

Pardon?

Did your paths ever cross with your father's?

No, I don't-- no, my parents-- no. I was adopted, you see.

I understand. But did he know of you?

I don't think so. I really don't think so. I think, from what I can gather, that he may have known that my mother was pregnant. But I'm not-- I would not swear on that.

OK.

But it seems-- because he did inform her that he was leaving to go to Uruguay. And I don't think he necessarily offered to take her along. So I don't think that was quite the-- quite-- as far as I can tell.

Was-- I mean, I usually ask such questions later on. But I'd kind of like to cover this and then really go back to everything else. So I'll explore a few more things that I then have about your father.

Yeah. His last name was Loeb, if I'm not mistaken.

L-O-E-B?

L-O-E-B, yeah.

OK.

But I also have his first.

Do you know what his first name is?

Sally Loeb.

Sally.

Sally. So would it have been Solomon?

Yeah.

Yes.

OK.

When you-- when your daughter Julie did do research, were you able to find out more about his life after you returned to Germany?

Yes. Yes, we did. It was actually quite an interesting experience about that side. That came out later. Julie, we were lucky that-- with the town that was near.

I was actually-- my family came from Neckarzimmern which--

Neckarzimmern.

Neckarzimmern. And it seems that somebody kept the records of most of the Jewish families. And there were not many-- were kept not in the main office but at somebody's. So they had some already records of some of the families, which was good.

And they were-- and we had a very good person who did-- was very helpful to Julie in getting names. And he's the one who found out about that my-- about my father and--

Your biological father.

Yeah, my biological father. And then what we did was we found out that he had a sister who lived-- who had come here to New York. And we sent an uncle of my husband to kind of not-- visit and find out a little bit.

So he did go to find out. He did find that there was-- I didn't know if he actually talked with them. But he found out she did live there.

And so we got the information. And I did go to visit to the-- visit this lady, who was the sister of my father. But she was fairly not quite with it at the time.

Oh, so she had a-- OK.

But she had enough sense. I told her a little bit. And she called her niece in and said, you know, I have another niece. And she-- the niece questioned that.

But she then called me. The niece called me. And that's how I found out a little bit more.

She lived in San Francisco. And I met her niece once. I went to San Francisco to have a chance to meet her niece. And she sent me a few pictures of my-- some of my father.

Did they know him? I mean, the niece, did she know?

She met him once. She said she may have met him once or twice, not much, because he had kind of left. But she had sort of three pictures, which she sent.

OK.

So it was-- so I did have then--

How interesting.

--some information about him.

Were you able to get a picture as to what kind of a person he was?

He was interesting. He was-- there were two sisters and him. And he-- they were in the meat--

Butcher business.

Butcher's business. My family was in the cattle business. And that is, of course, indirectly how they, of course, did meet.

Mannheim and Neckarzimmern is not that far. But that's how the connection somehow came. And he was obviously closer to my mother's age.

But he also never came back and, of course, had no-- there was nobody. I don't know if he even tried or not. But they did find out that he was living with somebody, that he had-- that there were no other children, as far as they could tell.

So we did have quite a bit of information. So he never-- it was not clear to me that he necessarily even tried to look or find out what happened.

What was-- why was it important to you to go through these steps? Why did you want to find out more, when he was really not part of--

Oh, well, you know, it is interesting, not that I got terribly involved. But it is interesting to find out a little bit, not that route. I did find out that he was partly-- did play the piano and accordion.

And that's how he made his living when he went to South America, to Argentina and to Uruguay. He kind of worked more in the music field. But it was just a general-- when my daughter started researching, we kind of figured, well, let's find out as much as we can, you know, if we--

Well, the DNA is there.

So it was-- yeah, it was just interesting to know a little bit, you know, the name. But that was about it. And he died when he was somewhere-- he was in his early-- it was in-- sometime in 1980, early '80s that he actually passed away. But he never knew anything, no.

OK. And you don't know if he had a second family.

They-- from what I-- the records indicate that he had-- he was living with somebody. I don't know if he actually was

married. But they did not feel there were any children that he had-- that I had any--

OK. Well, I ask this question. To me, it's almost-- I ask this question to find out in your words. To me, it would be self-evident. One wants to know. One just wants to know.

Right.

Because that's part of who you are. And in maybe not the emotional, spiritual way, but certainly the genes.

Right.

The DNA, the everything else. But let's turn now to your mother--

Right.

--who gave birth to you. Do you have any memories of her?

No, no, no. She left me already, I think, which was good advice. She left me already after I was 2 weeks old and left me at the Jewish home, the Pappenheim. It was called Bertha Pappenheim Home, which was in Neu-Isenburg.

Was that an orphanage?

It was not an orphanage. It was-- Bertha Pappenheim was a rather interesting lady, who was very-- an activist, and was very interested in seeing that Jewish young women who came to the city and so on didn't just act-- have to make their money living on the streets by-- with prostitution, but wanted to give them some kind of education a little bit and some kind of a-- so the Jewish home was a combination of women who also were trying to learn some kind of a--

Skills?

--something that they-- skill, be it cleaning, be it house cleaning, whatever they could do. And they also had-- they were very interested in growing their own garden. They had-- well, tried to get them to be self-sufficient.

So it was a combination. Some of them had children. Some did not. And there were a few of us who did not have our family around. So my mother placed me in that one with intentions of that, hoping that I would be adopted.

I see. I see. So--

Yeah, this was '37. So this was not an easy time to have a baby around, especially if you're not married, and you have--

And you're Jewish.

--to take care-- you're Jewish. You have your family to kind of-- her mother and family to--

So then let's turn to you because it's almost-- it's not quite as tenuous as your father but still tenuous. What do you know of your mother's side of the family? What do you-- how many brothers and sisters did she have?

I'm not quite sure, but there were quite a few. There was-- it was a fairly large-- we'd-- my parents who adopted me were-- did have quite a bit of information, actually, on my mother's family a little bit. They knew that they were Orthodox Jewish.

And I think they thought her father was a judge, which I don't really think he was. But he was in charge of the Jewish group there. And the-- was-- so they knew a little bit about they knew where I came from.

And there were at least quite a few sisters and I know at least two brothers. There may have been another one. One

sister, I know, died when she was fairly young. That was-- and we had that in our thing.

And we-- later on, I actually did have one or two times that I wrote to an uncle of mine, who was able to go to England. And he wrote me a letter about my mother, what she looked like. I asked him questions of what she was about.

One of her sisters went to Israel somewhere also around '36. May have been around that time. And I understand that her father had passed away somewhere in maybe '33 or '34, 1933 or '34. So he didn't live to see some of the problems.

OK, we had a little break. And during the break, it turned out that Julie, your daughter, was a big part of finding out more about your birth parents.

That is correct.

And so I wanted to bring her on to have both of you speak to different parts of that search and research. So, Julie, introduce us to yourself. Your name is--

Julie Langsdorf.

And when were you born?

In 1963.

And how many siblings do you have?

I have two brothers, older and younger.

And are you-- are all of you as interested as you are? Are all three of you as interested in you are-- as you are in the documentation and searching--

Oh, I don't think my brothers are interested.

OK, OK. So let's go back a little bit. One of the questions I was asking you, Isabel, was, why is it that you wanted to know, or did you want to know, anything about your birth parents? Did you have any curiosity as you were growing up?

Not especially.

OK.

No, I was-- I had wonderful parents, who were very focused on me, shall we would put it this way. And I was comfortable. And I definitely-- definitely not when-- while I was younger. I mean, I-- no, I didn't especially.

And did you have much knowledge of them?

No. No, I didn't have-- I mean, I did always know that I was adopted. That was not hidden away. I mean, I always knew I was adopted. That was no-- no-- but I never really was all that--

And did you know at least your mother's name when you were growing up?

No.

You didn't?

No, not especially.

Tell her how you first saw your mother's picture.

Well, I was sent-- they sent me to college. I went to one year to Canada when I was-- I did one year of high school in Toronto. And then they also sent me to one year of college.

And one-- when I was in college, I got one day an envelope, which had the picture of somebody that obviously I had never seen before. And written in back of it, it was-- it said, this is your mother. And I'm--

It said-- I'm sorry. It said, Ilse's mother. It didn't-- so it wasn't for you.

Yeah. It was a picture that they had, you know?

So who sent you that package?

That was my parents. Now was it accidental at the time? I am not sure, because they never-- you know, I'd never seen her picture before that.

Well, you talked to your mother. And she said she didn't mean to send it.

She did. I think it was, I think, not quite-- it somehow must have slipped. And somebody sent-- one of them sent it. And so I was-- I kind of-- after that, I was obviously more aware a little bit that I-- there was another member of the family.

But I never was-- because my parents were very focused on me, and I always felt that I may hurt their-- kind of hurt their feeling if I start going around and trying to find out who was what, I sort of never was too-- never really broached the subject too much. I kind of sort of was a little bit careful about it.

More reserved.

Yes, right.

But it doesn't sound like you also had a great burning curiosity.

Not a burning curiosity. But I did know-- but once I got that picture, something did start clicking a little bit. But I still was very careful about not wanting to offend them that I was--

And you get this picture-- the first time you lay eyes on your birth mother is when you were in college in Canada.

Right.

And in your mind's eye, what do you remember of the image that you saw? What kind of a person was there?

Well, she was-- she's a lovely looking, very-- it was a lovely, very sensitive picture, lovely black-and-white picture, which always is actually in my bedroom in a frame.

So now that's where it is, yeah.

But it did completely throw me off for a while that I got this picture, and nobody had really talked too much about that part of my adoption part.

OK, now I turn to you, Julie.

Mm-hmm.

How much did you know of your mother's story as you were growing up? What did you know, not what didn't you

know?

I remember-- I don't know whether I knew about it before this. But I do remember when I was--

Hang on, Julie. I thought it would go away. But there-- OK.

I'm not sure if this is the first time that I was told about her story. But the first time I remember, that I have a memory of learning about the story was when I was 9 years old. And my adoptive grandparents, Anna and Edgar Lieberman, took me and my younger brother Kenny to Bonaire, which is the island where my mother met her adoptive parents.

And I remember being told that they had lived there. And we went to the place where the internment camp had been, which had turned into a hotel. And we saw the plantation, the little house where they lived. So that was the first time I have a real memory of learning about her story.

But, I mean, knowing that your-- learning that your mother was adopted, did you know about that?

I must have known, but I can't remember. That's my first memory of any of it. But I must have known. It was never a secret.

OK. And what was your-- did you have a curiosity yourself to find out more?

I know it was fascinating. And I remember being very interested in it. But I never pursued it either. My adoptive grandmother was complicated. And it was-- we weren't encouraged to talk about my mother's story when I was growing up.

I do remember one time, and I must have been a teenager, asking about her mother.

Her birth mother.

Yes. And my mother told me that she had been sent this picture. And I asked to see the picture. And you couldn't find it. You'd lost it. And then-- but I do remember then at some point seeing the picture.

OK.

But my real curiosity in the story, it didn't really happen until after I had given birth to my son in 1994, when I remember I was holding my son, and rocking him, and thinking about my mother, and how she had never known her biological mother, and how-- just the tragedy of a child being taken from its mother. And I began to get interested. But I didn't really allow myself to fully explore it until 1995, when both of my grandparents died, my adoptive grandparents died, one in late '94 and one in early '95. So there really was something that kept us from pursuing it. But after they died, I just wanted, really, to know everything about her story.

And did you tell that to your mom?

No. I didn't talk to my mother about it, really, for several years. I knew-- I'm a writer. And I knew I wanted to write about it.

So I actually-- in-- we didn't know at that point if the family was religious or anything. But in 1997, I decided I was going to take an adult bat mitzvah class to learn more about Judaism because we were-- we weren't raised with any religion. And I was trying to get a feel for what life might have been like for Jews in Germany.

And I went to the Holocaust museum for months and researched lives of people who would have been about my grandmother's age. And it was really after a long time before I could approach my mother and ask her what she knew.

And what did you know? I mean, or what did-- excuse me. I'll ask Julie to tell me. What is it that your mom told you?

My mother was-- my mother tends to be quite matter-of-fact about things. And she said, oh, I have a file. So we went downstairs to the basement. And she brought out a Manila file.

And in it, there was a photo of my grandmother and her younger sister when they were children and a photo of my grandmother. And there were a few letters. There was a letter from my grandmother's sister, who had emigrated to Israel, talking a little bit about--

Ida.

--Ida. So there were a few just different things from different relatives and a little bit of information. But I had never known it was down there. And it gave me a little more insight into the family.

So it sounds to me like a slim Manila folder.

A very slim folder.

Yeah? And did you then-- when was the first time you talked about it?

So we started talking about it after that. So that would have been probably in 1997, 1998. And I had got some information from that folder.

And I started to write letters to town halls, to the town-- I learned. I actually, at that point, learned that my grandmother had been in Gurs concentration camp and then in Auschwitz. I had never actually known those details about her life.

And that was in the letters?

That was in the materials in this folder.

And who had written those letters?

I would have to look at those. But I know that one of them was the sister in Israel. I think another was from the-- her brother Max, who my mother had had a correspondence with. So I learned details that I hadn't known.

I began to write letters to-- now I knew the hometown. So I wrote to the town hall there and to different places. I learned about the Jewish home. And--

Excuse me. So you didn't know you were in the Jewish home until that point?

No, I don't think-- I don't think I was aware. I mean, I knew that--

You just knew you were adopted.

Yeah.

OK.

And I did know that I was in a Jewish-- I mean, it was some-- what, but that-- but not any details. I mean, I just--

So you didn't-- when you told me that you were in Bertha Pappenheim's home, that's things that you learned afterwards, when Julie started exploring?

Yeah. Well, I did have some information that I had been in this place where there were other children. And so I had some little things here and there that I had heard about but never pushed too much about information. So no-- little its

and bits, but didn't especially concentrate on them.

Mm-hmm. And when you started writing these letters, were you involved in this together? Or was this something that you did pretty separately from--

Well, at first you weren't very interested at first. But after a while, and I started to get responses, and we started to get information. And we talked about going to Germany to find out more. And at that point, you were interested, and you wanted to go also.

So at first I was very cautious about it and really wasn't sure what your response would be. And eventually, you became quite interested also. And that was when we started to really explore it, and go to her mother's hometown, and meet family. And it really became-- I think it really expanded your life quite a bit.

In-- my memory before we really did the research was that you talked about your life beginning with your memories, which was in Bonaire.

Bonaire, right.

And after that, you began to talk about your family. And you met cousins. And you talked about your life as starting earlier. And it was really-- it was really very expanding for both of us. It was kind of amazing.

But all of this happens after 1997?

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm.

OK, so we'll say the past 22 years is when this part of your biography kind of unfolds itself.

Yes. I did find out a few things from early on when I had a ship type of accident-- I had a ship incidence. This type of thing I did know about. But that was--

OK.

But we did more research. And then it-- after a while, the internet became amazing. And we could find out about the ship. So we really found out a lot of details from your life that you hadn't known.

Yeah.

And there were telegrams. So we have a lot of information. But I think part of it was allowing ourselves to be curious and then to explore it.

And to actually go there.

Yeah. And, Julie, what was your motive? What was driving you, as you were doing this?

Well, it's-- I knew nothing about an entire side of my family. And I think as Jews who were affected by the Holocaust, I had such a small family. On my father's side, he had one brother. I had two cousins.

And I really-- there is a feeling that you want to know more about what your family was. And who were these people? Who was my mother's mother? Who was my grandmother?

So I just, I wanted to write about it because as a writer, I just knew I wanted to research and write about it, and that I knew that I was going to have to invent quite a bit of it. But I wanted to use as much of the real story as possible. And in

writing about it, I really came to have a feeling that I knew my grandmother, even though, obviously, I never did. So that was quite an experience also.

And you have written about it then.

I've written about it, yes.

In what form?

It's a novel.

Has it been published?

No.

OK.

No, it's something I want to go back to. But it's difficult because it is a family story. And it's been one of my hardest projects because it is so close to my heart.

Yeah. So let's go to-- one of the reasons we stopped the camera is because I was asking you detailed questions.

Right.

And Julie was saying, oh, but there's this answer, this. So let's go back to some of those points.

Right.

I think it was at the point where I was asking about your mother's siblings, what kind of a family she had, and so on. And fill that in, either of you. I don't mind who.

Fill that in. Who was her father? Who was her mother? If there are names for her siblings. And I want to clarify, too, the town that they lived in. That you were born in Frankfurt is clear. That Bertha Pappenheim's home was in Frankfurt is--

In Neu-Isenburg.

Neu-Isenburg.

Neu-Isenburg.

Neu-Isenburg.

Right.

But let's address those questions.

Can I?

Mm-hmm.

All right. So my mother's father, Sally Loeb, was from Mannheim. And they either had a butcher shop or slaughterhouse, possibly both. But they were in the cattle trade, just as my mother mentioned her family, the Bauer family.

Was in the cattle trade.

They were cattle dealers. The men were cattle dealers. So we assume that they met somehow through the industry.

We know very little about Sally Loeb except that Mannheim. He had two sisters. And we know he left, and went to Argentina, and came back and then died, came back to Germany and died in, I believe, 1983.

In Germany.

In Germany.

OK.

He seems to have known that my grandmother was pregnant. At some point, someone sent us a questionnaire that my grandmother had filled out. And she indicated that the father knew that she was pregnant.

My grandmother, Ida Bauer, lived in Neckarzimmern. Her mother was Emma Bauer. The father was Leopold Bauer.

There were five siblings who survived. I believe one may have died early on. But my grandmother's younger sister died in the early '30s. One went to Israel, and one went to England. And at least one was killed in a camp.

So it sounds like we have one in Israel, one in England, your grandmother herself. That's number three. One was killed. Another one was--

A brother, Albert, was killed.

In a camp.

Yes.

And a fifth?

The fifth younger-- my grandmother's younger sister, who died of some kind of stomach ailment apparently before the family was deported.

Do you know the names of all of these people?

Her younger sister was Elsa.

OK.

She had a sister named Henrietta, whom they called Yetta. The one who went to Israel was called Flora. But I think she had another name also. But I believe she was called Flora when she was in Israel. Max went to England, and Albert or Alfred was killed in a camp.

So three of the five siblings, your mother being one of them, your birth mother being one of them, do not survive the war. One of them dies naturally--

Right.

--of stomach ailment, you said in the early '30s.

Yes.

OK, so not before deportation. It was--

Right.

I mean, it was 10--

Before deportation.

Before all that started, right.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And two siblings, your mother and Alfred or Albert, are actual victims of the Holocaust.

Right.

They are killed in Germany, or they are killed as a result of the policies and things like that. So two siblings survive. And you had contact with your uncle Max, is that correct?

Right.

And he sent you letters?

Yes, he did send-- I have-- I found one or two of them, yes.

OK. Was there great correspondence with Max or just a little bit?

Very short. But nonetheless, he did write a very nice letter to give me an idea what my mother looked like, and what, you know. And as far as I know, he was married and went with his wife to England, and then also went back to Germany, and stayed somewhere in Schwab-- I'm not sure which part of Germany. But he did also return from England, but later, after the war.

After the war.

After the war, he did return.

That's interesting that-- because so many families who left from Germany, Jewish families, didn't-- didn't want to go back, couldn't, I mean, emotionally couldn't go back and so on. So Max, does your correspondence with him happen after 1997 or before?

No, before. That was a-- I got quite a few things in. In 1953, '54, my parents got some kind of a [GERMAN], a type of letter.

A reparation type of letter.

Reparation letter, which the names of relatives, that there were some in New York, some--

That was later when we got the list of all--

It was in the middle '50s.

But we got the list of where everybody was quite a bit later.

Was at that point, right. And that's how I found out we had somebody in France. I mean--

No, that was later.

Also?

Yeah.

So when you're saying that you, in the '50s, you got this letter of relatives, this doesn't mean your adopted parents' relatives. This means your birth mother's relatives.

Right, correct, right.

OK. And, Julie, what are some of the things that you found that really stood out to you, spoke to you, as you were doing this research? What are the things you discovered?

Well, one of it was the [GERMAN], which they gave-- Germany gave $1,000 for the life of my grandmother.

Yeah.

So that was-- that's quite a thing to learn.

Yeah.

OK.

It was to piece the family together, to learn that the family had been-- lived in this small town. We knew that she was from-- her mother was from somewhere near Frankfurt. But to learn that they were in a small town. There were just a few Jewish families. There was a small synagogue there.

The story had been that her father was a judge. But he wasn't. But apparently he was very strict. And he had an ear horn.

I learned some of these things from-- one of the times when we went over to Germany it was to go back to Neckarzimmern, where they have a memorial for all the Jews of Baden, who were all sent to, in October 1940, were all sent to camps--

To Gurs.

And a lot of them were sent to Gurs. But the whole--

In France.

Yeah, so 6,000 Jews were deported on this one day in October of 1940.

Was Ida one of them?

She was one of them, and all the remaining members of the family--

There were also two aunts.

--two aunts, her mother, your cousins, two cousins, so many people in the-- all the Jews that were left in town. So learning about the town, I learned from a few Jews who had survived about the town. So through my research, we found another family, one of whom was Sophie Caan, who was born Sophie Falkenstein. And she is the mother of James

Caan. She died not long ago.

The actor?

Yes. And we met her when we were in Neckarzimmern. And she had been friends with Ida.

Yeah, they were-- the family was friends.

Ida was older.

Oh, wow.

And she has a picture that we have a copy of with Ida, Sophie, and Elsa, the little sister. And Sophie is holding a teddy bear. It was her 15th birthday. And they're out on the lawn. And apparently, the Bauer girls gave her this teddy bear for her birthday.

And my grandmother-- when Sophie left for the United States, my grandmother, who was apparently a very good seamstress, gave Sophie her sewing scissors. And Sophie gave me the sewing scissors.

So she still had them.

She had them, yeah. So we now have them.

Yeah, the scissors.

That's the one thing that we have--

I remember the scissors.

Of your--

--of my grandma, of her mother's.

Yeah. Yeah, the scissors. I remember those.

When you-- when that happened, what did that-- did that-- did you feel something?

Yeah, that was-- at the time, that was nice to have something in your hand that had been in the hands of my mother. But, yeah, it was nice. It was an object.

Your grandfather died before you were born.

Right.

So before your mother becomes pregnant.

Right.

Did you find out whether she had had issues in her own family, whether her mother or the siblings in any way ostracized her, or whether she suffered because of that, or the reverse?

I never had that feeling. I did not--

We don't really know.

No. We do have the feeling that they obviously did influence her on trying to put me at the time into a place instead of bringing me back to the town. She was at first working also at that time. It was a family in Frankfurt who emigrated pretty much soon.

And what was she doing at that family's home?

She was house-- maybe she was doing sewing. But I'm sure she also did housekeeping. I'm sure she did it.

So we don't know much about that. We know that she went to Frankfurt, and she lived in the home of Eugen Fisch, who was a wealthy man. And he emigrated sometime during that period.

But she lived there. We think she may have been doing housework there. But they tended to write that all of the Jews did things like housework. So we're not really sure if that actually was happening. But we know she lived with that family--

During that time.

--and then went, after she had-- gave birth to my mother, went to the Jewish Women's League home, to the [GERMAN].

She went there with you?

Yes, after you were born in Frankfurt.

Yeah, right. But I think Max was involved there, too. He came--

We don't know.

He's the only one who said he actually did see me once or that he saw me at the home. He could not-- he indicated that he had seen me in the letter--

Hmm, OK.

--as a baby there.

So your mother was living with you. It wasn't that she just left you at that home.

Well, after two weeks she was in the-- from the hospital, she basically did bring me to the home.

The mothers could stay for six weeks, and then they had to leave.

Ah, I see.

And then she went back to Neckarzimmern.

I see, I see, I see. Is there anything else that you found out in your research? I mean, all of this is predicated on the very first questions that I asked of, who is your mother, who is your father?

Right.

And we have two sets of parents here. And we're only talking about the first set, the biological set.

Right.

And you're-- the amount of information that you know, what you know, and, of course, that shows what you don't know, because what you do know is a fragment here, a fragment there, a fact here or there, and the effort that it took to find those things. And you have a pair of scissors. You have a pair of scissors from-- that's a tangible object. Is there anything else that you think we should know about Ida Bauer, her family, or Sally Loeb, his family, anything about their lives?

I can tell a few other things that I've found in my research. One of them was-- so the group that went to Gurs, her-- she had two cousins, and one of whom my mother did get to meet. The other one had died. So this-- and the second one has since died.

But she had-- the Resistance had helped her get out of Gurs.

The cousin.

The cousin. And she went to Paris.

Yeah, they were teenagers.

Yeah, they were teenagers.

They were two sisters.

And they went to Paris. So my mother, after we got the names of relatives, when I started doing the research, my mother called her cousin in Paris. And she started to-- I think you started to speak in French. Correct me.

But then she started to speak in German. And the cousin was completely flummoxed. She said that she-- there had been a rumor that Ida had had a child. And so--

Oh, they knew something.

Yes. And they thought it was the doctor in town who was the father. So her cousin-- this was the first time. Now they were in their 70s, and my mother was talking to her first cousin on the phone in German.

Whose child was this first cousin?

This was Yetta's daughter.

Yeah, Yetta's.

Yeah.

So you were a secret.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I was-- it was, yeah, not-- though it seems that this one person who lived, the Flads, she-- the mother-- they knew.

Oh, yes.

They knew something. They did.

So Ida's best friend, Anna Flad--

Flad.

--lived behind. They were not Jewish, and they lived behind the house. So there was the house on the main street in Neckarzimmern. There was the-- in back where they kept the cows. And behind that was her friend Anna Flad.

Anna Flad would later buy the family home in the '50s and live there. So she knew that Ida had had a child. But it was not widely known. That was her best friend. But it was-- you were pretty hush-hush.

Yeah.

Oh my.

Yeah.

Who would have thought in that town that 70 years later, half a century later, you would be coming back, Julie, and pulling up these details, and finding out these things?

Yeah.

How did-- when you-- on the one hand, you were a secret in the town and in the family. On the other hand, this birth family is also something pretty misty for you and something you're reserved about because of your own very loving adopted parents and you not wanting to hurt them. When those mists part on either end, what is that-- what did-- did it give you anything? Did it do anything for you? Did it-- and if so, what was that?

Well, I had always sort of a fairly practical, I mean, as my mother said, I always had-- they always complained about my lack of a little bit of emotions. They-- and I can now see where it comes from.

I really want to address that.

Yeah, I just didn't get terribly involved. Or at least I tried to keep it-- I always had a little bit of a wall between a lot of things matter of fact, I suspect, which had to do with the fact that I was all over the place the first years. So I think that later in life, so when some of these things kind of-- you know, eh, it happened.

But I did always enjoy when I had a chance to actually speak with somebody who actually was part of the family who I'd never met. So I had a way of-- my emotions were kind of always, you kept them-- you know, you just--

They were--

They were there. But they were, yeah.

OK.

So I always tended to do that.

What was it like to speak to that first cousin in Paris?

Oh, I loved it. Yeah, that type of thing, I love. She was not too-- actually not that great in German, but she could at least-- we communicated then in German. My French was school French. There was no way I could communicate with her.

So we got to know her, and her daughter, and her family. So we met that cousin. We did meet that cousin, and I met her in Paris. And you have met her, too, of course.

Now, in her case, her mother died also a little before the war.

Oh, that's right, she did.

Yeah, that's the one. She did die before the war.

Yetta died before the war.

So was that the stomach ailment?

No, that was another one.

Yeah, that was another one.

OK.

Yetta died a little before the war.

Yes, I'm sorry, it's a little bit confusing about the siblings. But she did. Yes, and the--

And I think also the father passed away. Her father passed away. He was--

I think you're right.

--had some injury.

Yeah. I want to address my mother. And, you know, when I think about your emotional distance, I mean, when we think about your story, and as you'll go into, the trauma of your young childhood, the idea that anyone would expect you to be any other way after all the trauma you went through is kind of absurd. So it's, of course, you couldn't be emotionally engaged after all you went through.

It was-- there always was a little barrier, you know?

You had to protect yourself.

My parents were very the hugging type and the-- you know. And I was, I mean, I didn't mind being hugged. But I was not the-- I was not big on--

I don't think people really understood trauma in the same way and how much it affected you, even if you didn't know-- remember it.

Well, that's an interesting thing. Can trauma affect you if you have no memories of it?

Yes.

That's a good-- and I think it does. I suspect it really does. I mean, that-- it was very clear. You know, I always had a little bit of trouble.

I mean, I was always friendly and had lots of friends. But I think there was always a little--

A little distance.

--distance I had, yeah. I didn't want to get too close to anybody, not too close. Close to be comfortable, but not close to be too close.

Yeah.

You went from hand to hand to hand, the things that you experienced. So this is going off topic, going on to--

Well, it's actually on topic but in a different direction. And that's where I want to go back. Let's just talk right now. Your very earliest conscious memories, when do they start?

I would-- I truly think that they didn't start till I was in Bonaire, and I was closer to 3, between 2, you know, closer to the age of 3 that I do feel that I remember actually things from there. Before that, I would not say that I do. I mean, no.

All right, so the part of your story that I think is one of the key parts is exactly those years, from the time that your mother leaves you in the home, Bertha Pappenheim's home in Neu-Isenburg, and you end up in Bonaire. And it's of this time that you-- these-- this period of two, three years, two and a half years maybe, where you don't have a memory.

That is right.

OK. Now what I'm going to ask you about, is this-- and we'll talk about it in a minute. But is this something you only learned after you and Julie started doing research, all of the various parts of that? Or did you know about this before?

That is, you don't have memories of it. But did you know about step one, step two, then this happened, then that happened, then the other thing happened? Did you know about those various events?

I did know a little bit about Truus Wijsmuller, I mean, who was the social worker who was a main person who dealt with me, with when I was in the home, because my parents had gone down to Aruba. They had left in '37 to Aruba. And she was from Amsterdam. And so she was then kind of the center person who was the one who was trying to get me--

There.

--get me to them.

So you knew of her.

Yes, yes. And I had met her also in Venezuela. She came to visit. So I did know about her, yes.

You knew the story because there was also--

About the boat, yeah, about the boat.

Her father-- her-- adopts a-- when we're talking about parents, we're talking about the adoptive parents, who went to the Dutch West Indies. There's a little tiny book that her father, her adoptive father, Edgar Lieberman, made for her, so little drawings about leaving, and then the ship that was hit by-- hit a mine. So you were told the story.

OK.

Yeah.

OK. Then in that case, I think that now we'll talk one on one again.

Yeah.

And unless, Julie, there's something else you want to say--

I feel as though there are things, and it's up to you.

She knows, yeah. It's just her memory is a lot better than mine.

Until Bonaire, I may be able to help with some of those details.

OK. So would-- so maybe we do it this way so we don't have to ask Katherine, our lovely videographer, to rearrange things. If you don't mind, I'll address most of your questions to your mom. But please stay where you are in case there is something that you don't remember.

OK, and I'll just give you a little--

[CHUCKLING]

--like, well.

OK. OK, Isabel, a question, do you have any documents from your birth? That is, do you have any documentation that you were born in that Frankfurt hospital that followed you to Bertha Pappenheim's home and things like that?

No, not besides--

No birth certificate or anything like this.

No.

OK. So at this point, where we're going to pick up the story is you are in the home, which is in Neu-Isenburg. And your mother leaves you there after two weeks, Ida Bauer. And does she sign over-- does she free you so that someone can be adopted?

Yes.

At that point.

Yes, there was something that I did see that looked like that was where I was-- there was something that I did see.

OK, some kind of form, or document, or something like that. Do you know if she ever visited you there afterwards? Do you have any idea?

From what I understand is she never did come there. I also do know when I did meet-- when I met with the Flads, they indicated that she was very unhappy about having to leave me. I mean, she really did not. It wasn't one of those things that she really would have wanted to keep me.

So she was definitely not-- and I think maybe they felt she was better off not seeing me again. So I do not think that she had a chance to see me again. But I do know that she was very unhappy having to leave me from this situation.

Well, that would be important. That would be important to know.

It was not-- it was a case that she-- and one of her friends had had a little baby, matter of fact. Was it Flad? She had a baby. And she very often had her friend's baby, and kind of held it, and so on. So there was, you know, that. I had heard something.

So you knew-- I mean, for a child, a child needs to know it's wanted.

Yeah. It was definitely not a case that she wanted to leave me there. It was just that it was the family thought it was better.

And she wanted something better for you.

Yes, I think she had a feeling at least that I had a chance to get out, leave, or somebody would adopt me.

So you were then in the home, in Pappenheim's home. And how does life progress there? It's 1937, 1938. What happens to this facility?

It was not till about the time in November of '38 that the Kristallnacht took place. And they-- I don't know if it was two buildings. But definitely one or two buildings were put-- were set-- burned. I mean, I don't say they were set. Somebody set the fires or not. But nonetheless, they were burning. And--

During Kristallnacht.

Yeah, Kristallnacht. And then one--

Well, there's quite a coincidence if it was not arson. It would've been--

Yeah. No, this was definitely a set thing. And they did get people out of the building. But people did not help one bit with the children. I mean, they were sort of getting the babies out and so forth.

There was a rumor that some teenager was-- may have held me at least for a while so that they could obviously move around. That was something that somebody seemed to tell me. Where did we--

What we know about the town was that the pastor in the town was a terrible Nazi, and apparently had an ax with him that he brought to the Pappenheim Home, that if the women and children didn't leave, he was going to break down the door. And they set fire to one of the buildings that night and burned it to the ground. They--

You mean he brought an ax with him to if they didn't leave, he was going to break down the door.

That's right.

Well, that could be to rescue them, because--

It wasn't, though.

So what was the purpose of him--

To break down the door, like if they were locking the door against him. We know this from the man who recently retired as the pastor of the town. He became the pastor 38 years ago. And this former pastor, who was really--

A Nazi.

--bad guy was the pastor there until, I guess, the '70s. He remained the pastor there. But, no, he was there-- there wasn't a synagogue in town. And they wanted to go after something Jewish. So they went after the Pappenheim Home.

The townspeople didn't want to help with the children, as my mother said. And apparently, they were asked-- there was a baby. And they said, can anyone hold this baby? And nobody volunteered. But a teenage girl finally said that she would.

And is that you?

They think it was.

We don't know, yeah.

But they don't know. But it's vague.

OK, it's vague.

Vaguely, that's what we heard.

So clearly, you're still a year old. And you would have no memory of this.

Right, correct.

So what I would like to know is did everybody make it out alive from this Pappenheim Home?

From what I hear, I never heard that anybody-- that people got out. They then had-- we went to some temporary place. I don't know exactly--

Excuse me, can we cut for a minute?

Yeah.

OK, so after that, after the fire, and you are taken-- nobody perishes in this fire.

Yes, as far as I didn't hear anything.

OK. What happens with you and all the other children then?

It was-- from what I heard, there was some other buildings where they put us for a while.

In Neu-Isenburg.

In Neu-Isenburg. We did stay but some, obviously, some other temporary places for. One building actually stayed in fairly good condition. And one, I guess, really got damaged.

And so for a while, we were some other part of town, uptown. We stayed in town, as far as I know.

Did you ever leave it, leave town?

Not that I'm aware of. It always-- the Pappenheim Home always stayed there. And there was-- and matter of fact, eventually, it was kind of used for a daycare. That was-- then it made it like a memorial in a way, too, partly to Pappenheim and also a little bit to the children who were, and people who were in the building.

That's after the war.

That was after the war.

OK, what I'm saying is at that time, you were taken out. The building is destroyed. One of them is in not such bad shape, but the other one completely.

You're in temporary quarters. What happens to all of you then? Do you stay in Neu-Isenburg? Do you--

Yeah, as far as I know, we stayed. That's all I-- otherwise, I didn't hear anything.

And how long did you stay there?

Well, I was there at least until November of '39.

So another year after Kristallnacht.

Yeah, I was still another-- yes, I was another year. There was at least two years there.

And your birth date-- remember-- remind me of it again. What is your birth--

It was November 4, '37.

OK, so that means you're exactly 2 years old.

Right.

When Kristallnacht happens, you've just turned 1.

Right.

And you're exactly 2 in November of '39.

Correct.

And then what happens?

Well, then it was-- at that time, it seemed there was this-- my family, who was-- who had-- who was looking for adopt a child, they were interested in getting a child from this home. And they had Truus Wijsmuller. And there were a few other people. There were various other people involved in trying-- getting me out.

But I had to get to the Dutch West Indies.

Why? Why the Dutch West Indies.

Because at the time, my adopted parents had left in '37 to go to Aruba. They were--

And what was their name?

Their name was Edgar and Anna Lieberman.

And where did they come from?

They came-- my mother came from Krefeld.

Krefeld.

And my father came from Hamburg.

OK, and so were they also German Jews?

They were Jews. Now, on my mother's side, actually, there were two rabbis in the family. But they were not-- they were-- they did-- they were not high Orthodox. But they did keep the Jewish.

Now, on the side of my father, I think there was really no-- especially, there was no religion. I mean, they were Jewish, but not-- didn't--

More secular.

--especially-- right, pretty easy going about it.

So they had left Germany in 1937. But they enter your life about two years later in that they're searching for a child to adopt.

Correct.

And they know of the Bertha Pappenheim Home?

Right.

And who-- let's spell out the name of the lady you mention, Truus Wijsmuller.

Yeah, Truus Wijsmuller was a-- she was a social worker who worked with various other people. She couldn't have done all the work she was doing with all the children that she was able. She had rescued like 10,000 children.

She worked with various organizations, a Jewish organization. So I'm sure she worked in conjunction with somebody. But the fact was that we knew they were trying to get me down to the Dutch West Indies.

What I'm trying to find out is, did Truus Wijsmuller work in the Pappenheim Home?

No.

Was she a staff employee?

No. She was a independent. She was married. She lived in Amsterdam.

And so what was her connection to the Pappenheim Home?

She was called in, at least was connected. Now, I think that the Warburgs, who was a-- they-- some of the Warburg family had already gone to England. And I think-- I don't know if some of them went-- came to the States.

But the Warburgs were related-- my father was related to the Warburg family.

Lieberman.

Yeah, Lieberman was. And they knew-- they-- Lola must, or somebody must have been able to find-- have been the one or somebody who told my parents about this place. And so she definitely was involved. She wasn't there.

Who's Lola?

Lola was, I guess, one of the-- she wasn't-- I guess she was not an aunt to me. But she was related to my father. There was-- it was a fairly large family.

OK, so this would have been somebody in your father's family who tells him-- and we're now, when we say mother and father, we're talking adopted mother and father.

Right.

Lola tells him that there is this place called the Pappenheim Home.

Right.

And the name Warburg, to me, sounds a little vaguely familiar. Tell me, who were the Warburgs?

The Warburgs were a family. I guess they were known for being in the bank, a basically banking family.

So they were well-to-do?

Well-to-do family. They were Germans, I think mainly from Hamburg. I think they were originally of Hamburg.

And I do-- my father had always connections with-- there was one person called Erich Warburg, who was more my father's age. And he was in connection. And they also had somebody in between, Mr. Minden, who was their kind of businessman, who did all their connections and things. He was a big factor in how I got back and forth to Truus. So he had a lot to do with it, too.

OK, so if I'm trying to reconstitute this, we have an independent social worker who lives in Amsterdam. And her name is Truus Wijsmuller.

Yes, Wijsmuller.

Let's spell it out. T--

T-R-U-U-S.

T-R-U-U-S is her first name?

Yeah, Truus. And Wijsmuller is W-I-J-S-M-U-L-L-E-R.

OK. Was she Jewish?

No, she was not. And she came from a very comfortable family. You know, they were in the bank, also banking. He was a banker. And she had--

OK, her husband or her father was a banker?

That was her husband, yeah.

Her husband.

Yeah, who was very good about letting her go back and, you know, because she was going back and forth, trying to help with all these cases. So he was very supportive.

OK. So--

Stop for a change.

OK, so I'm starting to get the connection. It is, first of all, your adoptive parents, who are in Aruba after 1937, find out from a lady named Lola, who is one of your adopted father's relatives, that there is this building-- there is this home called Pappenheim. Your adopted father also has connections through Hamburg, where he's from, to the Warburg banking family.

Right.

And their intermediary, a man named Mr. Minden.

Mr. Minden, right.

And how did the Warburgs-- how were they involved and Mr. Minden involved in getting you from Neu-Isenburg to Aruba?

He was mainly involved in letting my father know what was happening to me, because he-- I don't know if he was in Germany or in England at the time. But he was a main connection person who was able to--

How did they choose you? Who chose you for them?

That is a great-- I would never know how, because at the time, there was also a boy. There was a boy. And I was-- the two at the time were being looked into, one or-- so I have no idea how that part worked, if--

Were you the only two children in the Pappenheim Home who were free for adoption?

I am not even sure about that. There may have been some that were older. They may have wanted some that were a certain age.

It's possible. But that part I'm not quite sure. The only thing I do know is there were two of us who were available, at least, at the time.

OK. And somebody picked you for the Liebermans.

Yeah, how that worked, that I would not know.

OK. And how does Truus, who lives in Amsterdam, come into your life?

She-- because of the fact that they needed to send me to the Dutch West Indies. And she was familiar with the Pappenheim Home. I mean, she was aware of it.

She worked with various organizations, not just-- many different kind. So she was the one who was the most practical person in this case to deal with me because she was Dutch, and was in Amsterdam, and it had to be a Dutch ship to go to--

So who took you from Neu-Isenburg to Amsterdam? Who brought you from one place to the other?

I do know there was a family by the name of Westerman.

Westerman?

That's the only name I remember. The Westermans, somehow they were going to be going on that ship. She somehow must have known there was this family with a child because I do know they had a child, too. And I was given to the Westermans to kind of be the ones to--

Bring you to Aruba.

--get me-- yeah, right, because they were also going. As far as I know, they were planning to. I don't know if they were planning to go to England. But I do know they were the ones that Truus Wijsmuller handed me to them. So they were the ones to--

So they didn't take you from Neu-Isenburg to Amsterdam. Someone else did.

Some-- she may have been Truus. Who knows? That part, of course, I don't. I don't know who did that.

OK. But at any rate, in November 1939, you were taken from that home--

From the home, right.

--and taken to Amsterdam.

Right.

And in Amsterdam, you were given to the--

I stay at Truus. Yeah, I stay at-- I stay for quite a few weeks at her place, till they found out about a ship that was going. So Truus is the one at that point who mainly directed-- I don't know if she met with them or how they did it. But she was the one who made the decisions at that point.

OK. And so then you're given to the Westerman family. What was the name of the ship that you were going to be on?

The SimÃ³n BolÃvar.

And whose ship was it? What country's?

It was a Dutch ship.

It was a Dutch ship.

It belonged to Holland, yes.

It belonged to Holland.

It was a fairly large ship.

OK. And clearly, you then are with the Westermans. If they have a cabin, you must be there in that cabin. And when does it set sail? Do you know?

I'm trying to think. The accident happened around the 18th or 19th of November, sometime at that point. I have to check the dates when it happened.

I'm not quite sure how that exactly--

But it was still 1939?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, it was still in '39, and in November. It was still around--

So it could be that you even left Neu-Isenburg in October '39. Or did you leave in November '39?

Well, I may have left in the beginning of November or something to go to Holland because I did stay some time.

But it is a crucial time because the war starts. Germany attacks Poland September 1, '39.

Yeah. They were not in Holland yet at that point.

No, they weren't.

Right. Correct.

They were not in Holland.

Right, but they had Poland.

But the war starts.

Right, the war had started, yes.

OK, two months.

So things were-- had gotten very, very difficult. And I know from-- that Truus had-- with all the transportation, she had to-- she was very smart and had an amazing feeling of what to do with these last minute, because they're always last minute that the children were handed to her from all over the place, orphans and--

Did you ever meet her?

Germany. Oh, yeah.

Truus, you met her?

Yes, I met-- I've met Truus.

OK.

Yeah, I did.

How old were you when you met her and you could remember about it?

In Venezuela. Well, I was about a teenager, 10 or 11 when I met her the first time. I met her there, and then I met her again in the States.

OK. We'll come to that later. But right now, I just wanted to know that. All right, so she hands you to the Westermans. The SimÃ³n BolÃvar, which belongs to Holland, the Netherlands--

A Dutch ship, right.

It's a Dutch ship-- sets sail. And it's sets sail for Aruba. Is that correct?

Yes, I said it was going via England. So I don't know if some people-- and I think-- I don't know if there were any other countries involved where it was going to stop before it, you know. It was not clear because I met somebody who later on said that it may have stopped in Denmark first and then gone to. So that's what I heard from somebody. But it was headed then from England to the Dutch West Indies.

And so what happens? Is it-- does it get to England? Does it get to the Dutch--

It didn't get to England. It got very close. It went very close to the coast. I mean, they were very close to the English coast when the mine hit.

There was one mine. And then about a little while later, a second one hit.

So the ship hit a mine.

It hit. Yeah, it hit one. And then it hit two. And it was a big ship. And it was one of the first passenger ships that left from Amsterdam.

One of the first or one of the last?

No, one of the first, actually, passenger ships leaving the-- going. And so it was kind of noticed because it was a large ship. And it was basically a passenger ship, not a military type of--

And so was it sunk?

It got seriously-- yeah, it was very seriously damaged with the two mines caused-- there were about 100 and some people that were killed. I'm trying to remember the number. I have all that information. And a lot of people, of course, were seriously injured.

And the news spread fairly quickly in Europe because it was one of the first big ones to get. And we were very-- fairly quickly taken to-- but as everything, when something is an emergency, those little ships and those little things that you go in don't always work well. So there were a lot of problems to getting everybody to the English coast. But they were close.

So were you in the water?

Yes, it seems that I did hit water.

And what happened with the Westerman family?

I never heard anything. I never got any information about them.

So you don't know whether or not you were--

If they made it.

--in the water and someone was holding you, or whether you were all by yourself.

Or somebody else may have gotten-- it was chaos. It was real chaos going on, on that ship. The captain was killed right in the very beginning. That-- the first mine got-- the captain was killed. And it was a-- things were really wild.

And you're a 2-year-old toddler.

Yeah. And do you know whether the mines were British mines or German mines?

I'm pretty sure they were German. The Germans had been putting mines in that area during that period.

OK. So the ship does not sink, but it is crippled.

It's, yeah, seriously crippled.

And there are over 100 people who are killed.

Who are killed, yeah.

And do you know from your research later how many were on the ship to begin with?

I have to check. It was 800 or 1,000. It was somewhere around the figure of 1,000, give or take, that type of--

So somebody takes you from the water on a little boat to the shore.

Right.

Then what happens to you?

It seems that England got information very quickly that something had happened close by. And they brought everybody, whoever they could get hold of, to this one place, which was where they were-- they had people waiting for the injured people and so on. So they knew that something seriously had happened.

So obviously, Lola was informed very quickly about it. And she went right away to the place where they were--

Oh, so Lola, your father's relative, lived in Britain.

She went to England. I mean, she went out, left Germany because she could, obviously, she knew that there was problems. And so she had, I don't know if it was a year or two before they had emigrated a little bit there. And then eventually, she did come to the States. But she was involved with children programs.

And so she knew about you.

Yes, she--

And she knew that you were supposed to be on that ship.

Be on that ship, that is correct. She did know that I was on the ship.

So, you see, when I think of a little girl, toddler, who cannot speak for herself, and we don't know what happens with the family who's taken care of her, we don't know--

People were--

--how she ends up everywhere--

Families were all over the place, you know? It was--

So how do they know that you are you? That is, when you get to the shore, there's no documents with you.

Yeah.

Who's this child? She could be anybody.

That's true. That's a good question. Somebody obviously-- there may have been one of the Westermans was able to be the ones with me at the time. So it's hard to know. That, I have no clue.

OK. And you have no memory.

No, that's correct.

Were you injured yourself?

It seems I had some spinal-- something hit me on the back, and that I had trouble walking. And that seems to be-- and also, I had some respiratory problems that I developed after the-- some--

And so what happened to you? After they--

They put me in a hospital. I mean, Lola, you know, came. And all I do know is I was in the hospital for quite a while.

OK, and no memories of the hospital.

No.

Did you speak at this time?

No. No, I-- I was told that I was very-- friendly quiet. And I knew a few words. But I was not-- didn't say much.

OK. It is, I mean, it's incredible. When I think about it, it's incredible. A little baby, no parents, goes from Neu-Isenburg, who knows how, to Amsterdam.

You know you stay someplace in Amsterdam. You're handed off to people who you never find trace of again. The ship is hit. Somebody takes you from there to the coast.

You don't know what's happened. But you know later that you had an injury.

Right.

And not a minor injury. If it's the back, it's serious. And then you're in a hospital.

Do you know about where, what part of the coast of England the mine was? Was it near Scotland? Was it down below? Was it in the British Channel, English Channel?

It was more in the channel somewhere. I have to check, but I'm pretty sure it was in the channel area.

And a lady named Lola, who you never met--

That's correct.

--is the one who--

Wrapped me up and--

Brings you there.

Yeah, took me to the hospital.

And so you're in the hospital for how long?

I have not quite sure. But I was there definitely for a few months.

So if this happened in November '39, then you were talking into 1940, the first months of 1940.

Mm-hmm.

And then do you stay in the hospital?

I stayed mainly in the hospital. It is indicated that Lola at one point would have liked to have just-- because things were so difficult, she was willing to just keep me there. And I think her husband, who is fairly practical, said, she is-- my parents are waiting. Her adopted parents are waiting. We have-- we can't keep her.

So they-- I don't know if they made the decision. But I was then sent back to Holland and back to Truus Wijsmuller. so I ended up back at her place again for--

And do you know how you got there?

No, that I have no-- I don't know exactly what--

Was it another boat? Was it a train? Was it a short trip to France and then up?

Yeah, no--

You don't-- no idea.

Yeah, that-- those-- yeah, those facts I don't have.

OK. And then what happens? You're at Truus--

I was a few-- I was again for a few weeks at her. And I understand they had no children. So they loved having-- always they very often had children at that place.

And they had a housekeeper who loved children. And so-- and I did actually communicate a little bit with the housekeeper who loved me. She was Syche.

And Syche worked with all the children. She was the one who ran the household, because Truus was on the road. She was on the road. So Syche was the one in charge of all the things that were happening.

But you have no memory of this.

No.

This is all from things people tell you later.

Right.

OK. Do you know how long you stayed there in this place?

Just a few-- I mean, I stayed a few weeks. It took a while to find out what ship was-- was there any ship going down to the Dutch West Indies. And they did find out there was one leaving from Lisbon. That was one of the few ports that was still open at the time when I left was Lisbon.

And they did find out. So Truus took me to Spain at the time. And in Spain, at some point she must have handed me on because she had many other things that she was working on. She-- I was taken, I don't know it was who, and to the other ship, which left from Lisbon.

And do you know the date that you left the Netherlands?

I do because it was the day before the Germans invaded.

What is the date?

It was-- I'm trying to think. It was in either May or April. I have to look up when the Germans-- it literally the day--

Before.

Yeah, the day before the Germans invaded that.

So that was May 1940.

Yeah, so I left a few, like 12 hours before the Germans literally invaded Holland.

So you had been-- in November 1939, you had been on that ship. It hits a mine. You're taken to London. So you must be there for quite a few months.

Yeah.

And then you're brought back to the Netherlands.

Right.

And for some weeks, you are then in Truus' house.

Right. Truus then she lives with you the day before the Germans invade the Netherlands and takes you to Lisbon.

She didn't get to Lisbon. Somewhere in Spain there seems to have been--

A handover.

Somebody felt that there may have been somebody, some connection, somebody who she met, I mean, who she knew was--

And it's amazing, because all this time, when you think of a baby and you think of a toddler, children need to connect to a human being, to their caretaker.

Right.

And you've had one, and another, and a third, and a fourth. And that bonding doesn't happen.

Yeah, right.

All of these are goodwill-- good-meaning people.

Good people. They all were good, yeah.

Were well-meaning people. Not anybody-- nobody [? bruiser ?] amongst them.

Right. Having the luck that you have some good people.

Yeah, but still, nothing constant.

Correct.

And now you're on a ship that does go to the West Indies. Does it hit any mines?

No. This one went straight to Aruba.

Straight to the West Indies. And to Aruba?

Mm-hmm, yes.

OK. And when you get to Aruba, are your adoptive parents waiting for you?

No, the parents, unfortunately, couldn't be waiting for me there in Aruba because the Germans had invaded Holland. And what happened, the Dutch then, what they did was they interned any German-speaking people from Austria and Germany, and they brought them over to the island of Bonaire. They had sort of quickly set up very quickly two temporary spaces, one place near the waterfront, where the mothers and children were. And then there was one place, which with the name Guatemala, which was in middle of the island, was where the Jewish-- or the men, at least the men in one part of that.

So when you get to Aruba, who takes you?

They had some neighbors or good friends who were aware of the situation. And obviously, my father was communicating with them because he knew they were there. And they were there. So they were expecting me. So they knew-- the family, they knew that I was coming.

So this family, the neighbors, are the ones who you are handed off to.

Right. And they didn't have children, as far as I know. I also know that much. They didn't have children.

And I stayed with them. And at one point, they wanted also to adopt me. And they also thought, oh, she's really not well enough to come to Bonaire, where things were very simply set up, kind of small, kind of a type of thing.

But then my father got-- said, well, they had a doctor check me. And he said, she's OK. She can-- she'll make it.

So the governor kind of literally, I understand, the governor took me to Bonaire.

And so you were then in an internment camp to--

I was in, yeah, in sort of a camp of women and children that some were Jewish. Some were not. They just put anybody German-speaking till they could figure out were they spies, or were they enemies.

Well, that's an interesting kind of situation because that begged one of my questions of the motley group that would have been rounded up could include people on completely different sides of the spectrum. You could have German Nazis together with German Jews.

Exactly. You did. And there were some. Among the Germans, there were some Nazi [GERMAN]. Oh, yeah.

OK. Did your parents ever talk about that later?

Well, they just weren't friends with them. Nobody was literally kicked away eventually. But they were left out.

There were a few months. It was a few months till they were able to sort out the cases. And I think it was a few months before my father was then released from the men's camp. And they were able to then kind of, with my mother, they went-- we went into a little place in the middle of the island where they had this one place where they had a little water. And you could-- it was literally a little house that was made out of boxes that had been literally-- so that's where we lived.

And it was called Fontein. And it was one of the places where they had springs so that there was water there. And that is where we spent a few months.

Do you have memories of that place?

Yes. By that time, I was a little older and a little bit-- and what was wonderful, there were animals there. There were sheep and chickens. And I was always-- there were also some animals that just always kind of chased me.

There were some ducks. Ducks can be pretty aggressive. So-- and the same goes for roosters.

So I grew up with donkeys and things. It was very simple.

And my father grew-- was pretty smart. He grew vegetables there. It was one of the few places you could grow vegetable.

And it was, I think, formerly an aloe plantation. Aloe is some very typical of the tropics. And it had been an aloe. And it always was known to-- the house was made out of what people would have mostly shipped their furniture in, sort of these really large containers. Yeah, so the house was made of wood.

Very simple.

Yeah, very simple, no screens, no-- nothing of that nature.

So they didn't go back to Aruba.

No. No, they never went back to Aruba. My father was-- he worked for Aruba Trading Company for a few years. I mean, he's 37. And then once he was held in Bonaire, he never went back to Bonaire.

So they hadn't owned a place in Aruba. They just rented or something.

They may have rented, yeah. I have no idea exactly what their status was.

OK. And that's when your memories start is in Bonaire.

Yes, was in Bonaire, mm-hmm.

OK. And did you ever, in those early years, Mama was Mama, and Papa was Papa? And there was no question?

Papi and Mami. Yeah, Papi and Mami--

Papi and Mami.

--is what I called them, yeah.

And you spoke what language with one another?

Well, at-- well, it's interesting, because I knew some German, of course. But on the island, eventually we spoke German at the home. And on the island, we spoke Dutch and the dialect, Papiamento, which was a-- and, of course, my parents also spoke English. But I don't think they really worked on English with me right away at that point. But I would say mostly German and Dutch.

So you spoke Dutch.

Yes, mm-hmm.

OK.

Eventually, yeah.

And in the sort of container home that you had in the middle of the island in Fontein, were there other people who had been in this camp who had--

They had-- it had been a-- some kind of a-- as I said, it had been an aloe plantation, I mean. And things had been built there. They still had some foundations of some other buildings and things that had been left around that had shown that there may have been a house possibly or something that may have been built out of another material. But at that point, the only house that was, was this kind of a little wooden house.

So you had no neighbors.

No, no neighbors. It was a nice-- but not far away, let's say I don't know, there was a town called Rincon. And there was a town. And he got people to help him with growing the vegetables. And that's how I had-- and they had children, and the children came and played with me.

And did he have any work there? Or was it the work trying to make something from the land so that you had something to eat?

Yeah, well, partly that. And partly, yes, he-- he didn't have a truck. So he had somebody who came up with a truck who sometimes got his things and brought them to the-- where we were. But the market was to sell things.

Because it sounds lovely and idyllic.

And they loved it.

But it also sounds poor.

Yeah, but they loved it. My mother especially loved Bonaire. There was something, you know? She was an artist. And she was-- and for some reason, Bonaire always was a place where she always was positive about. She always loved that place. It was--

OK, so now let's--

--very restful.

--turn to yet another phase and another group of people. And this is your adoptive parents.

Right.

What was your mother's name, adopted mother's name?

Anna Marie Baum.

Anna Marie Baum.

Yeah, Anna Marie Baum.

And she becomes Lieberman.

She becomes Lieberman, mm-hmm.

Did they marry in Germany?

Yes, they did marry in Germany. She had been married before, when she was rather young. I think she was about 18, that first marriage.

And she had lost a child, which was, I guess, I don't know, she was maybe also 2 years old, from, unfortunately, from a disease. And she had one other child that didn't make it either. So that's when, of course, the idea of an adoption came

up.

I see. And she was from Krefeld, you said.

She was from Krefeld, right.

And did she talk much about her own family?

Yes, she did. She talked about-- she did talk about her family. She had a--

Did she have brothers and sisters?

She had a brother.

What was his name?

His name was Stefan, I guess.

Stefan?

Yeah, Stefan. I think they also called him Karlheinz, but Stefan.

And did he leave Germany?

He went into Switzerland. He married somebody in Switzerland. And they emigrated to Switzerland in 1927, around that time.

And her own parents, did they stay in Germany?

No, I think everybody-- her father and her mother, I mean, his parents, they went also to Switzerland at the time. In '27, they went.

So does this mean that no one on her side of the family was left in Germany when Hitler came to power?

I'm trying to think who of her family may have. I never heard too much about that part. But I do know the immediate family did go, you know, her brother and her parents.

And did you call her Mamina?

Mamina.

Mamina. And how did that come about? Is that a Spanish name, or is that--

Mami-- Mamina is like a-- Mami is Mami. But the Mamina makes it like a-- it's kind of added. In many languages, you add the little--

It's a little diminutive.

--cozy. It's, yeah, a diminutive. So, yeah, Mamina.

OK. And did Papi become Papina?

No, he stayed Papi.

No? He stayed Papi.

Yeah, Papi stayed Papi.

So as far as you know, for her immediate family, nobody was really targeted or--

They either died before-- I'm trying to think if some-- I mean, I heard sometimes. But I never heard anything on that side too much.

And what kind of a person was she?

Oh, Mamina? Mamina was very interesting. She was very artistic. She was really very talented.

And she was-- she had, I would nearly say, a bipolar personality. She had--

Well, that can be pretty frightening.

She was. But with me, she always was-- she was able somehow to control her presence with friends, family. The one who usually got the part was my father. When she was really difficult, it was with my father.

She had definitely depressions. And she was temperamental. But she was very loving. And you never knew from one moment to the next how she would react.

So it's never a dull moment.

No, there was never a dull moment with my mother.

Well, I think that sounds pretty frightening, actually. I mean, yes, very loving it can be, but frightening, because when you don't know-- a person needs, especially a child, needs grounding.

Yeah. But I was always very loved by her. She adored me. But she-- but as I got older, that's when I realized that she was having a harder time. She was-- she always put a front on, a very affectionate front on with me. And she was always very protective, overprotective maybe, both of them.

Was she aware that she had something funny going on?

Yes, I think she was. She must have been aware that she had a hard time. And it was things-- and in those days, medication and so on, you didn't, you just didn't do.

No, it's hard for everybody.

Yeah, it was. She had a very hard time with herself, no question about it.

Yeah.

We have a leaf blower out there.

OK. So we were talking about your mom and some of her challenges. Let's turn to your dad. He had-- did he have brothers and sisters?

He had a sister who passed-- who died when she was in her middle 30s from one of-- I'm trying to think what the name of one of the diseases that people, unfortunately, got. And so--

Like tuberculosis of something?

No, it was one of those-- I'll think of the name of it. It was something that nowadays you can, with medications, you don't have to die. And she had-- my father's sister had two children, a boy, Oscar, and I think-- I'm trying to think what his sister was. So she had two children.

And Papi kind of met my mother-- they had all-- in those days, when you had any trouble with your stomach or anything, you went to a place where you could have a cure.

Like a sanatorium?

It was-- yeah, it was a nice place. They met in a place not far from Neckarzimmern, where there was sort of a place where you could-- he had stomach problems and ulcers type of things. So he went for that.

And my mother went more at the time when her-- the little girl died, because she had a little girl who died. And she was sort of-- had a-- her marriage was not working out. So she had a breakdown. So she was there. So they--

Well, in German, it's called a [GERMAN].

Yeah, she was in a special-- it was like an old castle. That's where they had a lot of these places. It was not far from Neckarzimmern. I'm trying to think of the name of the town. But you practically could see it from Neckarzimmern.

Well, in my mind's eye, I think of the late-19th-century, early-20th-century places, where there's like Karlsbad, Marienbad, the springs, the waters. They're not really-- they're not hospital settings.

No, no, they were not hospitals.

But they are places to get well.

Where to get well, right. And this is where she met my father. But she, as I said, had after the--

Do you know when they married?

Let me see. I'd have to look it up. I know I have maybe something.

But I'm trying to think. My mother was still fairly young when she eventually remarried to my father. Trying to think if I can pin that down. No, I wouldn't know the exact date. But--

Were they older than your birth parents?

No, my mother was pretty much the same age as my mother was. They were pretty much, I would say, nearly the same. She was about the same.

There was a six-year difference in their age. My father was born in 1902. And she was born in 1908. And my mother was from around 1908 or 1907. So they were pretty much--

So your mother also was-- your birth mother was 29 or 30 when she had you, which was not that young.

Yeah, she was 27 when she had me.

Yeah.

Right.

Yeah, today that means nothing to have a child at that age. But that was old in those days.

At that point, it was a little older, right, 27.

So tell me a little bit about his personality, your father's personality.

My father had a sunny personality. He was one of those people who liked, loved people. He loved children.

And he was very good at communicating. He was a top-notch salesman. He was also very good at music.

But since-- what happened in his youth, his father died of cancer when he was in his 40s or something. And his mother remarried. But she had depression problems, and she committed suicide, unfortunately.

So he was kind of a teenager when he lost his mother.

We have to stop. We have to stop. We have to stop because--

These people are cutting up--

So your father, he had a tough childhood.

He did have a tough childhood because, as I said-- and he was not terribly excited about husband number two, who was a nice man. But it's not the same. And he was a-- and his mother confided very much in him.

He was kind of always her one that she always talked with and anything that had to be solved. So she had a very close relation with him. So she didn't-- he didn't like the fact that she had another man in his life, which is understandable.

So he-- and I'm not quite sure at what point, if his sister went with one of the-- somebody in the family. He was put with one, some aunt or uncle, for a while. And I think he joined the army very early at one point for just a year. But they found out he was too young.

But he always was a very-- liked people. He was good at finding out things about people. I mean, this was-- that's why he was a very good businessman. He was-- he knew everybody. He knew everything what was going on, and--

Had he had a profession in Germany before leaving?

He was working for a coal company. He was a salesman for a coal company. And I'm trying to think. I think it was in Breslau. They moved to Breslau.

Ooh, that's pretty far from Hamburg.

Yeah, they moved. Yeah, Breslau was where they moved. And my mother had a-- they both liked nice things.

They liked nice furniture and nice things. I think they had a very modern apartment. I know they always liked things that were interesting.

And so they lived-- so they were in Breslau for a while, while he was-- but then as the war developed, he couldn't go on the streets. He still worked for them inside the building because they liked him as a person. He was a terrific-- but they couldn't send-- he couldn't be the one who could go to different places to do the--

Because he was Jewish.

--sales. He was, yeah, Jewish. But no--

So we're talking now in the 1930s.

Right.

In the 1930s, he's still employed but--

He's still employed. But he can't be--

--curtailed.

But he can't be in the outside. He has to be more on the inside. And my mother was always the one from the beginning who said, I think it's-- we need to--

We need to leave.

--leave. We need to leave. And in 1936, I do understand they took a trip to the Caribbean and down to the Caribbean. He had also-- my father had also some good friends who were in Venezuela at the time, who had also-- but they had, of course, emigrated quite a while earlier to Venezuela.

So he kind of went around and looked to see where maybe he would get a job. And I guess in Aruba they had offered him something that sounded interesting. So they came back again to Germany. And I guess then in early '37, early on, I guess, they packed up and went down.

And his first name again was?

Edgar.

We still have that background noise.

That's what I thought.

Yeah, Edgar. Edgar.

So we had a little break. And I want to return to what we were talking about before. And I believe we were talking about your adopted father, Edgar Lieberman.

Right.

And you had told me that, first of all, he sounded like a very gregarious person, very open, very friendly, curious about people, and a natural salesman.

Yeah.

So you come into their lives when they are in Bonaire in these internment camps. And once you're released, you move to the inner part of the island to Fontein in what sounds like very primitive surroundings.

Yes.

But what you say are-- made everybody very happy.

It made everybody very happy. It really did.

And how long did you stay there?

I would say less than a year. I mean, maybe a year and something but not much more. As I said, he, for a while, sold

vegetables. He had somebody who had a truck. And he went with him into town.

And he had all these-- but lots of people came to visit the place because it was considered one of the few places where there was water. And so people came to see. And there were sort of little areas which had water around.

And I learned how to swim in those little things. They were about this wide. And they kind of went like little channels. And they made--

Were they like little creeks and things?

It was like there was a wall. And you kind of, you could kind of swim a little bit in it. So sometimes they made a little thing for me so that I could paddle around.

So it must've been shallow.

It was, yes. I could stand in them. But people came to see what was happening because they were interested in what was being grown.

And we had very often some of the Catholic church there. Brothers, as we called them, would come. And some of them actually helped my father sometimes working a little bit, and planting things, and so forth. So everybody sort of got somewhat involved in that way.

And then my father had an offer from the Dutch government to work for them in the place where they had uniforms and all these kind of things. So for the next few years, he kind of worked for the Dutch government and in their--

But you didn't know what capacity he had there, what his role--

He was mainly in, I guess, organizing things that were made, were all kind of put together. I mean, it was-- he mainly worked in Bonaire. But nonetheless, he was kind of the center where everything was kind of-- he helped with organizing and shipping.

Yeah, it's interesting to me that as an occupied country, the Netherlands, Germany is occupying it. But out in the German-- in the Dutch colonies, there would be some sort of activity that would be paid for, contracted activity, for Dutch military purposes. That's interesting.

And he had a big job there. He had a very good job. I mean, they knew he had been-- had worked for a company in Aruba and he-- and they knew he was a good natural salesman. So he sort of--

And he had been, how shall I say, filtrated, in that he's not an enemy alien.

Yeah. So he had-- there was no problem.

So this also means that the Dutch were still in control of their colonies.

Yes, mm-hmm.

OK. Did you move someplace else from Fontein?

From Fontein, from-- yeah, once we left-- we were about a year or what, give or take-- we moved into town, near the water, and had a very pretty house literally right near the beach.

Oh, how nice.

And I went to school. It was like a one- or two-room type of school and so on. So that was very nice. It was right in

town.

Were there any other children like you that had come from Germany?

I'm trying to think. I was friends with, I'm trying to think, Suzi. There were various friends. Suzi Meyer was her original name.

And she-- and her father was one of the few people who rented cars and had-- so I don't think we necessarily had a car. But very often, we drove with them somewhere to the beach and so on. So I'm trying to think if he was-- I think he was-- he had also come, but he came earlier there than my father.

And they were German Jewish?

They were-- I don't even think-- I think they were. But they're also not religious if they were. But I think he was German. But he came a little earlier than my father did. So he already was living there, and so obviously, that was nothing.

And I did-- when I go back to the island, there's sort of a few friends-- the ones who lived in the little town near that little place where my father grew vegetables, Fontein, they then-- I stayed friends with them. And they moved into town. And we have a--

You still maintain contact?

Oh, yeah, we still have all friends. It's a big family. And they have done very nicely. They sort of have nice jobs. And they--

But they stayed there.

Yeah, this was local. These were really local, local families. And so we still go. One is Judy and so on. And when we come, they make arrangements for us.

And what was the name of the town?

Well, the little town that was near Fontein was called Rincon, which means corner in Spanish. And that was where my friends lived at that point when we were working. Then later on, they also moved into town, into the-- the capital or whatever is called Kralendijk. Is it-- yeah, I think it's Kralendijk.

Kralendijk.

Kralendijk. So that was the main thing. And they all moved to town. And they were-- the father was in fishing, fisherman. And then the gal who was my friend, who was maybe one-- she's one year older than us, she was a teacher at one point. So she had various children. So whenever we have gone, we always--

You go back and visit.

--let them know. Yeah, we let them know that we're coming.

Were there other immigrant families there?

I'm trying to think. Not many. I would say no.

Most of them, if there was-- they had a chance, they also left by '45. They happened to be sort of caught in that little period. And they went back to-- some went back to Europe or so on. But most of them didn't stay. If they didn't have some family or some roots there, they didn't stay on, at least not on Bonaire.

So during these years, when you're between 3 and, I'd say, 8 years old--

Right.

--then there there's no real community, like a Jewish community that has come from Europe and is settled there.

No, there was not, no such thing. There were a few Americans and different countries, but there was no what I would call Jewish community. Yeah, not at that point.

Do you remember hearing about the war as you're in Bonaire?

Well, yes. I mean, they had radios. We all had radios. And everybody was listening every day to what was going on.

So, yes, I think as far as I know, we did have a radio. And it was put on at nighttime. We all sat down and listened to the-- radio was still--

And I wonder what kind of broadcasts they were. Were they over-- in Dutch? Were they in English?

Most of them were in Dutch or-- yeah, not Papiamento, Dutch. Yeah, Dutch. Occasionally English, but mainly--

Mainly Dutch.

--Dutch. Yeah, they were, yeah.

OK. And do you remember the instance of learning that the war ended?

I must say, I'm trying to remember. We were there at the time when that war ended. And I'm trying to think. I'm sure that everybody was on the streets and, you know, just as happy as could be that the war ended.

I cannot imagine. But I don't really, you know, funny--

Not a precise memory.

--don't precisely recall. But we definitely were aware. First of all, you couldn't get most-- many things that were imported could not be imported during the years.

You had to-- you got a lot of shipments more from South America to things that they needed or so on. Not so much from Europe you couldn't during that period. But I cannot imagine that we'd not-- everybody celebrated, you know? But I can't recall. That's not coming--

That's OK.

--coming back to me.

That's OK. So did you stay in Bonaire after the war ends?

No. At the end-- by the time, at '45, my father had a chance-- he had this good friend in Venezuela who had been trying to lure him to come to Venezuela and come and work there and so on. So my father at last decided it wouldn't be bad to move on.

To go there.

So we moved, really, sometime after-- a few months after the war, we--

OK, so mid-year July '45-- mid-year in 1945.

Yeah, we left then a little after '45, when the things ended. I don't know exactly when.

And where did you move to?

We moved to Caracas, Caracas, Venezuela. And we rented a small little house, a little place for a while. And I went to school.

Of course, suddenly you went into from Dutch to Spanish. But when you're a kid--

You're a sponge.

--it was no-- you know, you just learn it like nothing. But in the Dutch islands, we had-- every class was practically one big room. It was kind of an interesting type of place.

And even Queen Juliana came down once. That was a big event. During the war, she did come down once to--

No kidding.

Yes, she did. She came to the Caribbean. And what would they do, they would pick a little white girl to give her flowers instead of the native. I always thought, wait a minute. That's not-- but that's what they did.

But was that you?

I was a cute-looking little girl. Yeah, and I had curly little hair, and a white little dress, and flowers that were orange. [CHUCKLES]

And so you handed flowers to Queen Juliana.

For Queen Juliana, yeah, so, you know.

Wow.

But I always was, you know-- Suzi, who had lived there longer, I don't know why they didn't pick her. But they decided to pick me. But the question was, I truly felt-- even later on, I said to myself, really, it should have been somebody who was a native, who was a native of Bonaire. But that's how they did it.

And did your parents speak Spanish when they moved to Venezuela?

They learned. My father did a lot better than my mother. My father had-- being-- he was musical. And he learned languages very quickly and easily. He had no problem with Spanish.

And my mother's Spanish was acceptable. She could have a conversation. But my father was much more fluid and in changing language.

But in Venezuela, we had a lot of immigrants and people from all over, much more little groups of Czech, German, Austrians, whatever. And it was divided in that practically way. You socialized with your-- more your language.

So most our friends were German-- were either German-born Swiss or-- Venezuelans, you only went when they had a big party. So you were-- and you knew somebody, you were invited to it. But you didn't socialize with them. It was just--

With Venezuelans.

Yeah, mm-hmm.

OK. So your social life revolved around other immigrants.

Right. In most cases, it was more people who spoke-- yeah.

So they would be either from Germany or Austria.

Austria, Germany, Austria. We had a few Czech friends, and, yeah, also some Czech friends also, but more Europeans, in other words, yeah.

But again, I want to ask, these were people who were Jewish who had escaped? Or was it mixed?

Some-- I would say many of them were not necessarily Jewish, not that-- not all Jewish. I mean, we had some Jewish friends. But these were just-- it went by, just by the language.

OK, well, that's interesting.

Yeah.

So it's not church based or synagogue based. It's language based.

More language based. They did have-- of course, you had-- in Venezuela, we had, of course, definitely Jewish, Jewish, the religious people who were very much into church things. But you tended to go more practically by your native tongue type of a thing.

And since my parents were not religious-- had they been religious, they may have possibly associated more with some church or so. But we never did that. They went only to church for the music, if there--

So are you saying they went to church or to synagogue?

No, they never went to synagogue. I never stepped into a synagogue ever. I mean, I was brought up seriously unreligious.

Agnostic.

I was baptized as a-- I'm trying to remember. It was Christian. It was a Christian.

You were baptized as a Christian?

Yeah, was a Christian, baptized. And they had-- they converted. At some point, they, early on, they converted.

To Catholicism?

No, it was-- they then-- it was nearly like you-- like some of the ones we have now, which are sort of a mix. But they never went to a church. They went to church for a nice concert or for music. They were not interested at all in--

But what would have-- what would have been the impetus to convert in a place that is, quote, "safe," where there is no pressing need to stay? You know, usually, when people convert, they have a religious reason why they're converting. If it isn't to save their lives, but that they have some spiritual-- that part of their life is very important to them. And to convert and not be religious is kind of, it's--

Religion just was, especially on my father's side, absolutely was not a-- absolutely didn't matter. And my mother was easygoing about it. Nobody seemed to-- but on her side, she had grown up with, definitely, with Jewish holidays and things.

But that was not at all brought in. And they were much more interested more in like Unitarian, I mean, something more in that order. But religion just was not a-- never an issue.

So does that mean you didn't know much about the traditions?

That's correct. I never learned anything about Jewish religion at all. And my Catholic friends were always luring me to come. I went for the music or something.

But they thought that God would watch over me better if I come to church. [CHUCKLES] They were cute. But, yeah, no, religion never was--

Did that change in your life?

It-- for a little period in my life later on, for a few months we decided maybe the children should go to the Unitarian church. We had sort of a short period where we actually went for a few months. They went for something. We didn't go too much. And so after a few months, I think we kind of-- it sort of petered out. [CHUCKLES]

So it wasn't very big in your own married life.

No. No, and we married under not Unitarian. It was-- I'm trying to think-- one of the other ones that's just well known. So religion just never was something we--

And the husband-- your husband, his name is--

He came also from a fairly-- also Jewish background. But nobody kind of really went to the-- to Friday and Saturday things. It just wasn't-- they didn't go to anything.

What is his name?

Pardon?

Your husband's name?

Roger.

Roger?

Langsdorf.

Langsdorf.

Yeah.

And you met where?

Well, we kind of sort of met-- I got introduced through-- I met his mother once. At some point, I was-- I went for one-- I went one Christmas with my parents to Barbados for Christmas. I was studying already in the States. And we met some lovely people from San Francisco.

And when they were in New York, they invited me. And I met my husband's mother first. And she said, would you send

him a little note? I wouldn't mind if he meets.

So it was a blind date sort of. We met in front of a bookstore. That's how I met Roger.

Oh, that's kind of cute, yeah.

Yeah, it was a sort of blind, know of. It was cute. The letters were written to both of us. And that's how it--

And it worked.

And it worked, yeah.

And had he come from Germany?

No. His-- I'm trying to even think. His grandmother one side definitely was born in Baltimore-- Gertrude. His-- I think it's possible that one of his grandfathers was. But most of them, this was quite already a generation. His parents were already born here.

So they were already Americanized.

Yes, yes. Yes, he was.

OK so there's no World War II connection or anything like that.

No. No, not, I mean, no. I think Roger's father helped some relatives in here and there, a few to come to the States because it was rather difficult to immigrate to the United States. We didn't have a government which was very open to, let's say, the Jewish population. So he did help some of his relatives to come over.

And the relatives were from Germany?

They were from Germany, yeah.

OK.

But that was about--

That was it.

That was about it when they came to--

Did your adopted parents ever go back to Germany for a visit?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. We went back the first--

The three of you.

Yeah, we went back. We went. The first time we took a trip back to Europe and including Germany, I was 16 at the time. That was the first time that-- I'm trying to think if we went--

That's pretty early on.

I'm trying to think. We also went back to Switzerland. I'm trying to think. We went to Switzerland a few times because that's where my mother's brother and family was.

But I'm trying to think if-- well, definitely, I definitely was 16 on one of them. But we went back to Germany.

I mean, the only thing my parents were, they were not about to buy a Volkswagen or any German product. But otherwise, there was no major resentment. They never spoke of really hating the Germans or something. That was not a subject that we hang on.

Did they go back to their home towns to see anything? Did you go with them?

My father-- well, I didn't. But I know my father was invited to-- had a thing. And I'm not sure.

I never heard-- I don't remember if Mamina was. But Papi, I know I remember that he was invited to come back to Hamburg. And they did go also without me. So I know they went back to some places in Germany.

Do you remember how you learned of the Holocaust? Because it sounds to me it's not part of your conscious life. You're growing up in Bonaire and in Venezuela, half a world away. And you have friends who are part of a social circle who come from Europe.

Yeah, not religious, right.

But how do you learn? Or do you remember how you learned of what happened to the Jews?

Well, I'm sure that we did talk about those things at times. I'm sure that we mentioned-- we talked about the war. And we talked-- and we definitely talked about what happened.

So that was definitely something. It was not a religious subject. But we did talk about it. I mean, I'm absolutely sure that we discussed--

Did you connect it to yourself?

Well, I always knew that I had-- I did know that I had been on a ship. And so I was fully aware of the fact that I survived and that my family-- that many of my family did not. So I did, obviously, have some background for my-- of my own that I could-- it was not a major subject that people usually discussed. But, yes, it was not put under the table.

So when you go to-- when you went to Germany, you already knew that such things had happened, in the broad strokes?

Yes. And we did-- I mean, we did-- we also had some friends who were very-- a very good friend of mine, Renee, who was my age. And she then-- and my parents-- during the war, my parents sent packages to Germany, too, because I had to admit, in Germany, when you were after the war, things were not so good. And then later on, she came to Venezuela. And she kind of stayed there, and married a Venezuelan, and stayed there.

But it was-- the Holocaust thing was discussed. And, yes, we had some friends who were also Jewish. But it's not-- we didn't go to a synagogue or anything.

It's not like your social life was strictly within a Jewish community.

No, that was-- it never was.

OK, that's what I wanted to know.

Yeah. No, it wasn't.

And in Venezuela, were there are also Germans of a different stripe? That is, those-- post-war, a lot of Germans who had been associated with the Nazis fled to South America.

Yeah, well, there were some. No, I don't think they-- if there were some, they were not in our, let's say, in our circle. I'm sure about that much.

I'm sure that in Venezuela a few infiltrated. They went wherever they could, some of them, but not in our--

In other words, you didn't hear of such things.

No.

You didn't hear of-- OK, that's what I'm trying to establish.

No, not as--

It's not so much the historical what happened, but did such people cross your paths? And you're saying no.

Not especially.

OK. And when did you leave Venezuela?

My parents sent me-- I was about, let's say, nearly 16, going on 17. I was about to do my last year of high school. And they felt-- they sent me to Canada for a year, just to improve my English.

I went to a school which just was half Spanish, half English. So we did quite a bit of both languages. And they knew that they wanted to send me away to school later on. So that I would-- I was about-- I did one year of high school then in Canada.

What place in Canada?

In Toronto.

Oh, so you were in Toronto.

Yeah, which was a nice city.

Yeah, also a magnet for immigrants and refugees, a lot.

Yes, definitely. Toronto-- and I like Toronto. I like the Canadians, and I liked Toronto.

OK. And so you lived there for a year.

Yeah, I was one year at the school. And then they sent me one more year to a school in-- it was in New Brunswick--

In Canada as well.

--Canada, also for a year. And then I came back again.

Do you remember the names of the schools?

Yes, Mount-- well, the school was called Branksome Hall, the high school.

Bransom Hall?

Yeah, Branksome Hall. It was a very good private school. It was run by a Scottish lady, who was-- she must've been in her middle 80s.

And she watched over us. I mean, we couldn't slip away. We had quite a few foreign students sleep-- it was a day school, and a small part of people also who--

Boarded.

--actually slept, boarding school. And quite a few of us was from a few from South America, mainly from South America, Canada. But at least two or three of them were German also background, like I was. Not Jewish, but they were German.

And so she-- and we had a uniform. We had a kilt, and black shoes, and socks, and a little kilt, and a green jacket. And we had to run every morning around the block.

Oh, my goodness.

[CHUCKLING]

I never liked that at all.

I wouldn't either.

No, this was cold.

Yeah, and it's early.

Yeah.

And was this in New Brunswick or in Toronto?

This was in Toronto.

This was in Toronto.

The high school. In Toronto is where they had that high school where we had the uniform. And a very good school.

And I made friends with quite a few day students. I had one, especially one very good one who was Dutch. We got-- I got friendly.

I was very often at her house. They knew I was staying here. So very often, I was at her house.

Now, by this point, you had met Truus Wijsmuller.

I had met her as a teenager once, as I said, 12, 13 or something. And then I met her again. But I'm trying to remember if it was in New York or if it already was here in Washington. I am just-- there is-- I can't. But I do know I met her at least twice.

And when you met her, did you have long conversations or shorter ones?

She came for a few hours. It was-- she was so happy, I mean, to be able to see one of her children, as she puts it. She came for a day.

And what did she tell you about your early life from which you have no memories?

She must have said something. But I most-- Whatever they said went in and went out.

And out.

But I'm sure she talked with my parents about things. I'm sure they asked her some questions. My father was somebody who liked to know about everything. He was very interested, as I said, in details and stories.

That was what made him special. He always knew all his friends, and he knew exactly what was happening to them. And he was just well informed. So I'm sure that they asked her quite a few questions, which I not necessarily may not have been-- be standing there when they asked those questions.

Well, when you met her, what kind of an impression did she make on you as a person?

She was just a warm, huggable lady. I mean, she was just a very warm, very strong lady, very determined, very-- obviously, very comfortable with herself, but a very, very likable, truly likable person. And she truly liked people. She really did.

Did she, I mean, if she saved tens of thousands of children-- is it tens of thousands, or 1,000?

It was-- they say 10,000. But she-- but the total number they give nowaday is that she did more like 30,000. She did also families. She did families. She did a little of everything.

That's amazing.

She was amazing.

So if it was 30,000, how would she remember Ilse from Neu-Isendorf?

Well, she remembers it, in my case, especially since I was there twice. This was a mostly an unusual case. But I cannot imagine that there were many others who came twice.

That's true.

Very often, they were there for a few days, till they were able to then spread out, because a lot of orphans from Germany came and stayed in Holland. There was quite a few--

That's right, hidden.

--orphanages, yeah, were there. And the German-- and these, those were the ones that went to England. She worked on many of those groups that went then.

So she would have helped in the Kindertransport?

Yes, she did help on the Kindertransport.

OK.

Yes, she did.

And let's see.

And a lot of little ones, where she had just 10 or 12 people, so on. And very often, she had like a whole dozen of kids, and was on a train. And she would scatter them around, and kind of be charming with the person who came by so she didn't have to show all the tickets all the time. So she-- there were all kinds of devious ways of trying to get those kids on the train and get them out of so that-- that was a big job.

I can imagine.

Yeah, that was a big job.

Or I can't imagine.

Yeah, and she had little ways of giving somebody a ring. Or if she had to do a little semi-bribing to get them--

It takes-- there's a talent. You have to learn how to do it in a way that is discreet.

Right. So some of that was done, yes. Yeah, that was definitely done.

When you did meet her, was this a big thing for you, to meet her?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I mean, at the time, I think my parents made a big-- definitely made a-- made it an event. It was a big event to have her come, yes. And it was.

And the funny thing is in New York-- I can't remember where the second time was.

That's OK.

She does-- she did have a nephew who came then, who-- and I'm trying to remember if she came still, you know, because we moved in in '65. Her nephew came here maybe a few years after us, not much. So I'm not sure if she actually came here.

He was sort of a nephew of her husband of so. And so there are a few Wijsmullers right here in our area who know about it. And I'll have to-- I have to send, actually, an email, or on Facebook, they always send me something.

All right, so the last time, at least chronologically, is that-- where I kind of veered off of your story, is you have finished your second school year in New Brunswick in Canada.

Canada. Then I went home.

And then you go back.

I went home for a year.

To Venezuela. And you're now 17 years old?

No, I was-- well, I was about 17, going on 18 when I did my-- I was one year early [INAUDIBLE]. Then I went-- stayed for a year back in here. And then I went to Pratt in Brooklyn.

And why? How did you choose that?

Well, when I was at-- when I went to the school in Canada, and I was taking quite a bit of painting and art, my mother always was hoping that I'd be an artist. But it doesn't always quite work that way. My teacher said, you're-- he was very honest.

He said, you're good. But I think you may want to look into design. I think you would be very good in design. And he was a well-recognized artist actually in Canada.

And so my parents then after, when I came back, kind of decided, OK, if you want to take interior design, or if you want to take architecture, or whatever, that's-- that was OK. But he at least led me out of the fact he just somehow felt that

just--

And did you feel your calling was there, in art?

Not necessarily. No, I did not. I always felt I was OK. But you can tell, painting and being an art is a-- it's just a very competitive, very, you know--

And it is also something that someone who does have the calling has to do. They absolutely have to do it because they can't not do it.

Yeah, yeah. Either you have to put your soul-- your heart and soul in it. It's not something that you can just fiddle with, do a little here or a little there.

And I was realistic about that. Also, I loved New York. And my parents felt I was too young when I was about 18 or 19 to go to New York.

That was a no. So at last, by that time I was 19. And they said, OK, you can go and study in New York.

And did you ever go back to Venezuela after that?

I went back for some of the summers while I-- when the kids were little, we used to go bring the children and to visit.

But it means you never lived there again.

No, I never lived there again, no. And Roger came. I mean, the first year he, for some reason, had to work or something.

So he didn't go when-- that was when Steve, my oldest, he was rather rambunctious. And on the plane, he always crawled into first class. He knew where it was better. [CHUCKLES] I always loved that one.

And also, he wouldn't let me change him. And he reeked to hell. You know, there was nothing I could do. So that was not a wonderful experience.

[CHUCKLING]

Funny how kids show their will.

Yeah, no. Yeah, he under-- and formerly, there was a little break under the door. So he could just--

Crawl under it.

--crawl, and I couldn't get him out.

What year did you get married?

We got married in, it was '59. I'm trying to think. Wait a minute now. I was-- let me get the exact date it should be.

I was 21. Let's see. Wait a minute. I was in college. I was still not quite finished with college.

I have to do a little thinking there. He was-- Steve was, I think six-- born in six-- so '59. I would say around '59 that was, give or take around there, yeah.

OK, but we have approximately. We have approximately.

Right.

And when were your other children born?

Well, Julie was born then three years later in '63. And Kenny was actually born here in '65. That's when we moved to Washington.

And you've lived here ever since?

Yeah, mm-hmm. And I've loved Washington. I mean, I think it's a great, great place to grow up.

OK.

Well, we've come close to the end of our interview. Is there anything that I have not asked you about that you think is important for us to know about your story, or what it means, or the-- or any aspect of it? Is there anything you'd like to share as a kind of like--

Yeah. No. I think, well, I, first of all, think that I was a blessed child. I mean, the fact that I was able to get well, get through life, and come to this country. And in general, life has been kind to me.

And I think Washington is just a great place for a lot of people. It's a variety of people. What I like in the United States is also that people are much more into volunteering and really kind of, you know-- we may not like some of the things that are going on right now, and hope that some changes. But in general, this-- I consider myself lucky.

I'm lucky to have a good family. And I have also good friends.

Do you have Venezuelan citizenship?

Yes, I was a Venezuelan, oh, I was most-- by that time a teenager when I got my Venezuelan citizenship. And then eventually I got my American citizenship in '63. I remember that especially. That was around the Kennedy years--

Yes, yes.

--that I got a citizen.

How do you think your early years have shaped you?

Let's wait for that train to go by before you answer.

I guess [AUDIO CUTS OUT].

So, yes, how do you think those early years, and now, when you know your history and so on, how did they shape you? Did they?

I'm trying to think. I'm sure that-- I'm nearly sure that my early years formed some of my personality. I felt comfortable with people, friendly with people, didn't get too close to most people. I really, I-- that was one of the things I always had a harder time with, trying to-- getting too close to people. That's one thing I did, you know, I have noticed.

And I have a harder time sometimes also with my kids. I mean, I love my kids. But I'm not somebody who, you know--

Demonstrative like that.

--who is-- yeah, demonstrative. That's not my thing.

That could just be the kind of person that you are.

Yeah. So who knows? Yeah. But that's something, you know, I do-- because I see more people who are much more-- you know? Just that doesn't quite, never quite went into.

If you would have-- if you had had a chance to say something to Ida Bauer, or even Sally Loeb, what would you want to tell them, particularly Ida?

I wish she had had a better-- a wonderful-- a better-- hadn't to be a wonderful life. But I would have wished that she had had a happier-- a happy, and had a chance to live and see what was around her. No, I would have loved to have seen her.

She seemed to be a very caring person. She-- you know, her mother, and she had her aunts there. And she had-- obviously was a very warm person. I would have wished a good life for her, too.

And for Sally, at least, was able to survive. And he did the best he could with what he had. No, he really knew and he didn't know. There were two things that he may have know something. But he didn't quite-- didn't have the energy.

Or maybe would he have been able to find something out? That is a serious question. Things were not good. Early days, it was not so easy for him.

So he at least, he did survive. And my mother, it would have been nice to see some of the other families, the ones in the-- you know, for that matter, a lot of all these innocent people who life was taken for no good reason, no good reason. Yeah, it's very sad.

And what would you say to the Liebermans, your real parents?

Liebermans-- I loved my parents. They were wonderful parents. They really were.

They were not just-- well, they really loved also, they loved the children. They loved their grandchildren. They were a fascinating people.

Of course, they really-- they liked-- they always liked to learn something. And they liked to-- they were sort of really, really lovable, warm, and really interested in what everybody was doing. They really was one of them. And they also gave their opinion if they didn't like something. But--

But it sounds like they were very engaged.

Yes.

Engaged in the other people's lives.

Yeah, the were engaged. And actually, also Roger's parents were engaged. I would say more his mother more was engaged.

His parents were-- I liked his parents, but they were very different. One was very much more personal, and liked music, his mother. And his father was, you know, he was very good, but not-- a little bit different, more, you know, sort of a little different.

Was he more reserved?

Yeah. But his mother was much more-- and they were both very, very smart. And they also enjoyed traveling. And they were very interesting people. I did like them.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Well, thank you. Thank you for everything.

And I will say that this then concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Isabel Langsdorf on December 5, 2019, in Kensington, Maryland.

Thank you. And thank you. Thanking-- thank the crew, who had a real lot of work to do to get things quiet and dark.

[CHUCKLING]

We have a good crew.

And I was very appreciative having my daughter around.

Julie, yes.

Because she's the one who remembers the details.

[CHUCKLING]

To a fault.

Wonderful. Thank you to Julie.

[INAUDIBLE].

OK. All right.