This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Esther Starobin on May 20, 2020, taking place in Silver Spring, Maryland, where Mrs. Starobin is via telephone. And I am going to start our interview with the most basic questions. And we'll take things from there.

So first of all, thank you very much for agreeing to speak with us today. And I'm going to start out with the basic of the basic, which is can you tell me the date of your birth?

April 3, 1937.

And where were you born?

I was born in Adelsheim, Germany.

And do I spell that A- D- E- L- S- H-E-I-M? Adelsheim?

You do.

And what was your name at birth?

Esther Rosenfeld.

And would have that been E-S-T-H- E-R or E-S-T- E-R.

I think it was E-S-T- E- R when I was born. But now it's got an H.

And did you have brothers and sisters?

I did. I was the youngest of five.

Can you tell me their names and approximately when they were born?

Yes. My oldest sister, Bertl-- so she was Bertha when she was born-- was born in October 1925. My second sister was Edith Beate-- B-E-A-T-E-- was born in February 1927. And my sister, Ruth, was born August 1930. And my brother, Herman, was born and that's with two-- he was born with two Ns-- April 1933.

So that would have been H-E-R- M- A- N-N--

Yeah.

--in the way that it would be spelled in Germany.

Yes.

Did he later change his name?

He did. He later changed to just one N.

So there's about a 12-year span between your oldest sister and yourself.

Right.

12, 11 1/2 years, and so on. And can you tell me about your parents, then-- your mother's maiden name and her first name and then your father's?

My mother was Katie Limburger Rosenfeld. And she came from Rexingen. And my--

Was that a town close by?

Was it a what?

A town close by Adelsheim?

It's not real far, but it's not real close, either. And my father was Adolph. And he was born in Korb, which is very close to Adelsheim.

Would that be K-O-R-D?

It would be.

If you were born in 1937, that's already just over four years since Hitler comes to power and, in other words, at a very troubling time. Do you-- and I assume that you don't have any memory of your early years, your first couple of years at home.

I don't, and I left Adelsheim when I was two years old and two months, and I don't remember it at all.

When you say you left Adelsheim, did you leave alone?

I left on the Kindertransport, and I did because my sisters had been living in Aachen before that with my mother's sisters. And they had gone on a Kindertransport in March of 1939.

Just before your second birthday.

Right.

So that would have been Bertl, Edith, and Ruth.

That's right.

And what about Herman? Did he ever go on a Kindertransport?

No, and that's a big mystery in our family. Why did they send me and not my brother? And I got a couple of theories. One, boys were more precious than girls.

[LAUGHS]

And they wanted to keep them handy. At all when the opportunity came for me to go, he had been sent to school and wasn't in Adelsheim. He wasn't in Aachen. He was in Heilbronn, I think. I'm not exactly sure, but maybe he wasn't home, or maybe it was harder to send boys. But a six-year-old boy isn't going to be a spy.

No.

So I really don't know.

Did he survive the war?

He did.

And how did he survive the war?

Well, my parents, as were all the people in Baden were deported to France October 28, 1940. And when he was in the camps, the OSE organization took children out of the camp. They were Gurs to begin with. And they took the children out of the camps. They had hostel places for them and taught them to read and do all that stuff.

And then in 1941, they managed to bring 1,000 children to the United States. So that's how he got here.

That's amazing, actually. So he was deported with your parents to Gurs in France.

He was.

And I didn't catch the name of the organization that--

It's OSE It's a French name, [SPEAKING FRENCH], something, something that-- I don't remember the other two words for it.

Do you know--

But it was an organization that was helping to take care of the children in France. And they apparently had a lot of these homes. And we knew, from some letters that Bertl had from our mother and father when they were in the camps, that Herman had gone to one of these. And they never said where he was. They just said he was gone.

And I am friends with a young woman from Vienna who lives in Munich now and has done research on somebody who was one of these 1,000 children that came to the United States in '41. And Herman and this man either came on the same ship, and there was a list that-- Ron, what the heck is his name-- Ron at the museum-- when he came into--

Ron Coleman probably.

Ron Coleman-- when he was doing research for the exhibit on what the Americans knew, he found a picture that includes my brother looking, waiting to get on the ship in Lisbon. And there's a list of who the kids are. And Arthur was on that list. So when Lilly, the researcher, has done research because she wrote a book about Arthur, she found out more stuff about Herman, and that's actually how we know quite a bit about Herman because he would never talk about any of this [INAUDIBLE].

Oh, really?

No, never, never ever.

Well, I can understand that because these things happened when he was a child. He saw the deportation. He was part of the deportation. And children-- it's harder for them to incorporate that.

He came to the United States when he was eight. By the time he was eight, his sisters had disappeared. He had been sent away to school. He had been deported to a camp. Then he was in this OSE hostel. When he got to New York, they knew he had family here, but they didn't know where.

So he was in a home in New York until they found where his uncles were. And he was eight years old.

Yeah, exactly, exactly.

I mean, no wonder he wouldn't remember.

And so--

And he also--

--he was never interviewed?

I don't think so.

Is he still alive?

No, he died when he was 57.

Oh my.

And I think if he had lived to be older, I think when you get older, sometimes you're ready to go back. And he, apparently-- I think his wife told me-- he had started talking to his rabbi about it a little bit. But it's really interesting. Quite a lot of the cousins have applied for German citizenship. And his children just think it's terrible they're doing that, just-- they don't understand it at all.

And going on the Kindertransport, I don't remember my parents, but I didn't have an awful life. And his really was until he came here. And then it was hard at first when he was here, living with his aunt and uncle.

I'm jumping ahead of our story, but to come to the United States, to get to the part where you're all in the United States, which is several years later, there were five siblings. Did you ever live together again?

No. Herman stayed with his aunt where he had been living. And he called them mom and dad. I mean, that was that. And my sisters and I lived with a different aunt and uncle in a great big house on North Capitol Street. There was another refugee family there, and it was a really bad experience. [LAUGHS]

With the other family?

No, just living in that house with-- yeah.

Oh. Was it because of all of the turmoil that had gone on, or was it for other reasons, more personality maybe related?

Well, for me I didn't really know my sisters. I mean, they used to visit in Norwich where I lived in England. But I didn't really know them. I certainly didn't know my aunt and uncle. One of my cousins was a big bully and was really nasty to me. And I didn't know what to do about it. And if I had known, I should have told my sisters.

But I didn't know them enough to know that was what to do. And I had a new religion, new family. Everything was new.

And then I went to school, and the teacher used to make fun of when I used English words that are different than American words. And now, as an adult, an old adult, I look back and realize it probably wasn't personal. It was probably because she wasn't happy with immigrants, especially living today where you get this anti-immigrant stuff and that I also had a lazy eye, which had not been taken care of in England.

And when I first came here, they decided-- I was 10 years old-- I should wear a patch on my eye. Well, I was peculiar enough. I wasn't going to go to school with a patch on my eye. So I used to take that off. [LAUGHS] Yeah, and school in England at that time was much further advanced than school here. I mean the only new thing was learning to diagram sentences. And I couldn't see the point. If you didn't know the grammar, you couldn't do it.

[LAUGHS] This is true, absolutely.

And if you knew the grammar, why did you need to?

Need it-- [LAUGHS].

And I didn't know the grammar. Grammar was not a big thing in England [LAUGHS] in the schools. But then I went to junior high. And I had a great junior high homeroom teacher and a Spanish teacher who was really very special.

So it's more these-- when you come to the United States, these people are all family, but they're strangers.

But they were strangers. I mean, my sisters weren't strangers. I just didn't know them the way you know people when you live with them. And my sister Edie came a year after we did because she was in the British Army, and she had to be demobilized.

And my sister Ruth went off-- she went to high school when we first got here, even though she'd been out of school in England. And then she went to college and lived at college.

And my sister Bertl was trying to make-- she was a young woman trying to make it in a new country without a lot of support. And then she had me to hang onto. Edie came a year later. She arrived the day that Truman defeated Dewey.

Really. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] She couldn't understand why nobody was paying attention to her. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] Oh, how deflating, how deflating that. Let's go back now because we've jumped forward. I want to look back. When I look back to Adelsheim, how did your father support five children?

He sold grain to farmers and arranged for cows or horses to be traded, that kind of thing. And actually, I have found out, again through something at the museum, that the business was actually in my mother's name. My father had been in the First World War and had a leg amputated.

So originally, before he was in the war, he had apprenticed to be a baker. But you can't really be a Baker on a wooden leg too usually easily.

No, not easily, no.

And I think my mother's father had been in a similar business in Rexingen. Now, that's probably why they went into that kind of business. And it was hard for him to get on and off the cart. So my mother often-- this is what I've heard. All of this is hearsay. [LAUGHS]

You're the youngest, and you never had a chance to know them.

Right. But I'm the keeper of the family history because all my siblings have died. And I was the only one who really got involved with doing this. What was I-- yeah.

It was how they made a living, and the business was in her name.

Yeah, yeah, that's that's how he did that. And he lost the business the February before I was born. Somebody took him to court, said that he had arranged something with a bad cow. And he, of course, lost the court case.

And it's interesting. I've had it translated-- not exactly, but sort of-- and the judge just called him Jew Rosenfeld. He didn't even use his name. But he, of course, lost. There was no way he was not going to lose. And he had to pay the court costs, pay for the cow, and he lost his business. So I don't know how they lived after that-- not well.

Was there a family home, originally, or did they live in an apartment? Do you know anything?

They had a house. And one floor of the house, there were ladies living on that floor. So I guess it was rented out. And

there was a garage shelter, a shed, or something on the side because my sister Bertl said they had goats, and they had to drink goat milk, and she didn't like goat milk.

[LAUGHS]

So it was at the backyard. And I think my father owed money, from something I read, that he had a loan from the bank, I think it was. But you see, the house they had in Korb, which had also--

Which was where your father is from.

Where I was born-- and my parents, when they were first married, lived in Korb. And Edie, Bertl was born about a year after they were married. And by that-- the synagogue had actually been in that house. And by the time Bertl was born, there weren't enough Jews in Korb anymore to have a minyan, which is why they moved to Adelsheim.

Was there more of a Jewish community there?

Oh, I think there were about 10 Jewish families. It wasn't a big Jewish community. I mean, it was a little place. But when Bertl and I went back in 1940, we got to go in this house, which is no longer usable because the ceilings were so low. People used to be shorter.

[LAUGHS]

So we--

Are you talking about the house in Korb?

In Korb, yeah.

And you said 1940. Did you mean another year when Bertl and you had been--

Oh, I meant when we went back in 2000 for the--

For that commemoration. That you mentioned to me offline. We'll talk about that in a little bit. So you went back in 2000 to the original family home in Korb.

Where we got to see it. Yeah. [LAUGHS]

Was anybody living in there?

No. It's not habitable. Somebody owns it. But they weren't living there. And I think now, it's closed, I think. But in Adelsheim, it's a nice house. When I first went back in the '80s, I didn't go inside. But when we went back in 2000, Reinhart, who had arranged for us to be able to go inside the house, and of course, it had been renovated. It was a beautiful house. But there was a little boy living in the house who was the same age as my oldest grandson--

Oh.

--that we got to go up in the attic where he had his toys and basically, they're the same toys my grandson had. But his were so neat and stacked and put away.

[LAUGHS]

The Johns were never like that.

[LAUGHS]

Now, whether it was because we were coming or it was always like that [LAUGHS]--

Yeah, you don't know. [LAUGHS] You don't know.

[LAUGHS] I don't know if it was like that.

Tell us, who is Reinhart? You mentioned that he brought you opened your family home or brought you to the old family home in Adelsheim.

Reinhart is the man that the Jewish family who had family in Adelsheim write to to find out information, which--

But he's not Jewish, or is he Jewish?

Oh no, no. He's not [MUTED]. I don't know what he is.

Why do people write to him?

Well, originally, there was a man called Mr. [INAUDIBLE] who knew all these people. But when he got too old to be doing that, he bequeathed it to Reinhart to do. Reinhart was a teacher in the high school. And Reinhart established an after-school club. And Reinhart and the kids did research on various people that wrote to find out about their families.

So I have written that many times. I mean, when I do first person--

At the museum-- at the Holocaust Museum.

At the museum and when the interview with Bill asks me questions, which I don't know the answer to, I would email Reinhart . And he would find out for me. So I've learned a lot about my family. But it's research. It isn't that I personally know it and that.

So excuse me for interrupting, but is his research basically on Jewish life that was in Adelsheim, or is he also like the town historian in a certain way? I mean, sometimes, people do that on a volunteer basis.

I don't think he's the town historian. I think he looks into information about specific families when people write to him. For instance, we have a cousin, maybe four or five times removed-- I never get that stuff straight-- who had written to him, trying to find out who apparently this man's name.

Anyhow, when he had written, it turns out that Peter's grandfather and my great grandfather-- maybe it's the other way around. Anyhow, we're brothers, so it's a very loose relationship. I mean, now, Peter and we're all family. But I think he--

Through Reinhart? Did Reinhart put you together?

He did. [LAUGHS] He did. My sister, Bertl, got a letter from this Peter one day, saying, "I think I'm your cousin. I found this out by writing." And Bertl wrote back-- I mean, Bertl, who remembered all the family that I never knew, was excited about getting family. And she was good about doing that. So--

I have a question here that-- did your sisters and brothers-- and brother-- ever fill you in because they knew your parents? You didn't. Did they tell you what mom and dad were like?

My brother never talked about anything. Bertl would say, "Ask me any questions," especially when we all had children, and they wanted to know. "Ask me any question, and I'll answer you."

Well, when you don't know anything, it's hard to ask questions. And she had a couple of standard stories she would tell.

I mean, one was that my father would stand and whistle, and they had to come running, that he checked their nails to make sure they were clean.

Edie talked about my parents apparently had cookies they baked. And they kept it in the front room where nobody went. But she ate them all up one by one.

[LAUGHS]

And she also apparently took her father's watch apart once. Got it all back together, except there were pieces left.

Oh, geez.

I take it she was the mischievous one.

[LAUGHS]

Because she--

The curious one.

[LAUGHS] Back then, you had to take your challah to the community oven to get baked. And she talked about dropping the dough in the little brook somewhere. Bertl said I think an uncle had given her a scooter. And my father broke it up. He didn't want her on it. He thought it was too dangerous.

What I realized after Bertl died, which was about a year and a half ago, she never talked about her mother at all-- nothing. I realize that now. The few letters were in the '80s when there started to be a lot of information on television about the Holocaust.

Bertl mentioned she had a few letters from her mother and father when they were in the camp. Well, my mother wrote long letters. My father wrote two lines. And my husband had them translated. So I know things about my mother from that. But I wish I had thought to ask her when she still had a right mind and could have told me.

Edie, I mean other than those few stories, didn't talk about it much. And I never really talked about it with my sister, Ruth, though her children feel it affected her and made her the kind of person she was-- very annoying. She knew everything.

Oh [LAUGHS].

[LAUGHS]

Now, is it ironic, or am I reading something into this, that all of your siblings who were older than you knew things but were not interested in exploring the history? And you who had no direct memories have become the historian of the family, in the family.

That's because I volunteer at the museum. And how can you not become that way when you [LAUGHS] are down there.

Well, this is an interesting point. My question, then, here is, were you interested before you started at the museum?

Well I did go back to Adelsheim before I started at the museum because I needed to know where I came from. My foster brother, Alan, would come and visit. And I was a schoolteacher. I would take him to school. And I mostly talked to the kids that I taught about how many different homes I've lived in by the time I was 16. And then we did this brother/sister routine about growing up and the things we remembered and remembered differently.

But it was more that I was talking about being a foster child because I taught in a school where we had many kids who

had unusual family lives. The kids knew I had been in a-- well, Kindertransport people weren't really considered survivors till the museum opened.

It that so?

It's so. I mean, there was a gathering before the museum opened. And Bertl went down to volunteer. And they gave her a hard time. I don't think she did volunteer. And that-- and my sister, Ruth, considered herself a survivor. I'm not sure Bertl really did. And Edie, yeah.

Isn't that interesting because I mean, to me, it seems so self-evident. Had they stayed, who knows if they would have survived?

I mean, I--

And their lives were changed.

Absolutely. But the world as a whole didn't talk about it a lot. And people who had been in the camps were the people who were known as survivors. I mean, I don't feel the museum treats me that way. But--

So this comes from other survivors who might have borne the brunt of these policies.

No, I think it was people who were basically-- it just wasn't anything we talked about when I was growing up. I mean, Bertl and Edith got an apartment when I-- oh, I'm trying to think, how old was I? Maybe 12, and I lived with them, and then I graduated from high school when I was 16. And Ruth, by that time, was married, and her husband was working on a doctorate at the University of Illinois. So I lived with them through college.

But there were so many other things that were important that we didn't really talk about that. I mean, I don't know that I heard the word "Kindertransport" growing up. I knew I had been sent from Germany to England and the Harrison, all that. I don't know if I knew the actual word.

I mean, I'm part of the memoir writing group at the museum for survivor volunteers. And I wrote something about junior high and Kindertransport. And I sent it to my best friend from junior high. And she wrote me. She said, "I never knew you were on the Kindertransport." And I had spent every weekend with her. Her parents had a grocery store and I used to go stay over there. So it was just a different time.

So if I'm understanding this properly, is that until you came and became more involved at the museum here in Washington-- the Holocaust Museum-- it was not mostly part of one's conversation. It's sort of like it's there. It's a part of your family. But it's not what you're focusing on. The focus is on other things.

Right. So in the-- I think it was the early '90s, in England, somebody started a Kindertransport Association. And then one got started here. And my brother lent us his fancy, big car. And the rest of us went to this. And that was the first time I had met other people who had been on the Kindertransport. And had had similar kind of-- I mean, it was very exciting to do that. And the first--

Excuse me, there is some static on the line. There's some sort of fuzzy sound--

Oh, here.

--coming through.

Is it gone?

Not quite.

It will be. It's my teapot.

Oh. [LAUGHS] OK. Well, I think--

It's gone.

Well, I hope that the water is boiled. At least you could have some tea.

It's boiled. My tea is made. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

When I was married and had young children, I stayed home for nine years. And then I went back to teaching. And the first year I was back, our oldest daughter got sick. So we were very involved with her. And you're busy when you're working, and you have children. And you think you don't have time for this nonsense.

[LAUGHS]

I mean, not that it's nonsense.

No, but of course. It's not--

It's trying to live. It's something that you have time for later-- not for me. I mean, I know some people have been involved. I mean, it's the same way the Kindertransport Association here is basically second-generation KTAs. My kids are not interested. And what I have found out that most of the people who are involved, they didn't know the parents were in the Kindertransport till they were adults. Well, my kids always knew because we always had my foster family where we used to visit and all that. So it was always part of our lives.

Well, there are things that can be part of one's life, but you don't delve into them. You don't explore the various aspects. You just know the basic contours, the basic facts. Like one of my questions come from the very beginning. Your other siblings, your sisters who go on a Kindertransport, well, they all are of an age, if they're going in 1939 in March, where they can remember what the transport was like.

And if they went together, then Ruth, who was the youngest and is 9 1/2 or 8 1/2 or something, and Bertl, who was the oldest, who was, at that point, probably 14 or 15, they're there for each other. That is, they're not alone. You are a toddler who doesn't have memories. So somebody must have taken you. Who was that somebody?

I do wonder who looked after me. [LAUGHS] I do wonder. I clearly didn't look after myself. But I don't know. I mean, with all the records, that isn't something that either I or Reinhart have managed to find out, how that happened.

I mean, there's probably-- if I were more of a researcher, digger could find it out. But I haven't. I mean, my aunt that lived in London worked as a maid. So she had met a lot of people. And she found them all homes in the London area. I was placed by Quakers.

So clearly, I went with a different group. Originally, I was supposed to go to Wales, and then that fell through. So I went to the Harrisons in Norwich. And it--

Norwich is where in relation to London? What part of England is it?

It's in East Anglia. It is east, probably northeast from London. Just a little bit of orientation-- so that's where you-- and is it a large town or a small city or--

It is a cathedral city. And the Harrisons, actually, at that time, lived out in Thorpe, which was out in the country then. Now, it's just suburban Norwich like every place else that's an urban sprawl.

What was the name of the place? I didn't quite catch it.

Thorpe-- T-H-O-R- P-E.

OK, in Thorpe. And were they Quakers as well?

Nope. They were very fundamentalist Christians. They went to chapel, which was-- there was a chapel movement. I guess it's a lot like fundamentalist Christians now. But now, Alan goes to Church of England.

So he's now Anglican.

Church of England is Anglican.

That's what I thought. That's what I thought.

Yeah.

Yeah. So if your earliest memories aren't from Germany, and there are none from the Kindertransport, what are your earliest memories? Well, basically, of England, and I'm not real good on memories. As my daughter said, "Mom you never talked about things. We did things, and then we never talked about them anymore."

And I mean, there's some things that Alan and I talk about that we remember differently, like siblings tend to. I was very happy there. I mean, that was really the happiest time of my childhood. I was very happy there. War was going on. Norwich was bombed. There was an American Air Force base close by, so it was a busy place. And that-- it was the kind--

What was the kind of home that you grew up in, then? How did this man, Mr. Harrison, support his family? I'm being so patriarchal here, saying it's always the men supporting the families.

Well, it was back then--

Yeah, it was back then. [LAUGHS] Yeah.

--although my mother really worked with my father. He worked in the shoe factory, and he cut out the leather parts for shoes. And he knew a lot about fixing shoes. Auntie Dot was a good manager. Uncle Harry had gone off to-- oh, where had he gone-- Australia when he was a young man. He was gone eight, nine years. Auntie Dot worked in a family business-- a greengrocer's-- while he was gone, and supported herself. And then they got married when he came back. And they just had the one son, Alan.

That was my next question, as to whether you had any other foster siblings. No, just Alan, who was exactly the same age as Ruth. And their birthdays were 10 days apart. And I mean, we had gas masks, and there were bombs. We went into shelters. But I don't really remember that so much. I just-- it was--

Do you remember the house you lived in?

Oh yeah. It was a little house and that it's still there. It's been modernized. And I liked school. I was just ready to take the eleven-plus exam that you had taken England to see where you would go next. The chapel had lots of activity. It was very community-oriented like churches and synagogues so now. It was very family-oriented then.

So you went with them.

Of course. What else was I going to do? I didn't know from being Jewish or--

[LAUGHS]

Now, the minister-- the man who actually owned the chapel-- Mr. Ramsey, he tried to teach me Hebrew. But I'm really bad at languages, so I didn't learn it.

[LAUGHS] But what it shows is that he wasn't on a proselytizing mission to convert you.

I don't think so. If any of them were, I didn't get it. [LAUGHS] I mean, I left there when I was 10. How much proselytizing were they going to be doing? Now--

So all the war years, you're spending in Thorpe.

Right.

And do your sisters show up at all?

They do. Once they could travel, they used to come and spend time there. And we went to London. At least once, I went to a Seder, which I had no idea what it was. But we went to London every-- well, I don't know how often we went. I'm thinking. I know we went to London once, and Alan and I rode up and down the escalators because we didn't have them in Norwich-- [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

--or in Paris. And that--

I think every kid who has never seen an escalator does that. I mean, I've heard it so many times. [LAUGHS]

I think, actually, my Aunt Hannah came to Norwich once. But there was a lot of tension between my foster mother and her.

Why?

Oh, who knows? My aunt was a difficult lady.

This was a mother sister or father sister?

Mother sister.

Mother sister.

And she kept kosher, which was very difficult in a very small apartment where they lived. Once Bertl was 16, she went back to London and lived with her. And for years, Bertl wouldn't date because whenever my aunt was angry, she'd bake. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

Bertl. And yeah. So when we first came to this country, my aunt would send us packages. And she would not wrap them very well.

And there'd be things like woolen long underwear, which now, would be wonderful to have. But I was home. My sisters were working, and I was a high school kid. And I had to go to the post office and pick them up.

[LAUGHS] I used to find that so embarrassing.

Mortifying.

You've got it. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

But our aunt came once to visit. And I remember-- I mean, my sisters and I didn't keep kosher, but my aunt did. And I went to the kosher butcher with her, and I couldn't believe it, the haggling.

Oh.

Now, I know that's just what you do. But oh, goodness. And I ran away-- my sister, Ruth, was married then and living in the next door of the apartment we lived in, the next building. And I came home from school one day when Aunt Hannah was there. And there was something sitting in the refrigerator that looked good, so I took some of it to eat. And then I found out it was brains.

Oh gosh. [LAUGHS] Oh gosh.

[LAUGHS] I ran away to Ruth and David and lived in their closet for a few days. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] Oh gosh. And nobody explains anything. Nobody tells you anything about it beforehand.

Well, they probably think-- because I think back then, that food was cheap, unlike now. It's probably very expensive--

That's--

--and called sweetbread, so-- [LAUGHS]

That's right. [LAUGHS] That's right. Now, I know--

I mean, it's like I love liver, and now, it's expensive. [LAUGHS]

Yes, yes, that's true.

But it used to be that stuff was inexpensive.

I want to come back to something you said earlier, and that is when you said that when your foster brother, Alan, came to visit you when you were a teacher, you would go to school, and you would explain to kids that by the time you were 16, you had lived in 10 homes?

Not 10.

Oh.

No, but I had lived with my parents. I'd lived with the Harrisons. I've lived with my aunt and uncle. I had lived with my sisters. And then I lived with my other sister and her brother. So it was a lot of different places to live.

Can we retrace that just a little bit chronologically so I have it clearer?

Mm-hmm.

So in 1939-- I mean, as much as--

1937, I was born and lived in Germany.

Then 1939, you were on a Kindertransport, and you end up at the Harrisons in Thorpe.

Yeah.

And you stayed--

And then we--

Mm-hmm?

And then in '47, we came to Washington, DC. And I lived with my aunt and uncle.

What were their names?

Siegman and Regina Rosenfeld.

So they're your father's--

Yeah.

--your father's brother, probably.

Right. Then I lived with Bertl and Edith--

So they--

--in the apartment.

In Washington, DC?

In Washington, DC.

For how long?

Till I graduated from high school, just till I went to college in September of 1953.

And then where did you go to college?

I went to the University of Illinois, and I lived with Ruth and David.

Ah.

[INAUDIBLE]

And--

And then I graduated in '57. Then I came back to Washington.

And that's what you were telling the kids. That's what you were--

Yeah. I was basically talking about living in different homes and different people, whatever.

Did you feel always like a fifth wheel, or did you feel like this is my home now, and I'm fine in it?

I feel that way about my house, which is why I haven't moved like most-- [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

And I am so glad I haven't moved because I hear they have to stay in their apartments, and they can't go--

[LAUGHS] This is true.

I often feel not so much about the house as an outsider with groups. I do, like I'm other. I do feel that way a lot, actually.

And did you as you were growing up because those years are the years when one is particularly vulnerable because you're mortified when you go to the post office. That's so typical--

[LAUGHS]

--for a kid. But it's very touching. And if it's not negotiated properly, then those become very painful memories. [LAUGHS]

I mean, now, I look back and laugh about it, but [LAUGHS] yeah.

And I get it. I mean, I'm leading up to another question is, is that--

I figured you were.

You never knew your parents. But did you miss them? Did you miss having parents?

No.

That's huge.

I didn't know from missing parents. But something happened to me. I did the principal internship, which I flunked terribly. I was terrible at it. But at the school where I was working, the PTA mothers all used to get together for coffee during school hours. And I had to go with the principal.

And they were talking about what awful cooks their mothers were and how awful some of the recipes were. And I was so upset. I thought, I would just love to know what my mother cooked. But probably, my father cooked because most of my uncles cooked, not their wives. [LAUGHS]

But I think that really hit me. I just couldn't. I was so upset by that conversation. It just seemed so unreal to me.

Wow.

But actually, missing parents-- no, I didn't know from having parents to know you miss them when they're not there.

Did someone take over those roles?

Interesting you should ask. In the memoir writing group, a couple of people several sessions ago had written about things their mothers did to make their childhood fun, pleasant. And I am not a weeper, and I don't cry. But I really was upset by it. And I did-- I came home and I write a piece about not having a mother, which I sent to Maggie, who runs it. And I said, "Don't you dare share it with anybody."

But yeah, I mean, some of it hits me more, more recently. My sister, Bertl, took over and that she was very bossy.

[LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] But she made sure we stayed together as a family and became-- I mean, we have a pretty close family. And it was her doing that my mother had told her she should do. And my sister, Bertl was very dramatic. Everything was black and white in her life.

But she did it. She then held it. She did it.

She did it. She did it. Mm-hmm.

You mentioned also that, though, you remember the time with the Harrisons as being a very happy time.

That's because they spoiled me.

[LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

Well, that's nice. Did you keep up contact with them after?

Oh yeah.

Did you want to leave them-- if you were happy there?

Good God, no. I had no choice in the matter. I didn't want to leave. I would have been happy to stay with.

Who was the decision-maker there?

My parents had said we should stay together as a family and come to the United States where our brother was and where our aunts and uncles were.

Did they know that Herman had gotten to the United States?

Yeah, they did. My father had to sign something to let him go. Now, I just recently read something that those signatures were often forged. So I don't know if my father actually signed it. But I think he did. He had to sign that he would let him go.

And I didn't come back to this before. What happened with your parents?

My parents went to-- first, they went from Gurs to Rivesaltes in-- I guess in '41. I do have it somewhere. And then they were deported to Auschwitz in August of 1942. And they were killed August 14, 1942, upon their arrival.

Upon arrival. So documents show that, huh?

Yeah.

You found documents about that.

The book that the French-- God, why do I never remember his name? There's a book written that there's all the deportations-- when they went, who was on it, when they were born. Yeah.

You said that this was something that was always known in your family when you had children yourself and so on. But did your kids ask you questions?

Not so much. I mean, when we would get together as a family, sometimes they would talk about it. And they would ask. And that's when we heard these standard stories. No, they really didn't. It's interesting.

The neighborhood where I live used to be very Jewish. And the high school my kids went to had a large number of Jewish students. And my oldest daughter, Deborah, has said lately she didn't realize how many people's parents were survivors. I mean, she's gone to a lot of funerals and things. And she said, "I never knew that." It just wasn't relevant to the kids, I don't think.

I mean it probably was, but not enough that they shared it around.

Another question-- you mentioned earlier that one of the things that was jarring when you came, and you lived with your aunt and your uncle, your father's brother in Washington on I think Capitol Street did you say or Cathedral--

North Capitol.

--North Capitol-- was that you went from one religion to a new religion.

Well, I've been going to chapel in England and then came here. For a very short while, I was supposed to be going to Sunday school at Washington Hebrew, but I never went. [LAUGHS] I didn't know what they were talking about. I just didn't go. I left the house and fiddled around.

You mean you pretended to go?

You've got it.

[LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] But my sisters had me join Young Judaea, which was a youth group at the time. And then in-- did you grow up here?

No, I grew up in Boston.

In Washington, the high schools had Jewish sororities and fraternities and clubs.

In the public high schools.

Yeah. I mean, people in public school, and they belong to a sorority or a club. And I did belong to a club. I don't know why I belonged to that particular one, but I did. And kids used to go roller skating Friday nights. I mean, religion wasn't part of it, really.

And my sister, Bertl, worked for a person who was on the board of Camp Louise, which is Jewish girls camp. And they used to get to send me to camp for $5.00 a week. They got a bargain rate to get rid of me.

[LAUGHS]

I went there. And I didn't really know that much about Judaism. And then when I was older, I went to the Habonim Camp on the weekends because I was always working because Ruth was married to this David Ezekiel. And all his siblings went to Moishe and were involved in Habonim. But it wasn't a big part of my life otherwise.

But once we had children, and they were old enough to go to religious-- because my husband wasn't very knowledgeable, either-- he's had a bar mitzvah, though.

We sent them to religious school. And then eventually, we joined a reform congregation. And I still belong to that reform congregation.

But you did say something interesting earlier when you said, "I feel-- I mean, I am Jewish. This is how I feel." But when we were talking-- I don't remember whether it was online or recorded or not-- but we were talking about differences in religions.

And so I guess part of my questions are trying to trace that arc from your earliest memories are belonging to a a foster family that are from fundamentalist Christian. And so one of the questions I have-- is there anything that you took from that, that is still part of your life today?

So that was there something-- I'm going to say a lot of questions at once. Was there something when you came to Washington that still resonated with you so that being introduced to your own religion that you were born into felt strange? And then how do you acclimate to that? What brought you to Judaism? How did it come that this arc in the end says, "I am a Jew"?

I doubt if I had any of those thoughts and concerns when I first came here. I was just trying to survive. Also, my best friends in junior high and high school, I had one really close friend who was Jewish. Her family were also immigrants. And I spent a lot of time with them. I don't think she ever did any going to synagogue. I don't think they did that stuff either.

I think a couple of things. I think what's moral and right is the same whether I'm with the Harrisons or being Jewish. The importance of a religious community came from the Harrisons-- really did. I mean, it was such a big part of their life then.

The spirituality of music-- now, whether it came from them or not, I know when I visit Alan, we always go to the cathedral. I love the music. And it doesn't matter to me whether I know exactly what they're singing. There's something about music, choral music.

Alan's father-- turns out his father was Jewish, which Uncle Harry didn't know. Alan found it out after uncle Harry died.

Alan's grandfather was Jewish or Harry--

Mm-hmm.

--himself didn't know?

Alan's grandfather was Jewish. He had come to England and married Alan's grandmother. They had two children. And then he left and went back. He came from Poland or Ukraine or someplace.

And he went back and left Alan's grandmother with the two boys. She landed up in the poorhouse. And one of her children was Alan's father. And after--

Your foster father.

Yep. And after my foster father, uncle Harry, died, Alan was talking to one of his cousins who mentioned she had done some research and found out that the grandfather-- because it was her grandfather, too-- was Jewish. And as I've told Alan, his grandfather probably had a family in wherever he came from.

That often happened, yeah.

Yep. [LAUGHS] Alan's done a little research and found out some things about him. [LAUGHS] But I mean, the world is so small in many ways. But I mean, I have been-- after I retired, mostly-- I mean, I was involved in some stuff at temple while I was still working-- but I have been president of my congregation, school board chair, and religious practice chair, all kinds of things.

Now, I just act like I'm just a member. I don't do anything much.

But you're involved. You were--

Yeah, yeah, I mean, I actually am enjoying the Zoom services because I don't drive at night if it's raining. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

So I can enjoy the service. The other good thing is all these people whose names I've heard in the last few years-- because there are a lot of young, new members-- when you're on Zoom, it has their names. You can find out who they are.

That's right. You can attach name to face, and you don't have to ask, "Who is that? Who is that?" [LAUGHS]

No, I mean, it's embarrassing when you ask somebody the fifth time, and they say, "We've met several times before." [LAUGHS]

So I want to turn now, then, to the museum. I mean, we touched upon this earlier where you said that before it opened, Bertl had gone down, and there was somebody who didn't make her feel very welcome because she was in Kindertransport.

It was a program. I don't think it was a museum program. There was a gathering of survivors. It was before the museum opened. And Bertl did not feel welcome.

When did you first visit the museum?

[LAUGHS]

And for people who will be listening to this in the future, I'm talking about the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.

I'm trying to remember. What year did it open?

'93.

So I probably went-- I started volunteering there in '96. And I'm not sure I had actually visited it beforehand.

And then what prompted you to volunteer?

Well, I retired. I had to do something, right?

Mm-hmm.

And my husband was volunteering at the Smithsonian. That didn't appeal to me. It seems to be the Holocaust Museum was where I needed to be. So I volunteered. I first worked in public programs, and then that person left the museum and gave me to Suzy Snyder, who I don't think was Suzy Snyder back then. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] No, I think she had another last name.

Right, I think it was before she got married, actually. [LAUGHS] And I have worked for Suzy Snyder on and off since then. I took a break. My husband had a stroke at some point. And he stopped going down. So I stopped going down and that. So I worked for her for a long time.

I type at home sometimes when I can't get in. I do some typing at home.

Tell me some of the things that you do, some of those activities and/or tasks or assignments or something.

Well, I only know English. So I type what other people translate, or I do office work if she has pictures that need to be put in albums or make copies and that. But mostly, I type, which is kind of funny. I failed typing in high school. But I'm pretty good on the computer--

[LAUGHS]

--because it corrects for you. [LAUGHS]

Of course it does. It's a wonderful instrument. [LAUGHS]

So that's mostly what I do. And now, I am also working at the donor desk one day-- when I was till it closed-- a week. And I do talks through the Speakers Bureau.

So you visit schools.

Not very much. I have done some traveling for the museum. But I did some before Fred got sick. Back in the days when Fred could go with me, they didn't need to send a museum person. I did some of that. And then I did for a long time--

Could you tell me Fred who-- Fred last name? I don't know.

Starobin, my husband.

Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.

Yeah, and the last couple of years, I've done some trips and that. But I talk mostly to school groups.

That come to the museum.

Yeah. And I've done a couple online schools and--

And, of course, First Person.

First Person.

Do you know how many First Person interviews you've participated in?

No. How long has it been around?

Quite a while. Quite a while.

I've done quite a lot, but I don't-- an interesting story. The very first one I did, I was talking about how awful it was living in my uncle's house. And somebody popped up in the audience and said, "I used to live there." And she's telling the truth. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] That's funny.

It was so funny. And then there was somebody else who was there from Israel who knew about the Kindertransport who also did something. But now, they don't like people doing that.

They don't like people popping up and yeah, well, you're speaking on First Person.

Yeah, right. [LAUGHS]

And again, they're going to be people who will listen to this interview and won't know what First Person is. And I will just explain that it is a program at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, where I believe it's held once a week or so.

It's a couple times a week in the summer months.

And it is an opportunity for the public to come to one of the auditoriums and hear a person give an eyewitness testimony and-- a survivor, an eyewitness testimony of what their experiences were. And usually, but not always, it is held by the interviewer-- is a person named Mr. Bill Benson. And it lasts for an hour. Have I gotten that right? Is that most of--

You got it perfectly right. My daughter Deborah almost always comes and several of my nieces, and nephew. Once, my nephew came. And my niece from Philly usually comes in for it. And what really amazes me is Tamara, who has written about her mother's experience-- is the one from Philly-- well, says she always learned something new.

And if you ask me, I say the same thing every year, but apparently not.

Well, it is true. I've interviewed certain people over and over again, somebody that I might know personally. There is a Holocaust survivor that I first met in 1980. And she was very open and very giving and generous in many ways. And I first learned her story then. And I know it pretty well.

But over the years, I've listened to other interviews with this lady. And I've learned new things from them, some detail that was brought up that, oh, I hadn't realized that. It is true that several interviews can reveal different things.

Well, they ask a question a little differently and that.

What has been your experience interacting with the public during First Person?

It's been pretty positive. I mean, people ask questions. Usually, they ask about whether I'm still Jewish and if I've kept contact with the Harrisons. Those are the main kind of questions that get asked. But it's been pretty positive.

I mean, when I sit at the donor desk, and people come up, and they want to hug me, it's fine. I mean, it was fine till the spring. I don't quite understand it.

But I mean, I feel I had no control over anything that happened to me. So I don't think I did something to be alive. It's what other people did so I think everybody has things in their lives, hopefully not as traumatic as having to leave your home. But everybody has things that have happened to them that have shaped who they are.

Sometimes, I find it hard to understand. I mean I understand being God blessed. That's fine. I might say that to someone who's had a hard time. But I don't feel that I, personally, have done anything that has made me this wonderful survivor.

I want to turn the question, though, to a different aspect. And that is, you said that when you retired, and you wanted to do something, you felt that the museum was the right place to do it. So something at the museum is relevant for you.

Yes.

Something-- and what is that?

Well, I think it's given me not my family here. I know them. It's given me my history and some understanding of what was happening, I think. I mean, it isn't that I hadn't taken things about the Holocaust before and hadn't read, though I don't read endlessly about it. I really don't, but a perspective that I didn't have before that, I think, and also, the need to really tell people not so much about my specific experiences, about the fact that people can change people's lives by doing-- I was doing goodness.

I mean, I was very lucky that I had parents who were willing to let us go. And I think a lot of parents were not. And I don't know how they managed it. I mean, they weren't wealthy. They weren't highly educated. They weren't living in a big city.

How did they do that? And their faith-- I mean they really believe God would take care of us-- God and people. They had such faith. I mean, they kept the faith in God, but they also had such faith in family and the importance of family and other people.

And I think I didn't know that always. And I think it's an important thing that whatever as an individual we can do to help someone however small. I mean, when I talk to kids-- having worked in a middle school, I know this-- there are always kids who have no one to eat lunch with. Ask them to eat lunch with you. It doesn't have to be a big thing you do. It can be little things that help people, that change their lives in ways you don't know.

And I think if I certainly could tell people my story. But if I can get someone to be able to look outside of themselves and see what they could do that might help someone else, it's very important.

It's quite profound. I mean--

It's my preachy.

No, no, no, when I think of what you're saying in relation, I mean, to all of it, particularly to your parents, what would you want to tell them? If you had a chance to speak to them today-- these people you never knew-- would you want to tell them that their faith paid off?

Oh, yes. I would want to thank them for being able to make a sacrifice. I mean, I'm pretty sure when they sent us, they thought they were going to be able to get out. But I think I pretty much trust people. And that came from them. It came from reading the letters from them, from my mother. And I don't think I'm bitter. And I think it came from them.

And, of course, I didn't have terrible things happen to me. [LAUGHS] But I don't feel angry about it. I mean, I certainly went through a spell as a teenager when I wouldn't buy or anything German. When I first started teaching at the middle school, I wouldn't talk to the German teacher, but I got over that.

But I think a trusting nature came from them, and then family, which is so important to me. I mean, I know people who would have disowned their children for marrying someone non-Jewish. I don't get that. And maybe they were that way. But I think they weren't. [LAUGHS]

I had this picture since I don't know what they were really like. I'm made a picture in my mind. But I think--

Well, that's huge. I mean, you've hit upon a couple of things that are so deep and so hard to, I want to say, get rid of. And one of them is bitterness. And the other one of them is--

One of them is what?

Bitterness.

Oh, yeah.

Somebody who has experienced so much. I mean, it's not only what one has experienced. But of course, as you were saying that, I was wondering what your brother, Herman, felt because he tasted some of those policies. He had it on his back.

But the, how shall I say, the imprint that it often leaves is bitterness or the inability to trust. I think that that is huge. And to have that ability and to feel that is likewise huge.

It's the benefit of living to old age and being able to think about things, too. [LAUGHS]

Yeah, yeah. Not everybody's had that chance.

That's really true. I mean, I read about-- not so much now-- the people who are in [INAUDIBLE], but the people originally, who a lot of them were in camps, and hearing things that happened to them. And it's hard to think you could live through that and then be a functioning wife, mother, father, whatever. And I appreciate that. I mean, I appreciate the fact that I really didn't have horrible, horrible things happen, other than the basic thing, being taken away from your parents. But lots of other people have stepped into that role of mothering.

For you.

For me.

I mean, all of this area that I'm asking questions about now, and I'm exploring, has to do with the role of the museum. So we've touched a bit on what that has been for you, what it has given you. What do you think you have brought to the museum? And what do you think the museum-- what is its value for those for whom this is not part of their story?

Well, the museum, as I said, has given me some history, some understanding, some way to put my experience into the larger picture.

What do I bring to the museum? I'm not really sure that I bring anything. [LAUGHS]

Oh, I'm sure you do.

[LAUGHS] But I--

Isn't it 24 years? We're talking 1996 to 2020?

[LAUGHS]

Yeah.

Well, my great typing ability. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

No, but I do think I helped to broaden the picture of what people experienced. I mean telling and writing, I think it broadens the picture, and it expands people's knowledge so that they don't just think of the Holocaust as Auschwitz.

And I think I also bring the fact that people did help, that there were people who were helpful in ways that we don't think of as being helpful. And I mainly, when I write, write about how it affects me now.

And I think what I bring is a understanding that this is something that happened to me as a kid. But it impacts many aspects of my life and continues to do that, not necessarily negative. It's just more factual than anything. I think I do bring that to the museum because I don't write a lot about Germany, and that mainly because I've written a lot about it, and it isn't what I think about so much.

There's a movie, Into the Arms of Strangers, about the Kindertransport. And I was friends at synagogue with a man whose mother had gotten out of Ukraine, I think, because she worked as a nurse on a train bringing kids to England. So he was born after she got to England. But they showed this movie-- or there's a shortened version. They showed it to the high school kids at our synagogue, and John and I spoke.

And we decided to speak about the losses that are involved when you come from a family like this. And I do talk about that. I mean, some of them are silly things, like not knowing your parents' recipes or what they did for holidays. But some of them are more serious. You don't know medical history. You don't know-- I mean, if it wasn't for Reinhart, I wouldn't know about all these relatives.

You don't know that kind of stuff. You don't know stories. I mean, I know basically what happened to all of my aunts and uncles. But I've never heard any stories about them, so that doesn't mean a lot to me. You don't have that, even though as kids, I know kids often don't want to hear that stuff and listen to it.

But the things you are missing-- you don't know what your parents-- well, John, of course, knew because his mother was alive-- wanted for you. You don't know what traits in your life that came from your parents. And even though I left when I was two, I am sure there are things about me that are probably similar to one of my parents. But I don't know them. [LAUGHS]

So I think sometimes the kind of losses maybe are not that important in the broad sense. But there's something to think about.

Well, I think they're very important. I mean, I don't say that to magnify artificially what you are saying. I'm saying that because all that you talk about is what people would normally inherit that is not tangible. It's an intangible.

Definitely.

But it is something that you are given. It is part of a legacy. And those parts are missing.

True.

And you don't know whether or not it would have been always good stuff. It might not have been. But its part that you didn't have a choice to explore, to find out about. I'm talking not about the very concrete things, like medical conditions, but traits, or to find out about an uncle who you may not have liked, but you would have wanted to know him to know that you might not have liked him. Do you know what I'm trying to say?

Yeah, and some of it is stuff you just absorb without actually knowing you're absorbing it--

Exactly.

--like you know it.

Exactly.

I mean, that's one of the other things I tell when I talk to kids. Ask your parents about how they grew up. Ask these questions before it's too late. I mean, even with my sister, when I said about-- I wish I'd asked them, why didn't they talk about my mother? I mean, I know they lived in a time when the father was the head of the household, but still.

Well, what kind of a picture do you have in your mind of her?

I have a picture of a very busy lady taking care of five kids. [LAUGHS] I don't have that much of a picture of her. I mean, I know what she looked like. I think she was caring. I mean, the letters she told-- I love this one letter she had written to Bertl, who was maybe 15, and we were all in different places, telling Bertl to make sure we all thank the people taking care of us, we studied hard, we wash behind our ears, none of which she could actually do. But it was important to my mother.

In fact, my younger grandson was taking a Holocaust course in college. And he wrote using the letters-- how our mother mothered from the camp. It was interesting--

That's beautiful.

--to see what he thought and that. Yeah, it's very interesting.

Esther, I think I have more questions. But I'm wondering is there something that you think I haven't asked that you would want to say, and either about your story or the museum and the significance of what the museum is for you and what you think the museum is for others, any of it? Any final thoughts?

Well, I think, and I will tell people, my family is my most important thing in my life and my synagogue and then the museum. They are the three important pillars. That sounds kind of Muslim.

[LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] But that's my life. I mean, I have friends that have nothing to do with any of these things. But I think there were parts of my life that take my time and thought and caring. And I think the museum has been so important, both to me and my family, even though I'm the only person really actually involved with the museum.

But it's become very important. And I find that I think people go out of their way to be inclusive, to make it not a family, because that's a silly thing-- it's not a family-- but to make me feel part of it and somewhat necessary to it as it is necessary to me.

You mean like a community, that it's a community.

It is a community. Yeah.

Thank you. Thank you very, very much.

Well, I am here if you think you need to talk to me again. I'm not going anywhere. [LAUGHS]

I will say that formally, there could be more questions that come up. And so then I will call you again. But for right now, what I will say is I will formally end the interview. And that is that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Esther Starobin nee Rosenfeld on May 28, 2020, in Washington-- no, excuse me, Silver Spring, Maryland. Thank you again.