

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum
Interview with Nicole Yancey
October 22, 1996
Margaret Garrett, Interviewer

Tape 1 of 2, Side A

Born Saint Amand Montrond, July 26, 1941. Nicole Gugenheim name at birth.

Earliest memory grandfather clock ticking by crib, putting her to sleep. Reassuring. Conversation stopping, covers on lamps. Clock comfort. Was not able to find comfort in adults. Difficult time to live. They doing best they could. Children know and sense danger. Remembers not seeing father. Seeing mother on occasion and then not at all. As child, had to be good and not ask questions. Remembers wondering what was going on.

At 3 1/2 separated from parents and put in farm. True happiness. Couldn't put pieces of puzzle together, why was there, but good reason. Felt safe, felt love, it was a good time. Some things doesn't know whether her memory or something she was told. She was 2 1/2, turned three at farm. Sister going on 6. So many things expected from them. When told to hide and keep quiet, had to. At the farm a number of people. In the field a lot of aviators that would land. Remembers the parachute. Sheltered off and on some people. In research found out who they were. One, wife of someone active in Resistance. Farmers named Etienne and Marie Boissery. They had two daughters and a son. Son was in labor camp in Germany. Her mother had heard from them thru some people in Resistance. They had heard that the wife reluctant to take Jewish little boys but would take Jewish little girls. Meeting arranged with her mother, She agreed to take them. Her bed brought to the farm. Later she and sister came to the farm.

Living at the farm, woman, referred to as Grandmother; farmer, Grandfather. Two daughter still alive: Nenette, Pierette. Louis came back from war. Two daughters were her mother's age. Also there were transient people coming in and out, Resistance people coming for a meal. Off and on people they would hide. Now asks where did everybody fit. At that time the walls were like rubber. She slept near grandfathers clock. (Describes house and where slept.)

Whoever she was with would tell her to hide. Task of staying with her and sister usually daughter of farmer next door. Her name was Rolande Bregnon. Her task to take care of them when there was an alert-- whenever anyone unfamiliar would be spotted near the farm. Conspiracy to keep them alive. Referred to as Les Petites. Hid either in the grain in the attic, behind bushes, wherever two small little girls would fit. Always someone with them, never hid alone. When hiding, thinks she was numb. Told with such urgency, didn't feel, just do. Doesn't remember how long. Not days. Such a remote place.

Nenette favorite person there. In the olden days, father the authority and the comfort. Often sat on his lap to eat soup. Oldest daughter, her role to take care of physical needs, bath, combing hair. Grandfather in charge of manners. Grandmother supposed to take care of them when not feeling good. Remembers being sick one time, something put in between two towels, put on chest, felt so good. Everybody had own task. Favorite person, yes and no. Fantastic people.

Meals--early in morning, around four o'clock, grandfather would wake up, coffee grandmother had prepared. Grandfather would warm coffee on stove. Go in field and get cows. Grandmother and daughters milked cow. Grandfather walked cow back to field and grandmother prepared breakfast--(describes breakfast.) Day would start about seven. Lunch--stew. Around seven thirty dinner (describes.) Most of the time meat for lunch. Depending on product of farm. Clearly remembers killing the pig. Big festivity. Real fresh pork So good. (Describes making sausage.) Gather honey. Remembers harvest in July. Separate grain from wheat. Stack straw to feed animal during the winter. Special machinery went from one farm to another. Families followed. Children helped, got in trouble. A lot of happiness, camaraderie. Doing things in harmony. That is what she has been looking for ever since that time, the harmony of it. Never found it ever since. Aware of extraordinary warmth. So much harmony between those men and women.

Nicole Yancey, October 22, 1996

Tape 1, Side B

In the area where a lot of activity,. Close to but beyond demarcation line, a lot of Resistance movement going on. Open field. Not yet mountain or forest, a lot of everything in it. A lot of flying at night. That is why they covered the lamps. Now hates drapes. Married a man who likes no light in a room. Numb in feeling at the time. Remembers asking for her father. Doesn't remember missing her mother. Would meet mother in fields. Would wait for her to come on bicycle. Milice or Gestapo traced mother to farm where she was hiding. So mother was told she had to move. Then she lost contact with them. For a time did not see her. Sister would tell differently. She doesn't remember missing mother. So well adjusted to farm.

A lot of movement . Don't remember firing noise. Remember airplane. Years later in elementary school in France teacher told parents when plane flew over they bent their heads. When activity, signal for them to stay away or hide. Marvels at all those people who can tell you what happened day by day.

At farm from 2 1/2. until 1945. Mother expected brother so they were back to farm. When brother born and she was told time to go home, very mad. Went home but don't remember that part. Central figure lady from Resistance who lived on first floor of house where father left them when he went away. Living there were Nicole, her sister, mother, uncles and their family. Were all together in huge mansion called Les Barres. Madame Tesch on first floor. She was part of Resistance, never knew every link of the chain. When rumor that the Germans were going after everybody, especially Jews, uncle told mother time for her to find a place for the children. She talked to Mme. Tesch. She took mother to grandmother.

Mother went back with uncles. Escaped from Milice coming to get them. Just ran. Was lucky Went back to those people and asked for a place to hide. Her first shelter was near them. Gestapo found her trace. Initial couple found her a second place. Then they didn't see her any more. She found out that Nicole's dad had landed in St. Tropez in August. She met her dad in Marseilles in August. From there parents came back to get them.

Found out was expecting baby. Hated it. They sent Nicole back to farm. They were putting shoes with laces on her and she wanted to go back to farm. Had been raised wearing wooden shoes. Hard to leave farm and go to school. Went back to Orleans and started school. Every chance had went back to farm. Went back until got married. Still hard. A few years ago parents talking about grave site for them. Decided where grandparents are buried. Grave next to theirs at the farm. Comfort that father is on land that was good to them. When go there, feel going home, more than Paris or Orleans. Back to the farm, like a pulling, a magnet. I am home. The farm is now abandoned.

The last time at the farm the roof had collapsed, abandoned. Pride of grandfather, kept immaculate. Instilled in her and sister the ethic of good work. Grandfather died while Nicole in America in January '64, he died Feb. or March. Farm disintegrated. Land around is a big pull. Feels strong about it. Even now she doesn't know where all the pieces fit. With a very little knowledge she decided she was going to talk.

It is new, a brand new thing. It is hard to say when first decided to talk. She thinks that as going back to France as became adult, more and more angry at father. Born out of suffering that father since war always stayed in shadow because Jew, his way of staying alive. Inflicted on us. Not out of discipline but out of love. If they were quiet about being Jews, maybe would be spared. When she became Consul in 1987, her father had mixed feelings--impressed and happy but said do you have to do it. She said everywhere you go there will be something. Are we going to put our lives on hold. An obsession to repress feeling. Father a prince of a guy. Yet all his life he suffered. Refrained from expressing his talent. Some kind of manic-depressive disease after the war. Went to a hospital and had some kind of electro-shock and later lithium which helped him with his later life. One day thumbing thru his papers and found her dad spared an entire battalion and not given recognition because he was a Jew. It made her angry. Extraordinary recognition of her grandparents. Would she be able to do it. Would she take children. Would she take the risk, put her children at risk.. Take stock of life. Questions start forming.

In 1994 France did special promotion for those who participated in Resistance. As consul she was asked to look for lady in Norfolk area. Part of chain from Swiss Red Cross. Children now in America. Wanted Nicole to find her and someone to testify that she had saved them or that they

had witnesses. Became a mission in life. Exasperated by people who knew her and no one would say she saved my life.. She is 93 in nursing home. Not comforting. Did wonderful things, deserved. Thought she was doing it too, not talking. No one would know unless she opened her mouth and that is what she is doing. Woman in Norfolk is named Lili Olard.

Being a survivor is difficult. A lot you have to reconcile with yourself. You do not have the pattern to do it, the means to help your parents. Tried to find someone to help her come out of her shell. Talks to other survivors. In some ways feel guilty that survived. Other survivors look at her like she is not a real one, did not suffer, was spared, did not fulfill obligation. Thinks did not fulfill them during the war, but fulfilled after the war. Family does not come out without being dysfunctional. Forever changes life. She does talk. They all have their own story. All unique, all victims. Have in common want to know truth, put pieces together, want to talk before it is too late.

For a long time she and sister did not talk. Law of silence imposed by parents. Would say now is now, lets not talk about it. When dad died chose reading from Bible, "A time for everything". Mother did not help. Now can see some of the reason for her behavior. She became very controlling of her life and our life. Became totally--flexibility not her thing. Survive by discipline. Hurt herself and her relationship with children. She was 28 when it happened, husband gone with Free French forces. Lost all of her emotion, lost children too because they did not get any strength from her.

Nicole Yancey, October 22, 1996

Tape 2, Side A

First memory of father. Remember asking for him, don't remember image of him. Remember Father came in carriage, drawn by horse. Love at first sight. Years later talking to lady at farm about memory. She sent picture. That was it.

Left farm, went back to Orleans, had a little apartment, very unhappy. Had not known anybody, suddenly told aunt and uncle and grandmother. The one she wanted was left at the farm. Imposed on her some people she was supposed to love but she didn't know them. Thru the years learned to love them but did not seem like her family. Heart was at the farm.

Lack of space difficult. Used to roam at farm. Had to wear real clothes with woolen socks that scratched. She was five. Had to wear shoes, high above ankle, uncomfortable. Used to live in open air. Hated mattress. Raised on feather mattress. Went to school. Difficult that question could pop out who was Catholic and who was Protestant. Would come out that she was Jewish and people would gasp. Would she not have friends. Only Jewish child in class for a while. One year Christmas decoration in school. Brought star home. Father said not to use it. Knew that she was Jewish. Didn't understand that it was a different race. Father shy about Jewish origins. Mother's grandmother was Catholic. Close to her. Went to mass with her. Farmers were Catholic. Priest loved them. Helped with them. When she started asking questions to herself didn't know whether it was a curse or privilege to be Jewish. Didn't have any direction in life about that. Did not have identity or religious direction. Has always bothered her. Bothered her until not long ago converted. Shortly before her father died with his total approval. When converted to Catholicism found her Jewish identity. Would love to found church of Catholic Jew. Converted because husband and children were Catholic. Religious unity in her family, which she had lacked as a child. Everything made sense the day she converted--never felt so Jewish. Until baptized children and husband did not know, only one who knew was her father. At father's death had a rabbi and a priest. In Father's later life he was friends with priest who helped him with reconciliation--reconciled with life, serenity, spiritual grace--Father Lucet, still lives in Orleans, helped him a great deal. Father went a long way with finding his own peace.

Even now brother doesn't practice anything. Sister heavily involved in learning Yiddish. Family would observe holiday. Father gave to Jewish charities, knew rabbi of town. Father always in quest of truth and peace. Tormented soul. Father was in green leather business. Middle man between butcher that slaughtered animal and tannery. Cuir Verts in French. Founded before the war by two uncles. Father born in Anderlecht, Belgium. Decided to become French because couldn't pass exam in Belgium because of language. Did military service in France.

Orleans was headquarters for communications zone for American Army. Franco-American Women's Club. Mother the French President of the club. They said they would sponsor her to study in America. She was supposed to come for graduate school. Admitted to Georgetown Univ. Sponsor was assigned to Fort Monroe. so she transferred to William and Mary. After finished schooling Father said had to work for one year for American Army. Sponsor was one of the officers--daughter was her twin..

Husband was in Newport News which was next door. Met at a dance. Now Consul in Norfolk. From Richmond to Virginia Beach and Charlottesville and Lynchburg. Most activity in Norfolk--base, port.

Can suppress whatever affected your younger life. Cannot suppress them forever. At some point something triggers. Feel you are running after yourself, something that will not come back. Tendency to adjust your feeling to what people say. Have to accept that some things will never be explained--have to let it go.

Know nothing about what follows--was told. Father came to France at 16 to live with uncles. Adored them. When he married, her mother felt the same way toward them. She felt a lot of her father's family abandoned her. Her mother extremely close to memory of the two uncles. She felt abandoned by his parents. The business regrouped from Orleans to Bourges.

As the Germans advanced and Vichy government established everyone went to St.-Amand Montrond which is where she was born. Uncles were there. When her father was told that somebody had given his name to the Gestapo overnight he left. Joined Free French in Africa. Entrusted her mother ,

sister, and her to the two uncles, her great uncles. He rented for them the second floor of a mansion called Les Barres. They moved in together with uncles, wife of one, daughter of another. A danger because a whole Jewish family under one roof. Germans knew would be defeated. Killed everyone they could find. They were on the list. Her mother heard thru Resistance. Uncle said time for the mother and her daughters to leave. Uncles put in prison. Separated from other Jews. When drama in wells of Guerry and bodies discovered, cousin came in respect of memory. She identified body of her father and uncle. She thought they had gone to concentration camp. Men and women taken out of prison, taken to area where empty wells, thrown into wells, covered with lye. One man escaped. Pretended he was dead. Tragedy of Guerry, wells of Guerry. Big trauma for her father. He felt he had put them in great danger. He felt he should have found the farm, shelter for them. Later he felt he did the best he could.

Nicole Yancey, October 22, 1996

Tape 2, Side B

Father felt his judgment not the wisest. To put an entire Jewish family under one roof. When he reached France, before reunited with her mother he tried to track his family. Received a telegram that his entire family had been murdered. Something snapped. He never felt right again. Father tormented by this. Came to understanding did the best he could. Sorry her uncles had to suffer such terrible tragedy. Slow and painful death. Shadow on everybody in her family. She remembers the day her uncle's body was brought back to Orleans. Six or seven years old. Went to school that day. They were not part of it. Felt awkward about people dying. Never talked about it. As a child you go on with the masquerade. Father manic-depressive. Went to the hospital. Not told the truth until 15. A lot of anger, a lot of pain. Come to some kind of peace. Now wants to talk about it. She says she was at fault for not talking earlier to her children. Did not want to look at their eyes. Didn't want to suffer their curiosity. She thinks she imagined it would have happened. Could not share because she did not have the answer.

That kind of tragedy goes on even now, could go on forever. We are negative about ourselves. Do not accept difference. Want to be right about ourselves. If we go by we are all good people, diversified. Learn to live with it and communicate and respect each other and talk. Have not learned our lesson. Still doing it. She is doing it (talking) because her uncles suffered tragedy, all those who went through it have to say we suffer from it but learn from us. Don't repeat it. She hopes this Museum is going to do it. The danger is people think it won't happen to them. No one is immune. We still have stereotyped ideas of how Jew, Catholic are going to act. Always hope for a better world for your children. If it happens to her children she hopes they have to protect them people like those she calls her grandparents.

Conclusion