

U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
INTERVIEW WITH: MARGIE [MARGIT/"MELLY"] MIEDZWINSKI ROSENTHAL
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TAPE #1 OF 3, SIDE A:

Margie Rosenthal was born in Germany, in upper Silesia, July 19, 1927, in the small town of Gliwice. Her father, Fritz Miedzwinski was born in Kattowitz, Germany, later part of Poland, her mother, Elfriede Suessman, in Poppelau, Germany. Margie's younger sister and only sibling Eva Renate was born October 19, 1932, and the family shared its home with Elfriede's sister Ruth. Benno Suessman, a retired locomotive engineer and Elfriede's father, and his wife Anna, moved in with Margie's family after Benno had a stroke.

In Gliwice, there was one synagogue, serving its small Jewish community. Margie's parents, together with her aunt and uncle faithfully attended "temple" services every Friday night. On Passover, Fritz wore a "kittel". Shabbat was anticipated with much preparation and seriousness, and Margie often conducted Havdalah services at home in her father's absence. Of paramount importance to her parents was that Margie be a "good Jew".

The family lived in a largely Catholic neighborhood. In response to her envy of her friends' Christmas celebrations, Margie's father dressed up as the "Hanukah Man" bearing gifts. Margie's playmates were predominantly Catholic and Protestant, although her best friends were Jewish. She did not remember being discriminated against by her peers or anyone in her neighborhood. Nevertheless, Margie was "required" to attend a basically secular, public, Jewish school. There, she studied Jewish history and culture but went to synagogue for Hebrew and religious studies.

Until 1935, upper Silesia was protected from Hitler's intervention by the Versailles accords. Margie's father was a lumber merchant, travelling throughout Eastern Europe to various forests. In 1935, however, Hitler said that Jews could not leave the country, so Fritz could no longer do his job. He became part of the Nazis' forced labor and was assigned to dig ditches until he became ill in 1938, from the water in the ditches.

Jewish friends began leaving Germany in 1935. In early 1938, the family received an "affidavit" from members of Elfriede's family in Battle Creek, Michigan to permit them to leave the country. Fritz had another plan, however -- to get out of the country sooner by going to a protectorate of the United States, and, eventually, to the US. The Miedzwinskis got visas; Elfriede began putting things into suitcases for departure in October of 1938, around Yom Kippur. At Rosh Hashannah services, however, "somebody" came in and said "you'd better get out now, they [the Nazis] are about to close the border to France [at Strasbourg]". The family rushed out of the synagogue to finish their packing and call the officials who had to seal their luggage. The Nazis allowed them to take only ten marks each in their "pockets".

Tape #1 of 3, Side B:

Once, after bringing a gift of sausage back from Kattowitz, Poland, Elfriede was summoned to the police station, for bringing "contraband" into the country; she was terrified that she would be sent to a concentration camp. Still, when they left, the family's Jewish doctor was still able to be employed, and one of Margie's Christian friends wanted to go to the railway station to see Margie off. So, there was still some semblance of normalcy in the life they had known.

With immigration in mind, Fritz had gone to the American Embassy to solicit suggestions as to where he might continue his work in the lumber business; Fritz's profession was estimating the number of trees needed to be cut down in Eastern European forests he travelled to, to get the footage of lumber specified by his employer. The Embassy recommended that he go to the Philippines, an American protectorate, with its heavily wooded jungles and, eventually, to emigrate to the US. The family knew nothing about the Philippines; they were allowed to take bicycles but had no idea what to take. Their relatives and friends thought they were crazy to leave and begged them to stay longer.

Nevertheless, Fritz booked passage on a French steamer out of France. The Miedzinskis' luggage was sealed by officials, and the seals were broken at the train station before the crossing into France, for further inspection. The German marks Margie's mother had hidden in the clothing, more than the ten per person allowed, were not discovered by the Nazis.

In Paris, the Miedzinskis stayed in a rooming house for about ten days. They obtained additional money to live on through a mental patient receiving funds from his mother in the hospital. They met no other refugees and did not observe Yom Kippur.

Margie described herself as a "survivor", influenced in her values by her father and grandmother. They went to Marseilles to wait three days for the arrival of their ship, the "President Dormay" (spelling?). Margot and Heinrich Friedlander, a young couple waiting there as well, became their friends.

Tape #2 of 3, Side A:

The Miedzinskis had paid for their passage in Breslau, through the American consulate, possibly with financial assistance from HIAS. They carried German passports stamped all over with "Jude". By that time, however, they were considered "stateless". At the American consulate, they were required to swear that they would not be a burden to any other government.

On board ship, there were many refugees, very few Jews. Their ship was a luxury liner, serving French cuisine and wine. When they crossed the dateline, the crew staged a show of "catching" a whale which was filled with candy. In the assignment of cabins, women and men were segregated. They journeyed over the Suez Canal, to Djibuti, Singapore, Saigon, and Hong Kong, where the ship was hit by a typhoon. In Hong Kong, the ship's passengers were transferred to a freighter. The entire journey, from Marseilles to Manila, lasted almost a month, October 16 until November 14, 1938.

In Manila, the Miedzinskis were met by the "Jewish Committee" and taken to a hotel in the "Walled City"/"Intramuros" where they stayed for three days. They were told to watch out for

the rats. Each room at the hotel was occupied by a different family. The windows had bars because of the rampant thievery -- Margie recollected a man's pants' being lifted with hooks through a window so that his wallet and papers could be stolen.

Then, the Miedzwinskis moved to a house, in the Pasay area, again with bars on the windows, which they shared with another family. A robber broke into the house and awakened Margie by trying to remove a necklace from her neck while the rest of the family slept; Margie was twelve at the time. The burglar stole her father's jewelry which he had placed on the dresser. The family they shared the house with moved out, and another family moved in. Her father had still not found a job.

Margie's parents enrolled her and Eva in a private, Catholic school run by German nuns: Santa Escolastica; the girls were required to buy and wear uniforms, and Margie was placed in the fourth grade, Eva, in the first. Margie was quickly moved into fifth. Very soon, however, the girls, along with the other Jewish children, were kicked out of the school because they were Jewish. Apparently, a Jewish boy had taken a picture of Jesus off the wall and stepped or spit on it. The mother superior said that it was not surprising that the Jews did not know how to behave.

Tape #2 of 3, Side B:

[While on board ship, the passengers heard about Kristalnacht and realized how close they had been to not being able to get out of Germany. They heard -- through information passed on to them from the ship's radio -- of the mass arrest of Jewish males in Germany. (An uncle, Herbert Binger, was one of first taken, to Dachau concentration camp. The family learned about this from letters waiting for them when they arrived in Manilla.) They also learned that "the temples had been burned" and that the stores of Jewish merchants had been closed.]

It took Fritz a year to find a job in Manilla -- with Ford Motor Company as a purchasing agent. As the Company's agent, he travelled buying up parts. Before he found employment, the Jewish Committee had encouraged the family to spend their money and not to worry about his finding work. The girls then went to a private school at the Mary Knoll College, run by friendly, American sisters. As a Jew, she was not required to study Catholicism, but she listened to the lectures from the back of the classroom and did well on the religion exam.

The Miedzwinskis joined Temple Emil, the local synagogue, when they arrived in Manilla and remained members "throughout the occupation [by the Japanese]". It was first run by a knowledgeable man who was not a rabbi, a Mr. Konigsberg, father of Margie's friend, Rebecca Konigsberg. Margie and Eva attended the Temple's Sunday and Hebrew schools.

The family had moved to the suburb of Ermita, where they rented a downstairs flat, part of which they rented out to other tenants -- first, American business men, then, the wife of a military man, with a child, and, finally, to "white" Russians. People had an "inkling" that war was on its way but "no one talked about it."

In 1939, an uncle and aunt, and their six-year-old daughter

immigrated to Shanghai. When the uncle died of pneumonia, the Miedzwinskis were able to send money to the aunt to support herself and the child. They also sent money to Shanghai, when they heard that Margie's grandmother, Anna Suessmann, had not left Germany. Anna managed to get on the very last train out of Germany over Siberia, destined for Shanghai. They heard nothing of the family in Kattowitz. By the time Anna left Germany, Jews were being forced to wear yellow stars, for public identification, and her friends would no longer talk to her. They would go out of their way to avoid speaking to her.

When they arrived in Manilla, the Miedzwinskis had received letters from the aunt and the grandmother stating that that uncle had been sent to a concentration camp and needed money right away to get out of Germany -- the only way for him to get out of the camp. He had had tuberculosis when he was young and had weak lungs, so, once he arrived in Manilla, the family had done everything they could think of to try to keep him in Manilla with them. But, neither the HIAS nor Manilla's Jewish Committee, could help, and he and his wife journeyed to Shanghai to live. Anna eventually died in Shanghai of "old age".

While they were living in Ermita, the Miedzwinskis learned the War was coming. When the Japanese began bombing Manilla, between December 8, 1941 and some time in February of 1942, before the actual occupation, Fritz was working on the pier. If the Japanese were going to bomb the city on a particular day, they would begin flying high over the city at 8:00 am. If they were not bombing, they would not fly over. The Japanese made no distinction between military and civilian targets.

Residents were told to gather up whatever they could haul away -- foodstuffs, materials, clothing -- from the American facilities that were being evacuated because of the Japanese invasion. Everything, excluding homes, that could not be taken around the pier was burned. The fires spread, and many died in them.

Filippinos, who were largely Catholic, did not discriminate against Jews. The Miedzwinskis had many friends within the Jewish community there. Everyone, even the non-religious, attended High Holy day services. Theirs was a "nice life", though they had to "start over" and "were considered quite poor".

When the Japanese occupied the island, the family heard them marching into Manilla during the night. The first, the foot soldiers, were Koreans. The Koreans and the lowest, enlisted Japanese had a horrible stench, perhaps from not being able to bathe. The Mary Knoll nuns were interred immediately in Saint Thomas, the internment camp for those suspected by the Japanese of subversion. Residents feared being bombed by the American army. Mail was intercepted going out of and coming into the country.

Tape 3 of 3, Side A:

When the Japanese took over, beef and fresh fruit became unavailable. Caribous, from which beef had been obtained, disappeared, confiscated by the Japanese. The only potatoes they could get were very sweet yams. They lived on rice -- rice soup -- sweet potatoes, and, then, sweet potato peels. Eventually, flour could not be purchased. Store-bought bread was made out of rice flour,

and matzos were baked from "guava" flour. Horse meat was substituted for caribou meat. Chickens were so expensive that the Miedzwinskis began to raise their own, inside the house, in a closet, so that they would not be stolen. They had to chase rats away from the chickens regularly. Money became worthless.

Across the street from their home, the Japanese occupied a house for use as a place of torture. There, they tortured Filipinos suspected of being enemies. Walking by they could hear their screams and see what the torturers were doing. They saw men hanging upside down, forced to inhale smoke from cigarettes while keeping their nostrils and mouths closed. They would swell up. The Japanese pulled out finger nails and toe nails and used water torture.

At first, after the occupation, Margie and Fritz worked separately, buying and selling automobile parts to earn money. A client -- one of Margie's best was the cigar company -- would order a certain number of a certain part, eg, spark plugs or fan belts. There was no gasoline, so no one could drive cars, and they were slowly dismantled. The family had moved from Ermita to Pasay, into the downstairs portion of a bombed-out home.

Later, Fritz bought certain items such as "linguista" or sausage, that he thought he could sell deep in the interior provinces. Twice, he was caught. The first time, they thought he was a guerilla, but he talked his way out. The second time, he was bound and questioned for hours by rebel guerillas, suspected of being a Japanese collaborator. He insisted that he was Jewish and sympathetic to the Americans; to no avail, he offered to show that he had been circumcised and to recite "the sh'ma". They too, they said, were circumcised, and they would not know if he were really speaking Hebrew. Fritz was not only white, but also German, which made him highly suspect. Finally, the leader told him to go, threatening to check up on him to make sure he was telling the truth and kill him if he wasn't. Never again, did he go into the country.

There was a swamp behind their house, from which they tried to catch fish. Many, including Jews, were taken away by the Japanese -- perhaps for having a shortwave radio, or simply because the occupying forces did not like the way they looked. The Japanese kept up their atrocities; they had guard houses with sentries set up everywhere. Citizens were required to bow to military personnel. German Jews were not required to do this once they began to identify themselves as German, however. In all neighborhoods, the Japanese practice of storing munitions in residential areas continued.

During the rainy season, the water came up to the second floor of the house; everything was kept up high, and the Miedzwinskis could reach through their windows to catch fish that floated by to live on.

The family, just before or at the beginning of 1945, moved back to Ermita. Allied bombing and shelling was accelerating, and leaflets were dropped informing the citizenry that troops were already on the outskirts of Manila. So they knew the end was near if they could just hold out a bit longer. Throughout this period, the Jews were able to go to services. But it was very dangerous to

go outside, and the soil was too wet to build air shelters underground. Also, the Japanese put munitions and any flammable substances in residential neighborhoods; perhaps every two houses there would be a "big block of Japanese".

Tired of running, the Miedzwinskis made their "very last stand" at what had been a "dressmaker's place"; they were shelled everywhere -- it didn't make any difference. Food was running out, so Margie began selling pies baked by a woman she knew. She would take them to a hospital to sell to the doctors and nurses still there. There, she found a Jewish man who had been tortured by the Japanese; she fed him small pieces of pie.

Across the street from the dressmaker's was a house of prostitution. A Japanese soldier tried to drag Margie there. Fritz ran, found, and pled with a Japanese officer to save his daughter just as she was being pulled up the steps. The officer beat up the soldier who apologized to the family.

The Japanese began going house to house when the end was near, interrogating residents and taking them away. Fritz and Elfriede instructed their daughters to get to Shanghai to their aunt if they were taken away, and the family began saying the "sh'ma". The Miedzwinskis could hear screaming and crying as people were being dragged out of their homes and taken away in trucks. For some reason, however, their family's home was spared; the soldiers went on to the next house. Some of the women were brought back the next day but not the men -- it was all Filipinos who had been taken. The family assumed they had been spared because of their German nationality.

Shellings and the fires from shells falling on the Japanese munition stores started the next day. That night, the Miedzwinskis left and hid a block away until the shelling ended. They went home, having learned that their house had not burned down. They loaded up what few possessions they could carry -- an album, an electric hot plate Margie carried around her neck -- and went to an apartment house down the street where there were sandbags in the downstairs. A phosphorus bomb landed and exploded where they hid in a sort of carport area; Elfriede was injured with shrapnel wounds. They stayed in another carport-type area for one night, the floors hot from the flames. They then went to a boys' school and hid in the ditches where everyone else was hiding during the continued bombing. They could do nothing more than bandage up Elfriede's wounds. The shrapnel of a big shell landed between Margie and her mother, so they all left again. They saw their home and the apartment building go up in flames.

They moved several blocks to a sort of garage, wedged in with masses of other refugees. It was so crowded that they could not even lie down. Across the street were the Japanese who came over to grab girls to use as prostitutes. Margie escaped notice because she was so tiny and malnourished. The girls were lined up; one Jewish girl was spared. Then, the men were lined up; Fritz was spared by saying "German, German". Here, the family had no food or water. They had saved some whiskey for liberation. Margie then saw people going for what looked like water, lowering a can with a string near a house. Eva and Margie took a sort of flask they had found; the Filipinos were all fighting over the water. When

shelling began and everyone threw themselves down, Margie grabbed her chance and went to the well for the water -- which was very filthy. Fritz mixed it with their whiskey, so they had something to drink. Everything around them had been flattened.

The next day, Margie left the shelter to go to the toilet. The shelling began again, and Margie crouched, her head down. A soldier approached her and said, "get up, get up, we're here, we're here." He was an American; he and the rest of the invasion force were camouflaged, with mud on their faces. He had had no idea that there were still civilians around. Margie warned him that there were Japanese everywhere, so he crawled over to where her family was sheltered, and got them to crawl and then run toward the forces. Bodies were everywhere, some stinking with decay, as they were led away by the Americans.

They were sheltered at the Santa Ana caberet -- previously a dance hall -- and fed from a soup kitchen with the 2000 others there. Margie had had no period because of the stress and lack of nourishment. They were then sheltered for a few nights by a man, after which they moved on to a vacant house. The shelling began again, and Margie was hit with a hot, falling, iron bar on her breast. They left again, because there were Japanese everywhere. Eva and Margie washed their hair at a well, where they ran into a G.I., astonished that there were any white people left in Manila. They introduced themselves, he realized they were Jewish as was he; he took them to Quezon City, to an old school house converted for refugees. Sheets were used for partitions for each family.

Ernest Benesch, a Jewish sergeant, was the family's "savior": he brought them food from the mess hall and commissary and some of his "K" rations and chocolate. The Miedzwinskis stayed in the school for a long time, after which they moved to a primitive shack nearby. The Red Cross gave them clothing and household items for the house. By chance, Margie ran into her friends, Rosie and "Ziggy" Hellman. The Hellmans gave her a job working in an office building they had bought. Margie was able to bring food to her parents and met many officers, with whom she and Rosie went to dances.

Any loud noise made Margie dive for cover, for a long time, because of the trauma she had been through. In 1946, the rabbi/chaplain -- Feldman -- organized a Passover seder in a commissary. The Miedzwinskis were not able to emigrate to the US until February, 1948. They got visas, boarded an army transport, men and women separated, eating in a mess hall, and journeyed via Shanghai to San Francisco.

The first week there, Margie met her husband, Ernest Rosenthal, in Golden Gate Park. Ernest had heard about her for years through other members of her family. They married in 1949. The quota for Poles was smaller than that of Germans, and Fritz was Polish. That was why it took the family so long to get to the US. The most difficult part about adjusting to America was that they started with nothing.

It was central to Margie in deciding to marry Ernest that he had been through a similar experience, that he was Jewish, and that he was gentle and caring. Margie is now seeing a psychologist because of her nervousness. The therapist, according to Margie,

thinks that her condition is attributable to losing the rest of her family so abruptly and going through the hardships she endured in the Philippines. The Miedzwinskis never learned anything of the fate of the rest of her family who stayed in Germany.