This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Ruth Harvey conducted by Margaret Garrett on August 22, 1997 in Bethesda, Maryland. This interview is part of the museum's project to interview Holocaust survivors and witnesses who are also volunteers with the museum, tape number one, side A. Would you state your name at birth?

My name at birth was Ruth Abel, A-B-E-L.

And your date of birth?

October 9, 1928.

And place of birth.

Berlin.

Would you talk about your parents and your grandparents?

I only knew my maternal grandparents. And they were gentle people. But I always thought they were a bit forbidding. They didn't have a great way with children.

And their religion?

They were Jewish.

And your mother?

My mother, as well, was Jewish.

And what about your father and his parents?

My father's father was Jewish. But in those days, you were German first, and then whatever religion you were. He happened to fall in love with a Christian girl and switched religions in order to be able to marry her.

In order to--

Became a Christian.

Yeah. In order to be able to marry her because of her parents, or--

Now, this is something I do not know. I don't know.

So you--

This was quite a long time ago.

But you were just told that--

I was told that.

--he could not marry her unless he converted. but you don't--

I do not--

--know why.

--know whether it was a must situation, or whether it was just something he chose to do. Probably, her parents might have objected. But I don't know any of those circumstances.

So your father was raised Christian?

Yes, although secularly, really-- observing the major holidays, but nothing much in between.

And do you know whether he was Catholic or--

No. No--

--Protestant?

--Protestant.

Lutheran or--

Yes, Lutheran Protestant.

So Protestant Lutheran.

Yes.

And so his family were secular Lutherans and were not very observant, as far as you know.

I wish I could tell you. But my father was already 40 when I was born. His parents were long dead. I never knew them. All I knew was the stories he told me.

And what kinds of stories did he tell you about his parents?

Well, I mean the history of the fact that he never knew his mother. Only after she died he heard some aunt saying, the poor boy. And that was actually his first memory, because he couldn't remember his mother. She was the Christian.

And his father, he was extremely close to, very, very. He loved him and honored and respected him. In fact, all during my childhood, not a day would pass that he wouldn't mention his papa in one nice way or another.

So you had an idea of him, even though you didn't know him.

Oh, I saw photos of him, a man with very big eyes, worried looking. He had been widowed so very early. He was never remarried.

So your father was Lutheran. And your mother was Jewish. And what was your household like? Did your family--

Well, my parents were not churchgoers or temple goers as such. My mother, sometimes with friends, might go to temple for high holy days, Jewish high holy days. But other than that, she never did.

And my father simply was not a churchgoer, although he was a very religious man. When I was a teenager, I spoke to him once. And he didn't answer me, didn't answer me. And after about five minutes, he looked at me. And he said, I'm sorry I didn't answer you. I was praying.

That was his religion. And it was very deep. But he was not a churchgoer. But he accomplished miracles, as you will later find out. I'm sure it had something to do with this relationship he had with a higher being.

And were you baptized?

I was actually baptized when I was a young child. No, no, I mean I wasn't a toddler or an infant. I was already-- I can't remember how old I was-- maybe five, something like that.

And they decided that I should be baptized. And we went to Pastor NiemÃ¶ller's church, but he was not there. Someone else baptized me with water from the river Spree in Berlin.

And I remember we came home from that. And my mother had a close Jewish girlfriend who heartily disapproved. She said it was just terrible. And she told them that. Then she invited them in for coffee and cake to celebrate.

So this would have been 1933 about.

Probably, or a little later. I don't know whether I was-- I cannot remember what age I was. I might have been older. Probably, they might have done it a little later when things were beginning to look really bad. '33 was still fairly early. I wasn't aware of what was really happening.

But some persecution had started in 1933.

Yes. You have these roving bands of Brown Shirts singing antisemitic songs, and torch parades, a little bit awesome and scary, that sort of thing.

So you had a baptismal certificate.

If I ever had one, I don't think I ever saw it, honestly. My mother must-- I don't know. I just don't-- I've never seen it.

Do you think that, if you were baptized, that one existed?

This being Germany, you can be darn sure. They had documentation for everything. Yes.

So you went to school.

Yes.

To a public school?

A public school, until a certain time period later, in the '30s. When Jewish children were no longer allowed in public school, under the logic of the Nazis, they had me figured out as being 3/4 Jewish. So I went for a time-- only for a time, because then we left Germany-- to a private Jewish school.

Now, you said "they" had you figured out. Who were they?

The Nazis.

The Nazis. Now, how did they know that you were 3/4 Jewish?

Well, it would be like city hall.

So they would have traced who your grandparents were?

Yes. Well, everything was documented. So they know exactly everyone. They knew my roots better than I did.

So you had to leave the public school.

Yes.

Do you remember that?

Yes.

And what was that like for you, to have to leave the school?

Distressing, scary. All of a sudden, I was taken out of my-- although I must tell you that public school was no longer a pleasure. There was one teacher who was very antisemitic and was perfectly beastly to us Jewish children.

What did the teacher do?

Oh, it was just her sharpness and her nastiness. I don't remember details-- very quick to slap faces, and things like that.

Do you remember your face being slapped?

Yes.

And did you tell your parents?

Well, it was the custom for teachers to do that. It wasn't-- now it would be a shocking thing. In those days, it was done.

There were other Jewish children in your class?

That is vague to me. I don't really remember any particularly Jewish-- none of us children really paid attention to our different religions. We're just kids together.

And until this day, I could not tell you who was Jewish and who wasn't. I think there probably were more non-Jewish children in that class. There may have been a handful, besides myself.

And did you think of yourself as Jewish?

I always thought of my-- well, thanks to the Nazis, I thought of myself as 3/4 Jewish and 1/4 Christian.

And what did you think that meant, being Jewish?

Being 3/4 of one religion and 1/4 of another religion.

So what did Jewish in particular mean to you?

I wish I could really explain it to you. Later, upon maturity, I realized much more about what it means.

But as a child.

As a child, it was just a religion that, for some reason, wasn't popular at that time in that country. I was just a child.

So you had to leave the public school.

Yes.

Did the Jewish children in your class go with you to the same Jewish school?

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No. I remember going to this Jewish school, which was in a nice suburb there called Rosenthal, which means valley of roses. And not really. No, wait a minute. That may not have been there. But the lady, my mother's best friend whom I stayed with for a while, she lived in Rosenthal.

I remember having to take a bus in the mornings to get to the school. I can't tell you to this day where it was. But it was a very nice school. And everyone there was Jewish. And they were all new faces to me.

Was the curriculum very different from the public school?

The one big difference was that I had to learn Hebrew, which was very difficult. And of course, I never really learned it. I just learned some of the symbols, and how to pronounce them, and how to read them.

But that time period could not have lasted very long, because I didn't do that very long. And it must be shortly thereafter that we left. That means, in other words, that I didn't leave the German public school-- well, I left Germany in '39, probably '38.

That you left the public school?

Yes.

So you were about 10.

I think I was nine. I was 10 when I left. Yeah.

And what else do you remember from that time about what your life was like?

Well, there was one little instance. I was down-- I don't know if it was Wannsee, that great big bathing resort outside Berlin. I was at the beach, playing in the sand. And a little girl came over. And she said, may I play with you? And I was just about to say, yes, when she added, but not if you're Jewish, my mommy doesn't let me play with Jewish children.

So I said, well, I am. Well, you can't, or something. And that was the end of that. But I remember it to this day. And I'm now 67 years. But you must admit that that is-- others had much worse experiences. And even though this was a small thing, it was a pinprick that lasted.

And let me see. What else? Well, you just want me to tell you about things that went on around me and my reactions to them?

Sure.

Well, there were Hitler's speeches on the loudspeakers in the streets. I would hear this male voice shouting and, of course, this Austrian accent. I never was able to understand a word that the man was shouting. He could have been talking another language. I didn't understand what he said.

And there were all sorts of things in the newspapers, which of course I didn't read. But I heard my father and my mother discussing them at home in the evening. And he would furrow his brow and be very worried. And he always thought that this couldn't last. This was just something that would go away.

This is your father?

My father. Sorry, my father. And he just couldn't believe that this madness could stay. And they would be talking.

There was a current joke that went around in Berlin. It ended with, the Jews and the bicyclists. And then the question was, why the bicyclist? And then the answer would be, why the Jews? And that at that time was one of the current jokes that was going-- it sounds better in German.

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And let me see. What else? There was just a general feeling of-- I don't know-- something dark surrounding us. And of course-- should I go on about when my father left? Or do you want to ask me that later?

Well, before we get to that--

Yes.

--what was your father's occupation?

All right. He had his own export-import firm. And then he hired a new secretary. And this was my mother-to-be. She was his secretary for about four years.

And it was a one-man company. But of course-- no, he had people that worked for him. They were salesmen. It was export-import. And it was doing quite nicely.

What export-import--

Oh, I remember he had British Yardley soap, and things like that, all sorts of different things. And everything went along well. My parents got married after they had known each other for four years.

I was born the next year. By then, it was 1928. And his business folded. Times were bad, horrible. And he ended up scrounging around for all sorts of different jobs.

Now, was the business folding-- was that a result of persecution?

I believe so. I don't know. I think it was the economic climate. I don't know if it was a depression that touched Germany as well. I'm not clear about the economic reasons. I just know that, before I was born, or while I was still an infant, this business was no longer supporting him.

If his father was born Jewish, was he considered a Jew?

You mean his father?

No, your father's father--

Oh, my father.

--was born Jewish. So was your father considered a Jew by the Nazis?

Yes. For the same reason that I was considered 3/4 Jewish, he was considered one half Jewish. Yes.

I wondered whether that--

He had been--

--affected his business.

In World War I, he had gotten the Iron Cross, second class. And he had been a patriotic German. And he was 40 when I was born. He had had a very happy young manhood in Berlin, enjoying himself, enjoying life in Germany. And all of this came like a bad dream. And he couldn't believe that it was going to last.

So backing up a bit, there was bad economic times, and his business got into bad trouble. And so then what happened?

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Oh, he scrounged around. He sold vacuum cleaners. He was a wine salesman. You see, his great gift to salesmanship. His nickname was Fridl. They used to joke, Fridl could sell refrigerators to Eskimos. He really could. So he kept us afloat with that.

And my mother, when I was older, she went and got herself a job at something called the PalÃ¤stina Amt, the Office for Palestine, a Jewish organization near where we lived. And she had a regular office job there, secretarial. And she had that job, actually, until we left.

Oh, but before she got that, she tried everything. I'm going to jump ahead and say, when my dad left--

OK.

--she took on a job as a housekeeper for a very nice, well-to-do Jewish family. And it was really nice, because there was a young woman there whom she became very good friends with. Her grandfather, the young woman's grandfather and her mother, who seemed to be a little bit retarded or had some kind of emotional problems-- her grandfather was a marvelous old gentleman. And they adopted me as the child of the house and spoiled me.

And my mother did cleaning and cooking. And it was something she had never done before. But she was really great, very adaptable and hard working, just to keep us going.

So she was doing this to support you.

Yes. And also, we started out in a lovely apartment when I was four. Then we went to a slightly less wonderful argument, and finally ended up in a furnished room. Things were really, really bad. We were poor.

So going back to your father leaving, how did that come about?

All right. This was still before Kristallnacht. But things were bad. And he was struggling. And one day, a letter came from city hall to present himself there the next day with his passport.

And he knew something was up. He was very intelligent and aware, even though he couldn't believe that this would last. But he knew that things were getting dangerous.

What did he think that was all about?

Oh, I'll tell you. At that time, my mother was already employed at the PalÃ¤stina Amt. I don't know. I get confused. He called here at work. And he said, Edith, come home and help me pack. Tonight, I have to leave Germany.

And he explained that they wanted him to present himself with his passport at city hall. He knew what that meant. They were going to put a J in it for Jew, which would mean that his travel would be severely curtailed, if not made impossible. And he decided he going to flee that night, get out of there.

Before they put a--

Absolutely.

--J on his passport.

Yes.

And so how did he leave?

Well, I think he went to his great-aunt, Matilda, and borrowed some-- she was the Christian part of the family, and quite well-off. And she lent him some money. And I think he took a train to-- somehow, he found-- there was two places he

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went to. He was in Amsterdam. And he was in London trying to find a stepping stone.

I'm a little confused where he went first. And then, eventually, he ended up briefly in New York to gain a foothold. But in order to enter legally into the United States, he needed a quote number, visa. And so in those days, people in that position would either go to Canada. Some ended up in China, in Shanghai.

And he opted-- or maybe it was the only choice he had-- to go to Havana, Cuba, to wait for this. So that's what happened. In the meantime, we had a year without him.

And I must tell you, he was a marvelous cook. He was a great cook. And he had made a bouillabaisse this last day.

And I remember, after he had left-- he had left in the evening. And I don't quite know what mode of transportation. He must have taken a train to Hamburg to take the boat over to England, or something like that.

There we were, with his soup that he had left. And I remember my mother and I eating that soup. And the tears were just rolling down our cheeks. And for many, many, many years, I couldn't stand bouillabaisse. I just couldn't stand it.

Then, much later on, I developed a real liking for it, because we were together again. But that was something. It was a terrible shock to him him gone all of a sudden. But he saved himself. And he saved us by that action.

So when he left, you had some awareness of what was happening.

Oh, a great deal of it. In fact, fear was our constant companion, because then we had Kristallnacht. November 9, wasn't it? 1938, I believe.

And my mother was a real Berliner. There's an expression in Berlin. If somebody comes at you all excited, you say, [GERMAN], which means, oh, so where's the fire?

So at 4 O'clock in the morning, or at 4:30 or 5:00, there's a pounding at the door. My mother gets up out of her sleep-- this is some time after my father left, I don't know how long-- all grumpy. And she goes to the door and opens it. And she said, so where's the fire?

And the person knocking on the door said, the temple across the street is on fire, the Jewish temple. This was Fasanenstrasse. The corner had Hotel Kempinski at it. That was the last address we had in Berlin.

And kitty corner from across the street was a Jewish synagogue, which is now, by the way, the Jewish Community Center. I saw it in 1978. They did something very smart. They saved the front of this temple. It had been a beautiful building.

They saved a doorway, and made a modern building for the Jewish Community Center, and put the doorway there. It was a striking and very beautiful thing. It was a strange feeling to go back after so many years and see that.

But anyway, to get back to that horrible night or morning, my mother must have gone out the door to take a peek at it. I don't remember. She left me upstairs in bed. Or maybe I slept through all this. I don't know.

And I remember-- she stayed home that day. And I remember saying, oh, how nice. You don't have to go to work. You're staying with me. And I remember her sad smile. And she said, but what a reason. I was too young to understand the horrible things that were going on around me.

And another really nightmare moment was-- we, at this time, lived in a furnished room. And I, in fact, slept on a cot in the kitchen. It was a nice, big, old Berlin apartment. And the lady who lived there was a wonderful old lady. Her name was Mrs. Moses. I think her first name was Martha. I'm not sure.

She had a retarded daughter, a little shriveled lady, must have been in her 40s or 50s. Scared me terribly, because I

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didn't know about retardation. But she was kindness itself, very old and tired looking. And she was very good to my mother and myself.

She had some other tenants there, too. She had her son living in the apartment above her. And I think it was the day after the fire, or very shortly thereabouts, that there was talk of Jewish men being searched for by hordes of SA men. Those were the Brown Shirts.

And there was a brass door sign next to the apartment door outside the front door. And it said Moses on it. That was her name. And some very smart person across the way said, if I were you, I would unscrew those screws and take that sign off. It's a very Jewish name. They're bound to come to you.

And my mother, who was a real feisty Berliner always said, oh, that's not necessary. She didn't want to do that. But reason prevailed, and they did it. And it's a darn good thing, because later on, we heard these boots on the stairs.

My mother and I were inside the pantry with her arms around me, shaking like aspen leaves. We heard those pounding boots coming up the stairs. And we heard somebody say, oh, don't ring there, there's no Jews there. And they went on.

I believe they got her son, either that time, or later. I don't know. She and her daughter must have ended up dead. It was just dreadful. Anyhow, that is a moment that is probably the most frightening moment of my life.

Then we crept out of the pantry. The Nazis had gone. And then shortly thereafter it must've been that word came that we should go to-- from my father who had, at this point, reached Havana.

And he said, he wrote, go to Hamburg. Go to the Cuban consulate. And get all your documentation. And soon, I'll be able to send for you. And so my mother and I took an early morning train-- it was still dark-- from Berlin to Hamburg.

Now, this was right away, the next day? Or--

As a child, your sense of time is really nonexistent. It's fueled by events. I simply cannot tell. It must have been shortly thereafter, I'm sure.

So there we were. I thought it was the greatest treat in the world to sit in a dining car, a little-- no, white tablecloths, with silver, and waiters. And I remember eating a soft boiled egg and looking out the train window. I took my enjoyment where I found it. I thought that was great.

But then we trudged through Hamburg. And we went to the consulate. Everything was fine. It was lunchtime. And I was getting hungry. And my mother-- everywhere she saw, at restaurants, it said, Jews unwanted, forbidden to Jews.

And she was a mother first. And she decided that, heck with all this. She had a young child here. And she was going to see to it that that child got some lunch. And so we just walked into one of those restaurants and ate.

And of course, it didn't mean much to me. But you can imagine her feeling. And then, shortly after that, I was able to leave the school. And the happy word came that--

Pardon me. Did you go back to Berlin? Or did you stay in Hamburg?

Oh, yeah, this was just a trip to get documentation--

I see.

--from the Cuban consulate. And then shortly--

So you went right back to Berlin.

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We went right back to Berlin. And then--

How long was the trip from Berlin to Hamburg?

You ask me something I don't know. I could look at the map here. How far is Hamburg from Berlin? Maybe-- let's see, Hamburg.

So you did it in a day?

Oh, Yes.

OK.

Oh, yes. It was several hours.

So you didn't have to stay overnight in Hamburg.

I don't remember that. It must have just been a day trip. Yes. So then the wonderful word came that we would be able to leave. Do you want to ask me anything else? Or should I go on into that now?

Word came. And my mother got ready and prepared everything. Now I have to go back in childhood memories. Before I continue with this, let me go back.

When we started moving from one nice apartment, to one less nice, to one less nice, to a furnished room, I remember a lovely place we had. Geisenheimer Strasse was the place. It was outside of Berlin. And it was a little apartment with a balcony. But it was on the ground floor.

And I remember, at that time, I was four years old. And I was just starting having this impulse to draw pictures. And so I remember sitting at a little table on a little chair on this balcony. It had a hedge around it to separate it from the road. And I would sit there with paper and pencil, and scribble and scribble, happy as could be.

I remember that clearly, the first apartment I remember. In fact, my first memory was waking up from a sleep. And my parents were in the next room packing. And we were going to Denmark the next day for a little trip. That was my very first memory. I was three then, or something.

So that was a happy time when you were a very small child--

Oh, yes.

--before all the trouble starting.

My parents were my world. I had no siblings. And they were always absolutely wonderful parents. We had a happy relationship, trouble free.

But why did I go into that? Oh, later on, when I came back with my mother in '78, we visited this apartment, because that was the only place that held happy memories for me. It was raining cats and dogs. And the apartment, the whole neighborhood, was now filled with Turkish labor immigrants.

You've read about the Turks. And they were having a very hard time in foreigner-hating Germany. And there were these Turks in that apartment. And we couldn't make ourselves understood that we used to live here, that we wanted to see. It was a blank.

And it was raining. I feel heartbroken. I don't know why, but I felt so sad. Anyway, that was-- I'm digressing here. I went back into the past. Now, this-- but why did I do that? Now, what was I trying to tell you?

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You started to talk about leaving Germany. And then you--

Yes.

And then you went back to your early childhood happiness.

Oh, yes. Now, leaving that neighborhood, we had to leave that apartment because we just simply didn't have any more money. And that's when the furnished room life started. No, I think there was one more apartment high under the roof, which wasn't too bad. But then came the furnished room.

But anyway, the day that we had to leave Geisenheimer Strasse, there was a neighborhood Punch and Judy show. In German, it's called Kasperle Theatre. And all the neighborhood children were getting ready to sit and watch it, and I had to leave. I had to drive away with my parents. That very time, I felt so bereft. So that was a sad thing.

So it was, in many ways, difficult for you to leave your home.

Well, that home, yes. But then later, leaving Fasanenstrasse to go on a boat to Cuba was unbelievable happiness. I was not sorry to leave that Germany.

So talk about that leaving.

All right. I was never one for dolls, but I had a lot of stuff toys. Particularly, I loved a white stuffed cat, beautiful little white stuffed cat with green glass eyes, a little pink nose and mustache. I loved it. And for some reason, with all the excitement of packing and getting ready to leave, that got left behind.

And I don't know whether we were in a taxi to the train, or in the train, or what. All of a sudden, I remembered. And I said, oh, Mutti, I forgot the cat. Can we back and get it? And she said, no, oh, no.

Can you imagine, in her mind, going back and getting snapped up? Of course not. But to this day, I have regrets about that stuffed cat. But other than that--

Let's stop here--

Oh.

--because we have to turn over the tape.

Yes. Good.

[AUDIO OUT]

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Ruth Harvey, take number one, side B. When we stopped, you were talking about leaving your animal behind--

Well, it was not a living animal.

--your stuffed animal--

It was a stuffed animal.

--and how upsetting that was for you to forget that. And then you were telling me about a painting that you did, which you now have in front of you. And the title of the painting is--

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Childhood Memories. It is so strange. My art teacher suggested a subject, because I was at a standstill. She said, why don't you paint your childhood memories? And it unleashed a torrent in me. And it had a very odd result.

I had been planning a trip through the Rhine country, picturesque German towns along the river. When I got through painting this painting, I had gotten so closely back into my childhood self that I was totally unable to go to Germany. And I changed my travel plans and went to Greece instead.

So you had a lot of very strong feelings.

Oh, my lord, yes. And it was catharsis. It just came out.

To do the painting?

As I did the painting. Yes.

Could you describe some of the things in the painting?

Yes, I'll be happy to. Down here, you see this cornucopia with colorful objects spilled out of it.

This is in the lower right hand.

The lower right. I'm going to go from the lower right hand. Now, in Germany, when children reached school age, their loving families would present them with these cardboard cornucopias filled with candy. This is a German tradition for your first day of school. I remember mine was just somewhere.

I have a photo of myself with that in my arms. It was this big. And it was filled with candy. And what this here symbolizes-- it's lying on the ground with all these colors spilled out of it. And I think of that as my spoiled childhood.

Spoiled childhood?

Yes. Spilled, spoiled. Yes.

What do you mean, spoiled childhood?

Well, instead of having a normal childhood, going through the normal schools and the normal way, it took all sorts of odd twists, and turns, and humiliations, and scares, and that sort of thing.

OK. And what else in the painting is especially important to you?

Well, you see there a little girl with her arms outstretched, floating after a white toy cat. That's the story I told before. To this day, I'm searching for that.

Over here, then you speak into the microphone.

Thank you. Yes. So that is there. To the right of it is the Punch and Judy show. If you look at it very closely, there's a devil with a pitchfork and horns. He's all red. And there's Kasperle-- or Punch, as he is called in English-- with his stick, and his pointy cap, and his red nose.

And later on, when I was all filled anew with fury at what had happened, I somehow thought of the Punch as a typical stupid German, and the devil-- namely, Hitler or Goebbels-- leading him on. I thought of that later with an adult mind fairly recently. As a child, I just thought of it as Punch and Judy. But somehow, it fits into that painting for that reason.

Now, to the left of this, you see a black rectangle with a white bulb on the top. And you see two shapes-- a large female shape, and a small female shape-- clutching each other. And that was my mother and I in the pantry clutching each other

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in deadly fear.

Behind it, you see gray steps going up and a large red swastika behind it. That was the sound we heard of the Nazi boots on the stairs. Now, if there's anything else in here that you want to ask me about--

Well, is there anything else that is particularly emotional for you?

Well, all right, emotional-- it's both good and bad. Here, you see a gray ship going through the ocean, bravely headed in a new direction. And that was the German ship, the Orinoco. And my mother and I were lucky to get tickets on that.

We were in fourth class, steerage. We were down below in a huge room shared with many other women. I think there were 40 of them, and lower bunks, and upper. My mother and I, of course, were together. And I think it was a lower bunk.

And what she had done-- brave lady. We had a wonderful oil painting. It's right over there. It's a self portrait of a great-great-grandfather of mine who had artistic talent. And he did this painting of himself in the earlier part of the 19th century.

So she took it out of the frame, because this was the one true antique that we had of great sentimental value, a self portrait of an ancestor. And she rolled it up. And we slept with it between us in a cardboard roll. That was the one thing she managed to get out. Now it's hanging there.

Anyhow, that was a pretty unpleasant trip, I mean the sleeping conditions. The food wasn't too bad. It was simple, but good. And I, as a child, enjoyed everything. The adults, of course, were worried sick. And I'm comfortable.

Now, you were on a German ship.

Yes.

With a German--

In fact, there's something in there I'm going to tell you about. Yes, It was the first-- OK, this here, what you see here, is the--

Now, you're talking about the painting here, the upper right hand corner of the painting.

I'm still in the middle here. There's a black-and-white tile floor. There are tables with white tablecloths, an elegant French door, palm trees, or palm bushes in pots, a very elegant salon. Well, there was a lady on the ship who was a very well-to-do Jewish lady. And she was traveling first class. My mother and she were acquainted.

And one day, she invited us up to first class for tea. Now, we had been for quite some time down in the hold. And here I am, a little girl. And when we went up there, I heard violin music playing, and waiters scurrying by with trays. And I saw all this luxury. And it made a very deep impression on me. It really did.

The next picture you see is a man, my father, wearing his blue bow tie, white shirt, and gray pants with his arms raised in the air. And he's standing under a palm tree and bidding us welcome, a very welcoming figure. And were we ever happy to see him.

And then it goes on. The painting swirls up to the right above. And there's little girls floating around. Those were the little girls I became friends with once we settled in Cuba. And they were very lovely. And of course, I didn't speak Spanish. And they didn't speak German. But I managed to learn both Spanish and English, at least starting to, while I had that year and a half in Havana.

And the end of the painting, at the upper right, you see these white towers, skyscrapers. You see the stars in the sky

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turning into the stars in the American flag. And this was the land of our dreams, which I didn't know yet.

And I saw these miraculous skyscrapers up there. And we had to get there. And that was the idealized version of it. That pretty well describes everything.

Oh, that's a very interesting painting

Thank you.

Can we go back and fill in some of the details of your trip? You and your mother were in the taxicab going to the train.

Or whatever conveyance. Yes.

And then you got to the train station in Berlin.

All that is-- no, I don't remember those things.

You don't.

No. I just remember-- I had never had a terribly good memory.

Well, you were just--

I just remember--

--also a small child.

--the emotional parts or the dramatic parts. How I get somewhere, how long it took, this is all gray area, something I honestly don't know. At that time, I was about nine years old. Yeah.

Do you remember on the ship, the Orinoco-- it was a German ship. And I think you had said it sailed from Hamburg?

Yes, to Havana. Oh, and we stopped in Antwerp once. All I remember there are houses with blue tiles. We stopped there shortly.

Do you remember on the ship whether you were treated differently being Jewish?

The German crew for the fourth class were very decent. Nobody ever was rude or nasty. They were very decent. And in fact, my father always had high regard for the German Navy, men who were at sea. He had wanted to become a naval officer. But his astigmatism kept him from that.

No. There was not one instance of any kind of rudeness or mistreatment. There were other very interesting Jewish people who were-- professional people, who were also down there in steerage. And we enjoyed each other's company. And I have a photo of that little girl with a scarf and a little sailor doll-- must have brought on board-- looking as happy as could be.

Were most of the other passengers Jewish?

The people down at that level certainly were.

So the trip was as you described it before. Do you remember anything else about the ship?

Just a terrific contrast between our steerage and that first class salon with the violin music. It was unbelievable. I stood there thunderstruck. I thought I was dreaming it all. Yes.

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And of course, I enjoyed seeing the gray North Atlantic. I had never been at the sea before. No, I was at Wannsee, which is a huge lake. I had never been by the ocean. I loved it. I thought it was just wonderful. I've loved it ever since.

So you arrived in Havana.

Yes. I have a huge story to tell about my father. It shows you what kind of a man he was. First of all, he boarded the ship with the pilot. Somehow, he wrangle that, greeted us right on deck. It was heaven. It was so wonderful.

I had always adored my papi. And it was just sheer heaven to be with him again. And I'm pretty sure my mother felt the same.

And then, of course, he couldn't take us right off, because there was a Cuban version of Ellis Island called Triscornia. I think it means "three horns" in Spanish, but I'm not sure. And again, with a child's different look at things, I thought it was fantastic.

It was this ancient garden with palm trees. I'd never seen palm trees before. And they were so wonderful, I thought.

And we had really unpleasant conditions. There were no mattresses. We slept right on the metallic springboards with a sheet over it. But it was the tropics. It was very hot. And it wasn't too uncomfortable to me.

The only thing I remember eating there was sweet black coffee and red beans. I don't remember anything else. I thought it was great. I enjoyed it. And my father got us out of there within two or three days.

You and your mother stayed there--

Yes.

--not your father.

Yes. Yes. He had already made living arrangements. So he came to get us much quicker than we had anticipated. Other people were still there. I remember saying goodbye to them, and out of sight, out of mind. I don't even remember anyone particularly.

So my father confronted my mother. And he said, Edith, you have to be very brave. Now, you can imagine that I couldn't get something very good. We don't have any money. And you have to be brave. It's a bit of a slum, but at least we're together.

And she said, oh, Fridl, it doesn't matter. We're together. It's so wonderful. We all happily drove to whatever horrible place awaited us. Well, he had had his little joke, because he had rented half of a two-family house, typical Cuban, with gorgeous tile floor, lovely veranda, rented furniture.

We had rocking chairs. The one thing I remember inside was a tray with tall glasses from Woolworth's with big, red dots on them and a decanter. And these were the tropics. It looked so good, so inviting. And the house inside was cool with these wonderful old tile floors.

Well, we couldn't believe it. He totally tricked us. We were so happy. We didn't know what to think. He had his little joke. He was so happy, too, to have his family again.

And I must tell you-- and this is where my guilt complex comes in. While others were having this great sorrow and this great pain in Europe, and they were going to ghettos and concentration camps, we were having this little ideal lasting over a year or so of pure happiness. Of course, my father had money worries. But the important thing is we were together, and we were safe. In Cuba at that time, long before Castro, it was a wonderful place to be.

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Now, were there particular people back in Germany that you were concerned about?

My grandparents, who were our only close relatives, they had gone to South Africa through the help of my mother's younger brother. He was five years younger than she. He, in his youth, had been a Communist idealistic. And he saw the writing on the wall in the early '30s.

And he lit out from Germany. And he went to South Africa, established himself as a businessman, and became quite well-off. He's dead now. And he got his parents out. They lived there peacefully.

Did they leave Germany before you and your mother?

I wish I could tell you for certain. Probably. Probably. I was not close to them. They were good people. But they didn't have a knack with children.

And it was the same with my mother. They were her parents, but they were not really close. She appreciated them, but there was no closeness. So I'm not quite certain. They must have lived before we did.

Were there-

Yes, they must have, because there wasn't much later after 1939. Yes.

Were there any people back in Germany that you or--

There was the Christian side of the family whom we, ourselves, didn't know too well. My father was the contact there. They were doing all right. I don't know what they suffered under the Nazis. But they were not in any imminent danger.

My mother-- my father's mother's maiden name was Vogt, V-O-G-T. Or maybe it was V-O-I-G-T. I'm not sure. But it was pronounced Vogt, which in German means abbot. So they were the Christian side. And Aunt Matilda, the great-aunt, she had married an Abel, so she was Christian. But the man she married came from a Jewish family.

So anyway, there was one aunt much later. In fact, just about two years ago, I learned that my very glamorous older great-aunt-- she was my grandmother's sister. Her name was Ida, Eda. And she had married a wealthy-- she was Jewish, and she had married a Jewish gentleman.

And I learned recently that she had ended up in Theresienstadt. I had not know this before, and I was very, very sad. I wasn't close to her either. But she was an elegant lady, very unhappily married. And I remember the stained glass window in her dining room when we visited. They had one of those phenomenal Berlin apartments.

But being an only child, we did have some relatives in Dresden who were non-Jewish. The boys went into the army. I think they both died. They were an odd family. Do you want to hear another childhood memory--

Sure.

--when I was in Dresden? Two come to mind, neither one of them pleasant.

Now, I don't think you have mentioned why you were in Dresden or when you were in Dresden.

This was obvious. This was when my father was between jobs. He was struggling. And he wanted to put his wife and child someplace. So he decided to leave us with his relatives in Dresden. So we went there.

The lady was an eccentric. She had about 13 cats or more and this a big, old rambling country house in Dresden. She had two sons. I remember one of was called Rainer. And I can't remember the other one.

They were much bigger boys. I was just a little kid. And they played to tricks on me. They gave me something that

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looked just like honey. And they said, this is good, Ruth. Why don't you eat it?

I was such an ignoramus. I ate it. And it was laundry soap. To this day, I can remember the taste. It was so awful.

The other thing they did, which did not endear them to me-- they would put me in a potato sack and move me around the garden, just drag me. That wasn't too good. I was scared to death of them, not having any siblings, particularly brothers.

And the other thing is I developed a typical childhood cold. And some German families had some peculiar ideas of how to raise children. This woman's idea of curing me was to tie me, hand and foot, in bed and put a lot of blankets on me to sweat it out of my system.

Well, my mother was horrified. She felt like she was very vulnerable. She was there because she didn't have a penny to her name. Her husband was struggling in Berlin to find a job and a place to live. All she had were these people.

She didn't want to offend the lady. But she didn't want to desert me either. So I was lying there, sweating and pleading for her to release me, and she was sitting there crying. But she didn't have the nerve to untie me.

This was a very unpleasant memory. And remember, this was not done by a Nazi. This was done by what was considered a good German parent figure-- not my mother, but this lady who was related to my father by marriage. It was her husband who was a cousin of his. And so my memories of Dresden-- and it was also ghastly winter weather, and depressing. And I was cold, most of-- it was just simply a horrible memory.

So that was a difficult time for you.

But let me throw in how Germans think children should be raised. I told you how close my father was to his father. And his father was a darling man who had been widowed much too young. He was well-off. They had a lovely house.

And he had my father woken every morning by a housekeeper coming in and putting ice cold sheets around him to wake him up and toughen him up. Can you imagine a little boy, half orphan, from waking up in the morning and being wrapped up in these icy sheets? Well, this was the German way of bringing children up. I'm so glad that my own parents didn't have those ideas. I just wanted to throw that in.

OK. Well, let's move ahead to Cuba. You said that you were very happy--

Oh, it was unbelievable.

--with your family there for about a year. Did you go to school in Cuba?

Yes, I did. And this is a very interesting thing. I went to a place called Miss Phillip's School. And it was a private school. My father had done some fundraising for the American Joint committee, who helped many Jewish refugees. And they were giving him an allowance. That's how we managed to live.

And I don't know what the financial arrangements were for me to attend school. But I went to this lovely American Miss Phillip's School in Havana. It's a lovely tropical building in a nice part of town. And I was learning both Spanish and English. And I--

So the school was conducted in English?

There was a Miss [? Sema. ?] I think it was English and Spanish. Yes, it was. I had an American teacher, Miss Martha Jane Pruitt-- no, Martha Jane Jones. She married a Mr. Pruitt later. She was a darling young girl. And I remember there was an older teacher with white hair, Mrs. Flora [? Sema. ?] And she must have been Spanish speaking.

But I managed, with all these limitations in language, to be the second best in my class. And I got a silver medal. I still

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have it. And the gold medal was earned by another refugee boy I remember a nice, plump Jewish boy with a marvelous sense of humor. And he got the first one, which was gold. So these refugee children weren't really outdistancing the local kids.

Were there many refugee children in the school?

No, but there were many refugees in Havana. Yes.

And at home, did your family still speak German?

Yes. That's probably why I am now working in the historical division doing translations, because my fundamental German is very deep-seated. And I have not really forgotten it, because even in this country, until my parents' deaths-- my mother died in 1984, my father much earlier-- we would intermingle English and German.

So German has, for you, the memories of being with your mother and with your father and being--

Yes. I know some very embittered people who had suffered greatly in camps who, when they came to America, refused to speak German. And I respect that. And I understand it. But that's a different situation.

Well, maybe we can talk more about that later.

Yes.

What else about Cuba?

I thought the Cuban people were so different from anything I had seen before. I remember pale faced, northern Germans, or very Jewish Germans. And I was always cold in Germany, it seems to me. And everything seemed to be gray. Berlin seemed to be gray.

And all of a sudden, I was on this golden island. There were royal palm trees. I thought I'd never seen anything so beautiful. The sunsets, these tropical skies were something I'd never experienced before. The music, the people-- they were very warm and charming and, at that time, happy.

And did you feel any special treatment as a Jew?

They couldn't have been nicer to us. They were so good, and hospitable, and welcoming.

So how did you happen to leave Cuba?

Oh, that was because our quota number came up.

I see.

We had done our wait. I was heartbroken. I remember the day we sailed away. My parents had locked me into the cabin, because I had been asleep when they left, and they didn't want me to be in any danger.

And I remember waking up as the ship was sailing away. And I was looking at the Malecon it's that great stretch of road that's the first thing you see when you go to Havana Harbor-- and the lights twinkling like a pearl necklace. And I wanted to go on deck. And I couldn't.

The door was locked. And I remember standing in that porthole and sobbing, because I didn't want to leave Cuba, the people I knew, my girlfriends. I was distraught.

So you did make friends in Cube.

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In fact, just a few months ago, I visited one of them, who is now lady my age in her late 60s living in Florida. That was my dear friend Hilda, whom I met then. She was then a very beautiful little girl with her own problems. Her parents had divorced. But she was a well, upper-crust Cuban. I mean a very well-- they were wealthy.

So she was not a refugee.

She was an only child, like myself. And I fascinated her, because I was a refugee. So we became friends. And it's a lifelong friendship.

So it was hard for you to say goodbye to Hilda and your friends.

It was agonizing. Yes.

And why did your parents want to come to the US instead of staying in Cuba?

Oh, because there was no future for us in Cuba. It was a marvelous resting-- stopping off place, better than we ever hoped for or expected. But it was not a place to remain. There was no way he could make a living or anything. We were set to become Americans.

And did your family have contacts in the United States?

Well, he had connections with this Joint Committee. And he quickly found work. But it was a terrible struggle. I once wrote an essay about my father, and I gave it to my children, in which I explained how it was for him.

Here he was, at this point in his 50s. And he looked for any kind of job-- salesman. He worked at the Savoy Plaza Hotel in the basement as janitorial work. And here he was, once a well-set-up gentlemen with his little fortune.

And here he was, now practically a janitor. And guys half his age would refer to him as, hey, Al. And it was a great come down, or I don't know. But he was very gallant about the whole thing. He got used to it. He struggled with it. He put up with it. He fought.

And he finally ended up creating his own position with a German-language newspaper, Stats Sanctunk und Herald, and Knight Ridder paper. And he found a job in their advertising department. And with his contacts back in Germany and his knowledge of German, he became the advertising director for the ads from Germany, big industry ads.

And I wanted to explain how it was possible for him to go back to Germany on business trips after all that had happened. And this was, of course, after the war when Germany was being built up again. He knew the high commissioner. And he had contacts from business before. And he managed to get some fabulous ads for the paper.

And he did this twice a year for seven years until he died of lung cancer. And the way that he could do this, as I explained before, is that he had had 40, almost up to-- no, more than 40, mid 40s. He had had a good life in Germany. This was a nightmare that came upon him in middle age. And he had to adjust to it. He had to understand that it wasn't going to go away, that he had to get away from there.

He had not been in the camps. He had not had the experience. And so he was able to come back and deal with the post-war Germans. He was not eaten up by hatred or revulsion like so many rightfully were. And so he could do this.

Can we back up a bit to your arrival in New York? Do you remember that?

Oh, yes. He had a good friend in New York. His name was Eric Goodall. For a while, he was a political cartoonist. And the very first night, he took us around in his car, I remember, drove us through Little Italy where all the lights were lit-- oh, first the skyscrapers down Fifth Avenue. And I was a little child.

It was an open convertible. And I laid back, and just looked up at the skyscrapers, and the bright lights, and Little Italy, and all over. And I remember falling asleep, leaning back with my mouth open. That's my first night in New York.

My father, as we were going down Broadway on that first day, stopped at 77th Street in Broadway. At the corner, there was a hotel called the Benjamin Franklin. I looked recently, and the building is still there. But it's no longer the Benjamin Franklin. It's been rebuilt something else. It was a residential hotel.

And he rented us a nice, large room with kitchen privileges for that first night. And we lived there for some months. And so our arrival in New York was very pleasant. I had my parents with me. And my father had his good friend there, and getting acquainted with New York.

And then I went to public school. And that, of course, was a little frightening. But I got used to it.

So you were about 12.

11, I think.

11. OK.

Wait. We arrived in 1940. I was born in '28. 12.

And how was your English by this time?

Oh, it's so funny. I remember being in public school. And I asked, what is a bra? And this girl laughed and said, imagine Ruthie Abel not knowing what bra means. I didn't know that it was a brassiere. I was still too young for that. But the girls were talking about it.

And there were words I just didn't know yet. And I had to learn them. And eventually, I realized that I was beginning to think in English, and that I had really gotten good at it. But it took a few years-- not too long, because I was young. My mother, although she had a very good knowledge of the structure of the language, had an accent that is so thick you could cut it with a knife. She never mastered the TH's.

Was she home during the day?

She worked.

She did.

I was a latchkey child for quite awhile.

And what did she do?

Secretarial, mostly. She was a very good secretary. In those days, secretary was not a dirty word. Now it is.

So she was out with the public and had to use her English--

Yes. Oh, yes.

--every day.

But she also managed to work for many refugees firms where they all spoke German. Once she said to me, it's a shame I never get a chance to practice my English. How am I ever going to improve?

So she used German at work a lot of the time.

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Different jobs, yes.

Yeah. So you went through school in New York.

Yes.

What schools did you go to in New York?

It was a public school in a neighborhood there. And I was just getting adjusted to the American way of life.

How was it making friends?

I made a few good ones, not too many, kindred spirits. And in fact, one of them, Vera, was a refugee. In fact, she's in Chicago now. For many years, she taught art at the University of Chicago. And her father came from Danzig, a Russian background-- lovely girl, became very good friends.

And then there was a darling Irish American, Jill McConnell. She became my best friend. She was from the neighborhood. In fact, she's the one who gave me my middle name.

Which was?

Andrea. What happened was, after five years, my parents had the opportunity to get their citizenship. In fact, we went and swore the oath. And then we had a big dinner afterwards and celebrated. I, as their child, automatically became a citizen. And I was told that, when you become a citizen, you can have a choice at what name you want.

Well, I had always been upset at the fact that I had one name only, and that was only one syllable, Ruth. It just wasn't-- yeah, that's how it was pronounced in German, "Groot." I didn't like it. It wasn't enough for me. I didn't feel like just "Groot," or Ruth.

And so she and I took a walk on Riverside Drive, because I told her I wanted to get a middle name. I had realized that every American I knew had a middle name. But I only had one, and that was only one syllable. So I said, Jill, help me find a name.

So we walked. And we started with the A's, naturally. And we didn't get very far, because when she said Andrea, I said, say that again. And she said, Andrea. And I said, I like it.

What did you like about Andrea?

The sound, the soft three-syllable sound. And so I became Ruth Andrea Abel.

Did it have any national connotations for you? I mean, was it definitely--

No, I always went by sound rather than rule. Later, I learned that it meant something like, gift to God, or something. I'm not sure. I have to look that up again.

And of course, Ruth Andrea became Randy. That was my nickname for many years. Now that I work at the Holocaust Museum, I feel Randy isn't right. So I go with Ruth.

Were you named after anyone in particular?

Well, that's the strange thing. My parents, when they were waiting for me, apparently never had discussions about names the way my husband and I did. And here's my dear mother, recuperating from having had me in bed. And my dad hotfoots it to city hall and says he wants me named Ruth. He had never even consulted her.

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She wanted to call me Ellen. But then she thought Ellen Abel doesn't sound good, so she hesitated. So he comes back with a fait accompli. Here I was, Ruth. I didn't like it. She didn't like it. But there it was.

Do you know why he selected Ruth?

I wish I knew. It would be interesting, wouldn't it? I haven't a clue. I don't think he ever had a girlfriend named-- he used to have many girlfriends before he got married. In fact, he was married before. And he never mentioned Ruth.

Well, we're almost at the end of this tape. So let's stop and turn it over.

OK.

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