Interview with Margitta Cooper
January 4, 2002

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Margitta Cooper** conducted by **Gail Schwartz** on January 4th, 2002 at the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum. This is tape number one, side **A.** What is your full name?

Answer: Including maiden a -- **Margitta Granberg Grunberg Cooper.**

Q: And where were you born and when were you born?

A: I was born June the 10th, 1929 in **Speyer, Germany**.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family. Tell me about your parents and their background, how long they had been there.

A: My father was one of the religious leaders in the town, he was also the cantor cum rabbi. He was born in **Poland**. My mother was a -- a young woman who married -- in her day, who could -- never had a career, of course, she married from her mother's house, married my father. He had been married before, he was a young widower, as a matter of fact, when she married him. She -- how they met I never knew because there was some romantic story that she had gone to visit a friend and he met her and he fell in love with her. I don't know, I'm sure that's about it. Probably a blind date. Anyway, they married, they had one child, who died. My sister died when she was 10 years old, which was a devastating event for my

parents. And, as a matter of fact, if it had not been for the death of my sister, I probably -- my brother and I would not have been born -- we were twins. So in considering my father and his philosophy, he -- it had to be somewhat ironic for him to have lost a child and then have twins born. At any rate, that's how we arrived, and I think we had a n -- very nice life, a very nice home. Stable. I mean, I felt no anxiety or fear, at least not until I was about five years old, when it became more difficult to be a Jew in **Germany** and I think that's an old story. And the children, I think, more than the adults, began to react to my brother and I as Jews, even though there were still children who were not Jewish, Christian children who would play with us, because there was a park in front of our home. I had Jewish friends. I was a child that had -- my brother and I -- more m-me, because my brother was very well behaved. I always had the feeling that I had to be very well behaved. I was a special child because of my father and certain conduct was expected of me, so that was difficult. It was a very religious home. My father was a relig -- i-i-in -- in the sense that it was strictly Orthodox. My mother was, I think -- I don't know how sh -- exactly what her beliefs were, but certainly she -- she upheld whatever my father wanted to do in a -- in -- in the marriage. She was a very nervous woman because of my sister's death. I think that was a terrible trauma for her. So when I think of what ultimately happened to my mother, it's unbearable to think that this woman who had

-- ended up her life the way it eventually did. And that I find probably the most unforgivable thing about this whole situation that happened in **Germany**. And let me say now, at the outset, that what happened in **Germany**, while it was unique in the history of the world, notwithstanding great sieges, great battles and great suffering among other peoples of the world, I have come to the conclusions after many, many years of thinking about it, that whatever happened in **Germany** could happen anyplace, given certain economic and cultural events, and that it is singularly inappropriate for -- for people to be smug and say well, you know, this is -- these are the people that were able to do it. I think all peoples are capable of doing it.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: My mother's name was **Anna Rosenthal Greenberg.** She was born **Irena Bayata,** but they called her **Anna**. My father was **Benjamin Greenberg** and they called him **Benno Greenberg.**

Q: And -- and your brother's name?

A: My -- my brother's name was **Heinz** and he was my twin and he now lives in **Florida** and he's a grandfather. So I mean, you know, it's wonderful, when you think about that.

Q: And tell me a little bit about your late sister. What was her name and what did she die of?

A: My -- my sister's name was **Margot** and she was absolutely exquisite, I have a picture of her. She was angelic. Not only because she died, because people become angelic after they're dead, but from -- everybody said that she was just a sweet and gentle child. And her death not only devastated my parents, but I think my mother's brothers, her uncles and my -- my grandmother, and I think that -- she was really beautiful. I mean, she looked like the **Rosenthals.**

Q: Wha-What did she die of?

A: **Diphtheria.** She was fine. They had sent her to **Switzerland** to reco -- recuperate, and I think from what now that -- I was in the medical field a little bit for -- for a long time, she -- I think they must have given her **digitalis** to strengthen the heart, and I think they o -- overdosed and I think it killed her. She was only 10 years old. So I think that's precisely what happened, although, you know, it was so long ago, I mean, was 1928, so it's difficult to -- but they did bring back the body from **Switzerland --** it had to be a -- a frightful event for my parents. And -- but as I said, you know, my childhood was pretty normal. I was -- after the -- do you want to hear this?

Q: Well, let me ask you a little bit more before we get to the --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- the -- to the -- the 30's --

A: Yes.

Q: -- or the mid-30's. What kind of neighborhood did you live in, was it a Jewish neighborhood, or a mixed neighborhood?

A: Mm-hm. It was a Jewish neighborhood. It was a very nice neighborhood, you know, each house was individual, had land around it.

Q: You were right in the center of the city?

A: Not really. I would have thought it was more -- it was not a big -- I mean **Speyer** is -- is -- it was a fairly well known city, it had a very famous cathedral and it had the **Speyer Diet**..there was something with **Luther** that was there, too. I think it was more toward the outskirts. It was a very residential area and there were lots of Jews living in that area. There were some Christians too, but they would have been across the park. And there was a beautiful church not too far from us and then there were a cluster of homes there, too, that I think belonged to Christian families. But where I lived, our neighbors were Jewish. The interesting thing was that maybe 20 yards from us, around the corner, was what is known as a -- it was like, not barracks for soldiers, but like a building that housed soldiers. You know, army soldiers, not **SS** or Nazi. And that was very -- that was strange, because i-it -- right in -- in this area they had what is called a -- a -- I don't remember what it was called in **Germany** -- in

German, but they had soldiers living there, training, being trained there. So I used to watch them when I was little, and we -- they were very friendly then.

Q: You had mentioned extended family. Did you have quite a bit of relatives, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents?

A: I had a grandmother who lived in **Gimbsheim**, where my mother was -- where my mother was born. My mother had two brothers. One was a bachelor all his life and came to the **United States** in the late 30's, 1939. And she also had a younger brother who was married and I had one cousin. And then there were various assorted second cousins. My mother -- my grandmother was widowed when she was like, in her late 20's, from -- you know. And -- but she had a brother who came to this country as a young man. Now, I have family that live in **Wichita, Kansas**, too. So, I mean, you know, it's the old story about emigration and -- and -- and families and intermarriages and -- and -- but we -- we -- it was nice. I -- I -- it was a nice -- it was -- it was a nice -- it was a nice life for a child and certainly it had to be for my parents, you know, because they had a position in the community and -- and that wa -- that was --

Q: You said your father was a cantor, was that his full time work?

A: Work, yeah, plus he was educating all the young -- youngsters. He also educ -- you know, he also had classes. He also trained all the boys for their **Bar Mitzvahs**,

plus he had Sunday School, that he ran. So that's why I'm sa -- once -- th-that's why I said initially, my problem was that I always had to be on such good behavior, because of him.

Q: How would you describe yourself? Were you an independent child?

A: I think the word brat would probably come to mind. Independent. Well, I -- I think the one thing I -- that I learned and that I love, and I think that made it much easier to cope with me is I loved to read. And once I discovered books, I think I was easier to cope with. Before that, I -- I didn't understand what I did that made it -- made me always get into trouble, but I did, you know. And my mother would say, **Margit,** please stand up, **Margit**, please sit still. You know, the usual things, you know, that children do.

Q: Were your parents Zionists?

A: My father I am su -- I didn't understand what Zionism was, but certainly he believed in the state of i -- of i -- not -- at-at -- **Palestine**, absolutely, because I heard him talk about that. They were firm believers that Jews had to have a place to go. And he was very, very much aware of what was happening in **Germany**, because he told my -- my mother's brothers both to get out, and they listened to him. He could not leave, they would not let him.

Q: We'll talk about that also in a little while --

A: Yes, sure.

Q: I just wanted to go more into your own personal life.

A: Mm-hm, yes.

Q: You said you liked to read, any other hobbies that you had?

A: Now?

Q: N-No, when you were a child.

A: Oh. I read, I played. But I would think that reading was my great passion, always and still is.

Q: What about sports?

A: I wasn't very good. I mean, let me put it to you this way, when they would choose people to play, after everybody else was chosen they'd say, well, we'll take her, you know? That was the final choice, nobody really wanted me. But I -- it didn't bother me because I-I loved it, even though I was so bad at it. I mean, I played badly, but I loved doing it and I was always thrilled when they even would include me. So that was -- sports was not my forte, no.

Q: Did you have a special relationship with your twin brother?

A: Y-Y -- no. Yes and no, we fought a lot. Oh, I did te -- take violin and all that stuff. You know that my father was very musical and had a wonderful voice and he played like umpteen instruments, well. So I learned how to play the violin badly,

because I really wanted to play the piano, but my brother got the piano, per usual, he got everything, you know -- know the old ch -- my brother was a -- is and was a very gentle, sweet boy. I was really the monster. I mean, h-he -- it wa -- it -- definitely role reversal there somewhere, you know. But yeah, we got along fairly well.

Q: What kind of school did you go to?

A: Well, in the beginning we went to a public school -- I mean, public -- sort of private public school, like they have in **Europe**. It wasn't a school like they have here, it was a small school. But then eventually, when things were very bad, we had a tutor that came from another town and taught all the Jewish children in -- in -- in -- in -- in **Speyer.** He came every -- every day.

Q: When you were very young --

A: Yeah?

Q: -- did you feel very German?

A: I never thought about it, I was German, that was it. I was a German and a Jew and the two were not mutually exclusive, you know, there was one or the o -- I wou -- if you're saying did I feel a great sense of patriotism about **Germany**? I don't know. I don't think any child really thinks of it, unless -- I mean, today, after September the 11th, I'm sure there are children who will say, I'm an American and -- and be very conscious, who were unconscious before. I think it takes a catastrophic

event to make a child realize it. I became very conscious of being a Jew, and not being accepted as a German, after awhile.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Did you have any non-Jewish friends --

A: Yes.

Q: -- er -- early on?

A: Oh yes, I had always Christian friends. As a matter of fact, I got a letter not too long ago from one of them, and I should -- I se -- I'll send you -- and she goes to my sister's grave and she makes sure that it's still taken care of. So I mean, she -- yeah, I did, and I loved them. And they still played with me. I mean, some of -- some -- I mean, my mother, for example, sent me to a convent to learn how to knit and embroider because she and her -- my grandmother threw up their hands, they couldn't do it. And they sent me to the nuns, and I learned how to knit and I learned how to embroider. I had a nun there who would sit there and tell me wonderful stories. And it was fine. I was a Jewish child. I was the child of a -- a -- Dr. **Greenberg** and nobody ever thought about it. I also had a laundress who came -- we had a laundress who brought laundry back -- back and forth every week. I went to her house, I had ham sandwiches, and I -- my father found out, he was a little excited, but I was never very good. So, I mean I -- those are the kind of things you said how I got in trouble. I knew I shouldn't during Passover eat bread, let alone

cold cuts. So I mean, that's the kind of troubles I was always in. But it was, as I said, fine. I mean, I loved it. I would go with my -- I would go to the nuns and they would teach me. So there was a lot of interaction between a non-Jewish community and our family.

Q: And favorite holidays that you remember? Anything that stays out in your mind?

A: Yes, yes, I remembered -- I always liked the holidays, I did not like Passover, ever. I hated the **Seder**, I thought it was endless. I wanted to eat. But I liked Rosh Hashanah, I loved Yom Kippur, because I was allowed to eat lunch, and then I loved breaking fast, because they used to make something called **Pergelfleisch.** I don't know if you know what that is. It's -- it sounds horrific, it's called pickled beef, but it is the most wonderful thing in the world, nobody's ever makes it, nobody knows how to make it in this country. And I looked forward to that and having bread and I like the -- I like Saturday night dinners, except Swiss cheese. My father once said to me why -- why do you -- **Margit**, why do you hate Swiss? He s -- I said, I only like the holes. Now those are the kind of things that did not endear me to my mother.

Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: German. A little French, but mostly German.

Q: And why French?

A: Because my mother liked it. But I mean, we're talking about phrases like **n'est-ce pas,** or you know, **comme il faut,** or something like that. We're not speaking -- I me -- I mean, I'm not talking about real, real conversational French.

Q: Well now let's begin -- when did you first hear of a man named **Hitler**? I mean, you were born in 1929, so when did you first hear --

A: I think when I was five -- five, six years old. It's when -- when I first saw the uniforms and I saw marching through the streets, and then --

Q: What -- what do these uniforms mean to a five year old?

A: Th-The reaction of the adults to them. I -- I think I became more nervous about them because of the reaction of the adults. The fact that suddenly there was a difference, there was more tension.

Q: Did your parents explain what this meant? Earl -- we're talking about early on. Did your parents say anything?

A: No, no they didn't. All I know is that, for an example I was walking down the street one day when I was about maybe seven. I think it was -- began really when I was seven, and they were throwing stones at my brother and I, and they were yelling dirty Jew and -- and he -- he was hurt, I mean, they hit him. And when he -- we came home, that's when my father and my mother said we couldn't play any more and we couldn't go to the school any more. So I was about seven or eight when it

really, really, really began. And the German soldiers themselves began to change. Their attitude became -- there was so much hostility now. There was a different, there was a -- a break, and there was fear. **Kristallnacht** was when I was nine years old already. It had begun way before then. Not as terrible as it was after **Kristallnacht**, but there was a change. There was no longer the comfort level.

Q: What happened in school? Was this -- was your school a Jewish school, or both Jewish and non-Jewish students and faculty?

A: They were -- it was a non-Jewish school, and they were non-Jewish teachers, and they did begin to express a difference. I-I think there was begin -- the beginning wa -- who -- whichever one of them was a -- an anti-Semitism, now felt free to express it, whereas before they might not have.

Q: This is preceding **Kristallnacht**, we're talking about?

A: Oh yeah, yeah, I -- it was, but again, it was much worse after **Kristallnacht.** After **Kristallnacht** it became flagrant. And then -- let me say that at the time, you a -- also -- after -- even after **Kristallnacht**, there were still people who did not, in any way, react to us in a negative way, who became overtly anti-Semitic. The people who were really anti-Semitic were always anti-Semitic. Now the children were the surprise. The children who became so -- who became, you know, really taunted us and began -- made life so difficult for us. Those are the ones -- the mu -- most of the

u -- most of the Christians ignored it, ignored us. They might not have been friendly, but they were not overtly -- they were not overtly cruel or anything. It was the children more than anything else, and some of the teachers.

Q: When you and your brother were walking down the street, you said in some **[indecipherable]** can you describe that in more detail what your -- what thoughts were going through your head as a young child, when that was happening?

A: When I was walking -- I walked with my brother and they began taunting us both.

Q: What kind of things were said, do you remember?

A: You dirty Jew, **Christ** killer. That was a big one. All -- get out ,we don't want you, you don't belong here, all the usual. And then they picked up stones and it became physical. They hit me, and I ran. I think they may -- I may have fallen and scraped my knee. They hit my brother and of course, you know, he bled. And after that we were not allowed to go to school any more, my mother said no, we were not going to go. And we never went anywhere -- anywhere without having somebody along, or traveling in -- more than two. It was a terrible thing. I think it traumatized my brother to the point that even today he doesn't even talk about it, let alone remember it. It was a terrible --

Q: When -- when did this happen? Was it before **Kristallnacht**?

A: Yeah, it happened before **Kristallnacht.** Maybe -- I'm trying to think, was it before? No, I think it happened after. There were things that were happening before, but after **Kristallnacht** it all came together. It became a -- it became now a government directed persecution and I think it became -- and -- and -- and now the rhetoric was geared up so high. I mean, you know, we -- we -- the -- the -- the -- the -- the vendetta against Jew -- Jews, and the fine -- resolution became now a par -- a -- a -- a -- an aim, a political aim. And it became -- and I think -- you give people enough propaganda and you tell them and you repeat something enough, even they wa -- they want to believe it. If they have any dis -- I mean, today in this country, if you have a minority that somebody dislikes, if you give them enough power and justification to react to that minority, they will do it. And **Hitler** gave people the right to do it. He gave those children the right to hurt us. And he gave those people the right to burn down the synagogues and to arrest people and to murder them, and let the oth -- and let -- and let them -- and let the -- the people stand by passively and allow it to happen, because he made them feel that this was okay, that they -- he was absolutely getting rid of an -- of a world evil. That he was destroying a hydra-headed monster called a Jew. So it -- that was permissible.

Q: What does a flag with a swastika or a German in a uniform mean to a seven year old little girl?

A: Oh, a -- it frightened me. I remember I used to walk very quickly with my head down if I saw them. They would stand, you know, at kiosks and if I saw one of them, and the sad thing, the sad thing that I did not forgive myself for for a long, long time was that I was so intimidated by them and wanted so much to belong and be part of that -- this -- this -- this life, these children that had -- were so rejecting to me -- you know, were rejecting me. And I saw them with their little uniforms and I wanted so much that I actually one day walked by a German soldier and the child ahead of me had given the **heil Hitler** sign, and I raised my hand and said **heil Hitler**. Even though I know this m -- I knew by then that this man was our sworn enemy. I mean, they had arrested my father already, and -- by then. And I knew. And I remember he turned around and he said to me, you're a Jew, which humiliated me even more. Now, it took me years, I couldn't think about it. When I would think about it I would like break out in sweat, I was so humiliated and embarrassed and angry that I -- but I was -- I forgave myself after awhile. I realized I was a child, I wanted to belong, I wanted to be part, and I wasn't any more. I was now ostracized. All -- we all were. All our friends were. We were now **persona non grata**.

Q: And again, did you talk this over with your parents?

A: Oh yes, we talked --

Q: And how did they handle it?

A: They themselves didn't know how -- what to do. My father only knew one thing, that we had to leave, that it was done, that we had to go. That -- but he couldn't, he could not get out. They -- he was refused the visas, he was considered a political prisoner and he couldn -- but he knew. I mean, he urged my cousins, he urged my uncles, he urged everybody to go, they all left. They all went. They went. He knew that there was no survival.

Q: Whe-When did he try to start leaving?

A: He left -- immediately after he came back from **Dachau**, when they had arrested him aft -- at **Kristallnacht** they arrested him. He came back six weeks later, he did everything in his power -- I think he had done it before, but not with the kind of urgency that he felt then.

Q: Prec-Preceding November '38, was his work at the nu -- at the synagogue affected at all?

A: No, that continued. And I'll tell you something else that was interesting. One of the priests tried to -- wa -- on -- during **Kristallnacht** woke him up to tell him the synagogue was burning, they ran down and saved the Torah. I mean, you know ya -- I mean, the -- i-in all -- in the midst of absolute evil -- and I use that word in its true sense, there are people who took an interest. I remember walking with my mother while my father was in the -- in **Dachau** and I met one of my nuns. I had -- was no

longer going there, you know, because I think it was difficult for them, they couldn't -- I mean, anybody who had anything to do with a Jew was at risk. So I remember she bent down, she kissed me, and I had this overwhelming feeling of sadness, because sh-she ha -- the tear rolled down her cheek. So I mean she -- they all -- we all knew, I mean everybody knew that we were condemned. Nobody knew about the concentration camps yet. My father knew **Dachau** existed and **Buchenwald** existed, but nobody understood what the ultimate plan was. I mean, nobody could -- would have believed it, except that my father knew that the ultimate plan was to kill everybody, and he wanted his family out. Now, I think my mother -- and this is something I'm not sure about, but I do believe from what I remember as a child, that my mother could have left, and she refused. She stayed with my father. So I -- you know, I think she could have gone with her brothers, because they were leaving, and my grandmother could have gone too, and they chose not to go, they chose to stay.

Q: Could she have taken you too, the two of you?

A: Probably. But for some reason she wanted -- she didn't do it. She didn't. She condemned herself, effectively, to death, and probably us too, although I don't think she really believed they would kill us. I don't think any mother believes that her children are going to be killed. But I think she could have gone. And that -- for knowing my mother as I know her, it -- as I remember her, it -- it -- she was such a

delicate, as I said, nervous woman, for her to have made that decision had to take enormous courage. I mean, for her to know that she was going to stay in this horrible place where, you know, when everybody else was starting to go, you know, I think it had to take enormous strength. I don't know if I could have done it. I don't know if I wouldn't have said, I -- I'm sorry, I -- I'm taking my children, I'm running. I think it takes a very strange love, belief, confidence in your mate, or not being willing to leave him, you know, to -- to face it by himself. I -- I -- he -- she did that. I think that -- that -- that's one of the remarkable things about her.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Margitta Cooper**. This is tape number one, side **B.** Let's now talk about **Kristallnacht.** What are your memories of that specific time?

A: I think it was probably one of the major traumas in my life. First of all there was the burning of the synagogue, which while I -- I must say, being a little brat, as I said, or a child, for one glorious moment I said, oh thank God, I don't have to go. But then I -- then even -- e-even I understood that this was not a good thing. But then they came to arrest my father.

Q: Wer-Were you awake at night? Whe-When did you first become aware what was happening?

A: I heard the banging on the doors, and I heard them -- my father going downstairs and we -- the maid and my mother and I heard -- I knew it was the priest. And my father ran out of the house.

Q: This is in the middle of the night?

A: Yes. And then when he came back at five o'clock that morning, I heard again, a lot of noise, and I ran downstairs and I -- I mean, I don't think they had gone to sleep, I mean, nobody did. I mean, my father was still dressed, and he had burned his hand, and I think he had -- was wearing like a bandage on it. And the **SS** had come in and they were arresting him. And my mother -- this is -- and my mother was hysterical, everybody was hysterical and I started to become hysterical because I didn't understand. I must say the **SS** again, this is the contradiction in human beings, when they saw me and my brother, they tried to reassure me. They said, it'll be all right, your father will be all right. And of course they were very polite. I mean, there was nothing of the **sturm** and **drung** kind of thing that you see in the movies. They were very calm, very icy, very -- you know, waited for him to get hi -- you know, put his coat on and everything, and he was arrested. Now, once that happened my mother did everything to get him out, once we found out where he was, how -- the

police kind of told her where he was, or somebody told her. My grandmother and my uncle all tried everything. And I'll tell you a story that sounds like something out of a movie. My mother took -- told me to get dressed one afternoon, and I -- were t -- I-I was dressed, and she took me by the hand, and she had her pocketbook, and in her -- and er -- and she was holding a little chamois bag. And I'll never forget the -- and I remembered what she wore. She wore a -- she had a magnificent blue coat with a blue fox collar and she wore that coat with a matching blue dress. And we went to the police, and we sat outside and waited, and I had no idea and for once I was very quiet. And then she -- they told her to come in and we sat in front of this man and he wore a black uniform with the **SS** -- I mean, the swastika on his arm. And my mother said to -- they were talking and then she opened this little bag and she too -- put all her jewelry on the desk and she said, you may have it all. She said, I would like you to have it, she says, if you can get me -- if my husband come home. And I'll never forget what this man said, he looked at -- my mother was a very pretty woman, and he too-took her -- the jewelry and he put it back in the bag and he handed it to her -- of course it was all gone eventually anyway. And he says, I cannot take it, he says, but I will -- and I ca -- he says, I will try to do what I can. So we went home, and about three days later I heard footsteps coming down the street toward our house, I knew it was my father. I knew it. I woke up the whole

household. I start screaming, I said, Papa's home, Papi's home. And everybody says no, no, no. My mother says, what? I said, he's coming. And sure enough, the door rang -- there was a knock on the door, we all flew, and there was my father. He had taken -- he -- as he left the camp, he had given his jacket, his overcoat, everything he had to the prisoners that were left, that would never come home. And he had a white -- he wore his white shirt, he was very thin. My -- my -- my mother, of course, wept. We put him into -- he went to bed and I remember during the morning -- this was very early in the morning, was maybe 5:30 - six o'clock in the morning -- everything in **Germany** happens either in the middle of the night or early in the morning. That seemed to be their best time, you know, like the vampires, you know, do well at night. Anyway, I remember tiptoeing into his room to make sure that he was there, you know? And I remember he looked at me, he says, **Margit**? And I said yes. I said, are you all right? He says yes. Of course he wasn't, because he knew. You see, my father then knew that ultimately it was all downhill from then. I mean, you know, the school, everything had stopped, the tutors came. They were -- the families were trying to get out. Of course, the families that ended up going to **Gerthe** with us, stayed. They did not get out. And I still -- of course, and there were still a lot of people who really believed that this was some kind of nightmare, that something was going to happen. But then the united -- I mean, **England** went to war.

Q: How lo -- how long was your father in **Dachau**?

A: Six weeks. They kept him from **Kristallnacht** out and he came home in the beginning of January.

Q: Did he tell you anything about what happened while he was there?

A: He said it was very bad. He says there were a lot of people there. He said there were a lot of young men there. And he also said that that time that they were not getting out, that these were people that -- I don't think they had gas chambers then, but these were really prisoners -- not all Jews. I don't think they were all Jews. But he said the conditions were horrific. There was hunger. Of course he was so thin when he came home. There was already hunger, there was already a lack of food, there was lack of warmth, it was very, very cold. That's why he left all his clothing, as much as he could. The conditions were very bad and obviously he knew, he sensed that they were gearing up for something very big. And he also found out that **Dachau** was just one camp. There was also **Buchenwald** then. And he was -- **Belsen-Belsen** wasn't there yet. But he was -- he knew. He had heard from what -- he -- he told my uncle, who had come to visit him right before he left -- he left for -- for -- for the **United States**. That's why I know that my mother could have probably gone because my uncle came from **Berlin** to see his sister. And **--**

Q: But what did you do when your father was away? What activity, did -- were you still in school or had -- had you been expelled from school?

A: My mother slept with us that night. I didn't -- oh, I forgot to tell you that. The night that my father was arrested, that day my mother was so panicked that she packed us up and took us to cousins in **Mannheim.** She thought that -- she -- she -- she just was so frightened and probably went there to figure out what they could do for -- for my father. We stayed there, I'd say almost a week. And I remember I cried that night, I got like hysterical, I don't know why. I don't know if it was a performance, that I was being **Sarah Bernhardt,** or what, but I -- I -- I -- you know, and we stayed for a week and then came home and I think that's when she -- dis -- di -- I think that's when already they had begun to try to get to release him. The tutor came, I still played with my friends, my little Jewish friends. I didn't -- I don't think any Christian child was allowed to play with a Jew any more at all.

Q: When had you started with a tutor?

A: As soon as we had to leave school, all the children, all the Jewish children got tutors to co -- got one tutor and we were taught in a little room someplace.

Q: When -- when did you have to leave school, do you remember?

A: Yes, after **Kristallnacht.** Oh, maybe -- I think after **Kristallnacht**, yeah, yeah, yeah. I think it was then, and I think it was very uncomfortable before then, too. You

know, there was a lot of anti-Semitism. And as I said, the teachers who really didn't like Jews were free to begin to react to it.

Q: W-Were you physically hurt in school at all?

A: No. No, no. No, no.

Q: What -- what kind of things did the teachers say to you?

A: Well, she would -- you know, she -- it -- it wasn't anything overt. It was, your people, or -- you know, th-the -- the usual things, you know. Y-You know, you all think you know everything, or something, you know, there -- wa -- there were little slurs, which they could get away with. I think after **Kristallnacht** they could have probably been much more overt. But by then aw -- there was no child that was going. I mean, we couldn't walk the streets, we were afraid. Our parents were afraid. So it had become an absolutely impossibility for a child to continue in public school. And it -- it -- it was dangerous. So my brother and I and my friend **Truda Alcon,** who now lives in **New York** and **Gunter Katzen**, all of us had this crazy man who came, poor soul, he came from **Ludwigshaven** every morning and went back. He was a bad teacher, too, very boring.

Q: Wa-Was there secular subjects and religious, or just --

A: Secular. My father taught religion, you know, whatever religion I have -- had. I wa -- I became, of course, an agnostic by the time I could think straight.

Q: Do you remember names having to be added on, **Sarah** and **Israel** to the par -- adult names? Does that --

A: No, no, I don't remember that at all, no. No, they -- you mean i -- i -- to identify us?

Q: Yeah.

A: No, I don't remember that. I don't think so, no. The only thing was that -- things settled actually into a routine. That is why the arrest in 1940, to go to **Gurs** was such a profound shock, because life had become a routine, like everything else. I didn't think -- nobody thought about being re-arrested again. I mean, my father, I think suspected and maybe my mother, but I as a child thought everything was over. So when they came that night, I had no idea.

Q: Preceding **Kristallnacht, Hitler** had marched into **Austria** --

A: Mm-hm. Yeah -- oh, we --

Q: -- did you, as a child, know about that?

A: Oh, we all knew. My fa -- there was a -- my parents were very political and their friends were political, so I knew about the **anschluss** and I knew about --

Q: And again, what does that mean to you as a child, a nine year old?

A: I wanted **Hitler** to die. I wanted **Hitler** -- I wanted the Jews -- I had these fantasies about these great Jewish generals riding, in their great armies, to defeat

Hitler. I had visions of -- of God coming -- and I believed in God, of course -- I bel -- I thought that God would reach down his hand, the way he did it in the Bible and -- and -- and smite them, all the Germans, all the Nazis. That was my fantasy, and that's what I -- well, I was always a dreamer and I visualized this, you know, these -- this great host suddenly coming and -- and -- and destroying the Germans. And that was wonderful and that's why I knew that there was war. And when **England** would send her planes over at night, and my father and I would be outside watching the planes coming, while my par -- my mother and my brother and my grandmother were downstairs, my broth -- my father and I would go up to see. And the planes were coming, they were bombing **Germany** as early as 1939, most people don't realize it, 1939 and '40. I was thrilled. I loved it, I was excited that the Englanders were coming. The English were coming. Yes, I wanted **Germany** to be defeated. I knew that, you know, that I -- the Russians had -- I mean, I was horrified when I heard that the Russians were friends with the Germans because of the pact that **Stalin** had made. I mean, those were things that stunned me.

Q: Had you -- what did you know about the **United States** by that time, by '38 - '39 - '40? What did the **United States** mean to you? What di -- what was the concept of the **United States** to a child?

A: The **United States** of course was not called the **United States**, it was called **America**. **America** was the land, literally, of milk and honey. **America** was the Promised Land. **America** was the land that God chose for us to go to, if we were lucky. It was the place of miracles. It was utopia. It was everything that human beings could possibly visualize. The great hope was **America**, and that I understood. What it was, I didn't know. I knew it was a country, but I had no idea -- it was something myth -- almost mystic. It -- I didn't know, I just knew that I had to get to **America**, that in order to live, for us to be safe, we had to go to **America**. And that's all I knew and that's -- I heard that, of course, from adults.

Q: Did you ever listen to speeches of **Hitler** on the radio?

A: No, well yeah, the raving and the ranting, but I didn't fully understand, you know. But when you talk about **America**, I had read **Lord Fauntleroy,** who was born in **Brooklyn**, you see, so I had an idea of how wonderful **America** was, and I had read some books that -- that you know, I -- I had read a translation of some -- some books that had Americans in them. So I knew that this was the place, absolutely.

Q: So life continu -- your father came back from **Dachau**, you had private tutoring, and life --

A: Mm-hm, he conducted services.

Q: Yes.

A: He continued conducting services. Everything was going all right.

Q: What -- what happened to the rabbi of the synagogue?

A: Well, he was not there that much. My father usually conducted th-the -- the services there. He a --

Q: What was the rabbi's name?

A: I don't even remember. I don't remember, isn't that sad?

Q: How much --

A: **Lehrer --** was it **Lehrer?** Yeah.

Q: Ho-How much destruction was there of your synagogue?

A: Not that -- not that much, we -- it was able to be used. The only thing that was damaged, I think, was the -- in -- in the -- the sanctuary and I think that was repaired. I -- as I said, the life, oddly enough, continued after **Kristallnacht**, in a -- in a bizarre sort of a way. There was -- I -- I -- there was -- there was none of the -- I mean, we didn't live in fear and trembling, at least I didn't. What my parents or my father felt, I don't know. I'm sure they -- they were much -- but I didn't, I -- you know, children are very resilient. I accepted things had changed. I'm not going to public school, I have a tutor. I don't go outside to play that much, that's fine. I mean,

I adapted and it became normal. What was -- what was abnormal now became normal.

Q: Did you confide in your brother at all?

A: No. Mm-mm, we were -- very rarely talked about this. And then, you know, eventually it wasn't normal any more. 1940 arrived and the Nazis arrived and they arrested us again in the middle of the night, the Germans are night people. And they came and said pack up, and that was it, I mean, that was the end. And we left our house for good.

Q: Ta-Talk a little bit about that experience, when you -- were -- you were fast asleep?

A: I was fast asleep, again there was a banging on the door and the soldiers came in. Not Nazis, soldiers. They told us we had two and a half hours to pack everything we need. My mother forgot my clothes, most of them, so that was very tough for me in **Gurs**. I mean, you know, kind of had to wear a very few things. She na -- she was very upset that she forgot. But anyway -- but I would have outgrown them anyway. Anyway, she -- we had two and a half hours. My father wept. That's the only time I can ever remember my father, because my father knew that this was it. Of course, his horror was that we were going to go to **Buchen --** he did not know about **Gurs** in **France**. He thought we were going either to **Dachau** or **Buchenwald.** So we packed

that night, they came in trucks and took us. There were lots of people on the trucks. And --

Q: Wa-Was this the four of you, or more of your extended family?

A: It was my -- the four of us and my grandmother, who died in **Gurs.** My mother's mother. The five of us went into the trucks where there were already other people and they took us to a train station and then to **Frankfurt.**

Q: How old were your parents? Were they in their what, late 30's, early 40's?

A: 40's, in their 40's, cause my sister had been 10, so my mother was in her early 30's, she must have been then in her very early 40's, yeah. And so was my father, though my father must have been older, in his -- maybe in his middle 40's. Anyway, we went to **Frankfurt.**

Q: Tell me about getting on the truck. What were people saying?

A: Silent. There was dead silence. It was very quiet. I mean, we just sat there and I think some people wanted to know where we were going, and what was happening. And the thing that my mother was very upset about, cause there was laundry in the laundry, in the -- in the washing machine. I mean, those are the little things that are absolutely heartbreaking when you think that a woman was riding to eventual death. And what was she worried about? That somebody would find out she had laundry left in the washing machine. That's what enrages me so. That's when I feel total

rage, at that -- those little minutiae, you know, those little -- little things. Anyway, it was quiet.

Q: Did you take anything special as a child? A toy or a book or anything that meant something to you?

A: I took my books. That's unfortunate because I didn't have any clothes, but I took books. I took **Tarzan**, I took the **kinderha -- hagen**, th-the -- that -- that -- that the -- that's a special series of little books that will -- for a -- she -- it was called **kinderhagen.** And that means the little nestling, you know, the little bird? That's what it is, like a child, you know. And I took some books. We -- it was chilly. We got to **Frankfurt**, they gave us wonderful sandwiches, and which were -- which were not kosher but my father said I could eat them. I thought they were great. I said oh, this is going to be wonderful. Then we got on the train. Huge train that stretched for as far as you could see. And we all got on there, everybody that was -- had been unloaded from the trucks got on this train.

Q: So the truck went directly to the train station.

A: Right, station, right. The train curved around the entire track, that's how long it was, and we all got on there, and that m -- at that moment, my grandmother, I think had what is known to -- would have been called a **TIA,** a **transient ischemic** attack**.** She did not know where she was and she was disoriented and confused and of

course terrified. And -- but she was okay after that. We got on the train and the train began -- and -- and they were slamming the doors shut and --

Q: This is a passenger train, with seats?

A: This was not a cattle train. And they were slamming, and the train began to move and then it stopped, about an hour later and said, anyone who has jewelry, give it up now, a -- or you will be severely punished. Now, there are people who -- my mother didn't have any, and if sh -- I mean, she had given her -- ma -- jewelry that belonged to her to my uncle to take to the **United States** and I got that eventually, but just a few pieces. Most of it she had already sold. I think probably to bribe -- bribe -- for bribery to get my father out, which was fine. Whatever money they -- she had. And there were people who did hand it over and there are other pe-people I don't think ever did, and I hope they didn't. It didn't matter, they were going to die anyway. So anyway, the train then went, continued and continued and -- for hours. I mean, don't forget, we were leaving **Frankfurt** and going to the **Pyrenees,** which is -- and you know, so it was overnight. And then we got to this place, and there were more trucks. And they unloaded the train, this enormous train of people --

Q: Were there many children with you?

A: Oh yes. Well, the families, yeah, they had a lot of children, which is an interesting story. When we got to **Gurs,** I am not -- I'm very vague how we got

there. I think it was also by bus, but we got to this place which was a sea of mud with barracks. They separated the men and the women. The women had the children.

Q: O-On the -- on the trip to **Gurs --**

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- you said there were many children. Were the children calm? What did -- did the parents say to them? What did your parents say to you o-on the journey to **Gurs**?

A: My -- I -- I asked wher-where we were going, and I go -- I have to tell you, my parents were very -- always very truthful. My father said he did not know and so did my mother. But my father also said we are together. And -- and that was -- I think reassuring. I was not afraid. Now, I think maybe -- I'm not sure, in retrospect, whether the reason I wasn't afraid is because even though I always thought through these last four -- three or four years that it had no affect, it did affect me and that I had become very -- not stoic, maybe but dis -- disaffected, or disas -- you know, and no longer associative with a -- you know, a -- a -- a -- lacking affect, in other words. That maybe in some way I had detached myself, so that I was really looking at it now from -- from -- from a perspective that had nothing to do with me. I was there. So maybe that's really more the truth than anything else. At any rate, I was not afraid. I didn't know, and I wasn't afraid of death, and I certainly never thought of anybody harming me. When we got to **Gurs** and I saw the sea of mud, I knew. The

women, once they were separated from their men, fell apart. And this little dictator, meaning me, and all the other children -- oh, the German soldiers then said, get the women organized. To us. To us children. So that we were marching up and down these long barracks where these women were huddled, didn't know what -- I said, get yourselves organized. I said to my mother, sit there with **Omar**. And my mother, who would have probably had a shrieking fit having been told by her 10 year old daughter how to behave, right, did exactly what we told -- and we were so drunk with power, these kids, we were like, you know "**Lord of the Flies**"? I mean, we were telling everybody what to do. There was no place to lie down, there was no place to do anything, I mean, it was barracks. Long barracks with nothing. Eventually they gave us these pallets, you know, to lie -- sit on, to lie on, but there was nothing then. And then they did come with the pallets and they handed them out. And every family, every mother and her child had like a little -- ha-have you been to -- in barracks? You know, you can put stuff under the little eaves, you know? Well, that's where they put their possessions and that's where we were, it was very cold, damp, and very muddy.

Q: You're talking April 1940.

A: Yeah, yeah. And a sea of mud. I mean, that's the one thing I remember about -- no, this was in October of 19 -- was it --

Q: Oh, I'm sorry, October 1940.

A: Yeah. This was a sea of mud. I mean, you could not step anywhere. And the -- and the -- and of course the mu -- the m -- wives were terrified, the mothers were terrified because they no longer were with their husbands. And they went out on their own wi -- among these strangers with these soldiers. And --

Q: Did you say goodbye to your father when you were separated?

A: Yeah, we said goodbye, and I knew he was going to be down the road from us. They did tell us that they, you know, the men were going to be in one section and the women were going to be in another section. But it -- but can you imagine leaving your home and suddenly being transported for 24 hours or whatever time it took, and i -- and then put into a strange place in a barracks? I mean, and having absolutely nobody to tell you anything, nobody to explain to you what was happening to you? I mean, f -- Americans -- I mean, I -- I sometimes think to myself, what would happen if tomorrow morning this happened in this country, people suddenly vanished? I mean, you no longer saw anybody that had lived in that house for umpteen years and was suddenly gone. So I mean, th -- it was a terrifying time for -- for -- for -- for these -- for these poor women and for the -- and the children were crying, a lot of the children were crying, they were afraid. Again, I wasn't afraid. I -- I just a -- I -- you know, I just gave orders. And it worked. I -- in a

strange way I guess the -- the -- the three or four of us who were running around being, you know, the administrators probably did a lot of good because it made some of the mother's angry enough to say, who are you to tell us anything, and it probably established a sense of normalcy, you know? And that was the beginning of **Gurs.**

Q: And then what did you -- what -- what -- did they give you any food? Can you describe the living conditions there?

A: The food was horrific. They had a stove that really didn't throw much heat. The food was really like very -- like thin gruel soups. They had a place that they had built o -- on -- like on -- on -- that you walked up, it was like on stilts, where they had running water and stuff and a toilet, and toilets. And where you could wash. The camp had originally been established for Spanish prisoners and had been emptied after the Spanish Civil War. So actually we were using that, those facilities and of course they were not great facilities. It was a -- I think there was a lot of ent -- diarrhea, I mean, all the unpleasant side effects of not having a -- a decent food and decent water and decent conditions and certainly very -- no medical care, very little medical care. There were deaths. A little child died while out there. My father was allowed to sort of wander around and sort of, you know, help, because he was, you know, a-as a -- sort of a religious leader, they allowed him certain privileges.

Q: Could he come over to your section?

A: He came to visit, oh yeah. And I went -- was able to see him. I wasn't allowed to, but I'd sneak over there anyway. Yeah, he -- the men were allowed to visit. I mean, not conjugal visits, just to see their families. Yeah, I think maybe once a week or so, they came. My father came more frequently. He also was able to get me -- he was able to get my mother galoshes. The thing that was always -- you know, like little boots, because of -- and me, too. The thing I did learn, and I've never forgotten is if you need to flee anywhere, you better damn sight have money. You can't stop at the **ATM** machine. You have to have cash on you, your life is always saved by money. Money is a most valuable commodity you can have, if you are stuck anywhere where -- you can always buy your way out. It's sad to say, but that's true. My father had some money with him, and it was a -- he was able to make things a little easier, than maybe families who fled and didn't have any cash on them at all. That was the important thing.

Q: And that's how he got you your galoshes.

A: Got me my galoshes and maybe got my mother a blanket -- my grandmother and my mother a blanket. I mean, that's -- that -- that -- that's true. It -- it's sad that you can't -- that everything is available if you have the money.

Q: So the weather got worse, October, November, December.

A: Mm.

Q: What did you do to keep warm, and what did you do during the day?

A: Well, in -- we -- we dressed as warm as we could, and I read. Thank God people always are wonderful, they bring books. And I -- we sort of circulated all the books and I reread them again. I mean, you know, there's always people -- there are always people who have a sense of knowing that books are important.

End of Tape One, Side B

Interview with Margitta Cooper
January 4, 2002

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum ca -- volunteer collection interview with **Margitta Cooper**. This is tape number two, side **A** and you were talking about your life in **Gurs.**

A: The thing about **Gurs** was that -- the discomfort of -- for the -- more for the -- I think, for -- for -- for th -- for the women than for the children. Now, there's certain things that I -- I found -- I -- I wasn't bored. I just didn't -- I -- I just -- my -- I had my girlfriend al -- **Truda** with me and we still played together and we play -- we were together. The thing that bothered me is for example, there was a young wo- woman in our -- in our barracks who was handicapped. She had a very severe defor -- severely deformed hand. And I'm not sure if -- if it -- if -- if -- what happened, but one d -- you know, she -- she was gone. I wo -- I came back one day and I -- you know, when you live in a place, even a child as insensitive as I may have been, you know -- you can sense atmospheres. I mean, there was -- even the im -- the -- even the abnormal atmosphere of being in these barracks became a normality after awhile, so when you walk in and you sense another change, you know something has happened, and I knew something had happened because I saw -- I did not see **Becky**.

Q: And how old was she?

A: She may have been 14. She was older than I was, 14 or 15, pretty child, pretty young girl, but she had a very badly deformed hand, like a thalidomide hand. And something was -- and I think -- and there was something wrong with the second hand too, but one was really -- and I remember I walked in and I sat down and I turned around and I said -- I looked around and I saw her mother was sitting like with her head bent down and not doing anything, and I said, where's **Becky**? And my mother said shhh. And I said -- well, that was not the thing to say to me, so -- unfortunately, so I said, where is **Becky**? And she says, **Margit**, I'm going to hit you. Be still. Now that -- when that happened, I said, did she go away, and I said -- my mother said yes, she went away. And I was glad, I was happy, I thought she had gotten away. It took me -- yet, I knew. I wanted to believe she had gotten away, but I m -- sensed there was something wrong. And then there was the little girl, beautiful little girl who became ill, she was about maybe three years old, and she died. And I remember th -- the mother screaming in this makeshift hospital they had there, they had like a makeshift infirmary, that her body was still warm. She was screaming at my father, saying, she's still warm. And I remember my mother was dissolved in sobs, I mean, she was hyster -- well, first of all, to see this mother lose her child, well it had to bring back that same trauma for her, plus the fact that there was nothing to be done. And I'm sure, under -- given circumstances, she would have

survived. The thing was, eventually my father found out, or somehow discovered that he could get my brother and I out of **Gurs.** And I think that in every energy he had became bend toward that. And then of course they told him that he could -- his son could go. My brother, but not me. So my father told them -- and he told me this -- that he had two children, they were both going to leave, or neither will leave. He said, I'm not letting my son go and my daughter is to stay here. In other words he -- what he said to them in effect was, you're not sending my child, one child to death and not the other. They bo -- he says, they're twins. They belong together, they should go together. And they let us. So it was me and my brother. It was my friend **Truda** and my friend **Gunter Katz**, who were among the four children who left **Gurs.**

Q: Let's talk a little bit about again y-your life at **Gurs** before we get onto the next stage.

A: Mm. Mm-hm, yeah.

Q: What did you do during the day, and -- from October to April?

A: **Truda** and I would play cards, somebody had a deck of cards. We would read. We would talk. We would be outside in the mud, playing. I don't remember what we played. We played games that children played. There were no -- I think somebody had a ball, we would play with a ball. We tried to play things that were normal. I

would go visit my father as much as I could, my brother and I would. But **Truda** and I spent a lot of time together and we would be playing games. I remember we would sit on this bench they had, she and I and play cards together for hours on end. But of course, any book. Most of the time, I would read. Now the children -- it was -- for the children it had to be -- there was no education. I mean, nobody -- there were no classes, there was not -- no school, except you know, my fa -- my mother would try, but di -- we didn't go to school. We just -- it was just drifting every day. Get up in the morning, get washed, spend a little time with my mother. Find **Truda**, who le -- who was in the barracks, in the same barracks, but down, and -- and play together and then go outside if it was at all permissible, you know, and then go visit the -- my father and then come and stay with my parents. It was -- it was a non-existence. The only thing that really, really saved me wer -- were the books, was reading. The other children -- and when I talked to **Truda** about it she says, what did we do? I said, I don't remember. She says, I know we played some cards. They were -- we're all in the same boat. It was a non-existence.

Q: Did your mother or father make any distinction about Friday night? Friday night **Shabbat**?

A: No. You mean -- you mean -- oh, ma -- my father did come to conduct a little services on Friday night, yeah, for the women, yes he did, yes, yes. On Friday night

he came. And -- and -- I mean, there were -- the holidays, I mean, there was -- oh, and I will tell you something else. I was there for Passover. If a -- if you live to be a thousand years old you're never going to guess who sent the Jews matzo in -- in **Gurs.** The Japanese sent boxes of matzos. I swear, it said in the back, **Nippon.** Can you believe it? It was so amazing, I mean, and we did have matzo for Passover, and that's how I knew it was Passover, my father told us. And right after that I left. But -- of course, Hanukah came there was nothing, you know.

Q: Who were the guards? Were they French guards and did you understand any French?

A: No, they were all Germans and they had their groupies with them, they had these women who I guess were -- must have been prostitutes, but they were very glamorous. You know, to me they were very glamorous, they were clean, they had polished nails, I mean, you know, and they had them living there. And they were German soldiers, they were all German. They were German soldiers, not **SS.** I think the **SS** were sort of -- the commandant may have been **SS,** but the people guarding -- well, they had a -- they had no problems, they had a -- they had a -- a completely compliant group of prisoners. I mean, nobody did anything. I mean, they -- they had nothing to do. They would stay in those kiosks, you know, along the highway. Th- There was a highway that ran down and on each side were -- were the barracks. And

there was really nothing for them to do, and we would be walking on -- on -- on the highways once in awhile, but most of the time we did nothing. It was -- you -- it was impossible to be outside for any length of time because of the mud.

Q: Did any of the women bring Sabbath candlesticks with them?

A: I don't remember seeing anything like that. I don't remember seeing any -- anything that would have reminded them -- reminded us of **Shabbas** or of the holidays, except, as I said, we did get matzo. We knew, and I don't remember t -- th- the **menorah** or anything being lit. I think by then, whatever there was, the women themselves had lost hope, or had -- were beginning to give up.

Q: Did you and your mother and your brother sleep together on a pallet?

A: Yes, and so did my grandmother. Yeah, they -- we had them together. And they were sort of lined up, you know, we had --

Q: Did you have enough room, or were you crowded in on the pallet?

A: I think it was kind of crowded, but there was a more -- oh, actually, th -- oh, my brother was not with us, my brother was with my father. The girls --

Q: Oh, so when they separated the children --

A: -- children **[indecipherable]**

Q: -- they separated the girl children --

A: Yes, the girls were with -- I mean, the girls were with their mothers and the boys were with their fathers, yeah. But he -- my brother eventually -- I think there was a problem and my brother did come to us, but not in the beginning. And I think one of the reasons that happened was because he -- my brother became ill and my father said he should be with his mother. And, you know -- yet, he missed my mother. So -- I mean, he was a little boy, and -- and he s -- came -- came with us, and he stayed with us and it was fine, you know. He -- the thing was that -- that my brother had -- had become very quiet. He had completely become -- completely -- he was afraid. When we were at **Gurs,** I think my brother began to change. I think it -- it -- it -- I think the final -- the final straw was when we -- when he knew that we were going to be leaving by ourselves, without our parents, that we were going to be going alone. And I think for the children to know that they were leaving without their parents was very frightening to them. Because I didn't know. I mean, the bus -- the truck pulled up and there we were.

Q: How did your father present this to you initially, that you were going to be leaving? What -- how did -- do you remember what he said to you?

A: He said very simply, you're going to **America**. And here it was, that wonderful place I was going to go and my brother was going to go, too. He says, you're going to go to **America**. What I didn't know was that if I was going to go to **America**, it's

because they were going to be dead. And that was the only premise under which I was going to be going to -- I didn't understand that. All I knew, I was going to **America** and I really didn't give a damn what happened, you know, as long as I was going. And I just naturally assumed that as soon as I got to **America**, my parents would be right there -- were coming, you know. And that's how he presented it to me and I was -- I said, fine. I said, I'm going to **America**. And I told my brother we're going to **America**. And they came. Whatever little clothing I had which I -- you know, was no good any more, packed it up, looked at all this mud, which was now a sea of mud again because all -- everything had thawed out and it was, you know, no longer frozen, it was -- had been cold there. And we got on this truck, all the children.

Q: Ho-How many children got with you?

A: I think maybe 20. And we drove and drove and drove again.

Q: What did you say to your parents when you were leaving?

A: I said goodbye to them, and you know, the Germans allowed them to say goodbye to us when we left for the **United States**, before they took them to **Auschwitz**. Did you know that? Did you ever hear that? After -- I just -- after I went to **Marjelier** there, when we finally were allowed to go to the **United States**, they took us past my parents conce -- the concentration camp, near -- near **Po.** We went

to **Po** on the way to **Spain.** And they stopped the train and allowed the parents to see us one more time. My parents saw me one more time. M -- I didn't even recognize my mother, she was so thin, and my father. And my father gave me a letter which he asked me to destroy, which I should have never destroyed. It was a wonderful letter to me saying whatever happens, life is for the living, remember we loved you, remember us. And I -- I -- I destroyed the letter cause he asked to d -- he was afraid that it would be found on me. And he said, you came from a good family. You have -- you -- you -- you -- he -- he said, you came from a good family, a family who loved you. You -- we wanted a -- you were -- you should ha -- you're very bright, you deserve a wonderful education. We loved you, both your mother and I. That this has happened was not meant to be, but I want you to have a life and I don't want you grieve. And he says, I don't want you to hate, because he knew that I would hate, and I did. I hated with a passion for years. I mean, I've -- I could not forgive it. It took me long time. I mean, I would say it took me the better portion of my life to look at anything that was German and not wish it the most horrible things to happen. When thalidomide happened, to my shame, and I heard there were German babies, I felt not a shred of regret. When -- when **Germany** was being rebuilt, I felt nothing but anger and grief that this country should -- but then I began to understand what I said in the outset of this interview, that human beings are capable, all of them, of the

most horrific things. That we have an innate sense of cruelty. That we have what -- what -- what -- what is referred to as our reptilian system that has never matured, that has never developed, that has never -- that evolution has never taken care of, that re-regresses to this atavistic state of absolute enormous cruelty and rage against another person. And that's when I began to forgive the Germans, when I realized that there are people in this country who are perfectly willing and able to destroy others the same way the Germans destroyed us. So when I left **Gurs** -- to go back to the original thing -- when I left **Gurs** and went -- went to **Marjelier**, there was this enormous castle.

Q: Did you know where you were going? You get on the truck with these 20 other children, who were the adults with you?

A: They had two adults with us who had -- somehow, I think -- they were people who came to the concentration camp I should say, to **Gurs,** who were Jews, who were extremely well dressed. One of them was our former teacher, not -- not -- not -- it was a former teacher who had taught us at Hebrew school -- I mean, at -- at school, who had been a Jew. He was a --

Q: Ins -- in **Speyer?**

A: He was extremely well dressed, so was his wife. I couldn't understand it, they came to see my mother. And I afterwards said -- oh, I afterwards said to my mother,

oh, they look wonderful. I mean, they were dressed to the nines. So my fath -- my mother said something under her breath and I looked at my fa -- gr -- my grandmother, I said, **Omar,** they look so wonderful. He said, they sold out to the enemy. In other words that they betrayed their own people. They were one of the ones who obviously were able to deal with the Germans in some way, I don't know how. I really don't know. I've never been able to find out or understand how these people looked the way they did. They were not the only ones. There were others who came who were also German, who were well dressed, who were obviously on the side of the Germans, or in some kind of collaboration with them, I do not know. I swear to you **Gail**, I have never been able to find out. I tried very hard to find out. I talked to **Gunter** about it. I -- there was --

Q: These are German Jews, or German non-Jews?

A: German Jews. Oh no, the non-Jews I could have understood. But I've o -- I'm -- I'm definitely going to find out about it because it -- I hadn't thought about it for years. They were elegant. I mean, they w-wore fashionable clothes and they were very patronizing toward my mother. They came to see her really out of respect fo- for my father, but they were patronizing. And they were German. I mean, they belonged to our synagogue. So could it be --

Q: So these are Jews?

A: Mm. So in some way they **collabord** way -- collaborated with the Germans. Now my question has always been, in what way? I mean, what did they get, how did they escape being interned? How did they escape going to **Auschwitz**? How did they survive? I mean, it was like the French collaborators, you know, who -- who -- who -- like, you know, who sold the -- themselves to the Germans. And this is what these people had to have -- have done, because they were Jews. The Christians is another story, you know, but these were Jews.

Q: But they were coming to save you.

A: No, they --

Q: To save the children?

A: No, they -- no, no, no, no, no. They came to visit us and see sort of -- like they represented the Red Cross kind of thing, but they did -- nothing happened, they just came. They came to pay their respects and to see what was going on and how could they help, and there was nothing, but ma -- I remember my mother saying, what do you mean, how can you help? You know, she was angry. But they left again. I mean, they were free to come and go as they pleased. They had come to visit. From where? I mean, how do you get to **Gurs** from **Speyer**? And why were they not arrested? That is -- I have to find -- I mean, I -- I really -- it always bothered me all these years how this could have happened. But you know, it does happen, so either they

betrayed their own people for money, or somehow the Germans were using them in --

Q: Do you remember their names?

A: Yeah, that's -- no, but **Gunter Katz --** one of them was called -- was **Lehrer,** like te -- like teacher, and his name was **Lehrer**, but I don't remember his wife's name, but **Gunter** would remember. He absolutely would remember. And --

Q: So these people had nothing to do with your being chosen to leave?

A: I don't think so. I think that came from the -- I think that came from a much -- from an international kind of decision by the **United States** and other countries. No, the people that took us to **Gurs** were probably -- I -- I mean, took us to **Marjelier** were probably people who were sort of a liaison with all these different programs that had -- they were trying to get some of the children saved, and that we got to **Marjelier** and I was very bewildered. And I -- you know, when they said it was a castle, of course, after I -- I read all these books, I expected **Cinderella**, you know, with a -- well, this was not the place. I mean, this was a big, big place with a huge entrance. And very barren, very cold. Not -- you know, it was set up to take care of children. I mean, it was not set up to be a salon or anything like that. And there were lots of children there already. We were just more. They had teachers. They had -- they had ver -- they were very good to us, I mean, they were very nice to us. They

spoke French mostly, and that's how I learned to s -- really speak French much better. And they tried -- they tried to be really -- they really tried to educate us. I think that was one of the big things, they wanted to continue our education and we did go to school. Now, they gave me a little plot of ground outside for me to plant my own vegetables. Well, that is the s -- I mean, I can not even grow a weed. So I was the only one that nothing ever grew for. They were -- they -- they were -- they were nice to us. I mean, there was not -- I mean they were not gushing and they were not affectionate at all. I think they were doing a job, and I think they were also aware of the fact that most of these children were going to be leaving, hopefully, and that new ones would be coming in. When they finally -- now, there were children who were grieving terribly. There was a child that came whose mother died in the camp. She was an only child. She -- her mother -- she was in my -- she was in -- in -- in **Gurs** with us.

Q: And the mother died in **Gurs**?

A: No, the mother died in **Auschwitz**, but she was the only child of this mother who was either divorced or widowed. It was the most wrenching thing for that child to leave her mother and for that mother to let her child go. I -- I mean, I -- I have children and I'm sure you do too. I keep thinking of handing my child up on a truck, 10 years old, or 11 years old, and in this little c-ca -- girl's case, six years old, and

saying goodbye and letting them go down a road where you don't know where they're going. I mean, my father said **America**. I don't think he knew himself. The courage it had to take, and not to weep, and not to -- and to control yourself and not let the child see how s -- how anguished you are. This mother did that. This child looked like frozen, like a piece of glass when she sat down. She was beautiful. Black curls all over her head and she wore this little clean dress that her mother had saved for the occasion and she was sitting there and weeping, I me -- I me -- like a piece of stone with the tears just falling down her cheek. And terrified, I mean terrified out of her mi-mind. She'd never been alone, she had never left her mother. And she -- she was so quiet, you know, she -- her mother had -- must have impressed on her -- she was not in our barracks, that she had to do this, she had to go. And she had accepted it, but she didn't want to, you know, she kept saying -- and then that night she kept calling for her mother. I mean, she was a little child. And th-the teachers would come out and they would talk to her. As I said, they were not overly affectionate, not doting. They couldn't be. I mean, there were so many children. And --

Q: Who were the teachers?

A: They were French. I don't -- I think they were Jewish. You saw -- saw some of this. You showed me some of that stu -- they were Jewish. One was a married couple for sure because they shared the room right where we all slept. And you

know something how -- you know, I keep think -- I-I -- you know, for years I -- I was very smugly saying that these -- that I had absolutely no feelings about this at all, that I was absolutely objective, but when -- when the children were starting to go to **America** and I wasn't one of them, there were children that were beginning to leave and they were going to, quote, **America**. So one day I'm lying in bed and a spider is walking alongside the bed -- ara -- along my pillow. And I said to myself, if the spider climbs on my hand and climbs up my arm, I'm going to go to **America**. So the spider climbed on my hand and climbed up -- by now I'd probably faint, and climbed up my arm and then stopped and then turned around and climbed down again. And I swear to you **Gail**, the next day they came and said, you and your brother are going to **America**. Of course, what it meant that I had signed my parents' death sentence. I mean, not me, but they had -- were going to **Auschwitz**. That was the whole point. These were the families -- the children that left **Gurs** for **America** were -- were the children of parents that had been d-designated for **Auschwitz**. They had already been named that they would be shipped to **Auschwitz**, and my parents -- my mother was shipped in the transport of 1942, and this was 1941. So they were already designated for that. My grandmother had already died, and I didn't know that. My grandmother died in -- in '42 -- I mean, no, she hadn't died yet. She died in February of 1942 and my father -- now this is the thing that I'm

not sure about, my father I think died in **Gurs.** I don't think he died in **Auschwitz**. They have never been able to determine it. On the list it gives his name too, but -- but there are other things that indicate that he died in **Gurs**, of a massive heart attack, probably.

Q: O-On what list?

A: On the list of transports from **Gurs**, and I have that here, and -- but I'm going to have to send you copies of all that. Which means -- which is a horror to me, when I think that if my grandmother -- I have the death certificate for my grandmother from **Germany** -- from **France**, and if my father did die before my mother left for **Auschwitz**, that meant that my mother went to **Auschwitz** alone. And that I find unendurable. I'm hoping that if they went, they went together. But i -- I don't think so, I think my father did go to -- did die there and never got to go -- **Auschwitz** -- and for him it's a blessing and for my grandmother certainly it's a blessing, she was a woman in her 70's, so -- but for my mother I find it -- and I'm hoping that if -- you know, she did go, that there was somebody with her, that maybe the **Alcons** were still there, because **Truda** said her -- of course her parents died in **Auschwitz**. So maybe all the people from **Speyer** were still together then, you know.

Q: **Marjelier** was a chateau --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- and it was southeast of **Tur.**

A: Yes, yes, and it was a big place that had become a center for -- that somehow had been given over by -- by the French, I assume, to take care of these children until they could be dispersed into different -- to different places. Now, this was not occupied **France** at the time. S -- what happened was, as -- as -- I was there only a few months and what happened wa -- is that as we left, other children would come. Now, were these children -- how many of these children were from **Gurs**? I think most of them came from **Gurs.** I don't think they came from ger -- I think -- I -- I'm not sure what other places they could have been coming from. I mean, they were not coming from the German concentration camps. I don't know where else they could have been coming fr -- to -- to **Marjelier** from, because **Gurs** was really -- there was only **Gurs.**

Q: Was this mar -- **Marjelier** sponsored by the **OSA,** the **O-S-A -- O-S-E**?

A: I think so. I think that's who did it, yes. And I think they -- they were some -- the **United States** I think did offer to take **X** number of children. I think that's how they -- you know, I think they -- it was sort of sponsored, an international kind of thing. How it came to be, I don't know. Certainly when I got there it was already established. I mean, we were not the first arrivals, there were children there.

Q: Did you have any contact with your parents when -- once you got to **Marjelier**?

A: No --

Q: Between the time you l -- you got there and the time you left?

A: No, there was no contact at all. As I said, the only time I saw them again was at the end, when we left the country.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Margitta Cooper**. This is tape two, side **B** and I had asked you if you had had any communication with your parents bef -- until the time that you left, and you said no. So how was that for you and your brother not to have this communication with your parents? You were very young. What was that like?

A: The thing -- you know, as I s -- the thing that was so strange is that I really felt all right about it. I -- I -- I think maybe I thought this was just like a temporary thing. And the other thing was that I had become -- I -- I think I -- what had happened is that I had become really disaffected. I did not realize it, but I think I kind of had become like numb. I didn't think about my parents except in the expectation that I would see them, that this was a temporary situation and that they would eventually be coming. I didn't think beyond that. I would hear little conversations between the

teachers that would make me -- that would frighten me. For an example, they were talking about what was happening to some of the children, children that had physical handicaps. And -- and that's, of course, what happened with **Becky --** that they were doing things. They were very frightened and very uneasy, even about being in **Marjelier**. They were afraid of the Germans coming. The Germans had occupied, of course, a part of **France**, **Vichy, France** and I would hear little things, that they were always very conscious of being at risk or in danger in some way. And that made me nervous. And yet I thought, well, I'm -- we here. So if I'm here, and **Henry** and **Heinz** are here, then my parents can't be that far behind. So it didn't frighten me. I didn't begin to understand that they were not coming until I saw them in **Po.** And then I knew that they were not going to be coming with us to **America**, that we were going by ourselves. But until then, when the train stopped and I saw the parents, I thought well, this is it, you know, we're -- they're -- they're coming back. We're going now. We're going to **America.**

Q: Did you go to school in **Marjelier**? Did they have classes?

A: Yes.

Q: What did you learn?

A: They had classes in history, we took some math, we -- but it was all in French, so I mean, you know, I -- an-and they taught us how to speak French, of course, and children learn fast. And of course there were books, which was wonderful.

Q: Did they give you clothes?

A: They gave us clothing, absolutely, we had no clothing. They gave us clothing, as I said, they asked us to do -- we did work in the ki -- we kept our own rooms up, I mean the beds -- I mean, there was like a dorm. We made our own beds, we -- we cleaned. I, like an idiot one day thought it'd be fun to help scrub the floors. That taught me never to volunteer again. And -- and we worked outside and then la -- on the -- on the -- in the gardens and grew our own vegetables, and it was -- it was -- it was an absolutely work place. I mean, you know, the children were not pampered. But it -- they -- it saved their lives.

Q: And you had enough food?

A: Yeah, there was enough food, it was not good. Lots and lots of lentils. I remember we were loaded with lentils, lots of legumes, n -- very little meat. Some milk, some bread. Not -- not what you call haute cuisine. I mean, it was an -- sufficient for us to survive on. There was very little fresh food, I mean, no oranges and things like that. Sometimes -- I have always wondered what the neighborhood thought, you know, what the neighbors must have thought of this place and all these

children, though I'll -- although it was pretty isolated, I mean, there were not too many neighboring houses there.

Q: Di-Did you go into the nearby towns at all?

A: I don't think we ever did. I don't think we ever really left. There were places for us to roam around and to play in, but we never made visits into a-any neighboring towns, until we left. Until finally we had to go and we headed for **Marseilles.** But -- and -- you know, on the train. But it was -- it -- it -- it -- the children, again, were very well behaved. I think all the children knew there was -- this was not normal. You know, that we were going through am -- I mean, when you think of children, ranging from the age, let's say, of six, seven, to maybe 12 - 13, all strangers to each other, suddenly being thrust into a situation where they never saw their parents, never heard from their parents, having to exist in this way and having absolutely no -- no knowledge of what was to become of them. Except for me, I was positive I was going to **America**. My father had said so and I was going. But the rest of them didn't know. Everybody wanted to go. That was, you know, one of the most triumphant things was was one of the children came to me and said, I'm going to **America**. And that's when the -- right after that my little spider arrived. So, I mean, that was -- it was like getting -- you know, it was like going to look at the bulletin board in college and knowing that you been -- you know, that you've gotten the

school of your choice. This was the dream of every child there, it was to come to the **United States**.

Q: How many children were there when you were there?

A: About 80, yeah.

Q: And you mixed with the other children, besides your friend from **Speyer?**

A: Oh, yeah. We -- well, my friend from **Speyer** didn't come. She went later.

Q: Oh.

A: Yeah, they didn't come with me. **Truda** an-and **Gunter** came later, and **Truda** stayed in **France** for seven years after that. But she never left. The thing -- I came with my brother by myself, with other children from gu -- from **Gurs**, but not **Truda**. No, she said she -- they were very upset when I left because they thought they would never be able to get out, but they did eventually. No, these were children from everywhere.

Q: Did you stay with -- did your brother sleep near you?

A: Yeah, my br -- no, my brother slept with the boys and I slept with the girls. And there was like huge dormitories and he was -- you know, and they would come up at night and we were allowed -- they would turn lights out and that was it. It was -- it was like -- it was like -- a little bit like being in a camp for the poor.

Q: How was your physical condition, were you a strong child, physically?

A: Ye -- yeah, well I became ill on the boat. I got rheumatic fever. But I was fine then, you know, when I came -- when I -- when I left **Marjelier** and I was on the transport to **Marseilles,** they took two children off the train. They were friends of ours from **Marjelier**. And it was a sister -- a broth -- a brother and a sister and they had very bad eyesight, they wore very thick glasses. And the train stopped, the Germans came and took them off. Now, again, I don't understand that. I mean, I've never been able to understand why the ger -- the Germans allowed these children to go to the **United States**, obviously, or the fren -- no, the fr -- no, the French took them off, not the Germans, because we were traveling through unoccupied **France** at that time, til we got to **Marseilles.** It must have been the French that did that, because the **United States** would not have allowed them into the country, because they could not see well. So when I became very ill, on -- on the train, I had the first attack, I didn't tell anybody anything cause I knew that they would take me off the train. And I was fine when I got to **Marseilles.** And I asked my pediatrician who took care of me here, Dr. **Liebolis** in -- in **Maryland** why it would come like this, that I would get this tremendous pain. He says -- she says, because that's what happened. She says, it would come, the rum -- rheumatic fever is exactly like that, you have these terrible pains. It affects the heart. And I was fine when I got to **Marseilles.** When I got on the boat it happened again, and this time was very severe.

And again I was afraid to say anything. But when I got to this country, my brother had a fever, and they don't allow you in.

Q: Okay, well --

A: We'll go --

Q: -- we'll get to that.

A: -- yeah.

Q: So, how did you know you were be le -- you would be leaving **Marjelier?**

A: They told -- they came and told -- they called my brother and I into the office of the headmistress and they said we're going -- you're going to be leaving next week, you're going -- and I said, we're going to **America**. And she says, we are going to **America**. I said, good. And I -- I was going to say to them, well when is my mother and father coming, but I somehow didn't. I didn't. So she said to me, you know, we -- gather all your things together, and I did. I immediately was ready. I mean, I was ready at that moment. And they came and they were who -- they were whoever we -- it was a number of children. We all lined up. They had an -- this car. They had cars, not -- not trucks.

Q: It wasn't everybody in **Marjelier** at that time?

A: Oh, no, no, no, no, just a few. There were maybe -- how many were -- of us came on the boat? I would say maybe 20, that's about all, came -- again, only the par --

children of those parents that had already been designated. And they came -- we -- they took us in cars. Now, when we got to -- we went by train to marjel -- to **Marseilles.** What happened that was very interesting is that our leaders, there were two adults that went with us -- and on the train to **Marseilles** is when **Bernard** and his sister were taken off, and we never saw --

Q: The leaders are Jewish leaders?

A: Yes, I think they were Jewish. But when -- when we got to **Marseilles,** something happened and they told us to go very quickly down the steps because there were Germans coming in. And whether they thought the Germans would stop us, I don't know, but I remember absolute panicking. I did panic then because she said, go quickly, quietly, down the steps to the trains -- to, you know, wherever we were going, and we -- we all ran very quickly. And as I was running, I looked up and I saw the Germans coming and walking up the stairs. You know, we were going down one flight, they were coming up another flight and I remember thinking, oh God, ub -- because I saw their uniforms, the yellow uniforms with the swastika and the black pants. And that -- I got very frightened cause I thought I would be going to **America**, and -- you know, and we got --

Q: Now -- th-this is now October '41?

A: Yes.

Q: So you were in **Marjelier** from April to October?

A: -- ‘tober, yes. So then we get on the train and --

Q: And you were 12 years old?

A: Yes. I was not 12 yet. I was -- yeah, I was 12, I had turned 12. So anyway, we were on the train, and oh --

Q: Had you physically matured yet?

A: Yes, I was just thinking, they had given me a bra to wear, cause I was starting to show a little bit and I didn’t like that. But anyway, I wore the bra and I was getting to be -- well, I was not chubby, but -- I wasn’t chubby, but I was always a little short. So anyway, one of the teachers had tilted my head up like this, one of the woman teachers, very nice, I liked her very much, and said, you’re going to be a very pretty woman. And I never thought that at all, so I said -- I remember thinking she was cr -- oh, she was right, by the way, I did turn out to be a very pretty woman as I grew up. Anyway, not --

Q: Had you star -- how did you -- had you started to menstruate yet?

A: No, no, no, no, not -- I didn’t do that until I went to the Catholic co-convalescent home in the **United States** after I had rheumatic fever. Catholics and I have a thing, I’m telling you. So anyway, I -- we got on the train to **Marjelier --** is a -- at mas --

in -- in **Marseilles** and we headed toward the Spanish border, and that's -- was the incident with **Po** and my parents, you know. Wi --

Q: T-Ta-Talk a little more about that.

A: Okay.

Q: You did a little bit.

A: Okay, th-the train stopped and they said to us, they said that the parents would be allowed to see their children for five minutes. So all -- from **Gurs**. These were all the children from **Gurs** that were on the train. And I looked outside and there was my mother and father and they came on for a minute. My mother hu -- my other was almost silent.

Q: They came onto the car of the train?

A: Yeah, they came into the -- yeah, we were allowed to go -- they were allowed to step into the train, to the compartment. And my mother was very quiet. I think -- I think she knew. I think she knew. And she hugged me and she kissed my brother and I and she cried a little. And she said, be good. She says, be a good girl. And I think they must have been shocked by how much I'd grown in those few months. And then my father, as I said, gave me the letter, he hugged and kissed me, and I remember -- the thing I remember is when the train was pulling away and I saw them standing there, together, how totally forlorn they were. Even as young as I was,

I knew that ineffable sadness that every child on the train felt when they looked at their parents. Not just me, we all felt it. We were absolutely saddened. Now a c -- I'm wrong, not all the children's parents were at **Gurs**, there were others who came to us afterwards and said, were these your parents? So they -- not all the children were from **Gurs**, some of them were. I think most of them, because I remember come -- some one of the girls coming in and say, was that your mother and father and I said yes. So it wasn't her p -- her parents weren't there. But we all knew that pain, you know, that a child feels when they s -- when they suddenly feel that sense of insecurity of not having a parent, a -- any -- it was very frightening to me, and to -- I think to my brother, and the finality of it. And when the letter -- when I read the letter to my brother -- my father was saying goodbye, you know, an-an-and I knew that was it. I'm so sorry I ever tore it up, but it's gone. Anyway, we left **Marseilles**, now we head toward wonderful **Spain**. We pull into ma -- this is --

Q: What was your brother's reaction in seeing your parents, on saying goodbye?

A: Devastating, he -- devastating. He was -- I -- I'm telling you, for my brother the -- these little bits and pieces of life being torn away from him devastated him. I think he -- he became ap -- he -- h-he -- he looked at this as something that he was totally removed from. He went through all the motions, but he had absolutely no feeling with it. He behaved normally, but I think my brother was very badly hurt by all this,

all his life. So then we got t -- we got on the train and it's traveling, traveling, we pull into **Madrid.** Now, we had been given **Gruyere** cheese -- cheese, grapes and bread by s -- the people in -- in **Marjelier**. I have never eaten a piece of **Gruyere** cheese in over 60 years. They were starving in **Spain.** This was after the civil war. Mother were nursing their children at the depot. Soldiers in rags were walking up and down, there was nothing, we gave them all our food. All the children did, we handed it through the windows, never realizing that we were going to **Lisbon** and we would have to have nothing to -- well, we did, we all gave our food away. I think partly because we really were sick of the **Gruyere**, too. And the train continued to **Lisbon**, and we arrived in **Lisbon** in this beautiful city, have you ever been there? You -- it's still there, I s -- have a friend who went. You have this vista of the sea, the medit -- it's just magnificent, and this beautiful hotel, where they -- these raggedy children arrived. I'm sure that hotel concierge probably passed out when he saw us, all these raggedly -- bunch of kids who hadn't been bathed in days, you know, arriving. They gave us bread and butter, the best bread and butter I've ever eaten, and I'm telling you, they would bring out trays of it, it would be gone in two seconds. They kept bringing out more and more trays of bread and fruit and everything and the minute it was -- we just ate like wolves, I mean -- oh, the other thing was, we -- we did stay in **Marseille** for about three days and they brought us

food there, too. That's where we got the **Gruyere** cheese and stuff. They brought in this wonderful food, I don't know if it was kosher or not. But -- I mean, that was the first time we had really eaten really food -- food since we left **Germany**. I mean, we didn't -- you know, that we had meat and we had potatoes and we had vegetables, and you know, s -- things. And the same thing in **Lisbon**. They brought us all this bread an-and cheeses and fruit and -- and -- and -- and -- and -- and meals that we could actually eat. That night they showed movies. I had never seen these movies. American movies. They were in English, I couldn't understand, but I said, this is **America**. Well, of course, you know, **Shirley Temple**, I mean, need I say anything else? So that was wonderful, those were a wonderful three days because we were washed, our hair was washed, we had clean clothes to put on. But, when I got on the boat, I had nothing. I had no underwear, nothing. So I wore -- I used to wash out my underwear at night and -- and -- and wear it the next day and it was very cold. And of course, I was already sick, which didn't help, you know? But on the boat -- we were supposed to sail on this boat and the boat, we missed it in **Marseille.** There was a delay and when we got to **Lisbon**, this boat had sailed. That boat was sunk by a German sub, and we t -- I would have never made it here. You would not be listening to this absolutely scintillating story. I -- my -- we took the **Safir Pinto** instead. And we left and I was very, very seasick until we got to **Casablanca.** And

once we got to **Casablanca --** oh, and when I was standing there, you know, I was after -- and you know, being a reader and being very melodramatic, I watched the -- the -- the shores of **Europe** recede, and I'm thinking to myself, you must remember this moment all your life, that you are now leaving. You have to remember this, this is an important moment. It's just like when I saw my parents, I said to myself, you have to remember this, you have to remember them just as they looked. You know, I wanted to do that, and I did. I've never forgotten it. Anyway, we got to -- we get to **Casablanca** and we stayed there for -- oh, I did not see **Ingrid** or **Bogey**, I just saw a very dirty island, or dirty city. And then we sailed. It took us 10 days to come to the **United States**. More than 10 days, like 13 days, with one pair of underpants. Very strange food, very elegant first class. They had women -- they had a lot of emigrants on that boat, ver -- again, a very motley crew of people in first class. Women who were very heavily made up and wore very elegant clothes, and men. They pretty much tried to ex -- ignore us because we're this ragtag bunch of kids, you know, we -- I think we were sort of an object of pity and -- and also embarrassment and guilt, you know? That they were having this wonderful time with music playing and dancing and everything and here we were with these big eyes reminding them what was really going on in **Europe**, and they didn't want to be reminded. I don't think -- I don't know how many were Jews or not Jews, but

nobody wants -- wanted to be reminded. And they were sort of nice. But I had my first love affair on the boat because the son of the captain was on the boat, and he liked me. And he'd sneak little things for me. That's when I first began to understand the importance of being a female, and what it -- it -- you can derive out of that. I got great oranges, all peeled and beautiful. I got wonderful sweets and ice cream. I mean, he got me lots of goodies. And I --

Q: H-How old was he?

A: About 13. I was 12. And he really liked me. He would talk to me. We didn't understand one word, I mean he spoke Portuguese and I spoke whatever. But we understood each other. And I would be sitting there and he'd come up and the steward would be trailing behind him and he'd open up this thing and there would be wonderful goodies, and I was -- became very powerful then. Then we got to the **United States** -- oh, they posed us -- oh, go ahead.

Q: How many children were on the boat with you in your group?

A: I'd say about 40. About 40, I think, yeah, not that many. Yeah, about 40 because we -- when we landed you know, they posed me -- the newspaper, American newspapers posed me. It must be still there in -- it's in the archives of the **New York Times** for that day. They posed my brother and I on the rail of the ship behind the Statue of Liberty. The American reporters came to interview us because they heard

that the children had come from **Europe**. And that's how my Uncle **Heinz** found out, he opened up the **New York Times** and there on the front page was his niece.

Q: Now what day, this is October?

A: October -- it was October the seventh, I think. Anyway, there was his niece sitting there with her -- my brother. He -- he cried. My uncle, again, also cried. Anyway, they took --

Q: O-On the ship, did you have any classes, or it was just free time?

A: Oh no, nothing like that. No --

Q: No English classes?

A: -- no, no, no, but when the -- when the e -- nothing. We did nothing but roam the ship, play and do whatever and sit and read. Course again, I found books, which was wonderful.

Q: Did you have your cha -- your ho -- your own books with you? Had you been able to take them?

A: No, no, no, I brought nothing with me. As -- I got on that ship without anything. We had little satchel maybe of something, but when I left **Lisbon,** I really had nothing. I mean, I think I had one change of clothing and I really didn't have any under things at all.

Q: When did you have to give up your personal books that you had brought with you from --

A: I left them in **Gurs** for the children, for everybody else that was left. I never took them with me. No, I would never have done that. That's one thing we learned to do is that we had to -- whatever we could leave for somebody else to use, it became instinctive and we all did that. It's like when we gave all the food to the -- to the Spaniards, I mean, it was just instinctive to do that, we had learned to do that. Anyway, when we got on the **United States**, when the immigration people came on board and the doctors, they took my brother's temperature and ma -- he had a li-little temperature, so we had to go to this place in -- in -- in **Queens** or **Brooklyn** that was like a rehabilitation **[indecipherable]**

Q: Wa -- wa -- tell me, before that, what was it like for you to see the Statue of Liberty?

A: I hadn't -- didn't have a clue. I just thou -- looked at this big thing. I mean, I didn't know what it was supposed to be. Everybody -- I mean, I heard them saying Statue of Liberty, Statue of Liberty and I knew **liberté** means liberty. And I didn't know what these reporters were all doing around us and then he -- one of them hoisted me up on the rail and he hoisted up my brother and they all yelling and they all talking, and this -- the interpreter is trying to say things and they were taking

these pictures. He says -- and I do remember this, I understood, how do you like **America**? Are you an -- an-and I didn't understand and I kept saying yes, yes, you know, **oui, oui**. I didn't have a clue. And --

Q: What was it like when you first got off the --

A: It was **[indecipherable]** that boat -- huh?

Q: Oh -- oh -- oh -- and then when you got off the boat and got onto the land?

A: When I got off the boat and on the land, the thing that absolutely -- absolutely stunned me is as we walked -- driving through the streets is the outside of the food stores. The fruit piled up. I could not imagine that human beings had that much to eat. I mean, the -- the abundance of everything, and the way people were walking around and the yelling and the screaming and the waving and -- and you know, we were driving through a Jewish section, you know, it was probably like the East Side. I mean, the exuberance of this country, after all the quiet and -- and -- and -- and the desolation and the grieving and the mourning that I've been subjected to for the last four or five years, you know, that unconsciously I had absorbed. And now suddenly seeing all this life and this -- the -- the abundance is what -- what did it for me. I mean, I -- I saw oranges this big and people didn't pay -- I saw a woman eating an ice cream cone. I hadn't seen an ice cream, I didn't even know what it looked like any more. And the thing I fell in love with was chewing gum. The driver of the car

says, would you like chewing gum? I couldn't understand what chewing gum was, but he handed me this thing and he showed me and I chewed it and I loved it. And I -- it -- I -- and it was just wonder -- I mean, everything was exhilarating to me. I didn't -- again, I didn't realize, you know, that this was the prologue to my life here.

Q: So it was you and your brother in the car, and who else?

A: Oh, and all the other children. It was like a van, like a station wagon, you know. We were like in a big bus kind of thing, and they were taking us to this place where -- where there was like a little hospital, and it was really an orphanage, but a very high class orph -- very nice. And they kept us there until we could go with foster parents, til my foster parents could take me in **Baltimore.** You know, I came -- went to foster parents, my brother and I. You didn't know that? Yeah. So anyway, I -- th- that's --

Q: So you stayed in this -- this orphanage for how long?

A: Oh, about two or three days. And then the m -- the -- the -- Mrs. --

Q: What was the name of the orphanage, do you know?

A: Mrs. **Beser** came from **Baltimore**, who came with the associated Jewish charities. She was their liaison with all this and she came and got my brother and I. Her son was the nav -- navigator who dropped the atomic bomb on **Hiroshima, Jacob Beser**. Yeah, and he never recovered from that, which I can well understand.

Anyway, she came and she got us and on the trip to **Baltimore --** I had no idea -- oh, in the meantime, my Uncle **Heinz** came and my Uncle **Adolf,** they couldn't take us for some reason or other what had to do cause they weren't citizens themselves. And my father's family came and wanted us and I decided not to, which was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life. I did not want to go with these people, I didn't know who they were, I -- I --

Q: They ga -- they all came to the orphanage?

A: Yes, and -- which was sad because I should have gone with them. They were my father's -- but my uncles didn't want me to go with them because they didn't think they were high class enough. They were real German snobs and my poor father was Polish, so they never re -- they forgave him because he was so smart, but they could not forgive these people. Anyway, it was a big mistake. Anyway, went to **Baltimore,** got another attack of my little rheumatic fever, which I didn't understand, and this time it -- it got better but it didn't stay better. I ended up going to **Sinai** Hospital in **Baltimore**. And I met my foster parents. They were probably good people, but I think were doing it for the wrong reasons, they were doing it for financial reasons, with some compassion.

End of Tape Two, Side B

Interview with Margitta Cooper
January 4, 2002

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Margitta Cooper**. This is tape number three, side **A.** You have arrived in the **United States** and Mrs. **Beser** came and took y -- and then you were told you were going to **Baltimore**?

A: Mm-hm. And -- and I -- well, I became ill on the train again, you know, that -- that last -- I think it was like the last attack, that was like the third one. And again I kind of tried not to give into it because I was still very frightened, but it really kind of overwhelmed me and eventually I ended up going to **Sinai** Hospital. I s --

Q: Thi-Thi-This is the train from **New York** to **Baltimore**?

A: And then I -- I-I went to meet --

Q: In -- in October 1941.

A: Right.

Q: So you are 12 years old?

A: Yeah. And what happened was I was ill. I met my -- I did -- I met my new foster parents that night, and as I said, part -- they had various reasons for doing it. I don't think they were the right reasons and I don't think they were the right people for us. My brother eventually went to another foster home, and so did I. But they were not, in any way, abusive. My foster father, unfortunately developed an affection for me

which wasn't quite what it should have been. It wasn't paternal, let's put it that way. So it was -- it was not a great experience for me, but it wasn't horrible either, I mean, nothing terrible happened to me, except that I did go to the hospital, I couldn't speak English, I -- they were very concerned that they didn't -- couldn't -- didn't know exactly what was happening to me. I had a wonderful pediatrician who was taking care of me. Her name was **Lucille Liebolis**, and she's very well known. And -- and I was at **Sinai** Hospital in **Baltimore** and a lot of young doctors came in and tried to speak to me and I couldn't really understand them. And finally a -- a rabbi came in from **Ohav Shalom** and he was doctor -- oh God, he was a rabbi before, Rabbi **Shaw,** I can't even remember his name, but he had come in and said he had met my father in -- in -- in **Germany,** and he spoke to me in what was passable German, and so he finally explained to me what was happening to me and why I was there, and what they were trying to do to me, because I wasn't sure what -- what they were doing. Anyway, I stayed there for six weeks. After I came out of there --

Q: Did your foster parents continually visit you?

A: Once in awhile they did come, yes. Absolutely they came.

Q: What about your brother?

A: My brother did too. But -- but what happened in between is that the **United States** went to war. And I remember all the brouhaha that was going around. I had

become friendly with the little girl next -- in the cubicle next to me who had had polio. And that was really horrible what they were doing to her because they were using the kes -- Sister **Kenny's** system with the hot towels. Anyway, she and I became friends and my favorite occupation with her was singing, "You Are My Sunshine." We sang it day and night, we drove everybody insane. But I heard all this going on and somebody explained to me and I was speaking a little English, that the **United States** was at war. And somebody came in and said to me in Yiddish, the **United States,** it is **kreig,** is at war, and he said -- I mean, I said, e -- yes? He said, we are at war with **Japan** and **Germany**. And I couldn't understand that, I thought everybody was at war. I didn't realize the **United States** were not at war, I thought the whole world was at -- that wasn't -- that was no big deal. Anyway, that's what happened when I was in the hospital. I came out, I went to a convalescent center, Saint something in **Catonsville** in maryl -- in **Baltimore**, and --

Q: Did you know Yiddish?

A: No, but the words, the many words that are similar in a di -- you know, they are close. I couldn't speak -- I only sp -- only spoke German, but there are people who speak Yiddish who can make themselves understood very easily. Anyway, I went to this Catholic convalescent home and I stayed there for another six weeks, altogether. Then they told me at that time, Dr. **Liebolis** told me I would never have children,

that I had a very bad heart. I went to the **William S. Baer** School for crippled children with horrifically handicapped children, but very nice. I -- it was a very nice experience for me. They were very nice to me. And I -- then after that I went to **Western** High School. I sat for a scholarship to **Barnard**, but I met my husband --

Q: Well, now wait a minute, you -- you -- so you went to live with your foster parents after you got out of this --

A: Yes.

Q: -- special school?

A: Yeah, yes -- oh yeah, I went back to them, but th --

Q: What were the names of your foster parents?

A: **Snowhite,** if -- if you can believe it. **Jules** and **Ceil Snowhite**. I know. Yeah, I couldn't believe it either once I understood what the word meant. Anyway, I did go back to them and then I was transferred out from there to another foster family called **Maniken**, where I met my husband, because he had been their foster child, too. My husband --

Q: Wa -- wa -- why -- why did you leave snow -- the **Snowhites?**

A: Because Mrs. **Beser,** I think they all decided that it was not a good situation. She had another child. They were a very young couple, and they had another baby and they really had no room for me. I mean, once the baby came they needed the rooms.

My brother had already gone by then to another foster family, the **Kolectors,** and I went to the **Manikens,** and -- and my husband had come from **Germany** in 1938. There were two brothers, **Walter Grunberg** -- my maiden name and my married name became the same. And I know, it's a -- yo-you've got the weirdest interview here e -- in history. And his brother **Manfred** had come. His brother **Manfred** had enlisted in the American army and was killed as a navigator, he was shot down over **Germany**. If that is not irony I cannot tell you what else would be. Anyway, **Walter** was there. She had taken the boys in -- she took five German boys, German refugees, Jewish children, in. My -- the two **Grunberg** brothers plus the three **Mann** brothers. There were three brothers there. So there were five altogether. Well, they were all gone by the time I got there, they were all either in the service -- the only one that was left was **Walter** and I hated him and he hated me and we never got along, until one day when I was about 17, he says, you doing anything? I said no. He says, I'll take you to the movies, I said okay. So he went -- he took me to a movie with his friend **Frank.** My date consisted of me trailing behind -- behind them, while they were talking to each other. They never looked at me, never talked to me. I remember the movie, was called "**The Jolson Story"** with **Al --** and I came -- then when -- what ha -- I don't know what happened -- oh, I know, we -- he says, you want something to eat? I said yes. So we went to **Nate's [indecipherable]**, which

was a very famous deli in **Baltimore**, and **Frank** says, I've got to go. So, he left and **Walter** and I s -- began to speak to each other for the first time like human beings, instead of snarling at each other all the time. And I really liked him. And he really liked me. He had been engaged before, didn't work out, and he was very handsome. He is my children's father. And we started going out. Mrs. **Maniken** was outraged. Not for any sexual reasons. Not because she thought I was not going to be a -- you know, that there was going to be anything pornographic going on under her roof, or anything obscene or that I was doing anything bad, no. **Walter** was very generous financially. He bought her lots of gifts, he had no obligations, he was working. So she wasn't too happy about that. But he asked me to marry him, and I said yes, for all the wrong reasons.

Q: How old were you then?

A: I was going to be 18. I didn't deci -- I was not the -- which meant I was not going to go to college, I was going to be married. So --

Q: And he was how old?

A: **Walter** was 24. He was born in 1925, so he -- he was four years older than I was, so he was -- no, if I was -- he was about -- he was born in 1923, I'm sorry, '23, I was born in '29, he was six years older than I was, so he was about 24 then, almost 24. I wanted to be my own person. I wanted to be free. I didn't -- I didn't want to live

under anybody's roof any more. I wanted to -- I -- you know. So I married **Walter**. I cared about him, he was a very nice -- he was a very decent man, and he always loved me til the day he died. I had my son about two years later, which was wonderful. Then I had my daughter four years after that, and then I wanted a divorce, for no imaginable reason under the sun except I wa -- had met a psychiatrist. He promised me the earth and the moon and I thought, I don't want to struggle any more, I want everything easy. I was very immature. That's where children who are -- have to grow up so quickly, in one aspect of their lives and have no chance to mature in the normal things -- I did not have the chance to be a child, ha -- be a teenager. I never had the time to do any of those things. I was catapulted from one event to another. And adjusting to new people, adjusting to more new people, adjusting to a school, learning a language. There is no excuse. I'm not making any excuses for myself because that's not the reason I'm saying it. I'm simply saying that behavior that is aberrant among people -- from people that have gone through a lot of trauma has -- there are explanations. You don't have to forgive it and you don't even have to put up with it, but you have to know that it's going to happen. And it did happen with me. I was simply not prepared to be a mother. I was -- I love my children, I adore them. And my children, for some reason, think that I walk on water. And I always tell them I don't understand that because I was really

tempted to drown both of you at birth, you know? But the thing is that I have done that with my children simply because I love them and respect them. But I was not a great mother, I was not a doting mother. I was totally self-absorbed, always. It took me years to understand that there was a world outside of me, my feelings, my anger, my rage, what had happened to me. Not poor me kind of thing, I never felt that. I never felt, oh, poor me. I always realized how lucky I was. But -- but the self-absorption was unconscious. I didn't realize it. And so my marriage failed because of that. I then --

Q: Ca-Can we back up a little bit?

A: Yeah.

Q: When the war was over in 1945, you were 16 about --

A: Yes.

Q: -- I guess. What was -- what did that mean to you?

A: I wanted to find my parents and that's the first thing I did, I went to the Red Cross. And they came back and said my parents had died, both. They gave me the news that my parents were both dead, but they gave me the wrong dates. They told me my parents -- and for years I carried that burden -- they told me that my parents had died in May of 1945, maybe 20 days before the war was over, which I fi -- again, found intolerable. If I had known they had died in the beginning of 19 -- in th

-- in 1942, when there was no end to the war in sight, it wouldn't have been so horrific, but for me to realize that, you know, they could have lived another 20 -- well, i -- that was a mistake, they had made the mistake. It was one of those things that happened. But they told me that both my parents were dead. And --

Q: What -- be-besides the timing of it, what were your reactions?

A: Well, my reaction was -- it only fed into my rage and anger. I mean, it only fed by what was now, by now a full grown hate for -- for what happened to my parents, the fact that -- that this was done to them, and a -- a -- that people -- I mean, I was angry at the **United States**. I found Jews in the **United States** are forg -- unforgiving -- I -- I wa -- I was unforgiving toward them. I felt that they were the smuggest, most complacent -- I attacked them viciously, I mean, with venom. I'd say, don't you ever talk to me about your friend Mr. **Roosevelt.** I said, don't you ever talk to me and commiserate to me about what happened in **Europe** while you were all sitting here doing absolutely nothing while your people were dying in concentration -- where were your marches to **Washington?** I mean, I railed and ranted for years. And I really made -- I mean, I have a lot of friends, and that they took this crap from me -- I mean, I'm talking about people like **Elaine.** I mean, they've been my friends for over 50 years. They took it, and they absorbed m -- my anger and their guilt. Because they didn't have anything -- it was their parents, they were young

themselves, but I -- you know, I used to go on and on on my little soap box. Now I realize, it's going on he -- I'm sitting here, what am I doing for **Israel**? I'm sending them a few checks? Am I raving and ranting and railing and running to **Washington** saying do something? No. For my people? No, I'm just as complacent as these people were. The wheel is round. My husband always said that and he is right. I personally would like to see Mr. **Arafat** writhe in agony, but it ain't gonna happen. So, I mean, it -- it -- life goes on. Anyway, I got married, I had my children, left my husband, remarried again, disaster. Met my third husband who was the gem. He was wonderful, as **Walter** had been. And then I went to wor -- when I was married, after my relationship with my psychiatrist broke up and oh -- and I realized it wasn't going to work, I went to work for the school of medicine, **Johns Hopkins**, which was one of the highlights of my life. I went to work for **A. McGee Harvey,** who was -- who was chairman of the department of medicine, physician and chief of **Johns Hopkins** Hospital and the editor of the Journal Medicine. And the **McGee -- A. McGee Harvey** building is named after him at **Johns Hopkins** Hospital. And I went for an interview, and I walk into this room, and this little man is sitting there behind this absolutely cluttered desk in this rather -- rather unimpressive office. And I shook hands with him, I had wore kid gloves. I shook hands with him and sat down. I had failed the test that the employment agency had given me. There was a big red

X right across th-the exam that she had sent out. And I saw it lying there and I figure why is he seeing me? So he -- we were chatting and he asked me about everything and I said -- to everything he asked me I said no, cause I didn't know. So then I went home. I get this call from this man, this personnel director of the **Hopkins** and he says, Mrs. **Grunberg**? I said yes. He says, welcome to **Johns Hopkins.** I said, you mean he -- they hired me? He said yes. I said, who is that little man? I said, who is this Dr. **Harvey?** Well, there was dead silence like my asking do you know who president -- who the president is. He says, that is Dr. **A. McGee Harvey,** very, very coldly. He says, he is physician and chief of this hospital and chairman of the department of medicine, and professor of medicine. He is the -- the professor or medicine. I said oh. I said, I'm so glad you didn't tell me that beforehand because I would have fainted right there on the spot. Years later -- oh, when I walked in there was another man sitting in a corner, his name was **Kenneth Zeiler. Ken Zeiler** is one of the geniuses of all time, he was chief of endocrinology. Years later I said to **Ken,** why did ha -- **Mark** hire me? He says, you walked in, you shook hands, you sat down, you looked like a lady and you spoke English. I said, not well. He said but you -- he says, believe me, you did. It was -- you know, and then the other thing that was funny about **Ken,** I saw him maybe 10 years ago, I said, **Ken**, I said, you know you were always one of my most favorite people. He was also a full professor. He

says, did you know I was in love with you? I said, what? He says, I loved you for years. I said, **Ken**, you are married. He says, I know. I says, there was never -- he says, you never knew, he says, you never realized, he says, but I always loved you. I said, you are joining that long list. Anyway, that was wonderful, he trained me to be a redactor, you know, and -- and -- with manus -- for manuscripts. He put me on the internship committee, on the residency committee, I was in charge of the **Lilienthal** library. I mean, he really trained me and gave me wonderful, wonderful time. And then my husband said to me, it's time for you not -- I'd like you to stop working. He said, you don't need to financially -- but the mean -- in the meantime my mother's brother died, my Uncle **Heinz**, and left me money, which was very nice of him. And he left it to my brother and my cousin and I, and he was very well-to-do, he was rich man. And he -- we split it three ways. And -- and my husband was comfortable, so I didn't -- but I -- I said, okay. We joined the cumtr -- country club. I became like an adult camp -- you know, we're going shopping today, we're playing bridge today, we're doing mahjong today. The skirts are too long, the skirts are too short, they're wearing boots, they're not wearing boots. Finally got to the point I was going to lose my mind. I said to my husband, I have to go do something. So I called **Ira Morris**, a friend of mine, a doctor at **Hopkin --** from **Hopkins**, who had formed a medical group down in east **Baltimore**, which is a very poor area. And he was doing the --

not an **HMO**, but similar to that, but poor, for the poor. And that's where I met **Ellen.** Wonderful day, 1976. She was the -- there was **A-Annabelle Scher, Richard Scher --** do you know **Annabelle** and **Richard Scher**? He does news, he was the anchor and **Annabelle** was there, **Ellen** was there, and I went to work for **Ira. Ira** is her dear friend and my dear friend and he's the one she talks to now all the time about this. I called up **Ira,** I said, **Ira**, I need to do something. He says, what do you want to do, darling? He called me the countess. He says, Countess, what do you want to do? I said, I want to work a couple days a week. So he said okay. So we went -- I went to work in east **Baltimore,** which was run by the state and fu -- really funded by the state, for really the -- the -- the -- you know, really people who on Medicaid, you know. And **Ellen** was sort of there the psychologist cum whatever. And -- and that's how I met her and sh -- it was wonderful. I mean, it was a wonderful job, I loved it. I worked there for like two, three days a week. And of course I kind of became the -- like, you know, I became the administrator, I became the hot honcho. And that fell apart. **Ira** and the state and Senator **Douglas** from the state of **Maryland** parted company. Not -- not -- not the -- not -- the state senator. And he formed the east -- the central **[indecipherable]** medical group and I went with him, uh-huh, and stayed there for about another 10 - 12 years. **Ellen** did not come with that, **Ellen** then, when the whole thing fell apart, it was a very ugly scene,

with a lot of newspapers and I was interviewed again, do -- you know, the whole thing. Anyway, I went to work for him and then my husband died. That was tr- tremendous trauma for me. He died in 1980, and that was very hard. I f -- think that when you lose a mate, and I'm not pontificating, I don't think anybody whose never -- whose -- until you've been there, it is probably the singlest greatest loss that you can experience. Even -- I think even in situations where the marriage hasn't been that steadfast. And people, you know, always say that, but they don't understand why a person who's lived with somebody for 30 years and has never had a nice word to say about him all of a sudden is wailing and -- and weeping all over place. Well, I'll tell you why they do. I understand. It's because that person is no longer there, it has become an attachment. It's like somebody severing a part of you. And that is why suddenly this person becomes saint -- saintly. Well, I happen to have liked my husband, so it was really, really hard. And --

Q: Do you think it was harder because you had lost your parents?

A: Oh, I think so, I think it's -- a loss for me has always been difficult. And it -- I'm basically -- the thing I discovered about myself, which is the final result of all that has happened to me, is that underneath all the bravado, and underneath all this -- this -- this -- that my friends and my children to this day believe that I am the strongest person they know. I mean, they admire that -- that underneath all that I am the most

fearful, insecure, quivering mass of jelly you have ever seen. And they don't understand that. I am terrified of everything. And that came much later. That did not come when I was young. When I was young I had that audacity. I decided to leave a husband with two children. I had the guts to do all that. The -- th-the -- the -- the thing came as I began to understand and as I began to take my life apart and look at it. If I had kept it set in concrete the way it was, without ever chiseling away at that -- that -- that -- that -- that thing that I encased everything into. If I hadn't broken that thing apart to look at it, what was in there, if I kept it encapsulated, I wouldn't be so fearful. But I think in doing that I unleashed, literally, the fear that -- and -- and -- and -- and -- and -- and the terror that I experienced as a child, that I was -- that I just buried, and -- and closed up and -- and -- and -- until it became hardened. And that's what -- that's what I did. I don't -- I'm not sorry I did it because in a way it set me free in other areas. I don't -- I'm not so consumed by anger any more and I don't tend to be as judgmental as I used to be. You know, I -- I used to be very critical of people. When they talked about the war I looked at them with the utmost superiority and say, well you don't even know what it is, you know? But now I don't -- but now I do know. I think they -- I do know what that is that they felt during the war. It may not have been of the -- the -- the -- the epic proportions that we did, who were there,

over there, but certainly they suffered, too. Children whose fathers went overseas, and you know, who were left here, alone.

Q: When your children were young, and the age that you were then things started to get difficult and your father was taken away and then you were -- did this bring -- did thi -- di-did this trigger memories for you when your children were the age you were in **Gurs,** or -- you know?

A: Oh yeah, I think so. I think there were times when I would watch my children, and I would think about it. I would -- I remember when -- when -- when **Bonnie,** I think was like -- when I took **Bonnie** to school the first time, more so than **Mark**, because **Mark** went to school happily. I mean, he would -- he -- he ran away from me to get into class. But **Bonnie** -- when **Bonnie** -- I took **Bonnie** to school and I saw her walk away for the -- for one moment I felt the anguish that my mother must have felt, that I thought about it, I said, my God, she's only going away for four hours. I feel this pain of separation. How could my mother have done it? And then when I thought about my -- th-then wh-when they did things, like when -- I remember **Mark** when he was little, ran away once. He wandered off with a child. In those days we were not afraid of the kind of things that we're afraid of now, I just was nervous and I was pregnant with **Bonnie** and when he came home, the first thing that came out of his mouth was, did I miss the Good Humor man, Mommy?

But again I felt that anguish, that fear, you know, that something had happened to the -- that -- wa -- are my children safe? Every -- I remember the scare with -- with **Kennedy** and the -- and the **[indecipherable]**

Q: The Cuban -- the Cuban Missile Crisis?

A: -- Missile Crisis. I was at **Hopkins**. My children were in school. I remember thinking i -- what are -- how am I gonna find my children? Where are my children going to be? If there's a -- an attack, how will I ever get home. And I tr -- I was trying to give instructions to my children what they should do. Don't leave. I will get to you. Daddy and I will find you. But the thing was again, I thought all the time, my chil -- I can tell my children I'll try to get to them, because I have the ability. My mother could not leave that camp to come and get me, no matter what happened to me. If they told her your child is very sick in **Marjelier**, my mother could not walk out the door and say, well, I'm going to my daughter, she needs me. I cou -- had the freedom to go to my children, and I always told my kids that. I always told them that y -- what -- when you see anything done by state -- by a state, if you see a lynching, or if you hear a cross being burned on a lawn, that's one thing. That's a terrible and ugly thing, but if you ever hear -- if you ever see this government pass a law, by state, by state, that affects you, you get out. You do not wait, you run to the nearest exit. And they said -- they didn't understand. I said, it is when a government -- when

a head of state makes a statement against a group of people, it gives all the rest permission to act against that group. So if you ever hear a state -- head of state make a statement, or if y -- Congress ever passes a law that's inimical to a group, you leave. You go wherever they will take you. You get out. Yeah, as my children grew up, I was very conscious of that. I always told them how grateful they should be, and how much this country, good or bad has given them, and that it saved my life.

Q: What are your thoughts about ger -- **Germany** today, do you feel very German? Do you still feel German?

A: Not at all. I feel absolutely American. My loyalties are totally to this country. I never think about myself as a German, ever, ever. It's interesting -- not because I deliberately did this, it was just a gradual progress. It was -- I never thought of myself any more as German, I always thought of myself as Jewish. And by Jewish I have tried to explain to my children, who are not religious, but are a -- very Jewish, I always tell them that Jew -- being a Jew is not a religion. It is only partly that. Being Jewish is -- is a state of mind. It is an -- a -- a -- a very -- it is a part of you, it's an attachment of you. It's something you cannot erase, it is just a fact. I said, you are a Jew. It is genetic. It's almost like a genetic code, it is there. It is the 5,000 years of history. And -- and I think myself as a -- an American and as a Jew. Probably first as a Jew, and then as an American.

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Margitta Cooper**. This is tape three, side **B,** and you were talking about your feelings of being a Jew.

A: I think that's one thing the Germans did for me is that they made me very conscious of Judaism and being a Jew. I think the fact that they hated -- hated Jews so much, and were -- I mean, the whole idea that they were -- that they wanted only one thing, which was to kill all of us, to eradicate us completely, I think reinforced, in me at least, and I think in most Holocaust survivors, especially those who really survived the Holocaust in these -- in the camps, that they -- that -- that part of them re -- th -- I think the -- th-the -- the main thrust now is that they are Jewish. That doesn't mean that they necessarily practice it, but their awareness of it, o-of being a Jew. You s -- you asked me how I felt about **Germany** now, retrospectively? I feel that **Germany**, tomorrow morning under **Hitler**, another **Hitler** could do the same thing. That has never changed in my -- my opinion has never changed that. The -- as I said before, I don't think they're unique in that. I think they have a **parclivity** -- proclivity to do that, maybe a little faster, because once you've committed murder, the second time it makes it easier. I think their denials don't in any way impress me.

I think they're fully capable of relighting the ovens and doing it all over again. I'm not being bitter, I'm simply saying what I believe. Hopefully their governments will never permit that, because I think ultimately it is not the people who direct those activities, it is the government that does it. And people, a -- the people respond to that, to the government's edicts. **Germany** had behaved in an exemplary fashion in the last 20 years. Their government has been democratic. The fr -- much more so than the French do -- as far as I'm concerned, the French were as rotten, in their own way, as the Germans were. I think ger -- **France's** conduct toward Jews during the second war is atrocious. The fact that they had a camp like -- camp like **Gurs** right in the middle of their country without protest, is outrageous. The fact that they transported people by the hundreds of thousands across their country to these horror is -- is -- is an indictment against them. They've never accepted their guilt. Only lately I think I'm supposed to be getting 25,000 **francs** from them for transporting my parents to **Auschwitz**. So I mean, the whole European -- the -- all of **Europe --** the ur -- Austrians, for example, we -- you know, we talk about the Austrians and the **anschluss.** The Austrians were no better than the Germans. I mean, all of **Europe** was corrupted by **Hitler**, but basically underneath it all, it could never have happened, **Hitler** could have never achieved what he did if underneath it all wasn't this enormous wave of anti-Semitism that was allowed to spread and to be acted on.

That is the calamity of the -- of -- of the second World War and the Jews; it is the fact that the Austrians, the Germans, the French, all the rest were allowed -- not only allowed but encouraged, to act on festering anti-Semitism that had been there for a very, very long time. It didn't happen in 1933, it was there. It was simply allowed to come to the surface full force and to be acted on in any way anybody saw fit. There's a lot of anti-Semitism in this country. It is suppressed, it is never allowed to be acted on. If it was suddenly allowed to be fr -- to -- to free flow, without any reins or checks, I don't know what would happen here.

Q: What do you think are the roots of that anti-Semitism?

A: Well, Christianity, of course. I think when you have -- when you ha -- are the child of a father, and I'm talking about now Judaism versus Christianity, and the father does not accept the child, in this case meaning Christ, that is an enormous slap in the face. Christians simply cannot understand why Jews do not accept Christ as a godhead. That's the number one cause. And for hundreds of years there was this myth promulgated that they -- that we killed, we the Jews killed this child, that's number one, this chi -- this godhead. Number two, the Jews have always been in professions that have been very much -- not necessarily in the professions, they have been the shopkeepers, where money has always been exchanged. They have been -- they were the ones who were sent out by the Poles and the Russians to collect taxes.

They became the hated people who collected taxes. They had to collect them because their Christian bosses told them to go out. I think they -- and the fact that Jews have had one philosophy, that is to educate, to educate and to educate. And they have also done something else that we do, most societies don't do and we don't do any more either, which is sad, is that they took the best and the brightest and they married their best and their brightest off to their best and brightest girls, and they gave them the education and those who were a little slower and not quite as bright were put in the corner and say okay, be a good boy because your brother is the smart one, he's got to learn. We did that, so we had -- we had genetically, probably, through hundreds of years had developed a group of people who were very bright, aggressive, and because of our -- because of our -- the nature of our -- of our status in other countries, we've become aggressive. We have -- we -- we -- we -- we feel that we have to act in order to achieve. We have to push and shove in order to get anywhere, even when we don't have to. And I think there is a lot of resentment about that. It's the same resentment that Americans begin to feel about Asians, because they're thrusting themselves into the forefront of education, of everything, and it's beg -- an-and it's -- and now the rest of Americans are beginning to resent them. You always resent that. Anti-Semitism is a very, very old and sad story.

Q: Have -- have you been back to **Germany** at all?

A: No, I don't want to go. Ai -- well, that's not true, I'm starting to think. **Ellen** went to **Speyer** and she -- she went to see for me, and she sent me back lots of things that look familiar. So I'm thinking maybe this year -- m-maybe not this year, but certainly by -- maybe by the end of the year, I'd like to go with my son, he said he would go. Just to see where I lived, the house is still intact, everything is intact, the synagogue is intact.

Q: How many synagogues were there in **Speyer**, just the one?

A: One, yeah. Well, there may have been little ones, but that was the big one, that was the main one. And would I go back? I think yes. My friend **Lenore** went back to **Berlin,** they actually paid for her to come, and -- she says otherwise she wouldn't have gone. She says, I would have gone someplace else, but not there. But look, life is -- life is -- is -- is -- is a survival. When I live -- when I talk to people -- when I've the -- the people that I've met that have survived the Holocaust are different from the ones who are -- who had -- who didn't have to deal with it. We are different. There are distinct differences. I don't think -- I mean, I don't think my friends or even my children know. They think I'm just like everybody else. But underneath it all, I think when you start scratching the surface there are this -- there are this -- there are things that make us, that set us apart. I never want that, you know, I think I've s -- I think I strove very hard not to be a different -- I wanted to be a normal

teenager. I wanted to be a normal wife and mother. I made very sure I dressed the same, I acted the same, I -- I was very much the young American wife, you know. I think it's obvi -- very, very important to me that I should not be any different. I didn't want my children to feel that they had a mother who was, you know, a survivor. I mean the -- I-I never talked about it. I think -- and I always felt uncomfortable with the way people look at survivors. I mean, even I look at them -- I mean, it's like I'm not one of them. Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, where were you? Oh, in **Gurs?** Must have been terrible, tell me all about it, you know? I mean, that's what I'm saying, I never wanted to be like them. I never wanted -- I mean, I couldn't -- I -- if I'd had the number, I would have never shown anybody the number. It took me years to understand that it wasn't my fault, I was not to blame for this. I didn't have to assume the guilt for this. I felt guilty, so I didn't want anybody to know, or to remind me. I -- in some way being different may -- I felt guilty because I was different. I felt guilty because it had happened to me and that -- I don't know how to explain. It's like a child that gets beaten by a parent and they assume the guilt for the parent like they had done something wro -- well, I felt that maybe something had -- we had done something. This is what I said about anti-Semitism. What did we do that we deserved this? We didn't do anything. My parents did nothing. **Gunter's** parents did nothing. I mean, my friends -- they -- we -- there was nothing that any

Jew did that deserved them to end up as bones in a gas chamber. Nothing that they could have done deserved this. And I think that the smugness of even some American Jews when they say, well, you should have fought, you know, f-fight, fight what? It came like a bolt out of the blue. These were people living normal lives. My father did not keep an **Uzi** under his bed. And he was a non-violent man and he could never have de -- done anything. Yes, now, 50 years after the fact, you have an Israeli army, and you do have men livin -- men and women in this country who would not tolerate that being done to them. But that even -- but in my community, where I live now, they wouldn't be prepared to fight an a -- a -- a -- a -- a -- the onslaught of a Nazi's raid. So, I mean, you know, it -- it's -- but I always felt that I didn't want to be -- I always -- when I meet somebody who's gone through the -- through the whole scenario, which I did not, went to **Auschi-schwitz**, survived **Auschwitz,** the fact that they used to be able to talk about it so willingly embarrassed me. That was my own s -- reluctance to deal with it, to be different. And I don't know if any of the people that you interviewed have ever told you that they did not -- they didn't want to be -- they wanted to be like everybody else. They wanted to be normal. Especially with their very young. A child doesn't want to be -- I mean, my friend **Phyllis Coen**, who I'm been friends with for over sixt -- for 60 years because I met her when I was 12, in elementary school, sh-sh -- she said she

remembers me very well. I don't. I don't remember her because I think I blocked out that thing. I didn't want to be the little girl who sat in class, that everybody was talking about, who was -- had come over from **Germany**, and her parents didn't come with her and I think her parents are in a concentration camp, and I think she was in a concentration camp. I didn't want that. I wanted to be like them. I envied them. I envied them being -- going -- I remember I used to -- I always had friends. I remember being envious of going to my girlfriend's house after school and having -- we used to have cookies or milk, or I had a friend who loved tomato soup. She would open up cans of tomato soup for me, surely, and I would sit there and have tomato soup. And her mother would come in and she'd bend down, she'd kiss her. And she always patted me on the head, she always liked me. And say, girls, what else do you want? But I envied her the normalcy. I never had that and I wanted my children to have that. You know, I want -- I used to play hopscotch with my children when I -- because I want -- didn't -- I wanted them to not feel that alienation, and I always wanted to be the same, like a -- of course, I couldn't be. I didn't have the parents, you know, to make hi -- tomato soup. But -- and -- and again, it took me years to understand, that as sad as that was -- and it was sad, it was sad for a little girl not to have a mother and father. It was sad for me to have my first period and not know what it was, to see the -- you know, to see it and not understand what was

happening to me. I thought -- I was ashamed that I had done something wrong, because -- you know. Finally somebody explained it. But, on the other hand, years later when I used to listen to the stories of what went on in their lives, that looked so glorious to me from the outside, all the neurotic parents and the things that were going on behind closed doors which weren't so wonderful, I didn't know that at the time. I might not have been so longing for it if I had known that with that -- with everything there comes a price. And you know, that being a -- a child, you know, that my -- some of my friends had very tough lives of their own, with their parents.

Q: Di-Did you come to any of these newer insights through counseling, or just on your own?

A: No, on my own. I -- it -- you know, th-through examine -- I guess examining myself a little more and being a little more honest, I think we lied to ourselves so much, unconsciously. I mean, I -- I -- I -- you know, when people used to say to me -- I used to say to them, when people would push me a little bit and say to me, **Margitta**, n -- a -- you know, you just have a trace of an accent, that's the only way anybody would every know you weren't born in this country, I was so proud of myself, because I had achieved that look, you know, that American look that, you know, that -- that together, put together look and that nobody ever suspected anything. And that's one of the reasons I never wanted to talk about it, because once

I did talk about it, or mention anything like that, then I became different, and I didn't want to be different. You know, I wanted to spring full grown from a nervous head, you know, as -- as this American young adult. Then, as time went on, when I began to realize my anxiety about my children, when I began to underst -- when -- as I said, when I start hacking away that piece of steel inside of me that I had closed in and started to -- opening up and beginning to realize what I had done, I had taken 15 years of my li -- whol -- my first 15 years of life and just shoved it in a corner and pretended it didn't exist. Well, dammit, it did exist, and it was hava -- re -- in some ways going to wreak havoc on me somewhere down the road. We p -- I mean, the -- the survivors who won't deal with it ha -- I-I -- I'm sure -- I-I mean, we're old now, but through the years I'm sure a lot of them paid a very heavy price, because you cannot ignore what has happened to you. I cannot ignore my terror when those men came at that -- to my door at five o'clock in the morning and told my parents to pack up my clothes. I cannot -- I can't alter that, the terror, and the -- what I felt when I saw my father weeping. Weeping, sitting there with a shoe in his hand, trying to put his shoe on and weeping because he knew at that moment that his life and my mother's life and probably my grandmother's and his children's lives were over, done with, they were going to die. He knew it, because he had fought so hard to get us out and he wouldn't have done that if he had thought we would live. I can never

forget my grandmother's face. She had these magnificent big blue eyes, she was a beautiful woman. Like, she looked -- she didn't look like my mother, but they were both beautiful, really beautiful. Unusually pretty women. The way she looked when she looked around, she said, wh-where's the bed? And my mother's tears when she realized that her mother -- she thought her mother had had a stroke. I mean, -- and on this horrible train. And the men banging, the soldiers banging on the window, saying give us your jewelry or you're going to die. I mean, those things were real, and my sticking them somewhere there wasn't going to -- wasn't going to help me or my children. I finally sat my children down and said these are the facts of life, this is what you need to know, this is what really happened. I want you to understand it. I'm not saying -- telling you this cause I want -- expect you to feel sorry for your mother, because your mother is one of the lucky ones and I've had a good life. But I want you to understand what happened to your grandparents. And I did, I told them everything. And then when I got all this crap together for -- for the -- **France,** I -- I did, I got hysterical. I was at **Bonnie's** house in **Florida** and she was **Xeroxing** and she was looking at something and I looked at it and it was a transport list. And I did, I just lost it. I lost it at **Vad Yashe -- Yad Vashem --**

Q: **Yad Vashem.**

A: Yeah, in -- in **Israel**. But, for the most part it's okay. I'm fine with it now. But I had to deal with it and I think that the Holocaust -- I -- I admire those people who survived. I admired what they achieved. I look at a man -- ooh -- I look at a man like **Wiesel**, who is, I think the classic exponent of what human beings can survive and make of themselves. And I listened to some of the -- and I've listened to others, and I think to myself, they're so much braver than I was, because they faced it, and they dealt with it. I didn't. I just pretended it never happened. I made up a fantasy about the whole thing. You know, okay I went to **Gurs**, it wasn't really bad. I had to leave my parents, but it was all right. You know, I went si -- to **Marjelier**, that was okay, too. We were in **Marseilles,** we were afraid of being arrested. I had rheumatic fever, fine. I'll survive that, too. I mean, those are things -- I went to a hospital, couldn't speak a word of English, they were doing things to me I didn't understand. I mean, those things are things you need to deal with. You can't just blithely say them and think they're going to go away, they're not. They have -- they affect you. And I think that's what happened to me, I finally through the years learned to deal with it. Pretty well.

Q: Are there any sights today, or sounds, or smells that trigger memories? You -- you -- you gave one of when you took your child to nurser -- to kindergarten and

you had to say goodbye and you thought of your mother. Are there any other things that you see in the world around you, or hear, that also triggers memories?

A: Lots of things. Well, as I said, when I smell **Gruyere** cheese, it always reminds me of that trip. Dishwater. Dirty dishwater reminds me of **Gurs** because the soup smelled strange, and I'd smelled a little bit like th -- like cabbage-y. I think when I see pictures of -- of -- there was a film with -- which I never an -- I never watch anything that has to do with the concentration camps ever, and I have not seen **"Schindler's List,"** I do not -- I have not been to the Holocaust Museum, I haven't -- the only place I ever went to was **Yad Vashem** and that was very hard for me. But I think it's time for me to get over that a little bit. There's certain thing, it -- like, I saw a movie with **Vanessa Redgrave** where she was playing the violin. Well, we had -- we had a young woman who had like a flute with her in **Gurs,** and she would play occasionally. So when I hear those plaintive sounds, it reminds me. You n -- you never forget. Whenever I see pictures of **France**, you know -- I don't know where it was, I think couple years ago they were talking about the **Pyrenees,** and I -- I was right there. I mean, I saw it all ag -- all over again.

Q: Have you been back to that part of **France**?

A: I've never been back to **France.** But I mean, those are things that -- that remind me. When I see pictures um -- the second World war, when I see, for example, some

old movies that are mi -- that reminds me when I came over here and -- and gila -- **"Casablanca"** for example, I st -- you know -- I mean there are a lot -- **Lisbon**, when somebody talks about **Lisbon,** I'm back, you know, when -- with the bread and baskets. Yes, I think there are always memories. There are always certain smells that suddenly you are transported back. I cannot look at a **Bing** cherry, that -- without thinking of when **Hilda**, who was -- used to take care of us, my brother and I, during the summer, and she used to get the **Bing** cherries with the -- the thing and make earrings for me. And I-I remember that all the time. I -- when I see old movies that have th -- I mean, **"Tarzan**," I loved that book, I read that in concentration camp. "**An Old Fashioned Girl"** by **Louisa May Alcott,** I read that. Those are things I'll always remember, you know, that I don't know, it -- it -- it -- it's -- it's unexpected, I mean, you don't look for it, it's -- just happens and -- and it's there. I mean, you don't look for those memories, they just happened. And I think scent is a very pow -- provocative kind of memory. The thing I -- my mother's birthday and my father's, I always, you know, think about them. I sometimes can't believe -- I still can't believe that -- that -- one of the -- I'm sure that you've heard this so many times, that I ha -- one of the things that I have never been able to grasp -- I understand it intellectually, but emotionally, how an -- bo -- how c-could I ever be that angry, or that full of hate that I could take women and put them on a cattle car

and let those people walk into an oven to die? Into a chamber to die? Could -- how could that have happened? I mean, that's -- those are moot questions, they've been asked a million times. How did it happen and why'd it happen. But I sometimes think to myself, I was there, I saw these people. I understand that after awhile they lose their humanity. You do -- no longer look at them as human beings. They've lost it. I mean, they've become gray and dirty and with matter hair and they are no longer these attractive people that maybe you saw the first time. After awhile they bec -- they shuffle, they don't walk any more, they have become vacant looking, they have no expression in their eyes. But even so, can you do that? Can you tell somebody -- send somebody to their death? Those are the questions I've had about all this applica -- for th-these last 50 years. How can we -- how could that have happened? How could it have happened to somebody like my mother, who was such an immaculate woman, to end her life that way? You know? Who was brought up carefully by her own mother, and cherished? And yet, ended -- and had to die in that way, for what reason? An-And I -- I -- as I said, I became an agnostic when I was 14, but not because of that. I must tell you, I never decided there was no God because -- and I still have not decided that because nobody can prove one way or the other. The only reason -- it's not because of my own rage, that had nothing to do with it. It just seemed scientifically and logically impossible to me. I mean, it's like,

what did I hear, y-yesterday, somebody saying I can't really believe that people around there flapping with their win -- wings, there are just too many of them. But, I mean, I became agnostic because I -- I c -- I couldn't accept the reality of a -- a -- an organized religion that, you know, of a God. I mean, I just -- not because how could he have done -- had that happen. That is the -- that is the cry of -- of -- of grief and mourning, how could you let that happen to us, we are your chosen people. I always felt that we would have been a lot better off if He'd chosen the Chinese, but you know, but the thing is, that isn't why I decided. And of course, underneath it all I'm just as much of a coward as anybody else and I'm hoping I'm wrong.

Q: What about raising your children religiously? Did they have any religious education?

A: Yes, my children are th -- bar -- bat -- mar -- bon **--** they were **Bas Mitzvahed** and **Bar Mitzvahed.** And --

Q: Di-Di-Did your brother have a **Bar Mitzvah** when he was 13?

A: Yes, he had a **Bar Mitzvah**, a very nice one. And my nieces, his two daughters were raised and was -- both were **Bar Mitzvah** and my nieces children were **Bar Mitzvah** and **Bas Mitzvah**, yeah, I -- th-the tradition has continued. Not in the sense that my father would have.

Q: But -- but your children had --

A: Oh --

Q: -- Hebrew school training?

A: Oh, absolutely, and again, they chose -- if they ch -- they choose not to be religious, but they're very, very conscious, as I said earlier, of being Jewish and the obligation that being a Jew means. I mean, I told them, I said, it is not the religion. I said, I don't care if you do not go to shul, or to Temple, I said, but I care very, very much if you ever lose your identity as a Jew. That is your first identity, a second identity is that you are an American Jew. And I think that's a big difference. You know, I am a Jew. I may not be religious, but I am a Jew all the way, and nobody -- I mean, that would be the first thing I would ever tell anybody, I am a Jew, and I'm an American. So I think there is, as I said, I think being Jewish is being like a statehood, you know, it's -- it's -- it's -- it's a very special thing to me. And I think that I got from my father, because my father was a very bright man and also a philosopher. I mean, he had a philosophy. He believed that -- he believed that -- that religion brings with it other things. Pride in who you are, in your traditions, in the -- in your -- in the knowledge, in what the -- the contributions that your -- your people have made. I mean, if you really think about it, the Jews have contributed one-third of all the **Nobel** prizes winners in the world.

End of Tape Three, Side B

Interview with Margitta Cooper
January 4, 2002

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Margitta Cooper.** This is tape number four, side **A,** and you were talking about your father, and --

A: Well, my father was an avid -- my father was an avid reader, like I am. That's one thing he and I shared. And the thing was that he also had enormous interest in people, and he was very well liked. There was a -- there was a man, I don't know y -- are you interested in classical music? Okay, there was a man that used to be on every Saturday night, cannot think of his name, I have his letter home, who used to c -- do a program on classical music, what was his name? **Cliff**? Anyway, he was from **Speyer** and he was on **PBS** every Saturday for an hour or two hours and I wrote him a letter once and he wrote me a letter back and he says, your father trained me for my **Bar Mitzvah**. I mean, this is a very famous man, he came from **New York**, I think he's dead now. Anyway, he says, your father was very nice, he said, but your mother was a lot prettier and I had a crush on her. But my father -- the only thing he -- my father ever did for me -- to me that I didn't like is he made me play the violin instead of the piano. But he always used to say to me, what you have in your mind is gold, because nobody can take it from you. He said, and for every word you learn, he says, you will get smarter, more intelligent. And I said, what do

you mean? He said well, he says, if you learn a new word today, he said, that means you know that word and you will become more intelligent. He says, it'll help you. And it took me years to understand that. Then of course, then I read **John Milton**, and **John Milton** had said the same thing, vocabulary is a power. So I -- I -- that -- you know, he was just -- I miss not have known -- I miss not having known him as an adult, because as a child you hold -- talk to your parent in a different way than I would have, let's say if he had -- if I had gotten to know him as an adult and he and I could have shared adult thoughts. And that I never had the chance to do.

Q: What was your brother's **Bar Mitzvah** like in 1942?

A: Well, my uncle came -- my uncles -- my whole family -- I mean, the family came from **Germany** -- I mean, from **New York,** God. And his foster parents gave it to him -- well, at that time we were still with **Snowhites,** so sh -- they gave it. And of course, it was really nice. We -- he was -- a **Bar Mitzvah** at an -- an Orthodox synagogue. There was a party for him. He was shorter than I was at that time, then he grew to be six feet tall. And he was very excited, he did very well. And the thing I remember, he wore this navy blue suit, you know, how little boys dress for -- and he was reading the **Haftorah** and he really did very well, and I think -- and I remember my f -- my -- m-my uncle looked at me -- and I'm sure he wa -- I mean, we were all thinking about my father, I mean, that he's -- could not be there, I mean,

he would have trained his own son, you know, for the **Bar Mitzvah** himself -- that he couldn't be there. But I have to tell you, my Uncle **Heinz** came to my son's **Bar Mitzvah**, too. And when my son stood up to go -- you know, to -- to -- and I -- they called his father and I up to the **Bima.** And I remember, of course, I remember what I wore. I wore a suit about the color of **Jacqueline Kennedy's,** which she wore to **Texas,** that color pink, and I wore a big hat. I really looked great that day. And I looked very young. I mean, you know, everybody thought I looked like I was 20. And we -- I stood up there with him, and when I looked down the tears were rolling down my uncle's face. And I said to him afterwards, I said**,** Uncle **Heinz**, I said, why were you crying? He says, I thought of how you -- your father would have loved the way your son looked, you have a beautiful son, and how you looked. I said, I know. Well, I remember my **Tante Betty**, she was a cousin of my mother's, we were walking down the aisle when I was getting married to -- to **Walter.** I wore pale blue slipper satin, it was a beautiful gown, and my Uncle **Heinz** paid for all that too. He was, as I said, rich. Anyway, I didn't know how rich he was then. I wish I had. Anyway -- anyway, I'm walking down the aisle and of course everybody -- I don't have to tell you, I'm walking down the aisle with my uncle, and of course everybody in -- it was down at the **Luxemburger** Temple in -- in **New York,** and everybody knew, oh poor **Margaret,** poor little orphan, poor little thing, you know,

and I knew it and I held my head up very high. And my Aunt **Margaret** had given everybody orders to control themselves, you know. Except my **Tante Betty**. As I am walking down the aisle I hear this shriek. **[indecipherable]** I thought to myself, stupid woman. And -- you know, she was always very melodramatic. I lost two crowns and I feel very self-conscious -- at -- and I didn't lose them, thank God, I mean the two -- four crowns, actually, the whole thing came out yesterday. Four thousand dollars if I'd lost them. Anyway, yeah, she as shrieking at the wedding, and my -- **Walter** turned around to me afterwards -- and I remember thinking my knees were shaking so much, I was so nervous, you know, and I remember **Walter** didn't want to laugh, because he heard it, this **Margitt.** Anyway, so I -- aft -- so I -- that part, you know, I'm -- it's sad that my father never had a chance to see his grandchildren or even his son, or my mother. Now, when I was little, I went upstairs once to the attic. We had a huge house, it was three stories. There, **Gail,** believe it or not, was a chest, a hope chest that was yay high, maybe two and a half feet high and maybe 70 inches across. In that hope chest were sheets, beautiful, lace embroidered sheets with my initial on it and a space for where my husband's would go. Towels. Everything ever was so gorgeous I couldn't wait to get married. I never wanted to be married, but I thought this it beautif -- and now I -- you know, I used to think -- that was another thing that used to piss me, excuse me. Who got my sheets? Who was

using **M.G.** with a little space for the husband? All these things. My mother's sterling silver. All her bu -- beautiful things gone. You know, these were material things, I mean, they don't make up for a life. But when you -- but it -- she had to think about that. I mean, I -- I would be thinking -- h-how -- what did she think about in the concentration camp? What did she think when she went -- got to **Auschwitz?** What were i -- ow -- I mean, if there is an afterlife. Those are the questions I have. What did they feel like? What did they think once my brother and I were gone? What did they think when they saw us on that train going to -- you know, these little children, all these little children hanging out of the train, you know, and looking bewildered. And so many of them were -- you know. How did that mother feel who let her little seven year old go -- six or seven year old child go, you know, and she was alone. She was alone, she had no husband. But I would -- I -- I thought about that. I think about it, what if my father's -- if he was dying -- if he had died of a heart attack and didn't know, that's one thing. But suppose he wa -- had been dying -- suppose he died -- suppose these people died, they knew they were dying, the men, or the women, and they were leaving their mate behind to face something dreadful alone. At least if they had each other, there was some support. You were not alone in your fear, but if you had -- if you were a husband and you were dying and you were leaving your wife alone to face whatever there was coming

-- and I think by now they knew about **Auschwitz**. They had to know, they had to know that the camp was being emptied out. Where were all these people going? They were not going home. So they knew they were going someplace terrible.

Q: Do you and your brother talk about what you went through now? Or did you as you were young adults and more mature adults? Did you talk about it and do you still talk about it?

A: My brother -- I approached my brother several times and my brother's word to me always was, I don't remember. There are a few things that he remembers. He remembers **Marseilles.** I think he does not remember **Marjelier**. He remembers very little of **Gurs**, but he remembers. But he remembers very little -- if I remem -- mention people to him, he doesn't remember them. I knew he did not remember **Gunter Katz** at all. He didn't remember **Truda**. He --

Q: Do-Does he talk about your parents?

A: Very little. He remembers very little. He said my mother -- he -- the thing he said to my sister-in-law about my mother is that he says she was bossy. Which was true. My mother was firm. I mean, she had -- it was her way or no way. But he was a very fragile child. I mean, even before that, I think he was a very sensitive little boy, and I think he probably suffered in -- more than I did. Certainly he had more -- it had more of -- of -- a -- me -- well, he's not intro -- inpu -- he -- it would not be -- he's

not introspective. He does not look into things. I think he -- he keeps them covered up. I think he -- it was -- it had -- the whole thing was very painful for him and I think he does not want to talk about it at all.

Q: When you talk to him, do you talk in German, or in English?

A: Only English. He doesn't remember one word of German. Not a word. Nothing. That's what I meant when I said he just wiped the slate clean, but I mean clean. He -- I said to him something once about **Gurs** and he says, I don't remember. And I said something about coming over here in the **Safir Pinto**, he says, I remember being really seasick. I said, you were terribly sea -- he was very seasick. But that's it. He remembers being with his foster parents very well. From that moment on, he remembers everything. I mean, he remembers everything when he came to this country. Once he was here, his memory is perfect. It was just those time before that, he just doesn't remember.

Q: Did you fee -- keep up any connection with your first foster parents?

A: They're all dead, long -- oh, you mean --

Q: Well, I meant before they died.

A: No. No, no, no, I think they went back to **Philadelphia**, which is where I think they wanted to be. Oh -- oh -- oh no, they got divorced. The **Snowhites?**

Q: No, the first -- the first po --

A: The **Snowhites.**

Q: Those were your first po --

A: Those -- the **Manikens** were my second. The **Snowhites** got divorced, which -- and she remarried. She was really a nice -- she would have been a much nicer lady if she hadn't been so harassed with two little -- I mean, with one four year old, then two more children coming in what is really now -- was not that big a house. And the respon -- and frankly, I wasn't very -- I'm sure I wasn't very cooperative either, because I wasn't feel -- and I didn't like her. And I was very puzzled by the whole thing. It was not what I expected, you know. I think I had -- I'd seen **Shirley Temple** in "**Poor Little Rich Girl.**" I expected to move into this little mansion, you know, and have a nice little butler named **Arthur Treacher** taking care of me. I never expected to, you know. So -- oh, I had illusions of grandeur too, and I was very immature in that sense, too. I mean, I wasn't -- I was 12, but I don't think that I was really a true 12. I -- like a -- I was still young, like a child in many ways.

Q: But you se -- you had alluded to the first -- your first foster father, but there was no physical abuse or anything. Or was there?

A: No, sexual abuse.

Q: Sexual abuse.

A: Yeah, there was. There really was, and that's something my children did not know. I think I told **Bonnie** once a long, long time ago that sometimes things hap -- but I mean, it was limited, let's put it that way. I mean, you know, but he certainly tried. And except I was so frightened, I didn't know, you know? And when I told **Walter** when we were married, he was going to go find him and kill him. And you know, I said, that's not an answer. He says, how could he, you were 12 years old. I was, I was 12 years old, but I was, you know, starting to develop and -- and it wa -- it -- it happened when I came back from the convalescent home, so I was already almost 13. Because I went to the convalescent home in 1942, and si -- and I was going to be 13 in June. So, it happened around that time, and it didn't happen, you know, very often. But I just knew he fondled me and I didn't understand that.

Q: Did -- did you report it to anybody?

A: No.

Q: Did you say anything?

A: I never told Mrs. **Beser**, whom I saw once a month. I never told a soul. And I did not tell a soul for years and I'm telling you for the first time, except maybe my daughter. I just never talked about it. It -- now, you know, now of course it's wonderful cause girls can talk, but in those days, who would have believed me? This was a very respectable man. They would have thought I was making it up. Nobody

would have believed me and for years I wouldn't say anything, I wouldn't have said anything. Because of -- the chances are that somebody would have thought it was -- I was lying and I was -- I was afraid. And as I said, he never really harmed me. L -- it -- when I told **Walter,** he believed me. I mean, **Walter** knew that I would never, never lie about something and I -- just there was no reason for me to. Look, I had a t -- I had a doctor once, and -- who became very famous, his name was **Edgar Berman.** He wa -- became a famous surgeon, he took my tonsils out when I was 16 years old, and he was doing something with my -- on my boob, I thought it was part of the exam. It wasn't until I was married that I understood that this is not part of an exam. But he was doing it, talking to me the whole time, never paid any attention, you know? And so I mean, wi -- girls, you know, I -- we don't -- that -- that didn't upset me at all because I thought it was -- I had been examined so much in my life and I had so much blood taken and so many **EKGs** taken and so much stuff, that I just thought it was something new for the tonsillectomy, that it was part of that. And it took me, when I was married, about three fo -- I never told **Walter** about that one. I told him enough abou -- but I, you know, I think most young women have an unfortunate experience somewhere along in their lives before they are married, that somebody tries something. So it is nothing unusual, nothing exceptional happened to me. It was not a rape, it was nothing brutal like that. It was just a guy who was, I

think maybe not -- I wouldn't call -- certainly would not have called him a pedophile. I just think he was -- I was a young woman growing into maturity and that wa -- and I was in his house, probably, you know, running around in -- in a slip without thinking. I don't know. Again, we tend to blame ourselves, there's no excuse for his behavior. But that's what happened.

Q: Do you get reparations?

A: No. I never knew I could. No, because first of all, I didn't have loss of -- I didn't have loss of work. The Germans -- the French are now paying for the loss of my par -- mother going to **Auschwitz**, they're willing to do that. As I said, they're giving 80,000 **francs**, which I haven't gotten yet. My brother did, but I haven't yet.

Q: What -- what about your father, the loss of your father, they don't --

A: No. No, no, no, no, why would they do that? They pay for nothing. There are no reparations from **Germany**. **Germany** only did it for property, and I got something for my house years and years ago. Probably I mishandled that -- my brother and I did. But, you know, the thing is, they -- they did pay reparations, are you ready for this, to **Israel** -- to these -- to **Israel,** is they sent **Mercedes-Benz**, mer -- that -- I could never understand that, why did they do that? As -- as an atonement for what they did?

Q: Do you feel totally assimilated now?

A: In this country? Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I have absolutely nothing left that -- of -- to -- of **Europe** at all. I mean, as I said before, I've all -- I've -- I've considered myself an American from the get-go. The thing I feel bad about are the fact that my children have never had a family, that they've never had grandparents, you know.

Q: Wh-When they were younger and you hadn't told them the whole story, what did you say to them when -- about not having grandparents? How did you present it to them, before you told them?

A: I told them that their grandparents were dead on Daddy's and Mommy's side. Both of them died in ur -- both died in **Europe**. And then as they got older I told them that both their p -- all four of their grandparents died in concentration camps -- **Walter's** did, too. So, I said, this is what happened, and then they began to understand. I mean, you know, they un -- my children are unusual in the sense they had four grandparents die in a concentration camp. **Walter's** parents died too, and so did mine.

Q: Have you been back to **Europe** at all?

A: I've never gone back to **Europe**. When I stood dramatically with arms stretched out like **Rose** in the **Titanic** saying, I'm leaving, remember this moment, I meant it. I was not going to come back. But I'm ready now. Again, you know, it ta -- it took

me -- I'm a little slow. But I told the children that I'd be willing to go back to **Germany** and see, and go back to **France**, you know, and see something. And I'd like them to see th -- first of all, from a **thetic** point of view, it's the -- it's a beautiful country and there's no reason for them not to see it, you know. And thank God they don't have those memories. They're gonna look at it -- they may look at it with some sorrow for me, but certainly from their point of view, it -- it -- wa -- wa -- there's no -- there's noth -- no anguish there for them, you know? I mean, they don't know th -- they never knew their grandparents, so it's fine. I want them to see it. It's -- yeah, go ahead.

Q: What -- this is some time ago, but what were your thoughts during the **Eichmann** trial?

A: That they couldn't hang him high enough. I mean, my feelings for mist -- well, the thing that impressed me about **Eichmann** is number one, the way they got him. And my fervent regret that they never got **Mengele**. But I also felt that he represents to me what I said again earlier, that **Germany**, under the right kind of **Führer** could absolutely revert right back to 1932 without any question, because **Eichmann** was totally, totally unremorseful. He was -- did not regret one thing that he did. The only thing he regretted is that he was caught. He had -- he -- he felt absolutely justified in what he did, which is the -- the horror of the whole thing, is -- is what I s -- wa --

you know, how can you do this to another human being, I asked? Well, **Eichmann** thought that was absolutely justified. That is what's so terrifying. Not that these people did things that were aga -- went against the grain. These people did things that they felt were for the greater good of -- for all. This was for the greater good of **Germany**. They were doing by the -- the -- the -- the -- the ends justified the means -- or the means justified the ends, whatever. The point was that they felt what they had done was the thing to do. And that's what's frightening. When people do things that go against them, somewhere they begin to break down. Somewhere their conscience begins to catch up with them, but not if you really believe you're doing the right thing. Then you just go on. And **Eichmann** sat in that chair in frozen, like glacial calm, because he was right and they -- his -- th-the people, his accusers, were wrong. He was convinced of that. And he went to his death believing it. So I am convinced that if tomorrow morning a new regime -- I mean, look what the Germans have continued doing to the Turks. I mean, whatever their doing to their -- to foreigners, it is there. That absolute belief that somewhere along the way, they have achieved some kind of superiority. And that everybody else is really just a notch beneath them.

Q: Will you -- do you buy German products?

A: No. No, and my daughter bought a **Porsche**. It was a very dramatic day. She said, I saw this little car. And I said oh, is that darling, is that adorable. It was in **Massachusetts.** She's a very successful woman. So she says hop in, I'll give you a ride. So we drive gila -- **Gloucester**, which is a lovely fishing town in mas -- loved it. And it was a very teeming, raining day and I'm -- I -- I mean, every time we went by this, water would wash over the whole car, it was -- and I jump out and she says, you like it, Mother? I said, it -- I'm telling you **Bonnie**, it's adorable. I said, what kind is it? She said, oh, she says, it's like a little sports coupe. And of course, you know your child, right? I said, **Bonnie**, what little sports coupe? She said, Mother, she said, now don't get excited. I said, I'm not excited. She says, you're gonna be. I said no I'm not, I said, tell me. She says, it's a **Porsche**. I said, a **Porsche?** You bought a -- I said, I guess next you'll be buying **Braun**. She says, **Braun**, a coffeemaker? I said, oh, you already got one. It was a nice car. She sold it. No, I won't buy it. I -- y-you know, which is really st -- you know, i-it -- a -- i-it -- o-outside of -- inside of me goes this constant battle. Am I being really rationable, and -- and -- and normal, and -- not -- or stupid? I mean, what am I -- what -- what am I achieving? **Braun** does not miss me. The **Porsche** company will produce cars, **BMW** is booming and the **Volkswagen** is back in full swing. So what -- what does my boycotting have to do with anything? Is it just a matter of principle, or is it just --

am I being absolutely wrong in doing this? Those are the questions. I know people that -- that did not survive anything, who are American born, who will not buy a German product, because -- out of respect for those who went before. And they won't do it. And yet, I know that there are s -- Holocaust survivors, who are wearing the German watches, buying the German cameras, driving the German cars. They don't think it's anything wro -- so, it's fine, whatever you want to do, you know. I have never bou -- I've never had the need to buy it, but I am going to buy the **Braun** toothpa -- brush, because you know, being what is known as common sense wise, it's a very good toothbrush.

Q: On that note, is there anything else you wa --

A: No, I think **[inaudible]**

Q: -- you want to add to what you said today, any other thoughts?

A: Well, the only other -- I don't have another thought besides **Braun**. The thing I think that I would like -- if anyone ever listens to this ramble, the only thing I would like them to n -- remember is that vigilance -- and I'm sure they're going to hear this on every tape that is in -- in this museum, that vigilance is something that Jews and all people need. That human beings need to take care of each other, respect each other. I'm not asking them to love each other, because that's really hard to do, but at least have respect and trust. If we have a sense of trust of each other, even if -- when

there's betrayal, and there is bound to be betrayal between peoples, but if there is sufficient trust left, we can survive. We can't survive without it. And I think this is the most difficult lessons for man to learn and he hasn't learned it yet, we haven't learned it. We have not learned it in this year of 2002, we are -- you know, the -- let me end up on a note ma -- of a man much wiser than I will ever be. **Thucydides** wrote a book called "**The Peloponnesian Wars."** And the book was written, I would say, 1500 to 2000 **B.C.**. And he opens the book -- and I'm paraphrasing because I'm not as clever as **Thucydides**. He said, we are once again engaged in a great war, because we have not learned from the past. This man wrote this 4,000 years ago. And we begin the year 2002, once again engaged in great wars all over this globe. We haven't learned anything. And I think if my experience and those who came before me and those who will come after me, will teach anyone, it's that we need to learn to trust each other and to know something about justice and decency toward each other. That's all I can say.

Q: Well that's a lovely note to end on. Thank you very much for doing the interview.

A: Thank you. Now, I'd like a --

Q: This is a -- this concludes the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum collection interview with **Margitta Cooper.**

Interview with Margitta Cooper
January 4, 2002

End of Tape Four, Side A

Conclusion of Interview