This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Susanne Bennet conducted by Gail Schwartz on March 22, 2012, in Washington, DC. This is track number one. What is your full name?

It's Susanne Klejman Bennet.

And where were you born?

I was born in Warsaw, Poland.

And when were you born?

In August of 1938.

August, what date?

August 11, 1938.

1938. Now I know you have been interviewed previously. So we won't spend a lot of time on your wartime experiences. But I would like to get a sense of what happened to you and a sense of who your family was. How many generations back can you go with your family in Poland?

Back to-- well, actually in the 17th century, my father's family came from Holland to Poland. This was during the time of the Spanish invasion of Holland. My mother's family were Lithuanian and Russian, but she herself was born in Poland.

Was she born in Warsaw?

You know, I'm not sure. I would have to look that up. I'm not sure. I did find-- a friend in Poland sent me a clipping once about a direct ancestor of my father's from mid-19th century who apparently was a very early-- owned factories, and very early on had actually helped his workers to lead somewhat better lives than they normally would have, and had been written about at some length as sort of an early reformer.

And that's about it, because my parents were around in the early '30s when the war broke out. My mother was 31. And that was rather early to have bothered to talk to their parents about their own families.

Right. Tell me your parents' names.

They were John Jacob Klejman and Helena Klejman.

And your father, do you know when your father was born?

He was born in 1906 in Sochocin, Poland.

OK. And do you know the date, the date, the actual date? No? OK, that's all right. And your mother?

April 29, 1906. My mother-- Oh boy, you know, I lost-- I have a little booklet, if there's a way we can correct this later--

Yeah, that's OK.

--which I have been trying to find, that had all of these dates of things. And I've looked for it for the last two weeks and haven't been able to locate it. My mother was born in 1908.

And what kind of work did your father do?

My father had an art gallery. He was an art dealer, antiquities dealer, as it was called then.

In Warsaw?

In Warsaw. And my mother always worked with him.

Did you have any siblings?

No. Because I was born just before the war broke out, so I did not. But they did. They both had siblings, all of whom died, around 1943, or disappeared in 1943.

Really? Was that part of the family also in Warsaw?

Yes. Everybody had been pushed into the ghetto, which was very, very small in Warsaw before the war and was vastly expanded by the Germans who took over a huge area of the neighborhood around the tiny little ghetto and then proceeded to pack it, not only with all the Jews they could get their hands on in Warsaw, but also brought people in from all over Poland.

Now, obviously, since you were born in August of '38, your memories, the initial memories, of what happened-- or the initial information that you have must have come from your mother. So can you say anything that she told you that would pertain to when you were born and what happened after the-- what the story of the experiences were?

My mother and father both, my father never spoke about the war. My mother didn't speak about it very much either. In fact, one of the few times she talked about it was when my daughter was taking an ethics course in high school and asked her some questions. They never wanted to talk about it. My mother's thing was that it was all passed. You couldn't bring people back. And there was simply no point.

The only things they did talk about was that they refused to apply for any reparations when that came up because they felt that there was no way you could make reparations for what had happened. My father would sometimes talk a little bit about his family, but it was always prewar vacations, that sort of thing.

So your family, obviously, before you were born, was a well-to-do family. And as you said, they took vacations, and they were upper-class or whatever.

Well, middle.

Upper-middle.

Well, like most Jews of the professional class in Warsaw, they were educated abroad because the university had a tiny quota for Jews. So my father went to the Sorbonne. My mother went to Lausanne And my uncles, most of them were educated actually in Germany, in Zwickau.

Interesting.

And so forth.

So what do you know of what happened after you were born? Obviously, you don't remember this, but can you just kind of start the story about the early times of your life, the very early times, that you know of?

When the Germans first took over the ghetto area and expanded it and pushed everybody in, my parents traded their house with a artist friend who had a duplex apartment in a building which became part of the ghetto. He was not a Jew. And my father moved us and his whole family-- his mother, his sisters, brothers, and a niece who was my generation, and my mother's mother-- into that duplex apartment.

Was this in the fall of 1940, would you say?

I am not totally clear. I think it was more like the fall of '39.

The fall of '39, OK.

They were able to take some money and things with them so that they had the means of buying food and so forth for a while. One of my early memories is of my father's mother who was baking those little semi-round crescent cookies. So we must have been able to get flour at that point still.

So who lived with you besides your parents?

My parents, my grandmother on my mother's side. And my grandfather on my father's side died just before the war and was buried in the Jewish cemetery near the ghetto. He died a natural death before the war. Not natural, but I mean, you know.

Yeah.

So his mother, my father's mother, his three sisters, two brothers, the husband of one of the sisters, and the daughter of one of the sisters all moved in with us in this duplex apartment. My mother's mother would go every single day and visit her two brothers and their families who had moved into some other part of the ghetto. And one day, she simply didn't come back. She just disappeared.

I found a reference to one of her brother's daughters in Ringelblum's diary about 12-year-old girl and her death is in there. It's one of the few--

What was her--

Her maiden name was Batlaj, which is a Lithuanian name, B-A-T-L-A-J, L being a Polish. It's an L with a diagonal--

With a line through it.

--through it. Right. So that that is-- and the widow of one of the brothers of Henry Batlaj did survive the war with two children and ended up in France where my parents never really contacted anyone. They tried, but they couldn't. But in recent years, thanks to the internet, I've been able to find out that they eventually seem to have all become scientists. And one of the women, who by now must be the third generation, was actually visiting professor at Harvard about four or five years ago. And I asked my mother if I could contact her. My mother just didn't want to. She didn't want to, you know--

Anyway, my aunts on my father's side, and my cousin who was about 13, and the uncle, one uncle, the one who had been educated in Zwickau, one of his fellow engineering students was a German commandant. And they ran into each other in the ghetto. And he arranged for them to work in a factory outside the gates, which was supposed to be a slightly protected situation. So that every day they would all go out to work. And then every day they'd be checked back in. My mother was part of the group.

Oh, so was men and women?

Yes. Probably not the same factories, I don't know. It was sewing, I think, for the case of the women. And one day they simply didn't come back, any of them. My father-- I mean, I think my mother was under the impression that this man really had tried to protect them somewhat, but there was nothing that could be done. And I don't know his name. But they simply would clear the factories out and send the next batch out was the way it was done.

My mother, when that happened, which was beginning of '43, my father had sort of-- I mean, no one really believed the

Germans were going to do this. I mean, very few people left Poland when it was about to happen, because they just didn't-- I mean, no one believed there was such a thing as an extermination program, obviously.

So now, just to clarify, now we're in 19--

'43.

OK, but before that, do you have any--

Well, before that, they--

Or were you told anything about the years before '43?

Yes. I mean, one of the first people that my father found killed in the ghetto was a close friend of his named Roman Kramsztyk, who was a very well-known Polish artist. And my father found his body with a portfolio of his chalk drawings, lying next to it. And he managed to actually get that out of the ghetto. And it survived the war. He returned most of them to a distant relative of Kramsztyk's. I have a couple of them.

He was the first person that-- my father did talk about him-- was the first person he knew that he saw dead in the ghetto. And Kramsztyk had done some drawings, which I have one of upstairs, of figures in the ghetto. I don't know how many of them survived, but this one was of a woman lying either asleep or dead-- it's unclear-- on the steps of one of the buildings in the ghetto. And I was the model for the baby lying next to her, which it's hard to tell whether alive or dead in the drawing. I have it upstairs.

So what were your first-- do you have any memories of the ghetto?

I remember brick walls being built, which was something that happened. I mean, I have since looked that up.

Yeah, they did have 9-foot walls.

But I did remember those walls going up. And at what point that happened, I'm not sure. I remember beggars on the streets coming into the buildings. I remember this was really an awful-- there was a man who came into our building to beg.

And we had stairs in a building, which were very much like the kind of metal-edged stairs that you have in a lot of schools. You know, the old fashioned? I remember them very distinctly. And the man upstairs from us shoved this poor guy down the stairs. And I remember that. I mean, that really-- I asked my mother about it when I was a teenager. And she said, yes, it had happened.

You had this very large gap at the beginning between the people who considered themselves very middle class and the very, very poor people who were pushed in from the little ghettos outside. And these people did not feel they had anything in common with them. And they were trying to keep what little they had for their own families, which was the case up there. But I remember my grandmother would actually apparently would give this man money and food. And then he went on upstairs. And this was what happened. So I remember that.

I don't remember what's in these photographs of the dancing and all of this. Don't remember that at all.

So you were in the ghetto until when?

Until '43.

OK. And so by that time, you were five?

Mm-hmm.

Yeah. So do you just remember a sense of fearfulness or not up to that time?

Not really.

OK.

Not really. I mean, there was very little food. What there was, obviously, my parents tried to give me.

Do you remember being cold?

No. I don't. But I do-- in '43, when my relatives didn't come back that day, my parents decided they had to get me out. And they made arrangements with-- they had been able to stay in contact-- I don't know how-- with friends on the outside, who were not Jewish. And they arranged for one of them, Wladislaw Brezovsky, to-- and he arranged with a Polish policeman to come in and take me out.

Do you remember that?

That I do remember because my mother dressed me in this little white coat that she had. And I was very, very blonde and blue-eyed. I had white blonde hair.

What language did you all speak?

Polish.

You spoke Polish, OK.

But my parents knew French and German because of their--

Studies.

--their studies. And my father, I think, also knew Yiddish, but they never spoke it at home. But I think--

Were they religious at all?

No.

They were not.

They were not.

So you don't know if they-- they didn't observe any holidays or anything like that?

No. Only my grandfather on my father's side, who, of course, died before the war, did observe the Sabbath. And that was about it. Because ever after we came out, my father would-- only on Yom Kippur-- but he would light the candles for him. And we still have his candlesticks. I don't know quite how they managed to survive. But I still have them.

So there were no Passover Seders or anything like that?

No. No. You have to remember that the Poles and the well-to-do or middle-class Poles in Sweden--

Very similar.

--were extremely-- I mean, they considered themselves Poles. The more religious and orthodox were in the villages.

And they had very little contact with them ever. And that was one reason that all of this was such a--

Shock?

--shock, I guess, to everybody. They had never thought of themselves as being particularly different. Except, of course, they knew they were because of the quotas at the universities and all of this sort of thing. But in terms of everyday life.

So you said your parents had the friend outside that--

And he arranged with a Polish policeman, whom he knew, to come in and take me out. I'm not quite sure how it went.

So you in a sense walked out?

Walked out. And he at some point, that night, apparently, I spent somewhere that was like a cellar because my coat-- one of the things that my mother said afterward was that the friend who had arranged this said the next day that when he picked me up, my coat was very dirty, that I must have been sleeping somewhere. And he took me on a tram of some sort.

You remember this?

That I do remember because I threw up on the tram, and I was vastly embarrassed, got my coat dirty again.

Do you remember saying goodbye to your parents?

No. And they took me. And he somehow got me out, eventually, to the place where they had a little summer cottage.

Which was where?

In a place called--

OK. It's OK.

It'll come back to me.

It'll come back to you.

I'm sorry.

That's OK. But this is in the countryside?

In the countryside across the street from a castle, which had belonged to some people my parents knew, which is how they had bought the little-- and which ended up being the regional Gestapo headquarters for the area. And there I was across the road from it.

And it is crazy, I can't remember the name of the town because I just said it a few days ago.

What time--

It's about 13 miles outside Warsaw. When Warsaw burned a year or two later, we could see the--

Smoke.

--red sky.

But April '43 was when the ghetto was destroyed. So you got out--

Just before.

Just before.

And after my whole family had disappeared. My mother then, a few days after I got out--

She was able?

--she left with her work group. And the Polish woman who was checking people in and out turned out to be a high school classmate of hers. And she said to my mother, just don't come back. Keep going. And I'll check you back in.

Oh my.

Of course, she had no way of contacting my father at that point, except they had agreed that if there was ever a chance for any of them, that they would just--

Just go.

--do this.

He was still in the ghetto?

He was still in the ghetto. My mother eventually went to several friends and stayed with them around the city. I know who some of them were. And then there were two couples who knew where I was and could sort of, if my parents contacted them, would be able to tell them.

And my mother then, somehow or other, ended up working with a group of nuns who were trying to help people a little bit. And one of them died. And they gave my mother her habit to wear. And a few days later, the nuns were rounded up. And my mother had this amazing story of which she told Holly in high school, my daughter.

There was a staging area in one of the suburbs of Warsaw-- and I have the name upstairs, but I'd have to find it-- from which people were shipped out to the concentration camps on the trains. And the nuns were about to be shipped out. And one of the Germans on the platform said to the Mother Superior that one of the commandants was a Catholic and she should go and talk to him and see if he could help her.

And my mother describes literally having her foot on the bottom rung of the train car when the Mother Superior came running down the station, waving this little slip of paper saying that they could go. So I had 13 nuns show up on the doorstep of the place where I was, out in the country. And I had apparently the sense not to-- I recognized my mother, but I had the sense not to say anything about the fact that she was-- call her my mother or anything like that.

Even at that young age.

Because, of course, the nuns didn't know. Well, I wasn't that young anymore.

You were five.

I was five. And you had been absolutely told what you could not say. And we were very aware of it.

Did you keep your name Susanna?

No.

What was your new name?

Yes, I kept Susanna. Yeah. But I had the name of the nanny. And I have no idea what that was anymore. But it was a Polish. And

Because the Polish nanny was now your mother?

Technically.

Yes.

But I had the sense to say nothing apparently. And my mother claimed, when she was telling Holly this story, that I had dreamt the night before that she was coming, and I had said that to the nanny. Well, chances are, I probably dreamt that a lot of times, but that time it stuck in somebody's head. They stayed with us for several weeks. But obviously, we didn't have all that much food and so forth. And then the nuns went on to a convent somewhere.

Including your mother?

Not including my mother, who had at that point, she had developed very bad rheumatism from lying on stone floors. So she was ill enough that she had a good excuse, apparently, to say that she couldn't go on with them. And, of course, they knew she wasn't a nun. I mean, they had taken her in, given her the--

Yeah, right.

So the fact that she just wanted to stay there didn't seem that odd to them, even though they didn't know she was Jewish. My father got out after--

So she stayed, she stayed--

So she stayed.

With you?

With me.

Oh.

My father got out during the uprising, the ghetto uprising, through the sewers.

April '43, he did.

And then he, again, he went to more or less the same people my mother had gone to, to hide out. And when the embassy had this information, they actually knew the couple that he was with the most time. And they described this. I was amazed about it. And he had several very close escapes. At one point, he had to jump out of a second floor window into the back of a garbage truck.

Oh my god.

--as it drove by and managed to convince the truck driver that he was a British parachutist who had ended up parachuting in, and he was there to help free Poland. So he was not turned in. And don't know how he did that, but he was-- And he did not come to where my mother and I were until the Russians came into Warsaw. And at that point, he was able to get out. But he was in Warsaw until the end of the war, and hiding in various places, including for a while, he was in the basement of, it was a company called Wedel, which was the best chocolate factory in Poland, which was recently bought by Cadbury's of England.

And they hid him in the basement of their store, which was near where his former antique shop had been. And one of the sisters, of the Wedel sisters, would bring him water and so forth periodically. And then one day, a bomb fell and sort of cut the cellar in half. And she was actually killed on the other side of the-- and he eventually dug his way out. I mean, it was just--

My parents-- my mother, because my father would never talk about it, but my mother basically said that who survived and who didn't was simply chance, or luck, or something completely, no rhyme or reason to who did and who didn't.

Now, was your mother blonde and blue-eyed also?

No.

OK.

No.

She was dark?

She had dark hair and brown eyes.

OK, so the two of you are out in the country. Were you able to move around the roads, in the roads?

Well, I--

Or did you have to--

I mean, my nanny and I went to the little local town to buy things at the farmer's markets and so forth. They were just markets. They weren't called farmer's markets. And I went during the day to a small school, sort of through the woods that was in the basement of a local church. And the younger children were ostensibly raising rabbits. And the older children were actually studying. But they were not allowed to use Polish textbooks.

So if there was a problem they thought the Germans were coming to check up, they would shove the textbooks under the rabbit hutches. Were probably not very attractive by the time we were finished.

They were supposed to use German textbooks, is that what you're saying?

Yeah. And I have a photograph somewhere still of the priesthood in that church, who thought I was Catholic. It was not a problem.

Did you know, or did it mean anything to you at that very young age, about being Jewish? Did you know you were Jewish?

No. I only knew that I was not supposed to say who I was. I was not supposed to give my name, my real name, which I knew, or my parents' names or anything about our circumstances. I was supposed to only say that the nanny was my mother and to give that name. I think even small children, when they're living in situation that is that extreme, understand a lot more about what they are and aren't supposed to--

And if you think back to the fact that in the 19, well, even in the 20th century, fairly small children would be sent out to work in the factories and the fields and so forth. And they'd be able to do it. And I know, when we were living in India, and we visited Kashmir, there were five-year-olds sitting there, weaving rugs, because their fingers were so small. And they can learn to follow a pattern, and they can know what they're doing.

There's a lot that children can do when it's expected of them.

Do you have memories of whether or not it was a very frightening time for you or?

No. The time in the country was quite nice. I do remember being in the, very vividly, when we were in the marketplace one day, and this little town, that a couple of bombs fell, and a goat had its legs cut off. I mean, it was this memory of this goat lying there, bleeding all over the place. And I must have been about six years old at that point.

And we were aware of the fact that we were not supposed to be out too much in the fields or anything like that, because the Germans would sometime-- but at that point, it was an occupied country, so it was not that the Germans were strafing the fields as much as they did at the beginning of the war.

Right, right.

And I have no idea why they happened to attack that small market town that day. Maybe some bombs just fell by accident, and they meant to be bombing Warsaw or something like that.

Did you have any friends your age?

Yes. Yeah, there were-- my nanny's sister, who came regularly to visit us, had a little girl my age named ElÅ¼unia -- Elizabeth. And so she would be around to play with, and then the children at the school--

But you would never--

--at the church.

--tell them your story?

No.

No.

No. But nobody talked. We all knew not to talk anyway, in general, because even the children who were not Jewish were aware of who the Germans were and what they were doing.

So then comes '44, and Warsaw is invaded and destroyed. And you said you saw in the distance, you saw the flames.

We saw the red-- no, we didn't see the flames. We saw red sky.

Red sky. And that, I imagine, was frightening to you. Did you know what was happening? Of course, your mother was with you, fortunately.

My mother was with me at that point. And we knew that it wasn't good, but we didn't really know what was happening.

And then what happened after that?

Once my father came and the war was over, we moved back to Warsaw. My father reopened his gallery, although in a different place. They started to look for their family. The fact that he reopened it under his own name, they thought would be helpful, the people would know where they were, would find them. And they worked through the Red Cross trying to find people. But nobody was found.

So you lost your relatives?

Everyone except this one aunt, who had been sent out very early, who was working on a farm, who eventually came to the States. But otherwise, everybody in my grandparents' generation, in my parents' generation, and mine, in my

generation, they were-- well, among others--

And this was very interesting. At the end of my mother's life-- and she was almost 100 when she died-- she suddenly told me about this cousin of hers, a child of one of her uncles, whom she had never mentioned before, ever, because she really didn't talk about her family very much. And apparently, he was at Oxford. He was about 20. And when the war broke out, he came back to be with his family, her uncles.

So his last name would have been [? Batlaj. ?] And he was killed early on, or disappeared early on. You didn't really know what happened to most people. They just sort of weren't there one day. Now, people came back, thinking they'd be with their families, not realizing what was going to happen, of course.

So what did that mean? I mean, you're a little girl still. What did that mean that the war is over? Do you have any memories of that time?

Well, yes. I do remember some things. For one thing, I remember somebody giving me chocolate, which I'd never seen before. And I remember being given a banana, of all things, by somebody, which I, again, had never seen before.

Seen before.

The street where the gallery was was fairly wide. And one day, there were obviously no streetlights, but there were police who were really not real police, but they would be out there directing traffic and so forth. And they did have guns. And of course, there were no buses to speak of, so people drove around, mostly in trucks with seats going this way that they would sit in.

And in this case, there was a police woman with a gun, and the truck wouldn't stop when she was directing it. So she proceeded to shoot. And in some obscure way, the bullet went right through a whole row of people sitting on these seats. And there was a pharmacy in our building, and people were being brought in to be treated, and screaming and blood everywhere. And that really stayed with me too, because I was right there. But by that time, I was six or seven years old.

During the war, when you would see a German soldier, was that a frightening sight for you?

You knew you were not supposed to go anywhere near them. It was the dogs that were so frightening more than the Germans, because they would always have these braces of dogs with them on leashes. And we were all terrified of the dogs, who would just be sicced on people right and left.

And I've always, to this day, really had a fear of German Shepherds. And I love dogs. I have no problem with dogs. But I cannot stand being around German Shepherds. They were just the one dog that was-- it was more the dogs than anything else, because they were always in front of the soldiers, so you barely even were aware of the soldier behind that group of dogs. And they would always have two or three on leashes right in front of them.

Any other fearful times that you had during the war that you recall?

No. You were very wound up and very careful. I mean, you really were. I was away from my parents for almost three years, when you add it all up, because my mother didn't show up until she got out around '43. She didn't show up until two and a half years later. My father three years later.

Did you know who she was when she came?

I did. Apparently, I did. And that was the one thing my mother did tell me, that I knew who she was, but didn't call her by name. So there was a fairly long time between the time they got me out and the time that I actually saw them again, and my father even longer.

Even longer, yeah. Were there any celebrations when the war was over?

Not that I can remember. They were fortunate in that my father had had a lot of diplomats, foreign diplomats, as clients before the war. And some of them had taken things out for them when the war broke out, or kept them, returned them after the war. A friend of theirs came back as an ambassador from one of the Scandinavian countries. And he arranged for us to get visas to go to Sweden, which is how we ended up.

Oh.

We waited for a quota number to come to the States for four years, but we were in Sweden for three of those years, and then in Mexico for nine months.

OK. When did you leave Warsaw?

We left in '47.

To go to Sweden?

To go to Sweden.

So between the end of the war and '47, you were going to school and--

I don't really remember going to school in Warsaw itself, although I do have a school book kicking around, so I must have been. And I definitely want to first grade because when we went to Sweden, I did first grade over, because I was learning a new language.

Yeah. Yeah. But you obviously saw the destruction in Warsaw?

Yeah.

How terrible.

But I hadn't--

To a young child, that is--

--I hadn't known anything except destruction really, so it didn't seem that different to me, except when I was in the country, because the war started when I was only one. So I had never really seen anything that wasn't in ruins, except when I was in the country.

And that life was all right. I mean, we had this little house. We had chickens, which I remember feeding regularly. That was my job. And we had a well. We had a cellar with a little rug and a table over it, where you could hide when there were air raids.

But actually there weren't any in the country when we were there, partly because I think the Gestapo headquarters right across the road, so they were not about to start bombing that particular area. But we did have a bomb cellar, which was the usual root cellar type of cellar.

But you say you never had to use it?

And we never really used it. I mean, we used it to store things. We didn't have very much. I mean, we had some bread. We had access to bread somehow or other, and we ate a lot of bread with onions and slices of onion. We had eggs from the chickens. Certainly didn't have milk ever, that I can remember. But this was, again, in the country. So we had vegetables.

So now you hear you're going to be going to this foreign country. And to a young child, what does that mean? Was it upsetting?

No. We traveled a lot during the years we were in Sweden because my father just started up his business again. So we would go with him on some of his trips. And they had friends all over Europe.

No, I meant when you were told in Poland that you're going to now have to move to another country.

Oh, no. No. I'm not aware of being worried about it at all.

Because you had your parents with you.

I had moved so many times by that time already. It wasn't as if one more move was going to be any different. But I counted up once, by the time I was 11, I had moved 13 times. So it wasn't a problem.

Did any Jews come back to Warsaw after the war was over?

People did. And I know that some of my parents' friends went back to their places, only to be murdered by the people who had taken over their apartments or houses or businesses.

But did your parents feel that they were in danger?

They felt they had to get out. I mean, what happened was that the couple who were mentioned in this thing in this book that I came across on the internet, that the Polish embassy sent me an excerpt from, they were sort of like godparents or were my parents' closest friends, and he was the head conservator at the national museum. And they were Catholic.

And she was out walking after the war, shopping, going to buy food. And a man came along and shoved her into the gutter and said to her, apparently, so, you old Jewess, you survived the war, we'll get you yet. And she apparently went immediately to my parents and said, OK, you've got to get out. It's never going to change here. Because the anti-Semitism was so strong in Poland.

And they got out pretty much before the communist government took over, but very shortly before. And I'm not sure about the dates. I do have the passports and so forth from that period. I just haven't really looked at them. I have to do that. I mean, I have to get all the dates straight. And I found that some of--

But approximately 1946?

1947.

Oh, '47.

Seven. But I have to look at them. I do have them. I managed to misplace all these papers recently because I was trying to clear the house out and shoved things around. And when my mother died, almost four years ago now, and I moved a lot of her things into the house and just sort of everything got confused.

Where in Sweden did you settle?

In Stockholm.

In Stockholm.

Yeah, a friend of ours, who was with the Dutch Red Cross, had an apartment in Stockholm, which he wasn't using. And so it's in these pictures, so that was the apartment we lived in on [? Rindegarten ?] in '52. And I went to the local elementary school for four years.

Did you pick up the language?

Very, very quickly. And in fact, it was funny, there was somewhere I used to have a clipping. Someone took a picture of me and wrote up a piece for a local newspaper about a typical Swedish girl playing outside in the wonderful weather. And then they discovered afterward that I wasn't. But I have the picture and the little clipping somewhere, my mother took it.

Were there any other children that you played with who were refugees, who were--

No. No, there were no children to speak of. There was one boy who then went with his family to the United States. But he was four or five years older than I am. And he was actually, his father was Yugoslav, mother was Polish. And eventually, his father died during the war. And eventually, they moved to New York. And I did see them periodically.

And there were some other children who are friends of my parents who were born after the war. But except for Janek this one boy, I didn't know any who were--

Did the Swedish children ask you--

[PHONE RINGING]

Do you want to get that?

I'm so sorry I missed that call. Did my parents--

No, no I was asking if the other children questioned you.

No, I don't think so. I don't really remember any of that, ever being asked. Yeah, I learned Swedish very, very quickly. And I spoke it, apparently, perfectly. And children aren't that curious.

Well, also you were very young, eight years old, or nine years old. Yeah. Yeah.

And--

So you felt comfortable in Stockholm?

Yeah. I loved the school. And every summer, the Swedish government arranges for children-- or did then-- to go to summer camp. Depending on their health, they'd send you to the mountains or the seashore or something like that. And so I did that.

One memory I have, which is sort of an odd one, but for America, it's interesting. The very first African-American I ever saw was Paul Robeson, who came to give a concert and marched in the May Day parade. Of course, I didn't know-- we went to the concert, actually, and I heard him sing. But in retrospect, that seems sort of amazing now. But at the time, it was not. It was not that.

And my parents knew people in Sweden from before the war. And there were a few of their friends who went to Sweden after the war that we-- mostly women, mostly older women. And most of them lived in these little pensions. Their families were gone. And this aunt who survived was living in one of them. She didn't live with us then.

Did you miss Poland?

I don't think so, particularly. Sweden was a wonderful place for children. There was lots to do. And I don't know if I was aware of-- I think I was very introspective because I had grown up without not really playing with children very much. And then after the war, I was mostly with adults, except for school, where I had a perfectly good time, because my

parents really didn't know families with children because there weren't any children. And I think in some ways, they didn't really know very much about bringing up children either, as a result.

Did the Swedish teachers ask you about your background?

No. No.

So how much did-- well, I guess you don't know how much they knew.

No, I don't at all. And you know that Sweden had managed to stay neutral, while really in some ways cooperating with the Germans. And they probably didn't particularly much want to be reminded about any of it anyway.

When we then went to Mexico for nine months, my father wanted to study pre-Colombian archeology. And they were--

So that would be 1951?

1949, '49.

Oh, so you were in--

By that time.

You were in Sweden?

We were there four years. But it doesn't quite work in terms of, because it overlaps years. So it's four years total, but it doesn't quite work in even years because it doesn't--

And how did he get passage to Mexico?

Well, actually--

And papers?

--the same man, who had been ambassador to Poland, Sweden's ambassador to Poland, became the ambassador to Mexico. So he arranged for us to-- Klaus Festering. And he arranged for us to get visas. And there they had a number of friends who had survived the war, who had gone to Mexico.

Directly from Poland?

From Poland. And--

What city in--

--one of them-- in Mexico City. And one of them, the 18-year-old daughter of one of the families, I had English lessons with her at the same time that I went to seventh grade. I jumped from fourth in Sweden to seventh in the American School in Mexico City, because the Swedish schools were very far in advance of American schools, in terms of what you were learning. So I took an exam, and they stuck me in seventh grade.

So now you know Polish, you know Swedish, you're learning English--

And Spanish.

And Spanish.

But I've really forgotten the Swedish. I can still read it, but I haven't spoken it in all these years.

No, but at the time.

At the time, I did.

At the time, right.

At the time, I did.

So now you're doing English and Spanish.

I ended up actually eventually, years later, being assistant Scandinavian cataloguer at Harvard because of all of this. after getting a master's in library science after college.

And, again, to travel, to leave one country and go to another country, you just accepted. You were with your parents. There was no-- you weren't upset?

Well, you know--

Or questioning? Or why do--

--they had lived--

--we have to move?

--a very cosmopolitan life, as many educated Jews before the war did, because they were educated abroad. They knew all of these languages already. They had friends all over the place, people that they knew. I mean, I do remember walking in Paris at some point when I was, I don't know, nine or something, and hearing someone speaking German and getting really frightened. But generally, people did not bother to speak German, even if they were German. If they were wandering around Paris, they would make an effort not to, for obvious reasons. So you didn't really hear it very much.

Yeah. But in Sweden and in Mexico, again, just to reiterate, your parents did not talk about the war?

No.

And you didn't--

No.

It was a new chapter.

The friend, Wladislaw Brezovsky, who had gotten me out of the ghetto, had a British citizenship as well as Polish. And after the war, because he worked for a British firm. And after he got out of Auschwitz, with a number tattooed on his arm, he went to London. And we went a number of times and visited him. I sort of thought of him as my adoptive grandfather. He claims I cheated at checkers when I was seven years old. And somewhere in here.

Well, pictures may be upstairs. I do have a picture of him. These were the people who hid my father, the Kuharskys. And I was really furious with Yad Vashem, because when I went, my younger son was New York Times bureau chief in Jerusalem, and I went to Yad Vashem, which was a mistake. I shouldn't have. The photographs were godawful. And I went to the Polish section, and I wanted to put their names in with the--

And they said, well, are they still alive? And at that time, they weren't anymore. And they said, well, if they're not alive, we're not interested. We only want people whom we can give a certificate to and have a ceremony and so forth. And if

they're not, we don't really want to put their name in. And my feeling was if you were a righteous Gentile, which is what they called it, it shouldn't matter whether you were alive or not, if you had helped people during the war.

So now you're in Mexico. And how long did you stay in Mexico?

We were-- here we are in Mexico-- nine months.

Oh.

Yeah. And then so I went only partly to seventh grade. And then we came here.

So, again, in Mexico, nobody questioned you? The other children?

Well, in Mexico--

I mean, now you're even older.

I'm older. And, no, nobody cared in the school. But, of course, there were some Polish families there that my parents knew. The girl who was teaching me English, for example, who was sort of a late teen. But nobody talked about the war. Nobody wanted to talk about it. And the same thing in Sweden, they were-- here's Diego Rivera. I went off to-- watched him paint portraits. He was a friend of my parents.

As you're saying, people did not want to talk.

Nobody wanted to talk about it. And since then, in recent years, I've heard from people who went to Israel and who tried to talk about it. And nobody wanted to know. Everybody wanted to just talk about the future, and they didn't want to know what had happened. And so people stopped talking about it. I think in the case of my parents, my father never ever talked about it.

How was their health?

My mother, after the war, when we were living in Sweden, slept an awful lot. I think she was extremely depressed, but I wasn't aware of that. I mean, I didn't know what it was. She slept a huge amount. My father was always very quiet, very involved in his-- that's an old picture of my parents in god knows where. They--

I was asking about your father's health.

His health was all right. He had a bullet fragment in his back, which didn't really bother him. And he never told me how he got it either. But a very odd thing happened. He developed Alzheimer's and had to retire in '76. And eventually, they moved down here, and he was part of an NIH study, because in those days, they didn't realize how common Alzheimer's was. And the one proviso was that at the death of the person, we were to allow an autopsy of the brain.

The doctor called me, who did the autopsy afterward, and he said, was my father a boxer. And I said no. And he said, well, he has brain damage of the type which only a boxer or somebody that'd been hit in the head a lot would have. And that's probably what caused the Alzheimer's. Now, my father never mentioned anything. It could only have happened during the war. But he had never talked about it.

He never talked about it.

Ever. And whenever I would ask him questions, he would say, well, when I retire and I have time, because they worked six days a week in the gallery. And then they traveled a lot. And by that time, I was gone anyway and had my own family. He said, when I retire, we'll talk about all of this, and I'll tell you all-- and then he got Alzheimer's. And

Well, let's stop for a moment. And we'll start in the United States then.

OK.