

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Madeleine Sigel. This is track number two. And you were talking about being in the quarantine. Coming into Panama.

And so then when we were permitted to go out. We went to Panama and saw a lot of interesting things. Panama then was a small city, and the only thing that was air conditioned was the Kodak store.

And the bus went through what would be called what? The red light district, at this point. And my mother always engaged me in conversation, because she never wanted me to see the women sitting out there, and I would ask questions, which I saw anyway, and did ask questions. I never got an answer.

And anyway it was interesting. And the city itself was interesting. And they had ruins from the pirate Morgan, who had apparently destroyed part of the city. When I now see pictures with the skyscrapers, I can't believe that this is the same place.

But anyway, to go back to being able to go out, across the quarantine station there was a building, and it was called the Sailfish [? Forum. ?] And it was a building where the people in the quarantine-- in the Canal Zone had a club. And if they wanted to go fishing, then they would rent boats there.

And the man and woman who ran the club came over to say hello and to talk to us. And since I spoke English, I was the translator for a lot of people, and they were very nice. And so when we could go out, we would go over there, and they would give us-- invite us for dinner, take us out for a ride in the boat. And then he would also take us on the other side of the canal, where there was a beach.

And he was very nice. They were very nice people. And the kids-- and they had a daughter who was in school, who was my age. And then they had an adult, who was I think she was married and had a son. Anyway, the Barlow family was very nice. And we became very good friends and saw them afterwards in the States. They came-- they moved back to the States, to New Jersey. And so we saw them when we--

Did you go to school?

No, no school. No school. And I did babysitting for a colonel, a lieutenant colonel in the army. See, the quarantine station, it was attached to a fort, Fort Amador, where the army was stationed. And I have no idea how this occurred. There was a Jewish community in Panama, Panama City. And they came and we talked with them, and they came. And maybe they had something up.

Anyway, I got a job to babysit for a lieutenant colonel in Fort Amador. And the only thing I remem-- I got the job, but in order to get the job, I had to have a blood test. And so they took me into a room, into a lab, to take a blood, which I had never seen. So I watched them do it and promptly passed out.

And so I remember that the guys, very young guy, they were all shocked. What do we-- I can still hear them saying, "what do we do with her?" But obviously I woke up, and I got a job with the little girl, who was very cute. And at \$0.50 a night. And so I knew nothing. What do I know about taking care of her? But it worked out. I was there.

One night I was there and a bat flew around, and I was scared silly. It didn't sit in my hair. All I could remember is people saying that bats go into your hair. I was really very upset, but that worked. And then there was a little episode which I really have to mention, because it was a highlight of one of my things.

Jascha Heifetz, the violinist, came to-- it was announced that he would give a concert in Panama City. And so I told-- so there was a young man who came to visit always. He was a young man. I think he was 30, and I was 15. But he came. He was Jewish, I think. He worked in the Canal Zone, and he would come in and he would take me to the movies and show me around.

And so he took tickets to Jascha Heifetz concert. And I told the lady-- so she said to me on such and such a date I need

you at such and such a time. And I said, oh, I was just going to tell you, I can't come. I'm busy that time. She wanted to know what I was doing, and I don't know what I told her, but anyway I didn't tell her that I was going to the concert. Or maybe I didn't even know.

Whatever. Anyway, so she apparently got somebody else. So when we went to the concert, they were sitting in sort of the back, and he had taken tickets in the second row. And so I passed by and sat down in the second row. And I thought-- I could tell, I was just looking out of the corner of my eyes that she had a conniption fit. And afterwards she was never as nice as she was before. Anyway, but I thought this was just terrific.

And I even cashed in on this triumph a few years later when I was in New York, and among a crowd, older crowd, and a guy said that Jascha Heifetz is coming. And I said, I heard him play in Panama, and he played L'apres Midi d'un Faune. And the guy said, Jascha Heifetz wouldn't play that.

So I said, well, I'll show you. So the next time I saw him, I brought the program. I can prove it. I said, see here. He played. Oh, OK. But that was my second trifle of Jascha Heifetz. Never forget it. Anyway--

So anyway, then when he came close, when the war broke out and then it came-- things became sort of a bit more difficult-- oh, and then they had the [INAUDIBLE] it was a destroyer, I think, or a ba-- it was sunk near in the Caribbean or somewhere. So anyway, we couldn't get out. They closed the quarantine station. We couldn't go out anymore. And so--

By that time, the war had broken out in the fall of '39, and we were still there the whole winter.

After that.

After that.

What was it like for you when you heard that the war broke out? Did your parents talk about it?

Oh, yeah. We gathered around the one radio every night. And everybody wanted to hear what was going on.

What was your parents' reaction? Do you remember?

Listening. Oh, good. You know, everybody thought they were going to win right there.

Yeah, right.

So then I think when Dunkirk came, and I said, I don't know, it was pretty bad.

Yeah.

But the following happened. They all of a sudden, the powers-that-be became very upset. Not upset, but concerned that they had all these enemy aliens sitting on the canal. So what to do with them? So what they did was, they gave everybody a visa to the US.

Now, at the very same time, my uncle, after all these years, sent an affidavit, because a friend of my father's went to see him and said look, I'll guarantee that I will take over for them if they need any help. All you have to do is send the affidavit. And I will do everything else that needs--

So he sent the affidavit, and we got our visa at the same time, they were giving visas to the other people. So then the question was how do we get to the States? You had to pay. Well, they had arranged for a troop transport to transport everybody to Ellis Island. And again, my father persuaded the powers-that-be, the Colonel [? Odom, ?] that could we go on the troop transfer, even though we have the visa not through them but from-- So they permitted us to do that.

So we all got on the troop transport.

This is all 70?

All 70. Well, by then it had dwindled a little, because some of them had gotten affidavits over the months and were able to go. And went to Ellis Island. Got off in Ellis Island. And that was pretty unpleasant, I must tell you. Ellis Island, it was--

Arriving in the United States?

Yeah. Yes, it was. You saw that-- did we even see the-- yeah, we did. We saw the Statue of Liberty, and everybody read. It was fine arriving. But then being in Ellis Island was pretty fairly unpleasant. They closed-- they separated the men of the women, and you had to-- and by 9:00, you had to be in that room where they had four or five women, double bed bunks. You had to take all your luggage along. Well, there was a lot of luggage that you had to take into the room. And all the men were separate, so my father took it.

And then the next day you went out into the hall again, and you sat around with your luggage. And I don't-- oh, I think the hall had the food tables there. I don't remember how that went.

What month?

That was September. It was September 1940 we had been there a year, from May '39 until September 1940. But you know, the choice--

Right.

Right. I mean, nobody complained, really. I mean, and by then we really didn't know what was going to happen.

Right. Did you know anything up to that time about what was happening to the Jews?

No, that's what I'm saying. I mean, you knew that this was this terrible persecution, but you didn't know about Auschwitz. Or you know about concentration camps. You know where they are, but not what was happening. No, we had no idea. But even the other stuff would have been terrible. I mean, even thinking about going back and being-- obviously we didn't let these people in, they were going to go to a camp or something.

So anyway, so my uncle-- I just must add to this story, my uncle came to pick us up. Two days before he had bought a Packard, a black Packard. To show, I guess, that how well he is doing. Which apparently he wasn't doing all that well. But he drove us, took us from Ellis Island.

So you passed the test or whatever at Ellis Island, when you said you were waiting.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Well, Ellis Island--

Did they examine you at all?

Yeah. Yeah, sure. They examined you, and they--

So you passed all the questions?

All the questions and the past-- you know. And then if you got picked up by somebody-- I think they were the early--

we left early because he came and picked us up. So we went down the West Side Highway. I don't know if you know New York.

I do.

Yeah, West Side Highway. And--

What did the United States mean to a young teenager?

Oh, well, I had read some books. It must be OK. It was fine. But then I was--

16.

No, I wasn't 16 yet. I turned 16 in the United States. No, I turned 16 down there. Yes, of course, we had-- everybody said sweet 16. I didn't know what they were talking about. So I was 16. Yeah, of course I was 16.

But did it mean anything special, the United States, to you?

Oh, yeah. It was the golden country, I mean, even before. It was OK. Anyway, we came down the West Side Highway. And he was pointing things out, and then he says, oh, there is the Empire State Building on Thoidy-thoid Street. And me, big shot, said Thoidy-thoid? You mean 33rd Street? Well, that was the end of this relationship as you can imagine.

Anyway, we continued riding down the highway and ended up in Mount Vernon, where he had his store. He had a store with children's clothes. And he said very sweetly, "Well, I rented a room for you in a hotel for one week, and then you're on your own." OK. And then misery began.

We found a room in somebody's private house that actually had a kitchen in the room. It was a large room. And I guess my--

Did your parents speak English?

No, a little bit. Hardly any. And--

Was he able to get a job?

[LAUGHTER]

I'll tell you in a minute. So anyway, we went to-- we had friends in New York. And we had-- in New York. In New York City. And so my mother got a job. There was an agency, Jewish organization. I think it was ORT.

And so she got a job in a household with a young couple who just had a baby, and she was going to take care of that. And they treated her terribly. And she absolutely could not deal with that. So that took care of a week, and by then she was through with it.

And my father and I went to New York. And do you know this-- do you know New York? I mean, you're from New York? You know Barton Chocolates? OK, there was another one, Gregor chocolates. And he was a Viennese who delivered chocolates and stuff to my father in the store. And don't ask me how they found each other. Maybe through the Aufbau. Do you remember that paper, where you're always searching for--

Anyway-- anyway, he offered me a job. I was the only one who spoke English. I've got to have a job. So I was working-- so he offered me a job at his store. He had two or three stores by then. And he had a store on 42nd Street and Times Square, and I was-- and he offered me a job there.

So I went to work at 42nd and Times Square. The ride from Mount Vernon was first with a bus and then from 240--

241st Street on the Lexington, over two hours till I got there. And then the hours were from 1:00 to 10:00 at night. And so I worked there for a year in that store. Maybe a year. Yeah, something like that.

So you had no more schooling.

No more school. That's another story. And so I was miserable. I mean, really miserable. The whole time when all this started, I was never as miserable as I was the first six months in New York. Because I had no friends, nobody to talk to, and only going back and forth to this miserable job.

Anyway, so I did that. Then my father got a job. Somebody told him be a Fuller Brush man. So he did. He got all the stuff, the brushes. And they gave him the territory in New Rochelle, because he was out of Vernon. How he sold anything I don't know, because his English was really not-- practically nonexistent. But he managed somehow, but not very much. I was the one who got some money. Like some money, \$10 a week. And then he raised me to \$12 a week.

And then somehow or other, we still lived in Mount Vernon. And then I made contact with some people through the Aufbau and discovered who was here, and I discovered there was a club actually of Austrian young people my age. So then life began to look up. I still had to go in two hours, but I had people to talk to.

In fact, one was a close-- a friend of mine from school, from Vienna. So it was already better as long as I had-- and then I don't remember how the next thing occurred, but we moved to New York. I don't know how he finagled that. And we got an apartment on 96th Street and near river-- it's the last house on the Riverside Drive. Not on the Riverside, to Riverside, which was a walk up. And we had a walk up onto the fifth floor, which was a beautiful view.

He got it because you could see the Riverside Drive and the river and New Jersey across. And it had air. There was no air. Some air. It was under the roof, so the air didn't help very much. But anyway, it was a little apartment. It was fine. And so we moved to New York. And then he had-- Gregor had a store on 93rd and Broadway. So he nicely transferred me to that store.

So already life started looking up. But I still had to work nights, evenings, four or five times a week. And then, let's see, what else did happen? Oh, and then one evening-- I don't know when this happened, whether this was while he was still in Mount Vernon, but my father went, discovered the movie theaters on 42nd street where he went every day and sat from whenever it started till the evening. And that's how he picked up his English. Because he heard the same film over and over again and the words and he picked up his English.

And he got a job in the packing department-- what you call it? Whatever you call it. I can't think now.-- at Gimbel's. And he--

Shipping?

Shipping department. Thank you. Couldn't think of-- in the shipping department at Gimbel's. And so I got a job at the candy department in Gimbel's, because I had such experience with candy. That, of course, was great because I didn't have to work nights. So maybe one night they were open and we took turns. And so then I started-- I went to business school.

I was not very good. I learned typing and shorthand. That's what you learned then. And I went to business school. And then as you lived there, you made contacts with all the people. And the cafeteria was there. Again, they gathered the men there and talked.

So anyway, a very good old friend of ours, who had a daughter whom I knew well, lived on 86th Street. And we-- and so the whole thing became much more livable. And he worked for a shipping-- for a ship building office downtown in-- On Moore Street, near the Bowery.

And I was-- in business school. So anyway, he needed an assistant. So he said, why don't you come down and you can have the job, maybe? And so I had an interview, and I got the job. And fortunately, I didn't have to take dictation and

typing. It was only-- So anyway, but then I worked with him in cost accounting, so I learned some other stuff and really became his assistant, and didn't have to do any typing.

But it also gave me time to go to take some classes. So I ended up at the New School and New York University, but I only audited classes, because I didn't want to take any tests and stuff. And it was very interesting. I was able to get some different things. And I only took classes that interested me. I didn't have to take physics and chemistry, which I hated when I did that.

Anyway, so life became-- and the group, the Austrian group, we did a lot of things together, and I had a boyfriend, and the whole thing became livable.

Did you know what was happening in Europe during the early '40s.

Of course, of course. I was a-- so this is-- there were all these service men, and you went to canteens, and then they tell you to write to servicemen, write letters, and they gave you addresses. And I would sit in my lunch hour writing letters. And so this girl I got very friendly with in the office, she was not-- she was already married. And we got very close. She was very nice and very helpful when I first came.

There was a bitch there, a woman, and she would always give me stuff. And Rhoda would say, don't worry. I'll do it. So anyway, she saw me writing letters during the lunch hour. So she says, you know, my brother is in England. Why don't you write to him? I said, fine, I'll write to him. So we started a correspondence, which developed into marriage.

He was a lieutenant in the Navy. And he was stationed then in England before D-Day. And he had already been in the invasions in Africa, and in Italy, and in Sicily. And then he was a small boats officer on an LST. And he was in England. The only problem was, he was seasick a lot. But that was taken care of. He survived all that.

And in May of '45, the ship came back to the States. And he came to his sister's, and we met. And by then I had met most of his parents and some cousins, because Rhoda and I were very close, and she had a baby that spring, just after he came back. Yeah.

And his name?

Stanley Sigel. And her name was Rhoda Sigel. And they lived-- he grew up in Boston. And he grew-- he was born in Boston, and grew up in Maine, in Portland, Maine. And she had met her husband at a wedding of a cousin in Boston, and married and moved to New York. But the parents were still in Portland.

Portland.

And so anyway, so we started to go out, because he was stationed in Lido Beach for a while. And then he was down in Norfolk when he left, and then he went back. Oh, and he's a Harvard-- he was a Harvard graduate. OK. And when I first heard about him, I said to myself, a Harvard graduate and a lieutenant in the Navy? Couldn't be so bad. To myself. Turned out it was bad.

Anyway, so--

When did you get married?

We got married two years later, in '47. Yeah, he had gotten-- he went back to Harvard and got his master's. And I always say the PhD was my second child. And Joan is my third child. But she's my second child. And so--

What is his field?

Economics.

Economics.

He was with the Federal Reserve for 40 years.

Oh, my.

So yeah.

So before the war was over, were your parents hearing things and you hearing things about what was--

Oh, oh. My parents were living and they heard-- they got-- there was correspondence that took forever. Both there was the correspondence from Panama to Israel. And my grandfather-- my grandfather never got out. But he had a housekeeper for many years who was not Jewish, before Hitler came. She was like a member of the family. And somehow he ended up in the Jewish old age home in Vienna.

We have no idea how she arranged that. And he died in the home, in 1942, and is buried in the family grave, where his wife is. How this all came about under these circumstances I have no idea, but I presume Frau Else, as we called her, somehow managed that.

So did you lose any--

Yes, my grandmother was in Vienna. And there was always this thing, it's we'll go first, and you go first, and then we'll get you, yeah? So she and her sister, her sister lived with her at the time, unmarried. She was a widow for many-- she was widowed when I knew her. All my life she was single.

But she lived there with her after. After Hitler, I think she moved in. And they then had to move out of this fancy apartment into-- the 2nd District was a ghetto sort of-- into some apartment. And then there were cousins, Bonyhady cousins who lived in Graz, who had to move into Vienna. So they moved into their apartment. So I don't know how this--

And so we had still correspondence. And my aunt, that was my mother and a brother and a SISTER neither one of whom had offspring. My uncle left, also came to the States. And my aunt went to England. And so I have the correspondence from my grandmother to my aunt in England, which I have never really read. I can't deal with this.

And so they, of course, were carted off to Auschwitz in 1942 somewhere we checked it out.

Yeah. What were their names?

Bonyhady. Yeah.

And the first name?

[? Kaete. ?] [? Kaete ?]. Katherina. Kaete Bonyhady. And my aunt, my great-aunt, her sister was Petronella Cohn.

Oh, my.

So my older daughter is named Karen Patricia.

Oh, yeah.

So anyway--

Yeah. How did your family find out about this?

Only afterwards. My father found out about his father from the Red Cross. I still have a letter somewhere. They said he deceased. They wrote that he deceased in 1942. He could never get out. I don't remember what it was with the visa got filed that he was supposed to go to Israel.

My aunt-- my uncle left. My uncle left with-- left with the wife, with the son. And the other son had gone earlier. And the daughter had gone to England. She was in England during the-- my cousin. She was the oldest, and she was in England all during the war. She was a nurse. And then she went to Israel and had a family.

So you got married, and where did you live after that?

We lived-- well, we lived in Cambridge for six months, and then we moved down here. I've been here since 1947.

Oh, wonderful. You have how many children?

Two daughters.

Two daughters.

Yes.

OK.

And we lived in-- first we lived right close by here, because a friend of Stan's at the board got another woman who was going on vacation to lend us her house for four weeks. They were leaving for four weeks, the people. So we lived here on the River Road without a car. It was a little difficult.

He walked to the bus on Western-- on Western and got a ride. And I was stuck in without anything. And the neighbor took me to the store. And then we would take a bus and carry groceries around.

Oh, and then my brother-in-law and sister, Rhoda, came to visit. They had a car and stuff. So anyway, we lived here, we spent most of our time in town looking for a place to live. And we found a place. We had to move out, of course, when they came.

And we found a place near DuPont Circle, on P Street, with a woman, very convenient. She was a telephone operator at the Fairfax Hotel. And the night operator, which was very good. Because the apartment was like a railroad apartment, like you used to have. And you opened the door and there was a bathroom in front of you. There's a big corridor. The bathroom in front.

To the right were two rooms. And to the left were two rooms. And she had the rooms to the right, and we had the two rooms to the left with the kitchen. And she had breakfast at the hotel before she came home. And we left. And by the time we came home, she went back to have dinner and spent the night there as night operator.

So this worked out very well. And I got a job with FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization. And so I only walked down the street. They had-- their offices were next to the Mayflower. And I got a job as a translator of-- well, that's not the job I got it for, but that's what it ended up in. I was translating stuff, Scandinavian languages, because, well, I'm good in languages.

So when you know German and you know English and you know what the subject matter is, which is just agricultural food, I mean generally, I was able to put together some kind of translation of what the thing meant. And we did that. And then friends of ours who lived out in Mount Rainier, in Kaywood Gardens, which was then a very-- it probably still is garden apartments, but probably not as nice as it was then.

They managed to get us an apartment. We moved there, and they had cars, so we were able to go to work. If we wanted to stay in the city, we took the bus. Then at one point, we got a car.



Can we talk now a little bit about your thoughts and your feelings? Do you feel very Viennese, very Austrian?

I wouldn't say that, no. But I still have somewhat of a connection of feelings to Vienna, the city. I--

Have you been back?

Oh, I've been back quite a few times. Mainly because I had a childhood friend there. And I don't know. I can tell you very quickly the story. She was Jewish, but her husband, who was-- we would all grow up together, her husband, and she, and some other friends of ours.

And his mother had, as I would now say, as I mentioned before, like a daycare. You'd go afterwards to her house, and we would make-- do homework. But we had to take piano lessons and exercise at home. A woman would come to do-- you had to do exercise, gymnastics and stuff.

So we were all there. And so her husband, Hans, and his brother, they were this woman's sons. And so she was Jewish, and her ex-husband was not. They got divorced before Hitler came. And the father was a very nice guy. I mean, I met him and stuff.

When Hitler came and he made every effort not only for his ex-wife to go to England but to take the boys. He did not want to have the sons in Vienna. Hans was 18 by then, and the other one was 15. He didn't want that. So they went to England. And Susie and her mother went to England. And then Susie and Hans connected again, of course, and they got married. And they had a child in England.

Now. During the war, the refugees, many joined the army. But the other thing they wanted them for was to work on the farm. And Hans went to work on a farm with wife and child. And when the war was over and he'd been in touch with his father, of course, all along somehow.

Anyway, the father wrote-- said or called, and said to him, "look, you're going to be a farmhand all your life. I have a growing business, and it is yours. So why don't you come back and see what you can-- whether you would like to?" So they came back, and he took over the business, and they had a wonderful life in Vienna. They had another son.

And so they lived there for all their life, the rest of their life. She died a couple of weeks ago. And the big joke always was that I was a week older than she. Our mothers pushed us in the baby carriage.

What was her maiden name?

Her name was Wardak. Susie Wardak. Her father had a mental illness, and I never knew her father. He was in an institution.

So I was asking if you feel Austrian, if you feel Viennese.

I don't feel Austrian at all. No. I still have a sort of a feeling when there is something Viennese and something. And going back to Vienna was easy for me, because I stayed with her all the time. I didn't have to deal with any of these miserable people.

Why do you say "miserable people"?

Well, didn't they all get them happy that they had him in? I mean, things have changed now, but I went back to Vienna-- well, the first time we went is in 1967. Had a visit to I don't know how many countries to see the heads of the banks and stuff. And I went with him, and one of them was Vienna. And so we stayed with Susie then, which was about 20 years.

What are your thoughts about Germany?

They don't exist, as far as I am concerned. They are-- the Viennese never liked the Germans. I mean, generally, sort of. Particularly the-- particularly the Viennese Jews, but I don't know if it was only the Jews. There was always jokes about Germans. Except when they came in, they loved them.

Right.

So you know it's--

Have you been to Germany?

No, I wouldn't set foot in Germany. Absolutely not.

So you've never been?

No, the only thing, I've been on the Autobahn, because we lived in Paris, and we had to get from Paris to Salzburg, and Stan insists that the only way to go is on the Autobahn, and you don't have to stop. And I said, what if I have to pee? Well, then we have to stop.

But when you were growing up, you had never gone?

No, never.

How do you feel speaking German?

Oh, I speak Viennese. I don't speak German. No.

It's German with a Viennese accent?

No, it's a softer German.

Softer German?

I speak-- well, my parents lived here, we only spoke German. And I with Susie I spoke German.

She spoke English fluently, but when we talked on the phone all the time, when I went-- I speak German very well.

OK. What about reparations? Did your parents ever get reparations?

Yeah, we got reparations. Yes, my cousin here, who is here, we worked together, and we did not very well, but we did fine. I mean, they gave us stuff. Well, they had the compound. The villa in Baden was a big deal. And then my uncle had a couple of houses, I think, in Vienna. I have a cousin who lives here, in Washington. So we got some reparations, yes.

Have you been to Israel?

We've been to Israel about 50-- more than that. Yeah, 50 years. When we lived in Paris, we went to-- you could then go to Israel by boat. And we went by ship, and we spent a month in Israel, in August.

My aunt and uncle were still alive, and my cousin had the two little girls. And so we were there. But we have not gone back. We like to travel the world, and our feeling always was, we've been in Israel. And it's now to see the rest.

Obviously, we didn't see the rest. I mean, we were in Europe a lot, and in Australia. I have cousins in Australia on my mother's side.

Oh, my.

So it was very nice. But you know.

Do you feel that your childhood experiences made you more Jewish?

My what?

Your childhood, what are your thoughts about being Jewish? And considering what you went through and your father losing his--

Yeah, I obviously feel Jewish and stuff. My childhood, I mean, being Jewish, the festivals were part of it. But I--

How did you raise your children? Were they Jewishly affiliated?

Well, they were in Beth-El for--

Sunday school?

No, my daughter Karen was in Beth-El until we went to Paris. We lived in Paris for two years. And when we came back, I did not rejoin Beth-El because they started a building fund. And they started with bat mitzvahs for girls. And I didn't grow up with bat mitzvahs. No girls had bat mitzvahs. I was not going to take my children to Sunday school and all that Hebrew school. It was enough I had to take Karen before we left, but that was just Hebrew school. Fine.

But I did enroll Joan into the-- what was it called? The Bethesda Chevy Chase Jewish Community Group, which is the oldest Jewish group in Montgomery County. And they had-- I don't know what they have now, but they had Sunday school. You didn't have--

She was the younger of the two?

The younger. And they had Sunday school. And I took Joan to Sunday school, to that, because I wanted her to have some Jewish background and education. But I was not about to-- money wasn't plentiful at that time. And I was not going to spend it on something that really annoyed the hell out of me, quite frankly. So.

Do you think you would have been a different person today if you hadn't gone through having to leave?

Yeah, probably.

In what way?

I don't know.

Did it strengthen you?

Huh?

What did they experience, do you think, did to you? Make you a stronger, more independent person? You said you were an independent child.

Yeah. I don't know that I would have been more independent than I already was.

Yeah, yeah.

I mean, I would have not worked in a candy store or anything. I was in a society where, I guess, I would have gotten

married. I don't know that I would have gone to university, because I really did not like taking exams and stuff. So I don't know what I would have thought. The only thing that-- Susie and I felt that the only thing that Hitler did for us, we didn't have to take the Matura. Which is the final exams. At age 18, the baccalaureate.

Right, right.

I mean, neither one of us were that type of pupil. We were bad pupils. I was pretty good in stuff that interested me.

Were you active in the Civil Rights movement at all, since your civil rights were taken away from you?

No, I was not.

I mean, you were raising children.

I was very active, and still am, in the Democratic Party. And if you were-- well, you could come up there, but you don't want to. You see him lying in bed in the dining hall. You see my pictures from Clinton and Hillary. And here's a picture from Kennedy.

So you were active in politics?

Politics, yes.

Behind the scenes?

Behind the scenes. I didn't run for anything. I managed.

Did you?

I managed campaigns. This picture from Kennedy is my pride and joy. Unfortunately, the tub-- no, the toilet got stuck, and the water ran down. And while you can see his writing, which says "to Madeleine, with thanks and best wishes," you can see the imprint of the writing. The ink is washed out.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Much to my chagrin.

So do you think you were active in politics because you--

No, I think--

--it was a country where you were deprived of your--

No, I was active in politics because I liked what the Democrats were-- I was interested in what they were doing, stuff from day one. I mean--

I'm just saying, you would have more awareness than someone who was born here and wasn't subject to what you were subject to as a--

Maybe. I don't know. I mean, I never thought of it in that connection at all.

Have you been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington?

No.

Because you don't have the time?

I don't want to see it.

Because?

I don't want to.

Too painful?

Too painful. I don't want to deal with it. I don't have to see it. It's for people to see who--

Who don't know.

Who don't know. It's not for me.

Right.

I mean, even though I was lucky, I never considered myself a Holocaust survivor. I would say a Holocaust refugee maybe, but not a survivor. Survivor are the ones who survived the camps, as far as I'm concerned.

Anybody whose life was changed or life was in danger, like yours.

Yeah, but you know, it's no comparison.

Do you read about the Holocaust or see movies?

Not much. No, this is just too much for me.

Too much.

I can't, really.

Yeah. Do you do you have any grandchildren?

I have one grandson, who is absolutely adorable. And he has taped all of this that I have told.

I was going to say. And you've told him your story.

Yes, he knows my story.

Are you more comfortable with people who came from Europe than you are with native Americans?

Not particularly. Not particularly. I'm comfortable with all Americans. With anybody. Not with anybody. I mean, that's-- you know just living.

Well, is there anything else you wanted to add that we haven't covered?

I can't think of anything. I could tell you how my father proceeded in the United States.

Well, we have a few minutes, if you--

If you want to.

Sure.

It's quite a story, too.

Yeah.

It's still going, the tape?

It's still going.

Well, how are you going to erase all this other stuff about Netanyahu.

Can't erase it. So what your father--

OK, so my father, he--

Yeah, keep going.

Yeah. I got married, and I left, moved away. And I guess it finally hit him that he really has to do something. So far I was there, and money was coming in. I mean, he was, too. He worked in the shipping department in Gimbel's, and then in a shipping department at Hattie Carnegie and stuff. And then they were still gathering at the cafeteria of the Viennese. On 96th Street, there was a cafeteria on Broadway.

And there was a man there who said that he had pictures. And he goes into the Catskills to the hotels, and he sells these pictures, and he has some artists who paint them. And then the next-- at some other point, he mentioned that he needed an assistant. So my father decided, said, "oh, I can help you." So he started to go with him to do the pictures.

Now, what I hadn't mentioned before was that if you put-- never mind. I'll tell you later. So I hadn't mentioned that my father was extremely talented. He painted. One picture here is his. And he played piano by ear. And his painting and drawings were wonderful.

So he went with him, and he saw what the man was doing. And then he says, I can do this. So he went and he bought a car. And this was in 1950, because my daughter was born. And he appeared in Washington with this new station wagon and with pictures. And he was going down to Miami, because he had heard that they have a hotel boom. And he figured that maybe he could sell some pics to interior decorators or something, so he would do that.

So he painted some samples. And I guess had them framed. Anyway, he went down there and he made contacts. Well, to make a long story short, he sold-- he plastered, I think, most of the motels with his pictures. He hired artists in New York, and he would tell us he had a studio. They would send up 10 or 15 easels and go red, red, red, blue, blue, blue.

He designed the pictures, and the orders he got to match the pictures to the decor. So they were painted yellow and gray and blue and whatever. And he sold-- he must have sold thousands of pictures. He didn't just sell in Florida, but he went up the Southern coast to Houston, where this friend lived, who got my uncle to get the affidavit, who had a cafe by that time, I think.

And then he went up through the country, up through Arkansas and all there, wherever. And he sold pictures here in Washington, too, where the [INAUDIBLE] furniture and stuff. And he was absolutely--

Wonderful.

My mother traveled with him. Oh, and they had moved. After I left, they moved from 96th Street, which became a Puerto Rican district there, to Riverdale. And they had an apartment in Riverdale. Also, everything had to overlook something.

Do you think your mother was emotionally?

Oh, yeah, definitely. Definitely. I mean, there's no doubt about it.

How did it manifest itself?

Well, when retiring, she wasn't affected emotionally once things picked up. I mean, the first few couple years, especially after she had to be a maid.

But I meant having to leave Vienna.

Oh, no. She had it by that time. I mean-- and my parents did go back to Badgastein, which is a resort near-- in the mountains near Salzburg every summer. Oh, they moved. After they lived in New York, they moved to Miami. And then he retired. And every summer, they went to Badgastein.

Oh, interesting.

The first year they went to Israel, and they went all through Europe to see. And they went to Vienna, and they stayed at a hotel. I mean, he did very well. And then he invested. And he really did well in a very short time.

Yes.

Because he retired when he was 65.

Oh, my.

And so-- Oh, so I'll just tell you one other little story. He is sitting at a cafe in Badgastein. There was a man sitting next to him, and they started to talk, this and that and the other. And it turned out the man was the President of Austria. You see, things are different. And he was having his coffee. My dad was having his coffee. And so they became quite friendly. And every time he went to Vienna, he went to see the president.

Which President was this?

Kirchschrager. He's since deceased, of course. And very nice guy. So next time we went to Vienna, I wrote to him and said that I would like to meet him. And so when we were in Vienna, there was an invitation waiting at Susie's house for me to come at a particular time. And his office is in a palace, the president's palace. In fact, Maria Theresia's bedroom was the anteroom.

So is it still going?

Yeah.

Yeah, so it was the anteroom. So on the way to walk into the palace, we're on a street, Stan and I. And a man walked up to me, and he said, can you tell me where the Fischerstiege is? And I said, oh, yeah, no problem. And I showed him how to go. And Stan was very surprised. Anyway, we went on to have our audience with the president. And he, the president, Kirchschrager, he spoke English very well. So we talked English, of course, and all kinds of things.

And then he said to me, "by the way, do you still remember Vienna?" And I said, "Oh, yes. I remember it very well. And I told him the episode that just happened on the street." And he says, "Oh, that is really very interesting. Tell me, where is the Fischerstiege?" So I had to explain to him where it was.

That's wonderful. That's a wonderful story.

So anyway, that's the story.

Well, thank you very much for doing this interview.

Well, thank you very much. And--

I appreciate it.

Yes. Are we--

OK, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Madeleine Sigel.