

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Madeleine Sigel
May 22, 2015
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PREFACE

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MADELEINE SIGEL

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Gail Schwartz: This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview of Madeleine Sigel. It is being conducted by Gail Schwartz and is taking place on May 22nd, 2015 in Bethesda, Maryland. This is track number one. What is your full name?

Madeleine Sigel: Madeleine Sigel.

Q: And what name were you born with?

A: Madeleine **Bartfeld**, B-A-R-T-F-E-L-D.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in Vienna, Austria.

Q: When?

A: In, on February 16, 1924.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about your family. Your parents, their names?

A: My parents were **Melita** and Albert Bartfeld.

Q: And your mother's maiden name.

A: Was **Bonyhady**, B-O-N-Y-H-A-D-Y. I am an only child. No siblings.

Q: Ok. Were they also born in Vienna?

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A: Yes.

Q: How far back that you know of that your –

A: My parents were born in 1895 and in Vienna so I don't know when my grandparents on either side came. I don't know actually when my grandparents –

Q: How many generations were in Vienna?

A: When they came to Vienna. I know that my grandfather on my father's side was in the army and he was in the emperor's guard. Guard in Vienna. And actually went out, was there. It was pointed out to me by my cousin where he was stationed at the Vienna **burg**, at the health work. So anyway.

Q: Did you have a large extended family of aunts and uncles and cousins?

A: Not really no. I'm an only child. On my mother's side and on my father's side I had four cousins. That's about it. And one of the cousins lived in the States all her life and the other three lived in Vienna. And my cousin Charles Bartfeld was interviewed by the Holocaust Museum so they have their records.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

A: Well that's a long story. My grandfather and his sons had a dairy business, wholesale dairy business in Vienna. And my father then decided at some point to go out on his own. And he opened a delicatessen store like Balducci's in Washington. It was very fancy. And imported all kinds of goods from the States and things. And then after a while he branched out. He was always interested in theater and stuff. And he branched out and of course I had no idea how this all developed. Because I was a kid. But anyway he took over the largest or the best known I

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should say vaudeville theater called the **Ronacher**, R-O-N-A-C-H-E-R which was a very well-known place. And so I grew up being able to go there all the time and see the acts and all that. And then after a while he also got a cabaret café, called the Café de Paris. And he had by then he had left the Ronacher and by the time the Anschluss came, he had the Café de Paris, which was a very well-known cabaret where a lot of people, comedians and stuff and dancers appeared and many of them were – I don't know actually if there were many of them, were former citizens of so called Germany. And so anyway, I mention that because this was the cause for his being informed by one of his loyal employees that he was going to be picked up in a couple of days to go to a concentration camp. And so he left within those, before they came. But then I'm jumping ahead.

Q: We'll get to that time.

A: So I don't want to –

Q: But that's important what you just said. Did your mother work?

A: No, mother, when they opened the store, she helped out in the store and then when he, in the business I should say. And when he then took over, went off to the theater side, she sort of ran the store on a part time basis, I would say.

Q: They kept the store when he went into the theater world?

A: They kept the store the whole time because they supplied the food for the buffet in the theater and for the cabaret in -- afterwards. So the store was there until it was taken over by the Nazis.

Q: What language did you speak at home?

A: German.

Q: Spoke German. How religious was your family?

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A: Not very.

Q: Did you celebrate any holidays?

A: We celebrated holidays.

Q: Which ones?

A: You know the big holidays. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. Passover, you know, that's about it I would say.

Q: Would you get together with extended family?

A: Passover, yeah. And others when my grandfather was still alive.

Q: Do you have any special memories of those holidays?

A: Oh yeah, well you know we, we were young so my mother drilled me in the **Mah Nishtanah** when I was four years old and I always had to recite the Mah Nishtanah, even after my cousin was born but he was four years younger. And so I don't recall him ever reciting it. So that was sort of my job on Pesach, on the Seder.

Q: Did they belong to a synagogue?

A: They belonged to a synagogue, not my parents. Maybe one year they did, but my grandfather and uncle, they belonged to a synagogue.

Q: Were they quite observant?

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A: They were more observant than we were. I don't know whether they kept a kosher house or not. I don't think so but I don't know.

Q: Did your family observe Shabbat, Friday night Shabbat?

A: No.

Q: You didn't. Did you have a Christmas tree?

A: Only once. (laughs)

Q: How did that happen?

A: I don't know. I guess I carried on and wanted a tree so they put a tree up. I don't know.

Q: What kind of neighborhood did you live in? Was it a mixed neighborhood of Jews and non-Jews?

A: Well I, yeah, I would say that was it. Yes.

Q: Were you in a house or an apartment?

A: Apartment. Nobody lived in a house in Vienna. Vienna is apartment, it's a big city with apartments.

Q: I'm sorry, did you say Jews and non-Jews in the building?

A: Yeah, I guess so. Listen, remember I was a kid, ok. All right. I left, when we left I was 14. Ok.

Q: But when you were younger you played with non-Jewish children and Jewish?

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A: No, not really. I don't think so. I don't know. I mean we didn't – certainly when I was in elementary school there were a lot of non-Jewish children.

Q: So you went to a public elementary school?

A: Public school, yes public elementary school. Private school thereafter. Elementary school was four grades.

Q: What kind of private school? Was it a Jewish school or –

A: No, no. It was a very advanced what then was called, because it was called, it was for women. And it was, the only difference between that school and the gymnasium was that we did not have to learn Latin and Greek, but we had to learn, have chemistry and physics and history and all the same bit. And then of course, the, which I always stress is religion was a subject. I don't know if anybody ever told that. Religion was a subject in school. And at the end of the -- one day a week, at the last hour, the kids used to divide and go to their different classrooms. The Jews and the Catholics and the Protestants, different places. And it was, you were graded with your report card. In religion.

Q: What percentage were Jewish? Do –

A: In the upper school where I went, there were I would say 80 percent.

Q: Were Jewish?

A: I would say so. I don't know. I mean I never –

Q: So it was predominantly Jewish?

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A: I guess so, but that didn't matter. I mean it was Jewish but it was, that didn't come up except when you had your religion. I mean it was not something that was discussed or anything.

Q: Were your parents Zionists?

A: No. No. And nobody that I knew was Zionist. But again you have to take into consideration that I was a kid, so.

Q: Would you describe yourself as an independent child or –

A: Yes, very much so.

Q: You did things on your own?

A: Yes.

Q: Went out on your own?

A: Yeah, of course. We didn't have anybody walking with us. I walked to school and home and I went afterwards to things and went home. Nobody had accompanied, that I can remember. You went you know. We met our friends and we went out. And back and forth, I mean. We're different times.

Q: What about sports? Were you interested in sports when you were –

A: Yeah, soccer, football. My father was into soccer or football as we call it and he would take me, he would go to matches on Sunday and I would go with him. And –

Q: Did you play soccer?

A: Only what we did in school a little, not too much. Girls didn't really play soccer, God forbid.

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Q: What about swimming or anything like that?

A: Oh yeah, sure. I was taught to swim when I was four. Everything when I was four and then we were ice skating when I was four and you know they flooded tennis courts so you could go and – and so there were a lot skating rinks around.

Q: Did you play tennis as a young teenager?

A: Well yeah. My mother felt that I should learn to play tennis on one of our many vacations and she went to a store and bought a racket which was entirely too heavy for me. And then we had a tutor or whatever you call it. At a hotel and he was very impatient cause I couldn't hold the racket. So this was more or less a disaster but it ruined my arm for life.

Q: Where did your family vacation?

A: Well they had a home in a suburb of Vienna, in a little town called **Baden**, a spa town. And actually it was more like a family compound. It had two or three buildings and my uncle and family went there also in the summer. And I think they rented out one building. I don't really quite remember. But anyway and there was a, well it was called a beach spa. It was a big building and it had large, very large pools and they had imported sand the whole length of the pool. Anyway we, my first -- the first six years of my life we went every summer to Baden to be with the family in the house. And then my mother had enough. And so we traveled every summer, my mother and I. And my father rarely took vacation with us cause he was busy with the businesses. He would come out weekends or something. So anyway, I had a very interesting life I must say, being an only child. While we had help, very often since they were busy all week, I spent weekend, or Sundays with them and frequently wherever they went. So I went you know wherever they went.

Q: Did your family have a car?

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A: No. They had a, well that's later on they had the car but that was used only for business more or less.

Q: Did you, when you were old enough to remember, did you experience any anti-Semitism before 38, we're talking about pre-38?

A: No.

Q: No anti-Semitic –

A: I have not, felt nothing. How adults felt, I cannot tell you. As a child I had –

Q: So up to 38 there were no restrictions.

A: No, no of course not.

Q: A normal childhood.

A: Yes.

Q: Til the age of 14.

A: There were no re -- of course not. Remember, we lived in Vienna, like everybody else.

Q: Did you feel very Austrian?

A: Yes, very much so and very Viennese.

Q: Very Viennese. Did you feel very Jewish?

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A: Yeah, to a certain extent, but I never felt that it was any different from anybody else, as it came.

Q: So it was a happy childhood?

A: Very happy childhood with a lot of things going on. My main interests in my years I would say starting maybe at 12 or maybe at ten. I don't remember when, was really getting autographs from people, from actors and through my father and all that. And that was really –

Q: Any famous autographs that you –

A: Oh yes, they're all at the University of Maryland library.

Q: Such as.

A: They have a huge collection.

Q: Such as.

A: And I'll give you the write up on it. There were a lot like this poster you have behind you. The comedian **Harmonis** who were very well known and appeared in the theater and I have their autographs and to my father. Many of them were autographs to my father, not to me, but many of them are to me and then we spent a lot of time, a few friends and I, at the stage door of the largest theater, the **Burg** theater which was the classical theater and stuff and to get autographs from the actors. And there was a particular one that we all adored, a young man who was very good looking. And all his photographs and autographs are at the University of Maryland. And it's – so, well the school was a private school so you know we had classes all morning. And then in the afternoon there was a -- I went to another school I think one year. Not, just, I guess now you would call it day care in the afternoon. I had a governess for one year, I remember in the afternoon but we didn't get along. I was a very, tomboy type child and I really didn't like people to tell me what to do all the time. It got me into trouble in school at times but –

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Q: Such as –

A: Oh, no just talking, was talking. And so anyway the schools in Austria and other places had a break and they went, we went skiing for a week. I mean so when I was in I guess seventh grade was when we started to go on the ski trip which was very exciting.

Q: Where would you go, to go skiing?

A: Oh well when we went on, the school, we went into parts of Austria and then there was an area close to Vienna, about an hour or two hours away. Two hours. It was a big mountain that was a big ski resort. And a resort really and it still is, called the **Ste. Marie** and we went skiing there and it was wonderful.

Q: When did you first start hearing about man named Hitler?

A: Oh my, heard very early. I remember being in --

Q: When you were nine years old?

A: No, I was ten. No maybe.

Q: He came into power in 33.

A: He came in at 33. I don't think I heard about that but in 34, we were in Yugoslavia, my mother and I and that was when the chancellor, Austrian chancellor was assassinated in 1934 in the summer. And that's the, sort of the first time that I remember that I may have heard that things were in Germany that weren't good for the Jews. But I really don't recall. I mean this is something.

Q: You were young.

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A: That sinks in and then you know then of course, I was ten then. So then as you get older you become more aware and you hear more of what's going on.

Q: Did you listen to his speeches on the radio?

A: No but that's another story. And so the -- while you are asking me. The last time we were skiing with the group was about two, three weeks maybe before Hitler, before the Anschluss and so we were skiing on the Ste. Marie and then when we came down we had to -- in the room, so by then we were 13, yes. We were in the dining room and Hitler was giving a speech and we were supposed to be very quiet while he was -- and listen. And so the table I was at, we were fooling around and didn't really want to you know whatever kids do and they told us to be quiet. So ok. So the next day was the last day skiing and they were giving us tests and the woman who was the ski instructor was a real, you know, Hitler type, Hitler **Machen**. Blond, blue eyed, rather good looking as I recall. Anyway, as I came down the hill to be tested, I came close to her. She stuck her ski pole out and I fell. That was the result of fooling around. And as it turned out, late, as I -- when we went on the train and went home, on the train I had a very bad pain in my leg and it turned out then when I came home, I went to bed. Then they took me to the emergency room and I had torn my meniscus in the knee. So they you know they put a cast on and that's what you did at that time, I guess. And that was, by that time it was the week before Hitler came. And on the -- he entered on the 13th. The troops, or he entered on the 13th which was a Sunday. And in between they called for election so they put slogans on the streets and you know elections for the Austrian chancellor and all that. So before, this is, I'll always remember. You know kids do the crazy things. So the Sunday before there was a custom that people were sort of parading Sunday morning on the Ring which was a fancy area and it was called the **Corso**. So my friend Madeleine, I had a friend called Madeleine had broken her leg on the same trip. And so her left leg was in a cast and my right leg was in a cast and we both had canes so we decided we would parade on the Corso. The two Madeleines in the casts on the Corso. People looked you know we thought it was all a big joke. So that was the Sunday before Hitler came in. So he came on the 13th. On the 16th --

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Q: When he came, where were you and what did you see and –

A: I didn't see a damn thing for him, had newsreels or television.

Q: You did not go out to see him?

A: Are you crazy? Why would I go out to see –

Q: What did your –

A: The only people went out who claimed they were taken over who were screaming like crazy. Welcoming all this you know stuff. And –

Q: Did you feel particularly frightened when he came, knowing that he was there?

A: No, I didn't you know. You always have to view this from a kid's point of view. Yeah, obviously this was disturbing and stuff but you know you really didn't have any idea on the 13th. Now let me go on to the 16th. I spent a lot of time at my grandmother's cause my parents were occupied and then my father would be sleeping during the day because he was up at night with his business. And so I was at my grandmother's when all this happened and my parents were I guess in the apartment. And on the 16th I think we had no school that week. Yeah, I think we had no school that week. I was going to go to the business where my parents, you know the parents – not the night, the business. And as I reached the bridge across the canal, the **Donat**, the Danube canal. One of the employees met me from my father, from the business. And he says your parents want you to, not to come. They want you to go home, go back to your grandmother and just stay there. Well what was happening in the business was that they had come, Nazis had come in already. This was the 16th. And I guess they took over the business. Honestly, I can't really give you details. Cause obviously I didn't know a damned thing. And I think that same evening, that same day or maybe the next day. I don't know. They came to the apartment and had them search through the apartment. I was not there.

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Q: You were still at your grand –

A: I was at my grandmother's.

Q: Is this your maternal or paternal grandmother?

A: Maternal. And I had a paternal grandfather and a maternal grandmother. The other ones were deceased. So I was not there. So I only hear.

Q: You heard about it?

A: I heard about it time and again when my parents would relay what went on. And apparently they marched off with some stuff and –

Q: Were your parents there at the time?

A: Oh yeah they had to be there. I don't know, yeah I guess they were there. I don't know if they took them there or what. I have no idea how this was. But it was very upsetting obviously. And I think what stopped the whole thing was when they learned that my father was a lieutenant in the First World War. And so that seemed to stop whatever they were doing. So anyway, this is – and then I think school started again but we only had you know we had some new teachers. Some of them had, apparently were Jewish, not that we knew it ahead of time. But they weren't there when we came back to school.

Q: The new teachers were Jewish teachers?

A: No.

Q: The Jewish teachers had left?

A: Had left. Some of – some of them, all of them, I don't remember.

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Q: Did that upset you?

A: I don't remember really. Yeah, I guess, now the person who left, I know who left was the English teacher. We had an English teacher, a professor who was a dragon. She was really something but I've been very grateful to her ever since because when we left I spoke English. We had to learn things by rote. First we had to learn things phonetically for the first six months, with a handkerchief and a mirror and we had to turn our tongue the right way and all this. I mean it was unbelievable and then after, so I, we had her four years. Yeah four years. And we had to learn as the years progressed, not right away, books by heart. Like *The Jungle Book*, every day two pages that you had to recite. Well that was the way you practiced speaking because who would you speak to, you know. And it certainly turned out to be a, it was a miserable way to learn. But when I left I spoke English. I was fluent. I mean I didn't have adult, many adult words. I don't know. I have never had any problem communicating. So anyway that's an aside.

Q: You said you went back to school and there was , were some new teachers.

A: We went back to school and we had to quit school. You know when school was over, that was the eighth grade and that was it you know. They closed the school.

Q: They closed, oh you mean for the summer.

A: No, no I think the school was closed cause I think the owner was Jewish. But she was not in the country. She was a well-known educator and I have books for her. She, people still use her method.

Q: What is her name?

A: **Schwartzwald**. Eugenie Schwartzwald. That's black forest, translated.

Q: So then what did you do? It was summer time.

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A: It was summer time so what we do, you know.

Q: Did you still vacation –

A: When Hitler was there? Who went on vacation?

Q: So you stayed?

A: We were in Vienna. For the first time in my life I was in Vienna in the summer and I found it very uncomfortable. It was very hot.

Q: What about the soldiers?

A: No, you didn't see many. You know again, we didn't get together and then, we again, sort of couple of us went to the stage door and they gave us autographs and you know we gathered in a park or something, a group of kids and –

Q: But was it frightening to see soldiers?

A: Yeah, it was frightening.

Q: Or flags with the swastika?

A: Oh yeah of course.

Q: What did that mean to you as a teenager?

A: What do you mean? It was taken over. Wasn't Austria, it was Germany.

Q: Did you feel frightened?

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A: Hunh.

Q: Do you remember feeling frightened?

A: At times, yes probably.

Q: But your folks still gave you freedom to travel in the neighborhood?

A: Oh yeah, we were walking around as usual. You know of course they told us not to do this and not to do that. Not my parents. Parents, you know told us. Don't go there or don't go here. I don't know that we paid attention.

Q: Were there anti-Jewish signs?

A: Of course. And there were stuff painted on stores and things and I did go, I think my father was in the store sometime. They put a, what they called a commissar into the store. He was unpleasant but not too unpleasant, apparently. I mean I really cannot go into that. I really don't know. I mean it was, you discussed where would you end up and where did your friends go. And some had left and there was a big thing about always exchanging addresses among our group of kids. You know. We then had turned, we had turned 14 a month.

Q: Some of your friends already left by the time you were 14?

A: Some had left. You know they just disappeared, but the closer ones wouldn't, we didn't leave without exchanging addresses. And the idea was that wherever you went, you didn't know where you would be but you would try to general delivery so that you could pick up your mail. And you know there was a close knit group of about eight or nine that we had all gone to school together, all these years so we were all in touch.

Q: Where, what countries did they go to?

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A: All over the world. And –

Q: So now it's the fall of –

A: No it's not. Well then there was the summer and you know you learned where, what countries gave you visas. I mean you weren't oblivious. I mean you were discussing all these things all the time. And you know some apartments were taken over. You know it was a very, it was somewhat of a difficult time as I recall. I mean you didn't feel easy or anything. So let me go back, if you want to hear the whole story. In 1937 my mother and I were in Venice at the Lido and spending the summer. This was I think the second time already we were there. And we were in a very nice hotel, a small hotel is like now they would call them boutique hotels, I don't know what they call them now. And there was a young man there who was very nice and he sort of became friendly with my mother and me. And we would talk. And I guess he must have spoken German. I often wonder now how did I communicate with **Santi**. Anyway I guess he did and he was there because he worked for the police in Venice but in the summer it was too hot in Venice so he would take a room in the hotel at the Lido where the air was fresher, be out there. And so at dinner we would talk and all that. And we exchanged addresses and we were very you know became friendly. So after Hitler came at some point, I don't recall when this was exactly. Oh we would, when we went to Vienna, and we would occasionally write to each other. And he, so I think what happened. (pause) Now again you have to remember that I was a kid and not privileged to all this whatever. Anyway I think what happened was he wrote my parents that he, if we ever had to leave at some point, there would be a compartment in a certain sleeping car that leaves every night at 10:00 for Venice. And you could go to that compartment and it would be taken care of. So when my father was told that he was going to be picked up the next day, or whenever, next day. Two days. We went to (pause), we went to the station and he went to that compartment and he went -- showed this ticket. He had a ticket. And his passport and stuff. And he boarded the train and he left. This was in September. And arrived in Venice.

Q: This is September 38.

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A: Yep. And my mother and I were still there and the commissar was still in the store and at some point there was talk about you had to get a quota number for the, to get even if you get an affidavit you have to have a quota number from the US to be able to enter. And somebody told me that and my father was not there and my mother was, to put it mildly under the weather. I mean her nerves were shot. Among other things, I didn't mention this earlier. You know when they put slogans on the sidewalks during the election, when the Nazis entered, they got the women to scrub the sidewalks and my mother was one of them. And she was very devastated and only somebody came by and said what, you took Frau Bartfeld. That's not right and he took her out from the line and she went back. So she didn't do very well. Anyway –

Q: Did you see her scrubbing?

A: No. I mean I was told that or heard it when they told other people. I mean nobody told me things directly. And anyway to go back to that now. So she was not in great shape. She managed in whatever had to, but not much. So anyway I went to the embassy, to the US embassy and got the forms that you had to fill out to get a quota number which I did very well and –

Q: You did this on your own?

A: On my own yes. And since I had forged my father's signature when I was in the school a great deal you know for excuses or something, I had no problem signing his name and stuff. I filled all this out with his name.

Q: You're 14 years old?

A: 14 years old and we got a quota number. You know and that was, however the quota number didn't help us much because my uncle who lived in the States, my father's brother, didn't send any affidavits. He was – the family had a, you know there was a rift in the family. And he didn't send any affidavits. And he didn't send any affidavit for his father even who -- so that was a lot of – but we did have a quota number. So anyway my father was in Venice. And we were here and then we, you know there were things left in the apartment which – we packed big things in

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crates. And my uncle had a visa for Palestine which was always called a capitalist visa. I don't know what it meant, but what it did mean is that they could take a lift you know a container, what now is called a container and they were able to take all their stuff and the crates that we packed of the stuff that was left, my mother and I we'd send over to his house and those things, when they left for Israel or Palestine, these crates went with them. And, our crates. So we I don't know somebody that took the apartment. It was very fancy furniture and stuff. My parents both liked antiques and stuff so I don't know what happened to that. Anyway my mother and I left and in December. My father left in September. We left in December 38, the same way he did, in the compartment that Santi had arranged which was ready every night and we got to Venice. We handed our stuff to the conductor and we never saw anybody again until we arrived in Venice.

Q: In Venice. What about Kristallnacht?

A: Kristallnacht we were at my grandmother's. I was at my grandmother's and my mother was there too and we still had the apartment somewhere else. I don't know. I don't remember. And so where we lived they didn't really, it was part of the first district and there weren't any Jewish stores as such so there wasn't anything happening. My father's store was in the second district which you cross. I mean it just so happened, you cross on the Danube canal and the bridge and that's where – oh yeah. What happened was we were going to go for some reason to the second, to the store or to my grandfather. I don't know. We were on the bridge the night, starting on the bridge the night, the evening before Crystal Night. And we saw these guys in boots running with, they had stuff on their – they had like brooms I think running towards there and my mother said let's turn around and go back which is what we did. And then it turned out these were the hooligans and everything who were running into the district breaking everything up and the temple and stuff. And –

Q: What was it like to see the damage the next day?

A: I didn't see the damage. I didn't go near the place. You know who knew what was going to happen. You know we stayed where we were for I don't know a couple of days or something.

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Yeah, I didn't say anything. I mean I'm trying to think whether – I guess after a week or two I may have gone over there and looked. I really stayed away as much as possible.

Q: What was your –

A: My uncle, as I now recall they had to move out of their apartment and they moved into another place. This was earlier, not then, but I'm mentioning it because they always – the new place I think was backing onto a temple and that was on fire cause they were talking about it. I mean I have no experience of this. Only hearsay.

Q: What was your home address?

A: I lived on the first district.

Q: Do you remember the name of the street?

A: **Vonsadagasse**. Anyway and so anyway we ended up in Venice. By that time my father was already in Switzerland because you only had a certain permission to stay anyplace was only --

Q: A number of days.

A: Yeah the Italians at first were, didn't do much but then they said people had to get out after a certain time so he Santi was able to get him a visa into Switzerland. And he met us when we were in Venice. And we were in Venice two weeks. It was miserable. It was cold and rainy and we had always been there in the summer and it was gorgeous, blue sky. But because the summer was long and the winter was short, at that time, at least the place we were in, they didn't, they only had stone floors because they didn't need you know. So it was cold and miserable, I remember. And anyway I was very upset of course because I was away from my friends. You know when you're a teenager you've got to have your friends. Never mind anybody else. And so but –

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Q: So you were upset about leaving Vienna?

A: Yeah I was a, yes and no. I mean yes I was upset about leaving my environment but not you know --

Q: You knew what was happening.

A: But here I was with my mother so I did find letters. Right away you know this is what we did. As soon as, I think I confided in one person that I was leaving. Because you really didn't tell people and so there was a letter at the general delivery. All right so that already made it that much better. And so anyway we were there about two weeks and then we joined my father in Switzerland.

Q: What city in Switzerland?

A: Zurich, in Zurich and he by then was living at some woman who was renting rooms. You know there were Jewish organizations and they gave you addresses, I think that's how we found the place. So we moved in there and we were in a one room and except I was, they had two beds in the room and I was sleeping on the couch in the living room of this woman's home. It was ok. I mean you know. The best part of it was, as far as I was concerned, this other Madeleine, her mother was Swiss so she had left Vienna much earlier and she was in Zurich and so this was wonderful. Of course I had a friend, but also she had an aunt and uncle. Her mother was in St. Moritz. She was a bridge lady, she ran a bridge in a hotel. Bridge was the big thing at the time. So she was living with her aunt and uncle and they were very nice and we had dinner there I think once a week and stuff. And my father the ever outgoing man. He had connections with the theater people in Zurich because they had exchanged they were called artists you know. They were exchange. It wasn't too bad. So he went to the coffee house, they went to coffee house every afternoon where they met other refugees but they also met Swiss Jews, people. And so we were there probably two, three months. Four, I don't know how long it took but it was, when the rumor was always what country can you go to. This was the big thing that everybody, always this stuff. So one of the things came up that you could buy a visa to Cuba and you could get the

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visa in Geneva at the consulate. And you had to have a certain amount of money. You had to show that you had that kind of money. I forgot what it was in the bank, so that you're not a charge of the government. So one of the Swiss people that my father met, a businessman said to him you know I will put this amount in the bank, in your name and open up and give you a bank book and you show them that you have this kind of money and buy the visa. And then when you come back, I'll close the account and you will have the visa. So this was done. My father went to Geneva and got the three visas and for Cuba. We're going off to Cuba. So then came the question. How are you going to go there? Well I really don't know how this worked, but I think he was able to talk one of the Jewish organizations to pay for tickets on the boat and to go to Cuba. And the boat was leaving from France.

So we got on a train and went to Paris. Now I think we were in Paris for a week or two weeks. I don't remember. But again my parents felt particularly my father again that the child, that was me, may never be in Paris again. And she has to see everything there is to see. So he schlepped me to the museums and to I don't know all the sightseeing, all the sights that you had to see, which at the time, I didn't really appreciate but you know. Oh and then I had to go to the **Gallerie Lafayette** because you have to have a dress from Paris cause you can't go aboard ship without a dress from Paris. So I got me a cotton dress or something. You know I was it as far as they were concerned. And so anyway, we went to La Rochelle and boarded the boat. It was an English boat. It was a cargo ship that took passengers. So there were 70 people aboard. They were German, French, and Polish. And that's about it, I think you know. A mixture of – I don't know how they got to it but they got to it so we were 70 aboard. And the other group aboard was returning fighters from the Franco-Spanish civil war, Cubans who were going back to Cuba. Except they had been in war such a long time, there no manners left. It was steerage and it was disgusting, thoroughly disgusting where we were cause obviously we had the cheapest possible thing. But there were also some passengers who had taken passage to go to Cuba who were you know first class, second class, whatever they had. Upstairs. So I managed to go through the door upstairs and which was very good because I was what, 14. And an innocent teenager. But there were a couple of young men who were very pleased –

Q: What month was this?

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A: May.

Q: May 39?

A: May 39.

Q: You were already 15.

A: I was already 15, yes. And so we set out for Cuba and we came to Bermuda and I heard some officers talking to each other and I heard them say that we won't be able to land, they had – in Cuba and stuff. And I thought oh that's weird. So I told this to my father and his buddies. They were standing there. And the reaction was what does your child know? Who knows what she heard? Ok. The only good part of I mean you know makes big impression, there was a young man by the name of Paul Jones and we used to dance together. You know they had dancing and so he was going to Cuba. He was an Englishman. He was going not to Cuba, to Bermuda, this was – we stopped in Bermuda and so he left and we said goodbye. It was all very you know innocent. And so he, and then he came back in the late afternoon with a big bunch of oleander which was blooming in Cuba to give to me. Now can you imagine. I mean what – a 15 year old. I was absolutely.

Q: Smitten?

A: Yes, smitten and overcome. And I get tears in my eyes now. So anyway we set out for Cuba. We arrive. We arrived in the, yeah I think in the evening. In the morning my father had a cousin who was in Cuba already. She was from Germany. And so we had exchanged letters or whatever. Obviously hadn't called. And there was this big ship, not parked, what do you call it. Tied up next to us, this big ship. And so we learned that it was the, what's it called?

Q: The St. Louis.

A: St. Louis and it was here from Germany with all these refugees, there were about 500 or

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something on there I don't know. I remember my cousin standing on the pier and waving and my father waving to her in the distance, very far distance but he recognized her and stuff. So anyway, I don't remember how long we were there. Whether it was a day or two or what. But the captain, we were very fortunate because this was a British ship and the captain said you know I will take you down the coast, the west coast of South America because that's where I have, my cargo goes and I have to land at various places and we'll see if they let you go. If somebody will give you a visa. So ok. We went. I think we too sent telegrams to Roosevelt or something and you know people trying to –

Q: Where there are lot of Jewish passengers on your boat?

A: Yeah, the 70 of us were Jewish. Were Jewish refugees. The others were I think, I'm not even sure that there were any more left. I think the other passengers, the paying passengers were all, got off in Bermuda. There was just us left to go to Cuba, as far as I – maybe there were some other rich ones but I don't, who were on the upper – I don't remember. Anyway we set out. And we got to the **Cristobal** which is the Atlantic side of the Canal and the ship docked and a rabbi came aboard. He was the chaplain in the American army, a Jewish chaplain and he came aboard. He had heard about us. And you know everybody said oh what are we going to do? And all that and my Yiddish wasn't very good, was non-existent really. Whatever I picked up, I picked up in the States and but he said something like **Zochzachnicht** [ph] which means don't worry and it's the German word **Zoch** [ph], you know it's the same. So I remember his saying Zochzachnicht. But I'll see what I can do. So we went through the Canal which of course was very interesting and then we went down the coast of South America. We stopped in Colombia and Peru was really on my mind because all these Indians came aboard wanting to sell things. And my father of course bought a bracelet and all that because whatever money he had he was going to still make like he had a lot. (laughs) And then we went further down in the coast of Peru. We were in **Callao** was the port that is really right near Lima and I still have this vision of the church, of the cathedral in Lima. You could see that from the boat. It was very impressive, this big – and I have since seen pictures and realized that's what it was. So then when we hit the northern part of Chile, **Pisco**, I don't know if Pisco is still the southern part of Peru or was Chile. Anyway, the captain said this is the end. I cannot take you any longer because I have to go around the cape

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and leave my cargo but there is a sister ship coming up from the same company and they're going to transfer you from the sister ship to the sister ship and take you back and you'll go through the Canal and you will have to go back to Europe if nobody picks you up.

So anyway they transferred us on the boson chair across you know where you get on the wires. You get transferred because you couldn't touch land. Our luggage could touch land, put that on the boat but we were on the chairs. Anyway so we got on **Orbita**. This was the original ship was the **Orduna** and we went on the Orbita and we hit, came back and we hit Balboa which is the Pacific side of the Canal. And the rabbi came aboard and he said I was able to arrange for you to get off in the quarantine station here in Balboa. You do not have to go back to Europe. Ok. So we go –

Q: All 70 of you?

A: All 70. And we got off at the quarantine station and apparently HIAS paid, he arranged it was 250 a day for a family or something. And the quarantine station, at the time I understand they had quarantine stations in various ports in the world for the drunken sailors. And so there are buildings in there. It was a compound, a big compound, with a fence around it you know. And different buildings. And we were all in, I think in the same building, the families or the couples in the one building. There were a lot of young, not a lot, there were a few young men among the 70.

Q: Single men?

A: Single men and they were in another building.

Q: What about children? Were there a lot –

A: There were very few children. There were a couple of little children.

Q: Nobody your age?

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A: Nobody my age but there were a couple of little – one was as it turned out, it was really very weird. The person, the couple with a very young child, like a two year old turned out to be a distant cousin of my father's who was, and the woman who was in Cuba was his aunt. This cousin's aunt. So he was going to Cuba to her. And then it turned out another man, single man, my mother and he exchanged, you know they had, also turned out that he was a distant member of the family. I mean really weird. The father's side of the family, the guy who, they had lived in Germany, they were German cause the cousin that was in Cuba lived in Germany also and had gone to Cuba. The one in my mother's side I think was from Vienna but they never met. Anyway so we were in the quarantine station, not permitted to leave, to go outside and this went on for – we were there for almost a year and a half, 15 months.

Q: In the quarantine station?

A: In the quarantine station. After two or three months we were permitted to go outside. And we went to Panama, the city of Panama. It was no, you know the Canal Zone, this was still the American part. I mean recently, comparatively recently was returned to Panama. But at that time there was this Canal Zone and we were in the American part.

Gail Schwartz: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Madeleine Sigel. This is track number two. You were talking about being in the quarantine station. Going into Panama.

Madeleine Sigel: And so 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 obviously engaged me in conversation cause she never wanted me to see the women sitting out there and I would ask questions, which I saw anyway and did ask questions and never got an answer. And anyway it was interesting. And the city itself was

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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 Club. And it was a building where the people in the Canal Zone had a club and if they wanted to go fishing then they would rent boats there. And the men and women who were in the club came over and, to say hello and to talk to us. And since I spoke English, I was the translator for a lot of people. They were very nice. And so when we could go out, that we would go over there and they would give us, you know invite us for dinner or 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. And the kids, and they had a daughter who was in school who was my age and then they had an adult daughter 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 into New Jersey and so we saw them when we were –

Q: Did you go to school?

A: No. No school, no school. And I did babysitting for a lieutenant colonel in the army. See the quarantine station in – 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, in 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 baby sit for a lieutenant colonel in Fort Amador. And the only thing I – 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 say so now what do we do with her. But obviously I woke up and I got the job with the little girl who was very cute, and 50 cents a night. I knew nothing about, what do I know about taking care of her. But it worked out. I was there. And one night I was there and a bat flew around and I was scared silly and it didn't sit in my hair. All I can remember is people saying that bats go into your hair (laughs) and I was really very upset. The bat. And then there was a little episode which I really have to mention because it was the highlight of one

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of my things. **Yascha Heifetz** the violinist came to, it was announced that he would give a concert in Panama in the 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 and 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 the Yascha 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. Well 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 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. (laughs) 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 Yascha Heifetz is coming. And I said I heard him play in Panama and he played **L'Après Midi D'un Faun**. And the guy said Yascha 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 pull it out. I said see here, he played. Oh, ok. (laughs) That was my second triumph from Yascha Heifetz. I'll never forget it. Anyway, so then when he came close, when the war broke out and it came, you know things became sort of a bit more difficult. Oh and then they had the **Grafspaven** [ph] that it was a destroyer I think or it was sunk near in the Caribbean or something. So anyway we couldn't get out. They closed the quarantine station and we couldn't go out anymore. By that time the war had broken out in the fall of 39 and we were still there a full winter.

Q: After that?

A: After that? After the –

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

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A: Yeah, we gathered around the one radio, every night and you know everybody wanted to hear what was going on.

Q: What was your parents' reaction? Do you remember?

A: You know listening. Oh good, you know everybody thought they were going to win right then. Yeah, so then I think when Dunkirk came and it was, I don't remember. It was pretty bad. But the following happened. They all of a sudden, the powers that be became very upset. Not upset, but concerned that they have 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 am guarantee that I will take over for them if they need any help. All you have to do is sign 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 have 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, Colonel **Odum**, could we go on the troop transport, even though we had the visa not through them but from my – so they permitted us to do that. So we all got on the troop transport.

Q: This is all 70?

A: All 70, well by then we had three level 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 say. Ellis Island. It was --

Q: Arriving in the United States had no –

A: Well, no. It, yes. It was you saw the, did we even see the – Yes, we did. We saw the Statue of Liberty and everybody – 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, by 9:00 you had

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to be in that room where they had four or five women, you know 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. The men were separate so my father took too. 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 or I don't remember now how that went.

Q: What month?

A: That was September. Was September 1940. We had been there a year from May 39 until September 1940. But you know the choice – right. I mean nobody complained really. I mean you know and by then we really didn't know what was going to happen.

Q: Did you know anything up to that time about what was happening to the Jews? Do you know if –

A: 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 in the other stuff it would have been terrible. I mean even thinking about going back and being obviously, they weren't go, they didn't let these people in. they were going to go to a camp or something. Yeah. So anyway, so my uncle, I just must add to this thing, 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. And he drove us, took us from Ellis Island.

Q: So you passed the test, at Ellis Island, when you said you were waiting.

A: Yeah, well Ellis Island.

Q: Did they examine you at all?

A: Yeah, yeah sure. They examine you and they –

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Q: So you passed all the questions.

A: All the questions and all the pass, you know and then if you got picked up by somebody. I think we were the early, we left early because he came to pick us up. So we went down the West Side Highway. I don't know if you know New York. West Side Highway.

Q: What did the United States mean to a young teenager?

A: Oh well, I had read some book. It must be ok. You know. It was fine. By then I was, no I wasn't 16 yet. I turned 16 in the States. No, I turned 16 down there, yes. Cause we had, everybody said sweet 16. I didn't know what they were talking about. So I was, yeah of course I was 16.

Q: Did it mean anything special, the United States to you?

A: 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 33rd street. And me, big shot said Terty Turd, you mean 33rd street. Well that was the end of this relationship (laughs) 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. And then misery began. (laughs) You know 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 –

Q: Did your parents speak English?

A: No. A little bit, hardly any. And –

Q: Was he able to get a job?

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A: (laughs) Fine. I'll tell you in a minute. So anyway, we went to, had friends in New York you know in New York, in New York City. And we, so my mother got a job you know there was Jewish organization, I think it was ORT. 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 him. 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. And my father and I went to New York. You know, do you know New York. I mean are you from New York. You know Barton's chocolates? Ok. There was another one, Gregor Chocolates and he was 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 **Ofbauer**? Do you remember that paper where you're always searching for people. Anyway, he offered me a job. I was the only one who spoke English. I 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, to 41st street on the Lexington, over two hours til I got there. And then the hours were from one to ten at night. And so I worked there for a year, in that store. Maybe a year so –

Q: So you had no more schooling?

A: 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. Cause 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 this stuff, the brushes, and they gave him the territory in New Rochelle cause he was out of – how he sold anything I don't know cause his English was really not, practically non-existent. But he managed somehow, but not very much. I was the one who got some money. Like some money. Ten dollars a week. And then he raised me to \$12 a week. And then somehow or other I – we still lived in Mount Vernon and then I made contact with some people through the Ofbauer, discovered who is 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 two hours from

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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. So 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, the last house on Riverside Drive. Not on 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 he could see the Riverside drive and the river and New Jersey across and it had air. You know there was no air. Some air was under the roof so that 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.

Let's see, what else did happen. Oh and then one, 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 til the evening and that's how he picked up his English cause 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 or what do you call it, whatever you call it, I can't think now. At Gimbels and he –

Q: Shipping?

A: Shipping department, thank you. Couldn't think of. In the shipping department, Gimbel's. And so I got a job at the candy department in Gimbels cause I had such experience with candy. And that of course was great because I didn't have to work nights or maybe on night they were open, when we took turns. And so then I went to business school. I was not very good. I learned typing and shorthand. That's what you learn there. And I went to business school. And then you know as, you live there. You make 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 so the whole thing became much more livable. And he worked for a shipping off. For a ship building office downtown 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. So I had an interview and then I got the job and fortunately I didn't have to take dictation and typing was only little. So anyway

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but then I worked with him 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 at New York University. But I only audited classes. 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, not, didn't have to take physics and chemistry which I hated when I did that. So life became – and the group, you know the Austrian group, we did a lot of things together and I had a boyfriend and you know how things became livable.

Q: Did you know what was happening in Europe?

A: Of course, of course.

Q: During the early 40s.

A: I was a, so this is -- there were all these service men and we went to canteens and then they tell you to write to service men. Write letters and they gave you addresses. And I would sit in my lunch hour, writing letters. And so this girl I was very friendly with in the office who she was not a girl. 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, 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 a, you know in England. The only problem was he was sea sick a lot but that was taken care of. He survived all that. And in May of 45 the ship came to, back to the States. And he came to his sister's. And we met. By then I had met most of his parents and some cousins because Rhoda and I became very close and she had a baby that spring, just after he came back yeah.

Q: His name?

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A: Stanley Sigel. And her name as well you see. And they lived, he grew up in Boston. 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. And so anyway so we started to go out cause he was stationed in Lido Beach for a while and then he was down in Norfolk and he left and then he went back. And he was a Harvard graduate ok. 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. To another person, I didn't. (laughs)

Q: When did you get married?

A: We got married two years later, in 47 and 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.

Q: What is his field?

A: Economics. He was with the Federal Reserve for 40 years.

Q: Before the war was over, were your parents hearing things and you hearing things about what was –

A: 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 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 old 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 Elsa as we called her somehow managed that somehow.

Q: Did you lose any extended –

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A: Yes, my grandmother was in Vienna. And she, there was always this thing is you go first and you go first and then we'll get you. 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. She lived there with her after Hitler. I think she moved in. And they then had to move out of this fancy apartment into the second 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, what, and so we had still correspondence. And my aunt. There was my mother and a brother and a sister. Neither one of whom had offspring. But my uncle left also and came to the States and my aunt went to England. 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. Somebody checked it off.

Q: What were their names?

A: Bonyhady.

Q: And the first name?

A: **Kata**, Katherina, Kata Bonyhady. And my aunt, my great aunt, her sister was **Petronella** Cohn. So my older daughter is named Karen Patricia. So anyway.

Q: How did your family find out about this?

A: Only afterwards. My father found out about his father from the Red Cross. I still have the 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 fouled up. He was supposed to go to Israel. My uncle left, my uncle 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

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oldest and she was in England all during the war. She was a nurse. And then she went to Israel and had a family.

Q: You got married and where did you live after that?

A: We lived, well we lived in Cambridge for six months and then we moved down here, been here since 1947.

Q: You have how many children?

A: Two daughters. 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, or got a ride and I was stuck without anything. And a neighbor took me to the store. And then we would take a bus and carry groceries. Oh and then my brother in law and sister in law, 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. By the time we came home she went back to have dinner and spend 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 on -- the next to the Mayflower and I got a job as translator of, well that's not the job I got for, but that's what I 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 you know agriculture, food, generally, I was able to put together some kind of

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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 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 you wanted to stay in the city we took the bus. Then at one point we got a car.

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

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

Q: Have you been back?

A: 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 a story. She is Jewish but her husband who was, we were all grew up together. Her husband and she and some other friends of ours. And his mother had a, what as I would now say as I mentioned before, like a day care. You go afterwards to her house and we would make, do homework, but we had to take piano lessons and exercise. A woman would come to do, you had to do exercise, do gymnastics, ok and stuff. So we were all there. And so her husband Hans, and his brother, they were this woman's sons. And they, so she was Jewish and her ex-husband was not. They got divorced before Hitler came. And the father was very nice guy. I mean I met him. 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 Suzy and her mother went to England and then Suzy 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 the farm with his wife and child. And when the war was over, he'd been in touch with his father of course all along, somehow. Anyway the father wrote and said or called and said to him, look you going to be a farm hand all your life. I have a going business and it is yours. So why

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don't you come back and see 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 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 together.

Q: What was her maiden name?

A: Her name was **Wurdoch** [ph], Suzy Wurdoch. Her father had a mental illness and I never knew her father. He was in an institution.

Q: Do you feel Austrian? Feel Viennese?

A: I don't feel Austrian at all. I still have sort of a feeling when there's something Viennese you know. And going back to Vienna was easy for me because I stayed with her all the time. And didn't have to deal with any of these miserable people.

Q: Why do you say miserable people.

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

Q: What are your thoughts about Germany?

A: They don't exist as far as I'm concerned. The Viennese never liked the Germans, I mean generally sort of, particularly the Viennese Jews. But I don't know if they were really Jews. There was all these jokes about Germans, except when they came in they loved them. So

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Q: Have you been to Germany?

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

Q: So you've never?

A: 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 insisted 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 you have to stop.

Q: But when you were growing up you had never gone to –

A: No.

Q: How do you feel speaking German?

A: Oh, I speak Viennese, I don't speak German. No, it's a softer German. I speak, when my parents lived here we always spoke German and with Suzy I spoke German. She spoke English fluently but we talked on the phone all the time and when I went, I speak German very well.

Q: What about reparations? Did your parents ever get reparations?

A: Yeah we got reparations, yes. My cousin here, who's here, we worked together and we did, not really well but we did fine. I mean they gave us stuff. Well you know they had a compound and 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.

Q: Have you been to Israel?

A: 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 a ship and we spent a month in

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Israel in August. My aunt and uncle were still alive and my cousin had 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 not to see the rest. Obviously, we didn't see the rest. I mean we were in Europe a lot. Australia. I have cousins in Australia on my mother's side. It was very nice.

Q: Do you feel that your childhood experiences made you more Jewish? What are your thoughts about being Jewish, considering what you went through, when your father was in –

A: I obviously feel Jewish and stuff. My childhood. I mean being Jewish and the festivals were a part of it but I –

Q: How did you raise your children? Were they Jewishly affiliated? Did they have –

A: Well they were in Beth El for, 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 bad enough that I had to take Karen before we left, but that was just Hebrew school. But I did, Joan, I did enroll Joan in 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 –

Q: She was the younger of the two?

A: 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 I really annoyed the hell out of me, quite frankly.

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

A: Yeah, probably.

Q: In what way?

A: I don't know.

Q: What did the experience do to you, make you a stronger, more independent person? You said you were an independent child.

A: Yeah. I don't know that I would have been more independent than I already was. 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. And 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 done. The only thing that Suzy and I felt that the only thing that Hitler did for us, we didn't have to take the **matura** which is the final exam at age 18, the baccalaureate. I mean neither one of us were that type of pupil. We were bad pupil. I was pretty good but in stuff that interested me.

Q: Were you active in the civil rights movement at all, since your civil rights were taken away from you in your –

A: No, I was not.

Q: You were raising children.

A: I was very active and still am in the Democratic party. And if you were, well you can come upstairs, but you don't want to. You'll see him lying in bed in the dining room. You'll see my pictures from Clinton and Hilary and here is a picture from Kennedy.

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Q: So you were active in politics?

A: Politics, yes.

Q: Behind the scenes.

A: Behind the scenes. I didn't want for anything. I managed campaigns. This picture of Kennedy is my pride and joy. Unfortunately the t, no the toilet got stuck and the water ran down and 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, much to my chagrin.

Q: Do you think you were active in politics because you –

A: No, I think it was –

Q: A county where you were deprived of your –

A: No, not. I was active in politics because I liked what the Democrats were, I was interested in what they were doing from day one.

Q: 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.

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

Q: Have you been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington?

A: No.

Q: Because you don't have the time?

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A: I don't want to see it.

Q: Because.

A: I don't want to get –

Q: Too painful?

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

–

Q: Who don't know.

A: Who don't know. It's not for me. Even though I was lucky. I never consider myself a Holocaust survivor. I would say Holocaust refugee maybe but not a survivor. Survivor are the ones who survived the camps as far as I'm concerned.

Q: Thought anybody whose life was changed or life was endangered like yours.

A: But you know it's no comparison.

Q: Do you read about the Holocaust or see movies?

A: Not much. This is just too much for me. I can't really --

Q: Do you have any grandchildren?

A: I have one grandson, which who is absolutely adorable and he has taped all of this that I have

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Q: I was going to say and you've told him your story?

A: Yes, he knows my story.

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

A: No, not particularly. I'm comfortable with all Americans. With anybody, not with anybody. I mean that's – you know just living.

Q: Is there anything else you wanted to add that we haven't covered or –

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

Q: We have a few minutes.

A: If you want to, it's quite a story too. It's still going, the tape. How are you going to erase all this other stuff about Netanyahu.

Q: Can't erase it. Your father?

A: So my father. You know 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 mommy was coming. I mean he was too. He worked for the shipping department in Gimbel and then in the shipping department at Hattie Carnegie so and then there was still the 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, he 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 my – 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

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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 cause he had heard they have a hotel room and he figured that maybe he could sell some pictures to interior decorator and something so he would do that. So he had painted some samples and I guess had them framed. Anyway he went down there and he made contact. 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 if they had a studio they would set up ten 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 décor. So there are pink and 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 café by that time I think. And then he went up through the country, up through Arkansas and all wherever and he sold pictures here in Washington to Woodward and Lothrop and Pier West furniture and stuff and he absolutely – my mother traveled with him. And they had moved, after I left, they moved from 96th street which became a Puerto Rican district to Riverdale and they had an apartment in Riverdale. Also, everything had to overlook something.

Q: Do you think your mother was affected emotionally?

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

Q: How did it manifest itself?

A: Well her retiring. She wasn't affected emotionally once things picked up. I mean the first couple years, specially after she had to be a maid.

Q: Having to leave Vienna?

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A: Oh, no she had it by that time and my parents did back to **Dachstein** which is a resort near, in the mountains near Salzburg every summer from – Oh they moved. After they lived in New York, they moved to Miami and then he retired and every summer they went to Dachstein. The first year they went to Israel and they went all through Europe to see all. And they went to Vienna and they stayed in a hotel. And he did very well and then he invested and he really did well and in a very short time because he retired when he was 65. I was going to tell you, a little story. Sitting at a café in Dachstein 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 and dad was having his coffee and so they became quite friendly. And every time he went to Vienna he went to see the president.

Q: Which president was this?

A: **Kirchschräger**. He is since deceased. 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 Suzy's house for me to come at a particular time. And his office is in the palace, the president's palace. In fact Maria Theresa's bedroom was the anteroom. So it was the anteroom so on the way to walking to the palace we were on the 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, told him how to go and Stan was very surprised. Anyway we went on to have our audience with the president and the president Kirchschräger, he spoke English very well so we talked English of course. 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. (laughs) That's the story.

Q: Thank you very much for doing this interview.

A: Thank you very much.

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Q: This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Madeleine Sigel.

(end)