

OK, we're back, Susan. And you were telling me about growing up in your home with your brother. You said that you were very close and that your mother was singing a lot, that you had a very tight-knit family.

Yes.

Tell me a little bit about your daily life as a child.

How early do you want to start?

As early as you can remember.

Well, I remember when I was three years old. I remember a little bit. And there was-- I had a-- we had a-- she was a nurse, actually, but she-- a baby nurse. But she was with us for many years, as I was-- from when I was about three until I was about 10.

And because my mother was singing and my mother also participated in the business, and so there needed to be someone full-time that was appropriate. And so-- what was the question?

You were telling me a little bit about your childhood and your daily life.

So it was until Hitler came-- and I was 10 years old when it really kicked in in '33-'34. And so my childhood until Hitler was very serene, and very loving.

I went-- very purposely, my parents sent me to the elementary school. And my mother was a leftist. And my father, I don't know. So the child-- I was very close to both my parents.

My mother and I were very similar in many ways. And my father was, for me, the saint. He was absolute goodness, and patience, and kindness. And my brother and I, as I said, fought like cats and dogs, but we loved each other.

And he went to the United States in 1936. My parents got him out because he was very stormy child. And he would have gotten into a lot of trouble because he couldn't-- the whole antisemitism, he would fight like crazy to defend himself.

So he went to the United States, to strangers. Not very good, not a very good home. So at 18, he was independent. Then he went into the army when the war broke out and became a citizen. And I went to England three months before the war broke out, World War II.

Let's go back a little bit before we get to that, if you don't mind.

OK.

So what language did you speak at home?

German.

German, OK.

And also, my parents both spoke perfect French. And my father spoke very good English.

OK. And do you remember-- can you describe what your school was like, if you remember any friends or hobbies?

I remember many things, yes. Elementary school was run by a very good friend of the family's.

OK.

And Leo Portchtell his name was. And Henishtar was his wife. So I have very happy memories of the first four years of schooling. The first four years were elementary, public school. That was the norm in Germany. Then you could continue in public school for another four years or you could go to a private school.

OK.

So when I was 10, I went to a private school. And, of course, Hitler-- when I was 12, I was kicked out of school.

So that was what I was going to ask you next. When did you first start to feel a presence of antisemitism in your town?

Certainly 1933.

So you were already nine.

Mm-hmm.

And your brother was how old, like 12?

12, yes. And when I was 10, I was then going-- at 10, you could go to high school. And I went to a Jewish elementary school. And then when I was 10, I went to high school in my town. And when I was 12, they threw me out.

They kicked all of the Jews out of school.

Hmm?

They kicked all of the Jews out of school. And before we get into that, before you noticed the antisemitism, did you feel any antisemitism between your non-Jewish schoolmates before 1933?

Not at all.

So the Jews and the non-Jews got along well?

And when Hitler first came in and things began to change, I used to get notes from the girls in my class saying, dearest Susan, I love you so much, but I can't talk to you anymore. And that was the beginning of the end.

How did-- do you remember what you felt like at that time?

Yes. Well, it was interesting because you have defense mechanisms. And so a good part of me felt proud that I was a Jew and despised these girls, who were so stupid and superficial. And so they threw me out of school on Kristallnacht.

The morning after, I went to school. I had no idea that anything had happened. But the girls were, in my class-- it was a girls' school. And they were jeering and throwing paper balls at me and stuff like that. And told me that when I came home, my house would be burned down.

And so I left school. I ran out, ran home. And I remember my father standing at the top of the stairs, looking down at me as I was running up the stairs. And then he-- and he was absolutely marvelous and helped both my mother and me through these awful times.

And that first night, the Nazis came to our house, about a dozen of them. And they took me into my room. I had my own room. And so they took me into that room. And they made me stand against the wall and pulled out their revolvers. And said, where is your foreign money and something else. I can't remember now.

And I said, we don't have any. And they said if you don't tell us, we'll count to three, and if you don't tell us, we'll shoot. It's unforgettable, that.

And I remember, I was standing against the wall with my hands against-- the palm of my hands against the wall. And they counted, 1, 2, 3. And, of course, they didn't shoot. And eventually they left.

And so your brother had been sent at this point already.

Yes, he was in the United States.

OK. And how did they manage to get him out?

Through the Jewish Refugees Committee.

OK. And what year was that when he was sent to the US?

He went in '37.

OK, so your parents saw that things were changing.

Oh, yes. But they couldn't get out.

Right, I see.

My father was very well known in that town where I grew up. And there was no way.

What kind of things were changing in those years?

Well, for instance, we had to close our business. We had this very large store. And we had to-- it was an [SPEAKING GERMAN]. You don't speak German, no? [SPEAKING GERMAN] is when you sell out, you sell everything.

You liquidate the store.

Liquidate, yeah.

And did you have to wear a yellow star at that point?

No.

No.

Did I ever wear one? Isn't that interesting, I'm not quite sure.

But you were kicked out of school. And your father's business had to close.

And yeah, we closed the business. And yeah, then Jews couldn't go to the movies. Everything stopped. Any kind of recreational activity, we were barred from.

Right.

And so the elementary school that I went to, which was headed by a friend of our family, they took us in, even though we were too old for elementary school. So I went until shortly before I left for England. I went to that school just to sort of-- he was wonderful, the man. He sort of managed to teach us appropriately, in terms of our age.

So the school was still open, that lower school?

That school, it was still open, yeah.

OK.

So your parents decided to send your brother off. The night of Kristallnacht comes. You come home from school. The Germans come to your home. They eventually left. Then what happened?

Yeah, they ransacked the place.

OK.

It was the November 9th.

Kristallnacht, right.

And then they left and, of course, the business was closed. But we were still comfortable financially.

OK.

And my parents only wanted the kids to get out.

OK.

And so when I went to England, I tried very hard to get them. I got an affidavit. I was able to do all those things. But then the war broke out three months after I got there.

Well, first tell me about how it is you-- how is it that your parents set you up to go on a Kindertransport?

How they did it?

Right.

Through the synagogue too. There were ways of doing that.

And this was in what year?

I left Germany in '39.

OK, and do you remember the day you left?

Yes.

Can you tell me about that?

Yeah. We got up terribly early, like 4 o'clock in the morning. And my parents-- my brother was in the United States. But my parents took us-- took me to Dusseldorf, which is a major city. And from there, there was a train to Rotterdam. And that was the train I took.

So I said goodbye to them at the station in Dusseldorf. And I remember, we hugged. And I started to move away. And then suddenly, I couldn't do it. I turned around and they was standing there. And I ran back. And I said, I can't go, I can't go.

And my father, in his inimitable way, persuaded me to go. So I remember that last look. I think I wrote about it. Yeah, I think I was sorry.

Were you with other children that you knew?

No, nobody interesting. Nobody I knew. Many, many children. To me, it was like hundreds of children. I'm not sure just how-- but there were a lot of kids. And pretty much between the ages of seven and 14.

And so we went to Rotterdam and then we- I remember we walked for a very long time. And I had a suitcase, an attache case, and a rucksack on my back. And we walk through Rotterdam endlessly.

And went into a children's home eventually, where we stayed until close to midnight. And then we took the boat to England. And well, we arrived at 6:00 in the morning.

Did you know where you were going at the time?

I knew the names. I knew-- no, they were strangers.

And were there adults who were looking after you, who were supervising the trip?

Of course, yeah. They were both 35 years old.

And were they from a specific organization?

Well, she was very religious. He was not. Though he had a father who was really quite famous. Gaster, the name was Gaster. I don't know whether it rings a bell. But he was a philosopher, a Jewish philosopher. And he had 14 children. And I came to one of those children.

Right, so you're talking about the family that you came to in England. I'm talking about during the trip, before you got to England. Were there any adults who were helping the children with the transport?

Peripherally. There was no-- I don't remember anything affectionate or kind. It was just business.

And do you remember what agency helped you?

The Jewish Refugees Committee.

The Jewish Refugees Committee, OK. And you were with approximately how many other children?

Maybe 30.

OK. But you didn't know any of them.

No.

So you were 10 years old?

No, no, no, I was 14.

Oh right, you had left. OK, so you were 14 years old. And you were getting on a train and leaving your parents and leaving your home for the first time.

Never to see them again.

Wow. When you left, though, did you feel like you were going to see them again?

No, I felt that I wouldn't see them again.

Because you knew enough, you were old enough to understand what was going on.

Oh, yes. And during those last few years before you left, you still been living in your home?

Yes.

OK.

Though we gave up-- we had this huge house. And my father gave up the business, which was part of the house, the ground floor. And then there were three floors above it, where we lived.

And where was I-- I don't know.

So you were telling me, so you were on the transport. First, you went on a train from Dusseldorf. And then you arrived in-- what was the city?

Well, then I was on the train. Then we went to Holland. And I remember eating supper in Holland, in Rotterdam.

Rotterdam, right.

And then we went back. It was evening. And we took the boat to-- from Holland we took the boat. And we went to Harwich on the west-- on the east coast of England. And we arrived in Harwich-- oh, at about noon, I think.

And here were all these children waiting to be placed. And, of course, I was one of them. And I remember-- oh, yeah, they put us-- somebody put me on a train to the city where they lived, the couple who took me in.

And I remember getting-- we arrived there at about 10 o'clock at night. I hadn't slept for two nights by then. And I remember getting off the train. It was dark. And there were little lights, red lights, yellow lights.

And I stood on the platform. I didn't know what to do. And suddenly, there appeared a shape out of the dark. And a man's voice said, I am Uncle Michael. I've come to greet you-- in German. He did it in German.

And they were fabulous, both of them. They didn't have children. And she didn't want to adopt. So they decided to take a refugee child. And that they wouldn't get that attached to the child that's on its way to America. Of course, they became very attached and I did too. And we were in touch always, until they died.

What was it like living with them?

Hmm?

What was it like living with them?

I didn't live with them very long. The war broke out. I was enrolled in a high school. I learned English very quickly. And three months after that, the war broke out. And I was evacuated. So I only lived with them for three months. But all my vacations, I would always come back to their house.

So where were you evacuated to?

The first year, to Scarborough, which is on the east coast of England, a beautiful sea resort. It was really a pleasure place, fabulous place. And in a boarding school. It was in a boarding school.

We were there for one year and then we were sent to the Lake District, also very beautiful. And I had another year there. And then I graduated high school.

Were you in touch with your parents during this time?

I was in touch with them. The only thing that I could do, I wrote, I think it was 13 letters. And then I couldn't write letters anymore. They wouldn't allow it. But I could write messages, 30 words in a message. And I would do that as often as they let me.

Who would transmit the messages?

Hmm?

Who would send the messages for you?

The people I lived with. They took care. I don't remember at all. They must have taken care of it.

And did you receive correspondence back from your parents?

Yes, just 30 words. That was always--

And what kinds of things did they say?

Happy things always, you know. And always, be good.

When did those communications stop?

The war broke out in '39-- in '40.

In '40.

Mm-hmm.

And you know what happened to them?

Yeah, they were sent to concentration camp. They went to-- I know from a girlfriend of mine, who was in Germany and survived. And so she knew all this. And the place was Lublin, it's become Lublin, where I don't think there was a single-- there was one survivor, I think. And they vanished.

Did you ever receive confirmation of their death from any organization? So what you know is from your girlfriend?

Exactly, she got some mail from them. But no, it's just they disappeared.

And you found it after the war.

But I knew. I really knew.

And were you in touch with your brother during this time?

Yeah, I was always in touch with him. Then he went into the army when the war broke out. And was stationed in England for a while, so I saw him.

Oh, wow, OK.

And then I think I came to the States just a little bit before he came back.

Wait, so what happened once you graduated high school? You were at the resort area for a year. You were at another place for a year.

Well, when I was 17, school was over. I graduated high school. And I decided that I wanted to be independent. I felt-- from my parents I could have taken anything forever without batting an eyelash, but it was different. I loved the two of them. But I didn't want to be dependent. I wanted to be independent.

So when I was 17, I went to London and I got a job. It was called-- I was a runner. It was the messenger. I was called a runner. Because I had no skills whatsoever. I had a high school diploma.

And so I-- what happened then, yeah, at Bloomsbury House, the Jewish Refugees Committee. And then from there, by the time I left for the States, I was promoted to head of a department there.

Oh, wow. OK.

It was the relocation department.

OK.

And in 1945, I guess, I went to United States.

And you were in touch with your brother. And he, you said, was coming to England.

He came to England. I saw him. He and I, we loved each other, but we were very different in our-- our sense of the world was very oppositional then.

OK.

And he was a big, bigot, which really hurt the relationship a lot. But he-- what can I say? It's all a long time ago.

So you came to America. And where did you-- how did you get there?

How did I get there? I worked for the Jewish Refugees Committee. And I contacted the American Distribution Committee in New York. And through them, they sort of requested me. They asked for permission to bring me to the United States. So I did, right after the war. and

Did you come by boat?

Yes. Yes, I went by boat. And it found-- it was-- I had a very good childhood friend who lived in Chicago. And I told her to come to New York when I arrived. And I was taking care of all the expenses. I'd saved money.

And so I booked a room at the St. Moritz Hotel. And there we met. And she stayed with me for a week. And I found a room during that time that I could move into. And then I went to the Joint Distribution Committee and said, here I am. And they hired me.

And so I was there for a while, but not for that long, because I wanted to go into theater.

OK.

So I auditioned. There was a school in New York. It was called The Dramatic Workshop of the New School for Social Research. And it was attached to the New School. And the head of it was a man called Erwin Piscator, who was a very,



very famous stage director in Germany.

OK.

He was not Jewish, but politically he was so opposed to Hitler, he had to get out of the country.

OK.

And he opened a school here. And I asked for an audition because I couldn't afford to pay. So he gave me a scholarship. I auditioned. And he was wonderful. And so I stayed for a year and worked for a Jewish organization-- I can't remember their name-- on the side. I did both. And then I had my own apartment. And from there, I took off.

What did I do? I did quite a bit of theater, yeah, on Broadway, off Broadway.

That's wonderful.

Yes. That's how I met my husband, yes.

I got you. So he was American.

Yes, he was an American, second generation I think. And we were married for 60 years.

Wow. And did you continue to practice Judaism after the war?

Now, I remember-- when was it? That's hard to remember. I was in Wales, vacationing. And I was walking through the hills all by myself in this wonderful sort of mountain and wonderful forest. And it's funny, all of a sudden I stood still.

And it was the silence around me. And that at that moment, I said, I don't believe in this any longer. And that was it.

And your husband wasn't Jewish.

Hmm?

Your husband wasn't Jewish?

Yes, he was.

He was Jewish. OK.

Oh, I couldn't-- I don't think I could have married a non-Jew.

But you didn't practice once you were married?

No. We got married in a synagogue. Why? Because he said my grandmother would never forgive me. We need to show her pictures. So we did. But we were not-- no longer, traditionally.

Do you think that your experiences, losing your parents at such a young age, and all that happened to you, was part of the reason why you didn't want to be a practicing Jew any longer?

I remained a Jew, not a practicing Jew, but very much a Jew. And I don't know. I really don't know.

And did you continue to be in touch with your brother once you were here?

I came to the United States in 1946. And he was in Boston. And he wanted me to come and live with him in Boston.

And I said, no. I stayed in New York. And that's where I met Lester, my husband in acting school.

And we-- so we got married. I came to the United States in '46. And in '48--

You were married.

We were married, yes.

And where did you live together?

Hmm?

Where did you live?

We lived-- the first place we ever lived was wonderful. It was at 50 Grand Street. Do you know where that is, downtown?

Yeah, on the Lower East Side.

Yes. And we-- there were a bunch of actors who found this building. We were among them. And it was empty. It was totally-- you couldn't-- it was uninhabitable. And we took it on. And we renovated it. We worked like dogs. And we lived there. And we lived there-- \$25 a month.

Wow. But you couldn't stay there. You stayed there for how long?

Several years. We loved it. We had a wonderful time there, yes. And then we moved to 46th Street. And then we moved to Brooklyn Heights. That's where my daughter was born.

What year was that?

1960. Late-- we were married for many years before we had a child. And Lisa died when she was 40.

I'm sorry. Have you ever returned to Germany since then?

Once. Very traumatic. My husband and I went to Europe for-- we never took a vacation. And then after 10 years of marriage, we took a vacation for five months.

Oh, wow.

And we toured Europe. We had a marvelous time. And I wasn't going to go to Germany. And toward the end of the trip, he said, look, I just have a feeling it's important for you to go back and how about it? So he persuaded me. And I spent two nights there in my hometown.

Wow.

Saw a very good childhood friend, who was half Jewish and survived, she stayed in Germany. And I saw a cleaning lady we had. When you couldn't have maids anymore, Jews couldn't, this lovely woman, Mrs. Sangzen, came and she cleaned. I can't remember, but almost every day that she came.

And she was just so wonderful with my brother, and I, and my parents. And it was just-- it was a love affair.

Wow. Did anyone in your family ever receive any sort of compensation for the property that was lost?

Yes, I did.

You did.

It was like, I think, \$2,000 they gave me for the life of my parents.

Wow.

So you don't get any ongoing compensation? And nothing--

I think I was too young and I didn't know how to maneuver it. So I didn't.

Can you talk at all about the long-term impact your experience as a child had on your life, and your family, and how you chose to raise your child?

I think the major impact was I hated discrimination. And I needed to do something that addressed that. And so I did in my work and I wrote about it.

Where did you write about it?

Hmm?

Where did you write about it?

In my apartment.

Like in your diary?

No, it was published somewhere too. I have it still. I have my--

Can I take a look at it after?

Hmm?

Can I see it afterwards?

Sure.

What kind of work were you involved with?

Theater.

Theater.

I was on Broadway and off Broadway. And worked-- you wouldn't know, but there was a very famous acting couple, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, very famous. And I eventually worked with them. And I had a very good role. And it sort of launched me into television, the stage, et cetera. I did quite a bit of work.

And then when my daughter was born, I dropped it. I stopped it. And I spent the first three years with her, the only time in my life that I didn't work.

OK. And then you went back to work when she was three?

Yes, yes. What did I do then? Isn't that marvelous? I've blocked it. I became director of what? Jesus.

I thought I read somewhere Head Start.

Yes, I did. I became a Head Start director, right. And I started a school for young children, two and three years old.

Oh, wow.

And as the school was growing, Head Start had come into being. And so I applied for a Head Start grant and I got it. And so for many years, many years, I can't remember how many, until 1983, I was with something called the Bloomingdale Family Program, a wonderful organization.

And it's my organization. I started it.

Wow.

And I was with that for many, many years. And that was very meaningful because I worked with minority children from very poor families. And it opened a whole new horizon for me. It was a wonderful time in my life.

It sounds like it.

I still am in touch with some of the parents and children, and yeah.

That's wonderful. And what was your husband doing during this time?

My husband was in theater.

OK.

But also, because there wasn't enough money always in theater, he one day decided-- he said, I think I'm going to make a handbag. He bought some leather and a couple of tools. And before we knew it, we had a store on Christopher Street.

Oh, wow.

And he-- he was very talented in many ways. He had a PhD in theater and criticism. That was his field. He was a wonderful stage director. And we met in acting school. That's where we met.

Do you ever dream about your experiences as a child?

I used to. I haven't for quite a long time, but I used to. It was a recurring dream. And yeah, it was awful always. And the same dream over and over again.

Is there anything else you want to tell me?

Hmm?

Is there anything else you want to tell me about yourself or your story, or anything you want to pass on to anyone who may be listening to your story?

I don't know, what can I say? I believe that the experiences of the past made me a better person. Yeah, because there was a lot of pain, and a lot of guilt, and a tremendous need to protect freedom and justice. And I became very committed to that.

That's wonderful.

And that what my work for many years, in Head Start, as a Head Start director. I had 200 children in the program, in my

program. And I'm still in touch with some. And it was just a marvelous, different experience for me.

It sounds like it. Well, thank you so much for sharing your story with us, Susan. I really appreciate it.

I'm very glad to do it, yes, yes.

Great.

What was I going to show you? Something I was going to show you.