

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Juliette Peternick. It is being conducted by Gail Schwartz on March 20, 2019 and has taking place in Chevy Chase, Maryland. This is track number 1. What is your full name?

Juliette Peternick.

And what name were you born with?

Juliette Herrmann.

And when were you born?

July 7, 1937.

And where were you born?

Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg.

Let's talk about your family. Who made up your family, your parents' names?

My parents-- my father's name was Walter Herrmann. My mother's name at that time was Gisela Herrmann. And her name was actually changed legally to Helen Herrmann at Ellis Island.

And what kind of work did your father do?

My father owned his own business. He had a wholesale candy business. And my mother, well, in those days, the women stayed at home. Did you have any siblings?

No siblings.

So you were an only child?

Yes.

And what kind of neighborhood did you live in? Was it a mixed neighborhood-- Jews and non-Jews? I know you were very young.

I don't know for sure. In Luxembourg, I would say it was a mixed neighborhood. Luxembourg was-- is still a Catholic country, but all religions are treated equally. And I'm pretty sure it was a mixed neighborhood.

OK. And how would you describe your parents, as middle class or--

Middle class.

Yeah. Did you live in an apartment or a house?

I don't know.

You don't know what it was. Yeah. OK. So you were born in 1937. How far back can you go with your family history?

My parents-- I can discuss my parents and my grandparents.

OK. Tell me about them.

OK. My grandmother and grandfather were born in Germany.

These are on your father's side or you mother?

My mother's side. While on my father's side, I can say they were both born German.

All your grandparents?

Yes.

My grandmother and grandfather were born in the Schwarzwald Bavarian area.

The Black Forest.

Yeah. And my grandmother and grandfather on my father's side were born in Trier. And they passed away before I was born.

What were the names of your grandparents?

My grandma and grandfather on my mother's side was Solomon Abraham my grandmother was Julia Bloch. B-L-O-C-H And then, of course, it was Julia Abraham. My other two grandparents on my father's side were Jules Levy, and I would have to look up my grandmother's name on that side. I think-- I'm not sure. I'd rather not say.

What about extended family? Do you have aunts, uncles, cousins?

My father had two brothers and a sister before the war. And my grandmother-- my mother had two brothers, and that was it. Now, my grandparents, my grandmother on my mother's side came from a family of seven children. And my grandfather, I'm not sure. I would have to look it up. I don't have it off the top of my head. And on my father's side, I don't know.

OK. So what would you be able to say-- I know it would be something that your parents told you about life before the war. Obviously, you were too young. Do you remember what they told you?

Sure. My grandfather had a vineyard and also made wine. And that was his business in our time, which is a small town outside Landau, L-A-N-D-A-U. My grandmother was a housewife.

This maternal or paternal?

Maternal.

Maternal grandparents.

And my mother, there was no public school for a high school. So in the beginning she went to the Catholic school. And then later on, my grandmother's youngest sister lived in Switzerland, so my mother went to Switzerland for her last couple of years in school. On my father's side, my grandfather owned a department store in Aesch. And so he ran the store. And my father went into business. But he worked as a-- when he first started, they had family in Germany because my grandfather on that side was in Germany, and so he worked in one of the businesses that grandfather's brother and son had. And then he went back to Luxembourg, and he started his own business.

What brought the family to Luxembourg, the two families, eventually?

I am not sure.

Is it business?

I think business. Plus, also, Trier is not very far from Luxembourg. If you know that part of Germany very well, it's like within an hour. So it's not like-- yeah.

Do you know if your family was religious at that time?

My grandmother and grandfather were Orthodox at that time. And my father and mother, I believe, were Orthodox, too, because I don't think there was any reform congregation in those days. So it was either-- they were not as religious as my grandfather, but I do remember when we first came to the United States, I would walk with my grandfather to the kosher butcher to buy our meat. And when I first got here, I was four years old. And no matter the time-- winter, summer, spring, or fall-- he would also always say the blessings over the children at night on Friday night. And if you didn't come in on time, you were in trouble. And he took me to synagogue every Saturday morning.

This your mother's?

My mother's father. And as I mentioned, maybe, I know that when he came over, he brought some of his prayer books with him. That was very important, too. And then we joined the reform congregation. I think my uncle belonged to the reform congregation in Schenectady-- that's where we ended up, and I'll tell you about that. And so my mother and father and I belonged to the reform congregation. My grandfather and grandmother went to the conservative congregation. And when my grandfather came to my confirmation because, of course, girls couldn't be bar mitzvahed or anything else, he wore his tallis and his yarmulke. And he said he would not go in the synagogue without. So they were definitely from that background. I think in that part of Bavaria, if I'm not mistaken, that area was pretty Orthodox.

What was your very first memory?

My first memory is in France because when we came from Luxembourg to-- when we came up from Luxembourg to France, we were first, we actually walked part way and then got on a train.

OK. We'll get to that in a minute. Let's move a little earlier. The war started in September '39. And I know you were very young.

That was May '39. I don't remember coming over then. I mean, the stories I've heard and been told I can repeat, but I don't remember that. But I do remember living in France.

Well, OK, but let's take this. When did you leave? You were born in '37.

Left in May '39 when Hitler invaded France and crossed over Belgian and Luxembourg.

OK. And but obviously, you were too young to remember.

Right.

OK. Did your parents tell you anything about that? Later on, did they tell you anything about that time or not? Do you know anything they experienced? What it was like for them?

It was very difficult because my mother and father had visas. Well, let me go back a bit. My uncle was a patent attorney at General Electric in Schenectady, New York. And that's my mother's oldest brother.

His name?

Julius Abraham. And he went to Europe to try and tell my grandparents to leave. He belonged to a group of men in the United States most of whom worked at General Electric. They were not necessarily different religions. And they held a number of Jews come over. They sponsored them, got them visas, and helped them come over. So he went to Germany.

And I have a picture of him with the family in Germany.

Do you know what year? Was this, what, '38, or no?

I think it was around '34, and then he came back-- well, he went back and '37, '38 because my mother was pregnant with me. So and they tried to talk my grandmother and grandfather to leave. But my grandmother and grandfather had lived there all their lives, all their neighbors were whatever, and nobody treated them poorly at that time. So they said, this too shall pass.

Unfortunately, it didn't pass. And my grandfather was beaten up a few times by the brown shirts and other people. And so in 1937, just before I was born or maybe after, I'm not sure, my grandmother and grandfather moved in with my parents in Luxembourg. But by then, the Jews were watched closely and things were bad. So my grandparents didn't have visas. So it was problematic when we were in France under a Vichy government.

Now, my mother and father and I, well, I didn't count, but my mother and father each had a visa, allowing them to travel to France and go through France, and then eventually come over.

When did they leave Luxembourg to go to France?

They left Luxembourg in May of 1939. And they got here in December of 1941. So they were hiding now that entire time.

OK. So they're leaving Luxembourg, did they take anything special with them? Do you know? Did your mother tell you?

They took nothing because they couldn't carry anything. They had one suitcase with clothing. And my grandmother and grandfather had a suitcase with clothing. And my grandfather, bless his soul, had some prayer books and some kosher food that he wanted to bring along. That was very important to him.

Yes. OK. And so where did they go from Luxembourg?

They went to Northern France to the Loire Valley.

By train?

Initially, they walked. And then they eventually got on the train.

How did your grandparents manage the walking?

At that point in time, they were in pretty good health and so they could walk. I mean, they were--

So there were five of you, your parents, your grandparents, and you?

Yes.

Do you know if you were part of a group of people, or they did it on their own?

They did it on their own but there were other people with them. Now, the one person who was with them-- and I didn't find this out till later so I don't know how close they were when they left Luxembourg. But I know they went to the same towns in France. My father's sister, whose name was Alfreda, was married to a banker in Germany. And she went back to Luxembourg. And I think he was killed. And, well, I'm sure he was. And she had two children she traveled with us. One of the children lived a long life. She had a boy and a girl. And the boy whose name was Raoul, which would be Ralph, I guess, nowadays, got tuberculosis when they were over. And so he died before the war.

So your family walked from Luxembourg?

Part way to France, and then they got on the train.

Do you know where that was? Did they ever tell you?

They never told me. And then--

They got on the train, too?

When we were actually walking towards the train, some French soldiers picked us up and put me on their bicycle so my parents could walk to the train.

The train was in France or in Luxembourg? The train was in France?

The train-- I don't know how far they had to walk. OK. So then it was very crowded train. If you can imagine a whole cadre of Jews and non-Jews leaving Luxembourg to go to France, this train was. And my grandfather got pushed off the train. And luckily, the French soldiers saw him, picked him up, and took him to the next station, and found us and put him back on the train.

Who pushed him off?

I don't know. I don't know. It might have been an accident, it might have been on purpose. I think my parents tried to protect me from a lot of this so that I didn't grow up feeling-- yeah.

So now, you're in France.

And now, we're in France, and we're in the very northern part of France in the Loire Valley. And then we went a little bit South. And I'm going to have to look up all the geography for you because I was going to do it before I came, and I didn't. But we went to a little town. We first went to a little town called Le Puy. And actually, we stayed with a farmer outside a Le Puy, L-E capital P-U-Y. And my father and grandfather worked for the farmer on the farm. And he allowed us to stay in the barn. So we lived in the barn. And they had a little girl, too.

Do you have any memory of this or not?

I can remember Le Puy because since my grandmother and grandfather spoke only German, they had to hide out on the farm. And my father and I spoke French without an accent. So my father and I would go into town to do the shopping. And I could pass for a little French girl then. So and that, I remember, because--

Was it a frightening? Do you remember being frightened?

No. That's why I say that. And my mother and father told me a story afterwards, which obviously I don't remember at all. But my mother woke up one night. And she saw a big rat at my head. And so she picked up a broom and killed it. But that the next morning, I remember waking up and everybody was happy and whatever. But I had no fear at that point. I had some fears later, which I don't know what causes them. I guess if a psychiatrist or somebody else were to talk to me, maybe he could figure something out. But I'm deathly afraid of fire. So that's the only fear I have. Well, nothing else concerns me.

How long did you stay in Le Puy?

About six or eight months. And then we-- oh, a long time, yeah. And the farmer and his wife and daughter were very nice to us actually. And then we, I mean, we were not in the lap of luxury to say the least.

You had enough food?

We had enough food. And my father said that we didn't have much milk or eggs or things like that. But we survived.

And clothes, do you have enough clothes?

Yeah. I mean, you wore whatever you had. And that was it.

But you were growing.

Yeah, I was growing, and I don't know how they took care of that. From Lyon--

Le Puy.

Le Puy. From Le Puy, we went to Lyon and we stayed in Lyon a while. And I remember living in Lyon. And I think--

When would this be? This would be--

I would say that that was during 1940.

Early '40?

Early '40s. Maybe beginning. Yeah, had to be the early '40s. And we were there for a considerable amount of time. And most of the time, my father had taken some Luxembourg money with him. So he used that money. I still have a little backup for it that he carried along. But we never-- people tell stories about how they bought their jewelry or their this or their that-- none of that. The only thing I ever had at the end of the war was my mother's engagement ring, I guess.

Then we went from Lyon-- and we kept going South. In other words, the usual path that the Jews followed was from Northern France, which was Vichy, down to southern France, and then eventually we were in Marseilles.

What was life like in Lyon? You said you remember-- you have some memories? Did you see other children? Or were you just-- and adults?

I don't remember other children. I remember not having a bathroom with a real toilet. I remember--

Was it a house or an apartment?

It would be an apartment. I remember--

In town?

In a town. Now, Lyon wasn't so big then, obviously. And I remember taking baths in a tub that sat in the room, and my mother pouring water in there, whatever, and things like that. So it wasn't what you would consider, I guess, modern even for that age. It was just what you could get and where you could stay. And nobody would turn you in because, like, my father's youngest brother lived in the Alsace-Lorraine area. And we found out-- Jews in the United States, when they got here, I mean, German Jews, read the Aufbau every week because they could find people they knew, family, friends, whatever.

And my father knew where his-- he was the oldest of three boys. And he knew where the youngest one was because he was in that work camp and he also worked in the French underground. But the one that was closest to him, like, 15 months younger, he couldn't find right away. And then they found out that somebody turned him in and sent him to Auschwitz. But I also think-- and his wife's father was a mathematics professor. So that group of four were immediately sent to Auschwitz because you didn't want any smart Jews running around. I guess I shouldn't say that.

So you're in Lyon?

So we were in Lyon. And as I said, my father would go out every day and try to make do with what he could. And we stayed there for some period of time, but I don't know how long. And then we actually went down to Marseilles. And again, I think--

By train?

Partially, by train, but partially, walking. Because my grandparents, if they got caught, would have been taken away because it was Vichy government. So we had to be very careful where we went and when we went. Now, this is what I was told. I don't remember all of that. I do remember my grandmother taking care of me and kind of telling stories, Grimm's fairy tales, and things like that.

And you were about three years old now?

Yeah. Yeah. So she wanted to make things as normal as possible, call that normal. So anyway, we went down to Marseilles. And then my father made arrangements to go across the Pyrenees to Madrid. And we went spent two weeks in Spain--

OK. No, let's not go-- let's slow down a little bit.

Yeah.

OK, you said your father made arrangements to you get from France to Spain.

To get some help--

Did he tell you later how he knew all this? How did he know what to do?

I don't know. I don't know. I'm sure he checked around, and he asked, tried to get help.

Tell me about you're leaving France, going over the Pyrenees. Did you know what was happening?

No. I mean, I knew we were leaving France, but I didn't know any more.

OK. Do you have any memories of Marseilles?

Not really. I couldn't distinguish where we were in France as we moved along the road. I mean, my parents would today we're here or were there.

It didn't have any meaning.

It had no meaning.

Of course, of course. OK, so then you get down to Marseilles.

And then we go across the Pyrenees.

How did you do that? I think part of it was walking and part of it was they had-- I'm not sure frankly how they did it. I mean, I don't think that-- I don't know what kind of transportation, public transportation, there was at that point even.

Did you carry anything? You were a little girl and you're walking, do you remember carrying anything?

No. No.

Do you remember being hungry?

I remember discussing food with my parents, but I don't remember being hungry. And I remember, like, I would drink coffee with milk. And I drink coffee from the time I was five years old. And I'm sure that that was because that's what they had. And they would put milk in the coffee. And so now, you're walking in the mountains, in the Pyrenees Mountains.

Right, right. And then my father would carry me part way or my grandfather would carry me.

Were you part of a large group, do you know? Or was it just you're five?

I don't know.

OK.

So in fact, I understand from a friend of mine that there are some lists of people that crossed that Lisbon has. And so we're in that general area. So I was going to try and go over and see if I could find out anything. So you'd get through the Pyrenees.

And we go to Madrid.

That's their first stop?

Yeah. And we were there for two weeks. And my father got us into a hotel in Madrid and in Lisbon, Portugal.

Yeah. We'll get to that in a minute. And just to go back to the Pyrenees, did you ever feel that it was dangerous? Did you ever sense as a little girl any tension? Was it just a nice walk?

I just-- I had not-- I didn't never knew anything different. So it didn't occur to me. I mean, there were things I knew not to do.

Like what?

Like, speak German in the middle it's a street with my grandmother and grandfather in France. And I may have continued that, but I didn't think about it. I really never thought about it. It was just a way of life. And you just march on. And then we went, after the two weeks, we took the train from Madrid to Lisbon. And I actually have the bill from the hotel in Lisbon. little things that my father tried to keep, and I have them still. And I remember as clear as day getting on the ship because that was-- I guess, they then must've made-- I don't know if my parents made a big deal about it or if it was just because I was getting on a ship and I'd never been on one. But I remember that clear as day.

What happened from the beginning on the ship?

We got on this ship. We registered. I went with my mother and grandmother. Now, this was a US ship. And what they did was they set it up like the dormitory so that they could get more people on it. And my grandmother, my mother, and I, and one other woman shared a room. And my grandfather and father shared a room with a couple of bed.

This was December '41?

Yep. This was December 5, 1941.

That you got on the ship?

Yes. And then, well, I'll tell you the whole story. We were supposed to go directly from Lisbon to New York, but they bombed Pearl Harbor while we were on this ship. And the US was very concerned about the subs and everything. So



instead of going that way, we went from Lisbon to Bermuda and sailed up the coast of the United States.

When December 7th happened and Pearl Harbor was bombed, did you remember hearing that? Do you remember a change in atmosphere?

Well, the interesting thing was my father spoke English. Because if you grow up in Luxembourg, when you're in second grade, you start off speaking German and French. And then in second grade, you start to learn English. And you learn the King's English. So he could understand the sailors, and he knew that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. And so we sailed up the coast to the United States.

What was the name of the boat?

Excalibur.

It was an American boat?

Yes. You can see the manifest. I think I gave it to you, but I'll take it back home so they can see it. But yeah, it was the Excalibur. It was an American ship. And they spoke English. And the sailors knew my dad spoke English so they talk to him. But so instead of crossing the Atlantic in five days, we crossed the Atlantic in 12 days. So we got here December 17. And I remember that ship, and I thought, this ship was like--

You're going to 4 and 1/2 now?

I'm 4 and 1/2. And to me, it was like being on holiday. One night, I went to the movies, and I forgot to tell my parents, and everybody was looking all over for this kid who was running around having a good time. And it was just-- it truly was an experience that I remember. Now, my mother was sick the entire time.

She had seasickening?

Seasick. From the minute, she didn't even have to leave port to get seasick. And my grandmother was OK. And my mother and my father and my grandfather were OK. And so they would take me around, let me play, and whatever. So I do remember that very well. I also remember approaching the United States.

What did the United States mean to you? Do you know what it meant?

I didn't I had no idea what that meant. But everybody went out on deck to see the Statue of Liberty. So my father held me up, and I saw the Statue for. What it was, I didn't know. Give me your tired--

Your poor.

No, which we don't-- but anyway, so, no, I mean, it was very exciting. Then--

And then you dock.

Then we dock, and we dock at Ellis Island.

Everybody meet you?

My uncle Leo-- oh, my uncle Julius,-- the one who was the patent attorney. We were very fortunate because there were some people who couldn't get off the ship because they were worried about since we had entered the war by then, so there were some people who had to wait a little bit to get off the ship. But our papers were pretty straight so we got off the ship right away. Now, the interesting thing was I have two vaccinations from Luxembourg because in Luxembourg, I guess, I don't know, they give you two or whatever. And I remember getting vaccinated again. So I have a third one.

So you're met at Ellis Island, and then what happened?

And then my other uncle Leo, his wife lived-- OK. That uncle was in the US Army, but his wife lived on Central Park West. So we went to her house. And she had come over to the United States earlier with her son. And she was married to my uncle, but the son was from for her first husband, OK? So anyway, we went to her house, and we stayed there for a couple days. And then we went up to Schenectady. And we lived in Schenectady.

This is the five of you who went up to Schenectady?

Yes. We first stayed in my uncle's house. And then we got a flat. And I remember that that had three bedrooms, was across the street from the Schenectady Museum, and I lived there for a couple of years. And then my parents moved to another house.

And you started school?

Well, that was an interesting story. I was 4 and 1/2, so I wasn't allowed to go to school. But my mother and father and uncle wanted me to learn English. So they visited the Board of Education. And Board of Education said, no, we can't make any exceptions. And then they said, well, if we promise that she'll start school in September, will you let her come? So I went to-- I'm the only kid who flunked kindergarten. I went in April, May, and part of June, and then started school officially in September. But that helped me a lot, because I learned English. And the interesting thing-- the thing I do remember because I had a very heavy German accent or French, whatever you want to call it, was a lot of kids call me a Nazi. So I got into a few fights.

Did you know what that meant? You knew what it meant?

I knew what it meant. And so I got into a few fights and beat up a couple.

You did the beating or they beat you up?

Well, first, they tried to beat me up. And my father said, if somebody hits you, you can hit them back. So and then once I got into trouble because I picked up this little boy and I smashed him on the sidewalk. And my father said, you couldn't do that because you might hurt him. But my parents taught me to take care of myself.

How did the teachers treat you?

I think the teachers were fine. I don't remember being anybody, any of the teachers being mean to me. The only thing I remember is when I told them I was from Luxembourg, they said that was in a country where was I from. And then I'd go into this long dissertation because my father had taught me where I was from. And that I remember, but the teachers were very nice to me. I have no complaints.

The only thing I remember is when I went from-- moving from one house to another house, I had to change schools. And so they I had always been in the first reading group, so they put me in the middle reading group. So I came home and told my mother I was flunking out of school. So she got nervous and went to school. And I also remember when I was in first or second grade, I got chickenpox. It was first grade. I got the chickenpox. And when I came home, I told my parents I had smallpox because I didn't know how to translate anything like that. I could translate every day kind of sentences, but I couldn't do that. So my mother came home from work.

Now, when my parents came over, as I mentioned earlier, they had two suitcases and a little bit of nothing. And my mother had to learn English. And my father had to go to night school also because he spoke the King's English, and that didn't suffice. So my mother went to work immediately as the nanny for about six months or eight months. And then when her English was good enough, she went to work in a grocery store. And my father, because he couldn't get a regular job, there were a lot of jobs in Schenectady in the defense industry or the service industry that helped the defense industry because General Electric had a big plant in Schenectady, as did American Locomotives. So my father learned to be a baker.

And so he worked as a baker until I was probably middle junior high school. And my mother worked as a cashier in a grocery store until my grandmother got much older. And then she was worried about my grandmother so she stayed home. So they worked their way up, as I would say.

And as you were growing up in the grades, were the children friendly to you mostly?

Most kids were friendly. I was very happy with the kids in school. And I always had a great time. And I did well.

So then you went on to junior high.

And then I went on to junior high.

Did you feel American at that point?

By then, yeah, I felt really American. I worked-- I don't know how to say this, but I guess I worked hard to be integrated into the school that whole time. And then I was in junior high. And then my parents decided they should buy a house so we could move into a neighborhood where the schools were better. And we did. Now, I was also very active in junior high and high school in the Jewish community center. And in Schenectady, there aren't that many Jewish facilities. There is a kosher-- there was a kosher butcher or one deli that had kosher food and things like that. So there weren't a lot of Jewish people. So my mother and father sent me to the Jewish community center for camp in the summertime for day camp. And then I also went to the YWCA to take swimming lessons in because my parents thought I had to learn how to swim.

When did you become a citizen?

OK. My parents became citizens in 1947. And then when I was in high school, I wanted to take the New York State scholarship exam. And I was very surprised when I was told I had to be a citizen. So I said, oh, my gosh, what can I do? How quick can I get this paper? And it turned out that I was effectively a citizen as of 1947 when they got their citizenship. So if you read my papers that's what they all say.

During the war, did your parents talk about what was happening--

Absolutely. We talked about it every night. We listened to the news. I mean, we listened to the news every single night. Edward R. Murrow and one was at quarter of 7:00, the other one was quarter after 7:00. I knew all that. And I knew what we were going to do. And my uncle Julius was part of the group that went around Schenectady when they had it-- we used to have--

The air raids?

The air raids, yeah. And he would walk around and make sure everybody had lights out. And my parents and my uncle had a to victory gardens-- one on one side of the house, and then that belonged to my uncle, and then another one that they rented. And my grandfather would work in that one also. So yeah, I knew what was going on during the war very much so.

And then what happened when your folks found out and you found out about the camps after '45?

My parents told me what was going on. I mean, I knew from an early age--

So eight years old when the war was over?

Yeah, but I knew from an early age what was going on. That was not-- it was like we were safe, but we knew that my uncles were not. My grandmother had six brothers and sisters who were over there. One sister made it through the war. And then of course, the one sister who lived in Switzerland was fine.

My father's youngest brother made it through the war. And his sister made it through the war. She traveled all the way to France with us, and then hid out in France for the duration of the war. And she stayed with us, I think, till Marseilles and then we came over. And so they all corresponded after the war. And then my parents-- I went over to visit. When I went on my honeymoon, that was my first trip back to Europe, that was in 1963. Summer of '63, I went back I got married in '62 but I didn't go over till '63.

Let's go back a little earlier. So you go through high school.

Yes.

You went to a local high school. You felt very American.

Yes.

OK. And then how did you go to college?

Yeah. I went to-- I got one of those state scholarships and a scholarship from the University of Rochester.

Rochester, New York.

In New York. And I got a degree in mathematics. That was my thing. I felt part of things in high school. I was active. I played tennis on the tennis team and played this and did that. And there was a nice Jewish community in the sense that because we were small, we all kind of moved along together. And then I went to University of Rochester. Then I went to Tufts for my master's. And then I wanted to go for PhD.

We're taking about the 1950s.

That was in the '50s. Yeah. But I needed money, so-- the root of all evil. Because I had gotten into Columbia but they wouldn't give a first year PhD student fellowship in those days. So I was going to go to work to earn money. And my master had been in Asian studies. So anyway, that's a long story. But we'll leave that up for now.

I had never taken education courses, but I figured, well, I could teach, and I could teach math. Well, when I got to the various private schools that I applied to, they all said, look, history teachers are a dime a dozen but if you'll teach math, we'll give you a job. So I thought about it. And then I thought, well, I really need money to go to school, so maybe I'll try and work in industry. So I went to work at what was then Sylvania Electronics in the R&D department. They taught me how to program.

This is in Schenectady?

This was in Boston.

Oh, in Boston.

After Tufts, I stayed in Boston. And I really enjoyed it. And then I was doing well, so I kind of wobbled back and forth. And I eventually ended up staying in-- actually, my title was engineer. And I stayed there until I got married. And then I moved down to DC. My husband was a lawyer. And I stayed working until my first daughter was born. And then I didn't plan to go back to work. But I said to my bosses, I'd like a leave of absence for three months. And I said, but it says here in the HR manual that you can only get a leave of absence if you're male. And my boss said, forget that, Julie. You can come back any time. So that was because I had a skill they could use.

And so anyway, to make a long story short, in the beginning, I worked part-time, and then I went back to work full-time. And then my second daughter was born. And so I kept right on doing the same thing, took some amount of time off, and then went back to work. And I worked halftime till my kids were in school full-time.

And during that, when my first daughter was born, my parents were still living in Schenectady. And my husband said, why don't you ask your parents if they want to move down here? And I said, they don't want to move down here. All their friends are in Schenectady. Well, he talked me into asking them, and they decided they would move down. And they really liked it here. And they made a life in both places. They were really good at-- my mother was very outgoing. My father was quieter, less outgoing in that sense of the word. And when he first came down here, he went to work. And he worked here. And the people where he worked loved them, so it was a perfect setup. So that's the story.

Was your husband from Europe also?

His parents were from Russia.

Was he born in this country?

He was born here. They came over that 1917 migration to the US. Yeah.

So how would you describe yourself would you say? You're American, you're European, you're Jewish, how would you describe yourself? How do you feel mostly?

Mostly, I guess, I feel more American and then European at this point in my life.

When did that start to happen?

I think that started-- when you're a child coming over, and people react to you because you're European or whomever, I think you work very hard to become an American. And in those days, we didn't have ESOL or anything close to it. And so my parents know wanted me to learn English, I learned English. Now, my mother and father both told me to not to forget that French and German. And my father would talk to me in French every day. And I would respond in English, which was not the smartest thing to do.

So I think that you become American-- you become Americanized quickly. Now, there are certain habits that I have to this day that I think are still very European.

Such as?

All my manners are European because if I didn't stand up when an adult walked into the room, I was in trouble. If I didn't shake hands with people and shake hands when they left, I was in trouble. So all of those things remain to this day. And I probably-- and I think when I went to work truthfully, they stood me, they helped me know, because I was always showing respect, and if I had to go to visit a client or whatever. But that was just because that's the way my mother and father were. And that's what you learned.

I know you were very young when you had to leave Luxembourg. But do you feel that you lost a part of your childhood? I mean, obviously, this wasn't a typical experience for a young child to go through.

No. And I've always thought about that because it was not a typical experience.

No, it certainly wasn't. But my mother and father and grandmother and grandfather, I think, did a very good job of shielding me from the worst parts of it. And one of the things I learned when I came over here, for example, was my mother would come home from work, and she would say, "I don't know why people are complaining. They have rations. And they have to-- they can only get a pound of butter or a dozen eggs. I don't understand that. We are lucky to be here." So that stuck in my head. And so that gratitude stayed with me my whole life.

Were your parents' friends mostly European?

Most of their friends-- OK, when we first came over, most of the friends were Europeans. And they would have been.

And when they got together, they would have like a party and everybody spoke German. And that's why I say, I had to go around the room and shake hands with everybody, stand up. But my mother became very active in the synagogue, and in Hadassah, and places like that. So she developed them. And I'm really an American cadre of friends as well. So I think as time wore on, she became more active with that community.

When she was working, she really could. I mean, that was really a hard time. And she would get together with the other people and with most of the Germans. And they carried on their traditions. They would get together on Saturday night and have a party, have a dinner party, have big desserts, the men played cards, the whole nine yards. But later on, when she'd stop working and she'd got active in the temple sisterhood, then she would go out and collect money for advertising in the ABC book and the XYZ book. And she was very good at that.

So she became very active in both, the sisterhood and Hadassah. And I think she got a lot of joy out of that. And she did it again when she came to Washington. And I mean, I learned a lot of things-- I mean, it sounds so mundane now. But I remember, when we didn't have any money for a long time, my mother and father would sit down and figure out how much money they could give to Hadassah or to the UJA or XYZ.

And so some of those habits have stuck with me for a very long time. And I've passed them on to my kids. My older daughter, when she was in high school, didn't like Sunday school, didn't like Hebrew school, didn't do-- and I used to say, oh, gosh, when am I going to-- what's happening here? She teaches Sunday school now. So a lot of those things have followed us.

Do you think about your childhood, your early, early childhood experiences a lot?

I think about some of them. I think about-- I think about two things. One is I believe-- I always said, OK, my husband was not like this so I can see the difference. I always thought the glass was half full. He didn't necessarily think that. And when something happened, I always would say, you should kiss the ground you walk on. And I truly believe that. I mean, he did very well. So to me, there was nothing to complain about ever. And I think that's part of what I attribute to what happened and to my parents because I don't think it necessarily would be like that.

Now, many, many years ago, I don't know if you saw it, there was an article in Newsweek about people who emigrated to the United States, who were first generation Americans, and I had never thought about it. I mean, first generation it just was not something that stuck with me. And then I read this article in Newsweek and I said, there I am, right there, on page whatever. And I think it is you develop a certain need to please your parents because they've done so much for you. And you really work hard to do the best you can. I think that's a good thing.

Are there any sights or sounds, smells, or anything that bring back memories of being in Europe, walking through the mountains, or walking through--

Yes. The first time I went back, and I went with my husband-- well, I went to Luxembourg first. And the whole concept of sitting in a restaurant, having a nice dinner, being making sure you mind your manners kind of thing, that all came back to me. I mean it was like, here I am again. It's a very-- I didn't think about it much. I mean, as I was growing up, my parents told me you have to do this, you have to do that. You can't. You can't sit down when they're standing up. Something else that I learned was the teacher was always right no matter what I said or what happened, the teacher was right.

And I remember when I went to a PTA meeting. The first PTA meeting, I didn't go to PTA very often. I worked and whatever. And I would go in the beginning of the year to meet the teachers. And then I would do my thing. And I would say, if there's an issue, call me. And then I would go to back to school night.

Well, I went to elementary school, Laurie and Marcy's elementary school in Potomac. And the principal's name was Dr. Powers. I don't know, I don't know what if he had anything to do with the school system. And I said, how do you do that to Powers and not shook hands. And all these other people, from the neighborhood said, "Hi, Bill." And then Dr. Powers called them Doctor Whatever. They were either know or care. But it was shocking to me, absolutely shocking. I couldn't believe it. And maybe it was because my parents had taught me the other way. And maybe it was because that's what I

learned in school myself because when I went to school, if I came home, and said, the teacher, da, da, da, my mother said, well, what did you do? So I never did that.

You mentioned that your early reference fire, you said, it's very frightening to you. Do you know why?

No, I have no idea. I have no idea.

While you were leaving Luxembourg--

There must've been fire somewhere because I have no fear of-- I don't fear flying. I don't like heights. But that's-- I do have a fear of fire. And I have no idea. , Now I'm sure that when we were in France when there was bombings, we would be told to go to the shelter.

And you remember them?

No. I don't remember that. But I guess my mother or father would just pick me up and take me to the shelter. And there, I'd be with them with everybody else. But it must've left an impression on me or a subconscious impression.

Any memories of the Eichmann trial? The Eichmann trial in Israel, Adolf Eichmann.

Yes, yes.

What was that like for you and your parents?

OK. I watched-- I paid attention to all those things and I still do, whether it's something's going on. And whenever I go like, I was in Argentina, I, of course, went to the memorial that's there. And I went to the memorial in Rhodes that's there, and every synagogue. But for example, my father-- and maybe this is why, I don't know, I mean, I don't remember as much or they didn't tell me as much, but I remember when The Winds Of War were on TV, and I said, daddy, I'm going to watch this tonight. Do you want to watch it with me? He said, no. I've already seen that. That was-- yeah.

And I think my mother was very heavily impacted by the war, so because-- well, both of them. They were middle class. They had been gentlemen and ladies. And things changed for them when they first got here. They had to work very, very hard.

We're they very protective of you, do you think?

No. They were protective but not, no, not exceedingly. I mean, they would tell me don't go with strangers and things that anybody else would say, but they made sure I took piano lessons, they made sure I got swimming lessons, things like that. I think their goal was to make sure I could broaden my horizons and do the best I could.

What are your thoughts about Germany now today?

Well, I was in Germany. I hadn't gone back to Germany. And when I went back in 1962, I didn't go to Germany. I mean, I took a ferry from Hamburg to Copenhagen, but that was it. And but I really didn't go back. So I went back a couple years ago. And I went to a couple of museums. And I thought that the museums I saw, the work that had been done, and looking at it from a very American point of view, whatever, I thought it was well done. And I thought the Germans were doing a better job than, for example, the French.

And the reason I say that is not because the French did anything wrong, but when I got to the Jewish, that area in Paris, the Jewish area in Paris, I had to ask. I can't tell you how many people to be able to find the memorial. And I felt very badly. I thought here you all are, and you don't know where the memorial is. And the French suffered greatly. And the French Jews suffered greatly.

Now, I have one cousin who-- I have to tell you, the two Ritchie-- my uncle and my cousin got together, and at the end

of the war, they looked for their family. The military asked my uncle to stay in the military. And he was already of Captain or Colonel or something. I don't know. I can look it up. Anyway, so that cousin and my uncle Leo, cousin's name was Gus, the two of them went to look for the family and they went back to the Schwarzwald, in that little tiny town where they were from. And then they went to another town that was close by.

And they got out of their car. And they were in their uniforms. And they asked this little boy, they said, could you tell us where someone is. Well, the boy was scared to death because it was men in uniforms, and he was German Jew. So they spoke fluent German. And when they talked to him and they said, we're looking for him because they're our relatives, and I'm their cousin. Well, that turned out to be the cousin son.

So anyway, but what I started to say now, I have relatives who now live in Jerusalem. And when the German-- this particular cousin, that was this little boy at that time, got a PhD in biochemistry, pharmacology, whatever, at Wash U in St. Lewis because his uncle was there. And anyway, he became a very well-known chemist and he developed some drugs. Actually, thought up an easier way to make generic drugs. So he did very well in this French company. When the French company sold out to a German company, he said, I'm not working for the Germans. And he left and moved to Israel.

What's his name?

His last name is Bloch, B-L-O-C-H. And yeah, I can give you his name. I have it at home.

Who was the relative who was the Ritchie boy?

Pardon?

You said you had a relative who was a Ritchie boy.

Yeah, my uncle Leo.

Your uncle Leo, yeah.

And his cousin, Gustav Bloch, was also a Ritchie boy. But Leo did it a year earlier than-- yeah.

So he trained at Camp Ritchie here in Maryland.

Here, in Maryland.

And then went back to your--

And then went back. At first, worked with some of the Brits, who were in North Africa. But then did some-- but then interrogated prisoners of war. That was their main job. And that's what they learned to do. They also--

Was that in Germany? Or where did they--

In Germany. But the other thing he did-- there was an article that Mickey sent me, where the small horses that were in Germany were the Lily, what are they-- I forgot what they're called. But anyway, it doesn't matter, you know I'm not an expert in that.

Anyway, the Russians wanted those horses. And the group of Ritchie Boys that Leo was with-- in fact, he was the deputy commander-- figured out a way for the US to get those horses instead of the Russians. So that was a big deal, and the article is out on the internet.

Did your family or folks get reparations or you?



No, what happened was-- that's quite interesting. A lot of countries gave you reparations like, if you were from Luxembourg. But you had to stay a Luxembourgian citizen.

My parents thought about it and decided they were going to stay. In those days you couldn't have dual citizenship between Luxembourg and the US, in that category. I don't know what the laws were. So my parents stayed here and retained their US citizenship.

There was a lot of going back and forth with the German reparations. I don't know what happened. I don't think they got anything. Or if they did, it was much.

Were you in any way active in the civil rights movement here in the United States?

Yes.

You obviously had to leave your home country because people were losing their civil rights.

When I was at the University of Rochester, I was active in the civil rights movement. I did some other things thereafter. When I was working, I didn't really participate because I didn't have a made up-- I didn't do much. But I mean, I tried. I gave money or whatever, but I didn't give much time.

When I was at the University of Rochester I did things. I did belong to the NAACP. I did things like that. I try to do some things and make contributions. But I don't think I was really active per se.

I couldn't say-- Although I'll tell you, the first time I went down South I was shocked. Even coming down here. The first time I went to Virginia, I couldn't believe it.

And just what? Saw signs?

Signs. I went to a restaurant. There used to be a nice restaurant. So George took me to the restaurant for lunch. And this black man, Afro-American came in the front door. He didn't know there was a special door for him and they started screaming at him. And I thought, Oh my gosh. I don't think I can eat lunch here.

I mean, things like that really-- I haven't changed any. I don't deal well with it. I've been to Mississippi. I've gone into a restaurant in Atlanta. Had a contract when Lyndon Johnson was president, where we went to look at drug recidivism. We were doing a study.

Well we had a questionnaire. And rightfully so, they said, you know Julie, if you go in and ask these questions nobody will answer you. So I said, why don't we get some Afro-Americans to ask the questions or other drug users. Either one it doesn't matter, I said. But we have to get the answers to these questions.

So the first time I went into a restaurant in Atlanta with a Black guy, I mean, everybody looked like I had just worn-- you know. But of course, that's no more true. So things have changed. Things have changed but not all the way.

Do you think the Holocaust could happen again?

I'm scared to death. I'll tell you why. Now this is a cynical me, even though I say kiss the ground you walk on.

I always worry that everybody-- I worry this way. Right now, it's the Muslims that are being-- well in the United States you know. I'm just talking about Hispanics or whatever. Well, when a group gets through with whomever they're persecuting, who's the next one on the list? The Jews.

And I say that to my friends all the time. I say, you're the next one on the list. See I don't under-- I mean, I've met a few Jewish bigots in my day. And that is so far beyond my comprehension, that I don't understand it at all.

Because, what do you think is going to happen next? I mean, if I'm a redneck of whatever denomination I am, I don't care. If I'm a redneck and I've got all these people to pick on and now they're all gone, who's next on the list? The Jews.

And I mean, I will tell you I know there was prejudice in Schenectady. And I know where it was. And you know, we couldn't join a country club. Or we couldn't do this or we couldn't do that. Whatever was it, didn't matter.

I didn't feel it on a day-to-day basis. Never. I came down here and I said to my husband one day, what's a kike? And he said, are you sure you're Jewish? You know, I didn't feel--

I mean, I knew there was prejudice. And I saw prejudice against Blacks. I worked with a guy who wouldn't sit down and eat lunch with Afro-American. Ever. Period.

I told him I thought guns were bad. That was the day I learned never to argue about guns. I mean I said, this is a silly subject. Let it go. But I really do worry about that, a lot.

That's why I belong to the Holocaust Museum as long as it's existed. Because it has to be remembered.

How do you feel having the Museum in Washington? I mean the war wasn't in Washington?

I think it needs a Museum in Washington. I think a lot of people come here, and they learn it in the Museum in Washington. Just as they learn when they listen to a lecture in, I don't know, Chicago or Minnesota or wherever.

When I went to college, there were kids in my class who had never seen a Jew before. And they would ask me questions. Some of the questions were funny. My roommate had brown hair and brown eyes, and her mother had blue eyes.

So this girl from Buffalo, Buffalo mind you, said to me, "Is your roommate's mother Jewish?" And I said, "Yes, why do you ask?" And she said, "'Cause her mother has blue eyes and all the rest of you have brown eyes."

I don't think we're totally safe, let's put it that way. When I walk on the Champs-Élysées, I've been-- OK. The first time I went back to Europe, I told you, it was 1962. I used to travel on business quite a bit. I would travel to France, as well as to London. To Paris and London and couple other places. Lyon because that's where INTERPOL is.

And I will tell you that walking on the Champs-Élysées, today makes me nervous. And it never made me nervous in all the years I went there.

Because of the antisemitism in France?

Yeah, in front of me. I mean, they're walking right there, in all their glory. You know?

But you know, I was talking-- My cousin lives in a little town, called Thionville, which is about an hour, maybe 45 minutes, from Luxembourg and right in France. She and her husband live there. They also have a-- he's a cattle dealer.

They belong to the synagogue in the city where they live. They are orthodox. They have Shabbat dinner every Friday night. Everybody comes over on Saturday afternoon and they talk different subjects.

And I always ask her, "Aren't you nervous? Aren't you nervous? Don't you feel the difference?" And she always says no to me.

I really don't understand it, I got to tell you. Because if I were there-- I mean she was born after the war. I was born before the war, she was born after the war. So maybe it's a different outlook, I don't know. But if I was she, I think I'd be nervous.

Would you be a different person today if you hadn't had that early childhood that you had? Let's say you were born here

maybe.

Probably, I would be.

You'd still be the same person?

No, I think there are some parts of me that would be, maybe, somewhat different. OK. I work very hard to get ahead in the office, OK?

I was the first female vice president at Litton systems, in engineering. Because, why would you pick a woman when there are 40 men running around? And I don't know. I mean, I was very hard-working. My mother and father would-- [PHONE RINGS] Oh, that's me.

If you work hard and you do a good job, you'll get ahead. Now that made a big difference to me. Would I have done that same hard work if I had been born here, and sort of, had it a little easier when I was a child? I don't know.

Probably. Simply because I would have had it easier, right? That's why I said, when I read that article in "Newsweek" about first generation. There is something about always trying to do the best you possibly can that I think, may come because you're first generation. I don't know.

I can't answer it because I'm the only one I know. But I think it does impact you. Because-- it was because I felt I had, I wanted to do it. But I think I also owed it to my parents to do it.

I mean, as soon as I thought I was going to flunk second grade, I had to run and tell my mother. And my parents never put any-- I mean, they wanted me to do well but I don't think they put pressure on me. Like, a "helicopter mom" or whatever. My parents didn't do that. They just do the best you can.

And so I'm not sure what the answer would be. But I think I would be different. I think you have to be different.

Are you more comfortable being with people who were European-born than you are with--?

No.

Doesn't make a difference to you?

Doesn't make a difference to me. No, that doesn't make a difference to me at all. I was going to say, I'm sometimes-- I feel a little more comfortable sometimes with people who share my views on certain, who are more liberal in certain areas. That's the way I'll phrase it to be polite.

Because otherwise I have to watch myself that I don't, you know, really insult somebody. I used to have, I used to be more-- I'm not as outspoken as I was. I say things like, well I disagree with that. But we all live in the United States and that's, you know.

I have to be grateful that I can say what-- that we all have to be grateful that we can say what we think. I think that makes a difference. I think I said to you earlier that I can never understand why a Jew would be a bigot.

But I don't say anything because I know there are many. You know, I can name them and rattle them off. But that isn't going to do any good 'cause they're not going to change their mind. And I'm not going to change mine.

It's kind of interesting. I think the world has changed a lot, and we have to learn how to deal with the technology. In terms of how we're approaching war or news or anything else like that. Because I don't think we quite know how to deal with it. And we don't spend any time thinking about it.

I mean there are few people who do. But, you know, not as many as should. Or could. Not necessarily should, but could.

Because it's an issue of--

We don't want to regulate newspapers. We want freedom of speech. But we have to be careful, in some regard, about what is being published.

I mean, that 28-year-old man who went shooting up the mosque. Or the person who went shooting up the synagogue in Pittsburgh. There has to be some way to at least provide the people with two different views that they can then examine and say, well, maybe I'm not right about this or maybe I'm not right about that.

Like, where we live. There are a couple of people who are very-- "The Washington Times" is the only thing they read. Which scares me to death.

But having said that, one of the people said to me something about "The Washington Post" and I said, I find it-- I didn't say I disagree. I said I find it interesting. I see the same picture with a different headline in "The Wall Street Journal" and "The Washington Post."

And what I like to do is compare the two and see how different they are. And kind of evaluate which one has the more logical description of what happened. But that was too far for them to venture.

But, you know, that's why I say I'm always scared. Because I always think that the Jews are number two if they're not number one on your hit list. Do you think that too?

We can talk about that later. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about or mention about your experience?

No, not really. I don't know if this was valuable or not valuable.

No, it's very valuable. It's very valuable. Any message to your grandchildren?

Oh, yes! I love you dearly and you're the greatest ones on Earth. Not counting any other grandmother who's unbiased like me. Yeah. No I think--

Any words of advice to them, to your grandchildren?

When you pick your field, pick something that makes you happy because you're going to do it very many hours. And make sure that it isn't just the money.

Right.

No. I'll let them all choose their own. It's very funny. Sometimes when I talk to my younger daughter, who's a terrific person and she doesn't want to say, no mom that's wrong or whatever. Like, I'll tell her something about college and she'll say, "Mom do you remember how many years ago you went to college?" And I'll say, "I got it, Marcy."

Well, thank you.

Thank you. And my older daughter is a terrific person too. They're both very good.

Wonderful.

That's why I've to kiss the ground I walk on. Just grateful for all that.

That's a nice note to end on. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Juliette Peternick.