American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, Washington, DC, April 13, 1983, interview with Paulette Meltzer. Could you state your name and spell it, please?

It's Paulette Meltzer-- M-E-L-T-Z-E-R.

And your maiden name?

Is Goldstein-- G-O-L-D-S-T-E-I-N.

Where and when were you born?

I was born in Paris, France.

Where would you like to start talking? Tell me about your family.

Well, my family, I had, of course, a father and mother and two sisters. I was the youngest of the three children. And my sister was, at the time of-- in 1942, my younger sister was 14, and my oldest was 18. And it all started for me, what I remember because, after all, I was a six-year-old child. So whatever I remember is not really-- I have no way of knowing if it is the reality or just, you know, it just seems in-- never mind. That's-- I don't know what is--

Anyway, what I remember, the first time is that we were taken, my mother and I, to the VÃ©lodrome d'Hiver. It's a circus in Paris. It was in either June or July of 1942. And--

Who took you there?

The gendarme, the French police. As a matter of fact, there was no German, no German around that I remember at that particular day. It was all French police. And they came to the apartment, a very nice policeman.

And he told us to-- he told my mother to take some milk for me and a sweater and that not to take more than for a day or two. We are going on-- we were going on a-- I don't know if it was to work, my mother would be working or something. We were going in a camp, in a work camp.

Where was the rest of your family? Why only you and your mother?

Well, what happened is that, at the time, my father was working at the-- no, no, no, no, no. That was not at that time. My father, at the time, was in a prisoner of war camp because he was a French soldier. And he had been made prisoner by the German. And my two sisters were at sometimes-- and the day that that happened, they were not home. You see?

So anyway, I went with my mother. And he took us to a place where there was a lot of buses. It was in front of a school, the elementary school where I was going to school at that time. There were lots of buses.

And I remember there was a lot of people. And we all had to go into the bus. And there was a lot of neighbors, you know, a lot of people from the neighborhood who were watching.

Who were not Jewish.

Who were not Jewish.

Did you know at the time, or did your mom know at the time what was going on?

No. No, we-- you know, I don't know. I don't know if she knew. But of course, with me, I didn't know.

You were six years old?

Yeah. They told me we were going-- first, they told me we were going to the circus because that's what it was. It was a circus. And from there we were going away from Paris.

So they took us to this place. And it was a terrible-- from what I remember. This is why I would love to know someone who had the same experience.

The camp, was it--

It's not a camp. It was a circus at the-- in Paris. It was the VÃ©lodrome d'Hiver.

And what was it like there? Were there a lot of people?

There was a lot of people. It was very, very hot. I had to go-- everything was full. We had to go on-- you know how the seats are in a circus?

Bleachers?

And everybody was sitting-- sitting. Some people had been there, obviously, for more, for longer than we were because it seemed they were already there. There was, I remember, straw all over. And the smell-- smell, I remember, was very bad.

And anyway, we climbed some of the-- you know, those steps where all the seats are. And we found-- we found a place to sit. And it became very, very terrible. There were people screaming and crying.

And at one point, because across from the center, you know, where usually there's performance, right across from there a mother-- I guess it was a woman, who had a-- it was, I guess, a very small child, a baby, took a bottle and broke it on the child. That's what I-- I would--

She broke the bottle on the child?

Yes. And this is where I don't know if I remember this or I dreamed it. I don't know Because at this point-- and those things are so-- you know, it's like engraved, like, when I think about them.

You don't know why or what was happening?

It seems that everybody was going crazy, you know.

It was chaos there.

Yes. Yes. And I remember most was the smell. It was just--

Do you remember what your mother told you? Did she calm you down?

Well, my mother-- my mother somehow-- well, she looked very upset. But she kept telling me that they cannot keep us here because my father is French. She had--

Your father was Jewish though.

He was Jewish, but because he was in the army, you know, she had in her mind that they couldn't take-- they couldn't take us away. Finally we were there for some time. And--

Days? Weeks? Hours?

I don't know. I don't know if it was-- I don't know if we stayed overnight or what. It was for a tremendous time. For me, you know-- I don't know if you remember to when you were a child, you know. It's--

It's hard to remember.

It's hard to remember the length of time. All I know is that, at one point, my mother took me down, and she pleaded with some official, some gendarme, some policeman. And she showed all kind of papers, you know. And somehow we had to go back upstairs. And then we went down again. And then we were allowed to go out.

I don't know if we went out by ourself or they let us out. I have no idea. You know? Anyway, we-- my mother and I took a train to-- and I don't know how it happened, if she saw my father. I don't know what in between. I don't remember.

But we took a train to the demarcation lines. You know, we wanted to go to the Vichy France, the Vichy France. And when we get at the line, my mother was caught with papers.

You mother was what?

She was caught again with papers. And on the papers it said Jew. You know Juif. So we were taken to a camp. And it was an interim camp.

What was the name of it?

I don't know. I don't know. And then again--

What was it like?

It was not bad. That camp was small. I think it was a converted farm. That's what, you know, from the pictures that I remember, it seems that it was stalls, like from a farm.

Yes.

And we stayed there for a couple of days. And then a lady came. And I remember she had a long black cape like they wore in Europe, you know. And at the time, I remember she told me we were going on a big adventure. I didn't want to leave my mother.

And what?

I didn't want to leave my mother.

Oh, she came to take you?

That lady came to take me.

Where was your mother?

She was with me.

Oh, did she hear them say that?

Yeah, my mother wanted me to go with her. And a lot of people wanted me to go. And all I remember for many years, until about maybe seven years ago, I told this lady took me under her cape and smuggled me out. That's what I remembered all the years.

But what happened, I think-- see, a couple of years ago I was making some research-- not research. I was reading some books at YIVO, you know, in New York City. You know what YIVO? YIVO? It's a Jewish Yiddish-- the Jewish archive in New York City.

And I was reading this book where it says that, at that time, in, I think, '42, around the Vichy area, the [? Lyon ?] area, the Germans were still afraid of the public relations with the French people. And some organization kept them from taking the children. And they came, and they took children out of this interim camp.

Did your mother say anything to you before you left? Did she tell you?

No, she didn't tell. She told me we were going on an adventure. That was all.

And so you just wanted to go.

That's all I remember.

Yeah. And you went with this woman?

And I went with this woman. And she brought me to her friend. We went for again on a train for a long time. And she brought me to a friend, a Christian friend of my parents in ThÃ©nisy. It's about 90 kilometers from Paris.

And my father, meanwhile, was demobilized because he was-- he had tuberculosis. And somehow, I guess, they sent people back because they were not at war with France anymore. So he came back to Paris. And probably if he would have stayed in that camp, in that prisoner of war camp, he might still be alive. I don't know.

And he--

OK. So he came back.

He came back. And he took my sisters. No. Oh, no. Meanwhile-- that's right. Meanwhile, my mother was taken. When my father and my two sisters were not home, while I was away at that lady, my mother was taken. And when--

Taken where?

She was arrested.

From that camp?

No, no, no, no, no. She had came back also.

Oh, she came back?

All this, because it was still at the beginning. And because my father was a French citizen, it was still not-- the German did by stages.

You know, they first took those stateless. And then they took the immigrants. And then they took people who had been in France for five years, and then people who took for 10 years so that people lost their defenses. Because always, oh, it's not going to be with us, you know. We are French, whatever, you know.

So while my-- yeah, probably, my sisters came back to Paris. And they were still in the apartment.

With your father?

With my father and my mother. My mother came back.

Did they ever contact you during this time?

Oh, yes. Yes.

Oh, and you were with the other family.

Right. They felt, because I was a small child, it was better. It was less dangerous for me.

Do you remember your feelings? Weren't you--

Oh, I wanted to be with them, of course. I was very, very lonely, very upset.

Was this family a nice family?

They were very nice. They were very nice. But, you know.

Were there other children living in the house?

No. No. I was just alone.

Did you go out? Did you go to school?

No. No.

You just stayed home?

What she did-- what she did is she made believe-- see, it was a village. She told people who wanted to know that I was a niece. You know? And my mother was here one day when my mother was home. She was again arrested. And she was taken to Drancy.

What's Drancy?

Drancy was the interim camp to the death camps. And then the reason my father was looking for her, he knew something had happened because on that day they had been a roundup. And a few days later, he got some scroll paper and a piece-- scroll paper for my mother on an envelope, written by somebody else. She must have written something very fast and throw it somewhere, and somebody found it, because she put the address, and sent it to my father.

So he took my two sisters. And they also went to-- they wanted to go to Vichy. So they went.

I don't know how, but they got taken. And they were arrested. And they went-- they were put at Beaune-la-Rolande, which was a big-- a big camp, a big internment camp. And until yesterday, I thought that they stayed in Beaune-la-Rolande until they were taken from there to whatever camp because they never came back.

But I read-- Serge Klarsfeld wrote a book. You know who he is. He wrote a book, and he has all the names of all the people who were sent to the death camp from France, by convoy. And I had to look through the whole book.

This is your story. You can do whatever you want.

I never saw my-- I had no idea what happened to them because they all disappeared, my father, my mother, my two sisters. But I knew that my father and my two sisters were in that camp at Beaune-la-Rolande. But I didn't know which convoy, nothing.

So I looked, and I found, halfway through the book-- it's a big book. It's thousands and thousands of names.

This was yesterday.

Yesterday. And I found my father's name with my two sisters right all together. And I just had a big shock because it was like an affirmation. You know, it was there. You know, I had no-- until now, I felt maybe my older sister was alive because she was strong. She was strong. She was 18. My younger sister was sickly, so I knew I had no hope for her. And my father, I knew died in Lublin, in the concentration camp.

So when I saw their names, it was a shock. But anyway--

What about your mother?

My mother, she's not in the book. I cannot find her in the book. So I asked because he was there, Mr. Klarsfeld, and told me that either she died before they took her. And she must have died in Drancy, in that internment camp before they took her. Or it was just a lot of the papers, a lot of the records from the Germans were not in good condition, and he just-- they couldn't make it out. So maybe she's part-- or maybe I missed her name. I looked three times. It was a [INAUDIBLE] And I couldn't find her name.

So you were with this family. And you were how old by now?

I was-- that was still-- that was just in a matter of a few months. I was there--

You were still six years old.

I was still six years old. And they were really-- they were very nice. But you know, they never had children. And she was very strict and very--

How old were the people you were staying with?

They were a little old, and they were like-- at the time, they were in their late 50s. And she, never having had children and never having been with children, she really didn't know how to handle me or making me feel, you know. And now I think about it, you know.

But it's really, it's not that important when you really think about it. She did, she saved me. And not only did she save me, but she saved other children.

She did?

Yes. Yes.

That she brought into her house to live with her.

Yes. And of course, we were all hidden.

What do you mean you were hidden? You couldn't go out?

Well, I was able to go out once in a while. And I was-- till the villagers started-- I was very sick. Therefore, I couldn't go to school because she was afraid, you know. She was afraid I would go to school, and I would tell. Or I would tell my real name. You know? So most of the time I stayed there.

What did you do there all day?

Don't ask. Don't ask. She was-- her first husband had been in the First World War, and he had died from the gas, the--

Poison gas?

--poison gas. But he had been a professor at the Sorbonne. And she had all kind of books. And she taught me. You see? So I learned.

Every day she taught you?

Yes. And it was all history, geography, and-- of course mathematics, she didn't. But it was all literature, you know? But I was not allowed to read any children's book because she felt that was a waste of time.

So whenever I had a book, [INAUDIBLE] it was Shirley Temple. It was A Little Princess, Petite Princess, I remember. And I read this book. I must have read it a million times because that was the only book that I could relate to. All the other things were too grown up and too-- it was not for children. You know?

I forgot to ask you, when were you born?

In 1936.

In '36.

And she kept me during the whole war. And after the war-- she was an excellent cook.

When did they tell you about your parents?

After the war.

You waited all those years to find out if they would come back.

Oh, we knew that they were gone. We knew they were in the camps. We knew that all the people in that area--

She told you that your whole family was gone?

Yes.

Before the war was over--

Before the war was over.

How did you handle that, a little girl?

It was-- no, she didn't tell me they died. During the war, she didn't tell me they died. They were in a work camp. That's what we-- that's what she thought too. Nobody knew. Nobody knew this, all the people were being killed. You know?

So when the war was over, what did she-- did she tell you?

Well, we searched after the war. And you know, in Paris, in the whole area, the all dead-- we had a station, radio station that broadcast the names. You know, so-and-so is looking for so-and-so and so on, constantly, constantly.

How old were you when the war was over?

I was-- I was nine. It was '42. I was either eight or nine. And I was in '36. The war was ended in '44, right?

So eight or nine.

And so we listened. We listened and listened and listened to all those names. And after the war, she decided to adopt me. But in 1948, the OSE-- do you know who-- you know the Joint?

Yes.

Right. OK, well the French arm is called OSE. And they were taking children out from Christian families. They were trying to find them Jewish families. You see? And she didn't want to give me up. And I didn't want to go away from her.

You loved her.

Of course, after all that. And because even if she--

Was she loving and--

She was not. She was very cold. But she was all I had. She was all that united me with my family. You know, that-- the connection, it was the only connection. And finally she decided that she would put me in a children's home. Like a boarding school, it was. I mean, that's what we called it.

She was-- she was-- I used to see her once a week. But it was a Jewish children's home, where I learned I was Jewish. I mean, I knew I was Jewish, but I never had any training or anything, you know, through the war. She never let me look at the catechism, you know?

She never wanted me to look through it. I wanted to look at the pictures. And she didn't even want me to look at the pictures. She told me that I was Jewish, and this is the way my parents would want it. She was really [? unique. ?]

Of course, I didn't appreciate that when I was little. When I grew up, I realized what--

When your parents-- when they couldn't find your parents, and then you knew that they were all gone, how did you feel? You were all alone. And this was terrible.

It was. It was. Not only--

Did you have aunts or uncles, cousins?

I had nothing. I had absolutely nothing. I was the only survivor. But what happened though, in that children's home in 1953, in the spring, it was in Purim in 1953, the director of the children's home found-- received a phone call. It seems that an aunt was looking for me. And we couldn't believe because I had no knowledge of anyone.

And it came out that I had an aunt In New York who had been looking for me for eight years. But for some reason, she was looking for me under a different name. There had been some mix up because my parents were born in Romania. And my father and mother came to France when they were-- I think my mother was 17, and my father was 18. They got married because my father was supposed to go into the army.

So they went-- they escaped in a way from Romania so he wouldn't go into the army. So they exchanged names, my father and mother. And when they arrived in Paris, you know, they were young. They were afraid.

They came there and became the names that they had taken when they left Romania. So she, my aunt in here was looking for Schwartz, which was my father's name. And my name was under my mother's name, was Goldstein. So she couldn't find me.

And finally she did. She met me. She brought me to the United States.

She brought-- you left that woman.

Oh, that woman died in 1950. She died of cancer. If not, I would never have left. I would never have left.

What happened when she died? What did you do? I was in a children's home.

And then you had nobody.

Then I had no one. I had a-- but you see, in the children's home, there were other children.

They all had no one.

Nobody had any family.

So you thought it was normal. I mean, you knew it was not normal, but it wasn't so unusual.

That's right because, you know. And that's my story.

So how did you come to New York?

She brought me.

You flew, or you came by boat?

I came with a boat.

All by yourself?

All by myself.

And how old were you?

I was 17.

And you came to New York.

And I came to here.

Did you know English?

Oh, no. Well, I knew English from school. But it was the English from England taught by a French teacher. So when I came, the first evening I spent with my aunt, I couldn't even ask her anything. I mean, we were talking with sign language.

Was she happy to see you?

Oh, she was my mother's sister.

She must have been so happy to see you.

Did she have children?

No. She had no children.

She was married.

Yes.

So she-- you have no idea what it felt like. Not only--

Did she look like your mom? Was she like her in any way that you felt, that you--

No. No. Not-- you know, she was not. She was not. But of course, you know, she had-- she had stories of my mother when she was young, which somehow-- because you feel disconnected.

Did you have any pictures or--

Yes. She had pictures.

Of your mom?

Yes. And before that--

What about your parents' belongings when they left? Were you able to take any of the things that they had?

No.

What happened to them?

Ah, what happened to them? I don't know. The people from the building, first of all--

So you have no photographs, family photographs of your sisters or--

Yes, I do because of the Christian, that lady I was with during the war. She had pictures. You see?

And-- but you know, as long as this is in, young people are going to listen to this. I just want to tell them how the roundups in France was all done by the French police. And when you were in the street, I remember one time when the papers were taken. You know, you had to check the-- check papers. It was not done by the Germans. It was always done by the police.

And the French police always were the ones who arrested. You know? And someday maybe this will-- I don't know.

So you grew up. You lived with your aunt in New York.

In New York. In here, yes.

And she raised you.

Yes.

And you live in New York. And now you are--

Now I--

--living in New York.

I have been living in New York. I am married. I have two children.

How old?

I have a daughter of 14 and a son 19.

So you really do have everything. You've made a wonderful life for yourself.

Yes.

Loving your own loving family. And what do you tell your children?

I tell them-- I told them everything.

Do they say, Mom, how could you live through that? Do they--

No, not really.

Now that you are a parent, do you look back at your experience and think, how did I live through that?

It's not just how did I live. You know, I remember one time-- I have this picture of my mother sitting in the kitchen with me because, you know, there was no food. The Jews were not allowed to go shopping. Is it at the end of the--

Go ahead.

It was-- it was the Jews were not allowed to go and shop at the same time. So--

A different time than everybody else.

Right. So by the time they went, I guess there was nothing left. So we used to eat a certain vegetables that's called rutabaga.

Rutabaga.

And we used to eat it for breakfast lunch and dinner. All kind of ways, we used to eat them, as a cereal. I mean, any way, you know. So I didn't want to eat it. And my mother used to stay in the kitchen with me for a long, long time so that I would eat.

Do you remember her?

I remember her. I remember her sitting with-- I remember her like this, sitting and staring into space with a worried look in her face. And that's what I--

[AUDIO OUT]

--who were children, like you, or even teenagers. Most of them were teenagers, the ones that survived.

Yeah. And they could mostly worry about themselves. Of course, they were worried about their sisters, their brothers. But I always wonder what the parents must have felt like.

It must have been hell. Because I know, I can't imagine myself in a position like this.

With your children.

Because, my God, my son goes. He takes his car, and he comes home a half hour late. He tells me he's coming back at 11:00, and it's 11:30 and he's not there. And I worry. So can you imagine? This is nothing compared to-- you know? I don't know how they did it.

You don't know how you did it, do you?

Me-- no, me? It's a child. Children have ways of surmounting these things, you know. You worry. You-- I don't know how to express it.

But I think you don't know what will happen in the future. You don't worry. You don't know. You don't have the knowledge of what an adult has.

An adult will recognize signs of dangers. A child is-- a child doesn't see it. It's in no memory, you know? It's not in your memories to have anything that is happened. So you don't worry in the same way. You worry about the immediate things. You know?

But it must have been painful to be without your sisters and your mother and your father.

Of course, it was. One time, while I was at-- the last time I saw my father was when I was at that lady. And the Jews were not allowed out of Paris.

And he somehow came at night. And he slept with me. He slept in the same bed with me. And in the morning he left, and didn't say goodbye to me. You know, he was afraid for me to wake up, I guess.

You woke up and he was gone?

I woke up and he was gone. And--

Do you remember him?

Yes.

You had quite an experience. You were lucky because you were so young. Children your age didn't live.

Yes. That's exactly, exactly.

You were so young.

Yes. Because from reading this book that I bought yesterday, it seems that all the children below the age of 10, none of them came back, none of them who were taken.

Do you understand the hatred and the fact that you-- did you find that--

No. The only thing that I hated all through the war was-- you know what's a concierge? You know? It's a-- in each apartment building in Paris--

It's like a manager, a building manager.

Right. And she has like a little book. And nobody can go in or out of the building without her knowing. And you have to knock on her-- you have to speak to her before you can go in or out. Right? And she-- because of her, all the Jewish people in that building was-- she had the name of all the Jewish people, and they are on that floor, and they're on that floor.

She told them?

This when you-- you see, because they-- why my parents didn't go away before, I don't-- I'll never know. And it seems that this was duplicated in hundreds and hundreds of buildings, where the concierge gave away the people. And after the war, we came back. That lady, she took me, and we came back to that building to see if some of the property was--

because, you know, the German-- the German didn't take.

I mean, I make the German sounds wonderful. They were not. But--

Pardon me. I don't mean to interrupt. How do we in? Who--

Ask them.

The thing is that, as a child, I saw the German later on in the war, while I was in the country with this lady. But in Paris, I didn't see that many Germans. It was mostly the-- all I remember is the gendarme doing all these terrible things.

How do you feel about France now?

I have never gone back. And I am a French teacher. And I feel that everything I am teaching the kids is from the books because, when I was 17, you know, 30 years ago, the Paris was different. It had different everything. So I feel I have to go back and know firsthand.

But that's just one side. I am also-- I want my children to see where I grow up. I want to show my husband. So we are going in June because it's our 25th anniversary. And so we are, all the four of us, are going. But I have very funny feelings about it because I hated the gendarme all through the-- all through my childhood.

And when we were-- when I was in the country, you know, by that lady, then we saw the Germans. Then of course, the Gestapo--

What about her husband, that woman's husband?

Oh, yeah, they both-- they both were good. They both were excellent people. And the mayor of the village where I was was a collaborator with the Germans.

The French were trying to appease the Germans at that time, weren't they, by giving up the Jews?

That's right. So nobody was--

Do you think there was a lot of antisemitism before the Germans--

Oh, yes. There was-- in France, there was always. But of course, this I know from second hand. As a child, I wouldn't know. You know, I wouldn't know about it.

You were so young, so young.

But in the country, when the Germans came through, yeah, that-- I was starting to tell you. The one time I was-- I took a walk around the house, and I must have been longer than I was supposed to. And in front of the house was a black car with-- and there was the mayor and the Gestapo. They were looking at the map on the trunk of the car.

See, nobody was sure that I was Jewish. And--

When you were living with the--

With that lady. And I saw them, and I got so scared that I ran. I turned right away into a little way, a little--

Doorway?

Not a doorway, like a little--

An alley?

--alley. And I ran so far and so fast. And finally I fell, and I stayed there. I must have stayed there for an hour, until I decided to start going back. And when I came back, they were not there anymore. And sure enough, they had come in the house, and they had looked for me. So I escaped again.

How old were you at that time?

At that time, must have been about seven, I guess. But I feel that I was spared all this.

You wonder how you made it through. It's unbelievable.

And the only emotion-- the only emotion-- the emotion I feel is not-- maybe not normal or maybe-- or maybe it's normal. I always feel guilty of having survived. And this is--

Do you know that most people say that, all the people I've spoken to. Because you love the people who died. But you know it wasn't your fault.

I know it. Of course, it was not my fault. But you feel, why? Why did I survive? Why didn't they? I mean, how-- I don't know. It's-- when I'm rational, of course, you-- it has nothing to do. We shouldn't feel guild. But it's-- it's always on the back of your mind.

You always think about the fact that you survived this. And there are times that you forget, or do you feel like it's always there?

Oh, of course I forget, of course. You can't. You can't think about it all the time. You know? But there's-- you know, did you ever read the Marcel Proust, where he has the-- for example, if you think of something, you eat an orange. And it has a certain taste. And it instantly brings you back to a time, right? Well, this is the way I remember.

If I hear a certain word or I-- I hear a certain word, or I eat a certain thing, or I read-- any situation will bring me back instantly. You know? But my children are very knowledgeable in what happened. And I want them-- my daughter came with me here.

It's nice to share that with her.

Yes. Yes. Yes, because I want her, when she'll be married, to teach her children because we should never forget it. If you don't teach the children, then it will-- it-- it might happen again. They'll be the same way as we were. They won't believe that it could happen. So that's all my story. [INAUDIBLE], like, you know--