

Sheila Baxter, 05/19/87

Q: This is Harry Rosenberg, an interviewer for the National Council of Jewish Women and the Holocaust Program which is being created to benefit future curriculums and school systems. I am at the home of Sheila Baxter, Siesta Key, who is a British born subject and spent the war years or even prior to that in France. Later she went to Germany in 1946 and then came to America in 1949.

It was very nice of you to give us the opportunity to speak with you. Why don't you go ahead and tell us a little bit about when you were born and what your earlier experiences were in England or school and etc.

A: I was born on the Isle of Wight in 1922 and my father's people were in the navies, so we were based in Southampton and my mother decided I was going to be a dancer. So, at the age of five, she would push me in my pram from a farmhouse in Bedfordshire, Bedford, to take us to Sir Felix Demry who was an examiner for the Royal Academy of Dance. Then I went on to take my Royal Academy exams and I got a scholarship at the Royal Academy for classes and the Guildhall School of Music and then the Sadlers Wells Children's Family. And I was the will-o-the-wisp, way of the _____ ends _____ just where the Rainbow's End played for 20 years in England. It was the equivalent of pantomime, a patriotic play about St. George and the Dragon. And, um, so my education was mostly in private schools and with governesses and then I joined Sadlers Wells. From Sadlers Wells I joined the Marco Victorian Family and traveled with them and then they ran out of money, as companies do. And Anton Dolan asked my mother to take me to Paris to take lessons with Olga Privachenska (?). He considered her the greatest dance teacher in the world, a ballerina from the Narinsky Theater. And, um, so from there I met the first dancer from the Comedie Francaise and I married him and right after that he was....

Q: Uh, he was mobilized?

A:cast into the French army and then... Well, right away at the age of um,.....

Q: What's wrong?

A:At the age of 19, Michaud was president of the army and fought and was taken prisoner.

Q: Claude was his father or....

A:and Claude—Michaud was my husband. Claude was my husband's stepfather and he was a very fine writer of plays and novels. And he was Jewish and my mother-in-law was a gentile and, um, Claude of course had to wear the yellow star and Lena, his wife, wore it too as a sign of solidarity.

Q: Even so, she was Christian?

A: Yes, thank God, nothing ever happened to these wonderful people. In fact, Claude was a captain in the French army; he was the administrator of the French hospital in Midan (?) and, um, survived the whole war without... of course, we didn't have enough to eat. We all know that story.

Q: Yes.

A: We did have a place in the country and the farmer's wife did manage to give us extra things, but even so it was very tight. And during the exodus, mother and I walked for miles and miles and miles, trying to get to Brittany to take a boat back to England and, um, Germans caught up with us somewhere near Chartres, which had been bombed. And the German soldiers were very young and very arrogant. Here were all these refugees, old people, sick people in wheelbarrows, small babies, and they rode their bicycles and their motor scooters, whistling modern tunes in the most arrogant, high-handed manner in the world.

And the German captain who was leading them marched into the cornfield and urinated, really, in a brutal sort of way. It was a brutal manifestation. And we were forced to turn back as soon as the Germans arrived. We had to turn back and walked about 350 kilometers. And now we were in Paris and, um, I continued with my career. I continued to go to class with Madam Privachenska and I continued, I danced at the, in the theater at Champs Elysee in the ballet Avila as a French citizen, because I was married to a Frenchman. And, um, my mother... but before that happened, my mother was taken in a concentration at Berzencon on the Swiss frontier and life was very hard for her. They had to stand in line for soup at mid-day, up to their waists in snow many times, and the blood from the French wounded had not been cleaned from the walls or...

Q: May I just ask you a question, please. Your mother, of course, was there because she was English? She was not Jewish, was she?

A: No, she was English.

Q: Oh, I see. That's why the Germans arrested her. I see.

A: And when they arrested her, they didn't just know on this portier, this estate in the country. They kicked in the door. Sort of like trying to kill a butterfly with a machine gun. And when she was released from the camp, it was because she was so ill and we were given no warning she was coming back and she had to walk all the way from the railway station in Mont all the way to Gayville (?) which was miles and miles and miles, and she was very ill. And so we, we survived the war, but many of my Jewish, Russian, White Russian friends, well, just disappeared, and, um, some escaped and I have many stories of how they ran through the woods and they returned to Paris under aliases. A very, very beautiful woman,

the mother of my best friend, she was from Tartary, a beautiful woman. The Germans came, tore all the wallpaper from her flat, trying to find secret things and she was never seen again. Such a lovely woman. And mother and I lived in this flat for a long time after that with no water and no utilities, very little food. Well, Remy Blum, the impresario of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, came to my... the house of my father- and mother-in-law, and I signed a contract with him to perform for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and we were very sad, because a week after that he was taken by the Germans and I think it was about a year later that he died in the camp. He was such a wonderful, wonderful man.

Q: Yes. Could you tell us a little bit about... evidently you were reasonable free in your career; you could pursue your career. But you mentioned it was not entertaining, it was just dancing and classical dance.

A: It was classical dance in Avignon, in the Theater de Champs Elysee and...

Q: But your observations perhaps, of what French people did to Jews, what they did...

A: They were very helpful, very compassionate. Once we were into this terrible thing, several refugees from the Germans ran into the theater and the dressers and all of us would hide them and we had never seen anyone when the Germans came, looking for them, as well.

Q: You mentioned that you were hiding people, who tried to escape, in the theater and you said that you never knew that anyone was there when the Germans came looking. So, obviously, it was successful in trying to keep the Germans away or fool them enough that they didn't search the theater and the people that you were helping at the time, were they resistance fighters, or Jewish people? Who were they and where did they escape to and could you just elaborate?

A: To the best of my knowledge, they were resistance fighters and they may, indeed, have been Jewish. But I had no knowledge of that. But my Jewish friends were all White Russians and they were all involved in dance and the arts.

Q: White Russians means they escaped the Bolshevik Revolution and came to France.

A: Exactly.

Q: And they were Jews. I see.

A: And a great many of them, they were artists. And, um, all those families disappeared. And I'm glad to say that some of the young people escaped. They had breathtaking stories to tell of running through the woods in Germany and finding nothing to eat, and coming through Alsace-Lorraine, and some of these

young people appeared back in Paris with false papers. False papers was the thing to have.

Q: How did people obtain false papers under these circumstances?

A: Through the Underground.

Q: The Underground?

A: Yes.

Q: They did that, evidently, in many countries.

A: Yes.

Q: And then when these people returned with false papers, could they go along reasonably freely in Paris?

A: They went freely in Paris, but I don't know how they could earn a living. Other families helped them.

Q: I see, I see.

A: Just prayed that the war would end.

Q: Yes, sure. Could you perhaps tell us a little more about the... you said that your father-in-law wore the star, but by some miracle was saved and his Christian wife, out of solidarity, wore it too. Both of them were somehow saved.

A: Right. And then a friend of ours, a young man who was in the resistance, his father was a medical person and he was taken out and shot. And he wrote a beautiful letter which I can show you, with his photograph, and said that the Germans had prayed with him in the prison before he was...

Q: ...killed.

A: And he asked his parents to forgive him for all the sorrow he had caused and to forgive the Germans that were his jailors. It's not their fault that he was taken out and shot.

Q: Well, what was his... why was he arrested?

A: He was Resistance.

Q: A Resistance fighter, I see. Well...

A: I only mention that...

Q: Now would you please tell us about what happened to your husband who was evidently in the French army?

A: At 19 he was taken into the French army and he came home on a leave two times, and then we heard that he was taken prisoner. And then we never heard anything after that; we could never find out anything. It was such chaos.

Q: Was this prior to the war's end?

A: That was prior to the war's end. Yes.

Q: Now, in the period that you're now describing, how much longer did the war last and what happened with your mother?

A: After two years my mother became so ill that they released her from Berzencon. She found her own way; we were not given any notification that she had been released. She walked on for miles and miles and miles and she was almost comatose by the time she fell on the doorstep. And we picked her up and put her to bed. She never really did recover herself after that. Of course, being a British subject, they, as well as a concentration camp could be, they were as humane as others.

Q: Because she was British and she was also a Christian, of course. But nevertheless they persecuted her also?

A: Yes, because she was English. They were at war with England.

Q: Yes, I understand. And now that the war continues, would you like to speak towards the end of the war, towards liberation—how you felt and some of the things that you've experienced.

A: Those were intoxicating days when the French army and the American armies were approaching Paris. And it was my experience that the buildings were mined, the Concierge and all the big buildings, Hotel de Ville, they were mined. Hitler had given the order to blow up Paris. The German general in charge...

Q: Go ahead. Can't remember his name? I can't either.

A: It was _____, or something.

Q: Well, whoever. Go ahead as to what his plans were that you experienced.

A: He deflected. It was planned, very cleverly, just to, very stubbornly and doggedly...

Q: This was a German general?

A: A German general. He was not about to blow up Paris, but we all thought, through our connections with the French Underground, that everything was going to be blown up. And then there was intensive bombing and, naturally, every time the planes come over, you think you're going to be hit this time. So, it wasn't just joy and hope; it was sheer terror. But the French came in and General LeClair, very French, with his blue casquette and marching very correctly. La croix, la France, cheering crowds and all those flags waving. It was very exciting and then the Americans came in and there were still Germans in some of these strongholds. There were Germans in L'Ecole Militaire and in Les Invalides and they were shooting anybody who crossed the Square and the French had set up barricades and people were shot. Not, of course, too many. I just don't think I should...

Q: After the liberation of France and your mother's survival and your survival, what happened then?

A: Well, we returned to England and, in the course of time, I met an Englishman who was a nationalized American. He was a doctor with the American army, stationed in Munich. So we lived in Garmishpartenkirchen and I attended the war trials and visited Buchenwald and went skiing. And we met a number of Jewish people who were still displaced persons, who still had difficulty getting visas, and we tried to help with the children and things like that as best we could. And from Munich we went to Venice, I mean to Vienna.

Q: Could you...

A: And eventually back to America.

Q: To the United States. Could you tell us something about your encounters with Germans after the war—some of their points of view, some of their thoughts about the war? Did you have experience with that?

A: Well, I was awfully astounded in Munich. We met so many manufacturers and they denied that the camps were anything but humanitarian and hygienic was the word they used in connection with Goering's running of the camps. Hygienic, that was a word that startled me.

Q: I see.

A: And they said that if we had listened to them, we would not be having this trouble with Russia, that they had told us all along that the Russians were a real menace.

Q: They evidently at the time were trying to cover up some of the things that the Germans had done.

- A: Conscious or unconscious; had they consciously blocked their own minds and intelligence? How could they have expected us to believe it? How could they expect us to believe it? In Europe, we'd been hearing these things since 19--, since the 1930s. Everyone knew what the Germans were up to.
- Q: Yes. And when you came to Vienna, what did you find the Austrians... ?
- A: I found them a little more civilized about this, but not much. They still believed that none of these terrible things had happened.
- Q: This was immediately following the war.
- A: 1946, 1947.
- Q: And what were your feelings when you attended the trial, the war crimes trials, as a person who had suffered some persecution in France and being a British subject?
- A: I was horrified to meet the finality of evil face to face. Absolutely stupefied. I really can't find any words to have these monsters stand up and then pretend to be innocent and it was never their fault. They were always under orders. They were a German soldier and they had to follow orders.
- Q: Evidently the jury didn't quite believe them, either.
- A: Of course not. And the lawyers were wonderful, wonderfully ethical. Everything was aboveboard and fair. Everybody was very controlled. The lawyers were very controlled. There was nothing...
- Q: Well, everything you feel was run properly in the legal system during the trials and obviously the guilt of these people was established and...
- A: Terribly, terribly sick. They were terrified. These people who could do things to other people without compunction. When they themselves were confronted with death, they were terrified. They were groveling.
- Q: Well, that is something. I'm very glad that you bring that out. It's very important to know. Well, thank you very much for giving us some of your time and we really appreciate it and hopefully all this will help to teach future generations that it will not happen again. Thank you so much for the courtesy and your hospitality.
- A: My pleasure. I hope that you're very successful with this endeavor.
- Q: Thank you.