

On a bad morning in May 1940, I woke up. I look out of the window because I hear a lot of noise. There were planes over the country. And down the planes, like a swarm of locusts came German soldiers, not only machine guns, but tanks and everything, and in Dutch uniforms, and they spoke Dutch. But there are three words that somebody who is not born in Holland, in this case mine is so born to, cannot pronounce. And that was the only weapon they had. See?

This is why I'm so afraid that when these countries had no weapons. And somebody fights, well, we cannot defend ourselves. We are lost. Because I've gone through it. There was nothing we could do. They came down and the sky was black. I called a friend and I said, what's going on? She said, my God, the Germans are coming. I said, no. They're not. They're going over to England, thought I, which was silly.

And they came down they spoke Dutch. They had Dutch papers, Dutch uniforms. And the Dutch wanted to put the whole country under water. But lots of traitors put instead of dynamite under the bridges, sand under the bridges, and nothing went up. And they landed on dry land. And they came in. It's like you're seeing some burglars and they come in regardless. And they tell you what to do.

This was in Holland?

Holland, everything in Amsterdam.

This was in 1940?

1940 in May. The Germans in Germany have done terrible things, only not the Germans. I'm not saying it right. No army, it was only the dismissed SS and SA, and all these black and brown shirts. They were terrible. Where it says Jew, they smashed everything, stole everything. They stole from me. Can you imagine, for instance, I had a carafe in crystal with a silver neck, you see where you put wine or schnapps or anything in? They stole, they turned the silver off, put in their pocket. Everything I had, they stole.

That was the crust of the people, so to speak. That wasn't a German soldier. As a matter of fact, downstairs was a lady who was sent here, a German lady who I got very good friends with. And she had a maid who was a terrible Nazi. And one day I was down there. And the doorbell rang and a German soldier came. He said, is Miss Fisher in? I said, yes, she is. Who can I say?

And he said, he wanted to tell that her brother had died. And the last word the brother gave, go and see my sister. And he sat there and he said, when my friend said, she's OK. She's my friend. I'm ashamed to be a German. He comes from the Russian front. They had the Russians excavate huge, huge holes, and stand around these huge holes, and looking in the hole, the Germans stood behind them with a gun and killed them. And then they said, so, we don't have to feed those.

And he said he's ashamed to be a German. Now, that was a good German. They're not all like that. You see? But some who don't know better, and who had nothing to lose, so to speak. See? The scum SS, I say in this language here.

When the Germans invaded Holland, what at first did the Jews that you knew--

Some of them kill themselves. And some of them thought, oh, it can't be so bad. We're in Holland. You don't want to believe the bad things. You know that yourself. And you remember something, you remember the good. The bad you forget. That's why I've forgotten the whole thing already.

When I arrived here, I had an uncle who came with his arms spread. I arrived on the grass on a French boat in New York. And he said, now you're here and we welcome you to the United States. You're here in a free country. Forget the past life and start a new life. And I thought, that's a good thought and I'm going to do that.

That brings me to an interesting point. In what ways has your war experiences affected your religious beliefs and your political influence?

In the cell, people got more religious. But I was always deep, deep inside I always believed. And I haven't changed. I still believe. They always said in the underground, I have not only one angel, but I have two. And everything they wanted hidden. They said give it to Margot, because when she's picked up, she'll never betray us. I couldn't care less whether I died or not. Because I think I'm a fatalist in a way. I think my life is pointed out and this is what it is. This is how it happened.

And your faith?

It stays the same. I'm an interface. I don't care what anybody is. I have studied religions. I know all about the Jewish religions, the Islamic religion, the Mohammedans there, and all this Buddhism, the Nirvana, and the Catholic of course, and the Protestant. And now I'm married to a-- I don't even know what it is. It's a Church of England. I mean he's from here. But his parents were Swedish.

So it don't matter to me. Either I like him or else they can go wherever they want to.

In what ways has your war experiences influenced your political involvement?

It has. Because I don't want to be ever without a weapon, not that I want to use it. But if we are attacked, the Nicaraguans, the Cubans, the Russians, they're all around us. And one day, they may come. And we should not use the weapons. But then we can defend ourselves. I like it freedom. I don't like any kind of tyranny, any kind. I don't like anybody to command what you should do because you have only got one life. And see how terrible it is when you're taken away for no reason, just because you are Jewish, or just because-- that's not your fault what you're born with.

Were your attitudes any different as far as politically 40 years ago?

No. I was always leaning to the right. But not to the Hitler's right. I was leaning to be strong, and believe, and that's it. And you may now conclude what I think of Josephine Ferraro. [LAUGHS]

Is there anything you can think of that we've not covered that you would like to tell us about, perhaps Czechoslovakia?

If you want to hear that. Well one, there was a Messe, I don't know what they call it in English. When you go and buy your stuff, you know, like in Leipzig. There is a Messe, and there was a guy I knew from America, not because I was here. But he was there, a Mr. Levy. And at 6 o'clock in the morning, he calls up on my phone, and says get the hell down here. I said, why? I was asleep. He said, the Germans are marching in. I said, oh the hell with you. And I hung up. And I said the Germans are marching in?

And I got out of bed. And as I was, I ran down. And here they were all very big excited. And it was a German army coming in. The German women, the Czechoslovakian women were going up to them. And they were slapping them. And I was in the middle of the thing. And I fell, of course. And from the hotel the guy picked us up. In the afternoon I said, it's not that bad. It's just the army. But wait till the Gestapo comes. The next day the Gestapo came, took the whole hotel over.

And the people who had not real passports because Hitler made everybody without a state, they said to them, you've got to go out. And when they go out, and they have to register somewhere, they're sunk. So I said, I'm an interpreter by the League of Nations. I will help you to the Germans, you know, like my-- hello. And the guy said, what are we going to do? I said some people have a couch. Most hotel rooms are three times as large as this one, have couches in the thing. Let them sleep on the couch. Don't sell them out. Don't send them out. And they had them sleep on the couch. See?

And then they said, we will go out and you stay. And I stayed. And then Mr. Levy comes to me and says, have you got like 50,000 kroner? So I said, yeah sure. Can you give them to me? I said sure. I billed out 100,000, you know, that wasn't worth much. And somebody got out on that money. And when I was in Holland, all of a sudden, he sent me the money. I never thought he would. Can you imagine?

Things happen terrible.

There were Jews and non-Jews at the hotel?

Oh, yes. Yes.

People who were just standing there?

Yeah, staying there to buy merchandise for their stores and stuff, you know like the Messe.

And you had told the Germans that you would handle--

I will be happy to translate. I said, I'm licensed. And what did you do in this capacity of translating.

I said, look. This man has a paper from the British foreign office that he is a British subject, that nothing can happen to him. He said, all right. Put him aside.

And what did you do with these people who now were vouched for, so to speak?

Nothing. They stayed until they could get out. There was, of course no train and no plane. But as soon as there was one, my clothes were already at the plane. But I couldn't go either. I had to get them back.

They were still running planes where you were?

Yeah, they were running planes. But when the Germans came in, there was no plane, no train, no nothing.

And then where do you suppose these people went after?

They stayed. And after, they went back to England. There was no war yet. See? The war only started after Poland. But this was Czechoslovakia in '39. Oh, my God. You should have seen the excitement. The people hated the Germans. And now they are under another tyranny, so to speak. It's terrible how the whole world is crazy. They tell you what to do. And they-- oh, it's awful.

You had said that you never confided in anyone that you were working.

No, of course not.

But you did say that there was one person that--

That was the man I wanted to marry.

Can you tell us something about him?

He was the best man in the world. He gave everything away. He had a factory which the Dutch government gave me later, which I don't know nothing about. But I worked hard to make a living because I didn't have not even a pair of stockings, nothing. Everything was stolen. I think I have it here. Yeah, this I have. See, I have that thing. That's where he was killed.

And then when he was killed, they threw him in the canal. And the canal and the water was poisoned so they had to dig him out and burn everybody. And this is he.

Can you tell us how it came to be that he-- where he was sent, and why he was sent?

He was called one night, was called on him. What happened to your girlfriend, Margot Scharf? He said, what happened

to her? I don't know. And they said, you know where she is. And he said, no. What is she doing? He said, I don't know. She's not here. And he was taken to a concentration camp.

Which concentration camp?

In Vught, and that's where you have there the picture.

That concentration camp is in Holland?

Yeah. Oh, they made a lot of concentration camps. But that was good, because we put them all in there. And later, after the war the Dutch put the Germans in there. Were you sent to these concentration camps? I was never sent, only the Jews or the Catholics.

The Jews?

Yeah, I mean they pronounced, like part of the [NON-ENGLISH], who was here, the father.

Or people such as your sweetheart.

Yeah, my fiance or whatever you want to call him. I was almost married. But you couldn't marry during that time. You couldn't do anything.

I'd like to know if you have any comments that you'd like to leave--

Maybe--

--for your children, for your grandchildren.

Maybe when you get back, then I think of a million things. My children never knew it until now. And my oldest daughter said, why didn't you ever tell me? I said honey, I couldn't tell it to anybody. And then later she said after the war? After the war, I said nobody speaks about it. Nobody spoke about it. They still don't speak about it in Holland.

What would you like for people to know so that--

They were so hateful in Holland. After the war, there were two Swiss people coming in a train. They took them out. They talked German. German Swiss, and slapped them half dead, because you couldn't talk a German word in Holland.

Well after the war, the queen came. See, there is a Jewish part in Amsterdam that has a synagogue that stands on 6,000 wooden sticks, so to speak. There is no electricity, nothing in the ocean. The Portuguese who at the time Elizabeth was queen, was sent out of the country unless they had some non-Kosher meat like pork and so, and she put it outside that they saw that they had converted.

But the conversion didn't help you there. But they were--

In the war? With the Germans? Yeah, with the Germans didn't help you. But they had-- what was I saying now? Yeah, in Spain, these people went to Turkey and to Holland. And they were called the Sephardi Jews, which is OK. So these Sephardi Jews built that Portuguese synagogue. And that is the most famous building. And the Queen came right away to that building. They let that stand outside. There's a big monument of the Dutchman who helped them.

And then one day, she called us to the Hague, only two or three people, and she thanked us for that what we did for the motherland and her alive. And made me, who was actually nothing, German, an honorable citizen of the Netherlands. But I exclaimed like here, I said, I don't want it in the paper. I don't want anybody to know it. I did it for my heart. And I wish I could have done more.

Queen Wilhelmina, I'm sorry, then later came Queen Juliana.

Have you anything else you'd like to say?

Well, you read that. Maybe you find something I haven't said. Except the beginning, that's my parents were alive.

Well then in conclusion, I'd like to say this has been Marsha French interviewing Margot Lawson about her experiences as a rescuer of Jews during the Nazi Holocaust. This interview will be included as a valuable contribution to the oral history of the Nazi Holocaust. Thank you very much for participating in this interview.

There's a little PS. You asked me what happened to Mrs. Knoringer who was sent away with other women to a camp and asked me to see that her children will become good men.

While you were in prison?

While I was in prison. When I came out, the first thing I did, I was checking everywhere to find her husband Mr. Knoringer. And I heard from a third person he's up there. So immediately I wrote a letter. I was in jail with your wife for several months, blah, blah, blah. And I also have a package for you. And I hope you're all right up there, blah.

I got months later a rain drenched little piece of paper. What had happened? He got it the day he was sent out in camp in Germany to Auschwitz. And he could not take the package. He left it for other poor people. But he wrote on the back of somebody in the train, because it was like a cattle train. They're standing up. And he wrote I got your letter. I'm so grateful and all these things. And I'm just in the train to be sent out.

And before the train left Holland he threw it out. And you know Holland is raining all the time. So months later, I got a letter, a little note. I found this on the border. And it's wet and I had it dried I hope you can read it. And it said dear-- I have it exactly in words in that book. Dear Mrs. Scharf-- that was me. I thank you so much. I couldn't take that along, and God bless you, and so forth. He and his kids were sent to death too.

So I couldn't do it. It's here, and it's a letter word for word. I have it here and you are very welcome to read it. Because I have a few copies of it. But I didn't give it to anybody. Because I didn't want any publicity out of it, because I don't think it's much. It's just so that your heart hurts. You cry when you think of what happened to poor people who had never done anything bad in their lives, just being either Jewish or-- this year in prison, so that should be afterwards.

It is terrible, so you can't now 40 years later even imagine what these people went through. I too, I was never afraid. But once, I was very much afraid. Here, I think-- not in there. Ah, must be here.

I don't know, but literally, I have a lot of little stories. That must be it here. Here, dearest Isabel. I wrote Isabel, he said Margot. By twist of fate and good luck, I received-- that's word for word. I received your package and letter at the very moment we were shipped out to a camp in Germany. I'm writing on the back of a fellow condemned, as we cannot sit down in the cattle car. I had to leave the parcel behind. But I do want to thank you so very much. Your writing gives me strength and faith. God bless you. Werner Knoringer. That was the husband of Mrs. Knoringer.

He was with his children?

Yeah.

And that was actually the only thing I know about him. And I couldn't get to be-- I couldn't get the kids to be good men. I had a lot of stories. But you can see them in here, a lot of things happened. You don't forget four years, and 9 or 10 months that I was in that [NON-ENGLISH] almost, say for nothing. As my daughter says.

In the underground?

Oh, one night they came in and I had everything in my hand. And my daughter was in bed. And I stuffed it in

underneath the thing. And here they come, three four men high. And they say to me, what have you got in that bed. I said, don't go near her. She has measles or something very bad, you know? You could catch it. So they're scared to death. And she had everything underneath. And the little kid did not say one word, not one word.

What was underneath?

Yeah. Oh I have something also. Then when they looked around the house, I said, OK. I go on reading to you. I had never read and opened something and read. When I stood at the door, they said, you read very well. I said, yeah, I do. The hell with it, you know? And that was it. Otherwise, my friend once she wanted everything. I came over and she said, I have 18 people for dinner. Could you loan me your silver? And I said take the whole darn shooting match. And she wanted a damask tablecloth, and my camera and everything. And that night they came too.

Where's your silver? I said, what do you mean, silver? I haven't got any. That very night. And they say, what are you eating with? I said, my fingers. Oh, he slapped me. He didn't like that. So who cares?

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

No. Oh, I have a lot of stuff. But that would take all day. So you read a few things. And I have some more at home.

I thank you.

You're very welcome. It was very nice meeting you.