

MEISSNER, Margit
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Interviewed on April 20, 1992
One audio cassette

Abstract

Margit Meissner was born in Innsbruck, Austria in 1922, to the Morawetz family, which already had three sons. When she was a baby, her family moved to Prague, where she was reared.

Her mother had what Margit calls an “anti-Semitic streak”, and was very uncomfortable with being Jewish. Her mother wanted all her children to be baptized to lose all traces of their Jewishness, but Margit’s father, from a religious Jewish family in Bohemia, refused permission. The parents’ differing views about being Jewish “created all kinds of problems in our family”. The mother and children “were sort of ashamed of being Jewish.” However, before World War II began, Margit’s mother often invited impoverished refugees from Germany and Poland or Russia to their house for lunch. Margit’s father was a banker, and they lived in a large house with many servants, and governesses who taught the children four languages. The father died of natural causes before World War II.

In 1938, when Margit was 16, she was sent to France to live with a French family, due to the danger in Czechoslovakia. While in France, Margit was baptized as a Lutheran, but always remained a Jew. She considers her baptism as “one of these crazy things that one did to try to save one’s life.” She went to dress design school and loved it. Her mother joined her eventually in France. When fighting broke out in France in May 1940, police arrested Margit’s mother and deported her to a quasi-concentration camp, Gurs, on the French-Spanish border. Margit was in Paris when the Germans advanced. As an Austrian citizen (“Jew” had not been stamped on her passport), she was declared an enemy alien and forbidden to leave Paris. But she decided she must, so the 17-year-old bought a bicycle and rode it to Étampes, north of Lyon. She spent the night with fellow refugees at a school, which was bombed two hours after she left. Margit found out trains were running, and she stayed in line for 12 hours, braving one air raid, to obtain a ticket to Brittany to join friends. Her train was diverted to Bordeaux, near Gurs, and she was reunited with her mother. They walked over a mountain to get into Spain, but were imprisoned. They wrote to friends in Barcelona, who helped get them out of jail, and into Portugal.

After eight months or nine months in Portugal, where she became a dressmaker to refugees, one of her brothers in America got Margit and her mother into the United States. Margit, her mother, and all three brothers survived. One brother converted to Catholicism, one became Protestant and lives in Canada, and the other is a “very conscious Jew” in Israel. Margit worked two jobs, dressmaking and assisting the U.S. Office of War Information. She was at the Nuremberg war crimes trials as part of the American Army of Occupation.

Tape One, Side A

Interviewer: Okay, the date is April 20, 1992 and we are speaking with Mrs. Margit Meissner in Washington, D.C. Mrs. Meissner, can you please tell me your name during the time of the war, your date of birth, your place of birth, and anything you possibly can about your childhood?

Margit: My present name is Margit Meissner, my maiden name was Margit Morawetz. I was born in Innsbruck, Austria in 1922. My family moved to Prague, Czechoslovakia when I was a baby, so I was basically raised in Czechoslovakia. I come from an upper- middle-class family. My father was a banker from Bohemia, and came from a very religious Jewish family. His father was a tenant farmer in a small town in southern Bohemia. My mother was from Vienna, and came from a very assimilated Jewish family. Although they remained Jews, my mother had a very anti-Semitic streak. And I understand that when her children were born, and I was the fourth, she wanted them to be baptized so that they would sort of lose any Jewish trace, but my father would not hear of that. So there was always a certain amount of tension about our Jewishness. As a result, we were brought up feeling in a way ashamed of being Jewish. In Czechoslovakia, religious instruction was mandatory, but you could be excused from religious instruction because the pastor, priest, or rabbi would come to school one day a week in first period. We were always excused from any kind of religious instruction, and we never had any religious affiliation. My father, who died when I was ten, used to go to the synagogue on the high holidays. And my grandmother, who lived with us for a very short period when I was about three or four, maintained a kosher home. I remember that she always had to have separate food. I don't remember her very well, and I only know that my father was very attached to his mother. I really don't know what he thought about his wife's anti-Jewish feeling. I do know that this kind of dichotomy created all kinds of problems in our family because we really were sort of ashamed of being Jewish. I have three brothers, one of whom was a Zionist Jew, who eventually moved to Israel, and is sort of a very conscious Jew, and so are his children. My second brother became a Catholic and married a Catholic woman. He continued the same trend of thought as my mother, who believed that Jews were really smarter than anybody else, were really better than anybody else, but one could only believe this without it being acknowledged officially. My third brother became Protestant, married a Protestant woman, and lives in Canada. For many years, he had remained a Jew, but finally converted to the Anglican church. I was married to a man who was a very conscious Jew – not very religious – so here I am, Jewish. On the other hand, after 1938, I went to Paris to study, and I was baptized a Lutheran.

Interviewer: Really?

Margit: I went through some Lutheran instruction, and was baptized a Lutheran, the only baptism that I ever had. My mother tried to convince me that I was doing this out of some kind of religious feelings, and I think, in fact, that it was just a way of trying to protect us. I have never made any use of the fact that I am baptized Lutheran. I just consider this as part of the war experience, one of these crazy things that one did to try to save one's life.

My childhood was a very privileged one. We lived in a huge house with lots of servants, and had all the advantages that an upper-middle-class child could have – tremendous education advantages, private lessons in foreign languages because my mother, from Austria, before World War I, had been sent to boarding schools in France and in England, and she felt that her children had to know four languages by the time they were 16. We had French and English governesses, and we spoke German at home, and Czech with the servants and in the street. I went to German schools, and always had private lessons in Czech; when I went to Czech schools, I had private lessons in German. When I tried to explain my childhood to my children, they just laughed at me because it is so different from anything that they know. I was a very good student, contrary to my brothers, who didn't like the straitjacket system through which they went. I was the little girl, which I resented tremendously because I didn't want to be the littlest and I didn't want to be the girl. I was a very good student, and I used to tutor my brothers, so I knew much of the material that they were studying.

When Hitler came onto the scene, my first recollection must have been in 1932 when I was ten. At that time, the only radios that existed were little crystal radios which had very poor reception, and I remember my mother sort of fiddling with the radio trying to hear Hitler. It took hours to fiddle with the radio, and we never could get any good reception, and my mother said it was very important to hear him. I didn't really understand what was going on. The first time that I became aware of this being very serious was in 1934, when the Austrian chancellor Dollfuss was killed and by that time I was 12, and maybe a little bit more aware of what was going on. By the time I was 14, I became very conscious of the trauma that was occurring because we used to invite German refugees – Jews who had come to Czechoslovakia from Germany -- to have lunch with us because they didn't have any money. We helped some of them. There were also some refugees from Russia or Poland who came to Czechoslovakia, and my mother would invite these people for lunch and I would hear their stories. Of course, at that point, nobody had any clue about extermination camps but it seemed – it became very real. In the kind of world that I lived in, I began to feel very uncomfortable about being so privileged. And in my school, there was a group of people who were very left-leaning – in German there is a word for it, *salonkommunistes* – the communists who lived in great splendor. I belonged to a youth group that was not really a formal group. We met weekly with one of our teachers, one of our professors you might say – a political scientist who tried to make clarify for us the various political systems were. To me, it seemed that communism was an ideal system because it was going to create a just world where everybody was going to live well, where there wouldn't be this tremendous class difference that I was very aware of. I felt very uncomfortable about being so well-to-do, when so many other people were so poor, and this was in my developmental process, an important thought process.

I was sent to England for a summer in 1936 when I was 14, to learn English. My mother had always felt that Czechoslovakia was a very small pond in which to fish, and that we all should go abroad. My oldest brother was in South Africa and in England. My second brother went to the United States in 1936, and so the idea of emigrating didn't seem particularly frightening to my family because we had had this experience of going abroad frequently. My oldest brother married in February of 1938, and went with his bride to India to represent a Czech company. My mother felt that the situation was too

uncertain, and decided that I should leave. I wanted to go to Vienna because I had friends in Vienna, including a boyfriend. I thought that if I go any place, I would go to Vienna, without really thinking that Vienna would be just as difficult a place in terms of being Jewish as Czechoslovakia. My mother said Vienna was out of the question. So I went to France in 1938, when I was 16, to live with a French family that took in boarders – an impoverished aristocratic family that lived in a slightly rundown chateau on the outskirts of Paris. They were quite glad to have a boarder who would pay them for room and board and in return, I learned the language.

Interviewer: Before we get to this point, can I ask you just a couple of questions?

Margit: Sure.

Interviewer: Where in Prague did your family live? Did you live in the center of the city? Did you live in a Jewish neighborhood?

Margit: No. We had a villa – a big house, in a non-Jewish neighborhood, and although most of our friends were Jewish, we had no Jewish affiliation whatsoever.

Interviewer: Because I thought that it was curious that your mother, of all the people, should take in these refugees with her sense of self-hatred that you mentioned. That's interesting. But the other question that I had, in terms of high school. I assume that this was all during your high school period. Were you attending a gymnasium? A German gymnasium?

Margit: First a German gymnasium, and then a Czech gymnasium.

Interviewer: When the Czech government took over or just...?

Margit: No, I think it was a way of disassociating oneself with the Germans. My youngest brother, the one that now lives in Canada, became very interested in his being Jewish, and belonged to a Jewish youth organization, and he had a little blue box, saving boxes for people's contributions to the JNF fund – the Palestine Fund. I think that he was the one who persuaded my mother that it would be better to send me to a Czech school. He was then surrounded by friends who were Zionists – so I was interested in communism, and he was interested in Zionism. And my mother became an anthroposophist. It's a religious movement based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, a Swiss philosopher, who founded the Waldorf school movement. My mother became an anthroposophist, and had a priest friend who spent a lot of time at our house. We all went in very eclectic directions.

Interviewer: Sounds like it. I'm sorry to have interrupted you talking about your time in France, but I was just curious about those couple of things.

Margit: My mother was always very conflicted about her Jewishness because deep down in her heart she believed that we were superior because we were Jewish, but on the surface she really would have been delighted if she could have denied it. If one could pass from Jewish to non-Jewish, that was what she would have liked. That would be what I would

have liked. I mean, I felt exactly the same way, very uncomfortable about being Jewish. I never had the feeling that I was superior because I was Jewish, but I was just very uncomfortable about it, and it took me eons until I became comfortable with it. My husband helped me in this respect.

In France in 1938, I was by myself, having been a very protected young girl because in my house I was never permitted into the kitchen. I never saw a dish washed, I never washed a pair of hose, never drew my own bath. I always had somebody doing that for me, just really unbelievable when I think about it now. When I came to France, that changed in one day. But I was very comfortable with this because I was quite uncomfortable with the sort of goings-on in my home. My father died in 1932 of natural causes, leaving my mother with four children. I was ten, and my oldest brother was 18, so we weren't really children. I don't know how her feelings of identity progressed, but I know that she was very interested in this anthroposophical movement. In addition to helping refugees, she also was sort of a promoter of young artists. So we had young painters, young musicians, and poets coming into our house, and most of these were not Jewish, and she promoted them.

I went to France in 1938, by myself, and that was not difficult for me. I don't remember that I was ever lonely. It was a nice family. I spent a lot of time learning French. In the summer of 1938, I started going to school, and I continued living in France until the war broke out in 1939. In the summer of 1939, my mother came to France to be with me during the school vacation.

Interviewer: What type of school? Had you finished high school?

Margit: No, I was going to dressmaking school because one of the things that my mother said was, "You have to leave and you have to learn a trade with which you can make a living because who knows what is going to happen to us." I was thrilled. I was a very good student, but I wasn't particularly interested in school, so I said that I wanted to become a dressmaker because as a child, I had all kinds of illnesses, and I spent a lot of time in bed, and I learned to make doll dresses very well because we used to have a home dressmaker who would come and sew, and I would always watch her, and she would have me make these doll dresses, and I was very good at that. So I was going to go to Paris to become a dressmaker. I wanted to go to Vienna, but my mother said that Paris was a better place for dressmaking. After the first three or four months of French immersion, I went to dress design school, which was quite difficult for me because all the French girls in this school had had dressmaking in junior high school, and I had had none of this. I was not a very good student, but I went to one of these very prestigious dress design schools.

My mother came during the summer of 1939, and we went to the French Alps, where we heard that war had broken out. My mother had left her apartment in Prague, just closed it up to go for a vacation. We were Austrian citizens at this time. I had a student visa, and I can't quite remember how this happened ... when the war broke out... Mother was able to send me money every month as a student in France. But I think that when the war started, she could no longer send money. Maybe that was not until 1939, when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia in March, but I can't quite remember. My mother

stayed in Paris for the first few months of the war to see what would happen, and then we took an apartment in Paris. I continued going to school but she was anxious about the situation. It seemed clear at this point that one couldn't stay in Czechoslovakia. So she went back to Czechoslovakia in January of 1939 to pack up her apartment. She tried to get a lift out with all her furniture and other things, to Antwerp or someplace in the West. But when she went to Prague in January of 1939, she was in familiar surroundings, and things didn't seem quite as threatening as they had seemed in Paris. She tried to do all the legal requests to get permission to take her stuff out, and to get permission to emigrate. All this took time, and she hadn't completed it when the Germans marched into Czechoslovakia in March of 1939. So at that point, she left everything. She had a French *titre de voyage*, which was a very valuable paper allowing entry into France because at that point, the French were not letting any refugees in. She left Prague the day after the Germans marched in, with everything remaining there just the way it was, and she came with only a suitcase. My youngest brother was also in Prague, and had no place to go. Finally, he managed to get out also very soon because he was a land owner, a farmer, and he was able to, with great difficulty, go to England on an agricultural visa. At that point, there was already a great feeling of being trapped. But in France, it still seemed possible, and my mother came. I don't quite know what we lived on. I think that my mother's brother, who lived in England, helped. My mother had tried to smuggle out money which many of our friends did because they were very rich. And if they got 50 percent on the dollar, they still got a lot of money. In our case, that was very difficult because when my father died, his estate went into a trust fund, and my mother didn't have access to lots of money. She got a lot of money every month to keep up the house, but she didn't have any capital, so the only money that she could move out illegally was what she could save from her pension, but that was never a large amount. She did manage to smuggle some money out, and I remember transactions with South American diplomats who tried to get money out illegally. So I presume that during those times, when one couldn't get any money out of Czechoslovakia legally, we must have lived on some of this money. ... The war broke out in 1939 ...

Interviewer: For Czechoslovakia.

Margit: World War II started out in 1939?

Interviewer: Yes. The Anschluss was in 1938.

Margit: The Anschluss was in 1938, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia was in 1939, and the war broke out in 1939. When my mother came back from Czechoslovakia in March of 1939, she was able to enter France, but she was not permitted to live in Paris because the French had passed a law. They didn't want Paris to be impacted by refugees. So she could live outside of Paris in Versailles, but was not permitted to live in Paris. I had an apartment in Paris, where I lived with a maid, and my mother lived in Versailles, but came to Paris every day, a half-hour train ride. In September of 1939, war broke out, and my mother kept commuting from Versailles to Paris, and I kept going to school and there was a lull. There was no fighting, and I remember these huge signs saying "*Ils ne passeront pas*", "They are not going to pass" because we have the Maginot Line. People were leaving France for England, which was safer than France because war had not

broken out there. We started thinking seriously about leaving France, but there was no place to go because the American quota was filled. One of my brothers was in Australia, and we were thinking of going there, but we didn't do anything constructive about it. Fighting broke out in France in May of 1940. At that point, my mother was living in the Department de Seine-et-Oise and got a notice from the police that she should take whatever she could carry on her back, and enough food for three or four days, present herself at a refugee center set up by the police. She had to do this, and we didn't know what was going to happen to her. Ostensibly, they were going to evacuate the refugees to go south, and she wound up in Gurs, a French quasi-concentration camp on the French-Spanish border. It was a camp used for the Republican Spanish refugees, who came to France during the Spanish Civil War. By now, in 1939, the Spanish Civil War was over, and this camp was ready for refugees.

I didn't know where my mother went, and at that point, things became very serious, and there was fighting, and we knew that one had to get out of Paris, but I was in Paris as an Austrian refugee. My mother was also an Austrian refugee, but she was in a different jurisdiction, so they dealt with her differently. The French were really beastly. They looked at me as an enemy alien – although I was Jewish, and I had to go to the prefecture once a week, and then twice a week to show my face to make sure that I hadn't run away or done anything illegal. I was forbidden to leave Paris. In the meantime, most of our friends who were in Paris had Czech passports, didn't have Austrian passports, and with Czech passports were allowed to leave because they were not considered an enemy alien. With my Austrian passport, I was an enemy. At the time my mother was taken to an unknown location, she had given me 10,000 francs, and the address of a man who was going to help me trace her, and get her out of wherever they were going to take her. We had made very good friends in Paris – non-Jewish Germans who lived in Spain, and who had come to France during the Civil War, and who went back to Spain when war began. They were going to help us get to Spain, and via Spain, to Portugal, with the idea that we were going to emigrate to the Belgian Congo. When my mother was arrested, I went to Mr. Weil, who was going to get her out, and get her an exit permit and the visas to go to Spain to our Spanish friends.

While I was negotiating with Mr. Weil, the Germans advanced on Paris and all my friends left. I was the only one of the people I knew who was left because I did not have permission to leave, and I was a law-abiding young woman. In 1939, I was 17, and could not leave. One day, I was walking on my street, 1 St. Honore, which is a very fancy address in Paris in a very nice apartment with a maid, and terrified because I didn't know what I was going to do. As I walked in this street, I noticed that everybody had black faces, and I was wondering why people didn't wash today. When I went home and looked in the mirror, I too had a black face. As it turns out, either the French or the Germans had thrown a smokescreen across the Seine, so neither was able to advance. At that point, I decided that I couldn't stay, and I went to the police station to get permission to leave. The famous exodus from Paris, with people streaming south with baby carriages, parrot cages, wheelbarrows, and cars without any gasoline had begun: it was bedlam. I went to the police station, but found it empty. The doors were open, but policemen were also part of the people who left. I decided that I could also go. I went to the railway station, where there was a big sign saying that there were no more trains until the end of hostilities. I went with our housekeeper to buy a bicycle at the Place de

la Porte Maillot. There was a big bicycle shop there, and the only bicycle that they had for sale were men's racing bicycles so I had to sit uncomfortably. I bought one of those bicycles, and I had my 10,000 francs, and what I could carry, I was in design arts school, and I took along my paint box, my oil paints, and the notes from my dressmaking course. I also had two little *pains au chocolat*, pastry with chocolate inside. I waved goodbye to Maria, and said that I was going, but didn't know where, I was following the crowd.

I felt very sorry for myself because, first of all, I was very much alone, and secondly, I had this feeling that I was doing something illegal and, more than anything else, I was doing something which didn't behoove a nice young lady. I mean, those were my overriding concerns. I thought I will never get anywhere. However, I found out that my bicycle was a genius idea. A car could get stuck, and walking was slower. But with a bicycle, you could get around the traffic, and so I made pretty good progress. I was not hungry, not tired. I mean, the adrenaline was going, and I realized that I was lucky that I was moving much faster than most other people. Just before I had left to buy a bicycle, the concierge in my building handed me a letter in handwriting I didn't recognize. I was wearing a navy blue plaid outfit with a navy blue cape over it, which I thought would be convenient for bicycling, and I had stuck that letter in the pocket of my cape. After bicycling, I don't know for how many hours -- it was really pretty frightening, and there was no food anywhere. Every restaurant said "closed", and people were pretty upset about what they were doing.

That first night, I got to a town called Étampes, just north of Lyon. In Étampes, they were putting up refugees. A policeman stood at the entry of this town, and said that if you are a refugee, and you want to spend the night, you can go to the school building. It was evening, and I lay down on a mat on the floor. I presume they gave us something to eat. This was the first time that I remembered the letter in my pocket. I opened the letter, which was from somebody who had been with my mother. The message was that my mother was in Gurs near the Spanish border. I knew that my mother was safe, which was a great help to me. But she didn't know where I was, and she was very anxious to hear from me. I couldn't sleep very well so at four o'clock, when it became light, I decided to continue my bicycle trip. It turned out, as I found out later, that at six o'clock that morning, they bombed the school where I had spent the night. I was very lucky. In the crowd of people who came with cars, some didn't know how to drive, and had accidents. Some people who rode bicycles didn't know how to ride. As we were going down the hill, someone who didn't know how to stop, ran into me, and I fell off my bicycle, and injured my knee or my leg. It was bleeding profusely, but I paid no attention. That was not important enough. I guess the mindset was one of real -- not terror -- tremendous tension. I kept bicycling, and a young man bicycled next to me and said, "You can't continue like this, you have to take care of this. In a couple of kilometers you are going to arrive at a town, and you had better go to a druggist and see whether he can bandage your knee." I decided to do that, and that was on the outskirts of Orleans.

Interviewer: This is great, but I think that I want to flip the tape over.

Tape One, Side B

Margit: I went to the druggist, and he said that it was a good thing that I came because I would have bled to death and he said, "Why are you bicycling? Why don't you take the train?" I said, "There are no trains. What do you mean trains?" He said, "But of course there are trains. Just go to the train station, and you will see that there are lots of trains." I went with my bicycle to the train station, and there was a line a mile long of people, and in typical French fashion, they had one window open that sold tickets, and it took five minutes for each person to find out where he was going, and this was a very slow process. Some people in line were fainting, some had not eaten, children were crying, and it was really an awful experience. When I arrived, I hadn't known it was going to be 12 hours before I got to this counter, and suddenly, there was an air raid. We were standing underneath a glass overpass, and were told to go the air raid shelter. I decided I couldn't face the air raid shelter and losing my place in line, so I decided to stay there with five others. The bombs kept dropping all around us, but didn't hit us, and when the air raid was over, I was close to the window, and I got a ticket. I was going to Brittany because Austrians I knew, the daughter and granddaughter of Sigmund Freud, were there. The granddaughter was a friend, and still is a very good friend. They were going to Brittany, and I was going to join them. I bought a ticket to go from Orleans to Brest. I was able to register my bicycle, and it was going to go on the train with me. I thought the train would be tremendously crowded. However, it was totally empty. Perhaps nobody was in it because nobody knew that trains were running. It was night, and I was the only person on this big train, and the train was blacked out. It was pitch dark, and I was scared to death. The train started and stopped several times, and at one stop, troop trains were going in the opposite direction. A troop train was stopped, and as I stood at the window, a soldier in the opposite window asked me what I was doing. I was very careful not to divulge who I really was because I was doing all this illegally. I spoke very good French, so he could not recognize me as a foreigner. He asked me when I had last eaten, and I told him, and he gave me a big loaf of round white bread. Sort of a big *boule*, and I took it back to my compartment. At one of these stops in the middle of the night, the door opened and a man walked in. I nearly fainted because I couldn't see him, and I didn't know what this was going to happen. It turned out that he was a French soldier who was fleeing from the North. He didn't know where his regiment was, and somehow he had gotten onto this train. He said to me that he hadn't eaten in three days. I had this loaf of bread, and I gave it to him in the expectation that he was going to bite off a piece, but before I knew it, he had eaten it all. At daylight, it became clear that the train was not going to Brest because it had been diverted to Bordeaux in the South of France, which was in a way good because I knew my mother was there.

After daybreak, suddenly, the train filled up with people (some locals and many refugees from northern France.) They were telling each other where they were from, and I was apprehensive about doing all this because I was traveling without permission. Everybody started telling each other their stories, and the people in my compartment were complaining that the reason why France was in this kind of situation was because they had accepted refugees who turned out to be spies, and they were the people who made it difficult for France. I listened, and when they asked me where I came from, I said I came from Paris, but didn't divulge who I was. They said I was the example of a brave Parisian woman. I felt very uncomfortable that I did not have the guts to say that I

am one of those enemies whom you are blaming. I felt like a traitor in that I didn't have the guts to open my mouth. I said that I had French friends, with a house in the South, in the Pyrenées. I knew that that was one place that I could go, and as the train was going south, I managed to find my way to a house in Salies de Be'arn, which is a little village in the Pyrenées. The family received me with open arms. They had to register me with the police, and I couldn't stay at their house, they didn't have any room. They found me a room in a peasant woman's house in a mansarde, below the roof. They took me there so that I could have a good night's sleep because I hadn't slept in many days. They said that I should have a sleep, and then we would go to the police and get my identity papers because there were lots of controls – gendarmes standing on every street corner. The peasant woman, in whose house I lived, got suspicious of me, and went to the police to denounce me. Just as I had gotten to sleep at about four o'clock in the afternoon, there was a knock at my door and there were two gendarmes saying, "We have to take you to the police because you are an illegal alien." So this Salies de Be'arn is a nice old village with a cobblestone square and I remember walking across the square with the two policemen by my side when I collapsed. I was crying my eyes out on this square because suddenly it seemed to me that I had done all this to get away, and now the French were going to take me. The French were really very unpredictable because they were sort of acting on local orders. I got to the police station, and they decided not to put me in jail, and let me go back. My French friends guaranteed that I wasn't a spy, and that I wasn't going to run away.

The next day, when I went to my friend's house, I showed them the letter that I had received about my mother, and it turned out that I was ten kilometers from my mother's camp. A French lady, who had a car, went to this camp to see whether she could find my mother and tell her that I was safe. These were days when bombs were falling right and left, before France surrendered. The woman couldn't find my mother, but left a message in this camp for my mother to tell her where I was. I didn't know whether my mother got this message, and I had no way of getting in touch with her. A few days later, I was sitting in my friend's garden, when two women were approaching and waving at me. As they came closer, one woman looked a lot like my mother, but she was so thin and her face was so dark that I didn't think she could be my mother. But indeed, she was my mother. I think one of the greatest shocks for her was that she finally found me, and that I didn't recognize her. She had lost a lot of weight, and she was very sunburned because they lived outdoors in this camp. Being united with my mother was a tremendous thing. They had let her go from this Gurs concentration camp because when France fell and surrendered, the end of the war came for them. They saw no reason why to keep people in this camp and have to feed them. Fortunately, my mother had some place to go because she knew where I was. She got a peasant with a hay wagon to take her part of the way so that she didn't have to walk. She came with a friend, and they still had their rucksack with which they had been interned.

The area where I was would become occupied France, and it was important to leave the occupied zone and get into the unoccupied zone. We were not permitted to leave the village without a pass, and we couldn't get a pass, so we had to leave illegally. We pretended that we were taking a walk out of the village past the gendarmes who were standing there. We had found out about an unoccupied, abandoned house about ten

kilometers from the other side of the unoccupied part of France, and we thought that we could take refuge there. We had arranged for a hay wagon to meet us a kilometer out of town to take us to this abandoned house. We went to this abandoned house, which had no windows, but it was shelter, and it seemed like a fairly safe place where we wouldn't be found. I think that we had some cans with us, and we still had part of the 10,000 francs that I had, or maybe our friends lent us some money. We lived in this abandoned house, my mother's friend, my mother, and I. We were totally isolated. Nobody knew where we were and, of course, my family, my brothers were very worried because they hadn't heard from us. One day, a group of men arrived. They had also known about this abandoned house. They were a group of Czech Protestant clergymen who were also fleeing from the Germans. But they were legal refugees in France because they were Czech. They said that one couldn't spend the winter in this place, and that one had to go to Marseille because there were all kinds of refugee organizations that would help us. They went ahead to Marseille, and we followed. In Salies de Be'arn, in the first village, we had hidden all our papers in the roof. I wonder whether they're still there. The only document that I had was a French bread rationing card, which showed that I was a resident of Paris, and I think my mother also had her bread rationing card. We destroyed any kind of documents that we had, including some letters. When the train entered Marseille, you had to show your travel documents at the exit. We didn't have any travel documents, so we waited until everybody got off the train, until the guards who were stationed for the incoming passengers left, and then we sneaked out of the railroad station. These moments are when your heart is in your stomach because you are always thinking that now you are going to be taken in. We knew that the French were merciless. We spent some time in Marseille, trying to get exit permits, and first got a visa to the Belgian Congo. My mother at that point gave out. She could not negotiate, she could not wheel and deal. She was not prepared to lie or to negotiate about her future. She just said that she couldn't do that, and so I became the mother.

Interviewer: How old was your mother at this time?

Margit: My mother was 30 years older than I. So, she was 47. She was not very old, but this was not something that she could deal with. I started doing all the negotiating, and I got us a visa to the Belgian Congo and a transit visa to Portugal, and a transit visa to Spain. That was all set, but we couldn't get a French exit permit. In the meantime, the Czech consulate in Marseille gave us Czech passports because we each had lived there all our lives. They were very willing to help people. We now had Czech passports, with which we got all the visas, but we still didn't have a French exit permit. The visas were about to expire because were good only for a month. A man whom we met in the street told us to go to Cerbère, on the French-Spanish border in the Pyrenées, where Czech women had been permitted to leave France without an exit visa. On this bit of information, we decided we were going to try it. Again, without any permit, a train ride from Marseille to Cerbère, which is along the Mediterranean coast, started out okay, but every so often police would come to check papers. We didn't have any papers, so the first time that happened, we got out of the train, and reentered the train in the back, where we thought the police had already been. When we came to the French border in Spain, and said we were going to Spain, and this is the last day of our visa, they said sorry, you can't leave without an exit permit." We said we were told that Czech women could leave

without an exit permit. They said that was true yesterday, but not today. There we were, sitting at the border, the last day of our visa. I started talking to a porter, and explained our situation to him. He said, "Go to Mr. So-and-so and he knows how to help you to get across the border to Spain." We went to Mr. So-and-so, and he told us to go across the mountain, and take care not to go on the main road. It was a lovely sunny September day. We were told to get across this a hill, and if nobody sees us, to go into Portbou to find a man in a restaurant. We were to tell the owner that we want to go to the back apartment behind the back door. There, we were to find a Mr. Jesus, and when we got to his room, he said, "For God's sake, I told them not to send me anybody anymore. My contact was arrested and there's absolutely nothing that we can do for you."

What could one do? We were headed for Barcelona where we had these friends. We went to the railroad station, and somebody saw us. I don't quite know how, but in any case, we were arrested in the railroad station in Portbou, and were asked for our papers. We had no passport, and no legal entry into Spain. There were two American boys sitting next to us in the same situation. They said, "All right, this is not a police station. We are now going to go by train to Girona, which is the next Spanish town." There we were going to go to the police commissioner, and he was going to see what they were going to do for us. I sat, in an unforgettable moment, in this train station in Portbou, on a bench with my mother, and the two American boys, feeling that now we have come to the end of our rope. We went with the authorities. They did not put handcuffs on us, but there were two guards with machine guns posted next to us on the train. We came to the train station in Girona, and there were lots of other people in a similar position waiting in that police station. I did not speak any Spanish at that time. I started talking to these American boys, and it turned out that they were Americans who thought that the only way to get out of France, because they were in the fighting zone of France, was to go to Spain. They didn't know there was an unoccupied zone. They also had come across illegally, but I think they could have done this all legally. They just didn't know any better.

Interviewer: They had just been tourists there?

Margit: I don't think they were students. There was such confusion and nobody knew anything. The means of communication had totally broken down. The people just acted on hunches. We were all sitting in this police station. It was getting toward night, and it was obvious that they were trying to reach our friends in Barcelona and they couldn't reach them. I said to the guy, "Couldn't we at least go to a hotel overnight, and then come back? You have our passport, we can't escape. We can come back in the morning, and continue dealing." The American boys said they wanted to do that. An hour or two later, it was night. One of the gendarmes told us to come with him. I thought we were going to a hotel with the Americans. We kept going out of town, very dark, no lights. It seemed funny to me that this was a way to a hotel. After a while, there was sort of an *appell* [call from some distance away]. Before long, we passed through a locked gate that was being opened with a big key, which made a lot of noise. We walked through a covered courtyard, through another door that was double-locked, and then we were in jail. The Americans went to one side, and we went to the other side of this Spanish jail. It was the middle of the night, so the induction was that they

took everything we had. My mother had with her a small jewelry case with her best jewelry. Nobody thought that you could become a refugee with your jewelry case, so nobody even looked at it. She had lost the key to it somewhere along the way. They confiscated the jewelry case. They gave us a piece of a bed, an iron bed stand where the two of us had to sleep in a room with 50 other women.

We had arrived there on a Thursday. I know it was a Thursday because the prisoners could write once a week on Wednesday. We had nothing to write with, and no money to buy a stamp with, but more than anything else, it wasn't writing day. I befriended a young Spanish guard who helped us get some stationery and an envelope with a stamp, and we were able to write to our friends in Barcelona. In jail, the food required a vessel because they spooned whatever they were giving you into this vessel. We didn't have anything to put it in. The people who were our jail mates were either teachers whom the Franco regime thought were Republicans, or prostitutes. The prostitutes were the ones who helped us by giving us a plate so that we could get food. At least get whatever our jailers were passing for food. The next morning, when we went to the Spanish jail commandant, he asked who we were. We said we were Czech women. The commandant said that Czechoslovakia doesn't exist anymore, and that he would call the German consulate to deal with us. In the meantime, the regime was that at four o'clock you had to get up and roll up your bedroll with what passed for a mattress. Usually, two women shared a bed. One would sit on the iron bed stand, and the other would sit on the rolled up mattress, and they would delouse each other. We didn't have any lice yet, and this was really a desperate situation except that, to me, the first shock of being in jail was that how could a law-abiding good person like I ever go to jail? I still believed that there was justice in the world at that point.

Then I started to think. I was able to abstract myself from what was happening to me, and begin looking around. I began to see the world with totally different eyes. For example, the other thing that happened was that I got my period, and I had nothing for my period. I mean I was just bleeding, bleeding, bleeding, and nothing. There was another prostitute who gave me a washable sanitary napkin. This was lifesaving. The fact that they gave us a bowl with which to eat, and the sanitary napkin, I mean, those were incredible things. These prostitutes, the kind of people I would have thought I would never meet, and if I ever meet one, I would just spit. That really was food for thought. Fortunately, our friends quickly got our letter. They called the jail to say that they were on their way. The jail director, I guess, figured if we had some kind of Spanish connection, he didn't have to report us to the German consul. We waited for about a week or ten days until our friends came. They were able to bribe the jailer to set us free, and they took us to Barcelona. My mother and I had just begun to have eczema due to the lack of sanitary conditions in the jail. We went to Barcelona, but still didn't have the stamp and the passport with which we could leave. Our friends organized that for us, and we got to Portugal legally. They extended our Portuguese visa, and I think this all happened quite legally, and we took a train to Lisbon. We stayed eight or nine months in Lisbon.

Interviewer: What year would this be?

- Margit:** From September 1940 or October 1940 to April 1941, we were in Portugal. We came to America in April of 1941.
- Interviewer:** What did you do there?
- Margit:** I was a dressmaker. I forgot to tell you that in Marseille, before we left for Spain, the Quakers had given us money. There was a man named Varian Frye, who was very helpful to people passing the Pyrenées. Several books have been written about what he did. We didn't have any money, but I was able to make dresses. There were lots of refugees. Our Czech friends had wound up in Lisbon. They had lost all their clothes, and I became the couturier to the refugees. I made a living, my mother helped me, and we lived in a Portuguese home. We rented a room in a private home, where the lady had a treadle sewing machine. She also had an iron with coals, which one had to move so the coals would burn. We made enough money for my mother and me to live on. Our family in America then got us a visa and passage, and in a way, we regularized our situation. That's the end of my story.
- Interviewer:** That's a fascinating, exhausting story.
- Margit:** Well, it was a very valuable lesson for me. I started this emigration business as one person, and I came out another person, and I think a much more aware, and much more of a human being. I think I was lucky that I was able to make the most of that experience. It, of course, meant that I had really no adolescence; I grew up from one day to the next. This whole experience as a refugee, being forced to leave my country, changed me. One has absolutely no recourse. Going through this whole situation is the fundamental formative experience of my life, without any doubt. Not that I think about it very often, but it is there as the most important facet of who I am.
- Interviewer:** I was curious. You mentioned your connection with the Freud family. How did you meet them? Was it in Paris?
- Margit:** Yes. I knew them already in Prague because they were friends of friends. They were family friends of mine. The granddaughter of Freud, Sophie, also came to France by herself from Vienna. She went to stay with the same French family with whom I stayed.
- Interviewer:** I see. Very interesting.
- Margit:** If you go to Boston, you might be able to interview Sophie Freud.
- Interviewer:** I would be absolutely fascinated to. In the ID project, we have a policy of not doing famous people, people who are well-known. We want this to reflect the average person...
- Margit:** She's not famous.
- Interviewer:** I mean the family name is very recognized. The other thing I was curious about... when did you find out what happened to your brothers? Had they already left?

- Margit:** Yes, yes.
- Interviewer:** Earlier?
- Margit:** Yes.
- Interviewer:** So you knew that they were safe?
- Margit:** They were safe, yes.
- Interviewer:** I see. Were you reunited then at any point?
- Margit:** Well, one of my brothers had come to America. He met us when we arrived, and he helped us to get all these papers together. My family stayed dispersed. I then had a brother in Australia, who now lives part of the year in Israel; a brother in Canada who went from England to Canada; a brother in America who eventually settled in Spain; and I in the United States. It's very fortunate that we all survived. In my husband's case, he was the only survivor.
- Interviewer:** When you were doing all these travels, you were basically... did you have the "Jew" stamped on any of your papers originally? No? So you were never in any danger of being discovered as a Jew rather than as an alien?
- Margit:** Right.
- Interviewer:** I thank you very much. Are there any other episodes or incidents or things that you left out that you think you'd like to mention at this point?
- Margit:** No, I think that I told you lots of things, lots of details. I mean... I am interested in, I guess, my own development and how this influenced what I am today. I think it was really no different from what most people go through in the developments in their lives, whether as traumatic as mine or not. I was in Nuremberg at the war crimes trials as part of the American Army of Occupation, and that was a very sort of interesting experience for me. Because I was very close to this, to all that had happened, and I worked in the Office of War Information during World War II. I had been very much involved in World War II. That was a very important period in my life. But I think that that's neither here nor there anymore.
- Interviewer:** I think that's significant. Actually, when you came to America, how did you become involved with that?
- Margit:** Well, you know, I knew all these languages. I have this strange combination that I knew Czech and Portuguese because I learned Portuguese in Portugal. That was very unusual. Most people knew either the Slavic languages or the Latin languages, but there were very few people who knew, who had this combination. I had a friend who worked in the Office of War Information. He thought that I could be useful, so I started working there. But I also became a dress designer again. I have been going back and forth.

Interviewer: I was going to ask you if you resumed that.

Margit: Yes, I've been going back and forth. One thing that I have to tell you, which is kind of interesting. That when this whole emigration business started in Czechoslovakia, my mother, who had kind of kooky ideas, decided to have our handwriting analyzed. Both my brother and mine, to see if that would give her some ideas about future directions. The handwriting, what is the word for the people?

Interviewer: The graphologist.

Margit: The graphologist said that I would never be happy with a profession that would involve only my hands or my mind; that I would always have to have a combination of the two. My mother was satisfied to let me become a dressmaker because I was going to have sort of an academic career. But she was satisfied because the graphologist said that I could do things with my hands. But in essence, that is really true. I am the kind of person who really likes to combine my manual as well as my intellectual skills. I think that we've done enough.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you very much.