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This is a test. Do you want me to do more?

No.

The date is Sunday, March 29, 1992. We're speaking with Dr. Liane Reif-Lehrer about her parents. What can you tell us-- let's start with your mother. Is that all right?

OK.

Can you tell us her name, her date of birth, her place of birth, anything you know about her childhood, anything at all?

OK. My mother's name was Clara Gottfried-Reif, G-O-T-T-F-R-I-E-D, and she was born in a small town in Poland not far from Lemberg, which is now called Lviv. And she was apparently somewhat of a rambunctious young lady, and she often said that she-- I guess she didn't get along with her father as well as with her mother. And she liked to run around, and travel, and do a lot of things.

And she spoke several languages because when she was a child the borders kept changing, and so at one point, where she was born was part of Austria. And I think both she and my father were actually Austrian citizens because when they were born Poland was part of Austria. And then the Russians came in.

So she spoke Polish, Russian, German. I think she spoke some Czechoslovakia, and she might have been conversant with a couple of other languages. She always said she spoke five or seven languages, and I never remember whether it's five or seven.

Do you know what they spoke at home?

I think at home they probably spoke a combination of Polish and Yiddish. Yeah, I think that was correct.

So my mother did a lot of traveling around. She used to go to Lemberg to have clothes made and so on, and I think she went off to school at some point also.

Do you know what kind of a school? Was it a Jewish school, or a private school, or a technical school?

I don't know. No, it was definitely not a technical school, and I don't really know. I have a feeling it might have been more like a finishing school or just some kind of general school.

She definitely finished gymnasium but did not go to college, but she was pretty clever. She was very, very good with numbers, and she did a lot of reading. Anyway, at some-- and I think she was very interested when she was young in fashion and that kind of thing.

And so at some point, she went off to Vienna either for a vacation or to have clothes made. I don't know. And somehow-- and I don't know how-- but she met my father. And, well, ultimately, they got engaged, and then they got married, I think, in 1925. And so then my--

They got married in Vienna?

They got married in Vienna. Well, I'm not sure about that. I'm not sure about that. They might have gone back to Poland to get married, but anyway, they lived in Vienna after they got married.

And then in 1927, my brother was born. Now, my mother tells me about her life in Vienna. She said, in the beginning, it was kind of hard. My father had been trained as a physician, and then he went back and retrained as a dentist. And he opened his practice.

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Now, one of the things my mother always told me is that we lived in [PLACE NAME]. That's the first district in Vienna. And I guess that was not such a nice or the nicest part of Vienna. And it's [PLACE NAME]. Excuse me. The [PLACE NAME] is where she would have liked to live.

And she said that the reason they lived there was because my father's office was in our house, and that's where he saw patients. And it was for reasons of the business that we lived there, and we lived, actually, I guess, right overlooking the Danube.

And so in the early years, she said, things were difficult, and she helped my father. She would do things like answer the phone and maybe help prep patients and various other things. But I guess my father did pretty well fairly quickly, and so things kind of perked up. And I think things were quite comfortable.

And we had-- I know there were about six people who used to come and go in terms of, quote, "servants." There was a cook who did our meals. My brother and I each had a governess when we were kids.

Each?

Yeah, well, we were very far apart, so it wasn't concurrent.

Oh, I see. There were one or two women who came in to do laundry. In those days, everything was a big deal. Coming in to do the laundry was taking the sheets, and boiling them up with soap and Clorox, and so on and so forth. It was kind of a big thing.

And then even we did actually have a vacuum cleaner, but I personally remember that these two cleaning women used to come. And they would toll up the rugs and take them up to the roof with these bamboo oddly-shaped paddles and beat the hell out of the rugs. So there were these servants around.

And at that point, I think my mother sort of became a lady of leisure. And again, I don't know which of these stories are true or apocryphal, but her role was to put on a white glove after the servants and go around to make sure they had cleaned well.

And I think she went-- I think they did a fair amount of socializing. I think they went to the opera, and they would go dancing and go to the theater. And I know they went-- apparently, once a week they went to play cards with this relative who actually-- the daughter lives in New York now. So they must have done a lot of things like that.

I think my father was a fairly serious person, and my mother was probably a-- I don't know-- more frivolous person. And actually, my brother apparently didn't do very well with my mother because he was a very serious kid, and he really liked my father. But he thought my mother wasted her time, even when he was very little. Yeah, go ahead.

Can we back up?

Yeah, go ahead.

Do you know about her life in Poland, before she moved to Vienna? Do you know about, for example, the Jewish aspect of their life? Were they religious? Were they orthodox?

I think her parents were Orthodox. I don't know that my mother really-- my mother always did all the very traditional kinds of things, but I'm not sure she really believed in any of that.

I don't know. I think she might have-- she certainly had some sorts of superstitions involved in Jewish religion, but I have a funny feeling that she probably went along with the things. I don't think she and my father had-- we didn't have a kosher home, and I think they did go to services on the high holidays and things like that.

I'd be curious to know whether we-- I'm sure we ate matzah on Passover, but the real question is, did we also eat bread?

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And I don't know what the answer was.

Or like ham and matzah.

Yeah, right. Right, well, I'm sure we ate ham. I'm absolutely sure we ate ham. Well, no, we probably didn't eat bread at Passover, but I don't think it was terribly compulsive. I think it was fairly casual. But I have a feeling that her father was probably not very casual, and I don't know about her mother. I have a feeling that the mother was a more worldly woman, and the father may have been a more retiring religious kind of person.

I think that my mother always felt that she was the black-- or that she was considered the black sheep, that not by her mother but by her father, that her father didn't like her as well as he liked the other two kids. And I think she thought that was because she was sort of rebellious and didn't do the things that the other kids did.

Definitely my mother's brother and sister sound like more traditional kids. They got married, and they had kids. And they stayed, I think, in the same town or nearby, and here was this young chick going off to Vienna and marrying strange people.

Did she ever find out the exact fate of her family?

Yeah. Well, in 1946, when I would have been 12-- and I remember this very dramatically-- there was a blue letter that came from somebody, one of her relatives. And I think it might have been this guy called [? Moche ?] [? Weinreb, ?] who went to live in Israel and whose son is in Israel and is a physician, I think. And of course, I lost contact after my mother died.

But I think the letter was from this guy, [? Moche ?] [? Weinhaub, ?] and it told in very great detail what happened to all the relatives. And, well, they all perished in one form or another.

Now, my mother's sister-- that was the most dramatic thing. Apparently, they forced her to watch while they threw her kids into an oven, and then they shot her. That was really a horror story.

I think my mother's brother and maybe the parents-- I remember him describing that a lot of people in the camp had typhoid, and they purposely tried to contract typhoid. And they did, and so they died of the typhoid because they-- they purposely did that because they didn't want to die in what they knew was awaiting them.

And they were just descriptions of what happened to everybody that he knew about, and I don't know whatever happened to that letter. As a matter of fact-- it's really weird-- this is my mother's. Those two pieces of furniture are my mother's. And since my mother died, I have not been able to find the key to this, and every once in a while I try to get it open--

How intriguing.

--because I keep thinking that maybe there are some letters and things in there. And I know I could probably get a locksmith--

I'm sure you could.

--to open it, but I probably have mixed feelings. Part of me wants to know what's behind those little doors, and part of me probably doesn't. Anyway, but my mother-- well, I think my mother was a very, very different person after the war from what she was before, although I can't really judge that. It's kind of a guess.

So I made you jump. Now why don't we come back to close to the time that she had given birth to your brother, I guess. In what year?

Right, 1927, right, April 24, 1927. And my brother was apparently a very serious little boy, even at age two, and my

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mother always told stories about how, when she would go for a walk with him, instead of wanting to play and so on, he would want to have her read the street signs. What does that say, how do you spell that, what are the letters, and so on. That's her perception.

I have a picture of my brother sitting all dressed up with little Lord Fauntleroy tie in a sandbox with his rear end up off the sand so he wouldn't get himself dirty. And my brother tells with some resentment that he wasn't allowed to be a little boy because they dressed him up, and he always felt he couldn't get dirty. So I think there were a lot of interesting dynamics there.

And then at age three they started him on violin lessons, and somehow it didn't work out. So they stopped, at the advice of the teacher, I guess, and then he started again at age five. And then it really took hold very well, and he really did play the violin. If you ask him, he'll say, well, I can't really play very well, but he really plays. For an amateur, he plays extremely well.

Well then, when my father died-- well, first, my father got very depressed, well, because things were obviously looking really bad in Europe. Well, I really should back up. Starting in 1933, I think things started being politically very hairy, and people had just come out of the Depression.

And as an aside, all my life I was always really bothered that I might have been an accident because I'm seven and a half years younger than my brother, and subliminally that always bothered me. And I never had the guts to ask anybody, which, in retrospect, seems silly. But actually, I was over 40 once when I asked my brother, was I an accident, and my brother said, no, absolutely not. Why did they wait so long? Because of the depression.

So I was born in 1934, in November, and so things were-- now, as I think back on it, it was a really dumb time to have a kid because things were not looking good. And did I send you the article that I wrote for Boston Magazine?

You sent me one about your cousin.

I didn't send you mine from Boston Magazine? I should give that to you because that's sort of about this subject. Anyway, so then I was born, and then things started getting bad. And they got worse and worse.

And my father and mother started talking about the possibility of going to America, and apparently, my father just felt-- well, no, in 1934, my father was already 40 years old, so his feeling was, how can I go to America? I don't know the language. I would have to retrain. We would get there, and we would have nothing. And so it just didn't seem like a reasonable thing to do.

But then in August of 1938, I think it was, my father, like everybody else, had to close his practice because Jews were not allowed to work anymore, and my father got really, really very, very depressed. And my brother-- I think my brother really still has and had all that time a really tremendous resentment about my mother not handling that right.

And I've asked him about that, and he says, well, she used to say, well, you got to come out of this. You can't walk around like this. And she would kind of go off, then, and do whatever needed to be done. And I said to my brother, well, what'd you do? And he said, well, I remember standing in a dark room holding his hand just quietly.

Now that I'm at my present age and our kids are 22 and 24, I realize that it was just a very difficult situation for my mother. If somebody else is just very depressed all the time and you really don't know how to get the person out of it, I think, after a while, maybe it's a kind of survival thing that you've got to just keep doing your daily things because otherwise you're going to go insane also.

And so I don't know. I don't know what was going on there, but it was a really bad scenario. And really very unpleasant things were happening to Jews, and I'm sure that my father must have been extremely frightened. And there's a woman who actually went to medical and then dental school with my father, and we were always friendly with that family.

And for example, that woman was forced to go out and scrub the streets and things like-- so there were all sorts of

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demeaning things happening, and I think it must have been just a terrible, terrible time psychologically.

Until the time that he was forced to stop working, he worked regularly?

Yes, I think he did work regularly, yes.

Even if maybe he was beginning to be depressed or whatever, he didn't [INAUDIBLE].

No, I don't think so. I think he really got very depressed after he had to close his practice. Now, I don't know that for sure. I just know that from things that I've gathered.

So anyway, my mother, I think, tried to keep going about her business, and somewhere in this time span they did decide that they would have to leave. And so they went and applied for visas, and passports, and so on, and on the morning of September 30, 1938, my father and mother actually left the house together to go pick up those passports.

And they picked up the passports, and at about noontime, they parted to do separate chores. And they were supposed to meet, I think, at the home of this cousin where they used to play cards, and apparently my father never got there. And I guess at about 2:30 in the afternoon-- I seem to remember somebody telling me-- there was a phone call, and my father had been found at the bottom of a staircase. And I'm not sure whether he was already dead or whether he died either on the way to the hospital or right after he got to hospital, but the death certificate says that he died of multiple fractures, including a fractured skull and lots of fractured ribs.

So all my life, I grew up thinking that he had thrown himself off the top floor, the fourth floor of this, down the stairwell. And there was a lot of trauma around that. My mother did not want-- well, so the general consensus was that he had committed suicide. My mother didn't want anybody to know that.

And I don't understand-- it's funny. Children don't ask the right questions all the time, but I just took that on gospel. And I never ever said anything until quite recently about that. I never told it. Practically no one did I tell this to. And when I was discussing it with my brother recently, he said, well, I've never kept this a secret.

And then a few years ago, when I started really thinking about this, I started thinking, well, now, how do we know he committed suicide? And people say, oh, well, you're just trying to protect yourself from this sort of thing.

Well, first of all, I don't have anything against suicide. I just don't-- in general, it wouldn't bother me. Now, I keep asking myself, does it bother me if he did commit suicide? Well, I don't know. I suppose in one way it doesn't bother me, and in another way, I think, well, this was a shirking of your responsibility. You had two kids, and this was not the appropriate thing to do, to leave your wife alone with these two kids.

My brother's idea is that my father probably did commit suicide and that one of the reasons that he did it, aside from being depressed-- people were committing suicide right and left-- was that he probably figured that a woman with two children would have a much better chance of escaping if there was no husband around because, at that time, mostly it was the men who were being really harassed initially.

So I don't know. But now, as a scientist, I stop, and I think, well, there was nobody there to see this, and all sorts of horrible things were happening to Jews. How do we know what really happened? Could he have been pushed? And I think the chances are 90% that he probably did commit suicide.

Now, the other thing is that I keep thinking, why would somebody with a medical profession who has access to much neater, cleaner ways of committing suicide throw himself off a stairwell? So that's another reason why I think that maybe he didn't do it himself. On the other hand, I suppose that when people commit suicide they're not necessarily being totally rational.

Well, some people plan it out. This sounds like it perhaps hadn't been contemplated for too long or this specific act, if it was.

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I don't know. I don't know, but somebody recently pointed out to me that Primo Levi, who was also a scientist and also had more sophisticated means of committing suicide, apparently also jumped off something or else.

Yes, he did. And I think he did it in his basement or something, yeah.

Anyway, so the answer is, I don't know what happened. But anyway, when this happened, my mother was just totally devastated, just--

Before we-- I hate to--

No, go ahead. No, I don't mind.

--break the train of thought. But do you remember anything about her personality before this time, when you were very, very young?

No, I don't remember very much about her, except-- I remember a few silly things. Like I used to like to go into the kitchen and dry the dishes for the cook, and the cook would stand me up on a little stool and hand me one dish at a time. And I would dry it. And I also liked to iron. In those days, there was no electric iron, and so they had those irons that you kind of had to keep putting on the stove until they get hot. And I used to like to iron.

And my mother really didn't like me to do those things, and I loved to do those things. So maybe she was already overly-protective before the war. I'm not sure.

You still like to iron?

No, I don't like to--

And we have to iron.

I don't mind, but I don't like to-- no, I don't like to iron, and I hate to dry dishes, as a matter of fact. As a matter of fact, I think my mother used to kid me about that because then, when we came to New York and she wanted help with those things, she would tease me and say, you used to love to do it when I didn't want you to, and now when I want you to you don't want to do it. Well, it seems to me that's fairly self-evident that it would be that way.

But do I remember anything else about her? No, I actually remember more about my interactions with the governess and the servants. For example, the things that I remember about the servants is that they were fun for me, and the reasons they were fun was that they would come in and do all these routine things.

Like we had a very long hallway because the apartment was two seven-room apartments with the wall broken down between them, so there were 14 rooms. And they all went off this one long hallway, and we had this runner rug. And so they would roll that up every time they came, and I don't know whether it was every day, or every other day, or whatever.

And so they would let me sit on the end of the runner, and then they would start rolling it, pull, roll, pull. And so I'd get a ride. Or if they were sweeping the floor, they'd let me put my two feet on the broom and sweep with me. Or if they were folding the sheets, they'd put me inside the sheet and swing me back and forth and things like that. So those were kind of exciting things for me.

And also, I think my governess had a cot in my room, so I remember her being there. I think it was probably kind of a consoling feeling that-- I don't know whether she was there all the time or what, but I don't ever remember the thing of being left alone. But then early on, I think I did get left alone at night to sleep because my brother tells me I was an absolute royal pain, that I used to scream through the nights, and the governess would not let my mother come to me.

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But I don't really remember a lot about my mother in those days, and I certainly do not remember my father. The funny thing is, I remember remembering my father, but then I remember one day, when I must have been about 10 or something, looking at this picture of my father that my mother always had on her night table and suddenly realizing that the real memory of my father had been taken over by the memory of the picture and that I no longer had that real memory that I had originally.

So I remember my room in Vienna, and I think I remember the dining room. And I certainly remember the kitchen.

Do you want to describe them at all?

Well, the dining room-- I seem to remember it was very formal and dark. It seemed dark in there. I don't know whether it was because there were curtains drawn or something. And we did have, in New York, the table that was in that dining room, and it was dark, probably mahogany or something, massive.

The furniture we had in Vienna was this sort of massive thing that was popular in the 1930s. I just remember the big table in the middle and looking in there, and it was, I just remember, a sort of formal feeling. The kitchen was sort of light and airy, and there was this white-- in Vienna, there were no built-in closets, and so people had-- I don't know if they were called wardrobes or-- and in the kitchen, there was a white, lacquered, big wardrobe with two doors that opened with keys, these kinds of old-fashioned keys, and I think the cook had like dish towels in there.

And one memory that becomes very important for Kristallnacht-- she had-- and actually, I have one upstairs. There were these little things you could buy. Pastilles, they were called. They were awful-tasting things, minty or something, and they came in either single boxes or triple boxes. And I don't know if there were double-sized ones, but they were green and gold cans.

And the cook had a triple size one of those in that white closet, and whenever she had extra Groschen, which are the equivalent of pennies, she would put them into that can. So must there must have been some connection to me about that can. I don't know what it could have been. Maybe she bought me things with those occasionally or something.

But anyway, and then there was this long hallway, and I remember my room quite well. My room had a nice window which I think overlooked the river, and then there was a dresser over here with a stuffed animal on it and then my crib, which was not like an American crib but had-- the part that goes up and down had a mesh of ropes going both ways. That was the way cribs were made in that time, I think.

And then there was this cot that the governess used to-- I don't know-- maybe nap on or whatever. I don't think it was a very big room. I sort of liked that room. And then I remember my father's office, my father's examining room, and I remember the linoleum on the floor. And that becomes important for later when we went back to Vienna in 1963 and I recognized that.

But anyway, so then the next-- my big memory is the night of Kristallnacht, and my mother was holding me up in her arms. And my brother was-- of course, my father was dead by now. My brother was holding onto my mother's skirt, and there was this loud knock on the door.

And my mother said, who's there? And the superintendent was there. See, now, I only remember the superintendent and one other man, but my brother says there were actually five or six men who came. And my mother went to open the little metal thing on the glass peephole, and this guy smashed the glass with the back of a revolver.

And the superintendent said, let us in, Mrs. Reif. We won't hurt you. And they came in, and I remember being in the kitchen. And the only really strong memory I have is of them taking that can full of coins. And now, they took-- they helped themselves to everything, all the radios we-- anything that was of any value they took, although before that, interestingly, apparently either my mother or some relative-- my father, as a dentist, had hunks of gold because in those days a lot of fillings were made with gold. Somebody went and dumped those in the bottom of the Danube.

And I don't know. But anyway, whatever else was valuable in the house these people helped themselves to. And I do

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think I remember one of the guys having some radio or something in his hand, but the thing that I, as a little girl, felt most resentful about was that they took away this box of coins. So anyway, so they left.

And I don't remember anything else about Vienna, I don't think. I think I may remember the little suit that I wore when we got onto the ship, the St. Louis, but I'm not sure whether I remember that or I remember a picture that we have. I don't-- and I actually have that outfit still.

Oh, I know. I remember one other thing. OK, so then after Kristallnacht, somehow-- I don't know how it happened, but my mother managed to get these tickets to get on the St. Louis. And the reason we got first-class passage was because you were only allowed to take-- I think it was like $4 a person out of the country. And so my mother figured, what the hell, we might as well go first class. And so we had to pack up stuff, and you were allowed to send things away.

Abroad?

Yes, but there were regulations, and I have a feeling that some things got smuggled in because, for example, a bunch of sterling silver flatware was in that van. And I think that was strictly forbidden if I have read my history correctly.

But anyway, my mother was not very-- well, I don't know. I shouldn't say that. My mother was really devastated. I was going to say she wasn't very functional, but she obviously managed all right. But I think other people came and kind of had to help her do things.

And there was a-- my brother had met another boy called Erwin Kleinfeld, who's now a mathematician at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, and through that friendship, our parents kind of got to know his parents. And that guy-- the father was a lawyer, and somehow he came and helped my mother out with various things.

And the day this enormous van pulled up in front of our building, he was there helping my mother get stuff packed into this van. And I think my mother was really not doing very well, and he kind of said, take this, take that. And I don't know-- I don't know who made the final decisions. I have a feeling that he made a lot of them.

And there were some really weird things in this van, just really weird. For example, we had one room in Vienna that was totally covered, apparently, in mirrors, and it was made out of these tiles that were about 8 inches wide by maybe about 14 inches high. And one of the things that came out of this van when we got it in New York three years later was all these mirrors. Now, what did anybody think we were going to do with these mirrors? But anyway, so that was in there.

And then weird things-- on my second birthday, I had been bought a very special doll, and that doll arrived in New York. And speaking of traumatizing kids, it was hung by the neck from the bar inside one of the wardrobes with all the clothes and so on.

So anyway, so this guy-- I remember that day. I remember this guy coming. And I remember these things going out into this van, and that van went to New York. And it sat in a warehouse, which I think was paid for by my aunt, Lena. Or maybe we sent-- I don't know. I don't know what happened.

But anyway, so then I don't remember anything else until we went on the St. Louis. I don't remember that trip except for being seasick, and then we were sent back to Europe. And we went to France, and that's where my memories start again.

So the first thing that happened was-- am I on track? Is this the kind of stuff you want to hear?

Maybe we can-- since I already have a lot of the facts, maybe-- do you know any of your mother's responses to these things or her feelings about how-- how did she respond being in France when you were in Limoges and all of--

OK, well, the thing that I remember is that my mother-- my remembrance of my mother was that she was, to a large extent, for years and years in-- I don't know what to call it-- a state of somebody who's just been through a catastrophe, which she had been. It's just that most people seem to recover more rapidly, and she just did not recover. She recovered

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effectively in that she always seemed to do the right thing to get to the next step, but emotionally, she never recovered.

And so my recollection of my mother through most of those years is that she was often a very sad person. It was like a lot of sighing and just this unhappy demeanor on her face for years. Now, in later years, some of that lifted, and she could be a real fun person sometimes.

I don't know. It was almost-- it was almost weird, and I couldn't even begin to go through this until very recently. But now I have a feeling that if somebody had somehow just let her or encouraged her, she could have been just a really vibrant, dazzling lady.

Occasionally, she would dance with me, not very often, but occasionally. She was very good in later years, like after I met Sam and we got married and everything. She was always game for anything. Fly on a jet? Yeah, fly on a jet. She didn't have any of these hang-ups. Like other parents of my contemporaries-- they wouldn't ride an escalator. Even when she was 60, she climbed with us in Yosemite.

But there was always this real sadness. And I remember once, when she was already starting to get Alzheimer's disease, she-- well, she said this to me very often, but this particular time I remember it very dramatically. She said, you know, I've only had 13 good years in my whole life, and those were the first 13 years with my father is what she was referring to.

And we were not very nice children to her. We were extremely hard on her for many reasons. First of all, my brother thought she was frivolous. I probably thought she was a little frivolous, also, although she was very sad and serious. But she always seemed to be concerned about things that-- I don't know how we got to be so lofty-thinking, but she always seemed to be concerned with things that we felt were not terribly important.

And so one would say there was friction, but it wasn't really friction because we just totally lorded over her. As I think back on it now, it was a very strange situation. Do you want to switch it?

Let me flip it over. It's getting--

I'm not technical enough to [INAUDIBLE]. I'm sorry. Would you like to continue?

So is it going now?

Yeah, now we're on.

She was very, very encouraging of our studying and doing well for ourselves, but she didn't demand enough for herself. I can say this in retrospect. For example, my brother had a room to himself in New York-- I'm skipping ahead now-- and I didn't. I shared a bedroom with her. And so I did my homework in the kitchen.

She'd come home tired from work. She would make dinner. She would clean up. And then I had the audacity to tell her that she couldn't run the water to wash the dishes while I was doing my homework, and she went along with that. That was really-- in retrospect, that was not short of amazing. She should have told me where to get off.

And she did get after me to help often, and I sometimes tried to help a little. It's funny. Now you-- do you have children?

No, not yet.

Well, you see this thing reflected in your children. She would say, would you dry the dishes, and I would say, yes, I'll dry the dishes as soon as I finish my homework. And then she would say-- well, she couldn't wait until I finished because she was very methodical about all the household things, so she would dry the dishes. So most of the time, I never got to do it because-- I would have done it if she had waited, but she couldn't wait.

And so now, as a parent, I can sense that irritation of "I want it done now" and the kid wants to do it later. It's just that I

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know enough to know that if I really don't want to do it and I want the kids to do it, you just leave it and let the kid do it later.

Did she have any interests-- you said she enjoyed dancing and things like that. Did she have--

Well, she certainly--

You mentioned that they went to the opera. Did she follow anything closely or have hobbies or anything like that?

No, I don't think so. Actually, she was she was fantastic with her hands, and in Europe, when she was a lady of leisure, she did embroidery. That's what ladies did. She did that whole thing. That's all silk petit point, and it took her two years to do that. And we were such terrible kids. We both used to tease her about, why did you spend all this time doing this really disgusting-looking scene? Why didn't you at least pick some--

Well, first of all, now, it still looks-- I still think, why did she spend all this time doing this scene, but it doesn't look as bad as it used to look. And now I really appreciate the time--

[? To look at the work and-- ?]

--and the energy, and the devotion, and the workmanship. And there are lots of things around the house that she did. And later on, it became things that we tried to get her to do to keep her busy.

So needle point. [? OK, that's good. ?]

But she didn't know-- she did not-- I don't know how she did this in Vienna. I think in Vienna she probably picked this up whenever she had time and then put it down and so on. In the time that I really knew her, she didn't know how to-- she didn't know how to relax, except to read. She did a lot of reading.

I'm not always sure that-- she read in a funny way. She did not read like an educated person. She read in a way that was non-analytical, and so we, the children, who both turned out to be PhD scientists, found this really weird.

But how do you mean non-analytical? Reading fiction in a non-analytical way?

Well, the best way--

You have to defend the humanity?

Yeah. Well, and this is probably-- this may even be an unfair thing to say, but one of the things that I remember-- an this had nothing to do with reading but rather with a movie. She was up here babysitting for us, and she had seen a movie called I Never Sang For My Father.

And my husband and I were going out to see it that night. And when we came home, almost simultaneously, my husband and I said, boy, what a miserable father, and at the same moment she said, wasn't that a miserable son?

And I'm sure it could be interpreted both ways, but I think any-- if you looked at the critics, which I don't think I ever did, of that movie, I think the whole point of the movie is that here's a parent who is manipulating the son in such a way that the son's life becomes ruined. My mother totally missed that. All she could see was the bad son not being nice to the daddy.

I see.

Well, for example, after our kids were born, I would keep giving her books to read about child rearing, and every time she finished one, she'd say, oh, this is really interesting. This is great. I wish I had known about this when you were small. But then 10 minutes later, she would go and totally interact by her gut reaction rather than by what she had just

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read about.

And so we would-- we would get into some really ridiculous arguments, she and I. So later on, after I got my PhD and got a job-- because she worked like a mad dog in the factories, and she had incredible pride in her work. So she not only did what she had to do, but she worked harder because she wanted everything to be just right.

And so we pretty much had to insist that she retire, and my brother and I each gave her money. Well, she never could feel comfortable with getting money from us. And we would say, look, you struggled like mad to support us. Did we ever complain about that? No, we just took the money, and we lived happily ever after.

And so now it's your turn to have a good time and retire. We are doing quite well we are in no way being hurt by giving you this money. Why don't you just take the money and enjoy it? You've had a really hard life. Now's the time to have a good time.

She could never cope with that. Every month when the checks came, there was a struggle about whether she was going to keep these checks. But then also when she did retire, she was lonesome. What was she going to do with her time?

So Sam and I used to devise these projects for her to do. So one time, she said she really needed a bookcase, so we bought her an unfinished bookcase, and some varnish, and shellac, and the rest of it. And we said, well, this ought to keep her busy for a week or two, and so we told her how to do this and so on.

Two days later or three days later, she calls up, I finished the bookcase. I said, what do you mean you finished the bookcase? You have to wait at least so many hours in between.

To dry, yeah.

She said, oh, I did. She said, it said wait five hours, so I set the alarm clock when I went to sleep. And I at five hours, I got up, and I put on the next coat and so on. So everything was like something she had to do.

All right, I'll give her something better to do. So I gave her this enormous piece of rug mesh to hook a rug, which is now hanging on our wall. I thought, well, this has got to keep her busy for a while. After a few weeks, she came back. It was all finished, and she said, this was really very hard. My hands were bleeding along the sides from working on this.

So everything we tried to do to occupy her time in a nice way-- but on the other hand, she also did very well. Like she must have gone to every free concert in New York, and free plays, and so on. She would start talking to younger people. Other people found her very delightful because they didn't have to grow up with her, and so none of those irritations were there.

But it was very hard for her to make friends. The only people that she made friends with were other ladies like her from Vienna, and it was hard to find those as the years went on. And even with those people, she was very critical, and so if they did something wrong she would get very annoyed or insulted. You were going to ask something?

Did she speak German with you and your brother, or with these other people did she prefer to speak German?

She did speak German with them, yeah, and she did speak German with us for a long time. I think in the later years, after our kids were born, she probably spoke more English.

And she was very-- when we first came here, she had all these books, and every night she'd come home from work, she'd be exhausted. She would make dinner. She would clean up. She would get into bed. She would study her English. And she was very thorough.

She had these little notebooks about this size that she would keep, and every night she would write down everything she spent that day in that notebook. And she would add it up, and then she would count what was in her change purse and her wallet. And if it was off by even $0.01, even if it was late at night, she would go through the whole thing as many

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times as it took to balance that-- it could not be off by one penny.

And then funny things happened. Like one time I remember we were-- I don't know. You know how you get into silly discussions about-- she had bought me this dress, and I said it cost so much. And she said, no, it was so much. And she just went and got her little thing of little books and looked it up, and there it was with the date and how much it was, gray dress with white stripes.

So she was really-- she was almost compulsive about keeping the records, and every Saturday was cleaning day. And come heaven, hell, or high water, the house got cleaned on Saturday from top to bottom, and I got involved in that. And sometimes I probably felt resentful about that. It was a gorgeous Saturday, and from 9:00 in the morning until 3:00 in the afternoon we cleaned house, washed the floors, everything.

So I want to go back to France because-- in France, my mother was not doing very well, and with all the languages, she could speak she never learned to speak French because she was just so emotionally devastated. And in France, when we first got to Loudun, we lived in this hotel. There were a whole bunch of about 20 refugees who were put up at this hotel.

And she was really-- in addition to things being bad, she was upset about all sorts of minor things. Like in the kitchen of the hotel, there were cats, and the cats were allowed to walk on the food table. Well, yeah, I'd get bothered about that also, but under those circumstances--

She went to ask the woman who ran the hotel where is there a public bathroom. There was no bathroom. There were toilets but no bathroom in this hotel. The woman didn't know. This blew my mother's mind. How could she not know? And this woman, like a lot of other French women, would put on a lot of perfume, and my mother was always, God, she must be filthy. I'm sure she sponge-bathed and so on.

But anyway, so my mother was really bothered by things like that. So I remember that hotel very well. And then after we had been there-- I had a little boy friend whose name was Jean-Paul Berg, and I just--

He was in the picture that you sent me.

Right. And he apparently perished. I don't know what that meant, having a little boyfriend, but I think he was just my friend. We played together. And then the other thing I remember from that time-- this was really weird stuff. I remember there were these two girls who forced me to go to the-- who forced me to watch the hotel cooks kill a chicken in the back of the hotel, and I just cried and cried. And I was really upset.

And just around the time of the St. Louis reunion in 1989, I coincidentally met these two women who were the two girls. And they said, well, there weren't any other children, so it must have been us, and yeah, it sounds like the kind of thing we would have done. And they're actually-- those people, if you could get to interview them, would be very interesting because those two sisters have diametrically opposite stories about what happened in France. Not the facts but the attitudes are just diametrically opposite.

Do you remember their names?

Yes. Well, first of all, their unmarried last name was Isner, I-S-N-E-R, and the younger one is Ruth Isner Kissinger. And her husband is actually a first cousin of Henry Kissinger. And the other one is Bella, and she remarried-- I don't remember what happened to her husband. I think maybe he died. And she remarried, so she's now Bella Isner Uhlfelder, U-H-L-F-E-L-D-E-R.

Ruth Isner is-- I found her very easy to talk to. Well, actually, Bella was originally easier to talk to. Ruth is a more reticent person, but Ruth has been much more cooperative with me about collecting stuff for my book. And Bella got mad at me for some really dodo thing at the reunion because I got up and announced that I was doing this book, and she accused me of making this very emotional thing into a commercial affair. So I don't know.

But anyway, so I have not gotten a story from Bella, but I have one from Ruth Isner. And I think it would be very

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interesting to interview both of those sisters.

Do they live in New York?

Yeah, they both live in-- no, she lives in New Jersey. Bella lives in, I think, The Bronx or uptown Manhattan, but somewhere in the hundreds.

Anyway, so we spent almost a year there, just short of a year, and then one morning the Germans came in and took the town. And I remember that because we woke up, and they were parading around, and shooting into the air, and just being generally very noisy.

And the thing that I remember was I was a very goody-goody little girl, and I'd always been taught, you don't lie, you don't this, you don't that. And I was told that no way was I allowed to let on that I could speak German because the generals, I guess, actually came and lived in the hotel, so for about two weeks we were together.

And I remember being totally-- I thought this was really weird that you're not supposed to lie, but here I am. And I can understand everything all these guys say, and every time they talk to me, I'm standing there saying, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

And my brother now tells me that, one day, my brother just had his heart in his mouth because one of these guys came up to me, started to talk to me, and my brother saw me start to answer in German. And he became petrified, and he said, at the last minute, I suddenly must have remembered. And I said, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

But that was a very important time in my life because there was a young German soldier there. I don't really remember his face except it was a very nice face, and he had sandy-colored hair. I don't know if I could judge, but as I think back, he must have been 18 or 19. There was something very pleasing about this kid.

And every morning they did these stupid maneuvers around this hotel, and we would watch from our window, which looked out over the side. And this guy would throw me candies and things, and my mother was always sure they were poisoned and didn't want me to eat them. But I didn't get stuff like that, and so I ate it. And here I am.

And then he ultimately gave me a little doll, which I treasured for a long time. Now, I don't know whether this is true or not, but in my mind, that soldier was unbelievably important because when I came to the United States, the kids-- well, first of all, kids are brutal, and the kids were really brutal.

And first of all, everybody was making fun of me because I couldn't speak English, and even some of the parents in the neighborhood in Brooklyn were not really very kindly, which I find kind of shocking. But the kids would come over to me and even the adults and say, do you hate the Germans? And even as a kid-- I was seven-- I would say, no, I don't hate the Germans. There are good Germans, and there are bad Germans.

And the reason I was able to say that must have had to do-- it probably also had to do with discussions with my brother, but I think it had a lot to do with this soldier. And it really wasn't until very recently that I started thinking, well, was this soldier-- I always somehow in my life assumed that that soldier knew I was Jewish, but recently I thought, well, did he know? Maybe he didn't know. Maybe he was just being nice to me because he thought I was a cute, little Catholic kid.

But the point is, it's irrelevant. It's what that guy represented to me throughout my life, whether it was real or not real, that I think was just incredibly important about that particular stage.

So then there was a lot of talk between my mother and my brother about what's to be done. You can't stay here because-- I don't know how my mother managed to-- my mother couldn't even talk one word of French. How could she carry this ruse on for two weeks of us making believe that we couldn't speak German? I don't know how we managed to get through that.

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But apparently, according to my mother-- my mother says that my brother said to her one day, I'm leaving here whether you leave or not. Now, my brother doesn't quite remember saying anything quite so dramatic, but in the meantime, apparently, my brother tells me that there were meetings amongst these 20 refugees. And as a group, they decided to get out.

Now, there was only one family-- and I heard about this for years-- there was one family who decided not to leave, and I never knew who that was until 1989. It was this family, these sisters, and that was obviously the wrong move because they didn't get out until '46 or '47.

So we left all our stuff in this hotel except for a couple of, I think, pairs of underwear and my brother's violin, and we went very late at night. I remember walking to the train station. It was dark, and I think it was midnight. And we went to the train station, and I didn't remember that there were 20 of us, or 18 of us, or whatever it was. I only remember my mother, and my brother, and me walking to the train station.

And we took the train, and my brother has filled me in on the funny things that happened along the way and how we actually got across the border. It was just luck a ruse. But the next thing I remember is being in Limoges, which is the town in southern France that's famous for its China, and I think that first night we actually must have slept in the railroad station. And I slept on a scale. There was a scale in the railroad station.

And then we got put up. And I thought it was just for one night, but my brother says we were there for six weeks. So you can see that my memory is distorted compared to his. But we got put up in the concrete bleachers of a stadium for the circus.

Right. Yeah, you told me this, right.

And then ultimately, some people got together and rented these two rooms, and the rooms were each maybe about two or three times as big as this room. And there were 30 women in the room downstairs, and I think I was the only child. And so we lived in there for several months, and all the guys lived upstairs. And I think my brother was the only child upstairs, the only one of the men who was a boy.

What did your mother do there when you were there?

Well, nobody could do anything.

So you just hung around?

Well, I seem to remember them being pretty busy cleaning up. They were always cleaning up. In the nighttime, we had these straw sacks that we put down on the floor and we slept on. In the morning, we pulled them up against the wall, and there were these crates, like orange crates. And we put those down as tables and chairs.

And people were always sweeping, and cleaning up, and walking down. Every morning, we walked down-- I was allowed to get about 3 inches' worth of milk in a Coke-sized bottle, and my mother made me share that with my brother. So you had to walk to the store-- and they measured this out-- walk back.

And then there were always walks begging for bread in the bakery. That was my job. I think I told you about that. And just last year, when I was interviewing my brother, I said to him, did anybody think how-- did I tell you about this? I said--

Oh, yeah, how you felt.

Did anyone think how demeaning this was to me? And my brother looked at me, and he said, it wasn't demeaning. It was bread. And I have a sign in my office that says that because it reminds me of something.

So anyway, that's where I went to school for the first year, and I think it was a very lonesome time for me. There

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weren't-- somehow I don't think I played with the other kids after school. They lived someplace else. We were refugees, which was probably not a nice thing to be.

Do you know about your mother? Did she interact with the other people?

Well, she interacted with the other women.

You said how she basically began to changed or whatever. Do you think that she was [? in this-- ?]

She definitely interacted with the other women, but I have a feeling that she may not have been terribly popular because she was emotionally a downer a lot of the time. She was always sad. And a lot of other people-- and I think that's true of my brother also.

When we got on the St. Louis, apparently, most people, when the ship sailed away and the captain said, all right, these people are going to be treated like all other people who are on a tour, people were rejoicing, and dancing, and doing all these other things which my mother was not participating in.

And my brother, even though he was about 11 or 12 at the time, said he was really bothered that these people were being so insensitive, that they had left people behind in dire straits, that they had just come from being in dire straits and it was not a time to dance or sing.

Well, adult me can see it both ways. Yeah, it's not a time to dance and sing. On the other hand, I can see where if you've been really hurting for so long and there's an opportunity to do something different, then maybe it makes good mental health sense to try to take advantage of this.

So I think we spent our time on the ship rather quietly. I must have played with the other kids, and there's a picture that I sent you a copy of. And there seemed to be quite a lot of kids, though most of them, I think were older, and there were a few babies.

So in Limoges, I went to school, and I have a feeling I was kind of lonesome. But there was some-- I remembered some really nice things. Like there was a carpenter who couldn't work most of the time, and he made me this wonderful little set of red and blue furniture, tables and chairs, and he made upholstery things with little pieces of wallpaper and so on. So that was a really nice thought.

And then after a few months, two rooms next door to the two rooms we had became available. And I don't know why, but somehow my mother was chosen or somehow got to have the smaller of the two rooms with us, and so we didn't have to sleep on the floor. We could put our-- they would like orange crate beds that somebody had put together, and we could put our straw bags on those.

That's where I had real measles, in that room, and I remember that very dramatically. I remember for two weeks lying on my back in this room with the dark curtains drawn because I was so photophobic and watching the mold grow on the ceiling and the drips come and drip down. And two weeks I was lying there like that.

But the two couples who got the outer room were two sisters married to two brothers. One of those brothers was almost blind, and he somehow-- even though I think this was illegal, he managed to find some leather, and he would punch out those pieces of leather that you make, the belts that hook into each other.

And my brother and I would sometimes help him, and I liked doing that, especially because I think he used to tell us stories while we sat and worked. So we would sit at this little window, and we would make these belts. And that was kind of a pleasant thing for me.

Is there anything else you can think of about your mother? Because basically when we write this [INAUDIBLE] we'll stop when you get to America because that's your-- the Holocaust. So do you think-- is there anything else that you can think of to fill in?

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I think my mother was extremely somber in those days. We went for-- I remember going for some long walks to try to get food, and I remember those as being somber occasions. I may be totally wrong, but I don't remember any laughter or-- I think she was just-- but I have to--

The only way I can present her personality, really, is to tell you about after we came to America because I think it must have been worse in France. My mother imagined herself a really aristocratic lady. That's the way she thought of herself.

And when my aunt, Lena-- actually, it was her kids who came with her-- brought us from the boat to her house-- and she lived in the Lower East Side-- I was sitting next to my mother in the back seat, and my brother was sitting next to me.

And as we drove into the Lower East Side with the pushcarts and this sort of mass of humanity, my mother whispered, for this I've struggled all these years? And I thought, oh my God. What a terrible thing to say. Even though maybe I was-- maybe I was also feeling part of that, but maybe I was worried that somebody was going to hear or what.

But she just-- and then when my aunt-- we lived with my aunt for three months, and my aunt got sick at one point. And in retrospect, we should have been really grateful for being put up. And I think my mother really was very grateful, but at the same time, when my aunt got sick and needed somebody to make her a cup of tea, my mother had no idea how to make a cup of tea because she'd been so--

Now, part of that had to be a put-up job because in France in those two years, everybody was struggling making meals and so on. I think it was more maybe when she was asked to make cereal or something. She had never done it. She hadn't a clue and so on.

But she was a very giving person, and so when we finally got an apartment after three months and we had-- I think she was earning $35 or $45 a month, something like that. No, wait a minute. What was she earning? She was earning $15 a week-- that's what it was-- and the rent was $45 a month. And she would buy things for us. Sometimes she'd even come home with a little treat for us, and she was living on toast and tomatoes. It was all for us.

But she wore black for years and years and years. It wasn't until-- I don't know. She must have been-- I don't know. I don't know when it happened, but she would occasionally put on something red. But for years-- and then there was that whole struggle of when I tried to put on something black and she would say, there'll be time enough for that. Don't wear-- if you have to wear black, put on a flower or something like that.

She often complained about her state in life, and I don't blame her. But she also-- she didn't have any guidance. She could have had a fantastically better life. She could have been a fantastic bookkeeper, but nobody guided her.

So she ended up leading her life in the factories, which she hated because she-- it wasn't so much the work as it was the demeaning atmosphere. She felt that she was with these uneducated, boorish people who-- I think, occasionally, maybe even people made passes at her, which she found--

She was so Victorian that even when she was in the nursing home in her-- no, it wasn't a nursing home. It was when she was living in a senior citizen thing when we moved her up to Brooklyn, and she belonged to some golden age club. And I think she was 80 by then.

And one day, she called me up, and it was raining. And she said some 80-year-old man offered her a ride back to her apartment. I said, good, did you take it? Who do you think I am? Would I take a ride with a strange man?

So she had this image of herself. She never would have thought of getting remarried. She wouldn't-- she was so Victorian. The idea of-- no man was allowed to touch her except my father.

And she had a terrible time getting used to America because one time she came in for a job interview or something, and the boss was sitting on his chair with his feet up on the desk. While, she thought that that was treating her in a terrible way. Or for example, when people would call her by her first name without being invited because in Vienna she was

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Frau Dr. Reif. And the least she expected was to be Mrs. Reif.

So she had a lot of those-- she was just very European, but she also-- she adapted very well in other ways. She got to be really good at shopping and knowing where to get bargains.

And she was very-- she was always very energetic. It's just that she didn't always channel her energy. Like when she went to work in New York in the morning, she would get up, I think, at 6:00 in the morning to be able to leave the house at a quarter to 8:00. And during that time, she must have expended-- you could have built a house with the amount of energy she expended during that, just in the process of getting herself dressed, and makeup, and a hat, and hatpins, and stockings, and shoes, and all this thing.

And then she'd get to Manhattan and take it all off and put on some work clothes that she had at the factory. But then she'd put it all back on to take the subway back home. What else do you want to know?

I think that's painting a very nice picture. I think we can definitely-- because we have the storyline.

Right. Well, let me add one more thing because I don't want to leave you with the wrong impression. She was very good-natured. Like she'd play cards with me. If I was bored, she'd play cards with me. Or if I needed to memorize a poem for school, even though she was exhausted, she would sit up in bed at night and have me recite over and over again "If" by Rudyard Kipling. I just remember that one in particular, but many things like that.

She was really very good about always trying to do things to try to make me happy. So I think there was a really fun-loving person there that never got to come out because of the way life went.

Well, thank you very much.

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