

Going to start with this?

Well, I'm going to asking you to start by telling me your name, your date of birth, where you were born. And you might want to give me your name then and your name now.

OK. Well, my name is Margaret Lambert. I was born a name that I hate, Gretl. It's too Teutonic. I hate that name-- Gretl Bergman. And I was born April 12, 1914, in a very small town in the south of Germany. And it was a great life.

And what was the town called?

Laupheim.

Tell me a little bit about that great life.

Well, we had all the freedom that we needed, could roam around every place. Once I had a bicycle at the age of seven, I could go into the countryside and hunt for frogs, and snakes, and stuff like this-- and lots of friends-- mostly non-Jewish friends. There was a large Jewish community in the town, but due to my love for sports, most of my friends were non-Jewish, and that was never, never, never a problem until a certain time in my life.

Tell me about your family.

My father had a terrific sense of humor, and I think I inherited it from him. And he had a large factory making hair goods; hair nets, wigs, some of them found, even, their way into the Metropolitan Opera. And my mother was-- I don't know she was a little bit of a kvetch, if you know what that means. She was always trying to get our attention by saying, oh, have this terrible headache, and so on, and so on.

And I don't think she was-- she was not a very warm person, because both I and my two brothers, we felt that she was unapproachable. But we had a good time together. I had a brother who was two years older. Then I got a little baby brother.

He was 12 years younger, which embarrassed the heck out of me because I didn't think parents should engage in this sort of stuff. But we were all very good friends. My brother died, unfortunately, very suddenly, about 20 years ago on a pleasure trip. And my younger brother I'm in touch with. And we have a very good relationship.

Tell me a little bit about your religious background.

There was no organized religion in my house. We ate everything. We did everything. We never went to the temple except on the high holy days. And I hated it because I had to wear a hat. And my father used to say to us, be a decent human being, that should be your religion.

And I think he followed that, and we followed it too. And religion never meant anything to me. And especially after all the things that happened later on, if I ever had any religious feelings, I think I would have lost it pretty fast after all the things that happened to Jewish people.

So even though your family clearly was not very religious, did you identify with being a Jew as a girl?

Well, only in the fact that I was Jewish. And I had to go to temple twice a year. But it didn't make any difference because nobody cared. I was the only girl in my class. And I was the only Jew in my class. And there was never, never an unpleasant moment. And you didn't think of yourself as a Jew. You thought of yourself as a German, I think.

So you never experienced anti-Semitic feelings before Hitler arrived on the scene?

No, only once. I said some neighbor boy called me a dirty Jew or something. And I beat him up. And I was never

bothered again. So that was it.

So the events of 1933 and onward must have come as a shock to you? It most certainly did? It was terrible. I mean, from one day to the other, there was like a wall. One day you were a respected citizen. The next day you were a tenth rate citizen. You were excluded from everything, all German life. You were banned from all public places; no theaters, no restaurants, no swimming pools. You couldn't go anyplace, and you could not associate with non-Jewish people.

Actually, I want to get back to that. But I want to-- I haven't asked you that much about your athletic life. And I want to talk about that a little bit before 1933.

When I was about six years old, there was this little club in that town. And you could go as often as you wanted in the afternoon, or in the evening, whoever was ready there, the older people helped the younger people how to do certain things. And it was great. You just went there. I could go there unescorted because it was close to my house. And I'd spent some time there. And I was happy as a lark.

What did you do there?

Well, we did gymnastics. We did running. We did whatever, you know? There was a lot of gymnastics involved. And they worked on the parallel bars, which I hated. I hated that stuff because I wasn't good at it, because my legs were too long, I guess. But they instructed us, the older people. And it was a terrific relationship. They would take us out Sundays to go swimming. And it was really very nice.

What did you like about sports?

I just loved it.

You just loved what?

I loved everything that had to do with physical activity. I love to climb. I love to run. I just love to be outdoors. I skated. I swam. Nobody ever taught me anything. I played tennis. I played ping-pong. Nobody ever taught me anything. I was a natural athlete. And whatever I started to do, I did well without being instructed in anything. So it was the-- I liked it better than mathematics, let me tell you.

And you were good at it?

And I was good at it, without working very hard at it.

Did sports start playing a very significant role in your life?

Well, once I got to be in the age where I got to be noticing boys, it became a very important thing in my life because that was the social life then. You went to the gym. And the boy you had your eye on walked you home. And that was a big deal. And that was very good.

Was sports important in Germany growing up?

Yes. I think there was hardly the smallest little village that didn't have some kind of sports going. It just was a soccer club. They play soccer and team sports more. But there were very few places where there was nothing going on. And that was a very important thing. And once I got a little older, maybe 14 or so, we used to go to other little towns and compete there. And that was really a lot of fun. And you met a lot of new people. And it was great.

Were there a lot of sporting clubs and all that sort of thing for students?

Oh yes, has nothing to do with the school, as a matter of fact. I think that's why I hated school so much. Because whenever I came into school on Monday, the teachers would make fun of me and say, oh, you must have had a tough

weekend again? Maybe you've-- playing field handball or something. And why don't you pay more attention to your lessons? And I think that turned me off more than anything else. And I turned more to sports then instead of-- less the way they thought I would.

In talking about how much you loved sports and you were good at them, did it ever occur to you that-- were you thinking about a future in athletics? Were you thinking in terms of Olympic competition?

I don't believe so at that time. That came much later, really. But when I was quite small, maybe 10, 12 years old, I had made up my mind. I will be a physical education teacher or a coach. And I knew exactly where to go; to Berlin and study there. And it didn't work out that way because by the time I was ready for it, I wasn't accepted anymore. But I always wanted to be in sports.

Not necessarily competitively but--

No, just teaching, and the coaching, and the-- you know, later on, once I got too old to do it myself.

So you weren't thinking about competitions and the Olympics? I actually need you to say that as a full thought as opposed to just responding to me.

Well, I don't think that I really thought about the Olympics. I don't even think I knew much about the Olympics. You know, we lived in this small, hick town that did have a newspaper, but I think it was more important to see that the chickens laid the eggs or whatever, then-- or they would report the sports results of what happened in that town but nothing, really.

You didn't get much information. There wasn't any television, of course. And the radio came much later. So I don't think that I knew much about the Olympics until I got a lot older.

Actually, I think you just said there wasn't much television and the radio came later.

There was no television. There was no television, of course. No television whatsoever. And radio also came-- that wasn't there when I was very small.

And there was nothing different at that stage about being a Jewish athlete?

None whatsoever. I've said this so many times that there was absolutely no difference between the Jewish people and the Gentiles people. There were not that many Jewish people doing sports, let's face it, especially not girls. But I never felt any different. I mean, we would go Sundays-- go to a nice swimming hole and go swimming in the-- I, very often, was the only Jewish person going. So there was nothing. I felt perfectly comfortable.

Were your parents or your brothers athletic also?

No. Nobody. Nobody. I don't know where I got it from, I really don't. But my brothers liked to watch it, but they didn't do much by themselves. I mean, my brother-- my older brother skied a little bit, but nothing very-- not like I. I mean, I was possessed, I think, by sports.

You started to talk about when things began changing for you as a young athlete. And I'd like you to talk about that a little bit more. When did it start becoming difficult for you to continue the way you were?

In the spring of 1933. It was just around my birthday. And it was not a very nice birthday present. I got a letter from my sports club. You are no longer welcome here because you're Jewish, Heil Hitler. And that was the end of that. So they just threw me out of the club. And that was the end of my sports career as far as that was concerned. There was no Jewish sports per se in the town because everything was always mixed up. There was-- everybody did things together.

But we were just locked out of everything. All the Jews were thrown out of the sports club. You couldn't go to

restaurants. I mean, Jews were excluded from all German life. That started in 1933. And it was a horrible time. There was one Jewish restaurant in that town. And everybody congregated there. And everybody commiserated. What are we going to do? What's going to happen here? And it was a horrible life.

Was any of this anticipated? Did you know much about Hitler?

I don't think it was anticipated in the realm the way it happened. Once he became Chancellor, then you started to--

Sorry, can you just say, once Hitler became Chancellor? Once Hitler became Chancellor, you started to worry a little bit, you know? But everybody thought this is-- this is going to blow over. He's not going to last. As a matter of fact, I had been accepted at the University for Physical Education in Berlin for the spring semester. And I wrote them a letter saying that I was Jewish, and would it be advisable for me to come just then?

And they wrote me a letter back literally saying wait until this thing blows over. So everybody thought this is not going to last. But once Hitler had taken hold, you were just afraid for your life. If you disobeyed or whether it was a Jew or whether it was a Gentile, you did exactly as you were told like in a real dictatorship.

I want you to expand a little bit on how your life changed from what you were excluded from and how that felt, because I'm really trying to understand what it was like for a teenage girl all of a sudden having her life completely just turned upside down in a way.

It was a terrible, terrible time. it was almost-- you couldn't understand. Why did this happen? Why aren't those people associating with us anymore? I mean, some of the friends stayed with us but only in a way-- they couldn't be caught to come to our house, for instance. They had to come in the middle of the night and sneak in the back door if they wanted to visit with us.

But a lot of them did change. They went the other way, and they figured, well, maybe Hitler is our God from now on. And we'll stay with him. But it was very bad. We didn't know what to do with ourselves. You couldn't go anywhere. You couldn't go into a restaurant.

You couldn't go into a movie, and especially in a small town. A large town, I guess, you could dare to go to a movie every once in a while or a restaurant, but not in a small town. Everybody knew everybody else, and you just didn't do it. And if you did it, I'm sure you would be punished according to Hitler's creed or whatever.

Did you feel betrayed by friends and--

Yes, some of them. There was a girl next door to me, we grew up together as babies. We were together every single day. She ate in our house more times than she ate in her own house. And as soon as Hitler came in, she didn't know me anymore. That was it. She had the chance to sneak into the house just like everybody-- other friends that-- she never made that attempt.

And maybe two years ago, she wrote me a letter; the first time I ever heard from her. My dear, darling, you know, stuff like this. And I'm so happy to finally find your address. And the good times we had together and stuff like this. And I wrote her back. I said, yes, it was a good time. But you didn't think so then because you didn't know me anymore. That was the end of that friendship.

How did you make sense of all this?

Can I just make a quick lighting adjustment?

We heard this stuff so many times.

We ready?

Five seconds.

OK. How much more on the tape?

Ten minutes.

OK.

Rolling.

Whenever you're ready.

OK, I think when we stopped, you were talking a little bit about how life changed in '33. And, as much as you can, give me a picture of what that was like.

It is absolutely impossible for anybody who hasn't gone through this what it was like to be among friends one day, and the next day you would pass that same friend in the street and you wouldn't even say hello to each other because you were not-- some, you, were not allowed to do it, or some were afraid to do it. But you just passed your friends up and walked right on.

And, for instance, my younger brother is 12 years younger than I, and all the kids from the neighborhood were his friends. They played together, all non-Jewish children, and they all played together. And all of a sudden, after 1933, they started to beat him up. And on his way to school, he had to go to a Jewish school because the other schools would not take him.

And on the way to school, they beat him up. And I would walk him to school as often as I could. And they wouldn't beat him when I was there, but they would call him and me all kinds of horrible names. And they would spit at us. And I wouldn't dare to touch those children. Because, if I had touched a non-Jewish child, I would have been in a concentration camp the next day. So we really vegetated. There was nothing to do except worrying what's going to happen.

My brother was working for Universal Pictures. And they had a studio in Berlin.

Your older brother?

My older brother. And they closed up because they saw what was coming. And they closed up, and he came home because there was nothing for him to do. So he started to work in my father's factory, tried to make himself useful there because he couldn't find a job, of course, nobody would employ you.

Gentile people were not allowed to buy in Jewish stores, for instance. If somebody got caught doing that, they would take their pictures and hang them up at the city hall. I mean, they really meant business. You were absolutely excluded from everything.

As a family, did you talk about this? Did you try to make sense of it?

I don't remember that really. I think we were just into ourselves more or less. Everybody was worrying on their own, but I don't think it was discussed all that much. Until I finally decided that this was no life. From the Spring of 1933, then, finally, in the Fall, I said, I have to get out of here. I can't live like this.

And I decided to go to England. And my parents agreed to it that I would go to England because it was a life of just vegetating, and talking about the same thing over-- what is going to happen to us-- talking the same thing over and over again, and not to come to any result. I mean, nobody would know what was going to happen.

In this period then, did you essentially have to give up your athletics?

Oh, yes. We did try to straighten out an old potato acre that somebody had given us, one of our Jewish families there. And the we ran there. And I started the field handball, which is the same as football, except it's like a combination of basketball and football. And I coached them.

And it takes in 11 people, I think. I was the only girl on the team. And I shot the only goal the first time. We lost seven to one. And I shot the only goal. But, after a while, everybody got tired of this. The same people every day. It was horrible. They had an orchestra there. I mean, there were many Jewish people who played the violin. And we played a little music, but there really wasn't anything to do, so.

And your father was able to remain in business?

For the time being, yes, because he did a lot of business with the United States and England.

Can you say my father instead of he?

My father did a lot of business with England and the United States. And the Germans desperately needed the foreign currency to come in. So they were already preparing for the war effort I suppose. And that's why they left him on for a while.

But then after several years, he was just like a figurehead on there. And the Nazis took over. But he couldn't leave because they took a passport away. So he was stuck until a certain time came when he was able to get out.

You said that you decided you wanted to go to England. This was just you alone?

Yes.

Why don't you tell me a little bit about that, please?

I could not stand the life that we had. And my brother was working my father's business, but I had nothing to do. And my mother tried to teach me how to be a housewife, cooking, and washing, and ironing. That wasn't my deal. So I decided, or my parents decided, I would go to England and find a school comparable to the one in Berlin that didn't take me. And that's where I went in-- I think it was in October of 1933.

It was OK. It was a very weird time too. I mean, I was very friendly with the girls in school. I couldn't find a school that I wanted to go to; physical education. So I went to school to learn English. I figured, better than nothing. And it was OK. They had a track program. And they immediately took me into it. And I competed for them. And won everything in sight. Whatever I did, whether it was running, or jumping, or discus, or whatever it was. And in the school, I was a big shot.

However, what was very odd, I was very friendly with the girls and-- some of the girls-- I was never once invited to anybody's house. Now, why, I do not know. Maybe I was considered German. I was somehow discriminated against, even though I tried to get away from discrimination.

And I went to England, but somehow, I was discriminated against. I mean, when foreigners came to Laupheim, we made these people comfortable. And they were our friends and they came to our houses. Not in England. Not once in nine months, 10 months, 11 months was I invited into anybody's house. That really hurt.

Were there other Jews in the school?

I'm sure there were. But, then again, I didn't pay much attention to it. I did not seek out other Jews to be my friends. I was just friendly with all the kids.

So you competed. You kept up your athletics.

Yes, and it was heaven. It was heaven. It wasn't much of a program they had in school, but it was nice to be back too. They only did it-- no, we did it outdoors too. And then in June of 1934, I competed in the British Championships. And I won.

And that was a really big deal because then already, I felt like it was so satisfying to me to win this. And I was sure this would be known in Germany. It was like a revenge kind of thing. There, you see? I'm a Jew, but I've won the British Championship. So I was really very, very happy about that.

In what events were you?

High jumping. That was my big event, high jumping. Thanks to my long legs and my big feet, I suppose. I had great success in it. And it was very interesting. My English was atrocious, of course. And the other girls didn't bother much with me because I was an outsider. So it was kind of lonely, but it didn't matter. I won and that was-- my father came over.

I'm going to stop you here because we need to change tape. I do want you to pick up with this story.

OK.

OK?

Yeah.