

USHMM –Margaret Lambert (5-20-96)  
Tape 1 of 4

Q: ...name, date of birth.

A: My name is Margaret Lambert. I was born, a name that I hate, Gretl, it's too Teutonic. I hate that name and 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.

Q: And what was the town called?

A: Laupheim.

Q: Tell me a little bit about that great life.

A: Well we had all the freedom that we needed, could roam around every place, once I had a bicycle at the age of 7, I could go into the countryside and hunt for frogs and snakes and stuff like this and lots of friends, mostly non Jewish friends. We, 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 of my life.

Q: Tell me about your family.

A: 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, one of the, some of them found their way even into the metropolitan opera and my mother was, I don't know she was a little bit of a, a kvetch if you know what that means. She was always trying to get our attention by saying oh I have this terrible headache and so on and so, and I don't think she was a, she was not a very warm person because both I and my, my two brothers we felt she was inapproachable but we had a good, good time together. I had a brother who was two years older. Then I got a little baby brother when I, 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. And 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 good, very good relationship.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your religious background.

A: There was no organized religion in my house. We ate everything, we did everything, we never went to the temple except on the high holidays and I hated it because I had to wear a hat. And my father, he used to say to us, be a decent

human being, that should be your religion and I think we, 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 the Jewish people.

Q: ...did you identify with being a Jew as a girl?

A: Well only in the fact that I was Jewish and I had to go to temple twice a year but it, it didn't, 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 and you didn't think of yourself as a Jew. You thought of yourself as a German I think.

Q: So you never experienced anti – Semitic feelings before Hitler arrived on the scene?

A: No, I only once I said some neighbor boy called me a dirty Jew and I beat him up and I was never bothered again so that was it.

Q: So the events of 1933 and onward must have come as a shock to you.

A: It most certainly did. It was, it was terrible. I mean from one day to other, to the other there was like a wall you know one day you were a respected citizen. The next day you were a, a tenth rate citizen. You were banned from all public places, no theatres, no restaurants, no swimming pools, you couldn't go any place and you could not associate with non- Jewish people.

Q: ...your athletic life before 1933.

A: When I was about 6 years old there was this little club in the 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 un, unescorted because it was close to my house and I spent some time there and I was happy as a lark.

Q: What did you do there?

A: Well we did gymnastics, we did running, we did whatever, 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. And but they instructed us the older people, and there was a terrific relationship. They would take us out Sundays to go swimming and it was really very nice.

Q: What did you like about sports?

A: I just loved it.

Q: You just loved what?

A: I loved everything that had to do with physical activity. I loved to climb. I loved to run. I, I just loved, loved to be outdoors, it, it was, I skied, I skated, I swam. Nobody ever told me anything. I played tennis, I played ping-pong. Nobody ever told me anything. It was just, 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.

Q: And you were good at it.

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

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

A: 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 know you went to the gym and uh the boy you had your eye on walked you home and that was a big deal and that was very good.

Q: Was sports important in Germany growing up?

A: Yes, I think there was hardly the smallest little village that didn't have some kind of sports going. If it was just a soccer club, club. You know they play soccer and, 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 like a lot of fun and you met a lot of new people and, and it was, it was great.

Q: Were there a lot of sporting clubs and...

Q: Oh yes, oh yes, 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 were playing field hand ball or something and why don't you pay more attention to your, 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 I thought I would.

(Technical interruption)

Q: ...a future in athletics, in terms of Olympic competition.

A: 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 in 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 uh I always wanted to be in sports.

Q: Not necessarily competitively but...

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

Q: So you weren't thinking about competitions and Olympics...

A: Well, I, 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 than you know all they would report the sports results of what happened in that town. But nothing really you didn't, 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 later.

Q: ...and the radio came later.

A: There was no, was no television, of course, no television whatsoever. And radio also came you know it wasn't there when I was very small.

Q: There was nothing different at that stage about being a Jewish athlete?

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

Q: Were your parents or your brothers athletic also?

A: No. 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, they didn't do much by themselves, I mean my brother, my oldest brother skied a little bit but nothing very, not like I. I mean I was possessed I think by sports.

Q: 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...

A: 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 you know. There was everybody did things together. But we, we were just locked out of everything. All the Jews were thrown out of the sports club. All the Jews, you couldn't go to, to a restaurant. 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, in, in that town and everybody congregated there and everybody commiserated you know. What are we going to do, what's going to happen here. And it was a horrible life.

Q: Was any of this anticipated, did you know much about Hitler?

A: I don't think it was anticipated in the realm the way it happened. Um once he started, you know became chancellor...

Q: ...say once Hitler...

A: 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 you know taken hold you were just afraid for your life if you, 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.

Q: ...how your life changed...life for a teenaged girl...

A: It was a terrible, terrible time. It was, it was almost, you couldn't understand, why did this happen, why aren't those people associating with us any more. I mean some of the friends stayed with us you know. But only in a very 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 that, you know they went the other way and they figured well maybe Hitler is out god from now on and we will stay with him but it was, it was very bad. We didn't know what to do with ourselves, you couldn't go anywheres. You couldn't go into a restaurant, you couldn't go into a movie and especially in a small town. In a large town I guess you could bear to go to a movie every once in a while or a restaurant but not in a small town. Everybody knew everybody else and, and you just didn't do it and if you did it, I'm sure, you would be punished according to Hitler's credo, whatever.

Q: Did you feel betrayed by friends...

A: 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 soon as Hitler came in she didn't know me any more and that was it. She had the chance to sneak into the house just like anybody else, you know other friends did. But she never made that attempt and maybe 2 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 any more. That was the end of that friendship.

(technical adjustment)

Q: ...how life changed in '33, give me a picture of what that was like...

A: 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, friend or walk right on. And for instance, my younger brother is 12 years younger than I and he had 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 up 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 that, what's going to happen. My brother was working for a universal pictures and they had a, a studio in Berlin.

Q: Your older brother?

A: 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, in my father's factory. You know try to do make himself useful there because there was, he couldn't find a job of course, nobody would employ you. Gentile people were not allowed to, to but 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 know they were absolutely excluded from everything.

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

A: I don't remember that really. I think we were just into ourselves more or less, you know 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, you know so, in from the spring of 1933 then finally in the, in the fall, I said I have to get out of here, I can't live like this. And I, I decided to go to England then 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, knew what, what was going to happen.

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

A: Oh yes we did try to straighten out an old potato acre, that somebody had given us, one of our Jewish families there. And we, we ran there and I started a field hand ball, which is the same as football except it's like a combination of basketball and, 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, we lost 7 to 1 and I shot the only goal. But after a while everybody got tired of this, you know the same people every day. It, it was horrible, that was they had an orchestra there, I mean there were many Jewish people who played the violin and, we, we played a little music but there really wasn't anything to do, so.

Q: And your father was able to remain in business?

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

Q: Can you say my father...

A: My father did a lot of business with England and the United States and the Germans desperately the foreign currency to come in so they were already preparing for the war effort I suppose and that's why the, 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 and but he couldn't leave because they took passport away so he was stuck until a certain time came when he was able to, to get out.

Q: You said that you had decided that you wanted to go to England, this was just you alone?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me a little bit about that please.

A: Um, I couldn't stand the life that we had and my brother was working in my father's business but I had nothing to do you know. And my mother tried to teach me how to be a housewife, you know 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.

Q: How did that pan out?

A: I, it was OK, it was, 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, a physical education so I went to school to learn English. I figured you know better than nothing and it was OK. They had a, a track program that they immediately took me into it and I competed for them and won everything in sight, whatever I did. You know whether it was running or jumping or discus or whatever it was. And in the school I was a big shot. However um what was very odd. I was very friendly with the girls in you know some of the girls. I was never once invited to anybody's house. Now why I do not know. Maybe I was considered German. Maybe they, I was somehow discriminated against even though I tried to get away from discrimination when I went to England but somehow I was discriminated against. I mean when foreigners came to, to Laupheim, we made these people comfortable and they were our friends, that they came to our house. Not in England, not once in 9 months, 10 months, 11 months was I allowed to, was I invited into anybody's house. That really hurt.

Q: Were there other Jews in the school?

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

Q: So you competed you kept up our athletics?

A: 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 to you know they only did it, no they did it outdoors too. And then in, 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, you know and I was sure this would be known in Germany and it was like a revenge kind of thing you know. There you see, I am a Jew but I have won the British championship so I was really very, very happy about that.

Q: In what events were you...

A: High jumping, that was my, 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, yeah. 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.

(End tape)

Q: ...to backtrack...alternative outlets...

A: We made our own alternative outlets. We tried of course I was being in the torn in the direction of sports, as I said before, we played music and we tried to entertain ourselves as well as we could. But sports for me of course was the, the thing I wanted the most. So a farmer let us have an old potato field and we tried to make it smooth, you know it's very rough, you know big clumps on there and we tried to, to smooth it out and we started our own Jewish hand ball team on there, hand ball is a game like soccer except that you don't kick the ball. You dribble it like a basketball and you pass it you know throwing it and it's a great game. And I coached all the fellows on the team and I was the only girl on the team and I shot the only goal in the first time when we lost 7 to 1. And we also tried to straighten out, next to the Jewish school there was a, a yard and we tried to straighten that out to do calisthenics on it. Because the soccer field was a, the handball field was a little bit out of the way so we tried to straighten that out but we had to fight the teachers' chickens and they used that same place for their activities and it was not very appetizing so we gave up on that pretty fast.

(Technical adjustment)

Q: Were there Jewish sporting clubs?

A: There were Jewish sporting clubs. Maccabee they called it, but it was a Zionistic outfit and it was like the National League and the American League in baseball. They didn't get along with, with the other Jewish athletes so they, they called them the RFJ was people who fought in the first world war, they, they were the veterans they started this club for athletics and they were able in some towns to rent or even buy I don't know stadiums where Jews could, could practice on but the facilities were pretty poor, pretty terrible but as I said we tried to do as much as we could to entertain ourselves and there was no, no coach capable of, you know anybody who was a little bit more of advanced like I was to tell me what, how to do it and what to do and it was just a very, very bad time.

Q: Jewish clubs, were they already in operation or were they formed in reaction?

A: I think they were mostly formed after the, as I said the Maccabee, they were formed before already but the uh, veterans of foreign wars I think they called themselves, that, that came afterwards. You know in all the towns almost especially in the bigger towns, they, they start a movement so Jews would have a place to go to and and, and do sports.

Q: What kind of facilities were they?

A: Poor, mostly pretty poor, you know I think they only let you, the Germans would not give you anything very good. They let you have the, the garbage places, you know that nobody else wanted most likely, that's what they gave the Jewish people.

Q: So this made it difficult for the Jewish athletes to really improve or be competitive?

A: Oh yes. Oh yes. I mean it was, it was very bad to, to really achieve something spectacular because it was just, it's it was a poor condition and no coaching. That was, that was, that was bad too.

Q: ...jump forward to England...British National Championships.

A: Well the day I won the British championship, as I said that was a fabulous day for me.

Q: ...don't say as I said.

A: OK. The day I won the British Championship was a fabulous day for me because I felt such pride in myself that I was able to do that because the Germans had told me I'm inferior, I'm no good, you know. And all of a sudden here I am the British champion, champion. And I was hoping that somehow word would go back to Germany so they would find out that I did this. And my father had come over to watch me, I thought. I thought he, that was the reason for his trip, trip to watch me compete but on the way back from the stadium, we found out differently. My, he didn't tell me right away. He waited until we got back to his hotel. But on the way back there, there were newspapers being hawked in the street and everything seemed like to be big excitement. We asked the taxi driver what's going on. And he said has something to do with the Nazis killing each other off. So we stopped the taxi and we got out, got the newspaper and it told the story about Hitler having killed off his best friend, plus about a thousand of his Nazi people because they, they complained about something and he wanted to show you. You just didn't do that. You did as you were told and when we thought that this might have been the beginning of the end for Hitler we couldn't have been more wrong because Hitler by killing off these people let everybody know if you want to stay alive, don't be a hero. So we got to the hotel (clears throat) excuse me. And there my father finally told me that I had to go back to Germany and the reason he could not write to me or tell me on the telephone was because there was this strict censorship of everything coming into Germany or going out of Germany. And he couldn't have dared to tell me that unless I came back the family was being threatened you know. Tell her to come back or else. So of course I decided immediately to go home, especially in view of what happened to Hitler's pals. If he can kill of his own people, what is he going to, to

a Jew who says no. And I went back, I think within a week I was back in Germany which was very, very hard to accept. I was supposed to be a member of the German Olympic team and that was something I couldn't understand and didn't understand for a very long time. I think I didn't understand it until I came over here and saw all the newspaper articles that had been written about my involvement with this time. The only reason I was supposed to be on that Olympic team was because the Americans, and the English and the French and a lot of the other nations threatened not to come to the 1936 Olympics due to the discrimination of the Jews. And Hitler wanted to make this the best Olympics ever. He used it as a propaganda vehicle, and he wanted of course the United States and all the big nations to be there. And this was the, the ruse that they used. I was the pigeon to help him get the 1936 Olympics settled and in Berlin. They were already making, building and change, you know making a stadium and everything but they were really afraid that the, that it would not be a good Olympics for them because the big nations weren't going to show up and that would take away from the, from the, from the games of course. So that's how I got on the German Olympic team and it was tough.

Q: How did your father get this information that they wanted you to come back?

A: Well that was, it was very peculiar. My father told me at the time, the way he had to come to England to tell me a person. Somebody showed up at our house in Laupheim to tell him that he also could not write to my father that the family would be in, in danger if I didn't come back. So if this man traveled to Laupheim, told my father, my father traveled to England, told me and that was alike a relay race you know. Avoiding danger.

Q: ...did you know that you were going to fill a symbolic role?

A: No but I knew that I would be the only Jew because there were nobody else. I mean it sounds kind of conceited but there really wasn't another 100% Jewish athlete who could have competed in the Olympics. And you know having a chance to win a medal. They just weren't, weren't good enough. I mean that's, that's, that's the way it was.

Q: In Germany?

A: In Germany. And I didn't know that I was going, at first that I was going to be the only one. And in Germany nobody knew anything about this. This was strictly nothing was in the papers about this. That they were, that the Olympics weren't such good shape. No they only heard the Olympics is going to be the best thing you ever experienced in Germany and all this stuff and there was nothing in the papers that there was a danger that it wouldn't be, that it would be a flop.

Q: Do you remember the reaction of the German community to your coming back?

- A: Um I think that the Jewish community, they were very proud of me. I mean after a while word spread around that this Jewish girl who might be competing in the Olympics and of course I was like the bright Jewish hope you know that the, the great white hope and this boxer whoever he was, I was the great Jewish hope and I mean people were proud of me and they wished me the best and it was a terrible time for me because they would, I would be asked all these ridiculous questions. Are you going to be competing in the Olympics, and aren't. What are you going to do and how are you going to, to conduct yourself. I said I don't know. I mean how do I know what's going to happen. I'll just have to play it by ear and that's exactly what I did.
- Q: Did you think that you would go forward and participate in the Olympics at this stage?
- A: Well maybe I was hoping for it in a way and maybe I was hoping for it.
- Q: I need you to say...
- A: Oh yes, I am sorry. In a way I was hoping I would be in the Olympics because to compete in the Olympics is the thrill of a lifetime. I mean it and it doesn't happen to everybody, you know you have to be good enough to do it. On the other hand I was so afraid. Supposing I am allowed to compete, supposing I win and I was convinced that I would win a medal and possibly the gold. Supposing I do this, what, what do I do. I'm going to stand on that podium and, and say Heil Hitler like all the others, I mean that, that was the accepted way to, to say well I won, you know you had to stand up there and say Heil Hitler. I was scared stiff and this was going around in my head day and night, day and night, day and night. How I'll, what's going to happen, am I going to compete, am I not going to compete? How do I (clears throat) conduct myself if I do compete. It was a terrible.
- Q: You were very conflicted about this.
- A: Oh yes. I was so, so torn up about it, I didn't know what to do and it was not only that but I mean I met with the other girls, you know not Jewish competition or so. I was always afraid how are they going to react to me and at the Olympic training courses that I was ordered to attend, they, they couldn't have been any nicer. All the girls accepted me fully. No anti - Semitism. Nothing I mean I was just an athlete like all the other athletes and I wrote many, many years later, I mean after 1980 I wrote to one of them. I said I can't understand why you were so nice to me. Did you really know I was Jewish. And she wrote back to me, sure we knew you were Jewish but you were an, a good athlete like we were good athletes and that was all that counted to us and politics didn't mean anything to us, she said in the letter. But I'm sure that she as well as many of the other girls were members of the Nazi party. I mean there is this conflict again. You know they're Nazis

and still they, they accept me the Jewish girl, doesn't make any sense, it didn't make any sense.

(Water break)

Q: So you came back to Germany...training and preparation...

A: When I got back to Germany I was hoping I would at least have a place where I could train. But the fact that I was a member of the German Olympic team did not allow me to use any of the stadiums. I was still a Jew and was not allowed to use any of this. So I had to use the poor facilities of the Jewish clubs and compete there for them. And that was, was absolutely terrible because first of all there was no competition whatsoever. If you don't have any competition it's, you have to only fight yourself and that's much harder than somebody you know if there's stiff competition you try to outdo each other. But when there's no competition it's very hard so I always had to fight myself and it was really very, very tough. And then of course all those stupid questions I have to answer. You know everybody asked me are you going to be in the Olympics. You know what are you going to do. I was a nervous wreck I think and day and night, things were on my mind. It was really horrible. And my parents and I we didn't discuss it because I knew they were worried about it and they knew I was worried about it so we didn't talk about it. Because we, we didn't want to hurt each other's feelings I suppose so it, it was very, very hard.

Q: How does one train for the Olympics if you're not on the same playing field...

A: I was ordered three times, four times in those two years to go to an Olympic training course and that's the only solid training I had for the Olympics and as I said before, I think I said it before that I was a natural athlete and if I hadn't been a, a natural athlete I don't think I would have achieved what I did because there just wasn't any, any opportunity for me, for me to, to get better or to advance or to know what I was doing, it just happened naturally.

Q: ...if there had been good Jewish athletes...they wouldn't have had an opportunity to progress and be competitive with the German athletes. Is that true?

A: There were very few Jewish athletes who really were capable to compete on a national level. I mean there were, the best Jewish athletes let's say, but they weren't the best German athletes. And they really, really couldn't compare, they were very, very few and there were some for instance in the Olympics, there was a fencer Helena Myer, she was half Jewish, they let her compete, I guess half Jewish was only half as offensive as being all Jewish. And there were some half Jewish athletes that competed--one in, in ice hockey so he, he melted into the, you know into the team so he wouldn't stick out like I would have stuck out. But I don't think there were any Jewish athletes really that were capable of be, competing on, on a national level.

Q: ...the backing to get better.

A: No, the, the Germans did another number. They you know every time there were some newspaper articles written that they're not holding up their end of our, that they finally signed a commitment that they would not discriminate against Jewish athletes. They, they wrote it down and but there were all these newspaper articles that they were not living up to their commitment, that they wouldn't let me compete in the German national championship. And they said well she was not entitled to compete in that because she was not a member of the German track and field association. And why wasn't I member, because I was Jewish. And so you know it was like a dog chasing it's tail. And so it, they had, they had all kinds of, of, of ways to talk themselves out of it. They for instance, in 1935 for instance they got a little scared again so they called all the best Jewish athletes for a training course, an Olympic training course. I said in an article once, I think Snow White and the seven dwarfs would have done just as well as those athletes because they weren't any good. I happened to meet my husband there, that was the best part about this training course, really. But they really weren't good enough but it was just a sham by, by the Germans to show well we, we're trying to find new talent for the Olympics in the Jewish community but it, that was all baloney.

Q: Did you learn anything there...

A: Well there was a very good coach there and but I think what he told me I knew already, you know by then this is 1935 already and the Olympics were the following year and I did very well all along and in the training courses I always outdid the, my the other you know in, in not the Jewish one but in the other one. I always did better than, than the other, than the German girls and whenever I competed which only happened three times I think in the, in the 2 years, I always beat them. Even though I only once did I have good competition, girls that were also going into the Olympics. The other times I think I jumped about 15 inches higher than the next best and you know there was no, I had no competition in that respect and in the Jewish competitions also. But the, the Germans always kept an eye out. Whenever I was competing someplace, there was always somebody watching out, for the, for the Nazis to make sure if I did poorly, they would have kicked me off the team immediately I'm sure.

Q: ...equanimity from the officials and from the coaches.

A: The coaches treated me very well, I mean they saw and listen not everybody was a, was a Nazi you know. And that they treated me very well and they liked me it seems but the officials whenever I had to compete at the, at, they were, they were hostile, I think they were hostile towards me. At one time I saw this fellow who was a member of my former club. I knew him as well as I know myself. He looked through me like I didn't exist. He didn't say hello. He didn't, you know I

was just not, non – existent. And at that competition they tried, I mean the officials are supposed to be neutral. They tried to teach the other girls how to you know, how they could beat me. They didn't do that, of course, they couldn't because they weren't good enough.

Q: That must have been hurtful.

A: Yes, but it, it made me better because I was so full of rage, the madder I got, the better I jumped and the Germans didn't know that of course, otherwise they might have treated me a little better. But I was so, so absolutely enraged about everything, you know, the whole, the whole thing these whole two years that I, the madder I got, the better I did. And that was, that was wonderful.

Q: So rage was your motivator.

A: Rage was my fuel. You know fueled my energies. And my motivator. It was, it was, it was, it was really weird.

Q: Took you on to new heights.

A: Unh hunh.

Q: ...was there a qualifying process?

A: Well for instance the um German track and field championships, they were supposed to be one of the events that would show who was going to be taken into consideration for the Olympics but they wouldn't let me compete because it's, I was not a member of the German track and field association so I couldn't compete, but they, they, they at one time I, I had to compete in Munich which was the scariest thing because Munich was the hot bed of, of Nazism. That was where Hitler lived there and I was scared stiff to go there and I didn't do that well and it was noted, duly noted by the Nazis that I only jumped a, a meter 53 instead of better but I beat still, beat the competition by about 15 inches. But I didn't do as well because I think I was mentally a wreck at the time.

Q: Were there other qualifying matches?

A: The gentile com, the gentile girls who were supposed to go into the Olympics they had their own meets which I was not, not admitted and I think the whole deal was just if I did fairly well they would not throw me out because they were still afraid that the boycott would happen so I think no matter what I did, I was pretty safe at that point, even the, you know in Munich when I did not do too well, they couldn't, they couldn't afford to throw me out at that point because they were still afraid the Americans wouldn't show up.

Q: You just assumed you were going to be on the Olympic team.

A: Yes, I think so. I think that I was going, be safe then until further notice and I didn't know was I going to be, wasn't I going to be, what was I going to do. It was a terrible time.

(Tape change)

Q: ...when you came back from England you were able to go to some school?

A: When I came back from England I went to Stuttgart a couple of times during the month, because there the Jewish club had a stadium and they had invited me to come and use that stadium so I happened to learn about a school, a not a Jewish school it was a gentile owned school that for physical education, it was a private school, not a university. And I thought I'll, I'll apply and see if they take me, fine. If they don't take me fine too and they did take me because they might have got, they, they had to get permission from the government that they could accept a Jew and I suppose that it was all in view of my being an Olympic candidate and had they not let me go into that school, it might have come out into the other countries and there might have been more, more problems for, for, for the Olympics for Germany. So they accepted me and it, I had a good time there, we were all very friendly, the girls were all very friendly there and it was a big town and I could go in the afternoon after they were finished practicing we would go into this café and make pigs out of ourselves, eating whipped cream cake and everything and we had a terrific time there. And we were very friendly and it was nice. The only thing they would, they would prevent me, they, the curriculum had in it German gymnastics and they wouldn't let me take part in the German gymnastics, now why I don't know. Because the Jew and the German gymnastics that was too, too much of a paradox I don't know. But the other girls, we just laughed about it. We thought it was funny and by then I was so used to being excluded that it wasn't such a big deal.

Q: You were going to the café and hanging out?

A: Yes, it was good, it was good, it was, you know, the big time, in s big town you could do more things, you could go to the movies and we did do a foolish thing one time with these, with these girls. There were some, we were having a lot of good times and laughing and carrying on and about six of us and there was a table full of SS uni, uniformed SS men at the next table and they kept looking at us and looking at us. Finally they came over and they tried to make dates with us. And there's this big German blond guy trying to make a date with me and I said no and I said no. And the more he tried to make a date with me the more the other girls laughed and we got hysterical. And it was, it was funny and it was stupid at the same time cause had I been found out, I don't know what would ha, what would have happened to me. But we were young and you didn't really you know think of any consequences that much.



Q: ...Germans tried to sanitize anti – Semitism...apparent to you at all in Germany?

A: I didn't really see these signs until, these anti – Semitic signs. I mean I knew I was excluded from all public places but I don't think I saw ever any signs because I just didn't pay any attention to it, I suppose. I only noticed those in 1937 but I know that Brundage the, the head of the American Olympic committee went over to Germany to see what was going on because here was so much resistance in America against taking part in the Olympics so he went over there and I read later on doing some research that Berlin was manicured terrifically, everything was clean, every, all the offending signs, dogs and Jews not allowed etcetera, etcetera, they were all gone and Mr. Brundage was not a champion for Jewish causes as I have heard, never spoke to any Jewish people, he just let himself be lulled into some false sense of security by these Nazis saying everything is fine, we're doing everything we said we would do and he came back to the United States and said everything is fabulous over there and we'll be going.

Q: You were aware of efforts in other countries to boycott the Olympics?

A: Not at that time.

Q: Say you heard it after.

A: Yes, I was not, I was not aware of it at all.

Q: Prior to the Olympics was there some qualifying meet in Stuttgart?

A: Yes, after, after the...

Q: ...school in Stuttgart...afford you opportunity to get ready for the Olympics?

A: The school was very nice because I was able to do as much as I wanted to in sports. I, you know my, my body was reacting at the first, first few weeks I was a complete wreck because my body wasn't used to this kind of being used so much but after a while I got you know my muscles got supple, supple again and it was, it was great to be back into every day, being into sports. We had, we had gymnastics, we had track and field. We played you know team sports. It was, it was very nice and the first day I was scared stiff because I didn't know how the girls would react to me and they greeted me, what's your name. My name is Bergman. OK you're Bergie from now on and, and, and we were all the best of friends, it was really very nice.

Q: Were these facilities comparable to what the German athletes were practicing on?

A: No. I, I mean the, the track and field was not bad but it wasn't in, in very good shape either and the, the male teacher there if he could beat me in high jumping

which was really my specialty, he was so proud of himself and I mean as a man he should have been doing much better than I did. But if he just beat me by an inch he was very happy.

Q: ...the meet in Stuttgart.

A: There must have been quite some protest again in the, in the United States. I know that a Senator or Congressman Sellar that he was pleading in the congress not to send a team over. There were, there were protest meets in Madison Square Garden, 20,000 people showed up. There was a lot of resistance and this must have been the reason why they invited me to come to Stuttgart and, and that as in 19, 1936 to, to compete at a meet there and it was really rough. You know when you the only Jew you know people, if the spectators knew that I was Jewish they didn't wish me well. I knew that much. And the, the officials were hostile. I think I mentioned that before. And it was very hard to, to compete against myself. So but I was so mad that I equaled the German record. The German record then was five foot three and I equaled that. I must have cleared it by, by 15 inches at the time. I was so angry. And usually you have three tries for each height you know you start at 4, 6 let's say. You have, if you do it the first time, fine. But you have to go over it by the third try otherwise you're eliminated. Well all the other girls were out by if they did about 4, 8 and they were all out and I kept going and going on and going. And every height I jumped over it on the first time. So I did the 5, 3 and I think the, the officials most likely would have liked to poison but they didn't. And I was just so elated. I thought this is the first thing that ever happened to me, you know those lousy Nazis. And after that I went home I think and I wanted to share this with my family and I think this was the last time that I, I stayed in Stuttgart. I, I went home then and I said now this is 4 weeks before the Olympics start. I better go home and see what happens. So I went home and my parents were happy and my brothers were happy that I did this and I look for the mail everyday, what's going to happen, you know. What, what excuses are they going to use, that as only one, one other German girl who, who was capable of doing this right and how are they going to, if they don't want me in there how are they going to get rid of me. And I was really scared, aren't they going to break my leg or what are they going to do to, to eliminate me. But it was very simple. One day a letter came and it said in view of the fact that you have been doing very poorly lately we did not select you for the Olympic team. Heil Hitler and that was the end of it. And I said, I remember me sitting outside on the stoop and I got this letter and I must have used every profanity I knew and I knew a lot of them and at the same time, I had such an incredible feeling of relief. It's all over now, now I know what's going to happen to me. It was just like, like the biggest load was lifted off my shoulders and I know that was such a, a paradox. That I was angry, very very angry at the same time so relieved. And I don't remember a thing about the Olympics.

Q: Why were you so relieved?

- A: Well all this time I was worried how, first of all am I going to compete, am I not going to compete, how are they going to eliminate me or what am I going to do if I do compete and I do win a medal and I know the German way to, to acknowledge a victory you stand up on the, on the podium and Heil Hitler. And I didn't see that happening for me too easily. That would, I mean how can you expect a German girl to stand there and, and raise her arm in the Hitler salute.
- Q: You mean a Jewish girl?
- A: A Jewish girl and this was on my mind for 2 years. And all of a sudden I didn't have to worry about it any more. And there was a, a terrific relief.
- Q: Did you also think about the crowd reaction or the government reaction to a win on your part?
- A: Had I won the Olympics or had I been allowed to compete in the Olympics I would have been a loser either way. Cause had I won there would have been such a, an insult against the German psyche. How can the, a Jew be good enough to win the Olympics. Then I would have had to be afraid for my life, I'm sure. And had I lost I would have been made as a joke. See we knew that you couldn't have, couldn't do this and that, that was on my mind all these years.
- Q: So you got this letter.
- A: (chuckles) excuse me.
- Q: ...letter that said you're not good enough...competed and tied German record. Didn't make much sense.
- A: I think that was the first time I really realized that my candidacy for an Olympic athlete was really all a sham, I wish, it was just something that the Germans did to, to fool the whole group. Maybe that's when I realized that I really don't even know. I have, I think I have complete amnesia what happened to me after this. I cannot remember whether I watched the Olympics. I mean watch, you couldn't watch there was not television but I listened to the Olympics. I followed the Olympics in the newspaper. I have no idea, I cannot, I have complete amnesia about it.
- Q: You don't know where you were?
- A: I knew where I was. Except I did not want to think about the Olympics. As a matter of fact I, you know people all is for the best and my parents looked at me feeling sorry for me and my brothers looked at me feeling sorry for me and is she going to freak out or what's going to happen to her. I said I'll have to get away from here. And I went to a spa under an assumed name of course, you couldn't you know afford to nobody would take me if they knew I was Jewish. And I sat

there for two weeks. Not talking to anybody. I didn't want to be bothered with anybody. And I was just thinking about all this and what was going to happen and what did happen and that's when I realized I have to get out of Germany. That's and I just made up my mind I'm going to have to leave.

Q: ...being very aware of the Olympics.

A: I have completely, I to this day I can't remember what I did. Whether I knew who did what or I notice this one person that I I knew that later on she came in third a girl I was very friendly with. She came in third in the high jumping, a German girl and but whether I realized it at the time I do not know, I cannot remember.

Q: At what point do you think you came to?

A: I think that I only realized what was really going on once I came over to the States. Friends of ours had saved all the newspaper articles where my name's up here do you know with all the ups and downs and whether the Germans said and what the Americans said and what, what was going on and all their promises and all the, their excuses. The German excuses and I think that's the first time I really realized how I was used as a political football.

Q: Did the winners in your event, were the winners German?

A: The high jump in the Olympics was won with the height of 5 foot, 3, the height I had reached four weeks earlier and I had the best chance to win a medal. I could have had the gold medal because (laughs) when I got mad, I did better, so I would have been mighty mad seeing all those people out there with their uniforms on, all the swastikas flying, I would have been really mad and I know I had a very good chance to win a medal.

Q: Was it hard for you to come over to the United States, when did you come over here?

A: Well when I came back from that spa, I told my parents I'm leaving. I cannot stay here anymore. This is no future for me. My brother had left already. He came to the States in January I believe. No, no, no, no that was later. I said I'm leaving and my father had a very good friend who came from this town. And who emigrated to the United States, became very rich here and when he visited our town, I was the big shot you know the Olympic candidate. And he said to me oh any time you want to come to the United States, just let me know and I'll give you all the papers. So we wrote him a letter and said that we were now ready to accept his offer and pretty quick a letter came back saying well times are very bad in the United States and you might not be able to find a job and maybe things will get better in Germany and maybe you should rethink your future. Maybe you should stay and see what happens. And my father wrote him a very strong letter

back and he finally did give me the papers and I was able to come to the United States.

Q: When was that?

A: I came to the United States in May of 1937.

Q: When you came over here, did you decide to pursue your athletic career or had you been completely soured?

A: When I came over here um the first thing I had to do was make some money because the Germans allowed each emigrant to take along 4 dollars and a camera which everybody sold and lived on until they found a job and I had the same thing. And the first thing I had to do is find a job. But somehow a letter, a, an article appeared in the long defunct World Telegram newspaper, a New York newspaper about me arriving. I don't know, I think my brother must have been managing to get this in there and talking about what had happened to me and one day a coach showed up at my home and said listen I have a track and field team and would you like to compete for me and I said you bet and that was it and he wasn't a very good coach, it was an undertaker. And I kept teasing him that I thought the bodies that he prepared for wherever these bodies were going, were in better shape than the bodies he prepared to compete at the track meets. But he tried hard and I competed here several events and did OK.

Q: You weren't turned off by sports...

A: No, I, I really wanted to get back into it and I was right away very successful so that, that kept me going I suppose. The first year I was here I won the American championship in high jumping. I won the American championship in shot put, weighing all of 112 pounds. Beating out my competition who weighed must have been twice my size and twice my weight and that really gave me a good feeling.

Q: Did you feel somewhat vindicated...

A: It felt very good because I knew that somehow word had to get back to Germany that I did win and that made me feel very good but I knew it wouldn't be in any newspapers. Would be like word of mouth you know. And I knew that people who wished me well and there were some Germans. I mean not every German was a Nazi, they would be happy for me.

Q: What about your family, were they able to get out of Germany?

A: We were very worried about my family. My brother came here a few months before I did. And we were very worried about my family. And finally my father was able to get out even though it was a miracle. They took all the, all the people who they wanted to the Germans who they wanted to keep in Germany, they just

took their passports away so there was no way of for them to get out. And my father had a work permit for England which was pretty hard to get but he had done business with England quite a bit and he got that work permit and that was about to expire so he went to the authorities and said listen can I have the, my passport back I need to have my work permit renewed and somebody gave him this passport and my father said we are leaving so they packed a little suitcase, a little clean underwear and they all took off, my brother my mother and left the house, left everything back and went to the next town, went to the next town, went to the next town. Finally ended up in Cologne where they, they took a plane and flew to England.

Q: Were you able to communicate with them once you left Germany?

A: Oh yes, we, we wrote to each other all the time but you had to be extremely careful what you wrote. For instance there was the Crystal night and they took all the men from I think the age of 18 to maybe 60 and took them to concentration camps and we had no idea was my father taken or was, wasn't he and my mother wrote a letter that that Dad was quite ill and had to go away so we knew he was gone. And we tried everything you know congressmen and tried to get him back and he finally did come back after 4 weeks weighing 80 pounds. And signing himself into the hospital in, in Laupheim and the next day the nuns who ran the hospital came to him and said you have to leave. The authorities told me we don't, we can't keep Jews here. So they threw him out weighing 80 pounds and he had to recuperate another way. And I still blame them apart from his smoking cigarettes that he died at a very sudden death of a heart attack.

Q: Where was he sent?

A: Dachau. That's near Munich. And they took all their, their clothing away, they dressed them in these clothes, you know like you see in old movies with the stripes, the cotton, the cotton suits and they had to stand outside from 5:00 in the morning un, it was November until 11:00 at night. No, no warm underwear, no warm, nothing and I mean this is what they, what they did.

Q: This is in 38, 39?

A: I think it was in 39. I know the Crystal night. I can't remember was it I think it was 38 yeah.

Q: ...your father had to go away, what was going through your mind?

A: Well we just, we just tried to get him out of there you know, we wrote to everybody that we could think of to try to get him out and whether, it was, that we were successful or whether they were just saying well let's get those old guys out of here. You know after 4 weeks or 5 weeks he came home. And my husband's brother and future brother – in – law, they were also in Dachau and the Germans

told them if you can go someplace, leave Germany today, you can leave. So they China was the only place that would take you without any red tape so they bought steamship tickets to, to China and they went to China.

Q: ...did they give him a reason why they were taking him?

A: No, that was just a you know it was a fun thing to do I suppose for the Nazis.

(Change tape)

(Tape 4 of 4)

Q: What kind of team did Germany present in the high jump...

A: In the high jump, usually there are always three competitors for each event, three in the dash, and three in the shot put and three in the long jump and they only had two girls in the high jump. And that was a little bit unusual and a long, a long time later I found out that the team was told that Bergman is injured and cannot compete. But I also had the suspicion that they were trying to maneuver this whole thing because a letter was sent around that those who were in Olympic candidates should not expect to be chosen in some of them and that they did not measure up and that only in some events there would only be 2 competitors and I think that was really done for my sake already. Because they were already trying to get rid of me somehow, maybe, I'm not sure but it, it seemed to be very unusual that there would only be two girls in the high jump.

Q: When did you get this letter?

A: I think they came, the letter came in the, in the winter before the Olympics, I'll have to check the date.

Q: What role if any do you think the 1936 played in bolstering the Nazis for what was to come?

A: Adolph Hitler tried to use these Olympics as his propaganda vehicle to show the world how powerful he was, to show the world how unified a Germany was and I think he tried to scare the world into not standing up against him somehow. I think that's, that's the way I, I have to look at it. The Olympics were a great, a great success for Germany at the time. And they built this beautiful stadium. I mean people found work due, due to the Olympics, or help the Nazis to, to succeed.

Q: So you think he did gain from

A: I he definitely did gain from it and I, I've seen it written in a book someplace about how the Olympics are supposed to bring the youth of the world together and

that somebody made the remark that in 1936, the youth of the world came together in these Olympics and four years later they were, they were coming together against each other in a battle field. You know then the war started in 1940.

Q: ...did you lose friends or family members?

A: Unfortunately my husband's parents and many of his relatives were not able to get out and we really tried so hard and we had to battle people here to help and there was so little help to be had. My husband has very rich relatives, they had a jewelry store in, in New York and they're very rich and I approached them for papers for him and they refused and I made out his papers for him. I mean I got him out like it was really not quite honest to get him here. But they, we didn't even think about approaching them for his parents because we knew they wouldn't do it. And we tried, we tried to get them into Cuba and you know the, the people would buy visas for Cuba for \$400 and we got 2 visas for them and just when their turn was about to come, these visas were found out to be phony and that avenue was shut off so and they were all so a little bit reluctant. My father -in -law never could understand that this could happen to him. He said I've been living in this town forever, we were friends with everybody. They can't do anything to us or nothing is going to happen to us. And then when he did realized that he should have done something, it was too late. There were many, I, I don't remember how many relatives, I think it at least 15 or 30, I don't remember how many and in my family too. Some and friends.

Q: ...getting out?

A: Right, it was, it was. The American people a lot of them did not kill themselves, you know. They made all the big speeches how, how helpful they wanted to be, like my sponsor when it came down to it, he wasn't too anxious so my brother who there, the father of the motion picture industry by the name of Carl Laemmle, I mean he's a very famous man, he came into the United States from Laupheim. And he made out 300 affidavits. Anybody who approached him for papers, he made them out. And he wasn't sure whether these people weren't going to sit on his pocket eventually you know but he was wonderful but I think the American people in general were not very generous in that respect.

Q: ...think about 1936, what impact on your life, these experiences?

A: I think it made me a lot tougher, you know to face what, what I had to face and life here was very, very hard in the beginning, I worked as a housemaid for \$10 a week and even though life was a lot cheaper then, you couldn't get very far on \$10 a week. And my husband worked as a house painter, being a physician he worked as a house painter when he, when he arrived over here. It made us, I think tougher you know but what we went through and it might have helped us even though it was pretty tough school to go through.



Q: Anything else you want to add?

A: Well one thing I, I should mention maybe. I recently got a letter from the National, German National Olympic committee and they invited me to be their guest of honor at the Atlanta Olympic games from July the 19<sup>th</sup> until August the 3<sup>rd</sup>. And although I have never gone back to Germany and they invited me before for some other occasion, I have accepted the invitation and I think it will be a very emotional thing for me but I, I think I said to my husband what goes around comes around and I think I've got to make my peace with this thing at least even though it, it's it gnawed on me all these years you know and every time the Olympics come around, I I get mad as hell again, I say why, why did this happen to me. And but I've got to make peace before I go wherever I'm going to go, up or down, I don't know. So I'm looking forward to that and I think it was a very gesture. They have tried to and the town where I come from also they have tried very hard to make amends. They take care of the Jewish cemetery. Not a single Jew went back to that town. But the, the citizens of the town take care of the cemetery and they have Jewish artists come. They have ,they have all kinds of activities to not to let the Jewish life that once was there die. And I think that is that helped me too because even though I would have, I never, never thought of going back. I was invited 3 times from the town to go and some people went and they had a very good time. I said no, I will never set foot on German soil again. And I won't. I don't know how long I'll last but I'll never go back. But I did accept that invitation and I'm looking forward to it.

Q: One last question...boycott or whatever that it would have made any difference in terms of what followed the Olympics?

A: Any boycott that would have happened would have influenced only the Olympic games that it would not have been the huge success that Hitler expected from it but Hitler and Nazis they would have gone on no matter what, even if only one other country would have shown up to, to participate in the Olympics. I don't think it had anything to do with what he wanted to accomplish. He wanted to conquer the world and he, he, he would have gone forward no matter what. And I don't think that the Olympics in that respect had anything to do with it.

Q: ...feelings about Jewish athletes in other countries who did participate...

A: Well there are two trends of thoughts. They could have stayed home or they could have come and showed what a Jew could do. As a matter of fact, I think high jump was won by a Czech, a Jewish girl and I think that was like spitting in Hitler's eye, see a Jews, they can do it. And I think there were some that didn't come and that was their, whatever they wanted to decide about their lives. But I think they only hurt themselves and they, it didn't make any, it didn't make an impact. You know I think it had more, more impact for the Jews to go there and, and beat the Germans than, than to stay home and say I'm not going. I have that

much respect for myself that I won't go. I don't think that that, was, the ones that did it I respect them for it but the ones who didn't they have my respect too because they did what I would have done, beat the Nazis.

(End)