

So when we finished last we were talking about your life in the convent, and you were telling me what a typical day was like. I was wondering if you could tell me, what was it like to be Jewish in a convent?

Well, first of all it was different for me because I felt Jewish, of course, because that's why I was there, because I had to be hidden. But once I got into the convent, I assimilated myself very easily to the Christian life because most of the girls there, except I think there were 40 Jewish children hidden, because I told you from the age of 6 to the age of 16. And most of us, I think there were three or four that didn't convert, that just pretended, but the majority converted. And everybody says to me, did the nuns force you to convert? And I say, no, they did not.

I just kind of fell into it because, as I mentioned to you, I felt safe. I felt safe being a Christian. I liked the going to the chapel. It was very peaceful. I liked the service. I liked the pomp and circumstance that went with it, because in the Catholic religion there is much more fanfare than in Judaism, as far as I could see. And I really liked it. And so did all my friends. We thought this was like maybe we thought we were play acting. But we felt extremely comfortable.

And a lot of them stayed Catholic for a long time afterwards, some for years, some for months. I think I stayed Catholic for a good year after. I went every Sunday to church. I was very more strict than the Catholics. And to this day, I have to be honest with you, I've been invited to Catholic weddings or other Christian weddings, I feel very comfortable walking in a church. I don't have that feeling of, what's all this about? Or like some people when they see Jesus on the cross. That doesn't upset me at all.

And so some of it is left with me. And for a long time I did not know is my faith Judaism or is my faith Catholicism? But I, of course, I returned back to Judaism because this was my heritage. But probably if I had married a Catholic or Christian man I could very easily have stayed Catholic. Like I said, not in our particular convent but I know some of the girls that were hidden in a convent, some of them became nuns and some of them became priests. And I told you the one cardinal of Paris after the war stayed a Christian. And you know I forgot his name but he stayed a Catholic.

So I felt very comfortable with Catholicism. And the other day it was funny. Saturday night we were invited to my daughter's best girlfriend's mother's birthday party. And there was a gentleman from New York, and my daughter had told him that I was a hidden child and I was in the Catholic convent because they're Catholics. And he was so surprised. He said, you mean you liked Catholicism? I can't understand how you could like that. He was shocked. But I did. I liked actually my years in the convent. As strict as it was, I liked it. I felt very safe, like a safe place.

Do you remember your first mass?

Well, we arrived. I think I went into a convent I think it was the middle of the week. Now I wish I could give you-- I mean, we're going back 60 years almost. I remember the next morning the Mother Superior. I remember when we entered the convent with this woman and she took us to the Mother Superior's private quarters. And the Mother Superior, I remember telling us in French, now you are one of us. You forget whatever you have learned as far as your religious background. You're a Catholic. And we are going to have--

Every night they have vestibule service at 5 or 6 o'clock, and that's when I went. And I sat, and you know in those days it was all in Latin. By the way, we learned Latin in school because the mass was done in Latin. And I went with a bunch of kids. It's like going to a party. What did I know? Then the next morning, the only thing I didn't like about mass you had to get up so early. And then I used to sing in the choir. We had a choir, kids. We sang in the church choir. And all this, like I said again, the pomp and circumstance, this was all very exciting. You didn't look on the religious aspect.

How did they explain the fact that-- You didn't know very much. Did someone explain it to you?

No, you have catechism every day which teaches you Catholicism. Like kids go here to catechism, it teaches you. And in those days they really emphasized that Christ was killed by Jews. The old catechism said that he was denounced by a Jew, which in history you've learned where supposedly he denounced Jesus to the Romans.

How did you react to that?

I listened to it and I thought maybe that's true. It was like a story. You learn a story and you listen. I mean, look at when they made Oliver Twist. The Jew was the mercenary, that Fagin, you know the part, so I figured that was the way it was.

Did you speak to the other Jewish kids who were hiding there? Did you acknowledge the fact that you were Jewish?

Yeah, but we knew-- I mean, like especially the girl June that I'm so close with, and Edith and Ruth and Laurette, the four of us, we knew we were. But we all became Catholic so we were very comfortable. And my friend Ruth who lives in Paris, she was Catholic for many, many years till she married a Jewish man. So no, we thought this was--

Again, you have to realize too, and which I even told the children at Sacred Heart, you have to realize to be safe and not to worry about being killed or executed, you would accept anything. You know when people say, I would never do that, don't say that.

Do you remember any of the nuns specifically?

Oh sure, I remember Sr. Helene, Sister Helen. She was to me God. She was the most wonder-- Not only was she like the principal I would say, but she was our sister. She treated us so wonderful. She was also our teacher in class. Because you have to remember it's not like here where you had this period that period. You stay with the same teacher most of the time, except we had two other teachers for home economics and for foreign language. Otherwise, the same teacher teaches you everything.

And she was wonderful. And her sister, by the way, was married to a Jewish man. And her sister had converted to Judaism. So whatever happened to them I don't know, but she was wonderful. She was like a mother to us. And when I went back in '69 and I took my daughter to the convent, she was still alive. And she treated my daughter and I wonderful. Took us to their private dining room. We had lunch out there and was wonderful. The Mother Superior was still there.

And then we had one sister, Sister Denise, she was young and she was so beautiful. And we liked her a lot too because she treated us-- We were like her friends because we were the older girls. But I understand she died shortly after. She developed TB and died, but she was such a beautiful person too. Then we had one we didn't care for. Her name was Victoire. She was the director of the school and she was very strict, very, very strict.

And then there was one, Sister Pauline, and we were scared of her because we knew if she knew we were Jewish she would treat us like dirt. She was anti-Semitic. You know how you hear people. Because I remember the Mother Superior said, the only ones who know you're Jewish are these one, two, three, four, whatever.

When you arrived at the convent, did the Mother Superior give you any, like when you lived in Brussels, the landlord would call up--

[INTERPOSING VOICES].

Were there any similar--

No, except that day when the parachuters landed. She had an assembly and all of us were put in the attic, all the children, because she was afraid if they came in, the Gestapo and the SS, they would go ch-ch-ch-ch and did everybody if they thought the man was there. And I told you, to this day we do not know whether he really was there, if he wasn't there. It's just that somebody denounced the convent that they were hiding American parachuters. And that was right after D-Day.

And you said that during this time your father came and visited you.

Occasionally. Right, occasionally. I went home a couple of times. Before my mother came into the convent, I went home maybe once every two months. But then after the incident when the girl was picked up my father said, no more

coming home. I would go take the tram and go into Brussels and visit my parents at the attic. But then afterwards, after that incident, my dad said, you're not coming in. I'll try to come out occasionally with false papers.

Like I told you, he had false papers. Because you never knew in those days if you walk down the street if an SS man walked down the street, or a Gestapo-- Gestapo never wore a uniform. They only wore regular plain clothes like the FBI. They don't wear a uniform. And they could stop you at any time of the day and say, papers. Papier, as they say.

When he came to visit, did you ever discuss with him your interests?

Oh, he knew I became a Catholic. Yeah. And he said, you know, used to say, so-- You got to do what you have to do, and that was the end of it. He understood. Except when I came home and the war was over in 1945, when the war was declared over, he says, now is enough. But I still went to church off and on and he didn't object. But he felt I should go back to what I was. Because he said that was then and this is now.

And then you will moved after that parachute to a different location.

A convent. Yes, I can't remember. We were trying to remember the name of that convent. For the life of me I can't remember. All I knew were the addresses. And it was a reform school for bad girls.

What was a typical day like there?

Oh gosh, you got up at 5:00 there. And first you were deloused because a lot of the kids had lice. That was so terrible. I remember. June was telling me she can always remember how every night I would cry myself to sleep. I was so unhappy there. And it was school, and it was very, very strict. You didn't open your mouth. And I mean you used to get like porridge in the morning, like those stories you see. And very, very strict. Couldn't have visitors. I mean, it was a reform school. And we were put with kids that were bad kids, bad girls. But I guess that's the only place they felt we would be safe.

You were the only Jewish students?

Yeah. There were about, I think, for what I remember they put about 20 of us there. And then some went to other places. But like I said, thank God it only lasted for six weeks.

Do you remember any specific nuns there?

No. No, they were all mean. That's all I remember was-- Well, they had to be mean. There was only one, only the Mother Superior there knew we were Jewish.

Were you ever punished?

At the convent? Yeah, I told you we were punished when we read that book about a boy kissing the girl on the cheek. That was at the good convent we were punished. We could not have any fun activities like listening to music. I mean, there were radios, listening to music or participating in our drama unit for so many days. We had to do kitchen work, which we usually had to do. We had to take turns to do kitchen work every day, but we had to do it straight for one week and get up at 5:00 in the morning and do extra.

In the other convent, if one girl in the correctional institution, if one girl goofed off, we were all punished. No evening. After dinner into bed, no lights, no nothing. Even if it wasn't us, they would punish the whole group.

Were you ever physically--

No. No, never. Never.

OK. And you were there for a few months and then Belgium was liberated?

Right, September.

Do you remember it?

September 2nd. I sure do. I sure do. Everybody came running down this street. We heard, la liberation, which means the liberation, and we all ran out and I remember the woman-- Then it didn't matter you were Jewish or not, we all hugged and we-- How I remember my dad coming and looking for me and taking me home, because that was right in Brussels. That was about 15 minutes away by streetcar from where I lived. And he came to meet me because he knew where I was. Of course, he could never visit me there.

And we all went, I remember my mother was home but she wasn't doing that well, but we all went to this complatz and they danced on the street all night and celebrated for days. Then afterwards I remember I developed some kind, whether it was nerves or whether I picked something up at that correctional school, I developed this horrible eczema all over my body. Oh, it was awful. I had these terrible blats all over me. And I had to have special treatment where they would put you in hot sulfur baths because I guess they didn't have antibiotics and those. And it was awful.

And I don't know, I never had a diagnosis whether it was something I picked up there, or whether it was nerves. Probably now that I think back it probably was a nervous outbreak. And I remember my dad had a very good friend who was a physician, his name was Dr. Goldstein, and he could not practice during the war. They took away from the Jewish doctors their license. But then when the war was over, he regained it and he treated me. He sent me to a special place-- it's coming back-- to have hot sulfur baths. It would be like a mud or sulfur. I remember the smell of sulfur being so strong.

And it finally cleared off. Because you know today they give you antibiotics and things like that. But they didn't treat you like today. But I never knew why I got it and how I got it, because I don't think eczema you pick up. I think it could have been a nervous reaction to everything finally broke. That was right after the liberation, maybe a week or so after. I had to go, I remember, two or three times a week and take those baths, and I used to hate it.

After that what happened? Did you go back to school?

Yes. What I did is I worked at the American Joint Distribution Committee. But before I got the job I went to a business school in Brussels to learn shorthand and typing.

Did your family ever consider going back to Germany?

Never. Never. My dad said never, never would he go back. Some people went back. Like my dad said, no way. So I went to like a business school would be like HEALS here, that type of school, to learn business. Because I had my diploma when the war was over. The convent in Brussels gave us a diploma for the four years, which is equivalent to [NON-ENGLISH] It's equivalent to like a high school diploma. It's a little bit different there. There's no such thing as high school. And you do your [NON-ENGLISH] which is your finishing of your grade school type thing. And I received that. I still have my diploma at home from the convent.

And then I went to business school. I did that for a year, quick class, and then I worked. As I said, I got a part time job at American Joint Distribution Committee.

What did you do?

Just type and just file, type. And I spoke a little bit of English, so that helped. And of course they were instrumental all the refugees that came out of the camps had to be, all the displaced persons they called them, they had to place them, rehabilitate them. And some of them had visas for America, some went back to Germany, some went back to France. They all came from the camps. A lot from the camps went to Germany and then later went to Canada.

And what happened after that?

I came here to the United States. I came here in May of 1947.

What led you to--

My aunt lived here and she said my father contacted my mother's half sister and asked her if she could send an affidavit and bring me over because he wanted me to have a fresh start in a good country and be free, so to speak. So it took a while because she had to send me an affidavit. Then I had to go to the American embassy and be interviewed and also have a very, very, very, very strict medical examination that I was not bringing any diseases here. And then I obtained the visa.

And then being I worked at the American Joint Distribution Committee, they were very nice. They helped pay for my passage so I didn't have to go-- I went pretty nice. I came over on the Mauritania in second class, which in those days was pretty nice. I came with all the war brides. But it was very frightening for a young girl of 17 to travel by herself. I found myself alone again, and like I said, when I arrived here I was very unhappy because you know why? I found people treating me, not being able to speak English as good, the same way I was treated as a child in Belgium it was like again the same.

Because again I was not accepted right away. I had to prove that I-- That's why I never talked about my past. I wanted to be like they are. I joined the Jewish Community Center on California Street and I made some nice, decent people. But it took a while till they accepted me.

Did you ever discuss your experiences with your aunt?

No. No, she would not have understood. Because her theory would have been forget it, it's over. Her main interest was that I come here, that I go to work, and that I do not become a burden. As she used to say, you know I signed that you would not be a burden to the United States. Because when you did in those days an affidavit, you had to sign that the person was not a-- Because she came here as a little girl because my mother was my mother's half sister so she couldn't understand what went on. She had no idea.

How long did you stay with her?

She also had sent two affidavits, one for me and for my dad. But my dad being he was born in Lemberg, which was then under the Polish quota, he had to wait an extra year. So I stayed with my aunt from 1947 till 1949, two years. And believe me, it was not very pleasant. I said, why did I come here? I'm going through the same thing as I did as a child. When my dad came and he saw the circumstance he says, we get out of here.

I was working I worked at National Auto Club. Then through them my English got better. I went at night time to school here. I took public speaking to learn to speak better. And I got a job at American Hawaiian Steamship Corporation, which was very nice. And then when my dad came he said we get out of there. You are like in a prison. You're back like worse than the convent. So we got a small apartment on Guerrero Street, and that's when I left.

And I didn't have much contact with her at all anymore. Because she felt that I was not grateful to what she did for me. But again, that's why I say there's good and bad in all people. Maybe in her eyes she thought she was doing good. Who knows? May she rest in peace, she's gone so it's over.

Did you discuss your experiences much with your father when he came out?

He saw what was going on, sure.

Did you did you talk about your experiences during the war? Did you talk about it?

Not too much. We didn't talk much about it. We did not talk about it. The only time we started talking about it when he applied for restitution from the German government, my dad did. And I received one time \$1,000 American. I think it

was \$1,080, something like that, for having lost my education. That was nothing. And my dad took a lump sum for restitution for losing his business, his home, and everything. And he never took it by the month because he knew he was up in years and if he had taken it by the month when he passes on that's it. The child does not get anything. So he took a lump sum at that time of \$5,000, which is nothing.

Somebody told me that there is an attorney in Washington, D.C. Now I don't know if you've heard of that. Someone like myself who is a child survivor could reapply for what I have lost-- my education-- but I don't know how true it is. And you know you start with attorneys sometimes they want up front, so I don't know. I wonder if you'd heard anything about that.

How about your sister? Did she ever try to come to the United States?

No. No, she was married and my sister too would not talk about the past. It was like dormant. Because when my father applied for restitution, she could have gotten something and she refused to fill out any papers or anything. Just like how I feel about going to Germany. Even though I get a free trip, my husband even says, he says, go! We'll go, we'll have a good time, we stay there and go on. I said, no, you can't. You got to stay there the whole time because they're going to wine and dine you and show you how good they are. I said, you can't just go for the flight and take off.

Where did you meet your husband?

At the Jewish Community Center San Francisco in 1949. And we got married in 1950. The Jewish Community Center at a dance. Used to have the dances there you know. I don't think they still have them.

Did he grow up in the area? Yes. Well, he was born back East in Baltimore. And his father passed away and his mother came out here with him and his sister when they were very young so he feels like he's a native San Franciscan. He came here when he was four or five years old.

When did you become again interested in Judaism?

Oh, very shortly after the war, about a year or so after.

Is that an important part of your life now?

Oh, I feel very strong about Judaism. I go to services on the high holidays because I like the tradition of it but I'm not affiliated. I would be affiliated, but my husband kind of got away from religion, especially since our son passed away. Because he felt how can this happen? Why did we do? Or what happened God take away a life for somebody that's never done anything wrong? Like the book, I don't know if you ever read the book by Kushner, Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? There is no answer. But he said to him religion, my husband feels religion is to treat your fellow man right.

So that's why we don't belong, but I go every year with the high holidays. Temple Emanuel has tickets at the auditorium that you can purchase, so I go there.

How do you feel your experiences during the war affected you now?

Well, like I told you, I doubt people a lot. I have a certain apprehension. When people tell me something, I'm not always sure what they say they mean. And it's very hard for me to trust someone. But like I said, it's taught me to be a survivor.

How about these reunions that you've been having and meeting with other children? What has that meant to you.

Oh, it's been the most wonderful experience. Especially the first one when I had not seen-- in 1991 when I had not seen some of these women since 1947, '46, '47. So it was the most incredible reunion you could imagine. And the second one was great too because it went back to my childhood that I really remembered, Belgium. And my mother is buried too in Belgium, so there is a certain alliance there for me.

How about discussing your experiences with your children? Was that--

It was very hard. Very, very hard. Like I told you, I could not talk because-- I did not really talk about these experiences till after the first reunion. And the other day my daughter and granddaughter were for dinner and I happened to mention something. And she said, mom, you never talked about that. How come you never told us that when we were growing up? I said, I just maybe wanted to forget it. And it took the reunion to open it up again.

When we were your kids born?

Our son was born in 1952 and my daughter was born in 1958. And our son passed away in 1993, January.

What is your daughter doing now?

My daughter is home. She's raising a daughter. That's a full-time job as a teenager.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Really all I want is to thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell you my story. Although I feel there are stories that are a lot more important to tell. But I'm still happy that I was able to talk about it and tell you so it can go on for the next generation or on and on and on so people will always remember that there was a Holocaust. And that the ones that are alive are very lucky and we should never forget. But it's important we do forgive. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much.

OK, this is a picture of me as a little girl. I think I was about 16, 18 months.

OK, this is us, my dad and this is myself and this is my mom. And my dad had just returned from Buchenwald. This was January 1939, after he was taken to Buchenwald after the Kristallnacht.

Normally his hair wouldn't be this light?

No. There you can see his hair has just started going back because they had shaved all his hair.

This is my friend June, who I was in the convent with who you will see later. In New York at our first reunion in 1991 in her home. This was in the convent around 1945. I was receiving first communion. And this is myself on the left. In the middle is-- no, excuse me. I'm right here on the right. June is in the middle and another girl, I can't remember her name, is receiving first communion. And it was then taken in front of the grotto at the convent in their gardens.

This is a typical day at the school in the convent during a break of some kind. We were all sitting out in the schoolyard. And this was the school at the convent. The convent was called, I never mentioned it but I should mention it, Le Saint Pierre [NON-ENGLISH].

What does that mean?

Well, the town is Le Saint Pierre. The convent is called the Convent of St. Anthony of Padua. And St. Anthony of Padua is the saint that when you lose something you pray to him you'll find it.

This is the famous yellow star, the star of David that every Jew was told to wear on their lapel or on their blouse where it was visual so you would be recognized as a Jew. And the I stood for German Juden. Jew in English, Juif in French. And we all had to wear it.

Did you have to wear one on your back as well.

No. On the lapel. The only ones that wore them on the back were the ones that were in the camps.

These are the nuns that were running the convent that I was in. And the middle one was Sr. Helene that I told you that I loved so dearly. To the left was the Mother Superior. Next to the Mother Superior was the director of the school, Sr. Victoire. And on and on. There were so many there it's hard to determine each one. But this was the whole group of the nuns of the order of Saint Anthony de Padua. And this was the steps of the school.

This was our uniform of the day. A little coat over our dresses. And we wore those. We had one and we had to wash it every weekend to keep it clean for the next day. And it had pockets. It was quite convenient because you could put a lot of things in there. I was in the color of off-white. And there is June and there's Ruth and there's Laurette. And there's me and a couple of other girls that God knows I can't remember their name.

Could you point to yourself?

I'm the second from the right.

This was taken in one of the picnics they gave us, which we had occasionally. On a Sunday we would go out on picnics in the woods. And we are here. This is our class with our favorite teacher Sr. Helen, Sister Helen. And I'm the first one to the left. And then comes Ruth and then comes June and down below Laurette and Pauline and Gitte. And unfortunately the lady, the girl next to Sr. Helene on the right, Helene, went home on a weekend and never came back. She was denounced, deported, and who knows what happened to her.

This was again in the school yard. We had a drama class and we were putting on a play. And this was our costumes for the play. And I'm counting how many Jewish kids were in that picture. Was Felice, was June, was Ruth, was Pauline, Gitte, myself, Edith, Laurette, and Felice-- another Felice. And I would say they were two Christians. The rest of us were Jewish girls.

OK, on your left or I guess left is Mademoiselle Andre Gulen, G--U-L-E-N. She was the one that was working in the underground, a young student at the University of Brussels, a freedom fighter. And she was a Catholic, very involved with the Catholic Church. And she went around and asked all these different convents if they could hide the Jewish children. And sure enough she was successful and she hid, I understand, over 600 children alone from Brussels and Antwerp.

And at the 1991 reunion you see her now as a woman. At that time she was 18, 19. You see her now as a woman in her 70s receiving the award of Yad Vashem for the righteous people that helped to survive the Jewish children. And she's married now to a Jewish doctor and has children and grandchildren. And as we told her when we saw her the first time, we said, you are here because of us and your life will always be good because you saved us and you deserve the honor. More than the honor, you should be inscribed in the Book of Life.

So this was the woman who your father dropped you off to.

Exactly.

OK. Now I want to point out to you the people that you saw before as children are now women. And the first one I'm going to point out is here is June. And then is Laurette. And this is Ruth. This is myself. And this is Edith. This here is a cousin of June who was also hidden but not with us. This is another lady that was hidden in our convent but I could not remember her because she was a child. She was about five years old, and you know when you are 12 and 14 you don't associate with five-year-old. And this is her husband who is British who was a pilot for British Airways. And they came to the reunion.

Who is the gentleman standing?

Oh, excuse me. That's June's husband, Richard, who is an American all the way.