

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Berges, Mary

Date of interview: 7/21/1995

Summary: Mary Friedman Berges was born in Antwerp, Belgium on August 19, 1935 to Michael and Elizabeth Friedman. She had one brother, Alfred Friedman (birth date: 03/08/1932). Her father was a baker, and her mother was a homemaker in Antwerp. Her father was from Poland and her mother was from Graz, Austria. Mary is not sure when her family moved to Belgium, but she does know that her brother was born in Germany. She also does not know anything about her father's family and how her parents met. However, her mother was one of 12 children and had several siblings who survived. Her mother's family is scattered throughout the United States, Israel, England, and Holland.

She does not have clear memories of her life before the war in Antwerp. She only has vague recollections of playing with other children in the street and of the big mixer in her father's bakery. She thinks they were a poor family and were not very religious. She remembers her mother saying the blessing over the candles on Shabbat and eating challah, but does not remember going to synagogue.

Her father was taken first, but she has no memory of that incident either. Her mother hid Mary and Alfred in Catholic orphanages in the countryside, on the border near Holland, when Mary was five. She remembers walking down a country road, past a bus kiosk, and her mother sitting with her by the side of that road talking to her, but she does not remember what her mom said or how she felt. Mary went to a girls' orphanage and her brother went to a boys' orphanage. She believes that the name of the orphanage was St. Joseph's. She does not remember being told to conceal her identity at the orphanage but she thinks there were other Jewish children there. She does not remember seeing her mother after she was in the orphanage, but her brother says that their mother visited once or twice. She also saw her brother once or twice while they were hidden. Alfred found out later that the orphanages were specifically for troubled children. They were in the orphanage for three or four years. Mary remembers it as a very unhappy time. The nuns punished her for wetting the bed by placing the wet bed-sheet over her head while she was made to stand next to her bed in the dark. Her bed was by the window and she recalls standing there with the bed-sheet over her, hearing bombs exploding outside. She was also locked in a closet as punishment. Mary does not know what she did to be locked in the closet but she remembers being very scared. The only corporal punishment she remembers was being hit on the hands with a ruler in class. Mary does not remember the other children in the orphanage but she does remember other children standing with bed-sheets over their heads. Her happiest memory in the orphanage was when they went into the countryside once a week to pick gooseberries.

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Mary does not have a clear memory of the War ending or leaving the orphanage. Apparently, her mother told the sister of her sister Rivka's husband (so the sister-in-law of Elizabeth's sister Rivka) where she had hidden Mary and Alfred. At the time, Mary did not know what happened to her parents. She remembers asking Alfred and he told her that their mother would come back for them. She thinks that after a while she accepted that their parents were gone. Alfred found out that their parents died at Auschwitz after the lists of holocaust victims were made public in Israel. After the war, Aunt Rivka's sister-in-law, who lived in Belgium, went to the Catholic orphanage to collect Alfred and Mary. At that time, Mary did not know that she was Jewish and was told that she would not give back her bible or her Cross when she was leaving the orphanage. Aunt Rivka's sister-in-law took Mary and Alfred to an Orthodox Jewish orphanage in Belgium. Mary remembers receiving better treatment at this orphanage. They were allowed to leave and go to the store and their maternal Uncle Joseph, who served in the English military, visited them several times and took them to the sand dunes. The mother's family wanted to send Alfred and Mary to family in Israel (which was not yet a State, as this was prior to 1948) from the Jewish orphanage. But Mary was told that "Israel" wanted Alfred but did not want her because she was too young. So she and her brother were sent by boat to family in the United States when she was 11 years old (April 1947).

Mary arrived in New York and was met by her maternal Uncle Max, an optometrist trained in Austria, and his wife, Aunt Sylvie who had a two-year-old child, Mark. She remembers someone buying her a red outfit when they arrived in New York. From New York, Max and Sylvie took Mary by train to live with them in Decatur, Illinois. Mary does not remember where Alfred was sent to live after arriving in the States. Max and Sylvie had been in the US since before the War. They lived in the country and Mary lived in their attic. She remembers sitting on their front porch learning English. But when Mary arrived in the US the memories "started hurting", she felt abandoned and very alone, as she and Alfred were not close. She was told that she was a troublemaker when she came to the US. She did not get along with schoolmates or her family. She acted out by fighting in school and stealing. Eventually, her Uncle Max and Aunt Sylvie sent her to live with her maternal Aunt Ella in Detroit, Michigan. Her Aunt Ella had been the first family member to come to the US seeking opportunity when she was 16 years old. She had one daughter, Elise, who was three or four years older than Mary. Mary only lived with her Aunt Ella for one year as she was told that she was difficult. Mary does not recall being difficult but she does remember not feeling accepted, nor liked, and empty.

After living with her Aunt Ella, she was sent to live in a foster home in Detroit. This first foster family tried to adopt her but the adoption did not take place for some unknown reason. So Mary was sent to the Jewish foster home of Sadie and Harold Yanick (sp?) in Detroit, Michigan. At this time, Mary remembers her brother living with her in this foster home until he turned 18 and moved out.

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Unfortunately, the Yanicks were not nurturing and made Mary feel like a hired hand rather than a member of the family. Mary remembers one Hanukkah when all of the Yanick's relatives exchanged gifts and she did not receive one present. She just had to sit there and watch while everyone opened gifts. Mary shared a room with the natural daughter of the Yanick's. Several times, the daughter would awake screaming from a nightmare and the parents would comfort her. Mary remembers having a nightmare one night, crying out in her sleep and no one came to offer her comfort. It was another reminder that she was alone in life.

Mary did well enough to graduate high school and to attend a Catholic nursing school in Detroit. She lived in the nursing school's dorms for three years but had to take a leave of absence as she was "acting up," by doing things such as taking showers at night. After nursing school, Mary worked as a nurse but she moved often, as she never felt that she belonged anywhere. Mary felt depressed throughout her life and attempted suicide numerous times by drug overdoses. Mary's first attempt was when she was 26 or 27 when she again lived with her Uncle Max and Aunt Sylvie, then living in San Bernardino, California. She told her Uncle that she was not feeling well so her Uncle gave her Valium. She remembers just wanting to sleep. After sleeping for eight hours, she went to her Uncle's medicine cabinet and accidentally overdosed after she took more drugs. Her Uncle suggested that she voluntarily admit herself to the hospital, which she did for a short period. However, she attempted suicide a second time while living in San Bernardino by taking a bottle of Quaaludes. She was admitted to a psychiatric hospital where she received eight months of shock therapy. Her Aunt and Uncle only visited her a couple of times when she was in the hospital and again she felt rejected. After she was released, she moved to Los Angeles and sought help from a psychologist but still attempted suicide several more times over a 10-year period.

After traveling throughout the country and working as a nurse, Mary met her husband Harold Berges through a mutual friend in 1977 or 1978. She was then living in Colorado. Harold worked for an Aspen ski resort and was a farmer. They were married for 15 years until Harold died of Huntington's disease. They did not have any children, as they were older when they married. Mary also never really wanted children as she felt she would not have been a good mother. They had a good marriage but Mary struggled, as she had to learn how to love him. Harold was not Jewish and Mary is not religious.

Mary currently lives in Idaho and works as a traveling psychiatric nurse. She feels that her experiences with depression make her empathetic to her patients. Harold's death caused Mary to again seek counseling to deal with not only her husband's death but also the death of her parents, which she still feels she has not accepted. Throughout her life she would fantasize that her parents were alive and would find her.

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Today Mary and Alfred are still not close. He is not demonstrative and she feels he rejected her several times throughout her life. She was not comfortable discussing detailed rejections, but she did say that she remembers trying to hug him several times and he would push her away. He now wants to have a better relationship with her but she feels that it is too late. Alfred is remarried and has five children from his first marriage. He currently lives in Toledo, Ohio. Both his first and second wife are Jewish. His first marriage was unhappy but he is currently in a happy marriage. Alfred has conducted the research to try to find out what happened to their parents, their mother's family and their father's family. However, he has never been interviewed about his Holocaust experiences and has no interest.