Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project
P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Bendahan, Margaret

Date of interview: 8/28/1991

Summary: Margaret Bendahan was born in Saxony, Germany in 1908 to a Jewish mother and a Christian father. She had an older brother and a sister six years younger. She experienced a happy childhood enjoying both of her religions. Margaret was used to Christmas trees and Hanukkah menorahs as part of her religious ritual every year, even though she did not attend the Lutheran church or the synagogue regularly. Margaret and her family enjoyed this religious freedom as Mischlinges, a term later used to categorize the people who were half Jewish and half Christian, because, as Margaret recalled from her childhood, her family and the Germans around them got along fine.

The Bendahans were able to live normally until certain groups became suspect and undesirable under Hitler's regime. As a result of the widespread suspicion and distaste for Jewish people, Margaret's family went from respected members of society to low-order citizens as anti-Semitism escalated.

Margaret's first memory of being affected by the Holocaust was the loss of her father’s Glove and Sock Company. Once word of Hitler's brutal and extreme practices reached across Europe, buyers in France, Switzerland, and Italy quickly pulled their funding out of Mr. Bendahan's company. Business suffered until the family-owned company was finally forced to declare bankruptcy. Margaret's father suffered a stroke due to the stress of losing his life's work, and was never quite the same.

Margaret's mother was told to report to police headquarters and present her passport. Margaret was worried sick, so she volunteered to go along with her mother. Margaret was disgusted with the ignorant and rude way that they addressed her mother. After a rocky meeting, they told Mrs. Bendahan they would decide her fate, and notify her in a couple of days. Margaret begged her mother to contact her father's German relatives in the city, one of who had ties with the Gestapo. Mrs. Bendahan agreed, and they wrote to the family at once, asking if they could put in a good word with the Nazis so they wouldn't face the same fate of deportation that dozens of their friends already had. The response from the relatives was that they would try to keep the Bendahan's together, and out of trouble.

The Gestapo summoned Margaret, and she was told to present her passport. Knowing that her younger sister had a clever mind, she took her along, and they devised a plan. Since Margaret was able to speak German, French, and English, she was going to apply for a position with Lufthansa Airlines. When they arrived at the station, the Nazis took a look at Margaret and her sister Hilda, and

commented on their bright blonde hair and blue eyes. Because of these physical traits, the Nazis lowered their guard, and asked to see her passport as a precaution. They then proceeded to ask her about her employment, and when she told them about her plan to join the German airlines, all suspicions were dropped. The sisters were allowed to leave without the symbolic "J" being branded on their passport.

Margaret's quest to join Lufthansa was not as easy. She passed the interview and was about to start basic training when the company discovered her Mischlinge background. They abruptly cancelled Margaret's position, saying that they did not want any Jews working for them. Margaret remembers being appalled at the fact that she was a qualified person let go due to her religion, no questions asked. She then went back to work in Berlin at the same modest music store where she had worked since she was a teenager. Her caring boss welcomed her back with open arms, saying that her religion did not matter in the least.

Margaret's father then wrote to a friend in the United States, whom he had known years before. He wrote that Margaret needed an opportunity to go to the U.S. to escape from Germany and he enclosed a picture to the woman. Her son, Tom Erickson, became interested in marrying her and they agreed to sponsor her. As she prepared to pack, she also worked on the difficult task of being granted the necessary papers to leave Berlin. The officials denied this at first, because of the war, so they suggested that she go through Asia and into the Panama Canal, and then to America.

On a winter morning in 1940, all that Margaret carried with her was ten dollars, a modest amount of clothing, and fresh linens to present to her husband as her dowry. It was very difficult for Margaret to say goodbye, but she remembers her mother saying, "At least we could save one."

The long, hard trip to Panama would take Margaret through several countries. On a stuffy, cramped train occupied by German guards, Margaret began to feel very lonely and homesick. They traveled through Nazi-occupied Poland, where they were asked to pull the curtains down, and a brutally cold Russia. Margaret was allowed to get out and move around, but did not do so for long because she caught a terrible cold. They arrived in Okinawa, Japan to get on a boat that would eventually take them to Panama. Just as she thought she was clear of danger, Margaret's battle was just beginning. Her dream of marrying Tom would never happen.

Japan would be her foreign home for the next five years. Margaret was denied admittance when she tried to board the boat, and strict Japanese officials asked to see her passport. She was taken for questioning, and rudely told that she was going to have to remain in Japan. A devastated Margaret was determined to find a way to get to Panama to meet her fiancée. She went to the German embassy

in Japan, and also the Panamanian embassy in Japan, but neither would grant her a passport. She realized that she might be stuck there indefinitely, so she found a job as a French tutor for a family nearby, and was able to support herself.

One day as Margaret was walking down the street she was kidnapped by Japanese police and taken to Headquarters. She was kept waiting for hours until a translator came out and explained that the Gestapo in Germany sent a list to Japanese police of the Jewish spies who currently roamed the streets. Even though she insisted that she was not a spy, the Japanese locked her away in their central prison. Inside her 10 by 5 foot cell, Margaret was subject to daily beatings. They constantly struck her over the head with blunt objects, put out cigarettes on her body, and poured water into her eyes and nostrils until she fainted. The food was horrible gruel, and Margaret lost fifty pounds as a result of dysentery from her overflowing toilet. She also had to battle with the dozens of ticks and bed bugs that shared the cell. This cruelty resulted from Margaret refusing to sign an official document stating that she was a spy. Margaret continually refused, protesting that she could not admit to something that she had no part in. The beatings continued viciously, until her body couldn't take it anymore. She signed the paper, and was sent to a bigger prison with slightly improved living conditions. She would remain there from 1944 until the 1945 liberation.

Margaret still marvels at the fact that she survived being underfed and beaten constantly and attributes her survival to her daily prayers.

After Margaret was released, she had a very difficult time seeking medical attention, because American soldiers were given first priority, and the various hospital ships were already filled. Margaret's earlier saving grace of her passport without the Jewish branding would now prove to be her curse. Weak and frail, Margaret wandered in search of medical care. A charity offered by a group of Catholic priests who had heard of her case promised to get her the necessary treatments. They also referred her to the American Red Cross for employment, where she eventually worked as an activities director.

Margaret finally came to the U.S. in late 1945, and stayed with her first cousin in Mill Valley for a fee of twenty dollars a month. She did menial work as a maid at first, until her new husband suggested that she apply at a department store to sell clothes. She got the job, and worked there for a few years until she gave birth to a baby boy.

Margaret later said that during all those terrible days in prison she wished for a baby to love, and she was very happy to have this dream come true. Her husband passed away only eleven years after they married, but Margaret's mother and sister came to join her in the United States, after they had survived the war hidden in southern Germany.

Margaret expressed how difficult it is to relive and retell her experience. She compared it to a wound that is continuously opened every time she brings it up. She did take some comfort in the fact that she was allowed to report the atrocities committed against her to The War Crimes Board. She does experience some long-term memory loss that she attributes to continuously being struck over the head. She received a small pension out of this, but the trauma of her experience still haunts her to this day. She gets very depressed when she thinks of the friends that she lost, but remains hopeful for the future.