

Interview with: MARGOT WEBB

Holocaust Oral History Project

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Interviewer: Tami Newnham

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(Begin Tape 1.)

Q. Today is April 27, 1993. We are with the Holocaust Oral History Project, interviewing Margot Webb. Interviewing her is Tammy Newnham with David Sokolsky on videotape.

Margot, you start out giving us a description of your family members and the year you were born.

A. I was born in 1927, and I was the only child of Ilsa and Edmund Lewan. In Germany, of course, we called them Levine. I had a rather large family of adults around me, aunts, uncles, cousins; and those were really the people who supported me throughout that ordeal.

Q. Can you give us some of their names?

A. My grandmother, of course, I called Alma, the German word for grandmommy. Her name was Paula (Umba); and her husband, my (Oppa), was David (Umba). There was an aunt named Lena, an uncle Max; a cousin named Rosie and another one who ultimately worked for the Underground in Holland named Renee. I have grandparents on my father's side; my grandmother, (Mata), and my grandfather, Sigmund.

Q. Where were you born?

A. I was born in East Germany, in Halle, same town where Handel was born.

Q. What did your parents do?

A. My father owned a large department store that had been in the family for two other generations; and actually, he didn't like that very much. He wanted to become an architect. He was educated in England in a very classical tradition. He could read Greek and Latin and so forth. Then he had to go into his father's business. That was very sad for him.

Q. Do you remember that department store? Can you describe it?

A. Yes, I do. I remember that particularly in front of the department store, they had hired an African boy. Blacks were highly valued at that time in Germany, and here was this little African boy to get people into the store, and he was well paid. And if he ever said hello to me, I was really honored.

Q. Valued in what way?

A. The kind of black people who came to Germany at that time came usually with the diplomatic services or they came to be educated. So people just felt honored to be in their presence. They were musicians, opera singers, things like that.

Q. And your mother?

A. My mother is and was -- how can I describe her? She enjoyed parties. She still does. A bit of a flirt. Very pretty; small; wherever she went, you know, men admired

her. It was kind of difficult being the child of somebody like that; but that is how she was. But she was also a very loving mother.

Q. And your grandparents, did they live with you?

A. No, they didn't. But the part that I would like to talk about is in 1937, we had to leave Halle because the Nazi business was just getting to be too much. We tried to get out.

So, without my knowing why we were moving, we moved to my grandparents' place in the (Syringian) Forest. I went to school there, and my parents tried to keep everything a secret, and so did my grandparents and my aunts and my uncles. No matter how often I asked why are we here -- I mean, I was happy to be with my grandparents, really happy, but I wanted to know why we had left the other house, and were we ever going to go back home? Was I ever going to see it again? And I never got a straight answer, not for a long, long time.

Q. When you said that the Nazi business was getting worse, what did you see?

A. Well, in the city I was not allowed to see anything. It was just whispered conversations behind doors. My father's store was taken away. My grandmother on my father's side died. My other grandfather on my father's side moved to another city; and people were always saying,

We are leaving. I didn't know what that meant. I was a little girl then.

I didn't quite understand all the nervousness, the tension that was continuously around us. And what I did notice was the huge Nazi flags, and they always frightened me, and the SS soldiers, the incessant parades; but I was always pulled away from the window. Don't look, don't -- you know, don't go out in the street; stay with us.

No matter how much I asked, they wouldn't tell me.

Q. And you saw the parade right in front of your house?

A. Yes. They had a parade a day. Yes. Singing God-awful songs. It was very scary to me.

Q. Did you know what they were about? Did your parents explain?

A. Nothing. Nothing at that time. Not until we moved to my maternal grandparents'. Then I talked to a maid one day. They were all huddled together in another room in the house; and the house was built in 1450, so the walls were six foot thick. It was kind of hard to listen at the door. I tried. She caught me at the keyhole, the maid did.

She said, come into the kitchen, this is not a very nice thing to do. And I said, Well, it's not very nice that I don't know why I am here. She said, You mean they haven't told you about the Nazis?

And I said, No.

And my grandmother happened to be walking in and heard this conversation; and she took me by the hand and took me into the room where the whole family was sitting and said, I think it's time to tell her. That's how I found out.

Q. Do you remember much of what they said?

A. They were very blunt, especially my father. He took me on his lap and he said, We're Jews; and I knew that, but I thought everybody was a Jew, you know. I was a little girl. And so he said, People in this country hate us, and we have to leave. And Hitler doesn't really want us, so we have to go.

My main concern at that point was leaving my grandparents. I didn't want to do that. I was really afraid that I was going to lose all my friends, although I thought they were all Jewish; but none of them were.

Q. Do you think this was the first awareness you had of --

A. I always knew I was different in another sense, you know. I knew that I was different because I was an only child. I knew I was different because I was -- I hate to say this, it sounds like bragging, but I was always the top student. So oftentimes other children didn't like that. But in that town where my grandparents lived, when I started school there, I had a girl friend, her name was Rosemary.

We were competitors. It was just wonderful being with her, you know.

And -- I thought she was Jewish. Then my grandfather said, No, she is not. You have to be very careful when you go to school. Don't say anything. Don't bring attention to yourself. Don't talk loudly. Don't laugh too loudly.

Let other children win the games. You don't have to show off. You know, give a few wrong answers in school, things like that.

It seemed horrible to me. But that was only the beginning. That was that first day.

Q. And prior to this -- because you were Jewish?

A. Well, it was always, shh, be quiet, don't have such a Jewish mouth. I didn't know what that meant. I just thought, you know -- until much later when I began to see the Sturmer Papers with the exaggerated cartoons of Jews and heard the propaganda and was allowed to listen. In fact, I insisted on it.

Q. What is it you remember? The exaggerated characters?

A. Well, they always had -- the front page always had the picture of a Jew with an enormous nose and small pig eyes; generally something to do with money or beating a little child or hanging Jesus or something like that, but it was always very unflattering and the Jew was always fat and

always had a nose that was twice the size of his face.

Q. And what papers were these?

A. It was called the Sturmer, which means the stormer, so -- they had a thing about storm; storm troopers, storm -- even from the time of Wagner; you know, in his operas.

Q. Where did you get this paper?

A. It was everywhere. It was on the walls of buildings; it was on kiosks, everywhere. We didn't buy it. It was just there.

Q. So before you moved to your grandparents, what was your awareness of being Jewish? Did your parents practice holidays?

A. We always went for holidays to my grandparents. So actually in that town where I was born, I led a rather non-Jewish life. I had nannies. My parents had money, so I had nannies, and we had a cook, and we had a man to do gardening; and it was a sort of lonely, you know, quote unquote, privileged child existence, so I just didn't know. Until I came to that town where my grandparents lived. And then I found out little by little how -- you know, one horror built on the other.

Q. How long did you stay in school while you were there?

A. I think I was in school about a year; and the



first day I went to school, this friend, Rosemary, was really glad to see me. She said, Oh, good, we can go to school together. She lived right across the street. In the wintertime, we'd ski to school together. But when I got to the school, there was another girl named (Gizella). She already gave me the feeling that, you know, things are different.

She said, What are you doing here? Then she turned to her friend Rosemary and said, You know, don't forget our meeting tomorrow night. And I said, What meeting. She said, It's none of your business.

And later on, I found out about the Hitler Youth because Rosemary told me. I said, Well, I want to be in it, too. And she said, You can't be; I have to be in it to protect my parents.

And I said, Well, I want to protect my parents and my grandparents, so why can't I be in it? That's when she told me, We can't have Jews in it.

I was crushed.

I have written a book called Shadows at Noon, and I have in it the part where I was asked to leave the school. If you would like me to read that, I would be happy to do that.

Q. If that is what you --

A. Yes. Because I loved school. Absolutely loved

it.

Q. Did you know these girls before?

A. I had known them before from other vacations; that's right.

"One day" -- I called myself Miriam in the book, because that is my Jewish name, anyway.

"One day Miriam was called into the school director's office. What had she done wrong, she wondered. Her grades were good. What could he want? Suddenly, she brightened. Of course, that was it. He wanted to congratulate her on her excellent behavior. Still, Miriam's heart pounded as she knocked on the director's door.

"'Come in, come in, my dear,' Dr. Schmidt sighed, his fat little face almost comical with a smile overlaying an unhappy expression. 'Good morning, Miriam.' She curtsied before the director. She felt ashamed, she didn't know why. She was lost for words. Standing before Dr. Schmidt's desk she nervously smooth her navy blue skirt.

"'Please don't worry, Miriam,' the director said. 'Do you know why you are here?'

"'No, no, I don't,' she answered, trying to control herself. 'You are going on vacation, my dear. Aren't you the lucky one? You don't have to go to school for a long time. In fact, you never have to come to school again.' Dr. Schmidt's voice tightened and his thin lips stretched in another scowl.

"Miriam noticed the pained expression in his eyes. 'I don't want a vacation,' she protested, 'I love school. Besides, my parents would have told me if we were going away. Some of our visas haven't come yet and we are staying right here. So please don't make me go.'

"'You must leave at once,' the director said gently. He stood up and opened the office door. 'A monitor already left your coat and skis outside my office.' Miriam threw on the coat as the director led her out of the school into the snow-filled street. 'Go home fast,' he repeated.

"Miriam walked slowly dragging her skis under her arm. She felt one of her favorite places was being ripped away from her: Books, the rest of the world, learning new things, praise from teachers, the good feelings she got from success, the fun of friendly competition with Rosemary; all gone.

"Trudging through the empty street, Miriam felt completely alone. 'Miriam.' Was it the wind, or did someone really call her? Miriam decided to move along faster. 'Miriam, it's me; Rosemary.' Miriam turned around and saw her friend huddled in a doorway freezing, without her hat and coat. 'I took a chance and followed you,' Rosemary said. 'I don't care if the Nazis kill me for it. I wanted to say good bye and tell you that after this is over we'll get together again. I love you.'.

"'How did you know I left school?' Miriam asked as the snow settled slowly on her soft dark hair.

Rosemary's teeth chattered in the cold. 'Our teacher told the class this morning. She heard it on the radio how all Jewish children would be thrown out of school today. She

said you've been one of her best students.'

"The girls stared at each other. Would they ever play again? Miriam hugged her friend hard. 'I love you, too; never forget,' she said. 'Now hurry back before they miss you.'

"She watched as Rosemary dashed back to the school, her long blond hair blowing in the swirling snow. There was still some love in Germany, Miriam realized."

Q. (Inaudible)?

A. Yes. They notified my parents, too. So I went home alone and my mother and grandmother were waiting outside the house. I was shrieking, you know, across the street, They kicked me out of school; and they came running toward me and dragged me in the house and put their hands over my mouth. Don't talk. Just don't talk.

So I knew then, you know, things were really going to be different.

Q. Were there other Jewish children at the school?

A. There were none, no. There were only two Jewish children in the entire town. The other girl was already a teenager.

Q. How did the teachers treat you while you were there in the school?

A. Very well. One of them was a Jew. And I don't know if you want me to read this from the book or to tell

you.

Q. Tell me.

A. It was a he. He was my math teacher. You know, everybody was very grim, all the time. Grim, grim, grim. I was getting tired of it. You know, I thought, can't they ever smile? Can't they at least put on a front for me? One particular morning, that was when I was still in school, my father said, I need to tell you something before you go to school. They shot Mr. Stern today; and I said, Well, is he still alive? And he said, Well, they made him run in circles, the Nazis did. He ran and he ran and he ran and he ran until he was so exhausted that he could run no longer and when he fell down, they shot him.

And his wife heard the shot and she was a little way away from the house -- in her house, a little way away from the shooting, and ran to her husband, and he was dead. And after that I was told, Go on, go to school now; and I was so scared I thought, is he lying there dead in the street, am I going to have to go around him, am I going to be shot next because I am going into the same street? Are they gone? What is going to happen? But I had to go to school alone.

Q. What did they say at the school?

A. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. I think -- I don't know. I don't remember that part. But I know I thought I was all alone. Once again Rosemary came to the fore. She

was again hiding about three blocks away. She said, I will ski to school with you. But for the first three blocks I thought, Oh, God.

Q. Did you ever meet Rosemary's parents?

A. Yes.

Q. (Inaudible)?

A. Well, he was, you know, Heil Hitler, clicked his heels. The mother sneaked me into the house sometimes to play. She let me see their Christmas tree. In Germany there is a custom. When the Christmas tree is taken down, there are sweets hanging on the Christmas tree, and you can eat them; and she invited me for that. But all the drapes were drawn and I had to go out the back way.

Just before we left for the United States, I was allowed to visit her very briefly. The maid smuggled me over there without my parents or grandparents knowing. I knocked on the door. He -- the father -- answered. He said, Heil Hitler. Mouthed to me to say Heil Hitler very loudly, and I did.

He dragged me into the house and he said, Here is Rosemary. We just had time to hug and kiss and promise each other all sorts of things, and I went back.

That was --

Q. Did you get the feeling that they were sort of going through the motions?

A. I am sure that they were going through the motions. I am sure that these people were not Nazis. I found out later that Rosemary was the perfect German, exactly what Hitler wanted: Blond, blue eyed, slim, athletic, innocent, so she was sent to a breeding camp. I don't know how many children she bred for Hitler.

Q. How did you find that out?

A. Because she wrote my mother a letter and told her and she -- at the time that she wrote the letter, she was married to a doctor and living in Munich and wanted to put the whole thing behind her. I was really excited and wanted to get in touch with her. My mother lost the letter. She was so upset reading it that I guess -- you know how you do that, sometimes throw things away.

Q. Was there any description of this breeding camp, do you remember?

A. No. No. She just mentioned it. I have seen enough pictures of those places, I can imagine what it was like. Probably a big mansion.

Q. How about the other children at the school? What did you do during recess?

A. We didn't have recess. We had school from 8 to 12 and then we went home. The girl (Gizella) was absolutely horrible. My grandmother felt I was very lonely. After I was thrown out of school, she knew that (Gizella)'s parents



didn't have much money or food, so she apparently went to (Gizella)'s house, took groceries over there and said I am bringing this to you so that my granddaughter can play for one hour happily with your daughter and her friends.

The mother agreed to this. My grandmother came home and said, Guess what? (Gizella) asked you to play with her today. Well, I was ecstatic.

Q. You didn't know about the groceries?

A. No. Not right away. And so I went over there and the mother had cookies and milk and there were other girls there. We played dolls quite a bit. I know children in this country don't play dolls when they are that age, but we did.

Q. How old were you?

A. Let's see. I was eight.

So (Gizella) was saying that her mother was going to have a baby and we had all been told that the stork brought babies. We were not brought up in a real world.

And we argued with her. She said, I ought to know, my mother is having a baby and she's carrying it inside of her body. So we all put our dolls under our dresses and pretended we were having babies. And it got boring.

So (Gizella) said, I know a better game we can play. We can play drowning Jews. So she got a bucket. She dragged out all her oldest, most bedraggled dolls and all

the girls started putting them in the bucket, making drowning noises, Oh, please don't make me go in there, Oh, God. And they'd say, Oh, killed one Jew. Throw it on a heap. Killed another Jew, throw it on the heap.

I was stuck. I couldn't leave until my grandmother came. I was sitting there, absolutely horrified. You know, I didn't know what to do. (Gizella) said, Are you enjoying yourself, are you having a good time?

And suddenly, my grandmother came early. Such luck. I couldn't believe it.

So she took me by the hand and said there's a package for you at the post office, and that's where we are going, and that's why I got you early. It's from America.

I said oh, maybe there's a doll inside. And she said, No, these are hard times, don't expect anything like that.

Something in her attitude was changed. And all of a sudden, it hit me that she had left in the morning, and I said, Where were you this morning, you know; where did you go? And she said, Well, I just tried to help you. And (Gizella)'s parents needed food and it seemed the right thing to do.

And I thought, I'm never going to tell her about that afternoon. She tried so hard. So I began to be a secret keeper also. When we got to the post office, my grandmother said, You can't open the package; the Nazis would be very

upset and probably take away whatever it is that you got. It was a big long thin package. We went home and on the way home, we passed (Gizella)'s house. All her friends had left by then. She leaned out the window and said, Don't you want to come upstairs to play with me some more?

And I said, No, thank you, I really don't want to come.

And she said, But, we were playing your favorite game. So I didn't answer, and my grandmother tried to grill me about it, but I didn't -- I wasn't going to hurt her.

And when we got home, I opened the package and there was a big Shirley Temple doll, so it was a big surprise.

Q. Where did it come from?

A. From my uncle in the United States. And my grandmother explained to me that Shirley Temple was a movie star. I said, Can we go to the movies and see her? She said, No, Jews are not allowed in movies. You may not go.

And then I wondered if the doll was anti-Semitic. I was afraid of the doll for quite a while. I thought, she's blond, blue eyed, maybe she hates me. So it took a while, you know, to get familiar with this.

Q. Did you ever tell your mother or anyone about that experience?

A. No. No. They had kept so many secrets from me in an attempt not to hurt me, and I was growing up really

fast. And I thought, if I can possibly not hurt them, I won't. They were powerless. They didn't have guns. They were not violent people; and if my father would have dropped over there, he probably would have ended up in a camp or God knows what. So I learned to shut my mouth early. Not always. But sometimes.

Q. So your school, could you describe that for us, your reaction? Different --

A. A typical day at school is we sat down at desks alone, and if our pencils weren't sharp and our pens weren't exactly at the right angle, the teacher would go (indicating). Not a word. And he'd smack our hands with a ruler and then he'd slap our faces. And I was the one always picked out, even if my pencil was sharp and everything. He'd always mumble, "Jew."

Q. So that you could hear it?

A. So I could hear. Nobody else could hear. That was only one teacher. The others were very nice. But he was terrible. I was so afraid of going into his class.

Q. Did you have a religion class?

A. No. No. It was all academics. It was a school that was oriented toward gifted children; so everybody in there supposedly was gifted, like (Gizella), gifted in her imaginary game.

Q. The whole time you spent in class?

A. The whole time we spent in class. We went home.

Q. When you walked home, did you walk home alone?

A. I'd go home with Rosemary. She was faithful to the bitter end. I mean until I was kicked out of school. Then she couldn't come to my house and then I was totally, totally alone.

Q. Were you able to play with the girls after school sometimes?

A. No. No. She would come over until I was kicked out of school, Rosemary. Then I was completely alone. Just completely alone. So my grandmother decided I should have an English teacher, and I was uncooperative to the max because I thought, I don't want to learn English because if I learn English, it means I have to leave Germany and it means I have to leave my grandparents and my mother and father, and I'm not going to learn it.

There was an old maid in the town everybody used to laugh at, and we called her a witch. She would come in costumes from the 1800s or 1700s, and she was my piano teacher. She was the only one who would come. I was so embarrassed that she would come. Even though I wasn't playing with the other girls, they would know that this was the depths to which I had sunk.

People were getting really impatient in the family with me, so one day they invited the other Jewish girl in the

town to come to play with me. She was 13. And I said, Oh, please don't make me play with her, she always smells so terrible. And they thought I was just being unbelievably naughty.

Well, she came and she said, For God's sakes let me in. She had been chased by three Nazis and she carried a little brown bag, and in the brown bag was a change of pants. That is when I found out that she wet her pants.

I told my grandmother, There is no way I am going to play with this girl; you know, she stinks, she wets her pants and she is 13 years old, what am I supposed to do?

And the girl overheard me while she was changing in the bathroom and she also became angry and said, I think it is time for me to talk to you, you overprotected little girl. She said, My father is in a concentration camp, and that is why I wet my pants, because I am so afraid they are going to kill him, and my mother and I are all alone.

I said, What's a concentration camp, what is that, why didn't anybody tell me this?

So they finally had to tell me.

Could we stop a minute?

(Tape stopped.)

Q. How did they tell you what a concentration camp was like?

A. That night, my grandfather came home and he said

that it was a place where they took not only Jews, but mainly Jews, some Catholics, people who were dissenters; and that they killed them, tortured them, starved them. And he didn't spare me at all. You know, he said -- from overprotectiveness to this sudden knowledge that, you know, terrible things happen.

I said, how did they get there to the concentration camps? And he said, well, usually by trucks. That was just about six months before the trains to Auschwitz and all that started. They, of course, ended up in a box car, were taken to Auschwitz and gassed, my grandparents.

Q. (Inaudible)?

A. All these family meetings came about to see where we could go. And the hope was always that we would come to the United States; and my father had actually gotten a visa. He was the first one. So there was the problem of where was everybody else going to go; and we had these relatives in California. They had given a visa to my grandmother and grandfather.

My cousin, on the other hand, Rosie, decided that she was going to go to Holland. The way she was going to do it was to marry a Dutchman. She would immediately have Dutch citizenship and, therefore, could ask anybody who couldn't come to America to come to Holland. Everybody thought that would be a short stopover, you know. Then they would get

visas to come to America.

My grandparents decided that because they were very old people -- I think my grandfather was 49 or something and my grandmother was 50 -- very old people, so they decided that they had to give the visas to us, and they went to the consulate. I don't know how they finagled it, but we got their visas. And had we not come, my grandparents would have come and we would have ended up in the concentration camps; and I often wish that that would have happened. That is -- all of my life I lived with that knowledge that these people died for me.

Also by the time I was 10, it was Kristallnacht and they picked my grandfather up, and my uncle. And I was the first one to hear the Nazis come; and I told my mother, They are coming, they are coming to get my grandfather. She said, You are just having a nightmare. But within seconds, they were pounding on the door. They came in and asked for him, and my grandmother was downstairs.

It was a three-story house, so my mother and I were on the third story. And I wanted to run down, and the look my grandmother gave me was, sit down, you know, sit down on the step and don't move.

The man who came to arrest my grandfather had been a friend of my grandfather's, and he couldn't look him in the eye. So my grandfather said, Good evening, Hans, how are



you tonight? He said, Times have changed, old man, and took a baton and hit him across the back. My grandmother screamed and another Nazi slapped her in the face.

And so I said, Take me, take me, I'm a boy. And so they said, A boy in silk pajamas, hardly; and they dragged him off, put him in a truck, and it was only for one night. That was Kristallnacht. When he came back and my Uncle Max came back the next day, their hands were swollen because my grandfather had prayed all night with all the Jewish men who were taken from the town that night; and the Nazis had hit him over and over and over again on his hands all night long. That didn't stop him.

About a week after that, I was really afraid. By now I was terrified. I was terrified all the time, all the time. I said, Oh, God, what if they come again; what if they take you again? What are we going to do?

And the window was open, and both my Uncle Max and my grandfather said, They wouldn't dare. There was a Nazi, of course, under the window listening to everything. They came to the door and they said, We wouldn't dare? Pack your bags, you are going to Buchenwald. And I ran across the street to my grandmother's house and I told her, They are coming for real this time.

And she got completely hysterical. She packed a bag with warm things. They took my grandfather and they took my

uncle, and my aunt was left in the house across the street by herself, and at night I thought, I've been a good girl, with the exception of a few minor rule breakings, tonight I am going to break them all the way. I am going to leave the house and I am going to go and try to get my aunt who is all alone in the house; and I knew there were Nazis stationed everywhere with guns.

Q. Is that why your mother and grandmother didn't go?

A. They had no intention of going, because my grandmother was hysterical. My mother had to take care of my grandmother. She was screaming the entire time. So while she was screaming, I sneaked out. And I pushed myself against the walls of buildings and I saw them with their rifles; and one of them saw me, you know. And he said, What are you doing? What do you think your doing? And I said, I am going to get my aunt who is in the next house, and you can shoot me if you want to, I don't care. And he said, I didn't see you. And he said, If you come back with your aunt, I want you to come crawling along the wall, and I won't see you; but if I cock my gun, it means other people have seen you, and I am going to have to shoot you and your aunt; do you understand that?

I sort -- I didn't know what cocking a gun meant, you know; but I thought, well, I guess if he makes a noise, I didn't know. There she was, sitting all alone and sobbing.

I told her. She said, I can't go with you. You are just a child. You know, children were not valued that much in my day. You were a little girl. You were supposed to obey. That was that. And I was not obedient. She wasn't going to go with a mere child.

But when I told her the risks I had taken to get her, she decided, Okay, I will do it. And we crawled along; we made it there. The officer did see me again, and he sort of moved his hand like hurry, hurry; and we got there. Wasn't always that lucky, but that time we were lucky.

Q. Why was your father not taken?

A. He went to America.

Q. He was in America?

A. Yes.

Q. And then what happened after your grandfather was taken?

A. My grandfather, because it was, I guess, still early on, and because we had money, could buy his way out; and also because they had visas to go to the -- to Holland; so they bought their way out of the concentration camp. They were in there only one week, and he suddenly came back. You know, we were sitting there. It was Shabbat night. There was a knock on the door. I thought, Oh, God, now they are coming to get us, you know; but instead, there stood my grandfather and my uncle.

My grandfather came in with my uncle; my grandmother hurried and made a big dinner. And by the way they were eating, I thought, they are really hungry. Then I looked, and they were thin. They both had had these big beer bellies. And they looked very thin to me; I mean comparatively speaking.

So I said, Why are you like that? He said, Well, I know you thought I was in a concentration camp -- lie again, protection again; we were in a diet camp. Now, how stupid did they think I was? And he said, You see, I even brought you a present. He bent over to pick up a box of cookies from his suitcase; and as he bent over, his shirt pulled up a little bit, and I saw the welts on his back where he had been beaten. And he said, here are these cookies.

And I didn't want to take them, you know. I felt I'd been lied to again. And my mother said, I think you need to go to bed. You're getting very naughty again. You know, I can see it in your eyes. You should be grateful that everybody is back. Just go to bed. She took me upstairs. And there was a set of black staircases. The Nazis only allowed these steps to be painted black. She wouldn't allow carpeting, nothing. This house was supposed to be a historical house because it was built in 1450.

She walked me up these black steps into a bedroom where there was a stove in the corner throwing flames against it,

and she said, You'll be fine now, won't you? I said, Yes, yes. And my teeth were chattering. I stayed in bed exactly five minutes, and then I ran down those black steps, and I thought, That's it, they are coffins, they are going to get me. And I ran across the snow, bare feet, ran into where my grandparents were sitting; and just as I reached the door, just before I opened the door, I heard my grandfather say, And I took these cookies away from a man who was starving but I didn't want Miriam -- Margot, me -- to know where we had really been. I thought it was more important for her psychological welfare, because this man was going to starve anyway.

That did it. I went in there. I opened the box of cookies. I threw them at everybody. I got completely hysterical. And then I caught sight of my face in the window; and my hair had turned white.

So that was one of the worst nights, you know, that happened.

Q. What did they do with you then? Did they allow you to stay with them?

A. Oh, yes. There was no way they were ever going to let me out of their sight again. No way. But the next day they had somebody come to cut my hair and, you know, some -- she was a Christian girl, and she said, we are leaving for Kenya tomorrow; and I couldn't believe it, that a Christian

person would leave Germany. I said, why? She said, because we don't like Hitler. That was really amazing to me, that they were leaving, too. It made me feel a little bit better, you know.

Q. They cut your hair?

A. I had very long hair, and long white hair on a 10-year-old just was not very attractive.

Q. How long did your hair stay white?

A. It was streaked with black. It looked completely white to me. It was gray. It stayed like that until about a year after we came to the United States. So when my father first saw me in New York, he was horrified, you know.

Q. Do you remember what you said to your grandfather when you walked into that room?

A. I was not kind. I said, You know, you're a liar. I'm a big girl. I went across the street to save Aunt Lena when you were taken away; I was there with guns pointing at me and saved her, and you feel that you have to tell me this while -- they didn't have the word "bullshit" then, but they must have had a comparable word. And I told them off. I said, I don't want to be treated like this any more. There's nothing worse than being told a lie.

I'm still like that. When somebody tells me a lie now, I have very great difficulty being with that person again.

Even though it is maybe just a little white lie. It's not that I've never told any, but other people can't tell them to me. It is sort of a neurotic thing that hung on. I can't be lied to.

So that was one of the worst nights.

There was another time that was unbelievable. At the very end, knowing that we were leaving Germany, all of us, soon, my grandfather decided to give me a horse. I didn't know until much later that this horse's life was doomed anyway. It was a sick horse. It was a small horse. But it was my horse; and I loved it. You know, the groomsman outside used to help me brush it, and he was a Jewish man, and I said, don't you -- why didn't they take you into the concentration camp; and he said, I don't know, maybe they don't even know I exist. I don't know. And we became sort of friends, and we'd brush the horse. And one night -- I mean one day, rather -- the Nazis came just prior to our leaving and took all the jewels from the family members, rings, whatever.

And they said, Is there anything else, is there anybody who has anything else that they haven't declared that they haven't given to us? Is there anything? And I said, Yes, I have a coral necklace; and they said, we don't want junk like that. And I said then, Can I go now to Moses -- that was the name of the groomsman -- and to my horse?

He said, Oh, you have a horse, little girl? And I said yes, I do. And I said -- you know, I'm -- I was really stupid that day. I said, I'm so worried what's going to happen to my horse when we leave Germany; and he said -- he said, don't worry, I will take care of your horse, little girl; come with me. I will take care of your little horse, you'll see.

And I followed him, and we went to the stall, he took his gun, and he shot it.

Then he found out that the groomsmen was -- Moses was a Jew, had been overlooked. And they dragged him off; never heard of again. So I have that guilt, too. I'm sure they would have found him. My head tells me that, of course, they would have found him; but my heart never forgave me.

Q. Were you there alone with him?

A. When my grandfather heard the shot, he came running. Too late. And, you know, he told me the horse was already sick, and he had given me this horse knowing that by the time I left the country it would probably die of natural causes, but that didn't make any difference.

Q. Did the Nazis just leave then?

A. Well, he dragged off the groomsmen, Moses, so he was busy. He had done his thing with me. He had the jewelry from my parents, from my grandparents; and he had what he wanted. He terrorized me, so -- that was what he



had come to do.

Q. During this time you couldn't go to school, how did your family get food and necessities?

A. We were allowed to go to grocery stores. My grandmother mostly did that. Then we went to Berlin for visas, and the doctor who examined me found out that I had bad tonsils; and the United States didn't want anybody who had any diseases. You know, the United States was not very -- the government was not very helpful in helping the Jews. I mean, they could have taken out my tonsils in this country. What is a tonsillectomy in this country? But, no, it had to be done in Germany.

So they scrounged around and looked for a doctor, and they found one; and he said, You've got to come with your mother, and we'll just do it in the hospital and send you home again. And it was snowing, ice cold.

So my grandfather came along, too; and he sat in the corridor, and they kicked him out. And my mother and I went to the operating room, and he asked my mother to leave, the doctor did; and my mother said no, I'm staying; and he said Well, I have anesthetic only for one tonsil. The other one, no.

And here my grandmother and my mother had told me, well, you know, if you get your tonsils out, you get ice cream afterwards, it is not so bad. All the things we tell

our kids now, because it isn't that bad. But when he told me not to scream at any time, I knew, I knew that it was going to hurt.

So I sat in the chair opposite him. He sat on a low stool. The nurse was behind me; and they plunged this needle down my throat and I was terrified; and they snipped that tonsil out, and all the blood rose and fell, and I was gagging; and he said, You know, you're a terrible patient. I'm going to take a five minute break, and the next tonsil I'm going to cut out without anesthetic, so nurse, you better tie her down.

So they put my head in a vise, they tied me up, and they forgot my legs. When he sat down with -- and he came toward me with the instruments, said, Open up your mouth.

I couldn't; and the nurse just pulled my mouth open, and he was hurting me so much that I kicked him, and he fell off his stool.

And it may have been funny, except that he said, Now I'm going to make you suffer. Now I'm going to cut this tonsil out bit by bit. And he slowly snipped and he snipped.

I can't tell you how -- I thought I was going to choke to death. I hoped I would choke to death. And it seemed to take a lifetime. And he was enjoying it. He asked the nurse, Are you having a good time?

Of course, she had a mask over her face so she couldn't answer him, but my mother said afterwards that her eyes sort of crinkled up in enjoyment, you know, of this little girl being tormented like that.

Q. Your mother was watching you?

A. My mother was watching and crying very softly, because she knew if she made one noise God knows what operation he would have performed on her. She already knew about all the tortuous operations they had done in the concentration camps.

So as soon as he was finished, my mother stuck a scarf that she had around her neck in my mouth. No anesthetic, and I had to walk out of the hospital into the snow. My grandfather had disobeyed and parked the car about two blocks away. I got in the car with my mother, and my coat, my clothes, the car, everything was soaked in blood. And I decided I was never going to talk again. And so for a long, long time I didn't talk. Even after my throat healed, I wouldn't talk. I had nothing more to say.

So there were about two months when I didn't talk. When we came to the United States, there were six months where I didn't open my mouth. Just refused to talk. I just couldn't get over that.

Q. When did you start talking again? In Germany?

A. Well, in Germany, I saw Rosemary playing outside

with other girls, and she had on a pair of very shiny black snow boots, and it was sort of an involuntary little girl thing to say, I wish I had a pair of those. It was the silliest reason to begin talking. But my grandfather was bound and determined he was going to get me those shoes.

And he drove me to the next town where we were kicked out from one restaurant to another, finally made it to one place, and by evening we got to a shoe store. We were ushered in the back door, he had the shiny black boots, I put them on, they fit, out of the door and back on the train, back to the hometown where my grandparents lived. And I got the black shiny boots, and so I had to talk.

But it didn't last very long. Really I felt I had nothing more to give, to say, to do.

Q. Did they try to get you to talk?

A. They did. They did. They spoiled me and bought me things and brought me stuff. In Germany they have doll hospitals, if your doll breaks -- they are very -- they are not spendthrifts. So I had a doll that had broken, and asked a Christian neighbor to please take the doll to the doll hospital, and it was taken, and it came back looking absolutely gorgeous, all fixed, very pretty.

And so, you know, they really tried to get me to talk, and I did occasionally. But on the whole I just didn't want to leave Germany. In spite of everything, I didn't want to

come to this country, I didn't want to leave my grandparents. And quite a few of them had by now left for Holland, and it was getting very empty. I was left with my mother and my grandmother and my grandfather. So it was a very frightening thing for me.

Q. What did you mean when you said you went from restaurant to restaurant?

A. When we went to the other town we wanted to go out to lunch, and they all said, "No Jews allowed," "No Jews allowed." So my grandfather promised to take me to this one hotel that was supposed to be fabulous, you know, and it didn't say "No Jews allowed" where we could see it.

So we just walked up the steps, and an SS officer stood there and he said, can't you read, old man? And pushed my grandfather down the steps. As a matter of fact that's the picture on the cover of my book. Way in the back is this little -- sorry. Way in the back is this little sign that says, "No Jews allowed."

And he threw my grandfather down. So we trudged from street to street, and we passed one restaurant where the owner knew my grandfather, and although it said "No Jews allowed" there, he said, we live behind the restaurant, go on upstairs and we will feed you. And that's what they did.

So it was constantly good, bad, good, bad. Then it was

bad, bad, bad, bad.

Q. Sounds like your family tried very hard to make things good for you.

A. They did. They tried too hard, I think. And unfortunately I've carried that over to my children too, being overprotective. I thought, well, I'll learn from this. But really, I can't stand to see them in pain.

Q. So did you have to stay in the house all the time during this time period, or could you go out to a park?

A. I had to stay in the house, and, well, one time my grandmother took me to a palace at the edge of the city, and the princess who had lived there a hundred years ago had done something marvelous. She described all of her life in little tiny dolls, and she made the rooms look just like the rooms she had lived in.

So she took me there, and we were able to go through that palace without any trouble. But it was still wintertime, and she said, now I've brought you a sled, you can go sledding for a few minutes. And all the German children just said, get out of here, go, threw stones at me, and snowballs with stones in them and so forth. We left.

Q. So you weren't necessarily confined to your house, but --

A. Mostly. There was a large yard in the back for the horses. You know, my grandfather was a horse dealer, on

my mother's side, and those horses would run, and it was a huge yard. I could go back there.

But what was I going to do back there alone? And although my feelings were now with that 13-year-old Jewish girl that I had insulted, she didn't want to come back and see me, something I could understand very well.

Q. Did she ever come back?

A. No.

Q. Did you ever hear of what happened to her?

A. She was killed. She was taken to a concentration camp with her mother and killed. There was nobody who could give them a visa to leave the country. So I was the only Jewish child to survive in that town. I suppose that's survival.

Q. Were there any other restrictions placed on you, like curfews or --

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Or certain times when your parents could or couldn't go out?

A. We were restricted, period, at night. There was no way. There was one night when a Czechoslovakian family came to our house. I don't know how that happened, through the Rabbi or something. They were escaping on foot, a mother, a father and a little boy, and they were wearing all their clothes. And they peeled off their layers, they were

going to spend the night and have one meal.

They were going from safe houses to safe houses. And when the boy peeled off his clothes, I thought, this is the most handsome guy in the world, I'm going to marry him. But there was a parade outside that night, and we had to darken our curtains. We were not even allowed to look out on the street. And he said -- he was equally naughty, and he said, let's go in the next room and peek.

And we took one look and we were both so frightened, the songs, the "Heil Hitler," the lights, that goose step -- stupid thing. Now when I look at goose steps I think, insanity. But at that time it was very frightening, all these boots.

And I was so thrilled to have somebody to play with, and so was he. And so the next morning I got up and I thought, oh, I've got to find a boy's game, we certainly can't play with dolls, so we will play chess. And I got out the chess game. My mother said, what are you doing? I said, I'm getting out the chess game so I can play with the little boy.

She said, they left in the middle of the night. It was a heartbreak, because it was the first child I had played with in over a year.

But it sounds as though, as I'm hearing myself tell this, that there is very little danger for me, but that



wasn't really true. When the synagogues were burned all over Germany, and we heard that our synagogue was burned, I wanted to see it the next day, and of course we weren't allowed out to look at it.

And I went anyway.

Q. By yourself?

A. By myself. And I walked down the street, because I remembered how wonderful it had been with my grandfather, when he went to temple, and he was downstairs, the women were upstairs, and he would let me come down and pray with the men, and I thought I was a very special girl. So I walked by the temple. It was in ashes. And I bent down and I found a little piece of red velvet from the Torah, and I picked it up, and all of a sudden I felt this hand reaching out and grabbing my arm.

I thought, that's it, I'm done for. Well, it was my grandmother. She followed me. She knew my ways by that time. And she said, you shouldn't have done that. How could you disobey these people? There was such a mentality drilled into all the German Jews, and the Germans as a whole, you must obey, you know.

And they said, we were just following orders. Sometimes that was true. I mean, I couldn't have followed those orders. No ethical person in my mind could follow such orders. But even my grandmother felt, they told you

not to go, and you went. So I asked her, if they told you not to go, why are you here? She said, because I have to save your life.

And we went back, and my grandfather thought I was a heroine. Just wonderful. Because I had that piece of Torah. And he kept it.

So there were...

Q. You said there weren't any Jewish children at the school, but there was a synagogue around. So what was the population of Jewish --

A. It was a village. It was a small village. And the people were old. Middle aged to old -- at that time if you were 50 in Germany it's like being 80 now. So they were old, old people to me. And I never knew any Jewish children except that one. Maybe they had already left by the time we moved to that town, it's possible.

It was a very lonely existence.

Q. Did you have books to read?

A. Yes. My grandmother made sure that I read. She educated me. As a matter of fact I read *The Last of the Mohicans* in German. And when I saw it the other day in the theater I thought, that's not the way I remembered it at all. Not at all.

But you know, children were educated differently. They could read much more than children do nowadays. Not all

children, but the general population could read.

And I think I just have one more thing to add, really, and that was the day we left Germany.

Q. Can I ask you one more question about just how you spent your days?

A. How did I spend my days?

Q. Was there a certain place you would go to? Did you read, did you do things with your grandmother and grandfather?

A. We were no longer allowed to have servants, so my grandmother allowed me to dust, and she would have little gifts for me. She said, you know, if you dusted well, and what she would do is all the places nobody liked to dust, little holes, she would have a penny or a little piece of candy or something like that. So I spent at least an hour a day dusting.

Then, let's see, what did I do? She taught me for about two hours a day. And I had a gym, rings, like they have in gymnastics, and I would do that a lot.

And my grandfather said, if you polish my shoes you will get a reward, so I would polish all the man's shoes all the time, every night. And there would always be something in there. And strangely enough, around Christmastime, he had me put my shoes outside. They were orthodox Jews. They had me put my shoes outside for St. Nicholas to come by. If

I was a good girl there would be something in my shoes, and there was.

So it was very confusing, you know? On the one hand that Christmas tree and all the goodies hanging from it and going to Rosemary's house, it all seemed so much fun. But then I always thought Chanukah was better, it was always such a special event.

Q. How did you celebrate Chanukah?

A. Well, the last Chanukah we spent, of course, was at my grandfather's house, everybody was still there, the people going to Holland were still there. I had made -- I had learned to crochet, and I made pot holders for the women and I wrote poems for the men.

And I just wanted a baby doll, to keep that Shirley Temple company. And that's what I got, a baby doll. And -- can we stop? I'm sorry, it's so upsetting.

(Tape stopped.)

Okay. The reason the doll upsets me so much is because I named the doll after my grandmother, Paula, and -- I can't. Sorry.

(Tape stopped.)

Well, anyway, there was the little doll Paula, and that night I went to bed and put that little doll close to me, and Shirley Temple was lying on the other side, and she really felt strange to me. And I thought, this other doll,

this is a representative of the country that I'm going to go to, cold, hard, blond, in a fanciful dress, whereas the baby doll felt real to me, soft and cuddly, like my grandmother.

And the day that we left Germany, I just -- I was devastated. We would go to Hamburg and then take the ship. And that morning I didn't want to get out of bed. I wasn't going to say good-bye to my grandparents. I just couldn't do it. But, of course, as you can see, I'm here, so I must have gotten out of bed.

And my grandmother had made me a perfect outfit for the trip, for getting on the ship. It was a dress with a Peter Pan collar and white knee socks, patent leather shoes and a Navy blue coat, and the little doll Paula was dressed exactly as I was. She had sewn all that for the little doll, too.

So we got on the train and we kept waving and waving good-bye, and they got smaller and smaller and smaller. And that was the last time I saw them. They did go to Holland, and when the Nazis went to Holland they were caught, they were taken to Auschwitz in one of those cattle cars and gassed.

But before we could go on the ship, an SS officer approached my mother and said, are you Ilsa Levine, and she said, yes, and he said, we have been waiting for you, you are a spy. And they took her to a customs house, and I

said, I want to go too. And they said, no. No way. You stand right here.

I don't know what all they did to her. I can only imagine. And she came out, and then they said, now we're going to look at you. And my mother screamed, don't take her, don't do that. Well, they ripped off my clothes, they searched me everywhere. To put it in a more refined way, I lost my virginity. I wasn't raped. I was just prodded with things, because they thought I had either jewelry in there or whatnot. They poked in my ears until they were bleeding. They just poked everywhere.

And by the time I left the custom house, the buttons on my new coat were torn, my dress was ripped. And I ran to my mother and I fell down and I cut my knee open, I cut my hand open, and so there was all that blood in the snow. And she said, come on, come on, let's just go up the gangplank, let's go, let's stand on the deck.

And we boarded the ship, and we stood on the deck and she said, look, how tiny the Nazis are down there, and how high up we are. And as she was talking, another passenger was about to go on the gangplank, go up the gangplank. She had on a red coat and a really cute red hat. She was the one who had used my mother's name, Ilsa Levine, and she was a spy, and they shot her, and she fell right near where I had fallen down. So her blood sort of mixed with my blood

in the snow. That was the last I saw of Germany.

As far as the doll was concerned, she was in a suitcase, and she was way down below the decks, and my mother bribed one of the -- it was a German ship, so she bribed one of the sailors to go down with her and get the little doll out so I could have her at least. But that was it.

Q. Did your mother ever tell you what happened to her before she got on the ship?

A. No. No. But it was clear, after what they did to me, that they did the same to her. And I didn't tell my mother what happened to me until I was, oh, I think 16, 17, something like that. I think she knew. She gave me a bath that night. She had to know.

But we were all trying to protect each other so much. I think we were all pretty brave in spite of it all, you know. I don't know what I would do now. I keep thinking, you know, there is all this Nazism rising again in Germany. If I were there now, would I shoot? Would I kill? Are we different now, Jews? The Jews in Israel are. But I haven't changed. I would still allow myself to be killed. Because I couldn't kill.

So that's my story.

Q. I have more questions.

A. Okay.

Q. While you were still in Germany, did you get communications from your father here?

A. Yes. He wrote all the time. And he wrote innocuous letters so it wasn't censored. He wrote about living with the Catholic family in Massachusetts, and how they eat fish on Friday nights, and how this particular family eight lobster every Friday night, and he had a glass of white wine and toasted us in absentia, and how nice the country was, and how he would take me to a movie, and that he would get me a perm, and that I would look just like a darker version of Shirley Temple, and, you know, that sort of thing.

However, when we went to the United States and my grandparents wrote from Holland to the United States, those were censored things. And my grandmother finally devised a way of writing to us so that we knew what was going on. Like, "The tulips are in bloom and they are satisfactorily protected with fences," so we knew they were safe. Then, "The tulips died. It's that season of the year. The flowers are dying." So we kind of knew.

Then there was one that just said, "I love you." That was the last.

Q. Who did they stay with?

A. Let's see. My cousin Rosie who had married the Dutchman, they stayed there, all of them. They rented



houses one after another, but all together, sort of.

Q. Did your cousin Rosie survive?

A. Yes. She was rescued from Buchenwald and -- by the Russians, and the day of the rescue, 20 Russian soldiers raped her. How could they? She was a skeleton. And so did my aunt Lena survive, her mother survived. And Harry, her husband, the Dutchman that she married, died in the concentration camp, and the Nazis made him lie next to her for a week, the dead body, next to her. And she was sleeping next to this corpse.

After she got out, she was deaf, and I don't know why, she never told us, and she remarried, and that husband died just recently of cancer, and she's right now recalling constantly, over and over and over again, the Nazi times. And she refuses to be with any people. So she is totally isolated.

So she is capitulated to the whole thing. I think she is just waiting to die. She is in her 80s now.

Q. Any other family members, aunts, cousins, that survived?

A. No, just those who were in America already, you know. And I find the word "survival," I must say, somewhat offensive. I wanted to get that in. Survival how? I mean, yes, you are alive, yes, you can go on and do things. But there is that part of you that was killed off. So that's

how I feel, that I'm not a survivor. Maybe I'm not as brave as I thought I was.

Q. Have you told your children these stories?

A. Well, I wrote the book for my children. They haven't yet done me the honor of reading it. One son says that he is going through a very difficult time in his life right now, and he is, and he will read it, but not just yet.

Excuse me, my one son did read it. I'm sorry. Sorry, Peter. He did read it. And the thing that really struck him was the story of the horse. And lots of people read the book, and critiques in newspapers about the book have all mentioned this horse thing, which to me is amazing. Is that a safe thing to feel? Is that what that is? An animal being killed? I mean, it was tragic, you know, but it was certainly not the most tragic of all the things that happened.

And I understand it from an American point of view. I've lived here ever since I was a little girl, and I think American people have a great way of shutting out pain, of not going into it very deeply, unless they are in therapy or something. They really don't want to talk about profound things. Just the thing about how they greet each other. Hello, how are you? What are you supposed to say? I'm fine, thank you. How are you feeling? Oh, great.

Everything is wonderful.

And so that's why I say a part of me was killed, the part that's honest. I've fallen into this trap too. I told you, I had an operation three weeks ago on my knee. People say, how are you? I say, I'm great, I'm just wonderful. I mean, that doctor was fabulous. I wouldn't dare tell them how much it hurts, because nobody wants to hear that.

So I can understand that people don't want to read something like this, or if they do read it, then they pick on the least painful of all the painful aspects, and focus on that and say, oh, yes, I can understand how that must have hurt, to lose your horse. Not a part of your body snipping away, not your innocence.

Q. Your grandparents?

A. My grandparents. My way of life.

Q. When you say you wrote the book for your children, what do you mean?

A. I tried to talk to my children. They are atheists. I'm not. And so it's kind of hard to talk to them about these times. I think I did, to an extent, but they would run away and want to talk about other things. Now my oldest son wants to go to Germany with me, and he wants to -- he has gone to Germany with his wife, and he said, all you have to do is spit on the ground and say, you know, to hell with those Nazis, and then you will be okay.

And I want to take you to Dachau and I want to take you to Arnstadt, the town where my grandparents lived.

And I would like to do that with him, but first I want him to read that book. First I want him to know my story. First I want him to hear my heart of hearts. And maybe he has, you know, in his own way. I don't know.

We've got to stop. This is turning into a soap opera here.

(Tape stopped.)

Q. Do you have an interest to return to Germany and see where you lived?

A. I do. I do. You know, I can't exactly tell you. I'm kind of hoping to find that Rosemary again. I would like to see the house. I would like to see the house where I lived in Halle. I have some faint memories that that was a really fantastic house. And I know the Russian officers used it as their headquarters when they took over East Germany. So I would kind of like to see that.

And I certainly want to experience where my grandfather and grandmother met their death. I mean, that may be accomplished by just going to Washington, D.C. now, without my having to be in Germany. I did go back to Germany about 10 years ago. I wasn't married to the man I'm married to now. I was married to a man who passed away. And he was also a German Jew. And he had been told that -- he had sort

of felt that he had had a brother and sister at one time, and they had died within a day of each other, and his parents were overprotective and had never told him.

So he said, I'm an only child, but I see in my head that there must be graves with my little brother and little sister. So we went to Mannheim, which is way far away, as far as I'm concerned, from where I came from. And we went to the Jewish cemetery, and we saw all the stones, the monuments and all that stuff broken down, and a man came by on a bicycle, and he said, what are you doing?

And we said, well, we're looking for the graves of two children. And he said, what are the names of the children? We told him, and he said, oh, I know exactly where they are. And sure enough, he was right. He had had a brother and sister who died within a day of each other.

So while he was mourning, I was talking to the man on the bicycle. I said, can you explain to me how a Jew could come to live back in Germany after all this disaster? And he said, it's very simple. I'm not a Jew. I went to the concentration camp with my best friend. And now I tend his grave all of the time. He goes to Friday night services and so forth.

Q. That's nice.

A. It was. It was. And after we saw the graves and we sort of pulled ourselves together we decided, well, why

don't we go to Heidelberg and at least have one night, it's supposed to be so pretty. It was tourist season, and you sort of went to an information booth to ask where the openings in hotels were.

And the woman behind the information booth said to us, I can't find a single opening here in Heidelberg. And her eyes, it was the eyes. I ran -- nobody knew what had happened to me. I ran, I ran to the car, I said, get in. I drove a hundred miles an hour on the Autobahn, went to the airport, and we caught the last plane out of Frankfurt and went to London.

I just couldn't stand it, looking at those eyes. Those people have phenomenal eyes. So full of hate. And perhaps there was no place, you know? In retrospect I think, this was ridiculous. But that's how injured I am. Even on the train going to Mannheim, it's a funny story, but it shows the injury. We were sitting in a compartment, and my then husband looked very Hispanic. He could have passed easily for a Mexican.

And so we would always tease him, because he was a very sick man, he was a dying man, and so we always said, well, here comes the dirty Mexican. Not very nice of us. But I said, come on, don't be so nervous, get into the compartment, you dirty Mexican. And a couple at the end of the compartment said, would you allow us to introduce

ourselves, who are from Mexico City? I'm Dr. Gonzalez and this is my wife, Mrs. Gonzalez.

I died, and I explained the whole situation to them. I said, I'm sorry, but we're, quote, unquote, survivors of the Holocaust, and this has been sort of a joke in the family, and I'm not at all prejudiced. And I said, you see, it's women like the one in the corner, and she had her hair in a bun, in those braids on top of her head, she looked the perfect German, sitting up perfectly straight, her coat was hung up with the folds hanging neatly. There wasn't a thing out of place.

I said, that's what I'm afraid of. I said that to this Dr. Gonzalez. And I didn't realize she spoke English. She said, now I'm going to introduce myself. She said, I'm professor of Jewish studies at the University of Heidelberg.

So we all had a good time. There was an architect there, and he had a bottle of something to drink, and we all got drunk together. We needed it after all those boo-boos I made. So there are funny parts to it too. But really, there are not, because the fear is always there.

Q. How do you think these experiences affected your life, like in other words maybe your career or your work?

A. Well, I was a teacher for a while, and then I was a school counselor for a while, and then I did bilingual

education, and I always chose to be either with minority groups or with misunderstood gifted children, with anybody who had suffered. And I knocked myself out for people like that.

I adopted a little girl who had some problems, and of course she turned out to be an absolutely marvelous friend of mine, and she is a wonderful person, Sandy, you are. But I had to have this child, because she had been in the hospital for three months and there hadn't been -- there had been a lack of foster parents, and I became her foster mother and then her real mom. So I think it's affected me in a lot of ways.

I have grandchildren now. I can't bear it when they cry. And yet I know they need to, sometimes. I'm just overly, overly cautious with others, not with myself.

Q. How many years did you raise Sandy?

A. Sandy is now 31. Married.

Q. And you had her from the time she was a child?

A. From the time she was three months old. Then they decided I couldn't be an adoptive parent because I was a foster mother. So they took her away for eight months, and unfortunately put her in an abusive home. I got her back after fighting through the courts, and got her back a year and a half later. So my work was cut out for me.

Q. After you came to America, how did you adjust?



A. I didn't. I didn't. I told you, I didn't want to talk. I certainly didn't want to talk English. So I was sent to a private school where they told me the teacher could speak German, but she couldn't. All she could say in German was, can you speak German? Like people always say, "Parlez-vous Francais." That was it. So I was sort of stuck there.

And my uncle, we lived in Pennsylvania at first, my uncle in California said, this is enough of that behavior. I've had it. I'm going to send you money to send this girl to camp for four weeks, where nobody speaks German. And so I was sent to camp, summer camp. And I thought, that's fine. I'm not going to open my mouth. I'll just stand here.

But alack and alas, nature called, and I had to speak. And by the time I came back from camp, I was speaking English the same way I do now.

Q. Do you still speak German?

A. Yes.

Q. Was this a Jewish camp?

A. It was a Catholic camp, and I came back and I was convinced I was going to become a nun. And my mother would have none of that, so the following year I was sent to a Jewish camp. And I went to that for three more years. I loved it. It was really nice.

Q. How did it feel being now amongst many Jews?

A. Wonderful. Just unbelievable. I just couldn't believe that we had Shabbat, and we all had to wear the same clothes. It was sort of run on the order of a kibbutz. We had to wear Navy blue shorts and white halters, and on Shabbat we all wore white. It was very nice. I really liked it. Besides, I could speak English and I was talking.

Q. And once you left for America, did you experience anti-Semitism here?

A. I experienced that on an almost daily basis. We live in the mountains, and you know how Germans enjoy the fresh air on the mountains, and there are lots of them living up there, German Christians. And a few weeks ago my husband and I were driving along, and on various trees we saw signs, so we thought, oh, maybe there is something wrong with the trees or maybe there is a disease for the trees, we need to look at the sign.

And we pulled over and it said, please come to the club house on Sunday, we are going to have an all day meeting for ethnic cleansing. So we took all the signs down, and I went to the club house, nobody seemed to know anything about it, they gave me some cock and bull story. But there was that.

Then there was a little novelty shop I went into around December and bought something, and I said, oh, you are open

late, because in the mountains people close their shops around 5:00, and it was 7:00, and her shop was open, and she said, yes, I'm trying to be just like the Jews and make money when I can.

So these things go on.

Q. What about earlier, when you first came here?

A. Oh, when I first came here, people were -- once again, I was one of the few children who was a refugee in Erie, Pennsylvania, so I was a minor celebrity. Everybody wanted to get to know me. And if there was prejudice, I didn't feel it. No. I mean, people were just, you know, we in the United States have saved you -- people would say more, how do you like this country? Are you glad to be an American? Isn't America the greatest country, isn't it wonderful for you to be here, aren't you grateful to President Roosevelt, on and on like that. Those are the kinds of things. Which I found prejudicial in a sense.

Didn't they know I had just lost my country, my home, my way of life? I mean, sure, I liked O'Henry bars and bubble gum and ginger ale and Coke, but I could have gladly done without them.

And I found the schools absolutely, unbelievably boring. I thought, nobody was teaching anything. Everything was sugar fed to you. I remember a geography book I had, and it began with, "We are now flying low over

the State of Georgia." And I thought, why do they tell about the State of Georgia? What is this business, flying low? I'm not flying in any plane. And I couldn't understand why everything was so babyish, so geared to the lowest possible mentality.

And it wasn't until I was at the university that I felt at all comfortable.

Q. What are your religious beliefs now as a result of this experience?

A. Well, I still am a Jew. I'm a conservative Jew. Certainly not orthodox. My husband was a Baptist, and he recently became Jewish through no prompting from me. And he knows a great deal more about Judaism than I do. What I thought was Judaism isn't at all. And I have a lot to learn. So I am in a state of flux right now. What I always thought, Jews didn't believe in a life hereafter and that they didn't believe this and didn't believe that, and I'm beginning to find out differently. So I have a lot of learning to do.

Q. Was your family kosher in Germany?

A. My grandparents were. I think everybody else more or less became an atheist. I think -- my mother goes to temple, but I don't think she believes there is anything for her. My father said he was a total atheist, but at the last minute before he died he said the Shma. So I don't know.

My sons claim to be atheists, or agnostics. And my daughter is not into religion. So that sort of leaves my husband and me. And that's okay. I'm sorry that they feel that way. I'm sorry that they are not open to the possibility. Although when I die, if there is a God that one can meet, which I doubt very much, I would like to know what happened there, during the Holocaust, why. Although there are answers on a philosophical basis, of course. There will always be evil, there will always be good.

Q. So did your experiences affect your religious beliefs in any way?

A. If anything they made me more religious, in the sense that I feel I'm here to do good, and that's all I can do to honor my grandparents.

Q. Just some questions to clarify some things. You left on Kristallnacht?

A. No. No. We left in March of 1939. Kristallnacht was on November 9th, 1938.

Q. Can you describe what you remember happening?

A. Well, I remember my grandfather and uncle being dragged out of the house for that one night, and the temple being burned, and the Rabbi coming over for dinner.

Q. Any sounds, or lights?

A. Well, I heard them first. I was in bed, sleeping, and my mother allowed me to sleep in her bedroom after my

father went to the United States, and I heard them call. They said, we still have to get -- and they used my grandfather's last name, and I woke my mother up and I said, listen, they are coming to get (Oppa), my grandfather. She said, you are just having a nightmare. But then the pounding on the door started. So -- that was all that one night when I went to get my aunt and all that.

Q. That was --

A. That was all that night, right.

Q. And then when you went to the synagogue, did you see other areas, was there any other kind of destruction that you saw?

A. No, just that. They were very careful. It was just ashes. Except for that little -- it must have been more, but that's all I saw.

Q. The train ride to the ship, can you describe that? Do you remember?

A. Well, my mother tried to comfort me. I tried to comfort her. It wasn't the train ride to the ship exactly. We took the train to Hamburg and we spent the night there. And then we had to take another train to the port city of Bremerhaven, where the ship was. And that short ride to -- see, I still thought as long as I was in Hamburg it was okay, because I was still in Germany, I was still maybe not going, maybe my grandparents would come on the next train,

maybe it all was a dream. And we stayed in a hotel, and I always loved hotels, still do. And I said, oh, any second now they are going to come.

But when we took that short train ride, what, 15, 20 minutes to the ship, I knew that was it. That had to be it.

Q. What about the ship, the attitude on the ship, the activities on the ship?

A. There was -- my mother enjoyed the ship. She was out of it. And she had to have some good time. And she met a black lady who had been -- whose husband had been in the diplomatic service. And her husband was already in the United States, and she was leaving on this ship with her five-year-old son. And my mother thought, how wonderful, this is an opportunity for my daughter to learn to speak English with this little five-year-old boy. And she sort of pushed us together, and so did the other lady.

And I was enchanted, because this little boy, of course, reminded me of the little black boy who had been in front of our store. So it was, again, this feeling of being honored.

And all our parents -- I mean, our mothers -- saw was the two of us talking incessantly, and they were just thrilled to death. Well, he spoke German. So we were together a lot on the ship. And I was looking forward to

seeing my father again.

Q. Was it do you think mostly Jews on the ship, or --

A. I don't remember. I have no idea.

Q. And how did the ship's crew behave towards you?

A. Oh, very well. Very well.

Q. Why do you think that was?

A. Because they had the servant mentality. They were a luxury ship, and they had been paid, and they just -- they were not Nazis. They were just -- I mean, maybe their sympathies lay with Nazis, but basically they were stewards and stewardesses, that's all. And they behaved as such. I don't understand quite why, because I've heard other people tell me that their experiences were terrible on these ships. We had a good time. I mean, you know, as much as you can.

They were polite. I don't remember that, that there was any incident of any sort. Perhaps there weren't that many Jews on the ship. Maybe there were lots of diplomats leaving and other people like that. So I don't know.

Q. Did you spend a lot of time with this little boy?

A. Almost all day, every day. And, you know, he was taking care of me, and I thought, this is ridiculous, I'm twice his age. So after a while, things changed over a little bit. But it was funny, because they thought I was really learning English. And he was fluent.



Q. What happened to the little Nazi girl?

A. The little Nazi girl, my first marriage was to a man in India, and I lived in India, and I had my first son in India, and when I came back, she had written a letter -- I don't know how she tracked me down, when I came back to the United States, she said, we have children the same age now, do you remember our happy times of playing together? Now Germany is a poor country and we're very poor and destitute. Could you send me some clothes, old clothes of your child or perhaps some powdered milk, anything you can spare.

I couldn't believe it. I didn't.

Q. Did you respond at all?

A. Yes. Not very nicely. I said, I hope you and your child drown in one of the buckets. I wouldn't say that today. Today I think I would have sent something for the child. Nothing for her, but certainly for the child. But I had my children rather early, and I was still a young girl, you know, and so I didn't have the foresight -- it was still too close to me.

And it was amazing, in India, you know, they have swastikas all over, because the word "swastika" comes from Sanskrit, and it's a good luck sign, and so when I saw those things everywhere I felt very frightened at first, and once again, I was in another country. But that was my own

doing.

Q. Was there any -- what was the response to you being Jewish?

A. "Thank God you are not Christian." That was it. Because they absolutely detest Christians, because they feel the Christians are the missionaries, and try to change them from Hinduism to Christianity, and they know Jews don't do that. So my father-in-law said, you know, it's a terrible, terrible, terrible thing that my son married a Jew, but I'll tell you one thing, it's a good thing you are a Jew.

Q. How long did you live there?

A. Three years.

Q. What possessions do you have left from Germany? What did you bring with you?

A. My grandparents sent all their furniture to San Francisco. My mother took all her furniture to Pennsylvania. And of course there was no jewelry or anything like that. But carpets, persian carpets and stuff like that, everything was sent and left. So that was there.

Q. And you still have it today?

A. I don't, but my mother does, and unfortunately some members of the California family who had given us visas and so forth went into the lifts and stole some very precious things I would have liked to have had that were

specific to my grandmother, you know, little things, pictures and things of that sort. But I'm not making myself clear to them that I would like to have these things, not as a possession but as a remembrance.

Q. Can you describe some of the furniture?

A. I don't know if you are familiar with Biedermeier, that's a very famous kind of furniture, and my mother had that, and she had a beautiful dining room set made of ebony. My grandparents' things were really old fashioned things from -- with the claw feet in the dining room and things like that. But as I say, a lot of it was stolen. Amazing. Just amazing to me. And sad.

Q. Do you still have the dolls?

A. No. I have no idea what happened to them. I don't know.

Q. Another question, do you remember any addresses that your grandparents --

A. Yes.

Q. What were the addresses?

A. Well, my grandparents lived in a place called Read 10 in Arnstadt in Germany. And I remember the name of the street, and how it was called Hermanstrasse, but I don't remember the number.

Q. Can you describe the house?

A. Which house?

Q. Your parents' house.

A. It was gargantuan. It had marble steps leading up to the foyer, and the foyer was huge, just enormous, with stained glass windows at the far end. I mean, I could roll a ball, you know, it would take like 30 seconds to reach the other end. And there was a curved staircase going up to the second landing.

And there were big kitchens, huge dining rooms, and there was one room I remember, I think my grandmother was laid out in, my father's mother, I don't know, but I was afraid of that room, it had blue furniture and big white statues, and it was cold in there, and I always tried to stay away from that.

And there was a backyard, I mean, a garden, very formal, with gravel sidewalks and so forth. And my father's father decided that what I needed was a seesaw. That's what I needed. There was just one problem: Nobody to sit on the other end. So I would sit on the seesaw, and wait. And of course the adults, you know, didn't play with children the way American parents play with their children. So I would sit there.

Sometimes a maid would come and sit on the other end and go up and down one time, and that was it. And it finally fell into a state of disrepair, and I was glad. I always felt I had to play on that thing.

But that was when I was very little.

Q. And your grandparents' house, can you describe that?

A. The house that was built in 1450 with a big St. Christopher from the lower story, from the bottom story, from the street level, I should say, up to the third story. So the entire front of that house had St. Christopher on it. And they kept it exactly the way it had been, when you opened the front gate it had a cobblestone entry where horses and buggies used to go.

It was kind of hard driving over it with a car, I remember thinking, you know -- and the railings on the steps had been kept with the exact detail that it was in 1450, same colors of green with sort of vines trailing through it.

It was kept much the way it was -- had been. I'm sure it's a historical monument now. We had 14 houses in Germany, and my mother is now trying to get some of those houses back. So there are lawsuits going on. Something is happening, I don't know what. I'm sure the 14 houses won't be returned. But I'm sure some of them might be. I mean, the money for it anyway.

That all doesn't interest me. Not at all. I couldn't fight for that sort of thing, I don't think. They took it, they took whatever memories were in it. They took the

people who were in it. They took the love that was in it. But my mother is a little tougher than I am, and that's good. She is 89 years old, she had recently broken her hip, and she was told to walk in a walker, and she said the heck with that, and started marching around without it. So she has a lot of courage. In a different -- we're quite different.

Q. What was the name of your father's department store?

A. It was called (Il Levine), after a grandfather of his. So it had been in the family three or four generations, and it grew.

Q. Do you know what happened to it?

A. It's still going. That was East Germany. I'm sure they put some Russian name on it or something. But his biggest competitor who also owned a department store continued to live in that town, in Halle, under the Russians, too.

Q. He was Jewish?

A. Yes. I didn't quite understand that.

Q. Did your father have any political attitudes or affiliations, or was he a member of anything?

A. No, he wasn't a member of anything. But he would have made one hell of a good United States president. Or he would have made a fantastic professor of, you know,

politics. He really was -- he predicted all sorts of things, that, you know, some day Russia and China would be together in Communism, and all that sort of thing.

It's a shame, you know, that he had to come here and not fulfill himself as a man, and a human being, because he never got over leaving Germany. He didn't have a very successful business career in this country.

Q. What did he do?

A. He tried this and that, and that and this failed, and my mother became a businesswoman. She had been shielded and coddled all of her life, and she became a fabulous businessperson, in ladies' ready-to-wear.

And then after the war, there was an uncle we had who had started the Bank of Holland, and he had invested wisely, and some Christian people had hidden his assets, and those assets were then split between my cousin Rosie, who is still alive in Amsterdam, and my mother. So everything worked out fine. It was like American Tel and Tel bonds and stocks since 1933 and things like that.

Q. Did your parents ever talk much about the experience afterwards with you?

A. Well, they knew I got hysterical, every time a holiday came around, about my grandmother and grandfather, so they just tried to calm me down. I was a very difficult child, I think, when I came here. I wouldn't have wanted to

be the mother of me. It was hard. They had to learn -- my father knew English but my mother didn't, and she spoke, she didn't care if she made a mistake.

Q. Did you end up translating ever, did you learn English quicker?

A. Well, I learned English in that camp in four weeks.

Q. Did you end up translating sometimes?

A. For my mother? No. She learned English very fast. She carried a little teeny tiny dictionary with her. She just made people wait until they understood her. She's quite a fabulous lady.

Q. I'm not sure if we said this, but do you know the year and the month when you last got a letter from your grandparents?

A. It was either '40 or '42. I don't know. I don't know.

Q. And you came here in '39?

A. Yes. I think it was just -- I know they lived there a full year. So that would have been '40. I don't know. I have never found their name -- I've never gone to the Simon Wiesenthal Center or to any of these Holocaust things because I'm so afraid of finding it, and yet I want to find their name. So the next time I go to Washington, D.C., that's going to be a must. I will find out.



Q. Earlier you said you thought they ended up in Auschwitz.

A. Yes, that's for sure.

Q. How did you find that out?

A. Through the Red Cross. But when they died or how they died -- my fear has always been that they were liberated and that they were wandering around Europe not knowing who they were, you know. I almost preferred that they died, that they didn't just wander and we didn't know where they were. That's what I want to find out. And I've written to the Red Cross over and over again, and they said, we're still working on it.

Come on, you know. 50 years have gone by or more.

Q. But they knew where you were.

A. They contacted my mother. I got all that from my mother. And from Rosie, the cousin in Amsterdam.

(Photographs.)

One of my mother's friends went to Arnstadt after the war, and this is how it looks now. This is the place where my grandmother and grandfather lived.

That's the city where I was born, Halle. And that also was taken by somebody who went back to Germany after the war. I have no memory of that town. It's all blanked out.

My first day of school. And all German children get this cone shaped present on their first day. It's filled

with candy. And I got lots of them. I got not only the big one but I got lots of little ones too.

That was during the Nazi time, this was right after I had that little game of Jew dolls drowning in a bucket, and you can see how serious we all look. That was an uncle of mine, and that's my mother looking extremely serious, and you can see the difference between the time I entered school and the way I look there with the Shirley Temple doll.

Q. Where was this taken?

A. I don't know.

That's when I was a little girl, before everything became so horrible, with my grandfather, and you can see he had a big tummy before he went to the concentration camp. That was taken in a yard where the horses exercised. And you can see how even German Jews believed a lot in the German way of life, because there I'm dressed in a dirndl dress.

That was my father's department store, the one that had been in the family for so many years. It looks old to me now.

Q. Is it all three stories?

A. Yes, the whole thing.

That's my grandfather, and the horse he gave me, and you can see I was still terrified of sitting on it. I'm crying. I wanted to pet the horse, I wanted to curry the

horse, but I didn't want to sit on the horse.

That's my mother, in much happier days, before all the Nazis came.

Q. Do you know how old she is there?

A. No. She looks to me to be about 25. Cute.

That was my grandmother before she was married, when she was very young. She didn't look anything like that after a while.

I think we will make this one the last one. If I could title that picture anything, I would title it The Destruction of a Childhood.

Q. How old are you?

A. I don't know. I just know it was shortly before we came. So I must have been nine.

Q. Is that taken in your grandparents' house?

A. Yes. But you can see that the eyes, the mouth, it's totally different from that little girl who went to school.

Q. Do you remember this picture being taken?

A. No. That's it.

That's the book I wrote. I really wrote it for children. It's called Shadows at Noon. It's about all the things I just talked about, from a child's perspective.

(End of tape 1.)