

INTERVIEW WITH: MARION PORTMAN

INTERVIEWER: RACHEL GORDON

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PLACE:

TRANSCRIBER: RUTH M. MARTIN
1500 Locust Street, Suite 4212
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102
215-545-5584

1 MS. GORDON: Okay. Can you state
2 your name.

3 MS. PORTMAN: My name is Marian
4 Portman.

5 MS. GORDON: And you spell that
6 P-o-r --

7 MS. PORTMAN: t-m-a-n.

8 MS. GORDON: Okay. And your age
9 now?

10 MS. PORTMAN: I'm fifty-three.

11 MS. GORDON: Okay. And what
12 country did you live in?

13 MS. PORTMAN: Germany.

14 MS. GORDON: You lived in Germany.
15 And how old were you --

16 MS. PORTMAN: I wouldn't say
17 exactly I grew up, I left when I was nine.

18 MS. GORDON: You left when you were
19 nine.

20 And how come you left Germany?

21 MS. PORTMAN: Because of the Nazis.

22 MS. GORDON: Okay. Why don't you
23 tell us a little bit, as much as you can, of
24 what you remember when you were nine, where

1 exactly in Germany you were when the Nazis came.

2 MS. PORTMAN: Well, it isn't a
3 question of the Nazis coming like some of the
4 other countries in Europe, the Nazis were always
5 there from the time that I remember. They came
6 into power in 1933, which was when I was one
7 year old, so my childhood was during the Nazi
8 time. And I think I probably grew up thinking
9 that that was a normal way, that Jews didn't
10 have rights, and -- and, you know, all -- all
11 the laws that applied to -- to Jews. As a child
12 I -- I think I realized -- I just thought that
13 is the way it was, I didn't know that it was
14 abnormal until later on. I just knew that they
15 didn't like Jews, you know, I didn't know why or
16 anything.

17 MS. GORDON: What town were you in
18 in Germany?

19 MS. PORTMAN: I lived in Hamburg.

20 MS. GORDON: Okay. And who did you
21 live with there?

22 MS. PORTMAN: My immediate family,
23 my parents, my two sisters, and I had some
24 various relatives.

1 MS. GORDON: What were some of the
2 laws when you were a little girl that -- that
3 you remember with the Nazis?

4 MS. PORTMAN: Well, I think the one
5 that comes to mind first was the one that all
6 places had signs (inaudible) Jews undesired.

7 MS. GORDON: Where were some of the
8 signs?

9 MS. PORTMAN: Public places. Out --
10 everywhere, really. We used to go to some of
11 these places even though it wasn't allowed. I
12 suppose as a kid (inaudible) because, you know,
13 nobody checked your identification when you went
14 in, but you were always taking the risk that you
15 might be arrested for being in a place you
16 weren't supposed to be. But my parents wanted
17 to go places, so we used to go. Oh, I think in
18 theaters, well, museums. I had never been in a
19 museum. I remember walking down the street with
20 my mother and asking her what this large
21 building was and she told me it was a museum, I
22 didn't really know what a museum was but I knew
23 we couldn't go in. I never went to a museum
24 until I came to this country. And I had never

1 really been in a library either, but that may be
2 because the libraries there aren't like they are
3 here, I don't really know for sure. But public
4 parks -- well, not all -- parks, they had like
5 restaurants, I don't know exactly what you would
6 call them. I mean, we used to go to a park
7 every day that didn't have a sign, but there
8 were certain parks that I remember going to that
9 did have a sign that Jews couldn't go there.

10 I'm trying to think of some other
11 things. Well, I can't really think of anything
12 specific, but I know signs were everywhere.

13 MS. GORDON: Okay. Did -- did you --
14 what was your -- you wanted to go to these parks?
15 I mean, did you have feelings at all or did you
16 just --

17 MS. PORTMAN: Like I said, we used
18 to go anyway, because my parents liked, you
19 know, on Sundays liked to go for outings. We
20 didn't have a backyard like you do here, we
21 lived in apartments, and so we used to go. And
22 in fact, my parents had kind of a signal to each
23 other where if they thought they saw someone
24 else who was Jewish, my mother would say to my

1 father, that is Als-heim-me, which is the
2 initials AE for Als-heim-me, which is "also one";
3 in other words, it was the feeling that they
4 felt comfort to know that they were not the only
5 ones who were breaking the law.

6 MS. GORDON: Uh-hum.

7 Did you -- were you at all aware of
8 what would happen to you if the law was broken?
9 Was that ever a warning from your parents, to be
10 extra careful?

11 MS. PORTMAN: No, not really,
12 because I don't know whether anything really
13 necessarily did happen.

14 My father did break the -- the --
15 one of the other laws was a curfew. There was a
16 curfew in the summer, you had to be home by nine
17 o'clock at night, and in the winter it was 8:00.
18 Well, my father didn't really believe in keeping
19 these laws and one time -- he used to stay out
20 later now and then, and one time our apartment
21 was searched, two Gestapo men came and went
22 through the whole building. Well, the building
23 we lived in had about five -- no, let's see, it
24 had maybe ten or twelve different apartments,

1 suites, and about half -- half of them were
2 Jewish -- occupied by Jews, not necessarily
3 Jewish families, because most of the apartments
4 had more than one family in them, people had
5 rooms and it was kind of communal living where
6 they shared a kitchen, a bathroom. We happened
7 to have our own apartment, but most of the
8 others were several families in one. So the
9 Gestapo came into the building and they searched
10 every one of the suites where there were Jews
11 living. We lived on the top floor so they got
12 to us last, I guess. And my father wasn't home.
13 So, of course, my mother was really scared to
14 death, and I was (inaudible) and they came in,
15 they used this ridiculous excuse they were
16 searching for soap.

17 MS. GORDON: Really?

18 MS. PORTMAN: Soap.

19 Well, that isn't what they said the
20 reason they were there, but once they were
21 inside they said do you have any soap. And they
22 went into our -- the various rooms, and my two
23 sisters who were younger than I am, they were
24 sleeping together in cribs, they slept with my

1 parents in their bedroom, and my mother asked
2 them not to go into that room because the babies --
3 the children were sleeping, but, of course, they
4 (inaudible) they opened the door, looked in, and
5 closed it again. So they said that they would
6 come back later to -- to make sure my father got
7 there in the meantime and they said he better be
8 there. Well, a few minutes after they left, I
9 think they went to some other suites in the
10 building, a few minutes after they left my
11 father came in and my mother, of course, was
12 very upset and she told him about it, and he
13 said that he had seen two men go in the elevator
14 and I think he took the stairs instead. I mean,
15 he had no idea who they were. But my mother,
16 who was obviously quick thinking, she right away
17 had an alibi in her mind, and she told him to go
18 to a doctor. Well, he had complained of some
19 chest pain now and then, and she told him to go
20 to a doctor, Jewish doctor this was, and he
21 should write a note saying that he got late
22 getting home because he had pains and had to
23 stop off at the doctor. So this is what he did.
24 And he had to go down to the Gestapo the

1 following day or two days later, and they looked
2 at the note and what he had, and they just -- he
3 said they were -- the were cordial, I mean, I
4 don't know if they smiled or not, but they said
5 just, you know, see that it doesn't happen again
6 and then let him go home. But when I think
7 about this now, how close he brought us or this
8 could have brought us
9 (inaudible) just grabbed him, arrested him. I
10 mean, they arrested people for less than that.

11 MS. GORDON: So were -- were a lot
12 of arrests of Jews being made at that time that
13 you're aware of?

14 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, yes, arrests were
15 being made all the time.

16 I don't remember what year this was,
17 I think that probably most of the things I
18 remember maybe happened between 1939 and '41,
19 because that was when I was the oldest, that was
20 the time I was between seven and nine, and I
21 don't know how much I would remember at earlier
22 times, so I think, you know, the various
23 incidents I remember happened late -- and when I
24 say late, it's because when I think back now

1 it's so amazing that we were still living there,
2 pretty much everyday lives between '39 and '41,
3 because that's when the act of the Voyage of the
4 Dams, you know, the St. Louis, and I told this
5 to a friend of mine, who was in the Warsaw
6 Ghetto, and she said nobody in Poland at that
7 time realized that Jews were still living in
8 Germany, you know, everyday lives.

9 Well, I can't exactly say everyday
10 lives, because it wasn't a normal life, because
11 people couldn't work, like my father, he was
12 fired from his job. He did something with
13 journalism, he worked with some kind of a
14 magazine in the early thirties. Well, he never
15 did this work that I recall because I was so
16 young when he was fired, but I know he -- he
17 told me about this in recent years before he
18 died, that his boss called him in and told hm
19 that he had to let him go, he didn't want to let
20 him go, he was very sorry, but he was being
21 forced to let him go. So after that period
22 where he was really employed, you know, on a
23 regular job, he did kind of odds and ends. I
24 remember for a short time he was digging ditches,

1 that was kind of a forced labor type of thing,
2 but it was in Hamburg, and I think he must have
3 gotten paid for it, but it was something even --
4 either he did it because there was nothing else
5 available or maybe he had to do it, I just don't
6 remember.

7 But I'm kind of rambling on here.

8 MS. GORDON: No, this is fine.

9 MS. PORTMAN: 'Cause I got from one
10 thing to another.

11 Well, let me tell you about the
12 thing that he did for his definite, I have to
13 put quotation marks, just before we left, this
14 was his last business. Jews -- well, everybody
15 had ration cards for food, which I'm sure you
16 know.

17 MS. GORDON: Jews and non-Jews?

18 MS. PORTMAN: Yes, everybody, but
19 Jews had ration cards that had a J on them and
20 you can only use them in -- in Jew stores. We
21 had a name for it, we called it Jela, because
22 the word for Jew in German was Jeda, the first
23 to letters J-E, and laden is store, the first
24 two letters are L-A, so we put it together, we

1 used to call it the Jela, which, you know, meant
2 going to the Jewish store.

3 And the ration cards came out once
4 a month, I think, and they had to be picked up
5 at a certain office in -- in the city. And
6 there were many elderly people, or just people
7 in general who didn't want to go down there and
8 stand in line, you know, every month to get the
9 ration cards, so my father had built up this
10 little business and, you know, he kept getting
11 more and more people who would pay him for
12 getting their ration cards. I think he had a
13 bicycle at the time and he just used to ride
14 along the city and deliver -- deliver the cards.
15 The thing that kind of amazes me is that the
16 authorities allowed this. I mean, they could
17 have forced everybody to come for their own
18 cards, but they did let him do it. And I once
19 asked him what -- what happened to that after --
20 when we left, and he said that he gave it over,
21 you know, to somebody else, because it was
22 already established and, you know, it was
23 something to -- to support you.

24 MS. GORDON: Did you help at all

1 with that?

2 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, no, no, no.

3 Actually, I don't know what I could have done, I
4 was pretty young; so, no. He did it all by
5 himself. I don't think it was that demanding of
6 a job.

7 MS. GORDON: Can you tell us a
8 little bit of what just a typical day in your
9 life, what that was like as a little girl?

10 MS. PORTMAN: I really, you know,
11 can't -- I remember more certain instances, but
12 I can't really say I remember a typical day. I
13 did -- oh, you asked me before about the laws
14 that applied to Jews. Well, of course, one
15 thing was that we had to go to a Jewish school,
16 our own school. So my friends were all Jewish,
17 of course, mainly because the other children
18 weren't allowed to associate with us or, you
19 know, just -- just didn't. So as far as friends,
20 I never really felt discrimination because my
21 friends were all Jewish and, you know, the other,
22 they ignored me, I ignored them.

23 The school didn't have too many
24 children, it kept getting smaller and smaller as

1 people immigrated. But there were a lot of
2 children who -- who came from upper cities who
3 lived in -- in -- there were two orphanages, the
4 boys orphanage and the girls orphanage. They
5 weren't necessarily orphanages, but they were
6 housing for children who came from other places,
7 and I figured out over the years that I think
8 the reason they came to Hamburg was because they
9 lived in small towns where there was no Jewish
10 school that they could go to --

11 MS. GORDON: Okay.

12 MS. PORTMAN: -- so that their
13 families sent them to Hamburg.

14 And I used to go to these
15 orphanages, you know, to -- as a social thing,
16 because, you know, there were a lot of kids.
17 Well, you know, to play. I remember being at a --
18 I used to go to Saturday mornings services that
19 they used to have in the boys orphan home. The
20 girls orphan home wasn't really much of an
21 orphan home, it was just a building I guess that
22 the Jewish community owned and -- and they lived
23 there.

24 But, well, as far as a typical day,

1 I -- I don't know, it was just, you know, like
2 anybody -- it's day.

3 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: So you'd go to
4 school?

5 MS. GORDON: So you'd go to school
6 and play --

7 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah.

8 MS. GORDON: -- come home?

9 MS. PORTMAN: I used to play on the
10 street, but as I said, you know, I didn't play,
11 you know, with non-Jewish children. And I did
12 have a Jewish friend next door, but she never
13 came outside, so when I played outside I always
14 played by myself.

15 Now, let's see what --

16 MS. GORDON: Were you very aware
17 that -- you were aware that there were Nazi laws,
18 but were you -- how did you -- were you scared
19 of the Nazi, were they part of your life?

20 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah, they were a
21 part of your life.

22 In fact, (inaudible) I mentioned
23 the apartment building we lived in before, well,
24 this is the main thing, there was an SS office

1 in the suite on the first floor, the ones from
2 the black shirts (inaudible) and they used to
3 pass me playing outside, they walked past me all
4 the time and, you know, I mean, we, our family,
5 you know, we kind of stayed away from them and
6 they knew they -- they knew they didn't like us,
7 but, you know, you lived your lives and you
8 really, you know, didn't think very much about
9 it, you just hoped, you know, they didn't come
10 for you or you didn't get into any trouble. But
11 that is the main thing, that they were right in
12 the same building.

13 Oh, well, that -- you know, it's
14 kind of appropriate that I'm doing this tape
15 because -- today because I've been back to
16 Hamburg several times and I was back two years
17 ago. Well, the first time back I was by myself,
18 the second time I went with my parents and the
19 third time I went with my children. Well, my
20 husband was there two times too, but I wanted to
21 show my children where I grew up and went to
22 school and things like that. And ever since
23 I've been there two summers ago, I've wanted to
24 write a letter. There's a magazine that comes

1 out for tourists or -- well, for -- it's a
2 magazine that's put out by the City, and on the
3 last page there's an item where people who are
4 newcomers to Hamburg write their impressions of
5 what they find the city like when -- when they
6 (inaudible), and ever since I've seen that two
7 years ago I've wanted to write a letter to write
8 my impressions (inaudible) what it's like.

9 MS. GORDON: (Inaudible.)

10 MS. PORTMAN: Pardon?

11 MS. GORDON: (Inaudible.)

12 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah.

13 And this morning while I was
14 waiting for my husband, he was at the meeting, I
15 never have time to sit down, I finally sat down,
16 I started to write this letter. Well, it needs
17 a lot of editing, I have to go over it and over
18 it, but anyhow, but I -- so, you know, I was
19 just thinking about some of these things this
20 afternoon.

21 MS. GORDON: What does your letter
22 say? What are some of the things in it?

23 MS. PORTMAN: Well, I write that
24 the city is really pretty much the same. Of

1 course, there's some parts -- well, I didn't
2 mention this in the letter, but everybody knows
3 who lives there some parts were bombed
4 completely and are gone, but the streets are so
5 peaceful and pretty and green and, you know,
6 trees, and it's -- it's like a different world,
7 it's the same place and yet it's a different
8 world, and every time I go back I feel like I've
9 been on the moon, you know, I feel like I'm
10 coming from outerspace, 'cause, well, first of
11 all my German isn't all that great and I speak
12 with a heavy accent, so they tell me, and
13 sometimes I use the German words I haven't heard
14 in over forty years, I don't know whether that
15 word is still in the vocabulary or not, you know,
16 and it -- it seems like such a pleasant place
17 and yet the -- there's so much sadness because I
18 can walk passed the buildings and I -- I know
19 who lived there, you know, it was my old
20 neighborhood, and these people have been gone
21 for over forty years.

22 But let me say here one thing, I
23 mentioned before about we were there, you know,
24 during the time from '39 to '41 when everybody --

1 it's amazing that we were there. Well, because
2 of that, I'm probably the last child that
3 survived from that school or one of them, you
4 know, because we left in -- in July of '41, and
5 the deportation started in October, so -- and I
6 think in September, from some of the reading
7 I've done recently, I think in September there
8 was a law passed that you could no longer
9 immigrate. So I think that every child that was
10 left in the school after I left perished.

11 MS. GORDON: Uh-hum.

12 MS. PORTMAN: So I can pretty much
13 say that everybody I knew is gone.

14 So I would walk passed these
15 buildings and I remember who lived there and,
16 you know, I think they're forgotten, you know, I
17 sometimes wonder if anybody is still alive who
18 remembers these people. I mean, some may have
19 had relatives, but some may not have had anybody.

20 And this last time I went I took a
21 picture with me from a birthday party I had
22 attended not too long before we immigrated, and
23 I wasn't -- I knew the street approximately, but
24 I wasn't quite sure, you know, whether it was

1 one street or the next street or which house.
2 And we stood there and we compared the -- this
3 picture was taken outside the apartment building
4 on the street, but you could see the -- the
5 window frames on the picture and we compared
6 them, you know, to the buildings, and so I knew
7 exactly, you know, where it was that this was
8 taken, and there must have been like ten or
9 fifteen children in the picture and I think I'm
10 probably the only one that's still alive.

11 MS. GORDON: You mentioned that it
12 was amazing that -- that you remained there till
13 '41.

14 MS. PORTMAN: '41.

15 MS. GORDON: Tell us about that.
16 Why is it amazing?

17 MS. PORTMAN: Well, it's amazing
18 when you think back of what went on in Poland
19 and some of the eastern countries, you know, how
20 the people were being taken to concentration
21 camps and ghettos at that time. Well, what the
22 main thing I think that I meant by amazing is
23 that we survived and were still able to get away
24 in '41, because like I mentioned the St. Louis,

1 that episode happened in '39 where those people
2 had nowhere to go, and here we were still living,
3 you know, lives pretty much -- I mean, life was
4 getting harder all the time, there were more
5 restrictions, more rules, you couldn't work, you
6 know, and money --

7 MS. GORDON: You mentioned your
8 father did work, but you mentioned a couple of
9 the laws, the curfew.

10 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah, the curfew.

11 MS. GORDON: What were some other
12 laws, you know?

13 MS. PORTMAN: (Inaudible) Well, the
14 Nuremberg laws, some of them, you know, didn't --
15 didn't affect us, I mean like, you know, you
16 couldn't intermarry, you know, someone from out
17 of the religion. Of course, that had no bearing
18 on us directly. You couldn't employ someone in
19 your home who was not Jewish, and we did have, I
20 don't know if you call it a governess, which we
21 children, you know, did have, but they were
22 Jewish, so that may have had a bearing, maybe my
23 mother would have had, you know, someone else,
24 but -- but these girls were happy to get jobs,

1 they couldn't work anywhere, so one of the
2 things that was open to them was working in
3 Jewish households.

4 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: These are
5 Jewish help now?

6 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah, they were
7 Jewish.

8 More laws? Well --

9 MS. GORDON: Let me interrupt again.
10 Was this something that happened -- do you think
11 the law thing happened abruptly or was it one
12 step at a time?

13 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, it was one step
14 at a -- well, like one of the things I remember
15 is, it was on Yom Kupper or Rosh Hashanah, one
16 of the Jewish holidays, now, this I think was
17 before '39 when -- when the law came out -- well,
18 I don't know whether you call this a law, it was
19 a rule, all Jews had to turn in all their silver
20 and their radios to the Gestapo. I'm sure
21 you've heard --

22 MS. GORDON: When did you say this
23 was?

24 MS. PORTMAN: Well, I would say it

1 was somewhere between '36 and '39 maybe,
2 somewhere around there. I think the -- the
3 Nuremberg laws were passed in '35, so I think,
4 you know, it was somewhere around there.

5 And, of course, this was an uproar
6 in the Jewish community because, first of all,
7 it was one of the High Holidays and most of
8 people that I recall were -- were religious, you
9 know, orthodox, we were not, but -- so that in
10 itself -- but, you know, turning in your
11 belongings, you know. I don't remember if we
12 had anything to turn in or not. My parents were
13 pretty young so, you know, they wouldn't have
14 had time to accumulate things that some of the
15 older people had.

16 But -- oh, and my grandfather owned
17 a printing shop and that was taken away from him.

18 And --

19 MS. GORDON: Was there any money
20 given to him for that or was it just taken?

21 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, no, oh, no, I
22 don't think so.

23 And my grandparents were always
24 starving. I mean, it seemed like they never had

1 enough to eat, it was just, you know, to get
2 enough money to get food for another day.

3 MS. GORDON: Did you always have
4 enough to eat, your family?

5 MS. PORTMAN: Well, yes. Well, as
6 I said before, you know, my father did have --
7 he was young so, you know, he had these various
8 jobs, and my grandfather who was in his sixties,
9 you know, an older man couldn't do that.

10 Oh, I was -- I was going to mention
11 this before. Also, Jews were taxed. You know
12 how there's taxing here and if you are single
13 you pay more than if you're married or if you
14 have no children. Well, my mother once told me
15 that we as Jews were taxed when my father did
16 work at a rate as if there were no children in
17 the family, so, you know, we paid higher taxes,
18 and yet there were three children in my family.

19 Well, I mentioned the school, you
20 know, we had to go to a special school.

21 Now, this is something very strange
22 that I remember about the school. I'm sure the
23 teachers were told what they could teach,
24 although, you know, I was a child and I didn't

1 know that at the time. But I seem to remember --
2 sometimes I wonder if this is a figment of my
3 imagination or whether this actually was true.
4 We had a course called li-mo-kun-da, which means
5 studying about your home.

6 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Do you know how
7 to spell that at all?

8 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah.

9 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: I like that,
10 li-mo-kun-da

11 MS. PORTMAN: Maybe you can
12 translate it for me. I'm not sure what it is in
13 translation, but it's -- you know, rather than
14 studying the world, it's studying your home.
15 And we used to go outside the school building
16 with rulers and measure the ground outside the
17 building, and I'm wondering if this was
18 something that the teachers felt they were
19 filling a requirement, that there wasn't really
20 anything they could teach us about our home
21 because, you know, what it meant, so they were
22 doing these little time fillers.

23 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Because you
24 were Jewish, you mean, like that this wasn't

1 your home?

2 MS. PORTMAN: Well, no, no, no, it
3 was our home, but they -- politics, I mean, they
4 didn't want to teach us about, what I'm sure you
5 must have been taught in that subject in -- in
6 non-Jewish classes, you know, about the Nazi
7 party and things like that, and they weren't
8 going to teach us that, so -- but as I said, I
9 wonder if, you know, this is something I -- I
10 have a pretty good memory, so, you know, I think
11 that this must have been so, but it just seems
12 so strange when I think -- I can remember the
13 ruler, I was standing -- standing outside.

14 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: (Inaudible.)

15 MS. PORTMAN: But that's neither
16 here nor there.

17 MS. GORDON: Were you taught at all
18 about Nazis and their politics when you were in
19 school?

20 MS. PORTMAN: No.

21 MS. GORDON: Nothing at all?

22 MS. PORTMAN: No, no, no. No, we
23 had -- in fact, that's where I first studied
24 Hebrew and just learned about Adam and Eve and

1 the Bible. We had religion too, you know, we --
2 we studied the regular moral secular courses,
3 and we also had our own Jewish -- Jewish courses.

4 MS. GORDON: Were these public
5 schools?

6 MS. PORTMAN: No, no, this -- this
7 Jewish school was -- well, in Germany the
8 schools are -- were private, I think -- I don't
9 know if they were private or public, but you
10 still had to pay, and I think -- I think today
11 it's different, I think today they're free, but
12 at that time we had to pay no matter what school
13 you went to. So I don't know whether you would
14 call them private.

15 MS. GORDON: It wasn't subsidized
16 like our schools?

17 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah. And so even if
18 it hadn't been at the time, you still would have
19 had a choice, and like my mother went to a
20 Jewish school during her time and she could have
21 gone to any school. But it was just -- but no
22 matter where you lived you had to go to this
23 particular school, even if you didn't want to.

24 MS. GORDON: Right.

1 MS. PORTMAN: I'm sure I wouldn't
2 have wanted to go to any other school because I
3 would have been probably been ostracized or had
4 to listen to teachers teach things about Jews,
5 so, you know, I was perfectly content about
6 going to school.

7 But you asked me about a typical
8 day. Well, we, you know, we did go to school,
9 but there were often heavy -- now, this was
10 wartime, not necessarily Nazis, but this was
11 because of the war, we had many, many air raids,
12 and when the air raids lasted a certain amount
13 of time during the night so that you wouldn't
14 get much sleep, then there would be no school
15 the next day.

16 Speaking of air raids, that reminds
17 me of something else. Every building -- as I
18 mentioned before, we all lived in -- most people
19 lived in apartment buildings. Every building
20 had an air raid shelter in the basement, they
21 were made to -- you know, into shelters, plus
22 public shelters. If you were caught during the
23 day and there was an air raid and you were on
24 the street you had to head for the nearest

1 shelter, that was a public law, plus it was
2 self-preservation, you didn't want to be out
3 when the bombs went off. But most of the air
4 raids were at night. And there was a special
5 shelter for Jews in our building and that was
6 the shelter that was the farthest back, so in
7 case you had to get out during a bombing it was
8 the one that was the hardest to get out of. But
9 we all, you know, sat together. We had our
10 little suitcases packed so, you know, as soon as
11 the air raid alarm went off, you grabbed a
12 suitcase and went downstairs. You never knew
13 how long you were down there.

14 MS. GORDON: What's the longest you --

15 MS. PORTMAN: I don't know. But
16 often or sometimes, I don't know how often it
17 was, the air raid -- by the time you got down
18 there the all clear would already come on and
19 you'd get to bed, twenty minutes later it would
20 go on again and you'd have to go down again.
21 And, of course, my -- my sisters were really
22 small so they used to just kind of go on
23 sleeping, but I think I -- I was awake, you know,
24 most of the time.

1 MS. GORDON: Were you pretty aware
2 of all the things that were going on? As a
3 child did your parents keep some of the things
4 from you, do you remember, or were you -- you
5 knew what was going on with the war and the
6 Nazis, did you feel you were up on that stuff?

7 MS. PORTMAN: At that time?

8 MS. GORDON: Yeah, at that time.

9 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, yeah, you knew, I
10 mean it was was your everyday life. Well, as I
11 said before, I didn't think that it was abnormal
12 necessarily, that was the way -- you know, I was
13 born into it and until I came to this contry
14 when I was almost ten, I thought that was the
15 way, you know, life was, I really didn't know it
16 was any different.

17 It was -- there was something else
18 I was going to say. Oh, yeah, another --
19 another instance I want to mention was my sister
20 came down with scarlet fever plus a few other
21 diseases all at the same time, which was highly
22 contagious, and at that -- at that time, you
23 know, you had to go to the hospital and your
24 house had to be fumigated, you know, for germs.

1 And there was a Jewish hospital that all Jews
2 were supposed to go. Well, my parents felt that
3 the Jewish hospital wasn't equipped for
4 contagious diseases, so they didn't want to take
5 her to the Jewish hospital. Of course, I
6 realize now that the hospital doesn't really
7 have to be equipped, maybe they didn't have a
8 contagious section, but when they got a
9 contagious case, all they had to do was set up
10 isolation procedure. But, you know, my parents --
11 I'm really starting to know about that, but my
12 parents didn't know it.

13 And, well, at that time scarlet
14 fever was so feared that the hospital that she
15 was in, which was a regular city hospital,
16 whatever, had a special building just for
17 contagious diseases. But the reason I mention
18 this is because when my parents took her there
19 they didn't mention anything about her being
20 Jewish, they weren't asked and, you know, which --
21 I guess they crossed their fingers that we
22 weren't going to go asked, but I guess maybe the
23 personnel there didn't even think -- think of
24 asking that, because, you know, most Jews went

1 to the Jewish hospital, they had no reason not
2 to. So my parents took her there, and our name
3 wasn't Jewish sounding, which she was admitted,
4 but, of course, there was the fear the whole
5 time she was in the hospital that she might, she
6 was only three year ago old, she turned four
7 when she was in the hospital, but we were all
8 afraid that while she was there she might blurt
9 out something about our family being Jewish.
10 But she never did. I mean, we didn't tell her
11 not to, because I think, you know, it's kind of
12 hard to tell a child at that age not to, so we
13 just kept our fingers crossed. So she was there,
14 you know, as long as she needed to be, and when
15 she came home she was singing all these anti-England
16 songs that she had picked up from some of the
17 other children. So -- but that episode, you
18 know, turned out all right.

19 I mentioned the Jewish hospital. I
20 had been a patient in the Jewish hospital, which
21 I remember as the nice, brick, large building,
22 that building was taken way and just before we
23 left they put -- the Jewish hospital became a
24 small one-family home that was, you know,

1 converted into a hospital, partly because they
2 weren't allowed to have anything better, you
3 know, better facilities, but also at that time
4 so many of the doctors as well as the people who
5 lived there had immigrated and there wasn't that
6 much need for a large building.

7 MS. GORDON: What happened to you?
8 Why were you in the hospital?

9 MS. PORTMAN: Well, this -- I had --
10 had nothing, you know, to do with any of that, I
11 just was sick, I had surgery.

12 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: The doctors --
13 Jewish doctors had immigrated at that time?

14 MS. PORTMAN: Well, you know, Jews,
15 all kinds of Jews, doctors --

16 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Just had
17 emigrated at that time.

18 MS. PORTMAN: Yes.

19 So, I remember my mother telling me
20 about the surgeon who had operated on me was in
21 New York, you know, in later years, and so many
22 had immigrated. I remember the nursery school
23 teacher I went to, you know, immigrated. And
24 they went all over the world. There's a list

1 now that comes out, put out by the Senate of
2 Hamburg, that lists, you know, lists where the
3 people live.

4 MS. GORDON: You mentioned the
5 episode the Nazis -- two Nazis came to the house.

6 MS. PORTMAN: To the house, yes.

7 MS. GORDON: Are there any other
8 specific episodes that you remember where the
9 Nazis dealt specifically with your mom?

10 MS. PORTMAN: No, not really.

11 I'll mention something else here,
12 that this -- this was not Nazi per se, this was
13 children. One time when I was playing outside,
14 as I mentioned I usually played alone, but this
15 one -- there were obviously other children,
16 non-Jewish children there, but they always left
17 me alone. But one time one of them got the idea
18 to kind of gang up on me, got all of them
19 together and they started making this, you know,
20 big circle around me, and I really got
21 frightened. But my friends and I, you know how
22 kids are, we had I guess talked about something
23 like this happening once, and we had said, you
24 know, if anything ever happens, say your

1 father's a policeman. So, you know, I was
2 shaking while I was saying this, you know, but I
3 said, you know, leave me alone or I'll tell my
4 father, he's a policeman. So one of them yelled
5 out, your father's a Jew, he's no policeman.
6 And, you know, Jews obviously weren't allowed to
7 be policemen.

8 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: So it was
9 definitely because you were Jewish?

10 MS. PORTMAN: Well, I don't know if
11 it was, but they knew that I was.

12 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: All the kids
13 knew it, yeah.

14 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah, yeah. If all
15 of them didn't know it before, they certainly
16 did now.

17 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Yeah.

18 MS. PORTMAN: And another time,
19 this is one of the things that I mention in my
20 letter, in fact, there was this family in our
21 building who were real Nazis, and their -- their
22 boys used to play outside and, of course, they
23 always ignored me, but I guess one time they --
24 they decided to start playing with me, and, boy,

1 no sooner had they started talking to me, their
2 mother stuck her her head out of the window and
3 yelled, don't play with her, she's a Jew. And
4 so, you know, they never talked to me again
5 after that.

6 And then in the next building there
7 was this girl, her name was Sonya, I also
8 mention her in the letter. I'm just kind of
9 curious, you know, whether these people are
10 still alive today, how -- what they would be
11 like.

12 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Sonya what was
13 that?

14 MS. PORTMAN: No, I don't know her
15 last name. I never knew her last name.

16 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Jewish girl?

17 MS. PORTMAN: No, no, no, she was a
18 Hitler Youth. She obviously --

19 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: How --

20 MS. PORTMAN: Well, you know, the
21 uniform.

22 And she obviously would walk passed
23 with her, you know, nose up, never so much as
24 even acknowledged my existence, you know. I

1 don't know whether they were taught that in the
2 Hitler Youth, not to associate with Jews or, you
3 know, whether this was from the family or what
4 but, you know, I was -- she just used to walk
5 passed me all the time and I just remember this
6 blond girl named Sonya in the Hitler Youth
7 uniform.

8 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: That was the
9 brown, with the gold jacket?

10 MS. PORTMAN: Yes.

11 Let's see, what else?

12 MS. GORDON: When you referred
13 (inaudible).

14 MS. PORTMAN: No, no.

15 MS. GORDON: (Inaudible.)

16 MS. PORTMAN: I guess they did, I
17 don't know, I don't know. I don't think
18 children would have been required. Just like
19 when it became compulsive to wear the -- the
20 yellow arm band, I don't think children under a
21 certain age had to do that. But see, I wasn't
22 there anymore.

23 I wanted to say one other thing
24 about being deported. You know, I mentioned

1 that deport -- deportation started right after
2 we left. But they were taking place in other
3 cities, and I remember my mother saying to my
4 father, you know, I just remember the
5 conversation, that in such and such a place
6 there was a deportation. Now, the thing that
7 amazes me now is how news would get around so
8 fast, because there were no telephones, and I
9 guess it was just, you know, word of mouth, but
10 maybe the Jewish community office would hear
11 about it and, you know, would spread it.

12 But anyhow, whenever I used to hear
13 this, deportation, I remember lying in bed and I
14 would think, you know, I didn't know exactly
15 what it was, but I knew it was bad and it was
16 frightening, and I -- all I could kind of
17 visualize was people walking, although I didn't
18 know where they were walking to or what they
19 were walking from or, you know, that's as far as
20 my imagination went, and then I remember kind of
21 people asking each other, you know, Jewish
22 people, what are they going to do with us, you
23 know, what do you think, and the answer would be,
24 well, they just -- you know, they say they're

1 going to resettle us in the East, which, you
2 know, you still hear, I read that in later years.

3 Well, my grandfather was deported,
4 by the way.

5 MS. GORDON: Before you left?

6 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, no, no, I said
7 that --

8 MS. GORDON: Right, that it started
9 afterwards.

10 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah. I think -- I
11 have a book that lists all the transports and I
12 think the first transport started in -- on
13 October 7th. I'm sure the book is in the
14 library here.

15 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: October 7th?

16 MS. PORTMAN: Of 1941. We left
17 somewhere in July.

18 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: (Inaudible)
19 transport?

20 MS. PORTMAN: I think so. But I --
21 that may be a week after that, but that's not
22 that important. My grandfather was, I think, on
23 the second -- in the second transport, and all
24 our other relatives -- I counted twelve

1 relatives that were left, were there when we
2 left who all perished. Well, they weren't all
3 in Hamburg, some of them were (inaudible) but in
4 Hamburg, all the ones, you know, that we left
5 were --

6 MS. GORDON: Do you know where they
7 were deported to?

8 MS. PORTMAN: Well, my grandfather
9 went to Minsk, and then my father had two aunts
10 who went to Riga. They were actually like my
11 aunts. I mean, they were great aunts but I was
12 with them all the time, I used to stay with them.
13 And there was a third aunt, and I think she may
14 have been killed in one of those euthanasia
15 programs.

16 Euthanasia, am I pronouncing it
17 correctly?

18 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Yes.

19 MS. PORTMAN: My father made the
20 comment to me in -- in recent years that she was
21 the only one of our family who died right in
22 Hamburg, and I remember thinking that she had
23 gone to a home, and she was, you know, kind of
24 old and her fingers were, you know, crippled.

1 from arthritis, and -- and I don't know, she may
2 have gone to a home for the aged or something or
3 just been killed, but I'm not -- I'm not really
4 too sure about that. My parents didn't tell me,
5 you know, all I know is I never saw her again.

6 MS. GORDON: Can you tell us a
7 little bit about the time right before you
8 immigrated and the reasons why you chose -- why
9 your family chose at that time to leave?

10 MS. PORTMAN: My family didn't
11 choose at that time, my parents had been working
12 for three years to try to get our papers in
13 order to go, and maybe -- I think there was --
14 only if they were able to arrange it. It was
15 very, very difficult. And I remember my mother
16 telling some stories, but unfortunately I don't
17 know the details, it was something about you
18 couldn't get your tickets for the passage if you
19 didn't have some other paper, and you couldn't
20 get the other paper if you didn't have the
21 ticket, it was like a Catch 22.

22 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Catch 22.

23 MS. PORTMAN: And I don't know,
24 they lied about having the one, which was kind

1 of amazing because I would think they would have
2 been asked to produce it, but, you know, somehow
3 they did manage to get away.

4 But my father wrote a very
5 interesting travel report of our trip, which I
6 have thought of handing over to the library here,
7 I have to mention it to Lonny, that's the name
8 of the --

9 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Uh-huh.

10 MS. PORTMAN: But at this point I
11 haven't. I only have a copy and unfortunately
12 the copy is so difficult to read that I don't
13 know whether it's worth handing over.

14 But in this report, I didn't know
15 this at the time -- maybe I knew it at the time,
16 but this is something I didn't remember, we --
17 we first had to go to Berlin, from Hamburg we
18 went to Berlin, and in Berlin these people from
19 all over Germany came to meet, that was, you
20 know, the meeting point, and -- 'cause it was a --
21 like a closed transport that you left -- you
22 were able to leave the country. And in this
23 transit report my father wrote that when we got
24 to Berlin the head of the Jewish agent -- agency

1 who was in charge said to him, where were you
2 yesterday, your transport lapsed. So when I
3 read that, you know, I -- not only was it a
4 miracle we got away, but it was a miracle that
5 they managed to squeeze us into the wrong -- I
6 don't know if we took somebody else's space or
7 whether they just made the space or what, but I
8 can imagine what my parents feelings must have
9 been like. I mean, we hadn't, you know, given
10 up, but we had -- we had no place to go back to.

11 MS. GORDON: You lost everything
12 then?

13 MS. PORTMAN: Well, no -- I mean,
14 no, I think my parents were able to sell
15 everything. I remember the first thing that was
16 sold was my -- my doll buggy, and I remember
17 crying because it was -- I don't know if -- if
18 you've ever seen German baby buggies, but
19 they're -- they're very pretty, they're quite
20 different than anybody's, the Perambulator.
21 Well, in this country you don't use them very
22 much because everybody, you know, has a car,
23 maybe they do in Europe now too, but at that
24 time they had beautiful baby buggies and my doll

1 buggy was an exact replica of the regular. And
2 I used to push my doll buggy and my mother
3 pushed my sister in the baby buggy. So I -- I
4 think the first thing that was for sale was the
5 buggy and I remember crying when I had to part
6 with it. But I did bring my doll, and I still
7 have her, it's not in that great a shape, she's
8 pretty old, but I carried her, each one of us,
9 my sisters and I, we -- all three of us carried
10 our doll with us through the whole trip.

11 We're getting back to -- oh, yes,
12 so we were in the closed transport, as I
13 mentioned, from Berlin -- well, in Berlin I
14 think we stayed overnight or a few days, and
15 then we went on a regular train, it wasn't a
16 cattle car or anything like that, it was a
17 regular train to -- to France, to Spain, Spain
18 was a neutral country. I remember in -- in
19 France they opened the window -- well, what I
20 should say is we were watched by two, I think
21 they were Gestapo men, but they were
22 plainclothesmen, they were with us the whole
23 time on the train, when we went to the bathroom
24 they accompanied us, I mean, they waited outside,

1 but they -- I don't know why they didn't let us
2 out of our sight -- out of their sight.

3 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: They were
4 afraid you were going to jump off.

5 MS. PORTMAN: No, no, nobody was
6 going to escape, you know.

7 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: (Inaudible.)

8 MS. PORTMAN: But anyway, I
9 remember in France they opened the windows in
10 the train when we pulled into the train station
11 and the Red Cross gave us bottled water and
12 sandwiches or something. And then I remember
13 when we got to Spain -- well, I don't know when
14 they left us, these plainclothes men, if they
15 left us at the border from France -- I think
16 they must have left us at the border. Right
17 after we got into Spain I remember people, among
18 other things, were now free, there was a lot of
19 poverty in Spain, but we were free, that was the
20 first time.

21 MS. GORDON: So you were pretty
22 free to travel now? I mean, you could go
23 through -- since Europe was in war then, you
24 didn't have much trouble --

1 MS. PORTMAN: Well -- well, as I
2 said, we were accompanied by the Gestapo men, so
3 there was no problem. I don't know whether a
4 person traveling by himself, whether -- could be
5 encountered, whether you had to show your
6 identification, I'm sure you did when you
7 crossed from Germany into France, but we were a
8 closed transport, so, you know --

9 MS. GORDON: Do you remember at all
10 what you were feeling at that time, that trip,
11 and how long it took?

12 MS. PORTMAN: Well, it took long,
13 it took -- now you can cross the ocean in about
14 four or five days, it took five weeks. And, of
15 course, there was also the fear that -- that the
16 waters were mined, but that was a chance we had
17 to take and just hope, you know, for the best as
18 it was, and our ship did -- did get through okay.

19 But, well, in Spain, first we were
20 in Madrid, I think, overnight, and then we were
21 in Seville, and there we had a layover, it was
22 something about the ship, I think, either they
23 had trouble getting the ship or the ship we were
24 supposed to go on was changed to another ship or

1 something, I don't know, but there was a holdup
2 in Seville and our papers expired while we were
3 in Seville, but at that point they were not
4 going to send us back, so when we did finally
5 get on the ship -- I think we must have been in
6 Spain, I don't know, a few weeks. When we did
7 get on the ship, this -- it made a special stop
8 at Lisbon for all those whose papers had expired,
9 and I remember we went ashore. We were not
10 allowed to go ashore unless, you know, you had
11 this problem, and they did take us ashore, and
12 we went to the American Consulate and they
13 extended our papers.

14 The ship itself was horrible. My
15 children in the last -- in recent years have
16 gone to the library at UCLA and dug out the
17 newspapers from 1941 that had all the -- the
18 arrival, you know, written up. It was called
19 the Hell Ship, it was a ship that actually -- it
20 was a freighter, and freighters had room for
21 about twelve passengers, that's still true today,
22 but twelve cabins or twelve passengers,
23 something like that, and I think the article
24 said -- well, I was always under the impression

1 that there were over a thousand people,
2 something like a thousand people.

3 MS. GORDON: And all Jews?

4 MS. PORTMAN: I think they were all
5 Jews. This was -- I don't think they were all
6 German Jews, because I remember some people from
7 France, but probably they joined us, you know,
8 in Spain, but as far as I know they were all
9 Jews.

10 And the sanitation facilities were
11 just about non-existent. I think -- my mother
12 bought a washbowl somewhere along the way, maybe
13 in Portugal, that we -- she used, I think, to
14 fill with water to bring to us to wash because,
15 you know, as the trip went on, the toilets were
16 overflowing.

17 My sister got some kind of a
18 peculiar illness, she was covered with blisters
19 during the trip, something, I think, that she
20 picked up on the ship, that I'm not sure about
21 though, she may have gotten it before, and my
22 other sister definitely did get something on the
23 ship, she burned herself, because it was a
24 freighter, you know, it wasn't what we think of

1 as a luxury cruiser, there were all these pipes
2 on the deck that were exposed and she was so
3 tiny, she was only three, as I mentioned, that
4 her legs were so short it was hard for her to
5 cross -- climb over, and she had burns in the
6 back of -- of her knees, you know, underneath,
7 that sensitive area under there.

8 MS. GORDON: What about --

9 (End of side one.)

10 MS. PORTMAN: Well, people slept in
11 the lifeboats because they were so horrible.

12 Well, I did mention this, I have to
13 go back, but naturally we didn't have cabins,
14 what they had done was taken the space which is
15 called a hold where the freight ordinarily goes
16 and had sort of like big piles, dormitories, had
17 filled them with bunkbeds in order to hold --
18 this may have been done by the Jewish agency or,
19 you know, somebody who was trying to --

20 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: HIAS?

21 MS. PORTMAN: -- to save, you know,
22 as many people as possible.

23 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: HIAS?

24 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah, H-i-a-s, Hebrew

1 Immigrant Aid Society. You don't hear about
2 HIAS too much now-a-day's, but they had helped a
3 lot of Jews.

4 So we had bunkbeds, I think they
5 were double layer, we were fortunate enough to
6 have the top, because the air was so stale, I
7 mean, there was no -- there were no windows, you
8 know, this is where freight goes, but in the
9 middle of the room there was like an opening to
10 the -- just an opening, you know, sky, it was
11 just open, and what they had done was taken a
12 big sack that somehow they attached and it hung
13 down and it was supposed to -- but wait, I guess
14 I'm wrong, I guess it wasn't an opening, there
15 was no opening, they had taken this sack, made
16 an opening maybe, and put it down so it would
17 bring air. Now, I don't know why the sack was
18 necessary, 'cause you could have gotten the air
19 without the sack. But anyway, that was the way
20 it was. And that was the only air you got, and
21 that's why people, mostly men, I think, slept in
22 the lifeboats, you know, women used -- some
23 single women may have, but women who had
24 children, we were in this dormitory, which was

1 mainly women and children. My father was in the
2 men's, and there may have been ones, you know,
3 women without children with the men. But anyway,
4 I started to say we were lucky enough to have
5 the upper bunk because I guess you're -- you
6 know, the air was maybe a little bit fresher
7 than being more enclosed. But my sister was
8 still wetting her bed every night and I guess
9 the mattresses weren't very good, the woman
10 below her didn't like us too much.

11 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Yeah.

12 MS. GORDON: What did you feel as a
13 little girl there, was it at all -- were you
14 very scared on that journey as being only nine
15 years old then?

16 MS. PORTMAN: Not really.

17 MS. GORDON: Were you adventurous,
18 I mean, you were going to a new place, or just --

19 MS. PORTMAN: I don't know, I think
20 I just took it as it came, you know.

21 I think the biggest worry was that
22 you don't hit a mine, but I don't know if I
23 thought about that, maybe the adults thought
24 about it, but other than, you know, the

1 sanitation being horrible and the food not being
2 so great, you were just, you know, free to sit
3 and relax and, you know, sit in the sun or
4 whatever.

5 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Can I ask you a
6 question: What was -- did your parents talk
7 about things that frightened you a lot or --
8 that's what I was thinking, that's where you get
9 your frightening news from, rather than
10 imagining things.

11 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah. Not -- not
12 really other than the deportation. I mean, I
13 don't think -- not really. I mean, I heard, you
14 know, the new rules that came out, it was just
15 life, you just took it.

16 Well, to backtrack a little bit, I
17 mentioned before that most of the people in our
18 building were multiple family per suite. My
19 mother told me that in -- in recent years the
20 reason we were still able to have an apartment
21 to call our own was because whenever the
22 authorities used to call her in, that -- that we
23 should give up the apartment, and my parents
24 would say, well, we're leaving for the United

1 States soon, 'cause, you know, our papers were
2 in limbo for so long. So somehow we managed to
3 get away with it.

4 But we did take in a lot of people,
5 not so much because we were forced to, but
6 probably because it gave us some income. There
7 were many people who were getting ready to
8 immigrate, and they had given up everything, and
9 they had to have a place to stay, you know, like
10 for a week or so. And so I remember having
11 different borders, sometimes they would have my
12 room, I'd be shuffled into another room,
13 sometimes they'd have -- you know, and I
14 remember our borders. One woman went berserk
15 while she was living with us, I guess she had
16 had to give up everything, and she tried to
17 salvage as many pieces of her furniture as she
18 could, and she -- I think she moved into what
19 had been my bedroom. Well, when I say my
20 bedroom, I had two bedrooms, one time I had one
21 that was nice and airy and sunny, when that was
22 rented out then I was shuffled to the one that
23 faced the elevator shaft, which was kind of dark
24 and smaller. So this woman was moved into my

1 nicer bedroom, and I think she came with an
2 enormous closet or china cabinet or something
3 that hardly fit into the room, but she was
4 trying to -- you know, people didn't want to
5 part with their belongings and she was trying to
6 salvage what she could, and what she did one day
7 was take this cabinet and barricade herself in
8 the room, and my father couldn't get her out.

9 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Oh.

10 MS. PORTMAN: I don't know what
11 happened to her. I mean, she must have been
12 taken to probably some kind of a mental hospital
13 and killed, I don't know. But I -- but the
14 thing that -- that struck me was that my father
15 went down on the street and he just asked a
16 passer-by to come up and help him get this woman
17 out. And that kind of frightened me 'cause I
18 thought how he could just go up to somebody on
19 the street, you know, it might be somebody -- a
20 real Nazi type, you know.

21 We kind of catagorized people, like
22 my family, you know, some who were -- my mother
23 had a certain word for the ones who were real
24 pro-Nazi and then there were some who were anti

1 or who were friendly to us. Now, this didn't go
2 for children, as I said, I didn't play with any
3 children that weren't Jewish, but adults. I
4 remember there was one woman, she was kind of
5 our mending woman, we used to take our mending
6 to her, and I remember that whenever we went
7 there she used, you know, to really go on and on
8 about The Party, you know. I mean, she was very
9 anti The Party. And then there was this other
10 woman who used to help us a little bit by
11 trading. My father had an uncle who lived in
12 Sweden. Sweden, of course, was neutral. He
13 used to send us butter. Now, when I think back,
14 I don't know how you can send butter without it
15 spoiling, but, of course, it wasn't that far, he
16 used to send us butter. Now, my mother would
17 take the butter to this woman and she would, you
18 know, barter, give us things that we needed for
19 the butter. At one time she had -- she had a
20 son who evidently was in the Army, and she said
21 that her -- she said if I could only tell you or
22 if you only knew what my son has said -- told us
23 that's going on in the East, it -- you know,
24 just unbelievable. Of course, I don't think we

1 could have ever fathomed what really did go on,
2 it was beyond comprehension. But so, you know,
3 she was -- she was friendly to us. I don't know
4 how much she actually knew herself.

5 MS. GORDON: You mentioned that
6 your family wasn't orthodox religious, were you
7 religious at all? Did you go to Temple?

8 MS. PORTMAN: Well, I -- speaking
9 of Temple, it was Chris-tal-la-not, I guess I
10 should mention that. After the time, that was
11 in 1938, I was six, you know, from the time that
12 I mostly remember there were no synagogues,
13 because, you know, they were all burned down.
14 But I do remember going to synagogue. Now, the
15 one I remember going to was on a very busy
16 business street and it was kind of in between
17 the dime store, like a Woolworth, and some other
18 store, and it may be that they didn't burn that
19 down because it was part of these other
20 buildings, but, of course, they could have
21 closed it. Maybe this was before 1938. I really
22 don't remember. But I went --

23 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: A small Temple?

24 MS. PORTMAN: Pardon?

1 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: A small Temple?

2 MS. PORTMAN: Well, this was not
3 really a Temple, this was -- I call something
4 orthodox a synagogue, I don't call it a Temple,
5 it was -- actually they were -- you know, all --
6 all synagogues were orthodox, temple is an
7 American word, they were synagogues.

8 But my mother did have an aunt and
9 uncle who were really orthodox and they took me
10 and my sister with them to the synagogue on
11 Sim-pus tora because there the custom was, this
12 is not the custom in this country, but there
13 that children would go up and down the aisles
14 with bags and all the men would throw candy and
15 it was, you know, kind of like Halloween, only
16 it was Sim-pus tora.

17 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Excuse me
18 Sim-pus, what?

19 MS. PORTMAN: Sim-pus tora, which
20 is a holiday. I'll spell it for you later, just
21 put a T.

22 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Okay.

23 MS. PORTMAN: So that is about the
24 only memory I have of going to the synagogue.

1 But speaking of Chris-tal-la-not,
2 this was a day when, of course, the whole
3 community was in an uproar, you know, after all
4 the stores' windows had been broken and the
5 synagogues burned, and that was a terrible day,
6 I mean, I -- I do remember that day. I don't
7 remember about it, but I do remember it was a
8 day of terror.

9 MS. GORDON: Did you ever -- one
10 thing about some people which was an interesting
11 thing is the whole feeling of God and all this
12 was going on.

13 Did you ever question that at all?

14 MS. PORTMAN: No, no. I have in
15 recent years, but at that time I never -- I
16 never did.

17 MS. GORDON: I'm going to jump you
18 forward again back to the ship where you're
19 coming to the United States. Where were you
20 landing and --

21 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, okay.

22 MS. GORDON: -- docking and what
23 happened?

24 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, okay. Well, we

1 made one other stop in Bermuda after Portugal,
2 this was something by some woman's group, it was
3 kind of a charitable function, it was a picnic
4 that was sponsored to help the refugees, so all
5 mothers who had children under six, and, of
6 course, my mother did, 'cause my sisters were
7 under six, so my whole family except my father
8 was able to go ashore in Bermuda and we went to
9 this picnic. They gave us some hand-me-down
10 clothes, I remember I got this summer dress that
11 I wore for a long time afterwards. And my
12 mother tried out her first English, which she
13 had never used in school, which when I think
14 back now what she said was all backwards, not
15 forwards, because, you know, they spoke English
16 there. But it was kind of a charitable type of
17 thing.

18 But there were only two times that
19 people were allowed to leave the ship, in
20 Portugal and Bermuda, and because of the
21 circumstances we got to go ashore both times,
22 you know, once because we needed our papers
23 extended and the other time because of this
24 picnic.

1 And then the next stop was in Cuba,
2 because many people were going to Havana or Cuba,
3 and at that time they were allowing people to
4 land, it was not like the experience with the
5 St. Louis, you know, things changed all the time.
6 We didn't go actually up to the shore, I think
7 the ship was a little bit out. I remember all
8 the banana boats coming up, you know, to the
9 ship and they kind of took a rope and people who
10 wanted to buy bananas, you know, could, I don't
11 know what you call it, pulley, pulley them on.
12 Well, it was kind of an interesting sight.

13 Also -- oh, I might mention here
14 that I think -- that was the first time I saw
15 black people. Well, we did see one in -- in
16 Portugal, but in Bermuda they, you know, they
17 were lining -- welcoming us, you know, waving to
18 us.

19 So after Cuba we passed very close
20 to Florida, 'cause I remember people were
21 excited about seeing Florida, but we had to land
22 in New York, so, you know, we went up the coast.

23 And I remember my mother pointing
24 out the Statute of Liberty.

1 MS. GORDON: What happened when you
2 saw the Statute of Liberty?

3 MS. PORTMAN: Well, I don't know if
4 I really saw it. She just mentioned it, I don't
5 know if I really saw what she was pointing at,
6 but I remember -- well, it didn't really mean
7 anything. I mean, I didn't know, you know --
8 well, I guess to them it meant we've arrived,
9 but I don't remember it meaning anything to me,
10 I had never heard of it before, I didn't know
11 what it meant.

12 MS. GORDON: So what happened once
13 you got to New York?

14 MS. PORTMAN: Well, we were met by --
15 my father had an aunt and uncle and cousin who
16 had come, well, maybe three years before when
17 most of the working people came, most people
18 came about '38, and I think -- so they were
19 already Americans here, kind of. They came to
20 meet us. They were one of our sponsors, but
21 they were not our main sponsor. Our main
22 sponsor was the Bulova Watch Company. My
23 mother's side of the family -- well, my -- my
24 grandmother's, my mother's maternal side of the

1 family was from Czechoslovakia, Prague, and so
2 that part of the family was killed in the
3 Holocaust. But she -- my mother had had a
4 grandmother who had a name of Bulova, and when
5 my parents -- as I said, my mother, you know,
6 was quite bright and quite a genius. When they
7 didn't know, you know, where to turn for us to
8 get out, I guess she -- she sent home news that
9 there was this Bulova that had gone -- two
10 brothers from this Bulova from Czechoslovakia
11 had gone to the United States and were never
12 heard from again. I don't know, somehow she dug
13 out these names and she started writing to the
14 Bulovas in New York. They disclaimed any
15 relationship. I don't know whether it's true or
16 not. I mean, they didn't want to be related to
17 us, but they did sponsor us.

18 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Oh.

19 MS. PORTMAN: So they -- so we had
20 joint sponsorship.

21 But see, this uncle in New York, my
22 father's real uncle, I don't -- I don't think
23 they were citizens yet, I don't know. I don't
24 know whether one had to be a citizen to be a

1 sponsor or not, but you had to have some money.
2 See, being a sponsor, I think, is saying that if
3 you cannot find employment you will help support
4 these people, I think that's the way it went.
5 And the uncle, of course, you know, didn't have
6 that kind of money to support a family of five,
7 but he was co-sponsor and then the Bulova Watch
8 Company was the main sponsor. I think they even
9 lent us some money, but I know my parents paid
10 that all back 'cause we went through the papers
11 once and they had paid them off and, you know,
12 they made the comment that, you know, they have
13 so much money, but they still asked us to pay it
14 back. But, you know, I don't know how many
15 other people they helped, but it was kind of
16 remarkable that they did, because they saved us
17 actually.

18 MS. GORDON: So you stayed -- did
19 you say in New York once you got here?

20 MS. PORTMAN: Well, we arrived in
21 New York, and my mother was (inaudible). Our
22 arrival was greeted with some news that my
23 grandmother had died while we were on the ship.

24 MS. GORDON: She was back in

1 Germany?

2 MS. PORTMAN: Yes. Which, actually,
3 when I think about it now was kind of a good
4 piece of news because if she hadn't died then,
5 she would have been deported two months later
6 and died in a concentration camp.

7 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Which
8 grandmother was it?

9 MS. PORTMAN: This is my mother's
10 mother. My father's parents were already gone,
11 so it was my mother's mother and father.

12 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Uh-hum.

13 MS. PORTMAN: So that kind of put a
14 damper on our arrival, I remember my mother was
15 quite upset. Plus being in New York turned out
16 to be a terrible hassle. My parents knew a lot
17 of people, I guess, who had immigrated to New
18 York so, you know, they were trying to see them
19 and everybody lived in a different borough of
20 New York and we were riding the subways, you
21 know, day and night and it was -- it was really
22 fun, you know. So my parents wanted to get away
23 from New York, they didn't want to stay there.
24 And there was a friend who had come over on the

1 boat with us, she was a friend from Hamburg, in
2 fact we had been friends for all these years, I
3 don't know whether she's still living at this
4 point, she'd be in her eighties, but she used to
5 talk about Cleveland, because she had relatives
6 in Cleveland, and she was going to Cleveland,
7 and Cleveland had a population about the same as
8 Hamburg and the Jewish agency was very anxious
9 to get people out of New York 'cause they wanted --
10 they had enough of a burden for -- they were
11 trying to get people into the interior. So when
12 my parents were kind of on their own, I guess,
13 willing to go to Cleveland, they were only too
14 happy to ship us off to Cleveland. So after a --
15 a month in New York, we moved and went to
16 Cleveland and that's actually where I stayed
17 until I came to California when I was grown up.
18 My parents hated Cleveland it wasn't at all like
19 Hamburg or anything.

20 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Same amount of
21 people, that's about it.

22 MS. PORTMAN: And they always
23 wanted to go back to New York. See, New York is
24 like Europe, but, well, things have changed now,

1 but at that time New York was like Europe and
2 the rest of the United States, you know, was a
3 little backward. And they wanted to go back to
4 New York and my father wanted to look into a job
5 there, we spent a summer there, but we never did
6 move back. And over the years New York --
7 Cleveland became their home and they didn't
8 really want -- like when I moved to California I
9 thought they should come to California, but at
10 that time they couldn't really bear to leave
11 Cleveland anymore.

12 MS. GORDON: Do you remember, do
13 you have dreams or nightmares?

14 MS. PORTMAN: No. Well, I
15 shouldn't say that, I do dream about Nazis
16 sometimes, but that's usually when I see
17 something on TV or read something. I don't
18 think that's from my own experience, I think
19 it's from the things I have learned and --

20 MS. GORDON: So you're studying a
21 lot more now?

22 MS. PORTMAN: Well, I -- it's about
23 the only reading, leizure reading that I do, I
24 don't do much reading, but there are so many

1 books on it that if I spent (inaudible) for the
2 rest of my life, I don't think I can ever read
3 it all and everybody has had a different
4 experience. I mean, I've read so many different
5 angles and viewpoints. Like I read a book about
6 someone who was second generation I think the
7 book was called Michling Vica Prague in German,
8 and her -- she had one grandparent that was
9 Jewish and she's written a book about her life,
10 she belonged to the Hitler Youth, you know, with
11 a completely different perspective, but it was
12 interesting, you know.

13 MS. GORDON: Have you told your
14 children about this?

15 MS. PORTMAN: Oh, yes, they've
16 grown up with it.

17 MS. GORDON: And what do you do now?

18 MS. PORTMAN: I'm a housewife.

19 MS. GORDON: Living in California?

20 MS. PORTMAN: Uh-huh.

21 MS. GORDON: Okay.

22 MS. PORTMAN: I guess you call it a
23 housewife.

24 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Domestic

1 doesn't sound right.

2 MS. PORTMAN: No, I know, it better
3 not. Someone just told me coordinator of family
4 relations. Let me just (inaudible) that last
5 word.

6 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Fine, fine.

7 MS. GORDON: Let's see what else.
8 I'm sure there are other things. There was
9 something I was going to say before.

10 MS. PORTMAN: I know after I leave
11 I'll think of other things.

12 MS. GORDON: That happens to people.

13 MS. PORTMAN: Well, just a word
14 about my school. There's a book that I received,
15 I think I mentioned before that I'm on the
16 mailing list from the Hamburg Senate and they
17 send out to all former Hamburger Jews any
18 material that is applicable, like when there
19 would be a lecture or something taking place,
20 dedication of something in Hamburg, they always
21 send things. And someone has taken it upon
22 herself to write a history of my school, the
23 Jewish girls school, she sent me that book.

24 MS. GORDON: That sounds terrific.

1 MS. PORTMAN: Well, they sent it to
2 everybody in the mail.

3 And I found that book just
4 facinating. I haven't read it all because it
5 goes back, it's the hundred year history, and
6 I'm not terribly interested in earlier parts,
7 but (inaudible) became involved is children
8 never left the homes, you know, when -- that I
9 mentioned before when I left, and I think she
10 said that out of the whole school, now, they
11 weren't that terribly many in the school, maybe
12 just a few hundred at that time because so many
13 people had immigrated, but I think only four
14 children survived. And then she mentioned that --
15 now, I may be wrong, maybe it's seven, but it
16 was a handful.

17 MS. GORDON: Not a lot.

18 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah. And I think
19 the thing that -- maybe it was four teachers.
20 And --

21 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Teachers were
22 Jewish too?

23 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah.

24 And she mentioned that one of the

1 teachers survived because he got away that
2 summer, the summer of '41. I wondered if maybe
3 he left the same time we did or what, and I
4 wound up thinking my name was shown in there as
5 having been, you know, one of the ones that got
6 away. I'm sure they have the list, you know, of
7 all the children in the school. Because report
8 cards were shown and it mentioned one of the
9 ones who went to Auschwitz, and I remember she
10 was writing about this little girl who was six
11 and she was deported to -- she had just finished
12 the first grade, just gotten the first report
13 card and she wrote what the report card said.
14 I've been meaning to write to this woman and I
15 haven't gotten to it, 'cause I was really
16 fascinated by that.

17 MS. GORDON: So you say you've gone
18 back to Germany three times now?

19 MS. PORTMAN: Uh-hum.

20 MS. GORDON: How do you feel about
21 the German people now?

22 MS. PORTMAN: Well, the first time
23 I was back -- see, it's been a different time
24 period and that makes kind of a difference. The

1 first time I went back it was only fifteen years
2 since I left, so it was very --

3 MS. GORDON: '56?

4 MS. PORTMAN: Yes, '56.

5 It was very recent, I was very
6 bitter. I remember -- well, I do have some
7 friends there, let me put it this way, so that's --
8 these -- it's kind of unique, these people
9 weren't Jewish, but they were partly Jewish so
10 they survived, but they kind of were affected by
11 what went on because, you know, somebody in
12 their family was Jewish. But they went to
13 regular schools, they didn't go to Jewish
14 schools. They really were not considered Jews.
15 They were turned -- two women who were exactly
16 my age, so we kept up over the years, and when
17 I'm there I see them. So, you know, that part,
18 of course, is kind of fun. But the first time I
19 went back I stayed with a family in (Inaudible),
20 we were the same age, only four weeks apart, so
21 she was very eager to go to dances and places to
22 meet men, and, of course, I really wasn't
23 interested.

24 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: German men.

1 MS. PORTMAN: I felt, you know,
2 very, very, I don't know, like in a shell, I
3 didn't want anybody to talk to me. I remember I
4 was talking to this one fellow, of course, at
5 that time they were all young, now they're all
6 middle aged people, but at that time they were
7 all young, and, you know, he couldn't get over
8 about my German, that I could speak so well, and
9 I just couldn't bear to bring myself to -- to
10 tell, you know, why I could speak. I should
11 have, when I think now, but I just, you know,
12 let it pass, like my past was, you know, a
13 mystery, I just didn't see anything -- he kept
14 saying you must have been here before or
15 something.

16 And also this family that I was
17 staying with, this girl was having a co-worker
18 come over to visit and she told me before this --
19 this person came, she said, you know, she once
20 said to me that she's never seen a Jew. So, you
21 know, I -- in retrospect, I should have said,
22 well, really, take a good look, you know, but,
23 well, she felt uneasy about it and I didn't want
24 to -- 'cause her mother was partly Jewish and

1 she said she had never told this person about
2 her mother. So there's still some of that
3 feeling. And they asked me what I wanted to do
4 and I told them that I wanted to go to this real
5 nice restaurant, you know, 'cause that was one
6 place I had never been to because it always had
7 a sign, you know, Jews weren't allowed. So, you
8 know, she took me there for lunch. And, you
9 know, it was just kind of strange, you know,
10 fifteen years ago I couldn't sit here, now I can
11 sit here, you know.

12 So I felt -- and, of course, since
13 that was the first time I was back, it was
14 traumatic. I -- you walked passed, you know,
15 these houses, buildings, you know, that someone
16 I know who used to live there, you know, and it
17 was sad. But I can't say that time heals all
18 wounds, because, you know, I wouldn't say that,
19 but after -- after you're there, when you're
20 there again, I've been through this already
21 before, you know, now I can walk through the --
22 passed the buildings, I still think about it but
23 it isn't quite as painful as it was the first
24 time, because so much time as gone by, you know.

1 And as far as feeling towards the people, most
2 of the people you encounter there now are not
3 people who were alive at that time so you can't
4 feel bitter towards everybody because they just,
5 you know, weren't there. You can spot the ones
6 that were there. For one thing, they're always --
7 they have this look about them, you know, for me
8 they're -- I look at them, I can just think, oh,
9 you know, that's the perfect Nazi type; I mean,
10 they may not have been, but, you know, I just
11 get that feeling. But as time goes on, you know,
12 that gets less and less (inaudible) and people
13 like me, there'd be so few, 'cause, you know, we
14 were so young, so -- so few young ones that were
15 there at that time that survived.

16 But that brings to mind (inaudible).
17 Now, I have gone passed that same building where
18 I said there was a sign there that I could never
19 go into, now I can go in and I still haven't
20 been in there, so I will have to one day go in
21 there.

22 MS. GORDON: Okay. Is there
23 anything else?

24 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: (Inaudible).

1 MS. GORDON: We covered a lot, a
2 real lot.

3 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah, well, that's
4 what I say, I kind of jumped from one thing to
5 the other but it was as, you know, the things
6 came into my mind that I said them. Apparently,
7 you know, I'll think of something after I leave
8 here.

9 There are only certain things I
10 remember, and, you know, it's the same ones over
11 and over. I mean, they're just really a few
12 that I think about because most everything else
13 is just, you know, blanked out.

14 MS. GORDON: They're all extremely
15 important because all the interviews are put
16 together to complete the picture.

17 MS. PORTMAN: Let me say something
18 else about the Jela, the Jewish store. As I
19 recall, there was one butcher, one grocery and I
20 think -- bread I think we could buy in any store
21 and maybe milk we could buy in any store,
22 because we used to buy milk right around the
23 corner from where we lived. I think it was just
24 a general grocery store and the butcher.

1 Fortunately, they were very close to where we
2 lived, so we didn't have to go to any hardship
3 to get there, they were in the Jewish area. But
4 you always had to wait in line. It was kind of
5 like what you see about Russia nowadays, you
6 know, there were long lines. And I remember one
7 time I waited in line and just before, I don't
8 know for how long, my mother had sent me, and
9 just before my turn came up they closed or they
10 ran out of something and I never did get it.
11 And then there was this man, he was (inaudible),
12 I don't know how true this was, but among the
13 Jews there was the feeling of at least that he
14 was Jewish, I mean somebody must have known that
15 he was, but he was there kind of spying and that
16 he reported anything that anybody may have said
17 or did to the Gestapo. I don't know how true
18 that was, but he was always plotting around
19 outside, you know.

20 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Somebody that
21 had suspicious eyes.

22 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah, yeah.

23 Also as far as the rations, my
24 mother told me our rations were inferior to what

1 the Germans got. Like I don't think we ever got
2 fresh fruit or chocolate or, you know, things
3 like that. One of the things that was plentiful
4 were nuts, and I remember my mother and her
5 friends, they developed all these recipes that
6 you could make, like a nut tort by grinding up.

7 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: (Inaudible.)

8 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah.

9 But that may have been kind of a
10 wartime thing rather than a Jewish thing, maybe
11 nobody had the ingredients for baking, I don't
12 know.

13 MS. GORDON: Did you think of
14 yourself as a German or as a Jew or as a German
15 Jew or did you put yourself in a category as
16 that?

17 MS. PORTMAN: Well, (inaudible) but
18 I think of myself now as a German Jew; I mean,
19 my background, you know, is -- I mean, even
20 after I came here my parents were still German,
21 and when you're in your thirties, you know, by
22 that time you're pretty well set, so you know of
23 their ways, or you know -- I used to hear them
24 tell stories about their youth and things like

1 that.

2 It was interesting, I guess we're
3 just about done, but I -- I just want to say
4 this thing. My sister and I, now this is the
5 one who was not -- turned four the week after we
6 arrived. We were talking about this just
7 recently and she said -- well, I was saying
8 something about, you know, the past and -- and
9 then we realized that she really doesn't
10 remember a thing, you know, she was so young,
11 her life really started in this country and --
12 and we were laughing. She said, well, I'm
13 really your American sister, you know. She, you
14 know, she doesn't remember any relatives or, you
15 know, people or places. I mean, she could go to
16 Hamburg, it would be like going to Timbuktu, you
17 know, she has no -- just doesn't remember. And
18 yet, you know, we were the same family.

19 MS. GORDON: (Inaudible.)

20 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Yeah.

21 MS. GORDON: Culture.

22 MS. PORTMAN: Although, she's also
23 had a lot of influence on her life from my
24 parents, of course.

1 MS. GORDON: So both your parents --
2 are they still alive?

3 MS. PORTMAN: No, they had -- they
4 died recently. Well, as I said, we went to
5 Hamburg together once in 1971.

6 MS. GORDON: Okay. I think that's
7 all the questions I have.

8 INTERVIEWER NO. 2: Now, can I go
9 over a couple things?

10 MS. PORTMAN: Yeah, Yeah. I was
11 going to spell that...

12 (End of tape)

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