United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Elizabeth Koenig
June 4, 1997
RG-50.549.02*0002

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Elizabeth Koenig, conducted on June 4, 1997 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Alexandria, Virginia and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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Interview with Elizabeth Koenig
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Answer: It's June the 4th, 1997 and we are in my house in Alexandria, Virginia.

Question: And you are...

A: My name is Elizabeth Koenig.

Q: Elizabeth, I wanted to go back and, and ask a little bit of background about your family. One of the things that you didn't say on the, on the videotape was the names of your parents, I believe and maybe we can just start with that.

A: My father's name is Fritz Kaufman (ph) and he was born in 1896 in Vienna and in, he died in 1991, in New York City. And my mother is Helena Backroon Kaufman (ph) and she was born in Vienna in 1898 and she also died in New York City, 18, 1988.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your mom's background?

A: Yes. She, her father was a pediatrician and she grew up in a very middle-class environment, very comfortable in the first district of Vienna. She, she, they were a very close family. Her, her, she had a sister, a younger sister and she went to school in Vienna and actually I went to the same school late. And she, she helped my grandfather a little bit in, with the patients and always was interested helping the sick. She, she was very happy child and by the way, I can show you the painting of my great, great, great-grandmother which is hanging here on the wall.

Q: Kay, stop for one second. Can you talk a little bit more about what the

atmosphere was like in your home, when you were growing up. Do, how, I know your father was political and I don't know if that was true of the whole household. Can you talk a little about that?

A: I was born and lived in the first four years of my life in Vienna, in a, _____ comfortably apartment in Vienna's eighth district. My father's father was a lawyer and he had died a few months before my arrival. And it, my father was an editor at the newspaper and my mother managed the household. My parents loved music, people and discussions and they went out a lot, and, at, as well as having frequent get-together at their place. Their friends were writers and artists and the atmosphere at home was always very lively. My father worked at night so when he came home in the morning to sleep, I had to be very quiet. His paper appeared in the morning and, so he had to work all night. And they liked if I even left the house so I wouldn't disturb him. Before my father had, he had graduated from law school and this enabled him to be the newspaper's responsible editor. A position which required him to represent the newspaper in court whenever it was sued. He also, also specialized on reports relating to international subjects such as the League of Nations. As, as the world passed the period of economic depression, my father lost his position in 1927. He was appointed an editor to several publications in Berlin, and relocated his family to that city. I started going to elementary school in Berlin, Villmustof (ph), where

we lived until 1933. And returned to Vienna after Hitler's victory. It was an, I went to an all-girls' school and we had religious instruction once a week. We were given bible instruction and we were encouraged to make plays (ph) about the lives of the characters in the Bible and, such as, for instance, Esther and Ruth. In Berlin, my father worked as and, responsible editor at the Montock-Morgan (ph) whose editor in chief was Leo _____ , as well as at the Togaboo (ph) and founded the economic review there _____. In 1931, he was sent on a reporter's trip around the world, visiting Russia, Manchuria, North China, Korea, Japan and the USA. There is a write-up about him in the New York Times, July the 5th and from 1931 to 1933, he was co-editor in chief of the Daily _____. My mother disliked Berlin thoroughly, missing the charm of her daily existence. The social life was much reduced though we still had a lot of visits from family and friends. In March, 1933, we returned to Vienna, except for my father who wanted to finish some professional obligations, but was obliged to make a sudden departure when he escaped arrest by the Gestapo, May 1933. From then on, he was blacklisted as an opponent to the Nazi Regime.

Q: What, can you talk about how aware you were politically of what was going on at the time?

A: Oh I was a child. I had no political views. When the Nazis came of course, I was,

I was anti-Nazi, anti-fascist. I, I was very frightened by them, very.

Q: Do you remember hearing discussions, political discussions at home with your father and mother and people who would come over?

A: Yes, I, I listened. I didn't say anything but I listened.

Q: And what was usually the, the tenor of those discussions?

A: The, the, I must say that there's a vast generational change in the attitude of children, children were rarely even permitted to take part but we, we were very interested and usually just listening behind the door, too. And, but we weren't asked about our opinions.

Q: What was the relationship between you and your brothers and sisters?

A: I had only one brother and he, he was the big brother and he treated me as his little sister and we were, we had fun together.

Q: What kind of...

A: At that time, I mean at the time when I was, the time I'm speaking is six, seven, eight.

Q: What kinds of things did you do with, how did you play?

A: We, he had a, a rail...

Q: Train?

A: Train. Yeah.

Q: Electric train?

A: Yeah. And we liked to play with that.

Q: Let me jump ahead now to when you emigrated, how old were you?

A: Can I add something to the other, to your question?

Q: Of course.

A: I played mostly with my friend, girlfriend who was the daughter of a very prominent painter in Berlin. Her name is, was Yoseffa Shtinehart (ph) and her father had a very large _____ and we were together daily there and we, and I played with her, I mean very intensively at, and very much fun plays _____ and games. And she just lived around the corner and in 1933, when the, the, Hitler came to power, he was immediately arrested and it was terrible for me. It was in fact, on the day of my birthday and it was a terrible shock and he was released but he took off very, at that, just at that moment he took off for Israel with his family. It was very difficult for him to emigrate because of his paintings and how to take them along and safeguard them, but that's a long story.

Q: How old were you when you emigrated to the United States?

A: Oh that's a few years later, I ...

Q: Yes.

A: We went back to Vienna.

Q: We, we were going back just to talk about some of the things that you hadn't been asked in the video and now the, the main focus of this is going to be your experiences after the war.

A: How old was I...

Q: Yes.

A: Came to the United States?

Q: Yes.

A: I was 17 going on 18. I was ready, I was, when I came I went to high school. And I applied for college immediately afterwards. Excuse me, what was your question before?

Q: I just had asked you how old you were.

A: Oh.

Q: What were, what was the emigration process like? Can you tell me a little bit like, what that was, what that was like?

A: How we got into the United States?

Q: Yes.

A: That was very strange experience because we had to leave Europe during 1942, at the time when the transatlantic travel was very rare and we were extremely fortunate to get a little space on one of the rare transports that went from Portugal to the United

States. But by no means directly because they, the ship tried to avoid the mine, the mines of the ocean and we went first to Cuba then to the Bermudas and finally, we ended up at Virginia Beach but we didn't know we were, where we were. We just ended up and the immigration officers came on board and processed us on board and then when finally we were allowed to leave the _____ when they agreed, they were afraid that the boat contained spies and or, any other people they didn't wish to come on, to the United States. And that was their main concern. And so not everybody got off. So those that were allowed to get off finally were...

Q: Blindfolded?

A: Blindfolded and we were guided to a train. And the train were, was also blindfolded and we couldn't look outside and we didn't know where we were. We didn't know we were in Virginia Beach. And then something very nice happened. We received something to eat and...

Q: Were you blindfolded at the time?

A: Yes. Then of course they took it off in the train.

Q: Yes.

A: In the train they took it off because the train was black. You couldn't see anything anyway. And they gave us sandwiches and I, I don't think I'll ever forget my astonishment at the white bread that was given to us. During the war and I thought

this was a special welcome gift.

Q: You later found out this was...

A: Your daily bread. And then we were, when the train left, we weren't told where we were going and we landed, not landed, we arrived at New York City, Penn Station, 34th Street, the doors were opened. We were told you're on your own and here we were.

Q: So there you were in New York. What were your impressions of New York?

A: Well, first of all, we didn't quite know what to do. Here we were, we weren't prepared for, for that and we had very little money and so we had to decide what to do. So we actually decided to split up because, and everybody, we all had friends and family here in New York, but they had no clue that we had arrived. And so we didn't want to overwhelm any, any one in particular so we said it's best we go each to one person and then maybe they can put us up and that's what happened. And they did put us up very kindly, each one of us separately.

Q: And what did you think of, of New York?

A: Yeah, I walked the first day, already, on my arrival. I walked from 34th Street to, I think 86th Street on the west side. I was overwhelmed and I must say the, the word freedom became something of meaning. It, you were free to go without showing a paper, without identifying yourself. You were free. That was my, my really, the first

impact.

Q: Did you talk about that at all with people?

A: No, no.

Q: Just a feeling.

A: Yeah. I think this the first time that I mentioned it.

Q: And you were 17, 18 at the time?

A: Correct.

Q: And you'd never really experienced this kind of freedom?

A: Right. No. Because, not anyway, in the, as a child I had experienced that freedom, but not as a teenager.

Q: Did it take some getting used to? Was it strange?

A: No, I, I loved it. It and I, and that for me is the essence of America. It stayed with me. I, I, now even more shocked than a person who hasn't experienced that at the necessity of writing the social security on everything you, you hand in now. Before when I arrived in the United States, you needed nothing, absolutely nothing. You gave your name, everybody believed you and if, if, if you, if they asked you do you have an identification and you took out an envelope from a letter that you got yesterday, that was sufficient. And that was, that, I thought was marvelous.

Q: And this was after having been asked for your papers at every checkpoint

_____

A: Exactly, exactly.

Q: You were in school at this time. What, how did the teachers and, and your fellow students respond to you as, as a, as an immigrant, as someone who'd come from such a horrible experience?

A: Actually, nobody asked me anything. The only person who realized that was a teacher who, whose job actually it was to deal with children whose mother tongue is not English. And she was, she knew it, I think, about my background and she was very kind. And very helpful. She collected clothes that I needed but she didn't let me know that she gave it to me. She just, it appeared where I was sitting or she just gave, she never wanted to be thanked for it but I knew she must have been, she had collected it. And, and mostly marvelous clothes that I had never even had before, such beautiful clothes. And the, the co-student, my students, colleagues never asked me anything. And the fact that my English was very poor of course, was very noticeable and in fact, it was non-existent in, in the first few weeks. I learned fast but it, the first few weeks it was non-existent and so you tended to go, we had to eat at school, right? And so you tended to go and sit with children that you could talk with. So a little French table was sort of brought together with little refugees from Belgium and France and we got to know each other because of the language.

Q: Did you know any other Jewish children?

A: I, these children were Jewish mostly, my little friends, yes.

Q: And did you discuss the, where you had come from? Did you discuss the war?

A: Oh, we, we told each other our stories, yes.

Q: You did?

A: Yes. I remember my Belgian friend came from a diamond family and my, and I, and my French friend came from a doctor's family.

Q: Eventually when you learned how to speak English better, did you then talk about

_____

A: No, because it, I wasn't asked _____ no. The only thing, where I talked about actually is when I left Europe I was given certain letters and documents by a variety of people to bring to the United States which I kept on me with great care. And amongst it was a, a request by the Truckmay (ph) family for me to contact the Quaker in the United States, that was very important because the Quakers had given their support to the Luchombon (ph) Project and to, and Pastor Truckmay (ph) was entirely dependent on their financial help. And so that was one of the first things I did it, was to go to the New York Quaker office and they were very interested and they asked me to come to a meeting and they asked me to give a little talk on my experience and, and they, they were fascinated by what had happened to their

support, to hear about it from firsthand. And there's a little story, aside, is a lady came up to me and she said, would I agree to stay with her during the summer and be a companion to her daughter. And that was in springtime and so that seemed very far away and I agreed of course, yes I would. And then when I did spend time with that family in the summertime, what she really wanted me to do is to teach her child German. And to me, that was terrible. I didn't want to speak German. That was the language of the enemy. But I didn't want to disappoint her either. So I did teach the child German but it was, it was a great insight to my person, in a way. And I, I mention this because nobody would think of that, I don't think. You, you don't think you, this little girl speak, this not little, this young girl speaks German so why shouldn't she speak German with, I, I can understand her now very well but at that time, it made me very unhappy.

Q: Did you talk to anyone else aside from the Quakers about, about your experience? When did you begin to talk to, more, more openly and were people willing to listen to your story?

A: I, it's hard to answer. I cannot give you a time. There was no particular time when I started to talk about it. I was very occupied with doing my schoolwork and I, without being asked, I would not have started anything.

Q: And you weren't asked.

A: And, and nobody, nobody asked.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: That's an excellent question. They, in the United States, the United States were preoccupied with the war and the war effort. And they were fighting the war, they were not, I believe, interested in what happened before. Perhaps, maybe.

Q: Maybe they thought it was impolite or... to ask if it was something that, to ask about something that might have been hard to talk about.

A: I don't know.

Q: No.

A: I don't know.

Q: Your brother joined, or was a member of the United States Army.

A: Right.

Q: In, in the video you talked about his...

A: Yes.

Q: Contribution...

A: Yes.

Q: To the war effort. Do you, do you feel as though you made a contribution? Did you, did you want to make a contribution?

Q: Not through, not because of my brother but yes, immediately after I came, I felt

guilty, personally. Also, I felt guilty that we were saved. Made me feel guilty. I felt guilty that I left France at this particular time. So, I might mention something that I never mentioned before. It, it didn't occur to me to mention it, I guess or I forgot. But just before we left France, somebody contacted me and asked me to distribute anti-Nazi literature. I must say today they give it a name but at that time, we didn't think of ourself, neither working for the Resistance or Underground, we, we, didn't occur to us to think in those terms. And they, and they, today they give this a name. And they call it a coolyay (ph) but I just was a young girl on the bicycle who distributed this literature. And, and I, I, I personally did it in the streets of Toulouse and it was very dangerous but I don't think it ever occurred to me to think that I did something dangerous. The only thing I knew was that I had to keep my mouth shut, never tell anybody what I was doing, not my parents, not my friends, nobody. It was zero. You had to do what you were asked to do without asking any questions. And I felt I was doing something important. And to leave that gave me this guilt feeling. And also, I, I had something very rare, a bicycle. And I wanted to leave it with this organization and so when we escaped from France to Spain and we were on the train, this train stopped in Toulouse and I had my bicycle with me, on the train and I suddenly jumped out of the train and it, I wanted to leave the bicycle at the station. And my father jumped after me and said, you crazy? I mean, he was right actually, it

was crazy. And he, he, he gave me a, a slap, he slapped me. And the stationmaster came and said, what are you doing? You slapping this young lady? You mustn't do that. And everybody was against my father and defended me. And so I told the stationmaster what I wanted to do, to leave the bicycle in Toulouse and he helped me. He gave me a, he put it where the baggage is and he gave me a little receipt and I sent the receipt to somebody whom I told to give it to this other person and today I know he never got it but, that's another story again. But anyway, I tried very hard and, and I also didn't want to leave Earnest (ph) because I was afraid he would not be taken care of was parcels. Those were the basis for my guilt feelings actually and it stayed with me when I came here. So one of the first things I did was, when it was founded, I went to the Free French Movement in New York. [end of side one, tape one] One of the first things I did was, when it was founded, I went to the Free French Movement in New York and wanted, and told them I wanted to join them. They, they recruited people to go to England and on, and I was told I was too young. But until now, I don't believe that was the real reason. At this particular point I think I must have run into somebody who was an anti-Semite and didn't want me to join them.

Q: There were no Jews in, in this group?

A: Very few and the reason I, I think this today, at that time I was just devastated. I

think this today is, you know how the _____ came to New York at one time and the French Embassy gave him a reception, we attended. And the remarks he made made me think that.

Q: Was that the first time you'd experienced anti-Semitism in America?

A: Pretty much so, oh it's a very good question. I really have not experienced, personally, anti-Semitism in America. Maybe because I, in New York, maybe of New York, if I would have been sent to another region maybe I would have. But in New York? No.

Q: When, when did you become a citizen? American citizen?

A: Well, we, just about five years after the arrival. As soon as possible.

Q: Did you feel as though you were then an American? Or did you feel that before? Or did it take awhile? Or did you ever?

A: I ask myself that. I, I feel like I'm an international person, an international citizen. Especially, since the United Nations started. I, I, I was very glad about the start of the United Nations and it sort of fitted my personality. As a matter of fact, I don't know if you remember but, no, the, the United, first United Nations session were in a campus of Hunter College in the Bronx. And I went there and I was completely enthusiastic about the whole organization and of, when I looked for a job after I graduated from school, was the first thing, I went to the United Nations. But like

every other of these organizations which I didn't realize, is you needed somebody to push you if you wanted a job. I mean you needed to know somebody and I just walked in and applied and of course, I never got one. But I was very disappointed not to get one.

Q: What did you study at Hunter College?

A: I, I prepared myself exactly for that. I studied political science, philosophy and art. And in the, today this would be no, no problem but at that time, they came to me and said, art doesn't sit with that. Why you taking art? And I thought quickly and I said well what about a political cartoonist? And they said ah, yeah, you're right. And so I was allowed to take those three options. But I, I, I wouldn't, I wanted art for something entirely different reason. It's to me, art gives life another dimension. And it isn't cartoons that I was after, I was, my thought were that art is, well is, really the kind of life that I wanted to pursue.

Q: And you did study at a art school in New York as well as going to Hunter?

A: Exactly. I took classes at the Art Student's League immediately and then I stayed at the art school, art student's league as full time as monitor and after, after I had more time. I, I, I changed from Hunter College day to Hunter College evening and went to art school during the day.

Q: And did you study painting?

A: Painting. And drawing, from the model.

Q: What were most of your subjects about? What were most of your paintings and drawings about that point?

A: People.

Q: And do you feel as though that it was a, a way of expressing things that had happened to you earlier during, during the war and during your escape from France?

A: No. The, I, I did not take art as a means of translating realism. To me, art was the, gave the contact of the soul and maybe replaced what other people taken their religion, religious experiences.

Q: Can you tell me more about the reunion with Earnest in London?

A: Oh, I, I came to England officially to visit my grandmother who lived there. And my father came with me. It was not officially to visit Earnest but of course everybody knew I was going to visit Earnest. So the first thing I did was to fix a meeting place and we met at a subway station, underground. And we threw into each other's arms. That's it.

Q: How long had it been since you'd seen him?

A: I saw him the last time in 1940, 1940 and this was 1947.

Q: And you had communicated by writing letters?

A: Very few times.

Q: What happened next?

A: We got married seven days later. At the, where was it, Kensington.

Q: Did you know that was gonna happen when you came?

A: No, I didn't know. No.

Q: Were you surprised?

A: No.

Q: You must have thought about him an awful lot during that time.

A: Oh yes. Oh yes. And as I said before, I mean, it, it left me great guilt feelings that I, I wasn't able to help him. We did send the packages soon as we came to Lisbon and he got it and then I sent a package from, as soon as I came to New York and Earnest says he never got it. And then we couldn't send anymore anyway.

Q: Did you get to go on a honeymoon?

A: Well, if you call it that. We had no money and so we went to a little room, rented a little room in, in London. That was our honeymoon, wasn't very exciting maybe from the outside but for us, it was most exciting.

Q: And how long did you stay in London together?

A: Not too long because I wanted to claim him, to come to the United States as soon as possible. And also, that is perhaps, I had just gotten a job in New York at the New York Public Library. And they had given me one week of leave and I had already

extended it to two weeks. So I had to come back if I wanted to keep my job and it is very important that I kept my job because I wanted to send money to Earnest. So, for these reasons I didn't stay long at all. I returned to England, to excuse me to the United States and immediately claimed Earnest but I was still not citizen at the time. So I had to wait 'til I became citizen a few months later until he, he could really come as the wife of an American.

Q: But he did come with you?

A: No.

Q: Oh, he didn't, he stayed.

A: Oh no, he couldn't. He had to wait for the visa. Oh no, he couldn't.

Q: And how long was that? Several months?

A: Oh yes, it was, he only came in, in February of the next year.

Q: What was that time like?

A: Here?

Q: In between?

A: In between it was very hard, very hard but well compared to what went before, it wasn't as painful.

Q: So you were working as, as a librarian. As a research...

A: As, yes, in the, in the, in, in New York and that became my profession. I had not

gone to library school before and only went to library school when I arrived in Washington at a much later, much later.

Q: Can you talk about your career?

A: Oh yes, I loved my career. I loved, I loved being a librarian. When I first worked in New York, I worked with the, the American government had sent to various libraries the books that they captured in the various countries and wanted them to deposit in various libraries, of course the first library was the Library of Congress. But the New York Public Library was one of the chief libraries to receive these bounties also. So they had received an enormous amount of Nazi literature. And they engaged me actually to sift through all that material and make it available and of course it was very interesting to me, to, to do that. So my first duty as a library assistant that I was, was already within the, the field of World War II literature.

Q: You said it was very interesting, it must have been also somewhat difficult.

A: It was difficult but it was, it explained a lot to me that had happened. The, it, it, it filled gasps and it, it, I was, I worked together with actually with a lot of other people who had similar backgrounds and we, we were constantly discussing our work. It was a very interesting time.

Q: Do you recall any one particular document or any piece of literature that you came across that stands out?

A: Hitler's Mien Kampf (ph). It was the first time that I came across it.

Q: And you read the entire ...

A: No, I didn't read the entire, didn't, but enough to, to be impressed.

Q: And what were your impressions?

A: That he was a madman. And it was just not understandable to me, how a civilized people, the, the people that I had known in Germany, would fall for such a madman. And it, this is really not, this is still not resolved, I think that question. Why people accept mad leaders and they still do it today. So, the duty of democracy in my opinion is to explain that very clearly.

Q: And that's, it's still a question in your mind.

A: It's, yeah, not a question, it's still a challenge.

Q: You had said in the Washington Post that you, that you struggle to understand what happened during the Holocaust. Is this one of the things that...

A: Yes.

Q: That you?

A: Yes, like how people can be so evil is my, I cannot understand it and I see it every day today. Until very recently, I, I couldn't accept it. I, I mean I, I was always idealistic. I always thought that the good will win. Now I'm not so sure anymore. I, people always sort of laughed at me when I maintained this attitude that, they called

me naïve and, and unrealistic and, and, I guess because I had experienced so many good incidents that I firmly believed that the good will win out. I'm afraid to say that I, I have to, I have my doubts today.

Q: When did that attitude change?

A: Very recently.

Q: Any explanation?

A: Seeing what's happening in this world and how people repeat the same errors, which I would call errors, the same errors that have, that I can document, exactly for the same reasons.

Q: For example, Bosnia.

A: Yeah. Or Ruvana (ph) or everywhere in the whole world. The whole world.

Q: But it's interesting that you felt for most of your life, very optimistic and hopeful.

A: Yes. It...

Q: Can you talk a little bit about where that came from? I mean did you, you were incredibly, I don't know, maybe blessed is the word you could use during your experiences during the war. I mean, you, you managed to find your family amidst incredible chaos. That had to make you feel as though somehow there was a light shining on you.

A: No I didn't take it so personal. I thought that there are so many good people to

make this possible. I mean, I didn't talk to you now about Varian Fry (ph) for instance. He was my hero. I don't know if you know who he is. But Varian Fry (ph) was the person who, he, he was assigned by the Emergency Rescue Committee to distribute visas in France for the intellectuals and this is how we were saved by obtaining one of those out of quota visas. And, but the risks this man took. He was in danger every day of his, of his life while he worked in, in Marseilles and to me, he, he, he did it out of idealism, out of the conviction that he had to save people. And he, he saved as many as he possibly could. And when he came back to the United States, the world had forgotten him. It's very sad, finally, when we came to the United States, my father wanted to write a biography of, of Varian Fry (ph) but he was not allowed to do it. He was told somebody else is writing it which, this biography has never came out, so, it was very sad. It was sad also for my father because he admired him and then finally, the, there was an exhibit about him and the United States Memorial Museum made an exhibit about Varian Fry and he's now being recognized and it, he, I think you will hear about him very shortly.

Q: I wanted to go back to you and Earnest and...

A: Yeah.

Q: Settling down and he finally was able to come to join you. Can you talk a little bit about your, your early years and maybe sort of...

A: Yes. We, the first thing was for him to, to me, to regain his self-esteem. He hadn't worked, he hadn't studied for all this time and I was concerned that he, he should be given every opportunity possible so, but we had no money and so the first concern was to, to have enough money to live independently. So he had to find a job and he took any old job, whatever it was, he didn't, a long series of short jobs that he accomplished in the first half-year of his stay in America and then we had enough money to, to rent a little apartment on mid-Manhattan. And actually apartment is a big name for a room and a kitchenette. And then he joined the, I was very concerned that he should go continue his studies and he, he went to the new school and he took a scholarship and he, he then wrote a thesis and then the thesis was sent to many colleges and universities so he could ask for scholarships. And he did receive a, several scholarships and he choose to go to Johns Hopkins. And that of course meant that we had to leave New York and that meant that I had to leave my job. I might say at this point, this is the story of my life. I had to leave my jobs whenever it just started to bloom, whenever the first blooms came out, I had to leave because my husband was transferred or for such reasons. And today, I know that many married couples split up because of this situation which doesn't allow the woman to continue her career. And, but at that time, there was no question. And so I went with Earnest to Baltimore and I got a job in the Veteran's Administration Hospital Library. And

that made me change to a specialization that I had then for quite awhile, which is medical librarianship which is a class, sort of, in itself. We settled in, in Sparrow's Point, it, it, and Earnest went to Baltimore every day and I went to my hospital library. And he started his Ph.D. in economics. He choose economics. And after awhile, I said Earnest, we have to start a family. This is, I'm getting impatient about that. And so, he had to look for a job because he, he, he did get the scholarship and he did have a very, very small contribution for his teaching when he did, it was sort of a teaching scholarship. And he taught a few classes in Johns Hopkins, but was nothing one could live on. So he traveled to Washington and he actually got a job in Washington and we moved again. And as a matter of fact, I had taken, I had started to go to library school that summer in New York. I, I took off for a session of the summer school at Columbia University and took medical librarianship and my teacher there came from Washington and was chief of reference in the Armed Forces Medical Library which is the predecessor of the National Library of Medicine. And so when Earnest found his job in Washington, I went to see her and asked her if she would consider hiring me and as I had had an A in her course, she offered me a position in the reference library of the Armed Forces Medical Library which was located at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology which is the forerunner of the...

Q: NIH?

A: No of, in, the, for the army, Walter Reed (ph).

Q: Walter Reed (ph).

A: Yes and, the, the history of the growth of medical librarianship is very interesting and very influential because as you mentioned NIH, I mean NIH would be much less of what it is without the National Library of Medicine next door and actually it had an, it's own library which adjoined later.

Q: You talked about wanting to have a family.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have children?

A: Yes, actually I was rather unlucky. I had _____ miscarriages. And then I did have a successful pregnancy and had a girl. I named her Nicole, Nicole Andrea and she was born in '53.

Q: And is she still alive?

A: Very much so.

Q: Okay, I wanted to make sure, I hadn't heard. And what, what is she doing? Where does she live?

A: She is a teacher of biology. She studied biology and she fell in love with a, a British citizen and married him and he, he was not treating her right. He was beating her and she had to leave him. And so she had a very unhappy time. She passed away

unhappy time. She had a baby at that time and my granddaughter and she, but she stayed in England. And so today she is in England. She had remarried and is _____ divorced and now she's teaching biology in, in excellent school in Brighton.

Q: When did you first talk to her about, or tell her about your experiences as a young, as a, as a girl and as a teenager, during the war and before?

A: _____ a good question because she grew up after she, after she was four years old, a little bit like, I just remember I was four years old first time I, she, my husband is assigned his first foreign service appointment. My husband's position was in the Department of Agriculture when he came and the, he, he will tell you about his position so I won't go into this. That, he became then attached to the Foreign Agricultural Service and he was sent overseas as assistant attaché and his first assignment was in Germany. So that was not easy. In, to answer your question, what do you tell your little girl about the country she's just about to go to school in? And that was very difficult. We lived, when we came to Germany, this, the, there was a whole compound in Bonn. We were attached to the embassy, right? And there was a whole compound in, in Bonn called _____, it was called the golden ghetto by the local population because it, the American embassy had beautiful grounds and a lovely school and a wonderful restaurants and...

A: _____

Q: Oh yes. Do you want to take a break? Okay. Do you want to finish up this story or?

A: Yeah, finish it up and _____.

End of tape 1.

Tape 2

Q: You're, you're talking about, tell how difficult it was to tell your daughter about your experiences in, in, in Germany.

A: Yes, _____, yes. She, she was going to the American school in Pittusdorf (ph), and at the same time, we wanted her, in this, we wanted her to learn German. Because we felt that she should not feel that she's living in a sort of separate ghetto. And the school itself did not teach German very intensively. All the subjects were in English and they had a little German but it wasn't very much. So we had somebody come over to teach her German, to prepare her for it, normal transition if she, she wanted to, to go out of this golden ghetto. And we did not at this time, tell her about our previous experience in Germany but it was very difficult to keep quiet about it.

Q: So when, when did you finally talk to your daughter about the war experience?

A: Well, to come back what I had said, I felt that as a such a young child, she could not deal with this information, she would hate the country she is in, she would hate every individual for doing what they did to their parents, that's the way I imagined she would react because that's certainly the way I would react if I had heard this from my parents. And it would not be a happy life for her to have to deal with this problem, with this psychological problem so we postponed to tell her when she was

old enough to deal with it and we told her and it was a great shock to her. And, but she, she was very loyal and she, she felt very much with us and she, that's the way it is today.

Q: How old was she?

A: When we told her? About, I'd say, ten, eleven.

Q: And you think she understood?

A: Yes. I, I don't know if you can ever understand so.

Q: How was that for you to be in Germany?

A: Very difficult. Very different, that's why we came to this conclusion. It was very difficult, I, but we made some very good friends that are, are Germans and we still know them and it, it made me realize that you should not generalize, that as a matter of fact, we met a lot of people who were in the Resistance. We, we met a group of the, from the, Shtowfumbergs (ph) that had tried to kill Hitler. We met other Resistance fighters. There was as a matter of fact, a whole group of them in Germany. And it was very impressive to talk to them.

Q: How long were you in Germany?

A: We were twice as a matter of fact. We were first for, I'd say, three years, a little more, maybe. Then we were called back for a year and then we were assigned again for two years.

Q: And what years were those?

A: That was, so long ago, sixty...

Q: It, it's okay if you don't remember, just generally in the sixties.

A: In the sixties, yes. In the late fifties and early sixties.

Q: And did you experience any anti-Semitism there, in Germany?

A: In Germany? Yes. Not personally but we did hear anti-Semitic remarks. Not addressed to us at all but when you were in a restaurant, you overheard conversations between two ex-Nazis, obviously SS people, and you understood what they were saying sometimes. It was very hard not to react.

Q: Did you ever go back to your neighborhood in Vienna where you grew up?

A: Oh yes, recently. We wanted to show this neighborhood to my daughter and we intend to show it to my grandchild.

Q: What was that like for you?

A: Like coming to a foreign country, actually. Not countries, nothing, the, the streets had changed and the environment had changed, that's what I mean by that.

Q: What kind of emotions did it bring up?

A: The, the emotions that any injustice that you had to live through would bring up. I felt I had been unjustly, I felt is not the word, I had been unjustly treated and so did my entire family and this is how you react to that. Today I think of the black people

in America and I can understand their anger, perhaps better than other people can. Even though their anger is not constructive at this point. You don't choose not to be angry when you are.

Q: Do you still have a lot of anger?

A: It's not an anger at people, it's the anger of the in, injustice.

Q: Towards, it's at, I'm not sure I quite understand. It's that is not at the people...

A: The anger is directed against the injustice of, of, of life, of the situation one has to face.

Q: Do you feel as though you were deprived of, of large portion of your childhood?

A: It's not a matter of feeling, it's the truth. It certainly is true. But because it was also partly because of the war, I recognize that other people were also deprived who were not in the same situation such as the American soldier, so, it's not a unique situation.

Q: How do you think that experience sort of shapes who you are?

A: It entirely shaped who I am. I, I'm not a psychiatrist but isn't any experience shaping the person entirely, and even the unconscious? So, I mean that is always what defines you?

Q: What decisions and choices in your life do you think were made as an outgrowth of, of, of the war experience? For example, your marriage with Earnest or, or your

choice of your career? How much of those things were influenced by the war experience?

A: Well my, the, the greatest influence of my war experience certainly is to apply for the job at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. I, I had up till then worked to, with the medical library field. My last job was in Geneva, in Switzerland where I built up the medical library of the university there and a colleague of mine drew my attention to the advertisement in, in one of the Washington papers for that, they advertised for the job of the librarian of the Holocaust Memorial Museum. And I thought I was well qualified for what they asked and I applied and obviously they agreed with my desire to work there. And the experience I had gathered contributed of course immensely to this job.

Q: How many years did you work there?

A: I got the position in '89. And I resigned in '95.

Q: And in what ways did it contribute to your understanding of the Holocaust?

A: In what way did?

Q: Working there.

A: Working there contribute – every day. Every minute of my work I learned something new and it was fascinating for me to work with the material I worked with. And to build this library, I, I, when I came we had just a few hundred books on,

on a few shelves and, and some office on "L" Street and when I left, we had a full-fledged library which was my joy to build up. Also from an architectural point of view since I had had that experience in Geneva, working directly with the architects, I, I had also this opportunity here and I worked very closely with Freat (ph) who is the architect of the museum and who is also a refugee child. And so we had a lot in, in common and it was a great experience. We could, to build up this library from scratch.

Q: Why did you want to work at the Holocaust Memorial Museum?

A: Because of my past experience. You asked were there anything in my decision, in my career decisions was related to my past experience and that is the reason I applied. I felt now finally I can do something to, to bring this part of my life out.

Q: Is there, is there any one, I asked you this about your work at the New York Public Library, is there any one instance or moment or document or anything that, that stands out during your time at the Holocaust Memorial that you came across that had a profound impact on you?

A: Well, yes. There is a book published by Klassfelds (ph) which describes the transport to Auschwitz and is very comprehensive and one day we, when it came out, of course we acquired it as soon as possible and as, when it arrived, I opened it to the name Earnest Koenig and here described when and under what circumstances

Earnest was brought to Drancy and from Drancy to, I mean it didn't, not Washington, Drancy to Auschwitz and it didn't describe him. It only mentioned his name but it described the transport.

Q: And you didn't know this?

A: I had never seen it before.

Q: And what impact did that have on you?

A: It, it's a shaking up experience. I, I, now in the library, the majority of questions of people who come in now are trying to trace what happened to their ancestors and I was obliged to show them and have them, have the same experience that I had and it was very difficult for me to do that but I had to. I _____, working when you work with people in the reference and I knew exactly how they would feel when they saw the names of their loved ones.

Q: Had Earnest talked to you much about that experience?

A: No, he and I, and, and perhaps that was a mistake. I took that for his not wanting to talk about it and I do not know whether I was correct in this assumption. I, I just assumed that if he wished to talk it, he would start the conversation on, on the subject and I was not going to initiate or push or, I was always there to listen if he wished to open up. And it was very slow in coming.

Q: And has he since?

A: Yes. Oh yes.

Q: In the past _____

A: Oh yes, but, but not early on.

Q: Do you feel as though you and Earnest have sort of a bond or a connection because of, your experiences are different during the war but you, you did have, were persecuted?

A: Yes of course, certainly, one does have such a unique bond.

Q: Do you consider yourself a survivor?

A: I am a survivor. But so are other people. I mean if you are, if you survive a fire, you're a survivor. So, I mean this, the, the, the term survivor today has broadened enormously. And on the one hand, on the other hand, it sort of particularized by a certain group. So I, it's hard to answer, do you, I think I know what you mean?

Q: I was actually getting at whether you and Earnest agree on, on that term, whether you both agree whether you're a survivor because in the classic sense.

A: Oh, you, I tell you something. I have found out that the people who come from Auschwitz think that that term is sort of reserved for Auschwitz survivors. I've met a lot since then and they do not consider me a survivor. So on people or maybe also in perhaps other of the death camps, think the same way. When I say Auschwitz it might include the other four, five death, extermination, I mean extermination camps.

Q: Do you and Earnest disagree about that at all?

A: No, I, I, I think his experience was vastly more wrenching than mine. I, I mean I didn't have to watch people hang at 12 o'clock in the morning and stay there and then maybe be called as to be shot.

Q: Do you, do you ever have dreams or nightmares about the war?

A: Actually, no.

Q: That's good.

A: Do, do most people that you speak, I have never asked this question, or have been asked this question so I don't know what other people answer.

Q: The two other interviews, I remember one specifically said that he didn't, I don't remember about the other one.

A: No.

Q: I asked you about how the experience affected the choices you made. Wondering whether it, what influence it have on your spirituality?

A: I think we talked about it inasmuch as my experience showed me the goodness of people and that has, had a lasting influence.

Q: You had said when you came to America that you felt somewhat guilty, that you had, I guess left behind people, do you still have those feelings?

A: No. I mean the people that I left today are mostly have their own careers and is

only one of the ones that I had left behind died. He joined the Resistance and got shot. All the others survived. Almost, I might add, strangely enough since it was very, they had very different experiences after I left. Very different, some went illegally to Switzerland, some went to the Resistance, some went, came illegally to Paris, went back to Paris and hid there. It is, it's almost unbelievable that none of them got hurt.

Q: Have you ever seen, seen any of them since? Or spoken with them?

A: I see them so frequently that we call, I call the, the Mafia. We, we, we stick together like glue.

Q: So there's some in Virginia here?

A: There's, as a matter of fact, some not in Virginia but in Maryland and some in New York and, but we get together and we talk on the telephone all the time and we know of each other and we support each other and when, and there were reunions. We went to a reunion, I think it was '88, I'm not mistaken, _____ in Leshombon (ph) and there's going to be one this year in Leshombon (ph) for the sad reason to bury Maktotottmay (ph) and so we see each other very frequently.

Q: And that time seems like it left a profound and lasting impression and impact on your life, that time in Leshombon (ph).

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: Because it's, it's a most unusual story. The, that a whole village, in fact I think it's the only time an entire region, an entire region decided not to cooperate with the power in, of the government, to oppose the government in, in such a threatening situation to them, their own lives.

Q: You had said...

A: Not such a single person. That happened very often. Not just a single family or two or three devoted citizens but an entire village and their neighbors.

Q: You told me at lunch that you consider yourself a pacifist. What, what do you think that's, what do you think that's an outgrowth of? Where did that, I mean, was that from your family or from the Quakers?

A: It, it must be a combination but I just hate to see people be committed to a situation which they cannot control, it's beyond their control. And in war, you give up the control of your destiny.

Q: You had also said that your pacifism sometimes comes into conflict with, with wars that might be just.

A: Yes, I'm, I have learned that I have to admit that there are times when you have to give up your individual freedom for the, for the good of a principle which is the freedom of somebody else.

Q: I don't know whether I have any other questions for you? Is there anything else you'd wanted to say? Guess one of the things that I had asked you, in the questions I'd given you earlier was about the, whether you thought the experiences that you and Earnest had been through ever caused any difficulties in your relationship at all? It's a tough question to answer.

A: Could you be more precise?

Q: Well, that, that you had both been through such harrowing times that, whether you thought it meant that it was hard to get through to him or it affected your communication or that one of you didn't want to talk about something.

A: No I would related it to the past experience if we, like all people who live together for 50 years have differences of opinion, then it is more due to the change of the culture in which you live in that has occurred over those 50 years and I'm particularly referring to the change of women's rights for instance. And I am for complete legality, always was, even before it was fashionable.

A: _____

A: The legality of women and men, meant something to me ever since I can remember but at that time, it was sort of unusual and, and it wasn't an issue in, in our relationship. However, I, now that women not only demand equal treatment but also demand, not only equal treatment before the law, but ask for equal treatment in any

situation, this might constitute sometimes a point of difference.

Q: I guess my earlier question was, was sort of based on the, the phenomenon where men who've gone through experiences of war are, don't like to talk about them. They sort of keep it very hidden and reserved and I just wondered whether that Earnest had had that with his experience and that, it result...

A: What kind of, are you thinking of something in particular?

Q: Oh his, well his experience at, at the concentration camp and, and not wanting to talk about that and whether that made you feel somehow like you didn't understand a part of him, or didn't know a part of him. I just wondered whether there had been any of that at all.

A: Yes, I mentioned it before, that he was reluctant to talk about it. And I was reluctant to ask and I never knew whether he wanted me to ask first. And that was the difficulty, we, we really didn't talk about that until he, he, he seemed to become a little more comfortable with the situation.

Q: And why did it change? Why did he become more comfortable?

A: I think time, time, probably. And then his wish to talk about it became stronger and then my, also my family encouraged him to talk about it when we visited them.

[end of side one, tape 2]

Q: Did that bring you closer?

A: We were very close to begin with so I don't know. I don't think you, you could say that because we were very close at the start.

Q: Was it a positive experience that, that he began to talk and...

A: Oh yes, I was very glad that he did. Very glad. Yes, it gave me a great deal of insight and well like, you might find out, you might find that asking people the things that you ask gives you an insight that you didn't have before and adds to your knowledge of this world. It surely does.

Q: And did you discover whether it was the reason he didn't say anything, was it because he was waiting for you to ask or?

A: No, I don't, no, I think now he did.

Q: I don't have any other questions. If there's more that you want to say, that...

A: I would have to think about it.

Q: Do you want to look over your notes?

A: If not, that's okay. Well, we were talking about, that you talk, you speak about the Holocaust a lot these days. Can you, can you tell me what, what it is that you do and, and how often you, you talk about your experiences? And you, we, we talked about before we started recording that, for a long time you didn't talk, you didn't discuss it much, you didn't talk to other people and talk publicly and now, and now you do. Why, why is there that change? Why is _____ that change?

A: Well we have, ever since I'm working at the museum, I bring home a lot of material and also my husband has started to write his memoirs and that is probably the, the main reason, because after writing his memoirs he asks me to read them and to give my opinion and that's how we start about. His memoirs by the way, are not just on the Holocaust at all, his memoirs are about his entire life which includes his very happy childhood and after the war, his experience in foreign service. But of course, in the middle of these happy stories, is his experience of Auschwitz and he is extremely interested anything that relates to the Holocaust and its origin. And so we, we come very interested in the entire question of why the question of anti-Semitism and the history of anti-Semitism and in particularly the history of anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria and in France. And that's a very vast subject if you really want to get knowledgeable about it. The, it also refers you to things that have not disappeared and are, are, are reappearing in our days now. We have a very strong nationalistic party in every one of these countries, especially in France and in Austria, which is frightening.

Q: Do, do you feel as though it's sort of a duty of yours, to, to speak more openly about the Holocaust and help other people understand it? I mean is there, do you feel as though now you have more of a, kind of a mission, or that there's more of a need?

A: Yes, because we are dying out. The people who can testify. There are very few

left and each time you talk about a subject, one or more details come up that have not come up before, which might be helpful in writing this history. As an example, I just learned two days ago about a happening that might be interesting to mention in this connection. In, there was the, the big question in France was why the was the village of Leshombon (ph) spared and we never had really an answer and I don't think that there is an answer right now either that is hundred percent. But one of our colleagues was caught by the French police and put into a bus in order that he be transported into a camp or we didn't know where of course. And he was all of a sudden released. And of course he jumped from the bus and disappeared but the, we all had theories on why this had happened and his theory was is because he was so young, he was 12 years at the time. And the answer appeared two days ago, it wasn't at all because he was too young, because as we know now, very young children were brought into concentration camps. It was because the mayor of the city had written to Pitton (ph) saying that the children, the Jewish children of Leshombon (ph) have, are under the protection of the Swiss. Sicroa (ph) Swiss. And therefore cannot be touched. He had never received an answer but apparently this was noted by the authorities. They must have just of notified the police there and the little boy was left. This note, this letter by the mayor became known only very recently when the archives of the Red Cross, Swiss Red Cross was finally made available which was very recently. And I

expect that such incidences will come up daily now that the archives of, of the former Soviet Union, the archives from all over the occupied countries where the German Gestapo was the government, are coming up now. And they had been hidden before.

Q: How old is your grandchild?

A: She's 20.

Q: She's 20?

A: Yeah.

Q: Have you talked to her about...

A: Yes.

Q: Your experience?

A: Indeed.

Q: How old was she then?

A: Oh, I wouldn't know exactly.

Q: What did you tell her?

A: Everything. But, _____ I don't recall exactly when it was. She knew from her mother. She grew up in England, that's a different story.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yes.

Q: We, you had said earlier that people who were in concentration camps thought of

themselves as survivors and that anyone else who didn't, were not survivors.

A: Not at concentration camp. Extermination camp.

Q: Extermination camps. How does that make you feel? Do you understand? I mean obviously you understand that sentiment but...

A: Exactly, it doesn't matter to me, what they consider me. I don't, I don't think that's important at all.

Q: Do you think there's a danger ever in, in, people see you or anyone else who's a survivor, who's been through the Holocaust, that's, that's what they are, sort of typecasting them, and, and seeing them only as, as a survivor as opposed to a...

A: I don't know that I care what other people think about me. It doesn't change me, what they think.

Q: Do you think there's a danger in seeing, viewing, that some people do view survivors as just survivors? Not necessarily you but, that...

A: A lot of people do, I'm used to it.

Q: Well, I think I've exhausted my questions again. Thank you very much.

A: Thank you very much.

Conclusion of interview.