

[MUSIC PLAYING] This is December 28, 1988. And I'm talking with Hedda Evans in Denver, Colorado. Hedda, when, and where were you born?

I was born on August the 6th, 1899, in Prague, what was then Bohemia. And Kaiser Franz Joseph was the emperor.

How old are you now, Hedda?

I am 89.

OK. So next year, you'll be 90.

Next year, I will be 90. When I was nine years old, we moved from Prague to Vienna. My father, my mother, my eldest brother, my older brother, Willy, and my little brother, Paul, and my mother's mother, my motherly grandmother. We moved to Vienna in 1908. I went to school in Vienna. I was reared in Vienna. My mother tongue was German. And I went to middle school. And I always had a beautiful voice. When I was four years old and we had members of the family or friends coming, they said, Hedda, stand up and sing something. And at the age of four, I already could sing.

So you knew from the time you were a little girl, then--

Yes.

--that you could sing and that you loved singing?

And then also, my father had a wonderful tenor voice. And my mother played the piano wonderful. And an uncle of mine had a music store. And whenever there came some new music or opera or whatever, he brought it over to our house. We were in the next room playing. So I grew up, more or less, with opera and symphonic music.

Tell me what you remember about your grandmother.

Oh, my grandmother-- she was born in Prague. There was a Prague ghetto then. She lived in the time of the Golem and the famous rabbi who had the Golem. And she told me that the Jews had to be home at a certain hour. So she told me all kind of stories. And she was born in 1840.

Did she live with your family?

Yeah, I remember her since I was a little girl. She was a widow, and she had a few children. And she always lived with us. So she also came with us to Vienna.

Tell me a little about your parents.

Oh, my father was a traveling salesman for a big, big firm. And my mother, she went to the Prague Conservatory. And she gave piano lessons. And then, in Vienna, my father had his own business. But my mother died when she was 38 of tuberculosis. And my father remarried in 1917.

And there is a son from the second marriage, who is Dr. Walter Graab. He is a famous lecturer, goes to Hamburg and to Germany. He has 17 books published. And I haven't seen him since 1950, but I will see him in April of next year.

Oh, my oldest brother, Willy, he died in Auschwitz.

You say you lost one brother?

I lost one brother.

And what other family members?

And he had a daughter, Rita, that was in Terezin with my sister-in-law. And she died in Bergen-Belsen three days before the Britons came to liberate the camp, on typhoid.

And then I had some uncles and aunts from my father's side. They all died in Auschwitz. I only have three cousins that went through Auschwitz and made it back.

Tell me a little more about your childhood, Hedda. You mentioned that you moved from Prague to Vienna, right?

Yes.

What do you remember during those first nine years?

In the first nine years in Prague?

Right.

Well, I mean, we had a marvelous family life, a lot of uncles and aunts. My grandfather went to-- she had a son that had a music store. He had four children. And we went there always to visit. And they visited us. And I had a very happy, happy childhood until my mother died.

How old were you when your mother died?

I was 16. And my little brother was 10. And then, of course, then the First World War broke out. And my oldest brother had to go to the war. And he was wounded, but he came back.

So as a child, you must have had a lot of music in your home?

Yeah, we always had music in our home.

Was there a piano?

Oh, we always had a baby grand in our home.

Did your family sing?

My mother had a lovely alto voice. And my father had a beautiful tenor voice. And my brother, Willy, he could play the piano by ear. And he had also a very good voice.

And when I was 11 years old, one of my uncles got married. And we put on a show put together from all kind of opera melodies. I was in costume. And my older brother, Willy, he had on a tuxedo. And we played and sang in front of 500 people.

And then also, in summer, in Vienna, when there were [INAUDIBLE] for vacation, we all went to the country. We all rented a big farmhouse. Everybody went there, the whole family, the grandmother and the cook. And we put on plays. We memorized plays in the yard. And we had costumes. So the theater was always in my blood, more or less.

So when I was 16, I started to take voice lessons. So at first, it was Mendelssohn, and then it was Schubert, and Schumann, and Wolf. So I could give recitals. Then I started to sing opera. We had a group there. We went in Vienna to different places. And we sang from note. We didn't act it. But I know-- I remember that I sang the witch in Hansel and Gretel maybe when I was 19. Then I decided I want to be an opera singer. But in the meantime, I got a new teacher. His name was Tremmelis, I remember.

Was this in Vienna?

In Vienna, yeah. And he went to some place, to Tegernsee, in Bavaria, for vacation. And he said, if you want to come also, I will give you lessons there, too. So I went there. And that's when I met my first husband.

And what age were you then?

I was 22. And we fell in love. He lived in Graz. I lived in Vienna. And he called every day. Then he proposed, and we got married. But it didn't turn out so well, and I divorced.

But you kept the last name?

I had to keep the last name. His name was Kernmayr. And he was Gentile. And I had to become without religion, [GERMAN]. A judge married us.

And then, of course, the moment I was back in Vienna, I went back to another teacher. Her name was Weiss. And she was very famous. And so I got my first engagement, which was Mährisch Ostrau. And that's how my opera career began.

That was your very first role?

That was my very first engagement.

Let me back up just a little bit. And I'd like for you to tell me about your education. Where did you go to school?

Well, I went to school in Vienna, the so-called BÃ¼rgerschule. And then my father told me, I know you want to be a singer, but you have to have some background in case the singing doesn't turn out so well. So I want you to go for two years to the-- what do you call it-- business college, so you have some background in case your singing career doesn't work out.

So I went to the business college for two years. And I graduated in 1916. And on the day of my graduation, my mother died. I remember that. Then I got a job in a bank.

Oh, as a teller?

No, in the bookkeeping department.

Oh, bookkeeping.

Yeah, I had to add columns and columns. They didn't have any adding machines, no computers. Don't forget, that was in 1917, 1918.

What kind of currency-- were they using paper money? What kind of currency?

They were kronen. Kronen-- crowns.

Ah. How many languages could you speak by the time you had finished college?

Well, I spoke German. I spoke pretty well French. And--

And then you learned English?

I mean, I had some English. I had the basic knowledge of English. But where I worked, nobody was interested. All I did was add columns. And then, of course, I made money, so I paid for my voice lessons also.

So you never abandoned that pursuit?

No.

You always had voice.

No, no. I sang all along. At first, I wanted to be a cabaret singer because I was very good in expressing. But then I sang at least once a month for a big crowd. And then I took real voice lessons. And the time went on. And after my first marriage, which ended in mishap, I went to the stage.

How long did you work in that bank?

Maybe five years.

And you were singing in addition to that?

Yeah, I was singing all the time. I never stopped singing.

OK. Well, then let's start talking about your career. You mentioned you wanted to be a cabaret singer.

Yeah, yeah, sure. You know, in Vienna, there were so many nightclubs where there were terrific singers, nightclub singers. I mean, I went at least once a month there. I could have done as well as every single one of them. But I just wanted to sing.

Yeah, this Tremmelis, this teacher, Tremmelis, when he heard my voice, he said, oh, we have a new Brunhilde because I had a terrific range. But then I had to have my tonsils taken out, and my voice slipped down about a tone. I didn't have a high C anymore. I had only a B flat. So he said, you will be a terrific dramatic mezzo soprano. And that's what I became. And that's what I was singing.

Now, how old were you at this time?

23.

23.

That's when I went to the stage.

And where? Where did you start?

My first year was in Mährisch Ostrau, in the German opera. They had also a Czech opera in which I signed later, after-- but I sang in both in Mährisch Ostrau. But that was where the young people began.

This is a picture of myself when I was young and gorgeous.

[AUDIO OUT]

But I always-- I sang in Czechoslovakia the first few years. Then I had the engagement in Trebnitz [PLACE NAME], where they had a terrific opera, a new, big opera house. But you had also to appear in operettas. And I even had to appear there in plays.

When you were doing stage productions, did you ever travel with a company?

Oh, yeah. This one company, after the season, we traveled all around in Czechoslovakia. So that was Czechoslovakia.

And then, of course, I sang in Prague with George [PERSONAL NAME], on a big national Czech holiday, which was-- I don't know, when Masaryk became president or when Czechoslovakia became independent. I don't know when that was-- in the early '30s.

Yeah, of course. Then I also sang-- there was a [INAUDIBLE] being put on in Barcelona. And I auditioned for that. And I was chosen. And I sang in Barcelona for six weeks.

Then we had in Bayreuth, not in the Festspielhaus-- there is an opera house in Bayreuth where I sang the Hoffmann and Der Evangelimann. And we went with this tour to Graz, and to Linz, and all over Austria.

So you were quite well-known?

I was quite well-known. And we sang this in the Bayreuth opera house, not in the Festspielhaus. The Festspielhaus was renovated then. And so I sang all over the world, actually, till Hitler came. And in 1935, I couldn't get an engagement anymore because I was Jewish.

I know I sang for an agent, for Karlsruhe and Dortmund, some place in Germany. And he told me, gosh, I would love to give you a contract right now, but you are Jewish, aren't you? I said, yes. But one thing-- that was in '33, when Hitler came to power. No, that was after that. That was at '35.

'35?

No Jew could go and get an engagement anymore in--

So they asked you, that they just asked you that point blank?

Yeah, of course. Why was somebody with a voice like me-- I don't know what I sang for him-- Carmen, I guess. I was a very good Carmen. And he said, he told himself, why isn't she some place in a big opera house? And I had no way to go away to England or to America. Nobody believed you.

No, I lived in Czechoslovakia the last few years. And nobody ever thought that Hitler will come and take Czechoslovakia. I mean, he didn't, but he wanted only the people that are part German, right?

So anyhow, in the end, it came out that I couldn't get anywhere anymore. And I remember I cried my eyes out because not to be able to sing on stage anymore was worse than death to me.

How long did you not sing?

How long did I not sing? The thing was that the Jews got together in Prague and put on in houses, in private houses. There were very rich people there, very many rich people there. They had terrific houses with pianos. So we got together there, and we sang there.

Now, this is one of my first opera roles, Azucena from Il Trovatore, the mother of the unlucky lover, Manrico.

Now, this is Brangaine from Tristan and Isolde, being desperate when she sees that she gave Isolde the love potion instead of the death potion.

Now, this here is Dorabella, one of the sisters from the Mozart opera, Cosi Fan Tutte.

Now, here is a photo of the countess in the Tchaikovsky opera, Pique Dame, where Gherman threatens her with a revolver to find out the secret of the three cards. And in the next second or so, she dies of a heart attack.

Now, this would have been in '35, '36?

Yeah, '36, '37, '38. And even when the Jews had to wear the Star of David, even then we got together. Of course, it had to be in the afternoon, because after 8 o'clock no Jew could be on the street anymore.

So there was a curfew? What other ways did they discriminate against the Jews?

Well, I mean, you couldn't go in a coffeehouse anymore. There were two or three coffeehouses where the Jews could go. You couldn't live in certain places in Prague anymore. I had to move out from a wonderful apartment and move in someplace else because the Jews were not allowed to live there. That was in '39.

Nobody believed that Hitler will march into Prague. First they took away the Sudeten, where they were talking German, around the Sudetenland. That was in '38. And then Hitler marched in on the 15th of March, 1939. I never forget it. So then you were completely restricted.

And in 1941, I had already had to go to Terezin. The camp was done by the Germans. They told themselves we had to have a famous camp where the Jews are treated-- we'll call it ghetto, the ghetto of Terezin.

They will call it, and they will be self-supporting, self-sufficient. The Nazis will be on top, but the Jews will have a Jewish mayor, a Jewish elder, they called it, the Judenalteste. And they will have a Jewish police. And everything they will do by themselves. But on top of him, of course, will be the Nazis.

So they ended Theresienstadt, Terezin, which was built in 1790. Yeah, the son of Maria Theresa, Joseph, Kaiser Joseph, he built the barracks there. It was a garrison. It was a fort, Terezin, Theresienstadt.

My number in the camp was 999. There were 1,000 people sent. First they had a so-called Aufbau. All men, 1,000 men went there to prepare the camp whatever.

There were already other camps, right?

Oh, listen, there were camps in Dachau and where else?

Auschwitz?

No, Auschwitz wasn't there yet. No, in Poland there were Treblinka. He already did it to the Jews. But he just came into Czechoslovakia. We never thought-- we are not Germans. We talk Czech. I mean, I took lessons there on how to talk Czech because German you couldn't talk there. After the First World War, in 1918, Czechoslovakia became independent. And there was no German language there.

When I grew up there, when I was born there, there was German and Czech languages. And all the Jews sent their children to the German languages because the big Austrian Hungarian empire, the main language was German there. So where was I?

Well, the camps were being built. But there weren't any-- Czechs didn't-- did the Jews think that that would not happen there?

No, nobody said that. Hitler cannot be here. He's not interested in Czech-speaking. Of course, he wanted the whole world. You know that. And the war was already on in 1939.

In December of 1941, we all were there, were together like cattle in a big, big hall. Everybody could take 50 kilos with them. So I had a sleeping bag made. And you could only take 50 kilos-- that was 100 pounds-- of your possessions.

So then we went to a train station. And they put people in the train. And then you had to drag your-- you went a mile or a mile and a half into Theresienstadt. And there were these men. The powerful men were there greeting you.

Now, were there families there or any--

No, there were only 1,000 men by themselves. And then they picked-- I don't know. Yeah, there were some couples, married couples. But mostly they were singles. And I was divorced. And I didn't have any children. So I was single there.

And the people there, were they mostly musicians?

The people there-- all the people that lived in Theresienstadt had to empty-- they got paid to empty the whole place.

How did you find out that you had to go there? Did someone come and tell you?

Yeah, I was baking cookies for Christmas. It was maybe 11:30 at night. Somebody knocked on the door. Somebody came from the Jewish community, whatever, Kultusgemeinde-- I don't know what they call it here-- and brought me a slip of paper. And they said, you have one week. That was on the 11th or on the 10th of December. You have one week to get prepared to pack yourself up and to go to Theresienstadt.

So did you make that trip with people you knew or--

No, I mean, there were--

You just had to report--

--thousands. So you had to report to a certain place. And you had to bring all your papers that you had. Every ring, every silver, everything that you owned, all your papers, and all your things, whatever you had on jewels you had to bring and give it to them. And there were some Nazis sitting there and taking it away from you.

Did they tell you that you would get it back at some point?

No, you had to-- listen. Everybody was so scared. I know my brother, he had a big business there, my older brother. And he was interrogated in the Petschek Palace by the Nazis. He never told us. But he was lucky. He got away and he wasn't killed then and there.

But the really rich people, they knew what was going on or what is going to come. And they all went-- a lot of people went to South America, to Cuba, just to get away. But my brother didn't want-- and his wife didn't want to move. They were supposed to send their daughter to Palestine. Little Jewish children-- there were transports there. No, the family cannot be disrupted, my sister-in-law said. So my brother perished. And my niece perished.

What was I talking-- yeah, so we went to Theresienstadt. And I know that the first night we were in a schoolhouse, in a classroom. There was some straw on the floor. And that's where I spent my first night in Theresienstadt. And of course, everybody got a terrible cold because you lay on the floor. It was December.

And the people already said, Hitler is already through. In a few weeks, we will be home again. That was in December 1941. And I was there till May 1945.

And there were so many barracks. Their barracks there were like five, six story high, high rises, more or less because there were only little houses there where the people lived. We were there maybe-- I was in the Hamburger kaserne. And we were about eight or nine in a room.

And all you had-- you see it. I am sitting here in my chair. That was what you had. I had the two suitcases I put on the floor. They gave you one mattress, not like here you have a mattress that covers the whole bed, right? There it's three pieces of mattress in a bed. So they gave you one piece like this big. And that was your domain. Like from here, there your foot is. So how much is this? I mean, how tall is a man?

Probably six feet.

About six feet by-- I don't know. How much is this?

Maybe three feet?

Yeah, yeah. That was where you lived. The men were separate. The women were separate. I was there four or five days when they said we all had to go down. And then there were maybe 2,000. There were three people who tried to escape. So they told us--

What happened to them?

I'm going to tell you. They said we had all to go march down there some place. Well, we marched maybe half a mile. And there were three young people hanging-- hanging-- from the trees. They were hanged! Because they wanted to escape. And they were moving there in the wind. Can you imagine?

But you know, the thing is, it didn't do anything to me. The moment I came there I got kind of a mentally-- what do you call it? I froze inside. I mean, nothing that happened there could hurt me because that was the only way to make it.

A way to protect yourself, to survive.

It was kind of a mental [NON-ENGLISH], [NON-ENGLISH] or whatever. What do you call it? A mental anesthetic that I did.

Exactly, yeah.

Because I'm normally there in a bread line. And the man died in front of me. He slumped down and was dead. And I just stepped over him, like nothing happened, to get my meal. This is only possible because some people got crazy there, completely, couldn't take it.

That is how I protected myself. Nothing what I did or what happened around me could influence me. And that was the only way to make it. And then, when I came home, it took me maybe half a year to defrost myself because this is the only way you could really live through it.

When did you--

Yeah, and all you got for a whole week, maybe a piece like this, not more than that, bread. That was for the whole week.

And that's all you had to eat-- bread and coffee?

Bread and coffee, yeah. Then the big meal at noon was maybe to eat three potatoes with a little gravy and a soup that was-- I don't know what it was-- from nothing. And in the evening you got again-- I don't know what you got-- hardly enough to eat.

Did people die of malnutrition?

Oh, yeah. I mean, listen, I will tell you what happened there. I don't know what we did there. But beginning of April or something, somebody came and said, is there anybody that can put up-- any singer or actor or a musician that can put together a performance for the inmates? So I said, yeah, I am here. I was an opera singer.

So he said, what is your name? I told him. So he said, OK, you will be the head of the [GERMAN]. That means you will be the head of-- not amusement-- the free time entertainment. I mean, some people became policemen there, and the Judenälteste, the mayor or whatever you will call him.

So people have jobs? They had jobs?



Yeah, they had things to do just to keep-- somebody had to clean the bathrooms. And somebody had to wash the floors. And there was kind of a ghetto. People had things to do. But I don't know what I did.

I read the book.

Yeah?

Like, [PERSONAL NAME] book? In his book, he said that you were doing such lowly things, such as peeling potatoes when they came. And in the book, it says that they asked you to do this job that you just mentioned.

Yeah, yeah, because I was the first there that was an opera singer or could put together. So I behaved myself. Somebody recited some poetry. Somebody danced. And somebody took his accordion along. So I said, can you-- I sang two songs by Dvorák or three. And he said, OK, I will accompany you. And that was the first thing that got me started. So I was the head of the free time entertainment.

Do you remember who it was who asked you to do that?

Yeah, the Judenalteste. Lederman was his name. He was the Judenalteste, or the mayor, more or less. And he was a rabbi or whatever. And he also had speeches. He was very clever. But he also went to Auschwitz. So we were a self-supporting Jewish ghetto. I don't know what you call it.

Did the Jewish people who were the city officials acting as mayor and officials, did they truly have control of how things were handled or run? Or were the Nazis telling them everything to do?

No, they said, you do your thing. And we could do nothing, then they told them, we have to send 1,000 people away to a labor camp in Poland or in Germany.

So they had the Jewish officials--

So the Jewish officials, you pick the people. So maybe because I was the first to do these things and I did it maybe for two years, and then all the people from Vienna, from Prague, from Hungary came. And there were painters, there were conductors, there were musicians, there were singers. All of a sudden, we could have a whole opera put together.

As I recall kind of the chronology, this actually came under the Nazis in about 1942. They made it an official program. Is that right?

Yeah, they wanted to show off how good the Jews had it.

So this camp was different from the others in that it was supposed to look pretty posh.

To look how good the Jews had it. Look, they have an opera! Look, they have a concert! And one day you could go-- I had a concert. Someplace they had a children's opera. I mean, the Jews had it so good. And then, the next day, they closed the opera. And so many and so many people went to Auschwitz.

Of course, Theresienstadt was quite like a way station, you know For instance, there came transports of all the old people, only old people. And they all died there. And there was not enough room to bury them, so they put the corpses one on top of the other, four or five that were in the houses or in the barracks, in the front of the houses or barracks. It was such a stench-- you have no idea-- because they started to-- what do you call it-- to disintegrate or what?

So these people, they were not burying the dead? They were not doing anything?

No, I mean, there was not enough burial there. They couldn't pick up the corpses fast enough because all these old people died. At one time, there were 40,000 people in this village.

40,000?

Yeah. So the old people died there. And then they had to build a crematorium there because, you know.

So they did have a crematorium there?

Only a crematorium, not a gas chamber. The gas chamber was in Auschwitz. But they built a crematorium in Terezin. I was there three and a half years. And all the time there were concerts and operas and transports coming and transports going.

And once in a while, there came somebody to inspect. So I tell you, they inspected, so they opened the coffee house. And we had to go there and sit there. One guy was playing the fiddle. People had to dance. They're pretending to drink the coffee.

But this is just so that it will look good?

Yeah, they said, look how good the Jews had. They sit in the coffee house. And then they opened the bank. We had our money in Theresienstadt. I mean, they printed some money, but they didn't need--

But you didn't really have money?

No. And then the later transports, they didn't leave them their suitcases. They arrived, and the suitcases were taken from them. Everybody took what they could, the best stuff. And then they opened a store with men's clothing, with women's clothing. And they all-- you could go there and buy something.

So there was a bank. There was a coffee house. There's an opera house. I mean, they played opera. They sang concerts. There was a terrific chorus from 150. We did the Verdi Requiem there. Can you imagine?

And there were famous singers. Everybody that was Jewish and came to Terezin could sing, could go into the opera. So I don't know how many operas we performed there.

And usually the first performance we had to do for the Nazis. I remember I sang Carmen. The Nazis with their wives were sitting there. Concerts of all kinds. So they told them the Jews were having fantastic. And the next day, 4,000, 5,000, 6,000 went to Auschwitz. And then they tore down-- they emptied the bank, emptied the stores.

This is after the inspection?

Yeah, after they inspected. And that went on and on.

When people were transported to Auschwitz, they were not told where they were going?

No, they said, oh, you have to. We need some able-bodied-- for instance, my niece. My niece had a lovely voice, too. They put on Bastien and Bastienne by Mozart. And she sang Bastienne. No, I mean, they said, we need a labor camp.

Did word ever get back to the rest of you, though?

You know, there were so many that-- and mail, you could-- once in a great while you got a postcard or whatever. And one woman once told me, you know, this one that went three months ago wrote me, we are here and we--