

Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson, I am the host of the museum's public program, First Person. Thank you for joining us.

We are in our 10th year of the First Person program. Our first person today is Mrs. Margit Meissner, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2009 season of First Person is made possible through the Louis and Doris Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring our First Person program. And I'd like to acknowledge Mr. Louis Smith, who is in the audience with us today.

[APPLAUSE]

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their first-hand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each First Person guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. We will have a First Person program each Wednesday until August 26.

The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of the upcoming First Person guests. And since we're coming to the close of our 2009 season, if you check the website later this fall you'll have information about First Person in 2010.

This year we are offering a new feature associated with the First Person program-- excerpts from our conversations with survivors are available as podcasts on the museum's website. A number for this year are already posted on the website, and Margit's will be available within the next several weeks.

The First Person podcast joined two other museum podcast series, Voices on Anti-Semitism and Voices on Genocide Prevention. The podcasts are also available through iTunes.

Our first person today, Margit Meissner, will share her first-person account of her experience as a survivor and during the Holocaust for about 40 minutes. Depending on time, we hope we will have an opportunity for you to ask Margit a few questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you and a couple of announcements. First, we ask that if it is at all possible, please stay seated with us through our one-hour program, particularly today. We have a full house, as you can see, and that way, we minimize any disruptions for Margit as she speaks.

If we do have time for question and answers, and you have a question, I ask that you make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question, so everyone in the room hears it, including Margit, and then, she'll answer your question. If you have a cell phone or a pager that has not yet been turned off, we ask that you do that now.

If you have passes for the permanent exhibition today, please know they are good for the entire afternoon. So you can stay with us till we end our program, and then go to the permanent exhibition.

The Holocaust was a state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims-- 6 million were murdered. Roma and Sinti, or Gypsies, people with mental and physical disabilities, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons.

Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi Germany. More than 60 years after the Holocaust, hatred, anti-Semitism, and genocide still threaten our world. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades, and remind us of the constant need to be vigilant citizens, and to stop injustice, prejudice, and hatred wherever and whenever they occur.

What you are about to hear from Margit Meissner is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Margit's introduction.

And we begin with this photograph of Margit at age three. Margit was born Margaret Morawetz on February 26th, 1922. Margit was the youngest of four children, born to Gottlieb Morawetz, a banker from a religious Jewish family, and his wife, Lily, who was from Vienna. And here, we see Margit's father, Gottlieb.

Margit was born in Innsbruck, Austria. When Margit was a baby, her family moved from Austria to Prague, Czechoslovakia. Our first arrow on this map of Europe points to Austria, and the second to Czechoslovakia. On this map of Czechoslovakia, the circle shows the location of Prague.

As a young girl, in addition to the Czech and German spoken at home, Margit learned French and English. Here, we see Margit's family at the Lido, a beach resort in Venice, taken in 1926. From the left is her brother, Felix, her cousin, Ernie Morawetz, her brother, Bruno, her mother and father, Margit-- with a circle around her-- Margit's governess, Yeya, and her brother, Paul.

Margit's father, Gottlieb, passed away in 1932 when Margaret was 10 years old. In 1938, when Margit was 16, attacks on Jews in Central Europe escalated, and her mother decided she should leave school in Prague. Margit was sent to Paris to live with a French family, where she studied dressmaking.

In March 1939, Margit's mother joined her in France. In this photo, we see Margit with her dog, Flippy, just before leaving Prague in 1938.

As the Germans advanced on Paris, Margit's mother was deported. When Paris fell to the Germans in June of 1940, Margit bought a bike and fled with other refugees to the South of France. At this time, Margit was unaware of her mother's whereabouts. Her mother had been sent to the Gurs detention camp on the French, Spanish border.

Here, we see a photo of the Gurs detention camp.

Margit would reunite with her mother, and the two fled via Spain and Portugal to the United States, where they settled in 1941. We close our slideshow with this photo of Margit taken in 1941 soon after she arrived in the United States.

Upon her arrival in the US, Margit would find employment as a dress finisher on Madison Avenue in New York City. From there, she would attend Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and marry three days after Pearl Harbor. Margit would later work for the Office of War information, spend time with MGM Studios. And because of her language abilities, worked for the United States Army of occupation in Germany, re-educating Hitler Youth.

We can't do justice today to describing the remarkable journey Margit's life would take from there, but it included many stops in the US and abroad. Margit would eventually spend 20 years with the Montgomery County, Maryland public school system, specializing in disability issues. She remains on the board of an organization which she helped found that helps youth with disabilities obtain employment after graduation from high school.

Margit resides in Bethesda, Maryland. She has two children and two grandchildren. Her daughter, Anne, lives in nearby Silver Spring, Maryland. And her son, Paul, is a hospital planner at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. Margit's partner, Irvin, passed away early this year at age 97.

Margit leads tours of the museum, mostly for groups of police officers and FBI agents. She recently spoke to a group of Jehovah's Witnesses, among others, in Puerto Rico. She also works in the museum's archives translating documents from Czech and German to English. The first document she translated was the memoir of a Czech boy who was 15 when the war ended, and wrote his memoir at age 17. He was so pleased with the translation of Margit's that he donated the original manuscript to the museum.

In 2003, Margit's autobiography, *Margit's Story*, was published. Her book, which I have here in my hand, is available in the museum's bookstore. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Margit Meissner.

[APPLAUSE]

Just lean back and be comfortable.

OK.

Margit, thank you so much for your willingness to be our First Person today, and for joining us. We have so much to cover, we should start right away, I think.

OK.

Margit, although you were born in Austria, your family moved to Prague, Czechoslovakia when you were very young. You would live there until 1938 when your mother sent you to Paris at age 16. Let's begin today with you telling us a little bit about those early years-- your first 16 years, your life, your community living in Prague.

Well, I was a very fortunate little girl. I was the only little girl with three older brothers. And I think they thought that I was a doll. So I didn't like that. And I always thought, from the very beginning on, that it was a great shame to be a girl-- I would have much preferred to be a boy.

But I was a good little girl, and I was expected to be a good little girl. And if you saw that picture of me at age three with the white-- with the white stockings, the main issue was that I shouldn't make anything dirty. Because that was not ladylike. So I was brought up to be a very compliant, nice young lady.

We, as you heard, we had a French and an English governess because my mother believed that her children had to speak four languages by age 16. So we spoke German at home, we spoke Czech in the street, and we tried to speak English and French at home. And of course, that was very helpful because we didn't know that we would have to leave Czechoslovakia one day. But as it turned out, it was really very helpful to us.

I might just interject here the fact that I mentioned earlier that Margit spoke recently in Puerto Rico, and she gave her talk in Spanish and was interviewed in TV in Spanish. So she's added language. She met the challenge of learning four by 16, and went beyond that.

Margit, tell us a little bit about your father, whom you lost very young.

My father came from a very poor Jewish farm family in Bohemia. And he was-- I didn't know him very well, because he died when I was 10, and as was the custom in the kind of family that I lived in, fathers didn't spend very much time with their children. The children were really the mother's department.

But my father apparently was a very intelligent young man. So when his mother could no longer support him in what then was the Bohemian part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, she sent him to Vienna to study. And he studied very successfully. Most of his studies were in the German language, and he became-- he studied law, and then became a banker.

And when Czechoslovakia-- that was created in 1918 at the end of World War I-- became a new country that needed to create a new financial system, he was asked to go to Prague and to take over a large bank and help create that financial system, which basically had not existed.

Margit, in 1938, after Hitler annexed Austria, your mother and you made a profound-- a truly profound decision to send you, by yourself, at that time, from Prague to live in Paris. Tell us what convinced your mother and you that you needed to make that decision? Why Paris was chosen, and what it was like for you to go there alone at age 16?

Well, Austria had been annexed by the Germans in 1938. Then we were Austrian citizens, although we lived in Czechoslovakia. And we already knew what was happening to the Jews, because we had watched what was happening to Jews in Germany. Most Czechs felt that Czechoslovakia was a democratic country, and nothing like what happened

in Germany could ever happen in Czechoslovakia.

But my mother, a very smart lady, really didn't trust that. And she thought it was not safe to stay in Czechoslovakia if it wasn't absolutely necessary. And my two older brothers had already left, not only because of Hitler, but Hitler was one of the reasons why they had left. And my younger brother was still one of those who believed that nothing could ever happen to him in Czechoslovakia. But mother thought if I could leave, it would be so much-- I would be so much safer.

And I was a very good student because I knew how to take tests, but I was not an invested learner. I just went to school because it was-- because I had to. And I was mainly interested in boys.

[LAUGHTER]

But unfortunately, many of the boys that I was interested didn't look at me. So it was-- so in a way, for me to go to Paris was an adventure. And I also believed, together with my mother, that the future was so uncertain, that if I could become a dress designer, then I could maybe make a living wherever fate would take us. And if you wanted to become a dress designer, where would you go? To Paris.

So that was one of the reasons why mother and I together decided to take me out of school. I was in 10th grade, and that's basically all the education that I had for many, many years.

But it was difficult to leave home. On the other hand, it was an adventure. And I welcomed the adventure.

If her sense was that it wasn't safe to remain in Czechoslovakia, was the belief that Paris would be a safe place?

Yes, certainly, because people did not believe there would be a war, and Paris was far enough away. In retrospect, it seems like a very poor judgment. But of course, at the time, one didn't know what was going to happen. Although, there was a great deal of talk about war. And it was clear that the situation of the Jews all over Europe, but especially in Central Europe, was very precarious.

Did the family that you went to live with in Paris, were they known to your mother?

No, they were not known. But they were recommended to her by a friend. And so I went to live in a French family where, in sort of an impoverished aristocratic family, where the lady of the house was a French teacher. And she was very ambitious for me. And although I had, as I told you, I had had some French before I left, so I was not lost when I came to France, but she thought that I should learn French perfectly.

And she gave me three hours of French instruction every day. Just she and I. And then, she gave me enough homework for another hour in the afternoon. And as a result of that, after three months, I really spoke pretty good French, which has really stood me in very good stead.

And were you able to, in the midst of all of that study of French, also learn the dressmaking design that you set out to do?

Well, after I finished-- at the end of the summer, my mother came to join me in Paris. Basically only because of-- she came for vacation. She still didn't have any idea that one would have to leave.

But so then, I enrolled in a dressmaking course. And it was very difficult because I had not had any dressmaking in school because I went to an academic high school. And I came to a French dressmaking school for girls who had all done a lot of dressmaking, or sewing at home, and who knew a lot about sewing. And I was absolutely the worst student there. I mean, the teacher was very unhappy with me because she thought I was never careful enough, and my stitches were not even, and they were not-- they were not small enough.

And she kept chastising me. And I was really quite unhappy there.

And your mother came to spend some time with you, but did she go back to Prague?

Well, at the time mother came, an important political occurrence took place. And that was the Munich Conference. Rather, I should rephrase that-- Hitler decided to annex the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia without the consent of the Czech government. And that meant that Czechoslovakia was being dismembered.

The Czech government had to resign, and Hitler cemented this takeover of Czechoslovakia with a conference in Munich, to which he invited the British and the French to accede to his demands to take over that part of Czechoslovakia. And that became the well-known Munich Conference, which is sort of used again today by people who are talking about delivering a country to an aggressor without interfering with the aggression.

So that's so that happened while mother was in Paris with me. And then, of course, it became clear that now the situation was very, very dangerous, and that Munich-- Hitler had convinced the French and the Germans, for letting him have this part of Czechoslovakia, because he said he had no further territorial ambitions. And the British and the French believed him.

And the United States was basically looking away at that time. We had just gone through a very serious depression, as you will all know. And America was very inward-looking and was not interested, really, in what was happening in Europe, which was 3,000 miles away.

So as a result of this Munich Conference, then, the world was just watching what Hitler was going to do next. And although he had promised he had no further territorial ambitions, six months later, he took over all of Czechoslovakia. And that was basically the end of his the end of his territorial annexations, until a year later, he went-- he declared war on Poland.

And that's when, finally, the West woke up and Britain and France also declared war on Germany. So mother was stuck in Paris for a while, and then decided to go back to Prague to close her apartment. Because she had just left on vacation. And while she was there, Czechoslovakia was annexed.

And what happened to her once she was there?

Well, once she was there, she tried all kinds of-- by that time, it was clear that one had to emigrate. And she tried to take some of her furniture along, and to organize sort of emigration. But she came too late, and she wasn't able to do anything. And just after Czechoslovakia was annexed, there was a window of maybe three days when you could get out without permission by the Gestapo.

And my brother, Bruno, who was still there-- because he was the one who had faith in the Czech democracy-- he and she were able to leave on the last train out of Czechoslovakia before the Germans closed the border. And I was, of course, in Paris, and I had no idea where mother was.

And you have to think of a world where communications were not what they are today. I mean, there was no telephone. There probably were telegrams. But that was just about the only means of communication, except for what is now snail mail.

So I had no idea where mother was. I did not know where Bruno was. And I was very desperately waiting in Paris, and going to every express train from Prague, to the station, to see whether my mother would arrive.

And finally, she did arrive. And basically, with one suitcase. So that meant that we lost everything that we ever possessed.

Margit, your brother, Bruno, he was significant in helping to get out of-- your mother and he to get out of Prague. How did he do that?

Well, he was very clever. Because one couldn't get a permission from the Gestapo. So in order to use a subterfuge--

some ma came to him and said, I can get you a permit, but I need your passports for three days. And Bruno's friend said, you're crazy, don't give him the passports. He's just going to denounce you and that's dangerous.

And Bruno took a chance, and gave him the money and gave him the passports. And he actually produced the papers that he needed. So that was a risk well taken. But it could have ended very badly.

Absolutely. So now, your mother and Bruno are in Paris.

No, Bruno then went to England where my mother's brother was. And that was very fortunate. He came-- you know, as soon as Czechoslovakia was annexed, all the European countries closed the borders against refugees. Nobody wanted to accept any refugees.

And what was happening to the Jews was basically of no great importance to anybody but the Jews. But England still had-- and Bruno was the only one in our family who had a Czech passport, we had Austrian passports, because I told you we were Austrian citizens, because I was born in Austria. But Bruno, who was a great Czech patriot, he had decided to become a Czech citizen.

So with his Czech passport, he could go to England until the 30th of March of 1939. Am I correct? Yes, '39. Czechs could enter England without a visa.

However, they had to become farmers or they had to go into agriculture. And Bruno had already studied agriculture in Czechoslovakia. So he became a farm hand in England.

But that was an option not available to you and your mother.

No, certainly not, because we were Austrian citizens. And nobody gave us any options anywhere.

So once your mother was there with you, then what did you do? Did you remain living with that family?

No, then mother and I-- I have to tell you that, before Czechoslovakia was occupied, mother had gotten permission to send money to me every month for me to pay for my expenses. Because where did the money come from? And there were currency restrictions all over Europe, so you couldn't just send-- if you had money, you couldn't send it out.

So I had received this monthly allowance on which I lived. But then, mother came, and I-- and mother and I got an-- lived in rented rooms. And mother brought some money along, but very little. I mean, most of the money was lost. But she had some money along, and I really never quite figured out where she had the money from.

And so we lived in rented rooms. And I was going to school. And then, the war broke out in September of 1939. And mother didn't quite know what to do with herself.

I was going to school. So she went to live first in the South of France with her brother. The brother was an important person in our lives because he had a British passport. And that was a wonderful thing to have when you had such a second rate passport like either an Austrian or a Czech passport, because Britain was an important country in the world.

And he was the one who helped my brother get into England. And eventually, my brother, Bruno, was able to go to Canada because Canada also permitted farmers entrance. You couldn't go to Canada if you were not a farmer. You had a special visa.

But as a farmer, you could go to Canada. And the Canadian government gave you some money with which you could buy a small farm. And Bruno, for a while, became a fruit farmer in the Niagara Peninsula.

Now, when you think of his being a fruit farmer, or my becoming a dressmaker, out of this very intellectual upper middle class family, it was kind of an unusual change, shall we say.

Absolutely. So your mother and you were living in rented rooms, and you would remain there until June of 1940 when Hitler attacked France. Your mother and you had become separated, and you would be forced to flee from Paris. Tell us how you got separated, and then about your fleeing from Paris, your leaving by yourself.

So I'll try to make it simple. Mother was not permitted-- we lived in Paris in these rented rooms. But one day, mother had to leave Paris because the French-- because we were enemy aliens. As Austrians, we now belonged to Germany, and France was at war with Germany. So we were enemy aliens.

And enemy aliens were no longer permitted to live in Paris. So she had to go live in Versailles, which is about an hour out of Paris. And one day, she came to the apartment where she lived and she got a notice saying that she had to present herself at the police in three days with enough food for three days, with two blankets, and whatever else she could carry on her back. And she would be evacuated to the South of France.

So she did that. I mean, there was no question about not going. She simply-- she simply presented herself to the police. I was in Paris, and she gave me 10,000 francs, which was quite a bit of money at the time. But I have no idea where she had the money from, and I still cannot figure out how much money it really was.

But she gave me 10,000 francs, and she said to me, now, it's your turn to get us out of here. Now, whatever she meant, I'm really not quite sure. And I have to tell you, with embarrassment, that I never really asked her this question during the many, many years that we lived together. Because somehow, it didn't occur to me that I should ask her what she had meant at the time.

So I was in Paris by myself, and mother was gone and I did not know where she was.

And you're just 18 years old.

And I'm 18 years old. And now, the war really started, seriously. And I was all alone in Paris because I didn't have any close friends. Most of my friends were from Prague, and they were Czechs. And they were all trying to leave Paris. So I was one of the very few who had this dual problem that I was somehow Czech, and I had an Austrian passport, and I really had no good friends. And my French friends were all very nice, but they were not close friends, and nobody was in the same situation as I was.

So I was really not sure what I should do. But finally, one day, the war came. So France at first seemed impregnable, because there was the Maginot Line which the Germans could never cross. And that protected us-- protected France from Germany. And then, it turned out that the Germans went around the Maginot Line and attacked France through Holland and Belgium. And pretty soon, they were in France and they were menacing Paris.

And it was my job to get us out of there, which meant that first I had to get out of there. And when the noise from the approaching armies, or the smoke from the French documents that were being burned across France sort of wafted in the air, I felt I had to simply get out of there now. There were no trains, there were no buses, it was bedlam.

I mean, France had just started going to pieces. Although, they had not capitulated yet, but I think they were just about to capitulate. And so out of desperation, in one of those desperate movements, moments, I decided I could either walk, because there were thousands and thousands of Frenchmen were walking on the-- going South someplace.

Just streaming out of Paris?

Streaming out of Paris, south, because the Germans were coming from the north. Now I was, of course, continuously harassed by the French police. I was an enemy alien. I had to go to the police station every week to show my face, to show that I had not escaped, or I had not committed some kind of crime. And every time I went to the police, they threatened me with arrest if I did something wrong, or if I tried to leave without a permit.

I mean, so I was constantly frightened. I was frightened of the police on one hand, I was frightened of the Germans, I was frightened about being alone and not knowing what to do. And yet, I felt responsible. So it was not exactly an easy

position.

But finally, when it looked like the Germans were about to take Paris, I went to the police station to finally get the permission to leave. And when I got to the police station, the police station was open and the policeman had gone. They had joined the crowd that was escaping.

So at that point, I thought, well, if the policeman can go, then maybe I could go. And so that's when I had this idea of a bicycle. And I went and must have gotten-- I went to with my 10,000 francs, I went to buy a bicycle. And after a long search, the only bicycle I could find was a men's racing bike with these kind of handles.

Well, I didn't mind--

Because probably every bike has been taken--

Every bike was taken. So I had with me, I had a little case with me, which I thought would go on top of the bicycle. And in it was a change of underwear, 2 pounds chocolate, which is chocolate rolls, and my dressmaking notes. Because I had almost finished my dressmaking course, and I was very aware that I would have to make a living, because we certainly didn't have any money.

And for some reason, I also took my oil paints along because I had gone to painting class in Paris, believing that if I needed to, if I was going to become a dress designer, I also needed to draw. So it seemed very important to me that I took my wooden case with my oil paint.

So your oil paints, chocolate rolls--

And my dressmaking notes.

And a pair of underwear.

And a pair of underwear, that's what I left with. And I bought a watch and a map of France. So and that-- I don't know how many francs that cost out of my 10,000 francs.

And then, of course, I didn't know where to go. But I had Austrian friends-- there was one couple who happened to be the granddaughter of the famous psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud. She was my very good friend. And the Freud's were also Austrian citizens-- she and her mother. And the rest of the Freud family was in England.

So we thought we would go together to Brest, which was on the westernmost coast of France, because from there, maybe we could get the ship to England. So when I left Paris on my own, I had made arrangements with the Freud's to meet them in Brest. Where we would meet or how we would meet, we never discussed.

So I was on my way, on my way south with the whole thousands and thousands of French who were escaping. Now, I was sure every time I saw a policeman, I'm sure that he was looking for me. Because I was always afraid that I was going to be caught by the French police.

I was also very uncomfortable because I told you, I was a very proper young lady, and a young lady doesn't go walk-- doesn't go on the highway by herself. Right-- I mean that really was not proper. What would I do if a man would talk to me? So I was--

You felt very conspicuous, didn't you?

I felt-- I was sure that everybody was looking at me. And that they were most interested to see whether I had the right kind of papers.

Well, it turned out that really nobody cared. And I just went along with the crowd, feeling very sorry for myself. I was

really desperate because I was alone and I was afraid. And I didn't know where I was going. I was just going and going.

And there were-- since there were thousands of others with me, so I felt lonely in a crowd. And as you know, one can be maybe lonelier in a crowd than when one is by oneself. And there was no food anywhere. And I was not particularly a good bicyclist, but I just bicycled, bicycled.

And at night, after the first day, I arrived in a small town called Etampes, where there was a policeman directing the traffic. Because there were thousands of refugees. And he motioned to me and said, take your bicycle and go to the school over there. You can sleep on the floor there.

Well, at first, when he motioned me, of course, I stopped because I thought, now he's going to ask me for my papers. Well, he wasn't interested in my papers. So I went to the school, left my bicycle on the floor and lay down on the floor.

And as I lay down, I remembered that just before I had left Paris, somebody handed me a letter that I stuck in my pocket. And because I didn't know what-- I didn't know-- I didn't know what it was. And when I laid down on the floor of the school, I remembered the letter.

And it was a letter from somebody who had been with my mother, and he told me that my mother was in Gurs, that that was a detention camp in the Pyrenees. Now, I had no idea where Gurs was, but at least I knew that the Pyrenees were on the southwestern border of France.

And I slept the night on the floor of the school, and when day broke early in the morning-- probably 5:30 or 6:00, I couldn't sleep anyway-- I decided I'd continue. And so I took my bicycle and started bicycling again. And little did I know, as I found out the next day, that at 7 o'clock that morning, the school was bombed to bits by the Germans.

So it was one of those really tremendously lucky breaks that I got. And I have to tell you that, if I'm here today, it's mainly due to the many lucky occasions that came my way.

So I continued bicycling. And the crowds were still great. And I was bicycling down an incline. And somehow, I collided with another lady, and we both fell. And however, I got myself up, I was bleeding, but the bicycle could still be used. So I continued bicycling.

And after a while, a young man approached me. So I froze-- what does he want from me? And he said, you can't continue bicycling like this. You have to get this wound looked into because you're going to bleed to death.

Well, I tell you, I didn't realize that I was bleeding to death. It didn't hurt. Maybe I was bleeding very hard, but I was so intent on going that I didn't pay attention to any pain.

But indeed, there was a town nearby, and I went to a pharmacist who said, you should go to the hospital to have that wound sewn up. I said, I cannot go to any hospital. They'll ask me who I am.

So I said, just stitch it up. Well, so he stitched it up, and I felt no pain. I still hadn't eaten anything. I was not hungry, I was not tired. I didn't feel my muscles. I don't know, I must have had a lot of adrenaline in me.

And so I continued bicycling until somebody said to me, there are trains here. Why are you bicycling? I said, there are no trains. Yes, there are trains. Well, to make a long story short, I found a train which I thought was going to Brittany, to Brest, where I was going with the Freuds.

And as I got on the train, it turned out that the train went south to Bordeaux. Now, that was just another happenstance, because as I told you, my mother was close to the Spanish border, which is close to Bordeaux. So I was able, through again, complicated circumstances, to find my mother.

And that was, of course, fantastically lucky. Because if I had gone to Brest, which was on the other end of France, I might have never found her. And she might have never known where I was, because I had no way of getting in touch

with her.

Margit, there's so much to cover, and I know you're trying to move along. But let me just ask you about one thing-- when you got on the train, before you got on the train, you went to the train station, but there was a huge line. But there was an air raid warning. So everybody went down to the shelters.

You decided to stay on the platform. So when the air raid warning was over, you're first in line.

That's exactly--

And were able to get on a train.

[LAUGHTER]

That's exactly correct. I think I became a risk taker.

Yes.

And I think I've remained a risk taker. But it really-- when I came to that train station in Orleans, there was a huge line. And it was noon, and it was very hot, and people were standing there for hours in line.

And there were people who were fainting there, and children were crying, and it was really a bedlam situation. And in typical chaotic French manner at the time, they had one window open that was selling tickets. And so it took five minutes for each person to buy a ticket. So by the time my turn came, I was still an hour away from the counter, and suddenly an air raid came.

And everybody had to go to the air raid shelter. And I looked at the situation-- I was with my bicycle-- and I said, I can't stand it. I mean, if I come back and I have another line to face, I'm just going to take a chance. And I was really standing under a glass overpass-- underpass, of glass. There was glass over me. And there were three other people who stayed with me, and we watched the bombs fall on either side of us.

But somehow, I don't know how one makes one's decisions and how one looks at one's options, right, the option of getting killed by a bomb, as opposed to waiting in line some more-- [LAUGHS] seemed-- at the time, seemed reasonable.

[LAUGHTER]

So that allowed you to take the train.

So that allowed me to take the train. And when I got in that train-- and there were no trains in France, remember-- I was all by myself in the compartment. Now, I couldn't believe it that I could be all by myself in a compartment. And there was curfew, and there was everything was blacked out. There was complete blackout.

And I was all by myself in this big train compartment. And the train started rolling. And of course, I thought we were going to Brest, to Brittany. And so I sat there again, sort of wondering, what was I really doing? And was I doing-- I don't know whether I even thought about doing the right thing. I was just sitting there.

And the train stopped every once in a while, and once the train stopped, and next to a troop train that was going the opposite direction. And so I was standing at the window, and there was a French soldier who was standing on the other train at the window. And we started talking.

And because I spoke French really pretty well, I could not be recognized immediately as a foreigner. So I started talking to this French soldier. And he explained to me that he was coming from the war zone, and he sort of made conversation with me. And he found out who I was, and he wanted to know whether I had any food.

And I really hadn't thought about food. And I said, I didn't have much food. So just as the train was starting to leave, he gave me a boule-- a round loaf of French bread. And so I had this bread, and the train started going. And I went back into my completely darkened compartment.

And at the next stop, a man came into my compartment. So again, terror-- who can this man be? What could he want?

So after a while, we started talking a little bit. And it turned out that he was a soldier who had left his regiment and was trying to go back home. And he said, did I have something to eat? And I said, yes, I had a loaf of bread, and he could have some.

And I gave him my loaf. And before I knew, he had finished the loaf. He just ate the whole loaf.

So but I wasn't sorry, because I still wasn't hungry. But at least, he was not an unfriendly man. Now, I don't know what happened to him.

But as we continued, it became daylight and I realized then that the train was not at all going to Brittany. That the train was going south, because I understood-- I knew where we were going. And the train started filling up with Frenchmen from the South who were still not touched by the war.

And so they started talking all kinds of things about what terrible mess France was in. And there was one very loud gentleman, with a very Southern French accent, who kept saying that the real problem that France was that it had accepted all these refugees, and it was the refugees that got France into this predicament.

And then, when he found out who I was, that I was coming from Paris, he said to me, but you are one of those brave young Parisians who takes life into your own hands and you save yourself.

So this to this day is a difficult moment for me, because I felt that if I had been brave, I would have spoken up to tell him that I was one of those refugees that he thought was the cause for the French collapse. And I didn't have the guts to say it. And it still makes me feel badly today, 60-some odd years later.

But you might not be here with us--

Because I might not be here. So it's not easy to be an ethical human being.

So at some point, you would get off the train, and then, eventually, be reunited with your mother.

Well, so I got off the train, and when I realized where I was, I also realized that we had friends who lived close by. And that was, again, I mean, pure luck that happened. And there was no planning involved at all. And these French friends were very welcoming, and took very good care of me.

And when they found out that my mother was in Gurs, it turned out that Gurs was 10 kilometers from there. So this lady of the house, she took her car-- although it was not permitted for private cars to circulate-- and went to Gurs to see whether she could find my mother to tell her that I was in Southern France. Because at that point, Paris has fallen, and France was about to capitulate.

And she couldn't find mother, but she left a message. And in the chaos that was in this camp, nobody knew whether-- I certainly didn't think she had ever gotten this message. So and I didn't know anything about the detention camp of Gurs-- I couldn't imagine it. You saw a picture here, which I did not see, I think, until I came to this museum a few years ago.

So I really didn't know anything about Gurs. But when France capitulated, the director of this detention camp said to people who had a way to leave that they should just leave. Because he had no more interest in keeping the foreigners imprisoned.

So he said to my mother-- my mother came to him and said, I've just found out that my daughter is 10 kilometers away. May I leave? And he said, go. You can just leave.

And because she knew that I was close by, she was able to get a farmer with a hay wagon to take her and her bundle which she still had from when she was interned, and he drove her to close to where I was.

And I was sitting in the garden of the house where I was living. And a lady came from over there waving at me, and I didn't wave back because I didn't know who this lady was. And I was sure she wasn't waving at me. And as she came closer, she was still waving at me, and I was still not waving at her.

And when she came very close, it turned out that it was indeed my mother. But she had gotten so sunburned, and she had lost so much weight that I didn't recognize her in the first moment. And she was very upset about that for a long time.

She said, finally, she had found her child. And I was not even welcoming. How could that be?

Well, it was one of these moments. And then, I found out what life was like in Gurs, because as you saw this camp, she had spent much of her time sleeping outdoors. The latrines were almost unusable. And there was very little food. So she really had gone through a very difficult period, which made a huge impression on her for the rest of her life.

Margit, at this point, now reunited with your mother, you are now in the occupied zone of France. And you and your mother would escape from there. Tell us about your escape-- you went to Marseille. And then from there, crossed the Pyrenees.

And I know we're running short on time, but--

So should I do it quickly?

If you can, but--

[LAUGHTER]

Well, again, so we crossed-- we knew we were going to be in the occupied zone, which was going to be German, and there was going to be an unoccupied zone which was going to be French. So we had to cross into the unoccupied zone. Again, without any permission from the police, and with again trepidation that we were going to be caught.

And we found an uninhabited house that had a roof and no windows where we could stay, maybe, for a few days. And as luck again will have it, a group of men came to this house, who turned out to be Czech Protestant pastors. Now, can you imagine? That in this whole world, you all of a sudden find Czech Protestant pastors.

And they said to us, you can't spend the winter here. You have to go to Marseille, where we are going, because from there you might be able to leave France.

So we went to Marseille, because they told us that that's where we had to go. And there, indeed, we were able, through all kinds of subterfuges, to get a Spanish and Portuguese transit visas to leave France. But France would not give us an exit permit.

So the French didn't want us, but they didn't want us to leave, because they thought that they could always turn us over to the Germans and that would be a plus for their relationship with Hitler.

So our visas were about to expire, and somebody on the street said that at the border, women without exit permits had been permitted to leave yesterday. So on the basis of that bit of information from somebody on the street, we took off for the border of Spain. And when we arrived at the border, I said to the border guard, here we don't have any visa, but you let people like us go.

And he said, that was yesterday. Not today. So again, make a long story short, we walked across the Spanish-French-- the French-Spanish border into Spain. And there, we were told very carefully to avoid-- to take a certain route, which was the only authorized route that one could take. And we somehow lost the route and came into Spain in an unauthorized way.

And although, we had a valid Spanish visa, but because we crossed the border at an unauthorized place, the Spanish police took us prisoners. And that was a really sort of life-changing experience for me, to go to prison in Spain. Because I really-- as I told you, I was a very law-abiding young lady, and I thought I would never do anything that would land me in jail.

Little did I know at the time that there were lots of ethical people who went to jail during World War II and afterwards. So my experience in jail in Spain was life-changing, to the extent that I realized that the world in which I had been brought up certainly wasn't the real world, and there were all kinds of other ways of living than I was living.

And I sort of became-- I don't know, more aware of what the world was all about.

Tell us about the fellow inmates that were just so kind to you.

Well, the fellow inmates were on one hand French-- Spanish schoolteachers. Because this was after the Spanish Civil War, where the Franco regime, which was an autocratic fascist regime had vanquished the democratic Spaniards. And so, schoolteachers were-- and social workers were suspect by the fascists.

But most of the people were prostitutes. And of course, I thought I would never ever meet a prostitute in my life. And when it turned out that we had no-- in jail, you presented a bowl every morning into which the warden gave you some food. And we didn't have a bowl. So how could we eat anything?

And there were a couple of prostitutes who came to us and said, here, we give you one of our bowls. Well, that was a life-saving gesture, which certainly was not unappreciated. And it really showed me that you shouldn't have any prejudices against people who, just because they belong to a certain group, just dismiss them.

So that was a very helpful thing that I learned.

How did you get out of jail? And then, you made your way to Portugal.

Well, we had had in France good German friends who had lived in Spain before all this happened. And who escaped to France when the Civil War in Spain started. And when the Civil War was over, they returned to-- they returned to Spain. And they said to me, when mother was taken-- when mother had to go to the police, that they would always help us-- although they went back to Spain.

So when we were in jail in Spain, we were able to contact them. And again, there's one of those stories, if I tell you coincidences or luck. When we arrived in jail, it was a Thursday. And I said, we have to write to our friends. But of course, we had no pencil, no paper, no money, nothing.

And there was a guard there who spoke some French. So I started speaking to him, and said, we need to notify our friends. And he said, well, it's too bad because letter-writing day was yesterday. So however, he was very kind, and he wrote a letter on his own and paid for the stamp and sent it to our friends. So that we didn't have to wait until the next week.

And a few days later, indeed, our friends came, and told the warden that they would come to pick us up. Because what the Spanish jail had said, uh-huh, so you are German? If you're here in jail, we'll just call the German consulate and they'll come and pick you up.

So here, we were doing all this to escape the Germans, only to end up in Spain to be told by the Spanish authorities that

they will call the Germans. So our friend, our Spanish friends that came to the police in jail, and said, don't turn them over to the Germans, because we will come and pick them up.

So they picked us up. And we were fortunate, again, by people who helped us with the papers, which we didn't have. That we eventually were able to wind up in Portugal. That our visa was expired, you know-- I mean all kinds of little difficulties that somehow got overcome.

And we wound up in Portugal. Without any money, of course. And there, my dressmaking came in very handy, because there were many refugees there who had also lost all their belongings. And I became sort of the court dressmaker to the refugees. And that was wonderful.

We lived in a Portuguese family, we rented a room in a Portuguese family. And the lady had a sewing machine, and so-- a little treadle sewing machine. And I started sewing there. And she had an iron that one had to heat with coals, and you had to sort of go like this to make sure that it was hot enough, because there was no electric iron.

And so I started making dresses for the refugees. And my mother became the finisher. And so we made a living in Portugal.

And eventually, your mother, of course, would be able to reach out to her brother in the United States. And he would be able to get visas. And you were able to come to the United States. And again, your dressmaking got you started in this country.

Absolutely. I got a-- very soon after we came-- of course, we had no money ever. I got a job, very soon after we came, again, as a finisher. And I thought, I was pretty good by now, because I had sewn in Portugal for such a long time. And I was very successful-- very successfully sewing.

So when I got my first job, I thought that was going to be-- I was going to be very good at it. And I was put in front of an electric sewing machine, which I had never seen before. And I was the only young thing in this shop-- only elderly ladies who worked there. And one of the ladies helped me thread the machine, and I sewed a little bit and the thread broke, and I had to rethread the machine.

And I, again, didn't know how to thread it. And after a third time, the supervisor came and said, I'm sorry, we can't use you. And that was a tremendous blow to my pride, because here, I had landed this job-- first job in the United States. And the same day, I got fired.

So I went down the stairs, I remember, crying. Going to a payphone, trying to call my mother that yes, I got the job, but I already lost it.

[LAUGHTER]

So that was my beginning of my career in the United States. But I can tell you that the career has taken very many unexpected and very productive turns.

I wish, as obviously all of you know, there's just so much that we were not able to discuss. For example, when Margit talked about crossing the border over the Pyrenees, it sounds like walked across the mountains. Well, I went online, and it's described as peaks of 11,000 feet with few valleys, and they climbed over the Pyrenees and found themselves in all kinds of different circumstances.

So we could only scratch the surface. But Margit, before I turn back to you to close the program in just a few minutes, I want to thank you for being our First Person. I want to thank all of you for joining us today. I'd like to remind you that we will have two more First Person programs the remaining two Wednesdays of August this year, the 19th and 26th. And if you can't come back and join us either those two weeks, we hope that you will do so next year.

Our next program will be next Wednesday, August 19, when our first person will be Mr. Haim Solomon, who is from

Romania. Mr. Solomon and his family were ordered by Romanian authorities to move from their home town to another town. To escape fighting and chaos, they moved to Bucharest, remaining there until the end of the war.

In 1947, Mr. Solomon made his way to Palestine on a ship that was then captured by the British, and he was imprisoned on Cyprus.

Please remember that excerpts are available as podcasts on the museum website and at iTunes. And Margit's podcast will be available within the next few weeks.

It is our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn back to Margit to close our program. Before I do so, because we didn't have time for question and answers-- obviously we could have spent the next three hours talking with Margit-- when Margit steps down off the stage, she'll be available if you want to come up and say hi, or ask her a question, meet her. So please feel free to do that.

And let me just remind you that her book, Margit's Story, is available for sale, is able to provide those details that we were not able to get to. So with that, Margit, our last word.

Well, I want to thank you very much. You've been such an attentive audience, and I'm really happy that I was able to speak to all of you. And the thing that really is most important to me is to reflect on what it means to me to be able to work in this museum. As Bill told you, I lead groups, and I translate in the archives.

And I think this institution is really a unique place, because not only does it remember what happened to all of us during World War II, but it still deals with the genocide and the injustices that exist in the world. And I think it's so important for all of us to be aware of the prejudices and the injustice that people experience because of who they are.

And that I feel it's really-- in a way, I feel my work, my being here, is a reflection on the importance that I assume, and I hope all of you assume, of our making sure that our world becomes a just, less prejudiced, less violent place in which we can all live and raise our children.

And really, every time I come here, I learn something new. And the institution is really invaluable, and it's the only institution of its kind. And I'm really happy that you come to see it. And I hope that when you see the exhibit here, that you will remember what you saw, and you will remember the implications of what you saw.

So thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you.