

Good afternoon. While people are still coming in and getting settled, I just wanted to welcome you to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Susan Snyder, and I'm a curator here at the museum. And I will be speaking today with our guest, Margit Meissner. It's with great pleasure that we start our-- I think it's our 11th year, our 11th year of First Person.

And we will meet Margit Meissner shortly. I just wanted to give you a few tips today while you're here with us. Let me mention that the 2010 season of First Person was sponsored and made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring this program.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand experiences associated with the Holocaust. Each guest who is First Person serves as a volunteer here at the museum. With few exceptions, we'll have First Person each Wednesday through August 26. We will also have First Person programs on Tuesdays in April through July.

The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides a list of the upcoming First Persons, and we also have some of the past First Persons transcribed and available, excuse me, or digitally placed on our website, so you can go back and see some of the other First Persons that we have previously recorded. And they will also be excerpted as podcasts on the museum website and through iTunes. And many are posted already.

Margit Meissner will share her first-person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow with an opportunity for you to ask questions. And before you are introduced to her, I just have a few housekeeping announcements.

If you have passes for the permanent exhibition, they are good for the rest of the day. So if you are in the theater and you miss your time, those passes will be honored. If you have a cell phone, can I ask you to kindly silence it so as not to disturb our guests. And also, please, I do ask that you do not leave the theater before she is done speaking as it's a little bit intrusive.

And if you have any other questions for Margit after the question and answer period, we will have a book signing outside of the theater today in which Margit's book will be displayed. So please feel free to speak with her after the program outside in the foyer.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were primary victims-- 6 million were murdered. Roma and Sinti, 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.

Margit Meissner was born Margit Morawetz on February 26th, 1922. She was the youngest of four children to Gottlieb Morawetz, a banker from a religious Jewish family, and his wife Lily, who was from Vienna, Austria. She was born in Innsbruck, Austria. This is her father-- excuse me.

She was born in Innsbruck, Austria, and when she was a baby, her family moved from Austria to Prague, the Czech Republic.

Pictured is Margit's family at the Lido, a beach resort in Venice in-- excuse me, please forgive me, the mapping is always confusing to me, this is Prague. Pictured here is Margit's family at the Lido, at the Lido Beach resort in Venice in 1926. From the left, her brother Felix, cousin, Emmy Morawetz, her brother Bruno, mother, father, and Margit, who is circled, around Margit's governess, Yeya, and her brother Paul.

Margit's father, Gottlieb, passed away in 1932 when Margit was 10 years old. In 1938, when she was 16, attacks on Jews in Central Europe escalated, and her mother decided that she should leave school in Prague and be sent to Paris to live with family friends, where she studied dressmaking. In March 1939, Margit's mother joined her in France.

As the Germans were advancing 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. She searched and found her mother near the Gurs detention center, the Gurs internment camp in Southern France.

Eventually, she found her mother and the two fled, via Spain and Portugal, to the United States, where they settled in 1941. In this photo, we see Margit in 1941 soon after she arrived in the United States. Please help me in welcoming Margit Meissner.

[APPLAUSE]

OK, Margit, I'm very happy to actually have a conversation with you, because I've known Margit for, I think, more than 10 years. And I didn't really know specific details about your story, and I still don't very specific details. But I'm very glad that you are able to come today and to share them with us, because your story is so unusual, and the little that I read is-- it's like a novel.

And so I want to start by just talking about your life in the Czech Republic before the war, and what it was like growing up in Prague.

Thank you. And I am really very pleased that there are so many people who came to listen. It's a great honor for me to be able to tell you something about my life.

I was, as you saw in the PowerPoint, in the presentation, I was born in Austria, but I was raised in Prague, in Czechoslovakia. And I was the fourth child. I had three older brothers, and my mother was delighted that she had a little girl. And everybody else was delighted that I was a little girl, so they treated me like a doll. And I hated it.

[LAUGHTER]

I didn't want to be thought of like a doll. And most, also, I thought that being a girl was a shame. And fortunately, I got rid of that feeling later on. But so the youngest and the girl was not a very good combination, as far as I was concerned. But my brothers were pretty rambunctious, and I was a good little girl, so that I think people were happy because I went to school and I was a good student.

And my brothers had all kinds of problems with education, because our educational experience was very structured. In Prague, we went to school six days a week, including Saturday, from 8:00 in the morning until 1:00. And I had-- my mother was very interested in our education. Actually, the only thing that I was supposed to do was to learn.

And so I had private lessons in any subject that you could imagine-- sports, and languages, and I even had a gardening tutor. And I thought that's how people grew up. I didn't realize that was kind of unconventional.

You mentioned that you grew up speaking, in your Oral Histories, that you spoke a number of languages. How did your parents educate you? Your mother spoke German.

My mother was Viennese, and she was a German speaker. My father was Czech, but he was also a German speaker, because before 1918, before Czechoslovakia was created at the end of World War I, most intellectuals, many intellectuals spoke German. And my father went to a German-speaking university in Vienna. And my mother, very unusually, was sent to boarding school in England, and then in France.

So when she had children, she decided that these children were going to speak four languages by the time they were 16. So we grew up with German in the family, Czech in the street, with a French governess, and an English governess. And I thought that was just how it was. I didn't really realize at the time how unusual it was.

Your brothers, how much older than you were they?

My mother was 29, I think, when I was born, because she got married very young.

So they were-- you were all close in age. And when you were 10, your father died.

Yeah, when I was 10, my father died of an embolism in his leg, which at the time, there were no blood clotting drugs. So one couldn't help him. Today, he wouldn't have had to die. But it was 1932 when I was 10, I was born in 1922. So that makes me 88 years old, in case you don't know to do the arithmetic.

And by the way, she drove here.

[LAUGHTER]

So in 1932 was the year my father died. It was also the year that Hitler came to power in Germany. And although I was only 10 years old, I very soon began to understand that there was something going on in the world which was dangerous for us. Of course, I didn't know what that was. I had a big-- the one big fight with my mother, who she was trying to listen to the speech on this makeshift radio we had, and she couldn't get the sound out.

And I, apparently, made some real bad noise, and she yelled at me and said, shut up. And my mother never said shut up to me. So I knew that that speech that she was so eager to hear was very important. And eventually, she told me that there was a man by the name of Hitler who had become the chancellor-- the chancellor in Germany. And that he was going to-- he wanted to get rid of all the Jews in Germany and the rest of the world that he was going to conquer.

Now, that didn't mean very much to me as a 10-year-old. But it certainly left a very definite impression.

So after 1933, when Germany is overrun by the Nazis, but it really hasn't come yet to the Czech Republic, your mother-- things changed very quickly. Your father passes away, and your mother starts to-- she starts to host German refugees. Talk about this.

So one other way I found out about what was going on in Germany, that my mother used to invite Jewish refugees from Germany to lunch at our house. And I always wondered how come that she invited people whom she didn't know? And she said that they were refugees from Germany, they had to flee for their lives, and they didn't have enough money. So at least, they would get a good meal at our house.

And I listened to their conversation, and it became quite clear to me the danger that they were exposed to, and the difficulties that they had. And so I started to become very interested in what was going on. I was going to high school at that time, and I was, as I said, a very diligent learner.

Not a very interested learner, because as I started my teenage years, I became very interested in boys. And the boys I was interested in were not interested in me. So that was a kind of a-- what should I say, not such a happy experience. But I continued learning, and I continued-- I became quite politically aware during that time.

And before 1938, before the Nazis invade the Czech Republic, what we know today as the Czech Republic, are you feeling-- where are the Nazi influences? Are they coming into the Czech Republic? Are you feeling less secure? Was your mother?

Well, there were all kinds of opinions about what was going on in Germany. There were many people who felt that an upstart like Hitler couldn't possibly last-- that this was just a temporary aberration, because he had never won an election. But he had been made chancellor because the government of President Hindenburg thought that he was more easily controlled in the government than outside of the government.

But there was also, on the other hand, there was a strong communist influence in Czechoslovakia, because there were many people who felt some kind of kinship with the fellow Slavs, the Russians. So I was exposed to what was going on in Germany and what was going on in the Soviet Union.

And I was quite intrigued by the idea of communism because I pretty soon realized that I was a rich kid. And I didn't like to be a rich kid, that felt very uncomfortable to me. So I was kind of looking for a way of finding my place in this very fractured society.

And you were present when the Nazis invaded the Czech Republic?

No, I was not.

You left beforehand?

No, I was not.

So in 1938, though, your mother, then, obviously has-- she foresees--

Well, the real reason why I was sent away was that I was an Austrian citizen living in Czechoslovakia. And Austria was annexed by the Germans in March of 1938. And it was upon this annexation of Austria that my mother felt that, as an Austrian citizen in Czechoslovakia, you would not be safe.

And so there were all kinds of discussions until it was decided that I was to be sent to Paris where my mother had connections, and go live in a French family and perfect my French, because I already knew quite a bit of French. But that I was going to study dressmaking in France because all these German refugees whom we had met, they had lost all their belongings.

And when you became a refugee, you had to figure with the possibility of losing everything. So I would have to make a living. And dressmaking was the kind of activity for which you did not have to know the language. Like if you became a lawyer, or a doctor, you would have to know the language. And we didn't know where we would end up.

It may seem strange to many of the young people here that dressmaking was a good profession, but in 1932, or 1938, you didn't go to the department store to buy a dress. If you wanted to wear something, you had it made. So it was a very honorable profession, which unfortunately, has sort of disappeared in our time.

So how did you feel leaving your mother? Emotionally, how was that for you, and resettling?

Well, it was again, it was good and bad. I was excited at the idea of going to France. And I was very thrilled that my mother had enough confidence in me-- I was 16-- that I should be able to manage in the world by myself. So I thought that was pretty remarkable. And I will never be able to thank her sufficiently for that confidence in me, because it made me feel pretty independent.

On the other hand, I was leaving all my friends. And I had a boyfriend who seemed to like me at that time. And I had to leave him. And that was sad.

But I felt mainly excited. And I flew by airplane to Paris, and flying in 1938 was not very common. And I flew in a non-pressurized airplane, which caused the most terrible pains in my ears. And for days, I couldn't hear. But it was still an exciting plane ride.

So you arrive in Paris, you get settled in.

I got settled in with a lovely French family, sort of an impoverished aristocratic family, where the mother of the household was a French teacher. And she really put me through the paces. I had lessons with her for four hours every day, private lessons with her. And then, after lunch, I had to go do the homework she assigned to me.

And then, in the evening, I had to stand in front of the mirror to learn what kind of mouth movements to make so that I would be able to pronounce French perfectly. And I have to tell you that I really do not have much of a foreign accent in

French, much less of a foreign accent than I have in English.

So what was your daily life like? Was there, again, the question again, was there Nazi influence already in Paris?

Well, the Nazi influence was felt mainly in the police, because I didn't feel it among the people I knew. But as an Austrian, and Austria had been annexed by Germany at the time, I was considered an enemy alien. And as an enemy alien, and I had to go present myself at the prefecture de police every other week, and always being threatened that if you do something wrong we will arrest you immediately. And you better behave yourself.

And I used to stand in line for hours in a very dirty, unkempt waiting room. And next to my waiting room there was a special waiting room for British and American citizens. And I really resented that. Little did I know that I would ever become eligible for these plush quarters.

And how is it--

And I went to dressmaking school. At first, I went to the kind of dressmaking school for people who become dress finishers. And I was a very bad student, because I hadn't had any sewing in school, like all these girls had. And my teacher was always on top of me that my stitches weren't small enough. And they were not regular enough. And I couldn't do such a good job.

So finally, I changed-- I left this very prestigious school in the center of Paris and went to pattern-making school. And there, I learned to make patterns. And I also learned to actually sew, instead of just trying to make nice little stitches. And it was during that time that it became clear that the situation in Europe was really heating up.

And at what point did your mother decide she couldn't stay in Prague anymore?

Well, in 1939, World War II started in-- no wait, just a second. I have to go back. In March of 1939-- no, in September of--

The war breaks out in September of 1939, and so before that--

I'm trying to talk about Munich. Munich was in September of 1938. In September of 1938, after Hitler had successfully annexed Austria without any repercussions by the wider world, Hitler wanted to annex a part of Czechoslovakia that was German-speaking. And the Czech government said, no, I mean, this is part of our territory, you cannot have it.

And Hitler threatened that he would go to war against Czechoslovakia. And Czechoslovakia was willing to fight, but Hitler, genius as he was in his own way, invited the French and the British prime ministers to a meeting in Munich, without inviting the Czech government. And in this meeting, they negotiated the takeover of the Sudetenland by the Germans as a form of appeasing the Germans.

Because Hitler promised that he had no further territorial ambitions. And that was a very, very important conference that is still being referenced today when people talk about appeasement.

And let me just clarify that what Margit is referring to is the part of Czechoslovakia that we know as the Czech Republic today.

Yeah. And so at that point, my mother came to France to join me. But people were still-- the people in Prague were still not sure that Hitler would really invade Czechoslovakia, and that what was happening in Germany with the Jews would also happen in Czechoslovakia.

So they were not convinced.

They were not convinced. And people thought my mother was very anxious that she had sent me away, that to take me out of 10th grade and send me to dressmaking school was a very unusual thing to do. Because girls in my situation

would have continued going to the university and get some kind of additional training. So to take me out and learn a practical skill was very unusual.

And so she joins you.

So she joined me in Paris. And was there when the Germans invaded all of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939. And so then, what's the question?

Then, of course, the French became-- and then, the Germans had already conquered Poland in the fall of 1939. And the war was started in September 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. And then, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. And that was the beginning of World War II.

But the Germans fought only on the Eastern Front, and waited until they had conquered all of Poland to go against the West. And I was then in France watching what was going to happen, in terms of the war.

And the French-- Paris was plastered full of posters with the Maginot Line, which was the French line of defense, which was-- which the Germans could never pass. That ils ne passeront pas, that's what they kept saying. Little did they know that the Germans were going to go through Belgium and Holland, and bypass the Maginot Line and get into France very much more easily. And the French response was almost nonexistent.

So let me just again clarify the timing on this. So in 1940, when Germany, when the Nazis invade the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, your mother is with you at this point.

My mother is with me. And my mother could not live in the same house where I had a room because she had come after a certain-- after a certain day. And she had to go live in Versailles, which is a suburb-- which is a few miles outside of Paris. And in Versailles, all the ex-Austrians, these Austrian enemies, were given-- were advised to present themselves to the police station in three days. They were given a date.

And they should carry on their back whatever they could carry, they should take two blankets and enough food for three days. And they would be evacuated to the South of France to a concentration camp.

And who is asking for this? Is the French government?

The French police, the French government, yes. I mean, they had-- since everybody had to be registered with the police, they knew where everybody lived. So they sent this notice, this was a notice in the mail that came that at such and such a date, present yourself, and you will be evacuated to the South.

The Austrian, I'm sorry to interrupt, Austrian refugees that you're talking about, the group that you're talking about, are mainly Jews.

Mainly, yeah. I think only Jews. Or at least, I mean, the French didn't believe that we were Jews, they thought maybe we were spies. You see, because I came before that cutoff date, maybe I was not a spy, because I had come before Austria was annexed. But mother came after Austria was annexed.

So in any case, it's kind of a complicated story. And that's why I wrote this book, Margit's Story, to explain that in a little bit more detail than I can here.

So when mother was told to present herself to the police, the last thing she said to me, now it's up to you to get us out of here. Now, I never found out exactly what she meant, but it was clear that it was now up to me to do something to get us out of France.

And by the way, what were you living on?

What were we living on? I think that when I came to France, mother was able to send me a monthly sum, because I

came as a student and it was possible to get some to get permission from the Czech government to transfer money to France. Because there were very stringent foreign money regulations.

When mother came, I presume that she must have had some money with her, but not very much money. And we were very poor. I mean, we lived in a rented room, and we saved wherever we could. We certainly didn't-- the luxurious lifestyle that I had been used to, that was gone very quickly.

And when mother-- before she left for the police station, she gave me 10,000 francs, and that's when she told me that it was up to me to get us out of there. So that was at the point when it seemed quite obvious that France was going to capitulate very soon, that France could really not defend itself against the Germans.

And most of our acquaintances had Czech passports, so they were not in the same position as my mother and I. But I had a very good friend, Sophie, who happens to be the granddaughter of the psychiatrist, Freud, Sigmund Freud. This is a very close friend of mine still today.

And Sophie and her mother were also Austrians. And so I had somebody to talk to-- Sophia Freud and her mother. And the rest of the Freud family had been able to get out of Vienna to England. And so mother and daughter thought they would go to Brittany because from there, they might be able to catch a ship to go to England.

And so I was going to join them, since I didn't know where my mother was and I was all by myself. And all the Czech friends that I knew who did not have the kind of problems with the French police as I did, they all had left Paris. And the war was coming closer and closer, and I tried desperately to get a permit to leave Paris.

And now, I had to go to the police station every day, and the police station said, no way. We are not going to let you go. You just stay where you are--

Because let me just jump in here and just state that, in order to leave Europe, you had to have transit visas, you had to have exit visas for countries, entrance visas for countries. You had to have a place to go, somebody to support you. It was all a lot of red tape.

That's exactly correct. So but I mean, first, I had to leave Paris. So one day, when I tried to go to the railroad station, no more trains. To the bus station, no more buses. And there started a trickling of French people moving someplace, I didn't know, I presume south. So the streets started to be very crowded.

And one day, I looked at the people in the street and they all had black faces, and I couldn't understand why they had black faces. And then, I came home, and I looked in the mirror, and I also had a black face. And then I found out that the French army had put a smokescreen over the Seine to protect the French troops that were retreating from the Germans. And at that point, I decided it was just time for me to go.

I couldn't stay there any longer. And maybe I just had to join the crowd that was trying to flee Paris. But it occurred to me that I had this 10,000 francs, and that I maybe could buy a bicycle and leave by bicycle. So I went through Paris searching for a bicycle, with many various stores were closed, so they had no bicycles. And finally, I found a men's racing bike with these handles, with these handlebars, and I bought that men's racing bike.

And because I hoped to find one that I was going to leave, I had with me a little suitcase that I could put on the back of the bicycle. And in it, I had some underwear, two chocolate croissants, and my dressmaking notes. Because that was what I was going to live on. And also, for some reason, my wooden oil paint box. Because I had gone to art school to become a designer, you have to be an artist, and I thought that these oil paints were very important in my life.

So I was very sorry for myself and very frightened. As I left Paris, I joined the crowd. I didn't know where I was going, but I figured if everybody else goes there, I should go.

I forgot to tell you that before I went to look for this bicycle, I went to the police station where I was supposed to show my face every day, and the police station was opened but the policemen were gone. And it was that fact that the police

had-- the police had also tried to flee that maybe at that point, I was not--

Meaning it was time to go.

I was not going to be so doing something so illegal. Nevertheless, as I started bicycling, every time I saw a policeman, I was sure he was looking for me. I mean, the whole trip of my escape from Paris, every time I saw a policeman, I was sure he was looking for me.

And on the other hand, I also felt because I was a very-- what should I say, well-socialized young lady, I thought it was highly unseemly for me to be on this road by myself. That one didn't do things like this.

So between these two conflicting emotions, I was pretty rattled.

But you encountered a number of problems. You hurt yourself along the way.

Yes, I encountered many problems. And it's a long story, and I don't know how much more time we have.

I'll stop you.

OK, but let it-- yeah, I collided with another lady bicyclist at one point. And we both got up, and I looked at my bike, and it was kind of damaged, but still bicyclable-- I could still go. And I continued riding. And suddenly, a young man comes up to me and stops me.

Of course, I thought, what on Earth does he want from me? And he said, young lady, you cannot continue riding like this with this leg. And I said-- I looked at my leg, and it was bleeding profusely. But I didn't notice. I was too involved with what I was doing, I didn't notice that my leg was bleeding.

So he said, you have to get that stitched up. And I said, where am I going to go to have it stitched up? So he said, well, there's a pharmacy a few blocks from here, go there and he will tell you where to go. So I came to the pharmacist, and the first thing he said, this is too big a wound. I can't sew it up.

You have to go to the hospital. And I said, I have no papers, I cannot go to any hospital. You just fix it.

So he stitched it up, and it stopped bleeding. And then it started hurting, because I was now aware that I really had a wound.

Well, perhaps you were working on adrenaline to this point.

Right.

Just briefly, when he stitched you up, did he give you something for the pain?

I don't think so. I don't know. I don't remember.

Your focus was on just leaving, getting out.

My focus was to get out of there. And then he said to me, why are you bicycling? I said, well, I have to try and find my mother.

Now, I also have to tell you that I spent the night, the first night after I bicycled out of Paris, I spent on a floor in a local school, in a little town called Etampes, about 30 kilometers south of Paris. And there, I laid down on this floor in the school.

And I had received, five minutes before I left my house in Paris, a letter from somebody, I didn't know from whom. And

I stuck that letter in my pocket and paying no attention to it. And when I laid down on the floor of the school, I looked at the letter. And the letter was from somebody who had been in touch with my mother, and she asked him to tell me that she was in Gurs.

Now Gurs, to me, I had no idea what Gurs was. But I knew she said she was near the Spanish border. So I knew that Gurs must have been next to the Spanish border.

But I was still going with the Freud family to the west of France, to Brittany, so I had not intended to go to the Spanish border. And so long story, I came to the railroad station, the railroad station was being bombed while I watched the bombs falling. And it turned out that the school in which I had been, and where I left at 6:00 in the morning, was bombed to smithereens at 8 o'clock in the morning.

So I was really protected by God or good fortune, that I had all this-- that all these wonderful things were happening.

So you eventually did get to close to where your mother was staying.

I eventually came close to my mother. And my mother was in this really pretty horrible concentration camp. And when France fell-- and she had received notice where I was. So she knew where I was. And she knew that I was close to-- that I was close to her. Because the train that I was supposedly going to the west of France went by-- by good luck for me-- to the South of France.

So these were all these coincidences which enabled me to really save my life. And so when France fell, and the director of the concentration camp was no Nazi, and no particularly French bureaucratic somebody, he said to the people, you can leave. We don't need you here.

And most people couldn't leave because they had no money and they didn't have any place to go to. And my mother knew that I was 10 kilometers away. And so she was able to hire a peasant with a hay wagon to take her to where I was.

And when she came near me, she waved at me, and I didn't wave back because I didn't know who was waving over there. And she came closer, and she still waved, and I still didn't wave back because I didn't know who it was. And when she came really close, it turned out that it was my mother.

But I didn't recognize her because she was so suntanned and she had lost 20 pounds. And I was just amazed. And she has often said to me that the worst moment, one of the worst moments in this whole-- in this whole escape story was that she finally found her child, and I was not even welcoming.

[LAUGHTER]

So those are, you see, the moments that one never expects to live through.

And she-- I mean, here she was, she was a very-- from your description-- she was very proud woman who carried herself very-- she carried herself very straight, high, she was tough. She was she was the matriarch of the family. And you're seeing her in a way where she's not anymore.

Well, she was tremendously influenced by this experience. And it was a very demeaning experience for her. But we were surviving, and we then had to flee again from the occupied zone to the non-occupied zone.

All kinds of circumstances that, with luck, we survived. And very sort of really coincidences that I describe in my book, because they are sort of unbelievable. We were just very lucky. And we finally wound up in Marseille, where all the refugees were congregated trying to get-- as you heard-- trying to get a visa.

Now, we had an Austrian passport, born in Austria. We were subject to the American Austrian quota. You know, the United States immigration service had a quota for people, depending on where they were born. And the Austrian quota was oversubscribed for the next 10 years.

So coming to America was completely out of the question.

You couldn't have gotten out on the quota.

It was out of the question. But in Portugal, everybody was looking for some place to go. And I had sort of crazy idea-- we couldn't get anywhere. And my mother, after this concentration camp experience, sort of gave up. She just-- she said, you do it.

So you became--

I became the mother.

--the caretaker, basically.

I really became the mother. We had a tiny little room with a balcony where we had a little cooker, and she used to cook these wonderful French vegetables for us so we have something to eat. And I would go in the street and see whether I could get an idea of where we could conceivably go to.

And it occurred to me, in one of those moments of desperation, that my father had once said that he had owned shares in a Belgian Congo copper mine-- and Union Miniere du Haut-Katanga it was called. And it occurred to me that maybe that created some possibility, so that the Congo was then belonged to Belgium.

So I went to the Belgian embassy, and told this consul there that I wanted to go visit the copper mine of which I owned a share. Now, it was really a long shot, but it worked. So I got-- I had a visa to the Belgian Congo. But then, I needed a transit visa to Spain and Portugal to be able to go to the Belgian Congo from Portugal.

Well, I got a transit visa for Spain and Portugal, but no French exit permit because the French didn't want us there. But I think they had signed some kind of an agreement with the Germans that they were not going to let the Jews go, because the Germans wanted to incarcerate the Jews. So we didn't have a French exit permit, and desperate because the Spanish and Portuguese visas were going to expire.

So the last day of the visa, we took a chance and went to the French-Spanish border, hoping that they would let us get out without a visa. Because apparently they had let two women go out the day before, somebody someplace heard. Rumors were abounding.

And we came to the border, and he said, no way. You can't leave. You don't have an exit permit.

And it was the last day of this very hard-fought for visas, and so we decided to walk-- take a chance and walk across the Pyrenees from Spain, from France into Spain. It was a beautiful fall day, gorgeous blue sky. Beautiful countryside. And here we were, these two orphan people, trying to get into Spain without being seen by the Spanish police.

Because although we had a Spanish visa, we were supposed to cross the border at an authorized border point. And the guy at the station had given me some what I thought good advice of how to go to avoid the police, but I must have gotten lost. And sure enough, we were picked up by the Spanish police, and they looked at our passport, and said, you arrived at an unauthorized border crossing point. And we will have to arrest you.

So that was here we were in Spain, arrested by the Spanish police. And now what? So that was a very low point in this whole story. I mean, I thought this was just the end.

And then they motioned us and said, come with us. And they took us not with handcuffs, but holding both mother and me, on a train. And from that train, we went on the train for half an hour. And we came to a police station. And now it was 8 o'clock at night.

And there were all kinds of other refugees sitting there. And they had taken away our passports and the little bags, my little case, and whatever my mother still had, we had nothing. We just had what we had on.

And it was night time, and I said to one of those Spanish policemen who spoke French, can't we go to a hotel overnight? Because nothing is going to happen in the evening. The commissioner isn't going to come until in the morning. Can't we go to a hotel? You have all our papers-- we can't run away.

So he said, I'll see. And after a while, he motioned to us to come. And I thought we were going to a hotel. And this was dark at night, and the cobbled square in the small town. And we walked and we walked and we walked further away from the center. And I thought, would a hotel be that far away from the center in this little town?

Well, sure enough, before very long, we entered a big courtyard, where there was a huge big iron key that opened the gate. And instead of a hotel we were in jail.

Now, that was an unbelievable moment to me because I was never going to go to jail. I mean, I was at an upright, understanding, legally aware citizen who would never go to jail. And here I was in jail. And thought, this can't possibly be.

But it was. And we, again, long story, in this jail. But it was a for me a life-changing experience because one of the things that happened-- we didn't have a bowl. People were in jail, they brought their own things at that point. And they had their own bedding, and they had their own mess kits, and so forth.

We had no bedding, and no mess kit. And we were-- there were some women who saw our predicament, and they lent us a mess kit. And these women happened to have been prostitutes. Now, I thought I would never meet a prostitute in my life. And here, this woman was really in a way saving our lives.

So it really gave me food for thought, that my own viewpoint about what people are like in the world was maybe not such a good viewpoint. And I really had to begin to think about who I was becoming, and that was very important to me. And it really sort of continued up to today.

And so we-- it so happened, again, all these wonderful coincidence. We had friends in Spain who helped us get out. And we were able to, with a lot of problems, and lots of happy coincidences, were able to get to Portugal. Where we were now safe, because France had just ended the Spanish Civil War between the fascists and the democrats, and Franco, the fascistic government that won.

And so in Portugal, there were lots of other refugees. And most of these refugees had lost all their belongings, and they needed clothes. And I became the dressmaker to the refugees. So this idea of learning something that is not language-bound really brought fruit right away.

So I became the dressmaker. And my mother became my finisher. And we lived in the house of a Portuguese lady who rented rooms, and she had a treadle sewing machine, and an iron that when heated with coals, that you had to do like this so that the coals would burn, and that's how I made a living, sewing.

Margit, I hate to interrupt you. It's already-- we don't have much time for questions. But you were able to get out of Portugal with your mother, yes?

I was able-- while we were in Portugal, the Austrian quota opened, because nobody could leave Austria anymore. And so mother and I got-- through again, series of lucky coincidence-- a visa to come to the United States.

And we came in 1941 on a Portuguese cork freighter, with great seasickness, but great fun, because I was the only young woman on this boat, and I was very popular with the sailors. And when I wasn't seasick, they played ping pong with me.

So I came to the United States. And of course, we again we had no money, and the first thing I did, I became a dress

finisher on Madison Avenue.

I wanted to also ask, you went back to Europe in 1945?

I went back to Europe many times.

Can you talk about your experience going back right after the war?

Well, the most interesting experience is that I was in Prague very soon after the end of the war, and it seemed strange to me because I was an American now. And I was an American citizen, and I had married a Hungarian-American man, who was in the army. And after the war, he went to work at the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

And I went with him. And had a very, also, life-changing experience at the war crimes trials because I was not involved with the trial, but it was so difficult for me to be, as a Jew, in Germany shortly after the war, that I had to have some work. And I got a job with the American Army of Occupation to re-educate the Hitler Youth in democratic ways.

Now you can imagine what kind of a job that was. But it was a very interesting experience for me, because I got a good idea of how terrible war is and how one really has to do everything that one possibly can to avoid going to war. Because in war, innocent young men simply shoot at other innocent young men, and it really is the worst sort of atrocity that one can engage in.

So that also, in a way, influenced who I became.

Well, I'm going to take a few questions. And what I'd like to do is just repeat the question so the audience can hear. Yes?

What happened to your brothers and other relatives in Czechoslovakia?

What happened to your brothers and other family in Czechoslovakia?

My brothers all were able to leave. My two oldest brother had left before me. My oldest brother went to India and wound up in Australia. My second brother had come to the United States, but he wound up in Spain. My third brother, who didn't want to leave Czechoslovakia because he thought nothing would happen in Czechoslovakia, wound up in Canada.

So I am in the United States. So all four of us are in different parts of the world, and it makes for a very interesting family dynamic.

Yes, in the center.

How do you feel today about the Germans?

How do you feel today about the Germans?

Well, I feel that the Germans are no different from anybody else. I think that there was-- antisemitism was endemic. In Europe, and there's a lot of antisemitism in the United States, also. Except it's not popular to talk about it right now. But I feel that what-- the worst guilt of the Germans was that they were indifferent to what was happening to the Jews who had lived in their midst very peacefully, and very well integrated.

And that they understood that the Jews were being demeaned and made into outcasts, and they didn't object to it. They didn't know, like nobody else knew, what was happening in the East, and the Jews were being murdered and gassed by the millions. That nobody knew until the end of the war.

There were lots of rumors, lots of rumors about it. But no facts until the end of the war.

Yes, right here.

Present-day in the United States, related to your experience, are there any present-day issues or attitudes or policies that concern you?

Present day in the United States, are there any present day policies or issues in the United States that concern you?

Yes.

[LAUGHTER]

I obviously do not mince words, do I?

That's a good thing.

I am very concerned that Holocausts still happen. That what happened in Rwanda, when the United Nations was watching, where Tutsis and Hutus killed each other, and what happened in Bosnia, where Bosnians were murdered because of their ethnicity, and what goes on in Darfur today in the Sudan, and that we are-- we know it and we sit there.

And I think that we may not be able to interfere in politics as a whole, but we can certainly be aware of what is going on. And more than anything else, I think we have a responsibility to fight injustice wherever we see it, whether it's in our homes, or in schools, or in our workplace. And we shouldn't just let it happen and stand by and be indifferent to it.

[APPLAUSE]

You should only live and be well another 88 years.

Thank you.

He said, you should only live and be well and live another 88 years. Last question. Yes?

How did your experiences that you had affect your career choice here in the United States?

How did your experiences that you had affect your career choice here in the United States?

Long question-- short question, long answer. Because I had lots of different jobs, because I moved from place to place with my husband. And then, I moved to different countries in the world. But I wound up working for the Montgomery County Maryland School system for 20 years as an advocate for children with special needs.

[APPLAUSE]

I'm sure you could add to that, BUT what I'm going to ask, though, is it's usually our tradition to let the First Person speaker have the last word. So I would ask you to do that.

WELL, I think I already gave you my last word, because I really would like to urge you to be aware of what goes on in the world, and become active. And what each one of us does matters. And that's something that we really have to understand-- the idea that I'm just one little person what can I do, that idea has to go.

You cannot live with that. You really have to make sure that you understand, and that you are smart enough to know where your participation really matters. So that's what I would really like to urge you to take away from this here.

And I'd like to thank you. You have been a very attentive audience, and I appreciate it.

And we thank you very much, Margit. Thank you so much.

[APPLAUSE]