

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 13th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Margit Meissner, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2012 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person. First Person is a series of conversations each week with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their firsthand experiences during the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue until mid-August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each upcoming First Person guest.

Margit Meissner will share with us her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. If time allows, toward the end of our program, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Margit a few questions. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Margit is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Margit Morawetz was born February 26, 1922 in Innsbruck, Austria. When Margit-- when Margit was a baby, her family moved from Austria to Prague, Czechoslovakia. The first arrow on this map points to Austria and the second to Czechoslovakia. And this second map shows the location of Prague.

Here we see Margit at the age of three. She was the youngest of four children, born to Gottlieb and Lilly Morawetz. Gottlieb, whom we see here, was a banker from a religious Jewish family. Pictured here is Margit's family at the Lido, a beach resort in Venice in 1926. From the left is her brother, Felix, cousin, Ernie Morawetz, her brother, Bruno, her mother, her father, Margit, who is circled, 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 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. Here we see Margit with her dog, Flippy, just before leaving Prague. 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. Margit searched and found her mother at the Gurs detention camp, which we see in this photo.

After Margit found her mother, they 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.

Upon her arrival in the United States, Margit found employment as a dress finisher on Madison Avenue in New York City. From there, she attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina and married 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, work for the US Army of Occupation in Germany, re-educating Hitler Youth.

We can't do justice today to describing the remarkable journey her life would take from there, but it included many stops in the US and abroad. Margit eventually would spend 20 years with the Montgomery County Maryland Public School System, specializing in disability issues.

She remains on the board of an organization, that she helped found, that helps youth with disabilities obtain employment after graduation from high school. Margit lives in Bethesda, Maryland. She has two children and two grandchildren.

Her daughter, Anne, lives nearby in Silver Spring, Maryland, and she is here today to listen to her mother's story. And, Anne, if you don't mind, I'm just going to ask you to raise your hand back there. There you go.

Margit's son, Paul, is a hospital planner at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. Since Margit's partner, Irvin, passed away in 2008, at the age of 97, Margit's friend, John, takes very good care of her.

Margit leads tours in all three of the museum's exhibits. She is the host of a recent innovation in the museum's attempt to enable visitors, especially students, to become more involved in the museum's exhibits. Visitors can text with Margit in an interactive tour of the special exhibition, "State of Deception, the Power of Nazi Propaganda," which is right next door to our theater here, if you turn to the right when you exit.

She speaks in various settings about her Holocaust experience, such as to a group of Jehovah's Witnesses in Puerto Rico. She recently spoke at a teacher training seminar in El Paso, Texas, organized by a newly-created Holocaust museum in El Paso.

Margit also works in the museum's archives, translating documents from Czech and German to English. The first document she translated was a memoir of a Czech boy who was 15 when the war ended, and who wrote his memoir at age 17. He was so pleased with the translation that he donated the original manuscript to the museum.

In 2003, Margit's autobiography, *Margit's Story*, was published. Immediately after today's program, Margit will be available to sign copies of her autobiography, which is also available in the museum's bookshop. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Margit Meissner.

[APPLAUSE]

Margit, thank you so much for joining us, and for your willingness to be our First Person today. We have just so much for you to cover in such a short period of time, we better start.

Although, you were born in Austria, your family moved to Prague, Czechoslovakia when you were very young. And you lived there until 1938, when your mother sent you to Paris at age 16. Let's begin the conversation today with you telling us about your family, your community, and your life in those early years before the war and the Holocaust changed everything forever.

Well, so you saw my family here, and you saw that I was the youngest of four. And I was the only girl. And for many, many years, I believed that it was a terrible thing to be a girl. Now I don't have that problem anymore today. I was also always very upset that I was so young. As you can well imagine, that's not my problem anymore either. Because I'm mostly the oldest wherever I go.

My childhood was really a very special kind of a childhood, but I didn't realize it. My mother was convinced that because we lived in a small country, Czechoslovakia, that had a language which did not have much international standing, that we had to learn four languages by age 16. So we spoke German at home. We spoke Czech in the street. We had a French governess. We had an English governess. So by the time we were 16, all four of us, we really knew four languages.

And my job as a child was primarily to learn. I had-- I went to a German school and had a teacher who taught me the Czech curriculum so that I would not miss anything. And I had all kinds of private lessons. And I thought that's how everybody lived. I didn't really realize that that was very unusual.

Margit, you lost your father when you were very young, Gottlieb. Tell us a little bit about him.

My dad was from an Orthodox Jewish family in Bohemia. And Bohemia then was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, before World War I. And because he was a very bright boy, and he had lost his father when he was a baby, his mother couldn't educate him in Bohemia. So she sent him to live with his brother in Vienna. And there he went to school and eventually got a law degree.

And I didn't know him very well. Because in the world that I lived in, fathers didn't pay much attention to children. That was the mother's job. But he then-- at the end of World War I, when Czechoslovakia was created, he was then-- he was a banker in Vienna. And he got the opportunity to move to Prague to basically start a new currency, because this was a new country that was being born. So that's how we came to live in Prague.

You told me that after your father died that you were under a guardian. Tell us what that meant to you, your mother, and your brothers.

Well, so my father believed, rightly or wrongly, that my mother would never be able to deal with money. Because in the kind of marriage they had, she was not involved in anything that had to do with money. That was part of the world they lived in. And so before he died, he made a will. And he decided that to put all his assets into like a trusteeship, a guardian.

And this guardian lived in Vienna. And when Austria was annexed by the Germans, and my mother wanted to get money, to get a hold of some of her money, to be able to smuggle it out. Because it wasn't possible to send out money legally. There were all kinds of currency restrictions. But you could smuggle money out via some Latin American diplomats or some kind of smuggling systems. And the guardian would not permit it.

So that means that all our assets stayed behind in Czechoslovakia. And as a result of this, were all lost.

Margit, in 1938, after Hitler annexed Austria, your mother and you made this momentous decision to send you to Paris when you were 16 years of age. Tell us what convinced her that needed to take place, that had to happen, and how you reached that decision, and then what it was like for you to go to Paris.

Well, it's kind of a complicated story. I'll try. It was certain that being in Czechoslovakia as an Austrian citizen, my mother considered that serious, considered that dangerous. Whether it would of-- at that time, it seemed not dangerous at all. Because Czechoslovakia was a democratically elected government and was going to protect its citizens. But mother didn't believe that.

And she didn't quite know what to do. And so she had my handwriting analyzed by a graphologer. Now that was a very unusual thing to do.

A graphologer. A graphologer.

A graphologer. You know what that is?

I do now.

It is somebody who looks at handwriting and tries to decide who you are based on your handwriting and what your future will be. And this graphologer said that I would be a very good dress designer. And also he said that I wouldn't have to-- I wouldn't have to practice any profession for very long because I would get married soon. So that was his forecast.

So based on this idea, that I was going to become a dress designer, my mother decided I had to go to Paris, which was then the center of fashion. And she found a-- she found a French family that was going to take me in. And so just very soon after Austria was annexed, I was shipped off to Paris.

Now I thought that was a good idea. I was in-- I was in 10th grade. I was a very good student because I got good grades. I didn't learn very much. I just was not an interested learner. I was very interested in boys, but the boys that I was interested in weren't interested in me. So that leaving was a kind of a way out of this awkward situation.

And I arrived-- I went to Paris by airplane. And that was a very sophisticated thing to do. Because in 1938, people didn't fly. I had no idea I was going to be in a non-pressurized airplane, which when I arrived in Paris I thought my ears were going to fall off. So it was not such a great trip.

But my French family took very good care of me. And I was thrilled that I was-- I was primarily thrilled that my mother had enough confidence in me, at age 16, to send me away to a foreign country. So I thought that was pretty great.

Margit, at that time-- you were 16 when you went-- your three brothers were older. Where did they go? Or did they stay put?

No-- well, my brother Paul-- we were all Austrians. That's not true, my Canadian brother was a Czech citizen. So my oldest brother was sent by a Czech arms factory to India to work there for them. And then when Czechoslovakia was annexed, and he could no longer work because he was Jewish, he was dismissed. He found asylum in-- he found asylum in Australia.

My second brother had been caught in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, where he was about to be shot when somebody came to the people-- we're going to shoot them-- and told them, don't shoot, don't shoot, you've got the wrong guy. And he got so frightened by this experience that he decided to leave Czechoslovakia. And he convinced my mother that he should go to the United States. And so he was in America since 1936.

And my third brother, who had become a Czech citizen and was a farmer, he stayed in Czechoslovakia. And he was the one who said to my mother, you're just hysterical to send Margit away. Why don't you let her finish high school? Nothing will happen to her. And then when the Nazis finally entered Czechoslovakia, he and my mother were able to get out of there two days after they were-- after Czechoslovakia was annexed, before the Germans had a chance to instigate all their Jewish regulations.

And my brother, Bruno, went to England. My mother came to France, where I was waiting for her. And he was able to get to England as a farmer. He could not have come in if it had been a doctor or a lawyer. But as a farmer, he was able to get in. And as a farmer, he was able to go to Canada. Because Canada they also had a restricted immigration system. But if somebody wanted to farm, they would let them in.

And so the Canadian government gave him \$1,000 so that he could buy a fruit farm in the Niagara Peninsula. And so this Czech boy became a fruit-- a fruit farmer in the Niagara Peninsula.

Margit, what was it like for you at that time to be in Paris? Was it-- in light of what you said about leaving Prague, was it an exciting time for you?

Well, it was an exciting time to some extent. Because in the family where I was, I met some very nice young people. It was terrible as a citizen. Because the French were very unpleasant with foreigners. And they didn't want them there. And so I had a special-- a special permit to stay there. And I had to go to the police every two weeks to show my face. And they were always very unpleasant and very unwelcoming.

And there, in the police station, was really one of my first contacts with the United States. Because the prefect of the police in Paris, there were two waiting rooms. One waiting room had a carpeted floor and had benches with pillows. And the other side was a plain floor and just plain benches.

And the beautiful waiting room was for Americans and for Britishers. So they were special-- they were specially welcome, I guess, in France, and we were specially unwelcome. So I used to envy these Americans who could wait in luxury.

Margit, your mother would eventually, of course, join you in Paris. Tell us what brought her to Paris. And then, now you're there together, what your circumstances were like at that point.

Well, my mother first only came to visit. So she just closed her apartment and left, like if you go on vacation. And then it turned out that Czechoslovakia was occupied. And before the occupation, she really tried to see whether she could ship some of our belongings out. There was a possibility at the time to get the moving vans, and fill them up with your belongings, and then send them to a port, like Amsterdam, for example, or to Belgium on the Atlantic coast, from where they could get trans shipped.

But my mother was in the process of doing that and did not succeed before the Germans came in. So that, in the end, she left-- she left Prague with one suitcase in her-- in her hand. And that's basically all that we saved from all our

belongings.

Didn't your brother play a role in helping to get her out of Prague?

Yes, my brother did play a role. Because they needed an exit permit, and the exit permit could not be gotten. And there was-- of course, one could do things. One could bribe people. And somebody came to my brother. My brother tried to find somebody who would help him and my mother get an exit permit. And he found somebody. And this man said, you have to give me your passports for three days, and give me x number of Czech crowns, and then I'll return your passport.

And my mother said, you can't do this. This man is going to cheat you. And how will you ever get our passport back? And my brother, Bruno, said, we have to trust him. And they trusted him. And indeed, he brought the passports back and helped them get out. So that was a very courageous risk that he took.

In Paris, you had some French identification papers, if I remember correctly, but your mother did not. Tell us how significant that was, if I have that right.

You have that-- you have it right, indeed.

I do, thank you.

I came to Paris as a student. I had a student visa. And I came before a certain cutoff date. So I was in relatively good shape-- relative. But I was still an unwanted alien. But my mother came after a certain cutoff date. And then when the war in France started seriously-- because I don't know whether you know, but World War II was started in September of 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland. And at that point, the French and the British declared war on Germany. And that was the beginning of World War II.

But they fought on the Eastern Front only. And they left the Western Europe alone. So in France, we lived as though it was peace time, except we knew it was war. But the war was not being fought in the West.

And there were lots of propaganda posters in Paris with-- I remember a poster with the whole big world in red and the tiny little dot, that was black, that was Germany. And how could Germany really influence the world? I mean, that was an absurd thought.

And another poster was with the French fortifications, the Maginot Line, which the French had constructed after World War I and were very proud of. Because there were big signs all around Paris, said, "Ils ne vont pas passer,"-- "They are not going to pass." And I guess it didn't occur to the builders of this fortification that they could just go around Belgium and Holland and come into France.

And this is what happened. So at that point then, when the war started seriously in Western Europe, then there was the big question, how could we get out of there?

And, of course, that happened in June 1940, when France was attacked by Hitler.

Was attacked-- and so just before-- as it seemed imminent that France-- it seemed obvious that France could not defend itself, or that it didn't even try to defend itself, and at that point-- and the French government was so dysfunctional that I don't know that they knew what they were doing.

And so a couple of weeks, or maybe a month, before France was going to fall, my mother was-- received a notification from the police telling her that in three days, she has to present herself at the police station with enough food for three days, with a blanket, and whatever else she could carry on her back, and she would be, quote, "evacuated," which, basically, was a way of saying she would be deported.

Now I, because I had come before this cutoff date was not asked to present myself to the police. And I took my mother

to the police station because it didn't occur to anybody that this was-- that one could not obey the law. I mean, we were law-abiding citizens. Now you have to understand also that none of us had any idea what the outcome would be, that there would be a Holocaust, that all the Jews were going to be deported and murdered. We had no understanding of this at all. This never, ever entered anybody's head.

So when my mother went to the police station, the last thing she did, as we said goodbye, she gave me 10,000 francs, which I didn't know where she had from, because we had very little money to live on. And then she told me, very nonchalantly, it's now up to you to get us out of here.

Now what she meant by this comment, I really to this day don't know. But it was clear to me that I now had to go into action to see whether I could free her from wherever she was being sent, and whether she and I could somehow escape together.

And, of course, you didn't know where she was sent.

I had no idea--

No idea.

--where she was sent.

It was not-- I think it was about that time that you were out on the street, and you noticed that everybody's faces were blackened.

Well, that was then-- so first, I tried all kinds of avenues to find somebody who would help me. And I couldn't find anybody. And life became more chaotic in Paris by the day. And finally, one day, as you said, I was walking in the street, and everybody's face was black. And I came home, and my face was black also.

And then I understood that the French had put a smokescreen across the River Seine to be able to evacuate their armies to the south so that they would not be caught by the advancing Germans. And so I decided if it was so close, then I had to somehow get out of there.

But you remember that I had to go to the police every week to show my face. And they kept telling me, don't ever do anything illegal because we will arrest you immediately. So with this black face, and with the \$10,000 in my hand, I went to the police station, and said, now, policeman, you're going to have to give me a permit to leave. When I came to the police station, it was open, and the policemen were gone. There was nobody there.

They had fled too.

They had fled too. And so I thought now I had an alibi, and I could now buy myself a bicycle and leave without the permission. Because if anybody would stop me, I could say, I tried, but there was nobody at the police station. And so I went looking for a bicycle in Paris. And the only bicycle that I could find was a men's racing bike, with these kind of handles, which I bought. And I was not a good bicyclist. I mean, I was just sort of-- I knew how to ride a bicycle.

So I had with me a little case that would fit on the luggage carrier of the bike, which included a change of underwear, two chocolate croissants, my dressmaking notes-- what I haven't told you is that while I was in Paris, I went to dressmaking school-- and my oil paints. Because I thought that a dress designer, you need to also be able to paint. So these oil paints seemed very important.

What I forgot to tell you, during my stay in Paris, was that I went to dressmaking school. Now, as you know, the graphologist-- graphologer-- has said that I would make a good dress designer. But you have to remember that in 1938, if you wanted to buy a dress, you didn't go to the department store. You had it made by somebody. So dressmaking was a very respected position.

I wonder whether anybody here in this room ever sews. Does anybody sew? Well, there are some people who sew. That's a pretty good--

Pretty good showing.

Good show, because many groups I speak to, nobody ever raises his hand, because nobody learns how to sew. So i-- and one of the reasons why I went to--