

--dressmaking school also-- one, because the graphologist said so, graphology. And the other was that it was clear that we were going to lose everything we ever owned. And I would have to make a living as soon as possible. And we didn't know in what country we would end up and what language I would need to know. So it was-- dressmaking was a profession where you didn't need to know the language for.

So with your ability to take just a few meager possessions-- croissants-- but you also take your dressmaking notes and your paint book because that might be the key to your survival later.

Exactly.

Margit, just before you took off on that bike, you were handed an envelope at your apartment building.

Yeah, that's-- good for you. So when I left my apartment to go by the bicycle, indeed, somebody had handed me a letter, handwriting I didn't recognize. I put it in my pocket and took off on the bicycle. And I bicycled all day. And I was not tired. I was not hungry I think I lived on-- what is the word I can't think of?

Your croissant?

No, not-- I didn't eat my croissant. What? Adrenaline.

Oh, lived on adrenaline.

Adrenaline.

And Margit, you weren't just bicycling alone. You were with thousands of people fleeing a city under assault. So you are part of a stream of people.

A stream of people, a chaotic stream of people. And I felt very sorry for myself in the beginning. Because first of all, I didn't know where I was going. I was just following the crowd. I had no idea where my mother was. And I didn't know whether I was doing the right thing. Is that correct as a factual basis? And then I was the kind of very proper young lady who thought, how can I do this all on my own? And what will people think? That was very important to me at that time. So I was very scared.

But very soon, I saw that I had a great advantage. Because with my bicycle, I could go and get around the stalled cars and the thousands of people on the highway. So I made good progress. And I bicycled all day. And when it became-- when night started to fall, I was in a small town called *À%*tampes, which is, I don't know, about 30 kilometers maybe south of Paris.

And there, a policeman motioned to me. So of course, I immediately shrank. What is this policeman going to want? Because I was sure that every policeman in Paris was looking for me. So the policeman said, there is a school in the next block where you can lie down on the classroom floor. Why don't you go and spend the night there? And then next morning, you can leave again.

So I went to that school and laid down. And then I remembered that letter that I had in my pocket. And I opened the letter. And it was from somebody whom my mother had been able to tell-- to ask to let me know that she was in a camp called Gurs. That was on the French-Spanish border near the Pyrenees.

So that's all I knew. I had never heard of Gurs. I had no idea where it was. But at least I knew that my mother was out of harm's way. So that was good news. And I knew someplace one should be able to find her.

You now had a destination in mind.

Right. Right. And so I spent a few hours lying on the floor. And at daybreak, I got up, and took my bicycle, and started

on my road again. There were not quite as many people, but it was still an onslaught of people who kept fleeing south and south. And what I didn't know, and found out the next day, that the school in which I had spent the night was bombed to smithereens two hours after I left. So I was immensely lucky.

And so as I was continuing my bicycle ride. After an hour or so, I collided with another woman. And we both fell. And I looked at my-- I looked at my bicycle and it was damaged. But it was-- I could continue riding. So I continued to ride.

And after a few minutes, a young man comes up to me. And again, I thought, what is he going to want from me? And he said, Mademoiselle, you cannot go with this foot. I said, what do you mean? Look at your leg. It's all bleeding. You're going to bleed to death. Well, I didn't realize that my leg was bleeding.

That adrenaline that you talked about.

Yeah, the adrenaline. And now that I knew that it was bleeding, it started to hurt. Because until then-- so he said, there's a pharmacist two blocks from here. Go there and he will bandage it. So I went to the pharmacist. And he said, you have to go to the hospital, has to be stitched. I said, I can't go to the hospital. They will never accept me. I am a foreigner without any permissions. I can just bandage it. So he bandaged it.

And he said, and why are you riding a bicycle? Why don't you take the train? And I said, there are no trains in France. Well, so he said, maybe there are no trains in Paris. But here, there are trains. So why don't you go to the train station?

So I went to the train station in Orleans and with my bicycle. And that was another chaotic situation-- hundreds or thousands of people standing in line, one window open. And it took five minutes for every person to find the place they were going to and get a railroad ticket. And so we stood in line for hours and hours. And children were crying. And women were fainting. It was one of those really chaotic situations.

And so in the middle of this, air raid alert, everybody down to the basement. And so I looked at the situation and said, I am not going in the basement because when I come back and I have to stand in line for hours again, I can't stand it. So I stayed on the top there with maybe three or four other brave or maybe foolish people. But I stayed there and watched the bombs drop on both sides of the railroad station. And fortunately, nothing dropped on me.

And now, you're first in line.

Now, I was first in line to take my bicycle. And I had expected to go to the west of France before I knew where my mother was because there, I had friends with whom I thought one might be able to get the fishing boat to go to Great Britain. So I went. So I took my bicycle, registered it, and went into the train. And of course, I thought the train would be completely overcrowded.

And it was night time. It was curfew. It was-- everything was completely blocked-- blacked out. And I came into the railroad station. And I came into the compartment of the train. It was completely empty. I was all by myself in this huge compartment, completely blacked out. And I was scared. What can happen to me here? So that was a very scary situation. And the train kept starting and stopping, starting and stopping.

And at one point, it stopped next to a troop train on the other rail. And I opened my window. And there was a soldier standing on the other side. And fortunately, my French at that point was pretty good that I really spoke French without the foreign accent. So that I dared address the soldier. And he told me that he had come from the northern front. And they were trying to evacuate themselves.

And then he asked me whether I had anything to eat. And I said, no, because I don't know whether I've eaten my chocolate croissants by now. Maybe I had. I can't remember. But he gave me a boule, these round round loaves of bread that the French made. And just after he gave it to me, the train started going again. So I didn't even have a chance to say thank you to him.

And when I came back into my black compartment, there was a man sitting there. So of course, I was already frightened

to begin with. Now, I was twice as frightened. And then we started talking. And he told me that he was a French soldier who had left his outfit and was trying to go home in the south of France.

Then he asked me whether I had something to eat. And I said, yes, I just got this loaf of bread from another soldier. Here, why don't you have some of it? And so he started eating. And before I knew, the bread was gone. He ate it all. But I was happy that he didn't want anything else from me, that I just could give him this loaf of bread.

And then because I was born under a lucky star, the train that I went on came to a stop, which was at 15 kilometers from Gurs-- amazing luck, just amazing luck. And so I had friends-- I had no intention of going there. I thought I was going to the Atlantic coast of France. And when the train ended there, it was in-- near the Spanish border.

And you recognized the name of a town where you had friends, right?

Yes, I recognized the name of town where I had friends, which was close by. And so I went to these friends. And the lady of the house was a lovely French woman. And when I told her my story, she said, your mother has to find out where you are because in the meantime, France had capitulated. And there was bedlam all over.

And the situation was more chaotic than ever. So she was willing to take her car, although that was against rules, and go to Gurs to try and find my mother to tell her where I was. And she went to Gurs, but she couldn't find my mother. And she left a message there. So I thought, Mother will never get that message. When she described the conditions, it was going to be impossible. So I was waiting to see what was going to happen next, which had no bearing on what I was doing. It was just the world had collapsed, basically.

And in couple of days later, I was sitting in front of the house, and there was a lady coming from far away. And she waved at me. I didn't wave back because I didn't know anybody who would wave at me. Who would know where I was or who I was? And she kept closer. And she kept waving more urgently. And I still didn't respond.

And when she came real close, it turned out, this was my mom. And I did not recognize her because she had lost so much weight. And her face was all sunburned. And so from far away, I didn't recognize her.

No idea who she was.

And she was so upset with me, I guess, because she had finally found her child. She had been so worried about me. And here, I wasn't even welcoming her. Well, so we got over that. OK.

And now, of course, now, you're reunited, now, the pressure is really on for you to continue and to get out of France.

Right. Because now, France was going to be divided into an occupied and non-occupied zone. And we were in the occupied zone. So we had to get into the non-occupied zone. And it's really a complicated story. I think that's one of the reasons why I wrote this book, so that my children would really know some of the details of this escape. But to be-- to summarize, with all kinds of lucky coincidences and great deal of fear, and worrying, and stress, we managed to get to Marseille, which was a port in the south of France.

And if you don't mind-- and I know our time is limited-- but part of your escape to get to Marseille included connecting up with a group of pastors, as I recall.

Yeah. Well, again, fantastic coincidence. So when Mother and I first left from the occupied zone to the non-occupied zone, we were given the name of a house which was uninhabited. And so we found this house in the countryside, out in the meadows. The house had a roof, but had no windows, was all open. So it's a place that one could stay in during the summer, but certainly not during the winter. And so we had with us what I had from the little case that I had on my bicycle. And Mother had what she took to the concentration camp with-- that's all we had. And so we tried to install ourselves there.

And a couple of these days later, three men appeared at this house. Now, how they found this house, I really never

found out. But these three men were Czech Lutheran pastors. Would you believe it? Czech Lutheran pastors who had also found this house-- and they, of course-- the Czechs were friends of the French because they were not enemies. We, as Austrians, we were enemies. The Czechs were friends of the French.

So these pastors said, you cannot stay here. You have to go to Marseille. Because they were going to Marseille, to this port city, to see whether they could leave there. So with that knowledge, that there was these three men-- they couldn't really do anything for us because they were fleeing themselves. But at least they knew where they were going.

So we got the idea that that's what we have to do. So they, basically-- again, I mean, the coincidence that in this abandoned house, you would find three Czech pastors was just unbelievable. So we went to Marseille and with a lot of problems. We always had to evade the police and make sure that nobody would find us.

And finally, we had hidden all our documents in the roof of the house in which we were staying in Salies-de-BÃ©arn so that we wouldn't have any documents. The only document we had was a French bread ration card, which didn't show your identity. And of course, most people had an identity card. And we didn't have an identity card. We just had the bread ration card. So that was something. So with that, we went to Marseille.

And from Marseille, of course, you would eventually then escape over the Pyrenees to head for Portugal. Tell us about going across the-- how you were able to get out of France.

Well, again, long story. The French didn't want us there. But they didn't want to give us exit permits either. And we had a transit visa to Spain and Portugal, which we were lucky to get. And the day before the transit visa was going to expire, we met a man in the street in Marseille who casually said, women like you were permitted to leave France without an exit permit yesterday.

So with this bit of knowledge, we decided to go to the border between France and Spain. And when we got to the border and showed the border guard our papers, he said, you can't leave. What are you thinking? You don't have an exit permit. Go back.

So I found a porter and told him our woe. And he said, I know somebody on the Spanish side who can help you. And he showed us a way of walking across the Pyrenees going up on the French side and down on the Spanish side. And there, we would find Monsieur JesÃ©s who was going to help us through Spain.

So we took our little luggage and walked up the hill. And it was a beautiful fall day. If it hadn't been so stressful, we might have even enjoyed it because it's lovely countryside. And it was a great ascent and descent into the sea in Spain. And when we found SeÃ±or JesÃ©s, he shook his hands and said, my god, I can't help you at all because the people whom I helped yesterday, they were put in jail. So don't even tell anybody that you heard my name.

And this is on the Spanish side?

On the Spanish side. And so really, to make a long story short, they caught us. And they took us to jail in Spain. So when we arrived in jail in Spain, then, because we were Austrians, and Austria was part of Germany, what they said-- well, so you are part of Germany. We'll call the German authorities. And they will take you over. So we had done all this to escape the Germans. And then we were going to be handed to the Germans in Spain.

Tell us a little bit about your stay in the jail. And there were some of the inmates that were good to you.

The jail in Spain was a life-changing experience for me. First of all, I thought I would never go to jail. I'm in such an upright person who follows the laws. Why would you ever get in trouble with the law? That was absolutely out of the question. I had no idea that there were many people, upright people who went to jail during the war. But that I didn't know.

And then the conditions in this jail were awful-- I mean, very dirty and very, very inhospitable. And you needed something to-- you needed a vessel into which they gave you your food. And of course, we didn't have anything because

whatever we had along, they had confiscated. And we came into this big room, where all the women were sleeping because it was at night. So we came with nothing.

So you had to provide your own bowl, basically?

You had to provide-- we had to provide our own bowl. And there was a prostitute in this jail because the jail was full of prostitutes and teachers that the Franco government thought were unreliable, and prostitution was forbidden. And one of these prostitutes gave us a bowl into which we could put our food. And that was such a gift. I mean, that really was a life-saving gift that I had to rethink what my idea of the world was. My sort of elitist view of the world really changed in this prison. It really was an experience that made me realize who I thought I was and what the reality of the world was and influenced the rest of my life.

And you were able to, of course, get out of jail.

Yeah, we-- again, with tremendous luck, one lucky coincidence after the other. We were able to get out of the jail with the help of Spanish friends and were able to get to Portugal, where I became the dressmaker to all the refugees who had lost their belongings in a language which I didn't know. So this idea of having become a dressmaker was a good idea.

And eventually, the Austrian quota for the United States, which had been closed for 10 years, opened up because no Austrians could leave the country anymore. And so we were able to get an affidavit and an American visa and came to the United States nearly exactly three years after I left my home in Prague.

And as you said, you were a dressmaker to the refugees. You were able to earn some money--

With which we left.

--which you left with, yes. So I was able to make a living for my mother and me. And it was a fun time for me in Portugal because Portuguese young ladies were not permitted to be on the street by themselves because that was not proper. They had to be accompanied by a brother or an adult. But I was not a Portuguese young woman. So I was able to cruise the streets by myself.

And there were lots of men who always started talking to me because it was such an unusual thing to see a young woman on the street by herself. And I thought-- and I learned Portuguese because I needed to go buy notions and fabric. And we lived in the house of a Portuguese family. And when-- if these young men were attractive, I talked to them. And if I didn't like their looks, I would say, oh, I don't understand you.

Margit, you didn't come over on much of a ship. Tell us about your trip across the Atlantic. I came on-- we came on a Portuguese cork freighter. They export cork for bottle corks from Portugal. And there was no shipping available. I mean, any good ship tickets were unavailable. So we were lucky to get tickets on this cork freighter, which had, I think, five berths for people.

And so I was, of course, the only young woman there. And I was unfortunately seasick most of the time. But when I wasn't seasick, the Portuguese sailors were very interested in me. And I thought that was great. And they had ping-pong tables. So either I was seasick or I played ping-pong. And I became a very good ping-pong player.

And made it to the United States.

And made it to the United States.

Tell us about your arrival and just a little bit about the transition for yourself.

Well, it was-- my American brother, who eventually became a Spaniard, waited for us and took us to New York City. And he had an apartment. And it was so bright. I had lived in a blacked-out world for months now. And I was-- I had-- I knew nothing, really, about the United States because although I had a good education, but we didn't learn anything

about America. And I was thrilled to be here. But I was also upset when I saw the garbage pails in which there were half-chickens and food that was thrown away. I thought that was just impossible. So that upset me.

And I got-- and I had-- we had no money. So I immediately had to go to work. So I got-- I looked at the New York Times. And there was an ad for a dress finisher. So I thought I could become a dress finisher. And I indeed went to this place.

And I thought they were going to interview me and look at my credentials. They were not in the least bit interested in that. They said, where's your Social Security number? I didn't know it existed. So they said, come back on Monday with a Social Security number.

So I came back with my Social Security number and, again, thought they were now going to interview me. And the lady-- the poor lady put me at a sewing machine and said, sew this seam binding on the hem. And I looked at the sewing machine, I didn't know how to thread it because I had never seen an electric sewing machine before.

So there was an old lady sitting next to me who was a finisher. She helped me. So she helped me thread the machine. And I sewed five inches, and the thread broke. And again, I didn't know how to thread the machine. So she helped me again.

And after 15 minutes or so, the boss came, and clapped me on the shoulder, and said, young lady, you will not do here. And so I got this job at 9:00 in the morning. And at 9:30, I was fired. And I was beside myself because that was another thing that was never going to happen to me, that I would get fired. Because I had a certain amount of self-esteem. So I learned. And I was-- I don't know. We don't have any time anymore.

But you did end up owning your own dressmaking business.

I dress-- I did end up, at some point. I manufacture children's dresses. And I have to report, with great shame, that I did the same thing when I had-- I tried out somebody who came to work for us. And I realized that she was never going to be able to do what we needed her to do. And we were not a school. But we wanted to make money. So we couldn't afford to keep somebody who wasn't good. And I also fired some people, always feeling very badly about it. Because I remember how stricken I was when I was fired.

Margit, we have time to ask our audience if they have just a couple of questions for you. So if you don't mind, shall we do that? And then--

That's fine.

--if you have a question-- and I hope you will-- please, make it as brief as you can. I'll repeat it so everyone hears it, including Margit before she responds to it. So anybody have a question? If not, I got tons of them. And we're short on time too. Yes, Terry.

This detention center on the French-Spanish border, was that a French-controlled place? Were the Nazis there, taking it over? What happened over there?

Let's see, can you repeat that?

Question is the Gurs detention camp, was it a French camp? And what happened to that camp and the people that were there?

Yeah. Well, it was a French camp, which originally was created for communists because communism was outlawed in France. And then it was peopled by refugees from the Spanish Civil War, mainly Democrats who fled from the fascist Franco regime. So that's what the reason-- that was the reason for the creation of the camp. And then as France was about to collapse, they put the Austrian-- mainly Austrian and some German refugees there.

And then after-- as the continuation of the war, then the Germans sent a number of German prisoners to Gurs before they were going to be evacuated to the east. So today, there is a cemetery for German Jews who died in Gurs as they were waiting to--