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**UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
JACQUELINE MENDELS BIRN**

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>> Bill Benson: 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 on our 14th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Jacqueline Mendels Birn, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2013 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 weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each First Person guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue until mid-August. The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Jacqueline Mendels Birn will share with us her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor. If we have time towards the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask Jacqueline a few questions.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Jacqueline is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

We begin with this portrait of 6-year-old Jacqueline Mendels, born April 23, 1935, in Paris, France. France is highlighted on this map of Europe.

Jacqueline was the middle of three children. Here we see Ellen

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Mendels with two of her three children, Manuela and Jacqueline. The Mendels lived in Paris and life was quite normal until World War II began.

This is a birthday card that Jacqueline made for her mother in 1941, before the family fled Paris.

Jacqueline's father found two reliable farmers to help the family escape across the demarcation line to the Vichy-controlled southern zone of France. On this map we see the northern occupied and the southern unoccupied zones in France.

The family lived in the tiny village of Le Got in southern France for over two years. Here we see a contemporary photo of the house where the family hid in two rooms on the upper floor.

After allied forces liberated Paris in August 1944, the family resumed their life in Paris. From left to right are Manuela and Jacqueline and their mother Ellen holding their newborn brother Franklin who was born in 1943.

Jacqueline met her future husband, Richard, in 1957, while he was studying in Paris and would move to the United States and marry in 1958. They lived in New York City where Jacqueline worked as a chemist and Richard taught high school while waiting the required four years to join the Foreign Service because he married a foreign-born person. In order for Richard to join the Foreign Service, Jacqueline had to become an American citizen.

Once Richard began his Foreign Service career, they would live in many places such as Toronto, Hong Kong, Malta, and Mexico City, along with several stints

in Washington, D.C. Jacqueline worked for the Foreign Service Institute where she taught French and helped prepare Foreign Service Officers going to France or Europe. Later, Jacqueline trained foreign language instructors. Both Jacqueline and Richard are now retired. They have two children, Daniel Franklin and Anne Emanuelle. They also have a 12-year-old granddaughter whom they enjoy visiting in Toronto where she lives. I know they're going to be going there this summer, as a matter of fact. I'm pleased to say that Richard is here with us today.

Richard, if you wouldn't mind letting folks know you're here.

Jacqueline and Richard live in Bethesda, Maryland. Continuing a family tradition, Jacqueline is an accomplished musician, presently the first First Cellist, Emeritus. She is also a member of the Friday Morning Music Club which performs annually at the Kennedy Center and at many other places. She also plays in several trios, quartets and quintets.

Jacqueline speaks often about her Holocaust experience both in the museum and in other settings. She recently spoke in Virginia at a meeting of teachers who used the arts to teach about the Holocaust. She has spoken at such places as the National Security Agency, Colby College in Maine, and the University of Michigan in East Lansing, as well as at local Catholic schools.

Jacqueline's other volunteer work for the Museum has included editing documents written in French and interpreting for a group of French-speaking Holocaust survivors who visited the Museum. She is now working, and has been for a good while, with

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the Museum's "Remember Me?" project, which publicizes the photographs of over 1,000 Jewish children orphaned or otherwise separated from their parents during the Holocaust in an effort to identify them and connect them with surviving family members or friends. Jacqueline interviews those identified who are French speaking. The "Remember Me?" project has had remarkable successes.

Jacqueline's memoir will be published in June. It is titled, and forgive my pronunciation, I will do my best, "A dimanche prochain: Memoir of Survival in World War II France." Perhaps if times allow, we will learn the meaning of the first part of her memoirs title.

I'd like to ask you in joining me to welcome our First Person,
Mrs. Jacqueline Mendels Birn.

[Applause]

Jacqueline, thank you for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person today. Really great to have you here. You have so much to tell us in such a short period. We'll cover as much as we can. And I'm going to get us started right away. Let's start with you telling us a little about your family in your own early years before the Anschluss in 1938.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My parents decided it was very dangerous. We left. I remember leaving Paris and coming back. That was our first leave of our home in Paris. Then in 1939, declaration of war, my parents decided it was dangerous again. So we left Paris. We didn't stay very long. Nothing was happening. That was the phony war. So we went back to Paris.

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I remember those.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to take you back to those early years a little bit. Tell us -- your parents, tell us about their nationality. They were not French. Were they?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No. My parents were not French, never became French. My father was Dutch. His family had been Dutch for centuries. My mother was from Hamburg, Germany, where they had been for centuries also. And when my mother married my father, she became Dutch. So actually even though I was born in Paris, I was Dutch. I was a Dutch Jew, a foreign Jew in Paris.

>> Bill Benson: Even though born there.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. I didn't know that until a few years ago that actually I was not born French.

>> Bill Benson: Did you have a large, extended family?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. But not on my mother's side. She was an only child. My grandmother -- well, I'll tell you later, who died in a horrible way. And my grandfather had died quite a long time ago. My grandmother had a brother, was able to escape. But there was hardly anybody -- his children were in the transport and survived World War II.

On my father's side, on the other hand, he grew up in a very large family. He had many cousins. I don't know what I can tell you now. In our extended family we have over 200 members of our Dutch family that were murdered, murdered, gassed, who knows? We don't have the exact detail, although we know it was Auschwitz. That was my grandmother. And other places.

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline, during that pre-wartime, your father's business, he was having some difficulties.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Before the war there was a great depression just like in the U.S. It came later in France, but it was difficult earn a living. I never noticed because I know we eat a lot of pasta, because that was available. But then after the war started, very quickly there were laws established. The Jews were not allowed to own a business. So my father had to sell his shares for a few francs to his associate who was a very good man, actually. I will tell you that later. But my father was not allowed to work. All business where Aryanzed. So doctors, dentists, pharmacists, teachers, government employees, every Jewish person had had to leave their job. And to earn a living was impossible. It was very difficult. I don't know to this day how my parents managed. I know that my father probably by bicycle because there was no more oiling in France. Probably took his bicycle to go to his office. I know he told us later he was hiding in the back of the office because if somebody rang the bell, as a Jew and because of his ID card, he would have been arrested immediately.

>> Bill Benson: This is the back of what was his own business.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Am I right that at one point your family considered the possibility of converting to Catholicism?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. My parents had wonderful friends. And actually, the lady, I remember, her name was Genevieve, tried to convert us. It wouldn't have helped really because they were born Jews and they were Jews. The conversion would not help at all. But

that family was absolutely wonderful to us. And when we finally fled, we spent the last night with them. They burned our Jewish star, the yellow Jewish star. And they gave us, my mother and sister and me, a Catholic medal. That's very famous for Catholic people. Maybe there are some Catholics among you. That's from a little town in the south of France called Lourdes where there were many miracles since the 19th Century. So she gave that medal, Genevieve gave that medal. And I have mine to this day.

>> Bill Benson: You kept it.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. I don't know where I was wearing it when we crossed the demarcation line, but maybe it saved us.

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline, World War II began. A few months earlier, I think, March of 1939, your parents were able to declare you and your sisters French citizens. Why was that so significant?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My mother, well, probably both my parents felt that as French citizens, she would have a better hope of survival because the occupation forces and also the French police, unfortunately, arrested foreign Jews first. But my parents didn't realize that we were not French. There was a request. I have a piece of paper at home that is on the wall where it says that my father requested for us to be French, my sister and me. But it didn't happen. So we were foreign Jews.

>> Bill Benson: And a few months after that, I think in July, your father's father, your grandfather, died. And your father was not able to attend the funeral. That must have been just really -- for financial reasons, I believe.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah, no. Actually he was able. But the rest of the family for financial reasons we didn't go. So we never attended my grandfather, my paternal grandfather's. I always say it's a blessing that he died in 1939, because his wife, my grandmother -- [Inaudible]

>> Bill Benson: After war broke out in September 1939, you left Paris for a second time, returned again to Paris. And in May 1940, of course, Germany invaded what was called the low lands, Holland, Luxembourg, Belgium, followed by France. You then fled Paris, the family fled Paris, for a third time. They had returned to Paris. Why did your parents leave each time and each time go back to Paris?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My father say, "I have to earn a living." By that time, he could still work in his company.

>> Bill Benson: Even though he wasn't able to own it.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. That is what is called the exodus. And millions of people fled and went South. And many of them remain in the South of France. But my father say, well, I have to work. So we went back.

Things were all right. My father obeyed the law, registered at the local city hall. He always said we obey the law and they will leave us alone. But we couldn't go to the local library and get books. We couldn't take swimming lessons. We couldn't certainly go to a movie. We were really staying at home. There was very little food. The merchants in our little neighborhood knew the Mandels family, and even though my mother was only allowed to shop from 4:00 to 6:00, they always left a little something so we

had milk and bread and things.

>> Bill Benson: As you told us a moment ago, a little bit, on June 10, soon after France was invaded, you were part of that exodus out of Paris. Do you remember that exodus?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little. Literally tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people fleeing.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. My father had the use of a little van, if you want. I remember my sister and I sitting on the foot stool in the back. I don't remember if it was covered. But each of us, we had our doll. And there is my doll. Shall I pull it out?

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My sister had her doll that was given to us in 1940, and it survived up to this day. That was the first exodus of the doll. It's not in very good shape, but it's there.

>> Bill Benson: And your doll was with you through all the time and hiding?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I will tell you later. That's my doll. It was in very bad shape. The arms have been mended. This is my granddaughter's little outfit when she was born.

When we finally got our dolls in our hiding place, a neighbor upstairs sent some things, including the dolls because we didn't have them for the demarcation line, of course. I had some clothes. And then my father sold the clothes --the baby. And I cried.

>> Bill Benson: I bet. Jacqueline, at one point your parents considered trying to leave for a

Dutch colony.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Why a Dutch colony?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Because my parents were Dutch. They thought that the Queen of Holland was going to help the Jews, the Dutch Jews in distress, which I found out through papers and archives that it would never have happened. And then the war was declared. Then we couldn't leave the country.

My parents always said we're going to live together or die together. Actually, just before the war broke out my father wrote to one of his cousins and said that he was going to join the Dutch free forces that were in England by that time. Holland had been occupied. He was going to do that. He wrote to his cousin, I don't know how Ellen, his wife, and the children will manage. We would not have survived. But then France being occupied, my father couldn't escape. So we stayed together.

>> Bill Benson: The border was sealed.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Exactly.

>> Bill Benson: Before you left on the exodus, of course, you were in Paris when the Germans attacked. You were there I think, I think you remember being in a cellar.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. We had gas masks. We had to go to the cellar. The sirens were ringing. And once there were Germans right next to us because they were occupying the apartment upstairs from us where that family had fled already. So they were also taking shelter. And when they lifted the alarm, if you want, we went back to our

apartment.

>> Bill Benson: And part of lifting that alarm was to say Paris was an open city. What did that mean to say Paris is an open city? What did that mean?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That the French were not fighting. And after the Army ceased, the French soldiers were disbanded. Many of them had died. But there was no Army. And not only Paris, but a lot of the cities in the north were declared open cities. There was a contingent that the French would keep 100,000 soldiers in the non-occupied zone, in the so-called non-occupied zone, as I always say. They also saved our lives.

>> Bill Benson: Explain to us a little bit about what it meant, this demarcation line. You have this northern part occupied by the Germans, but they did not occupy at that time the southern part. That was what they called Vichy. What did that really mean?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Let me talk about something else before that. We were still in Paris. Things were getting really, really bad for the Jews. And in 1941 they were rounding up actually very important people but didn't have a job because you weren't allowed to have a job. But they rounded them up and sent them to Auschwitz. Then there was the terrible roundup. And we were in Paris. We were registered. And my parents had Jewish ID's. But they must have forgotten to ring our bell because they didn't come for us.

They wanted to round up 27,000 Jews in Paris. But thanks to some good policemen, people were warned. The police told them, don't sleep in your apartment tonight because there's going to be something very bad happening. So that's how close to 14,000 people, 4,000 children, were rounded up but not 27,000. And we were there.

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We were at home.

>> Bill Benson: And you were known. It was pure luck.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. We fled one week after. The end of July. No, actually it was almost two weeks. And the week after that they came for us.

>> Bill Benson: That was 1942. That's when your final time fleeing Paris. And as you just said, they actually came to your door. You learned that later, the following week you were gone.

So now you're fleeing for that third and final time. Where did you go?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My parents, thanks to that wonderful friend who gave us that, we slept there. My parents had their ID cards. We slept there. We took the first Metro in the morning which was 6:00 in the morning. I don't know if we traveled in the last compartment where the Jews were allowed to travel, the other compartments we weren't allowed. So I don't know. We got to the train station. And there's two young boys and the family, they were working in the underground. They had taken my parents' backpacks. My parents were not the kind of people walking around with a backpack. They had a backpack. That was their worldly goods. My sister and I had nothing. It was summer time. Imagine my parents had a sweater, maybe a change of shoes. I don't know.

So we got to the train station heading south because my parents knew that there were smugglers were going to be waiting for us at that border between occupied and non-occupied. And the two young men had taken the tickets. My parents

retrieved those and the backpacks and we got on the train.

It's something I remember very well, the train. We were sitting there. And my father became frantic. He went down the corridor and said, what's going on? The woman at the end said, oh, they are rounding up Jews on the other side of the track. So that was quite a miracle. They must have had their quota of Jews that morning.

>> Bill Benson: You were able to leave. Before you continue on, leading on the train, tell us about your parents' preparations to leave your place in France. Pretty remarkable.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. One flight up were the Germans. German soldiers. Actually knocked at our door and I opened the door. I was not supposed to. But maybe I wasn't wearing my Jewish star. Nothing happened to me.

One flight up from that was the wonderful woman whose husband had died in the First World War. So she hated the Germans. You can imagine. And she accepted to keep my parents' most important belongings from the apartment, wedding presents, silver things, one another. And I guess our dolls. Because our dolls were there, too, my sister and mine. We had our bicycles. We were not allowed to ride bicycles, of course. They were in the cellar.

My mother had a piano, a little piano. I don't know how it happened, but my father and the wonderful neighbor took the piano downstairs and put the piano in his apartment, the neighbors must have been away. Something was happening. No one said a word. And you know, it was the law, it was an order, you must denounce Jews and you must denounce people that help.

>> Bill Benson: And failure to do so carried a stiff price.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Also, I'm going take you back again. That was summer of 1942. But in November 1941, I believe, your mom received a letter from your grandmother.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, her name was Sophie, had tried to get out of Germany. She was desperate. She wanted to go to Shanghai. Her brother was in Brazil. She wanted to go to New York, there to get out. But she had a visa, number 18,000. And the American Consulate was of no help, as everybody knows. It's a history.

>> Bill Benson: 18?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: 18,000. So my grandmother was taken away from her apartment and was put in what is called a hidden house, a Jew house. And she had the little room. Terrible conditions. But she was able to write. Somehow, there was maybe censorship. But my mother received mail.

One day, it was November 1941, my mother got her letter saying that my grandmother couldn't live anymore and she was committing suicide. She never used the word suicide, but she said, I can't. And she said farewell.

>> Bill Benson: She made it clear.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. I think it was November 21. She took an overdose of sleeping pills. We know that from the criminal police that my daughter and niece researched about 10 years ago, 15 years ago, that she took an overdose of pills. And strangely enough,

she was buried in a Jewish cemetery. So they did those things. But you can imagine the shock.

>> Bill Benson: And you also shared with me something you wrote in your memoir. It's, quote, your grandmother's suicide probably triggered something in my mother's mind. Can you tell us what your mother thought about at that point?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. That happens later when we were in hiding. I was so afraid of the Germans. I was terribly afraid of those people in uniform. You know the word Nazi didn't exist for us. It was Germans. My mother told me and my sister -- that must have been when we were in hiding already. She told me, don't be afraid if the Germans come. I'll give you a little pill, and you will die right away and you will never suffer. And she told my sister. She told me. And the whole village knew that the Mendels family was going to commit suicide if the Gestapo by that time was coming.

I told my little friend. When I mentioned -- when we went back to the village -- what you told me? He remembered. The strange thing -- my sister and me, we had forgotten. I think a psychologist would say that this is something that you erase from your memory. And after that I remembered it, of course. But the village knew.

>> Bill Benson: Speaking of the village, tell us -- you escaped again on the train. There was a close call. And now you're going and end up at Le Got. Not quite yet.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: We got off the train. We had to change trains. Actually, my sister fell. She hurt. She said to this day she can feel on -- you know, on the hard cement. Lucky she didn't have a concussion. She would have ended up in the hospital, and then

Jewish, it would have been the end of us.

So we changed trains. We got to a little town. And the smugglers said that they couldn't take us that night. I don't know why. And two nights later we had an appointment in a cemetery, next to a tree, behind the church of that little village. I remember walking 10-kilometers, about six miles. It was hot. It was August 1, 1942. And we got there and we were meeting them at midnight. And we started walking through the woods. I don't remember. There was grass, I think. But I could see the Germans. They were on the right. We were sort of on the left. I could see the tips of their cigarettes. And my mother wrote in our baby journal, my father wrote, that there was a motorcycle coming through. But fortunately there were no dogs, because those dogs were trained to catch people.

At one time, one of the smugglers said, "go down on your knees! Go down on the ground!" Which we did. My sister at that time said, "I have to go pee-pee." It sounds funny, but if they had heard us.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: And another thing. I'm wearing it today. My parents carried heavy gold ring. I never wear it. But this was -- there's a saying in French, and in English, you say, "Your money or your life." And my parents were optimistic. Said we give you gold, give us our life.

>> Bill Benson: That was intended to be your way out if you should get apprehended.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I don't think it would have happened. Anyway, one of the smugglers got ahead. He was supposed to signal to us that everything was clear. And the

other one put my sister and me on the bicycle. And my parents were running behind. We got to the end of the place. It was the so-called -- I always say so-called free zone. There was a French soldier. He said -- it's a military expression, "Who goes there?" And the French soldier took us in for the night.

The next morning they say -- they took us to the town, a -- here you have the Governor's house, the state, and then you have a city.

>> Bill Benson: Counties and cities.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Something like that. What to do? They left us there. So they checked into a hotel. But in hotel, you have to check, give your name. And this was a war. I suppose the hotel keeper knew that we were Jews. My parents ID. Anyway, a knock at the door. It was 8:00 p.m. My parents were arrested. They were taken to the police station. They were interrogated. That's when they had to say that they were of the Jewish race. My father said he had 4,000 francs with him. My mother said she has 4,000 francs on her. We don't remember if we stayed in the hotel alone or if we went with them. My father declared that he had 25,000 francs with a friend in eastern France.

Perhaps, I can't say probably, perhaps that was the money from his firm that his good associate had kept for him. And perhaps that saved us.

My parents then were taken to "the perfect Jew," the main state headquarters. And my parents were interrogated again. They were held for one month, the whole month of August. We stayed in the popular soup kitchen. I don't remember --

>> Bill Benson: Were you with them during that time?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. They could sleep with us. But they had to report every day. And they didn't know their fate. Because it was up to each Governor, if you want, to either put the foreign Jews in a camp, in an internment camp, or in that -- and that led to the concentration camp -- or to let them loose and live in hiding, which is miraculously what happened to us.

They told us -- it was late August or early September -- go and find a place where you can go and hide. But we were under watch. And that's where we ended up in that little village. They accepted that. We were in the two rooms upstairs in that little village of Le Got.

>> Bill Benson: Just so the audience understands, this is still what they called the unoccupied part of France. So the Germans hadn't directly occupied it. But nonetheless you had to be registered. You were known. So the authorities knew that you were a Jewish family living in this little village.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That's right. We were under the watch all the way to Vichy. They could come any day. But probably one of the things that saved us, we were the only Jewish family in that village. There were Jews that were rounded up all around. But in that tiny village, 29 houses, we were the only ones.

But talking about unoccupied zone, you know, the Americans landed in November 1942. Hitler was furious. Then occupy all of France. So we had two and a half months of respite. Hitler chose November 11, which is the day for World War I.

>> Bill Benson: All around you at that point.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Exactly.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what your life was like in Le Got.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, there was no water. There was no electricity. There were no toilets. My sister and I went to get the water out of the pump, and my father devised a little pale which he emptied every morning. There was no toilet paper, of course. And my father said, but there are some vine leaves. So we picked a vine leaf, my sister and I. I remember going to get the water, and we had to -- there was still a train going there. I was so scared. But we crossed over the rails. We brought back water. There was an ancient stove. My mother learned to make some kind of black soap. We had a basin. And the whole family took a bath, if you want, one after the other, my sister, me, my father, my mother. One after the other we could wash once a week.

Actually, there were rabbits there. I remember that my father -- my parents were killing the rabbits to have food. So you have to skin the rabbit. And I had never seen a skinny rabbit. And it was -- I remember that clearly.

Also, my mother was cutting the wood so she could heat up the ancient stove. And she said, you know, she had to be very careful because she was a chemist. She didn't want to cut -- yeah. But all of France was occupied. The trucks with the Germans were going by. I was always a curious child. I opened the thing. My mother, "Go down on your knees!" They could have shot.

>> Bill Benson: Upstairs looking through the windows.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. The strange thing, I've been thinking of it recently, my

parents sent my sister and me to that little [Inaudible], you know, the teacher, a wonderful person, and his wife, they knew us by our first name. I don't know if they knew our last name, Mendels, which is a Jewish name. My sister remembers that we were supposed to say Frederick. Manuela Frederick, Jacqueline Frederick. I know that my sister carried a little pouch on her with the name of our family in California and in New York. And we both learned that by heart so in case my parents were deported and we stayed alive that we would know where to communicate to.

>> Bill Benson: An address in California and New York?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline, you would be in this village for more than two years. Tell us about it.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My mother became pregnant. She didn't tell us until a few months before. She had no pregnancy clothes. She was wearing some kind of a night gown. I remember going up the hill -- my parents had those temporary travel permits that I brought here, where it say drift. We were allowed to travel once a week. But it said Jew.

>> Bill Benson: Right there.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. So my parents could be arrested.

Anyway, we were pushing my mother up the hill. She had to go, I don't know, to the dentist, to the doctor. She managed. Must have been near the end of the pregnancy. My sister and I were pushing her. Then she was supposed to give birth. There was some kind of a midwife that was supposed to come. And the one night there was a

commotion. My sister and I were sharing a bed. We heard the noise. The neighbor who lived downstairs, a very nice woman, said go back to sleep, go back to sleep. My mother had to be transported. It was a breeched baby. She was bleeding terribly. There was no way she could give birth right there and then. She was transported to a clinic where the doctor, wonderful doctor, was treating the Germans on one side and the farmers and my mother, Jewish woman, on the other side. And my brother was born.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things you know I'm going to ask you, because I look forward to asking you this, when your brother is born and your mother -- I think she almost died during the time. It was a terrible, difficult time. Jacqueline, sisters, Manuela, and your brother is named Franklin. Why?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Because the only hope of survival for my parents was, as you may guess, Franklin Roosevelt at that time. My parents said Franklin Roosevelt is going to save us. And you know, in the summer of 1943, a terrible, terrible time. People were rounded up right and left. And even though we didn't have a radio, you knew the news. My parents knew, my mother certainly knew, since her mother's suicide, that there were horrible things happening east and they said, you know, the Americans are going to save us. They were hoping that. And that's why every Sunday morning my parents lifted their glass, and they said -- I don't know why I'm crying so much today. It means, in French, until next Sunday. That's because my parents said let's be alive another week. Let's be alive another Sunday. So every Sunday they lifted their glass. I don't know what they had, water, something in their glass. And they were wishing for another week of life.

>> Bill Benson: That's the title of your memoir.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes, it is.

>> Bill Benson: You told me about the mayor of the neighboring village.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: He was very important to you.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes, he was. He was. Certainly. The mayor saved our lives many times. He got false papers for my parents. That card actually was to get food tickets. It had to be stamped every three months. My parents were not allowed to go to that town. So it was --

>> Bill Benson: It was a catch 22. You're supposed to get it validated, but you're not allowed to go there.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Not allowed to go. He went. It was 30-kilometers on his bicycle. He had other things to do. He was heavily involved in the underground, and he had a lot of false papers for other people, too. He got false ID for my parents. I donated them to the museum. I don't even think my parents used them.

I asked the historian recently, actually, in France. He said, you know you were registered. What's the point of having false papers? They knew exactly who you were and where you were. So our real name.

But the mayor -- my sister and I wanted -- wanted to put us in a convent which was probably 10, 12-kilometers away. We were going to go by foot, of course. We prepared our little suitcase, my sister and I. And then there was word that it was too

dangerous to travel on those tiny roads, actually. Because they were -- there were roundups. So we didn't go. I think my sister and I were disappointed. But what happened is the convent was raided later.

>> Bill Benson: Where you might have gone.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Exactly.

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline, you're in this little village. You're the only Jews there. The fact that you're Jewish is known in that town. Germans are everywhere. It's now fully occupied. Why do you think you were not denounced?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Those people in that area of France, they're strong republicans in the French sense of the word, which means they were not realists, they were not on the right. They were for the republic. They were thinking of a good government again. And also so many of them had lost a father, a husband, a son in World War I. Let's not forget, 1918, 1940, you know, it's hardly a generation.

And let me tell you something else that happened. My brother almost died. He was so -- I have a photo of my brother. His legs were like a pin. Miraculously -- my mother was too sick to breast-feed. The cow's milk that there was didn't agree with him. So he was crying. The nurse said, oh, he's a bad baby. Miraculously my father found Nestle Condensed Milk. And my feeling is that -- you know, it's sweet milk that you dilute. And it will agree with you. My feeling because the Americans landed in Morocco, Nigeria, somehow that was part of their -- the military ration.

>> Bill Benson: The c-rations.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: C-rations, sorry. Somehow that milk got to our little hole there.

And it agreed with my brother. And I was licking the empty can. Tasted so good.

>> Bill Benson: You remember that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Oh, yes. It was sweet, you know? Oh, it was wonderful. We didn't have sweets.

>> Bill Benson: For you, as still pretty much a little girl, having been through some really scary times that you were well aware of, bombings in Paris, fleeing Germans, being very afraid of the Germans, what do you think your life was for you in that village? Did you feel at any point relatively safe there? Do you remember if it was just for you and your sister constant fear? Or as a child was there a certain comfort being there with your parents? They must have been terrified every day. Did you feel their fear?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No. My parents were hiding their fear. They probably didn't spend too many nights sleeping. It was, of course, frightful every day, every night for them. But for us they just told us – well, when we left, anyway, oh, we're going on vacation. That was August. And then we took it matter of fact. We stayed in the village. Although in my journal I wrote, "Oh, I hope we can go back to Paris soon." But my sister and I -- oh, there was no paper. We wrote on chalk on the boards. What do you call that? There was no paper. At school.

>> Bill Benson: Like a chalkboard.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. We ate -- a woman behind the school. There were worms in our food, like some kind of pate but worse. We came home. We don't want to eat there. So

we had chestnuts. That's an area of France where there were chestnuts. She made puree of chestnuts, butter chestnuts. We ate a lot of chestnuts. So once I was -- the little girl, and the third one came. I will never forget that. She said, "Aren't you ashamed to play with a Jew who is dirty like a pig in the stable?" Those words she said. I ran home and I said --

>> Bill Benson: Otherwise, I think you said that you were treated kindly in that village.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Yes. Of course, my father, well, there was a wonderful -- the mayor was wonderful, informed my parents every time we had to go in the woods. We slept in the chicken coop.

>> Bill Benson: When German patrols were coming, you would have to hide.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. And once my father was hiding for three days. Then he came back. I got scared. I didn't think -- and my father was hiding. He was so-called working for the farmer who was also wonderful. But he was really hiding all the time in a cellar, in terrible conditions. And he sometimes -- [Inaudible] my sister and I had each other. I think that really saved us. As I said, my parents were hiding their fears. My mother apparently never left those two rooms. So she stayed indoors most of the time. She was so scared.

And the Gestapo came, by the way, one day and surrounded the house. But they didn't come for us. They came for the man downstairs who was a worker on the train, a railroad man, young man.

>> Bill Benson: Not Jewish.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No, no, no, no. It had been announced that he was working for the underground. They had the gun under him. And then they took him to the prison. Three

weeks. We learned that many years later. And instead of saying don't take me, don't kill me, take the Jews upstairs --

>> Bill Benson: He didn't do that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: You know, those Gestapo people, I think there were five Gestapo surrounding the house, they were so dumb. They didn't go upstairs. They should have said, there's a stair there. They could have come upstairs. They didn't.

>> Bill Benson: Another miracle.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Our life of survival was daily. Daily.

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline, the allies landed at Normandy on D-Day in June 1944. Paris was liberated soon after. After the liberation of Paris, of course, the war would continue until May of 1945. But Paris was liberated. Your father decided it was time go -- to go back to Paris again. Tell us about that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: November 1944. Paris was liberated on the 25th of August 1944. And my parents heard about that. My father shortly after said, "I have to go back and see what's happening." I don't know how he did it. He went in November 1944. I don't know. He walked. I don't know if he took his bicycle. I have no idea. But he got to Paris. The apartment was empty because the Germans had fled, of course. And our furniture was here and there, but he was able to get a dresser, a bed. My parents' mattress had been slit open. They were probably looking for money hidden. And later, actually, I said, well, where are my toys? My mother said, you're too big now, don't worry about the toys. You'll have other occupations. So he made it.

>> Bill Benson: And your apartment had been requisitioned by German troops. Right?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: They had occupied your house.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes, the whole time. And then my father found out his business was inexistent. There was nothing. But he came back to the village and the five of us -- by that time we were five people with my baby brother. We managed to get back to Paris. And there was quite an ordeal. You might imagine if you have seen movies the trip took three days. And now it takes three hours so we had to change trains I don't know how many times. I don't know about my brother -- I know that somebody gave milk for my brother at one change.

And when we got to Paris -- [Inaudible] I'm still in touch with their children. We are very good friends. I remember especially the young one, who was my age -- who is my age. Eventually we got back to our apartment. My sister and I got four-year scholarship to a wonderful private school whose head was a hero in the underground. So we would learn what we hadn't learned all of those years.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things I wanted to ask you about, you had told me when your -- tell us about when your father heard the news that the allies had landed at Normandy.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My father that day was not in his hiding cellar. It was June. As you know, D-Day, and he was in a tree picking cherries. It was a cherry tree. When he heard the news from the farmer or the farmer's wife, he fell from the tree. It was such news. You know? Such wonderful news. It was not the end of the world. It was for my parents the beginning of the end.

>> Bill Benson: So in Paris, you're going to go to school. That's when you really took up music with a passion.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Oh, music.

>> Bill Benson: Say a little about it.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Of course my parents were miserable, especially after finding that everybody was dead. But my mother wanted us to continue the music trend in our family. My sister started the violin. And then -- and I started the piano. I was very bad at the piano. I couldn't coordinate my two hands. I learned to read music, but I couldn't play. Then my mother said, how about the cello? I had no idea. So the violin teacher, my mother found a teacher. I was playing on a 3/4 size then. I came home that day. And when my father came home, I said, listen to that. I played open strings. A, D, G, C. I said, isn't that beautiful? And that was my first love.

>> Bill Benson: And you have continued that passion throughout the rest of your life.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right.

>> Bill Benson: When I first met you, you had believed and said -- you believed that 13 members of your extended family had not survived the Holocaust. Now you know it's over 200. Tell us about learning about such a dramatically different number. That's fairly recently that you learned that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. My father started getting in touch with the Red Cross. He was so sure that the other members of the family had survived because we had survived. And then he found out his mother, sister, brother, their spouses, his cousins, everybody had

perished. And then he gave up. He said there's no point. They're all dead. Yeah, there were 13, 15 -- [Inaudible]

While I was writing my memoirs, my brother who unfortunately is not alive, has a daughter, had a daughter, Jessica Mendels, who has become my chief editor. She started doing research about my father's village -- no, not village, town, in the eastern part of France -- eastern part of Holland. I'm sorry. She discovered that there is a man there who did genealogy study. So she found that in our extended family there are over 200 Mendels that were deported. Mostly the Dutch ones were deported, Auschwitz. I don't want to name all the camps. But, yeah. And nobody in our family -- some concentration camps. It was a little girl, Marion, [Inaudible] so nobody. I'm relieved that my parents died about 20 years ago now and that they never knew.

>> Bill Benson: Didn't know the extent of it.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: They just gave up.

>> Bill Benson: Speaking of rebuilding. You would eventually, of course, come to the United States. How did that happen? I think Richard figures in there somewhere.

[Laughter]

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Well, Richard -- had a fellowship from the French government to study French foreign policy or colonial policy at that time. I had a cousin who had survived. She was in California. She came to work on her French. She was Dutch like we were. Her parents had been deported. She and her sister had gone to California, were adopted there. And she came one year in Paris. And that was the year. She said, tonight

there is -- why don't we go in disguise or something and go to the event. So my sister was disguised as a Japanese girl. I was dressed as a Hawaiian. I made the costume myself. And my cousin was dressed as a little Dutch girl. We went. And that's when I met my husband.

Are you awake?

[Laughter]

He met me. I didn't meet him. He met me.

>> The rest is history.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: And quite a history it is, I might add. We're going to wrap up in just a couple of minutes. I think we have time for a couple of questions from our audience, though. I think just a couple. We have microphones. If you have a question, please wait for the mic to be handed to you. I may repeat the question just to make sure everybody in the room hears it, including Jacqueline. But I may not have to do that. Try to make the questions as brief as you can.

And Jacqueline will respond.

Anybody have a question?

Yes, sir? A bold fellow here. Wait until we get the mic, that way we pick it up on the tape as well.

>> I was just curious. When the allied forces actually defeated Hitler, how was the reaction of your parents? What kind of mood did that set with the family?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I don't understand.

>> When he fell out of the tree when he heard the allied landed, how about when Hitler was

defeated?

>> Bill Benson: When the war was over.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: We were in Paris by that time in 1945. And I know people were dancing in the streets. It was a wonderful joy all over. That's when my father thought that the family in Holland would be able to rejoice also.

>> Bill Benson: I've wondered, Jacqueline, if even though Paris was liberated in August of 1944 and you were able to sort of resume a life there, with the war continuing until the following late spring, early summer of 1945, if there was fear that the Germans could return, if there was an ongoing fear of what if the tide shifts again. I wondered about that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I couldn't answer that. I was 10 years old. I was 9 years old when we went back. I was interested in schooling. I never talked about the war years, by the way, never. Never. Until not 20 years ago. And I don't know about my parents. All I know is they wanted to rebuild. They wanted to look forward.

The peril was the reds, the Soviets. Some of my parents' friends actually left Paris and moved to Canada and tried to convince my parents to move to Canada. My father had a cousin in Tel Aviv, what was Palestine. But my parents decided to stay in Paris.

>> Bill Benson: They wanted to stay in France. They stayed.

Another question. One right here.

>> You were such a young child when all of this happened. And I'd like to get an understanding of how it made sense to you why the Germans were doing what they were

doing. How did your parents explain what was happening? Did you understand the level of danger?

Do you understand what I'm trying to get at?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes, I am. I understand you. All I knew is that the Germans were bad people, and I was scared. That's about it.

When we fled, because it was summer and vacation, my sister and I were just so terribly happy. We could go on vacation. It didn't happen every year, you know. Conditions were difficult. And then everything went like a ball rolling. So we go to school, we have a little life there. I guess we were -- you know, children were much more innocent in those days. There was no radio, television, or news, anything. So we were not aware. And my parents were hiding all the time.

>> Bill Benson: Completely protected you in that regard.

We have time for one more, maybe two. A question about what happened to your sister.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My sister is alive and well. She also married an American. She is a grandmother of four little children. She lives in Atlanta. And in years past she has come and joined us. We're on the phone every day, on Skype every day or she's coming on vacation with me. She's a very happy person right now. I hope it continues for many years.

>> Bill Benson: Right here to the gentleman in the blue.

The question is, how much did your parents -- did they talk about what they went through after the war?

**ROUGH DRAFT TRANSCRIPT
NOT A VERBATIM RECORD**

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: When I asked my mother, all she was able to say, "It was hard." She never wanted to talk. And I'm not sure how much I asked my father because he was so busy. He was selling jam from door to door to try and make some money. And my parents with their little jewelry they had at the national pawnshop. And we were wearing hand-me-down American clothes. Life was so tough. I guess he didn't have time, and we probably didn't ask.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to close the program in a couple of moments, turn back to Jacqueline to do that. Thank you all for being here. I want to remind you that we have First Person programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We hope you can return some time.

It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. So with that I'm going to turn back to Jacqueline to close the program. And when she's finished -- you can stay for a few minutes? So for people who didn't get their questions answered, I -- and I apologize -- a chance to ask it, please come down and meet Jacqueline, ask her other questions. She has amazing documents that really are hard to see from up here if you want to look at any of them. I think you'll find her absolutely willing to stand and chat with you.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. You heard a minuscule sample of the horrors of World War II and of the genocide which was the worst thing in humanity probably. And when I talk, and I

talk a lot to various audiences, I always say, especially to the young generation, to try and do some good because here we are to bear witness. But we're not going to be around, my generation, forever, and it's up to the younger people to try and do good, to try and prevent further genocides.

We know on this planet there are some horrible things happening. I see some young heads there, in the green uniform. You have to choose your future career. And if you can choose something where you will do good, whatever field it is, that's what you should do so that there won't be another genocide like that one.

[Applause]

[The presentation ended at 1:58 p.m.]