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

REMOTE CART

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning and *welcome* to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I'm the host of the Museum's public program *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our 15th year of the *First Person* program and our *First Person* today is Jacqueline Mendels Birn whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2014 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation with additional funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

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 of our *First Person* guests serves as volunteers here at this museum. Our program will continue twice weekly through mid-August.

The Museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests. Anyone interested in keeping touch with the Museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card in the program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater when we finish our program. In doing so you will also receive an electronic copy of Jacqueline's biography so you can remember and share her testimony after you leave here today.

Jacqueline will share with us her *First Person* account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows at the end of our 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 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. Jacqueline was 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 Mendels with two of her three children: Manuela and Jacqueline. Jacqueline is on the right. Ellen was born in Hamburg, Germany. The Mendels lived in Paris and life was quite normal until World War II began.

This is a birthday card 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, August 1944, the family resumed their life in Paris. From left to right are Manuela, Jacqueline, 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. She moved to the United States and married 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 lived in many places such as Helsinki, Toronto, Hong Kong, Malta, 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 French-speaking countries. 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 13-year-old granddaughter whom they enjoy visiting in Toronto where she lives. At the moment, however, she is attending school in Italy where her parents are on a sabbatical. Jacqueline and Richard live in Bethesda, Maryland.

Continuing a family tradition, Jacqueline is an accomplished musician. She is presently the First Cellist Emeritus for the McClain Symphony in Virginia. She is 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. For the past five years, her Jewish quartet has played at an event here at this museum memorializing the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27.

As a member of the museum's Speaker's Bureau, Jacqueline speaks often about her Holocaust experience both in the museum and in other settings. She has spoken at such places as the National Security Agency, universities like Colby College in Maine and many others and local Catholic schools. She will speak this fall to a class at George Washington

University here in the District of Columbia, as well as to an association of retired U.S. diplomatic and office officials. Just this past Monday she spoke by Skype to the French-speaking school her granddaughter is attending in Naples.

Jacqueline's volunteer work includes serving as a tour guide for the Permanent Exhibition and editing documents written in French and interpreting for groups of French-speaking Holocaust survivors who visit the Museum. She is working with 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 and connect them with any surviving family members or friends. Jacqueline interviews those identified who are French-speaking. The "Remember Me" project has had some remarkable successes.

She is also a contributor to "Echoes of Memory," a collection of writings by survivors associated with this museum. Jacqueline's memoir, "A Dimanche Prochain: Memoir of Survival in World War II France," was published in 2013. Following today's program she will be available to sign copies of her book.

With that I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Jacqueline Mendels Birn.

[Applause]

Jacqueline, thank you so much for joining us and for being willing to be our *First Person* today. You have so much to tell us in one short hour, so we'll get started.

Let's begin, first, with you telling us a little bit about your family in your own early

years before Hitler annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938 and, of course, I know you were so young, so you really are recounting what you've learned from your family and others.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. Well, in my book there is a photo of my sister and me at the beach. We went to north of France, facing England. And all I know is that the water was so cold. It was freezing. I was afraid of the sea. But otherwise all I know is from my parents who kept a journal for my sister and me and later on for my brother. She wrote regularly in the journal. Otherwise I have no recollection until World War II.

>> Bill Benson: What were your parents' nationalities?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My father was Dutch. They had been Dutch for centuries. My father came from a town called Angouleme. On the Permanent Exhibition on the wall there is the town with all the Jews that were murdered. So he was Dutch. He never became naturalized French.

I was born -- I was born in Paris. So was my sister. And I thought I was French, but actually the French government didn't accept us as French until 1947. Something I found out just recently.

And my mother was from Hamburg, Germany. They had been there for centuries as well. I'm not sure if you're going to see that photo, but my grandmother and great grandmother, and great, great grandmother, were from Hamburg as well.

>> Bill Benson: How large was your extended family?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: It was large on my father's side, not on my mother's side who was an only child. My father, yes. And something that my niece, Jessica, my brother's

daughter, found out in great detail is that we have over 200 members of my Dutch family that were murdered.

>> Bill Benson: 200 that were murdered. What was your father's business during those early years of your life?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My father came to Paris in 1926. He was 21 years old. A high school friend of his in Holland, in Amsterdam, told him that there was an opening. My father had done some training in a bank, so he joined his friend in his business. He was not a merchant, he was a businessman importing and exporting food, specialty foods, usually. Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: And do you know what their life was like in those years before the war? Was it a comfortable life?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: It was a middle class Jewish family, in the suburbs just on the edge of Paris, on the southeast. Very close to the zoo. I remember I loved going to the zoo, which, of course, with the war I was not allowed. I loved the monkeys especially. That I remember.

>> Bill Benson: After Hitler annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia, your parents left Paris with you and your sister for a short time. Tell us what you can about that and about the events that occurred before the war actually began with Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Every time there was a danger, and especially with the declaration of war, Germany invaded Poland, my parents left with us, left Paris. Actually, we left Paris I think three times before the final leaving.

When Germany invaded Poland, because France and England had an alliance with Poland they were obligated to, by the treaties, to invade Poland. But nothing happened. And that's what was called in English the phony war, phony, funny, and in French if anybody speaks French, [Speaking French], the funny war.

>> Bill Benson: And that was the period between when Germany invaded Poland and the Low Countries were invaded in May.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That was later, in 39. And there was an alliance between Germany and the Soviet Union. They divided Poland. It was already pretty horrible for the Jews there.

>> Bill Benson: They called it the funny or phony war because nothing was really happening. Right?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. The French soldiers were mobilized but nothing was happening. So my parents left and then came back. But then Hitler was not satisfied and decided to invade, in 1940, Luxemburg. If you see a map of Europe, Luxemburg, Belgium, Holland, those countries were supposedly neutral. And then France in June 1940. And that was the big exodus. We left.

>> Bill Benson: Before we come to the big exodus when you left for that third time, in July of 1939, I think your grandfather died in Holland. Your father was not able to attend his funeral, if I recall. Why was that?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No. He was able, but he went alone. There was a big depression in America. There was a big depression, economic depression, in France, too.

And I suppose it was because there was really not enough money for the four of us to go. So my father went alone. And in my journal it says how sad he was, first of all because his father died -- his name was Emmanuel Mandels -- but also because the rest of the family couldn't join him. So collecting that from the journal and in my book I say it was a blessing that my grandfather died because he didn't have to suffer what happened to his wife, my grandmother, who was murdered.

>> Bill Benson: You mentioned that you ended up leaving Paris about three times. And, of course, the last time during the exodus. We'll talk about that in a moment. Do you know why your parents, like after war broke out in September 1939, why they left Paris but would return? Why would they return?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Because my father had to make a living.

>> Bill Benson: Go back to his job.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And once Germany invaded the Low Countries and invaded France in May 1940, full-blown war is on in France at that point. So you and your family joined literally millions of French and Parisians particularly in exiting Paris and heading south.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: What do you remember of that?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I remember that I had my doll. And my sister had her doll. I know from the journal that my father had his typewriter and my mother had her sewing machine. And my parents wrote in my journal, well, with those two instruments of work, we

can always make a living somewhere.

So my father was able to get a little van from his business. We were very lucky that we drove I don't know how many hours, enough gasoline. But there is another survivor, who is French -- I don't know if he's in the audience today. He just told me the other day that he was in the exodus -- he's about two years younger than I am -- and that his whole family was bombed and he lost a large part of his family. We were not hit by bombs. One of the many, many miracles.

My father must have taken little side roads. And then it was evening. He knocked at the door. Said could we spend the night. And those people were so wonderful. And they gave us their dining room and another room, and we ended up spending three weeks there. And then we went back to Paris. Why? Because my father said -- well, they had just closed the door of the apartment in Paris and my father said, “I have to make a living.”

And on the way back, my father saw the northern part of France was occupied, of course. That was the Armistice between Hitler and Petain. And my father wrote in my journal or in an interview later on that he saw a contingent of Senegalen soldiers being beaten by German soldiers. And my father wrote that it had given him the full taste of what was going to happen to us.

>> Bill Benson: Seeing the Germans beating the Senegalen soldiers.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: At one point I think your parents considered leaving for a Dutch colony but they didn't do so. Why was that?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: By the time they made up their mind, it was -- what was the other colony? Well, men were not allowed to leave France. My father at that time said, "We are either going to live together or die together."

>> Bill Benson: So he kept everybody together.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: But another thing. I have that in my book; that my father wrote to his cousin who had moved to Palestine at that time; that he was going to join the Dutch free forces in England. He wrote to his cousin on a postcard, which I have, saying -- and I don't know what Ellen, my mother, is going to do with the two little girls. But he felt it was his duty. And then he couldn't because with the war he couldn't get out. Right.

>> Bill Benson: So once the Germans attacked Paris -- I think you and your sister actually remember some of that. I think you remember going down into shelters.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Oh, yes. And the Germans were there, too, right next to us. And my father -- said, "Don't be afraid -- it's like a storm. “Don't be afraid of that big noise."

>> Bill Benson: Describe for us a little bit so we all understand what Vichy, France, was. What that demarcation line meant so that when you fled Paris and headed towards Vichy, France, what did that actually mean?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, from the Jews it meant that we were not allowed to cross again the north -- the occupied zone where the Germans were in full force and the south which I always say was the so-called unoccupied zone or the so-called free zone, settled in Vichy, which is a lovely town but that's where the government -- the free France government was. There were not exactly strict measures against the Jews yet.

>> Bill Benson: Yet.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: So that Armistice was signed. It didn't last very long. But for the moment, that's where it was. But Jews were not allowed to cross the demarcation line. You needed a visa. Jews, of course, were not allowed to get -- we were not allowed to live, period, and certainly not to get a permit to leave Paris and that area and go into the so-called free zone.

>> Bill Benson: You would remain in Paris until, I believe, the summer of 1942.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: That's when your parents arranged for the four of you to leave Paris for Vichy, France. Tell us what the events were, to the extent you know, that led up to their decision in July 1942 that we now really have to leave Paris.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My parents' friends kept on telling them -- first they told my parents why don't you get baptized and become Catholic, which was totally irrelevant because my parents, grandparents, great -- everybody was Jewish. That was senseless.

What it was is there were measures against the Jews right after 1940, right in 1940 when the Germans were in Paris. First of all, Jews are to register as Jews at the City Hall. And many years after the war France said: Why did you register? And my father said we're going to obey the law and they're going to leave us alone. So we were fully registered. My parents didn't have false paper on their I.D. card that everybody had to have. There was a big stamp in capital letters, in red saying "JEWS."

>> Bill Benson: "JEWS" stamped on the I.D. card.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: And there was a lot of police. The French police was cooperating very nicely with the Germans. They could ask for your papers. If my father or mother had given papers, that would have been the end of us. We children didn't have I.D. cards. I guess we were too young. But we couldn't go to the zoo. We couldn't go to the park. We couldn't ride our bikes. My sister started to take swimming lessons; she couldn't. All kinds of measures.

Paris has those little parks called square. The Jews could only go shopping at the end of the day when there was no food left because all the food -- I don't know if you know that all the food was sent to Germany for the soldiers, for the families; husbands or children or sons or fathers were in the war. So there was very little food right in the beginning. But the merchants in our neighborhood knew my parents. From 5:00 to 7:00 my parents were allowed to go. There was always a little food left for us.

>> Bill Benson: They would save a little for you.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. And in the school they gave us powdered milk. It tasted terrible. I can still taste it. And at recess, we had to drink it. So I had to drink it. So I drank it. It was food.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely. What happened to your father's business?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Oh. That was another law. That Jews were not allowed -- they were not allowed to be doctors, to be dentists, to be working for the government -- what you call in America federal employees -- and then in 1941, businessmen.

So my father had to give up his business; in other words, no income. His associate

was a very nice man. And my father used to go -- I believe he went by bicycle. Although he was not allowed to use a bicycle, but taking the Metro was very dangerous. Jews were in the last car in the Metro. And the police could come at any time.

>> Bill Benson: And just round people up.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. And whenever there was a ring of the bell -- a ring at the door, he used to hide in the back; another miracle, like many. Nobody came when he was there. And he was sort of supervising what was going on. He was given a little money. But we were very short of money.

>> Bill Benson: In November 1941, I believe, your mother received a farewell letter from her mother, your grandmother. Tell us about that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. That's very difficult for me. My mother received a letter despite the censorship. And my grandmother, my grandmother from Hamburg, was saying farewell. She never used the word suicide, but, indeed, she committed suicide. She received the order to report the next morning. She saw all her friends, her apartment had been taken. She was what's called a "Jew house" not a ghetto, but the Jews were -- from Hamburg were all rounded up there, waiting to be deported. And she realized that it was happening. So she took an overdose.

My daughter went -- about 15 years ago, she found out all of that information. And the letter, which is in my book, says farewell. But she never told us. I don't remember -- I think I knew that my grandmother had died. I know after the war my mother on the anniversary of her mother always had an azalea on the piano with her photo. That's really how I knew.

>> Bill Benson: And Jacqueline, around that time, your mother got a strange if not really bizarre call from someone at the German Embassy asking her to meet with them. Would you mind saying a little bit about that?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. I know very little, but my mother mentioned that there was a good person at the German Embassy who wanted to meet her. And my mother was so afraid to meet him, but she went. And my father went sort of in another cafe. He had money from my grandmother and the ring, which my sister has now. So that was strange, but that was some money that probably helped us to escape afterwards.

>> Bill Benson: And somehow your grandmother had been able to get that through the German Embassy to get to you. Amazing.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Absolutely. Absolutely. Some things are so strange.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your dad buying a cheap radio.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. It was the law that Jews could not keep their radio because the rumor was that Jews could understand all kinds of foreign languages and would tell about what was happening to the German armies. So all Jews had to give their radio to City Hall. So my father bought a cheap radio, gave it to the City Hall, and kept, for the moment, our good radio. Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: That was very clever.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, my father was very smart.

>> Bill Benson: In the spring of 1942, Jews began, were ordered, to start wearing the Jewish star. Tell us how your mother handled that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Right here. On a Sunday morning. My mother -- it was the law; every Jew had to buy three Jewish stars with our tickets, our clothing tickets.

>> Bill Benson: With your clothing ration, you had to buy the stars.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. So she sewed it on. My reflection was a little bizarre maybe to hear today. I said, "Oh, it's so pretty, this yellow star on my green sweater." And somebody --

>> Bill Benson: You were a little girl.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Somebody that I interviewed recently in that project “Remember Me” said, “Oh, I remember that Sunday morning. I was wearing a red dress. I told my mother, it's so pretty, yellow on my red dress.” So I was not the only one to make that reflection. Yeah.

And I didn't -- ok. And my sister, though, 20 months older, was called to the head of her class and the teacher said to the class you have to be very nice to this little girl because she's living in very difficult times. And my sister remembers.

>> Bill Benson: After a massive roundup in Paris of Jews in 1942, in the summer of 1942 is when your parents made the decision to leave for the final time. Tell us about that roundup.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That roundup is called the Vel’ d’Hiv. It was an arena on a small sort of west side of Paris. It's called by that time because that was that infamous roundup of mostly foreign Jews. And we were foreign Jews. And mostly from the center of Paris. It was an order emanating from Germany but done by the French police. They wanted to round up 27,000 Jews. And actually they rounded up 17. And that's because there was good police

who warned the people. And I have some friends my age who said that's when my parents and my mother and my father didn't sleep in their apartment that night. They went to some very good neighbors, and that saved them.

>> Bill Benson: Otherwise the police came to their home to get them.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. They forgot us. They forgot to ring our bell although we were registered. They went all over our neighborhood. And they came two weeks after we fled. They didn't come that day. Those two days.

>> Bill Benson: Another miracle, as you say.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: So with that, your parents are going to get you out of Paris. You told me that they planned the departure and handled it very quietly. Tell us about that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Well, first of all, we had Germans living upstairs from us. And that was not very good. But upstairs from the Germans was a wonderful lady, Madam Deneux, who hated the Germans because her husband died from the mustard gas in the First World War. She wanted to help us, which was very dangerous because you were not allowed to help Jews. I mean, this was -- she could have been put in prison. It's strange; today I'm wearing this scarf which she gave me for my wedding. That comes a long, long way.

So anyway, my parents at night brought things that were valuable to them: some paintings, some things from my grandmother. I don't know, that ring that I wear which is from my grandmother, I don't know if she left it with that lady, Madam Deneux. And her son, Pierre, a great help. He and his friend, they were 15 years old and they were working in the

underground. They were doing --

>> Bill Benson: 15 years old in the underground.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: They were doing very dangerous things. He bought train tickets for us. And he bought -- he took my parents' backpacks. Imagine, my parents' livelihood was in two backpacks. They were not used to carrying backpacks.

Anyway, so we were not caught on that roundup. My father had secured two -- you call them smugglers these days. In French it's passeur. They had to trust them. They didn't have any other choice. They were about 20 years old. My father had to pay them. I don't know exactly if it was the money from my grandmother. I have no idea. So it was arranged that we were going to meet at the demarcation line.

And we spent the last night at those wonderful friends who also risked their lives because they were helping Jews. I remember playing pillow fights with the little girl, who is still alive. We see them every time we go to Paris.

And Madam Paris, was her name, was a very Catholic woman, gave us, my sister and me and my mother -- I don't know my father -- a Catholic medal. This is not -- I don't know -- this is Notre Dame de Lourdes. Lourdes was a place in the 19th Century, and she said this will maybe help you. And to this day I have my medal.

>> Bill Benson: Once you leave Paris, you find your way to Le Got. Tell us how you got there.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That was quite an adventure to get there because we took the Metro early in the morning. There was no police. Another miracle. We got to the train and my parents retrieved their backpacks and their tickets from that young man and his friend. We got

on the train. But the train wouldn't leave and wouldn't leave. And I remember that and my father was frantic, as you can imagine. And he went to the head. The woman said: Oh yeah, they are rounding up Jews on the other side of the tracks. They must have had their quota of Jews that morning.

>> Bill Benson: So they didn't get to your car.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That's right. And the train left. And we had to change trains Angouleme. We had to change trains. My sister fell. And to this day she remembers how it hurt, you know, on the cement or whatever the ground is in between two trains. She didn't get a concussion. Another miracle. Because if we had had to go to a hospital with her, Jewish papers, that would have been the end.

So we made the other train and we got to that little town which was at the border between the occupied and the non-occupied. Two smugglers came. They were 20 years old. They say: We can't take you. And my parents found out -- I don't know either it was too dangerous or they were taking another Jewish family. But we got an appointment. This was the last July, the last day of July 1942.

>> Bill Benson: And you're right on the border, the line --

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. We checked into a hotel. And the next day we walked and walked. And it was hot. It was the last of July or the 1st of August. And I remember resting under a tree. We got to the cemetery behind the church where we had an appointment. And they were there. So we started walking. They were from that area so they knew the area very, very well.

Am I speaking too much?

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: No. That's the whole point.

[Laughter]

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: So we were really on our knees. I remember -- the Germans were, like, there. And we were there. And I remember seeing the tips of their cigarettes. And my father wrote later that actually there was a motorcycle. But another miracle; they didn't have dogs. And if I tell you to this day that I hate German Shepherds, I'm sorry, but they frighten me. But they didn't have those dogs.

>> Bill Benson: So you were able to pass undetected.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, at one time they were very close. The two smugglers said, "Go down on your knees!" At that time, my sister say, "I have to do pee pee." It sounds funny, but if they had heard us.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: So then, one of those two smugglers went ahead with his bicycle. He had a signal with my father, whistling, I guess, saying it's ok, you can go. And the other one took my sister and me on the bicycle. Because we couldn't walk fast enough. And my parents were running behind. And we made it across the line.

Then there was a contingent of French soldiers. It was the Armistice. There was a certain amount, certain quantity of French soldiers that were still allowed to -- I don't know if they were baring arms or were just there until later on when there were no more French

soldiers. They were there. And they took us to the barracks. We slept. I think it was like you use for camping that we slept. And the next morning the commander said: Can't keep you. They took us to -- here in this country you have states and you have --

>> Bill Benson: Counties.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: The capital of the state and then the sub capital. What do you call that?

>> Bill Benson: The counties?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No. Well, anyway. It was not the principle town. They left us there. We had to go to a hotel. In a hotel, you had to register. My parents had had their card saying "JEWS" and we went into the room because we were very tired.

At 8:00 a knock at the door, "Police." And we were under arrest. I don't remember if my sister and I stayed in the room, but my parents were interrogated one after the other. And I have the papers from the archives; from 8:00 to 8:15 and mother 8:15 to 8:30 saying that they were the Jewish race, were illegal, had never been arrested. My father said that he was Dutch and that he was -- he had a job in Paris; that he had to leave. He was always proud to say that he got his driver's license in 1929. I don't know if he showed it that day, but we were not refugees. But my mother said that she was born in Hamburg; she was Dutch by marriage. It was very dangerous to say that she was from Hamburg because German Jews were immediately put in one of those camps, like -- like other camps, because they were, according to Hitler -- I mean, because of the laws of the Germans, she was supposed to be sent to a camp in Germany and, of course, immediately put to death. But the fact that she was

naturalized Dutch probably saved her life.

So we were kept under surveillance for one month in the capital of that state. And my parents had to report every day. But they didn't put us in the camp at that time. Because my parents were reporting, they knew exactly where we were. I remember eating in those soup kitchens, the long table. I didn't remember complaining about the food. I don't remember that the food was terribly bad.

And the head of that is called [Speaking French]. It was the law. The [Speaking French] as stipulated had the right and the privilege to send us to a camp, an internment camp, or let us go to the country. And maybe because we were not refugees and we were Dutch that they let us. They said after one month: Just go get lost in the countryside. And my father was able to find a little, little village, 30 houses. And he asked permission. They said ok. It was less than 100 kilometers, 60 miles, from the capital. Of course, we were registered all the way to Vichy. They could come and get us any day. And we went to that little village.

>> Bill Benson: That was Le Got where you ended up.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: So you were then now living in Le Got in this little village. In August 1943 your mother gave birth to your brother, Franklin. And that was a very difficult time for your parents. Tell us about his birth and what that meant for your parents and for you and your sister.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. It's a very long story. My mother became pregnant. She didn't lose the pregnancy. She was miserable. She stayed in one of those two rooms most of the time. My sister and I actually went to the little school. The mayor, who was a wonderful

man whose family I hope will get a medal of the righteous gentiles at the end of this year -- anyway, he advised my parents to send the two little girls, us, to the school, which was extremely dangerous because the Gestapo could come at any time.

You mentioned the date, 1943. Let's not forget that November 11, 1942, Hitler was so furious after the Americans landed in Morocco. Said, ok, I'm invading France. There was no more demarcation. The Germans were all over.

>> Bill Benson: The entire country's occupied now.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right. So we were there in danger of our life or death every day. My father spent most of his time -- well, you don't have the photo there. But he was in the underground. The farmer most probably brought him some food. He also gave us eggs. There was not much food. There were chestnuts. My mother made bread with chestnuts, puree, anything with chestnuts. Apparently they're very healthy.

[Laughter]

So there was not much food. And once in a while around the house there was like some trees and in season strawberries, wild strawberries. We didn't get poisoned. We ate the strawberries. They were good.

Yeah, my mother became pregnant. She had a terrible pregnancy. I have little letters that I wrote, "I hope tomorrow you will feel better." And she was about to give birth that night. It was August 1943. We heard a little noise. My sister and I shared a bed. The neighbor downstairs -- I should talk about that neighbor, by the way; such a wonderful man -- said, "go back to sleep." And my mother had to be transported. She was losing blood. She

had a very rare type, which I have, AB-plus. She was transported to -- I don't know how many kilometers, to where there was a clinic and where the doctor was treating the German soldiers -- you know, the German soldiers, had a cold or whatever they had, they were treated. And on the other side there was a Jewish woman.

My mother gave birth to a little boy. We knew -- in the spring my parents told us, you know, we have no money; you will not get a gift, but there will be something or someone that will stay with us for the rest of our lives. And my sister guessed that it was going to be a baby. And my parents even told us the names. If it was a girl, it would be Marianne, the symbol of France. And if it was a boy, it would be Franklin.

>> Bill Benson: So not exactly a French name, Franklin.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Not at all. And why? Because probably some of you realize that Franklin Roosevelt, at that time, was the only hope of survival for my parents. So they named my brother -- yes.

What I want to say and I didn't mention. You probably know -- that the neighbor downstairs was working for the railroad and he was denounced. And the Gestapo came. Five cars around that little house. The whole village said, oh, that's for the Mendels, coming to round them up. No. It was for him because he had that word, the code word. The Gestapo had -- and the collaborationists had the gun there. They were going to shoot him. He should have said, could have said, might have said: let me live; why don't you go upstairs and get the Jewish family. He never said it. He was taken to a prison. He said, when we met him after the war, that the torture was not that bad. But he never, never said a word against us. Never

said there was a Jewish family upstairs. And that, in itself, to save his life -- he was young, married had a little baby girl himself. He never said it.

>> Bill Benson: And beyond what he did, you're in this small village, presumably everybody in that village knew you were Jews.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Why do you think you were not denounced and you were able to continue living in Le Got for almost two years?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, a lot of people had suffered terribly in World War I. And a lot of people, most probably, disliked very much the Germans in general. I was insulted only once as a Jewish girl. Well, it's in my book. I don't even have to say the words. It was -- I ran home crying to my mother, of course. Otherwise nobody denounced us.

But when we interviewed the family, the farmers -- after the war, they said, you know, all of us were scared and you never knew if your neighbor was going to denounce you. And then the Germans came and they stole the eggs and whatever food there was and took it for themselves. So they were very scared, but they said, of course, you were more scared than anybody else.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: And, yes, you're right; they didn't denounce us, the 30 houses. And we spent a lot of time in the woods hiding. And my father spent a lot of time in that cellar where he couldn't stand, couldn't lie. He had to crouch.

I remember once he had been hiding for a few days. He came home. He had a

beard with white hair. And I couldn't recognize him. He looked so old. And he was really a young man. So it was a shock for me. Of course. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the mayor that you mentioned. Tell us about him.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: He spoke to my father a lot. They trusted each other.

>> Bill Benson: He was the mayor of the village, right?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes, the mayor of the village. He warned us every time that there was extreme danger because the troops, the German troops, were going to go through the village. At one time my parents thought it was too dangerous for us to stay with them. They wanted to put us in a convent in the next town. And we were so happy. He prepared a little bag with things. He came, or somebody came, and said don't go.

>> Bill Benson: Don't go to the convent.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Which was a very good thing, we found out afterwards, because the convent was raided. And they would have found two little Jewish girls there. Would have been the end for us. Yeah. Another miracle.

And then something -- if you see my book afterwards, you'll see that the first is in French. It says [Speaking French], which means until next Sunday. It's something I remember very well. Every Sunday morning my parents lifted their glass and said, [Speaking French], which meant let's be alive another week.

>> Bill Benson: Until next Sunday. I think I'll join you.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: But, my parents took it for granted, just like my mother. Did I say that already; that she had poison for us?

>> Bill Benson: No.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No. I was so afraid of the Germans. And my mother said -- because I remember them from the days in Paris. I was just terribly afraid. And my sister, too. Knew they were bad people. And my mother said, "Don't be scared. If the Germans come, I'll give you a little pill. You will die right away, and you will never suffer." She had cyanide pills.

>> Bill Benson: Prepared to use if need be.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I don't know if she was influenced by her mother's suicide or what it was. I took it for granted. I told my little friend at school: Oh, you know what my mother said? And my sister said it to her little girlfriend. And my sister and I just forgot. We erased the whole thing. But when we went back to the village 14 years ago, and that man who was my age, of course, said, "Do you know what you told me, Jacqueline?" And it all came back.

>> Bill Benson: He remembered you telling them that you had these pills.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. And the girl Simone remembered with my sister also. Anybody a psychologist here, you realize we just erased it. Strange. No?

>> Bill Benson: No, I'm not surprised.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No? Ok.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: After the Normandy invasion, when the allies landed in June 1944 --

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: June 6.

>> Bill Benson: June 6, 1944. Paris was liberated by the allies in August. Once Paris was

liberated, your father made his way back to Paris. Tell us how he did that, what he found, and about coming back to get his family.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, at first after the landing it was even more dangerous because the Germans were retreated. They were burning every village. There was one village, my father wrote -- to this day it's a memorial. They put the women, children in the church. They put the men against the wall. They burned everybody. The village was entirely -- it was very close to our village. For some reason they went through our village. I remember looking out the window and my mother telling me, "Go down on your knees!" because they could have shot me. So it was very dangerous.

But finally, yeah, on August 28, 1944, Paris was liberated. At first my father -- my parents didn't dare do anything. But finally in November 1944, he said, well, I'm going to go back. And the trains were not working. I don't know -- he probably went by bicycle. I'm not sure. These days it takes three hours to go. I don't know how long it took him. He went back.

And the apartment, our apartment, had been vacated by the Germans. Of course they fled after the liberation of Paris. And the apartment was empty. And the concierge said, well, go to the City Hall and you'll see maybe some of your furniture is there. Indeed, my father found our bed, a dresser, a few things which he put back. And he claimed our apartment, which was very wise because any refugee which was alive was claiming an empty apartment. There was a great shortage of apartments in Paris. And he went back. And at the end of November 1944, the five of us, because we were five --

>> Bill Benson: With Franklin now. Yes.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Went back. It took three days, changing trains, stopping, my father getting papers without "JEWS" on it. We got back. Our wonderful friends, the lady with the medal, you know, housed us until we could go back to our apartment.

My mother wrote in my journal that I was so sad that I had no more toys. But she said, “Well, you're a big girl now, you'll get more important things.”

We got a four-year scholarship, my sister and I, in a wonderful private school. The head of the school was a hero in the underground herself. She and her brother saved another family. She didn't help us because it didn't happen that way for us. But four years so we could catch up. And I had my first lessons in English when I was 10.

>> Bill Benson: Let's go back for a minute. I want you to tell us about your father when he first learned the news that there had been an invasion by the allies of Normandy.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: He was not in hiding that morning. He was in a tree. It was June. It was the season for cherries. So he wanted to get cherries so we would have some food. He was in the tree. And then he heard, "America!" He fell from the tree out of joy. By that time my sister and I were writing in our journal. I knew how to spell D-Day. I remember spelling the war. I remember writing in my journal, which I donated to the Museum now, saying I hoped that the war will end soon.

And then something so sad. I said that I want to see my grandmother and my uncle and my aunt. Little did I know that they were all murdered.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to ask you a bit more about that in a moment. You told me that once you were back in Paris and trying to re-establish your lives that you took up music with a

passion.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: In your introduction it's clear that that remains today. Tell us about that time, this passion for music that you had.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. Well, as I mentioned, there was no money. My parents put whatever jewelry at the pawnshop, the national pawnshop. There was really no money. But I had a little bicycle that had remained in the cellar where we lived. I started piano. I was very bad. And then my mother said, well, how about the cello? I had no idea. You can imagine, I hadn't been to a concert or anything. My sister had started the violin there when we got back. So the teacher, the violin teacher, introduced me to the cello teacher. I had a 3/4 size at that time. I came home with my mother. I sat down. And I played open string. I just loved it.

>> Bill Benson: And continue to pursue that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes, to this day. Right. And then, of course, I needed a full sized. My cello teacher found a cello in an attic had been completely refurbished. Beautiful cello. My parents sold my bicycle, 100 francs, and got the cello.

>> Bill Benson: I think that was a good swap.

[Laughter]

Of course, when you were back in Paris in November of 1944, the war was continuing elsewhere until May of ‘45.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Exactly.

>> Bill Benson: Do you know, were your parents or others fearful that the Germans might

come back because the war was still going on?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I can't answer that. Maybe they did. But mostly my father was concerned about his Dutch family. Because he said, well, we survived; probably they are in hiding and survived, too.

>> Bill Benson: At what point did you learn about the magnitude of the losses in your family? As you said, over 200 of your Dutch family were killed during the holocaust.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Murdered.

>> Bill Benson: Were murdered. When did the full brunt of that become known to you?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, at first my father got in touch with the International Red Cross, maybe also with the Dutch Red Cross. And then he found out that his mother and his brother and his sister and the in-laws and the cousins. The initial list was about 18 persons that had been murdered; mostly from Holland, rounded up in Amsterdam and other towns, rounded up in a vestibule.

In the museum, in the third floor, which like in France -- in Holland it was vestibule. That's where they ended up. I even have a letter from a great aunt saying that they wanted this or that. There was a little 19-month-old little Miriam who was just learning to walk and she needed some toys.

So I remember coming home from school, that private school. And my sister and I were arguing. You know, children, 10 and 12 argue sometimes. And my mother said be quiet. We saw the telegram on the dresser. And that was the announcement that my uncle and aunt had been deported. It didn't say, I don't think, that they were murdered. But we knew to a

camp like it, there's not much chance that you come back.

So from 18 murdered people, Auschwitz and other camps, we stated that. And well, rather recent, I did a lot of research in Google and found out that among the in-laws, the family, in Dutch, that they had been deported, too. But still that didn't amount to maybe more than 50, 60 people. That was big enough. And then very recently my brother's daughter, Jessica, who was my editor-in-chief on my book, found out -- she did a lot of research, that over 200 members. I have the list here. I think I only have about 70 or 75 of the closest. My father came from a large family; over 200 members. Overwhelming.

>> Bill Benson: It's incomprehensible.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. Nobody came back. Nobody came back.

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline, you just told me, I think, just this week, just a few weeks ago here in this museum was a conference of the International Tracing Service and you met a professor from France.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the significance of that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. The professor, I found out in a list of professors from all over the world that that professor was coming. I said I wanted to meet him. So I came that Tuesday morning. I met him. He's doing research on that area where we were hiding. I said, you know, to this day -- although we were declared as Dutch Jews, in February 1943 all the Dutch Jews with the German Jews and the Czech Jews and the Romanian Jews, they were all on the list to be deported. And the Dutch were on the list. And we were not on the list. And I

asked him why. And he said at that particular time, this was February -- I think it's February 23, 1943, they exempted Dutch Jewish women that were pregnant.

>> Bill Benson: Dutch Jewish women who were pregnant.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. And how did the authorities, the French police, know that my mother was pregnant? Either she had to be declared by the mayor because a pregnant woman who I guess was getting more [Speaking French], you know, food tickets, or because my mother went to see a doctor. I know because I have an envelope from -- I can't really see the stamp. She must have gone to see a doctor at one time. And the doctor maybe had to declare.

Anyway, he's doing further research in that. But the fact is that we were not deported that day.

>> Bill Benson: But at any other time you would have been deported.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That day we would have been on the list.

>> Bill Benson: At that particular moment you were exempted. Maybe a few weeks later that wouldn't have happened.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That's right.

>> Bill Benson: One last question before we close for the day. I'm going to turn back to you to close the program. You've just published your book. What has this meant to you to publish?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, seven years ago I was still working and I had to leave my job because of serious illness. And I was terribly depressed afterwards. My son-in-law, Nikolai, Russian, wonderful man, said, “Jacqueline, why don't you start writing your memoir?”

And seven years ago my granddaughter was 7. Well, she's 13 1/2. What was it for you at that age? I said, “I don't know how to start.” He said, “One sentence at a time.” And I did.

I had written, because I was working at the Foreign Service Institute and I had spoken about our years, but that's when I started intensive research, until 1:00 in the morning. It took me six years.

>> Bill Benson: Six years. I first met you in 2008, six years ago. You had a working manuscript that you shared with me.

I'm going to close our program in a moment. In fact, Jacqueline will close our program. I want to thank all of you for being here with us. I appreciate it very much. We'll have programs every Wednesday and Thursday through the middle of August. We hope you'll come back. If not, look for our program if you come to Washington, D.C. in 2015 and the Museum's website will have information about that.

We didn't have an opportunity for questions and answers with Jacqueline. I apologize for that. I think you can see we could have spent the rest of the afternoon and beyond hearing more from Jacqueline. We just got a glimpse. Of course, her book has more detail in it than that.

I'm going to turn to Jacqueline to close our program. When she's done, she's going to step off the stage here and go up to the top where you all came in because she'll be signing copies of her book there. That's where you'll find Jacqueline after the program.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* gets the last word. So on that note I turn to Jacqueline. But before doing so, when she's done, I'm going to take a moment to

ask you all to stand because our photographer, Joel, is going to come on stage, take a picture of Jacqueline with you in the background behind her. It really just makes a lovely photograph for Jacqueline after we're done. We'll ask that.

Jacqueline?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. You have listened to me. You know -- you probably have not yet visited the Museum and learned a lot more about this horrific story of the Holocaust and about the monster that Hitler was. Shouldn't have been a monster, should have been a painter but he was refused in a school of painting. If you read his biography, you will see that.

In any case, what I want to say -- and I speak to a lot of people, young people, and I end my -- the story of my survival by telling them that even though there are genocides, and we know that, on this planet they have to try -- and maybe you have children, grandchildren around. They have to try and choose a job or a profession. It doesn't have to be a magnificent job. It can be a very small job. It can be nurses. It can be policemen, policewomen. But what I tell them is do good, try and improve this planet. Otherwise we'll have to move to another planet because this one seems to be rotten these days. I'm sorry to use that word but there are too many bad things. And we would like to try to improve things, to improve conditions. I would like you to carry that message with you home and tell it to your children, your grandchildren, or yourselves.

[Applause]

[The *First Person* presentation ended at 12:01 p.m.]