UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON JACQUELINE MENDELS BIRN
Wednesday, May 10, 2017
11:00 a.m. – 12:02 p.m.

Remote CART Captioning

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioning is provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.
This transcript is being provided in rough-draft format.

>> Bill Benson: Good morning, 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 today. We are in our 18th year of *First Person*. Our First Person today is Mrs. Jacqueline Mendels Birn, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2017 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of 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 serve as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue twice-weekly through mid-August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

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 we will have an opportunity for you to ask her 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. 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, daughters 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.

Here we see 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 Southern occupied zones in France.

The family lived in the tiny village of Le Got in Southern France for over 29 months. 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. Here we see from left to right 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 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 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 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 16-year-old granddaughter whom they enjoy visiting in Toronto, where she lives. She is fluent in several languages.

Jacqueline and Richard live in Bethesda, Maryland. Continuing a family tradition, Jacqueline is an accomplished musician. She is presently the First Cellist Emeritus with the McLean Symphony in McLean, Virginia. Jacqueline also plays in several trios, quartets and quintets. For the past eight years her Jewish quartet has played at an event here at this museum memorializing the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27th.

As a member of the museum's Speakers 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, local schools and universities such as George Washington University and American University here in the District of Columbia. She has also spoken to DACOR, an association of retired U.S. diplomatic and consular officials and recently at the State Department.

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 has worked 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 surviving family members or friends. 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. A new volume of Echoes will soon be available.

Jacqueline's memoir, "A dimanche prochain: Memoir of Survival in World War II France," was published in 2013. Following today's program, she will sign copies of her book.

Jacqueline is accompanied today by her husband Richard. With that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Jacqueline Mendels Birn.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline just had surgery on her foot but you wouldn't know it by the way she bounded up the stairs.

Thank you for joining us. You have so much to share with us and we just have one hour to try to do as much as we can. We'll start right away.

Let's begin today with you telling us what you can about your family in your own early years before the anschluss, knowing at that time you were very young. You don't have personal memories of most of that but tell us what you have learned and what you know about that period, about your family.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: All I know is that when I was 3 years old and there was the anschluss, my parents got scared and we left Paris and we went to a little town that I really don't know, and then we went back to Paris. I really don't have any memories of that.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your parents' nationalities because that's had some significance.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My mother was born in Hamburg, Germany, so she was a German Jew and my father was a Dutch and born -- for centuries the family Mendels was from a little town in the northeast of Holland. And in the cemetery there are many tombs of Mendels family. And when my father married my mother or when my mother married my father, she became Dutch by marriage.

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

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, my mother was an only child. She had cousins who later on we can talk about that if we have time, were on the Kindertransport, were able to go to England. So she had four cousins. But otherwise she was an only child. Her parents -- her father died.

By the way, my name Jacqueline is because my grandfather was called Jacob and my parents were so hoping for a boy. They had a girl, my big sister. So I was going to be the French equivalent of Jacob, it was going to be Jack. And here I come out a girl, so Jacqueline after my grandfather.

>> Bill Benson: I hadn't heard that before. Ok.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My family on my father -- sorry -- on my father's side was quite extended. They were all murdered, everybody.

>> Bill Benson: Everybody in the extended family. You had mentioned to me that during that period your father's business was not doing well. Can you say a little bit about that?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, France had a depression just like America. My father was a businessman, importing, exporting specialty foods.

If I can go ahead of myself, after the German conveyed Paris and there were all kinds of laws against the Jews, he was not allowed to keep his business. He had to give it away to his associate who fortunately was a good man.

>> Bill Benson: And I hope we'll talk a little bit about that a little bit later, absolutely.

As you mentioned, after the anschluss, your parents left Paris for a little while and returned. Tell us what you can about that period for the family and what happened with you and your family during the period right before Germany invaded Poland and war began, September 1939, so between the anschluss and the beginning of the war.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I was too young.

>> Bill Benson: Too young.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: When the Germans invaded, I was 4 years old. So all I know is that I was terribly afraid of the Germans.

>> Bill Benson: You had mentioned, and you I think wrote about it in your book, that when they fled, they took you Fontainbleau, I think. Was there a reason for going there, to your knowledge? Have you been able to learn that?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Probably there was a second time that we left. It was before the Germans invaded Luxembourg, Belgium, Holland and France. So there was a period that was very difficult and we went probably around Fontainbleau.
>> Bill Benson: Don't know the details.

In March 1939, your parents had you and Manuela declared French citizens. Tell us why that was significant.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That's a big story.
>> Bill Benson: Yeah.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: We were born in Paris of Dutch parents. My father went to the City Hall to have us declared French, which was helped. But after Petain and Hitler signed the cease, anybody like my sister and me who had been in a way, naturalized French, according to the laws and according to a law of 1927 we lost it. So we were foreign Jews. We lost our French citizenship and we became Dutch Jews, which were the first to be deported, were not French anymore.
>> Bill Benson: But at that point in 1939, your parents wanted to make sure that you were officially and in every way considered French citizens.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah, but it didn't last. And I know later on when we crossed the demarcation line, that my father took that piece of paper -- which I have on the wall, and I can see it was folded in four. And my father was hoping that the two daughters, my sister and me, would be declared French and wouldn't be deported.
>> Bill Benson: You also shared with me that in the year that the war began but before it began in September 1939, your family were able to take a couple of trips. I think they went to see your mother's family in Hamburg as well as took a trip to Holland during that prewar period.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That was in 1937. I have photos of that. But I don't remember it.
>> Bill Benson: After war broke out, your family left Paris for a second time but returned after a short period. In the following spring, of course, in May of 1940, is when Germany attacked Belgium and Holland and then, of course, they invaded France in June of 1940. When they invaded France, your family fled Paris for a third time but you, again, returned to Paris. Tell us why you think your parents several times left Paris but only returned to Paris. And in this particular case when they returned, now the Germans were there. What motivated them to return to Paris? What was life like for them when they came back after that third time?
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, the third time was the big time. It was the exodus. My father got a little car from his office where he was still in charge. I remember I had my doll and my sister had her doll. And we traveled until I guess there was no more gasoline in the car. We stopped in a little town. My father knocked at the door and said could we spend the night and actually we spent three weeks there.

They were wonderful people. We were four girls. I have a photo of them. I was the youngest of the four. We spent time. They gave us a room and their dining room. They were absolutely -- and they never accepted any money. And finally when France was occupied, my father said, well, I have to earn a living and we went back to Paris. A lot of the Jews never went back to Paris at that time because the Germans were all over in the northern part of France.
>> Bill Benson: But for your father it was that's where my business is. Because his business was there.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right.

>> Bill Benson: In the exodus, as you referred to it, there was really hundreds of thousands if not millions of Parisians fleeing.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: People came all the way from Belgium because Belgium was occupied -- and people were walking. One of the survivors, Albert, that you know, told me how they didn't have the use of a car or truck or van and they were walking. His mother was shot and died right there while they were walking. We were very lucky.
>> Bill Benson: I hope we get a chance to talk about that, too, a little bit later.

At one point your parents, I think, considered trying to leave for a Dutch colony but they didn't do that.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right.
>> Bill Benson: What was behind that?
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, apparently my father thought that Curacao, which was a Dutch colony, would take in Jews. And the queen of Holland, Queen Wilhelmina, at that time, had said that she was going to help people that were in distress, Dutch people in the distress.

Actually, I did a lot of research on that and it's not true, she was not. But something I just found now, by somebody whose family survived in Shanghai, that there was a Chinese man, a wonderful man, that was making fake visas for people to go to Curacao.

So everything I'm telling you is such a long story. My grandmother in Hamburg was trying -- was thinking of going east to Shanghai. If there had been America for her, she would have done that and she would have ended up maybe in Curacao but, of course, all of that never happened. It's a story.
>> Bill Benson: You and -- even though you were so young, you and your sister do have some memories of the German attack on Paris.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little bit about that.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: All I know is that I was so afraid of the Germans. There were Germans upstairs from us. We lived on first floor, French, which is second floor America. They were upstairs taking over. They took over family -- a Jewish family that had escaped. So we had Germans upstairs from us.

My mother was doing an errand -- Jews were only allowed to go shopping between 5:00 and 7:00 p.m. and my mother said don't open the door. And there was a ringing of the bell. And there's me, little curious -- I'm still curious today -- opened the door. And then I see boots. I was little. They were boots. And they were the Germans. And I don't know whether they were the ones that lived there or whether they were friends, I have no idea, but they closed the door. And at that time we were not wearing our Jewish star yet.
>> Bill Benson: That hadn't happened.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Which was fortunate. When I told my mother, when she came back, I was severely punished, of course.
>> Bill Benson: You returned to Paris and then you continued living in Paris until the summer of 1942 when your parents arranged for the four of you to leave Paris for Vichy or "free" France. Tell us about the events that led up to your parents' decision that it was time to leave Paris for good or at least at that time and how you found yourself, after that decision, in this village of Le Got.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That's a very, very long story. My parents' friends where we lived, which was near the zoo -- and I loved the zoo but we were not allowed to go to the zoo anymore. I loved the monkeys.

>> Bill Benson: That was part of the restrictions. Jews were not --
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: We were not allowed anything. We were not allowed to go to the library, not allowed to take books out. My father lost his business. My sister was learning to swim. She was not allowed to go to the swimming pool. Everything was forbidden for the Jews. We were not allowed to go to the little parks. It was forbidden -- how does it go? It was forbidden for blacks, for darks, and for Jews, in that order. We were learning to ride our bikes and we were not allowed to go to that little park.

But, yeah, my parents' friends said you can't stay in Paris. It was too dangerous. They were arresting people starting in 1940, 1941. They said you have to leave and my father, through the Dutch club where he was a member, found two, what he hoped, were reliable passeurs, which means smugglers, and for a fee -- and I don't know where he got the money because he didn't have a job anymore -- offered to get usually to the demarcation line.

In the meantime, in July 16 and 17, 1942, was that infamous [Speaking Non-English Language], what's it called? I'm missing that word. Anyway when they rounded up [Speaking Non-English Language], where they rounded up 13,000 Jews, mostly from an area in Paris where there was a higher concentration. We didn't live in a Jewish neighborhood. There were Jews, of course, but not a high percentage.

What I should say, also, is that my father wanted to obey the law. And when it was declared that the Jews had to register at the City Hall, he said, well, we'll do what they want and they will leave us alone. Well, fat chance. So we were registered.

There were some good policemen. Because that was the French police that rounded up the Jews. They were supposed to round up 27,000 Jews in Paris. But fortunately, and thanks to some good police, people were told don't sleep in your apartment tonight because they are coming to round you up the next morning at 5:00 a.m. So people changed or moved to some nice Catholic neighbors.

France is a Catholic country, as you know, I'm sure. So that's why 13,000 Jews instead of 27,000. But there were 4,000 children living in terrible conditions. There is a documentary that was made, the roundup about that story.

Some people managed to escape. They were rounded up in buses. Some people threw themselves out of the window and died because they knew something horrible was happening. And there we were, they forgot to ring our bell that day. They forgot to ring our bell. They rang our bell one week after we escaped. So that was the -- the roundup was 16, 17th of July 1942 which was very late in the war. The Germans were all over.

You hear me use the word German. For me the word Nazi didn't exist. It was [Speaking Non-English Language]. In French it's like that. And I heard it way after the war.

So anyway, those wonderful friends of my parents, they come and spend the last night with us. The man of the house -- they lived near the Metro. They said it would be very easy for you tomorrow morning to catch the first Metro. Jews were allowed at 6:00 a.m. in the last train of the Metro. So we went. Maurice was his name, found Jewish stars and burned them. But my parents had their I.D. cards and it said Juifs. So if the police came and asked for [Speaking Non-English Language], your papers, that would have been it. But like many, many, many miracle like I talk about and wrote about, that morning when we left there was no police asking for [Speaking Non-English Language].

And I'm wearing something that madam gave me. I took it this morning. If anybody's Catholic here, you will know Notre Dame de Lourdes, in the South of France.

Anybody Catholic here? No? Yes? You're Catholic. So you know about Lourdes.

And there was a woman, I forget her name, but in the 19th Century who had been saved. So madam gave a medal to my sister and my mother and to me. Mine is quite old. It says Notre Dame de Lourdes. She say that will help you. And I have it to this day.
>> Bill Benson: And your sister has hers.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. Yeah. But hers is not as precious as mine because it doesn't say Notre Dame de Lourdes. But this is -- as I said, it will save you.
>> Bill Benson: I'm glad you were able to share that with us. I know there's so much to tell and we're going to not have time for everything. Let's go back a little bit and briefly tell us about the letter that your mother got from her mother.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. My grandmother in Hamburg, my father had tried to get her out but she already walked with pain. And she said "Nothing will happen to me." And in 1941, November 1941, well, in the summer of 1941 her apartment was taken over. She was put in what's called a Jew house, if you want. It was a miserable little place. She got a letter saying that she had to report the next morning. She already knew that was go east to Auschwitz or one of the camps. All her friends were disappearing one by one. She knew it was the end. So she took an overdose of sleeping pill and committed suicide.
>> Bill Benson: And she wrote this to your mother.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. She wrote a letter. She didn't use the word -- I have a copy of the letter in my book. And she said farewell. I can extrapolate a little bit about that, I think. I'm pretty sure that this is when my mother got cyanide for us because my mother told us, my sister and me, "Don't worry. If the Germans come to get us, I'll give you a little pill. You will die right away and you will never suffer."

Now, I know if there are some young parents here, they think it's impossible to do that but my sister and I, we took it for granted so we'll die and we won't suffer. And that was the most important thing, not to suffer.
>> Bill Benson: And through the duration of the war your mother had those.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. She had those. And the whole village -- later on you'll see where we were in hiding, the whole village, maybe the Mendels family will commit suicide. Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: Through all of that you found yourself getting to this little village in Le Got.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Not exactly right away. [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: Not right away. So tell us a little bit about actually getting there. Because that had all kinds of risks for you. You're now in what's called the unoccupied zone of France.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: So-called unoccupied zone. Yeah. So we left that morning, after that wonderful family had housed us that night. My little friend Cecilia, who just died, I remember sharing a bed with her. And the two boys in that family, Michel, 15 years old, and his friend, Michel Deneaux, took -- my parents put their life belongings in a backpack. Imagine. And they bought the tickets.

Because Jews, of course, were not allowed. You needed a visa. You needed an [Speaking Non-English Language] in German, and Jews were not allowed any of that.

So they got all of that for us. They met us at the train station [Speaking Non-English Language], the station going south. And they gave us, my parents, a backpack. My sister and I didn't have anything. We got on the train, we had each other. We got on the train. And the train wouldn't leave. And my father -- I remember that. My father became frantic. He went to the head of that [Speaking Non-English Language] that particular train to see what was going on.

There was a woman who said they are rounding up Jews on the other sides of the tracks. So you can imagine --
>> Bill Benson: You're sitting there on that train.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: About to leave. And finally, they had their quota of Jews that morning, probably, and the train left, slowly, slowly.

Then we had to change trains in [Speaking Non-English Language], another big city. And my sister -- to this day my sister said she fell. She didn't have a concussion but she hurt her back. And another miracle because if we had to go to the hospital, they would have seen Juifs on my parents' paper. That would have been the end. But she said it's ok and we got to the middle of the train. We were meeting supposedly those two passeurs, those two smugglers, but they came and said we can't take you. Why? I don't know. We had to check into a hotel, which we did.

The next morning -- it was hot. It was the 31st of July. It can be very hot in France. We had to walk 10 kilometers, six miles. And for little legs --
>> Bill Benson: That's a long way.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I remember resting under a tree, actually. We were supposed to meet the smugglers. They showed up. They were not always honest but our smugglers were very honest. At midnight, in the cemetery behind the church, at midnight. We did. And they were there. And they came with two bicycles.

I wish I would be able to find out what happened to those two young men. They were very honest. I should do some research here at the museum, actually. One was a son of a farmer and the other was a son of a baker.

We started walking. You know, the Germans were there and we were there. I remember seeing the cigarette butts right there. And one of them said, go down on your knees, which we did. It was summer but it was wet in the middle of the night. And my sister said at that time "I have to go pee pee." It sounds funny, but could have been tragic because if they heard that, that would have been the end of us.

And also, my parents carried a ring. My father was able to get some gold ring. In French -- you have this in English, too, [Speaking Non-English Language]. It's your money or your life or your gold or your life.
>> Bill Benson: Money or your life.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My parents were hoping that they would give their ring. I have that ring. I'm not wearing it today. That we would have our life.

We managed to cross the demarcation line. My sister and I were on one bicycle. The other cyclist was ahead. He had a whistling signal with my father saying everything is clear. So we were able to cross the demarcation line in the so-called free zone.

There was a contingent of soldiers accepted by Vichy, by hitter and Petain. And they took us through the barracks. But the next morning the commandant, or the head, said we can't keep you. And they took us under escort to a town where we were. We checked into a hotel. My parents didn't know anybody. We were very tired. A knock at the door, police. My parents were under arrest.

They were interrogated. I found that all in the archives later on. They had to say that they were of the Jewish race, that they left Paris because it was too dangerous, that we are honest people, etc. 15 minutes for my father and he said he had 4,000 francs or something. And then my mother, 15 minutes, the same thing. She said she had 4,000 francs with her and that she was -- but something really interesting. She said she was born in Hamburg, Germany.

And if the police -- the French police had been smart, they would have said, oh, German Jew, and they would, they could, they should have shipped her directly to a camp in the South of France where they put all German Jews and they didn't. They were not smart enough, lucky for us. She was naturalized Dutch by marriage.

So my parents -- so then we were under escort to the headquarters. And there we were under -- my parents were under arrest again. For a whole month they had to report every day. We were in the little hotel. We were eating in the soup kitchen. I remember long table. But I don't remember being hungry. But we had food, like homeless people here.

At the end of the month there was a man, the man in charge of that area, and some other areas that had the right of life or death. And that was one of the Petain laws. So he could put us in a camp. And France had a lot of camps, not death camps but concentration camps or to [Indiscernible]. He was a good man. I found out his name. He said get lost in the country. My parents found a tiny, tiny village called Le Got where there were 30 houses. We had two rooms upstairs, no water, no toilet, no electricity, no nothing. My sister and I went to get water out of the pump. Once a week we could wash in a tub, one after the other. That's where we spent 29 months.

>> Bill Benson: I want you to tell us about that time but let's start with in August 1943 your mother gave birth to your brother Franklin. And that was, under the circumstances, clearly a very difficult time. Tell a little about his birth and what it meant for your parents and for you in this little village of Le Got.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. My mother became pregnant. Actually two months after we arrived, more or less, my brother was born in August 1943. We had arrived in October 1942. And all of France was occupied, by the way. November 11, the -- Hitler decided because the Americans had invaded North Africa, ok, so we are occupying all of France. So the Germans were all over.

>> Bill Benson: German soldiers were everywhere now.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: In our village, too, all over. I won't have time to tell but the Gestapo came, actually, to -- because of the young man downstairs had been denounced. So they were -- there were five Gestapo guards. They didn't go upstairs because he was good enough not to say don't kill me but go upstairs there's a Jewish family. He never -- he was tortured for three weeks. But he never said anything.

Anyway, my mother was pregnant. She was very sick. You know, we didn't have doctors or anything. She spent nine months -- I have little notes that were kept. I was telling my mother I hope you will feel better tomorrow. She had a terrible, terrible time. I remember once she did go to the next village where we were allowed to go. I was pushing, and my sister, we were pushing her up the hill. She was wearing a night gown. She didn't have pregnancy clothes, of course. She was wearing a night gown. We were pushing her. I don't know if it was a doctor or dentist. Anyway, the time came when she was supposed to give birth and there was a woman that was supposed to help with the birth. [Speaking Non-English Language]. How do you say that? English?

>> Bill Benson: Like a midwife?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: A midwife. The baby was in the breech position and my mother was bleeding. She had to be transported, which was strictly forbidden. The midwife said there is a hospital but it's in another department [Speaking Non English Language] where she was not allowed to go. It was the middle of night.

The man downstairs who worked for the Germans, took his car and took my mother, who was bleeding to death, and with my father and they made it to that hospital which was in the back of a chateau where there was daylight. On one side the doctor that we saw 20 years ago, was treating German soldiers because they had something, too, and on the other side was a Jewish woman who was about to die. My mother had a rare blood type, which I have, too, A-B plus. And to find blood --

>> Bill Benson: In wartime.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. They didn't have blood banks in those days. You can imagine. But my mother survived. My brother was born. And my parents named him Franklin.

Does anybody know why Franklin which in French is Franklin?

>> Bill Benson: For Roosevelt?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Because the only hope of survival for my parents was Roosevelt at that time. They didn't have news. They didn't have radio. But they had heard before we fled that Franklin Roosevelt might help. Actually, we know now that Franklin Roosevelt didn't do much. But if the baby had been a girl, they were going to call her Marianne because Marianne is the symbol of France. It was a boy so this was Franklin. They even had him circumcised, which was very dangerous because that meant a Jewish boy.

My mother couldn't breast-feed. I don't know. There was nobody. The milk didn't agree. He almost died. I don't know if you saw a photo. My brother was crying. The nurse said, Oh, what about baby? The milk didn't agree with him. I don't know if they knew about boiling milk or anything. But back to three weeks my mother was able to travel. I don't know under what circumstances. Came back.

In the meantime, my sister and I were taken care of by a Spanish refugee from the Spanish Civil War. Many Spanish refugees had moved to the South of France. And I remember the boy there he learned -- he taught me how to play marbles. That's what I remember. [Laughter] That was a big deal. We had no toys. We had nothing. But he had marbles. So he helped us to play marbles.

Miracle of miracles, you know now from what I wrote, my father discovered sweet concentrated milk, which still exists these days, the Nestle. And my mother was able to dilute that. My sister and I had to go get water, of course. And then when that tin was empty, I licked the bottom it tasted so good. We didn't have much food. We had chestnuts, that's what we survived on. So that little bit -- I remember to this day how good it was. [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: You would remain in, as you mentioned earlier, in Le Got for 29 months, more than two years. And during that time you were not denounced. How did your family manage to survive during that time and to not be denounced now that all of France was occupied, Nazis, the Gestapo are everywhere?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: It was the law to denounce Jews, actually.

>> Bill Benson: And there you are.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, they were wonderful people. They were very poor. They were farmers. My father was in hiding most of the time in an underground cellar or in the woods.

And I have to say that the mayor of Le Got of the village, I was able two years ago to have him declared righteous among the nations because he saved our lives. And there was one other Jewish family that he kept. He was a farmer. He had a tiny, tiny room. He helped the resistance, the underground people, as well.

But whenever something was happening he told us and we went into the woods, the whole family. I remember we went into a chicken coop once. But it must have been summer because I don't remember being cold. But he warned us every time.

One time the situation was so desperate, my parents wanted to put my sister and me in a convent. I don't think -- maybe it was before my brother. I don't know if it was before or after. It was in a town not far away. And there was a convent. My sister and I were actually happy. We prepared a little bag with things. And then the mayor came and said you can't do that because the Germans are traveling through that road. And we never went. It's a good thing we didn't go because then that convent was raided and they would have found two Jewish girls. And that would have been the end of us. So there were so many miracles like that it's unbelievable.

>> Bill Benson: And the mayor, I think he provided you, the family, with false papers.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. Except -- once a week we would go -- on Saturday, only, by foot or by bicycle, to get food or to get something, or go to go to the doctor. The whole time we were not sick. It's another miracle. We never needed a dentist or a doctor like children need usually, except my mother's pregnancy.

>> Bill Benson: That is amazing. You're young children. No sickness or anything.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. But the mayor was absolutely wonderful. He got those papers for us. But it said Juifs. And I remember asking the archivist 20 years ago and he said, well, you know, you were declared [Speaking Non-English Language], a town, knew the Mendels family was there and they were a Jewish family. They could come any day to get us.

So in order to get tickets for buying flour or -- I don't think there was oil -- a few things, we needed those cards. But it said les Juifs. The mayor got false papers for my parents which I think they never used. I remember seeing a drawer with those papers with false names.

Also, there was a tablet of chocolate that my mother kept. I remember. I think I wrote it in my book. When my mother finally opened it, it was full of worms. She had to throw it away. [Laughter] So for the chocolate, we were looking forward to having. We hardly had any food. We had chestnuts and walnuts.

>> Bill Benson: And that's what you lived on mostly.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. Well, there was a baker and with our ticket we could get bread once in a while. I remember when we were on our way to hiding in the forest, we stayed with that wonderful family. She did something that my sister forgot but I remember. She did the cross, the Catholic cross. And then turned the bread over and then sliced it. I guess that was a custom. There are many customs in that part of the South of France that some people know. My French friends probably know about that. And then we went into the woods. They found an ancient baby carriage for my brother. All of us were there.

>> Bill Benson: Incredibly, you can't possibly do justice to describing it, but to think that you are living openly but with hidden identities in a little village where it's the law to denounce Jews, the Villagers had to know you were Jewish.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No.

>> Bill Benson: You don't think they knew?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I don't think they knew what a Jew was. They knew we were refugees from Paris. In Paris, my sister and I were well educated little girls and we did [Speaking Non-English Language]. When we said hello to a friend of my parents, we bent down. And my mother said don't do that in this country. [Laughter] So we didn't do [Speaking Non-English Language]. Can you say that in English?

>> Bill Benson: I don't know.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, anyway. What I want to say is that those farmers, they were all farmers, they struggled. They were what we call in French [Speaking Non-English Language]. They were for the republic. And so many had lost somebody in the First World War. They hated the Germans. And there were some prisoners of war. I remember my little friend [Speaking Non-English Language], I told him about the poison and that we would die. His father was a prisoner of war.
>> Bill Benson: Of the Germans.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. It was [Speaking Non-English Language]. Of course for the Jews, once they said all men have to report and my father, instead, would have been shipped to the gas chambers. He didn't go that night. He thanked his lucky star that he didn't. He disobeyed, actually.

But, no, the mayor was marvelous. And the farmers were struggling themselves. The underground people came to the village and raided some eggs or things because they needed to be fed, too. And then the Germans came and they took everything. They took all the animals. They took everything. So it was tough for them. It was very tough. I think once in a while they gave us eggs, too.
>> Bill Benson: So after all of that time, in August 1944, soon after the Normandy invasion, Paris was liberated by the allies in August of 1944.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Not right away. The Germans were there in the south. And the Bremer company, whatever it's called, went up. And it was so dangerous. They went through all the Villages. I remember. They were crossing our little street. I was curious, as I always am. And my mother said, Down! Because they could have shot me right there and then. They went to a village, [Speaking Non-English Language], and my father -- they put all the men against the wall. They shot them all. They put all the women and children in the church and they burned the church. And to this day [Speaking Non-English Language] is a memorial. It has never been rebuilt.
>> Bill Benson: It's still the ruins that were left.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Exactly.
>> Bill Benson: So once Paris was liberated in August of 1944, your father pretty quickly made his way back to Paris and then came back to get the family later.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: In November 1944.
>> Bill Benson: First, tell us about your father hearing about the Normandy invasion.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: My father was out of his hiding place, the underground in a dilapidated old house from one of the wonderful farmers. He was out because it was June. Most people know June 1944 was the [Speaking Non-English Language], what you call D-Day. And he was picking cherries. That was food, you know, for us. When he heard the news, he fell from the tree. [Laughter] But he didn't get hurt. He came home. But that was not, of course, the end of the war but it was the beginning of a little bit of joy.
>> Bill Benson: What prompted him at that moment then to head for Paris?
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: He felt that he wanted to know what happened to his business. He wanted to know what happened to our apartment, which had been -- he didn't know that but our apartment was occupied by German soldier or -- the whole war. Furniture, everything had disappeared. When he got to Paris, the concierge told him go to the City Hall and see. And my father found the bed here, a thing there, and environments able to barely furnish our

apartment. My parents' bed was there. It was slit open. And they were looking. They thought my parents had hidden money but there was nothing except a slit mattress.

So my father claimed the apartment, which was very wise because the refugees that were coming back, first come, first serve, they would have taken our apartment. I know of people who came back and their apartment had been taken by other refugees. But our apartment was there.

>> Bill Benson: Your father, by getting there so quickly, was able to reclaim that.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Right.

>> Bill Benson: So he came back and gout and the family in November. And you returned to Paris. So that's November 1944. You're back in Paris. You're trying to resume life as best you can. But, of course, the war is still going on. Do you think your parents were worried the Germans might come back, that victories might be reversed and that there was still threats because of the war was underway?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: You know, I can't answer that question. I don't think you asked me that question. My parents were mostly concerned -- my mother knew her mother had committed suicide but my father said we survived so surely my mother -- my brother, my sister -- my father had a large family, that they were in hiding and survived, too. And little by little, my father went to the Red Cross and found out, actually, his mother was murdered in March 1943. My father had written he was so hoping to introduce his son to his mother but she was long gone. And my father's brother, sister, cousins, everybody.

Well, later on we found out. My niece did a lot of research, that 200 members of our extended family were murdered, everybody was murdered except my two cousins that were in hiding in Holland.

>> Bill Benson: Except for the two cousins.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: We have time to turn to our audience for a few questions. Before we do, I want to ask you one more, Jacqueline. You left France 1957 to come to the United States and marry Richard. Was it hard for your family after all you had been through?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Very hard. Very hard. We were the five of us, with my brother. We were so tight-knit. We had no family. My little friends went on Sunday to their grandmother, went on vacation. We had no one. We had us.

>> Bill Benson: No aunts, no uncles, no grandparents.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: No. Nobody. My parents wanted to keep us tight, together. So when I fell in love with Richard and he asked me to marry him, it was very hard. It was an ordeal for them.

>> Bill Benson: And your sister also eventually came to the United States. Did your parents come here?

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yes. They came to San Francisco. They spent 10 years there, I think. And then they went back to France.

>> Bill Benson: I know there's so much more for us to talk about but let's turn to our audience.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Let me tell you one thing.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely.

>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Since all my family died, there is something called [Speaking Non-English Language]. I was able to -- a German man, very nice man, to put -- I don't know if it's bronze or brick in front of the last residence. There is in The Hague, the last residence of my grandmother, where it says murdered and my uncle murdered in Auschwitz and his wife

murdered in Auschwitz. And that's on the ground in The Hague, in front of the former apartment house.
>> Bill Benson: And you were able to go and place that.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: I didn't go personally. But my cousin that survived, forever thankful to me for being able. It was a big deal to get permission. So that was done.
>> Bill Benson: And there's now many thousands of those.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: In Berlin mostly. But in Holland also.
>> Bill Benson: Let's see if our audience -- I think we have time for a couple of questions. We have microphones in each of the aisle. We're going to ask that you wait until you have the microphone in your hand. Make your question, if you can, as brief as you can and then I'll repeat it just to make sure that we hear it before Jacqueline responds.

I see we have one right over here.
>> Good morning. As a tour guide, my group was disappointed not to be able to go upstairs because we didn't have a reservation but I want to say to you we are so gratified to be able to come in here, my students here, and hear someone relate their experience that she had. I think your story, as you have related it to us, is so fascinating. Even though they didn't go upstairs, they have a firsthand account of what happened. I'm confident it will stick with them for the rest of their lives. I

just want to thank you for being available. I don't use the word enjoy anytime I come here. I ask them what they learned what they are inspired by. So it will be never again.

Thank you.
>> Bill Benson: Jacqueline, were you able to hear all of that?
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: That he's grateful.
>> Bill Benson: He's here with his group of students. They couldn't get into the Permanent Exhibition today but how wonderful it was to have the opportunity to hear your firsthand account and that will help make sure that this never happens again. That's what his students will take away with them.

Thank you for that. Very kind remarks. Thank you.

There we go. Right in the middle, I think.
>> Hello.
>> Bill Benson: Hello.
>> I was wondering. Have you seen a personal friend of yours captured and sent to the Holocaust?
>> Bill Benson: The question is if you saw somebody personally taken away to go -- during the Holocaust. But I think this really gets to the fact that you had not only so many family members that were deported and were murdered in death camps but also many, many other neighbors, children, and many others that you lived with in Paris, many others lost their lives and were murdered. I think that's probably what we're getting at here.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Yeah. I don't understand. I saw -- I went back to Paris many times. I saw those people that housed us the last night before we escaped.

When I came back to Paris, I was 9 years old. So some of those people were still there, those neighbors. Some of them were absolutely wonderful people. They suffered because they didn't have food with the Germans occupation but they didn't suffer like we did, of course. Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

Let us go with one more question; then it's time to close.

>> You talked about many different people who helped you survive this time, people who risked their lives to save your lives and those of your family. Was there a quality or characteristic that you felt those people all shared that we might learn from their deeds? That was very heroic.
>> Bill Benson: He's making the point that there were a number of people that you mentioned that helped you, helped save you during that whole time, some risking their lives doing that. He's asking could you see a characteristic or quality in them that maybe they had in common that enabled them to take those risks and those good actions.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: It's difficult to answer your question. What I want to say is that I am a speaker here at the Holocaust museum. I speak to a lot of people younger and older. And my final words are always try and do some good. We see the planet these days, full of horrible events. And I tell people, you know, you can help a blind person cross the street. You don't have to become a doctor or a doctor without borders. You have young people that are going to choose a profession.

The principle thing is to try and make the planet a better place. I think it's very difficult these days. Our planet, I must say, when I read the papers sometimes, every day, actually, our planet is becoming rotten. So we are going to have to either improve it or choose another planet.

That's what I say to young people.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you for that fine question.

We're going to close in just a moment. I ask you to stay with us for just a couple of moments more. It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. So I'm going to turn back to Jacqueline to close our program in just a moment. When Jacqueline is done, we're going to try to get her up the stairs as quickly as we can, actually up the elevator outside the door, because she's going to the top of the stairs in the foyer where she will sign copies of her memoir. If you have the opportunity to talk with Jacqueline then that would be great.

I want to thank all of you for being with us. I remind you we have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday through the middle of August. Perhaps you can come back and join us this year and if not maybe in a future year. We hope you can come back.

So with that, I'm going to turn to Jacqueline to close us out for today.
>> Jacqueline Mendels Birn: Well, what I wanted to say is the situation was so desperate. In my book, if you see it upstairs later on, entitled "A dimanche prochain," which means until next Sunday. Because my parents were so desperate, they say that they wished to be alive one more week, until the next Sunday. And my sister and I took it for granted. And I just hope that it will never happen to you in your lives whether you are young or not so young that it will happen that you are in a desperate situation and that you want to survive.

So I hope that you live in a better world, actually, and that there won't be these terrible events like in the Sudan, Serbia, Syria right now. Those things have to come to an end. And maybe you can do something about it to improve the planet.

Those are my words.
>> [Applause]