United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
First Person: Conversations with Holocaust Survivors
First Person Esther Starobin
Thursday, June 22, 2017
11:00 a.m. – 12:00 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.

HOME TEAM CAPTIONS
www.captionfamily.com

>> 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. Esther Starobin, 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. I'm pleased to say that Mr. Louis Smith is here with us today.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: *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 serves as a volunteer here at this museum. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Esther 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 Esther is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

We begin with this photograph of a very young Esther Starobin, born Esther Rosenfeld.

Esther was born in Germany, to where the arrow points on this map of Europe.

She was born in Adelsheim, a town north of Stuttgart, to which the arrow points on this map.

Esther was the youngest of five children. In this photograph we see her brother, Herman, her mother, Kathi Rosenfeld, Esther, who is on her mother's lap, her older sisters, Bertle and Edith, her father, Adolph Rosenfeld, and her sister, Ruth.

On November 9 and 10, 1938, a violent anti-Jewish Pogrom known as Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass, instigated primarily by Nazi Party officials and Nazi Storm Troopers, took place. The Pogrom took place throughout Germany, parts of Czechoslovakia, and Austria. In this photograph, Germans pass by the broken shop window of a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed during Kristallnacht.

Concerned about the safety of their family, the Rosenfelds registered their children for a kindertransport, the informal name of a rescue effort that brought thousands of refugee Jewish children to Great Britain from Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1940. The arrows show the route of the kindertransport.

Esther wore this tag attached to her clothing as she traveled from her hometown of Adelsheim, Germany, to Thorpe, Norwich, England, to join her foster family, the Harrisons. As you can see, beside her name it has the month of her birth, April 1937, on there.

We close with this picture of Esther with her English foster family, Alan, Dorothy, and Harry Harrison.

Esther came to the United States in 1947, settling in Washington, D.C. She attended the University of Illinois; then had a teaching career specializing in World Studies in Montgomery County, Maryland. Esther's husband, Fred, passed away in April 2011.

Esther and Fred have two daughters. Judy is a managing partner in her law firm. Deborah, who founded The Handmade Afghans Project, which made and sent more than 10,000 Afghans to "bring comfort and warmth to our wounded service members" before it ended in 2013, is now very involved locally in Community Supported Agriculture.

Esther and Fred have two grandchildren. Jon graduated in 2016 with a degree in mechanical engineering. He is now testing and developing bicycle tires at Maxxis in Suwanee, Georgia. He is also involved in bicycle racing on the national Level. I just learned that yesterday he won the Georgia state championship. Drew just finished his second year at the University of Southern California and has a summer internship in Orlando, Florida.

With Esther today are her daughters, Deborah and Judy, her niece Tamar, and her husband, Marshal, and their son, Solomon, and also niece Renee and grandnieces Danielle and Hannah. We have the family lined up here in the front row

Esther's volunteer work at the museum has involved helping to expand the museum's collections of documents, photographs and other items. Earlier this year, she took the museum's docent training to be a tour guide for the Permanent Exhibition. Esther has also been a contributor to the museum's writing project which produces editions of "Echoes of Memory," a collection of writings by survivors associated with this museum. Following today's program, Esther will be available to sign copies of "Echoes of Memory."

With that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Esther Starobin.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Esther, thank you for joining us today and for your willingness to be our First Person. Welcome to all of your family and friends that are gathered here in the front row. And to all of you, thank you for being with us.

Esther, you have a great deal to share in a short period so we'll get started right away if that's ok.

You were very young when your parents sent you to England. Although you were too young to be able to tell us firsthand about life in Germany for your family at that time, perhaps you can give us a sense of what you've been able to piece together about your family and about Adelsheim.

>> Esther Starobin: I'm happy to do that. Clearly I don't remember any of this. About our family, I learned it from my sisters, as much as they would talk about which wasn't a lot. And later as we get into further information, there's a man who lives in Adelsheim who researched. And he and I correspond by email. I've learned a lot from him and occasionally from other sources, which when I talk about something, I'll tell about it, at the time.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little about Adelsheim. It was and I think still is a very small town.
>> Esther Starobin: It is a very small town. There's one stop light in it. I've been back there three times because I felt a great need to go back and see where I came from. But there was a small Jewish community, about 10 families. My father and mother lived there. Before that, my father had lived in another little place and once their oldest daughter was born, they moved to Adelsheim.

My father sold grain. He had been in the First World War and lost a leg in the First World War. Originally he had trained to be a baker, to work in a bakery. But you can't really do that when you have to stand and you have a wooden leg. So he was selling grain. My mother worked with him because sometimes he had trouble getting up and down the cart.

It's hard for me to think of that. When they were doing this, it wasn't in cars, wasn't in trucks. It was a cart, which is a lot different to do. So he did that.

There were five children, as you saw in the picture, which explains why I have all of this family here. I was the youngest. And I was born, as he said, in 1937, when things had already started to become very difficult for my parents. In fact, in 1937, before I was born, my father was being sued -- a customer was saying that he had sold a cow that was bad. Well, it turns out maybe the cow was bad, maybe it wasn't but it was a way -- my father lost his business that way. And not only he did lose his business, he had to pay all the expenses. He didn't get his cow back. So it was really a hard time. So for them to then have another baby, which was me.

But my sister tells me before all of this happened life in Adelsheim was a pretty happy time. They had everything they needed. They spent holidays with relatives, doing the things do on the Sabbath. And they originally went to school, to the neighborhood school. But then they were not allowed to go to the school because Jewish kids were not allowed.

They first went to family. That didn't last. Then they went to live with my two aunts in Aachen. When they were living in Aachen, they went to the Jewish school there. My second sister, Edith, told me that sometimes there would be people in the house at night and they were gone the next morning. So they think my aunts were helping people escape from Germany or get out. My second sister, Edith, who also liked to eat a lot, said they used to sometimes walk across the border and would come back with food, especially chocolates, and some kinds of clothing tucked into their clothes. They were going back and forth across the border.
>> Bill Benson: One other question. What was the age range among your siblings?
>> Esther Starobin: My oldest sister is 12 years older than me. She's the only one that's still alive. So I'm the youngest and she's the oldest. Three in the middle have died.
>> Bill Benson: Kristallnacht, Night of Broken Glass, occurred in November 1938. That had a profound effect on your family in, of course, leading them to conclude that life under the Nazis was already horrible and was going to become worse likely. Tell us what you can about what the impact of Kristallnacht was on your family and anything that you might know about it.
>> Esther Starobin: Well, my sisters were living, as I said, in Aachen with my aunts. They went off to school. Because they didn't really know what was happening. They saw the synagogue

burning. They were told go home.

My sisters really didn't talk a lot about what happened before they left. They left in March 1938 on the kindertransport. They left from Aachen. They didn't have a chance to say goodbye to my parents.

Well, I heard two things. Bertle said her ears were pierced because there was an old wives tale it helped your eyesight. She didn't ever wear glasses, so maybe.

>> [Laughter]

>> Esther Starobin: And my sister, Edy, talked about on the train when they crossed the border into the next country, that they were given oranges and food and she remembers that. But my sisters really never talked much about the actual being on the train and going.

Now, in Adelsheim I know what happened and I know all of this from Reinhart who has told us this. People came from the neighboring village. They destroyed the temple. When you think of a temple, you think of a big, beautiful building. This was an ugly squared small place. They took the Torahs out, the Bibles. They took everything out and took it to a sports field and burned it. Some men were dragged out of their houses and taken away. My parents' house was sort of off the Main Street so nothing actually happened to them. According to Reinhart, you know, he's researching, and I don't know that these were all people coming from another village and they would add one or two people in each village. Who knows?

That's basically what I know.

>> Bill Benson: On that night, over 300 synagogues were burned throughout Germany and Austria, thousands of businesses destroyed. And in your community, because it was a small community, very few Jewish families, I think maybe 10, and your family had been there for centuries.

>> Esther Starobin: Not in that area. They had been in that area for 200 years.

>> Bill Benson: They were severely affected by Kristallnacht. As a result of that, your parents, the following year, early 1939, made truly an extraordinary decision to send their daughters away on a kindertransport. Tell us, first, what the kindertransport was and then what you know about, if anything, about how arrangements were made to do that.

>> Esther Starobin: People in England went to the government, the Jewish people in England went to the government, and asked if they could bring children over. And the parliament in England said they could bring children as long as they weren't going to be a ward of the country. They had to have a guaranteed amount of money and homes had to be found for them. Other groups joined in helping the Jewish groups, particularly the society of friends, the Quakers. And then they sent people to Germany to help organize it.

I don't really know and there's not a real way to know whether my aunts arranged -- my sisters left from Aachen -- whether my aunts really arranged it, my parents. It isn't clear to me from what I know. But my sisters lefts in March 1938 and went to England. We had an aunt in England, one of my mother's sisters, who worked as a domestic in England because you couldn't do much else when you were a refugee kind of person. And she found places for my sisters through the people she had met and knew.

My oldest sister, Bertle, went to live with some people from Scotland and actually went to Scotland for a while. And then when she was 16 -- because she was 14 when she went. When she was 16, she moved back to live with my aunt and go to work. At some later date there was a knock on the door and there were policemen there and said, "Do you know this man?" She said, “I don't know that name.” It turned out the people she had been living with, the man was actually a German spy. And while they had been in Scotland, he had been

taking information about the planes and things that were happening there.
>> Bill Benson: So a brilliant cover, taking a Jewish child, refugee from Germany, and spy for the Nazis.

A couple of other questions before we talk about your getting to England if we can. Your sisters went in March. You would go in June, I believe.
>> Esther Starobin: Right.
>> Bill Benson: Do you know why you didn't go at the same time as your sisters? And you also had your brother, Herman, at home as well.
>> Esther Starobin: I don't know that. Do you want me to finish talking about what happened to my sisters?
>> Bill Benson: Once they got there? No. We'll come back to that.
>> Esther Starobin: Ok. I imagine perhaps it was easier living -- Aachen is a pretty big city compared to Adelsheim. Maybe it was easier to get people. It's all speculation. I don't really know. I clearly wasn't there with them.

As to why they didn't send my brother, I don't know but according to my sister, Bertle, he was spoiled rotten because he was the boy.
>> [Laughter]
>> Esther Starobin: So I don't know. Did the kindertransport not take boys as easily? I was 2, so he was 6. I don't really know that.
>> Bill Benson: Ultimately I think about 10,000 children were saved as a result of the kindertransport. Does that sound right to you?
>> Esther Starobin: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: So your sisters going, went first. You started to tell us where they each went. You were not there yet.
>> Esther Starobin: Right. So Edith, my next in line sister, lived with a family in England. And then when the war really started, children were sent out of the big cities so she was sent to another family. She always said she was treated like a slave there. She did not go to school. After she was 14 she wasn't allowed to go to school. Eventually she joined the women's Army in England.

Ruth lived with a doctor in the family in London. And then she lived with another family out of London and eventually landed up in a hostile. Never quite sure what happened. Once she told me it was because she wouldn't do her Hebrew lessons. But I don't think that's really why -- you know, how. There was a lot of movement in kids in England during the war. A lot of things happening.
>> Bill Benson: Just as an aside, my mother's English. She was evacuated during the war to the countryside and moved to several different places, in that experience. And she remembers a place where she went where her words are, "I was essentially their scullery maid" as a 13-year-old in the country.

Your aunt, Aunt Hannah, tell us about her.
>> Esther Starobin: My Aunt Hannah. She was a very energetic, opinionated lady. Very good. Well, we haven't talked about where I went but she also kept kosher. That will come later. But she really looked after us. She knew where everybody was. She kept track. She sent information to my parents. I don't know why she was smart enough to leave early. I have no idea.
>> Bill Benson: You don't know any of that.
>> Esther Starobin: The thing is, my sister, Bertle, who is 12 years older than me, she always

says that kids at that time didn't know everything that was happening in the family. Well, my sister is not a stupid woman. How she couldn't have known some of this stuff is beyond me but she says she didn't. So I guess she didn't.
>> Bill Benson: When you finally got there in June, your brother stayed behind that meant four sisters were there and in different places.
>> Esther Starobin: Right.
>> Bill Benson: Do you know if there was any attempt in trying to have you stay together in one home or was that just not possible?
>> Esther Starobin: I don't think that was possible. There was an organization in England called Bloomsbury House that kept track of us and sort of looked after us. Not too energetically. And I just got records from them. There's extensive records about Bertle, what she was doing, any money that was given to people. There's a little bit about me. And it talks about I think when I was getting ready to leave, they had taken me for a picture. A tiny bit about Ruth, my sister Ruth. Hardly anything -- well, they didn't find anything about Edith. They didn't have enough information. I have to send information back. But it was really interesting because the information on Bertle was much more extensive than on us. But they kept track of the people, the kids that were there.
>> Bill Benson: And you'll tell us in a moment where you went. It was with a Christian family.
>> Esther Starobin: Right.
>> Bill Benson: Did some of your siblings go to other Christian families or to Jewish homes or did it matter, just whoever would take you in?
>> Esther Starobin: Ruth originally went -- the doctor's family was Jewish. And the people that Edith went to were Jewish. And the one that treated her like a slave were Jewish, too. I think the people that Ruth land up with in between the hostile were not Jewish. And Bertle's people were not Jewish.
>> Bill Benson: So it was a matter of -- it sounds like wherever a home could be found.
>> Esther Starobin: Right. And a lot of kids from the kindertransport landed up in group hostile kind of things.
>> Bill Benson: What was a hostile? We think of a hostile now where college students stay on the cheap.
>> Esther Starobin: Like an orphanage kind of place.
>> Bill Benson: At least one of your sisters ended up in a hostile.
>> Esther Starobin: Right.
>> Bill Benson: So June 1939 you go.
>> Esther Starobin: I go.
>> Bill Benson: Of course, you're too young to know anything about your trip there that you know firsthand but tell us what you know about your leaving, arriving, and where you went.
>> Esther Starobin: The one thing I don't know is who took care of me. I was on this train and then on a boat. I have no idea who took care of me. But I landed up in London.
>> Bill Benson: And you're 2 years old.
>> Esther Starobin: 2 years old. And somebody from the Quaker society took me by train to Norwich. There's a good train service. And then I have a copy of a letter that the woman in Norwich was also part of the friends, had written to my foster mother asking did they want me brought out to where they lived or could they come to the station. And I don't really know what they did.

So I landed with the Harrisons. They lived outside Norwich, a cathedral city. So I

was taken there. The Harrisons, my foster father, Uncle Harry, worked for a shoe factory that was owned by a Jewish man. And there was a sign on the bulletin board is anybody willing to take one of these children. And they were willing to take me. They had one son Allen, seven years older than I am. I think they basically would have liked another boy but they got me instead.

Originally I was supposed to go to Wales. I don't know why that fell through. So I arrived in Norwich. I promptly got pneumatic --

>> Bill Benson: Scarlet Fever?

>> Esther Starobin: Scarlet Fever. I was in isolation. Allen used to play with me through the window.

I was basically afraid of loud noises. I was afraid of Uncle Harry who was the kindest, mildest man you ever heard. But I was afraid. And all I could think of was that I must have heard a lot of men yelling and shouting in Adelsheim because I was afraid of him for a long time.

But I lived with this family. They belonged to a very fundamentalist Christian chapel. The man who owned it and ran it, a Mr. Ramsey, helped them out a bit. Back then 2-year-olds were still babies. Not like now. And I think they gave him some of the things they needed. I think occasionally they helped him with money.

This chapel was a small chapel. And many of the people who lived there belonged to it. It had a lot of community activities of which I was a very happy participant. But now in churches and synagogues, the big thing is community. And it really was a community place then.

So I lived with the Harrisons. I was very happy there. I went to school. I did whatever kids did, did naughty things, good things. I guess I basically knew I wasn't there forever but I didn't ask questions. It wasn't one of the things I did. Allen was really good to me. A lot of big brothers do mean things to their little sisters. He never did. He would take me with him and drag me around and all of that.

Bertle and Edith and Ruth used to come to visit sometimes in Norwich. It was hard originally for them to travel because there were a lot of regulations, especially for people from Germany. One time Bertle came, and she was living with my Aunt Hannah at the time, and my Aunt Hannah was kosher and it was hard to get meat and chicken. So I don't know how, the Harrisons got her a chicken. She took this live chicken back on the train because it had to be killed kosher in London. But they came.

One time we all went to London to visit Aunt Hannah and Bertle. There was a lot of tension between my foster Monday, Auntie Dot and my Aunt Hannah. I don't really know what that was about. Maybe it was just a natural kind of thing.

>> Bill Benson: Speculating. Family took you in this and were raising you as part of their household during the time. I'm sure Bertle was trying to check on you -- or Hannah, I mean, trying to make sure to keep the family ties strong and all of that.

>> Esther Starobin: Well, yes. So we went -- I went to a Seder which I had no idea what it was. I had absolutely no idea. I was supposed to be learning Hebrew. Mr. Ramsey, the man from the chapel, knew Hebrew but I am really bad at languages. I didn't really learn it.

One time somebody came from Bloomsbury House from the school to check on me. I do remember the headmaster not leaving me alone with him. I don't remember what they asked me or what they really checked on.

So I was there --

>> Bill Benson: The Harrisons didn't try to convert you or raise you as a Christian or do you know?
>> Esther Starobin: They belonged to something called the Hebrew Christian Society. So they probably would have not been unhappy if I had converted. But I was 10 years old; what did I know? I knew nothing about Judaism. What I knew -- I mean, I know tons of hymns and all of those things. But I don't -- they wouldn't have done that. They weren't that kind of people.
>> Bill Benson: Before we continue on with what it was like for you living with the Harrisons both during the war and a little while after the war, your parents, of course, when you left, were still in Adelsheim and your brother, Herman, was with them. Tell us what you can about what happened to Herman and then what happened to your parents as best you know.
>> Esther Starobin: In October of 1940, the Jews of the state Adelsheim was in were rounded up. They were told they could bring a small suitcase. They had to go to a central place.
My brother apparently had been at school someplace else and was home for one of the Jewish holidays that day. So he was in the house and rounded up with them. And they were taken to Gurs in France. They were in Gurs, which was a work camp in France. And my brother was with them.
>> Bill Benson: And he's probably, what, 7 at that time?
>> Esther Starobin: Yeah. 7 I guess.

So my father's wooden leg for some reason didn't go with him. I have copies of letters that came -- Reinhart found them -- that show the mayor of Adelsheim saying this man had a wooden leg; where is it. And they did find his wooden leg so his leg was sent to him in the camp of my parents both worked in the kitchen in the camp.
>> Bill Benson: Which was in France.
>> Esther Starobin: It was in France. One of my aunts was in the camp also. And the fact that they were in the kitchen, they could get a little extra food for Herman.

So in 1980s, when there started to be a lot of information on TV about the Holocaust, my sister, Bertle, said, oh, I've got letters from mother when she was in the camp. Well, I didn't know that. My husband had them translated. Basically that's the only way I know anything much about my mother. My father just wrote a couple of lines underneath. He didn't really write on it but my mother did. There are five letters. Bertle said she had other letters but they got lost in the movement.

So at the beginning, my mother was very hopeful that they were going to be able to leave and get out. But you needed money to do that and the right connections so that wasn't going to happen. A couple of things I learned from them. I never realized that you needed money in the camps. If you had money, you could buy some things. So my sister, Bertle, was sending them money.
>> Bill Benson: From England?
>> Esther Starobin: From England. And I think a couple of my uncles from here had sent money. But my mother would write -- just like a mother -- to Bertle, who was not living with us, was in her teens, make sure your siblings behave, they thank the people taking care of them, wash behind their ears, do well in school; you know, all the things anybody's mother would tell you to do on how to behave. I mean, they were in this horrible situation with not enough food, no freedom, and they're still trying to make sure that us children were being raised properly, behaving in a way that we should. It was pretty amazing to me.

So in the letters -- a lot of the letters are asking them to contact this relative and that relative, aside from telling them how to behave. In one letter my mother says "Save your

clothes for me. I am so thin now I could get into your clothes." Well, my mother was not a thin lady. You could see that from the pictures. So I found that pretty amazing that they did that.

But somewhere in one of the letters it mentions that Herman is in some kind of -- is not with them, is in some kind of a school or a home that children in France were in. Well, we didn't know much about that.

And this is another example of how we're still finding out a lot of things. There's so many things we don't know about our family. But there's someone who worked for this museum that I know who is married to somebody from Vienna and had met a young woman in Vienna who was doing research on the kindertransport. She asked me if Lilly could interview me and Lilly interviewed me. So, at the same time, the Holocaust Museum is having a new exhibit next year about the American response to the Holocaust and they found a picture of my brother waiting to get on a boat, because he did eventually come here. And the person that Lilly was doing research was also waiting to get on that boat. So from that connection we found out which home my brother had been in. I mean, it's such --

>> Bill Benson: This is very recent.

>> Esther Starobin: Oh, in the last year. So Lilly is doing research because she's going to write a book. And every time she does research, she finds out other things about my brother, which is so interesting. My brother's been dead 27 years, 25 years. He would never talk about what happened to him. And now we're finding out these things.

On the ship manifest when it says about him coming to this country, or something about him, it says that he knew -- he could read French and German. Well, where did he learn to read it? I guess he learned in these schools. How did he know these things? He certainly -- he absolutely wouldn't talk about it; so I don't know.

>> Bill Benson: He came here in 1941, I believe. Is that right?

>> Esther Starobin: He did. The United States allowed 1,000 children in, in 1941, it's called 1,000 children. And he was one of the children that came then. They landed in New York. There was a picture in the newspaper. A second cousin saw this picture and somehow or other got Herman connected with my uncle here. He was raised by an aunt and uncle here. He knew he had sisters but he was a little kid. He thought they were in this country and we were in England.

>> Bill Benson: I'm assuming that once he came here -- was there any communication from Bertle or anybody with Herman here in the United States during that period?

>> Esther Starobin: My mother knew he was here. One of the letters talked about him being here and how happy he was. He had this cousin who was like a big brother. So there was communication. I have copies of a couple of letters between my mother and my foster mother. Luckily my foster mother saved things. Otherwise I wouldn't have that information.

>> Bill Benson: What do you know about your parents?

>> Esther Starobin: Well, I know they were in the camp. They were in Gurs until 1942. And in August of 1942 they were sent to Auschwitz and they were murdered as soon as they got to Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: And you now know exactly what convoy train they went on?

>> Esther Starobin: I do. There's a book that was published by a French person. It listed all the convoys, the dates, the people who were on the convoys, when their birthdays were, where they were from, and what happened to them when they got there.

>> Bill Benson: Did you have -- to your knowledge, did Bertle have letters from your mom up until almost the time?

>> Esther Starobin: She did. Unfortunately the letters don't really have dates on them. We put them in some kind of order but reading over them recently, I'm not sure we have them in the right order. But as I said, at the beginning my mother really expected to get out. She really kept her religion. She still praised God, believed in God. And I've gone through periods when I couldn't understand that at all.
>> Bill Benson: When your parents perished and they were murdered in Auschwitz, obviously all communication stopped. Do you know if Bertle -- how Bertle or other sisters -- what they thought that meant, to no longer hear from your parents?
>> Esther Starobin: Well, Bertle got a letter back so she knew what it meant. I really didn't know. Even when I came here I kept thinking, well, maybe they'll appear. It was a while before it really sunk into my head that, no, they are not going to. But Bertle knew and I guess Edith and Ruth knew, too.
>> Bill Benson: The Harrisons, you described it as a pretty happy time. You would end up spending eight of your first 10 years living with the Harrisons. You were, of course -- the war began. You went to England in June 1939. War broke out in September 1939. And then there was terrible war going on in England, between the bombings and all of that. What do you recall, what impact did the war have on you? I know you're out in the countryside, not in London. Do you remember what it meant in terms of hardships for the family or anything?
>> Esther Starobin: Well, it's interesting. I had some friends who were English and they talked about always being hungry. We weren't hungry. We had a garden. So they grew some vegetables. For a while we had chickens. And then I think the rats appeared and the chickens disappeared. And we got food at school. We used to get milk and stuff at school. In England they give you lunch in school and I think they even did then.

We had to carry a gas mask. When my younger daughter was in nursery school, somebody brought a gas mask to the dress-up corner. I had a fit and I was in charge of the dress-up corner so it left. I don't think gas masks are to be played with. We had a bomb shelter. I don't exactly remember going into it but Allen, my foster brother, tells me we did.

It didn't seem to impact me a lot. I never remember hearing the radio. There must have been one. I don't remember hearing it or seeing the newspapers. There was an American Army base nearby. Allen tells me they used to go. And when the German planes came over, they would collect the scraps that fell down. But I didn't know he was doing that. He didn't tell me that.
>> Bill Benson: War ends in May 1945. You would continue living with the Harrisons until 1947. Tell us what you can about the decision, on Bertle's part, I guess, to get you the United States.
>> Esther Starobin: My mother had always told Bertle she had to keep the family together. And she did a superb job of that. Bloomsbury House found us passage to come to America. The Harrisons didn't have a phone. So one day Bertle and I got passage. My sister Ruth came before we did. Edith was in the Army.
>> Bill Benson: The British Army.
>> Esther Starobin: The British Army. So Bertle called the police in a Norwich, had them come around to the Harrisons and tell them they had to take me to London the next day to leave. Well, it was -- I knew I had to leave but I didn't know I was leaving right then. But just recently I got some records from Bloomsbury House which says that they had taken me to get a passport -- it wasn't a passport, a travel something. They had taken me to get a picture. So what did I think the picture was for? You know? I wasn't thinking.

>> Bill Benson: That means the Harrisons anticipated you were leaving.
>> Esther Starobin: So we went up to London the next day. Uncle Harry couldn't come because he couldn't take off work. Allen was supposed to receive some big prize that day which, of course, he didn't. They took me to London and they handed me over to my sister. Allen tells me his mother's hair turned white overnight. You know, she was so upset. She had written to my uncle and asked if I could stay and my uncles had written a sort of nice note saying no, I couldn't.
>> [Laughter]
>> Esther Starobin: It was interesting. Again, it was something I didn't know any of this. My Auntie Dot gave me all of these letters when I was an adult. I didn't know that.

So we were traveling on the Queen Mary. Well, it wasn't exactly a luxury liner in those days. It had been converted to a troop ship and it was on its way back. So there was a strike the day we left because somebody important was on the ship and it was decided it was a good day to have a strike. Bertle had a boyfriend who was a butcher. He had given her sausage, thank goodness, and my aunt had given us bread so we were ok. Then we sailed. I was terribly seasick.

What I didn't know until much later, Bertle didn't want to go either. I never knew that. But she always does what she's supposed to.

We came to this country. Well, two uncles met us in New York, an uncle that used to live with us in Adelsheim, Uncle Solly, where my brother lived, and an Uncle Jim who married to aunt of mine. I, of course, didn't know who they were. Bertle did. And we came down here and lived with my Uncle Sigmund on a big house on North Capitol Street, if you're from around here.

There's a movie about the kindertransport called "Into the Arms of Strangers." Many people in that talk about how awful it was going to live with these people in England, how mean they were and what a terrible experience. Well, that wasn't my experience. Coming to live with my aunt and uncle's was that experience for me.

My uncle had a pretty bad temper. My aunt was mentally ill. And back then they didn't have all of these medications for that. So they argued. My uncle threw furniture. It was not a good time. And it was many different things for me. I was living in a big city. I was living with tons of people. I was living with people who yelled and screamed. They were Jewish. I didn't know anything about Jewish. I went to a school where the teacher, frankly, was nasty to me. I was a teacher all my life. I would never have done what she did. So it was a really, really bad experience.

My other uncle sometimes would give my aunt food but she would keep it until it was bad. I threw my lunch out on the way to school every day. Plus I have a lazy eye and nothing had been done about it in England. I was 10 years old when I came here. They thought I was going to wear a patch on my eye? I was weird enough already.
>> [Laughter]
>> Esther Starobin: So I used to take the patch off. Little did I know the nurse at the school knew I was supposed to be wearing it.

So I went to an elementary school not far from here, North Capitol Street. I had never been to a movie. The Harrisons didn't go to movies, didn't dance, didn't wear makeup. As an adult, I know some of that was because they didn't have the money. But I didn't know that. My uncle dragged me kicking and screaming to a movie eventually. Clearly my uncles drank -- I mean they didn't drink to excess but they did drink. I didn't know that then.

So all in all living with my aunt and uncle was not a great experience. When my sister, Edy came over, and once she had a job, my two sisters got an apartment. My sister Ruth was going to college by then. She went to the University of Maryland. And believe it or not, back then you could work and earn your room and board and tuition, which is what she did. Not anymore. But my sisters got an apartment. So here were these young women, early 20s, trying to make a living in a new country and they took me. They didn't have to. They could have left me with my uncle, but they did. So sometimes they were dating people that were teachers in my school. It was very strange.
>> [Laughter]
>> Esther Starobin: But my sisters were really very good to me. They went out of their way. And, of course, I was ahead in school because the English schools were ahead in those days. Never occurred to me I couldn't go to college. My sisters never said you've got to go to work, which was probably good because I failed typing. I went to college. I lived -- my sister Ruth was married by then. I lived with Ruth and David.
>> Bill Benson: While going to college?
>> Esther Starobin: While I was going to college. So it all worked you out. Then I came back here and taught school for a long time.
>> Bill Benson: When did you connect with your brother? At what point after you arrived? Was it immediate?
>> Esther Starobin: Oh, yes. Now, Bertle, remembered him. I guess Edith and Ruth. I didn't know who he was. I was living with my aunt and uncle. He was in high school when I was in high school. We did some things together. But we weren't living together.
>> Bill Benson: You've gone back to Germany and to Adelsheim. What was that like for you?
>> Esther Starobin: First time I went back it was because I needed to know where I came from. I needed to know I wasn't born in a black hole. I needed to go back. Originally Bertle and her husband Morris were going to go with me but Morris had a heart attack. So Bertle wrote a letter to the people there telling them that I was coming. And Fred and I landed there. It was around noon. Nobody was around. It was so creepy. There was absolutely nobody on the street, nothing happening. It turns out they all go home for lunch or whatever they do.

So when we finally got to the Town Hall, I don't speak any German and there wasn't anybody there who really spoke English. So they arranged for the next day, the deputy mayor's wife spoke English so she was going to go with us and we were going to go on a tour of the area. Then they said, well, you don't want to stay here tonight. You know, you can go to the next place. I said, no, I do want to stay here tonight. I don't want to be sent away again. So we stayed in a guest house there. I don't know if the people knew who I was or not but I had such nightmares that night. I dreamt the Nazis were coming up the stairs to get me. It was really scary.

But the next day we went on a tour. There was an older man who had actually known my parents. And this woman who translated. So we saw the house where my family had lived. We didn't go in but we did see it. And my sisters had told me certain places. There was a brook -- back then when you baked the bread for Shabbats, you took it to the community bakery. One time Edith dropped it in the lake. So I had to look at that. And I saw where the synagogue was. And there's a Jewish cemetery between that little town and the next little town. We went there. We saw where many of my relatives were buried. So we saw a lot. There was a little museum. And there was a tiny section in this tiny museum about the Jews. The museum at that time was only opened Sunday afternoons but they opened it so we could

go in.

I in no way felt like this is my home. I felt like a tourist touring. That's how I felt. But I was glad that I went.

>> Bill Benson: And there were a couple of people from the town who eventually told you, if I remember right, tried to provide food.

>> Esther Starobin: That was later, when I went with Bertle and Renee. Bertle and Morris did go at some point. They met this man, Reinhart Lochman there.

>> Bill Benson: Who has become sort of a historian about what happened with the Jewish community.

>> Esther Starobin: Right. So he wrote in 2000 that they were having a commemoration of the deportation of the Jews. They were having a ceremony. And Bertle and I both said they need some Jews there. My niece, Renee, came with us. We went to this thing which was interesting.

In the meantime -- I'm sorry, I'm disjointed in how I talk. Bertle at some point asked me to see if there was any -- what was happening in Rexingen, the town my mother came from. This man answered that he was from Rexingen but he was in Washington. And Bertle wanted to meet him. I said, “You can't go meet a strange man by yourself.” So Morris went with her. And we became friends with this man, Tim.

So when we went in 2000, we first went to Rexingen and stayed with Tim -- Tim offered his parents' house. So we stayed there. And we got to see some places where my mother was from and the Jewish cemetery there. There's a man who has written a history of the cemetery there with the names of all the people, so I can look up some of my family and the next project this man did, there's a cemetery of the man -- of the people who were on the crusade. What a difference in this world.

So when we got to Adelsheim that time, there were two people: one person who said his parents had brought food -- his father brought food over to my mother and father at night and that his mother was very concerned because if she had been caught, something might have happened to his family; and then another woman who said they had traded things with my parents for food. So there were people. So it was an interesting time.

We got to go into the house where we had lived. Reinhart arranged for us to go in. It had been renovated in the meantime. What was really interesting to me. On the top floor, they had a little boy about the same age as my grandson was at the time. He had all the same toys but his were neat. They were stacked, put away. They were not a mess. It was just interesting to see that.

>> Bill Benson: You mentioned, of course, that your sister, Edith, I think, had been in the British Army. Did she end up stationed in Germany? She went to Adelsheim early, right?

>> Esther Starobin: She went when she was stationed there. Somebody was walking along the street and said to her [Indiscernible]. She looked just like him actually. But she got birth certificates and things like that.

Ruth has been, Bertle. We've all been.

>> Bill Benson: In the remaining time -- we want --

>> Esther Starobin: Oh, Herman hasn't been, didn't go.

>> Bill Benson: And as you said, Herman never talked about it.

>> Esther Starobin: No. In fact, the first time I went and sent a postcard back his wife said he wouldn't even look at the postcard.

>> Bill Benson: We're going to turn to the audience and see if you have some questions in a moment. But you've remained very close to the Harrison family. Say just a little bit about that.

>> Esther Starobin: Well, as I said, my sisters were very good people. They made me write letters. So we had visited with our kids. Our kids have been back. In 1964, Allen came over as an exchange teacher. We brought his parents over to visit with us, which was really a very special for them and very special for us.

I was just in -- my foster parents have both died by now but I just visited Allen. He's getting old. I'm getting old, too, but he's getting older.

>> [Laughter]

>> Esther Starobin: We have so much history together, so many things. Allen used to visit regularly. And after my foster mother died, Uncle Harry used to come and spend six weeks with us.

What's really interesting, he loved to go to synagogue with my husband. And at some point after he died, Allen found out that Uncle Harry's father had been Jewish when he never knew, Uncle Harry never knew that. If he did, he never told us. So it was interesting.

>> Bill Benson: Did any of your sisters stay in touch with any of the families they had lived with?

>> Esther Starobin: I think Ruth was in touch a little bit with the first family she was with. And the son came over here. I don't know if he came permanently but Ruth did see him when he came over.

>> Bill Benson: When did you start talking about what you went through? What prompted you to start speaking out as you're doing here and you've done here with *First Person* for several years now?

>> Esther Starobin: I retired.

>> [Laughter]

>> Esther Starobin: No. You ask it as a serious question. When Allen used to visit -- I taught in the middle school that had a very mixed population. And I would take Allen to school and we would talk about that I lived with him as a foster family. But I mean, I did mention the Holocaust but not so much.

I was involved with a group, a temple, before the Holocaust Museum opened, that we did stuff on educating our congregation. But I started volunteering here after I retired, which was quite a long time ago, actually.

>> Bill Benson: I think we can turn to our audience, see if you have some questions. We have microphones on both sides of the aisle. We ask that if you have a question, wait until you have a microphone. Try to make your question as brief as you can. Then I'll repeat it just to be sure we hear it correctly before Esther responds.

Anybody want to start us off with a question? If not, I will continue asking a bunch of questions.

We have a brave soul right here.

>> Hello. I really enjoyed your speech. Thank you very much. You mentioned the commemoration you went back to visit in your hometown, the historian studying. What form of commemoration and what year did that take place?

>> Bill Benson: The commemoration that took place in Adelsheim, when was it and what kind of commemoration did they do?

>> Esther Starobin: It was October of 2000. It was in what used to be a synagogue in the neighboring town. It's been made into a community place. And Reinhart had made exhibits of all the families, all five of them, of five families. A lot of people had contacted him to find out information. So we're used to very fancy exhibits. These were various copies of things, letters

and pictures, very basic kinds of things. There was a band that played the Jewish-type music. My sister was supposed to give a speech but she started crying so she didn't do that. They told a little bit about the history of what had happened. Reinhart read one of my mother's letters.

I'm trying to think what else. There was all kinds of information about it and about what had happened to the people.

>> Bill Benson: And did the townspeople turn out for that?

>> Esther Starobin: There was some young people. I think they were Reinhart's school, actually. There were other people. There was also a guard because they expected neo-Nazis, which was a little unnerving, to say the least.

It was all in German. I took German in high school and college and I don't understand German. There was a lot of talking about what happened to people, how they had been taken, where they were sent. A lot of history, a lot of information about what happened to people afterwards. I found it moving and I didn't understand a word of it. When I came home I had it translated.

One of the things I forgot to mention. Reinhart found a list, pages and pages, down to the rags, of everything that was in my parents' house.

>> Bill Benson: An inventory of everything in the house.

>> Esther Starobin: Bertle looked at it and said there used to be a fancy doll that they weren't allowed to play with in the living room but that wasn't on the inventory. Somebody had taken that.

It was a very homemade kind of thing. It wasn't sleek like we're used to when we see commemorations. We were really glad that we had been to it. When we first went, Bertle was talking to people she had gone to school with in first grade. Somebody had died when they were in first grade. So they were busy talking about this kid that died. It was like if you go back to your hometown. And to the first day, Bertle translated for me. After that she didn't. But luckily Reinhart and his wife speak English, so that worked out.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you for that question.

Do we have another one? We have one right here. Yes, sir.

>> [Question Inaudible]

>> Bill Benson: I can hear you.

>> [Question Inaudible]

>> Bill Benson: The question is, If you could walk into a time machine and Nazi leadership came out on stage, what would you say to them?

>> Esther Starobin: Good grief.

>> [Laughter]

>> Esther Starobin: You know, I have never actually thought about it. But when I think about it, I guess I would ask why they felt they needed -- in order to get ahead, they had to persecute. Why did they need to do that?

I mean, I know I've read a lot of history, I've taken this class. What makes people -- even today, why do people -- why the need to stigmatize other people to make yourself strong? What is the need for it?

You have me stumped. I don't know -- oh, I think it's a terrific question. And I'm going to think about it.

>> Bill Benson: And your response I think is exactly right. Why? I think everybody would have a very similar response to that.

I have another question for you before we close. Have you been to Auschwitz?

>> Esther Starobin: No. I've been to the one in Munich.
>> Bill Benson: I think we're going to close our program now. One last view for questions.
Ok. We're going to close in a moment. Oh, we do have another question. I'm sorry. Ok.
>> Hello. Thank you for sharing your story. I'm curious and inspired about how empowered and independent your sisters were throughout the story. I was wondering if you could talk just briefly about your thoughts on that.
>> Bill Benson: She's impressed with how empowered your sisters were and if you could say a few words about that.
>> Esther Starobin: I think it's fascinating. Because it was a time when women really were not. But they really were. It just amazes me. We laugh in my family that we have very strong women in our family and the men who marry in better beware.
>> [Laughter]
>> Esther Starobin: I think they had a very strong feeling of self. I think particularly in my sister, Bertle, who did all kinds of things when we were growing up, when we had families to make sure we spent time together, that the kids -- my parents would have had 10 grandchildren, and other than one who lives in New Mexico someplace, they're pretty close. I think my sister really worked at it. She felt her mother had told her that she had to keep her family together. And the fact that I have all of this family people here, most of whom have heard what I have to say several times before, is really -- it really shows that why they feel -- we all went to college. None of that would have happened. I mean, my parents maybe had sixth grade education if that. My sisters, only Ruth went to college. Edy got her G.E.D. and took some college courses but she was really smart. I think they just had a good sense of self. Now, where it came from I don't know. Maybe circumstances forced them into being very strong. They really were very strong people, exceedingly strong.
>> [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: Thank you all for really some great questions. We're going to have to wrap up now. I'm sorry. I'm going to turn back to Esther in a moment to close our program. I want to thank all of you for being here with us today. I remind you we will have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August.
It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. So Esther will close our program. When she finishes, Joel, our photographer, will come up on stage. He's going to take a photograph of Esther with you as the background. So we ask you to stay with us until we do that.
Esther?
>> Esther Starobin: For me, I don't think most of us are going to be in a position to affect tons of people. What we can do is help one person, two people. I think what we can do as individuals is to see people as individuals and to help encourage, do what we can in a small way. And if we all do things in a small way, it will improve the world in a big way.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you.
[Applause]